APRIL, 1917: WHAT IF?

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When the First World War began in August of 1914 President Woodrow Wilson urged the American people to strive to be "neutral in fact as well as in name, impartial in thought as well as in action." In December of 1914 Wilson stated to an interviewer "that the chance of a just and equitable peace, and of the only possible peace that would be lasting, will be happiest if no nation gets the decision by arms; and the danger of an unjust peace, one that will be sure to invite further calamities, will be if some one nation or group of nations succeeds in enforcing its will upon the others." What Wilson later called "peace without victory" became the goal of his diplomacy.

In Wilson's campaign for reelection in 1916 his slogan was, "He kept us out of war." After his reelection Wilson went before the Senate on January 22, 1917 and delivered his "Peace Without Victory" speech. Wilson declared that "only a peace between equals can last... a victor's terms imposed upon the vanquished" would "rest, not permanently, but only as upon quicksand."

Yet, on April 2, 1917, two and a half months later, Wilson summoned a special session of the United States Congress at which he asked for a Declaration of War against Germany. On April 7, 1917 Wilson signed the Declaration of War. What caused Wilson's change of mind and led to loss of the possibility of "peace without victory" once the power of the United States upset the relative balance between the Allies and the

Central Powers? The harsh "victors' peace" which followed produced the very "further calamities" that Wilson had sought to avoid.

The paramount cause was Wilson's view, and that of numerous Americans, that Germany's submarine warfare violated the rights of Americans as neutrals. This view was based upon the United States' historic position that in time of war where the United States was a neutral, American ships, provided they were not carrying military cargoes to a belligerent, had the right to travel anywhere without hindrance. A corollary to this view was that Americans had the right to travel without harm on the passenger ships of a belligerent. This American doctrine of "neutral rights" evolved at a time when American shipments abroad, in peace and in war, consisted of ordinary commercial goods rather than armaments and munitions, which the United States had a very limited capacity to produce.

The War of 1812 resulted from the fact that Great Britain did not accept the American view and issued a series of Orders in Council during the Napoleonic Wars establishing a naval blockade of Europe and requiring all American and other neutral ships heading for Europe, whatever their cargo might be, to submit to British inspection and obtain licenses to travel to European ports. As a practical matter, in the 19th Century the rights of neutral shipping were largely determined by Britain as the predominant naval power in the world.

Thus, at the outbreak of the First World War there existed only some generally accepted customs and unwritten rules concerning the rights of neutral shipping in time of war. The principal rule provided that neutral commerce in non-military goods with the enemy of a belligerent power

was allowed. There were no rules dealing with submarine warfare, whose potential was not foreseen.

Once the war began the British declared a blockade of all German North Sea ports and laid mines in various areas. The blockade was what is known as a "distant blockade," hundreds of miles out in the North Sea and the Atlantic, because of the threat of the German High Seas Fleet and the growing menace of German submarines in waters closer to German ports. The blockade embraced both German and neutral vessels with neutral vessels subject to search and confiscation of their cargoes if they carried contraband. At first only munitions of war and raw materials that could be used to manufacture same were treated as contraband, but in January, 1915, the British expanded the definition of contraband to include food and practically all other products. With respect to food the pretext was that the Germans were rationing their own food supplies as a war measure and therefore food could be viewed as a weapon of war.

Germany countered with its own blockade of the British Isles, enforced by its submarines, and declared the seas around Britain a war zone. Within the war zone the Germans declared they would sink all enemy vessels encountered, including merchant ships, and warned that neutral vessels would be in great danger because of the British practice of often flying neutral flags on their merchant vessels.

Both the British and German blockades were illegal under the previously mentioned customs and rules of international law governing neutral shipping. Both blockades also violated the traditional rule that a blockade was only lawful if it was a "close blockade" with the blockading vessels stationed in close proximity to enemy ports as was the case in the American Civil War. However, in enforcing their blockade the British only

stopped ships and sometimes seized their cargoes while the Germans sank ships which often caused loss of life. The American government lodged protests with both Great Britain and Germany but the February 10, 1915 protest to Britain was not forceful while the protest to Germany spoke of "indefensible violation" of neutral rights and warned that if German war vessels were to destroy an American ship or cause loss of American lives the United States would hold Germany "to a strict accountability... and take any steps it might be necessary to take to safeguard American lives and property and to secure to American citizens the full enjoyment of their acknowledged rights on the high seas."

