

Woodrow Wilson's War Message to Congress, April 2, 1917 (excerpts)

Gentlemen of the Congress:

I have called the Congress into extraordinary session because there are serious, very serious, choices of policy to be made, and made immediately, which it was neither right nor constitutionally permissible that I should assume the responsibility of making.

On the 3d of February last I officially laid before you the extraordinary announcement of the Imperial German Government that on and after the 1st day of February it was its purpose to put aside all restraints of law or of humanity and use its submarines to sink every vessel that sought to approach either the ports of Great Britain and Ireland or the western coasts of Europe or any of the ports controlled by the enemies of Germany within the Mediterranean . . . since April of last year the Imperial Government had somewhat restrained the commanders of its undersea craft in conformity with its promise then given to us that passenger boats should not be sunk and that due warning would be given to all other vessels which its submarines might seek to destroy . . . The new policy has swept every restriction aside. Vessels of every kind ... have been ruthlessly sent to the bottom without warning and without thought of help or mercy for those on board, the vessels of friendly neutrals along with those of belligerents. Even hospital ships and ships carrying relief to the sorely bereaved and stricken people of Belgium . . . have been sunk with the same reckless lack of compassion or of principle.

. . . American ships have been sunk, American lives taken, in ways which it has stirred us very deeply to learn of, but the ships and people of other neutral and friendly nations have been sunk and overwhelmed in the waters in the same way. There has been no discrimination. The challenge is to all mankind. Each nation must decide for itself how it will meet it. The choice we make for ourselves must be made with a moderation of counsel and a temperateness of judgment befitting our character and our motives as a nation. We must put excited feeling away. 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, of which we are only a single champion.

With a profound sense . . . of the step I am taking and of the grave responsibilities which it involves, but in unhesitating obedience to what I deem my constitutional duty, I advise that the Congress declare the recent course of the Imperial German Government to be in fact nothing less than war against the Government and people of the United States . . .

What this will involve is clear... It will involve the organization and mobilization of all the material resources of the country to supply the materials of war . . . It will involve the immediate full equipment of the Navy in all respects but particularly in supplying it with the best means of dealing with the enemy's submarines. It will involve the immediate addition to the armed forces of the United States . . . at least 500,000 men, who should, in my opinion, be chosen upon the principle of universal liability to service . . . It will involve also, of course, the granting of adequate credits to the Government by well conceived taxation . . .

Source: Woodrow Wilson, *War Message*, 65th Cong., 1st Sess. Senate Doc. No. 5, Serial No. 7264, Washington, DC, 1917; pp. 3–8. Available online at *WWI: The World War I Document Archive*, [http://wwi.lib.byu.edu/index.php/Wilson's War Message to Congress](http://wwi.lib.byu.edu/index.php/Wilson's_War_Message_to_Congress).

Senator Norris Opposes US Entry into the War, April 4, 1917

Mr. President, while I am most emphatically and sincerely opposed to taking any step that will force our country into the useless and senseless war now being waged in Europe, yet if this resolution passes I shall not permit my feeling of opposition to its passage to interfere in any way with my duty either as a Senator or as a citizen in bringing success and victory to American arms. I am bitterly opposed to my country entering the war, but if . . . we do enter it, all of my energy and all of my power will be behind our flag in carrying it on to victory.

The resolution now before the Senate is a declaration of war. Before taking this momentous step . . . we ought to pause and calmly and judiciously consider the terrible consequences of the step we are about to take. We ought to consider likewise the route we have recently traveled and ascertain whether we have reached our present position in a way that is compatible with the neutral position which we claimed to occupy at beginning and through the various stages of this unholy and unrighteous war.

No close student of recent history will deny that both Great Britain and Germany have, on numerous occasions since the beginning of the war, flagrantly violated in the most serious manner the rights of neutral vessels and neutral nations under existing international law as recognized up to the beginning of this war by the civilized world.

The reason given by the President in asking Congress to declare war against Germany is that the German Government has declared certain war zones, within which, by the use of submarines, she sinks, without notice, American ships and destroys American lives . . .

There are a great many American citizens who feel that we owe it as a duty to humanity to take part in the war. Many instances of cruelty and inhumanity can be found on both sides. Men are often biased in their judgment on account of their sympathy and their interests. To my mind, what we ought to have maintained from the beginning was the strictest neutrality. If we had done this, I do not believe we would have been on the verge of war at the present time . . .

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 increased 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 . . .

Source: George William Norris, *Congressional Record*, 65th Cong., 1st Sess. Vol. LV, pt. 1, pp. 212–213. Available online at WWI: The World War I Document Archive, http://wwi.lib.byu.edu/index.php/Senator_Norris_Opposes_U.S._Entry_into_the_War.

NAME _____ DATE _____

Critical-Thinking Questions and Class Discussion

Examples from the texts must be cited in the answers to these questions.

1. How did President Wilson attempt to evoke compassion from the American people?

2. How did President Wilson indicate his caution in asking for a declaration of war with Germany?

3. Explain how Wilson outlined the potential impact on the American people if a declaration of war was approved.

4. How did Senator Norris indicate his patriotism while opposing President Wilson?

5. What arguments did Norris make against US support for either Germany or Great Britain?

6. Explain who Senator Norris claimed would benefit from US entry into the war.
