

## U.S. Entry into WWI Lesson Plan

**Central Historical Question:**  
*Why did the U.S. enter World War I?*

### Materials:

- Classroom Textbook Excerpt on U.S. Entry into WWI
- Copies of Documents A and B: Wilson Speeches
- Copies of Document C: Zinn Document
- Copies of U.S. Entry into WWI Guiding Questions

### Plan of Instruction:

*NOTE: This lesson should follow a more thorough lecture on WWI, including:*

- *Causes: militarism, nationalism, imperialism, alliance system*
- *Allied vs. Central Powers (Allies=Triple Entente: France, Russia, Great Britain + Italy later); (Central Powers=Germany, Austria-Hungary, Ottoman Empire, Bulgaria)*
- *Mass death and destruction, trench warfare*
- *U.S. sympathized with Britain but didn't get involved until 1917*

1. Introduce main question: *Today we're going to look at why the U.S. entered WWI after it had decided to stay neutral.*

Mini-lecture on Woodrow Wilson:

- Woodrow Wilson became President of the United States in 1912.
- He won with less than 50% of the popular vote because the Republican Party split into the Progressive Party (Roosevelt) and the Republican Party (Taft).
- Wilson was a Democrat from New Jersey, but he won the support of many Progressives because he opposed political machines.
- As President, he signed some progressive reforms, like the Keating-Owen Child Labor Act, the Clayton Antitrust Act, and the creation of the Federal Trade Commission.
- However, he invited controversy because of his views on race. He supported segregation, and even had a screening of "Birth of a Nation" (a movie that celebrated the KKK) in the White House.

2. Pass out Wilson Documents A and B and have students answer Guiding Questions.
3. Discussion:
  - According to the second speech, why did the U.S. enter WWI?
  - How has Wilson's attitude changed from the first speech?

- Do you trust Wilson's speech and the reasons he gives for entering WWI?
4. Have students read the classroom textbook excerpt on U.S. entry into WWI and answer Guiding Questions.
  5. Discussion Questions:
    - What reasons does the textbook give for why the U.S. entered the war?
    - Do these reasons line up with Wilson's reasons?
  6. Hand out Zinn Document and have students answer Guiding Questions.
  7. Whole class discussion:
    - Does Zinn agree or disagree with the textbook?
    - What is Zinn's argument? What is his evidence?
    - Do you find Zinn's argument convincing? Why or why not?
    - Using all the documents, what would you argue were the reasons the United States entered WWI?
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Citations:

Woodrow Wilson, speech before Congress, August 19, 1914, 63rd Congress, 2nd Session, Senate Document No. 566.

President Woodrow Wilson, speech before Congress, April 2, 1917. *Woodrow Wilson, War Messages*, 65th Cong., 1st Sess. Senate Doc. No. 5, Serial No. 7264, Washington, D.C., 1917; pp. 3-8, passim.

Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the United States*, (New York: HarperCollins, 1980), 352-53.

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## Document A: Woodrow Wilson Speech #1 (Modified)

The people of the United States are drawn from many nations, and chiefly from the nations now at war. It is natural and inevitable that some will wish one nation, others another, to succeed in the momentous struggle.

Such divisions among us would be fatal to our peace of mind and might seriously stand in the way of our duty as the one great nation at peace, the one nation ready to play a part of mediator and counselor of peace.

The United States must be neutral in fact, as well as in name, during these days that are to try men's souls. We must be impartial in thought, as well as action.

### Vocabulary

mediator: someone who helps two groups reach an agreement

impartial: taking no sides

**Source:** *President Woodrow Wilson, in a speech before Congress, August 19, 1914.*

## Document B: Woodrow Wilson Speech #2 (Modified)

Property can be paid for; the lives of peaceful and innocent people cannot be. The present German submarine warfare against commerce is a warfare against mankind.

The German policy has swept every restriction aside. Ships of every kind, whatever their flag, their character, their cargo, their destination, their errand, have been ruthlessly sent to the bottom of the ocean without warning. American ships have been sunk, American lives taken.

