Was Hiram Johnson a True Isolationist During World War I and the League of Nations Debate?

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On June 2, 1919, Hiram Johnson rose to his feet in the Senate chamber to deliver a blistering attack against America's membership in the League of Nations:

This League means that American boys shall police the world; that all the tottering nations of the earth shall be upheld by our blood and our bone . . . It means that I must abandon the lessons of my youth, which until this moment have been the creed of my manhood, of American ideals, American principles, and American patriotism . . . The issue is America. And I am an American.¹

This speech went beyond itemizing specific flaws of the League to articulate a brooding suspicion of foreign governments, a fierce embrace of American patriotism, and contempt for his nemesis, President Woodrow Wilson. After his speech, Johnson embarked on a national speaking tour to denounce the League of Nations. In most cities he drew larger crowds than Wilson did at the same venue just a few days before. By seizing on the League of Nations as the central issue for his presidential bid for the 1920 election, Johnson painted himself as the antithesis of everything Wilson stood for, and in doing so he cemented his place in history as an isolationist. Johnson's comparatively parochial background prior to 1917 as a western governor, dedicated to domestic Progressive reforms with negligible exposure to international relations, only reinforced his propensity for isolationist leanings. He also displayed staunchly isolationist behavior later in his career when he opposed America's participation in the World Court (1935), the modification of the Neutrality Act (1939), the Lend-Lease Bill (1941), and membership in the United Nations (1945).

Nevertheless, during the 1917-1920 period, Johnson's positions on foreign policy were still in their formative stages as a newly minted Senator. Why exactly was Johnson so hostile to Wilson's foreign policy? Did his reasons neatly fit into the definition of "isolationism" or were other factors at work? This paper contends that "isolationist" is not a complete or accurate description for Hiram Johnson at this stage of his career. While he employed isolationist

¹ Senator Hiram Johnson of California, speech on June 2, 1919, 66th Congress, 1st sess., Congressional Record, 501-509.
themes in some of his political rhetoric, an examination of his letters, speeches, and articles reveals a man whose objections to Wilson's foreign policy transcended isolationism, and who was open to an expansive role for America in global affairs. Although defying simplistic definitions, Johnson more often espoused the positions of a unilateralist.

Most historians have characterized Johnson as an isolationist due to his stances on World War I and the League of Nations. After tepid support for America's entry into World War I, he became a leading critic of Wilson's wartime policies and the Versailles Treaty. In particular, he joined the ranks of the "Irreconcilables" in his opposition to the League of Nations. In his 1968 article entitled "California Progressives and Foreign Policy," historian Thomas Paterson highlighted Hiram Johnson's warning in 1916 that the preparedness campaign would only do harm to Progressive accomplishments. Paterson cited Johnson's call in April 1917 for moral, psychic, and social preparedness instead of military measures. Ralph Stone concurred with Paterson in his 1970 book, The Irreconcilables: The Fight Against the League of Nations, and went further by placing Johnson in the isolationist wing of the Irreconcilables. Stone singled out Johnson among the Irreconcilables as temperamentally more negative than his peers and unwilling to offer constructive alternatives to Wilson's proposals.

In his 1972 article "Hiram Johnson: The Making of an Irreconcilable," Richard Lower was generally more sympathetic to Johnson than Stone, suggesting that Johnson's concerns were sincere, consistent with his Progressive philosophy, and not without foundation. Lower quoted Johnson's warning that American democracy itself was being "transformed and disfigured" by the war, and that the management of the war was being "prostituted to serve the interests of Wall Street." Financiers under the cloak of patriotism made "unconscionable profits and gouged the government." In addition, Lower recounted how Johnson was alarmed at the enlargement of executive powers at the expense of Congress, individual liberties, and free speech, especially with the passage of the Espionage Act and Sedition Act. In his subsequent biography of Johnson, A Bloc of One: The Political Career of Hiram W. Johnson, Lower unequivocally treated Johnson as an isolationist when he named the chapter for the 1917-1919 period "The Confirmation of an Isolationist." Lower reiterated Johnson's objections to the war and the League of Nations found in his 1972 article, but added some additional insights. Although Johnson grudgingly voted for war on April 2, 1917, "Unlike Roosevelt, Johnson could not invest war with romance.

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5 Ibid., 509.

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and adventure or see it as an ennobling experience." For Johnson, war was "a bloody, murderous thing . . . a frightful nightmare."7

In the same year that Lower published "Hiram Johnson: The Making of an Irreconcilable" (1972), Peter Boyle wrote "The Roots of Isolationism: A Case Study," featuring Hiram Johnson. Boyle recited the same litany of Johnson's objections to the war, although he categorized those objections under the theme of "cost." Johnson worried America would be stuck paying the bill for the war and maintaining the peace on behalf of rapacious allies. There was also the cost to lives, including the life of his own son Arch who was injured in the war. Finally, the incursion to civil liberties represented a "cost" to American freedoms.8 Boyle linked Johnson's isolationist tendencies to his geographic insularity. Johnson never left California from 1866 to 1910, and his worldview was restricted accordingly.

