

# Foreign Meddling, President's Ego — World War I

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*Revisiting the US entry into World War I, including the Anti-War Movement, Propaganda, and the Sedition Act*

**By Martin Green**

One hundred years ago, in early April 1917, on a drizzly Washington evening, President Woodrow Wilson went before Congress seeking a declaration of war against Imperial Germany, thus placing the United States into the midst of what had become known as the Great War. According to Georgetown history professor Michael Kazin, the Great War, or World War I as it has become more familiarly known, remains America's "forgotten war." While the centenary has called forth a minor landslide of books, exhibits, and a six-hour PBS treatment (adding to all the tomes and documentaries that have been unleashed since the 2014 centenary of the outbreak of the war in Europe), there has been little (if any) public recognition of America's involvement in the war and the consequences of that involvement. Perhaps we're too distracted by the cable news cycle's relentless attention to our current President to worry much about something as remote as involvement in a quaint long-ago war in which our "boys" marched off in their silly-looking tin helmets, whipped the "Hun" in short order, came home again, and settled into the more colorful doings of the Jazz Age. But as Kazin argues in his *War to End War*, a study of the anti-war movement between 1914 and 1917, and as journalist and historian G. J. Meyer tells us in his recent *The World Remade: America in World War I*, a sequel to his comprehensive history of the war, *The World Undone: The Story of the Great War 1914-1918* (2006), the war did have consequences for our nation (and the other belligerents and, in fact the whole world) that still are being felt.

While seeing the past too much from the perspective of the present distorts history, the memory of events now one hundred years in the past does provide necessary perspective on our current situation. In the debates over the decision to enter the war, as Kazin and Meyer frame the issues, we can see one of the first major adumbrations of the current controversy over the United States' role in the world and defining U.S. interests, if not the origin of the argument. The charge made by many anti-war advocates in 1917 that the U.S.

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was being drawn into the war under the influence of wealth has some compelling resonances today. After the U.S. became a participant in the war, contention arose over how the war was being managed, foreshadowing today's debates over the relative powers of the major branches of the U.S. government in conducting war and pursuing foreign affairs. Especially striking in the story Kazin and Meyer tell is the account of how the war to make the world safe for democracy, as Wilson so famously put it, was pursued with an unprecedented assault on civil liberties at home: a powerful object lesson in how easily a nation can depart from central values in the name of protecting them.

**I**n his study of the anti-war effort preceding America's entry into the war, Kazin speculates on what might have happened if the U.S. had *not* decided to become a belligerent. The war might have ground on for a year or two more but would, he thinks, have eventually ended in the stalemate it had been from nearly the beginning. None of the belligerents could have claimed "victory" or exacted the kind of punitive revenge on the vanquished that fed the resentment and hostility that characterized the subsequent decades and culminated in World War II and its consequences for the rest of the twentieth century and beyond. Without U.S. involvement, Kazin writes, there would have been no Versailles treaty, "no reparations that helped bankrupt the Weimar Republic, no stab-in-the-back allegations by resentful Germans, and thus no rise, much less triumph, of Hitler and his National Socialist Party. The next world war, with its fifty million deaths would never have happened."

It may be a stretch to put all this on the collective back of the U.S. or on the individual back of President Woodrow Wilson. One can also speculate endlessly on what-ifs going further back before the U.S. entry into the war. Speculation aside, the consequences of the war were substantial: the rise of new autocracies to replace the ones destroyed by the war or in new places; the redrawing of borders and carving up of territories in ways that laid the grounds for future conflict (especially in the Middle East); the creation of millions of refugees and displaced populations; the beginnings of a relationship among government, industry, and the military that later became the basis for what President Dwight Eisenhower called the military-industrial complex; the rise of a "surveillance state"; the development of mass propaganda; the rise of cynicism and despair.

The story Kazin and Meyer tell about how the United States entered the war is one of a struggle over competing views of the United States' role in the world and what vital interests were at stake in the war. Initially, the major attitude in the U.S. was a bemused indifference to the disastrous consequences of a corrupt old-world culture. The causes of the war were hardly clear to Americans at the time (what was so important about an archduke being assassinated in whatchamacallit?), and the causes remain murky despite more than a hundred years of argument and counterargument. The prevailing narrative developed during the war posited a Germany dominated by Prussian militarism provoking the war to secure global domination. Recent historians have a more complex view. Meyer belongs to the

“they’re all guilty” faction of historians or at least to “the Germans weren’t the sole villains” camp. In Meyer’s view, the machinations of the Serbs, the Austro-Hungarians, the French, the Russians, the British, even “innocent little Belgium” (the notorious colonial power pledged secretly to allow Britain to use it as a landing place in case of war), played a role in the outbreak of the war, and Meyer makes the case that Germany was the last to mobilize in the crisis that followed Austria-Hungary’s issuing an ultimatum to Serbia. Christopher Clark’s 2013 book, *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914*, argues the case in more detail.

