

Competing Visions of World Order: Woodrow Wilson and The Hague in 1917

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Abstract

Throughout the First World War, neutrals and belligerents publicly defined what they believed their nation's role in the conflict to be and what they hoped the post-war world would look like. The public discussion in the United States about the structure of post-war international relations drew on a discourse about the nation's role in world affairs that the Hague Peace Conferences of 1899 and 1907 had significantly shaped. The conferences dealt with a range of issues, such as disarmament, the laws of war, and the development of international organisations, and provided the opportunity for these ideas to be debated in a more public manner than ever before. It is clear from American newspaper coverage during the First World War that The Hague continued to be seen by some as the best way to achieve peaceful relations. However, it is also clear that from early 1917, people in the United States were coming to view Wilson as the likely architect of any post-war international organisations. Wilson did not suggest, as others did, that The Hague should be used as the foundation for such an organisation, nor did he advocate the creation of an international court; instead, he argued for something separate, something new. 1917, therefore, marks an important transition whereby ideas of world organisation in the United States came to be dominated by a vision different from The Hague.

Keywords

American newspapers; international courts; international organisation; The Hague Peace Conferences; Woodrow Wilson

In his excellent work on the League to Enforce Peace (LEP), Stephen Wertheim argues that historians have reduced early 20th century internationalism to a 'one-dimensional, polarizing, and, not least, inaccurate' caricature.¹ Historians' focus on the United States' rejection of the League of Nations Covenant has led to the propagation of a simplistic isolationist-internationalist dichotomy, Wertheim argues, and such an approach obscures the nuanced debate among American politicians such as Elihu Root, William Taft, and Theodore Roosevelt that occurred in the United States throughout the First World War. Central to the views of these legalists, as Root, Taft, and Roosevelt can be loosely grouped, was the desire 'to create an international league dedicated to developing international law and enforcing judicial settlement upon member states'.² The focus on

international law and international courts was anathema to President Woodrow Wilson, and his disputes with the legalists over these issues, Wertheim suggests, are key to understanding American politics during the formation of the League of Nations.³

While demonstrating the breadth of internationalist thought among American politicians during the First World War, Wertheim's focus on prominent political figures, such as Taft, Roosevelt, and Wilson, ignores the extensive and sophisticated public engagement in the United States with ideas of the future world order.⁴ Roosevelt's public diatribes, Taft's plans for the League to Enforce Peace, and Wilson's famous speeches and declarations did not create the public discussion in the United States about the structure of the post-war world; rather, they joined an existing conversation, the contours

1 Stephen Wertheim, 'The League That Wasn't: American Designs for a Legalist-Sanctionist League of Nations and the Intellectual Origins of International Organization, 1914–1920', *Diplomatic History* 35, no. 5 (November 2011): 798.

2 *Ibid.*, 798.

3 *Ibid.*, 798. A similar argument was made 30 years earlier by David Patterson in his article 'The United States and the Origins of the World Court', *Political Science Quarterly* 91, no. 2 (Summer, 1976): 279–295.

4 Wertheim claims that in the United States the public debate on the post-war world 'proved sterile'; *ibid.*, 802.

of which had been significantly shaped by the ideas of the Hague conferences of 1899 and 1907. The American public were far more engaged with international relations than historians have acknowledged, and the First World War saw a continuation of the public discussion about international relations, not its beginning. It is clear from the American newspaper coverage during the First World War that The Hague remained a reference point for those interested in world organisation, and continued to be seen by some as the best way to achieve peaceful relations. However, it is also clear that from early 1917 people in the United States were coming to view Wilson as the likely architect of any post-war international organisation. Wilson did not suggest, as others did, that The Hague should be used as the foundation for such an organisation, nor did he advocate the creation of an international court; instead, he argued for something separate, something new. 1917, therefore, marks an important transition whereby ideas of world organisation in the United States came to be dominated by a vision different from The Hague.

