

Sinking Into War

WILLIAM JENNINGS BRYAN



(State Historical Society of Wisconsin)

William Jennings Bryan

Thousands cheered as the new president, Woodrow Wilson, finished his inaugural address on March 4, 1913. Then the crowds began to chant: "Bryan! Bryan! Bryan!" They wanted a speech from the new secretary of state, William Jennings Bryan, one of the most popular and dramatic orators of the time. The secretary was a bit embarrassed because the day belonged to the president. He was also flattered and said to his wife, Mary: "It is worth sixteen years of hard work to have devotion like this, isn't it?" Mary agreed.

William Jennings Bryan had been a leading figure in U.S. politics for more than 16 years. He was born in Illinois on March 19, 1860 and reared in a devoutly religious family. He soon became interested in politics and believed that he could apply his religious principles in the making of policy. He moved to Nebraska and was elected to Congress in 1890. He became a part of the *Populist* movement. Among other things, Populists believed that the influence of wealthy easterners should be reduced. Bryan's popularity was such that he was nominated for president three times by the Democrats, but was defeated in each election.

Bryan worked hard to elect Woodrow Wilson, who appointed him secretary of state. Before accepting the appointment, he asked the president to agree to two conditions. One was that Bryan not be expected to serve any alcoholic beverages at diplomatic dinners, where it was traditional to serve wine and other spirits. Bryan opposed drinking on principle and later in his life became an ardent *prohibitionist* (one who believed that alcohol should be outlawed). Wilson agreed that Bryan did not have to serve such drinks.

Bryan was also a *pacifist* (one who opposes war). In a 1909 speech he firmly argued: "When you believe war was the sum of all evils and that no good whatever can come from it, you should be true to that belief not only in times of peace but when war came." Bryan's second condition for accepting appointment as secretary of state was that Wilson be a strong advocate of world peace. Wilson said that he would, and Bryan accepted the appointment.

Bryan's high ideals quickly became a source of controversy. At his first diplomatic luncheon, grape juice was served instead of wine. There were many who supported Bryan's break with tradition, but many others pictured him as a ridiculous character. He was soon known as the "grape juice diplomat." Bryan stood by his beliefs and would not change.

Further controversy followed Bryan. For many years he had earned

money giving speeches and he planned to continue now that he was secretary of state. He said his \$12,000 salary was not enough to cover his personal expenses, which included generous donations to charities and churches. President Wilson did not object, but many others did. Critics said that Bryan was using his important position for personal gain. They said that he knew what his salary would be and should not have accepted the position if he felt the salary was not high enough. Bryan argued that he was speaking for good causes, and that he would be away from his office for only short periods of time. He continued his public speaking. The controversy died down as more significant events faced the nation.

Neither President Wilson nor Secretary Bryan had much experience in foreign affairs. After his election, Wilson said to Bryan that it would be unfortunate if they had to face many serious international problems. Wilson's fears became reality.

In Europe, tensions between the Triple Alliance (Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Italy) and the Triple Entente (England, France, and Russia) led to war in 1914. When war came, the alliances shifted somewhat. The Triple Entente plus Italy and a few other nations became known as the Allies. The Triple Alliance with Germany, Austria-Hungary, Bulgaria, and Turkey became known as the Central Powers. The war between the Allies and the Central Powers soon affected the United States.

In the United States, a day of prayers for peace was organized. In a speech on that day, Bryan said: "Most of the errors which man commits in international affairs arise from a failure to understand the fundamental truth—that moral principles are as binding upon nations as upon individuals. . . . 'Thou shalt not kill' applies to nations as well as to individuals." The pacifist Bryan was pleased that President Wilson said the United States would not take sides in the war. Wilson urged Americans to be neutral in both their words and actions.

As the war progressed, it became difficult for Americans to remain neutral. Two of the warring nations, England and Germany, took actions that violated traditional rules of war and the neutral rights of the United States.

