



# The Man She Could Not Forget

**Ida M. Tarbell &  
Woodrow Wilson**

*by Robert G. Wick*

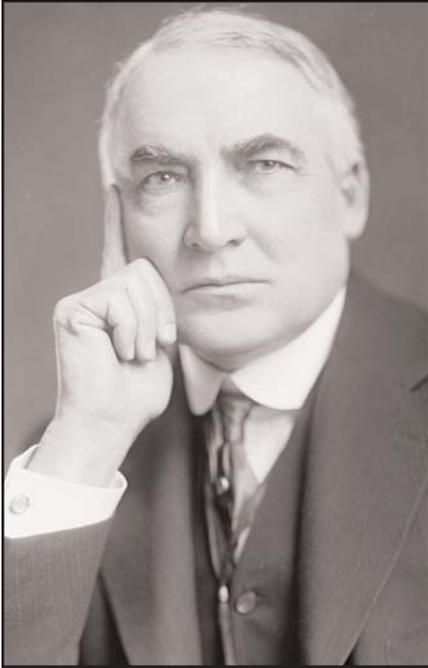
On a rainy spring day in 1922, “muckraker” Ida M. Tarbell visited the home of former-New Jersey Governor and ex-President of the United States Woodrow Wilson. Though debilitated by a stroke, Tarbell saw in Wilson parallels with Abraham Lincoln. Whatever history would make of Wilson’s legacy, *she* could not forget him.

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On May 5, 1922, torrential rains saturated Washington, D.C. A taxi carried Ida M. Tarbell two miles from the Powhatan Hotel to the majestic home of former President Woodrow Wilson. Amidst the sounds of the ensuing storm alongside the oncoming traffic, Tarbell had time to reflect. Although we will never know her exact inner thoughts as the car wended its way through the city, she likely rehearsed a proposal she planned to make to Wilson. Tarbell, and her former editor John S. Phillips, hoped to convince Wilson to take part in a series of conversations, which Tarbell would oversee, on American democracy.

Wilson had invited Tarbell for late-afternoon tea. As she traveled to Wilson's home in the district's tony northwestern section, dubbed "Embassy Row," Tarbell hoped Wilson would eagerly accept. Soon, Tarbell caught sight of Wilson's massive red-brick residence. Three symmetrical Palladian windows, flanked on either side by long narrow sidelights, dominated the spare, flat façade of Wilson's Georgian Revival townhouse. The taxi stopped at the front door; above it, a Doric-columned limestone portico shielded the arched-front entrance. Wilson's wheelchair occasionally was pushed on to the portico whenever the former president desired to make a rare public appearance.

Wilson welcomed only one guest per day into his home. Entering the elegant foyer, Tarbell was immediately whisked to the second floor drawing room from which she could see S Street through two of the three massive windows (the third window illuminated a serving kitchen). Soon, Edith Wilson entered the room. Tarbell later wrote that the former first lady appeared with "a fine impression of sweetness, self-control and elegance." She gave Tarbell a brief tour of the second floor, stopping at a large window at the rear of the home that overlooked the formal garden—a pleasant prelude to what Tarbell would find a disturbing sight.



Neither Tarbell or Wilson thought very highly of Wilson's successor as President, Warren G. Harding. He "did not know how to think," quipped Tarbell and Wilson added "he has nothing to think with."

By 1922, Wilson's friends should have realized that he no longer was the man they had once known. Nevertheless, Tarbell was unprepared for the damage Wilson's 1919 stroke had wrought. Entering the library, Tarbell caught her first glimpse of Wilson, who sat to the right of a massive fireplace; in shock, she silently recoiled. Tarbell later wrote she was "[s]tartled by a sense that he was a very sick man." She immediately dismissed the notion of asking Wilson about the conversations, noting later that she felt ashamed by the thought. "The impropriety, if not the cruelty of it, came on me at the first glimpse of him."

In spite of his fragility, Wilson offered Tarbell a firm, warm hand. His voice, however, carried traces of fatigue. Tarbell caught "an almost pathetic look on his face" when Wilson said matter-of-factly "You will forgive my not getting up. I cannot rise." Tarbell quickly recovered her composure, but found it difficult to speak to Wilson, whose voice was tinged with a weakness that unnerved Tarbell to the point where she began their conversation with the most banal of topics—the weather. Noting the torrential rains, she assumed the couple had forgone their daily drive. She was shocked to discover they had not; the Wilsons would let nothing stand in the way of something that had such a positive effect on the former president.

