Chapter 22

From Neutrality to War

Was it in the national interest of the United States to stay neutral or declare war in 1917?

22.1 Introduction

In the spring of 1914, President Woodrow Wilson sent "Colonel" Edward House, his trusted adviser, to Europe. House's task was to learn more about the growing strains among the European powers. After meeting with government officials, House sent Wilson an eerily accurate assessment of conditions there. "Everybody's nerves are tense," he wrote. "It needs only a spark to set the whole thing off."

That spark was not long in coming. On June 28, 1914, Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife, Sophie, made an official visit to Sarajevo, the capital of Austria-Hungary's province of Bosnia. Ferdinand was heir to the throne of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. A few years earlier, Bosnia had been taken over by Austria-Hungary, a move that angered many Bosnians who wanted closer ties to nearby Serbia and other Slavic ethnic groups. On the day of the visit, several terrorists, trained and armed by a Serbian group, waited in the crowd.

Early in the day, as the royal couple rode through the city in an open car, a terrorist hurled a bomb at their car. The bomb bounced off the hood and exploded nearby. Unharmed, the couple continued their visit. Another terrorist, Gavrilo Princip, was waiting farther down the route. When the car came into view, Princip fired several shots into the car, killing the royal couple.

Their murders set off a chain reaction. Within weeks, Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia. When the Russian foreign minister learned that Austrian soldiers had begun shelling the Serbian capital of Belgrade, the stunned diplomat warned the Austrian ambassador, "This means a European war. You are setting Europe alight." He was right. A local quarrel in the Balkans quickly became far more dangerous. Russia sided with Serbia and declared war on Austria-Hungary. To help Austria-Hungary, Germany declared war on Russia and its ally France. Britain came to France's defense and declared war on Germany. Dozens of countries took sides.

In 1914, during a visit to Sarajevo, Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria-Hungary and his wife (shown here with their children in 1909) were gunned down by a terrorist. Although this assassination sparked the outbreak of World War I, the conflict had deeper causes.

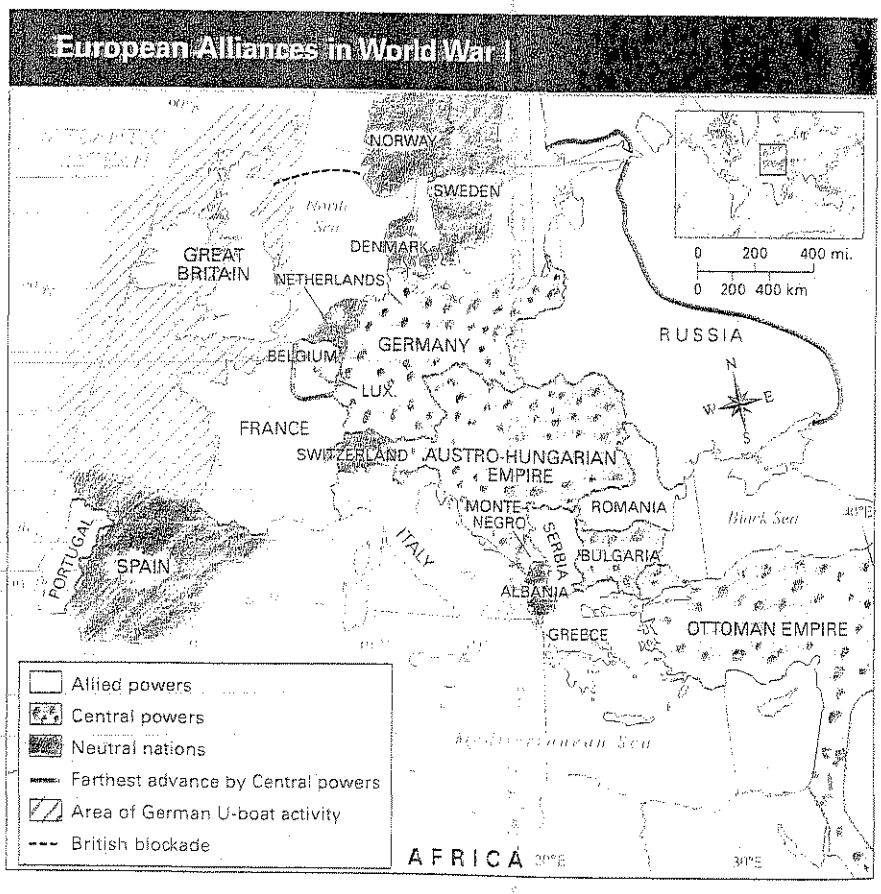
◄ Soldiers in the trenches during World War I

22.2 The United States Tries to Stay Neutral

For most Americans, the war was a distant conflict that did not concern them. Few felt alarmed by its outbreak. In September 1914, Theodore Roosevelt smugly observed that the United States was lucky to be almost "alone among the great civilized powers in being unshaken by the present worldwide war."

