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The End of an Idealistic Peace and an Intimate Friendship: Colonel House, President Wilson, and the Paris Peace Conference

On October 23, 1918, the German government appealed to United States President Woodrow Wilson for an armistice to end fighting in what had come to be known as the Great War. For over four years the world's greatest powers were engaged in the largest conflict in human history, and now it appeared as if peace was just beyond the horizon. However, President Wilson was not interested in simply peace. Since American entrance into the war in 1917, Wilson had preached about a gaining a "peace without victory," and strived to achieve a new world order that would shatter the nationalist ambitions of old Europe. The cornerstone of such a program was Wilson's idealistic Fourteen Points, and the difficulty he faced was getting the European nations to get behind his quest for a just peace. This is the task that Wilson entrusted to his closest friend and most intimate political advisor Colonel Edward Mandel House. Colonel House, a man that President Wilson greatly admired, shared the same principles of the president, and acted as spokesman and chief negotiator for him and the United States during the negotiations for an armistice and during the Paris Peace Conference that ended the Great War. However, it was during the negotiations for peace with the leaders of the Allied nations, that the type of peace that both men hoped to achieve faded away, and along with it their close and personal friendship.

Colonel House met Woodrow Wilson for the first time in New York City on November 24, 1911, as then Governor Wilson of New Jersey was making a push to be the Democratic nominee in the 1912 presidential election. House was a colonel by name only; the title was given to him by Texas governor Jim Hogg in recognition of the important role that House played in his gubernatorial campaign in 1890. House and Wilson arranged their meeting in 1911 in order to further their own political ambitions. House had been active in Texas Democratic Party politics for decades and was itching to become involved on the national level with the right Democrat

candidate. On the other hand, Wilson sought House's help in securing Texas' forty delegates in order to catapult him to the Democratic presidential nomination. From this meeting on, the two men became close friends as they came to realize their political and world view were nearly one and the same. Once, when asked whether Colonel House represented Wilson's opinion on a political matter during the campaign, Wilson replied, "Mr. House is my second personality. He is my independent self. His thoughts and mine are one."[1]

House played a minimal but important role during Wilson's successful bid for president in 1912. After the election, when Wilson took office, House's influence on the new President continually grew. The Colonel helped Wilson select his cabinet and, while he never held an official cabinet position in Wilson's White House, he played an active role in U.S foreign policy. Prior to U.S. involvement in the Great War, on several occasions Wilson sent House to Europe to attempt to broker an end to the ever continuing conflict between the Entente and Central powers. When the United States eventually entered the war, House served as the U.S. representative on the Supreme War Council, a body arranged to facilitate wartime relations between the Allied powers. Although most important, House helped Wilson draft his idealistic Fourteen Points and assisted the president in developing the idea of the League of Nations, the organization which both men believed to be the essential aspect of an enduring world peace. It was no surprise, then, when the German government accepted Wilson's Fourteen Points as the terms for peace in 1918 that Wilson sent Colonel House to Europe to act as his personal agent in the armistice negotiations with the other Allied powers.[2]

While Germany's request for an armistice was based on the Fourteen Points, the Allied governments had yet to approve Wilson's idealistic program for peace. As chief negotiator for the United States, it was Colonel House's duty to obtain Allied acceptance of Wilson's terms. However, this was no easy task. What was a just peace for Wilson and the United States was not

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[1] Godfrey Hodgson, *Woodrow Wilson's Right Hand: The Life of Colonel Edward M. House* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 1-7.
[2] *Ibid*., 8-12.

necessarily the same for the nations of Europe. The Entente powers had solidified their war aims among themselves long before the United States ever entered the war, and after fighting and defeating German aggression over the past four years, the cries of "Let Germany pay for her misdeeds" were not only heard across Europe, but also declared by many in America. Even former president Theodore Roosevelt echoed this view arguing, "Let them [the Allies] impose their common will on the nations responsible for the hideous disaster which has almost wrecked mankind."[3]

While House and Wilson certainly understood this sentiment, they realized that a peace where the Allied nations simply divided the spoils of a German defeat would not yield a lasting peace. Both men believed that kind of settlement would only fester in Europe and lead to yet another war sometime in the near future. House's mission in Europe was defined as winning the explicit approval of Wilson's Fourteen Points from the Allies and he was authorized to use any diplomatic tool possible to achieve this goal.[4]

Upon arriving in Paris, House immediately faced opposition from the European heads of state. British Prime Minister David Lloyd George was the first to state a complaint to Wilson's program. He first criticized the American president for not consulting the Allied premiers in developing the Fourteen Points. He then declared himself in opposition to Wilson's second point, which stated that there should be "absolute freedom of navigation upon the seas." Lloyd George took this rather vague point to imply the restriction of the right to blockade, the chief military strategy for Britain during a time of war.[5] The French Prime Minister, Georges Clemenceau, objected to the inclusion of the League of Nations in the treaty itself and took issue with the point concerning the abolition of secret treaties, stating simply to House, "I cannot agree never to make a private or secret diplomatic agreement of any kind." Lloyd George quickly agreed with his

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[3] Charles Seymour ed., *The Ending of the War*, vol. 4 of *The Intimate Papers of Colonel House* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1928), 151.
[4] *Ibid*., 150-151.
[5] *Ibid*., 163.

