Chapter 10
On the Threshold of the White House

The months following Wilson’s election victory provide a microcosm of his relations with the press. On the one hand, the compatibility he established with journalists in Trenton and nurtured during his campaigns continued, while on the other hand, old irritations with reporters reemerged—in some cases with surprising adamancy. Indications now appeared in his dealings with the press that suggested that the journalists might find him difficult to work with in the future. However, the president-elect had the benefit of having assigned the press a serious role in his thought about executive leadership in a democratic society and had gained many advantages in his practical experience with it and with journalists over the years. In determining his preparation for dealing with the press as president, these advantages would have to be measured against difficulties that had emerged in his dealings with journalists, with reporters in particular.

With some significant exceptions, Wilson remained on good terms with the correspondents, his “keepers,” following his election. They felt comfortable enough to entrap him in a joke. Not long after the election, they invited him into Tumulty’s office at the State House in Trenton to hear a recording of himself. The record began with a voice much like his own saying, “Do you want to gyrate with the gyrators or stand still with the stand stillers?” Cries of “No, no” followed. Realizing he had fallen into the hands of joking companions and was listening to a parody of an address he had delivered at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, Wilson responded with hearty laughter. The voice on the record continued, “Do you want a Democratic team with a captain . . . or do you want to play with [the] signals . . . [of] the last four years, . . .” Interrupting the
record, the governor exclaimed, “I know that voice.” Then a second voice could be heard on the record. It bore resemblance to Maud Malone, the militant suffragist who had interrupted Wilson’s speech at the Academy of Music. “How about votes for women, Governor, . . .” the voice demanded amid cries of “Put the woman out.” As the applause subsided, the mimicking of Wilson’s voice continued, “Resuming where I left off, . . . I maintain that the woman’s question is not pertinent onto the subject onto which I was discussing, . . . Do you want to set the Government free . . . ?” Cries of “Yes, yes” ensued. Then the voice concluded, “Well, I would rather triumph in a cause that I know some day will fail than to fail in a cause that I know some day will triumph.” The governor clearly enjoyed the spoof.¹

Wilson felt as comfortable with reporters as they did with him. He even told the photographers that he was “getting very meek” about having his picture taken.² Quite a change. Charles Swem, the governor’s stenographer who accompanied him throughout his campaign, later reflected, “He was frank in his enjoyment of an intimate newspaper conference. He appreciated the keenness of the newspaper mind, . . . and his conferences with little groups of correspondents invariably called forth the best that was in his own mind. He had an unexplainable habit of indulging in the most intimate and open franknesses in his newspaper conferences.” Swem recalled that he made “some of his frankest statements upon important and confidential matters before newspaper gatherings.”³ Nor, did he neglect the editors and publishers. He continued to accommodate them, and when a matter merited doing so, he would take into his confidence those editors whom he knew and whose advice he appreciated.⁴

Throughout his political ascendancy, Wilson had journalists among his trusted advisors and loyal supporters. Once he became an active candidate, many more rallied behind him. In some cases, no doubt, self-service or at least mutual benefit was involved. Some of his supporters in the press thought of him in terms of a winner, or as the candidate most able to unite the Democratic party, or as someone whose idealism inspired them. H. V. Kaltenborn, who would become the dean of radio news commentators, perceived Wilson as a candidate with a superb academic background, an authoritative knowledge of government, and a record of administrative ability, proven by his experience as university president and state governor. “This combination of practical and theoretical knowledge, not often found in those seeking public office, has always seemed to me to be ideal,” he reflected some years later.⁵

Wilson no less impressed the moderate muckraker Ray Stannard Baker,