"A Tragedy of Disappointment": Woodrow Wilson and the Treaty of Versailles

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The Great War of 1914–1918 was the most savage conflict ever fought up to that time. It was called the Great War then because nobody knew that an even more monstrous war lay in the future. The Great War began when Austria-Hungary declared war on a small Balkan country named Serbia, whose staunch ally was Russia. Because of entangling alliances among Europe's great powers, the war quickly spread until it engulfed much of Europe, with the Central Powers (Austria-Hungary,
Germany, and Turkey) fighting the Allied Powers (Russia, France, Britain, and Italy). It was the world’s first “total war,” in which whole societies battled one another. Before it was over, Russia had suffered almost 2 million casualties and collapsed in a Communist takeover; Germany had lost 2 million soldiers, France 1.5 million, and Britain almost 1 million.

The United States officially entered the war in April 1917, on the side of the Allies. The United States did so, in part, because the Germans had resorted to submarine war, torpedoing Allied warships without warning; to Americans, this seemed barbaric. The Allied blockade of the German coast, calculated to starve Germany into submission, did not strike most Americans the same way, because of their anti-German sentiment and sympathies for the Allies. When a German U-boat sank a British passenger ship, the Lusitania, with 128 Americans on board, the United States was enraged. President Woodrow Wilson warned the Germans that if they continued to commit such outrages, the United States would take the necessary action to protect its citizens traveling on non-military vessels. At first the Germans agreed not to sink any more enemy ships with Americans on board, but later withdrew the pledge on the grounds that Germany was already fighting American economic might—the United States was selling war materiel to the Allies—and had nothing to lose by attacking American merchant ships taking war supplies to Britain. "This means war," said Wilson. "The break that we have tried to prevent now seems inevitable." When the United States intercepted a secret telegram in which Germany invited Mexico to join the Central Powers, Wilson asked Congress to declare war, and Congress did so with thunderous applause and cheering. "My message today," said Wilson, "was a message of death for our young men. How strange it seems to applaud that."

As that remark suggests, Woodrow Wilson had a horror of violence and war. Why, then, would he lead the United States into a savage conflict like the Great War? The answer lies in Wilson’s complex and contradictory character. A former college professor and president of Princeton with a Ph.D. in political economy, Wilson was a conservative Democrat before he won the presidency. Once in office, however, he became a Progressive reformer who championed a program called the New Freedom that included substantial reforms in currency, anti-trust, and tariff legislation. Working well with Congress, Wilson went on to support women’s political rights and engineered the most sweeping legislative program since the days of Alexander Hamilton. Despite his spectacular achievements, Wilson was a sensitive, lonely man who wanted “the people to love me.” And yet he felt a powerful need, he said, to guard his emotions “from painful overflow.” Although his intellectual tradition was British (he extolled the British system of parliamentary government and admired English leaders such as Edmund Burke and William Gladstone), his politics were rooted in his southern heritage. A learned, eloquent champion of democracy, he nevertheless shared the racial prejudice that prevailed among white Americans of his generation, and as president he began a policy of discrimination against African Americans in federal employment.

In many ways, Wilson’s foreign policy was even more paradoxical. He abhorred violence, yet he was inclined to use moralistic, gunboat diplomacy in dealing with Latin America: he transformed Nicaragua into a veritable United States protectorate, twice sent American forces into Mexico, and ordered full-scale military occupation of Haiti and the Dominican Republic. Although Wilson convinced himself that high moral purpose justified such intervention, it left a legacy of bitterness and distrust in Latin America.

Finally, despite the pacific liberalism he had learned from British intellectuals, Wilson led the United States into the Great War on a messianic crusade to make that conflict "a war to end all wars." To achieve that goal, he devised the League of Nations, a kind of world parliament, which was the sanest blueprint for world peace anyone had yet contrived. But Wilson’s noble dream ended
in a crushing defeat when the United States Senate rejected the League of Nations and America turned away from the idealism that had produced it.

In the following selection, excerpted from her prize-winning book, Paris 1919, Margaret MacMillan tells the story of Wilson and the League of Nations in an elegant narrative filled with trenchant insights. She not only describes Wilson’s complex and contradictory personality, but also tells the rollicking story of his second marriage, to Edith Galt, while he was president. MacMillan goes on to explain how Wilson’s ill health and inability to compromise, combined with the tenacity of his adversaries and the sentiment of the times, brought about America’s rejection of the League of Nations. In the end, the United States was not prepared for the responsibilities of world leadership that Wilson had thrust upon it. Desperately ill from crippling strokes, Wilson viewed the rejection as a personal defeat. As historian Richard Hofstadter observed, the president’s “sense of guilt hung over him like a cloud.” Steeped in gloom, Wilson summarized his presidency with these words: “What I seem to see, with all my heart I hope that I am wrong, is a tragedy of disappointment.”

**Glossary**

**ARTICLE X** The most controversial part of the League of Nations covenant, Article X committed nations that were members of the League to defend any member nation when another power threatened its “territorial integrity” by “external aggression.”

**BAKER, RAY STANNARD** Wilson’s press officer, friend, and admirer. Baker accompanied the president to Paris.

**BLISS, TASKER** Bliss was America’s representative on the Supreme War Council in Paris. He later became one of the commissioners to the peace conference at Versailles.

**BULLITT, WILLIAM** Bullitt was an advisor to the American delegation that helped negotiate the Treaty of Versailles. He later served as the United States ambassador to Russia and then to France.

**BURKE, EDMUND** President Wilson greatly admired this British statesman and political writer, who lived from 1729 to 1797. A thoroughgoing Anglophile, Wilson adopted a foreign policy that favored Great Britain and finally led the United States to enter the Great War on the side of Britain and the other Allies.

**CLEMENTEAU, GEORGES** The French prime minister who wanted a peace treaty that would guarantee Germany could never again be a threat to France. An imperialist, he rejected President Wilson’s idealism, saying: “God gave us the Ten Commandments, and we broke them. Wilson gave us the Fourteen Points. We shall see” about breaking them.

