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Versailles after Sixty Years

The historiography of the Paris Peace Conference has always been highly political. One of the first works to appear on the subject was a little book that Ray Stannard Baker published in 1919, *What Wilson Did at Paris*. Baker, who had headed the Press Bureau of the American delegation at the peace conference, said the book had been ‘written chiefly to help along the League of Nations’.¹ President Wilson himself encouraged Baker to write a more wide-ranging history of the conference; the ‘little book’, the President said, should be its ‘nucleus’.²

The result, Baker’s *Woodrow Wilson and World Settlement*, appeared in 1922. Given Baker’s ties with Wilson, it is not surprising that his book was a strong and even strident defence of Wilsonianism — or in Baker’s words of ‘the principle of international cooperation for which he [Wilson] stood, and in which I believe to the bottom of my boots’.³ His goal, as he wrote to the editor of the *New Republic* (with the aim of influencing that magazine’s review of the book) was to ‘build up that new public opinion which we need’ in order to get ‘a juster view of our international relations and responsibilities’.⁴

The book’s thesis conformed to these purposes. To Baker, the conference was essentially a struggle between proponents of a peace of reconciliation, led by Wilson, and reactionary partisans of a ‘Carthaginian’ peace, led by the French Prime Minister Clemenceau. Many other historians and publicists, not just in America but in Europe as well, were to take the same general line; and often the political overtones of the argument are obvious. Paul

Birdsall, for example, in *Versailles Twenty Years After*, also viewed the conference as a contest between 'Wilsonian Principles and Nationalist Ambitions'. That political considerations played an important role in shaping Birdsall's work is apparent from the very first page of the book: Birdsall, like Baker and other historians who admired Wilson and shared his ideals, was trying to defend the 'internationalist' point of view against its 'isolationist' critics — an issue that had an obvious contemporary 'relevance' when the book came out in 1941.

Has this basic approach been fundamentally altered in recent years? Clearly, the historiography of the peace conference has shifted its focus: the most important works now try to place the diplomacy of the peace conference in a broader context by stressing the role of both Bolshevism and domestic politics. But the degree to which the older views have remained intact is striking. Thus in Arno Mayer's massive *Politics and Diplomacy of Peacemaking* — which, historiographically, is probably the most important book on the peace conference ever to appear — the political values of the author are apparent throughout: the right is condemned as selfish, vindictive, intransigent; the French in particular were 'predatory and punitive'; Wilsonianism was 'healthy' in comparison.⁵ The political implications of the argument are hard to miss; but this is only to be expected from someone who calls himself 'a confirmed leftist critic of those Allied and American policies, both foreign and domestic, that condoned or advanced, intentionally or unintentionally, the counterrevolutionary side in the era of the communist revolution'.⁶

Or to take a related work, consider N. Gordon Levin's interpretative study *Woodrow Wilson and World Politics*.⁷ Again, there is the assumption of an imperialist right, hostile to the Wilsonian programme of reintegrating Germany into a stable international order; the French especially are characterized as standing for 'an extremely punitive peace'.⁸ Levin's analysis, moreover, had clear political implications: Wilsonianism was interesting not just in itself but also because it would ultimately succeed in defining America's foreign policy as a whole after the Second World War — the 'cold war consensus' was to mark the 'complete triumph' of Wilsonian values.⁹ Was it inevitable that Wilsonianism took the form it did? Could the ideology which produced contemporary American policy have been basically different? Given his assumptions, it was natural that Levin, writing during the period of the

Vietnam War, should be concerned with such issues. That they were at the back of his mind is suggested by some of the questions he dwells on in his book: the problem, for example, of Wilson's failure to form a coalition with the radical left and press for more far-reaching change is analyzed at some length.¹⁰

One may, however, concede that scholarly writing on the subject has long had a distinct political dimension, and that this field of historiography may indeed have served as a vehicle for the transmission of political values. But this does not in itself mean that the traditional interpretation is invalid. There is only one way to test its validity, and that is by examining it systematically in terms of the evidence, first at a general and then at a concrete level. This is what I propose to do here. Was it the case that the Americans, and the British to a certain extent, really stood for a moderate peace, a peace of reconciliation with Germany? Did the French government, on the other hand, vindictively pursue a 'Carthaginian' policy? Are the negotiations on the major issues related to the peace treaty with Germany — reparation, war crimes, German disarmament, the League of Nations, territorial questions — to be seen in essence as a conflict between 'Wilsonian principles and nationalist ambitions'?

