The President as Statesman

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During the interbranch struggle over the Versailles Treaty, Wilson took the bad political situation resulting from the 1918 elections and made it worse. Breaking the taboo on sitting presidents traveling abroad, Wilson spent more than six months in Europe heading up the U.S. delegation at the peace negotiations, essentially forsaking all forms of domestic leadership. He also refused to select a senator or an influential member of the Republican Party to accompany him to Paris, even though he eventually would need to secure a two-thirds majority vote for ratification in the Republican-controlled Senate. Despite the pronounced objections of more than a third of the senators, Wilson insisted on including the League of Nations Covenant in the Versailles Treaty. When he finally presented the treaty to the Senate on July 10, 1919, he gave it to them as a fait accompli, asking rhetorically, “Dare we reject it and break the heart of the world?” Thereafter, Wilson would not compromise his demand for unreserved ratification of the treaty by the Senate, even after it was clear that it would not be forthcoming. In the final showdown, he lashed out at his opponents with increasingly strident rhetoric on a monthlong swing across the country, but the tour only hardened the opposition in the Senate. It also decimated Wilson’s physical and mental health, ruining any possibility of a constructive resolution to the treaty fight.

Scholars have developed a number of explanations for the abject failure of Wilson’s leadership in 1919. Insofar as the clash between Wilson and his Senate opponents was one of foreign policy visions—the president’s liberal internationalism versus the more traditional nationalism or isolationism of the senators—Wilson might well have tried to take the nation in a direction that it was not yet prepared to go. Lloyd Ambrosius has refined this argument by pointing out a basic contradiction in Wilson’s foreign policy vision, namely, the assumption that the United States could enter into an effective,
universal system of collective security and somehow retain its historical insu-
lation from—and ability to act unilaterally in—world politics. Another ex-
planation holds that in fact Henry Cabot Lodge and his Republican col-
leagues in the Senate opposed the president not because of legitimate policy
differences but for reasons of old-fashioned partisanship. Taking a different
tack, Alexander George and Juliette George argue that Lodge was more a
psychological than a partisan tormentor of Wilson, a cunning father figure
whom the president could not slay. The debacle in 1919, they maintain, re-
sulted from the final disintegration of Wilson’s insecure psyche. Jeffrey Tulis
argues in contrast that Wilson was brought down not by the contradictions
of his personality but by those of the rhetorical presidency he had created.
The rhetoric that Wilson used to defend his treaty at state fairgrounds and
whistle-stops only produced a backlash in the Senate. Finally, a group of
scholars led by Arthur Link have concluded on the basis of Wilson’s medical
records, some of which have only recently come to light, that the problems
in his leadership in 1919 stemmed from his failing health, which affected
him well before and certainly after he suffered the crippling stroke in Oc-
tober.

No doubt all of these factors have to be included in a comprehensive
account of Wilson’s downfall in 1919. For the purposes of this book, how-
ever, it is worth exploring the extent to which the problematic nature of his
program stands as the common denominator. Although multifaceted in ori-
gin, Wilson’s demise was hastened considerably by his convictions about the
president’s “very absolute” control of U.S. foreign relations, an understand-
ing that was especially bold when it came to the treaty-making power and
that was diametrically opposed to the views of Henry Cabot Lodge and
other opponents of unreserved ratification in the Senate. Wilson’s defeat at
the hands of Lodge and his colleagues punctuated his long and increasingly
bitter struggle with Congress over the control of foreign and national secu-
rity policy.

I

To gain a sense of Wilson’s understanding of the president’s treaty-making
powers, it is worth going back to his earliest writings, in which the young
political scientist had portrayed the president as little more than the chief
civil servant, one who normally had to approach the Senate as a servant
approached his master. Despite Wilson’s low regard for the presidency at this
time, he was nevertheless prepared to argue in Congressional Government that
the president could overcome the frequently demonstrated “treaty-marring
power” of the Senate and force it to ratify treaties in the form presented by
means of “his initiative in negotiation, which affords him a chance to get the country into such scrapes, so pledged in the view of the world to certain courses of action, that the Senate hesitates to bring about the appearance of dishonor which would follow its refusal to ratify the rash promises or to support the indiscreet threats of the Department of State.”

