

The History of the Twentieth Century

Episode 205

“1919 – The United States III”

Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

After an unprecedented six months spent in Europe, Woodrow Wilson returned to Washington with the Treaty of Versailles in hand. As difficult as the treaty negotiations had been, convincing the US Senate to approve the treaty would present an even greater challenge.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening Theme]

Episode 205. 1919: The United States, part three.

President Woodrow Wilson spent about six months in Europe altogether, in late 1918 and the first half of 1919. You may recall that his two immediate predecessors, Theodore Roosevelt and William Howard Taft, had been the first two Presidents to leave US territory while in office, which was regarded as controversial at the time. Some even questioned the constitutionality of an incumbent President traveling abroad. But neither Roosevelt nor Taft had been out of the country for anything like as long as Wilson was. And no subsequent US President ever has since, at least not as of the date I release this podcast episode. Given how international diplomacy is conducted in our time, it seems unlikely any President ever will again, but, hey, who knows?

Wilson did return to the United States for a couple of weeks in late February. That’s because the old US Congress, the 65th Congress, the one controlled by the Democrats, was due to adjourn *sine die*, as they say, on March 4, pursuant to the law in effect at the time. Wilson did not want to call the new Congress into session until the Peace Conference was over and the full treaty agreed to, but the Republicans were already fighting him on this. They tried to stall the passage of appropriation bills until after the fourth in order to force the new Congress into session. Today, we might say they “threatened a government shutdown.”

Wilson did invite the members of the House Foreign Affairs Committee and the Senate Foreign Relations Committee to dinner at the White House at this time, and afterward he held a two-hour informal Q&A with them. The Democrats spoke positively about the session, while the

Republicans grumbled. One Senator, probably Henry Cabot Lodge, was quoted anonymously as saying he was “astonished” by Wilson’s ignorance of the provisions of his own treaty. Wilson was also accused of dismissing a question about home rule for Ireland as a British internal matter.

This was significant because the Republicans saw the home rule question as potentially drawing the substantial Irish-American community away from its traditional home in the Democratic Party. That’s an aspect of US politics you’re going to want to keep an eye on. Outside of Congress, William Howard Taft and his League to Enforce Peace were all in on the League of Nations concept and undertook a huge publicity campaign to sell the American public on the treaty.

But the Republicans in the Senate were clearly unconvinced. At the close of the old Congress, Pennsylvania Senator Philander Knox condemned the League of Nations, saying it “absolutely requires that every future war will be a potential world war, and that we shall be an active participant in every such war.” Senator Lodge said it would nullify the Monroe Doctrine and take away from the US government control over immigration policy. Lodge produced a list of 37 Republican Senators who had declared they would not ratify a peace treaty that included a League of Nations in its current form. That was a large enough number to block the treaty in the Senate, and concrete evidence that ratification would be an uphill battle.

But first, Wilson returned to Paris to another four months of sessions at the Peace Conference. As negotiations continued, Wilson was forced to call the new Congress into session on May 19 to finish the appropriations bills for the coming fiscal year. Wilson called on Congress to finally pass the Constitutional amendment guaranteeing women’s right to vote. After multiple failed attempts, it passed the House of Representatives 304-89, and finally passed the Senate, 56-25. It would be ratified by the states as the Nineteenth Amendment to the US Constitution, in time for women across the nation to vote in the 1920 Presidential election.

Wilson showed some evidence of health problems during this time. He had had a bout of the flu in early 1919, at the tail end of the pandemic. He showed signs of fatigue and confusion, and developed a tic. These caused his family and friends some concern, though he was still able to do his work. Only in hindsight do we wonder if they were signs of a more serious problem.

In June, as the signing ceremony for the Treaty of Versailles was taking place in France, in the United States, the Chicago *Tribune* printed its assessment of the state of the treaty in the US Senate. It identified forty Senators who supported the Treaty—39 Democrats and one Republican. Eight Republicans were identified as completely opposed. In the language of 1919, they were called the “irreconcilables.” In between stood 43 Senators who would only support the treaty with modifications. In 1919, these were called “reservationists.” The others were undecided.

