

# The War to End War

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1917–1918

*The world must be made safe for democracy. Its peace must be planted upon the tested foundations of political liberty. We have no selfish ends to serve. We desire no conquest, no dominion. We seek no indemnities for ourselves, no material compensation for the sacrifices we shall freely make.*

WOODROW WILSON, WAR MESSAGE, APRIL 2, 1917

**D**estiny dealt cruelly with Woodrow Wilson. The lover of peace, as fate would have it, was forced to lead a hesitant and peace-loving nation into war. As the last days of 1916 slipped through the hourglass, the president made one final, futile attempt to mediate between the embattled belligerents. On January 22, 1917, he delivered one of his most moving addresses, restating America's commitment to neutral rights and declaring that only a negotiated "peace without victory" would prove durable.

German's warlords responded with a blow of the mailed fist. On January 31, 1917, they announced to an astonished world their decision to wage *unrestricted* submarine warfare, sinking *all* ships, including America's, in the war zone.

Why this rash act? War with America was the last thing Germany wanted. But after three ghastly years in the trenches, Germany's leaders decided the dis-

inction between combatants and noncombatants was a luxury they could no longer afford. Thus they jerked on the string they had attached to their *Sussex* pledge in 1916, desperately hoping to bring England to its knees before the United States entered the war. Wilson, his bluff called, broke diplomatic relations with Germany but refused to move closer to war unless the Germans undertook "overt" acts against American lives.

## War by Act of Germany

To defend American interests short of war, the president asked Congress for authority to arm American merchant ships. When a band of midwestern senators launched a filibuster to block the measure,

Wilson denounced them as a “little group of willful men” who were rendering a great nation “helpless and contemptible.” But their obstruction was a powerful reminder of the continuing strength of American isolationism.

Meanwhile, the sensational Zimmermann note was intercepted and published on March 1, 1917, infuriating Americans, especially westerners. German foreign secretary Arthur Zimmermann had secretly proposed a German-Mexican alliance, tempting anti-Yankee Mexico with veiled promises of recovering Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona.

On the heels of this provocation came the long-dreaded “overt” acts in the Atlantic, where German U-boats sank four unarmed American merchant vessels in the first two weeks of March. As one Philadelphia newspaper observed, “the difference between war and what we have now is that now we aren’t fighting back.” Simultaneously came the rousing news that a revolution in Russia had toppled the cruel regime of the tsars. America could now fight foursquare for democracy on the side of the Allies, without the black sheep of Russian despotism in the Allied fold.

Subdued and solemn, Wilson at last stood before a hushed joint session of Congress on the evening of April 2, 1917, and asked for a declaration of war. He had lost his gamble that America could pursue the profits of neutral trade without being sucked into the ghastly maelstrom. A myth developed in later years that America was dragged unwittingly into war by munitions makers and Wall Street bankers, desperate to protect their profits and loans. Yet the weapons merchants and financiers were already thriving, unhampered by wartime government restrictions and heavy taxation. Their slo-

gan might well have been “Neutrality Forever.” The simple truth is that British harassment of American commerce had been galling but endurable; Germany had resorted to the mass killing of civilians. The difference was like that between a gang of thieves and a gang of murderers. President Wilson had drawn a clear, if risky, line against the depredations of the submarine. The German high command, in a last desperate throw of the dice, chose to cross it. In a figurative sense, America’s war declaration of April 6, 1917, bore the unambiguous trademark “Made in Germany.”

### Wilsonian Idealism Enthroned

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“It is a fearful thing to lead this great peaceful people into war,” Wilson said in his war message. It was fearful indeed, not least of all because of the formidable challenge it posed to Wilson’s leadership skills. Ironically, it fell to the scholarly Wilson, deeply respectful of American traditions, to shatter one of the most sacred of those traditions by entangling America in a distant European war.

How could the president arouse the American people to shoulder this unprecedented burden? For more than a century, they had prided themselves on their isolationism from the periodic outbursts of militarized violence that afflicted the Old World. Since 1914 their pride had been reinforced by the bountiful profits gained through neutrality. German U-boats had now roughly shoved a wavering America into the abyss, but ominously, no fewer than six senators and fifty representatives (including the first congresswoman, Jeannette Rankin of Montana) had

voted against the war resolution. Wilson could whip up no enthusiasm, especially in the landlocked Midwest, by fighting to make the world safe from the submarine.

To galvanize the country, Wilson would have to proclaim more glorified aims. Radiating the spiritual fervor of his Presbyterian ancestors, he declared the twin goals of “a war to end war” and a crusade “to make the world safe for democracy.” Brandishing the sword of righteousness, Wilson virtually hypnotized the nation with his lofty ideals. He contrasted the selfish war aims of the other belligerents, Allied and enemy alike, with America’s shining altruism. America, he preached, did not fight for the sake of riches or territorial conquest. The Republic sought only to shape an international order in which democracy could flourish without fear of power-crazed autocrats and militarists.

In Wilsonian idealism the personality of the president and the necessities of history were perfectly matched. The high-minded Wilson genuinely believed in the principles he so eloquently intoned. And probably no other appeal could have successfully converted the American people from their historic hostility to involvement in European squabbles. Americans, it seemed, could be either isolationists or crusaders, but nothing in between.

Wilson’s appeal worked—perhaps too well. Holding aloft the torch of idealism, the president fired up the public mind to a fever pitch. “Force, force to the utmost, force without stint or limit,” he cried, while the country responded less elegantly with “Hang the kaiser.” Lost on the gale was Wilson’s earlier plea for “peace without victory.”

### **Wilson’s Fourteen Potent Points**

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Wilson quickly came to be recognized as the moral leader of the Allied cause. He scaled a summit of inspiring oratory on January 8, 1918, when he delivered his famed Fourteen Points Address to an enthusiastic Congress. Although one of his primary purposes was to keep reeling Russia in the war, Wilson’s vision inspired all the drooping Allies to make mightier efforts and demoralized the enemy governments by holding out alluring promises to their dissatisfied minorities.

The first five of the Fourteen Points were broad in scope. (1) A proposal to abolish secret treaties

pleased liberals of all countries. (2) Freedom of the seas appealed to the Germans, as well as to Americans who distrusted British sea power. (3) A removal of economic barriers among nations was comforting to Germany, which feared postwar vengeance. (4) Reduction of armament burdens was gratifying to taxpayers everywhere. (5) An adjustment of colonial claims in the interests of both native peoples and the colonizers was reassuring to the anti-imperialists.

Other points among the fourteen proved to be no less seductive. They held out the hope of independence (“self-determination”) to oppressed minority groups, such as the Poles, millions of whom lay under the heel of Germany and Austria-Hungary. The capstone point, number fourteen, foreshadowed the League of Nations—an international organization that Wilson dreamed would provide a system of collective security. Wilson earnestly prayed that this new scheme would effectively guarantee the political independence and territorial integrity of all countries, whether large or small.

Yet Wilson’s appealing points, though raising hopes the world over, were not everywhere applauded. Certain leaders of the Allied nations, with an eye to territorial booty, were less than enthusiastic. Hard-nosed Republicans at home grumbled, and some of them openly mocked the “fourteen commandments” of “God Almighty Wilson.”

