The President as Statesman

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Between the docking of the George Washington in France in December 1918 and the opening of the peace conference in Paris a month later, Wilson basked in the hero’s welcome given to him by massive throngs in Paris, London, and Rome. Little more than two years later, however, at the end of his presidency, he surrendered leadership of his own nation surrounded by ill feelings and controversy. What led to Wilson’s dramatic fall? The answer lies in part with his failure to bring more supportive Democratic majorities to Congress in 1918. This failure, in turn, stemmed from the U.S. entrance into World War I, which constrained Wilson’s ongoing efforts to build a progressive Democratic majority in the electorate. The war also raised a number of divisive issues, despite his efforts to suppress them, that wreaked havoc with his coalition. What is more, the control that Wilson sought to exercise over the American war effort and subsequent peace negotiations increased both the need for and the risks of a presidential intervention in the congressional elections of 1918.

In the aftermath of the 1916 elections, several prominent progressives who had supported the president analyzed the implications of the returns. In light of the crucial boost in support that Wilson received from progressives in and outside of the Democratic Party and the failure of machine politicos in the North to deliver the key states of New York, New Jersey, Indiana, and Illinois, his would-be advisers urged him to forsake the bosses and forge ahead with his efforts to build a center-left coalition. The editors of the New Republic summarized for the president what the new model Democratic Party had to do in order to prove its progressive bona fides and consolidate the support that had sustained Wilson in 1916: “It must be prepared to emancipate the administrative departments of the government from petty distracting po-
political interference. . . . It must be prepared to shed the newer-worldly provincialism of American foreign policy and to promote the participation of the United States in . . . a working international organization. Finally, it must recognize the existence of a class of wage-earners which . . . suffers from more or less exploitation, and for whom special provision must be made in the reorganization of American society." 1 Civil Service reform, liberal internationalism, and social welfare legislation — this was the progressive prescription for the Democratic Party. Wilson wasted no time in following it.

Braced by postelection letters from prominent reformers who were friendly to his administration but criticized his reliance on the spoils system, Wilson vowed to Colonel House that he would put a stop to blatantly political appointments in the upper reaches of his administration. Even more dramatically, Wilson decided to issue an executive order instructing Postmaster General Burleson thenceforth to fill all first-, second-, and third-class postmasterships — some 10,000 positions — in accordance with the merit system. 2 Wilson now was prepared to assume without qualification the progressive stance against patronage that he had called for as an academic and briefly assumed in late 1914.

After the announcement of the new policy in March 1917, a protest quickly and predictably brewed on Capitol Hill. Democratic legislators implored Wilson to reconsider for the sake of the party’s future. Champ Clark warned that the new classification would lead to electoral disaster, as was demonstrated, the Speaker argued, by the effects of the administration’s previous efforts to classify fourth-class postmasters: “That raised more Cain in politics than anything else, and it is one of the main reasons why the next House is so close. People in a Democratic district want a Democrat in office as Postmaster.” 3

Despite the protests, the president stuck to his new position. As for chastened Postmaster General Burleson, while his implementation of Wilson’s executive order was not completely free of politics, it was sufficiently neutral to draw the ire of Democratic regulars. Progressives were generally pleased. “President Wilson’s order,” commented George Keyes, president of the National Civil Service Reform League, “is one of the most progressive that any president ever issued. It stops the shameful spoilsmongering that has been going on with these offices for the past 80 years.” 4

Wilson also pursued his vision of a new world order through his efforts to mediate a “peace without victory” among the European belligerents and his address on the subject to the Senate in January 1917. Of course shortly thereafter, in the wake of the unrestricted submarine campaign by the Ger-
mans, Wilson gave up on mediation and led the United States into the war, actions that shook the faith of some of the die-hard pacifists who had warmed to his earlier pronouncements. However, many progressive internationalists, and Wilson himself, had come to believe that U.S. participation in the war was essential if the president and the ideas he espoused were to have any influence on the subsequent peace. As Wilson put it in the conclusion of his war message, the crusade he was prepared to lead looked forward to "a universal dominion of right by such a concert of free peoples as shall bring peace and safety to all nations and make the world itself at last free."\(^5\)