I advise that the Congress declare the recent actions of the Imperial German Government to be, in fact, nothing less than war against the Government and people of the United States.

Neutrality is no longer feasible or desirable where the peace of the world is involved.

The world must be made safe for democracy. We have no selfish ends to serve. We desire no conquest, no dominion. We seek not material compensation for the sacrifices we shall freely make. We are but one of the champions of the rights of mankind.

It is a fearful, but right thing to lead this great peaceful people to war. We shall fight for the things which we have always carried nearest our hearts – for democracy, for the right of [people] to have a voice in their own government, for the rights and liberties of small nations.

### Vocabulary

commerce: trade

feasible: possible

dominion: control or domination

material compensation: money

**Source:** *President Woodrow Wilson, in a speech before Congress, April 2, 1917.*

## Document C: Historian Howard Zinn (Excerpted)

President Woodrow Wilson had promised that the United States would stay neutral in the war... But in April of 1917, the Germans had announced they would have their submarines sink any ship bringing supplies to their enemies; and they had sunk a number of merchant vessels. Wilson now said he must stand by the right of Americans to travel on merchant ships in the war zone...

As Richard Hofstadter points out (*The American Political Tradition*): "This was rationalization of the flimsiest sort... The British had also been intruding on the rights of American citizens on the high seas, but Wilson was not suggesting we go to war with them..."

The United States claimed the *Lusitania* carried an innocent cargo, and therefore the torpedoing was a monstrous German atrocity. Actually, the *Lusitania* was heavily armed: it carried 1,248 cases of 3-inch shells, 4,927 boxes of cartridges (1,000 rounds in each box), and 2,000 more cases of small-arms ammunition... The British and American governments lied about the cargo...

Prosperity depended much on foreign markets, it was believed by the leaders of the country. In 1897, private foreign investments of the United States amounted to \$700 million dollars. By 1914, they were \$3.5 billion...

With World War I, England became more and more a market for American goods and for loans at interest. J.P. Morgan and Company acted as agents for the Allies and when, in 1915, Wilson lifted the ban on private bank loans to the Allies, Morgan could now begin lending money in such great amounts as to both make great profit and tie American finance closely to the interest of a British victory in the war against Germany.

*Source: Howard Zinn, A People's History of the United States, New York: HarperCollins, 1980. Howard Zinn is a historian and activist who is best known today as the author of A People's History of the United States, a book that tells American history from the perspective of minorities, women, and poor people, and that is very critical of the United States government.*



## Guiding Questions

Name \_\_\_\_\_

### President Wilson's Speeches

1. Read the first speech. Does Wilson think the United States should enter WWI? Why or why not?
2. Read the second speech. Does Wilson think the United States should enter WWI? Why or why not?
3. Contextualization: Use the 1917 speech to “imagine the setting.” (a) What does Wilson accuse Germany of doing? (b) Do you think this is a good reason to go to war? (c) What additional information would you need to have before making a decision?
4. Close reading: Re-read the last two paragraphs of the 1917 speech. Why do you think Wilson added these paragraphs? How do you think these words made Americans feel?

### Guiding Questions for Textbook:

1. What are TWO reasons that the textbook gives for why the U.S. entered the war?
2. Based on the reasons in Wilson's 1917 speech and in the textbook, do you think the United States had good reasons for entering WWI?

### Guiding Questions for Howard Zinn:

1. Sourcing: Before reading the document, what do you predict Howard Zinn will say about the United States' reasons for entering WWI?
2. Close reading; Why does Zinn claim that Wilson made a flimsy argument?
3. Close reading: What does Zinn suggest are the *real* reasons the United States entered the war?
4. Close reading: What evidence does Zinn provide to support his claims that the United States was motivated by other reasons (besides German attacks on U.S. ships)?
5. Do you find Zinn's argument convincing? Why or why not?