Real World Impact: How GCHQ's predecessors contributed to the US entering World War I

The 'Zimmermann Telegram' of 1917 demonstrates the need to balance making use of intelligence and protecting its source, which is still relevant today.

One hundred years ago in January 1917, GCHQ's predecessors in Room 40 of the Admiralty produced an intelligence report which contributed to the United States, still neutral at that point, entering World War I on the Allied side.

While the war on the Western Front had reached stalemate, the Allied blockade of Germany was beginning to bite hard. There were increasing shortages of food and of the raw materials need for Germany to keep on fighting. By contrast, between the Royal Navy's patrol activity in the Atlantic, and the restrictions placed on German submarines about which ships they could and couldn't attack, the Allies were receiving supplies from the US which enabled them to continue to deny Germany the opportunity to break through in the West.

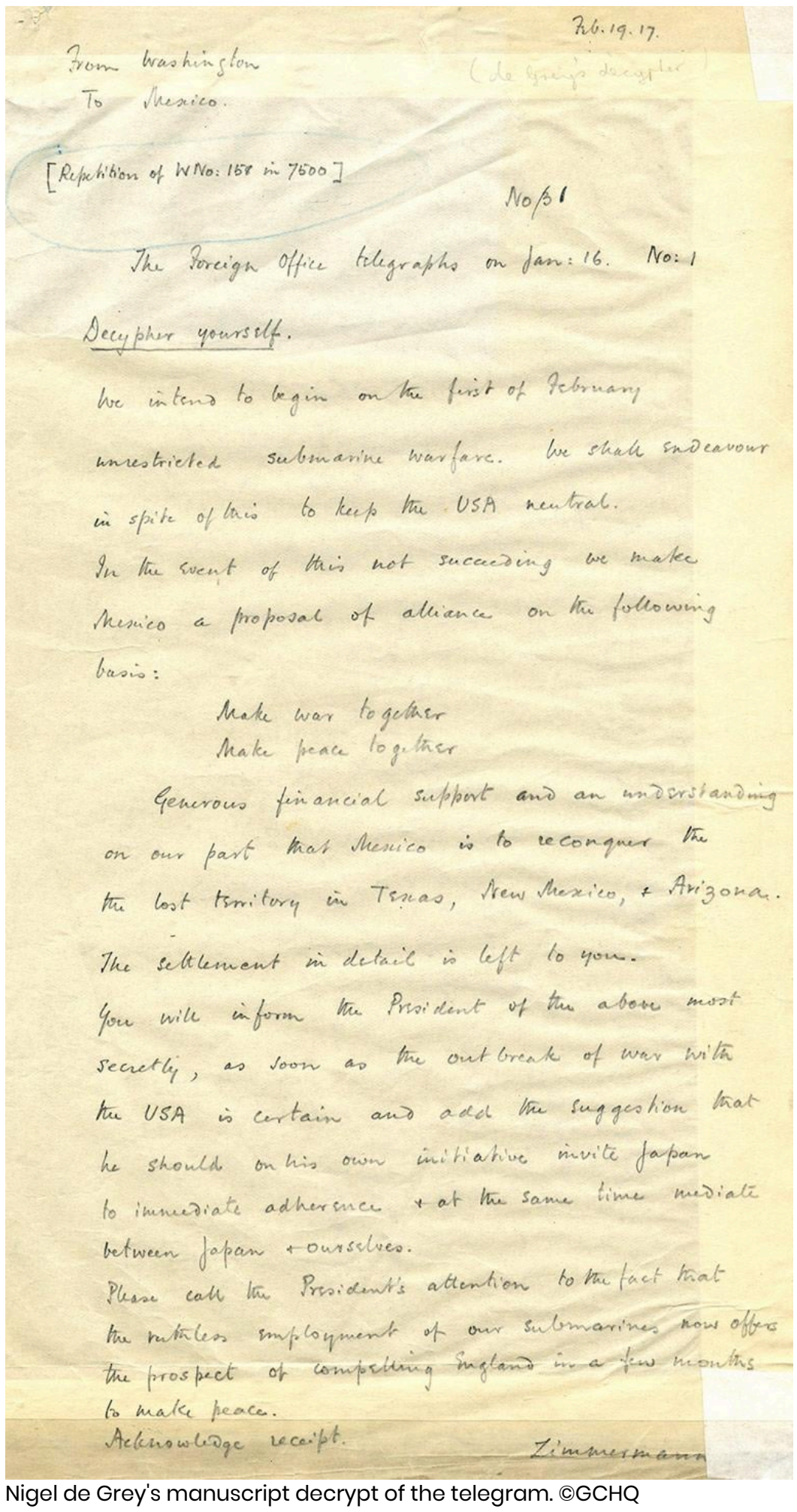
Early in January 1917 the German leadership decided to institute a new campaign of unrestricted submarine warfare. Although they recognised the danger that the sinking of American ships carrying supplies to the UK might bring the United States into the war, they were confident that the UK would be brought to the point of surrender long before any US troops could reach Europe.

