

The History of the Twentieth Century

Episode 138

“Make the World Safe for Democracy”

Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

According to Colonel House, during his 1915 peace mission to Europe and in the tense aftermath of the sinking of *Lusitania*, the US ambassador to Germany, James Gerard, told him, “The people here [in Berlin] are firmly convinced that we [Americans] can be slapped, insulted and murdered with absolute impunity, and refer to our [diplomatic] notes as things worse than waste paper... They feel that our ‘New Freedom’ is against their ideas and ideals, and they hate President Wilson because he embodies peace and learning rather than caste and war.”

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening War Theme]

Episode 138. Make the World Safe for Democracy.

Back in episode 132, we examined the history of the efforts made in 1914 and 1915 to force or cajole or shame the combatants in the Great War into making peace. I want to continue with that narrative thread today into 1916. The collapse of Henry Ford’s amateur peace effort at the end of 1915, which I told you about in that episode, effectively marks the end of private efforts to stop the fighting, but it won’t stop Woodrow Wilson. His first effort also failed in 1915, but by 1916, he was ready to try again.

Wilson sent his ambassador without portfolio, Colonel Edward House, back to Europe at the beginning of 1916 for another try at persuading the warring nations there to agree to American-sponsored mediation. House spent two months in London, Paris, and Berlin, but mostly in London, where he developed a close relationship with the British Foreign Secretary, Sir Edward Grey.

Wilson had instructed House not to get mixed up in discussions about territorial claims or payment of indemnities. *Per* Woodrow Wilson, the only topics that interested the United States were a) ending the war b) military and naval disarmament and c) the establishment of a league of nations to act as a deterrent against future aggression.

House went to Europe, met with Grey, and promptly went well beyond Wilson's instructions to engage with Grey on a wide-ranging discussion of possible territorial settlements. In fairness to House, this was probably the only way he could get a meeting with Grey. In January 1916, the Central Powers have soldiers on French soil, Belgian soil, Serbian soil, and Russian soil. There is hardly a single foreign boot on German or Austrian territory. Telling Allied leaders to discuss peace without discussing territorial settlements would be like telling your doctor you want to discuss losing weight without discussing dieting.

House and Grey discussed Polish independence, the future of Belgium, Italian claims against Austria, the German colonies in Africa, Alsace-Lorraine, and the disposition of Ottoman territories. The subject of a league of nations was barely discussed; disarmament was not discussed at all. In Paris, House had similar conversations with the French foreign minister, Jules Cambon, and the prime minister, Aristide Briand.

House sent cables to Wilson with vague messages of optimism. "A great opportunity is yours, my friend....The way out seems clear to me." House and Wilson used a private code they had worked out between the two of them ahead of time, a code that the British intelligence operation in Room 40 of the Old Admiralty Building had no trouble breaking. In fact, it was easier to decrypt than the standard American diplomatic code, which Room 40 had also broken.

House arrived back in the United States on March 5, 1916, and he hurried back to Washington with a memorandum in his pocket, written in Sir Edward Grey's own hand. This document, known to history as the House-Grey Memorandum, laid out what purported to be a framework for ending the war.

It went like this: After Britain and France first signaled that the time was right, the United States would propose a conference to end the war. If the Allies agreed to the conference and Germany did not, the United States would "probably" enter the war on the Allied side. That was the word the memorandum used. *Probably*. If the conference met and drew up peace terms not unfavorable to the Allies, the Allies would accept. If Germany was unreasonable in its demands at the conference, the United States would, again, enter the war on the Allied side.

The memorandum spelled out what the Allies regarded as a "not unfavorable" outcome: the restoration of Belgian independence, the return of Alsace and Lorraine to France, and Russian access to the Mediterranean. The memorandum allowed that in return for these German concessions, the Allies might have to make concessions to Germany elsewhere, but not in Europe.

House presented the memorandum with a great deal of excitement. He seemed to think he had the key to ending the war. Woodrow Wilson was decidedly less enthusiastic, and in a few days his attention would be diverted by Pancho Villa's raid on Columbus, New Mexico anyway. The British and the French expressed their disappointment with the memorandum's use of the word "probably." They wanted a definite US commitment to enter the war unless Germany was

willing to talk terms. Jules Cambon expressed the view that Wilson was mostly trying to position himself as a peacemaker in the run-up to the 1916 Presidential election. Whether Foreign Secretary Grey saw the memorandum primarily as a roadmap to a peace agreement or as a device to draw the United States into the war is certainly a debatable question. For that matter, it's debatable which way House himself saw the agreement. But whatever the interpretation, this is as far as House's latest diplomatic effort would get.

