The United States of America Formally Declares War

National Debate, Congressional Contention, and a Presidential Address Prompt America into World War I

The Changing European Continent

The Great War Forever Shifts the Balance of Power

- A century ago, the great powers of Europe became engulfed in what was then called the Great War.
- It signaled a new age in armed conflict in which mass armies supported by industrial mass production brought an unprecedented level of killing power to the battlefield.
- By the time the United States entered the Great War in 1917, the combatants were waging war on a scale never before seen in history.
- The experience defined a generation, cast a long shadow across the twentieth century and marked a new era in American foreign policy.
- In addition to a tremendous loss of life, the war shattered Europe, bringing revolution, the collapse of long-standing empires, and economic turmoil, as well as the birth of new nation-states and the rise of totalitarian movements.

The Precipice of War

America Must Decide upon Entry and Allegiance in the Great War

- The resumption of unrestricted German submarine warfare, the interception of the Zimmermann Telegram, and growing concern over the German atrocities committed against Belgians drew the United States to the precipice of entry into the war.
- The rallying cry for U.S. entry into war was based on President Woodrow Wilson's ideals of promoting democracy worldwide as opposed to the prevailing monarchies of the time that fundamentally shaped the political landscapes of Europe.
- While Britain and France retained monarch dignitaries, they were considered by the U.S. to be functional democracies.
- Successful British propaganda designed to draw the United States in as allies, as well as cultural and financial ties, resulted in the U.S.-British partnership.
- Additionally, lobbying on the part of American war profiteers who had made a fortune during the European war selling arms and making loans to the Allies pressured the U.S.-British alliance.
- On April 2, 1917, President Wilson asked Congress to declare war on Germany. Addressing the reasons the U.S. should go to war, the president asserted, "The world must be made safe for democracy."
- In the war address, President Wilson condemned German submarine attacks on U.S. and other neutral shipping vessels. He also argued that "autocratic governments, such as the German regime, with their habitual intrigue, unrestrained by the will of their people, were a threat to free and self-governing nations."
- On April 4, 1917, after contested debate, Congress passed the resolution to declare war.

THE BATTLE FRONTS OF EUROPE

IT is not always realised how extensive are the battle fronts which the Allies are holding in Europe. In this map they are shown drawn to scale upon a map of the United States. It will be seen that the total battle front amounts to 2,195 miles—a distance only 95 miles less than that from Chicago to San Francisco, while the battle front in the West, where Germany has massed her heaviest forces, is nearly half the distance from New York to Chicago.

Despite the victories which have crowned the Allied arms, their task still remains a heavy one, and it will need every ounce of effort which they, and their American comrades, can put into the struggle to defeat the sinister aims of Prussian militarism.

Division of Maps
DEC 3 1948
Library of Congress

Getting Perspective: The Central Powers Push to Claim New Lands

The nation in arms by Franklin K. Lane, U.S. Secretary of the Interior

Audio

We are fighting Germany because she sought to terrorize us and then to fool us. We could not believe that Germany would do what she said she would do upon the seas. Yet, we still hear the piteous cries of children coming out, out of the sea where the Lusitania went down, and Germany has never asked forgiveness of the world. We saw the Sussex sunk crowded with the sons and daughters of neutral nations. We saw ship after ship sent to the bottom -- ships of mercy bound out of America for the Belgian's starving -- ships carrying the Red Cross, and laden with the wounded of all nations -- ships carrying food and clothing to friendly, harmless, terrorized people -- ships flying the stars and stripes sent to the bottom hundred of miles from shore, manned by American seamen, murdered against all law, without warning.

