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Edith Wilson and the Treaty of Versailles

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EDITH WILSON AND THE TREATY OF VERSAILLES

The widowed Edith Bolling Galt, a direct descendant of Pocahontas, met the widowed Woodrow Wilson in March, 1915, and the two quickly fell in love. He purposed marriage less than two months after they had met, but Edith worried that it was too soon after the death of Ellen, Wilson's first wife, and was not sure whether or not she wanted to marry him. Wilson pursued her vigorously and worked to convince Edith that he loved and needed her. During their courtship, Wilson frequently invited Edith to the White House, wrote love letters to her, and sent Edith state papers on national and international issues. He wrote his comments in the margins and asked for hers.[1] Edith had a limited education and no actual political experience, other than seeing these documents, but Woodrow Wilson led her to believe that he relied on her advice.[2] In one of her letters to Wilson, Edith wrote, "Much as I love your delicious love letters,…I believe I enjoy even more the ones in which you tell me…of what you are working on – the things that fill your thoughts and demand your best effort, for then I feel I am sharing your work and being

[1]Judith Weaver, "Edith Bolling Wilson as First Lady: A Study in the Power of Personality," *Presidential Studies Quarterly,* 15:1 (winter, 1985), 52.

[2] Kristie Miller, *Ellen and Edith: Woodrow Wilson's First Ladies* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2010), 193.

taken into partnership as it were."[3] They married on December 18, 1915, and Edith Wilson became First Lady of the United States of America. Edith Bolling Wilson used her position as First Lady to assume presidential powers, including making executive decisions, and although she was not president in a true and complete sense, she was the single most important non-elected presidential advisor of all time. Edith Bolling Wilson's actions had many political consequences, and among them was her contribution to the defeat of the Treaty of Versailles.

While Wilson was experiencing happiness in his personal life, world conflicts dominated his political reality. World War I was raging in Europe, and Woodrow Wilson was trying to avoid American involvement. In March 1916, Wilson's advisor, Colonel House, returned from England after conferring with Sir Edward Grey, a British diplomat, regarding a role the United States might play in a peace negotiation between the Allies and Germany. Edith was present during this conversation, as well as at other discussions of political significance. She was also present in 1916 when Wilson called J.W. Gerard, ambassador to Germany, for a private consultation. Gerard wrote, "Mrs. Wilson was present…and at time asked pertinent questions showing her deep knowledge of foreign affairs."[4] In March 1916, Wilson met with Cabinet officials Newton Baker and Josephus Daniels concerning Germany's attacks on merchant ships, and to discuss a decision to arm American ships. Edith accompanied Wilson to this meeting. A member of the White House staff remarked that it was the first time a First Lady had, "accompanied the President in a purely business call on a Cabinet officer."[5] In November 1916,

[3]Arthur S. Link, ed., *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, 33 (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1991), 421.

[4] Miller, 144.

[5] E. David Cronon, ed., *The Cabinet Diaries of Josephus Daniels* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1963), 117-118.

Colonel House was in Europe discussing war aims with Britain and France. Edith decoded many of his messages and coded Woodrow Wilson's replies.[6] In addition, when the President was overwhelmed, he asked Edith to make phone calls for him.[7] In January 1917, House, Edith and Wilson met in Wilson's study and discussed who should comprise the peace conference when the war was over.[8] On April 2, 1917, the United States declared war against Germany, and on November 11, 1918, Germany formally surrendered, and all nations stopped fighting while peace terms were negotiated. Edith accompanied Wilson to the conference. In May 1919, Henry White, the only Republican in the American Peace Delegation to Paris, wrote about Edith, saying that he had, "…been surprised to find in her a much keener perception than I [Henry White] expected with respect to questions more or less complicated."[9]

Once the Treaty of Versailles was negotiated, it faced ratification by the United States Senate. This required two thirds of the Senate to vote in favor of the treaty. Most of the Republican Senators wanted supplemental paragraphs added. Henry Cabot Lodge, the Republican Senate majority leader, proposed fourteen reservations, one of which stated that Congress should have the right to approve any sanctions imposed by the League of Nations on an aggressor. He was referring to Article 10 of the treaty. Article 10 called on all nations in the League to, "respect and preserve" the territory of member nations. Article 10 was interpreted differently by Wilson, Lodge and Democratic Senator Gilbert Hitchcock. Their views were

[6] Miller, 152.

[7] *Ibid.*, 171.

[8] *Ibid.*, 153.

[9] *Ibid., 165.*

based on the various interpretations of the Monroe Doctrine and domestic autonomy.[10] Republicans feared that the United States would be required to protect any member nation under attack. Most senators who opposed the Treaty of Versailles were unwilling to yield congressional prerogative to declare war, which Article 10 required Congress to do. In the September before his stroke, Wilson, in a meeting with Senator Hitchcock, the ranking Democrat on the foreign relations committee, agreed to clarify language that could be written up and given to other league signators after ratification. Hitchcock was to release this information at the opportune time. Wilson argued for ratification of the Treaty of Versailles saying that American children would have to fight another war if the League of Nations did not prevent it. In order to gather support for the League of Nations and ratification of the Treaty of Versailles, Wilson embarked on a 27 day train trip across the nation during September 1919. While on the trip, he learned that Secretary of State Robert Lansing had been criticizing the League of Nations which angered both Wilson and Edith.

