In episode 33, we assess the day of 7th February, where the allies attempted to respond to what the Germans had done the previous day of 6th Feb, when the Constituent Assembly gathered in Weimar. The only problem with this allied approach was that no single man knew what exactly was happening in Germany. They were armed only with vague ideas and preconceived notions, and certainly no practical solutions. The French offered venom and wrath, the British caution, the Americans sympathy. It was impossible to decide upon the future either of Germany or the peace conference as a whole when everything seemed to be in flux, but this would not stop the allies from trying their best.

As talk of Germany continued, so did plans for creating the ideal version of the League of Nations. After being presented only the previous week, a commission had gotten to work sorting through the difficulties and disagreements, which were unfortunately legion. The French, much like in the case of the German question, posed the most problems in the League discussion. But was this fair to blame the French? Could we instead be more justified in blaming the American President? Was Woodrow Wilson to blame for failing to delegate, and for viewing the creation of the League as his one truly important purpose? As we will learn here, the consensus is not present on any of these questions, because the truth is far from so simple…

Hello and welcome history friends patrons all to episode 33 of the VAP. In the last few episodes, our narrative focused on the creation of some sort of organised solution for Eastern Europe, and on the convening of a National Assembly in Weimar, which was tasked with hammering out the new German constitution, and providing the German people with a stable transitional government. As we did so, we left the Big Three behind a little bit, but in the next two episodes, we return to their mission, specifically on 7th February, where a meeting of the SWC was being held for the first time in quite a while. As usual when the SWC met, the topic at hand was the distribution of troops and the sticky subject of demobilisation. At the same time, the 19 man Commission on the LON, led of course by WW, worked to hammer out a covenant in time for Wilson’s return to the US on 13th. It was, as usual, a very busy time, and there’s nothing for us to do but to get straight into it, so I will now take you all to the afternoon of 7th February 1919…

\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*

To Clemenceau’s certain relief, it was finally time to talk about Germany. Whether it was the LON, mandates or deputations from E Europe, it must have seemed sometimes like everyone had forgotten why they were there. The goal was to make peace with Germany, and to Clemenceau all other things – including the LON – were of secondary importance. On this point, Wilson disagreed, since he wanted to get the League sorted out first. A compromise of sorts was reached in late January; in the evenings, WW would meet with the 19 man LON commission, while during the day, the Council of Ten or the SWC, depending on the agenda being political or military, would meet. Today, on 7th February, the issue of renewing the armistice with Germany was up for debate, and intertwined within this was the issue of demobilisation. The allies were understandably anxious at the high cost of maintaining so many men for so long.

The figures provided by Marshal Ferdinand Foch at the beginning of the meeting revealed just how militarily committed each power was, even though the war was supposedly in its twilight phase. Foch read from a report compiled by the SWC from a late January meeting where he had been present, and which had been set two tasks; the first being to provide a figure of the available allied troops by 31st March, when it was believed the final treaty with Germany would be signed, and the second to explain what each power planned to do after 31st March if a peace was not signed. In case you were wondering, no, the TOV was not signed on 31st March – the SWC which drew up these calculations had in fact miscalculated the ending of the war by about three months. Again, reading the minutes of these meetings, we are provided with an invaluable picture of the allied expectations, and it gives us a chance to marvel once more at precisely how unprepared they were. Foch introduced the SWC meeting from 26th January, saying:

The object of this meeting was to determine, with the greatest possible accuracy, the situation of the allied armies on March 31st 1919, such as will result from the measures taken by each government for demobilisation and repatriation, and also to consider what further provisions could be made, given these measures.