Howard DeWitt followed Boyle in 1974 with "Hiram Johnson and World War I: A Progressive in Transition." DeWitt covered much of the same ground as Stone, Lower, and Boyle, but he emphasized Johnson's belief that the war was an assault on civic freedoms, especially the 1917 Espionage Act and 1918 Sedition Act.9 In his subsequent article entitled "Hiram Johnson and Economic Opposition to Wilsonian Diplomacy: A Note," DeWitt shifted his focus to Johnson's obsession with the idea that Wilson was being manipulated by British economic interests. America was becoming the protector of British territorial and financial aggrandizement.10 DeWitt did not question the sincerity of Johnson's concerns, but concluded that the acerbity of his invective and his intractable posture on these issues often placed Johnson in the minority of public opinion, and hurt him politically. Finally, in 1993 Michael Weatherson and Hal Bochin published Hiram Johnson: Political Revivalist. While it was less detailed or comprehensive than Lower's Bloc of One, it offered a somewhat different perspective. For Weatherson and Bochin, Johnson was not an isolationist but a "unilateralist." Johnson did not object to international involvements per se. Instead, he supported internationalism as long as it clearly supported American interests.11 They also emphasized that Johnson was motivated by a visceral dislike of Wilson, whom he viewed as an insufferable egotist.12

Throughout the historical studies of Hiram Johnson, a consensus emerged that placed Johnson among isolationists, ascribing to him numerous and profound concerns about the impact of World War I on American freedoms and on the momentum of the Progressive movement. They interpreted Johnson's

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7 Ibid., 115.
12 Ibid., 81, 83, 102.
convictions as sincere, grounded in a domestic Progressive agenda inherited from Californian politics, and they traced a fighting spirit that went back to his early days as a prosecutor. Nevertheless, they disagreed on whether “isolationist” was a technically accurate term for Johnson for this period, and some discounted Johnson’s ultimate influence due to a stubbornness and negativism that marginalized him as a partisan crank. What is missing in these studies is a description of Johnson’s positive vision for America’s appropriate role on the world stage. If he had such deep misgivings about America’s engagement in World War I and the League of Nations, what role did he favor, exactly?

The search for Johnson’s positive vision for America’s role overseas and the question of his identity as an isolationist cannot be easily resolved by his affinity with other Progressives. In fact, there was no single platform in foreign policy among the Progressives. If anything, most Progressives favored an expansionist or interventionist approach to world affairs. As Alan Dawley aptly put it, Progressives “rejected the materialism of balance-of-power politics and embraced, instead, the idealism of making the world safe for democracy as they marched off on a wartime crusade to save the world.” Those with imperialist predilections, such as Theodore Roosevelt, saw a civilizing role that America could play for other countries that were still in the “childhood stage of race development.” Roosevelt enunciated the Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine in 1904, and aggressively applied it to Germany’s blockade of Venezuela in 1902, assisting the Panamanian rebels against Colombia in 1903, taking over the customs collection for Santo Domingo in 1904, and placing a provisional government in Cuba in 1906. Over time Roosevelt’s vision moved away from the colonial interpretation of imperialism, but he still aspired for America to become a major power on the global stage. To help preserve the Open Door Policy in China, he facilitated the Treaty of Portsmouth between Japan and Russia in September 1905, then moderated the Algeciras Conference between France and Germany in 1906 to avert hostilities over Morocco, and finally sent the Great White Fleet around the world from 1907 to 1909 as a projection of American power.

Other Progressives adopted a more “internationalist” posture that rejected any imperialist pretensions. Woodrow Wilson typified the interventionist wing of the internationalists when on April 2, 1917 he justified America’s participation in World War I so that the world could “be made safe for democracy.” He had already opined on January 22, 1917, that American principles and policies were also those of “forward-looking men and women

14 Ibid., 82.
16 Woodrow Wilson, Speech on April 2, 1917, Congressional Record, 65th Congress, 1st sess., Congressional Record, 55, pt. 1:3.
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everywhere, of every modern nation, of every enlightened community."\(^{17}\) His Fourteen Points, introduced on January 8, 1918, and his subsequent campaign for the League of Nations became the capstone for Wilson’s faith in American internationalism, even if it required war. Other Progressive internationalists were not prepared to accept war. They embraced the new paradigm for American foreign policy articulated by the New Republic in 1915, which stated, “Instead of thinking and acting as a self-contained democracy whose virtue depended upon its isolation, the American people must think and act as a democracy whose future depends on its ability to play its part and assume its responsibility in a society of democratic nations.”\(^{18}\) As “Peace Progressives,” however, they insisted on peaceful means. Jane Addams and Robert La Follette both promoted American cooperation with international Progressive causes overseas, but they vehemently denounced America’s entry into World War I. La Follette warned that the only beneficiaries of war would be bankers, industrialists and the imperialistic ambitions of the European allies.\(^{19}\)

Given that Johnson’s identity as a Progressive did not necessarily make him isolationist, who were the isolationists and what were the essential features of isolationism? In The Vanity of Power: American Isolationism and the First World War, John Milton Cooper defined isolationism as “an attitude, policy, doctrine or position opposed to the commitment of American force outside the Western Hemisphere, except in the rarest and briefest of instances.”\(^{20}\) The tradition began with the Massachusetts colonists of the seventeenth century, who saw themselves on a mission to exemplify to the rest of the world a model society. John Winthrop’s famous pronouncement in 1630 that “we must be as a City on Hill” was repeated by future generations, and the purity of this “City” required that it be “preserved from the common corruptions of this evil world,” namely Europe.\(^{21}\) In his Farewell Address of 1796, George Washington reiterated the warning about any foreign entanglements, and the Monroe Doctrine of 1823 defined America’s sphere of influence as the Americas, with no intervention from Europe.