This was a time of great political stress for Wilson. In addition to political resistance to the Treaty of Versailles, there were many domestic issues facing the United States after the war: including a transition to a peaceful economy, the rising cost of living, union's demands for higher wages and civil unrest brought on by lynching and race riots. It took great energy to deal with all these stresses, and there were also signs that Wilson was facing a health crisis. In April 1919, his handwriting suddenly deteriorated, possibly caused by a small stroke. He was uncharacteristically irritable, rigid and illogical. He had problems remembering. His health issues, however, were kept secret. Wilson suffered from high blood pressure, and the writer's cramp that he complained of could have been one of a series of cerebrovascular events. He

[10]Phyllis Lee Levin, *Edith and Woodrow: The Wilson White House* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001), 366.

experienced partial blindness in his left eye, with probably hypertension, which led to retinal damage.[11] At the signing of the Treaty of Versailles, in the Great Hall of Mirrors, Wilson had trouble signing his last name. He claimed it was the excitement. He suffered two health breakdowns in April 1919, and stumbled when he presented the Treaty of Versailles to Congress. When Wilson became ill on a yacht excursion in July, Dr. Grayson told the press it was dysentery, but it might also have been a small stroke. Wilson suffered more episodes of memory lapses and more irritability after this event. While on the train trip to promote the treaty, he was in physical pain as well as a state of anxiety. He suffered head aches, shortness of breath; his voice was weak, and Dr. Grayson diagnosed asthma, but more likely it was heart failure, brought on by arteriosclerosis.[12] Edith became alarmed at Wilson's physical condition. In her memoir she wrote, "Something had broken inside me; and from that hour on I would have to wear a mask – not only to the public but to the one I loved… He must never know how ill he was, and I must carry on."[13] At the urging of Dr. Grayson, Edith and Joseph Tumulty, Wilson canceled the last portion of his trip and returned to Washington D.C. Grayson said that the President likely suffered from hypertension. The information that Tumulty gave the press, however, said that the trip was canceled because of indigestion and exhaustion.

On the evening of October 1, Dr. Grayson noticed Wilson drooling and wiping the left side of his mouth. He may have been having a transient ischemic attack, which is a forerunner of a devastating stroke. The next morning, Edith helped Wilson to the bathroom because he had trouble moving. She saw his pain, realized the crisis, and instead of using the bedroom phone

[11] Miller, 185.

[12] *Ibid.,* 181.

[13] Edith Bolling Wilson, *My Memoir* (New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1938), 284.

that went through the White House switchboard, she ran down the hall to a private phone to get Ike Hoover, the chief usher, to retrieve Dr. Grayson.[14] Dr. Dercum from Philadelphia, who was also called, found Wilson's left leg and arm completely paralyzed. Wilson had no feeling on his left side, and the left side of his face drooped. The diagnosis was that he suffered thrombosis of the middle cerebral artery of the right hemisphere (blockage of an artery in the brain), the prognosis impossible to determine.[15] Hoover said that "All his natural functions had to be artificially assisted. He appeared just as helpless as one could possibly be and live."[16] Hoover, reported that Grayson emerged from Wilson's sick room and said, "My god, the President is paralyzed."[17] This was the only time the word paralyzed was used, according to Hoover.[18] In the preface to *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson,* Arthur Link stated that Dr. Dercum and Dr. Grayson both confirmed that Wilson's stroke was severe, and that minimal recovery was expected. Both Dercum and Grayson noted that Edith and Margaret Wilson were fully informed of the President's condition. Edith, however, bound the two reputable doctors to secrecy regarding Wilson's health. All consulting doctors were in favor of full disclosure to the public, but according to Grayson, "In view of the wishes of __ this was deferred."[19] Grayson noted that regarding informing anyone outside the circle of family and health personal of Wilson's

[14] A. Scott Berg, *Wilson* (New York: Penguin Group, 2013), 640.

[15] Miller, 185.

[16] *Ibid.*, 190.

[17] Levin, 537.

[18] *Ibid.*

[19] *Ibid.*, 347.

condition, Edith "was absolutely opposed."[20] Edith insisted that only general statements be made, and Grayson was obliged to protect his patient's privacy. According to Hoover, there never was a conspiracy "so pointedly and so artistically formed" as the deception of the American people in regards to Wilson's condition.[21] Grayson reported that Wilson suffered from nervous exhaustion. He released thirty bulletins regarding the state of Wilson's health in the ten days after the stroke, none of which divulged the true state of the President's condition. When Edith noted that Dercum and Grayson "were not quite satisfied" with Wilson's condition, she either greatly understated reality or told a lie.[22] A protective wall was erected around Wilson. Only health care personnel, Wilson's daughters and Edith herself were admitted. Dr. Dercum confirmed Grayson's report that the president was suffering from nervous exhaustion and fatigue neurosis. However, Dercum's papers as well as Grayson's papers contradicted the information given to the public.[23] Grayson, in undated diagnostic papers, thought to have been written, in case Congress chose to investigate, wrote that Wilson was suffering from "a thrombosis involving the internal capsule of the right cerebral hemisphere."[24] He also wrote that Wilson's "muscle impairment and loss of motion..." were symptoms that were "often transitory and of brief duration, it was hoped they would speedily disappear."[25] Dercum's memorandums support Grayson's assessment of Wilson's health, along with his prognosis that Wilson would only be

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[20] Miller, 188.

