Ida M. Tarbell
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A Conversation with the President of the United States.

What do the people of the United States know about the man who for four years has directed their affairs? Do they see him like one of themselves, thinking, feeling, glad and sorry, hopeful and downcast, doing the things they like, hating the things they hate, working like other men? Those who are near him so see him. A few outside may have the imagination so to see him, but to the mass of the people the President is a remote figure. This is so from no fault of his. Mr. Wilson has never shunned popular contacts. He can meet people, campaign, dine out with the best of our politicians, but he cannot let these things interfere with work. If there is public business on hand which requires close thinking to bring it to a point where it will work, you cannot pry him from his desk. This is the job the people have put up to him, not dining out, not jollying crowds not showing off.

He works when there is work to do. It is decades since such floods of it have piled on a presidential desk, and such work! The peace of nations, the chances at life and liberty of men and women and little children, the preservation of the thing we call Americanism, that thing that gives us our own tang, as well as our hopes, our chance to be ourselves and not a poor imitation of other peoples. He has shut himself up to do this work. We are reaping the benefits today, and all the future will reap them for he has set both our thinking and our doing far ahead.

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Would that every man and woman in the country could sit with him for an afternoon as I recently had the privilege of doing, and read the man Wilson. He is open as a book. I have in a rather long journalistic career talked with many men of high position both in this country and Europe, with every president since and including Mr. Cleveland, with scores of our Captains of Industry, with great statesmen and scientists and writers, but never have I talked with any man who showed himself more genuine, less engaged with himself and more engaged with the affairs committed to him, more just and more gentle in his estimate of people, less bitter, emotional, prejudiced, and yet never for an instant fooled. Mr. Wilson is a fine humorous, cultivated American gentleman. He and Mrs. Wilson receive you into the temporary White House at Shadow Lawn with the simplicity and cordiality of gentle folk the world over. A President, yes, every instant; but also a gentleman, who having invited you to his table treats you as a fellow human being, interested in the things he is interested in and frankly willing to talk them over <u>with</u> you, not <u>at</u> you.

The sight of him moving so quietly yet energetically through his exacting daily program, treating the grave matters which so dominate him gravely, yet able to turn gaily and with full sense of human values to the lighter matters which are equally a part of his business, humanizes and endears him. The common things of life <u>interest</u> him and this fact somehow strengthens enormously the estimate which any candid examination of his career forces, and that is that here at last we have a president whose real interest in life centers around the common man, and on whom we can count to serve that man so far as his ability goes.

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How did he become the great democrat he undoubtedly is, he whose career up to fourteen years ago was the kind that usually makes intellectual Aristocrats of Americans?

I put the question to him, "I don't know," he said frankly. "I am not conscious of a process. No doubt there is something in my hereditary, Scotch and Scotch-Irish, ~~not much Irish.~~ There is no real aristocracy in Scotland; there is no such thing as a Scotch peasant. Carlyle's father was as intellectual as Carlyle. Scotland is full of men who match wits. The contacts of John Wilson were with all kinds of men. There is no difference between Scotch men but the difference of education. There has never been a barrier between me and anybody, except the barrier of taste. ~~Beginning with people who bathe every day, I can have intercourse with anyone.~~

"Does the Irish often show itself in public affairs?" I asked him.

"Occasionally, not often; it signs a bill," he laughed. "~~My only difficulty in handling the~~ Child Labor Bill was the lawyer's difficulty. I suppose that was due to the Scotch in me. One of the characteristics of the race is to stand solidly on the foundation of law. You may change the law, but not ignore it; so when I came to the Child Labor Bill, I was troubled by the unlimited construction of the Inter-State Commerce clause of the Constitution it required. I felt a great regret that the Constitution did not cover the Bill, as fully as I would have liked to satisfy the Scotch in me. I suppose it was the Irish that signed the Bill. It is the Irish in me, I take it, that arouses an occasional desire to ease the strain on my conscience, gives me occasional moments of

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irresponsibility. My father was like that. He was a wonderfully and thoroughly human person; he was always doing natural things. I remember once when I was a boy of listening to a number of men arguing hotly with him. One of the men began to swear, but picking himself up quickly, he said, "I beg your pardon, Dr. Wilson, I forgot for the moment that you were a minister. ". "It was not me that you offended, my father replied, quietly and simply."

