

The Zimmermann Telegram: The Secret Offer Across the Ocean

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Germany's encrypted proposal offered Mexico an alliance against the United States. British codebreakers exposed the message, turning a secret diplomatic contingency into public evidence that helped shift American opinion toward war.

STATUS	Authentic intercepted diplomatic proposal
CLASSIFICATION	STR
MATERIAL	Germany, Mexico, United Kingdom and United States
DISPOSITION	PUBLIC / SOURCED STORY
CATEGORY	Strange Files
RECORD TYPE	Secrets & conspiracies
STORY HISTORY	1917

THE ACCOUNT

The message traveled in code, carrying a proposal that could redraw a continent. In January 1917, German foreign secretary Arthur Zimmermann instructed his representative in Mexico to propose an alliance if the United States entered the war against Germany. Mexico was offered support in recovering lost territory. British codebreakers read the telegram, and the secret intended for diplomatic use became something its authors could no longer control.

FOLLOWING THE TRAIL

The National Archives preserves the telegram and translations, documenting both the proposed alliance and Britain's delivery of the information to Washington. News of it appeared in the American press on March 1, 1917. The message contributed to the movement toward U.S. entry into the First World War, alongside unrestricted submarine warfare and other factors. It records a proposal, not an alliance that Mexico actually carried out.

WHY IT STAYS WITH US

The suspense lies in an unreadable page becoming readable to the wrong people. A private contingency could be defended differently from a public threat, but the codebreakers removed that protective distance. The telegram also shows why authentic conspiracy evidence needs careful verbs: it proves what was offered and feared, without proving that every intended partner agreed or every proposed action followed.

WHERE THIS TELLING COMES FROM

The Zimmermann Telegram

National Archives

<https://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/zimmermann>

Zimmermann Telegram

National Archives

<https://www.archives.gov/historical-docs/zimmerman-telegram>

RETURN TO THE STORY

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