Declaration of War

As war broke out in Europe in 1914, the United States was faced with the decision of becoming involved or staying neutral. There were two sides: the allies, consisting of Russia, France, and Great Britain; and the Central Powers, which was mostly Germany, Turkey, and Austria-Hungary. For over two years, the United States was able to remain neutral in the war, but in 1917, it all changed. On April 2, 1917, President Woodrow Wilson made a plea to Congress asking for a Declaration of War. He wanted to tell everyone the reasons why this was necessary, the motives for needing this, and what it would involve for the American people.

Because President Wilson was originally against the United States entering the war, he had to explain his reasoning behind asking congress to declare war against the Central Powers. Germany had been using submarine warfare, promising to sink any ship without warning that passed through a certain area. Wilson said that this went against limitation of law. “…It was its purpose to put aside all restraints of law or of humanity and use its submarines to sink every vessel that sought to approach either the ports of Great Britain and Ireland or the western coasts of Europe or any of the ports controlled by the enemies of Germany within the Mediterranean” (124). The bombing of any ship that passed, regardless of if it was carrying war supplies or innocent passengers, was an inhumane procedure. As a country that believes in democracy, President Wilson thought that the United States needed to enter the war to protect the world’s right to democracy. The German Government took the lives of many in their actions, and that is a debt that cannot be repaid.

In this address, President Wilson also stated what entering the war would mean for America. The country will need to work together to attain war supplies, finances, and soldiers. He states that at least five thousand men are needed in the armed forces. Many were needed for the Navy, to fight against the German submarines. Wilson said, “The present German submarine warfare against commerce is a warfare against mankind” (124). He wanted an efficient, yet productive, way of taking care of the problem. America needed to put all of its resources together to find a way to end the war.

President Woodrow Wilson made sure that his objectives were clear to congress in this speech. We needed to make sure that the freedom of all peoples remained in place. Wilson believed that it was our responsibility to protect free will. He said, “Our object now, as then, is to vindicate the principles of peace and justice in the life of the world as against selfish and autocratic power…” (125). It was no longer necessary to stay neutral in the war because the peace of the world was at risk. President Wilson felt that, because the United States was a major world power, we had the obligation to secure peace to the other civilized states. We needed to help give a voice to the small countries. There was a need to fight: for justice, for peace, and for liberty.

President Wilson saw it as our duty to engage in the war. To him, the reasons were clear. He just had to convince congress that this was the right move. Democracy must persevere. The rights of the people are far too important to be taken away. This was shown after the German submarine warfare, which sunk ships and took innocent lives. Although America had no problem with German people, we did have a problem with their government. Their offensive stand led a peaceful nation, the United States, into a battle to secure justice. America was once again fighting for the principles that it had in the beginning: peace and happiness.