The Clashing Visions of President Roosevelt and Ambassadors Bullitt and Kennedy

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WWII and Beyond

By

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To Rachel

My best friend and life companion

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INTRODUCTION

CLASHING VISIONS IS AN ENSEMBLE STUDY of the personal and diplomatic actions (and how their personalities shaped them) of a president and two ambassadors, Franklin Roosevelt, William C. Bullitt, and Joseph P. Kennedy, during the middle decades of the twentieth century, a period of great moral and political complexities. In conflict-ridden years, the United States came of age as a world power, and its worldview and diplomacy demanded rethinking.

The actions of our protagonists address, among other concerns, the enduring issue of the importance of humanitarian values as factors in US diplomacy. It is a subject that requires ongoing scholarly debate in which history is studied for lessons on how unchecked tensions can lead to extremism at home. As the Trump years demonstrate, such questions remain germane and controversial.

The two ambassadors established intimate ties with the governments of their host nations. Their initial friendly relations with each other turned to bitter enmity, as did their relations with FDR. Tensions occurred among the three over differing views of the United States' vital interests. The question that initially separated the three was the same issue that divided the nation: Could the United States coexist with a Nazi Germany seeking world domination? Their actions allow insight into continuing conflicting themes in US diplomatic history on how to define national interest.

Clashing Visions recounts an unexpected tale of ego, intrigue, and scurrilous scandal that for Bullitt and Kennedy ended as Greek tragedies and demonstrates how personalities and the making of history are inextricably interwoven. Bullitt, a brilliant, mercurial, and self-destructive Philadelphian patrician, is the least known; businessman Joseph Kennedy is probably the most misunderstood. FDR, the master politician and juggler of men and ideas, remains the most controversial among historians. FDR calculatedly handled the other two with political astuteness and cold personal detachment. This study focuses on the interactions of the three to offer insights not found in previous works that concentrated on each individual. It demonstrates how personalities and the making of history are inextricably interwoven. The very different approaches to international relations of the three represent their legacies in diplomatic history.

The book's first three chapters are devoted to Bullitt as he ensconced himself in Roosevelt's inner circle and romanced Missy LeHand, FDR's indispensable aide and closest confidante. Bullitt led a tumultuous intellectual and personal life as ambassador to first Russia and then France. When he pursued a vendetta against Sumner Welles, a family friend and adviser of the president, Bullitt provoked a bitter final break with the president. The self-destructive Bullitt knowingly destroyed Welles's political career at the cost of his own.

The story of Kennedy, a morally blinkered, sharp-elbowed businessman and the United States' richest and most prominent Irish American Catholic, begins in chapter 4 with his ardent pursuit of an ambassadorship to Great Britain as a stepping-stone to the White House. Kennedy cannot be understood without considering emotionally charged issues: his support of appeasement, his lifelong isolationism, and his deep antisemitism. Until his death, Kennedy regarded World War II and US participation in it, with its "disastrous consequences," as an avoidable mistake brought about by Bullitt's influence on Roosevelt.

This study examines the critically different ways in which our formidable protagonists responded to the growing European crises. The aftermath of the epochal Munich Agreement divided the three men and the Western world into those who were willing to challenge Hitler and those who were seeking peace at almost any price. Kennedy, certain that Germany would win a war against Britain and France, perceived no significant moral distinctions between these nations. He argued for US noninvolvement in any upcoming military conflict. The mercurial Bullitt, however, demanded US alignment on the side of Britain and France to save Western Christian civilization.

Roosevelt, for personal and political reasons, was not prepared to act as quickly or decisively to aid the Allies as Bullitt persistently and tactlessly insisted. Each of the ambassadors for his own reasons would become a bitter Roosevelt-hater. The relations of Roosevelt and Kennedy had always been one of expedience, and the once close relationship of Roosevelt and Bullitt went downhill after 1939.

Roosevelt's death does not end the story of Bullitt and Kennedy. Both of the former ambassadors dismissed Roosevelt's vision of a peaceful postwar world of cooperative nations as naively utopian. The two men's views remained consistent with earlier views in the postwar era, but their reasoning appealed to very different constituencies than before World War II. This change offers a perspective on the debate over the fundamentals of foreign policy.

The interactions of FDR, Bullitt, and Kennedy occurred in an era of especially confusing historical moments, when the rules of the global game of nations were in flux, leaving a wide-open door for misjudgments and misunderstandings. Kennedy advocated a "fortress America" focused narrowly on maintaining an endangered free-enterprise domestic economy (and his family fortune); Bullitt responded to the nation's international challenges by urging a fervid foreign policy based on hegemonic US ascendency. FDR, at his death in 1945, sought to act as the architect of a democratic world that embraced US values and interests.

The conflict over defining US national interest continues. On one side are those who argue for a narrowly defined view of national interest concerned exclusively with preserving and extending vital economic interests, influence, and security, and on the other side are those who wish to also apply moral values of right and wrong to the guidance of foreign policy and the selection of friends and foes.

The three men's relationship reveals how personalities and policies are intricately intertwined in the shaping and executing of foreign affairs and how policies cannot be fully understood separately from their makers and their perception of the reality they are reacting to. Individuals, no matter how influential, do not make history by themselves. Their interaction with events and with each other provides this study's narrative arc and provides insight into how their temperaments and experiences were vitally connected to their actions.

It offers a window into the contingencies of history and the perils of diplomacy during uncertain times that reshaped the United States' traditional role in the world. Their "clashing visions" are worth considering at a time of unhinged volatility and grave challenges to US politics and foreign policy.

