

Making Sense of the War (USA)

By [Branden Little](#)

Summary

Americans comprehended the First World War as a disaster. Their understandings of neutrality and belligerency varied greatly depending on ancestral ties, class, race, and political perspectives. Despite strong anti-war currents of pacifism and socialism, most Americans eventually rejected non-intervention and embraced U.S. belligerency as a crusade to destroy aggression and restore peace in Europe.

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Introduction

Americans found the unanticipated explosion of the First World War objectionable and frightening. War threatened to tear apart the fabric of modern civilization. Prewar confidence in forecasts of unlimited economic growth grew murky with the disarray in global markets. Virtually unimpeded international immigration in recent decades also meant that all the nations at war were powerfully represented in the [United States](#) with potentially explosive repercussions. In addition, the war suddenly engulfed more than 125,000 Americans traveling in Europe. Even as the United States immediately proclaimed [neutrality](#), their fate awoke the [U.S. government](#) and the American people to the reality that war endangered American lives.¹

The United States struggled to maintain neutrality for thirty-three months. By April 1917, Germany's [submarine attacks](#) on ships carrying American citizens and commerce across the

Atlantic Ocean; its diplomatic intrigues that provoked aggression against the United States by Mexico and [Japan](#); and the perilous prospect of perpetual war thrust an otherwise tenuously neutral nation into belligerency. The United States' [abandonment of neutrality](#) triggered the national mobilization of the American people for war. Imbued with a crusading ethos to vanquish militaristic aggression and secure a lasting peace, American society prosecuted the war as an associate of the Allied coalition fighting against [Germany](#) and the other Central Powers.

Interpreting the War as a Cataclysm

In August 1914, in what became a common refrain among Americans, the former U.S. President [William H. Taft \(1857-1930\)](#) declared that the widening war “is a cataclysm. It is a retrograde step in Christian civilization.”² His predecessor in the White House, [Theodore Roosevelt \(1858-1919\)](#), considered the “volcanic fires” that were ripping apart civilization an “elemental disaster.”³ Sharing the same perspective, an American businessman and mining engineer who was working in London that summer, [Herbert C. Hoover \(1874-1964\)](#), described the war as an earthquake. When the trembling started, “[t]he substance and the bottom seemed to go out of everything.”⁴ Perceptive Americans instantly recognized that the United States could not escape the far-reaching effects of global war. “We in America are not immune to what some people imagine to be the diseases of Europe,” wrote [Walter Lippmann \(1889-1974\)](#), a nationally influential political commentator, shortly after returning in late 1914 from [Belgium](#) and Britain to the United States.⁵

Like Taft, Roosevelt, Hoover, and Lippmann, many Americans interpreted this historic moment through metaphors of natural disasters, sickness, and supernatural crises. By characterizing the war's outbreak in these ways, Americans unwittingly diverted much responsibility from the belligerent powers. Instead they attributed the war's eruption to an act of nature or God. Admittedly, some Americans blamed Prussian militarism or particular foreign leaders for bellicose decision-making, but the seeming inexplicability of the war defied such easy explanations. Uncertainty about the war's origins, however, did not induce paralysis among Americans who responded with alacrity to the growing conflagration.⁶

Sympathetic Urgencies to Act in Wartime

Deep sympathies for the nations at war resounded in the United States. Anglophilia and Francophilia predominated nationwide in the country of 99 million, but many of the 8.25 million German-Americans sympathized loudly with Berlin's decisions. Educated Americans who highly esteemed German [universities](#), scientific learning, and cultural achievements

initially supported Germany.⁷ The Irish in America expressed mixed feelings owing to longstanding enmities toward [Britain](#), which were nonetheless tempered by sharp opposition to Germany's invasion of the small, neutral Catholic nation, Belgium. The Irish considered Germany's aggressive actions similar to those of Britain's conquest of [Ireland](#).⁸

President [Woodrow Wilson \(1856-1924\)](#) understood that many [immigrants and Americans of European descent](#) harbored feelings for the nations at war. In his second major statement on neutrality made on 18 August 1914, Wilson proclaimed:

"It is natural and inevitable that there should be the utmost variety of sympathy and desire among them [the immigrants] with regard to the issues and circumstances of the conflict. Some will wish one nation, others another, to succeed in the momentous struggle. It will be easy to excite passion and difficult to allay it."

He nevertheless maintained that the United States must remain a sanctuary from violence.