We believed Germany's promise that she would respect the neutral flag and the rights of neutrals, and we held our anger and outrage in check. But now we see that she was holding us off with fair promises until she could build her huge fleet of submarines. For when spring came, she blew her promise into the air, just as at the beginning of the war she had torn up that scrap of paper. Then we saw clearly that there was but one law for Germany -- her will to rule. We are fighting Germany because she violated our confidence. Paid German spies filled our cities. Officials of her government, received as the guests of this nation, lived with us to bribe and terrorize, defying our law and the law of nations. We are fighting Germany because while we were yet her friends, the only great power that still held hands off, she sent the Zimmermann note, calling to her aid Mexico, our southern neighbor, and hoping to lure Japan, our western neighbor, into war against this nation of peace.

The nation that would do these things proclaims the gospel that government has no conscience. And this doctrine cannot live or else democracy must die. For the nations of the world must keep faith. There can be no living for us in a world where the state has no conscience, no reverence for the things of the spirit, no respect for international law, no mercy for those who fall before its force.

To Enter or Not to Enter

National Debate Erupts Over U.S. Entry into the Great War

- With the world at war, American debate over entering the conflict centered on the issue of military preparedness and the suitability of making financial loans and selling weapons overseas.
- Some Americans feared that a large army would jeopardize U.S. democracy and an expanded military arsenal would threaten other countries. This fear of militarism reinforced a growing domestic antagonism toward Germany, a well-armed and authoritarian monarchy.
- The revolution in Mexico and skirmishes along the southwestern border made the United States seem unready to defend itself, thus preparedness advocates believed that defending the nations security and physical borders outweighed other considerations.
- Other war opponents argued that the greed of munitions makers, bankers, and various profiteers might draw America into an expanded conflict for their own profit.
- As the death toll rose across Europe, peace activists, pacifists, and others rallied against the inevitable loss of life and economic drain that going to war would inflict on the nation.

Profiting from the War

Arguments Revealing American Interests in the European War

- Many communities with large shipping ports throughout the country stood to profit from wartime production.
- Initially many Americans celebrated the economic opportunities the war presented.
- Increased demand and pricing on goods allowed the nation's businesses to profit greatly during World War I.
- However, as a result of the war effort American consumers experienced price gouging and shortages as the costs of food, goods, and services inflated.

Library of Congress

Peace Movements

Advocating for Peace Over Preparedness

Library of Congress

Document

- Prominent organizations such as the Women's Peace Party, opposed American military intervention and the preparedness movement.
- Party leaders argued that preparations against threats from Europe, through the build up of the U.S. military, would only lead to arms races that would cause more problems than they solved.
- Peace advocates believed military preparations would create an international atmosphere of rivalry, suspicion, and increased taxation.
- Pacifists encouraged President Wilson to concentrate his efforts on the opportunity to establish permanent peace that the world crisis offered rather than escalate international tensions.

Anti War Opposition

The "War" Against the War

- As the war drew near, concern throughout the country regarding a large military and a society regimented by its preparations for war.
- Groups such as the Anti-War League of the District of Columbia opposed the preparedness movement and argued that the buildup of a nation's armed forces initially spurred the war in Europe.
- Mounting fears over a growing U.S. armed forces bringing a militarized culture to the United States was perceived by some as a threat to American values.

[1916?]

Neutral "War against War" Non Partisan

The Anti-War League

OF THE

District of Columbia

WILL HOLD

A big Peace Meeting in Bethesda Hall

On Rockville Electric Line

BETHESDA, MD.

Thursday, December 16th, 8:00 P. M.

Rev. Martin L. O'Donoghue and Wm. V. Mahoney

Will deliver brief and intensely interesting speeches against what it termed "Preparedness"

One Congressman has Promised to address us.

A prominent woman suffragist will also speak. Watch the Newspapers for further particulars.

ADMISSION FREE

You are invited to be present and tell your friends that THIS WILL BE THE BIG MEETING OF THE YEAR at Bethesda, Md.

Ladies welcome, free literature on the Peace question can be obtained after the meeting. Questions will be answered by the speakers.

The hysterical demand for Preparedness in the thin veil for covering a gigantic plan to stampede this nation into adopting European Militarism, all for the sake of huge profits to war speculators and munitions manufacturers. Hear both sides, come to this meeting and get the facts.

