

# THE "DO-NOTHING" CONGRESS

BY WILLIAM STARR MYERS

THERE is one practical facility in politics that is especially appreciated and admired by the American people. As they express it, this facility consists in the ability to "keep one's ear to the ground". In fact, the power of forecasting or anticipating the course of popular feeling and real public opinion is a priceless boon to the successful politician. Jefferson and McKinley possessed this ability to an unusual degree. So did Lincoln and Roosevelt, but they united with it the power to guide these popular tendencies along sound lines of statesmanship. Wilson told the people, in superb phrase and lofty thought, what they must believe, and then proceeded to act as though they really did so, but much to his own subsequent disillusionment.

It is exactly in this ability to sense public opinion that the members of the present, or Sixty-seventh, Congress, would seem to be most lacking. The reasons for this lack will be discussed later, but suffice it to say at the present time that in spite of the real honesty, sincerity and industry of the large majority of the members of both Senate and House of Representatives, a wave of public criticism and popular impatience has arisen during the past year, which has resulted in the nickname of the "Do-Nothing Congress". Whether or not this sobriquet is deserved, it is going to stick, and many a member will pay the penalty for the description at the polls in November, entirely aside from the question of actually deserving it.

In answer to the popular reproaches for inactivity and incapacity to legislate, the leaders of Congress "point with pride" to a record of accomplishment that is of no mean character. First of all comes the passage, in the early days of the Harding Administration, of the first national Budget Act. This took hold of our national financial administration and policy, hitherto not even worthy of the emulation in bookkeeping of a delicatessen

store on a back street in Bayonne, New Jersey, and placed it on a basis of sound common sense and efficiency. It is probable that future historians will rank the passage of the Federal Reserve Act as the greatest achievement of the Wilson Administrations, and the Democratic party has a right to be proud of President Wilson's leadership, which undoubtedly brought this about. In just the same way, the Budget Act will rank as an outstanding success for President Harding. With lapse of time, its enormous value will be more fully appreciated.

Along with the budgetary legislation goes an achievement that is as great in importance, although in the field of foreign relations. This is the Washington Conference, which may prove to be a turning point in the world's history as well as in that of the United States. Although President Harding and his administrative assistants are mainly responsible for the conception and accomplishment of the whole movement, yet the Senate must share with the President in the credit for its success. Within about seven weeks after the close of the Conference, the Senate had ratified all the treaties and agreements there formulated. This is remarkably quick action, when the ordinary delay in consideration of international matters is taken into account.

But not all the credit for this celerity is to be given to the Republican members of the Senate. One of the most forceful advocates of the treaties, and one whose leadership had great weight in their adoption, was Senator Oscar W. Underwood of Alabama, the Democratic floor leader, one of the ablest and most valuable members of the Upper House. His assistance was of vital importance, and it is doubtful whether ratification could have been accomplished without it. Also the dozen or more Democratic Senators who followed his leadership deserve like credit for sound and broad statesmanship. The less said about the statesman-like abilities of both the Democratic and Republican opponents, the better. With a few exceptions, the debates were on a rather low plane of ability, and failed to arouse the interest or inspire the imagination of the American people.

Republican leaders in the present campaign, in preparation for the coming November elections, are stressing among the accomplishments of this Congress the "saving of two billion dollars

in the expenditures of the Federal Government." This is an achievement worthy of note, but only what was to be expected, for any legislative body of a minimum of sanity must know inordinate and extravagant expenditures incident to the waging of war must of necessity stop at the earliest practical moment. To have failed in this regard would be unpardonable; to have accomplished it is only the fulfilment of an obvious duty. The further claim to merit for the annual reduction of \$900,000,000 in war taxes is in reality creditable, on the surface at least. But when it is remembered that the well thought-out plan as proposed to Congress by Secretary Mellon was in great part cast into the discard, and only those reductions made that would seem calculated to appeal to the votes of the unthinking and selfish class elements in our nation, the record is not so admirable. In fact, it is along the line of taxation that the greatest and most fundamental mistake of the present Congress has been made, as will be pointed out later on. The tax revision left untouched the essentially faulty principles upon which the Kitchin Bill of 1917 was formulated. The principles underlying that piece of legislation, so replete with silly, un-American and undemocratic provisions, seemed to be only those of the punishment of wealth as a crime, levying of taxes on the urban centers of our country and their tributary population, and penalizing of efficiency in business.

