

U.S. Entry into the First World War

Source A

At the outset of the European war in August 1914, Wilson did his best to keep America neutral. That was, after all, the tradition set out by the Founders, Washington and Jefferson. Not isolation in the strict sense because the United States had never been isolated from the global ebb and flow of trade, ideas, and migration, but the Founders had established a durable tradition of nonentanglement in the political affairs of Europe. Wilson believed that this was particularly applicable to the melting-pot nation over which he presided. More than 8 million of the country's 105 million people had been born in Germany or had at least one German parent. The Irish-American population, some 4.5 million strong, included many who believed Britain's defeat would aid the cause of Irish independence; conversely, many Czechs and Serbs felt that the defeat of Austria-Hungary; Germany's main ally, would promote the freedom of their home nations from the Hapsburg empire. Little wonder that Wilson feared that entering a world war abroad could trigger a civil war at home. ...

This was not, however, to be a timid neutrality, for Wilson also believed that the United States had a unique moral role to play ... in August 1914, at the very start of the conflict, the president had set out his abiding goal – to stand above the war so that America could shape the peace. ... In his view, the arms race and the scramble for empire had been driven by Britain and France as much as by Germany and the other Central Powers. Militarism and imperialism throughout Europe had to be curbed in the interests of a better world.

So prudence and principle dictated U.S. neutrality, but that did not mean curbing America's right, as a neutral nation, to trade freely with the belligerents. This had been traditional American policy in times of war, dating back to the 1790s ...

David Reynolds, *Empire of Liberty: A New History of the United States* (New York: Basic Books, 2009) pp. 245-46.

Source B

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

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 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. ...

Does not every American feel that assurance has been added to our hope for the future peace of the world by the wonderful and heartening things that have been happening within the last few weeks in Russia? ... The autocracy that crowned the summit of her political structure, long as it had stood and terrible as was the reality of its power, was not in fact Russian in origin, character, or purpose; and now it has been shaken off and the great, generous Russian people have been added in all their naïve majesty and might to the forces that are fighting for freedom in the world, for justice, and for peace. Here is a fit partner for a League of Honor.

One of the things that has served to convince us that the Prussian autocracy was not and never could be our friends 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. ... That it means to stir up enemies against us at our very doors the intercepted note to the German Minister at Mexico City [the Zimmerman telegram] 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. ... The world must be made safe for democracy.

Extract from President Woodrow Wilson's request that Congress declare war against Germany, *Congressional Record*, LV (April 2, 1917), Part 1, pp. 102-104. Reprinted in Dennis Merrill and Thomas G. Paterson (eds), *Major Problems in American Foreign Relations. Documents and Essays, Concise Edition* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006), pp. 201-203.

Source C

As the war in Europe developed, the president began to perceive two closely related but distinct external threats to American well-being: "balance of power" politics in general and the power of Germany specifically. Both endangered America's ability to avoid becoming an authoritarian, militarized state constantly on the verge of war. This conception of U.S. national security, no less than Wilson's missionary moralism, animated the president's response to the First World War. ...

For Wilson, a German victory would constitute a direct and immediate danger to the United States. It would enhance the power of a state Wilson considered, because of its autocratic character, peculiarly militaristic and hostile to America. Confronted with such a power, the United States would immediately have to arm to protect itself – something that raised the prospect that militarism could engulf America at home even if it never became involved in an actual war with the German Empire.

Ross A. Kennedy, "Woodrow Wilson, World War I, and an American Conception of National Security", *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 25, No. 1 (Winter 2001), pp. 1 and 8.

Source D

Wilson's hopes for creating a stable and open postwar world received their greatest jolt in May 1916, when the Allies met secretly in Paris to plan economic policies. They clearly foresaw that after the war, the United States would be the world's strongest and most competitive economic power. The British, French, Russians, and Italians, therefore drafted a program to seal themselves off from the effects of that power. The Allies planned to use government subsidies, higher tariffs, and controlled markets to fight U.S. competition. Wilson and Lansing were stunned when they learned of the Paris economic conference.

Walter LaFeber, *The American Age. U.S. foreign policy at home and abroad, 1750 to the present* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2nd ed. 1994), p. 292.

Source E

Wilson transformed what had started out as a reaffirmation of American neutrality into a set of propositions laying the foundations for a global crusade. In Wilson's view, there was no essential difference between freedom for America and freedom for the world. ... he developed

an extraordinary interpretation of what George Washington had really meant when he warned against foreign entanglements. Wilson redefined “foreign” in a way that would surely have astonished the first president. What Washington meant, according to Wilson, was that America must avoid becoming entangled in the *purposes* of others. But, Wilson argued, nothing that concerns humanity “can be foreign or indifferent to us.” Hence America had an unlimited charter to involve itself abroad.

What extraordinary conceit to derive a charter for global intervention from a Founding Father’s injunction against foreign entanglements, and to elaborate a philosophy of neutrality that made involvement in war inevitable!

Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994), pp. 47-48.

Source F

Most scholars (if not most of the U.S. public) would easily accept the idea that the United States ran a territorial empire in the early twentieth century, but even many who accept the idea of American empire might have trouble defining its geography. Fewer yet might be able to recount the aftermath of what exactly happened in those territories that the United States occupied and administered during the time of World War I. The narrative that dominates the history of World War I and after in the United States is that Wilson identified his country (however impractically) with an attempt to spread democracy and self-determination. But, what of Wilson’s relationship with the U.S. empire that had been built between 1898 and World War I? And what inspiration and transnational exchanges did the “Wilsonian moment” help spark in Wilson’s own backyard—the various U.S. dependencies?

Emily S. Rosenberg, “World War I, Wilsonianism, and Challenges to U.S. Empire”, *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 38, No. 4 (2014), p. 863.

Essay Question

With reference to these sources and your own knowledge, analyze why the United States adopted a position of neutrality at the outbreak of the First World War, but later entered the war as an Associate Power of the Allies.