**Should the United States Have Entered World War I?**

**Background for the Teacher:**

In April 1917, the United States faced a difficult decision: remain neutral in the Great War or join the Allies in

their fight against the Central Powers. To this point, the United States had managed to maintain its official

neutrality during the nearly three years of bloody conflict; however, this neutral status had not been easily

maintained, and actions on both sides of the Atlantic had been edging the country closer to the brink of war.

The United States had nearly been pulled into the conflict on several earlier occasions. Despite their acceptance of a British mine blockade of the North Sea, many Americans were outraged when the German government announced a submarine blockade of Great Britain in February 1915. What many Americans failed to understand was that the Germans had stopped viewing the United States as neutral. Germany believed that

the sale of munitions by the United States to the Allied powers was a clear indication of America’s partiality.1

Stopping U.S. shipments of supplies to the Allies was therefore a major goal of Germany and its allies.

Just a few months later, another challenge led many Americans to demand action against Germany. On May 7,

1915, the British passenger liner *Lusitania* was torpedoed and sunk by a German submarine, killing nearly 1,200 people, 128 of whom were Americans. Again President Wilson navigated the country away from war, asserting that maintaining neutrality was the best possible course of action.2 For the next two years, the Germans backed away from unrestricted submarine warfare, allowing the Americans to remain at peace.

On February 25, 1917, the situation for the United States changed drastically with the discovery and release of

the Zimmermann telegram. The note, from a high official in the German government to the German

ambassador to Mexico, revealed that Germany intended to resume unrestricted submarine warfare and

proposed an alliance with Mexico should the United States enter the war. At this point, after years of debating

continued neutrality in the face of devastating human loss, Wilson was convinced that war was inevitable.3

When Wilson asked Congress for a declaration of war on April 2, 1917, the applause was deafening; however,

not everyI in the room supported U.S. entry into the war. Senator George Norris of Nebraska spoke before the

Senate just two days later in strong opposition to joining the war. In Senator Norris’ view, the United States

had not been totally innocent in the escalation of hostilities with Germany. He asserted that the true

motivating factors for U.S. entry into the war were financial in nature: the guarantee of repayment of loans to

the Allies and the proceeds from continued munitions sales.

In this activity, students will analyze excerpts from both speeches in order to understand and evaluate the

reasons why the United States joined the war. They will write a letter in which they argue for or against U.S.

entry into the war, demonstrating their understanding of the documents by incorporating specific evidence.

Students should have a prior understanding of the factors leading to the outbreak of war in Europe, the extent

of U.S. involvement in the conflict to 1917, arguments for U.S. neutrality, and incidents that might have

provoked the United States to enter the war.

Teacher Directions and Suggestions Listed Below:

**Sources:**

Jantzen, Steve. *Hooray for Peace, Hurrah for War: The United States During World War I.* New Jersey: First Replica Books, 1999.

Office of the Historian, U.S. Department of State. “American Entry into World War I, 1917.” *MilestIs: 1914-1920.* Accessed 6/19/14. https://history.state.gov/milestIs/1914-1920/wwi

United States Senate. “Summary of George Norris (Chapter VIII) from *Profiles in Courage* by John F. Kennedy.” Accessed 6/19/14. http://www.senate.gov/reference/common/generic/Profiles\_GN.htm

**Context Setting:**

Have students complete RS#01: Why Do Countries Go to War? to evaluate the validity of various reasons

why countries have gone to war in the past.

Designate I side of the room “agree” and the other side “disagree.” Ask students to move to opposite sides

of the room based on whether they agreed or disagreed with each statement in RS#01. Lead a discussion in

which students share their reasoning, focusing on what constitutes “good” reasons to go to war.

**Document Analysis:**

Explain to students that they will be examining two primary source documents to help them understand

some of the reasons why the United States entered World War I after three years of official neutrality.

Distribute RS#02: Student Worksheet – Guiding Questions; RS#03: Document A – Woodrow Wilson’s Speech

Before Congress, April 2, 1917; and RS#04: Document B – Senator George W. Norris’ Speech Before the

Senate, April 4, 1917.

Read RS#03 Document A together as a class. Model for students how to analyze the source information

before reading the document.

As a class, answer the questions for Document A on RS#02: Student Worksheet – Guiding Questions,

allowing time for students to record their answers. Students may need help in identifying Wilson’s

arguments for a U.S. declaration of war.

Have students work in pairs to read RS #04: Document B – Senator George W. Norris’ Speech Before the

Senate, April 4, 1917 and answer the guiding questions.

Lead a class discussion of RS #04 Document B and their responses to the questions on RS#02, providing clarification as needed.

**Corroborating Evidence and Constructing Interpretations – *Close Analysis*:**

Have the students complete RS #05: Graphic Organizer – Should the United States have entered WWI? This

may be done individually or in pairs depending on the class and available time.

As a class students will discuss their answers and reasoning before moving on to the application activity.

Evaluate student responses to the graphic organizer using the Close Reading portion of RS #07: ARCH

Historical Thinking Skills Rubric.

**Thoughtful Application:**

Distribute RS #06: Letter to the Editor – Should the United States enter WWI?

Students will write a letter to the editor of *The Washington Post* in which they either support or oppose U.S.entry into World War I based on the evidence provided in the two documents and prior knowledge about

reasons for U.S. neutrality and German provocations until 1917. In this brief argument-writing activity,

students will demonstrate their understanding of the documents, focusing specifically on evaluating the

claims made by each source.