The repeal of the excess profits tax, one of the most uneconomic taxes ever laid in the long history of national finance, was accomplished only after a long struggle. The small reduction in the inordinate surtaxes on income merely saved the consistency of those members who were honest enough to look facts in the face; while the exemptions adopted were calculated to help just a few of our people, on the plea that those of narrow circumstances must be assisted. Instead of boldly recasting the whole of our iniquitous tax laws, reducing normal and surtax rates to a fair measure of the actual ability of our people to pay without exhausting the sources of revenue and discouraging individual initiative; instead of broadening the basis of taxation by means of a sales tax levied upon wholesale transactions at least, if not upon retail sales of a certain minimum amount—we have the recent

halting and ineffectual amendments of 1921. The country is still burdened by these ill-conceived taxes, and normal times and real prosperity will not come until the necessary reforms are made upon a basis of sound economics and fair politics.

The extending of emergency credits to farmers and the enactment of laws regulating and restricting immigration were necessary, and the latter was of prime importance. Probably the frank entrance upon a policy of restriction and discrimination in immigration, according to the ability of the country to assimilate the foreigner, will prove to be second only to the Budget Act in value and in importance to the welfare of the United States and the preservation of American institutions. The experiences with so-called hyphenates during and since the World War have awakened the people of this country to the extreme danger confronting them; but it took courage of no mean sort for the members of Congress, many of them from urban districts with large foreign populations, to vote for these restrictive measures.

In adding up the credit side of the ledger of Congressional achievement, due place should be given to the passage of the numerous appropriation bills and routine legislation, all of which absorb so much time and energy, but which pass unnoticed by the public. Probably no harder work, requiring sustained mental application and ceaseless energy, is to be found anywhere in our business or professional world. The men who have the responsibility for the laborious committee work, and the aggravating course of parliamentary procedure, with its trifling and irritating accompaniments of obstruction, selfishness and narrow-minded criticism, deserve the thanks of the American people for the tasks they have successfully accomplished.

When we leave the subject of the real accomplishments of the Sixty-seventh Congress, and consider what the people of the country at large seem to think are its shortcomings, the task of assessing praise or blame is not so easy. The three most contentious subjects before Congress during the whole course of the past year or more have been the tariff, the soldier bonus, and ship subsidies. Taking them in the order of their mentioning, it is not an exaggeration to say at the outset that the tariff was not a real political issue in any sense, during the campaign of 1920, with the

possible exception of a few isolated districts. The heavy majority of our people had no thought of tariff in their mind when they voted, but their attention was wholly absorbed by other and more important issues. But when the present Congress convened in special session in the spring of 1921, old-line and Bourbon leaders were in control, and to their limited political intelligence the only salvation of any nation on the face of this green earth consisted in tariff legislation; the more protective the better. At that precise time the agricultural interests of the country, among the first of our people, were feeling the severe shock of the necessary deflation that must follow the mad economic saturnalia that accompanies every war. Naturally they cried out with pain, and also naturally the sympathetic ears of these same leaders caught their plaints. The Fordney Emergency Tariff, one of the most ghastly failures ever placed upon our statute book, was the result.

Since that time, the members of Congress have been busy upon the formulation of a so-called permanent tariff, and the longer their labors have continued, the greater has been the popular opposition, irrespective of party, and the more unpopular has the whole Congress become. The thinking people of this country, irrespective of party, soon came to the conclusion that the chaotic and changing conditions following the war were no proper time for any general tariff legislation. Furthermore, when such legislation does take place, the lasting results of the war must be the primary matters of consideration. The facts that we are no longer a debtor but a creditor nation; that we also are changing from an importing to an exporting people; that we have become a leading world power whether we like it or not—these are the things that are of dominant influence in the minds of the thoughtful American people today. They also realize that depreciated currencies, economic exhaustion and the possibility of "dumping" of products by foreign nations are of but transient moment, and that in spite of the shrill cries of our calamity howlers, the trade reports of the United States Government prove beyond cavil that even the "dumping" danger is almost non-existent.

And the people also realize in addition that this same tariff legislation, accompanied by the most extensive political bargaining between various classes and interests in the country, has

resulted in a prospective law that probably can rightly claim the unenviable distinction of being the worst tariff bill in our history. They also know at the same time that instead of helping to revive business and prosperity, it is the greatest hindrance, and any present economic recovery is being made in spite of this prospective law, and in spite of the hindrance caused by the Fordney Emergency Tariff. The real sufferers, the ones who will pay the final and undeserved penalty, of course, are the poor "ultimate consumers". What the present gay and debonair leaders of the Republican party in Congress forget in their present delirium of tariff tinkering is that the above "he" and "she" have votes, and that these votes may count as disastrously for the party as was the case in 1910, when the far less reprehensible Payne-Aldrich Tariff went into *political* effect.

