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America in WWI 1914-1915
Neutral in Policy, Allied in Practice

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Much of American history is portrayed in the two extremes of either isolationism or military intervention. This applies to the U.S. and World War I where America is seen as disinterested in the war until its hand was forced by German submarine warfare at which point it became involved. However, the U.S. had far more of a stake in the war than this. In the first two years of WWI, the United States was not neutral in practice due to its economic investment in and diplomatic affinity for the Allied Powers.

At the outbreak of the war, the United States set and defined a policy of neutrality. Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia on July 28, 1914, exactly one month after a Serbian nationalist assassinated the archduke and his wife who were to have ascended to the Austro-Hungarian throne. Within a week, Russia mobilized against Germany and Austria-Hungary, Britain declared war on Germany, and Germany declared war on Russia, France, and Belgium.¹ It was in the wake of this that President Woodrow Wilson on August 19, 1914 appealed to the American public, “[w]e must be impartial in thought as well as in action, must put a curb upon our sentiments as well as upon every transaction that might be construed as a preference of one party to the struggle before another.”² Wilson defined neutrality as being emotionally, in “thought” and “sentiments,” and economically, in “action” and “transaction,” without “preference.” He set the tone for a dispassionate and detached outlook on the war.

Indeed, the United States had strong inducements to remain neutral. Neutrality gave a non-belligerent the right to trade with any belligerent.³ Cotton and copper ore from the U.S. made up two of Germany’s major imports and Britain was the U.S.’ leading trading partner.⁴ And this was

¹ Robert H. Zieger, *America’s Great War* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2000), xv.

² Woodrow Wilson, *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States*, 1914, Supplement, *The World War* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1914), Document 886.

³ Russell Freure, “When Memory and Reality Clash: The First World War and the Myth of American Neutrality,” *The Northern Mariner Le Marin Du Nord* 22, no. 2 (2012): 141, <https://doi.org/10.25071/2561-5467.290>.

⁴ Ernest R. May, *The World War and American Isolation, 1914-1917* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1959), 5.

amid the U.S. economy's severest depression since the 1890s.⁵ Further, a sentimentality toward France's aid in the Revolution and a recognition of common ground with Britain pulled the American public toward the Allied Powers. Meanwhile, ten million German Americans as well as immigrants who had been oppressed in Russia pulled the public toward the Central Powers.⁶ A neutral administration could avoid polarizing the public and could aid the struggling economy by maintaining trade with both sides.

Nevertheless, war news in America generated sympathy for Allied Powers in the American public. Britain controlled the cables carrying news to Americans such that "no more than twelve percent of war news was received from Germany during the entire course of the war."⁷ This explains, in part, why Germany violating Belgian neutrality garnered strong sympathy. Meanwhile, Britain's naval seizures and blockades, which were illegal by international law and which starved not only Germany but also neighboring countries who exported to Germany, did not stir these same passions.⁸ Headlines often ran with Allied sympathies such as the *New York Tribune's* "In Crushed and Starving Belgium" and *The Evening World's* "Germans Plan to Blow up Ships Carrying Food to the British."⁹ These combined with less sensationalized but no less distancing articles such as *The Sun's* "The War Discussed From The German Side" published weekly from November to

⁵ Zieger, *America's Great War*, 11.

⁶ Zieger, *America's Great War*, 14.

⁷ Amanda M. Mancini, "Neutral in Spirit?: An Analysis of Woodrow Wilson's Policies and the United States' Involvement in World War I," *International Social Science Review* 72, no. 3/4 (1997): 140, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41882244>.

⁸ Freure, "When Memory and Reality Clash," 158; May, *The World War*, 34.

⁹ Will Irwin, "In Crushed and Starving Belgium," *New York Tribune*, December 6, 1914, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83030214/1914-12-06/ed-1/seq-35/>; Karl H. von Wiegand, "Germans Plan to Blow Up Ships Carrying Food to the British," *The Evening World*, December 22, 1914, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83030193/1914-12-22/ed-1/seq-1/>.

