

## Introduction

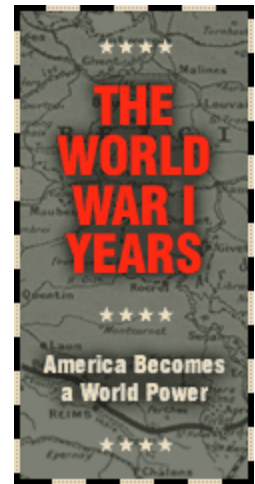
When the Great War broke out in Europe in 1914, Americans felt far removed from the conflict. President Woodrow Wilson called upon his countrymen to be “neutral in fact as well as in name.” The nation, preoccupied with its own domestic concerns and valuing its tradition of avoiding entangling alliances with European powers, by and large agreed. But problems related to the war quickly affected Americans. The U.S. economy, increasingly focused on production of war materials for Great Britain and France, became inextricably linked to their cause. For the millions of first and second-generation American immigrants whose ties to the past were still strong, it was impossible to remain neutral in thought. And on the ocean, German submarine warfare outraged America’s moral sentiments and violated America’s neutral rights as Wilson interpreted them.

Fierce national debate over intervention preceded America’s entry into the war in April of 1917. During the next 19 months — until November, 1918 — the American Expeditionary Force helped turn the tide of the war in the Allies’ favor. Active in several major battles in France, American doughboys suffered heavy casualties as they confronted the murderous new technology of modern warfare. In the air, pilots fought the enemy in rudimentary aircraft. On the seas, the American navy safeguarded troops and necessary supplies across the Atlantic. The American forces’ important contribution to Allied victory heralded the new status of the United States as a great world power.

Horrified by the war’s carnage, Wilson attempted at war’s end to forge a peace that would prevent future conflicts. Unprecedented for any sitting President, he spent a half —year in Europe in negotiations with the victorious Allies over plans for the post-war world. His vision for the world’s first international peacekeeping institution was incorporated into the Treaty of Versailles. But the failure to bring America into the League of Nations would have long- term consequences that would contribute to the causes of World War II.

Involvement in the war altered America’s status on the world stage, but it also intensified the tensions confronting American culture. African American workers who migrated north to fill wartime labor needs saw increased economic opportunity in northern cities, but also faced prejudice and racial violence. Long-held anti-immigration sentiments erupted during wartime in government-sponsored censorship and public antagonism, especially towards German Americans. Two major social reform movements — women’s suffrage and prohibition — achieved long sought- after legislative successes as a result of war-related events. The mass movement of servicemen — across the Atlantic to fight or across the United States to train — exposed millions of Americans to new cultures and customs and impacted the insularity of a generation.

The United States emerged from World War I as the strongest and richest nation in the world. But it would take another twenty-five years before it was fully willing to accept the international responsibilities inherent in that status. Nevertheless the war and the tensions it intensified lifted the curtain on the national experience for the rest of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Indeed, the Great War and the changes it accelerated in the United States have a continuing relevance at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup>.



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# THE ROAD TO WAR

by John Morton Blum, Sterling Professor Emeritus of History, Yale University

The Great War had been brewing for a decade before it began. In those years the European powers had created a system of alliances that led them to belligerency in 1914 over a crisis in the Austro-Hungarian Empire. When Germany overran neutral Belgium on its way to invade France, Great Britain, Russia and later Italy joined to oppose the Germans, whose allies were Austria and Turkey.



Shocked by the outbreak of hostilities and stunned by the horrors of modern battle, most Americans at first resolved to remain neutral. Many, however, identified with the countries of their forbears. President Woodrow Wilson, himself an admirer of British culture, nevertheless attempted a diplomatic resolution. He pressed both camps to accept his interpretations of neutral rights to trade and the use of the ocean. He protested both British interference with American shipping, and, more vigorously, Germany's use of submarines, then novel weapons. In 1915 Germany declared a war zone around the British Isles. There, German U-boats would attack enemy ships, and neutral ships risked being misidentified and sunk. Outraged, Wilson threatened to hold Germany to "strict accountability" for any American losses.

