

“MORE PRECIOUS THAN PEACE”

Woodrow Wilson, the German U-boat Campaign, and America’s Path to World War I

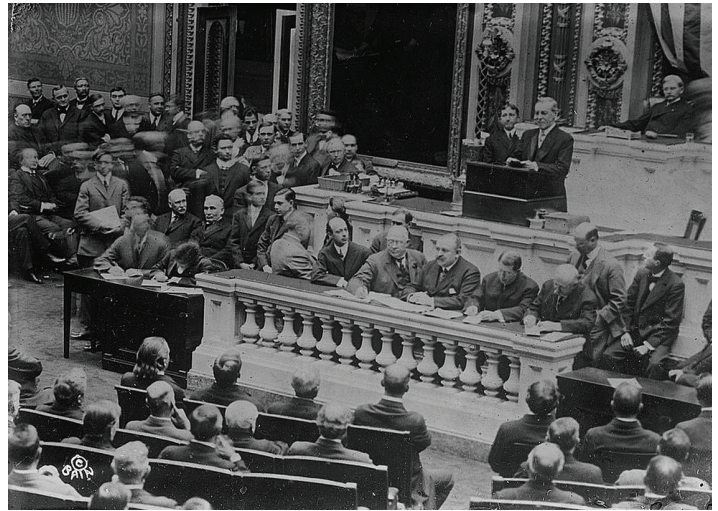
The early 20th century is portrayed as the era of American isolationism, and the United States’ official policy of neutrality for most of World War I is frequently attributed to the country’s economic interests and substantial population of European immigrants. However, German submarine warfare from 1915-1917 endangered American trade, incited public outrage, and created enemies in both major political parties. Why, then, was US entry into the war delayed so extensively? This paper examines the diplomacy of President Woodrow Wilson in the context of ongoing U-boat warfare and critiques his attempt to balance his personal vision of peace with his public responsibility to defend American interests from German aggression.

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“It would be the irony of fate if my administration had to deal chiefly with foreign affairs,” remarked Woodrow Wilson before his presidential inauguration in 1913.¹ He entered office with one of the most progressive domestic agendas in American history, including plans to introduce a graduated income tax, implement strict child labor laws, and limit the political power of special interest groups. Unfortunately for Wilson, the outbreak of war in Europe quickly came to dominate his attention, and his presidency was ultimately defined by the choices he made for the United States in World War I. Although popular sentiment, economic issues, and Wilson’s advisers all pressed him to enter the war early on, he refused to capitulate for almost three years. Until the German U-boat campaign reached a level of insupportable ruthlessness in 1917, Wilson prioritized his own vision of world peace over his responsibility to protect American interests abroad. In doing so, he demonstrated the rigidity of his personal moral code and his inability to reconcile his view of peace with the assertive action expected of a rising world power.

FASHIONING AMERICAN NEUTRALITY

When war broke out in Europe in July 1914, Wilson initiated a policy of neutrality that was designed to maintain peace within the United States. He justified this policy largely from a social standpoint, assuming that the United States “could never take part on either side without bringing on a civil war at home.”² The 1910 census revealed that Wilson presided over the highest proportion of foreign-born citizens in the nation’s history, many of whom had British or German origins.³ Thirteen and a half percent of Americans were immigrants, and Wilson was concerned that any policy other than neutrality would fragment the country and disrupt his efforts to achieve peace. Furthermore, despite initial popular sentiment that may have favored one side or another, “it was thought possible to be sympathetic yet completely neutral.”⁴ Though they were unaware of Wilson’s underlying motives, it was relatively easy for the American people to subscribe to his policy of neutrality. At least at the beginning of the conflict, domestic interests did not clash with Wilson’s attempts to bring Europe to the peace table.



President Woodrow Wilson addressing Congress (1913)
Source: Library of Congress

Any domestic opposition to neutrality was also subdued by the flourishing economy that the US experienced under the policy. Political neutrality meant that Americans were free to trade even contraband with both sets of belligerent powers, and Wilson seized the opportunity to bring the economy out of a recession. In his second annual address to Congress, he announced that the US should be “ready with its resources, its energies, its forces of production, and its means of distribution” to supply goods to both the fighting Europeans and their former clients.⁵ Though this could be interpreted as an action that prolonged the war, Wilson rationalized it on moral grounds. He believed that a refusal to supply arms to the Allies would equate to supporting Germany, whose public image in the US was rapidly declining after a brutal invasion of Belgium.⁶ Historians often point out that Wilson’s economic policy directly benefited the Allied Powers, Britain, France, and Russia, to the detriment of the Central Powers, Germany and Austria-Hungary. However, it should be noted that Germany did not take issue with American-British arms trade until after losing the Battle of the Marne in September 1914.⁷ Although the obvious economic bias toward the Allies contributed to later tensions between the US and Germany,



Woodrow Wilson and his War Cabinet (1920)

Source: Underwood & Underwood, N. Y., *Encyclopedia Americana*, 1920, v. 29

the alternative—not selling contraband to either of the powers—would have restricted American economic growth, an unattractive prospect for Wilson and his advisers.

