ZOLTÁN PETERECZ

TEXT AND PRETEXT: AMERICAN WAR RATIONALES IN 1917
THE FIRST WORLD WAR AND AMERICAN NEUTRALITY

The four main points of the foreign policy of the United States used to be democracy, staying aloof from power alliances, freedom of the seas, and the Monroe doctrine. This set of thinking defined the country's behavior from the very beginning. After the nation won its independence from Great Britain and started to build democracy, George Washington set the tone with his farewell address in which he warned against entangling alliances. The country was not to deal with European affairs. Freedom of the seas basically meant free trade between countries and the strong merchant class of the US was striving on it. No wonder when the nation went to wars, it was with the aim to protect the freedom of the seas. First, the young US Navy was engaged in an effective fight against the pirates of the Barbary states in the Mediterranean in 1801–1805. A few years later it was the British impressments that kept harassing American free shipping. This was the main reason why the War of 1812 broke out: the molested shipping could not produce free trade—the main element of the well-being of the US, especially in New England. In 1823 the Monroe doctrine declared that the western hemisphere was closed to European colonization while leaving open the possibility of United States expansion. In the next 90 years the US invoked the doctrine on many occasions to justify territorial growth and achieving an unmatched influence in the Western hemisphere.

As the First World War broke out in Europe, in the summer of 1914, the United States found itself at a crucial juncture. In accord with the long-held tradition of staying out of European problems, President Woodrow Wilson was quick to reinforce neutrality. A few weeks into the

war, he called on Americans to be "neutral in fact as well as in name" and "impartial in thought as well as in action."[1] This was an important stand to make and a sign of isolationism toward Europe, meaning that the United States concentrated on Latin America and the Far East instead. Aside from the traditional neutrality of the country in European affairs, Wilson represented a Christian idealism, which believed that war was wrong and evil, and it was to be avoided by all possible means.[2]

The majority of the American citizens shared this view. They felt that the raging war in Europe was not their business. To be sure, there was a small and fierce minority that wanted to enter the war, but the President, the legislative branch, and the public mood frustrated their eagerness. On the other hand, the country had been striving to get access to more and bigger markets, and the Great War, as World War I was called then, offered a great chance to increase the country's export dramatically.

With the seemingly limitless resources of the United States, the European countries leaned heavily on American imports, and with time this need only grew. Inevitably, the Allied side was the bigger benefactor of American shipments. This fact was partly due to the geographical facts, England and France offering an easier route, but the British blockade over Germany also made it really difficult to trade with the Central Powers. The fact that the United States had a much larger trade with the Allies clearly questioned the neutral status Wilson spoke of so eloquently, however, the country benefited from the situation financially. The war proved to be very profitable for the U.S.—the output of the industry rose from $20 billion to $30 billion, a 50% upsurge, while the total of foreign exports and imports tripled.[3]

Hand in hand with the financial gain, the country had to face geopolitical questions too. A German victory would have meant a possible totalitarian rule over the whole of Europe, and the United States' belief in democracy and free trade would have suffered a great blow in that case. In addition, the Anglo-Saxon bond was a natural tie that caused a large majority to feel sympathetic toward Great Britain. The Allies were aware of this situation and, with England's lead, appealed to the United

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[1] *Congressional Record*, 64th Cong., Appendix, 524.

[2] This idealism did not make Wilson refrain from using military force against small Latin American countries through the 1910s. See the cases of Cuba, Haiti, the Dominican Republic, and Panama.

[3] E. Dodd, William. *Woodrow Wilson and His Work.* New York: Page and Company, 1927. 158.

States for bigger help. The main priority was to bring America into the war—an objective that Germany wished to avoid at any cost in the beginning. In early 1916, the German Undersecretary of State Arthur Zimmermann declared: "Our situation is such that we cannot bear to have America as an enemy."[4] The Germans also thought that the many Germans living in the United States gave some kind of insurance against the U.S. joining the war against their Fatherland.

As the war got protracted, more and more incidents happened on the high seas that endangered American neutrality. The Germans, facing an effective British blockade, which was aiming to put as many hardships on Germany as possible, used a new weapon: the submarine. Since submarines were almost defenseless on the surface, it was only a logical necessity that they struck from under water without any warning—in a way that met indignation throughout the world. The most famous incident happened on May 7, 1915, when an English ocean liner, the *Lusitania* was torpedoed. The American nation was shocked to learn that 128 of their citizens lost their lives in a total of 1,198 due to a German submarine attack. The incident stirred up feelings and the first wave of strong sentiment against Germany swept across the country. Wilson though kept his calm: "I am keenly aware that the feeling of the country is now at a fever-heat and that is ready to move with me in any direction I shall suggest, but I am bound to weigh carefully the effect of radical action now based on the present emotionalism of the people."[5] The Germans never took full responsibility and through careful diplomatic correspondence managed to escape the wrath of the United States.

This was not very difficult, because Wilson himself did not want to engage in a war. Even when almost a year later, on March 24, 1916, the *Sussex* was sunk by a German submarine and Americans fell victims anew, the confrontation was restricted to notes once more. Although the U.S. threatened to sever diplomatic relations with Germany, the Germans reacted with the "*Sussex* pledge" on May 4, 1916, which promised that "merchant vessels […] shall not be sunk without warning and without saving human lives, unless these ships attempt to escape or offer

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[4] Hanssen, Hans Peter. *Diary of a Dying Empire.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1955. 121.

[5] Hilderbrand, Robert C. *Power and the People: Executive Management of Public Opinion in Foreign Affairs, 1897–1921.* Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1981. 123.

resistance."[6] For the next few months, the Germans were indeed more careful in this regard and the relations for the time being became somewhat less tense. This helped Wilson focus on reelection in the fall. With the slogan: "He kept us out of war," he managed to win, since the majority was still against the idea of war.

The "strict accountability," which the first *Lusitania* note promised seemed to have enough influence on Germany. The Kaiser himself was weary of the North American country: "America has to be prevented from participating in the war against us as an active enemy… The war must first be won, and that requires that we do not make new enemies."[7] But as the war progressed, more and more voices in the German High Command favored unrestricted submarine warfare, regardless of whether it would draw America into the war or not. The *Sussex* crisis made these people think twice and for a few months in the wake of the affair, there was only latent contemplation on the issue. Not much time had elapsed though before the German military leaders gained more and more power while the civilian and peace-minded people had less room for maneuver. Secretary of State Gottlieb von Jagow declared in October 1916: "All reports indicate that unrestricted submarine warfare means war with America."[8] But it was too late to raise such voices and they were not welcomed either. In November, after Jagow's resignation, Zimmermann became the new Secretary of State.

American Concerns over Japan and Mexico

Interestingly enough, the general reigning idea in German military circles was that they had a chance to keep America out of the war. They looked at the world map, and in the light of the last two decades' events and theories, some of which were questionable, they came up with a solution: the United States must be deterred from Europe in case she decided to want to enter the war. The logical plan was to create a suitable situation on the American continent toward this end. The idea was as simple and brilliant as ridiculous and flabbergasting. The Germans had

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[6] Gerard to Lansing, May 4, 1916. *Papers relating to the foreign relations of the United States, 1916. Supplement, The World War.* Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1916. 259.

[7] Jonas, Manfred. *The United States and Germany: A Diplomatic History.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984. 109.

[8] Hanssen, *Diary of a Dying Empire*, 162.

the notion that Japan was eager to attack the United States and that Mexico was nurturing plans to retaliate against her bullying northern neighbor.

As far as Japan was concerned, Americans had been looking at the Far Eastern country with suspicion. The early twentieth century in the United States was characterized by the fear of the "yellow peril," a feeling that too many Japanese had arrived in the U.S. and the Japanese foreign policy was challenging American interests.

