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Summary and Keywords

World War I profoundly affected the United States. It led to an expansion of America’s permanent military establishment, a foreign policy focused on reforming world politics, and American preeminence in international finance. In domestic affairs, America’s involvement in the war exacerbated class, racial, and ethnic conflict. It also heightened both the ethos of voluntarism in progressive ideology and the progressive desire to step up state intervention in the economy and society. These dual impulses had a coercive thrust that sometimes advanced progressive goals of a more equal, democratic society and sometimes repressed any perceived threat to a unified war effort. Ultimately the combination of progressive and repressive coercion undermined support for the Democratic Party, shifting the nation’s politics in a conservative direction as it entered the 1920s.

Keywords: United States, World War I, progressivism, Progressive Era, internationalism, Democratic Party, Woodrow Wilson, voluntarism, armed forces, civil liberties

America’s direct involvement in World War I lasted only nineteen months, from April 1917 to November 1918. But the war nevertheless profoundly affected the United States. It led to an expansion of America’s permanent military establishment, to a foreign policy focused on reforming world politics, and to American preeminence in international finance. In domestic affairs, America’s involvement in the war exacerbated class, racial, and ethnic conflict. It also heightened both the ethos of voluntarism in progressive ideology and the progressive desire to step up state intervention in the economy and society. These dual impulses had a coercive thrust that sometimes advanced progressive goals of a more equal, democratic society and sometimes repressed any perceived threat to a unified war effort. Ultimately the combination of progressive and repressive coercion undermined support for the Democratic Party, shifting the nation’s politics in a conservative direction as it entered the 1920s.
International Affairs

Neutrality Policy

The war’s impact upon U.S. foreign and military policy at first seemed minimal. Consistent with America’s traditional aloofness from European political affairs, President Woodrow Wilson proclaimed American neutrality toward the conflict immediately after it broke out. The overwhelming majority of the American people saw the war as a European problem having little to do with the United States; even if elements of the public sympathized with the Allies or the Central Powers (often along ethnic lines), few perceived any vital U.S. interests at stake in the war’s outcome. For most Americans, the war impressed them either as a humanitarian disaster—hundreds of thousands contributed to relief efforts administered by the American Red Cross—or as an opportunity to make money through the export of supplies for the fighting.¹

This desire to profit from the war—a desire magnified by the depressed state of the economy in 1914—soon led to tensions between the United States and the belligerents. Each group of combatants tried to prevent the other from importing supplies from overseas. As they implemented this policy, both sides broke international law. Britain did so by trying to confiscate all neutral trade headed toward Germany rather than seizing only internationally recognized war contraband; Germany illegally used its submarines to attack merchant and passenger ships without warning. Wilson protested against the maritime policies of both nations, but the incidents arising from Germany’s submarine warfare proved to be much more serious than those resulting from Britain’s blockade. On May 7, 1915, a German U-boat sank the British passenger liner Lusitania, killing almost 1,200 people, including 128 American citizens. This attack, and others that followed in late 1915 and early 1916, severely strained U.S.-German relations. Only Germany’s pledge in May 1916 to follow international law concerning cruiser warfare so long as the United States got Britain to modify its blockade prevented a break between Washington and Berlin.

As frictions developed with the belligerents, an intense debate over national security affairs began in the United States. On one side, conservative businessmen and professionals led by ex-president Theodore Roosevelt and the National Security League called for an increase in America’s military “preparedness.” This involved expanding the size of the army and navy and, most prominently, establishing a compulsory program of universal military training. Although they sympathized with the Allies, preparedness advocates did not call for the United States to enter the war. They instead primarily tied their defense program to a need for America to protect itself against dangers arising from postwar economic rivalries. Desperate for resources, the great powers after the war might invade the eastern United States, sensational preparedness books argued in 1915, and lay waste to New York and Washington. More generally, most preparedness
advocates linked their program to patriotism, American prestige, and the uplift of American manhood. Roosevelt especially depicted military training as a way to teach citizenship, Americanize immigrants, increase worker efficiency, and advance democracy, as all classes would have an equal obligation to serve.²

Peace progressives denounced the preparedness movement. They drew support from agrarian progressives, social reformers, and socialists, and their leaders included William Jennings Bryan, Jane Addams, and Max Eastman. Appalled by the destruction and suffering caused by the war, they wanted the United States to join with other neutral nations to offer “continuous mediation” of the conflict, without waiting for either group of belligerents to request it. Preparedness would undermine this goal by compromising America’s image as an advocate of peace. Peace progressives also saw no reason for military increases; to them, America’s isolated geographic position made it safe from attack regardless of what happened in the war. Finally, peace progressives believed that the enemies of domestic reform—munitions makers, Wall Street bankers, and Old Guard politicians—stood behind the preparedness movement. A larger military establishment, they argued, meant higher taxes for ordinary Americans, more forces that could be used to crush strikes, and the rise of an authoritarian military caste threatening to republican institutions. Far from advancing democracy, a larger military meant “militarism”—the erosion of America’s free way of life by a corporate-military oligarchy.³