For Woodrow Wilson, the statement that America would "probably" go to war if the Germans made unreasonable demands was not so much a warning as simply a prediction. New U-boat incidents still took place every few months and Americans were still occasionally getting killed. The longer the war went on, the more desperate and impatient the German government would get. Sooner or later, the United States would find itself at war, a war Wilson contemplated with dread. For him, the only way out seemed to be to find a peaceful end to the war before the inevitable happened.

But it would not be until the end of 1916 that Woodrow Wilson would be ready to try once again. In Between, Wilson's time and attention would be taken up by a number of things we've already discussed: Pancho Villa's attack and Pershing's retaliatory expedition, the Brandeis nomination, and of course the Presidential election campaign.

Almost as soon as Wilson was sure he had indeed won the election, he turned his mind to the next US peace proposal. In Berlin, minds were turning in a different direction. The US Embassy cabled the State Department on Election Day, November 7, to advise them of the news that a large but undetermined number of German U-boats had left Kiel with fuel and provisions sufficient for three months at sea. The German Chancellor, Bethman-Hollweg, summoned the US representative to his office on November 22 and all but begged the United States to make another peace proposal. In Washington, the German Ambassador, Count Bernstorff, was similarly pressing Wilson for a new peace offer.

The Americans didn't realize it, but Bethman-Hollweg and Bernstorff were two of the most ardent opponents within the German government of a renewal of unrestricted submarine warfare. Both of them believed that a peace proposal from Wilson was the only way to prevent it, or at least slow it down, and to prevent as well the entry of the US into the war. When Wilson sent Bernstorff a reply, assuring him that a peace proposal was forthcoming, Bernstorff responded that peace was just lying on the floor, waiting to be picked up. In his cables back to Berlin, Bernstorff urged his superiors not to begin the new submarine offensive until they had heard what Wilson had to say, and dangled the prospect that the US President might be able to get the Allies to soften their demands.

On December 12, the German government made a surprise peace offer of its own. The offer named no terms; it merely expressed German willingness to enter into negotiations with the Allies. The Allies quickly rebuffed the offer, but it was a signal to Wilson that if he wanted to try

his own hand, it would have to be now, or else never. On December 18, Wilson's peace proposal was cabled to US ambassadors in Europe for delivery to the respective governments; it was released to the press two days later.

Colonel House and Secretary of State Lansing both told Wilson his proposal would harm relations with the Allies, and it did indeed anger the Allied governments. Publicly, both the French and British governments were declaring that the only topic they were interested in discussing was victory. And yet, it was the German government that first responded in the negative, telling the Americans that Germany wanted to deal with the Allies directly. On December 27, Colonel House met with Count Bernstorff to discuss Wilson's reply to the Germans. If the German government would state privately to the American President what it would accept as a war settlement, then Wilson would use his good offices to bring the Allies to the peace table so that the two sides could then hammer out the details between themselves. The US would not be a party to the talks, except insofar as they involved Wilson's pet project of a league of nations to enforce world peace in the future.

Bernstorff agreed to this framework, but told House he and his government did not trust the US State Department with such sensitive information. What was needed was a direct channel from Berlin to Bernstorff to House to Wilson, bypassing the State Department. And so it was that Wilson and House made the fateful decision to allow Bernstorff and the German Foreign Office to use the State Department cable to communicate between themselves in code. Just days later, the Germans would use their secret communication privileges granted by the Americans to send the Zimmerman Telegram.

[music: Fillmore, "Rolling Thunder"]

Woodrow Wilson's peace initiative was no more popular with the Republican Party in the United States than it was in European capitals. One of Wilson's biggest critics was Massachusetts Senator Henry Cabot Lodge, who on January 3, 1917 gave a speech in which he accused Wilson of sympathizing with the Germans and opposing the nations that were "fighting the battle of freedom and democracy against military autocracy." That same day, Wilson's other biggest critic, Theodore Roosevelt, called Wilson's proposal "profoundly immoral and misleading." Roosevelt was particularly critical of the league of nations concept, calling it "a policy of violent meddling in every European quarrel." Idaho Senator William Borah was blunter still, calling the idea "treason."

That the Republicans were critical of Wilson for not backing the British more staunchly is no surprise, but those of you who have been following along with *The History of the Twentieth Century* since the beginning no doubt recall how twenty years ago, it was the Republicans who were leading the charge into the Spanish-American War and the Democrats who were reluctant to follow. And is this really the same Theodore Roosevelt who ordered the Great White Fleet to

sail around the world and let everyone know that America had arrived as a Great Power? Because, believe it or not, that was less than ten years ago.

