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World War I: Origins of American Intervention

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As the thunderclap of war rippled across Europe, Americans watched these astonishing events with shock and bewilderment. President Woodrow Wilson issued a proclamation of neutrality almost immediately and called on Americans to “be neutral in fact and name,” and “impartial in thought as well as in action.” The president’s proclamation was undoubtedly sincere and so was the general desire of Americans to remain neutral. Yet two and a half years later, the United States found itself at war with Germany and in league with the Entente of Britain, France, and Russia. The roots of both America’s original neutrality and its eventual declaration of war against Germany and the Central Powers lie deep in the nation’s history.

Americans had developed a tradition of diplomatic isolation from Europe’s military troubles going back to Washington’s Farewell Address of September 20, 1796. In this address, the nation’s first president warned America against getting involved in “entangling alliances.” Throughout the nineteenth century and into the twentieth, the nation followed Washington’s advice. The rapidly growing nation concerned itself with the westward movement across the North American continent. Also, after the announcement of the Monroe Doctrine in 1823, it routinely exercised its growing power to intervene in the affairs of Latin America, a region it considered to be part of its natural domain but off limits to European colonizers. The Old World was considered corrupt and degraded, and America’s principal enemy was Great Britain. For a century after the American Revolution, relations with Britain were prickly at

best and often confrontational. Problems with Britain led to the War of 1812, and even during the Civil War a half century later, relations with Britain were delicate. Britain remained for decades under suspicion by Americans, and politicians routinely inserted insults against the British in election campaign speeches, a ploy that was called “*Twisting the Lion’s Tail*.” Americans’ views of Britain in the nineteenth century somewhat resembled their views of the Soviet Union in the post-World War II years.

Starting in the 1880’s, however, this attitude began to undergo some profound changes. The British and Americans gradually began to recognize that they shared more and more common interests and attitudes. One was an increasing pride in Anglo-American cultural achievements and belief in the superiority of the Anglo-Saxon race and its civilization. Another was their position of leadership in the world in the development of industry and international trade. Yet another was the belief that their evolving foreign policies coincided with each others’ interests as opposed to the interests of other European powers. This change in attitude became known as “the Great Rapprochement,” in which not only were former diplomatic difficulties between these two nations solved, but also a strong sense of harmony began to develop among both their general publics. Not surprisingly, in the early years of the twentieth century, two American presidents of different political parties, Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson, were both noted anglophiles (great admirers of Britain and British culture.)

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Americans had always had a soft spot in their hearts for France. This was the country that had come to America's aid in its dire hour of need during the Revolution and whose fleet helped to bottle up General Cornwallis at Yorktown in 1781. This was the country that issued the Declaration of the Rights of Man in 1789 during their own revolution, a document that many Americans considered a derivative of the Declaration of Independence. This was also the country that was often Britain's principal opponent in the conflicts of the nineteenth century. Even as the Great Rapprochement flowered between Britain and America, the old emotional connection between America and France remained strong.

On the other hand, America's relationship with Germany had gradually become strained over the years since 1870. That country had been unified between 1862 and 1871 by the north German state of Prussia. Americans had generally amiable relations with the Prussians through the earlier part of the nineteenth century. This was perhaps due to the relative inconsequence of the Prussians in European power politics at that time and America's diplomatic isolation, but the form that German unification took was not pleasing to Americans. The strong autocratic leadership of Chancellor Otto von Bismarck during the unification period and for twenty years thereafter was alien to Americans' views of democracy and individual rights. Bismarck worked incessantly to foster nationalistic feeling among the German people, but he was essentially an opponent, if not an enemy, of liberalism. When Bismarck was forced

into retirement in 1890 by the new young kaiser, Wilhelm II, who was an even more ardent nationalist, Americans gradually came to view the German Empire with even more suspicion. The kaiser's arrogance, strutting gait, obsession with military uniforms, and blustery public statements on numerous foreign policy issues raised American suspicions of Germany much higher than they had been even during the years of Bismarck's leadership.

Thus as the war began, American sympathies tended to be on the side of the Entente, but it also had its limits. In 1914, about eight million Americans were of German descent and the overwhelming majority of them were strongly supportive of the Fatherland. In addition, four million Irish-Americans mostly shared their homeland's hatred of British rule and therefore supported the Central Powers. Also, many Americans were troubled by the Entente's third major ally, Russia. British propaganda often focused on the fight between western democracy versus German and Austrian authoritarianism. Many Americans were quite sympathetic to Britain and France but viewed autocratic tsarist Russia with skepticism and reserve. This in turn tempered interventionist sentiment toward the Entente.

