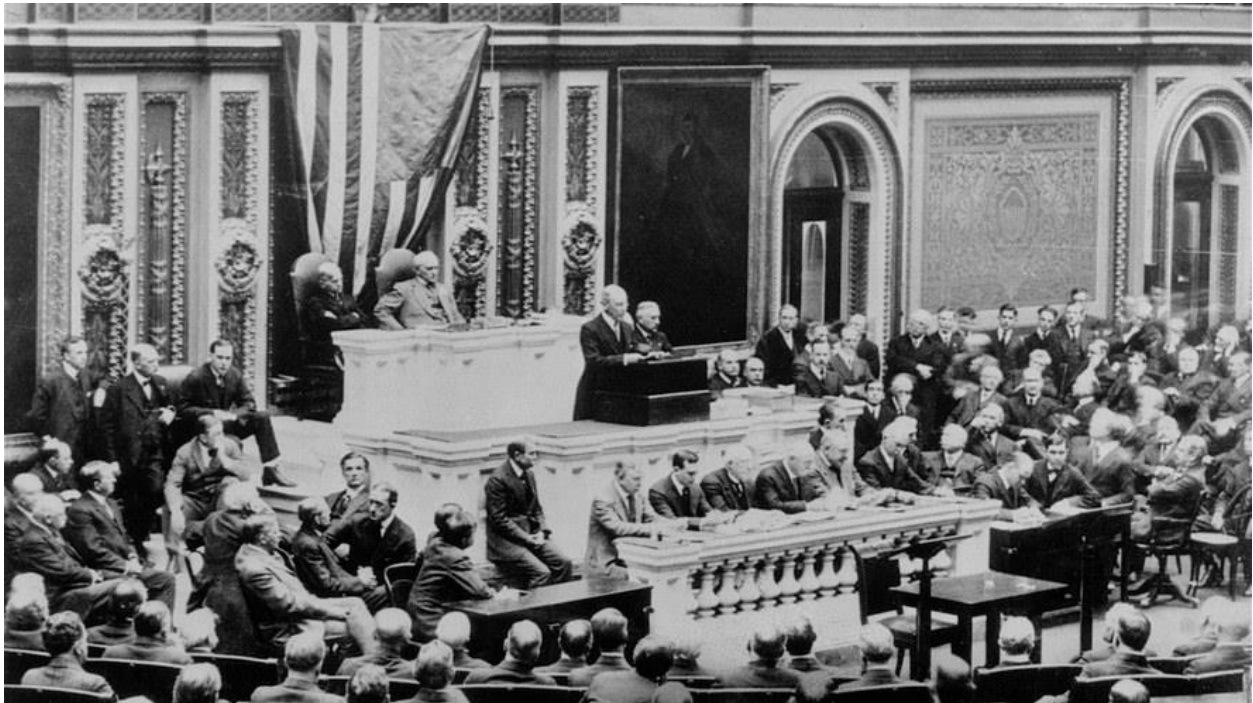


# Wilson's Call to War Pulled America Onto the World Stage in 1917

By The Conversation, adapted by Newsela staff



On April 2, 1917, President Woodrow Wilson addressed Congress. He was there to ask for a declaration of war against Germany.

It was a surprising change. Earlier in his presidency, Wilson came up with the expression “America First.” His supporters waved banners praising him for keeping the United States out of war.

But, now Wilson said that staying out of war was no longer possible. The peace of the world was at stake.

It is important to examine how presidents defend and explain the use of military action.

## **An important moment in history**

Woodrow Wilson was president from 1913 to 1921. During this time, America became involved in World War I. There were two sides. The first was the United States, Great Britain, Russia and France. They fought against Germany, Austria-Hungary, and the Ottoman Empire. Other countries also joined in the fighting.

Wilson is commonly remembered for traveling to Europe after World War I. There, he tried to get countries to agree on terms for peace. He later worked to start the League of Nations. This was the first global group devoted to peace. It was meant to be a strong group that could help prevent wars.

The United States never actually joined the League of Nations because Wilson could not convince Congress that the world needed it.

It was not until after World War II that the U.S. Congress and other world leaders accepted a global peace-keeping group, which would become the United Nations.

Wilson's address to Congress shaped American decisions for the next 100 years. He had to convince Americans to accept great costs to help make peace in a faraway land.

### **Lusitania changes many Americans' thinking**

At the beginning of World War I, Germany often sunk British ships using submarines. Many Americans did not see this as their concern. However, that changed on May 7, 1915, when a German submarine sunk the RMS Lusitania. It sank in just 18 minutes, killing 1,198 people. It was a British ship, but there were 128 Americans on board.

Wilson responded by making an agreement with Germany. They said they would limit their submarine activity. This included restrictions on what kinds of ships could be targeted and what warnings should be provided before Germany attacked.

But as the war became more serious in 1916, these negotiations fell apart. The Germans believed they could end the war quickly by being more forceful. On January 31, 1917, the German government announced it would start fully unrestricted submarine warfare again.

### **Both freedom and liberty**

Weeks later, Wilson marched to the podium and faced Congress. He explained that German submarine attacks represented attacks on all mankind.

Americans had long resisted engaging in European politics. The distance across the Atlantic Ocean made European problems seem far away. Wilson's reasons for going to war changed how the United States interacted with the rest of the world.

Wilson wanted the world to be based on liberty. He felt Germany's use of submarines as a weapon threatened everyone.

“The world must be made safe for democracy,” the president told Congress.

### **Wilson gets his war declaration**

President Wilson's speech succeeded. His call for war received praise from the major daily newspapers. Congress declared war on Germany on April 6.

Historian John Milton Cooper Jr. has written much about Wilson. He described this speech as the most important and greatest speech of Wilson's life.

Wilson's complicated life would soon take a sad turn. His efforts to create peace and his League of Nations left him exhausted. He had a stroke and died in 1924.

### **How to remember him**

Wilson should be remembered for how he changed his mind. He won re-election for keeping America out of foreign wars. Then, he led the United States into one of the bloodiest wars of the 1900s.

Today, leaders on both sides of the Atlantic still struggle to understand their relationships with other countries. Wilson's words continue to have a powerful meaning.

*Gordon Stables is a professor at the University of Southern California.*