

The world must be made safe for democracy...



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Author ★ President Woodrow Wilson

Context ★ When World War I began, the United States stayed neutral and continued to trade with Europe, although a British blockade prevented significant trade with Germany. On February 1, 1917, the German government announced that it would sink all ships approaching the British Isles, despite an earlier promise to refrain from unrestricted submarine warfare. To distract the U.S., the Germans secretly tried to convince Mexico to join the war. Soon after Wilson outlined his case for war to Congress. Four days later, the United States officially declared war on Germany.

I have called the Congress into extraordinary session

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

On the 3rd of February last, I officially laid before you the extraordinary announcement of the Imperial German government that on and after the 1st day of February it was its purpose to put aside all **restraints** of law or of humanity and use its submarines to sink every vessel that sought to approach either the ports of Great Britain and Ireland or the western coasts of Europe or any of the ports controlled by the enemies of Germany within the Mediterranean.

That had seemed to be the **object** of the German submarine warfare earlier in the war, but since April of last year the Imperial government had somewhat restrained the commanders of its undersea craft in **conformity** with **its promise** then given to us that passenger boats should not be sunk and that due warning would be given to all other vessels which its submarines might seek to destroy, when no resistance was offered or escape attempted, and care taken that their crews were given at least a fair chance to save their lives in their open boats.



International law had its origin in the attempt to set up some law which would be respected and observed upon the seas, where no nation had right of **dominion** and where lay the **free highways** of the world. By painful stage after stage has that **law** been built up, with **meager** enough results, indeed, after all was accomplished that could be accomplished, but always with a clear view, at least, of what the heart and **conscience** of mankind demanded.

This minimum of **right** the German government has swept aside under the plea of **retaliation** and necessity and because it had no weapons which it could

permissible
allowed

restraints; restrained
limits; limited

object
goal

conformity
agreement

its promise
In order to avoid war with the United States after the Lusitania was sunk in 1915, Germany had agreed to operate its submarines according to traditional blockading rules.

dominion
agreement

free highways
transportation route

law
International treaties on blockade laws stated that merchant ships of neutrals be warned before being attacked.

meager
unimpressive

conscience
moral sense

right
justice

retaliation
Germany justified unrestricted submarine warfare by pointing to violations of blockade law by the British.

use at sea except these which it is impossible to employ as it is employing them without throwing to the winds all **scruples** of humanity or of respect for the **understandings** that were supposed to underlie the **intercourse** of the world. I am not now thinking of the loss of property involved, **immense** and serious as that is, but only of the **wanton** and wholesale destruction of the lives of **noncombatants**, men, women, and children, engaged in pursuits which have always, even in the darkest periods of modern history, been deemed innocent and legitimate. Property can be paid for; the lives of peaceful and innocent people cannot be.

The present German submarine warfare against **commerce** is a warfare against mankind. It is a war against all nations. American ships have been sunk, American lives taken in ways which it has stirred us very deeply to learn of; but the ships and people of other neutral and friendly nations have been sunk and overwhelmed in the waters in the same way. There has been no discrimination. The challenge is to all mankind.



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

What this will involve is clear. It will involve the **utmost practicable** cooperation in **counsel** and action with the **governments now at war** with Germany and, as incident to that, the extension to those governments of the most **liberal** financial credits, in order that our resources may so far as possible be added to theirs. It will involve the organization and **mobilization** of all the material resources of the country to supply the materials of war and serve the **incidental** needs of the nation in the most abundant and yet the most economical and efficient way possible. It will involve the immediate full equipment of the Navy in all respects but particularly in supplying it with the best means of dealing with the enemy's submarines. It will involve the immediate addition to the armed forces of the United States already provided for by law in case of war at least 500,000 men, who should, in my opinion, be chosen upon the principle of **universal liability** to service, and also the authorization of subsequent additional **increments** of equal force so soon as they may be needed and can be handled in training.



We have no quarrel with the German people. We have no feeling toward them but one of sympathy and friendship. It was not upon their impulse that their government acted in entering this war. It was not with their previous knowledge or approval. It was a war determined upon as wars used to be

scruples

moral doubt

understandings

treaties, agreements

intercourse

dealings

immense

huge

wanton

senseless

noncombatants

people not involved in fighting

commerce

trade

solemn

serious

grave

serious

belligerent

nation at war

exert

apply

[bring] to terms

force to surrender

utmost practicable

most practical

counsel

advice

governments now at war

The United States never signed a formal treaty of alliance with the European Allies. Instead it insisted that it was fighting as a co-belligerent, meaning it wasn't bound by any promises made by the other Allies.

liberal

generous

mobilization

preparation for war

incidental

additional

universal liability

in this case, all men could be drafted for military services

increments

increases

determined upon in the old, unhappy days when peoples were nowhere consulted by their rulers and wars were provoked and waged in the interest of **dynasties** or of little groups of ambitious men who were accustomed to use their fellowmen as pawns and tools.

Self-governed nations do not fill their neighbor states with spies or set the course of **intrigue** to bring about some critical **posture of affairs** which will give them an opportunity to strike and make conquest. Such designs can be successfully worked out only under cover and where no one has the right to ask questions. Cunningly **contrived** plans of deception or **aggression**, carried, it may be, from generation to generation, can be worked out and kept from the light only within the privacy of **courts** or behind the carefully guarded **confidences** of a narrow and privileged class. They are happily impossible where public opinion commands and insists upon full information concerning all the nation's affairs.