President Wilson’s response to the war incorporated elements of both the preparedness and antipreparedness positions. To him, the impact of the war on the United States—the development of the preparedness movement, ethnic divisions over neutrality policy, the export boom in war supplies, and the tensions with the belligerents over neutral rights—demonstrated that whatever isolation America had enjoyed from international power politics was over. Even if the United States managed to stay out of this war, Wilson doubted it would be so lucky in the future. By early 1915, he therefore resolved to reform the international system to rid it of power politics and minimize the chances of future warfare. To accomplish this goal, Wilson wanted to mediate an end to the war on the basis of a “peace without victory,” reasoning that if neither group of belligerents gained anything from the fighting, they would be more willing to embrace a new world system founded on collective security, arms reduction, equal rights for large and small states, non-discrimination in international trade, and freedom of the seas. Maintaining American neutrality was crucial to convincing the Europeans to accept Wilson’s mediation, but over time the president found it hard to remain impartial toward the belligerents. Fearful that a victorious Germany might challenge the Monroe Doctrine and hopeful that British leaders were open to his ideas of international reform, Wilson issued only minimal protests against Britain’s maritime system. Rising U.S. trade with Britain and France reinforced this decision. Germany’s submarine warfare also shocked Wilson’s moral sensibility, resulting in much tougher protests to Berlin than Wilson ever sent to London. To underscore his threats to the Germans, Wilson even embraced a moderate preparedness program in late 1915. Still, the president never gave up his hope of
mediating an end to the war, and, shortly after his re-election in late 1916, he launched a major peace effort.4

War and Peacemaking

Wilson’s peace bid did not receive much of a hearing in Europe. Seeing little to lose by risking conflict with a United States that seemed to be a de facto ally of Britain, Germany decided to commence all-out submarine warfare in the Atlantic in early 1917, which led to the sinking of several U.S. merchant ships in March. These actions, along with German intrigue with Mexico revealed in the infamous Zimmerman Telegram, led Wilson to believe that Germany’s leaders wanted conquest, not a lasting peace, and were willing to attack Americans directly to accomplish their aims. Failing to respond forcefully to the submarine menace, Wilson further perceived, would destroy his credibility with the Allies and allow them to disregard his views on peace terms. This prospect especially disturbed the president since he thought the Allies had gained the upper hand in the war. With these calculations in mind, Wilson appeared before a joint session of Congress on April 2, 1917, and asked lawmakers to recognize a state of war with Germany, declaring that “the world must be made safe for democracy.” Over the outcry of peace progressives, the Senate voted 82–6 for war; the House of Representatives agreed by a vote of 373–50.5

Once in the war, Wilson unsurprisingly no longer favored a peace without victory. The president now thought that international reform depended in part upon weakening Germany’s power and making it pay a penalty for the war. On January 8, 1918, Wilson suggested such terms in his Fourteen Points Address to the Senate. Although vague, his revised war aims implied that Germany and its allies would lose territory and have to pay some amount of war reparations. Hoping to blunt Bolshevik Russia’s denunciations of imperialistic Allied war aims and to appeal to German democrats who opposed a war of conquest, Wilson also reiterated the principles for a new world order and called for a collective security organization—a league of peace—to uphold the peace. At this point, Wilson still wanted Germany included in this new system. Since he did not trust the existing autocratic government of Germany, he hoped, and publicly stated, that as Germany’s armies were defeated, its people would turn against their government, democratize it, and accept the Fourteen Points as the basis for peace negotiations. Peace talks with a democratized Germany would facilitate its reconciliation with its enemies and allow for its integration into the new world system. If Germany did not democratize, Wilson would not negotiate with it over the meaning of the Fourteen Points. Even in that event, Wilson anticipated advancing the aim of reconciliation—and thus the project of international reform—by blocking Allied territorial and economic demands he thought would embitter the Germans.6

As it turned out, the peace process ending the war proceeded along lines that largely met with Wilson’s approval. In October 1918, with their army in retreat in northern France, the Germans created a more democratically representative government and appealed to Wilson for an armistice and peace negotiations based on the Fourteen Points. Suspicious
of German motives, doubting the genuineness of Germany’s democratic reforms, and under pressure from Republicans to secure an outright surrender from Berlin, Wilson insisted that the armistice terms leave Germany militarily prostrate on the Western Front. To leave the door open for reconciliation, however, the president supported only a limited occupation of German territory. Similarly, at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919, Wilson excluded the Germans from the draft treaty negotiations and agreed to terms that weakened and punished Germany. Simultaneously, he successfully opposed provisions, such as the detachment of the Rhineland from Germany, that he thought unfair or unduly provocative to the Germans. He also got the “covenant” of the League of Nations incorporated into the first section of the treaty. Germany was not allowed immediate membership, but would get in once it carried out its treaty obligations. To Wilson, the Versailles Treaty might not have been ideal, but overall it provided a sound basis for creating a new world order free from power politics.\(^7\)

Both the treaty terms dealing with Germany and the covenant of the League provoked intense controversy in the United States. Peace progressives charged that the treaty provisions designed to weaken and punish Germany contradicted the goal of ending power politics. The settlement, they argued, was shaped not by the Fourteen Points but by the secret treaties of the Allies, and so it aimed to advance Allied imperialism while permanently destroying Germany as a great power. The League, from this point of view, was simply an alliance against the Germans. In contrast, conservative internationalists centered in the Republican Party had little problem with the peace terms, applauding them for weakening the Germans and strengthening the Allies. But they doubted the practicality of the League. Most importantly, they questioned the premise of collective security that nations were so interdependent that they each had a vital interest in stopping conflict anywhere in the world it occurred. League members would either ignore their collective security obligations in a crisis, conservatives like Henry Cabot Lodge predicted, or, if member states acted, would find themselves intervening in disputes having no relation to their interests. Approaching the treaty from different angles, many peace progressives and most conservatives reached the same conclusion: the United States should either reject the treaty altogether or approve it only with reservations exempting the United States from key parts of the League covenant.\(^8\)