French counterpart.[6] Further on the list of French objections was the issue of self-determination. While the French had already theoretically agreed to this point, House knew French claims to the disputed territories of Alsace-Lorraine, the Rhineland, and the Saar Valley were sure to prompt future challenges to the president's program.[7] The Italian Foreign Secretary, Baron Sonnino, took exception with Wilson's ninth point, which delineated Italian borders, telling House it was simply unacceptable from Italy's point of view. Lastly, each of the European leaders questioned whether Wilson's Fourteen Points adequately addressed the issue of German reparations.[8]

After hearing the objections of the Allied governments, House took a hard line stance in his negotiations. He threatened that the United States might make a separate peace with Germany, leaving the Allies to continue the war without the moral and economic support of the United States. This threat immediately put the European premiers in a more conciliatory mood. Clemenceau, who overnight had drawn up what House called an "elaborate memorandum concerning the President's Fourteen Points," withdrew the intricate French objections. Sonnino continued to push against Point IX, but when he realized he lacked the support of both France and Britain, decided to back down. The only obstacle that remained was a Lloyd George's memorandum that objected to the clause concerning freedom of the seas and cited the need for compensation from the German government for the damage done to the Allied civilian population during the war.[9]

The issue of reparations was quickly settled as House agreed that damage done to the civilian populations was an acceptable concession. However, Wilson demanded an explicit acceptance of the Freedom of the Seas issue. House agreed, and believed that reaching an agreement on this point was the most important issue of the pre-armistice agreement. He fought hard to find common ground with the British. House wrote in his diary on November 1, 1918 that

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[6] *Ibid*.
[7] Paul Birdsall, *Versailles Twenty Years After* (New York: Reynal & Hitchcock, 1941), 28-29.
[8] Seymour, *Intimate Papers*, 167.
[9] *Ibid*., 169-173.

he argued that the United States "would not consent to allow the British Government, or any other Government, to determine upon what terms our ships should sail the seas, either in time of peace or in time of war." House further suggested that the two nations would eventually "come to a clash if an understanding was not reached as to laws governing the seas." However, the British continued to refuse to accept the point until they received clarification that freedom of the seas did not constitute a law against blockade.[10]

Finally, on November 3, House and Lloyd George came to a compromise. House, with the support of Wilson, was ready to concede that the right of a nation to blockade would not be abolished, but that in light of the events that occurred in the current war, the law governing that right would need to be discussed at the peace conference and perhaps changed. With this concession, the first crisis among the Allies during the peace process ended as Lloyd George dropped his objection and accepted the principle of Freedom of the Seas.[11]

On November 4, Britain, France and Italy all officially endorsed Wilson's Fourteen Points and the German government quickly followed suit a day later. Colonel House was ecstatic over his achievement and was praised in many circles. Walter Lippmann, an advisor to President Wilson, wrote to the Colonel, "Frankly, I did not believe it was humanly feasible, under conditions as they seemed to be in Europe, to win so glorious a victory." Even the New York *Herald*, far from an undying supporter of Wilson, praised House's "diplomatic success in obtaining from the Allied Governments acceptance of President Wilson's points." [12]

With the pre-armistice agreement set the conference awaited the arrival of President Wilson, who would act as the head of the American delegation. In early December, the President boarded the *USS George Washington* and set sail for Paris. As November faded into December, House anxiously awaited President Wilson's arrival in Europe. Both men, with the initial victory of the Fourteen Points already in hand, thought that Wilson's idealistic program for peace might

[10] *Ibid*., 179-181.
[11] *Ibid*., 184-185.
[12] *Ibid*., 187-188.

finally become reality, and truly believed that achieving a lasting world peace was well within their grasp.[13]

