

WOODROW WILSON VS. AMERICAN PUBLIC OPINION: THE UNCONDITIONAL SURRENDER MOVEMENT OF 1918

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Scholarly exegesis of Woodrow Wilson's peace objectives has consumed much printer's ink over the past three quarters of a century. In the course of his distinguished career, Klaus Schwabe has made a decisive contribution to the ongoing debate on the subject. No one else has so enlarged our understanding of German-American mutual misperceptions at the end of World War I. Having taken on a democratic coloration, the Berlin government sought to escape from the logic of defeat in 1918 by belatedly embracing the Fourteen Points. Schwabe contrasts German expectations with Wilson's actual peace program, and he shows how the practical constraints of coalition warfare and Realpolitik limited the president's maneuvering room.¹

Wilson captured the imagination of liberals on both sides of the water. His hope that a concert of right could replace the balance of power inspired two generations of American internationalists. His vision of a world made safe for democracy, suitably transmogrified, still inspires one prominent strain in American foreign policy. No wonder that scholars of World War I have focused so closely on Wilson himself - on his aspirations, policies, achievements, and failures - in war termination and peacemaking.² Yet most Americans in 1918-19 did not favor the ideas we associate with a Wilsonian peace. It is easy to overlook the extent to which the president had lost control of U.S. public opinion by the time that the guns fell silent on the Western front.

Caught up in a paroxysm of war patriotism, the majority of articulate Americans came to believe that Germany figured as an incorrigible nation that had to be crushed were civilization to survive. The main organs of opinion called for an unconditional surrender and a dictated peace. And the voters elected a Republican Congress that would not indulge the president's penchant for making foreign policy in communion with himself.³

Public opinion is fickle. Even today, approval ratings for presidential actions swing wildly between one election and another. Before the development of modern statistical sampling techniques, one cannot gauge public sentiment with scientific precision. Moreover, government agencies subjected the population to such a massive propaganda barrage during World War I that it is hard to tell what people really thought in the privacy of their homes.⁴

¹ Klaus Schwabe, *Deutsche Revolution und Wilson-Frieden: Die amerikanische und die deutsche Friedensstrategie zwischen Ideologie und Machtpolitik 1918-19*, Düsseldorf 1971; idem., *Die amerikanische und die deutsche Geheimdiplomatie und das Problem eines Verständigungsfriedens im Jahre 1918*, in: *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte* 19 (1971), pp. 1-32; idem., *Woodrow Wilson, Revolutionary Germany and Peacemaking, 1918-1919*, Chapel Hill 1985; idem., *Die USA, Deutschland und der Ausgang des Ersten Weltkrieges*, in: Manfred Knapp et al. (eds.), *Die USA und Deutschland 1918-1975*, München 1978, pp. 11-61.

² For examples of this traditional biographical focus over the years, see Thomas A. Bailey, *Woodrow Wilson and the Lost Peace*, Chicago 1944; *ibid.*, *Woodrow Wilson and the Great Betrayal*, New York 1945; Arthur S. Link, *Wilson the Diplomatist*, Baltimore 1957, and the numerous other works by the same author; N. Gordon Levin, *Woodrow Wilson and World Politics*, New York 1968; Arthur Walworth, *America's Moment. 1918*, New York 1977, and *Wilson and His Peacemakers*, New York 1986; and Thomas J. Knock, *To End All Wars: Woodrow Wilson and the Quest for a New World Order*, New York 1992.

³ Earl S. Pomeroy, *Sentiment for a Strong Peace*, in: *South Atlantic Quarterly* (Oct. 1944), pp. 325-37; Selig Adler, *The Congressional Election of 1918*, in: *South Atlantic Quarterly* (Oct. 1937), pp. 447-65; Seward W. Livermore, *The Sectional Issue in the 1918 Congressional Elections*, in: *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* (June 1948), pp. 29-60; idem., *Politics is Adjourned: Woodrow Wilson and the War Congress, 1916-1918*, Middletown CT 1966.

⁴ James R. Mock and Cedric Larson, *Words That Won the War: The Story of the Committee on Public Information, 1917-1919*, Princeton 1939; Stephen Vaughn, *Holding Fast the Inner Lines: Democracy, Nationalism, and the Committee on Public Information*, Chapel Hill 1980.

The United States remained at the time an ethnically divided nation. German-Americans and other hyphenates did not fully share in the war hysteria.⁵ Nevertheless, when due allowances are made, what passed for articulate public opinion found expression or reflection in the mass media and the discourse of politicians. Here the evidence seems unmistakable. In the course of mobilizing the American people to fight the war abroad, Wilson and the liberal idealists whose views he championed lost the battle for hearts and minds at home.

