

## The United States and World War I

The nation's policy of non-intervention goes back to the days of Washington & Jefferson. Woodrow Wilson's first response to the conflict in Europe was Neutrality.

Prior to World War I the United States was in a recession. When war broke out in Europe the nation's economy boomed from supplying munitions and other war supplies to the British and French. In theory trade with Germany was possible but very little took place due to the British naval blockade of Germany.

British ships did seize U.S. ships in the North Sea as part of the naval blockade of Germany and Wilson subsequently protested. However the pro-British and French sentiment in the nation helped the situation disappear.

Between 1914 and 1917 trade with the Allies tripled while dealings with Germany went down to practically nothing. Funding came from J.P. Morgan and other bankers who had government approval to secure credit to Britain and France for \$ 3 billion.

In 1914 First and Second Generation Immigrants were over 30% of the population of America. Their sympathy was still committed to their nations of origin. In 1915 when Italy switched sides and joined the Allies the Italian Americans cheered. The German-Americans were still in sympathy for their homeland. Of note were the Irish-Americans who were on the side of Germany as they had a long hatred for the British.

Sympathy for the British was helped by Woodrow Wilson being of Scotch-English descent plus the British also commanded the war news to America. They cabled the United States daily with the events in Europe and the American press was open to the British propaganda.

The Americans saw the invasion of Belgium as the work of German Bullies. Kaiser Wilhelm was portrayed as a mean-spirited aristocrat.

In addition three events in 1915 and 1916 upset the American government and the people

1. On May 7, 1915 German submarines sunk the passenger ship *Lusitania*. On board were 128 Americans. Wilson sent a diplomatic message to Germany that he was holding them accountable for sinking unarmed ships. Secretary of State William Jennings Bryan stated that the message was too warlike – and resigned.
2. August 15 submarines sank the *Arabic* and two more American passengers were killed. In response Germany was made to pledge that they would no longer sink unarmed ships without prior warning. That warning being that time enough for passengers to get into the lifeboats will be given!
3. Germany sinks an unarmed merchant ship *Sussex* injuring several American crew. Wilson immediately threatened to cut-off diplomatic relations with Germany. The Germans backed down. The "*Sussex Pledge*" was then enforced; Germany would not sink any merchant or passenger ship without prior warning.

After the sinking of the *Lusitania* the Eastern Republicans were pro-war but they also realized that:-

- the nation was not ready for war
- America must take steps for “**preparedness**” and must allow greater defense spending
- more backing was needed so they allied with a group of business leaders who had formed the “National Security League”

Initially the Democrats were fully against the war but in late 1915 they changed their policy and Wilson went on a national tour to promote “preparedness”

In June 1916 he passed the National Defense Act

- increase the regular army to 175,000 men
- Congress was allowed (one month later) to approve construction of over 50 battleships, cruisers, destroyers and submarines to be built within one year.

Those against the war were: - people in the Mid-West and West, Populists, Progressives, and Socialists. Notables were William Jennings Bryan, Jane Addams, and Jeanette Rankin (later the first woman to Congress). In addition Woman Suffragists were initially anti-war but once U.S. troops were sent they became full supports for the war effort.

The Election of 1916

Wilson was fully aware that he won the election of 1912 because the Republican Party had split. The Progressive Party tried to nominate Theodore Roosevelt but he declined. This would be the downfall of the party, Roosevelt joined the Republicans. Thanks to Roosevelt’s return the Republican Party was now re-united. They nominated Charles Evans Hughes (ex Governor of New York and Supreme Court Justice).

Wilson adopted a campaign slogan “*He kept us out of war.*” The election was extremely close but in the end the Democrats and Woodrow Wilson won, most due to four reasons:-

1. Democratic strength in the South and West overcame the Republican dominance in the East
2. There was a peace sentiment in the nation and his slogan worked
3. Wilson’s past progressive leadership
4. Hughes was a weak candidate

Up re-election Wilson, as per his character and past promises, tried to negotiate a peace effort. In 1915 he had sent his Chief Foreign Policy Advisor Col. Edward House (Texas) to London, Paris and Berlin. The peace settlement failed. In addition other mediation efforts and offers were refused. Now Wilson had to explore another approach. In January 1917 Wilson made a speech to Congress stating that there would be “**Peace without victory**”

On April 2 1917, only one month after being sworn in to office Wilson went to Congress asking for a “**declaration of war**” against Germany.

## The events that led to America's Declaration of War against Germany

1. In January 1917 Germany continued to wage **unrestricted warfare** with their submarines. They knew that the United States would enter the war but they believed that by mounting a quick offensive against the Allies they could win the war before the Americans arrived.
2. **The Zimmerman Telegram:** March 1, 1917 German Foreign Minister Arthur Zimmerman had a telegram intercepted by the British intelligence bureau. The British leaked the telegram to the U.S. press. It read that if Mexico would ally with Germany then Germany would help recover Texas, New Mexico and Arizona for Mexico.
3. **The Russian Revolution** on March 15, 1917. Finally the Czar's government was overthrown and the national declared itself a new republic. This was good for Wilson's ideology of protecting democracy. He could now ally with Russia. Unfortunately later on, in November the revolutionary government would be taken over by Communists).
4. In the first few weeks of March 1917 German **submarines** sank another five (5) unarmed U.S. merchant ships

Wilson's speech to Congress called Germany's submarine attacks "**warfare against mankind**" and added that "**the world must be made safe for democracy**"  
On April 6<sup>th</sup> the majority of Congress voted for war.

However one key question remained; could the United States mobilize quickly enough to halt the German **Western Offensive** and the submarine sinkings? Training troops for battle would take months so the first step the nation took was to ship more munitions to the Allies. Congress allowed war agencies to be created and staffed by volunteers.

**Bernard Baruch** – Wall Street Broker – directed **War Industries Board** – set production priorities and established centralized control over raw materials and prices.

**Herbert Hoover** – engineer – headed the **Food Administration** – helped households eat less bread and meat so the excess could be shipped to Britain and France. In under two years shipments of U.S. food tripled.

**Henry Garfield** – headed the **Fuel Administration** – saved coal by having nonessential factories close and created **daylight savings time** helping extend the power supplies.

**William Howard Taft** – headed the **National War Labor Board** – Taft himself arbitrated disputes between workers and employers. Labor won several concessions during the war, especially those earlier denied such as wage increases, the 8-hour day and union memberships.

Woodrow Wilson's government raised \$ 33 billion in two years through loans and taxes. He persuaded the nation to "**Put Your Savings into Liberty Bonds**" In addition he raised both person and corporate income taxes and created an excise tax on luxury goods.

**Propaganda** played a major role in the war effort. The **Committee on Public Information** was headed by George Creel. He called upon many artists, writers, vaudeville performers, and movie stars to depict U.S. heroism and portray the Kaiser as the villain. Films, posters and pamphlets appeared telling the nation to **“Watch Out for Spies”** and **“Do Your Bit!”** The **American Patronage League** developed as the **“Hate the Hun”** vigilante movement. They led boycotts on everything German, from Beethoven to Sauerkraut.

During the war Socialists and pacifists were always under government scrutiny. **The Espionage Act**, passed in 1917, could give up to 20 years jail time for anyone rebelling in the army or obstructing the draft.

**The Sedition Act of 1918** prohibited “disloyal” or “abusive” remarks made about the United States government. About 2,000 were prosecuted under these laws, half of whom were convicted and jailed. **Eugene Debs received 10 years in prison for speaking out against the war!**

**Schenck v. United States** – The Supreme Court case was about a man imprisoned for distributing anti-draft pamphlets. In 1919 Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes ruled that the right to free speech was limited when it represented **“clear and present danger”** to public safety.

When war was officially declared thousands volunteered but **conscription** (a draft) was still needed. At first all men between 21 and 30 had to register but towards the end of the war it had expanded to all men between 18 and 45. **The Selective Service Act of 1917** was passed as a democratic method for ensuring all groups went into the service. **By war’s end 4.7 million were in the lottery, 2.8 million were called, out of which 2 million were sent to the Western Front in Europe.**

The war changed employment in the country, there were:

1. **More Jobs for Women** – as both volunteers and wage earners. This change in roles led to the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment being passed after the war.
2. **Migrations of Mexicans and African Americans** – Mexicans worked in agriculture and mining in the Southwest and Mid-West. African Americans mostly migrated to the North to work in the factories.

In April 1917 900,000 tons of shipping was sunk in one moth by German submarines to the **convoy system** (armed naval escorts) began so that Britain and France would not starve.

The first fighting seen by American troops was done by the **American Expeditionary Force (AEF)** – led by General John J. Pershing. The first role was for American soldiers to plug the gaps in the British and French lines but soon American troops occupied entire sections of the Western Front.

The last German offensive came in the spring of 1918 at Chateau-Thierry on the Marne River. The Americans counter attacked at Belleau Wood. In August, September and

October the Meuse-Argonne offensive took place. [Meuse River and Argonne Forest]. The Germans were being pushed back. This led to the **Armistice [November 11, 1918 the eleventh day of the eleventh month]**. The Armistice (cease-fire) meant that Germany had to surrender its arms, give up most of its navy and evacuate occupied territories.

