

America in World War I

A clash of idealism and pragmatic politics defined American involvement in the Great War of 1914-1918. In one corner was the devout scholar, American president Woodrow Wilson. He was the perfect representative for a country brimming with optimism and faith. In the other corner was the unprecedented violence of the war, a reality that required somber analysis of what was possible under dire circumstances. Consequently, the lead up to the war, activities on the home front, and post-war negotiations were all shaped by the tension between these two forces.

President Woodrow Wilson was a Progressive Democrat with impeccable credentials as an uncompromising idealist. While president of Princeton he battled elitist trustees and as governor of New Jersey he defeated the political machines of that state. He sincerely wished to dedicate his presidency to carrying out progressive reforms in domestic policy. When the violent unfolding of events in Europe took place in 1914, Wilson responded with typical idealism. As time progressed his commitment to that principle would be challenged by extraordinary circumstances.

On August 19th, 1914 Wilson addressed Congress with his “Declaration of Neutrality” that urged Americans to be “impartial in thought as well as in action.” This expression of idealism—American exceptionalism—had roots as far back as George Washington’s Farewell Address and resonated strongly with Wilson’s conviction that the Great War was a by-product of European imperialism and petty rivalries. Soon, however, the harsh realities of British blockades and German submarines demanded attention. On May 7th, 1915 the British merchant ship *Lusitania* was sunk off the Irish coast by a German U boat torpedo. Wilson maintained his public position

of idealistic neutrality by declaring, “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.”

Behind the scenes of Wilson’s public statement an increasing pressure to abandon idealism for realism was mounting. Secretary of State William Jennings Bryan sensed Wilson’s change in stance and promptly resigned his position to be an advocate for peace. International attorney Robert Lansing accepted the appointment to fill the vacant Secretary position. Lansing’s pragmatic perspective led him to believe that “the United States eventually would have to enter the war on the Allied side to protect neutral rights and basic American economic and security interests.” Eventually resumed submarine attacks, espionage, and the Zimmerman telegram forced Wilson’s hand to declare war. He justified American involvement by transforming the war from what it was—an imperial conflict—into a just cause: The War to End All Wars.

Across the country conspicuous acts of idealism took place to support the war effort. There was such an initial surge of volunteers to serve in the army that local draft boards complained they couldn’t handle the logistics. In December the War Department announced it would not accept any more volunteers. The citizens who stayed at home found ways to contribute as well.

Spurred on by propaganda, ordinary people reduced food consumption through planting gardens and participating in Herbert Hoover’s appeals for conservation such as “meatless Tuesdays.”

Unions and African-Americans were led by Samuel Gompers and W.E.B Du Bois to put down their grievances for the duration of the war.

Patriotic fervor wasn’t the only response to the war; however, those who opposed America’s entrance into the war were punished. Hard-nosed domestic policies dealt harshly with pacifists and those who sympathized with Germany. American liberties were curtailed in an effort to curb

dissent. The Espionage Act of 1917 and the Sedition Act of 1918 were loosely defined laws that made it a criminal act to publicly oppose the war. As a result Socialist Eugene V. Debs went to prison “for telling his followers they did not deserve to be ‘cannon fodder.’” Hundreds more were deported without a trial for their pacifism.

The final struggle between idealism and pragmatism was fought in the arena of post-war negotiations. Wilson desperately wanted to establish a “peace without victory” that would foster a new era of peaceful international relationships. The Germans agreed to negotiate with the Allied powers under the assumption that Wilson’s agenda would set the tone. The English and the French, however, had scores to settle. Their insistence on German “war-guilt” and reparations forced Wilson to compromise nearly all his original aspirations in the hope of establishing the League of Nations. In Wilson’s eyes, the overly punitive Versailles Treaty would be justified if a legacy of peace was created. Heartbreakingly, the United States Senate refused to ratify the treaty without amendments. After years of compromising his ideals for the exigencies of war, Wilson could not waver on this, his greatest accomplishment. In the end, a whirlwind train tour failed to build the public support he needed to pass the treaty and he faded from the political scene exhausted and very ill.

The story of idealism versus pragmatism is as old as time, but it has perhaps not been told as dramatically as during Wilson’s involvement in the Great War of 1914-1918. American optimism and good-faith came running out of the Progressive Era only to crash into the terrible necessities of war. Consequently, every aspect of America’s involvement in the military conflict of the war was shadowed by a theoretical conflict between idealism and pragmatism. And Wilson, defiantly idealistic on his death-bed, has become a hero to many and a fool to others.