

CURRENT OPINION

January, 1925

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Wilson Portrayed in Glowing Colors

*William Allen White's Estimate
of Our War President*

BY all odds the best of the four biographies of Woodrow Wilson appearing in America in 1924 is that* written by William Allen White. The publishers of this book go so far as to say that Mr. White was "ideally fitted" for the task which he undertook in writing it. Be that as it may, we can hardly deny his power as a writer and his influence as a public figure. A representative editor of the Middle West, a close student of and participant in national affairs, a co-worker with Wilson in Paris though himself an independent Republican, he had unique qualifications for producing a book of real interest and lasting importance. His opportunities for first-hand observation have been many, and he has supplemented this with extensive researches in the South and elsewhere.

The new book is nothing if not a colorful portrait, and it has all the charm of a well-written novel. Mr. White, while proclaiming himself "a benevolent enemy" of Wilson and denying to him "a first-class mind," is actually very much of a hero-worshipper. His few adverse criticisms, and, in particular, his statement on the first page of his introduction that Wilson was "neither God nor fiend, but in his political career rather a shy, middle-aged gentleman with the hoar frost of the cloister upon his public manner," seem only intended to heighten, by contrast, the rhetorical passages in which, toward the end of the book, he extols Wilson as "a world conqueror."

The key to Wilson's contradictory temperament is found by Mr. White in his mingled ancestry—the paternal Wilson strain of Irish and the maternal Woodrow strain of North British. "From both sides," we are told, "came

* WOODROW WILSON: THE MAN, HIS TIMES AND HIS TASK, By William Allen White.

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WOODROW WILSON AND HIS SECRETARY

Joseph P. Tumulty is described by William Allen White as "a stocky, blond, blue-eyed Irishman, with thin, soft curly hair, in his mid-thirties" at the time when he became Woodrow Wilson's secretary. He was Wilson's Man Friday for ten years.

the forward urge—the knack for enterprises which we hope is progress; the spirit that moves the pioneer, the crusader, the martyr. From the Woodrows came the capacity for slow, continuous, dogged, undramatic, spiritual struggle. . . . From the Wilson heritage came the gay fighting blood of the Irish; contentious, imaginative, often vain, but never cold in pride; restlessly following the call of eerie fairies to lovely and surprising things."

Passing on to describe, in sympathetic fashion, the emergence of Wilson from his boyhood home in Augusta, Georgia, through student days at Princeton and the University of Virginia, to a professorship in Princeton and then to the presidency of the University, Mr. White conveys the impressions of a man of thought and of books who was more and more irked by the burdens of teaching. The time was at hand when Wilson felt that he must *act*, rather than talk. His opportunity for escape from academic life came in connection with the wave of liberalism which was rising through the country about the year 1910. This wave, according to Mr. White, had been pioneered by Theodore Roosevelt, had been checked by Taft, and was now to reach its fullest strength. On its crest Wilson was carried, first, into the highest position that his State could give him, and, later, into the White House.

As a liberal thrust into the very center of national affairs Wilson may be

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said to have acquitted himself brilliantly. His Federal Reserve banking system, now ten years old, was his outstanding legislative achievement. But he also succeeded, in the Panama tolls matter and in his attitude toward Mexico, in injecting a new and idealistic spirit into foreign policies. He was aiming to put unselfish interest in orderly government ahead of any material interest of the United States.

There was often something inhuman about him on the personal side. He seemed at times to possess an almost vampire-like instinct for absorbing men's minds and hearts and then throwing them away. Mr. White rehearses the amazing record of friends and helpers sloughed off in fairly quick succession. It included, in the early years of his political career, James Smith, George L. Record, Harvey, Watterson, Bryan and McCombs. It was soon to include House, Lansing and even his faithful secretary Tumulty.

Mr. White makes it clear that Wilson, just because his life was so keyed to ideas, rather than to people, needed all the affection that he could get. He offers a very idealistic account of the three women in Wilson's life. There was Ellen Axson, his first wife, a Presbyterian preacher's daughter, who bore him three daughters and with whom he lived in what is described as loyal and affectionate comradeship for twenty-nine years. There was Mary Hulbert Peck, whom he met in Bermuda and to whom he wrote some two hundred letters. Mr. White has read these letters and says that, despite salacious gossip to the contrary, they were perfectly harmless and could all have been published in the *Sunday School Times*. There

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was, finally, Edith Bolling Galt, who became Wilson's second wife and accompanied him to Europe.