Europe: A Powder Keg Waiting to Ignite How did the murder of the archduke in little-known Bosnia turn into a global conflict? The interaction of many factors led to war. One cause was the system of alliances that linked the European nations to each other. This system required member nations to come to one another's aid in case of attack. When the conflict started, these ties led to the division of Europe into two camps. Germany sided with Austria-Hungary, and they headed the Central powers. They were later joined by the Ottoman Empire. France, Britain, and Russia led the Allied powers.

In Europe, **nationalism** also created tensions. Nationalism is a strong feeling of pride in and loyalty to a nation or ethnic group. Nationalism led some European powers to put national interests first, regardless of the consequences for other countries. For example, pride in Germany's rapid growth and military power led Kaiser Wilhelm II to seek an overseas empire for his country. He wanted Germany to be a world leader. Smaller ethnic groups expressed their nationalism by seeking independence from rule by foreign countries. For example, Serbs in Bosnia who resented Austro-Hungarian rule wanted to unite with other Slavic peoples in Serbia.



As World War I began, a system of alliances divided Europe into two camps: France, Great Britain, and Russia—called the Allies—backed Serbia. They were opposed by Austria-Hungary and Germany, known as the Central powers. Other nations joined the Allies or the Central powers as the war expanded to engulf most of Europe.

Another key factor was **militarism,** a policy of glorifying military power and values. When Germany modernized its army and added to its navy, Britain felt it had to do the same. Other major powers followed their lead. Soon the nations of Europe were in a full-scale military buildup.

Imperialism added more fuel to the fire. By the 1880s, Britain and France had colonies in Africa and Asia that provided raw materials and markets for their products. Germany wanted its own colonies and a share of this lucrative trade. The only way for Germany to get the territory it wanted was to take it from someone else. Competition for trade and colonies further strained relations.

Wilson Adopts a Policy of Neutrality Soon after the war began, Woodrow Wilson declared a policy of neutrality. The United States would not take sides in the conflict. It would offer loans and sell weapons and supplies to both sides. In a message to Congress on August 19, 1914, Wilson urged Americans to remain "impartial in thought, as well as action." The European war, he said, is one "with which we have nothing to do, whose causes cannot touch us."

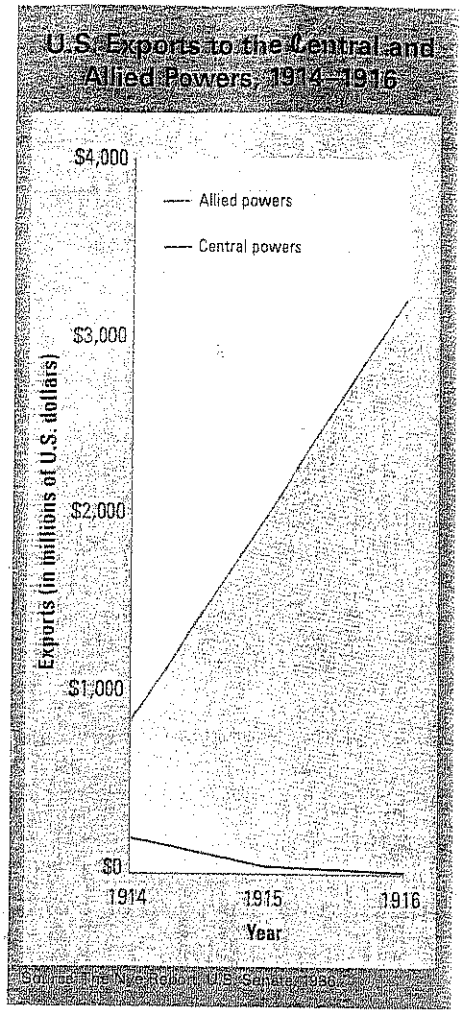
Wilson's decision to stay out of the war pleased many Americans. Ever since George Washington had warned the nation to avoid "entangling alliances," American presidents had tried to steer clear of European infighting. A Mississippi senator asserted, "There is no necessity for war with Germany—there is no necessity for war with any of the **belligerent** [warring] powers. Three thousand miles of water make it impossible for us to be drawn into that vortex of blood and passion and woe." As a neutral nation, the United States could make loans and sell supplies to both sides. U.S. leaders were also happy to have a way of helping American bankers, farmers, and businesses recover from a painful economic slowdown. Finally, members of the peace movement, who spoke out strongly against war, were in favor of this policy of neutrality.