As Tarbell grew more comfortable in Wilson's presence, the conversation turned to politics. Neither could resist a jab at the current president. Tarbell said of Warren G. Harding, "Of course he doesn't know anything and did not know how to think." Wilson replied, "No, he has nothing to think with" adding that when Wilson went before the Senate committee to discuss the League of Nations, no one asked more unintelligent questions than Harding "which I can quite believe," Tarbell later noted.

An anonymous editorial written by Tarbell for the popular national magazine *Collier's Weekly* had brought her

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Wilson's invitation for tea. However, it was Tarbell's open admiration for Wilson, which started long before that stormy afternoon, which prompted her to write the editorial. While often associated with Abraham Lincoln, Tarbell reported on and knew every president from Grover Cleveland to F.D.R. However, her most intimate friendship with the men who held the office was with Wilson. It had deep roots, including mutual expressions of admiration and previous interviews and conversations.

They shared several commonalities. Tarbell was born on November 5, 1857 in western Pennsylvania. Wilson entered the world nearly a year earlier on December 28, 1856 in Staunton, Virginia. Both claimed Scots-Irish ancestry. Both held distinct memories of life during and after the Civil War. For Tarbell, it was Lincoln's assassination. She remembered the shock that swept through her home on news of Lincoln's murder. Wilson vividly recalled as a young boy looking briefly into the face of Robert E. Lee. He also watched deposed Confederate President Jefferson Davis travel through Staunton under heavy guard and with wrists bound.

Their shared Progressive idealism and faith in American democracy are what drew Wilson and Tarbell together. However, Tarbell was not always so sure of the man. In an unpublished note Tarbell wrote to herself while writing her 1939 autobiography *All in the Day's Work*, she recalled being "lukewarm" to Wilson's 1912 presidential bid, believing him too much of an academic. Travelling from her Manhattan home to Jersey City in 1911 with University of Virginia President Edwin A. Alderman to hear Wilson speak, Tarbell saw "nothing academic or high-hat about him," adding that he "put no distance between himself and his humblest auditor." Tarbell left that speech a strong Wilson supporter.

As Wilson's first presidential term ended, Tarbell sought a role in his campaign for re-election. Wilson's



Theodore Roosevelt may have gone down in history as a champion of the Progressive Movement, but Tarbell was put off by his brash personality, preferring instead Wilson's gentler approach, calling him "the first real Progressive leader."

"Americanism" and Progressive ideals made him her clear choice over the Republican alternative Charles Evans Hughes. Tarbell's view of Wilson through the lens of her democratic faith and her Progressive loyalties was a key not just to her political activism but also to her approach in writing biography and history. These subjects engaged her emotions as much as her politics did. Throughout her life, for example, Tarbell lived with the criticism, especially from academic historians, that in her work she worshipped Lincoln. What her critics failed to grasp was that her admiration (whether of Lincoln or of Wilson) was an outgrowth of her worship of American democracy. Whoever moved it forward had her approval. By contrast, those who inhibited its growth, who sought to block its development, or who took undue advantage of it for personal gain, such as John D. Rockefeller, earned her scorn.

Tarbell made public her support of Wilson in September 1916 in a conversation with Dr. George Dorsey, a Chicago scientist who in 1912 published editorials on behalf of Theodore Roosevelt's Bull Moose insurgency. In 1916, Dorsey switched to Wilson. Tarbell told Dorsey that Wilson was "the first real Progressive leader that this decade has produced." Almost ignoring Hughes, Tarbell instead attacked Roosevelt. While T.R. brashly brought the people forward by the force of his personality, Wilson was the true leader by discovering "just how long an upward step they are ready for and then to fire them with courage to take that step."

Given her connection to Lincoln, comparison between the presidents was inevitable both for her and for those who interviewed her. In several conversations, Tarbell noted numerous connections between Wilson and Lincoln. As with Wilson, Tarbell admired Lincoln's "Americanism," which she defined as "his entire devotion to the well-being of the average man of our country and not to any

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particular favored class.” Both men had political issues that they kept at the forefront. For Lincoln, it was the preservation of the Union; Wilson battled to keep America from entering the war in Europe.

