WW’s stint back in the US had not been particularly successful. He had failed to woo his counterparts in the Republican Party, an essential task if the TOV was to successfully pass through Congress. Worse, he had come across as arrogant, preachy and inconsiderate during his delivery of the LON covenant. Wilson failed to sooth the fears of the opposition, and he failed also to reassure them that this brave new concept – the LON – would not interfere with the American constitution, nor would it supersede the rights of the President or Congress to pursue its own policies. Wilson refrained from appeasing these fears because he was so single-minded in his pursuit of the League, but also because he remained unsure about how to apply many of its elements himself.

However, it would unfair in the extreme to cast all blame for the ultimate failure of the TOV onto Wilson’s shoulders. While he was far from the perfect man to bring this ground-breaking treaty forward, the merits of the idea spoke for themselves, and the genuine popularity and favour shown by Americans towards the LON further underlined this point. We are thus confronted with the question of why, if the League was a popular idea in the US, it failed to be ratified in Congress. This process was confirmed in March 1920, when Congress voted against joining the League, but before that date, rumblings between the different sides had been heard. These different sides, we’ll be interested to hear, was far from as clear cut as Republic versus Democrat.

Instead, our analysis of the different sides must begin with the man who, 100 years ago today, delivered what would later be seen as the most significant attack upon the LON covenant, and consequently, as the fatal blow to Wilson’s vision. The fight to ratify the TOV and the League therein was not lost when HCL delivered his ‘reservations’ speech, but the odds had been stacked in favour of the so-called ‘irreconcilables’ – those Congressmen who hated the very concept of the League and who vowed to do all in their power to hamper and block its passage. What makes this story, and the person of HCL, all the more interesting, is that debate which asks whether Lodge was in fact among the foremost pro-League Americans that could be found, or, was the opposite the case? On 28th Feb 1919, Lodge presented reservations which he held towards the LON covenant as it then stood, but many historians suspect that by this point, Lodge had already determined to sink the League, and that he believed by bringing forward these reservations, he could achieve that.

In this episode, we’re going to do our best to first of all, investigate Lodge’s reservations and place them in the context of 1919 America. Second, we will examine the wider American responses to the LON, and the level of actual support for it. Finally, we will examine the evidence which points to Lodge’s true stance, and therein assess his true responsibility for the failure of the League. For those disinterested in American history, and eager to get back to Paris, I would urge you to try and accept this detour as a chapter in WW’s experience of the PPC in general. If it is debatable whether this incident represented the beginning of the end for Wilson’s vision, then what is not up for debate is that we cannot possibly begin to understand the President without first understanding the country he ruled.

This country and its opposition politicians, it is often forgotten, played a pivotal role in shaping the post-war order, and their contributions, negative or otherwise, should be acknowledged. The occasion of Lodge’s reservations was, perhaps, the most difficult part of this experience for Wilson so far, because he could find nobody as opposed to his ideals as those that existed within Congress, and consequently, no other figures, other than Congressmen, held so much power to disappoint his ambitions. I had a great time researching and writing this episode, and as you can see, it is one of the longest in our listing, and you should also know that it also took the longest of any episode to research and write – so far, that is.

By the end of this episode, you should have a good appreciation for the nature of Wilson’s defeat, and what it meant for his prospects in Paris. You should also be able to appreciate the fact that all of this was not the President’s fault, and flawed though he was, he did face considerable challenges which proved, in the end, too much for him to overcome. We will assess everything from HCL’s partisan motives, to his surprising grasp of what we would appreciate as neorealist principles, to his additional motives which are often swept under the proverbial rug. We will begin, as indicated above, with an examination of each of HCL’s 14 reservations. It was probably no accident that Lodge now had his 14 reservations, where Wilson had had his 14 points, but these were certainly of a different character than the President’s document had been. I should clarify that the TOV contained the stipulations for the League, so when the Senate voted to reject the Treaty in March 1920, they also voted to reject the League, and in fact the League was the major reason why the TOV failed to receive the ratification it needed from the Senate.

For our narrative, we will be referring mostly to the League, but on some occasions we will have to fast forward a bit to the point where the TOV and LON were opposed as a block, whereas in our timeline, in late February 1919, it was not yet certain what form the final peace with Germany would take, and while a covenant for the LON had been drawn up, its final form had yet to be cemented. This of course provided some opportunities for HCL to establish what his bones of contention towards the League were, and thanks to Wilson’s presentation of this covenant to Congress in his tour, Lodge and his colleagues all knew what articles the League would contain. Wilson had provided them with the roadmap, now it was up Lodge and company to delineate the different bumps and sharp turns which they were opposed to. After this very long, cautionary introduction then, I think we’re at last ready to visit the occasion where, 100 years ago today, Lodge presented his historic reservations.

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We don’t need to list verbatim each of Lodge’s 14 reservations, but we should provide a summary of each, so that you know where the source of his opposition was based, so let’s begin that task now.[[1]](#footnote-1) First, Lodge stated his objection to America’s indefinite League membership; the US, Lodge insisted, must be allowed exit the League whenever she liked, through a concurrent resolution involving the assent of both Houses, and in that event not even the President would be allowed stand in the way. This point was obviously symbolic, and designed to send a message to WW. Second, the most sensitive issue, that of the US engaging in collective security operations, was addressed. Lodge insisted that the US should never be obligated to intervene in conflicts which were not of her concern. Articles X and XI of the League provided for these obligations, but Lodge insisted here that only Congress was entitled to bring the country into war. Third, the US should not be obligated in any way to take on the responsibilities of a mandatory power, and will be entitled to reject mandates if they are fostered upon her. Lodge was evidently concerned that the US would be forced to cater for some far flung backwater of no strategic interest.