However, by the end of the nineteenth century, American isolationism was on the wane, punctuated by the Spanish-American War of 1898 in which America seized control of the Philippines along with Guam, Puerto Rico, and Cuba. With improved trade and communications extending the reach and interdependence of nations globally, the relevance of isolationism seemed to be shrinking. Assistant Secretary of State John Bassett More wrote in 1899 that the United States had moved “from a position of comparative freedom of entanglements into a position of what is commonly called a world power . . .

\(^{17}\) Dawley, Changing the World, 132.


\(^{19}\) Senator Robert M. La Follette of Wisconsin, speech on April 4, 1917, 65th Congress, 1st sess., Congressional Record, 55, Pt. 1:323-236.


where formerly we only had commercial interests, we now have territorial and political interests."22 Alfred Mahan's *The Influence of Seapower in History* (1890) spurred the McKinley and Roosevelt administrations to expand the size of the navy to defend America's security and interests, since they were now challenged by any nation in the world, especially the Europe nations. In 1900, Senator Albert Beveridge reengineered America's sacred mission to justify an imperialist agenda when he announced that God "has marked the American people as His chosen nation to finally lead the regeneration of the world. This is the divine mission of America."23

In this environment of increased involvement in world affairs, the individuals identified as leading "isolationists" did not conform to the description with any consistency. For instance, as the leader of the conservative wing of isolationists, Senator Henry Cabot Lodge enthusiastically supported entry into World War I, but he opposed with equal vehemence the terms of the Versailles Treaty and especially the League of Nations. He objected to how the League of Nations could force the United States to militarily enforce sanctions issued by the League of Nations, thus infringing on national sovereignty. Speaking more as a nationalist or unilateralist than as an isolationist, on August 12, 1919, Lodge declared:

> The United States is the world's best hope, but if you fetter her in the interests and quarrels of other nations, if you tangle her in the intrigues of Europe, you will destroy her powerful good, and endanger her very existence. Leave her to march freely through the centuries . . . strong, generous and confident she has nobly served mankind.24

Another leading "isolationist" was William Borah, who represented what was considered to be its "idealistic" faction. He too voted in favor of America's entry into the war but opposed the League of Nations for the same reasons as Lodge. Ironically, Borah rejected the "isolationist" label, writing, "There is no such thing as an isolationist. I advocated the principle of cooperation with other nations when the emergency arose."25 Arguably Senator Robert La Follette represented the most clear-cut example of an isolationist in this period due to his opposition to both America's entry into the war and to the League of Nations. As a Peace Progressive aligned with Jane Addams on internationalist causes, however, he supported America's participation in international organizations that promoted peace without the coercion of member states. In short, from 1917

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23 Senator Albert Beveridge of Indiana, speech on January 9, 1900, 56th Cong., 1st sess., Congressional Record, 711.
24 Senator Henry Cabot Lodge of Massachusetts, speech on August 12, 1919, 66th Congress, 1st sess., Congressional Record, 58, pt. 2:3784.
to 1920 it appeared that there were residual isolationist tenets that different people adopted at different times depending on the circumstances, but few individuals were pure “isolationists.”

It was in this murky swirl of interventionist and isolationist ideas that Hiram Johnson took his first steps into foreign policy when he assumed his new Senate seat in April 1917. Johnson’s reputation as an isolationist was cemented through his withering invectives against Woodrow Wilson’s League of Nations. His relentless rhetoric and curmudgeonly negativity towards Wilson only reinforced his image as an isolationist. He peppered many of his speeches with references to “America’s splendid isolation” and the Monroe Doctrine.26 He shared the same suspicion of the Europeans as had George Washington, invoking the same admonition against “entangling alliances” from Washington’s Farewell Address. When Johnson voted for war on April 4, 1917, he had his reservations, fearing that the allies were “dumping the war with all its burdens and its blood on us.”27 America would be left “holding the bag,” in what could become a “cataclysm.”28

Despite ample fodder to designate him as an isolationist, Johnson’s letters, articles, and speeches reveal a more complex and nuanced position that changed with time. They show that Johnson fundamentally supported America’s entry into the war, that his support grew with time, and that his objections centered on how Wilson was handling the war on the home front and at the Versailles Treaty, but not the war itself. Although wary of entangling alliances, Johnson also envisaged an expanded role for America overseas, and he was willing to vote in favor of the League of Nations if Wilson would only accept amendments, or “reservations,” that protected America’s sovereignty.

