

INFINITY WANDERERS

#9



Edited by
Grey Wolf

The Mouths of Children

Matias F. Travieso-Diaz

*There must be, not a balance of power but a community power;
not organized rivalries but an organized, common peace.*
— Woodrow Wilson

MEMORANDUM TO THE FILES

My name is Willy Lowry. Today, July 11, 1966, I am celebrating my sixtieth birthday. My life has been for the most part unremarkable: a white Christian, married, two children and three grandchildren. I have spent all my life in the Gulf Coast community of Pass Christian, Mississippi, where I currently own a hardware store.

At sixty years of age, the end of my life may not be far. I am depositing this memorandum with other valuables in my safety deposit box at the First American Savings and Trust Bank of Pass Christian, to prevent its disclosure causing embarrassment to persons that may be mentioned in it in an adverse manner. If there are any such persons, I apologize but I firmly believe in the truth and accuracy of the matters set forth herein.

My decision to write this accounting is to shed some light, while I still have time, on an important historical event in which I played a tangential role. I am referring to the brief stay in my hometown over the Labor Day holiday of 1919 by President Woodrow Wilson and the events that took place after that visit. He had been in Pass Christian over the Christmas holidays in 1912-13, vacationing at a mansion known as Beaulieu (now known as the Dixie White House in honor of his stays there). He also stayed at Beaulieu in 1919, when I made his acquaintance.

I was only six years old when Wilson first came to Pass Christian, and have only vague memories of that visit, which was a big event for our small town. Wilson had just been elected President and was about to start his first term, so I imagine his visit was full of great expectations and plans for our country's future. People who were around at the time have confirmed that this was indeed the case.

When Wilson returned to Pas Christian in 1919, both he and I had changed a lot from the time of his initial visit. In 1919, he was midway his second term, and the devastation that was the Great War had occurred and plunged mankind into chaos; millions of lives, including many Americans, had been lost in the conflict. Wilson was showing the signs of the strain of the war years and the uncertain future that our nation and the world were facing. I, on the other hand, was in my early teens, fresh out of seventh grade, and largely ignorant of what had transpired during my childhood.

Wilson had gone to Paris in late 1918 and stayed there well into 1919, taking part in a peace conference that would result in a treaty to formally end the war. He had developed a "Fourteen Point" plan that called for the establishment of an association of nations to guarantee the independence and territorial integrity of all nations – a "League of Nations." The peace conference resulted in the signing of the Treaty of Versailles, which included the idea for what became the League of Nations.

While the League of Nations concept was accepted in Europe, Wilson encountered serious obstacles in getting the United States to join the League. From the start, political and ideological differences and personality clashes threatened to derail Wilson's efforts. Many Senators advocated an isolationist policy that would keep America free of entanglements in

other world conflicts. The Senate's Republican Majority Leader, Henry Cabot Lodge, proposed a set of Reservations that should be included in the U.S. agreement to join the League. Taken together, these Reservations would have rendered of dubious value our country's participation in the League.

The difference of opinion between Wilson and Lodge appeared quite difficult to resolve. President Wilson was known to be quite stubborn and had a bad relationship with Senator Lodge, who was said to be vindictive and hold grudges against his political foes. So, he adamantly refused to compromise and accept any of the Lodge Reservations. Many of his advisors began suggesting to the President that, because of his intransigence, his proposal to have the United States join the League of Nations was in jeopardy.

Instead of heeding this advice, Wilson became entrenched in his position and decided to sell his plan to the general population by undertaking a country-wide railroad speaking tour to extol the urgent need for the U.S. to join the League on the terms he proposed. He was counting on his popularity with the electorate to ultimately persuade the more moderate Republican members of the Senate to desert from Lodge's camp.

His hopes of bulldozing his plan over the opposition of his enemies did not materialize. The tour left him exhausted and on the verge of physical collapse, yet it yielded no erosion in the Congressional opposition to his plan. Matters remained at an impasse and the President decided to take a short vacation over the Labor Day break and go to his holiday quarters in Pass Christian Pass to recuperate, play golf, and enjoy a respite from the political bickering.

President Wilson was an inveterate golfer, a sport in which he engaged often on the advice of his personal doctor. Despite a great deal of practice – he played every day save

Sundays – he was quite a mediocre player, his usual score being in the 100s. This vacation, with him suffering from fatigue, tension and anxiety, Wilson’s game was particularly erratic.

Wilson and I met at the golf course. I had learned to play golf from my uncle and, being of an athletic disposition, played as often as I could, and took to working weekends at the public course where the President went to play. On Saturday of that Labor Day weekend, I was Wilson’s caddy when he hit the links.

I was intimidated by the physical presence of the great man. Wilson was slender and tall, with a high forehead, long, thin nose, and long jaw, thrust forward in perpetual stubbornness. His eyes had a way of narrowing when he talked, giving him a stern, almost grim expression. He was not a man with whom one dared to disagree.

Playing that Saturday, I watched in silence as he butchered his way through the first three holes, giving the impression that he was venting his frustrations instead of trying to take good shots. He was ready to tee off on the fourth hole when I could not take it any longer. Standing in front of him, I addressed the President in the manner my uncle had made me practice: “Mr. President, Sir, with all respect, you are doing it all wrong.”

