

REQUEST FOR A DECLARATION OF WAR

1917

Woodrow Wilson

President Woodrow Wilson (1856–1924) delivered this speech to Congress on April 2, 1917, asking it to declare war against Germany. This followed nearly two years of deliberate efforts to stay out of World War I. He had campaigned for his second term as president on the slogan “He kept us out of war,” but when German submarines began sinking U.S. merchant ships in early 1917, Wilson was moved to act.

READING FOCUS:

What reasons did Wilson give Congress for declaring war on Germany? How might someone have argued against those reasons?

The new [German] policy has swept every restriction aside. Vessels of every kind...have been ruthlessly sent to the bottom without warning and without thought of help or mercy for those on board....The present German submarine warfare...is a war against all nations....Our motive will not be revenge or the victorious assertion of the physical might of the nation, but only the vindication of right, of human right.... We are...the sincere friends of the German people.... We shall, happily, still have an opportunity to prove that friendship in our daily attitude and actions towards the millions of men and women of German birth and native sympathy who live amongst us and share our life.... There are...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...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....

Address to a Joint Session of the Two Houses of Congress by Woodrow Wilson, U.S. Senate Document 5, 65th Congress, 1st Session, April 2, 1917.

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Analysis Questions:

1. How does Wilson characterize the German submarine war?
2. Why should the United States be proud to join the war against Germany?