Since when have Republicans become so gun shy about the US getting more involved in international affairs? What you're seeing here is a significant shift about to take place in American politics. As Woodrow Wilson and the Democratic Party become increasingly internationalist, the Republican Party is becoming increasingly isolationist.

"Back the British but stay out of world affairs," may seem like a contradictory stance, but it will help you to understand if you remember those Eastern Republican elites, the well-to-do of business and finance who had cultural and ancestral connections to Great Britain. And they had other, shall we say, less sentimental, reasons for supporting the British.

[sound effect: cash register]

The Allies were spending quite a lot of money in the United States on arms and munitions, cotton, steel, agricultural products, and chemicals. America was getting rich off this trade while enjoying the benefits of being far away from the battlefields and uninvolved in the actual combat. And when I say "America" was getting rich, I mean those Eastern elites were getting rich. And when I say the "Allies" were spending a lot of money, I mean the British were. The Allied side was largely being financed by Britain by this point, the Russians and the French having run out of money some time ago. The British were paying for all this with loans, mostly secured by British investments in the US. And the one man all this trade was flowing through was J.P. Morgan.

Ah, wait a minute, I hear you cry. Didn't you tell us J.P. Morgan died in March 1913? Why, yes, I did, in episode 68, to be exact. But this is J.P. Morgan, Jr., to whom his father, the original J.P. Morgan, left his company, J.P. Morgan and Company, after he passed away. The Morgan Company had a very good relationship with the British government. By 1915, Morgan was organizing consortiums of American banks that collectively lent the Allies \$500,000,000. Morgan and Company was also the designated US purchasing agent for the British government and of course was collecting a small cut of all this money, coming and going.

Those Americans who opposed US involvement in the war, especially those with German sympathies, were suspicious of Morgan and his web of financial transactions. Was filthy lucre going to ensnare the US into this horrible war? On July 2, 1915, a German-American named Eric Muentzer, possibly with the assistance of German intelligence, set a time bomb in the Senate reception room of the United States Capitol. The bomb exploded that night, just before midnight, destroying the empty room. Muentzer was by that time already in New York City, where the following day he hid a bomb in an American merchant ship, *SS Minnehaha*, then proceeded to Glen Cove on Long Island, where he forced his way into J.P. Morgan's house and tried to kill him. Morgan was shot and wounded but was able to wrestle Muentzer's weapon away from him. A few days later, Muentzer killed himself in prison.

So yeah, I guess you could say that Morgan was a controversial figure, and though killing him wouldn't have done much to hamper the British war effort, time and the inexorable realities of economics were presenting the British with a far graver threat by the end of 1916. When the war began, everyone believed it would end in 1914 or 1915 or 1916, and the Allies were in a rush to borrow and buy with little regard for the long-term consequences. That could all be sorted out after the war was won. But by November 1916, with no end yet in sight, Morgan and Company approached the Federal Reserve Board with the news that Britain was out of American assets with which to secure its loans. Any further bank loans to the Allies would have to be unsecured loans, backed only by the credit and reputation of the United Kingdom.

This was a tricky business for the Federal Reserve and the American government. Unsecured loans to the Allies would be a whole new level of American entanglement in the war. It would give the United States a vested interest in the outcome, since an Allied defeat might now lead to a financial panic, or an even worse economic decline, in the United States.

On the other hand, it also potentially gave the US a greater degree of leverage over the Allies. In the British Treasury Department, a 33-year old economist named John Maynard Keynes who supervised management of the British Government's debts and holdings of foreign currencies warned the Government of the situation: the Allied war effort was becoming increasingly dependent on supplies and credit from, and therefore the goodwill of, the United States.

And so, with a little arm twisting from the British, the Allies gave a sort of grudging answer declaring the Allies' goal of a future world of peace and security based on liberty and justice, attached to a long list of demands including the restoration of Belgium, Serbia, Romania, and Montenegro, the liberation of Czechs, Slovaks, Italians, South Slavs, and Romanians from the Austrian Empire, and "the restitution of provinces...wrested in the past from the Allies by force..." a clear reference to Alsace-Lorraine. There didn't seem to be much wiggle room for negotiation.

In their reply, the Central Powers merely reiterated their view that only direct talks between the two belligerent coalitions would end the war, and that any talk of a new international peacekeeping arrangement would need to wait until first the war was settled.

Woodrow Wilson didn't take the hint. At the suggestion of Colonel House, he prepared a speech for Congress outlining his ideas for peace. A public declaration of Wilson's vision might attract the notice of the European publics, who could press their respective governments to be more flexible.