[21] Levin, 338.

[22] *Ibid.*

[23] Link, 64, 507-510.

[24] Levin, 345.

[25] Miller, 192.

able to recover minimally.[26] All of the doctors who attended to Wilson, Francis Dercum, (neurologist), Sterling Ruffin (professor of medicine at George Washington University), Admiral Edward Rhodes Stitt (head of the Naval Medical School) and Dr. John Benjamin Dennis (director of the Naval Dispensary), agreed that Wilson required absolute rest.[27]

Dr. Dercum, according to Edith, warned her that Wilson needed to be protected from worry and work. Edith used Dercum's alleged advice as rational for what she called her "stewardship." She claimed that she asked Dr. Dercum if Wilson should resign and the doctor, according to Edith, answered,

> 'No,' the Doctor said, 'not if you feel equal to what I suggested. For Mr. Wilson to resign would have a bad effect on the country, and a serious effect on our patient. He has staked his life and made his promise to the world to do all in his power to get the Treaty ratified and make the League of Nations complete. If he resigns, the greatest incentive to recovery is gone.'[28]

Nothing referred to in this conversation was in the doctors' notes. Dr. Dercum, Edith wrote in her memoirs, said that Wilson's mind was "clear as crystal," that even with a "maimed body" Wilson could still do more than anyone else.[29] Dercum told Edith, "He (Wilson) has the utmost confidence in you. Dr. Grayson tells me he has always discussed public affairs with you; so you will not come to them uninformed."[30] According to Edith, Dr. Dercum said,

> Have everything come to you; weigh the importance of each matter, and see if it is possible by consultations with the respective heads of the departments to solve them without the guidance of

[26] Link 64., 500-505.

[27] Levin, 358.

[28] Wilson, 289.

[29] *Ibid.*

[30] *Ibid.*

> your husband (otherwise) every problem brought before the president would be like a knife in an open wound.[31]

Biographer John Milton Cooper argued that it would be strange for a doctor to recommend that Wilson stay in office and then forbid him to work. Furthermore, none of the doctors included such a recommendation in any of their notes.[32] Months later in a June 10, 1920 entry in his diary, House wrote that Marshall should have demanded a medical opinion under oath from the physicians, taken it to Congress who would have declared the President disabled and then Marshall would have assumed presidential responsibilities. House further wrote that "the world and the United States might have been saved the disastrous months which have followed the President's stroke …If he [Wilson] had resigned, the entire current of recent history might have been changed."[33] Thoughts of resignation did occur to Wilson after he got the flu in January 1920. Although Wilson recovered quickly from the flu, his health issues caused him to discuss possible resignation with Dr. Grayson who advised him to do so, but Edith objected.[34] In the Diary of Ray Baker, Baker alluded to Wilson's possible resignation at that time, but resignation never came to be. Edith was the only person who could convince Wilson to step down from the presidency, and this she refused to do. As Arthur Link noted: "The importance of Mrs.

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[31] *Ibid.*

[32] Miller thought Edith's decision to do what she could to keep Wilson in office was a serious decision with great consequences. See Miller, 262. Levin asserted that she betrayed the public interest when she prevented Vice-President Marshall from taking on the presidential duties. See Levin, 516.

[33] Link, 65, 384.

[34] Levin, 420.

Wilson's role in persuading Wilson not to resign in late January and early February is problematic. She was undoubtedly strongly opposed to resignation at this and other times."[35]

For at least a month after Wilson's October stroke, White House "business came to a standstill."[36] Wilson was unable to work. His left eye was almost completely blind, and, according to usher Hoover, Wilson "could articulate but indistinctly and think but feebly."[37] The stroke also caused behavioral disturbances. Wilson's emotions were unbalanced, his judgment warped, his formally combativeness and overpowering self-confidence were replaced with detachment, reflection and self-criticism. He denied his limitations, the seriousness of his illness, and he suffered self-pity.[38] On November 4, Secretary of State Lansing sent a draft of a Thanksgiving Proclamation to Wilson to be edited and signed. It was returned unedited and signed in a shaky hand. Lansing doubted that Wilson had been in a mental condition to understand the document. It was February before Dr. Hugh Young of John Hopkins University, the urologist who had examined Wilson, mentioned in an interview published in the *Baltimore Sun* that Wilson had suffered a cerebral thrombosis.[39] Two news reports followed in which it was stated that "At no time since his illness, has the President been incapacitated and his friends fear the statements of Dr. Young may arouse new rumors which are baseless."[40] Dr. Dercum

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[35] Link 64, 363.

[36] *Ibid.*

[37] *Ibid., 192.*

[38] John M. Cooper, *Woodrow Wilson: A Biography* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2009), 544.

[39] *New York Times*, 18:405, (Feb. 11, 1920), *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, 64 (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1991), 394-396.