In May 1915 a German submarine sank the British liner *Lusitania*, killing 1200 men, women and children, 128 of them Americans. The Germans had warned passengers not to embark, and the ship carried munitions, but most Americans agreed with Wilson, who called it an "illegal and inhuman act." Still, the country supported the President's decision to negotiate rather than fight, and Wilson extracted an apology from Germany. But in 1916 the *Sussex*, a French steamer, was torpedoed and sunk with Americans aboard. Now Wilson warned the Germans that he would sever diplomatic relations unless they ceased submarine warfare. They agreed to the demand, with conditions. Contending that he had preserved "peace with honor," Wilson campaigned successfully for re-election.

But in 1917, the Germans resumed unrestricted use of their expanded submarine fleet. They did so expecting the United States to declare war, but confident that American troops would be slow reaching Europe. In the meanwhile, Germany hoped to defeat the Allies by destroying American shipments of war materials essential to the Allied cause. At the same time, Wilson learned that Germany had offered Mexico the war prize of land in Arizona, New Mexico and Texas if they entered the war against the U.S. Wilson broke off diplomatic relations with Germany and ordered the arming of American merchantmen.

Wilson realized that war would endanger the humane and rational spirit he cherished, but he could see no alternative. Now he defined American purpose in lofty terms: he called for war to end wars, war to make the world safe for democracy. He asked Congress to recognize a state of war with Germany, and Congress, with some dissent, complied.

## Suggested Readings

A.S. Link, *Woodrow Wilson*, vols. 3-5; J. M. Cooper Jr., *The Vanity of Power: American Isolationism and the First World War, 1914-1917*; Thomas J. Knock, *To End All Wars*; E. R. May, *The World War and American Isolation, 1914-1917*.

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# OVER THERE

by Geoffrey Wawro, General Olinto Mark Barsanti Professor of Military History, and Director of the Center for the Study of Military History, University of North Texas.



Arriving in France with the vanguard of the American Expeditionary Force (AEF) in June 1917, General John "Black Jack" Pershing surveyed the Western Front. Pershing settled into his headquarters at Versailles just as the vast British Passchendaele Offensive was jumping off in Flanders. Passchendaele was one of the great blunders of an already blunder-strewn war, and 260,000 British troops were cut down as they staggered out of their trenches. Further east, the French army mutinied against its callous leadership and refused to attack, and German and Austrian forces crushed the Italians at Caporetto. In Russia, the Bolshevik Revolution broke out, removing the tsar's army from the European conflict, and freeing the German forces occupied on the Eastern front to focus on the Western. The British war cabinet glumly predicted that the Great War would now drag on into 1920.

Enter the "Doughboys": from a pre-war strength of just 130,000, the AEF expanded to 2 million men in 1918. "Britain's reserves are in America," British Prime Minister David Lloyd George liked to joke, but they belonged to Pershing.

Those forty-two fresh US divisions were a formidable force. From the start, the British and French tried to merge the Yanks into their own badly depleted units. But Pershing rejected such "amalgamation." He preferred to wait until 1919 to develop American strength under American command in a distinctly American sector of the Western Front. The British warned that the war would end badly in 1918 if the Americans did not commit.

In March 1918, the Germans launched what they expected would be a war-winning offensive. Ludendorff's Operation Michael shredded the British, then shifted its attention to the French, who reeled back to the Marne. Allied General Ferdinand Foch demanded in July that Pershing give him American troops. Pershing refused. "You are willing to risk our being driven back to the Loire," Foch asked. "Yes," Pershing answered, "I am willing to take the risk."

When Pershing did intervene, he did so on American terms, launching attacks from American positions against Cantigny, Chateau-Thierry and Belleau Wood to weaken and distract the German advance. Forced by Washington to detach some American units to shore up the French and British positions on the Marne and in Flanders, Pershing swiftly recalled the units in August 1918 for an all-American "push" against the St. Mihiel salient, which he assumed would open the door to Metz. When Foch tried to redirect the American troops to the French sector for a coordinated offensive with the British, Pershing nearly punched the Frenchman.

Historians must judge Pershing's conduct in those last months of war. Was he right to risk the very survival of the Western democracies in order to uphold American military independence? If the French and British had cracked in 1918, America's strategic task -- liberation of a German-run continent -- would have become immeasurably more difficult because of Pershing's obstinacy. As to Pershing's actual operations, in his determination to prove American autonomy, he fought battles that some called peripheral and needlessly bloody. The Meuse-Argonne region heavily favored the German defenders, but Pershing attacked it anyway to keep the doughboys out of the French and British sectors. Half of the American dead and wounded in the war -- 117,000 men -- fell in that fierce 47-day battle that ended with the Armistice on November 11<sup>th</sup>. Many of those men would have lived into ripe old age had Pershing fought further north -- at Foch's suggestion -- in the French sector on the Aisne.

