

PRESIDENT WILSON'S  
**NEW DECLARATION  
OF FREEDOM**

*A Charter for Humanity and  
World Peace*



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# PRESIDENT WILSON'S NEW DECLARATION OF FREEDOM

ADDRESSING CONGRESS IN THE CAPITOL AT WASHINGTON ON MONDAY, APRIL 2ND, 1917, PRESIDENT WILSON SAID



**I** CALLED Congress in Extraordinary Session because there are serious, very serious, choices of policy to be made, and made immediately, which it was neither right constitutionally nor permissible I should assume the responsibility of making.

On February 3rd last I officially laid before you the extraordinary announcement of the Imperial German Government that on and after February 1st it was its purpose to put aside all restraints of law or humanity, and use its submarines to sink every vessel that sought to approach, either the ports of Great Britain and Ireland or the western coasts of Europe, or any of the ports controlled by the enemies of Germany within the Mediterranean.

That had seemed to be the object of the German submarine warfare earlier in the war, but since April of last year the Imperial Government had somewhat restrained the commanders of its undersea craft, in conformity with its promise then given us, that passenger boats should not be sunk, and due warning would be given to all other vessels which its submarines might seek to destroy when no resistance was offered or escape attempted, and care would be taken that their crews were given at least a fair chance to save their lives in their open boats. The precautions then were meagre and haphazard enough, as was proved in distressing instances after instance in the progress of the cruel and unmanly business, but a certain degree of restraint was observed.

**T**HE new policy swept every restriction aside. Vessels of every kind, whatever their flag, character, cargo, destination or errand, have been ruthlessly sent to the bottom without warning, without thought of help or mercy for those on board vessels of friendly neutrals, along with those of belligerents. Even hospital ships carrying relief to the sorely bereaved and stricken people of Belgium, though the latter were provided with a safe conduct through the prescribed areas by the German Government itself, and were distinguished by unmistakable marks of identity, were sunk with the same reckless lack of compassion.

The principle of International Law had its origin in an attempt to set up some law which would be respected and observed upon the seas, where no nation had the right of dominion, where lay the free highways of the world. By painful stage after stage has that law been built up, and by meagre enough results indeed, after all has been accomplished, always with a clear view at least of what the heart and conscience of mankind demanded.

This minimum the German Government swept aside under the plea of retaliation and necessity and because it had no weapons which it could use at sea except these, which it is impossible to employ as it is employing them without throwing to the winds all scruples of humanity or respect for the understandings supposed to underlie the intercourse of the world.

I am not now thinking of the loss of property involved, immense and serious as that is, but only of the wanton and wholesale destruction of the lives of non-combatant men, women and children engaged in pursuits which have always, even in the darkest periods of modern history, been deemed innocent and legitimate. Property can be paid for; the lives of peaceful and innocent people cannot be.

**T**HE present German warfare against commerce is warfare against mankind. It is a war against all nations.

American ships have been sunk and American lives taken in ways which it has stirred us very deeply to learn of, but the ships and people of neutral and friendly nations have been sunk and overwhelmed in the waters in the same way. There has been no discrimination. The challenge is to all mankind.

Each nation must decide for itself how it will meet it. The choice we make for ourselves must be made with the moderation of counsel and temperance of judgment befitting our character and ours as a nation. We must put excited feeling away. Our motive will not be revenge or the victorious assertion of the physical might of our nation, but only a vindication of right, of human right, of which we are only a single champion.

When I addressed Congress on February 20th last I thought 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 now appears impracticable.

**B**ECAUSE 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 as the law of nations has assumed that merchantmen would defend themselves against privateers or cruizers, which are visible craft, when given chase upon the open sea. It is common prudence in such circumstances, of grim necessity

indeed, to endeavour to destroy them before they have shown their own intention. They must be dealt with upon sight, if dealt with at all.

The German Government denies the right of neutrals to use arms at all within the areas of the sea which it has proscribed, even in defence of rights which no modern publicist ever before questioned. An intimation has been conveyed that the armed guards which we have placed on our merchant ships will be treated as beyond the pale of the law, and subject to be dealt with as pirates.

Armed neutrality is insufficient enough at the best in such circumstances. In the face of such pretensions it is worse than ineffectual. It is likely to produce what it was meant to prevent. It is practically certain to draw us into war without either the rights or effectiveness of belligerents. There is one choice we cannot make and are incapable of making. We will not choose the path of submission and suffer the most sacred rights of our nation and our people to be ignored and violated. The wrongs against which we now array ourselves are not common wrongs; they cut to the very root of human life.

With a profound sense of the solemn, even the tragical character of the step I am taking, and of the grave responsibilities which it involves, but in unhesitating obedience to what I deem my constitutional duty, I advise that Congress declare the recent course of the Imperial German Government to be in fact nothing less than war against the Government and people of the United States; that it formally accept the status of a belligerent which is thus thrust upon it, and that it take immediate steps not only to put the country in a more thorough state of defence, but also to exert all its power and to employ its resources to bring the government of the German Empire to terms and end the war.

