

History Internal Assessment

What accounts for the failure of the US Congress to ratify the Treaty of Versailles and League of Nations?

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Section 1

This study will investigate what accounts for the failure of the US Congress to ratify the Treaty of Versailles and the League of Nations. The first source is a 1987 essay by American historian Lloyd E. Ambrosius titled 'Woodrow Wilson's Health and the Treaty Fight'¹. Ambrosius is a recognised authority in this field and his analysis was based on several primary sources enhancing his quality of analysis. This source is relevant because it highlights why the president's health was a contributory factor but not the most important. The second source selected for detailed analysis is a speech presented by Republican Senator William E. Borah before the US Senate on November 10th 1919. This speech is also relevant because as a primary source it highlights another reason why the Treaty and League were rejected.

Source A

The sources origin can be considered valuable because the essay was published almost 70 years after the event, so it would allow Ambrosius to be able to look, with hindsight, at primary sources about Wilson that was not realised until later due to official secrecy. Also Ambrosius's expertise is found in researching American presidency, allowing his research to make his essay on this topic valuable. Additionally, value is found in the essay's purpose as it portrays an understanding of Wilson's mind in "the politics of peacemaking in America after the war"². However, there are limitations to the source's purpose for my investigation because he unfairly negates the influence of psychological factors. By writing that "other factors in the

¹ Lloyd E Ambrosius, "Woodrow Wilson's Health and the Treaty Fight, 1919-1920," *The International History Review* 9, no. 1 (February 1987), accessed January 27, 2017, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40105699>.

²ibid., 73.

historical context...contributed even more to the president's failure to achieve US ratification [of the treaty]"³ he focuses on this aspect only to invalidate it. One limitation of the origin could be that he was an American historian writing about his own country's past president. There will undoubtedly be certain biases formed based on Ambrosius's own political views.

Source B

The speech (Appendix 1) made by Senator William E. Borah to the Senate on November 19th 1919⁴, can be used as a valuable primary source. The Senator was directly involved in the decisions made so his speech gives insight into the Republicans reasoning as to why they opposed the Treaty of Versailles proposed by Wilson. Especially when he says "we are told that this treaty means peace... I would not pay the price"⁵, he is making a statement that effectively sums up what many Republicans and citizens believed. A limitation of the speech is its origin as Borah was giving a speech to the Senate as a Republican Senator. His personal opinion can be seen when he says "I would not"⁶. Furthermore, a limitation to the purpose is that he is neglecting the positive aspects of Woodrow's proposals because Republicans were simply trying to score political points to win. An agenda can be seen in trying to convince the audience by misrepresenting Woodrow's policies in speeches.

³Ibid., 84.

⁴National Park Service, "Woodrow Wilson: Prophet of Peace--Reading 2", <https://www.nps.gov/nr/twhp/wwwlps/lessons/14wilson/14facts2.htm>. (accessed February 11, 2017)

⁵National Park Service, "Woodrow Wilson: Prophet of Peace--Reading 2", <https://www.nps.gov/nr/twhp/wwwlps/lessons/14wilson/14facts2.htm>. (accessed February 11, 2017)

⁶National Park Service, "Woodrow Wilson: Prophet of Peace--Reading 2", <https://www.nps.gov/nr/twhp/wwwlps/lessons/14wilson/14facts2.htm>. (accessed February 11, 2017)

Section 2

The failure of the US to ratify the Treaty of Versailles and League of Nations in March 1920 was a turning point in American and world politics, which arguable doomed any possibility of a new, liberal world order after World War 1. To understand why this happened, one must take into account why the US Congress failed to be persuaded by Woodrow Wilson's proposals. Historians Ambrosius and Bailey would argue that Wilson's health was an important factor, while HG Wells and Allan Todd would argue it was the lack of public opinion and Republican opposition respectively that accounts for the failure of the failure to ratify the Treaty and the League. I intend to argue that the most significant causal factor in the failure to ratify the Treaty and League is Republican opposition as identified by Alan Todd.

