In the year 1887 Woodrow Wilson was Associate Professor of Political Science at Bryn Mawr College in Pennsylvania. He was a graduate of Princeton, of the University of Virginia Law School and held the degree of Doctor of Philosophy from the Johns Hopkins University. While a graduate student in Baltimore, he had met Dr. James Burrell Angell, an adviser of President Gilman of Johns Hopkins; and the letters of Wilson here printed were written as a result of his friendship with Angell which began at the Hopkins. The letters show Mr. Wilson's ambition, his desire to have contact with practical affairs and his interest in public administration.

At the time when he wrote these letters, Woodrow Wilson was thirty-two years old, and in his third year of teaching at Bryn Mawr. The June preceding, he had published in the Political Science Quarterly (Vol. II, 197–222) an essay on administration which is easily the finest thing on that subject in our language. Two years later, in 1889, he published The State. Although this work contains some chapters on the federal government, it was written apparently without any first-hand observation of the government. Oddly enough, Wilson's desire to have some contact with administrative affairs at Washington was first satisfied a quarter of a century later when he was called to the Presidency of the United States. However, the "experience in affairs" which he hoped to attain first came to him as Governor of New Jersey.

When, in his letter, Wilson refers to having "studied Washington from a distance" he has in mind his doctor's thesis, Congressional Government, written at the Johns Hopkins. This was completed without a visit to the halls of Congress, but the sixteen printings through which it has gone testify to its continuing usefulness. In fact, Wilson was always proud of his thesis and of the astuteness of its observations. At the very height of the World War, on April 3, 1918, he wrote to Mr. C. D. Jackson of the Oregon Journal (Baker,
The proposals that Mr. Swagar Shirley (Congressman from Louisville, Kentucky) outlines have been discussed a good deal in Congress and the way to their success seems to be blocked by all sorts of influences, but I am ready to co-operate at any time that it will be effective to do so. *I have been in favor of this reform ever since I was in my twenties, and wrote about it then.*

Dr. Angell's reply to Mr. Wilson's letter of November 7 is not in the papers of either man. Apparently at that time neither one was very careful about keeping his correspondence. However, it is evident from Mr. Wilson's next letter that Angell did not encourage him to seek practical experience in the State Department. The reasons presented can be gleaned from the text of Mr. Wilson's letter of November 15. It should be noted that the place to which Wilson had aspired was filled on November 19, 1887, by the appointment of George L. Rives of New York.

*Kennett Square*  
**Paul Miller Cuncannon**  
Bryn Mawr, Pa.,  
7 November, 1887

Hon. James B. Angell,²  
Ann Arbor, Mich.,

My dear Sir:—Having had some personal experience of your indulgent temper towards the ambitions of young men, I am made bold to address a few lines to you concerning a thought of mine which you will I feel sure regard as extraordinary, but which will at worst, I hope, only make you smile and think none the worse of me.

A friend of mine in the Treasury Dept. in Washington, wrote me the other day urging me to "have steps taken" to have my name

1 In 1900, by appointment of Governor Theodore Roosevelt, Rives became President of the Commission which revised the Charter of Greater New York.

2 Dr. James B. Angell, President of the University of Michigan, was at this time one of the three plenipotentiaries of the United States to negotiate a treaty on the subject of Canadian Fisheries. The other American members were Secretary of State Bayard and Mr. W. L. Putnam.

When Dr. Angell retired at the age of eighty from the presidency of the University of Michigan, three men in addition to certain professors on the Ann Arbor campus were seriously considered to succeed him. These men were Woodrow Wilson; Dr. John H. Finley, Professor of Politics at Princeton (1900–1903), Commissioner of Education at Albany, and later editor of the New York Times; and Governor Charles Evans Hughes, later Chief Justice of the United States at Washington.
presented to Mr. Bayard for the now vacant post of Asst. Sec’y of State. My friend is a real friend, tho’ not an ‘influential’ one, being in charge of one of the minor subdivisions of the First Comptroller’s Office. He says that Mr. B., who likes scholarly men rather than politicians as assistants, is finding it rather hard to fill the place since Gov. Porter’s resignation: and he urges that I am better known—more favorably known—in Washington than anywhere else outside of University circles. I have written to him that I have no claims upon the good offices of any influential person I can think of.