### **Creel Manipulates Minds**

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Mobilizing people’s minds for war, both in America and abroad, was an urgent task facing the Washington authorities. For this purpose the Committee on Public Information was created. It was headed by a youngish journalist, George Creel, who, though outspoken and tactless, was gifted with zeal and imagination. His job was to sell America on the war and sell the world on Wilsonian war aims.

The Creel organization, employing some 150,000 workers at home and overseas, proved that words were indeed weapons. It sent out an army of 75,000 “four-minute men”—often longer-winded than that—who delivered countless speeches containing much “patriotic pep.”

Creel’s propaganda took varied forms. Posters were splashed on billboards in the “Battle of the Fences,” as artists “rallied to the colors.” Millions of

*Over there, over there  
Send the word, send the word over there,  
That the Yanks are coming, the Yanks are coming  
The drums rum-tumming ev'rywhere.*

Creel typified American war mobilization, which relied more on aroused passion and voluntary compliance than on formal laws. But he oversold the ideals of Wilson and led the world to expect too much. When the president proved to be a mortal and not a god, the resulting disillusionment both at home and abroad was disastrous.

### **Enforcing Loyalty and Stifling Dissent**

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German-Americans numbered over 8 million, counting those with at least one parent foreign-born, out of a total population of 100 million. On the whole they proved to be dependably loyal to the United States. Yet rumormongers were quick to spread tales of spying and sabotage; even trifling epidemics of diarrhea were blamed on German agents. A few German-Americans were tarred, feathered, and beaten; in one extreme case a German Socialist in Illinois was lynched by a drunken mob.

As emotion mounted, hysterical hatred of Germans and things Germanic swept the nation. Orchestras found it unsafe to present German-composed music, like that of Wagner or Beethoven. German books were removed from library shelves, and German classes were canceled in high schools and colleges. Sauerkraut became “liberty cabbage,” hamburger “liberty steak.” Even beer became suspect, as patriotic Americans fretted over the loyalty of breweries with names like Schlitz and Pabst.

Both the Espionage Act of 1917 and the Sedition Act of 1918 reflected current fears about Germans and antiwar Americans. Especially visible among the 1,900 prosecutions undertaken under these laws were antiwar Socialists and members of the radical Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). Kingpin Socialist Eugene V. Debs was convicted under the Espionage Act in 1918 and sentenced to ten years in a federal penitentiary. IWW leader William D. (“Big Bill”) Haywood and ninety-nine associates were similarly convicted. Virtually any criticism of the government could be censored and punished. Some critics claimed the new laws were bending, if not breaking, the First Amendment. But in *Schenck v. United States* (1919), the Supreme Court affirmed

leaflets and pamphlets, which contained the most pungent Wilsonisms, were showered like confetti upon the world. Propaganda booklets with red-white-and-blue covers were printed by the millions.

Hang-the-kaiser movies, carrying such titles as *The Kaiser*, *the Beast of Berlin* and *To Hell with the Kaiser*, revealed the helmeted “Hun” at his bloodiest. Arm-waving conductors by the thousands led huge audiences in songs that poured scorn on the enemy and glorified the “boys” in uniform.

The entire nation, catching the frenzied spirit of a religious revival, burst into song. This was undoubtedly America’s singingest war. Most memorable was George M. Cohan’s spine-tingling “Over There”:

their legality, arguing that freedom of speech could be revoked when such speech posed a “clear and present danger” to the nation.

These prosecutions form an ugly chapter in the history of American civil liberty. With the dawn of peace, presidential pardons were rather freely granted, including President Harding’s to Eugene Debs in 1921. Yet a few victims lingered behind bars into the 1930s.

### **The Nation’s Factories Go to War**

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Victory was no foregone conclusion, especially since the Republic, despite ample warning, was caught flat-footedly unready for its leap into global war. The pacifistic Wilson had only belatedly backed some mild preparedness measures beginning in 1915, including the creation of a civilian Council of National Defense to study problems of economic mobilization. He had also launched a shipbuilding program (as much to capture the belligerents’ war-disrupted foreign trade as to anticipate America’s possible entry into the war) and endorsed a modest beefing-up of the army, which with 100,000 regulars then ranked about fifteenth among the armies of the world, in the same category with Persia’s. It would take a herculean effort to marshal America’s daunting but disorganized resources and throw them into the field quickly enough to bolster the Allied war effort.

Towering obstacles confronted economic mobilizers. Sheer ignorance was among the biggest roadblocks. No one knew precisely how much steel or explosive powder the country was capable of producing. Old ideas also proved to be liabilities, as traditional fears of big government hamstrung efforts to orchestrate the economy from Washington. States’ rights Democrats and businesspeople alike balked at federal economic controls, even though the embattled nation could ill afford the freewheeling, hit-or-miss chaos of the peacetime economy.

Late in the war, and after some bruising political battles, Wilson succeeded in imposing some order on this economic confusion. In March 1918 he appointed lone-eagle stock speculator Bernard Baruch to head the War Industries Board. But the War Industries Board never had more than feeble formal powers, and it was disbanded within days after the armistice. Even in a globe-girdling crisis, the American preference for *laissez-faire* and for a weak central government proved amazingly strong.

### **Workers in Wartime**

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Spurred by the slogan, “Labor Will Win the War,” American workers sweated their way to victory. In part they were driven by the War Department’s “work or fight” rule of 1918, which threatened any unemployed male with being immediately drafted—

a powerful discouragement to go on strike. But for the most part, government tried to treat labor fairly. The National War Labor Board, chaired by former president Taft, exerted itself to head off labor disputes that might hamper the war effort. While pressing employers to grant concessions to labor, including high wages and the eight-hour day, the board stopped short of supporting labor's most important demand: a government guarantee of the right to organize into unions.

Fortunately for the Allied cause, Samuel Gompers and his American Federation of Labor (AF of L) loyally supported the war, though some smaller and more radical labor organizations, including the Industrial Workers of the World, did not. The IWW, known as the "Wobblies" and sometimes derided as the "I Won't Works," engineered some of the most damaging industrial sabotage, and not without rea-

son. As transient laborers in such industries as fruit and lumber, the Wobblies were victims of some of the shabbiest working conditions in the country. When they protested, many were viciously beaten, arrested, or run out of town.

Mainstream labor's loyalty was rewarded. At war's end, the AF of L had more than doubled its membership, to over 3 million, and in the most heavily unionized sectors—coal mining, manufacturing, and transportation—real wages (after adjusting for inflation) had risen more than 20 percent over prewar levels. A new day seemed to be dawning for the long-struggling union movement.

Yet labor harbored grievances. Recognition of the right to organize still eluded labor's grasp. War-time inflation threatened to eclipse wage gains (prices more than doubled between 1914 and 1920). Not even the call of patriotism and Wilsonian idealism could defuse all labor disputes. Some six thousand strikes, several stained by blood, broke

nine whites and at least forty blacks dead. An equally gruesome race riot ripped through Chicago. The wartime Windy City was taut with racial tension as a growing black population expanded into white working-class neighborhoods and as African-Americans found jobs as strikebreakers in meat-packing plants. Triggered by an incident at a bathing beach in July 1919, a reign of terror descended on the city for nearly two weeks. Black and white gangs roamed Chicago's streets, eventually killing fifteen whites and twenty-three blacks.

