

# [Why did the united states refuse to join the league of nations?](https://assignbuster.com/why-did-the-united-states-refuse-to-join-the-league-of-nations/)

The United States entered World War One in 1917 and the country was stunned , by  the slaughter that took place in what was meant to be a civilized part of the world. In the minds of many of the countries that participated in the war, the only way to avoid repetition of another World War, was to create an international body whose purpose was to repair any international disputes and to maintain a world peace, or at the very least European peace. This international body soon became the League of Nations, which was supported as a defining factor in world peace by nations of the world. However, the United States chose to perform the act of isolationism as opposed to involving themselves in world affairs, which led to America rejecting the opportunity to join the League of Nations. In this essay I will discuss the question “ Why did the United States refuse to join the League of Nations?” by looking at the reasons why the United States chose not to join, as well as analyzing if this was the correct move by the Americans. I will look atWoodrow Wilson’s “ Fourteen Points” and how it was received amongst European and American leaders, as well as why the United States refused to join the league of Nations and why they actively strove for the foreign policy of Isolationism. This will be done with analysis of the Fourteen Points and the analysis of the “ Lodge Reservations”. The United States not joining the League of Nations was crucial as America was considered one of the most powerful nations in the world, and without the United States the League of Nations was destined to not be as strong as it could be without American support.

Woodrow Wilson gave a speech to congress that would lately be called the “ Fourteen Points”, which was a speech that Wilson regarded as the only possible basis for enduring world peace and the basis of the idea of theLeague of Nations. In the speech, Wilson addressed what he believed to be the causes of the First World War by calling for the abolition of secret treaties, the adjustment of colonial claims, a reduction of armaments, and the freedom of the seas. Wilson would then promise to remove any economic barriers between nations, and the creation of a world organization that would protect political independence, which would later become the League of Nations. The speech was created from a set of diplomatic points made by Woodrow Wilson, and territorial points made by Inquiry general secretary Walter Lippmann. Lippman’s task according to Colonel Edward M. House, was “ to take the secret treaties, analyze the parts which were tolerable, and separate them from those which we regarded as intolerable, and then develop a position which conceded as much to the Allies as it could, but took away the poison. … It was all keyed upon the secret treaties.” [1] Among the major points was the territorial issues that were occurring as a result of the movement of troops during the war. Most importantly may have been the point referring to the French territory being occupied:

VIII. All French territory should be freed and the invaded portions restored, and the wrong done toFrance by Prussia in 1871 in thematter of Alsace-Lorraine, which has unsettled the peace of the world for nearly fifty years, should be righted, in order that peace may once more be made secure in the interest of all. [2]

This was one of the main reasons of Germany’s invasion during theSecond World War, and was used as justification by Adolf Hitler, the leader ofGermany during the Second World War. The Fourteen Points speech was givenwithout consultation and coordination between Wilson and his Europeancounterparts. As a major statement of war aims, it soon became the basis forGerman Surrender terms at the end of the First World War. After Wilson gave thespeech, Wilson’s “ right hand man” Colonel Edward House worked hard to securethe acceptance of the Fourteen Points by Allied European leaders. On October16, 1918, Sir William Wiseman, the head of British Intelligence in America, andWoodrow Wilson had an interview that would became a reason as to why the Germangovernment accepted the Fourteen Points, as well as the principles for peacenegotiations. However, the general opinion of the Fourteen Points in the UnitedStates was poor to say the least. Theodore Roosevelt, America’s 26th president, wrote an article titled, “ The League of Nations”, that was published in theMetropolitan Magazine which warned: “ If the League of Nations is built ona document as high-sounding and as meaningless as the speech in which Mr. Wilson laid down his fourteen points, it will simply add one more scrap to thediplomatic waste paper basket. Most of these fourteen points … would beinterpreted … to mean anything or nothing.”. [3] A further indication that the idea of a League of Nations was not well acceptedin the United States is in a comment by William Borah, an outspoken RepublicanUnited States Senator, who wished “ this treacherous and treasonablescheme” of the League of Nations to be “ buried in hell” andpromised that if he had his way it would be “ 20, 000 leagues under thesea”. [4] The Leagueof Nations however, was a main component of the Fourteen Points and WoodrowWilson strove to have it established and thrive. This was due to the aim ofworld peace which Woodrow Wilson aimed for, “ It was the first international organizationwhose principal mission was to maintain world peace.” [5] However, Wilson’s plans of having a more involved America in the Europeantheater would not come to be. The United States Congress would soon vote to notjoin the League of Nations. The United States, whose president, Woodrow Wilson, had dreamt up the idea of the League, refused to join it. As America was theworld’s most powerful nation, this was a serious blow to the prestige of theLeague. However, America’s refusal to join the League, fitted in with herdesire to have an isolationist policy throughout the world.

