

---

# Memorandum on the Severance of Diplomatic Relations with Germany

by Robert Lansing

Original manuscript in the Robert Lansing Papers, Library of Congress.

Published in Arthur Link (ed.), *Papers of Woodrow Wilson*.

(Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983), v. 41, pp. 118-125.

February 4, 1917.

During the forenoon of Wednesday, January 31, 1917, the German Ambassador telephoned my office and arranged an interview for 4 o'clock that afternoon. He did not indicate his purpose and my own idea was that he probably desired to talk over confidentially the terms on which Germany would make peace.

That afternoon I was working on a letter to the President in regard to the arming of merchant vessels on the ground that Germany was undoubtedly preparing to renew vigorous submarine warfare. Before I had completed the letter the German Ambassador was announced.

When he entered my room at 10 minutes after 4 I noticed that, though he moved with his usual springy step, he did not smile with his customary easy assurance. After shaking hands and sitting down in the large easy chair by the side of my desk he drew forth from an envelope, which he carried, several papers. Selecting one he held it out saying that he had been instructed to deliver it to me. As I took the paper he said that he had for convenience an English translation made. He then handed me 3 documents in English consisting of a note and 2 accompanying memoranda.

He asked me if he should read them to me or if I would read them myself before he said anything about them. I replied that I would read the papers, which I did slowly and carefully for as the nature of the communication was disclosed I realized that it was of very

serious import and would probably bring on the gravest crisis which this Government had had to face during the war. The note announced the renewal on the next day of indiscriminate submarine warfare, and the annulment of the assurances given this Government by Germany in the note of May 4, 1916, following the Sussex affair.

While I had been anticipating for nearly 3 months this very moment in our relations with Germany and had given expression to my conviction in the public statement which I made concerning our note of December 18 [1916], for which I had been so generally criticized, I was nevertheless surprised that Germany's return to ruthless methods came at this time. I knew that all her shipyards had been working to their full capacity in constructing submarines for the past 7 months and that thousands of men were being trained to handle their complex mechanism, but I assumed that on account of the difficulties of using submarines in northern waters during midwinter that campaign would not begin before March and probably not until April. It was therefore with real amazement that I read the note and memoranda handed me. I can only account for the premature announcement of indiscriminate warfare on the ground that the food situation in Germany had reached such a pass that the Imperial Government had to do something to satisfy public opinion.

As I finished my deliberate perusal of the papers, I laid them on the desk and turned toward Count Bernstorff. "I am sorry," he said, "to have to bring about

this situation but my Government could do nothing else.”

I replied, “That is of course the excuse given for this sudden action, but you must know that it cannot be accepted.”

“Of course, of course,” he said. “I understand that. I know it is very serious, very, and I deeply regret that it is necessary.”

“I believe you do regret it,” I answered, “for you know what the result will be. But I am not blaming you personally.”

“You should not,” he said with evident feeling. “You know how constantly I have worked for peace.”

“I do know it,” I said. “I have never doubted your desire or failed to appreciate your efforts.”

“I still hope,” he said, speaking with earnestness, “that with a full realization of Germany’s situation your Government will in justice decide that the notification of blockade is entirely warranted.”

I answered him that I could not discuss the merits until I had thoroughly digested the documents, but I would say that the first reading had made a very bad impression, and that to give only 8 hours notice without any previous warning of intention was in my opinion an unfriendly and indefensible act.

He exclaimed, “I do not think it was so intended — I am sure it was not.”

“I regret that I must differ with you,” I replied, “but this has come so suddenly that I am sure you will understand I do not wish to discuss the matter further.”

“Of course, of course, I quite understand,” he said, rising and extending his hand, which I took with a feeling almost of compassion for the man, whose eyes were suffused and who was not at all the jaunty, carefree man-of-the-world he usually was. With a ghost of a smile he bowed as I said “Good afternoon,” and turning left the room.

Immediately on his departure I called in [Frank] Polk and [Lester] Woolsey, and read the communication which I had received. We all agreed that the only course which seemed open was to break off diplomatic relations. I think we all expressed indignation at the shortness of the notice and the repudiation of the Sussex assurance.

I telephoned the White House and found the President was out. I then wrote him a short letter trans-

mitting the papers, and sent it by [Richard] Sweet to the White House, who between 5 and 5:30 left it with the usher to be put in the President’s hands as soon as he returned. Through some confusion with other papers the President did not get the papers until after 8 o’clock. He then telephoned me to come to the White House.

From a quarter to 9 until half past 10 we conferred in his study beneath the picture of Secretary Day and the French Ambassador signing the preliminaries of peace with Spain. Throughout the conference I maintained that we must pursue the course which we had declared we would pursue in our Sussex note of April 18, 1916, namely to break off relations with Germany if she practiced ruthless submarine warfare; that any lesser action would be impossible; and that the only question in my mind was whether we ought not to go further and declare that the actual renewal of indiscriminate submarine attack affecting our citizens or ships would be considered by us to be an act of war.

