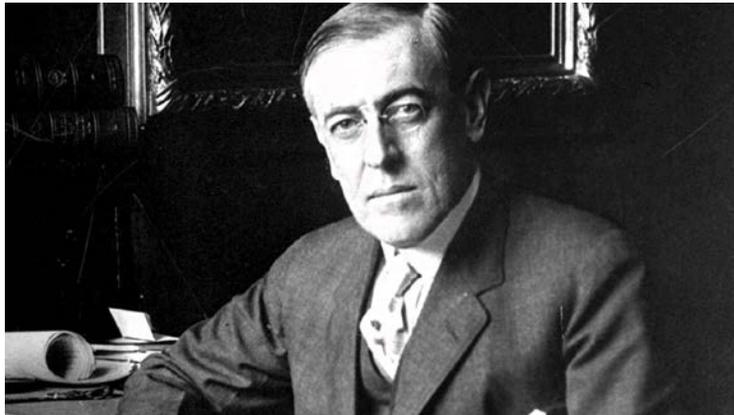


Armistice Day broadcast--Woodrow Wilson (November 10, 1923)

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Essay by Richard Striner (guest post)*



Woodrow Wilson

Woodrow Wilson's Armistice Day Speech in Perspective

Woodrow Wilson's radio address on November 10, 1923--on the eve of Armistice Day--must certainly stand as one of the most poignant and in some ways prophetic speeches of his life. It must also stand as one of the most ironic, or so it might be argued.

Wilson had only a few months to live when he delivered the address. His life ebbing away, he told the American people that the happy memories of that November day in 1918 when the guns fell silent--the day on which the horrific slaughter of World War One at last came to an end--would be "forever marred and embittered for us by the shameful fact that . . . we turned our backs on our associates and refused to bear any responsible part in the administration of the peace."

Wilson was referring to the fact that the United States had not joined the League of Nations.

Even so, said Wilson, there was reason to hope that America would come to its senses over time and eventually shoulder the burdens of global leadership. "The whole field of international relations is in perilous confusion," Wilson argued, but that very situation opened up a chance for the United States to resolve "to put self-interest away and once more formulate and act on the highest ideals and purposes of international policy."

Of course Wilson's vision would not come true in any meaningful way until the "perilous confusion" of world affairs had degenerated by the 1930s into global fascist aggression that led to a direct attack upon the United States at Pearl Harbor in 1941. Then and only then would America rise to the mission of world leadership and try, under the prompting of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, to exert the great power in world affairs that both Wilson and FDR's Republican fifth cousin Theodore Roosevelt had advocated for a generation earlier.

During World War II, a great revival of Woodrow Wilson's reputation took place.

When America had turned to the ways of isolationism in the 1920s and 1930s, Wilson was scorned by many as a credulous dreamer who had tried, in the face of the world's grim realities, to get America sucked into an endless, wasteful, enervating, and completely hopeless crusade, a crusade to "put out fires" all over the world when there was very little sense for any nation (or any group of nations) to attempt such a thing. Once a fire had been extinguished in one bleak portion of the world, yet another fire would be starting up somewhere else, and then another fire would begin after that, and this dismal process would simply go on and on, interminably, with America enslaved by a task that was absolutely futile.

But during World War II, a great many Americans repudiated isolationism and concluded that Wilson had been right--concluded that the terrible task of winning yet another global war would have been unnecessary if America (and the other western democracies) had put out the fires of fascist aggression in the early stages when the challenge of doing so would have been comparatively manageable, even easy.

In 1944, this message was delivered in an influential Hollywood film that won five Oscars. The movie "Wilson," produced and released by Twentieth Century-Fox and starring Alexander Knox in the title role, portrayed its subject as a man ahead of his times, a prophet whose vision should at last be heeded, lest global catastrophes of even worse magnitude occur in the future.

The problem with this view of Wilson--which is still extremely prevalent--is that Wilson himself was in large part to blame for the fact that the United States did not join the League of Nations. He made one mistake after another as he handled the issues from 1918 to 1920.

Indeed, well before the catastrophic stroke that disabled him on October 2, 1919, there was evidence that the arteriosclerosis that was diagnosed in Wilson many years earlier was leading to episodic dementia. His judgment was increasingly warped and his behavior was all too frequently petulant, stubborn, and irrational.

In 1918, for example, former President William Howard Taft, who was the head of an organization called the "League to Enforce Peace," paid a call on Wilson at the White House and offered to help build bipartisan support for the creation of a League of Nations. Wilson ignored this offer.

