THE VERSAILLES PEACE TREATY:
THE ROLE OF DIPLOMATIC AND MILITARY MAIL

PRESENTED AT

WORLD WAR 1 & ITS IMMEDIATE AFTERMATH
BLOUNT POSTAL HISTORY SYMPOSIUM
SMITHSONIAN NATIONAL POSTAL MUSEUM

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INTRODUCTION

The story begins with the diplomatic and military engagement of the USA with the Allied Powers to end World War 1 which led to Versailles Peace Conference in 1918. The Versailles Peace Treaty was signed on 28 June 1919 which led to the formation of the League of Nations. This presentation is based primarily on diplomatic and military mail received by President Wilson’s special advisor, Col. Edward M. House.

President Wilson with his special advisor, Col. House (Of Houston, Texas)

Highlights of the two frame exhibit, “Versailles Peace Treaty: Role of Diplomatic & Military Mail” at the “World War 1 & Its Immediate Aftermath” symposium are presented here.

Special acknowledgements:
Col. House practice of pencil notations on incoming envelopes
Archives at Yale University Library
Library Researcher: Ms. April Link
References: QR codes shown in exhibit.

I: Mail Delivery Methods
II. Pre-Armistice Treaty: 11 Nov. 1918
III. Armistice to Versailles Peace Conference
IV. Peace Treaty to League of Nations

28 June 1919: Versailles Peace Treaty Signing
First row, left to right: Col. House, President Wilson, French PM Clemenceau, British PM David Lloyd George.
Back center right: Maharaja of Bikaner, India, the only Indian delegate to sign the Peace Treaty.
BRITAIN LED ALLIES AT PEACE CONFERENCE

David Lloyd George was the highly energetic Prime Minister of the Wartime Coalition Government from 1916 to 1922. He was a major player at the Peace Conference that reordered Europe after the defeat of the Central Powers.

Arthur J Balfour served as the Foreign Secretary from 10 December 1916 to 23 October 1919 in David Lloyd George’s cabinet. He led British efforts to engage USA in World War 1 with Allied powers and liaised closely with US and French leaders in formulating the Versailles Peace Treaty. He especially forged a close relationship with Col. House.

Arthur J Balfour

Lord Robert Cecil was a British lawyer, politician and diplomat in the British Foreign Office. He was one of the architects and avid supporters of the League of Nations. His service to the organization saw him awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1937.

Lord Robert Cecil

David Lloyd George

Lord Derby, after serving as the Secretary of War, became British ambassador to France in Paris. He was an important messenger between the French and American delegations.

Lord Derby

Arthur J Balfour

Sir William Wiseman of British Foreign Office/MI-5 worked in USA before and after US entered WW 1. He liaised between British Govt. and President Wilson via Col. House.

Sir William Wiseman
FRANCE TOOK AN AGGRESSIVE POSITION AT PEACE CONFERENCE

Raymond Poincare served as the President of France from 1913 to 1920 and advocated Allied control over the Rhineland. He lost out the Prime Ministership to Clemenceau, who led the French delegation.

Clemenceau was Prime Minister of France from 1917 to 1920. He favored a total victory over the German Empire and pushed for the restitution of Alsace-Lorraine to France. He was one of the principal architects of the Versailles Peace Treaty.

5 Dec. 1918: French President Raymond Poincare sent a diplomatic invitation to Col. House via French postal service as a Free Frank.

13 Dec. 1917: French Prime Minister sent confidential documents to Col. House per this letter.

Stephen Pichon was Minister of Foreign Affairs from 1917 to 1920 and was close to Clemenceau but was overshadowed by the Prime Minister.

19 Feb. 1919: Andre Tardieu, the Commissioner of Franco-American Cooperation sent an urgent message related to Red Cross business in this official mail.
MAIL DELIVERY METHODS:
US POSTAL SERVICE – SPECIAL DELIVERY

Mail amongst US Government officials and leaders of Allied nations was handled in a variety of manners.