In part the American government relied on the customs and unwritten rules of so-called "armed cruiser warfare," also known as "prize regulations," which had developed in the 18th and 19th Centuries and forbade firing on unresisting merchant ships, attacking same without warning, or sinking enemy merchant vessels without trying to provide for the safety of passengers and crew. As time went on, the "armed cruiser" rules became increasingly difficult for submarines to respect.

At first German submarines generally attempted to halt and inspect vessels they encountered within the war zone, but this practice became more and more difficult to carry out as the allies began to arm their merchant ships. If the vessel was in fact an allied ship, the crew was allowed to leave the ship in lifeboats before it was destroyed.

The German submarines favored such approach since initially most of their submarines could only carry a few torpedoes and, therefore, they preferred to sink vessels by placing time bombs on board or using gunfire. However, further complications arose in the winter of 1914-1915 when the British Admiralty under Winston Churchill began to use what were

known as Q-ships, disguised as merchant vessels and heavily armed with concealed guns. As the submarine approached, some of the crew would abandon the ship in apparent panic and when the submarine was close enough the Q-ship would open fire.

The most deadly and critical occurrence was a submarine's attack, without warning, on the British Cunard liner Lusitania off the Irish Coast on May 7, 1915, with the loss of 1,201 lives, including 128 Americans. The Lusitania and its two sister ships were designed to be converted to armed merchant cruisers capable of carrying twelve 6-inch guns with the necessary magazines, shell elevators, and revolving deck gun rings being installed during construction.

When the war broke out the sister ships, the Mauretania and Aquitania, were converted to armed merchant cruisers but the Lusitania continued on its New York to Liverpool run with the British Admiralty having first priority on her cargo space. Unknown to its passengers, the ship's cargo space was being used to carry American munitions to Britain. On its last voyage the Lusitania carried 173 tons of munitions including 1,248 cases of artillery shells, 4,927 boxes of rifle ammunition, and ten tons of explosive powder.

The Lusitania's passengers were not deterred by notices published by the German Embassy warning that vessels flying the British flag or those of its allies in waters adjacent to the British Isles were subject to destruction.

The German submarine had on board the 1914 edition of Jane's Fighting Ships and Brassey's Naval Manual, both standard issue aboard every German U-boat. Both publications listed the Lusitania in the category of "Royal Navy Reserved Merchant Cruiser." Also on board was

a German merchant marine officer whose duty was to help identify any merchant ship targets whose nationality was in doubt. This officer, watching the approaching vessel through the periscope, became increasingly certain that it was either the Lusitania or the Mauretania. It was the common practice of the Lusitania to hoist the American flag as it approached the Irish coast. Presumably it did so on this occasion.

The sinking of the Lusitania and the loss of so many lives, including those of Americans, caused a great furor in the United States and occasioned a stern diplomatic note from the American government. Ignored was the fact that the American passengers chose to travel in a war zone on the vessel of a belligerent.

The initial American response on May 13 embodied a sweeping condemnation of Germany's conduct of the war at sea, mentioning not only the Lusitania but the sinking of the small British liner Fabala on March 28, 1915 with one American death, the April 28 attack on the American vessel Cushing by a German airplane with no loss of life, and the sinking of the American ship Gulflight on May 1 with two Americans dying. The note stated that the submarine "cannot be used against merchantmen... without a... violation of many sacred rules of justice and humanity" and demanded that submarine commanders be directed "to do nothing that would involve the lives of non-combatants or the safety of neutral ships, even at the cost of failing of their objective of capture or destruction." The note closed with the warning that the United States could not be expected "to omit any word or any act necessary to the performance of its sacred duty of maintaining the rights of the United States and its citizens."

The impact of the American note, however, was greatly weakened by Wilson's comments in a speech a few days before that "there is such a thing as a man being too proud to fight." Germany responded evasively to the May 13 note and when a second note to Germany was proposed, William Jennings Bryan resigned his position as Secretary of State on the ground that American neutrality was becoming increasingly tilted in favor of the Allies and unnecessarily risked a war with Germany. Bryan's view was that neutral powers had an obligation to avoid excessive risks and that Americans had no right to expose themselves to danger by traveling on an Allied vessel in a war zone. Yet the core of Wilson's position, from which he refused to depart, was that American citizens had the right to travel everywhere in safety on Allied ships. Bryan was replaced by Robert Lansing who was far more inclined to the British point-of-view.