Then, when the Republicans took control of Congress in the mid-term elections of 1918, Wilson refused to name any prominent Republicans to go with him to Paris and participate in the peace negotiations, which, at Wilson's insistence, commenced with discussions regarding a League of Nations. Preliminary terms for the League Covenant had been drafted when Wilson returned to the United States briefly in February 1919 to sign legislation passed by the outgoing Congress.

At the suggestion of aides, Wilson grudgingly scheduled a dinner at the White House to present the preliminary terms of the covenant to congressional leaders. And Wilson was told in no uncertain terms that the League was in trouble unless he would agree to discuss revisions with the members from both parties who found the terms troublesome.

Wilson refused. Instead, he threw a public temper tantrum on the last day of February in remarks at a meeting of the Democratic National Committee, stating that "of all the blind and little provincial people," the members of Congress who were calling for revisions to the covenant "are the littlest and most contemptible They have not even got good working imitations of

minds. They remind me of a man with a head that is not a head but is just a knot providentially put there to keep him from raveling out.”

After Wilson returned to France, Senator Henry Cabot Lodge--the Republican majority leader and chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee--circulated a “Round Robin” whose signatories declared that they would never vote to ratify a treaty containing the League covenant in its existing form. Treaties must be ratified by two-thirds Senate majorities. And more than a third of the members of the Senate signed the Round Robin, which meant that Wilson’s efforts were totally doomed unless he agreed to ask for revisions to the covenant that would make it acceptable to the Senate.

Wilson angrily agreed to ask for changes, but he refused to consult with any members of Congress as the changes were formulated.

When Wilson returned to the United States and presented the Treaty of Versailles to the Senate in early July, it was obvious that the treaty was dead on arrival unless Wilson would talk to the Republican leaders.

In August he at last agreed to engage in some discussions and the going was tough indeed. But a substantial group of moderate Republicans known as “mild reservationists” were willing to vote for the treaty if the ratification made it clear that only Congress--through a declaration of war--could send American troops abroad to engage in peace-keeping actions recommended by the League of Nations.

There was nothing unreasonable in that position. And a member of Wilson’s own party, Democratic Senator Gilbert Hitchcock, drafted compromise language in line with the request of the mild reservationists. Henry Cabot Lodge had drafted a different reservation.

The tone of the Lodge reservation was decidedly different from the tone of the Hitchcock reservation. But there was very little difference in substance, and the difference in tone was largely symbolic. Hitchcock’s draft-- in essence--proclaimed that the United States would *always* give favorable consideration to requests from the League for collective security action *if* such requests were consistent with the will of Congress. Lodge’s draft put the very same proposition in negative form. It proclaimed that America would *never* give consideration to such requests *unless* the members of Congress agreed.

Both drafts said substantially the same thing, but one of them was framed in positive language and the other one in negative language.

Wilson was just on the brink of consenting to the Hitchcock reservation when, in a snap decision, he declared that the covenant was perfect as it was and it was time for him to go over the heads of the members of Congress and take the proposition to the American people. He would tour the country by train giving speeches to build up support. This speech-making tour was so exhausting that it broke Wilson’s health: he collapsed in Pueblo, Colorado, and after his return to Washington, he suffered the paralytic stroke.

In November 1919, the Senate deliberated and voted on the peace treaty containing the controversial League Covenant. But there were insufficient votes to approve the treaty with any of the different reservations that were proposed. Wilson forbade Democratic senators from

breaking ranks and he even threatened any Democrat who voted for any reservations with political reprisals in Election Year 1920.

After the failure of the Senate to ratify the treaty, shock and alarm passed through the ranks of political moderates in both parties and some of them were determined to try again. Former President Taft stated that even the Lodge reservation left the heart of the covenant intact.

So in January 1920, some renegade Democrats met with Lodge and with Republican mild reservationists to work out a compromise. The negotiations were difficult, but more and more Democrats were concluding that Wilson's judgment was not to be trusted. The Senate voted again on the treaty on March 19, 1920. Twenty-one Democrats rebelled against Wilson and voted for the treaty with the Lodge reservation attached. But the treaty fell seven votes short of the two-thirds majority.

So the treaty was never ever ratified and the United States remained technically at war with the Central Powers. It would be left to Wilson's presidential successor, Warren G. Harding, to negotiate a separate peace.

This story puts the declarations of Wilson in his 1923 radio address into tragic perspective. This presidential oracle--this prophet who was supposedly years ahead of his time--was so deeply out of step with the political realities of his own time that he ruined his opportunity to get America committed to global collective security.

His stubbornness and his delusions got the better of him.

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*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.