### **Suffering Until Suffrage**

Women also heeded the call of patriotism and opportunity. Thousands of female workers flooded into factories and fields, taking up jobs vacated by men who left the assembly line for the frontline. But the war split the women's movement deeply. Many progressive-era feminists were pacifists, inclined to oppose the participation both of America in the war and women in the war effort. This group found a voice in the National Woman's party, led by Quaker activist Alice Paul, which demonstrated against "Kaiser Wilson" with marches and hunger strikes.

out in the war years. In 1919 the greatest strike in American history rocked the steel industry. More than a quarter of a million steelworkers walked off their jobs in a bid to force their employers to recognize their right to organize and bargain collectively. The steel companies resisted mercilessly. They refused to negotiate with union representatives and brought in thirty thousand African-American strikebreakers to keep the mills running. After bitter confrontations that left more than a dozen workers dead, the steel strike collapsed, a grievous setback that crippled the union movement for more than a decade.

The black workers who entered the steel mills in 1919 were but a fraction of the tens of thousands of southern blacks drawn to the North in wartime by the magnet of war-industry employment. These migrants made up the small-scale beginnings of a great northward African-American trek that would eventually grow to massive proportions. Their sudden appearance in previously all-white areas sometimes sparked interracial violence. An explosive riot in East St. Louis, Missouri, in July 1917 left

*In an open address to Congress in 1917, suffragist Carrie Chapman Catt (1859–1947) capitalized on the idealism of the day and invoked the founding principles of American democracy in arguing the case for women's right to vote:*

"How can our nation escape the logic it has never failed to follow, when its last unenfranchised class calls for the vote? Behold our Uncle Sam floating the banner with one hand, 'Taxation without representation is tyranny,' and with the other seizing the billions of dollars paid in taxes by women to whom he refuses 'representation.' . . . Is there a single man who can justify such inequality of treatment, such outrageous discrimination? Not one. . . ."

But the larger part of the suffrage movement, represented by the National American Woman Suffrage Association, supported Wilson's war. Leaders echoed Wilson's justification for fighting by arguing that women must take part in the war effort to earn a role in shaping the peace. The fight for democracy abroad was women's best hope for winning true democracy at home.

War mobilization gave new momentum to the suffrage fight. Impressed by women's war work, President Wilson endorsed woman suffrage as "a vitally necessary war measure." In 1917 New York voted for suffrage at the state level; Michigan, Oklahoma, and South Dakota followed. Eventually the groundswell could no longer be contained. In 1920, eighty years after the first calls for suffrage at Seneca Falls, the Nineteenth Amendment was ratified, giving all American women the right to vote. (See the Appendix.)

Despite political victory, women's wartime economic gains proved fleeting. Although a permanent Women's Bureau did emerge after the war in the Department of Labor to protect women in the workplace, most women workers soon gave up their war jobs. Meanwhile, Congress affirmed its support for women in their traditional role as mothers when it passed the Sheppard-Towner Maternity Act of 1921, providing federally financed instruction in maternal and infant health care.

Feminists continued to flex their political muscle in the postwar decade, especially in campaigns



for laws to protect women in the workplace and prohibit child labor. Complete success often eluded them in those crusades, but the developments of the World War I era nevertheless foreshadowed a future when women's wage-labor and political power would reshape the American way of life.

### **Forging a War Economy**

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Mobilization relied more on the heated emotions of patriotism than on the cool majesty of the laws. The largely voluntary and somewhat haphazard character of economic war organization testified unequivocally to ocean-insulated America's safe distance from the fighting—as well as to the still-modest scale of government powers in the progressive-era Republic.

As the larder of democracy, America had to feed itself and its allies. By a happy inspiration, the man chosen to head the Food Administration was the Quaker-humanitarian Herbert C. Hoover. He was already considered a hero because he had successfully led a massive charitable drive to feed the starving people of war-racked Belgium.

In common with other American war administrators, Hoover preferred to rely on voluntary compliance rather than on compulsory edicts. He deliberately rejected issuing ration cards, a practice used in Europe. Instead he waged a whirlwind propaganda campaign through posters, billboards, newspapers, pulpits, and movies. To save food for export, Hoover proclaimed wheatless Wednesdays and meatless Tuesdays—all on a voluntary basis. Even children, when eating apples, were urged to be “patriotic to the core.”

The country soon broke out in a rash of vegetable “victory gardens,” as perspiring patriots hoed their way to victory in backyards and vacant lots. Congress severely restricted the use of foodstuffs for manufacturing alcoholic beverages, and the war-spawned spirit of self-denial helped accelerate the wave of prohibition that was sweeping the country. Many leading brewers were German-descended, and this taint made the drive against alcohol all the more popular. The reformers' dream of a saloonless nation was finally achieved—temporarily—in 1919 with the passage of the Eighteenth Amendment, prohibiting all alcoholic drinks.

Thanks to the fervent patriotic wartime spirit, Hoover's voluntary approach worked. Farm produc-

tion increased by one-fourth, and food exports to the Allies tripled in volume. Hoover's methods were widely imitated in other war agencies. The Fuel Administration exhorted Americans to save fuel with “heatless Mondays,” “lightless nights,” and “gasless Sundays.” The Treasury Department sponsored huge parades and invoked slogans like “Halt the Hun” to promote four great Liberty Loan drives, followed by a Victory Loan campaign in 1919. Together these efforts netted the then-fantastic sum of about \$21 billion, or two-thirds of the current cost of the war to the United States. The remainder was raised by increased taxes, which, unlike the loan subscriptions, were obligatory. (The ultimate bill,

## Making Plowboys into Doughboys

Most citizens, at the outset, did not dream of sending a mighty force to France. As far as fighting went, America would use its navy to uphold freedom of the seas. It would continue to ship war materials to the Allies and supply them with loans, which finally totaled nearly \$10 billion. But in April and May of 1917, the European associates laid their cards on the table. They confessed that they were scraping the bottom not only of their money chests but, more ominously, of their manpower barrels. A huge American army would have to be raised, trained, and transported, or the whole western front would collapse.

Conscription was the only answer to the need for raising an immense army with all possible speed. Wilson disliked a draft, as did many other Americans with Civil War memories, but he eventually accepted and eloquently supported conscription as a disagreeable and temporary necessity.

The proposed draft bill immediately ran into a barrage of criticism in Congress. A congressman from Missouri, deploring compulsion, cried out in protest that there was “precious little difference between a conscript and a convict.” Prophets of doom predicted that on draft-registration day, the streets would run red with blood. At length Congress—six weeks after declaring war—grudgingly got around to passing conscription.

including interest and veterans’ benefits, mounted to some \$112 billion.)

