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Woodrow Wilson  
WE MUST ACCEPT WAR  
Message to the Congress April 2, 1917

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*Woodrow Wilson had won reelection as president in 1916, running on the slogan, "He kept us out of war." The slogan was technically true, but Wilson's policies had been "neutral" in name only. The British navy had successfully blockaded the Central Powers, cutting them off from American trade. American merchants, manufacturers, and bankers were eager to sell supplies and loan money to Britain and the Allies. Wilson allowed this burgeoning war trade, which boosted the ailing U. S. economy, but it also exposed American shipping and passengers to the perils of German submarines. By March of 1917, it had become clear that Germany was not going to relent in sinking American merchant ships that were trading with the Allies (and that Wilson had allowed to be armed). Wilson thus declared that neutrality was no longer possible and asked Congress for a declaration of war. Within a matter of days, Congress complied with Wilson's request, with large majorities voting for war in both the House and Senate. Speaking in opposition to war, Senator George Norris of Nebraska argued: "We are going into war upon the command of gold. We are going to run the risk of sacrificing millions of our countrymen's lives in order that other countrymen may coin their lifeblood into money." Norris recognized the largely economic justifications for going to war. Wilson's argument prevailed, however, because of the connection that he successfully drew between the freedom of the seas and the future of liberty and democracy. Wilson also correctly realized that the United States would have to participate in the war if he were to have a chance to implement his plans for a peaceful future. Wilson's hopes on this front were not fully met, as the Senate refused to ratify the peace treaty and thus declined membership in the League of Nations. —D. Voelker*

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Gentlemen of the Congress:

{1} 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.

{2} On the 3d of February last I officially laid before you the extraordinary announcement of the Imperial German Government that on and after the first 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. . . .

#### GERMANY'S RUTHLESS POLICY

{3} . . . Vessels of every kind, whatever their flag, their character, their cargo, their destination, their errand, 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, though the latter were provided with safe conduct through the proscribed areas by the German Government itself and were distinguished by unmistakable marks of identity, have been sunk with the same reckless lack of compassion or of principle.

{4} I was for a little while unable to believe that such things would, in fact, be done by any Government that had hitherto subscribed to the humane practices of civilized nations.

International law had its origin in the attempt to set up some law which would be respected and observed upon the seas, where no nation had right of dominion, and where lay the free highways of the world. . . .

{5} This minimum of right the German Government has swept aside under the plea of retaliation and necessity, and because it had no weapons which it could use at sea except these, which it is impossible to employ as it is employing them without throwing to the winds all scruples of humanity or of respect for the understandings that were supposed to underlie the intercourse of the world.

{6} 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 non-combatants, men, women, and children engaged in pursuits which have always, even in the darkest periods of modern history, been deemed innocent and legitimate. Property can be paid for; the lives of peaceful and innocent people cannot be.

#### GERMAN WARFARE AGAINST MANKIND

{7} The present German warfare against commerce is a warfare against mankind. It is a war against all nations. 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. . . .

{8} When I addressed the Congress on the 26th of February last I thought that it would suffice to assert our neutral rights with arms, our right to use the seas against unlawful interference, our right to keep our people safe against unlawful violence. But armed neutrality, it now appears, is impracticable. Because submarines are in effect outlaws when used as the German submarines have been used against merchant shipping, it is impossible to defend ships against their attacks as the law of nations has assumed that merchantmen would defend themselves against privateers or cruisers, visible craft giving chase upon the open sea. . . .

{9} There is one choice we cannot make, we are incapable of making; we will not choose the path of submission and suffer the most sacred rights of our nation and our people to be ignored or violated. The wrongs against which we now array ourselves are not common wrongs; they reach out to the very roots of human life.

#### BELLIGERENCY THRUST UPON US

{10} With a profound sense of the solemn and even tragical character 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. That it formally accept the status of belligerent which has thus been thrust upon it and that it take immediate steps not only to put the country in a more thorough state of defense, but also to exert all its power and employ all its resources to bring the Government of the German Empire to terms and end the war.

## WHAT THIS WILL INVOLVE

{11} What this will involve is clear. It will involve the utmost practicable co-operation in counsel and action with the Governments now at war with Germany, and as incident to that the extension to those Governments of the most liberal financial credits in order that our resources may so far as possible be added to theirs.

{12} It will involve the organization and mobilization of all the material resources of the country to supply the materials of war and serve the incidental needs of the nation in the most abundant and yet the most economical and efficient way possible.

{13} 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.

{14} It will involve the immediate addition to the armed forces of the United States already provided for by law in case of war at least 500,000 men, who should, in my opinion, be chosen upon the principle of universal liability to service, and also the authorization of subsequent additional increments of equal force so soon as they may be needed and can be handled in training.

