

**Commentary...**

# An incendiary telegram sends Americans 'Over There'

By **Jim Cornelius**  
News Editor

April 6, 2017, will mark the 100th anniversary of the entry of the United States of America into The Great War.

The U.S. had been officially neutral since the war burst like a sudden summer thunderstorm over Europe in August of 1914. Unlike a summer storm, the war did not pass in a quick, violent spasm. It ground on and on, chewing up thousands, then millions of lives as the allies Great Britain, France and Russia became locked in a death struggle with the Central Powers — Germany, Austria-Hungary and the Ottoman Empire. Most Americans wanted no part of the horrible conflict, though American arms manufacturers and farmers profited handsomely from providing weapons and wheat, almost exclusively to the Allies who, thanks to the British Royal Navy, dominated the seas.

President Woodrow Wilson won re-election in 1916 on the slogan, "He kept us out of war." By then there were also loud voices advocating for intervention on behalf of the Allies, not least from former president Theodore Roosevelt, who saw the war as a struggle for the future of Western Civilization. The Germans, desperate to knock Great Britain out of the war and ease the British naval blockade that was slowly strangling the Reich, decided to initiate unrestricted submarine warfare — knowing that sinking American shipping risked provoking U.S. intervention.

The German General

Staff calculated that they could starve Britain — heavily dependent on American and Canadian foodstuffs, as well as war materiel — out of the war before the U.S. could mobilize an army and send it across the Atlantic. To help ensure that, they schemed to keep the Americans occupied dealing with a military crisis on their southern border. Mexico had been convulsed in revolution since 1910, and much of the paltry military force of the United States was concentrated on the border. In fact, the U.S. Army had spent most of 1916 chasing revolutionary general Pancho Villa across the Chihuahua desert after Villa crossed the border into New Mexico and attacked the small town of Columbus.

The Germans figured that war on the border would prevent the Americans from intervening in Europe, even if unrestricted submarine warfare raised the Americans' ire.

As 1917 dawned, German Foreign Minister Arthur Zimmermann made an offer to the government of Mexican President Venustiano Carranza that he hoped the Mexicans couldn't refuse:

"We intend to begin on the first of February unrestricted submarine warfare. We shall endeavor in spite of this to keep the United States of America neutral. In the event of this not succeeding, we make Mexico a proposal or alliance on the following basis: make war together, make peace together, generous financial support and an understanding on our part that Mexico is to reconquer the

lost territory in Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona. The settlement in detail is left to you. You will inform the President of the above most secretly as soon as the outbreak of war with the United States of America is certain and add the suggestion that he should, on his own initiative, invite Japan to immediate adherence and at the same time mediate between Japan and ourselves. Please call the President's attention to the fact that the ruthless employment of our submarines now offers the prospect of compelling England in a few months to make peace." Signed, ZIMMERMANN.

The German play was not very strong. Carranza hated the Yanquis, but he had his hands full consolidating his own power (he'd be assassinated by his favorite general in 1920) and pacifying his war-torn country, and was in no position to get into a shooting war with the United States, no matter what the territorial enticement.

But the telegram proved much worse than a failed gambit. British intelligence intercepted the cable and decoded it. The British government and its operatives understood that the telegram was explosive, but they were reluctant to release the information to the Americans and tip their hand about their ability to crack the German diplomatic code. They sat on it for three weeks, then

colluded with the Americans to come up with a cover story that the telegram had been stolen in deciphered form in Mexico.

It wasn't a very good story, and a lot of Americans didn't buy it. They — reasonably enough — suspected a British forgery designed to pull the U.S. into the war and the Empire's fat out of the fire. Inexplicably, Arthur Zimmermann himself confirmed the telegram's authenticity, endeavoring to make the Americans understand that as long as the U.S. stayed out of the war, the proposed deal with the Mexicans would never take effect. That was tone deaf, to say the least. Enraged American public opinion turned decisively against Germany, and on April 2, Wilson asked Congress for a Declaration of War.

On April 6, 1917, the United States of America entered the Great War to make the world safe for democracy. Of course, it didn't work out quite that way. America's intervention

did prove decisive. In an unprecedented mobilization effort, the U.S. shipped millions of fresh if inexperienced troops to shore up the Allies on the Western Front in France.

An exhausted, bled-out Germany sought an Armistice in November 1918, and Wilson sailed across the Atlantic — the first time a sitting president had left America's shores — to craft a peace to cap "the war to end all wars."

But what actually came to pass was a peace to end all peace, leading to a second, even more horrific war that would overturn the world order and establish the United States as the dominant player on the international stage. That's the role we continue to play, to our benefit and to our cost, a role we first auditioned for 100 years ago on April 6, 1917.

(PBS will air a new three-part American Experience documentary on the United States involvement in the war starting on April 10.)

**Quality Truck-mounted CARPET CLEANING**  
Quality Cleaning 16 years in Sisters!  
Reasonable Prices — Credit Cards Accepted —  
**ENVIROTECH**  
541-771-5048  
Licensed • Bonded • Insured • CCB#181062  
RESIDENTIAL • COMMERCIAL

## Compost Sale!

**Give Your Garden a Boost.**  
Now through April 30, 2017  
**\$3 Off per cubic yard**  
of BioFine® and SoilBuilder® bulk compost.

**BioFine®**  
Now \$23/yard

**SoilBuilder®**  
Now \$17/yard

**High Country Disposal**  
1090 NE Hemlock Avenue, Redmond  
**541-548-4984**  
highcountrydisposal.com

Open Monday - Friday • We Deliver!

Come celebrate the source of our

# HOPE

Easter Sunrise Service  
8 a.m. (Outdoors)

Easter Breakfast  
8:30-9:45 a.m. (Free)

Easter Worship Celebration 10 a.m.

---

**Shepherd of the Hills Lutheran Church**  
386 N. Fir St., Sisters  
Pastor Ron Gregg, 541-549-5831  
www.shepherdofthehillslutheranchurch.com