

# The History of the Twentieth Century

## Episode 173

### “The Khaki Elections”

#### Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

Shortly after the Armistice, the United Kingdom held its first general election in eight years. In the United States, mid-term elections were held just before the Armistice. In both campaigns, the shape of the peace treaty with Germany was much on everyone’s mind. But those elections would influence more than the peace treaty. They would shape the character of both nations for years to come.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening War Theme]

Episode 173. The Khaki Elections.

Back in episode 158, I talked about the domestic political situation in the US during the war. By mid-1918, two political trends were evident. First, the Wilson Administration’s management of the war was coming under fire. Soldiers were not being trained and deployed fast enough; military equipment was not being produced quickly enough.

Second, wartime hysteria was reaching dangerous extremes. America went a little bit crazy in 1918, with prosecutions under the Espionage Act and even worse, vigilante justice breaking out against Americans accused of not supporting the war or secretly aiding the enemy. We’ve seen some of these cases already. Again, the Wilson Administration was criticized for not cracking down hard enough on anti-war dissent. By 1918, this led to the introduction of the Sedition Act. It was intended to strengthen the Espionage Act by making it a crime to use “disloyal, profane, scurrilous, or abusive language” regarding the US, its government, its military, or the war effort.

It passed the House of Representatives 293-1, with the only no vote coming from a Socialist. Republicans in the Senate were more vocal in their opposition, though the bill passed that chamber 48-26. The Wilson Administration backed the act, but it has to be said that this was partly done to quiet demands for even sterner measures. Even so, the Sedition Act has been called the most repressive piece of legislation ever enacted by the United States Congress.

1918 was also a mid-term election year in the US, and by the middle of the year, the Republican Party platform is becoming clear. Woodrow Wilson had been too slow to get into the war, he was prosecuting the war indifferently, and he could not be trusted to finish it properly. Theodore Roosevelt was at this time writing a syndicated column for the Kansas City *Star*, clearly a warm-up exercise for his all-but-inevitable run for the Presidency in 1920. He used the column to criticize Wilson, his administration, and their conduct of the war. When the Sedition Act was under debate, Roosevelt fulminated against it—not because it criminalized expression of anti-war views, but because of a proposed section that criminalized criticism of the President. Roosevelt wrote, “If it is passed, I shall certainly give the Government the opportunity to test its constitutionality.”

Roosevelt denounced Wilson’s Fourteen Points, dismissed the proposed League of Nations as a fantasy, and demanded the US send ten million soldiers to France. He called for declarations of war against Turkey and Bulgaria, and for American soldiers to be integrated into the British and French Armies. He wrote that Wilson’s Fourteen Points represented “not the unconditional surrender of Germany, but the conditional surrender of the United States.” Republican Senator Miles Poindexter of Washington managed to out-Roosevelt Roosevelt by denouncing Wilson’s peace terms as a “crime against humanity.”

Another political issue in 1918 that was less inflammatory but perhaps just as influential was government price controls on wheat. We’ve talked before about sharp increases in the price of food worldwide as a result of the war. When the 1917 harvest came in, Herbert Hoover’s Food Administration had set the price of wheat at \$2 per bushel. You might think that sounds pretty good, considering the 1914 harvest went for about 65 cents a bushel. But wartime demand for wheat had raised the price to nearly \$3 a bushel in 1916, and wheat farmers resented the 1917 price controls.

Early in the year, when Congress was debating taxes and funding for the war effort, difficult decisions for any legislature, Wilson had attempted to prod Congress into action by declaring, “Politics is adjourned. The election will go to those who think least of it.” He probably meant only that they should set aside political calculation and do the right thing, and that if they did, it would be good politics, too. Today, we might say, “Good policy is good politics.” That was always my mantra when I was in politics, and it made me the podcaster that I am today.

But whatever he meant, people kept repeating it for the rest of the year, usually with sarcasm. Because Woodrow Wilson himself invested deeply in the 1918 mid-term election. We’ve already seen how he got involved in Democratic primary races to support Democrats who supported the Administration and to oppose those who didn’t. He got involved in the general election too, and it’s understandable that Republicans might feel Wilson was imposing a double standard. “Politics for me, but not for thee.”

Woodrow Wilson felt he had a stake not only in winning the war, but in the peace negotiations that would follow. The end of the Great War would, or could, see sweeping changes in international law and international relations. If it were done right, war might be abolished forever. If it were done wrong, a second world war would inevitably follow. He believed his own presence at the peace negotiations was crucial. That meant he needed to be President when the war ended, and there's evidence he was already contemplating running for a third term in 1920, if that were necessary to insure his involvement at the peace talks. Also, any peace treaty that came out of the post-war negotiation would have to be ratified by the United States Senate, and that was where Wilson's most vocal opponents were lodged, you should pardon the expression. Henry Cabot Lodge, the Republican Senator from Massachusetts, was Wilson's toughest foreign policy critic in Congress, and a close political ally of Theodore Roosevelt, Wilson's toughest foreign policy critic outside of Congress. Lodge became chair of the Republican Conference in the Senate, the equivalent of minority leader, which is a title that won't enter the Senate rules until the 1920s.

Fortunately for Wilson, the Democrats control the Senate. But even if they retain control after the mid-terms, it takes a two-thirds vote to ratify a treaty, meaning Wilson would have his work cut out for him.

As you know, Germany and the United States began discussing a peace based on Wilson's Fourteen Points by early October, but the armistice did not go into effect until November 11, six days after the mid-term election. If you're the sort of person who likes to ponder historical counterfactuals, I'd suggest an interesting one might be: What if the armistice had taken effect two weeks before the US mid-term elections, rather than one week after? Because the political debate just before the election was about what kind of peace to make with Germany, whether the surrender should be unconditional, and whether Wilson could be trusted to press hard enough. Would the euphoria of the armistice have changed the terms of debate and affected the outcome?

Perhaps. But that is not how it happened. What did happen, two weeks before the election, was that Woodrow Wilson issued a public statement calling on the voters to elect Democratic majorities to both houses of Congress. Wilson explained he was not impugning the patriotism of Republicans, but at this critical moment, America needed to stand before the world united, and a Republican victory in the Congressional elections would be seen by the world as evidence America was divided.

This statement was controversial, and it may have backfired. Three days later, and a day after his sixtieth birthday, Theodore Roosevelt spoke for two hours before a packed house at Carnegie Hall in New York City and he tore into Wilson for that statement. Never mind that twenty years ago, during the 1898 mid-terms, in the final days of America's previous war, a Republican President, McKinley, had made a similar plea for a unified Republican government as he opened peace talks with Spain. Or that McKinley's appeal was seconded by the 1898 Republican candidate for governor of New York, Theodore Roosevelt.

In the end, the mid-term results were worse than feared for Wilson and the Democrats. They lost 22 seats in the House of Representatives, mostly because the Republicans reasserted their traditional dominance of the Midwestern and Great Plains states. Remember that the Democrats were actually two seats behind the Republicans after the 1916 election and only held control of the chamber with assistance from Progressives and Socialists. The last of the Progressives was gone now, and the Republicans had a solid majority.

A bigger surprise was the Senate, where the Republicans had to pick up five seats to take control. They managed six, again mostly in the Midwest and the Great Plains. That meant that any peace treaty Wilson negotiated would have to pass a Republican Senate, and that his nemesis, Henry Cabot Lodge, would be both majority leader and chair of the Foreign Relations Committee.

The only pick-up the Democrats managed in the Senate that year was in Massachusetts, where Democrat David Walsh ousted incumbent Republican Senator John Weeks. Weeks had been an opponent of votes for women. After a 1918 attempt to enact a constitutional amendment on women's suffrage had failed in the Senate by two votes, the suffrage movement had targeted Weeks specifically for his no vote. His defeat can likely be attributed to that vote, and demonstrated the rising power of the suffrage movement.

