



Section 1

PRIMARY SOURCE

The Zimmermann Note

On January 19, 1917, Arthur Zimmermann, the German foreign minister, sent the following coded telegram to the German ambassador in Mexico. British intelligence agents decoded the telegram and passed it on to the U.S. government. How do you think Americans reacted when this telegram was published on March 1?

Berlin, January 19, 1917

On the first of February we intend to begin submarine warfare unrestricted. In spite of this it is our intention to keep neutral the United States of America.

If this attempt is not successful we propose an alliance on the following basis with Mexico: That we shall make war together and together make peace. We shall give general financial support, and it is understood that Mexico is to reconquer the lost territory in New Mexico, Texas, and Arizona. The details are left for your settlement.

You are instructed to inform the President of Mexico of the above in the greatest confidence as soon as it is certain there will be an outbreak of war with the United States, and we suggest that the President of Mexico on his own initiative should communicate with Japan suggesting adherence at once to this plan; at the same time offer to mediate between Germany and Japan.

Please call to the attention of the President of Mexico that the employment of ruthless submarine warfare now promises to compel England to make peace in a few months.

Zimmermann.

from Henry Steele Commager, ed., Documents of American History, vol. II, (New York: Crofts, 1947), 308.

Discussion Questions

1. According to this telegram, what did the German government decide to begin on February 1, 1917?
2. What did Zimmermann propose if the United States went to war with Germany during World War I?
3. If this telegram had not been intercepted by British agents, what do you think might have happened? Cite evidence from your textbook to support your opinion.