



Massachusetts Senator Henry Cabot Lodge, shown here on the right, led the reservationists, who wanted the Treaty of Versailles changed. Idaho Senator William Borah, on the left, led the irreconcilables, who opposed the treaty in any form. Together, these two groups defeated the treaty in the Senate.

This cartoon illustrates the struggle in the Senate between supporters of the League of Nations and opponents who believed its covenant, or charter, conflicted with the U.S. Constitution. The key issue was whether the League could involve the United States in a conflict without congressional approval.



## 25.4 The Great Debate About Ratification

Two days after President Wilson returned home, he called on the Senate to ratify the Treaty of Versailles with U.S. membership in the League of Nations. Wilson had strong public support. More than 30 state legislatures and governors endorsed League membership. Still, Wilson had yet to win the necessary two-thirds vote of the Senate needed to ratify a treaty. The question was whether he could get enough Republican votes in the Senate to reach that magic number.

**Reservationists Seek Changes Before Approving Treaty** Many Republicans in the Senate were reluctant to approve the treaty as it was written. Known as reservationists, they said they would vote yes, but only with a number of reservations, or changes, added to it.

The reservationists were mostly concerned with Article 10 of the League's charter. This article focused on collective security. It required member nations to work together—and even supply troops—to keep the peace. Reservationists feared this would draw the United States into wars without approval from Congress. They demanded that Article 10 be changed to read, “The United States assumes no obligation to preserve the territorial integrity or political independence of any other country . . . unless . . . Congress shall . . . so provide.”

Republican Senator Henry Cabot Lodge of Massachusetts was the leader of the reservationists. In a speech outlining his views, he warned,

The United States is the world's best hope, but if you fetter her in the interests and quarrels of other nations, if you tangle her in the intrigues of Europe, you will destroy her power for good and endanger her very existence . . . Strong, generous, and confident, she has nobly served mankind. Beware how you trifle with your marvellous inheritance, this great land of ordered liberty, for if we stumble and fall freedom and civilization everywhere will go down in ruin.

—Henry Cabot Lodge, “On the League of Nations,” August 12, 1919

Lodge had both personal and political reasons for opposing the Treaty of Versailles. He and Wilson had long been bitter foes. “I never expected to hate anyone in politics with the hatred I feel toward Wilson,” Lodge once confessed. He was also angry that Wilson had snubbed Republicans when choosing delegates to the peace conference. The ratification debate gave Lodge and his fellow Republicans an opportunity to embarrass the president and weaken the Democratic Party.

As head of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Lodge found ways to delay action on the treaty. When the treaty came to his committee for study, he spent two weeks reading aloud every word of the nearly 300 pages. Next, he held six weeks of public hearings, during which opponents of the treaty were given ample time to speak out against it.

**Irreconcilables Reject the Treaty in Any Form** A group of 16 Senate Republicans firmly opposed the Treaty of Versailles. Known as irreconcilables, their “no” vote was certain. They were completely opposed to any treaty that included an international organization that might draw the nation into war.

Part I

Republican Senator William Borah of Idaho was one of the more outspoken irreconcilables. The world, he declared, could "get along better without our intervention." He scoffed at the reservationists' position. Recalling George Washington's Farewell Address, he asked, "Where is the reservation . . . which protects us against entangling alliances with Europe?"

**Internationalists Support the Treaty of Versailles** Most Senate Democrats strongly supported the treaty. This group, known as internationalists, believed that greater cooperation among nations could work for the benefit of all. They argued that the United States had already become a major world power. As such, it should take its rightful place in the world community by becoming a member of the League of Nations. Rather than worry about the United States being dragged into another war by the League, the internationalists focused on the League's role in keeping the peace.

**President Wilson Takes His Case to the People** As the ratification hearings dragged on, the public began to lose interest. Upset by Lodge's delaying tactics, Wilson decided to go directly to the public for support. On learning the president was planning a speaking tour of the country, his doctor warned that it could damage his already failing health. Wilson is reported to have replied,

[My] own health is not to be considered when the future peace and security of the world are at stake. If the Treaty is not ratified by the Senate, the War will have been fought in vain, and the world will be thrown into chaos. I promised our soldiers, when I asked them to take up arms, that it was a war to end wars.

—Woodrow Wilson, August 27, 1919

The president embarked on a grueling, 8,000-mile speaking tour of the West. He spoke up to four times a day, giving about 40 speeches in 29 cities. Two irreconcilables, Borah and California Senator Hiram Johnson, followed Wilson on their own tour. Despite their attacks, the campaign for the treaty seemed to be picking up speed when disaster struck. On September 25, 1919, the president collapsed with a severe headache in Pueblo, Colorado. His doctor stopped the tour, and Wilson's train sped back to Washington.

V-N Notes  
Part 2



In this cartoon, Woodrow Wilson is shown leaving Congress to seek public support for the League of Nations. The president's speaking tour of the country was cut short when he suffered a collapse.

# Begin V-N Notes Part 3



Edith Wilson managed the president's daily affairs after he collapsed from a stroke while touring the nation in 1919. She later said she made "the very important decision of when to present matters to my husband." But she denied making policy decisions for him.

