

Woodrow Wilson's War Message

Delivered to a special session of Congress on April 2, 1917

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When the major European nations entered into World War I in the summer of 1914, most of America was united in the desire to avoid getting involved in the conflict. Shortly after the war began, President Woodrow Wilson announced his intention to keep America neutral in thought and deed, for he hoped that America might play a vital role in bringing the warring nations to peace. But neutrality (the policy of not getting involved in the fighting) proved more difficult than anyone had anticipated.

As World War I wore on, the United States found itself increasingly compelled to take sides. Most Americans sympathized with the French and British, who appeared to be the victims of German aggression and brutality. And trade with France and Britain boomed during the war, as those countries grew increasingly dependent on American goods. Trade and cultural ties were important factors linking the United States to the Allies, but these things alone would not have been enough to draw the United States into the war. The single biggest factor driving the United States into war was German aggression.

"Our motive will not be revenge or the victorious assertion of the physical might of the nation, but only the vindication of right, of human right, of which we are only a single champion."

Woodrow Wilson



A German submarine attack sunk the British passenger ship *Lusitania* on May 7, 1915, killing 1,198 people on board, including 128 Americans. This incident increased awareness of the European war in the still-neutral U.S. (Corbis Corporation. Reproduced by permission.)

German military leaders recognized that to win the war they had to damage the economies of France and England. Their strategy was to stop supplies from reaching those countries, just as the British blockade of German ports stopped supplies from entering Germany. Early in the war German submarines launched numerous attacks on ships bringing supplies to the Allies. America protested loudly, and because the Germans did not want America to enter the war they stopped the attacks. By January 1917, however, the Germans decided that the only way for them to win the war was to resume unrestricted submarine warfare on neutral shipping. When German subs sank three U.S. ships in March 1917, President Wilson had had enough. He went to Congress and asked for a declaration of war on Germany on April 2, 1917.

Wilson did not make his decision lightly. As the following excerpt from his speech to Congress shows, he carefully explained why he believed America should enter into the war. Wilson expressed outrage at recent German submarine attacks

and explained why the United States must not endure these attacks; he detailed how the United States should prepare itself for war and outlined the goals that America hoped to attain by going to war. In one of the most striking passages from the speech, Wilson states that America must fight “for the rights of nations great and small and the privilege of men everywhere to choose their way of life and of obedience. The world must be made safe for democracy.” This statement helped shape American foreign policy for the remainder of the twentieth century.

Things to remember while reading President Wilson’s War Message:

- The British navy created a strong blockade of German ports on the North Sea early in the war. This blockade made it very difficult for Germany to import food, clothes, and other essential supplies. As the war continued and German farmers could no longer provide enough food for the German people, the blockade threatened to literally starve Germany to death. German submarine attacks on ships traveling to England were meant to inflict similar hardships on the British.
- In his speech, Wilson complains that submarine attacks defy the laws of humanity and the laws of war at sea. The rules of warfare required an attacker to notify a ship before attacking it. German diplomats contended that this rule should not apply to submarines, because submarines depended on surprise for their effectiveness and were very vulnerable to attack when they surfaced. By World War II, when every country had submarines, it was widely accepted that submarines would launch surprise attacks on ships.
- According to the U.S. Constitution, only Congress may declare war. The president, as commander in chief of U.S. military forces, asks Congress to declare war.
- Though Wilson focuses on German submarine attacks as the major reason for going to war, the “Zimmermann telegram” also influenced America’s decision to enter the war. In the Zimmermann telegram, a leading German diplomat proposed to Mexico that it join with Germany and attack the United States. The Americans intercepted and published the telegram, which stirred up anti-German sentiment.



War Message

I have called the Congress into extraordinary session because there are serious, very serious, choices of policy to be made, and made immediately, which it was neither right nor constitutionally permissible that I should assume the responsibility of making.

*On the 3d of February last I officially laid before you the extraordinary announcement of the Imperial German Government that on and after the 1st day of February it was its purpose to put aside all restraints of law or of humanity and use its submarines to sink every vessel that sought to approach either the ports of Great Britain and Ireland or the western coasts of Europe or any of the ports controlled by the enemies of Germany within the Mediterranean. . . . The new policy has swept every restriction aside. Vessels of every kind, whatever their flag, their character, their cargo, their destination, their errand, have been ruthlessly sent to the bottom without warning and without thought of help or mercy for those on board, the vessels of friendly neutrals along with those of **belligerents**. . . .*

*I was for a little while unable to believe that such things would in fact be done by any government that had hitherto subscribed to the humane practices of civilized nations. International law had its origin in the attempt to set up some law which would be respected and observed upon the seas, where no nation had **right of dominion** and where lay the free highways of the world. . . . This **minimum of right** the German Government has swept aside under the plea of retaliation and necessity and because it had no weapons which it could use at sea except these which it is impossible to employ as it is employing them without throwing to the winds all scruples of humanity or of respect for the understandings that were supposed to underlie the intercourse of the world. I am not now thinking of the loss of property involved, immense and serious as that is, but only of the wanton and wholesale destruction of the lives of noncombatants, men, women, and children, engaged in pursuits which have always, even in the darkest periods of modern history, been deemed innocent and legitimate. Property can be paid for; the lives of peaceful and innocent people can not be. The present German submarine warfare against commerce is a warfare against mankind.*

Belligerent: A participant in a fight or war.