A **steadfast concert** for peace can never be maintained except by a partnership of democratic nations. No **autocratic** government could be trusted to keep faith within it or observe its **covenants**. It must be a league of honor, a partnership of opinion. Intrigue would eat its **vitals** away; the plottings of inner circles who could plan what they would and render account to no one would be a corruption seated at its very heart. Only free peoples can hold their purpose and their honor steady to a common end and prefer the interests of mankind to any narrow interest of their own.

Does not every American feel that **assurance** has been added to our hope for the future peace of the world by the wonderful and **heartening** things that have been happening within the last few weeks in **Russia**? Russia was known by those who knew it best to have been always in fact democratic at heart... The autocracy that crowned the summit of her political structure, long as it had stood and terrible as was the reality of its power, was not in fact Russian in origin, character, or purpose; and now it has been shaken off and the great, generous Russian people have been added in all their naive majesty and might to the forces that are fighting for freedom in the world, for justice, and for peace. Here is a fit partner for a League of Honor.

One of the things that has served to convince us that the **Prussian autocracy** was not and could never be our friend is that from the very outset of the present war it has filled our **unsuspecting** communities and even our offices of government with spies and set criminal intrigues everywhere **afoot** against our national unity of counsel, our peace within and without, our industries and our commerce...Even in checking these things and trying to **extirpate** them, we have sought to put the most generous interpretation possible upon them because we knew that their source lay, not in any hostile feeling or purpose of the German people toward us (who were no doubt as ignorant of them as we ourselves were) but only in the selfish designs of a government that did what it pleased and told its people nothing. But they have played their part in serving to convince us at last that that government entertains no real friendship for us and means to act against our peace and security at its convenience. That it means to stir up enemies against us at our very doors the **intercepted note** to the German **minister** at Mexico City is **eloquent** evidence.

dynasties
ruling families

intrigue
plotting

posture of affairs
policy

contrived
crafted

aggression
attack

courts
in this case, the groups surrounding kings

confidences
secrets

steadfast concert
lasting organization

autocratic; autocracy
dictatorial; dictatorship

covenants
agreements

vitals
essential inner workings

assurance
confidence

heartening
hopeful

Russia
A month earlier, a revolution had deposed the Russian tsar (emperor), briefly promising a democratic Russia.

Prussian autocracy
Prussia was the dominant kingdom of the German Empire with the King of Prussia also the German Emperor (Kaiser). However, Wilson is not accurately describing Germany or Prussia, both of which were constitutional monarchies, although the King-Emperor had almost full control over foreign and military affairs.

unsuspecting
unaware, not suspicious

afoot
in the works

extirpate
remove

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

The world must be made safe for democracy. Its peace must be planted upon the tested foundations of political liberty. We have no selfish ends to serve. We desire no conquest, no dominion. We seek no **indemnities** for ourselves, no material compensation for the sacrifices we shall freely make. We are but one of the champions of the rights of mankind. We shall be satisfied when those rights have been made as secure as the faith and the freedom of nations can make them.



We have borne with their [Germany's] present government through all these bitter months because of that friendship—exercising a patience and **forbearance** which would otherwise have been impossible. We shall, happily, still have an opportunity to prove that friendship in our daily attitude and actions toward the millions of men and women of German birth and **native** sympathy who live among us and share our life, and we shall be proud to prove it toward all who are in fact loyal to their neighbors and to the government in the hour of test. They are, most of them, as true and loyal Americans as if they had never known any, other **fealty** or allegiance. They will be **prompt** to stand with us in **rebuking** and restraining the few who may be of a different mind and purpose. If there should be disloyalty, it will be dealt with with a firm hand of stern **repression**; but, if it lifts its head at all, it will lift it only here and there and without **countenance** except from a lawless and **malignant** few.

It is a distressing and oppressive duty, **gentlemen of the Congress**, which I have performed in thus addressing you. There are, it may be, many months of fiery trial and sacrifice ahead of us. It is a fearful thing to lead this great peaceful people into war, into the most terrible and disastrous of all wars, civilization itself seeming to be in the balance. But the right is more precious than peace, and we shall fight for the things which we have always carried nearest our hearts—for democracy, for the right of those who submit to authority to have a voice in their own governments, for the rights and liberties of small nations, for a universal dominion of right by such a concert of free peoples as shall bring peace and safety to all nations and make the world itself at last free.

To such a task we can dedicate our lives and our fortunes, everything that we are and everything that we have, with the pride of those who know that the day has come when America is privileged to spend her blood and her might for the principles that gave her birth and happiness and the peace which she has treasured. God helping her, she can do no other.

intercepted note

The British had decoded the German note to Mexico, the Zimmerman Telegram, before passing on the information to Wilson.

minister

ambassador

eloquent

convincing

gage

challenge

nullify

eliminate

pretensions; pretense

false sense of importance

indemnities

payment for damages

forbearance

tolerance

native

natural

fealty

loyalty

prompt

quick

rebuking

punishing

repression

force, control

countenance

support

malignant

evil

gentlemen of the Congress

Wilson was ignoring, probably unintentionally, the first woman elected Congress—Jeanette Rankin of Montana, who had taken her place a month earlier. Coincidentally, Congresswoman Rankin would vote against the war.