Meanwhile, even as Wilson was preparing his speech, encrypted communications continued to pass back and forth between the German Foreign Office and Count Bernstorff, despite the fact that Germany had rejected Wilson's peace offer and it would seem there was nothing left for them to talk about, or at least nothing that the Americans had any interest in facilitating. Yet the communications continued. Secretary of State Lansing became increasingly frustrated with this

process and began refusing to allow the Germans use of the cable without express orders from Wilson directly or through House. Each time Lansing refused, House would direct Lansing to transmit the cable, telling him the order came from the President. Lansing would then grudgingly comply, but then refuse to release the reply cable to Bernstorff without another direct order. And so on and so on, until a joke began going around in Washington. “How do you spell ‘Lansing?’” “H-O-U-S-E.”

After a few rounds of this, House got tired of Lansing’s stubbornness and told him that if he didn’t like the arrangement, to take it up with the President himself. Lansing accepted the challenge. He met with Wilson and his arguments must have been strenuous, because the next thing we know is that Wilson sent House a memo questioning whether the Germans were really using the cable for benign diplomatic purposes, and suggesting that perhaps it was time to get Bernstorff on the record with a personal pledge that the cables were not being used for any purpose inconsistent with US neutrality. House told Wilson that it was to America’s benefit to keep the Germans talking because as long as they were occupied with diplomacy, they wouldn’t be returning to unrestricted submarine warfare.

Of course, you know and I know and Room 40 knows, though Wilson and House and Lansing do not, that by this time the German Foreign Office has already used the State Department cable to transmit the Zimmerman Telegram.

On January 22, 1917, Wilson addressed the United States Senate and laid out in some detail his vision of a “peace without victory”:

Victory would mean peace forced upon the loser, a victor’s terms imposed upon the vanquished. It would be accepted in humiliation, under duress, at an intolerable sacrifice, and would leave a sting, a resentment, a bitter memory upon which terms of peace would rest, not permanently, but only as upon quicksand.

Only a peace between equals can last. Only a peace the very principle of which is equality and a common participation in a common benefit. The right state of mind, the right feeling between nations, is as necessary for a lasting peace as is the just settlement of vexed questions of territory or of racial and national allegiance.

...

No peace can last, or ought to last, which does not recognize and accept the principle that governments derive all their just powers from the consent of the governed, and that no right anywhere exists to hand peoples about from sovereignty to sovereignty as if they were property.

I take it for granted, for instance, if I may venture upon a single example, that statesmen everywhere are agreed that there should be a united, independent, and autonomous Poland, and that henceforth inviolable security of life, of worship, and of industrial and social development should be guaranteed to all peoples who have lived hitherto under the power of governments devoted to a faith and purpose hostile to their own.

...

Mere agreements may not make peace secure. It will be absolutely necessary that a force be created as a guarantor of the permanency of the settlement so much greater than the force of any nation now engaged or any alliance hitherto formed or projected that no nation, no probable combination of nations could face or withstand it.

If the peace presently to be made is to endure, it must be a peace made secure by the organized major force of mankind.

Wilson's words were well received by his fellow Democrats, who praised the speech, and by a few Republican Senators, like Fighting Bob La Follette. Henry Cabot Lodge scoffed at Wilson's ideas and asserted that peace could only come about through military victory. Theodore Roosevelt was harsher still: "Peace without victory is the natural ideal of the man who is too proud to fight."

Wilson himself was disappointed by the Republicans' lack of enthusiasm, but was more interested in the official reactions from the governments in Europe. He wouldn't have to wait long.

[music: Sousa, *La Reine de la Mer*]

Nine days after the "peace without victory" address, on January 31, 1917 at 4:10 in the afternoon, Secretary of State Lansing received a German diplomatic note informing the US government that Germany would resume the practice of U-boat attacks without warning on all sea traffic in the waters around the British Isles, France, and Italy.

Secretary Lansing recommended that the US break diplomatic relations with Germany at once. Wilson wanted time to think it over. On February 2, he polled the members of his Cabinet; they were unanimous in support of breaking relations. The next day, Wilson spoke to Congress. He announced the decision to break relations, while still expressing the hope that Germany would not actually follow through on her threat. If they did, Wilson vowed that the US government would do whatever was necessary to protect American lives.

Most members of Congress and newspaper editorials supported Wilson's decision to break relations but go no further for now. Theodore Roosevelt was the exception, of course. He privately grumbled, "Whether we go to war or not, Heaven only knows, and certainly Mr. Wilson does not."