"We must be impartial in thought as well as in action."⁹

Irrespective of Wilson's conviction that neutrality was the surest path to protect U.S. interests, Americans felt a sense of urgency to aid war-distressed populations who were displaced from their homes and made [refugees](#), or were otherwise endangered by the raging torrents of war. They were also intensely concerned about the well-being and survival of soldiers fighting for other nations. The acute sense of responsibility to mitigate suffering derived largely from the enduring ties of the European diaspora to its homelands. Tens of millions of Europeans had immigrated to the United States in recent decades. Many were not yet naturalized citizens, and European men of fighting age were often obligated to return home as military reservists. Wives sometimes accompanied their soldier-husbands as volunteers in [Red Cross](#) surgical units.

Other willing participants in the United States clamored to join foreign militaries, Red Cross societies, and ambulance groups. A recent university graduate, [John Dos Passos \(1896-1970\)](#) was unable to secure a position with the [Commission for Relief in Belgium](#) on account of his young age. He volunteered for ambulance service instead. "We flocked into the volunteer services," Dos Passos recalled. "I respected the conscientious objectors . . . but hell, I wanted to see the show."¹⁰ He soon found the war "futile and senseless."¹¹ In 1914-15, hundreds of thousands of immigrants and U.S.-born volunteers departed American shores for Europe. Collectively, the ardor of reservists and volunteers indicated that the United States' neutrality did little to undermine the strength of transatlantic psychological and familial connections in wartime.¹²

Neutrality's Contested Contours

Despite the variety and intensity of initial American responses to war in 1914-15, few citizens advocated early U.S. military entry in the conflict. The vast majority of Americans were content with their country remaining neutral. They desired peace at home, the safe return of Americans traveling overseas, the freedom to deliver humanitarian supplies to war victims, and a vigorous, undisturbed commerce with Europe.

Neutrality provided a shield of sorts behind which Americans engaged in vitriolic debates about the nature of the war and their country's relation to its conduct. They disagreed about the appropriateness of American loans and trade, which generally favored the Allies. They argued about the wisdom of the Wilson administration's diplomatic interactions with the belligerent and neutral powers. And they could not agree if the nation was vulnerable or secure.

From the middle of 1915 onward, the protective value of neutrality increasingly came into question. Americans abhorred submarine attacks on passenger liners, particularly the sinking of the [Lusitania](#) and the loss of nearly 1,200 civilians in the Irish Sea. In the wake of the *Lusitania's* destruction, Walter Lippmann argued, "This is not a crisis between the United States and Germany. It is a crisis between Germany and the whole neutral world." He hoped Wilson would convene a council of neutrals to deliberate on "whether Germany had not made herself an outlaw." Lippmann, like many Americans, was not yet willing to contemplate direct military reprisal.¹³ But in the aftermath of the *Lusitania's* torpedoing ever more Americans professed "preparedness" was necessary to protect American lives.

In 1915-17, instances of war-related violence were reaching from coast-to-coast across the United States. [Federal law enforcement](#) and counterintelligence services uncovered the secret machinations of German agents that had placed bombs aboard dozens of ships in U.S. ports, spread anthrax and glanders bacilli to kill livestock along the eastern seaboard, and sabotaged numerous factories engaged in the manufacture of war matériel for the Allies. At the same time, an unidentified perpetrator detonated a massive bomb during a Preparedness Day parade, which was winding its way through San Francisco. Fifty spectators were killed or wounded.¹⁴ The purported safety provided by the Atlantic Ocean that Americans had traditionally enjoyed seemed greatly diminished by these disturbing acts. Increasingly polarized, Americans responded in two major and somewhat contradictory ways: by curtailing American intercourse with warring nations, or by bolstering America's defenses to deter aggression.

War's Discontents

A substantial part of the American public believed that the war was folly and the United States government should do its utmost to insulate the country from harm. [Pacifists](#) like [David Starr Jordan \(1851-1931\)](#), the president of both Stanford University and the World Peace Foundation, considered the torpedoing of the *Lusitania* “an abominable act of piracy.” But Jordan insisted that Wilson’s response should be limited to a stern protest despite jingoistic calls for an immediate declaration of war. Jordan summarized the pacifist’s view of war: “War brings financial ruin and leaves undying hatreds.” Nothing could be gained from war.¹⁵

Another pacifist who shared Jordan’s beliefs, [Jane Addams \(1860-1935\)](#), strenuously denounced the war in 1914-15. Nationally respected as a pioneering social worker in Chicago, Addams spearheaded the formation of the Woman’s Peace Party in 1915. She also led the International Congress of Women at The Hague. Addams championed “continuous mediation” and other initiatives calculated to end the war.¹⁶ The divisions among immigrants in the United States along competing coalition lines particularly worried Addams as they threatened to unravel the myriad “Americanization” initiatives she promoted in urban settings. “We revolted not only against the cruelty and barbarity of war,” she recalled in her memoir, “but even more against the reversal of human relationships which war implied.”¹⁷ Vilified by pro-war critics who denigrated pacifism as the domain of the naive, Addams acted upon her beliefs with humanitarian service as a volunteer in fundraising for Belgian relief. She reconciled her opposition to war service by joining the U.S. Food Administration in 1917.

