

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **THE UNITED STATES AND COLLECTIVE SECURITY**

**(1919-1941)**

In his effort to replace the European system of a balance of power by a new world order, President Wilson was principally interested in the creation of the League of Nations. He achieved his purpose. The Peace Treaty of Versailles opened with the Covenant of the League, but this success was in contradiction with his own purpose. Many of the following provisions of the Peace Treaty contradicted the principles enunciated in the Fourteen Points; the peace was neither just, nor a peace without victory, but a new status quo based on revenge and compromises between the claims of rival states. The European leaders, who continued to think in terms of a balance of power, confused the dynamic concept of a collective security system with their static concept of a post-war status quo won in war and to be maintained thereafter. At home in Washington, no two-thirds majority could be obtained for consent of the U.S. Senate to the Peace Treaty without reservations. Most of the reservations concerned article X of the Covenant and expressed refusal or reluctance to give up U.S. independent action in favour of a commitment to uphold the status quo created by the peace treaties.

The United States did not join the League and kept aloof from European power politics, through the phases described and documented in the previous chapter, until the combined assaults of Hitler, Stalin, Mussolini and Japan in the thirties posed a

direct threat to the security of the United States. Under their impact President Franklin D. Roosevelt managed to shift American foreign policy from neutrality to involvement and entry into the war on the side of Britain. Roosevelt was not known to be a Wilsonian philosopher or prophet. He understood – writes Kissinger – that only a threat to the security of the American people:

“could motivate them to support military preparedness. But to take them into a war, he needed to appeal to their idealism in much the same way that Wilson had. In Roosevelt’s view, America’s security needs might well be met by control of the Atlantic, but its war aims required some vision of a new world order. (...) What he sought was to bring about a world community compatible with America’s democratic and social ideals as the best guarantee of peace.”<sup>1</sup>

In formulating his war aims, Roosevelt went well beyond those proclaimed by Wilson in 1917 and 1918. Why did he do so? And why could he convince the American people and Congress to go to war for these aims after almost two decades of aloofness and neutrality? According to Kissinger, “Nazi atrocities increasingly eroded the distinction between fighting to promote American values and fighting to defend American security.”

The collapse of the Versailles peace order, however, also taught at least three lessons confirming the validity of Wilson’s approach.

The *first* lesson was that the conduct of foreign policy aimed at upholding a balance of power, was – indeed – incompatible with the aim of maintaining international peace and security.

The *second* lesson was that no peace could be maintained except by a partnership of democracies. Totalitarian rule had shown that internal repression and external aggression are two sides of the same coin.

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<sup>1</sup> *Diplomacy, op.cit.*, p. 389-390.

The *third* lesson – learnt in the League of Nations despite her failure as a framework for collective security – was that democracies, not only America, need an ideal or a moral purpose for conducting foreign policy. In their absence – as French and British diplomacy in the inter-war years had made abundantly clear – foreign policy has only appeasement and demoralisation to offer. Without moral purpose, the West European democracies were powerless to contain the totalitarian states and prevent the outbreak of another war.

In this chapter we examine two aspects of the relationship between the United States and European security between 1919 and 1941. The first one concerns the evolution of American foreign policy from aloofness and neutrality, to entry into the Second World War. The second one concerns the ambivalent attitude of the United States to three issues considered to be of crucial importance in the Covenant and the history of the League of Nations: disarmament, the economic instruments for collective security, and the function of international law.

## FROM ALOOFNESS TO ALLIANCE

On 2 July 1921 Congress declared the end of the state of war with the central powers, and in August separate peace treaties were signed with Austria, Germany and Hungary. The peace treaties were meant to be the end of American involvement in European politics.

The three Presidents, succeeding President Wilson, were determined to keep the United States outside the League of Nations, as shown by the excerpts from their inaugural Addresses.<sup>2</sup> Each of the three presidents emphasised the need for disarmament, for conference diplomacy, for the peaceful settlement of disputes and for U.S. participation in the Permanent Court of International Justice. Each of them also re-affirmed the determination to make no political engagements such as membership in the League of Nations.

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<sup>2</sup> Document I.3.1.