CHAPTER 1

YOUNG MAN IN A HURRY

> Is there any other city of a million in the world in which everyone who counts lives in an area three streets by eight surrounding a Sacred Square? I've been away twenty years and I'll wager I can tell you every person you've met at dinner in the interval and that there'll be no one I'll meet while I'm here who'll not call me by my first name.
>
> —William C. Bullitt, *It's Not Done*

THE POET W. H. AUDEN FAMOUSLY DESCRIBED the 1930s as "a low dishonest decade." The thirties began with a global depression and ended with a world at war. Efforts to erect protective tariffs against foreign competition resulted in the collapse of international trade, leading to unprecedented levels of unemployment. It was a time of perilous uncertainty for world leaders and their diplomats. Multiple powerful nations vied with each other, some bent on undoing the existing international order and others seeking vainly to sustain it. By mid-decade, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt confided to intimates that the desperate condition of the world caused him many sleepless nights.

He wrote to his ambassadors to France, England, Germany, and the USSR in early 1936: "The whole European panorama is fundamentally blacker than at any time in your lifetime or mine. . . . You are in the best listening post in what may be the last days of the period of peace before a long chaos."[1]

William C. Bullitt in Moscow cautioned the president, "Peace is at the mercy of an incident."[2] Diplomats everywhere kept their ears close to the ground as ideology and nationalism, pessimism and fanaticism roiled the international scene, few more so than the highly ambitious Bullitt, who viewed himself as Roosevelt's European éminence grise in a troubled continent and possible successor down the line in the White House.

For most of President Roosevelt's first term, his involvement with domestic economic recovery and broad-ranging progressive reforms consigned foreign relations to a secondary concern. The darkening clouds of war both in Europe and in Asia, however, forced him to devote more time

to grappling with international problems as his reelection neared. During the second half of the 1930s, Roosevelt and Bullitt's relationship grew close, and their relationship remains historically significant. FDR's life is well-known and hence will be treated briefly, while this chapter will be devoted to Bullitt's ubiquitous background as a determined young man in a hurry to gain influence and fame, who early on exhibited weaknesses that eventually proved fatal. (Kennedy will not enter the picture until chapter 4, when he was appointed ambassador to England in 1938.)

Bullitt was a man Roosevelt related to easily. They shared a patrician background of inherited wealth and pride in lineage as well as an observant, strongly held Episcopalian faith. For their lifetimes, a relatively small network of white Protestant men, educated from childhood at a handful of elite private schools, dominated the top universities, the world of finance, the best private clubs, and especially high government service. Both men possessed what the American author John Updike has called "the WASP knowingness" that facilitated social ease and proffered a sense of presence. As members of the WASP elite then ascendant in US society, they had been similarly shaped by a setting of family and schools that emphasized a self-conscious stewardship role as caretakers of national institutions and values that spanned generations and encompassed global concerns.

Born to the highest level of old New York aristocracy, Roosevelt traveled frequently to Europe in his youth, mastered the rudiments of both the French and German languages, and became familiar with the culture of the continent's elites. He knew European geography and history somewhat, but Bullitt had by far a much deeper knowledge and a better understanding of foreign languages, cultures, and histories.

On graduating from Harvard, FDR attended Columbia University Law School for two years but dropped out after passing the New York Bar. An average student, he was noted more for his good looks and charismatic personality than for the quality of his mind. Neither self-reflective nor a deep thinker, he exhibited the nurturing self-confidence that comes from high birth, the indulgence of a doting mother, and boundless opportunity. After briefly trying the law, he decided on a political career. An admirer of Woodrow Wilson, the socially active Roosevelt served in his administration as undersecretary of the navy.

In 1920, Roosevelt ran for vice president on the defeated Democratic ticket. A year later, at age thirty-nine, he was crippled by polio and remained paralyzed for life below the waist. In the next several years, steeled by adversity, he sought to regain his health and mobility. In 1928, he actively resumed his political career, winning the governorship of New York for two two-year terms. But with fierce ambition, his real goal always remained the

White House, and in March 1933, he achieved this by boldly leading a troubled nation mired in depression and confronted by a volatile world. For Bullitt, Roosevelt's presidency posed the possibility of altering a life trajectory once rich in promise that until then had proven disappointing. It was FDR who picked Bullitt from relative obscurity and placed him on the world scene, making him and eventually breaking him.

Born into a prominent Philadelphia family in 1888, Bullitt traced his lineage on his father's side back to Huguenot ancestors in the colonial period; prominent figures were his forebears. His mother's family, the Horwitzes, traced their ancestry to Polish and German Jews who migrated to the United States and Philadelphia in the late eighteenth century. The family prospered, married outside their faith, and became Episcopalians, moving into the mainstream of upper-class Philadelphian society. Though unimportant to him—he had been raised with limited social contact with Jews and educated at private schools where Christian precepts were drummed in daily—his Jewish lineage was often commented on by others, especially his enemies.

Bullitt's paternal grandfather wrote Philadelphia's municipal charter, and he is memorialized by a statue in City Hall. His father, William C. Bullitt, a lawyer by training, was an official of the Norfolk & Western Railroad and the president of the Pocahontas Coal Company. His mother's father owned the city's leading streetcar company.

Bullitt grew up on Rittenhouse Square, the most prestigious address in Philadelphia at the time. Bullitt described the status-conscious insular world of his youth in a roman à clef, *It's Not Done*, that he published in 1926. In it, a character asks, "Is there any other city of a million in the world in which everyone who counts lives in an area three blocks by eight surrounding a Sacred Square?"[3]

Bullitt was closer to his mother than to his father. She was the disciplinarian who stressed the importance of mastering the social skills deemed appropriate to his background, and upper-class Philadelphians were celebrated among their East Coast peers for "rigid drawing-room etiquette." Bullitt attended a prestigious private school near his home. His summers were spent either traveling in Europe (his maternal grandmother lived in Paris) or at a camp that stressed an active physical life. At his mother's insistence, he became proficient in French and German, and she often insisted that French be spoken at the family dinner table. He matured into a handsome man of medium height, sturdily built with intense blue eyes, a brilliant smile, and wavy brown hair that showed early signs of receding. Adept at both sports and studies and with exceptional drive and energy, he claimed to need less than five hours of sleep a night.

Bullitt entered Yale in 1908 and graduated with the class of 1913, losing a year between his junior and senior terms due to illness. The 1912 class yearbook noted him as an ex-member of the class recuperating in Europe. Despite his absence, however, his peers had voted him "most brilliant," most likely to succeed, and most entertaining. Elected to Phi Beta Kappa, he was editor of the *Yale News*, captain of the debate team, and president of the Yale University Dramatic Society, which included Cole Porter and Monty Woolley.

In 1910, he starred as Lady Gay Spanker in an 1841 comedy, *London Assuranc*e, presented at the old Waldorf-Astoria Hotel in New York. The reviewer for the *New York Times* found Bullitt's performance outstanding: "As for Lady Gay Spanker, 'she' took the audience by storm, dashing onto the stage in a green cloth riding habit and receiving a round of applause when the elderly gallant remarked she was 'a devilish fine woman.'"[4]

Despite his accomplishments, the brilliant and mercurial Billy Bullitt was not well liked. His self-dramatization and aggressiveness antagonized. One classmate recalled him as always in a hurry, busily pushing himself forward, a "dandy with a performative personality." When challenged, he would get testy and red in the face. Another noted "that he would never call on you unless he wanted something."[5]

Bullitt conveyed an impression of total self-involvement and self-importance that occasionally bordered on the fatuous. Over-assertiveness led him to be inconsiderate to the feelings and views of others. His fellows regarded him as a formidable loquacious presence with a gift for outrageous repartee, reflecting a quick mind and tongue, but difficult to fathom, an evaluation that retained relevance in later years. Janet Flanner, the Paris-based writer for the *New Yorker*, a perceptive observer of people, authored a two-issue profile on Bullitt in late 1938 but could not decide whether she liked or disliked him, noting that critics regarded him as a "trick done with mirrors" and an "impious snob." Flanner also noted that he "tended to personality enthusiasms" but did not mention that these usually proved short-lived. His first wife described him as a "chameleon" that had the inner certainty to believe that he belonged wherever he wanted to go."[6]

On graduation, Bullitt tried Harvard Law but, finding it not to his liking, left in his first year. Undecided about a career, he traveled abroad with his mother in 1914. They were in Moscow when war broke out in August. Returning to Philadelphia, he secured a job at age twenty-three as a cub reporter with the *Philadelphia Public Ledger*. Six months later, Bullitt was an associate editor. During the following year, he worked as a peripatetic staff correspondent in Europe and then in 1916 as the paper's bureau chief in

Washington. Known to other reporters as the "Beau Brummell of correspondents," Bullitt wore beautifully tailored bespoke suits and carried himself with an air of upper-class refinement and authority that was edgy, memorable, and funny. Optimistic and enthusiastic, sociable and showy, a rule breaker, he was quick to anger and showed little restraint in displaying petulance over small setbacks and inconveniences.

As a journalist in Washington, he quickly cultivated a close relationship with the influential Col. Edward House, a wealthy Texas businessman and an early and generous supporter of Woodrow Wilson's presidential campaign of 1912. With Wilson's election, House emerged as his most trusted confidant, enjoying living accommodations in the White House. Col. House spent much of 1915 and 1916 on a mission from Wilson to negotiate peace through diplomacy. In September 1917, five months after US entry into the war, Wilson appointed House to assemble a team of "experts" to prepare material for peace negotiations and also to consider US policy in a postwar world, including steps to guarantee a permanent peace through a world federation to be called the League of Nations.[7]

Bullitt soon sought to involve himself in the Wilson administration. On July 5, 1917, he wrote House, "It has occurred to me . . . that because of the war the President might need an additional private secretary. . . . I have thought that he might need the services of a young man who is used to . . . dealing confidentially with all sorts of men from Foreign Ministers and Ambassadors to day laborers."[8] Bullitt did not receive an appointment to the White House or to House's team of experts, but his relationship with House paid off.

In December 1917, Bullitt received an appointment to the State Department as an assistant to the secretary of state and given responsibility for analyzing news received from Central Europe. Although House was not Bullitt's superior, the Philadelphian on his own regularly sent House copies of his reports. Almost immediately, Bullitt exceeded his modest mandated responsibilities. In February 1918, he wrote House to offer sweeping recommendations on foreign policy that Bullitt requested House to bring to the attention of the president.[9]

A month after the armistice of November 11, 1918, ending the "Great War," Bullitt, assigned to the staff of Col. House as a member of the American Commission to Negotiate Peace, sailed on board the USS *George Washington* for Paris. He went with high hopes for both his career and his ideals. On board the ship, the prematurely balding, twenty-eight-year-old Bullitt approached the reserved Wilson walking on the deck. He asked the president, whom he had never met before, to speak to the junior members about his ideas and policies. He complained to Wilson that "most of the men

with brains on board were being treated like immigrants and felt entirely left out of the game" and noted that the support staff was housed in steerage, while important officials were berthed comfortably on the upper decks.[10]

The startled Wilson agreed to meet with a dozen or so of the younger aides the next morning. He spoke of his distrust of the leaders of the European nations and his belief that the United States would be the only honest and disinterested nation at the conference table.

