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By Lamar W. Bridges

Zimmermann Telegram: Reaction of Southern, Southwestern Newspapers

The proposal of a Mexican-Japanese-German alliance against the U.S. was not viewed as a serious threat to American territory by 13 newspapers most directly affected. They did consider the telegram an act of war, however.

► On March 1, 1917, American newspaper readers were told of a startling German proposal to Mexico that she

¹ Barbara W. Tuchman, *The Zimmermann Telegram* (New York, 1958), p. 187.

² Robert Lansing, *War Memoirs of Robert Lansing* (New York and Indianapolis, 1935), p. 232.

³ Zimmermann apparently reasoned, explains Tuchman, that the U.S. would not go to war with Mexico, for President Wilson and a majority of Americans were anti-war. Furthermore, Zimmermann felt the West and Middle West, which could together control Congress, would not go to war with Germany for fear of a Japanese attack from the rear, a fear springing from reported Mexican-Japanese intrigues in 1908-09. See Tuchman, *op. cit.*, pp. 32-38, 142-144.

⁴ Newspapers read were those available to the author in the Wisconsin State Historical Library in Madison, where research reported in this article was done. Not all states of the South and Southwest are represented, for papers were not available for some states. Virginia was not considered a part of the Southeast. Papers read were *Arkansas Gazette*, *Atlanta Constitution*, *Austin American*, *Birmingham Age-Herald*, *Charleston (S.C.) News and Courier*, *Columbia (S.C.) State*, *Dallas Morning News*, *Houston Post*, *Montgomery (Ala.) Advertiser*, *Nashville Tennessean*, *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, *San Antonio Express*, *Santa Fe New Mexican*.

⁵ Zimmermann attached the plot to the German message of January, 1917, announcing plans to resume unrestricted submarine warfare. British intelligence intercepted the lengthy telegram on Jan. 16, 1917, later gave the message to American Ambassador Walter H. Page, who wired the German plot to President Wilson. On Feb. 28, 1917, President Wilson released the story to Associated Press newsmen E. M. Hood. See Tuchman, *op. cit.*, pp. 144-147. Tuchman gives the telegram in full on p. 146.

and Japan join Germany in an alliance against the United States if America entered the European War.

In the East, news of the German scheme was welcomed. To the Anglophile seaboard, the telegram of German Foreign Secretary, Alfred Zimmermann to von Eckhardt, Imperial German Minister in Mexico, was a blessing; Eastern newspapers played up the German intrigue.¹ In the Middle West, strongly isolationist to this time, and the Far West, the plot amazed thousands of Americans.²

But what was the reaction in the South and Southwest, the area most directly affected by Germany's grand design to return to Mexico territory lost to the United States in the 19th century in return for Mexico's pledge to attack the U.S. if America entered the European fighting?³ To get an indication of newspaper editorial sentiment in the South and Southwest, 13 daily newspapers in those sections of the country were read from March 1, 1917, to April 8, 1917. This period of time covers the days from the release of the telegram to the press until just after America's decision to enter the war against Germany.⁴

In the Southwest, the Zimmermann telegram⁵ angered many Americans, heretofore not greatly affected by the

► The author is university editor and assistant professor of journalism at Memphis State University. This article is based on research completed at the University of Wisconsin under the direction of Dr. W. A. Williams where Professor Bridges received his master's degree in journalism.

war and only mildly anti-German. Feeling ran high for war, reported a national magazine,⁶ and demands for action resounded from the editorial pages of Southern newspapers. "The attempt itself, made at a time when the relations between the United States and Germany were friendly, was an act of hostility, a true *casus belli*," said the *Dallas Morning News*. "It is a situation which calls for the employment of thorough and bold measures, . . ."⁷

The *Houston Post* saw the proposal as the move of a desperate country.⁸ The telegram denoted, said the paper, "A degree of stupidity of which the imperial German government has not been suspected heretofore." Except for the apparent authenticity of the note, commented the *Post*, "it would not be difficult to regard the whole matter as an invention of some fertile, though mischievous mind."⁹ The *Austin American* also saw an element of absurdity in the proposed alliance. "When it comes to a case of land grabbing on the American continent, then it must be taken as a joke," observed the *American*. "Mexico to have, as its share of the spoils of war, Texas, New Mexico and Arizona!"¹⁰

