

came from Lodge, who now recanted his earlier attraction to the league idea. Lodge professed "no superstition in regard to Washington's policy" against alliances, but he believed that there was "in this tortuous and distracted world nothing but peril in abandoning our long and well-established policies." For Lodge, those traditional policies of avoiding permanent alliances were "as clear as the unclouded sun at noonday, and are not collections of double-meaning words." By 1917 the league idea had clearly emerged as a major political issue.

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CRISIS RENEWED

The European belligerent governments reacted with surprising calm to Wilson's call for a "peace without victory." It would prove indeed the calm before the storm because on January 9, 1917, the German government had decided to resume and widen submarine warfare, starting on February 1. The Germans realized that their action could hardly fail to bring the United States into the war against them, but they reasoned that they now had sufficient numbers of submarines to make deep inroads against Allied shipping. Their plan was to cut their foes' transatlantic lifeline of munitions, food, and supplies, and thereby win the war long before the Americans could mobilize enough forces to make any impact. This calculated military risk almost succeeded. Allied losses to submarine attacks in the spring and summer of 1917 came close to knocking Britain out of the war. Only the last-minute decision by the British to adopt the convoy system, under which naval vessels escorted merchant ships in packs, provided an effective defense against undersea attacks and thus foiled the submarine campaign.

Yet the German plan contained a fatal flaw. By 1917 British credit in the United States was about to collapse, which would have cut the Allies' overseas supply lines without submarine attack. When added to the Allies' other setbacks in 1917—the collapse of Russia, weakness in Italy, mutiny in the French armies—that blow might well have cost them the war. Incredibly, the Germans either knew nothing of Britain's financial plight or underestimated its importance. The decision to renew submarine warfare was an expression of German contempt for a "shop-keeper's war"—one waged through economic attrition. Germany's leaders wanted to win a crushing victory through strictly military means. But by recklessly provoking the United States, they were trading probable victory for near certain defeat.

Ten days after the decision to unleash their submarines, the German

foreign secretary, Arthur Zimmermann, secretly cabled their embassy in Mexico City. Zimmermann warned of the approaching resumption of submarine warfare, and he instructed his envoys to seek an alliance with Mexico in the likely event of war between Germany and the United States. This cable—soon to be famous as the Zimmermann Telegram—offered the Mexicans recovery of lost territory in Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona should they enter the war against the United States. Through their cable-tapping and code-breaking operations, the British knew the contents of the Zimmermann Telegram within hours of its transmission on January 19. Because they took elaborate precautions to conceal their interception, the telegram was not released to the Americans for several weeks. With the resumption of submarine warfare imminent, and American participation in the war therefore likely, the British could afford to be unruffled by Wilson's proposal three days later for peace without victory. The British seemed to know that all they had to do was wait.

On January 31, 1917, the German ambassador informed the State Department that submarine warfare would commence against all shipping the next day. The news sent shock waves through the United States. Heated debate about an appropriate response swirled around the president, who still struggled to avoid having to choose between war and submission. Wilson broke diplomatic relations with Germany. It was, he explained to a joint session of Congress on February 3, the only "alternative consistent with the dignity and honor of the United States." But it was not, he insisted, a step toward war. "Only actual overt acts," by Germany could bring hostilities. Germany was quick to supply these. The submarine campaign opened with full force, sinking American as well as Allied ships and killing scores of citizens.

Wilson's response was to call for an armed neutrality, and with some reluctance he sent to Congress a measure to arm merchant vessels. Speaking to another joint session on February 26, the president asserted that the armed ships bill was intended solely to defend "those rights of humanity without which there is no civilization." On March 1 the House passed the bill by 403 to 14, and an amendment to prohibit American vessels from carrying munitions failed with 293 against. The 125 congressmen who favored the amendment showed that there still was strong sentiment against American entry into the war.

On February 28, the Zimmermann Telegram was published. The British had turned the telegram over to the Americans four days before. After taking steps to verify its authenticity, Wilson decided to release the telegram in order to bolster public support for armed neutrality.



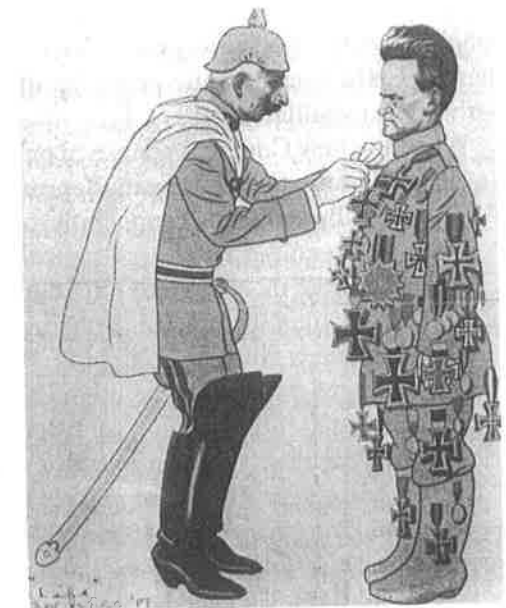
"ON THE AMERICAN PLAN." A disgruntled Uncle Sam asks the waiter, Wilson: "Here, Waiter, I can't wait forever. Where's my airplane soup?" "Cook begins on that next month, sir." "Next month! And my grilled rifles?" "Rifles too old to cook, sir." "Then bring on the canned ships." "No ships in the house, sir; nor in sight, sir." The preparedness issue persisted through the early war years.

