

# **The Madman in the White House**

# The Madman in the White House

Sigmund Freud, Ambassador Bullitt,  
and the Lost Psychobiography of  
Woodrow Wilson

Patrick Weil



Harvard University Press

CAMBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS · LONDON, ENGLAND

2023

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An earlier version of this book was published in French as *Le Président est-il devenu fou: le diplomate, le psychanalyste et le chef d'Etat*, © 2022 Éditions Grasset, Paris.

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Printed in the United States of America

First printing

Photograph courtesy of Hulton Archive/Getty Images

Design by Tim Jones

9780674293250 (EPUB)

9780674293267 (PDF)

Publication of this book has been supported through the generous provisions of the Maurice and Lula Bradley Smith Memorial Fund.

The Library of Congress has cataloged the printed edition as follows:

Names: Weil, Patrick, 1956– author.

Title: The madman in the White House: Sigmund Freud, Ambassador Bullitt, and the lost psychobiography of Woodrow Wilson / Patrick Weil. |

Includes bibliographical references and index. |

Identifiers: LCCN 2022037088 | ISBN 9780674291614 (cloth)

Subjects: LCSH: Freud, Sigmund, 1856–1939. Thomas Woodrow Wilson, twenty-eighth President of the United States. | Wilson, Woodrow, 1856–1924—Mental health. | Bullitt, William C. (William Christian), 1891–1967. | Censorship—United States—History—20th century.

Classification: LCC E767.F73 W45 I3 2023 | DDC 973.91/3092 [B]—dc23/eng/20220830

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2022037088>

*To the memory of Aya  
— Alice Roth (1912–2011) —  
who lived a century through love*

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# **The Madman in the White House**



# Introduction

AS SPRING DAWNED on the morning of March 21, 1920, many close observers of President Woodrow Wilson wondered if he had gone mad. The day before, despite their pleas, the president had instructed his fellow Democrats in the Senate to vote against ratifying the Treaty of Versailles. This was a shocking reversal of Wilson's earlier efforts. For the first six months of 1919, he lived in a "temporary White House" on the right bank of the Seine in Paris. There he worked tirelessly to negotiate the treaty, which he and millions of others saw as a framework for lasting worldwide peace.

Those negotiations followed, of course, the conclusion of the First World War. Eighteen million had died, almost 10 million of them civilians. Another 21 million were wounded, many horribly mutilated for the rest of their lives. In response, Wilson convinced the Allies to approve the creation of a League of Nations, a global organization designed to prevent future wars. In addition, Wilson and the leaders of the United Kingdom had agreed to a defense pact with France, pledging that they would act together in self-defense at any sign of German aggression against her French neighbor. This in effect created a new collective security apparatus with the United States at its center. Wilson and the Allies had anticipated the United Nations and NATO decades before their time.

Returning to Washington from Paris in July 1919, buoyed by the prestige and popularity of the peace he had negotiated, Wilson envisioned ratification of the Versailles Treaty as a formality. But this proved gravely wrong. Many in the Senate worried that the treaty would commit the United States to defend others subject to aggression, with the result that Congress would be stripped of its constitutional prerogative to declare war. For months Wilson obstinately refused to hear this concern or do anything that might assuage it. His position never wavered, right up until the final defeat of the Versailles Treaty in the Senate; the treaty with France and the United Kingdom became a casualty of the impasse. Immediately upon the completion of the Senate



vote, the whole world understood that although the Treaty of Versailles would formally enter into force, without US participation it provided little guarantee of an enduring peace.

In Paris, the press emphasized Prime Minister Georges Clemenceau's failed bet on a transatlantic alliance with the United States. French General Ferdinand Foch, the supreme allied commander who led the Allies to victory, predicted a new war would eventually break out and told a friend, "If we are not careful, our army will be significantly inferior in 1940 than it was in 1914."<sup>1</sup> In Washington, Wilson's followers unanimously held him responsible for the treaty's collapse, whether or not they supported its terms. Foreign policy "idealists" believed the treaty the president had signed betrayed his promise of "peace without victory"—it looked like a classic victor's peace, forced on the vanquished to the benefit of her enemy. Rather than provide for the universal self-determination Wilson called for, the treaty was full of annexations that saw the Allies swallowing up former territories of the defeated; rather than welcome Germany into a new world order centered on law, the treaty imposed humiliating and onerous financial burdens in the form of harsh reparations. "Realists," in contrast, thought that Wilson's main promises had been fulfilled. The treaty set out a collective-security framework that could prevent future wars. In line with the goal of self-determination, some new nation-states were born, including Poland. Germany would have to pay for the damages it caused, but contrary to popular belief the country—still the largest in Europe, and unencumbered by foreign debt aside from the reparations bill—had emerged from the war in relatively good economic shape.