**CREEL, GEORGE** Creel headed the Committee on Public Information (CPI) that publicized and, at times, propagandized American involvement in the Great War. Creel’s committee issued pamphlets, posters, and speeches that addressed such issues as “Why We Are Fighting” and that portrayed the Germans as bloodthirsty aggressors; CPI funds produced a film entitled *The Kaiser, the Beast of Berlin.*

**FOURTEEN POINTS** Wilson’s idealistic blueprint for world peace that was generous to defeated Germany, but failed to satisfy the wartime goals of the allied nations. The last and most important point called for a League of Nations, a kind of parliament of humankind, which would resolve international conflicts and thus avoid future wars.

**GALT, EDITH BOLLING** Wilson married this southern woman, seventeen years his junior, less than two years after the death of his first wife. Edith Galt was totally devoted to her husband. After the stroke that disabled him, she protected Wilson from perceived tormentors during his struggle with the Senate over the Treaty of Versailles.

**GRAYSON, CARY TRAVERS** Wilson’s personal physician and friend, Grayson opposed the President’s final speaking tour in 1919, which caused a further deterioration of his health. A naval officer, Grayson had also served as a physician to Presidents Theodore Roosevelt and William Howard Taft.

**HANKEY, SIR MAURICE** Secretary to the British cabinet and later to the Paris Peace Conference, Hankey fervently believed that Wilson’s Fourteen Points were the “moral background” that would establish a new world order.

**HITCHCOCK, GILBERT** A Democratic senator from Nebraska who led his party in the losing struggle to preserve
Wilson’s League of Nations against those who wanted to alter or destroy it.

**HOUSE, COLONEL EDWARD M.** House was a close friend to Wilson, who called him “my alter ego.” The Colonel was one of the President’s most important advisors until his second wife, Edith Galt Wilson, persuaded her husband to disregard his counsel.

**IRRECONCILABLES** A group of about a dozen senators who opposed the League of Nations in any form.

**LANSING, ROBERT** Wilson’s secretary of state, Lansing had doubts about the League of Nations that caused the President to lose confidence in him.

**LEAGUE OF NATIONS** An international organization of nations designed to prevent future wars. Without American participation, the League of Nations was largely ineffectual in the years following the Great War.

**LLOYD GEORGE, DAVID** The British prime minister who pushed for a harsher peace treaty with defeated Germany and the other Central Powers. He once threatened that the Allies would squeeze Germany “until the pipes squeak.”

**LODGNE, HENRY CABOT** Lodge was the senior Republican member on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee who led the fight against Wilson’s League of Nations.

**RESERVATIONS** Amendments to the League of Nations charter. Many United States senators believed them necessary to protect American sovereignty and to make the peace treaty consistent with the United States Constitution. Wilson adamantly opposed such changes to his cherished League. As a result, the Senate refused to ratify the Treaty of Versailles and thus rejected United States participation in the League, which proved too weak to preserve global peace and collapsed soon after the outbreak of World War II.

**TAFT, WILLIAM HOWARD** Rotund Republican president from 1909 to 1913, he lost to Wilson in the election of 1912. Taft believed that Wilson had slighted his party in the treaty negotiations that ended the Great War, and he subsequently opposed the League of Nations.

**TREATY OF VERSAILLES (1919)** Formally ended the Great War; only about four of the Fourteen Points found their way into the treaty. When Wilson refused to compromise on the League of Nations covenant, the Senate rejected United States participation in the world organization. As a result, America signed a separate treaty with Germany and the other Central Powers and never joined the international organization that Wilson hoped would end all future wars and preserve democracy the world over.

**WHITE, HENRY** A retired diplomat, White was the only Republican member of the peace commission that accompanied Wilson to Paris.

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On December 4, 1918, the *George Washington* sailed out of New York with the American delegation to the Peace Conference on board. Guns fired salutes, crowds along the waterfront cheered, tugboats hooted and Army planes and dirigibles circled overhead. Robert Lansing, the American secretary of state, released carrier pigeons with messages to his relatives about his deep hope for a lasting peace. The ship, a former German passenger liner, slid out past the Statue of Liberty to the Atlantic, where an escort of destroyers and battleships stood by to accompany it and its cargo of heavy expectations to Europe.

On board were the best available experts, combed out of the universities and the government; crates of reference materials and special studies; the French and Italian ambassadors to the United States; and Woodrow Wilson. No other American president had ever gone to Europe while in office. His opponents accused him of breaking the Constitution; even his supporters felt he might be unwise. Would he lose his great moral authority by getting down to the hurly-burly of negotiations? Wilson’s own view was clear: the making of the peace was as important as the winning of the war. He owed it to the peoples of Europe, who were crying out for a better world. He owed it to the American servicemen. “It is now my duty,” he told a pensive Congress just before he left, “to play my full part in making good what they gave their life’s blood to obtain.” A British diplomat was more...
cynical; Wilson, he said, was drawn to Paris "as a debutante is entranced by the prospect of her first ball."

Wilson expected, he wrote to his great friend Edward House, who was already in Europe, that he would stay only to arrange the main outlines of the peace settlements. It was not likely that he would remain for the formal Peace Conference with the enemy. He was wrong. The preliminary conference turned, without anyone's intending it, into the final one, and Wilson stayed for most of the crucial six months between January and June 1919. The question of whether or not he should have gone to Paris, which exercised so many of his contemporaries, now seems unimportant. From Franklin Roosevelt at Yalta to Jimmy Carter or Bill Clinton at Camp David, American presidents have sat down to draw borders and hammer out peace agreements. Wilson had set the conditions for the armistices which ended the Great War. Why should he not make the peace as well?

Although he had not started out in 1912 as a foreign policy president, circumstances and his own progressive political principles had drawn him outward. Like many of his compatriots, he had come to see the Great War as a struggle between the forces of democracy, however imperfectly represented by Britain and France, and those of reaction and militarism, represented all too well by Germany and Austria-Hungary. Germany's sack of Belgium, its unrestricted submarine warfare and its audacity in attempting to entice Mexico into waging war on the United States had pushed Wilson and American public opinion toward the Allies. When Russia had a democratic revolution in February 1917, one of the last reservations—that the Allies included an autocracy—vanished. Although he had campaigned in 1916 on a platform of keeping the country neutral, Wilson brought the United States into the war in April 1917. He was convinced that he was doing the right thing. This was important to the son of a Presbyterian minister, who shared his father's deep religious conviction, if not his calling.

