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The Relations of Woodrow Wilson with the British Government
1914 - 1917

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THE RELATIONS OF WOODROW WILSON

WITH THE

BRITISH GOVERNMENT 1914 - 1917

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Chapter 1

The Traditional Foreign Policy of the United States

The memorable message which President Wilson addressed to the Extraordinary Session of Congress on April 2, 1917, advising a Declaration of War against the Imperial Government of Germany, stands as a landmark in the history of the foreign policy of the United States. His action, arising from his conviction that the honor of the United States could be maintained only by actively espousing the cause of the Allies, marks a reversal of the time-honored and cherished attitude of non-intervention which through the years had become an integral part of our national life. So deep-rooted had become our acceptance of the idea of isolation, that only events of the very gravest character, reacting upon the convictions and emotions of the people as a whole, as well as upon their leader, would enable them to countenance such a break with tradition.

Why was such a course possible? Why was the President able to lead the nation into war in spite of his earlier determination to avoid foreign entanglements? The answers to these questions must be sought in the events and the diplomatic developments of the troublesome years of neutrality. But before attempting to trace these forces a brief consid-
eration of the traditional foreign policy of the United States may lead to a better understanding of the significance of President Wilson's action. Moreover, as the declaration of war drew the United States into the closest co-operation with England, a survey of the relations between these two countries during the previous century may not be amiss.

The earliest policy of the United States was not one of isolation. In their struggle for freedom the colonies sought and accepted foreign aid. But, although they welcomed the alliance with France in 1778, that same alliance later threatened to draw the new republic into the maelstrom of the European Wars. During her struggle with England the French Revolutionary Government attempted to secure the help of the United States according to the terms of this treaty. In this national crisis Washington, on April 22, 1793, issued his famous proclamation of neutrality in which he pledged the United States to a "...conduct friendly and impartial to the belligerent powers."

His views on the proper relations of this country with Europe were amplified in his Farewell Address, September 17, 1796, in which he advised that the United States in the future refrain from forming permanent alliances with any portion of the rest of the world. Because of our distant situation he

James D. Richardson, Compiler, A Compilation of the Messages and Papers of the Presidents, 10 V., New York, 1897, I, 148.
maintained such ties would be artificial and would serve merely to bring this country into controversies, the causes of which were not our concern.

Washington's injunction, reinforced by similar pronouncements by later presidents and statesmen, came to have increased weight and significance. The issuance in 1823 of the Monroe Doctrine, which placed the principle of non-intervention by Europe in American affairs side by side with the principle of American isolation from Europe, was the final bulwark which made these two principles an integral part of American policy. All through the nineteenth century the idea that the welfare of the nation was irrevocably bound up with the principle of the Monroe Doctrine was firmly adhered to by both statesman and citizen. Fears that American participation in international conferences was ushering in a new era in our foreign relations proved to be unfounded. On the occasion of signing the treaty drawn up at the Hague Peace Conference, the delegates did so with the reservation that no departure from the traditional policy of the United States should be inferred from any part of the treaty. Similar sentiments were expressed by the Senate in 1906 in ratifying the treaty drawn up at the Algeciras Conference.

But while the United States adhered to the tradition of political isolation, her foreign policy has all through her 2

IBID., I, 215.
history been influenced by the desire to extend her commerce with foreign countries. This has, necessarily, brought her into very close contact with Great Britain, the leading commercial nation of the world. For many reasons such a relationship was inevitable. England was the mother country from which to a large degree were derived our language, our culture, and our institutions. From the very beginning the bulk of our trade was with the British Isles. Moreover, the Atlantic Ocean, which has been our chief highway of intercourse with the nations of the world, has been dominated by the British Navy and merchant marine.

This very closeness of contact has resulted in many occasions of disagreement. The conclusion of the War of Independence left many questions still unsettled. British occupation of the Northwest, debt disputes, and difficulties over boundaries served to keep alive feelings of bitterness and resentment. The situation was further complicated by conditions in Europe growing out of the French Revolution. The outbreak of war between France and England marked the beginning of a struggle which in many ways was parallel to the period from 1914 to 1917. Trade, which had been renewed after the Revolutionary War and was then thriving, became subject to restrictions imposed by both countries. Then as in the recent period, according to Moore, the United States was faced with the prob-

lem of deciding "...how far neutral powers are required to sub-
ordinate the interests of their commerce to the hostile inter-
ests of belligerents."

The Treaty of Ghent settled none of the issues of the War of 1812. It did, however, pave the way for the settlement by diplomatic procedure of some of the most vexing subjects of controversy between the two countries. This method was particularly successful in settling questions involving our northern boundaries and the fisheries. But in questions relating to the freedom of the seas it proved ineffective. As a consequence, the conflict of maritime interests remained for many years a potential source of irritation between the two nations.

Their formal diplomatic intercourse shows that the states-
men of both countries were undoubtedly animated by a sincere desire to effect harmonious relations. Nevertheless powerful interests and deep feelings in both countries were working incessantly in the opposite direction. The failure to reach an agreement in matters respecting commerce and navigation was attributed by Dunning to the very nature of the problem. He said that it was "...inherent in the general condition of world politics that America should be seeking new things and Great Britain should be standing by the old.... The new comer among maritime powers found herself barred in every direction

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from profitable trade." The right of nations to regulate commerce in their own interests had hitherto been unquestioned, and the American demand for freedom of commercial intercourse was a departure from accepted ideas.

Between 1815 and the Civil War a number of disputes arose, a few of which, such as the Oregon question, were serious enough to threaten peaceful relations with England. In spite, however, of the bitterness in the United States that remained as a legacy from the Revolution and the war of 1812, and in spite of the anti-British influence exerted by large groups of Irish immigrants, the Government was able to adjust by arbitration all of its difficulties with England during this period.

A fresh crisis developed during the Civil War. British recognition of the Confederate States as a belligerent aroused bitter protests in the North. The Trent Affair brought the nations to the verge of war and revealed a curious reversal of their historic positions, with the United States upholding the right of search and seizure and Great Britain upholding the principle of the freedom of the seas. Relations were still further strained by the controversy over the depredations of the Alabama. Continued refusal by the British Government to consider proposals for a settlement were countered by anti-English measures in this country. An indication of

this was the open encouragement given to the Fenian Movement. Later a more conciliatory spirit on the part of Great Britain led to the submission of the questions in dispute to an international board of arbitration. A judgment rendered in favor of the United States was promptly paid by Great Britain in spite of the dissenting opinion of the British member of the board. This was the most famous case that had ever been submitted to arbitration and its successful adjustment "...encouraged the hope that the two great English-speaking peoples would never again have to resort to arms."

A subsequent movement for a permanent treaty of arbitration which definitely would supplant war as a means of settling future controversies was unsuccessful. This movement was the outcome of the settlement by arbitration of the friction which developed in 1895 over the Venezuela boundary. The failure of the Senate to ratify such a treaty was a great disappointment to all friends of permanent peace.

Great Britain's tacit approval of the course of the United States in the Spanish-American War did much to foster the growth of a more friendly feeling. The cordial relations manifested during the early years of the twentieth century seemed to indicate that the two nations were drawing closer

6 Latane, 113

7 Ibid., 115
together in sympathy and a spirit of co-operation. Dunning attributes this to an "intimate like-mindedness" which, he says, is an indispensable factor in international amity. On the eve of the World War he expressed the opinion that: "The whole trend of modern development in civilization is strongly toward the indispensable working of this factor. Its influence is most marked, however, where historical identity of language and tradition clears the way. The people of the United States and Great Britain are drawing nearer each other daily in both the material and spiritual aspects of life."

8 Dunning, 252.
Chapter II
The Problems of Neutrality

In the years immediately preceding the World War many people in the United States felt that we faced the dawn of an era of international co-operation and good will. In his Annual Message to Congress on December 2, 1913, President Wilson noted the "...many happy manifestations...of a growing cordiality and sense of a community of interest among the nations, foreshadowing an age of settled peace and good will." This, he felt, would result in an ever-increasing willingness to "...bind themselves by solemn treaty to the processes of peace, the processes of fair concession." In the United States, as in Europe, a movement for peace flourished. Just prior to the war peace societies had a phenomenal growth, sixty-three organizations being devoted to the cause. These societies enjoyed the support of many of the most prominent business leaders, professional men and philanthropists in the country. President Wilson and Secretary of State William Jennings Bryan attested their devotion to the cause of peace


by joining the American Peace Society in 1913. The movement was subsidized by wealthy men, notably Andrew Carnegie, who endowed an organization designed to foster international peace.

All of these dreams were shattered in the summer of 1914 when most of the leading nations of Europe took up arms. Immediately upon the outbreak of war President Wilson issued a formal proclamation of neutrality, which was repeated as successive nations entered the war. This proclamation was quite in keeping with his ideals of peace and his allegiance to the traditional American principle of isolation. "America," he said, "must live her own life... free from entangling alliances." In a statement to the press, he expressed his determination to observe the strictest neutrality in every act of the Government in order not to give the slightest offense to any one of the powers involved.

3 Ibid., 200.


The general reaction of the people of the United States to the President's action was aptly stated in an editorial in the New York Tribune: "Every American is reflecting these days upon the inestimable value of our isolation from the armed camp. The neutrality proclamation of President Wilson is the reiteration of the policy of detachment which every American schoolboy reads in Washington's words of far-seeing wisdom and which we shall forget to our sorrow." Two weeks later, on August 18, the President issued an Appeal to the American People asking them to act and speak in the true spirit of impartiality and friendliness to all concerned. He realized that the citizens of the United States traced their racial origins to many countries, particularly to those at war, and that consequently the utmost extremes of sympathy would be natural and inevitable. He, therefore, warned them against what he called the "...the deepest, most subtle, most essential breach of neutrality...which would spring from passionate partisanship."

The extent to which either the citizens or their leaders could conform to this lofty ideal of remaining impartial in thought as in action, is certainly a matter for debate. An exact evaluation of public opinion is difficult, if not ab-

7 New York Tribune, August 5, 1914.
8 American Journal of International Law, IX, 199.
olutely impossible, due partially to the complexity of our racial structure, the variation of economic and cultural interests from section to section, and to the inarticulateness of large groups of the people. Generalizations, therefore, are dangerous but for the most part historians are of the opinion that the dominant feeling in the East, where the bonds with England had always been the strongest, favored the Allies and that farther from the seacoast the enthusiasm for the Allies decreased. In this connection, Seymour stated that British and French sympathizers made little progress in the Middle West and the West and that German sympathizers made none in the East.

The attitude of the press was, generally speaking, more favorable to the Allied than to the German cause. This was due in part to a lack of sympathy with what was considered the extremely militaristic policy of the German Government, but more particularly to the violation by that government of the neutrality of Belgium. Prominent citizens of German extraction and German newspapers and societies protested against the unfair treatment they felt they were receiving from the newspapers of the country. In defense of their position


10 "Blaming Germany for the War", Literary Digest, V. 49, 293-294, August 22, 1914.
many editorial writers made that distinction, which was to become so familiar during the course of the war, between the German people, whom they highly honored, and the German Government. In spite, however, of the natural sympathy shown to one side or the other, it was undoubtedly true that the majority of American citizens felt that the war was a strictly European affair and could not affect us.

