

Unable to get their ships out of port and past the British blockade, the Germans resort to submarine warfare. The subs can circumvent the blockade and sink ships bringing food and military supplies to the British and the French.

According to Wilson, German submarine warfare violates international law because if a ship is to be sunk, it must be warned ahead of time so the crew and civilians aboard can get to safety before the attack occurs.

This isn't practical since if a submarine surfaces to warn a ship, it risks being rammed and sunk itself.

The Germans accuse the US of allowing the Brits to violate international law (by not challenging their blockade of Germany) but holding the Germans to a strict (and impractical) standard.

May 1915 – German sub sinks the British ship Lusitania killing 128 Americans. The Germans did warn American passengers to stay off British ships carrying contraband, but Wilson asserts that the passengers should not be denied their right to travel safely. He refuses to ban Americans from traveling on British ships.

Slowly, however, Wilson comes to realize that if Germany wins the war, there will be no hope for progressive values taking root in Europe.

He also realizes that unless and until he can back his progressive rhetoric with force, he will have little leverage. The Great Powers will not accept the US as a "mediator" if the US has no force to back up its words.

By August 1915, Wilson reverses himself and supports a program of military preparedness. It seems clear that the United States' "preparations" are for a war with Germany, not Britain and France.

March 1916 – Germans sink the Sussex, a passenger ferry; no American lives lost but Wilson threatens to sever diplomatic relations (one step short of war).

Germans back off and in May 1916 announce the Sussex Pledge which promised a change in Germany's naval warfare policy:

- Passenger ships would not be targeted;
- Merchant ships would not be sunk until the presence of weapons had been established, if necessary by a search of the ship;
- Merchant ships would not be sunk without provision for the safety of passengers and crew.

In the wake of this pledge, Wilson believes he might be able to avoid war and returns his attention to pursuing further progressive reforms and his own re-election. As a new wave of reforms pass

Congress, progressives come to believe that involvement in the European war will divert attention from domestic reform and so they are more reluctant to take a tough stand against Germany.

Wilson's slogan in the 1916 election: "He kept us out of War." In fact, Wilson believes that war with Germany is probably only a matter of time – not "if," but "when." He keeps this to himself and allows the voters to believe he will "keep them out of war"...and he is re-elected to a second term.

The U.S. enters the War

Germany soon realizes that even though it doesn't want the Americans to enter the war, it cannot allow ships to continuously supply the British with weapons, food, and equipment. The German high command has to decide whether it's worth giving up sub warfare just to keep the Americans out of the war. They decide it is not.

The Germans calculate that the Americans will take at least a year to mobilize. The Germans convince themselves they can win the war on the battlefields of France before the American forces are able to tilt the balance to the Allies.

January 1917 – Germany resumes unrestricted submarine warfare.

The Zimmermann telegram follows on February 24, 1917.

This telegram from Germany to Mexico, offers the Mexican government German support in retaking large areas of the American Southwest lost to the US in the Mexican War in the 1840s.

The Germans hope that, diverted by a war on its border with Mexico, the US will be delayed or even kept from mobilizing its forces for a war in Europe.

When the telegram is "leaked" – thanks to the British – Wilson and the US must respond. (Some thought the Brits themselves may have forged the telegram to get the US involved in the war. Though it was understandable to be suspicious, there was nothing to this rumor.)

The Mexican government declares immediately that it wants no part of the German "deal." The American public, including many German-Americans who had been opposed to the U.S. entering the war on the side of the British, now is determined to fight against Germany.

Ultimately, however, the resumption of submarine warfare – more so than the Zimmermann Telegram – forces Wilson's hand. He asks Congress for a Declaration of War in April 1917.

Wilson not only mobilizes the US Armed Forces for war, through the Committee on Public Information, he launches an anti-German propaganda campaign to raise pro-war sentiment and morale.

The campaign arouses anti-German passions that often go too far. German-Americans (and any Americans who show insufficient enthusiasm for the war effort) become subjects of attacks and are often denied basic civil liberties. Anything "German" is denounced, or even renamed: "sauerkraut" becomes "liberty cabbage."

This seems an example of "social control" progressivism → if you don't adhere to the "progressive" position, you will be punished. It marks an attempt to impose "national unity" for a "good cause"

without taking into account the rights of those who might be "loyal" Americans but find themselves in disagreement with government policy.

The End of the War...and the 14-Point Peace

In resuming submarine warfare, the Germans severely miscalculated. The Americans, though slow to mobilize, did mobilize faster and to greater effect than the Germans had anticipated.

Also, with the declaration of war, the US began sending hundreds more ships filled with supplies to Europe. The German submarines could not keep up – they did not have enough subs to sink the increased number of ships. The Germans hadn't accounted for this.

Though the "Doughboys" (Allied Expeditionary Force) played a relatively small role in the military victory (compared to the sacrifices of the British and French), their presence and the flow of supplies from America tipped the balance and ended the military stalemate.

Because the U.S. military contribution did end up playing a significant role in ending the war sooner rather than later, the U.S. believed it would have some leverage at the peace talks that followed the war.

Wilson's 14 Points (See powerpoint slides) were largely his answer to how to solve the problems that had caused the war in the first place.

If secret alliances had caused the war to escalate, the peace treaty should call for open diplomacy.

If submarine warfare and naval blockades had fueled the war, the peace treaty should call for freedom of navigation on the seas.

If trade barriers had caused some nations to feel excluded or shut out from selling their goods in foreign markets, then the peace treaty should remove trade barriers and encourage free trade.

If the build up of arms and war ships had caused carnage on the battlefields and the high seas, the peace treaty should call for arms reductions.

If some ethnic groups and colonial peoples felt oppressed by governments not of their choosing, they should have the right (self-determination) to choose their own governments.

Though the people of Europe hailed Wilson as a hero and most European governments agreed, in theory, with Wilson's points, there were significant hurdles to clear.

First, in Wilson's "peace without victory," the defeated powers (particularly Germany) were not represented at the peace conference. Hard to see how the Germans would see this as a "peace without victory" if they had no say in crafting the peace terms.

More importantly, some of Wilson's points seemed unworkable. For example, how could each ethnic group exercise the right of "self-determination" if people from that group lived in regions that contained multiple ethnic groups scattered all around?

Finally, Point 14, which created the League of Nations, seemed to take power from the hands of Congress and put it in the hands of the League.

If a League member was attacked by another nation, the other members were obliged, by the terms of Article 10 of the treaty, to declare war on the aggressor nation.

Congressmen in the US claimed that THEY, and not the League, would determine when the US would declare war, and against whom.

This provision ends up sinking the League and the US Senate rejects the peace treaty.

Moreover, the treaty contained provisions that the Germans found unacceptable – particularly their obligation to pay war reparations and to accept full responsibility for the war ("war guilt").

This anger with the harshness of the treaty would, in time, fuel German anger and lead to the rise of Adolph Hilter.