Yet the situation was more complicated than America's neutrality policy expressed. In 1914, more than 32 million Americans—a full one third of the population—were either foreign born or the children of foreign-born parents. Many of these Americans had strong emotional ties to their homelands and found it hard to remain neutral. Germans and Austrian Americans were sympathetic to the Central powers. Irish Americans also sided with the Central powers out of their long-standing hatred of the British. The majority of Americans, however, favored the Allies. Many felt connected by ancestry, language, culture, and democratic values. Still others had economic ties to Britain or France.

While Americans debated neutrality, the war raged on two fronts in Europe. On the eastern front, Russia quickly advanced into Germany and Austria-Hungary. A German counterattack, however, stopped the Russian advance. In two key battles, the number of Russian casualties—soldiers killed, captured, wounded, or missing—totaled about 250,000.

On the western front, German troops easily rolled across Belgium and into France. Intense fighting by British, French, and Belgian armies finally stopped the German advance, but not until German troops were within 30 miles of Paris. By the end of 1914, the war on the western front had turned into a long and bloody **stalemate,** or deadlock. Neither side was able to knock out its enemies, and yet neither side was willing to sue for peace.

By late November 1914, the war reached a stalemate. The lines of battle stretched across Belgium and northeastern France to the border of Switzerland. Month by month, casualties mounted in what, to many Americans, looked like senseless slaughter.



Although the United States may have declared itself neutral, American businesses and banks were anything but. Between 1914 and 1916, the value of American trade with the Allies soared from $800 million to $3 billion. U.S. banks loaned the Allies $2 billion to pay for these purchases.

22.3 Challenges to the U.S. Policy of Neutrality

As the land war dragged on, both sides sought to break the stalemate. Unable to defeat their enemy on land, both Britain and Germany looked for ways to starve their enemies into submission. To do this, they needed to win control of the seas.

Britain Stops U.S. Ships Heading for Germany The war at sea started with a British blockade of ships headed for Germany. British ships turned back any vessels carrying weapons, food, and other vital supplies to the Central powers—even ships from neutral nations such as the United States.

President Wilson complained to the British about the policy of stopping neutral ships, but he did not threaten to take action. His hesitancy came in part from the strong economic ties between Britain and the United States. Trade with Britain had given a boost to the sagging American economy, and U.S. banks and businesses were earning millions of dollars from loans and exports to the Allies. These same banks and businesses made fewer loans and sold fewer supplies and weapons to the Central powers. Moreover, many businesspeople in the United States openly supported the Allies. An officer at the Morgan bank recalled, "Our firm had never for one moment been neutral . . . We did everything we could to contribute to the cause of the Allies."

