

America and World War I

While the United States played a prominent role in the First World War, for most of the war's duration, the country was neutral. The end of the war placed the United States in a position of global leadership. Economically, the United States had enjoyed full productivity while the Great Powers of Europe decimated each other on the battlefield. Politically, the moral leadership of President Woodrow Wilson and the ideals he espoused excited the people of the world to believe in the possibility of a better, more peaceful future. That future did not arrive in the interwar years between 1918 and 1939, partly because the United States largely withdrew from European politics after 1920. The First World War can nonetheless be seen as a rehearsal for the country and its people; in the Second World War, the experience of total war and world political leadership came more easily.

American Neutrality: 1914–1917

Since its inception in 1776, the United States had always been wary of European politics. It was no surprise, therefore, that when the First World War erupted in the summer of 1914, the United States remained on the sidelines. This desire to avoid entangling alliances reflected the feelings of President Woodrow Wilson and of many Americans. Wilson repeatedly urged the European powers to come to a just peace, and even offered to mediate a settlement. Wilson's desire to stay out of the war was best displayed in a speech he gave on January 22, 1917, in which he argued for a "peace without victory," with no annexations. While Wilson's stance failed to move the European powers, it was influential with the American people. Wilson campaigned in the 1916 election under the slogan "He Kept Us Out of War." Wilson's victory in the election seemed to vindicate his policy.

While the United States was not fighting in the First World War, it was nonetheless very involved. American companies did a lot of business with the governments on both sides. The Americans did brisk business with the British and French in particular, who amassed large debts over the course of the war to finance their purchases. American citizens were also heavily involved in relief efforts for the victims of the war. A successful engineer named Herbert Hoover organized the Commission for the Relief of Belgium, which provided basic necessities for those whose lives and livelihoods had been destroyed by the trench warfare in the country. Other relief efforts, such as the one for the people of Poland, were also popular, but the belligerent nations rejected any proposals that might give succour to their enemies. (Germany possessed Poland for most of the war, so Britain did not want to allow the possibility that the Germans might commandeer food aid.) While American companies did some business with Germany, it was substantially less than what they did with the British and the French. Public opinion in the United States also increasingly turned against Germany after the Germans sank the *Lusitania*, a passenger liner with many American passengers on board, in 1915.

Governments on both sides of the war used every means at their disposal to convince the Americans to come in on their side. These propaganda efforts often

focused on the large immigrant communities. The German government appealed to the substantial German-American communities, for instance, to get them to use their influence to bring the United States into the war on the side of the Central Powers.

These efforts failed, however, and the force of events brought the United States into the war. In the winter of 1917, the German command decided to pursue unrestricted U-boat warfare. This included attacks on American ships trading with the British and the French. The German action had followed the Zimmerman telegram; Arthur Zimmerman, the German Foreign Secretary, advised the Mexicans that Germany would support them if they attacked the United States. On April 2, 1917, Wilson asked Congress to support a declaration of war, which it did unanimously.

Total War

The entry of the United States into the war quickly and drastically changed life in the United States. All of the country's resources were directed to support the war effort; scholars refer to this as *total war*. Several new government departments were created to meet the demands of wartime. Herbert Hoover, who headed the new Food Administration, was referred to jokingly as the "Food Dictator" because his department, in the course of managing food reserves, introduced strict controls on most foods. A barrage of propaganda urged Americans to support the war effort in a wide variety of ways. Some suggestions included purchasing "Victory Bonds" from the government to finance the war effort and growing "Victory Gardens" at their homes so that other produce could be redirected to Europe. The constant message was that the home front was as essential to victory as the action on the front lines.

To this end, the United States government did not tolerate much dissent. The government introduced censorship controls on newspapers and letters to and from servicemen. The government also cracked down on groups it believed to be unfriendly to the war effort. Communists and socialists were the worst affected. The Russian Revolution scared the American government, so they jailed many confirmed or suspected "Reds," including Eugene Debs, the well-known socialist leader. Such censorship, authorities hoped, would solidify the home front in support of the war.

