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Republicans entered the elections of 1916 confident of victory—and with some reason. The GOP had controlled the House of Representatives for all but four of the last twenty-two years, and had gained sixty-six seats in the 1914 midterm elections. Republican Senate majorities were equally common. The party had won four of the last five presidential elections, all of them convincingly. Republican leaders regarded the one exception to this pattern, Democrat Woodrow Wilson’s election in 1912, as a fluke, an artifact of their party’s split between conservative supporters of President William Howard Taft and progressive supporters of former president Theodore Roosevelt, both of them Republicans. Between them the Republican nominee, Taft, and TR, running as a third-party candidate, had outpolled Wilson in the national popular vote by 51 percent to 42 percent. In 1916, with Wilson seeking a second term, Republicans were not about to make that mistake again. Instead, they united in support of U.S. Supreme Court Justice Charles Evans Hughes, who had demonstrated his electoral prowess before joining the court by winning elections for governor of New York in 1906 and 1908.

In addition to being a united party in 1916, the GOP regarded the Democrats as a weak one. No Democratic incumbent had been reelected as president since Andrew Jackson in 1828. The Democrats’ strongest region was the South, still regarded by many northerners as barely reconstructed after defeat in the Civil War. The Republicans dominated the Northeast, then the most populous and electoral-vote-rich region of the country. New York had forty-five electoral votes, for example, and Pennsylvania had thirty-eight.

Nonetheless, as Lewis Gould explains in this book, the confidence with which Wilson began his bid for a second term was not misplaced. As the head of a united Democratic government for the first time since 1894, he had ridden into office four years earlier with a 435 electoral vote victory and coattails long enough to bring a Democratic majority into Congress. As a strong party leader Wilson was able to pass a raft of progressive legislation, including the Underwood Tariff, the Federal Reserve Act, the Federal Trade Commission Act, and the Clayton Act. The outbreak of the Great War in Europe in 1914 made many Americans...
reluctant to change leaders in uncertain times, especially with TR campaign-
ing ardently not just for Hughes but also for military preparations that many feared would lead to American involvement in the European war. “Wilson or Peace or Hughes and War” became the Democrats’ rallying cry as election day approached in November 1916.

The election was close until the end and even a bit beyond. The outcome in California was narrow, the results late in coming. Whichever candidate won its 13 electoral votes would be president. As Gould shows, Hughes had campaigned ineptly in California, alienating progressive Republican supporters of Governor Hiram Johnson by spending all his time with Johnson’s conservative rivals. Wilson carried the state by about 4,000 votes out of nearly a million cast, enough to give him 277 electoral votes to Hughes’s 254. The Republicans regained control of the House but the Democrats held on to their majority in the Senate.

As Gould shows, the 1916 elections were noteworthy not just for the Democracy but also for democracy. In 1913, just three years before, the Seventeenth Amendment had transferred the power to select U.S. senators from the state legislatures to the voters. Nineteen sixteen marked the first time popular election of the Senate coincided with a presidential election. In addition, the woman suffrage movement gained strength in 1916, with Hughes supporting what soon became the Nineteenth Amendment and Wilson favoring the reform while preferring that it continue to come about through state action.

Nineteen sixteen also marked the restoration of two-party competition to presidential elections. Gould’s book about the 1912 contest is aptly titled Four Hats in the Ring because the nominees of the Progressive and Socialist parties joined the Democratic and Republican nominees as viable contenders. In 1916 the Socialist Party nominee, newspaper editor Allen Benson, received just 3 percent of the national popular vote, less than half of Eugene V. Debs’s total four years before, and the remnants of the Progressive Party offered no candidate when TR refused to run again as its nominee. Not until 1948 would third-party candidates again be a factor in a presidential election.

Michael Nelson
John McCardell
The presidential election of 1916 has not fared well at the hands of historians. A recent history of the Republican Party covers the contest between Charles Evans Hughes and Woodrow Wilson in a scant three sentences that only touch on the issues between the two parties.¹ The only book on the election is now almost four decades old, and the study that examines one of the electoral implications of the result is nearly thirty years old.²

When 1916 is mentioned in popular sources, the judgment usually turns on how close the outcome was and the pivotal role of the state of California in making Wilson victorious. Yet the election had serious ideological consequences for the future of American politics. More even than in the more studied election of 1912, the Republicans and Democrats divided on class-based lines in 1916, with the Wilson campaign in many respects looking forward to the New Deal while the Republicans adopted the small government, anti–labor union, antiregulation positions they have articulated ever since. When Republicans denounced President Wilson for passage of the Adamson Act to forestall a nationwide railroad walkout, they did so for reasons that conservatives now would find very familiar. Convinced that Wilson was illegitimate and a political usurper, the Republicans expected with great confidence that they would win the 1916 election with ease behind their well-qualified candidate, former Supreme Court Justice Charles Evans Hughes. Accustomed to Democratic ineptitude in campaigns, the GOP did not conceive that Wilson could survive. When Hughes proved to be a flawed candidate on the stump and the Democrats put together an efficient campaign, the Republicans found themselves in a close contest where issues of war and peace divided the party and gave the president the upper hand. Wilson prevailed in what has to be regarded as an upset, if not quite on the level of Harry S. Truman in 1948, certainly one that defied contemporary political wisdom.