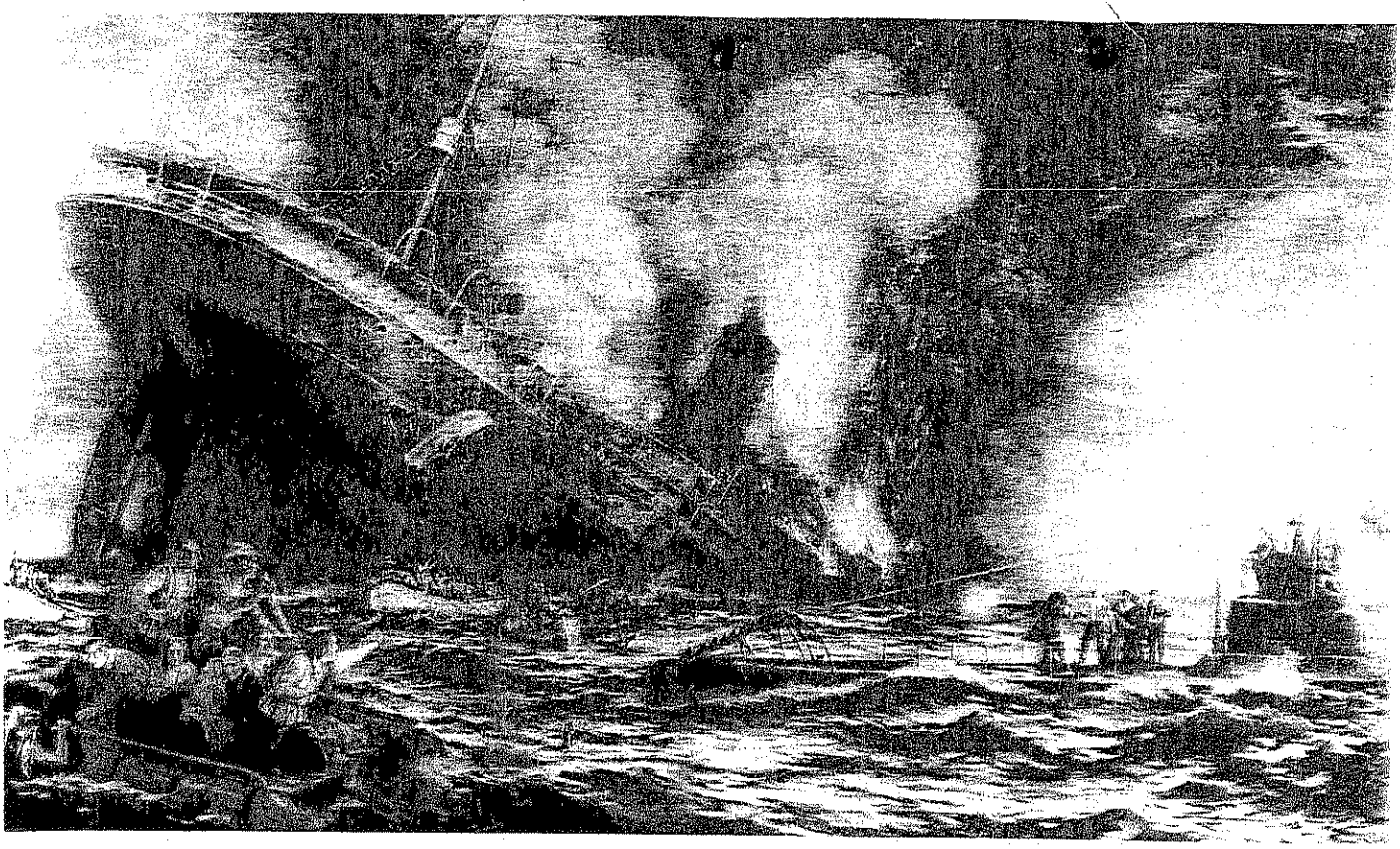
U-Boat Attacks Increase Tensions with Germany In February 1915, Germany found a way to challenge the British blockade: submarine attacks. Their deadly new weapon was the U-boat, short for *Unterseeboot* ("undersea boat"). The German navy hoped this new weapon would break the British blockade and at the same time stop vital supplies from reaching the Allies.

Early in 1915, Germany declared the waters around Britain a war zone. Within this zone, German U-boats could sink enemy ships without warning. Because British ships sometimes disguised themselves by flying the flags of neutral nations, neutral ships going into this zone were also at risk.

By international law and custom, warships had the right to stop and search merchant ships that they suspected of breaking a naval blockade. Such vessels could even be sunk, but only if the passengers and crew were removed first. This practice worked for warships, which could take on extra passengers, but not for submarines, which were small and cramped. In theory, a U-boat could allow the ship's crew and passengers to launch lifeboats before sinking the ship. But in practice, this strategy made no sense. A U-boat that surfaced to warn a merchant ship of an attack would become an easy target, foiling its surprise attack.

Wilson protested that sinking merchant ships without protecting the lives of passengers and crews violated international law. He warned that the United States would hold Germany to "strict accountability" for any American casualties in such attacks.

The policy of "strict accountability" was soon put to a test. On May 7, 1915, a U-boat sank the British liner *Lusitania* without warning. Among the 1,198 dead were 128 Americans. Germany tried to absolve itself from blame by arguing that the ship was armed and was carrying weapons and ammunition. The second charge was true. Nonetheless, former president Theodore Roosevelt denounced Germany's actions as "murder on the high seas."