Still, the scale of American involvement in the League's activities grew and was considered to be useful. By 1930, the State Department had appointed a consul in Geneva with the specific task of coordinating policies with the League. American representatives were sitting on committees dealing with economic, scientific, social welfare issues, slavery, disarmament and the codification of international law. In political affairs, however, the United States remained firm in its policy of non-involvement, which also included non-recognition of the Soviet-Union.

Soviet pressures for recognition found a more favourable response, when Franklin Roosevelt took office in March 1933, shortly after Hitler's rise to power. On 16 November 1933, Roosevelt decided on the establishment of diplomatic relations, but insisted on being given Soviet assurances with respect to propaganda, legal protection of Americans and economic espionage. None of these assurances, of course, had any value whatsoever.<sup>3</sup>

### *Change of policy*

Roosevelt and Congress remained committed to a strict policy of neutrality by the Neutrality Acts of 1935 and 1937.

The first clear indication of a change of policy came with Roosevelt's Quarantine Speech on 5 October 1937 in which he warned the American people against the spreading of the epidemic of world lawlessness.

The turning point from neutrality to alignment with Britain in particular came after the German occupation of Czechoslovakia. Thereafter Roosevelt steadily moved the United States towards involvement by seeking Congressional approval or, when necessary, circumventing it. In September 1939, Roosevelt recommended Congress to revise the Neutrality Act. In an Address at the University of Virginia on 10 June 1940 – a month after the

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<sup>3</sup> The exchange of letters between President Roosevelt and People's Commissar for Foreign Affairs Litvinov is reprinted in document I.3.4.

German invasion of Norway, Denmark, the Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg and France – Roosevelt warned against the delusion that the United States can safely permit itself to become a lone island in a world dominated by the philosophy of force.<sup>4</sup>

In a period of less than two years until the German invasion of the Soviet Union, the United States aligned itself with Britain and against Germany. On his own authority Roosevelt concluded the Destroyer for Basis deal with Britain in June 1940 and extended American protection to Greenland, Iceland and the Atlantic Ocean west of Iceland. In his State of the Union on 6 January 1941, Roosevelt stated the four freedoms as the objectives of America's foreign policy :

"In the future days, which we seek to make secure, we look forward to a world founded upon four essential human freedoms.

The first is freedom of speech and expression everywhere in the world.

The second is freedom of every person to worship God in his own way- everywhere in the world.

The third is freedom from want which, translated into world terms, means economic understandings which will secure to every nation a healthy peacetime life for its inhabitants everywhere in the world.

The fourth is freedom from fear which, translated into world terms, means a world wide reduction of armaments to such a point and in such a thorough fashion that no nation will be in a position to commit an act of physical aggression against any neighbor anywhere in the world."

The Lend-Lease Act of 11 March 1941 afforded the necessary Congressional approval for massive aid to Britain. Officially named "an act to promote the defence of the United States," it was to make America the arsenal of the democracies in their fight against German and Italian aggression.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> The change of policy can be clearly read through documents I.3.5, I.3.6 and I.3.7.

<sup>5</sup> Compare documents I.3.8, I.3.9 and I.3.10.

As forebode of what was to come a few months later, Roosevelt aligned America with Britain against Germany, Italy and Japan, but not against the Soviet-Union. He did not recognise the Soviet invasion of Poland as war, nor did he sever diplomatic relations with Moscow over this invasion or the Soviet attack on Finland. He refused to invoke the Neutrality Act or to give assistance to Finland.

The year 1941 marked the end of American aloofness and neutrality. The Lend-Lease Act was still opposed and passionately so by the isolationists. One of them, Senator Arthur Vandenberg, commented on the Act:

"We have tossed Washington's Farewell Address into the discard. We have thrown ourselves squarely into the power politics and the power wars of Europe, Asia and Africa. We have taken the first step upon a course from which we can never hereafter retreat."

The same Senator had to say this after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor:

"In my own mind, my convictions regarding international cooperation and collective security for peace took form on the afternoon of the Pearl Harbor attack. That day ended isolationism for any realist."