Fourth, Lodge declared that it was the right of Congress to determine what was or was not within her jurisdiction, and that any issues pertaining to American interests, be it do to with the drug trafficking or immigration, was up to America and not the League to sort out. Fifth, the Monroe Doctrine, that policy document from the previous century which entitled the US to defend its interests in Latin America, was to be defended and placed under no threat by the League’s operations. Sixth, the US was again to be under no obligation to interfere in the event of a war between China and Japan. Seventh, it was the prerogative of Congress, and nobody else, even the President, to appoint delegates to the League. Eighth, only by approval from Congress can the League make a ruling or interfere within German-American trade relations. Ninth, the US was not obligated in any way to pay money to the League, and she could not be compelled to provide economic assistance to its member states. Tenth, the US was entitled to build up its military forces at any point that it desired, and would not be beholden to the military limitations of the Treaty.

11th, it was said that if a member of the League was found guilty of violating its key tenets, the US would not have to cease trading with that state, and could follow its own policy line. 12th, nothing within the Treaty should interfere with the US’ Bill of Rights, and no citizen should have their rights affected by it. 13th ruled that any organisations which the League created in the future could not demand American participation, and that only Congress could determine which new organisations or League institutions the US would join. 14th and finally, Lodge put forth a reservation designed to protect the US against the influence of a larger community of states, as this point absolved American policymakers from having to adhere to a ruling wherein more than one vote from a similarly minded group of states was cast. It is difficult to avoid the impression that this reservation was directed at Britain and its Commonwealth, which many Americans feared would outvote the American position by voting as one single block rather than as a collection of states.

So what do you make of Lodge’s reservations? Some would say that they were fair enough, and that Lodge was here inserting insurance clauses which would guard America from unfair or unforeseen circumstances. Others, in particular WW, argued bitterly that Lodge’s reservations missed the entire point. The League, indeed, was not perfect, and neither was the TOV which included that League and which Wilson brought home in the middle of July 1919. However, as Wilson expressed to Joseph Tumulty, his private secretary during these years, the implementation of these reservations would so nerf the League as to make it pointless. On 25th June 1919, Wilson wrote to Tumulty, just before the TOV was due to be signed, saying that:

My clear conviction is that the adoption of the treaty by the Senate with reservations will put the United States as clearly out of the concert of nations as a rejection. We ought either to go in or stay out. To stay out would be fatal to the influence and even to the commercial prospects of the United States, and to go in would give her a leading place in the affairs of the world. Reservations would either mean nothing or postpone the conclusion of peace, so far as America is concerned, until every other principal nation concerned in the treaty had found out by negotiation what the reservations practically meant and whether they could associate themselves with the United States on the terms of the reservations or not.[[2]](#footnote-2)

There was a real danger, Wilson believed, that in accepting these reservations, and in accepting special treatment for American membership, the League would come to resent the American presence, and Americans would view their participation as something less than the noble exercise it was. As Tumulty himself expressed, Wilson viewed the constitution of the League not as a perfect piece of writing, but as the best which could be offered to a broken world, and as something which could be changed in time. Tumulty wrote:

To his mind the reservations offered by Senator Lodge constituted a virtual nullification on the part of the United States of a treaty which was a contract, and which should be amended through free discussion among all the contracting parties. He did not argue or assume that the Covenant was a perfected document, but he believed that, like our American Constitution, it should be adopted and subsequently submitted to necessary amendment through the constitutional processes of debate. He was unalterably opposed to having the United States put in the position of seeking exemptions and special privileges under an agreement which he believed was in the interest of the entire world, including our own country. Furthermore, he believed that the advocacy for reservations in the Senate proceeded from partisan motives and that in so far as there was a strong popular opinion in the country in favour of reservations it proceeded from the same sources from which had come the pro-German propaganda. Before the war pro-German agitation had sought to keep us out of the conflict, and after the war it sought to separate us in interest and purpose from other governments with which we were associated.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Classifying Lodge’s reservations as some form of German propaganda was certainly a step too far, but this demonstrates again how bitterly Wilson resented those that disagreed with him. Yet, historians continue to investigate Lodge’s motives and his sincerity when proposing these reservations, especially considering his consistently changing mind, and his public changes in perception towards the purpose and responsibilities of the League. The increasingly partisan atmosphere of the League debate, which Tumulty discerned, also had to be factored in. A somewhat explosive question, is that which asks whether Lodge proposed the above reservations because he genuinely believed that there was a need for them, or whether he put them forward because, deep down, he wanted to sink the entire League idea, and he believed that only by suffocating it with these reservations would it in the end be forced to fail. ‘How would proposing reservations cause the League to fail?’, you might be wondering.

Well, the more opportunities Lodge gave his colleagues and counterparts to debate his points, the longer it would take for the League to pass, and the more ammunition sceptics would be able to draw by examining the problems Lodge already had with it. Furthermore, because he loathed Wilson, but also knew him quite well, Lodge suspected that the President would never agree to any adjustment of the League covenant as it stood in spring 1919, and thus, any attempts to propose reservations or adjustments to the League would not only fail owing to Wilson’s stubbornness, they would also paint him and his supporters in a negative light. The League failed to pass, Lodge and his supporters could claim, not because America wasn’t ready for it, but because Wilson refused to compromise with Congress, and refused to listen to his Senators, just as he had failed to do so before.

