

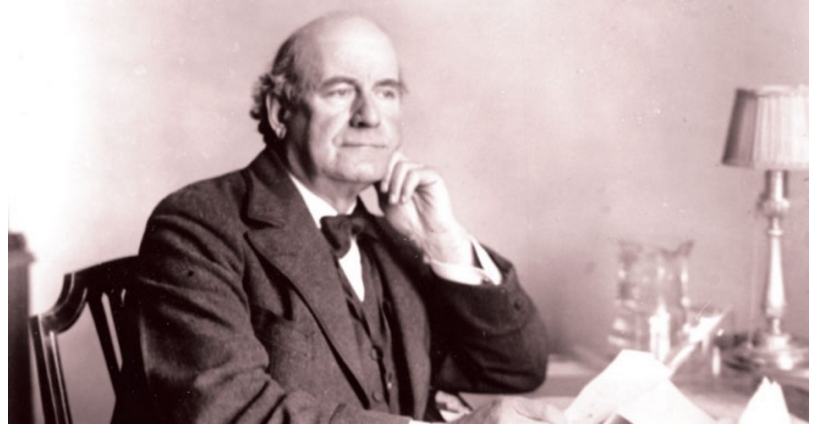


Written by [Steve Byas](#) on July 10, 2017

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William Jennings Bryan: He Really Tried to Keep Us Out of War

Popular myth says that President Woodrow Wilson kept America out of WWI as long as possible, when in fact he continually sided with the Allies, against the advice of Bryan.



When Woodrow Wilson ran for reelection in 1916, the Democratic National Convention offered up a keynote speech that praised the president as the man who “kept us out of war.” This may have provided the narrow margin of victory for Wilson that fall, as notable Republican leaders such as former President Theodore Roosevelt were pounding the war drums. Americans who did not want to get involved in the Great War in Europe no doubt cast their vote for Wilson.

But in less than six months, Wilson would ask Congress to declare war on Germany.

As we shall see, while Wilson had been moving the country toward war for more than two years, making the campaign slogan highly duplicitous, the man who had been his secretary of state, William Jennings Bryan (shown), made heroic efforts to keep us out of the European conflict. Bryan argued, “The world would enter a dark and dangerous era if the conflict didn’t end soon,” and he feared the longer the war lasted, the more likely the United States would find itself in it.

As Bryan predicted, the consequences of World War I were immense. Totalitarian governments came to power in Italy, Germany, and Russia. With the fall of the Ottoman Empire, radical forms of Islam were unleashed. Millions of people, both soldiers and civilians, perished. Governments grew in size and scope, and liberty contracted. Horrific economic consequences resulted, including Germany’s hyperinflation and the great damage done to the monetary systems of the other involved nations, including the United States.

Bryan ultimately failed to keep America out of the European war, but his public opposition probably delayed the nation’s entry until after Wilson had been safely reelected.

Bryan burst on the national political scene as the Democratic nominee for president in 1896, the youngest person ever nominated — he was just 36 years old. Known as the “silver-tongued orator,” he drew large crowds whenever he spoke, whether he was running for president, or just speaking on the Chautauqua lecture circuit. (He received \$250 per speech, a considerable sum at the time.) One Republican confessed that had radio existed in 1896, he probably would have been elected. He ran for president a total of three times, and although he did not win, he amassed a large and devoted following.

Photo of William Jennings Bryan: AP Images

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G. J. Meyer, in his book *The World Remade: America in World War I*, observed that Bryan was willing to destroy his own political career if that would keep America out of the war. A man of principle, he had opposed the takeover of the Philippines following the Spanish-American War as contrary to American ideals. In 1900, Bryan said he understood why the Filipinos hated foreign domination, citing Patrick Henry's famous words, "Give me liberty or give me death." He believed the conquest of the islands contradicted the words of Thomas Jefferson in the Declaration of Independence, saying, "But if it were possible to obliterate every word written or spoken in defense of the principles set forth in the Declaration of Independence, a war of conquest would still leave its legacy of perpetual hatred, for it was God Himself who placed in every human heart the love of liberty."

When Democrat Woodrow Wilson won the 1912 presidential election, it is likely that the heart of the average Democrat was still with Bryan. At Wilson's inauguration, Bryan was embarrassed when many in the crowd began chanting, "Bryan, Bryan, Bryan, we want a speech from Bryan."

