

Theodore Roosevelt on the sinking of the Lusitania, 1915

Introduction

On May 7, 1915, the British passenger ship *Lusitania*, sailing from New York to Liverpool, was torpedoed by a German U-boat. The *Lusitania* sank, killing 1,195 people on board, including 123 Americans. The incident created sharp reactions among Americans, many of whom believed that the United States should inflict an immediate reprisal upon Germany. President Woodrow Wilson, however, took a cautious approach to responding to the attack, demanding from Germany an apology, compensation for American victims, and a pledge to discontinue unannounced submarine warfare.

Former President Theodore Roosevelt disagreed with Wilson's diplomatic response to the sinking of the *Lusitania*. Roosevelt believed that the attack warranted a military reprisal and that the United States had little choice but to enter the war. In June 1915, Roosevelt wrote to an acquaintance criticizing Wilson's handling of the incident, writing, "If Lincoln had acted after the firing of Sumter in the way that Wilson did about the sinking of the *Lusitania*, in one month the North would have been saying they were so glad he kept them out of the war." Criticizing both the government's response and the American peoples' apathy over the attack, Roosevelt wrote that he was "pretty well disgusted with our government and with the way our people acquiesce in and support it."

Excerpt

Wilson and Bryan have quarreled over what seems to me an entirely insignificant point, that is, as to the percentage of water they shall put into a policy of mere milk and water. Both of them are agreed that this is what the policy shall consist of. I am pretty well disgusted with our government and with the way our people acquiesce in and support it. I suppose, however, in a democracy like ours the people will always do well or ill largely in proportion to their leadership. If Lincoln had acted after the firing of Sumter in the way that Wilson did about the sinking of the *Lusitania*, in one month the North would have been saying they were so glad he kept them out of the war and that they were too proud to fight and that at all hazards fratricidal war must be averted.

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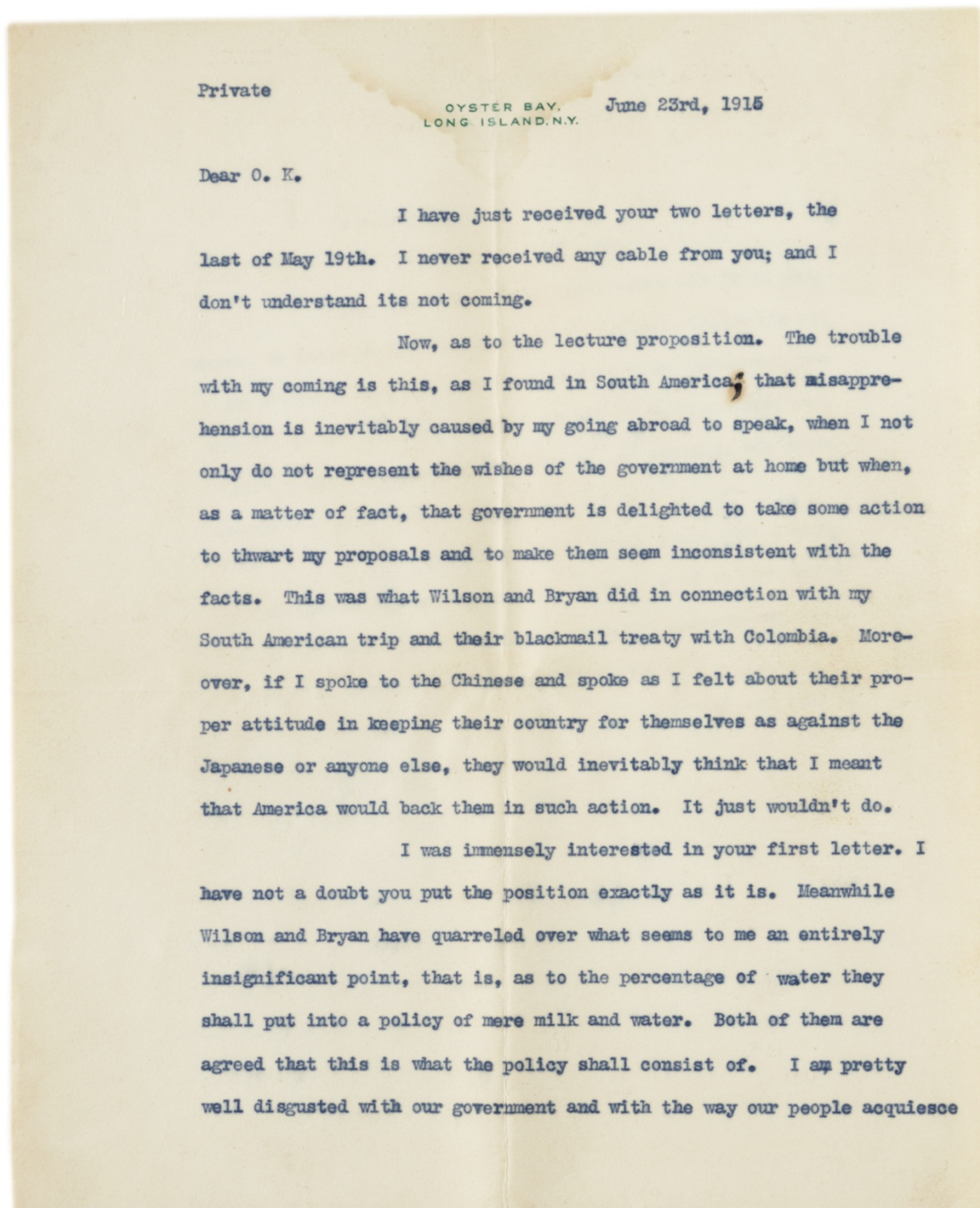
Questions for Discussion