December 1914.¹⁰ There was no need for *The Sun* to publish a weekly discussion specifically on the Allied side. Historians, relying on recorded opinions, note that the decrease in German news correlated to an increase of editorials in favor of the Allied Powers.¹¹ Neutrality in the sentiments of the American public was, consequently, lost at the level of the press. However, the strongest voices that kept America from practicing neutrality were found in diplomacy.

Perhaps the greatest force in Anglo-American relations was the British Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, Sir Edward Grey, and the influence of the War of 1812 on his position. Despite 1812 having been between the United States and Britain, relations had evolved to the point that, in Grey's mind his biographer writes, "to keep the friendship of America, which alike in peace and war he always regarded as England's most vital interest of all."¹² He reminded the Foreign Office that questions of neutrality set off 1812 and that "the surest way to lose this war would be to antagonize Washington."¹³ Consequently, Grey spared no effort in conciliating the U.S. administration in 1914 and 1915. When the British navy seized copper imports into Germany, he offered to buy America's export for that year.¹⁴ He not only labored to minimize the blows of British policy on the American economy but he was also in constant communication with the U.S. Ambassador Walter Hines Page. When Britain endangered Anglo-American friendship by rejecting the Declaration of London, which contained policies favorable to neutral trade, Grey thoroughly acquainted Page with Britain's situation. He explained why the declaration was unfeasible in light of Britain's economic war and the need to pull its weight in the Triple Alliance.¹⁵

¹⁰ "The War Discussed from the German Side," *The Sun*, November 1, 1914; November 8, 1914; November 15, 1914; November 22, 1914; November 29, 1914; December 6, 1914; December 13, 1914; December 20, 1914, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83030272/1914-11-01/ed-1/seq-25/>.

¹¹ Mancini, "Neutral in Spirit," 140.

¹² George Macaulay Trevelyan, *Grey of Fallodon*, (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1937), 107.

¹³ May, *The World War*, 18.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 31.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 20.

When the U.S. administration's desire to mediate clashed with Britain's policy to continue the war, Grey endeavored to keep Wilson from recognizing the conflict of interest.¹⁶ His determination to avoid interfering with U.S. shipping and to prioritize American friendship at every turn resonated with the U.S.' own priorities of defending its neutral rights and preserving the economy.

Before long, Grey's counterpart in the U.S. arose in Colonel Edward Mandell House, Wilson's friend, advisor, and representative to the European governments. House's first priority was also Anglo-American friendship, and the progression of his influence on U.S. foreign policy compared to Secretary of State William Jennings Bryan's reflects U.S. policy's development away from neutrality.¹⁷ Bryan was nearly a pacifist. He saw America's role and responsibility as keeping out of the war and, eventually, ending the bloodshed and achieving peace.¹⁸ He ensured that two German radio stations were kept so the American public would not favor one side over the other to the point of emotional involvement.¹⁹ Wilson initially laid his longing to mediate on Bryan's shoulders. After one failed attempt, however, where a German ambassador spoke of a peace proposal when he had not been instructed to do so, Wilson's faith fell increasingly on House.²⁰

House was the defining figure toward a U.S. administration in favor of the Allied Powers. He prioritized relations with Britain even over peace.²¹ His views came to represent Wilson and, thus, the United States as a whole, and he feared what a German victory would mean for his country.²² When House and Grey met at last, House having come to Europe to learn about the potential for peace, Grey found in him an ally with the same vision of Anglo-American

¹⁶ Ibid., 89.

¹⁷ Ibid., 40.

¹⁸ Ibid., 37, 73.

¹⁹ Ibid., 38.

²⁰ Ibid., 73-76.

²¹ Ibid., 72.