The soldier bonus is the second member of this questionable legislative trinity, and were it not for the skilful political manoeuvring of President Harding it long ago would have been upon the statute books. It would seem that the "average" American citizen fully realizes that the service rendered to this country by the men who risked their all in the recent war is of the type that never can be paid for. It is beyond money and beyond price. On the other hand, there also is honest confession that the ex-soldiers have a righteous grievance against the profiteers of that period, whether in the manufactures, the professions, the labor unions, or among the general lines of business. There was downright profiteering among all these classes, and only too late does this country realize its dereliction in not having made more strenuous efforts to prevent it. But this profiteering was at the expense of the taxpayers of the nation at large and at the hands of comparatively few of our citizens. The bad effects will gradually work themselves off by a process of self-elimination.

But to attempt to even up to the soldiers by making them a species of profiteers by law, does not appeal to the common sense or justice of the American people. Although this bonus to the soldiers is veneered with the pleasing name of "adjusted compensation", the real meaning of the movement stands out in all its naked disgrace. Bad as would be the economic effects of the passage of such a law with its appropriation of billions of dollars,



the mere fact of taking money out of the pockets of the taxpayers, in order to legislate it into the pockets of able-bodied men, would cause a deterioration in the moral fibre of the manhood of this country that would be the greatest misfortune that could overtake it. Patriotism is either beyond price, or it is commercialized and its keen edge is dulled.

In the third place, there is no doubt that the American people are in hearty sympathy with President Harding's desire for the upbuilding and maintenance of a merchant marine. The lessons of the war have not been forgotten, in this respect. But as yet they are not convinced that the subsidy scheme is the way to reach the desired result. In fact, they are timorous about the incurring of further expenditures for any reason whatsoever, and one great cause of suspicion with regard to Congress, as far as the ordinary citizen goes, is the feeling that too much money is being spent. Whether the expenditure be right or wrong, does not much matter. Therefore, there is a popular feeling that we should "go slow", to use an old pioneer saying, and let the subsidy question drop for awhile.

It is because Congress has been for months occupying its time mainly with tariff, bonus and subsidy, three things which have not the support of the majority of the *thinking* American people at any rate, and probably of all the people in the last analysis, that popular impatience has become so outspoken, and possibly it may be very disastrous to the personal fortunes of a large number of the present members of both Houses of Congress, whether they really deserve it or not. And this necessarily brings us to the question of the real issues of the campaign of 1920, which were primarily two, according to the writer's own opinion. No matter how much the strong and dominating personality of President Wilson may have counted, one way or the other, in determining the result of the election, there were also two great issues in the minds of the people: the acceptance or rejection of the League of Nations *as proposed*, and relief from the inordinate burden of war taxation.

During the past year the Harding Administration, with the acquiescence or help of Congress, has been taking those slow and gradual steps in formulating our international relations which

public opinion in this country really is willing to endorse. President Harding and Mr. Hughes are in all probability fully abreast of the maturing judgment of the rank and file of our citizens. But as noted above, Congress has completely failed to appreciate the inner meaning of the election, and has taken no real steps to meet the demands of our people with regard to taxation. It is true that these demands may not be clear-cut or even articulate, but even the less informed elements of our people are now aware of the immense levies of direct taxes they are paying, and also are becoming aware of the far greater burden of indirect taxes they must shoulder. In comparison with this present and ever-wearing load, such matters as tariff, subsidy, bonus and routine legislation pale into insignificance. Whether the burden of taxes can or should be lifted, our people are demanding it, and only by the most statesmanlike and fundamental changes in our whole tax system, as hinted above, can this demand be met and satisfied. Secretary Mellon, who ranks as one of our ablest contemporary administrators, has indicated the way, but Congress is too cowardly, or too blind, to take the road.

But there is one great and final reason for popular impatience with Congress, and that is ineffectual leadership. Whether it is owing to the outworn and futile rule of "seniority", lack of party responsibility, and lack of executive leadership due to the reaction from the extreme type of policy as followed by President Wilson, or even perhaps due to the absence of men and women of ability from our public life, there is a lack of leadership in both Houses of Congress, and the people of this country are convinced of it, and resent it. It is not within the purposes of this present paper to discuss the causes of this lack, but merely to accept the fact that it exists. Added to this is the fact that the present dominant Republican leaders, and the Democratic leaders as well, are, with a few exceptions on both sides, either of the Bourbon, stand-pat variety, or else at the other extreme of unbalanced and half-baked Radicalism. The voluntary or enforced retirement at the end of the present Congress of a number of the Republican leaders will open the way for other men. It is probably not an exaggeration to say that the present Congress is of the same average ability as preceding ones, although possibly this



may not appear to be a very great compliment in the eyes of some people. The great difficulty at this time is to give an opportunity for leadership to the ability that already is there. It is likely that the rule of seniority is the main cause of the trouble. However that may be, there is no doubt of the above-mentioned general opinion throughout the country that this is a "do-nothing Congress".

