

A News Report

[c. Feb. 28, 1917]

A Visit to the President

About 150 delegates from the twenty-two leading peace societies of the United States met in New York City on February 22nd and 23d,¹ for a conference on the best coöperative means of promoting international peace.

A committee reported recommendations for certain measures to be adopted in the present emergency. One of these provided for the sending of a delegation to interview President Wilson, and urge upon him the unanimous desire of the conference that he should continue to keep the country out of war and to settle the existing disputes with Germany and Great Britain by peaceful means alone.

This delegation consisted of William I. Hull, chairman, Jane Addams, Joseph D. Cannon, and Emily G. Balch.²

The President accorded the delegation an hour's interview on the afternoon of February 28th. It was a time of very grave national tension, and the President talked most feelingly with the delegation, but as he pledged its members to hold in entire confidence whatever he might say, no statement of his side of the conversation can be given. It might be of interest, however, to give in outline the message which the delegation presented to him.

Dr. Hull emphasized a number of historical precedents for the peaceful solution of exceedingly difficult international problems. Among these were the precedents set by Washington, John Adams, Lincoln, and President Wilson himself. When the French Revolution and the French Revolutionary War were raging in Europe, and a large portion of the American people sympathized with France and desired to become its ally against Great Britain, President Washington sent John Jay to England, and succeeded in negotiating a treaty with England which settled some of the outstanding disputes between the two countries. Jay was burned in effigy in America, and his treaty was extremely unpopular—an unpopularity which Washington shared. In spite, however, of the contumely which his political enemies heaped upon Washington's head, the mature verdict of the American people has been that Washington's greatness never shone brighter than on this occasion.

Four years later when the great European tempest was still raging, and even a majority of the President's own party under the leadership of Alexander Hamilton were determined to fight

France, President John Adams sent commissioners to negotiate with the French Government. Although armed conflicts between French and American ships had already occurred upon the sea, Adams was successful in settling the dispute with the French Government. This was done in defiance of his own party, and indeed of his own cabinet, and cost him all chance of re-election to the Presidency; but he said in a letter written a score of years later that he would rather have inscribed upon his tombstone the words, "He kept the country out of war," than the record of any other event in his long and illustrious career.

The historic precedent set by President Lincoln in surrendering Mason and Slidell to the British at a time when the country deemed that they should be held at the risk of a war with England, and the settling of the *Alabama* claims by means of arbitration, were also recalled.

Finally, President Wilson's own success in keeping the country out of the European war, and in tiding over the Mexican crises by means of the conferences of Niagara Falls, Washington, and Atlantic City was recalled, and the conviction was expressed that the approval of these peaceful triumphs of the administration had been registered by the country at the last election.

In view of these and other notable precedents, Doctor Hull ventured to urge that two joint commissions of inquiry and conciliation should be appointed to negotiate with Germany and Great Britain, respectively, a *modus vivendi* relating to neutral rights and duties—possibly in line with the Declaration of London—until the end of the war. This attempt might seem especially helpful for the reason that both Great Britain and Germany have endorsed in principle the offer of the United States to investigate and settle by conciliatory means disputes which might arise between them; and also because such an offer would seem so reasonable to the *people* of the two belligerent governments that those governments could not well decline it.

Miss Addams emphasized especially the anxiety and distress of the German and Austrian immigrant families domiciled within our country, and mentioned several moving illustrations which had come to her personally in connection with her work at Hull House in Chicago. She quoted some of her immigrant friends as declaring that "Your President will not go to war, because he is a man of peace." She also expressed her conviction that our country cannot be precipitated into war by the "hyper-nationalism" which has forced the European belligerents into war, because of the cosmopolitan character of our American population; and she made a fervent appeal to the President that the

great program of social legislation upon which his administration has made so splendid a beginning should not be sidetracked or destroyed by leading the country into a military means of settling international disputes.

Mr. Cannon, a representative of the miners, especially of those in the far West, reminded the President that all of the political parties in the recent Presidential campaign had endorsed the President's policy of keeping the country out of war, and he emphasized especially the overwhelming advocacy of the peace policy in the Democratic Convention, platform, and campaign; and finally he assured the President that only a small minority of the people were in favor of the war, and that the great majority of the American people would support unwaveringly whatever peaceful method the President decided upon for a solution of the outstanding questions with Germany and Great Britain.