Factor 1: Wilson's failures

Historians Lloyd Ambrosius⁷ and Thomas Bailey⁸ suggest that for a comprehensive understanding of the Treaty fight, Woodrow Wilson's health failures must be taken into account. Wilson's fading health due to mental disintegration eliminated the possibility of making strong appeals for the case to ratify the Treaty. The condition of Wilson's mind and body and how it influenced political leadership is argued by Thomas Bailey to be the sole reason why his appeal for the League failed. In Bailey's "Woodrow Wilson and the Great Betrayal"⁹, he argued that the primary responsibility falls on Wilson's shoulders rather than Senator Lodge and the Republicans. This is supported by his statement that "the Treaty was slain in the

⁷Lloyd E Ambrosius, "Woodrow Wilson's Health and the Treaty Fight, 1919-1920," *The International History Review* 9, no. 1 (February 1987): 73, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40105699>.

⁸ Ibid., 73.

⁹ Brainerd Dyer, "Review," *Reviews of Books* 14, no. 4 (December 1, 1945), accessed February 10, 2017, doi:10.2307/3634700, <http://phr.ucpress.edu/content/14/4/471>.

house of its friends [and not] its enemies. Wilson...delivered the fatal stab."¹⁰ This source is limited as it clearly has an agenda to reveal a single point and negate it, and does not have enough evidence to support its own thesis. Yet it is merited because the evidence that the historian uses comes from qualified psychologists who specialise in Wilson's health, even though the evidence seems to support his counter-claims instead.

Further support comes from Senator Gilbert M. Hitchcock¹¹, the democratic minority leader during the Treaty struggle where he said that ratification would have happened "if Wilson's health had not given way."¹² This quote has significant amounts of value as it reflects the opinions of those closest to Wilson in that a healthy president would have given Wilson a better chance to force the Republicans to accept the Treaty without reservations. The president himself was in "denial of his incapacity"¹³ according to psychiatrist Edwin Weinstein as Wilson persisted in rejecting Republican reservations creating no prospect of a bridge between his proposition and the Republican senators. These points demonstrate the views of historians who think that health was the downfall Wilson's appeals. However, these perspectives put the blame unfairly on Woodrow Wilson by failing to take into account that the psychological diagnosis only exemplified the real problem which was that neither party was willing to compromise on their position; whether Wilson's health was intact or not. Instead, an examination of the lack of internal democratic support is necessary to consider.

¹⁰Ambrosius, "Woodrow Wilson's Health and the Treaty Fight", 73.

¹¹Ambrosius, "Woodrow Wilson's Health and the Treaty Fight", 74.

¹² Ibid., 74.

¹³ Ibid., 77.

Factor 2: Public opinion

While Wilson's health did play a role, it was also the public opinion of the USA that helped to steer the Treaty and the League away from ratification. A huge fraction of the American population consisted of German immigrants¹⁴, who felt that the Treaty initially proposed by the Big 3 was too harsh towards Germany¹⁵ and instead favored the British and French. Others, who were American isolationist, were concerned that the Treaty would drag the US back into foreign conflict that would impact America's freedom and result in permanent global involvement. According to Herbert George Wells, many Americans think that "America would be better off by cutting its brief participation in European affairs and [return] to an isolationist approach."¹⁶ This quote is of value because Wells is a British writer who commented on the American isolationists at the time. It demonstrates public opinion well from a British perspective, however it suggests that the only reason Americans opposed the Treaty was because they were isolationists. Wilson knew the importance of going to the people as seen through the cartoon titled "Going to the Boss"¹⁷, created and published by Chicago News in 1919 (Appendix 2). After resistance with Congress, Wilson decided to take his case to the public, suggesting that the people are in control as the "boss". It provides insightful analysis of the situation, conveying the importance of getting the public on Wilson's side. Without the support of many ethnic groups in America, the failure of the ratification of the Treaty and the League can be

¹⁴ Immigration to United States "German Immigrants,"

<http://immigrationtounitedstates.org/519-german-immigrants.html> (accessed February 11, 2017).

¹⁵ John B. Duff, "The Versailles Treaty and the Irish-Americans." *The Journal of American History* 55, no. 3 (1968): P.592, www.jstor.org/stable/1891015.

