



Activity #3: The U.S. Declaration of War against Germany, April 1917

Student Name _____ Date _____

Directions: in this exercise, you will read the following primary sources, then write a two paragraph essay answering this question: *Was Wilson's policy of neutrality impossible to maintain during World War I?*

Document 1: Excerpt of Wilson's request to Congress for a declaration of war, April 2, 1917:
<http://www.lib.byu.edu/~rdh/wwi/1917/wilswarm.html>

Gentlemen of the Congress:

I have called the Congress into extraordinary session because there are serious, very serious, choices of policy to be made, and made immediately, which it was neither right nor constitutionally permissible that I should assume the responsibility of making....

The present German submarine warfare against commerce is a warfare against mankind.

It is a war against all nations. American ships have been sunk, American lives taken, in ways which it has stirred us very deeply to learn of, but the ships and people of other neutral and friendly nations have been sunk and overwhelmed in the waters in the same way....

When I addressed the Congress on the 26th of February last, I thought that it would suffice to assert our neutral rights with arms, our right to use the seas against unlawful interference, our right to keep our people safe against unlawful violence. But armed neutrality, it now appears, is impracticable. Because submarines are in effect outlaws when used as the German submarines have been used against merchant shipping, it is impossible to defend ships against their attacks....

We are now about to accept . . . battle with this natural foe to liberty and shall, if necessary, spend the whole force of the nation to check and nullify its pretensions and its power. We are glad . . . to fight thus for the ultimate peace of the world and for the liberation of its peoples, the German peoples included: for the rights of nations great and small and the privilege of men everywhere to choose their way of life and of obedience. *The world must be made safe for democracy* [emphasis added]. Its peace must be planted upon the tested foundations of political liberty. We have no selfish ends to serve . . . We are but one of the champions of the rights of mankind. We shall be satisfied when those rights have been made as secure as the faith and the freedom of nations can make them.

Document 2: War is a "Blessing, Not a Curse": a March 30, 1917 essay from the magazine *North American Review* supporting a declaration of war: <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/4939>

[...] We are for war; of course, we are; and for reasons good and plenty, to wit:

1. Because we have reached and passed the limit of forbearance in trying to maintain amicable relations with a barbaric brute who has presumed so far upon our good intent as to treat our most conciliatory and helpful suggestions with glaring contempt, who has incited all manner of treasonable activities and damnable outrages within our borders, has gloated over his avowed assassination of our innocent and harmless citizens of both sexes and all ages upon the high seas and has missed no opportunity to deceive, to sneer at and to lie to our constituted authorities; because to conserve our own self-respect we are driven finally to the point where we must fight or forfeit the decent opinion of all mankind . . .

2. Because we owe it to our forefathers who founded the Republic and to our fathers who saved the Union to prove ourselves not merely worthy of the happiness which flows from prosperity but eager and fearless in support of free life and full liberty the world over . . .

3. Because our going into the great conflict at this psychological moment would . . . complete the ring of democracies around the doomed autocracy . . .

Was Wilson's policy of neutrality impossible to maintain during World War I? Your essay: