



Policy



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On December 13, 2018, UK Prime Minister Theresa May met with her European counterparts in an attempt to renegotiate the “Brexit deal” she had reached with them only weeks earlier; the deal was facing harsh criticism and almost certain rejection at home. Perhaps only the keenest students of history could have noticed that when she landed in Brussels, it was precisely 100 years — *to the day* — after another world leader, U.S.

President Woodrow Wilson, had visited the continent in the hopes of saving it. Both the parallels and the perpendicularities between the negotiation sagas of Theresa May and Woodrow Wilson are stunning.

On December 13, 1918, President Wilson arrived in France to negotiate a new world order in the aftermath of World War I. In many ways, the visits by Wilson and May could not have been more dissimilar. Wilson was an idealist who tried, albeit with little success, to portray himself as a pragmatist. May is a pragmatist who is awkwardly working to the brief of an idealist. Wilson fashioned himself a savior, who came looking to inspire the better angels of Europe's nature. May fashions herself a political survivor, who came looking for saviors. Wilson's negotiations lasted six months and resulted in a multitude of peace agreements, but much of what the parties accomplished only led to future wars, including conflicts in the Middle East and World War II. May's conversations, in contrast, lasted only a few hours and achieved close to nothing, although we might one day credit the EU's intransigence for having safeguarded a hard-fought and historic peace, Northern Ireland's Good Friday Agreement.

Despite these stark differences, the similarities between how things turned out for Wilson and how they are going for May deserve consideration; it may not be too late for Prime Minister May to learn from how and why Wilson's otherwise remarkable journey ended in bitter disappointment. While Wilson did not get everything he sought in his negotiations with his European allies — for example, he failed to convince the French to impose a less punitive peace on the Germans — the failure that took the greatest toll on his legacy (not to mention his health) was domestic, not foreign.

What Wilson had wanted most in 1919 was for the creation of a strong and enduring League of Nations that would replace the world's reliance

on “balance of power” geopolitical calculations to maintain peace (a practice that had failed in spectacular fashion in 1914). Wilson hoped that structures and institutions based on the principle of “collective security” would herald an era of more stable peace. Europeans were almost uniformly skeptical of Wilson’s vision, but eventually acceded to Wilson’s demands for the creation of a League of Nations. Unfortunately, Wilson was far less successful with his fellow Americans, who [rejected his calls](#) for the United States to join the League.

We might endlessly wonder whether American involvement in the League of Nations would have changed the course of world history, or whether the catastrophes of the ensuing decades were inevitable. What requires less endurance is an analysis of why we never had a chance to find out.

President Wilson failed for many of the same reasons Prime Minister May is struggling today. Like Wilson, May managed to conclude a Brexit agreement with the European Union, but she has struggled mightily with winning support for this deal at home. When UK citizens voted to leave the European Union two years ago, it was in the context of an aggressive “Leave” campaign based on, in my view, unrealistic promises, strategic misrepresentations, and some outright lies. The British people were assured, in essence, that a final Brexit agreement would give them all of the economic benefits that they currently enjoy as EU members, but without having to accept any of the unpopular elements of EU membership (e.g., the free movement of people or regulations). As I have explained elsewhere (see [here](#) and [here](#)), an analysis of each side’s constraints and relative leverage made clear that this was never going to be possible.

The agreement Theresa May actually reached with her European counterparts falls well short of what was promised, and it has elements

(e.g., the “Northern Ireland backstop” provision) that the EU deems imperative and Brexit supporters find odious. Hence, the current impasse – and the growing possibility of a potentially disastrous “no deal” Brexit, in which the UK leaves the EU without any agreement at all to safeguard mutual economic, strategic, and geopolitical interests.

As May tries to negotiate the Brexit endgame, she might well consider three lessons from Wilson's futile diplomacy during his last year in office.

Manage expectations and build support on your side of the table from the very start

Like May, Wilson focused all of his attention on negotiating with the Europeans and failed to manage expectations or build support at home. This made it easy for Republicans, who opposed international influence over American foreign policy, to build a strong case against the League. By the time Wilson finally decided to travel across the U.S. to sell his message, opposition to his proposal had hardened, his health had weakened, and time was running out.

