

# The Family Heritage Series

A weekly discussion of Americanist truths and traditions for those "heirs of all the ages" who will have to preserve that most important inheritance of all — freedom. Produced by the Movement To Restore Decency.



Volume II

Lesson Ninety-Two

## Wilson and House

### LESSON IDEA

To describe the basic character traits of Woodrow Wilson and Edward House, and to show how the two men complemented one another.

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**T**HE MID-1800's were tragic years. In Europe there was a resurgence of socialist thinking and revolutionary violence. Karl Marx finished the "Manifesto to the World" he was commissioned to write; the red flag of international revolution flew over France; and the Social Democratic Republic was proclaimed. A few years later, in America, the War Between the States tore a nation dedicated to liberty into warring factions, leaving in its aftermath not only personal scars of death and destruction but also the legal scars in the Constitution caused by Reconstruction and the Fourteenth Amendment.

The same period of history produced two men who could combine their talents to rule the United States and to push it into socialism. One of these men was Thomas Woodrow Wilson, born in Staunton, Virginia, in 1856, the son of a Presbyterian minister. The other was Edward Mandell House, born in Houston, Texas, in 1858, the son of a wealthy planter and Confederate blockade runner. They did not meet until 1911, when Wilson was maneuvering to become the Democratic candidate for the presidency of the United States.

It is ironic that both Wilson and House were reputed to be intellectuals; yet neither was an

outstanding student. Each man was more interested in activities outside the classroom; and each began preparing for a career of political power at an early age. Wilson concentrated on oratory and debate as a means of persuading people; House on psychology as a means of manipulating people.

"What is the object of oratory?" Wilson asked in an article published in his student days at Princeton. "Its object is persuasion and conviction — the control of other minds by a strange personal influence and power." Oratory, he argued, is not an end but a means — a means which it behooves any aspiring politician to master.

When Wilson graduated from Princeton in 1879, he was an accomplished debater and a recognized leader, and he was more than anxious to step onto the political stage for a starring role, or even a bit part, if only someone would provide the stage. But no one did. So Wilson decided to mark time by studying law. "The profession I chose was politics," he explained to a friend; "the profession I entered was the law. I entered the one because I thought it would lead to the other."

By 1882, the would-be politician had opened a law office in Atlanta with another young lawyer, and was waiting for clients to bid for his services. None did. The elaborate daydreams of brilliant, overpowering oratory in the courtroom faded slowly. Months passed, and when the law practice failed to develop for Wilson's benefit, he decided to give it up and prepare instead for a career as a university professor. The university life was his "natural bent,"

he explained to a friend in 1883; he could never be happy unless he was leading an "intellectual life." His failure to earn even a meager living as a lawyer was, of course, the fault of the legal profession, not himself. "The greater matter is," he wrote, "that the practice of the law, when conducted for purposes of gain, is antagonistic to the best interests of the intellectual life . . . . The philosophical study of the law — which must be a pleasure to any thoughtful man — is a very different matter from its scheming and haggling practice . . . ."

What does this reveal about Wilson's character? Would Rickenbacker have used such reasoning to explain his failure? [*Discuss Wilson's snobbishness — particularly as he used it to excuse his laziness. A frank admission of his lack of interest and effort would have shown more character.*]

**I**N SEPTEMBER 1883, Wilson, now twenty-seven, enrolled in the Johns Hopkins University to prepare for a teaching career in history and political science. As always, he immediately sought out the debating society, and within a short time began to dazzle its members with his oratory. In fact, he somewhat dazzled himself. The conquest of a hostile audience, he wrote to his fiancée, Ellen Axson, was an "absolute joy." "I have a sense of power," he told her, "in dealing with men collectively which I do not feel always in dealing with them singly . . . . One feels no sacrifice of pride necessary in courting the favor of an assembly of men such as he would have to make in seeking to please one man." He longed, he confided, "to do immortal work."

In 1885 he accepted a professorship at a new college for women — Bryn Mawr. His modest salary made it possible for him to marry, but teaching women and being supervised by a female dean was not to his liking. In 1888, he accepted a position at Wesleyan University in Connecticut; and in 1890, he was invited to join the political science department of Princeton, an honor which he considered worthy of his mettle. Moreover, Princeton was the ideal intellectual stage from which to display his talents to the world; and his performance, from the very start, was extraordinary.

As biographers Alexander and Juliette George explain: "His class lectures were celebrated. He applied all his carefully cultivated dramatic skill to

the facts of American constitutional law, international law, English common law and administration . . . . Sometimes, at the end of a particularly brilliant performance — and they were *performances* — the students would impulsively burst into applause.