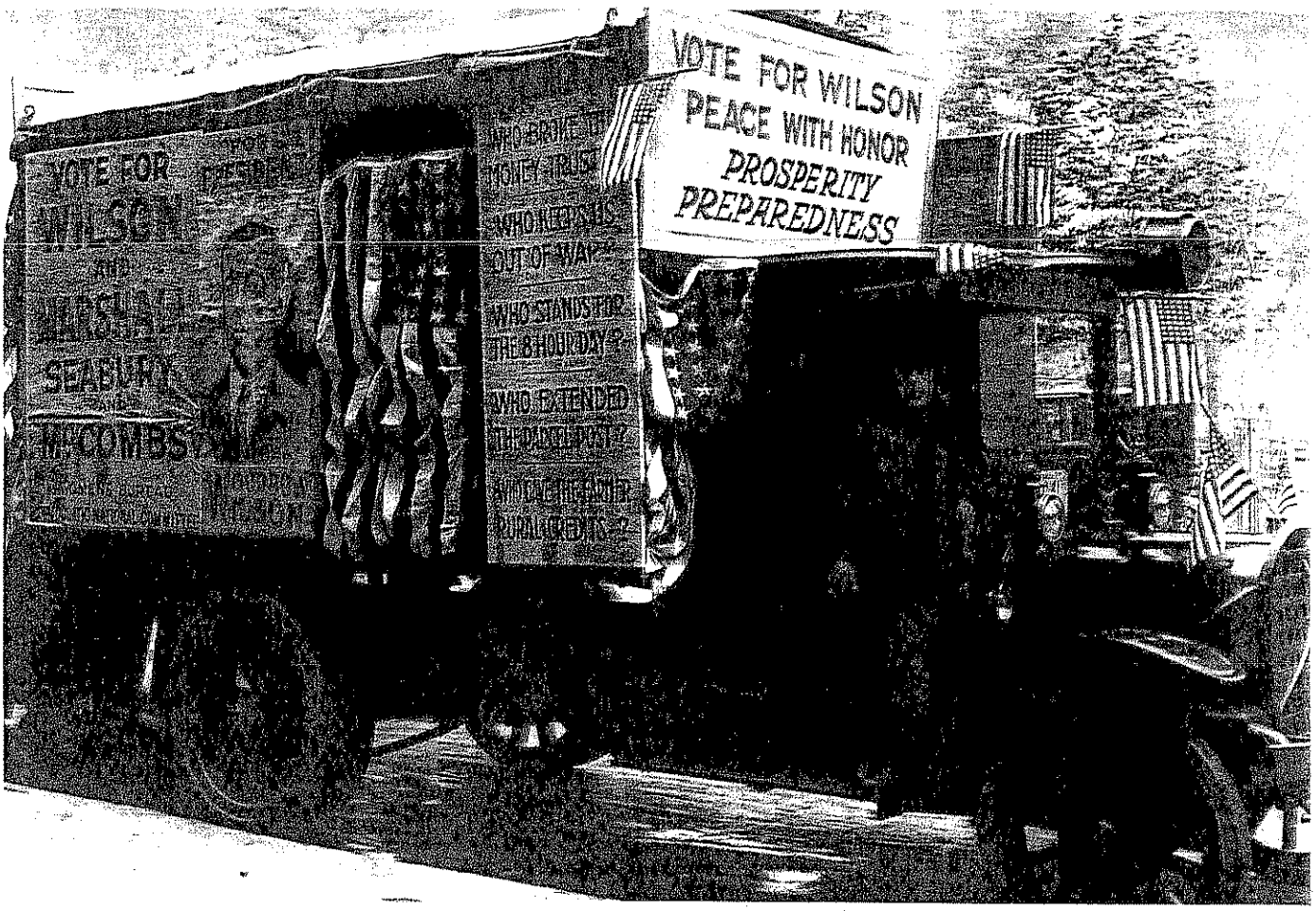


The *Lusitania*, a British passenger ship, sank near Ireland after being torpedoed by a German U-boat. Of the 1,198 people who died, 128 were American. The American public was outraged, and the incident helped strengthen American support for the Allies.

Within the State Department, a debate raged about how to respond to the ...nking of the *Lusitania*. Secretary of State William Jennings Bryan believed Americans had a "higher mission" than helping "one European monarch fight out his quarrels with another." He argued that the United States should accept the reality of submarine warfare and warn its citizens that they traveled on British ships at their own risk. State Department lawyer Robert Lansing opposed this view. He argued not only that Americans had a right to travel on British ships, but also that the United States should vigorously protect that right.

Wilson sided with Lansing and sent Germany a series of notes demanding that it stop unrestricted submarine warfare. Afraid that the notes violated neutrality and might involve the United States in war, Bryan resigned. Wilson chose Lansing to replace Bryan as Secretary of State. Lansing was anything but neutral. "The Allies must *not* be beaten," he wrote. "War cannot come too soon to suit me."