Whatever the causes, there was a strong argument at the outset that the U.S. had little at stake, and it was protected against invasion in those pre-aviation years by 3,000 miles of ocean. Theodore Roosevelt, who later became one of the more vociferous proponents of U.S. participation in the war, wrote a long essay in the early months of the war providing a balanced view of the claims and counterclaims of the belligerents. Throughout the country there were partisans of both sides. Our coming in on the side of Britain, France, and Russia (the Triple Entente allies), instead of in support of Germany, Austria-Hungary, and the Ottoman Empire (the Central Powers), was not inevitable. Support for Britain and France was the result partially of US cultural and historical affiliations with those nations. The majority of old-stock Americans considered themselves racially and culturally Anglo-Saxon and memories of French support in the American Revolution still occupied a prime place in the American historical consciousness. Nonetheless, a significant minority of the population was openly hostile to the Entente, with Irish-Americans opposed to Britain over its policies in Ireland, and German-Americans supportive of Germany. Many non-Germans had high regard for Germany’s intellectual culture and its efficient industry and even its military efficiency. (Imperial Russia was another matter; that corrupt autocracy had hardly any support in the U.S. and was particularly hated by the growing Jewish immigrant communities.) Germany was particularly aggrieved at what it perceived as U.S. support for Britain and France even while President Wilson publically urged the nation to be neutral “in fact as well as in name” toward the belligerents.

A major factor cited by Woodrow Wilson in his April 1917 address to Congress seeking a declaration of war was, he said, that Germany had interfered with the “freedom of the seas” in its extensive U-boat campaign and had sunk many British ships—most notoriously the *Lusitania*—and vessels of neutral nations. But even that *casus belli* is not as straightforward as it once seemed, according to Meyer. Britain was equally culpable of violating the “freedom of the seas” in its interdiction of neutral shipping to Germany, and President Wilson chose to castigate only Germany and to defend a right of Americans that was hardly self-evident: to travel aboard any vessel whatever, whether those of belligerent or neutral nations. (Meyer proposes that the number of U.S. ships directly attacked by Germany was small and that, not counting the American victims of the British-owned *Lusitania* sinking, the loss of American lives had been minimal prior to 1917.)

A more proximate cause for the U.S.'s leaning toward the Entente, Meyer argues, was Great Britain's major propaganda effort. From the outset of the conflict Britain dominated the propaganda war for U.S. sympathy. Having cut off direct sources of information from Germany by severing Germany's undersea cable, Britain controlled most of the news of the war that Americans read. Stories of German atrocities in "innocent little Belgium" circulated widely. According to Meyer, many of these were exaggerated fabrications of Britain's propaganda bureau, and indeed some American writers in Europe at the time initially discounted the atrocity stories or at least treated them neutrally. Recent historians other than Meyer, however, give the atrocity stories greater credence. The obverse of British skill in framing the perspective on the war was Germany's ineptitude in the new "science" of public persuasion. The official German reaction to the release of the notorious Zimmerman telegram—by which Germany attempted to convince Mexico that it should go to war with the U.S. if the U.S. declared war on Germany—was the last in a series of public relations missteps by the Kaiser's government. When the telegram was released in late January 1917, as a result of Britain's intercepting and decoding it and stealthily passing it to the American government without revealing its hand in the process, German foreign minister Zimmerman blithely acknowledged sending it. (No claims of "fake news" then.) Meyer may overdo the rhetorical flourishes with which he consistently characterizes British propaganda successes and German public relations ineptitude, but he makes the case that U.S.'s eventually deciding in favor of the Entente was hardly the result of neutral, disinterested analysis of facts.

A major part of Britain's propaganda effort was to sway an audience of one—President Wilson himself. Here they had the help of several of Wilson's key advisors: Colonel Edward House, an independently wealthy, unpaid, and unofficial aide to the President who was his chief confidant; the U.S. ambassador to Great Britain, Walter Hines Page; and Secretary of State Robert Lansing. These men were committed anglophiles and conveyed the British point of view fed to them by British foreign secretary Lord Grey. House was particularly alert to Wilson's desire to be seen as a savior. House flattered Wilson into seeking a role as the one who could determine the outcome of the war and could play the major role in shaping the post-war future. Initially that meant trying to be a mediator among the warring parties and eventually becoming a participant on the side of the Entente. House, urged on by Lord Grey, persuaded Wilson not to issue any critical diplomatic rebukes to Great Britain while at the same time encouraging him to take a strong stand against German U-boat attacks.

