A Peacemaker Enters the War to End All Wars

President Woodrow Wilson, like each and every President--and all of us--was a bundle of contradictions, his very soul a nest of hooks. From the time he was a kid, he wanted to be in government. A portrait of Gladstone hung in his boyhood bedroom, and he made no bones about it--he wanted to be a statesman.

In private he was an entertainer. He could dance a jig, tell hilarious jokes, imitate people with enough talent to put him on a stage. But he loved ideas more, and was, for better or worse, a no-holds-barred intellectual. His father, a Presbyterian minister, home-schooled him until he was 13 years old, took him all over, to museums and factories and cotton gins--and gave him thereby a sturdy understanding of the world of his time. He became a thoughtful scholar, a much beloved teacher, and, eventually, President of Princeton University. Prof. Wilson wrote highly acclaimed books on American government.

He'd grown up in the American South, in the bloody maelstrom of the Civil War. His very first memory, he used to tell people, was hearing someone say that Abraham Lincoln had been elected President and now there was going to be war. He was four years old.

Throughout his life, he remained a segregationist, a racist. His father's church became a hospital for the bloodied Rebel troops. What he saw in that church, he never forgot. Some call him the only President of these United States to grow up in a defeated nation.

Still, what he experienced in the American South during and after the Civil War made him dedicate himself to peacemaking. It was difficult, very difficult for him to bring America into the trenches of the First World War.

But it became impossible not to when German U-boats sunk American shipping.
The *Lusitania* wasn't the only vessel to go down with its innocent passengers. And when intelligence discovered Germany was attempting to enlist Mexico's help in defeating America and the Allied nations, the peacemaker understood that once again, America was going to have to go to war.

Woodrow Wilson was the last President to write his own speeches. He didn't have a cadre of writers around to make his rhythms dance and his metaphors glow. Any lyrical sense to his words came from his soul.

On April 1, 1917, the scholar-President pulled an over-nighter on a speech he would deliver the next evening to a joint session of Congress, one of the most important speeches in American history, the speech that would carry a single line to the practice of American foreign policy for generations: "the world must be made safe for democracy."

"The challenge is to all mankind," he said.

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 temperateness of judgment befitting our character and our motives as a nation. 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 which we are only a single champion.

A peacemaker was going to war.

With a profound sense of the solemn and even tragical character of the step I am taking and of the grave responsibilities which it involves, but in unhesitating obedience to what I deem my constitutional duty, I advise that the Congress declare the recent courses of the Imperial German Government be in fact nothing less than war against the government of the United States.

When he finished, Congress got to its feet and gave him a thunderous ovation.

He was dumbfounded. "My message today," he told an aid, "was a message of death for our young men. How strange it seems to applaud that."

Then, at that moment, President Woodrow Wilson, having declared war on Germany, laid his head on the Cabinet table and cried.