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Historians are always reluctant to draw lessons from history, and with good reason. History has been so often abused to support outrageous policies, to promote extravagant claims to territory or to explain away bad decisions. We all know how nationalist movements have created, and indeed been the creation of, highly selective histories. We have seen in the recent past how reference to, for example, appeasement can be used to justify actions in contexts which are not at all like that of the 1930s. Nevertheless I am going to break the rules of the Historians' Guild and see whether the Paris Peace Conference of 1919 offers any useful suggestions for today. The word 'lessons' is perhaps too strong, but history can offer us instructive analogies. It can help us to formulate useful questions about our own times. And it can provide warnings: we are on thin ice here, there are dangerous beasts over there.

Since the end of the Cold War, our world has become an increasingly complicated and troubling one. We have seen the spread of an irrational, powerful and anti-Western fundamentalism in the Muslim world. Failed states, Somalia for example, provide a convenient home for terrorist movements. Ethnic nationalisms, which many of us thought were dying out, are challenging secular states such as India. Rogue states such as North Korea remain outside the international system. A war which shows no signs of ending is ravaging the Great Lakes area of Africa. The Trans-Atlantic alliance which proved so strong during the Cold War has been damaged by recent events, perhaps fatally. The United States, a somewhat reluctant hegemon, is for the time being under the guidance of unilateralists who dismiss the concerns and national interests of other nations as irrelevant. This is bad news at a time when so many challenges, from terrorism to Aids, require more international co-operation rather than less.

If the great conference in Paris at the end of the First World War has been drawing attention recently, it is largely because of our concern with our own world. During the Cold War, the events of that earlier war and the peace settlements which came at its end were remote. They seemed to have no relevance to the great struggle which locked East against West. What did it matter how Yugoslavia or Iraq came into existence? Or how the statesmen then envisaged a world order. Since