Read the document introduction and excerpt. Then apply your knowledge of American history in order to answer the questions that follow.

1. Theodore Roosevelt considered himself a “man of action.” How does this letter support his claim?
2. How did Roosevelt expect President Wilson to respond to the sinking of the *Lusitania*?
3. Why is Roosevelt “disgusted”?
4. Explain why Roosevelt referred to Lincoln’s reaction to “the firing of Fort Sumter.”

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Image



Theodore Roosevelt to Oscar King Davis, June 23, 1915. (Gilder Lehrman Collection, GLC08003)

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OYSTER BAY,
LONG ISLAND, N.Y.

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Your letter of May 15th I think I shall take the liberty of quoting, of course not using your name, because of the admirable lesson it contains for our pacificists. I agree absolutely with you as to the future danger from Japan. Probably if this war results in a deadlock abroad (which will be a virtual triumph for Germany) we shall have to pay tribute to Germany first; but we will have to pay tribute to Japan in the end, as sure as fate; and by tribute I mean the loss of Hawaii, the Panama Canal, and probably Alaska, unless we are willing to forswear Wilson and Bryan, Taft, Carnegie, Jane Addams, David Starr Jordan, Nicholas Murray Butler and all their works and act as men amongst men. England is in a death struggle with Germany; and it is idle to suppose that she will try to save her own interests in the Far East at the cost of sacrificing her life at home. *This accounts for her attitude*
upon Japan (or her own, not England's, withdrawal) interest.
Like you, our attitude over the Lusitania horror made me heartsick. I hope you saw my own statements in the matter.

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OYSTER BAY,
LONG ISLAND, N.Y.

They were very unpopular. Most of the Progressives approve of
Wilson's infamous policy. As for you, you are a man and naturally
take the view that you do.

Faithfully yours,

Theodore Roosevelt

O. K. Davis, Esq.,

Correspondent of The Chicago Tribune,

Hotel des Wagon-Lits,

Peking, China.

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Transcript

Theodore Roosevelt to Oscar King Davis, June 23, 1915. (Gilder Lehrman Collection, GLC08003)

Private

June 23rd, 1915

Dear O. K.

I have just received your two letters, the last of May 19th. I never received any cable from you; and I don't understand its not coming.

Now, as to the lecture proposition. The trouble with my coming is this, as I found in South America[*inserted: ;*] that misapprehension is inevitably caused by my going abroad to speak, when I not only do not represent the wishes of the government at home but when, as a matter of fact, that government is delighted to take some action to thwart my proposals and to make them seem inconsistent with the facts. This was what Wilson and Bryan did in connection with my South American trip and their blackmail treaty with Colombia. Moreover, if I spoke to the Chinese and spoke as I felt about their proper attitude in keeping their country for themselves as against the Japanese or anyone else, they would inevitably think that I meant that America would back them in such action. It just wouldn't do.

I was immensely interested in your first letter. I have not a doubt you put the position exactly as it is. Meanwhile Wilson and Bryan have quarreled over what seems to me an entirely insignificant point, that is, as to the percentage of water they shall put into a policy of mere milk and water. Both of them are agreed that this is what the policy shall consist of. I am pretty well disgusted with our government and with the way our people acquiesce [2] in and support it. I suppose, however, in a democracy like ours the people will always do well or ill largely in proportion to their leadership. If Lincoln had acted after the firing on Sumter in the way that Wilson did about the sinking of the Lusitania, in one month the North would have been saying they were so glad he kept them out of war and [*inserted: that*] they were too proud to fight and that at all hazards fratricidal war must be averted.

Your letter of May 15th I think I shall take the liberty of quoting, of course not using your name, because of the admirable lesson it contains for our pacifists. I agree

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Like you, our attitude over the Lusitania horror made me heartsick. I hope you saw my own statements in the matter. [3] They were very unpopular. Most of the Progressives approve of Wilson's infamous policy. As for you, you are a man and naturally take the view that you do.

Faithfully yours,

Theodore Roosevelt

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Notes: This document is typed and all handwritten text is underlined. Written on Oyster Bay stationery.