

# Note Taken!

## An Analysis of The Zimmerman Telegram

*by Joseph P. Guichet*

As late as January 22, 1917, President Woodrow Wilson acted as a peace maker vying to bring the war in Europe to a close through agreement rather than by force, for fear that a militant ending and settlement would not last. <1> In February, as a result of two actions of the German government, the desire of the people and government of the United States to remain neutral dissolved rapidly. These events were the resumption of Germany's unrestricted submarine warfare and the discovery of the Zimmermann Telegram and its contents. Unrestricted submarine warfare meant that any ships, whether enemy mobilization carriers or neutral merchant ships, caught within the area Germany defined as "blockade zones" was to be stopped "with every available weapon and without further notice." <2> The Zimmerman Telegram proposed that Mexico form an alliance with Japan and join the Central Powers against The United States if the U. S. entered the war to aid the Allied Powers. In return, the Germans would help Mexico reconquer territory lost within the States. The U.S. government was enraged and felt betrayed in their quest for peace, while the public turned from a desire for neutrality and urged for the first time that the U.S. enter the war. This new attitude of the public supported President Wilson and drove the United States first to a state of armed neutrality and eventually into the World War.

To better understand why the contents of the Zimmerman Telegram had such a strong effect on the United States, a brief summary of early 20th Century relations between the U. S., Japan, and Mexico is necessary. In 1895, Kaiser Wilhelm of Germany, astonished by Japan's defeat of China in battle, expressed to the world his expectation of Japan rising in the near future into a leading world power, declaring their presence as the "Yellow Peril." <3> Following the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-1905, the Japanese continued to promote their expansion. Europe considered a clash between Japan and the United States inevitable; <4> these two newly powerful nations, both showing the desire for imperialism, were doomed for collision. With the changes in trade and trade regulation approaching as the United States constructed the Panama Canal, the confrontation seemed near. The Kaiser was pleased by his prediction of the "Yellow Peril" and waited hopefully for the hostilities to break. Having a desire to be involved in the conflict, the Kaiser, in January of 1908, revealed to American Ambassador Charlemagne Tower, that ten thousand Japanese soldiers were within Mexican borders preparing to seize the Panama Canal. He U.S. did not respond. Wilhelm fostered the conflict by releasing his information in an interview on October 28, 1908 with the London Daily *Telegraph*. The public of both the United States and of Europe was shaken hard by the news of the coalition between Mexico and Japan. <5>

In February of 1911, German spy Horst von der Goltz was ordered to steal the draft of the secret treaty between Mexico and Japan. The document was then copied and sent to the United States government. Shortly afterward, two-thirds of the U.S. troops were mobilized to the Mexican border. The nation was fearful that a conflict was forthcoming.

All allegations by the Kaiser, however, were dispelled by the U. S. government as fraudulent. Whether the events reported by Germany were actual or fictitious has yet to be resolved, but they were successful in creating a great deal of tension between the nations involved. An alliance between Mexico and Japan against the U. S. was indeed possible. <6>

With the storming of Veracruz, the threat of large scale confrontation continued to intensify as the United States intervened in the political turmoil of Mexico. Hostilities between Japan and the U. S. likewise increased as the result of legal restrictions put on the freedoms of Japanese citizens within the States. As a result of these incidents, the American public felt threatened by a possible Mexican/Japanese alliance and aggression toward the States.

Germany continued to create disorder within Mexico, especially once the European War had begun. By keeping the political situation within Mexico in turmoil, Germany ensured the U.S. focus of attention to remain on the border to its south. Germany was certain that the U.S. would eventually be forced to intervene in the internal Mexican affairs; such an intervention would have reduced the amount of munition available for the U.S. to send to the Allied Forces. <7> Continued relations between the German government and that of Mexico gave Under-Secretary Arthur Zimmermann of Germany the notion to plan for a military alliance between the nations. <8> Using the territories lost by Mexico to the United States, he schemed to lure President Carranza of Mexico into an agreement pledging Mexican military action against the U.S. if they entered the war against Germany. Zimmermann believed in such instance, Mexico would attempt to gain the assistance of Japan by offering an invasion base within Mexican borders. Japan could not refuse such an inviting offer to expand control over the Pacific by gaining territory on the West Coast of North America. The defense from such a Mexican/Japanese alliance was to prevent the United States from opposing the Germans with full strength. The Germans did not however believe that Mexico could be successful in such a campaign, but they would stall the movement of the States against the Central Powers long enough to conclude Germany's defeat of the European Allied Powers. <9> Such plans to keep America out of Europe may have been the actions that brought about Zimmermann's promotion to Foreign Minister on November 22, 1916. <10> On January 17, 1917, Zimmermann sent these plans in a telegram to Herr von Eckhardt, the German Minister at Mexico City, as follows:

BERLIN, January 19, 1917.

On the 1st of February we intend to begin submarine warfare unrestricted. In spite of this, it is our intention to endeavor to keep neutral the United States of America.