The situation temporarily quieted down when in June the Kaiser issued orders that henceforth neutral ships should not be attacked, that all passenger liners, even those of the Allies, should be spared, unless they were armed, and that the "armed cruiser" regulations were to apply with respect to enemy merchant ships, which meant that the safety of the passengers and crew had to be assured. However, in August, 1915, the White Star liner, Arabic, was torpedoed without warning with the loss of three Americans. Like the Lusitania, the Arabic was also carrying munitions and other contraband on its voyages from New York to Liverpool. Tension again was relieved when on August 25 the German Chancellor, Bethmann-Hollweg disclosed the June U-boat restrictions; declared that the submarine commander who sank the Arabic must have exceeded his instructions, and that Germany would give complete satisfaction to the United States if its investigation proved a German

submarine was responsible. The U-boat restrictions became known as the Arabic pledge. As a consequence of the Arabic restrictions, the U-boat command virtually suspended submarine operations for the remainder of 1915. Meanwhile the United States turned much of its attention to Britain's illegal distant blockade of neutral ports and its constant expansion of products deemed contraband including, most importantly, cotton.

This state of affairs continued into early 1916. However, in March 1916, with the belief that a renewed submarine campaign could win the war within six months, German submarines were sent back to sea with new instructions that enemy merchant ships within the war zone could be destroyed without warning while outside the war zone they could only be attacked without warning if armed. In addition, enemy passenger ships were never to be attacked, even if armed. The instructions said nothing about neutral shipping, which presumably was already protected under the Kaiser's June, 1915, orders. The March, 1916, submarine warfare rules were a compromise between Bethmann-Hollweg's opposition to any measures that risked bringing America into the war and the desire of the German High Command to wage unrestricted submarine warfare.

On March 24, 1916, the unarmed French Channel steamer, Sussex, was torpedoed without warning off Dieppe with four of the dead being Americans. Apparently the submarine commander thought it was a troopship, believing that all cross-channel passenger ships with civilians on board used Boulogne as their destination. The incident appeared to be a flagrant violation of the Arabic pledge and Wilson appeared before a special session of Congress calling the use of submarines against commerce "utterly incompatible with the principles of humanity and the incontrovertible rights of neutrals" and stating that unless Germany

"should now immediately declare and effect an abandonment of its present methods of U-boat warfare against passengers and freight carrying vessels... the United States can have no other choice but to sever diplomatic relations."

In response, on April 24, after a month's delay, U-boats were instructed again to follow the "armed cruiser warfare" rules and not to destroy any ships, even an enemy merchant vessel, without first examining its papers and ensuring the safety of the crew. The only exception was if the ship tried to escape or offer resistance. The German delay in responding was occasioned by the continuing debate between Bethmann-Hollweg and the German High Command over the dangers of provoking the United States. The Kaiser ultimately sided with Bethmann-Hollweg.

For the remainder of 1916 Wilson focused on his campaign for reelection and also sought to bring both warring sides into peace negotiations, using his trusted assistant, Colonel Edward House, as the go-between. With both the Allies and the Central Powers still focused on achieving victory despite the military stalemate on the Western Front, the American initiative was unsuccessful.

In late 1916, having failed to defeat the British at the Battle of Jutland, Germany again turned its attention to submarine warfare and the possibility of breaking Britain's power to resist if unrestricted U-boat attacks were resumed. Again a long debate ensued between Bethmann-Hollweg and the German High Command, where Hindenberg was the new chief of staff, assisted by Ludendorff. This time the High Command prevailed and on January 31, 1917 Germany announced the resumption of unrestricted submarine warfare.

In the meantime, after his reelection Wilson had resumed his peace negotiation efforts and on January 22, 1917 delivered his "Peace Without Victory" speech to the United States Senate. Unfortunately, by the time of the speech the German U-boats had already put to sea with their new unrestricted submarine warfare orders.

On hearing the news Wilson felt that he had no choice but to break diplomatic relations with Germany since he had always taken the position that the United States would not tolerate unrestricted submarine warfare and that to yield now on the principle of freedom of the seas would stain American honor. On February 3 the German Ambassador, Count Bernstorff, was given his passports, and told to leave.

In February the new U-boat campaign commenced. Two American merchant ships were torpedoed with no loss of life and on February 26, while Wilson was reluctantly asking Congress to authorize the arming of American merchantmen, news came that the small Cunard liner, Laconia, had been torpedoed without warning with two American women killed.

Also, in February an incredible act of hairbrained bungling by the new German foreign minister, Arthur Zimmerman, came to light. Apparently acting on his own, he sent a coded telegram to Bernstorff on January 16 to be forwarded to the German minister in Mexico, directing the German minister to propose an alliance with Mexico, under which Mexico would recover its lost territory in Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona, should the United States enter the war. Unknown to Zimmerman, the British had broken the German diplomatic code. The British kept the message secret for over a month in an effort not to reveal that the code had been broken and then on February 23 handed the decoded Zimmerman telegram to the American Ambassador in London.