We can begin with the conventional analysis of American policy in 1919. Wilson is generally seen, even by his critics, as the champion of a liberal, moderate, and relatively generous policy toward Germany; the United States stood for a peace of reconciliation, one which would 'reintegrate' Germany into the community of peace-loving democracies. Thus Levin's book, in many ways the most perceptive analysis of Wilsonianism, insists on the essential unity and coherence of Wilson's policy: Wilson was striving for a 'peaceful liberal capitalist world order under international law, safe both from traditional imperialism and revolutionary socialism, within whose stable liberal confines a missionary America could find moral and economic pre-eminence'.¹¹ The implication is that these goals were what distinguished Wilsonianism from the other policies pursued at the peace conference. Yet who among the diplomats at Paris did not want a stable system, who did not want to preserve the bourgeois socio-political order? If, as Levin says, the 'main thrust' of Wilson's policy at the peace conference was the reintegration of a liberal Germany into a stable international

capitalist system, then it must be noted that there was nothing uniquely generous about this goal either. It did not mean, according to Levin, that Germany was to be treated as an equal: the President, he says, wanted not 'real solidarity' but rather a dictated peace and a 'docile' Germany subject to 'Allied-American dominance'.¹² The French, for their part, would have been very pleased if Germany had resigned herself and accepted 'Allied-American dominance'; in that case, they would have been very happy to welcome Germany into the international system and resume normal relations with her. It is misleading, therefore, to portray the conference as a struggle between 'reintegrationists' and 'anti-reintegrationists' — but such an approach is typical of the over-schematized way in which the diplomacy of 1919 is often discussed. The problem is that ultimate goals were not in fact polarized in this way: everyone at Paris wanted the reintegration of a docile Germany. The real issue lies in analyzing the *terms* for such a reintegration.

What in particular is to be made of the assumption that Wilson wanted a peace of reconciliation with Germany, and that as a consequence his policy was relatively mild? Wilson had, of course, spoken of a 'peace without victory' in January 1917. But this was prior to America's entry into the war, and Wilson's wartime speeches make it abundantly clear that after April 1917 he had ruled out the idea of a peace among equals, a compromise peace, a negotiated peace with Germany. For in his mind, if the United States had eventually been forced to become a belligerent, it was only because the moral issues had been clear-cut. The Germans were the aggressors, their leaders and their whole political system were the embodiment of evil.¹³ One could not compromise with evil; a negotiated peace, a peace based on the accommodation of interests, was utterly out of the question. Indeed these wartime speeches bristle with contempt for the very notion of a compromise settlement.¹⁴

It seems rather that justice and not reconciliation was the keynote of Wilson's policy from April 1917 on. Given that, it is by no means odd that Wilson failed at the peace conference to insist on real negotiations with Germany, and agreed that the peace terms should be elaborated and imposed by the Allies themselves. More generally, the whole spirit of the Versailles settlement was to treat Germany as a moral inferior: she was supposed to turn over her 'war criminals' for trial, reimburse the victors for the material

devastation that had resulted from her 'aggression', and — most crucial of all — accept limits on her military power unmatched by anything her former enemies agreed to. Was any of this inconsistent with Wilson's basic approach to peacemaking?

Reading the documents, one is struck by the punitive undercurrent to Wilson's policy. At the end of the peace conference, for example, when the British Prime Minister Lloyd George tried to modify the treaty, Wilson told him that 'he was not willing to change anything in the Treaty because it was severe; that he wanted this to be a historic lesson, so that people might know that they could not do anything of the sort the Germans attempted without suffering the severest kind of punishment'.¹⁵ He made the same point in a reply to an appeal made on 14 May by the South African statesman Smuts for radical alterations in the peace terms. 'The Treaty,' he wrote, 'is undoubtedly very severe indeed. I have of course had an opportunity to go over each part of it, as it was adopted, and I must say that though in many respects harsh, I do not think that it is on the whole unjust in the circumstances, much as I should have liked to have certain features altered. . . I feel the terrible responsibility of the whole business, but inevitably my thought goes back to the very great offense against civilization which the German State committed and the necessity for making it evident once and for all that such things can lead only to the most severe punishment.'¹⁶

He used the same kind of argument repeatedly in his campaign to win public support for the peace settlement. The treaty, he declared on 4 September 1919, 'seeks to punish one of the greatest wrongs ever done in history, the wrong which Germany sought to do to the world and to civilization, and there ought to be no weak purpose with regard to the punishment. She attempted an intolerable thing, and she must be made to pay for the attempt.'¹⁷ And again in his Omaha speech of 18 September 1919: 'I hear that this treaty is very hard on Germany. When an individual has committed a criminal act, the punishment is hard, but the punishment is not unjust. The nation permitted itself, through unscrupulous governors, to commit a criminal act against mankind, and it is to undergo the punishment.'¹⁸

Clearly Wilsonianism had a punitive component, but its significance has generally been played down, even by those scholars who have been most critical of Wilson's policy. The 'realist' critique of Wilsonianism stresses objective consequence, not subjec-

tive intent. A commitment to high moral principles meant that the war would be transformed into a crusade, that it would be fought to the bitter end, that German power would be crushed, and that the Allies would dictate the terms of peace. Wilson repudiated the principle of the balance of power; he failed to see why a relatively strong Germany was necessary as a counterweight to Russia; and as a result a moderate peace, a negotiated peace with Germany was ruled out.