Also, recall that in Constitutional Government, having acquired a much fuller appreciation of the need for and power of presidential leadership, particularly in foreign affairs, Wilson affirmed his reading of the executive’s power to make treaties in even stronger terms. Although he acknowledged that “the President cannot conclude a treaty with a foreign power without the consent of the Senate,” he went on to contend that the president “may guide every step of diplomacy, and to guide diplomacy is to determine what treaties must be made, if the faith and prestige of the government are to be maintained. He need disclose no step of negotiation until it is complete, and when in any critical matter it is completed the government is virtually committed. Whatever its disinclination, the Senate may feel itself committed also.”

Wilson’s belief that it was both appropriate and possible for the president to control the negotiation and ratification of treaties was only reinforced by the nature of the policy dispute in which he was involved. Over the course of World War I, Wilson had grown more and more convinced of the need for a union of nations that could provide a forum for the peaceful airing and resolution of international disputes, a league resting ultimately upon a mutual pledge among member states to help defend each other from external aggression. In the ratification struggle, Wilson plausibly insisted that if the regime of collective security he envisioned was going to work, it would require the full, resonant support of the nation holding the most power after the ravaging war, namely, the United States. Were the Senate to delimit the extent to and the circumstances in which the United States would rally behind the league, and the issue of reservations essentially boiled down to this, it stood to reason that other member-states would also reduce their commitments, intangibly if not formally. The system of collective security would thus never take root.

Wilson’s psychobiographical interpreters point to his refusal to let the senators modify the Versailles Treaty as the best evidence of his irrational behavior in 1919. However, Wilson’s unstinting refusal appears reasonable when viewed in light of his long-held convictions about the president’s prerogatives in treaty-making and his judgment that the policy he considered essential for the nation’s peace and security, not to mention the world’s, depended on his exercising those prerogatives to the utmost. This is not to say
that the unfortunate stubbornness and self-righteousness that Wilson was prone to did not figure into the treaty fight in 1919, only that their emergence might better be depicted as an effect rather than a cause of his dispute with his Senate opponents. The senators’ unstinting and direct challenge to his understanding of his prerogatives and to the imperatives of his foreign policy infuriated him, amplifying aspects of his personality that he had previously been able to keep in check.

The intertwined debates between Wilson and the senators over constitutional powers and foreign policy ultimately hinged on Article 10 of the League of Nations Covenant. It read as follows: “The Members of the League undertake to respect and preserve as against external aggression the territorial integrity and existing political independence of all Members of the League. In case of any such aggression or in case of any threat or danger of such aggression the Council shall advise upon the means by which this obligation shall be fulfilled.”

At a White House lunch with Lodge and the members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on August 19, 1919, at which Wilson was trying to soften the opposition to the treaty, the president stated that he was essentially the author of the controversial provision. Wilson believed that a mechanism such as that provided by Article 10 was necessary for the success of the system of collective security that he saw the league establishing; indeed, he termed it the “very backbone of the whole Covenant.” Were the Senate to modify the provision in any significant way, the league “would be hardly more than an influential debating society.”

Lodge and the Senate opponents of the liberal internationalism that Wilson had imparted in the League Covenant likewise focused on Article 10. Speaking for many of his colleagues, Lodge told the Senate on August 12, 1919, of his “gravest objection” to the league: “Congress is granted by the Constitution the right to declare war, and nothing that would take the troops out of the Country at the bidding or demand of other nations should ever be permitted except through congressional action.” Article 10, as Lodge described it, would take this momentous choice out of Congress’s hands, undermining the Constitution and, more broadly, the nation’s sovereignty. Hence the necessity of attaching to the treaty a specific affirmation of the right of Congress to declare war, along with a statement that the United States would assume no military obligation under Article 10 until Congress did so.

Lodge’s plan called for the Senate to participate substantively in the process of treaty-making, not simply in an up-or-down vote on ratification, in order to ward off the perceived encroachment on Congress’s war power.
This line of attack enabled the senators opposed to unreserved ratification of the Versailles Treaty to seize upon the constitutional issues at stake in order to make their arguments on especially defensible grounds.