¹⁶ H.G Wells, *"The Outline of History: The Whole Story of Man"* (Doubleday & Co.: New York, 1971)

¹⁷ Gayle Olson-Raymer, "Causes and Consequences of World War 1," Humboldt State University's Department of History., accessed January 27, 2017, <http://users.humboldt.edu/ogayle/hist111/WWI.html>.

attributed to the lack of public support, rather than issues over Wilson's mental or physical health as suggested by historian Thomas Bailey.

Factor 3: Republican opposition

Whilst public opinion did shape the outcome of the situation, it was the Republican opposition that was detrimental to the failure of the ratification of the Treaty of Versailles. The Reservationists were led by New Republican Majority leader Henry Cabot Lodge¹⁸, and were motivated by concerns over that fact that the League would reduce the United States' ability to defend and consider its own interests and therefore he led the opposition to joining the League and ratifying the Treaty. Historian Allan Todd¹⁹ was one to argue that it was the fact that the reservationists were "isolationist and would not agree to the Treaty" that caused them to oppose Wilson's proposals. Republican Senator William Borah commented that "we are told that this Treaty means peace. Even so, I would not pay the price. Would you purchase peace at the cost of your independence?"²⁰ This quote from his speech was said with intention and makes what he says a limitation to the investigation, while still being valuable as it reflected the emotions of the Republicans at the time. Nevertheless, reservationists believed that ratification of the Treaty would cause the country to become involved European relations and entangled with European

¹⁸ "The Treaty of Versailles," Senate, accessed February 16, 2017, https://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/history/common/generic/Feature_Homepage_TreatyVersailles.htm

¹⁹ "How Did America React to the End of World War I?," John D. Clare, <http://www.johndclare.net/America2.htm> (accessed February 11, 2017).

²⁰"Woodrow Wilson: Prophet of Peace--Reading 2," National Park Service, <https://www.nps.gov/nr/twhp/wwwlps/lessons/14wilson/14facts2.htm>. (accessed January 27, 2017).

politics, which wasn't what was wanted. Historian James Hewes²¹ also noted that this fear of involvement overseas was an overpowering concern for the Republicans.

However, the biggest issue between the Republicans and Wilson was the 'Article X'²² which would constitute a universal commitment binding the United States to send troops anywhere at any time to reduce tensions and aggression in accordance with the League. While Lodge made an attempt to compromise with Wilson through his reservations attached to the Treaty, the president was quick to reject this. This was a huge mistake made by Wilson as a democratic senator later noted that the President and the League's supporters "had sinned away their day of grace by refusing to compromise last August."²³ This quote is significant as it demonstrates how ultimately Wilson's refusal to cooperate led to the Republican opposition's victory on the matter when the Senate voted down the Treaty and never joined the League of Nations.

Conclusion

While the positions held by Ambrosius and Bailey²⁴ about Wilson's health are important to consider, it was ultimately Republican opposition that caused the US Congress to reject the Treaty of Versailles and the League of Nations. The Republican opposition appealed to the Senate and also the people which in turned resulted in the failure to ratify the Treaty and the League. The role of public opinion

²¹ James E. Hewes. "Henry Cabot Lodge and the League of Nations." *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 114, no. 4 (1970): 245-55. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/985951>.

²² "The Treaty of Versailles and the League of Nations," US History, <http://www.ushistory.org/us/45d.asp>.

²³ Hewes "Henry Cabot Lodge and the League of Nations," 252.

²⁴ Ambrosius, "Woodrow Wilson's Health and the Treaty Fight, 74.

was not the most important because often Wilson ignored popular opinion but focused on the Republican opposition. Similarly Wilson's health was not the most crucial factor because he still made progress in his case, which demonstrates how he was still capable despite health setbacks. Thus, Republican opposition led by Lodge was the most significant factor leading to the failure of the ratification of the Treaty of Versailles and the League of Nations.

Section 3

While investigating the topic of what accounts for the failure of the US Congress to ratify the Treaty of Versailles and League of Nations, I was able to gain insight into the role of historians and how the reliability of sources limited certain aspects of my investigation. Throughout my research, I read books and journal articles by historians, statements by senators and uncovered quotes by people involved in the debate on the Treaty of Versailles and the League of Nations. I was able to recognise that some sources were more reliable than others and by acknowledging this, it was helpful in identifying the values and limitations of my range of sources on why the Treaty and League failed to be ratified. This in turn revealed the role of historians in recognizing these values and limitations when using them in their academic writing.