Miss Balch expressed her conviction, on the basis of personal experience since the war began, that the German *people* were wholly adverse to war with the United States, and that if the President could decide upon some peaceful means of settling the dispute with their government, they would force their government to consider it.

After these preliminary statements were presented to the President, he entered into a very frank and earnest conversation with the delegation, in which he gave further convincing evidence of his earnest desire to find some peaceful means of settling our present international difficulties.³

At the end of the interview, Dr. Hull ventured to express on behalf of the New York conference the hope that the President would utilize the first suitable opportunity, preferably in his inaugural address, to bring before the world again his program for international organization and the limitation and reduction of armaments which he outlined in his address to the Senate on the 22d of January last, and which has already made so profound an impression upon the mind of the world.

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¹ Where they formed the Emergency Peace Federation.

² Persons not identified heretofore were William Isaac Hull, Isaac H. Clothier, Professor of History and International Relations at Swarthmore College, prominent Quaker leader and peace advocate, author of numerous studies of Quaker history and of international relations; Joseph D. Cannon, organizer for the Western Federation of Miners, Socialist party candidate for United States senator from New York in 1916; and Frederick Henry Lynch, secretary of the Church Peace Union of America and director of the New York Peace Society.

³ Wilson met this delegation at 2 P.M. on February 28. Two of the participants later wrote their recollections of what Wilson had said. Hull remembered the following: "As for our informal discussion with President Wilson after the formal presentation of our points of view, I recall that he enumerated with great emphasis our various grievances against the Hohenzollern government . . .

and stressed repeatedly his conviction that it was impossible to deal further in peaceful method with that government. When I ventured to press upon him the possibility of making a successful appeal to the German people, over the heads of their government, he said that he considered that attempt impracticable. Finally, I recall with great vividness his tone and manner—a mixture of great indignation and determination—when he said: 'Dr. Hull, if you knew what I know at this present moment, and what you will see reported in tomorrow morning's newspapers, you would not ask me to attempt further peaceful dealings with the Germans.'" W. I. Hull to R. S. Baker, Oct. 10, 1928, TCL (RSB Coll., DLC).

Jane Addams recalled other facets of the encounter: "Professor Hull . . . , a former student of the President's, presented a brief résumé of what other American presidents had done through adjudication when the interests of American shipping had become involved. . . . The President was, of course, familiar with that history, as he reminded his old pupil, but he brushed it aside as he did the suggestion that if the attack on American shipping were submitted to The Hague tribunal, it might result in adjudication of the issues of the great war itself. The Labor man on the committee still expressed the hope for a popular referendum before war should be declared, and we once more pressed for a conference of neutrals. . . . The President's mood was stern and far from the scholar's detachment as he told us of recent disclosures of German machinations in Mexico and announced the impossibility of any form of adjudication. He still spoke to us, however, as to fellow pacifists to whom he was forced to confess that war had become inevitable. He used one phrase which I had heard Colonel House use so recently that it still stuck firmly in my memory. The phrase was to the effect that, as head of a nation participating in the war, the President of the United States would have a seat at the Peace Table, but that if he remained the representative of a neutral country he could at best only 'call through a crack in the door.' The appeal he made was, in substance, that the foreign policy which we so extravagantly admired could have a chance if he were there to push and to defend them, but not otherwise." Jane Addams, *Peace and Bread in Time of War* (New York, 1922), pp. 63-64.

An Address to the President by Max Eastman¹

Mr. President:

Feb. 28, 1917

I was especially eager to talk with you about this particular crisis, because your general international policy, announced in your address to the Senate advocating a league of the nations to ensure peace, has my fervent support and admiration. I am sure that with communication becoming continually more fluent and rapid all over the earth, with people all over the earth learning to read and translate each other's languages over-night, and with social and scientific and vast commercial combinations overspreading the boundaries of all nations, such a political union of the people for the protection of their common interests is inevitable. I am sure that whether the pre-prerequisite [*sic*] of peace without victory can be attained in this situation or not, in the lapse of time such a union will come nevertheless, and your "Declaration of Interdependence"—as we call it—will have an honored place in the histories of all nations.

I think of this union, and I believe you do, not exactly as the so-called "League to Enforce Peace," for it is utopian to hope