Both knew strong enmity from political enemies. Tarbell noted, “There was always in the North a great variety of opinion against Lincoln during the War. There were radically opposed interests united in only one thing—bitter hostility to Lincoln.” Tarbell added concerning Wilson, “At present, too, there are radically opposed interests united in only one thing—bitter hostility to Wilson.”

A number of people who thought they knew Tarbell bristled at her support of Wilson. “I am greatly surprised, by an indication in the daily press, that a full-grown daughter of Frank Tarbell declares for Woodrow Wilson for reelection to the presidency,” wrote Pittsburg resident E.W. Hukill. A St. Louis resident, identified only as “An Old Admirer” expressed his dismay in verse (apparently channeling Robert Burns):

*Weel, Ida, lass, didst coin they pass?  
Didst worra na' a bit?  
Didst coont th' cost o' honour lost?  
Ah me, the shame o' it!  
Na thinkin' lass o' thy high class  
Could stand for one who smote  
A nation's pride, an' weal beside,  
Ta catch the labour vote!  
Thou, we've admired. Thou hast inspired  
In us respect for ain  
Thy keen research. Nay lass, besmirch  
Not they fair name for gain!*

Wilson ecstatically accepted Tarbell's endorsement. He called it “a matter of peculiar gratification to me that

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you have come out so generously in my support.” Wilson added, with evident hyperbole, that her one voice meant more to him than the collective voices of another thousand endorsements.

Wilson’s campaign advisors knew they had an uphill fight ahead. In a dark portent of the upcoming general election, Maine voters spurned the Democrats in September, turning out incumbent Senator Charles Fletcher Johnson and filling several offices with GOP stalwarts. John R. Dunlap, a friend to both Tarbell and Wilson, urged the president to “make effective use of every Progressive influence” which included allowing Tarbell an interview in which she could quote Wilson directly, something the president had not been willing to do before.

Tarbell told Dunlap that although she would be willing to write an article on Wilson’s behalf, an article merely summing up her impressions of him would be of little use either journalistically or politically. She doubted George Horace Lorimer, editor of the *Saturday Evening Post* where Tarbell hoped to place her article, would even consider publishing the piece “because his readers are not specially interested in her . . . personal views.” An interview in which Tarbell quoted Wilson would pique Lorimer’s interest and that of the voters.

Wilson gave Tarbell permission to quote him in her article, but reserved for himself the right to edit her final copy. Evidence exists that he exercised that right. A manuscript copy of the article in Tarbell’s papers bears edits not in Tarbell’s handwriting. Indeed, the unknown editor crossed out a whole paragraph about Wilson’s Scottish heritage. We know also that Tarbell sent a telegram to Wilson’s private secretary Joseph P. Tumulty confirming that she had omitted the paragraph contrasting the Scotch and the Irish. “All other suggested changes were also made,” Tarbell noted. Instead of the *Saturday Evening Post*, Tarbell’s article on Wilson appeared

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in the October 28, 1916 edition of *Collier's Weekly*, which two weeks before had published an article on Wilson by Tarbell's former colleague and lifelong friend (and Wilson's eventual biographer) Ray Stannard Baker. The week before Tarbell's article appeared, *Collier's Weekly* profiled Hughes.

After Wilson's narrow re-election, Tarbell regretfully turned down his offer of a seat on a commission that Wilson hoped would take the politics out of setting the tariff. Wilson wanted the commission to be independent and nonpartisan. Tarbell later explained that she believed the various trusts were too powerful for that to happen. More important, however, was the financial cost Tarbell would incur if she gave up writing and lecturing to serve on the commission. Tarbell's biographer, Kathleen Brady, notes that in addition to maintaining her Connecticut farm and her New York City apartment, Tarbell was paying the debts of her brother, William. Tarbell also was concerned for her own health. After the United States entered World War I, Tarbell accepted Wilson's offer of a seat on the Women's Defense Committee, although the lack of real activity on the Committee annoyed her.

After the Allied victory in 1918, Tarbell traveled to Paris ostensibly to report on the peace conference. Wilson confidante Col. Edward M. House, however, had suggested to Wilson that he urge Tarbell to come. House hoped her appearance would inspire the French liberal element to support Wilson's goals given Tarbell's popularity with the French people after Tarbell had published works on Napoleon and Madam Roland early in her career.