**W**HAT this involves is clear. It will involve the utmost practicable co-operation in Council with the Governments now at war with Germany, and as incident thereto an extension to those Governments of the most liberal financial credits in order that our resources may as far as possible be added to theirs.

It will involve the organisation and mobilisation of all the material resources of the country to supply materials of war to serve the incidental needs of the nation in the most abundant yet most economical and most effective way possible.

It will involve the immediate full equipment of the Navy in all respects, but particularly in supplying it with the best means of dealing with the enemy's submarines.

**I**T will involve the immediate addition to the armed forces of the United States already provided for by law in case of war of at least 500,000 men, who should, in my opinion, be chosen upon the principle of universal liability to service, and also the authorisation of subsequent additional increments of equal force so soon as they may be needed and can be handled in training. It will involve also, of course, the granting of adequate credits to the Government, sustained, I hope, so far as can equitably be sustained by the present generation, by well-conceived taxation. I say sustained as far as may be equitable by taxation because it seems to me it would be unwise to base the credits which will now be necessary entirely upon money borrowed.

It is our duty, I most respectfully urge, to protect our people as far as we may against the very serious hardships and evils which are likely to arise out of the inflation which would be produced by vast loans.

In carrying out the measures whereby these things will be accomplished, we should keep constantly in mind the wisdom of it in all respects, as little as possible in preparation and in the equipment of our own military forces with the duty—of it will be a very practical duty—of supplying nations already at war with Germany with materials which they can obtain only from us or by our assistance. They are in the field. We should help them in every way to be effective there.

**I** TAKE the liberty of suggesting through several executive Departments of the Government, for the consideration of your committees, measures for the accomplishment of the several objects I have mentioned. I hope it will be your pleasure to deal with them as having been framed after very careful thought by the branch of the Government upon which the responsibility of conducting war and safeguarding the nation will most directly fall.

While we do these things—their equally momentous things—let us make it very clear to all the world what our motives and our objects are. My own thought has not been driven from the habitual normal course by the unhappy events of the last two months. I do not believe the thought of the nation has been altered or clouded by them. I have actually the same things in mind now as I had when I addressed the Senate on January 22nd, and the same things I had in mind when I addressed Congress on February 3rd and February 20th.

Our object now as then is to vindicate the principles of peace and justice in the life of the world as against selfish autocratic power, and to set up amongst really free and self-governed peoples of the world such a concert of purpose and action as will henceforth insure the observance of these principles.

Neutrality is no longer feasible or desirable where the peace of the world is involved and the freedom of its peoples and the menace to that peace and freedom lies in the existence of autocratic Governments backed by organised force which is controlled wholly by their will and not by the will of their people.

We have seen the last of neutrality in such circumstances. We are at the beginning of an age in which it will be insisted that the same standards of conduct and responsibility for wrong done shall be observed among nations and their Governments that are observed among individual citizens of civilised states.

WE have not quarrelled with the German people. We have no feeling towards them but one of sympathy and friendship. It was not upon their impulse that their Government acted in entering this war. It was not with their previous knowledge or approval.

It was a war determined upon as wars used to be determined upon in the old unhappy days when peoples were nowhere consulted by their rulers and wars were provoked and waged in the interest of dynasties, or little groups of ambitious men, who were accustomed to use their fellow-men as pawns and tools. Self-governed nations do not fill their neighbour States with spies or set in course an intrigue to bring about some critical juncture in affairs which would give them an opportunity to strike and make a conquest. Such designs can be successfully worked only under cover where no one has a right to ask questions.

Cunningly contrived plans of deception or impression, carried, it may be, from generation to generation, can be worked out and kept from light only within the privacy of Courts or behind the carefully guarded portals of a narrow, privileged class. They are happily impossible where public opinion commands, and insists upon full information concerning all the nation's affairs.

A steadfast concert for peace can never be maintained except by the partnership of democratic nations. No autocratic Government could be trusted to keep faith within or observe its covenants. There must be a league of honour and partnership of opinion.

Intrigue would eat its vitals away. Plottings by inner circles, who would plan what they would and render an account to no one, would be corruption seated at its very heart. Only free peoples can hold their purpose and their honour steady to the common end, and prefer the interests of mankind to any narrow, selfish, class interests.

Does not every American feel that assurance has been added to our hope for the future peace of the world by the wonderful heartening things that have been happening within the last few weeks in Russia? Russia was known by those who knew her best to have been always in fact democratic at heart in all vital habits, in her thought, and in all intimate relations of her people that spoke of their natural instinct and their habitual attitude towards life.

The autocracy that crowned the summit of her political structure, long as it bad stood, and terrible as it was in the reality of its power, was not in fact Russian in origin, character or purpose.

And now it has been shaken, and the great generous Russian people have been kind in all their native majesty and might to the forces that are fighting for freedom in the world, for justice and for peace. Here is a fit partner for a league of honour.

