

## CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

### The United States

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Unlike Europe's rush to war in 1914, the United States took two and a half years to enter the conflict. Even before the nation officially joined the Allied side, the country found itself caught up in the opportunities and dangers presented by this worldwide conflagration. Once the United States declared war on Germany in 1917, the need to raise, supply, and transport an army overseas quickly reshaped American society. The government assumed new powers to direct the economy, control dissent, and conscript men. Emboldened by their sudden economic importance, workers, women, and blacks all demanded recognition of their rights as citizens. Meanwhile, the American military struggled to overcome its lack of preparation and field an army that could contribute enough to the eventual victory to win the United States a significant say in the final peace settlement. From farm to factory, training camp to battlefield, the White House to town hall, marshaling the nation's resources to fight America's first total war accomplished more than victory against Germany; it transformed American society and the role that the nation played in the world.

#### The Path to War

"It would be the irony of fate if my administration had to deal chiefly with foreign affairs," the newly elected president Woodrow Wilson noted before his inauguration in 1912.<sup>1</sup> During his campaign, Wilson had focused on the domestic reform issues that most interested Americans. Four years later, the United States faced a myriad of foreign policy crises and Wilson won reelection with the slogan "he kept us out of war." The nation's official policy of neutrality in World War I was becoming increasingly difficult to maintain, however, in the face of the trade war that erupted between Britain and Germany.

By 1915, both Britain and Germany were using their navies to disrupt the trade of their enemy, thereby hoping to gain an advantage that would propel their armies to victory along the western front. The British established a blockade that included mining the North Sea, while Germany turned to its new weapon, the U-Boat or submarine, to launch surprise attacks against merchant and military vessels. Both tactics met with protest from neutral nations. Norway and Sweden complained that Britain had violated

international law by disrupting their use of the North Sea. The American government also officially denounced British interference in shipments between neutral countries. Yet as long as the Americans' traditional route through the English Channel remained open, the effective closure of the North Sea did little to disrupt normal American trading patterns. To maintain good relations with its most important prewar trading partner, the Americans grudgingly accepted the limitations that Britain placed on its trade with Germany, such as the illegal ban on food shipments, with little fanfare. The United States reacted more negatively when Britain added cotton to the contraband list and demanded that the British buy excess American cotton to stabilize the price. Overall, Britain maintained an effective blockade because few neutral ships dared enter the North Sea. By 1916, American trade with Germany was less than 1 percent of what it had been in 1914, but had tripled with Britain and France.

By contrast, Wilson immediately protested when Germany declared a submarine blockade around British waters and warned all ships, belligerent or neutral, to stay out of the war zone. International law required that passengers be given time to vacate a ship carrying contraband before its cargo was sunk, a rule that negated the very element of surprise that made the U-boat a valuable weapon. Once spotted, armed merchant and passenger ships could easily attack and sink the fragile submarines. Wilson denied that it was a double standard to hold Germany strictly accountable to the rules of international law, but accept illegal British blockade policies.<sup>2</sup> The difference, he claimed, was that British violations did not directly threaten American lives. Secretary of State William Jennings Bryan argued to no avail that if Americans and American ships stayed out of British waters, there was little chance that German U-boats would threaten their lives or property.

The real crisis in American-German relations began in May 1915 when Germany sank the *Lusitania*, a British passenger ship that also carried munitions. The attack killed 1,198 passengers, including 127 Americans. When the *Lusitania* went down, Wilson's trusted advisor Colonel Edward House was in Europe trying to negotiate a peace settlement. Rather than convincing the belligerents to negotiate, this visit persuaded House that an Allied victory was desirable. In the wake of the sinking, Wilson also hardened his stand. He demanded that Germany pay reparations and accept the right of Americans to travel on any ship they wished. Bryan resigned in protest, convinced that Wilson cared more about protecting the rights of neutrals than keeping the nation out of the war.

Bryan represented a significant segment of American opinion in 1915, especially within Midwestern and Southern farming communities, where strong ethnic and class loyalties sustained support for neutrality. German American farmers refused to accept Wilson's one-sided application of international law. Millions of other rural folk worried that northeastern banks and businesses were forcing the country to choose sides simply to continue their profitable war trade with Great Britain. Leading female reformers and suffragists also joined the chorus urging neutrality, and formed the Women's Peace Party to seek a diplomatic solution to the war. Urban elites, however, strongly endorsed Wilson's efforts to protect the nation's honor and economy by bringing Germany into line. At this point, the dividing line within the American population was over how vigorously to pursue economic opportunities created by a bottomless war trade, not direct intervention, a step that few Americans considered either possible or desirable.<sup>3</sup>

With the United States and Germany still in dispute over who was responsible for the *Lusitania* disaster, two other controversial sinkings pushed German-American relations to the breaking point. In August 1915, the Germans sank another British passenger ship,

the *Arabic*, and two Americans were among the victims. Seven months later, German torpedoes hit the *Sussex*, an unarmed English Channel steamer, in an attack that killed 80 passengers and injured several Americans on board. Faced with Wilson's ultimatum to stop threatening American lives and property or face a break in diplomatic relations, Germany yielded. In the *Arabic* Pledge on September 1, 1915, Germany agreed to refrain from sinking passenger ships without warning and in the *Sussex* Pledge on May 4, 1916 halted surprise attacks on merchant ships.

