

Finding a Man Who Will Take Advice: Woodrow Wilson and Edward House¹

PERRY LEAVELL

William R. Kenan, Jr. Professor Emeritus of History
Drew University

Like most historians, I am here to tell you a story, this one about two men who began their most important work together approximately 100 years ago. Unlike most historians, I will be explicit about my message.

In November 1911, Woodrow Wilson and Edward House met for the first time. When he was a teenager, House, a wealthy Texan, decided that he wanted to become an advisor of presidents. He got his start working with governors in Texas, but when he tried to move to the national level, he was blocked by William Jennings Bryan. Democrats loved Bryan and nominated him for the presidency three times, but House saw two huge flaws. One, Bryan could not win a national election, and two, he would not listen to advice. House needed a candidate who could win and would take advice, and Wilson looked like that candidate. Wilson, meanwhile, knew that he could not win the Democratic nomination for the presidency or a national election without the support of Texas. Friends said that House could win that support. A man who made quick decisions, Wilson fell in love with both his first and second wives at first sight, and he did the same with House in 1911.²

Wilson's best biographer wrote that they were an "odd couple"—the intellectual academic and the wily politician—but they had much in common.³ Both were grandfathers in their 50s, political outsiders in Washington, expatriate-southerners, fathers of daughters, dreamers from boyhood of political careers, and relative late-comers to progressive

1 Read on 26 April 2013 at the Spring General Meeting of the American Philosophical Society.

2 John Milton Cooper, *Woodrow Wilson: A Biography* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2009), 281.

3 Cooper, *Woodrow Wilson*, 193.

reform movements. Both viewed themselves as physically frail, and both were incredibly ambitious in their desires to do something big and important in the world.

Over the year following their meeting, they became intimate (this word is used over and over) friends. Wilson later said that he felt as if “they had known one another always . . . for our purposes and thoughts were as one.” House added, “. . . I had begun to despair, believing my life would be more or less a failure, when he came into it, giving me the opportunity for which I had been longing.”⁴

In 1912, Wilson sought advice from House on political strategy, speeches, and how to deal with William Jennings Bryan. However, other advisors played a bigger role in Wilson’s nomination by the Democratic Party, particularly his wife Ellen, and Louis Brandeis offered crucial economic and political advice in the presidential election. House was not present at the Democratic Party Convention, and he played only a fitful role in the campaign of 1912. His best biographer calls him Wilson’s “right hand,” but it is a poor right hand that is not attached to the body. House was simply not present at crucial moments in the campaign.⁵

Once Wilson was elected president, however, House became more important. Today, when a new president is elected, a “transition team” has already been working for months to prepare for taking over the executive branch of government, but in 1912–13, Edward House was Wilson’s transition team. He proposed candidates for the cabinet, he vetted them, and he and the president-elect made final decisions together. Mostly they met in House’s New York City apartment. Sometimes they went to Broadway plays together, and they often enjoyed far-ranging conversations, especially when Wilson spent the night.

On several occasions, Wilson asked House to join his cabinet, offering any position except that of Secretary of State, which was reserved for William Jennings Bryan, but the Texan refused, saying that he preferred “being a free lance . . . and to have a roving commission to serve wherever and whenever possible.”⁶ House had discovered long before that he could best serve ambition by appearing to reject it. One reason why Wilson believed that House was selfless, disinterested, and totally devoted to his presidency was because the Texan was the only person in Washington who did not want a job from the new president.

After the inauguration, House considered moving to Washington

4 Edward M. House, Diary, 1/25/1915. House Papers, Yale University.

5 Godfrey Hodgson, *Woodrow Wilson’s Right Hand: The Life of Colonel Edward M. House* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006)

6 House, Diary, 1/7/1913.

but rejected the idea. He was, he said, a better advisor because he was not part of the Beltway crowd and only came to the Capitol when the president wanted to consult with him. Throughout 1913 and 1914, he visited often, sometimes staying overnight in the White House, but he also spent several months each year traveling in Europe or summering on the Massachusetts coast. Wilson talked to him about the major issues of his early years—the tariff, the Federal Reserve Act, antitrust reforms, Mexico, etc.—but House was not a major player in any of these matters. He was mainly involved, at first, in patronage and politics.