This article traces the transition in 1917 that saw Wilson's ideas take prominence over the ideas of The Hague. The purpose of this article is not to offer a new interpretation of Wilson's ideas or their effect on the international order; there is a vast and ever-expanding historiography that does exactly that.⁵ Instead, this article specifically argues that Wilson's rhetoric had a significant effect on the discussion of The Hague in American newspapers in early 1917. In 1917 a number of peace activists and international lawyers continued to believe in the value of The Hague, but their attempts to promote it to the American public fell victim to Wilson's emergence as a global leader and the influence of his post-war vision. Despite the efforts of peace activists and prominent figures like Taft to promote the expansion of The Hague, in the early months of 1917 the conferences and courts associated with them were subsumed by Wilson's ideas.

The Hague conferences of 1899 and 1907, historian Sandi Cooper argues, created 'an open forum on international issues', and generated an unprecedented and very public global discussion of issues related to war and peace.⁶ The public discussion began with

the Tsar's Rescript of 1898, which was Nicholas II's invocation to the world to meet and discuss the crippling levels of expenditure on armaments. The conference that convened at The Hague in 1899 in response to the Tsar's request discussed a much broader range of issues than the crushing cost of armaments, and included subjects such as the pacific settlement of disputes, the development of international law, the creation of international courts, and the regulation of the rules of war.⁷ The conventions adopted at the 1899 conference would be refined and expanded at a second conference in 1907, at which a significantly larger number of nations were represented. The debates among the delegates at The Hague were mirrored in American newspaper editorials, articles, and letters to the editor and the United States public utilised the language of The Hague to enthusiastically discuss the development of international law and organisations.⁸ The outbreak of war in Europe in 1914 reinvigorated the public discussion in the United States about the utility of international organisations. The Hague was presented in the newspapers as a potential means of stopping the conflict and being the foundation on which to build peaceful international relations.⁹

As the war dragged on, Americans continued to draw on The Hague in their discussion of plans to stop the conflict and prevent something similar occurring again. In a pamphlet published in January 1916, Arthur Deerin Call, secretary of the American Peace Society, argued that The Hague had been a key moment in the development of international organisation. The 1907 conference had, he believed, created 'a draft convention for the establishment of a permanent court of justice—in other words, a supreme court of the world'.¹⁰ He argued that there would likely be a third Hague conference at the end of the war and that the duty of every intelligent American 'would be to lend every ounce of his support to the greater perfection of the congress and court of nations existing there in embryo'.¹¹ Similar ideas appeared in American newspapers throughout the war, often in response to statements from peace activists like Deerin Call or from Taft and Roosevelt. The two ex-presidents loomed large over the public discussion of the post-war international order. Roosevelt had outlined plans for a

5 For example, see Arthur Link, *Woodrow Wilson: Revolution, War, Peace* (Arlington Heights: Wiley Blackwell, 1979); Thomas Knock, *To End All Wars: Woodrow Wilson and the Quest for a New World Order* (New York: Princeton University Press, 1992); John Milton Cooper, Jr., *Woodrow Wilson: A Biography* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2009); Ross Kennedy, *The Will to Believe: Woodrow Wilson, World War I, and America's Strategy for Peace and Security* (Kent: Kent State University Press, 2009).

6 Sandi Cooper, 'Peace and Internationalism: European Ideological Movements Behind the Two Hague Conferences (1889–1907)' (PhD diss., New York University, 1967), 291.

7 For an excellent account of the origins, proceedings, and consequences of the Hague Conferences see Maartje Abbenhuis, *The Hague Conferences and International Politics, 1898–1915* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018).

8 Thomas Munro, 'The Hague's War, 1914–1918: British and American Newspaper References to The Hague During the First World War' (PhD diss., University of Auckland, 2019), 27–51.

9 *Ibid.*, 53–74.

10 Arthur Deerin Call, 'The Patriotic Duty Facing the Americas' (Pamphlet, January 1916), in International Peace Movements, Nippold Collection, Box 102, File 4, United Nations Archives, Geneva.