The maintenance of a strict neutrality presented problems of increasing complexity as the war progressed. Neither our isolated position nor our freedom from entangling alliances was sufficient to keep us from becoming involved in the intricacies of the conflict. That this became evident immediately was evidenced by editorial comment throughout the country. In the first few weeks of the war the statement was made in the Baltimore News that complications were bound to ensue, "...for our relations with each country, if advantageous to her, are as distasteful to her enemies." Prophetically, it continued "...we must expect attempts at abuse of our neutrality, and we must fight as desperately to guard it against the slightest infraction, intentional or otherwise, while still offering to each of the warring Powers the hospitable consideration of a friendly nation."11 Similar views were expressed in the St. Louis Democrat which warned the nation that

11 Editorial Comment from the Baltimore News, quoted in the Literary Digest, V. 49, 292, August 22, 1914.
a mere declaration of neutrality, issued in a spirit of friendliness toward all belligerents could not safeguard the country against dangers resulting from continued hostilities. The desperation of the combatants, the inevitable result of a prolonged war, would impel them to make seizures on land or sea, either for points of tactical advantage or for articles listed as contraband. Any of these acts in violation of the rights of the United States might easily lead to complications with one or more of the warring powers.

These prophecies proved to be extremely accurate. Quite early in the war, it became clear that a major portion of the attention of the belligerents was to be concentrated upon the effort to get control of the sea. Continuance of commercial relations with the rest of the world was essential to the welfare of both sides. For many months after the opening of hostilities the Allied nations were forced to depend upon the United States for a great portion of their munitions. Later, when the war became a protracted struggle, they looked to this country as an important source of food, raw materials and credit. On the other hand, the Central Powers were, at least

12 Editorial Comment from the St. Louis Democrat, quoted by the Literary Digest, V. 49, 292, Aug. 22, 1914.

during the first years of the war, fairly self-sufficient in the matter of munitions but were greatly in need of raw materials and food. It was quite evident, therefore, that without access to the world's markets, neither side could hope for success in a prolonged war.

In any struggle for command of the seas the United States has inevitably become involved. Now, as in the period preceding the War of 1812, she became the champion of the doctrine of the freedom of the seas. She thus came into direct conflict with Great Britain who adhered to the doctrine of the command of the seas. The positions assumed by the two nations were consistent with the general tone of their national policy for, as stated by Kenworthy and Young, "Command of the Seas has been the Palladium of the British since the institution of the United Kingdom. Freedom of the Seas has been the Palladium of the Americans since the independence of the United States." In essence, the difference between these two doctrines was the difference between the rights of belligerents and the rights of neutrals. Great Britain claimed the right to command the seas on the ground that her very existence was dependent upon keeping open the channels of internal communication. But inasmuch as these channels coincided

14 Joseph W. Kenworthy and George Young, Freedom of the Seas, New York, Liveright, 1929, 15.
with the great highways of international trade, their control by one nation was almost certain to result in restrictions upon the free intercourse of other nations.

The history of British seapower reveals that it has not been based upon the sanctity of any codified or customary law. A study of their actual practice in warfare shows little consideration for the rights of neutrals or the responsibilities of belligerents. Lloyd George justifies this attitude by saying that: "Nations fighting for their lives cannot always pause to observe punctilios." The keynote of the British policy in the World War was expressed by the Prime Minister, Mr. Asquith, in an Address to the House of Commons in which he said; "...we are not going to allow our efforts to be strangled in a network of juridical niceties...under existing conditions there is no form of economic pressure to which we do not consider ourselves entitled to resort."

The last important effort to regulate maritime relations was made in 1909 when the ten leading maritime nations held


16  Quoted by Kenworthy and Young, 27.
a conference in London. The idea underlying the negotiations was the same that had been the basis of the American position all through the history of the nation, namely that the rights of neutrals should be determined by a power greater than the will of any single belligerent. The Declaration drawn up by the Conference was an attempt to clarify naval practice and to embody it in a set of accepted rules. Among other things, it validated the interpretation of the doctrine of "continuous voyage" given by the United States during the Civil War, namely that the ultimate destination of the goods must be taken into consideration. It also protected neutral commerce in conditional contraband when bound to neutral countries. Contraband was redefined in its two categories, absolute and conditional. Absolute contraband was to consist of goods exclusively used for war and destined for an enemy, even if passing through a neutral country enroute. To this class of goods the rule of "continuous voyage" was to apply. Conditional contraband consisted of goods which might have a peaceful use but which were also susceptible of use in war and which were destined for the armed forces or a government department of a belligerent state. To these goods the rule of "continuous voyage" did not apply. In other words conditional contraband comprised articles that were used generally by civilian populations as well as by armies and only when destined for

17 Robinson and West, 45.
army use were they to be treated as contraband.

In view of the fact that Great Britain had a vastly superior naval force, the Conference was somewhat in the nature of an attempt to limit her use of that power. As a result the ratification of the Declaration of London was blocked by the House of Lords. For the same reason that made it unacceptable to Great Britain, namely that it was too favorable to neutral trade, it won the favor of the German Government. In the event of a future war the observance of the provisions of the Declaration would enable Germany to draw upon adjacent neutrals for supplies. Germany accordingly embodied it intact in her Prize Law. It was ratified also by the Senate of the United States but, when it was rejected by Great Britain, the President withheld final ratification, a course which was followed by the other governments.

When war broke out in 1914, the Government of the United States inquired whether the British Government would be willing to agree that the laws of naval warfare as laid down by the Declaration of London should be applicable during the present conflict, providing that the Governments with whom Great Britain was at war also agreed. The communication


19 Ibid., 589.
pointed out that an acceptance of these rules would prevent grave misunderstandings which might arise as to the relations between the neutral powers and the belligerents. The British Foreign Minister replied that the Government had decided to adopt generally the rules of the Declaration "...subject to certain modifications and additions which they judge indispensable to the efficient conduct of their naval operations." The refusal of the British Government to accept the Declaration of London without modification prompted the United States to withdraw the proposal for its adoption as a temporary code of naval warfare to be observed by belligerents and neutrals during the war. Lacking such a code the Government stated its intention to insist that the rights and duties of the United States and its citizens were to be defined by the existing rules of international law and the existing treaties. It also reserved the right to protest each violation of its rights.

Untrammeled, therefore, by the Declaration of London, Great

Secretary of State Bryan to Ambassador W. H. Page, Aug. 6, 1914, American Journal of International Law, IX, 1.

Minister of Foreign Affairs Grey to Ambassador W. H. Page, Aug. 22, 1914, Ibid., IX, 3.

Britain at the very outset of the war and by the magnitude of her shipping was able to assume command of the seas. Her policy and that of her Allies was to keep the seas open for her own commerce and to close them absolutely to that of her enemies. German merchant ships were driven from the seas and the German navy rendered ineffective. Because of the inferiority of her naval power, Germany was not able to contest the Allied control of the seas but attempted by various means to destroy the commerce of Great Britain. Her principal weapons of retaliation were mines and submarine attacks upon commerce and the coast towns. Both nations were actuated in this struggle by the desire to defeat the enemy by economic strangulation and starvation and both disregarded the principles of international law when they threatened to interfere with the national policy. The use of the submarine by Germany to destroy on the high seas merchant ships coming to the British Isles, without examination or warning, was clearly a violation of accepted international practice.

On the other hand Great Britain placed her chief reliance upon a blockade of German ports. But a close blockade was not possible because of the mines placed by Germany in the waters adjacent to her shores, and consequently the British procedure could not, according to American lawyers, be called

23 Bemis, 587.
a blockade and was contrary to international law.

The only restraining influence in the conduct of such a campaign lay in the possible effect upon the neutral powers and, particularly, upon the greatest of the neutrals, the United States. Neutral rights were constantly endangered and the extent of the respect paid to them depended, not on the rules of international law, but on the fear of neutral intervention. Too flagrant a violation of American rights might lead to an embargo upon exports which would have proved disastrous to the Allies. Without the raw materials and the munitions which they could secure only from the United States, they could not carry on the war. But while a general embargo would seem to be an effective method of compelling observance of our neutral rights, its use would in turn create serious problems. In the first place, the proclamation of neutrality had stated that all persons within the country had the right to manufacture and sell arms. This was according to custom, there being no precedent to the contrary in international conflicts. Interference with such sales might, therefore, be regarded as an unfriendly act by the government seeking to purchase. Secondly, an embargo would certainly

24 Seymour, American Diplomacy, 30.

25 Kenworthy and Young, 37.

26 The critical situation of England in regard to munitions is discussed in detail by Lloyd George, I, 112-187.
have precipitated an acute economic crisis. At the outset of the war the United States seemed to be on the verge of an industrial depression. Curtailment, therefore, of the prosperity induced by the war orders of the Allies might have proved not only an economic calamity but disastrous to the Democratic party.

Other factors which, without a doubt, rendered the maintenance of strict neutrality more complicated were the personal views of the President and his advisers in regard to the respective merits of the war aims of the belligerents. To determine the personal feelings of the President was a matter of some difficulty. He was a man of scholarly and retiring habits and his natural tendency toward seclusion was intensified by the death of his wife a few weeks after the opening of the war. The evidence upon which to base an evaluation of his attitude must, therefore, be gathered from several sources. The first of these will necessarily be the diplomatic intercourse with the belligerents during this period. Seymour, whose close association with Colonel House would seem to give some weight to his opinion, says that the diplomacy of the United States at this time was the diplomacy of the President. This opinion is supported by that of a member of the Cabinet who said that the President's conduct at the Cabinet meetings, immediately after his inauguration,

27 Seymour, American Diplomacy, 401.
indicated that he was going to be his own Secretary of State. Later this same man denied the charge that the Administration was too Bryanistic by saying that the "President was doing the leading and Bryan the following.

A unique feature of the diplomacy of this period was that much of it was carried on outside of the regular diplomatic channels. The agent through whom these negotiations were conducted was the President's closest friend and trusted adviser, Colonel House. House was perhaps more familiar with the President's ideas and reactions in regard to the European situation than any other person, and the frank and personal character of their correspondence makes it the most valuable source of information though, unfortunately, a great many of the letters are not yet generally available. Finally we may learn something of Wilson's feelings from a study of the impressions received by the statesmen with whom he was, necessarily, in very close touch.

According to Colonel House, the personal sympathy of the President was, from the very beginning, with the Allies. Nevertheless, he insisted that his personal convictions should


not affect his political attitude which was to be one of the strictest neutrality. His greatest desire was to be the instrument through which peace could be restored. He also shared the opinion of the majority of Americans that the war was a distant event in which we could not and should not become involved. An exceedingly interesting sidelight on the President's attitude at this time is found in the Diary of Colonel House. An entry of August 30, 1914, says:

I was interested to hear him express as his opinion what I had written him some time before in one of my letters, to the effect that if Germany won it would change the course of our civilization, and make the United States a military nation... I found him as unsympathetic with the German attitude as the rest of America. He goes even further than I in his condemnation of Germany's part in this war, and almost allows his feeling to include the German people as a whole rather than the leaders alone. He said German philosophy was essentially selfish and lacking in spirituality. 31

The belief that the general feeling in the country was predominantly friendly toward England and hostile to Germany was also expressed by Theodore Roosevelt in a letter to the British Ambassador at Washington. 32 This he attributed to the consistent policy of friendliness manifested by England for several decades and the unfriendliness of Germany, particularly during our trouble with Spain. When communicating this com-

31 Seymour, I.P., I, 293.

ment to his government the Ambassador indicated that it was in conformity with his own observations. He also added that the entire State Department was on the side of the Allies except Bryan. This statement was correct at least in regard to the Assistant Secretary of State, Robert Lansing, who was convinced that sooner or later the United States would be forced to enter the war on the side of the Allies. In this he differed radically from Bryan whose greatest interest was in the movement for peace.

The British Ambassador felt that the President was in sympathy with their cause. In a letter to Grey he said: "The President will be with us by birth and upbringing but he is very much in the hands of our worst enemies and his name is rather compromised by the Panama affair. He will have to be rather conspicuously neutral and that he is trying to be. Our line is to say that we are confident that he will favor neither one party nor the other and that all we want is a fair field and no favors." On another occasion, in the course of an interview, Spring-Rice remarked on the similarity between the sentiments of Wilson and Grey, and he said "...there were tears in his eyes and I am sure we can at the right moment depend on an understanding heart.