The first major example of the difference between Hiram Johnson and the isolationists like La Follette was the decision in April 1917 to go to war. Johnson was unequivocally supportive of America’s decision to fight, even though he was anxious about the financial and bloody cost of war. It was clear to him that America had been flagrantly provoked by Germany when “Our rights were invaded; our citizens had been murdered; and our dignity as a nation had been flaunted.”29 In February 1917, Johnson unsuccessfully lobbied the Wilson administration to commission a volunteer brigade commanded by Theodore Roosevelt. Immediately after the declaration of war, he came out in favor of universal conscription. He was so convinced of the need for conscription that he suspected Wilson would not launch it soon enough.30 On April 28, 1917, Johnson proposed in the Senate that a volunteer army be formed until the draft

29 HWJ to C. K. McClatchy, January 8, 1918, Johnson Papers, Part III, Box 1.
30 HWJ to C. K. McClatchy, May 1, 1917, Johnson Papers, Part III, Box 1.
was fully in place.\textsuperscript{31} It was important to Johnson that America commit men and not just money to the effort. It was a testament to national character that “we have grown so flabby and inert and so cowardly that we won’t fight as we formerly did . . . we must be prepared to do our duty or it will be all over.”\textsuperscript{32} As the war progressed and Americans became more acutely aware of the carnage on the Western Front, Johnson did not flinch in his commitment to the war. In a letter to his daughter-in-law Amy Johnson, he wrote:

> The present condition of affairs—the blackest since our entry into the war—gives me a sort of cold determination to see the thing through now at all hazards. The fact that, apparently, we are up against it, and that developments make, for the moment, success look extremely doubtful, gives me added zest for the struggle and makes me want to fight all the more.\textsuperscript{33}

Johnson repeated his resolve in a subsequent letter, but expressed a preference for a quiet determination to win rather than the “silly boasting of our greatness and valor” by Washington’s “patrioteers” whom he despised as much as the “profiteers” of industry.\textsuperscript{34}

Johnson’s support for the war was not limited to retaliation for attacks on shipping that killed Americans, such as the sinking of the \textit{Lusitania} on May 7, 1915. There was a broader principle at stake. He saw Germany as “more of a menace to civilization itself than immediately to our territory,” and that Americans “must fight for our kind of civilization and for our race.”\textsuperscript{35} Johnson was implicitly accepting a larger role for America in global affairs when he defined the war as a “defense of liberty, democracy and civilization against the attack of militarism.”\textsuperscript{36} This was not just about protecting American territory and interests, but about preserving world order and promulgating the principles of justice, freedom, and democracy overseas. On June 2, 1917, Johnson reiterated that “we are fighting for the rights of nations, even small nations, that never shall civilization see another Belgian crucifixion. We are fighting for the Democracy of Europe against the Autocracy of that continent.”\textsuperscript{37} In a speech on the next day, he added that “humanity is greater than any nation” and that “democracy cannot be destroyed in all the rest of the world and still be secure with us.”\textsuperscript{38} He implicitly criticized isolationists when he recalled later that “for more than two years we closed our eyes to the reddening horizon about us . . . in

\begin{itemize}
  \item Hiram Johnson, speech to Senate on April 28, 1917, 64th Congress, 2nd sess., Congressional Record, 54, pt. 5.
  \item HWJ to Arch and Hiram Johnson Jr., April 18, 1917, Diary Letters, vol. 1.
  \item HWJ to Amy Johnson, March 9, 1918, Diary Letters, vol. 1.
  \item HWJ to Amy Johnson, March 16, 1918, Diary Letters, vol. 1.
  \item HWJ to Amy Johnson, March 9, 1918, Diary Letters, vol. 1.
  \item Hiram Johnson, Speech in Washington DC, April 21, 1917, Johnson Papers, Part III, Carton 25.
  \item Hiram Johnson, Speech, June 2, 1917, Johnson Papers, Part III, Carton 25.
  \item Hiram Johnson, Speech in St. Louis, June 3, 1917, Johnson Papers, Part III, Carton 25.
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our splendid isolation, and now civilization hangs in the balance." These were hardly the words of an isolationist.

If Johnson accepted the idea of American intervention abroad in the name of civilization and democracy, why did he implacably oppose the League of Nations? It was not because he objected to the idea of future cooperation with other nations to preserve peace. Johnson was aware of America’s emerging responsibility as a world power, acknowledging that “the liberal world is asking us to come into a Council to find a solution for these things . . . it is asking for our economic and moral weight, our idealism, and our disinterested sense of justice.” Despite his difficulty in finding anything good to say about Wilson, Johnson rarely criticized his Fourteen Points, and he repeatedly endorsed the idea of making the world safe for democracy. Indeed, in numerous letters to family and close colleague he lamented that Wilson was undermining his own Fourteen Points and the goal of making the world safe for democracy. In a note to his friend Mayer Lissner on March 14, 1919, Johnson conceded he originally wanted to support the League of Nations, but he was persuaded that it was unacceptable in its proposed form. He believed that Wilson’s advocacy of the League was a “betrayal of our country to the superior cunning and diplomatic skill of England.” In December 1918, he wrote to his son Hiram, Jr. that:

A league of nations abstractly appeals to me. It is an alluring prospect to contemplate that the great nations of the world will unite to prevent future wars; and then the argument that all this slaughter must not be in vain, and from it the lesson of future conflicts must be learned, is quite persuasive.

It was not the idea of a cooperative international body, but the onerous terms of the League of Nations that were offensive to Hiram Johnson.