To the west, in Santa Fe, the afternoon *New Mexican* termed the Zimmermann scheme the last straw and demanded action:

Sooner or later we are going to have to face this international desperado and criminal. Half way measures, further listening to the 'pacifists' who have labored so long for the ruin of their country, will be suicidal. Every iota of energy in the country should be devoted to placing America in a position to defend her rights, her ships, her citizens and her territory.¹¹

In San Antonio, home of the famous Alamo, the morning *Express* saw very little danger in the German alliance, observing that "such plots as now revealed do not easily flourish against a people in whose union it is never forgotten that eternal vigilance is the price of liberty, the price of preserving the

Nation!"¹² And the afternoon *San Antonio Light* commented that Texans viewed "with complacency the cold-blooded proposition by Germany that the State should become Mexican territory provided Mexico joins Germany and Japan in a war against the United States." They have no fear that such an event would happen, boasted the paper.¹³

► In the Southeast and Gulf Coast region not all papers viewed the Zimmermann plot with such calmness as the *Light*. "Germany's underhanded machinations constitute a virtual act of war and to all practical purposes this nation is now at war with Europe's crazed war-lord and the things he represents," stormed the *Birmingham Age-Herald*. "It is time to put aside trifling and to announce to the world that we are enemies of this sort of thing and unite the forces of this nation with those who are struggling to put an end to these mad Teutonic dreams of world domination," added the *Age-Herald*.¹⁴ In Atlanta, the *Constitution* commented that "history scarcely presents a parallel to the plot intended to pierce the heart of the American republic, which has been laid bare to the world in the publication of the Berlin letter to the German minister at the Mexican capital." The time for "determined, aggressive, thoroughly united action on the part of this government has come," cried the Georgia newspaper.¹⁵

Two South Carolina newspapers greeted the Zimmermann news with ridicule and scorn, yet both demanded

⁶ *Outlook*, quoted in Samuel R. Spencer, *Decision For War, 1917* (Rindge, New Hampshire, 1953), p. 99.

⁷ The *Dallas Morning News*, March 2, 1917, p. 8.

⁸ The *Houston Post*, March 2, 1917, p. 6.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ The *Austin American*, March 2, 1917, p. 8.

¹¹ *Santa Fe New Mexican*, March 1, 1917, p. 4.

¹² The *San Antonio Express*, March 3, 1917, p. 6.

¹³ The *San Antonio Light*, quoted in Spencer, *op. cit.*, p. 80.

¹⁴ *Birmingham Age-Herald*, March 1, 1917, p. 4.

¹⁵ *Atlanta Constitution*, March 2, 1917, p. 8.

action by the American government. "While there is nothing in the disclosures by the Associated Press to quicken the pulses of sensible men, they should put an end to further hesitation in this country in preparing for war with expedition and energy," said the *Columbia State*.¹⁶ In the opinion of the *Charleston News and Courier*, the telegram had been an embarrassing blunder of German diplomacy. But one fact was plain, said the *News and Courier*: America must not stand idly by while German ships sink British vessels, for a Prussian victory would "mean a desperate fight for our lives against heavy odds."¹⁷

Other Southeastern newspapers saw the plot as an absurd scheme of misguided German diplomacy. "The plot to embroil Mexico and the United States was evidently 'made in Germany'—for no German diplomat or agent in this country would have been foolish enough to propose the reconquest of Texas, Arizona and New Mexico as a bribe to the Mexican government," stated the New Orleans *Times-Picayune*.¹⁸ The *Arkansas Gazette* of Little Rock voiced the same opinion when it observed that "in spite of the avenue of information open to them they (Germans) have never had a proper idea of sentiment in the United States or the power of the United States or of the possibilities for danger in their policy of nagging the United States and finally committing what in the eyes of many students of international law is an act of war."¹⁹