Regardless of their differences, idealists and realists blamed the president for the failure of the peace—whether because the treaty itself was fatally flawed or because Wilson had assured its ruin in the Senate. Some attributed Wilson's fatal stubbornness to a stroke he suffered in fall 1919, which left him at death's door for weeks and permanently paralyzed the left side of his body. But others thought his behavior had deeper roots.

Many of the participants in the conference—including Clemenceau, British prime minister David Lloyd George, and Lloyd George's war secretary, Winston Churchill—attributed Wilson's failure to his psy-

chology. This belief was shared by his American collaborators, including Robert Lansing, the secretary of state, and Wilson's closest adviser, Colonel Edward House. But only the young British economist and peace conference delegate John Maynard Keynes, in the enduringly influential 1919 book *The Economic Consequences of the Peace*, publicly evoked Wilson's "Freudian complex." Keynes was in the idealist camp—the group that saw the treaty as abandoning the principle of a law-based peace among states acting as equals. "The President's psychology was essential to explain how it came about, in spite of the President's sincerity, that a perfidious peace was enacted," Keynes wrote in a letter.<sup>2</sup>

William C. Bullitt, a journalist, diplomat, and fellow idealist, had joined Wilson in his fight to "create a world adequate to the needs of mankind."<sup>3</sup> After serving in the US delegation and coming away with an opinion similar to Keynes's, he resolved to torpedo the treaty in the Senate. Early in September 1919, the elegant twenty-eight-year-old appeared at a Senate hearing where he revealed that Wilson had deceived senators about the negotiations and further testified that top foreign policy officials—including Secretary of State Lansing—feared the treaty would draw the United States into a new war. Before the senators, Bullitt argued that if the United States ratified the treaty, it would indeed find itself at war again in short order, enjoined to fight on behalf of Eastern European states sure to be overrun by the new Bolshevik government in Russia.

Bullitt became a hero both for Wilson's Republican opponents and the liberals who had once supported Wilson. His revelations—arriving just before the treaty debate began on the Senate floor, while Wilson still enjoyed momentum—had seismic effects and earned him tremendous publicity. Activists urged him to seek office in his own right. Yet, though Bullitt had no doubt that he had been right to testify against the treaty, he had no interest in staying in politics. Disgusted by Washington, he withdrew into writing and existential limbo. In 1923 he divorced his first wife and married Louise Bryant, a fellow writer, social high-flier, and the widow of John Reed, the socialist journalist and author of *Ten Days that Shook the World*. Three years later Bullitt published an autobiographical novel, *It's Not Done*. An unexpected hit, the book sold 200,000 copies and was reprinted seventeen times.

Despite his successes, Bullitt remained traumatized by the tragedy of Versailles. He took up the torch of psychology and decided to write about Wilson's personality in an effort to make sense of what had happened. To help him in his task, he called on none other than Sigmund Freud, the founder of psychoanalysis. At the end of 1926, Bullitt went to Vienna and presented himself at Freud's door. Bullitt became Freud's patient. On Freud's couch, he shared facets of his life story but also discussed Wilson, about whom he was writing a play. The project received considerable praise from dramatists, but Bullitt was forced to abandon the work when he could not find a theater willing to show it.

Three years later, Bullitt came to Freud with a new idea. At the time, the Great Depression had hit the world and Europe's precarious peace was imperiled by the rise of fascism. The role of the United States in the world had expanded, yet its diplomacy remained embarrassingly underdeveloped. So Bullitt decided to write a book on diplomacy, a subject he intended to approach scientifically—through studies in geography, economics, history, and, finally, psychology. For Bullitt, the psychology of leaders was what mattered most. The book was to include portraits of the key personalities of the Paris Conference: Clemenceau, Lloyd George, Wilson, and other heads of state, as well as important figures from the American delegation, such as House and Herbert Hoover, the agricultural official and future president who ensured that Americans and their allies stayed fed during the war while the Germans succumbed to famine. Bullitt also intended to feature Vladimir Lenin, the Bolshevik leader, who had not been at the conference but whom Bullitt had met during secret talks in 1919. The book would conclude with a radical call for parliamentary government in the United States. The structure of the US government was overly dependent on a single individual, he thought—the president. A parliamentary system was better suited for a democracy.

Freud was intrigued. He had confided to Bullitt that he, too, had some ideas about Wilson that he would like to put to paper. Bullitt asked Freud to contribute to his book. Freud agreed, but only if Bullitt could gather the hard historical evidence they would need, including archival resources and interviews with the people who knew Wilson best. If Bullitt could gather this material for him, and if it proved appropriate, Freud was eager to collaborate.