While the majority of Wilson’s inner circle was sympathetic toward the Allies, Wilson insisted that no policy other than strict neutrality was sustainable. As he explained in an address to the Daughters of the American Revolution, the US should keep its distance from the European conflict “not because it does not understand the quarrel... but because America had promised the world to stand apart and maintain certain principles of action which are grounded in law and in justice.”⁸ Wilson detested the idea of war, and although he could not forcibly bring the Europeans into peace negotiations, he did have the power to direct American foreign policy and keep the US out of the hostilities. By limiting American involvement to trade interests only, Wilson prevented Americans from rushing into the war, maintaining the domestic tranquility that he hoped would serve as an example to his European counterparts. As Wilson tried to personally mediate the peace between the belligerent powers, his citizens largely dismissed the war as a short-lived scuffle.⁹ The majority of them perceived it as yet another senseless conflict plaguing Europe, and the American ambassador to Britain, Walter Hines Page, wrote to Wilson that “again and ever I thank Heaven for the Atlantic Ocean.”¹⁰ This traditional sense of American isolationism, among other political factors, led Wilson to institute and maintain the policy of neutrality for as long as he could.

AGGRESSION ON THE HIGH SEAS

However, it was only a matter of time before Britain and Germany antagonized Wilson by challenging American neutral-

ity. Britain announced its intention to make the North Sea a mine war zone in November 1914, and Germany issued a similar declaration for the waters surrounding Britain and Ireland three months later. This disrupted the “relative placidity” of American-German relations, and it was interpreted by Wilson as “an extraordinary threat to destroy commerce.”¹¹ Germany’s public image degenerated in the wake of the Belgian occupation, when German soldiers terrorized the population and displayed no respect for the country’s declared neutrality. To Americans, it seemed that Germany “had deliberately trampled on the rules of civilized warfare,” and many became more outspoken in favor of the Allies.¹² More so than Britain, Germany’s behavior in the war offended American citizens, and the challenge of maintaining popular support for neutrality began to take a personal toll on Wilson. As he confided in a letter to his friend Mary Allen Hulbert in early 1915, “every bit of my strength has been used, and more than exhausted, by our friends, the people of the United States.”¹³ It was becoming progressively more difficult for Wilson to promote an attitude of peace and non-involvement in the US. While he viewed America’s role in the war as that of a peaceful ideal for the belligerents to emulate, his people saw the US as a world power capable of intervening by force to bring the president’s ideals of law and justice to the forefront.

Nothing caused him greater concern than the emergence of U-boat warfare. On March 28, 1915, the British ship *Falaba* was sunk by a German submarine, killing one American.¹⁴ Wilson assumed that the American casualty was unfortunate collateral damage from a German attack on Britain, but still condemned the nature of the act. He and his advisers viewed U-boat warfare as a violation of international law, since the

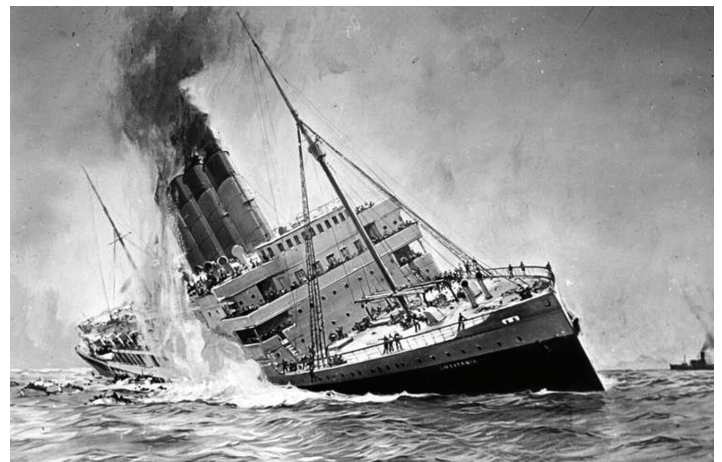
U-boats sunk ships without searching them first for contraband or sparing the lives of non-combatants.¹⁵ Wilson ordered his first Secretary of State, William Jennings Bryan, to procure an explicit affirmation from the German government that the U-boats would not harm neutral vessels. Bryan was instructed to use an “earnest, though of course entirely friendly” tone in his note, a strategy designed to appeal to the Germans on a moral level.¹⁶ “My idea,” said Wilson, “is to put the whole note on the very high grounds—not on the loss of this single man’s life, but on the interests of mankind which are involved and which Germany has always stood for.”¹⁷ Wilson did not want to acknowledge a deliberate violation of American neutrality, knowing that it could force him to take undesirable military action in retribution. He instead chose to display borderline naïveté in his dealings with Germany, ignoring his legal adviser Robert Lansing’s conviction that the submarines were designed to provoke war.¹⁸ In a pattern that would last for months to follow, Wilson refused to react decisively to German aggression, snubbing both the counsel of his advisers and the tide of public opinion.

