The Wilson Brand of Americanism

Candid thinking is difficult at all times. It has been made infinitely more difficult for us by the great war. There are few men and women who have not been shaken more or less both morally and mentally by that catastrophe: strange things that we did not realize were in us have been brought out. It has thrown a great body of us back on this or that panacea, the thing that would have prevented or would cure. It has seemed as if in our impotency to grasp even to touch the Horror , much less influence or stay it, we have become the more obstinate, the more bitter in clinging to our own little notions. The awful suffering and destruction instead of making us more gentle, more tolerant, more human, has made us more bitter, more intolerant, more inhuman towards those who did not agree with us. This is one of the "ennobling" results of war. It shuts up the mind and the heart to all but your own group.

It is true too that our thinking has been more or less contaminated by the money that we have been making through the war. It has kept us busy, and more or less contented. We have ceased to see that there must be a moral come-back for contentment in making money out of war.

All of the influences that have made straight and continuous thinking so difficult throw into high relief any mind that has withstood them, that has been able to hold itself steady and keep alive its determination to see right. Fortunately for the country, we have had such a mind at the center of our affairs. President Wilson's mind has not only been steady through these dreadful times, but at the same time it has been flexible and constantly expanding.

He has been charged with vacillation, with shifting his opinions in dealing with foreign affairs, but when a situation is new every morning, if you are going to handle it honestly, the mind must not only

Digital Image, 2009. The Ida M. Tarbell Collection, 1890-1944, Allegheny College Pelletier Library

be alert enough, it must be open enough to seize the new developments and to fit them in with what has gone before, to get their full meaning; and to set your course according to the new knowledge and the new meaning. Mr. Wilson is by no means the only man who has revised his opinions as the situation has developed. There is Mr. Roosevelt, for instance. He thought quite differently about the matter of protesting against the invasion of Belgium in September, 1914 from what he thinks now. But, as a matter of fact, Mr. Wilson has never shifted from the start his opinion of what he believed was the true American course for us to follow. His quick demand at the breaking out of war for neutrality has never been recalled, indeed it has been held to so faithfully that each group of belligerents accuses him of favoring the other.

What Mr. Wilson has sought from the first, as I understand it, has been to preserve intact the little bundle of international laws on which civilized nations depend for safety and justice in their relations with one another. It is a thin little bundle at the best, but it is all they have been able to get together in the centuries that they have been working towards the hard task of living on the same globe in justice and peace. That little bundle would be broken into splinters now if it had not been for Woodrow Wilson. It has been a difficult and bewildering task, and people whose hearts were breaking in their passion of devotion to one or another country have not been able to see, naturally enough, what Mr. Wilson was trying to do. In their heat many have objected that he should try to adjust invasions of international law by diplomacy instead of by guns. They declared that we were dishonored

Digital Image, 2009. The Ida M. Tarbell Collection, 1890-1944, Allegheny College Pelletier Library

in the face of the world by not having made a show of force when our rights were threatened or invaded. They had come to object to a triumph won by the appeal to reason, to law, to honor, and to humanity. It is to be feared that a good many of Mr. Wilson's critics believe that no nation should yield to another for any other reason than because it has the biggest guns. For a nation to yield when there are no guns of any size, and no mention of them, they somehow feel is not regular.

What Mr. Wilson has believed, and what his critics do not see, is that there is an American point of view about this whole matter, something quite different from the European point of view. America has always held quite a different notion of the part that guns should play in settling foreign affairs from what Europe holds. She has the idea about the matter that democratic peoples everywhere have. It is never the people who want war, though the people will go to war always, when they think that their rights and opportunities are threatened. They will go to defend their country, and they will go to avenge wrongs, nevertheless, there is nothing more fundamental in the democratic creed than that leaders ought to find an honorable way of getting along without war. Certainly this has always been the idea of the masses in this country, and it is the feeling of the mass that Mr. Wilson, saturated as he is with American thinking, has shared and has tried to realize. This phrase that so many take as something ignoble, "He has kept us out of war," is a recognition that he understands the underlying notion of peoples that there are or ought to be more intelligent ways of settling difficulties than killing.