Bullitt wanted influence, fame, and the achievement of great deeds. In Woodrow Wilson, he saw the means to achieve his goals. Ray Stannard Baker, a journalist who served as Wilson's press secretary at the Peace Conference, described the president as one of those extraordinary individuals "who from time to time have appeared upon the earth & for a moment, in a burst of strange power, have temporarily lifted erring mankind to a higher pitch."[11] Bullitt was only one of many intellectually gifted young men and women, including his acquaintance and fellow journalist Walter Lippmann, enthralled by the president and his message.

In Wilson's ideas about foreign relations, he personified a liberal internationalism, especially strong among the East Coast elites, contending that the flawed international system that had given rise to the First World War had to be transformed into a peaceful and moral world order. Wilson's famous Fourteen Points, outlined in a speech to the US Congress in January 1918, talked about a just peace leading to the disappearance of militarism, the creation of a League of Nations, and self-determination for ethnic nationalities.

Wilson broadened his ideas to include the end of colonial empires and the creation of democratic governments along US lines: a capitalistic economy, free trade, and a well-informed populace with respect for the rule of law and civil rights. In short, Wilson projected the United States' domestic values outward to become the goals of its foreign policy. He assumed an American exceptionalism, in which the unique US system of democracy and values served as the spearhead of progress, providing a universal model. To achieve this "noble ideal," Wilson and his supporters urged the United States to break with its isolationist past and assume a new ongoing leadership role in world affairs. As Godfrey Hodgson has written of Wilson, "He wanted the United States to emerge from the war as the arbiter of world politics."[12]

Bullitt threw himself into advancing Wilson's moral crusade to create a better world. He, however, did not intend to serve the campaign as a foot soldier. His ego demanded he play a major role and make an important contribution.

The unknown young Bullitt and the famous president both possessed total confidence in the rectitude of their views. Fascinated by the big picture, each had a sense of a personal rendezvous with greatness. Neither was willing to budge from what he deemed right. Anyone who disagreed was not only wrong but morally suspect. Neither tolerated dissent or saw important issues in anything but black or white terms, being ruthless with opponents and quickly dismissive of friends who disappointed them. Little patience was shown to those who were viewed as wrongheaded or unintelligent, and little restraint was displayed in demonstrating this. These traits help explain why both men eventually fell far short of their goals and caused Bullitt in the end to loathe Wilson.

Wilson arrived at Paris's Luxembourg Station early in the morning of December 14, 1918, a month after the signing of the armistice. There he encountered a wildly cheering crowd estimated at two million lining the streets. Wilson, celebrated as the man of the hour, was convinced he spoke for the world's people. His Fourteen Points, accepted by the Germans as the basis for their acceptance of an armistice, epitomized an American idealism that contrasted sharply with Europe's self-interested legacy of imperialism and colonialism. To people everywhere, Wilson promised a progressive new world.

In Paris, Bullitt attached himself closely to House, who he knew could be his conduit to Wilson. At first, Wilson and House talked daily either in person or on a direct private line that connected the Hotel Crillon on the Place de Concorde, where House occupied the hotel's best suite, to Wilson's temporary residence in an elegantly furnished private home. A steady stream of visitors, both American and foreign, streamed through House's hotel suite as the Texan, a seemingly shy and self-effacing man, played the political game that he passionately loved.[13]

Bullitt, with his social skills, fluent French, and impressive knowledge of European history and culture, proved himself invaluable. His official title was chief of the Division of Current Intelligence Summaries, and every few days he prepared a newsletter with background information on various issues and countries and then briefed the US delegation.

The statesmen assembled in Paris confronted a long list of problems, many of them intractable. Viewing Wilson as naïve, most European diplomats scorned the crowd's adulation of him. They had come to the peace table at the Palace of Versailles to advance narrowly defined national interests, not to lay the foundations for a liberal world structure. France's Clemenceau famously quipped, "Woodrow Wilson came with fourteen commandments, the Good Lord had only ten." The final result of the diplomats' work at Versailles was a dictated peace treaty that created Germany as a

pariah nation, its embittered and humiliated populace rankling at what was regarded as a punitive injustice, while preserving and even expanding the British and French Empires. The peace treaty embodied a travesty of Wilson's principles.

The vindictive French insisted that Germany admit guilt for starting the war, pay heavy reparations for war damages, and accept permanent military limitations. The latter goal was realized by virtually disarming Germany, its armed forces limited to one hundred thousand men, a small air force, and a coastal navy. Germany was also stripped of its colonies, most of which David Lloyd George of Britain and Georges Clemenceau of France added to their nations' colonial empires. German resentment over the post-1919 settlement churned international instability for the next two decades.

A striking result of the peace treaties was the breakup of the Austro-Hungarian, Ottoman, and Russian Empires. Created in their place was a cluster of small states. Nominally based on one nationality, many of these new nations contained sizable minority populations. Their hastily drawn borders made for a destabilized continental system prone to conflicts. In particular, the requirement that Germany surrender its eastern border regions, largely inhabited by Germans, to Czechoslovakia and Poland contributed greatly to Central Europe's volatility. The seeds of future conflicts had been planted.

