Section 2
America's Road to War

American Diary

In 1914 many Americans believed that the war in Europe was a European conflict in which the United States should not be involved. Mississippi Congressperson Percy E. Quin strongly opposed building an army just to be ready because "When our country really needs soldiers to defend it, millions of patriots will rush to arms and rally to the flag." That time was drawing near.

—from America's Great War: World War I and the American Experience

Policy in 1915
Policy in 1917

U.S. members of the Women's Peace Party arrive in Paris to call for negotiations to end the war.
American Neutrality

Main Idea The United States tried to remain neutral in the war in Europe.

History and You Do you think the newspaper in your city or town reports on national events accurately? Read how propaganda influenced people’s ideas about the war in Europe.

President Wilson had to make some difficult decisions. He declared that the United States would be neutral in the war in Europe. Most Americans did not think that the war concerned them. Many shared the view expressed in an editorial in a New York newspaper.

Primary Source

There is nothing reasonable in such a war...and it would be [foolish] for this country to sacrifice itself to a clash of ancient hatreds which is urging the Old World to destruction.”

—from the New York Sun

Despite pleas for neutrality, Americans soon began to take sides. More than one-third of the nation’s 92 million people were either foreign-born or the children of immigrants. Many naturally favored their countries of origin. Some of the 8 million Americans of German or Austrian descent and the 4.5 million Irish Americans—who hated the British because they ruled Ireland—favored the Central Powers.

Even more Americans, however, including President Wilson, favored the Allies. Ties of language, customs, and traditions linked the United States to Great Britain. President Wilson told the British ambassador: “Everything I love most in the world is at stake.” A German victory “would be fatal to our form of government and American ideals.”

Using Propaganda

To gain support, both sides in the war used propaganda. This term describes information used to influence opinion. Allied propaganda stressed, or called attention to, the German invasion of neutral Belgium and included horror stories of German atrocities. It called the Germans “Huns” and barbarians.

By the Numbers Land Forces

Size of Armies, August 1914

![Graph showing size of armies with data]

Central Powers Allied Powers

*Although not yet involved in the war, American troops totaled about 119,250 enlisted men.

Source: Encyclopaedia Britannica; U.S. Census Bureau

German soldier, 1916

Critical Thinking

Analyzing How did the armies of the Central and Allied powers compare in size?
The United States began building its own submarine fleet during the war. The fastest American submarines reached a top surface speed of 14 knots (a little more than 16 miles per hour).

1. The conning tower is the attack center.
2. The diving rudders guide the submarine to different depths.
3. The rudder steers the vessel.
4. About 12 torpedoes could be carried at a time.

Critical Thinking
1. Naming: What part of the craft guided the submarine up and down?
2. Predicting: How might submarine warfare lead to U.S. entry into the war?

The propaganda from the Central Powers was equally horrible, but because of sympathy for the British, Allied propaganda was more effective in influencing Americans.

**America’s Early Involvement**

Trade between the United States and the Allies helped build support for the Allied cause. As a neutral nation, America sought to trade with both sides. However, Britain’s blockade of Germany made this difficult.

Stopping and searching American ships headed for German ports, the British navy often seized the ships’ goods. The United States protested that its ships should be able to pass without interference. The British responded with the defense that they were fighting for their survival. "If the American shipper grumbles," wrote a London newspaper, "our reply is that this war is not being conducted for his pleasure or profit." The U.S. government could do nothing about the blockade. Barred from trading with Germany, it continued trading with Britain.

Indeed, American trade with the Allies soared. In addition, Great Britain and France borrowed billions of dollars from American banks to help pay for their war efforts. All this business caused an economic boom in the United States. It also upset the Germans who watched the United States—supposedly a neutral nation—helping the Allies.

**Submarine Warfare**

To stop American aid to Britain, Germany stated in February 1915 that it would sink any vessels that entered or left British ports. President Wilson warned that the United States would hold Germany responsible for any American lives lost in submarine attacks. The Germans ignored Wilson’s threat. On May 1915, a German U-boat torpedoed the British passenger liner *Lusitania* near the coast of Ireland. The captain reported:
The End of Neutrality

Main Idea  Relations with Germany worsened, and the United States entered World War I.

History and You  Why did the United States enter into a war with Iraq in 2003? Read to learn why the United States finally entered World War I.

The crisis over submarine warfare led Congress, in the summer of 1916, to pass legislation to strengthen the military. Congress doubled the size of the army and provided funding for the construction of new navy warships. President Wilson still hoped, however, to stay out of the war.

Antiwar sentiment remained very strong. Some Americans saw the nation’s military buildup as a step toward entering the war. The phrase “He [Wilson] Kept Us Out of War” became the Democrats’ campaign slogan in 1916. Wilson, however, only narrowly defeated the Republican candidate, Charles Evans Hughes.

