

Wilson in Iowa

President Woodrow Wilson made two trips to Iowa, both at rather crucial points in his career. The first was in 1916 when the country was turning its attention from domestic issues to the question of preparedness, and the second was in 1919 during the bitter Senate fight over the League of Nations. This was his last speaking tour which began September 4 in Ohio, and continued day and night all the way to the west coast and back to Pueblo, Colorado, where his health collapsed and he was forced to return to Washington. On both these visits the President spoke at the Coliseum in Des Moines and received a more than moderately warm welcome from a normally Republican state.

In 1916 Wilson's visit was part of a tour begun in January largely to call the attention of the North to the need for a greater army. That the issue of preparedness was to dominate the nation's interest through the approaching presidential election in the fall of the same year, is reflected in a cartoon by J. N. Darling appearing in the *Des Moines Register and Leader* just before Wilson's visit. The cartoon shows "Tariff" as a young

lady who is the deserted wallflower at the dance while an attractive young "Preparedness" has grouped around her caricatures of such prominent figures as William Jennings Bryan, Theodore Roosevelt, and the President himself. The war in Europe had clearly caused the popularity of the new issue, yet Wilson had managed not to commit himself to the likelihood of American participation. In fact, two days before his Des Moines appearance, he had solemnly promised in a speech at Milwaukee, Wisconsin, "I pledge you that, God helping, I will keep it [the nation] out of war."

The day before Wilson appeared (February 2), the Des Moines papers were full of descriptions of the preparations for his visit. "It will not be the mere recognition of the office," one paper declared, "it will be in large measure the welcome of the man." Iowa had voted for Wilson in 1912, in the electoral college, the first Democrat to receive such favor since Franklin Pierce. Now Iowans were turning out to welcome him.

All along his route into the State, crowds gathered at the station in below-zero weather. At Davenport, Iowa City, Grinnell, and Newton, Wilson spoke briefly from the rear platform of his train. Iowa City alone mustered 5,000 people, including many students from the University who

left their classes to greet him. At Grinnell, tragedy was narrowly avoided when the train began backing into the crowd as a mother was holding up her small child to shake hands with the President. Everywhere the crowd was not a little curious to see the President's bride, the much-talked-of former Mrs. Edith Galt, whom he had married less than three months before. People crowded around for a close look at the new Mrs. Wilson, and as the couple stepped off the train in Des Moines, a girl near the rope was heard to exclaim, "She looks just like her best pictures."

At the state capital, Governor George W. Clarke and Mayor James R. Hanna were on hand to welcome the President. There were other welcoming delegates, a motor procession, dinners for officials of the arrangements committee, and a parade, but the President and Mrs. Wilson dined alone at the Chamberlain Hotel on a menu specially prepared by the head chef, Frank Tyck. (The menu of the President's dinner appeared in the paper on the following day.) Crowds began collecting at the Coliseum by 4:30 and the roped-off block in front was completely filled by 6:00 P. M., a half-hour before the doors were open.

That evening nearly 8,500 heard President Wilson declare, "There is danger to our national life." This he gave as the reason "why greater

preparedness is necessary in the United States." The speech was received with enthusiasm and cheers, yet the conclusion the next day after the President's train had moved on to Kansas City was that Iowans were still not won over. "There seemed to be an impression on the train that Iowa's response to the president's appeal was less pronounced than that of states farther east. The message was heard with earnest interest, but there was that about the crowds that led one to feel that they were disposed to go home and think it over soberly rather than be convinced offhand of grave perils threatening the country from without." This seems to have been the President's impression, too. At any rate, the result of the journey was a conviction that it was best not to hasten the larger preparations which Secretary of War Garrison demanded.

When Wilson came to Iowa on September 6, 1919, preparedness and the war, too, were past events. The post-war period had brought the usual reaction to national solidarity which found one of its outlets in resentment against and delay in ratifying the Versailles Treaty. Wilson's impatience with the delay made "Save the Peace" his first purpose and the reason behind his tour of the country in the fall of 1919. It was a tour of desperation taxing all of his physical reserves and

made out of his deep conviction that a failure to support Article X and the League of Nations was a betrayal by Americans of the men who had fought the war.

Again Des Moines hung out the bunting and made elaborate preparations to welcome the President. This time he arrived with an airplane escort which met his train twenty miles out and hovered overhead as it pulled into the station. Governor William L. Harding and Mayor Thomas Fairweather were on hand to welcome him officially. Again there were parades and processions and huge crowds which gathered at the Coliseum and waited more than two hours to hear the President speak. People began to arrive before 6 o'clock and by 6:30, when the doors were opened, the crowd was immense. Nine thousand persons listened to him declare, "America is the make-weight in the fortunes of mankind. How long shall we be kept waiting for the answer whether the world shall trust or despise us?" The following day part of his speech was reprinted in a front-page box by the *Des Moines Register*. This excerpt, besides presenting one angle of the significance of the Senate delay over ratification, is a good example of Wilson's eloquence:

"There was another thing we wanted to do, that is done in this document (the peace of Ver-

sailles). We wanted to see that helpless people were nowhere in the world put at the mercy of unscrupulous enemies and masters. There is one pitiful example which is in the hearts of all of us. I mean the example of Armenia. There was a Christian people, helpless, at the mercy of a Turkish government which thought it the service of God to destroy them. And at this moment it is an open question whether the Armenian people will not, while we sit here and debate, be absolutely destroyed. When I think of words piled on words, of debate following debate, when these unspeakable things that cannot be handled until the debate is over are happening in these pitiful parts of the world, I wonder that men do not wake up to the moral responsibility of what they are doing.

“Great peoples are driven out upon a desert where there is no food and can be none, and they are compelled to die and then men, women and children are thrown into a common grave, so imperfectly covered up that here and there is a pitiful arm stretched out to heaven and there is no pity in the world. When shall we wake to the moral responsibility of this great occasion?”

“One of the glories of the great document which I brought back with me is this: That everywhere within the area of settlement covered by

the political questions involved in that treaty, peoples of that sort have been given their freedom and guaranteed their freedom.

“To reject that treaty, to alter that treaty, is to impair one of the first characters of mankind. And yet there are men who approach the question with passions, with private passion and party passion, who think only of some immediate advantage to themselves or to a group of their fellow countrymen, and who look at the thing with the jaundiced eyes of those who have some private purpose of their own.

“When at last, in the annals of mankind they are gibbeted, they will regret that the gibbet is so high.”

The emotion behind this plea was so evidently sincere that most Iowa editors, regardless of the political affiliations of their papers, were inclined to agree with the *Des Moines Register* that, “There is this to be said for President Wilson, he has always been on the large side.” Today as the peace following World War II likewise totters precariously, Wilson’s crusade which took him to Des Moines and caused his collapse twenty days later seems even more significant. As one editor said of him then, “It is the measure of big men that they are on the big side of big events.”

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