



Sinking of the Linda Blanche out of Liverpool, by Willy Stöwer, 1915. Source: Wikimedia Commons. Though this German depiction exaggerates the ship's size, U-21 did sink Linda Blanche in January 1915. This same U boat sank the British cruiser HMS Pathfinder in September 1914 near Scotland off the Firth of Forth, making it the first modern submarine to sink a ship with a torpedo.

THE GREAT WAR & THE DAWN OF THE AMERICAN CENTURY

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By the spring of 1917, the most advanced nations on earth had spent nearly three agonizing years destroying themselves in a frenzy of blood-letting never seen within the boundaries of Europe.

The United States watched, with bewilderment and anxiety, as a “Great War” among

the European states broke out in August 1914. What began as a diplomatic kerfuffle between Serbia and Austria-Hungary quickly metastasized into a global conflict, ultimately involving dozens of nations. What was supposed to be a short, tidy campaign devolved into a ferocious stalemate, a war of attrition, with no end in sight.



America's decision to enter the First World War on behalf of the Allied forces, in April 1917, shattered the wretched status quo. The nation's economic and martial resources—the US military would swell to five million men within 18 months—would make a German victory impossible and hasten the end of the conflict.

Vera Brittain, an English nurse working in a London hospital, remembered seeing “a large contingent of soldiers pass by on the main road.” She noted “an unusual quality of bold vigor in their stride,” which “caused me to stare at them with puzzled interest.” Brittain didn't recognize these fresh troops:

They looked larger than ordinary men; their tall, straight figures were in vivid contrast

to the under-sized armies of pale recruits to which we were grown accustomed...Had yet another regiment been conjured out of our depleted Dominions? I wondered, watching them move with such rhythm, such dignity, such serene consciousness of self-respect. But I knew the colonial troops so well, and these were different; they were assured where the Australians were aggressive, self-possessed where the New Zealanders were turbulent.

Brittain then heard an excited cry from a group of nurses behind her: “Look! Look! Here are the Americans!” The arrival of American troops on the European continent also signaled the ascendance of the United States as the leading democratic power in the West. Prodded by a visionary American president, the entire international order would be transformed. The American century was about to begin.

This new American century, however, would begin under the political leadership of Woodrow Wilson, whose approach to international relations was a mix of sloppy moralism, liberal internationalism, and Kantian utopianism. Although understandably appalled by the results of *realpolitik*, Wilson sought to replace the European “balance of power” with a “community of power,” a union of democracies devoted to peacemaking as a transcendent political ideal. The result was a League of Nations that lacked both the will and the capacity to respond effectively to international aggression.

BEATING SWORDS INTO PLOWSHARES

There was nothing inevitable about US intervention in the First World War. Indeed, there was absolutely no possibility that the United States would quickly enter the conflict. For over a century, Americans had tried to avoid the political intrigues of Europe. The Napoleonic Wars, the Crimean War, the Franco-Prussian War, and now this latest outbreak of war—it all seemed to confirm George Washington's counsel in his farewell address to avoid “entangling alliances” at virtually any cost. Hence the US ambassador to Great Britain, summarizing the American

mindset: “Again and ever I thank God for the Atlantic Ocean.”

Woodrow Wilson’s first annual address to Congress, on December 2, 1913—the first time a president personally delivered his State of the Union address—revealed his lawyerly approach to peacemaking:

More and more readily each decade do the nations manifest their willingness to bind themselves by solemn treaty to the processes of peace, the processes of frankness and fair concession. So far the United States has stood at the front of such negotiations. She will, I earnestly hope and confidently believe, give fresh proof of her sincere adherence to the cause of international friendship by ratifying the several treaties of arbitration awaiting renewal by the Senate.