34 Gwynn, II, 220
35 Ibid., II, 223
The views of another English statesman, Lloyd George, were not, however, so optimistic. He felt that it was a matter of great difficulty to determine where President Wilson's real sympathies lay. His deportment he described as being so "studiously unpleasant" to both sides that each suspected him of favoring the other. The English condemned him for the severity of his judgments on Allied activities "...not realizing that this was due to the fear lest his private sympathies should peril the strict impartiality of attitude which he was imposing on himself." The attitude of the people of America Lloyd George seems to have analyzed rather astutely. While giving due consideration to the verdict generally accepted by England and France, that the predominating opinion in America was pro-Ally, he nevertheless realized that there was a strong pro-German sentiment among the Germans of the Middle West and a "chronic hostility" to England among the Irish-Americans. With a rare delicacy he reveals his understanding of the latter group. The former constituted a peaceful, industrious and respected element in their communities which could not conceivably be suspected of harboring the inhuman designs attributed to their race. Moreover, many of them wielded considerable influence and they commanded a number of votes which might be sufficient to determine the issue in a crucial election. Weighing all the

Lloyd George, II, 117.
factors in the situation, he reached the conclusion that in 1914 opinion in the United States was neither pro-Ally nor pro-German but pro-American. If, in the main, the general sympathy was with the Allied cause, it was not strong enough for them to endure with patience losses or inconvenience to themselves or to impose an obligation to share in the conflict. The main interest of America was to maintain her trade, her prestige, the security of her citizens and to keep her young men out of the shambles. She would be forced to fight only if fighting was better calculated to defend these interests than neutrality.

The final problem of neutrality to be considered here resulted from the different views held by the opposing sets of belligerents as to the duties of a neutral. This led to controversies, based on the sentiment stated above, that any of our practices which were advantageous to one country would be equally as distasteful to her enemies. Something has been said of the attitude of Great Britain and our difficulties with her will be treated in more detail later. But a word should be said here in regard to the German attitude toward American neutrality. Count Bernstorff, the German Ambassador at Washington, felt that at the beginning of the European war the people of America were predisposed to a feeling of sympathy for the Allies. This he attributed to several things:

the common language which opened the door to English political and cultural influences; the conviction held by many that Germany was bent upon establishing a world empire; German attacks upon the Monroe Doctrine and finally the hostility of the Imperial German Government to the efforts of the United States to bring about international peace. But, in spite of this feeling, he felt that the general indifference that prevailed in regard to all that happened in Europe, together with the strong pacifist feeling in the United States, would prevent intervention in the hostilities unless provoked by unforeseen circumstances. The greatest potential danger to friendly relations between the two countries lay in the complete failure of the German government to understand the character of the American people. Bernstorff said: "The American judges affairs in Europe partly from the standpoint of his own private sentiment of justice and partly under the guidance of merely emotional values; but not, as was generally supposed in Germany, simply from a cold and businesslike point of view."

This lack of understanding, he felt, was responsible for Germany's complete inability to appreciate the terrible effect upon public opinion of the invasion of Belgium and the sinking of the Lusitania.38

President Wilson's declaration of neutrality, which was

38 Count Bernstorff, My Three Years in America, New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1929, 28-29.
supported by American public opinion, was looked upon with sus-
picion by the German Government. From the very beginning the
charge was made that American neutrality was tinged with sym-
pathy for the Allies. This was denied by the President who
said that such an appearance was due to Great Britain's super-
ior naval force which the United States could not alter. This
argument did not satisfy Germany who soon became convinced
that the neutrality of the United States "...was a mere hypo-
crisy, and that all kinds of pretexts were found for helping
England." 39

The most perplexing of the problems which arose was that
over the sale of munitions to the Allied Governments. In
this case Bernstorff admitted that Germany had no real legal
basis for complaint. 40 The right of private individuals to
make and sell munitions of war had been approved at the Hague
Conference of 1907 at the suggestion of the German delegate.
Regardless, however, of the evident legality of the American
position, the German Government continued to protest. They
claimed that the munitions industry was delivering its wares
only to the enemies of Germany and their theoretical readiness
to do the same for Germany, if transportation was possible,
did not alter the case. The claim was made that a real desire
to maintain honorable neutrality would involve the prohibition

39 Ibid., 67
40 Ibid., 71
of this one-sided traffic. Intense bitterness of feeling was aroused in Germany over this issue. A vivid illustration of the prevalent hatred toward America is furnished by the Kaiser's refusal, contrary to all diplomatic practice, to receive the American Ambassador. In answer to a protest in regard to this unusual procedure he replied: "I have nothing against Mr. Gerard personally but I will not see the Ambassador of a country which furnishes arms and ammunitions to the enemies of Germany." The charges of partiality made by Germany were echoed in a much milder form by the American Secretary of State. The question of foreign policy occasioned the first real disagreement between him and the Chief Executive. Bryan took the position that all belligerents should receive exactly the same treatment from the United States. Germany, in her submarine warfare, was inhuman to the last degree but he felt that she was no more culpable than England who cut off food supplies from the women and children of the Central Powers. Both countries were violating our neutral rights and he warned that "...denunciation of one and silence for the other will be construed by some as partiality."


Chapter III

The Controversy over Neutral Rights

The earliest and most continuous of the difficulties, which beset President Wilson in the maintenance of his policy of strict neutrality grew out of the interference by the belligerents with American shipping. By force of the circumstances which, quite early in the conflict, gave Great Britain control of the seas the major portion of the controversy was carried on with that government. Because of her naval superiority it was comparatively easy for Great Britain to stop all direct trade with Germany in articles of absolute contraband, that is, articles exclusively for military use. The right of seizure of this type of goods was so well recognized that very few complications arose in connection with it. Moreover, the Allies were so inadequately prepared to produce munitions that they furnished a practically unlimited market for all that could be produced in the United States. Inability, therefore, to furnish these materials to the Central Powers produced no economic hardship on American manufacturers.

Conditional contraband, on the other hand, was a constant source of trouble. Allied control of the sea did not extend to the Baltic region and could not prevent German trade with the neighboring neutral states of Sweden, Denmark and Holland.
As a consequence, the British policy in regard to conditional contraband was formulated for the purpose of cutting off every possible source of German supplies. Great Britain's refusal to accept the Declaration of London without modification was followed by Orders in Council extending the lists of both absolute and conditional contraband. During the course of the war fifteen proclamations for this purpose were made and the list of contraband extended to include two hundred and thirty articles. By April 13, 1916 the lists of absolute and conditional contraband had been combined as, in the eyes of the British Government, the distinction between the two classes had ceased to have any value.

Although each extension brought protests from those in the United States whose interests were affected, the general right of a belligerent to modify the lists of contraband was upheld by this government. In reply to a letter from Senator Stone protesting Great Britain's disregard of the definitions of con-


2 Kenworthy and Young, 71.

contraband contained in the Declaration of London, Bryan pointed out that the Declaration of London had not been adopted and that there was no general agreement between nations as to the articles which were to be regarded as contraband. It was the practice of belligerents to declare the articles which would be considered as contraband and in this situation the rights of belligerents and neutrals were inevitably opposed. He further stated that the record of the United States in the past had not been free from criticism. "When neutral this government has stood for a restricted list of absolute and conditional contraband. As a belligerent we have contended for a liberal list according to our conceptions of the necessities of the case."

Nor had the United States any grounds for complaint in regard to the Allies' application of the doctrine of "continuous voyage" to prevent passage of goods to Germany through neutral countries. In doing this, they were merely following the precedent set by the United States during the Civil War, when this country exercised the right to determine from circumstances whether the ostensible was the real destination. Because of the implications of these earlier policies, the Government of the United States was not free to take action against all of

the commercial restrictions which were causing inconvenience to the American people. They, as well as the Government, must realize that: "...some of the doctrines which appear to bear harshly upon neutrals at the present time are analogous to or outgrowths from policies adopted by the United States when it was a belligerent. The government cannot, therefore, consistently protest against the application of rules which it has followed in the past unless they have not been practiced as heretofore."  

The recognition of these principles did not, however, prevent many serious conflicts between the two governments. As the war progressed, the methods employed by Great Britain in enforcing her naval policy, as well as her ever-widening interpretation of contraband, occasioned many protests from the American Government. Very soon after the opening of the war, certain areas surrounding Germany and her Allies had been designated as "war zones" and had been made unnavigable by means of fixed mines. This policy was explained as an act of retaliation against Germany for having scattered floating mines in the path of British commerce. Use of the North Sea was not forbidden to neutral vessels, but they were warned to use the lanes of navigation through these areas which were kept free of mines by British patrols. This gave Great Britain absolute control over all trade with the Northern Euro-

pean neutrals and made it possible for British vessels to stop all neutral ships and take them into British ports for search.

On December 26, 1914, the Government of the United States made its first vigorous protest against the seizure on the high seas of a large number of vessels, laden with American goods destined to neutral ports, and their retention in British ports for long periods of time. In this note the United States Government pointed out that peace, not war, was 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. The seizure of cargoes of foodstuffs and other articles which were admittedly relative contraband, on the mere suspicion that they were destined for an enemy of Great Britain, was condemned in the following passage:

"In spite of the presumption of innocent use because destined to neutral territory, the British authorities have made these seizures and detentions without, so far as we are informed, being in possession of facts which warranted a reasonable belief that the shipments had in reality a belligerent destination, as that term is used in international law. Mere suspicion is not evidence and doubts should be resolved in favor of neutral commerce and not against it."

6 Congressional Record, Lll, 1487-88.
The note finally complained of the injury to American commerce as a whole because of the hazards of the enterprise and the repeated diversions of goods from long established markets.

In answer to the protest of the United States, the British Foreign Minister expressed his Government's unwillingness to interfere with trade which was of a "bona fide" neutral character. At the same time, he said that the Allies were confronted with the growing danger that neutral countries contiguous to the enemy would become a base of supplies for the armed forces of the enemy and for materials for manufacturing armament. In support of this statement, he cited figures to show the tremendous increase of exports, from the United States to the neutral countries of North Europe, in November, 1914, over those of November, 1913. The British Government felt that its national safety depended upon the interception of goods really destined for the enemy and refused to accede to the demands of the United States that search for such goods should be made at sea and not in the ports of one of the belligerents.

This interchange of notes was the beginning of a long and voluminous correspondence which continued to the time that the United States severed diplomatic relations with Germany. In this controversy, according to Lansing, every principle and

Congressional Record, L11, 1488-90.
rule of international law applicable to naval warfare was invoked by one government or the other and became the subject of debate and argument. There was no definite code, no fixed standard, which could be applied. Everything seemed to be vague and uncertain by reason of the new conditions, though the long recognized principles were in fact unaffected.

As the British became more and more severe in dealing with ships and cargoes destined to neutral ports, from which transshipment to Germany was possible, American shipping and industrial interests became exceedingly irritated and indignant at the treatment they were receiving. They bombarded the Department of State with complaints and demanded that the Government take steps to protect their rights and save them from financial loss. Their dissatisfaction was aggravated by the growing suspicion that Great Britain was actuated by other motives than merely the prevention of goods reaching Germany through neutral countries. American business interests were becoming convinced that, under the pretext of national necessity, a definite effort was being made to kill American trade.

