

FROM CHAPTER THREE – CHOOSING WAR

[In January, 1917, Germany ordered its submarines to attack all shipping, including those of neutrals, in the war zones around Britain and France. Doing so, it realized that it risked bringing America into the war.]

Wilson's first response to the notification of unfettered U-boat attacks was to break diplomatic relations with Germany. On February 3, 1917, at 2 p.m., a State Department lawyer arrived at the German Embassy on Massachusetts Avenue. There he formally declared to German Ambassador Bernstorff that because there is "no alternative consistent with the dignity and honor of the United States... The President has, therefore, directed me to announce to your Excellency that all diplomatic relations between the United States and the German Empire are severed."...

Then Wilson waited, almost in seclusion, much of the time, in fact, in his bedroom—a presidential withdrawal absolutely unthinkable today. First he told aides that he could not be disturbed because he had a severe cold; then he just stopped accepting callers, maintaining what Wilson scholar August Heckscher calls an "impenetrable facade." He interacted with the outside world almost exclusively via his wife Edith. From historical accounts, it seems that he was waiting and closely watching, hoping that Germany would do something to give him cause not to take the next step: a declaration of war.

After all, he reasoned, twice before had Berlin reined in U-boat actions after strong Washington protests; perhaps it would happen again. But Berlin no longer was calculating the tradeoffs between the gains from U-boat attacks versus the likelihood of war with America. In essence, the German Kaiser and Chancellor Bethmann-Hollweg both had decided that there no longer were tradeoffs. Manfred Jonas, in his history of U.S.-German relations, explains that the Chancellor was now persuaded that in the past he "had given in more than enough to the American viewpoint and had obtained little or nothing in return." This time Germany was not going to give in.

And Germany did not. With their new battle orders, the U-boats aggressively began patrolling the high seas for Allied ships and in the war zone around Britain for all ships. Two days after the launch of unrestricted submarine warfare, U-boats torpedoed and sank twelve merchantmen, one of them American. On March 18, three more American ships in the war zone—*City of Memphis*, *Illinois* and *Vigilancia*—went down. In all, fourteen Americans died. Meantime, understandably wary of U-boats, American captains balked at braving the war zone; they kept their ships safely in America's home harbors, where goods destined for Britain and France began piling up, prompting frantic calls for supplies from London and Paris. For Wilson, all this was too much to bear.

It was in response to the resumed U-boat attacks that Wilson, on March 20, 1917 met with his cabinet. He asked for, and unanimously received, support for his next step, a call to Congress to convene in special session on April 2, to receive from the president "a communication concerning grave matters of national policy." There was little doubt that this grave matter would be a request for a declaration of war, proclaiming Germany the enemy of the United States.

In many respects, particularly from a century's perspective, that would seem a puzzling development. Germany had not declared war on America. For the thirty-one months since the start of the war, Germany had made numerous concessions and taken numerous steps to persuade America to remain neutral. And when, earlier in the war, U-boats did kill some Americans, they were traveling on belligerent ships at time of war in a war zone. And even when, after the unrestricted submarine campaign had begun and American ships themselves were targeted and torpedoed, those ships were in the war zone, not on the high seas, and were steaming toward Allied ports with cargoes almost certainly beneficial to the Allies...

In Wilson's April 2 speech to Congress requesting that the House and Senate send him a declaration of war to sign, Wilson invoked a catalogue of reasons and motives. Several times did he bring his audience—Members of the House and Senate, the entire Supreme Court and Cabinet, the Diplomatic Corps (with the British, French and Russian ambassadors in formal attire) and scores of distinguished Americans and foreigners—to its feet, filling the House chamber with hurrahs. Some of them were led, unthinkable today, by an arm-waving Chief Justice of the Supreme Court who wore a tiny American flag in his lapel.