Pressures of various kinds, patriotic and otherwise, were used to sell bonds. The unfortunate German-American who could not display a Liberty Bond button might find his or her house bedaubed with yellow paint. A number of reluctant investors in war bonds were roughly handled. In at least one instance, a man signed for a bond with a rope around his neck.

Despite the Wilson administration’s preference for voluntary means of mobilizing the economy, the government on occasion reluctantly exercised its sovereign formal power, notably when it took over the nation’s railroads following indescribable traffic snarls in late 1917. Washington also hustled to get its hands on ships. It seized enemy merchant vessels trapped in America’s harbors and orchestrated a gigantic drive to construct new tonnage. A few concrete vessels were launched, including one appropriately named *Faith*. A wooden-ship program was undertaken, though after months of war, birds were still nesting in the trees from which the vessels were to be hammered.

*Putting aside grizzly tales of the agonies of trench warfare, many young American men saw an opportunity for adventure and seized it. Author John Dos Passos (1896–1970) recollected how he felt going off to war in 1917:*

“We had spent our boyhood in the afterglow of the peaceful nineteenth century. . . . What was war like? We wanted to see with our own eyes. We flocked into the volunteer services. I respected the conscientious objectors, and occasionally felt I should take that course myself, but hell, I wanted to see the show.”

The draft act required the registration of all males between the ages of eighteen and forty-five. No “draft dodger” could purchase his exemption or hire a substitute, as in the days of the Civil War, though the law exempted men in key industries, such as shipbuilding.

The draft machinery, on the whole, worked effectively. Registration day proved to be a day of patriotic pilgrimages to flag-draped registration centers, and the sign-up saw no shedding of blood, as some had gloomily predicted. Despite precautions, some 337,000 “slackers” escaped the draft, and about 4,000 conscientious objectors were excused.

Within a few frantic months, the army grew to over 4 million men. For the first time, women were admitted to the armed forces; some 11,000 to the navy and 269 to the marines. African-Americans also served in the armed forces, though in strictly segregated units and usually under white officers. Reflecting racial attitudes of the time, military authorities hesitated to train black men for combat, and the majority of black soldiers were assigned to “construction battalions” or put to work unloading ships.

Recruits were supposed to receive six months of training in America and two more months overseas. But so great was the urgency that many doughboys were swept swiftly into battle scarcely knowing how to handle a rifle, much less a bayonet.

## Fighting in France—Belatedly

Russia’s collapse underscored the need for haste. The communistic Bolsheviks, after seizing power late in 1917, ultimately withdrew their beaten country from the “capitalistic” war early in 1918. This sudden defection released hundreds of thousands of battle-tested Germans from the eastern front facing Russia for the western front in France, where, for the first time in the war, they were developing a dangerous superiority in manpower.

Berlin’s calculations as to American tardiness were surprisingly accurate. Germany had counted on knocking out Britain six months after the declaration of unlimited submarine warfare, long before America could get into the struggle. No really effective American fighting force reached France until about a year



### Major U.S. Operations in France, 1918

One doughboy recorded in his diary his baptism of fire at St. Mihiel: “Hiked through dark woods. No lights allowed, guided by holding on the pack of the man ahead. Stumbled through underbrush for about half mile into an open field where we waited in soaking rain until about 10:00 P.M. We then started on our hike to the St. Mihiel front, arriving on the crest of a hill at 1:00 A.M. I saw a sight which I shall never forget. It was the zero hour and in one instant the entire front as far as the eye could reach in either direction was a sheet of flame, while the heavy artillery made the earth quake.”

after Congress declared war. Berlin had also reckoned on the inability of the Americans to transport their army, assuming that they were able to raise one. Here again the German predictions were not far from the mark, as shipping shortages plagued the Allies.

Nevertheless, France gradually began to bustle with American doughboys. The first trainees to reach the front were used as replacements in the Allied armies and were generally deployed in quiet sectors with the British and French. The newcomers soon made friends with the French girls—or tried to—and one of the most sung-about women in history was the fabled “Mademoiselle from Armentières.” One of the printable stanzas ran

*She was true to me, she was true to you,  
She was true to the whole damned army, too.*

American operations were not confined solely to France; small detachments fought in Belgium, Italy, and notably Russia. The United States, hoping to keep stores of munitions from falling into German hands when Bolshevik Russia quit fighting, contributed some 5,000 troops to an Allied invasion of northern Russia at Archangel. Wilson likewise sent nearly 10,000 troops to Siberia as part of an Allied expedition, which included more than 70,000

Japanese. Major American purposes were to prevent Japan from getting a stranglehold on Siberia, to rescue some 45,000 marooned Czechoslovak troops, and to snatch military supplies from Bolshevik control. Sharp fighting at Archangel and in Siberia involved casualties on both sides, including several hundred Americans. The Bolsheviks long resented these “capitalistic” interventions, which they regarded as high-handed efforts to suffocate their infant communist revolution in its cradle.

### **America Helps Hammer the “Hun”**

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The dreaded German drive on the western front exploded in the spring of 1918. Spearheaded by about half a million troops, the enemy rolled forward with terrifying momentum. So dire was the peril that the Allied nations for the first time united under a supreme commander, the quiet French marshal Foch, whose axiom was, “To make war is to attack.” Until then the Allies had been fighting imperfectly coordinated actions.

At last the ill-trained “Yanks” were coming—and not a moment too soon. Late in May 1918, the Ger-

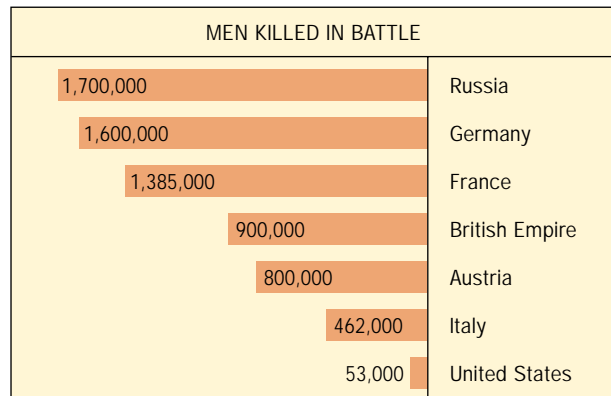
man juggernaut, smashing to within forty miles of Paris, threatened to knock out France. Newly arrived American troops, numbering fewer than thirty thousand, were thrown into the breach at Château-Thierry, right in the teeth of the German advance. This was a historic moment—the first significant engagement of American troops in a European war. Battle-fatigued French soldiers watched incredulously as the roads filled with endless truckloads of American doughboys, singing New World songs at the top of their voices, a seemingly inexhaustible flood of fresh and gleaming youth. With their arrival it was clear that a new American giant had arisen in the West to replace the dying Russian titan in the East.

American weight in the scales was now being felt. By July 1918 the awesome German drive had spent its force, and keyed-up American men participated in a Foch counteroffensive in the Second Battle of the Marne. This engagement marked the beginning of a German withdrawal that was never effectively reversed. In September 1918 nine American divisions (about 243,000 men) joined four French divisions to push the Germans from the St. Mihiel salient, a German dagger in France’s flank.