American diplomats had frequently dealt with Japan. As early as 1907, Commander W.L. Howard, the American naval attaché in Berlin, became convinced that a war between the two countries was unavoidable.[9] He also reported that both the British and German admiralties agreed that it would end with a Japanese victory.[10] The same year, Howard wrote to the office of Naval Intelligence that his British colleague was on the opinion that Japan was preparing to attack the United States.[11] This view did not really alarm the administration due to the fact that Japan lacked money to think seriously of a war with the US.

When World War I broke out, Japan, as her treaty with Britain compelled her to do, declared war on Germany on August 23, 1914, and soon took over German possessions in the Far East.[12] Japan quickly realized that the European powers were putting all their energies into the war in Europe and were rendered helpless in the Pacific theater. Being confident of their military superiority, they thought the time had come to spread their influence over China. Japan wanted the huge market and other economic possibilities the large country offered. This move further impaired Japanese-American relations. Admiral Alfred von Tirpitz wrote to the German Foreign Office: "For the time being I doubt…that Japan is ready to get involved in war with the United States and England, but in case the Japanese-American tensions resulting from the China question further increase, I do not totally rule that out."[13] Although both Japan and

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[9] Braisted, William Reynolds. *The United States Navy in the Pacific, 1897–1909.* Austin: University of Texas Press, 1958. 198.

[10] Ibid., 198.

[11] Ibid., 209.

[12] Curry, Roy Watson. *Woodrow Wilson and Far Eastern Policy, 1913–1921.* New Haven: United Printing Services, 1957. 108–9.

[13] Mehnert, Ute. "German Weltpolitik and the American Two-Front Dilemma: The 'Japanese Peril' in German-American Relations, 1904–1917." *The Journal of American History*, 82, no. 4 (March, 1996): 1470.

the United States were weary of the other, the equal suspicion they held about each other gave impetus to such German opinions.

The most troubling news though, to both the administration and average American citizens, was the information that Japan might have harmful schemes against the U.S. in Mexico. After the conclusion of the Gentlemen's Agreement in 1907, which curbed Japanese immigration to the United States, Japanese moved to Mexico in larger numbers. Americans watched this Japanese influx with growing apprehension. William II even sent letters to Theodore Roosevelt and warned him of Japanese soldiers in Mexico disguised as farmers with the aim to attack the Panama Canal in case of war.[14] As Johann Heinrich Graf von Bernstorff, the German ambassador in Washington, reported in 1911: "American public opinion is gradually approaching hysteria with regard to Japan."[15] Tensions climbed further when in 1913 a Japanese shipment of arms arrived in Mexico.[16] In January 1914, the Wilson government expressed regrets that Japanese naval officers had accepted entertainment by the Mexican revolutionary government. Americans shared the feeling that they must watch out for Japan.

In spite of the perception that Japan posed a threat, what really possessed the U.S. was Mexico. The revolution that broke out there in 1910 plunged the country into turmoil and the warring sides could not come to a satisfactory conclusion for years to come. Since Wilson held the notion that well-established democracies, meaning close replicas of the United States, should work in Latin America, he watched the unfolding situation closely. By October 1915, Wilson had made up his mind that recognition of Venustian Carranza, who promised to implement a democratic government, was still the best available option. But Carranza was not friendly with Wilson and wanted to solve his problems without American help.

The inner strife between warlords that characterized Mexico soon led to a major problem between the two countries. Carranza was able to overcome his two main challengers for power, Emiliano Zapata in the south and Francisco "Pancho" Villa in the north. The latter, bitter at his losing ground in the battle for power, had decided to vent his anger on

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[14] Jonas, *The United States and Germany*, 90.

[15] Katz, Friedrich. *The Secret War in Mexico: Europe, The United States and the Mexican Revolution.* Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981. 76.

[16] Curry, *Woodrow Wilson and Far Eastern policy*, 131.

America, which he considered as the main scapegoat in Carranza's success against him.[17] On March 9, 1916, Villa and his men raided the town of Columbus, New Mexico, where they killed seventeen people. The almost unbelievable and brazen act of Villa met quick action and on March 15 a punitive detachment crossed the border. The expedition, led by General John J. Pershing, failed to capture Villa, but had to face Carranza, who had given no permission for an American unit to enter Mexico. On June 20, even a clash occurred between the armies and an American–Mexican war seemed imminent. Only the European war and the serious problems it caused prevented the crisis from deepening. After long and futile discussions, Wilson agreed to withdraw the troops in January 1917, a move which was completed on February 5.[18] The Germans tried to make the most of the situation and aided Villa with munitions for months to come.[19]

Dual Tension: Great Britain and Germany

The main reason Wilson's attention turned more and more toward Europe was the threat of getting drawn into the conflict. The President was determined to stay out of the war, but the clouds were gathering, especially in the forms of deteriorating German–American relations. The Germans were always able to diminish the American government's anger with great diplomatic skill. Despite all the German efforts, the whole U.S. looked at Germany with a growing resentment. Germany, on her part, saw Mexico as an ideal player to distract her northern neighbor. If the United States were tied down in America, she would not be able to enter the war effectively.

To reach this goal, rumors started to emanate from Berlin. The press both in Germany and the United States picked them up and they spread like wildfire. To spice things up, Germany used its long-standing obsession that Japan was to attack the United States. In 1911, there was a story in the American newspapers about a secret treaty between Japan and Mexico against the United States, which seems to have been only a

[17] True, in November 1915, it was with American help that Carranza could score a decisive victory over Villa.
[18] Katz, *The Secret War in Mexico*, 313.
[19] Thurston to Foreign Office, March 24 and March 27, 1917, *The National Archives of the United Kingdom* (subsequently: TNA), FO, 115/2265.

German scheme. The widespread rumors were reported to the Japanese Foreign Ministry by the consul in Portland:

> One hears, for example, that this maneuver by American land and naval forces is aimed at restraining Japanese intentions toward Mexico… One hears that there are observers that have seen 50,000 Japanese currently carrying out military maneuvers on the Pacific Coast of Mexico… One also hears that negotiations for an alliance are currently in progress between Japan and Mexico.[20]

In February 1915, an anonymous article in the *Atlantic Monthly* warned of the "yellow peril" and stated that "in spite of all denials, Japan is flirting with Mexico… Japan would like to make Mexico into a base of supplies for the protection of its interest on this continent."[21] Despite any hard evidence of such Japanese efforts, the general public and official feeling was that Japan might want something in Mexico, a country that had already meant a lot of trouble to the U.S.

The belief that the Germans were dangerously active in Mexico was strong in all walks of American life. Secretary of State Robert Lansing, for example, wrote in his diary in October 1915: "Germany desires to keep up the turmoil in Mexico until the United States is forced to intervene."[22] Indeed, based on constant reports from American agents in Mexico, the administration knew that Germany was trying to flare up Mexicans against the US. In 1916 it was the "Plan of San Diego," which stunned every one that heard about it. The plan was aiming to produce a revolution that was to start in Texas and to spread over from there to other American states, hopefully culminating in a separate republic of Mexicans, Negroes, and Indians.[23] During June of 1916, reports from agent Canada in Mexico arrived with information that the "German Minister, von Eckhart, and Consul General here are doing everything possible to induce Mexico to make war on the U.S."[24] He added that "German reserved and non-commissioned officers residing in the U.S. have been ordered…to place themselves at the disposal of the Mexican Government."[25] Interestingly enough, in 1916 it was Mexico that wanted

[20] Katz, *The Secret War in Mexico*, 77–78.
[21] Ibid., 78–9.
[22] Tuchman, Barbara. *The Zimmermann Telegram*. New York: Bantam Books, 1971. 86.
[23] Ibid., 93.
[24] Canada to Lansing, June 18, 1916, *National Archives and Record Administration* (subsequently: NARA), Washington, D. C., M336, 862.20212/55.
[25] Canada to Lansing, June 19, 1916, *NARA*, M336, 862.20212/30.

to conclude a treaty with Germany, but the latter refused it due to political considerations.[26] Obviously, Germany wished to avoid further conflict with the United States. In 1917, however, this Mexican initiative must have been a basis on which the Germans built their fantastic idea.

