



Breaking the Heart of the World: Woodrow Wilson and the Fight for the League of Nations

By John Milton Cooper

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The fight over the League of Nations at the end of World War I was one of the great political debates of the American twentieth century. President Woodrow Wilson, himself a key architect of the League, was uncompromising in his belief that the United States would rise to a position of leadership in the peaceful union of states that he had envisaged. A masterful politician and distinguished theorist, Wilson was unprepared for the persuasiveness of his opponents and the potency of their argument. Though he struggled tirelessly in the summer of 1919 to drum popular and political support for the League, he could not keep pace: he suffered a disabling stroke in July. The United States Senate ultimately rejected membership in the League, and the League failed to realize its diplomatic potential. In this engaging narrative, John Cooper relates the story of Wilson's battle for the League with sympathy, accuracy, and a deep understanding of the times. John Milton Cooper, Jr., is E. Gordon Fox Professor of American Institutions at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. He has held Guggenheim and National Endowment for the Humanities fellowships and served as a Fulbright Professor at Moscow University. His previous books include *The Warrior and the Priest* (Harvard University Press, 1985) and *Pivotal Decades* (Norton, 1992). Cooper is Chief Historian of the forthcoming biography of Woodrow Wilson on American Experience, which will be broadcast by PBS in 2002.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

The tragic story of the League of Nations centers on the idealistic Woodrow Wilson, who conceived the League and offered it to the world, who developed its charter and bore the pains of its formulation at the Versailles Peace Conference that ended WWI, and who broke down in exhaustion when his own nation refused to grant ratification in the Senate. University of Wisconsin professor Cooper (*The Warrior and the Priest: Woodrow Wilson and Theodore Roosevelt*) does a splendid job of revealing what has come to be called "the League fight." As Cooper shows, Wilson faced an awesome challenge at Versailles among the European old-school diplomats who were determined to gain all they could for their own national interests. In the end, Wilson walked away without a generous peace agreement for the vanquished and instead pinned his hopes on what he saw as the one positive result of Versailles: the League. Cooper is especially strong in depicting senators Henry Cabot Lodge, William Borah and other conservative Republican isolationists who torpedoed ratification of the League in the U.S. with the help of many German-American voters unhappy with the draconian terms of peace forced on Germany by other aspects of the Treaty of Versailles. In the end, Cooper supplies a profoundly sad story of Wilson the man, his hopes for the world shattered just as much as his frail body was, rendered helpless by a stroke in the midst of his greatest political defeat. B&w photos.

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From Library Journal

The 1919-20 Senate debate over ratification of the Versailles Treaty and the League of Nations remains one of the most intense foreign policy debates in U.S. history. The idea of an international organization to repel aggression had been popular for most of the 1910s. Cooper (Univ. of Wisconsin, Madison), who did extensive research in the archival papers of key players in the debate, here provides a new interpretation differing from that of standard works such as Thomas Bailey's *Woodrow Wilson and the Great Betrayal* (1945) and Ralph Stone's *Irreconcilables* (1970). He attributes the defeat of the treaty to President Wilson's failure to court senators' support of the agreement and his failure to compromise at all with Senate opponents. At several critical junctures, the author claims, the President could have changed enough votes to ratify the agreement had he been willing to deal. The secrecy surrounding the President's stroke made his supporters unwilling to strike their own deal without approval. This fresh and well-documented assessment belongs in most academic libraries. Marcia L. Sprules, Council on Foreign Relations Lib., New York
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Review

"*Breaking the Heart of the World* is a wide-ranging, exhaustively researched, and carefully argued study of the treaty debate." *Rhetoric & Public Affairs*

"Cooper's analysis is acute, even-handed and remarkably free of the sentimentality (or scorn) that so often colors writing about Wilson." Jeff Shesol, *The New York Times Book Review*

"The end of the Cold War has brought renewed support for--and renewed opposition to--the Wilsonian vision of the international future. *Breaking the Heart of the World*, a splendid fusion of absorbing narrative and crisp analysis, is the book that explains authoritatively what in fact Woodrow Wilson was up to and the difference he hoped to make in all our lives." Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.

"It did not have to happen. At any point Wilson could have had his treaty. Its opponents could have had their reservations. Good men failed. It broke the heart of the world, and for the rest of the century things were never the same. John Milton Cooper, Jr.'s account is, well, heartbreaking." Daniel Patrick Moynihan

"Mr. Cooper has made a substantial contribution to our understanding of Woodrow Wilson, both as man and myth, and has thoroughly fleshed out a political and diplomatic narrative that will not be easily or soon surpassed." Washington Times

"A most probing, balanced, and enlightening treatment of Wilson and the League, drawn from a remarkable array of sources and from this distinguished historian's decades of study on the project." James MacGregor Burns, Williams College

"This beautifully crafted book--at once dramatically engaging and intellectually stimulating--offers a new and highly significant analysis of a subject of inestimable importance in understanding international relations in the modern epoch. *Breaking the Heart of the World* is a work by an eminent historian at the top of his form. It will not only rank as one of the truly great books ever written about Woodrow Wilson; it may also make a notable contribution to public discourse on American foreign policy in our own time." Thomas J. Knock, author of *To End All Wars: Woodrow Wilson and the Quest for a New World Order*

"Dismiss the idea that yet another book on the League fight might be reluctant. Cooper places the struggle in the widest possible context and in the process makes a major contribution to our understanding of the sometimes troubling nature of American political culture. He also provides a needed lesson for the current generation of historians, namely that insight and judiciousness are not mutually exclusive qualities." William C. Widenor, author of *Henry Cabot Lodge and the Search for an American Foreign Policy*

"John Milton Cooper, Jr. has produced a masterpiece of meticulous scholarship and incisive argumentation. Never before has the debate on American participation in the League of Nations been so thoroughly analyzed on the basis of such extensive research. An never before have the implications of Woodrow Wilson's ultimate failure been so intelligently--and so regrettably--explored." Niall Ferguson, author of *The Pity of War: Explaining World War I*

"*Breaking the Heart of the World* is a meticulously researched and well-written study of Wilson's efforts." Claremont Review of Books

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