WWI Socratic Seminar Documents

Document 1

FROM 2nd from London # 5747.

"We intend to begin on the first of February unrestricted submarine warfare. We shall endeavor in spite of this to keep the United States of America neutral. In the event of this not succeeding, we make Mexico a proposal or alliance on the following basis: make war together, make peace together, generous financial support and an understanding on our part that Mexico is to reconquer the lost territory in Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona. The settlement in detail is left to you. You will inform the President [of Mexico] of the above most secretly as soon as the outbreak of war with the United States of America is certain and add the suggestion that he should, on his own initiative, invite Japan to immediate adherence and at the same time mediate between Japan and ourselves. Please call the President's attention to the fact that the ruthless employment of our submarines now offers the prospect of compelling England in a few months to make peace." Signed, ZIMMERMANN.

(In January of 1917, British cryptographers deciphered a telegram from German Foreign Minister Arthur Zimmermann to the German Minister to Mexico offering United States territory to Mexico in return for joining the German cause. To protect their intelligence from detection and to capitalize on growing anti-German sentiment in the United States, the British waited to present the telegram to President Wilson. Meanwhile, frustration over the effective British naval blockade caused Germany to break its pledge to limit submarine warfare. In response, the United States severed diplomatic relations with Germany in February. On February 24, Britain released the Zimmerman telegram to Wilson, and news of the telegram was published widely in the American press on March 1.)

Document 2

The resolution now before the Senate is a declaration of war. Before taking this momentous step, and while standing on the brink of this terrible vortex, we ought to pause and calmly and judiciously consider the terrible consequences of the step we are about to take…

The reason given by the President in asking Congress to declare war against Germany is that the German Government has declared certain war zones, within which, by the use of submarines, she sinks, without notice, American ships and destroys American lives....

There are a great many American citizens who feel that we owe it as a duty to humanity to take part in this war. Many instances of cruelty and inhumanity can be found on both sides. Men are often biased in their judgment on account of their sympathy and their interests. To my mind, what we ought to have maintained from the beginning was the strictest neutrality. If we had done this, I do not believe we would have been on the verge of war at the present time…

It is now demanded that the American citizens shall be used as insurance policies to guarantee the safe delivery of munitions of war to belligerent nations. The enormous profits of munition manufacturers, stockbrokers, and bond dealers must be still further increased by our entrance into the war. This has brought us to the present moment, when Congress, urged by the President…, is about to declare war and engulf our country in the greatest holocaust that the world has ever known…

We are taking a step today that is fraught with untold danger. We are going into war upon the command of gold. We are going to run the risk of sacrificing millions of our countrymen's lives in order that other countrymen may coin their lifeblood into money. And even if we do not cross the Atlantic and go into the trenches, we are going to pile up a debt that the tolling masses that shall come many generations after us will have to pay. Unborn millions will bend their backs in toil in order to pay for the terrible step we are now about to take.

We are about to do the bidding of wealth's terrible mandate. By our act we will make millions of our countrymen suffer, and the consequences of it may well be that millions of our brethren must shed their lifeblood, millions of brokenhearted women must weep, millions of children must suffer with cold, and millions of babes must die from hunger, and all because we want to preserve the commercial right of American citizens to deliver munitions of war to belligerent nations.

Senator George Norris, April 4, 1917, speech given while proposed declaration of war was before the Senate

Document 3

Conscription is immoral, un-American, and unconstitutional. There is a provision in our Constitution forbidding involuntary service. If conscription does not mean involuntary servitude, then I don't know the meaning of these two words.

Two years ago the President was too proud to fight the Germans; now it seems the Germans are too proud to fight us--at least they have not made a formal declaration of war against America. Then, why in the name of humanity drag us into a war, which we disapprove?... Why send the flower of our young men to the trenches? Why don't the old men go? We can spare them better than our young men. This is not our war...

Do not forget that the present Conscription Law is only the thin edge of the wedge; don't forget that it is merely the beginning of the large opening that will bring the military monster into our homes, and as it grows stronger it will become more greedy, and the love for conquest will take possession of it, and the next thing that we will be required to do will be to conquer Mexico. That is the natural progress of militarism. If you believe in this war, go ahead, but don't force us. We have as much right to our principles as the militarists have to theirs…

The Government must have a guilty conscience when it arrests college boys and girls and tries to break up meetings that are opposed to its conscription.

Dr. Leonard Abbot, speech at a meeting of the *No-Conscription League*, June 4, 1917

Document 4

It is time for her to be put out of the public schools and to be put out forever… And when another [teacher] declares she doesn’t believe the Board of Education has the right to interfere with her religion and her conscience… then its high time a drastic lesson be taught her… to the effect that the religion of Liberty and the conscience of the United States are above her creed and her opinion, and that she will have to obey!

Excerpt from Sacramento Bee (newspaper), November 12, 1917

[The press condemned dissenters and war protesters as disloyal. They were often beaten by mobs. Sometimes they were forced to kiss the American flag.]

Document 5

Whoever, when the United States is at war, shall willfully make or convey false reports or false statements with intent to interfere with the operation or success of the military or naval forces of the United States, or to promote the success of its enemies… or incite insubordination, disloyalty, mutiny, or refusal of duty… or shall willfully obstruct… the recruiting or enlistment service of the United States, or… shall willfully utter, print, write, or publish any disloyal, profane, scurrilous, or abusive language about the form of government of the United States… or shall willfully display the flag of any foreign enemy, or shall willfully… urge, incite, or advocate any curtailment of production… or advocate, teach, defend, or suggest the doing of any of the acts or things in this section enumerated and whoever shall by word or act support or favor the cause of any country with which the United States is at war… shall be punished by a fine of not more than $10,000 or imprisonment for not more than twenty years, or both.

Section 3 of the Sedition Act, June 15, 1917

Document 6

The example of American must be a special example. The example of America must be the example not merely of peace because it will not fight, but of peace because peace is the healing and elevating influence of the world and strife is not… There is such a thing as a man being too proud to fight. There is such a thing as a nation being so right it does not need to convince others by force that it is right.

President Woodrow Wilson, May 10, 1915, speech in Philadelphia, PA

Document 7

Document 8

When one surveys the world about him after the great storm, noting the marks of destruction and yet rejoicing in the ruggedness of the things which withstood it, if he is an American he breathes the clarified atmosphere with a strange mingling of regret and new hope. We have seen a world passion spend its fury, but we contemplate our Republic unshaken, and hold our civilization secure…

Our eyes never will be blind to a developing menace, our ears never deaf to the call of civilization. We recognize the new order in the world, with the closer contacts, which progress has wrought. We sense the call of the human heart for fellowship, fraternity, and cooperation. We crave friendship and harbor no hate. But, America, our America, the America built on the foundation laid by the inspired fathers, can be a party to no permanent military alliance. It can enter into no political commitments, nor assume any economic obligations, which will subject our decisions to any other than our own authority…

President Warren Harding, Inaugural Address, March 4, 1921