Wilson could not overcome the combined strength of these forces against the treaty. His best chance for victory lay in accepting reservations to U.S. membership in the League, but he refused, believing that to do so would cripple the League’s effectiveness. He instead went on an extended speaking tour across the country in September 1919, hoping to whip up public pressure on the Senate to approve the treaty. As he delivered forty speeches over twenty-one days, Wilson’s health deteriorated. On September 26 he collapsed and had to return to Washington; a few days later, he suffered a massive stroke. The president recovered to some degree by early November 1919, but his political judgment was impaired. He continued to demand unreserved ratification of the treaty even though the votes to sustain this position did not exist. Most Democrats in the Senate
loyally followed their president, however, which doomed the treaty to defeat in ratification votes taken in November 1919 and March 1920.³

Despite America’s failure to ratify the Versailles Treaty and join the League of Nations, Wilson’s approach to the war had lasting consequences for U.S. foreign relations. His preparedness program of 1916 combined with U.S. involvement in the war led to a significant expansion of the American peacetime defense establishment. The National Guard became the army’s official reserve force and came under much greater federal supervision; a Reserve Officer Training Corps was established at universities; the army itself won approval for a new peacetime ceiling of 280,000 officers and men, up from its prewar strength of around 100,000; and the United States committed itself, in principle, to a navy “second to none.” More significantly, American lending to the Allies, including both private bank credits and, after April 1917, massive U.S. government loans totaling over ten billion dollars, transformed the United States into the world’s dominant financial power. Equally important, Wilson’s obsession with international reform left Americans with little sense of their nation’s specific security interests in Europe or Asia. Republican leaders who supported some sort of “entente” between the United States and the Allies to uphold peace in Europe found their ideas sidelined in the debate over the League. In the 1920s, most U.S. leaders focused not on America’s security stakes abroad but on how best to promote international reform while avoiding entanglement in European political matters. By the 1930s, to be sure, interest in international reform faded and isolationism dominated American foreign policy. But after World War II began, Wilson’s vision of collective security—including its assumption that any war, anywhere, threatened everyone—returned to the center of policy debates. As the United States entered a new era of war and cold war, it did so guided by strategic conceptions associated more with Wilson than anyone else.⁴

Domestic Affairs

Economic Mobilization

World War I had a profound impact on America’s domestic life. At the time the United States entered the conflict in April 1917, its total land forces numbered around 335,000 men, and it had relatively few merchant ships and anti-submarine craft. Yet by early June 1917, after Allied officials requested American men for the front, War Department planners aimed to send over one million men to France within a year, with more likely to follow. Fulfilling this plan—and meeting the continuing needs of the Allies for munitions, financial aid, and food—posed enormous challenges for the Wilson administration. The economy was already running at close to full capacity as a result of the boom triggered by war-related exports that began in early 1915; America’s gross domestic product, indeed, barely grew at all from 1916 to 1919. With output failing to keep pace with wartime..
demands, prices roughly doubled from 1914 to 1919. This inflation, along with tight labor markets, contributed to waves of strikes beginning in 1917 as workers demanded wage increases. The economic boom also made businesses reluctant to shift from consumer goods to war production, which was difficult to organize in any event because the U.S. military had an antiquated system for procuring supplies and developing weapons. America’s entry into the war, moreover, was not very popular. Many agrarian progressives voted against the war, and over one hundred House members opposed conscription; the Socialist Party, which garnered around 6 percent of the presidential vote in 1912, overwhelmingly opposed the war, as did members of the more radical Industrial Workers of the World (IWW); and millions of German and Irish Americans hated the Allies. Achieving a unified national effort to defeat Germany would thus be no easy task.

To surmount this challenge, the Wilson administration in general hoped to appeal to the public’s patriotism and invoke a spirit of voluntary cooperation between private citizens and the government. In economic matters, this outlook reflected President Wilson’s desire to avoid divisive confrontations with business that might disrupt production and his assumption that corporate elites knew best how to mobilize the country for war. For their part, corporate leaders such as Bernard Baruch and Robert Lovett feared that government management of the economy would undermine its efficiency. After years of progressive agitation against big business, they also wanted to rehabilitate the image of corporate America by demonstrating its willingness to support the public interest over private greed. Voluntary cooperation between business and government could at the same time validate the existing structure of corporate capitalism and advance the values of scientific management, standardization, and rationalization they associated with progress. More broadly, an ethic of voluntarism, expressed through countless civic and social associations, permeated American culture and society. The existence of this vast infrastructure of voluntarism no doubt reinforced the Wilson administration’s faith that it could avoid using state coercion to mobilize the United States for battle.