Some of the best writing in Mr. White's book traces Woodrow Wilson's development from a pacifist into a war president. We are told of a "Sunrise Conference" held in the early morning hours at the White House in the spring of 1915, following the sinking of the *Lusitania*. At this conference, attended by Congressman Claude Kitchin, Democratic House leader, Congressman Henry D. Flood, of the House Foreign Relations Committee, and Speaker Champ Clark, of the House, Wilson is said to have announced his intention to put the United States into the War immediately. "The Democratic leaders," Mr. White writes, "were thinking in terms of a Democratic Congress. They, and not Wilson, seem to have kept us out of war in May, 1915. Yet it is characteristic of Woodrow Wilson that he stood manfully against the uproar and contumely hurled at him by the war party in America during that spring of 1915; let men call him coward and pettifogger, and said not one word in his own defense, released no whit of the truth which would have shielded him from the scorn and abuse of his enemies."

If Woodrow Wilson suffered by comparison with Theodore Roosevelt, one of his chief critics and opponents, the reason must be sought in the fact that he lacked the power of dramatizing himself. But Wilson, as Mr. White interprets him, possessed a spiritual power that Roosevelt never could have reached. His statement in a Philadelphia speech in 1915 that "there is such a thing as a man being too proud to fight" was, according to Mr. White, a courageous appeal to the philosophy of Jesus in the hearts of men. In the heat of the War itself he could never forget that man is spirit, as well as body. Mr. White writes, finely:

"Woodrow Wilson, the administrator, the head of the Army and Navy, put into battle millions of men, and treasure beyond the dream of avarice. During the nineteen months of the War, those men and that treasure, hurtling out of the catapult of our physical fortress, crashed into the German forces terrifically. Probably no conqueror in the world, not

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Philip of Macedon, not Caesar, not Genghis Khan, not Napoleon, ever in so short a time assembled so much death-dealing force against an enemy. Wilson meeting force with force was Ajax hurling thunderbolts. And yet, what he did with force will crumble. If only force had conquered the Kaiser, he and his kind could return again. But the conflict in the upper zone, the weapons of the spirit, the thunderbolts of reason, the shafts of resistless logic, Wilson's will for a more abundant life on this planet, his vision of a new order, his call to a nobler civilization, the Olympian debate which he began April 2, 1917, and continued for three years until he was stricken—that is a part of the conquest of this war that leaves him a world conqueror, the only one whose fortifications will not turn to dust."

There is ample ground for criticism of Wilson's course both before and after his visits to Paris in the interest of the Versailles Treaty and the Covenant of the League of Nations, yet the verdict of history on his achievement, Mr. White affirms, is likely to be a positive rather than a negative one. "He played a great game, and posterity may call it a successful game." Mr. White concludes:

"Whether or not Wilson will live as a world figure depends not so much upon what work he has done as upon what the chance of time and circumstance will do with his work. He must live or die in world fame bound up in the League of Nations. If that stands he may tower beside it as the Washington of a world federation. If the league crumbles, if in the inscrutable ways of Providence some other method is devised by men to institutionalize their yearnings for peace, then Wilson will become one of the host of good men who spent their zeal striving for futile things. That he put into his endeavor heroic qualities through vigils long of a body which he sacrificed to his ideal as surely as Cranmer gave his body to be burned, will avail nothing when Fame makes her award.

"On the other hand, if his vision becomes reality, then all the petty faults which men saw and fumed about will fall away from him. His strength will survive; his moral courage will stand out. The fire of his words will not be quenched, and the sword of his faith will flame at the gates of a new order. This much we know of Woodrow Wilson surely: If Fame does come to him through the conjunction of time and chance working upon the genius of the race to preserve the structure which he provisioned in his hour of trial, Fame will find a man here—a clean, brave, wise, courageous man—ready-made for heroic stature."