Hello and welcome history friends patrons all to episode 47 of the VAP. Last time, we engaged in a whopper examination of the first two weeks of March, as we unveiled exactly what the mice were doing while the cats were away. By 14th March though, all of the cats had come home, and it was time to return to the old style of doing things, where the leaders of the US, Britain, Italy and France gathered, alongside Japan. This return to form suggested that more work would be done, that greater progress would be made, that the blessings of those senior figures would be given to decisions which had recently been passed among the allies in the CX while they had been gone. Yet, while the return to form was significant, it was not a wholly positive experience. Nearly two months after the PPC had first opened, it was difficult to deny that so much had changed – the optimism which had once couched the actions of the President, PM and premier, for one, had effectively evaporated. WW had been outmanoeuvred and defeated at home and GC had nearly been killed; arguably only DLG emerged stronger than he had been a month earlier, largely because of his success in quashing strikes and opposition to his leadership at home, but also because his weakened counterparts in Paris provided him with new opportunities by default.

Other things were changing too – even down to the format of the meetings which were held. The absence of the major allied leaders had led to a change in how the other figures met, with the CX taking up the afternoon, but with House, Balfour and Clemenceau normally meeting each morning as well, in House’s private apartment. House commented, as we saw last time, that these morning meetings were by far the more productive, and this lesson seems to have been internalised, with the first C4 meeting held on 20th March, and the precedent being gradually adhered to more and more. A month later, from 21st April, the minutes of the PPC essentially switch to sometimes three times daily meeting of the C4, reduced to the C3 once Italy stormed out. That was where the iconic image of the big three meeting together was confirmed, and while it was certainly significant, and a very interesting phase of the PPC, it only lasted two and a half months or so. Before we get to the last week of April when that change took place, the minutes dictate that we stick with the old way of doing things – the returning President didn’t know what lay in store for him for the next few months, or even that he’d still be there by 28th June. All he did know was that the trip to America had not gone well, and he was determined to let House know all about it. Let’s go to that difficult scene for House then, as I take you all to 13th March 1919…

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‘The weather was as bad as the weather can ever be at Brest’ was how Edward House began his recollection of the difficult day of 13th March 1919 in his diary.[[1]](#footnote-1) He spent that morning arranging who would come with him to see the President, and he worked to exclude those that had made the journey two months before. House was unable to prevent certain individuals, such as the French ambassador to the US and his wife, from ‘entertaining’ the President on the evening of 13th March, and even though he never says so in his diary, one can get the impression that Wilson was somewhat cold towards his old friend at this early phase, and that House, for his part, was probably a bit apprehensive about how the President would receive him. For all his flaws and the ginormous ego which followed him around Paris, House had worked hard since the President had left a month before, and it was difficult to fault these efforts especially considering the very trying circumstances of mid-Feb to mid-March 1919.

It is certainly unusual that House records no worthwhile conversation between himself and the President on 13th March – considering the fact that the two men hadn't seen each other in a month, even because they were friends, one would expect some kind of dialogue. It is especially unusual because House *did* meet with Wilson, and for several hours on his return. Reportedly armed with several maps, after the meeting between the two best friends, Mrs Wilson allegedly asked Woodrow how things had gone. The historian HCF Bell, writing in his 1945 book *Wilson and the People* elaborated on that difficult scene when Wilson’s boat sailed into the harbour at Brest:

Colonel House came aboard, carrying a set of maps, and retired with the President for a long private conference. Mrs. Wilson's much-quoted account of her husband's reaction to the interview may be explained in either of two ways. It is quite possible that time, devotion to her dead and defeated husband, and possibly her dislike of House, had blurred her memory as to just what took place. But it is at least as likely that Wilson, indulging in a fit of temper, was very unjust to his old friend. As Mrs. Wilson remembered it, the President "seemed to have aged ten years" when House took leave of him. When Mrs. Wilson asked what had happened, he declared that the Colonel had "given away everything"; had "compromised on every side," so that he would have to "start all over again."[[2]](#footnote-2)