Just a few days before his arrival in Europe, President Wilson held a meeting with the American delegation aboard the *George Washington* where he plainly stated his intentions for the Peace Conference. He spoke eloquently about the League of Nations and the need to throw off the old ideas of a balance of power among the European nations, which he argued had always led to "aggression and selfishness and war." He further spoke of achieving his dream for a peace of justice and completed his address exclaiming, "Tell me what is right, and I will fight for it." With his words, Wilson made his mission in Paris utterly clear to his delegation. He was determined to bring about a new world order with the League of Nations as its foundation, but most important, that he was ready and willing to fight for this if the situation demanded. After all, as Wilson would later state to House, the President believed, "Once that [the League of Nations] is a fait accompli, nearly all the very serious difficulties will disappear."[14]

President Wilson arrived in Paris on December 13, and immediately began to work for an agreement on the League of Nations. However, meetings with Clemenceau revealed that there was a greater divide between the two men and their visions of the League. The French leader's greatest objection was concerning French security from future aggressors. In his diary on December 19, House recalled Clemenceau expressing his doubts to Wilson, "He thought a League of Nations should be attempted, but he was not confident of success, either of forming it or of its being workable after it was formed."[15] Wilson followed his meeting with Clemenceau with a trip to London to meet with Lloyd George at Buckingham Palace. During the meeting, the British Prime Minister agreed to support the establishment of the League of Nations, and was even receptive to the idea that this be the first item discussed at the Peace Conference. After

[13] *Ibid*., 188, 206.
[14] *Ibid*., 280-283.
[15] *Ibid*., 250-252.

securing British support for the League, Wilson left for Italy for a state visit and returned to Paris on January 7, 1919.[16]

While Wilson was touring Europe meeting with leaders and visiting war torn regions, Colonel House continued to push Clemenceau on the League of Nations. By January, House and Clemenceau had developed a friendship. Both men had made a lasting impact on the other, and House attempted to utilize this advantage in his negotiations over the League.[17] On January 7, House and Clemenceau met alone. Later in his diary, House described their conversation as "one of our heart-to-heart talks" and recounted the discussion that transpired,

> In the present war England voluntarily came to France's aid. She was not compelled to do so. The United States did likewise without compulsion. I asked whether or not in the circumstances France would not feel safer if England and America were in a position where they would be compelled to come to the aid of France in the event another nation like Germany should try to crush her. Under the old plan, the shadow and the specter of another war would haunt her. If she lost this chance which the United States offered through the League of Nations, it would never come again because there would never be another opportunity.

According to House, his argument clearly made a great impression on the French leader, "The old Tiger seemed to see it all and became enthusiastic. He placed both hands on my shoulders and said, 'You are right. I am for the League of Nations…and you may count upon me to work with you.'"[18]

When the Peace Conference officially opened on January 18, 1919, the Council of Ten, which included representatives of the five major Allied Powers, Great Britain, France, Italy, Japan, and the United States, adopted the necessary resolutions to establish the League of Nations as a part of the peace treaty. Next, the Council of Ten authorized a commission, with representatives from each of the Allied governments, to work out the details of the covenant of the League. Wilson was to serve as the Commission's president.[19] The Commission met ten times, and by February 13 all twenty-six articles that comprised the Covenant of the League of

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[16] Birdsall, *Versailles Twenty Years After*, 48, 55.
[17] *Ibid*., 55.
[18] Seymour, *Intimate Papers*, 269-270.
[19] Birdsall, *Versailles Twenty Years After*, 57.

Nations was proposed to the Council of Ten. The next day, the League of Nations was born and the first step to Wilson's dream of a new world order was taken. House noted in his diary that evening, "He [President Wilson] looked happy, as well indeed he should."[20]

On the evening of February 14, Wilson boarded a train that would eventually take him back to the *George Washington*; the president needed to make a short visit to the United States to attend to Congressional matters. As Wilson boarded his train in Paris, House describes the hero's farewell the president received with imagery that invokes the memory of the biblical story of Palm Sunday,

> From the curb to the train itself, a distance of many hundred feet, a beautiful red carpet was spread with palms and other evergreens on each side, making a corridor of some fifteen or twenty feet wide and extending several hundred feet…the entire occasion was a fitting tribute to him and was an appropriate ending to a very memorable visit.[21]

Just before boarding the train, Wilson turned to House. In a gesture that House describes as a "fervent good-bye," the President grasped his close friend's hand, and then placed his arm around him.[22] The two intimate friends had been triumphant in taking the first step to realizing their idealistic dreams for world peace. However, as Wilson's train crept away from the station in Paris, neither man knew that upon the president's return three weeks later there would be no red carpet celebrations, and that their relationship would be forever changed.

