

On the League of Nations

While proponents of the League of Nations saw that organization as a vehicle for ensuring world peace, those who opposed joining the League argued that the United States would lose its independence.

AGAINST JOINING THE LEAGUE OF NATIONS
Senator William Borah (ID), Senate speech,
November 19, 1919

We can not send our representatives to sit in council with the representatives of the other great nations of the world with mental reservations as to what we shall do in case their judgment shall not be satisfactory to us. If we go to the council or to the assembly with any other purpose than that of complying in good faith and in absolute integrity with all upon which the council or the assembly may pass, we shall soon return to our country with our self-respect forfeited and the public opinion of the world condemnatory. . . .

Shall we go there, Mr. President, to sit in judgment, and in case that judgment works for peace join with our allies, but in case it works for war withdraw our cooperation? How long would we stand as we now stand, a great Republic commanding the respect and holding the leadership of the world, if we should adopt any such course? . . .

We are sending to the council one man. That one man represents 110,000,000 people. . . . [W]e are transferring to one man the stupendous power of representing the sentiment and convictions of 110,000,000 people in tremendous questions which may involve the peace or may involve the war of the world. . . .

What is the result of all this? We are in the midst of all of the affairs of Europe. We have entangled ourselves with all European concerns. We have joined in alliance with all the European nations which have thus far joined the league, and all nations which may be admitted to the league. We are sitting there dabbling in their affairs and intermeddling in their concerns. In other words, Mr. President—and this comes to

the question which is fundamental with me—we have forfeited and surrendered, once and for all, the great policy of “no entangling alliances” upon which the strength of this Republic has been founded for 150 years.

AGAINST JOINING THE LEAGUE OF NATIONS
Senator Warren G. Harding (OH), Senate speech,
November 19, 1919

I have not liked this treaty; I think, as originally negotiated, it is the colossal blunder of all time; but, recognizing the aspirations of our own people and the people of the world to do something toward international cooperation for the promotion and preservation of peace and a more intimate and better understanding between nations, I have wished to make it possible to accept this covenant. I could, however, no more vote to ratify this treaty without reservations which make sure America’s independence of action, which make sure the preservation of American traditions, which make sure and certain our freedom in choosing our course of action, than I could participate in a knowing betrayal of this Republic. . . .

I know, Mr. President, that in this covenant we have originally bartered American independence in order to create a league. We have traded away America’s freedom of action in order to establish a supergovernment of the world, and it was never intended to be any less. I speak for one who is old-fashioned enough to believe that the Government of the United States of America is good enough for me. In speaking my reverence for the Government of the United States of America, Senators, I want the preservation of those coordinate branches of government which were conceived and instituted by the fathers.