
Interlude between War and Peace

THE PARIS Peace Conference of 1919, long recognized as a pivotal event of modern history, was also a milestone in the evolution of international journalism. The last assemblage to approach the magnitude of this conference was the Congress of Vienna following the Napoleonic wars. However, the modern press had yet to emerge at that time. Circumstances now were different. Since the mid-nineteenth century, both the press and public opinion had acquired new stature. The press had become a modern institution; public opinion had become an integral part of American and European political culture. At the same time interest in world news grew, a byproduct of industrialization, the communication technology that was conquering time and space, and the advent of a series of turn-of-the-century wars. World War I spurred that interest to new heights. Unprecedented in scope, it took the lives of ten million men and left millions more wounded. For four years, war news had dominated press coverage, and now news of the coming conference captured similar attention. The war left the Central Powers defeated, three empires vanished, and a fourth, the Ottoman, rapidly dissolving. The peace settlement, therefore, would have worldwide consequences. As delegations from more than thirty nations prepared to gather in Paris, newsmen found the lure of covering the conference irresistible. They anticipated that it would be a new type of conference, one of “open diplomacy,” of “open covenants of peace openly arrived at.” More than five hundred journalists (over 150 from the United States alone) soon began arriving in Paris to report these “open proceedings.”

In the two months between the armistice and the opening of the conference, Wilson remained the main focus of front-page news. His conference-related decisions in Washington followed by his preconference activities in Europe commanded editors’ daily attention. The first decision, that of declaring his intention to go to Europe to participate in negotiating the main features of the peace settlement, became an immediate public controversy. It is not known when

he arrived at that decision, but he made it known to his cabinet on the day following the armistice. Some of his own advisors, questioning the wisdom of his decision, felt it would be better for him to remain in Washington where, away from the clash of interests at the conference table, he could maintain the moral high ground and assert his influence at crucial moments. Those approving the decision thought that only Wilson himself could carry through his peace program at the conference.¹

In Paris, House was also weighing the pros and cons of having Wilson at the conference. This was a delicate task for him. He knew that Wilson wanted to attend at least the preliminary conference, but he preferred to have him remain at home.² The colonel, therefore, decided to handle the matter by indirect means. To dissuade Wilson from coming over, he used the pretext of opinion, private and public, while keeping his own opinion on the matter to himself. British attitudes toward Wilson participating in the conference being all-important, House turned to two of his confidants who were abreast of British attitudes, Frank Cobb and Sir William Wiseman. They were empathetic in their opinion that Wilson should remain in Washington. His strongest supporters, they discovered, wished him to stay at home, where he would have the advantage of detachment and of his mystique as a moral statesman standing above the intrigues and disputes of the negotiations. Cobb also reported that the British correspondents he met believed that in certain official circles there was a "keen desire to have him come" because he could be "handled with less difficulty here than in the United States."³ In his report, Wiseman stressed that in Paris Wilson would only be a negotiator among other negotiators. Admitting that the president might be successful in Paris, Wiseman believed the "odds would be enormously against that, and he would be much more likely to lose prestige and authority and be drawn into a very difficult diplomatic situation under the worst possible conditions for himself."⁴

House related these opinions to Wilson along with others he gathered in Paris. "Americans here whose opinions are of value," he told the president, "are practically unanimous in the belief that it would be unwise for you to sit in the conference." "They fear that it would involve a loss of dignity and your commanding position." He added that Premier Clemenceau, who would preside at the conference, was against having him there because "no head of state should be there." However, House assured Wilson that everyone wanted him to take part in the preliminary conferences. Such advice, soon to be repeated in the press, aroused Wilson's displeasure. The next day when House informed him that Clemenceau had told Lloyd George that it was "neither desirable nor possible" to have Wilson take part in the conference, the president responded with a stern message. The French and British leaders, he said, were trying to exclude him from the conference for fear that he "might lead the weaker nations against

them.” It was clear that the president was in no mood to have his plans thwarted, and it was also true that he would disregard unwanted advice in this case and rely on his own intuition. “It is universally expected and generally desired here,” he said, “that I attend the conference, but I believe that no one would wish me to sit by and try to steer from the outside.” Warning House to be “very shy” of advice offered by French and English leaders, he asked him to reconsider the matter and give him his “own independent judgment” on it. Wilson had forced House’s hand. Consequently, he advised the president to sail for France as planned. “When here,” he added, “you will be in a position to assess the situation properly.” Realizing that Wilson would not appreciate that ambiguity, he explained in a second message that he had “constantly contended” that the president should sit in the conference, “but [Ambassador] Sharp is practically the only one who has agreed with me.”⁵

On November 18, Wilson made his decision public. He would lead the American delegation to the conference “for the purpose of taking part in the discussion and settlement of the main features of the treaty of peace.”⁶ Since there had been speculation in the press about the possibility of his participation in the conference, the announcement was not surprising. The *Christian Science Monitor* described it as a “practical inevitability.”⁷ Nevertheless, few editors treated it lightly and most voiced strong views about it.