If House did not want a job, everyone else did. A big difference between the presidency of today and the presidency of 100 years ago is the large number of jobs that presidents controlled. The post office alone dispensed 56,000 jobs. Some positions, such as Collector of the Port of New York, were especially desirable because of the high salary and the many opportunities for bribery and control of other jobs.⁷

Out of office for 16 years, Democrats were desperate for jobs in 1913. House complained of a “hungry horde” of job-seekers.⁸ Senator Ben Tillman was moved to quote scripture: “The wild asses of the desert are athirst and hungry; they have broken into the green corn.”⁹ President Wilson knew that patronage was a source of power, but he hated dealing with it. Inevitably, he disappointed more applicants than he pleased. He said that he needed a sign in front of the White House like one a pastor placed in front of his church when his congregation complained about an organist: “Don’t shoot. He’s doing his damndest.”¹⁰ House joined others in managing patronage.

He also played a big role in domestic politics, preparing for the elections of 1914 and 1916. He represented the president in negotiations with Tammany Hall and other city machines. Wilson told New Yorkers, “His thoughts and mine are one.”¹¹ Ultimately, however, politics and patronage were not what House wanted to do at this stage in his life. He had had enough of those in Texas. At the end of the Wilson administration’s first year, he found his real interest. He envisioned what the world might look like if the great powers—Britain, Germany, France, and the United States—cooperated. In 1914, he visited Europe, with Wilson’s encouragement, meeting European leaders Kaiser Wilhelm II in Germany and Foreign Minister Sir Edward Grey in

7 Hodgson, *Woodrow Wilson’s Right Hand*, 70.

8 Hodgson, *Woodrow Wilson’s Right Hand*, 69.

9 Arthur S. Link, *Wilson: The New Freedom* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1956), 173.

10 Link, *Wilson*, 163.

11 House, *Diary*, 8/16/1913.

London. However, by summer 1914, it was too late to talk of cooperation; he could not stop the coming of war.¹²

The year 1914 was an emotionally tough one for Wilson. His favorite daughter, Eleanor, the one family member who could make him laugh, married and left home. "How desperately my heart aches that she is gone," he wrote. "I feel the loneliness more than I dare admit to myself."¹³ Just as the first shots were fired in the war, his wife Ellen died. For 30 years, she had been his closest advisor, his most intimate companion. He fell into a deep depression, telling House that he was unfit to be president: "God has stricken me almost beyond what I can bear."¹⁴ Then Europe went to war, forcing him to shift attention from his personal tragedy and familiar domestic issues to foreign policy. Emotionally bereft, the president sought companionship and solace from his one male friend of his age, Edward House. The two men were closest emotionally during the months after Ellen's death.

For almost 3 years, Wilson struggled to remain neutral in the war. Early on, House replaced the Secretary of State as the president's most important advisor in foreign policy. Bryan had been absolutely essential to the success of Wilson's domestic reform agenda, but he and the president disagreed about the meaning of neutrality. During the *Lusitania* crisis in 1915, Bryan said that Wilson was following a pro-British policy that would lead to American involvement in the war. In protest, he resigned, telling the president, "Colonel House has been Secretary of State, not I, and I have never had your full confidence."¹⁵ Robert Lansing, Bryan's successor, was chosen to run the State Department, but he was to leave real policy-making to the president and his advisor. Jokesters in Washington spelled Lansing "H-O-U-S-E."¹⁶

During the years of neutrality, House met regularly with German and Allied ambassadors. He had Secret Service protection, and the Justice Department installed secret recording devices in his office. Special telephone lines linked his New York apartment and his summer residence in Massachusetts to the White House; a special cable line linked his homes to London; and official diplomatic correspondence was sent directly from the State Department to House's New York apartment. Because some of these documents were secret and important, at the end of a working day, his secretary took them to a safety deposit box in a bank, protecting them on the street with a pistol

12 Hodgson, *Woodrow Wilson's Right Hand*, 97–101.

13 Cooper, *Woodrow Wilson*, 259.

14 Cooper, *Woodrow Wilson*, 261.

15 Cooper, *Woodrow Wilson*, 292.

16 Hodgson, *Woodrow Wilson's Right Hand*, 138.

she carried in her muff. Officially a private citizen, House traveled to Europe with a letter identifying him as the personal representative of the president. While abroad, he communicated with Wilson using a secret code. The president gave no specific instructions, telling House, "I feel you do not need any."¹⁷

House told Allied and German leaders that the president wanted to be a mediator, presiding over a peace conference that would end the war; he pressured them to name their peace terms. Eager for agreement, he sometimes said things that he should not have said. Told by the president not to talk about specific issues, he discussed Alsace-Lorraine in France and German colonies in Britain. In 1916, he told the British and French, without prior approval from the president, that if they agreed to a peace conference and Germany did not, the United States would enter the war on the side of the Allies.¹⁸ Both House and Lansing thought "war with Germany [was] inevitable," and they were frustrated by Wilson's refusal to agree with them.¹⁹ In late 1916, Lansing deliberately undermined the president in public.²⁰ House was much too skillful to make a similar mistake.

