

Why the League Failed

GEORGE STEWART

MANY liberals of the Western world, Christians, Jews, and other men of good will, looked upon the League with an almost Messianic hope. We in America revered it as a memorial to Woodrow Wilson, spokesman for American ideas. We saw in it a step toward a desperately needed organization of mankind to make and to keep the peace. Some of us refused to doubt its efficacy even when we saw it by-passed in one major crisis after another. We shut our eyes and held our faith in it, in the face of discouragement. The League seemed the cornerstone in the political expression of our faith. It was surrounded with an almost religious aura. We could not forsake it. We could hardly bear to hear it criticized.

Now, friends of the League, friends of peace, must diagnose its demise with the cool-headed judgment of a scientific post-mortem. For the life and death of the League affects all mankind.

We are faced with facts so grim that we dare not deceive ourselves. We must see reality "bare and to the buff." If we are worthy of victory again, it is imperative to see why the League failed, and to take a few resolute steps in world political organization which will hold together the diverse fabric of international life, until, through a mutual trust engendered by working together, we can elaborate and perfect that structure. It would be disastrous to attempt either too little, or too much.

No such assemblage of statesmen had ever before occurred as that at Paris. Most of us believed that the Congress of Vienna, the only comparable gathering, had been a cynical meeting of professional diplomats playing a game of international chess with peoples and states as pawns. We were promised an immense gesture of honest statesmanship. But ironically, Talleyrand, Metternich, and their colleagues, using the yardstick of legitimacy, were able to give mankind a century of comparative peace, a century which contrasts sharply with the explosive events of the last three decades.

Why did the League fail when so many intelligent men and women of good will placed their faith in it?

First, the plan was too American. It was foreign to the thought and experience of most of the world. It came out of our American history, channelled through the brain of Woodrow Wilson. True, men of other nations contributed to its basic ideas, notably some British thinkers. The Covenant is as typically Anglo-Saxon as our Declaration of Independence, our Constitution or the Statute of Westminster.

Second, it was accepted by the allied and associated powers for two reasons, both of which augured ill for the future.

One of these reasons was that Wilson's high idealism and the prestige of America almost compelled the victors to accept it. Wilson, representing America, had almost too much power and esteem. He was hailed as a savior by the populace of European cities. For a few months he stood as no man had ever stood, as the embodiment of the hopes of mankind. Any promise we held out for the saving of the world stood a good chance of acceptance. Public opinion in a stricken Europe was in an apocalyptic mood, looking for an almost divine deliverer. Woodrow Wilson seemed to meet that need for a fleeting half year. No statesman could have successfully opposed Wilson on the League issue. The weak League which came of his efforts led to an equally great disillusionment and gave aid and comfort to the most sinister political circles and to the forces of reaction.

The other reason for acceptance of the League related to the seamy side of the peace conference. Wilson would have none of the Treaty unless the Covenant were included. Clemenceau and Lloyd George took the Covenant in order to secure the rest of the Treaty. The League was never wholeheartedly accepted by France or by the rest of the Continent. Smaller states gladly came in, as it gave them for the first time a place in the sun along side the big powers. Germany, which was expected to hail the Covenant as an antidote to this severe section of the Treaty, naturally doubted its efficacy, as she was expressly excluded from membership at the beginning.

Third, too much was asked and expected of the League. It was too weak to bear the load placed upon it. This was not the fault of the League. The idea of a victory to make the world safe for democracy, and a war to end war, attached to the League itself. All over the earth it was promoted as a means of preventing war. But given Europe as it was, given the League as it was created—the prevention of war was impossible. Its members and the United States at the moment of their greatest power after an overwhelming victory *refused to pledge themselves in advance of the crisis* for collective security. There was a vague hope that when the crisis came, some moral compulsion or enlightened self-interest would suddenly bring them together. Cecil and Wilson supported the Covenant on the postulate that moral forces would prevail in any crisis. They manifested an almost naïve belief that public opinion would be precise and determined on the side of the common weal. They gave scant attention to French demands for an International Police Force and a General Staff. But no clear, aroused, morally informed public

opinion arose anywhere in the last two decades, save at fleeting moments, never in time to prevent Hitler rearming to raid the world.