The German Navy did not show anything like the restraint Wilson was hoping for. The number of attacks on merchant vessels soared, and for the first time in two years, American ships were attacked. There were calls for American merchant ships to be armed with Navy guns and gun crews and to sail with US Navy escorts to protect them from German attacks. Again, Wilson was reluctant to take this step, but on February 26, he spoke to Congress once again. He believed that as President he already had the authority to arm and protect US shipping, but, he explained, he sought Congressional authorization anyway as a show of American unity during the crisis.

Even as Wilson was addressing Congress, the news reached Washington that a German U-boat had sunk the British ocean liner *Laconia*. Two Americans, a mother and daughter from Chicago, had died of exposure in their lifeboat.

And a bigger bombshell was about to drop. You'll recall the Zimmerman Telegram from episode 134. At the end of that episode, I told you, the British government had a copy of the telegram and wanted to release it to the Americans, but there were two problems. Releasing the telegram would reveal to the Germans that the British had cracked their diplomatic code, and it would reveal to the United States that British Intelligence was tapping the State Department's diplomatic cable.

Admiral Hall, the man in charge of Room 40, had at first hoped it wouldn't be necessary to do anything at all about the Zimmerman Telegram. The telegram itself had said that unrestricted submarine warfare would begin on February 1. With any kind of luck, that would bring the Americans into the war all by itself, and British Intelligence could keep its secrets secret. All that was necessary was to wait for the inevitable.

Only, the inevitable didn't happen. The US broke diplomatic relations with Germany and began to debate arming its merchant ships, but that's as far as she got. That wasn't going to help Britain, or at least not enough. The US merchant fleet was only one-tenth the size of Britain's, and only slightly larger than the merchant fleets of the Netherlands or Norway. Even if US ships could still somehow still keep plying the trade routes between North America and Great Britain, that alone would not be enough to keep the British supplied.

And then there was the credit problem I mentioned. Britain was spending \$10,000,000 a day she didn't have in the United States. How long would the US government continue to allow new British loans before they would say, "Enough?" How long before Woodrow Wilson decided to use America's leverage over the British government to force Britain to the peace table?

On February 5, Admiral Hall notified the Foreign Office of the existence of the Zimmerman Telegram. On February 10, as Count Bernstorff was packing up the German Embassy in Washington and preparing to return to Berlin, he sent instructions to Germany's ambassador in Mexico City, essentially forwarding the Zimmerman Telegram to him with instructions to get cracking on negotiations with Carranza and his government.

The British government had its own reasons to worry about a German-Mexican alliance. Recall that Mexican oil is fueling many of the Royal Navy's newest and most modern ships. The British government's worst fears appeared on their way to becoming reality when on February 13, Venustiano Carranza unveiled his own peace plan. Under the Carranza peace plan, the neutral nations of the world would band together in a mutual agreement to refuse to trade with any nation fighting the Great War until they all agreed to lay down their arms.

Now, this plan was evenhanded on its face, but in practice, the British blockade meant that the Central Powers were already cut off from neutral trade, meaning the Carranza proposal was effectively an embargo against the Allies. Again, the British government thought nervously about all that oil the Royal Navy was getting from Mexico.

But the knowledge that this telegram had been sent to Mexico City also provided an opportunity for the British. The British ambassador in Mexico City had a contact in the Mexico City telegraph office who owed him a big favor. He called in his favor and collected a copy of the German telegram. It was worded differently and used an older code, so that would help keep Britain's most valuable secrets secret.

On February 19, Admiral Hall showed the Zimmerman Telegram to Edward Bell, an official from the US Embassy in London who served as liaison to British intelligence agencies. Bell's immediate reaction, quite understandably, was to denounce the telegram as a fake, and not a very clever one at that. What a ridiculous suggestion, that the Germans were in talks with the Mexicans about handing over Texas! Hall patiently assured Bell that the telegram was genuine. Bell said, if that were true, it would mean war. Hall suggested that if the American government checked with the Western Union company, they could discover for themselves that Bernstorff had sent a coded telegram to Mexico City at exactly the time the British were claiming. If the State Department wanted to forward a copy of Bernstorff's coded message to its embassy in London, Admiral Hall offered to bring over Room 40's own copy of the German code book and allow Mr. Bell to decipher Bernstorff's message for himself.

The US Embassy in London duly cabled this information to Washington. Woodrow Wilson was reportedly "indignant" upon hearing the news. It is said that he went so far as to exclaim "Good Lord!" which by Woodrow Wilson standards, counts as a huge emotional outburst.

There's no evidence that Wilson personally questioned the authenticity of the telegram, but many others would.