During this investigation, I used an array of academic journals in order to gain insight on different factors that caused the Senate to reject the Treaty of Versailles. These journals were almost all written many years after the year 1919, meaning historians had more information that played a part in writing their journals. With books, I had to consider the nationality of the historian writing the book as their personal views may present a biased recount of the event. For example in Herbert George Wells' 'The Outline of History', he claims that it was because of American isolationism that the Treaty was rejected. While this may be a factor, he was a British author and shows how the cultural identity of the author and political context at the time needs to be taken into account to truly understand the nature of a source.

For this investigation, the information gained from sources by members of the American government were valuable in coming to a conclusion. The information gained can be considered trustworthy and reliable as it comes from people who were there at the time; something historians often cannot say about themselves. Primary sources such as Senator Borah's speech and the Chicago News cartoon provide an insight into the detail of that exact moment in time. Faced with a variety of primary and secondary sources, a historian has to decipher which sources will best convey the point that needs to be made, similar to what I have had to do in this investigation to conclude that the Republican opposition was the greatest factor to why the Treaty of Versailles and the League of Nations were failed to be ratified.

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Appendices

Appendix 1

*Excerpts from a speech by Senator William E. Borah to the US Senate on November 10, 1919.*²⁵

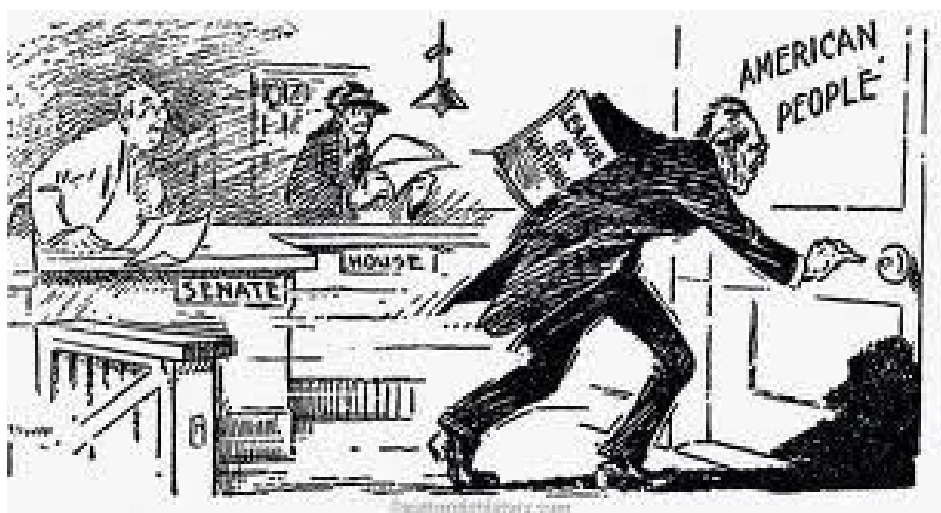
“Sir, we are told that this treaty means peace. Even so, I would not pay the price. Would you purchase peace at the cost of our independence?”

“Mr. President, to recapitulate, Europe is still Europe, with all her racial antipathies and imperialist appetites.”

“She is unchanged, and if we assume the task of effectuating a change, save as in the past by whatever power precept and example may exert, we will end by becoming Europeanized in our standards and in our conceptions of civilization or we will fall into disintegration and as a Republic die. If we give up our independence and enter her councils with one vote, if we surrender our seat of authority here upon the Western Continent...free from all foreign entanglements... if we quit our own stand upon foreign soil, we shall return as our President returned from Versailles, stripped of our principles and shorn of our ideals.”

Appendix 2

*Cartoon titled “Going to the Boss” which was created and published by Chicago News in 1919*²⁶.



²⁵ “Woodrow Wilson: Prophet of Peace--Reading 2,” National Park Service, <https://www.nps.gov/nr/twhp/wwwlps/lessons/14wilson/14facts2.htm>. (accessed January 27, 2017).

²⁶ Gayle Olson-Raymer, “Causes and Consequences of World War 1,” Humboldt State University’s Department of History., accessed January 27, 2017, <http://users.humboldt.edu/ogayle/hist111/WWI.html>.