During Wilson's stay in the United States, Colonel House took his seat on the Council of Ten and became the interim head of the American delegation. However, House was not left without guidance. Prior to leaving Paris, Wilson and House met for three hours, and the two men discussed how things should proceed in the president's absence. House recalls the meeting in his diary entry of February 14,

> I outlined my plan of procedure during his absence: we could button up everything during the next four weeks. He seemed startled and even alarmed at this statement. I therefore explained that the plan was not to actually bring these

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[20] Seymour, *Intimate Papers*, 314-318.
[21] *Ibid*., 317-318.
[22] *Ibid*.

> matters to a final conclusion but to have them ready for him to do so when he returned.[23]

The two agreed that House would pursue a program regarding a reduction of the German military, the delineation of Germany's boundaries, and the amount of money to be paid as reparations to the Allied nations. As the meeting between the two men came to a close, House spoke to the president of the need to compromise during negotiations,

> I asked him to bear in mind while he was gone that it was sometimes necessary to compromise in order to get things through; not a compromise of principle but a compromise of detail; he had made many since he had been here. I did not wish him to leave expecting the impossible in all things.[24]

Once the president left Paris, House felt empowered to push the peace process forward. Yet, House's ambitions were halted briefly when on February 19 Clemenceau, while traveling in his car to meet the Colonel and British delegate Arthur Balfour, was shot at point blank by a Communist. Clemenceau would later remark, "Fortunately, the rascal was a bad shot" and despite the bullet that was lodged underneath the Prime Minister's shoulder, the man commonly known as the Tiger called for the continuation of the peace conference three days later.[25]

Once the conference resumed, Clemenceau made clear his intention of making the Rhine frontier a permanent military barrier between France and Germany by the establishment of an autonomous republic in the Rhineland.[26] Colonel House immediately cabled the President with the contents of the meeting.

> He [Clemenceau] is insistent upon the creation of a Rhenish Republic. There will be about four million of Germans aggregated in this way. He desires that this Republic should be exempt from the payment of any indemnity; that they should have no armed force; that everything should be done to make them prosperous and contented so that they will not want to join the German Federation and if they have such a desire they will not be permitted to do so.[27]

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[23] *Ibid*., 329.
[24] *Ibid*., 330.
[25] *Ibid*., 330-331.
[26] Birdsall, *Versailles Twenty Years After*, 195-196.
[27] Seymour, *Intimate Papers*, 334.

Clemenceau argued that France had twice been invaded by Germany through the lower Rhine and that the creation of the Rhenish Republic was vital to French security. However, House was against the establishment of such a republic. He foresaw it being a new "Alsace-Lorraine" and further argued that it was "contrary to the principle of self-determination."[28]

Wilson's response echoed House's beliefs. On February 23, Wilson cabled House saying,

> It seems to me like an attempt on the part of the French to hurry us into an acquiescence in their plans with regard to the Western bank of the Rhine, a plan to which I could, as I now see the matter, in no case accede. I know that I can trust you and our colleagues to withstand such a program immovably…The determination of the geographical boundaries of Germany involves the fortunes and interests of many other peoples and we should not think of being hurried into a solution arrived at solely from the French point of view.[29]

House conveyed his and Wilson's thoughts to the French delegation. Nevertheless, Clemenceau remained steadfast in his opinion that the Germans must be pushed back past the Rhine for the protection of France. House had hoped to convince the French that once the League of Nations took effect, France would ultimately be protected from any aggressor. However, after hearing the fervent French argument with overwhelming force from the entire French delegation, House began to gain sympathy for the French situation and realized that this issue was one that could only be settled through compromise.[30]

Compromise came in the form of a plan from French delegate André Tardieu. On the evening of February 23, House met with Tardieu and the latter explained that it was no longer France's intention that the Rhenish Republic be forever barred from reuniting with Germany. House recalled Tardieu's proposal in his diary, "In five, ten or some other number of years, when the League of Nations was working as a protection against war, they [the French] would have no objection to it [the Rhineland] going where the inclination of the people might lead them."[31] For

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[28] Birdsall, *Versailles Twenty Years After*, 197-198.
[29] Arthur S. Link ed., *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 55 (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1986), 230.
[30] Seymour, *Intimate Papers*, 344-345.
[31] *Ibid*., 347.