Wilson went on to boast that 31 nations, representing four-fifths of the world’s population, had agreed “in principle” to sign bilateral treaties with the United States to resolve disputes diplomatically. If diplomacy failed, the treaties instructed that all disagreements “shall be publicly analyzed, discussed, and reported upon by a tribunal chosen by the parties before either nation determines its course of action.” In other words, Wilson imagined that a “cooling off” period, legalistically imposed, could overcome nationalistic war fever. “There is no record,” writes Henry Kissinger, “that any such treaty was ever applied to a concrete issue.”¹

Less than a year later, Europe, and much of the world, would be at war. Wilson immediately declared American neutrality toward all belligerents in the conflict, and instructed US citizens to do likewise in their innermost thoughts.

Political neutrality is one thing; however, economic policy is another. In the first six months of the war, US bankers extended \$80 million in credits to Britain, France, and their allies. America was also trading with Germany, but the British blockade of northern Europe made it difficult for the United States to offer loans or credits to the

Central Powers. Additionally, there was the sale of armaments: Between August 1914 and March 1917, America sold \$2.2 billion in arms to Great Britain and the Allied powers. Almost overnight, the United States became a creditor nation—and would emerge as the strongest economic power on earth by the end of the war.

“HE KEPT US OUT OF WAR”

If President Wilson wanted a pretext for entering the European conflict, it arrived on May 7, 1915, when a German U-boat torpedoed the British-owned *Lusitania*. The luxury passenger ship sunk within 18 minutes, taking 1,119 of the 1,924 passengers with it. One hundred and twenty-eight Americans were among the dead—including women and infants. There were lurid newspaper accounts of people struggling to get into lifeboats, of mothers being separated from their babies, of lifeless bodies floating in the water. Americans were stunned and outraged at this “murder on the high seas.” Although support for “military preparedness” increased, there was no public clamoring for war.

Instead, Wilson got assurances from Germany that such atrocities would not happen again. “Peace is the healing and elevating influence of the world,” he said. “There is such a thing as a nation being so right that it does not need to convince others by force that it is right.” British officers, who were dying by the dozens every month to combat German aggression, mocked the American president: British artillery shells that failed to explode were called “Wilsons.”

Less than three weeks later, on May 27, Wilson spoke before a crowd of 2,000 supporters at Washington, D.C.’s New Willard Hotel, assuring them that an era of “more wholesome diplomacy” was at hand. America was assuming responsibility in helping to secure the peace of the world, he said, and a new political organization was needed to bring it about.

“So sincerely do I believe in these things that I am sure that I speak the mind and



Flower of Death—The Bursting of a Heavy Shell—Not as It Looks, but as It Feels and Sounds and Smells, by Claggett Wilson, circa 1919. Source: Smithsonian American Art Museum.

wish of the people of America when I say that the United States is willing to become a partner in any feasible association of nations formed in order to realize these objects and make them safe against violations,” Wilson said. “God grant that the dawn of that day of frank dealing and settled peace, concord, and cooperation may be near at hand!” The room burst into applause, with the liberal press comparing the speech to the Declaration of Independence and the Gettysburg Address.²

In the 1916 presidential election, Wilson’s campaign slogan—“he kept us out of war”—helped him to narrowly defeat Republican Charles Hughes. The president made several offers—sometimes clumsy and ill-advised—to mediate the conflict. All were rejected by the Allies and Central Powers. Yet Wilson’s effort exceeded anything America had ever attempted in European affairs. For the first time in its history, the United States was trying to negotiate an end to a major European

war. “Clearly it reflected the sense that the Europeans were incapable of managing their own, and by extension, the world’s affairs,” writes Harvard historian Akira Iriye, “and that without some leadership role played by the United States, there could be no stable international order.”³

PEACE WITHOUT VICTORY

The opening months of January 1917 tested American neutrality to the breaking point. On January 21, Germany declared unrestricted submarine warfare on all shipping headed for Britain, neutral or belligerent. The next day, addressing the Senate, Wilson made a final appeal for ending the war: a plea to the warring parties to give up the objective of military victory, enter into a peace agreement, and establish a new community of nations based on democratic principles. The end of the conflict must be founded upon “a peace without victory.”



His Bunkie, by William James Aylward, circa 1918. Source: National Museum of American History. Aylward was one of eight official artists to be deployed with the American Expeditionary Forces (AEF).