The Americans, dissatisfied with merely bolstering the British and French, had meanwhile been demanding a separate army. General John J. (“Black Jack”) Pershing was finally assigned a front of eighty-five miles, stretching northwestward from the Swiss border to meet the French lines.

As part of the last mighty Allied assault, involving several million men, Pershing’s army undertook the Meuse-Argonne offensive, from September 26 to November 11, 1918. One objective was to cut the German railroad lines feeding the western front. This battle, the most gargantuan thus far in American history, lasted forty-seven days and engaged 1.2 million American troops. With especially heavy fighting in the rugged Argonne Forest, the killed and wounded mounted to 120,000, or 10 percent of the Americans involved. The slow progress and severe losses from machine guns resulted in part from inadequate training, in part from dashing open-field tactics, with the bayonet liberally employed.

Approximate Comparative Losses in World War I



Tennessee-bred Alvin C. York, a member of an anti-war religious sect, became a hero when he single-handedly killed 20 Germans and captured 132 more.

Victory was in sight—and fortunately so. The slowly advancing American armies in France were eating up their supplies so rapidly that they were in grave danger of running short. But the battered Germans were ready to stagger out of the trenches and cry “Kamerad” (“Comrade”). Their allies were deserting them, the British blockade was causing critical food shortages, and the sledgehammer blows of the Allies rained down relentlessly. Propaganda leaflets, containing seductive Wilsonian promises, rained upon their crumbling lines from balloons, shells, and rockets.

### The Fourteen Points Disarm Germany

Berlin was now ready to hoist the white flag. Warned of imminent defeat by the generals, it turned to the presumably softhearted Wilson in October 1918, seeking a peace based on the Fourteen Points. In stern responses the president made it clear that the kaiser must be thrown overboard before an armistice could be negotiated. War-weary Germans, whom Wilson had been trying to turn against their “military masters,” took the hint. The kaiser was forced to flee to Holland, where he lived out his remaining twenty-three years, “unwept, unhonored, and unhung.”

The exhausted Germans were through. They laid down their arms at eleven o’clock on the eleventh day of the eleventh month of 1918, and an eerie, numbing silence fell over the western front. War-taut America burst into a delirium of around-the-clock rejoicing, as streets were jammed with laughing, whooping, milling, dancing masses. The war to end wars had ended.

The United States’ main contributions to the ultimate victory had been foodstuffs, munitions, credits, oil for this first mechanized war, and manpower—but not battlefield victories. The Yanks fought only two major battles, at St. Mihiel and the Meuse-Argonne, both in the last two months of the four-year war, and they were still grinding away in the Meuse-Argonne, well short of their objectives, when the war ended. It was the *prospect* of endless U.S. troop reserves, rather than America’s actual military performance, that eventually demoralized the Germans.

Ironically enough, General Pershing in some ways depended more on the Allies than they depended on him. His army purchased more of its supplies in Europe than it shipped from the United States. Fewer than five hundred of Pershing’s artillery pieces were of American manufacture. Virtually all his aircraft were provided by the British and French. Britain and France transported a majority of the doughboys to Europe. The United States, in short, was no arsenal of democracy in this war; that role awaited it in the next global conflict, two decades later.

### Wilson Steps Down from Olympus

Woodrow Wilson had helped to win the war. What part would he now play in shaping the peace? Expectations ran extravagantly high. As the fighting in Europe crashed to a close, the American president towered at the peak of his popularity and power. In lonely huts in the mountains of Italy, candles burned before poster-portraits of the revered American prophet. In Poland starry-eyed university students would meet on the streets, clasp hands, and utter only one word: “Wilson.” No other man

had ever occupied so dizzy a pinnacle as moral leader of the world. Wilson also had behind him the prestige of victory and the economic resources of the mightiest nation on earth. But at this fateful moment, his sureness of touch deserted him, and he began to make a series of tragic fumbles.

Under the slogan “Politics Is Adjourned,” partisan political strife had been kept below the surface during the war crisis. Hoping to strengthen his hand at the Paris peace table, Wilson broke the truce by personally appealing for a Democratic victory in the

congressional elections of November 1918. But the maneuver backfired when voters instead returned a narrow Republican majority to Congress. Having staked his reputation on the outcome, Wilson went to Paris as a diminished leader. Unlike all the parliamentary statesmen at the table, he did not command a legislative majority at home.

Wilson’s decision to go in person to Paris to help make the peace infuriated Republicans. At that time no president had traveled to Europe, and Wilson’s journey looked to his critics like flamboyant grandstanding. He further ruffled Republican feathers when he snubbed the Senate in assembling his peace delegation and neglected to include a single Republican senator in his official party. The logical choice was the new chairman of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, slender and aristocratically bewhiskered Henry Cabot Lodge of Massachusetts, a Harvard Ph.D. But including Lodge would have been problematic for the president. The senator’s mind, quipped one critic, was like the soil of his native New England: “naturally barren but highly cultivated.” Wilson loathed him, and the feeling was hotly reciprocated. An accomplished author, Lodge had been known as the “scholar in politics” until Wilson came on the scene. The two men were at daggers drawn, personally and politically.

*Theodore Roosevelt (1858–1919) favored the Germans’ unconditional surrender. Referring to Wilson’s practice of drafting diplomatic notes on his own typewriter, Roosevelt telegraphed several senators (October 24, 1918),*

“Let us dictate peace by the hammering guns and not chat about peace to the accompaniment of clicking typewriters. The language of the fourteen points and the subsequent statements explaining or qualifying them are thoroughly mischievous.”

## An Idealist Battles the Imperialists in Paris

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Woodrow Wilson, the great prophet arisen in the West, received tumultuous welcomes from the masses of France, England, and Italy late in 1918 and early in 1919. They saw in his idealism the promise of a better world. But the statesmen of France and Italy were careful to keep the new messiah at arm's length from worshipful crowds. He might so arouse the people as to prompt them to overthrow their leaders and upset finespun imperialistic plans.

The Paris Conference of great and small nations fell into the hands of an inner clique, known as the Big Four. Wilson, representing the richest and freshest great power, more or less occupied the driver's seat. He was joined by genial Premier Vittorio Orlando of Italy and brilliant Prime Minister David Lloyd George of Britain. Perhaps the most realistic of the quartet was cynical, hard-bitten Premier Georges Clemenceau of France, the seventy-eight-year-old "organizer of victory" known as "the Tiger."

Speed was urgent when the conference opened on January 18, 1919. Europe seemed to be slipping into anarchy; the red tide of communism was licking westward from Bolshevik Russia.

*Grave concern was expressed by General Tasker H. Bliss (1853–1930), one of the five American peace commissioners (December 18, 1918):*

"I am disquieted to see how hazy and vague our ideas are. We are going to be up against the wiliest politicians in Europe. There will be nothing hazy or vague about their ideas."

Wilson's ultimate goal was a world parliament to be known as the League of Nations, but he first bent his energies to preventing any vengeful parceling out of the former colonies and protectorates of the vanquished powers. He forced through a compromise between naked imperialism and Wilsonian idealism. The victors would not take possession of the conquered territory outright, but would receive it as trustees of the League of Nations. Strategic Syria, for example, was awarded to France, and oil-rich Iraq went to Britain. But in practice this half-loaf solution was little more than the old prewar colonialism, thinly disguised.



