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President Wilson and the Decision for War

The causes of America's entry into the First World War have been debated by scholars for more than 75 years. The so called "Revisionist" school "denied that the government had been genuinely neutral (and) asserted that war had been forced upon Germany by America."¹ British propaganda, economic ties, and pro-allied sentiments were the key factors causing war. Studies since 1945 point to the factors of public opinion and Germany's unrestricted submarine warfare as the causes for America's entry into the war.

A study of President Wilson's decision making within the bureaucratic political context of his day provides another viewpoint. Evidence suggests that domestic political pressures, not national security reasons, forced President Wilson to request a declaration of war on Germany in April 1917. This paper will begin with an investigation of the organizations and key players involved in decision making, and then examine key decisions leading to America's entry into the First World War.

Decision Making Channels and Key Players

A small staff to support the President, a weak State Department, and a Congress inclined to let the chief executive run foreign policy matters were the major characteristics of organizations supporting foreign policy

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decision making during Wilson's presidency. No elaborate apparatus existed for thinking about foreign affairs, collecting intelligence, presenting options, or planning strategy. Foreign policy decision making relied on Congress -for legislative support and a link to public opinion, advice from a small group of advisors, and the personal skills of the President.

Wilson's Office consisted chiefly of an assistant, a stenographer, and several typists.² This small staff naturally led the chief executive to rely heavily on his principal department secretaries as advisers.³ Wilson's Cabinet met regularly with the President and advised him on both domestic and foreign matters. The President also used Colonel E.M. House, a wealthy Texas political organizer, as a defacto chief of staff, foreign emissary, and trusted informal adviser.

President Wilson frequently composed his own letters to heads of state and conducted diplomacy. Wilson relied on his Secretary of State for advice and mainly the execution of policy. This is not surprising considering the nature of the State Department. Compared with the Post Office, Treasury, and Interior, "the State Department was one of the smaller departments of the federal government (lacking even) a good system of intelligence."⁴ The Democrats had been out of power for so long that few talented people were available for political appointments.

The Legislative Branch of the federal government was mainly involved in domestic policy making and conditioned to allow the President a very loose rein in foreign policy. Republican presidents before Wilson, especially Theodore Roosevelt, significantly expanded executive powers in foreign affairs without much resistance from Congress.⁵ Wilson continued this precedent during a crisis with Japan and then Mexico. The Senate Committee on Foreign Relations and the House Committee on Foreign Affairs

frequently reflected the public's general anti-war sentiment when legislating, but invariably supported the President. Wilson suffered only one legislative defeat - a bill permitting naval gun crews on merchantmen. Congress was a valuable representative of public opinion, but sensitive to forcing the President's hand in foreign relations.⁶

The Decision for Neutrality

President Wilson declared America's neutrality on 4 August 1914, the same day that Germany invaded Belgium. His decision to remain neutral was a product of his character, the advice of Secretary of State Bryan, and public opinion. National security considerations were not a significant factor.

Wilson's convictions and Bryan's influence inclined the President toward neutrality. The President's speech to the Senate on 19 August 1914 revealed a man who believed that America was committed to peace.⁷ Bryan's well known pacifist beliefs and his frequent contacts with the President reinforced Wilson's decision. Colonel House indicated this in a 5 August letter telling Wilson to take credit for the policy of neutrality and not link it to Secretary Bryan.⁸

Public opinion played an important role in influencing the President. Wilson made the point on several occasions that he was "under bonds to public sentiment."⁹ Newspapers discussed the public's opinion before the war and found that the American public favored the allies, but a strong minority supported the Central Powers. Almost a third of America's 1914 population of 92 million were first or second generation immigrants from Europe; German-Americans numbered over eight million.¹⁰ Despite ethnic ties, Americans "were in no mood to go to war to save the Entente Powers

from German defeat, ...(and were) rejoicing that no entangling alliance with a European Power made it necessary for the United States to enter the war."¹¹ Wilson did not hesitate to declare a policy of neutrality.