Cover mailed 10 days after Battle of Amiens started which was the beginning of Allied Offensive leading to Allied Victory. Enclosed letter on French Embassy letterhead mentions he and his wife are planning a short vacation in Magnolia, Mass (their first one after 4 years of his posting in Washington, DC) and his proposal to visit Col. and Mrs. House while there.
MAIL DELIVERY METHODS:
STATE DEPARTMENT POUCH MAIL

DEPARTMENT OF STATE: SPECIAL POUCH MAIL TO AMERICAN EMBASSY, PARIS FRANCE

Misses Emma and Katherine Lansing, sisters of Sec. of State Robert Lansing, were in France doing Red Cross work during WW 1. They established aid stations for the soldiers at the front among other charity services.

Circa 1918-1919: Official free frank mail from Secretary of State Lansing with his signature under “SPECIAL POUCH” to his sister, Ms. Emma Lansing, at the American Embassy in Paris, France. The mail was sent in the State Department diplomatic mail bag outside of postal service to American Embassy directly.

20 Dec. 1919: This private mourning cover to Ms. Katherine Lansing, bore US 5¢ Washington stamp, which paid the UPU rate to France as required. However, it was mailed through State Department post office which tied the stamp with red oval cancel, marked “SPECIAL POUCH” and sent it by State Department pouch mail service to the American Embassy in Paris, France who forwarded it to Hotel Chatam where she was staying.
MAIL DELIVERY METHODS: US CONSULAR POUCH MAIL

US DIPLOMATIC POUCH MAIL: Under the 1903 UPU convention, US diplomats were allowed to send/receive mail via diplomatic pouch provided prevailing postage of the host country was affixed without sending it through that country’s postal service.

Brad Whitlock, Head of US Legation in Brussels, worked closely with Mr. Hoover (subsequently President Hoover) and his Belgium Food Relief program which he headed from March 1917. This was the largest food relief program led by USA in collaboration with Britain and eventually served over 11 million people in Belgium and Southern France.

14/16 Dec. 1916: Mail from Brad Whitlock, Head of US Legation in Brussels, sent to Col. House via Diplomatic Pouch while Brussels was under German occupation. Whitlock applied two German occupied Belgian stamps totaling 25¢ cancelled by American Legation Brussels and then forwarded by Diplomatic pouch to Dept. of State in Washington, DC from where it entered the US Postal service on 3 Jan. 1918 as signified by the four-line PO hand stamp and Washington, DC post mark.
MAIL DELIVERY METHODS:
AMERICAN EXPEDITIONARY FORCES (AEF) MAIL SENT “FREE”

Shortly after the United States declared war on Germany, it became necessary to organize a postal system for the American troops overseas. On June 13, 1917, Postmaster General Albert Burnham authorized the establishment of mail agencies in France. Marcus Bunn, assistant superintendent of the Railway Mail Service, was appointed as Postal Agent in Charge. Soon after his arrival in Paris on June 30th, he began making arrangements for “The United States Mail Agency in France.”

10 Feb. 1919: General John J. Pershing mail with typed “VIA COURIER” sent it via the US military courier to Col. House in Paris. Cover was censored as signified with Captain Williamson’s signature and “A.E.F. PASSED CENSOR A. 61” circular cancel. Cover lacks both traditional “Officer’s Mail” and AEF postal cancellation but bears rubber stamp, “68412” and pencil marking “3411.” Hotel clerk added Col. House hotel room no. 336.

6 June 1919: “AMERICAN COMMISSION TO NEGOTIATE PEACE” corner card cover mailed by Capt. T J Damon to his wife in Windsor, Conn. USA. Marked Official Mail and self censored, it was sent via US Army Expeditionary PO, “POSTAL EXPRESS SERVICE / 6 June 1919” Also bears purple censor cancel.
MAIL DELIVERY METHODS:
BRITISH & FRENCH MAIL VIA US EMBASSIES & COURIERS

Sir William Wiseman, a successful banker was one of the early MI-5 officers first assigned to the British Embassy in USA where he cultivated close ties with President Wilson’s close advisor, Col. House. He continued his role at the British foreign office in London during the Peace Conference.


