

U.S. Neutrality in World War I and the Sinking of the *Lusitania*

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On May 7, 1915 the *Lusitania* was hit by a German torpedo and sunk. Although one hundred and twenty-eight Americans perished, President Wilson did not declare war. It would be another two years before the U.S. would enter World War I. During that time, Wilson had to overcome many challenges revolving around his policy of neutrality. “The United States must be neutral in fact as well as in name...We must be impartial in thought, as well as in action...”¹

At the start of World War I, America declared a policy of neutrality. There were many reasons for this decision. First, Americans wanted to stay isolated from the other side of the world. It was Europe’s war, on the other side of the ocean, and there was no need for U.S. involvement. “Like a preponderant majority of Americans, Wilson also believed that the United States had no vital stakes in the outcome of the war to justify gratuitous risks of involvement.”² In addition, America would largely profit from trading with both the Allies and Central Powers. Siding with Britain would cause the U.S. to lose trade with Germany.

Perhaps most importantly, America was a country of mixed people. German-, Italian-, and Irish-Americans sided with Central powers for a few reasons. For instance, their ancestors came from there. Also, some groups such as the Irish held hatred towards Britain. “Although the large majority of the American people were bound to England by origin, language, and culture, there were also some eight million German-Americans and four million Irish-Americans who made no bones about their sympathy for England’s foes.”³ Jewish Americans were also concerned with Russia being an Ally power. Jews

¹ Thomas Bailey, *Voices of America*, (New York: The Free Press, 1976), 330.

² Arthur Link, *Woodrow Wilson: A Brief Biography*, (New York: The Publishing Company, 1963), 88.

³ Jan Willem Schulte Nordholt, *Woodrow Wilson: A Life for World Peace*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 131-132.

had suffered under Russia's rule. Siding with one power would divide the country.

Wilson realized this and understood the importance of staying a neutral nation during the war.

Wilson, himself, was not neutral. "In his personal feelings Wilson was not in the slightest neutral."⁴ Personally, he sided with Britain and wanted the Allies to be victorious. On the other hand, when it came to politics, Wilson tried to stay as neutral as possible. He realized that a policy of neutrality was at best interest for the U.S.

Therefore, Wilson did not want war, only a defeat for the Central Powers. He once stated, "If there is an alternative [to war], for God's sake, let's take it!"⁵

Most of Wilson's policies were Pro-British. "In public he pursued a pro-British neutrality which helped to drive Germany to the desperate expedient of unrestricted submarine warfare in 1917 - and war with the United States."⁶ This would lead Germany to constantly have to change their strategies during the course of the war. For example, the U.S. traded more with England than the Central Powers. Also, Britain constantly examined American ships for contraband, while Germans could do little but protest. "The British navy also took unprecedented liberties with the right of visit in search."⁷ During war, a belligerent power could search neutral ships on the sea for illegal materials. If contraband was found, they could confiscate the materials. The British abused this policy, but America hardly responded. At first, the U.S. sent worded protests to Britain. England reacted by delaying their replies to America.

The longer Washington deferred a showdown, the more perfect Britain's strangulation of Germany became, the more closely America was bound by

⁴ Ibid, 134.

⁵ Thomas Bailey, *A Diplomatic History of the American People*, (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1980), 582.

⁶ Bailey, *Voices of America*, 331.

⁷ Bailey, *A Diplomatic History of the American People*, 568.

economic ties to the Allied chariot, and the more likely a maddened Germany was to drive the United States into war with her submarines.⁸

America was doing little to stop Britain's abuse of the international laws.

"Washington had no objection whatever to selling arms and ammunition to Germany.

But if German ships could not get them because of the British navy such were the misfortunes of war."⁹ Germany was left with few options. One was to allow the British to continue to seize "contraband". Another was to change their policy at sea. Germany decided upon the latter. In February 1915, Germany enforced a blockade around the British Isles. The plan was to destroy all enemy merchant ships in that zone. One problem that arose was the rules of war. A belligerent power had to warn the ship before attacking it. Also, the warring party had to ensure the safety of the passengers and crew. Germany felt this was unreasonable for a submarine to follow this rule. The main purpose of a sub was the element of surprise, and surfacing to ensure the safety of the enemy ship, which would result in the U-boat being vulnerable to attack. Wilson responded by stating Germany would be held with "strict accountability" if any Americans were harmed. "The submarine weapon made it much more difficult for the United States, like all nonbelligerents, to remain neutral."¹⁰

Germany could not attack an American ship under international laws. Britain flew the American flag on their ships in order to freely pass through war zones. This proved to be a challenge for Germany, seeing as how they did not know whether the ships were American or British. Since America was not particularly forceful in demanding England to pull down American flags, Germany was left with no other option

⁸ Ibid, 571-572.

