

Wilson Asks For The Declaration Of War

Posted on September 11, 2019

Introduction

On April 2, 1917, President Woodrow Wilson asked a joint session of Congress to declare war against Germany. The original essay correctly emphasizes American neutrality, trade with the Allies, German submarine warfare, and Wilson's eventual change of policy, but it contains major historical errors. Russia did not ally with Germany for protection; the Ottoman Empire was declining rather than expanding across Europe; American ports were not rented neutrally to both coalitions; and German submarines did not destroy British seaports. The decision for war emerged from unrestricted submarine warfare, the Zimmermann Telegram, economic and cultural ties, claims about neutral rights, domestic politics, and Wilson's belief that intervention could shape the peace. (Cooper, 2009; U.S. Department of State, Office of the Historian, n.d.)

European Alliances before 1914

Europe before the First World War was divided principally between the Triple Alliance of Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Italy and the Triple Entente of France, Russia, and Britain. These arrangements developed from security fears, imperial rivalry, military planning, and the changing balance of power after German unification. Italy later remained neutral and joined the Allies in 1915, while the Ottoman Empire entered on the side of the Central Powers. The alliances did not make war inevitable, but they increased the danger that a regional crisis would expand. Russia did not join Germany and the Entente simultaneously. By 1914, Russian alignment with France and Britain placed it against Germany and Austria-Hungary in the emerging conflict. (Keene, 2011)

The July Crisis

The immediate crisis began after the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo on June 28, 1914. Austria-Hungary, supported by Germany, issued an ultimatum to Serbia and declared war. Russian mobilization to support Serbia led Germany to declare war on Russia and France. Germany invaded neutral Belgium under the Schlieffen Plan, prompting Britain to enter. The Ottoman Empire joined later in 1914. This sequence matters because it replaces the vague claim that Europe had simply been preparing for war since 1870. Long-term tensions created vulnerability, but decisions by governments during the July Crisis transformed assassination into continental and then global war. Responsibility is therefore historical and political, not automatic. (Keene, 2011)

Wilson's Initial Neutrality

Wilson declared that the United States would remain neutral in thought as well as action. Neutrality reflected geography, the absence of a direct military attack, a tradition of avoiding European wars, and a diverse population with ties to different belligerents. Many Americans believed intervention would sacrifice lives for imperial rivalries. Others supported Britain and France because of language, political culture, or fear of German militarism. Neutrality did not require equal public sympathy, and it became increasingly difficult to maintain as the war affected shipping, finance, propaganda, and trade. Wilson's policy aimed to protect American rights while preserving the possibility that the United States could mediate a negotiated peace. (Cooper, 2009; Kennedy, 2004)

Trade and Finance

International law allowed neutral countries to trade with belligerents, including in many goods useful for war, subject to blockade and contraband rules. British naval power restricted German access to overseas trade, while the United States sold large quantities of food, raw materials, and weapons to Britain and France. American banks also extended major loans to the Allies after the administration relaxed earlier restrictions. This commercial pattern made formal neutrality increasingly favorable to the Entente, even without a secret plan to enter the war. Geography and British control of sea lanes mattered as much as presidential intention. The economic relationship also created concern that an Allied defeat would harm American financial interests, though economics alone did not determine Wilson's decision. (Kennedy, 2004)

The British Blockade

Britain used its navy to blockade Germany, intercept ships, expand contraband categories, and limit neutral trade. American officials protested some British practices because they interfered with neutral rights. The response, however, was less confrontational than the response to German submarine warfare because the blockade usually seized cargo rather than killing passengers without warning. Critics saw a double standard and argued that Wilson tolerated British violations while condemning Germany. The difference was partly legal and humanitarian: a surface ship could stop and search a merchant vessel, while a submarine operating against armed or escorted shipping had difficulty protecting crews and passengers. The asymmetry made equal neutrality nearly impossible in practice. (Cooper, 2009)

Submarine Warfare

Germany used U-boats to challenge British maritime superiority and cut supplies reaching the islands. In February 1915 it declared the waters around Britain a war zone. Submarines often attacked

merchant vessels without following traditional prize rules because surfacing exposed them to armed ships. This strategy endangered neutral shipping and civilians. The central issue was not destruction of seaports but the sinking of vessels at sea. Wilson insisted that Americans had a right to travel and trade on lawful ships. Germany argued that British blockade policy and the military use of merchant vessels made older rules impractical. The conflict between new technology and existing law drove repeated diplomatic crises. (U.S. Department of State, Office of the Historian, n.d.)

The Lusitania

On May 7, 1915, a German submarine sank the British passenger liner *Lusitania*, killing nearly 1,200 people, including 128 Americans. The ship carried passengers and war-related cargo, facts Germany used to defend the attack. Wilson demanded accountability while resisting immediate war. Secretary of State William Jennings Bryan resigned because he believed the administration's position favored Americans who knowingly traveled on belligerent ships and treated Germany more harshly than Britain. Germany later issued the Sussex pledge, promising limits on attacks against passenger and merchant vessels. The episode moved opinion against Germany but did not bring immediate intervention. Wilson won reelection in 1916 partly under the claim that he had kept the country out of war. (Cooper, 2009; U.S. Department of State, Office of the Historian, n.d.)

