

# REVIEW of REVIEWS

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## HOW THE WILSON ADMINISTRATION WENT TO WAR IN 1917



THE COUNCIL OF NATIONAL DEFENSE AT WASHINGTON IN WAR TIME

(From left to right are: Grosvenor Clarkson, Director of the Council; David F. Houston, Secretary of Agriculture; Josephus Daniels, Secretary of the Navy; Newton D. Baker, Secretary of War; Franklin K. Lane, Secretary of the Interior; William C. Redfield, Secretary of Commerce; and William B. Wilson, Secretary of Labor)

**M**ANY readers may recall the sensation that was produced a decade ago by the publication of the diary of Gideon Welles. That diary revealed secrets of the Lincoln War Cabinet that had been kept under lock and key for fifty years. The present generation will not have to wait so long to learn what happened in the Wilson Cabinet meetings of the eventful winter and spring of 1917. In the letters of Franklin K. Lane, as published in the *World's Work*, we now, five years after the events related, have "the inside story."

Mr. Lane, who was Secretary of the Interior in the Wilson Administration, wrote these letters in confidence to his brother, and they are now, after his death, given to the world for the first time. They show clearly that as late as February, 1917, when the United States had severed relations with Germany, President Wilson was still extremely reluctant to take any step that would cause us to enter the war. He believed that both Germany and the Allies had been equally indifferent to the rights of neutrals, though Germany had been brutal in taking life and England only in taking property. He would like to see the neutrals unite. At this point, writes Mr. Lane, speaking of the Cabinet meeting held on February 2:

I ventured the expression that to ask them to do this would be idle, as they could not afford to join with us if it meant the insistence on their rights to the point of war. He thought we might coordinate the neutral forces, but was persuaded that an effort to do this publicly, as he proposed, would put some of the small powers in a delicate position. We talked the world situation over. The fact that Russia had been, but a short time since, on the verge of an independent peace with Germany was brought out as evidencing the possibility of a break on the Allies' side. His conclusion was that nothing should be done now—awaiting the "overt act" by Germany which would take him to Congress to ask for power. [On February 3 the President addressed Congress announcing the severance of relations.]



*Wilson: 1917*

At this time Secretary Lane, with the other members of the Cabinet, was active in the work of the Council of National Defense. On February 16 he writes:

At the last meeting of the Cabinet we again urged that we should convoy our own ships, but the President said that this was not possible without going to Congress, and he was not ready to do that now. The Navy people say that to convoy would be foolish because it would make a double target, but it seems to me the right thing to risk a naval ship in the enforcement of our right.

At our dinner to the President last night he said he was not in sympathy with any great preparedness. I think he is dead wrong in this, and as I am a member of the National Council of Defense, I am pushing for everything possible. This week we have had a meeting of the Council every day—the Secretaries of War, Navy, Interior, Commerce, and Labor—with an Advisory Commission consisting of seven business men. We are developing a plan for the mobilization of all our national industries and resources so that we may be ready for getting guns, munitions, trucks, supplies, airplanes, and other material things as soon as war comes—if not too soon. It is a great organization of industry and resources. I think that I shall urge Hoover as the head of the work. His Belgian experience has made him the most competent man in this country for such work. He had promised to come to me as one of my assistants, but the other work is the larger, and I can get on with a smaller man. He will correlate the industrial life of the nation against the day of danger and immediate need.

France seems to be ahead in this work. The essentials are to commandeer all material resources of certain kinds (steel, copper, rubber, nickel, etc.). Then have ready all drawings, machines, etc., necessary in advance for all munitions and supplies. And know the plant that can produce these on a standard basis.

The Army and the Navy are so set and stereotyped and standpat that I am almost hopeless as to moving them to do the wise, large, wholesale job—they are governed by red tape; worse than any union.

The Chief of Staff fell asleep at our meeting to-day—Mars and Morpheus in one!

On February 25 Mr. Lane writes that on the preceding Friday had been held "one of the most animated sessions of the Cabinet that, I suppose, has ever been held under this or any other President."

The President said that the country was not willing that we should take any risks of war. I said that I got no such sentiment out of the country, but if the country knew that our Consuls' wives had been treated so outrageously that there would be no question as to the sentiment. This, but if the country knew that our Consuls' wives had been treated so outrageously that there would be no question as to the sentiment. This, the President took as a suggestion that we should work up a propaganda of hatred against Germany. Of course I said I had no such idea, but that I felt that in a Democracy the people were entitled to know the facts. McAdoo, Houston, and Redfield joined me. The President turned



on them bitterly, especially on McAdoo, and reproached all of us with appealing to the spirit of the *Code Duello*. We couldn't get the idea out of his head that we were bent on pushing the country into war. X talked of resigning after the meeting. Y will—within a year, I believe. I tried to smooth them down by recalling our past experiences with the President. We have had to push and push and push to get him to take any forward step—the Trade Commission, the Tariff Commission. He comes out right, but he is slower than a glacier—and things are mighty disagreeable whenever anything has to be done.

Now he is being abused by the Republicans for being slow, and this will probably help a bit, though it may make him more obstinate. He wants no extra session, and the Republicans fear that he will submit to anything in the way of indignity or national humiliation without getting back," so they are standing for an extra session.

I don't know whether the President is an internationalist or a pacifist; he seems to be very mildly national—his patriotism is covered over with a film of philosophic humanitarianism that certainly doesn't make for "punch" at such a time as this.

Mr. Lane continued his work in the Council of National Defense and on May 5, a month after we had entered the war, he wrote to Mr. Frank I. Cobb, of the *New York World*:

Do not, I beg of you, minimize the immediate danger. This is the time to defend the United States, and the United States is woefully indifferent to its danger and to the needs of the situation. We have been carrying on a ship-building program with reference to conditions *after the war*. It is only within ten days that we have realized that the end of the war will be one of defeat unless we build twice as fast as we proposed to build. You know that I am not pessimistic. It is not my habit to look upon the gloomy side of things. It is no kindness to the American people or to France or England to give them words of good cheer now. This war is right at this minute a challenge to every particle of brains and inventive skill that we have got.

Writing to Secretary Lansing in the summer of 1917, Mr. Lane said:

I had lunch yesterday with Colonel House, who asked me what I thought should be done as to the Pope's appeal for Peace. I told him I thought it should be taken seriously. He agreed and asked what the President should say. I answered that, inasmuch as all the evidence pointed to the conclusion that the German Centrists and Austria were responsible for this appeal, that we could not afford to have them feel that we were for a policy of annihilation—for this would be playing the War Party's game and would place the burden on us of continuing the war. And this we could neither afford [to do] at home or abroad. This opportunity should be seized, I said to make plain not so much our terms of peace but the things in Germany that seemed to make peace difficult, Germany's attitude toward the world, the spirit against which we are fighting.