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Lodge and Wilson

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During 1956 a number of ceremonies, lectures, and special publications have commemorated the centennial of Woodrow Wilson's birth. This nation-wide tribute is another indication of Wilson's increasingly secure position as one of the central figures in American history. During the thirty-two years since his death Wilson has been elevated to the select company of hero-presidents who are regarded as embodiments of vital elements in American tradition. Historical scholarship and popular legend have combined to place him alongside Jefferson, Jackson, and Lincoln. It is often forgotten, however, that in almost every case, the great presidents were in their own day keenly partisan and bitterly controversial figures. Woodrow Wilson was no exception to this rule.

An echo of the controversial nature of Wilson's administration is contained in three previously unpublished letters now in the Colby College Library. They are from the correspondence of Senator Henry Cabot Lodge, whose opposition to Wilson was at times so intense as to move beyond the scope of ordinary partisan conflict and assume the status of a personal struggle.

The first letter is dated January 19, 1911, and merely expresses Lodge's appreciation of congratulations sent to him by Talbot Aldrich, a relation by marriage.

The second letter was written to Thomas Sergeant Perry at a crucial point in Lodge's struggle against President Wilson's peace note of December, 1916. For three days,
from January 2 to January 4, 1917, Lodge took the Senate floor in a bitter attack on the Hitchcock resolution which sought to give senatorial approval to Wilson’s position. On January 9 Lodge wrote to Perry as follows:

Jan. 9th, 1917

My Dear Tom,

Nothing is pleasanter than to be “bombarded” with such letters as yours, although “bombardment” seems a large word for the one or two notes you have written me. To know that you and others whose opinion I value most approve my speech is both a comfort and encouragement, and there is little encouragement in the Washington situation at the moment. To be one of a helpless minority and reduced to the utterance of protests as one’s only resource is not stimulating. But I would not allow that peace note to receive the approval of the Senate without saying as forcibly as I could what I thought of it. Under the White House whip the Democratic senators, although I think most of them disapproved the whole business, would have fallen into line and passed it if necessary as it stood. Our attack reduced it to the lowest terms and it was a lame and impotent conclusion, and I think we took the bloom off the note and the attempted approval. I am very grateful to you for your letter, which I assure you is most helpful.

With best regards, as always,

Sincerely yours,

H. C. Lodge

T. S. Perry Esq.,
312, Marlborough St., Boston

The third letter reflects the bitterness of the controversy over ratification of the Treaty of Versailles. On August 12, 1919, Lodge made one of the major speeches in his fight to revise or destroy the treaty. On September 4 Lodge

1 Congressional Record, Vol. 54, Pt. 1, pp. 737, 793-797, 830-832.
2 Ibid., Vol. 58, Pt. 4, pp. 3213-1258.
wrote a letter to Perry which throws additional though by no means conclusive light on the much-debated question of his motives in proposing reservations to American participation in the League of Nations. This was the day on which the foreign relations committee had ordered its report on the treaty and one day following Wilson's departure on his ill-fated speaking campaign. Lodge wrote:

September 4, 1919

My Dear Tom:

Your letter of the 31st is a real help and encouragement and gives me great pleasure. I like to know you read my speech with interest and approve it and I value particularly what you are good enough to say about my style for I know that you are a judge of style.

The League as it stands is too dangerous to be accepted and it can only be saved by efficient reservations. I do not think I shall give much comfort to Germany for nobody seems desirous of interfering with terms imposed upon her.

I also like to feel that you and I agree about Mr. Wilson—a very sinister figure in my judgement.

With best regards and thanks,

Ever yours,

H. C. LODGE

[P.S.:] Will you give my best regards to your wife and recall to her that I am (in Japanese form) her "profoundly loving" kinsman.

Thomas S. Perry, Esq.
Hancock, N. H.

3 The fullest account of the controversy is contained in Frank Fleming's The United States and the League of Nations 1918-1920 (New York, 1932). Lodge's view is presented in his The Senate and the League of Nations (New York, 1925).