In practice, however, voluntary cooperation characterized America’s war mobilization only to a limited degree. State power mattered more. In some areas of the economy, the administration either established enterprises that directly competed with privately held firms or temporarily took over existing companies. The government got into the shipping business (the Emergency Fleet Corporation), housing (the United States Housing Corporation), insurance (the War Risk Insurance Bureau for shippers), banking (the War Finance Corporation, to finance capital improvements), hydroelectric power (Muscle Shoals/Wilson Dam, for manufacturing nitrates for explosives), and armor plate manufacturing. To address transportation bottlenecks, the administration seized most of the nation’s railroads; it also took over telegraphs, the Smith and Wesson arms plant, and the American radio industry. All of these ventures represented not voluntary cooperation between private firms and the government but instead experiments in “state capitalism,” a new form of direct government intervention in the economy.
Where the government did not compete with or take control over private enterprises to spur economic mobilization, it deployed patriotic propaganda, profit incentives, regulations, and coercion to get what it wanted. The biggest propaganda agency was the Committee on Public Information (CPI), headed up by progressive journalist George Creel. Enlisting advertisers, academics, artists, filmmakers, and seventy-five thousand volunteer speakers, the CPI saturated America with messages calling for national unity, self-sacrifice, and determination to defeat a brutal enemy in the name of peace and freedom. This campaign created an environment that made it difficult for anyone to resist administration demands to cooperate with the war effort. When some companies rejected standards and prices recommended by the War Industries Board (WIB), Chairman Baruch threatened them with bad publicity. In other cases of business resistance, such as when steel companies balked at reducing the prices they charged the government, even though they would still make a hefty profit, the administration threatened to seize them, which resulted in an agreement. Such coercion was usually not necessary, though, given the Lever Fuel and Food Control Act passed by Congress in August 1917. This sweeping legislation allowed the administration to regulate agricultural and fuel supplies and prices. To be sure, Herbert Hoover, the head of the Food Administration, emphasized voluntary food conservation and avoided food rationing. In the name of conservation, efficiency, and morality, the administration tightly regulated alcohol production, however, a policy that eventually culminated in the Prohibition amendment to the Constitution passed by Congress in December 1918. More generally, through the regulations instituted under the Lever Act and its direct control of the railroads, the administration effectively controlled much of what the entire economy produced.14

**Labor Relations, Finance, and Manpower**

The administration likewise sought to manage labor relations essentially by forcing business to pacify workers with concessions to organized labor’s agenda. This approach became clear in the summer of 1917 in the War Department’s policies toward clothing contractors, and it was confirmed by the National War Labor Board (NWLB), established in April 1918. Composed of representatives from business, government, and “the public” (in this case personified by ex-president William Howard Taft and labor reformer Frank B. Walsh), the NWLB principles for labor peace included recognition of workers’ collective bargaining rights, the eight-hour day, equal pay for women for equal work, and the right of workers to a living wage. On paper, the NWLB epitomized the ideal of voluntary public-private cooperation, as it had no legal power to enforce its interpretation of its principles in labor conflicts, unless the parties to a dispute had agreed to submit to its judgment. But armed with a large and able staff of mostly pro-union field investigators and an administration willing to threaten recalcitrant corporations with government takeovers, the NWLB became a quasi-coercive, aggressively pro-labor agency. While strikes continued to plague the economy, union membership rapidly climbed; the ranks of the American Federation of Labor (AFL) rose from around 2.2 million to over 3.2 million
from 1917 to 1919. Other unions doubled their membership. Businessmen tried their best to resist this trend, but with the administration blocking their way, they could not stop it.\(^\text{15}\)

The financing of the war was another crucial area of war mobilization. Here too the federal government employed a mixture of voluntaristic appeals and compulsion to gain its ends. Before the United States entered the war, the Revenue Act of 1916, enacted to pay for Wilson’s preparedness program, established the nation’s first truly progressive federal tax code. After U.S. intervention, the administration wanted to build on this achievement by raising 50 percent of the cost of the war through an increased levy on incomes, a steep excess-profits tax, and new taxes on luxury goods. Conservatives in Congress managed to blunt this program. Still, the War Revenue Act of October 1917 increased the top income tax rate from 13 to 50 percent and imposed higher taxes on corporate profits—“a fiscal revolution” in the words of historian David Kennedy. All told, tax revenues covered about 23 percent of U.S. war costs (compared to around 20 percent in Britain and less than 2 percent in Germany). The government raised the remaining amount through borrowing, most spectacularly through “Liberty Loan” campaigns, supported by the full weight of the CPI’s propaganda machine, to persuade Americans to buy war bonds. These loan drives ultimately accounted for almost all of the government’s borrowing for the war, raising around $21.4 billion.\(^\text{16}\)

