

THE PEACE ISSUE IN THE GENERAL ELECTION OF 1914

By ROBERT P. WILKINS*

More than a half century ago, a future secretary of the State Historical Society of North Dakota wrote: "It is not too much to say that it is time to stop writing American History in the large until we have more of it in the little."¹ Investigation of the phenomena of American history has developed into something resembling an industry since 1900; yet today too little time and energy are devoted to research in narrow fields of "local history," the importance of which as a sure foundation for national history O. G. Libby was proclaiming at the close of the nineteenth century.

The political phenomenon known as isolationism, so conspicuous in North Dakota, is one of those fields in which "local history" can contribute to a sound interpretation. Yet little has been published on the subject beyond the study of voting patterns by Samuel Lubell, the most widely-read student of isolationism.² Examination of the election of November, 1914, in North Dakota may add to the understanding of the isolationism of voters in that state which Lubell, in addressing himself to it, attributes to ethnic sympathies.

North Dakota followed with interest the outbreak of the first great world conflict. Its causes and the responsibility for its coming as assessed by the press of North Dakota in 1914 anticipated by a decade the views of the revisionists.³ In the early months of the war, those attitudes which were to become characteristic of the state throughout the years 1914-1917 appeared. Atrocity stories were discounted and preparedness was opposed. Wilson's ship-purchase plan and the war-risk insurance system were criticized as likely to entangle the United States in the "death struggle" being waged in Europe. The question of the rights of neutrals was carefully examined. Britain's violation of international law was remarked upon even as the press noted the responsibility of commercial interests in the eastern United States for America's violation of contraband regulations. For the first time it was charged that in the East "a few effervescent patriots" had stirred up a "sort of tin-horn patriotism" over incidents involving America's rights at sea. Editors predicted that

*Robert P. Wilkins, Department of History, University of North Dakota.

¹O. G. Libby, "The Lead Region of Grant, Iowa and LaFayette Counties in Wisconsin," Wisconsin Academy of Sciences, Arts and Letters, *Transactions*, XIII (1900), p. 189. Cedric Cummins, *Indiana Public Opinion and the World War, 1914-1917* (1945).

²Samuel Lubell, *The Future of American Politics*, N. Y. (1952), Chapter VII, "The Myth of Isolationism." *The Revolt of the Moderates*, N. Y. (1956) Passim.

³North Dakota's reaction to the war is the subject of Robert P. Wilkins, "North Dakota and the European War, 1914-1917, A Study in Public Opinion" (MSS, West Virginia University Library).

the direction events were taking would bring "sharp interference by the United States," and "ultimately war." Such an outcome was not warranted by the matters at issue and must be avoided. As an important daily, the Valley City *Times-Record*, commented in November, 1914, a "peace policy" could not be overdone.⁴

As the Democrats opened the Congressional campaign the war was a month old. Already events overseas had brought an improved financial position to the farmers of the state. Democratic speakers hastened to appropriate credit for this prosperity. By keeping the United States out of a war with Mexico, which so many Republicans advocated, Wilson had put the American farmer in a position to supply Europe with food profitably. America at peace, thanks to the Democratic party, had unparalleled opportunity to enrich itself. Indeed, Washington was 'busy with plans to take the fullest opportunity of conditions created by war.'⁵

Republican candidates countered by reminding voters that the early years of the Wilson administration had been a period of depression. Congressman Patrick D. Norton, running for re-election, declared that the war, providentially, had revived American commerce which Democratic "free trade" had been killing. "War," he observed, had "changed the situation materially and furnished campaign material for the Democrats."

Although Republican campaigners called attention to Democratic "extravagance" and the need for a protective tariff, they were soon to see the war as a campaign issue assume unexpected proportions.⁶ At Jamestown, for example, the *Stutsman County Democrat* announced that the Wilson foreign policy was to "avoid war." John Burke, treasurer of the United States, and a former governor of North Dakota, lauded Wilson for avoiding entanglement in the European war in terms approaching eulogy. Earlier, William D. Purcell, Democratic candidate for the United States Senate, had spoken of a "war party" in the United States, and his handling of the subject strongly suggested that this faction sought to involve the nation in European war.

To answer these opposition charges and suggestions because North Dakota prejudice made it impossible for Republican spokesmen to ignore them, they attempted to nullify their effectiveness in three ways: First, admitting that there could be no other policy than neutrality for the United States, they denied that it was peculiarly a Democratic policy. Though it was supremely wise and reflected great credit upon Wilson, the neutrality policy was simply "patriotic service to the nation. Wilson

⁴Grand Forks *Daily Herald*, January 16, 1915; Dickinson *Press*, September 5, 1914; Williston *Herald*, October 15, 1914; Fargo *Courier-News*, October 9, 1914; Valley City *Times Record*, November 20, 1914.

⁵Warwick Weekly *Sentinel*, October 29, 1914.

⁶Jamestown *Stutsman County Democrat*, September 17, 1914; Bismarck *Daily Tribune*, October 27, 1914; Grand Forks *Daily Herald*, October 22, 1914.

would go down in history as an enemy of his country if he took any but the present position."⁷ Secondly, they pointed with alarm to the contrast between the President's pronouncements of neutrality in thought and deed and the Democratic Congress' program for a neutral America. Henry T. Helgesen, candidate for re-election as United States Representative, and later to be much abused in the Eastern press for his resistance to the drive toward war in 1917, declared at Grand Forks:

Wilson is often praised for his war policy . . . As far as Wilson is concerned, the United States . . . may still [sic] be at war with the European countries, now involved, if the manufacturers are allowed to ship contraband and are insured against loss by the Wilson war insurance act. The President while preaching "Prayer Sundays" is in reality employing the one main method by which war can be prolonged and that is by insuring manufacturers against loss in the shipping of contraband.⁸

By misrepresenting the provisions of the insurance act and mistakenly identifying the President as its sponsor,⁹ Helgesen appealed to the strong desire of the populace to escape involvement in the war, and played upon the farmers' suspicions of the business classes and their motives.

And finally the Republicans attacked the Democrats' use of the war in the campaign as a "red herring." The Congressional campaign was being "thoroughly confused" by "orators" who proclaimed that the Wilson administration was "vital to the preservation of peace in this nation," and by such Democratic slogans as "Wilson needs _____ in Washington to help preserve peace," or others "equally misleading and jingoistic."¹⁰

While the Republicans were denouncing such "war claptrap," the Democratic campaign managers inserted into the newspapers of the state an advertisement which reproduced the following statement by Senator Robert M. LaFollette:

Because of his course in dealing with the European war, President Wilson today holds a supreme place in the confidence of the people of the United States. In the estimation of his character and service, all other subjects are subordinated to the one great fact that everywhere finds spontaneous expression in the simple phrase "He is keeping us out of war." As the shock of the war crystallizes the divided sentiment of a nation and makes it a unit for the struggle once begun, so the reaction for peace in this country has placed every man and woman back of the President for peace.¹¹

On election day, despite all Democratic efforts, the Republicans were uniformly successful. To the Bismarck *Daily Tribune*, this victory was proof that the people had continued to see the issues clearly: "The jingoists who dangled visions of war before their constituents as an intimidation to secure votes found that the veil was too thin for even the most gullible." Neutrality in the European war, voters realized, was a ques-

⁷Jamestown *Stutsman County Democrat*, September 17, 1914; Bismarck *Daily Tribune*, October 28, 1914.

⁸Grand Forks *Daily Herald*, October 25, 1914. For editorial accusing him of representing the "pro-German element" in North Dakota, see *New York Times*, March 3, 1917.

⁹The *Herald*, supporting Helgesen's candidacy, corrected his mistakes.

¹⁰Bismarck *Daily Tribune*, November 1, 1914.

¹¹Grand Forks *Daily Herald*, November 1, 1914.

tion of patriotism rather than party. Public opinion, not President Wilson, was responsible for America's being at peace.¹²

From even a brief survey of the campaign, a distinct pattern emerges. Peace, which was to become a major issue in the national Presidential campaign in 1916, had already appeared in North Dakota, and without the identification of either party with the fortunes of any foreign power. In this respect the campaign strategy contrasted sharply with the situation in other states for which public opinion studies have been made, where the issue was not raised at all, or, as in the case of Indiana, where the Republicans attempted to identify the Democratic party with the Entente cause.¹³ Rather, at a time when major violations of American rights at sea were being committed by Great Britain rather than by Germany, politicians in North Dakota, both Democratic and Republican, believed that voters feared American involvement in the European war. Furthermore, Helgesen in his campaign warned that the President's handling of foreign affairs would involve the United States in war in which Great Britain was the enemy, as three years later he was to argue that the President's policies would involve the nation in a war with Germany. All of these facts would seem to reduce the force of the contention that North Dakota isolationism was prompted by pro-German sentiment.

¹²Bismarck *Daily Tribune*, November 7, 1914.

¹³Cummins, pp. 38-39; Edwin Costrell, *How Maine Viewed the War, 1914-1917*, Orno, Maine, 1940; John C. Crighton, *Missouri and the World War, 1914-1917: a Study in Public Opinion*, Columbia, Missouri, 1947. The Maine and Missouri studies make no mention of the 1914 election.

