

“A Mistake and An Injustice” :
Letter to J. Mahlon Barnes
(July 2, 1912)

July 2nd, 1912.

Dear Comrade Barnes:—

Replying to your favor of the 27th addressed to me in St. Louis,¹ I have just now, since my return, seen the *Review* article to which you call my attention. I do not know how the *Review* came in possession of this information, who wrote the article, or anything at all about it, as I have had no communication, directly or indirectly with the *Review* or anyone connected with it, touching this matter.²

As to what Robert M. Howe is alleged to have said at the meeting of the 7th ward branch at Chicago, based upon the conversation he had with me on Sunday, June 16th,³ I have to say that Howe quoted me correctly in substance, but the should of the conversation should have been repeated to avoid possible misunderstanding as to my position. How asked me if I had been consulted about your election; I told him I had not. I then told him in substance what I told you, and what I later said to the members of the joint board,⁴ individually and collectively, about your appointment being a mistake and an injustice, that it would revive the whole scandal, and that it would be a most unfortunate thing for the party and everybody concerned. This was my opinion from the first and every passing day since has but served to strengthen it.

But I also told Howe, as I have told many others, in person and by letter, that you were not to blame, that you did not seek nor want the place and that it was thrust upon you by those who are responsible for the situation that now confronts us. For you I have had only sympathy, but I cannot say as much for Hillquit and those who acted with him in this matter. It is strongly against my nature to believe ill of a comrade and I refuse to do so until I am driven to the last extremity. I wish I could give Hillquit credit for desiring your vindication but I cannot do it. He deceived the convention and I believe he did it deliberately.⁵ If his motive had been your vindication, whatever one might have thought of his action, one must at least have respected him for his loyalty to a comrade and his devotion to a principle. I watched him narrowly at the joint meeting when he had his face up in the air quibbling our words like a shyster

lawyer to cover up his tracks and evade responsibility for his acts. I could have still had some respect for him if he had manfully admitted that he had deceived the convention instead of playing on words which neither admitted nor denied but were calculated only to muddy the waters so that he might safely make his escape.

When Hillquit made that move he knew what position it would place me in and that I would have to bear the brunt of the whole affair. I have borne it until now but he will bear his share before it is over with. My mail is loaded with angry protests, threats, denunciations, demands that I withdraw, etc., etc. but I am not going to lose my head. I am going to face the issue and I am going to protect the party according to my best judgment regardless of myself or any other individual. I propose to issue a statement in the next few days making my position clear and placing the responsibility where it rightly belongs.⁶ Then Hillquit and those who acted with him can denounce all those who object to his action in this affair (among whom there are some of the most loyal comrades and hardest workers in the party) as not being socialists at all and unfit to belong to the party. That is what he said to me at Chicago in the presence of comrades and I intend to see to it that his position is understood by the members of the party.

I am positively convinced as I told him that the affair was pre-arranged and when he attempted his denial the truth of that charge could not have been more plainly written in his features if it had been branded there in letters of fire. I have an opinion of my own as to what his real motive was in springing the affair at the close of the convention and rushing it through with the backing of the false statement that it was the unanimous recommendation of the committee on constitution and the National Executive Committee.⁷ A member of the former committee has just denied that the matter was ever brought before the committee. It was a clear case of deceit and trickery and misrepresentation and I am going to call it by its right name.⁸ It is a pity that a man who is so skilled in the trickery of capitalist politics was not a delegate at Chicago or Baltimore instead of Indianapolis.⁹

Please note that there is nothing private in this letter and nothing you are not at liberty to quote to anyone concerned.

I shall try to be at the meeting of the campaign committee next Sunday and if I am unable to make it on account of the great amount of work to do here Theodore will be there in my place.

With all good wishes for your well-being I remain as ever

Fraternally yours,

[Eugene V. Debs].

Typed letter, unsigned, included in *Papers of Eugene V. Debs, 1834-1945* microfilm edition, reel 1, frame 1004. Not included in Constantine (ed.), *Letters of Eugene V. Debs: Volume 1*.

¹ The letter of June 27, 1912 from campaign manager Barnes to Debs in St. Louis has not survived.

² Reference is apparently to the unsigned 21-page lead article of the June 1912 issue of the *International Socialist Review*. In this high profile piece the anonymous author asserts: "It was rumored more than a month ago that J. Mahlon Barnes had been slated by 'the machine' for manager of the 1912 presidential campaign, and such indeed proved to be the case. Hillquit explained that the Socialist Party 'owed' this position to Barnes." See "The National Socialist Convention of 1912," *International Socialist Review*, vol. 12, no. 12 (June 1912), p. 828.

³ Debs had been in Chicago to deliver the speech launching his 1912 campaign at Riverview Park. See this volume, pp. XXXXXX

⁴ That is, the joint session of the National Executive Committee and the national campaign committee.

⁵ Fred Warren suggested Debs's state of mind in a June 24, 1912 letter to him, in which he suggested "I am at a loss to understand what could have prompted Hillquit and Spargo to put this over on the party unless it was for the purpose, as you clearly point out to the latter [in a June 19 letter], of humiliating you and placing you on the defensive throughout the campaign." Fred D. Warren in Girard to EVD in Terre Haute, June 24, 1912, in Constantine (ed.), *Letters of Eugene V. Debs: Vol. 1*, p. 490. Hillquit was angered by this bad faith allegation.

⁶ See "Statement of Presidential Candidate on J. Mahlon Barnes as Campaign Manager," this volume, pp. XXXXX

⁷ This is an unfair misrepresentation of what Hillquit actually said, as published in the stenographic report of the convention. It also misrepresents the process of electing a campaign manager, which the convention logically undertook immediately after selecting its presidential ticket and was an open election featuring half a dozen nominations from the floor, all of whom declined save Barnes. Had Debs bothered to attend the gathering and participate in the selection process himself instead of remaining aloof from the proceeding in Girard he would have known such things firsthand.

⁸ Again, Mahlon Barnes was elected campaign manager by acclamation due to an utter lack of alternative candidates, not due to the strength of the nominating speech or any assertions made therein by Morris Hillquit.

⁹ That is, at the 1912 conventions of the Republican and Democratic parties, respectively.