In support of this idea, we should consider the record of Senator James E. Watson, who wrote his memoirs in 1936, and who recalled conversations he had had with HCL. Watson, as an irreconcilable wholly opposed to the League, vented his spleen to Lodge, and Lodge’s reply, if indeed it is correct and accurate, represents dynamite in the historical record because of its implications for changing our understanding of Lodge’s motives and character. Watson recalled the scene, which he opened by exclaiming to Lodge his woes and concerns, saying:

"I don't see how we are ever going to defeat this proposition. It appears to me that eighty per cent of the people are for it. Fully this percentage of the preachers are, right now, advocating it, churches are very largely favouring it, all the people who have been burdened and oppressed by this awful tragedy of war and who imagine this opens a way to world peace are for it, and I don't see how it is possible to defeat it." He turned to me and said, "Ah, my dear James, I do not propose to try to beat it by direct frontal attack, but by the indirect method of reservations." "What do you mean by that?" I asked. "Illustrate it to me." He then went on to explain how, for instance, we would demand a reservation on the subject of submitting to our government the assumption of a mandate over Armenia, or any other foreign country. "We can debate that for days and hold up the dangers that it will involve and the responsibilities we will assume if we pursue that course, and we can thoroughly satisfy the country that it would be a most abhorrent policy for us to adopt."…Senator Lodge then went on for two hours to explain other reservations, and went into the details of the situation that would be thus evolved, until I became thoroughly satisfied that the treaty could be beaten in that way.[[4]](#footnote-4)

We will speak more on Lodge’s character later on in the episode, but I should emphasise an important point, that the question of passing the League was not a simple case of R versus D. The loss of Congress did not guarantee that Wilson would automatically lose the League, but it did make his mission that much more difficult. There were of course figures from the Republican Party who were strongly in favour of the ideology behind the League, and urged their colleagues to support it, even though it came from the pen of the President, for the sake of the higher ideals which were at stake. Perhaps the most notable of these was Elihu Root, a former US secretary of State, a member of the American League to Enforce Peace, and a fascinating man whom we unfortunately do not have more time to investigate further.[[5]](#footnote-5) Indeed, the idea for the LON had not emerged from nowhere; in 1828 an organisation the American Peace Society was established, and what was one of its primary aims? A precursor of the League, with this desire expressed in the following manner during one of its opening statements:

We hope to increase and promote the practice already begun by submitting national differences to amicable discussion and arbitration and finally of settling all national controversies by an appeal to reason, as becomes rational creatures, and not by physical force, as is worthy only of brute beasts, and this shall be done by a congress of nations, whose decrees shall be enforced by public opinion.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Using the journal *World Affairs*, which many of us may well have come across in our travels, the APS, the views and plans of the organisation were brought forward, and heaped scorn upon war even as warfare seemed to grow in acceptance. Upon the outbreak of the GW, the APS did not relent in its quest to promote the cause of peace, and its leading lights remained transfixed on the power of public opinion as a resource to promote peace. During a rally for the APS in spring 1915, one of its keynote speakers exclaimed:

The great campaign in which we are engaged is nothing more or less than a campaign of education in which physical force, as such, finds no place. There is a factor other than physical force that controls mankind. It controls mankind within those small groups which we call communities; it controls mankind in those larger groups which we call nations; it will ultimately control mankind in the largest group of men and women, which we call the world. This factor is public opinion, and if the past belongs to physical force, or largely to such force, the future will belong to public opinion, or largely to public opinion.[[7]](#footnote-7)

The focus on public opinion is quite topical for us, because the assumption is often put forward that the LON failed to pass in Congress, and WW’s dream floundered, because the American public did not desire it. This, in fact, could not have been further from the truth. It was also untrue that Congress was evenly divided between the yay’s and the nay’s. Several groups, ranging from all for it, to for it with some adjustments, to desiring of more adjustments, to totally against it, existed. It was broadly true that the people of America, and of Europe, were with Wilson, as the president had hoped, yet he had failed to account for the fact that the people did not vote on legislation as momentous as the TOV. The people of America were for Wilson’s League, and for approving the intervention of the US in such an organisation, and we know this thanks to polling data from American newspapers at the time. What is more, we are also able to deduce that a majority of American newspapers were with Wilson’s vision; The *Literary Digest* conducted a poll of newspapers in April, 1919, and found that 718 were for ratification, 478 were for ratification with conditions, and only 181 were against ratification.[[8]](#footnote-8)

The ‘ratification with conditions’ option may leave us scratching our heads – what conditions were suspect? As our investigation into HCL’s 14 reservations demonstrates, there were several areas where Americans, be they citizens or officials, could feel concerned at the sweeping powers and controls which would be handed over to the omnipresent League. But some Americans thought bigger than even the world they lived in and the best solution for its woes. One example if given where the historian James Lancaster examined the extensive support which Protestant churches in America provided for WW’s League, writing that:

Those of liberal theological persuasion saw in Woodrow Wilson's vision for a new world order a moral issue comparable to the abolition of slavery or the prohibition of [alcoholic] drink. Through the National Committee on the Churches and the Moral Aims of the War, the Federal Council of Churches of Christ in America worked during 1917 and 1918 to stimulate both public and official acceptance of a world organization to ensure peace and to maintain the liberal principles advanced by the President as the basis for the American war effort. Protestants who believed that a league of nations would be "the organization of the Christian idea of life" launched their campaign to help make it a reality following Wilson's departure for Paris. The period from December 1918 to the signing of the Treaty of Versailles on June 29, 1919, was the formative phase of their involvement. The polemical phase began with Wilson's return from Paris and ended with the Senate's first rejection of the treaty on November 19, 1919. From then until the final vote on the treaty on March 19, 1912, the Protestant efforts in behalf of the League display their confusion and desperation in defeat.[[9]](#footnote-9)

While the Protestants worked to support it, other Congressmen worked to undermine it, and another historian has examined the correlation between anti-League sentiment and those living in the south. This historian, Dewey Grantham Jr, noted that 18 southern Democrats voted against Wilson during the final senate vote for the Treaty in March 1920. What was more, only five Democrats from *outside* of the south voted against the TOV at that time. It is important to get to grips with how one’s perspective on the League might have been skewed depending on which state one hailed from.[[10]](#footnote-10) Thus, it is obviously not enough to pin the blame or approach the question of the rejection of the League through Wilson or Lodge alone, and certainly not on the Republicans. Thinking objectively, American participation in the LON would be a drastic transformation of her foreign policy, and would effectively prevent her policymakers from following the traditional cycle which swung back and forth between isolationist or interventionist depending upon events taking place in Europe.

The aversion towards the war which was so strongly felt essentially led Americans in turn to feel one of two things; all Americans believed that the war had been an unprecedented catastrophe, and that a second round had to be prevented at all costs, but some believed that this placed responsibility on Americans to help prevent it, so let’s join the LON, and others believed that this meant Americans had to *avoid* becoming entangled in Europe at all costs. Membership in the League would not just limit America’s freedom of action – as it would for every member state – it would also prevent her from withdrawing into isolationism as she had done before. In addition, some were concerned that the League might actually be incompatible with the constitution, and would compromise some of the country’s most cherished freedoms.[[11]](#footnote-11)

In time, a great deal of attention would be focused on those articles dealing with American responsibilities in the event of war and when collective security was called in. We have already seen that Lodge’s second reservation sought to address this by absolving the US of any responsibility to make war on some disturber of the peace. In particular, these issues were dealt with by articles 10 and 11 of the LON constitution, which read:

[X] 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 aggression, the Council shall advise upon the means by which the obligation shall be fulfilled. [XI] Any war or threat of war, whether immediately affecting any of the members of the League or not, is hereby declared a matter of concern to the whole League, and the League shall take any action that may be deemed wise and effectual to safeguard the peace of nations. In case any such emergency should arise, the Secretary General shall, on the request of any member of the league forthwith summon a meeting of the council.[[12]](#footnote-12)

There was some apprehension felt towards these articles, because of the potential they had to interfere with American foreign policy and force American soldiers into wars they had no interest in. This how many anti-League Americans also felt about American involvement in the recent war – it had been a European war, of no direct interest to them, and its outcome had provided them with no net benefits. This belief would grow among isolationist circles in the 1920s and 30s, in spite of the facts, facts which plainly illustrated that America was inherently pro-war by the time the declaration was made in April 1917, and that Germany had by then done more than enough to provoke her involvement in the conflict.[[13]](#footnote-13)

Some narratives which appeared in the subsequent years painted American involvement in the war as a grave mistake, and expressed the view that war could only be avoided again if America’s hands were not tied to an institution which did not have her interests close at heart. What was more, optimistic observers believed that Europeans would never willingly repeat the experience of the war anyway, and that America did not need to tie itself to a world peace organisation when it held most of its views close to heart in any case – why not pursue a bilateral relationship with the League instead, but keep America safely outside of it?[[14]](#footnote-14) In a previous episode, we saw how a Democratic senator from MA, David Walsh, changed his stance from pro to anti-League thanks to the influence of the large Irish and Italian American populations in his constituency. The pressure which these groups, in addition to German, Hungarian, or even Bulgarian Americans may have applied as lobbyists against the adoption of the League, as a means of spite due to the failure of Wilson and others to treat fairly with their countrymen back home, is a complex and multi-layered question badly in need of proper investigation.

It is very difficult to ascertain where HCL fit into all of these arguments. It is often assumed that Lodge opposed Wilson’s league because, in his view, it was short of what it needed to actually properly function. Lodge was therefore content to propose his reservations; akin to specific demands which must be met before he or his supporters would fall in line with the President’s vision. On the contrary, the story goes, Wilson refused to adjust the League’s makeup in any way, shape or fashion, thus forcing two very stubborn men and bitter enemies into a political slugging match with one another, and since neither gave way, neither man got what he wanted, and the irreconcilables, those that we wanted nothing to do with the League, won out. On the other hand, there are those that believe that Lodge was a Republican Party stalwart, and that once Wilson returned to the US with his League plan, Lodge committed himself to oppose it because he believed a win for Wilson would mean a win for the DP.

Lodge’s view of the League as a partisan issue was only supported, it is said, by the fact that Wilson made it unnecessarily partisan by refusing to welcome any senior Republican senators onto the American delegation, preferring to do all the work in Paris himself. Consequently, having felt ignored, Lodge and his supporters worked day and night to destroy the League, out of the belief that victory in this quest would discredit Wilson and pave the way for a Republican triumph in the presidential elections.