The German Foreign Ministry decided to play its part by seeking to neutralise any potential US response. The German Foreign Minister, Arthur Zimmermann, proposed an alliance with Mexico: if the US joined the Allied side in the war and Mexico would ally itself with Germany, it would receive Texas, New Mexico and Arizona as prizes after the defeat of the Allies.

At the start of the war, the UK had cut the German telegraphic cables which ran through the English Channel, removing the German capability to communicate directly with North and South America, and forcing them to find other ways to reach their diplomatic missions there. One method, nicknamed the "Swedish Roundabout", was to have the Swedish Foreign Ministry send their messages for them, disguised as Swedish diplomatic messages. This was supplemented in 1916 with the offer by US President Wilson to allow the Germans to send diplomatic telegrams through US diplomatic channels if this would help advance Wilson's efforts to bring peace to Europe. In what seems an act of outrageous cheek, the German Foreign Ministry used this channel to send its offer to Mexico via its Embassy in Washington on 16 January 1917.

All telegraphic traffic between neutral countries in Europe and North America had to transit the UK, and this meant that enciphered messages would be brought to the attention of Room 40, or their War Office colleagues in MI1(b).

The message was read on 17 January by a team including Nigel de Grey, and its importance was quickly realised. However, using the intelligence it contained - that Germany was offering an alliance and the promise of US territory to Mexico - was complicated. How could the material be shown to the US authorities without revealing that it had been obtained by reading American diplomatic telegrams? And how could the information be made public without revealing to the Germans that their diplomatic codes were being read?



From Washington
To Mexico.

(de Grey's decypher)

[Repetition of WNo: 158 in 7500]

No 51

The Foreign Office telegraphs on Jan: 16. No: 1

Decypher yourself.

We intend to begin on the first of February unrestricted submarine warfare. We shall endeavour in spite of this to keep the USA neutral. In the event of this not succeeding we make Mexico a proposal of alliance on the following basis:

Make war together
Make peace together

Generous financial support and an understanding on our part that Mexico is to reconquer the the lost territory in Texas, New Mexico, + Arizona.

The settlement in detail is left to you.

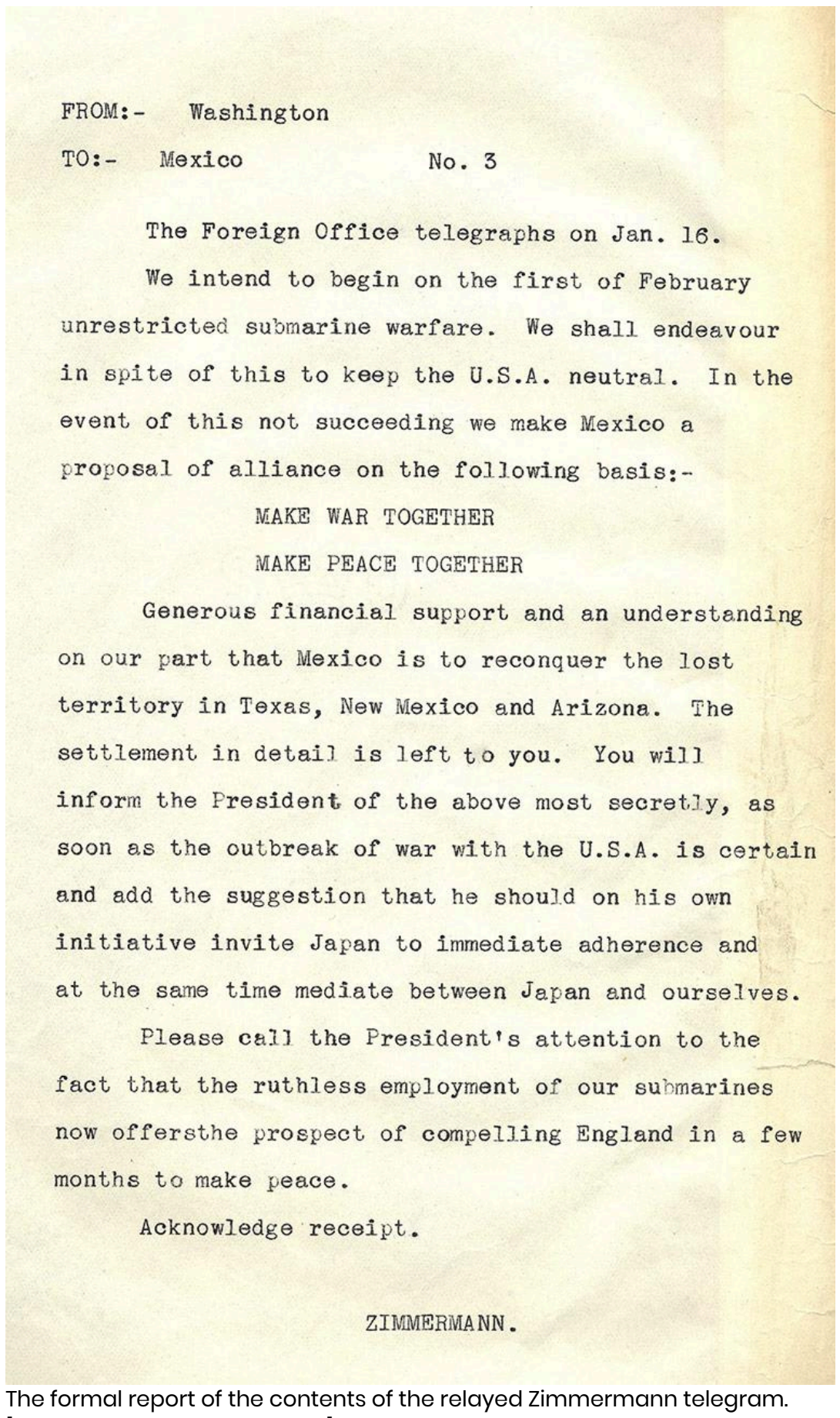
You will inform the President of the above most secretly, as soon as the outbreak of war with the USA is certain and add the suggestion that he should on his own initiative invite Japan to immediate adherence + at the same time mediate between Japan + ourselves.