The slapdash pace of the work of inventing and adjusting borders is revealed by the British diplomat Harold Nicholson's diary entry of February 7, 1919, in which he wrote breezily, "spent most of the day tracing Rumanian and Czech frontiers with the US delegation, there are only a few points at which we differ."[14] Winston Churchill would indeed later write in the 1930s that the treaty had left a "crippled broken world" divided along fault lines that had not been obliterated.

Wilson's idealism had received lip service but resulted in little more than a weak League of Nations. The hard bargaining that led to a proposed peace treaty in June 1919 also included as its first article the covenant for the League. A tired Wilson had been forced to compromise his principles. As the US diplomat Sumner Welles later described the reaction, "The arbiters of human destiny seemed less and less like prophets and more and more like harassed, tired, and irritable old men. The initial flood of post-war hopeful optimism gave way to a wave of cold and cynical pessimism."[15]

When the League of Nations was founded with its headquarters in Geneva in early 1920, the United States, assumed to be the League's key player, was absent. US participation had fallen victim to Wilson's political foes and his own flaws.

Many of Wilson's idealistic followers were understandably disillusioned and angered with the treaty. Wilson had vowed "to make the world safe for democracy," but the terms dictated to the losers suggested otherwise. Critics denounced the Treaty of Versailles as punitive and vindictive. Wilson had surrendered his cause to the reactionaries of the old world.

Some critics argued that if Wilson had acted decisively while the war was on, he could have used the European powers' dependency on the United States to bend them to his will. A few of his critics went even further and charged that Wilson's façade of idealism had always concealed the calculated aim of global economic dominance by the United States. On January 9, 1920, an embittered Lippmann wrote Bullitt, "How did you and I ever have any faith in the Wilson administration."[16]

The young British economist John Maynard Keynes called Wilson a "blind and deaf Don Quixote" and, in *The Economic Consequences of the Peace* (1919), predicted that the treaty's harsh treatment of Germany set the stage for a future war within decades. He was far from alone in this view. Germans strongly resented the treaty's restrictions and reparations. The head of the German delegation at Versailles forecast that the treaty would be impossible to fulfill and would only create dangerous discontent among the German people. The dire predictions were soon borne out.[17]

The once intimate relationship between Wilson and House had frayed in Paris. By the time Wilson returned to the United States to gain congressional approval of both the peace treaty and the charter to the League, his confidence in House had eroded. They would finally end their close relationship in November 1919. House largely blamed Wilson's second wife's jealousy over their friendship, but an increasingly ailing and irritable Wilson had developed other grievances.

Bullitt's ties to House, however, remained strong until the latter died in 1938. Although House's public role had ended, he had developed a good relationship with Franklin Roosevelt. This connection proved useful to Bullitt when he sought entry into Roosevelt's inner circle in 1931.[18]

Aside from the peace treaty and the League, the diplomats in Paris dealt with other troubling problems. One of these was what to do with a new revolutionary Russia. Russia had started the war as an ally of Britain and France. Military defeats brought down the tsarist government in March 1917. The provisional government that took its place was committed to liberal democracy and remaining in the war. A war-weary Russia, however, soon looked elsewhere for an end to the fighting.

Lenin and his Bolsheviks seized power in November 1917 and removed Russia from the war, angering its former allies. Their hostility grew as the Bolsheviks repudiated Russia's foreign debts, nationalized property, and

openly preached world revolution. Fearful of the spread of this revolutionary ideology outside the borders of Russia, Britain, France, the United States, and Japan provided troops and supplies in a futile attempt to bolster Lenin's opponents. No one knew how to deal with Russia as it plunged into civil war.

Many Western liberals, including Bullitt, wanted to give the Bolsheviks the benefit of the doubt. They admired the Bolsheviks' challenge to the old world order that had led to four years of war. On February 3, 1918, Bullitt, acting with characteristic audacity, wrote House (assuming that it would reach Wilson), "I have passed over the question of the Bolsheviki because I know little at hand of Russia. But it is obvious that no words could so effectively stamp the President's address with uncompromising liberalism as would the act of recognizing the Bolsheviki."[19]

A steady stream of messages from Bullitt to Wilson via House urged the recognition of Lenin's Russia, pleading that the Bolsheviks could be won over to democracy. Others, however, did not see it that way. They were antagonized by Lenin's advocacy of class warfare and world revolution.[20]

At the end of January 1919, Wilson and Britain's Lloyd George sent out indirect feelers to Lenin about possible low-level meetings to consider recognition of the Bolshevik state by Britain and the United States. The Russian response was unclear; further information was needed. In mid-February, House and Secretary of State Robert Lansing agreed that a mission to Moscow could be useful.

House suggested the twenty-seven-year-old Bullitt, who had already proposed himself for a job that promised an opportunity to advance himself. Lansing, although irked by Bullitt's sympathetic view of the Soviets, agreed, suggesting that the experience would "cure him of his Bolshevism." Lincoln Steffens, the celebrated muckraking journalist, well-known for his pro-Bolshevik sentiments and a friend of Bullitt, was asked by him to join the mission. An exuberant Steffens famously proclaimed on his return from Russia, "I have seen the future and it works."[21]

Bullitt always claimed that he was sent to Russia to negotiate terms of a settlement of US-Bolshevik differences for Wilson's appraisal. Lincoln Steffens later recalled, "Bullitt's instructions were to negotiate a preliminary agreement with the Russians so that the United States and Great Britain could persuade France to join them in a parley, reasonably sure of some results."[22]

The State Department denied this. It asserted that the mission's only purpose was to report on political and economic conditions, with Bullitt instructed to meet informally with Bolshevik officials to gather information.