The war's impact on America's security interests received little thought. Cabinet discussions prior to the war and Wilson's correspondence showed scant concern for American national security interests. Colonel House suggested in a 22 August 1914 letter to Wilson that, "Germany's success will ultimately mean trouble for us."¹² Wilson dismissed the thought. He believed that if Germany won, she would need a long period to recover. He told House that "no European power offered an immediate menace to the United States."¹³ In contrast, Colonel House's letters indicate considerable discussions concerning American security interests with Mexico, Panama, and South American countries.¹⁴ Events in Europe were too far removed to threaten America's interests.

The Decision to Export War Supplies

The President's decision to allow the export of war supplies was caused by his belief that Americans wanted to remain neutral. His initial efforts focused on ways to preserve neutrality and protect the nation's rights as a neutral. His actions with Congress on the export issue reflected the influence of public opinion.

Wilson carefully articulated the internationally accepted rights of neutrals in his 4 August 1914 "Proclamation of Neutrality." The commercial manufacture and sale of war supplies to belligerents was permitted because it was a fundamental right of a neutral party.¹⁵ On 5 August Secretary Bryan officially banned the sale of all government-owned munitions to belligerents; private industry shipments were excluded.¹⁶ Bryan worked

closely with Wilson to insure accepted international practices were reflected in neutrality rules. The President believed the American people expected him to implement neutrality and protect U.S. rights.

Public opinion caused the President to defeat subsequent Congressional efforts to ban the export of war supplies. Although private industry could sell supplies to all belligerents, the British blockade of German ports and Germany's weak surface fleet made the policy heavily weighted toward the Allies. Segments of American society viewed this as "inconsistent with (our) professed neutrality," and pressured Congress to completely prohibit the export of munitions.¹⁷ Legislation was introduced in December 1914 and newspapers took up the debate.

Public opinion clearly favored continuing the export of war supplies. A January 1915 Literary Digest poll of the nation announced that 55% were not in favor of stopping exports, 38% favored a ban on the sale of supplies, and 7% were noncommittal. Significantly, large industrial cities in the East favored continuing exports, while the Midwest and Pacific Coast supported the legislation.¹⁸

Aware of the public's support for neutrality and the export of war supplies, the President acted to stop legislation aimed at blocking munition sales. A note to the Secretary of State on 7 January 1915 directed Bryan to inform the House Committee on Foreign Affairs that any restrictive legislation would be viewed as unneutral. That message to the House and a subsequent letter by Bryan to the Chairman of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations "effectively discouraged any further attempts to introduce legislation of a restrictive character."¹⁹

The Decision to Grant Loans to Belligerents

The neutrality policy that permitted the export of war supplies also forbade loans by American banks to the belligerents. A State Department note of 15 August 1914 signed by Bryan declared any such loans as "inconsistent with the true spirit of neutrality."²⁰ Bryan's memoirs depict the President in complete agreement.²¹ Wilson subsequently reversed this policy. Election year promises, public opinion, and pressure from businesses were key factors in the decision. The President's actions were caused by pressures to end a business recession and sustain economic prosperity.

Woodrow Wilson, like most newly-elected presidents, was subject to implementing his campaign promises. His "New Freedom" program would accomplish many goals, including lifting the country out of a recession.²² But economic recovery did not come, and as 1914 passed into mid-year "there wasa sense of creeping paralysis upon the air (that many) traced to the lowered tariffs, anti-trust activities, and to governmental interference."²³ Wilson was sensitive to getting the economy moving.

Banking interests during August 1914 realized that a ban on all forms of loans would soon stop orders for war supplies. The banking industry and Counsellor Robert Lansing of the State Department exerted strong pressure on the President to permit some sort of credit.²⁴ This caused Wilson in October 1914 to modify his stance and allow "credit loans" based on America's balance of trade deficit with European countries.²⁵ Although the immediate credit problem was resolved, a long-term solution was required. Bryan and the State Department continued with the policy banning private loans to the Allies.²⁶

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Bryan resigned as Secretary of State on 8 June 1915 after determining that he could no longer influence the President and that America was drifting into a war with Germany.²⁷ Wilson replaced Bryan with Robert Lansing.

