

*Address at New York University
Hall of Fame Ceremony
on the Unveiling of the Bust and
Tablet for Woodrow Wilson*

NEW YORK MAY 20, 1956

May I first of all thank you for inviting me to join in this ceremony. An occasion such as this in the Hall of Fame for Great Americans belongs in a very special way to the American people. This is a national shrine. The men who are honored here have helped to make the history which is your national heritage. They are bone of your bones and flesh of your flesh.

In asking an international official—the Secretary-General of the United Nations—to speak on this occasion, you have, I am told, broken a precedent of long standing. I am deeply grateful for the generous thought which prompted your invitation. You have done so because of Woodrow Wilson's pioneering leadership in the struggle to achieve a just and peaceful international order.

Woodrow Wilson came to that leadership as an authentic and eloquent spokesman to the world of the spirit of American idealism. That spirit, expressed anew from generation to generation, is deeply rooted in your own national culture. But because it also reflects and shares ideals that are universal, it has often been an inspiring and enriching influence for all mankind.

This is the case with the great idealists of any age and culture. This was the case with Woodrow Wilson's advocacy of world organization. From the very first, he spoke in terms of universal ideals and of the common interest. His first public commitment to the idea of a League of Nations was made just forty years ago this month. It was made when he spoke on May 27, 1916, to a meeting of a group of world-minded Americans who had banded together as The League to Enforce Peace.

Why was an association of nations needed? Because, he said, "the peace of the world must henceforth depend upon a new and more wholesome diplomacy"; because "the principle of public right must henceforth take precedence over the individual interests of particular nations"; because "the nations of the world must in some way band themselves together to see that that right prevails as against any sort of selfish aggression"; because "there must be a common agreement for a common object" and "at the heart of that common object must lie the inviolable rights of peoples and of mankind."

In this same speech he defined some of these rights: the right of every people "to choose the sovereignty under which they shall live"; the right of small states "to enjoy the same respect for their sovereignty and territorial integrity as the great nations" and the right to be free from every disturbance of the peace "that has its origin in aggression and disregard of the rights of peoples and nations."

These statements of the reasons for, and purposes of, world organization are as much to the point today as when they were made forty years ago. In his stress upon the precedence of "public right" over "the individual interests of particular nations" and upon "common agreement for a common object"—that is for the rights of peoples—Woodrow Wilson went to the heart of the matter.

As he so clearly understood, the international interest had to be institutionalized if it were to have a reasonable hope of prevailing in the course of time. No matter how solemn the engagement to common purposes and universal aims, whether expressed in a Covenant for a League of Nations or in a Charter for the United Nations, institutions functioning continuously in the service of these purposes would be needed to give them effect. When he opened discussion of plans for a League of Nations at the Paris Peace Conference in January 1919, Wilson called for the creation of an organization that should, he stressed, be "not merely a formal thing, not an occasional thing, not a thing sometimes called into life to meet an exigency" but that should have a "vital continuity" of function. He summed it up in these expressive words: "It should be the eye of the nations to keep watch upon the common interest, an eye that does not slumber, an eye that is everywhere watchful and attentive."

Forty years after Woodrow Wilson first uttered these words, the idea of world organization is far more firmly established than it ever was in the years of the League of Nations. The mere fact that the United Na-

tions, unlike the League, has never lost a Member state, and now, with seventy-six Members, seems to be moving inexorably toward true universality, speaks for this. But we are still seeking ways to make our international institutions fulfill more effectively the fundamental purpose expressed in Woodrow Wilson's words—"to be the eye of the nations to keep watch upon the common interest."

I have no doubt that forty years from now we shall also be engaged in the same pursuit. How could we expect otherwise? World organization is still a new adventure in human history. It needs much perfecting in the crucible of experience and there is no substitute for time in that respect.

Two of our most common human failings, indeed, seem to be our disrespect for the slow processes of time and our tendency to shift responsibility from ourselves to our institutions. It is too often our habit to see the goal, to declare it and, in declaring it, to assume that we shall automatically achieve it. This leads us to confuse ends with means, to label as failure what is in fact an historic step forward, and in general to mistake the lesser for the greater thing.

Thus Woodrow Wilson, in the years between the wars, was commonly considered to have failed because the United States refused to join the League of Nations. Yet, in fact, he had made history, great history, by being the principal founder of the first world organization.

The League itself was labeled a failure because its existence did not prevent a second World War. Yet the failure lay not in the League, but in the nations which failed to live up to their pledged word and also failed to infuse into the League as an institution the vitality and strength that Wilson had pleaded for in 1919.