As he talked he told me more of his father. "He was a man of great intellectual energy. My best training, particularly in English came from him. He was intollerant of vagueness, and from the time I began to write, until his death in 1903, when he was 81 years old, I carried everything I wrote to him. He would make me read it aloud, which was always painful to me. Every now and then he would stop me "What do you mean by that?" I would tell him, and of course in doing so would express myself more simply than I had on paper. "Why didn't you say so," he would go on, "don't shoot at your meaning with bird shot, and hit the whole country-side, shoot with a rifle at the thing you have to say. He was a great student of language, loved words, and often gave an archaic touch to his expressions. I rember that he used to say, "I wonder at that with great admiration." Of course such an association was constantly stimulating and exciting. It broke up my habit of surrounding what I wrote with a penumbra. I came to think in definitions"

This bit of reminiscence answers a question many of us have asked, Where did he learn to use language as he does? No man is born with his power of definition, certainly no man gets in any school in the United States today training in English which gives anything that approaches his clearness, his flexibility and his modernness.

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His language has the elegance of classic English, and yet it is shot through and through with the phrase and the feel of the man in the street. I doubt if there is any man in America that can talk and speak with such taste, precision and elegance, and not at the same time alienate the crowd. This training given by his father accounts for his rare accomplishment.

It is obvious, too, that Mr. Wilson is a master of orderly thinking, else he could never turn off so many letters and speeches that exactly hit the mark. No one interested in the writer's craft reading his recent speech of acceptance, for instance, could fail to marvel, not only at its style, but at the way it was knit together and packed with facts. What is his technique? That is what the writer is curious about, and that is what I asked..

"I begin," he said, "with a list of the topics I want to cover, arranging them in my mind in their natural relations, that is, I fit the bones of the thing together; then I write it out in shorthand. I have always been accustomed to writing in shorthand, finding it a great saver of time: this done, I copy it on my own typewriter, changing phrases, correcting sentences and adding material, as I go along. Usually, the document is not changed after it comes from the typewriter, but sent as it is to the printer. When the paper is my own, like the "Acceptance Speech" or the "Lincoln Speech", I rarely consult anybody about it. Sometimes, when it seems specially important that I be understood, I try it on Tumulty, who has a very extraordinary appreciation of how a thing will 'get over the footlights' He is the most valuable audience I have."

He spoke of the methods of other presidents and statesmen, and naturally enough of their Americanism. There is no subject

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with which he is more saturated, none on which he loves better to talk. It is a satisfaction to hear one speak of these things to whom they are more than words. Mr. Wilson has no penumbra about his notions of Americanism. It is something alive, practical, fit to live and work by; and he measures American statesmen strictly by the canon he has worked out.

"It has taken many men to make America," he goes on. "Hamilton was never an American. He never believed there was such a thing as the wisdom of the masses. He was a great conservative genius, and we needed that at the moment. Marshall and Webstzy were through and through Americans, that is, they knew how to make the law a vehicle of life, to stretch it to fit ~~x to meet~~ the demands of a new country. Jefferson ~~corrupted~~ Colored his thinking with French philosophy. Liberty was a sentiment as well as a conviction and an experience with him. To a genuine American, it is always a product of experience, not something we have read about in a book, but something we have tried out and found to work. Jefferson ~~never quite~~ saw it in both ways. ~~It prevented his being~~ He was a great American, ~~although he was a great man.~~ and something else besides."

"And Lincoln," I asked, eager to have him say freshly what I knew he felt.

"Oh, Lincoln," he said, with enthusiasm, "He embodies what I take it we mean by Americanism more nearly than any one. He began as a frontier statesman, came out of the rudest human lair, but everything formed, informed and transformed Lincoln.

"He learned as he went . He arrived without baggage, but immediately acquired it. He knew nothing of the East until he came to the East, and when he made his Cooper Union speech he so sensed the East that he won it. He was not fit to be president until he

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was president. He was the common man with genius. He understood it all -- the West, the Conservative East -- even the South. No Northerner of his generation understood it so well. A marvellous figure."

