

# The Commoner

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## President Addresses Extra Session of Congress

Text of President Wilson's Address Before the Extraordinary Session at Washington, April 2, 1917

President Wilson, addressing the joint extraordinary session of congress at Washington, April 2, spoke as follows:

"I have called the congress into extraordinary session because there are serious, very serious, choices of policy to be made, and made immediately, which it was neither right nor constitutionally permissible that I should assume the responsibility of making.

On the 3d of February last I officially laid before you the extraordinary announcement of the imperial German government that on and after the first day of February 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.

### GERMAN PLEDGE RECALLED

"That had seemed to be the object of the German submarine warfare earlier in the war, but since April of last year the imperial government had somewhat restrained the commanders of its undersea craft in conformity with its promise then given to us that passenger boats should not be sunk, and that due warning would be given to all other vessels which its submarines might seek to destroy, when no resistance was offered or escape attempted, and care taken that their crews were given at least a fair chance to save their lives in their open boats.

"The precautions taken were meager and haphazard enough, as was proved in distressing instance after instance in the progress of the cruel and unmanly business, but a certain degree of restraint was observed.

"The new policy has swept every restriction aside. Vessels of every kind, whatever their flag, their character, their cargo, their destination, their errand, have been ruthlessly sent to the bottom without warning and without

thought of help or mercy for those on board, the vessels of friendly neutrals along with those of belligerents.

"Even hospital ships and ships carrying relief to the sorely bereaved and stricken people of Belgium, though the latter were provided with safe conduct through the prescribed areas by the German government itself, and were distinguished by unmistakable marks of identity, have been sunk with the same reckless lack of compassion.

"I was for a little while unable to believe that such things would in fact be done by any government that had hitherto subscribed to the humane practices of civilized nations.

"International law had its origin in the attempt to set up some law which would be respected and observed upon the seas, where no nation had right of dominion and where lay the free highways of the world.

"By painful stage after stage that law been built up with meager enough results, indeed, after all was accomplished that could be accomplished, but always with a clear view, at least, of what the heart and conscience of mankind demanded.

"This minimum of right the German government has swept aside under the plea of retaliation and necessity, and because it had no weapons which it could use at sea except these, which it is impossible to employ as it is employing them without throwing to the winds all scruples of humanity or of respect for the understandings that were supposed to underlie the intercourse of the world.

### THINKING ONLY OF LIVES

"I am not now thinking of the loss of property involved, immense and serious as that is, but only of the wanton and wholesale destruction of the lives of non-combatants, men, women and children, engaged in pursuits which have always, even in the darkest periods of modern history, been deemed innocent and legitimate.

"Property can be paid for; the lives of peaceful and innocent people can not be.

"The present German submarine warfare against commerce is a warfare against mankind. It is a war against all nations.

"American ships have been sunk, American lives taken, in ways which it has stirred us very deeply to learn of, but the ships and people of other neutral and friendly nations have been sunk and overwhelmed in the waters in the same way.

"There has been no discrimination. The challenge is to all mankind. Each nation must decide for itself how it will meet it.

"The choice we make for ourselves must be made with a moderation of counsel and a temperateness of judgment befitting our character and our motives as a nation.

### MOTIVE NOT REVENGE

"We must put excited feeling away. Our motive will not be revenge or the victorious assertion of the physical might of the nation, but only the vindication of right, of human right, of the right of those who have been unjustly and cruelly treated.

"When I addressed the congress on the 26th of February last I thought that it would suffice to assert our neutral rights with arms, our right to use the seas against unlawful interference, our right to keep our people safe against unlawful violence.

"But armed neutrality, it now appears, is impracticable. Because submarines are in effect outlaws when used as the German submarines have been used against merchant shipping, it is impossible to defend ships against their attacks, as the law of nations has assumed that merchantmen would defend themselves against privateers or cruisers, visible craft giving chase upon the open sea.

"It is common prudence in such circumstances, grim necessity, indeed, to endeavor to destroy them before they have shown their intention. They must be dealt with upon sight, if dealt with at all.

"The German government denies the right of neutrals to use arms at all within the areas of the sea which it has proscribed, even in the defense of rights which no modern publicist has ever before questioned the right to defend.

"The intimation is conveyed that the armed guards which we have placed on our merchant ships will be treated as beyond the pale of law

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### THE DEMOCRATIC POSITION

Columbus, Ohio, April 13, 1917.  
Editor Public Ledger,  
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

You inquire whether I am in favor, during the war, of turning the grain now used for the making of liquor into food for the family. My reply without reservation is yes.

JAMES M. COX, Governor.