Then, Foch provided details of the strength of the four allied powers. First the French, by 31st March, would possess 1,350,000 men still under arms, the British 212,000, the Americans 680,000 and the Italians 225,000 men. The plans which each of these powers had for events after 31 March varied, with the Americans committing to move in more equipment and train more reservists, the British committing to ship more men in from the dominions, the French keeping a rotating reserve on hand at all times, and the Italians being a bit cagey about their plans. Foch concluded that, according to this report, ‘the future can only be ensured by maintaining the above mentioned resources in stopping the process of demobilisation.’[[1]](#footnote-1)

Against this, WW wanted to know whether Foch believed that the Germans would accept the armistice again – since it was renewed every month don’t forget – or whether pressure would have to be applied. Foch predictably replied that the Germans would have to be coerced, but added a note which was similar in outlook to that of Clemenceau, namely, that the allied should not demobilise until the Germans had signed the final treaty. If they demobilised too early, then there would not be sufficient pressure in place to guarantee Germany’s cooperation. According to the plan which had been written up on the SWC meeting on 26th January, the allies were relying on Germany to uphold her promises and stick to the terms of the armistice. If she then decided to rebel against this in late March, and the allies had demobilised a great proportion of their soldiers, then the situation could well become critical.

Clemenceau asked Foch if there was any other way to impose the allied will over Germany, and to maintain control over its war-making capabilities. Foch, after suggesting an unlikely plan to occupy her factories, replied in the negative. Wilson thanked Foch for his frank reply. LG asked whether it would be possible to weaken Germany by adhering to a suggestion made in the aforementioned SWC meeting, that being, to confiscate much of Germany’s rifles, machine guns and artillery. Foch replied that it would weaken Germany, but that he did not know how long for. LG then spelled it out; it would take at least two years for Germany to replace all the military hardware that the allies proposed to take, even longer if the allies blocked the delivery of raw materials into the country. Therefore, by seizing these items, Germany would be effectively crippled as a military power, there would be no danger of a renewal of the war, and the demobilisation process could proceed. Wilson then asked what the allies would do if the Germans promised to send their hardware but then refused to, using the opportunity to test the allied will. Foch replied that the allies would have to seize the weaponry by war. LG was dubious, pressing Foch about whether the Germans would choose war over food, or whether they would hang onto their weaponry during peacetime rather than feed themselves, to which Foch unhelpfully replied that he did not know.

Wilson’s idea caused further divisions; he suggested that a civilian commission be sent to Germany which would renegotiate the renewal of the armistice, and added that a mass demobilisation of the German army would only fill the ranks of the unemployed. This was too far for LG, who reasoned that the allies were under no obligation to feed or supply Germans according to the terms of the armistice. LG wanted the Germans to reduce the size of their armies, since this was the best way to guarantee peace, otherwise, as LG put it, ‘should Germany mean mischief, she could call together millions of well-trained men, with full complement of officers and non-commissioned officers, thousands of the best guns in the world and fifty thousand machine guns. A fit of anger might come over her.’ Demonstrating then his distinct lack of information about the situation in Germany, LG exclaimed that ‘a tailor named Ebhardt is chancellor’, when in fact Philip Scheidemann was chancellor, and the man who they may have been referring to, Friedrich Ebert, was a former saddle maker, and he was President rather than Chancellor. LG added that ‘Germany herself was being endangered by having this temptation left at her door’ – the temptation being the recalling of these millions of men, supposedly on standby, back to the colours to fight the allies.

Knowing what we know about Friedrich Ebert’s government, and the fact that a National Assembly had only been convened the day before the Big Four fulminated over how to plan for a renewal of the war, one could argue without too much difficulty that a renewal of the war was the last thing on the German president’s mind. In any case, there were enough military and political threats to keep Ebert’s regime occupied, be it in the form of the expanding Poles, the Spartacists and fringe elements that continued to lurk, or the paramilitary organisations like the Freikorps which Ebert found himself regrettably depending on. Wilson seems to have been the only figure present to have appreciated this, though this did not mean he was well-informed of the goings on in Germany. If he had been, then he would have been able to make a more convincing case, but as it stood on the afternoon on 7th February, he was only able to make moral arguments, and this was not at all sufficient for French security or British guarantees.[[2]](#footnote-2)

GC cut straight to the point in declaring himself ‘not in accord’ with the American President, before going down a by now familiar rhetorical path to explain why. The French premier’s diatribe, quoted in the minutes of the meeting, is worth quoting from, because Clemenceau explored several issues on the way to his conclusion: that being, Germany must be forced if necessary to accept the terms, and she would not respond well to timidity or division among the allied ranks. Clemenceau said:

France would be placed in a position of great danger if a firm attitude were not adopted. When the terms of the armistice had been discussed he had said that only what was necessary should be inserted, in order not to risk a refusal of the terms. But, each time it had been agreed to renew the armistice for a period of one month only, and this was done with the express object of having an opportunity of imposing new terms, adapted to the changing situation. The right to impose new terms, or new conditions, could not therefore be contested either on juridical or any other grounds…But he had one other thing to say. The present most was decisive, not because it was a question of winning the war, but because there was a danger of losing the fruits of victory. It was essential to act quickly. The forces at the call of the allies had not yet diminished appreciably. In the last few weeks, the Germans had become insolent, and recently an incident had occurred. Marshal Foch had been forced to use constraint to bring the German delegates to a meeting. If now ambassadors were to be sent and negotiations were to be begun, much valuable time would be lost; and April would come and find our forces partially scattered…He knew the German people well. They became ferocious when any one retires before them. Was it forgotten that they were still at war; that the armistice was a status of war? The Germans had not forgotten it. He called attention to the case of Poland. The Poles had stopped the further advance of their troops at the request of the allies, but the Germans had treated a similar request with a blank refusal…The allies would be exposed to great danger unless they menaced the Germans now. There was need of a strong Poland. Furthermore, President Wilson had, as one of his fourteen points, assumed the obligated of reconstituting Poland. The LON was a very fine conception, but it could not be constituted without nations. As one of the nations concerned, Poland was most necessary as a buffer on the east just as France formed a buffer on the west. If the Germans were formally told that any attack by them on the east would mean an advance by the allies on the west, he knew that such language would be understood by the Germans and command immediate compliance. Instead of this, it was proposed to buy the good will of the Germans by offering them food and raw materials. A state of war still existed, and any appearance of war would be construed as an evidence of weakness…He did not wish to starve the Germans, but the blockade must be maintained. If he so far forgot the interests of his country and of Europe as to consent to this proposal, the Chamber would undoubtedly dismiss him, and it would be acting right in doing so.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Indeed, it was quite the speech, topped off with the remark that if the allies did not heed his warnings and went along with the idea of a civilian commission to Germany, then Clemenceau would be relieved of his premiership, and the allies would be forced to deal with another French leader instead. LG tried to reach a compromise, suggesting a mixture between Wilson’s commission idea, and the pressure of force which Marshal Foch believed was necessary. Clemenceau rejected this as well; he simply could not accept the spectacle of a purely civilian commission travelling to Germany to negotiate the armistice terms. The armistice terms were set, Germany must agree to them, and to any adjustments which were made. He was not opposed, he said, to adding civilians to Foch’s pre-existing military commission, but he could not countenance giving the impression to the Germans that the military pressure had somehow slackened.

At its heart, this was a difference in policy and psychology; Clemenceau was adamant that the Germans would exploit any weaknesses they detected, and he did not want to take that risk, securing the issue by ramping up the military speak and presenting demands to Germany before offering the carrot. The Americans and to some extent the British wanted to go with the usual carrot and stick approach, if for no other reason than to arrive at a negotiated solution while they possessed the military potential to serve as the hard power, while the blockade and potential of supplies being delivered in the near future could serve as the soft power incentive. The Italians also weighed in to support Clemenceau, with VO arguing, according to the minutes that:

…whatever was wanted must be demanded in the form of an order and in a loud tone of voice. If a German thought that the one having the mastery showed any signs of hesitation, or failed to look him straight in the eyes, he would concede nothing. The victors must speak to the Germans as the vanquished. It would be undesirable to have to face a refusal. Therefore, if necessary, the conditions might be reduced, but whatever was agreed to must be demanded as an order.

