

**The League of Free Nations Association,
the First Organized Attempt to Move Policy
Toward a Union of Democracies**

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Foreign Policy in a Democracy: the Role of the Foreign Policy Association

Even since the rise of nations, there have been proposals for, and groupings of, nations in alliances, leagues, confederations and federations. The twentieth century was a period of exceptional activity in this regard as the world experienced two world wars.

I would like to tell you a bit about a World War II proposal and an alliance in which I became personally involved, and then about a little-known idea at the close of WWI which may have opened the door leading toward that alliance.

In the 1930s the New York Times correspondent at the League of Nations , Clarence K. Streit, observed the rise of the Nazis and Fascists, and the failure of Western democracies to agree on measures to halt aggression by the dictators. In alarm, he wrote a book, *Union Now*, published in 1939, in which he proposed a federal union of the democratic nations to give them a common foreign policy and common defense force that could defeat any dictator or combination of dictators. He hoped to prevent a second world war.

Streit resigned his position with the Times and took nationwide speaking tours to arouse the country to the impending danger. The idea generated a lot of publicity, and a large following. Streit became a *Time* cover man and a frequent figure on the nation's top radio programs. Many newspapers editorially endorsed his proposal. Streit addressed an enthusiastic rally in Madison Square Garden . He met with presidents and prime ministers. The serving prime minister of Canada came to the US to deliver an address supporting the idea. President Roosevelt invited Streit to dinner at the White House. Winston Churchill offered France a last-minute opportunity to form a federal union with Britain , but France fell to the Nazis.

While serving as a naval officer during World War II, I read Streit's fascinating book with hearty approval. When I returned to my home in Ohio at the close of the war in 1945, I resolved to seek employment in a cause in which I believed. I went to Washington , was interviewed by Streit and ended up as executive director of his organization, an exciting and rewarding position I held for seven years.

In 1953 I joined the staff of the Foreign Policy Association, from which I retired as vice president in 1986. Upon retirement, I decided to write a history of the Association. To my surprise and delight, I discovered that the FPA had begun at the close of WWI as an advocate of principles very similar to those of Streit, (if not in a specific proposal.???)

During and immediately after the war, New York City gave birth to a number of citizen organizations created to promote foreign policy views for organizing the peace. The largest, organized in 1915, was the League to Enforce Peace headed by former President William Howard Taft, with 34 state governors as vice presidents. It wielded enormous influence, but virtually collapsed when the U. S. Senate rejected US membership in the League of Nations in 1919. (Its quest was taken up by the American Association for a League of Nations, founded in 1922.) Other organizations of particular note were the League of Free Nations Association, founded in 1918, and the Council on Foreign Relations, established in 1919.

In a very fledgling form, the idea of a union of liberal democracies emerged from the League of Free Nations Association. This is the group to which I wish especially to call your attention. The LFNA later became the Foreign Policy Association. In my book *Foreign Policy in a Democracy: the Role of the Foreign Policy Association (2003)*, I provided the first full review of the work of the LFNA.

The initiator of the LFNA was Paul Kellogg, crusading editor of *The Survey* and president of the National Conference of Social Work. In April 1918 he assembled 18 friends, many from the liberal weekly US journals that had become the leading exponents of democracy in foreign affairs during WWI. These included Norman Angell, first recipient of the Nobel Peace prize, from *The Independent*; Herbert D. Croly, founder of *The New Republic*, and Henry R. Mussey of *The Nation*. Also present were two budding historians: Charles A. Beard and Will Durant.

Paul Kellogg had recently returned from Europe and believed there was an urgent need for building a body of support for the liberal, democratic principles expressed by President Wilson for establishing peace and a new world order. He stressed freedom when he wrote: “the only consistent work in preparing for the time of settlement by a lay body is that of the League to Enforce Peace, which is mostly absorbed in the machinery of international control rather than the democratic principles which must shoot through all such arrangements to make them tolerable.”

