

American Government & Politics: A Christian Worldview.
The *Lusitania* Propaganda Pitch (25–30 Minutes)

TEACHER INSTRUCTIONS

Goal

By playing the part of government officials, students learn how they can use incidents like the sinking of the *Lusitania* to mold public opinion, and even justify entrance into war.

Instructions

1. Put students in groups of 3–5.
2. Read the instructions together.
3. Students complete the handout. (Allow 15–20 minutes.)
4. Discuss as a class via volunteers for each group.

Debrief/Wrap-Up Question

Ask the class:

- Did your group feel pressure to lie? Why?
- If the truth had been told, would Congress have voted for war?
- What modern examples follow this same pattern of exaggerating dangers that lead to increased government powers, lost individual rights, or the ignoring of the Constitution?
- Is it ever legitimate for a government to deceive its people into war?

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Your group is a **Presidential War Justification Team** in the White House in the spring of 1917. Your job: Manufacture public consent for a declaration of war against Germany. You are not allowed to tell the truth. The truth is:

- The *Lusitania* was a British naval auxiliary carrying four million rifle cartridges and tons of ammunition.
- Germany published warnings in American newspapers not to sail on her.
- Wilson and other officials knew all this, but let American civilians travel on armed belligerent ships.
- The real drivers were banker profits, munitions sales, and British propaganda.

Your team must create a three-part strategy that successfully sells the war to the American people and Congress.

Task 1: Framing the Narrative (5 minutes): Each team must produce three talking points for Wilson’s speech to Congress, following these rules:

- Omit any fact that reduces German guilt. Do not mention the ammunition, the warnings, or the blockade starving German civilians.
- Invent or exaggerate moral outrage. Paint the sinking as “unprovoked mass murder of innocents.”
- Elevate the stakes. You cannot say, “We’re fighting for bankers and arms dealers.” You must claim the peace of the world or civilization itself is at stake.

Your three talking points:

Task 2: Managing Dissent (5 minutes): Senator George Norris is giving speeches saying the American people are being deceived. Your team must design a counter-propaganda tactic. Choose one:

- A newspaper smear campaign against Norris (accuse him of being pro-German, a coward, or a traitor).
- A censorship plan to suppress anti-war articles and speeches (use the Espionage Act as cover).
- A staged event (e.g., a “spontaneous” patriotic rally, a fake German plot exposed by your agents).

Your 2–3 sentence description of your tactic:

Task 3: The One-Page Press Release (5 minutes): Draft a single paragraph (100 words max) that you will release to every major newspaper. It must do these:

- Blame Germany entirely.
- Use emotionally charged language.
- Make no mention of American merchants profiting, British blockade, or German warnings.

Your press release: