

# The Wilsonian Vision for a New Liberal International Order: Symbolic Diplomacy at the Paris Peace Conference\*

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## Abstract

When the Allied Powers gathered in Paris in the first half of 1919, to discuss the peace terms, President Woodrow Wilson was welcomed as “a prophet,” “a saviour,” who came to rescue Europe from the ravages of the war, promising a brave new world where there would be an equitable international order to engender peace for all peoples. The Paris Peace Conference represented the climax of the American war propaganda campaign as the First World War was fought in the media as well as in the trenches. Wilsonian liberalism as it became known, was a paradoxical mix of visionary idealism and political pragmatism. The ‘saviour’ himself began to recognise his mortality and realise the limits of his ideals during the Paris Peace Conference. Yet images of diplomacy constructed largely by the media during the Paris Peace Conference tended to inform contemporary perceptions of the success of peace conference diplomacy at Paris. To this end, ‘public diplomacy’ constituted an integral aspect of peace conference diplomacy. In the end, Wilson himself faced a personal defeat in his own country which had failed to ratify the Treaty of Versailles. Nonetheless, the international order or the League of Nations which was born out of his brand of idealism survived its difficult birth, and ventured to live a short but eventful life.

It is opportune to reconsider the liberal international order of the interwar period, as we face the centenary of the end of the First World War. When the Allied Powers gathered in Paris in the first half of 1919, to discuss the peace terms, President Woodrow Wilson was welcomed as “a prophet,” “a saviour,” who came to rescue Europe from the ravages of the war, promising a brave new world where there would be an equitable international order to engender peace for all peoples. Some of the top brass in the American delegation worried that his personal presence in Paris would break the sacred halo with which he had to come to be regarded by some of the people.

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In this presentation, I’m going to focus on the symbolic diplomacy of Wilson’s at the Paris Peace Conference because it helps us shed an alternative light on Wilson and what “he” and his

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vision for a new world might have represented at Paris Peace Conference.<sup>1</sup>

Let us begin with a quotation from the *New York Times* on December 16, 1918

“It is far worse than when the Czar of Russia visited Paris—you would think every Parisian had determined not to rest happy until he had a close personal view of President Wilson.” The speaker was a veteran gendarme attached to the force guarding the entrances of the Rue de Monceau, where Prince Murat’s house is situated, from the overcurious crowds.... Somehow the news had spread yesterday... that the president had been to church and would return at about noon. The result was an enthusiastic gathering before the police barriers—hundreds of people, quiet and well-behaved, in their Sunday clothes, but resolved not to leave the spot before the President had passed.... Suddenly, the boy on the outskirts of the crowd cried: “Le voila!” as a limousine turned a corner. Hats came off, flags and handkerchiefs were waved, and the air rang with shouts of “Vive Wilson! Vive le President!” Smiling with unaffected pleasure, the members of the Presidential party passed through the hedge of spectators down the street.... Not the least striking feature of the President’s popularity is Parisians have learned how to cheer in order to greet him properly.... There has been another change in the city during the last few weeks. Paris is recovering its old gaiety.... Now with illuminations in Wilson’s honor, confetti have reappeared on the boulevards, until the pavements are covered with the bright-hued jetsam.

The above reporting tells us many things: the symbolic linking of Wilson with the French aristocracy, heroic stature of Wilson amongst Parisians, and added to this was the smugness evident that even the French have had to change their old ways and learn to do things in an American way in order to please the president. Indeed, the media covered Wilson’s activities with a paparazzi-like zealously—such as Wilson was seen at the races, Wilson was seen on his daily round of motoring in the Bois de Boulogne, and so on. The amount of media attention that Wilson attracted was a reflection, at one level, of how the world was changing and how Wilson was seen to symbolise the new configuration of power in international relations that placed the United States at its helm.<sup>2</sup> Most of all, the piece is an excellent example of how effectively the American propaganda machine was working in Paris—in presenting Wilson and the influence of the US in Europe, by appealing to popular penchant for heroic figures. Arguably, the Paris Peace Conference represented the climax of the American war propaganda campaign as the First World War was fought in the media as well as in the trenches.<sup>3</sup>

What I attempt in this brief presentation is to suggest the importance of the symbolic in diplomacy; or more precisely, how images of diplomacy as constructed largely by the media during the Paris Peace Conference tended to inform contemporary perceptions of the success of peace conference diplomacy at Paris.<sup>4</sup> To this end, “public diplomacy” constituted an integral

<sup>1</sup> For the fuller treatment of the topic, refer to my ‘A Cultural History of Diplomacy: Reassessing the Japanese “Performance” at the Paris Peace Conference’, in Urs Matthias Zachmann, ed., *Asia after Versailles: Asian Perspectives on the Paris Peace Conference and the Interwar Order, 1919–33* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), 101–123. I have excerpted a substantial part of this paper from my article above.

<sup>2</sup> Lloyd C. Gardner, *Safe for Democracy: The Anglo-American Response to Revolution, 1913–1923* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 6.

<sup>3</sup> For an interesting account of American war propaganda, cf. James R. Mock and Cedric Larson, *Words that Won the War: The Story of the Committee on Public Information 1917–1919* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1939).

<sup>4</sup> For a fuller treatment of the idea of ‘performance’ in diplomacy, cf. Naoko Shimazu, ‘Diplomacy as Theatre: Staging the Bandung Conference of 1955’, *Modern Asian Studies*, 48:1 (January 2014), 231–4.

aspect of peace conference diplomacy.

A brief analysis of the American delegation will provide us with helpful insights into how the most powerful state in the world saw the workings of symbolic power. Americans were very aware of the symbolic importance of their representation at the peace conference, and this can be seen in many details of the American presence. Paris was being “liberated” by the Americans, as the American Mission to Negotiate Peace, with a vast entourage of well over 1,000 staff, occupied the geographical centre of Paris, taking Hotel Crillon which faced Place de la Concorde as its headquarters. And the above-mentioned mansion of Prince Murat, that is, Wilson’s temporary “home,” became known as the “Paris White House.”<sup>5</sup> The positioning of Americans in the centre of Paris is significant because it reveals much about their self-perception. What is important to emphasise here is that even the physical positioning of the American headquarters can project its sense of national power. Moreover, the fact that Wilson was hosted at the mansion of a French aristocrat was doubly significant if not ironic.

It was reported that the arrival of Wilson as a “saviour” of war-ravaged Europe was symbolic not only for Americans and Europeans but also for the many oppressed peoples of the world.<sup>6</sup> The Italian minister, Francesco Saverio Nitti later wrote of Wilson: “I have seen Wilson come to Europe in 1918 acclaimed as the apostle of the new civilisation and the liberator of the peoples...” An American press photograph of Rue Royale immediately after the passing of Wilson’s cavalcade illustrates the fervour which gripped Paris on his arrival, and acts as a visual testimony to the press write-up. Even the choice of the location in the photograph that includes the sign of Maxim’s with “Vive Wilson” blazoned across the photograph is significant as the restaurant is synonymous with Parisian high life.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, the entire pictorial composition suggests not only the victor’s entry into the city but, even a moral victory of the New World over the Old World. The frequent biblical allegory used to capture popular enthusiasm for Wilson implied that the American president was represented as an embodiment of “sacred” political values of contemporary times. One could even argue that traditional notions of monarchical sanctity were being put into use to “legitimise” the political authority of Wilson. In some sense, it was ironic that the Old World had to rely on the idioms of traditional, monarchical absolutism to privilege the political leader from the New World.

The decision taken by Wilson to attend the peace conference was not without its problems. Wilson was personally very keen to come to Paris as he believed that he alone commanded the moral authority necessary to create the League of Nations. However, there were those like Secretary of State Robert Lansing, who argued strongly against it on the grounds that his personal presence would diminish the near-mythical quality of Wilsonian idealism.<sup>8</sup> As the main part of the peace conference lasted the first six months of 1919, there was also the problem of dual track diplomacy which began to evolve at Paris: the last two months of the peace conference was characterised by the summit diplomacy of the Big Four where the major political decisions were made (more on this later), and in parallel, “peace conference diplomacy” through bureaucrats and diplomats who laboriously panned out the details in the special commissions. Not surprisingly, the lack of diplomatic knowledge by the Big Four led to behind-the-scene criticisms

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<sup>5</sup> ‘Interview with President Wilson’, *The Times* (London), 21 December 1918. 7.

<sup>6</sup> Erez Manela, *The Wilsonian Moment: Self-Determination and the International Origins of Anticolonial Nationalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

<sup>7</sup> Princeton University Library, Woodrow Wilson Coll., box 42, folder 5.

<sup>8</sup> Robert Lansing, *The Peace Negotiations: A Personal Narrative* (London: Constable, 1921), 14; Inga Floto, *Colonel House in Paris: A Study of American Policy at the Paris Peace Conference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 70.

of the bosses by their diplomats.<sup>9</sup> In a political cartoon entitled “Diplomats and the Shadow on the Blind” featured on 21 December 1918 in *The Herald* it underlines bureaucratic jealousies felt by diplomats who must have resented being marginalised by the presence of their top statesmen who would invariably turn the peace conference into a political pageantry and “hog” the limelight. Strikingly, it is Wilson himself who was portrayed as a “problem of peace” by diplomats.

What becomes evident is that the role of the media in the new age of “public diplomacy” was of paramount importance, necessitating state actors to either create their own news agencies and/or to cultivate good working relations with commercial presses. To this end, the United States government was well ahead of the game, having created the Committee on Public Information in April 1917 with George Creel as its head. As the work of CPI has been covered in the existing literature, it will suffice here to emphasise that the successful “packaging” of Wilson underlined the success of the CPI’s propaganda activities.<sup>10</sup> Woodrow Wilson even had his own press secretary at the peace conference in Ray Stannard Baker. Excessive reliance on press campaigns was not altogether without its own problems either. The fact that the American delegation was divided internally resulted from time to time to the dispatching of separate and ill-coordinated messages between the offices of Wilson, Colonel House and Robert Lansing.<sup>11</sup>

Visual images of Wilson in press photographs and newsreels distributed globally came to assume great importance, often becoming the key reference point of the event for the public at large. Indeed, it is not an overstatement to say that “the power of images [worked] as substitutes for reality.”<sup>12</sup> The over-exposure of Wilson resulted in over-expectations—and this meant that his downfall was so much greater when he failed to deliver the “goods”—national self-determination—to the colonised world.

For one, the rising importance of “public diplomacy” at Paris can be accounted for by the change in the political environment of the states represented. One of the most important characteristics of the Paris Peace Conference, which marked it out from previous peace conferences such as the Congress of Vienna, was that it was predominantly a gathering of the top *elected* representatives of the newly emerging liberal democratic world. In Woodrow Wilson’s very own words, Vienna was “a Congress of ‘bosses’” whereas “Versailles...must be a meeting of the servants of the peoples represented by the delegates.”<sup>13</sup> By 1919, apart from Japan, all the other great powers had universal male suffrage, the oldest being France in 1792 (re-enacted in 1848), the US in 1869, Britain and Italy in 1918, and Japan in 1925. Added to the fact that the First World War had mobilised and resulted in such an enormous number of casualties, a sense of crisis pervaded in many Western polities, aggravated by the threat of communism in the Bolshevik Revolution. As the first total war, the First World War was a paradigm-shifting experience at least in so far as political accountability was concerned, as popular expectations placed on political leaders were much greater than at any other time. Greater media scrutiny of their political leaders in 1919 reflected the changing nature of the relationship between the political elite and the ever-expanding electoral body.

<sup>9</sup> Curzon to Derby, 2 April and 7 April 1919, FO 608/124, f 6445, National Archives, London.

<sup>10</sup> George Creel, *Complete Report of the Chairman of the Committee on Public Information*, (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1920); George Creel, *How We Advertised America: The First Telling of the Amazing Story of the Committee on Public Information that Carried the Gospel of Americanism to Every Corner of the Globe* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1920); Manela, *The Wilsonian Moment*, 48–52. 13.

<sup>11</sup> I discuss the American delegation and its internal division in my Japan, *Race and Equality: The Racial Equality Proposal of 1919* (London: Routledge, 1998), especially Ch. 6.

<sup>12</sup> Robert Elwall, *Building with Light: The International History of Architectural Photography* (London: Merrell, 2004), 9.

<sup>13</sup> ‘Interview with President Wilson’, *The Times*, 21 December 1918, 17.

Therefore, all statesmen at Paris were, to varying degrees, “performing” for the benefit of domestic audience back home. In lieu of monarchical pageantry, the public became interested in a new diplomatic pageantry of the grandest kind as it unfolded in Paris, and climaxed symbolically in the Hall of Mirrors of the Palace of Versailles, now filled with politicians and bureaucrats who were the new ‘royalties’ in the age of popular democracy.<sup>14</sup>

**Conclusions:**

What we can see from the explanations of how Wilson and the US delegation attempted to exert the symbolic importance of their representation at Paris, in the way Wilson himself was presented as a media narrative, underlined the significance which American diplomacy attached to their symbolic presence at the Peace Conference. In the end, Wilson became too vested with symbolic power, and his “demise” exposed, partly, an overly ambitious CPI’s bid to stake out US’s newly acquired superpower status.

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<sup>14</sup> Ursula Stark Urrestarazu, “‘Theatrum Europaeum’ or: the Presentation of International Identity Relations at Peace Congresses”, working paper presented at the workshop, ‘Anthropology meets IR: potentials, prospects and pitfalls’, 29–30 November 2012, Peace Research Institute Frankfurt, 25–32.