Please call the President's attention to the fact that the ruthless employment of our submarines now offers the prospect of compelling England in a few months to make peace.

Acknowledge receipt.

Zimmermann

Nigel de Grey's manuscript decrypt of the telegram. ©GCHQ



FROM:- Washington

TO:- Mexico No. 3

The Foreign Office telegraphs on Jan. 16.

We intend to begin on the first of February unrestricted submarine warfare. We shall endeavour in spite of this to keep the U.S.A. neutral. In the event of this not succeeding we make Mexico a proposal of alliance on the following basis:-

MAKE WAR TOGETHER

MAKE PEACE TOGETHER

Generous financial support and an understanding on our part that Mexico is to reconquer the lost territory in Texas, New Mexico and Arizona. The settlement in detail is left to you. You will inform the President of the above most secretly, as soon as the outbreak of war with the U.S.A. is certain and add the suggestion that he should on his own initiative invite Japan to immediate adherence and at the same time mediate between Japan and ourselves.

Please call the President's attention to the fact that the ruthless employment of our submarines now offersthe prospect of compelling England in a few months to make peace.

Acknowledge receipt.

ZIMMERMANN.

The formal report of the contents of the relayed Zimmermann telegram. [Click image for large version.] ©GCHQ

Admiral Hall, the Director of Naval Intelligence, and therefore in charge of Room 40, got round the first part of the problem by acquiring in Mexico City a copy of the message between the German Embassies in Washington and Mexico City, and this is what was shown to the US Embassy in London. It was leaked to the US press and was front page in most US newspapers on 1 March 1917. The US Secretary of State, Robert Lansing, dropped deep hints about the acquisition of the telegram by a spy, and the German authorities in Berlin eventually accepted that this was probably the case. In any event, Zimmermann publicly announced that the telegram was authentic, and in April the United States declared war on Germany.

WESTERN UNION

TELEGRAM

NEWCOMB CARLTON, PRESIDENT

Send the following telegram, subject to the terms on back hereof, which are hereby agreed to

via Galveston

JAN 19 1917

GERMAN LEGATION

MEXICO CITY

130 13042 13401 8501 115 3528 416 17214 6491 11310
18147 18222 21560 10247 11518 23677 13605 3494 14936
98092 5905 11311 10392 10371 0302 21290 5161 39695
23571 17504 11269 18276 18101 0317 0228 17694 4473
22284 22200 19452 21589 67893 5569 13918 8958 12137
1333 4725 4458 5905 17166 13851 4458 17149 14471 6706
13850 12224 6929 14991 7382 15857 67893 14218 36477
1870 17553 67893 5870 5454 16102 15217 22801 17138
21001 17388 7116 23638 18222 6719 14331 15021 23845
31[illegible] 23552 22096 21604 4797 9497 22464 20855 4377
23810 18140 22260 5905 13347 20420 39689 13732 20667
6929 5275 18507 52262 1340 22049 13339 11265 22295
10439 14814 4178 6992 8784 7632 7357 6926 52262 11267
21100 21272 9346 9559 22464 15874 18502 18500 15857
2188 5376 7381 98092 16127 13486 9350 9220 76036 14219
5144 2831 17920 11347 17142 11264 7667 7762 15099 9110
10482 97556 3569 3670

BEPHSTOPFF.

Cherpe German Embassy.

Did the Zimmermann Telegram bring the United States into the war? Not by itself: America was moving away from the isolationism which had characterised it in the first years of the war; and the deliberate sinking of US merchant ships would undoubtedly have changed the American mood. Yet publication of the telegram contributed to changing American perceptions of Germany: it was suddenly much harder to say that one side was as bad as the other when an offer had been made to Mexico to annex three states.

Most importantly, to the cryptanalysts in London at least, the Germans never realised that their diplomatic codes were readable, or, more generally, that the UK had been involved at all.

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