Tarbell feared that people expected too much from the Versailles peace conference. She later wrote, "What scared me was that so many battered people accepted this notion of what the Conference could and would do." She remained skeptical that any man, group or conference

could undo in a few short months problems that had taken years to create. Tarbell admiringly referred to Wilson as

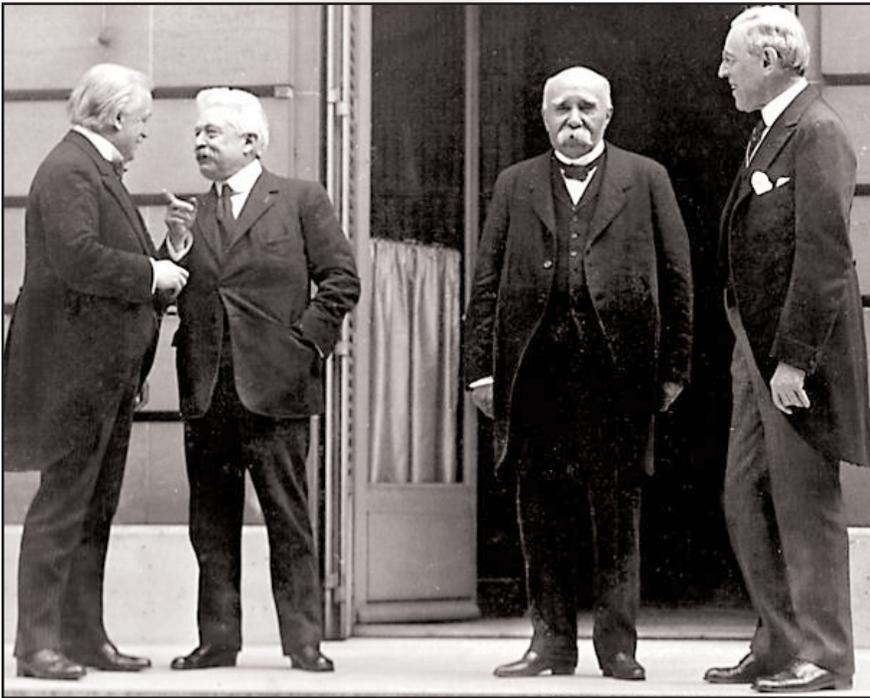
“the Messiah of the Conference,” however she knew his hope that the fires of war would be forever extinguished depended on the cooperation of men who had rarely cooperated before.

In her memoirs, Tarbell’s disappointment in Versailles is palpable. From her perspective, the United States deserved some blame for the peace talks’ failure owing to its refusal to join the League of Nations—“the largest and soundest joint attempt the world had ever

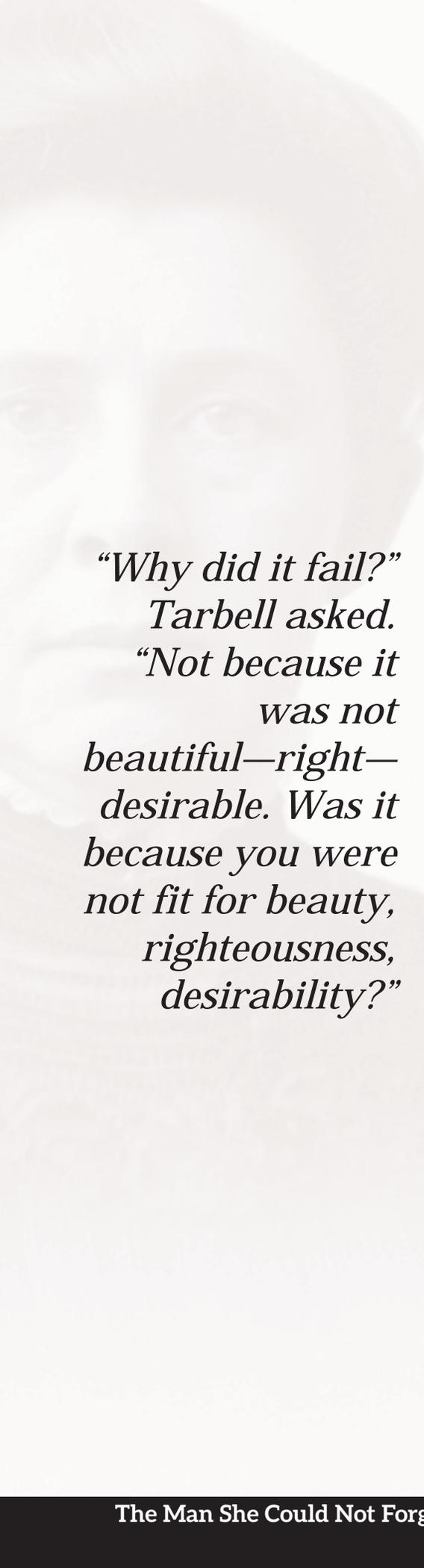
seen, to put an end to war.” However, in her view, Europeans who refused to listen to the political objections coming from America were also at fault. European signatories never took Wilson’s dreams of a lasting peace seriously, she added.