**People IN HISTORY**

Jeannette Rankin

First female Member of the U.S. Congress

Rankin voted against the declaration of war on Germany just a few days after taking office in 1917. During the vote, she said, “I want to stand by my country—but I cannot vote for war.” Her pacifism probably cost her the Republican Senate nomination in 1918. She was reelected to Congress in 1940 on an antiwar platform. She was the only member of Congress to vote against the declaration of war on Japan after the bombing of Pearl Harbor in December 1941. The vote met with wide disapproval, and Rankin did not seek reelection the following year.

**CRITICAL Thinking**

1. Analyzing  Why do you think Rankin made the statement “I want to stand by my country” at the time she voted against a declaration of war on Germany?

2. Synthesizing  Did voters agree or disagree with Rankin’s position on war? How do you know?
What If the British Had Not Intercepted the Zimmermann Note?

In January 1917, German foreign minister Arthur Zimmermann proposed that Mexico help Germany if the United States entered the war. A British official intercepted Zimmermann’s telegram.

The Telegram

“We shall endeavor . . . to keep the United States of America neutral. In the event of this not succeeding, we make Mexico a proposal of alliance on the following basis: make war together, make peace together, generous financial support and an understanding on our part that Mexico is to reconquer the lost territory in Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona.”

On the Brink of War

In January 1917, Germany announced that it would sink on sight all merchant vessels, armed or unarmed, sailing to Allied ports. The Germans knew they risked bringing Americans into the war. However, the Germans believed they could defeat the Allies before the United States became too involved. An angry President Wilson broke off diplomatic relations with Germany.

Then a few weeks later, British agents intercepted a secret telegram sent by the German foreign minister, Arthur Zimmermann. It offered an alliance with Mexico against the United States if war broke out. Newspapers published the Zimmermann telegram, and Americans reacted angrily to the German offer. The telegram set off a new wave of anti-German feeling.

Revolution in Russia

Dramatic events continued to push the United States into the war. First, in March 1917 a revolution—a war to overthrow the government—took place in Russia. The Russian people overthrew the monarchy and established a temporary government promised free elections. The new Russian government also vowed to continue the war to defeat Germany.

This change from an autocracy, in which one person with unlimited powers rules, to a more democratic government, raised Allied hopes. Wilson could now argue that the Allies were fighting a war for democracy.

Other critical events took place at sea. In March 1917, within a few days’ time, the Germans attacked and sank four American merchant ships. Thirty-six lives were lost.

President Wilson continued to struggle with his conscience. His cabinet, on the other hand, strongly favored war. One government official later explained:

Primary Source

“If we had stayed out of the war and Germany had won, there would no longer have been a balance of power in Europe or a British fleet to support the Monroe Doctrine and protect America.” —from “The Duties of the Citizen,” 1917

Critical Thinking

Analyzing If there were no Zimmermann note, do you think the United States would have: (a) entered the war when it did in April; (b) entered the war at a later time; or (c) not been drawn into the war at all? Explain.
America Enters the War

President Wilson decided that the United States could no longer remain neutral. On the cold, rainy evening of April 2, 1917, he asked Congress for a declaration of war against Germany:

PRIMARY SOURCE

The world must be made safe for democracy. . . . It is a fearful thing to lead this great, peaceful people into war, into the most terrible and disastrous of all wars. . . . But the right is more precious than peace."

—from Democracy Today: An American Interpretation

Congress did not agree at once to a war resolution. In the end, however, most members agreed that the nation must defend its rights if it wished to remain a great world power. As a result, Congress passed a declaration of war, and Wilson signed it on April 6. Fifty-six members of the House and Senate voted against war. One of those 56 was Jeanette Rankin of Montana—the first woman to serve as a representative in Congress.

The United States had to raise an army quickly. On May 18, Congress passed the Selective Service Act, setting up a military draft. Men aged 21 to 30 registered by the millions. By war's end, some 24 million men had registered. Of them, about 3 million were called to serve. Another 2 million joined voluntarily. In addition, for the first time, women enlisted in the armed forces. They served in noncombat roles, such as radio operators, clerks, and nurses.

More than 300,000 African Americans joined the armed forces, but they faced discrimination and racism. Most held low-level jobs at military bases. Among the 140,000 African American soldiers sent to Europe, 40,000 fought in combat. Many served with honor, including a regiment that received medals for bravery from France. One of its members, Henry Johnson, was the first American to receive the French Croix de Guerre [Cross of War], a medal for bravery.

Describing: What was the purpose of the Selective Service Act?