Considering the efforts his advisors made to dissuade him from going to Paris, the strength of press opinion approving it is surprising. One historical survey covering 168 of the nation’s most important newspapers showed that 48 percent approved his decision while only 25 percent opposed it and 27 percent remained noncommitted.⁸ It was not only Wilson’s friends in the press that backed him in this instance. His support crossed both political and geographical lines. Some regular Republican critics such as the *Rocky Mountain News* and the *Portland Morning Oregonian* joined his usual supporters such as the *Baltimore Sun* and the *Dallas Morning News* in endorsing the decision. Stressing his stature as a world figure and the moral influence he would have on the conference, they held that it was essential for him to be in Paris, where the great questions of the day would be settled. He was needed there to fight for a peace of justice rather than one of bargaining, and as the author of the set of principles designated to serve as the basis of peace, his personal leadership at the conference was desirable. His intellectual acumen, his stature among the peace-loving people of Europe, and his influence as the leading statesman of the forces of progress rounded out the reasons these newspapers gave for his presence in Paris.⁹

Opposing newspapers included several of the leading Democratic dailies such as the *New York World* and the *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, as well as established Republican critics such as the *Boston Evening Transcript* and the *St. Louis Globe Democrat*. They disapproved of his absence from Washington when

he was needed there and even questioned the constitutionality of a president leaving the country while in office. Claiming that there was no reason for him to go, they believed that his influence on the proceedings would be as great, or greater, from Washington than it would be if he were in Paris. A common argument appearing in these newspapers questioned the propriety of his attending the conference where, as president, he would outrank the other delegates. The Allies would be represented by their premiers, not their heads of state. These critics also believed his presence there would imply that the United States was seeking an importance in the negotiations beyond which its participation in the war merited. The American Expeditionary Force only arrived in mass in time to fight in the final campaigns of the war, during which time it lost, killed, and wounded about two hundred thirty-six thousand men. Britain and France, however, had experienced four years of agony and suffered losses numbering in the millions.¹⁰ The most damaging criticism, one also shared by some Allied leaders and journalists, was the claim that Wilson and his peace program had been repudiated in the recent election and, as a consequence, he had lost the authority to speak for the American people. Finally there was an underlying but sometimes expressed theme mainly in Republican newspapers that he would seek a lenient peace with Germany.¹¹

Opposition to the president's decision could become personal. "He was unable to resist the unique opportunity to hear the plaudits of the world," charged the *Philadelphia North American*. Such barbs hit home more than their authors knew, for according to Tumulty, the thought that some people felt he was going abroad to promote himself or to gain political advantage was the only thing that distressed him about the trip.¹² This genre of criticism sometimes revealed the hatred that his bitterest opponents had for him. The *Rutland Daily Herald*, for example, described Wilson as nerve personified, the "opportunist deluxe," and the "soloist of one-man government." Charging him with "creeping megalomania," it accused him of trying to "hog the stage" like motion picture stars who cover themselves with publicity in their effort to capture the public's gaze. "Let us bow humbly to the undulations of that obtuse mentality," it concluded, "and not seek to scrutinate the inscrutable. Time enough for that in 1920."¹³ In all of these emotive attacks as well as in more moderate ones voiced elsewhere, the newspapers overlooked what was perhaps the best argument for Wilson not to go to Paris as a delegate: the fact that he lacked both the background and experience to deal with the complicated territorial questions that would come before the conference. There is nothing to suggest that he had more than a cursory knowledge of the peoples of central and southeastern Europe, nor of those who inhabited the doomed Ottoman Empire.

The president soon aroused his critics' displeasure with another decision. On November 29 he announced his selection of four peace commissioners who

would accompany him to Paris. It was one of his greatest mistakes. Colonel House and Robert Lansing were included by virtue of their positions. Henry White, a former ambassador and a Republican, and the American military representative on the Supreme War Council Gen. Tasker Bliss rounded out the delegation. It was not so much his choices that disturbed his critics, though they drew abundant fire, as it was the names missing from the list. Where were the nation's leading foreign policy experts, such as Henry Cabot Lodge and Elihu Root? Where were former president Taft and Charles Evan Hughes, Republicans who had expertise to bring to the proceedings? Joseph Tumulty and Colonel House had urged Wilson to include Root, as had Richard Hooker, whose advice Wilson often welcomed. But Hooker and other friendly editors were to be disappointed. They had no fault to find with the men named, but along with the *New York Times*, they questioned whether the president had made the "wisest possible selections." Wilson's hardest opponents in the press dismissed that type of mild rebuke. Like the Republican senators who were denouncing his selections, they were indignant about his failure to include a leading Republican or a member of the Foreign Relations Committee. They claimed the delegates failed to represent the best thought on international affairs in the country. It was a "commission of mediocrity," nothing more than a group of "peace manikins." The *Philadelphia Inquirer* berated the delegates themselves, charging that Secretary Lansing had become a mere "recording machine." It found Henry White, whose son-in-law was a German officer, "particularly obnoxious." He was, until recently, "a pro-German of the rankest breed," it complained.¹⁴

Before departing for Paris, Wilson angered his opponents yet again. His press critics had long complained, and for valid reasons, that he spoke in generalizations when discussing his peace program. If they expected him to be more explicit about his ideas in his Annual Address on December 2, they were disappointed. Wilson appeared weary as he stood before Congress, and his speech lacked his usual rhetorical polish. The Republicans sat in silence throughout his delivery, leading the *Milwaukee Journal* to say that their action fell "a little short of disrespect" and revealed "a depth of meanness" that was "incomprehensible." Regarding his reasons for going to Paris, the president said he was going there to make certain the ideas Americans fought for in France would not fall victim to false interpretation. George Harvey's response to that idea was as harsh as it was immediate. It was "pure gush," he wrote. They went to "fight for their country and fought a good fight and won, and want to see France and England get all they can get."¹⁵ Wilson's denial of information to the nation, the *New York Sun* protested, was absolute. He left "slamming the door in the faces" of the people who stood in "dumb surprise and awaiting an explanation of the errand." Friendly editors countered that Wilson had been discussing his peace principles for over a year and he could not "commit himself to details in advance" without

compromising his position at the conference. Besides, no one could interpret his ideas to the other peacemakers better than he. But that type of approval left even some liberal editors unmoved. Those at the *Nation* believed that Wilson's supporters had reason to feel "chagrin and humiliation" at being asked that the positions he would urge at the conference must "be taken on trust."¹⁶