## Suggested Readings

Edward M. Coffman, *The War to End All Wars*; J. J. Pershing, *My Experiences in the World War*; A. E. Barbeau and F. Henri, *The Unknown Soldiers: Black American Troops in World War I*; L. Stallings, *The Doughboys: The Story of the AEF*; R. Weigley, *The American Way of War*;

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# MODERN WAR

by Geoffrey Wawro, General Olinto Mark Barsanti Professor of Military History, and Director of the Center for the Study of Military History, University of North Texas.



The European generals who professed shock at the conditions and casualties of 1914 had no reason to be shocked. The Russo-Japanese War of 1904-5 had been a warning to European armies. The dreadful battles of Port Arthur and Mukden were the first clash of great powers armed with the new technologies of the 20th century: magazine rifles (firing clips of five to ten bullets), machineguns (firing 600 rounds per minute), heavy howitzers, and recoilless field guns (firing 15-30 shells per minute.) A British observer at Port Arthur noted the results: "trenches crushed into a shapeless jumble of stones" everywhere there are bodies, or portions of bodies, flattened out, or stamped into the surface of the earth."

Those tragic results seemed to confirm the prediction of the Polish banker Jan Bloch, who had famously argued in the 1890s that war was no longer possible because of technological advances. An early 20<sup>th</sup> century brigade of 3,000 men with artillery was capable of spewing more shells and bullets in a single *minutethan* Wellington's entire army of 60,000 had fired in the day-long battle of Waterloo in 1815. In early twentieth century warfare, artillery was the chief agent of death and maiming thanks to new chemical bursting charges like "trinitroluene" (TNT). "Shell shock" —a form of battle trauma resulting from exposure to incessant artillery bombardment -- would be diagnosed for the first time among the troops.

In 1914 the European armies marched off to impale themselves on these deadly technologies. Their generals were mainly impelled by operational requirements. The German army provoked the war to implement the Schlieffen Plan, developed at the turn of the century, which aimed to envelop and destroy first the French and then the Russian armies using speed and initiative to crush slower-moving foes before they had finished mobilizing. But the Germans ignored matching French and Russian advances in tactics and technology, and the Schlieffen Plan foundered in September 1914 at the Battle of the Marne, where French artillery flattened the German advance. Early German victories in the East also ran out of steam. On both fronts, the stalemated war settled into trenches, deep fortifications dug into the earth that stretched for hundreds of miles, protected by barbed wire, machine guns and artillery.

All of the armies entered the war with insufficient "trench-busting" heavy artillery, and crippling shell shortages. The Schlieffen Plan failed chiefly because the largely horse-drawn German army of 1914 simply could not transport all of the shells, bullets, and food needed to beat the French and Russians quickly. (Its direct descendant, the *Blitzkrieg* of 1940, would have been impossible without panzers and two-ton trucks.) The failures of the Allied command in 1914 were tactical. They sincerely believed, as General Joseph Joffre put it in 1913, that "battles are above all moral struggles." They foolishly concluded -- from a hare-brained analysis of the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71 -- that armies needed to shun the defensive and always attack. The generals of 1914 thus repressed the gory results of the Boer, Russo-Japanese and Balkan Wars, and merely *hoped* that things would go better in the Great War.

Such hopes were crushed within hours of the outbreak. A British officer observing the fall of German shells near Mons wrote: "A chill of horror came over us. Hitherto it had been war as we had conceived it, hard blows, straight dealing, but now for the first time we felt as if some horrible Thing, utterly merciless, was advancing to grip us." The Austrians lost one-third of their army in the first month of fighting. The French lost one-fourth of their army in the first *days* of the war: 300,000 casualties. "Astonishing changes in the practice of war," was General Foch's comment. But war had been like this since the 1890s. The generals had apparently not noticed. This shortsightedness would cost Europe an entire generation: by war's end, five million French, Russian, British and Italian soldiers, and over three million Germans and Austrians had perished.

## Suggested Readings

Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*; John Keegan, *The First World War*; David Stevenson, *Cataclysm: A New History of the First World War*; Hew Strachan, *The First World War*; Tim Travers, *The Killing Ground*.