Excited by the project, Bullitt dedicated himself to the task after returning to the United States. He obtained access to important personal archives. He carried out interviews with Wilson's confidantes: Cary Grayson, the president's doctor; Ray Stannard Baker, Wilson's biographer; Joseph Tumulty, his secretary; Bernard Baruch, his economic adviser; Colonel House; and others. Each confessed to Bullitt secret information or interpretations about Wilson that have been unknown until today.

Once assembled, the material seemed sufficiently impressive to Freud. In October 1930, he and Bullitt decided on a new course: instead of appending an additional chapter to Bullitt's diplomacy book, they would coauthor a complete book dedicated exclusively to Wilson. For months in Vienna, Freud and Bullitt studied and analyzed Wilson's life and personality. The president, they concluded, could not help but put himself in situations where he would suffer, be humiliated, enraged, and ultimately fail. To a psychoanalyst, this predilection for repeated cycles of self-destruction was a clear sign of neurosis, with the potential to provoke irrational thoughts and behaviors of the kind that appeared to be in evidence during the peace treaty negotiations.

In April 1932, after two years of work, the two men signed each chapter of a 389-page manuscript. By the end of their collaboration, Freud had developed an affection for the diplomat-turned-biographer. He was smart, he knew international politics, and he even had innovative ideas about psychoanalysis. They had become friends. When Bullitt wrote Freud, he would address him as "Dear Freud"—a rare expression of familiarity, as Freud was known reverentially to his circle as "professor." The coauthors looked forward to publishing their interpretation of Wilson's personality and its decisive role in the crisis that was then threatening world peace—an interpretation bolstered by the authority of the founder of psychoanalysis.

But if Bullitt had lost his admiration for Wilson, he never truly abandoned Wilson's vision. Amid the unfolding global catastrophe, he yearned to return to the center of the action and see that, this time, American values of democracy, liberty, and free enterprise won out. A liberal internationalist to his core, Bullitt found a new vehicle for his ideals in the 1932 Democratic presidential nominee, Franklin Roosevelt. Bullitt hoped to secure a job in Roosevelt's administration and recognized

that further public criticism of Wilson—whose reputation was sullied after Versailles but on the mend posthumously in the 1930s—would render him *persona non grata* in the Democratic Party. With Freud's blessing, Bullitt chose to postpone publication of their book.

Over the next ten years, Bullitt served Roosevelt as one of his most prized diplomats. In the fall of 1933, Bullitt conducted alongside Roosevelt the negotiations that led to US recognition of the Soviet Union. He went on to become the first US ambassador in Moscow. Surrounded by a young guard that included George Kennan—future author of the vaunted “long telegram” laying out the foreign policy doctrine of Soviet “containment”—Bullitt cultivated a trademark style that blended dazzle with professional rigor. He loved diplomacy and geopolitics, but he was also a devotee of theater, parties, socialites. And socialists. Bullitt was a strident anti-Communist but not because he opposed leftist ideas. He had sympathy for socialist policies and tried to cultivate left-wing allies capable of appealing to those who might otherwise succumb to Communism, which Bullitt associated with dictatorship and cultism. In his private life, emancipated women played a major role and contributed to his successes: Inez Milholland, the feminist and suffragist; Ernesta Drinker, a writer and journalist who became his first wife; Bryant, the revolutionary journalist and his second wife; Missy LeHand, Roosevelt's assistant and chief of staff; Cissy Patterson, editor of the *Washington Times-Herald* and scion of the owners of the *Chicago Tribune*.

In August 1936 Bullitt became ambassador to France. From Paris, he coordinated the US embassies in Europe in an effort to save the increasingly tenuous peace. In September 1938, he went against the grain of elite opinion and convinced Roosevelt that the Munich Agreement would not satisfy Hitler and would instead lead to war. With the help of others—in particular the French businessman and statesman Jean Monnet—Bullitt organized the mass production of US fighter planes to supply the French army. When the French government fled Paris in June 1940, Bullitt stayed behind to protect the City of Light from destruction. He was among those who recognized the true nature of the new Vichy regime—its ambition to become the finest province of a Nazi Europe and to see Britain defeated. Bullitt had enormous influence on the early course of the war: after returning to the United States, he convinced Roosevelt to target North Africa as a possible site

for a US offensive, providing the blueprint for Operation Torch, the first Allied landing of the conflict.

