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Woodrow Wilson's Place in History

By General the Right Honorable Jan Christian Smuts, Premier of South Africa.
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General the Right Honorable Jan Christian Smuts, Premier of the Union of South Africa, served with President Wilson on the League of Nations commission of the peace conference.

General Smuts was an active leader of the Boer army in the field in the Boer war. He is a graduate of Cambridge university in England, served as state attorney for the South African republic, and was well known as a member of the bar at Cape Town.

Accepting the outcome of the Boer war, he entered the service of the British government, becoming colonial secretary for the Transvaal in 1907 and exercising a leading influence as a delegate in the national convention of 1910, which drew up the constitution for the present Union of South Africa. He was minister of defense of the South African government and commanded the troops in the campaign against the Germans in East Africa in 1916-17. Promoted to be an honorary lieutenant-general, he was the South African representative in the imperial war cabinet in 1917-18. This led to his prominence in the peace conference and to his close contact with President Wilson. On February 8 of this year Premier Smuts and the South African party won a decisive victory at the polls over General Hertzog and those who advocated the secession of South Africa from the British empire.



PREMIER SMUTS

Pretoria, South Africa, Jan. 8, 1921. It has been suggested that I should write a short estimate and appraisal of the work of President Wilson on the termination of his presidency of the United States. I feel I must comply with the suggestion. I feel I may not remain silent when there is an opportunity to say a word of appreciation for the work of one with whom I came in close contact at a great period and who rendered the most signal service to the great human cause.

There is a great saying Mommson (I believe) in reference to the close of Hannibal's career in failure and eclipse. "On those whom the gods love they lavish infinite joys and infinite sorrows." It has come back to my mind in reference to the close of Wilson's career. For a few brief moments he was not only the leader of the greatest state in the world; he was raised to far giddier heights and became the center of the world's hopes. And then he fell, misunderstood and rejected by his own people, and his great career closes apparently in signal and tragic defeat.

What is the explanation of this tremendous tragedy, which is not solely American, which closely concerns the whole world? Of course, there are purely American elements in the explanation, which I am not competent to speak on. But besides the American quarrel with President Wilson there is something to be said on the great matters in issue. On these I may be permitted to say a few words.

The position occupied by President Wilson in the world's imagination at the close of the Great War and at the beginning of the peace conference was terrible in its greatness. It was a terrible position for any mere man to occupy. Probably to no human being in all history did the hopes, the prayers, the aspirations of so many millions of his fellows turn with such poignant intensity as to him at the close of the war. At a time of the deepest darkness and despair, he had raised aloft a light to which all eyes had turned. He had spoken divine words of healing and consolation to a broken humanity. His lofty moral idealism seemed for a moment to dominate the brutal passions which had torn the old world asunder. And he was supposed to possess the secret which would remake the world on fairer lines. The peace which Wilson was bringing to the world was expected to be God's peace. Prussianism lay crushed; brute force had failed utterly. The moral character of the universe had been most signally vindicated. There was a universal vague hope of a great moral peace, of a new world order arising visibly and immediately on the ruins of the old. This hope was not a mere superficial sentiment. It was the intense expression at the end of the war of the inner moral and spiritual force which had upborne the peoples during the dark night of the war and had nerved them to an effort almost beyond human strength. Surely, surely, God had been with them in that long night of agony. His was the victory; His should be the peace. And President Wilson was looked upon as the man to make this great peace. He had voiced the great ideals of the new order; his great utterances had become the contractual basis for the armistice and the peace. The idealism of Wilson would surely become the reality of the new order of things in the peace treaty.

In this atmosphere of extravagant, almost frenzied expectation he arrived at the Paris peace conference. Without hesitation he plunged into that inferno of human passions. He went down into the pit like a second Hercules to bring back the fair Alcetis of the world's desire. There were six months of agonized waiting, during which the world situation rapidly deteriorated. And then he emerged with the peace treaty. It was not a Wilson peace, and he made a fatal mistake in somehow giving the impression that the peace was in accord with his Fourteen Points and his various declarations. Not so the world had understood him. This was a punic peace, the same sort of peace as the victor had dictated to the vanquished for thousands of

years. It was not Alcetis, it was a haggard, unlovely woman with features distorted with hatred, greed, and selfishness, and the little child that the woman carried was scarcely noticed. Yet it was for the saving of the child that Wilson had labored until he was a physical wreck. Let our other great statesmen and leaders enjoy their well earned honors for their unquestioned success at Paris. To Woodrow, the apparent failure, belongs the undying honor, which will grow with the centuries, of having saved the "little child that shall lead them yet." No other statesman but Wilson could have done it. And he did it.

The people, the common people of all lands, did not understand the significance of what had happened. They saw only that hard, unlovely Prussian peace, and the great hope died in their hearts. The great disillusionment took its place. The most receptive took for a new start the world had been in for centuries passed away. Faith in their governors and leaders was largely destroyed, and the foundations of human government were shaken in a way which will be felt for generations. The Paris peace lost an opportunity as unique as the Great War itself. In destroying the moral idealism born of the sacrifices of the war it did almost as much as the war itself in shattering the structure of western civilization.

And the odium for all this fell especially on President Wilson. Round him the hopes had centered; round him the disillusion and despair now gathered. Popular opinion largely held him responsible for the bitter disappointment and grievous failure. The cynics scoffed; his friends were silenced in the universal disappointment. Little or nothing had been expected from the other leaders; the whole failure was put to the account of Woodrow Wilson. And finally America for reasons of her own, joined the pack and at the end it was his own people who tore him to pieces.