The central problem that eventually led to America's declaration of war had to do with naval warfare between the combatants. President Wilson intended that America would carry on trade with both sides as it had done during peacetime and that America should enjoy all the rights of nonbelligerents. However, it did not work out that way at all. The British blockaded the German

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coast, effectively stopping trade between America and Germany. Wilson protested the blockade but was powerless to prevent it. The result was that America continued trade with Britain but not with Germany. Trade with the Entente nations quadrupled during the first two years of the war, and loans to the Entente Powers exceeded loans to the Central Powers by a ratio of 100 to 1. This business activity brought America out of the recession it was in when the war started and produced a new economic boom. This in turn increasingly tilted American sympathies toward the Entente.

Germany's reaction was to resort to submarine warfare against the British to break the blockade and to effect their own blockade around the British Isles. This led to the sinking of the Cunard liner *Lusitania* off the Irish coast in May, 1915, causing the deaths of 1,198 people, including 128 Americans. Although the Germans had warned Americans not to travel on the ship, and although it was later shown that large amounts of military supplies were on board, Wilson started an angry exchange of diplomatic notes with the Germans. In March, 1916, a German U-boat torpedoed the *Sussex*, an unarmed French passenger ship, and Wilson threatened to break off diplomatic relations with Germany. He compelled the Germans to pledge that they would board and inspect all ships before attacking them. This pledge was kept until the following February.

Although America was technically neutral at this time, a movement for military preparedness began. In June, 1916, Congress passed the National

Defense Act which doubled the size of the regular army to 220,000 and placed the state National Guards under federal control. Two months later, Congress approved funds for building new battleships, cruisers, and destroyers. While this was happening, Wilson was running for re-election and having to tread the political middle ground cautiously. He was a supporter of both neutrality and preparedness. As a result, he was attacked from the left by various peace groups while also being attacked from the right by hawkish nationalists such as Senator Henry Cabot Lodge and former President Theodore Roosevelt. Wilson's supporters adopted the slogan "He Kept Us Out of War" although the president privately admitted during the campaign that "Any little German lieutenant can put us into war at any time by some calculated outrage."

Wilson won his campaign for re-election but by the barest of margins. The outcome of the election was in doubt for two days until the president succeeded in winning California and defeating his Republican opponent Charles Evans Hughes, former governor of New York and U.S. Supreme Court justice. Wilson knew that both his re-election plurality and attempts to keep America out of war were extremely fragile. In the next few months he began an initiative for a negotiated peace and delivered a "Peace Without Victory" speech to Congress in January. However, despite the millions of casualties on both the Eastern and Western fronts and the hopeless deadlock of trench warfare in the West, neither side expressed much interest in peace talks. Then on February 1, 1917 came the

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startling news that the Germans were intending to resume unrestricted submarine warfare. They saw no other way to break the deadlock and win the war, and they also decided to take the risk that they could defeat the Entente before American military aid and troops could arrive in sufficient numbers to affect the outcome.

After that events moved quickly toward war. Wilson broke off diplomatic relations with Germany on February 3 and asked Congress to approve the arming of U.S. merchant ships although he still hoped to avoid war. A month later came news of the Zimmermann note. Alfred Zimmermann, the German foreign minister, had sent a telegram to the German ambassador in Mexico suggesting an alliance in case of war with America. In return Mexico would receive the territories lost to the United States in 1848. British naval intelligence intercepted the telegram and forwarded it to the U.S. State Department which then sent it to Wilson. The president was infuriated by this German attempt to make a secret treaty with the Mexicans, especially as it violated the Monroe Doctrine of non-European interference in the New World. He made the telegram public on March 1, and he authorized all merchant ships to be armed (despite the Senate's refusal to act) and

to shoot at submarines on sight. During March, German U-boats sank seven U.S. merchant ships with a corresponding high death toll. Although the public was now aroused against the Germans, there was still the problem of fighting as an ally of Russia. However, in mid-March came news of bread riots in St. Petersburg, the abdication of Tsar Nicholas II, the establishment of a provisional government, and the hope that a democratic republic would be established. One by one the major objections to war with Germany were crumbling. War sentiment now grew quickly, and pro-war demonstrations took place in many large American cities. Reluctantly Wilson concluded that war was inevitable and went to address a joint session of Congress on April 2, 1917, in which he asked for a declaration of war. It was in this speech that the president insisted that "The world must be made safe for democracy." Although Congressional opinion was not unanimous, the resolution passed in both houses by overwhelming margins. The Senate agreed to the resolution by a vote of 82 to 6, and the House passed it 373 to 50. On April 6, President Wilson signed the declaration of war, and America prepared to take up arms against a foreign power for the first time in nearly twenty years.