

The Zimmermann Telegram

Directions: Read the information below and then answer the questions.

Between January 16 and 19, 1917, German Foreign Secretary Arthur Zimmermann sent a top-secret, coded telegram to Count Johann von Bernstorff, Germany's imperial ambassador to the United States. Bernstorff, with the unwitting aid of the United States State Department, relayed the message to the German embassy in Mexico City. In the process, the British intercepted the telegram and began decoding the information with the aid of German code books they had discovered in 1914.

On January 31, Bernstorff informed the United States that the German government intended to resume unlimited submarine warfare on February 1. On February 3, the United States broke diplomatic relations with Germany. Two weeks later the British finished decoding the Zimmermann telegram and turned over the decoded message to the United States government.

The telegram read as follows:

We intend to begin unrestricted submarine warfare on the first of February. We shall endeavor in spite of this to keep the United States neutral. In the event of this not succeeding, we make Mexico a proposal of 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 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 unrestricted employment of our submarines now offers the prospect of compelling England to make peace within a few months. Acknowledge receipt.

On March 1, 1917, American newspapers broke the story. A war scare quickly swept the nation, and on April 6, President Woodrow Wilson asked for and received a declaration of war against Germany from Congress.

1. For what nation was the telegram meant?

2. What did the telegram propose?

3. Who were Arthur Zimmermann and Johann von Bernstorff, and what roles did they play in this incident?

4. How much warning did Germany give the United States before resuming unlimited submarine attacks?

5. How were the British able to decode the Zimmermann telegram?

6. List two specific items that Germany promised to Mexico if that nation agreed to the proposal.

7. When was the Mexican government to be informed of the plan?

8. Which other nation was to be drawn into the scheme, if possible?

9. Why did Germany believe the plan would work?

Listing Consequences

10. List several reasons why the Zimmermann telegram caused war hysteria in the United States.

11. How might the war have been different if the German plan had succeeded?