Wilson was born in Virginia in 1856, just before the Civil War. Although he remained a Southerner in some ways all his life—in his insistence on honor and his paternalistic attitudes toward women and blacks—he also accepted the war's outcome. Abraham Lincoln was one of his great heroes, along with Edmund Burke and William Gladstone. The young Wilson was at once highly idealistic and intensely ambitious. After four very happy years at Princeton and an unhappy stint as a lawyer, he found his first career in teaching and writing. By 1890 he was back at Princeton, a star member of the faculty. In 1902 he became its president, supported virtually unanimously by the trustees, faculty and students.

In the next eight years Wilson transformed Princeton from a sleepy college for gentlemen into a great university. He reworked the curriculum, raised significant amounts of money and brought into the faculty the brightest and the best young men from across the country. By 1910, he was a national figure and the Democratic party in New Jersey, under the control of conservative bosses, invited him to run for governor. Wilson agreed, but insisted on running on a progressive platform of controlling big business and extending democracy. He swept the state and by 1911 "Wilson for President" clubs were springing up. He spoke for the dispossessed, the disenfranchised and all those who had been left behind by the rapid economic growth of the late nineteenth century. In 1912, at a long and hard-fought convention, Wilson got the Democratic nomination for president. That November, with the Republicans split by Teddy Roosevelt's decision to run as a progressive against William Howard Taft, Wilson was elected. In 1916, he was reelected, with an even greater share of the popular vote.

Wilson's career was a series of triumphs, but there were darker moments, both personal and political, fits of depression and sudden and baffling illnesses. Moreover, he had left behind him a trail of enemies, many of them former friends. "An ingrate and a liar," said a Democratic boss in New Jersey in a toast. Wilson never forgave those who disagreed with him. "He is a good hater," said his press officer and devoted admirer Ray Stannard Baker. He was also stubborn. As House said, with admiration: "Whenever a question
is presented he keeps an absolutely open mind and welcomes all suggestion or advice which will lead to a correct decision. But he is receptive only during the period that he is weighing the question and preparing to make his decision. Once the decision is made it is final and there is an absolute end to all advice and suggestion. There is no moving him after that.” What was admirable to some was a dangerous egotism to others. The French ambassador in Washington saw “a man who, had he lived a couple of centuries ago, would have been the greatest tyrant in the world, because he does not seem to have the slightest conception that he can ever be wrong.

This side of Wilson’s character was in evidence when he chose his fellow commissioners—or plenipoten
tiaries, as the chief delegates were known—to the Peace Conference. He was himself one. House, “my alter ego,” as he was fond of saying, was another. Reluctantly he selected Lansing, his secretary of state, as a third, mainly because it would have been awkward to leave him behind. Where Wilson had once rather admired Lansing’s vast store of knowledge, his meticulous legal mind and his apparent readiness to take a back seat, by 1919 that early liking had turned to irritation and contempt. Lansing, it turned out, did have views, often strong ones which contradicted the president’s. “He has,” Wilson complained to House, who noted it down with delight, “no imagination, no constructive ability, and but little real ability of any kind.” The fourth plenipotentiary, General Tasker Bliss, was already in France as the American military representative on the Supreme War Council. A thoughtful and intelligent man who loved to lie in bed with a hip flask reading Thucydides in the original Greek, he was also, many of the junior members of the American delegation believed, well past his prime. Since Wilson was to speak to him on only five occasions during the Peace Conference, perhaps that did not matter.

The president’s final selection, Henry White, was a charming, affable retired diplomat, the high point of whose career had been well before the war. Mrs. Wilson was to find him useful in Paris on questions of etiquette.

Wilson’s selection caused an uproar in the United States at the time and has caused controversy ever since. “A lot of cheapskates,” said William Taft. “I would swear if it would do any good.” Wilson had deliberately slighted the Republicans, most of whom had supported the war enthusiastically and many of whom now shared his vision of a League of Nations. “I tell you what,” the humorist Will Rogers had him saying to the Republicans, “we will split 50–50—I will go and you fellows can stay.” Even his most partisan supporters had urged him to appoint men such as Taft or the senior Republican senator on the important Committee on Foreign Relations, Henry Cabot Lodge. Wilson refused, with a variety of unconvincing excuses. The real reason was that he did not like or trust Republicans. His decision was costly, because it undercut his position in Paris and damaged his dream of a new world order with the United States at its heart.

Wilson remains puzzling in a way that Lloyd George and Clemenceau, his close colleagues in Paris, do not. What is one to make of a leader who drew on the most noble language of the Bible yet was so ruthless with those who crossed him? Who loved democracy but despised most of his fellow politicians? Who wanted to serve humanity but had so few personal relationships? Was he, as Teddy Roosevelt thought, “as insincere and cold-blooded an opportunist as we have ever had in the Presidency”? Or was he, as Baker believed, one of those rare idealists like Calvin or Cromwell, “who from time to time have appeared upon the earth & for a moment, in burst of strange power, have temporarily lifted erring mankind to a higher pitch of contentment than it was quite equal to”?

Wilson wanted power and he wanted to do great works. What brought the two sides of his character together was his ability, self-deception perhaps, to frame his decisions so that they became not merely necessary, but morally right. Just as American neutrality in the first years of the war had been right for Americans, and indeed for humanity, so the United States’ eventual entry into the war became a crusade, against human greed and folly, against Germany and
for justice, peace and civilization. This conviction, however, without which he could never have attempted what he did in Paris, made Wilson intolerant of differences and blind to the legitimate concerns of others. Those who opposed him were not just wrong but wicked.

