

## **Wilson's Declaration of Neutrality**

### **August 19, 1914**

The effect of the war upon the United States will depend upon what American citizens say and do. Every man who really loves America will act and speak in the true spirit of neutrality, which is the spirit of impartiality and fairness and friendliness to all concerned. The spirit of the nation in this critical matter will be determined largely by what individuals and society and those gathered in public meetings do and say, upon what newspapers and magazines contain, upon what ministers utter in their pulpits, and men proclaim as their opinions upon the street. The people of the United States are drawn from many nations, and chiefly from the nations now at war. It is natural and inevitable that there should be the utmost variety of sympathy and desire among them with regard to the issues and circumstances of the conflict. Some will wish one nation, others another, to succeed in the momentous struggle. It will be easy to excite passion and difficult to allay it. Those responsible for exciting it will assume a heavy responsibility, responsibility for no less a thing than that the people of the United States, whose love of their country and whose loyalty to its government should unite them as Americans all, bound in honor and affection to think first of her and her interests, may be divided in camps of hostile opinion, hot against each other, involved in the war itself in impulse and opinion if not in action.

Such divisions amongst us would be fatal to our peace of mind and might seriously stand in the way of the proper performance of our duty as the one great nation at peace, the one people holding itself ready to play a part of impartial mediation and speak the counsels of peace and accommodation, not as a partisan, but as a friend.

I venture, therefore, my fellow countrymen, to speak a solemn word of warning to you against that deepest, most subtle, most essential breach of neutrality which may spring out of partisanship, out of passionately taking sides. The United States must be neutral in fact, as well as in name, during these days that are to try men's souls. We must be impartial in thought, as well as in action, must put a curb upon our sentiments, as well as upon every transaction that might be construed as a preference of one party to the struggle before another.

## **The US Statement on the Status of Armed Merchant Vessels September 19, 1914**

- A. A merchant vessel of belligerent nationality may carry an armament and ammunition for the sole purpose of defense without acquiring the character of a ship of war.
- B. The presence of an armament and ammunition on board a merchant vessel creates a presumption that the armament is for offensive purposes, but the owners or agents may overcome this presumption by evidence showing that the vessel carries armament solely for defense.
- C. Evidence necessary to establish the fact that the armament is solely for defense and will not be used offensively, whether the armament be mounted or stowed below, must be presented in each case independently at an official investigation. The result of the investigation must show conclusively that the armament is not intended for, and will not be used in, offensive operations. Indications that the armament will not be used offensively are:
  - 1. That the caliber of the guns carried does not exceed six inches.
  - 2. That the guns and small arms carried are few in number.
  - 3. That no guns are mounted on the forward part of the vessel.
  - 4. That the quantity of ammunition carried is small.
  - 5. That the vessel is manned by its usual crew, and the officers are the same as those on board before war was declared
  - 6. That the vessel intends to and actually does clear for a port lying in its usual trade route, or a port indicating its purpose to continue in the same trade in which it was engaged before war was declared.
  - 7. That the vessel takes on board fuel and supplies sufficient only to carry it to its port of destination, or the same quantity substantially which it has been accustomed to take for a voyage before war was declared.
  - 8. That the cargo of the vessel consists of articles of commerce unsuited for the use of a ship of war in operations against an enemy.
  - 9. That the vessel carries passengers who are as a whole unfitted to enter the military or naval service of the belligerent whose flag the vessel flies, or of any of its allies, and particularly if the passenger list includes women and children.
  - 10. That the speed of the ship is slow.
- D. Port authorities, on the arrival in a port of the United States of an armed vessel of belligerent nationality, claiming to be a merchant vessel, should immediately investigate and report to Washington on the foregoing indications as to the intended use of the armament, in order that it may be determined whether the evidence is sufficient to remove the presumption that the vessel is, and should be treated as, a

ship of war. Clearance will not be granted until authorized from Washington, and the master will be so informed upon arrival. The conversion of a merchant vessel into a ship of war is a question of fact which is to be established by direct or circumstantial evidence of intention to use the vessel as a ship of war.

***Instructions for presenting to the class:***

1. Briefly explain why merchant ships of nations at war might arm themselves.
2. Tell your classmates some (not all) of the ways in which armed merchant ships can prove to neutral nations that they are not warships.
3. Explain how this primary source shows the difficulty of the US remaining neutral.

## **William Jennings Bryan's Opinion of the Great War November 13, 1914**

Letter from Sir Cecil Spring-Rice to Sir Arthur Nicolson, concerning U.S. Secretary of State William Jennings Bryan's Opinion of the Great War.