I am seeking only to face realities and to face them without soft concealments. Victory would mean peace forced upon the loser, a victor's terms imposed upon the vanquished. It would be accepted in humiliation, under duress, at an intolerable sacrifice, and would leave a sting, a resentment, a bitter memory upon which terms of peace would rest, not permanently, but only as upon quicksand. Only a peace between equals can last. Only a peace the very principle of which is equality and a common participation in a common benefit. The right state of mind, the right feeling between nations, is as necessary for a lasting peace as is the just settlement of vexed questions of territory or of racial and national allegiance.

Historians debate whether Wilson was blithely indifferent to the nature of the European conflict or a prophet doing battle with the spirit of his age. Nevertheless, after two and half years of industrialized slaughter, Wilson's proposal didn't stand a chance of being accepted by the European powers. The British believed that, unlike the United States, they had been sacrificing the best of their youth to defend the principles upon which Wilson was pontificating. Moreover, the "right feeling between nations" would not be achieved after so much suffering and loss. The French leader, George Clemenceau, was characteristically frank about Wilson's aims: "Never before has any political assembly heard so fine a sermon on what human beings might be capable of accomplishing if only they weren't human."⁴

In the end, Germany's political and military leadership—determined to win the war and impose its will upon the Continent—rendered Wilson's plea an irrelevance. When the conflict began, German author Thomas Mann, a future Nobel Prize winner, expressed the nationalist mood. The war, he said, was "a purification, a liberation, an enormous hope. The German soul is opposed to the pacifist ideal of civilization, for is not peace an element of civil corruption?"⁵ Thus, in December 1916, the German Reichstag approved an Auxiliary Service Law, which effectively conscripted every German male between the ages of 17 and 60. Men not sent to the front would be assigned to a munitions factory or some other

industry to help the war effort. Like no other nation in European history, Germany embraced the concept of total war.

In pursuit of this goal, Germany made two of its most fateful mistakes in relation to the United States. The first was the decision to resume unrestricted submarine warfare, a direct threat to America's economic interests. The second blunder was the Zimmerman telegram: an absurd plan to support a Mexican war against the United States. In February 1917, British naval intelligence intercepted and decoded the cable to Germany's ambassador to Mexico City. The British government quickly shared its contents with the US ambassador in London. Within five days the telegram was released to the press. When Wilson called his cabinet together, everyone favored war.

A WORLD MADE "SAFE FOR DEMOCRACY"

On April 2, 1917, the president asked Congress for a declaration of war. "The world must be made safe for democracy," he announced. "Its peace must be planted upon the tested foundations of political liberty." Wilson again made the case for a new international system to replace the old order of Europe:

A steadfast concert for peace can never be maintained except by a partnership of democratic nations. No autocratic government can be trusted to keep faith within it or observe its covenants. It must be a league of honor, a partnership of opinion. Intrigue would eat its vitals away; the plottings of inner circles who could plan what they would and render account to no one would be a corruption seated at its very heart. Only free peoples can hold their purpose and their honor steady to a common end and prefer the interests of mankind to any narrow interest of their own.

Under Wilson's vision, international peace and security would not rest upon a "balance of power," but on democratic states binding themselves to treaties extolling universal moral laws. Foreign policy would not be driven by national self-interest, but instead by a sense of universal brotherhood. International disputes would not be resolved by force, but

by diplomacy, based on reason, negotiation, and arbitration.

In Wilson's famous "Fourteen Points" speech, delivered on January 8, 1918, these ideals were taken to their logical conclusion. There were to be no private agreements among nations, but rather negotiations conducted "always frankly and in the public view." There would be no new arms race; instead, spending on national defense would be reduced "to the lowest point consistent with domestic safety."

The most contentious and problematic idea in Wilson's speech, expressed in articles 5, 10, and 12, is often neglected: his insistence that the empires of Europe and Asia abandon their colonial holdings and allow their ethnic minorities to choose their own political path. Wilson imagined "a free, open-minded, and absolutely impartial adjustment of all colonial claims." Ethnic nationalities under colonial rule, he said, must be granted "an absolutely unmolested opportunity of autonomous development." With the growing strength and prestige of the United States behind him, Wilson was promising nothing less than an absolute right to self-determination.