Will this judgment, born of momentary disillusion and disappointment, stand in future, or will it be reversed? The time has not come to pass final judgment on either Wilson or any of the other great actors in the drama at Paris. The personal estimates will depend largely on the interpretation of that drama in the course of time. As one who saw and watched things from the inside I feel convinced that the present popular estimates are largely superficial and will not stand the searching test of time. And I have no doubt whatever that Wilson has been harshly, unfairly, unjustly dealt with, and that he has been made a scapegoat for the sins of others. Wilson made mistakes, and there were occasions when I ventured to sound a warning note. But it was not his mistakes that caused the failure for which he has been held mainly responsible.

Let us admit the truth, however bitter it is to do so for those who believe in human nature. It was not Wilson who failed. The position is far more serious. It was the human spirit itself that failed at Paris. It is no use passing judgments and making scapegoats of this or that individual statesman or group of statesmen. Idealists make a great mistake in not facing the real facts sincerely and resolutely. They believe in the power of the spirit, in the goodness which is at the heart of things, in the triumph which is its store for the great moral ideals of the race. But this faith only too often leads to an optimism which is sadly and fatally at variance with actual results. It is the realist and not the idealist who is generally justified by events. We forget that the human spirit, the spirit of goodness and truth in the world, is still only an infant crying in the night, and that the struggle with darkness is as yet mostly an unequal struggle.

Paris proved this terrible truth once more. It was not Wilson who failed there, but humanity itself. It was not the statesmen that failed, so much as the spirit of the peoples behind them. The hope, the aspiration for a new world order of peace and right and justice—however deeply and universal felt—was still only feeble and ineffective in comparison with the dominant national passions which found

their expression in the peace treaty. Even if Wilson had been one of the great demi-gods of the human race, he could not have saved the peace. Knowing the peace conference as I knew it from within, I feel convinced in my own mind that not the greatest man born of woman in the history of the race would have saved that situation. The great hope was not the heralding of the coming dawn, as the peoples thought, but only a dim intimation of some far off event towards which we shall yet have to make many a long weary march. Sincerely as we believed in the moral ideals for which we had fought, the temptation at Paris of a large booty to be divided proved too great. And in the end not only the leaders but the peoples preferred a bit of booty here, a strategic frontier there, a coal field or an oil well; an addition to their population or their resources—to all the faint allurements of the ideal. As I said at the time, the real peace was still to come, and it could only come from a new spirit in the peoples themselves.

What was really saved at Paris was the child—the Covenant of the League of Nations. The political realists who had their eye on the loot were prepared—however reluctantly—to throw that innocent little sop to President Wilson and his fellow idealists. After all, there was not much harm in it. It threatened no present national interest, and it gave great pleasure to a number of good unpractical people in most countries. Above all, President Wilson had to be conciliated, and this was the last and the greatest of the Fourteen Points on which he had set his heart and by which he was determined to stand or fall. And so he got his way. But it is a fact that only a man of his great power and influence and dogged determination could have carried the covenant through that peace conference. Others had seen with him the great vision, others had perhaps given more thought to the elaboration of the great plan. But his was the power and the will that carried it through. The covenant is Wilson's souvenir to the future of the world. No one will ever deny him that honor.

The honor is very great, indeed, for the covenant is one of the great creative documents of human history. The peace treaty will fade into merciful oblivion, and its provisions will be gradually obliterated by the great human tides sweeping over the world. But the covenant will stand as sure as fate. Forty-two nations gathered round it at the first meeting of the league at Geneva. And the day is not far off when all the free peoples of the world will gather round it. It must succeed, because there is no other way for future civilization. It does not realize the great hopes born of the war, but it provides the only method and instrument by which in the course of time those hopes can be realized. Speaking as one who has some right to speak on the fundamental conceptions, objects, and methods of the covenant, I feel sure that most of the present criticism is based on misunderstandings. These misunderstandings will clear away, one by one the peoples still outside the covenant will fall in behind this banner, under which the human race is going to march forward to triumphs of peaceful organization and achievement undreamt of by us children of an unhappy era. And the leader who, in spite of apparent failure, succeeded in inscribing his name on that banner has achieved the most enviable and enduring immortality. Americans of the future will yet proudly and gratefully rank him with Washington and Lincoln, and his fame will have a more universal significance than theirs.

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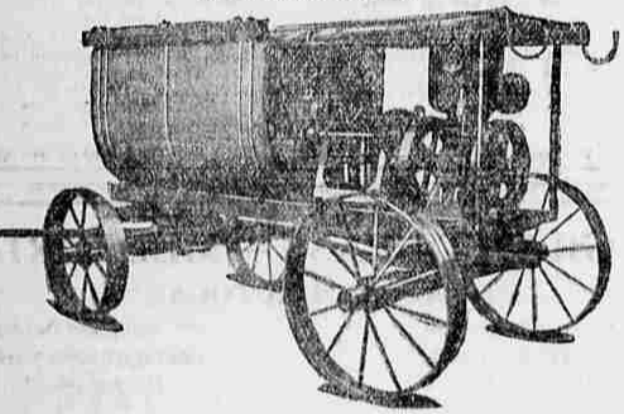
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