

1918—The League of Nations

In his address to Congress on January 8, 1918, Woodrow Wilson outlined the steps the United States and its allies would have to take in order to ensure a postwar world "made fit to live in." The fourteenth point of this plan was the idea of a league of nations. When the League of Nations was established on January 10, 1920, it disappointed some of its early supporters. The Covenant, which was the basis for the league's operation, was included in the Treaty of Versailles imposed on defeated Germany. This made it look as if the league was a tool for the victors to use against their former enemies. The U.S. Senate refused to ratify the peace treaty and, in a blow to President Wilson, also kept the country out of the League.

Gentlemen of the Congress: . . .

We entered this war because violations of right had occurred which touched us to the quick and made the life of our own people impossible unless they were corrected and the world secured once for all against their recurrence. What we demand in this war, therefore, is nothing peculiar to ourselves. It is that the world be made fit and safe to live in; and particularly that it be made safe for every peace-loving nation which, like our own, wishes to live its own life, determine its own institutions, be assured of justice and fair dealing by the other peoples of the world as against force and selfish aggression. All the peoples of the world are in effect partners in this interest,

and for our own part we see very clearly that unless justice be done to others it will not be done to us. . . .

XIV. A general association of nations must be formed under specific covenants for the purpose of affording mutual guarantees of political independence and territorial integrity to great and small states alike.

In regard to these essential rectifications of wrong and assertions of right we feel ourselves to be intimate partners of all the governments and peoples associated together against the Imperialists. We cannot be separated in interest or divided in purpose. We stand together until the end. [Woodrow Wilson's Address to Congress, January 8, 1918]

—Questions—

1. If you had been a senator in 1918, would you have voted in favor of the League of Nations, or against? Give reasons for your decision.
2. Why do you think the U.S. refused to join the League of Nations?
3. How might the League of Nations have been different if America had joined it?

GLOSSARY covenant—agreement
integrity—completeness, unity

rectification—setting right, correcting