Despite these pledges, the war continued to creep ever closer to American shores. Throughout the period of neutrality, internal sabotage effected by German agents destroyed factories, ships, and goods. The largest terrorist act occurred in July 1916, when German spies within the United States engineered a huge explosion along the Hudson River in Black Tom, New Jersey that destroyed munitions awaiting shipment to the Allies. Shrapnel from the blast poked holes in the Statue of Liberty and shattered windows in lower Manhattan.

As Germany continued to build U-boats at a frenzied pace, American businessmen formalized their close trading ties with Britain. On January 15, 1915, the financial behemoth J. P. Morgan became the purchasing and contracting agent for the British government within the United States. Over the next two years, the House of Morgan worked closely with British military and financial officials to award more than 4,000 contracts worth over \$3 billion to American businesses. In addition, American bankers extended commercial credit to the Allies that averaged nearly \$10 million a day.<sup>4</sup> By 1917, the British were overwhelmingly dependent on American credit and supplies to continue the war (see chapter 15). Almost overnight, the United States transformed itself from a debtor to a creditor nation and made inroads into world and domestic markets traditionally dominated by British capital. The jobs and steady income provided by these war contracts spread the benefits of wartime trade throughout the American economy. These financial and economic ties helped to build strong support for the Allied cause, especially within urban areas. British propagandists also provided an emotional reason for Americans to turn against Germany. A massive advertising campaign within the United States highlighted German atrocities in Belgium and cast German submarine attacks as contrary to the laws of civilized warfare.

Strong financial ties did not guarantee a tension-free relationship between Britain and the United States. In the summer of 1916, as controversial German sinkings ceased, relations with Britain became strained over the British decision to blacklist American firms that traded with Germany. The violent suppression of the Irish Easter Rebellion also fueled already strong anti-British feelings within the Irish-American community. In addition, Wilson became increasingly frustrated by the Allies' unwillingness to consider a negotiated settlement. A second visit by Colonel House to Europe in 1916 found the British intransigent on the issue of freedom of the seas, the Germans unmovable on the issue of submarine warfare, and the French unwilling to consider negotiations until they were closer to victory along the western front.

While momentarily calming the crisis on the high seas, Wilson faced a more immediate problem in Mexico. In the spring of 1916 Mexican rebel Francisco "Pancho" Villa launched a series of murderous raids against American border towns. In pursuit of Villa and his forces, 12,000 American troops marched nearly 300 miles into Mexico. The Mexican government regarded the incursion as an invasion and American troops clashed with the Mexican army in Carrizal on June 21, 1916. Wilson prepared an address requesting permission from Congress to occupy northern Mexico, but upon learning that

American troops had attacked first at Carrizal, he abandoned his plan to fight Mexico. Wilson told his personal secretary:

Someday, the people of America will know why I hesitated to intervene in Mexico ... Germany is anxious to have us at war with Mexico, so that our minds and our energies will be taken off the great war across the sea .... It begins to look as if war with Germany is inevitable. If it should come, I pray God it may not, I do not wish America's energies and forces divided for we will need every ounce of reserve we have to lick Germany.<sup>5</sup>

The two governments talked throughout the fall, and in January 1917 American troops withdrew.

That same month, Germany made the fateful decision to resume unconditional submarine warfare. German officials reasoned that their now substantial fleet of U-boats could sink enough Allied shipping fast enough to win the war before the Americans could arrive in force along the western front. It is easy to see why Germany dismissed the immediate military potential of the United States. During the period of neutrality, the nation had made few preparations for war. There were no fully organized divisions, corps, or armies, and available active duty and reserve troops numbered fewer than 350,000. The nation had 55 planes in questionable condition, enough artillery and ammunition to support approximately 220,000 men, and no tanks.<sup>6</sup> The Americans were somewhat more prepared with rifles, possessing enough to arm 890,000 troops.

Unaware of Germany's decision, Wilson made one final effort to suggest "a peace without victory." In a speech before Congress on January 22, 1917, Wilson outlined principles that he felt would end both this war and prevent futures ones. In this address, Wilson based his plan for a just peace on "American principles, American policies," which he defined as democracy, freedom of the seas, no entangling alliances, and equality of rights among nations. These were, Wilson asserted, "the principles and policies of forward-looking men and women everywhere, of every modern nation, of every enlightened community. They are the principles of mankind and must prevail."<sup>7</sup> Little did Wilson realize that within three months of uttering these words the nation would be at war.

In preparation for the announcement on January 31, 1917 that Germany would resume unconditional submarine warfare, German Foreign Minister Arthur Zimmermann attempted to take advantage of the Americans' recent trouble with Mexico. On January 16 Zimmermann sent a telegram to the German ambassador in Mexico instructing him to "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 re-conquer the lost territory in Texas, New Mexico and Arizona" ceded to the United States in the nineteenth century.<sup>8</sup> Zimmermann also suggested encouraging Japan to join the alliance to threaten America's Pacific island possessions. British intelligence cryptographers scored a major triumph when they both intercepted and deciphered the telegram. Britain presented the telegram to the Wilson administration at the end of February and its contents were released to the public in March. That month, German U-boats sank three American merchant ships. The tangible physical danger that Germany now posed to the nation's territorial and economic security convinced Wilson to ask Congress for a declaration of war.

