

Why did the united
states refuse to join
the league of
nations?



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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 at Woodrow 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 the League 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 to France by Prussia in 1871 in the matter 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 the Second World War, and was used as justification by Adolf Hitler, the leader

of Germany during the Second World War. The Fourteen Points speech was given without consultation and coordination between Wilson and his European counterparts. As a major statement of war aims, it soon became the basis for German Surrender terms at the end of the First World War. After Wilson gave the speech, Wilson's "right hand man" Colonel Edward House worked hard to secure the acceptance of the Fourteen Points by Allied European leaders. On October 16, 1918, Sir William Wiseman, the head of British Intelligence in America, and Woodrow Wilson had an interview that would become a reason as to why the German government accepted the Fourteen Points, as well as the principles for peace negotiations. However, the general opinion of the Fourteen Points in the United States was poor to say the least. Theodore Roosevelt, America's 26th president, wrote an article titled, "The League of Nations", that was published in the Metropolitan Magazine which warned: "If the League of Nations is built on a 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 the diplomatic waste paper basket. Most of these fourteen points ... would be interpreted ... to mean anything or nothing."^[3] A further indication that the idea of a League of Nations was not well accepted in the United States is in a comment by William Borah, an outspoken Republican United States Senator, who wished "this treacherous and treasonable scheme" of the League of Nations to be "buried in hell" and promised that if he had his way it would be "20,000 leagues under the sea".^[4] The League of Nations however, was a main component of the Fourteen Points and Woodrow Wilson strove to have it established and thrive. This was due to the aim of world peace which

Woodrow Wilson aimed for, " It was the first international organization whose principal mission was to maintain world peace." [5] However, Wilson's plans of having a more involved America in the European theater would not come to be. The United States Congress would soon vote to not join 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 the world's most powerful nation, this was a serious blow to the prestige of the League. However, America's refusal to join the League, fitted in with her desire to have an isolationist policy throughout the world.

Isolationism is a an act of foreign policy institutionalized by leaders who assert their nation's best interests first by keeping issues of other countries largely at a distance. The United States often practiced a form of isolationism in their short existence as a country. While some scholars, such as Robert J. Art, believe that the United States has an isolationist history, other scholars dispute this by describing the United States as following a strategy of unilateralism or non-interventionism instead. [6] Among the scholars that disagree with the idea that America had not practiced isolationism is Bear F. Braumoeller, who argued that even in the largest case of isolationism, which was the interwar periods of the First and Second World War, the notion of isolationism " has been widely misunderstood and that Americans proved willing to fight as soon as they believed a genuine threat existed." [7]

Although the United States did maintain major economic contacts abroad, and maintained diplomatic relations in these years, it greatly restricted these as much as possible in order to retain its rather newly gained independence.

In the aftermath of the First World War, the non-interventionist methods of <https://assignbuster.com/why-did-the-united-states-refuse-to-join-the-league-of-nations/>

United States policy gained major ground in the country. With the Treaty of Versailles and the League of Nations causing reservations in Congress, the United States Senate had rejected the participation of America in the League of Nations in the final months of Woodrow Wilson's presidency. Of the many reasons that the United States had chosen to object to the League of Nations, a definitive factor was the clause in the League in which the United States would be compelled to defend other nations in the event that they were attacked. While some 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 Nations was that the Republicans, who were the majority in the Senate, were shaken by the notion of being forced to stick with the obligations brought upon by becoming a member of the League. Senator Henry Cabot, the Republican Majority Leader and Chairman of the Committee on Foreign Relations, drafted a document named "The Lodge Reservations", which would have given a lot of the power back to the United States in regard to how it interacts with other countries. Many of the reservations would have granted the United States more authority over its place within the League of Nations, as well as when the United States would have to follow decisions made by the League involving the United States. Among these Lodge Reservations was Reservation Two, which confirms America's disinterest in lending troops to the League of Nations and possibly being dragged into a war they did not have the interest in fighting:

" 2. The United States 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 United States 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 authorize the employment of the military or naval forces of the United States, shall by act or joint resolution so provide.” [9]

Ultimately, it was clear that the United States Senate had very little interest in the League of Nations. Most of the Lodge Reservations had reservations that were known to be too intense and thus, would never have been approved by the League. In a letter by Woodrow Wilson, he pleads to his Senate allies for the League of Nations to oppose the Lodge Reservations, “ On that I cannot hesitate, for, in my opinion, the resolution in that form does not provide for ratification but, rather, for the nullification of the treaty. I sincerely hope that the friends and supporters of the treaty will vote against the Lodge resolution of ratification.” [10] In the end, the Lodge Reservations seemed to work, or at least encourage the majority of the Senate to not join the League of Nations, which was accomplished after the Senate rejected the Treaty of Versailles by eight votes.

Overall, the question “ Why did the United States refuse to join the League of Nations?” can be answered simply by looking at the reaction of important American leaders during the time period of when the United States was debating joining the League of Nations. Woodrow Wilson’s Fourteen Points were a great foundation for the future United Nations and also an important starting point for the League of Nations, but the intense multilateralism that

was expected of nations in the League had caused the United States to shy away from any possible agreement to be made. At the time of Treaty of Versailles and the development of the League of Nations, the United States chose to focus on growing as a nation itself, as opposed to potentially being dragged into more conflict that the Americans felt was no threat to their own nation. This is why Lodge's Reservations were appreciated by many of the United States Senators when the time came to vote upon entry into the League of Nations. These reservations were important as it posed the fear of the United States in having their somewhat newly independence stripped from them in the form of being forced to defend a nation, attack a nation, or restrict imports and exports to and from a specific country. Ultimately, it falls down to the simple fact that the United States did not need the support of other nations to protect its land and independence, as well as the rebuilding of its land because it was not nearly as affected as nations like France and Britain who were devastated financially and morally after the brutal conditions of the war. Had the United States lost as much as the other countries that joined the United Nations, I believe that they would have quickly joined the League of Nations, and potentially become a global superpower, much like what occurred 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 of Nations, which greatly hurt its reputation and power.

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Woodrow Wilson, President of the United States, "Response to the Lodge Resolution" c. November 18, 1919

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