Theresa May faces a similar problem of her own making. By repeating, for almost two years, the unrealistic positions and false promises of the hardline Brexiteers, May perpetuated false hope in the UK about the kind of deal she would be able to negotiate with Europe. Not surprisingly, she now finds herself in a Wilsonian bind: the British people do not understand or like what they see, political opposition has hardened, and time is running out.

To be effective, threats must be credible *and* meaningful

Like May, Wilson misplayed his hand because he seems to have misunderstood what makes a threat effective. First, threats need to be *credible* — i.e., the other side needs to believe what you say. Second, threats need to be *meaningful* — i.e., the other side needs to care about the consequences of what is threatened. Wilson warned his fellow Americans that rejecting the League of Nations would increase the risk of another massive European or worldwide war that Americans would again need to fight. This might have been true, but it was too theoretical and too distant a possibility, and hence easily dismissed. More pressing for many Americans, and especially the Republican “irreconcilables” (the label given to those who were categorically opposed to Wilson’s treaty), was the concern that joining the League might entangle the U.S. in unnecessary conflicts.

Similarly, May has been trying to motivate Members of Parliament (MPs) to vote for her Brexit deal with precisely the wrong threat. She warns that a refusal to back her deal will lead to a “no deal” Brexit, which most experts (and this author) believe would be especially disastrous for the UK. This threat, while credible, is not meaningful: polls show that most Conservative MPs actually *prefer* a no-deal Brexit to the agreement May has negotiated. It is hard to threaten people with an outcome they actually prefer. A more effective threat would be for May to say that if parliament rejects her deal she will back a second referendum on Brexit (which could result in the UK remaining in the EU). As even May knows, if push comes to shove, a second referendum is a better outcome for the UK than a no-deal Brexit. More importantly for May, this threat also motivates Conservative MPs to votes in favor of her deal, because a second referendum is the outcome they fear most, *by far*.

Don’t escalate commitment to a failing strategy

Like May, Wilson failed to change his strategy even after a resounding political defeat. In November 1919, the U.S. Senate voted against the Treaty of Versailles, largely due to Wilson's unwillingness to revise any provisions related to the League of Nations. He would get an opportunity for a second vote, which meant that in the weeks and months to follow, Wilson faced a choice: build a bipartisan coalition with Republicans who had reservations about the treaty but were not categorically opposed to it, or double down on a failing course of action. Wilson chose the latter, and a second vote on the same treaty in March 1920 led to a final defeat for the idea of American involvement in the League of Nations.

Theresa May has now matched Wilson with her own two failed attempts in parliament, and is poised to add another when she returns for a third and (likely) final vote in mid-February. It is not too late to discard her failed strategy and to try something different — e.g., threaten a second referendum or build a cross-party coalition with elements of the Labor party who are open to a more moderate version of Brexit — but so far, she has signaled no willingness to do so.

As I emphasize in my most recent book, *Negotiating the Impossible*, effective negotiators pay attention to the interests and perspectives of *all* parties that can influence a deal — not just those who are sitting across the table from them. Both Wilson and May were so fixated on their own interests, and on extracting concessions from their European counterparts, that they failed to appreciate the importance of negotiating appropriately with their own side. At least for May, it is still not too late to learn this lesson. She cannot go back in time to manage expectations or build support for her deal, but she can discard her failing strategy and try something different that maximizes the likelihood of success given limited time and options.

Almost no one believes that Prime Minister May actually thinks a no-deal Brexit would be better for the UK than a second public referendum, but in order to appease the Brexiteers who put her in power—and to remain consistent with her earlier statements rejecting a new vote—she has so far refused to back a second referendum. As we approach the Brexit endgame, however, this approach no longer represents just a disappointing failure of leadership, but also a striking failure of strategy. If May announces that she will support a second referendum unless parliament supports her deal, she not only avoids disaster in the event negotiations *fail*, she also increases the likelihood that negotiations *succeed*.

In his essay entitled *Self-Reliance*, Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote: “A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little statesmen and philosophers and divines. With consistency a great soul has simply nothing to do.” Prime Minister May never claimed to be a philosopher or divine, but her actions in the coming weeks will determine the kind of stateswoman that history will judge her to have been. For the good of her country, it is time for May to stop escalating commitment to a failing strategy and to shed the constraints of a foolish consistency. Admittedly, it is never easy to concede failure and to change course—especially in the realm of politics. Then again, when it comes to leadership and moral courage, nothing that is truly worth doing is ever easy.



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