The Nashville *Tennessean* termed the German promise of restoring American soil to Mexico "a lying hope, a hope that Germany knew could not be re-

alized, but a hope that Germany thought the gullible Mexican people, and particularly the proud and stubborn Mexican ruler (Carranza), would swallow." The real purpose of Germany, remarked the *Tennessean*, "was to make Mexico sacrifice itself to hold the hands of the United States from gripping the throat of Germany."²⁰ And the Montgomery (Ala.) *Advertiser*, reminding its readers that Texas was larger than Germany, said Germany was trying to "buy the military support of two nations," neither of whom in the present crisis had a just grievance against the United States.²¹

► To these newspapers, the danger of a Mexican attack was remote. Only the *New Mexican* voiced real alarm. Amid March reports that Mexicans were amassing at the border to invade the United States, the Santa Fe newspaper called for close teamwork on the part of the Southwest and Uncle Sam. "There is not a city in the Southwest, however small, which should not take time by the forelock and be vigilant," cautioned the paper.²² One week later, the *New Mexican* repeated its plea:

"Action by the southwestern states, concerted action, ought to come quickly; . . . an invasion by a properly officered and equipped Mexican army would be no trifle."²³ The only other paper to voice alarm was the *Arkansas Gazette*. "Neglecting to take thoroughgoing measures would be inviting disaster," said the Little Rock daily. "For example, there is the possibility of an invasion from Mexico, led by Germans."²⁴ In other Southeastern newspapers, there was no alarm that the Germans might extend the dimensions of their grand design and seek to take over the Gulf Coast states or Florida.

To the 13 editors the importance of the exposure of the plot lay not in the discovery of a military scheme but in the unifying effect the note had on the American people and Southerners in particular. "Herr Zimmermann's little scheme has solidified the American

¹⁶ The *Columbia State*, March 2, 1917, p. 4.

¹⁷ *Charleston News and Courier*, March 2, 1917, p. 4.

¹⁸ New Orleans *Times-Picayune*, March 2, 1917, p. 8.

¹⁹ *Arkansas Gazette*, March 2, 1917, p. 6.

²⁰ Nashville *Tennessean*, March 5, 1917, p. 4.

²¹ Montgomery *Advertiser*, March 5, 1917, p. 4.

²² *New Mexican*, March 28, 1917, p. 4.

²³ *Ibid.*, April 5, 1917, p. 4.

²⁴ *Arkansas Gazette*, March 20, 1917, p. 6.

people as nothing else short of an actual invasion of our territory could have solidified us," commented the *News and Courier* of Charleston.²⁵ The Germans, said the *Arkansas Gazette*, "have done overnight for this country what might have required months."²⁶ Publication of the intrigue "has united the people of this country behind President Wilson," added the *Austin American*.²⁷

Secondly, noted the editors, the lack of and the need for American military preparedness was vividly shown by the German plot. "Because the South, Southwest and part of the West are so removed from the war many people in these regions have adopted an attitude of complacency with reference to proper preparations. . . . The divulging of German plots against this country has aroused most of the people in the complacent regions," observed the *Arkansas Gazette*.²⁸ Out of the Zimmermann exposure have come two necessities, warned the *Tennessean*. "One is to prepare immediately for whatever future invasions may threaten. The other is to meet Prussia's civilized savages on the Somme in 1917 instead of on the Hudson or on the James in 1920."²⁹

Revelation of the intrigue "affords an inkling of the secret hostility that exists for the United States and of the dangers against which preparation must be made as rapidly as possible," cautioned the *Houston Post*. "It is a warning that ought not to be lost upon members of congress who are disposed to play and trifle with the security of the nation at a time when there should be a serious realization of the crisis which is at hand."³⁰

At the time of the publication of the Zimmermann telegram, Congress was debating the Armed Ship Bill, an act which would have armed American merchantmen. Just when it appeared neither house would give President Wilson the war-making authority he desired, the President released the Zim-

mermann story to Associated Press.³¹ News of the German audacity stunned Congress; opposition in the House of Representatives diminished, and the Armed Ship bill passed that body March 1.³² But the bill was blocked in the Senate by 12 filibustering senators, led by Robert La Follette of Wisconsin.³³