One of the generally accepted rules of war was that the fighting should only be among the troops of each side. Civilians of the warring nations were not to be harmed unless it was unavoidable. Early in the war, England, with superior naval power, declared a blockade of Germany. England wanted to prevent Germany from obtaining mili-

tary supplies. In addition, England tried to prevent food from going to Germany; food that would be used to feed the civilian population as well as soldiers. England even stopped neutral ships from sailing to neutral European ports, because supplies might be taken overland to Germany.

In carrying out its policy, England frequently stopped U.S. ships and took them into British ports where the cargoes were inspected and often detained. U.S. business leaders were outraged, as were many other Americans. The United States protested, but England continued stopping ships.

In retaliation against the British blockade, Germany declared a war zone around England. The Germans intended to use a modern weapon of war—the submarine. The German government warned all neutral nations to keep ships out of the war zone because they might be torpedoed by submarines. British ships often flew the flags of neutral countries such as the United States. England hoped to protect its ships by flying such flags. As a result, Germany said it would not be safe for neutral ships to travel in the war zone.

The United States sent a message to Germany. The message said that Germany should not violate the traditional rules of naval warfare. One of those rules required that ships be stopped and searched to determine if they were carrying supplies for an enemy. Another rule required that a ship's passengers and crew be given time to get into lifeboats before the ship was attacked.

The United States insisted in the message that Germany respect its neutrality. The U.S. government would hold Germany to a "strict accountability" on these matters and would "take any steps it might be necessary to take to safeguard American lives and property and to secure to American citizens the full enjoyment of their acknowledged rights on the high seas."

Finally, the message said that the United States was sending a protest to England over the use of the American flag on British ships. The message was signed by Secretary of State Bryan.

The German government responded by saying it had no intention of harming neutrals. Because the British blockade was intended, in part, to starve innocent German civilians, Germany believed it was justified in striking back with submarines. Submarines could not be expected to follow traditional rules of naval warfare because they could easily be sunk if they showed themselves on the surface. Germany reminded the United States that it had given a general

warning to neutrals to stay out of the war zone and that England continued to use neutral flags to disguise its ships.

The United States remained angry at England's violation of neutral rights. The most severe tensions, however, developed between Germany and the United States. On March 28, 1915, the British liner *Falaba* was torpedoed by a German submarine. One of the passengers who was killed was a U.S. citizen, an engineer on his way to a job in West Africa.

Details of the sinking were unclear, but an American life had been lost and the United States had to respond. Robert Lansing, Wilson's chief legal advisor, argued that Germany's actions were legally and morally indefensible. He said the United States should insist that Germany apologize for the sinking, punish the submarine commander, and pay money for the death of the American.

Bryan disagreed with Lansing. Germany had warned neutrals to stay off British ships, said Bryan, so the American knew he was taking a risk. He said the American was putting his private business interests above the interests of his country. He asked:

[Should a citizen,] by putting his business above his regard for his country, assume for his own advantage unnecessary risks and thus involve his country in international complications? Are the rights and obligations of citizenship so one-sided that the government which represents all the people must bring the whole population into difficulty because a citizen, instead of regarding his country's interests, thinks of himself and his interests?

President Wilson was impressed with the arguments of both Bryan and Lansing, but tended to side with Lansing. Wilson was disgusted with Germany's use of the submarine. He believed Americans had the right to travel where they wished, and the government should protect them when they legally acted on that right. He also noted that England violated U.S. property rights by detaining ships and cargoes; Germany, according to Wilson, was violating rights of life, a more fundamental human right.

Before a final decision was made on how to respond to the *Falaba* incident, a more disastrous event occurred. On May 1, 1915, the following notice was printed in New York newspapers:

Travellers intending to embark on the Atlantic voyage are reminded that a state of war exists between Germany and her allies and Great

Britain and her allies; that the zone of war includes the waters adjacent to the British Isles; that, in accordance with formal notice given by the Imperial German Government, vessels flying the flag of Great Britain, or any of her allies, are liable to destruction in those waters and that travellers sailing in the war zone on ships of Great Britain or her allies do so at their own risk.