But what do you think? Does the conventional explanation make sense to you? Was it truly the case that Wilson wouldn’t compromise, that Lodge wouldn’t either, so neither man got the League he wanted? Do you feel that it was more likely that Wilson’s arrogance and ignorance of hurt Republican feelings were to blame? Or, do you think that a revisionist interpretation of what went down, and one which views the entire episode as an example of the partisan nature of American politics, is more realistic? Perhaps, you even think it’s a mixture of all three. Whatever the case, let’s investigate what the historical record tells us, and try and get to the bottom of whether Wilson ever stood a chance, and who or what we can pin most of the blame on for killing this vision in its cradle.

Something which we should be aware of is the fact that HCL had changed his mind about the need for a League, publicly, in the past. During the early years of the war, Lodge had stood side-by-side with the likes of Wilson and Taft when advocating for some kind of league of states which would work to uphold peace. Speaking in 1915, Lodge exclaimed: ‘in differences between nations which go beyond the limited range of arbitrable questions peace can only be maintained by putting behind it the force of united nations determined to uphold it and prevent war.’ A year later, when he shared a platform with ex-President Taft, President Wilson and other advocates of an international league at a meeting of the First Annual National Assemblage of the *League to Enforce Peace*, Lodge repeated these ideas. At this meeting, he declared that:

The limit of voluntary arbitration has, I think, been reached [and] the next step is that which this League proposes, and that is to put force behind international peace. We may not solve it in this way, but if we cannot solve it in that way it can be solved in no other.

Wilson could have been forgiven for thinking that he had an ideological ally in Lodge, yet by 1917 the fiery MA senator had changed his tune confess that ‘when I first began to consider it some two years ago, it [the league idea] presented great attraction to me, but the more I have thought about it the more serious the difficulties in the way of its accomplishment seem to be.’ The historian David Mervin, when writing about HCL’s influence upon the League of Nations, continued this analysis of Lodge’s changing mind, saying:

The senator went on to argue that a league of nations would involve ‘making war on any nation which does not obey the decisions of the league’. While in his Union College speech in 1915 Lodge had praised the 'Utopianism' of the league proposal, the senator now spoke harshly of this virtue turned vice, of the dangers of plunging ‘blindly forward misled by phrases and generalities into undertakings which threaten worse results than the imperfect conditions now existing’. As we have seen, in 1915 and again in 1916 Lodge had argued that only a limited range of questions could be made subject to arbitration, but in 1917 we find the senator proposing, as an alternative to a league, the further use of voluntary arbitration.[[15]](#footnote-15)

Lodge had essentially flip-flopped back to his old position, rejecting the premise of the League as an arbiter, and returning to his original position which upheld that voluntary arbitration, often manifesting itself as the invitation to a neutral third party to mediate in a dispute, was the best tactic. Interestingly, David Mervin discerned, when investigating Lodge’s change of mind a bit further, that it was at some point between May 1916 and January 1917 that Lodge underwent that change. What could account for the change of mind in such an experienced and knowledgeable expert of foreign affairs such as Lodge was? Certainly not, Mervin believes, an epiphany which revealed to him how difficult making the League would be. No, for Mervin, the answer revolves around Lodge’s partisanship, more specifically the fact that Wilson, contrary to the expectations of many, secured a second term as President in 1916. When he did that, and when Lodge realised that the proposed League would not be shaped and controlled by a Republican President, he essentially withdrew his support. This of course suggests that Lodge’s support for the League was not so strong to begin with, if these partisan considerations could factor so heavily into his calculations. As Mervin wrote:

It is not unreasonable to assume that Lodge's abrupt change of mind on the league was the first of a series of shrewd tactical manoeuvres aimed at preventing Wilson from emerging as 'The maker of peace', and reaping the enormous electoral benefits that would surely follow from this.[[16]](#footnote-16)

Well then, we may be wondering, if Lodge was so dead set against the League and wished to prevent Wilson from gaining the fame which would follow a successful political campaign, why didn’t he simply oppose it outright, and join the ranks of the so-called irreconcilables within the Republican Party, who wished to prevent the establishment of the LON at all costs? The answer, Mervin deduces, is that Lodge again detected which way the wind was blowing, and it seemed to be blowing in the direction of popular opinion. To oppose the League unconditionally would have seemed like an immensely unreasonable stance for Lodge to take, and it would have portrayed this veteran of diplomacy and his party as inherently partisan at a time when greater principles were said to be at stake. Also, don’t forget that because the League and peace with Germany were bound together in later months, a policy of outright hostility towards the League would mean that, by default, Lodge and company opposed a final peace with the enemy. This tactic would certainly have backfired, and could have provided endless PR ammunition for the Democrats. So, Lodge chose a middle of the road approach, which soon presented some potential benefits all of its own, as David Mervin noted when he observed that:

By adopting this middle position on the League, Lodge placed himself and his party in a strategically strong position; within the party neither Irreconcilables nor internationalists were totally alienated, and in the country the Republican leadership could be presented as pursuing a statesmanlike course of moderation in contrast to the extreme alternatives, idealistic internationalism and reactionary isolationism.[[17]](#footnote-17)

Historians are still not united over the question of exactly how limiting Lodge’s reservations were, but answering that question is important because it reveals the extent of Lodge’s anti-League feelings, which seem to have been grounded mostly in partisan motives. If Lodge’s reservations were not that limiting, and they didn’t compromise the key premise of the League, then one could argue that Lodge did want the league to succeed, and that his motives were sincere. Yet, if the opposite is true, then it follows that the opposite is true in the case of Lodge’s sincerity as well; there is thus a lot riding on Lodge’s reservations, but it is, at the end of the day, a matter of interpretation.