Four months later, in August 1915, Germany sank a second British ship, the *Arabic*, killing two Americans. Wilson sent another, more sharply worded protest to Germany. German officials promised that Germany would sink no more passenger ships without warning. In March 1916, they broke that promise by sinking the French liner *Sussex*, an attack that left several Americans injured. Wilson threatened to break off diplomatic relations with Germany if it did not stop surprise attacks. In an agreement called the *Sussex* pledge, Germany promised to spare all lives in any future U-boat attacks on merchant ships. But ... attached a condition: The United States must force Britain to end its illegal ...ockade. Wilson accepted the pledge but would not accept the condition.

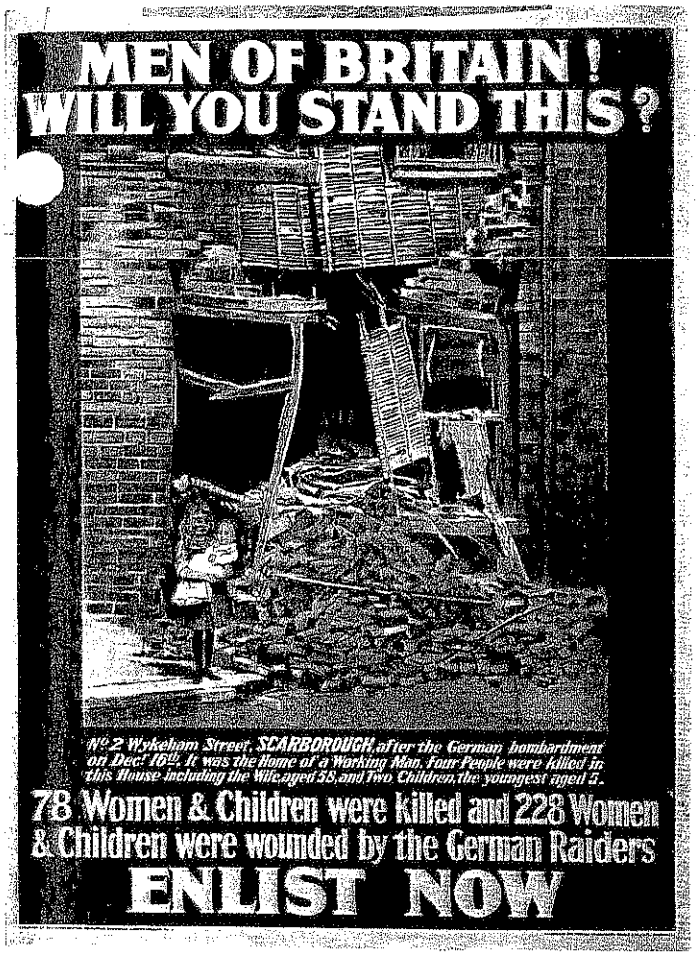


In 1916, Woodrow Wilson ran for reelection against the Republican presidential candidate, Charles Evans Hughes. The Democrats did their best to portray Hughes as eager to go to war. Full-page ads in newspapers read, "If you want war, vote for Hughes! If you want peace with honor, vote for Wilson."

Preparedness, Promises, and Propaganda Concern over President Wilson's handling of the war fueled a growing preparedness movement. This movement was led by former president Theodore Roosevelt, who pointed out that the United States was ill-prepared for war should it need to fight. In 1915, the army had only 80,000 men and lacked equipment.

At the outbreak of the war, Roosevelt had not sided with either the Allies or the Central powers. Even so, he was not impressed by Wilson's policy of neutrality. He was even more put off by Wilson's statement after the sinking of the *Lusitania* that "there is such a thing as a man being too proud to fight." Roosevelt had long believed preparedness for war, not talk of neutrality, was the best guarantor of peace. As he toured the country promoting preparedness, many newspapers took up his cause. Advocates of preparedness called for an army of a million trained men and a navy larger than Great Britain's.

For a time, Wilson resisted calls to strengthen the military, but the submarine menace persuaded him that he had to increase the nation's readiness for war. With an election coming up, he launched his own nationwide tour, talking about preparedness and promising a "navy second to none." Back in the capital, he pressed Congress to allocate money to double the size of the army and begin construction of the world's largest navy. Enough Americans saw Wilson's efforts as preparedness for peace, not war, to elect him to a second term. He won reelection by a paper-thin majority on the slogan, "He kept us out of war."