There is repeated charge against Mr. Wilson for having vacillated in Mexico, but Mr. Wilson has never vacillated for a moment in the

Digital Image, 2009. The Ida M. Tarbell Collection, 1890-1944, Allegheny College Pelletier Library

position that he took at the beginning of his administration. His notion then as now was that we could best help Mexico to find herself by allaying her old suspicions of us, by convincing her that we did not want her land, that we did want to play fair with her, that we wanted to be a good neighbor, to help her and not to exploit her. Mr. Wilson believed that this cpolicy would in the long run best protect our own citizens and their property in Mexico. He knew that we were never going to allay Mexican suspicions by displays of force. He must have known that he was undertaking something very difficult for not only the Mexicans, but a large body of Americans to understand. He knows it now at least, if he did not then. He has stuck to his idea and it certainly looks as if he were making an impression on the distracted country. It is certain that he has softened the suspicion that was widespread in South America, that our real intent in regard to Mexico was sooner or later to annex it. The A·B.C. Congress, the present discussions of the American and Mexican Commission show that there is something in Mr. Wilson's contention that countries ought to be able to get on together by the use of reason.

As I have said, there has been no vacillation in this policy. The only vacillation has been in the number of guns it was going to be necessary to drag into the process when reason weakened. Mr. Wilson has been uncertain about this at different times, largely because he could not count on the Mexicans and their varied assortment of leaders. The Mexicans no more believed that he was sincere than his opponents have believed that he was "wise." They could not "see" his point of view. They did not think it was regular. It was this that made it necessary to be ready with guns.

Digital Image, 2009. The Ida M. Tarbell Collection, 1890-1944, Allegheny College Pelletier Library

The truth is Mr. Wilson has been trying to put into these international problems of ours a spirit so different from that which usually animates international dealings that he has bewildered a good part of the world; and yet all that he has been doing is to try to realize those principles of Christianity and civilization which most of the world has declared itself in favor of. He has merely been taking those who profess democracy at their own word.

Mr. Wilson thinks with the mass on this matter, and he thinks with the mass in domestic affairs. His handling of all the various questions that have come up for legislation has had a good deal of the same spirit as his handling of foreign affairs. Take this Federal Reserve Bill. There is no question that that bill is the kind of bill that the people want. The earlier bill, framed by Mr. Aldrich, which so many of Mr. Wilson's opponents favored was not at all a polular bill. It was the kind of bill that the thing we call Wall Street wanted. Saying this is not denying credit to Mr. Aldrich for all the good work that he did in breaking ground for the bill we have. It is not saying that people who think Mr. Aldrich's bill was better than the one Mr. Wilson has given us are knaves, but it is plinting out that Mr. Wilson and his opponents see things from absolutely different points of view. He instinctively is for distributing power and opportunity. They are for concentrating them. He is not afraid of putting everything we have into the hands of all the people, indeed he feels safer if everything we have is in their hands. His opponents are honestly nervous over the distribution of the control, particularly of money. They do not think it is safe scattered all over the place where anybody who can answer to the specifications can get it and carry out his little project.

Digital Image, 2009. The Ida M. Tarbell Collection, 1890-1944, Allegheny College Pelletier Library

They somehow feel that it would be better if each one of these projects had to be passed on by themselves and denied or accepted according as they saw that it fitted into their schemes. Now there is not necessarily anything sinister or wicked about their feeling. It is simply that their minds do not grasp the idea of all people, trained and untrained, black and white, sharing in things, having a chance at leadership, a chance at money, a chance at power . They want to look over and select and fit them into the things which they, the few who have arrived, are building up. The difference is the difference between the thing we call democracy and the thing we call aristocracy.

There is the same difference in the way that Mr. Wilson looks at the tariff and the way his opponents look at it. Mr. Wilson sees the tariff as the mass of people in this country have always seen it: something which might properly enough be used to help a young industry onto its feet, to help it prove whether or not it could compete with the world. When that had been done, protection must come down. If it is continued, it becomes a privilege, and soon a burden on the mass, and so an undemocratic thing. Again and again the tariff has been forced down from the high place where the Civil War left it, by the demand of the people. The few, the same few who are now fighting Mr. Wilson have always fought to keep the duties up. They never had more distinct rebuke than in 1912. The Progressive revolt which led to Mr. Wilson's election was a revolt on the part of Republicans to put an end to further abuse of the tariff. Mr. Wilson's party has given us a tariff as nearly a direct answer to a popular demand as we have often had, and possibly could have by our byngling and unscientific way of handling the thing. Whatever its defects, its aim is democratic. It aims to cut priviliges from and not put them into the law.

Digital Image, 2009. The Ida M. Tarbell Collection, 1890-1944, Allegheny College Pelletier Library

&ere again we need not be certain a man is a knave because he believes in high and still higher protection. We need not think him a fool, because he believes it is protection which makes prosperity, although may be it is difficult not to do so. But you do know that a man that feels this way about the tariff has not a well grounded faith in free institutions, that he constitutionally is afraid of open doors and open trade.