Parallel to the disturbance in Mexico, Germany tried to play the Japanese card as well. Secretary of State Jagow held in the spring of 1916 that "all sorts of inflammatory propaganda material against Japan" ought to be distributed in California.[27] Bernstorff reported that he kept launching "material fit to deepen the American anxiety about the Japanese peril into the American press."[28] In November 1914, the American ambassador to Tokyo, George W. Guthrie, reported that the "Germans are making efforts here to estrange America and Japan."[29] Gerard sent reports about rumors that Japan was seeking a separate peace with Germany in order to attack the United States.[30] As it turned out, this piece of information proved to be reliable, because the Germans indeed tried, although futilely, to come to an agreement with Japan.[31] The Japanese basically used these German attempts to exert pressure on England in order to gain more freedom in the Pacific.

On the other hand, since the outbreak of the war, the different aims of the U.S. and Great Britain and, consequently, their different interpretations of certain issues led to an unfriendly stance between them. The British were quick to put a blockade on Germany to starve them out. But American companies also traded with Germany and other neutral countries from where Germany could get access to these shipments. The blockade flew in the face of the American idea of free seas and trade. Americans saw the British practice of taking neutral ships into port for inspection for contraband of war as harassment and violation of their rights. A long series of protests was sent from the State Department to London without much effect. The British always seemed to understand international law in a different light. In March 1915, they issued the

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[26] Boghardt, Thomas. *The Zimmermann Telegram: Diplomacy, Intelligence and the American Entry into World War I.* Georgetown University: Working papers Series, No. 6–04, 14.

[27] Mehnert, "German Weltpolitik and the American Two-Front Dilemma, 1471.

[28] Ibid., 1471.

[29] Ibid., 1473.

[30] Ibid., 1473.

[31] In detail see Ikle, Frank W. "Japanese-German Peace Negotiations during World War I." *The American Historical Review* 71, no. 1 (October, 1965): 62–75.

Reprisals Order of March, which basically ordered all ships of presumed enemy destination to be subject to seizure.[32] The tug-of-war of differing opinions went on and by 1916 the relations had worsened.

The reason for the tension was mainly economic. On July 18, 1916, the British government issued a blacklist of eighty-seven American firms (containing roughly other 350 Latin American ones).[33] These firms were accused or suspected of trading with the Central Powers. It was forbidden for British subjects to have any dealings with these firms. Fury swept across the United States. As Acting Secretary of State Frank Polk wrote to House: "This blacklisting order of the English…is causing tremendous irritation and we will have to do something."[34] Wilson was perhaps the angriest. On July 23, he wrote to House: "I am, I must admit, about at the end of my patience with Great Britain and the Allies. This black list business is the last straw… I am seriously considering asking Congress to authorize me to prohibit loans and restrict exportations to the Allies… Can we any longer endure their intolerable course?"[35] A strong protest was sent to Britain on July 26 to which no answer arrived for months.[36]

The antagonistic British policy toward the US and the conciliatory stance applied by the Germans caused a stalemate as to what the US should do. In November, freshly reelected, Wilson was at the end of his patience with the British. Britain also began to realize more and more that they needed American material help, if not outright military assistance. Since financially Great Britain had weakened in the first two years of the war, and there was no hope of a speedy conclusion, they tried to be friendlier with the US. The future giant of economics, John Keynes, wrote for the War Committee of Britain in November: "…the policy of this country towards the U.S.A. should be so directed as not only to avoid any form of reprisal or active irritation, but also to conciliate and to please."[37]

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[32] Spencer, Jr., Samuel R. *Decision for War, 1917: The Laconia Sinking and the Zimmermann Telegram as Key Factors in the Public Reaction against Germany.* Rindge: Richard R. Smith Publisher, Inc., 1953. 21.

[33] Link, Arthur S. *Wilson: Campaigns for Progressivism and Peace, 1916–1917.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965. 65.

[34] Ibid., 66.

[35] Ibid., 67.

[36] The black list issue remained a serious issue until the U.S. had declared war on Germany. On April 27, 1917, the *London Gazette* announced that the American firms were dropped from it (Bailey, Thomas A. "The United States and the Black List During the Great War." *The Journal of Modern History* 6, no. 1 (March, 1934): 32.)

[37] Link, *Wilson*, 180.

During the winter, the British adopted this analysis and began working on a rapprochement with America.

Break with Germany

Germany's military leaders, Paul von Hindenburg, Erich Ludendorff, and Henning von Holtzendorff, whose influence was significant on William II, went unopposed. These three persons shared the strong belief that they had found the only solution to decide the debacle in the form of the unrestricted submarine campaign. Even the possibility of America entering the war could not veer them off this course. As Holtzendorff wrote to Hindenburg in December 1916: "[I]n spite of the danger of break with America, an unrestricted U-boat war, promptly launched, is the proper means of winning the war. Moreover, it is the only means to this end… I guarantee that for its part the U-boat war will lead to victory."[38] Zimmermann also accepted and represented the view that Germany might have a good chance to achieve positive results by launching an unrestricted submarine warfare. In January 1917, in front of the Finance Committee he said: "If submarine warfare accomplishes the expected results, America will not have time to attack before victory is certain… submarine warfare is, under the circumstances, our last and ultimate means."[39] One could no longer talk about civilian leaders or voices in Germany as 1916 came to an end. By the end of December, even Chancellor Bethmann-Hollweg, the last person that represented a sober view and was against a drastic and final step, seemed convinced and declared that "the advantages of an absolutely ruthless U-boat war are greater than the disadvantages resulting from the United States joining our enemies."[40]

On January 9, 1917, a meeting took place at Pless, the German military headquarters, to decide the question of the U-boat war. Here, the Kaiser was reassured that an unrestricted submarine warfare would produce results. Holtzendorff promised to William II: "I give your Majesty my word as an officer that not one American will land on the continent."[41] After the decision, Rudolf von Valentini, chief of the Kaiser's civil

[38] Ibid., 242.
[39] Hanssen, *Diary of a Dying Empire*, 162–3.
[40] Link, *Wilson*, 241.
[41] Asprey, Robert B. *The German High Command at War: Hindenburg and Ludendorff Conduct World War I.* New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1991. 294.

cabinet, wrote in his diary: "finis Germanie."[42] With this step, the die had been cast. Germany had stepped on a path that was almost without doubt to bring the United States into the war. Zimmermann was not present at the Pless meeting, but earlier he had conferred with Ludendorrf and the two seemed to agree on the U-boat war as the right step for Germany.[43]

On January 31, Bernstorff handed a note to Lansing containing the exact information regarding the submarine warfare. The message was a harsh one and declared that a zone will be created around Great Britain, France, Italy, and in the Eastern Mediterranean. The insolent note left no room for misunderstanding: "All ships met within that zone will be sunk."[44] Furthermore, it gave instructions as to how American ships should bear certain marks, follow a certain route, and were allowed to travel only once a week to Europe.[45] On the same day, Zimmermann said before the Financial Committee in Berlin: "We have done and will continue to do all in our power to keep America out. I do not know whether we will succeed. America is and will be uncertain. I will not speak more optimistically than I think. And I believe that America will enter the war."[46] As was seen, this possibility was beyond realistic concern for the people that steered Germany's fate.

