

Declaration of War

(1)

*On February 3, 1917, President Wilson addressed Congress to announce that **diplomatic** relations with Germany were severed. In a special session of Congress held on April 2, 1917, President Wilson delivered this message. Four days later, Congress overwhelmingly passed the War Resolution, which brought the United States into the Great War.*

(2)

Gentlemen of the Congress,

I have called the Congress into extraordinary session because there are serious, very serious, choices of policy to be made. On the 3rd of February I officially laid before you the extraordinary announcement of the **Imperial** German Government that it was its purpose to put aside all restraints of law or of humanity and use its submarines to sink every vessel that sought to approach Great Britain or the western coasts of Europe. Vessels of every kind, whatever their flag, their character, their cargo, their destination, their errand, have been ruthlessly sent to the bottom without warning and without thought of help or mercy for those on board.

(3)

I was for a little while unable to believe that such things would be done by any government that had hitherto subscribed to the humane practices of civilized nations. I am not now thinking of the loss of property involved, immense and serious as that is, but only of the destruction of the lives of noncombatants, men, women, and children. Property can be paid for; the lives of peaceful and innocent people cannot be. The present German submarine warfare against commerce is warfare against mankind. It is a war against all nations. American ships have been sunk, American lives taken. Our motive will not be revenge or the victorious assertion of the strength of the nation, but only the vindication of right.

What's going on?

(4)

I had thought that it would suffice to assert our neutral rights with arms, our right to use the seas against unlawful interference, and our right to keep our people safe against unlawful violence.

Armed neutrality, it now appears, is impractical. It is likely only to produce what it was meant to prevent: It is practically certain to draw us into the war without the rights or effectiveness of the aggressors. There is one choice we cannot make: We will not choose the path of submission and allow our nation and our people to be ignored or violated. I advise that 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 and that the Congress exerts all its power and resources to bring the government of the German Empire to terms and end the war.

What’s going on?

How does this relate to what you have read already?

(5)

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 right is more precious than peace, and we shall fight for that which we have always carried nearest our hearts—for democracy. 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.

Adapted from Wilson, W. (1917, April 2). President Wilson’s declaration of war message to Congress. Records of the U.S. Senate (Record group 46). National Archives, Washington, DC.

What’s going on?

How does this relate to what you have read already?

What is the overall message of the passage?

What questions do you have?