

A Declaration of War

Robert Lansing



OVERVIEW

The United States had remained neutral during the first three years of World War I, with people in the country sharply divided about entering the conflict. A new round of German submarine warfare against neutral ships led President Woodrow Wilson to ask Congress to meet on April 2, 1917. Robert Lansing, secretary of state, included portions of Wilson's speech in his memoirs, and they appear here, along with Lansing's own comment.

GUIDED READING As you read, consider the following questions:

- According to President Wilson, why must the United States declare war against Germany?
 - How does Lansing describe the response to the president's speech?
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"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. . . .

". . . Property can be paid for; the lives of peaceful and innocent people cannot be. The present German submarine warfare against commerce is a warfare against mankind.

"It is a war against all nations. American ships have been sunk, American lives taken, in a way 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. . . .

"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. . . .

". . . We are now about to accept gauge 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 peoples 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 tested foundations of political liberty. 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 nations can make them. . . .

"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 seems to be hanging 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. 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 help her, she can do no other."

As the sound of Mr. Wilson's voice ceased and he seated himself, there was for several seconds, which seemed like long minutes, a dead silence. It was the finest tribute ever paid to eloquence. Then spontaneously and as if with one voice the vast audience broke into a tumult of applause that was deafening. They clapped, they stamped, they cheered, they fairly yelled their approval and support.

No one who witnessed that scene in the Hall of Representatives, where the whole Government of the United States was assembled, will ever forget the soul-stirring moment when the patriotism of the nation spoke in no uncertain tones and shouted approval of the President's demand that the German challenge be accepted and that the Republic wage war to the uttermost against the Prussian-ruled Empire. The scene is indelibly impressed on the memory, a vivid picture which can never fade or grow dim. It was a great event in American history, an event big with possibilities which touched the very destiny of the United States if not of the whole world. The tremendous forces set in motion on that April evening were to continue without check or abatement until achievement and victory were attained, until Autocracy was crushed by the irresistible might of Democracy.