## DISARMAMENT

The armaments of the major European powers had been considered by President Wilson to be a principal cause for the outbreak of the First World War. Disarmament, as a consequence, was to be given high priority in his new world order and in the Covenant of the League of Nations.

Part V of the Treaty of Versailles had provided for drastic disarmament of the vanquished powers.<sup>6</sup> It was to be followed by

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<sup>6</sup> Text in document I.1.15 (The Treaty of Versailles).

the reduction of the armed forces and the navies of the other powers. Disarmament, in Wilson's conception, would lead to more security and facilitate political agreement.

So, it was on American initiative that the first disarmament conference convened in November 1921. Proposed by one of the U.S. Senators, who had voted against American membership, the Conference had nothing to do with the League of Nations. Its primary purpose was to discuss reduction of naval armaments between the United States, Britain and Japan. It resulted in three treaties: the Five Power Treaty dealing with certain limitations to naval armaments between the United States, Britain, France, Italy and Japan; the Four Power Treaty respecting the insular possession of the United States, Britain, France and Japan in the Pacific (and abrogating the British-Japanese alliance); and the New Power Treaty by which the nine participating states in the conference (Netherlands, Portugal, Belgium and China in addition to the Five) pledged to respect the sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of China. The treaties were easily accepted by the U.S. Senate, with the exception of the Four Power Treaty, to which the Senate added the reservation that there would be no commitment to armed force, no alliance and no obligation to join in any defence.

In the League of Nations several attempts were made to promote disarmament. Attempts to regulate arms trade and arms production led to the Geneva Conventions of 1925 on arms trade. With the exception of the Protocol for the prohibition of the use of Asphyxiating, poisonous or other gases, and of bacteriological methods of warfare, none of the conventions entered into force.

Following the Briand-Kellogg Pact of 1928, a Disarmament Conference convened in 1932 to discuss a universal reduction and limitation of all types of armament. Agreements were reached on a number of points, but – following Germany's withdrawal from the Disarmament Conference and the League of Nations – the Council of the League decided to suspend the

Conference.<sup>7</sup> After the 1938 Munich agreement, President Roosevelt declared that no nation can accept disarmament while neighbour nations arm to the teeth. He called for strengthening the defences of the United States.

## ECONOMIC INSTRUMENTS

In his plans for the League of Nations, Wilson attached great importance to the provisions to be made for economic sanctions. He considered economic sanctions to be both a substitute for war and something more tremendous than war. His views were embodied in article 16 (1) of the Covenant of the League of Nations. In the one case in which the League of Nations applied sanctions, the United States refused to participate.

The United States had unquestionably emerged from the First World War as the new international economic leader. Its economic policies, however, were both nationalistic and isolationist. The United States refused to cancel the European war debts. Despite the Dawes plan and the later Young Plan for the problem of German reparations, no acceptable solution was reached and payments on reparations and war debts ceased after the economic crisis.

Since 1930, the United States had become increasingly involved in the economic and social activities of the League. When asked for its opinion on the future development of the economic and social activities of the League, the United States came out in favour of strengthening the League's machinery rather than setting up a new organisation outside the League (as favoured by some members). In May 1939 and on proposal of the Secretariat, the League's Council invited Stanley Bruce (of Australia) to preside over a small committee to propose reforms within the League system. In their report, the committee:

"described the past achievements and the future hopes of the economic and social agencies. Both their achievements and

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<sup>7</sup> See: Jozef Goldblat, *Arms Control. A Guide to Negotiations and Agreements*, PRIO, 1996.



their hopes depended on the fact that "the League represents the aspirations of mankind towards a higher degree of co-operation and organization in the service of world peace," [and] they proposed a new Central Committee for Economic and Social Questions which should exercise effective power over them all.