I need to explain some of this, especially for my listeners outside the United States. The requirements to ratify a treaty agreement vary from one country to another. In democratic nations, the approval of the national legislature is often required, although in some parliamentary nations, the approval of the Cabinet is sufficient. The United States has a uniquely difficult system. The House of Representatives has no role in treaty ratification at all, but before it is ratified, a treaty must be approved by a two-thirds vote of the United States Senate, often a difficult threshold to reach. Just ask Woodrow Wilson.

You may wonder why the Constitution makes it so difficult for the United States to ratify a treaty. The explanation lies in the fact that the United States is a federation. The states that comprise the US are sovereign entities, but the US federal government is also a sovereign entity, making the US a dual sovereignty federation. The Constitution resolves this seeming contradiction by delineating the boundaries of federal sovereignty and reserving to the states all sovereign powers not vested in the federal government.

Now, the power to govern relations with other nations is explicitly a federal power, and this includes the power to conclude treaties. But here's the rub: a treaty agreement might also restrict the powers of a state government. To give you an example: in 1916 the United States and the United Kingdom entered into the Migratory Bird Treaty, which was an environmental treaty aimed at preserving certain species of birds that migrate between the United States and Canada by regulating the hunting and trafficking of live or dead birds, their eggs, their feathers, and their nests. It was quite properly the role of the federal government to negotiate and sign such a treaty, but there's also a constitutional difficulty here: the regulation of hunting and trading of birds is a state power that ordinarily the federal government would be unable to limit directly. Yet by agreeing to the treaty, the federal government has indirectly limited the sovereign power of the states in a way it could not do directly.

The Senate approval process resolves this inconsistency. Since Senators represent states, a two-thirds approval from the Senate is effectively the approval of two-thirds of the states. That's why the US has this stringent requirement—because under the dual-sovereignty framework, the states also have a right to weigh in on treaty questions.

Within the US constitutional system, you also have to ask this question: If the Senate decides it wants to adopt the Treaty of Versailles with modifications, how would that work and would it require taking the treaty back to the other signatory nations for their approval of the modifications? Well, it depends, and this would be one of the questions that Wilson and the Senate Republicans will be hotly debating. One possible pathway would be for the Senate to amend the treaty, to change its actual language. This would definitely require the consent of the other parties to the treaty. If they did not consent, then the outcome would be the same as if the Senate had rejected the treaty. On the other hand, the Senate might approve the treaty as written, while in the same resolution declaring that the US commitment to this or that provision of the

treaty was subject to certain conditions or “reservations,” as they liked to say in 1919, hence the term “reservationists” for Senators who wanted to see reservations made.

Woodrow Wilson’s position, understandably after six months of hard work negotiating this thing, was that adding reservations would undermine the treaty. It was already a complex document, with a lot of moving parts. Fiddling with one could make the whole project unworkable. If the Senate reservations were numerous or represented substantial changes, the other signatories might well decide to treat US ratification as no ratification at all.

Well, that’s the process. What was the substance of the Senate Republicans’ complaints about the treaty? They were many, but let’s take a look at some of the most important ones.

First was the decision the Conference had made regarding the Shandong Peninsula. We already covered this in episode 200, but in summary, the Treaty of Versailles awarded the German concessions on the Shandong Peninsula to Japan rather than to China. This was a flat-out violation of the principle of self-determination, since no one doubted that the ethnic Chinese people who live on the peninsula wanted to be ruled by the government of China rather than by the Japanese Emperor. Even Woodrow Wilson knew this and acknowledged it. This is the only case I’m aware of when Wilson actually admitted to bending his own principles, but the reason was plain enough. Wilson believed the Shandong Peninsula was the price that had to be paid to get Japan to support the League of Nations and that Japan’s participation was essential.

But it was hard for a lot of Americans to swallow. The US public of the time had a lot more sympathy for the Chinese position. Even worse, as the Republicans pointed out, the mutual defense principle of the League of Nations would require the United States to defend Japanese ownership of the peninsula in any future war between China and Japan. That could be awkward.

Second, there was the Irish question. Shouldn’t the principle of self-determination apply to Ireland? As I said, there were a lot of Irish Americans who were hostile to Britain. And there were a lot of Republicans who saw an opportunity to split the Irish-American community away from the Democratic Party. Wilson held to the view that the United Kingdom was a democracy, and therefore any dispute over the structure or composition of the UK could be resolved internally, democratically, within the constitutional structure of the United Kingdom. There was therefore no need to bring the dispute before an international forum.