But there are men as young as I in high places in the Depts., and, if there really is any ‘fighting’ chance even for me, I am very loath indeed to miss it. And my reasons are such as I am sure you will think proper and honorable. I have sometimes thought of entering the Civil Service Examinations for some govt. clerkship in order to see, if only in that way, the inside of the mechanism I am engaged in studying. I have been restrained, not only by the fact that a clerk’s salary would not suffice for the support of my little family, but also by the consideration that such a view of the actual operations of the daily conduct of federal administration as I could obtain from a clerk’s desk in one of the departments, would be too imperfect and limited to be of any real service to my thought. But I do want—and need—particularly, as it seems to me, at this juncture in my studies,—a seat on the inside of government—a seat high enough to command views of the system. I acknowledge I dread becoming doctrinaire: I dread writing what will be of no practical usefulness—a mere closeted student’s view of affairs. I want to handle the practical things of my subject for a time, with an official’s diligence:—and that is the reason I am tempted by this suggestion of my friend’s,—absurd as my candidacy may at first sight appear.

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3 Thomas Francis Bayard was Secretary of State under Grover Cleveland (1885–1889). He started his law practice in Wilmington, Delaware, in 1857, and served as United States District Attorney for Delaware. During the Civil War he was a peace Democrat. In 1869, he succeeded his father in the United States Senate and was the fourth of his family to represent Delaware in that body. In 1893, Cleveland appointed him Ambassador to the Court of St. James, where he remained until 1897. It should be noted that Bayard was a supporter of the Civil Service reforms.

4 James Davis Porter (1828–1912) was a Tennessee lawyer and a major in the Confederate army. He was Governor of Tennessee, 1875–1879, and was commissioned Assistant Secretary of State to Secretary Thomas F. Bayard March 20, 1885. Later (1893–94) he served as Minister to Chile.
I have written to seek your advice upon the matter because I feel confident that you will understand me and my motive.

There are other reasons for my wish as to taking an office at this time which I may mention without impropriety. My teaching here this year lies altogether in the field of political economy, and in my own special field of public law: and I already feel that teaching such topics to women threatens to relax not a little my mental muscle—to exalt the function of commonplace rudiments in my treatment. Before I teach elsewhere I should like to mix with the rough practical things again in which I was formerly at home—to recover the proper atmosphere for my studies.

You see, therefore, how earnest my wish in the matter is. I would eagerly accept such an office, could I honorably break off from my occupations here: and I am sanguine enough to believe that I could—though my engagements here, while not so binding as they were when I saw you, still hold me back from instituting an active candidacy, even if I could. You, as a student and a man of affairs both, can give me the advice I need. Would I not be a better professor of Public Law for having been Asst.-Sec’y of State? If so, can you suggest proper dignified means of getting my name mentioned in the proper quarter? Or can you—to be at my boldest—give me in any way your own personal assistance?

Now, for my closing request. If you consider all this an indiscretion on my part, pray regard it as a mere indiscretion, due to a young man’s eagerness to push himself in the ways of his chief ambitions, and cover it with your indulgence.

With sincerest respect,

Yours very sincerely,

WOODROW WILSON

Bryn Mawr, Pa.,
15 Nov., 1887

My dear Dr. Angell,

I am sincerely obliged to you for your very kind letter of yesterday. You have honored me by thoroughly believing in my sincerity.

I of course thought that the duties of the Asst.-Secretaryship were such as one with a pretty thorough outside acquaintance with the
public business might, with diligence, master; for I can of course pretend to no personal experience in affairs, much less to my acquaintance with the formal etiquette of the diplomatic service. I have already confessed that I wanted the office in order to learn, my only readiness being a trained understanding relative to such matters. Certainly, under the circumstances, the place ought to be filled from within the Department, by somebody drilled in its service. I must thank you very heartily for setting me right.

Experience in affairs, I feel, is what I most imperatively need to vivify my chosen studies. A constructive imagination will reach but a little way: even a sympathetic instinct to know cannot gain complete instruction in practical affairs; and, if I have heretofore studied Washington from a distance, it has been simply because I had no choice in the matter. It was a limitation to my work which I keenly felt, but which I had no way of removing. The consciousness of it has, moreover, made me particularly impatient of studious isolation: leading me, perhaps, to magnify its present disadvantages. I love the stir of the world; that stir is what I chiefly desire to study and explain; and I know I cannot sanely explain it from Teufelsdröckh’s tower.

I did not know that you were already in Washington. I hope that your labours there will be as pleasant as I am sure they will be successful.

With sincere gratitude and respect,

Yours very truly,

Woodrow Wilson