The extent to which President Wilson was willing to accede to the demands of the commercial interests in his protests to Great Britain, seems to have been limited by his own personal

8 Langing, Memoirs, 120.
9 Ibid., 121.
10 Ibid., 124.
convictions. Tumulty, who was intimately associated with the President all through the war, is of the opinion that only the belief that it was his duty to rule according to the will of the people kept him, after the violation of Belgian neutrality, from championing the cause which he felt involved the civilization of the world. "It was his devotion to the idea of trusteeship that held him in check, and the consciousness that in carrying out that trusteeship he had no right to permit his own passionate feelings to govern his public acts."

A few weeks after the opening of hostilities, he stated to Tumulty that the war would soon resolve itself into a struggle between autocracy and democracy and that the United States could not remain isolated.

When the official action taken by the Government failed to satisfy the commercial interests and the German sympathizers, who were clamoring for a firmer and more decisive attitude toward England, he refused to accede to their demands. He charged that many of the senators and congressmen who were urging him to take radical action against England were merely trying to influence German votes in their districts and had no thought of the calamitous results of a breach between England and the United States. He felt that he had gone the limit in pressing the claims of the United States but that Eng-


12 Ibid., 228.
land, in the throes of a world crisis, must be given a chance
to adjust these matters. Sir Edward Grey's contention that
England was fighting America's fight to save civilization was
in accord with his own views as stated to Tumulty:

"England is fighting our fight and you may
well understand that I shall not, in the
present state of world affairs, place ob-
tacles in her way. Many of our critics
suggest war with England in order to force
reparation in these matters. War with Eng-
land would result in a German triumph. No
matter what may happen to me personally in
the next election, I will not take any ac-
tion to embarrass England when she is fight-
ing for her life and the life of the world.
Let those who clamor for radical action
against England understand this." 13

The President's determination not to precipitate a crisis
with England was ably seconded by Lansing who, first as Under-
Secretary and later as Secretary of State, was responsible for
most of the notes sent to the belligerents. As previously
stated, he early became convinced that ultimately the United
States would intervene on the side of the Allies and he felt,
therefore, that her differences with England must never reach
a point where diplomatic correspondence would give place to
action. Moreover, the United States must not enter the war
too closely bound by what had been written beforehand. Pre-
sumably when she became a participant in the conflict, she
would wish to adopt many of the policies and practices against
which she was now protesting, for her aim then would be that of

13 Ibid, 231.
the Allies, namely to effect the economic isolation of Germany. Lansing stated that he never lost sight of this possibility during the controversies concerning the British restraints on our trade. His notes, therefore, became long and exhaustive treatises designed to open up new subjects for discussion rather than close those in controversy. Because short and decisive notes were dangerous, he worked with the deliberate purpose of keeping the controversy open and the questions unsettled, in order that the United States would be free to act, even illegally if necessary, when she entered the war. The execution of this policy presented many difficult problems. On the one hand was the ever-increasing pressure from American business men, acting through their Senators and representatives and other officials, to do something drastic to relieve our commercial interests from British interference. On the other hand, there was Lansing's own conviction that, because the United States would eventually be at war with Germany, its difficulties with England must never be allowed to proceed to an open rupture.

The policy of Wilson and the State Department in protesting every violation of our neutral rights was vigorously opposed by the American Ambassador at London. During the entire period from 1914 to 1917, he was engaged in a campaign which he called "waging neutrality." His conception of the
term was entirely at variance with that of President Wilson's and involved the maintenance of an outward neutrality and at the same time the exertion of pressure on Washington in behalf of the Allies. He complained bitterly of the policy of the Government and characterized Lansing and the other members of the State Department as "library lawyers." He believed that the State Department had no conception of the real issue involved, that the Administration at Washington was not representing the real sentiments of the American people and that, for political reasons or through a false appreciation of the vital interests at stake, it was sending unwarranted or at least needless complaints and protests to London. The President was greatly irritated by the attitude of Page and asserted that if he were to represent the American Government he must see the matters under discussion in the light in which they were seen in the United States.

The Administration was fully as anxious as Page at this time to maintain friendly relations with Great Britain but both the President and Colonel House felt that it was essential for the


16 Seymour, Intimate Papers, I, 305.


18 Seymour, Intimate Papers, I, 306.
United States to assert her rights as a neutral. If she did not do this in the case of the seizure of cargoes she could not protest effectively in case more serious attacks followed. House expressed to Page his conviction that there could not be any serious trouble between England and America, "... with all of us feeling as we do; but of course we must needs be careful in the manner of doing things - for the American people, as you know, are exceedingly sensitive regarding certain questions, and it would not be advisable for the President with all his power and popularity to go counter to this sentiment.  

Unfortunately Page seemed unable to grasp the American point of view which Wilson was trying to uphold. His letters reveal his frank admiration of the English system and from the very beginning of the war he urged American intervention on the side of the Allies. He had little sympathy with the President's refusal to recognize the legality of the blockade. He was willing to make allowance for the British restrictions on trade and seemed to feel that, in comparison with the defeat of Germany and the maintenance of good feeling between Great Britain and America, the losses and inconveniences of neutrals were of minor importance. The State Department felt that its work was constantly hampered by this.

19 Ibid., I, 308.

20 Hendrich, III, 172; and Edward Grey, 1st Viscount of Falkland, Twenty-Five Years, 1892-1916, 2V., New York, Stokes, 1925, II, 110.
attitude of the Ambassador. Mr. Lansing made the apparently justifiable complaint that Page:

"...seemed to have so little conception of the state of public opinion in this country that he, doubtless without realizing it, discounted ...the instructions sent him by his own government by showing his personal disapproval of them and by giving the British officials the impression that it was needless to pay serious attention to the numerous complaints which he was directed to lay before them."

There can be little doubt that Page's insistence that the communications of the State Department did not represent the real American sentiment, was an important factor in stiffening the British resistance to the American demands. But, at the same time, the British Foreign Office was fully aware of the danger of pushing the United States too far. Sir Edward Grey realized from the beginning the importance of the attitude of the United States. He reasoned that by virtue of its large population and with resources greater than those of any other country, the United States could do whatever it felt to be right or desirable without fear of the consequences. This country became, therefore, a factor of such great importance that its attitude might be decisive in determining the success of either side. If Great Britain secured American sympathy and support she could win. The loss of that sympathy might even result in throwing American support to Germany and in-

Lansing, Saturday Evening Post, April 18, 1931.

Grey, II, 168.
volve almost certain defeat for the Allies. This conviction became the basis of Grey's policy and he was determined to shape his course so as to win the support of the United States.

The problems involved are stated very clearly in his Memoirs:

"...the blockade of Germany was essential to the victory of the Allies, but the ill-will of the United States meant their certain defeat. After Paris had been saved by the battle of the Marne, the Allies could do no more than hold their own against Germany; sometimes they did not even do that. Germany and Austria were self-supporting in the huge supply of munitions. The Allies soon became dependent for an adequate supply upon the United States. If we quarreled with the United States we could not get that supply. It was better, therefore, to carry on the war without blockade, if need be, than to incur a break with the United States about contraband and thereby deprive the Allies of the resources necessary to carry on the war at all or with any chance of success. The object of diplomacy, therefore, was to secure the maximum of blockade that could be enforced without a rupture with the United States."

Grey realized that the execution of this policy placed Great Britain on very delicate and debatable ground. Having superior sea-power, she interpreted international law in a manner that would permit the maximum of interference with goods destined to the enemy. This involved two steps: first, all articles that were essential to modern warfare must be made absolute contraband; second and more important, the United States must accept the list. Grey mentioned the United States particularly because it was the only neutral

that could effectively dispute the list and it was presumed that the other neutrals would accept any list that this country accepted. The attitude of the United States, therefore, became of supreme importance. She might reasonably be expected to dispute listing as contraband articles which in previous times had been of little or no use to armies but were now essential to them. Inasmuch as these articles were of general use for ordinary commercial enterprises it was felt that they should not be put in the same class as munitions. To increase the possibility of acceptance by the United States, the British Government decided to make the list comparatively short at first and increase it as circumstances warranted. This extension of the list until it included some of the most important articles of American export, accompanied by an ever more severe control over trade with neutrals, formed the basis of the controversy which continued until our final break with Germany.

In spite of the very evident desire on both sides of the Atlantic to preserve amicable relations, by the spring of 1915 the United States was becoming so irritated by Great Britain's high-handed interference with our neutral rights that affairs were rapidly approaching a crisis. This was averted only by a new development in the war which, for the time being at least, thrust our difficulties with England into the back-

ground. From the beginning of the war Germany, due to the inferiority of her surface shipping, had placed her main reliance for injuring the commerce of the Allies upon the submarine. She now proposed to extend this policy and render it more effective. Accordingly, on February 4, 1915, the German Admiralty issued a proclamation declaring that the waters surrounding Great Britain and Ireland would henceforth be comprised within the seat of war. After February 18 the German navy would endeavor to destroy all enemy merchant vessels found within this area notwithstanding the fact that this practice might involve the destruction of lives and property. Neutral nations were warned not to entrust passengers, cargoes or crews to such vessels and neutral vessels were warned to steer clear of these waters. The German Navy had received instructions to abstain from all violence against neutral vessels but it was felt that the use of neutral flags by the belligerents might make it impossible to prevent a neutral from becoming the victim of an attack intended for the enemy.

This proclamation injected a new element into the situation. Up to this time the question involved had been the capture, retention and possible confiscation of vessels and cargoes. The new German policy meant their absolute destruction and an almost certain loss of life. These facts with their serious possibilities were called to the attention of the German Government.

ernment. In a note dated February 10, 1915, the United States warned Germany that the destruction of American vessels or the loss of American lives would be considered an indefensible violation of neutral rights for which this Government would hold Germany to strict accountability. In the course of the subsequent diplomatic interchange, the German Government announced that its new and drastic policy was a retaliatory measure and was undertaken to break the British blockade upon foodstuffs and to cut off the British supply of munitions. In view of the emergency the United States proposed to both Governments a modus vivendi which, it frankly admitted, was based upon expediency rather than legal right. It proposed: the entry of foods to Germany, solely for the use of non-combatants; restrictions upon floating mines; the discontinuance of the use of neutral flags by belligerent vessels; and that neither Germany nor Great Britain should use submarines to attack merchant vessels except to enforce the right of visit and search. This proposal was accepted conditionally by Germany but was refused by Great Britain. Ambassador Page, in a telegram to the Secretary of State, described the English reaction to the efforts of the United States. He stated that: "The feeling

26 Journal of International Law, IX, 86-88.

27 Foreign Relations, 1915, Supplement, 1125.

28 Ibid., 119-120.

29 Ibid., 134.
in official and unofficial life is that our pacific intentions and our lack of appreciation of what the war means have led us to play into Germany's hands. Whatever may be said or thought of this English opinion, it is clear that the British regard this move on our part as well-intentioned meddling and it lessens their respect for our judgment."

The failure of this proposal was followed by a more aggressive program on the part of both belligerents. Great Britain issued new Orders in Council which constituted in effect a blockade of neutral ports. The United States denied the legality of these measures, maintaining that if carried into effect they would amount to a practical assertion of unlimited belligerent rights over neutral commerce within the whole European area, and an almost unqualified denial of the sovereign rights of nations now at peace. Irritating though this policy was, it was conducted without actual loss of vessels, cargoes, or passengers. In contrast, the activities of the German submarines seemed to violate all the principles of humanity.

Within the next few months several American ships were sunk by German submarines and a number of American lives were lost.

30 *Ibid.*, 134

31 *Foreign Relations*, 1915, Supplement, 144.

32 *Congressional Record*, Llll, 1188.
Popular feeling in the United States became tinged with bitterness toward Germany. English officials on the other hand, considered that the German U-boat campaign was of the greatest assistance to their cause inasmuch as it turned American irritation from the British naval policy to the German outrages. Moreover, the tension which now developed between the United States and Germany enabled England to increase the stringency of her blockade without straining her precarious relations with the United States to the breaking point.

