

From William Jennings Bryan

My Dear Mr President

[Washington] May 12 1915.

Your more than generous note received with draft of protest to Germany.

I have gone over it very carefully and will give it to Mr Lansing at once, for I agree with you that it is well to act without delay in order to give direction to public opinion. I do not see that you could have stated your position more clearly or more forcibly. In one sentence I suggest addition of words "as the last few weeks have shown," so that it will read: "Submarines, we respectfully submit, can not be used against merchantmen, as the last few weeks have shown, without an inevitable violation of many sacred principles of justice and humanity." The only other amendment that occurs to me relates to the Cushing and Gulflight. Would it not be wise to make some reference to the rules sent us yesterday and the offer to apologize and make reparation in case a neutral ship is sunk by mistake?¹ I suggest something like this: "Apology and reparation for destruction of neutral ships, sunk by mistake, while they may satisfy international obligations, if no loss of life results, can not justify or excuse a practice, the natural and almost necessary effect of which is to subject neutral nations to new and immeasurable risks, for it must be remembered that peace, not war, is the normal state, and that nations that resort to war to settle disputes are not at liberty to subordinate the rights of neutrals to the supposed, or even actual, needs of belligerents." I am in doubt about the propriety of referring to the note published by Bernsdorf.

But, my dear Mr President, I join in this document with a heavy heart. I am as sure of your patriotic purpose as I am of my own, but after long consideration, both careful and prayerful, I can not bring myself to the belief that it is wise to relinquish the hope of playing the part of a friend to both sides in the role of peace maker, and I fear this note will result in such a relinquishment—for the hope requires for its realization the retaining of the confidence of both sides. The protest will be popular in this country, for a time at least and possibly permanently, because public sentiment, already favorable to the allies, has been perceptibly increased by the Lusitania tragedy, but there is peril in this very fact. Your position, being the position of the government, will be approved—the approval varying in emphasis in proportion to the feeling against Germany. There being no intimation that the final accounting will be postponed until the war is over, the jingo element will not only predict,

but demand, war—see enclosed editorial from Washington Post of this morning²—and the line will be more distinctly drawn between those who sympathize with Germany and the rest of the people. Outside of the country the document will be applauded by the allies, and the more they applaud the more Germany will be embittered, because we unsparingly denounce the retaliatory methods employed by her without condemning the announced purpose of the allies to starve the non-combattants of Germany and without complaining of the conduct of Great Britain in relying on passengers, including men, women and children of the United States, to give immunity to vessels carrying munitions of war—without even suggesting that she should convoy passenger ships as carefully as she does ships carrying horses and gasoline. This enumeration does not include a reference to Great Britain's indifference to the increased dangers thrown upon us by the misuse of our flag or to her unwarranted interference with our trade with neutral nations. Germany can not but construe the strong statement of the case against her, coupled with silence as to the unjustifiable action of the allies, as partiality toward the latter—an impression which will be deepened in proportion to the loudness of the praise which the allies bestow upon this government's statement of its position. The only way, as I see it, to prevent irreparable injury being done by the statement is to issue simultaneously a protest against the objectionable conduct of the allies which will keep them from rejoicing and show Germany that we are defending our rights from aggression from both sides. I am only giving you, my dear Mr President, the situation as it appears to me—and am praying all the while, that I may be wholly mistaken and that your judgment may be vindicated by events. With assurances of respect I am my dear Mr President,

Very truly yours W. J. Bryan

ALS (WP, DLC).

¹ J. W. Gerard to WJB, May 9, 1915, printed in *FR-WWS 1915*, pp. 387-88, stating that specific instructions had repeatedly been issued to German war vessels to avoid attacks on neutral ships in the war zone which had "been guilty of no hostile act." However, if a neutral ship should come to harm by mistake through the action of German submarines or aircraft, the German government would "unreservedly recognize its responsibility therefor," express its regrets, and pay damages without the usual prize court action. The note also outlined briefly the procedure for establishing responsibility in such cases.