[40] Link 64, 403.

refused to comment and deferred all inquiries to Dr. Grayson.[41] This news shocked the public. Dr. Arthur Dean Bevan, a professor of surgery at Rush Medical College, and ex-president of the American Medical Association said in a February 15, 1920 news report that Wilson's stroke meant a permanently damaged brain. Dr. Bevan thought Wilson should resign.[42] Dr. Dercum's response to Dr. Bevan in *The Philadelphia Press*, February 16, 1920 was that "The President's mentality is today keen," and there was no relapse.[43] In contrast to being mentally keen, however, Wilson was sometimes slightly delusional, often petulant, and had little stimulation or information except what Edith and Dr. Grayson permitted.[44]

The nature of Wilson's illness, though, was not known by the Cabinet when Secretary of State Lansing called a Cabinet meeting on the October 3. Tumulty wrote of Lansing.

> He informed me that he had called diplomacy to suggest that in view of the incapacity of the president we should arrange to call in the Vice-President to act in his stead as soon as possible…When I asked Mr. Lansing as to who should certify to the disability of the President, he intimated that that would be a job for either Doctor Grayson or myself… (I) said: 'You may rest assured that while Woodrow Wilson is lying in the White House on the broad of his back I will not be a party to ousting him. He has been too kind, too loyal, and too wonderful to me to receive such treatment at my hands.'[45]

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[41] *Ibid.*

[42] Arthur S. Link, ed., *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, 64 (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1991), 432-433.

[43] "Doctor Dercum Declares Mind of President Wilson is Keen, Denying Relapse," *Philadelphia Press*, (Feb. 16, 1920), *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, 64 (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1991), 433-434.

[44] Berg, 662.

[45] Joseph P. Tumulty, *Woodrow Wilson As I Know Him* (New York: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1921), 443-444.

In a memorandum written on October 6, 1919, Dr. Grayson also wrote of the meeting with Lansing, and of Lansing's suggestion that Marshall take over presidential responsibilities. He wrote, "My reply was that the President's mind was not only clear but very active."[46] Edith knew that the cabinet continued to meet, and by late October, Wilson also knew of the meetings, but did not try to stop them. Edith was angry at Lansing, because he was the first to raise questions of Wilson's disability and "…to try to force him [Wilson] from office."[47] Vice President Marshall, though, was not anxious to assume presidential responsibilities. Tension had occurred between Wilson and Marshall when Wilson announced his trip to Paris without consulting with Marshall, and the Vice President would not consent to take over presidential duties while Wilson was abroad unless ordered to do so by Congress. While Wilson was away, he did ask the Vice President to preside over the Cabinet. Marshall did so a few times, but claimed his role in the legislature interfered with participation in the executive branch.[48] During October 1919, Senators twice tried to persuade Vice President Marshall to take over the presidency, but Marshall answered that the only way he would agree would be if Congress passed a resolution declaring the office of the president vacant, and Edith and Grayson agreed to this in writing.[49] It was in February 1920 that the issue of Cabinet meetings held during Wilson's illness was raised when Wilson wrote to Lansing asking for his resignation based on the fact that Cabinet meetings were held even though Wilson had not called for them**.**

[46] Link, 64, 496.

[47] Wilson, 298.

[48]Miller, 188.

[49]Cooper, 540.

Even though the business of government needed attention during Wilson's illness, Edith was determined to keep the state of Wilson's health a private matter. The *New York Times* on November 9, 1919 reported,

> Dr. Francis X. Dercum, of Philadelphia, paid his regular weekly visit to President Wilson today and held a consultation with Rear-Admirals Grayson and Stitt and Dr. Sterling Ruffin of this city. After the consultation Admiral Grayson said the visiting physicians were well satisfied with the President's condition and noted a general improvement.[50]

Other than family members and medical personnel, only Secretary of the Navy Josephus Daniels, Joseph Tumulty and Secretary of Agriculture Houston knew of Wilson's true condition from October to November.[51] In late November, Edith wrote to Ray Baker, Wilson's press secretary, and tried to influence him regarding what to say about Wilson's condition in an article he was about to publish. Baker, in his diary, described the disturbing emotional state of Wilson. In her memoirs, however, Edith stated that

> He (Wilson) asked thousands of questions, and insisted upon knowing everything, particularly about the Treaty. He would dictate notes to me to send to Senator Hitchcock who was leading the fight for the Treaty in the Senate. Or he would tell me what Senators to send for, and what suggestions he had to make to them.[52]

This is in conflict with reports given by Hoover and Charles Swem, Wilson's stenographer, who said that Wilson did not dictate more than five minutes at a time after his stroke, and Edith had to help with the dictation while Wilson sat in silence.[53] Edith, Grayson, and, after a time, Tumulty,

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[50] "President Still Gaining," *New York Times,* 37:10593, (November 9, 1919), as seen in *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson,* 64 (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1991), 8.

[51] Weaver, 55.

[52] Wilson, 290.

[53] Weaver, 54.

took the law of the land into their own hands: "Their behavior tacitly acknowledged that this was a power grab, as they enshrouded the presidency in as much secrecy as possible."[54] R.A. Rogers, a therapist, worked with Wilson, and reported in a letter to Dr. Dercum that "Mrs. Wilson runs the case… and Dr. Grayson is afraid to speak to patient of Mrs. Wilson." Rogers went on to report Wilson's spells of forgetfulness, dizziness, weakness, tiredness and inadequate caretakers.[55] Medical evidence showed that Wilson was incapable of conducting national business for six months and was not strong enough to attend cabinet meetings until mid-April.

