

PRESIDENT WILSON'S SPEECH AT THE PLENARY SESSION OF THE PEACE CONFERENCE, MAY 31, 1919

'Mr. President, I should be very sorry to see this meeting adjourn with permanent impressions such as it is possible have been created by some of the remarks that our friends have made. I should be very sorry to have the impression lodged in your minds that the great powers desire to assume or play any arbitrary rôle in these great matters, or assume, because of any pride of authority, to exercise any undue influence in these matters, and therefore I want to call your attention to one aspect of these questions which has not been dwelt upon.

We are trying to make a peaceful settlement, that is to say, to eliminate those elements of disturbance, so far as possible, which may interfere with the peace of the world, and we are trying to make an equitable distribution of territories according to the race, the ethnographical character of the people inhabiting those territories.

And back of that lies this fundamentally important fact that when the decisions are made, the allied and associated powers guarantee to maintain them. It is perfectly evident, upon a moment's reflection, that the chief burden of their maintenance will fall upon the greater powers. The chief burden of the war fell upon the greater powers, and if it had not been for their action, their military action, we would not be here to settle these questions. And, therefore, we must not close our eyes to the fact that in the last analysis the military and naval strength of the great powers will be the final guarantee of the peace of the world.

In those circumstances is it unreasonable and unjust that not as dictators but as friends the great powers should say to their associates: "We cannot afford to guarantee territorial settlements which we do not believe to be right, and we cannot agree to leave elements of disturbance unremoved, which we believe will disturb the peace of the world"?

Take the rights of minorities. Nothing, I venture to say, is more likely to disturb the peace of the world than the treatment which might in certain circumstances be meted out to minorities. And, therefore, if the great powers are to guarantee the peace of the world in any sense is it unjust that they should be satisfied that the proper and necessary guarantee has been given?

I beg our friends from Rumania and from Serbia to remember that while Rumania and Serbia are ancient sovereignties the settlements of this conference are adding greatly to their territories. You cannot in one part of our transactions treat Serbia alone and in all of the other parts treat the kingdom of the Serbs, the Croats and the Slovenes as a different entity, for they are seeking the recognition of this conference as a single entity, and if this conference is going to recognize these various powers as new sovereignties within definite territories, the chief guarantors are entitled to be satisfied that the territorial settlements are of a character to be permanent, and that the guarantees given are of a character to insure the peace of the world.

It is not, therefore, the interventions of those who would interfere, but the action of those who would help. I beg that our friends will take that view of it, because I see no escape from that view of it.

How can a power like the United States, for example – for I can speak for no other – after signing this treaty, if it contains elements which they do not believe will be permanent, go three thousand miles away across the sea and report to its people that it has made a settlement of the peace of the world? It cannot do so. And yet there underlies all of these transactions the expectation on the part, for example, of Rumania, and of Czecho-Slovakia, and of Serbia, that if any covenants of this settlement are not observed, the United States will send her armies and her navies to see that they are observed.

In those circumstances, is it unreasonable that the United States should insist upon being satisfied that the settlements are correct? Observe, Mr. Bratiano – and I speak of his suggestions with the utmost respect – suggested that we could not, so to say, invade the sovereignty of Rumania, an ancient sovereignty, and make certain prescriptions with regard to the rights of minorities. But I beg him to observe that he is overlooking the fact that he is asking the sanction of the allied and associated powers for great additions of territory which come to Rumania by the common victory of arms, and that, therefore, we are entitled to say: “If we agree to these additions of territory we have the right to insist upon certain guaranties of peace.”

I beg my friend Mr. Kramar and my friend Mr. Trumbic and my friend Mr. Bratiano to believe that if we should feel that it is best to leave the words which they have wished to omit in the treaty, it is not because we want to insist upon unreasonable conditions, but that we want the treaty to accord to us the right of judgment as to whether those are things which we can afford to guarantee.

Therefore, the impressions with which we should disperse ought to be these, that we are all friends – of course that goes without saying – but that we must all be associates in a common effort, and there can be no frank and earnest association in the common effort unless there is a common agreement as to what the rights and settlements are.

Now if the agreement is a separate agreement among groups of us, that does not meet the object. If you should adopt the language suggested by the Czechoslovakian delegation and the Serbian delegation – the Jugoslovak [?] delegation – that it should be left to negotiations between the principal allied and associated powers and their several delegates, that would mean that after this whole conference is adjourned, groups of them would determine what is to be the basis of the peace of the world. It seems to me that that would be a most dangerous idea to entertain, and, therefore, I beg that we may part with a sense, not of interference with each other, but of hearty and friendly co-operation upon the only possible basis of guaranty. Where the great force lies there must be the sanction of peace.

I sometimes wish, in hearing an argument like this, that I were the representative of a small power, so that what I said might be robbed of any mistaken significance, but I think you will agree with me that the United States has never shown any temper of aggression anywhere, and it lies in the heart of the people of the United States, as I am sure it lies in the hearts of the peoples of the other great powers, to form a common partnership of right, and to do service to our associates, and no kind of dis-service.'

[Quelle: Galántai, József: Trianon and the Protection of Minorities, Boulder 1992, S. 151-153.]