Wilson had long known that any treaty that would commit U.S. troops to hostilities without the consent of Congress would be a nonstarter politically and constitutionally. He attempted to explain to Lodge and his committee that the League Covenant did not, on the face of it, contain any such provisions. Wilson pointed out that the United States would always be represented on the council of the league and therefore would be in a position to veto any resolutions by the council recommending the use of force, which required a unanimous vote of the members. Even then, the council could only "advise upon" the moral obligations of member states; while duty bound, the nation was free internally to use its own constitutional procedures as it decided whether or how to meet the obligation. Congress thus retained the power to declare war. Article 10, Wilson proposed, was "binding in conscience only, not in law." For all the earnestness of Wilson's attempt to calm the constitutional sensitivities of the Senate regarding Congress's war power, it only made matters worse. The U.S. veto on the council would be deployed—or not—by an executive branch official, not a member of Congress. More important, as numerous senators pointed out, the president's easy reconciliation of the U.S. Constitution and the League Covenant seemed to undermine his prediction of the potential impact of the league. For if the United States and other nations were free to decide through their own political and constitutional mechanisms whether they would come to the aid of a beleaguered member-state, then the regime of collective security that Wilson championed already began to look like the mere debating society he warned it would become if reservations were placed on Article 10. Either the United States was obligated (morally or otherwise) to make war upon the advice of the league, in which case the Constitution was being violated (at least in spirit), or the United States had no obligation, in which case Wilson's league would be ineffectual and might well serve only to entangle the nation in an overarching and debilitating set of alliances.

Wilson's insistence that the nation's obligations under Article 10 would be morally but not legally binding allowed him to subscribe to potentially contradictory ideas: that the United States would benefit from being interdependent with other nations in a system of collective security yet at the same time retain the right of independent action in foreign affairs. For his part, Lodge rejected the distinction between a legal and a moral obligation and refused to ignore the contradictions that would arise between the na-
tion's sovereignty and its obligations to the league. Believing that the former should be paramount and secure, he and his allies in the Senate sought to delimit the latter.20

And the senators meant to do this formally in the instrument of ratification. In his luncheon with the Foreign Relations Committee, Wilson reversed his announced position and told Lodge and his colleagues that he would be open to Senate “interpretations” that did not qualify but only clarified the meaning of the Covenant, and that were not formally attached to the instrument of ratification.21 With this announcement, he acknowledged the reality, recognized by Democrats as well as Republicans, that the treaty was not going to pass as it stood. However, the senators who Wilson was attempting to win over were not interested in merely clarifying meanings with informal interpretations but in attaching formal reservations to the treaty in order to specify, among other things, the circumstances in which the United States would assume an obligation under Article 10. The reservationists in the Senate, whether of the mild or strong variety, were not prepared to accept the limitations on their treaty-making prerogative and Congress’s war power that Wilson’s insistence on unqualified ratification implied.22 Like Wilson, the Senate opponents of such a ratification were defending what they regarded as their prerogatives as much as they were their foreign policies, not least because they saw the former defense as the key to the latter.

II

It is plausible to conclude that the resort to constitutional arguments by senators opposed to Wilson’s league was merely a disguise for their underlying partisan and personal grievances against the Democratic president. These grievances certainly had been stoked by Wilson’s dominance during World War I and his appeal for a Democratic Congress at its conclusion. The opposition to unreserved ratification was overwhelmingly Republican, and it was almost exclusively the Republican senators who invoked the specter of constitutional usurpation by the president. What is more, Lodge, the Republican leader, was an inveterate partisan who admitted to friends he hated Wilson.23

That Lodge and many of his GOP allies were out to get Wilson goes a long way toward explaining why the treaty was defeated. However, this fact does not discredit the validity or the influence of the constitutional arguments they brought to bear against the president and his league. To propose that arguments that evidently have arisen from underlying political disputes or even personal hatreds are somehow not really “constitutional” is to mis-
construe the nature of the Constitution itself. The validity of an executive or legislative interpretation of the separation of powers does not ultimately depend on the motives of the politician making it. Indeed, the Founders intended and hoped that officeholders would be compelled by their own interests and ambitions to perceive and ward off interbranch encroachments on their institutions, i.e., that they would make political use of the separation of powers and in the process defend and preserve the arrangement. Witness the imperative of *Federalist* 51: "Ambition must be made to counteract ambition. The interest of the man must be connected with the constitutional rights of the place."\(^{24}\)

When the separation of powers is seen in this light, as a constitutional arrangement intended to be thoroughly political in its functioning, accusations of encroachment are no less constitutional if they are generated in part or even completely by narrow partisan motives. In the end, the hearing granted to arguments about the separation of powers depends upon the acts or decisions being questioned and whether they are readily defensible in terms of constitutional precedents and principles. In this respect, the Constitution is a standard that the scoundrel and the man of integrity alike can appeal to with similar resonance in certain circumstances.\(^{25}\)

Although genuine constitutional convictions are not necessary to make an effective constitutional argument, when the convictions of those upholding a traditional interpretation are real and pronounced, those attempting to reinterpret the Constitution through an expansive reading face a particularly zealous opponent. Such a man was Henry Cabot Lodge, Wilson’s nemesis in the treaty fight. Without disregarding the ill will that Lodge had for Wilson, the senator’s constitutional conservatism also drove him to stand against the president.

