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How the War Came to America ---A Bit of Diplomatic History

By the Committee of Public Information

Even at this late-day there are some Americans who have lost sight of the important facts which lead up to the declaration of a state of war between the United States and the Imperial German Government. To refresh the memory of Americans and to refute the slanders of those whose heart is with the German cause this series of articles by the committe on Public Information is being presented. The next issue will carry the history of German transgressions of the laws of nations further.

The outbreak of the war in 1914 caught this nation by surprise. The people of Europe had had at least some warning of the coming storm, but to us such a blind, savage onslaught on the ideals of civilation had appeared impossible.

The war incomprehensible. Either side was championed here by millions living among us who were of European birth. Their contradictory accuations threw our thoughts into disarray, and in the first chaotic days we could see no clear issue that affected our national policy. There was no direct assault on our rights. It seemed at first to most of us a purely European despute, and our minds were not prepared to take sides in such a conflict. The president's proclamation of neutrality was received by us as natural and inevitable. It was quickly followed by his appeal to "the citizens of the Republic."

"Every man who really loves Amerisa will act and speak in the true spirit of neutrality," he said, "which is that of impartially and fairness and friendliness to all concerned. * * * It will be easy to excite passion and difficulty to allay it.'" He expressed the fear that our Nation might become divided in camps of hostile opinion. "Such divisions among us * * * seriously stand in the way of the proper preformance of our duty as the one great nation at peace, the one people holding itself ready to play a part of impartial meditation and speak councels of peace and accomodation, not as a partisan, but as a friend."

This purpose—the preservation of a strict neutrality in order that later we might be of use in the great task of mediation, dominated all the President's early speches.

"We are the mediating Nation of the world," he declared in an address on April 20, 1915. "We are compounded of the nations of the world; we mediate their blood, we mediate their traditions, we mediate their sentiments, their tastes, their passions; we are ourselves compounded of those things. We are, therefore, able to understand them in the compound, not separately as partisans, but united as knowing and comprehending and embodying them all. It is in that sense tha I mean that America is a mediating Nation."

American neutrality, in those first months of the great war, was beyond any question real.

But the spirit of neutrality was not easy to maintain. Public opinion was deeply stirred by the German invasion of Belgium and by reports of atrocities there. The Royal Belgium Commission, which came in September, 1914, to lay their country's cause for complaint before our National Government, was received with sympath and respect. The President in his reply reserved our decision in the affair. It was the only course he could take without an abrupt departure from our most treasured traditions of noninterference in Old World desputes. "But the sympathy of America went out to the Belgians in their heroic tragedy, and from every section of our land money contributions and supplies of food and clothing poured over to the Commission for Relief in Belgim, which was under the able management of our fellow countrymen abroad.

Still, the thought of taking an active part in this European was very far from most of our minds. The Nation shared with the President the belief that by maintaining a strict neutrality we could best serve Europe at the end as impartial mediators.

But in the very first days of the war our Government foresaw that complications on the seas might put us in risk of being drawn into the conflict. No neutral nation could foretell what violations of its vital intergsts at sea might be attempted August 6, 1914, our secretary of State dispatched an identical note to all the powers then at war, calling attention to the risk of seriour trouble arising out of this uncertainty of neutrals as to their maritime rights and proposing that the declaration of London be accepted by them for the duration for the war.

But the British Government's response while expressing sympathy with the purpose of our suggestion and declaring that "keen desire to consult so far as posrible the interests of the nuetral countries," announced their decision "to adopt generally the rules of the Declaration in question, subject to certain modifications and additions which they judge indespensable to the effective condect of their naval operations." The Declaration had not been indorsed by any power in time of peace, and there was no legal obligation on Great Britain to accept it. Her reply, however, was disappointing, for it did nothing to clarify the situation. Great Britain recognized as binding certain long accepted principals of international law and sought now to apply them to the peculiar and unforeseen conditions of this war. But these principals were often vague and therefore full of dangerous possibilities of friction.

Controversies soon arose between Great Britian and this Nation. In practice their ruling sometimes seemed to our Government inconsistant with the spirit of international law, and especially with the established precedents with which they invoked. But painful as this divergence of opinion sometimes war, it did not seriously threaten our position of neutrality, for the issues that arose involved only rights of property and were amply covered by the arbitration treaty signed only a short time before by Great Britian and the United States.

