

President's Speech Presenting Peace Treaty to the Senate

President Wilson, in presenting the peace treaty and the League of Nations to the senate at Washington, July 10, spoke as follows:

Gentlemen of the Senate: The treaty of peace with Germany was signed at Versailles on the twenty-eighth of June. I avail myself of the earliest opportunity to lay the treaty before you for ratification and to inform you with regard to the work of the conference by which that treaty was formulated.

The treaty constitutes nothing less than world settlement. It would not be possible for me either to summarize or construe its manifold provisions in an address which must of necessity be something less than a treatise. My services and all the information I possess will be at your disposal of your committee on foreign relations at any time, either informally or in session, as you may prefer; and I hope that you will not hesitate to make use of them. I shall at this time, prior to your own study of the document, attempt only a general characterization of its scope and purpose.

"YOU ARE AWARE OF PROBLEMS"

In one sense, no doubt, there is no need that I should report to you what was attempted and done at Paris. You have been daily cognizant of the difficulty of laying down straight lines with which the peace conference had to deal and of the difficulty of laying down straight lines of settlement anywhere on a field on which the old lines of international relationship and the new alike, followed so intricate a pattern and were for the most part cut so deep by historical circumstances which dominated action where it would have been best to ignore or reserve them. The cross currents of politics and of interest must have been evident to you. It would be presuming in me to attempt to explain the questions which arose or the many diverse elements that entered into them. I shall attempt something less ambitious than that and more clearly suggested by my duty to report to the congress the part it seemed necessary for my colleagues and me to play as the representatives of the government of the United States.

That part was dictated by the role America had played in the war and by the expectations that had been created in the minds of the people with whom we had associated ourselves in that great struggle.

The United States entered the war upon a different footing from every other nation except our associates on this side of the sea. We entered it not because our material interests were directly threatened or because any special treaty obligations to which we were parties had been violated, but only because we saw the supremacy and even the validity of right everywhere put in jeopardy and free government everywhere imperiled by the intolerable aggression of a power which respected neither right nor obligations and whose very system of government flouted rights of the citizens as against the autocratic authority of his governors. And in the settlements of the peace we have sought no special reparation for ourselves, but only the restoration of right and the assurance of liberty everywhere that the effects of the settlement were to be felt. We entered the war as the disinterested champions of right and interested ourselves in the terms of the peace in no other capacity.

The hopes of the nations allied against the central powers were at a very low ebb when our soldiers began to pour across the sea. There were everywhere among them, except in their stoutest spirits, a sombre foreboding of disaster. The war ended in November eight months ago, but you have only to recall what was feared in mid-summer last, four short months before the armistice, to realize what it was that our timely aid accomplished alike for their morale and their physical safety. That first, never-to-be-forgotten action at Chateau Thierry had already taken place. Our redoubtable soldiers and marines had already closed the gap the enemy had succeeded in opening for their advance upon Paris, had already turned the tide of battle back towards the frontiers of France and began the rout that was to save Europe and the world. Thereafter the Germans were to be forced back, back, were never to thrust successfully forward again. And yet, there was no confident hope. Anxious men

and women, leading spirits of France, attended the celebration of the Fourth in Paris last year out of generous courtesy—with no heart for festivity, little zest for hope. But they came away with something new at their hearts. They have themselves told us so. The mere sight of our men—of their vigor, of the confidence that showed itself in every movement of their stalwart figures and every turn of their swinging march, in their steady comprehending eyes and easy discipline, in the indomitable aid that added spirit to everything they did—made everyone who saw them that memorable day realize that something had happened that was much more than a mere incident in the fighting, something very different from the mere arrival of fresh troops.

PROUD TO BE THEIR LEADER

A great moral force had flung itself into the struggle. The fine physical force of those spirited men spoke of something more than bodily vigor. They carried the great ideals of a free people at their hearts and with that vision were unconquerable. Their very presence brought reassurance; their fighting made victory certain.

They were recognized as crusaders, and as their goods swelled to millions their strength was seen to mean salvation. And they were fit men to carry such a hope and make good the assurance it forecast. Finer men never went into battle and their officers were worthy of them. This is not the occasion upon which to utter a eulogy of the armies America sent to France, but perhaps, since I am speaking of their mission I may speak also of the pride I shared with every American who saw or dealt with them there. They were the sort of men America would wish to be represented by, the sort of men every American would wish to claim as fellow countrymen and comrades in a great cause. They were terrible in battle, and gentle and helpful out of it, remembering the mothers and sisters, the wives and the little children at home. They were free men under arms, not forgetting their ideals of duty in the midst of tasks of violence. I am proud to have had the privilege of being associated with them and of calling myself their leader.