No doubt in recognition of Bryan's popularity within the core of the Democratic Party, Wilson named him as secretary of state. Without World War I, this position would have still carried great prestige, but with the war, it afforded Bryan the opportunity to fight to keep his country out of war.

When war did break out in Europe in the summer of 1914, only a tiny percentage of Americans gave it much thought. After all, there had been wars and rumors of wars in Europe for centuries, but almost no one publicly expressed the viewpoint that the United States needed to get involved in this one — at least not at first.

Bryan moved quickly to make sure his country did not get involved in this war, either. His clout was greatest while keeping the United States out in the first few weeks of the war. Wilson's first wife died on August 6, and he left D.C. for several days to mourn. During this time, Bryan blocked J.P. Morgan and Company from loaning millions of dollars to France and Great Britain. The French had asked for a \$100 million loan, but Bryan believed such was inconsistent with the neutrality policy he believed Wilson would support.

"We are the one great nation which is not involved and refusal to loan to any belligerent would naturally tend to hasten a conclusion of the war," Bryan explained. "Money is the worst kind of all contrabands 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."

Unfortunately, the Morgan banking house became the purchasing agent in America for both Britain and France, and would eventually win a change in the no-loan policy. While Bryan continued to oppose loans or credits to the warring powers because he feared it would suck the United States into the war, Wilson had been a close associate of Morgan for years, and proved much more open to the idea of loans to the English and the French. And as Judge Andrew Napolitano noted in his book *Theodore and Woodrow*, "Wilson's acts were quite contrary to the neutral stance he took in public."

Bryan's neutrality, however, was sincere. Fearing the consequences of a protracted conflict, wrote Louis Koenig in *Bryan: A Political Biography*, "Bryan felt driven to take every step to bring the war to its earliest possible close." He pushed Wilson to take the lead in being an honest mediator between the nations at war in Europe.

But instead of sending Bryan to Europe, Wilson sent Colonel Edward Mandell House. House held no official post in the government, but his relationship with Wilson was so close that he was known as the



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president's "alter ego." Bryan was understandably upset, not just that he was passed over for this important assignment, but that House was, as Koenig explains, "an Anglophile, and his concern for peace would be subordinated to British self-interest."

"House was soon absorbing and acquiescing to the hostility of the British Cabinet to any talk of peace," Koenig wrote.

He was not the only person in the Wilson government to undermine Bryan's efforts at neutrality. The U.S. ambassador to Britain, Walter Hines Page, despised Bryan and his peace efforts, openly siding with the British in what he called "English civilization" against what he termed "Prussian military aristocracy."

When bills were introduced in Congress to halt the export of arms to the belligerent nations, Bryan was supportive. He was particularly against the British practice of impounding ships bound for Germany and Austria, believing it was a violation of American sovereignty. Bryan feared America was already "taking sides" in the war, and he believed strict neutrality would more likely keep us out of the war. When Bryan directed Page to take a hard line with the British Foreign Office, Meyer writes, Page ignored him.

This led Bryan to send Sir Edward Grey (the British foreign secretary) a direct message. He told Grey that Britain's action "exceeds the manifest necessity of a belligerent and constitutes restrictions upon the rights of American citizens upon the high seas which are not justified by the rules of international law or required under the principle of self-preservation." Grey ignored the warning from Bryan, apparently because Page told him that Wilson did not share Bryan's displeasure. Page told Grey, when handing him the document signed by Bryan, "I do not agree with it; let us consider how it should be answered."

Michael Kazin wrote in *A Godly Hero: The Life of William Jennings Bryan* that Wilson told several friends he wished Bryan would just quit. This was the major problem. Wilson's government (except for Bryan) all favored the British, and it was Wilson himself who did the most to drive the non-neutral policy of his administration (after all, he was the president, not House or Page).

The German army was very effective on both the western front (with Britain and France) and the eastern front (with Russia). But the British navy kept the Germans bottled up in the North Sea, using their naval superiority to place a crushing blockade on the country. Winston Churchill, the British first lord of the admiralty, bluntly explained its purpose: It was to "starve the whole population — men, women, and children, old and young, wounded and sound — into submission."