On February 28 Wilson gave the telegram to the press, causing a surge of patriotic emotion.

Nevertheless, Wilson continued to wait and see how American shipping would be affected by the submarine campaign. In March the answer came as the American steamer Algonquin on March 12 was sunk by gunfire with the crew reaching land after 27 hours in open boats. In addition, three American merchant ships were torpedoed without warning on March 18 with fifteen crewmen lost on one vessel. For a further two weeks Wilson waited but finally on April 2 he summoned Congress to the special session which resulted in the Declaration of War against Germany.

As stated at the beginning of this paper, the central factor causing Wilson's change of heart about preserving American neutrality and securing a peace without victory was Wilson's view that Germany's submarine warfare violated the rights of Americans as neutrals. That the historic American doctrine of neutral rights was badly outdated and made no allowance for the advent of the submarine was not taken into account or was ignored. Nor did Wilson consider the unfairness of allowing one belligerent to block import of foods and other non-military cargoes while challenging the right of the blockaded belligerent to respond with the submarine weapon. Walter Lippmann, in a series of articles in the New Republic, published in 1916-17, discussed this double standard and stated that the United States had followed a deliberate policy of un-neutrality, accepting the British violations of international law while standing firm against German violations.

With the benefit of hindsight the American position enunciated by Wilson seems quite quaint and archaic. A little more than twenty years later when the Second World War broke out, there was no thought that

American ships had the right to sail unhindered in the seas adjacent to belligerent countries or that Americans had the right to travel on vessels of a belligerent without harm.

Only a few hours after Great Britain and France declared war against Germany on September 3, 1939 the British passenger liner Athenia was sunk by a German submarine with 112 passengers dying including 28 American citizens. There was no protest of the sinking and loss of American lives by the United States. And on that very day, President Roosevelt made a broadcast to the American people stating "Let no man or woman thoughtlessly or falsely talk of America sending its armies to European fields. At this moment there is being prepared a proclamation of American neutrality."

Immediately after Pearl Harbor the United States itself commenced unrestricted submarine warfare against Japan. In the Nuremberg Trials there was no effort to prosecute Admiral Doenitz and other heads of the German Navy for engaging in unrestricted submarine warfare except for cases where U-boats fired upon lifeboats.

Wilson's personality was all important to his change of view. His father was a Presbyterian minister and Wilson grew up in the strict Calvinist tradition. He had a rigid, stubborn personality and a belief that he was one of God's elect. In his biography of Wilson, Louis Auchincloss put it this way: "Wilson, in seeking to emulate his God, in aiming perhaps to fulfill his destiny as a kind of minor prophet, would ultimately take on some of the characteristics of a supreme judge... [and] could be harsh and authoritarian in his moral judgments."

Wilson was a man with few intimates as President, with the exception of Colonel House. He generally made decisions on his own with his cabinet usually in the dark as to what he intended to do.

As the war went on, a messianic attitude developed with Wilson increasingly believing that he was destined not only to end the war but to secure a lasting peace through creation of some international authority. At first Wilson thought that this could be achieved by America remaining neutral and achieving a negotiated peace without victory. When this proved impossible, Wilson began to believe that the United States must enter the war so that he could sit at the peace table and armed with America's power and prestige secure an international entity that could bring war to an end.

Wilson's interventionist tendencies became evident in his first years as president when he authorized the bloody seizure of Vera Cruz by American forces in 1914 at a cost of 126 Mexican and 19 American lives, the occupation of Haiti and the Dominican Republic in 1916, and the fruitless pursuit of Pancho Villa deep into Mexico in 1916 after Villa's raid on Columbus, New Mexico. As Atlantic Magazine put it in its 2006 listing of the most influential Americans, Woodrow Wilson "made the world safe for U.S. interventionism, if not for democracy."

Other factors were present when the United States chose to enter the war but none of them, even in combination, were sufficient to cause America to join the Allies if Wilson, and other Americans following his lead, had not considered that Germany was blatantly violating American rights as a neutral. Thus, the importance to the United States economy of the large arms purchases by the Allies and the more skillful propaganda campaign carried on by the British, which included many invented tales of

German atrocities in Belgium, had only incidental influence on Wilson. And as a counterbalance, the large German-American and Irish-American communities were for the most part opposed to intervention on behalf of Great Britain and its allies.

