

Justification for U. S. Involvement in World War 1

Essential Question

To what extent was the United States morally, economically and politically justified in entering the First World War against Germany?

Document 1

Whereas a state of war unhappily exists between Austria-Hungary and Serbia and between Germany and Russia and between Germany and France:

And Whereas the United States is on terms of friendship and amity with the contending powers, and with the persons inhabiting their several dominions;

And Whereas there are citizens of the United States residing within the territories or dominions of each of the said belligerents and carrying on commerce, trade, or other business or pursuits therein;

And Whereas there are subjects of each of the said belligerents residing within the territory or jurisdiction of the United States, and carrying on commerce, trade, or other business or pursuits therein;

And Whereas the laws and treaties of the United States, without interfering with the free expression of opinion and sympathy, or with the commercial manufacture or sale of arms or munitions of war, nevertheless impose upon all persons who may be within their territory and jurisdiction the duty of an impartial neutrality during the existence of the contest; And Whereas it is the duty of a neutral government not to permit or suffer the making of its waters subservient to the purposes of war;

Now, Therefore, I, Woodrow Wilson, President of the United States of America, in order to preserve the neutrality of the United States . . . do hereby declare and proclaim. . . .

That the statutes and the treaties of the United States and the law of nations alike require that no person, within the territory and jurisdiction of the United States, shall take part, directly or indirectly, in the said wars, but shall remain at peace with all of the said belligerents, and shall maintain a strict and impartial neutrality. . . .

SOURCE: Woodrow Wilson's proclamation of August 4, 1914.

Document 2

Morgan Company of New York have asked whether there would be any objection to their making a loan to the French Government....[I would question] whether it would be advisable for this Government to...approve...any loan to a belligerent nation....Money is the worst of all contraband because it commands everything else....I know of nothing that would do more to prevent war than an international agreement that neutral nations would not loan to belligerents....The powerful financial interests which would be connected with these loans would be tempted to use their influence through the newspapers to support the interests of the Government to which they had loaned because the value of the [loan] would be directly affected by the result of the war....All of this influence would make it all the more difficult for us to maintain neutrality [with] powerful financial interests...thrown into the balance....

SOURCE: Secretary of State William Jennings Bryan, August 10, 1914.

Document 3

There is no doubt as to the sentiment in Germany and the view they take is a natural one. 1st, They have warned Americans not to travel on British ships. Why do Americans take the risk? Not an unreasonable question. 2nd, If we allow the use of our flag, how can we complain, if in the confusion one of our boats is sunk by mistake? 3rd, Why be shocked at the drowning of a few people, if there is no objection to starving a nation? Of course Germany insists that by careful use she will have enough food, but if Great Britain cannot succeed in starving the noncombatants, why does she excite retaliation by threatening to do so?...It seems to me we must prevent the misuse of our flag and warn Americans not to use British vessels in the war zone unless we can bring pressure on Great Britain to withdraw threat to make bread or food contraband...

SOURCE: William Jennings Bryan, 1915.


Document 4

The German officer...knocked at the door...The officer ordered the soldiers to break down the door, which two of them did. The peasant came and asked what they were doing. His hands were tied behind his back, and he was shot at once without a moment's delay. The wife came out with a little sucking child. One of the Germans took a rifle and struck her a tremendous blow with the butt on the head. Another took his bayonet and fixed it and thrust it through the child. He then put his rifle on his shoulder with the child up on it, its little arms stretched out once or twice. The officers ordered the house to be set on fire...The man and his wife and the child were thrown on the top.

SOURCE: Viscount James Bryce, head of the Committee on Alleged German Atrocities as reported to the British Parliament, 1915.

SEAWAY STEAMSHIP

CUNARD



**EUROPE VIA LIVERPOOL
LUSITANIA**

Fastest and Largest Steamer
now in Atlantic Service Sails
SATURDAY, MAY 7, 10 A.M.
Transylvania, Fri., May 7, 5 P.M.
Orinda, - - Tues., May 18, 10 A.M.
Tuscany, - - Fri., May 21, 5 P.M.
LUSITANIA, Sat., May 29, 10 A.M.
Transylvania, Fri., June 4, 5 P.M.

Gibraltar—Genoa—Naples—Piræus
S.S. Carpathia, Thur., May 13, Noon

NOTICE!

TRAVELLERS intending to embark on the Atlantic voyage are reminded that a state of war exists between Germany and her allies and Great Britain and her allies; that the zone of war includes the waters adjacent to the British Isles; that, in accordance with formal notice given by the Imperial German Government, vessels flying the flag of Great Britain, or of any of her allies, are liable to destruction in those waters and that travellers sailing in the war zone on ships of Great Britain or her allies do so at their own risk.

IMPERIAL GERMAN EMBASSY:
WASHINGTON, D. C., APRIL 27, 1915.