More so than in its mobilization of capital, the administration relied on coercion to recruit the manpower it needed for America’s armed forces. According to the Selective Service Act of 1917, all men aged twenty-one to thirty (later expanded to eighteen to forty-five) were legally obligated to register for the draft before local boards composed of civilian volunteers—chiefly doctors, businessmen, and local officials. The boards then awarded exemptions based on their interpretation of the War Department’s criteria. The major exemptions related to financial hardship for dependents, occupation, and religious objections to military service (later expanded to include nonreligious conscientious objectors). Many Americans resisted the draft, especially in the rural South, where agrarian progressives considered the conflict a “rich man’s war, poor man’s fight.” Somewhere between two and three million men never registered, and 338,000 (12 percent of those drafted) failed to report or deserted. To catch these “slackers,” agents from various federal departments, and especially from the Justice Department’s Bureau of Investigation, fanned out across the country. Their efforts were supplemented by the American Protective League (APL), a group formed by Chicago businessmen in early 1917. Officially endorsed by the Justice Department as a volunteer auxiliary to the Bureau of Investigation, the APL had 250,000 members in hundreds of cities by the end of the war. Along with other patriotic organizations like the American Defense Society, APL volunteers conducted “slacker raids” on the streets of major cities, rounding up draft-aged men and demanding to see their registration cards. By the end of the war, almost twenty-four million men registered for service, and 2.8 million of those were drafted.\(^\text{17}\)
The practice of using private groups to help to enforce government mandates extended to the policing of the training camps built to house America’s new army. Constructed at a cost of roughly $270 million by over two hundred thousand workers, thirty-two “cantonments” were completed by the end of 1917. To reassure family members anxious about drunkenness and prostitution associated with army training camps, the Selective Service Act included provisions outlawing the sale of alcohol to servicemen and banning the sex trade in areas near all military bases. The War Department also established a Commission on Training Camp Activities (CTCA) to protect the moral and physical health of America’s soldiers. Chaired by social reformer Raymond B. Fosdick, the CTCA organized recreation and sex education programs inside and outside of the training camps aimed at molding the troops into its conception of efficient, moral manhood. It also provided preemptive chemical treatments against venereal disease. Various private groups assisted it, including the YMCA, the Salvation Army, and the American Library Association. Local governments usually assisted the CTCA as well, although many communities, particularly in the South, resisted its effort to organize recreational activities on Sundays. To combat prostitution, the CTCA pressured local governments into shutting down red-light districts. It then enlisted local police and citizen volunteers to patrol camp environs, dance halls, and amusement parks and detain any young woman—especially working-class girls—they suspected of promiscuity. Though obviously unconstitutional, the Justice Department endorsed this public-private crusade against vice in April 1918.18

Dissent, Race Relations, and Women

To deal with dissent against the war, the Wilson administration and state governments enacted repressive laws and enforced them with police agencies and volunteer citizen groups, which often degenerated into vigilante mobs. Repressive legislation included the Espionage Act (June 1917), the Trading with the Enemy Act (October 1917), and the Sedition Act (May 1918). These were designed to suppress publications or speech with the potential to undermine the war effort. The administration also used the Alien Enemies Act, a statute from 1798, specifically to regulate the freedoms of German citizens living in the United States. These laws, combined with the frenzied atmosphere produced by the administration’s propaganda campaigns, led to mass violations of the constitutional rights of pacifists, leftists, and German Americans, among others. For example, the government banned many socialist publications from the mails; arrested Eugene Debs, frequent presidential candidate of the Socialist Party; and, aided by the APL, raided IWW offices and arrested its leaders, essentially destroying it as an organization. State governments and state-sanctioned volunteer “home guards,” meanwhile, restricted or banned the use of the German language, campaigned against German music, burned German books, and broke up socialist meetings. In Bisbee, Arizona, police and the business-dominated Citizens’ Protective League attacked striking copper mine workers, loaded 1,200 of them onto trains, and dumped them near a desert town in New Mexico. Smaller-scale mobs lynched or beat up German Americans and anyone else suspected of disloyalty.
seventy Americans died from such violence. Some progressives protested against the repression, founding a National Civil Liberties Bureau in late 1917. President Wilson, however, eager to blunt leftist calls for a negotiated peace, largely ignored them and did little to stop the wave of intolerance engulfing the country.¹⁹

Whites directed intense violence against African Americans as well. With immigration from Europe cut off by the war and the draft adding to labor shortages in the North, managers from America’s industrial corporations began recruiting black labor in the South. This spurred the “great migration” of African Americans out of the South to northern and western cities; by 1920, perhaps five hundred thousand of them had relocated. This demographic shift, which continued after the war, increased economic opportunities for blacks while putting them in position to vote—a development with enormous consequences for American politics. At the same time, President Wilson’s wartime rhetoric defining the conflict as a fight for democracy and freedom gave an opening for blacks to demand that America live up to its ideals at home. Urged on by leaders such as W. E. B. Du Bois, African Americans largely supported the war, and nearly 370,000 served in the army, including in two black combat divisions. They were lauded in the black press as symbols of African American manhood and bravery, and they returned from Europe determined to assert their citizenship rights. All of these developments frightened and alarmed whites. In the South, the very existence of black veterans threatened white supremacy; in the North, housing shortages and labor unrest exacerbated racial tensions. Lynchings of blacks rose sharply during the war, and dozens of race riots broke out in U.S. cities. Far from cowing blacks, however, the violence only fueled their racial consciousness and resolve to demand civil rights.²⁰

The war had an equally complicated impact on women. In some ways, it intensified women’s political activism and challenges to prevailing gender roles. The Women’s Peace Party, for instance, became the leading organization promoting progressive internationalism during the war. Beginning in 1917, the National Woman’s Party (NWP), led by Alice Paul, picketed the White House, carrying banners mocking Wilson for fighting for democracy abroad while denying women the vote at home. Women also joined preparedness organizations, with thousands of them participating in rifle clubs and paramilitary groups to get weapons training for “home defense.” After April 1917, tens of thousands of professional women served in the Army Nurse Corps and the American Red Cross (ARC). Millions of female volunteers, often acting though a vast network of middle-class women’s clubs, also organized food conservation, knitted socks for soldiers, and helped to run CTCA activities. All of this service, as well as a shift of working-class women from domestic service employment to war industries, combined with the NWP’s protests to provide a powerful boost to the woman’s suffrage movement, which finally secured the Nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution in 1920.²¹