Yet in his war address, Wilson did not dwell on these threats to the nation's borders or economy. Instead, he quickly summarized Germany's crimes on the high seas, then

went on to cast the war in broader, idealistic terms. The United States, he declared, had "no quarrel with the German people." Instead, the United States was fighting against the "little groups of ambitious men" who used the German people as pawns to aggrandize their power. Wilson succinctly framed the war's purpose in a phrase that has resonated in American foreign policy ever since: the world, he declared "must be made safe for democracy."<sup>9</sup>

Congress overwhelmingly supported Wilson's request for a declaration of war against Germany, but approval was not unanimous. "I shall always believe we could and ought to have kept out of this war," House majority leader Claude Kitchin, a Democrat from North Carolina, remarked during the Congressional debate over the war resolution.<sup>10</sup> The United States officially declared war against Germany on April 6, 1917. The nation did not enter the war against Austria-Hungary until December 7, 1917, mostly to prevent Italy from leaving the war after its defeat at Caporetto, and never declared war against the Ottoman Empire or Bulgaria.

### The Home Front

The war quickly changed the role that the federal government and its designated officials played in the lives of ordinary Americans. Within days of declaring war, Wilson decided to send troops rather than just financial or material aid to the western front. For men of fighting age, the immediate introduction of conscription took the decision to enter the army away from the individual and placed it in the hands of one of the 4,647 local draft boards formed to implement draft regulations.<sup>11</sup> The fear that too many volunteers from essential manufacturing and agricultural sectors might hamper the nation's ability to perform its vital function of feeding and supplying the Allied side heavily influenced the decision to rely primarily on conscription to raise the wartime force. Traditionally, however, the United States had only used conscription to spur enlistments once initial enthusiasm for war waned. The government worked hard to counter the popular view, well expressed by one congressman, that "there is precious little difference between a conscript and a convict."<sup>12</sup> Selective service, the government repeatedly told the American public, was a modern management technique designed to place men where they could best serve the war effort. Far from forcing the unwilling into uniform, the government contended that the draft selected men "from a Nation which volunteers in mass."<sup>13</sup>

American men exhibited less than overwhelming enthusiasm for going to war. During the short window available for enlistment, men did not flock to the colors and the army had to fill many spaces reserved for volunteers with conscripts. Although 24 million men registered for the draft without incident, millions then took advantage of their right to request a deferment because of their occupation or support of dependents. Overall, nearly three million of the draft-eligible male population refused to register or report to induction centers once called into service. In some isolated instances, draft evaders even engaged in armed confrontation with authorities. Yet the manpower pool was large enough for the draft to operate successfully in spite of these problems. In the end, over 72 percent of the wartime army was conscripted.

The government organized the selective service system without delay. It took more time for federal agencies to exert their full authority to manage the economy. In the winter of 1917-18, gridlock paralyzed railroads and ports, while an unusually cold winter created fuel shortages. To sort out this mess, a newly empowered War Industries Board ranked industries to ensure those most critical to the war effort received raw

materials ahead of nonessential wartime businesses. The agency also established industrial committees to set price and production codes, and became the purchasing agent for Allied governments. By far the strongest step the government took was nationalizing the privately owned railroad system. Railroad companies eased their objections once the government offered generous financial compensation for use of their trains and track. In 1920, the government returned the railroads to their owners over the objections of labor unions lobbying for permanent nationalization.

Nationalizing industries was one approach to managing the wartime economy. At the other end of the spectrum lay the policies pursued by Food Administration director Herbert Hoover. The President possessed extensive powers to regulate the food and fuel industries. Hoover, however, opted to use high prices and patriotic appeals to control the nation's food supply. To stimulate production, he forced the American and Allied governments to pay high prices for agricultural goods. To curb civilian demand, he organized a propaganda campaign around the slogan "food will win the war" to encourage wheat-less Mondays, meatless Tuesdays, and pork-less Saturdays.

Patriotism helped the nation conserve sugar, but it did not blind businessmen and workers to the new economic opportunities that war made available to them.<sup>14</sup> The steel, copper, petroleum, and meat-packing industries enjoyed a healthy increase in profits once they began selling their products to the government. The government built high wages and union protection into its wartime contracts in exchange for a no-strike pledge from labor. Through the National War Labor Board, the federal government began maintaining fair and decent work standards for the first time in American history. The government took a hard line against industrialists who opposed collective bargaining, yet it also used sedition laws to harass antiwar radical labor groups. Both measures helped conservative trade unions like the American Federation of Labor increase their membership by 70 percent between 1917 and 1920.

In the end, however, business profited more than workers from the war. Workers received high wartime wages, but after adjusting for the considerable inflation, real wages only increased 4 percent. When the war ended and the government canceled its contracts, workers lost governmental support for their right to organize unions. Without the government stopping them, many manufacturers quickly returned to their old union-busting ways. The strong partnership that business created with the government during the war lasted longer. The prewar emphasis on punishing and regulating corporations gave way to new faith that the government could build a cooperative, friendly alliance with business to protect the common good.

