

# Hail and Farewell

## *A Valediction to Mr. Wilson and a Speculation Upon Mr. Harding*

By WALTER LIPPMANN

**I**N well-managed monarchies the façade of the sovereign is a subject of constant attention. From the day he is born to the day of his death he is surrounded by property-men, writers of scenarios, scene painters, and artists in the business of retouching, who manufacture a personality for him. That can be done so well that after a while it becomes extremely doubtful whether the sovereign himself can tell his various selves apart. Nor does death release him, for then comes the official biographer, takes the image of plaster and paint, and casts it in imperishable bronze.

The ancient Egyptians were less confusing. Instead of finishing off their monuments with the semblance of a human face, they frankly substituted the head of an eagle, a dove, or a vulture, as the case might be. That is more honest than any campaign biography ever written; but the Egyptian method will no longer work. We have become sufficiently democratic to insist that our public characters shall resemble the human species. But we are not democratic enough to stomach them as they are.

In an effort to find out what is expected of a public character, I began recently to look into the most public characters which have ever existed on this planet. I mean the moving picture heroes. And I find that in an excellent, solemn little book the specifications have been put down in black and white. Here they are. The hero must observe:

1. The doctrinal conventions:
  - a. the existence and providence of God
  - b. the truth and beauty of religion in general
  - c. the immortality of the soul
  - d. the existence and malice of sin and the final triumph of justice
2. The moral conventions:
  - a. the hero, if he would hold the sympathy of the audience, must at least during the action of the play, observe the Ten Commandments
  - b. for the heroine this rule is absolute, admitting only of such exceptions as prove its universality
  - c. the villain may be credited with all the sins in the calendar
  - d. the minor characters may have many faults, but must show some stock of solid virtues
3. The ideal conventions:
  - a. the drama must give us what real life so rarely does—the triumphant resolution of a set of difficulties; the anguish of virtue and the triumph of sin must be changed to the glorification of virtue and the eternal punishment of its enemy
  - b. the hero and heroine must, in general, possess youth, beauty, goodness, exalted self-sacrifice, and unalterable constancy.

“The photoplaywright” says our authority “may apply these principles to his character delineation with profit.”

Now there are men who have always felt the finger of destiny pointing at them. From earliest childhood their public façade has been in the making. At the tenderest age they were exhibited by their parents, made to stand off in the center of the parlor, and recite *The Wreck of the Hesperus*. In school they performed the class oration on any and every occasion, and departed in a nimbus of valediction. As college seniors they had already learned to visualize themselves in the manner of a steel engraving.



*Farewell, Mr. Wilson**The Two Routes in Politics*

**B**Y these standards Mr. Harding is what one might call a recently improved public character. To be sure, he has been in politics a long time, but that is not the same as being in public life. There are plenty of politicians, and very powerful ones at that, who have never in this sense of the word been in public life. For there are two main avenues to high office. Let us call them for short the underground and the elevated. They are both legitimate, and well accepted.

The underground route is what is known as working up from the inside. You start young and early in your local Republican club. And you work. Make no mistake about it, you work. You watch at the polls, you lick postage stamps, you make house-to-house calls, you parade, you arrange for the bunting. You run errands for the visiting celebrity's secretary. You make yourself indispensable, and you are promoted. You second the nomination of an alderman. You go as a delegate to a county convention. You fill in as speaker at the annual banquet of the Dried Fruit Association. In a few years you yourself are nominated for coroner or state printer. And so by proving yourself inch by inch a tried and trusty servant, your influence spreads, and you become more and more "available". This in its general pattern has been Mr. Harding's method of ascent.

Sharply contrasted was Mr. Wilson's. He took the elevated route. It led over the corpses of the local politicians of his state. Long before any one could possibly have known it, he knew the goal, and prepared for it. He put his mind, his information, his principles and his habits in order, and when he reached the top there was no need to improvise a public character. There lies the deepest difference between the two men. Mr. Wilson was President in his imagination long before he was President in fact. Mr. Harding became a President in fact before he had fully and vividly conceived himself as one.

