

American Debate over Ratification of the Treaty of Versailles

American foreign policy continues to resonate with the issues surrounding the debate over U.S. entry into the League of Nations—collective security versus national sovereignty, idealism versus pragmatism, the responsibilities of powerful nations, the use of force to accomplish idealistic goals, the idea of America. Understanding the debate over the League and the consequences of its ultimate failure provides insight into international affairs in the years since the end of the Great War and beyond.

<http://edsitement.neh.gov/curriculum-unit/debate-united-states-over-league-nations>

The Treaty of Versailles

Of the treaty's 440 articles, the first twenty-six comprise the **Covenant of the League of Nations**. This covenant describes the operational workings of the League. **Article Ten** obliges signatories to guarantee the political independence and territorial integrity of all member nations against outside aggression, and to consult together to oppose aggression when it occurs. This became the critical point, and the one that ultimately prevented the treaty's ratification by the Senate.

Here is Article 10:

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.

Source: excerpt from The Covenant of the League of Nations, <http://avalon.law.yale.edu/imt/parti.asp>

Senator **Henry Cabot Lodge** led the opposition. Lodge and Wilson were bitter political foes, but they also had legitimate differences of views on the League and on the covenant's Tenth Article. Lodge believed that the League, under Article Ten, could require the United States to commit economic or military force to maintain the collective security of member nations. Wilson did not share this interpretation of Article 10 - an article that Wilson had written himself. Wilson stated that the veto power enjoyed by the United States in the League Council could prevent any League sanction, but if a unanimous League voted sanctions, the vote amounted only to advice, in any case. The United States would not be, therefore, legally bound to the League's dictates. However, Wilson did declare, that the United States would be morally bound to adhere to the League's resolutions. A moral bond was, for Wilson, infinitely superior to a mere legal one. Article Ten was, for him, "a very grave and solemn obligation."

Wilson and Lodge surely could have found a middle ground. Some sort of compromise language could have been drafted. There were pro-treaty Republicans who could have formed a coalition with the Democrats to win the necessary two-thirds majority. But Wilson blocked compromise after he suffered a massive stroke in October 1919. No accommodation with the opposition was found on either side. The treaty was voted down.

The United States remained officially at war until June of 1921 when President **Warren Harding** approved a joint congressional resolution proclaiming the war with the Central Powers ended, and later signed a separate peace treaty. The resolution and the treaty specified that although the United States was not a party to the Versailles Treaty, it retained all rights and advantages accorded to it under the pact's terms, excluding the League Covenant. The United States never joined the League of Nations.

http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/wilson/peopleevents/p_lodge.html