

Congressional Republicans Perspective

Republicans were not united in their opposition to the Treaty of Versailles or American participation in the League of Nations. Some were extreme isolationists philosophically opposed to any international involvement. Others stood much closer to Wilson's position, agreeing with the underlying principle of the organization but expressing reservations about a controversial section that committed the United States to collective security. Between these two groups was the majority faction, led by Henry Cabot Lodge of Massachusetts, which exhibited determination to have the League of Nations on their terms or not have it at all.

Partisanship motivated Lodge to oppose ratification of the peace treaty in order to prevent Wilson and Democrats from taking credit for it in the November election. Combining his partisan opposition to Wilson with a lifelong passion to defend American freedom of action in foreign affairs, Lodge waged a fierce campaign against Wilson's version of the peace.

During this struggle over the treaty Wilson suffered his paralyzing strokes. In November 1919, when the Senate voted on the treaty as amended by Lodge's committee, Democrats dutifully opposed the treaty as Wilson had instructed. The combined opposition of Democrats and isolationist Republicans defeated this version of the treaty.

The British Perspective

British interests at the Paris Peace Conference were represented by Prime Minister David Lloyd George, who developed an easier relationship with Woodrow Wilson than French Premier Georges Clemenceau. However, the prime minister was capable of diplomatic sharp dealing and deception when necessary.

Leading British concerns included the following:

- **Primacy on the Seas.** British economic and diplomatic strength were rooted in a vigorous international trade, protected worldwide by the British Royal Navy. They held little interest in Wilson's call for freedom of the seas and wanted to continue a long tradition of ruling the waves with little interference from other nations.
- **Territorial Gain.** To keep merchant and naval vessels afloat, the British needed to expand a network of repair and fueling stations across the globe. They hoped to divide German island possessions in the Pacific with their ally Japan and secure access to a newly important fuel — oil — by gaining a position of primacy in the Middle East. The British also hoped to acquire some German holdings in Africa.

British Aspirations and Compromise. Foreign Affairs, 1919. US History.com. 6 Oct. 2009 <<http://www.u-s-history.com/pages/h1331.html>>.

The French Perspective

Woodrow Wilson arrived back in Europe on March 14, 1919, following a contentious work session at home. Lines of division had been drawn sharply between the president and the Republican-controlled Senate over the nature of the pending peace agreement.

Relationships in Paris were, if anything, worse. The crafty and cynical Premier Georges Clemenceau, known to his countrymen as “the Tiger,” was an effective advocate of French interests and held little sympathy for Wilson’s idealistic approach to peace. He remarked, “God gave us the Ten Commandments and we broke them. Wilson gives us the Fourteen Points. We shall see.” Having suffered two devastating invasions from Germany in the past 50 years, the French in 1919 were intent on humbling Germany, not just for the immediate future, but for generations. Two issues dominated French thinking:

1. **Reparations.** Clemenceau insisted on receiving compensation for damages incurred during the war, but sought to defer the determination of the actual amount to be collected from the aggressor. Instead, Germany would in effect be asked to sign a “blank check” for reparations in an amount to be set at a later time.
2. **Buffer Zones.** In addition to monetary awards, the French sought the creation of buffer territories to insulate them against future German aggression. The French asked for the right to occupy all territory up to the west bank of the Rhine River or, failing that, for the creation of a new buffer state. These demands were resisted by Wilson as running counter to his ideal of territorial self-determination; he did not want Germans living under French control — an obvious source of irritation and a likely contributor to future conflict.

The French press and public, which had recently held Wilson in almost reverential terms, turned sharply against the president for resisting their national aspirations. Suffering from fatigue and the flu, Wilson clashed bitterly with Clemenceau and at one point in early April threatened to return to the United States. Perhaps in part due to that threat, a compromise was reached on two territorial issues of vital importance to France:

- The Rhineland. The area bordering the great river was to be occupied by the French for a maximum of 15 years.
- The Saar Basin. This area, rich in coal, also was to be occupied by the French for up to 15 years, then a plebiscite would be held to determine its ultimate allegiance.