Soon, however, diplomacy was reduced to an auxiliary of war, and Roosevelt cast Bullitt aside. Bullitt nonetheless persisted in trying to shape national policy. On January 29, 1943, he warned the president in a famous memorandum that the United States should not, in its zeal to defeat Hitler, make undue concessions to Stalin. The consequences, Bullitt predicted, would be terrible for hundreds of millions of Europeans and Chinese, who were liable to become Soviet victims in due course. In appraising the memorandum's farsightedness, Kennan wrote that "it had no counterpart as a warning of that date." Indeed, Bullitt had been enormously prescient in foreseeing the postwar situation. As early as September 1939 he wrote, "To my mind, Mr. Hitler has already lost this war completely. I rather imagine that he thinks he can finish the French and British quickly enough to turn around and smash the Bolshies; but that isn't going to happen and in the end the Bolshies will gradually eat like a cancer to Berlin. Then the next stage will be of finishing off Stalin Khan."<sup>4</sup>

Bullitt worried that, like Wilson in 1919, Roosevelt would win the war and lose the peace. But Roosevelt was not listening. Frustrated, Bullitt decamped to Europe and, in April 1944, joined the Free French Army under Charles de Gaulle. Bullitt proved an able officer, serving and advising the esteemed General Jean de Lattre. By the close of the war, Bullitt had become something of a French national hero.

When he returned to Washington, D.C., in fall 1945, Bullitt continued his fight against Communism. He had no official position, but he nonetheless played a crucial role in foreign affairs. Through journalism, campaigns to sway his powerful friends, and freelance diplomacy, he found his way to the frontlines of the Cold War. He was a key negotiator in bringing about armistice in Korea. He contributed decisively to the return of Emperor Bao Dai to the throne of Vietnam, securing French and US support and thereby arraying American power against Ho Chi Minh's Communists. And he was indefatigable in his efforts to stave off Chinese Communism. When Chiang Kai-shek and his Nationalists lost China, Bullitt moved to Taiwan to advise Chiang.

In the early 1950s, Bullitt became an informal adviser to Vice President Richard Nixon; he was in some respect the original Henry

Kissinger, well before Kissinger arrived on the national scene. Although Bullitt died before Nixon became president, his influence lingered. Nixon held Bullitt up as a model. “The foreign service reporting is an utter disaster,” he complained in 1971, because they described every little thing that happened without assessing the bigger picture. “The great ambassadors of the past such as Bullitt, put their view out.”<sup>5</sup>

But it was not Bullitt’s diplomatic record that would be his legacy. In December 1966, feeling death approaching, Bullitt finally published the Wilson biography nearly thirty years after Freud’s death. The work was met with howls of protest. Many questioned whether Freud was really a coauthor. Bullitt died in Paris in February 1967 before reading any of the reviews, which were often severe. Wilson’s reputation seemed untouchable at the time, while the influence of Freud and psychoanalysis had precipitously declined. Few reviewers agreed with the recent assessment of historian Adam Tooze, who has called the Wilson book a “compelling psychobiography” of a president “trapped in an imaginary world of language woven by his domineering Presbyterian father.” Of course, others had written biographies of Wilson and his fellow presidents, but no one had written anything like that—no one except Bullitt and Freud.<sup>6</sup>

BEFORE HE PUBLISHED the Wilson biography in 1966, Bullitt removed or otherwise edited some 300 passages. Many of these focused on an ingenious link the authors had forged between Wilson’s ineptitude and his Christ complex. Bullitt was a passionate Christian, and Freud, though he did not share Bullitt’s faith, saw in the figure of Christ hope for a peaceful future. Although it is impossible to say so with certainty, I believe—and defend this belief in the later chapters of this book—that Bullitt thought this discussion would be excessively controversial and potentially dangerous, not least because it was steeped in shocking claims about Wilson’s sexuality. Earlier than many other cold warriors, Bullitt perceived a global war afoot between Communists and Christians, and he was loath to give the former ammunition against the latter.

But while the published book omitted these key points of analysis, Bullitt preserved them. He kept the original manuscript all along, perhaps hoping that the public would one day discover what he and Freud

truly thought of Woodrow Wilson. That day has come. My book reveals for the first time the content of the original Freud and Bullitt manuscript—a manuscript everyone thought had disappeared.

As a student, I read the Freud-Bullitt book published in 1967 in French translation. Even that version, though redacted, makes a convincing case that the psychology of leaders matters in the conduct of political affairs—that personality is very often at the heart of policy. But I did not take particular interest in Bullitt until the summer of 2014, when I found the 1966 US edition of the book in a New York shop. While reading, I took special note of the treatment of Colonel House, Wilson's adviser, on whom I was conducting research in the context of his relationship with Clemenceau. Seeking out correspondence between House and Bullitt, I discovered that Bullitt's archives were at Yale's Sterling Memorial Library, the same location as House's. Now I was pursuing Bullitt, too. The search took me to archives in Washington, D.C., Edinburgh, London, and Paris; Louisville, Kentucky; Staunton, Virginia; and West Branch, Iowa. By the winter of 2015, I had before me the original manuscript, signed by Freud and Bullitt at the bottom of each of its chapters. Some scholars were aware of it but presumed it lost or destroyed. At any rate, no one alive had seen it.

