

## This Day in History... April 2, 1917

# Wilson Asks Congress to Declare War

President Woodrow Wilson addressed Congress on April 2, 1917, asking to declare war and join World War I.

The US was unprepared for war in 1914, and most Americans did not favor any involvement in the conflict abroad. President Woodrow Wilson called for the country to be "impartial in thought as well as in action." Opinions started to shift when German mines began sinking the ships of Great Britain, which was one of America's closest trading partners. Tensions rose further in February 1915, when Germany declared a war zone around Britain and promised unrestricted warfare against all ships entering it. Just one month later, a German cruiser sank the *William P. Frye*, an American merchant ship transporting grain to England. The German government issued an apology, calling the attack an unfortunate mistake, but Americans were outraged.

In early May 1915, the German embassy in Washington warned that Americans traveling on Allied ships in war zones did so at their own risk. Several New York newspapers published the warning. In one paper, the announcement was placed on the same page as an advertisement for an upcoming sailing of the British-owned *Lusitania* ocean liner, which was scheduled to travel from New York to Liverpool, England. On May 7, a German submarine torpedoed the *Lusitania* without warning off the coast of Ireland. Among the passengers killed were 128 Americans. Although it was revealed that the ship was carrying some 173 tons of war munitions for Great Britain, the US protested the attack and Germany pledged to end its unrestricted submarine warfare.



*James M. Flagg based this famous image of Uncle Sam partly on himself.*

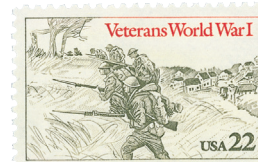
Britain urged the US to declare war on Germany immediately, but Wilson was hesitant. On November 7, 1915, the Italian liner *Ancona* was torpedoed, killing more than 250 people, including 27 Americans. Public opinion in the US changed rapidly. However, Wilson was reelected in November 1916, after campaigning with a pledge to keep the nation out of war. But before his second inauguration, Germany announced it would resume unrestricted submarine warfare, promising to attack all neutral ships sailing into a German war zone without warning, whether armed or unarmed. On February 3, 1917, Wilson broke off all diplomatic ties with Germany. Hours later, the American liner *Housatonic* was sunk by a German U-boat. Congress quickly passed a \$250 million arms appropriations bill to ready the nation for war. In March, Germany sank four additional US merchant ships. The discovery of the so-called Zimmerman Telegram, in which Germany's foreign secretary proposed an alliance with Mexico against the US, further inflamed Americans. The final straw came on April 1, 1917, when the US steamer *Aztec* was torpedoed and 28 crew members died.

On April 2, 1917, President Wilson appeared before Congress to call for a declaration of war against Germany. He claimed, "Neutrality is no longer feasible or desirable where the peace of the world is involved and the freedom of its people, and the menace to that peace and freedom lies in the existence of autocratic governments backed by organized force which is controlled wholly by their will, not by the will of their people."

Congress approved Wilson's declaration four days later, on April 6. After four years of deadly stalemate along the Western Front, the first 14,000 US infantry troops landed in France on June 26, 1917. America's entrance into the conflict was a major turning point. When World War I ended on November 11, 1918, over 2 million Americans had served and over 50,000 had died. The Russian, Ottoman, and Austro-Hungarian Empires were crushed and the United States emerged as a superpower. Tanks, airplanes, submarines, and poison gas had been used in battle for the first time. War reparations levied against Germany crippled their economy, setting the stage for the rise of Adolf Hitler and World War II.



*Stamp pictures Woodrow Wilson's favorite photo of himself.*



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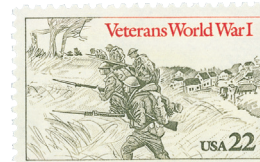
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