As a further inducement to accept compromise, the French were offered a defensive treaty with the United States and Britain, pledging military assistance in the event of an unprovoked attack by Germany — a measure certain to raise the ire of the increasingly isolationist U.S. Senate.

French Aspirations and Compromise. Wars and Battles, World War I - Spring 1919. US History.com. 6 Oct. 2009
<<http://www.u-s-history.com/pages/h1329.html>>.

The Italian Perspective

The Italian premier, Vittorio Emanuele Orlando, was a member of the Big Four at the Paris Peace Conference at the end of World War I. His sole interest was to gain control of neighboring territory that he felt was promised in the secret Treaty of London in 1915. That agreement had induced a reluctant Italy to desert the Central Powers and join forces with the Allies. The Italians anticipated establishing their northern border at the Brenner Pass and adding lands on the eastern shore of the Adriatic Sea.

Later, Italian demands were levied upon the city of Fiume (later Rijeka), which was inhabited largely by Croats.

Orlando's effort to extend Italian control over non-Italians ran counter to Woodrow Wilson's principle of national self-determination. During often bitter negotiations, the American president took the unprecedented step of making an appeal directly to the Italian people. His effort failed miserably. The Italians were caught up in a wave of nationalism and clearly supported their delegates at the conference. Wilson, who had earlier been greeted as an international savior in Rome, became the object of ridicule.

Wilson reluctantly agreed to the northward Italian expansion, overlooking the fact that the area was home to more than 200,000 German-speaking people. However, he held firm in his opposition to the absorption of Fiume (which remained essentially independent until Italian Fascists staged a coup in 1924). Italian delegates protested Wilson's stance by walking out of the negotiations and remaining absent for two weeks. Wilson was unmoved and Fiume continued as a source of bitterness between the two nations.

Italian Aspirations. World Affairs, World War I. US History.com. 6 Oct. 2009. <<http://www.u-s-history.com/pages/h1332.html>>.

German Perspective

Germany surrendered in the face of mounting defeats at the hands of the French, British, and American armies, as well as political and economic instability at home. Under the terms of the ceasefire, Germany was allowed to retain its army and it did not have to admit defeat by surrender. Germany was not invited to participate in the negotiations over the peace treaty at Versailles. While Germany was aware of Wilson's proposal for peace through the Fourteen Points, they found a very different peace treaty presented to them. Below is the statement issued by German Foreign Minister Brockdorff-Rantzau:

I have the honor to transmit herewith the observations of the German Delegation on the Draft of the Treaty of Peace. We had come to Versailles in the expectation of receiving a proposal of peace on the basis actually agreed upon. . . We hope to get the Peace of Right which has been promised us. We were aghast when, in reading (the treaty), we learned what demands Might Triumphant has raised against us. The deeper we penetrated into the spirit of this Treaty, the more we became convinced of its impracticability. The demands raised go beyond the power of the German Nation.

In spite of such monstrous demands the rebuilding of our economic system is at the same time made impossible. We are to surrender our merchant fleet. We are to give up all foreign interests. We are to transfer to our opponents the property of all German undertakings abroad, even of those situated in countries allied to us. Even after the conclusion of peace the enemy states are to be empowered to confiscate all German property. No German merchant will then, in their countries, be safe from such war measures. We are to completely renounce our colonies, not even in these are German missionaries to have the right of exercising their profession. We are, in other words, to renounce every kind of political, economic and moral activity.

But more than this, we are also to resign the right of self-determination in domestic affairs. Dictatorial powers are conferred on the International Reparation Commission

Also in other respects Germany's right of sovereignty is abrogated. Her principal rivers are placed under international administration, she is obliged to build on her own territory the canals and railways desired by the enemy, she must, without knowing the contents, assent to agreements which her adversaries intend concluding with the new states in the East [i.e., Poland and the Baltic states] and which affect Germany's own boundaries. The German people is excluded from the League of Nations to which all common work of the world is confided.

Thus a whole nation is called upon to sign its own proscription, yea, even its own death warrant.

Germany knows that she must make sacrifices in order to come to Peace. Germany knows that she has promised such sacrifices by agreement and wishes to carry them through to the utmost limit she can possibly go to.