Wilson and the League

Questions for Reading 1

1. What does Wilson say has been the "chief pleasure" of his trip? Why? What did he not like? Why?

2. There was one note of applause early in the speech. What do you think the listeners liked about that point made?

3. According to Wilson, why should the U.S. join the League of Nations? Do you find this reason persuasive? Why or why not?

In the fall of 1919, President Wilson set off on a cross-country speaking tour designed to convince the country that the United States should become part of the League of Nations. He hoped in particular to create public pressure that would convince senators to ratify the treaty that would make the country part of the League. Starting in Columbus, Ohio, he reached the West Coast and was making his way back to Washington when his doctor ordered him to stop the tour after his speech in Pueblo, Colorado on September 25, 1919.

MAP: http://www.cr.nps.gov/nr/twhp/wwwlps/lessons/14wilson/14images/14map2.pdf

Questions for Map 2

1. How do you think Wilson chose his routes? Would he be more likely to speak in states whose Senators supported or opposed the League of Nations? Why?

2. Do presidents today make such efforts to reach the American public over important issues? Compare and contrast how modern-day presidents win public opinion versus Wilson's method. Which method would you find more persuasive?

Questions for Reading 2

1. According to Senator Lodge, why should the U.S. not join the League of Nations?

2. What reasons did Senator Borah provide as to why the U.S. should refuse to join the League of Nations?

Mr. Chairman and fellow citizens: It is with great pleasure that I find myself in Pueblo, and I feel it a compliment that I should be permitted to be the first speaker in this beautiful hall. One of the advantages of this hall, as I look about, is that you are not too far away from me, because there is nothing so reassuring to men who are trying to express the public sentiment as getting into real personal contact with their fellow citizens....

The chief pleasure of my trip has been that it has nothing to do with my personal fortunes, that it has nothing to do with my personal reputation, that it has nothing to do with anything except the great principles uttered by Americans of all sorts and of all parties which we are now trying to realize at this crisis in the affairs of the world.

But there have been unpleasant impressions as well as pleasant impressions, my fellow citizens, as I have crossed the continent. I have perceived more and more that men have been busy creating an absolutely false impression of what the treaty of peace and the Covenant of the League of Nations contain and mean....

Don't think of this treaty so much as merely a settlement with Germany. It is that. It is a very severe settlement with Germany, but there is not anything in it that she did not earn [applause]....

But the treaty is so much more than that. It is not merely a settlement with Germany; it is a readjustment of those great injustices which underlay the whole structure of European and Asiatic societies. Of course this is only the first of several treaties. They are constructed under the same plan....

But at the front of this great treaty is put the Covenant of the League of Nations. It will be at the front of the Austrian treaty and the Hungarian treaty and the Bulgarian treaty and the treaty with Turkey. Every one of them will contain the Covenant of the League of Nations, because you cannot work any of them without the Covenant of the League of Nations. Unless you get united, concerted purpose and power of the great governments of the world behind this settlement, it will fall down like a house of cards.

There is only one power behind the liberation of mankind, and that is the power of mankind. It is the power of the united moral forces of the world. And in the covenant of the League of Nations the moral forces of the world are mobilized....But all the nations that have power that can be mobilized are going to be members of the League, including the United States. And what do they unite for? They enter into solemn promise to one another that they will never use their power against one another for aggression; that they will never impair the territorial integrity of a neighbor; that they will never interfere with the political independence of a neighbor; that they will abide by the principle that great populations are entitled to determine their own destiny; and that they will not interfere with that destiny; and that no matter what differences arise amongst them, they will never resort to war without first having done one or other of two
things—either submitting the matter of controversy to arbitration, in which case they agree to abide by the result without question, or having submitted it to the consideration of the Council of the League of Nations, laying before the Council all the facts, agreeing that the Council can publish the documents and facts to the whole world.

In other words, they consent, no matter what happens, to submit every matter of difference between them to the judgment of mankind. And, just so certainly as they do that, my fellow citizens, war will be in the far background, war will be pushed out of the foreground of terror in which it has kept the world generation after generation, and men will know that there will be a calm time of deliberate counsel. .

I believe that we will see the truth, eye to eye and face to face. There is one thing that the American people always rise to and extend their hand to, and that is the truth of justice and of liberty and peace. We have accepted the truth and we are going to be led by it, and it is going to lead us, and through us the world, out into pastures of quietness and peace such as the world has never dreamed of before.