Like the Germans. The decision to go to war had been agony for Wilson. He had worked for a peace of compromise between the Allies and the Central Powers. Even when they had rejected his offer to mediate, when German submarines had sunk American ships, when opponents such as Roosevelt had attacked his cowardice and when his own cabinet had been unanimous for war, he had waited. In the end he decided to intervene because, as he saw it, Germany left him no alternative. “It is a fearful thing,” he told Congress in April 1917, when he went before it to ask for a declaration of war, “to lead this great peaceful people into war, into the most terrible and disastrous of all wars, civilization itself seeming to be in the balance.” In Wilson’s view Germany, or at the very least its leaders, bore a heavy burden of guilt. The Germans might be redeemed, but they also must be chastised.

The photographs taken in 1919 make him look like an undertaker, but in the flesh Wilson was a handsome man, with fine, straight features and a spare, upright frame. In his manner he had something of the preacher and of the university professor. He placed great faith in reason and facts, but he saw it as auspicious that he landed in Europe on Friday, December 13. Thirteen was his lucky number. A deeply emotional man, he mistrusted emotion in others. It was good when it brought people to desire the best, dangerous when, like nationalism, it intoxicated them. Lloyd George, who never entirely got his measure, listed his good qualities to a friend—“kindly, sincere, straightforward”—and then added in the next breath “tactless, obstinate and vain.”

In public, Wilson was stiff and formal, but with his intimates he was charming and even playful. He was particularly at ease with women. He was usually in perfect control of himself, but during the Peace Conference he frequently lost his temper. (It is possible he suffered a stroke while he was in Paris.) He loved puns and limericks and he liked to illustrate his points with folksy stories. He enjoyed doing accents: Scottish or Irish, like his ancestors, or Southern black, like the people who worked for him in Washington. He was abstemious in his habits; at most he would drink a small glass of whisky in an evening. He loved gadgets and liked the new moving pictures. On the voyage to Europe he generally went to the after-dinner picture shows. To general consternation the feature one evening was a melodrama called The Second Wife.

Wilson’s relations with women had always caused a certain amount of gossip. During his first marriage he had close, possibly even romantic, friendships with several women. His first wife, whom he had loved deeply if not passionately, had died in 1914; by the end of 1915, he was married again, to a wealthy Washington widow some seventeen years his junior. That this caused gossip bewildered and infuriated him. He never forgave a British diplomat for a joke that went around Washington: “What did the new Mrs. Wilson do when the President proposed? She fell out of bed with surprise.” Wilson’s own family and friends were more charitable. “Isn’t it wonderful to see Father so happy,” exclaimed a daughter. House, who was later to become Mrs. Wilson’s bitter enemy, wrote in his diary that it was a relief that Wilson had someone to share his burdens: “his loneliness is pathetic.”

Edith Bolling, the new Mrs. Wilson, accompanied the president to Europe, a privilege not allowed lesser wives. She was warm and lively and laughed a great deal. She loved golf, shopping, orchids and parties. She had, everyone agreed, wonderful eyes, but some found her a bit plump and her mouth too large. She wore, they thought in Paris, her clothes a little too tight, the necks too low, the skirts too short. Wilson thought she was beautiful. Like him, she came from the South. She did not want to spoil her maid by taking her to London, she told a fellow American, because the British treated blacks too well. Although she had the easy flirtatious ways of a Southern woman, she was a shrewd businesswoman. After her first husband’s death she had run the family
Woodrow Wilson and his wife Edith in 1920, when the President was recuperating from his near fatal stroke. Sheltering her husband from the outside world, Edith controlled most of the visitors and correspondence that Wilson saw. Gravely ill and clinging to his foreign policy goals, Wilson witnessed the Republican controlled Senate defeat his cherished League of Nations. (Library of Congress)

jewelry store. When she married Wilson, he made it clear that he expected her to share his work. She took up the offer with enthusiasm. No intellectual, she was quick and determined. She was also ferociously loyal to her new husband. Wilson adored her.

On board the George Washington, the Wilsons kept to themselves, eating most of their meals in their state-room and strolling on the deck arm in arm. The American experts worked away on their maps and their papers, asking each other, with some disquiet, what their country’s policies were to be. Wilson had said much about general principles but had mentioned few specifics. A young man called William Bullitt boldly went up to the president and told him that they were all confused by his silence. Wilson was surprised but agreed pleasantly to meet with a dozen of the leading experts. “It is absolutely the first time,” said one afterward, “the president has let anyone know what his ideas are and what his policy is.” There were to be few other such occasions. The experts left the meeting heartened and impressed. Wilson was informal and friendly. He spoke about the heavy task ahead and how he was going to rely on them to provide him with the best information. They must feel free to come
to him at any time. "You tell me what’s right and I’ll fight for it.” He apologized for talking about his own ideas: “they weren’t very good but he thought them better than anything he had heard.”

When it came to making peace, Wilson said, their country would rightly hold the position of arbiter. They must live up to the great American traditions of justice and generosity. They would be, after all, “the only disinterested people at the Peace Conference.” What was more, he warned, “the men whom we were about to deal with did not represent their own people.” This was one of Wilson’s deep convictions, curious in a man whose own Congress was now dominated by his political opponents. Throughout the Peace Conference he clung to the belief that he spoke for the masses and that, if only he could reach them—whether French, Italian or even Russian—they would rally to his views.

He touched on another favorite theme: the United States, he assured his audience, had not entered the war for selfish reasons. In this, as in so much else, it was unlike other nations, for it did not want territory, tribute or even revenge. (As a sign that American participation in the war was different from that of the Europeans, Wilson had always insisted on the United States being an Associate and not an Ally.) . . .

In that meeting on the George Washington, Wilson also talked briefly about the difficulties that lay ahead with the nations emerging from the wreckage of central Europe: Poland, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia and many more. They could have whatever form of government they wanted, but they must include in their new states only those who wanted to be there. “Criterion not who are intellectual or social or economic leaders but who form mass of people,” a member of his audience wrote down. “Must have liberty—that is the kind of government they want.”

Of all the ideas Wilson brought to Europe, this concept of self-determination was, and has remained, one of the most controversial and opaque. During the Peace Conference, the head of the American mission in Vienna sent repeated requests to Paris and Washington for an explanation of the term. No answer ever came. It has never been easy to determine what Wilson meant. “Autonomous development,” “the right of those who submit to authority to have a voice in their own governments,” “the rights and liberties of small nations,” a world made safe “for every peace-loving nation which, like our own, wishes to live its own life, determine its own institutions”; the phrases had poured out from the White House, an inspiration to peoples around the world. But what did they add up to? Did Wilson merely mean, as sometimes appeared, an extension of democratic self-government? Did he really intend that any people who called themselves a nation should have their own state? In a statement he drafted, but never used, to persuade the American people to support the peace settlements, he stated, “We say now that all these people have the right to live their own lives under governments which they themselves choose to set up. That is the American principle.” Yet he had no sympathy for Irish nationalists and their struggle to free themselves from British rule. During the Peace Conference he insisted that the Irish question was a domestic matter for the British. When a delegation of nationalist Irish asked him for support, he felt, he told his legal adviser, like telling them to go to hell. His view was that the Irish lived in a democratic country and they could sort it out through democratic means.

The more Wilson’s concept of self-determination is examined, the more difficulties appear. Lansing asked himself: “When the President talks of ‘self-determination’ what unit has he in mind? Does he mean a race, a territorial area, or a community?” It was a calamity, Lansing thought, that Wilson had ever hit on the phrase. “It will raise hopes which can never be realized. It will, I fear, cost thousands of lives. In the end it is bound to be discredited, to be called the dream of an idealist who failed to realize the danger until it was too late to check those who attempt to put the principle into force.” . . .

Wilson spent most of his time in the meeting with his experts on the matter closest to his heart: the need to find a new way of managing international relations. This did not come as a surprise to his audience. In his famous Fourteen Points of January 1918,
and in subsequent speeches, he had sketched out his ideas. The balance of power, he told the U.S. Congress in his "Four Principles" speech of February 1918, was forever discredited as a way to keep peace. There would be no more secret diplomacy of the sort that had led Europe into calculating deals, rash promises and entangling alliances, and so on down the slope to war. The peace settlements must not leave the way open to future wars. There must be no retribution, no unjust claims and no huge fines—indemnities—paid by the losers to the winners. That was what had been wrong after Prussia defeated France in 1870. The French had never forgiven Germany for the monies paid over and for the loss of their provinces of Alsace and Lorraine. War itself must become more difficult. There must be controls on armaments—general disarmament, even. Ships must sail freely across the world's seas. (That meant, as the British well knew, the end of their traditional weapon of strangling enemy economies by blockading their ports and seizing their shipping; it had brought Napoleon down, and, so they thought, hastened the Allied victory over Germany.) Trade barriers must be lowered so the nations of the world would become more interdependent.

At the heart of Wilson's vision was a League of Nations to provide the collective security that, in a well-run civil society, was provided by the government, its laws, its courts and its police. "Old system of powers, balance of powers, had failed too often," one expert jotted down, as the president spoke. The League was to have a council that could "butt in" in case of disputes. "If unsuccessful the offending nation is to be outlawed—'And outlaws are not popular now.'"

Wilson's was a liberal and a Christian vision. It challenged the view that the best way to preserve the peace was to balance nations against each other, through alliances if necessary, and that strength, not collective security, was the way to deter attack. Wilson was also offering a riposte to the alternative being put out by the Russian Bolsheviks, that revolution would bring one world, where conflict would no longer exist. He believed in separate nations and in democracy, both as the best form of government and as a force for good in the world. When governments were chosen by their people, they would not, indeed they could not, fight each other. "These are American principles," he told the Senate in 1917. "We could stand for no others. And they are also the principles and policies of forward looking men and women everywhere, of every modern nation, of every enlightened community. They are the principles of mankind and they must prevail." He was speaking, he thought, for humanity. Americans tended to see their values as universal ones, and their government and society as a model for all others. The United States, after all, had been founded by those who wanted to leave an old world behind, and its revolution was, in part, about creating a new one. American democracy, the American constitution, even American ways of doing business, were examples that others should follow for their own good. As one of the younger Americans said in Paris: "Before we get through with these fellows over here we will teach them how to do things and how to do them quickly."

The Americans had a complicated attitude toward the Europeans: a mixture of admiration for their past accomplishments, a conviction that the Allies would have been lost without the United States and a suspicion that, if the Americans were not careful, the wily Europeans would pull them into their toils again. As they prepared for the Peace Conference, the American delegates suspected that the French and the British were already preparing their traps...

American exceptionalism has always had two sides: the one eager to set the world to rights, the other ready to turn its back with contempt if its message should be ignored. The peace settlement, Wilson told his fellow passengers, must be based on the new principles: "If it doesn't work right, the world will raise hell." He himself, he added half-jokingly, would go somewhere to "hide my head, perhaps to Guam." Faith in their own exceptionalism has sometimes led to a certain obtuseness on the part of Americans, a tendency to preach at other nations rather than listen to them, a tendency as well to assume that American motives are pure where those of
others are not. And Wilson was very American. He came to the Peace Conference, said Lloyd George, like a missionary to rescue the heathen Europeans, with his “little sermonettes” full of rather obvious remarks.

It was easy to mock Wilson, and many did. It is also easy to forget how important his principles were in 1919 and how many people, and not just in the United States, wanted to believe in his great dream of a better world. They had, after all, a terrible reference point in the ruin left by the Great War. Wilson kept alive the hope that human society, despite the evidence, was getting better, that nations would one day live in harmony. In 1919, before disillusionment had set in, the world was more than ready to listen to him.

What Wilson had to say struck a chord, not just with liberals or pacifists but also among Europe’s political and diplomatic élites. Sir Maurice Hankey, secretary to the British War Cabinet and then the Peace Conference itself, always carried a copy of the Fourteen Points in the box he kept for crucial reference material. They were, he said, the “moral background.” Across Europe there were squares, streets, railway stations and parks bearing Wilson’s name. Wall posters cried, “We Want a Wilson Peace.” In Italy, soldiers knelt in front of his picture; in France, the left-wing paper L’Humanité brought out a special issue in which the leading lights of the French left vied with each other to praise Wilson’s name. The leaders of the Arab revolt in the desert, Polish nationalists in Warsaw, rebels in the Greek islands, students in Peking, Koreans trying to shake off Japan’s control, all took the Fourteen Points as their inspiration. Wilson himself found it exhilarating but also terrifying. “I am wondering,” he said to George Creel, his brilliant propaganda chief, who was on board the George Washington, “whether you have not unconsciously spun a net for me from which there is no escape.” The whole world was turning to the United States but, he went on, they both knew that such great problems could not be fixed at once. “What I seem to see—with all my heart I hope that I am wrong—is a tragedy of disappointment.”

