A Light That Failed Completely

The League of Nations struggle was ferocious but honorable. Edith Wilson was only ferocious.

BREAKING THE HEART OF THE WORLD

By John Milton Cooper Jr.

For the League of Nations.

By John Milton Cooper Jr.

Cambridge University Press, $34.55.

EDITED AND WOODROW

The Wilson White House.

By Phyllis Leis Levin.


By Jeff Shesol

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In the time it takes to read this, the world has always seemed right for a reappropriation of Woodrow Wilson. It is because the speaker he waged over the creation of a League of Nations was at its core a debate over the terms of America's engagement in the world. This struggle, so central to our national purpose, has been perpetually replayed.

Over the decades, most historians have agreed that the sound and fury over America's participation in the League was a mistake in the end—but that the arc of United States foreign policy bent inexorably toward isolation. In "Breaking the Heart of the World," John Milton Cooper Jr. puts that view to a serious, scholarly test.

Cooper, a historian at the University of Wisconsin, has written on Wilson before, most notably in "The Warrior and the Priest," a recounting of the defection of the Senate on the Treaty of Versailles between Wilson and Theodore Roosevelt. His new book has a narrower focus: the causes and consequences of what participants labeled "the League fight." That battle began even before the Great War had ended, and the combustible kept ages longer than American troops fought in Europe. It was one of the most brutally partisan and bitter personal disputes in American history. At the same time, it set a precedent (as yet unmatched) for the informed, principled discussion of the fundamental aims of American foreign policy.

Ironically, the idea of an international organization to enforce peace originated with Wilson but with his Republican rivals, the same men who would defeat it a decade later. In 1910, former President Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson both asserted a "League of Peace" to prevent conflict among nations, "by force if necessary." One of Roosevelt's first converts was his close friend the partisan republican, By Jeff Shesol, the author of "Mutual Contemp: Lyndon Johnson, Robert Kennedy and the Fued That Defined a Decade," is the Amschutz distinguished fellow in American studies at Princeton University.

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book makes a strong counterclaim, lending credibility to contemporary accounts that Edith had, in fact, become the first woman president of the United States.

The book paints a sinister picture of Edith Wilson's White House: the lights dimmed, curtains drawn and "enemy secrets and impostures" taking the place of candor. One marvels at Edith's ability to keep reporters, senators, cabinet members and the vice president, Thomas Riley Marshall, in the dark about Wilson's condition. While Wilson struggled even to hold a pen, Edith presided over the Senate, reading the bills, signing each with the words, "the President says." With Tu- multy, she scripted the State of the Union Message, vetoed the Volstead Act (the Untouchables' Pre-Prohibition amendment) and reorganized the cabinet. She also deflected action on the Senate's committee on business, ensuring what Levins calls a "grovellingly subjective" sense of what mattered to her husband's limited energies.

Unworthy of his time, apparently, was any talk of a deal on the League of Nations. The Importing of Senate De- mocats, waiting desperately for Wilson to release them to vote for the treaty "with reservations" rather than let it fail, fell on deaf ears. Hill was perhaps too eager to attribute malicious motives to her subject. She hints at seeing a崽e that the fact that it was not a consensus of the people that minted the nation (and minted the Constitution), it was a conspiracy of four—a number that included the president himself, who was just well enough to know what to do and say.

Both books conclude that Wilson's health was the critical factor in the League's defeat. It is of course unclear whether American participation in the League of Nations would ever have amounted to real leadership. But the carnage of the 20th century was to make clear that in the absence of a genuine global commitment to keep the peace, there would be no peace to keep.

The American tradition of the United Na-

tions did much to restore Woodrow Wil-}

son in December 1913, he ex-}