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# THE AMERICAN PEOPLE IN WARTIME

by John Morton Blum, Sterling Professor Emeritus of History, Yale University



World War I accelerated trends in American society and culture, and many of the important domestic developments of succeeding decades emerged in the shadow of the war. To initiate and sustain the war effort required the United States to mobilize its resources on an unprecedented scale. A new army was created by the Selective Service Act of May 1917. A Council of National Defense supervised huge federal agencies that managed food and fuel supplies, transportation and industry. Wartime needs triggered large-scale movements of people, as workers left rural areas for economic opportunity in industrial centers. Millions of American servicemen crossed the Atlantic, and even troops who remained stateside were moved around the country for training and duty. All of these shifts would have long-term demographic and cultural repercussions.

The outbreak of hostilities in 1914 spurred an economic boom as the United States mobilized to supply Europe with goods. But war also shut off the flow of European immigrants who had traditionally supplied America's unskilled labor force. Factory employers turned to the South, and hundreds of thousands of workers, many of them African American, moved north to work in cities like New York, Philadelphia, Detroit and Chicago. White reaction to their arrival, which strained the supply of housing, schools and social institutions, resulted in race riots during and after the war. Black communities also began to develop institutions of their own in the north — social clubs, businesses, newspapers and political organizations — as well as a vibrant urban culture. Despite persistent discrimination, some 375,000 black Americans served in uniform during the war, as conscripts and volunteers.

During the war, prejudice intensified towards America's new immigrants, 12 million of them since the turn of the century. As wartime fears ran high, anti-immigrant sentiment took the form of demands for 100 percent 'Americanism,' calls for restrictive immigration laws, and antagonism towards German-Americans and immigrant groups suspected of sympathizing with the enemy. In the years directly after the war, as Soviet Bolshevism spread through Eastern Europe, the emotions Americans had directed against Germans shifted to immigrants who were feared to be Bolshevik sympathizers.

America's participation in WWI helped bring to fruition two important social reforms. The suffrage movement's struggle to achieve universal voting rights for American women made major gains in wartime. The active role women played in war related services — 20,000 serving in the armed forces as nurses and clerks, 40,000 replacing men in the workforce and countless others volunteering for war work at home — won the movement increased support. Congress passed the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment, giving women the right to vote, in June 1919, and women across the country voted in the presidential election of 1920. The war also impacted the movement to prohibit the use of alcoholic beverages. When the wartime need to conserve grain occasioned a temporary ban on brewing and distilling, Prohibitionists lobbied successfully for the passage of a constitutional amendment. The 18<sup>th</sup> Amendment barred the manufacture, sale or transportation of intoxicating beverages and ushered in the post-war era of prohibition.

## Suggested Readings

D.M. Kennedy, *Over Here: The First World War and American Society*; N. Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism*; M. W. Greenwald, *Women, War and Work: The Impact of World War I on Women Workers in the United States*; J.R. Grossman, *Land of Hope: Chicago, Black Southerners, and the Great Migration*; F. Henri, *Black Migration: The Movement North, 1900 — 1920*; T. J. Archdeacon, *Becoming American*; J. Higham, *Strangers in the Land*.

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# PEACE MAKING

by John Milton Cooper, Jr., E. Gordon Fox Professor of American Institutions, University of Wisconsin, Madison



When the war ended President Wilson felt triumphant. American intervention had helped ensure the Allied victory, and Wilson believed this would grant him the leverage to realize his vision of a new world order based on democratic principles. His vision, laid out in 1918 in ‘Fourteen Points’, called for freedom of the seas, arms reduction, and new political boundaries in Europe, as well as the establishment of an international organization — a League of Nations — to preserve the peace of the world. The Fourteen Points inspired idealists everywhere, and the German government had sued for peace on their conditions. Wilson left for the Paris peace talks confident he could help establish “a just and magnanimous peace” that would help prevent future wars. Arriving in Europe in December 1918, he was greeted by vast cheering crowds, and children tossed flowers at his feet. The promise of a better, more peaceful world seemed to rest in Wilson’s hands.

But the realities of peacemaking were not so glowing. Power politics and rancorous negotiations among the victorious Allies dominated the conference proceedings. Defeated Germany and Russia, where Bolshevism was growing, were excluded. The French, led by Premier Georges Clemenceau, were determined to exact revenge for their country’s huge losses by breaking the power of Germany. Other Allied leaders wanted to wrest territorial, financial, naval and colonial spoils from the defeated Central Powers. Wilson’s principles of democratic self-determination clashed with geographical and economic realities, and with the national self-interest of France, Britain, Italy and Japan.