11 Call, 'The Patriotic Duty'.

great-power league as soon as the war had started and Taft became the lead activist for the League to Enforce Peace (LEP), which grew to be one of the largest pro-league organisations in the world.¹² Although their visions of the post-war world differed in a number of respects they both suggested The Hague had an important role to play in the development of international organisation. Both stressed the importance of an international court but disagreed on the manner in which such a court's decisions should be enforced.¹³ The plans of people like Taft and Roosevelt joined the public discussion about the structure of international relations that had taken place in American newspapers since the start of the war.

The period from December 1916 through to April 1917 saw the nature of the discussion about the structure of international relations change. This period saw Wilson's ideas and proposals come to dominate the public discussion of the post-war international order, and Wilson's vision did not include The Hague. Wilson articulated his plans for the future—vague as they still were at this stage—in a number of speeches and notes to belligerents from late 1916 onwards.¹⁴ International organisation featured in these statements, but notions of legalism were replaced with more nebulous concepts like 'freedom' and 'justice'. In his note requesting all belligerents to offer concrete peace terms in December 1916, Wilson said the objects of the statesmen on all sides of the conflict were virtually the same: they wanted to protect the rights of their people and were prepared to consider the creation of 'a league of nations to insure peace and justice throughout the world'.¹⁵ Wilson stated that the American people would 'cooperate in attaining such goals' when the war ended.¹⁶ In his famous address to a joint session of Congress on 22 January

1917, Wilson stressed the need for 'peace without victory'.¹⁷ He called for an end to military and economic alliances, for the limitation of armaments, for freedom of the seas, and for the right of all peoples to choose the governments under which they would live. And he called for a 'covenant of cooperative peace', an international organisation that alone could foster and ensure 'an organised common peace'.¹⁸ Wilson's language was similar to those advocating the expansion of The Hague machinery, but the absence of an international court was a key difference. Wilson refused to endorse the calls for regular international conferences to codify international law and, David Patterson argues, 'displayed a particular aversion to the internationalists' dream of a world court'.¹⁹ An international court was central to The Hague idea, but in Wilson's view The Hague was 'old world' and a symbol of legalism, two things he opposed.²⁰

The American press reprinted Wilson's speeches and notes to the belligerents in full, and the newspapers extensive discussion of Wilson's ideas largely omitted any reference to The Hague. On 23 January, for example, the *Chicago Daily Tribune*, *St Louis Post-Dispatch*, *Los Angeles Times*, and *New York Evening World* all gave significant front page coverage to Wilson's 'peace without victory' speech in Congress the day before.²¹ The *Washington Post* provided a summary of over 30 other newspapers' varied editorial reactions to Wilson's speech.²² The same day the *New York Evening World's* editorial claimed Wilson had espoused 'nothing less than the greatest plan—though still but partly formulated—that civilisation has yet evolved out of the bitterness and tragedy of experience'.²³ Absent from the newspapers' coverage of Wilson's speech on how to achieve peaceful

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- 12 For Taft and Roosevelt's activism during the war, see Wertheim, 'The League that Wasn't', *passim*; Patterson, 'Origins of the World Court', *passim*.
- 13 Wertheim, 'The League that Wasn't', 804; Mark Mazower, *Governing the World: The History of an Idea* (New York: Penguin, 2012), 120–121.
- 14 There is a vast historiography on Wilson and the development of his political vision. This article engages with the newspaper discussion of Wilson's public statements rather than offering a new interpretation of Wilson's ideas. See note 6 for some of the key texts on Wilson.
- 15 Justus Doenecke, *Nothing Less Than War: A New History of America's Entry Into World War I* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2011), 230.
- 16 *Ibid.*
- 17 Adam Tooze, *The Deluge: The Great War and the Remaking of Global Order* (Milton Keynes: Penguin, 2014), 53.
- 18 Robert Zieger, *America's Great War: World War I and the American Experience* (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), 48.
- 19 Patterson, 'Origins of the World Court', 290.
- 20 For a good discussion of Wilson's views on international law, The Hague, and a world court see Patterson, 'World Court', 291–294; Wertheim, 'The League', 829–830; and Calvin D. Davis, *The United States and the Second Hague Peace Conference: American Diplomacy and International Organization, 1899–1914* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1975) 345–356.
- 21 'Peace Plea Stirs World', *Chicago Daily Tribune*; 'Peace Plan of President', *St Louis Post-Dispatch*; 'Wilson Would Forbid a Peace of Victory', *Los Angeles Times*; 'Wilson's Peace Plan Taken Up by the Senate', *New York Evening World*, 23 January 1917, 1.
- 22 'Editorial Views on Peace Address by the President are of Wide Divergence', *Washington Post*, 23 January 1917, 5.
- 23 'The President on Permanent Peace', *New York Evening World*, 23 January 1917, 16.