Victory was a mixed blessing for the Democrats, who saw their fragile electoral coalition collapse under the strains of World War I and Wilson’s blunders as a wartime political leader. By 1920 the Republicans regained national power behind Warren G. Harding as the voters repudiated Wil-
son and his party. Twelve years would elapse before a leader more skilled than Wilson would reassemble the Democrats into what became, with the addition of black Americans, the New Deal coalition. The issues that Franklin D. Roosevelt and his enemies debated, however, would be reminders of 1916 in both language and content. That dialogue would continue until the end of the twentieth century and beyond. In many respects the struggle over government power that Hughes and Wilson waged has never ended. And so the origins of liberal-conservative warfare, so heated in our own time, can be seen on the hustings and in the newspaper columns a century ago in a contest that the confident Republicans expected to win and never really accepted as a defeat.
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Lewis L. Gould  
Monmouth, Illinois  
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The results of the 1912 election transformed the American political landscape. For the first time in twenty years the Democratic Party, behind the candidacy of Woodrow Wilson, swept into control of the federal government. Wilson secured a landslide victory in the electoral college with 435 votes of forty states to 88 for Theodore Roosevelt and his Progressive Party from six states and a mere 8 electoral votes for the incumbent chief executive, William Howard Taft, from the small states of Utah and Vermont.

For all its prominence in the literature of American politics, however, the 1912 contest did not feature serious differences between the Republicans and the Democrats. Woodrow Wilson and his party focused for the most part on the challenge that Theodore Roosevelt and the Progressives presented in the shape of Roosevelt’s New Nationalism. Wilson countered with his New Freedom, which advocated reform without a great expansion of governmental power. The demoralized Republicans, with President Taft hardly campaigning, relied on their customary advocacy of the tariff as the main part of their appeal. There was a dearth of ideological intensity between the two major parties in 1912.

When the results came in, the Republicans concluded that the Taft-Roosevelt split, not differences with the Democrats, had been their downfall. The Democratic candidate had secured only 41.9 percent of the popular vote. Meanwhile, Roosevelt had garnered 27.4
percent while Taft had tallied 23.2 percent. Adding the votes of Roosevelt and Taft together convinced many Republicans that their party’s underlying majority, established during the 1890s, could once again be restored with a popular candidate who could unify the GOP. There was no need to depart from their customary pro-tariff appeal to defeat the Democrats.

For the Republicans the electoral problem ran deeper. The Democrats, who had been gaining since their overwhelming defeat in 1904, held control of both houses of Congress. In the House, Wilson and his party had added sixty-one new members to their majority first achieved in 1910. They controlled the Senate by 51–44. The Democrats, if they stayed united, could enact Wilson’s New Freedom program of tariff revision and banking reform. When the Democrats did so, the Republicans found themselves in new and unfamiliar political circumstances.

Until that began to happen, the defeated parties could only engage in elaborate post-mortems. For Roosevelt’s Progressives, the question was whether they could supplant the Republicans as the major party alternative to the Democrats. On the surface the new party could make a good case that their start was better and more promising than any other comparable organization in the country’s history such as the Republicans in the mid-1850s. From nowhere in June 1912 they had established a presence nationally and elected seventeen of their number to the House of Representatives. With Theodore Roosevelt as their leader they had instant credibility and access to the national press. As Roosevelt himself said, “I firmly believe that we have put forward the cause of justice and humanity by many years.”

On the other hand, the Moosers, as they were known after Roosevelt’s assertion in 1912 that he felt like a Bull Moose, recognized that their appeal rested on Roosevelt’s personal charisma. Their reform ideas had gotten a hearing because of their presidential candidate’s appeal as an individual. What would happen if Roosevelt’s personal life took him in new directions, wondered many who had followed him on his quest for the White House and who believed in his reform program.

The Republicans contemplated an even more uncertain future. In the three-party contest they had finished a dismal third with their candidates repudiated. The Wilson tide and Republican divisions had swept away such party stalwarts as former Speaker of the House Joseph G. Cannon and Theodore Roosevelt’s son-in-law, Nicholas Longworth. Cannon told a friend that “the party landed in Purgatory from which place according
to orthodox teaching there is an escape. We have to be thankful we didn’t land in that other place from which it is said there is no escape.”