The notice had been published by the German embassy. Next to the notice in many of the newspapers was another notice announcing the sailing of the huge British liner, the *Lusitania*. On May 7, 1915, the *Lusitania* was torpedoed without warning in the war zone around Great Britain. About 1,200 people died, including 128 Americans.

William Jennings Bryan, like most Americans, was shocked by the news of the sinking. He feared it would bring war. As he thought about the matter, one idea began nagging him. He said to his wife: "I wonder if that ship carried munitions of war! I will have to investigate that! If she did carry them, it puts a different face on the whole matter! England has been using our citizens to protect her ammunition!" In fact, the *Lusitania* had been carrying four to five thousand cases of ammunition.

Bryan was determined to maintain U.S. neutrality in the face of the *Lusitania* crisis. In discussion with Wilson and others, Bryan argued that Americans should have been prevented from traveling on British ships. He said Germany had a right to prevent ammunition from reaching England. He was angered because he said England was trying to use American citizens to protect shipments of war goods.

President Wilson listened to Bryan's arguments but was more influenced by other advisors. He continued to object to submarine warfare. He said the United States must protect its citizens when they were within their rights to travel on British passenger ships.

On May 13, the United States sent a note to Germany. The note included five major points: (1) submarines cannot be used in war "without an inevitable violation of many sacred principles of justice and humanity"; (2) American citizens had a right to expect their government to protect them in their rights to free travel; (3) the warning in the newspapers could not excuse the "unlawful and inhumane act" that had occurred; (4) Germany should recognize a wrong had been done, prevent it from happening again, and pay for the loss of life; and (5) the United States would not "omit any act necessary to the performance of its sacred duty of maintaining the rights of the United States and its citizens."

Bryan was not pleased with the harsh tone of the note but, as secretary of state, he signed it. Nonetheless, he feared that Germany might think the United States was siding with the Allies.

It is difficult to tell how many Americans supported Bryan's ideas. There was strong sentiment against entering the war. Many believed England had violated the rules of neutrality and hurt the U.S. economy by interfering with trade. There were also those who were outraged by German war methods, such as the use of poison gas and the killing of civilians in Belgium.

It was becoming more difficult for Americans to remain neutral. Former President Theodore Roosevelt believed Germany was acting immorally. He said the nation should take action against wrongdoing. "More and more I come to the view that in a really tremendous world struggle, with a great moral issue involved, neutrality does not serve righteousness; for to be neutral between right and wrong is to serve wrong."

Germany responded to the U.S. protest note by saying the *Lusitania* should not be considered an innocent passenger ship. Germany regretted the loss of American lives but said it was acting "in just self-defense when it seeks to protect the lives of its soldiers by destroying ammunition destined for the enemy." Finally, Germany said the ship's company was to blame for the deaths because it knew it was placing passengers in a dangerous situation.

The German response had failed to address the main points in the U.S. protest note. Nonetheless, Bryan renewed his struggle to preserve neutrality. To protect U.S. citizens he said the United States was "compelled by duty to do what we can to prevent our citizens incurring unnecessary risks." He wanted Wilson to agree that Americans should be prohibited from traveling on British ships, especially those that carried ammunition. He also said a law should be passed preventing passenger ships from carrying ammunition.

Wilson rejected Bryan's advice. For some time, the president had been more influenced by his friend Colonel House and by Robert Lansing. Wilson was convinced that Germany's actions were more severe violations of human rights than the British actions.

Wilson prepared a second protest note to Germany. In it he said the sinking of the *Lusitania* without warning was unacceptable. The German warning to stay away from the war zone could not justify a restriction of the rights of Americans legally to travel on the high seas. Wilson said that the "United States is contending for something much

greater than mere rights of property or privileges of commerce. It is contending for nothing less high and sacred than the rights of humanity."

Bryan had reluctantly signed the first protest note to Germany. He believed he should not sign the second one. His advice had been rejected. To resign from office during a time of international crisis would be a dramatic act. If he resigned, he would probably be called a quitter, a coward, or worse.

