

Unit 8: World Expansion and New Responsibilities

DBQ 16: Why Did We Enter World War I?

Historical Context:

When the Great War broke out in the summer of 1914, Americans were shocked at the barbarism of modern warfare. They were thankful for the Atlantic Ocean which separated our country from the warring nations of Europe. People were determined to keep out of the conflict and applauded President Wilson when he asked that his fellow citizens remain "neutral in fact as well as in name."

Through the following months, while national resolve to remain neutral stayed strong, many Americans began to choose sides. This was almost inevitable. Most Americans could trace family roots to England, Germany, Italy, Eastern Europe, or other countries or regions then engulfed by war. In fact, many were themselves immigrants or the children of immigrants from one of the nations at war. It was only natural that they still had emotional ties to their homelands. Many people, shocked and appalled by Germany's brutal invasion of Belgium in the opening weeks of the war, were firm opponents of the Germans. Many others aligned their sympathies with France, remembering that the French had aided us in our war of independence. As American shipping and trade began to be blocked by England and Germany, patriotic anger rose. But still, even after German submarines sank the British liner *Lusitania* in May of 1915, killing over 100 Americans, public opinion still opposed American involvement in the war. In November 1916, American determination to stay out of the war expressed itself in reelecting President Wilson whose campaign slogan was "He kept us out of War."

Nonetheless, April 2, 1917 found President Wilson standing before a joint session of Congress asking that war be declared against Germany. "I advise that the Congress declare the recent course of the Imperial German government to be, in fact, nothing less than war against the government and people of the United States." Two days later the Senate voted 82 to 6 for war. Then, on April 6, the House of Representatives did the same, voting 373 to 50.

What led the United States to abandon its neutrality and isolation? What led Americans into World War I?

Question: Why did the United States abandon its neutrality, choosing to enter World War I on the side of the allies?

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Document 1

When the war broke out in Europe, William Jennings Bryan was serving as President Wilson's Secretary of State. On August 10, 1914 (only two weeks after the outbreak of the war), Secretary Bryan sent President Wilson the following message.

Morgan Company of New York [a large Wall Street investment bank] have asked whether there would be any objection to their making a loan to the French Government. . . . [I would question] whether it would be advisable for this Government to . . . approve . . . any loan to a belligerent nation. . . . Money is the worst of all contraband because it commands everything else. . . . I know of nothing that would do more to prevent war than an international agreement that neutral nations would not loan to belligerents. . . . The powerful financial interests which would be connected with these loans would be tempted to use their influence through the newspapers to support the interests of the Government to which they had loaned because the value of the [loan] would be directly affected by the result of the war. . . . All of this influence would make it all the more difficult for us to maintain neutrality [with] powerful financial interests . . . thrown into the balance. . . .

Document 2



(continued)



DBQ 16: Why Did We Enter World War I? (continued)**Document 3**

Our entrance into the war in 1917 found us allied with England, France, and Russia. But the year 1917 also saw revolutionary upheaval in Russia. In the autumn, the Bolsheviks (communists), under the leadership of Lenin, took control of the country. Within months Russia dropped out of the war. In August of 1918, Lenin released a letter to American workers. These excerpts come from that letter.

The results of the four years of war have revealed the general law of capitalism as applied to war between robbers for the division of spoils; the richest and strongest profited and grabbed most, while the weakest were utterly robbed, tormented, crushed, and strangled.

The American multimillionaires . . . have profited more than all the rest. . . . They have grabbed hundreds of billions of dollars. And every dollar is sullied [dirtied] with filth: the filth of the secret treaties between Britain and her "allies."

Document 4

In January 1917, British intelligence agencies intercepted this message being sent from the German Foreign Minister to the government of Mexico. It was turned over to the United States Department of State and released to the newspapers in mid-March.

In the event [that the United States is drawn into the war] we make Mexico a proposal of alliance on the following basis: make war together, make peace together, generous financial support and an understanding on our part that Mexico is to reconquer the lost territory in Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona.

Document 5

These are excerpts from President Wilson's war message to Congress on April 2, 1917.

On the third of February last I officially laid before you the extraordinary announcement of the Imperial German Government that on and after the first day of February it [would] use its submarines to sink every vessel that sought to approach . . . Great Britain . . . or the western coasts of Europe. . . . The new policy has swept every restriction aside. . . . The present German submarine warfare against commerce is a warfare against mankind.

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DBQ 16: Why Did We Enter World War I? (continued)**Document 6**

During the four days of Congressional debates following President Wilson's war message, Senator George Norris of Nebraska spoke against voting for war. In this excerpt from his speech of April 4, 1917, he suggested a cause of America's entrance into the war.

To whom does war bring prosperity? War brings prosperity to the stock gambler on Wall Street—to those who are already in possession of more wealth than can be realized or enjoyed. . . . Their object in having war and in preparing for war is to make money. Human suffering and the sacrifice of human life are necessary, but Wall Street considers only the dollars and the cents. . . . We are going into war upon the command of gold.

Document 7

Here is an excerpt from a secondary source, a major study of the factors that eventually led the United States to abandon neutrality. The excerpt describes President Wilson's thinking during the weeks following Germany's January 31, 1917 resumption of unrestricted submarine warfare. (From Ernest R. May, *The World & American Isolation, 1914–1917*, Harvard University Press, 1959, p. 430, 432–433.)

. . . chauvinism [pro-war nationalism] was visibly on the rise. The Zimmerman telegram and the sinking of the Cunard liner *Laconia*, with three Americans among the lost, had created a spreading excitement. The *Literary Digest* [a popular magazine] reported newspapers all over the country to be joining in a clamor for war. . . . Future incidents would meanwhile strengthen and embitter the chauvinists. Other *Laconias* were certain to sink. Even as Wilson sat meditating in the White House, five American ships went down.

On March 19 he emerged from his solitude, still anxious and troubled but apparently satisfied that the alternatives of acquiescence [submission] and armed neutrality were impossible. . . . On March 20 he conferred with the cabinet. No one had any alternatives to suggest. The neutralist members . . . were now . . . sure that war was the only course. The Attorney General and the Secretary of Labor seconded the arguments for it. When the President asked the Postmaster General to speak, Bureleson said quietly: "We are at war. I am in favour of asking Congress at the earliest possible moment." . . . The cabinet was one. On the following day the President summoned Congress to meet on April 2.