The war initiated a major demographic shift within the United States as Southern blacks began to migrate north to fill vacancies generated by booming wartime production, conscription, and the interrupted flow of immigrants from Europe. African American migrants hoping to find the "promised land" in the North were often disappointed, however. Stuck in unskilled or semiskilled factory jobs and denied membership in white-only unions, black workers often jumped at the chance to work as strikebreakers. The explosive combination of economic competition and racial hostility triggered a series of racial riots in northern cities during the war. At the war's conclusion, the desire of whites to maintain the racial status quo collided with demands for change from African Americans, resulting in widespread racial violence and an upsurge in lynching in 1919.<sup>15</sup>

Women also assumed multiple new roles in factories and offices. Suffragists demanded that the nation thank women for their wartime contributions by giving them the right to

vote. For months, members of the militant National Women's Party stood outside the White House with banners asking, "How long must women wait for liberty?"<sup>16</sup> The more conservative National American Woman Suffrage Association followed a different tack, presenting the right to vote as a way for women to protect their families and nation. "Every slacker has a vote ... Every pro-German who can not be trusted with any kind of military or war service will have a vote," Carrie Chapman Catt proclaimed. "It is a risk, a danger to a country like ours to send 1,000,000 men out of the country who are loyal and not replace those men by the loyal votes of the women they have left at home."<sup>17</sup> At the end of the war, the 19th Amendment to the American constitution finally granted women the right to vote. Their wartime work, however, failed to create any permanent opportunities for women in higher-paying or skilled industrial occupations.

Besides female suffrage, the war provided an opportunity for temperance reformers to add another amendment to the Constitution that permanently banned the manufacture and distribution of alcohol. The desire to protect the innocent young men heading to the training camps from the evils of drink and the need to conserve the nation's grain resources led to strict regulations concerning alcohol consumption and production during the war. Temperance advocates seized the moment to win crucial congressional and state support for prohibition and the nation officially went dry on January 16, 1920.

While various groups on the home front took advantage of the wartime environment to enact long desired changes in American society, the government tried to keep Americans focused on winning the war effort through a massive propaganda campaign headed by the Committee on Public Information. This agency plastered the nation with posters urging Americans to buy liberty bonds, organized a civilian army of public speakers known as "four-minute men" to address movie audiences on the causes and progress of the war, and offered translations of its pamphlets in multiple languages to spread its message throughout the nation's polyglot population.

### Over There

"I hope you have not arrived too late." This was the greeting that General John J. Pershing received from the American Ambassador to France upon his arrival in Paris two months after the American declaration of war.<sup>18</sup> When the war ended on November 11, 1918, the Americans looked back over the previous 19 months and marveled that they had managed to raise an army of over 4 million men, transport 2 million to France, and command a field army of 1.2 million in major offensive operations along the western front. Despite these significant achievements, the Americans paid a price for their inexperience and lack of preparedness. American-commanded operations in the last four months of the war (when the United States took over its own sector of the western front) were hampered by disorganization in the rear, high casualty rates, and constantly changing leadership, problems all symptomatic of an army forced by circumstances to fight before it was fully trained and formed.

From 1914 to 1917, the professional military establishment in the United States did not completely ignore the war in Europe. With Congress only willing to authorize a small increase in the size of the army, however, there were few preparations defense officials could make to enter the fray at a moment's notice. As late as 1916, war plans prepared by the General Staff focused on protecting the United States from invasion. Given the distance that most Americans felt from events in Europe, it was perhaps fitting that it took an American military attaché in Greece to envision actually sending American

troops overseas. In 1916, Captain Edward Davis took the initiative and developed a plan to land 500,000 American troops in Salonika to force Bulgaria out of the war.<sup>19</sup> Once the United States actually entered the war, the military quickly discarded this idea. The War College concluded:

The Western Front is nearest to us; it can be most readily reached and with the least danger; we there fight with England and France with whom we have the greatest natural interests; and we can make our power felt on that front quicker and stronger than anywhere else; and we are there opposed by Germany, who is our only real enemy.<sup>20</sup>

Although nothing came of it, the exercise of considering another point of entry into the war revealed the misgivings that many Americans felt about sending troops into the bloody morass that had produced cataclysmic casualties at the Somme and Verdun. This sentiment was expressed best by Senator Thomas S. Martin, who when he heard of the War Department's initial request for \$3 billion to equip the wartime force, exclaimed, "Good Lord! You're not going to send soldiers over there, are you?"<sup>21</sup>

The feeling that the Allies had squandered millions of men, coupled with Wilson's desire to use a strong showing on the battlefield to enhance his position at the peace table, led to an early American decision to create an independent army that controlled its own sector of the western front. When the American Expeditionary Forces (AEF) Commander, John J. Pershing, sailed for France, he left with these instructions from Secretary of War Newton Baker:

In military operations against the Imperial German Government, you are directed to cooperate with the forces of the other countries employed against the enemy; but in so doing the underlying idea must be kept in view that the forces of the United States are a separate and distinct component of the combined forces, the identity of which must be preserved.<sup>22</sup>

Except for outlining these general principles, Baker later liked to recall that he gave Pershing only two orders, one to go to France and the other to come home. No American commander before or since has had greater latitude in directing overall military operations.

