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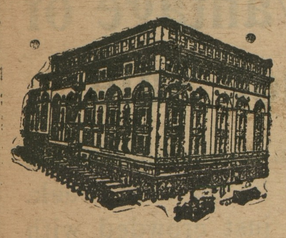

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THE PEOPLE AND THE PRESIDENT

By HAMILTON HOLT

The writer of the article below Hon. Hamilton Holt, is one of the brainy men of this country. He recently made a great speech at Washington College and all who heard him were charmed by both the manner and substance of his address:

No nation has been blessed by such an illustrious line of chief magistrates as the United States. All our Presidents have been good men. Most of them have been great men. Some have been political geniuses. Yet every President from Washington down has had a majority of the American people arrayed against him at some period of his term of office.

During the interval between the election and inauguration of our Presidents partizan rancor has time to subside. Each incumbent enters office with the good will of the whole nation. But generally at the end of the first year a tiny cloud appears on the horizon. By the end of the second year the whole sky is overcast. By the end of the third year the storm is raging. The President then seems to be the most execrated man in the land.

Take our last four Presidents, for instance. How we revieled McKinley. "Spineless jellyfish!" we shrieked. "He waits till public opinion is formed before acting. Oh, for a leader!" And then when we got Roosevelt we shouted, "Give us a rest! Stop leading us hither and yon." Next came Mr. Taft. "Quit gallivanting around the country," we wailed. "Cut out the Methodist socials. You waste half your time seeing unnecessary people." And then when we elected Wilson we growled, "Why do you go in your closest and lock the door? You won't let us talk to you at all." Whatever qualities a President has, we demand the opposite. We are a queer people.

It looked for a time as tho Wilson might escape the fate of his predeessors and be the one American President to retain his popularity to the end. But it was not to be. The first rumblings were heard when he called upon the country to vote the Democratic ticket at the last election. Even if this was good advice, he should not have given it. He should have left that to his friends. He had been the real spokesman of the united nation during the war and the people resented his descnding to the lower plane of partizan leadership. That doubtless lost him a Democratic majority in Congress. He next picked out—not a bi-partizan Peace Commission of the ablest statesmen, labor leaders, economists and financiers—but a Commission composed of comparatively unknown men and did not even seek to have the Senate confirm them. He then broke a hundred years' precedent and went to Europe. The verdict of history will in all probability record this as his greatest act of statesmanship. Yet it caused intense resentment in all the little minds who hate innovations and whose vision looks backward to the days of Washington and Jefferson.

So the political sky at home had begun to cloud over when the President left for Europe. But there he was everywhere received with universal acclaim. But when I arrived in Paris a few weeks later I found the enthusiasm had subsided and a campaign of vilification against him had already begun in the French press. I read with astonishment the cables sent over from America reporting each trivial and derogatory thing said against him by every celebrity, notoriety and nonentity in America. It was evidently a propaganda of the most sinister character for which somebody other than the newspapers was paying the bills. Everywhere men asked me if it were true that American sentiment did not support the President. All the reactionaries at the Conference were in high glee, for manifestly if the President was to be repudiated at home there was no need of paying attention to his advice.

Such was the situation during my three months over there. I had hardly landed at the dock on my return home when I learned that the attitude of the American people toward President had undergone a marked change since he had been in Paris. At first I supposed it might be only a local matter confined to New York City and the Atlantic seaboard, but I have since traveled thru New England and as far west as Nebraska, and I find the President's prestige is at its nadir everywhere. And synchronously with the waning and decline of Mr. Wilson one perceives the waxing and "coming back" of Mr. Taft, the man who was the most unmercifully defeated candidate for the Presidency in American history.

Whether President Wilson's eclipse is temporary or not time alone can tell. I rather expect him to regain popularity after he returns to Washington and takes the helm again, especially if he decides to tour the nation in the interests of the ratification of the Covenant and Peace Treaty.

But what I cannot understand is how the American people can forget his supreme leadership during the war, and the great achievements he is now accomplishing at the peace table. Let me mention but three instances:

First, he—one man—focused the hetrogeneous and diverse aims of the war into the one ideal of pure Americanism, which is democracy. The Allied peoples with one accord followed the banner he unfurled.

Second, he first enunciated the aims for which the war was being fought. Samuel Gompers told me that had he not done this there would have been revolutions in both England and France early in 1918 just before the big German drive began. By his fourteen points peace was eventually concluded. Some have said the Allies should not have stopped fighting until the peace was dictated by the sword at Berlin. That undoubtedly might have been done. But all the generals I met in France, from Mangin, Bliss and Bullard down, told me that Germany is completely beaten in a military sense. Thus we could have got no better peace in Berlin than at Versailles, and we have saved probably half a million lives by securing the early surrender of Germany thru negotiations.

Third, he is now on as great a quest as was ever undertaken by an American—a quest, that if successful, will substitute co-operation for competition [illegible] by establishing a League of Free Nations to promote peace and justice on earth.

I cannot deny that Mr. Wilson asked the people to vote the Democratic ticket. I agree that he has not sufficiently conciliated the prejudices and jealousies of the Senate. I am aware that he likes to be the only star in the caste. I grant that he has taken over the railroads, telegraphs and telephones when some people did not want him to, and proposes to give them back when others do not want him to. I know that he consults Samuel Gompers more frequently than J. P. Morgan. But what do these and all the other objections amount to as compared with the three acts of transcendent statesmanship I have enumerated above?