While Wilson tried hard to keep the nation out of war, both the Allies and the Central powers launched **propaganda** campaigns designed to whip up support for their side. Propaganda is information or rumor spread by a group or government to promote its own cause or ideas or to damage an opposing cause or idea. The information in the propaganda may or may not be accurate. Either way, the intention of propaganda is not to inform, but rather to persuade others to adopt the view or to take the action supported by the propagandist.

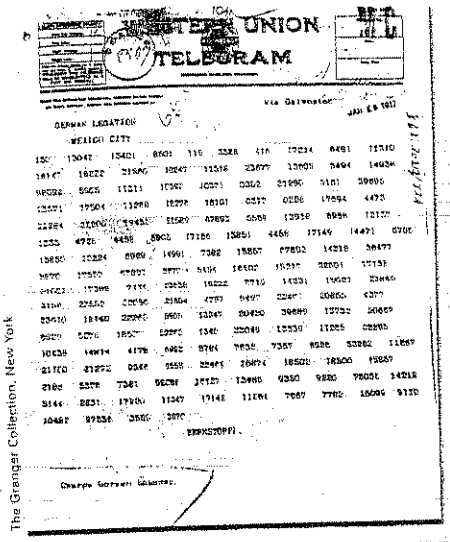
The Allies waged the most successful campaign. Early in the war, the British circulated stories about alleged atrocities committed by German soldiers in Belgium. The British government appointed a special commission headed by Lord James Bryce, a well-respected historian, to investigate these "outrages." Published just days after the attack of the *Lusitania*, the Bryce commission's report was filled with stories of German soldiers torturing innocent women and children and using civilians as "human shields" during combat.

The German government angrily denied these stories, as did American reporters traveling with the German army. Later study proved many of the stories to be exaggerated or invented. Nonetheless, the British government made sure the Bryce report was sent to nearly every newspaper in the United States. The more horrible the story, the more likely it was to be reprinted in the American press. As a result, neutrality "in thought" gave way to anti-German feeling in the minds of many Americans.

Both the Allies and the Central powers used propaganda posters to drum up support for the war at home. The British poster (above left) uses alleged German atrocities for this purpose. The German poster reminds German soldiers that they are fighting to resist the forces of anarchy while protecting their women and children. (Translation of the German text: "We will not bear [put up with] anarchy. We will protect women and children.")

22.4 The United States Declares a "War to End All Wars"

In a speech to the Senate on January 22, 1917, Wilson declared that he wanted to find a way to end the stalemated war in Europe. He called on the warring powers to accept a "peace without victory." He also spoke of forming a "league of honor" to help nations settle conflicts peacefully. Germany's response to Wilson's peace efforts was to launch an all-out effort to win the war, including a return to unrestricted submarine warfare. Keeping to his *Sussex* pledge, Wilson broke off diplomatic relations with Germany.



The Granger Collection, New York

Written in code, the Zimmermann note was deciphered by British cryptographers. The British waited to release the telegram to American newspapers until relations between the United States and Germany were at an all-time low. The threat in the telegram to help Mexico regain territory lost to the United States further inflamed public opinion against Germany.

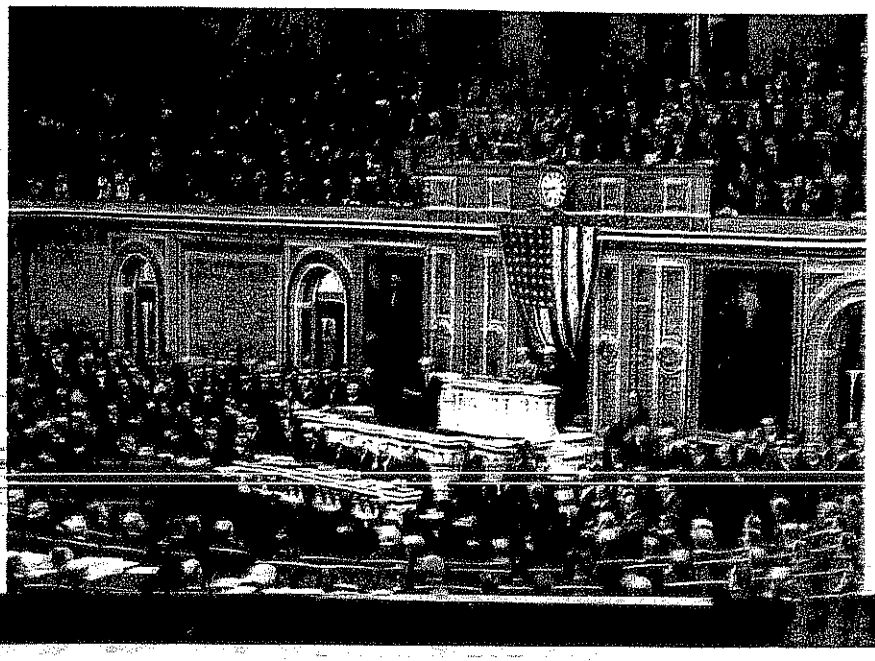
The Zimmermann Note Stirs Up Anti-German Feelings Wilson had hoped the Germans would back down, but his hopes were dashed in late February 1917. Britain had gotten hold of a note sent in code by the German foreign minister, Arthur Zimmermann, to the German minister in Mexico. Zimmermann suggested that if the United States entered the war, Mexico and Germany should become allies. Germany would then help Mexico regain "lost territory in New Mexico, Texas, and Arizona." The Zimmermann note created a sensation in the United States and stirred anti-German feeling across the nation.