A February 15, 1920 headline of the *Philadelphia Press* read "PRESIDENT WILL NEVER RECOVER IS VIEW OF DR. BEVAN". The ex-president of the American Medical Association declared that Wilson's brain would always be affected, and that he should resign. Bevan felt that Wilson was not competent to act as the nation's executive and head of defenses.[56] Many newspapers ran articles regarding Edith's role in conducting the business of government. "When *The* [Chicago] *Tribune* was suggesting that the nation needed a regent for the period of Mr. Wilson's disablement, it was asking for something we had…There is Madame Regent."[57] Edith had been the one to inform John B. Payne that he was the appointed Secretary of the Interior and Admiral William Benson that he was appointed head of shipping board. "If the next president has to be a democrat, we're for Mrs. President Wilson" editorialized the *Chicago*

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[54] Berg, 644.

[55] Levin, 396.

[56] "President Will Never Recover, is View of Dr. Bevan," *Philadelphia Press,* (Feb. 15, 1920) as seen in *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson,* 64 (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1991), 432-433.

[57] *Chicago Tribune*, (Mar. 8, 1920), 8, as seen in Kristie Miller, *Ellen and Edith: Woodrow Wilson's First Ladies* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2010).

Tribune on February 28, 1920.[58] The same newspaper on March 8, 1920, published "Mrs. Wilson has exercised more power than ever before fell to the lot of an American Woman… Circumstances give the sovereign power to a woman not elected by the nation."[59] The *Los Angeles Times* complained that Mrs. Wilson had been receiving diplomats and Dr. Grayson had been conferring with the members of the Cabinet. "Someone in the succession to the presidency ought to have the authority" to act but no procedure existed.[60] *Boston Globe's* White House correspondent, Robert Bender, wrote that the First Lady "has time and again come close to carrying the burden of the first man." He furthermore stated that Edith represented the best argument for woman's suffrage by functioning as an "executive by proxy."[61] After a series of newspaper articles, October through March, Edith made an effort to curtail her activities of a political nature. When the new British ambassador visited Wilson and Edith in May 1920, he reported that Edith said nothing political. She seemed to be acting to counter those who said she was "Madame President."[62]

Edith alone decided who would see the president. Even before Wilson's stroke, though, Edith had limited access to the President. On September 30, 1919, Edith met with Sir William Wiseman from the British embassy, who wished to give Woodrow Wilson important

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[58] *Chicago Tribune* (February 28, 1920), 6, as seen in Kristie Miller, *Ellen and Edith: Woodrow Wilson's First Ladies* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2010).

[59] *Chicago Tribune,* (Mar. 8, 1920), 8, as seen in Kristie Miller, *Ellen and Edith: Woodrow Wilson's First Ladies* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2010) .

[60] *Los Angeles Times* (March 7, 1920), 13, as seen in Kristie Miller, *Ellen and Edith: Woodrow Wilson's First Ladies* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2010).

[61] "Mrs. Wilson Head of Government as Well as Head of White House," *Boston Globe,* (March 21, 1920), E4 as seen in Kristie Miller, *Ellen and Edith: Woodrow Wilson's First Ladies* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2010).

[62] Miller, 220.

information. Edith informed the diplomat that Wilson was too ill for visitors, but that she would take the information and give Wiseman a response in the afternoon. Later, she informed Wiseman that the information was not important enough for further consideration.[63] Then after the stroke, Edith and Grayson followed the medical thinking of the time when they limited visitors and the business stress for the President would have to deal. The White House diary, kept by Ike Hoover, listed only doctors and Wilson's daughters as visitors after October 2 until Hoover gave up the appointment diary on October 19 for the remainder of 1919.[64] The Vice President was completely out of the loop in that he was not informed officially of Wilson's stroke, but learned of it from a correspondent of the *Baltimore Sun*, J. Fred Essary.[65] When Vice President Marshall called at the White House in October, Edith informed him that Wilson was too sick to see him. He called again in November 1919, but he could not get past Edith, who said she would convey the news of his visit to the President. Marshall never heard from the President again.[66] Edith's primary concern was not the country's welfare, but her husband's. Edith refused to allow a delegate to see Wilson explaining that "I am not thinking of the country now, I am thinking of my husband."[67]

When King Albert and Queen Elizabeth of Belgium came, they were allowed to visit Wilson in his bedroom on October 30, 1919, but Secretary of State Lansing was left standing in the hall during the visit. Meanwhile, Tumulty worked to keep the business of government going

[63] *Ibid.,* 184.

[64] Levin, 339.

[65] Miller, 189.

[66] Berg, 658.