Johnson’s biggest problem with the League charter concerned Article X, which would have bound the United States to provide financial and military aid to member nations if they were attacked. In a major Senate speech on the League delivered on June 2, 1919, Johnson compared Article X to the “Holy Alliance” that was formed by France’s enemies at the Treaty of Paris in 1814 and at the Congress of Vienna in 1815. The significance of the Holy Alliance was that it compelled member nations to provide military aid when other members were attacked. For Johnson, the parallels between Article X and the Holy Alliance were unacceptable representing a breach of national sovereignty that America should avoid at all costs. Article X would ensnare America in entanglements that were unrelated to its own interests, and lacked the more profound threats to world order that drove America to war in 1917. Worse still,

39 Hiram Johnson, Speech, April 6, 1918, Johnson Papers, Part III, Carton 25.
41 HJW to Hiram Johnson Jr., January 8, 1918; HWJ to Amy Johnson, March 9, 1918, Diary Letters, vol. 1; HIJW to Theodore Roosevelt, December 27, 1918, Johnson Papers, Part III, Box 2.
42 HJW to Meyer Lissner, March 14, 1919, Johnson Papers, Part III, Box 2.
43 HWJ to Hiram Johnson Jr., December 26, 1918, Diary Letters, vol. 2.
America would become victimized by “cynical old world diplomacy,” whereby American money and blood would be consumed to prop up rapacious empires of Europe. Americans would end up supporting “the tyranny of the strong over the weak.” Johnson viewed these empires as gluttonous and “engorged with land,” and he refused to be party to their “territorial aggrandizement.” Speaking to the Senate, he forewarned:

The League of Nations is written around one central idea that the great democracy of the United States shall guarantee, maintain and preserve the British Empire’s boundaries, with its seething millions of discontented peoples; the increased territories of France; the vastly expanded boundaries of Italy...and the rape of China by Japan.

It was not lost on Johnson that the League of Nations would protect entrenched empires that made no attempt to extend the benefits of democracy to their colonies.

Johnson’s objections to Article X were not merely based on hypothetical conjectures about what might go wrong. Evidence was surfacing of “secret plotting and plunder” from the Allies. In April 1919, the Americans at Versailles confronted by the existence of the Treaty of Shantung, which had been secretly signed by Britain and Japan in 1915 but only came to light in 1917. Britain agreed to allow Japan to keep lands in the Shantung Province of China that it had seized from the Germans. At the same time the Allies persuaded China to enter the war against Germany with the promise that lands formerly under German control would be restored to China at the war’s conclusion. Thus, the Shantung Treaty exposed both the duplicity of Britain in its dealings with weaker nations and a disregard for the territorial integrity of sovereign nations. Even though it went against the letter and spirit of the Fourteen Points and against the principles of peace that Wilson expounded at the outset of the Versailles Conference, Wilson yielded to Japan’s insistence that the treaty be left intact. Johnson seized on the Shantung Treaty as an example of the selfish and untrustworthy nature of the European partners, and it undermined Wilson’s credibility as a moral and impartial arbiter. According to Johnson, “The nation that breaks its promises, forsakes its principles and violates its plighted words destroys its national fiber.” The public met Wilson’s claims of complete ignorance in 1919 over the matter with incredulity. The Nation termed it “unpardonable innocence or ignorance” on the part of Wilson, especially since the new Bolshevik government had leaked the details of treaty in 1917.

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44 Hiram Johnson, Senate speech on June 2, 1919, Johnson Papers, Part III, Carton 25, 1-16.  
45 HWJ to Amy Johnson, January 10, 1918, Diary Letters, vol. 1.  
46 Hiram Johnson, Senate speech on June 2, 1919, Johnson Papers, Part III, Carton 25, 1-16.  

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March 1918, Johnson wrote to Charles McClatchy of the Sacramento Bee that Japan would become another "menace":

[It] will have all the characteristics of a military autocracy....
My greatest fear is that with German autocracy in Western
Russia and the Japanese in eastern Russia, it will not be long
before there is an alliance between the two, and it will not
bode well for the rest of the world.\(^5\)

For Johnson, the Shantung episode prompted a wariness of the Japanese as potential partners in the League of Nations, perceiving them as the voracious imperialists of the Pacific.

The Shantung Treaty was not the only evidence for Johnson that a legally binding commitment to the League could compromise the United States. In August 1918, Wilson authorized the deployment of 8,000 American troops into the eastern Siberian region of Russia without congressional consent. Although ostensibly commissioned to protect American munitions sent to the Tsarist regime from falling into Bolshevik hands, the deployment was made in concert with the British, French, and Japanese forces. Johnson seized upon this as a reckless attempt to interfere with Russia’s internal affairs induced by America’s future League partners. America had no right to “impose our system on others,” he wrote to his sons in November 1918, and continued on to say that it was a "disgrace to our democracy."\(^5\) In a Senate speech on December 12, 1918, Johnson derided Wilson’s secretive approach to America’s operations in Russia and the fact that Wilson was attempting to suppress any debate on the subject. He demanded that Wilson disclose the true aims of intervention. Johnson expressed no particular sympathy for Bolshevism, referring to Bolsheviks as “a menace and danger to the Christian conscience and political democracies of the whole world.” Nonetheless, he rejected America’s right to preemptively invade and dispose of regimes because they were unsavory. “God forbid this Nation should impose by military force upon the various peoples of the earth the kind of government we desire for them,” Johnson admonished.\(^5\)

He saw the Russian episode as an example of the adventurism that would occur at the behest of League members seeking to protect or expand their territorial possessions.