{15} It will involve also, of course, the granting of adequate credits to the Government, sustained, I hope, so far as they can equitably be sustained by the present generation, by well-conceived taxation. . . .

{16} In carrying out the measures by which these things are to be accomplished we should keep constantly in mind the wisdom of interfering as little as possible in our own preparation and in the equipment of our own military forces with the duty--for it will be a very practical duty--of supplying the nations already at war with Germany with the materials which they can obtain only from us or by our assistance. They are in the field and we should help them in every way to be effective there. . . .

## OUR MOTIVES AND OBJECTS

{17} While we do these things, these deeply momentous things, let us be very clear and make very clear to all the world what our motives and our objects are. . . . Our object now, as then, is to vindicate the principles of peace and the justice in the life of the world as against selfish and autocratic power and to set up amongst the really free and self-governed peoples of the world such a concert of purpose and of action as will henceforth insure the observance of those principles.

{18} Neutrality is no longer feasible or desirable where the peace of the world is involved and the freedom of its peoples, and the menace to that peace and freedom lies in the existence of autocratic Governments backed by organized force which is controlled wholly by their will, not by the will of their people. We have seen the last of neutrality in such circumstances.

{19} We are at the beginning of an age in which it will be insisted that the same standards of conduct and of responsibility for wrong done shall be observed among nations and their Governments that are observed among the individual citizens of civilized states.

{20} We have no quarrel with the German people. We have no feeling toward them but one of sympathy and friendship. It was not upon their impulse that their Government acted in entering this war. It was not with their previous knowledge or approval.

{21} It was a war determined upon as wars used to be determined upon in the old, unhappy days when peoples were nowhere consulted by their rulers and wars were provoked and waged in the interest of dynasties or of little groups of ambitious men who were accustomed to use their fellow-men as pawns and tools. . . .

### PEACE THROUGH FREE PEOPLES

{22} A steadfast concert for peace can never be maintained except by a partnership of democratic nations. No autocratic Government could be trusted to keep faith within it or observe its covenants. . . .

{23} Does not every American feel that assurance has been added to our hope for the future peace of the world by the wonderful and heartening things that have been happening within the last few weeks in Russia?

{24} . . . The great, generous Russian people have been added, in all their native majesty and might, to the forces that are fighting for freedom in the world, for justice and for peace. Here is a fit partner for a league of honor.

{25} One of the things that have served to convince us that the Prussian autocracy was not and could never be our friend is that from the very outset of the present war it has filled our unsuspecting communities and even our offices of Government with spies and set criminal intrigues everywhere afoot against our national unity of council, our peace within and without, our industries and our commerce. . . .

{26} But they have played their part in serving to convince us at last that that Government entertains no real friendship for us and means to act against our peace and security at its convenience. That it means to stir up enemies against us at our very doors the intercepted note to the German Minister at Mexico City is eloquent evidence.

### A CHALLENGE OF HOSTILE PURPOSE

{27} We are accepting this challenge of hostile purpose because we know that in such a Government, following such methods, we can never have a friend; and that in the presence of its organized power, always lying in wait to accomplish we know not what purpose, there can be no assured security for the democratic Governments of the world.

{28} We are now about to accept the gage of battle with this natural foe to liberty, and shall, if necessary, spend the whole force of the nation to check and nullify its pretensions and its power.

We are glad, now that we see the facts with no veil of false pretense about them, to fight thus 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 upon the trusted foundations of political liberty.

{29} We have no selfish ends to serve. We desire no conquest, no dominion. We seek no indemnities for ourselves, no material compensation for the sacrifices we shall freely make. We are but one of the champions of the rights of mankind. We shall be satisfied when those rights have been made as secure as the faith and the freedom of the nation can make them. . . .

### RIGHT MORE PRECIOUS THAN PEACE

{30} It is a distressing and oppressive duty, gentlemen of the Congress, which I have performed in thus addressing you. There are, it may be, many months of fiery trial and sacrifice ahead of us. 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, for the right of those who submit to authority to have a voice in their own governments, for the rights and liberties of small nations, for a universal dominion of right by such a concert of free peoples as shall bring peace and safety to all nations and make the world itself at last free.

{31} To such a task we can dedicate our lives and our fortunes, everything that we are and everything that we have, with the pride of those who know that the day has come when America is privileged to spend her blood and her might for the principles that gave her birth and happiness and the peace which she has treasured. God helping her, she can do no other.

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#### Discussion Questions:

1. Why, according to Wilson, was neutrality no longer possible?
2. What strategies did Wilson use to argue that war was necessary to protect liberty and democracy? How convincing were these arguments?

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SOURCE: *Why We Are At War: Messages to the Congress January to April, 1917* by Woodrow Wilson, President of the United States, with the President's proclamation of war April 6, 1917 and his message to the American people April 15, 1917. Harper & Brothers Publishers, New York and London. Published May, 1917.



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