Right of dominion: Legal claim; Wilson is referring to the fact that beyond a certain distance from the coast, the oceans are owned by no country.

Minimum of right: Minimal standards for how to treat other ships at sea.

*It is a war against all nations. American ships have been sunk, American lives taken, in ways which it has stirred us very deeply to learn of, but the ships and people of other neutral and friendly nations have been sunk and overwhelmed in the waters in the same way. There has been no discrimination. The challenge is to all mankind. Each nation must decide for itself how it will meet it. The choice we make for ourselves must be made with a **moderation of counsel and a temperateness of judgment** befitting our character and our motives as a nation. We must put excited feeling away. Our motive will not be revenge or the victorious assertion of the physical might of the nation, but only the vindication of right, of human right, of which we are only a single champion.*

*When I addressed the Congress on the 26th of February last, I thought that it would suffice to assert our neutral rights with arms, our right to use the seas against unlawful interference, our right to keep our people safe against unlawful violence. But armed neutrality, it now appears, is **impracticable**. . . There is one choice we can not make, we are incapable of making: we will not choose the path of submission and suffer the most sacred rights of our nation and our people to be ignored or violated. The wrongs against which we now **array** ourselves are no common wrongs; they cut to the very roots of human life.*

With a profound sense of the solemn and even tragical character of the step I am taking and of the grave responsibilities which it involves, but in unhesitating obedience to what I deem my constitutional duty, I advise that the Congress declare the recent course of the Imperial German Government to be in fact nothing less than war against the Government and people of the United States; that it [Congress] formally accept the status of belligerent which has thus been thrust upon it, and that it take immediate steps not only to put the country in a more thorough state of defense but also to exert all its power and employ all its resources to bring the Government of the German Empire to terms and end the war.

What this will involve is clear. It will involve the utmost practicable cooperation in counsel and action with the governments now at war with Germany, and, as incident to that, the extension to those governments of the most liberal financial credits, in order that our resources may so far as possible be added to theirs. It will involve the organization and mobilization of all the material resources of the country to supply the materials of war and serve the incidental needs of the nation in the most abundant and yet the most economical and

Moderation of counsel and a temperateness of judgment:

Wilson is trying to stress that his decision to go to war is rational and carefully thought out; he is trying to contrast America's "moderation" and "temperateness" with the aggression of Germany.

Impracticable: Not possible.

Array: Order or organize.

Universal liability to service:

Wilson is calling for the selection of soldiers from men within a specified age range; the result of this call was the random selection, or draft, of soldiers from the general population.

Increments of equal force:

Groups of troops.

Granting of adequate

credits: Wilson is saying that the government will need to raise money—"adequate credits"—to pay for its army; it will raise money by raising taxes and by selling bonds (financial certificates that guarantee repayment of the sum the buyer pays plus interest).

Vindicate: To remove doubt.

Autocratic: An autocrat is a single powerful leader; here "autocratic" means without regard for the interests of the people.

Concert: Joint effort.

Gage: Challenge.

Pretence: Pretending or deception; usually spelled "pretense" in the United States.

efficient way possible. It will involve the immediate full equipment of the Navy in all respects but particularly in supplying it with the best means of dealing with the enemy's submarines. It will involve the immediate addition to the armed forces of the United States . . . at least 500,000 men, who should, in my opinion, be chosen upon the principle of **universal liability to service**, and also the authorization of subsequent additional **increments of equal force** so soon as they may be needed and can be handled in training. It will involve also, of course, the **granting of adequate credits** to the Government, sustained, I hope, so far as they can equitably be sustained by the present generation, by well conceived taxation. . . .

While we do these things, these deeply momentous things, let us be very clear, and make very clear to all the world what our motives and our objects are. . . . Our object . . . is to **vindicate** the principles of peace and justice in the life of the world as against selfish and **autocratic** power and to set up amongst the really free and self-governed peoples of the world such a **concert** of purpose and of action as will henceforth ensure the observance of those principles. Neutrality is no longer feasible or desirable where the peace of the world is involved and the freedom of its peoples, and the menace to that peace and freedom lies in the existence of autocratic governments backed by organized force which is controlled wholly by their will, not by the will of their people. We have seen the last of neutrality in such circumstances. We are at the beginning of an age in which it will be insisted that the same standards of conduct and of responsibility for wrong done shall be observed among nations and their governments that are observed among the individual citizens of civilized states. . . .