And this controversy led to a clearer understanding on our part of the British attitude toward our ideal of the freedom of the seas. They were not willing to accept our classification of the seas as being distinct from the Old World. We had confined our interests to matters affecting rights at sea and had kept carefully aloof from issues affecting the interests of European nations on the land. The British were interested in both. They explained that they had participated in the London naval conference in the hope that it would lead to a sound and liberal entente in the interest of the rights of all nations on the sea and on the land as well, and that they had refused to ratify the London Declaration because no compensating accord to the Contenent had resulted. They could not afford to decrease the striking power of their navy unless their powerful neighbors on land agreed to decrease their armies.

That this attitude of England deeply impressed our Government is shown by the increasing attention given by the United States to the search for ways and means of insuring at the end of the war, a lasting peace for all the world. The address of our president, on May 27, 1916, before the League to Enforce Peace was a milestone in our history. He outlined the main principals on which a stable peace must rest, principles plainly indicate that this nation would have to give up its position of isolation and assume the responsibilities of a world power. The President said:

"So sincerely do we believe these things that I am sure that I speak the mind and wish of the people of America when I say that the United States is willing to become a partner in any feasible association of nations formed in order to realize these objects and make them secure against violation."

It was a new and significant note in our foreign policy. But the mind of America had learned much in the long bitter months of war. Future historians will make charts of this remarkable evolution in our public opinion: the gradual abandonment of the illusion of isolation; the slow growth of a realization that we could not win freedom on the sea—for us a vital interest—unless we consented to do our share in maintaining freedom on land as well, and that we could not have peace in the world, the peace we loved and needed for the perfection of our democracy—unless we were willing and prepared to help to restrain any nation that willfully endangered the peace of the whole world family.

Had this address of the President come before the war. There would have arisen a storm of protest from all sections of the land. But in May, 1916, the Nation's response was emphatic approved.

(Continued Next Week)

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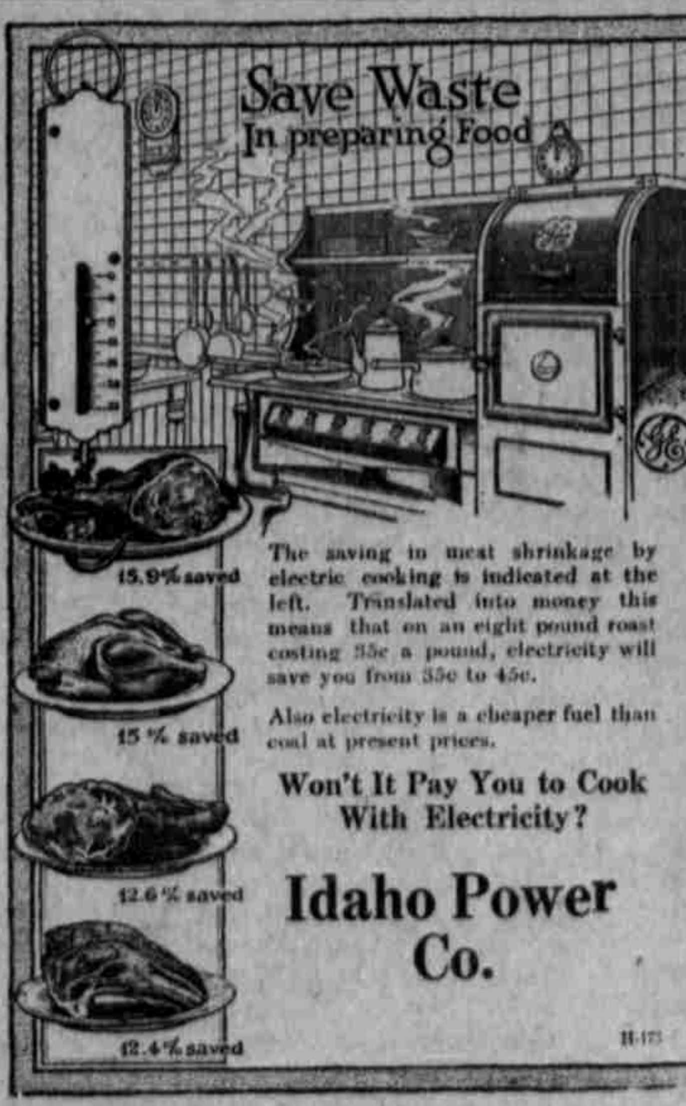

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