

# Wilson's Speech Before Congress, April 2, 1917

**Background:** Woodrow Wilson made the key decisions, as he had since 1914. Certain members of the Senate still sought to avert war by keeping American ships out of the war zone. The President, however, decided that he had the necessary authority to arm these merchant ships, giving them a chance at self-protection, and to send them out. Wilson agonized over the situation, believing that the war was almost intolerable, that it might do irreparable damage to American institutions. And yet he saw no way out.

The only hope was that Germany would avoid sinking the ships of neutral powers and especially those of the United States. Wilson, in other words, was prepared to retreat from the Sussex pledge of 1916 (an agreement between the U.S and Germany where Germany agreed to warn all ships German U-boats came across before the torpedoed them), so eager was he to avoid war. He did not adhere doggedly to an extreme interpretation of international law, as formerly believed.

Gradually, events carried Wilson toward war. On February 25, the British turned over to him an intercepted note from the German foreign secretary, Arthur Zimmermann, proposing that in the event of war Mexico should attack the United States and receive in return her lost province north of the border. Americans were infuriated.

At about the same time the Russians revolution replaced the czar (ruler) with a communist government. Because of the struggle in Russia, the new Russian, communist government had to pull out of WWI causing a void in the Allied Powers.

**[This is President Wilson addressing Congress about the U.S. Declaration of War—officially entering WWI]**

It is a distressing and oppressive duty, gentlemen of the Congress, which I have performed in thus addressing you. 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 the right is more precious than peace, and we shall fight for the things which we have always carried nearest our hearts -- for democracy, for the right of those who submit to authority to have a voice in their own governments, for the rights and liberties of small nations, for a universal dominion of right by such a concert of free peoples as shall bring peace and safety to all nations and make the world itself at last free. 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.

Using the speech in the box, what were President Wilson's reasons for going to war?

Point of View Point of View:

Who is the author? Name \_\_\_\_\_

	Position—title (president, politician, leader or organization, ...)	Status (upper class, middle class, lower class)	Education Level	Nationality	Location writing from	Gender
Author <b>Do ALL</b>						
How does it affect the author's statement? <b>Do only 2</b>						
Tone (angry, persuasive, resigned,...) <b>Do ALL</b>	Type of document (letter, treaty, speech, ...)		Motive for writing (inform, complain, protest, share good news, ...)		Intended Audience	