

Why did the United States enter WWI?

Document A: America and World War I Introduction

Shortly after war erupted in Europe, President Wilson called on Americans to be "neutral in thought as well as deed," but quickly the United States began to lean toward Britain and France. Although America was supposedly neutral, during the early years of the war, trade with Britain and France tripled. This volume of trade quickly exhausted their cash reserves, forcing them to ask the United States for credit. In October 1915, President Wilson permitted loans, a decision that greatly favored Britain and France. By 1917 American loans to the Allies had soared to \$2.25 billion; loans to Germany stood at a paltry \$27 million.

There are three main reasons that America ultimately entered World War I:

1. On May 7, 1915, the Lusitania, the "fastest vessel afloat," was sunk by a torpedo from a German submarine. The ship sank off the Irish coast and 1,198 passengers and crew members, including 128 Americans, lost their lives. Although the Germans had warned that any ships flying the flag of Great Britain might be destroyed, few believed that the Germans would actually target a civilian ship. The Lusitania was actually carrying arms as well. When the Germans sunk this ship, many Americans were outraged.
2. It was Germany's announcement in January 1917 that it would resume unrestricted submarine warfare (submarine attacks without warning) that led to American entry into the conflict. Germany hoped to win the war within five months, and was willing to risk antagonizing Wilson on the assumption that even if the United States declared war, it could not mobilize quickly enough to change the course of the conflict.
3. Then a fresh insult led Wilson to demand a declaration of war. In March 1917, newspapers published the Zimmerman Note, an intercepted telegram from the German Foreign Secretary Arthur Zimmerman to the German ambassador to Mexico. The telegram said that if Germany went to war with the United States, Germany promised to help Mexico recover the territory it had lost during the 1840s, including Texas, New Mexico, California, and Arizona. The Zimmerman note and German attacks on three U.S. ships in mid-March led Wilson to ask Congress for a declaration of war.

Document B: President Woodrow Wilson Speech #2 (Modified)



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.

The German policy has swept every restriction aside. Ships of every kind, whatever their flag, their character, their cargo, their destination, their errand, have been ruthlessly sent to the bottom of the ocean without warning. American ships have been sunk, American lives taken.

I advise that the Congress declare the recent actions of the Imperial German Government to be, in fact, nothing less than war against the Government and people of the United States. Neutrality is no longer feasible or desirable where the peace of the world is involved.

The world must be made safe for democracy. We have no selfish ends to serve. We desire no conquest, no dominion. We seek not material compensation for the sacrifices we shall freely make. We are but one of the champions of the rights of mankind.

It is a fearful, but right thing to lead this great peaceful people to war. We shall fight for the things which we have always carried nearest our hearts – for democracy, for the right of [people] to have a voice in their own government, for the rights and liberties of small nations.

Source: President Woodrow Wilson, in a speech before Congress, April 2, 1917.

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Vocabulary

commerce: trade

material compensation: money

feasible: possible

dominion: control or domination

Document C: Historian Howard Zinn (Modified)

President Woodrow Wilson had promised that the United States would stay neutral in the war. But in April of 1917, the Germans had announced they would have their submarines sink any ship bringing supplies to their enemies; and they had sunk a number of merchant ships. Wilson now said he must stand by the right of Americans to travel on merchant ships in the war zone.

This was a flimsy argument. The British had also been intruding on the rights of American citizens on the high seas, but Wilson was not suggesting we go to war with them. The United States claimed the *Lusitania* carried an innocent cargo, and therefore the torpedoing was a monstrous German atrocity.

Actually, the *Lusitania* was heavily armed: it carried 1,248 cases of 3-inch shells, 4,927 boxes of cartridges (1,000 rounds in each box), and 2,000 more cases of small-arms ammunition. The British and American governments lied about the cargo.

Prosperity came from doing business in foreign markets, it was believed by the leaders of the country. In 1897, private companies had invested \$700 million in foreign nations. By 1914, they had invested \$3.5 billion...

With World War I, England became more and more a market for American goods and for high-interest loans. In 1915, Wilson lifted the ban on private bank loans to the Allies, and bankers could now begin lending money in such great amounts as to both make great profit and tie American finance closely to the interest of a British victory in the war against Germany.

Source: Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the United States*, New York: HarperCollins, 1980.

Howard Zinn is a historian and activist who is best known today as the author of A People's History of the United States, a book that tells American history from the perspective of minorities, women, and poor people, and that is very critical of the United States government.