The German government soon faced rising discontent from its own people. Faced with such dire consequences, Germany began to use submarines to strike back at the powerful British navy. Germany placed all the waters around Britain in a war zone, and proclaimed "unrestricted submarine warfare." Bryan was concerned that the blockade on food to Germany would cause mass starvation. This British position was "without justification," Bryan told Wilson. After consulting with German officials, Bryan believed that they would be willing to "give assurances that the food imported will not be taken by the government [of Germany]." Germany even offered that they would let American organizations distribute the food directly to the civilian population.

Bryan proposed that food be allowed to enter Germany in exchange for Germany's cancellation of the war zone around Britain. Writing to Ambassador Page for the British government, Edward Grey totally rejected the proposal, insisting that starving the enemy civilian population was "a natural and



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legitimate method of bringing pressure to bear on an enemy country.”

Wilson had no sympathy for the German position, even telling them that he would hold them strictly accountable if any Americans died as a result of German submarines sinking British ships. He took the position that American citizens had a right to travel on British ships. But it was not necessary for Americans to travel on British ships, and as Pat Buchanan wrote in *A Republic, Not an Empire*, “There was no major peril to American citizens from submarines, if they traveled on American ships.”

An exasperated Bryan asked, “Why be shocked by the drowning of a few people, if there is to be no objection to starving a nation?”

But Wilson chose to further take England’s side and insisted that German subs follow the rules of “cruiser warfare.” As Buchanan explained, “These rules required a submarine to surface and fire a warning shot before a ship was searched. Such rules were utterly unworkable for submarines, which were small and flimsy. A surfaced U-boat could be attacked, rammed, and sunk. Indeed, the British Admiralty had given orders to ram surfaced submarines and developed decoy merchant ships called ‘Q ships’ with hidden guns to lure U-boats to the surface, where they could be blasted out of the water.”

Accordingly, Germany offered to follow the rules of cruiser warfare if the British would disarm their merchant ships. When the British refused, Wilson did not pressure them to do so.

Bryan feared that Wilson’s insistence on Americans having a “right” to travel on belligerent ships would lead to American deaths on the ocean, and more American deaths in the resulting war. He argued that Americans who opted to travel on such ships were being “selfish,” because they were putting not only their own lives in danger, but putting their fellow Americans at risk of involvement in the Great War.

Finally, as was inevitable, the British passenger ship *Falaba* was sunk in St. George’s Channel on March 28, 1915. One hundred and eleven passengers died, including one American, Leon Chester Thrasher. Robert Lansing, a high-ranking official in the State Department, argued that Germany be ordered to punish the submarine commander, and pay damages. Bryan disagreed, telling Wilson that he should afford the Germans the same right to ignore international law that he had given to the British. He also urged Wilson to make an appeal to all the nations at war to consider peace terms, accept American mediation, and end what Bryan called the madness of the war.

Bryan took the opportunity to press his argument to forbid U.S. citizens from ignoring the dangers of traveling on belligerent ships, telling Wilson, “There is no more reason, why an American citizen should take the risk involved in going in one of these [belligerent] vessels than there is for taking the risks that are involved in going near the fighting on land.”

Wilson rejected Bryan’s pleas, however, adamantly insisting that Americans had a “right” to travel on belligerent ships. The German government took out ads in American newspapers on May 1, 1915, warning that any American who traveled on a British ship did so at his own risk.

Despite this blunt warning, it was less than a week later when the British passenger liner *Lusitania* was sunk off the coast of Ireland, taking the lives of 128 Americans. Upon hearing the terrible news, Bryan wondered to his wife if the ship was carrying ammunition. It turns out that it was — six million rounds of small-arms ammunition and 1,250 cases of shrapnel shells. Such information did not bother Republican Teddy Roosevelt, who called for an immediate declaration of war, condemning the German action as “an act of piracy.” But congressional leaders told Wilson that they would not give him a



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declaration of war.

Wilson did decide to send a note to the Germans, and he solicited the opinions of his advisors as to its wording. Bryan gave Wilson an editorial in the *Washington Post*, which noted the presence of ammunition on the ship. The *Post* argued that the British use of civilians to protect a ship carrying weapons of war was “like putting women and children in front of the army.” Bryan agreed, and told Wilson that a belligerent note would give the Germans only two options — capitulate or create an open break with the United States. Bryan added, “A person would have to be very much biased in favor of the allies, to insist that ammunition intended for one of the belligerents should be safe-guarded in transit by the lives of American citizens.”