The news of the German note caused a serious consternation throughout the nation, particularly for Wilson. The concordant opinion of the newspapers was that it was intolerable. With the *New York World* in the lead, basically every newspaper cried out for severance of diplomatic relations and agreed that this should mean war.[47] Wilson was shocked to hear this turn of Germany. He had been led to believe that the Germans wanted to conclude the war by a peace conference. They seemed to be more in line with his plans than the British. Since the *Lusitania* incident, the Germans had appeared to back down in the face of American protests and Wilson, almost naively, believed they were playing a fair game. His anger was understandable. According to Joseph P. Tumulty, his secretary, the President's first reaction was that this meant war.[48] But Wilson faced

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[42] Valentini, Rudolf von. *Kaiser und Kabinettschef.* Oldenburg: Gerhard Stalling, 1931. 146.
[43] Boghardt, Thomas. *The Zimmermann Telegram*, 9.
[44] Scott, *Diplomatic Correspondence*, 301.
[45] Ibid., 303.
[46] Hanssen, *Diary of a Dying Empire*, 162.
[47] Link, *Wilson*, 292.
[48] Hilderbrand, *Power and the People*, 133.

a serious dilemma: he obviously had to respond to the note with the harshest possible answer, but did not want to close the door on his vision: a negotiated peace. He held the conviction that it was his ultimate role to bring it about. Throughout 1916, he frequently expressed his solid belief that America must give up her isolationist stance. He realized that in order to achieve his aims, the old-fashioned neutrality must end. "We are participants, whether we like it or not, in the life of the world;" "…no nation can any longer remain neutral;" "…the business of neutrality is over;" "…the day of isolation is gone."[49] When he spoke of giving up neutrality, he meant that the country had to face a bigger involvement in international affairs.

On January 22, he delivered his famous "peace without victory" speech before Congress, which outlined for the whole world what agenda he would like to see implemented. It meant a peace achieved at the negotiating table and not on the battlefield. He wanted to do away with the old world order, which he believed to be the main cause behind the European carnage. Soon he declared that "peace cannot securely or justly rest upon an armed balance of power."[50] Rather, he saw the solution in open diplomacy. Certain people saw his opening toward Europe as a departure from the Monroe Doctrine, which had defined the country's foreign policy for the past 90 years. The *New York Sun* harshly criticized his December 21 peace note as one that would make the US enter "political entanglements of European concern and conversely admitting European powers into political engagements of purely American concern."[51] Senator Lodge said the peace note was sending "the Monroe Doctrine straight to the tomb."[52] The idealistic Wilson, even in the face of the brazen German note, stalled for time waiting for something miraculous to happen.

Despite the general public mood in the country, Wilson went only as far as breaking of diplomatic relations with Germany. In his February 3 speech to the joint session of Congress he stated in his eloquent style:

> I cannot bring myself to believe that they [Germany] will indeed pay no regard to the ancient friendship between their people and our own or to the solemn obligations which have been exchanged between them and

[49] Ibid., 136–8.
[50] *Congressional Record*, 65th Cong., 1st Session, Senate, 3.
[51] Ibid., 64th Cong., 2nd Session, Senate, 830.
[52] Ibid., 830.

> destroy American ships and take lives of American citizens in the willful prosecution of the ruthless naval programme they have announced their intention to adopt. Only actual overt acts on their part can make me believe it even now… We do not desire any hostile conflict with the Imperial German Government… We shall not believe that they are hostile to us unless we are obliged to believe it.[53]

This fact countered some opposition and genuine surprise. Lansing, just three days prior to the German note, reflected on the situation and wrote: "Sooner or later the die will be cast and we will be at war with Germany. It is certain to come. We must nevertheless wait patiently until the Germans do something that will arouse general indignation and make all Americans alive to the peril of German success in this war."[54] Lansing, who had been all along pro-Allies, was understandably disappointed with Wilson's mild reaction. Theodore Roosevelt, one of the main voices in favor of joining the war against Germany, did not beat around the bush: "I do not believe Wilson will go to war unless Germany literally kicks him into it," he wrote to Lodge in mid-February.[55] Wilson, just as in the cases of the *Lusitania* and *Sussex*, was satisfied to give warning with words.

The question is why. The only explanation is that the President still believed firmly that he would be able to make Germany accept his vision. His naiveté is easy to see and his assumption about a more liberal German leadership was a general feeling in America, exactly because of Zimmermann. When in November 1916, Zimmermann became Secretary of State for Germany replacing Jagow, America was satisfied, even optimistic. Due to the fact that Zimmermann was a representative of the middle class, his nomination was interpreted as a sign of liberalism in Germany. A longer article, written by Gilbert Hirsch, was published in the *New York Evening Post* and other papers under the headline: "Our Friend Zimmermann."[56] The *Literary Digest* proclaimed that Zimmermann at the helm of the German Foreign Office was equal to the "Liberalization of Germany."[57] The German press emanated comments that conveyed that Zimmermann was "a particularly warm friend" of the

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[53] Ibid., 64th Cong., 2nd Session, House, 2579.
[54] Asprey, *The German High Command at War*, 287.
[55] Ibid., 287.
[56] Heinrich, Johann—Graf von Bernstorff, *My Three Years in America.* New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1920. 349.
[57] Tuchman, *The Zimmermann Telegram*, 111.

United States, and the American papers "joyfully echoed" these reports.[58] In addition, both House and Gerard found Zimmermann friendly and able.[59] Wilson would have never thought that with such changes in the German leadership and attitude the Germans would act in the most condemnable way. If he had known Jagow's opinion about Zimmermann that he "always swam with the stream and with those who shouted loudest," the President might have had second thoughts.[60]

The overall view among the German leaders was optimistic. There was even a thin line of reasoning that America might not join the war after all. Zimmermann's main argument against the American entry, although he had admitted it as almost certain, was based on the outcome of the 1916 elections: "The people of the West [of the US] are not opposed to us, and Wilson was elected by the Western States. Besides, Wilson was elected as the friend of peace. He can declare war only with the approval of Congress, in which body the Western and Middle States are in a majority."[61] This argument did not lack absolute substance. While the Eastern part of the US was reacting to the war much more sensitively, the rest of the country lived happily in its isolation. The news of the war could not really penetrate their daily life. David Houston's, Wilson's Secretary of Agriculture, visit in the West left him with the impression that people there were not concerned with either Mexico or Europe, and the sinking of the *Lusitania* was not a topic there.[62] These states were simply too far away to be directly affected with the war in Europe.

Zimmermann Sends His Telegram

While Americans in general were against entering the war, the Allies, Great Britain in particular, had been eagerly waiting for the United States to join them. It was the American material help in the first place that the Allies wanted. Germany, as was seen, was also of the opinion that the North American power would join the war. Both countries acted fittingly to their own conviction, which resulted in one of the most famous diplomatic incidents. The German "overt act" that Wilson spoke about

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[58] Bernstorff, *My Three Years in America*, 349.
[59] Tuchman, *The Zimmermann Telegram*, 112.
[60] Boghardt, Thomas. *The Zimmermann Telegram*, 7.
[61] Hanssen, *Diary of a Dying Empire*, 168.
[62] Houston, F. David. *Eight Years with Wilson's Cabinet, 1913–1920* Vol. 2. Garden City: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1926. 132.

and many had been waiting for had already been committed. It offered the justification on a plate why the United States should enter the war against Germany.