In the summer of 1917, Pershing traveled to France and selected the Lorraine sector as the eventual site for an independent American presence along the western front. He also devised an overall strategic plan that settled on taking Metz as the key to defeating Germany. Controlling the key German railroad lines and iron mines above the city and the coal mines in the Saar, Pershing contended, would give the AEF a definitive victory in 1919.<sup>23</sup> In retrospect, the selection of Metz as a decisive target appears less convincing because the railroad line that Pershing expected to cut at Metz actually turned west much further north at Thionville, while the coal and iron reserves in the Saar region only accounted for 10 percent of Germany's available resources. Nonetheless, the goal of taking Metz strongly influenced American training and operational planning.

To fight in the open terrain of the Moselle Valley, Pershing developed an open warfare strategy that served his dual purposes of training his army to fight in this region while also establishing a unique American combat doctrine that clearly separated American fighting technique from that of the French or British. Open warfare became Pershing's mantra throughout the war, a concept defined as much by the failings he saw in the Allied approach to war as by his eagerness to champion American initiative and individualism.

Trench warfare, the AEF commander concluded, had weakened the aggressive spirit of the Allied forces, and now their troops fought ineffectively when forced out of the trenches and into the open battlefield. By contrast, Pershing contended:

open warfare is marked by scouts who precede the first wave, irregularity of formation, comparatively little regulations of space and time by the higher command, the greatest possible use of the infantry's own fire power to enable it to get forward, variable distances and intervals between units and individuals, use of every form of cover and accident of the ground during the advance, brief orders, and the greatest possible use of individual initiative by all troops engaged in the actions.<sup>24</sup>

To further his goal of open warfare, Pershing decided to form divisions of 28,000 men. Twice the size of their Allied counterparts, Pershing expected these larger divisions to have greater staying power in the field as the American Army surged forward toward Metz. Open warfare also privileged the firepower of the infantry over the artillery, a preference apparent when Pershing rejected an early suggestion that he double the size of both the infantry and artillery. As a result, American divisions went into combat with the same artillery as European divisions half their size.

Pershing's steadfast commitment to creating an independent army caused much conflict with the French and British. Pershing's reliance on his Allies to train, transport, and equip his troops did force some compromises in how and where the Americans fought. Despite Pershing's insistence on developing a distinct training regime, over the course of the war 25 American divisions spent time training with the French while nine divisions encamped with the British. In addition, hundreds of French and British instructors traveled to the United States to help train American troops. The reliance and influence that Allied trainers exerted on American troops were a constant source of concern for AEF commanders, who regarded their Allies with a mix of respect and disdain.

Reports of incremental success in building an independent American army failed to impress the Allies. For them, the only measure of progress that mattered was the American presence on the battlefield. The defeat of Russia meant that German divisions from the east would soon be making their way to the western front, where Allied commanders expected the German manpower advantage to increase by as much as 60 percent. French Commander in Chief Philippe Pétain worried that "the American army, if it wished to retain its autonomy, would be of no use to the Allies in 1918, except, perhaps, along some quiet section of the front."<sup>25</sup>

As Pétain suggested, to be an effective fighting force in 1918 required some alterations in Pershing's grand strategic plan. Although Pershing repeatedly resisted Allied demands to amalgamate American troops permanently into their armies, American units did a significant amount of fighting under British and French command. In a heralded moment at the height of the German spring offensives, Pershing went to Marshal Ferdinand Foch, the newly appointed Supreme Commander of the Allied Armies on the western front, to tell him that in light of the seriousness of the situation, "all that we have is yours; use them as you wish."<sup>26</sup> Subsequently, American infantry units fought alongside the British and French throughout the spring and summer. Some units even stayed with Allied forces after the Americans finally took over their own sector of the western front in August.

Many American soldiers initially looked forward to fighting. One soldier later recalled that he and his friends "were simply fascinated by the prospect of adventure

and heroism... Here was our one great chance for excitement and risk. We could not afford to pass it up."<sup>27</sup> Once on the front lines, however, American soldiers soon realized that real war bore little resemblance to their romantic fantasies. On the western front, Americans experienced both the horrors of trench warfare and the difficulties of conducting a war of movement during the sweeping counteroffensives and attacks that slowly pushed the Germans back toward their own border in the summer and fall of 1918. As one soldier succinctly noted, "those that weren't scared, weren't there."<sup>28</sup>

The war ended before Pershing had time to demonstrate either the wisdom or folly of attacking Metz, although in September 1918 the AEF successfully executed part of Pershing's initial plan by straightening out the Saint-Mihiel salient. Pershing had expected this battle to put the Americans in a better position to launch their planned 1919 attack on Metz. Instead, it proved a costly diversion that left the Americans with only two weeks to get into position 60 miles away to begin the Meuse-Argonne offensive, the American component of the final coordinated Allied attack along the western front. Contrary to American expectations, their larger divisions often proved unwieldy and difficult to maneuver during this final 47-day battle. With a lack of confidence in his troops' training, Pershing and his staff tended to give units carefully constrained instructions that undermined rather than encouraged the individual initiative that open warfare depended on for its success. In the end, critics charged, bigger divisions simply led to increased numbers of casualties.<sup>29</sup>

The final campaign did produce one genuine war hero on the American side, Sergeant Alvin York. York entered the military as a conscientious objector, but training-camp officials persuaded him to put aside his religious doubts and fight. York was an expert marksman who grew up hunting wild turkeys in the Tennessee Appalachian Mountains. He catapulted to fame within the United States when he singlehandedly rescued his ambushed patrol by killing 20 Germans, silencing 35 German machine guns, and taking 132 prisoners. In previous American wars, individual acts of heroism often turned the tide of battle. In the mechanized slaughter along the western front, York's extraordinary actions were still not enough to make a decisive difference in the Meuse-Argonne campaign.

