Hello and welcome history friends patrons all to episode 4 of the VAP. Last time we spent a great deal of time with Edward House, the ally and confidant of President WW, who spent more than a week from late October to early November 1918 hammering out the details of an armistice deal with the Entente of Britain and France. In Paris, and in communication with the British PM DLG and the French premier GC, House bathed in the feelings of self-importance which his position as the president’s personal representative accrued him. Wilson hadn't even seen fit to give House any specific instructions, assuming that his friend would mostly know what to do. Despite this though, House learned from others what the President wanted, and by all accounts – well, by House’s own personal account in his diary at least – the President’s best friend seemed to have done a stellar job.

By 3rd November indeed, DLG and GC were on board with the principle of using the FPs as the basis for future negotiations and the armistice with Germany. House had overcome LG’s opposition to the freedom of the seas measure, as well as Clemenceau’s scepticism and anti-German sentiments. The foundations to the peace plan which was to culminate in the German signing of the Treaty of Versailles on 28th June the following year had thus been set – or had they? House, as we certainly deduced last time, was one of his own biggest fans; he thrived on praise, and recorded every little bit of it. Sort of like that friend you have who won’t shut up about that thing they did right years ago.

Except House wasn’t dealing with inconsequential memories, he was dealing with the future of the world. He was certain that he had traversed the challenges put upon him, and come out the other side with a settlement to be proud of. Yet it is well worth considering whether House’s diary account whitewashes the very real problems and shortcomings the man actually faced; perhaps, out of a sense of pride, he could not bring himself to commit pen to paper and admit when he had lost, and he turned defeats into victory because he could not bring himself to face the fact that he had played the game and lost. The figures he met with will come under our microscope more closely in later episodes, but here we touch on the fact that whatever House said, the reality was less upbeat, and the proceedings were dominated and influenced a great deal more by the British and French premiers than House claimed.

Furthermore, the ultimate failure of the American mission, both at Versailles and before, is often glossed over because the FPs *did* forge the basis for agreements, and the Germans at least believed that they were entering into a new world with new standards of respect for equality in negotiations. It was, one could argue, more than the Germans deserved, but a key part of why we’re spending time unwrapping the background to the armistice is because of the impressions it instilled within German statesmen about what to expect. The penny dropping on the situation they were actually facing into was a state of affairs that took some time to mature, but when it did, it would have been very hard for House or his President to have claimed that this – the end result – was what they had been aiming for all along.

House, just like WW, had to compromise, and even though he would never admit it, America’s foremost representative at Paris before the arrival of Wilson did compromise, and he did so often without realising it, because he did not, in spite of his claims to the contrary, really know how to play this game. It was a game which the British and French had been playing for some time, and they were not about to let the Americans march into the peace negotiations and dictate the terms. If the President wanted to have a role in remaking the world, if he wanted the 14 points to serve as the baseline for whatever peace conference might follow, then he would have to meet the Europeans on their level, listen to their concerns, and make some concessions and allowances to them.

Unfortunately for WW, his message was challenged not only in the preliminary peace talks, but also in the untimely elections to the Senate on 5 November which dramatically weakened his position. In this episode then, sort of like the riposte to House’s apparently spotless record, we examine what we can say truly went down at these preliminary peace talks. This episode should help to explain why – if House appeared so confident at bringing everyone around – the eventual armistice terms were a great deal harsher than had originally been intended. Without any further ado then, let’s get into it…

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From the beginning, House was at a disadvantage, for the key reason that his good friend and President had neglected to actually provide him with concrete instructions. Shorn of a clear cut set of demands, House had to rely on three main resources. First, his own knowledge of his President, and his favour for a peace settlement with Germany which had the 14 points as its basis. Within House’s breadth of knowledge of Wilson’s vision there existed several gaps though, gaps which House aimed to fill with two additional resources. The second resource was the minutes of an interview held between William Wiseman and WW just before House left for Paris, wherein the two figures talked at some length about the 14 points, and Wilson expressed his opinions freely.[[1]](#footnote-1)

