Woodrow Wilson and Neutrality

As World War I erupted in Europe, President Woodrow Wilson addressed Congress to proclaim America’s neutrality. Wilson was supported by a vast majority of citizens wanted to avoid involvement in the conflict. In fact, when Wilson ran for reelection in 1916, his campaign used the popular slogan “He kept us out of war.”

Wilson’s initial hope that America could be “impartial in thought as well as in action” eventually proved impractical as the war progressed. However, in 1914, Wilson firmly favored neutrality.

Below is the President’s declaration of neutrality, delivered to Congress in August of 1914. Read the excerpts and answer the 5 questions that follow.

President Woodrow Wilson’s Declaration of Neutrality
Message To Congress, 63rd Cong, 2nd Sess.
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.

1. What position does Wilson want the United States to take in the war?

2. According to Wilson, what power do citizens and the media have to influence the country?

The people of the United States are drawn from many nations, and chiefly from the nations now at war. It is natural and inevitable that there should be the utmost variety of sympathy and desire among them with regard to the issues and circumstances of the conflict. Some will wish one nation, others another, to succeed in the momentous struggle. It will be easy to excite passion and [some] may be divided in camps of hostile opinion, hot against each other….

Such divisions amongst 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….
3. Why does Wilson believe that there will be large numbers of Americans who support the Allied Powers and similarly large number of Americans who will support the Central Powers?

4. What does Wilson fear might happen if the United States were to choose one side over the other?

I venture, therefore, my fellow countrymen, to speak a solemn word of warning to you against … taking sides. 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.…

My thought is of America. I am speaking, I feel sure, the earnest wish and purpose of every thoughtful American that this great country of ours … show herself in this time of peculiar trial a [to be a] Nation fit beyond others to exhibit the fine poise of undisturbed judgment, [and] the dignity of self-control…

5. What does Wilson believe the United States will demonstrate if it maintains neutrality?