Owing to the complete political overturn that accompanied the enormous triumph in 1920, a large number of Republicans were elected to Congress from districts normally Democratic. These new members of Congress in some instances are totally inexperienced, not only in legislative ways and methods, but also in practical politics as well. They accepted the nomination with little or no expectation of election to Congress, but merely to "bring out the vote" and keep the party organization together. As a result, they are showing their lack of experience by incompetence in sizing up public opinion and in understanding the needs of an united party policy. They are easily influenced by the organized propaganda for various special interests located at Washington. Thus the idea of getting the "soldier vote" in their districts causes them to put aside their real convictions in many cases, and hypocritically to vote in favor of the bonus. Likewise, the narrow effect of some tariff rate in their district totally blinds them to the ultimate effect on the consumers. For one vote gained from an ex-soldier or the beneficiary of a protected interest, they probably will lose a dozen votes of the ordinary citizens and taxpayers. This side of the matter does not occur to them. They are clutching at the last straw in their efforts to secure re-election from their normally Democratic districts, and are following, in their inexperience, the very policy that is apt to defeat their aims. Many of these will be conspicuous by their absence from the Sixty-eighth Congress.

Undoubtedly there will be at least the normal reaction against the Republican party this November, such as usually comes at the mid-term election during a Presidential administration. This will be added to by popular impatience with Congress, and lack of confidence in the leaders of Congress on the part of the rank and file of the Republican voters. These latter, some ten

years ago, showed beyond all doubt that they are decidedly Progressive in spirit, and the present Old Guard leadership is no more popular now than it was then.

Possibly the best thing for the country would be a continuance of Republican control of Congress. The people had a very unfortunate experience of divided control during the last two years of the Wilson administration. But from the standpoint of the future welfare of the Republican party itself, the loss of the House of Representatives would prove a piece of good fortune. It should effectually dispose of the present antediluvian leaders in Congress and their baneful influence. It also should leave Mr. Harding, with Mr. Hughes, Mr. Hoover, and other more progressive or more trusted members of the Administration, in absolute control of the national party organization. Judging from the present popularity that these same men enjoy, the country again would turn to Mr. Harding in 1924 and elect him for a second term in the Presidency. Added to this is the fact that American people find little cause for confidence in the present leaders of the Democratic party. At any rate, the individual voter is doing some thinking, as well as much "cussing". If he or she finally is aroused to the point of real anger, and consequent vigorous action, popular indifference may disappear, and responsible citizenship again take its necessary place in our scheme of democracy. Possibly this is the inner meaning of the recent primary elections in so many of our States.

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# THE FORGOTTEN WOMAN

BY JOHN CORBIN

MUCH has been said of late of the economic pressure which is bearing so heavily upon the officer in our Army or Navy, upon the teacher, the university professor, especially the clergyman. The lack of adequate means cramps him as a servant of the community, weakening our institutions of light and leadership. But that is not his chief hardship. The pressure becomes decisive when it touches him in his personal relations as lover, as husband, as father. Our institutions of service and enlightenment have a yoke-fellow in misery, the home. In the personal life of salaried people everywhere—the families of the Middle Class—the millstones are grinding, grinding. Now in an organized institution a decline of morale may be measurably checked. Congress comes to the aid of the service academy, loyal alumni to the aid of the university. But the unorganized institution of the home has no champion and defender. That the Middle Class is forgotten, we cheerfully assume, is its own affair. If any one considers its plight, it is the labor leader, the Guild Socialist, who counsels the “salaried” to unionize and join the proletarian movement—as musicians, actors, and many school teachers have already done. In effect, accordingly, the forgotten man’s home is his own affair.

Or, rather, is it not more particularly the affair of his wife? If she is forgotten, the world we live in is ungallant, certainly—and much more than that. Her cause is public, universal; for she is, or she should be, the mother of the finest and the best of the nation, the hope of all its future. Without her, Army and Navy, school, university and church, are alike vain and futile. In the lack of a worthier, I venture to be her champion. This is an essay in feminism—feminism, at least, of a sort.

The hardship of the middle class woman long antedates the war. During the suffrage campaigning we were often told how,