As historian Thomas Knock has documented, however, the appeal of Wilson's crusade to progressives was quickly diminished by the reactionary aspects of the administration's handling of the war effort. The Espionage Act passed by Congress at Wilson's urging in July 1917 gave Attorney General Thomas Gregory and the Justice Department the power to prosecute those deemed to have jeopardized recruitment for or loyalty in the armed forces. The act also empowered Postmaster General Albert Burleson to withhold from the mail printed material that likewise undermined the war effort or that could generally be construed as fomenting treason or insurrection. Liberally interpreting the illiberal law, Gregory and Burleson cracked down on socialist and pacifist leaders and publications. Their zealousness profoundly disturbed new Wilsonians such as John Reed, Max Eastman, Amos Pinchot, Herbert Croly, and Walter Lippmann, who warned the president of the damage that Burleson was inflicting on both civil liberties and Wilson's coalition. He was sensitive to this criticism, but he was not a civil libertarian. And, as Wilson's push for the Espionage Act demonstrated, he believed that the war necessitated a curtailment of personal freedoms. In keeping with his general inclination to defer to cabinet members, Wilson accepted the judgments of Burleson and Gregory in almost every case.\(^6\)

The irony is that even as the Wilson administration's curtailment of civil liberties was convincing many progressive and independent observers that the president was, at heart, a reactionary, his opinions on social policy and domestic reform continued to shift to the left. In February 1918, Wilson told Colonel House that he found the Fabian socialist program that the British Labor Party had just put forward to be a compelling reform agenda. In his diary, House recorded the subsequent conversation:

We discussed the trend of liberal opinion in the world and came to the conclusion that the wise thing to do was to lead the movement intelligently and sympathetically. . . . He spoke of the necessity of forming
a new political party in order to achieve these ends. He did not believe the Democratic Party could be used as an instrument to go as far as it would be needful to go and largely because of the reactionary element in the South. . . . Again let me say that the President has started so actively on the liberal road that I find myself, instead of leading as I always did at first, rather in the rear and holding him back.7

House's comments show that Wilson's conversion to advanced progressivism before the 1916 elections was as much intellectual as political in its origins. It also reveals that Wilson still sought to preside over a realignment in which disparate progressive elements would be brought together in a new majority. Indeed, Wilson was now contemplating leaving behind the conservative wing of his own party in order to forge it.

Wilson did not just confide his changing convictions to Colonel House. On March 20, 1918, he sent a letter to the New Jersey Democratic Party in which he declared that the economic and social forces unleashed by the war needed to be channeled toward “greater opportunity and greater prosperity for the average mass of struggling men and women, and of greater safety and opportunity for children.” Subsequently, he drafted a platform for the Indiana Democratic Party's convention in June 1918. Building on the exhortations of his New Jersey letter, Wilson looked ahead to the postwar reconstruction and called for “the sympathetic aid of the Federal Government. . . . to the allocation of labor, the development of its skill, and the establishment of proper labor conditions.” Moreover, in vague phrasing that he adopted in order to mute arguments that Tumulty and House found too radical, the president proposed government control over “raw materials and all universal essentials, like coal and electric power” as well as the rail and water transportation systems. The New Republic remarked that the new tone of Wilson's views “indicates for the first time the direction in which his mind is working and the burden of radicalism which in his opinion a responsible political leader can afford to carry.”8

Yet Wilson's discussion of the future direction his party should take regarding social and economic policy received surprisingly little attention. The discussion was overshadowed because as Wilson himself said in the first sentence of the Indiana platform, “The immediate purpose of the Democratic party, the purpose which takes precedence over every other, is to win the war.” He therefore told government officials that legislation geared toward social and economic reconstruction and not immediately connected with the war effort would have to await the conclusion of hostilities.9 In the meantime, all that Wilson could offer the advocates and potential beneficia-
ries of the proposed domestic agenda were promises. Not least because of
his treatment of their civil liberties, many progressives were skeptical.

II

The American involvement in the war was causing Wilson additional head­
aches by raising the divisive questions of prohibition, women’s suffrage, and
southern domination of the Democratic Party. The war thus revealed the
extent to which Wilson’s party was riven by cleavages along religious, cul­
tural, and sectional lines and, conversely, the extent to which it diverged
from his programmatic ideal of a party united on and animated by encom­
passing national issues.