If we could put him out of office the way the English and French call retire Lloyd George or Clemencuea by simply getting an adverse vote in Parliament, that would be one thing. But the President of the United States cannot be retired except on impeachment proceedings.

Woodrow Wilson is our spokesman before the world and will remain our spokesman during the present peace negotiations whether we like it or not. Altho we may not agree with this or that compromise he has been forced to take, he is the only statesman in Paris who represents a nation which is 100 per cent disinterested. Why not support the man who has thrown the whole weight of his great prestige into the scales to help save the world, even at the expense of his personal popularity at home and abroad? Such a man deserves the most ungrudging loyalty from the American people.

We ought to be ashamed of ourselves to let the forthcoming Presidential election blind us to the great work he has done and is doing for this and future generations, when the only effect is to hamper every effort he is making at the Peace Conference in behalf of ourselves and the world.

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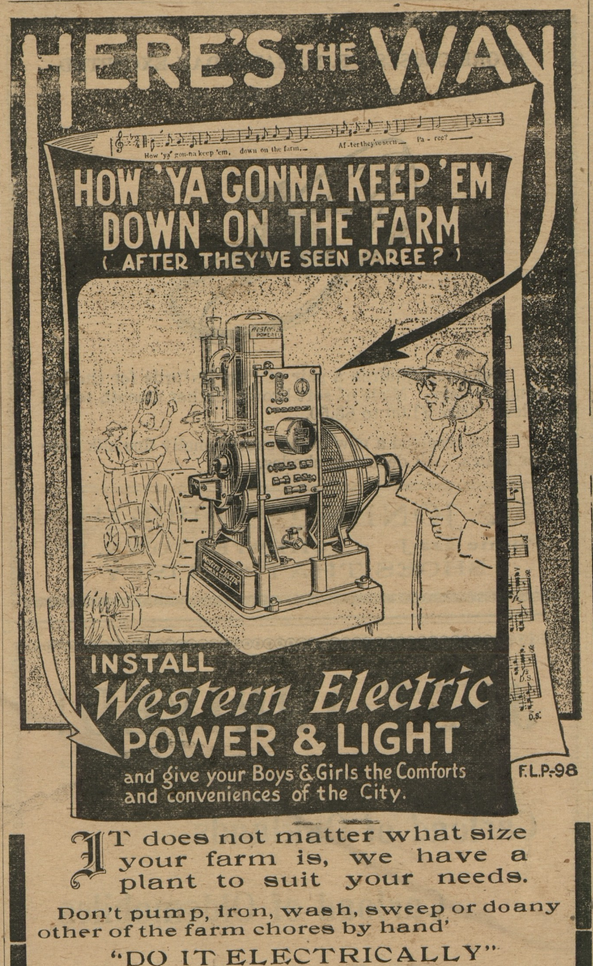

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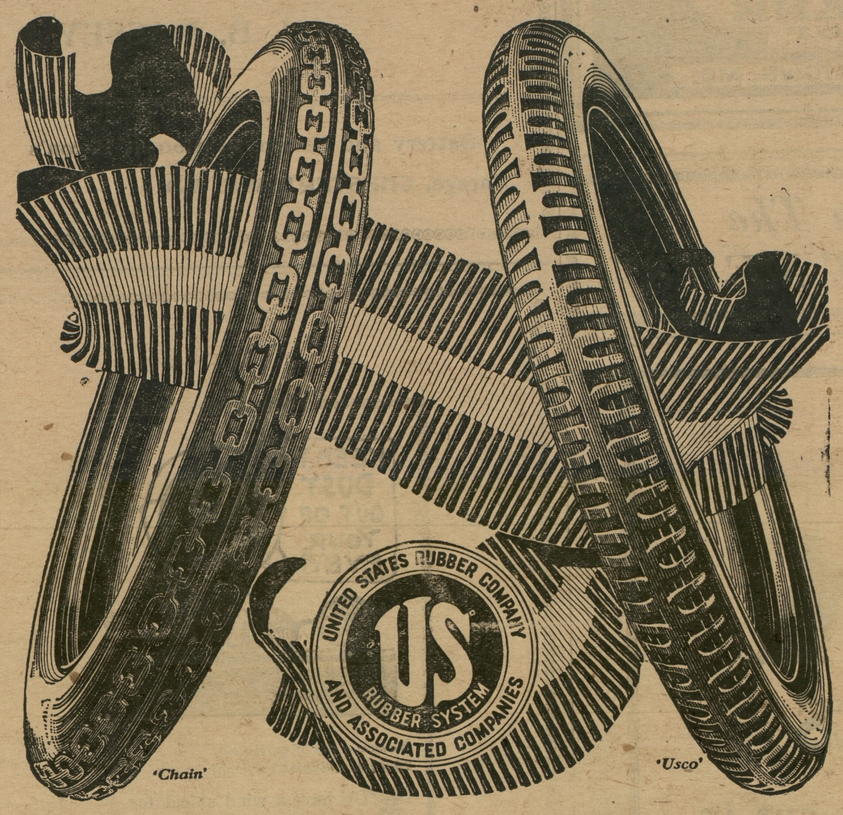

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