Besides the unwelcome adventurism and obligations that could come with Article X of the League of Nations, Johnson took issue with other aspects of the League. Since each country under the aegis of the British Empire would get a vote in the League, Britain could effectively outvote the United States six to one. Furthermore, Johnson objected to the lack of transparency of the League’s proceedings in which selfish imperial interests would prevail

\(^5\) HWJ to C. K. McClatchy, March 18, 1918, Johnson Papers, Part III, Box 1.
\(^5\) HWJ to Arch Johnson, November 11, 1918; HWJ to Hiram Jr., December 7, 1918, Diary Letters, vol. 2.
\(^5\) Hiram Johnson, Senate Speech on December 12, 1918, Johnson Papers, Part III, Carton 26.
undetected and unchecked. In the October 1919 issue of Sunset Magazine he wrote:

There is before us a league of nations that is not an open world forum where all the peoples of the earth shall know what transpires, but a secret tribunal at Geneva—a secret tribunal of the same kind of men who have been sitting in Paris, actuated by the same sort motives...perpetuating the old balance of power.53

Such lack of transparency would help the members of “old world” Europe perpetuate their imperial status quo unhindered.

The sum of Hiram Johnson’s objections to the League of Nations was substantial. The issues of the infringement of American sovereignty, the risk of adventurism or becoming the “world’s policeman,” the evidence of secretive and duplicitous machinations among the partners, and imbalances in voting rights were problems to which many Americans, not just isolationists, objected.54 That is why Hiram Johnson was joined by a majority of fifty-five senators in rejecting American membership in November 1919. As one of the “irreconcilables,” Johnson was considered immoveable in his opposition. He seized on the League of Nations as the core issue for the 1920 presidential election, and his rhetoric escalated to a level of intransigence and hyperbole as he compared the shortcomings of the League to the virtues of “Americanism.” What is remarkable, however, is that while he relentlessly exploited the League as a campaign issue, Johnson simultaneously was prepared to vote in favor of the League if the offending clauses of the League were amended. He joined other senators in calling for “reservations” to the League’s charter, which he outlined in the February 1920 issue of Sunset Magazine.55 In the following issue, he restated that “certain reservations are deemed essential for the protection of America and its rights.” Even the “League to Enforce Peace,” led by A. Lawrence Lowell, President of Harvard University, agreed with his reservations.56 The sincerity of Johnson’s willingness to vote for the League during this period is evident in private letters he wrote close friends and colleagues, such as Charles McClatchy and William Borah.57

If Hiram Johnson’s reputation as an isolationist was based in part on his opposition to the League of Nations, it was ironic that his objections were not intrinsically isolationist in nature. After all, Johnson supported America’s entry into the war and his commitment only grew stronger with time. Still, many observers had the impression that he was isolationist during this period. Some

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54 Hiram Johnson, Speech in South Dakota, December 31, 1919, Johnson Papers, Part IV, Carton 1.
57 HWJ to C. K. McClatchy, October 30, 1919 and on February 12, 1920; HWJ to William Borah, February 9, 1920, Johnson Papers, Part III, Box 2.

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historians have ascribed the general opposition to Wilson’s foreign policy as an isolationist opposition to the war. For instance in Woodrow Wilson and the Great Betrayal (1945), Thomas Bailey characterized Johnson’s harsh criticisms of Wilson as demagoguery and unprincipled partisanship that threw him into the isolationist camp. In 1972 in “The Making of an Irreconcilable,” Richard Lower challenged Bailey’s assertion, showing how Johnson was attacking Wilson’s management of the war and not the decision to go to war itself. Lower elaborated on this point in his 1993 biography of Johnson, Bloc of One. The heart of Johnson’s challenge was how he interpreted many of Wilson’s actions on the home front as a blatant violation of the principles of Progressivism. Johnson protested Wilson’s undue infringement of civil liberties and his policies that seemed to favor bankers and industrialists as flagrant profiteers.

Johnson deemed the 1917 Espionage Act and the 1918 Sedition Act as the most egregious attacks on civil liberties, especially on free speech and freedom of the press. These acts allowed the government to censor or prosecute any communication judged critical or disloyal to the administration. The press was heavily censored in its critiques of the war, outspoken socialists and pacifists were jailed, and the film The Spirit of ’76 was shuttered because of its implicit criticism of America’s ally, Britain. Finally, E. E. Cummings was arrested for being insufficiently critical of the Germans. In a speech in Philadelphia on August 18, 1917, Johnson said he, “Had neither sympathy or patience for censorship which denies from us legitimate knowledge.” The tone of his complaints in private letters was more strident and bitter. He viewed Americans as already loyal people, and thus undeserving of mistrust. Johnson believed Americans could handle the truth even when it included bad news, and he frequently cited England’s Lloyd George as a leader who was honest and forthright with his own people. Johnson feared that withholding the truth would make the people excessively compliant, “mentally inert, intellectually barren.” To Charles McClatchy, Johnson fumed that the Espionage Act was “the most outrageous, shameful, tyrannical measure ever passed by a free government.” When Johnson contested the Sedition Act in the Senate in 1918, he asked, “When did [this war] become a war on the American people?” The extent of his concerns over censorship went far beyond political posturing.