The electoral disaster and Roosevelt’s departure intensified the debate within the Grand Old Party about its future as an organization. There had been serious qualms about Roosevelt’s belief in more government regulation even before he bolted. His advocacy of the recall of judicial decisions through popular votes in 1912 had been a breaking point for many conservatives. Now, regular party members maintained that “if the Republican party is to have a future it must be on conservative lines: it must be the great conservative party of the nation.”

Other voices among Republicans expressed similar views. William A. Barnes, the leader of the New York party, wrote in his newspaper that “the Republican Party must and will stand up on its own ground. There will be no compromise with those who are antagonistic to its principles.” Joseph G. Cannon told the press: “The Republican Party is not dead. I hope that all those who believe in the policy of the party will unite with it.”

Political calculations bolstered the convictions of Republican regulars in early 1913. GOP stalwarts had long believed that the Democrats would blunder at some crucial point to give the Republicans an opening. It had been an article of faith among Republican partisans that the Democrats, inept and illegitimate, chronically made crucial mistakes that cost them political points. “My experience with the Democratic party,” wrote William Howard Taft in mid-April 1913, “has been in matters requiring capacity for government that whatever they did was wrong.” In 1893, after winning the presidency and control of both houses of Congress, the Democrats under Grover Cleveland had mishandled the economic depression arising from the Panic of 1893, the Wilson-Gorman Tariff, and the silver question. The result had been sweeping Republican victories in the elections of 1894 and 1896. The party regulars expected that the novice Wilson, elected as an accident, would experience a similar result in 1914 and be voted out of office in 1916. The GOP had only to wait for Democratic mistakes to regain its political dominance. The party newly in power posed no long-term ideological threat to the GOP.

So when proposals surfaced for the Republicans and Progressives to reunite, the Republicans saw no reason for hasty action. The most public of these schemes came from the wealthy newspaper publisher Frank A. Munsey, who had been one of the major financial backers of Roosevelt in 1912. He used his newspapers and periodicals to advance “amalga-
mation” between the anti-Wilson forces. Munsey envisioned a “holding party” that would grow out of state conventions of Progressives and Republicans, which would in turn select delegates to a meeting of the new party that would then oppose the Democrats. He saw in the future the “Liberal” party as a result of this process. He stressed that he had not discussed his ideas with Theodore Roosevelt.  

Any hopes that Munsey might have had about Roosevelt’s receptivity to “amalgamation” soon disappeared. Shattered by his election defeat, Roosevelt had revived the grievances against Taft and the conservatives that had impelled him to run as a third-party candidate in 1912. Within a day, a statement came from Roosevelt renewing his criticism of the Republicans and reaffirming his commitment to the Progressive Party. “Personally, I strongly feel that we should no more enter into a combination with the Republican machine than with the Democratic machine.” A speech by President Taft defending his renomination in 1912 drew Roosevelt’s ire. He denounced the president’s convention victory as “barefaced political theft and fraud” and once again claimed that his own nomination “was deliberately stolen from the people by the bosses on behalf of the privileged interests.” He charged again as he had not done for some months that in key states such as Arizona and Washington the regulars had practiced fraud and theft. Roosevelt reaffirmed his allegiance to the Progressives, which he maintained throughout 1913. As he wrote an old political friend, “I believe firmly that ninety per cent of the Republican party would like to follow our lead or have a coalition with us on the basis of our platform. But I do not see how it is to be achieved under the present Republican leadership.”

With Roosevelt committed to the Progressives for the moment, any impulse for changing party procedures among Republicans failed. As the New-York Tribune put it, the theory of the regular leaders was “that the party will be restored through the blunders of the Democracy in power and through the natural gravitation of the Progressives back to their old allegiance.” When Senator Elihu Root of New York and former Massachusetts senator Winthrop Murray Crane called for a national convention in the fall of 1913, it attracted some interest, but most Republicans saw no reason to act. As anticipated, the Progressives had already experienced a falling-off in their vote in local elections and Democrats faced potential divisions as they sought to implement tariff reform and banking legislation.

One major issue was the nature of the Grand Old Party in southern
states. Because of the allegiance of the Democrats to segregation in all aspects of life, the Republicans were shut out of any hope of winning electoral votes in the region. In presidential elections, the Democrats started out with more than 130 electoral votes before any ballots were counted. Critics of the existing system asked why southern Republicans should not have a lesser voice in nominating presidential candidates. In response to these criticisms, the party decided to reduce the number of delegates from the South to the national convention in a modest but not sweeping manner.¹

The Republicans were in a bind in 1913–1914 in appealing to southerners. The Wilson presidency and the Democrats in general were still champions of white supremacy in Dixie. There was no way for the Republicans to compete for the allegiance of white southerners before the New Deal. The African American vote in the North stayed with the Grand Old Party as the Great Migration brought more and more black southerners northward. Moreover, the segregationist policies of the Wilson administration kept blacks loyal to the Republicans. In time these new residents of northern cities would abandon the Republicans but that had not yet happened in the early years of Wilson’s administration.

