Introduction

The Treaty of Versailles, which ended World War I, was drafted at the Paris Peace Conference in the spring of 1919 and shaped by the Big Four powers—Great Britain, France, Italy, and the United States. This souvenir copy of the Paris Peace Conference program is signed by President Woodrow Wilson and other world leaders.

The treaty would largely come to be seen as a failure for Wilson, however. Congress, concerned about conceding individual power in order to become a member of the League of Nations, refused to ratify it. Wilson had been the driving force behind the League of Nations, and while the other signatories of the treaty embraced the League, American isolationism quashed enthusiasm for it at home. This press statement, released as Wilson left office in 1921 by William Gibbs McAdoo—who was both Wilson’s son-in-law and his treasury secretary—defends the President’s handling of the Treaty of Versailles. McAdoo argued that Wilson had “laid the foundations of world peace and a new order” and made a “matchless contribution to his time” in the treaty. “Whatever may be the imperfections of the Treaty from a political or economic standpoint,” McAdoo wrote, “Woodrow Wilson did not fail.”

Excerpt

I do not agree with those who hastily and inconsiderately adjudge the President’s work at the Peace Conference a failure. Whatever may be the imperfections of the Treaty from a political or economic standpoint, Woodrow Wilson did not fail. The outstanding thing for which he fought, the thing that transcends political and economic considerations, is the permanent peace of the world. Unless this is secured all else is failure; without this the sublimest hope of humanity is sunk in the black abyss; without this all political and economic adjustments are unstable and sooner or later will disappear.
Questions for Discussion

Read the document introduction and the transcript excerpt and view the images. Then apply your knowledge of American history in order to answer the questions that follow.

1. How can we explain the hostility and indifference many Americans expressed toward Wilson’s efforts after the war?
2. Examine the cover of the program. How does it explain why the activities at Versailles were looked upon with so much interest?
3. Explain the concerns of Secretary McAdoo.
Treaty of Versailles and President Wilson, 1919 and 1921

Image

Peace Congress, Versailles 1919, Session of 28 June 1919: Agenda. (Gilder Lehrman Collection, GLC00752)
New York, March 4, 1921

Statement given out by Ex-Secretary of the Treasury
William G. McAdoo in response to a request from the
Editor of the New York Globe.

It is with hesitation that I comply with your request for an expression of my views on Woodrow Wilson, because my
intimate relationship may incline cynical or prejudiced minds to
say that I am not an impartial observer. His retirement from the
Presidency marks, however, an epoch of such profound significance
to the world that I cannot resist the temptation to say a few
words about one phase of his career.

I do not agree with those who hastily and inconsider-
ately adjudge the President’s work at the Peace Conference a
failure. Whatever may be the imperfections of the treaty from
a political or economic standpoint, Woodrow Wilson did not fail.
The outstanding thing for which he sought, the thing that trans-
cends political and economic considerations, is the permanent
peace of the world. Unless this is secured all else is failure;
without this the sublime hope of humanity is sunk in the black
abyss; without this, all political and economic adjustments are
 unstable and sooner or later will disappear.

Woodrow Wilson laid the foundations of world peace and
a new order in the Versailles Treaty. This is the supreme need
of civilization; this is his greatest work. The fact that the
burning structure has not yet reached completion, that it has
been halted by the selfishness of designing politicians and the
greed of materialistic national interests, is neither implied nor
destroyed those foundations. The tide of reaction will in-
ncessantly exhaust themselves and the work of Woodrow Wilson will
emerge unbroken and stand like the eternal rock as the support
of a new and better order of which peace and justice will be the
keystone.

This is Woodrow Wilson’s matchless contribution to his
time. Great and noble as have been his other unsurpassed
achievements in the fields of politics, economics, and letters; this is his
enduring monument. He has put a new star in the American flag —
like the Star of Bethlehem, with its eternal message of peace,
good will and hope. No one can tear that star from the flag.
With it America will lead the vanguard of humanity and civil-
ization to a new day of human brotherhood and world order. This
will not come immediately, but it will come inevitably in the
slow and sure processes of time.

Woodrow Wilson, the man, will die; but Woodrow Wilson,
the Apostle of Peace, will live forever. Out of his sacrifice
and suffering — borne with admirable dignity and sublime courage —
the good he has sought to do for mankind will come to a noble
fulfillment and receive a splendid though perhaps belated recognition.
In his martyrdom there is no defect — there is triumph.
History will do him justice. He can await its verdict with
serenity.