60 Lower, A Bloc of One, 99.
63 HWJ to Arch Johnson, March 24, 1918, Diary Letters, vol. 1.
64 HWJ to Amy Johnson, January 12, 1918, Diary Letters, vol. 1.
66 Hiram Johnson, Senate speech on April 24, 1918, 65th Cong., 2nd sess., Congressional Records, 76.
Besides the incursions on civil liberties, Johnson perceived the Wilson administration as being duped and manipulated by big business, which he labeled “profiteers.” Ever since he took on the Southern Pacific Railroad as governor of California Johnson had become deeply suspicious of industrialists and bankers, and he was quick to assume they lacked positive motivations. He wrote to his son Arch that the worst kinds of traitors were German sympathizers or profiteers, and to Roosevelt he wrote that profiteers were “traitors” who profited unduly from war contracts and “at the expense of soldiers’ blood.”67 As the war progressed, Johnson became highly critical of the performance of the “captains of industry” who failed to deliver on their promises:

I am gradually reaching the conclusion that it is our captains of industry, and our great manufactories of which we have always boasted, that have fallen down completely in this crisis. Of course they give one reason or another . . . but the outstanding fact to me is that these men who represent big business . . . have been found utterly wanting. They know how to make money to coin others’ efforts in ordinary times, but they are not equal to emergency.68

Johnson went on to accuse the Wilson administration of covering up the shortcomings of big business, stating they “would cover up inefficiency, which might cost thousands of lives, rather than remedy it by exposure.”69

Johnson confronted Wilson on two issues that were targeted squarely at big business, the first of which concerned the railroads. In July 1917, Johnson was one of only seventeen senators to vote in favor of Robert La Follette’s amendment to allow the government to operate the railroads and shipping firms for the duration of the war. The owners were to be paid an amount equivalent to their earnings for the period before June 1916, which were lower than for the period after the armaments buildup began. By February 1917, Johnson was calling for permanent government ownership, but only ten senators voted for this. Johnson railed against the exorbitant level of compensation that the Wilson administration paid the railroads because it had been calculated on the railroads’ inflated earnings after the escalation in war spending. He accused Wilson of becoming a pushover for big business, and in a Senate speech on February 19, 1918, he demanded to know “upon what theory is a maximum of sacrifice demanded of all the rest of the nation and a maximum of compensation accorded to the railroads, a compensation based on...the most profitable years of their existence?”70 In that same speech he again called for the nationalization of the railroads. He later seethed in a letter to Amy Johnson that Wilson and his Senate

67 HWJ to Arch Johnson, September 7, 1917, Diary Letters, vol. 1; HWJ to Theodore Roosevelt, September 8, 1917, Johnson Papers, Part III, Box 1.
69 HWJ to Amy Johnson, May 11, 1918, Diary Letters, vol. 2.

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of compliant lemmings were guilty of intentionally "handing over hundreds of millions of dollars" to the railroads. In numerous letters to friends, Johnson reiterated the failings of the Wilson administration and the need for nationalization.

The second issue aimed at business concerned graduated income taxes. Johnson could not abide by the massive windfall in profits gleaned by the "profiteers" of big business. Although wartime receipts from business rose from $359 million in 1917 to $2.8 billion in 1918, Johnson joined La Follette and George Norris of Nebraska in proposing an 80% war profits tax on the portion of profits that exceeded prewar norms. In his "War Revenue" speech on August 20, 1917, Johnson implored the Senate that since "we conscripted the youth of this land and sent that youth forth to fight for this nation and to die.... I ask that you have the same enthusiasm for conscripting the same wealth of this nation to stand behind the lads." It met with resounding opposition, especially from the Wilson administration, but a diluted version of the amendment yielded another $500 million in incremental tax revenue. Although far less than he hoped, Johnson declared a partial victory.

If Johnson's opposition to Wilson's management of the war on the home front gave the misleading impression that he was against the war itself, his personality exacerbated that impression. In his The California Progressives (1951), George Mowry described Johnson as a "fighter," "tenacious," "partisan," with a propensity to be "self-centered." Even as a young prosecutor in California, Johnson was known for his fighting spirit. He once exchanged blows with an opposing attorney in 1908. As Governor of California in 1910, he had delivered the following bloodcurdling invective against Harrison Gray Otis, the publisher of Los Angeles Times:

We have nothing so vile, noting so low, nothing so debased, nothing so infamous in San Francisco, nor did we ever, as Harrison Gray Otis. He sits in senile dementia, with gangrened heart and rotting brain, grimacing at every reform, chattering impotently at all things that are decent, frothing, fuming, violently gibbering, going down to his grave in snarling infamy...the disgraceful, depraved, corrupt, crooked and putrescent—that is Harrison Gray Otis.

While consistently holding principled positions, Johnson was prone to demonize his opponents, too often ascribing conspiracy theories to them. He also allowed

71 HWJ to Amy Johnson, February 23, 1918, Diary Letters, vol. 1.
73 HWJ to Joseph Scott, September 17, 1917, Johnson Papers, Part III, Box 1.
76 Lower, A Bloc of One, 21.
himself to become a shrill voice of negativity, rarely offering constructive alternatives to initiatives like the League of Nations.

The man Johnson demonized the most was Woodrow Wilson, and his polemical attacks on him were relentless. No sooner had Johnson taken his Senate seat in April 1917 than he was telling friends of his visceral dislike of Wilson. In a typical letter to Mayer Lissner dated April 9, 1917, Johnson observed that “The absolute dictator and tsar is the President. Arbitrarily, dictatorially, and arrogant, he directs the majority and...he is able to blight any who oppose him. He does this in spite of the fact that nobody loves him and practically everyone detests him.”