international relations was any reference to The Hague. Prior to 1917, The Hague would invariably be referenced whenever ideas of international organisation were discussed. This changed during the early months of 1917 as Wilson came to dominate discussion of the post-war world. The omission of The Hague and international courts from Wilson's plans meant they also began to disappear from the public discussion.

The ideas of Taft, Roosevelt, and other proponents of international organisation were to a large degree subsumed by Wilson as he came to dominate the discussion of the post-war international order. In early February, for example, the *St Louis Post-Dispatch* produced extensive analysis of Wilson's speech to Congress in which he announced that the United States had severed diplomatic ties with Germany in response to the resumption of unrestricted U-boat warfare. An editorial in the newspaper argued that Wilson was correct to assert that the principles underlying American politics were in 'accord with the ideas of peace'.²⁴ The editorial noted that despite Wilson's noble intent, it was difficult to make the ideas of sovereignty and independence fit with structures created to ensure world peace. The newspaper thought 'ultimate government by a judicial tribunal' was the main object of the world court movement, and that Wilson was right to not commit himself to such a goal despite his inclinations towards the plans of the LEP.²⁵ The editorial went on to question how a league of peace could create machinery to ensure peaceful relations given the irregular growth and development of nations worldwide. While it expressed uncertainty that this would ever be possible, the editorial noted that Wilson had in any case revived the belief held by many that future wars could be prevented. This extensive and well-considered piece made no reference to The Hague machinery for the pacific settlement of disputes, and only referenced the conferences as an example of the diplomatic difficulties attendant on international conferences. The editorial approach of the *St Louis Post-Dispatch* was not unique, as other prominent newspapers provided similarly extensive discussion

of what Wilson's ideas might mean for international relations without referencing The Hague.²⁶

Days after Wilson announced that the United States was severing diplomatic ties with Germany another *St Louis Post-Dispatch* editorial demonstrated how Wilson's ideas were coming to dominate the public discussion on international organisation and how such organisations were presented as key to preventing war and spreading justice. The editorial continued to discuss the structure of the post-war world and Wilson's role in shaping it, describing Wilson's proclamations as part of a move 'towards a league of nations to enforce just peace and preserve the fruits of civilization'.²⁷ The end of the war would see a 'union of nations joined to prevent lawless warfare and to enforce justice and liberty'.²⁸ Despite the appeal to justice, there was no reference to an international court or international law.

Despite calls for greater American involvement in international affairs from people like Taft and Roosevelt, Wilson's programme was espoused in the newspapers with much greater vigour. An editorial in the *New York Evening World* argued that Wilson's second inaugural speech, in March, was a call for Americans to recognise that the nation had 'new duties and responsibilities in a disordered world'.²⁹ This editorial is an example of what John Milton Cooper Jr. called 'the shock of recognition', which was the realisation of Americans during the First World War that they were involved in international politics whether they liked it or not.³⁰ The editorial in the *New York Evening World* agreed that the United States would have to play a more expansive role in international affairs and thought Wilson's speech was 'an impressive exposition' of the 'new Americanism' that this entailed.³¹ The editorial demonstrates the remarkable change in the discussion about the United States' role in the world that occurred during the First World War. It also shows the extent to which Wilson had come to be associated with American internationalism long before he made his 14 points speech.³²

Wilson's prominence only increased after the United States' declaration of war, and his speech to

24 'Analysis of the President's Call for World Peace', *St Louis Post-Dispatch*, 4 February 1917, 10. The article starts on the front page and continues across multiple pages.