Wilson stayed in Paris, except for one quick trip home, until late June 1919. In long, grueling negotiations with the Allied leaders, he had to give in on many points. The resulting Treaty of Versailles imposed harsh terms on Germany, stripping it of its colonies and considerable territory in Europe, and exacting huge reparations of \$ 5 billion. Blackmailed by an ongoing Allied blockade that was starving its population, Germany had no option but to agree to the punishing terms of the treaty.

But Wilson did gain one great victory — the League of Nations. The president drafted the basic charter of that organization, its Covenant, and had it included as an integral part of the treaty. With the Allied victors intent on punishing Germany, and events in Europe deteriorating, Wilson believed he had won the best terms for the post-war world that he could. He counted heavily on his League to oversee and revise the peace settlement, as well as to prevent future wars by enforcing collective security. But the League, and the Treaty, had yet to be approved by the Senate. When he arrived back in the U.S. in 1919, Wilson would face the bitterest fight of his career on home soil.

## Suggested Readings

M. MacMillan, *Paris 1919*; J. M. Cooper, Jr., *Breaking the Heart of the World: Woodrow Wilson and the Fight for the League of Nations*; Thomas A. Bailey, *Woodrow Wilson and the Lost Peace*; A. S. Link, *Woodrow Wilson: War, Peace and Revolution*.

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## AFTER THE WAR: THE TURBULENT YEARS

by John Milton Cooper, Jr., E. Gordon Fox Professor of American Institutions, University of Wisconsin, Madison



The years after the armistice were among the worst in American history. 1919 began with the “Spanish influenza”, which would kill over half a million people, with six hundred in Philadelphia dying in one day. Later in that year, the worst sports scandal in the country’s history rocked baseball when players for the Chicago White Sox took money from gamblers and deliberately lost the World Series.

The U.S. economy was in shambles. With the removal of wartime price controls and rationing, inflation soared. Unemployment escalated as millions of returning servicemen flooded the job market. Bitter conflicts between management and labor erupted in crippling national strikes. White backlash against African Americans who had moved to northern cities during the war exploded in violent race riots in Washington, Chicago and other urban centers.

Events in Europe also contributed to American anxieties. As Bolshevik forces in Russia advanced into bordering Eastern Europe, a series of bombs set off on Wall Street incited a nation-wide campaign against radicals. In 1920, six thousand people were arrested, and hundreds were jailed or deported.

President Wilson was of little help in these troubles. In the first half of 1919, breaking precedent, he spent almost half the year abroad negotiating the Paris peace talks. He returned home to confront a Republican majority in the Senate from which he needed approval for his treaty and its League of Nations. A small band of isolationists in the Senate wanted to avoid all future entanglements in Europe. The internationalists, a majority, were divided. Henry Cabot Lodge of Massachusetts, leader of the Republican internationalists, resisted the idea of a League with any authority. In the ensuing battle, the isolationists refused to support the limited concessions that moderate Republicans proposed, while the President did not want to budge from his decisions in Paris.

Wilson took his case to the people, and while on a whirlwind speaking tour across the country, collapsed physically. Rushed back to the White House, he suffered a stroke that left him partially paralyzed and impaired in judgment. Wilson never fully functioned again as president. His stroke-influenced bitterness and refusal to compromise played a major role in the Congressional standoff that kept the United States from ratifying the peace treaty and joining the League of Nations.

These events helped trigger a massive political reaction. In the presidential election of 1920, the Republicans nominated an anti-League Senator from Ohio, suave and calming Warren G. Harding. Harding won a landslide victory calling for a return to “normalcy.” As postwar America turned to the domestic concerns of “peace and prosperity”, Wilson’s message of international responsibility was, for the time being, repudiated. But in Europe, the changes brought about by the Treaty of the Versailles had planted the seeds for a new and terrible conflict. As that conflict approached, it would become clear that the United States could no longer avoid playing a significant role in international affairs.

### Suggested Readings

B. Noggle, *Into the Twenties: The United States from the Armistice to Normalcy*; Ralph A. Stone, *The Irreconcilables*; W. Bagby, *The Road to Normalcy: The Presidential Campaign and Election of Warren Harding*; John Dean, *Warren G. Harding*; W.C. Widenor, *Henry Cabot Lodge and the Search for an American Foreign Policy*; F. Russell, *The Shadow of Blooming Grove*.

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