I decided to investigate how the original work was conceived, to measure the contribution of the father of psychoanalysis and to understand why the published version appeared as it did. I also needed to check the rigor of the historical details on which the two authors based their biography of Wilson—in particular, the negotiations surrounding the Treaty of Versailles, the Senate debate, and Wilson's role in both. I quickly concluded that to understand the fate of the Freud-Bullitt manuscript, I also had to follow Bullitt throughout his diplomatic life, from 1917, when he joined the State Department, to his death in 1967. This story begins with the Great War and the political wrangling surrounding its conclusion, focusing on the psychology of the president who saw the United States through the conflict and the subsequent peace process. From there it illuminates Bullitt's research into Wilson's life and work and his discussions with Freud before turning to Bullitt's diplomatic efforts in the Soviet Union and France and his wartime exploits. Finally, we join Bullitt in his personal Cold War, which overlapped with his return to the Wilson book.



This book, then, is a journey across the twentieth century. The Freud-Bullitt manuscript was born, nourished, delayed, modified, and cut for reasons having to do with Bullitt's intimate relationship with the great international events of the twentieth century and with the giants of his time: Lenin, Stalin, Roosevelt, Hoover, de Gaulle, Churchill, Chiang, and of course Wilson. Bullitt worked with them all, not to mention others less well-known but no less important for having been forgotten.

Bullitt's service alongside Wilson decisively influenced the project with Freud. The relationships Bullitt developed with others in Wilson's sphere facilitated his inquiry into what exactly had happened at the Paris Peace Conference—how it was that Wilson came to abandon many of his ideals and then his treaty. Later, Bullitt's return to a diplomatic career and his dedication to the fight against Communism help explain why the manuscript's publication was further postponed. These factors also shed light on most of the cuts that Bullitt made before the book was finally published. Until his death, he feared the potentially devastating effects of the original manuscript.

This manuscript emerged from the anger of its two authors. Freud and Bullitt were amazed at the discrepancy between the Wilson who bestrode the earth as a peaceful colossus in 1918 and early 1919 and the man who gave in so readily once the peace conference began. And why did Wilson—who understood that the treaty was far from perfect but thought that it might later be revised—seemingly do everything possible to kill it in the Senate? There was so much to explain to a public that, by the 1930s, had come to see Wilson as a heroic victim of isolationist US politicians and European imperialists.

Bullitt and Freud showed that Wilson was indeed a victim, but a victim of his own psyche. In assessing their research, I realized that there was much I had not understood about the Treaty of Versailles and the Senate ratification process, to say nothing of many of the tragic events that came after. Wilson bore considerable responsibility for those tragedies, as becomes clear when one peers behind the obscuring veil of a mythologized past. Even at a distance of ninety years, Freud and Bullitt's call to recognize the signs of pathological personality in our leaders has lost none of its urgency.

# 1

## The American Collapse of the Treaty of Versailles

WHEN PRESIDENT WOODROW WILSON RETURNED to the United States on July 8, 1919, he was convinced that he would easily overcome all domestic opposition to the treaty he had negotiated in Paris. The peace, signed with Germany in the Hall of Mirrors of the Palace of Versailles, bore the strong imprint of the United States. Wilson's Fourteen Points, the framework for a lasting peace that he had presented to the US Congress in January 1918, had been accepted by the Allies and by Germany. The restoration of Belgian sovereignty, the return of Alsace-Lorraine to France, the dismantling of the Ottoman Empire, the adjustments of borders in the Balkans and Italy—all these territorial dimensions of the Fourteen Points were integral to the Treaty of Versailles. The Austro-Hungarian Empire also disintegrated and was forced to recognize the independence of its peoples in accordance with the principle of self-determination that had become Wilson's talisman.

Finally, and above all, the League of Nations, the cornerstone of the Fourteen Points, was placed at the head of the treaty. Wilson was especially proud of this contribution, which he considered decisive for the stability and security of all states. The league would be a forum for adjudicating international disputes and would provide mechanisms for preventing war. In cases of military aggression, economic sanctions would be applied immediately, and league members would be enjoined to collective defense, putting their own forces on the line to protect any member states that had been attacked.