Room existed for honest confusion over Bullitt's instructions, but his objective was more ambitious than collecting information. Exceeding authority, he did what he wanted. He set out deliberately to become a hero and a Great Man.

Bullitt acted as if his mission had full authority to conduct negotiations on recognition. Before leaving for Russia, Bullitt arranged a meeting with Lloyd George's confidential secretary, Philip Kerr, who as Lord Lothian was ambassador to the United States 1939–1940, to discuss the British requirements for a rapprochement with the Bolsheviks. Bullitt proposed that Allied troops already in Russia be withdrawn in return for an armistice that would leave the warring factions in control of their respective areas of occupation. Kerr essentially agreed, noting that this was only his opinion and not an official endorsement.[23]

During a ten-day stay in Russia, Bullitt's mission met with Bolshevik leaders in Petrograd and Moscow by day, dining on caviar and attending the opera and ballet in the evenings. Bullitt concluded that the violent phase of the revolution had ended. He reported that the Soviet regime "has acquired such a hold on the imagination of the people that the women as well as the men are willing to starve for it" and that the Moscow streets were safe and free of prostitutes, "the economic reasons for their careers having ceased to exist." On March 14, 1919, Bullitt interviewed Lenin and Foreign Minister Georgi Chicherin in Moscow.

Lenin later offered Bullitt a proposal for a treaty along the lines Bullitt had proposed to Kerr, even including a promise to honor tsarist foreign debts. An overjoyed Bullitt wired his superiors in Paris recommending acceptance before an expiration deadline set by the Soviets. Lincoln Steffens wrote a letter that expressed both his and Bullitt's view of events: "We were very successful at our end. . . . We got a proposition which seemed to us more than fair and not to be rejected." George Kennan and others have argued that under the agreement, Lenin would have acquired far less territorial expanse then he realized at the civil war's end in 1922, making for a smaller, less formidable Soviet Union, and that it should have been accepted. In any case, the question is moot. Wilson never considered Lenin's proposal.[24]

On returning to Paris, Bullitt delivered a report to House and Lansing on his mission urging recognition of Lenin's government. He observed, "The Soviet government is firmly established and the Communist Party is strong politically and morally." He personally sought to deliver a copy marked "Urgent and Immediate" to the president, only to be told that Wilson was not feeling well and could not meet with him.

Wilson, while in Paris in April, suffered from flu, followed by a small stroke that began a mental decline and erratic behavior. Bullitt's appeal to

House for help was of no avail. Wilson told his adviser that he was preoccupied with Germany and could not "take up Russia."[25]

Bullitt had been unaware that House's relations with Wilson had collapsed. Now with the government's refusal to publicize the report, Bullitt vainly sought permission to publish his report elsewhere. As word of the report leaked out, rumors circulated that the United States and Britain intended to recognize the Soviet government, stirring up a storm of disapproval. As for Wilson, he told other Allied leaders at this time that the West should "let the Russians stew in their own juice until circumstances have made them wiser, and let us confine our efforts to keeping Bolshevism out of the rest of Europe."[26]

Meanwhile, Lloyd George, who had privately assured Bullitt that he was sympathetic to the offer, changed his mind when faced with mounting criticism for being too lenient toward the godless Bolsheviks. The editor of the *Times* of London, Henry Wickham Steed, a rabid antisemite, warned against the machinations of Jewish bankers, snidely noting that Bullitt's mother was a Horwitz. Two hundred members of Parliament signed a letter to the *Times* opposing recognition of the Bolshevik government.

US and British officials hurriedly disavowed any official involvement with Bullitt's negotiation. The April 10 deadline given by Lenin for acceptance of his offer passed without Allied acknowledgment.

A furious Bullitt organized a group he named the Jeunesse Radicale of disillusioned Americans in Paris to protest against the hypocrisy of Wilson's peace. At least two others aside from Bullitt became prominent in later life: the Harvard historian Samuel Eliot Morrison and the diplomat scholar Adolf A. Berle. The Jeunesse Radicale were stunned when the terms of the peace treaty and the charter of the League became known. Wilson had given ground on most of his Fourteen Points, strengthening the British and French Empires. The Treaty of Versailles, dictated by the victors to a defeated nation, fell far short of the "peace without victory" that he had promised. A furious Bullitt told Col. House, "This isn't a treaty of peace. I see eleven wars in it." From the young Philadelphian's perspective, global injury, an "imperialist peace," had been added to his personal insult.[27]

At a meeting on May 23 at the Crillon Hotel, Bullitt tried to persuade the Jeunesse Radicale to resign from the US delegation in protest. But only a few did. For himself, he delivered an angry letter of resignation addressed to Wilson and drove south to the Riviera, "to lie on the sand and watch the world go to hell." To his pleasure, the letter stirred up an international row when published in the socialist newspaper *L'Humanité*. Bullitt returned to the United States in the fall, determined to expose Wilson as a weak leader who had betrayed his followers and principles.

On September 3, Wilson, facing formidable challenges in acquiring a Republican-controlled Senate's approval of the peace treaty and the Covenant to the League of Nations, embarked on a grueling, ill-fated cross-county train tour to win support for their acceptance. Despite misgivings, Wilson believed the treaty still represented a step forward.[28]

Three weeks into the tour, the president collapsed. He had suffered a severe stroke. For two months, he hovered near death's door, confined to a White House bedroom, while his wife and aides conveyed instructions to officials and with the press and Congress deliberately kept ignorant of the seriousness of his condition. He remained an invalid for the remaining eighteen months of his presidency; his political career was effectively over.