Meanwhile, a competitor emerged. Eight months after Wilson's first wife Ellen died, he met Edith Gault, a well-to-do Washington widow who owned the city's finest jewelry store. She was attractive and independent, dressed fashionably, played golf better than the president, and had the first driver's license issued to a woman in the District of Columbia.²¹ While House was in Europe, they courted, and the president asked her to marry him. Washingtonians asked, "How did Edith respond to the proposal?" The reply: "She was so surprised she fell out of bed."²²

They married, which meant that House was no longer the person closest emotionally to the president. Wilson's first wife knew that her husband needed help with the demanding tasks of the presidency, and she encouraged the relationship between House and Wilson, but Edith did not think of the president as a man who was vulnerable. Wanting to be his intimate advisor, she saw House as competition and looked for opportunities to weaken his position. Perhaps because she was a woman, he underestimated the danger she represented.

17 Hodgson, *Woodrow Wilson's Right Hand*, 142–4 and Cooper, 317.

18 Cooper, *Woodrow Wilson*, 316–8.

19 Hodgson, *Woodrow Wilson's Right Hand*, 125.

20 John A. Thompson, *Woodrow Wilson* (London: Pearson Education Limited, 2002), 132–3; Cooper, *Woodrow Wilson*, 304, 366–7.

21 Cooper, *Woodrow Wilson*, 281.

22 Cooper, *Woodrow Wilson*, 258, attributes the joke to one man, but others say it was widespread in Washington.

In early 1917, the country moved toward war. On February 1, Germany resumed unrestricted submarine warfare, leading to a break in diplomatic relations. A German submarine sank an American ship for the first time in 2 years. Wilson received a copy of the Zimmerman Telegram, triggering a massive public outcry. Still hoping to avoid war, the president called for “armed neutrality,” requesting Congress to authorize arming American merchant ships. A small group of Senators, led by Bob La Follette, refused. Fearful that someone may physically stop his filibuster, La Follette brought a loaded pistol into the Senate and placed it in his desk. The president angrily denounced the “small group of willful men” in the Senate who blocked his legislation.²³ Later, when he saw his first grandson, he said of the baby, “. . . with his mouth open and his eyes shut, I predict he will make a senator when he grows up.”²⁴

Wilson called a special meeting of the Congress for April 2. House came to Washington from New York. The president wrote his speech calling for a declaration of war and showed it to House and probably Edith, but not to his cabinet. House believed that many of the ideas in the speech were his ideas.

After the United States entered the war, Wilson was busy and often exhausted. He needed help more than ever. House was a crucial conduit for communication with Great Britain. When Wilson and Prime Minister Lloyd George wanted to communicate, they used the Texan as their informal link, partly because their ambassadors were ineffectual. William Wiseman, head of British intelligence in the United States, rented an apartment in the same building where House lived. They became close friends. Communication between the two men and the two nations was quick and intimate.

In late 1917, Wilson told House that he wanted to begin systematic preparations for peace talks after the war ended. “What would you think,” he asked, “of quietly gathering about you a group of men to assist you to do this?”²⁵ House quickly organized academics and others and set them to work in New York planning for the post-war peace. They were called the Inquiry, and they researched such subjects as the appropriate boundaries for a new Poland, work that was considered beyond the capabilities of the State Department. Soon thereafter, House represented the United States in meetings of the Inter-Allied War Council in Paris.

23 Cooper, *Woodrow Wilson*, 379.

24 Thompson, *Woodrow Wilson*, 221.

25 Cooper, *Woodrow Wilson*, 419.

In January 1918, the president said that the time was right to explain to the world what America wanted from the war. House brought a statement of war aims written by the Inquiry to the White House, where he and the president spent 2 days rewriting the draft and “remaking the map of the world.” The result was the 14-Points address delivered to Congress on January 8. Only Edith and House saw the speech before it was delivered.²⁶ In the summer of 1918, the president and his advisor also wrote a draft of what would become the Covenant of the League of Nations.²⁷

That autumn, Germany abruptly requested an armistice based on the 14 Points. Wilson began unilateral negotiations that led to peace in November. Meanwhile, he sent House to Europe to nail down Allied support for the 14 Points. Georges Clémenceau and Lloyd George protested that they had never been consulted about the points and were unsure of their meaning. Anticipating such a response, House produced an Inquiry document explaining the points. Lloyd George said that Britain would never agree to “freedom of the seas,” and Clémenceau added that he could not accept a peace without reparations. To ensure that the meeting would not be a complete failure, they fudged their language, accepting the 14 Points with two qualifications. House claimed “a great diplomatic victory,” but the seeds of discord were well planted.²⁸