Wilson was also the object of intense lobbying by a strong anti-war movement. According to Kazin, the anti-war movement in this period was "the largest, most diverse, and most sophisticated peace coalition to that point in U.S. history. Not until the movement to end the Vietnam War half a century later would there be as large, as influential, and as tactically adroit a campaign against U.S. intervention in another land. There has been none to rival it since." But it failed to keep the U.S. out of the war. Part of the reason for the failure

was the diversity of goals of the various constituents of the movement and lack of strong leadership.

The opposition was a motley assortment of socialists, feminists, conservative Democrats from the South, and Progressive Republicans from the upper Midwest and the West. Kazin focuses on the roles of figures like socialist Morris Hillquit, feminist leader Jane Addams, and conservative Democratic North Carolina Congressman Claude Kitchin in spearheading the anti-war opposition. Meyer focuses on Progressive Senator Robert La Follette, and reminds us of the contribution to the peace movement of populist icon William Jennings Bryan, the one-time “Boy Orator of the Platte” and three-time unsuccessful presidential candidate of the Democratic Party. Bryan—still enormously popular in those days, even after his many failed attempts at running for President and before his reputation was fatally damaged by his anti-evolution campaign in the 1920s—was perhaps the single boldface name in the movement. As Wilson’s first Secretary of State, he had been a voice within the administration for restraint and pacifism, but Wilson marginalized him and eventually Bryan resigned—in opposition to Wilson’s refusal in the wake of the *Lusitania* sinking to hold Britain equally to account with Germany for violations of the rights of neutral shipping by its blockading of German ports. Probably second in prominence was La Follette. The Wisconsin Progressive was an outspoken opponent of U.S. involvement in the war. In March 1917, he ground the Senate to a halt with an epic filibuster in the debate over arming U.S. merchant vessels to counter renewed German U-boat attacks. The other peace movement leaders lacked national standing.

The bases for opposition to war in general and this war in particular varied among the different subgroups. Feminist groups campaigned against “masculinist” militarism; socialists attacked war as a product of capitalism and imperialism and looked forward to a world without war under a worker-dominated world order; conservative politicians, especially from the South, worried over the expansion of federal power that a war could bring; and Progressives worried over what the war would do to the Progressive agenda. In the recent Library of America volume *World War I and America: Told by the Americans Who Lived It*, A. Scott Berg reprints a speech on the Senate floor by Progressive Senator George Norris that sums up a major strand of the opposition to the war: it’s largely a Wall Street plot. As Kazin and Meyer both point out, the war was good for American business even before our direct involvement. Initially, the economy went into a major recession when Europe erupted into war and trade was disrupted; the stock market closed for four months, so bad was economic activity. But a combination of looser regulation of trade with Britain and France (permitting the sale of armaments and food to these countries while sales to Germany were cut off by the British naval blockade) and a policy of allowing banks to offer “credits” to France and England (in lieu of loans) produced a spurt of unprecedented economic growth. Condemning this capitulation to the bankers and industrialists as the primary motivation for Wilson’s seeking a declaration of war, Norris thundered on the Senate floor:

[T]here is no doubt in my mind, but the enormous amount of money loaned to the allies in this country has been instrumental in bringing about a public sentiment in favor of our country taking a course that makes every bond worth a hundred cents on the dollar and making the payment of every debt certain and sure. . . . [Furthermore,] the enormous profits of munitions manufacturers, stockbrokers, and bond dealers must still be further increased by our entrance into the war.

Norris was joined in opposition by La Follette, whose four-hour speech against the declaration of war attacked Wilson's lack of consistency on the neutrality question and his hypocrisy in declaring the war a struggle between autocracy and democracy. Of the Allied powers, France came closest to being a democracy but had significant colonial interests to offset its republican heritage; Britain was, in the eyes of many an American, the avatar of colonial oppression; Russia, had only recently toppled its autocracy in favor of what seemed a more democratically oriented government but it was too early to tell which way it would develop.