But the most important take-away from the mid-terms was that Wilson faced a challenge in getting his own government to ratify any forthcoming peace treaty, and the Republicans wasted no time in pointing that out. Theodore Roosevelt wrote to British Prime Minister David Lloyd George, foreign secretary Arthur Balfour, and French Prime Minister Georges Clemenceau, counseling them to disregard Wilson's views on any impending peace deal. The Republicans supported the Allies to the hilt and they would back a far more punitive peace settlement than President Wilson would. Henry Cabot Lodge also wrote to Balfour to oppose any League of Nations, which Lodge dubbed "almost hopelessly impossible." Lodge also visited the British and French embassies in Washington to impress upon them the futility of dealing with Woodrow Wilson.

Americans like to tell themselves that "politics stops at the water's edge." That's how future Republican Senator Arthur Vandenburg is going to put it. That is, Americans do not air their domestic political disputes in the midst of dealings with foreign powers. In truth, this principle has been honored more in the breach than in the observance, as Roosevelt and Lodge have just demonstrated.

By 1918, it was clear that former President Theodore Roosevelt was the heavy favorite for the 1920 Republican Party nomination. He had worked hard to mend fences with his opponents in the party. Roosevelt even managed an awkward reconciliation with William Howard Taft. And his denunciations of Wilson and the Democrats cheered the party faithful.

Roosevelt was as feisty and vigorous as ever, it seemed, but it was undeniable that his health was failing. He suffered debilitating pain and frequent abscesses. These were lingering aftereffects of

his ill-fated Amazon expedition. Roosevelt had four sons, who ranged in age from thirty to twenty in 1918, and, being Theodore Roosevelt, he had encouraged them all to enter military service in the Great War. On July 17, 1918, a newspaper reporter was the first to break the news to Roosevelt that his youngest, 20-year old Quentin, a fighter pilot, had been shot down behind German lines. Three days of suspense ended when Roosevelt received a telegram from Woodrow Wilson. Quentin was dead. He had been buried by the Germans with full military honors.

As with Rudyard Kipling, we can only speculate what the effect of losing a son had on the old jingo, Theodore Roosevelt. Like Kipling, he did not grieve in public. But the hurt must have been profound. Quentin was, by many accounts, the most promising of the Roosevelt boys, clever and well-liked, and as a father myself I can assure all of you that while you love all your children equally, there is a special place in the human heart reserved for your youngest child. “To feel that one has inspired a boy to conduct that has resulted in his death has a pretty serious side for a father.” He acknowledged that much.

On the day of the armistice, Theodore Roosevelt was admitted to Roosevelt Hospital in New York—it was founded by a distant relative—because of a wracking pain that was diagnosed as lumbago and rheumatism. The doctors told him he might have to use a wheelchair for the rest of his life. He told them, “I can work that way, too.” He was discharged from the hospital and returned to his beloved home, Sagamore Hill, just outside Oyster Bay on Long Island, where he spent the final eleven days of his life. He died in his sleep during the early morning hours of January 6, 1919, at the age of sixty. He was buried following a simple ceremony attended by about five hundred people, including fifty children from the Oyster Bay public school, where he had sometimes appeared as Santa Claus. Also in attendance: William Howard Taft, who was observed standing silently over the grave after the ceremonies were over.

Vice President Thomas Marshall, always quick with a quip, observed upon hearing the news: “Death had to take him in his sleep, for if Roosevelt had been awake, there would have been a fight.”

[music: Beethoven, *Symphony No. 3*]

Historian Erik Loomis calls Theodore Roosevelt “the first twentieth century American.” Roosevelt casts a long shadow over American history, and in many ways, for good and for ill, his influence is still felt in our time.

Let’s start with the good. Roosevelt’s Progressive streak led to reforms that have made the lives of Americans better in ways beyond measure. He was the first major political figure to embrace conservationism. We Americans have him to thank for our National Parks, for the Food and Drug Act, and for anti-trust enforcement. He helped revitalize the Presidency, an office which had many powers on paper, but which had atrophied from lack of use by the succession of small, unimaginative Presidents who had preceded him. The US in 1901 was in the thrall of powerful

plutocrats and the dishonest legislators who took their orders and their money. Someone like Roosevelt was needed to shake up this too-cozy system of corruption.

On the other hand, Roosevelt set the US system of government on the road that led to what will later in the century be called the Imperial Presidency. And he did so consciously, intentionally, working toward exactly that outcome. He took advantage of a loophole in the US Constitution, the one that gives Congress the power to create an army and navy, but puts the President in charge of it, and used it to push for a more militarized America.

The man loved war. There's no other way to say it. He never met a war he didn't love. He believed in war. He thought it built character, in a man and in a nation. He still thought of military combat in terms of honor and glory. In that respect, he was hopelessly old-fashioned and out of touch with modern reality. He defied the odds charging up San Juan Hill in 1898, and never once considered maybe that was just luck. The Roosevelt Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine cleared the way for a century of unfortunate US military interventions in Central America. And his screeds against what he called hyphenated Americans at the end of his life are simply embarrassing.

So then, in what way was he the first twentieth century American? American politics was changing in the early twentieth century, and Theodore Roosevelt was one of the first politicians to learn how to ride the wave. He was quick with a quip, or sound bite, as we would say nowadays. He was an entertaining writer and public speaker, and he understood the power of newspapers and magazines, the foremost media of his day. Much of the image Roosevelt has even today, of the manly man, the charismatic, larger-than-life, rough-and-tumble enemy of corporate excess and economic inequality on the one hand and the carry-a-big-stick uber-patriot on the other, is the very image he carefully crafted for himself. This was how he always wanted us to think of him.

And he could deploy those media skills as a weapon. Ask Woodrow Wilson. Ask William Howard Taft, whose political career Roosevelt made, and then unmade on a whim. I'm still not clear on what was so terrible about Taft that it inspired Roosevelt's jihad against him. Taft was not a great President, but he was a pretty good one, and his reputation even today has not recovered from the beating it endured at the hands of Theodore Roosevelt.

With regard to the other US Presidents of his era, I think it indisputable that the two greatest between Lincoln and the second Roosevelt are Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson. I would put Wilson first, but your mileage may vary. The only other President who stands out from the herd of mediocrities the nation endured over this period is William Howard Taft, who is securely in third place. Overall, you'd have to say that America was fortunate in its Presidents in the first two decades of the twentieth century.

For myself, I can't escape this feeling that I ought to dislike Theodore Roosevelt, and yet I find I can't. There is far too much about the man to admire, even when he made poor choices.

Certainly he has livened up this podcast, and I am going to miss him. His contemporaries expressed similar feelings. The newspaper columnist Irvin Cobb wrote, “You had to hate the Colonel a lot to keep from loving him.” Secretary of War Newton Baker wrote, “About many things my disagreements with him were fundamental, but like all Americans I had a sympathy for his irresistible energy and courage...In practically every field of human endeavor, he had made his mark.”

[music: Beethoven, *Symphony No. 3*]

Within days of the Armistice, a general election was called in the United Kingdom. The last general election had been in 1910, and none for the duration of the war, so it was about time.

The 1918 general election was held on Saturday, December 14. This was the first election conducted on a single day across the nation, although the results were delayed until the votes of soldiers serving abroad could be collected and counted. It was also the first general election held under the 1918 Representation of the People Act, which for the first time granted universal suffrage to all British men 21 and older, and also to women aged 30 and older, provided they owned property, or their husband did.

