
Booth Tarkington and the League of Nations: Advice for Senator Harry S. New

*Edited by Howard F. McMains**

Writing from Maine to his friend Harry S. New in 1920, Booth Tarkington claimed, "I'm a farmer now." But the Indiana author was a summer resident of fashionable Kennebunkport, not an Aroostook valley potato grower, and was famous for his novels set in the Midwest. He was also a moderate Republican who supported the League of Nations. When the 1920 presidential campaign opened between Republican candidate Warren G. Harding and Democrat James M. Cox, Tarkington believed Harding had to speak in favor of the League to defeat Cox. Senator New was Tarkington's old friend and director of the Republican campaign speakers' bureau, and in his folksy letter from Maine, the Hoosier novelist expressed the viewpoint of Republicans who favored the League of Nations.¹

Tarkington and New both came from politically active Indianapolis families. Tarkington's father was an Indianapolis attorney and circuit judge, his uncle a California governor and United States senator. After graduating from Princeton in 1893, Tarkington decided to become a writer instead of reading law. While on vacation at Bar Harbor that summer, he began both his first novel, *The Gentleman from Indiana*, and his life-long attachment to Maine. The book appeared in 1899 and established Tarkington's career, which reached its peak in the years around 1920. The Indiana author wrote the first of his highly successful "Penrod" stories in 1913, and in 1918 he published his most enduring novel, *The Magnificent Ambersons*, for which he won a Pulitzer Prize. Three years later he published *Alice Adams*, a lesser novel than his saga of the Ambersons but also a Pulitzer winner. He frequently vacationed at

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¹ Booth Tarkington to Harry S. New, August 16, 1920, Harry S. New Papers (Indiana Division, Indiana State Library, Indianapolis).



BOOTH TARKINGTON'S HOME ON NORTH PENNSYLVANIA STREET,
INDIANAPOLIS

Courtesy of Susanah Mayberry.

Kennebunkport; and as his literary success increased, he built Seawood, his summer home. The property gave him claim to being "a farmer now." The green-shuttered colonial frame house had terraces, groves of trees, and views of the Kennebunkport River. Tarkington preferred Seawood to his Indianapolis mansion.

A minor character in *The Gentleman from Indiana* was Brainard Macauley, a newspaperman whom hero John Harkless met while at a country club dance of the sort that Tarkington often attended in Indianapolis during the mid-1890s.² The novel describes Macauley as "an American of affairs; slight, easy, yet alert; relaxed, yet sharp; neat, regular, strong . . . and one knew at once that he would make a rattling fight to arrive where he was going."³ Tarkington based the character of Harkless on his closest friend at Princeton, John Cleve Green, who died at Philadelphia in 1897.⁴ And he probably based that of Brainard Macauley on an Indianapolis newspaperman of the 1890s, Harry S. New.

New grew up in Tarkington's northside neighborhood, scene of Penrod's adventures and noted in the *Gilded Age* for attractive

² James Woodress, *Booth Tarkington: Gentleman From Indiana* (Philadelphia, 1955), 69.

³ Booth Tarkington, *The Gentleman from Indiana* (New York, 1902), 281, 291.

⁴ Woodress, *Booth Tarkington*, 72-73.

streets lined by maple-shaded houses and picket fences.⁵ The two were long-time friends, although New was somewhat older. Throughout his life, Tarkington often signed letters to New with his childhood nickname, "Boots." When Tarkington sent New an inscribed copy of *Alice Adams*, which conjures up that neighborhood of maples and picket fences, New thanked him for the "reminder of old times and a dearly cherished friendship."⁶ New's father was John C. New, a leading Indiana Republican, publisher of the Indianapolis *Journal* and 1888 campaign architect for Benjamin Harrison. Harry New worked as a *Journal* reporter and by the late 1890s was its editor. Having lived in London when Harrison appointed his father consul, Harry New was the very model of the American of affairs whom Tarkington described in the fictional Brainard Macauley.