The George Washington reached the French port of Brest on December 13, 1918. The war had been over for just a month. While the president stood on the bridge, his ship steamed slowly in through a great avenue of battleships from the British, French and American navies. For the first time in days, the sun was shining. The streets were lined with laurel wreaths and flags. On the walls, posters paid tribute to Wilson, those from right-wingers for saving them from Germany and those from the left for the new world he promised. Huge numbers of people, many resplendent in their traditional Breton costumes, covered every inch of pavement, every roof, every tree. Even the lampposts were taken. The air filled with the skirl of Breton bagpipes and repeated shouts of “Vive l’Amérique! Vive Wilson!” The French foreign minister, Stéphen Pichon, welcomed him, saying, “We are so thankful that you have come over to give us the right kind of peace.” Wilson made a noncommittal reply and the American party boarded the night train for Paris. At three in the morning, Wilson's doctor happened to look out the window of his compartment. “I saw not only men and women but little children standing with uncovered head to cheer the passage of the special train.”

Wilson’s reception in Paris was an even greater triumph, with even greater crowds: “the most remarkable demonstration,” said an American who lived in Paris, “of enthusiasm and affection on the part of the Parisians that I have ever heard of, let alone seen.”

His train pulled into the Luxembourg station, which had been festooned with bunting and flags and filled with great masses of flowers. Clemenceau, the French prime minister, was there with his government and his longtime antagonist, the president Raymond Poincaré. As guns boomed across Paris to announce Wilson’s arrival, the crowds started to press against the soldiers who lined the route. The president and his wife drove in an open carriage through the Place de la Concorde and on up the Champs-Elysées to their residence, to the sound of wild cheers. That night, at a quiet family dinner, Wilson said he was very pleased with his reception. “He had carefully watched the attitude of the crowd,” he reportedly
told the table, “and he was satisfied that they were most friendly.” . . .

The Peace Conference continued until January 1920, but it was like a theatrical production whose stars had gone. The foreign ministers and the diplomats took over again but they never regained their old grip on foreign relations. The important decisions were always referred back to their political superiors in Rome or London or Washington and the difficult issues were hammered out in special conferences, of which Lloyd George alone attended thirty-three between 1919 and 1922.

Between January and June 1919, the peacemakers had accomplished an enormous amount: a League of Nations and an International Labour Organization, mandates handed out, the Germany treaty finished, the treaties with Austria, Hungary, Bulgaria and Ottoman Turkey nearly done—but there were many loose ends . . .

The peacemakers in 1919 felt that they had done their best, but they had no illusions that they had solved the world’s problems. As he left Paris on June 28, Wilson said to his wife, “Well, little girl, it is finished, and, as no one is satisfied, it makes me hope we have made a just peace; but it is all in the lap of the gods.” It was also in the laps of those who came next to lead the world, some of whom had been in Paris—such as Prince Konoe of Japan and Franklin Delano Roosevelt—some of whom had been watching from afar. In Italy, Mussolini was rising fast in nationalist politics, as the old liberal order crumbled. . . . The young Adolf Hitler was in Munich that June, taking congenial courses on the glories of German history and the evils of international Jewish capital. Already he was discovering his own talents as an ideologue and an orator. . . .

Wilson’s end was the saddest. Exhausted by the Peace Conference, he plunged into a wrenching and debilitating fight with the Senate over ratification of the Treaty of Versailles and, more specifically, the League of Nations. His supporters and his opponents had both been busy while he was away. The League to Enforce the Peace was energetically lobbying for ratification. Wilson, unfortunately, did not much care for them, dismissing them as “butters-in” and “wool-gatherers.” The League for the Preservation of American Independence, inspired, so it frequently said, by George Washington’s and Thomas Jefferson’s repeated warnings against permanent or entangling alliances, did its best to thwart the president. As for the ninety-six members of the Senate, it became apparent that they were dividing into roughly four groups. At least six Republicans would not have the League in any form—they came to be known as the Irreconcilables. A few Democrat mavericks would probably vote with them. Some nine Republicans were Mild Reservationists who would have accepted the League so long as their reservations to protect American sovereignty were registered. (Reservations were the well-established diplomatic practice of accepting an international agreement with qualifications; so long as all parties to the treaty agreed, the reservations stood.) This left three dozen Republicans who were not yet fully committed. Most Democrats still followed their president, although many privately hoped he would come to terms with the Mild Reservationists. If Wilson did compromise, there was a good chance that there would be enough votes to get the treaty passed. Would the European powers accept reservations? Lloyd George claimed in his memoirs that they had always expected they might have to. But they were never put to the test.

Wilson could have built his own coalition. The Republicans only had a majority of two in the Senate and he could have won over the moderates among them by accepting some reservations. When Lansing urged him to compromise, the president was unmoved: “His face took on that stubborn and pugnacious expression which comes when anyone tells him a fact which interferes with his plans.” His opponents, Wilson told an intimate, were moved by the basest instincts. “They are going to have the most conspicuously contemptible names in history.”

The president arrived back in Washington at midnight on July 8, 1919. A crowd of 100,000, enormous
The Council of Four included from left to right: Vittorio Orlando of Italy, David Lloyd George of England, Georges Clemenceau of France, and Woodrow Wilson. During the negotiation of the Treaty of Versailles, Wilson lost all but four of his Fourteen Points. The victorious European leaders were never committed to

Wilson’s noble goal of “a peace without victory.” As Clemenceau sneered: “God gave us the ten commandments and we broke them. Wilson gave us the Fourteen Points—we shall see.”