The immediate danger of a quarrel with England was averted by the sinking, on May 7, 1915, of the British liner, Lusitania, with a loss of one hundred twenty four American citizens. Resentment against Germany became so intense as to bring in America the first general demand for war. The tone of the President's notes to Germany during the preceding months had led many to believe that he would immediately adopt decisive measures. The German Ambassador felt that the force of public opinion and the hostility to Germany aroused by this disaster would force the President to break off diplomatic relations. Such a course, he was convinced, would inevitably lead to war. Wilson took no action, however, for a period of six days. During this time, Tumulty stated, his calmness in


34 Bernstorff, 144.
the face of clamorous demands for war brought accusations of heartlessness and indifference to the terrible tragedy. But Wilson felt that his refusal to act hastily was justified by the necessity of considering his first step in the most careful manner, for once having taken it he could not withdraw. He again stressed his obligation to evaluate, to the best of his ability, the feeling of the country. He was uncertain whether the current emotionalism of the people would endure until a special session of Congress could be called upon to sustain any radical action he might take. His desire to act in conformity with the will of the people he expressed in the following words:

"The vastness of this country; its variegated elements; the conflicting cross currents of national feelings bid us wait and withhold ourselves from hasty and precipitate action. When we move against Germany we must be certain that the whole country not only moves with us but is willing to go forward to the end. I know that we shall be condemned for waiting, but in the last analysis, I am the trustee of this nation, and the cost of it all must be considered in the reckoning before we go forward." 36

President Wilson's fear that public opinion would not support warlike measures was shared by Lansing. The intense excitement of the East was not so evident in the Central and Western sections of the country. In these regions resentment

35 Tumulty, 232.

36 Ibid., 233-4.
was qualified by arguments in regard to the wisdom of American travel on British vessels and the right of Germany to adopt retaliatory measures against Great Britain. Judging from the comments in the press Lansing concluded that public opinion was by no means unified but that the majority of the people were opposed to measures that would lead to war. The probable correctness of this conclusion was verified by Secretary of Agriculture Houston who was traveling in the West at the time of the sinking of the 

_Lusitania_. He stated that to the people of the West the war seemed very far away and, although they wanted the rights of the United States safeguarded, they did not seriously contemplate the possibility of becoming involved in the struggle.

The long controversy between the United States and Germany which followed the sinking of the _Lusitania_ cannot be treated adequately here. The limitations of this paper make impossible any detailed discussion of the issues involved and hence only those aspects of the case which have a bearing upon Anglo-American relations may be touched on. The first formal action taken by the United States took the form of a note of protest sent to the German Government on May 13, 1915. The answer

37 Lansing, _Memoirs_, 27.


to this note was so evasive and unsatisfactory that President Wilson felt that a more vigorous expression of the position of the United States was necessary. Houston has given a very detailed account of the Cabinet meeting of June 1, at which the President presented the draft of his reply to Germany. Bryan's demand for a strong note to England also, protesting against her illegal action in holding up our exports, was opposed by the other Cabinet members. They denounced the idea that material interests should be considered during a discussion which involved so serious a matter as human lives. Bryan's charges that the Cabinet was pro-Ally were denied by the President. He said that the United States had sent a note to England and might do so again at the proper time, but that this was a singularly inappropriate time to take up such a matter with her. In view of the seriousness of the issue with Germany, Wilson felt it would be folly to force matters with England. Secretary of Commerce Redfield pointed out that Bryan erred when he said that England had stopped our exports. Figures were cited to show that the export trade of the United States was greater than ever and was growing. The practically unanimous view of the other Cabinet members that American trade was flourishing in spite of English regulations, failed to impress Bryan.

40 Houston, I, 137.

41 Ibid., 138
The final draft of the President's note called Germany's attention to the fact that the Government of the United States was "...contending for something much greater than mere rights of property or privileges of commerce. It is contending for nothing less high and sacred than the rights of humanity, which every Government honors itself in respecting and which no government is justified in resigning on behalf of those under its care and authority." Bryan, who was opposed to the United States becoming a participant in the European struggle, regardless of the offenses, resigned rather than sign this note which he felt was only a prelude to war.

The unwillingness of Germany to recognize the principles for which Wilson was contending served to keep the situation critical all during the summer of 1915. A break with Germany was avoided only because of the President's determination to first exhaust all possible means of reaching an understanding. His efforts met with a degree of success although, in fact, the Lusitania case was never definitely settled and remained a disturbing element of our international relations all during our period of neutrality. The immediate controversy was, however, terminated on September 1, by Germany's pledge that "... liners will not be sunk by our submarines without warning and without safety of the lives of noncombat-

43 Lansing, Memoirs, 29.
ants, provided that the liners do not try to escape or offer resistance.

The failure of the President to break off relations with Germany was a bitter disappointment to Ambassador Page. His letters during the summer and autumn of 1915 were full of complaints in regard to the course adopted by the administration. He held that the practice of writing notes to the German Government instead of immediately dismissing its ambassador had resulted in a complete revulsion of English feeling towards the United States. The conviction was becoming general that the United States would submit to any indignity without resentment and was pledged to a peace at any price policy.

Writing to Colonel House, he stated emphatically that "...British opinion and the British Government have absolutely lost their respect for us and their former high estimate of the President. And that former respect is gone for good unless he acts now very quickly."

House, on the other hand, defended the President's motives. He argued that the charge of timidity was not justified because resistance to the popular excitement of the East required an exceptional amount of courage and subjected Wilson to many months of deep anxiety and humiliation. His slowness to take decisive action and his willingness to negotiate were

44 Foreign Relations, 1915, Supplement, 530-1.
45 Hendrick, II, 37.
simply the result of his unshakeable conviction that he was under obligation to the American people to keep out of the war unless the Germans definitely forced it upon him. The British Foreign Office was apprised of the views of the President and the attitude of the American people by House. Shortly after the second Lusitania note he wrote that the vast majority of the people desired the President to be firm with Germany but yet avoid war. Some time later he reported that the sentiment of the country continued to be against war and it was doubtful whether the President would be sustained by Congress if he advocated drastic action. In this same letter he warned Grey that if the immediate tension between Germany and the United States should be relieved, a demand for an adjustment of our shipping troubles with England would immediately arise. Grey received a similar warning from the British Ambassador at Washington, who said that after the passing of the German crisis it would be the turn of the Allies. In regard to the American note which was being sent he stated that "...feeling in the Government circles seems to be that the United States must defend their rights and they must make a good showing before Congress meets, but that the correspondence, should not take a hostile character but should

46 Seymour, Intimate Papers, II, 1.

47 Ibid., 12.

48 Ibid., 57
be in the nature of a juridical discussion." He also ad-
vised his government that inasmuch as England was using this
country as a base of supplies and had just floated a loan here
it would probably be good policy, if not an absolute necessity,
to make some concessions to American opinion.

The note mentioned by Spring-Rice was sent on October 21,
1915, and firmly stated the American objections to the restric-
tions of the Allies. Page complained of its tone, saying
that it contained "...not a courteous word, not a friendly
phrase, nor a kindly turn, not an allusion even to an old ac-
quaintance, to say nothing of an old friendship, not a word of
thanks for courtesies or favours done us, not a hint of sym-
pathy in the difficulties of the time. There is nothing in
its tone to show that it came from an American to an English-
man..." In spite of the firmness of the tone, however,
the note produced no change in Great Britain's policy. Grey
stated the English point of view in a letter to Colonel
House. Compliance with the American demands would, in the
eyes of the British Government, be tantamount to giving up,
definitely and openly, any attempt to stop goods from entering
Germany through neutral ports. The friction and trouble which
developed made Grey personally desire to give up the whole idea

49 Gwynn, II, 282.

50 Hendrick, II, 79.

of blockade as practiced by Great Britain but such a step would materially lessen the chance of Allied success. "The real question, he felt, was not concerned with legal niceties about contraband, but was whether England could continue to use the weapon of sea power which the United States was now threatening to strike from her hand.

The persistent refusal of Great Britain to recognize the American position resulted in a change of opinion on the part of President Wilson. During the years 1915 and 1916 he grew more and more impatient with what he termed the "intolerable conditions of neutrality." The diplomatic surrender of Germany in the cases of the Lusitania and the Sussex caused the attention of the Administration to be concentrated upon our commercial troubles. Moreover, the cold reception given by England to his proposals for peace apparently led Wilson to the conclusion that the war aims of the Allies were as selfish as those of Germany. Spurred on by demands in Congress for immediate and decisive pressure on the Allies, he instructed Colonel House to inform the British Foreign Office that the United States was faced with the necessity of taking some definite action immediately. In his opinion


53 Seymour, Intimate Papers, II, 389.
only two courses were open to this country. The first was to make a definite move for peace upon some permanent basis. In the event of the failure of this first plan the United States would insist to the limit upon her rights of trade and upon the freedom of the seas as defined by international law. If forced to this second course, the American position would be asserted with the same plain speaking and firmness that was used against Germany.

The reluctance of Great Britain to consider peace proposals at this time and her refusal to give up the blockade led Wilson to give serious consideration to the idea of imposing an embargo upon exports to the Allied countries. This was generally recognized as the most effective weapon in the possession of the United States and its use at any time would have resulted in a complete change of policy on the part of Great Britain. The reluctance of the President and his advisers to resort to it cannot be attributed entirely to their friendship and sympathy with England which made them loath to hamper her effectiveness against Germany. They were also acutely conscious at all times of the effect of such a step upon the economic life of the nation. Commercially we had always been bound more closely with England than with any other country. Drastic action at this time, though it might accomplish its

immediate objective, would undoubtedly upset commercial relations between the two countries for some time to come. House stresses this point in July, 1915, when he wrote to the President: "In regard to our shipping troubles with Great Britain, I believe that if we press hard enough they will go to almost any length rather than come to the breaking point. But, in so doing, we would gain their eternal resentment for having taken advantage of their position and our action would arise to haunt us - not only at the peace conference but for a century to follow...If it came to the last analysis and we placed an embargo upon munitions of war and foodstuffs to please the cotton men, our whole industrial and agricultural machinery would cry out against it." 55

Another reason equally important was the fact that the war orders of the Allies had created a time of great prosperity in the United States. A break with the Allies would endanger this large and profitable trade and might induce a commercial crisis. The British Government was kept informed of this situation by its Ambassador at Washington. In one report to his superiors, he stated that: "The brutal facts are that this country has been saved by the war, and by our war demand, from a great commercial crisis; that in normal times Great Britain and her colonies take forty per cent of the total export trade of the United States. We have, therefore, the claims of their 55 Seymour, Intimate Papers, II, 58.
best customer and, at the present moment our orders here are absolutely essential to their economic prosperity." Reports such as this, undoubtedly, were a very important factor in helping Great Britain to determine just how far resistance to American demands could be carried without inducing retaliatory measures.