## 25.5 A Divided Senate Decides the Treaty's Fate

A few days after returning to the White House, Wilson had a major stroke that left him partly paralyzed. For months, the president remained very ill. Hoping to restore his health, his wife, Edith Galt Wilson, became a gatekeeper. She decided what news he would hear and chose his few visitors.

At first, the public had no idea just how sick Wilson was. When the extent of his illness became clear, Wilson's critics accused Edith of making decisions for the country. Some called her the "assistant president." In her own account of this time, she said she had "never made a single decision regarding . . . public affairs." Still, in her role as caregiver, Edith Wilson became caught up in the nasty political fighting that marked the debate on the Versailles Treaty.

**Partisanship Defeats the Treaty** From the start, bitter **partisanship**, or rivalry between political parties, marked the treaty ratification process. During the months of debate, senators on both sides put loyalty to their party above all else.

By the time the treaty came to the Senate for a vote late in 1919, the reservationists had added 14 amendments to it. Most of the changes had little impact on the League of Nations. Despite this, Wilson rejected them all. He refused to accept any agreement that did not have the precise language he had agreed to in Paris. When Nebraska Senator Gilbert Hitchcock advised Wilson to work with Republicans, Wilson barked, "Let Lodge compromise!" The president called on his supporters to vote down the amendments and then pass the treaty in its original form.

The plan backfired. On the first vote, Democrats loyal to Wilson joined the irreconcilables to defeat the amended treaty. When the Senate voted on the unamended treaty, Democrats voted yes, but reservationists and irreconcilables joined forces to defeat it.

Under strong public pressure to try again, the Senate reconsidered the treaty four months later. Once again, Wilson opposed any changes. "Either we should enter the League . . . not fearing the role of leadership which we now enjoy," he told his supporters, "or we should retire . . . from the great concert of powers by which the world was saved."

Not all Senate Democrats agreed with this point of view. Fearing that the nation might be left with no treaty at all, 21 Democrats voted to accept the 14 amendments. But even with their support, the final count fell seven votes short of the two thirds needed for treaty ratification.

**The 1920 Election Becomes a Referendum on the Treaty** As the 1920 presidential election heated up, Wilson struggled to save the treaty. The Democratic candidate for president, Governor James M. Cox of Ohio, declared himself firmly in favor of the League of Nations. His running mate, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, supported it as well. "If you want . . . another war against civilization," Roosevelt warned, "then let us go back to the conditions of 1914. If you want the possibility of sending once more our troops and navies to foreign lands, then stay out of the League." The Republican Party straddled the issue, favoring "an international association" to prevent war but opposing the League. Its candidate, Warren G. Harding, lacked conviction either way.

End  
V-N  
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Wilson called for the election to be a “great and solemn referendum” on the League of Nations. By this time, however, Americans were losing interest in the partisan debate over ratification. Issues closer to home, such as inflation and unemployment, appeared more pressing. Most people seemed to think, observed Secretary of State Robert Lansing, that Americans should “attend to our own affairs and let the rest of the nations go to the devil if they want to.”

When the votes were in, Cox received just 9.1 million votes, compared with Harding’s 16.1 million. “It was not a landslide,” said Wilson’s private secretary, Joseph Tumulty, of the Democratic defeat. “It was an earthquake.” The great referendum on the treaty had gone terribly wrong.

In October 1921, the United States, which had fought separately from the Allies, signed a separate peace treaty with Germany. The League of Nations had begun operations by that time, but the nation whose president had created it was not a member.

Two decades would pass before Americans would rethink the idea of collective security. By then, the nation was engaged in a second global war. Looking back, people could not help but wonder: Could that next war have been avoided if the United States had joined the League of Nations?

## Summary

**After World War I, President Woodrow Wilson hoped to create a lasting peace. He insisted that the treaty ending the war should include a peacekeeping organization called the League of Nations. Many Americans feared that membership in the League could involve the United States in future wars.**

**The Fourteen Points** Wilson outlined his goals for lasting peace in his Fourteen Points. Key issues included an end to secret agreements, freedom of the seas, reduction of armaments, self-determination for ethnic groups, and collective security through creation of an international peacekeeping organization.

**The Big Four** When the heads of the four major Allies—France, Great Britain, Italy, and the United States—met in Paris for peace talks, they were more focused on self-interest than on Wilson’s plan.

**Treaty of Versailles** The treaty negotiated in Paris redrew the map of Europe, granting self-determination to some groups. Some Allies sought revenge on Germany, insisting on a war-guilt clause and reparations from Germany.

**League of Nations** Wilson hoped that including the League of Nations in the final treaty would make up for his compromises on other issues. He believed that by providing collective security and a framework for peaceful talks, the League would fix many problems the treaty had created.

**The ratification debate** The treaty ratification debate divided the Senate into three groups. Reservationists would not accept the treaty unless certain changes were made. Irreconcilables rejected the treaty in any form. Internationalists supported the treaty and the League.

**Rejection of the treaty** Partisan politics and Wilson’s refusal to compromise led to the treaty’s rejection and ended Wilson’s hopes for U.S. membership in the League of Nations.