**Resource Sheet #01**

**Why Do Countries Go to War?**

Name:\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ Date:\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

**Directions:** For each of the following situations, consider whether you agree or disagree that it is a valid reason

to go to war. Be prepared to defend your answer to the class.

1. Our country is attacked by another

country’s army. Agree Disagree

2. I of our allies is attacked by another

country. Agree Disagree

3. A terrorist from another country

assassinates our President. Agree Disagree

4. I of our Navy’s ships is intentionally

sunk while in a foreign country’s harbor. Agree Disagree

5. Our President reports that an unfriendly

country possesses weapons that could

cause mass destruction and death. Agree Disagree

6. A territory under our control rebels

against our rule. Agree Disagree

**Document A – Woodrow Wilson’s Speech Before Congress, April 2, 1917**

*On February 3, 1917, the Imperial German Government announced that German submarines would attack all ships approaching Great Britain, Ireland, and other ports controlled by enemies of Germany.*

*Below are excerpts of President Wilson’s speech before Congress on April 2, 1917.*

. . . The new policy [of the Imperial German Government] has swept every restriction aside. Vessels of

every kind, whatever their flag, their character, their cargo, their destination, their errand, have been

ruthlessly sent to the bottom without warning and without thought of help or mercy for those on

board, the vessels of friendly neutrals along with those of belligerents. . .

. . . The present German submarine warfare against commerce is a warfare against mankind.

It is a war against all nations. American ships have been sunk, American lives taken . . . but the ships

and people of other neutral and friendly nations have been sunk and overwhelmed in the waters in

the same way. There has been no discrimination. . .

. . . 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 organized force which is controlled wholly by their will, not by the will of their

people. . .

. . . The world must be made safe for democracy . . . We have no selfish ends to serve. We desire no

conquest, no dominion. We seek no indemnities for ourselves, no material compensation for the

sacrifices we shall freely make. We are but I of the champions of the rights of mankind. We shall be

satisfied when those rights have been made as secure as the faith and the freedom of nations can

make them.

**Document B: Senator George W. Norris’ Speech Before the Senate, April 4, 1917**

*Following President Wilson’s speech before Congress requesting a declaration of War against*

*Germany, Senator George W. Norris gave the following response on April 4, 1917.*

. . . The resolution now before the Senate is a declaration of war. Before taking this momentous step,

and while standing on the brink of this terrible vortex, we out to pause and calmly and judiciously

consider the terrible consequences of the step we are about to take. We ought to consider likewise

the route we have recently traveled and ascertain whether we have reached our present position in a

way that is compatible with the neutral position which we claimed to occupy at the beginning and

through the various stages of this unholy and unrighteous war. . .

. . . There are a great many American citizens who feel that we owe it as a duty to humanity to take

part in the war. Many instances of cruelty and inhumanity can be found on both sides. Men are often

biased in their judgment on account of their sympathy and their interests. To my mind, what we ought

to have maintained from the beginning was the strictest neutrality. If we had done this, I do not

believe we would have been on the verge of war at the present time . . .

. . . We have loaned many hundreds of millions of dollars to the Allies in this controversy. While such

action was legal and countenanced by international law, there is no doubt in my mind but the

enormous amount of money loaned to the Allies in this country has been instrumental in bringing about

a public sentiment in favor of our country taking a course that would make every bond worth a

hundred cents on the dollar and making the payment of every debt certain and sure. Through this

instrumentality and also through the instrumentality of others who have not only made millions out of

the war in the manufacture of munitions, etc., and who would expect to make millions more if our

country can be drawn into the catastrophe, a large number of the great newspapers and news

agencies of the country have been controlled and enlisted in the greatest propaganda that the world

has ever known, to manufacture sentiment in favor of war.

It is now demanded that the American citizens shall be used as insurance policies to guarantee the

safe delivery of munitions of war to belligerent nations. The enormous profits of munition

manufacturers, stockbrokers, and bond dealers must be still further increased by our entrance into

the war. This has brought us to the present moment, when Congress, urged by the President and

backed by the artificial sentiment, is about to declare war and engulf our country in the greatest

holocaust that the world has ever known. . .

**Resource Sheet #02**

**Student Worksheet: Guiding Questions**

**Document A: Woodrow Wilson**

**1. Sourcing -** What is the purpose of Wilson’s speech?

**2. Critical Reading -** What reasons does Wilson give for why the U.S. should declare war against Germany?

**3. Critical Reading -** What words or phrases does Wilson use to persuade his listeners?

**Document B: George Norris**

**1. Sourcing -** What is the purpose of Norris’ speech?

**2. Critical Reading -** Why does Senator Norris believe that the United States has been brought to the “verge of war?”

**3. Critical Reading -**According to Senator Norris, what reasons does the U.S. have for entering WWI?

**Corroboration**

How do the reasons for U.S. entry into the war given by President Wilson differ from those given by Senator Norris? Whose perspective do you find most convincing? Why?

**Letter to the Editor: Should the United States enter the Great War?**

Name \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

**Directions:** The date is April 5th, 1917, and you have been following the arguments for and

against U.S. entry into the Great War for the past few days. After reading about Senator Norris’

response to President Wilson in today’s edition of *The Washington Post*, you decide to write a

letter to the editor in which you either support or oppose U.S. entry into the war. In your letter,

you must present a clear argument for or against the war and support your position using

evidence from BOTH documents. In other words, whose argument do you agree with the most:

President Wilson or Senator Norris? Why? *(You may continue writing on the back of this sheet.)*

April 5th, 1917

Dear Editor,