For the Republicans, the achievements of Wilson in office produced some surprising and unwelcome results. The Grand Old Party was not prepared for a strong Democratic chief executive who did things. The last time that had happened had been during Grover Cleveland’s first term from 1885 to 1889, outside the political memory of most Republicans. Wilson delivered a compelling inaugural address and then summoned Congress into special session to deal with the tariff. He announced that he would deliver his tariff message in person, breaking with a century-old precedent that had precluded chief executives from appearing in the flesh before lawmakers.¹⁰ Using publicity and personal persuasion, Wilson proceeded to confound skeptics in Washington and pushed the Underwood Tariff through Congress, lowering rates and instituting an income tax without splitting the Democrats. The administration had, said a popular magazine, “done much to remove the grounds for the criticism which has been consistently and justly against their party in the past that it is incapable of positive action.”¹¹ One Republican senator concluded: “There is no doubt that Mr. Wilson is showing himself a very adroit politician.”¹²

Throughout the legislative maneuvering that resulted in the Underwood Tariff, the opposition to the president and the Democrats expressed
increasing dismay about Wilson’s tactics. A Republican journalist and one of William Howard Taft’s close friends, Gus Karger, told the former president that “the gentleman from Princeton seems to have Congress thoroughly ‘buffaloed’ and ‘government by intimidation’ would be an apposite title for the chapter in American history that is now being written.”

Forgetting that they had given the Democrats no role in tariff making when they had a majority, Republicans now denounced the Democratic reliance on the party caucus. Senator Joseph L. Bristow of Kansas contended that “if the caucus system which has been adopted by the Democrats had been used by the Republicans in forcing through the Payne-Aldrich bill it would have created a howl throughout the country that would have been deafening.”

Bristow had a short memory. Republicans in the House and Senate had limited the role of the Democrats in the framing of the Payne-Aldrich Tariff in 1909. When they were in power the Republicans had routinely excluded the minority from meaningful participation in the affairs of the House. The objection in 1913–1914 was that the Democrats were being effective as the majority for the first time in years.

Although he had spoken of seeking “common counsel” in his inaugural address, Wilson proved to be a president who rarely relied on the advice of the politicians who came to see him. He listened politely to visitors but rarely acted on what they told him if it differed from his personal convictions. Politicians soon noticed this Wilsonian trait and shared with colleagues their views of the president’s tendencies. Senator William P. Dillingham of Vermont informed a reporter friend: “The President, as you know, is the most self-contained man whom any of us have ever seen in office. Apparently he shares his confidence with no one outside of the Democratic party, and sparingly with the individual members of that party.” Taft complained, as did other Republicans, that “the trouble about Wilson is that he knows it all and nobody can tell him anything.” Reasonable criticism would soon turn bitter.

Convinced that as the natural governing party of the nation they deserved to be consulted and their advice heeded, Republicans bridled when Wilson functioned as a partisan chief executive. An early episode fanned Republican suspicions of the new president. Congress dealt with appropriations in the Sundry Civil Bill in April 1913. The American Federation of Labor, led by Samuel Gompers, had been a strong supporter of the Democrats since 1906. Now they sought their reward. They wanted language in the Sundry bill that would bar the Justice Department from...
using the injunctive power in the Sherman Antitrust Act against the AFL in labor disputes. Conservatives saw the wielding of injunctions in strikes as a needed weapon against labor anarchy.  

Frustrated in passing such a bill on its own, the new Democratic majority crafted wording for the Sundry Bill that achieved labor’s aim. Wilson decided to sign the bill despite the pro-union wording. He did so in language that his major biographer called unconvincing. Conservatives reacted with outrage at what seemed to them a chief executive giving in to lawlessness. William Howard Taft believed the incident showed that Wilson “is not governed nearly so much by principle as he would have people believe” and he denounced “that outrageous discrimination in favor of trades-unions and farmers in the matter of the enforcement of the anti-trust law.” If the Democrats started to woo specific interest groups, they would be challenging the Republican belief that the government should not cater to individual sectors of society. Other aspects of Wilson’s partisan approach did not sit well with the opposition and stirred rancor for the GOP. Republicans took pride in the quality of the diplomatic service they had established during the Roosevelt and Taft administrations. They watched with more than a little dismay as Wilson turned diplomatic appointments over to Secretary of State William Jennings Bryan, who in turn found places for men whom Bryan called “deserving Democrats,” many with scant qualifications for their new jobs. Wilson did not go all the way with Bryan’s patronage approach but the quality of the diplomatic service did decline during the Wilson years. Though the Republicans made much of the issue, especially during the 1916 election, the criticism did not resonate with the public.

