1 ‘You must not speak of us as cousins’

You must not speak of us... as cousins, still less as brothers; we are neither. Neither must you think of us as Anglo-Saxons, for that term can no longer be rightly applied to the people of the United States... there are only two things which can establish and maintain closer relations between your country and mine: they are community of ideals and of interests. (President Wilson to King George V, 1981)

On the outbreak of war in 1914, President Woodrow Wilson made his position clear: ‘The United States must be neutral in fact as well as in name... we must be impartial in thought as well as in action, must put a curb upon our sentiments as well as upon every transaction that might be construed as preference of one party to the struggle before another.’

Woodrow Wilson was determined that America should not be drawn into the internecine conflict in Europe. The people of the United States, he pointed out, were drawn from many nations and chiefly from the nations now at war. Over eight million of America’s population of 105 million in 1914 had been born in Germany or had at least one German parent. The Irish-Americans, some four million and a half at the start of the war, also had no love for the British. Americans did not feel themselves threatened by the renewal of quarrels in Europe. The United States had never had to form any serious alliance, except tactically with the French during the War of Independence. ‘Thanks to the width of the ocean’, Teddy Roosevelt wrote to Rudyard Kipling, ‘our people believe that they have nothing to fear from the present contest, and that they have no responsibility concerning it.’

Yet the majority of Americans still traced their ancestry back to British roots and, particularly on the east coast, sympathy for Britain was strong. J.P. Morgan acted as the agent for British purchases of munitions and vital raw materials. As the Allies were, effectively, subjecting Germany to a blockade, US trade with Germany was insignificant while exports to Britain and France rose to nearly $3 billion.

The President’s closest confidant and envoy, Colonel Edward House, found him ‘singularly lacking in appreciation of the importance of this European crisis. He seems more interested in domestic affairs’. But in January 1915, Wilson accepted House’s suggestion that he should seek to act as a channel of confidential communication through which the warring nations could explore the possibilities for peace. Encouraged by the German Ambassador in Washington, Count Bernstorff, to believe that Germany might agree to evacuate and indemnify Belgium, House set sail for Europe.
In London he was charmed by the Foreign Secretary, Sir Edward Grey. 'If every belligerent nation had a Sir Edward Grey at the head of its affairs, there would be no war.' But Grey did not believe Bernstorff's account of the German position and it soon turned out that he was right. Indeed Dr Arthur Zimmermann, on behalf of the German Foreign Office, came close to suggesting to House that Germany needed to be indemnified for the loss of life they had suffered in invading Belgium! The Germans did, however, suggest that if Britain lifted the blockade, they might no longer need to occupy Belgium.

The Americans also wanted the blockade eased or ended. When German sympathisers chartered an American vessel, the \textit{Wilhelmina}, and loaded it with food for Hamburg, the ship was intercepted and the cargo seized by the British. Wilson's Secretary of State, William Jennings Bryan, and Colonel House canvassed the idea of a \textit{modus vivendi} whereby, if the Germans would cease submarine warfare, the Allies should permit food shipments to Germany.

This found favour with neither side. In May the Cunard liner, \textit{Lusitania}, which had brought House across the Atlantic, was torpedoed off the southern coast of Ireland. The \textit{Lusitania}, it transpired subsequently, was carrying some munitions, but 124 American passengers were killed. Theodore Roosevelt demanded that the United States should protect its neutral rights by force. President Wilson responded by describing America as being: 'too proud to fight. There is such a thing as a nation being so right that it does not need to convince others by force that it is right.'

The British Ambassador in Washington, Cecil Spring-Rice, close friend of Teddy Roosevelt, strongly disliked Woodrow Wilson, whom he found a remote and forbidding figure. There was, he believed, nothing to be done with 'this hardened saint'. He wrote in exasperation to Balfour that he had served in Russia, Berlin, Constantinople and Persia, 'but I have never known any government so autocratic as this'. This did not mean that the President acted without consulting the popular will, 'but his interpretation of the oracle is his own secret'. As Lloyd George, at the time Minister of Munitions, observed, Wilson was 'so studiously unpleasant to both sides' that each suspected him of being particularly hostile to them.

The intensely patriotic Spring-Rice, author of 'I vow to thee my country' ('I vow to thee, my country - all earthly things above - Entire and whole and perfect, the service of my love'), became understandably overwrought at the tendency of the President and the State Department to apportion blame equally between the two sides, as if the Germans had not violated Belgian neutrality - described by the German Chancellor as a 'scrap of paper' - and were not occupying a large part of northern France. Spring-Rice found it trying to his nerves to have to coexist in Washington through two and a half years of war with Bernstorff. When, on Wilson's behalf, Colonel House showed him an American 'indictment' of the actions of the British government in enforcing the blockade, Spring-Rice exploded: 'I suppose you know that the record will forever