"He took an active interest in faculty affairs. His contributions to the discussions were cogent, frequently witty and enormously stimulating . . . . He was writing too, prolifically, and his books and articles spread his fame far beyond Princeton. So did his outside speeches, for which he now had many more invitations than he could accept . . . . Such outstanding accomplishments resulted in literally scores of offers from other institutions. Whenever a university presidency was open, it seemed, Wilson was sought to fill the post . . . . The more other institutions pursued him, the more determined the trustees became to persuade him to remain at Princeton. They approved an unusual arrangement which provided that several friends of Princeton would contribute money to increase Wilson's income substantially in return for his promise not to accept a position at any other university for five years, beginning in 1898."

**T**HE ULTIMATE HONOR came in 1902 when Princeton needed a new president and the trustees unanimously elected Wilson. For most men the presidency of such a large and prestigious university would have been the fulfillment of a lifelong ambition, but not for the man who longed "to do immortal work." By 1909 he was openly telling friends that his "instincts" all turned to politics, and that he sometimes felt rather impatiently "the restraints" of his academic position. What he was meant for, he wrote, was "the rough and tumble of the political arena."

It was inevitable that the New Jersey politicians, noting Wilson's flair for dramatic oratory, should begin to watch him. Perhaps he was the political racehorse they could ride to power — first as governor of the state and later as a senator or president. The final decision, however, turned on Wilson's attitude toward Boss Smith's political machine: As governor, would he cooperate with Smith's boys or try to destroy the organization? When they put the question directly to him, Wilson

replied that he was "perfectly willing to assure Mr. Smith that I would not, if elected Governor, set out 'fighting and breaking down the existing Democratic organization and replacing it with one of my own.' The last thing I should think of would be building up a machine of my own." Smith took the Princeton president at his word; the great, corrupt New Jersey political machine moved into the Democratic nominating convention and forced the delegates to accept Wilson as their candidate.

Wilson, in turn, launched his own campaign — against the boss system that had given him the nomination. Even more startling, he transformed himself from a conservative Democrat into a liberal Democrat. As historian Arthur S. Link explains: "Wilson wanted desperately to enter politics, to hold high office, and he must have recognized that the strength of the progressive movement, especially in New Jersey, was growing rapidly, and that a continued adherence to his conservative creed would be almost certainly fatal to his political aspirations. After his nomination for governor, Wilson was forced to make a deliberate choice between conservatism and progressivism, and he knew that the outcome of the election depended upon his decision. The choice was inevitable — he finally capitulated to the progressives."

The switch in philosophies did not disturb Wilson's conscience. It was merely part of what he liked to call being "a leader of men" by "playing to the audience." If the audience, meaning the voters, wanted liberalism, Wilson was perfectly willing to give them a dramatic liberal performance. If the audience demanded conservatism, his performance would be a dynamic conservative one. It was not the philosophy to which he was dedicated, but the applause.

Thus, in 1911, when the voters seemed to want reform, Wilson proposed four major pieces of legislation. They were: (1) an election law which would establish direct primaries; (2) a corrupt practices act; (3) a law regulating public utilities; and (4) an employer's liability act.

The passage of all four in one legislative session won for Wilson acclaim as a political genius — an inspired Democrat who could impose his will on a Republican-controlled Senate. In truth, he had persuaded the Republicans not of the "rightness" of his program but of the danger to their careers if they

incurred the voters' wrath by voting against it. Nevertheless, his masterful "play to the audience" brought his name to the attention of the nation's presidential kingmakers. His candidacy was a distinct possibility; and Edward Mandell House of Houston, Texas, began to maneuver for a position of influence in Wilson's circle of friends.

**E**DWARD HOUSE, according to the entries in his diary, shared Wilson's ambitions for world leadership. But he had given up the dream of holding office himself. For one thing, he lacked the physical charms that appeal to voters: He was short, his chin receded, and his voice lacked all the qualities that make a persuasive public speaker. For another, he was almost continually in poor health; it was the price he paid for recklessness in his youth.

He had grown up on a plantation outside Houston in the lawless, turbulent days of Reconstruction when riots, shootings, and murders were commonplace. Hunting was one of his boyhood delights; fighting was another. Of his early schooling at the Houston Academy, he writes: "I was a strong and sturdy little ruffian then, and expert in all the devices essential to win physical supremacy." But at the age of twelve, a daredevil stunt on a swing nearly killed him; and during his convalescence, he contracted malaria. When he finally recovered, his health was broken and his energy limited. He could no longer impose his will on his friends by brute force.

But his will to dominate remained, and he soon learned to control and influence his companions by manipulating them psychologically. "I used to like to set boys at each other to see what they would do," he told his biographer, A.D.H. Smith, "and then try to bring them around again." To turn people's emotions on and off at will brought him immense satisfaction.

House's interest in politics, according to his own account, began in those early teen years — even though his father's fortune and business connections would have made moneymaking a more logical career choice. But money was of less interest to him than power — political power over a nation — or the world. And if he could not wield that power directly, he meant to do it indirectly as the silent, behind-the-scenes advisor to presidents. He prepared for his chosen career by studying all aspects of the