Fischer and his followers have shown conclusively that the Berlin government and the High Command pursued annexationist objectives from the beginning of the war to the end. Sentiment in the Reichstag varied depending on the progress of the forces in the field, but there is little to indicate that either the German people or their representatives in parliament would ever have accepted a moderate peace until military defeat obliged them to do so.⁶ Nevertheless, when General Ludendorff determined that his armies could not prevail, the Wilhelmstraße could find much in President Wilson's speeches to give them hope of a tolerable outcome.⁷

President Wilson derived his bedrock views not from empirical scrutiny of the German war record, but rather from the predispositions of nineteenth-century humanitarian liberalism and the Presbyterian religion. According to Wilson's *Weltanschauung*, privileged elites might long for conquest and governments might make war. The „people“, however, always stood for peace. In his wartime speeches Wilson repeatedly distinguished between the „military and imperialistic minority“ in the Reich and the German people, toward whom he had no feeling but „sympathy and friendship“⁸. Insisting that America fought as an associate and not as an ally, the president long hoped to impose an American program of reconciliation and reconstruction on England and France as well as on Germany. „When the war is over“, he wrote Colonel Edward M. House, „we can force them to our way of thinking, because by that time they will, among other things, be financially in our hands“⁹. Wilson expressed disillusionment when the Reichstag received the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk with undisguised enthusiasm, but his basic convictions survived intact. He disclaimed any desire „to march triumphantly into Berlin“¹⁰. As late as July 1918 he continued to advocate a settlement based upon the „free acceptance of that settlement by the people immediately concerned“¹¹.

European liberals, in Germany and elsewhere, did not follow American domestic politics closely so long as the United States maintained its traditional isolation from European affairs. Washington figured as a hardship post before the days of air-conditioning; neither diplomats nor foreign journalists ventured frequently into the interior. Still, the basic ground rules of American politics should have posed no riddle. The Republicans had dominated both the White House and the Congress most of the time since the Civil War. Wilson had prevailed in 1912 only because the Republican majority split; he won reelection four years later by a relatively narrow margin. Foreign observers might casually assume that Wilson's winged words reflected not merely the policy of his administration, but also the convictions of the governing elites. In fact, the Democrats drew support largely from the South, the West, and immi-

5 Frederick C. Luebke, *Bonds of Loyalty: German-Americans and World War I*, DeKalb IL 1974; also Carl W. Wittke, *German-Americans and the World War*, Columbus OH 1936.

6 Fritz Fischer, *Griff nach der Weltmacht: Die Kriegszielpolitik des kaiserlichen Deutschland 1914/18*, Düsseldorf 1964; Hans Gatzke, *Germany's Drive to the West: A Study of Germany's Western War Aims during the First World War*, Baltimore 1950; Klaus Epstein, *Matthias Erzberger and the Dilemma of German Democracy*, Princeton 1959.

7 Harry Rudin, *Armistice 1918*, New Haven 1944; also see Erich Ludendorff, *Meine Kriegserinnerungen 1914/18*, Berlin 1919.

8 Albert Shaw (ed.), *The Messages and Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, New York 1924, Vol. 1, pp. 373-83, 411-18, 421-24, 443-54, 464-72 (2 Apr., 14 June, 17 Aug., 4 Dec. 1917; 8 Jan. 1918).

9 Wilson to House, 21 July 1917, in: Ray Stannard Baker (ed.), *Woodrow Wilson: Life and Letters*, Garden City 1927-39, Vol. 7, p. 180.

10 Shaw, *Messages and Papers*, Vol. 1, pp. 480-84 (6 Apr. 1918); talk with foreign correspondents, 8 Apr. 1918, in: Baker, *Woodrow Wilson*, Vol. 8, p. 80.

11 Shaw, *Messages and Papers*, Vol. 1, pp. 497-501.

grants; the business community and the established classes of the East who had traditionally shaped foreign policy and who had sounded the tocsin for preparedness in the early years of the war remained overwhelmingly loyal to the Republicans.¹²

After five years in opposition, no figure on the Republican side could compete in moral stature with Wilson. Nevertheless, ex-President Theodore Roosevelt and Senator Henry Cabot Lodge could rival him in passion and eloquence. And a diverse group of pro-war intellectuals and publicists, including Lyman Abbott, George Louis Beer, George Harvey, Albert Bushnell Hart, and William Roscoe Thayer, though largely forgotten today, garnered as much attention at the time as the inspired idealists who wrote for the *New Republic*.¹³

The Republican leadership had never accepted the Wilsonian notion of a war „thrust“ upon the United States owing to violations of neutral rights. Instead, the pro-war spokesmen insisted, both before and after April 1917, that German ambitions and conduct posed a direct threat to American national security. The United States should respond accordingly. As early as August 1917, the magazine editor George Harvey began his campaign in the high-profile *North American Review* for „Unconditional Surrender: The Only Way“.¹⁴ Denied his wish to take a volunteer division overseas, ex-President Roosevelt elaborated the theme in his syndicated newspaper column and repeatedly toured the country pressing for a fight to the bitter end.¹⁵

Temperament, political analysis, and a Social Darwinist conception of manliness all led Roosevelt in the same direction.¹⁶ „First and foremost“, he argued, „we have to make the world safe for ourselves“. If the United States failed to win an overwhelming victory, it would „some day have to reckon with Germany single-handed“.¹⁷ Therefore, every decent citizen should feel an obligation to „make the pacifist and the home Hun realize that agitation for a premature peace, for a peace without victory, is seditious“¹⁸. In contrast to Wilson, Roosevelt proclaimed that „our war is as much with the German people as with their government“. The German people had „stood practically united behind their government in upholding and insisting upon the systematic infliction of hideous brutality upon their foes“¹⁹. Roosevelt had followed Wilson’s seemingly irresolute defense of American rights on the high seas, his dilatory conversion to preparedness, and his wordy embrace of a League to Enforce Peace with mounting frustration and indignation. Hatred of his Democratic successor figured as the consuming passion of Roosevelt’s final years. Privately, he denounced the President as a hypocrite obsessed with his own reputation who would „make a German peace tomorrow if he thought it for his own advantage“²⁰.

