



# The Zimmermann Telegram: Intelligence, Diplomacy, and America's Entry into World War I

*By Thomas Boghardt*

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## **The Zimmermann Telegram: Intelligence, Diplomacy, and America's Entry into World War I** By Thomas Boghardt

By the winter of 1916/17, World War I had reached a deadlock. While the Allies commanded greater resources and fielded more soldiers than the Central Powers, German armies had penetrated deep into Russia and France, and tenaciously held on to their conquered empire. Hoping to break the stalemate on the western front, the exhausted Allies sought to bring the neutral United States into the conflict.

A golden opportunity to force American intervention seemed at hand when British naval intelligence intercepted a secret telegram detailing a German alliance offer to Mexico. In it, Berlin's foreign secretary, Arthur Zimmermann, offered his country's support to Mexico for re-conquering "the lost territory in Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona" in exchange for a Mexican attack on the United States, should the latter enter the war on the side of the Allies. The British handed a copy of the Telegram to the American government, which in turn leaked it to the press. On March 1, 1917, the Telegram made headline news across the United States, and five weeks later, America entered World War I.

Based on an examination of virtually all available German, British, and U.S. government records, this book presents the definitive account of the Telegram and questions many traditional views on the origins, cryptanalysis, and impact of the German alliance scheme. While the Telegram has often been described as the final step in a carefully planned German strategy to gain a foothold in the western hemisphere, this book argues that the scheme was a spontaneous initiative by a minor German foreign office official, which gained traction only because of a lack of supervision and coordination at the top echelon of the German government. On the other hand, the book argues, American and British secret services had collaborated closely since 1915 to bring the United States into the war, and the Telegram's interception and disclosure represented the crowning achievement of this clandestine Anglo-American intelligence alliance. Moreover, the book explicitly challenges the widely accepted notion that the Telegram's publication in the U.S. press rallied Americans for war. Instead, it contends that the Telegram divided the public by poisoning the debate over intervention, and by failing to offer peace-minded Americans a convincing rationale for supporting

the war. The book also examines the Telegram's effect on the memory of World War I through the twentieth century and beyond.

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### Editorial Review

Review

"...Fascinating book." ? *Military History*

"A specialist in the history of espionage and covert operations during the Great War, in *The Zimmermann Telegram* Boghardt gives us the first new book on this event since Barbara Tuchman's treatment over 60 years ago. In his excellent opening survey of the historiography of the subject, Boghardt notes that Tuchman and other earlier writers on the subject worked without many documents that remained classified until recently, and also wrote largely without reference at all to German sources. A valuable work for anyone interested in the diplomacy of the war or American's participation."--*StrategyPage.com*

"Overall, this is a deeply researched, clearly written, and highly analytical monograph. It certainly supersedes anything else written on the Zimmermann telegram and should be read by anyone interested in the First World War." ? *Intelligence and National Security*

"I give this book a high recommendation: FIVE CLOAKS, FIVE DAGGERS!" --*The Washington Times*

"...Impressive study...Well-researched, engagingly written, and superbly produced...a valuable and enjoyable read." ? *The Journal of Military History*

"U.S. Army Center of Military History senior historian Thomas Boghardt is a thoughtful, technically astute, balanced investigator and fine author of prose...Read *The Zimmermann Telegram*. You won't be disappointed."

? Naval Historical Foundation

"Boghardt blends the scholarship of a refined historian with the narrative skills of a John Le Carré in retelling the story of the Zimmermann telegram. Summing Up: Highly recommended."

? Choice

"...Should be the definite work on the subject...Dr. Boghardt's work is a masterpiece of intelligence writing. By following the hard evidence rather than relying on historical assumptions, he provides an incisive case study on how intelligence can affect national affairs."

? *Intelligencer: Journal of U.S. Intelligence Studies*

"This is a fresh, comprehensive study of how intelligence and counter-intelligence can be used in war, and of an incident that formed one of the markers on the way to the special relationship between Britain and the

USA."

? Warships International Fleet Review

"...Fascinating book."

? *Military History*, July 2013

"The detailed analysis here, drawing from documents of the time, tells us much that is new about the telegram, its decryption, and the tricks which not only brought it to light in 1917 but also kept the whole story from being told until now."

?The Commercial Dispatch, (Columbus, Mississippi)

"Replete with deft pen portraits of the main protagonists such as Kemnitz?nicely characterized by Hollweg's secretary, Riezler, as a 'fantastic idiot'?Boghardt has produced a highly readable, scholarly, and accomplished account. It adds particularly to our understanding of the dysfunctional nature of German policy-making."