Although New was involved in Republican politics, serving as state and national chairman, he did not run for major office until 1916, when he entered Indiana's first primary under the Seventeenth Amendment and sought election to the United States Senate. During the campaign, Tarkington wrote "An Appreciation" of New for an Indianapolis newspaper. Echoing his description of Brainard Macauley, Tarkington wrote that New was from "the old Hoosier stock that stood for cool level-headedness, for common sense, for steadiness and for kindness . . . and when he acts, something happens!"⁷ The candidate of course admired the article, which he read on board a Monon train entering Indianapolis: "I wish I might tell you how much I appreciate *it*—and you,—but I can't, words won't do it," he wrote.⁸ New won both the primary and the election.

In the Senate, New was an undistinguished member of the Republican Old Guard. According to California's progressive Republican Senator Hiram Johnson, "New of Indiana, is the type of Indiana politician, pleasant and affable, whose mind is ever dealing with combinations, and trades, and negotiations, and manipulations."⁹ During New's six year term, the largest question before the Senate was ratification of the Treaty of Versailles, which included President Woodrow Wilson's idea for the League of Nations. New was strongly opposed to the League, but he was not one of the "irreconcilables" against it root and branch, as were Johnson and Idaho's William E. Borah. The sixteen "irreconcilables" composed

⁵ Charlotte Cathcart, *Indianapolis from Our Old Corner* (Indianapolis, 1965), 24.

⁶ New to Tarkington, May 6, 1922, Booth Tarkington Papers (Princeton University Library, Princeton, N.J.).

⁷ Indianapolis *News*, February 18, 1916.

⁸ New to Tarkington, February 20, 1916, Tarkington Papers.

⁹ Hiram Johnson to Mrs. Amy Johnson, June 1, 1918, *The Diary Letters of Hiram Johnson*, ed. Robert E. Burke (7 vols., New York, 1983), II, n.p.

approximately 17 percent of the Senate.¹⁰ New was a "strong reservationist" opposed especially to Article X's mutual agreement to "respect and preserve" territory because it implied future use of American troops under League control.¹¹ Isolationist Hoosiers thought his opposition to the League was his "greatest service," long to be remembered "as equal to the service performed by the [Republic's] early founders."¹² Hiram Johnson, on the other hand, considered the affable New to be one of the "dark-age politicians."¹³

Harry New's Senate friend was Ohio's Warren Harding, another "strong reservationist." Both New and Harding occasionally "engaged in the royal indoor sport" by playing poker with Johnson and other Republicans.¹⁴ But the two midwesterners followed Senate majority leader Henry Cabot Lodge's strategy of demanding revisions to defeat the Treaty rather than Johnson's preference for outright rejection. Lodge correctly believed that Wilson would not compromise on the League. After the Senate defeated the Treaty, New and Harding continued to be close friends. Harding sat in New's Delaware Street living room at Indianapolis when he heard of his poor showing in the 1920 Indiana primary and nearly dropped out of the race for the presidential nomination.¹⁵ After Harding won the nomination—defeating Hiram Johnson, among others—the Republican national chairman, New's fellow Hoosier Will H. Hays, asked the Indiana senator to direct the campaign's speakers' bureau, a major responsibility.¹⁶ In 1922, then-President Warren Harding appointed New to be postmaster general, replacing Will Hays in the traditional Cabinet chair reserved for a politico "whose mind is ever dealing with . . . manipulations." Republican insider Harry New held the post through the Coolidge administration.¹⁷

¹⁰ Ralph Stone, *The Irreconcilables: The Fight Against the League of Nations* (Lexington, Ky., 1970), 90. In addition to Johnson and Borah, the other irreconcilables were: Frank Brandegee of Connecticut; Albert Fall of New Mexico; Bert Fernald of Maine; Joseph France of Maryland; Asle Gronna of North Dakota; Philander Knox of Pennsylvania; Robert M. La Follette of Wisconsin; Joseph Medill McCormick of Illinois; George H. Moses of New Hampshire; George W. Norris of Nebraska; Miles Poindexter of Washington; James A. Reed of Missouri; Lawrence Y. Sherman of Illinois; and Charles S. Thomas of Colorado. Reed and Thomas were Democrats; the others were Republicans. *Ibid.*, 183-88.

¹¹ Robert H. Ferrell, *Woodrow Wilson and World War I* (New York, 1985), 173.

¹² Paul D. Brown, ed., *Indianapolis Men of Affairs, 1923* (Indianapolis, 1923), 462.