"I have been wondering," Mr. President", I broke in, "if you would have been able to say the other day at the dedication of the Lincoln cabin what you did of Lincoln's isolation, his loneliness, if it had not been for your own deep experience in the last four years."

"No, I could not. Do you not get the impression in studying Lincoln through the war of a man of great loneliness? He could make no associate in his great crisis. I felt this profoundly in the acute stage of our difficulty with Germany. The strongest men about me came with their opinions and suggestions. 'I am offering this for what it is worth' they said, 'but you must think it out' There were multitudes of messages from the country, offering all kinds of suggestions, but always they ended, ' We will stand by what you think it best to do.' The awful and overwhelming thought was that the country trusted me.

"My determination from the start was to let nothing hasten me, nothing tempt me to override principles. I meant, if possible, to keep the country square with principles. I waited for clearer air. I made it a point not to read the details of what was happening, ~~a case like that of Edith Cavel, for instance~~ instances of personal suffering and what seemed undue outrage, I did not dare to do so lest I should see red. I feared to be overwhelmed by a storm of feeling.

In handling National affairs feeling must never take precedence of judgment. I used to tell my students long before I had an idea of going into politics that no case could ever be made up at the

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time that it was developing. The final judgment on everything that happens in the world will be made up long years after the happening is over; that is, the student always has the last say. He interprets the letters, the documents. I have tried to look at this war ten years ahead, to be a historian at the same time I was an actor. A hundred years from now, it will not be the bloody details that the world will think of in this war, it will be the causes behind it, the readjustments which it will force."

The wind came soft and fragrant through the trees, the head of a secret service man peered from behind a pillar of the verandah, the end of a great camera showed itself through the shubbery; but the President was silent; far away in those days of terrible uncertainty, when no man could tell what horror might not crash the next instant on his head.

"The actor at the center of a great drama", he went on, "is frequently judged as if he knew everything . It is impossible that he should know all. He may make the most diligent attempt to inform himself and much escape him. When I was writing history, and I wrote my history of the United States principally for the sake of learning that history, I was often puzzled as to whether a man had known certain things, which I knew; unless I was certain, I could not be fair to him. I had an illustration of this when Mr. Cleveland was in Princeton. We asked him to give us some lectures on his administration. Like many men who never had a college education, Mr. Cleveland attached exaggerated importance to the college audience. He asked me to listen to the lectures as they developed. I remember calling on him at his request to hear the paper on his speech with about removals from office; I found him walking up and down his study in a violent

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rage. "I have just been reading in the Congressional Record. I never knew they said these things about me. In a case like the Mexican or the German action is again and again necessary upon imperfect information. Action necessarily takes place before the case is finally made up. In the Mexican matter there was a time when it did not appear who in Mexico was a sincere friend of the people; we had to act on what we knew then, not on what has developed since.

"At the same time that one often has insufficient information on certain questions, there are others on which he has much more than he dare let the public know. In many of the situations created by the war ~~the affair with Germany~~ there were many days, when the facts were new every morning; it was unsafe for anybody except the Secretary of State and myself to know these facts; another twenty-four hours would change them; all we could do was to try to accommodate ourselves to the situation, to avoid all possible elements of irritation, to keep our object clearly before us. There were people who felt that they could settle the trouble on what they knew, but usually they came to me with general statements. It bores me to have men waste my time in general terms. What I want to know is how it is to be done. I am never interested until that point is reached. When I was teaching and my students would offer me a general proposition, I would send them away, telling them to draw up an act of Congress to do it. They did not often come back. I am not interested until a practical method is proposed, that is, I suppose that in government I am a pragmatist; my first thought is will it work?"

The program of domestic legislation that has been put through under Mr. Wilson's direction is so extraordinary; it crystallizes so much of the progressive thinking for a good many years that I

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have felt surprise that it should have been possible to accomplish so much when the administration was standing on such ticklish ground and I dropped in as much in the conversation.