Events in Russia removed another barrier to the United States joining the Allies. In March 1917, a revolution toppled the autocratic Czar Nicholas II and replaced him with a democratic government. At the start of the war, Wilson had not wanted to be allied to a dictator. With the hope of democracy in sight, the United States could now see Russia as "a fit partner" in a war against German aggression.

The United States Enters the War On April 2, 1917, Wilson spoke to a special session of Congress. He reminded lawmakers of the loss of life caused by German U-boats and how these attacks hurt the nation's ability to trade freely with other countries. Then he turned to his main theme:

> Neutrality is no longer feasible [practical] . . . where the peace of the world is involved . . . The world must be made safe for democracy. Its peace must be planted upon the tested foundations of political liberty . . . 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.
>
> —Woodrow Wilson's War Message, address to Congress, 1917

In 1917, President Woodrow Wilson asked Congress to declare war. "It is a fearful thing to lead this great peaceful people into . . . the most terrible and disastrous of all wars," he said. "Civilization itself seems to be hanging in the balance."



When Wilson finished, lawmakers cheered. Later Wilson said sadly, "Think what it was they were applauding. My message today was a message of death for our young men."

Critics reacted strongly to Wilson's war message. Nebraska Senator George Norris argued that the United States was going to war for economic reasons only. "We have loaned many hundreds of millions of dollars to the Allies," he said. He saw American involvement in the war as a way of "making . . . payment of every debt certain and sure." Wisconsin Senator Robert LaFollette argued that the nation had gotten itself into the war by failing to treat the "belligerent nations of Europe alike." He urged the government to remain neutral and "enforce our rights against Great Britain as we have enforced our rights against Germany."

In spite of such protests, on April 4, 1917, the Senate voted 82 to 6 to declare war on Germany. The House followed on April 6 by a vote of 373 to 50. The United States was going to war.

Summary

The assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand sparked the outbreak of World War I. However, the war had many underlying causes, including the European alliance system and the growth of nationalism and imperialism, which led to military buildups. The United States remained neutral until events in 1917 convinced Americans to fight on the side of the Allies.

The Allied and Central powers When World War I began, the nations of Europe divided into two alliances—the Allied powers and the Central powers.

U-boats The war at sea started with a British blockade of German ports. Germany fought back by introducing a new weapon called a U-boat, or submarine. German U-boats sank both neutral and enemy vessels, often without warning.

Lusitania The German sinking of the British ship the *Lusitania* killed 128 Americans. The United States strongly protested U-boat attacks on merchant ships carrying American passengers.

***Sussex* pledge** Germany agreed in the *Sussex* pledge to stop sinking merchant ships without warning but attached the condition that the United States help end the illegal British blockade. Wilson rejected that condition, and Germany did not keep the pledge.

Preparedness movement As anger over American deaths at sea grew, some Americans called for the country to prepare for war. Although Wilson won reelection on the slogan "He kept us out of war," he was already preparing the country to fight by building up the army and navy.

Unrestricted submarine warfare In a desperate bid to end the conflict, Germany announced early in 1917 that it would resume unrestricted submarine warfare.

Zimmermann note The disclosure of the Zimmermann note, calling for cooperation between Mexico and Germany to take back U.S. territory, outraged Americans. Soon after its publication, the United States declared war on Germany.