This is why I believe that House refrained from writing in his diary about his interactions with Wilson on 13th and 14th March, preferring to simply not record the coldness between himself and Wilson. Maybe it was painful for House to admit that despite his efforts, his old friend was unwilling to commend him on a job well done over the previous month, where House had effectively acted as the President of the US in Wilson’s absence. With personal accounts like House’s diary, sometimes silence spoke volumes, and it wasn’t the first time where House was mum about something that he felt sore about. This theory that House could detect something in the air between he and Wilson is confirmed again on 14th march, where Wilson and House sat down together once more. It was now that Wilson uttered his infamous rebuke of his good friend and political confidant, and the fact that House records the unpleasant experience is itself significant – this is perhaps the first time House’s name was associated with failure throughout the previous six volumes of his diary. House wrote:

I had ample opportunity this morning [on the 14th] to go over the entire situation with him and to get from him his story of his visit to the United States. He said, "Your dinner to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee was a failure as far as getting together was concerned". He spoke with considerable bitterness of the manner in which he was treated by some of the Senators. Knox and Lodge remained perfectly silent, refusing to ask any questions or to act in the spirit in which the dinner was given. However, I told the President that the dinner was a success from my viewpoint which was that it checked criticism as to his supposed dictatorship and refusal to consult the Senate about foreign affairs. He admitted this. I told him that it also had a good effect upon the people, even if it had failed to mollify the Senators themselves. The President comes back very militant and determined to put the League of Nations into the Peace Treaty.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Perhaps it was true that Wilson had been mulling over what to say about his American tour, and perhaps he was indeed resentful towards House for putting him in that position, but House had at least been correct that Wilson had to show himself as an accountable president, even when this accountability cost him political credit. According to House and to Wilson, the journey had been at best a moderate success, at worst an embarrassing and costly failure, but the politician within Wilson was activated on his return journey. Unsure though he may have been about his relationship with House, now that the latter had ‘let him down’ to some extent, Wilson was in no doubt that his return to Paris would be difficult – there would be no adoring crowds or country as there had been in December. As the historian HCF Bell wrote:

He knew that he was sailing into a very sea of trouble at Paris. He had always said that thirteen was his lucky number: he might have reflected, during those days at sea, that four seemed now to be his unlucky one. He had been told before he sailed, by people as friendly to the League as Mr. Taft and President Lowell, that he would have to secure at least four amendments to the Covenant if it was to stand any chance of adoption by the Senate. And he had to consider that the representatives of four great governments were going to make demands on him that he could not in conscience satisfy.

Something which really emerges from the histories where Wilson’s trip is concerned is that the dispute with Congress did not merely make him vulnerable domestically, it also bled into Wilson’s relations with the other European leaders. Now that they knew the President was weak, and that a cabal was forming against him, they knew that in turn, he would be under greater pressure to accede to their demands in return for the fulfilment of his goals. The more practical aspects of this were that HCL, when communicating his dissatisfaction with the League, had put forward his known reservations to the scheme, and he also demanded certain amendments be made. For Wilson to gain these amendments to the LON, and thereby ensure that the League was acceptable enough to Congress to become law in the US, he would need to appeal to and negotiate with his European partners, who had gotten the League this far already.

Thus, Wilson was unmistakably reliant upon the British, French, Italians and Japanese above all to help him modify the League covenant, and in order to approve of these modifications, those powers were highly likely to demand concessions of their own. This was a policy of give and take which had characterised the PPC up to this point, but now the big four had true leverage which they could hold over the leader of the League idea. Now, to some extent, this might have been less than a disaster. After all, you’ll surely recall that other European statesmen were supposed to favour a LON as well – it wasn’t meant to be a solely American mission, but an integral part of the new world order which they were meant to be determined to create. The British and French, even the Italians and Japanese, had all expressed favour of the League in the past, and British Empire subject Jan Smuts had effectively created the iteration of the League as it stood by spring 1919. As it happened though, while the League was atop the list of going concerns for many European statesmen, national considerations often took centre stage. As HCF Bell wrote, these concerns were multi-layered, and not easily ignored when used as leverage against the President:

Since the early part of January the French had been asking that the Rhineland should be cut off from Germany, and made into one or more little republics which France would dominate, in fact if not according to any protocol. Disputes concerning the disposition of the Saar Valley were certain to be especially troublesome. Still greater difficulties were to be expected regarding the boundaries of Poland. While an early French suggestion that they should include the whole of East Prussia had now been dropped, Clemenceau and his delegation were insistent that the Poles should have Danzig. American and British experts were backing them, while Lloyd George was opposing them. Wilson's own mind was not made up.[[4]](#footnote-4)

As House had recorded, Wilson was absolutely resolute in his determination to push for the League as included within the final peace deal. To his counterparts and rivals in Europe, this determination and news of his defeat made him vulnerable. Wilson might have believed that he was pursuing the most sincere, forthright policy which he could conceive of, and perhaps he even hoped that the Europeans would not make use of old diplomatic tactics to hamper the realisation of the new world order. Yet, as the historian William Allen White explains, writing in 1924, Wilson assumed too much of his counterparts in Paris if he expected them not to take advantage of his well-publicised weaknesses. White wrote:

…the President made one of the major blunders of his life by going back to Europe for the second time. The pocketful of amendments to the Covenant, which came as the result of Republican conferences, Colonel House easily could have put through. Wilson's presence did not particularly facilitate the passage of the amendments. If he had stayed in America to meet the American opposition to the League, House in Europe would have had to surrender less on the treaty than Wilson surrendered. The European statesmen at the council table were influenced by the opposition to the League of Nations which the President had stirred up on his hurried trip to America in February. A round robin of Republican Senators, just sufficiently large to defeat the Covenant, had been sent to the President and published to the world in which the signers declared they would not accept the Covenant of the League of Nations "in its present form." That round robin always was in the minds of the statesmen of Europe, and it made the President's situation more and more difficult at the conference table.[[5]](#footnote-5)

This negative view is echoed by Joseph Tumulty, Wilson’s private secretary, though Tumulty took the view that those Europeans were to blame, rather than Wilson, for it was the Europeans that insisted on taking advantage of Wilson’s weakness in order to acquire the national concessions they desired. Tumulty is also clear that the likes of GC, LG and others were well aware of what Wilson’s defeat meant for them, and that news of this defeat – particularly the round robin sent by HCL and the demands for amendments therein – granted them ideal opportunities for gain, and forced Wilson to compromise where it pained him to do so. As Tumulty wrote:

The Allies, eagerly accepting the orders of the Republican majority, had lost no time in repudiating the President and the solemn agreements that they had entered into with him. The League of Nations was not discarded and the plan adopted for a preliminary peace with Germany was based upon a frank division of the spoils, the reduction of Germany to a slave state, and the formation of a military alliance by the Allies for the purpose of guaranteeing the gains. Not only this, but an Allied army was to march at once to Russia to put down the Bolshevists and the Treaty itself was to be administered by the Allied high command, enforcing its orders by an army of occupation. The United States, as a rare favour, was to be permitted to pay the cost of the Russian expedition and such other incidental expenses as might arise in connection with the military dictatorship that was to rule Europe.[[6]](#footnote-6)

So was it WW’s fault for failing at home and then returning to Paris, knowing full well that these failures had been publicised and his position was greatly disadvantaged, or was it the fault of his European counterparts, many of whom had worked with Wilson in the previous months, for taking advantage of the President’s new vulnerability and leveraging concessions for their states? It depends on where you stand on both the President’s character and the utility of the League, but there can be no denying that much of the sheen had left the President’s mission. He had evidently found the trip back home very taxing, and he was smart enough to know that his mission in Paris had been made that much harder. He had gained little of anything, save for a clear message of negativity directed against the League concept, and his health had undoubtedly suffered in the meantime. Three weeks after returning to Paris, Wilson would be incapacitated with what seems to have been a miniature stroke.