The Republicans took particular pride in their relationship with the Philippines. Under William Howard Taft (1900–1904) and other GOP proconsuls, Republican leaders believed they had given the islands wise, nonpartisan leadership toward eventual independence at some distant, unspecified date. Democrats on the other hand were convinced that the acquisition of the archipelago in 1898 had been a serious mistake and that the United States should relinquish control of the Philippines once the residents had displayed the capacity for self-government. Wilson eventually named a member of Congress from New York, Francis Burton Harrison, as governor general of the Philippines to implement the Democratic program of giving the Filipinos a greater part in their own affairs. President Taft had barred Harrison from the White House over his partisan criticism and the former president regarded Harrison as a
shady character in his personal life. The appointment and subsequent Democratic legislation looking toward Philippine independence sharpened the animosities between the two parties.\textsuperscript{20}

In the battles that ensued over the tariff in 1913, the Republicans defended their protectionist record and contended that Democratic tariff reduction would lead to a slowing economy and an eventual depression. The imposition of an income tax to compensate for reduced revenues arising from lower customs duties started the Republicans on their commitment to diminished taxes and smaller government that would become a hallmark of their party. By 1914, Republicans were complaining that Wilson was an antibusiness president who had “put through a dangerous and destructive legislative program.”\textsuperscript{21}

Another area that the Republicans sought to exploit against the Democrats in 1913–1914 was Mexico. There the long-standing government of Porfirio Díaz had succumbed to a popular revolution led by the reformer Francisco Madero. In the waning days of the Taft administration, opponents of Madero had ousted him and then killed him. Wilson refused to recognize the leader of the coup, Victoriano Huerta, as the legitimate government in Mexico City. Republicans questioned Wilson’s strategy and the resulting failure to protect the lives and property of Americans in Mexico while running the risk of war.

An indefinable element in the political controversies of the early Wilson administration was the personal animus that Republican leaders developed toward the president as an individual. Joseph L. Bristow called Wilson “a sheep in wolf’s clothing” who was “more ultra reactionary than Taft or Ben Harrison ever were.” Elihu Root, William Howard Taft, and Henry Cabot Lodge all concluded early on in their dealings with Wilson that he could not be trusted. The president was artful in his manipulation of words in his public statements and often practiced what he called “grazing the truth” in his dealings with reporters and fellow politicians. By 1915 Lodge was telling Theodore Roosevelt that he “never expected to hate anyone in politics with the hatred I feel towards Wilson.”\textsuperscript{22} An illegitimate usurper in the eyes of many Republicans, Wilson was not entitled to the respect that surrounded his office. Instead, he should be opposed with every possible weapon and driven from office in 1916.

Theodore Roosevelt, too, had come to despise Wilson as a result of their exchanges in the 1912 campaign. “I don’t like Wilson or trust him,” Roosevelt told an English friend in 1913, “and I think Bryan a flamboyant ass.”\textsuperscript{23} In the aftermath of his defeat in the 1912 election, Roosevelt re-
remained committed to the Progressive Party he had created as the vehicle for his presidential ambitions. He wanted to run again in 1916 to beat Wilson and return to the power that made him fully alive. To do that, however, he had to keep the Progressive Party functioning since any resumption of relations with the Republicans seemed impossible after his apostasy. Yet Roosevelt’s skills as a party builder were at best marginal as his second term in the White House had shown.

In the weeks following the election of 1912, members of the Progressive Party recognized their predicament and their dependence on Roosevelt. Harold Ickes of Chicago posed the salient question to Amos Pinchot, a fellow Progressive, in a letter in early December. “Lacking the enthusiasm of a national campaign and the leadership on the stump of Col. Roosevelt, can we continue to arouse interest in support of our Progressive program?”

The problem was that the Progressives, as Ickes recognized, were at
the mercy of Wilson’s success or failure as a future president. The assumption was that the Democrats had reactionary elements that would outweigh any reform impulse from the new chief executive. But what if Wilson exceeded expectations? “I have no hesitancy in saying that if we have a thoroughly Progressive administration under President Wilson our party is likely to have a brief life.”

As a result of Wilson’s unexpected success in enacting the Democratic agenda, Theodore Roosevelt faced a complex set of circumstances in the waning months of 1913. Since leaving the White House, the former president had not displayed the sure political touch that he had possessed in office. He had cut his ties with the Republicans, his traditional political home. If he wished to seek the White House again in 1916, the Progressives were his only real option. Psychologically troubled at his loss in the election, Roosevelt had little time to rebound from the defeat before the leaders of his third party fell to squabbling among themselves about the conduct of the election and the future course of the party.