Parallel to the fateful decision at Pless on January 9, the German Foreign Office was working on a secret plan. In line with the German belief that Mexico was the Achilles' heel for the US, and Japan was perceived as a threat there, Zimmermann chose a seemingly logical solution. The idea was that an alliance should be established between the three countries with the main purpose of distracting the United States to the utmost.[63] The warm German–Mexican relations made Zimmermann believe that such a plan was feasible. Since Japan had been playing a two-faced game with Germany, but it was on good terms with Mexico, it was also natural to count on Mexico to persuade Japan to join such an alliance. All this was worded out in a clear and compelling fashion:

> … we make Mexico a proposal of alliance on the following basis: Make war together, make peace together. Generous financial support, and an understanding on our part that Mexico is to reconquer the lost territory in Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona. The settlement in detail is left to you.You will inform the President [of Mexico] of the above most secretly as soon as the outbreak of war with the United States is certain and add the suggestion that he should, on his own initiative, invite Japan to immediate adherence and at the same time mediate between Japan and ourselves.[64]

Zimmermann decided to send this telegram to Mexico.

The first problem that Zimmermann encountered was how to send the message and exactly where. There were two major obstacles the Germans had to overcome. One was that right after the war started, the British cut Germany's transatlantic cables, thus depriving Germany from direct cable communication with overseas countries. From then on, Germany had to rely on either wireless communication or other countries' telegram cables. Either way, they had to face the possibility that the enemy, first of all England, might get access to the messages. The other difficulty was lack of time. After the decision was made that the submarine warfare must

[63] The brain behind the scheme might have been von Kemnitz, Adviser at the Foreign Office on Far Eastern and Central-American Affairs. (*New York Times*, May 15, 1920.)

[64] Full decoded version, February 19, 1917, *TNA*, HW7/8.

start on February 1, there was not much time. So the original plan, the only one that could have provided safety for the secret message that a German submarine should transport the letter fell through.[65] It would have taken about a month for a submarine to get to Mexico and deliver the message. This predicament forced the Foreign Minister to find an alternative way. On January 16, the telegram was sent. It was attached to a longer one, which was from Bethmann to Bernstorff, informing him about the final decision on the launching of the unrestricted submarine warfare. Naturally, the message was encoded and Zimmermann felt assured that his message would be delivered in due time.

The real "gatekeepers" had no illusions about German motives. The British Naval Intelligence had been busy from the start of the war and gathered as much information as possible about the German plans. The most secret and effective division was Room 40, which was responsible for deciphering German secret messages. The director of this section was Sir William Reginald Hall, who was eager to get every piece of information about the enemy.[66] The British had managed to put their hands on the German diplomatic codebook used between Berlin and Washington, and via Washington the Western Hemisphere.[67] From this point on, Great Britain knew basically all the important information about German plans, location of submarines, or messages sent to German diplomats. So, when Zimmermann sent his telegram, the very next day it was in Room 40.

On the evening of January 17, Admiral Hall had to make a significant decision. Nigel de Grey and his colleague, Dilly Knox, had made good progress with the deciphering the first day.[68] A skeleton version of the full telegram appeared and its importance was unmistakable for de Grey. He asked Hall: "Do you want America in the war Sir?... I've got a telegram that will bring them in if you give it to them."[69] A proposal for

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[65] Hendrick, Burton J. *The Life and Letters of Walter H. Page.* Vol. 3. Garden City: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1925. 339–40.

[66] According to Page, Hall was "a genius—a clear case of genius" (Hendrick, *The Life and Letters of Walter H. Page*, 61).

[67] Tuchman, *The Zimmermann Telegram*, 12–9.

[68] For a long time, William Montgomery had been credited as the co-decipherer of the telegram. But according to de Grey, it was Knox, who first worked on the telegram, but his weak German made him ask for de gray's help. (Account by Nigel de Grey, October 31, 1945, *TNA*, HW3/177).

[69] Ibid.

an alliance with Mexico and Japan was understandable from the part of the text that they had managed to decipher and the concluding sentence, "our submarines …will compel England to peace in a few months," was too ominous.[70] Hall knew right away what he had in his possession. His first reaction, after thinking over what he had just read, was how to tackle the inevitable problem: "Our first job will be to convince the Americans that it's true—how are we to do that? Who would they believe? Is there any Englishman whom they will believe?"[71] It was obvious that information of such magnitude and content would be highly suspicious in the Americans' eyes. It would have been immediately declared as an English machination, an effort on the British side to draw America into war.

Hall had to be careful. If he handed his find over right away, it would not contain the full translation of the text, which was crucial to its result. On the other hand, America had no way of knowing that the British were systematically reading their cable messages. This was a factor that could be brought to light under no circumstances. The American reaction, with Wilson in the lead, was not hard to anticipate. After all the tension during 1916, the recent refusal to both the German and Wilson's peace notes, the news that England had been using such an illegal and unethical method could have jeopardized the value of the captured telegram. Hall needed time to come up with the solution.

He decided that safest and most soluble way would be to try to get the telegram in Mexico City. Since the original was sent to Bernstorff to Washington, he was to forward it to Eckhardt, the German minister in Mexico City. The telegram was an attachment to the note of the submarine telegram, so Hall calculated that Bernstorff would send a new telegram from Washington to Mexico City in the code that London did possess. According to Bell, Hall had a "plant" in the telegraph office in Mexico City.[72] On February 5, the order went out to get the copies of all German cables from Washington to Mexico.[73] So when Bernstorff indeed sent the telegram to Eckhardt, the British managed to get a copy of it. It is impossible to know when exactly the telegram was stolen in Mexico City

[70] First draft of decoded version, January 16, 1917, *TNA*, HW7/8.
[71] Account by Nigel de Grey, October 31, 1945, *TNA*, HW3/177.
[72] Kahn, David. "Edward Bell and His Zimmermann Telegram Memoranda." *Intelligence and National Security* 14, no. 3 (Autumn 1999): 149.
[73] Director of the Intelligence Division to Bayley, February 5, 1917, *TNA*, HW3/178.

and when the final version of it translated.[74] The time lapse is important though, because many historians have assumed that Hall withheld the telegram till he thought it best to hand it over from a diplomatic point of view. It is a valid point that he played with time somewhat, but in light of the evidence that is at hand, it is more probably that it was Hall's tactics to save his section's activity from being discovered that caused the delay.[75] Also, the telegram from Zimmermann to Bernstorff was in a new code. The British were not able to read it perfectly and they needed an absolutely readable version. That was another reason why they needed to get the Mexican version of the telegram, which indeed was in the code they possessed.

Wilson's Decision

Wilson was aware of the force of public opinion and knew too well that he could not ignore it. He believed that he was the representative of the people but he also held the belief that as president he enjoyed the ultimate voice in matters.[76] This was the corner stone of his political decree and he proclaimed in his book that the "nation as a whole has chosen him [the president], and is conscious that it has no other political spokesman. He is the only national voice in affairs."[77] Wilson tried to put this into practice and throughout the war, he set out to make propaganda for his agenda. In the beginning of his presidency, he used the press, but from the summer of 1915 onward, he rather chose a more frequent personal presence in front of Congress. He calculated that this method insured him a greater access to wider public attention.[78] In his speeches, even if indirectly, he always spoke to the citizens believing that they

[74] There is a fully deciphered version of the telegram that was sent from Washington to Mexico City with a date of February 19, 1917 (*TNA*, HW7/8). Tuchman also says it was on February 19 (Tuchman, *The Zimmermann Telegram*, 154–5). According to Andrew, however, Hall got news from Mexico City on the 10th and that Thurston, the British Minister there, had gained a copy (Andrew, Christopher M. *Secret Service: The Making of the British Intelligence Community.* Sevenoaks: Sceptre, 1986. 171–172.)

[75] Account by Nigel de Gray, October 31, 1945, *TNA*, HW3/177.

[76] He regarded himself the "trustee" of the nation. (Tumulty, Joseph P. *Woodrow Wilson As I Knew Him.* Garden City: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1921. 234.