To McClatchy, Johnson complained that Wilson was “an idiot,” “insincere,” and “acts based on his personal animosities.” Some of Johnson’s frustrations with Wilson were based on how Wilson poorly communicated the war’s aims, and Johnson suspected that Wilson was ambivalent and confused about those aims, but too proud to admit it.

To Hiram Jr., he wrote that Wilson “is the most inconsistent man on earth and will not be embarrassed or humiliated by taking a new position within the next week.” Over time, Johnson’s wrath focused on Wilson’s ego and secretive nature. He told his daughter Amy that Wilson viewed himself as the next Louis XIV and “wants to be remembered as the greatest man of all time” and that “the President takes nobody his confidence, except possibly [Colonel] House, and there is nobody here who understands what is transpiring.” A perpetual theme of Johnson’s letters was Wilson’s refusal to keep Congress updated on the status of the war and the Versailles negotiations, and his refusal to disclose any information to the public about the war that reflected weakness or adversity. For Johnson, Wilson was a deeply flawed character. As a result, Johnson was consistently perceived to stand in binary opposition to Wilson’s administration. To the extent that Wilson stood for military intervention and the League of Nations, it would be easy, if simplistic, to therefore assume that Johnson stood for the opposite, namely isolationism.

Johnson’s support for the war, and the fact that the substance of his opposition to the League of Nations and Wilson’s management of the home front had little to do with isolationism, suggest that the label of “isolationist” was not appropriate. While occasionally indulging in isolationist rhetoric and wrapping himself in the flag of “Americanism” in the 1920 election, Johnson did not think of himself as an isolationist. He reaffirmed his belief in America’s responsibility to intercede in world affairs, but restricted it to ways that protected American sovereignty and respected the Constitutional safeguards against undemocratic maneuvers by the President:

77 HWJ to Mayer Lissner, April 9, 1917; see also HWJ to Charles Rowell, April 10, 1917; HWJ to Charles McClatchy, April 7, 1917, Johnson Papers, Part III, Box 1.
78 HWJ to Charles McClatchy, May 23, 1917, Johnson Papers, Part III, Box 1.
79 HWJ to John Chambers, June 21, 1917; see also HWJ to Charles Rowell, June 8, 1917; HWJ to Charles McClatchy, June 21, 1917, Johnson Papers, Part III, Box 1.

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I would not, of course, isolate our country.... The lurid painting by the advocates of the league of the terrible consequences of isolationism has been wholly unjustifiable. We have never been isolated, commercially, socially, financially, or otherwise, and we will never be isolated from the rest of the world. We have played our high part in the past, and, just as we have done in the past, we will do so in the future. Whenever there is the cry of humanity or the anguished appeal of civilization, we will respond, but I insist that the people of the United States, represented by Congress, acting under the Constitution, shall be the ones to determine when we respond.  

A more accurate term for the role Johnson sought for America overseas is unilateralism. He clearly anticipated that America would continue to be actively involved in world affairs, but refused to have America’s autonomy and ideals compromised by some “foreign council” that “destroys every power for good and for peace that the Republic possesses.” Johnson’s unilateralist “Americanism” represented an idealized view of America that included elements of Exceptionalism. It was a combination of Progressive principles, strict compliance with the Constitution, and an “America-first” attitude, but also a willingness to defend “humanity” and “civilization” overseas. While Johnson was willing to break with isolationist tendencies to do so, he retained Winthrop’s guardedness about the corrupting influence of foreign governments. America’s contribution to the world would depend on its independence from the tainted power games of Europe and Japan.

Not only does “unilateralist” more effectively describe Johnson’s foreign policy outlook from 1917 to 1920, but it also recognizes a larger trend in American diplomacy. In From the Old Diplomacy to the New, Robert Beisner cited Johnson as part of a new paradigm in which America’s foreign relations were evolving away from isolationism. In addition, it suggests that statesmen frequently evolve their domestic and foreign policies, but in retrospect those distinctions are lost when historians paint them with one brush. Although Johnson seized on the League of Nations as the main issue for his 1920 election and his isolationist tendencies subsequently became more calcified and intransigent, he was clearly in a more malleable stage from 1917 to 1920.

Such flexibility invites the conjecture that if Johnson’s mentor, Theodore Roosevelt, had championed the League of Nations under terms that protected America’s rights, Johnson would likely have supported it. Thus, he would never have catapulted down the anti-League path in the 1920 election, which cemented his ultimate reputation as an isolationist. Johnson may have

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even joined Roosevelt in his quest to establish a more dominant position for America in the Pacific. In 1910 Roosevelt wrote: "I wish to see the United States the dominant power on the shores of the Pacific...we wish this giant of the West, the greatest republic upon which the sun has ever shone, to start fair in the race of national greatness." Johnson never displayed the same imperial aspirations as Roosevelt, but any projection of American power and commerce in the Pacific would have appealed to the regional interests of the former governor of California, and it would have addressed his growing consternation about Japanese territorial expansionism and duplicity. Instead, in 1919 Roosevelt was dead. Johnson faced the "tragic figure" of Woodrow Wilson, who Dawley suggests "compromised all of the high principles embodied in the Fourteen Points in order to get a fatally flawed agreement, leaving him, in the end, like King Lear, a stubborn old man blindly clinging to a lie." Under such circumstances, then, how could Johnson resist taking aim at Wilson and his League?

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