

LETTER TO SIR EDWARD GREY

Letter regarding World War I addressed to the British Foreign Secretary
January 22, 1915

To me the crux of the situation has been Belgium. If England or France had acted toward Belgium as Germany has acted I should have opposed them, exactly as I now oppose Germany. I have emphatically approved your action as a model for what should be done by those who believe that treaties should be observed in good faith and that there is such a thing as international morality. I take this position as an American; who is no more an Englishman than he is a German, who endeavors loyally to serve the interest of his own country, but who also endeavors to do what he can for justice and decency as regards mankind at large and who therefore feels obliged to judge all other nations by their conduct on any given occasion.

I do not think you need to have me show a precedent for writing you; but, if you do, I shall ask you to turn to young Trevelyan's "Life of John Bright," pages 314 to 316. Bright was writing to Sumner at the time, when the bulk of the leading English politicians, from Palmerston and Derby to Gladstone and the editor of "The Times," were more or less openly hostile to the cause of the American Union and the freeing of the slaves. Bright's letters were written to Sumner in order that they could be read aloud by Lincoln to his Cabinet, which was actually done. He was afraid the United States would drift into war with England. His letters run in part as follows;

"You know that I write to you with as much earnest wish for your national welfare as if I were a native and resident of your country. I need not tell you, who are much better acquainted with modern history than I am, that nations drift into wars. I fervently hope that you may act firmly and courteously (towards England). Any moderate course you may take will meet with great support here. I have no doubt you will be able to produce strong cases from English practice in support of your actions, but I doubt if any number of these will change opinion here. You must put the matter in such a shape as to save your honor and to put our Government in the wrong if they refuse your propositions.

"At all hazards you must not let this matter grow to a war with England, even if you are right and we are wrong. War will be fatal to your idea of restoring the Union. I am not now considering its effects here; but I am looking alone to your great country, and I implore you, not on any feeling that nothing can be conceded and that England is arrogant and seeking a quarrel, not to play the game of every enemy of your country. Nations in great crises and difficulties have often done that which in their prosperous and powerful hour they would not have often done; and they have done it without humiliation and disgrace. You may disappoint your enemies by the moderation and reasonableness of your conduct; and every honest and good man in England will applaud your wisdom. If you are resolved to succeed against the South, have no war with England. Make every concession that can be made. Do not hesitate to tell the world that you will even consider what two years ago no power would have asked of you rather than give another nation a pretence for assisting your enemies. It is your interest to baffle your enemies even by any concession which is not disgraceful."

America then acted along the lines John Bright advised. I do not know whether his advice carried any weight. I have not the slightest idea whether you may not resent my giving advice; but I assure you that it is given with as much friendliness and disinterestedness as fifty odd years ago John Bright gave his to Sumner and Lincoln, and with as sincere a purpose to serve what I believe to be the cause of justice and morality; and with reversal of names the advice I am giving is the same as John Bright gave; and my reasons are the same.

There have been fluctuations in American opinion about the war. The actions of the German Zeppelins have revived the feeling in favor of the Allies. But I believe that for a couple of months preceding this action there had been a distinct lessening of the feeling for the Allies and a growth of pro-German feeling. I do not think that this was the case among the people who are best informed; but I do think that it was the case among the mass of not very well informed people, who have little to go upon except what they read in the newspapers or see at cinematograph shows. There were several causes for this change. There has been a very striking contrast between the lavish attentions showered on American war correspondents by the German military authorities and the blank refusal to have anything whatever to do with them by the British and French Governments.... The only real war news written by Americans who are known to and trusted by the American public comes from the German side; as a result of this, the sympathizers with the cause of the Allies can hear nothing whatever about the trials and achievements of the British and French armies.... It may be that your people do not believe that American public opinion is of sufficient value to be taken into account; but, if you think that it should be taken into account, then it is worth your while considering whether much of your censorship work and much of your refusal to allow correspondents at the front has been damaging to your cause from the standpoint of the effect on public opinion without any corresponding military gains. I realize perfectly that it would be criminal to permit correspondents to act as they acted as late as our own Spanish War; but, as a layman, I feel sure that there has been a good deal of work of the kind of which I have spoken in the way of censorship and refusing the correspondents permission to go to the front which has not been of the slightest military service to you and which has had a very real effect in preventing any rallying of public opinion to you....