In Mexico City, the US Ambassador was instructed to ask the Mexican Foreign Ministry about the Zimmerman Telegram. The Foreign Ministry denied any knowledge of the matter, which was a little white lie. Carranza had gone so far as to ask his military commanders about it, but Mexico was exhausted from its revolutionary conflicts. A new constitution had just been enacted and a Presidential election was coming up. Carranza's advisors told him that German promises of aid were empty, so long as the British blockade remained in effect. Where would Mexico get the arms and ammunition for such a war? Mexico had little hope of defeating the US on the battlefield, and even if all this could somehow be made to come to pass, Mexico would be stuck with new territories inhabited by a large number of very unhappy English-speaking *gringos* who could not be expected to reconcile themselves to Mexican rule at any time in the foreseeable future. It's hard to see how this ends any way other than badly.

When Wilson spoke to Congress on February 26, the day when he asked for authorization to arm merchant ships, he already knew about the Zimmerman Telegram. To fully understand what Wilson was up to here, you need to remember that there had been an election last November. Under the law that was in effect at this time, the newly elected President's term would begin at noon on March 4. Since Wilson had been re-elected, that was no big deal, but the new Congress that was elected last November—the 65th Congress—would also take office then. The authority of the current lame duck Congress—the 64th Congress—would expire at that same time, noon on March 4, and it would be forced to adjourn *sine die*, as they say.

Under the terms of the Constitution that were then in force, Congress was not required to meet until the first Monday in December, that is, a full thirteen months after it was elected and nine months after its Members took office. Now, Presidents do have the power to call Congress into session sooner and the Republicans were already clamoring for Wilson to go ahead do just that—perhaps even take the unprecedented step of calling the new Congress into session before the old one officially ended.

But Wilson didn't want to do that. Wilson was afraid that a Congress in session would give Republicans like Henry Cabot Lodge a platform from which to agitate for war and otherwise interfere with the careful line Wilson was trying to walk: a response to Germany forceful enough to get results without requiring a declaration of war.

In other words, what Wilson really wanted was for Congress to give him that authority to arm and protect merchant shipping, and then go away for nine months and let him handle things on his own. But while the jingoes in Congress were pushing Wilson to call the new Congress into session, the pacifists in Congress were pushing to adjourn the old one without giving Wilson the authority he was looking for. Principal among these was our old friend, Fighting Bob La Follette,

the Progressive Senator from Wisconsin and staunch opponent of war. On February 27, the day after Wilson's speech, La Follette signed up ten Senators to filibuster the authorization Wilson had requested. The day after that would be the day Wilson ordered the Zimmerman Telegram leaked to the press.

On Thursday, March 1, newspapers across the country carried eight-column headlines declaring that Germany was pressing Mexico to attack the United States. Coming less than a year after Pancho Villa's raid on Columbus, the story seemed all too plausible.

But the news reports were silent on how the press had obtained and decoded a secret German diplomatic cable. Anti-war Senators immediately began questioning the authenticity of the telegram, which under the circumstances was not an unreasonable question to raise. Most people guessed that British Intelligence had been the source, which made Irish-American politicians immediately skeptical. Our old friend, George Viereck, editor of the pro-German publication *The Fatherland* and whom we saw working hand in glove with German agents in episode 119, called the Zimmerman Telegram "preposterous," "brazen," and "obviously faked."

That's an extreme example, but it wasn't only paid German agents raising doubts. William Randolph Hearst instructed his newspapers to take the position that the telegram was a probable forgery. Even some prominent Republicans, like Elihu Root, expressed reservations. Oscar Underwood, now a Democratic Senator from Alabama, argued that even if the telegram were authentic, it merely set out a proposed German response in the event of an American declaration of war, and therefore represented no unfriendly intentions toward the US.

News of the telegram prompted the House of Representatives to pass the authorization Wilson requested to arm US merchant ships by the overwhelming margin of 403-13. The Senate was another matter. Fighting Bob La Follette was determined to filibuster the bill. Today was Thursday, March 1. If he and his allies could hold out until noon on Sunday, March 4, that would be the end of this Congress, and the end of this bill.

Pro-war Senators had their own priorities. Henry Cabot Lodge introduced a resolution in the Senate asking the Administration to express a view of the authenticity of the telegram. Lodge hoped to box Wilson in, forcing him to publicly acknowledge the Zimmerman Telegram's authenticity. But this was not as big a political problem for Wilson as Lodge thought. Within the Wilson Administration, there was no doubt the telegram was authentic. The evidence the British had presented was far too compelling. Pledges of secrecy made to the British made it impossible to explain why, but Wilson and his officials had no reservations about publicly confirming the authenticity of the telegram.

Henry Cabot Lodge told Theodore Roosevelt, “He does not mean to go to war, but I think he is in the grip of events.” Lodge meant that as a putdown, but in hindsight it sounds more like exoneration.