La Follette and Norris were but two of barely a handful of Senators who voted in opposition to the war measure. They were joined by a minority, though larger number of House members, including the House's first (and, at that time, only) woman. Anyone who is pained by what they consider over-the-top political language today might have second thoughts in light of the criticism of La Follette by opponents. Following his filibuster of the arming-U.S.-merchant-vessels bill, he was denounced as a "Benedict Arnold," "a Judas," "a pervert, lunatic, madman, and devil who humiliated the nation." After his speech against the war resolution, he was labeled a "pusillanimous, degenerate coward."

Once the decision to enter the war had been made, the dimension of the challenge facing the new belligerent began to define itself. How the U.S. would gear up to participate in the war; how it would raise an army of two million men in time enough to make a difference for its new allies (to be precise, Wilson insisted on calling them "associates" not allies); how it would train, feed, and transport the troops across the Atlantic, and how it would finance its efforts were daunting questions facing a nation that had limited experience in international warfare and none in the new forms of industrial-scale warfare that the Great War brought forth. The answers that emerged to many of these challenges all involved an unprecedented expansion of federal power that had lasting effects, positive and negative, on the nation as a whole long after the war came to an abrupt halt eighteen months after the U.S. joined it.

To meet the call for "men, men, men," as French General Joseph Joffre implored France's new partner in the war to provide, Congress eventually passed the Selective Service Act which imposed conscription for the first time since the Civil War (and with memories of the infamous Draft Riots of 1863 still alive in the nation). The act succeeded in enlisting

more than 2 million men with a minimum of opposition. To train these men, the federal government undertook to build a nationwide network of training facilities (cantonments), which required massive federal expenditures. To move the food and war materiel that the new army required, the government took control of the railroads and the merchant marine, and established agencies for controlling food production and distribution. To ensure a steady supply of war materiel the government experimented with various forms of government-industry partnership. Although many of these initiatives were rolled back once the war came to an end, they set the precedent for later expansions of federal authority in the New Deal and the Second World War (and continuing into the post-World War II period).

One of the major federal initiatives, the like of which had not been seen before, was the creation of a bureaucracy to shape public opinion—the Committee on Public Information, headed by journalist George Creel. The CPI or Creel Committee professed to eschew outright propaganda; Creel claimed that his mandate was to provide objective information as a means to “mold the people of the United States into one white hot mass instinct with fraternity, devotion, courage, and deathless determination.” As Meyer notes, the CPI’s greatest innovation was the institution of the Four-Minute Men, a cadre of volunteer orators who addressed issues of the war during reel changes at movie houses across the country (and in other venues). While denying that it was engaged in propaganda, the CPI monitored newspapers, urged editors to refrain from printing negative stories relating to the war (including any peace proposals), created reams of school curricula that cast the issues in the most favorable terms for the Allies, and secretly funded organizations to counter the anti-war message of labor and socialist activists.

The CPI’s hand in creating a visual environment supportive of the allied cause is on view as part of the recent exhibit mounted by the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts (PAFA), *World War I and American Art*, and its accompanying volume of the same name (currently on view at the New-York Historical Society, under the title “World War I Beyond the Trenches”). As Pearl James describes in her contribution to the PAFA volume, the CPI’s Division of Pictorial Publicity “brought fine-art painters and popular illustrators,” like Charles Dana Gibson, Howard Chandler Christy and James Montgomery Flagg, together to create poster art that encouraged enlistment in the various military branches with a gentle touch (Christy’s “Gee! I Wish I Were a Man, I’d Join the Navy” and Flagg’s iconic “I Want YOU” are two of the most well-known). Other posters inspired fear and loathing of the enemy (Harry Ryle Hopps’s “Destroy This Mad Brute, Enlist”). Other campaigns urged sales of Liberty Bonds and food conservation. James argues that the proliferation of poster art was unprecedented, citing a statistic of “twenty million copies of perhaps twenty-five hundred posters . . . *more posters than all of the other belligerents combined*” [Italics in the original].

While Creel’s committee (which eventually employed several thousand people) labored to create support for the war mostly by means of persuasion, other unprecedented initiatives were cast in more draconian terms. The Espionage Act, passed by Congress shortly after the declaration of war (and still on the books), and the Sedition Act passed the

following year gave legal cover to major crackdowns on dissent, targeting anti-war activists such as Socialist presidential candidate Eugene V. Debs and members of the militant Industrial Workers of the World, among others. The chief enforcers within the Federal government were the Postmaster General, Albert Burleson, two Attorneys General, Thomas Gregory and his successor A. Mitchell Palmer, and a new Bureau of Investigation in the Justice Department (the nascent FBI, headed by young J. Edgar Hoover). Burleson used his office to crack down on publications deemed insufficiently loyal, such as the radical magazine *The Masses*. Attorney General Gregory enlisted the aid of the American Protective League, a private organization whose volunteers monitored the behavior of neighbors and relatives. Meyers reports that there were nearly a quarter-million members in the APL by the war's end, and he calls it "the most intrusive and far-reaching (and also most irresponsible) threat to free speech and the right of assembly in the history of the United States."