Two days after the Annual Address, the president boarded the *George Washington* (a former German luxury liner) to sail for France. According to his secretary, when Wilson discussed the trip with him, he mused: "Well, Tumulty, this trip will either be the greatest success or the supremest tragedy in all history; but I believe in Divine Providence."¹⁷ Such faith would sustain him in either case, but at the outset it appeared that the odds for it becoming a supreme tragedy were considerable. The popular support for his peace program in Europe did not prevail in the chancelleries of government, where national interests were uppermost. More than joining the president in creating a new internationalism, the ministers were committed to defending national, imperial, and economic interests, and in some cases expansionistic ones as well. Moreover, British leaders including Lloyd George believed that Wilson's prestige had suffered irrevocable damage as the result of his rebuff in the recent election. As Viscount Esher put it, he could never "carry again the guns he carried." Furthermore, on November 27, Senator Lodge wrote an extraordinary letter to the British foreign secretary saying that Republicans would support him if he opposed Wilson regarding the League of Nations.¹⁸ One week later, on the very day that Wilson sailed, Senator Philander C. Knox introduced a resolution stating that "any project for any general league of nations should be postponed for separate consideration." Meanwhile, criticism of Wilson's trip and of the peace commissioners continued in the press, leading the *Literary Digest* to entitle its weekly press survey, "Making War On Our Chief Executive."¹⁹ Wilson, in fact, not only needed to rally press support to his cause, he also had to find a way to repair his personal relations with the correspondents. At this momentous time, he had offered them no guidance, sought no interaction with them, and held no press conference. His relations with them had reached their nadir.

That changed the moment he stepped aboard the *George Washington*. He had invited three newspaper men (Robert Bender of the United Press, John J. Nevin of the International News Service, and L. C. Probert of the Associated Press) to accompany him on the voyage, and even before the ship moved away from her pier, he asked them to join him in his office. The meeting itself was short and candid but much appreciated. In a second meeting, he shared with them his view on the pressing issues of peace. Afterwards, Dr. Cary Grayson, Wilson's personal physician who would be Tumulty's eyes at the conference, reported to him that Wilson had told the correspondents all that he knew about his peace plans. Moreover, when meeting them on deck, Wilson would stop and chat with

them and sometimes regale them with one of the humorous stories he loved to recount. "The newspaper men are simply carried away with enthusiasm for his ideas and plans," Grayson told Tumulty. "He has shown them on this trip more friendly and good feeling than he has for some time."²⁰

While at sea, the correspondents also saw a side of Wilson rarely known to the public, one revealed by his winning ways with the ship's crew. The on-board newspaper, the *Hatchet*, praised the camaraderie he had with them, describing it as acting in "true democratic fashion."²¹ When encountering the sailors on deck, he gave them a hardy wave, and when close enough, a friendly greeting. He visited every part of the ship and consented to be photographed with crewmembers, including shots with the "black gang" from the engine room. In the evenings, he often joined the crew to watch a motion picture. One evening he attended their performance of a musical comedy and was noted to be laughing "his head off." Another evening he joined the sailors for a song service. Everyone sang as the words of the hymns were flashed on the screen. Mrs. Wilson's secretary, Edith Bentham, was present and said that the president sang with "great gusto" and afterwards scored a "ten strike" when he asked the captain if he might shake hands with the assembled ship's company before retiring. The final night of the voyage, after the evening's film, a group of fifty bluejackets gathered together to sing "God Be With You Till We Meet Again." Visibly moved, Wilson joined them afterwards in a rendition of "Auld Lang Syne."²² Such good fellowship could only be, as he liked to say, "a tonic for him," and he arrived at Brest with his spirits high and anxious for negotiations to begin.

He received additional "tonic" when he landed and later when he entered Paris. Members of the American delegation said they had never seen anything like it. When his train arrived at Paris's Luxembourg station, Wilson found it festooned with bunting and flags, its platform, steps, and reception room filled with clusters of roses and green ferns. Outside, amid the boom of cannons, huge crowds surged forth to catch a glimpse of the American president. His entourage passed along streets lined with tens of thousands of people and bedecked with flags and banners proclaiming "HONOR TO WILSON, THE JUST." An estimated one hundred thousand cheering people crowded into the Place de la Concorde to greet him as his carriage passed through en route to his residence. The noise was deafening. President Poincaré said that no previous visitor to Paris had received such a welcome, and Wilson felt this outpouring of enthusiasm and friendship presaged "the prospects of common counsel."²³ The acclaim was contagious. In American theaters, audiences applauded scenes of Wilson's arrival in Paris as newsreels showed him riding in an open carriage, tipping his high hat to the cheering crowds, behind whom huge signs proclaimed "VIVE WILSON."²⁴

After surveying the press's treatment of Wilson's welcome, Tumulty reported to him that newspapers spoke "flatteringly" about it.²⁵ Had he wished, Tumulty

could have cited almost any newspaper in the country to support that observation. Headlines proclaiming “2 MILLION CHEER WILSON IN PARIS” and “PARIS GIVES WILSON WELCOME OF UNEXAMPLED WARMTH,” and others expressing the same upbeat message appeared in newspapers from coast to coast. Republican newspapers were often no less exuberant in highlighting his triumph. Just as important was the optimistic tone of news reports coming out of Paris in the ensuing weeks. Judging from them, one could gather that Wilson, Lloyd George, and George Clemenceau were in agreement on the issues of peace and that snarls were dissipated and complexities resolved in preconference discussions. The *New York Times* would soon report, “British and French Feel That Talk of Friction Is Baseless.”²⁶