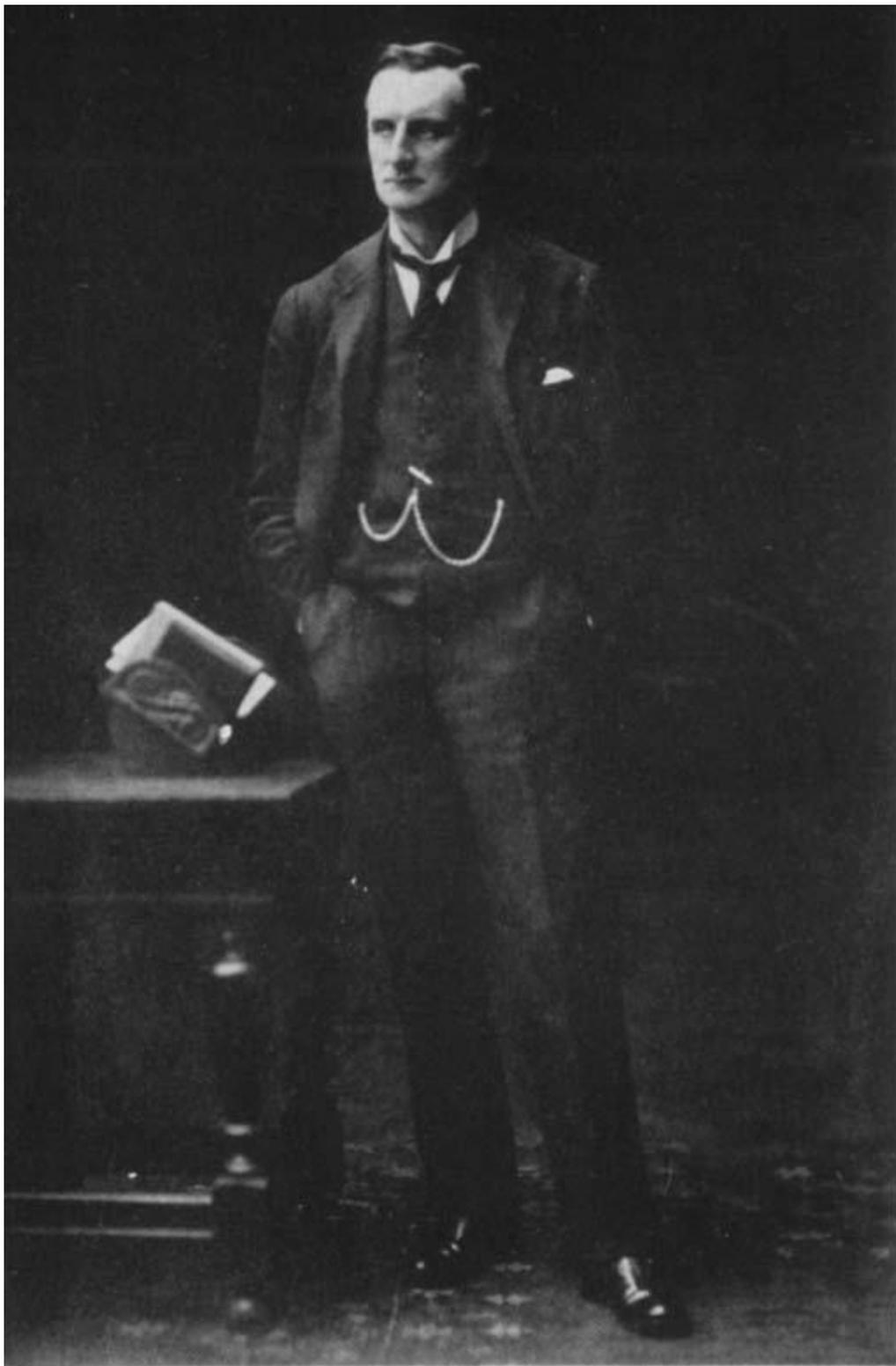
Now, as to the question of contraband. You know that I am as little in sympathy with President Wilson and Secretary Bryan as regards their attitude in international matters as John Bright was in sympathy with Lords Palmerston and Derby and Mr. Gladstone in their attitude toward the American Republic when it was at war fifty years ago. But they speak for the country; and I have no influence whatever in shaping public action, and, as I have reason to believe, very little influence indeed in shaping public opinion. My advice, therefore, must be taken or rejected by you purely with reference to what you think it is worth.

President Wilson is certainly not desirous of war with anybody. But he is very obstinate, and he takes the professorial view of international matters. I need not point out to you that it is often pacifists who halting and stumbling and not knowing whither they are going finally drift helplessly into a war, which they have rendered inevitable, without the slightest idea that they were doing so. A century ago this was what happened to the United States under Presidents Jefferson and Madison--although at that time the attitude of both England and France rendered war with one of them, and ought to have rendered war with both of them, inevitable on our part....

I regard the proposed purchase by the Administration of German ship[ping] as entirely improper. I am supporting the Republicans in their opposition to the measure. I regard some of the actions of the Administration in, for instance, refusing to make public the manifests in advance and the like as improper. I think Great Britain is now showing great courtesy and forbearance. I believe that she has done things to our ships that ought not to have been done, but I am not aware that she is now doing them. I am not discussing this question from the standpoint of right. I am discussing it from the standpoint of expediency. . . . Our trade, under existing circumstances, is of vastly more service to you and France than to Germany. I think I

underestimate the case when I say it is ten times as valuable to the Allies as to Germany. There are circumstances under which it might become not merely valuable but vital. I am not a naval man, I do not know what the possibilities of the submarine are. But they have accomplished some notable feats, and if they should now begin to destroy ships carrying foodstuffs to Great Britain, the effect might be not merely serious but appalling. Under such condition, it would be of the utmost consequence to England to have accepted the most extreme view the United States could advance as to her right to ship cargoes unmolested. Even although this possibility, which I do not regard as more than a very remote possibility, is in reality wholly impossible, it yet remains true that the trade in contraband is overwhelmingly to the advantage of England, France, and Russia, because of your command of the seas. You assume that this command gives you the right to make the advantage still more overwhelming. I ask you merely to take careful thought, so that you shall not excite our Government, even wrongfully, to act in such a way that it would diminish or altogether abolish the great advantage you now have. . . . Exactly how far you can go in any given case, I cannot say. But where it is so very important for you that there should be no American hostility, I hope you will not only avoid doubtful action but will not insist on your rights, even when these rights are clear, unless you are convinced that the gain to you will more than offset causing an irritation in this country which might have effects that I will not even contemplate, because they would cause me real horror....

Edward Grey, 1st Viscount Grey of Fallodon (25 April 1862 – 7 September 1933), better known as **Sir Edward Grey**, was a British Liberal statesman who served as Foreign Secretary from 1905 to 1916.



Edmond Grey.