When American sympathy showed signs of becoming alienated from the cause of the Allies and agitation for an embargo increased, Spring-Rice sent another very significant report to Grey. In appraising the possibilities of action by the United States, he stated:

"The reason why there has been no embargo on arms and ammunition is not sympathy with us, but the sense that the prosperity of the country, on which the administration depends for its existence, would be imperilled by such a measure. If there is a scarcity of material or any other reason why an embargo would pay, we should have an embargo. At present I don't see any chance of it unless there is a change in the conditions. But lesser measures may be put into force. Restraints on shipping may be ordered. Transport may be impeded. A loan may be made more difficult. We are not secure against such measures. Therefore, we must watch very carefully what is occurring here. Do not depend on official reports. But obtain independent information from as many sides as possible. The object should be to ascertain when the breaking point is near and where. There may be a breaking point. Do not deceive yourself as to that. If it approaches you may have to concede a point or two." 57

56 Gwynn, II, 300.

57 Ibid., II, 345.
During 1916 relations between the United States and Great Britain became steadily worse. But each time that the breaking point seemed imminent, Germany intervened to draw attention from the dispute in progress. A new crisis developed, however, with the publication on July 18 of a black list of American firms with which Allied firms were forbidden to trade. This appeared to Wilson to be the last straw. He informed House that his patience was exhausted and that he was considering asking Congress for authority to prohibit loans and to restrict exportation of supplies to the Allies. This step was actually taken and before its adjournment in September, two very significant measures were passed by Congress. In the first place, Congress conferred upon the President authority to inaugurate an embargo upon munitions and other articles needed by the Allies. And secondly, a huge appropriation was made to provide for a vast ship-building program. This appropriation was sufficient for the construction of one hundred thirty five vessels of all classes. With such an addition the navy of the United States would have been in a position to dispute with Great Britain for the command of the


seas. House warned the president of the dangers that were inherent in such a program. Wilson's irritation with Great Britain is evidenced by his reply: "Let us build a navy bigger than theirs and do what we please."

These weapons for enforcing respect for the neutral rights and the sovereign power of the United States were not, however, put into effect. Just at the time that the situation between the United States and the Allies was apparently becoming intolerable, Germany injected into the war the element of unrestricted submarine warfare. As a result of this policy of desperation the United States not only submerged her trade dispute with the Allies, but ultimately espoused their cause and became an active participant in the war.

Seymour, Intimate Papers, II, 317.
Chapter IV

President Wilson's Attempts at Mediation

All through the trying period of neutrality President Wilson in his relations with both sets of belligerents shaped his foreign policy along two main lines. In the first place, his allegiance to the principles which formed the cornerstone of the traditional foreign policy of the United States prompted him to use every effort to keep the country out of the European war. And secondly, his own devotion to humanitarian ideals incited in him the desire to direct his own energy and the power and influence of the United States to the task of bringing peace to the warring nations.

Although attempting to carry out both policies simultaneously, the methods employed in each case were somewhat dissimilar. In questions involving our rights as a sovereign power, the views of the President were generally conveyed to the belligerent Governments through the State Department. But his negotiations to bring about peace were of a more informal nature and were conducted, for the most part, outside of the regular diplomatic channels. The greater part of this work, which of necessity was of a very delicate and confidential nature, was entrusted by President Wilson to his closest friend, Colonel House, to whose Intimate Papers we must turn
as our most important source of information. We cannot doubt that, in his negotiations with the representatives of the belligerent Governments, House was expressing the views and desires of the President. Wilson, himself, attests the bond between them and the similarity of their sympathies and ideals. Having been asked whether House represented him accurately in a certain situation, he replied: "Mr. House is my second personality. He is my independent self. His thoughts and mine are one. If I were in his place I would do just as he suggested...If any one thinks he is reflecting my opinion by whatever action he takes, they are welcome to the conclusion."

House was peculiarly fitted to carry out such a mission by reason of his lifetime interest in foreign affairs and his close association with those in charge of our foreign policy. The President had consulted him constantly in regard to appointments to both the domestic and foreign service and he was, therefore, thrown into close contact with the Ambassadors to other countries. He was always deeply interested in their problems and his cordial relations with them expedited the work that he was commissioned to undertake. His relations with the foreign diplomats stationed at Washington were always on a friendly and sometimes even an intimate basis. 2

1 Seymour, Intimate Papers, II, 114.

2 Ibid., II, 90.
ing the course of the war he made a point of keeping in close touch with the Ambassadors of the belligerent powers. In his diary he said: "I am laying plans to make myself grata to all the nations involved in this European War so that my services may be utilized to advantage and without objection in the event a proper opportunity arrives.

Unlike the President House was convinced that modern conditions, which had made the United States a world power, demanded the abandonment of the policy of isolation. Bound more closely, intellectually and commercially with Europe during the last thirty years than at any time in her history, she had incurred an obligation to actively participate in formulating plans for the maintenance of the peace of the world. But he also felt that any movement for international cooperation must be based upon a close understanding between this country and Great Britain. Settlement of the difficulties between them, which were based chiefly upon misinformation and misunderstanding on both sides, was imperative. To accomplish this President Wilson and Colonel House employed a method which was unique in diplomatic history. It was based on the idea that foreign policy could be conducted like personal business by a frank interchange of views in a spirit of honesty and friendliness.

In the British Foreign Minister, Sir Edward Grey,


House found a kindred spirit for whom he came to have a deep affection and unbounded respect. He considered him a diplomat distinguished by sincerity of purpose and honesty of method and one who did not regard diplomacy "...as a mysterious intrigue, but rather as a means by which the representatives of different states could discuss frankly the coincidence or the clash of national interests and reach a peaceable understanding." 5

The efforts of President Wilson and House to insure peace in Europe really antedated the war. Alarmed by the growing tension between the nations of Europe, Wilson dispatched House, in May 1914, on a mission designed to bring about a better understanding between England and Germany. Negotiations to effect this end were, however, abruptly terminated by the events which culminated in the general European War. Immediately after the outbreak of the war, Wilson sent to each of the belligerents a formal offer of mediation. This offer was merely an expression of his willingness to act in behalf of European peace at the moment or "...at any other time that might be thought more suitable..." 6 The replies of the belligerent Governments were equally formal acknowledgements of the President's offer of mediation and were productive of no results.

5 Ibid., I, 195.

6 Journal of International Law, Supplement, IX, 42.
As a result of the many misunderstandings that developed over our trade during the first months of the war and the apparent inability of Ambassador Page to grasp the American point of view, Wilson resolved, early in 1915, to send House to England to explain the American attitude. A secondary purpose of this mission was to determine the possibilities of mediation. Informal conversations held by House with Spring-Rice and Bernstorff had given rise to the faint hope that the time was ripe for an offer of mediation. That such an undertaking would be complicated in both England and Germany by the strong anti-American sentiment which was developing, this Government was well aware. Grey wrote that, although it would give him great pleasure to see and talk to House, it was most important that he should be cognizant of the state of public opinion in England before embarking upon his mission. The policy of the United States Government of singling out Great Britain as the only Power whose conduct merited protest was, according to Grey, creating a very unfavorable impression on the people of England. Ambassador Gerard sent a similar report from Germany. He said that German resentment against American sales of munitions to the Allies was finding expression in a veritable campaign of hate directed against America and Americans.

Despite these discouraging reports the undertaking was not
abandoned. Wilson and House both felt that every opportunity which offered even the slightest chance to bring peace should be seized. House accordingly sailed for England on January 30, 1915. He immediately got in touch with Grey to whom he proposed a peace conference to negotiate a peace based upon the evacuation and restoration of Belgium and a drastic disarmament program to ensure permanent peace. Grey signified that peace upon these terms would be satisfactory to England but he feared that England's Allies would not accept a program which did not take their territorial aspirations into consideration. Grey also maintained that an essential element of a settlement must be some general guaranty for world-wide peace. British officials were inclined to be sceptical of the sincerity of the Germans, feeling that their military success precluded the acceptance of any peace terms that would be satisfactory to the Allies. This feeling was intensified by the German proclamation of February 4, in regard to the use of the submarine.

House later visited Paris and Berlin where the fears expressed in England were confirmed. His conferences with Poincare and Delcasse, the Minister for Foreign Affairs, convinced him that the basis of peace which he had discussed with Grey would not be acceptable to France. In regard to the territorial ambitions of that nation he said: "The French not only want Alsace and Lorraine but so much more that the two countries are
not within sight of peace." From Berlin, he wrote that he was sadly disappointed that "...we were misled into believing that peace parleys might be begun upon a basis of evacuation of France and Belgium." 9 As a result of his visits and conferences, House became convinced that the Civil Governments of each of the belligerents would welcome peace but feared to begin negotiations. Because of the strength of the military machine and the intensity of feeling that had been developed among the people, any proposal of peace terms which did not signify complete victory would have meant the downfall of those in power. Zimmerman, the German Secretary of State in charge of Foreign Affairs, told House that peace parleys, upon any terms that would have any chance of acceptance would mean the overthrow of the Government and the Kaiser. House summed up his impressions in a message to Bryan in which he stated:

"Everybody wants peace, but nobody is willing to concede enough to get it. They all also say that they desire a permanent settlement so that no such disaster may occur hereafter, but again there is such a divergence of ideas as to how this should be brought about that for the moment it is impossible to harmonize the differences.

Germany is not willing to evacuate Belgium at all, nor even France, without an indemnity, and Count von Bernstorff's suggestion that this could be arranged was wide afield. The Allies, of course, will not consent to anything less; and there the situation rests." 10

8 Seymour, Intimate Papers, I, 399.
9 Ibid., I, 403.
10 Ibid., I, 403.
11 Ibid., I, 417.
Except to make it known that he held himself in readiness to act in the interests of peace at any time, President Wilson made no further moves until late in the year 1915. By that time the position of the United States had become extremely precarious. Beset on the one hand by Allied restrictions on our trade, and on the other by the menace of the German submarines, the maintenance of neutrality became increasingly difficult. Moreover, Wilson's preoccupation with domestic affairs, which had been a matter of such concern to House early in the Administration, was now giving way to a conviction that the United States was destined to play a very important part in the solution of world problems. He was still determined to keep out of the war if possible, but he was beginning to question whether such a course could be followed. In a speech delivered at Milwaukee on January 31, 1916, he pointed out that the nations at war, who felt that they were struggling for their lives and honor, were constantly impelled to do things which were inconsistent with the rights of the United States and which led to serious misunderstandings and difficulties. In meeting these difficulties, the President stated, he was charged with a two-fold duty: "In the first place, I know you are depending on me to keep this nation out of war. So far I have done so, and I pledge you my word that, God helping me, I will if it is possible. But you have laid another duty upon me. You have bid me see to it that nothing stains or im-
pairs the honor of the United States, and that is a matter not within my control; that depends upon what others do, not upon what the Government of the United States does; there may at any moment come a time when I cannot preserve both the honor and the peace of the United States."  

The complexities of the situation brought House to the conclusion that some definite action by the United States was necessary. He felt that the policy of drifting and attempting to settle our difficulties with first one and then another of the belligerents could only result in the loss of the friendship of the Allies and perhaps the ultimate victory of Germany. The procedure which he advocated was for the President to demand a conference to negotiate peace upon the basis of complete restitution by Germany and full guarantees against future wars. In case one side refused such a conference, the United States would enter the war on the side of the other. As acceptance of these terms by an undefeated Germany was extremely problematical, it virtually amounted to a proposal that the United States should aid the Allies to enforce terms that they probably could not enforce themselves. 

House feared that President Wilson's desire to keep the country out of war would cause him to reject a plan which involved direct intervention. This fear was somewhat allayed 12

Baker and Dodd, IV, 48.
by the President's assertion that he had never been sure that this country should remain aloof from the conflict and if Germany and militaristic ideas were to win, the obligation of the United States was greater than ever. Thus encouraged, House developed his idea and a few weeks later submitted it to the President. Although startled by a plan which might easily lead to active participation, Wilson agreed that House should begin an informal discussion with the Allies to determine their attitude toward a demand that hostilities cease. The success of the plan depended upon a complete understanding between England and the United States and this he set himself to bring about. Letters from Grey, in the autumn of 1915, had expressed his belief that the cessation of hostilities and, still more important, the prevention of future wars, could be secured only with the assistance of the United States. In one letter he inquired as to the willingness of the President to propose a League of Nations with power to proceed against any nation which violated treaties or international laws, or refused to submit disputes to arbitration.