However, shortly after his arrival in Paris, President Raymond Poincaré of France entertained Wilson at a luncheon and there revealed to him the depth of French bitterness toward Germany. Poincaré spoke of the pillage and destruction that Germany had rained on his country and told Wilson, “Whatever precautions we may take, nobody, alas! can assert that we shall save humanity forever from further wars!”²⁷ His statement pierced to the heart and challenged Wilson’s peace principles. Several days later, speaking at the Sorbonne, where he received an honorary degree, Wilson answered Poincaré with an assertion of his own: “The triumph of freedom in this world means that spirits of that sort now dominate the world,” he declared. “There is a great wind of moral force moving through the world, and every man who opposes himself to that wind will go down in disgrace. The task of those who are gathered here, or will presently be gathered here, to make the settlements of this peace is greatly simplified by the fact that they are masters of no one; they are the servants of mankind, and if we do not heed the mandates of mankind we shall make ourselves the most conspicuous and deserved failures in the history of the world.”²⁸ Despite the rosy portrayals of the preconference discussion in Paris in the American press, friction was present among the peacemakers, and it would grow.

Meanwhile, the correspondents in Paris anticipated fruitful days of newsgathering to come. But there were obstacles to overcome. One had been removed prior to Wilson’s departure for Europe. Following the armistice, the government discontinued voluntary censorship of the press that prevailed during the war and all press censorship of cables and mails. However, when Wilson announced that the government would take over the American marine cable systems and place them under Postmaster General Burleson’s control, fears spread that control of the cables would be used to censor news from the conference.²⁹ There was “not a paper in this country” that would not construe this “as an attempt to *control the news* of the peace conference,” the Chicago newspaperman Herman Kohlsaet warned Wilson. However, Creel and Burleson allayed those fears with assurances that there would be a full and free flow of news from the conference.³⁰ Meanwhile,

Wilson and House took steps to have the British and French governments suspend their censorship of American press dispatches, an action the British advocates of an open conference used in their fight against censorship.³¹ Wilson's insistence on an open conference had its effect, and by the end of November, House could inform Wilson that both British and French governments had abolished political censorship of press dispatches to the United States. Wilson, in turn, informed Congress in his Annual Address that there was now "no censorship whatever exercised at this end except upon attempted trade communications with enemy countries."³² Once the proceedings began, the French would again attempt to impose censorship on conference news. But for the moment Wilson had prevailed, and a major obstacle to the correspondent's work had been removed.

Wilson also helped the correspondents by having George Creel assist them in reaching Paris and establishing working arrangements for them upon their arrival. Creel managed to hurry along the processing of the correspondents' passports, a move that allowed them to be in France when the president arrived. With Wilson's approval, he had a ship, the *Orizaba*, made available for their transport to France. Figures vary as to how many correspondents went over on the *Orizaba*, but well more than one hundred took advantage of the opportunity. Once the journalists were there, the transmission of news back to the United States posed a major problem, but Creel's Committee on Public Information (CPI) offered assistance. Walter S. Rogers, director of the CPI's Foreign Wireless and Press Service, agreed to use its cable facilities to transmit formal statements such as Wilson's speeches and other textual matter to the three press associations in New York, thus lightening the correspondents' cable load. Through negotiations with the French government, he was also able to offer the correspondents three thousand five hundred words daily by wireless transmission free of charge, to be allotted by the correspondents' own press committee. Only noninterpretative news could be transmitted in this matter, and the wordage allowed was minimal when parceled out. Still it was of some help. Finally, the CPI provided a workroom for the correspondents at 4 Place de la Concorde next to the Hotel Crillon, where the American delegation was headquartered and where its press bureau would be located. These arrangements concluded the work of the CPI at the peace conference.³³

Once in Paris, Wilson acted promptly to organize the delegation's press relations. "I have been thinking a great deal lately about the contact of the Commission with the public through the press and particularly about the way in which the commission should deal with the newspaper men," he told House and the other commissioners on December 17. His plan, soon to be implemented, was to have the four commissioners hold brief daily meetings with the correspondents at 10:30 each morning. Hoping for contact with the president himself, that was not what they wanted to hear. While Wilson was yet at sea, the trade journal *Edi-*

tor and Publisher had announced that he planned to hold daily conferences with the correspondents during his "entire absence."³⁴ There is no evidence that he planned anything of the kind. But rumors of this sort no doubt led correspondents to expect more of Wilson than was possible for him, either for practical or physical reasons, to deliver. However, his commitment to open diplomacy justified their expectation to have some contact with him. The second part of Wilson's plans for the press was the establishment of a press bureau. To head it he designated Ray Stannard Baker, who had been in Europe for the better part of the year. It will be recalled that he was close to Colonel House and had reported to both House and Wilson on European opinion and movements. He held the president's confidence, as Wilson said, to a "very high degree." It would be Baker's responsibility to "act with the newspaper men as an interpreter of America's position at the conference and to look after the publicity of the conference." As he set himself to organizing his work and to opening the Press Bureau, the correspondents' daily visits to the office began. But there was little real news to report once the president settled in, nor was there much to report from the Hotel Murat, Wilson's first residence in Paris, where newsmen watched visitors come and go, hoping to glean from them some newsworthy story.³⁵ Consequently, at this point, the factual bases of many of the dispatches they sent must be questioned.

