

Secretary of State William Jennings Bryan (1915)

William Jennings Bryan was President Wilson's Secretary of State. A fervent pacifist, he believed in the American duty to "help" less favored nations. Below are excerpts from a letter in reply to the Chairman of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations where Bryan defends America's reasoning of neutrality.

Washington, January 20, 1915

Dear Mr. Stone:

I have received your letter of the 8th instant, referring to frequent complaints or charges made in one form or another through the press that this Government has shown partiality to Great Britain, France, and Russia against Germany and Austria during the present war, and stating that you have received numerous letters to the same effect from sympathizers with the latter powers. You summarize the various grounds of these complaints and ask that you be furnished with whatever information the Department may have touching these points of complaint, in order that you may be informed as to what the true situation is in regard to these matters.

[...] The record of the United States in the past is not free from criticism. When neutral, this Government has stood for a restricted list of absolute and conditional contraband. As a belligerent, we have contended for a liberal list, according to our conception of the necessities of the case.

The United States has made earnest representations to Great Britain in regard to the seizure and detention by the British authorities of all American ships or cargoes bona fide destined to neutral ports, on the ground that such seizures and detentions were contrary to the existing rules of international law. It will be recalled, however, that American courts have established various rules bearing on these matters. The rule of "continuous voyage" has been not only asserted by American tribunals but extended by them. They have exercised the right to determine from the circumstances whether the ostensible was the real destination. They have held that the shipment of articles of contraband to a neutral port "to order," from which, as a matter of fact, cargoes had been transhipped to the enemy, is corroborative evidence that the cargo is really destined to the enemy instead of to the neutral port of delivery. It is thus seen that some of the doctrines which appear to bear harshly upon neutrals at the present time are analogous to or outgrowths from policies adopted by the United States when it was a belligerent. The Government therefore can not consistently protest against the application of rules which it has followed in the past, unless they have not been practiced as heretofore....

[...]

(9) The United States has not interfered with the sale to Great Britain and her allies of arms, ammunition, horses, uniforms, and other munitions of war, although such sales prolong the conflict.

There is no power in the Executive to prevent the sale of ammunition to the belligerents.

The duty of a neutral to restrict trade in munitions of war has never been imposed by international law or by municipal statute. It has never been the policy of this Government to prevent the shipment of arms or ammunition into belligerent territory, except in the case of neighboring American Republics, and then only when civil strife prevailed. Even to this extent the belligerents in the present conflict, when they were neutrals, have never, so far as the records disclose, limited the sale of munitions of war. It is only necessary to point to the enormous quantities of arms and ammunition furnished by manufacturers in Germany to the belligerents in the Russo-Japanese war and in the recent Balkan wars to establish the general recognition of the propriety of the trade by a neutral nation.

[...]

This Government has not been advised that any general loans have been made by foreign governments in this country since the President expressed his wish that loans of this character should not be made...

(20) General unfriendly attitude of Government toward Germany and Austria. If any American citizens, partisans of Germany and Austria-Hungary, feel that this administration is acting in a way injurious to the cause of those countries, this feeling results from the fact that on the high seas the German and Austro-Hungarian naval power is thus far inferior to the British. It is the business of a belligerent operating on the high seas, not the duty of a neutral, to prevent contraband from reaching an enemy.

[...]

The foregoing Categorical replies to specific complaints are sufficient answer to the charge of unfriendliness to Germany and Austria-Hungary.

I am [etc.]

W.J. Bryan

Source: U.S., Department of State, Papers Relating to Foreign Affairs, 1912, pp. vii-xxvii