²² Ibid., 78, 76.

friendship.²³ Recalling the meeting, Grey wrote, “House left me in no doubt from the first that he held German militarism responsible for the war, and that he regarded the struggle as one between democracy and something that was undemocratic and antipathetic to American ideals.”²⁴ House delayed his departure for Germany at Grey’s advice. Wilson warned him about letting the British direct American diplomacy, but House assuaged the president’s fears in his return letter and only continued on his journey when Grey assented.²⁵ Thus, a representative of Wilson and the United States impressed upon the British Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs his belief that German militarism was opposed to democracy and American values. He then, still representing U.S. policy, allowed an Allied administration to advise his movements when treating with the European governments. The U.S. was beginning to look increasingly like a friend of the Allied Powers.

Wilson himself led the United States farther from neutrality due, in part, to a lack of awareness. A lack of education on foreign policy meant that he underestimated the importance of questions of neutrality. His mind was also elsewhere at the beginning of the war, namely on domestic concerns and on the death of his wife.²⁶ Grey successfully kept Wilson in the dark so he would not recognize that Britain did not share his passion for mediation, a fact that would have undermined Wilson’s trust in Anglo-American common moral ground.²⁷ The greatest threat to Anglo-American relations in the first year of the war came from Wilson himself. He wanted a merchant marine and had his eye on German ships available for purchase, overlooking the legal and moral implications of funding the Central Powers and placing Britain in a bind should its navy run across such an American-bought German vessel.²⁸ Perhaps most significant of all though was

²³ Ibid., 87.

²⁴ Lord Grey, *Grey, Viscount of Fallodon Twenty Five Years 1892-1916*, (New York: Frederick A. Stokes Company, 1925. Quoted in Mancini, “Neutral in Spirit,” 138.

²⁵ May, *The World War*, 88-89.

²⁶ May, *The World War*, 42; Zieger, *America’s Great War*, 143.

²⁷ May, *The World War*, 66, 72.

²⁸ Ibid., 66.

his unawareness of how every time he gave Britain the benefit of the doubt this communicated to Germany and Britain that the U.S. would not oppose British violations of international law. In other words, every step the U.S. took to maintain relations with Britain was inevitably step toward an end of relations with Germany.²⁹ In the end, Wilson's position developed in opposition to the Central Powers. One major factor was having a cabinet that was sympathetic to the Allied Powers. Another was a public stirred to fear Germany. But the sentiment was Wilson's own in 1914 when he expressed, of the Germans, to British Ambassador Sir Cecil Arthur Spring Rice, "Everything that I love most in the world is at stake...If they succeed, we shall be forced to take such measures of defense here as would be fatal to our form of Government and American ideals."³⁰ The president's convictions and his fears sided with an Allied victory even in the first year of the war. Ultimately, the positions of Grey, House, and Wilson aligned to form a precedent in United States policy that favored the Allied Powers.

In addition to diplomacy, the U.S. was economically predisposed to favor the Allied Powers despite its policy of neutrality. A turning point in America's stake in the war was the reversal of the loan ban for belligerents. As it became evident that the war was to last far longer than anyone anticipated, the administration could admit, collectively, the impracticality of denying credit to belligerents. American eyes were opened to how the demands of the war in Europe could be a boon to their own struggling economy.³¹ Although, theoretically, opening loans meant impartial trade with both the Allied and Central Powers, in practice, the British navy's chokehold on Germany meant the U.S. was trading solely with the Allied Powers.³² Seeking moral ground for this decision,

²⁹ Freure, "When Memory and Reality Clash," 159.

³⁰ Ross Gregory, *The Origins of American Intervention in the First World War*, (New York: Norton, 1971), 45. Quoted in Mancini, "Neutral in Spirit," 138.

³¹ Zieger, *America's Great War*, 11.

³² May, *The World War*, 49; Zieger, *America's Great War*, 11.