Hurrahs too have been offered up over the decades by those many historians who judge Wilson's words one of the nation's great presidential orations. Yet a review of the 2,700-word address now finds it puzzling and troubling. Missing from it is any litany of alleged wrongs committed by Germany against America to warrant America's going to war. Missing is the indictment charging Germany with counts meriting retribution. The standard for such an indictment, of course, is America's Declaration of Independence, listing one after another the many injustices and pains inflicted by England's George III on the colonies. Even today, nearly a quarter-millennium later, that Declaration's indictment rings true, convincing any reader that the colonies had a right and were right to raise an army and revolt. Closer to our time, some twenty-four years after Wilson's speech, Franklin Roosevelt, at the same rostrum, needed point only to the skeletons of American warships still smoldering in Pearl Harbor to make the convincing case that America had to go to war against Japan. There was no question that Japan had attacked America and posed an unacceptable danger to the nation.

But such was missing from Wilson's eloquent and moving plea. All he could point to, and did so repeatedly, was a single German action: deploying U-boats to sink ships in the war zones around Allied ports. America was going to war, said Wilson, because those U-boats had trampled on America's neutrality. Nothing was said about British warships similarly trampling on neutrality by preventing American merchantmen from reaching German ports, even though Wilson had complained as recently as February 2 at a cabinet meeting that "both [sides] had been equally indifferent to the rights of neutrals." Secretary of State Lansing, in fact, later admitted "that in 1917 we had as good, if not better, legal grounds for fighting Britain as for fighting Germany." Wilson, in truth, could not offer a litany of German transgressions against America because no transgressions existed.

Instead of justifying war as a way to stop Germany from allegedly grievously harming America (and to punish Germany for it), Wilson in his call for war justified it as an opportunity for America and other nations to improve the world or, as he put it in one of American history's most memorable phrases, "to make the world safe for democracy." Using words and concepts deeply familiar and powerfully resonant to his generation of Progressive reformers and to a public nurtured on soaring sermon-like Progressive rhetoric and cadence (the very concepts and rhetoric that would launch Prohibition within a year), Wilson told Congress that war was justified because it would be a "vindication of right, of human right"; it would "vindicate the principles of peace and justice in the life of the world as against selfish and autocratic power"; it would be a "fight thus for the ultimate peace of the world and for the liberation of its peoples"; and it would be a fight against "an irresponsible government which has thrown aside all considerations of humanity and of right and is running amuck."

This indeed is, as Wilson's many admirers state, a grand and eloquent vision, so much so that it has given a name, "Wilsonian," to a whole school of policymakers and scholars who still, in our day, on the left and even on the right, argue that American foreign policy must be driven by high ideals. Wilson, writes an admirer, took America into war to establish "a regime of liberty in the world." From all we know, Wilson strongly believed and was motivated by such ideals.

But there also was a fabric of realities that had made war against Germany an acceptable American policy: The reality that many Americans, influenced by British propaganda, had concluded that Germans were evil and barbaric Huns who deserved to be fought; the reality that American industry, farms and banks had much to lose from an Allied defeat; the reality that East Coast policymakers, media and academics had, from the start, favored Britain and France; the reality that such senior Wilson advisers as Edward House and Secretary of State Robert Lansing repeatedly were assuring London and Paris that America was not at all neutral but really on their side; and the reality that the broad American public, thinking that their nation was neutral and thus angered that this neutrality allegedly was being violated by Germany, never realized how far that neutrality had tilted.

What was not a reality was that Germany in 1917 posed a strategic threat to the United States. It did not. And Wilson, according to all the documents, diaries, papers and speeches, never once indicated that he regarded Germany as a military or security threat. Germany, like Britain, France and Russia, was exhausted and impoverished. The only reality at that date was the extraordinarily bloody and costly stalemate that the war had become, with the sole certainty that no nation would emerge victorious or even healthy and that all would emerge weak and wounded and disillusioned. It is this reality of stalemate that would be changed by America's declaration of war.

Late on April 4, the Senate voted 82-6 to declare war on the German Empire; two days later, on April 6, so did the House of Representatives, 373-50. This joint declaration then was sped to the White House by messenger, who interrupted Wilson's lunch. The president, leaning on the chief usher's desk, signed it at 1:18 p.m. Immediately a Navy lieutenant ran out onto the White House lawn and by hand waves sent a prearranged message to another officer waiting across the street at a Navy Department window. At once, the signal was relayed to every U.S. Navy ship and shore installation: "W...A...R."