'Bryan spoke to me about peace as he always does. He sighs for the Nobel Prize, and besides that he is a really convinced peaceman. He has just given me a sword beaten into a ploughshare six inches long to serve as a paper-weight. It is adorned with quotations from Isaiah and himself. No one doubts his sincerity, but that is rather embarrassing for us at the present moment, because he is always at us with peace propositions. This time, he said he could not understand why we could not say what we were fighting for. The nation which continued war had as much responsibility as the country which began it. The United States was the one great Power which was outside the struggle, and it was their duty to do what they could to put an end to it. -- I felt rather cross and said that the United States were signatories to the Hague Convention, which had been grossly violated again and again without one word from the principal neutral nation. They were now out of court. They had done nothing to prevent the crime, and now they must not prevent the punishment.

He said that all the Powers concerned had been disappointed in their ambitions. Germany had not taken Paris. France had not retaken Alsace, England had not cleared the seas of the German navy. The last month had made no appreciable difference in the relative positions of the armies, and there was now no prospect of an issue satisfactory to any Power. Why should they not make peace now, if they had to make peace a year hence after another year's fruitless struggle. It would be far wiser if each said what it was fighting for and asked the United States to help them in arriving at a peaceful conclusion.

I asked him if he thought that under present circumstances Germany would give up Belgium and compensate her for her suffering. If not, how could the United States Government go on record as condoning a peace which would put the seal on the most disgraceful act of tyranny and oppression committed in modern times? I didn't believe there was a man in the country not a German or a Jew who could advocate such a cause.

He got rather angry and said that if that was what we wanted, why did we not say so. He added, 'Who can tell who was really responsible for what had happened in Belgium or whether the treaty wasn't only a pretext?' I reminded him that he was a great admirer of Gladstone, who was like him, a great lover of peace, and that Gladstone had always maintained that if we had gone to war for Belgium in 1870, we should have gone to war for freedom and for public right and to save human happiness from being invaded by a tyrannous and lawless power, and that in such a war as that while the breath continued in his body he was ready to engage. This rather surprised him as he had read in the newspapers that Gladstone had always maintained that the Belgian Treaty was not binding."

***Instructions for presenting to the class:***

1. Summarize what William Jennings Bryan wants Britain and the other warring nations to do.
2. Explain why Lord Cecil Spring-Rice believes the US is being inconsistent in calling for peace.
3. Explain how this primary source shows the difficulty of the US in remaining neutral.

## **US Protests against Maritime Warfare December 26, 1914**

Excerpts from a letter from Secretary of State Bryan to Walter Hines Page, US Ambassador in Great Britain:

The present condition of American foreign trade resulting from the frequent seizures and detentions of American cargoes destined to neutral European ports has become so serious as to require a candid statement of the views of this Government in order that the British Government may be fully informed as to the attitude of the United States toward the policy which has been pursued by the British authorities during the present war...

The Government of the United States has viewed with growing concern the large numbers of vessels laden with American goods destined to neutral ports in Europe, which have been seized on the high seas, taken into British ports and detained sometimes for weeks by the British authorities...

It is needless to point out to His Majesty's Government, usually the champion of the freedom of the seas and the rights of trade, that peace, not war, is the normal relation between nations and that the commerce between countries which are not belligerents should not be interfered with by those at war unless such interference is manifestly an imperative necessity to protect their national safety, and then only to the extent that it is a necessity. It is with no lack of appreciation of the momentous nature of the present struggle in which Great Britain is engaged and with no selfish desire to gain undue commercial advantage that this Government is reluctantly forced to the conclusion that the present policy of His Majesty's Government toward neutral ships and cargoes exceeds the manifest necessity of a belligerent and constitutes restrictions upon the rights of American citizens on the high seas...

This Government believes and earnestly hopes His Majesty's Government will come to the same belief, that a course of conduct more in conformity with the rules of international usage, which Great Britain has strongly sanctioned for many years, will in the end better serve the interests of belligerents as well as those of neutrals...

Not only is the situation a critical one to the commercial interests of the United States, but many of the great industries of this country are suffering because their products are denied long-established markets in European countries, which, though neutral, are contiguous to the nations at war. Producers and exporters, steamship and insurance companies are pressing, and not without

reason, for relief from the menace to transatlantic trade which is gradually but surely destroying their business and threatening them with financial disaster...

In conclusion, it should be impressed upon His Majesty's Government that the present condition of American trade with the neutral European countries is such that, if it does not improve, it may arouse a feeling contrary to that which has so long existed between the American and British peoples. Already it is becoming more and more the subject of public criticism and complaint. There is an increasing belief, doubtless not entirely unjustified that the present British policy toward American trade is responsible for the depression in certain industries which depend upon European markets. The attention of the British Government is called to this possible result of their present policy to show how widespread the effect is upon the industrial life of the United States and to emphasize the importance of removing the cause of complaint.

***Instructions for presenting to the class:***

1. Tell your classmates what Britain is doing to American ships and why.
2. Explain why the US wants fair access to European ports even though there is war.
3. Explain how this primary source shows the difficulty of the US remaining neutral.