Third, there was the Monroe Doctrine. Wilson had gotten the Conference to agree to a clause in the treaty upholding the Monroe Doctrine, but Republicans argued it wasn’t strong enough.

Fourth, and similarly, Republicans raised the question of whether the League would have authority over domestic issues within the United States, such as the size of the US Army and Navy or immigration policy. They wanted language assuring that it wouldn’t.

And finally, there was the question of Article Ten, under which members of the League pledged to defend one another's territorial integrity and independence. The League was envisioned as using economic boycotts, or as a last resort, military intervention to protect League members against threats from other nations. The Republicans expressed concern that this would give the League too much power over US trade policy and worse, the US military would be subject to endless calls to deal with conflicts all over the world. Wilson's response to this last point was to note that the US was geographically remote from most world trouble spots and offered a firefighter analogy. If a fire broke out in Oklahoma, Wilson argued, you wouldn't worry that a firehouse in Utah would be called to fight it. Simple logic tells you that the firehouses closest to the fire would be called first, and more distant ones only when the need was great.

Wilson spoke before the Senate on July 10 to urge passage of the Treaty, but his speech fizzled. Republicans complained that Wilson spoke only in pleasant generalities; "a soufflé of rhetorical phrases," one irreconcilable Senator called it. He spoke to Congress again on August 8; that speech was on domestic matters. These would be his last two speeches to Congress.

Wilson had two possible paths, two strategies to get the Treaty approved. One was to work the Senate, patiently, Senator by Senator. Explain the treaty to them. Explain why it was the way it was and what tradeoffs had to have been made in Paris in order to make the thing work. The other strategy was to go over the Senate's heads, so to speak; to take the treaty case directly to the voting public and persuade them that they needed the treaty, and get them to convey that message to the Senators who represented them.

Wilson favored the second strategy here. He had been elected President twice, he was a talented public speaker, and he firmly believed the American public supported his position. His advisers, on the other hand, counseled the first approach. The Treaty debate would be settled on the floor of the US Senate, not at the ballot box, and the Senate, by design, was insulated from public opinion. One-third of the Senate had five years to go on their terms. Another third had three years. By the time they faced the voters again, the Treaty of Versailles would be yesterday's news.

Wilson gave it a shot. He spent his summer in one-on-one meetings with Senators, trying to persuade them to support the Treaty. This was an unusually hot summer, even by Washington standards, and as you well know, it was also a time of labor unrest, complaints about the high cost of living, and the aftermath of anarchist bombing campaigns. Wilson remained aloof from all of this, as well as from the violence of the Red Summer, even when it struck in Washington itself, and indeed, even when it came within sight of the White House.

Again, you have to wonder if this aloofness was an indicator of failing health. I told you last time that Wilson was out cruising the Potomac on his yacht when the violence began in Washington. He did not cut his weekend short; even after he returned to the White House, he made no public appearances and made no statement about the rioting. The press was told the President was

suffering a bout of dysentery. Whether that was true, or whether we can take all this as a hint of some graver illness is a question no one can answer with confidence. He was working the Senators hard during this time, and no doubt that took a toll on him.

In August, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee began hearings on the Treaty, and the hearings quickly turned hostile. By this time, Wilson had abandoned his position that the Treaty must be ratified as it stood. He was now saying he was prepared to accept reservations, but only if the reservations were not part of the actual treaty text. He insisted that the obligations the League of Nations covenant would impose on the US, such as the obligation to defend other League members, were moral obligations only, not enforceable legal ones.

If all this sounds nitpicky, that's because it is. Looking back at this debate from a modern perspective, it's surprising how weird and arcane some of the issues under debate were. For example, there was an article in the League Covenant that said any League member could withdraw from the League, once it had fulfilled its commitments to the League. Senate Republicans worried that if the US ever wanted to leave the League, that clause might be used to prevent it. Wilson argued that it was a moral commitment, not a legal one. In hindsight, it seems a bit silly. Of course if the US or any other nation wanted to leave the League, it would be able to. How was anyone going to stop them? Similarly, the concerns about Article Ten seem way overblown. Obviously, if the League called on its members to join an economic boycott, or commit to combat, the US would first consider its own national interests before agreeing, whatever the text of the Treaty might say, as would every other member nation.