The most immediate issue was the role of the New York financier and close Roosevelt friend, George W. Perkins. Associated in the public mind with the large corporations he had formed as a partner with J. P. Morgan, Perkins seemed an improbable advocate for Progressive ideals to such Progressive stalwarts as Amos and Gifford Pinchot. They assailed his prominent place in the party in post-election letters to Roosevelt. Whatever the merits of the complaints from the Pinchot brothers, their timing could not have been worse in terms of the public image of the Progressive Party. As Roosevelt later complained, “Reformers are a dreadful set, and it is awfully hard to try to do anything with them!”

The inescapable fact was, as Frank Munsey told former Indiana senator Albert J. Beveridge, “there is no considerable money in the Progressive Party, save in the pockets of a very few, and the very few will not feel called upon to fight another campaign alone.”

During the 1912 campaign, the articulate and dynamic Perkins had been second only to Roosevelt as a public advocate of the new party. He made good copy at the New York headquarters and reporters found him an easy source to quote. The visibility that Perkins achieved did not suit other leading Progressives. “He was a tremendous load for us to carry during the campaign,” Harold Ickes wrote later. To critics of Perkins, there was something incongruous in having a major figure in the business world, on the boards of International Harvester and U.S. Steel, occupy such a visible role in the reform effort.
With the votes counted and the party defeated, these long-simmering animosities came to the distraught Roosevelt for resolution. The volatile Pinchot brothers suggested to Roosevelt that the headquarters of the Progressives be moved to Washington and a senator of Progressive sympathies be placed in charge of the party’s organization. They wanted Perkins “kept in the background.”

There was little doubt about how Roosevelt would decide the Perkins flap. The financier was one of Roosevelt’s closest political friends and a major contributor to the coffers of the Progressives. The dispute ended in a conference of Progressives in Chicago in December 1912 where Roosevelt sustained his friend within the party. Perkins emerged from the meeting stronger than ever in party councils.

The effort to make the Progressive Party a viable organization went forward during the first half of 1913 under arduous and often adverse political circumstances. Believing that voters who had defected in 1912 would drift back to their customary roots, the Republicans did little to make life easier for Roosevelt and his allies. Meanwhile, the Democrats carried forward their program and saw no reason to conciliate what appeared to them an ineffectual rump of the Republicans. The Progressives struggled to gain traction as a credible alternative to the two major parties.

The plight of the seventeen Progressive members of the House underscored the problem. Impotent against the huge Democratic majority, the Progressives stood against the rate-reducing Underwood Tariff and thus just seemed a variant of traditional Republican protectionism rather than a group with new fresh ideas. When Roosevelt conceded that the Democratic tariff proposal was “a little better” than the Payne-Aldrich Tariff of 1909 but there was no real difference between the two measures, his comments rang hollow since there was no chance of achieving the tariff commission answer that the third party favored. How did the Progressives differ from the GOP if they took a protectionist position?

Below the national level, the Progressives did some good work on behalf of woman suffrage and political reform in the states. The labors of such reformers as Frances Kellor and Donald Richberg were creditable but non-exciting. The key to the success of the party lay with their one sure-fire drawing card—Roosevelt himself. By 1913 Roosevelt had become a political celebrity. Offers and requests poured into his office in an endless flood that simply swamped his ability to respond in a timely manner. He worried about the consequences for himself and his ca-

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reer from over-exposure. Roosevelt told a Progressive colleague “that he should not be used except for a very few occasions, each use diminished just so much of his power of attraction and influence.” As voter interest waned and the total of the party fell off in local elections, it became apparent that Roosevelt was all that the Progressive party really offered to the country.

And Roosevelt had competing personal priorities that took time away from his commitment to the fortunes of the Progressives. Long angered by the whispering campaign that called him a drunkard, Roosevelt had determined in 1912 to refute these rumors in a public forum. He and his lawyers filed a libel suit against an obscure Michigan editor who printed the charges that Roosevelt drank. The case came to trial in late May 1913. Numerous witnesses attested that Roosevelt consumed tiny amounts of liquor at infrequent intervals. The jury ruled in favor of Roosevelt who sought only nominal damages and the restoration of his reputation.

By the summer of 1913 Roosevelt was deep into planning for a trip to South America in the latter part of the year and the early months of 1914. In a kind of replay of his 1909–1910 African adventure, Roosevelt sought to recapture the vigor and élan of his youth one final time. That the trip represented what he called his last chance to be a boy again attested to the juvenile element in Roosevelt’s thinking. In reality, he was a corpulent man in his fifties who tended to overeat, and was blind in one eye, and in poor physical shape. A physically taxing exploration of the interior of the Amazon would have been dubious for a young man in peak physical condition. For Roosevelt it was beyond quixotic.