Notice! Travelers intending to embark on the Atlantic voyage are reminded that a state of war exists between Germany and her allies and Great Britain and her allies; that the zone of war includes the waters adjacent to the British Isles; that, in accordance with formal notice given by the Imperial German Government, vessels flying the flag of Great Britain, or any of her allies, are liable to destruction in those waters and that travelers sailing in the war zone on ships of Great Britain or her allies do so at their own risk. Imperial German Embassy; Washington D.C.

SOURCE: Cunard Lines poster with German Embassy warning notice, 1915.

Document 6

Ten million soldiers to the war have gone,
Who may never return again.
Ten million mothers' hearts must break,
For the ones who died in vain.
Head bowed down in sorrow in her lonely years,
I heard a mother murmur thro' her tears:

Chorus:

I didn't raise my boy to be a soldier,
I brought him up to be my pride and joy,
Who dares to put a musket on his shoulder,
To shoot some other mother's darling boy?
Let nations arbitrate their future troubles,
It's time to lay the sword and gun away,
There'd be no war today,
If mothers all would say,
I didn't raise my boy to be a soldier.

(Chorus)

What victory can cheer a mother's heart,
When she looks at her blighted home?
What victory can bring her back,
All she cared to call her own?
Let each mother answer in the year to be,
Remember that my boy belongs to me!

(Chorus)

SOURCE: "I Didn't Raise My Boy to Be a Soldier," by lyricist Alfred Bryan and composer Al Piantadosi; a hit song of 1915.

Document 7



SOURCE: "Babes on Bayonets," *Life Magazine*, 1915, about the Germans in Belgium.

Document 8



SOURCE: "Britannia Must Be Careful How She Waves the Rules," John T. McCutcheon, *Chicago Tribune*, January 16, 1915.

Document 9

There is no doubt that the good relations between the US and Great Britain would have been seriously jeopardized by this unreasonable attitude...except for the fact that the British violations of law affected American property, while the German violations affected American lives...The Germans, with their genius for always doing the wrong thing in the wrong way and at the wrong time, perpetrated new crimes in their submarine campaign. These events made the complaints against the British seem insignificant and ill-timed, and aroused anew the indignation of the American people toward the ruthless commanders of Germany's under-sea corsairs...

SOURCE: Secretary of State Robert Lansing, 1916.

Document 10

FROM 2nd from London # 5747.

"We intend to begin on the first of February unrestricted submarine warfare. We shall endeavor in spite of this to keep the United States of America neutral. In the event of this not succeeding, we make Mexico a proposal or alliance on the following basis: make war together, make peace together, generous financial support and an understanding on our part that Mexico is to reconquer the lost territory in Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona. The settlement in detail is left to you. You will inform the President of the above most secretly as soon as the outbreak of war with the United States of America is certain and add the suggestion that he should, on his own initiative, invite Japan to immediate adherence and at the same time mediate between Japan and ourselves. Please call the President's attention to the fact that the ruthless employment of our submarines now offers the prospect of compelling England in a few months to make peace." Signed, ZIMMERMANN.

SOURCE: Zimmerman Telegram, January 19, 1917.

Document 11

To whom does war bring prosperity? Not to the soldier who for the...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 broke hearted widow who waits for the return of the mangled body of her husband; not to the mother who weeps at the death of her brave boy; not to the little children who shiver with cold; not to the babe who suffers from hunger; nor the millions of mothers and daughters who carry broken hearts to their graves. War brings no prosperity to the great mass of common and patriotic citizens. It increases the cost of living of those who toil and those who already must strain every effort to keep soul and body together. War brings prosperity to the stock gambler on Wall Street – to those who are already in possession of more wealth than can be realized or enjoyed...Their object in having war and in preparing for war is to make money. The enormous profits of munition manufacturers, stockbrokers, and bond dealers must be still further increased by our entrance into the war.

SOURCE: Senator George Norris, April 4, 1917.

Document 12

In my judgment, we could keep out of the war with Germany as we kept out of the war with Great Britain, by keeping our ships and our citizens out of the war zone of Germany as we did out of the war zone of Great Britain. And we could sacrifice no more honor, surrender no more rights, in the one case than in the other. We could resort to armed neutrality. But we are told that Germany has destroyed American lives while Great Britain has destroyed only property. But are we quite sure that the real reason for war with Germany is the destruction of lives as distinguished from property, that to avenge the killing of innocent Americans and to protect American lives war becomes a duty? Mexican bandits raided American towns, shot to death sleeping men, women, and children in their own homes. We did not go to war...I have hoped and prayed that God would forbid our country going into war with another for doing that which perhaps under the same circumstances we ourselves would do.

SOURCE: Representative Claude Kitchin, 1917.

Document 13

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, been deemed innocent and legitimate. Property can be paid for; the lives of...innocent people can not be. The present German submarine warfare against commerce is a warfare against mankind...American ships have been sunk, American lives taken, in ways which it has stirred us very deeply to learn of...Our motive will not be revenge or the victorious assertion of the physical might of the nation, but only the vindication of right, of human right...Indeed it is now evident that its spies were here even before the war began...That it means to stir up enemies against us at our very doors the intercepted note to the German Minister in Mexico City is eloquent evidence...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...We shall be satisfied when those rights have been made as secure as the faith and freedom of nations can make them...We enter this war only where we are clearly forced into it because there are no other means of defending our rights...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...