**By November 11<sup>th</sup> the United States had lost 49,000 men in combat but many more died of diseases. In total 112,432 died as a result of the war.**

Woodrow Wilson's effort to "secure the peace" was highlighted by his "**Fourteen Points**" which included such issues as:

- Recognition of Freedom of the Seas
- An end to making secret treaties
- Reductions of national armaments
- An "imperial adjustment of all colonial claims"
- Self-Determining for various nationalities within the Austria-Hungary Empire
- A general association of nations... *"for the purpose of affording mutual guarantees of political independence and territorial integrity to great and small struggles alike"* – namely the **League of Nations** to be formed.

Wilson's proposal also included:-

The return of Alsace and Lorraine to France  
The German evacuation of Belgium  
The German evacuation of Romania and Serbia

### **The Treaty of Versailles – January 1919.**

No U.S. President had ever traveled abroad before this signing outside of Paris.

**The Big Four: Woodrow Wilson (USA), David Lloyd George (Great Britain), Georges Clemenceau (France) and Vittorio Orlando (Italy) agreed on only some of the "Fourteen Points" yet all agreed on the formation of the League of Nations.**

### **Peace Terms:**

- Germany had to be disarmed
- Germany was stripped of its colonies in Asia and Africa
- Germany had to admit guilt for the war
- The French would occupy the Rhineland for 15 years.
- Reparations had to be made to Great Britain and France
- Self-Determination must take place in the territories once controlled by Germany and Austria-Hungary (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Finland, and Poland)
- Russia will receive its independence
- New nations of Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia will be formed.
- The League of Nations will be created as part of an international peace treaty, each member to stand ready to protect the independence and territorial integrity of other members.

Back in America the Treaty of Versailles had to be ratified by a 2/3 majority in Congress. Wilson ran into difficulties once back in Washington.

Many, including the Republicans believed that United States membership might interfere with U.S. Sovereignty and might cause European nations to interfere in the Western Hemisphere, therefore a violation of the Monroe Doctrine.

**The Irreconcilable Faction** – dozens of Republican Senators could not accept membership into the League of Nations no matter how it was worded.

**Reservationist Factor**: including Henry Cabot Lodge, the League of Nations could only be accepted if certain reservations were added to the covenant.

**Wilson did not back down.** Instead he again went on a national speaking tour of the West to promote his entire League of Nations plan to the public. On September 25, 1919 he collapsed in Colorado. Upon his return to Washington he suffered a massive stroke from which he never fully recovered.

The treaty was voted upon twice, rejected both times, with and without reservations. In 1920 the Democrats joined the pro-reservations vote. An ailing Wilson asked his loyal supporters, in a last ditch effort, to pass the vote with no reservations.

It was not until 1921 (after Wilson) that the U.S. ended the war officially and it did so by:-

1. **Signing a separate treaty with Germany**
2. **Never ratifying the Treaty of Versailles**
3. **Never joining the League of Nations**

## Post War America

For the 4 million who came home after the war there were not enough jobs. There was no longer a boom in production as the war effort had ceased. In addition European crops were now on the world market so U.S. Crop prices fell drastically. In 1920 there was a consumer spending spree which led to inflation but by 1921 there was a Recession and 10% national unemployment.

### The Red Scare of 1919 – the threat of Communism in America.

**The Palmer Raids** were the result of an unexplained series of bombings in America. Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer had J. Edgar Hoover investigate the bombings. Palmer also had mass arrests of anarchists, Socialists and labor agitators. Over 6,000 – based on minimal evidence and mostly foreign-born people were arrested. Some 500 were deported for their crimes.

The Red Scare and the power of Palmer diminished after he predicted May Day Riots in 1920, which never took place. His loss of creditability and the rising concerns over civil liberties caused the hype to recede.

Americans still had the belief that “Free Enterprise and Rugged Individualism” created an **Anti-Union environment**. During the war unions made gains but not during the Post War.

**The Strikes of 1919** – Seattle. In February 60,000 unionists plus shipyard workers held a peaceful strike for higher pay. Troops were sent in and fortunately there was no violence.

In the same year in **Boston** there was a strike within the police department due to several officers making attempts to unionize. **Massachusetts Governor Calvin Coolidge** sent in the National Guard to stop the policemen from striking.

Also of note was the **1920 strike against U.S. Steel**. This demonstration was broken up by the state and Federal troops but not without violence.

There were still racial tensions in the nation. During the war African Americans who moved north for employment were the victims of discrimination and violence. Riots were not uncommon. One major event took place in **East St. Louis in Illinois**. Another tense situation was in **Chicago in 1919** when rioting saw 40 dead and 500 injured.

Life was not better in the South – lynchings were still common practice.

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