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THE PRESIDENT IN HIS DAY OF TRIAL— HOW HE MET THE LUSITANIA CRISIS

By HENRY ROOD. IT is now permissible to tell for the first time the story of the President and the Crisis, to picture Woodrow Wilson during these seven nights and six days following the Lusitania horror, when he shut himself within his private study, isolating himself from the world and with grim determination fought through to a finish the course this nation should pursue in respect to the Imperial Government of Germany.

An Intimate Study of Mr. Wilson's Mental Processes in the Formulation of His Note—The Executive Well Advised in This, as in All Other Questions Growing Out of the War



German aeroplane dropping a bomb on the American vessel Cushing by a German aeroplane. The above picture represents a similar incident.

Seven nights and six days they were of strain and anxiety such as no President has been called upon to bear since Abraham Lincoln unflinchingly faced the onrush of civil war. For no living man could foresee what might happen should the United States be forced into hostilities by a mighty engine of military strength, unsurpassed in relentless power save by that corresponding engine which enabled Napoleon Bonaparte to sweep the continent of Europe for twenty years before he finally was crushed by the most overwhelming coalition of civilized governments recorded in history.

In this present crisis stands a single figure, upon his judgment, upon his moral stamina plus his physical courage, balances the destiny of a nation numbering a hundred millions. What part he made in the flash of a moment of character inbred through generations which are now seen of all the world? What did he do during those seven nights and six days? How did he refrain from doing? How did he arrive at the momentous decision proclaimed in that note, pregnant with possibilities and armed with the name "Bryan," which he wrote with his own hand and ordered to be cabled to Berlin?

These are questions which thoughtful men and women are asking, and an effort will be made to gratify their natural and patriotic interest without overstepping the bounds which sharply separate the official life of every President from his personal or private life.

For upward of a century an unwritten law has prevailed regarding the disclosure of that which is said and done in the White House, and the White House itself issues statements thereof to the public. This law, still unwritten, yet is riveted with steel; it is like unto the laws of the Medes and the Persians and is respected of all men who have access to the executive offices. There is no violation either of its spirit or of its well understood provisions.

Twice each week, on Tuesdays and on Fridays, the President meets the Washington correspondents of newspapers published in all of the great cities of the world. At the White House, in his office, seated before his desk as a usual thing, and when they enter they unconsciously group themselves in a semi-circle somewhat removed from his desk and ask questions, to which he replies—as a rule directly, tersely.

On Friday, May 7, he met them as usual and later went about his work as Executive of the nation, until suddenly a portentous message snapped off the telegraph wires: The great passenger steamer Lusitania had been torpedoed by a German submarine; there had been a terrific explosion on board; the ship had sunk; probably a thousand lives had been lost, among them many Americans.

Just a bare statement, that first message, practically in the form of a bullet, but in the flash of a moment thought its overpowering importance was comprehended by the President. Better, far better, than any other he saw the possibilities therefrom resulting. He was not stunned, as some uninformed correspondents wired their papers had the news of the tragedy fell upon him with full force.

A short, quick walk in the open air, then back to the White House. To his secretary he said he was going to his private study; that he must not be disturbed. Then he went up to that room, but in the flash of a moment he turned to the circular library to think the situation out to a finish. Friday night and Saturday passed by, and Saturday night and Sunday, and Sunday night and Monday.

No documents or other papers were brought to him save those he sent for. No person save him without being summoned, save one—Dr. Cary Grayson, his personal physician, who has in his keeping the President's health and strength, upon which so much depends.

Within a few hours after news had arrived of the Lusitania tragedy telegrams commenced to pour in from all over the country. Within a day or so between 1,500 and 2,000 had arrived. The President read almost all of them, for he wanted to know how the individual American felt. He did not care to see any newspapers, however, for time was precious, and he had absolute faith that the press of the United States, irrespective of party affiliations, would stand by the Government, a wall of inviolable strength in the time of the affairs of this country.

News of the Lusitania's fate hurt upon him with full force, but his self-control, and his sympathy is keen, and even this sudden and unparalleled tragedy could not swerve him from his duty, from his determination to hold Germany to full account, to uphold new and forever the rights of American citizens freely to sail the seas under provisions of international law. And when finally he made up his mind as to what he should do he sat down in the seclusion of his study and with his own hand wrote that note to the Imperial Government of Germany.

This state communication, so uncompromising in its assertion regarding human life and liberty on the part of non-combatants, was not put on the cable until its provisions had been submitted to advisers. No President, least of all so conservative a man as Woodrow Wilson, would dream of despatching such a document without consultation, without hearing possible criticism from his official family. In this way his responsibility was shared by members of the Cabinet, and it may be said in passing that every one of them felt the weight.