I now turn to the realm of speculation and to the "What If" in this paper's title. The Second World War was a continuation of the First World War with a 21-year interruption. It was the "further calamity" that Wilson warned against and arose out of a peace where the "victor's terms [were] imposed upon the vanquished." Germany lost Alsace-Loraine, substantial territory in the East to the new state of Poland and all of its colonies. The Rhineland was demilitarized and occupied by French and other Allied troops and very large reparations were imposed on Germany. The British blockage of food and other products was kept in place after the Armistice and only ended when the Versailles Treaty was signed by the German delegation.

The result was an embittered Germany with a sizeable portion of its population ready to follow a leader who promised to restore the country to great power status and wipe out the shame of Versailles. Adolf Hitler and his Nazi Party stood ready to accept this role and did so in 1933.

But what if the United States had not entered the First World War on April 7, 1917? Would Hitler and the Nazi Party taking power in Germany and initiating World War II never have occurred?

What possibility was there that the First World War would have ended in a stalemate and a negotiated compromise peace between the two exhausted sides if the United States had not thrown its weight into the scales? War weariness and disillusionment was growing rapidly on both sides during 1917 after the bloodbaths of Verdun and the Somme, the

chaos in Russia and gradual collapse of the Russian Army after the February, 1917 revolution, and the crushing defeat of Italy at Caporetto in October, 1917, which saw hundreds of thousands of Italian soldiers surrender or desert.

The most important sign of unwillingness of soldiers to continue to sacrifice themselves in fruitless attacks was the so-called mutiny of the French Army in May, 1917, which infected sixteen army corps and caused the French forces on the Western Front to confine themselves to defensive operations for an entire year. As for Germany and Austro-Hungary, food supplies were increasingly scarce for both the military and civilians with protests and demonstrations occurring in various cities. In addition, the anarchy and Bolshevik propaganda which was spreading over Russia began to infect the German and Austro-Hungarian forces on the Eastern Front and caused growing concerns as to their reliability.

Another important factor that would have increased the Allied need for peace was that by April 1, 1916, the Allies had exhausted their means of paying for essential military and other supplies from the United States. If America had not entered the war, the 700 billion dollars in loans provided by the United States between 1917 and the end of the war would not have been received.

After the death of Emperor Franz Joseph in November, 1916, the new Austro-Hungarian Emperor, Charles, in March, 1917, sought to enter into peace negotiations with the Allies and in July, 1917, the German Reichstag passed a so-called peace resolution which in essence renounced all territorial annexations by Germany. The Austrian overtures were favorably regarded by the British and French but floundered on the territorial demands of Italy. The Reichstag's resolution, not being an

official act of the German Government, was more or less ignored by the Allies, but it did demonstrate the growing dissatisfaction with the war in Germany.

In my opinion, given the war weariness on both sides, the financial problems facing the Allies, and the peace overtures made by Austria and the interest in peace without territorial gains evidenced by the Reichstag's peace resolution, there was a good possibility that the Allies and the Central Powers would have been receptive to a negotiated compromise peace if the Allies had not been bolstered, both in morale and by the vast increase in military strength, resulting from America's April, 1917, entry into the war.

A compromise peace, which would have essentially restored the status quo antebellum, would not have left Germany feeling that it was the victim of an unjust peace. The Kaiser would probably have remained on his throne, at least for awhile, but with most of his power transferred to the Reichstag and a civilian government. The German public would not have hungered for revenge or sought a leader to achieve this. As for Austro-Hungary, a compromise peace probably would have forestalled the disintegration of the country into a group of small states unable to defend themselves against a revived Germany.

Of course, this is only speculation and there are several factors that might have made a compromise peace unattainable.

First were the secret treaties entered into by Britain and France in the course of the war to entice Italy into joining the Allied side in 1915 and to provide an incentive for Russia to remain in the war. Italy, which abandoned its pre-war alliance with Germany and Austria, was promised the South Tyrol, Trieste, and portions of the Adriatic Coast of Austro-

Hungary while Russia was promised Constantinople and other parts of Turkey. The treaty with Russia evaporated after the 1917 Revolution but Italy was determined to secure its promised territories.

Second, there were the enormous casualties suffered by both sides which, while engendering war weariness, also gave rise to the feeling that only victory could atone for the suffering and death experienced. On the Allied side, this feeling was especially prevalent in Britain. Also, for France, a settlement which did not include the return of Alsace-Lorraine, which would have been unacceptable to Germany, would have been hard to swallow.

With the war deadlocked and America still a neutral, these factors might have assumed lesser importance as the war dragged on in 1917. We will never know.

I shall end my paper at this point, with the "what ifs" and "might have beens" unresolved and gradually receding into the mists of history. But remaining is the sadness of what might have been prevented if World War II had been avoided.