World War I and the League of Nations

PS 142A.6
First attempt to extend U.S. rule to Europe.
Neither coercion nor indirect rule possible. Reverted to domestically-determined policies.

Mischaracterized as debate between isolationists and liberals, but actually between Wilsonian internationalists and Hamiltonian unilateralists who judged the benefits and costs of coercion and indirect rule differently.

Failure of postwar cooperation led to economic instability, the Great Depression, Fascism, and World War II.
World War I

- Rising tensions in Europe.
- Assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria.
- Schliffen Plan expands war, then empire.
- U.S. reluctant to join.
U.S. and World War I

- Not our fight!
  - Domestic cleavages along ethnic lines
  - Wilson reelected in 1916 on slogan “He kept us out of the war.”
- Germany expands attacks on neutral shipping in March-April 1917.
  - Several attacks on U.S. merchant ships
  - Zimmermann Telegram March 1917
- U.S. enters war on April 6, 1917.
Making the World Safe for Democracy: Wilson’s 14 Points

- Abolition of secret treaties
- Freedom of the seas
- Equality of trade
- Reduction of armaments
- Adjustment of colonial claims
- Return to prewar borders
- Dissolution of Austrian-Hungarian empire
- Balkans to be independent states
- Reestablish Poland
- League of Nations
President Woodrow Wilson

- Famous professor of Political Science
- President of Princeton University
- Progressive Governor of New Jersey (1911-1913)
- Elected in 1912 in 3-way race
The Design of the League of Nations

- Collective Security
  - Art. 10 creates a morally binding commitment for member states to preserve the integrity and independence of all other states.
  - By binding states to action, attempted to overcome the collective action problem at the heart of any collective security scheme.

- Council of the League could call upon states to act and advise them of their obligations.
  - Council could only act by unanimous consent
  - U.S. thus had a veto over League actions
  - But, Council free to determine its own powers

- For Wilson, the U.S. would rule the League, and the League would rule Europe.
The Debate over the League

- Veto in the League did not protect against Executive Power within the U.S.
- Open-ended “contract” allowed for an expansion of powers within the League.
- Current instability in Europe increased risk of opportunism (entrapment).
- Commercial relations did not require international rule.
Strategy

- All knew that coercion would be costly.
  - WW I was devastating for all; ended with compromise. To fight to the “end” to impose U.S. will on Europe would have been extraordinarily costly.
- U.S. lacked clear “allies” within European powers.
  - Interests differed over geopolitics: status of Germany, empires, values
  - Interests differed over economic policy: U.S. moving towards freer trade, Europe away from openness
  - But no “pro-American” group that could be promoted to power
- Governance costs of supporting one faction against others would be high
- No specific assets at risk
  - U.S. had very little at stake in Europe that would have justified costs of ruling region
Collective Security

- Wilsonian internationalists favored continued engagement by U.S.
  - Willing to forego some measure of sovereignty to reduce risk of future wars.

- Hamiltonian unilateralists favored freedom of action.
  - Concern about executive power real
  - Were not isolationists (split in the 1930s)
  - Supported an active U.S. role in world politics
  - Preferred strategy of Off-Shore balancing.
The Tragedy of Wilson

- Wilson proved unwilling to compromise.
  - Small amendments preserving power of Congress and such might have enabled passage
  - Wilson refused to consider revisions. Particularly fearful of watering down Art. 10
- Wilson took his case to the American people.
  - In September 1919, he suffered a paralytic stroke.
- Treaty (with Lodge reservations) defeated in November 1919 (39-55) and again in March 1920 (49-35).
  - Irreconcilables joined with committed Wilsonians to defeat treaty.
Failure of Cooperation Amidst Hard Bargaining

- Do not know the counterfactual of the League with the U.S. as a member
  - Reality probably closer to Lodge than Wilson
- With failure of the League, cooperation became harder than it might otherwise have been.
- Countries unable to reconcile their differences, leading to economic collapse and fascism/militarism
Failure of Cooperation: War Debts and Reparations

- Germany plagued by crippling reparations.
- UK and France owed large war debts to the U.S.
- U.S. refused to forgive loans, but willing to make new loans

The International Financial System Under the Dawes Plan and Young Plan 1924-30

- $2.6 Billion in War Debt Payments
- $2.5 Billion in Loans
- $2.0 Billion in Reparations Payments

U.S.  

Allies  

Germany
Failure of Cooperation: Economic Instability

- Return to the Gold Standard
- Agricultural depression
- Financial crisis → Great Depression
- Trade Wars
  - Smoot-Hawley and retaliation
Smoot-Hawley 1930

U.S. Average Tariff Rates (1821-2016)

Effect of Smoot-Hawley

Chart 7: When protectionism failed ... impact of 1930 Smoot-Hawley Tariff Act on US equities

- 24 March '30 - Passed the Senate
- 28 May '29 - Passed the House
- 17 June '30 - Smoot-Hawley Tariff Act signed into law
- 12 June '34 - Reciprocal Tariff Act

Smoot & Hawley lose their seats in midterm elections
Reduction in World Trade

League of Nations’ World Economic Survey 1932-33
Failure of Cooperation: Economic Instability

- Return to the Gold Standard
- Agricultural depression
- Financial crisis → Great Depression
- Trade wars
  - Smoot-Hawley and retaliation
- Beggar-thy-Neighbor monetary policies
  - Competitive devaluations of currencies
  - Ended only with Tripartite Monetary Agreement of 1936
Consequences

- Fascists come to power in Germany and militarists in Japan.
  - Partly by mobilizing resentment against Versailles
  - Partly due to economic misery from Depression
- In both, attempt to create autonomous economic spheres
- U.S. retreats into true isolationism in the 1930s
First Response Paper

Please answer the following questions using appropriate materials from the course readings and lectures. Be sure to address the question fully and completely. The emphasis should be on the first part of the prompt, with the normative questions (in the last two sentences) being, perhaps, used to motivate your essay or reserved for the conclusion. Your essay should be up to four pages, double-spaced, with normal font (12-point) and margins (approximately 1300 words in total). Although we are not specifically grading according to these criteria, the clarity of your reasoning, grammar, spelling, and general style will matter. Please use this “take-home” assignment as an opportunity to craft a compelling and refined analysis.

You are free, of course, to discuss your thoughts and essay with other students in the course. Each essay, however, must be your original and autonomous response. All essays must be submitted by 11:59 PM on Tuesday, January 28, via Turnitin on Canvas.
First Response Paper

Compare and contrast the order constructed by the United States in the Caribbean basin between 1880 and 1939 with the proposed order championed by President Woodrow Wilson through the League of Nations, where orders are defined as patterned relationships between member states governed by rules, norms, and decision-making procedures. What were the principal differences? Why did the orders differ between the two regions? Why did the former persist for decades while the latter was never implemented? Use the history provided by Herring and the theoretical frameworks by Lake and Mead to support your analysis. Given the normatively objectionable characteristics and the resistance (anti-Americanism) generated by the U.S.-Caribbean order, and the problems of international cooperation that followed the failure of the League of Nations, is some order better than no order? Why?