Beyond those hard facts was the issue of what he owed to the Progressive Party. In 1912 he had asked politicians all over the country to follow him out of the Republican ranks and into his third-party venture. They had done so in the confidence that Roosevelt, with his abundant personal appeal to the voters, would lead them in the 1912 presidential race and beyond. Now the Progressive leader would be out of the country and away from the political fray at a time when their party most needed his leadership.

The Brazilian trip was a personal disaster for Roosevelt. His explorations brought him physical perils that led him to the brink of death. His son Kermit, along to safeguard his father’s well-being, refused at crucial moments in the danger-filled journey to see the elder Roosevelt left behind. The former president survived but undermined his health to the extent that he never regained a good physical condition for the few years
he had left. He came back to New York in May 1914 after his ordeal and everyone recognized that the ailing, limping figure, supported by a cane, had been through extraordinary circumstances that had shattered his resilience. One reporter concluded: “He looks like hell.” Yet almost at once he was expected to throw himself into the congressional races of 1914 to stave off defeat for the weakened Progressive Party. There were calls for him to run for governor of New York and to speak all over the country.

During Roosevelt’s months away from the United States, the political tide seemed to be running well in favor of the Republicans. The Democrats and Wilson had continued the pursuit of their ambitious agenda. Having revised the tariff downward, the lawmakers, with the president prodding them for action, had enacted banking reform through the Federal Reserve Act in late 1913. While the consensus was that the banking law was needed, the process of enacting it spent some of Wilson’s political capital. The Republicans anticipated a normal voter reaction against a newly elected president and the Democratic congressional majority as 1913 went on.

The off-year elections in 1913 had revealed no clear trend against the Wilson administration. Indeed the White House was pleased that Democrats won the governorships in Massachusetts and Maryland. Former president Taft noted the falling off of the Progressive vote in Bridgeport, Connecticut. He was equally gratified with the poor showing of Augustus P. Gardner, son-in-law of Henry Cabot Lodge, in the Massachusetts gubernatorial contest. It was, Taft wrote, “a very considerable jolt” for “that element in the Republican party that thinks that the views of the conservative part of the party can be disregarded by a union in which we are to surrender to the Progressive element in the party who are just as radical as the Progressives themselves.”

The economy was sluggish and some GOP members took the predictable course of blaming tariff reduction for any hard times. In the House, the Republicans through their leader, James R. Mann of Illinois, sought to harry the Democrats in December 1913 when Mann alleged that “the country is in the midst of a financial and industrial panic.” Mann had a point. Business failures in October 1913 were running at levels not seen since the depression of the 1890s. Other Republicans echoed Mann’s theme as his party followed its time-tested script in attacking the party in power. By the spring of 1914 the Republicans sensed that the tide of public opinion was moving in their direction while the Democrats worried over their prospects before the voters.
The New Freedom of Wilson had been a three-pronged promise of legislative action—the tariff, banking and currency, and antitrust reform. The first two had been achieved in a prolonged congressional session in 1913 and, as 1914 began, the president insisted that Congress act on the problem of industrial consolidation and consider the antitrust legislation the Democrats in Congress were preparing. The administration was actually moving in opposite directions, trying to fulfill its campaign promises to curb business at a time when the president was becoming more and more convinced “that the only danger that threatens his administration is from depressed business conditions.”

That prospect was enough to terrify Democrats who recalled how their party had suffered during the 1890s when Grover Cleveland had mishandled the Panic of 1893 and the party experienced devastating losses in the 1894 congressional contests. They could see the scenario appearing all over again with the same dire result. To counteract the Republican onslaught, Democrats in the House, led by Speaker Champ Clark, rebutted the assaults of Mann and other Republicans with promises of good times to come as a result of lowering the tariff and the newly enacted Federal Reserve Law. “There is a big business boom coming as sure as shooting,” Clark observed in late December 1913.

Wilson himself followed a conciliatory policy toward business during the first half of 1913. There were statements from the White House about his willingness to meet in person with business operators. A reporter in February 1914 struck just the note that the administration wanted: “Business has nothing to fear from Mr. Wilson so long as he continues his present course.”

The president, who was not a radical man by nature, no doubt was sincere in his professions of sympathy for entrepreneurs and their concerns during the early months of 1914. Yet there was something forced and artificial about Wilson’s reassuring comments. He had no background in business himself, having been a college professor and university president all his adult life. He had friends in the business world such as the wealthy Cleveland H. Dodge, who had donated so generously to Wilson’s campaigns. His closest advisor, Edward M. House of Texas, had an affinity for capitalists. Yet the Republicans, with their close ties to the world of enterprise and finance, could always demonstrate a greater sense of fellow feeling with the rank and file of the business world. The growing animosity toward Wilson and his party permeated the business world.
Champ Clark and the president promised in late 1913 and early 1914 that the Democratic Congress would proceed with its extensive legislative agenda including reform of the Sherman Antitrust Act. The events of the first half of 1914 emboldened the Republicans and did not help the Democrats with the voters. In 1912 Congress had passed legislation that exempted American ships from paying tolls on the Panama Canal, which was scheduled to begin its operation in 1914. The law clearly violated the Hay-Pauncefote Treaty of 1901 that put all shipping through the canal on an equal footing. The law produced diplomatic difficulties with the British, and Wilson asked Congress for repeal.

