League of Nations Lesson Plan

Central Historical Question
Why did senators oppose joining the League of Nations in 1919?

Materials:
- League of Nations PowerPoint
- Copies of Documents A-E
- Copies of Guiding Questions

Plan of Instruction:

1. **Introduction.** Use the League of Nations PowerPoint to introduce the Treaty of Versailles and the League of Nations.
   
   a. **Slide 2: Armistice.** *By the fall of 1918, the German army realized that their hopes of winning the Great War were slim, and German leaders agreed to surrender. On November 11, 1918, Germany and the Allies signed an armistice, which is an agreement to stop fighting. Although the fighting had ceased, the two sides had yet to sign a formal peace treaty ending the war. Some of the Allies, especially France and Britain, wanted a peace treaty that would punish Germany for the war. They especially wanted Germany to accept blame and to pay enormous reparations.*

   b. **Slide 3: Wilson and League of Nations.** *President Wilson had a different vision for peace than Britain or France. Wilson wanted a “peace without victory,” meaning that no nation would be forced to take the blame or be punished for the war. Wilson also had an idealistic vision for how to use the peace treaty to prevent future wars, which he laid out in his “Fourteen Points” address to Congress. Central to his vision was the establishment of a “League of Nations,” an international organization that would help protect peace by providing a forum for resolving international disputes.*

   c. **Slide 4: Treaty of Versailles.** *Leaders from around the world met in Versailles, France, to negotiate a peace treaty in the summer of 1919. Although many nations were in attendance, it was France, England, Italy, and the United States that had the power to dictate the terms of peace. European leaders resisted most of Wilson’s ideas and insisted that the treaty punish Germany by including severe reparations that would cripple the German economy. The Allied leaders did, however, agree to establish a League of Nations. This new organization included a General Assembly of all member states and an Executive Council comprising the world’s most powerful nations. The Executive Council was given the power to create a court that would manage disputes between nations. As part of membership in the League, each member nation was expected to reduce its military to only what was needed for self-defense and to submit any*
conflicts with other member states to arbitration by the League before going to war.

d. Slide 5: Senate Opposition. President Wilson signed the Treaty of Versailles, but the Constitution requires treaties be approved by two-thirds of the senate to become law. Wilson faced a tough political battle when he returned from Paris. Some senators were vehemently opposed to the treaty. A group of 12-18 senators, who became known as “irreconcilables” opposed the treaty at all costs.

Other senators were willing to negotiate on the treaty but were concerned about the terms of the agreement for the League of Nations. These Senators, led by Henry Cabot Lodge from Massachusetts, became known as “reservationists” because they would only agree to the treaty if it included certain reservations that addressed aspects of the treaty that they didn’t like.

e. Slide 6 Article X: A principle objection was to the language of Article X of the League of Nations charter, which stated, “The Members of the League undertake to respect and preserve as against external aggression the territorial integrity and existing political independence of all Members of the League.”

Stop here and ask students to speculate about why some would oppose this section of the Treaty of Versailles. Stress that the documents in the lesson will reference Article X. You can project this slide for students to reference as they analyze the documents.

f. Slide 7: Wilson’s Battle with the Senate. Had Wilson been willing to compromise with the Reservationists on the language of the Treaty, it would likely have passed. However, he was unwilling to make even small, symbolic changes. Rather than compromise, Wilson went on a nationwide speaking tour to drum up support for the treaty. However, Wilson fell ill during the tour and returned to Washington DC, where he suffered a debilitating stroke that would leave him physically and mentally impaired for the rest of his presidency. Wilson was never able to muster the political capital needed to bend the Senate to his will.

The Senate voted on the treaty three times during the remainder of Wilson’s final term in office, rejecting it each time. The Treaty of Versailles was never ratified by the Senate and the United States never joined the other 63 countries in the League of Nations.

g. Slide 8: Central Historical Question. Today, we will examine documents from the time to answer the question: Why did senators oppose joining the League of Nations in 1919?
2. Inquiry.

   a. In small groups, have students examine Document A and answer the Guiding Questions. If your students are unfamiliar with Washington’s Farewell Address and/or the Monroe Doctrine, you may want to review them with students.

   b. Discuss Document A together as a class. Elicit student responses to Question 1. Be sure that students see the different aspects of Lodge’s argument, including:

   - The Treaty would be a major change in American foreign policy, including a departure from the principles of Washington’s Farewell Address and the Monroe Doctrine.
   - The United States would be forced to support decisions of the League with force, which would require a large standing military and could cost the lives of Americans.
   - The Treaty could give foreign powers a say over American policies, including immigration.

   For Question 2, students should see that this address is limited as evidence because it is the perspective of only one senator. They should also see that a senator might not be completely honest in a public speech, especially if their true motivations would be unpopular with voters. However, a public statement by the leader of the majority party in the Senate on an important issue does provide evidence of their party’s positions on the issues and may reflect opinions held widely among colleagues.

   c. In groups, have students answer analyze Document B and Document C and answer the corresponding Guiding Questions.

   d. Discuss answers to Guiding Questions for Document B and Document C. For Document B, students should see the range of possibilities for Lodge’s apparent change of heart on a league of nations. One possibility is that Lodge saw the issue differently over the four-year gap in time. Another possibility is that Lodge still supported a league but objected to this particular vision for it. However, it is also possible that Lodge changed his position for political purposes. In 1915, many powerful Republicans supported a league, and the Democrats were not unified behind the idea. By 1919, Democratic president Woodrow Wilson had embraced the idea and Democrats supported him.

   Document C shows how Senators from each party voted on issues that Wilson supported. Although votes did not strictly follow party lines,
Democrats tended to support the treaty and Republicans tended to oppose it. This suggests that party considerations were important in the debate over the Treaty of Versailles and supports the idea that Lodge may have changed his positions for political reasons.

e. In small groups, have students read Document D and Document E and answer the Guiding Questions.

f. Discuss Guiding Questions as a class. Senator Norris expressed concern about the American military being forced to support the British Empire. This echoes the concerns that Lodge raised about American forces being deployed at the behest of the League of Nations. Senator Johnson corroborates Lodge’s statements about a loss of national autonomy in policy and lawmakers.

3. Writing Activity. Have students complete the writing activity, either in class or as homework.

4. Final Discussion. Have students share their thesis statements and then discuss how students used each of the documents to support the thesis. Be sure that student claims are adequately supported by the evidence and that the evidence is used appropriately to support the claim.

Extending Understanding: Debates about the role that America should play in international affairs is an enduring theme in United States history. You can help your students see how the debate over the League of Nations fits into this broader theme by comparing American visions of American foreign policy over time. One option would be to ask students to compare the objections to the League to current discussions about America’s role in the world. To what extent do we see the objections raised to the League of Nations mirrored in current events? And just as importantly, how are they different than the present?

Sources

Document A

Document B

Document C
Document D

Document E