But this was the tenor of the debate. The so-called reservationists kept coming up with scenarios for how the future League of Nations might bind the US government in some unanticipated way that would undermine US sovereignty. Wilson kept holding out for no reservations, or at least only modest ones. He was being nitpicky too, adamant that any but the slightest change would doom the whole Treaty. Sometimes he wasn't prepared to agree to any reservation at all. He went back and forth on that.

On August 23, the Foreign Relations Committee went beyond even that debate and passed an actual amendment to the Treaty, striking the provision that gave the Shandong Peninsula to Japan. This was not a reservation, mind you, but a full-on amendment, one that would require the other signatories to agree to it, which would be next to impossible. Woodrow Wilson and the Democrats were furious.

Days later, Wilson announced that he would be taking a speaking tour of the nation, making a broad circuit of the United States by train, campaigning at every stop along the way for ratification of the Treaty of Versailles. Many of his closest advisors, including his wife Edith, disagreed with this move and tried to talk him out of it. Some thought it was a rash response to the rebuke from the Foreign Relations Committee, one made in haste and in anger. Others, including Edith, may have had concerns about Wilson's health. After grueling months in Paris

and a summer of setbacks in Washington, did the 62-year old President have the stamina for this ambitious tour? Wilson told his wife that he had promised the troops this would be a war to end wars. They had done their part; now it was his turn to do his.

His train left Washington on September 3. The next morning, he gave the first speech of the tour in Columbus, and later that day at the Indiana state fairgrounds outside Indianapolis. In between, he made whistle stop appearances, that is, he spoke briefly at train stations during stops. Wilson spoke without a prepared text, as was usual with him, but stenographers took down his speeches, which were then transcribed and distributed to newspapers across the country. All this cost a lot of money—about \$1000 a day, a hefty sum in 1919, much of which was underwritten by automobile magnate and treaty supporter, Henry Ford. Recall that Ford had run for the US Senate seat in Michigan last year, as a Democrat and a Wilson supporter, but had lost narrowly in that year's mid-term Republican wave.

The pace was frantic. Wilson gave two speeches every day, except on Sundays, and made whistle stop appearances in between. Three days into the tour, he joked with the press that he had already lost two pounds. His doctor suggested slowing down, perhaps ditching the whistle stops, but Wilson did not take his advice.

The pace was as demanding as either of Wilson's Presidential campaigns, maybe more demanding than either. He had been out of the country for six months and had catching up to do. The terms of the treaty were complex and difficult to explain to the public, even for a college professor. Wilson did his best. In Omaha, he told the crowd that the League of Nations could not guarantee there would be no more world wars, but "I predict with absolute certainty that, within another generation, there will be another world war if the nations of the world—if the League of Nations—does not prevent it by concerted action."

[music: Dvořak, *Symphony No. 9*]

By the second week of the tour, Wilson's train was negotiating America's Great Plains, and the hot, dry climate appears to have affected his health. His speeches became disorganized. He wandered off topic. In Montana, he expressed "my shame as an American citizen at the race riots that have occurred in some places." This was his only public comment on the Red Summer, and he followed it immediately with a harsh attack on the striking police in Boston.

Meanwhile, in Washington, William Bullitt, the former diplomat who had resigned in protest against the administration's Russia policy, episode 184, appeared before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and produced his copy of a memo from Secretary of State Lansing, no fan of the Treaty. In his memo, Lansing dismissed the League of Nations as "entirely useless," and expressed the view that if the American public understood the Treaty of Versailles, it would be defeated.

This revelation was a bombshell that undid much of Wilson's work on his speaking tour and estranged the President from his Secretary of State. Lansing himself refused to comment. He disappeared on a fishing trip, and set to work quietly drafting a letter of resignation.

Wilson spent most of the third week of his tour in California, where the weather was kinder and the pace slower. He gave powerful speeches there, including one in San Diego where he addressed a crowd of more than 30,000 people using a microphone that amplified his voice electronically and relayed it to the audience over loudspeakers; the first time in Wilson's career he spoke with electronic amplification. He reportedly didn't like the microphone, because it kept him in one place. He couldn't move around the stage, but the speech was a hit. He told the crowd he could accept reservations to the Treaty that were intended as clarifications; what he could not accept, what the world could not accept, would be treaty modifications that gave the United States a privileged position among the nations. He spoke of the children he had met on the tour, and predicted that if "we should not win this great fight for the League of Nations, it would mean their death warrant."