Getting to this point hadn't been easy. Hostilities had ceased with the armistice of November 1918, but Wilson aimed for much more: not just the formal end of the Great War, but an end to all wars, for all time. The American president had spent the entire spring of 1919 negotiating daily with the Italian, British, and French prime ministers—Vittorio

Emanuele Orlando, David Lloyd George, and Georges Clemenceau. Along with Wilson, they comprised the so-called Council of Four or Big Four. The challenge was to draft a peace treaty that would secure a lasting peace while satisfying the Big Four's security, territorial, and financial interests and obtaining Germany's agreement.

Lloyd George and Clemenceau had been especially intractable. Having come to power in the middle of the war, both promised outright victory, not negotiated peace.<sup>1</sup> During arduous talks, Wilson was forced to make numerous concessions never contemplated in the Fourteen Points—concessions that allayed fears in Britain and France while deepening resentments in Germany. The British Empire would gain control of the German naval fleet and most of Germany's colonies. For fifteen years, France would be granted occupation of the left bank of the Rhine, the river comprising most of its border with Germany, and ownership of the Saar, a coalmining region straddling the French-German frontier. Thereafter, the Saar region would choose its destiny in a referendum. The treaty finally obliged Germany to not only pay reparations for damage done to civilian populations and property, but also to assume the cost of military pensions and compensation granted to soldiers' families during the war; for that purpose, Germany would be required to acknowledge its sole responsibility for "all loss and all damage suffered by Allied governments and associates and their nationals." But, recognizing that the resources of the vanquished were not unlimited, the treaty included some flexibility as to how much Germany would owe. A league commission, presided over by the United States, would determine the exact cost of the reparations. And Wilson thought that the league, once established, would compensate for the treaty's deficits.

By the summer of 1919, when the Senate began debate over ratification, a majority of Americans favored severe treatment of Germany. They were also in favor of maintaining alliances with England and France. The Republicans, Wilson's opposition in Congress, largely agreed. Henry Cabot Lodge, the powerful Massachusetts senator who served as majority leader and chair of the Foreign Relations Committee, wanted "a League among the Nations with whom the United States had been associated in the war."<sup>2</sup> What gave Lodge and his allies pause, however, was Article X of the League of Nations Covenant, the clause

committing members to defense of each other's independence and territorial integrity. A separate Treaty of Guarantee—also under consideration in the Senate—would require the United States and Britain to defend France in case of German aggression. Wasn't that good enough? When it came to defending all league members from any aggression, Lodge and many others, including most Senate Republicans and some Democrats, were circumspect.

After Wilson introduced the treaty in the Senate on July 10, Republicans insisted on reading its hundred pages line by line, a process that took two weeks. Then the Foreign Affairs Committee organized six weeks of public hearings, at which thirty-three witnesses testified and presented documents, amendments, and resolutions.<sup>3</sup> On August 19, Wilson, sensing that opposition to the treaty might be growing as time dragged on, invited the Foreign Affairs Committee to a meeting at the White House. Aside from the transfer to Japan of Shantung, a German colony in China, the territorial clauses of the Versailles Treaty provoked little concern among the senators. Most of the discussion turned on the possibility that the United States might be pressed into a war by virtue of Article X, which would oblige the country "to respect and preserve as against external aggression the territorial integrity and existing political independence of all Members of the League." Wilson tried to assuage the senators by assuring them that any action would require the "unanimous consent" of the league's Executive Council, of which the United States was to be a permanent member. Furthermore, "Congress" would be "absolutely free to put its own interpretation upon [Article X] in all cases that call for action." Wilson described Article X as "the very backbone of the whole Covenant," yet he also said that it imposed only "a moral, not a legal obligation." It was "binding in conscience only, not in law"—though, he added, a "moral obligation" was "of course superior to a legal obligation."<sup>4</sup> It was a confusing assertion, not a clarifying one. The senators' perplexity only increased when they questioned Wilson about agreements the Allies—France, Italy, Russia, Britain, and Japan—had signed in secret before the United States joined the war. These treaties allocated territorial rewards in case of victory. Wilson told the senators, implausibly, that he had no knowledge of the secret treaties.

To shore up support for the treaty, Wilson went on tour, visiting sixteen states to address the American people directly. Considered by many contemporaries to have been the most powerful speaker the United States had ever produced, Wilson knew that he could court public opinion far more effectively than he could sway the opposing senators. He had a talent for turning people around, a power of reasoning embellished by his impressive rhetorical skills, which often united the inspirational tone of Theodore Roosevelt—with its echoes of the founding era—and the kinds of policy specifics that defined the speeches of Wilson's predecessor in office, William Howard Taft.<sup>5</sup>