## **American Protest over the Sinking of the *Lusitania*** **William Jennings Bryan**

In view of recent acts of the German authorities in violation of American rights on the high seas which culminated in the torpedoing and sinking of the British steamship *Lusitania* on May 7, 1915, by which over 100 American citizens lost their lives, it is clearly wise and desirable that the government of the United States and the Imperial German government should come to a clear and full understanding as to the grave situation which has resulted...

[The United States] assumes ... that the Imperial government accept, as of course, the rule that the lives of noncombatants, whether they be of neutral citizenship or citizens of one of the nations at war, cannot lawfully or rightfully be put in jeopardy by the capture or destruction of an unarmed merchantman, and recognize also, as all other nations do, the obligation to take the usual precaution of visit and search to ascertain whether a suspected merchantman is in fact of belligerent nationality or is in fact carrying contraband of war under a neutral flag.

The government of the United States, therefore, desires to call the attention of the Imperial German government, with the utmost earnestness, to the fact that the objection to their present method of attack against the trade of their enemies lies in the practical impossibility of employing submarines in the destruction of commerce without disregarding those rules of fairness, reason, justice, and humanity which all modern opinion regards as imperative. It is practically impossible for the officers of a submarine to visit a merchantman at sea and examine her papers and cargo. It is practically impossible for them to make a prize of her; and, if they cannot put a prize crew on board of her, they cannot sink her without leaving her crew and all on board of her to the mercy of the sea in her small boats...

### ***Instructions for presenting to the class:***

1. Tell your classmates what happened to the *Lusitania* on May 7, 1915.
2. Explain why the US wants Germany to stop using submarines to destroy the merchant ships of its enemies.
3. Explain how this primary source shows the difficulty of the United States remaining neutral.

## **Wilson on the Sussex Case**

### **April 19, 1916**

President Wilson's remarks to Congress regarding Germany's attack on the *Sussex*, an unarmed French passenger ship traveling in the English Channel.

...I have deemed it my duty, therefore, to say to the Imperial German Government, that if it is still its purpose to prosecute relentless and indiscriminate warfare against vessels of commerce by the use of submarines, notwithstanding the now demonstrated impossibility of conducting that warfare in accordance with what the Government of the United States must consider the sacred and indisputable rules of international law and the universally recognized dictates of humanity, the Government of the United States is at last forced to the conclusion that there is but one course it can pursue; and that unless the Imperial German Government should now immediately declare and effect an abandonment of its present methods of warfare against passenger and freight carrying vessels this Government can have no choice but to sever diplomatic relations with the Government of the German Empire altogether.

This decision I have arrived at with the keenest regret; the possibility of the action contemplated I am sure all thoughtful Americans will look forward to with unaffected reluctance. But we cannot forget that we are in some sort and by the force of circumstances the responsible spokesmen of the rights of humanity, and that we cannot remain silent while those rights seem in process of being swept utterly away in the maelstrom of this terrible war. We owe it to a due regard to our own rights as a nation, to our sense of duty as a representative of the rights of neutrals the world over, and to a just conception of the rights of mankind to take this stand now with the utmost solemnity and firmness....

#### ***Instructions for presenting to the class:***

1. Tell your classmates why Wilson is threatening to break off diplomatic relations with Germany.
2. Explain why the US cannot ignore Germany's use of submarines to attack merchant ships, even they are not American ships.
3. Explain how this primary source shows the difficulty of the US remaining neutral.

## **Wilson's "Peace without Victory" Address to the Senate January 22, 1917**

It is inconceivable that the people of the United States should play no part in [negotiating an end to World War I]. To take part in such a service will be the opportunity for which they have sought to prepare themselves by the very principles and purposes of their polity and the approved practices of their Government ever since the days when they set up a new nation in the high and honourable hope that it might in all that it was and did show mankind the way to liberty. They cannot in honour withhold the service to which they are now about to be challenged...

The question upon which the whole future peace and policy of the world depends is this: Is the present war a struggle for a just and secure peace, or only for a new balance of power? If it be only a struggle for a new balance of power, who will guarantee, who can guarantee, the stable equilibrium of the new arrangement? Only a tranquil Europe can be a stable Europe. There must be, not a balance of power, but a community of power; not organized rivalries, but an organized common peace...

[There] must be a peace without victory ... [t]he equality of nations upon which peace must be founded if it is to last must be an equality of rights; the guarantees exchanged must neither recognize nor imply a difference between big nations and small, between those that are powerful and those that are weak. Right must be based upon the common strength, not upon the individual strength, of the nations upon whose concert peace will depend. Equality of territory or of resources there of course cannot be; nor any other sort of equality not gained in the ordinary peaceful and legitimate development of the peoples themselves. But no one asks or expects anything more than an equality of rights. Mankind is looking now for freedom of life, not for equipoises of power...

And there is a deeper thing involved than even equality of right among organized nations. 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...

### ***Instructions for presenting to class:***

1. Tell your classmates why Wilson believes the US must help end the war.
2. Explain what Wilson means by "peace without victory."
3. Explain how this primary source shows the difficulty of the US remaining neutral.