Many were ready to take him at his word. US mobilization began immediately, and by December 1917, 200,000 Americans were in Europe. Within 18 months, roughly 2 million men joined the American Expeditionary Forces in Europe, mostly along the Western Front. The United States was fully committed to the conflict.

In September 1918, 600,000 American troops helped launch the last great offensive of the war—the largest in US history—and among the deadliest for the United States. More than 26,000 American soldiers were killed in the battle, including many from the 91st Division, where the author's grandfather, Michael Loconte, was deployed as a private. Their orders were unambiguous: "Divisions will advance independently of each other, pushing the attack with utmost vigor and regardless of cost." Their success is credited with crushing German hopes for victory, producing the Armistice on November 11, 1918.

"America now had one of the largest and most powerful armies in Europe," writes historian Paul Johnson, "and could convincingly claim that it had played a determining role in ending Germany's ability to continue the war." More than that, the United States had entered upon the world stage at a moment of global catastrophe with the purpose of bringing the catastrophe to a decent and honorable conclusion. In this, under Wilson's leadership, the nation made a contribution to world peace that only it could make.

Wilson's vision for a new world order, his Fourteen Points speech, was widely circulated in European capitals. It became a kind of moral compass for millions of Europeans, Africans, and Asians. "They are the principles of mankind," he told the US Congress, "and they must prevail." They would not prevail, of course, but many in Europe were not prepared to believe it. All over the Continent there were parks, squares, streets and railway stations bearing Wilson's name. Posters declared, "We Want a Wilson Peace." Italians knelt in front of his image. In France, the left-wing newspaper *L'Humanite* devoted an issue to praising the American president. Nationalist movements from Korea to Arabia clung to the Fourteen Points as their lodestar.⁶

Thus when the American president arrived in Paris on December 13, 1918, to hammer out a peace treaty, the United States was at the height of its influence and prestige. Throngs of admirers were there to greet him. They filled the streets, hung from windows, cheered from rooftops. "He was transfigured in the eyes of men," writes H.G. Wells. "He ceased to be a common statesman; he became a Messiah."

Many wanted to believe that, under Wilson's enlightened leadership, democratic ideals of equality and self-government would guide the nations of the world. After a war that had devastated so many lives and national economies, Europeans longed for a redemptive outcome. Wilson, as the leader of the only democracy that seemed capable of negotiating a just and lasting peace, held out the prospect of a new global order. Historian Michael Kazin writes that the American president seemed to believe



Symphony of Terror, by Claggett Wilson, circa 1919. Source: Smithsonian American Art Museum.

that “well-meaning Christians could transform the world into a polite, even brotherly place.” Margaret MacMillan summarizes his influence thus: “Wilson kept alive the hope that human society, despite the evidence, was getting better, that nations would one day live in harmony.”

TRIUMPH & TRAGEDY

Although Wilson would get his “league of honor,” the participating nations would not live in harmony for long. When the Treaty of Versailles was signed on June 28, 1919, the leaders of 44 countries joined the newly

created League of Nations. The League’s charter, in important respects, echoed Wilsonian principles: the elimination of armaments “to the lowest point consistent with national safety,” arbitration to resolve international disputes, a cooling-off period during the interim, the preservation of peace as a binding moral commitment. Nevertheless, unchecked aggression over the next two decades would bring the League into widespread disrepute. By 1939, Europe was again at war.

Conventional wisdom blames the harsh terms of German surrender stipulated in the Treaty of Versailles—widely known as “that wicked



The Menin Road, by Paul Nash, 1919. Imperial War Museums. Source: Google Art Project.

treaty”—as the guarantor of a second world war. Wilson offered the world a way out of its troubles, we are told, but the European powers wanted vengeance and a return to power politics. Americans, misled by an isolationist Congress, rejected Wilson’s vision and refused to join the League.