Yet the war experience also limited changes in the status of women. The total number of female wage workers did not change much, and those who went into industry often faced hostile male coworkers and male-dominated unions. Male physicians and social workers benefitted from ARC’s massive expansion, as they typically took on supervisory roles.
Administration propaganda reinforced traditional gender roles by portraying women as helpless victims in need of male saviors. Even the CTCA's progressive reformers, who encouraged a new ideal of women as public servants and equal partners of men, usually defined women’s roles only in relation to men and, in their sexual hygiene propaganda, portrayed women as “either morally pure or a sexual disaster waiting to happen.” Thus, while their war service spurred their demands for full citizenship, it failed to alter women’s economic and cultural roles as much as one might expect.22

Warfighting, Reconstruction, and Memory

America’s intervention in the war had a decisive effect on its outcome. From mid-1916 on, the Allied war effort depended upon U.S. money and raw materials. After April 1917, U.S. destroyers provided important help to the British navy in blunting Germany’s U-boat campaign, thus securing British supply lines and allowing the American Expeditionary Force (AEF) to go to Europe. By summer 1918, over one million Americans were on the front lines in France; several divisions fought with French and British armies to help to stop Germany’s final sequence of offenses against the Allies. To maximize his diplomatic influence, however, Wilson for the most part resisted Allied pressure to amalgamate U.S. troops with Allied forces and insisted upon the creation of an independent American army under the command of General John J. Pershing. Its largest action took place at the Battle of Meuse-Argonne from September 26 to November 11. It stands as the biggest single battle in American military history. It involved 1.2 million American soldiers and left over twenty-six thousand of them dead and almost one hundred thousand wounded. Up to forty-five thousand American casualties occurred in the first four days, and the attack soon ground to a halt. Logistical problems contributed to this failure, as did the impact of the global influenza epidemic upon U.S. forces—the disease struck the AEF most intensely right at the time the offensive began. Nevertheless, the presence of large numbers of American troops in Europe and the certainty of more to come, along with Wilson’s vague promises of a fair peace, combined decisively to influence Germany’s decision to ask for an armistice.23

America’s World War I experience did not end with the cessation of fighting on the Western Front on November 11, 1918. American troops did not leave Russia, where they had participated in an Allied intervention in Archangel and Siberia chiefly designed to keep Russia in the war and to combat Bolshevism, until 1920. American troops also helped to occupy the Rhineland until January 1923, and ARC workers did not leave Europe until later that year. At home, Wilson, focused on foreign policy and facing a Republican Congress after the 1918 elections, failed to propose a progressive postwar agenda. Consequently, the various federal agencies established during the war quickly closed down, and the government terminated most of its ventures in state capitalism. Companies immediately backtracked on labor agreements reached during the war as inflation accelerated to 15 percent, which sparked a huge wave of strikes in 1919–1920.
Simultaneously, racial violence surged as black veterans returned home and the Justice Department, convinced that Bolshevik sympathizers wanted to spark a revolution in America, unleashed a new round of raids against suspected “Reds.” Finally, in early 1920 the Federal Reserve attacked inflation by abruptly increasing interest rates, plunging the economy into a recession that lasted until 1922.²⁴

The events of 1919–1920 further undermined the already weakening political appeal of the Democratic Party. In 1916, Wilson had won re-election primarily by holding his base in the South and picking up new supporters in the West attracted to the Democratic Party’s progressive legislative record. Wilson’s appeal to progressives was especially important to his victory because it offset a decline in the Democratic vote among German and Irish Americans angry at Wilson’s pro-British neutrality policies. During the war, though, Wilson’s 1916 coalition unraveled. Midwestern and Western wheat farmers were dismayed by the administration’s controls on wheat prices while cotton remained unregulated and rose in price 400 percent. Large numbers of them switched to the Republicans in 1918, helping the GOP to take control of Congress. The administration’s intolerance toward German Americans, its repression of the left, its failure to support unions after the armistice, its apparent support for British and French imperialism at the Paris Peace Conference, and its inability to do anything to stop the onset of the postwar recession all combined to ruin whatever slim prospects the Democrats had to win in 1920. The Republicans, firmly in the grip of conservatives eager to reverse eight years of Democratic progressive reform, won a smashing victory, beating the Democrats in the presidential race by seven million votes. Progressivism might not have died in 1920, but its primary political vehicle, the Democratic Party, took a decade to recover from the debacle.²⁵

In the initial decades after the war, America’s involvement in it generated both solemn commemorations and controversy. About 116,000 Americans died in the war, and almost 4.5 million served in the armed forces during the conflict. The government honored the dead and remembered the war by building cemeteries and monuments in France, establishing the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier at Arlington National Cemetery, and funding pilgrimages of “Gold Star” mothers of the fallen in the early 1930s. Those who served in the war, as well as the dependents of those who died, also received a variety of government benefits. The biggest veteran organization, the American Legion, became the chief lobbying group for such assistance; its most notable achievement, the Bonus Bill to compensate veterans for civilian wages lost during the war, passed over President Coolidge’s veto in 1924. Eight years later, in the midst of the Great Depression, thousands of veterans marched on Washington demanding immediate payment of their bonus money. President Hoover dispersed them with the army. By this point, political leaders in both parties essentially saw U.S. involvement in the war as a mistake—as unnecessary and as destructive to the nation’s free political economy at home.²⁶