[77] Wilson, Woodrow. *Constitutional Government in the United States.* New York: Columbia University Press, 1908. 68.

[78] Hilderbrand, *Power and the People*, 106.

would listen to him. He was aware of the national pride and general fury when Americans' interests were hurt. So he felt that he had to do something momentous when the Germans started unrestricted submarine warfare. If nothing else, national pride had to be defended. Wilson himself wrote to Senator Stone in an open letter in February 1916 that he could not "consent to any abridgment of the rights of American citizens in any respect. The honour and self-respect of the nation is involved. We covet peace, and shall preserve it at any cost but the loss of honor."[79]

It is important to consider what decision Wilson would have made without listening to public opinion. If he had relied only on the facts and realities of the international landscape, he would have had no other choice than taking the firmest stand against Germany. His naive plan to bring about a peace that would be just and lasting faced the danger of an autocratic hegemony in Europe, which was lurking in the shape of a German victory. In that event Europe would have been pushed into an antidemocratic state—the only thing that Wilson and the United States could not afford to happen. Wilson may have taken a more belligerent step without the American public, but he needed to have the nation behind him. This was an inseparable piece of his political philosophy. So his sensitivity to the majority's mood in his own country and the looming danger on the international scene forced him to steer cautiously. He saw the solution in the arming of the merchant ships. Clearly, after such an act, the country was on the very brink of war. However, Wilson gained some time and Americans had time to adjust to the idea that soon they might find themselves in the "European" war. Due to a small group of Republican senators' filibustering, the Armed Ship Bill fell through first, but a more momentous event had already started to shake the solid foundations of a neutral United States.

On February 24, Page sent a confidential telegram from London to Wilson and Lansing. In it he informed them that Balfour, the British Foreign Minister, handed him a deciphered telegram.[80] He went on to give the translation of the telegram and gave a "strictly confidential" explanation as to how the British had been able to get access to Bernstorff's messages to Mexico.[81] Naturally, he was saying what Hall was feeding him. The British hoped that such a gesture and proof would

[79] Tumulty, *Woodrow Wilson As I Knew Him*, 207.
[80] Page to Lansing, February 24, 1917, *NARA*, M336, 862.20212/69.
[81] Ibid.

help to achieve what many German submarines had not: to bring the US into the war. Page gave the first interpretation of the British service and goodwill in the same telegram:

> This system has hitherto been a jealously guarded secret and is only divulged now to you by the British Government in view of the extraordinary circumstances and their friendly feeling towards the United States. They earnestly request that you will keep the source of your information and the British Government's method of obtaining it profoundly secret but they put no prohibition of the publication of Zimmermann's telegram itself.[82]

The British obviously took a risk. If the information that they were able to read German messages got out, the Germans would surely change their code system and the Allies would be denied very important information. This risk was worth trying to prove to the US how friendly Britain was and implicitly they suggested that the telegram should be publicized. They were aware of the huge impact it would be able to cause. They were correct.

Wilson read the telegram on the 25th. Not much is known of his feelings after-wards, but there are two notes that shed light on his mood. According to Polk, Wilson showed "much indignation and was disposed to make the text public without delay."[83] The other is William Hull's memory of the meeting on February 28 between Wilson and the leaders of the Emergency Peace Federation, of which Hull was a member. He remembered that Wilson said "that it was impossible to deal further in peaceful method with [the German] government."[84] Since Wilson was known as striving for peace, the people present must have been shocked when he said: "Dr. Hull, if you knew what I know at this present moment, and what you will see reported in tomorrow morning's newspapers, you would not ask me to attempt further peaceful dealings with the Germans."[85] It is clear that the President was angry, disappointed, and as belligerent as he could be. But he was still cautious and did not jump to fast conclusions. In his address on February 26, he did not mention the telegram. One reason is that he had only one day to react. He found that

[82] Ibid.
[83] Link, *Wilson*, 346.
[84] Link, Arthur S. ed., *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson.* Vol. 41. Princeton: 1983. 305.
[85] Ibid., 305.

not enough. The other was the predictable reaction of Congress that the whole telegram was just a British scheme to lure the country into war.

Wilson's awareness of public opinion made him decide soon in favor of publication of the telegram. In fact, he wrote to House the very next day he read the telegram: "We shall probably publish it (that is, let it be published) on Wednesday."[86] He knew it would generate public support for his next decision about Germany. Since public mood always seems to polarize when two contradictory paths are available, Wilson was positive that American public feeling would be on his side. But the predictable public fury would mean having to make a strong step against Germany. House and Tumulty were also for publication. House hoped for publication and emphasized that it would make a "profound impression both on Congress and the country."[87] Lansing suggested issuing it not officially but through the *Associated Press* to attract more attention.[88] The President agreed. In his eyes Germany had become a country that would never accept his ideas and would stubbornly fight on. Decision was all the more urgent, because the loss of life was steadily climbing and the Germans were continuously hurting commerce through sinkings.

As far as American commerce goes, the war produced an increase in American trade. The war orders on export trade were 60% of all orders between August 1915 and May 1916, in a total of $3,601,186,000.[89] The export in 1916 was $5,481,000,000. As a clear sign to which side America was committed, $3,382,000,000 of this amount, almost two-thirds, went to the Allied belligerent countries. With Germany threatening the safe conduct of delivering such orders, the United States could have lost an enormous profit. Parallel, the Allied countries had accumulated huge debts toward the US. By 1917, Great Britain had six times as high a debt as prior to the war, France was a close second, while Russia's and Italy's added debts were close to that of Great Britain's.[90] In the event of a German victory, these debts would have never been paid back, a course the United States did not want to take.

The role of big business is well discernible. As early as August 1914, J. P. Morgan Jr., James Stillman, and George Baker, only known as the

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[86] Ibid., 288.
[87] Ibid., 297.
[88] Hilderbrand, *Power and the People*, 134.
[89] *Congressional Record*, 64th Cong., 1st Session, Appendix, 1766.
[90] Ibid., 65th Cong., 1st Session, House, 6585.

Trio, started to give a series of loans to the Bank of England.[91] These funds were used to stabilize the frail British currency and finance the large-scale purchase of arms and ammunitions. Loans were offered to France and Russia later on as well. American Banking Syndicates provided $1,764,752,532 to the Allies till April 1917.[92] Naturally, this activity of the Trio was not altruistic in nature. They used it to expand their financial influence and kept buying up British and other interests in Central and South America.[93] As can be seen, the opportunities offered by the war worked in harmony with the drive in American business for ever bigger markets. American business kept growing but also shifted the country financially inseparable from the Allies.[94] It had become a financial necessity to save them. The representatives of these business circles had friends in the Legislative body, too. They tried to help them and exerted as much influence as possible on the political decision-making. They vigorously pursued their interests and were helped by the events of early 1917. What no Congressmen, staggering debt, or a friend of the President could have achieved for the business society was done by the German telegram.

The War Entry

On March 1, 1917, the Zimmermann telegram was published and it proved to be a bombshell. The *Times* informed the readers: "Germany Seeks Alliance Against Us," while the *World*'s headline read: "Mexico and Japan Asked by Germany to Attack U.S."[95] The *Chicago Daily Tribune* and the *New York Tribune* informed the country about the deplorable German act this way: "U.S Bares War Plot," "Germany Asked Mexico To Seek Alliance with Japan for War on U.S.," "Congress Faces War Demand."[96] The news swept through the country and two distinctive feelings arose on Capitol Hill. The first was patriotic fury. The House of

[91] Hart, John Mason. *Empire and Revolution.* Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002. 312.
[92] Ibid., 531–539.
[93] Ibid., 319.
[94] As an illustrious example of this, J. P. Morgan said: "We have overt support to the Allies by America's principal bankers, and their commitment via cash to Russia, Great Britain, and France. Their investors are likewise committed." (Ibid., 305).
[95] Tuchman, *The Zimmermann Telegram*, 170.
[96] Spencer, *Decision for War, 1917*, 73.