This line of argument is perhaps most closely associated with the works of George Kennan. But even Kennan does not deal directly with the problem of the punitive aspects of Wilson's policy. He clearly assumes that the Versailles peace was not the kind of peace Wilson really wanted; at the peace conference, he says, Wilson suffered his 'tragic and historic failure'. Versailles had happened because things had 'advanced with a deadly logic and precision': it was 'the sort of peace you got when you allowed war hysteria and impractical idealism to lie down together in your mind, like the lion and the lamb; when you indulged yourself in the colossal conceit of thinking that you could suddenly make international life over into what you believed to be your own image; when you dismissed the past with contempt, rejected the relevance of the past to the future, and refused to occupy yourself with the real problems that a study of the past would suggest'.¹⁹

Thus even 'realists' like Kennan accepted, in essence, the standard characterization of Wilsonianism as leaning toward a mild peace with Germany. If only Wilson had come to grips with the problem of power, things might have worked out well; the problems could be resolved if a concern for power were added on to the basic Wilsonian ideology. This was clearly a line of criticism which left the core of the ideology intact. The problems raised by all the evidence of certain punitive tendencies in Wilsonian policy were never really examined by Kennan or by other scholars in this school. What is striking in retrospect is the degree to which this point of view reflects the traditional popular view of American diplomacy in this period: American statesmen are well-intentioned, but naive, easily out-manoeuvred by their more sophisticated and more experienced European counterparts.

Levin is the one scholar who has actually analyzed the punitive elements in Wilson's policy in some detail. But Levin does not view this punitive streak as an integral part of Wilsonian policy. He perceives a contradiction between Wilson's hope to punish Ger-

many and the main reintegrationist thrust of Wilsonian policy, and insists on seeing the contradiction 'resolved' — and not just papered over — by Wilson's policy of creating a League of Nations.²⁰

This tendency to play down the punitive side of Wilsonianism is matched by a similar bias in the interpretation of British policy in 1919. Arno Mayer, for example, defined Lloyd George as 'an appeaser by temperament and outlook';²¹ and the assumption is fairly common that the British Prime Minister's call, in the famous Fontainebleau memorandum, for a peace settlement to be drawn up 'as if we were impartial arbiters, forgetful of the passions of the war', somehow typified the aims he had long been pursuing. Indeed, even so careful a scholar as Harold Nelson wrote that the 'possibility of reconciliation' was a 'constantly recurring motif' in Lloyd George's statements on peacemaking.²² So if some aspects of British policy at the peace conference were harsh, the argument goes, this really had little to do with Lloyd George's personal inclinations, but rather was essentially a product of domestic political pressures.

Yet both Nelson and Mayer themselves show that Lloyd George, when he discussed the question in the highest councils of the British government, repeatedly took a radically different line on the nature of the peace to be sought. Thus in the Imperial War Cabinet in March 1917 he argued that Germany should be punished after the war because 'the conviction must be planted in the minds of the civilized world. . . that all wars of aggression are impossible enterprises. Men must in future be taught to shun war as every civilized being shuns a murder; not merely because it is wrong in itself but because it leads to inevitable punishment. That is the only sure foundation for any league of peace.'²³ He reiterated the same theme before that body in August 1918: 'Germany had committed a great crime and it was necessary to make it impossible that anyone should be tempted to repeat that offence.'²⁴ As the end of hostilities approached, he suggested on 13 October 1918 'giving the German people a real taste of war' and inflicting 'an even more humiliating defeat on them' than one which could then be imposed.²⁵ And he reiterated the same point in the cabinet on 26 October:

The Prime Minister said that industrial France had been devastated and Germany had escaped. At the first moment when we were in a position to put the lash on Germany's back she said, 'I give up'. The question arose whether we

ought not to continue lashing her as she had lashed France. Mr. Chamberlain said that vengeance was too expensive these days. The Prime Minister said it was not vengeance but justice.²⁶

The whole point of view received public expression just two days before the armistice in Lloyd George's Guildhall speech of 9 November:

We cannot forget the reckless wantonness with which the rulers of Germany, with the full assent of her people, committed this atrocious crime against humanity. They cheered their rulers for the deed, they would have cheered them today had they won. We must keep that in mind when we seek security. . . There must be terms which must discourage ambition and arrogance from repeating this atrocity against humanity. . . Justice. Divine justice, the foundation of civilization, justice must be satisfied. . . The country that recklessly plunged the world into that agony must expect a stern reckoning.²⁷

But how seriously is all this to be taken? Were these calls for a punitive peace essentially emotional in nature, cut off from the main body of official British and American thought on peace-making, and thus in the final analysis irrelevant to the kind of policy each government was to pursue in 1919? I think the answer is no. The reason is that the notion of a punitive peace was deeply rooted in basic liberal assumptions about the problem of war and peace. It was an integral part of a well-articulated and coherent set of ideas. It is for this reason that evidence of punitive sentiment cannot be written off as mere isolated outcroppings of wartime hysteria, but deserves rather to be taken very seriously.

How did a punitive policy fit into the world view of the moderate left? A fundamental liberal assumption was that the international system in its natural state was peaceful; it followed that war could only be the product of perverse human will. This basic assumption, that is, led directly to a moral, as opposed to an essentially political, theory of conflict: war necessarily resulted from 'aggression'. What this implied was that there was some absolute standard, some moral law, by which aggression could be defined. The goal was to remould the international system in such a way that it conformed to this moral law. For it was vital that international relations be governed by the rule of law — that, in Wilson's words, 'the same standards of conduct and of responsibility for wrong done shall be observed among nations and their governments that are observed among the individual citizens of civilized states'.²⁸

This system, however, would be meaningful only if those who violated the law by committing aggression were punished. Justice and punishment were but two sides to a coin; reconciliation was possible only if the guilty nation somehow made up for its crime and thus worked its way back into the community of civilized nations. A period of probation was thus necessary; in the meantime, the criminal nation could not be granted the same political rights as its erstwhile victims.