[67] Weaver, 65.

but was not allowed access to Woodrow Wilson until the middle of November. Levin wrote of a bedside government: a mysterious, impenetrable triumvirate (Edith, Grayson and Tumulty whose loyalty was to Edith rather than the U.S. government).[68] The decision to restrict visitors continued to be supported by medical advice. As late as March 16, 1920, in a letter from Dr. Dercum to Dr. Grayson, "Whether or not he should see a large number of persons is a question which must be left to the judgment of yourself and Mrs. Wilson. Of course if his contact with other persons is increased, it should, other things equal, be only with close personal friends."[69] Correspondent Mark Sullivan wrote in February that over the past four months the President had seen fewer people than was commonly understood. Mrs. Wilson had made decisions about whom the President should see based on who would be least likely to upset him. Sullivan wrote that there were "serious lapses of function in the executive branch."[70] From October 2, 1919 until his resignation in February 1920, Secretary of State Lansing had not seen Woodrow Wilson. All business was conducted through paperwork that went through Mrs. Wilson, Dr. Grayson or Tumulty. House, once a close personal friend to Wilson, also complained that Woodrow Wilson was seeing some people, but not members of his Cabinet or other members of his official family. In his Diary, Colonel House wrote "[Attorney General] Gregory came to dinner last night. He said the Cabinet members are becoming restless because the President is seeing outsiders from time to time and has not seen them."[71] Foreign dignitaries also

[68]Levin, 341-342.

[69] Arthur S. Link, ed., *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson,* 65 (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1991), 90.

[70] *Atlanta Constitution* (February 15, 1920), 1A as seen in Kristie Miller, *Ellen and Edith: Woodrow Wilson's First Ladies* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2010),.

[71] Link 65, 79.

complained. French Ambassador Jean Jules Jusserand, when he was denied access to Wilson after his stroke, complained of undignified treatment because he was left to discuss the important topic of the Treaty of Versailles reservations with Edith instead of Wilson. The ruler of the United States of America really was "Madame President," Edith Wilson, he concluded.[72] Limiting access to the President gave the First Lady tremendous power.

After his stroke, Edith acted as Wilson's sole friend and advisor. If his brain had been affected, if he had suffered brain damage, if his political judgment was impaired, Edith enforced Wilson's misjudgment by preventing his advisors from talking to him. According to Weaver, Edith had the power to determine who would be making policy during Wilson's illness. In the early weeks of his illness, Edith's messages would have represented, at most, a rough interpretation of Wilson's episodes of clarity. She banished his confidential secretary Gilbert Close and one of two of the chief stenographers.[73]

After Wilson's stroke, Edith described an involved Woodrow Wilson, capable of directing her actions, but according to Hoover it was February 2 before Wilson could dictate three or four letters daily to stenographer Swem. Wilson would start a letter but lose the thread of what he was saying. His voice would be indistinct. He would stare into space, needing to be reminded of what he was doing. His hand would be placed wherever a signature was required, and there he would scribble.[74] Colonel House complained that those around Wilson were

[72]Miller, 214.

[73] Levin, 361.

[74]*Ibid.*, 350-351.

restricting access to him, and wrote his doubts that Wilson should continue in office in March 1920.[75]

Edith told Vance McCormick, Wilson's former campaign manager that it might be necessary for Wilson to run for the presidency again in order to fight for the League of Nations. Other political people assumed that he would be unavailable to run in 1920, and Tumulty prepared a statement that Wilson would not run for a third term, However, Wilson and Edith changed the statement. Wilson had decided to run again if possible.[76] There were plans to have Louis Seibold of *New York World* write a glowing account of Wilson's health. When the Democratic convention nominated James Cox as a presidential candidate and Franklin Roosevelt, Wilson's assistant secretary of the Navy, as Vice President, Wilson was disappointed and angry.[77]

Meanwhile, in deciding what matters to take to Wilson, Edith exercised substantial influence.

> I studied every paper, sent from the different secretaries or senators, and tried to digest and present in tabloid form the things that, despite my vigilance, had to go to the president…The only decision that was mine was what was important and what was not, and the *very* important decision of when to present matters to my husband.[78]

She sat with Wilson during his recovery and tried to deal with the affairs of the presidency. For the first month almost nothing was given to Wilson. However, four days after Wilson's stroke, on October 6, there was an official request from the Senate regarding a newspaper report of an

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[75] Link 65, 139-141.

[76] *Ibid.,* x.

[77] Miller, 224.

[78] Wilson, 289.

unauthorized landing of American sailors and marines on the Dalmatian coast. On October 7, 1919, Edith called Navy Secretary Daniels to expect a memo dictated by Wilson. The unsigned note contained instructions to send Wilson any congressional inquiries into a recent military action. Daniels replied that the matter was resolved and received a penned thank you note. Both the note and the memorandum were filled with Edith's spelling, punctuation and grammar errors.[79] The president was not actively in charge. At first, advisors sent documents and requests to Wilson asking for action, but urgent letters were unanswered and requests were put off. The White House chief mail clerk learned to send important mail to Grayson, who would give it to Edith. Papers would move to and fro in the same channel of people. Leases came to the White House for Wilson's signature. Edith studied each, arranged the papers in stacks, carried them to Wilson's bed, and he signed many until he tired.[80] Edith prefaced many of her messages with the words "The president says…" on White House stationary, though Hoover and a series of physicians described Wilson's condition as nearly comatose.[81] She firmly requested that Tumulty see that no documents or papers of any kind be sent from his office to Edith, unless they were in a sealed envelope. Edith wrote: "I think you will see the reasons for this suggestion without my dwelling upon them."[82]

Edith assumed the position of sole liaison between Congress and Wilson during the League of Nations fight. Edith, not the Secretary of State, or any member of the State Department or Cabinet, oversaw papers relating to the Treaty of Versailles negotiations. These

[79] Miller, 192.