The third and final resource, one which House does not see fit to mention in his diary, was the commissioning of a confidential interpretation of the 14 points by two individuals, one a prominent journalist, the other a member of the Inquiry who had helped draft the original 14 points document. This interpretation was finished and handed over to House as he arrived in Paris, and it retains a certain significance in the historical record for two key reasons. Reason number one; this document was probably the most radical liberal version of the 14 points which had yet been conceived. It underlined heavily the independence of the American negotiating position, thus adding to the perception that American interests were distinct and even in opposition to those of their European allies. Reason number two is associated with this, because this document happened to fall into the hands of the Germans, who took one look at it and drew some immediate conclusions: ‘this is far more lenient than we had originally hoped’ and ‘it may be possible to drive a wedge between the allies to the benefit of our negotiating position.’

The radical nature of this document – named the Cobb-Lippmann commentary after the aforementioned figures that penned it – is palpable in further sections. Germany would pay the total costs of the war only for Belgium; she would have to return only A-L, but no other parts of her territory; German speaking regions like Austria would be permitted to unite with the larger Greater Germany; Britain would not receive any reparations; the freedom of the seas would guarantee naval safety and security for all, particularly in times of war; Poland would receive a corridor to the Baltic Sea; the League of Nations was declared an institution within which the authors of the commentary placed great faith. Even though we have yet to reach that point in the story yet, we know already that this generous treatment was a far rosier deal than Germany actually got in the end.

The Cobb-Lippmann commentary, in addition to the Wiseman interview, provided House was an impression that was both ambitious and impossible at once. If one wonders why House didn’t simply ask his President for clarity, the answer is that he did, sort of. He sent the Cobb-Lippmann commentary back to Wilson to comment upon; the President declared that it was ‘a satisfactory interpretation of the principles involved’, but he refrained from commenting on the more important details, referring to them as ‘illustrative suggestions.’ Here, as later, Wilson refused to be pinned down by any strict terms – this would provide his vision with a broader appeal.

But House didn’t help himself either; he did not pester the President for more details nearly as much as he should have. Partly this was due to pride, but mostly, it was because House was sticking to the same hymn sheet as his President. As long as the allies could agree to use the 14 points as the basis for the future peace settlement, that was good enough for him. The problem with this stance was that by failing to present concrete aims, short of the vague ones which WW had made public in the original 14 points speech in January, House found that his position was easily outmanoeuvred by individuals more concerned with clarity than idealism, a fact which must have been painfully obvious to him by the end of the process, even if he neglected to admit it.

Thus the President and his friend had undermined their own position from the very beginning, even before the official gathering of the world at Versailles several months later. House’s position was simply picked apart, but he let the losses pile up, because the men in the room promised to agree in principle to the 14 points serving as the basis for negotiations. Take House’s professed victory on the freedom of the seas issue – a prickly point indeed for the British PM, who viewed it as an American effort to limit Britain’s use of its best weapon, its navy. House claimed that by 4th November, LG simply backed down on the issue, and that consequently the last obstacle was overcome. As far as white lies go, House was stretching the definition to its breaking point.

LG did back down, but only after he produced a document on 30th October containing his reservations to the 14 points programme. Top of the list was opposition to the 14 points motion. House pacified LG by allowing the PM to interpret the phrase ‘freedom of the seas’ in any manner Britain desired. Thus, the point was still technically present, even if its core principle had been torn out by the wily Welshman, and made effectively empty. Yet this wasn’t the only thing LG wanted to talk about – he also wished to insert some wording about reparations into the preliminary peace settlement. House had been sure not to mention reparations – instead the term restoration was used. Again, like with freedom of the seas, the terminology was stretched so much as to make it appear irrelevant, and more like a nod to WW rather than an actually meaningful stipulation. Restoration, as the name suggested, had originally only been meant to mean the restoration by Germany of territory it had occupied or seized. By the time House had signalled his agreement though, restoration had been inflated to mean all non-military losses, from livestock to sunken merchant vessels.