THE CRISIS ESCALATES

Though Wilson could somewhat ignore the loss of one American life in the *Falaba* sinking, the *Lusitania* tragedy demanded a response. Sunk by a German U-boat on May 7, 1915, the enormous British liner resulted in the deaths of nearly 1200 people, including 128 Americans.¹⁹ The news provoked unparalleled outrage in the United States; one contributor to the *Literary Digest* commented that “condemnation of the act seems to be limited only by the restrictions of the English language.”²⁰ The *Lusitania* attack was denounced as a “foul deed of enormous barbarity” by the *Philadelphia Press*, and former president Theodore Roosevelt was quoted as saying, “[it is] inconceivable that we should refrain from taking action on this matter.”²¹ Wilson and his advisers agonized over an appropriate response to Germany, understanding the inflammatory sentiment of ordinary citizens, yet still wishing to maintain American neutrality. He ultimately decided to write a series of notes that reiterated his expectations of neutral trading rights and reprimanded Germany for violating them. Considering the magnitude of the incident, this was a weak diplomatic response from the Americans. Though Wilson preached his commitment in the *Lusitania* notes to hold Germany to “a strict accountability for any infringement of [neutral] rights, intentional or incidental,” rhetoric alone was not a practical method of ensuring future German cooperation.²² Instead of employing decisive action to censure Germany for its transgression, Wilson chose to pursue a feeble strategy of letter-writing just to emphasize his dedication to staying peaceful.

Wilson’s inflexible foreign policy, as well as Germany’s continuation of U-boat warfare, set the two nations on a diplomatic collision course. In the month following the *Lusitania* crisis, Lansing, the newly promoted *Secretary* of State, and Edward House, Wilson’s two principal advisers, helped him

make two critical decisions that would impact the way he dealt with subsequent developments in the war.²³ He decided to pursue independent policies with the Allied and Central Powers, a departure from his original plan to send one consistent message to all belligerents. Additionally, Wilson accompanied his verbal condemnation of U-boat warfare with “an implied threat of war,” which he never came close to issuing to the Allied Powers.²⁴ His seemingly harsh response was motivated by an interest in preserving America’s public image. Wilson and his advisers thought that “any appearance of concession or compromise [to Germany] would taint the reputation, the dignity, or the honor of the nation.”²⁵ In the third and final *Lusitania* note, published in July 1915, Wilson wrote that he was “keenly disappointed to find that [Germany] regards itself as in large degree exempt” from international codes of conduct.²⁶ Wilson apparently no longer saw the Germans as a willing partner in peace negotiations, and began to shift his focus to protecting American interests. He asserted his intention to continue fighting for freedom of the seas “without compromise and at any cost.”²⁷ Germany’s U-boat campaign would repeatedly test his commitment to those words.



Untergang der *Lusitania* [Sinking of the *Lusitania*] (1915)
Source: Kommando der Volksmarine - Bildbestand, Deutsches Bundesarchiv

In spite of Wilson’s emphatic claim, he did not react to subsequent German U-boat crises with the strength he had implied. On August 19, 1915, the British ship *Arabic* was torpedoed and sunk by a submarine in what Wilson interpreted as “a clear affront to his principles.”²⁸ Still hoping for the opportunity to mediate a peace settlement, Wilson did not want to take any deliberate action to insult Germany, compromising the very dignity and honor that he’d recently sworn to protect. Frustrated by the president’s pacifism, House complained that “further notes would disappoint our people and would cause something of derision abroad. In view of what has been said... it is clearly up to this Government to act.”²⁹ House voiced a concern shared by many Americans, who thought Wilson’s adamant peace strategy was no longer compatible with defending US interests abroad.