13 Dec. 17: French Prime Minister Clemenceau (Top Right photo) letter in English mentions sending confidential document to Col. House as requested. It was sent via the American Embassy in Paris who forwarded it by Diplomatic pouch to State Dept. in Washington, DC who handed it over to Col. House.

Circa 1919: This mail with corner card with “Chamber du Deputies, Cabinet du President” and marked, “Urgent” from President of France, Raymond Poincare. It bears “P.O.” oval cancel of French official mail service who delivered it to Col. House at Hotel Ritz, Paris.
17 Dec. 1918: Mail marked “Private” and signed “A.J.Balfour” contained the letter shown on right, expressing limitations of telegraph and postal service to “real and full inter-communication of ideas” which is only possible by conversation requiring face-to-face meetings. Mr. Balfour also shares his concern toward emerging ambitions, fears, dislikes and even hatreds in abundance among Allied delegates as the “Sunshine of Peace” approaches. The letter ends with his hope that President (Wilson) is faring well and refers to great reception for his upcoming visit to London on the Boxing Day in 1918.

4 Sept. 1917: British Prime Minister Lloyd George responded to Col. House letter sent via British Intelligence Head, New York, Sir Wiseman. He stressed the urgency of Allied campaigns and for Col. House to represent the US at Allied deliberations (London) immediately. He impressed that Sir Wiseman will explain the reasons why it was important for Col. House to attend and render invaluable services.
Frank Polk was a key member of “The Inquiry” commission led by Col. House for President Wilson to study causes of World War 1 and strategies to prevent such world wars in the future. Subsequently, he was ‘figure head’ of the American Commission to Negotiate Peace for the Versailles Peace Treaty.

10 Aug. 1918: Frank Polk, Under Secretary and Acting Secretary of State, sent this registered letter using the cover bearing his previous position, “THE COUNSELLOR FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF STATE”. Since free frank excluded both Personal and Registered mail, this cover bears 1¢ + 5x3¢ definitive stamps paying registered postage.


When Col. House arrived in Paris for the preparation of the Versailles Peace Conference, General Pershing recognized the importance of Col. House as the special advisor to President Wilson by inviting him and General Bliss to visit him for a full briefing about the US Army’s progress at the war front.
President Wilson directed Sec. of State Lansing and Col. House to organize a special diplomatic mission to Russia under former Secretary of State Root. The mission intended to advocate democracy and avoid new Russian government making peace with Germany. Samuel R. Bertron, a NY Banker/Lawyer, and a friend of Col. House was the “Finance” expert in the commission.

18 June 1917: Samuel Bertron, a Mission member, wrote a four-page letter to Col. House, three days after first Soviet Congress where Lenin proclaimed Bolsheviks were ready to take the power. Letter was written the day after violent street protests by Bolsheviks. Letter highlights: i) Long journey on Cruiser Buffalo to Vladivostok, China and Siberia by train helped commission become familiar with Russia; ii) Workmen representing 2% of population in real control by aligning with solders and peasants (80% of population) and pushing wages up to 500% higher; iii) Identified three key ministers in the cabinet and reviewed with Russian Finance Minister the dire economic conditions including factory shutdowns, rampant inflation-ruble devalued to $0.25; iv) Fear of government takeover by socialists, in absence of decisive measures by current coalition government, v) Afraid, Russia will make peace with Germany if the socialists take over the government. and vi) General consensus amongst Russians, French and English diplomats that President Wilson, is the most commanding figure carrying a potent voice in the world today.
This detailed letter mentions the French government overcoming recent French Army setbacks, strikes and agitations in Paris and pacifist propaganda. Mentions the planned French army offensive in two weeks which will test General Petain. Also reports the arrival of the first American Expeditionary Force (WEF) at St. Nazaire and speculates as to how well they will be received when they march through the streets of Paris.