The telegram had a stunning effect, especially after Zimmermann publicly acknowledged having sent it. Many Americans had previously regarded the submarine controversy as a remote affair which involved only a few wealthy transatlantic travelers and scruffy merchant seamen. Now the threat of Mexican involvement, no matter how far-fetched it seemed, brought the war closer to home. Some previously uncommitted politicians and editors now called for war, but most persisted in seeking some honorable alternative. Anti-interventionists dug in their heels. Senator La Follette was already opposed to the armed ships bill, and what he regarded as a war scare over the Zimmermann Telegram only stiffened his resistance.

A group of eleven senators, led by La Follette and composed almost equally of Republican insurgents and Bryanite Democrats, prevented

the House-approved armed ships bill from coming to a vote in their chamber. Through parliamentary maneuvers and lengthy speeches, the opponents consumed the time that remained before the expiration of the Congress at noon on March 4, 1917. Tempers flared, and physical violence threatened to break out on the Senate floor. One senator was ready to use a file as a dagger, while La Follette had brought in a revolver, which his son quietly removed from his desk. Supporters of the bill took revenge by consuming the session's final hours, depriving La Follette of his coveted chance to close the debate with a carefully prepared statement. Wilson blasted the filibuster with a stinging rebuke: "A little group of willful men, representing no opinion but their own, have rendered the Great Government of the United States helpless and contemptible." But when advised by the attorney general that the president already had the authority to do so, Wilson ordered the ships armed. His words and deeds were now reminiscent of Roosevelt's, and he was following his predecessor's footsteps by resorting to executive action to circumvent Congress.

While most Americans remained as torn as ever between war and peace, Allied losses at sea climbed, and in Russia a relatively bloodless revolution at the beginning of March toppled the czar. The Russian revolution expunged a blot of autocracy from the Allied cause, but it also raised doubts about the viability of their already shaky Eastern



A Life cartoon depicting Sen. La Follette as a traitor for his opposition to the armed ships bill.

Front. The president meanwhile gave few indications of his thinking. On March 9, Wilson called Congress into special session for April 16, and on March 21, he moved the date up to April 2. He also authorized limited naval action against German submarines, and he permitted an American admiral to travel incognito to London to consult with the British. At no time, however, did Wilson indicate to anyone that he regarded these actions as steps toward war.

Wilson went through an agony of the soul as he wrestled with what to do. Cabinet meetings witnessed sharp exchanges as Secretary of State Lansing, Postmaster General Bursleson, and Secretary of Treasury McAdoo tried to push the president toward intervention. "You are appealing to the spirit of the code duello," Wilson once snapped at Lansing, when he suggested that German violence against the United States required a response in kind. Another time Wilson avowed that he would "submit to anything and any imputations of weakness or cowardice" in order to stay out of the war. Wilson shared the fears of many anti-interventionists about undoing reform achievements. If the United States went to war, he told one cabinet member, "you and I will live to see the day when the big interests will be in the saddle." Further, as he privately confessed to a newspaper editor, he shrank from awakening "the spirit of ruthless brutality" that would infect "the very fibre of our national life." Above all, Wilson ached at the prospect of abandoning "peace without victory." American intervention would remove "a preponderance of neutrality" from world politics. No longer would there be "bystanders with power sufficient to influence the peace terms. There won't be any peace standards to work with. There will only be war standards."

When the new Congress convened on April 2, 1917, the first woman in either House took her seat: Representative Jeannette Rankin of Montana, a Republican. Democratic control of the House was now tenuous and required horse-trading with a remaining handful of Progressives. But the most anxious attention focused on the White House. Everybody awaited the president's address to a joint session that night, and nobody knew what he was going to say. When Wilson spoke, his first words gave no hint of his intentions, as he recounted recent diplomatic events. Only gradually did the drift of his remarks become clear: armed neutrality was an insufficient response to German attacks. "There is one choice we cannot make," Wilson declared, "we are incapable of making: we will not choose the path of submission." A storm of applause arose from the senators and representatives, many of whom waved small flags. Conspicuously silent was Senator La Follette, who



Jeannette Rankin, the first woman elected to Congress and a dedicated pacifist.

sat with his arms folded and his mouth grimly set.

Wilson acknowledged his "profound sense of the solemn and even tragical character of the step I am taking." The words "solemn," "tragic," and "grave," cropped up again and again in ways that lent a somber beauty to the speech. He made no exalted claims for America, which he described as "but a single champion" of right. In urging defense of the nation's ideals, he proclaimed that "the world must be made safe for democracy." He admonished his countrymen to "fight without rancor" and to uphold "with proud punctilio the principles of right and fair play we profess to be fighting for." Wilson's war address reverberated with the sense of tragic necessity. It was the most philosophical call to arms that any American president ever sounded. Wilson's deepest thoughts came at the end. "It is a fearful thing to lead this great peaceful people into war, the most terrible and disastrous of all wars, civilization itself seeming to be in the balance. But the right is more precious than the peace." America would fight for her greatest values, for democracy, freedom, "for the principles that gave her birth and happiness and peace which she has treasured. God helping her, she can do no other." STOP