Edmund Wilson has written of Wilson, "It is possible to observe in certain lives, where conspicuously superior abilities are united with serious deficiencies, . . . a curve plotted over and over again and always dropping from flight of achievement to a steep descent into failure." Events would demonstrate that these words were tragically true for Bullitt as well.[29]

The chair of the Senate's Committee on Foreign Relations, Henry Cabot Lodge, loathed Wilson. On the suggestion of the journalist Walter Lippmann, Lodge invited Bullitt to testify before the committee. Bullitt told the senators that Wilson's treaty encouraged imperialistic expansion and invited future wars. He submitted to the senators a copy of Wilson's original draft of the Covenant to the League of Nations, which had been given to him in confidence by House. He then pointed out with great flair how this document was superior to the official one before them.

Bullitt testified at length from well-prepared notes about a confidential conversation in Paris with Secretary of State Lansing, who had privately expressed strong criticism of the League. According to Bullitt, the secretary, who had been largely pushed aside in Paris, thought the League useless. 'The Great powers had simply . . . arranged the world to suit themselves." The humiliated Lansing testified before the committee to discredit Bullitt's account as distorted and exaggerated but did admit having strong reservations about the treaty. Soon after testifying, he resigned his office at Wilson's request.[30]

Bullitt told friends that he did not feel honor bound to respect the confidentiality of his conversation with Lansing because he despised the secretary's refusal to resign in protest over Wilson's actions in Paris. From Lansing's perspective, Bullitt's behavior had been "most despicable and outrageous." Many in Washington agreed, and it stained his reputation for years.[31]

The incident followed a well-established pattern in Bullitt's life. Having a highly personalized view of his role in government, he tended to strongly

espouse causes and individuals and then suddenly turn against them. Filled with self-righteousness, he pursued his opponents relentlessly, indifferent to whom he was hurting, including himself. Although his testimony certainly did not lead to the United States' refusal to join the League, it did not help the League's cause. More importantly, Wilson's stubborn refusal of Republican senators' demands for changes in return for passage of the League doomed it to defeat. One might wonder how the decades of the twenties and thirties might have differed if the United States had joined the League.

The United States emerged from World War I as the economic powerhouse of the world but showed little interest in asserting itself on the international diplomatic scene. Instead, it pursued isolationism in foreign policy and rejected participation in the international organization. Wilson's crusading idealism had fallen from popular favor, his critics deriding it as "missionary diplomacy." Nevertheless, the vision of the United States leading the world's nations to accept basic principles of democracy and the rule of law lingered on. In the 1920s, small circles of clergy and intellectuals continued to crusade to reduce arms and to end war through a concert of democratic nations. As internationalists, they felt that the United States had a responsibility to the rest of the world. Even for some of Wilson's young critics, a Wilsonian sense of national destiny tied to global moral leadership became a strain of thought that challenged the more conventional view of US foreign policy as concerned with advancing narrowly defined national self-interests.

Bullitt walked away from the Senate hearings with self-inflicted wounds. It was not opposition to the treaty that damaged his reputation; prominent American liberals, among them Lippmann, Berle, and John Dewey, criticized the treaty with no consequences. It was his indiscretions, turning over of confidential documents, and betrayal of Lansing's trust that made him persona non grata in political and diplomatic circles. He had by now acquired a reputation as impulsive, mercurial, and high-handed, a difficult man who used and discarded people, and, to top it all, a radical propagandist. Certain avenues had now closed for him, and he needed to reconsider his career. Throughout his life, he would leave behind a trail of broken friendships and bitter estrangements as he continuously started his life anew.

Bullitt now regarded himself as a critic of the US establishment. The Paris reporter of the *New York Times*, Edwin L. James, who would in 1932 become the powerful managing editor of the paper and remain in the top position for the next thirty years, wrote a savage attack on Bullitt. In a news piece in September 1919, James claimed that Bullitt, before departing Paris

for home, had sat around the cafés on the Champs-Élysées "expounding his admiration of Lenin and his devotion to the doctrine of revolution."[32]

According to James, Bullitt predicted that the Red Army would soon sweep across Europe. "'Suppose Bill,' said an acquaintance to him, 'that when the Red flood comes along, you'll be riding the crest with Trotsky and his generals?' Bullitt suddenly became profound and sober. 'I would feel honored if they let me,' he said, 'but I'm not good enough.'" James also reported that at a dinner given by friends for Bullitt on the night before he left Paris, he stated that the only remedy for international problems was "world revolution." Bullitt had joined a small group of educated young Americans from privileged backgrounds naively enamored of Bolshevik promises of sweeping economic and social changes, whom the historian Christopher Lasch has depicted in *The American Liberals and the Russian Revolution* (1962). Prominent among them was the Harvard-educated journalist John Reed.

From late fall of 1919 until the summer of 1921, Bullitt worked as the managing script editor in the New York offices of the Famous Players-Lasky Corporation, an early motion picture and distribution company that eventually became Paramount Pictures. Louise Bryant, the widow of the controversial radical writer and journalist John Reed and earlier lover of the playwright Eugene O'Neil, approached Bullitt in his executive capacity with the studio. Bryant wanted Bullitt to make a movie of her late husband's *10 Days That Shook the World*, his classic account as a witness of the Bolshevik triumph in November 1917. Bullitt found Bryant, a star journalist for the Hearst newspaper chain, fascinating and attractive, with dark good looks.

