

Why did the United States enter the Great War (World War I)?

A) Secretary of State William Jennings Bryan to President Woodrow Wilson, August 10, 1914:

Money is the worst of all contrabands because it commands everything else. . . . I know of nothing that would do more to prevent war than an international agreement that neutral nations would not loan to belligerents. . . . We are the one great nation which is not involved, and our refusal to loan to any belligerent would naturally tend to hasten a conclusion of the war. . . .

If we approved of a loan to France we could not, of course, object to a loan to Great Britain, Germany, Russia, or to any other country, and if loans were made to these countries, our citizens would be divided into groups, each group loaning money to the country which it favors and this money could not be furnished without expressions of sympathy. These expressions of sympathy are disturbing enough when they do not rest upon pecuniary interests -- they would be still more disturbing if each group was pecuniarily interested in the success of the nation to whom its members had loaned money.

The powerful financial interests which would be connected with these loans would be tempted to use their influence through the newspapers to support the interests of the Government to which they had loaned because the value of the security would be directly affected by the result of the war. We would thus find our newspapers violently arrayed on one side or the other, each paper supporting a financial group and pecuniary interest, All of this influence would make it all the more difficult for us to maintain neutrality as our action on various questions that would arise would affect one side or the other and powerful financial interests would be thrown into the balance.... As we cannot prevent American citizens going abroad at their own risk, so we cannot prevent dollars going abroad at the risk of the owners, but the influence of the Government is used to prevent American citizens from doing this. Would the Government not be justified in using its influence against the enlistment of the nation's dollars in a foreign war?

B) U.S. Trade with Belligerents, 1914-1916

Nation	1914	1915	1916	% change
Great Britain	\$594 million	\$912 million	\$1,527 million	+ 257%
France	\$160 million	\$369 million	\$629 million	+ 393%
Italy	\$74 million	\$185 million	\$269 million	+ 364%
Germany	\$345 million	\$29 million	\$290 thousand	- 1,150%

C) British Propaganda: Viscount Bryce, Report of the Committee on Alleged German Outrages (1915)

“The [German] officer . . . knocked at the door; the peasant did not come. The officer order the soldiers to break down the door, which two of them did. The peasant came and asked what they were doing. The officer said he did not come quickly enough. . . . His hands were tied behind his back and he was shot at once without a moment’s delay.”

The wife can out with a little sucking child. She put the child down and sprang at the German like a lioness. She clawed their faces. One of the Germans took a rifle and struck her a tremendous blow with the butt on the head. Another took his bayonet and fixed it and thrust it through the child. He then put his rifle on his shoulder with the child on it, its little arms stretched out once or twice.”