Wilson appointed himself head of the American peace commission, and in December 1918, he and his wife sailed for Europe; he was away from the United States for 7 months, except for a 2-week trip back in February. Expectations were high. Wilson felt that the Allies owed America for victory, and he knew that without American loans, the Allies would have gone bankrupt in 1917. He was greeted in France as a Messiah. His words about democracy, self-determination of nations, and peace stirred people everywhere. Like Thomas Jefferson in 1776, his words exceeded his grasp, but their power was not blunted by a little hypocrisy and a lot of miscalculation. In early 1919, Wilson was a heroic world figure, the first American president to operate on a global stage.

House was his lieutenant on the peace commission. They worked for the same objectives, Wilson advocating in committees and elsewhere, House nudging and negotiating behind the scenes. Some

26 Cooper, *Woodrow Wilson*, 421–2.

27 Hodgson, *Woodrow Wilson's Right Hand*, 199–204. Henry Cabot Lodge criticized the language of the Covenant, saying “it might get by at Princeton, but certainly not at Harvard.” Hodgson, 252.

28 Thompson, *Woodrow Wilson*, 178.

reporters discovered that they learned more about what was happening if they talked to House and his people than to the president's spokesman. In February, when Wilson returned temporarily to the United States, he left House in charge of the American team while he was away. The Texan confidently seized on this opportunity to try to resolve some major issues. When Wilson returned, he complained that his advisor had been too accommodating in his absence and had surrendered too much on some issues, and gradually, a distance appeared in their relationship. Toward the end of the peace conference, the president largely ignored House.

After the treaty was signed and when the president was on his way to meet his ship back to the United States, House approached and "urged him to meet the Senate in a conciliatory spirit." The president responded, "House, I have found one can never get anything in this world that is worthwhile without fighting for it."²⁹

They never spoke again. Later, after Wilson suffered a horrible stroke, House mailed two letters to the president, but the letters were later found sealed and unopened. He also called on the Wilsons at their post-White House home in Washington and left a card at the door, but no one responded. The great friendship was over.³⁰

I said that I would be explicit about my message. Here are two questions and two observations.

A question: Was Wilson a man who could be advised? The two men who had been closest to him in politics before House would have said, "No." When he no longer needed them, Wilson dropped George Harvey and Jim Smith unceremoniously. Like his fellow Presbyterian elder, William Jennings Bryan, Wilson held strong opinions and beliefs and usually made his own solitary decisions.

A second question: Was House an effective advisor? In politics, he had special knowledge and experience. In foreign policy, he was an amateur with a spotty education and no experience. None of that matters, of course, because the president alone can decide whom and for what reasons he consults.

What did matter was House's secret diary. Unknown to the president, his advisor started a diary in September 1912 that swelled to more than 4,000 typewritten pages. Its purpose was to provide evidence that House was the source of many of the ideas Wilson expressed and policies he adopted. This document was one example of a flawed relationship between advisor and advisee.

²⁹ Thompson, *Woodrow Wilson*, 220.

³⁰ Hodgson, *Woodrow Wilson's Right Hand*, 254-6; House, Diary, 10/14/1921.

An observation: Perhaps nothing in this story mattered as much as the fact that the United States government was not prepared institutionally to undertake a leading role in world affairs in 1919. Edward House could not make up for the absence of an effective State Department or espionage agency. He and the Inquiry could not provide the president with the information and planning needed for choosing appropriate goals.

A final observation: This story is part of a bigger, more important story about the debate over how much the United States should be involved in the world. Wilson said that Americans in 1919 were no longer provincials, and a popular British painting proclaimed the “Return of the *Mayflower*” to Europe.³¹ Henry Cabot Lodge and Theodore Roosevelt favored a more traditional and more limited American involvement. Roosevelt explained his view this way: “The man who loves other countries as much as his own stands on a level with the man who loves other women as much as he loves his own wife.”³² Wilson and House³³ were one key part of this important debate.

31 Robert H. Ferrell, *Woodrow Wilson & World War I 1917–1921* (New York: Harper & Row, 1985) 39.

32 Patricia O’Toole, *When Trumpets Call* (New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2005), 396.

33 After this paper was read at the meeting of the American Philosophical Society, a new, excellent biography of Edward House was published. See Charles E. Neu, *Colonel House: A Biography of Woodrow Wilson’s Silent Partner* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).