The reply to Grey's letter, drafted by House and approved by Wilson, was an extremely significant document. It not only openly expressed sympathy with the cause of the Allies, but

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\[14\]
Ibid., II, 89.
definitely proposed intervention and indicated the method of procedure. In it House stated that, in his opinion,

"...it would be a world-wide calamity if the war should continue to a point where the Allies could not, with the help of the United States, bring about a peace along the lines you and I have so often discussed. What I want you to know is that, whenever you consider the time is propitious for this intervention, I will propose it to the President. He may then desire me to go to Europe in order that a more intimate understanding as to procedure may be had.

It is in my mind that, after conferring with your Government, I should proceed to Berlin and tell them that it was the President's purpose to intervene and stop this destructive war, provided the weight of the United States thrown on the side that accepted our proposal could do it.

I would not let Berlin know, of course, of any understanding with the Allies, but would rather lead them to think our proposal would be rejected by the Allies. This might induce Berlin to accept the proposal, but, if they did not do so, it would nevertheless be the purpose to intervene. If the Central Powers were still obdur ate, it would probably be necessary for us to join the Allies and force the issue." 15

The proposal was received by England with a noticeable lack of enthusiasm. This attitude was no doubt due to a number of reasons, only a few of which need be mentioned here. In the first place, England interpreted American protests against restrictions on her trade as evidence of unfriendliness to the Allied cause. Then too, the ideas expressed in the note were such a radical departure from the long-established foreign policy of the United States and from Wilson's own repeatedly expressed sentiments, that some doubt may have been felt as to

15 Seymour, Intimate Papers, II, 90-1.
whether this country would actually enter the war. And, finally, the terms of peace proposed coincided only with the publicly expressed war aims of the Allies. Secret agreements between the Allied Powers, in regard to territorial annexations, indemnities, and the political destruction of the enemy, were not taken into consideration. Wilson and House were disappointed but not discouraged by the indifferent reception given to their offer. They felt that a better understanding must be brought about and that this could be best accomplished by again sending House to Europe to sound out the sentiments of the belligerent Governments.

In the meantime, House kept in touch with the German Ambassador. He told him of his forthcoming trip and said that if Germany would consent to a plan of general disarmament, the President would demand a peace conference. He did not discuss with Bernstorff the questions of territorial adjustment or indemnity as he felt that these problems were best left to the Allies. In dealing with Germany he advised Wilson it was well to move circumspectly, not permitting the German Government to lead them into an attitude that would place them in a disagreeable position with the Allies. Bernstorff forwarded the information received from House to his Government, stressing the desirability of his mission for the purpose of improving mutual relations. Unaware of the proposals already

made to Grey, he described House as being absolutely neutral, very discreet and trustworthy, and standing in the very center of the political situation in America. The German Foreign Secretary, von Jagow, responded by requesting House to visit Germany first in order to discuss militarism as it applied to that country.

House did not accede to the request of von Jagow as he thought it advisable to proceed directly to London. He sailed on December 28, 1915, and upon his arrival in England immediately got in touch with the British statesmen. To allay doubts entertained by them as to the possibility of American cooperation, Wilson sent an historic message to House: "Would be glad if you would convey my assurance that I would be willing and glad, when the opportunity comes, to cooperate in a policy seeking to bring about and maintain permanent peace among civilized nations." During his stay in England House conferred with the Prime Minister and other members of the Cabinet. President Wilson's desire to aid in bringing the war to an end was laid before them, but no action was taken.


18 Ibid., II, 1279.

Their slowness to act was deplored by House, who felt that delay might be fatal to the success of the plan inasmuch as the uncertain state of our relations with both sets of belligerents was liable to culminate in a crisis at any time. He, therefore, determined to go to Berlin to sound out the attitude of that Government toward a peace movement.

In Berlin, House was received in a most friendly manner by the German officials, but it soon became evident that they would not consider a peace based upon the terms suggested by Wilson. Although both the Chancellor and the Foreign Secretary expressed a desire for peace they repudiated the idea of a settlement which signified defeat for Germany. Their real attitude toward the efforts of President Wilson to initiate a movement for a conference was disclosed a little later in messages to Bernstorff. Bethman Hollweg stated that the people of Germany felt that Wilson's policy consistently favored England. This impression was so marked that only some very definite action against England would convince them that he was sufficiently unbiased to offer his good offices in favor of peace. The Foreign Secretary, von Jagow, likewise, expressed the belief that little could be expected from "...one whose instincts are all in favor of the English point of view and who, in addition, is so naive a statesman as President Wilson." Any attempt to effect a peace based upon the

20 German Documents, II, 974.
status quo ante, he deemed absolutely unacceptable to Germany. He recognized, however, the possibility that a change of feeling in England coupled with German refusal to conclude peace might induce the President to cooperate openly with the Allies. He instructed Bernstorff that, "As soon as Mr. Wilson's mediation plans threaten to assume a more concrete form and an inclination on the part of England to meet him begins to manifest itself, it will be the duty of your Excellency to prevent President Wilson from approaching us with a positive proposition to mediate. The choice of the means to reach this result without endangering our relations to the United States I venture to leave to your Excellency's ability as a diplomat, since I am not able to form a complete estimation of the situation from here."

After leaving Berlin, House proceeded to Paris where he set himself to the task of creating a "good atmosphere." His policy up to this time had been to deal with the British with the greatest frankness but leave to them the task of dealing with the Allies. However, the extreme deliberateness manifested by the British in this matter, made him decide to present the issue directly to the heads of the French Government. He informed Briand and Cambon that neither the President nor he felt any fears for the safety of the United States but that their deep interest in the future of democratic principles prompted them

Ibid., II, 978.
to take their present course. He left them, according to his report to Wilson, with the final understanding that no movement for intervention would be made if the Allies were victorious during the spring and summer but if the tide of war went against them or remained stationary, the United States would intervene.

Upon his return to England, House won the support of Grey to the plan of calling a peace conference, but no action could be taken without the consent of the Prime Minister and the Cabinet. Several conferences with Lloyd George and a number of his colleagues were encouraging but not conclusive. After one such conference, Grey and House drew up a memorandum which outlined the action President Wilson would be prepared to take and the terms of the peace he would endeavor to secure. House took this memorandum with him to Washington and submitted it to the President for his approval. Only one change was made in the cabled confirmation. The original text was changed by the insertion of the word probably in the sentence which read: "Colonel House expressed the opinion that if such a conference met, it would secure peace on terms not unfavourable to the Allies; and if it failed to secure peace, the United States would (probably) leave the Conference as a belligerent on the side of the Allies if Germany was unreasonable."

22 Seymour, Intimate Papers, II, 164.

23 Text of Memorandum, Grey, II, 123.
The offer of the President was not accepted at that or any subsequent time. Many reasons have been advanced for the failure of those in power to seize this opportunity to bring the conflict to an end. Grey has stated that England's Allies were convinced that their national interests could be served only by a decisive defeat of Germany and they would resent the proposal of any terms which could not be interpreted as a victory. Moreover, as both France and Russia had suffered more from the war than England, who still possessed reserves of men and resources, he hesitated to recommend Wilson's proposal fearing it might be interpreted as a weakening of British support. He, therefore, communicated the substance of the memorandum to Briand without a recommendation.

Lloyd George, in his Memoirs, has attempted to fix responsibility for failure to call a conference, which he said would have saved a whole year of ruin, havoc, and destruction. He advanced three probable reasons. The first was the reluctance of Sir Edward Grey to press the matter upon France and exert pressure upon them for acceptance of the terms. The second probable reason was the insertion of the "one fatal word" in the gentleman's agreement drawn up by House and Grey. He felt that the insertion of the word, probably, changed the whole character of the agreement, which consequently gave no real assurance of American cooperation. But the real explanation, 24

Ibid., II, 125.
he concluded, was that "...President Wilson was afraid of public opinion in the U.S.A. and Sir Edward Grey was frightened of our Allies."

The refusal of the Allies to avail themselves of the President's assistance seemed to House to constitute one of the monumental blunders of the war. The effect upon Wilson, and to a lesser degree upon House, was to raise in their minds grave doubts as to the sincerity of the Allied Statesmen. Since the beginning of the war Great Britain and France had protested that they were fighting to save civilization from the threat of autocratic and militaristic domination. Nevertheless, they refused an opportunity to effect a just and permanent peace, apparently hoping, by continuing the struggle, to eventually crush their enemies. House foresaw that, in the event of Allied success, new and disturbing problems would be created. He noted in his diary; "A situation may arise, if the Allies defeat Germany, where they may attempt to be dictatorial in Europe and elsewhere. I can see quite clearly where they may change their views on militarism and navalism. It depends entirely upon what nation uses it, whether it is considered good or bad."

25 Lloyd George, II, 688.

26 Comment of House on July 20, 1933. Cited by Seymour, American Diplomacy, 163.

27 Seymour, Intimate Papers, II, 284.
Chapter V

The End of Isolation

The failure of the Allied Governments to take advantage of his offer of mediation was a bitter disappointment to President Wilson. Through Colonel House he notified Grey that, unless peace negotiations were soon inaugurated, the people of the United States would demand that the Government adopt the same vigorous attitude in regard to Allied violations of their neutral rights as had been adopted toward the Central Powers. So serious was the state of public opinion that, according to Lansing, only one thing saved our relations with Great Britain from becoming strained to the breaking point. This one factor, which alone saved the British from a most serious situation, was the stupidity displayed by the German Government in the conduct of its submarine warfare.

The submarine campaign against neutral vessels, which had abated somewhat after the German declaration of September 1, 1915, was renewed in the spring of 1916. In February the German and Austro-Hungarian Governments announced that armed merchant ships of the Allies would henceforth be considered as auxiliary cruisers and that, being in the nature of naval ves-

1 Seymour, Intimate Papers, II, 286.
2 Lansing, War Memoirs, I11.
sels, would be attacked without warning. This was in effect an announcement of an unrestricted submarine war, inasmuch as neutral as well as belligerent ships would be liable to attack. The use by belligerents of neutral flags in dangerous waters constituted a menace to all shipping. During the succeeding weeks many ships in the vicinity of the British Isles were torpedoed. The most wanton of all these attacks was the sinking on March 24 of the unarmed channel passenger boat, the Sussex.

As American lives had been lost the incident became a matter of concern to the American Government. Both Colonel House and Secretary Lansing were convinced that the time for writing notes had passed and urged the President to take some decisive action. They felt that the only practicable course under the circumstances was to break off diplomatic relations with Germany. Wilson, however, was reluctant to adopt a course, which, he felt, would inevitably lead to war. Although his peace proposals had involved possible intervention against the belligerent who refused to negotiate upon the basis of reasonable terms, he was loath to enter the war because of a quarrel with Germany over the submarine. The first course, he thought, would be a means of bringing an early and just peace, whereas to enter the conflict in defense of our own rights would not.


4 Lansing, Memoirs, 135-6; and Seymour, Intimate Papers, II, 227
only prolong the war, but lessen the influence of the United States in the peace conference. He accordingly refused to send the note prepared by Lansing which recalled Ambassador Gerard. Instead he drafted a reply himself in which he reviewed all the facts in the submarine controversy and concluded with the statement that: "Unless the Imperial Government shall now immediately declare and effect an abandonment of submarine warfare against passenger and freight-carrying vessels, the Government of the United States can have no choice but to sever diplomatic relations with the German Empire altogether."

In its reply to this note, Germany acceded to the demands of the United States. Submarine warfare in the future would be confined to the fighting forces of the belligerents. Merchant vessels would not be sunk without warning or without saving human lives, unless they attempted to escape or offered resistance. This pledge was kept by Germany for about eight months, during which time, as has been previously noted, our relations with Great Britain became increasingly tense.

