

## Chapter 10 America Goes to War



**Wilson addressing Congress**

President Wilson won a diplomatic victory by putting heavy pressure on Germany after the Lusitania incident. After months of difficult negotiations, Germany not only renounced submarine warfare, but also paid money to the relatives of the victims. But Wilson's victory for free trade during times of war was only temporary. On January 31, 1917, eighteen months after the sinking of the Lusitania, Germany announced a resumption of unrestricted submarine warfare beginning the very next day. This left the U.S. with the same set of choices it had in 1915 following the sinking of the Lusitania. This time, however, Germany did not back down, and President Wilson asked Congress for a declaration of war.

This chapter asks you to decide whether the U.S. should or should not have gone to war and why it actually did declare war on Germany and her allies. Deciding what the U.S. should have done, learning why she did and deciding why she did it could help you make better judgments about how we resolve similar foreign policy issues today.

### The US's Economic Ties with England and France

The reasons the U.S. allowed England's blockade and not Germany's have already been discussed. This decision led to a very lopsided trade advantage among the warring countries that favored England and France. As indicated by the following chart, the U.S. not only sold goods primarily to England and her allies (mainly France), but increasingly lent these countries the money needed to pay for the goods:

| Trade With England and Germany. 1914 – 16 |         |                                    |
|-------------------------------------------|---------|------------------------------------|
| U.S. Trade with England and Allies        | Year    | U.S. Trade with Germany and Allies |
| \$ 824,000,000                            | 1914    | \$169,000,000                      |
| \$3,214,000,000                           | 1916    | \$1,159,000                        |
| Loans to Allies                           |         | Loans to Germany                   |
| \$2,300,000,000                           | 1914-16 | insignificant                      |

### The War to Save the World for Democracy

From the beginning, President Wilson had tried hard to keep the U.S. out of World War I. He had asked Americans to be neutral in fact as well as in name. As the war proceeded, he tried to maintain America's rights as a neutral nation to trade with both sides. When it appeared that the U.S. might be dragged into the war, he tried to bring about a negotiated settlement that would be fair to all sides. But

the declaration of unrestricted submarine warfare on January 31, and the indiscriminate sinking of ships that followed, convinced Wilson to ask Congress for a declaration of war against a "selfish and autocratic power."

Believing he was forced to fight, Wilson chose the highest possible moral ground on which to base his request for war. Wilson saw Germany's declaration of submarine warfare as an attack on the rights of all nations, great and small. The war he sought would be fought "for the principles of peace and justice in the life of the world as against selfish and autocratic power." While the U.S. had kept out of the war to date, Wilson explained that neutrality was no longer desirable because "the peace of the world is involved and the freedoms of its peoples." Furthermore, President Wilson stated that it was time to fight for:

*...the ultimate peace of the world and for the liberation of its peoples, the German people 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 on the tested foundations of political liberty. We have no selfish ends to serve. We seek no indemnities for ourselves, no material compensation for the sacrifices we shall freely make. We are but one of the champions 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.*

## **A War for Profits and Not Principles**

A strong, but very outspoken minority opposed America's entry into war on the basis that the pressure for the war stemmed from economic interests and not high ideals. These opponents included a well-known reformer George Norris. Norris argued that, "the money of manufacturers of ammunitions and guns and the stockbrokers and bankers with similar interests have controlled the flow of news and created a state of opinion in favor of the U.S. entering the war."

*...Through the instrumentality of [those] who have not only made millions out of the war in the manufacture of munitions, etc., and who would expect to make millions more if our country can be drawn into that catastrophe, a large number of the great newspapers and great news agencies of the country have been controlled and enlisted in the greatest propaganda that the world has ever known, to manufacture sentiment in favor of war. It is now demanded that the American citizens shall be used as insurance policies to guarantee the safe delivery of munitions of war to belligerent nations. The enormous profits of munitions manufacturers, stockbrokers, and bond dealers must be still further created by our entrance into the war. This has brought us to the present moment, when Congress, urged by the president and backed by the artificial sentiment, is about to declare war and engulf our country in the greatest holocaust that the world has ever known.*

*To whom does the war bring prosperity? Not to the soldier who for the munificent compensation of \$16 per month shouldered his musket and goes into the trench, there to shed his blood and to die if necessary; not to the broken-hearted widow who waits for the return of the mangled body of her husband; not to the mother who weeps for the death of her brave boy; not to the little children who shiver with cold, not to the millions of mothers and daughters who carry broken hearts to their graves. War brings no profit to the great mass of common and patriotic citizens. It increases the cost of living of those who work and those who already must strain every effort to keep soul and body together*

## A War to Defend the United States

Shortly before Woodrow Wilson asked Congress to declare war on Germany and Austria, he released a telegram that the British foreign office claimed it had intercepted. Addressed to the German minister in Mexico, the telegram advised him to offer Mexico the territories (including Texas and Arizona) which the U.S. had taken under the Treaty of Guadeloupe Hidalgo in 1848. At the time the cable was released, U.S. troops were about 200 miles inside of Mexico looking for a bandit (Pancho Villa) who had crossed the border and attacked a town in Texas. This dramatic if not necessarily authentic information shocked Americans into fearing German aggression. If nothing else, the U.S. had a real interest in keeping a 'balance of power' in Europe:

*The great majority of Americans know by instinct and by reason that the control of the Atlantic Ocean is vital to the defense of the United States and of the whole Western Hemisphere. They know that for their physical security, that for the continuation of the free way of life, it is necessary that the other shore of the Atlantic Ocean should be held by free, friendly and trustworthy powers.*

*The knowledge that the survival of Britain is necessary to the sure defense of America is as old as the American Republic itself.... Alexander Hamilton knew it in 1797 when Napoleon began his conquest of Europe.... Thomas Jefferson knew it in 1803 when Napoleon was threatening to invade England.*

### Suggested Student Exercises:

1. Which, if any, of the three reasons given for going to war against Germany and her allies justifies our going to war. Support your answer with facts from the unit.
2. Which of the above, do you think was the main reason for the U.S. entering World War I? Support your answer with facts from the unit.