Mr. Wilson has no fear of putting Americans up against the competition of the world. He has faith enough in them to believe that they can meet any conditions that they have to meet. He probably recognizes, though I don't know that he has ever said so, that the chief reason we cannot compete in many lines is that we have been so shielded by protection that we have been deprived of the wholesome discipline and the stimulating which open competition with other nations gives. He wants us to have that discipline and training. He wants is for the sake of all the people, not for the sake of making things safe for a few. It is a different way of looking at things. I doubt the ability of a mind that accepts the Republican interpretation of protection to understand what Mr. Wilson is driving at in any of his policies. Such a mind is too fearful of letting everybody into the game. Its horizon is too narrow. It is too concerned with its own door yard.

His handling of the railway situation was all of a piece with his handling ofboth our foreign and domestic affairs. Just as he has seemed to feel that it is his business to find a way to get on with the belligerent nations and with Mexico which is more intelligent than war, he felt that it was his business to find a way not only to prevent the strike which threatened, but to prevent future situations of that kind He refused to accept the matter as one that concerned simply the railroad managers and their employees. He refused to act merely as an arbitrator nbetween these two disputants. When his mediation which he carried on for

Digital Image, 2009. The Ida M. Tarbell Collection, 1890-1944, Allegheny College Pelletier Library

days and at a tremendous expense of vitality failed by the refusal of the railroad managers to accept one of the best balanced programs yet devised to meet the present issues in the labor problem, he refused to believe that all that could be done had been done . He brought in a third party -- the people as represeted by Congress. "The people are the ones," he said, "that have most at stake. They are the ones by whom anf for whom these disputants exist. It is for us, their representatives, to say what these disputants shall and shall not do. We will do so and so for the moment, and here is a program we will take up as quickly as possible which will give the people their proper place in these matters, and which will enable us to help settle them in the future more in accordance with reason and humanity.

This kind of thinking and dealing is Mr. Wilson's conceptinn of Americanism. He means finding through reason and cooperation ways by which that which is just and right shall be done. The things he wants done and his methods of doing them are what he conceives to be democratic and for the good al all men.

It is really amazing in the general cras and violence of the opinion which the great war has caused that a man should have been able to hold so steadily to a definite and high ideal as he has. He has kept his nerve unshaken under rep ated international shocks. Perhaps he has been able better to keep it because while waiting he worked so hard on his budget of home legislation. It is many a day since we have had so efficient a worker in the White House, one who knew better what he wanted to take up and what he felt he could put aside. His power to master intricate problems and to think clearly and finely on a great body of subjects has been an amazement to his colleagues. An awe-struck young newspaper mwn who with scores of his colleagues was kicking his heels on the outskirts of the summer White House said to me, "Why, do you know, the man goes to work at

Digital Image, 2009. The Ida M. Tarbell Collection, 1890-1944, Allegheny College Pelletier Library

five o'clock in the morning." At the same time he grunbled because he coult not get more attention. "He is always nice to us," he said, "but he don't give us time enough." There have been a good many people like my newspaper friend who have felt that Mr. Wilson was not giving them time enough, but his reason for his isolation has been his absorbtion in the country's interests and his efforts to handle them along lines which unfortunately for us have been poorly understood by many of his predecessors. It is this absorption in democratic interests and democratic ~~things~~ ways of handling them that has made it possible for Mr. Wilson so far to treat his great rival with such perfect courtesy. The only remark that I know of his making about Mr. Hughes is that he is "an honorable gentleman," which is t rue -- an honorable gentleman, who has done some splendid work for the country, who would undoubtedly make a far better president than he has campaigner; but Mr. Hughes is running for a party that does not believe in the brand of Democracy and Americanism that Woodrow Wilson offers us. They have not for a good many years fully believed in the crowd. They believe in themselves and their power to create for us lall that it is good for us to have, but they do not want us mixing in too freely, disturbing their calculations.

The swing that we are seeing toward Mr. Wilson today is a more or less belated recognition of the spirit that he has been putting into our affairs. People are understanding that he thinks like an American, not like a German, not like an Englishman; that he feels that there is such a thing in this t errible war as an American point of view . The more people look over his record, the more they feel that they are with him.

Digital Image, 2009. The Ida M. Tarbell Collection, 1890-1944, Allegheny College Pelletier Library