ONE of the things that have served to convince us that Prussian autocracy was not, and could never be, our friend is that, from the very outset of the present war, it flits our unswerving enemies, and even our offices of government, with spies, and the criminal intrigues of every kind against our national unity of council and our peace within and without our industries and our commerce.

Indeed, it is now evident that spies were here even before the war began. It is unhappily not a matter of conjecture, but of fact, proved in our courts of justice, that intrigues which more than once, came seriously near disturbing the peace and dislocating the justice of the country have been carried on at the instigation, with the support, and even under the personal direction, of official agents of the Imperial Government accredited to the Government of the United States.

Even in checking these things and trying to extirpate them, we have sought to put the most generous interpretation possible upon them, because we know that their sources lay not in any hostile feeling or purpose of the German people towards us (who were no doubt as ignorant of them as ourselves), but only in the selfish designs of a Government that did what it pleased and told its people nothing.

But they played their part in serving to convince us that just as that Government entertains no real friendship for us, and means to set against us all the forces of its country at its venience. That it means to stir up enemies against us at our very doors the intercepted Note to the German Minister at Mexico City is eloquent evidence.

WE are accepting this challenge of hostile purpose because we know that in such a Government, following such methods, we can never have a friend, and that in the presence of its organised power, always lying in wait to accomplish we know not what purpose, there can be no assured security for the democratic Governments of the world.

We are now about to accept the gage of 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, now that we see facts with no veil of false pretence about them, to fight thus for the ultimate peace of the world, for the liberation of its peoples—the German peoples included—the rights of nations, great and small, and the privilege of men everywhere to choose their way of life and obedience.

The world must be safe for democracy. Its peace must be planted upon the trusted foundations of political liberty. We have no selfish ends to serve. We desire no conquests and no dominion. We seek no indemnities for ourselves and no material compensation for sacrifices we shall freely make. We are but one of the champions of the rights of mankind, and shall be satisfied when these rights are as secure as fact and the freedom of nations can make them.

JUST because we fight without rancour and without selfish objects, seeking nothing for ourselves but what we shall wish to share with all free peoples, we shall, I feel confident, conduct our operations as belligerents without passion, and ourselves observe with proud punctilio the principles of right and fair play we profess to be fighting for.

I have said nothing of Governments allied with the Imperial Government of Germany, because they have not made war upon us or challenged us to defend our rights and our honour. The Austro-Hungarian Government has indeed avowed its unqualified endorsement and acceptance of reckless and lawless submarine warfare, adopted now without disguise by the Imperial German Government, and it has, therefore, not been possible for this Government to receive Count Tarnowski, the Ambassador recently accredited to this Government by Austria-Hungary, but that Government has not actually engaged in warfare against the citizens of the United States on the seas, and I take the liberty, for the present at least, of postponing the discussion of our relations with the authorities in Vienna.

WE enter this war only where clearly forced into it because there are no other means of defending our rights. It will be easier for us to conduct ourselves as belligerents in a high spirit of right and fairness because we act without animus, not in enmity towards a people, or with a desire to bring any injury or disadvantage upon them, but only in armed opposition to an irresponsible Government which has thrown aside all considerations of humanity and right and is running amok.

We are, let me say again, sincere friends of the German people, and shall desire nothing so much as an early re-establishment of intimate relations to our mutual advantage. However hard it may be for them for the time being to believe this, it is spoken from our hearts.

We have borne with their present Government through all these bitter months because of that friendship, exercising patience and forbearance which otherwise would have been impossible.

We shall happily still have an opportunity to prove that friendship in our daily attitude and actions towards millions of men and women of German birth and native sympathy, who live amongst us and share our life, and we shall be proud to prove it towards all who in fact are loyal to their neighbours and to the Government in the hour of test.

THEY are most of them as true and loyal Americans as if they had never known any other fealty or allegiance. They will be prompt to stand with us in rebuking and restraining the few who will let of discipline and discipline. If there should be delinquency it will be dealt with by the hand of stern repression, but, if it lifts its head at all, it will lift it only here and there, and without countenance, except from the lawless and malignant few.

It is a distressing and oppressive duty, Gentlemen of Congress, which I have performed in thus addressing you. There are, it may be, many moments of fiery trial and fiery crises ahead of us. It is a fearful thing to lead this great and peaceful people into war, into the most terrible and disastrous of all wars.

Civilisation itself seems to be in the balance, but right is more precious than peace, and we shall fight for the things which we have always carried nearest our hearts—for democracy, for the right of those who submit to a government to a voice in their own government, for the rights and liberties of small nations, for the universal dominion of right by such a concert of free peoples as will bring peace and safety to all nations and make the world itself at last free.

To such a task we can dedicate our lives, our fortunes, everything we are, everything we have, with the pride of those who know the day has come when America arrives to the voice of her blood and might for the principles that gave her birth and the happiness and peace which she has treasured. God helping her, she can do no other.



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