Many Democrats, including the House leadership, favored the law’s retention, as the 1912 Democratic platform had promised, and the issue split the Democratic caucus. Republicans rejoiced at the prospect of serious divisions within the majority coalition. The tolls issue was a volatile one on which passions ran high. Wilson’s about-face from the 1912 Democratic platform aroused strong opposition in the country and seemed for a time to threaten a Democratic split in Congress. Wilson prevailed at the cost of some lingering hard feelings in his own party and a boost for the GOP. In New Jersey, in a special congressional election, the Republican candidate achieved a decisive victory on April 7, 1914, in what was seen as a test of sentiment against repeal of the Canal toll law. Republicans boasted in the House that they would prevail in the fall elections and retake the lower chamber.

A subsidiary event in the tolls controversy revealed the bad feelings that now flowed between ordinary Republicans and the president. In a House speech on March 29, Representative Joseph R. Knowland, a California Republican, looked at meetings of Wilson and British diplomats over the preceding months and inquired whether the president had made a trade with Great Britain over the tolls issue in return for help with Mexico. The allegation was described in the White House by the president himself as the “crowning insult” of the tolls fight and a direct assault on Wilson’s personal integrity. One gleeful Republican wrote in private the day after Knowland floated his thoughts: “Wilson is charged with having been euchred by the British and with now demanding an unconditional surrender to our ancient foe and rival and there is no telling where it will end. The day of his domination of Congress is over, unless I am mistaken.”

Knowland, who assumed Wilson’s guilt, was premature and wrong. Wilson won his victory and the issue of an alleged deal with England
faded away. That the president had all but called the House Republicans liars did not go away. The conviction grew within the Grand Old Party that Wilson’s duplicity and dishonesty was an essential part of his character. A Republican journalist wrote to a colleague in early May 1914: “It is impossible for me to express the disgust I feel at the ineptitude of this administration. I met Senator Root this morning and he feels the same as we do.” And Root had been one of Wilson’s strongest Republican allies during the tolls fight.

On two other subjects, Republican suspicion of Wilson was always very close to the surface. In the disputes over Mexican policy, Republicans stood with the president in April 1914 when he sought congressional support to intervene in that country over the arrest of American sailors at the port of Vera Cruz, which in turn persuaded Wilson to confront the regime of Victoriano Huerta with armed force. Though Congress went along with the president and the Republicans joined in “with disgust in our mouths” to back Wilson, Republicans took a more mil-
itant posture than the Democrats toward events in Mexico and would extend that policy into the presidential contest of 1916.

Coupled with their ongoing indictment of the White House for its alleged attacks on business confidence, the Republicans now garnered most of the headlines as the main opposition to the Wilson administration. One Progressive Party leader noted in a wry moment in January 1914, “So far the Republicans have managed to occupy the front of the stage in antagonism to the Democracy.”

As spring 1914 proceeded, the Republicans felt a growing sense of confidence about their prospects in the fall elections. In late June a prominent banker wrote that “the administration is losing support at an astonishing rate.” Some erosion of popular backing for the president was to be expected two years after winning the White House. Wilson also suffered from a worldwide economic downturn that the opposition blamed on the Underwood Tariff for undermining confidence in the future of American business and threatening national prosperity. The battle over the Panama Canal tolls irritated the public and its harmful effects on the Democrats lingered on into the fall. American politics seemed to be returning to its customary pattern and the Republican electoral majority was reasserting itself after the anomaly of 1912.

On June 28, 1914, the Washington Post published a lengthy analysis of the Democratic electoral woes and noted that Republicans were looking for a repeat of the election of 1894 when their party swept the board against the Cleveland administration. The predictions of a Republican sweep, while well grounded, rested on the assumption that American politics would remain in familiar grooves. However, had a reader of the newspaper earlier that Sunday morning in late June purchased an evening edition of a newspaper in the nation’s capital, they would also have seen a banner headline that read: “Serb Student Assassimates Archduke and His Duchess.” World War I was about to begin and the course of American politics and the election of 1916 were destined to follow new and untested paths. World War I would complicate and then frustrate entirely Republican efforts to defeat Woodrow Wilson and get him out of office.