Wilson concluded that, “[a]lthough America’s arms production went exclusively to the Allies, those nations were less prepared for war than were their enemies.”³³ Doubtless the depression under previous Democratic president Grover Cleveland played a role in pressuring Wilson to prioritize shipping even if it brought the nation in conflict with belligerents and with its own policy of neutrality.³⁴ While the U.S. continued to declare and defend its neutrality, it placed itself in a position where “[t]he American economy was closely intertwined with the success of the Allied Powers.”³⁵ The reversal of the loan ban had the practical effect of investing the American economy in an Allied victory.

The United States also favored the Allied Powers in foreign policy. When the U.S. presented the Declaration of London to all belligerents, the declaration served the three-fold purpose of protecting international law, neutral trade, and American exports.³⁶ American interests were so closely tied to its execution that one might expect an outcry when the British rejected it. Instead, after an initial protest, negotiations progressed from the U.S. “[offering] to accept the letter rather than the substance of the London rules” to conceding negotiations altogether and “insist[ing] only upon its rights under traditional international law.”³⁷ The tone of this compromise is captured in the Counselor of the Department of State Robert Lansing’s telegram to Page in London, ““You will impress upon Sir Edward Grey the President’s conviction of the extreme gravity of the situation and his earnest wish to avoid every cause of irritation and controversy between this Government and the Government of His Majesty.””³⁸ The U.S. was not only open to compromising in its stance but it also acquiesced to Britain’s wishes. This developed into expressing that Anglo-

³³ May, *The World War*, 49.

³⁴ Zieger, *America’s Great War*, 16.

³⁵ Mancini, “Neutral in Spirit,” 139.

³⁶ May, *The World War*, 16.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 59-60.

³⁸ Robert Lansing, *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States*, 1914, Supplement, The World War (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1914), Document 232.

American friendship belonged at the forefront, a stance that contrasts with the civil yet insistent tone of America's response to Germany's submarine warfare.

Where British violations of American interests were smoothed over, German violations met with threats. The first domino to fall was America's nonresponse to the illegal British naval blockade. The blockade persisted and escalated without the pressure of U.S. protest. Germany, cut off from supplies and humanitarian aid, turned to submarine warfare in attempt to gain access to shipping once again. However, Germany was unable to distinguish between neutral and belligerent ships because the British were disguising their vessels as American. Germany was legally justified in "[declaring] unrestricted submarine warfare on all ships carrying cargo," but the American government wanted guarantees for American lives on belligerent ships.³⁹ The U.S. backed its demands with a warning: if Germany destroyed American vessels or American lives, "it would be very hard indeed to reconcile with the friendly relations now so happily subsisting between the two Governments," and "the United States would be constrained to hold the Imperial German Government to a strict accountability for such acts."⁴⁰ Consequently, where U.S. policy reminded Britain of its desire to maintain good relations, with Germany, the U.S. threatened a breach in relations. Where U.S. policy took a conciliatory position with Britain to the point of giving up the Declaration of London, with Germany, the U.S. insisted on "strict accountability" for Germany's actions. After the Germans sank the *Lusitania*, a British passenger liner with 128 American lives and what Germany claimed were "large supplies of munitions," Wilson wrote such a forceful letter calling for German renouncement and reparations that Bryan refused to sign it. Bryan wanted to respond in a way that demonstrated American neutrality, but he was forced to resign for his refusal

³⁹ Mancini, "Neutral in Spirit," 140-141.

⁴⁰ William Jennings Bryan, *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States*, 1914, Supplement, The World War (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1914), Document 133.

and his replacement signed the letter.⁴¹ Thus the U.S. applied a more hostile tone in German-American than Anglo-American relations.

The United States announced and intended to maintain a policy of diplomatic and economic neutrality regarding the Allied and Central Powers. However, the desire for friendship with the British and the needs of the struggling economy undermined this policy at every turn. Ultimately, from the outset of World War I, the U.S. was on a trajectory toward sympathy with the Allied Powers despite its claims of neutrality.

⁴¹ Ziegler, *America's Great War*, 23; Mancini, "Neutral in Spirit," 141-142.