



Written by [Brian Farmer](#) on July 17, 2017
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America's Grand Entry Into the Great War

From the print edition of The New American

Despite the fact that the British interfered with U.S. shipping early in WWI and refused to abide by international rules of naval warfare, America sided with them against Germany.



From the outset of "The Great War" (as World War I was referred to at the time and until World War II came along), the United States faced formidable problems. As the world's greatest producer of foodstuffs, raw textiles, iron, steel, and petroleum, it had carried on a large trade in peacetime with both the Triple Entente (Great Britain, France, and Russia) and the Central Powers (Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Turkey), so its economic interests were bound to be affected by prolonged hostilities.

Furthermore, the United States had a large immigrant population with ties to the warring nations. As a result, there was an upsurge of pro-Ally (Triple Entente) feeling in the country from the moment that Germany invaded Belgium and Great Britain declared war on Germany. There was also an early upsurge of sympathy for the Central Powers among the large number of citizens of German and Austro-Hungarian descent (there were so many such citizens in Wisconsin that most of the newspapers in that state were printed in German!) and among Irish Americans, who were traditionally anti-British.

President Woodrow Wilson publicly professed an ardent desire to remain absolutely neutral in the conflict, insisting that the United States would set a salutary example for other neutral nations. Therefore, in addition to declaring formal neutrality, the president called on the public to be "impartial in thought as well as in action." However, as we shall see, his policies and actions, far from being neutral: 1) favored Britain and the Allied powers; 2) unfairly held Germany to harsher standards; and 3)



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steadily pushed America closer to war.

On the other hand, Wilson's Secretary of State, William Jennings Bryan, unequivocally and heroically made every effort to see that our country was not dragged into the European conflagration and to assure that America abided by the rules of neutrality. Tragically, his pleas and counsel for genuine neutrality and peaceful relations were repeatedly overridden by the pro-war, Anglophile globalists in Wilson's inner circle, as exemplified most especially by Colonel Edward Mandell House; Wall Street insiders Bernard Baruch, Henry Morgenthau, Robert Lansing (who would replace Bryan as secretary of state); and Walter Hines Page (the U.S. ambassador to England).

The U.S. State Department asked all of the warring countries to abide by the unratified 1909 Declaration of London (which concerned itself with the rules of naval warfare). The Central Powers agreed, but the Allies put forward modifications and additions that stymied a universal accord. The president and secretary of state became concerned that the Allies not only would interfere with American commerce, but would also create disputes over neutrality rights, such as those that led to the war against Great Britain in 1812. The U.S. government's effort to persuade the British to accept the Declaration of London as originally written failed. As a result, President Wilson fell back on a policy of simply protesting British infringements of neutrality rights as defined in traditional international law, while at the same time treating German infringements as grievous offenses.

Controversy with Great Britain might have grown more acute if the Germans had not issued their maritime war zone decree on February 4, 1915, in which they declared that the seas surrounding Great Britain and Ireland were part of a war zone and that any ship caught within its boundaries could be sunk without warning. This German announcement was not as shocking and unreasonable as President Wilson and the pro-war establishment media made it out to be. First and foremost, the German stance was in response to the barbaric and illegal naval blockade imposed by the British navy against Germany's North Sea ports, and was specifically designed to — in the words of Winston Churchill, then first lord of the admiralty — “starve the whole population ... into submission.” In addition, the British navy and merchant marine were under orders to violate the international rules of “cruiser warfare.” The rules required, among other things, that submarines surface and fire a warning shot in order to search or accept surrender of the opposing ship. However, after multiple cases of German U-boats being sunk (and their crews killed) as a result of adhering to the rules only to be fired upon or rammed after surfacing, Germany realized the futility of abiding by rules that were being used as a weapon against them.

On May 7, 1915, the British liner *Lusitania* was torpedoed off the southern coast of Ireland, and 1,198 passengers, of which 128 were Americans, went down with the ship. The American press denounced the action of the German submarine commander as an atrocity, and important leaders of American opinion viewed the incident as a justification for war. Even Secretary of State Bryan, who was almost a pacifist, agreed that some new actions were necessary. On May 13, a message was sent to Berlin calling on the German government to repudiate the submarine commander, make reparations for the lives lost, and pledge that submarines would no longer attack passenger liners. Declaring the German response unsatisfactory, President Wilson ordered that a second, stronger message be sent. Secretary Bryan could not bring himself to do so, resigned on June 8, and was replaced by Robert Lansing. In the end, there was a cessation, at least for a time, of unrestricted sinkings by German submarines in the declared maritime war zone.



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However, of vital importance to the entire affair is the fact that the *Lusitania* was registered not as a passenger liner but as an *armed auxiliary cruiser* and was carrying a massive shipment of munitions for the British war effort. Hence, Germany did not violate international law in sinking the ship. More little-known facts include:

Photo: AP Images

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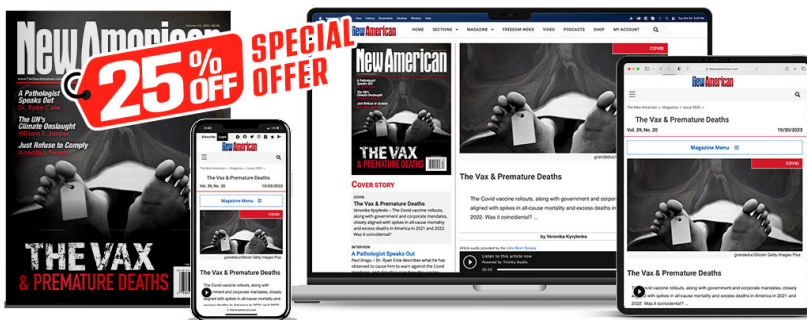
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