[80] Berg, 664.

[81] Levin, 355.

[82] *Ibid*, 430.

were forwarded to Edith from Tumulty.[83] Lansing worked through Tumulty, who sent correspondence to Edith, who was asked to get Wilson to act in order to obtain ratification of the Treaty of Versailles.[84] Senator Hitchcock led the democratic fight for passage without reservations in the Senate and sent notes to Edith regarding the progress made. On November 17, Hitchcock wrote a letter to himself that he wished Wilson to sign, and he sent it to Edith in the hopes of her getting Wilson's signature. In this letter, Hitchcock, speaking as Wilson, wrote

> I assume that the senators (only) desire my judgment *only* upon the all-important question of the final vote on the resolution containing the many reservations by Senator Lodge. On that I can not hesitate, for in my opinion the resolution in that form does not provide for ratification, but rather for (defeat) the *nullification* of the treaty.[85]

On November 15, before the vote took place, Hitchcock wrote to Edith, asking, "I must learn from the President definitely whether in his judgment the friends of the treaty should vote against the…Lodge reservations and thus defeat it."[86]

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[83]On November 17, 1919, Tumulty wrote to Edith and forwarded information that Wilson would need before discussing the Treaty of Versailles with Senator Hitchcock the following day. He included Senator Underwood's suggestion that Wilson insist that Wilson's friends in the Senate vote on unconditional ratification. See Link, 64, 42.

[84]On January 14, 1920, Lansing wrote in his diary of working with Tumulty on a letter that Wilson could send Hitchcock suggesting reservations. Tumulty talked with Edith before writing her a letter with the details. See Link, 64, 276-277.

[85]In a prior letter, Hitchcock wrote to Edith on November 13, 1919 of a strategy in which Article X reservations would be less "obnoxious" than they had been earlier. He suggested that Democrats would block Lodge reservations and could add five reservations of their own. The first four would be in accordance with suggestions made by Wilson, and the fifth reservation would be consistent with Wilson's views on the true purpose of the League of Nations. Hitchcock saw the Democrat sponsored reservations as a substitute for the Lodge reservations. See Link, 64, 29.

[86]*Ibid.*, 64, 37-38.

At the bottom of Hitchcock's letter, Edith penciled the President "could not accept ratification with Lodge reservations in any case."[87] Hitchcock warned Wilson that there were not enough votes to pass the Treaty of Versailles without reservations, but Wilson responded that the Lodge reservations would kill the treaty and that he was unwilling to compromise, responding, "I consider it a nullification of the treaty and utterly impossible."[88] On November 17, Edith allowed Hitchcock to meet with Wilson for a second time, regarding the status of the League of Nations in Congress. Edith and Grayson were present. Wilson explained to Hitchcock that "they [Edith and Grayson] have purposely kept a great deal from me."[89] According to Edith's memoirs, she begged Wilson to compromise, and he would not. In her memoirs, she stated,

> I would never ask my husband again to do what would be manifestly dishonorable. When I went back to the President's room he dictated a letter to Senator Hitchcock, saying: 'In my opinion the resolution in that form [embodying the reservations] does not provide for ratification but rather for nullification of the Treaty….I trust that all true friends of the Treaty will refuse to support the Lodge resolution.'[90]

On November 19, 1919 with and without reservations the treaty was defeated, but Hitchcock thought of the vote as a temporary defeat.

The League of Nations was to come up for a final vote in March 1920. Hitchcock continued to work through Grayson who communicated with Edith who hopefully transferred the messages to Wilson. There were several reasons to suspect Edith was involved in efforts to sway

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[87]*Ibid.*

[88]Woodrow Wilson compared the Lodge reservations to South Carolina's efforts to nullify federal laws before the Civil War. See Cooper, 543.

[89]Levin, 377.

[90]Wilson, 297.

Wilson to agree to compromise but he would not. Ray Baker in his diary on January 23, 1920 related his thoughts after conversing with Edith about the fact that people blamed both Wilson and Lodge for the failure of the treaty. "He (Wilson) has been ill since last October and he cannot know what is going on. He sees almost nobody: and hears almost no direct news."[91] Baker continued that Edith agreed that Wilson should make a great gesture, set aside trivialities, united the country and demand Senate passage.

In the middle of January, Lodge and eight senators reviewed the treaty article by article in an effort to compromise. Colonel House wrote a letter to Wilson urging him to permit the democratic senators to vote for the treaty with the Lodge reservations. "House's letter was never acknowledged."[92] Tumulty wrote to Edith asking her to get Wilson to initiate compromise, but compromise did not happen. According to Historian Thomas A. Bailey, "Wilson's vice-regents shouldered a grave responsibility in keeping it (Lodge's efforts to explore a compromise that would have left the League's structure intact and would not have interfered with workings of the League) from him (Wilson) – granted that they did."[93] Lodge's olive branch never reached Wilson. On March 19, 1920 the final vote was held on the League of Nations with the Lodge reservations, and it was defeated. It fell 7 votes short of the necessary two thirds with 49 votes in favor and 35 votes against.[94] Edith wrote, "My conviction is that Mr. Lodge put the world back

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[91]Link, 64, 321.