¹² Although the hagiographic focus on Wilson in recent years has obscured this point, it is a staple of the older historiography. See William E. Dodd, *Woodrow Wilson and His Work*, Garden City 1920; and Robert E. Osgood, *Ideals and Self-Interest in America’s Foreign Relations*, Chicago 1953.

¹³ John Garraty, *Henry Cabot Lodge*, New York 1953; William Widenor, *Henry Cabot Lodge and the Search for an American Foreign Policy*, Berkeley 1980; Willis F. Johnson, *George Harvey: A Passionate Patriot*, Boston 1929; Charles D. Hazen (ed.), *The Letters of William Roscoe Thayer*, New York 1926. The pro-war conservatives have not received scholarly attention comparable to that lavished on the Wilsonian publicists by Charles Forcey, *The Crossroads of Liberalism: Croly, Weyl, Lippmann*, New York 1961; Stuart I. Rochester, *American Liberal Disillusionment in the Wake of World War I*, University Park PA 1977; and Ronald Steel, *Walter Lippmann and the American Century*, Boston 1980.

¹⁴ *North American Review*, Aug. 1917, pp. 177-87; see also the passionate editorials in the *North American Review War Weekly* throughout 1918.

¹⁵ See the collected columns in Ralph Stout (ed.), *Roosevelt in the Kansas City Star*, Boston 1921.

¹⁶ For a psychoanalytically informed approach to Roosevelt, see Peter Gay, *The Bourgeois Experience: Victoria to Freud*, vol. 3: *The Cultivation of Hatred*, New York 1993. For a useful comparison of Roosevelt’s and Wilson’s respective leadership styles, see John Milton Cooper Jr, *The Warrior and the Priest: Woodrow Wilson and Theodore Roosevelt*, Cambridge MA 1983.

¹⁷ Theodore Roosevelt, *Foes of our Own Household*, Sept. 1917, in: *The Works of Theodore Roosevelt*, New York 1926, Vol. 19, p. 12; also *The Peace of Victory for which We Strive*, in: *Metropolitan*, June 1917.

¹⁸ *Kansas City Star*, 23 Oct. 1917.

¹⁹ *Kansas City Star*, 13 Nov. 1917.

²⁰ Roosevelt to Arthur H. Lee, 21 Feb. and 25 Mar. 1918; Roosevelt to Caspar Whitney, 16 Jan. 1918,

Senator Lodge, the leading Republican on the Foreign Relations Committee, affected a New England Brahmin style. His urbane and modulated speeches, studded with arcane literary references, lacked the fire and brimstone that Roosevelt considered a hallmark of popular leadership. In his own inimitable fashion, however, Lodge faithfully echoed the substantive views of his friend of thirty years.²¹ He too nourished an inveterate suspicion of the President dating back to Wilson's 1914 plan to purchase German ships interned in American harbors.²² He too held that attempts to separate the German people from the Kaiser represented the „merest illusion“²³. While not objecting to the territorial proposals embodied in the Fourteen Points, he dismissed the broader propositions set forth by the President for open covenants, disarmament, and freedom of the seas as „general bleat about virtue being better than vice“²⁴. And, like Roosevelt, he continued to fear a plunge by Wilson for a negotiated peace, though he hoped that the momentum of war would „carry us on to the end“²⁵.

Wilson had expressed his trepidation, on the eve of intervention, that the people would „go war-mad, quit thinking and devote their energies to destruction“. He would then have to attempt to reconstruct a peace-time civilization with wartime standards.²⁶ All the same, Wilson encouraged the activities of George Creel's Committee on Public Information, which fanned the country's moral fervor by sponsoring one million speeches and distributing seventy-five million pamphlets that stigmatized the enemy in scarcely human terms.²⁷ Liberal critics fretted that, if the President lost his fight for a humane peace, one reason might be that he stood silent when local authorities abridged the right of conscience and undermined freedom of speech.²⁸ In the short run, however, the CPI proved remarkably effective. „The whole country is aflame“, noted the normally stodgy *New York Times* in August 1918, „with a rage to beat down the Prussian military power into the dust, and end for all time its rapacity, its cruelty, its greed for domination over the bodies and souls of men“²⁹.

By November 1918 two million American soldiers had landed in France. The U.S. Army entered hostilities grossly unprepared for modern warfare; hence the majority of doughboys spent their first months abroad in the comparative safety of training camps. From May 1918 onward, however, the AEF took an increasing part in battles at Montdidier, Château-Thierry, Belleau Wood, and St. Mihiel. Beginning in late September, American troops took the offensive in the Meuse-Argonne sector. Casualty lists began to mount. An accompanying mobilization of sentiment took place on the home front.