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for those days, waited at the train station. Two days later he presented the Treaty of Versailles, with the League covenant at its start, to the Senate in person. “Dare we reject it,” he asked them, “and break the heart of the world?” His speech, it was generally agreed, was poor. Unusually, he read parts of it and he lost his thread in places. Washington, and the country, readied themselves for the next step—the Senate’s consideration of the treaty.

At first Wilson chose to work largely behind the scenes, meeting with Republican senators in an effort to persuade them that American independence was not compromised by membership in the League or by Article X, in particular, which was the heart of collective security. (Signatories promised “to respect and preserve as against external aggression the territorial integrity and existing political independence of all Members of the League.”) He was confident, he
told a British diplomat, that the treaty would go through the Senate. He was not prepared, he reiterated, to accept any changes; the treaty must be ratified as they had written it in Paris.

At the end of his first week in Washington, Wilson escaped the summer heat with a cruise on the Potomac on the presidential yacht. He was already looking tired. The impending treaty fight was not the only problem facing his administration that summer. Food prices were going up sharply; racial tensions were exploding into race riots; key unions threatened strikes. The weather broke, with violent thunderstorms, and the president took to his bed for several days. A touch of dysentery, was Admiral Grayson's explanation. There has been much speculation since that it was in fact a minor stroke. Whatever the case, and we will never know for certain, Wilson was clearly not the man he had been. He was easily confused and forgot things he should have known. He lost his temper frequently, often over small matters. Wilson's deteriorating mental and physical health contributed, perhaps, to his refusal to face the reality that he did not have the votes to get the treaty as it stood through the Senate and also to making his well-known stubbornness something more like blind obstinacy. Grayson and Mrs. Wilson, loyal and protective to a fault, did their best to persuade him to rest. They also downplayed the problems with his health.

On July 14 a Democrat who supported the treaty made the first of what were to be five months of speeches in the Senate. On July 31 the Senate Foreign Relations Committee under Lodge's chairmanship started six weeks of hearings. Not surprisingly, the questioning from the Republican majority focused on the League's covenant, especially the by now notorious Article X. On August 19, in an extraordinary breach with convention, Wilson appeared before the committee. He gave no indication that he was prepared to compromise. Four days later, the committee voted on the first of what were to be numerous amendments and reservations to the treaty. The issue they chose was Shantung—to reverse its award to Japan and hand it back to China. An angry Wilson decided the time had come to reach beyond the senators to the American people.

On September 2, 1919, he left Washington for a trip across the country. His closest advisers begged him not to go. Wilson was adamant. The treaty must be saved, even if he had to give his life for it. "In the presence of the great tragedy which now faces the world," he told them, "no decent man can count his personal fortunes in the reckoning." Grayson heard the decision with dread: "There was nothing I could do except to go with him and take such care of him as I could." As Wilson boarded his special train, he complained about the dreadful headaches that he had been having. For almost a month Wilson made speech after speech, sometimes two, even three a day. He hammered at the same themes. The treaty was a great document for peace and for humanity, dearly bought with the sacrifice of the young American men who had gone over to fight in Europe. Those who opposed it back in Washington were partisan, shortsighted, selfish, ignorant, perhaps something worse. "When at last in the annals of mankind they are gibbeted, they will regret that the gibbet is so high." He was glad, he told an audience in St. Louis, that he was away from the capital. "The real voices of the great people of America sometimes sound faint and distant in that strange city!" The crowds grew larger and more enthusiastic as he headed west. Supporters of the treaty grew moderately confident that it might get through if only Wilson would accept some of the milder reservations.

Wilson's headaches grew worse and he looked more and more exhausted. Bad news came in from Washington. Sentiment was growing in favor of reservations. . . . Grayson noticed with alarm that the president turned pale and saliva appeared in the corners of his mouth. In San Francisco, Wilson told an old friend, a woman whom he had once been close to, that the attacks on the treaty were simply personal. "If I had nothing to do with the League of Nations, it would go through just like that!"

On September 25 Wilson was in Colorado. By now he was having repeated coughing attacks which
Grayson attributed to asthma. He had to sit propped up at nights and could not sleep for more than two hours at a time. He spoke in Pueblo that afternoon, his forty-sixth speech in twenty-one days. "Disloyalty," he said of the League's opponents. There would be no compromise with them, no reservations to the covenant: "We have got to adopt it or reject it."

Wilson never spoke in public again. At two the next morning, Mrs. Wilson woke Grayson. He found the president in a pitiable state, ill, gasping for air, the muscles in his face twitching. Wilson feebly insisted that he must carry on. His wife and doctor overruled him. "The doctor is right," Wilson told his secretary with tears in his eyes. "I have never been in a condition like this, and I just feel as if I am going to pieces." The president was suffering, Grayson said in a public statement, from physical exhaustion and a nervous reaction affecting his stomach. The rest of the tour was canceled and the president's train headed back to Washington.

On October 2, at the White House, Wilson had a massive stroke that left him partly paralyzed on his left side. Although he would make a limited recovery over time, he was not physically or mentally the man he had been. He never effectively functioned as president again, although he continued to influence the battle over the treaty from his sickroom. Mrs. Wilson and Grayson took it upon themselves to conceal the full extent of his illness and to carry out his wishes. In the first weeks after the stroke, when it was not clear that Wilson would survive, they kept everyone except Wilson's daughters and the essential nurses and doctors from seeing the president. The leader of the Senate Democrats, Gilbert Hitchcock of Nebraska, was shocked when he finally saw Wilson on November 7. "As he lay in bed slightly propped up by pillows with the useless arm concealed beneath the covers I beheld an emaciated old man with a thin white beard which had been permitted to grow."

The treaty continued to make its way through the Senate for the rest of October and part of November 1919. Amendments, twelve in all, were defeated by a combination of Democrats and moderate Republicans. Lodge managed, however, to hold most of the Republicans together, and their votes, along with those of the few Democrats who crossed party lines, were sufficient to attach a number of reservations to the treaty. The most crucial reservation involved Article X; the United States would not act to protect the territorial integrity or independence of any League member unless Congress approved. Lodge put forward a motion of ratification incorporating the reservation. When Hitchcock went to Wilson's bedside for a second time on November 17 to discuss this, he found the president significantly more alert—but also more determined than ever. Wilson adamantly opposed the reservation in any form. "That cuts the very heart out of the treaty," he told Hitchcock to let the Republicans take the responsibility for defeating the treaty; they would have to answer to the people of the United States.