¹³ Hiram Johnson to Mrs. Amy Johnson, May 5, 1918, *Diary Letters of Hiram Johnson*, II, n.p.

¹⁴ Hiram Johnson to Hiram Johnson, Jr., February 8, 1919, *ibid.*, II, n.p.

¹⁵ Francis Russell, *The Shadow of Blooming Grove: Warren G. Harding and His Times* (New York, 1968), 346.

¹⁶ Robert K. Murray, *The Harding Era: Warren G. Harding and His Administration* (Minneapolis, 1969), 47.

¹⁷ For an example of New's inside "manipulations" during the 1920s, see Howard F. McMains, "The Guest of the Nation: Politics and Charles Lindbergh's Return to the United States in 1927," *New York History*, LXVI (July, 1985), 263-79.

Tarkington wrote from Kennebunkport on August 16, 1920, to Senator Harry New, campaign insider and personal friend of the candidate, at the speakers' bureau in Chicago. He discussed the one campaign issue about which the two Hoosiers differed, the League of Nations. Tarkington went to the heart of the political issue in 1920, which was world peace. Two former Ohio newspaper editors, Senator Warren G. Harding and Governor James M. Cox, competed for the presidency in a strange contest that centered on President Woodrow Wilson's opinions rather than those of the candidates. The president had staked his career on acceptance of the League, but by 1920 Americans were tired of campaigns for morality and tired of international affairs; they wanted nothing so much as to keep to themselves. Possible campaign issues included inflation, civil liberties, civil rights, and wartime mismanagement of economic mobilization. The candidates in 1920 ignored them. Republicans had controlled Congress since 1918 and could not blame economic dislocation on Wilson. Recent constitutional amendments had settled the issues of prohibition (for the time being) and of women's suffrage. That left only the issue of peace, which both Wilson and Cox equated with the League.¹⁸ Harding, however, had opposed the League while in the Senate and at the campaign's beginning was ambivalent, leading pro-League Republicans to believe that he might embrace the idea. He spoke of an "association" of nations, encouraging both the League's supporters and opponents with his deliberate obfuscation. His campaign frustrated such moderate Republican supporters of the League as Tarkington, who believed that the world organization could prevent future wars.¹⁹

Despite portents of Republican victory, Tarkington feared in August that Cox might win the 1920 election on the peace issue. Other Republicans also wanted Harding to adopt a position favorable to the League. Elihu Root led a large group that attempted to persuade the candidate to modify his views.²⁰ To the same purpose, Tarkington informally used his friendship with campaign insider Senator New. Antiwar sentiment was strong enough, Tarkington thought, to determine the election. He predicted that the women's vote—a new and unknown factor in elections—would go to Cox because women supported the League "by nature." A month later, in September, Republicans swept Maine's early state election, and Harding anticipated how the nation would go. Two days after the November general election, the president-elect openly sided with root-and-branch opponents of the League and said that it was "now deceased."²¹

¹⁸ Ferrell, *Woodrow Wilson and World War I*, 219-22.

¹⁹ Stone, *The Irreconcilables*, 175-76.

²⁰ Ferrell, *Woodrow Wilson and World War I*, 227-28.

²¹ Stone, *The Irreconcilables*, 177.

Tarkington wrote the following private letter to New early in the campaign, when it appeared that Harding could be swayed in the League's favor. Although Tarkington adopted the guise of "a farmer" from Maine to discuss concerns he heard "from the soil," he represented moderate Republicans who sought to affect both the candidate's position and the League's fate.



BOOTH TARKINGTON

Courtesy of Indiana Historical Society, Indianapolis.

SEAWOOD
KENNEBUNKPORT, MAINE.¹

Aug. 16. '20

Dear Senator:—

I do hate to see the approach of another eight years of Democratic Administration, but the weather begins to look that way.

Let me tell you how "the masses" feel: I'm a farmer now, as well as a sensitized plate, and I'm fairly aware of the average inside.

For several years high prices have annoyed us a whole lot: we've been getting more money (which made us restless and sore at the fellers that we hear get more than *we* do) but that doesn't make us one bit less sore about the price of a shave, eggs and coal—and R. R. tickets!

Also, Uncle George's wife's nephew got a rotten deal from the draft board.