But as long as there was no public proof of the authenticity of the telegram, there would be those who refused to believe it. The Mexican and Japanese governments both denied any knowledge of the telegram; so did the German ambassador in Mexico City. But the German Foreign Office in Berlin was conspicuously silent. That was no surprise at first. No doubt the Germans were carefully crafting a public statement. In Washington, everyone, pro-war and anti-war alike, assumed that when the Germans finally made that public statement, they would deny everything. What then?

But on Saturday, March 3, two days after the telegram became public, German Foreign Secretary Arthur Zimmerman dropped his own bombshell. At a press conference in Berlin, an American reporter named William Bayard Hale asked about the telegram. Hale worked for the Hearst newspaper chain, but he was also being paid good money on the side and secretly by the German government to advise them on public relations in the United States. Hale’s question ended with the words, “Of course, Your Excellency will deny this story,” which I guess we can interpret as a subtle hint.

But if it was a hint, Zimmerman didn’t take it. He replied, “I cannot deny it. It is true.”

Why Zimmerman so readily admitted this isn’t clear. Perhaps he reasoned that the British and the Americans had the goods, so there was no point in a denial. Perhaps he thought, like Senator Underwood, that there was nothing particularly underhanded about making plans for the eventuality of a war. That wasn’t the same thing as starting one, was it? This was the argument he would use in his defense, but few in the United States would find it convincing.

In Washington, the Senate began debating the armed ships legislation on March 3. Seventy-five Senators signed a so-called round robin petition, meant to put themselves on the record as favoring the bill. This would have been more than enough votes to pass the legislation, but under the Senate rules of the time, there was no mechanism to cut off debate. As long as even one Senator wanted to keep talking, no one could stop them.

Debate continued all through Saturday night and into Sunday the fourth. Tensions were high in the Senate chamber; La Follette brought in a loaded pistol, which his son, Bob Jr., quickly confiscated. La Follette had planned to take up the final two hours of debate on Sunday morning with his own speech, but angry pro-Wilson Democrats held the floor themselves in order to deny him the spotlight. Noontime came and the Vice President, Thomas Marshall, was forced to adjourn the Senate *sine die*.

At that moment, Woodrow Wilson was elsewhere in the Capitol to take the oath of office for his second term in a private ceremony. The official inaugural celebration would be held on Monday. Wilson was furious at the Senate's inaction and put out a statement, in which he called for the new Senate to adopt a rule for ending debate and reasserted his view that he already had the power to order the arming of merchant ships. He also couldn't resist adding, in an intemperate and very un-Wilsonian outburst, that "[a] little group of willful men, representing no opinion but their own, have rendered the great Government of the United States helpless and contemptible."

Wilson had no choice but to call the new Congress into session early, which he did, setting April 16 as the date. And then he gave the executive order to begin arming ships.

The Senate began an early special session to debate a treaty to pay Colombia an indemnity and apologize for America's role in the Panamanian revolution of 1903. This treaty had been negotiated in 1914 and had already been ratified by Colombia, but the United States had taken no action on it. In response to Wilson's call, the Senate adopted a rule under which a two-thirds vote could cut off debate. Unfortunately for Wilson, Republicans opposed to the treaty, including Henry Cabot Lodge, were able to filibuster it in spite of the new rule. The Senate would eventually ratify this treaty in 1921.

Wilson spent the rest of March pondering the question of war. He mostly kept his own counsel, although he worried out loud that US entry into the war would end any hope of a "peace without victory," producing instead a dictated peace based not on peaceful and civilized principles, but on "the barbarian principle that might makes right."

He also worried what effect being a part of such a huge and bloody war would have on the character of the United States. A newspaper editor quoted him as saying, "Once lead this people into war, and they'll forget there ever was such a thing as tolerance. To fight you must be brutal and ruthless, and the spirit of ruthless brutality will enter into the very fiber of our national life, infecting Congress, the courts, the policeman on the beat, the man in the street....If there is any alternative, for God's sake, let's take it!"

The following day was a Cabinet meeting. Wilson asked his Cabinet what they thought. The Cabinet was unanimous for war. Wilson did not reveal his own mind, but he did reschedule the upcoming Congressional session for two weeks earlier: April 2.

On March 15, 1917 in response to the February Revolution in Petrograd, the Russian Emperor Nikolai II abdicated. This surely played a role in Wilson's decision. While it was possible to frame the Great War as a confrontation between the world's great democracies and the world's most powerful autocratic governments, Imperial Russia undermined this moral argument, and moral arguments were always very important to Woodrow Wilson. Russia was a more autocratic state than Germany or Austria, or even the Ottoman Empire these days. Russia was famous for

the heavy-handed authoritarianism of its government. There was no nation anywhere in the world that put more power in the hands of one person than did Imperial Russia.