There are, however, problems with this interpretation of history, problems that go much deeper than a treaty or an international organization. Wilson proclaimed the “destruction of every arbitrary power anywhere” as an uncompromising goal of American participation. He repeatedly assured his audiences that once the Kaiser and the other “autocratic powers” of the world were toppled, newly liberated citizens would create self-governing democracies. This was the “war to end war,” the “culminating and final war for human liberty.” The world would be rebuilt on “American principles.” Wilson’s political progressivism, his liberal religious views of human potential, his trust in the power of democratic ideals to transform international relations—at times it all smacked of utopianism.

Assuming that all reasonable people desired peace, the American president extrapolated

that all civilized nations would share the same goal: the perpetual peace dreamed of by Immanuel Kant. He helped design an international order built on this idea. “This was the sort of peace you got when you allowed war hysteria and impractical idealism to lie down together in your mind, like the lion and the lamb,” concluded the US diplomat George Kennan, “when you indulged yourself in the colossal conceit of thinking that you could suddenly make international life over into what you believed to be your own image.”⁷

All of that may be right. Yet the enormity of the First World War—it’s sustained assault on the moral and religious ideals of the West—created challenges that no statesman could overcome. “Injuries were wrought to the structure of human society which a century will not efface,” observed Winston Churchill, a participant in the war. “The war really did change *everything*: not just borders, not just governments and the fate of nations, but the way people have seen the world and themselves ever since,” writes G.J. Meyer. “It became a kind of hole in time, leaving the postwar world permanently disconnected from everything that had come before.”⁸

Into this hole—this vortex of suffering, terror, destitution, and disillusionment—stepped the United States. Historians such as Michael Kazin argue that American intervention was a mistake, that it “foreclosed the possibility of a negotiated peace” among the belligerents.⁹ Such a revisionist view, however, ignores the determination of Germany and its allies to dominate the Continent: Almost up until the Armistice, more British, French, and American troops were being killed in combat than Germans.¹⁰ The revisionist view rests on the fantastical idea that additional years of remorseless slaughter would have produced a better outcome for European civilization.

Whatever the aims of other nations engaged in the conflict, America’s motives for waging war were honorable, its objectives humane. Even if the United States could have produced the most equitable peace treaty imaginable, it probably would have been resented by a defeated and demoralized Germany. Even the most generous treaty would have been exploited by an embittered anti-Semite, a brooding and hate-filled demagogue by the name of Adolf Hitler.

Perhaps, as George Kennan wrote, the peace at Versailles “had the tragedies of the future written into it as by the devil’s own hand.” But the human condition, by its nature, is crippled by a tragedy of its own making: a disaster that is both moral and spiritual. Individuals, consumed by the lust to dominate, by the demonic, will always appear on

the world stage. No paper treaty, no matter how enlightened, can negate the Will to Power.

American involvement in what Churchill called “the world crisis” of the Great War would not prevent the nations of Europe from being overwhelmed by new hatreds in another global conflict. This would become the task of a future generation of statesmen: men and women, awakened to the danger, resolute in their calling, and moved not by visions of power, but by moral purpose. By joining its fate to that of Europe a century ago, the United States can be credited with helping to preserve enough of Western civilization to make the appearance of such statesmen possible, before a hateful and hideous gathering storm could sweep them all away. P

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(Endnotes)

- 1 Henry Kissinger, *World Order*, (Penguin Books: 2014), 258.
- 2 Walter McDougall, *Promised Land, Crusader State*, (Houghton Mifflin Company: 1997), 122-123.
- 3 Akira Iriye, *The New Cambridge History of American Foreign Relations*, Vol. 3 (Cambridge University Press: 2015), 30.
- 4 McDougall, 135.
- 5 G.J. Meyer, *A World Undone* (Bantam Dell: 2007), 470.
- 6 MacMillan, *Paris 1919* (Random House: 2003), 15.
- 7 George Kennan, *American Diplomacy* (University of Chicago Press: 1984), 69.
- 8 Meyer, 469.
- 9 Michael Kazin, *War Against War: The American Fight for Peace, 1914-1918* (New York: 2017)
- 10 Meyer, 600.