– *The Historian*

"Boghardt expertly dissects the political and military situation surrounding the decryption and dissemination of the notorious Zimmermann Telegram which triggered (but was not the cause) America's entry into the Great War. Of equal importance are his brief but revealing character sketches of the principal actors in the drama: German Foreign Secretary Arthur Zimmermann, British naval intelligence chief, William "Blinker" Hall, Wilson confidant Colonel Edward House, and U.S. Secretary of State Robert Lansing among many other major and minor characters."

? "St. Mihiel Trip-Wire" on [www.WorldWarI.com](http://www.WorldWarI.com), December 2012

"The Zimmermann Telegram will fascinate history buffs. It is worth reading."

?Galveston Daily News, 18 November 201

"...The story of the Zimmermann telegram has enough twists and turns to keep the attention of even a jaded James Bond. U.S. Army Center of Military History senior historian Thomas Boghardt is a thoughtful, technically astute, balanced investigator and fine author of prose...Read *The Zimmermann Telegram*. You won't be disappointed." ? **Naval Historical Foundation**

"Boghardt has given us a deeply researched and well-written book that tells us much that is new about the

Zimmermann Telegram and its role in American entry into World War I. More than that, however, it is a solid analysis of German foreign policy and the international context of 1917. It should be a must read for anyone interested in these subjects.”

?Michael S. Neiberg, author of *Dance of the Furies: Europe and the Outbreak of World War I*

“Thomas Boghardt has provided the most thorough, comprehensive, and reliable account to date of the Zimmermann Telegram. He has judiciously analyzed the diplomatic, political, bureaucratic, and cryptological dimensions of the crisis. His conclusions about its role in the American decision to enter the war against Germany in 1917 are compelling.”

?Roger Chickering, professor emeritus, Georgetown University, and author of *Imperial Germany and the Great War, 1914-1918*

“The Zimmermann Telegram is a critical moment in the history of World War I and the history of intelligence. Thomas Boghardt’s work deftly examines the disclosure of the telegram, the U.S. entry into the war, and its historical memory. It’s a lovely work of scholarship, deeply researched, that pays careful attention to all the main actors and reads as compellingly as a thriller.”

?David Silbey, author of *The British Working Class and Enthusiasm for War, 1914-1916* and *The Boxer Rebellion and the Great Game in China, 1900*

“Thomas Boghardt has produced a brilliant analysis of the most sensational code-breaking coup of World War I which also sheds new light on the origins of today’s British-American special relationship.”

?Christopher Andrew, author of *Defend the Realm: The Authorized History of MI5*

“Thomas Boghardt has written the only book anyone needs to read about the storied Zimmermann Telegram episode. By exhaustively mining several countries’ archives, using previously unavailable records, and giving equal treatment to all the major players, Boghardt corrects many durable misunderstandings about how the telegram was conceived, discovered, perceived, and exploited. He has made a vital contribution to the scholarship on intelligence and World War I.”

?David Robarge, chief historian, Central Intelligence Agency

From the Inside Flap

In January 1917, British naval intelligence intercepted a secret telegram from Germany's foreign secretary, Arthur Zimmermann, offering his country's support to Mexico for regaining lost territory in the U.S. in exchange for a Mexican attack on the United States. Five weeks later, America entered World War I. This

remarkable study taps fresh sources to provide a definitive account of the origins, cryptanalysis, and impact of the German alliance scheme. Challenging many widely accepted views of what happened, the author contends that the telegram was a spontaneous initiative, not the result of a long-term German plan. He further argues that the telegram did not rally Americans for war, but instead proved divisive, alienating isolationist and pacifist groups and lawmakers. He also corrects mistakes made previously about how the telegram was sent and coded. The book's new findings, as well as a firsthand account of how the telegram was conceived, published here for the first time, are certain to attract attention.

#### About the Author

Thomas Boghardt grew up in Germany. He has lived in Florida, France, Italy, and England where he went to university. After graduation he taught briefly in Pakistan, then came to Washington, D.C. in 2002 on a postgraduate fellowship at Georgetown University. He subsequently worked for six years as a historian for the International Spy Museum. In 2010, he joined the U.S. Army Center of Military History in Washington, D.C. as a senior historian. He lives with his wife and two young children in Bethesda, Maryland.

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**Jacki Peters:**

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