"It has been a wonderful record, has it not?" Mr. Wilson said, with his engaging frankness. "It has been a positive relief to have a definite program . Of course the strength of my position was, that I was working on a party platform, and not on an individual plan. There has never been a Wilson Policy, with one exception. What we have carried out were democratic policies laid down in our platform. The one exception, that is the one Wilson Policy, was the repeal of the exemption of American ships from Panama Tolls at the Canal. Both party platforms commended that law, but when I found that both parties to that treaty had understood in signing it that all shipping was to be subject to tolls I determined to insist upon the repeal. With the exception of that, it was a party plan for which we were working. I never raised the question with regard to anyone of the things we have done, "Shall we do it?" I simply said, "We have promised, how are we going to do it? As valuable a thing as we have done is to entirely change the at osphere of legislation. We did this when we drove out the lobby. We have changed the lobby from one of inducement to one of argument, more than one cynical Congressman of long experience tells me , 'That all the conditions under which they work in Congress is now done are changed. The old lobby was the heart of things and the heart is changed."

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It is impossible to listen to President Wilson discussing the work of the last four years done under such terrific strain without asking yourself again and again how has he been able to carry it? It is evident that he has stood it. He is not a rugged man but his color is too good, his eyes too his motions too easy and unhurried not to feel that he is in a clear, normal physical and mental condition. He laughs cheerfully when you ask him.

"There is a lot of the boy left in me. I have never forgotten how to play, never forgotten how to loaf, I get great relief as I go along by a sense of the fun in things. There is a constant succession of funny things happening. I enjoy stories; that is another thing that my father taught me, he was a great story teller. I generally open cabinet meetings by telling the last story I have heard, I think it sometimes disturbes my colleagues, but it relieves the tension. Frank Cobb was down here last night, and he told me a new story of Pat McCarren. A police justice in Brooklyn had just died. Pat heard of it at eight o'clock; at half-past eight a young lawyer turned up and said, "Mr. McCafren, have you heard of Murphy's death? What would you say to my taking his place?" "I have no objection," McCarren told him, "if you can arrange it with the undertaker."

I have often been willing to make the same arrangement with Office seekers. I know of nothing more indecent than for a man to apply for the seat of a Judge who has just died.

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"Do you find much relief in reading, " I put in.

"I haven't read a serious book through, Mr. Wilson replied, for fourteen years, I read Detective stories for fun, but very little of modern fiction. It concerns itself too exclusively with problems, and I have enough problems. Of course, I read my old favorites, and some poetry. There are some things of Tennyson's that have been a comfort to me. I don't know that any one expounds the theory of popular government better than Tennyson. You remember the lines in the Princess -

"A nation yet the rulers and the ruled -
Some sense of duty, something of a faith
Some reverence for the laws ourselves have made
Some patient force to change them when we will
Some civic manhood firm against the crowd."

"Firm against the crowd," The President repeated the lines over and over. That is where our danger lies. Do you remember the angry crowd that was worked up in Ephesus by a silversmith who told his workmen that Paul would surely spoil their trade of making shrines for Diana if they did not stop his talk of theirs being no gods made by hands. The men filled the streets crying "Great is Diana of the Ephesians" until the town clerk came out and said "You idiots, nobody is hurting Diana. If you have a complaint against any man, take it to the courts, but stop this uproar or you'l get into trouble."

That episode in Ephesus is very like what is going on today in the country in regard to Mexico. A few men

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men who have property down there have worked up a clique to cry, "Great is order in Mexico." But it is order not for the Mexicans but for ~~the oil men.~~ Some of the foreign investors. Neger in all of their appeals to me has one of them even mentioned the fifteen million Mexicans. It is always our investments. One can almost always find a parallel for a political situation in the Bible. A man can get a liberal education from the Bible. It has educated the Scotch. They have learned from it to understand the human heart and the history of civilization. There is another character in the Bible that I have had frequent dealings with in the last fourteen years. I don't always remember his name - Je - Jeshu - Jeshurun. That's it, they say of him that he waxed fat and kicked. I have met a good many men of that kind in the last few years."