[92]There is no way of knowing what happened to House's letters; no way of knowing if Edith ever showed the letters to Wilson or informed Wilson of the Colonel's advice. It is known, however, that she read some of the letters as she referred to House's proposal as "surrender." Thomas Gregory, a Texas lawyer and Wilson's former attorney general, delivered House's letter to Mrs. Wilson and reported back to House that Edith regarded House's suggestion as surrender. See Weaver, 67.

[93]Levin, 371-372.

[94]Democrat Peter Gerry of Rhode Island attached a reservation affirming self-determination for Ireland. This reservation was included in the final vote. See Cooper, 548.

fifty years, and that at his door lies the wreckage of human hopes and the peril to human lives that afflict mankind today."[95]

When Edith kept information and the input of advisors from Wilson, it impaired Wilson's judgment on compromising. Many feel that Wilson might have realized the need for compromise had Tumulty been allowed to advise him.[96] She also prevented Wilson hearing advice from House, Lansing and Lord Grey. She told Hitchcock that she did not want Wilson upset over the League of Nations issue. According to Cooper, Wilson's isolation in the White House --Hitchcock only saw him twice and House not at all—along with the psychological effects of the stroke resulted in Wilson's inability to adjust to reality. Historians attribute Wilson's refusal to compromise on the League of Nations to several possible causes: Wilson's inflexible personality, his hatred of Lodge, the fact that he lost touch with public opinion, Wilson's illness and the resultant brain damage that impaired his political judgement and the fact that Wilson's only confidante was Edith.[97] On March 23, 1920, Tumulty wrote to Edith and recommended that Wilson make a statement about withdrawing from seeking a third term, in order to increase support for the League of Nations.[98]

When Edith kept advisors away from Wilson, she changed the course of decisions. According to Miller, the United States probably would have joined the League of Nations with reservations and perhaps the United States membership would have prevented World War II. Possibly, the League would have taken stronger action against aggressive nations, but of course

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[95] Wilson, 303.
[96]Weaver, 61-62.

[97]*Ibid.*, 65.

[98]Link, 65, 117-119.

this would have required public support.[99] Other decisions made by Edith during Wilson disability also had huge political consequences. She decided to misrepresent the state of Wilson's health to Wilson's associates, political leaders, the press and the public, and decided that Wilson should retain the presidency until the end of his term. If Wilson had resigned, Marshall would most probably have agreed to the Treaty of Versailles with reservations. He would have appointed ambassadors and would most likely have reigned in Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer. The government would have been managed.

Illustrious men visited Mrs. Wilson, and she negotiated the reorganization of the President's cabinet, according to Levin, who asserted that Edith was a woman of narrow views and formidable determination, which yielded great influence over important decisions. Years later, Alden Hatch asked Edith Wilson how she decided what to show the President. She responded, "I just decided. I had talked with him so much that I knew pretty well what he thought of things. If there was a doubt in my mind, I would mention a problem tentatively. Often he said, 'That's not important.'"[100] Her power was recognized by Hitchcock when he asked her for help in becoming the Democratic minority leader.[101] However, Arthur Link, in *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson* wrote that no evidence existed that Edith ever tried to run the government or ever acted other than as Wilson's assistant.[102] Miller, however, claimed that

[99]Miller, 264.

[100]Link,64, 56.

[101]*Ibid.*, 273.

[102] Link 64, IX.

Edith did make high level government decisions, and at other times refused to make necessary decisions. Miller also credited Edith with impacting the Constitution of the United States.[103]

Edith subordinated the country's needs to her personal needs and was intensely possessive of Wilson. In 1929, after Wilson's death, some Wilson enthusiasts suggested that Edith run for Vice President with Al Smith. Hugh Wallace, Wilson's ambassador to France, asserted that Edith could carry the South, the far West and that many republican women would support a women candidate, but Edith was not interested.[104]

Edith Wilson's life and her place in history changed dramatically on October 2, 1919 with the stroke of President Wilson. From that point on, until the spring of the next year, Edith Wilson was the most powerful non-elected presidential advisor of all time, and her executive actions constituted the strongest power exerted by someone other than the President. Confident that she knew what Wilson would do, she used President Wilson's name and position as the source of the decisions, though many times President Wilson was unaware of what was happening. Edith was a strong, independent woman who cared deeply about pleasing Wilson, and she needed his approval. Edith, in trying to please Wilson – who desperately wanted an unamended treaty to pass – through her executive actions actually influenced the defeat of Treaty of Versailles in the United States Senate.

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[103] On February 26, 1920, Martin B. Madden of the House Judiciary Committee proposed that legislation be enacted to provide for someone to conduct the business of the country during any period of presidential disability. The 25th Amendment of the Constitution provides for the transfer of power in case of presidential illness or death. It provides for the President to declare, in a letter to Congress, that he is unable to discharge his duties. The vice president than becomes acting President until the President sends another letter saying he is able to resume duties. Although there are still challenges and problems regarding determination of inability, there was no provision for a presidential disability until 1967 when the 25th Amendment was passed.

[104] *Ibid.*, 249.