These British reservations notwithstanding, House secured the agreement of the allies to declare themselves in fundamental accord with the 14 points. This they did do, safe in the knowledge no doubt that the British had just demonstrated how flexible these points could be in practice; should something come up which they did not like in the peace discussions, they would surely be able to raise their own objections as well. House had every right to celebrate – at the very least, he had achieved his primary objective of making the 14 points serve as the basis for all future talks. Yet, one figure in particular frustrated House’s efforts in making the home run, and this was none other than the President himself. WW was outraged that DLG had raised his reservations at all, and rather than let them stand on the official record, he insisted that the British PM drop these reservations at once. Writing to House, the President was adamant that Congress would not approve of replacing German militarism for the British variety, a veiled threat which House had drawn from several times already. Understanding that he held the cards, the British PM did not budge. Eventually, Wilson had to give ground – he had no leverage to hold against the Entente, and he agreed with House when he had said it would have been ‘grotesque’ if Anglo-American spats over the 14 points had delayed the ending of the war.[[2]](#footnote-2)

House’s victory was thus delayed, and though he would pepper his November 3rd diary entry which such sentences as: ‘I feel that I have won a distinct victory and consequently I am happy tonight’, the victory was far hollower than House was letting on.[[3]](#footnote-3) What, then, was the end result of these preliminary discussions? The end result was Lloyd George’s statement, made before the allies on 30th October, that he agreed with the 14 points in principle, but that the allies must ‘reserve for themselves complete freedom’ on the question of freedom of the seas and that, furthermore, the allies understood ‘restoration’ to mean ‘that compensation will be made by Germany for all damage done to the civilian population of the allies and their property by the aggression of Germany by land, sea and air.’ Even that tiny addition of the word ‘aggression’ had been LG’s idea, and all had gone along with it.

Wilson declared himself satisfied with this statement, but ignored the freedom of the seas chestnut in the accompanying text he added to it. This bulky document then, containing LG’s statement, the President’s additional statement of satisfaction, and the signatures of all that mattered, was sent by Wilson to the German government on 5th November. It was known as the Lansing Note, after the US Secretary of State Lansing who had also signed off on it. Within his statement, the President recommended that the Germans contact Marshal Ferdinand Foch, the Supreme Allied Commander, in regards to negotiating an armistice. By this point in the preliminaries, two things were clear; the first was that the 14 points were such a loose collection of principles, and so vague and lacking in fine detail, that the allies could declare themselves in agreement with it even if they disagreed with several aspects of it. House and Wilson were surely aware of this by now. However, they were not aware of the second point, which was that the Germans had acquired a copy of the Cobb-Lippmann interpretation of the 14 points, or in other words, the Germans possessed the most radical, gentle interpretation of the 14 points in existence.

By 5th November, the 14 points to the Germans meant a second chance, hope, opportunity and honourable peace; to the allies, the 14 points were the vague statements which they would interpret to their advantage, and there was nothing the American President could do to stop them.[[4]](#footnote-4) This difference in interpretation is critically important to the story of the armistice and then peace conference negotiations. A chasm existed between what the Germans believed they were getting and what they got in the end, and this chasm had been dug from late October onwards before everyone had even sat down at Versailles. It set an unfortunate precedent, and demonstrated that WW would not be able to have his vision in its complete form. He would be forced to compromise, as House had already compromised in spades by 5th November, in spite of what his diary might tell you.

House had paid a price for the end result. He had backed down on the question of freedom of the seas, and he had been forced to agree to a much broader definition of "restoration" than Wilson had intended. In time, this expanded definition would cause immense difficulty to the American peace negotiators in 1919; indeed it would be appropriate to say that the thorny issue of reparations was born during these negotiations, and House could do nothing to stop it. However, House’s most serious concession was in fact not committed to paper, and did not appear in the Lansing Note of 5th November either; Wilson, for his part, was not even aware of it. That’s because House’s concession was not written or confirmed, it was verbal and intimated, twice. House first dropped this weighted hint on October 29 and he repeated it again on November 3. This hint, completely unauthorised by the President, indicated nothing less than that the United States would not stand in the Allies' way if they interpreted the Fourteen Points strongly in their own favour when it came to territorial and reparations questions.