We are accepting this challenge of hostile purpose because we know that in [the present German government] . . . we can never have a friend; and that in the presence of its organized power, always lying in wait to accomplish we know not what purpose, there can be no assured security for the democratic governments of the world. We are now about to accept **gage** of battle with this natural foe to liberty and shall, if necessary, spend the whole force of the nation to check and nullify its pretensions and its power. We are glad, now that we see the facts with no veil of false **pretence** about them, to fight thus for the ultimate peace of the world and for the liberation of its peoples, the German peoples included: for the rights of nations great and small and the privilege of men everywhere to choose their way of life and of obedience. The world must be made safe for democracy. Its peace must be planted upon the tested foundations of political liberty.

We have no selfish ends to serve. **We desire no conquest, no dominion.** We seek no **indemnities** for ourselves, no material compensation for the sacrifices we shall freely make. We are but one of the champions of the rights of mankind. We shall be satisfied when those rights have been made as secure as the faith and the freedom of nations can make them. . . .

It will be all the easier for us to conduct ourselves as belligerents in a high spirit of right and fairness because we act **without animus, not in enmity** towards a people or with the desire to bring any injury or disadvantage upon them, but only in armed opposition to an irresponsible government which has thrown aside all considerations of humanity and of right and is running amuck. We are, let me say again, **the sincere friends of the German people**, and shall desire nothing so much as the early reestablishment of intimate relations of mutual advantage between us — however hard it may be for them, for the time being, to believe that this is spoken from our hearts. . . .

It is a distressing and oppressive duty, gentlemen of the Congress, which I have performed in thus addressing you. There are, it may be, many months of fiery trial and sacrifice ahead of us. It is a fearful thing to lead this great peaceful people into war, into the most terrible and disastrous of all wars, civilization itself seeming to be in the balance. But the right is more precious than peace, and we shall fight for the things which we have always carried nearest our hearts—for democracy, for the right of those who submit to authority to have a voice in their own governments, for the rights and liberties of small nations, for a universal dominion of right by such a concert of free peoples as shall bring peace and safety to all nations and make the world itself at last free. To such a task we can dedicate our lives and our fortunes, everything that we are and everything that we have, with the pride of those who know that the day has come when America is privileged to spend her blood and her might for the principles that gave her birth and happiness and the peace which she has treasured. God helping her, she can do no other.



What happened next . . .

The United States Congress declared war on Germany on April 6, 1917. French and British soldiers and citizens cele-

We desire no conquest, no dominion: Wilson is assuring the world that America is not entering the war to gain territory or power for itself.

Indemnities: Security against losses suffered.

Without animus, not in enmity: Without ill will or hatred; notice that Wilson often uses paired terms when he wants to emphasize his point.

The sincere friends of the German people: Wilson is trying to emphasize that the United States is fighting against the government of Germany, which he believes does not represent the will of the German people. This is both an effort to appeal to the people of Germany and to appeal to Americans not to harass German Americans and/or German immigrants living in the United States.

A *New York Journal* headline marks the entrance of the United States into World War I, April 6, 1917. (Corbis Corporation. Reproduced by permission.)



brated, for they felt sure that America's entrance into the conflict would turn the tide of the war. It took some time for their hopes to be realized, however. America was slow bringing its troops into action. It had to enlist, train, and equip an army, and it took months to do so. The first U.S. forces began arriving in Europe late in 1917, but it wasn't until the summer of 1918 that a strong American army was ready to fight. Allied troops withstood the last German offensive in the spring of 1918 and, with the help of fresh, well-supplied American forces, they struck the Germans hard through the summer and into the fall of 1918. American soldiers under General John "Black Jack" Pershing fought well in major battles at Saint-Mihiel, Belleau Wood, and the Meuse-Argonne Region. On November 11, 1918, the Germans surrendered. The American presence had proved to be the key factor in ending a war that had lasted four years and had laid waste to major sections of France, Belgium, and several other countries.

Did you know . . .

- The move from neutrality to war brought real changes in the United States. The government passed strict laws forbidding any words or actions that questioned the government's war aims, and it created a government agency, the Committee on Public Information, to produce propaganda promoting government policies.
- Wilson's decision to institute a military draft (required enrollment in the military for selected people) in 1917 was quite unpopular, even within the military. Many people believed that military drafts were incompatible with democracy. Despite these problems, the draft successfully built an army of nearly one million soldiers.

For More Information

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Web sites

World War I Document Archive. [Online] <http://www.lib.byu.edu/~rdh/wwi/1917/wilswarm.html> (accessed February 2001).