

## *Introduction*

### I. WHY FIGHT?

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THE AMERICAN people's views on the war ran the gamut in 1914 from indifference to support for the Allies to a desire for strict neutrality. A small minority expressed a desire for a German victory. By 1917, however, American opinion was almost entirely sympathetic to the Allies as German atrocities in Belgium, the sinking of the *Lusitania*, and the massacre of the Armenians made the Central Powers seem like a threat not just to British and French values, but to American ones as well. Alan Seeger represents the significant group of Americans who believed deeply in the Allied cause from the war's very first days. They saw Belgium as an innocent victim of German aggression, and France and Britain as defenders of a democratic way of life and international order that Imperial Germany was trying to destroy. Tens of thousands of Americans joined the Allied armies or volunteered to serve the Allies as nurses, doctors, and aid workers. They served in the cause of democracy and freedom. Many, though by no means all, of them came from privileged backgrounds. Very few American citizens volunteered to serve the Central Powers, a clear indication of where American sympathies lay.

The resumption of unrestricted submarine warfare in February 1917 and the decoded Zimmerman telegram, in which the Germans tried to enlist Mexico as an ally against the United States, made almost all Americans hostile to the German cause. Some were also motivated by the March 1917 revolution in Russia, which deposed Tsar Nicholas II in favor of a democratically-minded centrist provisional government. Nicholas's downfall made the war come into greater focus as a conflict between the world's autocracies and its democracies. In such a contest, many Americans saw themselves as having no choice but to side with the democracies. The promise, however brief it turned out to be, of democracy triumphing in Russia also held out the hope of something positive coming out of the war that might justify its enormous toll in human life.

Not all Americans were convinced. Socialists were divided on the war. Some supported American entry, but only if America would dedicate its power toward creating a more equitable and just world. They saw Britain and France as imperial oppressors not worthy of American assistance. Few socialists, however, saw in a German victory any hope for progress for Europe or the world. The authors of the Majority Report of April 1917 saw the war as a naked competition for power and profits among the world's capitalists. Such a war, they believed, did not deserve the support of workers anywhere, nor could it advance the cause of democracy. They were a small percentage of Americans, but their critical view of the conflict would prove influential both during and after the war.

President Woodrow Wilson laid out a justification for American entry in his address to Congress on April 2, 1917 asking for a declaration of war. Wilson believed deeply that wars were the products of avaricious and corrupt regimes, not the result of the will of people who had to fight them. From this core belief, Wilson concluded that America's enemy was not the German people, but Kaiser Wilhelm and his militaristic government. Replacing that government with a democratic and open one would give the German people the chance to determine their own, peaceful, future alongside their neighbors. Wilson also believed that economic exchange and open markets would give nations more incentive to cooperate with one another than to compete.

By entering the war, Wilson believed that the United States could reshape the world, making it more economically open, more democratic and less imperialist. With shared democratic values as a basis for the new world order, he hoped, there would be no reason for a second world war. Americans thus went to war led by a president determined both to protect his nation's freedom from the growing German threat, as represented by the Zimmermann Telegram and the resumption of unrestricted submarine warfare, and to bring about the reformation of the world.

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*Woodrow Wilson: from  
Address to Congress on War with Germany*

Wilson addressed Congress on February 26, asking for the authority to arm American merchant ships. The House of Representatives approved the measure by a vote of 403-13 on March 1, but a Senate filibuster led by Robert "Fighting Bob" La Follette, the progressive Republican from Wisconsin, blocked its passage before the 64th Congress adjourned on March 4. Enraged, Wilson denounced the "little group of willful men" who had "rendered the great Government of the United States helpless and contemptible" and imposed an executive order to arm the ships; but this new policy of armed neutrality failed to stop the Germans from sinking American vessels. On March 20 the cabinet unanimously recommended asking Congress for a declaration of war; and the next day Wilson requested that a joint session convene on April 2. The last president to write his own speeches, he toiled over multiple drafts right up until the morning of his address. On the evening of April 2, Wilson arrived at the Capitol to deliver one of the most important speeches in American history, contending that a war of choice had become one of necessity. Eight words embedded in his argument—"The world must be made safe for democracy"—have remained the cornerstone of American foreign policy for a century. The speech received thunderous approval, which depressed the President. "My message to-day was a message of death for our young men," he said to one of his advisers. "How strange it seems to applaud that." A moment later, Wilson laid his head on the Cabinet table and sobbed.

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2 April, 1917 8.30 P.M.

One of the things that has 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 counsel, our peace within and without, our industries and our commerce. Indeed it is now evident

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that its spies were here even before the war began; and it is unhappily not a matter of conjecture but a fact proved in our courts of justice that the intrigues which have more than once come perilously near to disturbing the peace and dislocating the industries of the country have been carried on at the instigation, with the support, and even under the personal direction of official agents of the Imperial Government accredited to the Government of the United States. Even in checking these things and trying to extirpate them we have sought to put the most generous interpretation possible upon them because we knew that their source lay, not in any hostile feeling or purpose of the German people towards us (who were, no doubt as ignorant of them as we ourselves were), but only in the selfish designs of a Government that did what it pleased and told its people nothing. 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.

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. 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 pretence 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.

Just because we fight without rancour and without selfish object, seeking nothing for ourselves but what we shall wish to share with all free peoples, we shall, I feel confident, conduct our operations as belligerents without passion and ourselves observe with proud punctilio the principles of right and of fair play we profess to be fighting for.

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It will be all the easier for us to conduct ourselves as belligerents in a high spirit of right and fairness because we act without animus, not in enmity towards a people or with the desire to bring any injury or disadvantage upon them, but only in armed opposition to an irresponsible government which has thrown aside all considerations of humanity and of right and is running amuck. We are, let me say again, the sincere friends of the German people, and shall desire nothing so much as the early re-establishment of intimate relations of mutual advantage between us,—however hard it may be for them, for the time being, to believe that this is spoken from our hearts. We have borne with their present government through all these bitter months because of that friendship,—exercising a patience and forbearance which would otherwise have been impossible. We shall, happily, still have an opportunity to prove that friendship in our daily attitude and actions towards the millions of men and women of German birth and native sympathy who live amongst us and share our life, and we shall be proud to prove it towards all who are in fact loyal to their neighbours and to the Government in the hour of test. They are, most of them, as true and loyal Americans as if they had never known any other fealty or allegiance. They will be prompt to stand with us in rebuking and restraining the few who may be of a different mind and purpose. If there should be disloyalty, it will be dealt with with a firm hand of stern repression; but, if it lifts its head at all, it will lift it only here and there and without countenance except from a lawless and malignant few.

It is a distressing and oppressive duty, Gentlemen of the

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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. 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.