Political and Moral Foundation Undermined

Fourth, much of the political and moral foundation was cut from under the League. Democracy began to disintegrate beneath the whole democratic structure of the new organization. Democracy as we had known it in Europe was already sadly in disrepair. Forces which were released in the post-war era were furthering this process. Liberal democracy was in disrepute. Fascism was beginning to raise its head; militant, materialistic communism was astride the Muscovite lands and was conducting underground campaigns to further the world or continuing revolution. Germany, Russia, Italy and many of the Balkans had never known democracy. They were new to its ways. In Germany and in other lands, Moderates, unaided by strong and resolute support from the great democracies of the West, were impotent to handle various internal enemies, and their prestige and power rapidly declined.

A democratic League composed largely of undemocratic members could not be expected to keep the world safe for democracy or to prevent war.

Fifth, Article XIX was never resolutely put into force. This article read:

"The Assembly may from time to time advise the reconsideration by Members of the League of treaties which have become inapplicable and the consideration of international conditions whose continuance might endanger the peace of the world."

True, a number of provisions regarding reparations and indemnities, military establishments and other matters were altered, but not in so rapid and forthright a manner as to aid the Moderates in Germany who were running a losing race with the die-hard reactionaries.

Sixth, the principle of self-determination of peoples, as fair as it seems on paper, was highly destructive when unharnessed to the equally valid principle of federation among the smaller states of *Mittel-Europa*, the Danube Basin, and the Balkans. We fought the Civil War to preserve the Union and against states rights carried to the extreme of secession. Self-determination did bring the fulfillment of political aspiration for independence to several peoples for a few brief years, but the result, freed as these new states were from mutual obligations for collective security with neighboring weak states, was an inflamed nationalism. Unsupported by one another in some pledged, prearranged, resolute bond of mutual aid, these states which had lately realized their hope of independence, were overrun one after another. Grave crises were bound to arise under

rampant nationalism which the new world organization was unprepared to handle.

Seventh, the proponents of the League held too low an opinion of European institutions as they existed before 1914. Some of the major constructive elements in the political and legal set up of European states should have been incorporated in the Covenant rather than making it so exclusively an Anglo-American statement in its final form. The Covenant was inserted in the various conventions ancillary to Versailles, the Treaties of St. Germain, Trianon and Neuilly. This was a psychological mistake. Wilson thought it would give moral vindication to the rest of the Treaty, much of which he did not like. Article XIX, providing for revision of treaties, often comforted statesmen in these hurried early months of 1919 in Paris—men who were laboring under pressure from the press of the world to get the job done. They hoped vainly that a good Covenant made with their left hands would wash clean all they were doing with their right hands.

Too small attention was given to differences in culture and education, to the desire, or the lack of desire for democracy, and to the political maturity or immaturity of the different peoples involved. Although the fall of the Dual Monarchy was highly probable in a few years, it had not a few qualities which were commendable. An ethnographic map of that terrain looks like a Persian carpet. It is not easy to govern such a mixture. Nor did the break up of Austria-Hungary solve the problems in that area.

Lack of Clear-cut Political Principles

Eighth, there was a lack of clear-cut political principles resolutely pursued by its most powerful members and by the United States. The Western democratic world, as strong and as energetic as it is, employing the philosophy of the eighteenth century and the economic ideal which sprang up after the Industrial Revolution in the nineteenth, drifted in a moral vacuum or slept in false security, while militant creeds of new secular faiths, fanatically preached and ruthlessly prosecuted, rose to power. The empty house, only half swept and indifferently garnished, was broken into by seven other spirits worse than the first. Economic and social injustice existed not only in lands with measurable political equality, but in even sharper tension elsewhere.

A basic need existed as it does today for an enlargement of economic frontiers and the preservation of the smaller cultural, ethnic and spiritual entities. Lacking the ideals and the stern tenacity to achieve this by negotiation, or even to relieve severe situations by the ordered use of force under decent international auspices, we were forced to watch Hitler enlarge the economic frontiers of Germany and rip

to shreds the smaller cultural, ethnic and spiritual entities involved.

Ninth, there was no military power either to arrest aggressors or to enforce its decrees.

One need not give up one's confession to being a liberal, a democrat, a Christian or a devout Jew, to see that men of ill will must be stopped forcibly from oppressing the weak or robbing and enslaving their neighbors. No one should be allowed to brutalize fellow men and women, even if it be in his own house. It is our concern if a man beats the life out of a child in Java, or a gang of Storm Troopers drive great scientists from Heidelberg, or a mob of Americans hang a Negro in a lynching bee. There are brutes, retrogressives, spiritual throwbacks in every nation and in almost every family. These people must be kept in control by the only restraint they recognize, overwhelming force. Gentleness is a provocation to their aggressive instincts; the willingness to reason, discuss and to compromise they take to be a sign of weakness. The most dynamic political leaders of the last decade have been plain criminals. Whatever shape our new international set-up to make and to keep the peace shall take, it must have adequate military strength to enforce its decisions.