When the guns fell silent along the western front, nearly 53,500 American men had died in combat as compared to 1.3 million Frenchmen and 900,000 from Britain and the Empire. Fully engaged from the opening days of the war, France and Britain lost an average of 900 and 457 men a day, respectively. For the Americans, the bulk of the fighting came in the last six months of the war, with their first year at war primarily given over to training and transporting troops overseas. The overall American average of 195 deaths a day reflects this lag between the American declaration of war and heavy involvement on the western front. Yet once American troops began fighting in earnest, their losses mirrored those of their Allied counterparts. In the summer and fall of 1918, deaths averaged 820 a day, not too far off the French figure and almost twice as many as the British.<sup>30</sup> These figures reflect the ferocious fighting that American troops encountered, as well as their overall lack of preparation for combat on the western front.

The Americans had reasons to be proud of the part they played in the final military victory. In the immediate aftermath of the conflict, enthusiasts wildly claimed that the United States had singlehandedly won the war, while detractors contended that the Americans accomplished little more than convincing Germany it was hopeless to continue. The truth lay somewhere in between. The Americans may not have won the war for the Allies, but they certainly kept them from losing it. At key moments in the German

spring offensives in 1918, American troops helped stop the Germans from taking Paris. Newly arrived American divisions provided key strength to French-led counteroffensives over the summer, and in the fall American-commanded assaults pinned down large numbers of German troops, helping make possible British and French advances to the north.

Why Americans had fought and died became an open question once peace negotiations began. The challenge of fashioning a lasting peace proved as difficult as mobilizing the nation for war. For the first time, an American president traveled to Europe to oversee the peace process personally. How well Wilson succeeded in his quest to reshape the world became the measuring stick Americans used to decide if their sons and husbands had sacrificed their lives in vain.

### Negotiating the Peace

In 1917, Wilson's "peace without victory" speech and his war address outlined his definition of a just peace. In January 1918 he refined his message even more with a speech that became known as the Fourteen Points. This address outlined a prescription for peace that both reflected Wilson's idealistic view of a future without war and also served the interests of the United States. Provisions to guarantee freedom of the seas and free trade now linked the spreading of democracy to the expansion of laissez-faire capitalism, a measure likely to advance American trading interests at the expense of imperialist powers such as Britain and France. Wilson's suggestion that the world disarm would certainly improve the security of the United States, which had traditionally maintained a small peacetime military. The promises to redraw the map of Europe along ethnic lines and consult colonial populations before determining their futures established the principle of "self-determination," an idea likely to cause conflict with the Allies over their own territorial ambitions in Europe and Africa. Finally, Wilson's proposal for a League of Nations envisioned collective security replacing the balance of power in order to maintain world peace.

Overall, the Fourteen Points were an ambitious proposal that reflected a desire to remake the world in the American mold and create a future without war. Wilson understood the challenges ahead. "England and France have not the same views with regard to peace that we have ... [but after the war] we can force them to our way of thinking, because by that time they will [...] be financially in our hands," Wilson told an aide.<sup>31</sup> While the last part of Wilson's prediction came to pass, at the Paris Peace Conference the Allies proved resolute in rejecting most of Wilson's plan.<sup>32</sup> Hinting at the trouble to come, French Prime Minister Georges Clemenceau did not even bother to read the Fourteen Points until Germany requested an armistice based on them in October 1918. Only the threat of a separate American peace settlement with Germany encouraged France and Britain to accept the Fourteen Points (minus the provision for freedom of the seas) as the basis for the armistice on November 11, 1918. On the eve of peace negotiations, Clemenceau quipped, "God gave us his Ten Commandments and we broke them. Wilson gave us his 14 points - well, we shall see."<sup>33</sup>

Once in Paris, Wilson came face to face with France's strong desire for a punitive peace and the guarantee of traditional defense pacts to contain any future German threat. Wilson was not opposed to dealing strongly with Germany, having moderated his initial view that the war was only against the German government and not its people. The harsh peace settlement that Germany inflicted on Russia in 1918 angered Wilson and he now

agreed with the importance of depriving Germany of her navy and colonies. He parted company with the French, however, over their insistence that Germany be completely eviscerated.

Wilson also had problems at home where skeptics in Congress chafed at the president's plan to dramatically alter the nation's approach to foreign affairs by joining the League of Nations. Having eschewed any formal alliances since the eighteenth century, isolationists and traditionalists in Congress feared ceding too much power to the League of Nations. Critics chafed over the pledge member nations made to defend each other if attacked. "Are you ready to put your soldiers and your sailors at the disposition of other nations?," Senator Henry Cabot Lodge, the leading Republican opponent of the treaty, asked the American people.<sup>34</sup> Lodge was not an isolationist, but instead preferred the traditional balance-of-power approach to foreign policy. Overall, Lodge proposed adding 14 American reservations to the treaty, including one explicitly stating that "the United States assumes no obligation to preserve the territorial integrity or political independence of any other country or to interfere in controversies between nations," unless Congress gave explicit approval to send American troops overseas.<sup>35</sup>

Wilson refused to accept any alterations to the treaty, arguing that modifications would require renegotiation with all its signatories. He ignored hints from the other side of the Atlantic that Europe might accept American reservations if they were required to secure ratification. It was entirely possible Wilson intended to use this unyielding position as a negotiating strategy. Once the Senate vote was near, and Wilson was sure Lodge would not formulate other objections, perhaps he intended to bend. For the moment, however, Wilson stood firm and instead resolved to take his case directly to the people.