House, this was a suitable step towards a compromise as it upheld the principle of self-determination. The next day, he cabled the basics of the proposal to the president.[32]

Three days after receiving House's cable, Wilson responded telling the Colonel that he was having difficulties decoding his messages and stated, "Sorry to say new means of communication so far so unsatisfactory that I really do not clearly know anything that you are trying to tell me."[33] With communication between the president and House fickle, the Colonel simply continued on with his negotiations. On March 2, House once again met with Tardieu; this time the two men agreed in principle to Tardieu's plan for the Rhenish Republic.[34]

Five days later, House had an official meeting with Lloyd George and Clemenceau. House, still without directives from the president, continued to negotiate the issue of the Rhineland. After the meeting, House cabled Wilson with an update on the discussions the three men had,

> The left bank of the Rhine was discussed, but no tentative agreement was reached because of Clemenceau's very unreasonable attitude. He wanted the Rhenish republics to be perpetually restrained from joining the German Federation. Tardieu tells me he will urge him to modify this view.[35]

As his correspondence makes clear, House's view was that Clemenceau was resolved to making the Rhenish Republic permanently separate from Germany but that the Colonel was counting on Tardieu to persuade the French Prime Minister that temporary separation was a reasonable compromise. When Wilson received and deciphered House's cablegram, he immediately became alarmed.[36] Wilson's reply perfectly embodies the president's worried state, "Am made a little uneasy by what you say of the left bank of the Rhine. I hope that you will not even provisionally consent to the separation of the Rhenish provinces from Germany under any arrangement but will reserve the whole matter until my arrival."[37]

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[32] *Ibid*., 349.
[33] Link, *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 55, 299.
[34] *Ibid*., 387.
[35] *Ibid*., 458.
[36] Birdsall, *Versailles Twenty Years After*, 204.
[37] Link, *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 55, 472.

Wilson's cable came just a little too late. On the very day that Wilson sent his letter, Clemenceau, Lloyd George, and House agreed to establish a committee to study the possible boundaries of the new Germany. Although Lloyd George signed on to idea of a committee, he made it very clear to House that he was uncomfortable with the French proposal in the Rhineland. He began to think of other ways that Great Britain and America could make France feel more secure, including an additional agreement that the two nations would come to the rescue of France if she were ever invaded again.[38]

While House was technically unable to make formal commitments for the president, he had nevertheless made a commitment in principle concerning the Rhenish Republic. This decision had major consequences in that it completely changed the president's bargaining position upon his return to Paris. According to the president, House effectively opened the door to issues Wilson believed were in opposition to America's peace program. Thus when the President returned to France he arrived to a situation that was entirely different from the one he left only weeks earlier. It was a situation that he and others around him would later blame Colonel House for creating, and would constitute the beginning of the end of not only the idealistic peace they had hoped for, but also their friendship.[39]

When the *USS George Washington* carrying President Wilson docked at the French port of Brest, Colonel House was there awaiting the president's arrival. On their train ride to Paris, House updated Wilson on all the advancements made at the conference during his absence. That evening in his diary, House noted that Wilson's tone towards him had changed saying that Wilson was "bitter" and "militant."[40] House was not the only one to notice the change. Wilson's biographer, Ray Stannard Baker, who traveled with the President back to France later recalled, "Colonel House met the President when he arrived at Brest and rode up to Paris with him. From

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[38] Birdsall, *Versailles Twenty Years After*, 204.
[39] Inga Floto, *Colonel House in Paris: A Study of American Policy at the Paris Peace Conference 1919* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1973), 128, 154, 163.
[40] Seymour, *Intimate Papers*, 384-385.

this time onward there began to grow up a coldness between the two men." He further noted that it was not a coldness based on "trivial personal causes" but a coldness "based upon far deeper failures in understanding and action."[41] It is impossible to know exactly what caused the change in Wilson's attitude when he encountered House on March 14 at Brest. However, the closest way to understand the President's inner thoughts comes from his wife in an account written years later. Mrs. Wilson quotes her husband as declaring, "House has given away everything I had won before we left Paris. He has compromised on every side, and so I have to start all over again and this time it will be harder."[42]

Another cause for Wilson's changed mood was the deterioration of the political situation back in the United States. While the president was home, the new Republican Congress began to make a Constitutional objection to the League of Nations, arguing it disregarded senatorial rights in its collective security clauses. In addition, the Senate wanted a specific change in the League's constitution that recognized America's Monroe Doctrine. Without senatorial support, the treaty would be have no chance of ratification. President Wilson knew he would need to ask for concessions concerning the League and was afraid of what he might be asked to concede in return.[43]

It was on March 3, some days before Wilson's return to Paris, that Colonel House came to the realization that the outcome of the peace conference would be drastically different than his expectations. That night in his diary he wrote, "It is now evident that peace will not be such a peace as I had hoped, or one which this terrible upheaval should have brought about."[44] It was with this mindset that House compromised on the issue of the Rhenish Republic with the French. However, it was not a mindset that President Wilson shared when he resumed negotiations with the European heads of state on March 15, 1919. This was yet another sign of a break with House,

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[41] Floto, *Colonel House in Paris*, 164.
[42] *Ibid*., 167.
[43] Seymour, *Intimate Papers*, 384-385.
[44] Seymour, *Intimate Papers*, 362.

a friend who the president once said was his second personality and whose thoughts were an extension of his own.

