

THE VERSAILLES CONFERENCE

by Kevin Murphy

Few American presidents have ever enjoyed the adulation of the world quite like Woodrow Wilson did in the months after World War I. “When President Wilson left Washington” to attend the Paris Peace Conference in 1919, wrote English economist John Maynard Keynes, “he enjoyed a prestige and a moral influence throughout the world unequalled in history.” After the most horrible and devastating war Europe had ever known, Woodrow Wilson seemed to exhausted millions a herald of a “world made safe for democracy” (or what later generations might call “a new world order”) dedicated to peace, international cooperation, and the principle of self-determination. The idealism he and his Fourteen Points inspired was reflected by adoring crowds for the president not only in Paris but all across Europe. “After his entrance into Rome in early January – where the streets were sprinkled with golden sand, in accordance with ancient tradition, and the banners read ‘Welcome to the God of Peace’ – it was said that Caesar had never had a grander triumph,” observed historian Thomas Knock. “In Milan, the ovations verged on hysteria, and Wilson was moved to tears.”

In short, the Paris Peace Conference was the president’s – and America’s – coming-out-party as one of the preeminent diplomatic powers in the world. For arguably the first time in its history, the world looked to the United States for global leadership, and basked in the democratic vision it offered. And yet, if Versailles in part represents the dawn of the American Century in foreign affairs, it also illustrated the limits of American power in shaping the world in its own image, and the dangers of substituting vague idealism and general moral principles for concrete proposals and diplomatic realism. For, while Wilson’s vision for peace may have inspired millions, the president was all too easily outflanked at Versailles by the representatives of the European powers, who were both more prepared for the conference and much more accustomed to the compromising give-and-take nature of diplomatic realpolitik.

“When it came to practice,” Keynes wrote of Wilson despairingly after seeing the man in action, “his ideas were nebulous and incomplete. He had no plan, no scheme, no constructive ideas whatever for clothing with the flesh of life the commandments which he had thundered from the White House.” In fact, Keynes was forced to conclude, “[t]here can seldom have been a statesman of the first rank more incompetent than the President in the agilities of the Council Chambers...The President was capable of digging his toes in and refusing to budge...But he had no other mode of defense.” Indeed, Wilson’s peers at the conference eventually came close to openly mocking the American president and his evangelical piety. “God gave us the Ten Commandments, and we broke them,” noted French Prime Minister Georges Clemenceau. “Wilson gives us the Fourteen Points. We shall see.”

Partly as a result of Wilson’s idealistic hubris, the peace treaty composed at Versailles displayed neither the optimism nor the democratic principles which the American president was to have bestowed upon it. Instead, the treaty placed harshly punitive reparations on the defeated Germany and mostly divvied up the German and Ottoman Empires into Allied-controlled mandates. (Wilson’s one major victory was the formation of a League of Nations, which, after a long battle in the Senate, the United States ultimately refused to join.) Keynes famously deemed the Treaty of Versailles “a Carthaginian peace,” and French General Ferdinand Foch presciently exclaimed at the signing that it amounted at best to a twenty-year armistice. He was almost exactly right: Twenty years after the “war to end all wars” concluded at Versailles, German tanks would roll into Poland, plunging Europe into chaos anew.

And World War II was not the only international conflict to come with roots in the Versailles Conference. Moved strongly by Woodrow Wilson’s elegant evocations of the principle of self-determination, a twenty-nine-year-old radical named Nguyen Tat Thanh tried desperately to meet with the president while in Paris, in the hopes that he could help Nguyen’s homeland of Vietnam emerge from under the thumb of European colonialism. He was rebuffed by lower-level officials (as he’d be rebuffed again after World War II), and he, under the later name Ho Chi Minh, ultimately waged his nation’s struggle for self-determination instead under the aegis of Communism.

Other decisions made at Versailles would resonate through the century and beyond. Attempting to make sense of the diverse peoples and territories of the collapsed Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman Empires, diplomats at Versailles carved out new lands and laid the basis for new governments

around the world, usually with the balance-of-power in Europe being the principal consideration. Hoping to diminish Italy's influence in the Balkans, European leaders gave their blessing to the newly-formed and culturally disparate nation of Yugoslavia. German holdings in Africa, such as Kamerun and Togoland, were haphazardly divided between the British and French. And all the participants, including Wilson, looked warily over at the new Bolshevik government to the East – The Russians were explicitly not invited to the Versailles conference, and the Big Four kept an eye to constraining the power and influence of the new Soviet threat in all of their decision-making, further chilling relations between West and East.

The Versailles negotiators looked at the oil-rich Middle East in particular as a valuable strategic asset now in play. Following the outlines of an earlier agreement, Sykes-Picot, Britain and France redrew the map of the region, greatly angering Arabs in the process. Among the mandates formed under European rule were Syria (held by the French) and Palestine (held by the British). In addition, the British would fuse together the culturally and religiously distinct regions of Basra, Baghdad, and Mosul into one single administrative unit, which later became known as the kingdom of Iraq. As historian Margaret Macmillan has noted: "In 1919, there was no Iraqi people; history, religion, geography pulled the people apart, not together." In these enduring tensions between Arab peoples and Western powers, as with the fragile nations created by the latter for the former, the decisions made at Versailles continue to influence the world today.