In just three weeks Wilson traveled 10,000 miles and made 40 speeches to hundreds of thousands of people. He offered a powerful defense of the League, and the momentum of public support began swinging his way as he crisscrossed the country proclaiming the virtues of becoming a member nation. Wilson mocked opponents' concerns about sending American troops throughout the world. "If you want to stamp out the smoldering flames in some part of Central Europe, you don't send to the United States for troops," Wilson contended. Besides, he noted, no nation could be forced to send troops against its will. The League would only select "them at their own consent, so the United States would in no such circumstances conceivable be drawn in unless the flames spread to the world," he assured his listeners.<sup>36</sup>

Wilson never acknowledged that joining the League of Nations represented a dramatic departure from the traditional American insistence on avoiding entangling alliances. Instead, Wilson used his extraordinary oratory skills to reduce audiences to tears by recalling those who fell on the battlefield to spread peace and democracy throughout the world. "What of our pledges to the men that lie dead in France?," he asked in the last public speech he gave in Pueblo, Colorado. "Nothing less depends upon this decision, nothing less than the liberation and salvation of the world."<sup>37</sup> Within hours after delivering this speech, his doctor rushed a twitching and nauseated Wilson back to Washington, DC, where two days later he suffered a stroke. His life in the balance and permanently paralyzed on his left side, Wilson spent the rest of his presidency hidden in the White House. Wilson was "as much a victim of the war as any soldier who died in the trenches," observed British Prime Minister David Lloyd George.<sup>38</sup>

Instead of using Wilson's collapse to win sympathetic support for the treaty, the president's inner circle kept the seriousness of his illness a secret. Wilson's secretary issued a statement attributing his collapse to exhaustion and assured the public he was resting

comfortably. For weeks, however, Wilson only spent three hours a day out of bed and saw no one except his wife and physician. Wilson rejected all private suggestions that he resign, and still refused to accept any reservations to the treaty. It remains unclear whether this stubbornness was due to his convictions or symptomatic of a stroke-induced mental impairment. Regardless of the real reason, Wilson's refusal to compromise doomed the treaty to defeat. The Senate never ratified the Versailles Treaty and the United States never joined the League of Nations. Instead, the United States signed its own separate peace treaties with Germany, Austria, and Hungary in October 1921. Not all of Wilson's dreams died when the Senate rejected the treaty. Despite the nation's refusal to join the League of Nations, the United States continued to pursue the ideals of disarmament and collective security through a series of multinational agreements in the 1920s.

### Postwar America

The crusade to make the world safe for democracy fared poorly within the United States both during and after the war. To control the antiwar movement and German propagandists, the government enacted a series of restrictive laws that severely curtailed Americans' right to free speech. The Trading with the Enemies Act in 1917 required all foreign-language publications to submit English-language translations of articles about the war to the Postmaster General. The Espionage Act of 1917 made it a crime to obstruct military recruitment, encourage mutiny, or aid the enemy by spreading lies. In 1918, the Sedition Act went even further by prohibiting anyone from uttering, writing, or publishing "any abusive or disloyal language" concerning the flag, constitution, government, or armed forces.

With the war won, the German threat evaporated. The menace of Bolshevism quickly took its place as the focus of government concern. Anxiety over disloyal immigrants continued, but federal investigators now centered their attention on Eastern Europeans, whom they suspected of importing radical communist ideas into the United States in the wake of the Russian Revolution. The war and subsequent Red Scare provided the momentum needed by anti-immigration groups to dramatically restrict immigration in the postwar period. A nation that had annually absorbed nearly a million immigrants from Europe now begrudgingly welcomed fewer than 200,000 a year.

The war had another marked effect on American society by establishing World War I veterans as a distinct political force.<sup>39</sup> Thousands returned home with war wounds that they grappled with for the rest of their lives. By 1921, most veterans were convinced that the war had permanently changed their lives, even if they were not suffering directly from mental or physical injuries. Unable to find jobs in the postwar recession, veterans believed they had missed their chance to get ahead in life. During the war, workers received the highest wages in American history, while soldiers collected \$30 a month. Even worse, wartime contracts guaranteed industrialists generous profits. Veterans believed the federal government had failed to balance the financial burden of the war equally between civilians and soldiers. To rectify this past injustice, they agitated for adjusted compensation. In 1924, veterans settled for a bond certificate that matured in 1945, rather than an immediate cash settlement. With the economy improving, veterans accepted this compromise, satisfied the country had acknowledged its monetary debt to them.