Lodge’s concern for the integrity of the Founders’ Constitution was un­stinting. In 1912, it had led to his denunciation of the program for direct democracy advocated by his close friend, Theodore Roosevelt.\(^{26}\) Subsequent­ly, over the course of Wilson’s presidency, Lodge had grown increas­ingly alarmed by what he perceived as the president’s efforts to override and even disregard the separation of powers. Lodge’s constitutional objections to Wilson’s leadership figured prominently in the senator’s criticism of the administration’s shipping bill in 1915 and its exclusive framing of war legisla­tion in 1917. Wilson’s October 1918 appeal for a Democratic Congress appeared to Lodge to confirm the worst of his suspicions in this regard: Wilson had finally “thrown off the mask.”\(^{27}\) The reply to Wilson’s appeal that Lodge coauthored with the Republican leadership in Congress made a point of promising to check this trend and to reestablish the independence and ini­
tiative of the legislature. Reflecting on the subsequent Republican capture of Congress, Lodge wrote to a friend that it was "a great victory for Constitutional Government, as well as for the Republican Party." At long last, he and his party colleagues were in a position to uphold the separation of powers, and on November 26, 1918, he reported with satisfaction and hope to a friend that "the first thing the Republican Conference did when it met the other day was to pass a resolution that Congress should assert and exercise its normal constitutional functions. I think the new Congress will do it and will have some Democratic help in doing it."29

Of all the "normal constitutional functions" that Lodge was expecting Congress to exercise, none was more crucial than the Senate's playing an integral role in the upcoming peace negotiations. Lodge laughed at Wilson's assertion in Constitutional Government that a president could ignore the Senate during the negotiation of a treaty and then present it with a fait accompli that it would have little choice but to ratify. In the Senate on December 21, 1918, Robert LaFollette, who like Lodge also wanted to expose what he saw as the president's mounting usurpation, quoted derisively from this passage in the book. "Let timid souls then take courage and be cheerful," Lodge declared after LaFollette was finished. "There is nothing either in law or good manners or custom which stands in the way of advice from the Senate to the Executive charged with initiating and carrying on negotiations when the Senate thinks advice desirable." Indeed, Lodge subsequently declared that "in the present unparalleled situation the right of the Senate to advise as to a treaty becomes a solemn, an imperative, duty."30

History suggested as much. As Lodge pointed out, several presidents, including Washington, Jackson, and Lincoln, had sought the Senate's advice about treaty negotiations and kept it well informed of their progress. President McKinley had even named three senators, one of them a Democrat, as delegates to the peace conference with Spain. Lodge did not insist, as many senators did, that Wilson was obligated to follow McKinley's example with the Paris peace conference, though he noted that it would certainly be helpful and bode well for ratification (as it was and did in 1898).31

What Lodge did insist upon was the Senate's prerogative to participate in the treaty negotiations, if not through senatorial delegates or through advice granted to the president upon his request, then through statements undertaken by senators on their own initiative or through formal resolutions of the whole body as to what sort of peace they would find acceptable as equal holders of the treaty-making power under the Constitution.32 Indeed, after Lodge discussed the Senate's right to play an independent role in treaty-making in his speech of December 21, 1918, he went on to offer a prelimi-
nary critique of the foreign policy goals that Wilson appeared intent upon realizing in Paris. With this speech Lodge fully intended to send a message abroad, a message to the negotiators from other nations who would be sitting down at the table with Wilson, and it no doubt reached them. Just over two months later, in early March 1919, Lodge forced Wilson's hand at the peace table in an even more dramatic fashion by engineering the Round Robin letter, in which thirty-nine Republican senators—more than enough to prevent ratification—publicly announced that the Versailles Treaty as it then stood was unacceptable to them. Significantly, the letter opened with a ringing assertion that it was a constitutional function of the Senate “to advise and consent to, or dissent from, the ratification of any treaty of the United States” and subsequently asserted that the Round Robin itself was understood by its signatories as “a discharge of [the Senate’s] constitutional duty of advice in regard to treaties.”

Lest Lodge’s December 21 speech or the Round Robin be seen as mere partisanship dressed up in constitutional garb, consider the following passage:

The power of the Senate in making treaties has always been held, as the Constitution intended, to be equal to and co-ordinate with that of the President, except in the initiation of a negotiation. . . . The Senate has the right to amend, and this right it has always exercised largely and freely. It is also clear that any action taken by the Senate is part of the negotiation, just as much so as the action of the President through the Secretary of State. In other words, the action of the Senate upon a treaty is not merely to give sanction to the treaty, but is an integral part of the treaty making, and may be taken at any stage of a negotiation.