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Document

Forging Alliances

The United States Sides with Britain and Her Allies

To Slay the Serpent

On the eve of the United States joining the war effort, Minerva, the Goddess of war and knowledge representing the civilized world, stands ready to slay Kaiser Wilhelm II, the serpent suppressing Europe.

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The Main Players

Germany- Kaiser Wilhelm II

Britain- Prime Minister Lloyd George

France- Prime Minister Georges Clemenceau

Russia- Czar Nicholas II

Italy- Premier Vittorio Orlando

United States- President Woodrow Wilson

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Library of Congress

Hyphenated Americans

Declaring Fidelity to the United States of America and its Allies

- The coming of World War I brought with it a backlash against German culture in the United States.
- In 1917 one in every three Americans had either been born abroad or had at least one foreign-born parent, a phenomenon captured in the term "Hyphenated Americans."
- The hyphen could be characterized as a bridge between two cultures or a measure of divided loyalties.
- Many German Americans struggled with their feelings, realizing that sympathy for their homeland appeared to conflict with loyalty to the United States.

Audio

A Warning to German Americans

DN-0069264, Chicago Daily News negatives collection, Chicago History Museum

"Every citizen must declare himself American — or traitor!"

Ambassador James W. Gerard

Advocates for War

The German Threat to Liberal Systems of Government

- President Wilson and his cabinet met on March 20, 1917, to discuss the question of declaring war.
- Secretary of State Robert Lansing urged war, but he did not believe the United States should go to war solely because German submarines had sunk U.S. ships and killed Americans.
- In his account of the cabinet meeting discussion, Lansing related how he tried to convince the president of the duty "to suppress an autocratic government like Germany because of its atrocious character and because it was a menace to the national safety of this country and of all other countries with liberal systems of government."

Opposition to War

Congressional Debate: Fearing an Autocratic Peace

Newberry Library

- Opposition in Congress to the pending Declaration of War centered around the concern that the war would not be fought to further democratic ideals.
- Some senators opposed American entry on the grounds that the Allies were contributing to the same tyranny as the Central Powers.
- Congressmen argued that the United States was entering into the compact of war without any knowledge of the extent to which it was committing to the foreign policies of the Allies and that while America may declare it was a war for democracy, if the Allies partitioned smaller nations, the United States would be party to autocratic peace.

President Wilson Before Congress

April 2, 1917

National Archives

President Wilson Before Congress

The Atlanta Journal. SPECIAL WAR EXTRA

VOL. XXXV. NO. 41. ATLANTA, GA., FRIDAY EVENING, APRIL 6, 1917. PRICE 3

WILSON HAS SIGNED DECLARATION OF

WAR

BRAZIL MAY ENTER WAR TO AID U. S.

Situation Most Grave, Declares Foreign Secretary Muller—South American Country to Seize Ships

GERMAN PRESS IS BITTER AGAINST U. S. AND WILSON

Lokal Anzeiger Says President Tells an Untruth—Count Reventlow and Others Abuse Americans in Attacks

ALLIES' GRIP NOT BROKEN BY TEUTON ASSAULTS

Picked Troops Hurled Against French Line Northeast of Rheims in Desperate Effort to Relieve Pressure

CONSECRATES SERVICE OF GEORGIA TO U. S.

Congressman W. S. Howard Tells House State Is Ready to Do Its Part in War on Kaiser

LADY OF MONTANA, IN TEARS, VOTES AGAINST THE WAR

"I Want to Stand by My Country, but I Can't Vote for War," Woman Congressman Sobbed

WASHINGTON, April 6.—President Wilson has signed the war declaration and the United States is now at war against Germany.

The senate met at noon and Vice President Marshall immediately affixed his signature to the resolution declaring state of war exists between the two countries. President Wilson's signature was placed on the resolution immediately after Mr. Marshall signed it. The resolution had passed the house early this morning and the senate had adopted it late Wednesday night.