To the Southern newspapers, publication of the note did not leave the anti-war senators and pacifists a leg to stand on, a third benefit they saw in the exposure. "Whatever reason there may have been why congress should have hesitated to grant the president's request for full authorization and means to protect American lives and property against Teutonic piracy on the high seas, the startling expose of intrigue put on foot by Germany to involve Japan and Mexico in armed invasion of the United States certainly should be enough to cause prompt action," reasoned the *Atlanta Constitution*.³⁴ The Zimmermann proposal has made each man either friend or foe, said the *Age-Herald* of Birmingham. "There can be no quibbling, no middle ground when the sacred precincts of the nation's rights are wantonly invaded," commented the paper, adding that "there is no longer room for pacifists."³⁵

For days the 12 senators who had blocked the Armed Ship Bill were showered with abuse—some of it "nothing short of violent"—by the nation's press.³⁶ In the 13 Southern and Southwestern newspapers, criticism of the 12

²⁵ *News and Courier*, March 7, 1917, p. 4.

²⁶ *Arkansas Gazette*, March 2, 1917, p. 6.

²⁷ *American*, March 3, 1917, p. 8.

²⁸ *Arkansas Gazette*, March 19, 1917, p. 6.

²⁹ *Tennessean*, March 5, 1917, p. 4.

³⁰ *Houston Post*, March 2, 1917, p. 6.

³¹ Arthur Link, *Woodrow Wilson and the Progressive Era, 1910-1917* (New York, 1954), p. 272.

³² Lindsay Rogers, *America's Case Against Germany* (New York, 1917), pp. 215-216.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Constitution*, March 2, 1917, p. 8; see also *Arkansas Gazette*, March 2, 1917, p. 6.

³⁵ *Age-Herald*, March 1, 1917, p. 4.

³⁶ Ray S. Baker, *Woodrow Wilson, Life and Letters* (New York, 1937), vol. vi, p. 482.

was often heavy and extended especially against Senator William F. Kirby of Arkansas and Senator James K. Vardaman of Mississippi. The *Montgomery Advertiser* summed up the papers' feelings when it remarked that those opposing Wilson "are opposing the American republic in a critical hour in its history and they are giving aid and comfort to an enemy who is trying to raise up other enemies to the welfare, honor and territorial integrity of the United States."³⁷

► To the 13 newspapers the Zimmermann telegram was not the major cause of America's entry into World War I. Rather, many mentioned the conspiracy as the culmination of a series of hostile acts on the part of Germany: the sinking of the *Lusitania*, the Rintelen-Huerta intrigue, and German activities along the Texas border.³⁸ The alliance was merely the climax in the German testing of U.S. neutrality. Only one of the 13 papers specifically cited the Zimmermann telegram in its editorial following Congress' declaration of war on April 6.³⁹

But the editors did see the Zimmermann note as a contributing factor in America's decision to fight. First, the note had confirmed the papers' distrust of Berlin diplomacy and had shown the Germans' affront to the Monroe Doctrine.

"The informed man, the thoughtful man, will find nothing to surprise him in the German intrigue to raise up enemies against a neutral and supposedly friendly country," cried the *Montgomery Advertiser*. "The informed man must have known that such underground work has been going on, and if he had common sense he must have known that in Germany's present ex-

tremity there was no American right that Germany would respect."⁴⁰ Whatever surprise caused by the note is a result of its exposure rather than its formulation, commented the *Columbia State*. "One may not review the conduct of the Hohenzollern government from the inception of the great war without arrival at the conclusion that Zimmermann's enterprise was in exact harmony with the ethical standards to which it has adhered."⁴¹

The *Nashville Tennessean*, in a long, two-column editorial on March 5, voiced little doubt that German conspiracy in Mexico was much older than the Zimmermann proposal. "Every indication," said the paper, "points to the fact that, for a long while past, Germany has exerted every effort to engage the United States and Mexico in war."⁴² In the opinion of the *Times-Picayune* of New Orleans, the disclosure of the plot would resolve certain doubts. "For example, there seems no reason to doubt any longer Berlin's purpose and effort, past and present, to stir up trouble for the United States wherever the stirring is good."⁴³

Germany's disregard of the Monroe Doctrine was stunning, but equally as startling to some papers was Germany's protestations of friendship at the time Minister Zimmermann was plotting his alliance. Their indignation was reflected in an editorial of the *Atlanta Constitution*:

Here, it would seem, is Germany, pretending sorrow at the strained relations between that country and this; Chancellor Bethmann-Hollweg, as the kaiser's spokesman, shedding crocodile tears because the United States placed an interpretation upon the Teutonic submarine declaration 'never intended by Germany,' and declaring that his government had 'promoted and honored' friendly relations with the United States 'as an heirloom from Frederick the Great!' Yet he was speaking in full light of the fact that the house of Hohenzollern was insidiously dangling before the de facto government at Mexico City a bait to tempt Carranza into an

³⁷ *Advertiser*, March 2, 1917, p. 4.