Representatives was full of voices that called for strong and firm steps to defend American interests, commerce, lives, and, perhaps above all, prestige.[97] The House passed the bill for arming the merchant ships by an overwhelming majority of 403 to 14, with 17 abstentions.[98] The other reaction was lack of belief in the telegram's authenticity. This was manifested strongly in the upper house.

On March 1, the Senate was like a beehive and debate was the order of the day. Senator Stone warned that the telegram may be a fake and outside forces wanted "to excite the public opinion of the American people… A publication of this nature is calculated…to excite the public opinion and to inflame the public mind of the country, and thus develop a tendency toward working up a spirit of belligerency on our part."[99] Mississippi Senator John Williams posed the question: "Is there a letter like this signed by Zimmermann…in existence in the possession of our Department of State, and, secondly, is that letter authentic?"[100] Senator James O'Gorman, implicitly referring to the British be-hind the telegram, said: "More than once in the history of our own country a belligerent nation has resorted to deceit and forgery in an effort to induce us to become involved in a contest in which we were not concerned."[101] There were also rumors that the administration had withheld the information. Senator William Borah, relying on "one of the most responsible papers in the country,"[102] said that the "document has been in the hands of the Government since President Wilson broke off diplomatic relations with Germany."[103] Others, like Senators Smith and Tillman, questioned the possibility of a Japan–Mexico–German triangle, thus not giving credit to the telegram.[104]

In wake of the debate, Senate Resolution No. 379, introduced by Senator Lodge on March 1, was passed, which requested the President to send information about the authenticity of the telegram. As Lodge wrote to Theodore Roosevelt on March 2:

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[97] *Congressional Record*, 64th Cong., 2nd Session, House, 4637–4641.
[98] Ibid., 4692.
[99] Ibid., 64th Cong., 2nd Session, Senate, 4571, 4593.
[100] Ibid., 4596.
[101] Ibid., 4597.
[102] This was Hood's report in the *Associated Press* (Tuchman, *The Zimmermann Telegram*, 171).
[103] *Congressional Record*, 64th Cong., 2nd Session, Senate, 4599.
[104] Ibid., 4598, 4605.

> As soon as I saw it [the telegram], I felt sure it came from the Administration. I felt that would arouse the country more than anything that has happened, and that it would widen the breach with Germany and drive us toward the Allies. The one thing lacking was a declaration from the President as to its authenticity, and with his endorsement on it I knew the country would be bound to accept it and that he would be tied up. It seemed an almost unlimited use in forcing the situation.[105]

Thus, the interventionist Lodge introduced the resolution not because he questioned, or was interested in, the genuineness of the telegram. For one, he thought it was the Government's intrigue. But he sensed the great opportunity to make the most of it in terms of provoking American entry. Wilson was quick to respond. Through Lansing, he gave assurances "that the note referred to is authentic, and that it is in the possession of the Government of the United States, and that the evidence was procured by this Government during the present week."[106] Wilson wanted to avoid even the farthest possibility to be seen as hesitating or unsure. The next day, the newspapers proclaimed in headlines the Administration's reassurance.

The government instructed Page to ask the British to let him decipher the telegram in order to make its authenticity bulletproof. On March 2, Page sent the news that second secretary of the embassy Edward Bell had done the deciphering, and he sent the original German text.[107] In reality, it was de Grey who did the brunt of the work; Bell did only the very beginning.[108] De Grey also ran into trouble while trying to put on a show for Bell, because he used a wrong codebook, but quickly used his memory and bluffed. According to de Grey it only worked because Bell "wanted to be convinced and anyhow regarded the whole thing as black magic. A more unconvincing demonstration could never have been given."[109] The Administration now had hard evidence, but the last shred of doubt disappeared only after Zimmermann committed what could be simply labeled as one of the greatest diplomatic blunders of all times. In an interview on March 3 with William Bayard Hale, Hearst's

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[105] Link, *Wilson*, 354–355.
[106] *Congressional Record*, 64th Cong., 2nd Session, Senate, 4618.
[107] Page to Lansing, March 2, 1917, *NARA*, M336, 862.20212/81.
[108] Kahn, "Edward Bell and His Zimmermann Telegram Memoranda," 145; Andrew, *Secret Service*, 175.
[109] Account by Nigel de Grey, October 31, 1945, *TNA*, HW3/177.

correspondent in Berlin, Zimmermann admitted that he had sent the telegram: "I cannot deny it. It is true."[110]

Wilson must have been aware of the fervent public reaction after the publication of the Zimmermann telegram. No polls were carried out in those days, thus it is impossible to tell exactly what the different components of the nation thought about the situation. Newspapers of the day are, however, a good secondary source to establish the general feeling. The common voice was that of anger and indignation. The whole nation felt offended and threatened to some extent, although this feeling was mixed with disbelief. The *Independent* called the plan a "sheer lunacy," a "proof of the incurable stupidity of Germany in the field of diplomacy."[111] Zimmermann's admission of his plot smashed whatever little pro-German sentiment was left in the United States. The telegram was the product of a coldly planned plot that threatened the country. This was what Wilson had counted on. That was the reason why he let the information go through the press: to influence the public. He knew that it was the most useful tool in his hand to fight Congressional antagonism, which finally took place in the Senate.

The imminence of war was now admitted widely throughout the country; the pacifist voices diminished. Not only was the American foreign policy's most defended element, the Monroe Doctrine, challenged, but the country itself was threatened. This situation represented a cohesive force and was able to do what politicians rarely have: to unite the nation. Headlines gave proof to such a change. The *Literary Digest* on the March 17 issue claimed in its headlines: "How Zimmermann United the United States."[112] The same newspaper a week before had already given account of the clamor for war, which was typical all over the country.[113] The *Omaha World Herald*, in the remotest place from either Germany, Mexico, or Japan, reflected the change in isolationist mood: "The issue shifts from Germany against Great Britain to Germany against the United States."[114] The Midwestern press, also an

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[110] Spencer 74–75. Lansing said of Zimmermann's admittance: "Of course the message was a stupid piece of business, but admitting it was far worse." (Papers of Wilson, 326)

[111] Spencer, *Decision for War, 1917*, 80.

[112] Ibid., 81.

[113] May, Ernest R. *The World War and American Isolation, 1914–1917.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1959. 430.

[114] Tuchman, *The Zimmermann Telegram*, 179.

isolationist group, declared as one voice that the US could not avoid war. The Southern states appeared also affected. The *Outlook* after a field trip reported on March 14 that the Zimmermann telegram had "got under the skin of a great many Southerners who have not been hitherto much affected by the war."[115] Lansing reached the same conclusion. He wrote that the Zimmermann telegram "resulted in unifying public sentiment throughout the United States against Germany."[116] All these opinions came as a positive echo to Wilson's second inaugural speech in which he asked for unity: "The thing I shall count upon, the thing without which neither counsel nor action will avail, is the unity of America—an America united in feeling, in purpose, in its vision of duty, of opportunity, and of service."[117] The country was responsive.

The President had already committed himself to armed neutrality as a penultimate step. With no authorization from Congress, he acted on his own. On March 9, he ordered the arming of the merchantmen and called Congress into special session on April 16.[118] The Executive Order was issued on March 12 and formal notices went out the next day. This step did not have much time to be put to the test.