As the German armies withdrew, they dismantled villages, destroyed coal mines, and put to the torch what they could not carry away. The distorted reports that filtered back to the American press seemed shockingly consistent with the atrocity stories that British propagandists had so vigorously disseminated during the early part of the war. The Missouri State Council of Defense reacted with a not atypical pledge: „Let the work you do every day be dedicated to the babies of France and Belgium who have been impaled on bayonets [...] little boys in the invaded districts of Europe who have been crucified [...] little girls of Belgium and France who have been carried into a slavery far worse than death [...] the once happy

in: Elting E. Morison (ed.), *The Letters of Theodore Roosevelt*, Cambridge MA 1954, Vol. 8, pp. 1288-91, 1303-4, 1272-75.

21 See Roosevelt-Lodge letters in Boxes 86-98, Henry Cabot Lodge Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society; expurgated versions in H. C. Lodge (ed.), *Selections from the Correspondence of Theodore Roosevelt and Henry Cabot Lodge, 1884-1918*, 2 vols., New York 1925.

22 Garraty, *Lodge*, pp. 307-32; Lodge to Roosevelt, 1 Mar. 1915, Box 89, Lodge Papers.

23 Lodge to Channing Cox, 6 Mar. 1918, to James M. Beck, 19 Mar. 1918, Box 50; and Lodge to Alfred C. Lane, 19 Nov. 1918, Box 51, Lodge Papers.

24 See Henry Cabot Lodge, *The Senate and the League of Nations*, New York 1925, pp. 92-95.

25 Lodge to Beck, 19 Mar. 1918, Box 50, Lodge Papers.

26 See his discussion with newspaperman Frank Cobb, in: John L. Heaton (ed.), *Cobb of „The World“*, New York 1924, pp. 268-70.

27 George Creel, *How We Advertised America*, New York 1920; Mock and Larson, *Words that Won the War*, op. cit.

28 *The Nation*, 9 Nov. 1918, p. 502.

29 *New York Times*, 19 Aug. 1918.

homes of Europe which the Hun burned after murdering the inmates.³⁰ In October the *New York Times* soberly reported that „the oft-repeated statement that the Germans are a nation of madmen seems to be literally true“³¹. And Harvey’s *War Weekly* suggested modestly that „our soldiers who are killing Huns for humanity’s sake will experience an exaltation of soul such as the Crusaders knew“³².

In those far-off days before Korea and Vietnam, unselfconscious Americans could indulge a Manichean view of the world. To those who saw the struggle in terms of moral absolutes - as the opposition of „right“ against „crime“ - there seemed but one appropriate response to Germany’s continued belligerency. The mass-circulation magazine, *Outlook*, trumpeted in late July that the only suitable terms for peace with the Reich were „those which General Grant made immortal unconditional surrender“³³. A group of Flint, Michigan, businessmen formed an „Unconditional Surrender Club“. Their pledge for a war to the finish against the Central Powers appeared in hundreds of newspapers on 15 August. The National Security League, the League for National Unity, the American Defense Society, the One Hundred Per Cent American Clubs, and the various war-volunteer organizations that had formed at a community level took up the cry. „Unconditional Surrender“ buttons appeared in workplaces across the land.³⁴

On 23 August Henry Cabot Lodge, the new Senate Minority Leader, delivered a carefully crafted foreign-policy address to set off the fall election campaign. Lodge targeted national security as the pivotal issue. This could not be achieved through a treaty, for „no treaty is worth the paper it is written on when made with Germany, whom no agreement binds, to whom no signature has meaning, and whose pledges are as false as dicers’ oaths“. A just and righteous peace must rest on a victory won „finally and thoroughly in German territory“, crowned by unconditional surrender, and followed by settlement terms reflecting the „hard physical facts“ of Allied preponderance. In a word, „we must go to Berlin and there dictate peace“³⁵.

Lodge’s speech received bipartisan acclaim. The *New Republic* saw the destruction of Germany as the only alternative to a strong League of Nations, but insisted that liberals could not accept that alternative.³⁶ That remained a minority view. The *New York Times* concluded that „Mr. Lodge has spoken not merely the voice of a party, but of all Americans, of all the Allied people who understand at last what Germany is“³⁷. Lodge wrote with satisfaction to Roosevelt. He trusted the speech would „make it difficult for Wilson to betray the United States and the Allies by negotiating a peace with Germany with a view to the German vote in this country“³⁸.

In mid-September the Central Powers’ front began to crack. Austria-Hungary proposed a non-binding conversation over principles of peace. Secretary Lansing promptly rejected the offer.³⁹ But release of the exchange prompted a further outpouring of rodomontade in the press. „Let the Hun whine, let him sing his song of peace and brotherhood“, thundered the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*. „Our answer to his peace twaddle shall be more war.“ The

30 *Missouri on Guard*, Jefferson City MO, quoted in: *Literary Digest*, 31 Aug. 1918, p. 33.

31 *New York Times*, 15 Oct. 1918.

