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# America Declares War on Germany, 1917

**A**t 8:30 on the evening of April 2, 1917, President Wilson appeared before a joint session of Congress and asked for a declaration of war against Germany in order to "make the world safe for democracy." On April 4, Congress granted Wilson's request.

America thus joined the carnage that had been ravaging Europe since 1914. Germany's renewal of unrestricted submarine warfare and the revelation of a proposed German plot to ally with Mexico against the US prompted Wilson's action.

In January 1917, Germany renewed its policy of unrestricted submarine warfare that it had abandoned in 1915 after [the sinking of the Lusitania](#). All ships trading with Britain, including those of neutral countries such as the United States would be targets for their submarines and would be sunk without warning.

In February, the British gave the American ambassador in London a copy of an intercepted German telegram. The telegram came from the German Foreign Secretary, Arthur Zimmermann, to the German ambassador to Mexico. Zimmermann proposed that in the event of war with the US, Germany and Mexico would join in an alliance. Germany would fund Mexico's conflict with the US. With victory achieved, Mexico would regain her lost territories of Arizona, Texas and New Mexico. Release of the telegram ignited a public furor further enflamed by the loss of four US merchant ships and 15 American lives to German torpedo attacks.

Wilson realized war was inevitable but agonized over the decision for what it might do to the spirit of the nation. He feared war would change America forever, making her tougher, less humane. "Once lead these people into war, and they'll forget there ever was such a thing as tolerance ... the spirit of ruthless brutality will enter into the very fiber of our national life ... every man who refused to conform would have to pay the penalty."

## "What else can I do?"

*Frank Cobb was Editor of the New York [World](#) and a confidant of President Wilson. On the eve of asking Congress for a declaration of war against Germany, the president asked Cobb to visit him at the White House. We join his story as Cobb enters the President's private quarters:*

"The night before [Wilson] asked Congress for a declaration of war against Germany he sent for me. I was late getting the message somehow, and didn't reach the White House till one o'clock, in the morning. 'The old man' was waiting for me sitting in his study with the typewriter on his table, where he used to type his own messages.

I'd never seen him so worn down. He looked as if he hadn't slept, and he said he hadn't. He said he was probably going before Congress the next day to ask a declaration of war, and he'd never been so uncertain about anything in his life as about that decision. For nights, he said, he'd been

In the photo of President Wilson emerging from a British tank, his smile disguises the fact that he has just touched the tank's hot exhaust pipe and severely burned his hand.

During the course of the war, Wilson sponsored, and Congress passed, two acts - the Espionage Act (1917) and the Sedition Act (1918) - that severely limited a citizen's right to criticize the conduct of the war.

lying awake going over the whole situation - over the provocation given by Germany, over the probable feeling in the United States, over the consequences to the settlement and to the world at large if we entered the melee.

He tapped some sheets before him and said that he had written a message and expected to go before Congress with it as it stood. He said he couldn't see any alternative, that he had tried every way he knew to avoid war. 'I think I know what war means,' he said, and he added that if there were any possibility of avoiding war he wanted to try it. 'What else can I do?' he asked. 'Is there anything else I can do?'

I told him his hand had been forced by Germany, that so far as I could see we couldn't keep out."

### **The Consequences for Germany...**

"It would mean that we should lose our heads along with the rest and stop weighing right and wrong. It would mean that a majority of people in this hemisphere would go war-mad, quit thinking, and devote their energies to destruction. The President said a declaration of war would mean that Germany would be beaten and so badly beaten that there would be a dictated peace, a victorious peace.

'It means,' he said, 'an attempt to reconstruct a peacetime civilization with war standards, and at the end of the war there will be no bystanders with sufficient power to influence the terms. There won't be any peace standards left to work with. There will be only war standards.'

The President said that such a basis was what the Allies thought they wanted and that they would have their way in the very thing America had hoped against and struggled against. W.W. was uncanny that night. He had the whole panorama in his mind. He went on to say that so far as he knew he had considered every loophole of escape, and as fast as they were discovered Germany deliberately blocked them with some new outrage."

### **The Consequences for America...**

"Then he began to talk about the consequences to the United States. He had no illusions about the fashion in which we were likely to fight the war.

He said when a war got going it was just war, and there weren't two kinds of it. It required illiberalism at home to reinforce the men at the front. We couldn't fight Germany and maintain the ideals of government that all thinking men shared. He said we would try it, but it would be too much for us.

'Once lead this people into war,' he said, 'and they'll forget there ever was such a thing as tolerance. To fight you must be brutal and ruthless, and the spirit of ruthless brutality will enter into the very fiber of our national life, infecting Congress, the courts, the policeman on the beat, the man in the street.' Conformity would be the only virtue, said the President, and every man who refused to conform would have to pay the penalty.

He thought the Constitution would not survive it, that free speech and the right of assembly would go. He said a nation couldn't put its strength into a war and keep its head level; it had never been done.

'If there is any alternative, for God's sake, let's take it,' he exclaimed. Well, I couldn't see any, and I told him so.

The President didn't have illusions about how he was going to come out of it, either. He'd rather have done anything else than head a military machine. All his instincts were against it. He foresaw too clearly the probable influence of a declaration of war on his own fortunes, the adulation certain to follow the certain victory, the derision and attack which would come with the deflation of excessive hopes and in the presence of world responsibility. But if he had it to do over again he would take the same course. It was just a choice of evils."

**References:**

This account was originally published in Heaton, John L. (ed.), Cobb of "the World" (1924), reprinted in Commager, Henry Steele, and Allan Nevins, *The Heritage of America* (1939); Ferrell, Robert H., *Woodrow Wilson and World War I* (1986); Kennedy, David, M., *Over Here: The First World War and American Society* (1980).

How To Cite This Article:

"America Declares War on Germany, 1917," EyeWitness to History, [www.eyewitnesstohistory.com](http://www.eyewitnesstohistory.com) (2006).