

The Family Heritage Series

A weekly discussion of Americanist truths and traditions for those "heirs of all the ages" who will have to preserve that most important inheritance of all — freedom. Produced by the Movement To Restore Decency.



Volume II

Lesson Ninety-Four

The League of Nations

LESSON IDEA

To show the defects of the League of Nations and the dangers of world government.

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FROM 1914 to 1918 more than eight million men died fighting "the war to end all wars" — World War I. To add to this horror, millions of civilians lost their homes, their families, and their fortunes. When the Armistice was signed on November 11, 1918, people on both sides of the Atlantic celebrated. The men were coming home! Peace at last!

But what kind of "peace" was it going to be? Many well-meaning men naively thought World War I was going to be the last war men would ever have to fight; they hoped to keep the peace permanently by establishing a benevolent world government with enough power to keep aggressive nations from destroying their neighbors. Other men, more cunning and cynical, wished to set up an all-powerful world government to serve their own interests, not the cause of peace.

Perhaps the most important of these ruthless would-be dictators was Colonel Edward M. House, President Woodrow Wilson's personal advisor. As early as 1914 House was trying to persuade Wilson to take a more active interest in world affairs and to openly support a world peace organization. In 1916 Wilson publicly announced his approval of such an organization and, a year later, instructed House to draft a charter for a world government.

Given unlimited power by the President, House immediately assembled a staff of young intellectuals to help him. Included in this elite circle were Walter Lippmann, a socialist since his days at Harvard and later world-famous as a journalist; Norman Thomas, who was to lead the American Socialist Party; Allen Dulles, head of the C.I.A. in later years; John Foster Dulles, who became Secretary of State under Dwight Eisenhower; and Christian A. Herter, who served as Secretary of State under John F. Kennedy. They were all brilliant and shrewd men.

House and his intellectuals completed their work in July of 1918 and sent the so-called "Covenant of the League of Nations" to the President for approval. Wilson adapted the draft as his own, and it became the "American" plan which House and Wilson took to the Paris Peace Conference in 1919. The point to remember, as noted by Ray Stannard Baker, Wilson's official biographer, is that "practically nothing — not a single idea — in the Covenant of the League was original with the President. His relation to it was mainly that of editor or compiler. . . . He had two great central and basic convictions: that a league of nations was necessary; that it must be brought into immediate existence." To these might be added a third conviction, perhaps the most significant of all: that he alone must be credited with bringing the new organization into existence.

At the Paris Peace Conference, European diplomats offered plans for a League of Nations similar to the House-Wilson draft, and ultimately the British plan was adopted. Interestingly, House's ideas and

suggestions were as prominent in the British Covenant as in the so-called American. (His time in Europe before and during the Conference had not been wasted.)

The final Covenant was approved by the Conference delegates on February 14, 1919; and intertwined with it was the peace settlement, the Treaty of Versailles, which was to be imposed on the defeated nations. Neither document was binding on the United States, of course, until it had the approval of the Senate, but Wilson believed he had found a way to stymie all opposition and force his country into the proposed world government.

ACCORDING TO Thomas A. Bailey, a historian who *favored* the League, Wilson “had interwoven the Covenant with the treaty and with the other peace settlements so intimately that the League could not be cut out without unraveling the whole arrangement. Wilson not only had planned it this way, but had unfortunately boasted of his strategy in public. Some of the senators were angered because the President had deliberately confronted them with a horrible dilemma. Apparently they had to kill all or accept all; and they wanted to do neither.”

Adding to the Senators’ discomfort was a tremendous surge of pressure from newspapers, certain business interests, and peace groups for immediate ratification. The Senate Foreign Relations Committee, whose job it was to study the Treaty and Covenant in detail and submit its findings to the Senate, charged in its report that the “demand for speed” had been largely a strong-arm move by Wilson and members of his administration working through the newspapers and organizations under their control. But there was also, the Committee acknowledged, a genuine demand for action from many excellent people “who, for the most part, had never read the treaty or never got beyond the words ‘league of nations,’ which they believed to mean the establishment of eternal peace. To yield helplessly to this clamor,” said the Committee, “was impossible for those to whom was entrusted the performance of a solemn public duty.”

The Committee’s “solemn public duty” — which meant analyzing Mr. Wilson’s masterpiece — took six weeks and was conducted under the leadership of Henry Cabot Lodge, Sr., a powerful Republican

Senator who was anti-world government as well as anti-Woodrow Wilson. The final report of the Foreign Relations Committee pointed to some of the most serious defects of the Covenant and suggested that the United States add amendments and reservations to it before ratification. For example, under the Wilson plan, the world organization was to be composed of three divisions: the Council, the Secretariat, and the Assembly. In the Assembly all League delegates would meet yearly to vote on important issues. Each member nation was granted one vote, except the British Empire, which controlled enough self-governing dominions and colonies to have six votes. This was unfair, and the Senators rightly demanded that the Covenant be amended to either reduce England’s voting power or give the United States an equal number of votes. “If other countries like the present arrangement,” said the Foreign Relations experts, “that is not our affair; but the Committee failed to see why the United States should have but one vote in the assembly of the league when the British Empire has six.”

TO CORRECT other major defects in the Covenant, reservations were proposed. One gave the United States the unconditional right to withdraw from the League at any time. The Committee report phrased it this way:

“The provision in the league covenant for withdrawal declares that any member may withdraw provided it has fulfilled all its international obligations and all its obligations under the covenant. There has been much dispute as to who would decide if the question of the fulfillment of obligations was raised, and it is very generally thought that this question would be settled by the council of the league of nations. The best that can be said about it is that the question of decision is clouded with doubt. On such a point as this there must be no doubt. The United States . . . can not permit all its existing treaties to be reviewed and its conduct and honor questioned by other nations. The same may be said in regard to the fulfillment of the obligations to the league. It must be made perfectly clear that the United States alone is to determine as to the fulfillment of its obligations, and its right of withdrawal must therefore be unconditional . . .”

Do you agree with the Committee? Do you think

the United States should submit to the dictates of an international organization? What is the danger of agreeing to conditions that are vague — that is, not knowing specifically what is meant by “obligations”? [*Encourage discussion.*]

A second reservation blocked the League’s right to interfere in the domestic affairs of the United States — particularly in immigration and tariff policies. No foreign superstate, concluded the Committee, should be allowed to tell our country that it must admit Orientals, for example, on an unrestricted basis, or that it must raise this tariff and lower that one, or that it must do or not do any particular thing that the League might decide is part of its “peace-keeping” business.

More important, the reservation proposed by the Senate Committee made it clear that the United States, not the League, would decide what questions or disputes were within its domestic jurisdiction. Wilson had wanted the Council of the League to decide — which, of course, would have given no protection whatsoever from the dictates of the bureaucrats of world government.

Senator Lodge and his committee were equally realistic about the effects of the League Covenant on the Monroe Doctrine, which had kept European conquerors out of the western hemisphere since 1823. Wilson had tried to forestall this objection by changing the original draft of the Covenant to exempt “treaties of arbitration or regional understandings like the Monroe Doctrine”; but critics quickly pointed out, as any fledgling lawyer could have done, that the Monroe Doctrine was not a “treaty of arbitration” or a “regional understanding.” It was a unilateral policy of the United States, and a reservation was needed in the Covenant to expressly exempt it from interpretation by foreign powers.

THE MOST SERIOUS THREAT to the sovereignty of the United States, however, was Article X of the Covenant which committed each League member to military action or economic boycott against any nation that threatened “the territorial integrity” or political independence of a League member. The Council of the League decided how this “obligation” was to be “fulfilled.”

To quiet his critics, Wilson quickly pointed out

that the Council’s decisions required unanimity; therefore, the League could not order American troops into battle or demand an economic boycott unless the delegate from the United States agreed with the Council’s decision. What the President carefully avoided saying was that this procedure was revolutionary and unconstitutional. In the complex checks and balances of power which were written into the United States Constitution, it was not the President — and certainly not an appointed delegate to an international organization — who had the power to commit American men to battle or to declare war. It was Congress — and only Congress. Moreover, all money matters or economic action, like a boycott, which would affect our national revenue were constitutionally required to originate in the House of Representatives, not in the diplomatic pouch of a League delegate who was out of reach of American voters.

This unconstitutional procedure was denounced in the strongest terms by Senator Lodge and the Foreign Relations Committee. The reservation which they recommended to counter it was clear and concise: “Under no circumstances must there be any legal or moral obligation upon the United States to enter into war or to send its Army and Navy abroad or, without the unfettered action of Congress, to impose economic boycotts on other countries . . . American lives must not be sacrificed except by the will and command of the American people acting through their constitutional representatives in Congress.”

Similar denunciations came from private citizens. “The framers of the League,” wrote a far-sighted opponent named Frank Putnam, “propose that this country shall become financially and militarily responsible for widely scattered, semi-civilized peoples whose whole history is one of intermittent warfare. This means that tens and perhaps hundreds of thousands of American boys would have to spend years of their lives fighting and doing garrison duty in those regions thousands of miles from home. It means that if American boys refused to volunteer for a service so insane, they must be and would be conscripted for it

“Our destiny is here upon our own continent. Here we must win or lose. Let Europe stew in its own stench until Europe repents of its sins of greed and age-old mutual hatreds. Never again should an