Returning from Paris, Tarbell took to the lecture circuit promoting ratification of the Treaty of Versailles and encouraging Americans to back Wilson’s bid to bring the United States into the League. She forgave Wilson his “Scotch stubbornness” and his refusal to waiver from his belief that the treaty must pass without Republican Senator Henry Cabot Lodge’s reservations, a set of Senatorial doubts, and amendments to the treaty. The ratification battle “was a sickening thing to watch,” she recalled.

Although Wilson’s enemies crowed at his defeat and downfall (after his calamitous stroke that left him an



**“The Big Four” made all the major decisions at the Paris Peace Conference. From left to right are David Lloyd George of Britain, Vittorio Emanuele Orlando of Italy, Georges Clemenceau of France, and Woodrow Wilson of the U.S. Tarbell expressed disappointment in the conference.**



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invalid in the presidency), Tarbell doggedly insisted that Wilson could not be forgotten so easily. After leaving the White House in 1919, Wilson proved her point. His public appearances as an ex-President were rare, but one so moved Tarbell that she felt compelled to take pen in hand.

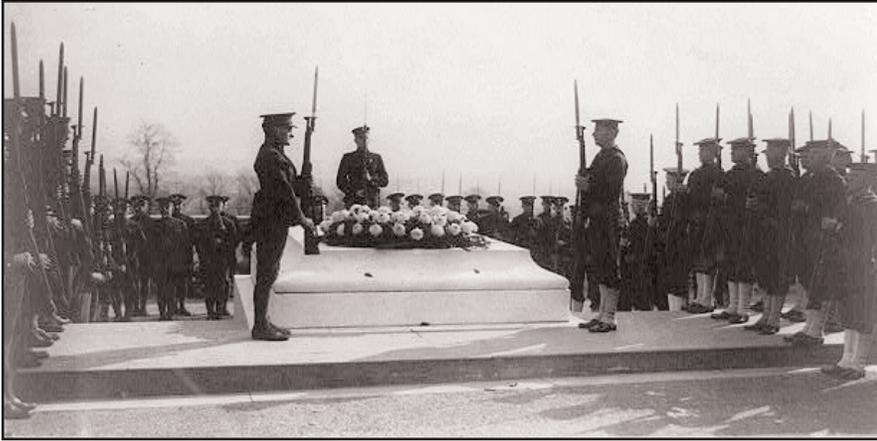
On November 11, 1921, Americans laid to rest the remains of the Unknown Soldier from the Great War. All of official Washington—including President Harding, the members of the Supreme Court, and the leaders of the House and Senate—marched in the parade to Arlington National Cemetery. Tarbell watched from the crowd. At the rear of the parade, uninvited by Harding, were Wilson and his wife. “As the packed ranks between which the procession had passed in silence saw its occupants, Woodrow Wilson and Mrs. Wilson, a muffled cry of love and gratitude broke out, and that cry followed that carriage to the very doorway of their home. It was to be so until he died. He was the man they could not forget.”

Tarbell’s article, “The Man They Cannot Forget,” appeared as an editorial in *Collier’s Weekly* on February 18, 1922. Tarbell’s byline, however, did not appear in the magazine. The magazine’s longstanding tradition dictated that editorials were unsigned as they represented the opinion of the magazine and not one writer.

Human nature, Tarbell wrote in the editorial, is such that reflection crowds the memory of mankind whether for an event or individual. In that reflective time, one wonders what made an event or person special. Extra attention comes when failure has occurred. “Why did it fail?” Tarbell asked. “Not because it was not beautiful—right—desirable. Was it because you were not fit for beauty, righteousness, desirability?”