The house voted 373 to 50 for war; senate 82 to 6.

Budget of $3,401,000,000 asked for army and navy.

Bond issue of three and a half billion proposed.

German ships in American ports seized.

Thirty-two thousand industrial plants offered for government service.

Army bill calls for:

Regular army full strength—287,846 men.

National guard full strength—440,000.

Two half million units by draft under universal service plan, 1,000,000.

Total, 1,726,846.

Authorized strength of navy increased from 87,000 to 150,000 men; marines from 17,500 to 30,000.

Sinking of Steamer Is Reported Officially

British Steamer Cannizaro Torpedoed Without Warning

U. S. ENTERS WAR FOR HUMANITY ON GOOD FRIDAY

Resignation of Austrian Minister Not Accepted

Effigies of Senators Hung in Washington

Funeral of Mr. Ansley Will Be Held Saturday

"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 see no indemnities for ourselves, no material compensation for the sacrifices we shall freely make."

Library of Congress

Preparing the Nation for World War I

President Wilson Now Favors a U.S. Role in War in Europe

- In his speech before Congress, Wilson laid out evidence of why the United States should now join its Allies, Great Britain and France, in the European war that had been raging since August 1914—at the cost of enormous bloodshed and destruction with no end in sight.

- The president described attacks by German spies as well as U-boats targeting medical ships and vessels carrying relief supplies to Belgium which were fair game to enemy sea hunters.

- He proclaimed this was "warfare against mankind," and assured his audience that "the United States could not choose the path of submission and suffer the most sacred rights of our nation and our people to be ignored or violated."

- Wilson advised that Congress "declare the recent course of Imperial German Government to be in fact nothing less than war against the government and people of the United States."

- In his address, the president outlined the war aims, and stressed that the nation's motive "will not be revenge or the victorious assertion of the physical might of the nation, but only the vindication of right, human right, of which we are only a single champion."

- Furthermore, the president declared, "there is one choice we cannot make, we are incapable of making," and that is "we will not choose the path of submission."

Image

Legislative versus Executive Branches

Congress Backs the President Despite Ongoing Disagreement

National Archives

- The Great War in Europe was proving to be a cataclysmic event, which spurred Congress to address the nation's role on the world stage.
- As foreign aggression increasingly threatened national security, Congress refined its isolationist stance by declaring war on its enemies.
- To prepare the country for entry into World War I, Congress debated and passed legislation to recruit citizens to serve their country, expand the U.S. citizenry and their rights, regulate the domestic economy, and define national loyalty. These laws forever changed the nation and the everyday lives of all Americans.

Library of Congress

"We are going to war… to vindicate our honor and to maintain our independence as a great nation. We are going to war… in defense of humanity."

—Senator Gilbert Hitchcock of Nebraska, Speech to the U.S. Senate, April 4, 1917

America Goes Over

Silent Footage: The U.S. Army Signal Corps Official Films

Run Time: 54 Minutes Video

Extension Activity: The Military Lens

Examining Civic Duty, Conscription, and Enlistment

Conscription versus Enlistment

The Selective Service Act of 1917

- Less than six weeks after the United States entered World War I, Congress narrowly passed the Selective Service Act of 1917, giving the president power to draft men for war service.
- The act authorized the conscription of military manpower for the war effort so that the United States did not have to rely solely on volunteers as it was implausible to raise a sufficient number of soldiers from all sections of society in equal percentages by voluntary enlistment.
- Many American citizens believed it was their patriotic duty to support the war effort. The draft was well-received with relatively low rates of draft dodging.
- More than 1.3 million men and 20,000 women enlisted in the armed forces. Though some Americans opposed U.S. entry into the war, many believed they had a civic duty to support the war effort. U.S. government propaganda sought to mobilize the American citizenry through appeals to patriotism and civic duty, and by linking U.S. democracy with support for the democracies of Western Europe.