Naturally, the first issue Wilson had to deal with upon returning to Europe was that of the western bank of the Rhine River. Wilson reasserted his opposition to any restructuring of the German border and Lloyd George stood with Wilson on this debate. The impasse brought the conference to a deadlock and things only got worse on March 17, when the French included in their demands for the Rhineland the annexation of the Saar Valley.[45]

The Saar Valley basin was a small region near Luxembourg on the border between France and Germany. The Saar was French territory back between 1789 and 1814, but was taken away and during the Conference of Vienna after Napoleon's defeat in 1815. One hundred years later, Clemenceau was arguing that this justified its return to French sovereignty. However, the French claims went further than simple history. The Saar Valley was the most valuable industrial region in Europe. Prior to the war, the coal mines of the Saar produced eight percent of the German coal output totaling seventeen million tons of coal per year. Since the German army destroyed the French mines and industrial machinery during its initial invasion in 1914, the French felt justified in making a claim to annex this region.[46]

Wilson immediately objected to French claims of the Saar Valley. He argued that while the region may have been French back in 1814, its people in 1919 were overwhelmingly German. For Wilson, ceding this land to France would violate the notion of self-determination. Lloyd George, who took a hostile stance to French claims on the left bank of the Rhine, amended his view slightly concerning the Saar. Seeing this as an issue of German restitution, he took the middle ground, objecting to French occupation of the land, but not to French ownership of the mines in the region.[47]

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[45] Birdsall, *Versailles Twenty Years After*, 226.
[46] *Ibid*., 224-225.
[47] *Ibid*., 225-228.

Concerning the Saar, House saw room for compromise. In his diary on March 17, the Colonel wrote that America should entertain the French proposal to reestablish the 1814 frontier. However, he added that the president should push for political control of the region to go to the League of Nations for a set number of years; that way the region's population might exercise their right to self-determination at a later date. During the next days, House tried to sway Wilson over to his point of view on both questions concerning the German boundaries. However, Wilson remained immovable on the issue of the Saar as well as the Rhenish Republic.[48]

Over the next week and a half, negotiations among the European powers nearly grinded to a complete halt and the conference appeared to be approaching a moment of crisis. Crisis came on March 28, during the meeting of the heads of state of the four European powers. In the afternoon session, the Council of Four, as they had come to be called, began to discuss French territorial claims. Clemenceau once again made his case for the Saar Valley and Wilson challenged him. During the conversation, Wilson asked Clemenceau what rightful claim the French had to a land that was so characteristically German. Clemenceau responded with the argument that the Saar had been French territory one hundred years ago. At this moment, the Italian premier Vittorio Orlando quipped that Italy might begin to make claims to land controlled by Great Britain, as some hundreds of years ago it was once part of the Roman Empire. Wilson heartily laughed at Orlando's joke, while Clemenceau failed to see the humor.[49]

The meeting spiraled downhill from this moment. Wilson attacked Clemenceau on both the Saar and the Rhenish Republic, saying that the French did "not have sufficient historical basis" to annex these territories and reiterated his position that the people of the Saar should maintain ownership of their coal mines. At this moment, Clemenceau went on an offensive that attacked the intentions of the president. The French leader claimed that President Wilson "disregards the depths of human nature" because "America did not see this war at a close distance

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[48] Seymour, *Intimate Papers*, 383.
[49] Link, *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 56, 348.

for its first three years." He concluded his personal assault on Wilson by accusing him of wanting "to do justice to the Germans."[50] At this point, Clemenceau got up and walked out of the meeting.[51]

That night Colonel House met with President Wilson. In his diary he recounted the discussion the two men had,

> I asked the President to bring his position on the French [Saar] boundary proposals into harmony with the British…it would be a tactical mistake to have the United States take a stand in which she was not supported by Great Britain. I advised yielding a little in order to secure harmony, so that the accusation could not be made that we were unreasonable.[52]

However, Wilson refused to yield, prompting Clemenceau to more insults on Wilson's character. In private, the Tiger suggested, "The President thought himself another Jesus Christ come upon the earth to reform men."[53]

Clemenceau was not the only one becoming frustrated with Wilson. House, in his diary on April 1, gave his own thoughts, "The President is becoming stubborn and angry, and he never was a good negotiator. So there you are. I think the President is becoming unreasonable, which does not make for solutions."[54] House even went as far as saying to Robert Lansing the American Secretary of State, "It was a mistake for him [Wilson] to come [to Paris] at all."[55]

