Issue Number 2.3

“Was Woodrow Wilson Responsible for the Failure of the United States to Join the League of Nations?”

Madison Lockamy

History 222 – 01

Issue 2.3:

“Was Woodrow Wilson Responsible for the Failure of the United States to Join the League of Nations?”

 Woodrow Wilson served as the President of the United States from 1912 to 1920, under a very controversial reign. He grew up as a leading academician, devout Christian, and with a stubborn headed inflexibility. He had very little political experience before his presidency, other than holding the positions of president of Princeton and governor of New Jersey. Shocking to many, Wilson has been ranked among the top ten presidents in a number of polls. Many criticize Wilson for his inability to compromise and an overwhelming number blame him for the league of nations debacle. In the issue of whether Woodrow Wilson was responsible for the failure of the United States to join the League of Nations, Thomas A. Bailey, author of *Woodrow Wilson and the Lost Peace* and *Woodrow Wilson and the Great Betrayal*, argues that a physically unfit President was unable to compromise with the Senate and Congress in order to join the League of Nations. Meanwhile, William G. Carleton, author of *The Revolution in American Foreign Policy*, undermines Lodge, the chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and believes Wilson knew exactly what role the United States would play in the affairs of the world.

 While there was a plethora of reasons to blame Wilson for the collapse of the League of Nations concept, three points in particular stand out: his overconfidence, his incapability to compromise, and his health complications.

 Woodrow Wilson had handled his presidential terms with grace and decisiveness up until now. He had kept the United States out of the war until absolutely necessary and then stepped in at the ideal time and won it for the allies. He was favored in most of the public’s eyes, and he knew it. According to Bailey, “Wilson now towered at the dizzy pinnacle of his popularity and power” (143). Unfortunately, this is where it started to go downhill for him. It began with his cocky request for a “Democratic Congress in October of 1918” (143). This request was promptly denied with the return of a Republican Congress in the month. Then, Wilson further illustrated his arrogance by justifying himself to become the first President to go abroad in order to negotiate the Treaty of Versailles. Bailey claims, “Republicans condemned the decision as evidence of a dangerous Messiah complex” (143). These feelings of superiority contributed to Wilson’s series of costly decisions following the war.

 Dating back to January of 1918, Woodrow Wilson knew what he wanted. He addressed his Fourteen Points to Congress, which consisted of promises like “the end of secret treaties, freedom of the seas, the removal of economic barriers” and most importantly, a league of nations (142). Although previously suggested by Republican senator Henry Cabot Lodge, Wilson claimed the idea of a league of nations to be strictly his own. And so began the long, never-ending feud between Wilson and Lodge. This childish rivalry cost Wilson the League of Nations, in many individuals’ opinions. Wilson was so caught up with getting his version passed with no reservations from Lodge, he could not see that “a good deal of compromise had already gone into the treaty, and a little more might have saved it” (145). As a result of this, the Senate was forced to go through countless voting regarding the subject until members grew weary and the public became too confused to care.

 Wilson faced numerous health deficiencies throughout this fiasco, according to Bailey, this included influenza and “a stroke that paralyzed the left side of his body” (145). The stroke left him heartbroken and deterred. His wife remained at his bedside and refused to relay any disagreeable news to him in fear it may shock him into a relapse. By the time Wilson made a feeble attempt at a recovery, it was too late. According to Bailey, “it appeared the public opinion had veered considerably” (145). The majority of people now favored the treaty, but with some more reservations than Wilson wanted. He considered this a loss.

 While Bailey does not go into severe scrutiny of Woodrow Wilson’s flaws, that does not mean other authors did not. Carleton claims that, “Much more than other historical figures (Wilson) is being judged by personality traits, many of them distorted or even fancied” (147). Wilson is openly judged for his upbringing and personal faults, whereas the typical president in his time period would not have been put under a microscope like that.

 The other key part of Carleton’s argument is Woodrow Wilson’s overlooked flexibility. The author refers to the “Federal Reserve Act, the Clayton Anti-Trust Law, and the Federal Trade Commission” pointing out Wilson’s repeated mediations between members of his own party (147). Carleton also describes the President’s ability to maneuver from left to right in order to achieve what everyone desires. This cannot possibly be easy, especially when Wilson had to deal with stubborn-minded senate members like Henry Cabot Lodge. Some say he had no party loyalty, which was proved to be true when he “secretly entered into negotiations with the Democrats in an effort to work out acceptable reservations” for the League of Nations (145). And yet this is who Woodrow Wilson had to feud with for months to try and accomplish his Fourteen Point plan the way he foresaw it back in January of 1918. Carleton argues that Wilson’s plan was remarkable from the beginning, “and it will not be denied him merely because he was turned down by the United States Senate” (150).

 Although both Bailey and Carleton make valid points concerning the issue of Woodrow Wilson’s responsibility in the failure of the United States to join the League of Nations, I find myself agreeing with Bailey. While I will concede that Wilson got a bad reputation from the public due to unnecessary scrutiny, he also proved time and time again his inability to compromise with senators, especially regarding the subject of the League of Nations. Furthermore, Wilson’s physical ailments proved detrimental to his presidency in the eyes of the senate, the public, and even himself. His overconfidence fell to low self-esteem and led to his various questionable decisions in the year of 1918. Ultimately, Wilson’s intentions were good, but he let his physical and emotional illnesses get in the way of the United States joining the League of Nations.