Thus, from the Wilsonian point of view, force was to be reserved for the purpose of assuring justice and the rule of law; conflicting interests were to be reconciled through a process of conciliation. But because armed conflicts arising from purely political disputes were not seen as an integral and natural part of international politics, a process of negotiation, compromise and accommodation of interest was not seen as playing a fundamental role in the maintenance of the peace. Indeed, there was something repugnant about a process in which arrangements were reached not on the basis of what was right, but rather to some degree at least on the basis of the relative power of the nations involved. The whole phenomenon of power was to be suppressed (although in practice all this meant was that it was to be ignored as much as possible); force, or even the threat of force, was not recognized as a legitimate and normal element in international politics.

If this was a mentality that led to a punitive peace, it also meant that the kind of settlement based on it would in all probability be highly unstable. For it was not likely that the ex-enemy nation would accept as morally valid a punitive settlement based on the victor's notion of 'justice'. The settlement in that case could only be upheld through force, or at least the implicit threat of force. But force was not recognized as a natural part of international life; there would be a great incentive to change the situation so that it conformed better to the picture of a normal, peaceful system, by meeting the grievances of the former enemy. There would, in other words, be a conflict between the ideals of justice and reconciliation, a conflict that could be reconciled only by changing the notion of what was just and altering the status quo accordingly. Until it was fully resolved there would be a certain ambivalence and perhaps confusion about what should be done, and in particular about the role of force in international affairs.

Reading through the documents on the peace conference, one is struck repeatedly by the pervasiveness of this set of conceptual pro-

blems: should the aim be justice or reconciliation? should the enemy be punished or treated generously? should the peace be based on force or on trust? Thus Wilson, for example, argued both ways. Sometimes he called for a peace of justice, based on Germany's responsibility for the war; Germany, he thought, would have to 'redeem' herself before she could be fully reintegrated into the international system.²⁹ He argued that Germany should be put on probation and consigned to an inferior status for a very considerable period of time: 'In general, he felt that until we knew what the German government was going to be, and how the German people were going to behave, the world had a moral right to disarm Germany, and to subject her to a generation of thoughtfulness.'³⁰ And he accepted the idea of a settlement which would keep Germany militarily weaker than France: because of France's 'geographical risk' she was entitled, he said, to 'maintain a force proportionately more considerable than other nations'.³¹ Yet he was unwilling to follow through and back up this kind of settlement with real force, as though the Germans would freely accept such a system. Ultimately the settlement had to be based on trust, not coercion: 'sooner or later', he said, 'the Allies would be compelled to trust Germany to keep her promises'. And he asked rhetorically: 'When peace would be signed, should we still be compelled to maintain a great army of occupation to make sure that Germany would keep her promises?'³² It was on the basis of this kind of reasoning that he also opposed the idea of a long-term Allied control of German disarmament.

Similarly, a certain ambivalence about the role of power is evident in his attitude toward the League of Nations. On the one hand he wanted the League to have 'teeth' and felt that without the territorial guarantee contained in Article 10, the League would be 'hardly more than an influential debating society'.³³ And he ultimately wanted the whole world to disarm down to the point where each country's military establishment was limited to that needed for 'internal police' and for 'the national contribution to the general force of the League of Nations'.³⁴ This, it would seem, would put him closer to the French, with their idea of a League force based on national contingents, than to the British, who consistently sought to avoid a firm territorial guarantee enforced in the final analysis by military means.³⁵ It would seem in fact that on this issue Wilson differed from the French only in that he wanted to keep implicit and 'in the background' what they sought to make

explicit and obvious.³⁶ Nevertheless, his attack on their conception of the League was extremely vigorous: he was against 'substituting international militarism for national militarism'.³⁷

Thus Wilson had not really faced up to the problem of a conflict between the ideals of justice and reconciliation, nor had he adequately worked out the related issue of the role power was to play in the international system. He took refuge in the hope that everyone, even the Germans, would recognize the essential legitimacy of a settlement based on Allied notions of justice, and thus that such a settlement would provide the basis of a lasting peace. Lloyd George also seemed to think it was possible to square the circle in this way: in the Fontainebleau memorandum, his great plea for a moderate peace, he insisted that the settlement 'do justice to the Allies by taking into account Germany's responsibility for the origin of the war and for the way in which it was fought'. The assumption was that Germany would simply accept this verdict: 'Our terms may be severe, they may be stern and even ruthless, but at the same time they can be so just that the country on which they are imposed will feel in its heart it has no right to complain.'³⁸

By the end of the conference, however, it had already begun to become apparent that this was an illusion. The German representatives had protested against the peace terms so stridently that Germany's voluntary compliance could no longer be taken for granted. Wistfully Wilson contrasted Germany's resistance to the treaty terms with Austria's acquiescence: 'If the Germans had had the good sense to speak like the Austrians, the situation would be better. The Austrians said to us, "We are in your hands; but we are not solely responsible".'³⁹ Things were not going the way he had expected; the contradiction within Wilson's policy was beginning to work itself out.