Bryant's connection to Reed, whom Bullitt had known since 1915, and her unconventional lifestyle and radical identification explain a large part of her attraction for the unhappily married Bullitt. Fascinated by left-wing bohemian intellectuals, he hoped for a literary career as a novelist and playwright. Although nothing came of the proposed film, the two started an affair in 1922.[33]

Friends noticed that Bullitt encouraged Bryant to talk constantly about Reed. Reed appealed to Bullitt as an idealist and a man of action, whose support for the Bolsheviks and his role in founding the American Communist Party had led the Soviet government after his early death in late 1920 to bury him in the Kremlin. Reed's commitment to a cause appealed to the strongly romantic side of Bullitt's nature. The Philadelphian also wanted a ruling passion, a cause that would demand his total commitment and loyalty. Bullitt was prone to idealizing individuals as well as overdramatizing reality. Bryant's active role as a radical, well connected to the bohemians of

Greenwich Village with their political, aesthetic, and sexual experimentation, appealed to Bullitt, who had started to write a confessional novel with those same themes, based on a failed marriage.

Bullitt was married when he met Bryant. In 1916, he had wed Aimee Ernesta Drinker, a renowned beauty whose father was president of Lehigh University. A son born in 1917 died after two days, and she was unable to have another child. In 1920, with his marriage in trouble, he bought a farm in the Berkshires as a retreat and a possible way of easing the strained relationship with his wife. He started seeing other women when working and living in New York, while his wife remained in Philadelphia. In April 1923, he wrote her from France a rambling, bizarre five-page letter telling her of his overwhelming sexual passion for Bryant: "I need her far more than she needs me." He asked for a divorce and warned that without Bryant he would "smash himself utterly," drink excessively, and cavort with prostitutes.[34]

Bryant and Bullitt, both prone to emotional volatility, had an on-again, off-again relationship for nearly two years as he finalized his divorce. They often traveled abroad together. Despite her reputation as a "Red," she worked as a well-paid freelance correspondent for the Hearst papers; Bullitt quit his job and followed her around as she handled assignments in Paris, Rome, Athens, and Constantinople, living in the last city for nearly a year. Their relationship did not go smoothly, and they broke off several times. She would claim that he always actively and persistently pursued her.

Bryant was seven months pregnant when they secretly married in Paris in December 1923. Bryant would recall many years later, after a nasty and bitter end to this marriage, that she had consented to it only because Bullitt was suffering an emotional crisis, and his needs appealed to her maternal instincts.

Money posed no problem, as they lived well on his inheritances, supplemented by their earnings. Soon after the birth of their daughter, she abandoned her journalistic career. She would later say, "I knew Bullitt was very rich but I never knew his worth." He knew she was famous as a radical and Reed's widow, but he did not know (or so he claimed) that she had lied about her age, thirty-eight, nine years older than she had told him, or that her family background was working-class Irish Catholic. Bullitt completed a roman à clef in 1923, *It's Not Done*. Published in 1926, the novel was dedicated to "Louise Bryant, my wife."

The novel scandalized Philadelphia society with its frank sexual discussion and the obvious resemblance of characters to the author and his wives. The hero, John Corsey, is involved with two women. One is a bohemian, Nina, who does not fit into his upper-class world; he marries the other, Mildred, who does. Mildred, however, is sexually frigid: "Do go into the next

room, dear. I'm so tired. It's silly for us to sleep in the same bed. Only peasants sleep in the same bed." The other woman, Nina, has gone to Paris to have his son. Years later, when the marriage with Mildred ends, Nina returns to him as a successful sculptress. Their now-mature son is a dedicated communist prepared to die for his cause. John is eager to marry Nina, who scoffs at the need for this bourgeois convention. Readers of the novel easily identified the hero with Bullitt, the bohemian Nina with Bryant, and Mildred with his first wife. The heroic son is seemingly modeled on John Reed. The *New York Times* reviewer described it as a "propaganda novel, directed against a single institution, the American aristocratic ideal." Not a critical success, the novel sold over 150,000 copies, according to Bullitt.[35]

Bryant and Bullitt maintained an apartment in New York, rented luxurious quarters in Paris when they were there, and spent part of most summers on the farm in the Berkshires. They also spent time in Istanbul and Vienna. Usually, they resided most of the year in Paris, where they entertained lavishly. Steffens wrote of being entertained by Bullitt with the finest wines and gourmet foods.

Bullitt described a leased apartment on Paris's fashionable Right Bank in 1924 as "Elsie de Wolfe, soft gray curtains, mauve taffeta curtains, green walls, curtained glass doors." A guest at a party there described Bullitt as "dressed impeccably": "he held sway over a highly diverse salon with a cocktail or wine glass in one hand and a cigarette in the other." Even as a bohemian rebel, Bullitt insisted on only the best.

Paris in the 1920s was the Western world's art and culture capital. It acted as a magnet for British and American expatriates, some who came to write a great novel and others to enjoy a bohemian lifestyle, which often included capacious amounts of alcohol and drugs that were denied them in their own countries. Hundreds of British and American gays and lesbians sought safety in a France, which lacked laws prohibiting homosexuality.

A favorable exchange rate for the dollar made Paris a ridiculously cheap place to visit or live. In a decade noted for hedonism, Paris was the place to be. In 1925, four hundred thousand Americans visited the city, with many opting to linger for a while. His close friend and classmate Cole Porter—both had been Scroll and Key at Yale—maintained a palatial home decorated with platinum wallpaper and chairs upholstered in zebra skins, where he hosted lavish parties that included cross-dressing and gay and bisexual activity. Porter captured the mood of expat Paris in two of his songs from the period: "Let's Misbehave" and "Let's Do It." Paris was indeed a symbol of and stage for social and sexual freedom. Billy Bullitt and Louise fully participated in the scene.