



THINKER IN BOXES

WOODROW WILSON

Team: League of Nations

Position: Long stop

Status: 6 over par

In political science courses, Woodrow Wilson (1856–1924) is most often discussed in terms of idealism and international politics. He was personally involved in the Treaty of Versailles, which ended World War I, and most political scientists consider him to be the central player in the creation of the League of Nations. The problem with that designation is, however, that the League didn't work. It all failed quite miserably, actually. The Treaty of Versailles turned out to be one of the most catastrophic peace treaties ever imposed on the losers of a war. It saddled Germany with tremendous reparations commitments, which were an economic drain that prevented any real recovery after the war, and in doing so, it all but guaranteed the economic collapse of that country. It's probably not fair to blame Woody, but if he's going to take credit on his website, it's his own fault if I call him on the blame side as well, and the treaty really was one of the primary causes of World War II. The economic despair that the reparations caused, along with some of the more humiliating terms of the peace treaty, proved fertile ground for the rise of extremism in Germany. Hitler used the excuse of the Versailles "diktat" to seize power, and the downhill tumble into World War II inevitably followed. It can even be argued that Woody's famed League of Nations only made matters worse. Wilson was unable even to get his own country to ratify the treaty, and the absence of the United States turned the League into a weak, almost pointless institution that could do nothing except delay confrontation with Nazi Germany by providing a forum for idealists intent on avoiding war. The League seemed like a good idea and all, but like my investment in that chicken sushi chain, it was one of those good ideas that just didn't take off.

A less celebrated, but perhaps more positive, contribution of Wilson was his work on bureaucracy. "The Study of Administration"^a laid much of the conceptual foundation for the rapid development of American bureaucratic government that followed shortly thereafter. In many ways, it was an argument against personalized government. Personalized government left too much discretion to individuals in positions of authority and was fertile ground for corruption. Personalized government was also a problem because the scope and complexity of many of the demands made on governments had grown far beyond what individuals could accomplish in an ad hoc fashion. Professionalism, organization, and structure were needed, and Wilson went about creating them. See, you can blame him for income tax and World War II.

^a Woodrow Wilson, "The Study of Administration," *Political Science Quarterly* 2 (1887): 197–222.