Aside from what could be gathered about Wilson's activities in Paris, the first major news story to come out during the preconference period had nothing to do with American correspondents. On December 18, the president granted an exclusive interview to Lord Northcliffe's London *Times*, despite his dislike of the press baron. He considered "the Napoleon of Fleet Street" no better than William Randolph Hearst. The idea of an interview originated with Sir William Wiseman, House's frequent confidant. He informed House that recent statements and articles in American newspapers about freedom of the seas, and particularly about increasing the size of the US Navy, had created a bad impression in England. Believing that some way had to be found to reassure the British about Wilson's intentions and to check the growth of ill feeling toward the United States, he suggested the president grant an interview to the *Times*. It could pay tribute to the British war effort and assure Britain of American friendship.³⁶ House agreed and now had the unpleasant task of carrying that suggestion to Wilson, who was known to resist granting interviews. In his diary, House explained how he won Wilson's consent by arguing that "Lloyd George had been telling the English people things about him that were untrue" and he wanted him to use the interview "to brand them as untrue."³⁷ The diary offers no further comment on what passed between them in this discussion, but they both understood that an Anglo-American rift had to be avoided at all costs. They knew that without British support there was little hope that Wilson could prevail against Clemenceau at the conference.

It is sometimes claimed that Northcliffe conducted the interview himself.³⁸ Although he wanted to conduct it himself, Wiseman persuaded him that it would be a mistake to do so on the grounds that it would create an undesirable sensation.³⁹ Upon publication, it was attributed to George Adam, the Paris correspondent for the London *Times*, but although Wilson approved it after making some changes, House's secretary and son-in-law Gordon Auchincloss was its main author. Moreover, Stephen Bonsal, another of House's advisors, claimed "in fact we all had a whack at it."⁴⁰ Regardless, when the interview appeared, covering four full columns in the *Times* on December 21, it offered a complimentary description of the president as well as the reassurances Wiseman and House wanted. It presented Wilson not as an unyielding statesman out to force his views on the conference but as an unpretentious leader with many endearing human qualities who wished beyond all else to cooperate with the Allies in re-ordering world affairs. However, the most important statement in the interview was Wilson's comment that the American people were "deeply appreciative" of the role the British navy played in winning the war. Implicit in that statement was the idea that he might be flexible in interpreting freedom of the seas in the settlement. Apparently Northcliffe believed that was what he meant, for he commanded the *Times* to print an editorial accompanying the interview thanking Wilson for "his appreciation of the special international questions which arise from our peculiar position as an 'Island Empire.'" Northcliffe knew that Wilson and House had given him a great journalistic coup, and he was profuse in thanking House "for securing for my 'Times' the honour of the interview with the president."⁴¹

The receipt of that honor may help to explain Northcliffe's next moves, but there were other factors behind them. He was disturbed not only by the delicate nature of Anglo-American relations but also by the fear that Lloyd George had snubbed the president by failing to go to Paris to meet him. In fact, the press lord had come to believe that the prime minister was evading the main issues of peace in his current electioneering. Northcliffe wanted to bring pressure to bear on him. After the tumultuous reception Wilson received in France, which Northcliffe and House believed had "changed the political sentiment, even in government circles, for the better," they felt that, if the British people could match that ovation, Lloyd George would not dare oppose his policies at the Peace Conference.⁴² Consequently, the press baron's first move was to grant an interview to Charles Grasty of the *New York Times* in which he described Wilson's extraordinary popular reception in France and the reason for it. "The feeling is universal that gratitude is due to the man who is about to set up a League of Nations to end war," Northcliffe explained. He predicted that in England, which had lost nearly one million men in the war, a similar popular response to his presence at the peace negotiations would be forthcoming.⁴³

Wilson was “immensely pleased” by the article.⁴⁴ So was the colonel. “There is nothing that could be better from our viewpoint,” he noted. “It will make opposition to the League of Nations sick at heart, and it will help make American people understand the need for it.”⁴⁵ Northcliffe did not let his campaign rest with the interview. He followed it with a great reception at the Hotel Ritz in Paris for American journalists. In his welcoming speech, he assured them that when they accompanied Wilson on his anticipated visit to England, they would witness “the greatest welcome ever accorded to any foreigner coming to England.” A spirit of Anglo-American friendship ran through his comments as he expressed hope that out of conversations beginning in London, “the basis of the League of Nations would be formed.”⁴⁶

Northcliffe’s optimism about the visit appeared well founded when Wilson arrived in England on December 26. From the moment the king met him at Charing Cross Station to escort him through the cheering throngs to Buckingham Palace, the rousing ovations raised by unprecedented crowds testified to his popularity among the people. The British press daily applauded the president during his stay. Even the Conservative *Daily Telegraph* proclaimed his “conquest of London and England.”⁴⁷ Editors vied with one another to describe the appealing human qualities he displayed in his public appearances. A. G. Gardiner, his most enthusiastic supporter in the British press, had this to say about Wilson after he received the Freedom of London award at the Guildhall: “He was the kind of man one would want on his side in a fight.” His face was “masterful and decisive”; his smile, “spacious.” It was a smile that exhaled “good humor like a benediction,” but behind that smile was “hard, uncompromising stuff.”⁴⁸ The *Daily Telegraph* spoke of his force of character tempered by his genuine humanity.⁴⁹

On December 28, Wilson left for Carlisle to visit the birthplace of his mother and the church that his grandfather once served. He insisted his visit there was that of a private citizen, not as a head of state, and the city’s officials, respecting his wishes, kept their greeting formalities simple. However, he experienced memorable moments while away from London. One was in Manchester, home of British liberalism, when Wilson met with C. P. Scott, the editor who made the *Manchester Guardian* a force for liberalism on both sides of the Atlantic. They talked for an hour about a wide range of pressing concerns, including Russia, Germany, and the League of Nations. Concerned about the fate of the League, Wilson feared that the belligerent mood expressed in the recent British election produced an atmosphere inhospitable to its creation. Scott reassured him that the British people were on his side and encouraged the president to appeal to them. Wilson said he intended to do precisely that if he encountered insurmountable obstacles in the peace negotiations. As Scott was leaving the room, he turned to Dr. Grayson and said, “I think the President is the greatest man in the world; he is the greatest man I have ever met.”⁵⁰