The following day Mrs. Wilson sent Hitchcock a letter she had written at her husband's dictation. The reservations of Senator Lodge and his cronies amounted to a nullification of the treaty. "I sincerely hope," Wilson said unequivocally, "that the friends and supporters of the League will vote against the Lodge resolution of ratification." The next day the Senate voted on Lodge's motion. It was defeated by a combination of those Democrats, the majority, who still followed Wilson's bidding and Republican Irreconcilables. Four weeks later, Wilson learned that he had won the Nobel Peace Prize.

Moderate Republicans and Democrats made a last-ditch effort to find a compromise. From the White House an embittered Wilson did his best to block them. Even so the moderates came close; when the Senate voted for the final time on March 19, 1920, on a fresh resolution to ratify the treaty, with slightly modified reservations, the new resolution passed. Twenty-three Democrats defied their president to vote in favor. The necessary two-thirds majority, however, remained just out of reach so the Senate failed to give its consent to the treaty. "Doctor," Wilson said to Grayson that night, "the devil is a busy man."

He never changed his view that he had been right to reject compromise. The United States later
signed separate treaties with Germany, Austria and Hungary, but it never joined the League. Wilson, who had briefly contemplated running for president again, lingered on until 1924. Mrs. Wilson survived to go to John F. Kennedy's inauguration in 1961.

Wilson's efforts, and those of the many other peacemakers who shared his ideals, were not completely wasted. The Treaty of Versailles, and the other treaties with the defeated that used it as a model, certainly contained provisions about territory and reparations that could have been written in earlier centuries, but they were also imbued with a new spirit.... The provisions for an International Labour Organization, for treaties to protect minorities, to set up a permanent court of justice or to try men such as the kaiser for offenses against international morality, underlined the idea that there were certain things that all humanity had in common and that there could be international standards beyond those of mere national interest. And when those treaties were attacked in the interwar years it was generally because they had failed to match those standards.

Later it became commonplace to blame everything that went wrong in the 1920s and 1930s on the peacemakers and the settlements they made in Paris in 1919, just as it became easy to despair of democracy. Pointing the finger and shrugging helplessly are effective ways of avoiding responsibility. Eighty years later the old charges about the Paris Peace Conference still have a wide circulation. “The final crime,” declared The Economist in its special millennium issue, was “the Treaty of Versailles, whose harsh terms would ensure a second war.” That is to ignore the actions of everyone—political leaders, diplomats, soldiers, ordinary voters—for twenty years between 1919 and 1939.

Hitler did not wage war because of the Treaty of Versailles, although he found its existence a godsend for his propaganda. Even if Germany had been left with its old borders, even if it had been allowed whatever military forces it wanted, even if it had been permitted to join with Austria, he still would have wanted more: the destruction of Poland, control of Czechoslovakia, above all the conquest of the Soviet Union. He would have demanded room for the German people to expand and the destruction of their enemies, whether Jews or Bolsheviks. There was nothing in the Treaty of Versailles about that.

The peacemakers of 1919 made mistakes, of course. By their offhand treatment of the non-European world, they stirred up resentments for which the West is still paying today. They took pains over the borders in Europe, even if they did not draw them to everyone's satisfaction, but in Africa they carried on the old practice of handing out territory to suit the imperialist powers. In the Middle East, they threw together peoples, in Iraq most notably, who still have not managed to cohere into a civil society. If they could have done better, they certainly could have done much worse. They tried, even cynical old Clemenceau, to build a better order. They could not foresee the future and they certainly could not control it. That was up to their successors. When war came in 1939, it was a result of twenty years of decisions taken or not taken, not of arrangements made in 1919.

Of course things might have been different if Germany had been more thoroughly defeated. Or if the United States had been as powerful after the First World War as it was after the Second—and had been willing to use that power. If Britain and France had not been weakened by the war—or if they had been so weakened that the United States had felt obliged to step in. If Austria-Hungary had not disappeared. If its successor states had not quarreled with each other. If China had not been so weak. If Japan had been more sure of itself. If states had accepted a League of Nations with real powers. If the world had been so thoroughly devastated by war that it was willing to contemplate a new way of managing international relations. The peacemakers, however, had to deal with reality, not what might have been. They grappled with huge and difficult questions. How can the irrational passions of nationalism or religion be contained before they do more damage? How can we outlaw war? We are still asking those questions.
1. Explain MacMillan's conclusion that Wilson "remained a Southerner in some ways all his life." Describe how Wilson's background and character made it difficult for him to compromise.

2. Why did Woodrow Wilson personally lead the peace delegation to Paris? What risks did he take by leaving the United States when it was still recuperating from the war and was filled with anxieties about the upcoming peace settlement? Why did his peace delegation cause rancor among Republicans?

3. What role did women, especially Edith Bolling Galt, play in Wilson's life? How did the second Mrs. Wilson attempt to shield and protect her husband during those days when, gravely ill, he battled with the Senate over the League of Nations?

4. Why, at the peace negotiations at Versailles, was Wilson's goal of self-determination not consistently applied to all nations? For example, why did the Irish find unconvincing the President's appeal for self-determination? In what ways did the League of Nations challenge the old belief of world peace achieved through a balance of power? Explain the author's conclusion that Wilson's peace program incorporated the concept of "American exceptionalism."

5. When Wilson returned from France with the Treaty of Versailles, what dissension did he encounter in the United States Senate? Why was the President in no mood to compromise on any changes in the League covenant? How might Wilson's health problems have contributed to his intransigence on the peace treaty?

6. Why does MacMillan assert that the failures of the 1919 peacemakers did not cause the foreign policy problems of the next two decades or the outbreak of the Second World War? In what ways are twenty-first-century world leaders still trying to resolve threats to world peace that are similar to those faced by the diplomats of 1919?