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Woodrow Wilson

The League of Nations



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It gives me pleasure to add to this formal reading of the result of our labors that the character of the discussion which occurred at the sittings of the commission was not only of the most constructive but of the most encouraging sort. It was obvious throughout our discussions that, although there were subjects upon which there were individual differences of judgment with regard to the method by which our objects should be obtained, there was practically at no point any serious differences of opinion or motive as to the objects which we were seeking.

Indeed, while these debates were not made the opportunity for the expression of enthusiasm and sentiments, I think the other members of the commission will agree with me that there was an undertone of high respect and of enthusiasm for the thing we were trying to do which was heartening throughout everything.

Because we felt that in a way this conference did entrust into us the expression of one of its highest and most important purposes, to see to it that the concord of the world in the future with regard to the objects of justice should not be subject to doubt or uncertainty; that the cooperation of the great body of nations should be assured in the maintenance of peace upon terms of honor and of international obligations.

The compulsion of that task was constantly upon us, and at no point was there shown the slightest desire to do anything but suggest the best means to accomplish that great object. There is very great significance, therefore, in the fact that the result was reached unanimously.

Fourteen nations were represented, among them all of those powers which for convenience we have called the Great Powers, and among the rest a representation of the greatest variety of circumstances and interests.



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So that I think we are justified in saying that the significance of the result, therefore, has the deepest of all meanings, the union of wills in a common purpose, a union of wills which cannot be resisted and which, I dare say, no nation will run the risk of attempting to resist.

Now, as to the character of the document. While it has consumed some time to read this document, I think you will see at once that it is very simple, and in nothing so simple as in the structure which it suggests for a league of nations, a body of delegates, an executive council, and a permanent secretariat.

When it came to the question of determining the character of the representation in the Body of Delegates, we were all aware of a feeling which is current throughout the world.

Inasmuch as I am stating it in the presence of the official representatives of the various governments here present, including myself, I may say that there is a universal feeling that the world cannot rest satisfied with merely official guidance. There has reached us through many channels the feeling that if the deliberating body of the League of Nations was merely to be a body of officials representing the various governments, the peoples of the world would not be sure that some of the mistakes which preoccupied officials had admittedly made might not be repeated.

It was impossible to conceive a method or an assembly so large and various as to be really representative of the great body of the peoples of the world, because, as I roughly reckon it, we represent as we sit around this table more than 1.2 billion people.

You cannot have a representative assembly of 1.2 billion people, but if you leave it to each government to have, if it pleases, one or two or three representatives, though only with a single vote, it may vary its representation from time to time, not only, but it may (originate) the choice of its several representatives [wireless here unintelligible].

Therefore we thought that this was a proper and a very prudent concession to the practically universal opinion of plain men everywhere that they wanted the door left open to a variety of representation, instead of being confined to a single official body with which they could or might not find themselves in sympathy.

And you will notice that this body has unlimited rights of discussion. I mean of discussion of anything that falls within the field of international relations--and that it is especially agreed that war or international misunderstandings or anything that may lead to friction or trouble is everybody's business, because it may affect the peace of the world.

And in order to safeguard the popular power so far as we could of this representative body, it is provided, you will notice, that when a subject is submitted it is not to arbitration but to discussion by the Executive Council; it can, upon the initiative of either of the parties to the dispute, be drawn out of the Executive Council on the larger form of the general Body of Delegates, because through this instrument we are depending primarily and chiefly upon one great force, and this is the moral force of the public opinion of the world--the pleasing and clarifying and compelling influences of publicity--so that intrigues can no longer have their coverts; so that designs that are sinister can at anytime be drawn into the open, so that those things that are destroyed by the light may be promptly destroyed by the overwhelming light of the universal expression of the condemnation of the world.



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Armed force is in the background in this program; but it is in the background, and, if the moral force of the world will not suffice, the physical force of the world shall. But that is the last resort, because this is intended as a constitution of peace, not as a league of war.

The simplicity of the document seems to me to be one of its chief virtues, because, speaking for myself, I was unable to see the variety of circumstances with which this League would have to deal. I was unable, therefore, to plan all the machinery that might be necessary to meet the differing and unexpected contingencies. Therefore, I should say of this document that it is not a straitjacket but a vehicle of life.

A living thing is born, and we must see to it what clothes we put on it. It is not a vehicle of power, but a vehicle in which power may be varied at the discretion of those who exercise it and in accordance with the changing circumstances of the time. And yet, while it is elastic, while it is general in its terms, it is definite in the one thing that we were called upon to make definite.

It is a definite guaranty of peace. It is a definite guaranty by word against aggression. It is a definite guaranty against the things which have just come near bringing the whole structure of civilization into ruin.

Its purposes do not for a moment lie vague. Its purposes are declared, and its powers are unmistakable. It is not in contemplation that this should be merely a league to secure the peace of the world. It is a league which can be used for cooperation in any international matter.

That is the significance of the provision introduced concerning labor. There are many ameliorations of labor conditions which can be effected by conference and discussion. I anticipate that there will be a very great usefulness in the Bureau of Labor which it is contemplated shall be set up by the League.

Men and women and children who work have been in the background through long ages and sometimes seemed to be forgotten, while governments have had their watchful and suspicious eyes upon the maneuvers of one another, while the thought of statesmen has been about structural action and the larger transactions of commerce and of finance.

Now, if I may believe the picture which I see, there comes into the foreground the great body of the laboring people of the world, the men and women and children upon whom the great burden of sustaining the world must from day to day fall, whether we wish it to do so or not; people who go to bed tired and wake up without the stimulation of lively hope. These people will be drawn into the field of international consultation and help, and will be among the wards of the combined governments of the world. This is, I take leave to say, a very great step in advance in the mere conception of that.

Then, as you will notice, there is an imperative article concerning the publicity of all international agreements. Henceforth no member of the League can call any agreement valid which it has not registered with the secretary general, in whose office, of course, it will be subject to the examination of any body representing a member of the League. And the duty is laid upon the secretary general to earliest possible time.



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I suppose most persons who have not been conversant with the business of foreign affairs do not realize how many hundreds of these agreements are made in a single year, and how difficult it might be to publish the more unimportant of them immediately. How uninteresting it would be to most of the world to publish them immediately, but even they must be published just as soon as it is possible for the secretary general to publish them.

There has been no greater advance than this, gentlemen. If you look back upon the history of the world you will see how helpless peoples have too often been a prey to powers that had no conscience in the matter. It has been one of the many distressing revelations of recent years that the great power which has just been, happily, defeated put intolerable burdens and injustices upon the helpless people of some of the colonies which it annexed to itself; that its interest was rather their extermination than their development; that the desire was to possess their land for European purposes, and not to enjoy their confidence in order that mankind might be lifted in these places to the next higher level.

Now, the world, expressing its conscience in law, says there is an end of that, that our consciences shall be settled to this thing. States will be picked out which have already shown that they can exercise a conscience in this matter, and under their tutelage the helpless peoples of the world will come into a new light and into a new hope.