Senate Republicans planned a rejoinder. They would bring in another witness—an insider, a diplomat who had taken part in the Paris Peace Conference itself and who would speak damningly of what Wilson had agreed to. Their first choice was William Bullitt, who had provided intelligence to Wilson and the others representing the United States at the conference. A few months earlier, on May 17, Bullitt had tendered his resignation in a letter to President Wilson that became public a few days later. "I am sorry that you did not fight our fight to the finish," Bullitt wrote, "and that you had so little faith in the millions of men, like myself, in every nation who had faith in you." Bullitt had counted himself an idealist of Wilson's stripe, a liberal who believed that international law could secure permanent peace. The Treaty of Versailles achieved nothing of the sort, he concluded. "Our government has consented now to deliver the suffering people of the world to new oppressions, subjections, and dismemberments—a new century of war." The renewal of conflict was assured by the treaty itself, Bullitt wrote. The "unjust decisions of the conference" with regard to territorial control and reparations were sure to provoke hard feelings and hostilities. What is more, the resulting conflicts would embroil the United States, thanks to Article X. "It is my conviction that the present League of Nations will be powerless to prevent these wars," Bullitt wrote, "and that the United States will be involved in them by the obligations undertaken in the Covenant of the League."<sup>6</sup>

The Foreign Relations Committee issued a subpoena for Bullitt's testimony, and after a few days of searching, the summons reached him in the woods near Fort Kent, Maine, where he was staying with his wife Ernesta. Returning from an errand, she found her husband lying in bed.

“Are you ill?” she asked, observing later that “he looked white and queer.” He handed her the telegram from Senator Lodge. “If I tell what I should,” he said, “my career will be ruined.”<sup>7</sup>

But when it came time to testify, on September 12, 1919, Bullitt did not shrink from the limelight. Indeed, he had long hoped for an opportunity to speak before the Senate and only suffered briefly from cold feet. Once in the chambers, he swore to tell the truth and said all that he knew.<sup>8</sup> He spoke for three hours and provided extensive documentation of his experiences and what he had witnessed. At the end of his testimony, the journalists in the room rushed out to report on the day’s events, knowing that the hearing would make the front page of every newspaper in the United States and would shake the world. Lodge was exultant. His last witness exceeded his expectations.<sup>9</sup> Bullitt had revealed key details that would help Lodge revise or derail the Treaty of Versailles in the Senate.

### Bullitt’s Revelations

Bullitt knew the peace conference and the European security situation better than anyone. After joining the State Department in fall 1917, he had coordinated what was commonly known as its Enemy Desk.<sup>10</sup> He would gather information from the Central Powers—Germany and Austria-Hungary—for Colonel Edward M. House, Wilson’s main personal and political adviser, or for the president himself. At the peace conference, Bullitt served as chief of the Division of Current Intelligence Summaries. Every morning, he scoured sources and delivered his syntheses personally to Wilson, Secretary of State Robert Lansing, and the three other commissioners representing the United States at the conference. Bullitt retained numerous documents and drafts related to the treaty and the league; it was these that he provided to the senators, along with his own observations. The Wilson administration had deliberately kept senators in the dark, hoping to present them a *fait accompli*. Bullitt saw to it that they knew the facts.

Among the most important facts of which the senators knew nothing was Bullitt’s secret mission to Russia and Wilson’s response to it. A few weeks after Bullitt arrived in Paris for the peace conference, Colonel House directed him to travel to Moscow and meet with

Vladimir Lenin. The leader of the Bolsheviks, who had taken power in October 1917, saw an opportunity to obtain Allied recognition of his government. This was crucial because, in early 1919, the Bolsheviks were engaged in a bloody civil war with remnants of the tsar's regime and with others jockeying for control in Russia. Bullitt's task was to negotiate Russia's terms of entry into the new world order.

For the Allies, any such talks were enormously contentious, thanks to the Bolsheviks' perceived betrayal at Brest-Litovsk in March 1918. The Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, negotiated directly between Russia and the Central Powers, had ended the war in the east, freeing Germany to focus its might on the Western Front. This caused understandable consternation among the Allies. Upon entering the war, the United Kingdom, France, and Russia—the so-called Triple Entente—had each agreed not to conclude a separate peace. Yet the Bolsheviks did not feel bound by the tsar's promises.

Following the Allied victory, Clemenceau, alongside British secretary of war Winston Churchill, argued for intervening in the Russian Civil War in support of anti-Bolshevik forces. But Wilson and Lloyd George opposed, deeming the idea too risky.<sup>11</sup> All over Europe and the United States, the Bolshevik Revolution had politically powerful supporters who approved of a rebellion against what they considered an exploitative, domineering, and imperialist order that had sent millions of soldiers and civilians to die for their rulers' profit. As Wilson saw it, there was not a Western country that could safely deploy troops to Russia without creating troubles at home. After Brest-Litovsk, the United States had agreed to join its allies in deploying troops to the northern Russian towns of Arkhangelsk and Murmansk to prevent munitions previously sent to Russia from falling into German hands and to preserve the economic blockade against Germany.<sup>12</sup> But directly supporting the White Russians in their war against the Reds was a step too far.

