

President Wilson's Protest to Germany

21 July, 1915

The Government of the United States is not unmindful of the extraordinary conditions created by this war or of the radical alterations of circumstances and method of attack produced by the use of instrumentalities of naval warfare which the nations of the world can not have had in view when the existing rules of international law were formulated, and it is ready to make every reasonable allowance for these novel and unexpected aspects of war at sea; but it can not consent to abate any essential or fundamental right of its people because of a mere alteration of circumstance. The rights of neutrals in time of war are based upon principle, not upon expediency, and the principles are immutable. It is the duty and obligation of belligerents to find a way to adapt the new circumstances to them.

The events of the past two months have clearly indicated that it is possible and practicable to conduct such submarine operations as have characterized the activity of the Imperial German Navy within the so-called war zone in substantial accord with the accepted practices of regulated warfare. The whole world has looked with interest and increasing satisfaction at the demonstration of that possibility by German naval commanders. It is manifestly possible, therefore, to lift the whole practice of submarine attack above the criticism which it has aroused and remove the chief causes of offense.

In view of the admission of illegality made by the Imperial Government when it pleaded the right of retaliation in defense of its acts, and in view of the manifest possibility of conforming to the established rules of naval warfare, the Government of the United States can not believe that the Imperial Government will longer refrain from disavowing the wanton act of its naval commander in sinking the "Lusitania" or from offering reparation for the American lives lost, so far as reparation can be made for a needless destruction of human life by an illegal act.

The Government of the United States, while not indifferent to the friendly spirit in which it is made, can not accept the suggestion of the Imperial German Government that certain vessels be designated and agreed upon which shall be free on the seas now illegally proscribed. The very agreement would, by implication, subject other vessels to illegal attack, and would be a curtailment and therefore an abandonment of the principles for which this government contends, and which in times of calmer counsels every nation would concede as of course. The Government of the United States and the Imperial German Government are contending for the same great object, have long stood together in urging the very principles upon which the Government of the United States now so solemnly insists. They are both contending for the freedom of the seas.

The Government of the United States will continue to contend for that freedom, from whatever quarter violated. without compromise and at any cost. It invites the practical cooperation of the Imperial German Government at this time, when cooperation may accomplish most and this great common object be most strikingly and effectively achieved.... Repetition by the commanders of German naval vessels of acts in contravention of those [neutral] rights must be regarded by the Government of the United States, when they affect American citizens, as deliberately unfriendly.

Source: <http://net.lib.byu.edu/~rdh7/wwi/1915/wilsprot.html>

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