A group of about forty American correspondents accompanied Wilson to England. The ones Gordon Auchincloss chatted with on the way over were full of complaints about their treatment. "I am sick to death of them all," he noted in his diary, "and I hope to heaven I shall never be called upon again to go on a trip with such a crowd."⁵¹ They had reason to be disappointed about the scarcity of news in Paris once they reported the fanfare accompanying Wilson's arrival. In England, however, there would be abundant news to fill their dispatches, although little of it penetrated the surface of events. They wrote about his public appearances, his meetings with the royal family, and his discussions with Lloyd George and other political leaders and about the outpouring of popular enthusiasm for him. Aside from accounts of his speeches, most of their dispatches remained descriptive. They covered his triumphs but little of the reservations appearing in British newspapers regarding his peace program. However, they could see that there was something special about Wilson's connection with the British people, especially the Liberals and Laborites among them. This, too, could be found in the correspondents' dispatches. In a letter to his wife, veteran Associated Press reporter E. M. Hood wrote, "There can be no question of the hold he has taken on the imagination and hearts of the common people as well as of the aristocracy. . . . Honestly I believe he is more popular than their own king."⁵²

Oswald Garrison Villard was present when the president spoke in Manchester. Writing twenty years later, he still recalled that meeting.

In all my journalistic experience I have never attended a meeting so moving and reverential as that in the historic Manchester Free Trade Hall on December 30 [1918]. . . . I am sure that if it had been Christ Himself returning to earth, His reception could not have been more impressive or awe-inspiring. When the great crowd rose to its feet as Wilson appeared, there was an atmosphere around me—yes, all through the hall—that defied description. Reverence, profound gratitude, the feeling that there stood the savior of the world, the creator of a new and better universe—all these feelings were expressed on every countenance. Never have I noted elsewhere such a reverential spirit outside a church. It would have taken very little more for that audience to have gone down on its knees to Wilson.⁵³

The president's speech on this occasion was far from his best, but that was of no consequence to the people. They had come to honor the man himself.

Wilson's triumph, however, was not complete. Reservations the British held about his Point II, "Absolute freedom of navigation upon the seas, outside territorial waters, alike in peace and war," continued to disturb them—at all levels. The long-serving *Chicago Daily News's* London correspondent Edward Price Bell's observation that "public opinion here was, as it always is, hypersensitive to the question of sea-power" rang true.⁵⁴ The Conservative British press made this

clear before Wilson's arrival. It considered the right to impose a wartime blockade, as the British interpreted it, as sacrosanct. J. L. Garvin wrote in his weekly leading article, which was considered indispensable reading for Conservatives and Liberals alike, that "no British Government could give in on that point and survive." To a lesser yet real degree, Conservative editors, while admitting the attractiveness of a league of nations in principle, questioned how it would function in practice.⁵⁵ Wilson's interview with the *Times* and now his tour of England had softened criticism of his peace principles in the British press, but they failed to remove a lingering apprehension about them, especially his ideas about freedom of seas. On this point, J. A. Spender, the voice of the Liberal Party, joined them. Regarding the League, some members of the British Cabinet considered it an irrelevancy. Conservative editors were more polite about it, but they remained doubtful that it would put an end to war when so many previous attempts to do so had failed.⁵⁶

Criticism of Wilson's idealistic policies in England emanated from yet other sources. John L. Balderston, a noted correspondent who spent the war years in London, ending up as the last head of CPI operations there, found that Americans in Britain who truckled to the Tories were an insidious source of anti-Wilsonianism. "These malcontents," he wrote, "were never more active than at present. The worst of them is Wade Chance . . . a *New York Tribune* correspondent . . . who represents himself as an agent of Col. Roosevelt and as such is being received by everybody." Balderston said that Chance backed up his personal attacks on Wilson with claims that his peace program was incited by Germany. That idea was also part of the propaganda the British government was circulating. Only a short while before, Frank Cobb told House that "by virtue of this propaganda most Englishmen really believe that in demanding freedom of the seas the President has been tricked into supporting a German proposal."⁵⁷ Just how far such ideas took root cannot be known, but news damaging to Wilson's position could be found in a variety of reports in the British press. Early in the new year, Colonel House complained that both British and French newspapers were "filled with news indicating that our press, public men and the people themselves are not in accord with the President's views, and wish the Allies to make the kind of peace that they . . . think best."⁵⁸ That was, of course, the argument championed by Roosevelt, and it no doubt influenced his many friends in England. It was true that Wilson had many supporters in England, particularly among the Liberal editors, and that his visit there proved his popularity among the masses. But it was also true that there were other forces at work anxious to direct opinion against him.