The Sedition Act of 1918 was written in the broadest terms. It made almost any criticism of the war, even casual grumbling over food restrictions, subject to legal action that regularly resulted in lengthy prison terms under harsh conditions. According to Meyer and several of the historians featured in the recent six-hour PBS documentary, *The Great War*, Wilson took any criticism of the war as a personal attack and only occasionally offered the mildest of objections to some of the methods of suppression. He was particularly opposed to granting clemency to Debs. To his credit, President Warren Harding, Wilson's successor, commuted Debs' sentence and that of many convicted under the Sedition Act, but many remained in jail long after the war ended. The courts were for the most part complicit in abetting the government's repression of dissent, and it wasn't until after the war that the Supreme Court took up the major issues raised by curtailment of free speech, formulating the "clear and present danger" doctrine that still governs first amendment cases. (The effort to protect free speech also had its origins in this period in the form of the Civil Liberties Bureau of the American Union Against Militarism (AUAM), progenitor of the American Civil Liberties Union.)

**T**he way in which American troops figured in bringing the war to its conclusion is a complex story in itself, but in the long run may seem subordinate to the domestic drama. Troops began to reach France within six months of the declaration of war, but their commander, General John J. Pershing, kept them out of major operations until he was satisfied that they were combat ready. Other than a brief engagement in a relatively quiet part of the Western Front, this did not occur until mid-spring 1918, despite the Allies' continued pressure on Pershing to integrate his troops into their armies. Pershing's mandate from Wilson was to ensure that the troops played a decisive role in the combat to warrant the United States later playing a decisive role in negotiating the peace. Pershing, like his commander-in-chief Wilson, may have had an inflated sense of his own capabilities and what his troops were capable of, and that he could avoid the traps that had bogged down all the other combatants for the past four years. But he, like the leaders of the other combatants,



found himself and his troops mired in the relentless, grinding war of attrition that has become synonymous with this war. (An anonymous essayist in the inaugural issue of H. L. Mencken's *American Mercury* in the mid-1920s noted that the war was far from "great" on a strategic level.) The U.S. troops acquitted themselves well in the long campaign in the Meuse-Argonne forest that was the last major battle of the war, but at great cost to life and limb. What perhaps made the difference was the sheer number of troops pouring into France and continuing to do so as the German army, after four grinding years of combat on two fronts, finally collapsed.

The peace negotiations and Wilson's failure to achieve his goal of a "peace without victory" are another long and complex story, best reserved for separate treatment. So much of how the U.S. entered the war and much of its consequence turns on the character of Wilson. Margaret Macmillan, in her account of the Paris Peace Conference, foregrounds the essential paradoxes of Wilson:

Wilson remains puzzling. . . . What is one to make of a leader who drew on the most noble language of the Bible yet was so ruthless with those who crossed him? Who loved democracy but despised most of his fellow politicians? Who wanted to serve humanity but had so few personal relationships? Was he, as Teddy Roosevelt thought, "as insincere and cold-blooded an opportunist as we have ever had in the Presidency"? [Quoted from J.W.S. Nordholt, *Woodrow Wilson*, (Berkeley, 1991), 195.] Or was he, as [Wilson's chief spokesman, journalist Roy Stannard] Baker believed, one of those rare idealists like Calvin or Cromwell, "who from time to time have appeared upon the earth & for a moment in burst of strange power, have temporarily lifted erring mankind to a higher pitch of commitment than it was quite equal to?"

The jury is still out on Wilson, although recently the negative side of his character and values (his racism, especially) has been much in the forefront; Meyer is particularly critical of his many failings as a human being and leader.

More than forty years ago, Paul Fussell published his now-classic study *The Great War and Modern Memory*. Weaving a tapestry out of the poetry, fiction, memoirs, and other first-hand accounts of this most literary of wars, Fussell's book (issued in an updated edition in 2000), analyzed the ways the war penetrated the consciousness of twentieth-century Britain and shaped its responses to language, realism, and patriotism. No parallel study exists for the effect of the war on the American consciousness. In this year marking the centennial of the United States' entry into the war, Kazin and Meyer's books and the comprehensive PBS documentary go a ways toward filling in the memory of that "forgotten war."

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