Moreover, we're mad as hell about our taxes going up. And the Treasury Dep't asked us the stinkindest questions about our own potatoes—how much we sold 'em fer—and how much we paid Ole, the loafing Swede hand. Ole's mad, too, because they probed around in *his* private affairs.

All this we are going to blame *somebody* for, dad burn it! and we blame Woodrow Wilson. He was in *charge* of things, if *anybody* was, wasn't he? Well, anyhow we blame him.

That's all the Republican Party has got, Senator: the election is going to be won by the unattached vote, the un-Party vote, and Blaming Wilson, in ordinary, ornery human nature, is all you can count on to bring that vote to Harding. All. Except anti-Leagueism.

What do the Democrats offer the un-Party vote: They offer Cox and a League. About Cox. He has "caught the popular imagination" much more than Harding has. Yes, he has, too! Newspapers rather like to talk about Cox. More than they do about Harding.

So do people. Very significant.

Men sore at Wilson say, "Well, Cox isn't Wilson. He gave Ohio a good administration, and I hear he's a corking fine business man. A couple of months ago I'd have laughed at anyone who told me I'd vote for another Democratic administration, but I've made up my mind this man Cox is a new deal." About the League. An amended,

¹ Booth Tarkington to Harry S. New, August 16, 1920, Harry S. New Papers (Indiana Division, Indiana State Library, Indianapolis). The author and staff of the *Indiana Magazine of History* have made every effort to present the letter as it appears in manuscript form. The original paragraph structure has been retained; Tarkington's address is typeset as it appears on his stationery; and words and phrases that Tarkington underlined for emphasis are italicized here. Occasional words or phrases that are underlined twice in the original are both italicized and underlined.



ENTRYWAY OF SEAWOOD, KENNEBUNKPORT, MAINE

Courtesy of Susanah Mayberry.

interpreted or somethinged League is what the "general mass" *wants*. The mass has a vague idea that a League will help to stop wars. The mass thinks *Wilson's* league probably wasn't *just* right, but was somewhere near it; and thinks that if this scheme for a League is *dropped* there *never* will be *any* League.

The mass now thinks that Harding doesn't want any League.

What voters do *not* want a League and are consequently won by Harding's position? Certain Republicans and a very few Independents and Democrats who would vote for Harding anyhow, had he "come out" for the League in its modified form as passed by the Senate.

The mass is for a League and Cox gives it the only chance to vote for one, the mass thinks.

Women will vote for Cox because all women are (by *nature*) for a League. There are *some* women who are against a League. They are women whose husbands have talked 'em into being against it. *All other* women will vote for Cox, if the impression is allowed to remain that *the* League dies if Harding is elected.

The one Republican asset, Blaming Wilson, is weakened because a Republican Congress didn't lower the price of shingles and pork chops—which went *up*, instead.

So there we are; the impression that Harding is against *any form of this League*, or maybe against any such thing, holds [Hiram] Johnson and [William E.] Borah and their 17 per cent [i.e., the Senate "irreconcilables"]; but *may* lose the whole shout.

Now, I doubt not you're incredulous; but think a little *about* the women's vote, for instance. Think of a woman whose husband hasn't got her against the League. How many of 'em would take a deliberate or impersonal view? About 3 in 1000. The others would say: "A vote for Cox and the Covenant may save some poor dear good looking boy from getting shot through the lungs and everything. Grandpa was a Republican, and I'd *like* to be one—but I can't vote against saving that boy."

And the mothers *and* fathers of growing boys generally—you can explain to *some* of 'em that you think the Covenant would lead *to* war—but three-fourths of 'em won't hear about that—and some that do hear about it only get a little more confused and retain that vague impression of benefit from the League;—it *might* save their sons from war, they dimly feel.

They'd have accepted a denatured League perfectly—they would *yet*—and the Democrats would have got *nowhere* trying to insist on the literal text of Wilson's League. But *now* what the country sees is this:

Harding means no effort to avoid wars.

Cox means an effort to avoid wars.

The mass is a *simple* mind: it *takes* things with a startling simplicity. It hates war more than ever it did. The Great War is fresh in its mind. The ex-soldier of the mass says *he* won't go to war again, no matter what they do to him. Well, I hope I'm not right, but this is what my ear hears from the soil. Love to Mrs. New & all your family. Yours, Boots T.