California seemed to be good for Wilson, but on the return trip, he showed signs of decline. He complained of headaches. He spoke to a crowd of 15,000 in the Mormon Tabernacle in Salt Lake City. It was hot and stuffy and afterward, Wilson's jacket was soaked through with perspiration. Not coincidentally, the speech was a poor one. From there he went on to Cheyenne and Denver and then to the Colorado state fairgrounds outside Pueblo on September 25. That speech went better. Wilson cited the late Theodore Roosevelt on the need for a league of nations. He ended the speech with this ringing declaration:

"There is one thing that the American people always rise to and extend their hand to, and that is the truth of justice and of liberty and of peace. We have accepted that truth and we are going to be led by it, and it is going to lead us, and through us the world, out into pastures of quietness and peace such as the world never dreamed of before."

It was a great speech, from one of the era's greatest speakers, and it would be his last major public address. After he finished and boarded his train, he was tired and in pain. His doctor thought he needed to take a walk, and so the train stopped about 20 miles outside Pueblo so that the President and the First Lady could go for a walk. While they were out, a local farmer recognized Wilson and gifted him with a head of cabbage and a sack of apples. Back on the train, Wilson told everyone the walk had done him good. He insisted on staying up past ten o'clock to make a whistle stop in the small town of Rocky Ford, Colorado, population then of about 3,700; it's about the same today. There he shook hands with some of the locals.

Wilson went to bed, but got up later that night, complaining that he could not sleep because of a severe headache. He was nauseous and exhibited twitches in his face. The doctor tended to him and Wilson finally drifted off to sleep at about five in the morning. His alarmed doctor advised his staff to cancel the rest of the trip. When Wilson awoke later in the morning, he at first

resisted the idea. He worried that his political enemies would call him a quitter. But he soon gave in and admitted that something was wrong with him, and his train was rerouted onto a direct route back to Washington. The press were told the President was suffering from a digestive problem.

Back in the White House, Wilson rested the next few days. His headaches were too severe for him to get any work done. Then on the morning of October 2, Wilson complained that his left hand was numb. When he tried to walk, his left leg collapsed and he fell to the floor. Doctors found Wilson conscious but sluggish, his left side paralyzed.

Woodrow Wilson had suffered a stroke. Specifically, it was what today we call an ischemic stroke, brought on by a blood clot. This kind of stroke comes upon the victim gradually and is rarely fatal, as opposed to the hemorrhagic stroke, caused by internal bleeding, which is usually more sudden and more often fatal. Wilson remained conscious and aware of his surroundings. He retained his sense of humor, accusing one doctor who wanted to draw some of his blood of being in league with the Senate Republicans.

But less than two weeks later, Wilson experienced a second, apparently unrelated, medical crisis when he developed an infection of the prostate gland that led to urinary blockage and a high fever. There were no antibiotics back then, and the standard treatment would have been surgery, except that the stroke had left the President too weak for that option. Unlike the stroke, this infection was potentially deadly.

The combination of these two conditions effectively made Wilson unable to function at all as President for about six weeks in October and November. During this period, Edith Wilson would permit no one apart from Wilson's daughters, his doctors and nurses, and the White House servants to see the President. The circle of people allowed to meet with Wilson gradually got wider, but Edith retained tight control over who could meet with her husband for several more months.

It is sometimes said that Edith Wilson effectively ran the country for this period. I've even seen it argued that Edith Wilson was the first woman President. People said that at the time. It was called "government by petticoat." How's that for classy? And people still say these sorts of things today. But those claims are exaggerated. Edith Wilson herself would always deny that she had any role in public affairs during this time or in any way usurped her husband's authority. When a person is ill, and particularly when their ability to communicate is impaired, it's only natural to have a close family member fill the role of liaison to the outside world. Who better to discern the impaired person's will than someone who knows them well?

But I don't want to let Edith Wilson off the hook here. She was probably doing her best to keep Presidential business going the way her husband wanted. But under the US constitutional system, control over access to the President is effectively control over the administration of the federal government, whether you admit to it or not.