25 *Ibid.*

26 For example, see 'Congress Thrilled by Historic Speech', *New York Times*, 4 February 1917, 1; 'Chicago Hopes for Peace, But Backs Wilson', *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 4 February 1917, 2.

27 'A League of Neutrals', *St Louis Post-Dispatch*, 5 February 1917, 12.

28 *Ibid.*

29 'The New Americanism', *New York Evening World*, 6 March 1917, 14.

30 John Milton Cooper, Jr., 'The Shock of Recognition: The Impact of World War I on America', *The Virginia Quarterly Review* 76, no. 4 (Autumn 2000): 567–584.

31 'The New Americanism', *New York Evening World*, 6 March 1917, 14.

32 Erez Manela argues that 'by mid-1917, Wilson had clearly emerged on the world stage as the champion of the new diplomacy of liberal internationalism'; Erez Manela, *The Wilsonian Moment: Self-Determination and the International Origins of Anticolonial Nationalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 37.

Congress in early April 1917 generated a considerable public response in the United States. Newspapers reproduced Wilson's speech in full and provided articles and editorials analysing its contents.³³ The speech was important not just because of American entry into the war, but because it offered a clearer vision of why the war was being fought and what form of international society would emerge at its conclusion. Wilson emphasised democracy and justice as the guiding principles for American participation in the war. Although The Hague had often been invoked as a symbol of civilisation during the war, it was not strongly associated with democracy.³⁴ Protecting or enabling the spread of democracy and self-determination had not been a feature of the discussions at The Hague in 1899 or 1907. The deliberations at The Hague had been focussed on regulating relationships between nations, rather than fundamentally changing their political structure. The Women's Congress at The Hague in 1915 had produced a vision of The Hague that presented its courts and conferences as potential vehicles for democracy, but newspaper reporting suggests that The Hague continued to be associated with international courts and the regulation of warfare.³⁵ International courts did not feature in Wilson's vision, in which democracy could be served by the concert of nations he proposed rather than by The Hague. As Wilson rose to prominence in

the discussion of post-war international relations, the number of references to The Hague in American newspapers diminished.

The opportunity for American opinion to be mobilised behind a plan to develop international law through an international court was missed in 1917, as Wilson chose not to encourage the development of The Hague system. The Permanent Court of International Justice, or World Court as it was often known, was established by the League of Nations in 1920 but the United States never accepted the court's jurisdiction. A number of Americans continued to promote the World Court and agitate for American involvement, but they struggled to generate the same level of public engagement with the issue that had occurred during the war. The key moment had passed. In 1917 the structure of international relations had been at the forefront of American news reporting. How international affairs should be structured and what role the United States should play was discussed with a high degree of sophistication on newspaper front pages, editorials, and letters to the editor. The discussion drew on the ideas of The Hague conferences and can be seen as the continuation of the international forum created by the Tsar's Rescript in 1898. Woodrow Wilson subtly but significantly changed the nature of the public discussion and, by doing so, changed the course of early 20th century liberal internationalism.

Thomas Munro completed his doctorate in history at the University of Auckland in 2019. His thesis, *The Hague's War, 1914–1918: British and American Newspaper References to The Hague During the First World War*, examined how the multitude of ideas that developed out of the Hague Peace Conferences of 1899 and 1907, relating to war, peace, international law and organisation, remained relevant through the course of the First World War and in its aftermath. His main research interests are the First World War and international relations during the 19th and 20th centuries. tmun010@aucklanduni.ac.nz

33 For example, see 'Full Text of the Address by the President to Congress', *Los Angeles Times*, 3 April 1917, 1; 'For Freedom and Civilization', *New York Times*, 3 April 1917, 12.

34 Munro, 'The Hague's War', 153–177.

35 For more on the Women's Congress at The Hague in 1915, see Thomas Munro, 'The Courageous Conference: British and American Newspaper Coverage of the 1915 Women's Peace Congress at The Hague', *Australian Journal of Politics and History* 64, no. 3 (September, 2018): 422–435.