But there is another difference that originates in the facts, and not in the men. The world in which Mr. Wilson had long imagined himself playing a big rôle was America before the war. It was a familiar world, in which people knew their way about. That they did not really understand all its possibilities, the war, of course, revealed. But barring so unexpected a breaking of all the crusts of habit, the America of Mr. Wilson's first inauguration was only slightly different from the America of his youth. A public official knew, or at least everybody thought that he knew, how to fulfil the specification (3a) about the "triumphant resolution of a set of difficulties." Not so to-day. There is no agreement as to what the difficulties are, much less about how triumphantly to resolve them.

*What Mr. Wilson Accomplished*

**T**HIS great change took place in the middle of Mr. Wilson's term of office. To my mind, and I know there are plenty of people who will disagree with the opinion, Mr. Wilson, in spite of many failures in detail and of practical execution, did succeed brilliantly in reconciling the public purposes of the war with the American tradition. Without denying any of the essential American ideals, he refocussed, expanded, and developed their implications, until at the armistice practically the whole civilized world professed to see the war that



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way. And I firmly believe that the historian who examines the state papers of Wilson up to November, 1918, will say, not only that they are in an unbroken line from Washington's Farewell Address, but that it required something very like genius under the pressure and in the fog of a world war, to keep that line intact.

It was a daring thing to do, and there are opponents of Mr. Wilson who will deny that it was a good thing to do. The world, they say, was never the kind of world he described. The war was never fought for the purposes he announced. It was a pretense or a delusion, and it was bound to bring practical confusion and immense disappointment. "Look at the result," says Mr. Lodge, "I told you so"; "Look at the result," says Mr. Neutral, "I told you so." Well, I do not think they told us so. All that Mr. Lodge told us was to win the victory without considering what we should do with it when we had it. And all that Mr. Neutral told us was that we should not win a victory, but not what we should do with our defeat. I think Mr. Wilson did the right thing both ways, first in recognizing that there was a time even for America when it was a choice between the German will and our will, and second in trying by his state papers to give our will an aim.

There came a time when a settlement was reached. And then a new question existed. It was, first, whether that settlement could be squared with American aims, as the President had adapted them to the war, and, second, whether the settlement could be squared with the condition of the world. The answer to that question will always be the culminating chapter in the life of Woodrow Wilson. His official biographers will answer Yes, and his critics No. And so long as the human drama at Paris interests people they will divide in accordance with their answers.

*The Verdict on the Settlement*

**A**ND they would continue to disagree even if the facts are accepted. For though people were agreed that the settlement does fundamentally contradict the whole of the spirit and most of the letter of Mr. Wilson's state papers, agreement on this fact would still leave the jury divided. For there will, I believe, always be some to claim that, though he failed to realize it, he established an ideal, and there will be some to claim that by his failure he discredited the ideal. And there will be others, whose opinion I share, to say that it was not the failure which discredited the ideal, but the attempt to deny that it was a failure.

We who are in this third group will argue that the denial was on the whole sincere, because the President's elaborate public character, constructed through a lifetime, censored out at the climax any vivid sense of contradiction. At the high tension in which the whole affair culminated he would see nothing that was inconsistent, and would have no friend around him who disturbed his equanimity. To one great novelty, the war itself, he could and did adjust himself. To the other great novelty, the peace, he was now no longer plastic.

Considerably mussed up, that undesired novelty now lies on Mr. Harding's doorstep. He must take it in, and deal with it. But how? If in politics you travel by the elevated route, you deal with new situations by such light as is in yourself. If the light happens to be a good one, you travel brilliantly;



if it is no longer good, you smash. But the point of reference is yourself. If what is in yourself happens to fit what is outside, as it did with Abraham Lincoln, you are known as a great moral leader. If it does not fit, you are known as an obstinate, dogmatic autocrat.

The inside of no man's mind to-day really fits the wildly unprecedented world outside. And that is the reason why the men of "principle" are utterly unable to keep themselves going, but the unprincipled men remain. The Wilsons and the Clemenceaus go, the Lloyd Georges continue, because the heads of the principled men are so full of ideas that are not so, while the unprincipled ones can keep their eyes on the facts. Only those who do not follow a straight and narrow path can tack before the wind.