What makes this passage particularly revealing is that it is taken from an essay that Lodge first published in 1902, in which he had sought to refute the assumption held by John Hay, the Republican secretary of state, among others, that the Senate had no power to take part in the actual making of treaties. During the McKinley, Roosevelt, and Taft administrations, Lodge angered fellow Republicans in the executive branch by insisting on the Senate’s prerogatives and working against treaties that he believed did not respect those prerogatives. That Lodge would do likewise with a Democrat in the White House was therefore quite predictable—and not because of the president’s party affiliation.

III

Ironically, in *Constitutional Government*, Wilson had written that presidents might very well have to treat the Senate in the fashion that Lodge and his
colleagues in the upper house were demanding. Wilson understood that the special constitutional duties of the Senate made the institution more inclined to take issue with the president, especially when it was controlled by the opposition party. At the same time, the senators’ staggered, six-year terms made them much less susceptible to any form of presidential pressure. Public appeals from the White House intended to coerce the Senate were likely to backfire. 37

Therefore, Wilson wrote in 1908, if the president faced a recalcitrant Senate, he might well follow a more conciliatory course,

which one or two Presidents of unusual political sagacity have followed, with the satisfactory results that were to have been expected. He may himself be less stiff and offish, may himself act in the true spirit of the Constitution, and establish intimate relations of confidence with the Senate on his own initiative, not carrying his plans to completion and then laying them in final form before the Senate, to be accepted or rejected, but keeping himself in confidential communication with the leaders of the Senate while his plans are in course, when their advice will be of service to him and his information of the greatest service to them, in order that there may be veritable counsel and a real accommodation of views instead of a final challenge and contest. 38

Far from driving Wilson to go over the heads of his Senate opponents, at one level his understanding of the appropriate form of presidential relations with this body bid him to engage it in common counsel.

At various points in time, Wilson sought to act in accordance with his own prescription. When he and Colonel House were considering potential members of the U.S. delegation to the Paris peace talks, for example, they mulled over the selection of some delegates from the Senate and prominent Republicans such as Elihu Root or William Howard Taft. 39 In February 1919, when Wilson returned briefly from Paris, he attempted to duck out of a public speech upon disembarking in Boston—Lodge’s home—that Tumulty had lined up; Wilson was concerned about “the impression on the hill” (i.e., in Congress) that such a speech would make. 40 On this visit, Wilson also met with the members of the House and Senate Foreign Relations Committees at the White House for a cordial dinner and an extended discussion of the league. The New York Times reported of the meeting that “the course of the President tonight seemed to have removed from the minds of some of those who were present the idea that he was trying to push the campaign for the League without the advice and consent of
the Senate.\textsuperscript{41} Finally, in July 1919, after returning from his last journey to Europe, Wilson held back from the publicity tour that many were assuming he would undertake immediately. Given the potential backlash that a swing around the circle might generate, he knew that it could only be a last resort, and an uncertain one at that. Over the next few weeks, Wilson conducted over twenty one-on-one meetings with mild reservationists at the White House in the hope of persuading them to drop their plans.\textsuperscript{42}

However, these endeavors could not produce any genuine conciliation or consensus because, in the end, Wilson was not prepared to share in any significant way the treaty-making power that he was convinced was rightfully his and upon which his policy depended. Hence no senators served on the peace commission, Wilson's February return to the United States began and ended with highly charged speeches criticizing his Senate opponents,\textsuperscript{43} and the attempt at "common counsel" in July and August 1919 was curtailed by the "pitiless publicity" of September's speaking tour.

The self-defeating tour was not the inevitable product of Wilson's rhetorical presidency. Rather, it marked an unsuccessful resolution of a contradiction in his program. His determination to exercise absolute control of the treaty-making power was inconsistent with his recognition that the Senate was in a position and often inclined to thwart such presidential control—and could not be subdued with popular appeals. Wilson nevertheless proceeded with his attempt to set the course for American national security policy, as he had essayed before and during U.S. involvement in World War I. That unqualified American participation in the League of Nations, deemed by Wilson as essential to the nation's well-being, not to mention the world's, depended on his exercising such control only made him that much more determined. The irony, or rather the tragedy, of Wilson's defeat was that he could have predicted it himself.