³⁸ Tuchman, *op. cit.*, discusses these episodes.

³⁹ *San Antonio Express*, April 6, 1917, p. 6.

⁴⁰ *Advertiser*, March 2, 1917, p. 4.

⁴¹ *Columbia State*, March 2, 1917, p. 4.

⁴² *Tennessean*, March 5, 1917, p. 4.

⁴³ New Orleans *Times-Picayune*, March 2, 1917, p. 8.

alliance with Japan and with Germany for the destruction of the American republic as its objective!⁴⁴

Thirdly, the note proved to the papers the necessity of stamping out German autocracy if democracy were to survive in the world. The scheme vividly portrayed the dangers of a victory by military Germany, advised the *Santa Fe New Mexican*, the first paper to voice this sentiment. "It all goes to show more plainly," editorialized the paper, "that the defeat of Germany and the Prussian idea are vital to the future well-being of the United States, to the existence of any effective code governing international relations, to every conception of democracy and liberty and the cause of world peace."⁴⁵ A German victory "would spell national disaster and imperil the future of this and all other democracies," contended the *Times-Picayune*.⁴⁶ "A victory for that (German) autocracy would mean world enslavement," predicted the *Austin American*.⁴⁷ To the papers, the struggle was between free government and popular vote and autocratic government and divine right.

► In summary, the papers studied did not regard the Zimmermann proposal of a German-Mexican-Japanese alliance as a serious threat to the territorial integrity of the United States. To the editors, the scheme was fundamentally a blunder both ludicrous and fantastic. The papers saw the intrigue as an act of

war, a climax to German violations of American neutrality. The Zimmermann telegram solidified public opinion for war, illustrated the need for military preparedness and destroyed the arguments of pacifists and neutralists, according to these editors. The telegram, though not the only nor major factor in President Wilson's decision to call for war, did contribute to the decision because it showed (1) Germany's disregard for the Monroe Doctrine and her design to set up a base on the doorstep of America (2) Germany's hypocrisy and her hostile intentions to the United States at a time when she was manifesting friendship for America and (3) the danger of autocracy triumphing in Europe and the necessity for America to do her part in halting the German drive for world domination.

To the papers, the telegram was the outward manifestation of the inner German contempt for America. As the newspapers saw it, the note made American entrance into the conflict inevitable. And more importantly, the note made American entry into the war a duty—an obligation which had lain dormant for months but an obligation which was now at hand.

⁴⁴ *Constitution*, March 2, 1917, p. 8.

⁴⁵ *New Mexican*, March 1, 1917, p. 4; see also editorial of March 3, 1917, p. 6.

⁴⁶ *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, March 31, 1917, p. 8.

⁴⁷ *American*, April 5, 1917, p. 8.

IMAGE OF THE NEGRO IN THE MARYLAND GAZETTE

(Continued from page 80)

such a Law, from what I have seen of some of our own Colour, for I have been in Company with Men when they have been meanly dressed, and they have been as still and as humble as a Bee, and at other Times have seen them with their Sunday or Holyday Cloaths on, and they have been as impudent and bold as a Lion; such is the Difference fine Cloaths make in the Vulgar, and such is the Difference, I am sure, they make in the Negroes.²²

The *Maryland Gazette*, then, offered

its readers a Negro whose total image was many-sided and complex, an image which saw the Negro as property but which also revealed his human qualities.

Whatever else can be said about present day attitudes toward the Negro, that they are confused, unclear and shaped by fear and misunderstanding, it does seem obvious that patterns of race prejudice and discrimination are deeply set in the nation's past.

²² *Ibid.*, Oct. 18, 1770.