The President, though deeply incensed at Germany’s insolent notice, said that he was not yet sure what course we must pursue and must think it over; that he had been more and more impressed with the idea that “white civilization” and its domination in the world rested largely on our ability to keep this country intact, as we would have to build up the nations ravaged by the war. He said that as this idea had grown upon him he had come to the feeling that he was willing to go to any lengths rather than to have the nation actually involved in the conflict.

I argued with him that if the break did not come now, it was bound to do so in a very short time, and that we would be in a much stronger position before the world if we lived up to our declared purpose than if we waited until we were further humiliated. I said that if we failed to act I did not think we could hold up our heads as a great nation and that our voice in the future would be treated with contempt by both the Allies and Germany.

The President said that he was not sure of that — that if he believed that it was for the good of the world for the United States to keep out of the war in the present circumstances, he would be willing to bear all the criticism and abuse which would surely follow our failure to break with Germany; that contempt was

nothing unless it impaired future usefulness; and that nothing could induce him to break off relations unless he was convinced that viewed from every angle it was the wisest thing to do.

I replied to this that I felt that the greatness of the part which a nation plays in the world depends largely upon its character and the high regard of other nations; that I felt that to permit Germany to do this abominable thing without firmly following out to the letter what we had proclaimed to the world we would do, would be to lose our character as a great power and the esteem of all nations; and that to be considered a "bluffer" was an impossible position for a nation which cherished self-respect.

There was of course much more said during our conference. The President showed much irritation over the British disregard of neutral rights and over the British plan (asserted by Germany) to furnish British merchant ships with heavy guns. I told him that so far as proof of this we had none, but it seemed to me that Germany's declaration in any event justified such a practice. He replied that he was not certain that the argument was sound but he did not think it worthwhile to discuss it now in view of the present crisis.

After some further talk it was agreed that I should prepare a note to Bernstorff setting out the breach of faith by Germany and breaking off diplomatic relations. This was to be a tentative draft and a basis for further consideration of the subject.

On returning home I immediately prepared a draft in rough form, and the next morning (Thursday) [Feb. 1, 1917] redrew it in my own handwriting using for the quoted parts clippings from the printed correspondence. (This note with practically no changes was the one finally sent.)

Although many diplomats called at the Department I denied myself to them all as I did not care to discuss the situation. However I had to see Senator [Gilbert] Hitchcock, who in the absence of Senator [William] Stone was the ranking Democrat on the Committee of Foreign Relations. He suggested that we ask the belligerents of both sides for a 10 day armistice. I asked him what good that would do. He said, "To gain time."

"Well, and then what?" I asked. He had nothing to offer and I told him that I did not think that it would get us anywhere, but that, even if there was some

benefit to be gained, I was sure that Germany would decline and the Allies would probably do the same. He went away in a dispirited frame of mind, saying that he saw no way of avoiding the trouble.

At noon on Thursday (the 1st of February) I went over to the White House and with Col. [Edward] House, who had arrived early that morning, conferred with the President for about an hour in his study. We went over substantially the same ground which the President and I had covered the night before. The Colonel, as is customary with him, said very little, but what he did say was in support of my views.

I went further in this conference than I did in the previous one by asserting that in my opinion peace and civilization depended on the establishment of democratic institutions throughout the world, and that this would be impossible if Prussian militarism after the war controlled Germany. The President said that he was not sure of this as it might mean the disintegration of German power and the destruction of the German nation. His argument did not impress me as genuine, and I concluded that he was in his usual careful way endeavoring to look at all sides of the question.

When I left the conference I felt convinced that the President had almost reached a decision to send Bernstorff home. It was not any particular thing which he said but rather a general impression gained from the entire conversation. At any rate I felt very much better than I had the night before when the President's tone of indecision had depressed me. Probably I misjudged him because he did not at once fall in with my views, which were certainly radical.

Thursday evening [Feb. 1, 1917] I wrote out at considerable length an arraignment of Germany on her submarine methods and the faithlessness of the German Government in giving its assurance of May 4, 1916, in the Sussex case. I wrote it as I felt without softening the harshness of my thoughts, and, as I intended to send it to the President, I wished him to know exactly how I felt.

The next morning (Friday, the 2nd) I read to Mr. Polk my arraignment of Germany, which he heartily approved, and then sent it to the President. Three times that morning the President and I conferred over our private wire. We discussed the issuance of passports, the sailing of American ships for the "danger

zone," and the possibility of securing identic action by other neutrals in case of a break with Germany.

At 2:30 Friday afternoon the Cabinet met and sat until 4:45. The entire time was given to a discussion of the crisis with Germany. The discussion was very general although it was chiefly confined to the subjects which the President and I had been over in our conferences.