Wilson had maintained the “local option” position on prohibition during
his governorship and his first term in the White House. In doing so, he
sought to avoid alienating either side in an intraparty debate that pitted im­
migrants in the urban Northeast and “wet” enclaves in Wisconsin, Kentucky,
and Tennessee against the progressive, southern, and Bryanite Democrats
fighting for a nationwide ban on alcohol. However, American belligerency,
and the accompanying demands for the conservation of foodstuffs and the
concentration of virtue, gave strength to the prohibitionists. In late 1917,
Wilson told Tumulty, “I should like very much to keep out of the prohibi­
tion mixup,” but this tactic proved to be impossible. Despite his covert ef­
forts to dissuade them, persistent Anti-Saloon Leaguers and their supporters
in Congress managed to attach a series of riders to wartime legislation that
sharply curtailed and then finally banned the production of alcohol. Wilson
paid a price coming and going: his reluctant acquiescence did not merit the
approbation of the dry forces but nevertheless earned him the opprobrium
of the wets.10

Wilson faced similar difficulties over suffrage. Western and progressive
Democrats were pushing for a constitutional amendment granting women
the vote, while southerners, who saw in the proposed amendment the thin
end of a political wedge that would open the way for black voting rights,
were opposing it. Wilson had long sought to defuse this controversial issue
by maintaining that it should be settled at the state level. As with prohibition,
the war made it impossible for him to stay on the fence. The suffragists had
the president over a rhetorical barrel: how could he claim to be leading a
crusade to make the world safe for democracy, they asked, when he refused
to push for its full establishment in the United States? Wilson endorsed the
amendment in January 1918 and thereafter was an increasingly forceful ad­
vocate on its behalf. However, he could not budge most of the southern
Democrats in the Senate. In September 1918, fifteen out of twenty-two of
them voted against the amendment, which failed by two votes. At the same
time that Wilson had succeeded in antagonizing these senators, he and his
party nevertheless had failed to meet the suffragists' demands and had to face
the political consequences as a result.11

The outcome of the prohibition and suffrage controversies also threw
stark light on the most divisive threat to Wilson's coalition: the widespread
perception that southerners held firm control of the Democratic Party and
were bent on using the party's control of government to the benefit of their
own section and to the detriment of the rest of the nation. This accusation
was an old one, of course, stretching back to the bloody-shirt campaigns of
the Gilded Age and the alleged dominance of a slaveholding oligarchy in
the years leading up to the Civil War. It reappeared during World War I in
part because Wilson himself and many of his top aides and officials, e.g.,
House, Burleson, Gregory, McAdoo, Houston, and Daniels, were southerners.
Although there was no monolithic "southern" view in Wilson's circle—
Daniels was as progressive as Burleson was conservative—the diversity was
lost on the administration's critics. The critics also could level accusations at
Capitol Hill, where southern Democrats had capitalized on the one-party
system characteristic of their region and the nascent seniority system in
Congress to wield a remarkably disproportionate influence, controlling the
vast majority of the major committees in both the House and Senate.12

The controversies of agricultural price-fixing brought the question of
southern domination squarely to the fore. The Wilson administration kept
the price for the 1917 and 1918 wheat crops set at $2.20 a bushel, making
prices manageable for American consumers and the British government,
which was purchasing vast amounts of wheat. Yet Wilson's decision roused
cociferos opposition in the wheat belt, the region that had swung behind
him in 1916.13 Meanwhile, the South was enjoying what chief administra-
tion price-fixer Robert Brookings termed a "runaway market" for cotton
(prices would ultimately quadruple over the course of the war). Cotton was
less essential to the war effort than wheat; fixing its price would be more a
symbolic act than an economic necessity. That being said, the disparity in
regional fortunes, and the potential electoral consequences, clearly troubled
the president. In September 1918, he indicated that cotton prices would be
controlled. However, a sudden drop in the market and an immediate protest
by southern Democrats led him to forgo his plans, giving more credence to
the charges of southern dominance.14

That southerners were enjoying an economic boon in the war seemed
particularly unjust to observers in other sections of the country in light of
the opposition of many southern Democrats to the mobilization. The focal
point of the antisouthern sentiment in this regard was House Majority Leader Claude Kitchin of Great Neck, North Carolina, who confirmed the suspicions of many about the “Americanism” of southern Democrats. Kitchin had led the campaign against preparedness and even voted against the declaration of war; thereafter, he was a frequent hindrance to Wilson’s war legislation. To make things worse, Kitchin, from his chair on the Ways and Means Committee, was quite vocal if not vindictive in his pronounced intentions to throw the cost of the war on the industrialists and financiers of the North. In 1918, the cry of “Kitchinism” emerged as not only a ready-made epithet for GOP strategists but also a succinct encapsulation of the difficulty that Wilson was having in holding together the divergent elements of his coalition in wartime.15