Wilson was taken aback, but suppressing a scowl, he asked me in a menacing tone: “What do you mean, boy?”

“Sir, your stance is wrong. Your posture is too rigid, so you end up coming over the top and your shots don’t carry far enough.”

“Do you mean that I lack flexibility and as a result the ball doesn’t go as far as it needs?”

“I would not put it that way, but yes, something like that.”

The President bent his knees so he was eye level with me. “Are we talking about golf or politics?”

I began trembling, fearing I had given offence to such an important person. Nonetheless, I felt I had to hold my ground: “I don’t know politics, Sir. But I reckon that whatever you do in golf may be an indication of how you carry yourself in other things. That’s what my uncle says.”

President Wilson sighed. “Jesus said that the truth shall come out of the mouths of children. Maybe I should think afresh about my problems.”

The following day was Sunday. There was no golf, and President Wilson – a devout Christian – went to services at the local Presbyterian Church and spent the rest of the day in meditation, praying for divine guidance.

On Monday Wilson announced his plans to return to Washington and, on arrival at the White House, scheduled a meeting with Senator Gilbert Hitchcock of Nebraska, a Democratic Senator who sat in the Committee of Foreign Relations that was chaired by Lodge. After a long meeting, President Wilson agreed to support a set of watered-down Reservations proposed by Hitchcock, which might be palatable to many Republican Senators outside the recalcitrant group led by Lodge. In particular, the United States would have the right to veto proposed actions by the League, but would be required to support any proposed actions that it failed to veto.

Wilson was unhappy with the compromises he had to make, but finally recognized that the Hitchcock proposal was the best deal he might be able to get from Congress, so he threw his support behind it. The issue continued to be debated as Senator Hitchcock introduced a Treaty

adherence motion containing his Reservations. A vote was taken and the Hitchcock proposal was approved by the slim margin of 46 to 44.

The United States thus became a member of the League of Nations in 1920 and its participation – and, to this date, the absence of its exercise of the veto power – has demonstrated that flexibility and strength that are earmarks of any successful conduct of foreign affairs.

The benefits of a strong League of Nations, under the leadership of the United States, have become self-evident. Save for localized bursts of violence that were impossible to prevent, the League has kept the world free from any major war for almost half a century. To this end, the League has acted decisively when it needed to do so. Thus, in 1938, when Germany was poised to invade its neighbors in Austria and Czechoslovakia, the League imposed a strict naval blockade of German ports and a complete embargo on trade with that country. It took months of brinkmanship, but at the end the Germans backed down and Hitler was soon deposed by his own armed forces. Similarly, the League provided steadfast support to the Republic of China against a threatened Japanese invasion of Manchuria, and thus thwarted a potential armed conflict in the Far East. The U.S. involvement in those and other operations – providing massive naval and aerial presence, and in China's case, stationing troops on the ground in Manchuria – was decisive in dissuading the potential aggressors from proceeding with their plans.

The League has also undertaken numerous diplomatic efforts that have prevented widespread conflicts and have fostered the peaceful resolution of controversies between

countries. A good example was the recent standoff between the United States and Russia over the deployment of Russian missiles in Cuba aimed at this country. The League brokered a peace conference in Montevideo that brought the parties into a reluctant agreement: Russia agreed to withdraw its existing missiles from Cuba and refrain from trying to introduce others, and the United States guaranteed it would not attempt to overthrow the Castro regime from power. The result pleased nobody, meaning it was an overall success.

This does not mean that the League has always acted to prevent the rise of tyrants into power. It has never been the intent of the alliance to meddle in the internal affairs of a nation, no matter how displeasing they may be to the rest of the world. The League did not actively oppose Hitler becoming Germany's Chancellor, or Mussolini taking over the government of Italy. Lenin, Stalin and his successors have kept Russia, without League interference, a totalitarian state after the Tsars were overthrown; but the League has made sure that Russia keeps its policies and practices within its borders.

The expectation of continuing peace under the League has brought about manifold benefits to the United States and other member nations. Our per-capita expenditures on national defense are half of what they were a century ago. The savings on military spending and the absence of a threat of war have resulted in great gains in all areas of civil society. Education, health care, science and technology, infrastructure, the arts, all have prospered beyond our forefathers' expectations. And the physical well-being of our planet itself has improved, for a peaceful Earth is a healthier Earth.

President Wilson died in 1924, satisfied that his main foreign policy objective had been achieved. I, for my part, remain proud of my small role in influencing him to accept a

compromise that otherwise he would have rejected, leaving the United States absent from the League and causing its probable failure over time.

I wish to end by paying tribute to President Woodrow Wilson, and hoping that the League he championed will continue to exert its beneficial influence upon this world for many years to come.

END

Matias Travieso-Diaz

Born in Cuba, Matias Travieso-Diaz migrated to the United States as a young man. He became an engineer and lawyer and practiced for nearly fifty years. After retirement, he took up creative writing. Over one hundred of his short stories have been published or accepted for publication in anthologies and paying magazines, blogs, audio books and podcasts. Some of his unpublished works have also received "honorable mentions" from a number of paying publications. A first collection of his stories, "The Satchel and Other Terrors" was published in February 2023.