As soon as news came of the Lusitania, each of the Secretaries concerned directly or indirectly with foreign affairs knew that he would be called upon by the President for a personal independent opinion regarding the course which the President would think it best to pursue. And when opinions were requested of the Cabinet each man attacked the problem in his own way. To show something of the conscientious care with which this was done the experience of one of the Cabinet members may be told here without breach of etiquette and practically in his own words.

"When the time came for me to send the President my personal opinion of the course he had mapped out," says this Secretary, "I sat down quietly at my desk, with full realization of what might happen should his formal protest be refused by the Power to which it was addressed. With every desire to be true to the country, as well as true to myself, I asked myself this question: 'Are the principles which the President proposes to uphold so great, so important as to risk plunging the United States into warfare?' Then I wrote down my answer: 'They are.'"

"I asked myself a second question: 'Are those principles so great as to warrant me, personally, risking the loss and destruction of the little property I have been able to accumulate by a lifetime of hard work and self-denial?' Again I wrote down my answer: 'They are.'"

tremendous energizer, emphatic, impetuous, is one type. Another is Taft—genial, merry, quickly responsive to friendship, versed in literature as in the law, "intensely human" he has been termed. Men have followed Roosevelt into the rattling fire of Spanish rifles. Men have looked into Taft's kindly eyes, have felt Taft's friendly handclasp and have been won over to give him all they owned on earth. But the idea of infringing on Woodrow Wilson's austere dignity is simply inconceivable. To Wilson life is not all beer and skittles; it is a serious thing. He has shown this from early manhood, in fact from youth. And he ever has acted accordingly.

Anthropologists tell us that if we wish to sound the depths of any human character we must look far beyond the present living individual back through generations, noting his trait or his succeeding ancestors, this or that habit of life, this or that temperament, of all of which any living individual is very largely a composite so far as physical and mental characteristics are concerned.

Scott Woodrow Wilson is descended on both sides from a long line of Scotch-Irish ancestors. Teuton strain there is none, nor that of Gallic lightness with mercurial tendency. Scotch-Irish he is—and on both sides, the latest human emigration descended from principles which they believed to be the right principles, regardless of what others thought to the contrary, unmindful of what the consequences might be to themselves.

Given a man with two or three hundred years of such ancestors back of him, and when once his mind is made up on an important matter it would be just about as easy to change it as to pick up the rock of Gibraltar and heave it into the heart of the Sahara. Fortunate, such a man does not make up his mind in a hurry or without due consideration to the opinions of those whose judgment he respects. But when such a mind is made up it's made up—and there's no more to be said or done.

Those who are sympathetic with such a temperament refer to it as being one of "unshakable decision." Others, not sympathetic, are inclined to term it "sheer obstinacy." The difference merely reflects a difference in individual viewpoint. This mental immovability at basic roots on supreme self-confidence, and in the opinion of President Wilson, has been said that once in a fight he is in it "for keeps." When victorious, no more is to be said. When defeated, as the boys say, he "doesn't know when he's licked."

Side by side with these characteristics—that life is a very serious matter, and that his mind once made up cannot be altered—is another: That of the hardest kind of work. Glance for a moment, and very briefly, at the story of Woodrow Wilson's life up to date. Born in Staunton, Va., in December, 1856; graduated from Princeton at the age of 23; then a student at the University of Virginia, two years practicing law in Atlanta; a course in post-graduate work at Johns Hopkins; married at Savannah in 1885, and commencing that year to serve as assistant professor of history and economics at Bryn Mawr College.

Many years before this he had become intensely interested in political movements. Even as a youth he had an interest amounting almost to a reverence for the science of government, whereby men are enabled in varying degree under varying forms of government to work out their destiny here on earth. In this aspect the science of government assumed tremendous importance in his eyes, and he set himself the work of trying to master it.

To do this he must needs master history—the records of Governments in times past; and the two studies went forward year by year. When he married, and went to Bryn Mawr, at the age of 29, his first serious book appeared—a treatise on Government: "A Study in American Politics." At the time other young men of his age were publishing in the magazines charming love stories and in book form novels of adventure. Further comment is unnecessary.

At Bryn Mawr, and at Wesleyan—where he was from 1885—Woodrow Wilson continued to toil unceasingly. His time and thought were devoted to research, consideration, criticism, reflection in undisturbed quiet. To be sure, he possessed the innate courtesy born in every Southern gentleman, and his politeness and reared in a home of refinement and education. When he went into society he was distinguished as much for urbanity as for that dignity of bearing so quickly recognized by all who come in contact with him. And his powers of persuasion were so compelling, his scholarly enthusiasm for his subjects so engaging, that at Princeton in later years, his courses were eagerly thronged by students who could attend them.

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