III

Confronted with these difficulties in reaching out to progressives while holding together the Democratic coalition, Wilson felt compelled to make a series of personal interventions in the 1918 congressional elections. In his influential study of politics during World War I, Seward Livermore has suggested that these interventions were thoughtless and self-deceptive, ultimately born of Wilson’s “strong personal antipathies.”16 However, Wilson was fully aware of the risks involved with intervening in these difficult political circumstances and wrestled with how to proceed amid them. He fully understood—but could not resolve—the tension in his program between the president’s roles as party and national leader. Here, too, the war complicated his task.

In 1914, Wilson had sought to support the Democratic candidates for Congress from a discreet distance. In a public letter written before the congressional elections of that year to the chairman of the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee, Wilson observed that as president he bore a “two-fold responsibility”: on the one hand, he was the prime minister, the leader of his party supporters in Congress, while on the other hand he was the leader of the people as a whole, the executive who needed to act and speak for the nation with respect to the war in Europe. Wilson observed that the former role might well be perceived as conflicting with the latter role. Given the supreme importance of national leadership in a time of crisis, his party leadership had to be subordinated to it, and he could not actively campaign. Instead, he issued a general endorsement in which he commended the work done by the 63d Congress, expressed confidence that grateful voters would return its Democratic majorities, and left it at that.17

The self-restraint that Wilson had publicly adopted in 1914 seemed even
more necessary in the congressional elections of 1918, for now Wilson was the commander in chief of a nation at war. At the same time, though, even more was at stake, notably, control of the war effort as well as the subsequent peacemaking and domestic reconstruction. The high stakes gave Wilson powerful incentives to intervene in the elections, both to preserve Democratic control of Congress and to ensure that his ostensible supporters responded more consistently to his direction. On several occasions during the 1918 congressional campaign, Wilson put aside his ambivalence and acted as a party leader. The mixed results his interventions met with, however, appeared to validate the wisdom in Wilson's earlier, more reticent stance. Leading both the party and the nation in such critical times was an impossible juggling act.

In March 1918, Wilson made his first political intervention in a special election for a Wisconsin Senate seat. The Democratic candidate, Joseph Davies, had asked Wilson for an endorsement. Wilson could not decide whether or not to give him one and turned to Albert Burleson for advice. Braced by the unabashedly partisan Burleson, Wilson sent a letter to Davies that made note of the Democratic candidate's support of the administration on the warning resolutions and armed neutrality. His letter implicitly criticized Irvine Lenroot, the GOP candidate, for not having backed the president on the issues that provided "an acid test in our country to disclose true loyalty and genuine Americanism." 18

The voters of Wisconsin, many of whom were of German origin, willingly failed Wilson's "acid test" and elected Lenroot. Wilson's political intervention was widely decried, by friends and enemies of the administration alike, as an action that not only demeaned the authority of the president through unseemly party maneuvering but also met with the electoral fate it deserved. 19 Apparently chastened, shortly thereafter Wilson gave his "politics is adjourned" speech to Congress, in which he publicly subordinated his fight as a party leader to the fight he was presiding over as commander in chief.20

Although Wilson was willing to put his campaign against the Republicans on hold, he could not abstain completely from party leadership. The Democratic primary campaigns were under way in the summer of 1918, and Wilson, against his expressed intentions, was eventually drawn into some of them. Several considerations lay behind Wilson's hesitance to choose between and among competing factions and candidates at the state and district level. The spurned Democrats would obviously harbor a grudge, and given the prevailing attitudes toward the president in many regions, they might well be able to wear Wilson's admonishment as a badge of honor. A repudi-
ated candidate's nomination would only highlight the administration's weakness. Wilson also sensed that his taking a stand in one primary campaign would make it impossible to avoid the exhausting and controversial task of vetting candidates in every race, even when none of those running met the "acid test." Hence Wilson's statement, repeated in various forms to those who inquired in the early months of 1918, that "I do not feel at liberty . . . to suggest who shall be candidates for Congress or who shall be preferred at the elections. I think that would be going beyond my prerogatives even as leader of the party." 21

However, while publicly disavowing such activities, Wilson was in fact working behind the scenes in various races, rallying support for the most promising proadministration candidates; attempting to unite factions opposed to antiadministration renegades; avoiding even the appearance of validating the campaigns of his personal opponents and their political allies; encouraging congressional supporters who were contemplating retirement to mount yet another campaign; and instructing inconsistently supportive Democrats who appealed for a presidential endorsement that none would be forthcoming. 22 With all of this activity, however, Wilson continued to hold back from publicly endorsing or condemning candidates in the Democratic primaries. Only in late July and August 1918 did he change course.