IV

On September 26, 1919, after having traveled some 8,000 miles and delivered thirty-six major speeches and numerous shorter addresses in little more than three weeks' time, Wilson collapsed under the physical and emotional strain of his tour.\textsuperscript{44} With the remainder of the tour canceled, he returned to Washington to convalesce, only to suffer a crippling stroke one week later. From that point forward, Wilson was in the grip of a disease that affected his mind and emotions as well as his body, and he became steadily more recalcitrant. The moment of compromise, if there ever had been one, had passed.\textsuperscript{45}

Wilson's stroke raises the question of whether the treaty debacle was not
simply a historical accident, the result of the president's incapacitation at the very moment that he might have forged a viable compromise on Capitol Hill, as he had so many times before during his presidency. The editors of The Papers of Woodrow Wilson and several medical historians, pointing to recently discovered medical records, conclude that Wilson's health had begun to impinge on his leadership even before the devastating stroke in October 1919. In particular, a viral infection that Wilson suffered in Paris in April 1919, and a minor stroke that evidently befell him in July, in the midst of his meetings with the mild reservationists, are seen by these scholars as having permanently diminished Wilson's emotional and mental capacities, not to mention his physical health.\footnote{46}

However, even if Wilson's health was deteriorating before October 1919, it is not easy to blame it for his failure to secure Senate ratification of the Versailles Treaty. Given the policy that he was pushing for, and his understanding of how the president should exercise his treaty-making power, his leadership was understandable and quite consistent with his objectives both before and after his illnesses in April and July. It is highly unlikely, for example, that even a healthy Woodrow Wilson would have made the key compromise that the mild reservationists were demanding—a reaffirmation of Congress's exclusive right to declare war formally attached to the treaty itself—without taking his case to the people. And after the president took his case to the public, the angry reaction in the Senate as much as his collapse effectively ruled out a compromise.

It is also important to recognize how Wilson's own expansive conception of his office contributed to the erosion and eventual devastation of his health. Wilson believed he could personally exercise "very absolute" control of U.S. foreign policy and set up the League of Nations. These were huge objectives, to be sure, but fitting for a man convinced that his office made him "one of the great powers of the world."\footnote{47} Wilson's expansive conception of the presidency led to his undertaking the extended journeys abroad to head up the American delegation at the peace negotiations; to his chairing the evening meetings of the commission that would draft the League of Nations Covenant in Paris; to his entering into round after round of frustrating negotiations with the senators; and, finally, to his embarking on a desperate stumping campaign when these negotiations failed. He had quipped in Constitutional Government that in light of the mounting demands on the presidency and the multiple roles that the inhabitant of the office had to perform, only wise and well-conditioned athletes could do the job. Even the strongest Olympian would have been hard-pressed to endure unscathed the ordeal that Wilson subjected himself to in 1919.
The bitter end of the treaty fight found the sick and embattled president returning to his earlier, critical judgments on the Founders' separation of powers and the independent executive office it secured. Wilson's remarkable reliance upon and defense of these arrangements during his prosecution of the war effort gave way in peacetime to his old longing for responsible government in the United States. In August 1919, before he began his fateful tour on behalf of the league, he discussed with family members the weaknesses of the presidency that had once again become all too apparent to him. "The office in and of itself is not one of the most powerful of offices," Wilson insisted, especially when compared with that of the British prime minister, who can at any time dissolve Parliament and appeal directly back to the British people, and it is this knowledge on the part of Parliament . . . that undoubtedly whips Parliament into supporting the Prime Minister in many things in which they would not otherwise support him. And thus he has a hold on Parliament utterly unlike and superior to the hold which the President has on Congress. Suppose . . . I could dissolve Congress now and appeal to the people to support the Treaty, is there any question that the Treaty would be immediately ratified? I would not have to dissolve Congress. The mere fact that I had the right to do it would bring Congress around at once.48

How could the impasse be resolved? How could public opinion be brought to bear on the fifty-three senators who had refused to support unreserved ratification when the treaty was put to a vote on November 19, 1919? From his sickbed in December 1919, Wilson regretted that "the Constitution provides no method or machinery for such a reference." With the help of his wife and Joseph Tumulty, he came up with a proposal that called for the fifty-three senators to resign and run again for their seats in a special election. If, as Wilson was convinced was the case, the vast majority of the voters supported his version of the league, then the deadlock would be broken. On the other hand, if a majority of the offending senators were re-elected, Wilson would institute his resignation scheme from 1916: he would appoint a Republican leader as secretary of state, he and Vice President Marshall would resign, and by the rules of succession there effectively would be a new government in the parliamentary sense of the word.49