That makes this the first election in which women could vote, although the qualifications were still more restrictive for them than for men. Women would finally get universal suffrage in 1928. As for men, the end of property restrictions represents a response to the British experience of conscription and the socialist complaint that men were being compelled to fight in a war directed by politicians they had had no say in electing.

Despite the extra limitations on women’s suffrage, about 40% of the voters in this election would be women. This statistic partly reflects the number of men lost to the war. Besides all these new women voters, remember that no man under the age of 29 has ever had opportunity to vote in a general election before, since it’s been so long since the last one.

This was also the first British general election in which women stood for Parliament. Actually, the Representation of the People Act was silent on the question of women standing for Parliament, and it was only after it passed that it was brought to Parliament’s attention that the Reform Act of 1832 only permitted men to stand as candidates, and absent any mention of the question in the new act, the old act still applied. Thus, one of the very last acts of Parliament before it dissolved for the election was the Parliament Act of 1918, which enabled women to stand. The hastily passed act was only 27 words long, and Wikipedia tells me it is a contender for the title of the shortest act ever passed by Parliament.

Seventeen women stood for seats in the new Parliament, but only one of them won her election. I’ll have more to say about her in a couple of minutes, but first let’s talk about the overall political situation in the country. Remember that two years ago, David Lloyd George cut a deal with the Conservative Party to put together a coalition Cabinet of Conservatives and renegade

Liberals supporting Lloyd George, with Lloyd George himself as PM, replacing the official Liberal Party leader and previous PM, Herbert Asquith. The now-66-year-old Asquith had taken the role of Leader of the Opposition. For the new Parliament, Lloyd George and Andrew Bonar Law, the Conservative Party leader, cut another deal. The Conservatives would agree to endorse 150 pro-Coalition Liberals, and after the election, the two groups would form another coalition government under Lloyd George. The anti-Coalition Liberals and the Labour Party each fought the election on their own.

Parliamentary candidates supported by the coalition were designated through a letter signed by Lloyd George and Bonar Law. Herbert Asquith mocked this process by dismissing the letters as “coupons,” a reference to war-time ration coupons, and this election would become known as the “Coupon Election.” Since the UK is still technically at war, you could also call this a “khaki election.”

The election came down to a referendum on Lloyd George’s government and its prosecution of the war. Lloyd George had been one of the Liberal Party’s staunchest supporters of social legislation before the war and then had rescued a floundering war effort from the mismanagement of Herbert Asquith, or so the Coalition would have it. Now that the war was ending and the soldiers would be returning home, Lloyd George was positioning himself as the best leader to provide a better future for them and for the nation. To make, as he put it, “a country fit for heroes to live in.” He also pledged harsh peace terms, famously threatening to squeeze Germany until “the pips squeaked.”

Asquith dismissed the whole coupon process as a “wicked fraud,” and did not campaign aggressively, because he believed the situation hopeless for his party and predicted a stinging Liberal defeat, with his branch of party reduced to a hundred seats, less than half the number it had won in 1910. Still, Asquith had hopes of being part of the British delegation to the forthcoming peace talks.

When the results came in, they were not so much stinging as devastating for the Liberals. The Conservative Party won 382 seats, an outright majority on their own. Most of the Coalition Liberals also won their races, 127 out of 150. Asquith’s Liberals only held 36, reducing what had once been the largest party in Parliament to the fifth largest, behind even Labour, which had done better than ever, with 57 seats. Not only were the Liberals greatly reduced in number, but every Liberal who had ever served in Cabinet was defeated, including Asquith himself. The Coalition had declined to put up a candidate in Asquith’s own constituency, but he lost anyway, ousted from the seat he had held for 32 years. He would not be going to the peace talks.

