“The Shadow of War”

June 1915–August 1915

Shall we ever get out of the labyrinth made for us all by this German ‘frightfulness’?

—Wilson to Edith Galt, September 6, 1915

In the first 11 months of the war, Wilson repeatedly placed US neutrality in question. Yet during that period his actions did not violate the letter of the law. By the summer of 1915, the Wilson administration began an important and intentional shift in its approach to the belligerents. After Secretary of State William Jennings Bryan’s resignation, hawkish policy makers dominated the administration, and Wilson permitted his pro-British leanings to influence his policies. He concluded that American economic and political development depended on a healthy Anglo-American friendship. Britain also understood the significant contribution the United States would make to an Allied victory. By late 1915, Britain had almost depleted its cash reserves and could not raise further capital from domestic sources. The quandary forced Britain to seek loans in the United States in order to continue purchasing vital war materiel. At the same time, the ongoing submarine crisis convinced the president and his advisors that Germany was unwilling to negotiate a resolution. In this volatile environment, the British and US governments came together in the hope of protecting their financial and ideological interests.

Bryan’s resignation brought about a wide mix of reactions. British Ambassador Cecil Spring-Rice asserted that Bryan’s decision was good for the British war effort. With Bryan out of the way, the United States might get in line behind the Allies. Spring-Rice did, however, fear that his resignation might temporarily have a negative effect since Bryan would “give a visible head to the ‘long-haired men and short-haired women’ who are agitating this country for peace, prohibition, woman suffrage and the prohibition of the export of arms.” In the ambassador’s opinion, the former secretary was going to become an outspoken leader for the peace movement and the
German-Americans who “accepted him as a Heaven-born leader.” 2 Spring-Rice later wrote that Bryan’s resignation would aid the peace party’s propaganda against the war. His “motives were perfectly honest, but the result of what he has done had been to give the effect of international treason to the President.” 3 Even Wilson privately denounced Bryan’s resignation as a “desertion.” 4 Colonel Edward House, on the other hand, saw the great commoner’s exit as a boon for the United States and Allies alike. In a letter to British Foreign Secretary Edward Grey, House said that US involvement in the war was “inevitable unless Germany changes her policy in regard to submarine warfare” and that with Bryan gone, America was much closer to entering the fray. 5

War was still in the distant future for the United States, but the colonel predicted correctly that the government would begin to actively support the Allies. With Bryan gone, there was no one to offer Wilson a cautious perspective that might counterbalance the viewpoints taken by House. The president and House discussed several individuals to appoint as secretary of state. They wanted someone who would not challenge Wilson’s policies, and on June 16, House advised the president that he should consider State Department Counselor Robert Lansing. Wilson’s first impression of Lansing was that he was not a “big enough man” for the job and that he lacked the necessary initiative. For House, this was a positive attribute of Lansing because he was “a man with not too many ideas of his own and one that will be guided entirely by you.” 6

The president eventually agreed with House that Lansing was a good choice. According to House, Wilson was his own secretary and “Lansing would not be troublesome by obtruding or injecting his own views.” Assuring the president that Bryan’s departure was for the good, the colonel added that Bryan “had never done any serious work in his life; that he was essentially a talker.” Finally he asked Wilson if he should brief Lansing on his recent European mission, to which the president responded “No.” Lansing should only know “enough to get him to work in harmony with us.” 7 Wilson was looking for a sycophant who could take care of public diplomacy. In Lansing, he thought he had found his man.

Even before Wilson officially selected him to be the new secretary of state, Lansing was hard at work tightening the relationship between the United States and Great Britain. In June, the Foreign Office was still debating over when to reply to the American April 2 note. On the evening of June 10, Grey notified Spring-Rice that Britain’s reply was almost ready; however, he sought advice on the matter before he sent it to Washington. 8 The ambassador replied that the dispatch should be postponed until a later date, arguing that at the moment it might generate a “dangerous discussion and crisis” in the United States. 9