Wilson's far-fetched plan to resolve the impasse with the Senate—which assumed, among other things, that duly elected senators would willingly resign their seats at the president's request—was quickly dropped.50 The plan that Wilson resorted to next, again with Tumulty's help, was somewhat more
practical in design and was put forward in a most conspicuous fashion: a presidential letter to fellow Democrats banqueting on Jackson Day. The Democratic faithful who assembled in two separate halls in Washington on January 8, 1920, heard the president's letter declare that U.S. participation in the league was essential for world peace. "We cannot rewrite this treaty," Wilson argued. "We must take it without changes which alter its meaning, or leave it." Asserting that his opponents in the Senate had defied a popular majority and were responsible for the deadlock, Wilson proposed that the next election be made "a great and solemn referendum" on unreserved ratification of the treaty.51

The best analysis of Wilson's Jackson Day appeal can be found in a private memorandum written shortly thereafter by his secretary of state, Robert Lansing. Assuming—which Lansing did not—that Wilson's version of the treaty enjoyed the support of a majority, how could voters, with their own multiplicity of concerns, be expected to concentrate on the one issue that obsessed the president? And the league was not a clear-cut issue given the "several grades of reservations, interpretive, slightly modifying, radical, and nullifying." Moreover, Lansing looked over the list of senators—only one-third of the body—who were up for reelection in 1920 and noted that even "the greatest Democratic landslide in all history would never carry enough seats to give the necessary two-thirds." Therefore, it was "nonsense . . . to talk about a popular decision at the polls." Indeed, attempting to force the Senate to submit to unreserved ratification in such a fashion was akin to butting "one's head against a granite wall." Lansing concluded that if the Democratic Party adopted Wilson's approach, "it is beaten already. . . . whether he wants to or not the President must compromise or he will wreck the party."52 But if there ever had been a possibility that Wilson would come around to this reality, it had collapsed with his health.

Lansing's warning on the need for compromise resonated with the views of congressional Democrats, who had been urging Wilson to soften his stance on the treaty.53 Circumstances unrelated to the league issue made Wilson's hard line particularly burdensome. Among other things, the administration was no longer dispensing patronage to ease the sting of the party whip. Wilson had stuck to his decision in late 1916 to classify the first-through third-class postmasterships, thereby drying up the chief source of administration patronage. He also had kept his vow to stop letting political considerations dictate appointments in the upper reaches of his administration. It is worth noting, for example, that three men who held perhaps the most powerful positions in Wilson's war machine and who made the most controversial decisions—food administrator Herbert Hoover, fuel adminis-
trator Harry Garfield, and chief price-fixer Robert Brookings—were all nominal Republicans.

Wilson’s progressivism may have cleared his conscience and halted the criticism of his administration by otherwise supportive reformers, but it rankled the regulars. In December 1919, after hearing that yet another Republican was being considered for a top post in the administration, William Gibbs McAdoo warned against it, reporting what he had learned in his travels across the country since leaving the cabinet a year earlier: “I think the Democratic position has been enormously weakened by the great number of appointments to highly honorable places which the Administration has made of prominent Republicans. . . . they were justified for the war purpose, but the rank and file of the party do not understand this, and they certainly will not understand if the policy is continued in peace time.” Neither were the rank and file happy with the classification of postmasterships, which was carried out with an almost spiteful efficiency by the postmaster general. Burleson’s newfound zeal as a civil service reformer surprised and alarmed McAdoo, Tumulty, and other prominent Wilsonians, men with whom Burleson once had joined in dividing up the spoils of the administration. One of these men, Robert Woolley, complained to Colonel House in June 1919 that “[Burleson] must resign—or be forced to—if there is to be a shred of the Democratic Party left to go into the campaign of 1920.”

It is difficult to estimate the extent to which the new patronage policy contributed to the surge of opposition that Wilson met with from congressional Democrats during the war years or to the electoral demise of the party in 1918 and especially in 1920. But no doubt his sudden adherence to his principles in this regard did not help his ongoing efforts to line up Democratic votes in Congress and the electorate. As the more traditional politicians in Wilson’s inner circle—and the president himself, in his more realistic moments—knew, there was a general, albeit rough, correlation between the normal distribution of spoils and party regularity. When it came to patronage, it appears that Wilson was both damned when he did and damned when he did not.