But there's a more important issue here than how an impaired Wilson runs his administration. It's whether Wilson should still be President at all. Edith Wilson consulted with Dr. Francis Dercum, a prominent Philadelphia neurologist who had been called to Washington to examine the President. Dercum's words were encouraging—he cited the case of the famed French biologist Louis Pasteur, who suffered a similar stroke in 1868 and not only recovered, but went on to do some of the most important work of his career. When Edith asked if Wilson should resign, Dercum counseled her that her husband's mind was sound and he could still be a great leader. The doctor said, "If he resigns, his greatest incentive to recovery is gone." On the other hand, he counseled Edith not to lay on Wilson too many mental burdens: "[K]eep in mind that every time you take him a new anxiety or problem...you are turning a knife in an open wound."

So by keeping Wilson rested and in seclusion, Edith was merely following the medical advice she was given, and it's hard to blame her for that. But though this advice may have been the best available at the time, our modern understanding of stroke rehabilitation is quite different from the advice Edith Wilson received a century ago. Modern medicine emphasizes stimulation. The patient should be up and doing things and interacting with other people as soon as possible, exactly the opposite of what Edith was told to do.

But again, I have to raise the larger question. Edith may have been doing what she believed to be best for her husband, keeping him in office but aloof from most of its burdens, but what's best for Woodrow Wilson the man is not the same as what's best for his country. And was it best for the United States that Wilson remain in office, despite his impaired condition?

Within days after Wilson's stroke, the Secretary of State, Robert Lansing, was asking this very question. Recall that he'd just had a falling out with Wilson, and likely would have submitted his resignation, but Wilson's stroke changed things. Lansing was asking questions about what was wrong with Wilson, and getting little information from the White House. He spoke with Secretary of War Newton Baker and Secretary of the Interior Franklin Lane, both of whom agreed with Lansing that the Cabinet should meet to discuss the situation.

And so they did, on Monday October 6, just four days after Wilson's stroke. Lansing's motives in organizing this Cabinet meeting without Presidential authority came under scrutiny at the time, and ever since. Lansing's relationship with Wilson was damaged—irretrievably broken, as it would turn out—and under the law in effect at the time, Lansing, as Secretary of State, was next in line for the Presidency after Vice President Marshall, and some saw—and see—in Lansing's actions here the work of a man angling to install himself in the White House, or at least to sabotage the President he'd had a falling-out with. But there's no evidence to support these dark accusations, and it may well have been merely that Lansing was a government official concerned about the circumstances of the government in which he served.

There was no precedent for the situation in which the Cabinet and the Administration now found themselves. Five times previously in US history, the President of the United States had died in

office and was succeeded by the Vice President, per the US Constitution. But in four of those cases, the President had died pretty quickly. James Garfield had survived more than ten weeks before succumbing to the wounds his assassin had inflicted, but Garfield was conscious and alert most of that time. He had only taken office four months earlier, it was summer, and Garfield had far less Presidential business to attend to than Woodrow Wilson had. Wilson needed to deal with racial tensions, labor unrest, the high cost of living, Prohibition, and the coming Red Scare. And above all else, America was still technically in a state of war with Germany and had a peace treaty to deal with. Yeah.

The Constitution states that the Vice President should assume the office of President, and I quote, “[i]n Case of the Removal of the President from Office, or of his Death, Resignation, or Inability to discharge the Powers and Duties of the said Office.” It’s that last passage—“Inability to discharge the Powers and Duties of the said Office”—that applies here. When the Cabinet met, Lansing raised a difficult constitutional question no American had ever had to ask before: What constitutes “inability to discharge the powers and duties,” and who decides when and whether the President has become disabled?

The Cabinet sent for Wilson’s doctor, the White House Physician, Rear Admiral Cary Grayson, who was now the only person besides Edith Wilson who was seeing the President regularly. Lansing asked Grayson point blank: What was wrong with the President? How long would he be sick? And was his mind clear or not?

Grayson replied that the President’s mind was very clear and that he had clearly expressed his annoyance on being told that a Cabinet meeting had been called without him, and the President wanted to know by whose authority the meeting had been called and what was its purpose? Wilson’s Cabinet wilted. Newton Baker, the Secretary of War, replied that the Cabinet was only meeting as a gesture of affection and asked Grayson to offer the President their sympathies and assurances that their respective departments were operating smoothly.