The reference gave me an opportunity that I wanted. For a number of months I have been feeling more and more strongly that the real issue in the campaign was going to be the old one between money and no money. The Chicago Conventions reeked with the power and the determination of property by hook or crook to get its hands on things again. Every week since has intensified my impression that this is the fact. Money thinks the populace is getting too strong and it means to take the reins. I wondered how deeply the President from his close touch with men of various points of view felt this and asked, "It is a fact. The philospphy of the situation, as I see it, is this. The democratic party is offering a programme of principles based on a belief in the control of the people. The policy of the other side is and will be determined by those who have the largest stake. They are not interested in policies; to them policy is neither here nor there

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if they can control. For instance they are not opposed to the Federal Reserve Bank, but they don't want the people to control it. They will consent to almost any policy if you will allow them to manage it. Again and again I have found men in Wall Street uneasy because the Treasury was being managed without their advice. Of course I am always willing to listen to their advice but they want me to promise to follow it. They are genuinely uneasy and feel that someway a joke has been played on them.

"Who shall control? That is the issue today. What the other side is trying to do is to bring Mark Hanna back, that is, a return to the day of vested rights. They are saying now that they were responsible for the Federal Reserve Bill; that is, that their Spokesman Aldrich made the Bill. Mr. Aldrich made the anatomy of that bill, but we changed the heart, I don't care who produces the anatomy, if I can make the heart. I have lived with this group for fourteen years. They have no other ambition or desire but to control men's thoughts and lives. We are up against the very essence of privilege today. Nobody can predict the profundity of change in this Country after the War, nobody can predict the hold on the country that privilege is going to take again if this class is put in power.

One can't sit by and see this done without protest. In my old days at Princeton, one of my friends used to say to me "Can't you let anything alone," and I always answered, "If you will hold anything where it is without deterioation I will let it alone, but you can't do that. Things either go ahead or fall back. Chesterson says if you want to keep a white post white,

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you must never stop painting it. Nothing can be conserved without growth. The law of conservation is growth. The reaction, true, those who call themselves Conservatives are the real destroyers. All life is positive and must change and enlarge to keep itself in health. You cannot conserve Liberty by letting liberty alone. I don't allow myself to think about how much is involved lest my grip weaken."

But do not fancy that this man so full of the issues of the day,- pragmatist and actor sees only today, that he has no sense of the eternal procession of life. That sense broke into our talk by what route I do not know. "I remember a sermon my father once preached" the President said and his voice took on a peculiar tenderness and appreciation that it seems always to take when he speaks of his father: - "His text was a chapter enumerating heads of families and always each mentioned ended - 'and he died ' - 'and he died' -'and he died.' It gave me an extraordinary impression of how generations follows generation on the earth - like the never ending succession of the waves of the sea.

"But the people Mr. President, What do they want? What are they thinking?"

"They will not want to make this change if they understand the case. I feel certain of that. I do not believe there is a man alive more saturated with American thinking than I am, I have lived with it all my life. I have no special way of finding out what they think, I don't expect them to think with

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with me at once, but I feel reasonably sure of how they will ~~am convinced that they will eventually~~ eventually ~~think with me.~~ think. I much prefer to have their deliberate to their hasty verdict. I told a delegation of ladies the other day that I wanted both their respect and their votes but that if I must give up one I prefer to give up the votes.

"If I understand myself I am sincere when I say that I have no personal desire for re-election. It would be an unspeakable relief to be exempt ~~get rid of the Presidency,~~ but I am caught in the midst of a process. ~~It is impossible for me to retire.~~ Every thing I believe in chains me here. Nothing is finished. Is it wise that the Country should change now leaving so much at loose ends."

I hazarded that he stood about where Mr. Lincoln did in August 1864.

"Exactly," the President replied.

I quoted, the secret compact Lincoln made with himself at the time. "This morning as for some days past, it seems exceedingly probable that this admininstration will not be re-elected. Then it will be my duty to so co-operate with the President-elect as to save the Union between the election and the inauguration; as he will have secured his election on such ~~grounds~~ grounds/that he cannot possibly save it afterward."

"That" said Mr. Wilson, is the very soul of man."