Vice President Thomas Marshall agreed with Bryan’s more conciliatory response, contending, “When a person boarded an English vessel he was virtually on English soil and must expect to stand the consequences.”

Robert Lansing, officially Bryan’s subordinate at the State Department, disagreed. He wanted Wilson to demand an apology, an indemnity, and a promise to protect the lives of American citizens. And if Germany refused these demands, he recommended the severing of diplomatic relations.

Colonel House, who was in London, cabled that the president should tell the Germans that any more such attacks would result in war with America. House even told Wilson, “Our intervention will save rather than increase the loss of life. America has come to the parting of the ways, when she must determine whether she stands for civilized or uncivilized warfare.” He then added, “We can no longer remain neutral spectators.” Clearly, House was not a neutral spectator, and it is doubtful he had ever been one.

Wilson finally sent a note to Germany, insisting Americans had an “indispensable” right to sail on the oceans in the ships of any nation — whether those nations were at war or peace. He demanded Germany pay reparations. Bryan reluctantly signed the document, telling Wilson that he did so “with a heavy heart.” Wilson rejected Bryan’s suggestion that he call upon American citizens to avoid travel on belligerent ships, saying that such an idea was “both weak and futile.”

Germany did not want war with the United States, and answered with what they called a preliminary note, with a more conclusive one later.

Bryan was distraught, fearing war was imminent. He met with the envoy of Austria-Hungary, and sent a cable to the American embassy in Germany. After almost a month, Germany gave a more detailed response to the Wilson message, arguing that their submarine had acted “in self-defense” when it destroyed a ship carrying “ammunition destined for the enemy.” They expressed regret for the loss of civilian life, but said their subs would continue to attack British ships in the Atlantic.

At a June 1, 1915 Cabinet meeting, Bryan was quiet until an objection was raised to the suggestion that a protest be sent to the British for interfering “with our trade.” Bryan angrily charged that those who opposed blaming the British for anything had always taken the side of the Allies. Wilson chastised Bryan, saying that Bryan’s remarks were unfair and unjust, adding that he should not be shifting the subject away from the German atrocity.

Finally, Bryan met with Wilson on June 7, and told the president that he had treated House as the real secretary of state. “I have never had your full confidence.” The next day, Wilson received Bryan’s letter



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of resignation.

At a final lunch with some members of the Cabinet (Wilson being absent), Bryan said, "I believe I can do more on the outside to prevent war than I can on the inside. I can work to control popular opinion so that it will not exert pressure for extreme action." After Interior Secretary Franklin Lane told Bryan, "You are the most real Christian that I know," Bryan responded, "I go out into the dark. The president has the prestige and the power on his side."

Indeed, Bryan did continue to work against American entry into the war. His position won him admiration by many, but fierce opposition as well. Journalist Henry Watterson said that "men have been shot and beheaded, even hanged, drawn and quartered, for treason less heinous." Watterson added that Bryan was "disloyal by nature, inordinately selfish, avaricious, egotistical, without any sense of the true relations of life and duty, or decent regard for the fitness of things."

In London, Bryan's old nemesis Walter Hines Page said that Bryan possessed "the yellow streak of a sheer fool." Theodore Roosevelt said Bryan was "the most contemptible figure we have ever had as secretary of state."

The *New York World* condemned Bryan as having "publicly betrayed" the president, while the *Atlanta Constitution* dismissed him as a "public nuisance." They added that they would no longer print any more of Bryan's anti-war statements.

Out of office, Bryan returned to giving public speeches and traveling the Chautauqua circuit. Retiring to Miami, he renewed the Men's Club at the Presbyterian Church, led a fundraising drive for the YMCA, and conducted a large, well-attended outdoor Bible class.

He also continued to speak out against American entry into the European war. On July 8, he spoke to 100,000 people at the World's Fair in San Francisco. At New York's Carnegie Hall, he told an overflow crowd, "It is necessary for those who love peace to advocate it, so that the jingoes will not seem to represent the sentiment of the country." Next came Madison Square Garden and another huge crowd.