32 *North American Review War Weekly*, 24 Aug. 1918, p. 12.

33 *Outlook*, 24 July 1918, p. 473. As every American schoolboy used to know, General S.B. Buckner of the Confederate Army proposed to yield Fort Donelson through an armistice on 18 Feb. 1862. General Ulysses S. Grant replied: „No terms except an unconditional surrender can be accepted. I propose to move immediately upon your works.“

34 *Unconditional Surrender, a World Slogan: Its Inception and Development*, in: *Outlook*, 6 Nov. 1918, p. 350.

35 *Congressional Record*, 65 Cong., 2 Sess., 23 Aug. 1918, pp. 9392-94; coordination with Republican National Committee in Will H. Hays to Lodge, 26 and 29 Aug. 1918, Box 51, Lodge Papers.

36 *New Republic*, 31 Aug. 1918, p. 122 f.

37 *New York Times*, 26 Aug. 1918.

38 Lodge to Roosevelt, 3 Sept. 1918, in: *Roosevelt-Lodge Correspondence*, Vol. 2, p. 536.

39 *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States, 1918: The World War*, Washington 1933, Supplement I, Vol.1, pp. 306-10.

Washington Post invoked the Deity. „Who will dare to stay the execution of the assassin? Who is the man who will try to interfere with God’s will as voiced by his people?“⁴⁰ Wilson sought to build a backfire against such sentiments in a carefully calibrated address at the Metropolitan Opera House on 27 September. He would make no „bargain or compromise“ with the Central Empires. On the other hand, there could be „no discrimination between those to whom we wish to be just and those to whom we do not wish to be just“⁴¹. The majority of the press praised the address, but pointedly ignored the emphasis on the League of Nations and the warnings against self-aggrandizement by other belligerents. The logical purpose of the President’s golden words, Harvey’s *Weekly* concluded illogically, was to make clear that our answer to „Hunnish peace proposals“ would be unconditional surrender.⁴²

On 6 October the news arrived that Germany was seeking an armistice on the basis of the Fourteen Points and the Metropolitan Opera speech.⁴³ Not a single national newspaper favored accepting the „Teutonic suggestions“. The *Baltimore Sun* summed up the general reaction. „The fact to be constantly kept in mind is that this is not a war against a nation or a combination of nations, but against a great criminal which has deliberately organized to conquer and plunder the world.“⁴⁴ In the Senate the next day, Democrats vied with Republicans in sanguinary rhetoric. Senator Ashurst (D-AZ) hoped that our armies would follow „a wide pathway of fire and blood from the Rhine to Berlin“ and annihilate both the Kaiser and „all of his criminal junkers“⁴⁵. Wilson had initially prepared a mild draft reply to Germany. After reading the transcript of the Senate debate he evidently changed his mind. Colonel House noted that the president had not realized beforehand the nearly unanimous sentiment of the country for unconditional surrender. This had to be taken into account, but not „to the extent of meeting it where it was wrong“. Press secretary Joseph Tumulty predicted that the revised reply would appeal to the sober-minded, although the country might not at first accept it with enthusiasm.⁴⁶

The frigid public reaction belied Tumulty’s tempered optimism. Wilson had phrased his reply as an „inquiry“ whether the Imperial Chancellor accepted the terms laid down in his addresses and whether he spoke „merely“ for the heretofore constituted authorities in the Reich.⁴⁷ Gilbert Hitchcock, Senate majority leader, weakly defended this „preliminary answer“ as „well calculated to develop the issue“. But a storm of telegrams and resolutions descended on Washington from State Councils of Defense, patriotic leagues, and Chambers of Commerce all over the nation, demanding unconditional surrender.

Undoubtedly the timing proved unfortunate for the administration. With the Fourth Liberty Loan campaign in full swing, lurid features on German barbarities suffused the daily press. A U-boat, hoping to destroy the evidence, machine-gunned the wounded on the decks after torpedoing a cargo transport. This further enflamed the public.⁴⁸ Secretary of State Lansing vented his frustration in his diary: „On the crest of this wave of passion which is

40 Press comment, *New York Times*, 16 Sept. 1918.

41 *Messages and Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, Vol. 1, pp. 520-28.

42 Press Comment, *New York Times*, 29 Sept. 1918; *Literary Digest*, 12 Oct. 1918, p. 11 f.; *North American Review War Weekly*, 5 Oct. 1918, p. 4.

43 *FRUS 1918*, Supp. I, Vol. 1, pp. 337-38.

44 Press Comment, *New York Times*, 8 Oct. 1918.

45 *Congressional Record*, 65 Cong., 2 Sess., 7 Oct. 1918, pp. 11155-63.

46 Charles Seymour, *The Intimate Papers of Colonel House*, Boston 1928, Vol. 4, pp. 75-79; Joseph Tumulty, *Woodrow Wilson as I Know Him*, New York 1921, pp. 311-15.

47 *FRUS 1918*, Supp. I, Vol. 1, pp. 343.

48 *New York Times*, 9-11 Oct. 1918; *Literary Digest*, 19 Oct. 1918, p. 8 f.; *North American Review War Weekly*, 19 Oct. 1918, pp. 2-6; *Congressional Record*, 65 Cong., 2 Sess., 10 Oct. 1918, pp. 11165-81.

sweeping the nation rides the malignant Roosevelt, the partisan Lodge, the narrow-minded politician [House Republican leader Frederick H.] Gillett, and all the lesser enemies of the Administration who have been seeking for a chance to bite.⁴⁹

White House spin doctors sought to contain the damage. A source „close to the president“ reiterated that Wilson aimed to overthrow the arbitrary power of the Kaiser and his associates and to compel them to „surrender unconditionally to the terms laid down in his speeches“⁵⁰. But the second German note, which arrived on 13 October, put his resolution to the test.⁵¹ With one eye cocked on the election clock, the Senators waved the bloody shirt *en masse*. Senator Cummins (R-IA), one of the „little group of willful men“ who in 1917 declined to countenance the arming of merchant ships, now stridently demanded „capital punishment for a nation“. From the other side of the aisle, Senator Myers (D-Mont.) proposed responding to peace offers by „slaughtering more Huns and piling up the bodies [...] on the battlefield“, and then keeping the survivors busy paying indemnities for a century.⁵²

Colonel House, consulting with Wilson, regretted that they were hampered by the vociferous outcry in the country. It was „difficult to do the right thing in the right way with people clamoring for the undesirable and the impossible“⁵³. Pressed also by a blunt message from the British and French premiers, Wilson’s reply to the second note made clear that conditions of armistice must be left to the judgment of Allied military advisers.⁵⁴ The country reacted with relief to his denunciation of German atrocities and the assurance that Marshal Foch would dictate military terms. Mixing his metaphors as usual, Senator Harding (R-OH) discerned „the sunshine of freedom and confidence after groping in the fog“. Senator Simmons (D-NC) read the note as „not very far from demanding unconditional surrender“. Once again, „those best qualified to know the president’s mind“ reassured the newspapers that Wilson would not drop his guard against Teutonic diplomacy or trickery.⁵⁵

The White House press office labored skillfully to minimize the yawning chasm between the president and the people. But it would be inaccurate to speak of a secret. The editors of the *Nation* and the *New Republic* accurately discerned Wilson’s state of mind. The presidential intimate and journalist Ray Stannard Baker noted: „If the German people only knew it, this stern man is their best friend. He will be no less bold with greed, arrogance, and the spirit of revenge on the side of the Allies.“⁵⁶ And on 16 October Wilson guilelessly revealed his preoccupations in a talk with Sir William Wiseman, the head of British Intelligence. The temper of those who wished to devastate Germany distressed him. The people who were shouting that we must dictate terms in Berlin were „not the real Americans“. The Allied side ought to end the war nobly, to „show the world that we are the better fellow“. The military and naval experts should recommend terms, but those terms should not be made unendurable, because Bolshevism was lurking everywhere and would thrive on the humiliation of the German people.⁵⁷

The third German note, which became available on 21 October, actually represented a victory for civilian moderates in Berlin who hoped to strengthen Wilson’s hand against the American „chauvinists“⁵⁸. Nevertheless, senators on both sides of the aisle denounced the note as „shifty“, „audacious“, „clumsy“, and „equivocal“. The *New Haven Courier-Journal* typically proclaimed that Foch should give the answer: „Down on your knees, Hun, down

49 Robert Lansing Desk Diary, 12 Oct. 1918, Library of Congress.

50 *New York Times*, 11 Oct. 1918.

51 *FRUS 1918*, Supp. 1, Vol. 1, pp. 357-58.

52 *Congressional Record*, 65 Cong., 2 Sess., 14 Oct. 1918, pp. 11204-37.

53 *Intimate Papers*, Vol. 4, pp. 82-83.

54 *FRUS 1918*, Supp. I, Vol. 1, pp. 333, 358-59.

55 *New York Times*, 15 and 20 Oct. 1918.

56 *The Nation*, 19 Oct. 1918, p. 436; *New Republic*, 19 Oct. 1918, p. 325; Baker, *Wilson*, Vol. 8, pp. 480.

57 The transcript of this extraordinary talk did not surface until the 1950s. See John L. Snell, *Document - Wilson on Germany and the Fourteen Points*, in: *Journal of Modern History*, Dec. 1954, pp. 364-69.

58 *FRUS 1918*, Supp. 1, Vol. 1, pp. 380-81; discussion in: Rudin, *Armistice*, pp. 134-62.

on your knees."⁵⁹ Wilson, who usually kept his own counsel, felt puzzled enough to consult his cabinet. His son-in-law, Secretary of the Treasury McAdoo, backed by a few others, emphasized the financial drain entailed by continuation of the war; otherwise, the President obtained little satisfaction. Secretary of the Interior Lane wanted no negotiation „until Germany was across the Rhine“. Postmaster-General Burleson feared that Foch, Haig, and Pershing might prove too lenient. Wilson's observation that the Allies were „reaching out for more than they should have in justice“ fell on unreceptive ears.⁶⁰

Despite these troubles within his official family, the President crafted a reply to Germany that contained enough convolutions and obscurities to meet both his diplomatic and his political needs. On the one hand, he agreed to transmit the correspondence to the Allies and to invite the generals to submit proposals for an armistice. On the other, he insisted that, if the United States had to deal with „military masters“ and „monarchical autocrats“, it would demand „not peace negotiations, but surrender“⁶¹.

Wilson's third reply split the country along party lines. Roused to his highest peak of fury, Roosevelt shot off a public telegram to Congressional leaders: „Let us dictate peace by the hammering guns and not chat about peace to the accompaniment of the clicking of typewriters.“⁶² But Democrats breathed easier. Senator Hitchcock interpreted the note as giving the Germans a choice between democratization and terms of peace, or unconditional surrender if they retained „the old form of militaristic government“. The *New York Times* believed that the note meant „surrender in either case, on either hand“⁶³.

Wilson now pressed his advantage with a call for the election of a Democratic Congress. The return of a Republican majority, he said, would be „interpreted on the other side of the water as a repudiation of my leadership“⁶⁴. The Republicans counterattacked. Will Hays, chairman of the Republican National Committee, declared that Wilson stood „for the unconditional surrender to himself of the Republican party, of the country, of the Allies—all to him, as the sole arbiter and master of the destinies of the world“. Roosevelt rejoiced that „Judas“ had abandoned his „treacherous make-believe of nonpartisanship“, and senatorial heavyweights warned darkly that the idea of peace without victory „remained in the President's mind“⁶⁵.

Somehow, the controversy fizzled out in the final week before the election. A kaleidoscope of stirring events now followed one another: the dismissal of Ludendorff, the hasty adoption of parliamentary reforms in Berlin, the collapse of Austria-Hungary, the abject surrender of Turkey. Senator Key Pittman (D-NEV) made a statement, „not issued without sanction from the White House“, to the effect that the war had been „practically won“. The German people, he predicted, would bow to Wilson's ultimatum, depose the Hohenzollerns, establish a democracy, and accept terms of armistice as prescribed by Pershing, Haig, and Foch. Only one issue remained. Did the people trust Wilson or Lodge to finish the job?⁶⁶

We now know that Colonel House played hardball in order to bind the Allied premiers in Paris to the White House peace program. Wilson provided categorical instructions: „My deliberate judgment is that our whole weight should be thrown for an armistice that will prevent

⁵⁹ *Cong. Record*, 65 Cong., 2 Sess., 21 Oct. 1918, p. 11402; *New York Times*, 18-23 Oct. 1918; *Literary Digest*, 2 Nov. 1918, p. 7.

⁶⁰ Baker, *Wilson*, Vol. 8, pp. 500-501; Edward N. Hurley, *The Bridge to France*, Philadelphia 1927, pp. 322 ff.; David F. Houston, *Eight Years with Wilson's Cabinet*, Garden City 1926, Vol. 1, pp. 308-17; Anne W. Lane and Louise H. Wall (eds.), *The Letters of Franklin K. Lane*, Boston 1922, pp. 293-96.

⁶¹ *Foreign Relations 1918*, Supp. I, Vol. 1, pp. 381-83.

⁶² Elting E. Morison (ed.), *Roosevelt Letters*, Vol. 8, pp. 1380-81; *New York Times*, 25 Oct. 1918.

⁶³ *New York Times*, 24-25 Oct. 1918.

⁶⁴ Shaw, *Messages and Papers*, Vol. 1, pp. 557-59; Adler, *The Congressional Election of 1918*, in: *South Atlantic Quarterly*, Oct. 1937, p. 449.

⁶⁵ Hays statement in: *New York Times*, 28 Oct. 1918; Roosevelt to Lodge, 25 Oct. 1918, in: *Roosevelt-Lodge Correspondence*, Vol. 2, p. 542; senatorial debate in: *Cong. Record*, 65 Cong., 2 Sess., 28 Oct. 1918, pp. 11485-503.

⁶⁶ *New York Times*, 27 Oct. 1918; *Cong. Record*, 65 Cong., 2 Sess., 28 Oct. 1918, pp. 11491-96.

a renewal of hostilities by Germany which will be as moderate and reasonable as possible within those limits, because it is certain that too much success or security on the part of the Allies will make a genuine peace settlement exceedingly difficult.“⁶⁷ When the premiers declined to endorse the Fourteen Points, House retorted that if they persisted in their objections, he would advise the president to ask the Congress whether the United States should continue to fight for the aims of Britain, France, and Italy. House wired his chief suggesting that he „quietly diminish the transport of troops“ and begin to „shut down upon money, food, and raw materials“. Wilson cabled back: „I am proud of the way you are handling things.“⁶⁸ The Allied premiers executed a strategic retreat, and House reported with satisfaction: „I consider that we have won a great diplomatic victory. This has been done in the face of a hostile and influential junta in the United States and the thoroughly unsympathetic personnel constituting the Entente governments.“⁶⁹