On March 18 news arrived that three other American ships had been sunk. The news reinforced that Germany meant harm and was the enemy of the country. As an immediate effect, Wilson ordered the extra session to be moved two weeks forward on April 2. At that point it was clear that he was going to address the Congress to ask for declaration of war. Between his order to arm the merchant ships and to bring the extra session two weeks earlier only twelve days passed. It is highly indicative of Wilson's mindset: it is safe to conclude that by early March, in wake of the Zimmermann telegram, he himself had given up hope that peace could be reached and his country could stay out of the conflict.

On April 2, amid high expectations, Wilson delivered his war message to joint Congress. Here the long agony ended both for Wilson and the country. The President finally had been freed from the burden of fighting for his, now proved impossible, ideal: luring Germany and the other

[115] Spencer, *Decision for War, 1917*, 99.
[116] Hilderbrand, *Power and the People*, 135.
[117] *Congressional Record*, 65th Cong., 1st Session, Senate, 3.
[118] Houston, *Eight Years with Wilson's Cabinet*, 241; Link, *Wilson*, 376.

belligerents to the table.[119] Wilson's eloquent style echoed older patterns: "Our object…is to indicate the principles of peace and justice in the life of the world as against selfish and autocratic power… The world must be safe for democracy."[120] The United States had to go to war for a higher goal only and was forced to enter it. But clearly, the country would be the rescuer of mankind and the example of democracy. The whole speech was interwoven with grievances and atrocities that Germany had committed against the U.S. Interestingly enough, the Zimmermann telegram deserved only a sentence that read: "That it [Germany] means to stir up enemies against us at our very doors the intercepted note to the German Minister in Mexico City is eloquent evidence."[121] He downplayed the telegram and its impact and concentrated on the harm Germany had caused against American shipping, Belgium, and democracy. It must have been a conscious choice on his part. A secret message was unworthy to get a prominent place in his war speech. The fact how much it had helped to turn the national sentiment toward this direction was a different matter. On April 6, Congress declared war on Germany. The Senate's result was 86 to 6, while in the House it was 373 to 50.

The Aftermath

It is equally interesting how the countries involved reacted to the news of the Zimmermann telegram. The two German hopefuls, Mexico and Japan, soon repudiated the German offer. The Mexican foreign minister denied knowing the telegram, although he did not rule out that Carranza might have been directly notified by the Germans.[122] The Japanese Foreign minister referred to the German scheme as "ridiculous" and "declared that no proposals of any kind had ever been received in Tokyo from Mexico."[123] In Great Britain, as could be expected, the main tone was that of happiness and relief. A major reason was that by early April

[119] He confessed two days after the speech to his old friend and classmate, Cleveland Dodge: "[T]here is a certain relief in having the task made concrete and definite." (Curry, *Woodrow Wilson and Far Eastern* policy, 165).
[120] *Congressional Record*, 65th Cong., 1st Session, House, 119–20.
[121] Ibid., 120.
[122] Fletcher to Polk, February 26, 1917. *Papers relating to the foreign relations of the United States, 1917. Supplement 1, The World War.* Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1917. 235.
[123] Balfour to Foreign Office, March 5, 1917, *TNA*, FO 204/492.

the submarine question had become serious. Losses were 536,000 tons of shipping in February, 571,000 in March, and 205,000 in the first ten days of April.[124] This was a secret, but the United States participation made the whole British government let out a collective sigh of relief. The news meant that with time the losses would be cut back and the greater common effort would take its toll on the German submarine fleet.

On the other hand, the German leadership was flabbergasted at the news. Zimmermann was defending himself before the Budget Committee that it was only a proposal and the plan was a sound one regarding its goals, that is, to distract the United States.[125] It was altogether an offer in case the United States declared war. Zimmermann used the same line of reasoning in the German Parliament: "…I said that the briefing [the telegram to Eckhardt] may and should only come into effect in the following case, namely after a declaration of war on behalf of the United States, i.e. after the breakout the war between us. Gentlemen, I believe that the briefing is absolutely loyal toward the United States; that nobody can deny."[126] What is more intriguing and shows that Zimmermann lied is the fact that on February 8, he sent another telegram to Eckhardt. In this dispatch he ordered Eckhardt to start talks with Carranza right away about an alliance between the two countries, dependent of the war between Germany and the United States, and already start talks with Japan.[127] When the news got out, Zimmermann ordered Eckhardt to burn all compromising evidence.[128] The German leadership finally concluded that Eckhardt was not to blame, but they had no clue where the betrayal took place.[129] With the Zimmermann telegram well known to all, the Germans still hung on to their scheme. In fact, Germany's military leadership held to the belief for months to come that such a plan was feasible. They even tried to establish an alliance with Mexico in August, although in vain.[130]

The most important issue is how big a role the Zimmermann telegram played in bringing the United States into the war. As an immediate effect, it produced three sets of opinions: it made evident that Germany was not

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[124] Admiralty Secret Note, April 17, 1917, *TNA*, HW3/179.
[125] Katz, *The Secret War in Mexico*, 351.
[126] *German Parliamentary Debates*, XIII. Legislaturperiode. II. Session. Band 309. Berlin, 1917. 2898.
[127] Zimmermann to Eckhardt, February 8, 1917, *TNA*, HW7/8.
[128] Zimmermann to Eckhardt, March 7, 1917, *TNA*, HW7/8.
[129] German Foreign Office to Eckhardt, April 4, 1917, *TNA*, HW7/8.
[130] Katz, *The Secret War in Mexico*, 380–381.

going to bow to American initiatives and conclude peace with its enemies; that the Germans would not refrain from inflicting harm on the US; and that the telegram must be fake and others were at work to bring the US into the war. The careful British handover of the telegram to the Americans and Zimmermann's surprising admission of his authorship clarified the issues for the whole nation and made it obvious that America had no real other choice but join the war. The telegram proved many people right who had been saying that the only method to deal with the Germans was that of military response. The quick publication of the telegram helped the whole nation swing toward a general belligerence. Wilson, who all along had been burdened with his dilemma over a reachable peace and an inevitable war, recognized right away this possible tool in the telegram. With the telegram's predictable effects, he wished to achieve a unity of Americans in sentiment. He regarded it essential to have the public behind him, especially in the question of war. In the 1910s, the technology was able to assist the President to achieve this goal. But the Zimmermann telegram in itself was not the reason why the country joined the war.

The basis to go to war was manifold. First of all, it was the question of neutral nations' rights on the high seas. The German submarine warfare hurt American shipping and pride continuously and drove an irreconcilable wedge between the two countries. Ever since the sinking of the *Lusitania*, relations were never again cordial and the German stubbornness thwarted any chance of concord. The question of Belgian neutrality and the German rape of it provided grounds for moral dislike against Germany. The authoritarian statehood of the Central Powers was an ideological challenge to America's democracy. By the same token, the whole Western democratic belief was questioned. Both the historical and ideological ties between the United States and England or France were much stronger than to be neglected. There was a very conscious British propaganda working in the United States. Although it never achieved such successes as with the Zimmermann telegram, it managed to emanate a certain amount of anti-German information. In contrast, the German propaganda was never nearly as flourishing. Wilson also wanted to be an active participator in the conclusion of a peace treaty. The only chance to do that, as the Allies had hinted, was to join the war. As he told Jane Addams on February 28, the representative of a neutral country could

only “call through a crack in the door” at the peace table.[131] And there were the economic ties. As was shown above, the American business needed the war with its orders and markets. American companies reaped huge profits throughout the war and this had to be upheld. Therefore, it must be concluded that there were many causes for the United States to enter the war and no isolated incident can be pointed at as the main reason. The Zimmermann telegram had its unique role with its impact on national sentiment, which proved to be a very strong force.

[131] Addams, Jane. *Peace and Bread in Time of War*. New York: King’s Crown Press, 1945. 64.