National Archives

National Registration Day

June 5, 1917

Library of Congress

Form 1 744 881 REGISTRATION CARD No. 86

1 Name in full Irving Berlin (Given name) (Family name) Age, in yrs. 39

2 Home address 30 West 70 St N.Y.C. (No.) (Street) (City) (State)

3 Date of birth May 11 1888 (Month) (Day) (Year)

4 Are you (1) a natural-born citizen, (2) a naturalized citizen, (3) an alien, (4) or have you declared your intention (specify which)? declarant 1st

5 Where were you born? Mogilev Russia (Town) (State) (Nation)

6 If not a citizen, of what country are you a citizen or subject? Russian

7 What is your present trade, occupation, or office? Composer Music

8 By whom employed? employed by self

Where employed? Grand Theatre Bld

9 Have you a father, mother, wife, child under 12, or a sister or brother under 12, solely dependent on you for support (specify which)? Mother

10 Married or single (which)? Single Race (specify which)? Caucasian

11 What military service have you had? Rank —; branch —; years —; Nation or State —

12 Do you claim exemption from draft (specify grounds)? No

I affirm that I have verified above answers and that they are true.

(Signature or mark) Irving Berlin

If person is of African descent, tear off this corner

National Archives

Have You, Mr. CITIZEN, Bought Your LIBERTY BOND? Go To Your Bank And Get One

British Sink German Sea Raider

SAN BERNARDINO NEWS

SUBSCRIBERS

HUNDREDS OF CONVICTS SET PRISON AFIRE AND THEN BATTLE SOLDIERS

Many Are Hurt In Fight With Troops As Buildings Burn; Number Refuse To Surrender To Authorities

GUARDS ACTIVE

OVER TEN MILLION OF YOUNG MEN REGISTERED FOR NATION'S SERVICE

About 600,000 Will Be Called Out By Early Fall To Take Task—Training In Government's Soldier Camps

SEA ATTACK BY BRITISH WARSHIPS

One German Raider Sinks And Another Is Badly Damaged, Is Report

STRIKE PROBED

BOUGHT YOURS?

REALLY HELPER

WOULD BATTLE

WOULD ASSIST

HONORS GAINED

WOMAN ASSIST

ARREST RESULT

PRISON NAMES

MONEY

California Digitized Newspaper Collection

Library of Congress

On Registration Day all draft-eligible men between ages 21 to 30 were required to publicly register for the Selective Service at their nearest voting stations. The reason for public registration was to make enlistment a community decision rather than individual.

Mobilizing the Home Front

Selective Service Allows All to Serve on the Home Front or the Front Line

National Archives

National Archives

- WWI saw new rules for conscripting recruits into military service offering the opportunity for military age men to serve in various ways within the American Expeditionary Forces, or remain on the home front to keep the country and economy stable.

- As recruits shipped out for training, towns across America held farewell parades, proudly cheering for the departing soldiers.

American Soldiers' in WWI

The War from the Soldiers Perspective

Run Time: 50 Minutes Video

Patriotism Redefined

German Americans Defend America in World War I

- With the war underway, some German Americans reacted by overtly defending their loyalty to the United States and enlisting in the armed forces.
- Others changed the names of their businesses, and sometimes even their own names, in an attempt to conceal German ties and to disappear into mainstream America.
- Ironically, and contrary to Wilson's opinion about divided loyalties, thousands of German Americans fought to defend America in World War I, led by German American General John J. Pershing, whose family had long before changed their name from Pfoerschin.

National Archives

American Military Strength

- For the first time in its history, the nation's military would be derived largely from conscripts rather than volunteers.

- General John J. Pershing crafted the largest army in U.S. history from a force that in 1915 was a fraction of the size of the armies contesting in Europe.

Library of Congress

National Archives

Library of Congress

General Pershing and Party Go to France

Department of Defense Silent Footage from June 1917

Run Time: 5 Minutes Video

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