But then, we are getting ahead of ourselves already. While there were difficult scenes to come, there was also reason for Wilson to feel enthusiastic about meeting with the leaders of Britain, France, Italy and Japan again. Vulnerable though his position was, Wilson was fervently supported by House, who had carved out a nice little niche for himself in Paris through the use of surprising methods which included wielding influence through contacts in foreign press organisations, as House recalled for 14th March:

I had arranged for him to meet in the afternoon in my rooms at the Crillon, Clemenceau and Lloyd George. They remained together from three to five o'clock discussing the Western Boundary question and the amount of reparation Germany should be forced to pay…The Prime Ministers have skirted around the different questions long enough and I am determined that they shall get at them, troublesome as they are, and settle them this week if it is possible. The President is willing, but first Lloyd George and then Clemenceau shies. The reason I wanted them to meet in my rooms was to keep my hand on the situation. If they go to the Quai d'Orsay or the Ministry of War or to the President's house, matters get out of hand. The people I have seen today are almost without number, but I have not the time or the inclination to go into the subjects discussed. My main drive now is for peace with Germany at the earliest possible moment, and I am determined that it shall come soon if it is within my power to force action. I have the Northcliffe Press at my disposal in this effort, and every day editorials and articles appear which have a tendency to frighten, persuade or coerce.[[7]](#footnote-7)

This revealed several interesting points. Observe for instance how eager House was to successfully push his agenda, even to the extent that he collaborated with the wealthy newspaper magnate Lord Northcliffe in Britain. Here indeed was an interesting demonstration of how far House had already invested his energies and talent for scheming, and it also shows that he was not above taking advantage of LG’s own difficulties with Northcliffe, who deeply resented the PM when LG failed to select him as a member of Britain’s five man delegation. We can also note that House was evidently warming to the idea of more personal, face to face meetings over the informal chaos of the CX in the Quai d’Orsay.

This was an effective way of reuniting the big three together after a month’s hiatus, but there is little in the way of detail in how the mood was between the three leaders. It may well have been polite, but also tense – Wilson had been informed of the difficulties which each of the leaders opposite him presented. The French had ramped up their efforts to get some kind of concession regarding the Rhineland, be that occupation or the creation of a separate republic which they could dominate. The Saarland was also a subject of considerable discord. The Japanese were silent for the vast majority of the CX up to this point – sometimes I had to double check the minutes to see if they were actually present at all, since they rarely said anything – but one could be sure that the Japanese would press their claims to the former German possessions, particularly on the Shantung peninsula.

There was also noise about a troublesome racial equality law which the Japanese wanted passed, and which American lawmakers on the Pacific coastal states in particular would have been vehemently opposed. California had only passed a law a few years before guarding against immigration from Asia, and hostility to continued immigration from Japan, combined with suspicion of her intentions in the Pacific, would have exacerbated the situation. The Italians wanted the promises made in the Treaty of London realised, or in other words, they wanted their rights in the Adriatic and parts of the Balkans accepted, as well as control over formerly Habsburg districts like the Brenner pass in the Tyrol region or Fiume in Croatia. Britain, once the most agreeable ally of them all, was kicking up a great deal of fuss over the issue of reparations, and what constituted reasonable expectations where Germany coughing up funds was concerned.

