

This week in American history

Written by By Martin Link For the Sun
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One hundred years ago, the first week in April, 1917, was one of the most momentous times in our country's history. For the three preceding years, Americans watched, with a degree of horrible fascination, as the countries of Europe and the Middle-East tore each other apart in the most vicious war humanity had ever witnessed.

As a result of a constant attrition of young men, national resources, health facilities and general infrastructure, and most importantly, the involved country's moral fibers, the battlefield had degenerated into a series of bloody, but stalemated conflicts. The French government was about ready to give up, the Italian Army virtually disintegrated at the battle of Caporetto, where 275,000 soldiers surrendered and the remaining 30,000 deserted, the Russian governing family -- the Romanovs, were executed, the Habsburg family who had ruled Austria-Hungary for the preceding 400 years fled into exile, and the total collapse of the 500-year reign of the Ottomans left the Turkish empire without a government.

Even though President Woodrow Wilson had insisted on American neutrality since the beginning of the war in August, 1914, he now realized that the basic concepts of free democratic systems of government were now at stake. Although he abhorred the war, he now realized that only through American military intervention could the war be brought to an end and peace-loving governments be installed in the afflicted countries.

On the evening of April 2, 1917, while in front of a subdued joint Congress and with a packed gallery listening, the President delivered his war message. The Supreme Court justices were also present.

Much of his message dwelt with German submarines sinking American merchant and passenger ships, and then he said: "There is one choice we cannot make -- we are incapable of making -- we will not choose the path of submission and suffer the most sacred rights of our

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nation and our people to be ignored or violated. The wrongs against which we now array ourselves are no common wrongs; they cut to the very roots of human life.”

He continued to a more meaningful expression of purpose. “The world must be made safe for democracy. Its peace must be founded upon the trusted foundations of political liberty.” He now felt that the only road to that peace was by America’s active participation in the war and asked the Congress for a joint resolution declaring war on Germany.

At 3 am in the morning of April 6, after an 82 to 6 vote in the Senate, the House voted 373 to 50 to support the President – and the nation was at war.

Now, the administration had to face the daunting task of raising and equipping a modern, efficient Army and Navy. Currently, there were less than 200,000 men in the combined armed forces, and only 19 field-grade officers that made up the General Staff in Washington. The newly-created Aviation Section consisted of four planes under the jurisdiction of the Army Signal Corps.

One of the first decisions the General Staff was faced with was to find a field commander for the soon-to-be organized American Expeditionary Force, someone who would actually have some field combat experience. Their choice was the former commander of Fort Wingate and the field commander of an expedition in 1916 against the Mexican rebel, Pancho Villa -- Brig. General John J. Pershing. Raising an Army and Navy of a million men took a little longer. By December 31, 1917 only 176,665 troops were in France and England and had not yet participated in any large-scale combat operations. That would all change in mid-April, 1918, but that’s another story.

To get a good idea of America’s involvement in World War I, be sure to watch “The Great War” on New Mexico PBS, channel 5 - KNME. This 6-hour, 3-night event, airing in conjunction with the 100th anniversary of America’s entry into World War I will be shown between 8 - 10 pm on Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday, April 10-12.

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