After visiting England, it was impossible for Wilson to avoid going to Italy, where adulation for him peaked. His schedule afforded little breathing space. He met the king and the Italian cabinet, and at Tumulty's urging he became

the first American president to visit Pope Benedict XV. He addressed the Italian parliament, visited famous historical shrines in Rome, and met wounded Italian soldiers in a hospital established in a wing of the Quirinal Palace. He also met with Leonida Bissolati, a founding father of Italy's Socialist Party and a war hero. Crowds everywhere cheered him and strained to glimpse him passing by. "As far as the eye could see men, women and children were jammed in the roadways," Dr. Grayson noted. Crowds filled every inch of the large square around the palace to cheer Wilson as he greeted them from the palace balcony. The scene was repeated in Genoa, Milan, and Turin. In Milan thousands of soldiers were unable to contain the enthusiastic throngs that burst through the lines to reach the palace where Wilson was staying. Years later, Richard Oulahan was asked to name the "most impressive or inspiring" sight he had ever witnessed. It was, he said, Wilson's visit to Milan and the exuberant greeting he received there. "I doubt if anybody ever before had seen Woodrow Wilson as we saw him on that occasion. Certainly never since has he appeared as he appeared then. Cheer after cheer went up. 'Wilson, God of Peace' shouted by men and shrilled by women punctuated the cheering." Forgetting his poise for once, the president began throwing kisses to the people and beating time to the band playing in his honor. Oulahan was not the only one to acknowledge the uniqueness of this event. He noted that Wilson himself described it "as the most spontaneous and inspiring [one] in all his experience."⁵⁹

Nevertheless, Wilson's popularity with the Italian people caused unease among the country's leaders. After welcoming ceremonies at the Quirinal Palace, Wilson and his entourage attended a luncheon with the king and queen at the Royal Villa. When Premier Orlando arrived, he announced that a group of newspapermen had requested to see the president and that he was expected to speak to a crowd gathered at the Victor Immanuel II Memorial. Foreign Minister Sidney Sonnino, a diplomat of the *realpolitik* school, sent word that it would be "impudent" either for the newspapermen to expect to meet the president or for a crowd to expect him to speak at the memorial. Wilson disagreed. He insisted on meeting the newspapermen as soon as he returned to the palace, which he did, but he did not fare as well in his efforts to greet the crowd at the memorial. His hosts promised to drive him at least near enough to the memorial square to allow him to wave to them while en route to address Parliament. That did not happen. Although a huge crowd had assembled there after the newspaper announcement that he would greet them at the square, the presidential procession took an alternate route. An estimated fifty thousand people were left disappointed. The Italian politicians were trying "to keep the President from the people," Grayson cabled Tumulty.⁶⁰

En route back to Paris, Wilson invited Robert Bender, John J. Nevin, and L. C. Probert, the three correspondents who conferred with him on board the *George*

Washington, to join him. He wanted “to match minds” with them about the reception in Italy. According to Dr. Grayson’s notes on the meeting, Wilson was confident that the Italian people were behind the League as a means of preventing another war like the one they had just experienced. When the conversation turned to Italy’s territorial demands, the president admitted that Sonnino was determined to uphold the Treaty of London’s territorial rewards to Italy. He also admitted that during his trips to Genoa, Milan, and Turin, numerous propaganda leaflets demanding Dalmatia and Fiume were dropped on his carriage. Nevertheless, despite those incidents and the attitude of the Italian statesmen, he believed the masses were with him. Talks he had with ordinary people during his Italian travels convinced him that they “were willing to make sacrifices if they felt it would insure a lasting peace.” In a talkative mood, the president allowed the conversation to drift as he discussed the League and other matters. But the bulk of his comments centered on Italy and the terms he expected the Italian delegates to demand at the conference.⁶¹

It is tempting to think of his visits to England and Italy as needless junkets when his own people were anxious to have peace made as soon as possible. However, it would have been awkward for him to decline invitations to visit those countries whose press had raised such high hopes of his coming. The conference, moreover, could hardly begin before results of the British general election were known, and they could not be counted until December 28.⁶² Time also had to be allowed for delegations from sometimes distant nations to gather in Paris. While Republican editors were quick to attribute the delay in opening the conference to Wilson, Democratic editors had a different concern. They worried that the rousing ovations Wilson received in England and Italy, following the French reception, might lead him to overestimate support for his program. The *Philadelphia Public Ledger’s* Herbert Bruce Brougham was among those who shared their concern, and he warned Wilson not to be deceived by the adulation he was receiving. The editor thought there was dubious intent behind it, believing it a ploy to wean Wilson away from his plans for the League. Wilson assured Brougham that he had “not been deceived by the acclaim,” but he would have been less than human had he not felt that the crowd’s rousing cheers were an indication of the great influence he had with people in the Allied countries, perhaps greater than was the case. Historians weighing the pros and cons of these tours have often concluded that they were a waste of time or that they fell short of substantive achievement, but in reaching any assessment of them, Tumulty’s advice to Wilson is difficult to dismiss. The League could not be established, he said, unless the president had “the popular sentiment throughout Europe” behind him.⁶³ For this brief historical moment, that sentiment was with him. He had touched the hearts and raised the hopes of millions for the coming peace. How those hopes might be channeled no one

could say, but at this point Wilson and Tumulty were pleased with the outcome of the president's "junkets."

