

Richard Nixon: The Last Wilsonian?

Not 1/12/73
Fifty years ago, in this room and at this very desk, President Woodrow Wilson spoke words which caught the imagination of a war-weary world. He said: "This is the war to end wars." His dream for peace after World War I was shattered on the hard realities of great power politics and Woodrow Wilson died a broken man.

Tonight I do not tell you that the war in Vietnam is the war to end wars. But I do say this: I have initiated a plan which will end this war in a way that will bring us closer to that great goal to which Woodrow Wilson and every American President in our history has been dedicated—the goal of a just and lasting peace.

—Richard M. Nixon, Nov. 3, 1969

SIXTY YEARS OLD this week, Richard Nixon may be the last professed believer in the ideals of the man who was President when he was born. Despite the disclaimer, Vietnam is Nixon's war to end wars, the one due to usher in "generations of peace." It is the war which, if concluded with "the right kind of peace . . . a peace that lasts," will enable the United States to keep up the global civilizing and peacekeeping missions which Woodrow Wilson assumed for a then-eager United States so many decades, so many wars, ago.

Just this week, lame duck Defense Secretary Melvin Laird surfaced his judgment that we have done "the most any ally could reasonably expect" for South Vietnam. In words that could be taken as obviating any need for the administration to keep on negotiating, the retiring Pentagon chief pronounced "Vietnamization" a full success.

Henry Kissinger's own preference for a "decent interval" — between American departure and the falling apart, if it came to that, of the political structure the Americans leave behind — has long been circulated and was

presumably exemplified in the draft agreement he brought back from Paris last fall.

BUT EVIDENTLY it is not enough for Richard Nixon to be able to walk away from Vietnam saying with Melvin Laird that the South Vietnamese



1917: President Woodrow Wilson leads the Draft Parade

are ready and their fate is up to them, or to walk away saying with Henry Kissinger in effect that the requisite impression of American strength and credibility has been cast.

To take the President at his word, he will accept no such subterfuge: He wants "a peace that lasts." With Wilson, he apparently believes that the nation's destiny compels his quest. Anti-communism is part of it but only part. His own and the country's pres-

tige requirements are part but only part. Greatly experienced, he cannot and does not claim to be in a bureaucratic vice. Re-elected by a landslide, he cannot and does not contend he is under political pressure to conduct any but the policy he truly desires. Many would add that no domestic cause is so important to him as to distract him from his foreign goal.

"A peace that lasts": there is something not only old-fashioned and Wilsonian about such a purpose but admirable, if you judge it apart from the means used, the costs paid and the other values relinquished in order to attain it. Mr. Nixon presumably hopes to avoid Wilson's cruel fate and himself to become better appreciated in times to come for the national contribution and the personal sacrifice he is making now.

IF HE DID NOT feel this way, then it becomes virtually impossible to understand why he is pursuing the policy he is, the way he is.

For long, many people thought Nixon's qualities as a man of the right, added to his qualities as a confirmed pragmatist, gave him a unique chance to liquidate promptly the American investment in Vietnam. But too much time has gone by — one could also say that too many bombs have fallen without loosening Nixon's hold on public office — for that expectation still to be entertained.

As hard to accept as it may be for critics of his Vietnam policy, not to say for members of his own administration, Mr. Nixon has kept the United States in the war for what must seem to him to be worthy and serious reasons of his own. These reasons may finally spin out of the Wilsonian tradition of a special American mission in the world — the tradition the President himself so feelingly evoked back in 1969. What is troubling is that if it is so that he has a serious purpose and believes in the cause for which he has kept the country fighting, then peace is not at hand.