Meanwhile, Wilson had been serving as midwife for the League of Nations, which he envisioned as containing an assembly with seats for all nations and a council to be controlled by the great powers. He gained a signal victory over the skeptical Old World diplomats in February 1919, when they agreed to make the League Covenant, Wilson's brainchild, an integral part of the final peace treaty. At one point he spoke with such ardor for his plan that even the hard-boiled newspaper reporters forgot to take notes.

## **Hammering Out the Treaty**

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Domestic duties now required Wilson to make a quick trip to America, where ugly storms were brewing in the Senate. Certain Republican senators, Lodge in the lead, were sharpening their knives for Wilson. To them the League was either a useless "sewing circle" or an overpotent "super-state." Their hard core was composed of a dozen or so militant isolationists, led by senators William Borah of Idaho and Hiram Johnson of California, who were known as "irreconcilables" or "the Battalion of Death."

Thirty-nine Republican senators or senators-elect—enough to defeat the treaty—proclaimed that the Senate would not approve the League of Nations in its existing imperfect form. These difficulties delighted Wilson's Allied adversaries in Paris. They were now in a stronger bargaining position because Wilson would have to beg them for changes in the covenant that would safeguard the Monroe Doctrine and other American interests dear to the senators.

As soon as Wilson was back in Paris, hard-headed Premier Clemenceau pressed French demands for the German-inhabited Rhineland and the Saar Valley, a rich coal area. Faced with fierce Wilsonian opposition to this violation of self-determination, France settled for a compromise whereby the Saar basin would remain under the League of Nations for fifteen years, and then a popular vote would determine its fate.\* In exchange for dropping its demands for the Rhineland, France got the Security Treaty, in which both Britain and America pledged to come to its aid in the event of another German invasion. The French later felt betrayed

when this pact was quickly pigeonholed by the U.S. Senate, which shied away from all entangling alliances.

Wilson's next battle was with Italy over Fiume, a valuable seaport inhabited by both Italians and Yugoslavs. When Italy demanded Fiume, Wilson insisted that the seaport go to Yugoslavia and appealed over the heads of Italy's leaders to the country's masses. The maneuver fell flat. The Italian delegates went home in a huff, while the Italian masses turned savagely against Wilson.

Another crucial struggle was with Japan over China's Shandong (Shantung) Peninsula and the German islands in the Pacific, which the Japanese had seized during the war. Japan was conceded the strategic Pacific islands under a League of Nations mandate,\* but Wilson staunchly opposed Japanese control of Shandong as a violation of self-determination for its 30 million Chinese residents. But when the

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\*The Saar population voted overwhelmingly to rejoin Germany in 1935.

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\*In due time the Japanese illegally fortified these islands—the Marshalls, Marianas, and Carolines—and used them as bases against the United States in World War II.

Japanese threatened to walk out, Wilson reluctantly accepted a compromise whereby Japan kept Germany's economic holdings in Shandong and pledged to return the peninsula to China at a later date. The Chinese were outraged by this imperialistic solution, while Clemenceau jeered that Wilson "talked like Jesus Christ and acted like Lloyd George."

### **The Peace Treaty That Bred a New War**

A completed Treaty of Versailles, after more weeks of wrangling, was handed to the Germans in June 1919—almost literally on the point of a bayonet. Germany had capitulated on the strength of assurances that it would be granted a peace based on the Fourteen Points. A careful analysis of the treaty shows that only about four of the twenty-three original Wilsonian points and subsequent principles were fully honored. Loud and bitter cries of betrayal burst from German throats—charges that Adolf Hitler would soon reiterate during his meteoric rise to power.

Wilson, of course, was guilty of no conscious betrayal. But the Allied powers were torn by conflicting aims, many of them sanctioned by secret treaties. There had to be compromise at Paris, or there would be no agreement. Faced with hard realities, Wilson was forced to compromise away some of his less cherished Fourteen Points in order to salvage the more precious League of Nations. He was much like the mother who had to throw her sickly younger children to the pursuing wolves to save her sturdy firstborn.

A troubled Wilson was not happy with the results. Greeted a few months earlier with frenzied acclaim in Europe, he was now a fallen idol, condemned alike by disillusioned liberals and frustrated imperialists. He was keenly aware of some of the injustices that had been forced into the treaty. But he was hoping that the League of Nations—a potent League with America as a leader—would iron out the inequities.

Yet the loudly condemned treaty had much to commend it. Not least among its merits was its liberation of millions of minority peoples, such as the Poles, from the yoke of an alien dynasty. Disappointing though Wilson's handiwork was, he saved the pact from being an old-time peace of grasping imperialism. His critics to the contrary, the settlement was almost certainly a fairer one because he had gone to Paris.

### **The Domestic Parade of Prejudice**

Returning for the second and final time to America, Wilson sailed straight into a political typhoon. Isolationists raised a whirlwind of protest against the treaty, especially against Wilson's commitment to usher the United States into his newfangled League of Nations. Invoking the revered advice of Washington and Jefferson, they wanted no part of any "entangling alliance."

Nor were the isolationists Wilson's only problem. Critics showered the Treaty of Versailles with abuse from all sides.

Rabid Hun-haters, regarding the pact as not harsh enough, voiced their discontent. Principled liberals, like the editors of the *New York Nation*, thought it too harsh—and a gross betrayal to boot. German-Americans, Italian-Americans, and other "hyphenated" Americans were aroused because the peace settlement was not sufficiently favorable to their native lands.

Irish-Americans, traditional twisters of the British lion's tail, also denounced the League. They felt that with the additional votes of the five overseas British dominions, it gave Britain undue influence, and they feared that it could be used to force the United States to crush any rising for Irish independence. Crowds of Irish-American zealots hissed and booed Wilson's name.

### **Wilson's Tour and Collapse (1919)**

Despite mounting discontent, the president had reason to feel optimistic. When he brought home the treaty, with the "Wilson League" firmly riveted in as Part I, a strong majority of the people still seemed favorable. At this time—early July 1919—Senator Lodge had no real hope of defeating the Treaty of Versailles. His strategy was merely to amend it in such a way as to "Americanize," "Republicanize," or "senatorialize" it. The Republicans could then claim political credit for the changes.

Lodge effectively used delay to muddle and divide public opinion. He read the entire 264-page treaty aloud in the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and held protracted hearings in which people of various nationalities aired their grievances.

Wilson fretted increasingly as the hot summer of 1919 wore on. The bulky pact was bogged down

in the Senate, while the nation was drifting into confusion and apathy. He therefore decided to go to the country in a spectacular speechmaking tour. He would appeal over the heads of the Senate to the sovereign people—as he often had in the past.

The strenuous barnstorming campaign was undertaken in the face of protests by physicians and friends. Wilson had never been robust; he had entered the White House nearly seven years before with a stomach pump and with headache pills for his neuritis. His frail body had begun to sag under the strain of partisan strife, a global war, and a stressful peace conference. But he declared that he was willing to die, like the soldiers he had sent into battle, for the sake of the new world order.