All of these issues and many more represented bones of contention for the allies and for their populations which they represented in Paris. Much like WW, knowledge of their innermost desires made them theoretically vulnerable, but in the case of the American President, his vision remained the braver and more ground-breaking aim. Where other allied leaders wanted large indemnities or to have claims on neighbouring lands accepted, Wilson was determined to move past these old diplomatic contracts, and to dream bigger. The problem, of course, was that this dream was dreamt a generation too soon, and that demands for its redesign were made by Wilson’s political opponents and communicated to his counterparts at Paris. The declared American goals were thus not even supported by all of America, and if Wilson wanted this support to come, he would have to deliver amendments to his vision which only GC, LG and VO were in a position to grant. Yet, while politics dictated that, as a rule, those with leverage tend to succeed over those that don’t, it must be said that Wilson did remarkably well in spite of the handicaps set against him. William Allen White, hardly the President’s biggest fan, among others, was forced to recognise this turn of events, when he wrote:

When the President sat down at the peace table, after coming from home in March, the others about the board had their cards on the table. They knew his hand then; understood his game, valued his stakes. In his absence they had been trading among themselves. The French asked for a neutral republic in West Prussia, and the Allies wanted to give the Saar Valley outright to France. Fiume also was to go to Italy. Joseph's coat was fairly well divided among the brethren when the President returned from America. And then he witnessed a curious thing. During January the French press had sneered so openly at the President's aspirations that his friends wished to move the Conference from Paris. When the President returned in March, the French press covered him with encomiums. No adjective was too saccharine for their uses. Evidently the powers that controlled the French press thought they had President Wilson's game beaten, so far as it affected Europe, and that he would take the League of Nations and they would get their boundaries, and all would live happily ever after. Here the President began to fight. He made alliance with the British and secured the League of Nations as a part of the treaty. He restricted French, territorial aspirations in the Saar. He overturned the sterilized republic along the west bank of the Rhine, and did things to the arrangements about Danzig. He changed his mood from the academic subjunctive to the presidential imperative. His disguise almost fell off. He nearly showed his groceries and his promissory notes. Then the French press became silent.[[8]](#footnote-8)

If, in other words, the allies expected Wilson to defer to the political logic of the day and become something of a pushover, then they were to be sorely mistaken. But don’t take this as a rousing defence of Wilson’s abilities and his spirit – he did eventually hit a wall, several walls in fact, and it did erode his health and his negotiating position. He was also forced, in the subsequent weeks, to lob threats and make a show of leaving the whole wretched conference business if people did not start talking seriously. This was the next chapter of the PPC – it involved the famous face to face meetings depicted in so many indulgent photographs, where the big three are smiling and marching together, and Clemenceau mischievously lifts his cane, yet it also involved some bitter, angry people petitioning in vain, and the leading statesmen of the world straining their poker faces beyond belief. It was not destined to be a clean fight, nor was it one which Wilson was destined to win. Those amendments which he wrested from the allies proved insufficient in the end, and the President was forced to watch his vision crumble, though arguably, only partially.

Again, we are marching ahead for the purpose of perspective, but the 14th March represents something of a watershed moment, just as the exit of Wilson had done the previous month. Within a week, the allies were to begin experimenting with a new kind of council, and as the anxious days ticked by, the pressure was mounted upon these leaders to do something of import. Reparations, the League, the Rhine, a final peace with Germany – all were pieces of a puzzle which different players tried to squeeze into place. Now that the break had been had, the big four were reunited at long last, but the mood, for Wilson, for House, for the other allied leaders, was more anxious than optimistic, more grasping than generous, and more frosty than warm. Gone were the declarations of unfettered allied unity, present now was an unstated, unwritten sense of opportunity. Back together though they were, the allies knew now that that age old cliché had never been truer – it was every man for himself.

1. MS 466, Edward Mandell House Papers, Series II, *Diaries*, Volume 7, p. 94. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. H. C. F. Bell, *Woodrow Wilson and the People* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Doran and Company, 1945), p. 304. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Ibid*, p. 95. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. H. C. F. Bell, *Woodrow Wilson and the People*, p. 303. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. William Allen White, *Woodrow Wilson: The Man, His Times and His Task* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1924), p. 414. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Tumulty, *Wilson as I Know Him*, p. 348. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. House, *Diaries*, p. 95. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. William Allen White, *Woodrow Wilson*, pp. 418-420. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)