Letter ends with the mention that Sayles, the US Naval Attache advocates that the US Navy take over the patrol of the French coast from Brest to Bordeaux from the weak and inadequate French naval fleet.
11 Oct. 1918: Mail from US Consul Brad Whitlock while at the American Legation in Havre bearing French Sawyer type 15¢, as required per UPU treaty and cancelled by American legation hand-stamp and then sent by Diplomatic pouch to Washington, DC who forwarded it to Col. House in New York.

Above letter ends with very emotional praise of unending file of our soldiers marching by the streets and the kindness from their hearts.

11 OCT. 1918: A heart-warming letter from the US Consul Whitlock to Belgium while in Havre, France. Letter is jovial about a cartoon of "German Kaiser and his children on a galloping horse trying to escape the wrath of democracy". He was delighted with President’s response to heavy-handed Armistice proposal by French. Expresses high praise for President Wilson’s “Five Points” speech of 27 Sept. 1918.

1. Impartial justice without discrimination amongst all nations.
2. No separate interests or settlements by any nation that is inconsistent with interest of all.
3. No special alliances or covenants among some in the family of League of Nations.
4. No selfish economic combinations or boycotts or exclusions except for the power of economic penalty of world market exclusions vested in the League of Nations for discipline and control.
5. All international treaties/agreements in full should be made known to the rest of the world.

Adds, “No modern statesman has ever attained such moral heights.” Expresses prodigious prestige of Wilson by quoting his French Chef, “It is no longer the ten commandments of the Lord, but the fourteen commandments of President Wilson.”
BRITISH PRIME MINISTER URGES COL. HOUSE TO ATTEND THE ALLIED MEETING IN LONDON

Cover to Col. House at Hotel Crillon, Paris bearing Minister of Foreign Affairs (France) corner card and with “V”, “P.O.” and “152” manuscript markings.

4 Sept. 1917: British Prime Minister Lloyd George responded to Col. House letter sent via British Intelligence Head in New York, Sir Wiseman. He conveyed the urgency of Allied campaigns and urged Col. House to represent the USA at the Allies deliberations in London and to come over promptly. He impressed that Sir Wiseman would explain the reasons why it was important for Col. House to attend and render invaluable services.

6 Dec. 1917: Letter on French Foreign Ministry letterhead from Mr. Pichon nominating M. Clemental - Minister of Commerce & Maritime Transport and M. Loucheur – Minister of Armaments to the Inter-Allied Conference, the Section of Imports & Maritime Transport, to work with their counterparts from Britain, Italy and US. Letter asks Col. House who will be the US representative in this Section.

FRENCH FOREIGN MINISTER NOMINATION TO INTER-ALLIED CONFERENCE
BRITISH KING INVITES PRESIDENT WILSON TO VISIT THE UK

12 Nov. 1918: Letter from Lord Derby, the British Ambassador to France, to Col. House conveyed the King's invitation to President Wilson to visit Britain upon his pending travel to France to attend the Peace Conference.

BRITISH DIPLOMACY ENABLED PRESIDENT WILSON TO ATTEND PEACE CONFERENCE

16 Dec. 1918: Copy of telegram from British Ambassador in France to the Foreign Secretary Mr. Balfour was sent to Col. House marked "URGENT" and was hand delivered. Telegram reported on meeting of the Council President and Prime Minister of France, Mr. Clemenceau, with President Wilson. He reported about President Wilson's strong desire to attend the inaugural of the Peace Conference (as the head of USA delegation). Clemenceau initially was strongly opposed but soon realized the huge popularity of President Wilson in Paris (when he arrived there on 13 December) and changed to strongly support President Wilson's request to attend the Conference.
MISUNDERSTANDING ABOUT US ARMY IN FRANCE

30 Dec.1918: General Pershing from Monte Carlo mentions his conversation with US Consul Frazier about confusion with the French Marshal Foch about the meaning of withdrawal of US Army from France after Armistice. He mentions that by law the US Army can’t remain in France as an occupying force for more than four months after the Peace Treaty is signed. He meant to convey that the US Army would be withdrawn but would be replaced with Army volunteers. Letter ends with his request to Col. House to clarify this point with the French Prime Minister.