“More Precious Than Peace”

Wilson, however, resisted bringing his Cabinet together to discuss the incident. As he explained to Lansing, “haste in the matter would be likely to give the country the wrong impression, I fear, with regard to our frame of mind.”³⁰ This comment notwithstanding, Wilson’s reluctance to act decisively should not be interpreted as an attempt to defend Germany from his hawkish advisers. He was equally annoyed by the crisis, telling his fiancée, Edith Bolling Galt, that “the Germans are blood-mad. You notice the *Arabic* was bound out from Liverpool.”³¹ To Wilson, Germany was exhibiting unjustifiable obstinacy in its efforts to disrupt neutral trade, even attacking ships traveling away from the Allies. But unlike Lansing and House, the president retained the hope that he could “bring [the Germans] collectively to their senses, to a realization of moral obligations, and to a recognition of the interests of humanity.”³² His own preoccupation with morality and justice mistakenly led him to believe that the fighting Europeans shared his principles, and—more crucially—that they valued them more than actually winning the war. This assumption was far too idealistic, and Wilson’s ongoing efforts to mediate a peace settlement did not quell the submarine warfare.

peers. While they advocated an offensive strategy and saw it as long overdue, Wilson’s foreign policy remained fully reactive. Other than committing to his vigorous defense preparation plan, he maintained the status quo and resisted deviating from the official position of American neutrality.

The attack on the *Sussex* on March 24, 1916 marked a turning point in the crisis. All evidence seemed to indicate that Germany was responsible for torpedoing the boat, and the affair incited public outrage akin to the *Lusitania*. Unlike the *Lusitania* incident, however, Wilson was slow to denounce Germany for its actions, and Britain consequently felt betrayed by his lack of immediate response. A letter from Page informed Wilson that the British had “made up their minds that we can be of no use for any virile action... because we are so divided and so ‘soft’ that, when action is required, we do not even keep our own pledge, made of our own volition.”³⁷ Lansing, too, could not understand Wilson’s continued hesitation to condemn the latest U-boat attack. “We can no longer temporize in the matter of submarine warfare,” wrote Lansing, “when Americans are being killed, wounded, or endangered by the illegal and inhuman conduct of the Ger-

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Continued interference with neutral trading rights finally provoked Wilson to alter American policy, at least in practice. Though he maintained an official stance of neutrality, he acknowledged in November 1915 that “we have it in mind to be prepared, not for war, but only for defense.”³³ Wilson unveiled his plan to Congress in December, stating, “[the war] has extended its threatening and sinister scope [across] every quarter of the globe, not excepting our own hemisphere.”³⁴ Clearly, he anticipated a time when American involvement in the conflict could no longer be postponed or evaded. Though Germany had disavowed the sinking of the *Arabic* and stressed that German U-boat commanders would not cause similar incidents, Austria-Hungary’s U-boat warfare independently antagonized the United States. The sinking of the Italian *Ancona*, for example, was perceived by Wilson as the “wanton slaughter of defenseless noncombatants,” and the Central Powers’ refusal to terminate their submarine policy weighed heavily on the president.³⁵ He consulted his advisers, who suggested severing diplomatic relations with Germany entirely. Lansing in particular thought that the ongoing negotiations with the German ambassador were utter nonsense; he expressed to Wilson that he found them “purely dilatory and [offering] no possible middle ground for an agreement.”³⁶ Still, Wilson’s foreign policy remained a strategy of patience and indecision, much to the chagrin of his

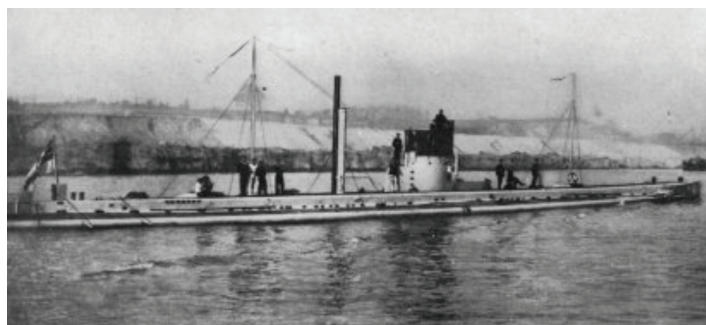
mans.”³⁸ Eventually, Wilson was persuaded to threaten Germany with a break in diplomatic relations. When addressing Congress about the *Sussex*, he explained that German submarines “have attacked merchant ships with greater and greater activity... in a way that has grown more ruthless and indiscriminate.”³⁹ These repeat offenses left him “no choice but to sever diplomatic relations with the Government of the German Empire” unless Germany issued an immediate apology for the attacks.⁴⁰ Despite his strong rhetoric, none of Wilson’s previous actions in the submarine crises provided evidence that he would follow through on his threat. Presumably recognizing this, Germany issued a declaration that no merchant vessels would be attacked without warning, doing the bare minimum to appease Wilson and temporarily improve the situation. However, the drama generated by the U-boat campaign was far from over.