All this is important not just for what it suggests about the dynamics of the peace conference — for example, that the conflict between the two sides of liberal policy might have been as important a force in shaping the treaty as any conflict between the French and the Americans — but also for the light it sheds on subsequent developments. For by early 1920 both the British and the American attitudes had shifted radically; the notion of 'justice' in the sense of a punitive settlement had all but disappeared. This is a phenomenon that cannot be understood without reference to the conceptual problems that underlay British and American policy during the peace conference period: for policies built on inconsis-

tent ideas are inherently unstable.

If the simple textbook interpretation of American and British policy is fundamentally misleading, what is to be made of the traditional view of French policy in 1919? Was Clemenceau working for a 'Carthaginian' peace, a peace that would crush German power once and for all? On the theoretical level, there was a great difference between Clemenceau's approach to peacemaking and that, say, of Wilson. The French premier laid out his basic views in his great speech to the Chamber of 29 December 1918. People spoke of 'justice', he said, but in a world shaped not by heavenly decree but by centuries of struggle, 'justice' was not so readily defined. Every people saw things differently; the accommodation of divergent interests through bargaining was thus an essential and wholly legitimate method of peacemaking.⁴⁰ In his mind, the problem of power was fundamental, since force was necessarily the ultimate arbiter in international conflicts. The harsh realities of international life could not be conjured away by pretty phrases; if the peace was to be stable, the problem of power had to be confronted directly.

Thus on the theoretical level Wilson's and Clemenceau's ideas diverged sharply. But just as Wilsonianism in 1919 did not imply a policy of reconciliation with Germany, so Clemenceau's 'realism' did not necessarily imply a harsh policy. The problem of German power was central, but it was a problem that would be dealt with in more than one way. German power could be broken by a policy that aimed at splitting up the Reich. It could be contained basically by continued Allied unity, but also by disarmament and similar restraints. Or it could be accommodated by a policy of conciliation. What this implies is that fundamental, abstract notions about peacemaking do not in themselves sharply define policy; indeed, vast and striking theoretical differences may evaporate when particular issues are discussed. It is for this reason that it is necessary to examine the negotiations on the main issues of the settlement with Germany: for only by turning from the abstract to the concrete can the dynamics of the peace conference really be grasped.

Turning to the specific issues, therefore, does any clear pattern emerge? Were the abstract notions about the nature of peacemaking directly related to the policies actually pursued? Were the expressions of punitive sentiment essentially irrelevant to the main thrust of policy? In other words, when it comes down to specifics, did the peace conference really amount essentially to a conflict between American moderates and French hardliners, with the British

somewhere in between? Or was the conceptual confusion reflected in specific policies? For if the latter is the case, then the diplomacy of the peace conference would be considerably more complex than the traditional account has indicated; and the recognition of the complexity would in that event be the first step toward a better understanding of the dynamics of international politics in the whole postwar period.

One can begin with the economic issues, which, as everyone agrees, played a very important role in 1919 and in the early 1920s as well. In particular, a distinctive picture of the negotiations on reparation is one of the chief pillars on which the orthodox account of the peace conference rests. 'The French,' Levin says, 'were primarily concerned with extorting the largest possible reparations from Germany,' while it was on these economic issues 'that the Wilsonian reintegrationist approach to Germany was most operative.'⁴¹ It is hardly an exaggeration to say that practically all the major accounts, both old and new, have taken much the same line. Given this virtual unanimity of scholarly opinion, what is striking is how wrong this traditional interpretation is on more or less every important point. First, perhaps the most striking thing is that French and American policy in essence came to coincide at the peace conference: both delegations were willing to accept the same relatively moderate figure for a settlement, while British figures were always much higher. In fact, at one important point, the French were willing to accept a considerably more moderate figure than the Americans would concede. Clemenceau, moreover, was the only one of the Big Three willing to discuss the question of Germany's capacity to pay directly with the German delegation before the final settlement was drafted. But when he suggested it in the Council of Four both Wilson and Lloyd George turned a deaf ear to the idea. In spite of this, Clemenceau went ahead and French representatives held private talks with the Germans in April and May 1919, in which they stressed France's willingness to work out mutually acceptable arrangements on issues like reparation, reconstruction and industrial collaboration. Massigli, one of the French representatives, even used the phrase 'collaboration franco-allemande'. That this was no aberration is suggested by the fact that the policy of economic collaboration was pursued by Clemenceau through 1919 and was continued by succeeding French governments, reaching a climax in the Seydoux Plan negotiations of the winter of 1920-21.⁴² On broader economic issues, one does not