His main argument was that Americans should stay out of war zones and off ships carrying contraband. He mocked the reasoning of many that America should go to war to avenge the death of a hundred Americans in a ship sinking by sacrificing "a million more killed before we get out of it." Specifically addressing the war in Europe, Bryan said, "They are fighting over questions which do not affect our welfare or destiny."

But inside the Wilson White House, all voices favored war, and there was no longer a William Jennings Bryan to offer a contrary view. Although Wilson was reelected in 1916 on the slogan "He kept us out of war," shortly after the election the Germans announced a return to "unrestricted submarine warfare" that they had previously abandoned in order to avoid war with America. The British blockade was literally starving the German nation to death, and the Germans reasoned that they must take the chance of war with the United States by using the only weapon that could strike back at the British in the Atlantic — the submarine.

Koenig wrote that as war seemed imminent, Bryan issued "An Appeal for Peace to the American People," outlining specific steps for avoiding a war: "Keep Americans off belligerent ships; postpone until after the war any question that cannot be settled now by peaceful means; refuse clearance to Americans and other neutral ships carrying passengers and contraband; withdraw protection from



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American citizens who travel as seamen with contraband on American or other neutral ships; keep all American vessels out of the danger zone.” He also visited multiple members of Congress to personally argue against a declaration of war.

Bryan’s efforts to stop a declaration of war took a severe hit — perhaps a fatal blow — when the Wilson administration released the infamous Zimmermann Telegram in early 1917.

Much has been said about the Zimmerman Telegram tilting the scales toward war. The telegram was a message that Germany’s foreign minister, Arthur Zimmermann, sent to his ambassador in Mexico City in early January. In it, Zimmermann directed his envoy to offer, should the United States declare war, an alliance with Mexico. In return for Mexico making war upon the United States, Germany would give it “generous financial support,” and help in recovering its lost territories of Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona.

The British intercepted the telegram and, after decoding it, informed Ambassador Page. Page sent the message on to the United States in late February. The Wilson administration kept the telegram secret, waiting for an opportune time to release it for maximum effect. When it was released February 28, 1917, it naturally caused great indignation in the United States and agitation for war.

Meyer asks the question, “But was the telegram as villainous as Congress and the newspapers proclaimed it to be? Did it make the case for war unanswerable?”

Meyer answered his own question: “No answer is satisfactory that does not make note of the fact that an alliance of Germany and Mexico was not proposed until *after* an American declaration of war. To condemn this as an outrage is to deny nations the right to respond to direct and deadly threat by seeking allies.” (Emphasis added.)

Wilson did ask for war on April 2, 1917, but up until the very end, Bryan pleaded with Congress not to give him the war declaration, arguing that it would “mean the signing of the death warrant of thousands, even millions of your countrymen.” He reasoned that “our land is not threatened with invasion, but that we are asked to go 3,000 miles for a chance to fight.” He lamented, “God alone can save this republic [from the] horrors of the European slaughter.”

Once war was declared, however, the silver tongue of Bryan went silent. He had failed to keep America out of the war. His successor at State, Robert Lansing, was ecstatic at the prospect of war, saying, “Things have turned out right and the days of anxiety and uncertainty are over.... It may take two or three years. It may even take five years. It may cost a million Americans; it may cost five million. However long it may take, however many men it costs we must go through it.”

Historian Charles Tansill contended that had Wilson followed Bryan’s advice, instead of that offered by House, Page, and Lansing, America could have avoided the war, with all of its terrible effects. He wrote: “America finally entered the war because of serious difficulties with Germany arising out of submarine warfare.... If the president had taken any decisive action against the admission of armed British merchantmen into American harbors, and if he had warned American citizens of the dangers that attended passage on belligerent vessels, America might well have been spared the great sacrifice of 1917-1918.”

And had the United States made it clear that we were never going to get into the conflict, it is widely understood that the two sides would have called it quits. The Germans had been asking for peace for



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months, and the British and the French would have had they not been hoping the United States would get involved.

Tansill concluded it was a failure of Wilson to follow a course “dictated by American interests rather than Allied interests.”

In other words, America should have followed the course championed by William Jennings Bryan — the man who truly did try to keep us out of war.

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