By 30 June 1915 the ballance of trade had shifted heavily to America, and the belligerents again needed money.²⁸ A September 1915 letter from Lansing to Wilson explained the renewed loan dilemma: ²⁹

If the European countries cannot find means to pay for the excess of goods sold to them over those purchased from them, they will have to stop buying and our present export trade will shrink proportionately. The result would be restriction of outputs, industrial depression, idle capital and labor, numerous failures, financial demoralization, and general unrest and suffering among the laboring classes.

Wilson took heed of the letter and other advisers and agreed that the government would neither block nor endorse private loans.³⁰ A statement issued to the press on 29 November 1915 by the Federal Reserve Board explained the new policy, and at once "created a sensation."³¹ The weight of economic affairs significantly influenced the mechanics of neutrality. The President resolved the loan dilemma in favor of the American economy.

The Decision for War

America's trade policy and pressure from the public, not national security concerns, caused President Wilson to request a declaration of war.

Public opinion continued to guide the President during the year preceding America's entry into the war. The desire for neutrality surged in 1916 as a stalemate on the battlefield, British seizures of American transatlantic mail, and a ruthless British reaction against the Irish rebellion "fueled an outburst of neutralism among Americans."³² Wilson's

November 1916 reelection campaign resounded with the slogan, "He kept us out of war." He worked tirelessly during the final months of 1916 and January 1917 for a peace conference.³³

The continued export of war supplies, made possible by a policy that condoned foreign loans, allowed Germany two reasonable options: defeat or unrestricted submarine warfare. The war had turned into a contest of economic exhaustion. Hindenburg reflected this dilemma when he told the Reichstag, "It was our duty to conduct such a U-boat war, since there were no other means at our disposal."³⁴ The German Ambassador notified the Secretary of State on 31 January 1917 that unrestricted submarine warfare would begin the next day.

During January and February 1917 the President remained convinced that America would not enter the war. Colonel House suggested increased military preparedness, and Wilson responded on 4 January, "There will be no war. This country does not intend to become involved in this war."³⁵ He delivered his "peace without victory" speech to the Senate on 22 January, and maintained his optimism even after ordering a break in diplomatic relations with Germany.³⁶ As late as 23 February he scolded his cabinet for thinking war was inevitable.³⁷

Public opinion dramatically changed with the revelation of the Zimmerman telegram and the subsequent sinking of four U.S. ships during March. The Zimmerman telegram disclosed a proposed alliance between Germany, Mexico, and Japan against the U.S., should America enter the war.³⁸ Colonel House urged publication of the text, and the telegram was provided to the press on 1 March. "Public indignation at German villainy was so instant and decisive that the President felt safe in placing armament upon American merchant ships...."³⁹ Between 14 and 18 March four American

ships were sunk by German submarines. Anti-pacifist demonstrations erupted, the American Federation of Labor changed its position and supported war, and newspapers demanded action.⁴⁰ The Cabinet unanimously recommended war during a 20 March meeting.

President Wilson's decision reflected the opinion of the American people, as it had so often since the war began. The President asked Congress on 2 April to declare war on Germany, and on 6 April, after a symbolic attempt by a small group of pacifists to stop the resolution, Congress launched America into the First World War.

Conclusion

Public opinion and Wilson's strong convictions for peace were the foundation of the decision for neutrality; national security interests were not perceived as threatened. Wilson's insistence for implementing neutrality in accordance with commonly accepted international laws led to a policy allowing the export of commercial war supplies. Public opinion, election promises, and business pressures caused the President to defeat anti-export legislation. Economic considerations caused Wilson to reverse his previous loan policy in order to sustain a growing economy. The President's economic policies of neutrality left Germany with no viable option but unrestricted submarine warfare. The Zimmerman telegram and ship sinkings enraged American public opinion. Domestic political pressures, not national security reasons forced President Wilson to request a declaration of war on Germany in April 1917.