In our day, too, we often hear it said that the United Nations has succeeded here, or has failed there. What do we mean? Do we refer to the purposes of the Charter? They are expressions of universally shared ideals which cannot fail us, though we, alas, often fail them. Or do we think of the institutions of the United Nations? They are our tools. We fashioned them. We use them. It is our responsibility to remedy any flaws there may be in them. It is our responsibility to correct any failures in our use of them. And we must expect the responsibility for remedying the flaws and correcting the failures to go on and on, as long as human beings are imperfect and human institutions likewise.

This is a difficult lesson for both idealists and realists, though for different reasons. I suppose that, just as the first temptation of the realist is

the illusion of cynicism, so the first temptation of the idealist is the illusion of Utopia. As an idealist, it was natural that Woodrow Wilson also did not entirely escape his temptation, any more than have most of the idealists of history. In his valiant fight for the cause of the League of Nations, he went beyond the concept of an institution acting for the common interest of the peoples of the world. He visualized the establishment of the League as ending the old system of the balance of power and substituting what he called a "community of power."

The creation of a true community of power to serve the common interest is, indeed, the goal—now as it was in Woodrow Wilson's day. But the establishment of the League of Nations did not, and could not, of itself bring such a community of power into being. It did not, nor could it, end at one stroke the system of the balance of power in international affairs.

The League was an association of sovereign nation-states, just as the United Nations is today. In such an association, the play of the balance of power is inevitable. And it should be said that one of the most serious remaining obstacles in the way of public understanding of the true role of the United Nations today results from a similar tendency to picture the United Nations of 1945 as establishing collective security for the world.

Now, as then, it is important for all of us to understand that true collective security, in the sense of an international police power engaged to defend the peace of the world, is to be found at the end, not at the beginning, of the effort to create and use world institutions that are effective in the service of the common interest.

The spirit and practice of world community must first gain in strength and custom by processes of organic growth. It is to the helping along of these processes of growth that we should devote all our ingenuity and our effort. To the extent that we are able to increase the weight of the common interest as against the weight of special interests, and therefore of the power of the whole community to guide the course of events, we shall be approaching that much nearer to the goal.

This is, in fact, the most essential message of the career of Woodrow Wilson for the present day, whether we think of him as educator, as President of the United States, or as the pioneer of world organization.

Throughout his life he was the eloquent spokesman and dedicated champion of the general welfare both within his nation and among the nations of the world. Though his hopes for the enforcement of peace

through collective security were ahead of the times, he also saw that international organization should rely primarily upon moral force, because—in his words—it was “intended as a constitution of peace, not as a league of war.”

He understood very well what was at the root of the difficulty with making world organization work more effectively in the common interest and he expressed it in words that we would do well to turn into the first person plural and repeat to ourselves in our own times: “They have thought too much of the interests that were near them and they have not listened to the voices of their neighbors.”

Woodrow Wilson could denounce such selfishness, as powerfully as he could evoke a vision of “pastures of quietness and peace such as the world never dreamed of before.” He could also give movingly human expressions to his deep-seated faith in the processes of democracy. Just before he died in 1924, he told a friend: “I am not sorry I broke down. As it is coming now, the American people are thinking their way through and reaching their own decision, and that is the better way for it to come.”

It is not only the American people, of course, but the peoples of many nations, who have been thinking their way through and reaching their own decision since Woodrow Wilson first showed the way. The United Nations stands as evidence of the direction of their thinking and of their decision.

How would Woodrow Wilson have reacted to the recent developments in the life of the United Nations?

Would he not have hailed the atomic conference at Geneva last summer as evidence of the possibilities of cooperation even in a divided world, when a major interest common to all is at stake? Would he not have been happy that this cooperation developed within the framework of an organization owing so much to his original conception?

Would he not have hailed the development of the membership, which shows the vitality of the concept of universality at the present juncture in the growth of internationalism?

And, although he certainly would have been deeply worried by the underlying problems, would he not have been happy to see how in the Middle East the United Nations machinery could help Member governments in crystallizing their wish to reestablish order?

I think he would, but I think he also would have found reason for criticism. He would have been surprised to see how far we have yet

failed to bring international conflicts effectively under the rule of law.

Although the spokesman for "open covenants openly arrived at"—for democracy in international negotiation—he would also, I think, not have approved all of the applications given to that sound principle. Knowing too well the ways of man to believe in his ability to resist selfish or short-sighted public pressures, he would certainly have found it appropriate to plead for a combination of the new methods of diplomacy, of which he was in favor, with such of those time-honored political techniques as would give us the result best serving the interests of peace.

It is a true measure of the leadership and idealism of Woodrow Wilson that it is not a vain pastime in this way to give some thought to the question of how he would have looked at our endeavors, our failures, and our successes, in the fields to which he devoted the best of his life. He is not only the first and foremost spokesman for true international organization. He is one of those who helped to create an international conscience which is, and will remain, a living force in all attempts to build a world of order.