So much for the Cabinet. But what about the Vice President, Thomas Marshall? Marshall and Wilson were not close, though Wilson’s staff did inform Marshall about the President’s stroke within hours after it happened. But afterward, Marshall was as much in the dark as anyone else. Some historians criticize Marshall for not taking a firmer stand. He could have insisted on seeing Wilson and confirming the President’s condition personally, under the threat of claiming the Presidency for himself if he was refused. But this was not in Marshall’s nature. Members of both the House and the Senate of both political parties met privately with Marshall and pressed him to claim the office. Marshall told them that the only conditions under which he would assume the Presidency were either that Wilson or his staff acknowledged that the President was unable to serve, or if the House and Senate passed a joint resolution declaring the office vacant. No such resolution was ever passed.

And so, with the United States still technically at war and with much still needing to be done, the President of the United States was in seclusion, and although the White House kept insisting everything was under control, there was good reason to wonder. Who is administering the government of the United States? Is anybody?

We'll pick up this story next time, but we'll have to stop there for today. I thank you for listening, and I'd especially like to thank Andrew for making a donation, and thank you to Liam for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons like Andrew and Liam help cover the costs of making this show, which in turn keeps the podcast available free for everyone, so thank you all for that. If you'd like to become a patron or make a donation, just visit the website, historyofthetwentiethcentury.com and click on the PayPal or Patreon buttons.

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And I hope you'll join me next week, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*; as we continue the story of Woodrow Wilson, his health, and the fate of the Treaty of Versailles. That's next week, here, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Yeah, and one more thing. I have one last story I would like to tell you about something that took place in the United States in the months just after the Armistice. I've been wanting to tell you this story all along during this United States series of episodes, but I was having a hard time finding a place to fit it in. On the surface, it doesn't seem to connect to anything else we've been talking about, but...well, let me tell the story, and then you decide.

In early 1919, a US Navy sailor named Ervin Arnold, recently transferred to duty at the naval station at Newport, Rhode Island, became aware of some...activities at the Army and Navy YMCA in the city of Newport. Specifically, that the YMCA was being used as a meeting place for sailors and civilians who got together for wild parties that involved liquor, cocaine, and gay sex.

The forty-something Arnold had served in the Navy for fourteen years, and he had been a detective in Connecticut for nine years before that. His law enforcement work in Connecticut—as far as I can make out—was apparently related to vice crimes, and it seems pretty clear that this was a person who in our time would be called a “homophobe.” The revelation that there were gay sailors in the Navy was deeply troubling to him. He feigned interest in the gay scene in Newport, collected names and other information, and reported all of it to his superiors.

There was no specific regulation against gay men in the military at this time, but homosexuality was a criminal offense in Rhode Island, and indeed, most everywhere in the United States, and there were rules against criminals serving in the military.

The matter was passed up the chain of command to the Assistant Secretary of the Navy, Franklin Roosevelt. Roosevelt referred it to the newly installed Attorney General, Mitchell Palmer, but Palmer and the Justice Department declined to get involved. Apparently not taking the hint, Roosevelt decided the Navy would investigate the matter internally and a court of inquiry was set up. Ervin Arnold was assigned to the investigation. He recruited dozens of sailors to infiltrate this gay community, carefully selecting good-looking men in their teens and early twenties. These sailors spent weeks on their assignments. They were specifically ordered not just to observe, but to participate. To “go all the way,” as people said in my day, and to keep detailed written journals of exactly who and what and when.

The arrests began in April. Frightened sailors caught up in this “sting” freely gave up the names of others, until so many sailors were implicated that the head of the court of inquiry complained that the investigation was getting out of hand. In one particular moment of frustration, he demanded to know whether the Navy intended to hang the entire state of Rhode Island.

More than fifteen sailors were court-martialed. Some were acquitted or discharged, others sentenced to prison terms. This might have been the end of the story right here, but the Navy was not content with merely prosecuting its own; it also wanted the civilians involved to be punished. It turned over evidence to the local prosecutor. As it happened, one of the earliest civilian prosecutions to come out of this investigation was of one of Newport’s most prominent and respected citizens.