The Bruce Report was issued on August 22nd, 1939, only a few days before the German invasion of Poland. In one sense, it must be counted as a plan whose execution was rendered impossible by the same catastrophes which finally destroyed the tottering structure of the League itself. But in another sense it was more than a plan. It was the conclusion of twenty years of experience unprecedented both in extent and in variety. It was the summing-up of the first great attempt to organize the social and economic interests of the world as a whole. In consequence, when, in the last months of war, the powers met to construct the institutions of the United Nations, they adopted, with slight changes, the system proposed in the Bruce Report. The Central Committee for Economic and Social Questions, still-born, as it seemed, in 1939, came to life as the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations."<sup>8</sup>

In fact, its impact reached even further. The recognition of the importance of economic and social cooperation "in the service of peace", not only produced the United Nations system with its many Specialised Agencies. It also guided George Marshall and Jean Monnet after the Second World War when they initiated Western Cooperation and European integration.

## THE FUNCTION OF LAW

"Peace through law" probably best captures the spirit of Wilson's proposals for the League of Nations. Succeeding presidents emphasised the importance of international law for the attainment of world peace.

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<sup>8</sup> F.P. Walters, *A History of the League of Nations*, 1969, p. 761-762.

The United States attitude towards the function of international law in the proposed system of collective security was, however, ambivalent. The League's Covenant carefully formulated the law – in articles 10-16 – to be applied, but the Senate objected to membership in name of the political concepts of sovereignty and independent action.

This American ambivalence, between its advocacy for the rule of law in international relations and its claim to be above the law in the name of its own national interests, is a significant and persistent feature, much related to the ideal of a democratic world order.

Two examples of this ambivalence merit attention in this chapter.

The first one concerns the Briand-Kellogg Pact of 1928. The idea for such a pact originated within the American peace forces. A Chicago lawyer managed to interest French Foreign Minister Aristide Briand for the idea of abolishing war by outlawing it. Briand in turn proposed it to Secretary of State Frank Kellogg. Today, it seems rather odd that serious statesmen would really believe that a simple pledge to renounce war as an instrument of national policy, would contribute to collective security and peace. Still, simple as the treaty was, many signatories added interpretative notes and reservations to qualify their commitment – as one can read in Edward Borchard's Address on the pact. Kellogg himself insisted that his Pact contained no sanctions, no commitment and no restriction on the right of self-defence. It was a grand gesture without any meaning.<sup>9</sup>

The second one concerns American adhesion to the Permanent Court of International Justice, created in implementation of the Covenant, but independent from the League. The presidential pleas for adhesion to the Statute of the Court<sup>10</sup> were addressed to a reluctant Senate. The Senate battle over the question covered almost the entire twenty year period. Already in

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<sup>9</sup> The text of the Kellogg-Briand Pact and Edward Borchard's address can be found in documents I.3.2 and I.3.3.

<sup>10</sup> See document I.3.1 again.

January 1923, President Harding sent the treaty of adherence to the Senate. It passed the Senate no earlier than January 1926 with five reservations. The fifth reservation of the Senate was unacceptable to the other members. The second attempt was made by President Hoover in February 1929, when agreement on the reservations with the other parties to the Statute was within reach. The Senate failed to act on the agreed Protocol of accession until March 1934. In January 1935, finally, the Senate defeated the resolution of adherence to the Court.

The Senate's unwillingness to approve accession was probably best expressed by its first reservation:

"That such adherence shall not be taken to involve any legal relation on the part of the United States to the League of Nations or the assumption of any obligations by the United States under the Treaty of Versailles."

It should be borne in mind, that the Senate's refusal not only concerned adherence to the Statute of the Court. "At no time did the United States propose to make any large contribution; at no time did it propose to make a declaration accepting compulsory jurisdiction."<sup>11</sup>

In 1945, the United States became a member of the United Nations and ipso facto a party to the Statute of the International Court of Justice. On 2 August 1946, the Senate accepted the compulsory Jurisdiction of the new Court. Its Declaration of acceptance, however, contained the highly dubious exception as to

"disputes with regard to matters which are essentially within the domestic jurisdiction of the United States as determined by the United States" (emphasis added).

The outbreak of the Second World War ended isolationism for realists like Senator Vandenberg. It did not end the ambivalence

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<sup>11</sup> Manley O. Hudson, *The Permanent Court of International Justice 1920-1942. A Treatise*, Macmillan, 1943, p. 237.

in the American attitude between legal internationalism and political unilateralism.