They were also pleased with the tours' impact on American opinion. As the first American president to visit Europe while in office, and for such a momentous occasion, Wilson was making news on a grand scale in printed media as well as in newsreels and news films.⁶⁴ The films were an immense success. Audiences cheered as he appeared on screen. Meanwhile, editors broadcasted his triumphs from city to city. Wilson dominated the front pages, crowding out press reports about his Republican opponents. News of the president's meeting with King George in Buckingham Palace, of his meeting with the pope in Rome, and of his discussions with British and Italian leaders resonated with Americans. It was transforming opinion. Tumulty cabled Wilson, "The attitude of the whole country toward the trip has changed. Feeling universal that you have carried yourself magnificently through critical situations with prestige and influence greatly enhanced here and abroad." Frank Cobb agreed and wrote to House, "Opposition to the President's going to Europe has largely subsided. There has been a great change in public opinion, owing to the wonderful way in which he had handled himself." These two veteran interpreters of press and public opinion had reason to feel optimistic, for judging from the recent tone of press comment on Wilson, the tide was turning in his favor. Even a persistent critic of Wilson's such as *Leslie's*, the mass circulating weekly newspaper, admitted that America rejoiced "over the splendid welcome their President has received abroad," adding that it was not only a tribute to him but also to the nation's contributions and sacrifices toward winning the war.⁶⁵

No less important to Wilson was the growing support at home for the League of Nations. The leading liberal journals, despite their disagreement with him over the continuing intervention in Russia, were rallying behind him as the one leader capable of driving the League to fruition. The *New Republic*, the *Nation*, the *Independent*, the *Survey*, the *World Tomorrow*, and the *Public* led the chorus demanding its creation. The president was "in for the fight of his life," the important freelance publicist and League enthusiast Amos Pinchot wrote to the editor of the *Baltimore Sun*. "He will need your support and mine and that of every man" who believed the war was not "fought in vain." The League of Free Nations Association (LFNA) was also ready to mobilize public support behind Wilson. In deference to his aversion to any premature publication of plans for the League, the LFNA had, since its formation in the spring, hesitated to announce its program. It now began in earnest conducting a campaign to educate the public about "American aims and policy as outlined by President Wilson," the "cornerstone of which was the League of Nations." Proponents of the League had to feel encouraged by these developments. After surveying American opinion, Secretary of War Baker wrote to Wilson assuring him that early doubts

about the League expressed in the press and in the Senate had been overcome and that the tide of opinion was now running in its favor.⁶⁶ The tide was indeed rising behind the League, but Baker was overly optimistic. The president's hardcore Republican opponents in the Senate had lost none of their anti-League zeal. That same zeal permeated the press, and it was disquieting to League supporters when voiced by militant opinion makers such as Roosevelt in the *Kansas City Star* and Hearst in his sprawling newspaper empire.⁶⁷

Some news reports about Wilson's discussions with Allied leaders were cause for frustration even among advocates of a Wilsonian peace. They dealt with his alleged abandonment of parts of his peace program. One Associated Press report, for instance, stated that he had capitulated to Britain and France on his freedom of the seas principle.⁶⁸ "In the past two weeks," Tumulty cabled Wilson, "the trend of newspaper dispatches from Paris has indicated a misunderstanding of your general attitude towards problems pending at [the] peace conference." Wilson responded, saying that each report cited was a "fable." He had "yielded nothing," nor had he been "asked to yield nothing." Since the men who sent those reports insisted on "having something to talk about whether they knew the facts or not," he said there was little he could do to check them. However, he promised Tumulty that he would do his best with the three press associations.⁶⁹ It was possible, however, that Wilson himself was, in part, responsible for the freedom of seas report, for he spoke in general terms about it and had even suggested in private to Lloyd George that the matter could be delayed until the League of Nations was established and its ability to function was proven.⁷⁰

A deeper concern troubled Tumulty and a number of pro-Wilson editors. They viewed the negotiations about to open as a struggle between the old order and the new, between forces advocating power politics, imperialism, and a punitive peace and those favoring the League, democracy, and a just peace.⁷¹ Consequently, Tumulty warned Wilson to be unyielding in the face of the powerful, retrospective forces aligned against him in Paris. Henry Herbert Brougham had been in London for the last two months, and from all he heard "high and low—but chiefly 'higher up,'" he concluded that there would be a League but it would not resemble the one Wilson envisioned. Plans were afoot, he warned Wilson, for the "exponents of privilege" to make the League an instrument for their continued imperialistic exploitation of the world's people. Frank Cobb had a more succinct message for the president. In his opinion, Clemenceau and Lloyd George were in "strict agreement," and the cards were "stacked" against him.⁷² Such apprehensions were well justified. At the Imperial War Cabinet's meeting of December 30, called to review Lloyd George's preconference meeting with Wilson, its members raised a number of questions about the president's position on the issues. One member, the Australian Prime Minister William Hughes, known for his stubbornness, was outspoken when the discussion turned to the

League. For it to endure, he said, it would have to be “a thing like the British Empire, framed in accordance with historical associations and practical needs.”⁷³ The day before, Clemenceau told the Chamber of Deputies that he favored a peace based on the balance of power complete with a system of alliances.⁷⁴ Meanwhile, the Italian leaders made no secret of their expansionistic intentions.

As the battle lines of the conference became apparent, the *Springfield Daily Republican* gave dramatic expression to the prevailing dichotomy in an editorial that Tumulty forwarded to Wilson. “Fate” had made Wilson the champion at the conference of the democratic and progressive forces of the western world opposing a “rapacious and vindictive” peace, it began. He faced a “superhuman task” of having to satisfy the hopes of liberalism while contending with “selfish, cynical and ‘practical’ forces which hitherto had never failed to shape the balance of power and dictate” terms of peace. Determined and sharing a common understanding, they would fight Wilson “to the end.” It was inevitable that they would force him to compromise some of his principles. Yet Wilson had a powerful resource of his own: the ability to rally sympathetic elements in the Allied nations to his cause. Would he prevail? It was impossible to say. The war had not ended as many statesmen wished. Revolution was rampant in Russia and Germany. Half of Europe was in “semi-chaos,” tottering on “political and social liquidation.” Conditioned by the ravages of war, expectations and passions ran high among the delegates. The stage was set for an epic drama. “On to that stage,” the *Republican* concluded, “the American president dauntlessly strides; and he goes, perhaps either to his fall or to immortal fame.”⁷⁵