The rise of this negative view of the war in the 1930s set the stage for its eclipse in the national memory after 1945. To be sure, Wilson’s reputation enjoyed a resurgence during World War II amid much debate about how best to fulfill a “second chance” to reform
international politics. But with the tumultuous events of the 1940s and America’s rise to global predominance, the nation’s First World War experience largely faded from view in American culture. To the degree it is recalled, it has taken on the aura of a failed enterprise that does not fit into the popular narrative of a triumphant America rising to superpower status in the 20th century. For that reason, interest in America’s World War I, unfortunately, remains largely confined to academia.27

Discussion of the Literature

Scholarly writing on the United States and World War I began almost immediately after the conflict ended. Initially, in the interwar period, much of the literature focused on Woodrow Wilson and political issues. Several of Wilson’s advisors, including Joseph Tumulty, David F. Houston, and William Gibbs McAdoo, among others, published memoirs dealing in part with the war years. Wilson’s neutrality policies especially came under scrutiny from scholars. “Revisionists” such as John Kenneth Turner and Walter Millis charged the president with a pro-British bias and portrayed U.S. intervention as essentially serving the interest of American business. Although Wilson had his defenders, including biographer Ray Stannard Baker, the revisionist perspective dominated America’s view of the war as the 1930s came to a close.28

Diplomatic and political topics continued to absorb scholars in the 1950s and 1960s. Most significantly, Arthur S. Link completed a massive five-volume biography of Wilson, three of which covered the years 1914–1917. With regard to World War I, this detailed work, based on exhaustive archival research, included discussion of public opinion, the preparedness debate, the 1916 election, and, at length, Wilson’s diplomacy up to America’s entry into the war. Link defended Wilson’s statecraft against both revisionists and “realist” writers of the 1950s who depicted the president as a utopian moralist. Other scholars, meanwhile, began to produce studies of the war’s impact on party and Congressional politics; these included books by William E. Leuchtenberg, Seward W. Livermore, and David Burner.29

During the 1950s and 1960s, scholars also began to examine the wartime wave of repression and xenophobia. H. C. Peterson and Gilbert C. Fite wrote a sweeping review of repressive instruments and incidents in 1957, as did William Preston Jr. in 1963; Robert K. Murray took on the Red Scare in 1955; and John Higham placed the war years into the context of late 19th-century nativism. Harry N. Scheiber and Donald Johnson each penned major books on the development of the civil liberties issue. These works, as well as examinations of the IWW and the Socialist Party, were undoubtedly influenced by the shadow of the Cold War and McCarthyism during the post–World War II period.30

At the same time, and continuing on into the 1970s, the war became the subject of a quite different line of inquiry concerned with business-government relations. Scholars in this field, such as Paul Koistinen, Melvyn Urofsky, and Ellis Hawley, portrayed the mobilization
regime created during the war as either heavily influenced by corporate leaders for their own benefit or, more broadly, as expressing a corporatist ideology stressing voluntary public-private cooperation. This interpretation became wrapped up with ongoing scholarly debates about the character of reform in 20th-century America. It met resistance, however, from Daniel Beaver and especially Robert Cuff, who suggested the WIB’s rhetoric of voluntary business-government cooperation masked a far more complex reality. Later scholars of wartime labor relations have tended to confirm Cuff’s picture.

Since the 1970s, scholarship on the United States and World War I has paralleled historiographic trends in general in shifting more to cultural topics and issues concerning race and gender, although interest in politics and foreign affairs has by no means disappeared. The CPI’s propaganda campaign has attracted significant attention, starting with a major monograph by Stephen Vaughn in 1980. Other authors have examined roles played during the war by higher education and the film industry. The scholarship on women’s wide-ranging involvement with virtually all aspects of the war experience has grown tremendously in recent years; major works include those by Barbara J. Steinson, Frances H. Early, and David S. Patterson. Studies of race relations have increasingly perceived the war as a pivotal period for African Americans. In a study of African American soldiers, for example, Chad Williams argues that the war was “a turning point in the struggle for African American freedom, citizenship and self-determination.”

Research on the war in the 21st century, in different ways, frequently attempts to integrate previously disparate lines of inquiry to provide a more satisfying sense of what the war meant to ordinary Americans. Jennifer Keene, in Doughboys, the Great War and the Remaking of America, provides a new angle on the war’s military history not so much by looking at military strategy and leaders, as earlier military histories have tended to do, but by examining the experience of common soldiers and how the war shaped the military as an institution. Julia F. Irwin has used the story of the American Red Cross to illuminate the humanitarian dimension of American foreign relations during the war, while Carol R. Byerly has shown the wide-ranging impact of the influenza epidemic on America’s fighting capability. Ross Kennedy examines Wilson’s approach to the war in the wider context of a national debate about security strategy that engaged progressives and conservatives. Finally, the multifaceted face of the coercive state and its volunteer citizen groups is explored in Christopher Capozzola’s Uncle Sam Wants You: World War I and the Making of the Modern American Citizen.