If this attempt is not successful, we propose an alliance on the following basis with Mexico: That we shall make war together and together make peace. We shall give general financial support, and it is understood that Mexico is to reconquer the lost territory in New Mexico, Texas, and Arizona. The details are left to you for settlement. You are instructed to inform the President of Mexico of the above in the greatest confidence as soon as it is certain that there will be an outbreak of war with the United States, and suggest that the President of Mexico, on his own initiative, should

communicate with Japan suggesting adherence at once to this plan. At the same time, offer to mediate between Gen, any and Japan.

Please call to the attention of the President of Mexico that the employment of ruthless submarine warfare now promises to compel England to make peace in a few months. ZIMMERMAN. <11>

However, without knowledge of the Germans, British Naval Intelligence had, since the outbreak of war in 1915, been working to break the German military code used to send information across the globe. On January 17, 1917, having already broken the code, the telegram was intercepted and ciphering work began. Specialists Reverend William Montgomery and Nigel de Grey, hired by the English to aid in the deciphering of codes intercepted from the Germans, looked over the paper without knowing that the key to the war's deadlock lay concealed within. <12> Once deciphered, the importance in mobilizing sentiment in America in favor of the war was immediately recognized by the British. <13> The United States, having no knowledge of the telegram or its contents, continued attempts to bring the European powers to a peaceful settlement to end the war.

These negotiations were in vein; Germany never intended to participate in Wilson's compromise. They partook in the peace talks with Wilson only to appease the President in order to stall the possible intervention of the U.S. against the Central Powers. On January 31, 1917, Ambassador Bernstorff announced Germany's resumption of unrestricted warfare to the U.S. State Department. <14> The information was in turn relayed to President Wilson which, according to Secretary Lansing, "aroused in him a resentment against the German Government such as had not resulted from any previous action." Facing war, to the Secretary's surprise the President responded only, that he "was not yet sure," that "we must think it over." <15> It was believed that such an attack by Germany upon humanity as a whole was certain to bring retaliation from the United States; but the President still hesitated, probably in disbelief and despair, while he attempted to decide upon a comparable response.

Wilson's actions while in office were frequently dependent upon the opinions of the Cabinet. When the President arrived at a position of uncertainty, he often resorted to following the advice of his cabinet members. This dependency was apparent in the period following the resumption of unrestricted submarine warfare by the Germans. After contemplating for two days on an appropriate response against Germany, the President turned to his cabinet, holding a meeting on February 2. At the meeting the entire situation at hand was discussed, and it was apparent that the cabinet members did not believe that the U.S. should enter the war, but that diplomatic relations between the two nations should be severed. <16> As a result, the following day Wilson announced before Congress the breaking of relations; Ambassador Count von Bernstorff was given his passports and the American Ambassador to Berlin, Mr. Gerard, was recalled. <17>

This action, however, failed to bring about a favorable response from the American public. On February 19, President Wilson disclosed to the French philosopher, Henri Bergson, that Americans were still badly divided, and that many Westerners were for peace at any price. <18> British reports of American opinion also showed very clearly

the widespread reluctance to fight Germany. <19> It was this lack of support that created difficulty for Wilson in deciding on a course of action. In response to the sinking of the *Housatonic* and the *Lyman M. Law*, Wilson appealed to Congress on February 26 for authority "to supply our merchant ships with defensive arms, should that become necessary, and with the means of using them." <20> Concerned that the public fear of war may lead to the decline of his request, the President stated within his appeal, "I am not now proposing or contemplating war or any steps that need lead to it." <21> This statement clearly expresses the fact that as of February 26, 1917, President Wilson did not feel that U.S. intervention in the War was inevitable, In addition, the strength of public opinion and that of the President's Cabinet is exemplified. Fearing such an armament would indeed close the U.S. to the stage of entering the European war, a filibuster of the Senate was begun.

On February 24, two days before the Armed Ship Bill was put before Congress, the Zimmermann Telegram was delivered from the British Foreign Office to U.S. Ambassador Page. <22> Upon receipt, Wilson read over the letter carefully; realizing that the German plot had begun five weeks ago while its authors were still talking peace, the President, according to Secretary Polk, "showed much indignation." <23> It was decided that the Telegram and its contents should for the time being remain confidential. One member of the Emergency Peace Federation remembers a discussion on February 28 with the President. "I recall that he enumerated with great emphasis our various grievances against the Hohenzollern government ... and stressed repeatedly his conviction that it was impossible to deal further in peaceful method with that government... Finally, I recall with great vividness his tone and manner -- a mixture of great indignation and determination -- when he said: 'Dr. Hull, if you knew what I know at this present moment.... you would not ask me to attempt further peaceful dealings with the Germans.'" <24>

During Wilson's appeal to Congress on February 26, the note was not mentioned, but by the next day the information had made its way through the grapevine to Capitol Hill. <25> As a result, the House patriotically passed the Armed Ship Bill, 403 to 13, but a few members of the Senate, paranoid of being thrown into the war, raised the question of the authenticity of the telegram and continued on with their filibuster preventing the passage of the bill.