Even after leaving the White House, Tarbell argued, Wilson remained a presence in the public mind. “Let it be known that he is in his seat in a theatre, and the whole house will rise in homage,” the unnamed Tarbell wrote.

“Let his face be thrown on the screen, and it will draw a greeting that the face of no other living American receives.”



**Woodrow Wilson’s public appearance at the interment ceremonies for the “Unknown Soldier” in 1921 reminded many of his heavy burden in sending American sons off to war. It reminded Tarbell of the parallels she saw between Wilson and Abraham Lincoln.**

When Wilson appeared in the parade for the Unknown Soldier in 1921, the crowd recognized that he had borne the heavy responsibility of calling the nation to war; it was in his name that tens of thousands of other soldiers, known and unknown, perished. The people knew, and Wilson agreed, that there was no other place he should have been. Something deeper, however, also was in play. The people recognized, much as the people of the 19<sup>th</sup> century recognized with Lincoln, that their striving ensured that freedom and democracy endured. “He made them [the people] realities, personal, deep—showed them as the reason of all that is good in our present, all that is hopeful in our future, the working basis on which men may strive to liberty of soul and peaceful achievement. He made them literally things to die for, lifting all of our plain, humble thousands who never knew applause or wealth or the honor of office into the ranks of those who are willing to die for an ideal—the highest plane that humans reach.”

As Lincoln would have struggled and suffered in Reconstruction had he lived, Wilson struggled and suffered during the post-war period. Wilson believed that the mass of people had it in their power to end warfare. However, his enemies were strong. They were organized and willing to join “in an attack such as few men have ever faced in the history of this earth. He fought to a finish, that he might secure the pledge of the nations to the ideal of world cooperation.” Wilson won, Tarbell believed, with the

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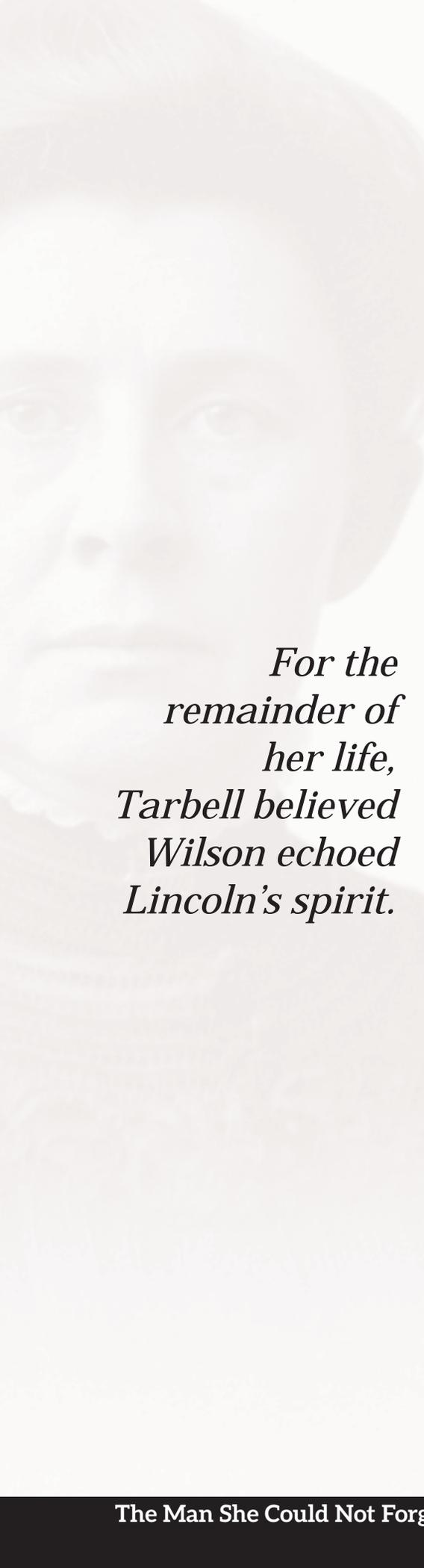
people of the world if not with their leaders.

Those people whom Wilson won over were the same people on whose behalf Tarbell took up her muckraker’s pen. It was the “demos” in society in whom Tarbell believed. Nevertheless, she wrote sadly, Wilson’s enemies misled them. “They are simple people, remember, those thousands whose hearts he had rekindled. They are the people who do the work of the world, and their minds are easily bewildered.” Though Wilson’s enemies overcame his efforts to permanently end war, the people never forgot Wilson’s efforts. They sought confirmation that his—and their—sacrifice had not been in vain.