On April 3, with the Conference still in a state of crisis, conditions drastically changed. On that day, Wilson came down with a severe case of influenza, and the Council of Four had to suspend their meetings while Wilson took to his bed. Wilson's doctor noted in his diary that the president had a fever of 103 degrees and was experiencing "violent coughing spells."[56]

The President would be unable to attend to the peace conference for several days, but did not wish to see negotiations delayed.[57] While Wilson's relationship with House was already

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[50] *Ibid*., 366.
[51] Seymour, *Intimate Papers*, 396.
[52] *Ibid*., 397.
[53] Link, *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, 517.
[54] *Ibid*., 518.
[55] *Ibid*., 351.
[56] *Ibid*., 557.
[57] Seymour, *Intimate Papers*, 398.

strained, the president had no other choice but to select the Colonel to take his place on the Council of Four as he was the only American delegate with intimate knowledge of the issues.[58] House, who had become increasingly impatient with the progress of the Conference, was excited for his chance to push forward the peace process saying, "It was more important to bring about peace quickly than it was to haggle over details." He further argued, that he "would rather see an immediate peace and the world brought to order…than…a better peace and delay."[59]

The first three days that House stood in for President Wilson, the Council of Four debated the issue of German reparations. House successfully and accurately represented Wilson's stance on this issue and arranged an agreement among the four heads of state. However, on the morning of April 8, the council addressed the issue of the Saar Valley. Lloyd George opened the discussion saying that the Saar should be transformed into a neutral state and House concurred that so long as this "buffer state" was placed under the protection of the League of Nations, it would be considered by the United States.[60]

That afternoon, House's position on the Saar Valley once again proved to misrepresent President Wilson's view. Later that day, Wilson felt healthy enough to rejoin the conference and immediately stated his position in this crucial debate. The president claimed he was ready to cede the coal mines to France, but he refused any split of the Saar from Germany. During his brief time on the Council of Four, House strongly sided with French claims both in formal and informal discussions concerning the Saar and the left bank of the Rhine.[61] House was so firmly in Clemenceau's corner that at one point during the conference Lloyd George complained to House, "You and I do not agree as well as the President and I agree."[62]

The very next day, on April 9, President Wilson realized that he could no longer escape making concessions. He proposed that German sovereignty over the Saar be suspended for

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[58] Floto, *Colonel House in Paris*, 188-192.
[59] Birdsall, *Versailles Twenty Years After*, 259.
[60] Seymour, *Intimate Papers*, 405.
[61] *Ibid*., 405-406.
[62] Birdsall, *Versailles Twenty Years After*, 212-213.

fifteen years and placed under the authority of the League of Nations. However, the issue of the Rhenish Republic still remained. The president had offered some concessions to Clemenceau on this issue, specifically the offer of military support should France be invaded through this region again. However, Wilson had continued to hold on to the idea that the left bank of the Rhine should not be separated from Germany, a view that put him at odds with Clemenceau's view of a thirty year Allied occupation of the region.[63]

Finally, on April 14, a breakthrough was made. Clemenceau, through Colonel House, came down on his demands to three five year periods of occupation, so long as the American offer of protection remained. House immediately took this message to Wilson and recounted his interaction with the president in his diary, "The President made a wry face over some of it, particularly the three five-year periods of occupation, but he agreed to it all."[64] Lloyd George held out for several more days, but on April 22 he gave a reluctant acceptance of the compromise concerning the Rhineland, "Very well, I accept."[65] With the compromises on the German boundaries complete, the other European powers acquiesced to Wilson's proposed changes to the the League of Nations. By mid-April, the completion of the treaty appeared to be on the horizon.[66]

While House must have been satisfied that the treaty seemed close to completion, he could not have been content with the current state of his relationship with President Wilson. After House stood in for Wilson on the Council during his illness, their relationship deteriorated even further. The two men had already quarreled over the Rhineland question and House clearly did not approve of Wilson's handling of the Saar crisis with the French. Conversely, House did not understand Wilson's firm opposition to compromise. Wilson had wanted to make a principled stand, if for only a moment, against French territorial demands. However, where Wilson wanted

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[63] Seymour, *Intimate Papers*, 406.
[64] *Ibid*., 409.
[65] Birdsall, *Versailles Twenty Years After*, 214.
[66] Seymour, *Intimate Papers*, 433.

to make a principled stand, House saw a tactical opportunity to concede a point to the French in order to pass through American changes to the League of Nations.[67]