Implications

Events leading to America's entry into the First World War provide several useful insights for national security decision making. Economic entanglements can draw a nation into war. The globalization of business has dramatically increased, and international companies operate relatively free of regulations. Governments will find it very difficult to shape national security issues or design successful strategies when multinational business is a player. A government may be powerless to prevent war.

Economic ties may preclude a nation from following a true policy of neutrality. The growth of multinational corporations has woven a web of interlocking assembly plants, research, and financial interests. A threat upon one country could likely pose an economic threat upon other states. The power of an aggressor may likely depend upon business interests in other countries. Neutrality will be a difficult policy to execute.

Military flexibility in response to a crisis is essential for preserving diplomatic elasticity. This is an important consideration for reshaping America's armed forces. Our force structure should provide multiple means for a military response to a crisis situation. Our doctrine should reflect the complete integration of each service component in joint operations at the operational and tactical levels. A smaller military force can be a more effective political tool.

Notes

- ¹ Daniel M. Smith, ed., American Intervention, 1917: Sentiment, Self Interest, or Ideals? (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1966) xi.
- ² Arthur S. Link, Woodrow Wilson - Revolution, War, and Peace, (Arlington Heights, Illinois: AHM Pub. Corp., 1979) 15.
- ³ George C. Edwards III and Stephen J. Wayne, Presidential Leadership, (New York: St. Martins Press, 1990) 165-166.
- ⁴ Link 15.
- ⁵ Samuel F. Wells, Jr., The Challenges of Power - American Diplomacy, 1900-1921, (New York: University Press of America, 1990) 49-76.
- ⁶ Charles C. Tansill, America Goes To War, (Gloucester, Mass. : Peter Smith, 1938) 472-486.
- ⁷ U.S. Department of State, Papers relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States, 1914 Supplement (Washington: GPO, 1928) 551-552.
- ⁸ Charles Seymour, The Intimate Papers of Colonel House (New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1926) vol. 2; 282, 284.
- ⁹ Charles Seymour, American Neutrality, 1914-1917 (1935; Yale University Press, 1967) 2-4.
- ¹⁰ Smith 7-12.
- ¹¹ Tansill 31.
- ¹² Charles Seymour, The Intimate Papers of Colonel House vol. 1; 285.
- ¹³ E. May, "The Last Crisis", American Intervention, 1917, ed. Dan Smith 250.
- ¹⁴ Seymour, The Intimate Papers of Colonel House vol. 1; 207-234.
- ¹⁵ Smith 3,4.
- ¹⁶ Tansill 36.
- ¹⁷ Tansill 37.

- 18 Tansill 37-39.
- 19 Tansill 34-42.
- 20 Note of 15 August 1914, U.S. Department of State, Papers relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States, 1914 Supplement (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1928) 580.
- 21 William Jennings Bryan and Mary Baird Bryan, The Memoirs of William Jennings Bryan (Philadelphia: Winston Pub, 1925) 375.
- 22 Walter Millis, Road to War, America 1914-1917 (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Riverside Press, 1935) 6-9.
- 23 Millis 14,15.
- 24 Tansill 74-78.
- 25 Tansill 104.
- 26 Tansill 75.
- 27 Tansill 333-339.
- 28 Seymour, American Neutrality, 1914-1917 100.
- 29 Seymour, American Neutrality, 1914-1917 100,101.
- 30 Tansill 120.
- 31 Tansill 121.
- 32 Link 52-53.
- 33 Link 53-58.
- 34 Seymour, American Neutrality, 1914-1917 69.
- 35 Seymour, The Intimate Papers of Colonel House vol. 2; 412.
- 36 Tansill 646-648.
- 37 Millis 402.
- 38 Millis 404.
- 39 Tansill 654.
- 40 Tansill 413-419.

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