Tenth, the League failed because millions in the Anglo-Saxon world mixed their categories. We surrounded the whole discussion with an emotional atmosphere which did discredit to both our religious and our political acumen. We fell again for the old heresy of identifying socio-political hopes and devices with the Kingdom of God. We equated religion and democracy, and felt with understandable but mistaken ardor that the League was the best expression of both. In a limited sense it was. But we pictured it as more powerful and adequate than it could possibly be under the existing Covenant. A more historically critical view would have told us that it was a feeble instrument. It would have been far better to have pictured the League to the peoples of the world as weak, tentative and experimental, but a device from which might grow a better organization in the future.

Within the powers given them, the servants of the League accomplished a magnificent record. The failure of the League to prevent major crises was due to its own inherent structural weaknesses and to the hesitating and downright deceitful action of its own members. To say that it failed due to events beyond its control is to beg the whole question. Any organization given to the common people of the world as a device to relieve injustice and to keep the peace must be powerful enough to meet and to resolve major crises. We expected the resilience and strength of an oak. We planted a tree of lesser valor.

Eleventh, the League never met its highest possibilities because England and France were either un-

willing or unable to give unified backing at critical junctures. Manchuria, Ethiopia and Spain are three examples. Dr. T. V. Soong, Minister for Foreign Affairs for China, in an address at Carnegie Hall on October 10, 1942, remarked in part:

"But we know that the League failed for a very concrete reason—because the two great powers which controlled it and could prevent action by it did not believe it was necessary for their own security."

"That is not the situation today.

"Today those powers which did not feel the League useful to safeguard their own security, and you who felt it even less necessary for your own security, have to recognize that international order and collective security have become essential for the survival of strong states as well as the preservation of weaker ones. Today an aggressor left alone in his preparations can get a death jump on a strong state as well as a weak one.

"A second difference from the League—is that this time we can form our international society while we are still fighting the war.

"Undoubtedly much of the trouble with the League was that it was formed *after* and not *during* the first World War when Allied Nations no longer had to find answers to the thousand and one reasons why men do not want to cooperate"

Twelfth, the League failed because the Covenant did not provide for instantaneous and automatic application of full sanctions toward aggressors.

The first two paragraphs of Article XVI read:

"Should any Member of the League resort to war in disregard of its covenants under Articles 12, 13 or 15, it shall *ipso facto* be deemed to have committed an act of war against all other Members of the League, which hereby undertake immediately to subject it to the severance of all trade or financial relations, the prohibition of all intercourse between their nationals and the nationals of the covenant-breaking State, and the prevention of all financial, commercial or personal intercourse between the nationals of the covenant-breaking State and the nationals of any other State, whether a Member of the League or not.

"It shall be the duty of the Council in such case to recommend to the several Governments concerned what effective military, naval or air force the Members of the League shall severally contribute to the armed forces to be used to protect the covenants of the League."

The first part of this is explicit, but the Council's duty only to recommend to the Governments effective military, naval and air contributions to protect the members of the League was the fatal weakness. Also oil was not included in exports which were to be shut off. Military action was left to the discretion, good will or ill will of the individual members. Thus the latter part of Article XVI effectively wiped out the earlier definite language. The only sanctions which will work are those which all members are bound to obey *automatically and instantaneously*.

ously, and which include the provision that if any country fails to come into the enterprise of mutual aid at once that such a betrayal will be equal to aggression.

Chief Reason for Failing

Thirteenth, the chief reason the League failed was because the United States refused to participate as a member. It is hard for Americans to realize the shock which our refusal to join gave to such peoples as the Czechs who hailed Woodrow Wilson almost as a superhuman personality, to the British, to all the Continent and nations in every part of the world. At its birth, the League was fatally handicapped through American repudiation, repudiation by the people out of whose life and thought it grew, the most powerful single unit in the world and in spite of all blemishes, the most liberal. Millions overseas could not understand our sharp reversal of opinion from the enthusiasm for world service of 1917 and 1918 to the reaction of 1919 and 1920, and they cannot understand it now. The truth is there was no great reversal of public opinion while the League issue was being debated during the peace negotiations and for months thereafter. Harding decided to interpret the vote of 1920 as anti-League. As a matter of fact a majority of the Senate voted for the League, but a two-thirds vote was required. By that time the campaign of Hiram Johnson, Henry Cabot Lodge and William E. Borah against Wilson and all his works had won away enough votes to make a two-thirds majority impossible.