find anything like the kind of generous economic policy that a truly 'reintegrationist' America might have been expected to stand for. American tight-fistedness cannot be written off as an understandable response to Allied 'irrationality' on reparation, since if that were the crucial factor, the Americans would have offered significant assistance in one form or another in exchange for Allied moderation on reparation — a deal which, in my view, both the British and the French would almost certainly have accepted. Yet America's reluctance to commit its resources to European reconstruction in any major way was from the outset so great that any policy of that sort was consistently ruled out. And American economic policy is not to be explained solely by ordinary selfishness; rather, the moral cast of Wilsonianism played a great role in shaping policy on these issues. For why should America take on the economic burden of European reconstruction? America had not caused the war. Germany was responsible. Let Germany make amends for her crime by restoring the territory she had devastated; let her compensate the victims of her aggression. Only in this way could she do penance and so earn for herself a place in the community of civilized states. Thus the fact that the reparation clauses of the peace treaty were introduced by the famous affirmation of German war guilt in Article 231 did not in any way contradict the fundamental thrust of Wilsonian policy.⁴³

In the most basic way, therefore, the question of reparation was linked to the war guilt issue. The general question of responsibility for the war and for the way it was fought — and the problem of the punishment of war criminals — was of course also directly considered by the conference. Although this issue has rarely received the attention it deserves as a measure of Allied attitudes toward Germany — and indeed, as the first important test, in late 1919, of Allied seriousness about the enforcement of the Versailles settlement — it does bear very directly on the problem we are concerned with here. Were the negotiations on this issue essentially a struggle between the 'vengeful French' and the 'conciliatory Americans'? The interesting thing here is that the demand that the Kaiser be tried and that Germany turn over the other alleged war criminals for trial was primarily British in origin, as Lloyd George later admitted. The war crimes issue played a great role in the British general election campaign, held at the end of 1918. Indeed, it is curious to note that Labour was the first of the three major parties to press the issue publicly during the campaign: the Labour leader,

Arthur Henderson, demanded the trials on 15 November, whereas Lloyd George waited until 29 November to make a public commitment.⁴⁴

What, however, was the attitude of Britain's chief allies? Were the 'vindictive' French eager for the trials? Although inclined to be somewhat more moderate — Clemenceau wanted to try only seven or eight of the chief criminals — the French in essence backed Lloyd George on this issue.⁴⁵ As for Wilson, he opposed the idea of trying the Kaiser when it came up in the Council of Four in early April. But he never made the political argument about the need to avoid antagonizing the Germans; instead he relied on the much weaker legalistic argument that Secretary of State Lansing had developed in the commission set up to look into the question: the invasion of Belgium was of course a crime, but because of the absence of juridical precedents, the head of state could not be held personally responsible for it; the principle of personal responsibility, although not retroactive, could, however, be established now, and would apply in the future. But a narrow legal argument of this sort was highly vulnerable to counter-attack. Lloyd George and Clemenceau argued that moral considerations should take precedence over purely legal ones — in a peace based on justice, international crimes could not be allowed to go unpunished — and they appealed to Wilson's commitment to the League of Nations. How could the League succeed if the principle of the sanctity of treaties and the rule of law in international affairs was not affirmed at the outset by the trial of the Kaiser? It is therefore not surprising that Wilson quickly gave in and accepted the provisions governing the war criminals.⁴⁶

The same kind of thing is also evident in the negotiations on German disarmament — ultimately the most important constraint on German power, and thus in a sense the most crucial element in the Versailles system. Once again, the British took the lead. Because of the rapid Allied demobilization, Lloyd George did not even want to wait for the final treaty, but rather sought to impose a swift and permanent disarmament via the continuing armistice negotiations (the armistice had to be renewed periodically). Both the French and the Americans were somewhat less eager for these arrangements.⁴⁷

It was not of course that the French were oblivious to the problem of security; indeed France's relative moderation on some of the important non-territorial issues was more than balanced by the tough position she took on some of the issues relating to Germany's

borders. But even here the traditional interpretation has tended to oversimplify matters. On the issue of the German-Polish border, the struggle was between the French and the Americans, on the one hand, both of whom took a relatively pro-Polish line, and the British on the other.⁴⁸ The traditional view, however, does apply to the question of Germany's western border. Indeed, recent work has come to stress the seriousness and depth of France's interest in a political separation of the Rhineland from the rest of Germany.⁴⁹ And it is certainly correct that French ambitions in this area were opposed by both the British and the Americans.

What then does all this imply about our understanding of the process of peace-making after the First World War? Merely that the traditional view is rather simplistic and overschematized? The past is always more complex than the conceptual structures we use to come to terms with it, and detail and complexity are hardly to be taken as ends in themselves. It is all a question of degree, of how much detailed analysis is needed in order to understand what was going on. The point here is simply that while grand and overly broad interpretations of the peace conference might have made people feel good about their political values, they have also prevented scholars from understanding what actually happened, and from grasping the logic underlying the course of events in 1919 and after. Indeed, unless the policies pursued in 1919 are seen for what they were — complicated, even incoherent to a certain degree — then much of what happened subsequently simply does not make sense.

Thus the dramatic shifts in American and British policy that took place in late 1919 become comprehensible only when seen in the light of what policy had been at the peace conference. For there the basic problems — justice or reconciliation? upholding the peace terms or ruling out force? — had all been evaded. But sooner or later choices would have to be made; the contradictions would work themselves out; and until then American and British policies were almost bound to be unstable.