At the time, this appeared to settle the issue once and for all. But in 1932, three years into the Great Depression, 30,000 World War I veterans organized a two-month march

on Washington, DC to demand early payment of their wartime bonus. The government's decision to use the army to violently evict these veterans resulted in a backlash against President Herbert Hoover that contributed to the election of Franklin D. Roosevelt. The hope of avoiding a similar clash with veterans at the end of World War II induced the government to create the most comprehensive social welfare program in American history for these returning servicemen. The nation, therefore, felt the after-shocks of its first experience with mass conscription long after the last American soldier came home in 1920.

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The United States took a long time to decide that military engagement in World War I was in its national interest. Once it entered the conflict the demands of total war quickly reconfigured American society. The war touched all segments of the American population, many of whom realized that the crisis presented an opportunity to achieve long-coveted changes, including female suffrage, immigration reform, market consolidation, or simply a new job and address. Mobilizing the manufacturing and agricultural sectors, selecting men for the military, and regulating transportation and media networks required an exertion of unparalleled state power. The precedent set by the government's wartime management of the economy created the foundations for a managerial state that would evolve dramatically over subsequent decades. The state's surveillance of the American population created an atmosphere in which dissent became practically impossible and established a police-state apparatus that never disbanded. Overall, the measures taken to marshal the nation's resources for war established the modern American state.

The impact of the war on American foreign policy was equally significant. Seeking to provide a broader purpose for the conflict, Woodrow Wilson articulated ideological principles that became the basis for future American overseas adventures. Spreading democracy through the principle of self-determination emerged as the cornerstone of American foreign policy, as did the expectation that progress depended on the rest of the world adopting the American form of capitalism. For this reason, the Fourteen Points stand alongside the Declaration of Independence and Emancipation Proclamation as one of the most important documents in American history.

In the broadest and narrowest sense, American involvement in the war tipped the balance in favor of the Allies on the western front. American material and financial support proved crucial even before the United States formally entered the war, while American troops contributed significantly to the final victory in 1918. Over 15 percent of the American male population served in the military during the war and over one million saw combat along the western front. They were part of the unlucky generation that came together from throughout the world to fight the bloodiest war to date.

### Notes

- 1 Knock, *To End All Wars: Woodrow Wilson and the Quest for a New World Order*, p. 19.
- 2 Zieger, *America's Great War*, pp. 41-2.
- 3 Keith, *Rich Man's War, Poor Man's Fight*, pp. 24-54.
- 4 Zieger, *America's Great War*, pp. 30-1.
- 5 Levin, *Woodrow Wilson and World Politics*, p. 311.
- 6 Weigley, *History of the United States Army*, p. 362.

- 7 Graham, *The Great Campaigns: Reform and War in America*, p. 326.
- 8 Zimmermann Telegram, reproduced at [http://www.archives.gov/digital\\_classroom/lessons/zimmermann\\_telegram/zimmermann\\_telegram.html](http://www.archives.gov/digital_classroom/lessons/zimmermann_telegram/zimmermann_telegram.html).
- 9 Graham, *The Great Campaigns: Reform and War in America*, pp. 330–2.
- 10 Keith, *Rich Man's War, Poor Man's Fight*, p. 14.
- 11 Keene, *Doughboys, the Great War and the Remaking of America*, pp. 18–19.
- 12 Chambers, *To Raise an Army: The Draft Comes to Modern America*, p. 165.
- 13 Rawls, *World War I and the American Poster*, p. 112.
- 14 Kennedy, *Over Here*, pp. 93–143.
- 15 Barbeau and Henri, *The Unknown Soldiers: African-American Troops in World War I*, pp. 175–89.
- 16 Schaffer, *America in the Great War*, p. 93.
- 17 *Ibid.*, pp. 91–2.
- 18 Pershing, *My Experiences in the World War*, vol. I, p. 60.
- 19 Spector, “You’re Not Going to Send Soldiers Over There, Are You!,” pp. 1–4.
- 20 Trask, *The AEF and Coalition Warmaking, 1917–1918*, p. 7.
- 21 Keith, *Rich Man's War, Poor Man's Fight*, p. 42.
- 22 *United States Army in the World War, 1917–1919*, vol. 1, p. 3.
- 23 Millett, “Over Where? The AEF and the American Strategy for Victory, 1917–1918,” p. 239.
- 24 *United States Army in the World War, 1917–1919*, vol. 2, p. 491.
- 25 *Ibid.*, pp. 186–7.
- 26 Bruce, *A Fraternity of Arms*, p. 195.
- 27 Langer, *Gas and Flame in World War I*, p. xviii.
- 28 Coffman, *The War to End All Wars*, p. 289.
- 29 Nenner, “American Military Effectiveness in the First World War,” pp. 42–153.
- 30 Audoin-Rouzeau and Becker, *14–18, Understanding the Great War*, p. 22.
- 31 Zieger, *America's Great War*, p. 163.
- 32 Harries and Harries, *The Last Days of Innocence*, pp. 409–14.
- 33 Widenor, “The United States and the Versailles Peace Settlement,” p. 40.
- 34 *Ibid.*, p. 49.
- 35 Keene, *The United States and the First World War*, p. 75.
- 36 *Ibid.*, p. 75.
- 37 *Ibid.*, p. 110.
- 38 Kennedy, *Over Here*, p. 361.
- 39 Keene, *Doughboys, the Great War and the Remaking of America*, pp. 179–214.

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