Administration spokesmen provided quite another spin at home. On 31 October the press reported that different points of view had arisen in Paris natural to the immensity of the interests involved, but these had disappeared under friendly examination. By election eve „complete unity and cordiality“ were said to prevail.⁷⁰ Election Day newspapers printed the drastic terms of the Austrian armistice. Authoritative sources stated that equally categorical terms for Germany would follow. Senator Thomas exulted on behalf of the Democratic Congressional campaign committee: „Who now doubts that the president has at all times required unconditional surrender? Who now dares to challenge his wisdom or his purposes?“⁷¹

The Republicans won the election anyway, but not because of differences over strategy for ending the war. In both parties, candidates betraying an insufficiently belligerent temper had lost their footing in the spring primaries. By mid-October, the National Security League could boast that over ninety percent of the candidates answering its loyalty questionnaire had pledged themselves to unconditional surrender.⁷² The results at the polls turned instead on a host of economic, social, and sectional issues. Western farmers resented the fact that the Democratic Congress had fixed a maximum price for wheat while allowing Southern cotton to find its level on the free market. Woman’s suffrage, prohibition, tax policy and the tariff, even the postal zoning laws played a role in local races.⁷³

Whatever the explanation, the Republicans would have a two-vote majority in the new Senate and a forty-five seat margin in the House. Senator Lodge would become chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee. And Wilson would ignore Republican proposals for peacemaking at his peril. Almost the entire press interpreted the Armistice as tantamount to unconditional surrender. „The utter submission and stripping of the Hun [...] a surrender unexampled in the history of the world“ - these were typical newspaper reports.⁷⁴ Peace came, wrote an exultant Theodore Roosevelt, „not on Mr. Wilson’s Fourteen Points, but on General Foch’s twenty-odd points, which had all the directness, the straightforwardness, and the unequivocal clearness which the Fourteen Points strikingly lacked.“⁷⁵

Wilson and his domestic opponents continued to talk at cross-purposes. Underestimating sentiment for a harsh peace, the president expressed a quasi-theological certainty that his critics were out of touch with the forward-looking masses of the world. „There is a great voice

67 Baker, *Wilson*, Vol. 8, p. 521.

68 Seymour, *Intimate Papers*, Vol. 4, pp. 119-88; Baker, *Wilson*, Vol. 8, pp. 529-39; *FRUS 1918*, Supp. I, Vol. 1, pp. 460-62.

69 Baker, *Wilson*, 8:554.

70 *New York Times*, 31 Oct., 3 Nov. 1918.

71 *New York Times*, 5 Nov. 1918.

72 *New York Times*, 15 Oct. 1918. See the similar results of the American Defense Society poll, in: *ibid.*, 28 Oct. 1918.

73 Livermore, *The Sectional Issue in the 1918 Congressional Elections*, in: *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, June 1948, pp. 29-60; Adler, *The Congressional Election of 1918*, in: *South Atlantic Quarterly*, Oct. 1937, pp. 447-65.

74 *Literary Digest*, 23 Nov. 1918, p. 12f.

75 *Kansas City Star*, 17 Nov. 1918.

of humanity abroad in the world just now which he cannot hear is deaf“, Wilson proclaimed upon his arrival in Europe. „We are not obeying the mandates of parties or of politics. We are obeying the mandates of humanity.“⁷⁶ Lodge begged to differ. He reminded his British friends of prevailing American opinion and urged them to leave no opportunity for Wilson to „play the umpire“. Lodge elaborated his concrete proposals in a memorandum for Henry White, the single non-partisan member of the American delegation. He favored a large indemnity, a long occupation of Germany as a guarantee of payment, a possible separation of the Reich into its component parts, and the cession not merely of the Corridor but also East Prussia to Poland. The controlling purpose of the peace, urged Lodge, „must be to put Germany in such a position that it will be physically impossible for her to break out again upon other nations with a war for world conquest“⁷⁷.

Wilson ignored the new Congress. Lodge would exact his revenge. Yet the issue went beyond personalities. „Underlying the whole question of the [Versailles] treaty“, Lodge would later write, „is the determination to put an end to executive encroachments and to reestablish the legislative branch of the government and its proper Constitutional power. Mr. Wilson’s comprehension of government is that of the third Napoleon, an autocrat to be elected by the people through a plebiscite and no representative bodies of any consequence in between.“⁷⁸ Lodge, despite his animus, was too kind. Like other visionaries before him, Wilson felt an inner certainty that he expressed the general will. He did not simply mold enlightened public opinion; he incorporated it. With an entirely clear conscience, the President secured a negotiated end to the war with Germany against the overwhelming sentiment of his own people. It was a famous victory. It would set the stage for his later repudiation.

⁷⁶ Shaw, *Messages and Papers*, vol. 1, pp. 590-94, 30 Dec. 1918; see also Stephen Bonsal, *Unfinished Business*, New York 1944, pp. 10, 47f.

⁷⁷ Lodge to Lord Bryce, 16 Nov. and 14 Dec. 1918, Lodge to Sir Arthur Balfour, 25 Nov. 1918, Box 50; Lodge to Henry White, 2 Dec. 1918, Box 53, Lodge Papers; also Allan Nevins, *Henry White*, New York 1930, p. 353 ff.

⁷⁸ Lodge to Lord Charnwood, 24 Jan. 1920, Box 66, Lodge Papers.

Guido Müller (Hg.)

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