An important letter about the transition for US Army from WW1 to peace and recovery mission in post Peace Treaty period. General also getting well deserved rest at Monte Carlo during Xmas-New Year holidays.

INTER-ALLIED GAMES HOSTED BY YMCA IN PARIS

A R Dorris, 2nd Lieut. US Army Athletics, mailed this commemorative card on the games opening day 22 June 1919 via US MILITARY POSTAL SERVICE which was censored and sent to Mrs. Borzec and Normal School in Monmouth, Oregon.

General Pershing issued the first General Order (#241) relating to sports in the US Army on 29 Dec.1918. He issued this order about six months prior to the start of the Inter-Allied Games that were to be conducted in Paris between 22 June and July 1919. The purpose of the order was to direct attention of all concerned to the importance of encouraging the development of general and competitive athletics to keep up the morale, to foster and develop esprit de corps and to improve the physical fitness of the Army personnel. The order directed competition in the AEF leading to championships in track & field, baseball, football, basketball, tennis, boxing and wrestling. The publication of GO #241 established a cooperative arrangement between the US Army and the YMCA. The Inter-Allied Games conveyed to all the soldiers of the various armies of the allies that the Great War had ended with the beginning of a greater and more hopeful peace than the world had yet known.
23 May 1919: Lord Derby, British Ambassador to France, forwarded a Registered Letter addressed to President Wilson which, while passing through “United Kingdom,” was accidently opened by error by its Postal Censor. He requests Col. House to forward that letter to President Wilson and to convey sincere regret of His Majesty’s Government. One wonders where the letter to President Wilson originated from that was transmitted through the UK.
Lord Charles Hardinge Penhurst, former Viceroy of India, was appointed Under Secretary of Foreign Affairs in 1916. He was instrumental in gaining support of Indian nationalists in WW I and sent close to a million Indian soldiers to Europe to join their British counterparts.

10 Feb. 1918: Lord Penhurst, British Delegate, wrote about Austrian Red Cross telegrams to President Wilson and Prime Minister Balfour which dealt with the treatment and need to visit Turkish POWs in Siberia and Turkistan. Letter requests American cooperation for proper treatment of POWs in Siberia under Allied Control. Also mentions plans to allow return of POWs who surrender to British Military Authorities.
Belgium's Foreign Secretary Hyman was the head of the Belgian delegation and sought reparations against the Central Powers and advocated the representation of small nations at the nascent League of Nations (without notable success). However, he was appointed to be its first President the same year, standing down as Belgian Foreign Secretary in 1920.

14 Apr. 1919: Hyman letter on official Belgian Delegation stationery sent in matching envelope with official red wax seal on the back. The letter marked "Secret" refers to President Wilson’s plan to bring up the issue of Luxembourg at the conference as the Luxembourg parliament was to vote on a referendum. He wanted to continue close association between Belgium and Luxembourg. He sought US support by enclosing a confidential document from France during the war of assurances for Belgium to retain its close relationship with Luxembourg.

Circa 1919: L. Richards was the Secretary to Belgium and Commission for Relief in Belgium. Richards played a significant role in CRB which fed over 11 million people in Benelux-French region during World War I.
Eleftherios Venizelos, former Prime Minister of Greece, was deposed by the Greek King when he invited Allied Forces to Salonika in 1915. Then in 1917, Allied Forces deposed the King and restored Venizelos to power. He led the Greek delegation at the Versailles Peace Conference.

18 Feb. and 30 March 1919: Two covers from Greek Leader Eleftherios Venizelos, one about the Red Cross. At the Peace Conference, the Ottoman empire was ready to be carved out. He successfully negotiated with Allied nations to secure Western Thrace in the Treaty of Neuilly in November 1919, and Eastern Thrace and a zone around Smyrna in western Anatolia in the Treaty of Sèvres of August 1920.
10 April 1919: British Foreign Secretary Balfour wrote to Col. House regarding the proposed visit of the Anglo-American mission to Montenegro. Letter details coordination between Count de Salis, former British Minister to Montenegro, and British Colonel Miles in Rome and relevant government officials of France and Italy to plan for the proposed visit by the joint delegation.

