

AMERICAN ARCHIVE

Woodrow Wilson's War Message: April 2, 1917

Presidents George Washington and James Monroe had established a tradition of keeping the United States free from entanglements in European wars. From the time World War I started in 1914, a majority of Americans had favoured maintaining this neutrality, and President Wilson won re-election in 1916 based on his promise to keep America out of the conflict.

After Germany resumed unrestricted submarine warfare in February 1917, public opinion in the United States shifted. On April 2, 1917, Wilson went before a joint session of Congress to ask for a declaration of war. In an eloquent speech, the president made the case for war by characterizing Germany as a barbaric nation that threatened not only the US, but the world at large.

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 ... The present German submarine warfare against commerce is a warfare against mankind. It is a war against all nations.

Wilson was careful not to target the German people, but the autocratic government that had dragged them into war. In a sense, his goal was not just victory in battle, but a change of regime in the name of a democratic world order.

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 ... A steadfast concern for peace can never be maintained except by a partnership of democratic nations.

Unlike Britain and France, who were fighting in part to win control of Germany's colonies, the United States, according to Wilson, would wage war to guide the world into a more democratic age:

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



Figure 9.28 Front page of the *New York Times*, April 3, 1917.

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.

Having established both the immediate threat posed by the German government and the goal of a democratic world order as reasons for going to war, Wilson ended his speech by warning that in spite of the horrors of war, the country must remain steadfast in its commitment to freedom and justice:

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.

Congress erupted into applause as the president finished his speech, and two days later voted overwhelmingly in favour of war.

Think It Through

1. According to Wilson, what were the two main reasons for the United States declaring war against Germany?
2. In what ways did Wilson's broader, philosophical arguments for war parallel his reformist, Progressive ideology?