The Revolution had changed all that in a matter of days. Russia was now a fledgling democracy, under assault from the Kaiser's advancing troops. Wilson dreamed of a post-war league of nations, but part of his vision was that only democratic nations need apply. Only democratic nations, he believed, could be trusted to work together for the common good. Putting Imperial Russia into a league of nations would undermine that vision. The Revolution, though, eliminated this problem. Now Russia was a struggling democracy calling out to other democratic nations to come to her aid.

Congress convened on Monday, April 2. Wilson spent the weekend before writing his speech, which he showed to no one. When the day arrived, the new Congress needed all day Monday to organize itself and elect its leadership, so it was not until 8:30 that evening that President Wilson arrived to address them. The House chamber was overflowing with Members of Congress, Senators, Supreme Court Justices, the Cabinet, the diplomatic corps and the press.

“With a profound sense of the solemn and even tragical character of the step I am taking,” Wilson told them, he asked Congress to “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.” He told Congress that the autocratic German government made war for its own selfish purposes, not for the good of its own people. The United States had no quarrel with the German people, only with the Kaiser and his government. A democratic nation would not have committed these crimes. A democratic Germany would never again commit such crimes. He laid out his vision of a postwar world in which peace was maintained by a partnership of democratic nations. “The world,” Wilson declared, “must be made safe for democracy.”

That line was met with uproarious applause, and came to define Wilson's foreign policy legacy and his reasons for entering the war. Please note, though, that unlike the title of this episode, that Wilson used the passive voice. He did not say it was America's role to make the world safe for democracy. He said simply that it must be done, meaning it was the common duty of all the world's peoples. He concluded, “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.”

Wilson's closing words echo Martin Luther's famous declaration at the Diet of Worms 396 years earlier: “God helping me, I can do no other.” As the son of a Protestant minister, Wilson surely knew exactly who and what he was quoting.

With those words, the House chamber let loose an explosion of cheers, applause, and flag waving, with the notable exception of Fighting Bob La Follette, who sat quietly in his seat, his arms crossed, a grim expression on his face. This was the greatest speech ever given by a man noted for his great speeches. Newspaper editorials around America echoed the cheers of Congress.

The Senate spent 13 hours debating the war resolution on April 4, La Follette personally taking up four of the 13 hours. In the end, six Senators voted no: three Democrats and three Republicans, including La Follette.

The House debate was similar, with the final vote being 373-50. The Member there who got the most attention was the newly elected Representative from Montana, Jeanette Rankin, the women's rights campaigner who was now the first woman to serve in the United States Congress. She was under great pressure from women's suffrage advocates to vote yes. They didn't want opponents of women's suffrage to use Rankin's vote as evidence that women were too weak or easily frightened to make difficult decisions. When the roll was called, Rankin hesitated, then, with tears in her eyes, voted no. As did the House's lone Socialist Member.

And so, with only slight opposition, the United States of America was now a belligerent in the biggest and bloodiest war the world had ever seen.

We'll have to stop there for today. Thanks for listening. I'd also like to thank Jonathan for making a donation and *muchas gracias, Francisco*, for becoming a patron of the podcast. With the holidays upon us, allow me to remind you once again that donations and patronages make excellent gifts, for me. Just visit the website, historyofthetwentiethcentury.com and click on the PayPal or Patreon buttons. Also, and although this goes against my grinchy nature, if there is some other podcaster, or artist or musician or writer or other creative person whose work you admire and value, consider supporting them via a patronage or donation. Even a modest donation of a dollar or two a month on Patreon will help them feel respected and valued and encouraged to keep producing more of what you appreciate. Trust me on this.

And I hope you'll join me next week, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, as we return to Russia to have a look at what the new revolutionary government is up to and how well it is dealing, or not dealing, with the burdens of the war. No Fight, No Loan, next week, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. The US ambassador in London, Walter Page, became a great admirer of Room 40, and the man in charge, Admiral William Reginald Hall, the Director of Naval Intelligence. Hall was often known as "Blinker" Hall, because of his chronic blinking, which was probably the result of some neurological disorder.

Walter Page remarked that he hoped he lived another twenty years, until the records of Room 40 became public, so that he could write a book about Hall and his accomplishments, which Page believed deserved much more credit than they were getting. He praised Hall as a “genius.” Sadly for Page, he would only live another year and a half, dying in December 1918, at the age of 63. Admiral Hall, on the other hand, would live a further quarter-century, dying in 1943, at the age of 73.

[music: Closing Theme]