Philip Kerr, personal and political secretary to Lloyd George, provided Bullitt with a list of conditions upon which he thought it would be possible for the Allied governments to establish normal relations with the new Russia. Hostilities would have to cease on all fronts of the Russian Civil War. All Russian parties claiming the authority of the state must be allowed to remain in control of whatever territories they occupied at the time, meaning that the Bolsheviks and the

White Russians would each keep their lands. The Allies would then agree to trade relations with the various governments succeeding Imperial Russia and would reopen supply routes.<sup>13</sup>

Negotiating secretly with the Bolsheviks, on the sidelines of Versailles, was a bold move. But Bullitt was determined to succeed. On March 11, the day he arrived in Moscow, he held face-to-face discussions with Lenin. For three days after that, Bullitt conducted negotiations with the Russian minister of foreign affairs, with Lenin nearby. Lenin eventually agreed to a proposal including all the points that Lloyd George and Kerr had charged Bullitt with obtaining. And Bullitt won additional concessions: political opponents of the Bolsheviks would be granted amnesty, and the tsar's successor governments would recognize full responsibility for paying the former empire's foreign debts. Lenin gave the Allies until April 10 to sign the agreement.<sup>14</sup> On March 25 Bullitt returned to Paris. That night, excited by Bullitt's debriefs, Colonel House called on Wilson, and the president invited Bullitt for an appointment the following afternoon.

The morning of the twenty-sixth, before his appointment with Wilson, Bullitt breakfasted with Lloyd George, Kerr, and General Jan Smuts, who represented South Africa at the Paris conference. All found Bullitt's report of the utmost importance; every indication was that they found the terms of Lenin's proposal entirely acceptable. However, that same morning, the influential editorialist Wickham Steed denounced the Allies' apparent readiness to accept the evil of Bolshevism. All the English-speaking attendees at the conference read Steed's rebuke in Paris's *Daily Mail*; he accused the Allies of accepting the plague of Communist dictatorship in exchange merely for the prospect of business opportunities in Russia.<sup>15</sup> Lloyd George, who was very sensitive to the press, decided he could not openly promote Lenin's proposal, but he still hoped it would win the day. He authorized Kerr to tell "Wilson that if he wanted to bring Lenin's proposal before the Council of Four, [Wilson] could count upon [Lloyd George's] support for consideration of it and probably acceptance of it."<sup>16</sup>

But before Bullitt could meet with Wilson, the president canceled the appointment, claiming a headache. The meeting was rescheduled for the following day, then canceled again. Wilson carried on refusing to meet with Bullitt until Lenin's April 10 deadline passed.



The new Russian state therefore never committed to laying down arms in the civil war and a fortiori was not included in the Treaty of Versailles or the League of Nations, which required signatories to recognize the borders of all member states. Wilson, it seems, had been convinced that the Bolsheviks would soon lose control of Moscow to the White Russians, who had wrested a hundred miles from the Bolsheviks in the previous week. Yet the opposite happened. The Bolsheviks quickly regained territory and by summer were moving toward victory across the area previously controlled by White Russians and toward possible expansion beyond the borders of Russia.

The Senate was therefore forced to confront a grave question: if, in the near future, Bolshevik armies spread into the rest of Europe, wouldn't the United States be at war? Bullitt laid before the senators Wilson's own draft of the league covenant, written on the president's typewriter. "So far as I know, in the final form of the League the only proposal of the president that remains more or less intact is Article X," Bullitt told the senators. It was hard to see how Wilson was not committing the United States to a war that seemed almost certain to arise, and not least because of the president's own miscalculations.<sup>17</sup>

### Losing the War for Public Opinion

Wilson's refusal to act on Lenin's proposal was not the only revelation of Bullitt's testimony. Bullitt also told the senators about a conversation he and Secretary of State Lansing had in Paris, after Bullitt had submitted his resignation.

According to Bullitt's notes, Lansing had called parts of the treaty "thoroughly bad" and the League of Nations "entirely useless." Lansing thought France and Britain had gotten everything they wanted into the treaty, at the expense of ensuring dangerously high levels of resentment not only in Germany but also among colonized peoples—Irish, Arabs, Indians, and so on—who hoped that the league and treaty would assure them national self-determination. Instead, thanks to the Treaty of Versailles and various other treaties negotiated in Paris, many colonized peoples would remain under domination, if perhaps that of a new power. Nothing could be done to alter the unjust

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