ALL THAT AMERICA STANDS FOR

But I speak now of what they meant to the men by whose side they fought and to the people with whom they mingled with such utter simplicity as friends who asked only to be of service. They were for all the visible embodiment of America. What they did made America and all that she stood for a living reality in the thoughts not only of the people of France, but also of tens of millions of men and women throughout all the toiling nations of a world standing everywhere in peril of its freedom and of the loss of everything it held dear, in deadly fear that its bonds were never to be loosened, its hopes forever to be mocked and disappointed.

And the compulsion of what they stood for was upon us who represented America at the peace table. It was our duty to see to it that every decision we took part in contributed, so far as we were able to influence it, to quiet the fears and realize the hopes of the peoples who have been living in that shadow, the nations that had come by our assistance to their freedom. It was our duty to do everything that was in our power to do to make the triumph of freedom and of right a lasting triumph in the assurance of which men might everywhere live without fear.

OLD ENTANGLEMENTS IN WAY

Old entanglements of every kind stood in the way—promises which governments had made to one another in the days when might and right were confused and the power of the victory was without restraint. Engagements which contemplated any disposition of territory, any extensions of sovereignty that might seem to be to the interest of those who had the power to insist upon them had been entered into without thought of what the peoples concerned might wish of profit by; and these could not always be honorably brushed aside. It was not easy to graft the new order of ideas on the old, as some of the fruits of the grafting may, I fear, for a time be bitter. But, with every few exceptions,

the men who sat with us at the peace table desired as sincerely as we did to get away from the bad influences, the illegitimate purposes, the demoralizing ambitions, the international counsels and expedients out of which the sinister designs of Germany had sprung as a natural growth. It had been our privilege to formulate the principles which were accepted as the basis of the peace but they had been accomplished, not because we had come in to hasten and assure the victory and insisted upon them but because they were readily acceded to as the principles to which honorable and enlightened minds everywhere had been bred. They spoke the conscience of the world as well as the conscience of America and I am happy to pay my tribute of respect and gratitude to the able, forward-looking men with whom it was my privilege to co-operate with for the unfailing spirit of co-operation, their constant effort to accommodate the interests they represented to the principles we were all agreed upon. The difficulties, which were many, lay in the circumstances, not often in the men. Almost without exception the men who led had caught the true and full vision of the problem of peace as an indivisible whole, a problem, not of mere adjustments of interests, but of justice and right action.

The atmosphere in which the conference worked seemed created, not by the ambitions of strong governments, but by the hopes and aspirations of small nations and of peoples hitherto under bondage to the power that victory had shattered and destroyed. Two great empires had been forced into political bankruptcy and we were the receivers. Our task was not only to make peace with the central empires and remedy the wrongs their armies had done. The central empires had lived in open violation of many of the very rights for which the war had been fought, dominating alien peoples over whom they had no natural right to rule, enforcing, not obedience, but veritable bondage, exploiting those who were weak for the benefit of those who were masters and over-lords only by force of arms.

There could be no peace until the whole order of central Europe was set right.

That meant that new nations were to be created—Poland, Czecho-Slovakia, Hungary itself. No part of ancient Poland had ever, in any true sense, become a part of Germany, or of Austria, or of Russia. Bohemia was alien in every thought and hope to the monarchy of which she had so long been an artificial part; and the uneasy partnership between Austria and Hungary had been one rather of interest than of kinship or sympathy. The Slavs whom Austria had chosen to force into her empire on the south were kept to their obedience by nothing but fear. Their hearts were with their kinsmen in the Balkans. These were all arrangements of power, not arrangements of natural union or association. It was the imperative task of those who would make peace and make it intelligently to establish a new order which would rest upon the free choice of people rather than upon the arbitrary authority of Hapsburgs or Hohenzollerns.

More than that, great populations, bound by sympathy and actual kin to Rumania, were also linked against their will to the conglomerate Austro-Hungarian monarchy or to other alien sovereignties, and it was part of the task of peace to make a new Rumania as well as a new Slavic state clustering about Serbia.

And no natural frontiers could be found to these new fields of adjustment and redemption. It was necessary to look constantly forward to other related tasks. The German colonies were to be disposed of; they had not been governed; they had been exploited merely, without thought of the interest or even the ordinary human rights of their inhabitants.

The Turkish empire, moreover, had fallen apart, as the Austro-Hungarian had. It had never had any real unity. It had been held together only by pitiless, inhuman force. Its people cried aloud for release, for succor from unspeakable distress, for all that the new day or hope seemed at last to bring within its dawn. Peoples, hitherto in darkness, were to be led out into the same light and given at last a helping hand. Undeveloped peoples and peoples ready for recognition, but not yet ready to assume the full responsibilities of statehood, were to be given adequate guarantees of friendly protection, guidance and assistance. And out of the execution of these great enterprises of liberty sprang opportunities to attempt what statesmen had never found the way before to do; an

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