THE TIPPING POINT

Late the following January, Germany announced its intention to resume unrestricted submarine warfare, a policy that, in effect, it had been pursuing throughout the war. A formal declaration, however, marked the end of possible negotiations between Wilson and the German government. Wilson, who was still trying to mediate peace between the belligerents, saw the announcement as “a terrible shock” and

thought that unrestricted submarine warfare “was equivalent to declaring total maritime war against all neutral powers.”⁴¹ Wilson seemed to be the only one still surprised by Germany’s tactics, and he was gravely offended by the Germans’ “campaign of terror.”⁴² This led Wilson to finally sever diplomatic relations between the United States and Germany, almost a full year after he had initially threatened to break them. Unrestricted submarine warfare was seen as the ultimate violation of American neutrality, and no letters from Wilson could have satisfied the American people as a response to the policy. On February 3, 1917, the president informed Congress of his decision to terminate diplomatic relations with Germany. Wilson had “no alternative consistent with the dignity and honor of the United States but to take the course which [he] announced that it would take” after the *Sussex*.⁴³ A remark about handing the German ambassador his passports was met with “a furious round of applause.”⁴⁴ Though Wilson had long resisted pressure from his advisers and the public to punish Germany for its disgraceful wartime practices, the peak of the U-boat campaign finally toppled his pacifism.

From the break in diplomatic relations, it was only a matter of time before the US formally entered World War I. The brutal U-boat campaign continued; in the first three weeks of February, the Central Powers sunk 128 ships (40 of which were neutral), destroyed over 250,000 tons of goods, and cost the American Line \$3,000,000 in damages.⁴⁵ Germany continued to sink American vessels well into March. Meanwhile, US news coverage grouped the attacks together, creating the illusion that the Germans were actively attempting to provoke the US into making a declaration of war.⁴⁶ Attacks on the clearly marked American oil tanker, the *Healdton*, and on the armed American steamer *Aztec* led Wilson to call for a Congressional assembly.⁴⁷ The Germans’ apparent disregard for neutrality, property rights, and even human life repelled Wilson from any further attempts to negotiate with them. “It is a fearful thing to lead this great peaceful people into war, into the most terrible and disastrous of all wars,” Wilson explained to Congress, “but the right is more precious than peace.”⁴⁸ He emphasized America’s role as a peacekeeper, and its responsibility to defend human rights in the face of German aggression. Simply maintaining armed neutrality was no longer realistic. As Wilson said, “Property can be paid for; the lives of peaceful and innocent people cannot be. The present German submarine warfare against commerce is a warfare against mankind. It is a war against all nations.”⁴⁹ In his mind, American involvement in the war was the only morally justifiable choice; the US could no longer serve as a passive example of peace, but rather had to take an active role



German submarine U9 (1914)

Source: Author Unknown (Wikimedia Commons)

in shaping it. The U-boat campaign left Wilson no choice but to declare war on Germany. Despite his own peacekeeping initiatives, reluctance to join the war, and noncommittal diplomacy, there was a point when even Wilson could not postpone American involvement in the conflict.

Unrestricted U-boat warfare was the catalyst for Wilson’s severance of US-German diplomatic relations, but only because it was preceded by two years’ worth of assaults on American neutrality. Wilson kept the US out of the war for as long as he believed that there was a chance, however small, of negotiating peace between the belligerent powers. In doing so, he left the ultimate decision of peace or war with Berlin. Germany did not share Wilson’s desire to terminate the war for any cause other than victory, and when the military found a naval strategy that worked—submarine warfare—they exploited it without regard to the violations of international law that Wilson found so reprehensible. It is important to remember that Wilson’s split from Germany was not motivated by a handful of incidents that provoked outrage in the US. There were hundreds of sunk vessels, thousands of lives lost, and too few concessions on the part of Germany to sufficiently minimize the risks of U-boat warfare to neutrals.

Wilson grappled on a daily basis with his desire to mediate peace and his responsibility to protect American interests, but his cautious diplomacy gave the Germans the power to control the situation. He did not adequately supplement his tough rhetoric toward Germany with force, damaging his credibility and inaccurately representing the wishes of the American people. Wilson’s foreign policy was dictated by his ideals of peace and justice, while Germany’s was motivated by the life-or-death reality of fighting a world war. While the idealistic president made every effort to prevent engaging the US in the conflict, he ultimately could not defend his vision of peace against Germany’s frequent assaults on American lives and property. 🏛️

Endnotes

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