Now Mr. Harding belongs to the unprincipled men. I do not mean that in his personal life he violates the moral conventions. On the contrary, he adheres to them. But politically the inside of his mind, though in it there are a number of resonant perorations, is devoid of any preconceived idea of what to do about this strange world. Now that would be an excellent start, if with it there went a trained capacity for filling an open mind with real ideas.

Mr. Hoover has that capacity in one way: Mr. Lloyd George in another. Mr. Hoover does know how to get facts, where to get facts, how to read facts, how to draw conclusions from facts. He is in short a scientifically trained man. Mr. George's mind is more mysterious, but he, too, possesses a marvellous gift of opening his mind, joined to the power of selecting with lightning skill something to put into it. But how does Mr. Harding reach out for ideas with which to fill his open mind?

Having neither the good lawyer's education in the assembling of evidence, nor the engineer's discipline in surveying the ground, nor the intuition of a wizard like Mr. George, he has to fall back on the habits of his political past. In the underground approach to politics, decisions are reached by feeling around among strategic individuals, by logrolling their interests and neutralizing their ideas. Theoretically, it sounds like a fine thing for a President to consult everybody. But actually he can consult only a very few people, even if he gives up golf and confers sixteen hours a day. He must pick the men he will consult, and inevitably, if he has advanced up through the political hierarchy, he must consult those who are powerful in it. And among these he must give more weight to some than others. But his method of judging the value of what they tell him is again limited by his past. The word of a political grand duke goes further than the word of a viscount, and a viscount's further than that of an insurgent baronet. Lacking an independent or objective method of arriving at a knowledge of the facts, he must take the word of other men. And the value of that word is determined for him not by their expertness but by their position.

All this is aggravated for Mr. Harding by a knowledge that these handicaps were precisely what brought him the nomination. For he cannot be deceived into thinking that his plurality was any measure of his personal strength. He was chosen just because he had an open mind, to which all the approaches are well guarded.

**B**UT it is rumoured, and there are stray facts to bear it out, that he is restless



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about the mayors of his palace. It is not surprising, because in the pressures that go with the consultation of best minds, there is a tendency for one mind to cancel out the other, and to leave a net impression not too favourable to any of them. Mr. Harding has within his own party gone through the experience of the honest and puzzled citizen who attended Democratic and Republican meetings alternately through a whole campaign, and came out convinced that each had made its case against the other. That restlessness might turn out to be an important political fact.

But it may simply make Mr. Harding profoundly unhappy, as he feels the grinding of his associates against his own honest soul. Or it may mean, as one of his friends put it, that some day he will go awkwardly over the fence, and carry the fence with him. It may mean that Mr. Harding will play poker. That would require a knowledge of the game, its objects, its stakes, and a finesse in negotiations which Mr. Harding may possess, though he has rarely exhibited it in a public capacity. And he would be playing against the men with whom he has spent his life.

To try that would argue a miracle of conversion. But such a miracle is not in the least impossible. The difference between Marion, Ohio, and the Presidency is so stupendous that it could change, if anything could, the whole direction of a man's mind. But it is no less possible to want with your whole soul to make a change, and not know how. In that respect, more will depend upon his private secretary and his partners at golf—that is, upon those who immediately guard his presence—than upon any one else.

For if Mr. Harding is to be somebody, and not merely the junction point where all the political collisions are to occur, he will have to become a real person by the only method open to a man of his intellectual habits. He cannot go up on to a mountain top and see the world. He cannot go into solitude and find the truth. He cannot study a pile of papers and arrive at a policy. He must converse with somebody he trusts—that is the way of his life. And that is a good way if he knows whom to trust, but the worst way possible if he does not. There have been plenty of successful men no better brained than Mr. Harding is. But then they have had the one great gift of picking men. Does Mr. Harding have it? People realize now, in his case, everything depends upon the character of his immediate circle. That accounts for the enormous curiosity about his appointments. There is always some curiosity, of course. But where the man himself has decided colour, as Roosevelt and Wilson had, it is not such anxious curiosity. In Mr. Harding's case there is knowledge that on the quality of his associates the fate of the nation depends. Nation is perhaps too large a word. We ought rather to say the fate of the Republican party.

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