The final rift between Wilson and House came over the issue of Italian territorial demands. Throughout the entire conference, the Italians had remained relatively quiet and offered nearly blanket support for the American program. Prime Minster Orlando, who was well liked and respected by the American delegation, had hoped that by supporting American demands during negotiations, he would receive a favorable settlement concerning his territorial claims, which centered on the Adriatic port of Fiume.[68]

Italy's claims to the Fiume evolved out of the fear of having a strong state on the east coast of the Adriatic Sea. For years, that land had been occupied by the Austro-Hungarian Empire, but now since its collapse was replaced by a Jugo-Slav State. Italy was interested in becoming the dominant regional power and the port of Fiume was the biggest puzzle piece in attaining this goal.[69] They argued their claims on strategic necessity, economic concerns, and even nationality of the people of Fiume in order to appeal to Wilson's principles.[70]

Wilson, who had just negotiated away the Saar Valley, was in no mood for another compromise. Concerning Fiume, he was dedicated to standing up for his principles against what he regarded as excessive Italian demands contrary to self-determination (the population of Fiume was both Italian and Slavic). While the president readied to fight for his principles, Colonel House believed in the need to compromise on this matter. House recognized that throughout the conference, there was no greater ally to the United States than the Italian Prime Minister. While House agreed that Italy's territorial claim of Fiume too great, he believed there was a need to treat Orlando and the Italians with sympathy on this issue.[71]

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[67] Floto, *Colonel House in Paris*, 199.
[68] Birdsall, *Versailles Twenty Years After*, 264, 272.
[69] Seymour, *Intimate Papers*, 434.
[70] Birdsall, *Versailles Twenty Years After*, 268.
[71] Seymour, *Intimate Papers*, 437.

From this point forward, House actively worked towards a compromise and proposed making Fiume a "free city" under the League of Nations. On April 18, House met with Wilson and encouraged the president to accept his proposal.[72] However, House's actions put him in direct opposition to the principled stand the president was attempting to make. Furthermore, Wilson believed the Colonel's attempts to arrange a compromise greatly complicated his negotiating position in the final days of the conference.[73] In the end, the issue of Fiume was never settled at Paris. Orlando never understood why Wilson had yielded so much to France, but would not offer a simple concession to Italy, especially when one of Wilson's supposed closest advisors was advocating for such a compromise. On April 24, Orlando left the Paris and never returned.[74]

By the end of the peace conference, the unusually close bond between President Wilson and Colonel House was nearly completely severed. During their disagreement over Fiume, the President rarely again met with House alone, something that occurred practically daily at the beginning of the conference. However, once Orlando left Paris in the wake of the Fiume crisis, the two men barely saw each other at all.[75]

Many historians have attempted to explain the exact moment when Colonel House's relationship with the president was officially severed. Yet, there is no one moment in history that solely contributed to this break. Instead, the fracture in their relationship occurred over time, between President Wilson's return to Paris and the end of the peace conference. It is important to note, the split between the two men did not occur over a difference in ideology; both Wilson and House truly believed in the idealistic goals of the American peace program. Rather the split happened over the divergent views concerning how to achieve their common goal. Wilson believed in standing firm on his principles that were outlined in the Fourteen Points, and he was resolved to fighting for them even if he would need to compromise upon them later. However,

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[72] *Ibid*., 442-445.
[73] Birdsall, *Versailles Twenty Years After*, 287.
[74] Seymour, *Intimate Papers*, 448-449.
[75] Birdsall, *Versailles Twenty Years After*, 287.

Colonel House believed in establishing a quick peace reached through compromise and diplomacy, with sympathy for the nations of a war torn Europe.

No one incident embodies the break between the two men more than their meeting in Paris on June 28 after the Treaty of Versailles had officially been signed. The two men discussed the impending struggle that President Wilson would have in getting the U.S. Senate to ratify the treaty. House recorded their conversation in his diary,

> My last conversation with the President yesterday was not reassuring. I urged him to meet the Senate in a conciliatory spirit; if he treated them with the same consideration he had used with his foreign colleagues here, all would be well. In reply, he said, "House, I have found one can never get anything in this life that is worth while without fighting for it." I combated this, and reminded him that Anglo-Saxon civilization was built upon compromise.[76]

After his conversation with House, President Wilson left Paris to return to the United States. At home, without compromising, Wilson fought for the ratification of the treaty he had brought home with him. In the end he failed; the Senate never approved the Treaty of Versailles. President Wilson and Colonel House would never see each other again.[77]

[76] Seymour, *Intimate Papers*, 487.
[77] Birdsall, *Versailles Twenty Years After*, 287.

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