It is plain that the contest has simmered down in Mr. Wilson's mind to a question between ~~the~~ privilege and people. It is plain that his conception of the need at this moment is to keep the interests of the people to the front and so far as possible to bring all liberal forces into co-operation. The lack of

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co-operation between the property class in the nation and the great working mass is painfully clear to him. "The most alarming impression that I received from negotations with the Railroad Presidents and the working men", he said, "was their utter distrust of one another, and that is one of the most serious barriers we have in the Country to anything like a real democracy. I believe that if I could have stilled this suspicion, the program I offered would have been accepted by both sides, but each questioned the good faith of the other. Men in Congress who have worked long over these various labor questions in the main agreed to my program. It was ~~worked out with their help, and~~ based on the multitude of information and experience that committies have been gathering for many years, and that the Inter-State Commerce Commission since its formation in 1887 has piled up. There is a multitude of experience to prove that the eight hour day is the only efficient day. When you have a thoroughly scientific management of business hours go down. This measure carries with it a provision for collecting experience on which to arbitrate. Certainly the railroad presidents were not able to furnish that. The truth is, that they, like the heads of many other businesses in this Country do not know their own conditions well enough to say what they can or cannot do in regard to wages or hours. They fight the shortening of the working-man's day, not on the basis of indisputable figures and facts, but on a basis of fears and old fashioned misconceptions. It is almost impossible to get old notions out of men's heads. Take our proposed Tarrif Commission. A republican Congressman came to me not long ago to offer a

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suggestion about what the commission should do. It's chief business he said, should be finding the cost of production, 'My dear man,' I said, haven't you discovered that there aint no such animal, that the most of production differs always with management. I can take you to five factories in one community, all making the same kind of goods, and each having a different cost of production. In the case of two factories of which I know, one making money and the other not, the condition was exactly reversed, by swopping Managers.'"

It certainly is unexpected to find Mr. Wilson quoting practical observations, such as these on every matter that is raised. He really knows something about the tarrif. He knows something about everything he touches, and the subjects of which he talks so well are very wide apart. It was, perhaps, quite natural, that in a house built under the eye of John McCall, architecture should come up, but it was a little surprising to me that he had so much real comment to offer upon it. " A man of taste whom I know" he said,"once characterized the architecture of the -------- club in New York and as a combination of early Pullman and late North German Lloyd, this same man said that in America most of our architecture was either bizzare or Beauz-Arts. I had to contend with that kind when I was in Princeton, One set of important plans offered I refused telling the architect that it seemed to me that an important principal of his art was that you ~~couldn't~~ should not construct ~~decoration~~ ornament, though you might ~~decorate~~ ornament construction. It_s indigested money that is doing this. It is robbing many a fine boy of his chance. I spoke once to a boy's school, which

starting as a school for poor boys had become onf for the rich. I think I puzzled them a little by telling them I was sorry for them. The probability is, I said, that no one of you will ever amount to anything. You are not going to have the stimulus necessary to develop a zest for work and a man must have that if he does real things. I have seen young men honestly struggle against it, but few succeed. The pressure is too great. I used to tell my boys in Princeton that I did not believe it was safe for a man to have money for which he did not work earlier than forty-three. As I was about forty-three then they saw the point." One thing is certain the President of the United States is not worrying about the election. He is basing himself absolutely on the proposition that the people of this Country are going to vote as they think. He says very positively you cannot calculate what the election on November 7th will do. The people are thinking it out and they will follow their judgement. "All that I am willing to do is to present our record and to explain as clearly as I can the situation as I see it. I am not willing to do anything that is inconsistant with my position as a president. I do not believe that the people of this Country want their President on the stump, working for his own interests. I am not willing to do anything that they would feel is bad taste in a president, I am inclined to think that bad taste is bad politics."

Simmered down the question seems to be, Have the American people as much taste as Mr. Wilson credits them with. Are they as thoroughly American as he believes them ,

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that is,have they kept what they undoubtedly once had, the passion for thinking things out themselves, and voting independantly. Ar they as saturated with Americanism as he is? Are they as jealous of the dignity of their leader as he is? Or has the sense that taste has no place in a president taken the place of that old sensitiveness, Has the willingness to yield to popular rule to the few interested in property taken the place of their former determination to rule themselves. These are the questions that are to be decided on November 7th. Not whether Mr. Wilson may or may not have made mistakes in handling the Mexican question; whether he may or may not have overstrained patience in dealing with Germany; whether he may or may not have been unwise in believing that the best way to settle the eight hour controversy was to conduct a nation wide experiment under scientific observation in order to get material for arbitration instead of attempting to arbitrate without sufficient information. The question is not a matter of details but one of fundamentals and chief of these is whether we are going to return to the days and rule of Mark Hanna.

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