Similarly in the case of France, the basic characteristics of her policy in the postwar period were foreshadowed by her policy at the peace conference. Given their basic assumptions, the French could pursue a variety of policies: should one try to accommodate, contain or crush German power? The French, in early 1919 and after, experimented from time to time with all three alternatives: accommodation in the economic settlement, which might, it was felt,

spread out to political issues as well; containment by means of the alliance with Britain and America, and to a lesser degree through the disarmament clauses; the 'crushing' of German power through a policy aimed at destroying German unity — a policy which focused on the Rhineland. But none of these options had much appeal; the obstacles and risks associated with each approach outweighed the possible advantages. The result was a policy of drift: the lack of direction so characteristic of French policy in the postwar period has to be understood in this context.

But none of this, I think, has ever been adequately grasped. The conventional interpretation, which from the outset has tended to view the peace negotiations essentially as a struggle between moderation and vindictiveness, between left and right, between good and evil, has been insensitive to nuance and oblivious to detail; the conceptual core of each nation's policy has not been subject to critical examination; the complexity, indeed at times the intellectual incoherence of national policy, has not been brought out in a way that illuminates why events took the course they did. This then is the result of the politicization of this field of historiography: historical writing on the peace conference has been used as a vehicle for the projection of political values, and as a result our understanding of the period has been seriously distorted.

It is important, if the true flavour of the period is to be grasped, that ideas be taken for what they were — that the integrity of conceptual structures be respected as historical reality. It may have served, and perhaps may still serve, a political purpose to project back and make a hero out of Wilson — to assume, for example, that there was no punitive component to his policy, and that all he wanted (at any rate until he was 'bamboozled' by the Europeans) was the moderate peace of reconciliation we think all good liberals should have wanted. It may have served a similar purpose to blacken the French and claim that Clemenceau, and the right in general, singlemindedly worked for a harsh, Carthaginian peace. But if the problems of the period are to be brought into focus — and in particular the problem of how it was that the one major peace dictated solely by the great democracies was also the most unstable peace in European history — the tendency to interpret the peace conference in politically comfortable but overly simplistic and value-laden terms simply will not do. For, as a famous historian once said, human beings make history — human beings, not great abstractions, human beings struggling, often in a

confused way, with the complex and sometimes intractable problems of the real world.

Notes

1. Baker to Manley Hudson, 18 October 1922, Ray Standard Baker Papers, Box 1, Firestone Library, Princeton University.
2. Wilson to Baker, 18 December 1920, Baker Papers, Box 2.
3. Baker to Hudson, 18 October 1922, Baker Papers, Box 1.
4. Baker to Herbert Croly, 25 January 1923, John Foster Dulles Papers, Box 5, Firestone Library, Princeton University.
5. (New York 1967), e.g., pp. 13, 15, 85, 167.
6. *Dynamics of Counterrevolution in Europe* (New York 1971), 1.
7. New York 1968.
8. For example, Levin, 1, 85, 137.
9. Levin, 260.
10. See esp. 162-168.
11. Levin, vii.
12. Ibid., 155, 168.
13. See for example his speech to the Congress of 4 December 1917: 'this intolerable Thing of which the masters of Germany have shown us the ugly face, this menace of combined intrigue and force which we now see so clear as the German power, a Thing without conscience or honor or capacity for covenanted peace, must be crushed and, if it be not utterly brought to an end, at least shut out from the friendly intercourse of the nations' (Woodrow Wilson, *War and Peace* [New York 1927], 129).
14. Speeches of 4 December 1917, 11 February, 4 July and 27 September 1918, ibid., 129, 133, 182-183, 233-234, 255.
15. Bernard M. Baruch, 'American Delegation to Negotiate Peace. Memoranda, Comments and Notes in Diary Form', entry for 2 June 1919, p. 60, Baruch Papers, Firestone Library, Princeton University.
16. Quoted in S.G. Millin, *General Smuts*, II (Boston 1936), 232-233.
17. Woodrow Wilson, *Messages and Papers of Woodrow Wilson* (New York 1924), 728.
18. Ibid., 807.
19. George Kennan, *American Diplomacy* (New York 1951), 61-62.
20. Levin, chapter 5, esp. 157, 168-169.
21. Arno Mayer, *Politics and Diplomacy of Peacemaking: Containment and Counterrevolution at Versailles, 1918-1919* (New York 1967), 69.
22. Nelson, *Land and Power: British and Allied Policy on Germany's Frontiers*,

1916-19 (London and Toronto 1963), 7.

23. *Ibid.*, 16.

24. Great Britain, Cabinet Office, minutes of the Imperial War Cabinet, 15 August 1918, in class 'Cab 23', vol. 7, minutes 459, Public Record Office London. Henceforth Cabinet sources will be cited in the standard short form, in this case Cab 23/7/459. For a slightly different version, see Nelson, 47-48.

