

ON THE TERMS OF PEACE

1918

Henry Cabot Lodge

Following Germany's defeat in World War I in 1918, representatives of the United States, Britain, France, Italy, and Japan met in Paris to negotiate a peace treaty. The resulting agreement, the Versailles Treaty, included a proposal, championed by President Wilson, for a League of Nations. Republican Senator Henry Cabot Lodge (1850–1924) led the fight against senatorial approval of the Versailles Treaty and the proposed League. Following is an excerpt of a speech Lodge delivered before the United States Senate.

READING FOCUS:

Why does Lodge oppose Wilson's plan of a League of Nations? Be specific in your answer.

We have now at this moment a league of nations. They have been engaged in compelling Germany to make peace and in restoring peace to the world. It has taken four years of the bloodiest war ever known to get that peace. By this existing and most efficient league the peace once signed must be carried out and made effective. Therefore, it is well to reflect that entering upon a new and larger league of nations involves somewhat heavy responsibilities and dangers which must be carefully examined and deliberately considered before they are incurred. The attempt to form now a league of nations—and I mean an effective league, with power to enforce its decrees—no other is worth discussing—can tend at this moment only to embarrass the peace which we ought to make at once with Germany. The American people desire as prompt action on peace with Germany as is consistent with safety. The attempt to attach the provisions for an effective league of nations to the treaty of peace now making with Germany would be to launch the nations who have been fighting Germany on a sea of boundless discussion, the very thing Germany most desires. It would cause wide differences of opinion and bring long delays. If the attempt was successful and a league of nations, with the powers about which I have ventured to inquire vested in it, were to come here before the Senate, it might endanger the peace treaty and force amendments. It certainly would lead to very long delays. Is not the first duty of all the countries united against Germany to make a peace with Germany? Is that not the way to bring peace to the world now? Ought we not to avoid, so far as possible, all delays? Ought we not, speaking only for ourselves, to have a treaty here before the Senate which will not involve interminable discussions about the provisions of a league? Is it not our first duty and our highest duty to bring peace to the world at this moment and not encumber it by trying to provide against wars which never may be fought and against difficulties which lie far ahead in a dim and unknown future? I have merely glanced at these outlying questions, my purpose being simply to show that they ought none of them to be pressed at this time; that the making of peace with Germany and the settlement of the questions inseparably connected with it is enough and more than enough for the present without embarrassing it with questions which involve the settlement of the unknown, without the attempt to deal with all possible questions that ever may arise between nations. To enter on these disputed fields which are not necessary to the making of the peace with Germany seems to me perilous and more likely at this moment to lead to trouble and to a failure of the German peace and its associated questions than to anything else.

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The Senate and the League of Nations by Henry Cabot Lodge (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1925), pp. 96–98.

Analysis Questions:

1. Why does Lodge oppose the creation of a League of Nations at Versailles?
2. How would the creation of a League of Nations prevent peace with Germany?