This mission was promoted by Balfour after US declined British-Franco request in March 1919 to send its troops to Montenegro to quell civil war about whether Montenegro should join the new confederation of Jugo-Slav. There were concerns about illegal arms supplies to Bolsheviks and factions supported by Italians behind the civil war.

22 Jan. 1919: Mail from the acting Foreign Minister Dr. P. Chotch sharing a note to “Great Powers” complaining that Mr. Poincare, President of the French Republic, did not name Montenegro at his inaugural speech at the opening of the Versailles Peace Conference on 18 Jan. 1919.

On 28 Jan. 1919, Dr. P. Chotch also wrote a lengthy letter to General Bliss that strongly protested against Serbian government which claimed merger of Montenegro in Serbia in its representations to the Allies at the Versailles Peace Conference.
27 Feb. 1919: Letter from Prime Minister of Romania presenting a new map of Romania showing desired territory sought.

30 Apr. 1919: Letter in French from Romanian Prime Minister Brătianu advising of interruption of American supplies to Romania (by French Colonel Vix) and requesting Col. House to urgently seek a solution. Also mentions that he has yet to respond to the letter from Mr. Hoover (who led the food and emergency relief supplies to Europe). Finally, letter mentions contacting Mr. Davis to facilitate “This Agreement.”

Earlier in April 1919 Romanian army advanced in Hungarian-held territories without explicit approval of the Allied Powers. On 30 April French Foreign Minister Stephen Pichon summoned Prime Minister I. Brătianu, Romania was told to cease its advance at the Tisza River and retreat to the first demarcation line imposed by the Allied council.
VERSAILLES PEACE TREATY SIGNED ON 28 JUNE 1919

28 June 1919: Postcard depicting Versailles Peace Treaty table bearing French 15¢ Sawyer stamp cancelled “VERSAILLES-CHETEAU CONGRES DE LA PAIX / 15* / 28-6-19”, mailed by Isabelle (Most likely an American nurse) to North Bergen, NJ, USA. Card bears North Bergen receiving cancel. Message reads: “This is the table where they signed that wonderful document today. Wish you were here with me. Everything is OK.”
Wm G. Phillips served as Assistant Secretary of State from 1917 to 1920 but played no role in the Versailles Peace Conference.

3 Jan. 1919: Wm. G. Phillips’ four-page letter to Col. House expressing high hopes for President Wilson’s proposed League of Nations as the “World’s Baby” for family of nations and admiration for Col. House; conveys dis-satisfaction with his current role and seeks a suitable position in the new world organization, the League of Nations.

Since the US Congress never ratified the League of Nations, the US never became a member. However, several subsequent Presidents did support many initiatives of the League of Nations.
Sir R. Cecil of the British Foreign Office co-wrote the charter of the League of Nations and worked closely with Col. House and President Wilson.

Sir R. Cecil informed in this letter that Hyman of the Belgian delegation will not insist on Brussels as the seat of the League of Nations, will praise the League and requested President Wilson’s support for Belgium’s reparations requests which Cecil conveyed to British Foreign Secretary Balfour.

26 April 1919: Mail sent in a handwritten envelope from Sir R. Cecil (Member of British Delegation at the Peace Conference) to Col. House at Hotel Carillion with “By Hand” and “Pressing” markings indicating letter was urgently hand delivered.
Sir Eric Drummond was part of a British Delegation both to USA and at the Peace Conference in 1918-1919 and led drafting of League of Nations Charter. He was chosen to be the first Secretary General when the League of Nations convened first time on 20 January 1920 in Geneva, Switzerland.

17 May 1917: Letter from Foreign Secretary Balfour sent via Sir Eric Drummond who was part of “BALFOUR Mission” to Washington DC, to promote greater cooperation between USA and UK after US declared war on 6 Apr. 1917.