Comment:
France, Britain and the USA

The President of the United States of America reached Brest on 13 December 1918. Woodrow Wilson (for he it was) stood on the bridge as the *George Washington* steamed in through a long avenue of saluting battleships, French and British as well as American. The President's party were greeted by huge crowds, shouting 'Vive l'Amérique, vive Wilson!'. It fell to the French foreign minister to deliver the formal welcome: 'We are so thankful that you have come over to give us the right kind of peace'. Wilson's quite brusque reply was non-committal. He had expected some more important person. In Paris, as his train pulled in, he was met by the prime minister Georges Clemenceau and Raymond Poincaré, President of France. He seems to have been mollified.

Wilson, a deeply religious Presbyterian, born in 1856 in Virginia, President of Princeton University before his election, could not have been more different from Clemenceau, a fierce anti-Catholic, proud never to have set foot in any church, born in 1841, trained in medicine but never practising, a professional politician to the fingertips of his gloved hands (to conceal eczema). As a young man he spent a good deal of time in the United States, one result being that he spoke English fluently, in a Yankee drawl, carefully retaining his rolling French 'r's. He also brought back to France a lovely young New England wife, whom he deposited with his parents and unmarried aunts. They had three children but eventually separated. She never learned French. She supplemented her income by taking American tourists round Paris. When she died in 1917 his comment was: 'What a tragedy that she ever married me'. He never remarried.

The Wilsons spent Christmas in Paris. His first wife died in 1914; the second Mrs Wilson was a wealthy widow, seventeen years younger than himself. He knew of malicious jokes in Washington, emanating from the British embassy.

In London the crowds turned out and there was great popular enthusiasm. Initially, though, Wilson did not hit it off with David Lloyd George, the prime minister. He had been completely captivated by Clemenceau during their private meetings — the wily old Frenchman let him do all the talking, intervening only with grunts of approval.

Indeed, Wilson and his chief aides, at this stage, believed that France and the United States would make a common front against the British. Clemenceau was too experienced to think so — but the latent rivalry among the Allies would affect the rest of the Peace Conference.

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Gathered to hammer out a treaty with the defeated German Empire, they soon discovered how much more contentious their own self-interested geopolitical manoeuvrings would be.

President Wilson, like many Americans then (as now), held very ambivalent views about the British. 'If England insisted on maintaining naval dominance after the war', he told one of Clemenceau's colleagues, 'the United States could and would show her how to build a navy' — imagine the glee with which this remark circulated in Paris!

Within days of arriving in London, indeed at the gala reception at Buckingham Palace, Wilson reproved a British official, no doubt ingratiating himself in what Wilson took to be a patronising way: 'You must not speak of us who come over here as cousins, still less as brothers; we are neither'. This remark was soon passed on to the official's superiors. It was misleading to speak of a common Anglo-Saxon world, Wilson explained, so many American citizens were from other cultures: 'No, there are only two things which can establish and maintain closer relations between your country and mine: they are community of ideals and of interests'. And none knew better than Wilson that American ideals and interests were far from coinciding with those of the British Empire.

King George V offered a toast to the gallantry of the victorious American forces, in as fulsome a manner as royal inarticulacy permitted. The British were disconcerted when the President failed to return the compliment. As Lloyd George recalled many years later, in 1938: 'There was no glow of friendship or of gladness at meeting men who had been partners in a common enterprise and had so narrowly escaped a common danger'.

He at once set out to charm the President, and, as Wilson's private papers confirm, the Welsh magic worked. He was never really to like Wilson — 'kindly, sincere, straightforward', yet 'tactless, obstinate and vain'. For his part, Clemenceau disliked both Wilson and Lloyd George: 'I find myself between Jesus Christ on the one hand, and Napoleon Bonaparte on the other' — another remark that went the rounds.

Margaret MacMillan, in her superb study, *Peacemakers: The Paris Conference of 1919 and Its Attenpt to End War* (John Murray 2001), is as entertaining as she is informative about these men and their relationships — as she is about the whole story of the decisions they took that so fatefully affected the rest of the twentieth century. Allies no doubt, yet the British, the French and the Americans have quite a history of viewing one another with suspicion.

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