The *single greatest fear* of non-American statesmen regarding a structure for world peace after this war is that *history will repeat itself*.

America's refusal to come in effectively stopped any genuine application of sanctions, thereby losing to the League its major means of controlling aggressors. Sanctions were bound to fail. If they were applied rigidly and the United States were not included, we would have insisted on trading with the offending nation. There was always the danger of sinking our ships and bringing us into the war. No nation, especially England and France, wanted to take this risk. Our refusal to join, thus fundamentally weakened the League at one of the few points where it could exercise effective pressure on predatory nations.

Our rejection gave the League a bad start, created cynicism and doubt, and held us aloof from the greatest experiment, so far, in attempting an organization to make and to preserve peace. *We impoverished ourselves politically and spiritually for selfish reasons, and we impoverished and endangered others by refusing to take our share of whatever praise or blame, whatever disgrace or glory, might attach to the League.*

In the face of world needs for two decades we have been spiritually and politically stopped. When our representatives from all walks of life have raised their voices, and they have done so magnificently at times, our critics abroad have spoken of fulsome American preaching, or have thought with sorrow on what might have been. We had the small foreign policy of a state the size of Costa Rica instead of one suitable to the largest nation in the world.

But no person emotionally and politically mature need be cynical about the League. It accomplished much. The seed of a supra-national order has been sown and it will never die. As Irving Fisher has pointed out, the League period in international life is comparable to what John Fiske called the "critical period" in American history, when our thirteen colonies were loosely federated under our Articles of Confederation. It was a painful period of poorly co-ordinated effort and state rivalries. It was launched with a promise it could not fulfill. Fortunately for us during these years no major divisive controversy became a burning issue, as slavery later became. And, most fortunately, we were blessed at the moment by statesmen who saw the value of New Hampshire, Vermont and other small and poor states as well as the worth and power of Massachusetts, New York, Virginia and Pennsylvania. We were blessed with statesmanship which could make the grand compromise, which is politics at their best, and achieve results which benefited all and harmed none. There will come a day when all nations will give up some sovereignty that they may have peace and enjoyment of moderate benefits. No one gave up much sovereignty under the Covenant.

We shall have various choices when the arms of the United Nations are crowned with victory. We can (1) do what we did after the last war, sulk in our tent, drift into isolation; (2) enter a military alliance similar to the Axis. Both of these choices would lead to war. (3) We could accept Clarence Streit's *Union Now*, an immediate federation of all democratic powers, which is unlikely. Nations are not yet at the point where they will so dilute their sovereignty. (4) We could revive the League. (5) We can erect an Executive Council of the United Nations which can take the most effective parts of the League and employ them.

We should not attempt too little nor too much. An Executive Council of the United Nations should do a few things well and with iron resolution. Weakness, vacillation or divided counsels will lead us to another war. Whereas the staffs of the chief military powers engaged on our side, Russia, China, the British Commonwealth and the United States, must be primarily charged with fighting the war, the Executive Council should be primarily charged with stating the aims of both the war and the peace, in framing and announcing *before the guns cease firing*,

both the immediate and the long-term measures which will be taken to make and to keep the peace. A few resolute steps, with no fanfare, steps we are ready to pledge ourselves to, now, will test out whether association together can lead us to a more elaborate and enduring structure which may include all mankind.

Not a moment should be lost giving effect to pre-announced plans when the war ends, plans to *occupy, to help feed, if necessary, to administer, to protect, and to re-educate* the Axis. No armistice and no peace conference is needed. Either would imperil the quick working of the material and spiritual forces of recovery. The Axis nations will be physically and spiritually bankrupt. Their peoples will respond to any clear-cut measures, definitely dated in extent of operation. They will respond to plans carried through with iron resolution. There must be no hesitation, no waste of time. Each Axis nation should be handled by only one Allied power as trus-

tee for all the rest. Unless prearranged, clear-cut action is taken the moment the war ceases, the great moment will be lost, and we shall be compelled to fight another war.

In major tests the League failed. This was no fault of the tool which was made to bear only certain strains. The faults of the Covenant were few; given wholehearted cooperation by the United States, it probably would have worked well. The great dereliction was in the behavior of individuals and of nations. Some day enlightened minds—after this war or the next, or the next—will build an instrument which will command respect and loyalty and be powerful enough to save mankind from the international immorality in which we flounder today. If we do not, through an Executive Council of the United Nations or by some other method, form an even more adequate device than the League, and if by chance we refrain from joining again, a third World War is inevitable.