The Lansing note of November 5 fulfilled Germany’s wish, in that the 14 Points would serve as the basis for any peace settlement, but the plentiful loopholes inserted by the other powers meant that this basis was only in a literal and legal sense. On the one hand, it gave Germany a legal basis for later calling for revisions of the peace settlement. But the question of just what the specific contents of that settlement would be were not clarified, and were left wide open. Indeed, one could argue with good reason that with regard to issues like reparation it had already been decided to Germany's disadvantage. The final answer to this question would depend on the balance of power which held sway at the peace conference. But even this power balance had been partially determined by the negotiators in Paris; GC and DLG had made it plain that they intended to see Germany pay.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Unaware of the conflict and disagreements which had been encountered in the preliminary discussions about the 14 points, the German government was soon to walk into a buzzsaw. Until that happened though, a heavy dose of wishful thinking mixed with the misunderstanding of what the 14 points actually meant by 5th November helped to facilitate the collapse at home and on the front for the German Empire. Upon receiving this statement from the President, Germany became a hive of diplomatic activity, as its statesmen attempted to forge an appropriate response. This response was given, surprisingly enough, by Paul von Hindenburg, who communicated with Ferdinand Foch over 7th November to reach an agreement: the armistice would be signed. This conversation between France and Germany’s foremost military personnel is worth recounting in brief, for the sheer lack of pomp and theatre it contained, a somewhat disappointing fact, considering the gravity of the moment in question:

German General Headquarters to the Allies' General Headquarters; the German Commander-in-Chief to Marshal Foch: 12:30AM, 7 November 1918.

The German Government, having been informed through the President of the United States that Marshal Foch had received powers to receive accredited representatives of the German Government and communicate to them conditions of an armistice, the following plenipotentiaries have been named by it…The plenipotentiaries request that they be informed by wireless of the place where they can meet Marshal Foch. They will proceed by automobile, with subordinates of the staff, to the place thus appointed.

Foch replied only an hour later…

Telegraph from Ferdinand Foch to Paul von Hindenburg, 1.30 a.m. 7 November 1918

To the German Commander-in-Chief: If the German plenipotentiaries desire to meet Marshal Foch and ask him for an armistice, they will present themselves to the French outposts by the Chimay-Fourmies-La Capelle-Guise road. Orders have been given to receive them and conduct them to the spot fixed for the meeting.

To this, Hindenburg responded:

Telegraph from Paul von Hindenburg to Ferdinand Foch, 1 p.m. 7 November 1918

The German plenipotentiaries for an armistice lease Spa today. They will leave here at noon and reach at 5 o'clock this afternoon the French outposts by the Chimay-Fourmies-La Capelle-Guise road…From the German outposts to the French outposts our delegation will be accompanied by a road-mending company to enable automobiles to pass the La Capelle road, which has been destroyed.[[6]](#footnote-6)

The cold, clinical way in which the German desire for an armistice was confirmed betrayed nothing about the revolutionary turmoil which had ripped through Germany up to that point, and which only helped facilitate an end to the war. Following the vast but still organised retreat across the Western Front, it was clear that, in time, Germany’s military situation would collapse. The only question was whether Germany should fight to the end, or whether she should fold now while she still retained some military potential which could be used as leverage during the negotiations. Leverage and the use of proper diplomacy in a future conference was how German statesmen resigned themselves to the initial peace overtures which WW had sent on 5th November. Following this, we can discern from the time stamp of Hindenburg’s telegram to Foch that it took fewer than 48 hours for Germany to accept the terms which Wilson had given in the Lansing note. The first step, acceptance of the need for an armistice, had been given, and now the second, the provisional terms of that armistice, would have to be accepted too. This was the process which occupied all involved from 7-11 November.

Those familiar with the narrative of the PPC know that Germany was ignored for several months, before being confronted with the Treaty of Versailles, the contents of which caused consternation and outrage among German statesmen, who had believed up to that point that WW’s 14 points would serve as the guiding basis for a final peace. In the Treaty of Versailles, we see WW being overcome by the opposition and activity of his allies, thus, the final settlement fell far short of what he had wanted. What is often forgotten is that that infamous scene of the Germans first realising how severe the final terms would be had actually happened before. After all, before there could be a final peace settlement, there had to be an armistice, and the terms of that armistice, signed at 5AM on 11 November and coming into effect six hours later, were viewed by Germans as just as much of an affront as the Treaty of Versailles.