And then there was Ireland, which returned a result every bit as shocking, but for different reasons. We’ve talked at length about the ups and downs of Irish Home Rule since the early days of the podcast. More recently, we saw the Easter Rising in 1916 and earlier this year, 1918, we saw the uproar in Ireland when Westminster voted to impose conscription on the island. The



people of Ireland were not happy, and it's worth noting once again that this 1918 general election will see hundreds of thousands of women and younger men voting in Ireland for the first time. The total numbers voting in Ireland more than doubled, to two million, compared to the previous general election, so Ireland is primed for change.

In recent decades, most of Ireland's 105 seats in the British Parliament have been held by the Irish Parliamentary Party, which supports Home Rule for Ireland. But in the past two years, the independence-minded Sinn Féin party has won six out of nine by-elections in Ireland, evidence that something is about to give.

And yes, something gave. Sinn Féin collected over 50% of the total vote across the island and took 73 out of those 105 seats. The Irish Parliamentary Party, which had taken 74 seats in the previous election, was whittled down to six, and five of those were in Ulster, which they mostly held because Irish Nationalists voted for them over the Irish Unionists, who took 22 seats overall. The only seat the Irish Parliamentary Party retained outside of northern Ireland was Waterford City, the constituency John Redmond, the elder statesman of the party, had represented until his death, earlier in the year. Waterford City voted for William Redmond, John's son.

With self-determination all the rage this year, and following the example of the Czech members of the Austrian Reichsrat, Sinn Féin had campaigned on a manifesto calling for its MPs to assemble not in Westminster as part of the UK Parliament, but in Dublin, to form Dáil Éireann, a new Irish parliament, and there to declare an independent Irish state, which would take its place among the Allies at the peace talks. And so they did. On January 21, 1919, 27 of these newly elected MPs gathered in Dublin. 34 others were unable to attend, as they were sitting in British prisons. Most of the Sinn Féin candidates had been involved in some way in the Easter Rising.

Among them was the only woman elected to Parliament in 1918. I told you I'd get back to her. This was Constance Markievicz, an Irish nationalist, socialist, and suffragist. She had married a Polish aristocrat, hence her Polish surname, and had been involved in the Easter Rising as one of the fighters at St. Stephen's Green. She had been sentenced to death for her role in the Rising, but her sentence was commuted to life in prison on account of her sex. When she was told of the commutation, she replied, "I do wish your lot had the decency to shoot me." She was released in 1917 as part of Lloyd George's amnesty. Now she was the first woman MP, although she would never sit in Westminster. She was in fact elected to her seat from prison. She had been arrested again for her anti-conscription activities earlier in the year.

And so the Irish Question remains very much unresolved. We'll return to Ireland of course, but we'll have to stop there for today. Thank you for listening, and I'd like to thank Jeanne for her donation, and thank you to Neil for becoming a patron of the podcast. If you'd like to join them in becoming a donor or patron, just visit the website, [historyofthetwentiethcentury.com](http://historyofthetwentiethcentury.com).

And I hope you'll join me next week on *The History of the Twentieth Century*. Before we move on to the peace negotiations, it's time to ponder the meaning of the Great War. Lessons Learned, next week, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. In the United States, the Supreme Court upheld the constitutionality of the Sedition Act in 1919, in *Abrams v. United States*, a case involving Bolshevik sympathizers circulating leaflets in opposition to sending US soldiers to Russia. The vote was 7-2, and if you've been following the Supreme Court, you should not be surprised if I tell you that the two dissenters were Justices Holmes and Brandeis.

As is typical of Supreme Court decisions of this era, Holmes' dissent is today more often quoted than anything in the majority opinion. In particular, he expressed his opposition to attempts to control free speech by arguing that "the ultimate good...is better reached by free trade in ideas...the best test of truth is the power of the thought to get itself accepted in the competition of the market...That, at any rate, is the theory of our Constitution. It is an experiment, as all life is an experiment."

These words in Holmes's dissent gave rise to the expression, "the marketplace of ideas," as a rationale for freedom of expression, and Holmes's argument has in our time become commonplace.

[music: Closing War Theme]