² "If War Should Come," *Washington Post*, May 12, 1915. "The plain truth is," the editorial declared, "that the United States is in no condition to declare war upon Germany. It could not make its demands effective by force of arms, because it has no navy and no army capable of waging war on the scale that would be required." President Wilson was right in his strong desire to maintain peace. But the nation was in no position to "command peace." In its present state, it could have only "a peace of weakness, preserved at the expense of national humiliation, purchased by the surrender of national rights." America was becoming involved in the war in spite of itself, and Americans would have to decide whether they wished a peace of weakness or a peace of strength.

JUNE 5, 1915

From William Jennings Bryan

My Dear Mr President

Washington June 5 1915

The fact that the note to Germany has not yet been completed encourages me to trespass upon your time for a moment to present again three matters which, to my mind, are necessary to insure us against war with Germany.

1st A reference to the plan embodied in our 30 treaties—the principle of which has been accepted by Germany. Her mention of arbitration opens the way and makes the suggestion easy, if it does not in fact compel the suggestion. It will insure a peaceful settlement of this controversy, and we can not forget that the peace plan for investigation in *all* cases was endorsed by the Senate and is *now in force* with Great Britain France & Russia.

Second. Steps to prevent passenger ships from carrying ammunition. This is also referred to by Germany. Action ought, in my judgment, to be taken before the reply is sent.

3rd Before we send another note to Germany I think we should make a renewed protest to Great Britain against interference with our trade with neutrals. These three propositions have been under consideration before. The first was decided upon—that is the idea was to be given to the public and communicated to Germany but you were dissuaded by some thing that you heard. The second is thought by the Atty Gen to be possible—and even if it could not be accomplished as a matter of fact, the same end could be reached almost as well by advice, such as was given to Americans in Mexico.

The third suggestion was about to be carried out but you were dissuaded by a message from Mr House.

I beg to renew the suggestions most urgently believing, as I do, that without them the note as you outlined it at the cabinet meeting would be likely to cause a rupture of diplomatic relations, and this might rush us into war in spite of anything we could do. If the ini[t]iative were with us, I would not fear war for I am sure you do not want it, but when the note is sent it will be Germany's next move. If the note causes her to act in an unfriendly way it may cause conditions here that will increase the difficulties of our position. This may be our last chance to speak for peace, for it will be much harder to propose investigation *after* some unfriendly act than *now*.

Pardon me for presenting these suggestions so earnestly but I am sure that the sober judgment of the people will not sustain any word or act that *provokes* war. They will support you

if war comes but they will do all in their power to prevent war and I fully share their desire and purpose in this respect.

With assurances of high respect I am my dear Mr President
Very truly yours W. J. Bryan

ALS (WP, DLC).

To William Jennings Bryan

My dear Mr. Secretary, The White House. 5 June, 1915.

I hope that you realize how hard it goes with me to differ with you in judgment about such grave matters as we are now handling. You always have such weight of reason, as well as such high motives, behind what you urge that it is with deep misgiving that I turn away from what you press upon me.

I am inclined to think that we ought to take steps, as you suggest, to prevent our citizens from travelling on ships carrying munitions of war, and I shall seek to find the legal way to do it. I fear that, whatever it may be best to do about that, it is clearly impossible to act before the new note goes to Germany.

I am sorry to say that, study as I may the way to do it without hopelessly weakening our protest, I cannot find a way to embody in our note the principle of long discussion of a very simple state of facts; and I think that our object with England can be gained better by not sending a note in connection with this one than by sending it; and, after all, it is our object and the relief of our trade that we wish to accomplish.

I recast the note last night. I hope you will think a little better of it.

I would be very much obliged if you would go over it for substance, making any suggestions that may occur to you, and that you will ask Mr. Lansing to go over it for form and validity of statement and claim.

With the warmest regard, and with a very solemn and by no means self-confident sense of deep responsibility,

Cordially and faithfully Yrs., Woodrow Wilson

WWTLS (CLO).

From William Jennings Bryan

My Dear Mr. President:

Washington June 5, 1915.

You have probably seen the enclosed flimsy,¹ but notwithstanding this probability, I am sending you a copy of this