I succeeded in persuading him [Wilson] to cancel his plans formed for the journey in early August, but later on, the conviction grew upon him that he must go. Opposition to the Treaty was increasing in the Senate, and he must rally the moral opinion of the country and do it immediately, so he felt. I played my last card and lost. Going to the study one morning I found the President seated at his desk writing. He looked up and said: 'I know what you have come for. I do not want to do anything foolhardy but the League of Nations is now in crisis, and if it fails I hate to think what will happen to the world. You must remember that I, as Commander in Chief, was responsible for sending our soldiers to Europe. In the crucial test in the trenches they did not turn back—and I cannot turn back now. I cannot put my personal safety, my health in the balance against my duty—I must go.'
You may call me selfish if you will, conservative or reactionary, or use any other harsh adjective you see fit to apply, but an American I was born and an American I have remained all my life. I can never be anything else but an American, and I must think of the United States first, and when I think of the United States first in an arrangement like this, I am thinking what is best for the world. For if the United States fails, the best hopes of mankind fail with it. I have never had but one allegiance—I cannot divide it now. I have never loved but one flag and I cannot share that devotion and give affection to the mongrel banner invented for the League.... Are the ideals that are confined to this deformed experiment upon a noble purpose, tainted, as it is with bargains and tied to a peace treaty which might have been disposed of long ago to the great benefit of the world if it had not been compelled to carry this rider on its back? We all share these aspirations and desires, but some of us see no hope, but rather defeat, for them in this murky covenant. For we, too, have our ideals, even if we differ from those who have tried to establish a monopoly on idealism. Our ideal is our country... We would have this country strong to resist a peril from the West, as she has flung back the German menace from the East. We would not have our politics distracted and embittered by dissensions from other lands. We would not have our country's vigor exhausted, or her moral force abated, by everlasting meddling and meddling in every quarrel great and small, which afflicts the world. Our ideal is to make her even stronger and better and finer, because in this way alone, as we believe, can she be of the greatest service to the world's peace and the welfare of mankind.

Following are excerpts from a speech before the U.S. Senate, presented by Senator William E. Borah on November 10, 1919.

Mr. President, after Mr. Lincoln had been elected President, before he assumed the duties of the office and at the time when all indications were to the effect that we would soon be in the midst of civil strife, a friend from the city of Washington wrote him for instructions. Mr. Lincoln wrote back in a single line, 'Entertain no compromise; have none of it.' That states the position I occupy at this time and which I have in my humble way occupied from the first contention in regard to this proposal of entering the League of Nations.... Have we not been told day by day for the last nine months that the Senate of the United States, a coordinate part of the treaty-making power, should accept this league as it was written because the wise men sitting in Versailles had so written it, and has not every possible influence and every source of power in public opinion been organized and directed against the Senate to compel it to do that thing? What is the result of all this? We are in the midst of all the affairs of Europe. We have joined in alliance with all European concerns. We have joined in alliance with all the European nations which have thus far joined the league, and all nations which may be admitted to the league. We are sitting there dabbling in their affairs and intermeddling in their concerns. In other words, Mr. President—and this comes to the question which is fundamental with me—we have forfeited
and surrendered, once and for all, the great policy of 'no entangling alliances' upon which the strength of this Republic has been founded for 150 years....

There is another and even more commanding reason why I shall record my vote against this treaty. It imperils what I conceive to be the underlying, the very first principles of this Republic. It is in conflict with the right of our people to govern themselves free from all restraint, legal or moral, of foreign powers...I will not I can not, give up my belief that America must, not alone for the happiness of her own people, but for the moral guidance and greater contentment of the world, be permitted to live her own life. Next to the tie which binds a man to his God is the tie which binds a man to his country, and all schemes, all plans, however ambitious and fascinating they seem in their proposal, but which embarrass or entangle and impede or shackle her sovereign will, which would compromise her freedom of action I unhesitatingly put behind me....

Sir, we are told that this treaty means peace. Even so, I would not pay the price. Would you purchase peace at the cost of our independence?...

Mr. President, to recapitulate, Europe is still Europe, with all her racial antipathies and imperialistic appetites, with the same standards of government, whatever name Government may bear, and the same strange conceptions of right and justice in whatever terms she may clothe her schemes of ambition. She is unchanged, and if we assume the task of effectuating a change, save as in the past by whatever power precept and example may exert, we will end by becoming Europeanized in our standards and in our conceptions of civilization or we will fall into disintegration and as a Republic die. If we give up our independence and enter her councils with one vote, if we surrender our seat of authority here upon the Western Continent, this place of command to which the living God directed our fathers that they, free from all foreign entanglements, might work out a new scheme of government, if we quit our own stand upon foreign soil, we shall return as our President returned from Versailles, stripped of our principles and shorn of our ideals. Look upon his experience. The thoughtful will gather from it a lesson of deep and lasting significance.