Peace without Victory

Wilson spent late 1916 and early 1917 seeking mediation. In his "Peace without Victory" address, he argued that a settlement imposed by one side would preserve resentment and produce future conflict. He envisioned freedom of the seas, limits on armaments, national self-determination, and an international organization to guarantee peace. This diplomatic ambition complicates the claim that he had always waited for an opportunity to destroy Germany. Wilson wanted the United States to remain outside the war long enough to act as an impartial mediator. His neutrality also served a larger purpose: American independence from both coalitions would give him authority over the shape of the postwar order. (Cooper, 2009)

Resumption of Unrestricted Submarine Warfare

Germany announced that unrestricted submarine warfare would resume on February 1, 1917. Military leaders calculated that U-boats could defeat Britain before American forces arrived in meaningful numbers. The policy meant attacking merchant shipping in designated zones without warning, including neutral vessels. Wilson broke diplomatic relations, but he still waited before asking for war. During the following weeks, German submarines sank several American ships. The new campaign destroyed the practical basis of armed neutrality because American commerce could continue only if the United States either accepted German control of the sea route or used military force to defend it.

Submarine warfare became the primary immediate cause of entry. (U.S. Department of State, Office of the Historian, n.d.)

The Zimmermann Telegram

British intelligence intercepted and shared a secret German message from Foreign Secretary Arthur Zimmermann to the German minister in Mexico. The telegram proposed that, if the United States entered the war, Germany would support a Mexican alliance and encourage recovery of Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona. Publication in March 1917 intensified American anger, and Zimmermann publicly acknowledged the message. Mexico was in no position to reconquer the territories, but the proposal made the European conflict appear connected to American security. The telegram did not cause war alone. It reinforced the perception that German leaders were willing to threaten the United States while unrestricted submarine warfare attacked American ships and citizens. (U.S. Department of State, Office of the Historian, n.d.)

Russia's Revolution

The Russian Revolution of March 1917 overthrew Tsar Nicholas II and created a provisional government. Before this change, Wilson faced the problem of describing the Allied cause as democratic while one major ally remained an autocracy. The revolution temporarily made a moral argument easier: the United States could claim to join a coalition of constitutional governments against militarized autocracy. This interpretation was idealized because the Allied empires had their own colonial systems and the Russian political situation remained unstable. Nevertheless, timing mattered. Wilson's war message presented intervention not only as defense of shipping but as a struggle over the political principles that would shape international order. (Cooper, 2009)

Wilson's War Message

Wilson told Congress that Germany's submarine campaign was warfare against humanity and against all nations. He argued that armed neutrality had proved impracticable and that the world must be made safe for democracy. The speech carefully distinguished the German government from the German people, whom Wilson said Americans did not hate. It also rejected conquest and material compensation as war aims. These claims elevated intervention from maritime retaliation to a universal moral mission. That rhetoric inspired support but created expectations the war and peace settlement could not fully meet. Critics argued that democratic language concealed economic interests, censorship, racial inequality, and the coercive power of wartime government at home. (Wilson, 1917)

Congress and Public Division

The Senate approved war on April 4, and the House followed on April 6. The votes were strong but not unanimous. Opponents such as Senator Robert La Follette and Representative Jeannette Rankin questioned whether war truly protected democracy or primarily defended finance and trade. Peace activists, socialists, religious groups, German Americans, and many rural communities remained skeptical. Once war began, the Espionage and Sedition Acts restricted dissent, and the government conducted mass mobilization through propaganda and conscription. Entry was therefore a constitutional decision made amid genuine debate, not the unanimous awakening of a previously neutral nation. The costs of suppressing opposition complicate Wilson's moral language. (Kennedy, 2004; National Archives, n.d.)

Was the United States Truly Neutral?

The original essay concludes that America was never neutral because trade favored Britain. The better conclusion is that American neutrality was legally declared but materially unequal and politically unstable. British sea power made balanced trade impossible, American finance became tied to Allied success, and many officials preferred a British-led order to a German victory. Yet Wilson repeatedly resisted calls for intervention, protested British policies, pursued mediation, and ran political risks to avoid war. Neutrality was not a hidden alliance, but neither was it complete detachment. It was a policy under pressure whose contradictions became unsustainable after Germany chose unrestricted submarine warfare and threatened American security through the Zimmermann proposal. (Cooper, 2009; Kennedy, 2004)

Consequences of Entry

American troops, finance, food, and industrial capacity helped shift the balance toward the Allies. The United States entered as an associated power rather than formally joining the alliance. Wilson later presented the Fourteen Points and promoted the League of Nations, but the Treaty of Versailles included punitive and imperial compromises. The U.S. Senate rejected League membership. At home, wartime mobilization expanded federal power, accelerated migration and industry, and intensified repression. These outcomes show that the decision cannot be judged only by the causes stated in April 1917. Intervention enabled the United States to influence victory and peace, but it also exposed the gap between democratic ideals and actual wartime practice. (Kennedy, 2004)

Conclusion

Wilson's request for war resulted from a cumulative collapse of neutrality rather than a long-concealed plan to attack Germany. The alliance system and July Crisis produced the European war,

while American trade and finance drew the United States closer to the Allies. British blockade policy complicated neutral rights, but German unrestricted submarine warfare placed American ships and lives at direct risk. The Zimmermann Telegram deepened the security threat, and the Russian Revolution supported Wilson's democratic framing. Economic interest, law, strategy, ideology, and presidential ambition all mattered. The United States was not perfectly impartial, yet Wilson's repeated search for mediation makes it inaccurate to say that he merely waited for the right moment to reveal an inevitable alliance. (Cooper, 2009; U.S. Department of State, Office of the Historian, n.d.; Wilson, 1917)

References

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