Wilson did so in part because in two Senate primaries his covert efforts to thwart candidates who had been irascible in their hostility to his administration, Senators Thomas Hardwick of Georgia and James Vardaman of Mississippi, appeared increasingly likely to fail. Wilson either had to put aside his qualms about direct intervention in the primaries or face the unsavory prospect of having to endure the barbs of Hardwick and Vardaman for the rest of his presidency. Wilson discussed his ambivalence with his cabinet. Most members who spoke urged him to continue his policy of not embroiling himself in primary controversies. Albert Burleson, as was his wont, weighed in on the other side, and the partisan postmaster evidently persuaded the president to put aside his doubts. Wilson proceeded to send out public letters repudiating Hardwick and Vardaman. Whether or not his letters were the deciding factors is hard to estimate, but both men were defeated in the primaries. 23

In what appeared to be arbitrary political overkill, Wilson also publicly condemned two House Democrats, James Slayden of Texas and George Huddleston of Alabama. These repudiations were more a result of local partisans wanting to use the president's authority as party leader for their own purposes than of Wilson's proclivities. Predictably, his repudiations generated considerable criticism, and in Huddleston's case the presidential black-
ball did not even hold up. Commenting on the Alabamian's primary victory, the Nation quipped that "somehow this does not look as if the American electorate were disposed to take directions from the White House as to how it should vote." 24

The Nation's judgment proved to be equally apt for Wilson's national appeal for a Democratic Congress on October 25, 1918. This appeal has long been seen as an act of unabashed partisanship. It is worth noting, though, the extent to which Wilson and his party assistants both developed the idea of the appeal and attempted to craft and deliver it with an eye toward mitigating accusations that the president was inappropriately resorting to party politics during a national crisis.

The genesis of the appeal can be traced to a Tumulty memo in September 1917. Tumulty suggested that Wilson should hold back from giving endorsements to individual Democratic candidates, a course of action that would repeatedly give the impression that the president was concerned more with the fortunes of his party than with his duties as commander in chief. Instead, the president should wait until just before the congressional elections of 1918 and issue a blanket endorsement of all Democrats. Of course, this approach would still be a partisan act on the president's part, but it would be geared directly toward the election and limited to a single instance. Subsequently, in June 1918, Tumulty repeated the need for a general endorsement and suggested that it be combined with a "nonpartisan" speaking tour of the West to bolster support in the region. In September, Wilson decided to forgo the proposed tour to ward off charges that he was politicking on the stump instead of administering the war effort. However, he was persuaded of the need for a general statement supporting the Democratic candidates. In addition to Tumulty, his nervous supporters in Congress also implored him to act on their behalf. 25

Around October 10, Tumulty gave a highly partisan draft appeal to Wilson. In two revisions over the next week, Wilson muted his secretary's denunciation of the Republicans, allowing that they had been "pro-war" despite being "anti-administration." He cast the appeal not so much as a request for complete command but as an "unmistakable vote of confidence." But Wilson still maintained a sharp partisan tone and singled out Lodge as an obstructionist. He redrafted the appeal yet again with the aid of Democratic National Committee officials Homer Cummings and Vance McCormick, and upon their advice further muted its partisan tenor and dropped the critical reference to Lodge. Despite the numerous revisions, however, the president's final draft remained, in its essence, a partisan document. Cummings and McCormick thought it might backfire because of the
apparent political bitterness it projected, and Wilson also admitted that he had reservations along these lines. 26

Forsaking his doubts, Wilson went ahead and released it to the press on October 25. In the opening paragraph, he told voters that “if you have approved of my leadership and wish me to continue to be your unembarrassed spokesman in affairs at home and abroad, I earnestly beg that you will express yourselves unmistakably to that effect by returning a Democratic majority to both the Senate and the House of Representatives.” 27 Wilson tried to diffuse the partisan nature of his appeal by insisting that “I have no thought of suggesting that any political party is paramount in matters of patriotism.” He went on to propose that “in ordinary times I would not feel at liberty to make such an appeal to you. In ordinary times divided counsels can be endured without permanent hurt to the country. But these are not ordinary times.” 28 What made the times so extraordinary that Wilson believed he could legitimately call for a Democratic Congress? Why was unified counsel so important?