In the telegram preceding the Zimmermann Note, Bernstorff was warned: "I know full well that by taking this step we run the danger of bringing about a break and possibly war with the United States. We have decided to take this risk." <26> This gamble proved to be lost following March 1, the day the Zimmermann Telegram was made public. At first, many people stood in disbelief and the authenticity of the letter was questioned. The *New Yorker Staats-Zeitung* claimed the telegram to be simply another effort by pro-Allied propagandists to stir up hatred of Germany, <27> and many, probably wanting something to dispel the fear of war, agreed with this explanation. Zimmermann as well challenged the United States to prove the authenticity of the telegram; the U.S. government was not able to derive conclusive evidence to prove that the telegram was not indeed a forgery.

Unbelievably, the credibility of the note was established the next morning as Zimmermann inexplicably admitted his authorship.

For the first time, Americans in the West and Southwest felt themselves directly threatened by the European conflict. <28> This was by far Germany's greatest blunder of the World War. Wellington House reported: "The timely revelation of the proposed German alliance with Mexico, and the gift to Mexico of these states of the Union, appears to have aroused feeling considerably, and it seems to have stirred precisely that part of the country which was most indifferent to American rights at sea," and "the one factor which . . . has convinced the people that war with Germany is necessary, is the German intrigue in Mexico." <29> The attitude of non-involvement dissipated. After the provocation of the Zimmermann Telegram, war with Germany was all but inevitable. <30> The media exploited the telegram and were almost united in declaring that Germany had committed an act of war against the United States. <31> From the close of the month, there was no doubt that the United States would enter the War. <32> President Wilson gained in public support as a result of this change in public opinion towards the war. Nor was the Cabinet unaffected by this shift in public opinion. The emotion of the people "was so instant and decisive that the President felt safe in placing armament upon American merchant ships without the express approval of Congress." <33> Therefore, on March 12 the Department of State announced that it was necessary to place upon "all American merchant vessels sailing through the barred areas an armed guard for the protection of the vessels and the lives of the persons on board." <34> And on April 2, 1917, Wilson made before Congress his request for a declaration of war, partly due to the opinion of the Cabinet that he should do so. <35>

The Zimmermann Telegram, sent to Mexico solely as a precautionary measure before their declaration of unrestricted submarine warfare, may well have cost Germany the War. The telegram struck a certain fear within the American people, the horror that a neighbor could be an enemy and may strike at any time. They held the instigator of this fear responsible. This surge of public opinion gave Wilson the support he needed to take control of the United States' military intervention in the European War. After nearly three years of neutrality, America within one month, due in large part to the Zimmermann Telegram, was provoked into joining the Allied Forces.

### Notes

1 Robert Lansing, *War Memoirs of Robert Lansing, Secretary of State* (Indianapolis, 1935), quoted in H. C. Peterson, *Propaganda for War* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1939), p. 302.

2 The Literary Digest, *History of the World War* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls Company, 1919), Vol. IV, p. 7.

3 Barbara W. Tuchman, *The Zimmermann Telegram* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1958), p. 25.

4 Tuchman, p. 30.

5 Tuchman, pp. 32-33.

6 Tuchman, pp. 34-38.

7 Tuchman, p. 66.

8 Recent studies have shown that the telegram was actually conceived and drafted by Latin American specialist of the German Foreign Office von Kemnitz, who, against the opposition of some of his colleagues, persuaded Zimmermann to send the telegram to the German Ambassador at Berlin. Arthur Link, *Wilson: Campaigns for Progressivism and Peace 1916-1917* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1965), Vol. V, pp. 433-436.

9 Charles Callan Tansill, *America Goes to War* (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1963), p. 653.

10 Tuchman, p. 114.

11 Francis Jos. Reynolds, *The Story of the Great War* (New York: P. F. Collier & Son, 1917), Vol. XII, p. 3600.

12 Tuchman, p. 3.

13 Callan, p. 653.

14 *Official German Documents Relating to the World War* (New York, 1923), Vol. 2, p. 1017, quoted in Tansill, p. 636.

15 H. C. Peterson, *Propaganda For War* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1939), p. 307.

16 Peterson, p. 308.

17 *The Literary Digest*, p. 10.

18 Link. p. 340.

19 Peterson, p. 309.

20 *America's Attitude* (New York: Bankers Trust Company), p. 102-105.

21 *America's Attitude*, p. 104.

22 Peterson, p. 314.

23 Tuchman, p. 168.

24 "The Ray Stannard Baker Collection of Wilsonia": Library of Congress, quoted in Link, p. 346.

25 Link, p. 351.

26 *Official German Documents*, Vol. II, p. 1019, as quoted in Peterson, p. 301.

27 *New Yorker Staats-Zeitung*, Evening edn., March 1, 1917, as quoted in Link, p. 353.

28 Walton Rawls, *Wake Up, America* (New York: Abbeville Press Publishers, 1988), P. 109.

29 Peterson, pp. 314-315.

30 Jere Clemens King, ed., *The First World War* (New York: Walker and Company, 1972), p. 270.

31 Reynolds, p. 3604.

32 Harry Elmer Barnes, *The Genesis of the World War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1929), p. 636.

33 Tansill, p. 654.

34 *The Department of State to the Argentine Embassy*, March 12, 1917, as quoted in Tansill, p. 654.

35 Peterson, p. 319.

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