The presidential tour, begun in September 1919, got off to a rather lame start. The Midwest received Wilson lukewarmly, partly because of strong German-American influence. Trailing after him like bloodhounds came two “irreconcilable” senators, Borah and Johnson, who spoke in the same cities a few days later. Hat-tossing crowds answered their attacks on Wilson, crying, “Impeach him, impeach him!”

But the reception was different in the Rocky Mountain region and on the Pacific Coast. These areas, which had elected Wilson in 1916, welcomed him with heartwarming outbursts. The high point—and the breaking point—of the return trip was at Pueblo, Colorado, September 25, 1919. Wilson, with tears coursing down his cheeks, pleaded for the League of Nations as the only real hope of preventing future wars. That night he collapsed from physical and nervous exhaustion.

Wilson was whisked back in the “funeral train” to Washington, where several days later a stroke paralyzed one side of his body. During the next few weeks, he lay in a darkened room in the White House, as much a victim of the war as the unknown soldier buried at Arlington. For more than seven months, he did not meet his cabinet.

### **Defeat Through Deadlock**

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Senator Lodge, coldly calculating, was now at the helm. After failing to amend the treaty outright, he finally came up with fourteen formal reservations to it—a sardonic slap at Wilson’s Fourteen Points. These safeguards reserved the rights of the United States under the Monroe Doctrine and the Constitution and otherwise sought to protect American sovereignty. Senator Lodge and other critics were especially alarmed by Article X of the League because it *morally* bound the United States to aid any member victimized by external aggression. A jealous Congress wanted to reserve for itself the constitutional war-declaring power.

Wilson, hating Lodge, saw red at the mere suggestion of the Lodge reservations. He was quite willing to accept somewhat similar reservations sponsored by his faithful Democratic followers, but he insisted that the Lodge reservations “emasculated” the entire pact.

Although too feeble to lead, Wilson was still strong enough to obstruct. When the day finally

came for the voting in the Senate, he sent word to all true Democrats to vote *against* the treaty with the odious Lodge reservations attached. Wilson hoped that when these were cleared away, the path would be open for ratification without reservations or with only some mild Democratic ones.

Loyal Democrats in the Senate, on November 19, 1919, blindly did Wilson's bidding. Combining with the "irreconcilables," mostly Republicans, they rejected the treaty with the Lodge reservations appended, 55 to 39.

The nation was too deeply shocked to accept the verdict as final. About four-fifths of the senators professed to favor the treaty, with or without reservations, yet a simple majority could not agree on a single proposition. So strong was public indignation that the Senate was forced to act a second time. In March 1920 the treaty was brought up again, with the Lodge reservations tacked on.

There was only one possible path to success. Unless the Senate approved the pact with the reservations, the entire document would be rejected. But the sickly Wilson, still sheltered behind drawn curtains and blind to disagreeable realities, again sent word to all loyal Democrats to vote down the treaty with the obnoxious reservations. He thus signed the death warrant of the treaty as far as America was concerned. On March 19, 1920, the treaty netted a simple majority but failed to get the necessary two-thirds majority by a count of 49 yeas to 35 nays.

Who defeated the treaty? The Lodge-Wilson personal feud, traditionalism, isolationism, disillusionment, and partisanship all contributed to the confused picture. But Wilson himself must bear a substantial share of the responsibility. He asked for all or nothing—and got nothing. One Democratic senator angrily charged that the president had strangled his own brainchild with his own palsied hands rather than let the Senate straighten its crooked limbs.

### **The "Solemn Referendum" of 1920**

Wilson had his own pet solution for the deadlock, and this partly explains why he refused to compromise on Lodge's terms. He proposed to settle the treaty issue in the forthcoming presidential campaign of 1920 by appealing to the people for a "solemn referendum." This was sheer folly, for a true mandate on the League in the noisy arena of politics was clearly an impossibility.

Jubilant Republicans gathered in Chicago in June 1920 with wayward bull moosers back in the corral (after Theodore Roosevelt's death in 1919) and the senatorial Old Guard back in the saddle. The convention devised a masterfully ambiguous platform that could appeal to both pro-League and anti-League sentiment in the party. The nominee would run on a teeter-totter rather than a platform.

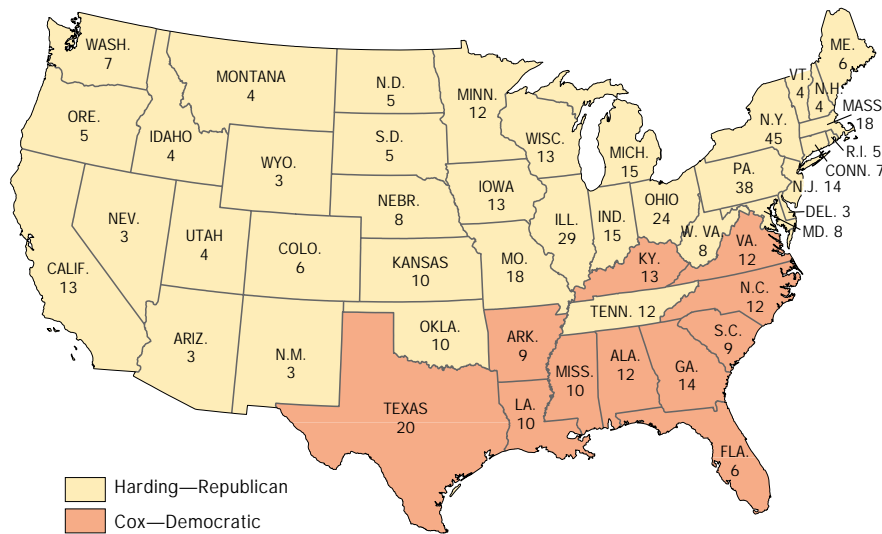
As the leading presidential contestants jostled with one another, the political weathervane began to veer toward genial Senator Warren G. Harding of Ohio. A group of Senate bosses, meeting rather casually in the historic "smoke-filled" Room 404 of the Hotel Blackstone, informally decided on the affable and malleable Ohioan. Their fair-haired boy was a prosperous, backslapping, small-town newspaper editor of the "folksy" type, quite the opposite of Wilson, who had earlier noted the senator's "disturbingly dull" mind. For vice president the party nominated frugal, grim-faced Governor Calvin ("Silent Cal") Coolidge of Massachusetts, who had attracted conservative support by breaking a police strike in Boston.

Meeting in San Francisco, Democrats nominated earnest Governor James M. Cox of Ohio, who strongly supported the League. His running mate was Assistant Navy Secretary Franklin D. Roosevelt, a young, handsome, vibrant New Yorker.

Democratic attempts to make the campaign a referendum on the League were thwarted by Senator Harding, who issued muddled and contradictory statements on the issue from his front porch. Pro-League and anti-League Republicans both claimed that Harding's election would advance their cause, while the candidate suggested that if elected he would work for a vague Association of Nations—a league but not *the* League.