The difference was, in the days leading up the signing of the armistice, Germany’s military situation had become increasingly dire and impossible to redeem. To salvage what remained of Germany’s military reputation, it was essential that an armistice was reached quickly; after that, it was hoped, the final terms could be adjusted with some careful lobbying and skilful diplomacy – think Talleyrand at the Congress of Vienna. Yet, while some in Germany may have hoped that their statesmen could ‘pull a Talleyrand’ in the final peace conference, the reality was that the game was rigged from the start. Germany was kept in the dark not just because the allies wanted to keep her there, but also because, as will become painfully obvious in part two of this project, these same allies were flying by the seat of their pants.

The signing of the armistice on 11th November and the Treaty of Versailles on 28th June appears on the surface to wrap the whole episode into a neat little bundle – eight and a half months of negotiation and fervent activity. The reality was much less straightforward, but a certain element of continuity was maintained, that of WW’s insistence on Germany not being treated too severely, and being ignored or modifying his own views each time. During both the armistice negotiations and the Versailles negotiations, WW started out strong, before being gradually worn down by his peers. In addition, where WW and House anticipated support for their armistice plan from the exhausted European public, particularly on the left leaning side of the political spectrum, the President would have been painfully aware that the question of American public support for his vision had suffered a devastating blow.

On 5th November, the same day which the Lansing note had been communicated to the Germans, elections to the Senate had taken place, which granted the Republicans a majority of two seats. This forgotten event in American electoral history had profound repercussions for the Treaty of Versailles and for world history. It amounted to an obstacle which WW would find impossible to overcome. With Congress in the hands of the opposition, the President would face a grave challenge when it came time to ratify the Treaty of Versailles and the principles engendered within it, such as the League of Nations. The US famously refrained from joining the League, and to explain why we may look no further than these elections to the Senate. Though the Republicans held the Senate by a majority of only two seats, this was enough for Henry Cabot Lodge, the unofficial Republican leader and nemesis of WW, to successfully lead opposition to the Treaty.

We thus return to the fact that context is everything: whatever armistice wish list the British, Germans, French or Americans may have had, their domestic position could mean the difference between the policy receiving a blessing, or bringing down the government. Pressure from home was a significant element of the Treaty of Versailles’ process; virtually all the governments that were represented at the PPC had had to concern themselves with what their public back home thought of their dealings. The Italian premier Vittorio Orlando was ousted because he couldn’t deliver; DLG had called an election in December for the very purpose of securing a mandate for his negotiations at Versailles, during the course of which he promised the British electorate that Germany would pay. WW, the visionary and missionary who imagined the arrival of a new world order, knew before either of those leaders that he lacked the mandate, or at the very least, that persuading his European peers would only be half the battle, and that the other half would require a no less tireless campaign at home to convince the American people of where their future lay. Wilson, as we will see, was thus torn between his duties at home and abroad, all the while many were convinced that he never should have gone to France in the first place.

Before the Treaty of Versailles had been signed, before the President had gone to Paris; before, indeed, the war had been brought to an end, WW had been fatally undermined at home. Worse than that, his lack of domestic support, and the shaky hold he no longer maintained over Congress, would be an open secret during the PPC, one which was picked up on by frustrated foreign delegates. In late October, WW had opined on the terms of the armistice which would be negotiated with Germany. Predictably enough, the President urged clemency and sense to prevail. Germany should not be humiliated any more than was absolutely necessary, since Wilson believed this would only serve the purposes of the German militarists and Bolsheviks who lurked in the fringes. In a telegram to House, Wilson named another and perhaps more important reason:

My deliberate judgment is that our whole weight should be thrown for an armistice which will prevent a renewal of hostilities by Germany but which will be as moderate and reasonable as possible within those limits, because it is certain that too much success or security on the part of the Allies will make a genuine peace settlement exceedingly difficult, if not impossible…Foresight is wiser than immediate advantage.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Foresight indeed, was lacking from those that populated the PPC, but it was also lacking from the President. What WW never realised, or perhaps more accurately, could never bring himself to accept, was the fact that his vision was lost the moment he lost the battle for American hearts and minds. In addition, some have even suggested that Wilson was directly to blame for this loss, since he had sent an appeal to the American people in the days before the election urging those to vote Democrat, and validate his peace plan in the process. While on paper this tactic may appear sensible to some degree, in its execution the act was a miserable and disastrous PR failure, and it came across as condescending and arrogant – incidentally, the worst aspects of Wilson’s character – rather than the stiff, defiant rallying call it had been intended to be.[[8]](#footnote-8)

WW was only one man, and he would only live so long. What guarantee did those negotiating with during the PPC have that, when he passed away, the tide of American opinion would undo all that had been negotiated and agreed to, if indeed the Treaty of Versailles could be passed at all? As soon as Congress was lost, Wilson could not give any guarantees. He was therefore vulnerable to his stronger colleagues and opposites, who would demand much of him before they would consent to approve his vision. This, indeed, had already happened by 5th November, except it was House rather than Wilson who bore the brunt of the allied riposte. At least with House though, he was engaged in a process of consistent communication with the President; this slowed down proceedings, but it also gave American negotiators in early November a chance to catch their breath. When WW arrived though, there would be no such safeguard.

The majesty and promise of the American president would be on display for all to see, and while it did work its magic for a time, it must have dawned on Wilson that making himself so available was as bold and brilliant an idea as it was reckless and dangerous. House had learned first-hand that the allies were not content to fall in line without concessions. As much as WW liked to imagine that his vision would prevail in the end, or that he would do a better job than his friend, the second phase of negotiations – those which aimed at drafting the actual terms of the armistice – reiterated the point that the Americans and Europeans stood on different ideological platforms. To bridge the gap between these two positions, the President was forced to compromise, on the understanding that the end result would be worth it. What Wilson consistently failed to appreciate though was that his original vision could not survive so long as so much compromise was necessary.

The eventual outcome, that of a watered down vision and an enraged Germany, was so far from what the president had wanted, and yet he couldn’t muster the necessary support in Congress to support even this limited interpretation of his vision. Instead, America would retreat into isolation, as the rest of the world curiously proceeded without him, like taking control of the car when the driver was long gone. All of these; the failure in the preliminary negotiations, the failure at the PPC, the failure to convince the opposition to accept Versailles, the failure to learn the lessons of the past, the failure to preserve the peace and avoid a sequel to the Great War – all of these were consequences of a President’s vision which the world, perhaps, was not yet ready for. His vision would carry him far, but not far enough.

Next time, having discerned the true situation which the allies faced, we will resume our examination of the build towards the armistice, complete with the signing of that document and the conclusion of the war at long last. The armistice, we will learn, was the antithesis of what WW had claimed to want, but the development of its terms demonstrated yet again that the President was in the minority and opposed by those who wanted to see the Germans pay. I hope you’ll join me for that history friends but until then, my name is Zack and this has been episode 9 of the VAP. Thanks for listening and I’ll be seeing you all soon.

1. Wiseman’s record of the President’s thoughts on the Fourteen Points are detailed in full in an article by John Snell, see ‘Wilson on Germany and the Fourteen Points’, *The Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 26, No. 4 (Dec., 1954), pp. 364-369. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This account is provided by Klaus Schwabe, *Woodrow Wilson, Revolutionary Germany, and Peacemaking 1919*, pp. 81-85. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See his account for this day on *Edward Mandell House Papers*, Series II, Diaries, Vol. 6, pp. 23-27. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Schwabe, *Woodrow Wilson, Revolutionary Germany, and Peacemaking*, pp. 85-87. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Ibid*, pp. 87-90. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. This document is available: https://www.firstworldwar.com/source/armistice\_hindenburg.htm [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *Ibid*, p. 88. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. The act and its execution is examined by Joseph Tumulty, *Woodrow Wilson as I Know Him* (Doubleday, Page; Garden City, NY: 1921), pp. 322-335. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)