“I wish to express to you my pride and deep pleasure that you should entertain such thoughts of me,” Wilson wrote Tarbell. “It is the favorable verdict of minds like your own which everyone dealing with high and difficult affairs should desire and strive for.” Wilson wanted once again to meet with Tarbell, so he issued the invitation for afternoon tea.

Tarbell never brought up the idea of a series of conversations on democracy with Wilson. Indeed, after that visit, Tarbell never saw Wilson again. Two years later, Wilson was dead. Tarbell wrote from her sickbed to Edith Wilson on February 18, 1924, expressing her sorrow at Wilson’s passing. Two weeks later, she received a letter from Edith noting that Tarbell’s letter “brought me the sense of your love and admiration of my husband—that went right to my heart. And I want you to know of his profound friendship and admiration for you. He always called you among those who saw the light and who fearlessly followed it.”

Even before psycho-biography found a home in American historiography, Tarbell found it necessary to put Wilson on the couch. After her half hour with the Wilsons on that rainy May afternoon, Tarbell wrote a long memo giving her impressions of the former president. He was “a

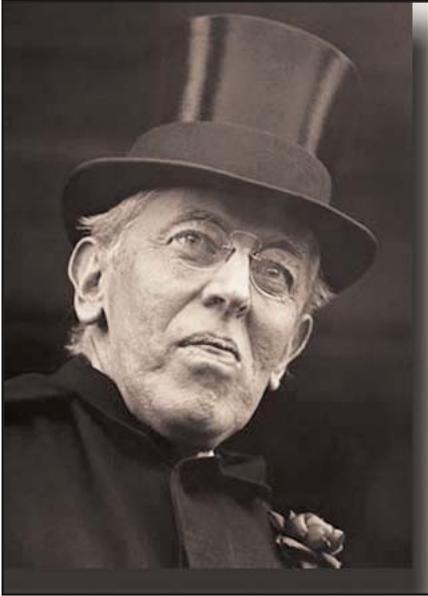


broken man but of a spirit as unyielding, as capable of contempt for those he regards as contemptible." Noting that Wilson's mind remained sharp, she sensed a bitterness of spirit in him that, in her view, made it impossible for Wilson to approach the work Tarbell believed the country needed. Wilson could have an impact on the nation as the leader of democracy, but not as the partisan leader of the Democratic Party. The former was a role, she sadly admitted to herself, that Wilson could no longer shoulder.

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Tarbell also saw in Wilson's psyche reflexive self-protection. She told Ray Stannard Baker that she believed Wilson quite capable of cruelty. Baker, who knew Wilson as closely as anyone, agreed. He confided to his diary his belief that Tarbell was also correct in noting that, given his ability to sway the public, it was to mankind's benefit that Wilson was not an evil man. Tarbell believed Wilson used his capability for cruelty as a defensive weapon to overcome the demands placed by the numerous requests made of him during his tenure in office. Lincoln, she noted, did the same thing.

For the remainder of her life, Tarbell believed Wilson echoed Lincoln's spirit. Responding to one correspondent's charge that such a comparison was "blasphemous" Tarbell patiently explained that while subtle differences existed in how Lincoln and Wilson acted, the similarities were too real to ignore. Both were more interested in what a man could accomplish than how he accomplished it. Where Wilson maintained a coldness in order to get through the day (Kansas editor William Allen White once described Wilson's handshake as feeling "very much like a five-cent mackerel"), Lincoln angered many men around him by his incessant story-telling. "He had to push people away, and he often offended deeply by the habit" as did Wilson. Tarbell said she saw "no blasphemy in speaking of Lincoln and Wilson in the same breath."



Although she realized that for many Wilson would never attain Lincoln's stature, their greatest similarity came with their views on democracy. Tarbell argued that Wilson's "interpretations had an integrity, a clarity, a soundness that sunk into minds that listened; and it was part of his faith that the masses did listen," just as they did to Lincoln. Despite the fact that the machinery Wilson sought to put in place failed, his ideas thrived. "They are at work today in a marvelous fashion. They cannot be killed," she wrote. Wilson, Lincoln and Tarbell all shared a "faith in what we call democracy" and had a "willingness to trust it to the future" because all believed it "to be God's way with men."