The chief concern in Wilson’s mind was not the war, which at that juncture apparently was coming to a close (Germany having approached the West about an armistice), but rather the subsequent peace. Lodge, Roosevelt, and other Republicans had voiced rancorous criticism of Wilson’s negotiations with the Germans and his hope of forming a league of nations to enforce the peace. A more or less official statement of the Republican opposition came with Roosevelt’s public telegram to Senators Lodge, Poindexter, and Johnson on October 24, one day before Wilson released his appeal. Roosevelt urged the senators to make use of their constitutional prerogatives regarding treaties in order to thwart Wilson’s foolish desire to achieve “peace without victory” and to implement his fourteen points. “Let us dictate peace by the hammering guns,” the colonel exhorted, “and not chat about peace to the accompaniment of the clicking of typewriters.” Roosevelt’s rhetoric gave credence to Wilson’s claim in the appeal that the Allies “would find it very difficult to believe that the voters of the United States had chosen to support their President by electing to the Congress a majority controlled by those who are not in fact in sympathy with the attitude and the action of the Administration.” 29

As soon as Wilson issued the appeal, it met with the accusations of narrow-minded partisanship that Wilson had feared but in the circumstances had decided to risk. Predictably, Theodore Roosevelt was Wilson’s most prominent and vehement critic: “The President’s statement is an announcement that he is a partisan leader first and a President of all the people second.” His angry rejoinder on behalf of the aggrieved Republicans who were
shocked (shocked!) to find Wilson making such a political appeal during the war was wholly disingenuous. But Roosevelt had put a stubby rhetorical finger on one of the major contradictions of Wilson’s program, one that Wilson himself was quite sensitive about. Roosevelt’s sentiments matched those of many Wilsonians in and outside of the administration, who were pained by their conclusion that the president had demeaned his office, and his authority as a national leader, with the appeal.

In the official Republican Party response, Senator Lodge, House Republican Leader Frederick Gillette, and the chairs of the GOP congressional and senatorial campaign committees took another approach in attacking Wilson. The Republican leaders pointed to the significant gap between, on the one hand, Wilson’s pretenses to serving as a national leader and the head of a broad-minded party, and on the other, the more parochial perspectives and activities of the party on whose behalf he was speaking during the war. Unfortunately for Wilson, it was easy to exploit this gap.

### IV

The 1918 congressional elections indicated that the voters did not share Wilson’s convictions concerning the dangers of divided government, and the Democrats lost control of Congress. When the 66th Congress convened, Wilson would face Republican majorities of fifty seats in the House and two seats in the Senate. The losses were not too severe considering the obstacles that the Democratic Party faced: a well-financed, organized, and united GOP and the typical drop of support in the second midterm election for the president’s party. Nevertheless, Wilson now faced the prospect of having to get his peace treaty ratified by a Republican Senate led by Henry Cabot Lodge.

The incoming Senate Majority Leader, partisan and constitutional conservative that he was, was convinced that the outcome of the vote stemmed from fears of usurpation borne of Wilson’s appeal: “It came from the popular uprising against [Wilson’s] attempt to order a Congress as if he would have ordered a dinner, and the people saw in it instinctively the beginning of a dictatorship and went against it.” Democratic analysts were divided on the effect of the appeal. Administration officials such as Interior Secretary Frank Lane thought that such public partisanship in wartime had not only been inappropriate but politically disastrous. Representative Jouett Shouse of Kansas reported that in his state it had “the unfortunate effect of solidifying Republican opposition more strongly than in ten years.” On the other hand, a party leader in Massachusetts reported that it had helped tremendously there, and observers from Homer Cummings to the editors of the
New York Times concluded that the appeal had prevented worse losses for the president's party. On balance, it seems doubtful that Wilson's appeal either seriously cut into or increased the Democratic vote.

One explanation for the GOP victories that enjoyed wide credence among disenchanted progressives in 1918 was that the Wilson administration's curtailment of civil liberties had strangled the organs of opinion and the general goodwill on the American left that had sustained the president in 1916. What was more, because of the stilted public debate, Wilson could not carry out the political education that was necessary to build support for his plans for a league of nations abroad and for progressive reconstruction at home. Hence his appeal for a Democratic Congress at the end of the war, essentially an appeal made in the name of these policies, fell on deaf, or at least untutored, ears.