I felt all the time that, while the President was holding back in the traces, he was not unwilling to be urged forward by argument favoring a strong policy. He appeared to be resisting the idea of a break with Germany. In this he was supported by Secretary Wilson and Burleson seemed more or less sympathetic. All the rest were united in support of severing relations, McAdoo and Houston being particularly outspoken. I am not at all sure that the President urged his arguments in good faith. I do not mean anything invidious by this, only that I have often seen him in Cabinet meetings opposes action, which I was sure he favored, in order to draw out arguments on both sides. Indeed I am morally certain his mind was made up when he came to the meeting.

Just at the close of the session he read the note which I had drafted saying that if it seemed best to sever relations it was proposed to send this note which avoided a general attack on lawless submarine warfare and dealt only with Germany's broken promise.

I think that the part of the discussion which most deeply shocked some of the members was the President's comment on a remark which I made concerning the future peace of the world. I said that I was convinced that an essential of permanent peace was that all nations should be politically liberalized; that the only surety of independence for small nations was that the great and powerful should be politically liberalized; that the only surety of independence for small nations was that the great and powerful should have democratic institutions because democracies were never aggressive or unjust. I went on to say that it seemed to me there could be no question but that to bring to an end absolutism the Allies ought to succeed, and that it was for our interest and for the interest of the world that we should join the Allies and aid them if we went into the war at all.

To this the President replied, "I am not sure of that." He then went on to argue that probably greater

justice would be done if the conflict ended in a draw. This did not make so painful an impression on me as it did on others who heard it, for I was sure it was done to draw out arguments. Furthermore I knew that the President agreed with me about democracy being the only firm foundation for universal peace.

When we left the Cabinet room some of my colleagues remarked that I seemed very cheerful. I told them I was cheerful for I was sure that it would all come out all right. They shook their heads dubiously and said that they could not see it that way.

Friday [Feb. 2, 1917] was a day of extreme tension. From morning till night officials and newspaper men were fairly on tiptoe with suppressed excitement. Fully 80 of the correspondents were present at my interview in the morning, and they were swarming in the corridors when I returned to the department at 5 o'clock. I slept soundly that night feeling sure that the President would act vigorously.

Saturday morning (the 3rd) soon after I reached the Department Polk and I discussed the situation. He was doubtful and distressed, and I assured him that I was certain the President would act that day.

A little after 10:00 Senator [William] Stone, who had arrive from the West on Friday noon and had taken part in the conferences which the President held in his room at the Capitol soon after the Cabinet meeting, came in, but as I had just been summoned by telephone to the White House we had only a word together.

At 10:30 I reached the President's study and we conferred for half an hour. He told me that he had decided to hand Bernstorff his passports and to recall Gerard, and that at 2 o'clock that afternoon he would address Congress, laying before them in a little more elaborate form the substance of the note which I had drafted together with a statement that he would come before them again and ask for powers in case Germany should carry out her threats. I congratulated him on his decision, saying I was sure that he was right and that the American people almost to a man would stand behind him.

It was arranged that at the hour when the President began his address to Congress Count Bernstorff would receive his passports. I told the President that in view of the routine preparation of the note and passport and of the necessity of getting of telegrams to

Berlin and neutral countries inviting their identical action, it would be impossible for me to go to the Capitol at 2 o'clock. He replied that he understood perfectly and that in any event the essential part of his address was the not which I had drafted.

On leaving the White House I met Tumulty in front of the Executive Offices. He had just returned from the Capitol, where he had been to arrange for the President's appearance there at 2 o'clock. I then hurried over to the Department, called in Polk and Woolsey and later [William] Phillips and Sweet. The necessary papers were prepared as rapidly as possible and I read and signed them. Everything was carried through according to schedule. At 2:00 the President spoke at the Capitol in the House of Representatives. Three minutes before 2:00 Woolsey delivered the note and passports to Count Bernstorff at the Embassy; and the necessary telegrams were put on the wires.

Even so serious an act as the severing of diplomatic relations with Germany was a great relief from the intense anxiety of the two preceding days. From the reception of the German notification Wednesday afternoon I had felt that such action was the only possible one to take and to preserve the Honor, dignity, and prestige of the United States. I did not really doubt but that the President would ultimately reach the same conclusion, but I feared that the delay would create the impression that he was wavering and undecided. When, therefore, he announced his decision on Saturday morning [Feb. 3, 1917] I was thankful that the period of uncertainty was over, that the die was cast, and that Germany's insolent challenge had been met with firmness. That it would be received with the universal approval by the American people was not a matter of doubt. Whatever may be the consequences, no other course was open to a self-respecting nation.

*Edited by Tim Davenport.*

*Non-commercial, fair use reproduction by 1000 Flowers Publishing, Corvallis, OR, 2007.*