Primary Sources

Primary sources for studying America and World War I are abundant, and many of them are easily accessible. For anyone interested in politics, the place to start is the Papers of Woodrow Wilson, edited by Arthur S. Link. This collection of sixty-nine volumes stands as one of greatest editorial achievements of the last century. It contains not only outgoing speeches, writings, and letters by Wilson for all of the war years but also most, if not all, of the important incoming material that crossed Wilson’s desk, as well as relevant diary
entries by those who came into contact with him. Each volume also has a useful introduction, and later ones have appendices dealing with Wilson’s health. Most of the other major political figures of the period have their papers deposited at the Library of Congress; congressional debates are in the Congressional Record. For the records of the wartime agencies, one should consult the National Archives at College Park, Maryland. The National Archives also contain War and Navy Department records. For the AEF, see also the U.S. Army Military Institute in Carlisle, Pennsylvania. An important published source is American Battle Monuments Commission, American Armies and Battlefields in Europe. For African American soldiers, see material collected by W. E. B. Du Bois in the Du Bois papers at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst, Massachusetts. On veterans, see the holdings at the American Legion National Headquarters Archives in Indianapolis, Indiana. Finally, an array of important papers relevant to a variety of World War I topics are at the Hoover Institution Library and Archives in Stanford, California.34


Researchers can also consult a vast number of published primary source collections and memoirs. Speeches of major political figures such as Charles Evans Hughes are often readily available, for example, as are published letters; one excellent source for understanding the conservative internationalist perspective on the war is The Letters of Theodore Roosevelt. Abundant published microfilm collections also exist; on the repressive state and African Americans, for instance, see Theodore Kornweibel’s Federal Surveillance of Afro-Americans, 1917–1925: The First World War, the Red Scare, and the Garvey Movement. Government documents can also be found in most major research libraries. Important ones for the study of foreign affairs are the State Department’s Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States, 1914–1917. Nearly all major secondary sources list relevant government documents for their respective topics.35
Links to Digital Materials

General

1914-1918 Online’s entry on the United States. This is sorted by themes and entries. Themes include: African American Soldiers, Bereavement and Mourning, Soldiers’ Attitudes Towards War, Civilian and Military Power, Commemoration and Remembrance, Ethnic Minorities at War, Literature, Naval Warfare, Press/Journalism, Pre-war Military Planning, Propaganda at Home, Personal Accounts of World War I, Religion, Science and Technology, Social Conflict and Control, Protest and Repression, War Aims and Peace Discussions, Warfare 1917–1918, War Losses, Women’s Mobilization for War, and many more. It also has individual entries, including things such as the Fourteen Points, the Lusitania, and War Bonds and people such as Woodrow Wilson, Eugene V. Debs, and John J. Pershing.

The Library of Congress collections on WWI: This link has an overview of the Library of Congress holdings.

The World War Document Archive: This is an extensive online collection of conventions, treaties, papers, documents, and other primary resources in various languages collected and made available by an American nonprofit organization.

The Great War and the Shaping of the Twentieth Century: This is an interactive overview of World War I, complete with timeline, glossary, maps, educational resources, and commentary from historians.

For a general overview of the war, see First World War.com. This has collections of documents, photos, maps, audio, and the like. Generally, the collections are sorted by year. It seems best used for multimedia rather than analysis or discussion.

Military

The Stars and Stripes: The American Soldiers’ Newspaper of World War I, 1918–1919, Library of Congress. The is the complete edition of the newspaper The Stars and Stripes, published in France by the United States Army from February 1918 to June 1919. The eight-page weekly featured news, poetry, cartoons, and sports coverage.

Music

Library of Congress, National Jukebox, Historical Recordings: The National Jukebox of the Library of Congress makes historical sound recordings available to the public free of
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charge. The National Jukebox includes more than ten thousand recordings made by the Victor Talking Machine Company between 1901 and 1925. Searchable by artist, song, and year. See also a collection specifically of World War I songs searchable by year.

Food

Recipe for Victory: Food and Cooking in Wartime, University of Wisconsin Digital Collections. This is a collection of English and American wartime resources on cooking, gardening, and nutrition. It includes titles such as The Eat Less Meat Book: War Ration Cookery, Victory Breads, and Preserve Eggs for Winter Use.

Coverage of War

World War One Centennial Gallery: An online archive of over six hundred articles from English-language magazines that focus on various aspects of the First World War. All articles were published between 1914 and 1918.

Newspaper Pictorials: This collection includes an illustrated history of World War I selected from newspaper rotogravure sections that graphically documents the people, places, and events important to the war.

Speeches about the War

The Nation’s Forum Collection from the Library of Congress’s Motion Picture, Broadcasting, and Recorded Sound Division consists of fifty-nine sound recordings of speeches by American leaders. The speeches focus on issues and events surrounding World War I and the subsequent presidential election of 1920.

War Posters

World War I Posters, Library of Congress: A collection of approximately 1,900 posters created between 1914 and 1920. The majority of the posters were printed in the United States.

American War Posters from the First World War, Bancroft Library: 168 digitized American posters from World War I.

Photos

First World War.com has a collection of photos, sorted into categories such as Camp Life, Commanders, Trenches, and the War at Sea.
The American Experience during World War I

Photo Archive, *LIFE Magazine* World War I photographs in the *LIFE* photo archive, hosted by Google.

**Influenza**

**The Deadly Virus: The Influenza Epidemic of 1918**, US National Archives and Records Administration: An online archive of documents and photos showing the course and consequences of the 1918 Spanish flu epidemic that killed fifty million people worldwide.

**Further Reading**


The American Experience during World War I


Notes:


(8.) R. Kennedy, *Will to Believe*, 203–220.


The American Experience during World War I


The American Experience during World War I


(33.) Keene, Doughboys; Irwin, Making the World Safe; Byerly, Fever of War; R. Kennedy, Will to Believe; and Capozzola, Uncle Sam.


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