At the same time that Wilson was denying congressional Democrats the spoils that many of them believed were rightfully theirs, he also was forcing on them his exclusive focus on the nation’s foreign relations. The Democratic Party, like the nation, was increasingly buffeted by the social and economic turbulence caused by the rapid demobilization. Wilson’s evident reluctance to create and maintain administrative bodies that might have assisted with postwar reconstruction of the American economy and the remarkable dearth of domestic policy initiatives by the White House amid the
tremendous unrest indicated to observers in and outside of the administration that the president was out of touch with the bread-and-butter issues most important to the masses.\textsuperscript{55}

Ironically, Wilson’s personal convictions about domestic policy were continuing to shift to the left. He still talked with friends and associates about the need for the government to control, among other things, railroads, mines, and electric power, and he now believed in the need for “industrial democracy” as a prerequisite for “political democracy.”\textsuperscript{56} Wilson also remained fully aware of the political benefits that would be within reach if the Democratic Party undertook a progressive socioeconomic agenda.\textsuperscript{57} But he refused to initiate or oversee domestic legislation that might realign voters.

Wilson was determined to have the treaty ratified first. Just as war legislation took precedence over domestic reform in 1917–1918, now the peace treaty did. Wilson told legislators that the economic problems of the country were primarily due to the unratified treaty and the resulting ambiguity of the nation’s foreign relations. By making the treaty the top priority, he was hoping that the increasing demands for domestic action would work to force the Senate to ratify it quickly, if only to get it out of the way.\textsuperscript{58} His hope, of course, was not realized, but the political costs of this policy brinkmanship soon would be.

Wilson did everything he could throughout 1920 to bring about the “great and solemn referendum.” In March, before the treaty came up for one last vote, Wilson dashed off another resounding public letter in which he ruled out any formal reservation indicating that U.S. fulfillment of its obligations under Article IO depended on Congress exercising its war power.\textsuperscript{59}

So long as he held to this position, the Senate would not ratify the treaty, and there the issue stood. Sensing that the president’s unyielding stance would not have the beneficial effect in November that he was assuming it would, several party advisers urged him to compromise, as he had done so adeptly with various progressive initiatives before the 1916 election. In his diary, Josephus Daniels paraphrased one such conversation, and Wilson’s response to it, at a cabinet meeting on April 20: “Burleson wanted W. W. to send treaty to Senate and say what reservations he would accept. Otherwise people thought it was his stubbornness that killed the treaty. . . . Burleson said three issues would outweigh treaty—Liquor, Taxes, Cost of Living. Meredith thought it would be good tactics. So did Palmer. WW said he would not play for position. No time for tactics, time to stand square.”\textsuperscript{60}

Of course, the man who was determined to “stand square” was sick; a healthy Wilson might well have been more apt to consider the electoral situation, as he had in endorsing direct democracy in 1910–1911 and social
welfare and labor legislation in 1916. But even if healthy, Wilson may have been just as unyielding. At no time in his presidency had he hesitated in forcing his strongly held diplomatic views upon his party, disregarding their protests and pointing to the inescapable imperatives of world politics as he did so.

The Versailles Treaty fight thus laid bare a problem in Wilson's ideal of interpretive statesmanship. Three factors, he believed, should push a statesman to alter his positions: changes in or a better grasp of public opinion, the unfolding logic of reform ideas, and the leader's experience in power. Wilson's unstated assumption was that these three factors would always push in the same direction. With his conversion to direct democracy in 1910–1911, and to advanced progressivism in 1916, they generally did; i.e., with these shifts Wilson was simultaneously "fishing for a majority," to use his phrase, following certain premises to their conclusions, and reconciling his views with the lessons he had learned while in office. With the league, trends in public opinion pointed toward a compromise, but Wilson could not or would not acknowledge this because his grasp of the logic of collective security, and his experience as chief diplomat and commander in chief, both pointed in the direction of unqualified American participation.

Much to Wilson's ire, James Cox, the Democratic Party's presidential candidate in 1920, bowed to the public's increasing dissatisfaction with the president's stance on unreserved ratification and adopted a supportive but decidedly ambiguous position on the issue. Cox's waffling frustrated Wilson's hope of making the election a clean vote on the league. That being said, in light of Cox's retreat and his nonetheless massive defeat at the hands of the Republican Party and its candidate, Warren Harding, who were clearly opposed to the unaltered Article 10, the returns of 1920 amounted to a resounding "no" on the question of whether the majority of the people were behind Wilson on this issue. Secretary of State Robert Lansing's warning that Wilson's quest for a solemn referendum on the league was the political equivalent of beating one's head on a granite wall proved to be all too prophetic.