

Sussex Pledge

By [Simone De Santiago Ramos](#)

Summary

In May 1916, the German government issued a pledge to the United States that the Imperial navy would not attack passenger ships and would further allow the crew of merchant ships which carried war material to exit their vessels before they would be sunk.

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Background and Rationale

The Sussex Pledge was seen as an attempt by the [Imperial German government](#) to appease the [United States](#) to prevent a rupture in diplomatic relations as [Germany](#) pursued unrestricted [submarine warfare](#). The pledge got its name from the steamer *S.S. Sussex* built in 1896 used for services between the British Isles and [France](#) during World War I and sunk by the Germans in 1916.

First, a German submarine sunk the British passenger ship *Falaba* in March 1915, followed by the sinking of the famous [Lusitania](#) in May 1915 that killed 128 Americans. The British passenger ship *S.S. Arabic* was attacked and torpedoed only three months later by yet another German submarine near the Irish coast, killing forty. After this incident concern that the President [Woodrow Wilson \(1856-1924\)](#) might sever relations with Imperial Germany along with a desire to tarnish [Britain](#) in world opinion as the only violator of [neutral](#) rights influenced the German decision to issue the Arabic Pledge. Despite its anger over the amount of financial aid and economic support going to the Allied side, the German government issued the Arabic Pledge on 18 September 1915. Germany promised not to sink passenger ships without warning and to give civilians thirty minutes to leave any ship.

The Sinking of the S.S. Sussex

This promise was broken on 24 March 1916 when a German submarine torpedoed the ferry

S.S. *Sussex* which sustained heavy damage, killing fifty and injuring hundreds, including three Americans. The ferry crossed from Folkestone in south-east England to Dieppe in France and was towed to the port of Boulonge-sur-Mar, France. At first the [German government](#) denied the torpedoing of the ferry but later admitted that the German submarine, UB-29, mistakenly believed it to be a minelayer. The Marine Nationale at Le Havre repaired the steamer and sold the vessel after the war to [Greece](#) where she was scrapped in 1924.

The *Sussex* incident infuriated President Woodrow Wilson further, who “considered the sacred and indisputable rules of international law and the universally recognized dictates of humanity.”¹ If Imperial Germany would not immediately stop its unrestricted submarine warfare the government of the United States would be “forced to the conclusion that there is but one course it can pursue and otherwise would break off diplomatic relations.” Wilson in part based his decision on the fact that the United States had signed the “Declaration of Rights of Neutral Nations” in 1909, an international code of maritime laws which addressed blockades, convoys, contrabands and non-neutral service in times of war. He expected that the other signees from the warring nations would respect this declaration as well.

The Sussex Pledge and Its Aftermath

Chancellor [Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg \(1856-1921\)](#) issued the Sussex Pledge on 4 May 1916. Germany promised to no longer attack any passenger ships, expanding the promise made in the Arabic Pledge. Merchant vessels would only be sunk if war material was aboard but only after all passengers, including the crew, had left the ship. This policy of appeasing the United States aided the German war effort. German submarines effectively sunk large amounts of purely military shipping in the following six months and successfully avoided any showdown with the United States until it resumed unconditional submarine warfare in January 1917.

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Notes

1. Wilson, Woodrow: *President Wilson’s Addresses; The Submarine Question*, Hamburg 2012, p. 176. [↑](#)

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External Links

- [Declaration concerning the Laws of Naval War. London, 26 February 1909 \(International Committee of the Red Cross\) \(Primary Source\)](#)
- [United States: Address of the President of the United States, Delivered at a Joint Session of the Two Houses of Congress, April 19, 1916, Washington 1916 \(HathiTrust\) \(Book\)](#)
- [zur Gathen, Joachim von: Zimmermann Telegram, Cryptologia 31/2, 2007 \(Bonn-Aachen](#)

[International Center for Information Technology\) \(Article\)](#)

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