American men signed up in large numbers for the war effort, but many saw little action. It took a long time to organize units, train them, and then ship them off to Europe. In 1917, the greatest American contribution was of materiel and financing. By 1918, however, the American Expeditionary Force had landed in large numbers, and American troops took part in many of the crucial battles in the "Hundred Days" in which the Allies gained victory.

Perhaps the United States' greatest contribution was its potential to contribute and participate if the war went on for a long time. The Entente and Central Powers were evenly matched through most of the war, but the prospect of having millions of American soldiers and the American productive juggernaut on the side of the Entente scared the Germans. The Central Powers launched a major offensive in the spring of 1918, hoping to defeat the Entente before the United States could impact the war. The Entente barely stopped the German advance, with some American help, but then quickly turned the tide and defeated the exhausted Germans. With an army on the

continent, and as a holder of a great deal of British and French debt, the United States was in a new position as an influential power in European politics. Moreover, Woodrow Wilson had grand plans to end American isolation and build a lasting peace. In what has been called the “Wilsonian moment” people around the world drew inspiration from Wilson’s call for national self-determination, equality among states, and a League of Nations. Most, however, soon found that the time to implement these ideas had not yet come.

Wilson’s depiction of a just and lasting peace had evolved since his call for “peace without victory” in January 1917. Even before then, Wilson began considering a league of states that would provide for collective security. European politics would no longer be characterized by secret alliances and imperial conquest, but by representative government and peaceful coexistence. Wilson broadcast these ideas to the United States and the world in his Fourteen Points address on January 8, 1918. In his speech, he proposed a League of Nations, as well as an end to “European imperialism,” which meant the Central Powers’ occupation of Belgium and Serbia.

American propaganda helped to spread Wilson’s message around the world, and he became immensely popular. His call for “national self-determination,” albeit a vague notion in practice, galvanized people throughout Europe and across the world. When he travelled to Europe for the postwar peace conference in Paris, huge cheering crowds met him in every town. What Wilson did not expect, however, was that his ideas would inspire nationalists in Egypt, India, and Korea, where the people demonstrated in favor of freedom from colonial rule. While Wilson may have meant for the people of these countries to have their freedom eventually, he did not expect that they – or the Irish, or blacks, or many other marginalized groups – should have it yet.

Wilson’s popularity diminished, however, when the peace conference began. The attempt to redraw the map of Europe along ethnic lines was the conference’s main goal, but many sticking points soon emerged. Wilson had a huge quarrel with the Italian delegation that led them to leave the conference, albeit temporarily. When the leaders of Britain, France, the United States, and Germany, among others, signed the Treaty of Versailles on June 20, 1919, critics lined up against it, and against Wilson, for compromising either too much or too little. Moreover, as the countries outside Europe received very little of what they wanted, the conference left a particularly bitter taste for them.

The treaty provided for Wilson’s League of Nations, but his fight was not yet over. He returned to the United States to convince the Senate to ratify the treaty. Many people mistrusted Wilson, though, believing that the League would forever embroil the United States in European affairs. In September 1919, as Wilson was in the midst of a barnstorming tour to raise popular support, he suffered a massive stroke. For three months, he was unable to fight at all for his cause. He made a limited recovery but remained unable to manage much of the country’s business. His actions after his recovery can be best described as irascible, and he was less willing than ever to compromise with his opponents. The treaty died in the Senate after Wilson had recovered a little, and the United States turned swiftly away from European politics when the Republicans swept the 1920 election. The League of Nations continued, but it proved largely ineffective without any American involvement.

Summary

- From 1914 to 1917, the United States remained neutral in the First World War. President Woodrow Wilson attempted to mediate between the combatants, but in general the Americans traded much more with the British and French.
- The United States entered the war in April 1917 because of German moves against them. The government mobilized the home front quickly, though the troops did not begin arriving in Europe in large numbers until 1918.
- Wilson's public statements about his desire for a lasting peace made him very popular and gave the Americans added clout at the postwar peace conference in Paris. It also helped that both Britain and France owed money to the United States.
- Wilson's plan for a League of Nations was written into the Treaty of Versailles, but the United States never ratified the treaty.