LG did not seem to have anticipated Clemenceau’s opposition, or for situation to present such difficulties. The British aim was to reduce the burden of the mobilised soldiers; if the French or anyone else wished to add new terms to the armistice, then now was the time to do so and enforce them before the costs of mobilising so many men became unbearable. Furthermore, LG believed that by taking the arms away from the Germans, there would be no need to maintain such massive armies. By taking away their arms and sending a conditional civilian commission with military backup where necessary, the allies would make plain their commitment to peace, but would also show that they were not messing around. ‘He did not contemplate making Europe an armed camp forever, and the best way to prevent this was to disarm Germany’, the minutes record him saying. LG then asked that if it were possible to combine Wilson’s suggestions with the French proposals, and to get Germany’s guns, then concerted action might become possible on the allied side. With this in mind, LG proposed a second draft of the commission idea, but this was rejected by Clemenceau as well.

Clemenceau declared himself opposed to the second draft of the commission idea on the grounds that it alluded to the carrot before the demand was set down. In Clemenceau’s view, this would lead to nothing less than an endless set of negotiations between the Germans and allies, where the Germans attempted to wrest the desired carrots before considering the stick. On the contrary, Clemenceau insisted, the Germans should be presented with the allies demands, and no hint of carrots given, until they then bowed down to the threats and obeyed. Furthermore, Clemenceau feared that the longer this process took, and the longer the Germans had to debate whatever new clauses might be added to the armistice, the weaker the allied position would become, as the previously agreed demobilisation arrangements would come into effect.

By 31st March, the allies would still be maintaining more than 2 million men, but this would not be sufficient to pressure the Germans if Ebert’s government did not believe the allies had the stomach or will to resume the fight. The allies had to come on strong from the beginning, and show the Germans that they were not going to let up in their demands. As the defeated power, the Germans were in no position to negotiate and certainly not to make requests of their own – Germany could comply, or she could be invaded again. Wilson called the SWC’s report on Germany a ‘panic programme’, and argued that while it was sensible to confiscate Germany’s artillery and her small arms where possible, the act of occupying her major arms factories would only ignite conflict, especially if allied officers were seen to be in occupation.

LG agreed it could get messy, especially if other allied armies were required to back up these officers. He thus suggested a compromise – a committee would be created consisting of a representative from the three allied powers who had forces on the Western Front, in other words, the big three. These three reps would determine what Germany would have to hand over, for her disarmament to be considered complete and acceptable. This, at least, was accepted, and with that, the SWC meeting dispersed for the evening.[[4]](#footnote-4) It had been a tense, fraught atmosphere, and all involved were no doubt eager to depart. Unfortunately for WW, there was to be no rest. He returned to House’s room for the latest meeting on the LON. Wilson may by now have envied the decisions by Clemenceau and LG to delegate responsibility for the League to subordinates, but as the League was his baby, it is unlikely Wilson would ever have delegated his role to anyone. Just as the LON was to be the centrepiece of his LON, so too was WW the centrepiece of the LON commission meetings. House recorded his performance, which was both good and bad, saying:

We had the usual meeting of the Committee on the League of Nations last night. We did not adjourn until eleven. Many important articles were adopted. Practically everything originates from our end of the table, that is with Lord Robert Cecil and the President, I acting as adviser. The President excels in such work. He seems to like it and his short talks in explanation of his views are admirable. I have never known anyone to do such work so well. Personally, I dislike working over details. After the broad general lines are agreed upon, I am always willing to turn the finishing touches over to others. The President, in my opinion, lays too much stress on these details. It is not a hard and fast trade we are making with one another, and a more flexible instrument would be better than a rigid one. It is the spirit of the Covenant that counts more than the text.[[5]](#footnote-5)

House’s observations about Wilson’s willingness to get into details is interesting, especially in light of the repeated accusations from contemporaries and historians alike that Wilson was a man of ideas, but not of specifics, an approach which drove his peers and counterparts crazy. So vague had Wilson been on the LON idea, that in the previous December Jan Smuts, the SA delegate and one of two British reps on the LON commission, drafted ‘A Practical Suggestion’ which set down the guiding principles and structure of the League. Wilson accepted Smuts’ suggestions as his own, which flattered the SA, but which also made conversing with him and his fellow British delegate, Robert Cecil, an easier task than conversing with any other delegates. It was therefore little surprise that in the LON commission meetings, the British and Americans sat side by side, and worked out most of the details before they were brought before the Commission.

A major criticism levelled at Wilson’s performance during the PPC is that his single-minded pursuit of the League left him vulnerable, not least because so few American delegates were willing to accept his vision of the League without compromises. Wilson wanted his vision of the League, and no other, to be the final version which was adopted. After some initial opposition, the different delegations accepted, but conditionally. Instead of attempting to drive a hard bargain and have their own say in how the LON would be forged, most simply gave up trying to change the President’s mind. This sounds good on paper, but what these delegates did instead was fight for their country’s interests instead, and in exchange for their avowed support of Wilson’s vision, the President was compelled to grant several concessions to them. No other figure than Robert Lansing, the SOS, handed down this harsh interpretation of his President’s behaviour at the PPC. As he wrote in his memoirs:

Obsessed with the idea that the organization of a league of nations was the supreme object to be attained at the Paris Conference, the President devoted his time, his effort, and his influence to drafting its charter and removing or neutralizing the objections which stood in the way of its acceptance. At the first he conferred with the other American commissioners in regard to the covenant, but on finding them, except possibly Colonel House, more or less sceptical as to the practical operation of the organization which he had planned in collaboration with Lord Robert Cecil and General Smuts, and disposed to offer suggestions materially modifying the plan, he showed that he preferred only the cooperation of those who unreservedly believed in his draft. It was very apparent that he did not desire counsel and criticism, but approval and commendation of the covenant. It was unfortunate for the President and for the League that he took this attitude, as subsequent events proved. As the leaders of the Allied Powers, with their practical ideas, came to a realization of the situation and saw that the President was willing to concede much in exchange for support of the covenant, they utilized his supreme desire to obtain by barter material advantages for their own nations. From the results of the negotiations it may be deduced that by clever representations they gained concession after concession.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Wilson may have been single-minded and too agreeable on certain subjects, but as far as the League negotiations went, those involved demonstrated remarkable patience and skill. It was the task of the 19 man commission to create some kind of covenant for the League which Wilson could bring back with him to the US by 14th, and much to Cecil’s surprise, the ten men from the Big Five and nine from the other powers worked remarkably quickly. They would likely have finished quicker, and with less stress, had the French not weighed in so heavily on the debate. If the aforementioned SWC meeting on 7th February proved tense, as Wilson and Clemenceau espoused vastly different views on how to deal with Germany, then the fortnight leading up to the signing of the Covenant of the LON demonstrated to the American President that the French might not be such reliable or suitable allies after all.

To begin with, Leon Bourgeois, the French delegate to the LON commission, began making suggestions that the League should have more teeth, perhaps its own general staff or at least an army. Wilson for so long had operated on the assumption that since everyone wanted it, nobody would resist whatever judgements it delivered. French suggestions challenged that assumption, which to Wilson, meant that they challenged him. But that wasn’t all; GC had become more vocal in his opposition to certain American ideas, more specifically, his lukewarm enthusiasm for the League was beginning to show, likely fanned by Clemenceau’s impression that the British and Americans couldn’t always be relied upon to defend French interests.[[7]](#footnote-7) Then there was the press. ‘A dreadful attack on Wilson in *La Figaro*’, noted HN on 11th February. ‘I hear he is furious, and threatens to transfer the Conference to Geneva. It would be a good thing if he did.’ The feeling against Wilson and the Americans was growing, Nicolson claimed, adding:

They loathe the LON and say that Wilson’s insistence on its being taken first is delaying the peace. This is nonsense, as it is only being done in the Commission after dinner till midnight, and the rest of the day is perfectly free for the CX to go ahead with other things.[[8]](#footnote-8)

As we will see in the future, the holiday Wilson had from France and his return in mid-March was effectively a signal that the honeymoon period was well and truly over. Once the President returned from a mostly unsuccessful publicity and support campaign, he came under the full force of an attack from the French press, who criticised his tone, his ideals, and even his wife. This only added to Wilson’s difficulties, and it also exposed cracks in Wilson’s personality; the man was not used to criticism, and was really bad at dealing with it, especially the kind launched from the back of the classroom. So the President had thin skin, and we are jumping ahead in our story somewhat, but it should be noted that Wilson, while he was present in the CX meetings, maintained a certain aura which even his critics, such as men like Robert Lansing whom he so unfortunately alienated, had to admit was impressive. As Lansing wrote:

Mr. Wilson during the sessions of the Council of Ten spoke in a low, pleasant voice and without rhetorical effort. As no one rose in speaking, he would lean forward, resting on the arms of his chair, and address his remarks first to one and then to another of his confreres. With fluency and with perfect diction he would present his views in sentences so well rounded that they suggested copper-plate perfection. His accuracy of language and his positiveness of assertion not infrequently reminded one of a lecturer imparting knowledge to a class, and gave the impression that he felt that what he said left nothing else to be said. He exhibited the traits of a philosopher rather than those of an advocate. He preferred to deal in generalities rather than with facts. His discourses, though essentially academic, were clear and logical.[[9]](#footnote-9)

As to what those that did admire or appreciate Wilson thought, to them the President was not at all a pushover or single-minded in his pursuit of his goals. Lansing recorded Wilson as frequently needing breaks to consult with experts, even after hearing a presentation on the subject for several hours.[[10]](#footnote-10) Yet, it is at the same time not hard to find those that would disagree with this interpretation, which begs the question of who do we believe, and as usual, the right answer is probably that Wilson slotted in between the two versions of himself with critics and fans alike saw. One individual, Mr. Thomas W. Lamont, a member of the great banking house of J. P. Morgan & Company, one of the representatives of the United States Treasury with the American Commission to Negotiate Peace, gives the lie to the criticisms uttered about the President, to the effect that he was exclusive, secretive, and refused to confer with those associated with him. Lamont said:

I am going to take this opportunity to say a word, in general, as to President Wilson's attitude at the Peace Conference. He is accused of having been unwilling to consult his colleagues. I never saw a man more ready and anxious to consult than he. He has been accused of having been desirous to gain credit for himself and ignore others. I never saw a man more considerate of those of his coadjutors who were working immediately with him, nor a man more ready to give them credit with the other chiefs of state. Again and again would he say to Mr. Lloyd George or Mr. Clemenceau: "My expert here, Mr. So-and-So, tells me such-and-such, and I believe he is right. You will have to argue with him if you want me to change my opinion." President Wilson undoubtedly had his disabilities. Perhaps, in a trade, some of the other chiefs of state could have "out-jockeyed" him; but it seldom reached such a situation, because President Wilson, by his manifest sincerity and open candour, always saying precisely what he thought, would early disarm his opponents in argument. President Wilson did not have a well-organized secretarial staff. He did far too much of the work himself, studying until late at night papers and documents that he should have largely delegated to some discreet aides. He was, by all odds, the hardest worked man at the Conference; but the failure to delegate more of his work was not due to any inherent distrust he had of men--and certainly not any desire to "run the whole show" himself--but simply to his lack of facility in knowing how to delegate work on a large scale. In execution, we all have a blind spot in some part of our eye. President Wilson's was in his inability to use men; and inability, mind you, not a refusal. On the contrary, when any one of us volunteered or insisted upon taking responsibility off his shoulders he was delighted. Throughout the Peace Conference, Mr. Wilson never played politics. I never witnessed an occasion when I saw him act from unworthy conception or motive. His ideals were of the highest, and he clung to them tenaciously and courageously. Many of the so-called "Liberals" in England have assailed Mr. Wilson bitterly because, as they declare, he yielded too much to their own Premier, Mr. Lloyd George, and to Mr. Clemenceau. But could he have failed to defer to them on questions in which no vital principle was involved? I well remember his declaration on the question whether the Allies should refuse, for a period of five years during the time of France's recuperation, to promise Germany reciprocal tariff provisions. What Mr. Wilson said to Mr. Lloyd George and Mr. Clemenceau was this: "Gentlemen, my experts and I both regard the principle involved as an unwise one. We believe it will come back to plague you. But when I see how France has suffered, how she has been devastated, her industries destroyed--who am I to refuse to assent to this provision, designed, wisely or unwisely, to assist in lifting France again to her feet."[[11]](#footnote-11)