⁹ Ibid, 575.

than to follow their own policy. This led to the controversy surrounding the sinking of the *Lusitania*. “Fundamentally, of course, the crisis in the Atlantic Ocean was unsolvable. America stood upon its rights, German[y] could not abandon its best weapon, and England could not lift its blockade.”¹¹

The *Lusitania* sailed on her maiden voyage in September 1907. The ship was part of the Cunard Company and was one of its prized vessels. “The *Lusitania* was the pride of Britain’s commercial fleet.”¹² She could carry a total of 2,200 passengers. The *Lusitania* would make many trips across the Atlantic from Liverpool to New York before its tragic sinking during World War I.

Once Germany declared their policy of destroying any enemy merchant ship in a war zone, they began publishing advertisements in newspapers across the globe stating the danger of traveling on an enemy vessel. Americans were warned that their safety was not guaranteed if they sailed on a British liner. William Jennings Bryan, Wilson’s Secretary of State, pleaded to the president to tell the American people that they should not sail on vessels belonging to belligerent nations. “An idealist and humanitarian, Wilson was dead set against accepting any restrictions on so-called American ‘rights’ to sail through blockades on belligerent merchant ships like the *Lusitania*.”¹³ Wilson did not heed his advice and Americans dismissed the warnings. As a result, 128 United States citizens would pay with their lives. “...like many passengers that warm spring day, they paid no heed at all to the German notice.”¹⁴ On May 7, 1915 the *Lusitania* was torpedoed without “proper” warning by German U-Boats. “German apologists claimed

¹⁰ Schulte Nordholt, *Woodrow Wilson: A Life for World Peace*, 148.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 157

¹² Diana Preston, *Lusitania: An Epic Tragedy*, (New York: Walker and Company, 2002), 45.

¹³ Bailey, *Voices of America*, 334.

that the sinking was justified because the *Lusitania* was carrying 4200 cases of small-arms cartridges, as well as other contraband of war.”¹⁵ Over 1,200 people perished, including 128 Americans. Americans were outraged over the incident, especially since women and children were killed. Still, the majority in the United States did not want war.

On May 10, Wilson addressed the nation in Philadelphia. “There is such a thing as a man being too proud to fight. There is such a thing as a nation being so right that it does not need to convince others by force that it is right.”¹⁶ Wilson would pay dearly for this remark. Newspapers criticized him as being a coward. Theodore Roosevelt was outraged and asked the public to demand war. Embarrassed as the president was, he stuck by his word and would not declare war on Germany. Wilson wanted the United States to act as a mediator of the war. He stated, “I am interested in neutrality because there is something so much greater to do than fight: there is a distinction waiting for this nation that no nation has ever yet got. That is the distinction of absolute self-control and self-mastery.”¹⁷

On May 13, Wilson sent a note to Berlin. It stated that Americans were allowed to travel on the high seas, Germany was responsible for reparation for damages, and was liable for the sinking. Germany did not take this seriously, and believed the *Lusitania* was carrying arms. Therefore, they had every right to attack the ship without warning. Wilson all but declared war with a second note, which again Germany ignored. “Not until February, 1916, some ten months after the fatal torpedoing, did Berlin agree to

¹⁴ Preston, 106.

¹⁵ Bailey, *A Diplomatic History of the American People*, 578.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 579.

¹⁷ Schulte Nordholt, 153.

assume liability for the loss of American lives and to pay a suitable indemnity.”¹⁸

More than a few challenges surfaced during this time. For instance, the debate over whether or not to declare war. Another was to keep the original policy that was in place at the start of the war. He ultimately decided upon taking a firm stance against Germany, but not to the point of war declaration. “But Washington did not regard this concession as satisfactory, and the controversy was still dragging along when the United States went to war with Germany.”¹⁹

In August 1915, another British liner, the *Arabic*, was sunk by a German U-Boat, which was violating instructions, killing two Americans. Germany quickly apologized and offered compensation. In addition, they promised no more unarmed passenger ships would be attacked.²⁰ America viewed this as a victory, given Germany’s swift response. “A clash with Germany might still be avoided if the submarine could be kept leashed.”²¹

Almost a year after the sinking of the *Lusitania*, Germany attacked the French ship, *Sussex*. Four Americans were injured, which was in violation of the *Arabic* pledge, and this only furthered the debate in Washington. Germany responded with yet another pledge (*Sussex*). “...Germany promised to attack no more merchant ships without warning, and the safety of the passengers would be assured.”²² This differed from the *Arabic* pledge for two reasons: it included merchant ships, not just passenger ships, and asked the United States to pressure England into following international laws. Wilson warned Germany that he would sever relations with them if sub warfare continued.

This victory couldn’t have come for a better time for Wilson because it was an

¹⁸ Bailey, *A Diplomatic History of the American People*, 580.

¹⁹ Ibid, 580.

²⁰ Schulte Nordholt, 157.

²¹ Bailey, *A Diplomatic History of the American People*, 581.

election year. “The campaign involved many issues - Mexico, the railroads, the tariff - but the leading one seems to have been the tacit promise of the Democrats to preserve neutrality.”²³ His slogan, “He Kept us Out of War,” would help him win the election, but would also prove ironic. Less than a year after his re-election, the United States would declare war on Germany.

On January 22, 1917, Wilson addressed Congress and stated a need for “peace without victory”. He believed this could occur with a league of nations. Most Americans were overjoyed by his speech, but those in Europe had different ideas. Too many had died to leave the war at a stalemate. Someone had to be victorious. “Germany provided her brutal answer to ‘peace without victory’ by proclaiming, on January 31, 1917, an unrestricted submarine campaign.”²⁴ This meant all ships, whether neutral, belligerent, passenger, or merchant were fair game. Germany wanted the war to end one way or another. This was their only chance to put a stop to Britain’s blockade. Wilson responded by cutting off diplomatic relations with Germany. He began arming merchant ships with orders to fire if only fired at. This was referred to as armed neutrality.

The Zimmermann note also created a challenge for Wilson. The telegraph was sent from Germany to Mexico asking them to join the Central powers if the United States entered the war. In return, Germany would help Mexico regain their lost territory of New Mexico, Arizona, and Texas. It also stated Japan as a possible ally. Americans on the west coast began to worry considering Japan was on the Ally’s side in the war. The note was intercepted by the British and published in the paper before Wilson could do anything about it. This brought the United States one step closer to war. Many

²² Schulte Nordholt, 158.

²³ Bailey, *A Diplomatic History of the American People*, 588.

Americans were now ready to defend their country.

The importance of the Zimmermann telegram was considerable, but not because it changed Wilson, who was still full of doubts and continued to cling to armed neutrality. But what the telegram did do was to shake the American people out of their slumbers and make it clear to them that the time of their self-satisfied isolation was past and that Germany could literally be a threat to the Western Hemisphere, which in fact was its aim.²⁵

During the month of March, four unarmed American ships were sunk by German U-Boats. Wilson could no longer stand idly by. Armed neutrality was not working. Wilson was left with two decisions: go to war, or let Germany win. “As for Wilson’s larger goals, his war message declared, ‘the world must be made safe for democracy’ so that democratic institutions could live without fear of militaristic aggression.”²⁶ On April 7, 1917, America declared war on Germany.

America’s entry in to the war came about for a few reasons. One was due to all the money that was invested in the Allies. The banks in America had written so many loans to them that if the Allies lost the war, the United States would have many problems. “Its interest in an Allied victory became so great that it was later often asserted that it had no choice but to enter the war in order to protect its investments.”²⁷ Also, Britain wasn’t viewed as monsters, like Germany was. The Huns needed to be defeated. They were cruel and inhumane, especially after the sinking of the *Lusitania*. Most importantly was Germany’s policy of unrestricted submarine warfare. “If the Germans had not launched their all-out submarine campaign, the United States would not have been drawn into the

²⁴ Ibid, 590.

²⁵ Schulte Nordholt, 221.

²⁶ Bailey, *Voices of America*, 341.

²⁷ Schulte Nordholt, 143.

conflict when it was- possibly never.”²⁸

America’s entry into the war may have been avoided had Wilson acted in different ways. He could have accepted Germany’s policy and let U-Boats sink ships that did not heed their warnings. He could have warned Americans that it was not safe to travel on belligerent vessels. Lastly, Wilson could have treated Germany equal to Britain. Most of his policies were siding with England, which upset Germany. For example, sinking ships with passengers was inhumane (Germany), but starving a country was acceptable (Britain’s blockade). The main problem with Germany’s actions was the fact people were dying. England was taking property, not lives. In the end, most Americans only sided with Britain. “A more even-handed neutrality might have averted a clash.”²⁹

The sinking of the *Lusitania* was not the main reason for America’s entry into World War I. Instead, it was unrestricted submarine warfare that caused Wilson to declare war in April 1917. The *Lusitania* sinking only lit the fuse for America’s involvement into the war. Wilson tried many times to overcome the challenges he was faced with, but entering the war was the only way he could try to achieve “peace without victory” and create a league of nations. By April 1917, most Americans were ready for war and there was little that could change their minds. The *Lusitania* was still in the back of their minds and not forgotten. “In the United States it was a very different matter- the *Lusitania* incident would remain a live issue until her own entry into the war and beyond.”³⁰

²⁸ Bailey, *A Diplomatic History of the American People*, 593.

²⁹ *Ibid*, 593.

³⁰ Preston, 332.

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