SOURCE: President Wilson, April 2, 1917.

Document 14

We believe that the large majority of Americans are proudly ready to fight to the last for the overthrow of the brutal German militarism, which threatens America no less than every other civilized nation. We believe that it would be an act of baseness and infamy, and act of unworthy cowardice, and a betrayal of this country and of mankind to accept any peace except the peace of overwhelming victory, a peace based on the complete overthrow of the Prussianized Germany of the Hohenzollerns. We hold that the true test of loyal Americanism today is effective service against Germany.

SOURCE: Theodore Roosevelt, 1917.

Document 15

Just a word of comment more upon one of the points in the President's address. He says that this is a war "for the things which we have always carried nearest to our hearts—for democracy, for the right of those who submit to authority to have a voice in their own government." In many places throughout the address is this exalted sentiment given expression...But the President proposes alliance with Great Britain, which, however, liberty-loving its people, is a hereditary monarchy, with a hereditary ruler, with a hereditary House of Lords, with a hereditary landed system, with a limited and restricted suffrage for one class...The President has not suggested that we make our support of Great Britain conditional to her granting home rule to Ireland, or Egypt, or India. We rejoice in the establishment of democracy in Russia, but it will hardly be contended that if Russia was still an autocratic Government, we would not be asked to enter this alliance with her just the same...In the sense that this war is being forced upon our people without their knowing why and without their approval, and that wars are usually forced upon all peoples in the same way, there is some truth in the statement; but I venture to say the response which the German people have made to the demands of this war shows that it has a degree of popular support which the war upon which we are entering has not and never will have among our people...The poor, sir, who are the ones called upon to rot in the trenches, have no organized power, have no press to voice their will upon this question of peace or war...

SOURCE: Senator Robert LaFollette, 1917.

Document 16

For twenty-five or thirty years we have told you that the United States of America is appropriating more power every day until the time will come when individual men or women will be nothing but cogs in a machine of this centralized, cruel, blood thirsty government known as the United States. We told you that, and you said, you are alarmists. You said, you are too extreme, that will never happen in the United States. And here you are, friends. It has happened in the United States. A Czar was imposed upon you without the consent of the people. The people were never asked whether they wanted war. Indeed, the people of America placed Mr. Wilson in the White House and in the Chair of the Presidency because he told the people that he would keep them out of war, and as one of his political advertisements billposters were posted all over the city with the picture of a working woman and her children saying, "He has kept us out of war." He promised you heaven, he promised you everything if you would only place him in power. What made you place him in power. You expected peace and not war. The moment you placed him in power, however, he forgot his promises and he is giving you hell. War was imposed upon the people without the people getting a chance to say whether they wanted war or not, and war was imposed upon them, I say, because the gentlemen of power and those who back power want war. And because war has been declared upon you we are told, we men and women of the United States who work and sweat and toil to sustain these gentlemen of power, we are told that there is a law and we must go to war. If war is necessary, only the people must decide whether they want war or not, and as long as the people have not given their consent I deny that the President of the United States has any right to declare it; I deny that the President or those who back the President have any right to tell the people that they shall take their sons and husbands and brothers and lovers and shall conscript them in order to ship them across the seas for the conquest of militarism and the support of wealth and power in the United States....

SOURCE: Anarchist Emma Goldman, June 14, 1917.

Document 17

Now let us picture what a sudden invasion of the US by these Germans would mean; sudden, because their settled way is always to attack suddenly.

First, capture New York City,...cut its rail communications, starve it into surrender, and then plunder it...

One feeble old woman tries to conceal \$20 which she has been hoarding in her desk drawer; she is taken out and hanged (to save a cartridge). Some of the teachers in two district schools meet a fate which makes them envy her. The Catholic priest and Methodist minister are thrown into a pig-sty, while the German soldiers look on and laugh...

By this time some of the soldiers have managed to get drunk; one of them discharges his gun accidentally, the cry goes up that the residents are firing on the troops, and then hell breaks loose. Robbery, murder, and outrage run riot. Fifty leading citizens are lined up against the First Federal Bank Building and shot....

This is not just a snappy story. It is not fancy. The general plan of campaign against America has been announced repeatedly by German military men. *And every horrible detail is just what the German troops have done in Belgium and France.*

SOURCE: George Creel, head of the Committee on Public Information, commissioned Professor J. S. P. Tatlock to write this pamphlet, "Why American Fights Germany", 1918.

Document 18

Allied & Neutral Ships Lost During Word War I

	1914	1915	1916	1917	1918
To Submarines	3	396	964	2,439	1,035
To Surface Craft	55	23	32	64	3
To Mines	42	97	161	170	27
To Aircraft	---	---	---	3	1

SOURCE: Table from *The World War I Source Book* by Philip J. Haythornthwaite.