Further to this, it is also worth looking at the testimony of Mr. Isaiah Bowman, Chief Territorial Adviser of the Peace Commission who, a man who we’ve met before when discussing maps, who certainly knew his way around the map room and who, in answer to the direct question: "Was there not a time when it looked as if the Peace Conference might break up because of the extreme policy of one of the Allies?" gave the following revealing anecdote:

Yes, there were a number of occasions when the Peace Conference might have broken up. Almost anything might have happened with so many nations represented, so many personalities and so many experts – perhaps half a thousand in all! Owing to the fact that President Wilson has been charged on the one hand with outrageous concessions to the Allies and on the other hand that he had always been soft with the Germans, particularly with Bulgaria, let us see just how soft he was! On a certain day three of us were asked to call at the President's house, and on the following morning at eleven o'clock we arrived. President Wilson welcomed us in a very cordial manner. I cannot understand how people get the idea that he is cold. He does not make a fuss over you, but when you leave you feel that you have met a very courteous gentleman. You have the feeling that he is frank and altogether sincere. He remarked: 'Gentlemen, I am in trouble and I have sent for you to help me out. The matter is this: the French want the whole left bank of the Rhine. I told M. Clemenceau that I could not consent to such a solution of the problem. He became very much excited and then demanded ownership of the Saar Basin. I told him I could not agree to that either because it would mean giving 300,000 Germans to France.' Whereupon President Wilson further said: 'I do not know whether I shall see M. Clemenceau again. I do not know whether he will return to the meeting this afternoon. In fact, I do not know whether the Peace Conference will continue. M. Clemenceau called me a pro-German and abruptly left the room. I want you to assist me in working out a solution true to the principles we are standing for and to do justice to France, and I can only hope that France will ultimately accept a reasonable solution. I want to be fair to M. Clemenceau and to France, but I cannot consent to the outright transfer to France of 300,000 Germans.' A solution was finally found – the one that stands in the Treaty today.[[12]](#footnote-12)

Thus, Wilson’s character was by no means a straightforward, open and shut case. We have talked before about his convictions, and how they may have been too strong for his own good. It is certainly true that he possessed convictions which may have complicated or delayed the final settlement, but there can be doubt that Wilson’s counterparts did as well. What kind of baggage did GC, DLG or even VO bring to the PPC? I would wager most of you accept that the GW wasn’t caused by a single actor; I would hope that you would view the failure of the TOV in the same vein.

A failure so catastrophic, so terrible and so unfortunate was not caused solely by Wilson’s arrogant tone or vagueness of vision, nor was it caused by him rubbing the French the wrong way or failing to deal with challengers from home. The failure of Versailles was a failure perpetrated by people, but it was also a failure of the system in which they lived. While the planks had been set in place for the LON, the nails were crooked, some hammered in only halfway, and some powers had not done any hammering at all. It was going to be a struggle to get this League project across the finish line, but because Wilson believed it was so worth it, he was not going to give up. We should remember, as did his contemporaries, that while often justifiable criticism was lobbed in his direction, Wilson bore the brunt of it not for money, for fame or necessarily just for adulation. The dream which he envisaged – of a world made safe from war and guided by humanitarian principles – was a dream born a generation too early, so it proved, but nobody, throughout the PPC, was able to stop the American President from trying nonetheless.

1. See Council of Ten minutes, *Paris Peace Conference* 1919, volume III, pp. 896-897. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Ibid*, pp. 897-903. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Ibid*, pp. 903-904. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Ibid*, pp. 904-908. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Edward Mandell House, *Edward Mandell House Papers*, Series II, Diaries, Volume 7, p. 39. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Robert Lansing, *The Big Four and Others of the Peace Conference* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1921), pp. 49-50. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Macmillan, *Peacemakers*, pp. 102-103. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Nicolson, *Peacemaking 1919*, p. 182. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Lansing, *The Big Four*, p. 59. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. *Ibid*, pp. 54-56. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Quoted in Tumulty, *Wilson as I Knew Him*, pp. 356-357. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Quoted in *Ibid*, pp. 359-360. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)