In his books examining Wilson’s mission and the legacy he left behind, historian Thomas A. Bailey, writing in the 1940s, believed that historians had been too critical of Lodge’s reservations, and too willing to accept Wilson’s point that the reservations nullified the entire League.[[18]](#footnote-18) David Hunter Miller, a member of the American delegation present at Paris, who left us his diary and can be seen in many respects as America’s answer to HN, observed that: ‘for as far as the Lodge reservations made changes in the League, they were of a wholly minor character, they left its structure intact, and they would have interfered with its workings not at all.’[[19]](#footnote-19) But this minimal interference in the workings of the League was not even how Lodge himself saw the reservations, as he wrote to a friend with some indignation that:

You talk about mere reservations as if they would have no effects. I am afraid you do not understand the nature of a reservation fully. Such reservations as we should adopt would take the United States out of the treaty entirely on all points where we wish to refuse obligation.

To drive the point home, several anti-Leaguers also weighed in on the debate at the time, with one commenting that the reservations ‘would have driven a coach and four through the League of [Nations] and made the obligations of the United States thereunder almost minimal.’ Another figure, focusing on article X or that point which obliged the US to become involved in wars during a collective security exercise, expressed the belief that ‘my conception of the original Lodge reservation (to Article X) is that it freed us entirely from the obligation.’[[20]](#footnote-20) I tend to side with the latter point of view, simply because Lodge’s reservations granted the US a get out of jail free card which no other member state of the League would have had. Lodge’s objections, I believe, can be explained *mostly* by partisan motives – mostly, but not all, and I’ll come back to the other motives in a little bit when examining Lodge’s objections from another point of view, that of neorealism.

Back to that reservation towards article X though, and we need to bear in mind, as if it needed repeating, that the whole point of the League was to guard against war by attacking those that broke the peace. This was meant to be a last resort of course: public opinion and the value for peaceful relations was supposed to lead the way, but the threat of force was supposed to keep the system in check, and the combined power of its numerous nations was meant to serve as the final layer of protection against a repeat of the GW. Let’s look at Lodge’s second reservation to see just how far reaching and conclusive it was on the issue of collective security:

The US assumes no obligation to preserve the territorial integrity or political independence of any other country or to interfere in controversies between nations – whether members of the League or not – under the provisions of article 10, or to employ the military or naval forces of the US under any article of the treaty for any purpose, unless in any particular case the Congress, which, under the constitution, has the sole power to declare war or authorise the employment of the military or naval forces of the US, shall by act or joint resolution so provide.[[21]](#footnote-21)

To me, there doesn’t seem to be much room for manoeuvre here. The final decision rested with Congress, and any question of obligation to protect or defend nations which came under attack was declared to be removed. Yet, having said all that, I want you to consider another potential motive for Lodge’s opposition to Article X which I believe is worth looking at too. Remember my mention of neorealism earlier on? Neorealism essentially stipulates that every state looked out for its own interests, and did not go above and beyond the call of duty for the interests of another. Considering this, it is worth asking the question, as the historian James Hewes Jr does, of what if Lodge opposed Article X not because he wanted to weaken the League, but because he believed that by agreeing to Article X, the League would itself be weakened? How does that make sense, you may be wondering, and how would approving of the central tenet of the League thereby weaken that League in the process? Well, Lodge’s reasoning was based in neorealism, although neither Lodge nor the historian James Hewes called it that. Remember, neorealism essentially declared that it was every state for itself, and where this was relevant to article X was the fact that, in this state of affairs, there was simply no way that states would rush to defend another state when the act of saving or defending it would grant no net benefits to the saver or defender. Lodge also focused on the public opinion aspect, reasoning that the American public would never allow their boys to be sent to foreign lands to fight in unpopular wars simply because the League said so. This failure to intervene would thereby discredit the League, and significantly dampen its potential use, causing it in the end to fail. As he expressed in a letter to Elihu Root in late June 1919:

If we agree to this article, it is extremely probable that we shall be unable to keep our agreement. Making war nowadays depends upon the genuine sympathy of the people of the country at the time when the war has to be carried on. The people of the United States certainly will not be willing ten years or twenty years hence to send their young men to distant parts of the world to fight for causes in which they may not believe or in which they have little or no interest. If that is the attitude of the people when we are hereafter called upon to wage war under Article X, no general indefinite agreement made years before will make them disposed to fight. And we shall be in the worst possible position for having made an agreement and not keeping it.[[22]](#footnote-22)

James Hewes Jr makes the useful point that Lodge was not the only figure to make this argument; Sir Robert Borden, the Canadian premier, wanted to remove article X altogether from the covenant of the League, while Sir Robert Cecil, Britain’s foremost League supporter, wanted to remove the words ‘and preserve as against foreign aggression’ from the first sentence of article X, so that instead of a call for collective security, it simply called on member states to respect territorial integrity. If we talk about Lodge changing his mind and approaching the issue from a partisan perspective, then we must denote that he had displayed a degree of consistency in this regard, when he had written to his good friend Roosevelt in 1912 expressing the view that:

No greater disaster could befall the cause of peace than to make a promise in a treaty designed to promote peace which we know when we make it will not be kept in certain contingencies. I will go just as far as I can in promoting peace, but I will not retard the cause of peace by promoting on paper what I know cannot be performed in action.[[23]](#footnote-23)

Thus, it could be said that Lodge’s aversion to overtly idealistic foreign policy concepts had its roots in neorealism and in the pre-war era, and did not change as abruptly as we might have suspected. More relevantly, when discussing the then emerging PPC, in late 1918, Lodge expressed his opinion on its strengths, but warned that realism must rule the decisions which were made, saying:

They have one very great advantage. Everyone agrees with them. They have one very great disadvantage. They lead nowhere except into a pathless jungle of words. The mighty questions which confront us cannot be settled or even intelligently dealt with by words and phrases…We must deal with human nature as it is and not as it should be, if we are to convert ideals into reality.[[24]](#footnote-24)

So which view of HCL is the truth? Was Lodge’s objection to article X based on its impossible application genuine, or merely window-dressing? The answer is, again, that it very much depends upon your interpretation of the man and his motives, but it is undeniable that we cannot understand him without first understanding who he was before the war and what he stood for throughout its tenure. To offer my own interpretation, I would stick to my earlier judgement on Lodge’s partisan nature, but as I said, partisanship does not wholly explain Lodge’s actions, so I would like to bolster it with this additional note. In 1919 HCL was a 69-year-old Republican Senator and career politician who had changed his mind and vented his spleen on numerous occasions. Was he a cardboard cut-out, dyed in the wool anti-Wilsonian republican, determined to oppose everything which fell from the President’s mouth? Perhaps he *was* to *some extent*, and perhaps he *did* put party before League in this debate.

It is impossible to remove party politics from the equation, especially considering the legitimate concerns which the Republicans had that the Democrats, triumphant following the war, might explode in popularity if they also won the peace. Lodge was also, by 1919, a master of parliamentary technique, and it is reasonable to attest that nobody knew better than he did how to manipulate or make use of Congress to defeat the League without heaping ignominy upon himself or his party’s record. We should not eliminate the possibility that the historical record is clouded in terms of Lodge’s motives, because Lodge wanted it to be that way. The historian Walter Johnson captured the dilemma regarding Lodge’s character – that as much as we know about him, there remains a great deal which we still do not know. Johnson wrote:

Just what the role that Henry Cabot Lodge was playing in these months and those to come is not entirely clear. His apologists claim that he was honestly for a league of nations, with reservations. There is evidence, however, to demonstrate that he was out to kill the league under any circumstance, and that he considered the best way to accomplish this was through attaching reservations to the covenant. Lodge was a partisan Republican willing to sacrifice ideals or anything else to party loyalty. From 1893 to 1924, as a member of the Senate, he never departed from strict party regularity. In addition to party regularity, he hated Woodrow Wilson. Until Wilson's entrance into politics, Lodge had been known as "the scholar in politics," but this title, probably much to the bitterness of Lodge, then passed to Wilson. According to the estimate of Nicholas Murray Butler, "The figure that made the least appeal throughout all these years was that of Henry Cabot Lodge. He was able, vain, intensely egotistical, narrow-minded, dogmatic, and provincial.”[[25]](#footnote-25)

Notwithstanding his clearly partisan motives, we also cannot ignore the fact that he had genuine concerns about the sustainability of an organisation which committed to always intervene in every dispute across the world at all times, but this did not mean he rejected the idea of a League which upheld peace as its key aim. These concerns had been expressed even before Wilson became president, and Lodge’s adoption of what could be viewed as the principles of neorealism tell an important story all by themselves. As I usually do when I make these judgements of a person’s character, I’m going to pick from both debates, rather than place poor old Lodge in a particular box. He was a partisan Republican, but he was also a neorealist, and I would argue that these character traits fit together quite well, and that each quality informed and complemented the other.

It was convenient, for instance, that Lodge never seemed to believe wholeheartedly in the premise of collective security, because this made it easier to argue against the League with his Party’s interests in mind later on. It is also fortunate that Lodge’s view of international relations did not wholly gel with those of his nemesis, WW. We do not have to follow the logic which dictates that Lodge completely changed his mind to spite or to politically wound Wilson; we could instead adhere to the idea which suggests that Lodge always felt a certain way towards institutions like the League, and as the years progressed, what positive feelings he did have for institutions like the League were reduced, and replaced with the more extreme ends of his true beliefs, those being, first, opposition to an unrealistic article, and second, the unconditional support of his Party’s interest and future in the 1920 elections.

I feel we cannot discount Lodge’s earlier support for a League, which he would probably have continued had Wilson not won his second term. Yet, at the same time, it is unlikely that, whoever the President was, Lodge would have supported an article which compelled America to intervene in every war at every time, and it is also possible that a different president would not have sought such an article in the first place. If I had to measure it, I’d say that Lodge was 80% motivated by partisanship, and 20% motivated by his perspectives on international relations. To this we can add another point, that Lodge was unfortunately correct in his assumption that the members of the League would not respect article X, and would not intervene wholeheartedly in a collective security action. As the tragic history of the LON demonstrated, time and again, the members failed to intervene when the security of another of its members was threatened. Lodge was also correct in that the failure of its members to adhere to article 10 represented a stain on the League’s reputation and collective morale, as belief in the promise of the League began to decline just as the world became more hostile and extreme. Lodge’s predictions, gloomy as they were, rang true, but this does not mean that the man was without fault in his partisan policy, nor does it mean that Wilson should not have tried harder himself to meet his detested rival halfway. The problem was precisely that though – American politics was so polarised in 1919, and the leading lights of both parties were so bitterly hostile towards one another, that it remains difficult to get to the bottom of things. We have done our best in this episode, but we have not seen the last either of the American political divide, or of HCL, just yet.