With newly enfranchised women swelling the vote totals, Harding was swept into power with a prodigious plurality of over 7 million votes—16,143,407 to 9,130,328 for Cox. The electoral count was 404 to 127. Eugene V. Debs, federal prisoner number 9653 at the Atlanta Penitentiary, rolled up the largest vote ever for the left-wing Socialist party—919,799.

Public desire for a change found vent in a resounding repudiation of "high-and-mighty" Wilsonism. People were tired of professional high-browism, star-reaching idealism, bothersome dogoodism, moral overstrain, and constant self-sacrifice. Eager to lapse back into "normalcy," they were willing to accept a second-rate president—and they got a third-rate one.



**Presidential Election of 1920 (with electoral vote by state)**  
Cox rashly claimed that “traitors” would vote Republican. But Harding and Coolidge ran successfully as small-town boys who had made good. Harding celebrated his fifty-fifth birthday on election day, and the voters presented him with the largest victory margin to date in a U.S. presidential election.

Although the election could not be considered a true referendum, Republican isolationists successfully turned Harding’s victory into a death sentence for the League. Politicians increasingly shunned the League as they would a leper. When the legendary Wilson died in 1924, admirers knelt in the snow outside his Washington home. His “great vision” of a league for peace had perished long before.

## **The Betrayal of Great Expectations**

America’s spurning of the League was tragically shortsighted. The Republic had helped to win a costly war, but it foolishly kicked the fruits of victory under the table. Whether a strong international organization would have averted World War II in 1939 will always be a matter of dispute. But there can be no doubt that the orphaned League of Nations was undercut at the start by the refusal of the mightiest power on the globe to join it. The Allies themselves were largely to blame for the new world conflagration that flared up in 1939, but they found a convenient justification for their own shortcomings by pointing an accusing finger at Uncle Sam.

The ultimate collapse of the Treaty of Versailles must be laid, at least in some degree, at America’s doorstep. This complicated pact, tied in with the

four other peace treaties through the League Covenant, was a top-heavy structure designed to rest on a four-legged table. The fourth leg, the United States, was never put into place. This rickety structure teetered for over a decade and then crashed in ruins—a debacle that played into the hands of the German demagogue Adolf Hitler.

No less ominous events were set in motion when the Senate spurned the Security Treaty with France. The French, fearing that a new generation of Germans would follow in their fathers’ goose steps, undertook to build up a powerful military force. Predictably resenting the presence of strong French armies, Germany began to rearm illegally. The seething cauldron of uncertainty and suspicion brewed an intoxicant that helped inflame the fanaticism following of Hitler.

The United States, as the tragic sequel proved, hurt its own cause when it buried its head in the sand. Granted that the conduct of its Allies had been disillusioning, it had its own ends to serve by carrying through the Wilsonian program. It would have been well advised if it had forthrightly assumed its war-born responsibilities and had resolutely embraced the role of global leader proffered by the hand of destiny. In the interests of its own security, if for no other reason, the United States should have used its enormous strength to shape world-shaking events. Instead it permitted itself blythely to drift toward the abyss of a second and even more bloody international disaster.

## Chronology

<b>1915</b>	Council of National Defense established	<b>1918</b>	Armistice ends World War I
<b>1917</b>	Germany resumes unrestricted submarine warfare Zimmermann note United States enters World War I Espionage Act of 1917	<b>1919</b>	Paris Peace Conference and Treaty of Versailles Wilson's pro-League tour and collapse Eighteenth Amendment (prohibition of alcohol) passed
<b>1918</b>	Wilson proposes the Fourteen Points Sedition Act of 1918 Battle of Château-Thierry Second Battle of the Marne Meuse-Argonne offensive	<b>1920</b>	Final Senate defeat of Versailles Treaty Nineteenth Amendment (woman suffrage) passed Harding defeats Cox for presidency

## VARYING VIEWPOINTS

### Woodrow Wilson: Realist or Idealist?

As the first president to take the United States into a foreign war, Woodrow Wilson was obliged to make a systematic case to the American people to justify his unprecedented European intervention. His ideas have largely defined the character of American foreign policy ever since—for better or worse.

“Wilsonianism” comprises three closely related principles: (1) the era of American isolation from world affairs has irretrievably ended; (2) the United States must infuse its own founding political and economic ideas—including democracy, the rule of law, free trade, and national self-determination (or anti-colonialism)—into the international order; and (3) American influence can eventually steer the world away from rivalry and warfare toward a cooperative and peaceful international system, maintained by the League of Nations or, later, the United Nations.

Whether that Wilsonian vision constitutes hard-nosed realism or starry-eyed idealism has excited scholarly debate for nearly a century. “Realists,” such as George F. Kennan and Henry Kissinger, insist Wilson was anything but. They criticize the president as a naive, impractical dreamer who failed

to understand that the international order is, and always will be, an anarchic, unruly arena, outside the rule of law, where only military force can effectively protect the nation's security. In a sharp critique in his 1950 study, *American Diplomacy*, Kennan condemned Wilson's vision as “moralism-legalism.” In this view Wilson dangerously threatened to sacrifice American self-interests on the altar of his admirable but ultimately unworkable ideas.

Wilson's defenders, including conspicuously his principal biographer, Arthur S. Link, argue that Wilson's idealism was in fact a kind of higher realism, recognizing as it did that armed conflict on the scale of World War I could never again be tolerated and that some framework of peaceful international relations simply had to be found. The development of nuclear weapons in a later generation gave this argument still more force. This “liberal” defense of Wilsonianism derives from the centuries-old liberal faith that, given sufficient intelligence and willpower, the world can be made into a better place. Realists reject this notion of moral and political progress as hopelessly innocent, especially as applied to international affairs.

Some leftist scholars, such as William Appleman Williams, have argued that Wilson was in fact a realist of another kind: a subtle and wily imperialist whose stirring rhetoric cloaked a grasping ambition to make the United States the world's dominant economic power. Sometimes called "the imperialism of free trade," this strategy allegedly sought to decolonialize the world and open up international commerce not for the good of peoples elsewhere, but to create a system in which American economic might would irresistibly prevail. This criticism itself rests on a naive assumption that international relations are a "zero-sum game," in which one nation's gain must necessarily be another nation's loss. In a Wilsonian world, Wilson's defenders claim, *all* parties would be better off; altruism and self-interest are not mutually exclusive.

Still other scholars, especially John Milton Cooper, Jr., emphasize the absence of economic factors in shaping Wilson's diplomacy. Isolationism, so this argument goes, held such sway over American thinking precisely because the United States had such a puny financial stake abroad—no hard American economic interests were mortally threatened in 1917, nor for a long time thereafter. In these circumstances Wilson—and the Wilsonians who came after him, such as Franklin D. Roosevelt—had no choice but to appeal to abstract ideals and high principles. The "idealistic" Wilsonian strain in American diplomacy, in this view, may be an unavoidable heritage of America's historically isolated situation. If so, it was Wilson's genius to make practical use of those ideas in his bid for popular support of his diplomacy.

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For further reading, see page A21 of the Appendix. For web resources, go to <http://college.hmco.com>.

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