Woodrow Wilson's Messages to Congress-1914 and 1917

Read the following selections and answer the questions. Be prepared for class discussion.

Woodrow Wilson was president of the United States in 1914, when World War I began in Europe. On August 19, 1914, Wilson made a speech to the Congress of the United States. In this speech, he asked that the United States act as peacemaker. He wanted to try to help the European powers settle their disagreement through peaceful compromise. The European leaders ignored Wilson's plea, but the Americans did stay out of the war. By 1917, the German government had changed its policy of restricted submarine warfare and began unrestricted submarine warfare. After several American ships were sunk and American lives were lost, Wilson's policy of neutrality changed. He appeared before Congress again on April 2, 1917, and asked the Congress to declare war on Germany and her allies. Two days later Congress declared war on Germany. Below are two excerpts from Wilson's speeches.

Woodrow Wilson-An Appeal for Neutrality-August 19, 1914
My Fellow Countrymen:

I suppose that every thoughtful man in America has asked himself, during these last troubled weeks, what influence the European war may exert upon the United States.

The effect of the war upon the United States will depend upon what American citizens say and do. Every man who really loves America will act and speak in the true spirit of neutrality, which is the spirit of impartiality and fairness and friendliness to all concerned. The spirit of the nation in this critical matter will be determined largely by what individuals and society and those gathered in public meetings do and say, upon what newspapers and magazines contain, upon what ministers utter in their pulpits, and men proclaim as their opinions on the street.

. . . It will be easy to excite passion and difficult to allay it. Those who excite it will assume a heavy responsibility. . . that the people of the United States. . . may be divided into camps of hostile opinion, hot against each other. . .

Such divisions among us would be fatal to our peace of mind and might seriously stand in the way of the proper performance of our duty as the one great nation at peace. . . ready to play a part of impartial mediation . . . not as partisan, but as a friend.

The United States must be neutral in fact as well as in name during these days that are to try men's souls. We must be impartial in thought as well as in action, must put a curb upon our. . . preference of one party to the struggle before another I
Gentlemen of the Congress:

. . . On the third day 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 or Ireland or the western coast of Europe or any of the ports controlled by the enemies of Germany within the Mediterranean. . .

Vessels of every kind, whatever their flag, 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 nations along with those of belligerents. Even hospital ships and ships carrying relief to the sorely bereaved and stricken people of Belgium, though the latter have been provided with safe-conduct through proscribed areas by the German government itself and were distinguished by unmistakable marks of identity, have been sunk with the same reckless lack of compassion or of principle. . .

It is a war against all nations. American ships have been sunk. American lives taken. . . There has been no discrimination. The challenge is to all mankind. . . We must put excited feelings away. Our motive will not be revenge. . . but only the vindication of right. . .

Neutrality is no longer feasible or desirable where the peace of the world is involved and the freedom of its peoples. . .

One of the things that has served to convince us that the Prussian[s] . . . could never be our friend is that. . . it has filled our unsuspecting communities and even the offices of our government with spies. . . That it means to stir up enemies against us at our very doors the intercepted note to the German Minister at Mexico City is eloquent evidence. . .

The world must be made safe for democracy. . .

To such a task we can dedicate our lives and our fortunes, everything that we are and everything that we have, with the pride of those who know that the day has come when America is privileged to spend her blood and her might for the principles that gave her birth and happiness and the peace she has treasured.
1. What is neutrality?

2. Who did President Wilson say would influence how people felt about America's entry into the war?

3. For what would the people who opposed neutrality be responsible?

4. Why do you think that President Wilson felt that divisions in the nation would affect America's ability to act as a peacemaker?

5. What had the German government done in February 1917 to anger President Wilson and change his belief in neutrality?

6. How did unrestricted submarine warfare put American ships at risk when they sailed back and forth to Europe?

7. Why did President Wilson feel that neutrality was no longer feasible or desirable?

8. How did the Germans show their intent to involve America in the war?

9. What did President Wilson say America was going to protect by going to war?

10. Do you feel that President Wilson's proposal to enter the war was justified?
Letter to the Editor-April 15, 1917

Write a letter to the editor of your hometown newspaper on April 15, 1917. The United States has recently declared war on the Central Powers. In your letter, state your views on the U.S. entry into World War I. Be sure to cite specific facts to support your viewpoint.