Before dispatching his Sussex note to Germany, the President had made another unsuccessful appeal to the Allies to accept his offer of mediation. His efforts in this direction, although apparently fruitless, had one very important result.


6 Ibid., 1916 Supplement, 257.
During the period of negotiation, his ideas in regard to the foreign policy of the United States were completely revolutionized. His earlier conviction that the war was a purely European affair whose causes could not touch us, had, by May 1916, been replaced by the idea that: "We are participants whether we would or not of the life of the world, for the interests of all nations are our own also. We are partners with the rest. What affects mankind is inevitably our affair as well as the affair of the nations of Europe and Asia." 7

The negotiations with Grey, perhaps the most moderate and disinterested of the Allied statesmen, had led him to embrace the idea of a world pact to provide a mutual guaranty of the political independence and territorial integrity for all nations. Early in 1916 he had pledged to Great Britain his adherence to such a pact. He announced his policy to the American people in an address, on May 27, 1916, before the League to Enforce Peace. His intense desire to act as a mediator and to be instrumental in effecting a just and permanent peace, had impelled him to give serious consideration to the basis upon which such a peace could be established. His plan, which he felt was in conformity with the American ideal, was based upon two fundamental principles: the right of every people to choose the sovereignty under which they would live; and the right of small nations to the same respect for their

7 Baker and Dodd, IV, 185.
sovereignty and territorial integrity as was accorded to large and powerful states. In pledging the cooperation of the United States in any feasible association of nations to secure and guarantee these rights, Wilson expressed the conviction that he was acting in accordance with the wishes of the American people. By this declaration, Wilson definitely abandoned the historic American policy of isolation and accepted the idea of a League of Nations as the keynote of his foreign policy.

During the summer and early fall of 1916, the Presidential campaign was the matter of paramount interest in the United States. As was to be expected, problems growing out of the war became involved in the campaign issues. Irritation against England was increased by her unyielding attitude and the issuance of the black list. Relations with Germany, on the other hand, were comparatively smooth. The institution of unrestricted U-boat warfare, which was a constant source of controversy in Germany, was withheld largely through the efforts of Count Bernstorff. He consistently pointed out to his Government that such a course could only result in the breaking off of relations and the entrance of the United States into the war.  

8 Ibid., IV, 185.

9 The Correspondence between Bernstorff and the German Foreign Office, between June and September 1916, is contained in German Documents, II, 978-85.
Wilson accepted his re-election to the Presidency, after a campaign based on the slogan "He kept us out of war," as an endorsement by the people of the United States of his policy of neutrality. Shortly after the election he, therefore, undertook to inaugurate a new movement for peace. He suggested sending a note to the belligerents demanding the cessation of the war. Unless this action was taken he felt we would inevitably drift into war with Germany over the submarine issue.

Warnings had been received from Ambassador Gerard that Germany intended to break her promise of May 4 and institute unrestricted submarine warfare unless peace came soon. Colonel House, upon being consulted, advised against the initiation of any movement in this direction without first obtaining the consent of the Allies. He argued that any demand for a peace conference would be interpreted as a definitely unfriendly act and as an effort on the part of the United States to avert a crisis over the submarine issue and also to save Germany from the consequences of her disregard of international obligations.

Similar views were expressed by Secretary Lansing.

President Wilson refused to accept the advice given but did modify his proposal. Instead of demanding peace, his note sent to the belligerents on December 18 was an appeal to them to state the terms upon which they would be willing to negoti-
All hope of favorable results from this appeal was nullified, however, by the issuance on December 12 of identical notes addressed by the Central Powers to the Entente Governments, expressing their willingness to enter a peace conference. Wilson appreciated the danger that the Allies might feel that he was acting in collaboration with Germany but he nevertheless determined to send his note. In it he expressed the hope that an interchange of views would disclose that the terms of the belligerents were not so irreconcilable as had been feared. His statement that the war aims expressed by the statesmen of the belligerents on both sides were virtually the same was received in England, according to Page, with "...surprise and sorrowful consternation." The English, he stated, interpreted the President's remarks as placing the Allies and the Central Powers on the same moral level. The British themselves felt that they were fighting a holy and defensive war to save free government from military tyranny.

The President's request was refused by both the Central Powers and the Allies. Germany, although expressing her willingness to begin negotiations, refused to make an announcement of her war aims. The Allies refused on the grounds that

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13 Ibid., 94.
14 Ibid., 108.
15 Ibid., 108.
only a satisfactory conclusion of the war could bring a permanent peace. At the moment, they stated, it would be hopeless to expect Germany to consent to the policy of reparation, restitution and guaranties, that would be necessary to insure such a peace.

The failure of these peace moves precipitated a crisis in Germany. The disastrous effects of the English blockade were becoming noticeable and the Civil Government was consequently forced to accede to the demands of the extreme militarists. Their promises to bring a quick end to the war by an unrestricted submarine campaign were finally accepted by the Government. Official notice of this decision was forwarded to Bernstorff on January 19. He was instructed to notify the American Government on the evening of January 31 of the new policy. Bernstorff warned his Government that war was inevitable if the contemplated course was pursued and advised delay that the President might continue his efforts for peace. This advice was not heeded, however, and on February 1, 1917, Germany began an unrestricted submarine war.

The President learned of the German action first through an Associated Press bulletin. His reaction to the news has been described by Tumulty: "Without comment," he said, "I laid the fateful slip of paper on his desk, and silently watched him as

Ibid., 1917, Supplement I, 6.

Bernstorff, 358.
he read and then re-read it. I seemed to read his mind in the expressions that raced across his strong features: first, blank amazement, then incredulity that even Germany could be guilty of such perfidy; then gravity and sternness, a sudden grayness of colour, a compression of the lips and the familiar locking of the jaw which always characterized him in moments of supreme resolution. Handing the paper back to me, he said, in quiet tones, 'This means war. The break that we have tried so hard to prevent now seems inevitable.'

Colonel House also testified to the bitter disappointment of President Wilson at this sudden and unwarranted action of the German Government. He had placed great reliance on the hopes, extended by Bernstorff, of securing definite peace proposals from Berlin. This sudden reversal of policy, when all the talk was of peace, aroused in him an intense resentment. Moreover, the German announcement came at a time when the President was more than ever convinced that the United States should remain out of the war. His earlier sympathy for the Allied Cause and his conviction that the welfare of the world depended upon the defeat of Germany had undergone a change during 1916. The refusal of the Allies to accept his offer of mediation had made him suspicious of their motives in forcing a continuance of the war. In addition he feared that Ameri---

18 Tumulty, 254-5.
19 Seymour, Intimate Papers, II, 439.
can assistance, if given, would be used merely for the attainment of national ambitions by the Allied nations. Another vital reason for his opposition to war was his conviction that he ruled by the will of the people. His recent re-election he interpreted as a mandate from the people to keep them out of war.

But despite these considerations President Wilson did not delay action. On February 3 he announced to Congress the breaking off of relations with Germany. He expressed the hope that war might still be averted. He told Congress that only actual overt acts could convince him that Germany really intended to carry out the threatened policy. Overt acts, however, were not lacking and served the double purpose of convincing the President that war was inevitable and of crystallizing public opinion. The publication on February 26 of Zimmerman's telegram, offering an alliance to Mexico with the promise that she could regain from the United States by conquest the territory lost at an earlier date, raised resentment in the United States to the highest pitch. The results of this telegram were, according to Lansing, to transform popular indifference into intense hostility to Germany and to convert pacifism and a desire for continued inaction into demands for war. Public sentiment was unified against Germany and support

20 Foreign Relations, 1917, Supplement I, 24-29.
of the acts of the Executive was assured.

The sinking by German submarines of a number of American vessels seemed to make action by the United States imperative. The question of the nature of this action was submitted by the President to his Cabinet at the regular meeting on March 20. The Cabinet was of the unanimous opinion that war was inevitable and that Congress should be called in extraordinary session as soon as possible. Lansing's notes on this momentous meeting are significant:

"Thus ended a Cabinet meeting the influence of which may change the course of history and determine the destinies of the United States and possibly of the world. The possible results are almost inconceivably great. I am sure that every member of the Cabinet felt the vital importance of the occasion and spoke with a full realization of the grave responsibility which rested upon him as he advised the President to adopt a course which if followed can only mean open and vigorous war against the Kaiser and his government. The solemnity of the occasion as one after another spoke was increasingly impressive and showed in every man's face as he arose from the council table and prepared to leave the room." 23

On April 2, 1917, President Wilson read to the joint session of the two houses of Congress, the message which marked the abandonment by the United States of a principle which had been an integral part of her policy since the inception of the nation. It has been the purpose of this paper to trace the

21 Lansing, Memoirs, 232.

22 Houston, I, 241-4; and Lansing, 236.
main steps by which this decision was reached and to outline briefly some of the difficulties which beset the President's path. At the beginning of his executive career, Woodrow Wilson was devoted to the policy of isolation. Domestic reform was the keynote of his policy and foreign affairs received a scant share of his attention. Continued absorption in domestic matters was rendered impossible by the outbreak of the European War. The relation of the United States to the other nations of the world now assumed new significance. Though striving outwardly to maintain a strict impartiality, both by training and tradition his sympathy was with England. His admiration of the English system was equalled by his detestation of the autocracy and militarism which, he felt, was characteristic of the German Government.

Wilson's sympathy for England was put to a severe test during the course of the war. In the beginning, the object of his diplomacy was the adoption of a policy which, while maintaining the honor of the United States, would not hinder England's attainment of her national desires. England's determination, however, to let neither the rights of neutrals nor the observance of international law interfere with her policy, had the ultimate effect of exhausting the patience of President Wilson and undermining his faith in their motives.

The effect of England's naval policy upon Germany was the factor which ultimately determined the course of action in the
United States. The issue is succinctly stated by Kenworthy and Young who observed that: "... one effect of the British blockade was so to irritate Germany into so irritating America that Britain could continually screw the vise tighter." In the last analysis, therefore, the decision of President Wilson was forced, neither by his own sympathies nor by the character of his intercourse with Great Britain, but by the ruthless character of German submarine warfare. Both nations had violated American rights repeatedly and grievously. But balanced against British disregard for property rights, was German disregard for human rights. This was the final factor that influenced Wilson's action. When he became convinced that he could not remain out of the war and still maintain the sovereign rights and the honor of the United States, he took the eventful step that led to active participation in the European War.

24 Kenworthy and Young, 73.
BIBLIOGRAPHICAL ESSAY

An invaluable aid to a study of Woodrow Wilson may be found in the bibliography prepared by Harry Clemens, George Dobbin Brown and Howard Seavoy Leach, An Essay toward a Bibliography of the Published Writings of Woodrow Wilson, Princeton, The Library of Princeton University, 1913-1922. The period of neutrality is covered in the second essay. Another very fine bibliography is contained in the edition by Ray Stannard Baker and William E. Dodd, of the Public Papers of Woodrow Wilson, New York, Harper and Brothers, 1926, V 6, 437-482.

The most complete and most important source of information in regard to the diplomatic relations with the belligerents during the years 1914-1917 is the Department of State's Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States, 1915, 1916, and 1917 Supplements, The World War, Washington, Government Printing Office, 1928. Another well arranged list of documents relating to the period is found in the Supplement to the American Journal of International Law in 3 Volumes, published for the American Society of International Law by Baker Voorhis and Company, New York, 1915-1917. This work contains the Diplomatic Correspondence between the United States and Belligerent Governments Relating to Neutral Rights and Commerce, printed from official texts furnished by the Department of State. Many of Wilson's writings and speeches are contained
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For a study of the background of our foreign policy many works are available. A good brief study of the development of the American policy is John Holloday Latane's From Isolation

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