The Rev. Samuel Neal Kent was an Episcopal priest in Newport, well-regarded in the community and in the churches. He was head of an ecumenical group in Newport that ministered to the sailors at the naval station. Now he was being prosecuted for sodomy.

Looking at it from our 21st-century perspective, it seems pretty clear that Rev. Kent was guilty as charged, although the charge was merely consensual sexual relations that would be perfectly legal in the United States of our time. But in 1919, most citizens of Newport, including the other clergy in the town, found it impossible to believe that a man who had so clearly devoted his life to good works and community service could be guilty of such a scandalous crime.

Worse still, from the point of view of the prosecution and the Navy, was that this was a public trial, not a closed hearing like a military court martial. Rev. Kent’s attorney was able to publicly cross-examine the Navy’s, um, “investigators,” and was able to draw out the full story of their methods: that sailors as young as seventeen had been recruited by their superior officers to walk the streets of Newport like prostitutes, lie about their intentions, solicit civilians, use illegal drugs and alcohol with them, and then sleep with them, only to return to the naval station the next morning and report everything they had done to the Navy.

Again, considering this case from our modern perspective, you might well think that this investigation was way overblown for what were at worst private, victimless offenses. You might also think that self-appointed guardians of morality shouldn't be in the business of recruiting what were probably naïve and vulnerable, barely adult (or not even adult) young men to participate in the very booze- and cocaine-fueled sex parties they claimed to abhor. But then you might also think, "Well, this was a hundred years ago. Attitudes were different back then."

Only, here's the thing. Attitudes weren't so different back then. Once these details came out, the good citizens of Newport were far more offended by the Navy investigation than they were by what it uncovered. The jury apparently felt the same way; they acquitted Rev. Kent. The trial was quite an emotional ordeal for him though, and afterward he left Newport for the famous Battle Creek Sanitarium in Michigan, the one operated by the physician John Harvey Kellogg, inventor of corn flakes. And granola, but I don't have time today to get into *that* story.

Anyway, you'd think by this point the Navy Department would be ready to cut its losses and give up. It was not. In January 1920, Rev. Kent was prosecuted again, this time in Federal court under a Federal law that made it a crime to commit immoral acts within ten miles of a military base. United States Marshals were dispatched from Newport to Battle Creek to arrest the hapless Rev. Kent at the sanitarium and drag him back for a second trial.

The second trial went even worse for the government than the first one. Fourteen other clergy from Newport testified to Rev. Kent's good character, while the Navy "investigators" were subjected to another round of relentless cross-examination that established they were themselves guilty of everything Rev. Kent was accused of and more. This second trial also resulted in an acquittal.

At this point in the story enters the *Providence Journal*, the same newspaper that got the conductor of the Boston Symphony imprisoned for not playing "The Star-Spangled Banner" before his concerts, episode 158. The only thing the staunchly Republican *Journal* liked better than a sensational scandal was a story that put the Wilson Administration in a bad light, which made this story like catnip. The *Journal* covered it extensively. Other newspapers across the country picked up on it, and the United States had on its hands its first-ever gay sex scandal, which in turn led to an investigation by a US Senate subcommittee. The Republicans on the subcommittee released a report in 1921 that harshly criticized Navy Secretary Josephus Daniels and Assistant Secretary Roosevelt, neither of whom held those positions anymore, since by now we are in the Harding Administration. *The New York Times* story on the subcommittee report appeared under the headline "Lay Navy Scandal to FD Roosevelt," and the sub-headline "Details are Unprintable."

The subcommittee also questioned why the Navy even prosecuted gay sailors. The cutting-edge medical opinion of the time was that homosexuality should be viewed as a mental illness rather than as criminal conduct. That being the case, Navy representatives were asked, wouldn't it

make more sense to give these sailors a medical discharge rather than a prison term? The Navy did not take up the suggestion.

As I said, I wanted to include this story along with the Red Summer stories of last episode, or with the Red Scare stories of two episodes ago, but it didn't seem to fit comfortably in either narrative. And yet, I cannot escape the feeling that somehow it is connected very closely with both of them. They all took place at the same time, these overblown fears of dangerous elements among our own people. They live among us, but they are not part of us, and they are working to undermine our society. That's the mindset. Are they all connected? I leave it to you to decide.

[music: Closing Theme]