This explanation rests on the assumption that a progressive majority coalition, harmonious, coherent, and national in its outlook, was latent in the U.S. polity and only needed to be drawn out by an astute and visionary leadership. The same assumption figured prominently in Wilson's program. He was continually contemplating ways to bring about such an awakening and a corresponding realignment in the party system. It would have been cruelly ironic if Wilson's failure to preside over a liberal war mobilization killed the realignment that might have sustained his postwar policies.

However, it would have been exceedingly difficult if not impossible for Wilson to have presided over such a war effort. His administration could not command the society and the economy because of administrative weakness and the less than overwhelming popular support for the war; instead, the administration had to resort to exhortation and a shrill war cry in order to buttress the essentially voluntaristic principles underlying the mobilization. Hence the administration's emphasis on national morale and the duties of the great mass of citizens rather than the internationalism and rights of the progressive minority. The necessity of this emphasis during the war, furthermore, was quite consistent with the views of Wilson as well as those of more reactionary elements in the Democratic Party, elements that he chose to have represented in the cabinet by Albert Burleson and Thomas Gregory. The conservative reaction against progressive dissenters during the war marked yet another fault line in Wilson's coalition.

Ultimately it was his failure to dissolve these cleavages that led to the Republican victories. Democrats commenting on the elections generally agreed that the party's major problem was the argument (as it was abbreviated and emphasized by a frustrated Joe Tumulty) that "Kitchin, Dent and
Clark are great liabilities. Too much Southern domination. Failure to fix the price of cotton. *We must fight Kitchin. We must fix the price of cotton.*”

Tumulty’s analysis has since been affirmed by Seward Livermore and David Burner. They have demonstrated that the Democratic Party lost the crucial seats in the wheat-growing regions of the Midwest and Great Plains, losses that no doubt reflected the resentment of farmers who had to sell their crop for controlled prices while their cotton-growing counterparts in the South were left free to profit. The Republican gains in the wheat belt could also be explained in part by the mass defection of the many German-Americans in the region. Needless to say, after eighteen months of war against their homeland and persecution of similar duration that appeared to be sponsored by the administration, these voters were even less likely to support Wilson and the Democrats than they had been in 1916. \(^{38}\) But regardless of whether one accepts the wheat or the hyphen thesis for explaining Democratic losses in the Midwest, or some combination thereof, each scenario involves voting behavior based upon sectional or ethnocultural grievances, and thus they both undermine Wilson’s programmatic assumptions concerning the responsiveness of the electorate to the issues as the president defined them.

Despite Wilson’s attempt to make the congressional elections of 1918 hinge on what he saw as the most pressing and relevant national concerns, especially the shape that the impending peace treaty should take, in the end control of the new Congress turned on the basis of bloody-shirt memories, ethnocultural loyalties, and regional economic grievances, all of which were carefully stoked by the opposition. Wilson failed to animate the voters to respond to his issues, and he was unable to prevent his party from being riven by the sort of centrifugal forces, arising from what he considered malformed public opinion, that had long worked against the construction of durable and harmonious majority coalitions in the American electorate. Wilson himself acknowledged as much a few months later, when he gave his own postmortem of the election to the Democratic National Committee. Citing the divisions and feuding within the Democratic camp during the war, he observed that “in assessing the cause of our defeat we ought to be perfectly frank and admit that the country was not any more sure of us than it ought to be.” Only when the Democrats proved themselves to be a party united on policies and underlying principles, Wilson continued, would it again receive the voters’ trust. \(^{39}\)

Perhaps Wilson was judging himself and his compatriots too severely: the demise of the Democrats as a governing party was to be expected, given both the tumultuous circumstances of the war, over which he had little con-
trol, and the difficulties that presidents have typically encountered in mid-term elections. Viewed in this light, the Democratic demise in 1918 is unexceptional. However, insofar as Wilson assumed that the president had the power to realign the electorate and to exercise simultaneously party and national leadership without serious complications, the elections of 1918 stood as an overwhelming refutation, not just of his party but also of his program. Worse still, these elections put both the party and the program, along with the policy that Wilson was most concerned with, the establishment of the League of Nations, on the road to even greater ruin.