While the idea of an open nucleus of democratic countries was more an idea of World War II, its first general formulation is found in the programmatic statements of the LFNA. In 1918 that organization proposed the creation of a “League of Free Nations, as universal as possible,” clarifying that “the initiating nucleus of the membership of the League should be the nations associated as belligerents in winning the war.” The decision-making process it envisaged was different from the usual pronouncements of the League to Enforce Peace: “the rules of international law should not be defeated by lack of unanimity.”

President Woodrow Wilson himself, though dedicated to universalism, had in 1917 championed the idea of a League of Democratic Powers. It was through the work of the LFNA that the idea first took the form of political planning. It answered the concerns of those who, though skeptical about the viability of universalism in their time, still felt a universal moral responsibility. The

idea that the democracies could perform such a moral obligation better than others seemed to provide a logical pathway out of the tension between universalistic goals and pragmatic reliable means.

In the “Statement of Principles” announcing its formation, the League of Free Nations Association stated that “indispensable to the success of American policy (is)... a universal association of nations based upon the principle that the security of each shall rest upon the strength of the whole, pledged to uphold international arrangements giving equality of political right and economic opportunity, the association to be based upon a constitution democratic in character, possessing a central council or parliament as truly representative as possible of all the political parties in the constituent nations, open to any nation, and only such nation, whose government is responsible to the people.”

The LFNA founders knew that a universal organization comprised of democracies and dictatorships, kingdoms and theocracies could provide only limited security to the world because national governments would yield little authority to it. That is why, while calling for an organization as universal as possible, it proposed beginning with a nucleus of democratic nations and emphasized freedom and human rights: “democratic principles,” “self-determination,” “equality of political rights and economic opportunity,” “a truly representative parliament.” “a government responsible to the people,” “a constitution democratic in character,” “to achieve for all peoples, great and small, security, the due protection of national existence.”

The LFNA proposal was, in a sense, the most far-reaching of the proposals for institutionalizing, instead of dissolving the World War I Atlantic alliance. At Versailles, a much more modest form of institutionalization was adopted - an Anglo-American Treaty of Guarantee to France – alongside the universal League, which the U.S. Senate failed to adopt. It is possible that, had the war-time alliance been institutionalized successfully, the peace would have been less vindictive and the Nazis and Fascists might never have come into power.

After the Senate rejected US entry into the League of Nations the LFNA gave up its role as an advocate and became the nonpartisan, educational Foreign Policy Association. Through enlightened education on the nature of the world year by year it helped bring Americans to enter into a second generation Atlantic alliance in 1941, and to institutionalize it in 1949 as NATO. It also helped Americans to decide to join the United Nations organization which they helped form in 1945.

Eleanor and Franklin D. Roosevelt were strong supporters of LFNA (and FPA). Within three months of the founding of LFNA, FDR spoke on its platform, as he did on a number of occasions, including when he was President. Eleanor signed the foreign Policy Association’s incorporation papers, served on its Board and spoke for it many times.

What became of the idea of a federal union of democracies? It reached a zenith in the late 1940s and early 50’s. The end of the war, and founding of the United Nations as a universal organization for peace, brought a relaxation in the search for democratic world order, although a young John F. Kennedy, reporting for a newspaper at the founding conference of the United Nations, wrote a nostalgic piece “What became of Union Now?”

Many Federal Union members joined the America Association for the United Nations (now UNA-USA). Also, as a consequence of the advent of the atomic bomb, many supporters of Streit's proposal decided there was no time to start with a federal union of democracies, that world government was needed now. This group left the Streit organization and joined with several smaller groups to form the United World Federalists.

Nevertheless, Streit's Federal Union organization continued to be influential. It spawned a political action group, the Atlantic Union Committee, to support the idea of a military alliance of democracies, and was influential in obtaining U.S. participation in NATO, the North Atlantic Treaty Association, in 1949. It was instrumental in NATO's sponsorship of the Atlantic Congress held in London in 1959, with 600 leaders of the NATO nations attending, to seek closer integration of the Atlantic Community.

Sixty-five years after Streit submitted his proposal his vision is alive and active, backed by the Streit Council for a Union of Democracies located in Washington , DC .