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Obama's Prize, Wilson's Legacy

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Published: October 10, 2009

Madison, Wis.

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PRESIDENT OBAMA'S surprise Nobel Peace Prize is only the second in the last century that a sitting president has received. The first was presented in December 1920, when the Nobel Committee of the Norwegian Parliament awarded Woodrow Wilson the peace prize for 1919. Beyond the coincidence of both men residing in the White House, however, Presidents Obama and Wilson look like the starkest study in contrasts in when and how each received this prize.

For example, while Mr. Obama is being honored at the beginning of his presidency and while his popularity is high, Wilson's prize came three months before the end of his presidency and at the lowest point in his personal and political life. It came a year and a half after the signing of the Treaty of Versailles, which ended World War I. The intervening months had witnessed a series of defeats and disasters for Wilson and his policies.

He had returned home from Paris to face a spite-filled, partisan deadlock over ratification of the peace treaty, which would carry with it membership in the new League of Nations — the international organization Wilson had played the central role in creating. In the Senate, some of his Republican opponents rejected league membership altogether, while others, most notably Henry Cabot Lodge of Massachusetts, would accept membership only under severe restrictions that many believed would cripple America's ability to help the organization fulfill its mission.

Wilson first tried negotiating with the senators, and when they rebuffed his efforts, he took his case to the people, mounting a whirlwind campaign-style speaking tour across the country. He never completed that tour. His doctor, seeing him exhausted and showing symptoms of impending collapse, rushed Wilson back to the White House, where he suffered a stroke. He never fully functioned as president again, and his remaining time in office saw the worst instance of presidential disability in the nation's history.

Physically, Wilson's stroke left him partly paralyzed and enfeebled; psychologically, it unhinged his emotional balance and impaired his judgment. Faced with Lodge's reservations, Wilson from his sickbed rejected all talk of compromise and ordered Democratic senators to accept virtually unconditional approval of the treaty. After an initial defeat of the treaty in November 1919, a bipartisan group of senators tried to find

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a middle ground, only to fail in the face of intransigence by both Lodge and Wilson. The treaty went down to a second defeat in March 1920, prompting the president to tell his doctor, "the Devil is a busy man." As a result of those votes, the United States never ratified the Treaty of Versailles and never joined the League of Nations.

Still worse humiliation followed for Wilson. Public opinion largely turned against him. The Republican nominee in 1920, the handsome, mellifluous Warren Harding, called for "not heroics but healing, not nostrum but normalcy, not revolution but restoration, not agitation but adjustment, not surgery but serenity" — all ways of drawing a sharp line between himself and Wilson. Not surprisingly, the Republicans won one of the biggest popular and electoral victories ever; Cordell Hull, then a just-defeated member of Congress but later Franklin Roosevelt's secretary of state, called it "a tidal wave."

Coming just a month after that repudiation at the polls, the peace prize offered balm to Wilson's wounded body and soul. The news surprised him, but it should not have. With the Great War over, the leading peacemaker and author of a bold new plan to rid the world of war was the logical, well-nigh inescapable choice

Yet the prize was a case of a prophet enjoying greater honor among others than among his own people. Abroad, reactions were generally approving, even among some figures from the defeated Central Powers. At home, Republicans in general and Lodge in particular ignored the event, while privately they were itching to take power and have a chance to show what they trumpeted as their better approaches to peace and security — plans that did not include the League of Nations.

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John Milton Cooper, a professor of history at the University of Wisconsin, is the author of the forthcoming "Woodrow Wilson: A Biography."

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A version of this article appeared in print on October 11, 2009, on page WK12 of the New York edition.

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