As Bryan grappled with these thoughts and feelings, he sought advice from his friend William McAdoo, secretary of the treasury. McAdoo said: "I think you could not make a graver mistake than to resign. I am sure that the note that the President proposes to dispatch to Germany will not lead to war. But if you resign, you will create the impression that there is a difference of opinion in the Cabinet over this serious situation, and you will, I think, contribute to the very result which you are anxious to avoid." President Wilson, upon hearing of Bryan's possible resignation, shared McAdoo's concern and hoped that Bryan would remain in office.

McAdoo also told Bryan that resignation would end his political career. Nonetheless, after careful thought, Bryan responded: "I believe you are right: I think this will destroy me; but whether it does or not, I must do my duty according to my conscience, and if I am destroyed, it is, after all, merely the sacrifice that one must not hesitate to make to serve his God and country."

On June 9, 1915, it was announced that Bryan had resigned. People at home and abroad were startled. There were those who respected his decision and others who were angered. He was called disloyal and a "second Benedict Arnold." One newspaper editorial accused him of being selfish; another claimed it would be a long time before "Americans forgive the man who sulked and ran away when honor and patriotism should have kept him in his post."

Although Bryan was saddened by much of the public response to his resignation, he was determined to work for neutrality and peace. He began a campaign of public speaking, hoping to arouse public opinion against war. He said it would be wrong for the United States to send millions of young men to possible death because a hundred people died on a sinking ship.

Bryan publicly opposed President Wilson's policy of *preparedness*. Wilson wanted to strengthen the military in case of war. Bryan argued that building up the military violated the principle that

America should "influence others by example rather than by exciting fear."

Bryan's efforts for peace could not stop the flow of events that led to America's entrance into the war. Germany continued its policy of submarine warfare. Early in 1917 it was discovered that, in case the United States entered the war, Germany was planning an alliance with Mexico. If Mexico accepted the alliance, Germany would provide support for an invasion of the southwestern United States. The secret German offer, in what was called the Zimmerman note, had been intercepted by British intelligence agents, and sent to the United States.

President Wilson finally decided that the United States must enter the war. On April 2, 1917, he asked Congress to declare war. He said America must help make the world "safe for democracy." Wilson loved peace but, he said: "The right is more precious than peace." By a huge majority, Congress declared war.

Like many pacifists of the time, Bryan faced a dilemma. Now that his country had declared war, should he support the decision or continue to argue against it? Bryan chose to support the president and urged all Americans to unite in working to end the war quickly.

With America's help, the Allies were able to defeat the Central Powers. Over 100,000 Americans died in the war. A truce agreement with Germany was signed on November 11, 1918.

The major sources for this story were:

- Coletta, Paolo E. *William Jennings Bryan, II: Progressive Politician and Moral Statesman, 1909-1915*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1969.
- Devlin, Patrick. *Too Proud to Fight: Woodrow Wilson's Neutrality*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1975.
- Koenig, Louis W. *Bryan: A Political Biography of William Jennings Bryan*. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1971.
- Scott, James B. *Diplomatic Correspondence Between the United States and Germany: August 1, 1914-April 6, 1917*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1918.

ACTIVITIES FOR "SINKING INTO WAR"

Write all answers on a separate sheet of paper.

Historical Understanding

Answer briefly:

1. What was one desire of the Populists?
2. In what ways did Germany and England violate America's neutral rights?
3. What was *preparedness*?
4. Identify two events that led the United States to enter World War I.

Reviewing the Facts of the Case

Answer briefly:

1. What two conditions did President Wilson have to agree to before William Jennings Bryan was willing to become secretary of state?
2. How did Bryan and Robert Lansing disagree over what the United States' response should be to the sinking of the *Falaba*?
3. In what ways did Wilson and Bryan disagree about what should be done after the sinking of the *Lusitania*?
4. What did the United States demand from Germany after the sinking of the *Lusitania*? How did Germany respond?
5. What advice did William McAdoo give Bryan about resignation?
6. What was the reason Bryan resigned?

Analyzing Ethical Issues

There are a number of times in this story where ethical decisions were made. An ethical decision is one in which the rights or well-being of others are involved. List three instances where ethical decisions were made in this story. For example one instance is:

