



11-6-1914

Letter From Francis Mairs Huntington-Wilson to J. Reuben Clark, November 6, 1914

Francis Mairs Huntington-Wilson

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Recommended Citation

Huntington-Wilson, Francis Mairs, "Letter From Francis Mairs Huntington-Wilson to J. Reuben Clark, November 6, 1914" (1914). *World War I Era Documents, 1914-1918*. 3.
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-2-

Hotel Suiza, Barranquilla, Colombia,
November 6, 1914.

Dear Reuben:

I had not intended to speak of the war, which is almost too hopelessly appalling to discuss in a letter, but after all I want to say a few things to you.

I give all my time to studying these countries and have scarcely looked at any home papers. I did hear the administration was going to seek a law whereby we, as a Government, should buy a lot of merchantmen from belligerents. I saw a letter from H. G. Wells, who, among others, protested against this. I fancy we should be within our rights, but I think it might with reason be considered queer procedure. Besides, about ten years ago in Japan, Bryan advocated, in conversation with me, this policy:- that the government should own a large merchant marine fleet for transports in war time, and should rent them out in time of peace to private companies. State socialism, if you like, but what is more important, silly policy. In activities where we, as a people, are already apathetic, we certainly should substantially encourage private effort instead of adopting measures which would saddle the particular activity with the slowness and apathy which usually characterizes government enterprises in contradistinction to private ones. In shipping and banking, for instance, we need all the stimulus that self-interest on the part of private parties can engender. I wrote

J. Reuben Clark, Esquire,

Hibbs Building,

Washington, D. C.

Gillett suggesting a bill by which the Commissioner of Navigation or the Secretary of Commerce should be authorized to guarantee for a reasonable time, say twenty years, a reasonable return of say 3% on all American capital henceforth invested in merchant ships, provided, of course, that the ownership should remain American, that the proper proportion of the crew should be American, and the ships themselves should satisfy the standard for possible transports, etc. (naval reserve provisions could be added on the basis of the government's paying in proportion to the excess of American over foreign wages). In the United States there are wealthy people who from patriotism would be willing to put some capital in shipping if guaranteed even a low profit, while the same people would hardly risk their capital at a probable dead loss. On the other hand, they would be interested in trying to earn more than 3%, and the government would have to pay only the difference, if any, between their profits, algebraic or otherwise, if less than 3%, and 3%. What do you think? If you think the scheme has merit, you might interest someone.

As to the war, I pray we may look at it from an American rather than a universal standpoint, remembering that we have enough at present in looking after ourselves. The situation looks to me like this:

Several of the greatest and most enlightened nations of Europe are engaged in a war arising from the clash of the Pan-German and the Pan-Slav ideals, but involving a struggle for life by France, and a struggle to maintain its integrity by the British Empire, long considered menaced by German ambitions for territorial expansion.

The war has been precipitated by the German Government,

which frankly relies today, as it has throughout its history, upon the use of sheer force. (See Prussian wars with Denmark, Austria, France. See also Kiaochow, Agadir, the previous Moroccan crisis, the bullying of Russia in the last Balkan war, Admiral Dietrich at Manila, the bullying of Japan in company with Russia and France about the Liaotung Peninsula after the Chinese-Japanese war, the Kaiser's telegram to Kruger, the Kaiser's speeches, the German attitude at The Hague, and even the excessive pressure and sending of a cruiser to Monrovia during the Liberian negotiations). It is not to the interest of the United States or the world that a Power relying wholly on force, and taking a cynical view of treaties, should reach a position of dangerous preponderance.

It is against the interest of humanity and civilization that so many useful lives should be uselessly sacrificed.

In view of the protection of its own interests; actuated by a desire to contribute to the world's peace and progress, the United States should consider carefully whether it ought to sit idly by in case the preponderance referred to seemed likely of accomplishment. The United States would hope that such a declaration would tend to hasten the end of a useless slaughter.

Whatever be the issue of the war, a too overwhelming preponderance of any Power places upon the United States, with its vast interests and obligations, the necessity of having naval strength of the first class, and the United States should as a prudent measure of defense therefore proceed at once to the building of a navy proportionately equal to that of Great Britain.

It is painfully evident that the time when the conviction and faithful cooperation of all mankind will make peace universal

is still far distant, and that the best guarantee of peace is that military strength should be in the hands of the Powers most devoted to justice and peace.

Therefore the United States should have a great navy in order to be prepared to do its part in the future in giving the mandate of force to all guarantees of peace and justice.

The United States is happily isolated from the turmoil of European politics and the stress of European militarism.

The United States should preserve this isolation from any general commitments, and confident in the righteousness of its own ideals, should pursue its individual course in the intelligent and just development of its interests in this hemisphere and elsewhere.

Now, Reuben, I wanted to get this out of my system. It is the most hasty possible outline. If Germany triumphed, we should be next on the list for a licking. If English ^{and} triumphs, we do not want to stay so weak that our British cousins can always snap their fingers at us. It is sickening to see so much of the world's best blood spilt in this war. Is there not a chance of this war's dragging on, and of a moment's coming when some such resolution in Congress would have a powerful influence in terminating the war by the intimation that we (and we could do it by moral, or at most naval action) were interested? Might not this be peace work really worthy of the Nobel prize, as well as a chance of warning us in advance against various follies, and a chance of agitation for the big navy we need?

After the war, Europe may want us to try our hands in conferences. We should be fools if we do it, I think.

I envy you and Mr. Knox your chances to discuss all these problems

No
now wrong
3/10/43

No

Now, goodbye again. El Guiza, Barranquilla, Colombia,

November 6, 1914.
Your friend,

Huntington Wilson.

"Some" talk, when we meet!?

HW

Dear Reuben:

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