25. Cab 24/66/GT967, quoted in Mayer, 69.

26. Cab 23/14/491B (a specially secret series of Cabinet minutes was numbered 'A' or 'B'), 26 October 1918.

27. The text is given in the *Daily Chronicle* (London), 11 November 1918.

28. Speech of 2 April 1917, in Woodrow Wilson, *War and Peace*, 11.

29. 'For Germany will have to redeem her character, not by what happens at the peace table, but by what follows' (speech of 27 September 1918, *ibid.*, 256).

30. Minutes of the Council of Ten, 12 February 1919, in US Dept. of State, *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States: The Paris Peace Conference*, 13 vols. (Washington 1942-47), (henceforth cited as *FRUS, PPC*), III, 1002.

31. Quoted in Francis B. Lowry, 'The Generals, the Armistice, and the Treaty of Versailles, 1919', unpublished dissertation, Duke University, 1963, 254.

32. Minutes of the Council of Ten, 24 January 1919, *FRUS, PPC*, III, 709.

33. See Seth Tillman, *Anglo-American Relations at the Paris Peace Conference of 1919* (Princeton 1961), 112, 126.

34. Minutes of the Council of Ten, 12 February 1919, *FRUS, PPC*, III, 1001.

35. Tillman, Chap. 4, esp. 125, 127, 130.

36. *Ibid.*, 132.

37. Lowry, 254.

38. Ray Stannard Baker, *Woodrow Wilson and World Settlement*, 3 vols. (Garden City, NY 1922), III, 450.

39. Interpreter's notes, Council of Four, 2 June 1919, in *Les Délérations du Conseil des Quatre (24 mars-28 juin 1919): Notes de l'officier interprète Paul Mantoux*, 2 vols. (Paris 1955), II, 273. This source will henceforth be cited as 'Mantoux'.

40. France, *Journal officiel de la République Française, Débats parlementaires, Chambre des Députés*, 29 December 1918, 3733.

41. Levin, 146, 150.

42. See my article 'Reparation at the Paris Peace Conference' (with comments and reply), *Journal of Modern History*, LI (March 1979), 24-85.

43. Sometimes Article 231 is dismissed as in origin an essentially meaningless legalistic contrivance designed to bridge divergent views on the war costs issue. While it is true that the article was drafted for this general purpose, it does not follow from this that it was meant to be meaningless. Indeed, the discussion of this clause in the Council of Four makes it clear that the interpretation of Article 231 as an assertion of Germany's moral responsibility for the war is valid. In particular, it was the American expert Norman Davis's suggestion that provided a solution to the problem of Germany's liability: 'It can be said that Germany was morally responsible for the war and all the consequences thereof, and legally that she is responsible in accordance with the formula adopted for damage to property and the persons' (Minutes of the Council of Four, 5 April 1919, Philip Mason Burnett, *Reparation at the Paris Peace Conference from the Standpoint of the American Delegation*, 2 vols. [New York 1940], I, 826).

44. For proof that the demand was essentially British in origin, see Lord Hankey, *Politics, Trials and Errors* (Chicago 1950), 3 and Lloyd George to Curzon, 7 August 1919, Lloyd George Papers, F/12/1/21, Beaverbrook Foundation, on deposit at the House of Lords Record Office, London. On the other point, see Kevin Kelley, 'British Foreign Policy and the War Criminals Trials, 1918-1921', MA thesis, University of Pennsylvania, 1979, 34-36.

45. Notes of London Conference, 2 December 1918, Clemenceau Papers, 6 N 72, War Ministry Archives, Vincennes; the British minutes are quoted at length in David Lloyd George, *The Truth about the Peace Treaties* (London 1938), I, 137-141.

46. Mantoux, I, 120-124, 184-192, esp. 186; and for Lansing's arguments, see Conférence de la Paix, *Recueil des Actes de la Conférence*, 28 vols. in 8 parts (Paris 1922-34), part III, section B, number 2, 143, 223, and so on. This source is available in the original printed version at a number of libraries and archives, and has recently been published on microfilm by the Hoover Institution Press. Much of this material has also been published in *La Paix de Versailles* (series 'La Documentation internationale'), ed. Albert Geouffre de Lapradelle, 9 vols. (Paris 1930ff.), volume (un-numbered) on 'Responsabilités des auteurs de la guerre et sanctions'.

47. See Lowry, passim, esp. 196-199, 336. It is interesting to note that the British continued well into the 1920s to be more enthusiastic about Germany's disarmament than the French were: see Thomas Boyle, 'France, Great Britain and German Disarmament: 1919-1927', unpublished dissertation, State University of New York at Stony Brook, 1972.

48. Nelson, Chap. 6, esp. 171; Tillman, 356-358; Mantoux, II, 275-283, 351.

49. See Jacques Bariéty, *Les Relations franco-allemandes après la première guerre mondiale* (Paris 1977), 26-63; Walter A. McDougall, *France's Rhineland Diplomacy, 1914-1924: The Last Bid for a Balance of Power in Europe* (Princeton 1978), 15-96; Robert McCrum, 'French Rhineland Policy at the Paris Peace Conference, 1919', *The Historical Journal*, XXI:3 (1978), 623-648, and especially Georges Soutou, 'La France et les Marches de l'Est, 1914-1919', *Revue Historique*, CCLX:2 (1978), 341-388.

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