Isolationism is a an act offoreign policy institutionalized by leaders who assert their nation’s bestinterests first by keeping issues of other countries largely at a distance. TheUnited States often practiced a form of isolationism in their short existenceas a country. While some scholars, such as Robert J. Art, believe that theUnited States has an isolationist history, other scholars dispute this bydescribing the United States as following a strategy of unilateralism ornon-interventionism instead. [6] Among the scholars that disagree with the idea that America had not practicedisolationism is Bear F. Braumoeller, who argued that even in the largest caseof isolationism, which was the interwar periods of the First and Second WorldWar, the notion of isolationism “ has been widely misunderstood and thatAmericans proved willing to fight as soon as they believed a genuine threatexisted.” [7] Although the United States did maintain major economic contacts abroad, andmaintained diplomatic relations in these years, it greatly restricted these asmuch as possible in order to retain its rather newly gained independence. Inthe aftermath of the First World War, the non-interventionist methods of UnitedStates policy gained major ground in the country. With the Treaty of Versaillesand the League of Nations causing reservations in Congress, the United StatesSenate had rejected the participation of America in the League of Nations inthe final months of Woodrow Wilson’s presidency. Of the many reasons that theUnited States had chosen to object to the League of Nations, a definitivefactor was the clause in the League in which the United States would becompelled to defend other nations in the event that they were attacked. Whilesome of the sentiment was grounded in adherence to Constitutional principles, some of the sentiment bore a reassertion of nativist and inward-looking policy. [8] Another of the reasons why the United States refused to join the League of Nationswas that the Republicans, who were the majority in the Senate, were shaken bythe notion of being forced to stick with the obligations brought upon bybecoming a member of the League. Senator Henry Cabot, the Republican MajorityLeader and Chairman of the Committee on Foreign Relations, drafted a documentnamed “ The Lodge Reservations”, which would have given a lot of the power backto the United States in regard to how it interacts with other countries. Manyof the reservations would have granted the United States more authority overits place within the League of Nations, as well as when the United States wouldhave to follow decisions made by the League involving the United States. Amongthese Lodge Reservations was Reservation Two, which confirms Americasdisinterest in lending troops to the League of Nations and possibly beingdragged into a war they did not have the interest in fighting:

“ 2. The United States assumes no obligation topreserve the territorial integrity or political independence of any othercountry or to interfere in controversies between nations — whether members ofthe League or not — under the provisions of Article 10, or to employ themilitary or naval forces of the United States under any article of the treatyfor any purpose, unless in any particular case the Congress, which, under theConstitution, has the sole power to declare war or authorize the employment ofthe military or naval forces of the United States, shall by act or jointresolution so provide.” [9]

Ultimately, it was clear that the United States Senate had very littleinterest in the League of Nations. Most of the Lodge Reservations hadreservations that were known to be too intense and thus, would never have beenapproved by the League. In a letter by Woodrow Wilson, he pleads to his Senateallies for the League of Nations to oppose the Lodge Reservations, “ On that Icannot hesitate, for, in my opinion, the resolution in that form does notprovide for ratification but, rather, for the nullification of the treaty. Isincerely hope that the friends and supporters of the treaty will vote againstthe Lodge resolution of ratification.” [10] In the end, the Lodge Reservations seemed to work, or at least encourage themajority of the Senate to not join the League of Nations, which wasaccomplished after the Senate rejected the Treaty of Versailles by eight votes.

Overall, the question “ Why did the UnitedStates refuse to join the League of Nations?” can be answered simply by lookingat the reaction of important American leaders during the time period of whenthe United States was debating joining the League of Nations. Woodrow Wilson’sFourteen Points were a great foundation for the future United Nations and alsoan important starting point for the League of Nations, but the intensemultilateralism that was expected of nations in the League had caused theUnited States to shy away from any possible agreement to be made. At the timeof Treaty of Versailles and the development of the League of Nations, theUnited States chose to focus on growing as a nation itself, as opposed topotentially being dragged into more conflict that the Americans felt was nothreat to their own nation. This is why Lodges Reservations were appreciated bymany of the United States Senators when the time came to vote upon entry intothe League of Nations. These reservations were important as it posed the fearsof the United States in having their somewhat newly independence stripped fromthem in the form of being forced to defend a nation, attack a nation, orrestrict imports and exports to and from a specific country. Ultimately, itfalls down to the simple fact that the United States did not need the supportof other nations to protect its land and independence, as well as the rebuildits land because it was not nearly as affected as nations like France andBritain who were devastated financially and morally after the brutal conditionsof the war. Had the United States lost as much as the other countries thatjoined the United Nations, I believe that they would have quickly joined theLeague of Nations, and potentially become a global superpower, much like whatoccured after the Second World War in regard to the United Nations. However, this was not the case and the United States refused to join the League ofNations, which greatly hurt its reputation and power.

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