One of the most important takeaways from this episode in Wilson’s treaty fight is that nagging fact which tells us that the fight was not yet over. As we’ve referenced multiple times, it was not until the senate voted against ratifying the TOV in March 1920 that the LON was truly sunk. Until that date, Wilson fought tooth and nail for its acceptance, infamously succumbing to a stroke in early October 1919, and remaining in poor health for the rest of his life. The toll of creating the TOV, and then re-creating the fight for it in Paris back home in Washington understandably was too much to bear for Wilson, and it is a tragic fact of the era that after all his work, he lived to see this life’s work end in heartache and failure. But, not yet. By early March, signified most strikingly in the round robin which Lodge had circulated, Wilson had been informed of the opposition of the Senate, and Wilson knew that Lodge led the way in this opposition, but everything was not doomed because of that fact. There remained much to do in Paris, and in the meantime, it was by no means guaranteed that those fellow ideologues of Wilson’s would not work to change Lodge’s mind. As he had done before, Wilson dared to dream, but this time, upon his return to Paris, he was more vulnerable and much less popular than he had ever been among the peoples of Europe.

1. These reservations can all be found in the archived document available here: https://archive.org/details/reservationstotr00lodg/page/n1 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Quoted in Tumulty, *Wilson as I know Him*, p. 452. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Ibid*, pp. 452-453. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. James E. Watson, *As I Knew Them* (Bobbs-Merrill, 1936), pp. 190-191. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. For more on Root’s ideology and its development see Martin David Dubin, ‘Elihu Root and the Advocacy of a League of Nations, 1914-1917’, *The Western Political Quarterly*, Vol. 19, No. 3 (Sep., 1966), pp. 439-455. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Quoted in HOMER T. ROSENBERGER, ‘The American Peace Society's Reaction to the Covenant of the League of Nations’, *World Affairs*, Vol. 141, No. 2, Celebrating 150 Years of the American Peace Society (Fall 1978), pp. 139-152; p. 139. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Quoted in *Ibid*, p. 140. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See Walter Johnson, ‘Senatorial Strategy, 1919-20: Will It Be Repeated?’, *The Antioch Review*, Vol. 3, No. 4 (Winter, 1943), pp. 512-529; p. 514. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. James Lancaster, ‘The Protestant Churches and the Fight for Ratification of the Versailles Treaty’, *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, Vol. 31, No. 4, The Historical Study of Public Opinion (Winter, 1967-1968), pp. 597-619; pp. 597-598. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Dewey Grantham Jr, ‘The Southern Senators and The League Of Nations, 1918-1920’, *The North Carolina Historical Review*, Vol. 26, No. 2 (APRIL, 1949), pp. 187-205; pp. 187-188. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. The most concise and useful summary of the constitutional pressure which the League faced is examined in William G. Ross, ‘Constitutional Issues Involving the Controversy Over American Membership in the League of Nations, 1918-1920’, *The American Journal of Legal History*, Vol. 53, No. 1 (January 2013), pp. 1-88. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Quoted in Robert David Watson, ‘Article XI in the Debate on the United States' Rejection of the League of Nations’, *The International History Review*, Vol. 15, No. 3 (Aug., 1993), pp. 502-524; p. 503. See also: https://www.refworld.org/docid/3dd8b9854.html [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. See Justus D. Doenecke, *Nothing Less Than War: A New History of America's Entry into World War I* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2011), pp. 250-308. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. There remains, to my knowledge, no book or source examining in detail the relations between the League and the US during the inter-war years. However, a broad survey which contains some of these elements can be found in the new book by Susan Pendersen, *The Guardians: The League of Nations and the Crisis of Empire* (Oxford University Press, 2015). This book is especially useful for its focus on mandates and the contribution which imperialism made towards the eventual failure of the League. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. David Mervin, ‘Henry Cabot Lodge and the League of Nations’, *Journal of American Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (Feb., 1971), pp. 201-214; p. 202. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. *Ibid*, p. 204. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. *Ibid*, p. 205. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. *Ibid*, p. 206. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Quoted in Thomas A. Bailey, *Wilson and the Peacemakers: Combining Woodrow Wilson and the Lost Peace and Woodrow Wilson and the Great Betrayal* (New York: Macmillan, 1947), pp. 383-384. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. All quoted in Mervin, ‘Lodge and the League’, pp. 206-207. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Available: https://archive.org/details/reservationstotr00lodg/page/12 [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. See James Hewes Jr, ‘Henry Cabot Lodge and the League of Nations’, *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, Vol. 114, No. 4 (Aug. 20, 1970),pp. 245-255; p. 245. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. *Ibid*, p. 246. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. *Ibid*, p. 248. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. See Walter Johnson, ‘Senatorial Strategy, 1919-20: Will It Be Repeated?’, p. 517. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)