American socialists claimed the war was hypocrisy, an elite-driven madness that exploited underprivileged laborers and minorities. Such views resounded favorably among the working classes in a rapidly industrializing nation characterized by great inequities in the distribution of wealth. They also resonated among critics of America’s financial ties to the Allies. Senator [George W. Norris \(1861-1944\)](#) claimed, “We are going into war upon the command of gold.”¹⁸ A fellow senator of Norris’, [Robert M. La Follette \(1855-1925\)](#), protested that war was a conspiracy of the rich, fought by the powerless poor who would “rot in the trenches.”¹⁹ Their belief that capitalist economic tendrils pulled the United States into war remained a popular view during and after the war.

Nationally influential [labor leaders](#) who opposed the war included the Socialist Party’s candidate for U.S. president in 1912, [Eugene V. Debs \(1855-1926\)](#), and [William D. “Big Bill” Haywood \(1869-1928\)](#), a party spokesman and radical co-founder of the International Workers of the World. As had Addams, Debs decried the outbreak of war. But he could not

reconcile, as did she, war service. Debs exclaimed, "I am not a capitalist soldier; I am a proletarian revolutionist."²⁰ Already dismayed by the pro-war commitment of European labor along nationalist lines, Debs witnessed [Samuel Gompers \(1850-1924\)](#) and the American Federation of Labor lead American workers into a wartime alliance with the U.S. government in 1917. Gompers hoped that labor's alignment with Wilson's war administration would consolidate union gains (his vision failed to materialize and union power was largely broken after the war). But Debs' convictions never wavered. His uncompromising opposition to U.S. belligerency resulted in his conviction and multi-year imprisonment on charges of violating the Espionage and Sedition Acts of 1917-18.

War's Adherents

The belief that war promised to produce constructive as well as destructive forces encouraged Gompers and many progressive era opinion-makers to welcome U.S. preparations for war and even belligerency. Theodore Roosevelt ardently promoted war "preparedness" and military service as a means of cultural revitalization by strengthening America's moral fiber against the enervating forces of crass consumer luxury and materialism. In addition to the perceived cultural benefits of military rearmament and training, the assistant secretary of war, [Henry S. Breckinridge \(1886-1960\)](#) believed "preparedness" would safeguard American interests, lives, and property. Having directed the U.S. Relief Commission in 1914, which facilitated the repatriation of Americans stranded in Europe, Breckinridge helped to catalyze a national movement that promoted military reform and enlargement. By 1916, Wilson grudgingly accepted that preparedness was a prudent policy to pursue. He approved an unprecedentedly large naval expansion and modest plans to enlarge the army. In tandem with these developments, a voluntary military training camp system emerged with the powerful support of the former army chief of staff, General [Leonard Wood \(1860-1927\)](#). The Plattsburg movement, as it was soon called, derived its name after the first city in New York in which a camp was established. The cadets included Wall Street executives, Ivy League undergraduates on summer vacation, daredevils, and other concerned citizens willing to privately pay for military training conducted by the U.S. army. Tens of thousands of "Plattsburgers" welcomed the nation's drift toward war.²¹

For abundantly good reasons, African Americans found it objectionable that their countrymen deplored suffering in Europe while evincing little concern for the chronic domestic exploitation of minorities. Nevertheless, [W.E.B. Du Bois \(1868-1963\)](#), who had studied at the University of Berlin prior to becoming a leading figure in the African American intelligentsia and founding member of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, despised German aggression. His views mirrored those of Irish-Americans in their hatred of

tyrannical oppression. Du Bois unflinchingly informed a German scientist, “I sincerely hope that your country will be thoroughly whipped.”²² As Gompers had rallied labor to the colors, Du Bois encouraged [African Americans](#) to participate in the war in the hopes that war service would purchase them a better status in a deeply racist American society. The hope proved to be largely chimerical. Native Americans also remained dubious about fighting for a nation that sharply curtailed their political and economic rights. But they fought while believing that gallant contributions on the homefront and on the battle-front would expand their freedoms at home. Like African Americans, they were mostly destined for disappointment.²³

Still others who either volunteered or enthusiastically submitted themselves to conscription welcomed new experiences. “We men, most of us young, were simply fascinated by the prospect of adventure and heroism,” recalled one army veteran who subsequently became a distinguished historian at Harvard University, [William L. Langer \(1896-1977\)](#).²⁴ Undoubtedly Langer’s sentiments reflected the opinions of young men who had few responsibilities. With few exceptions among pacifist denominations such as Mennonites, American clergy endorsed the Wilson administration’s “just” war thesis and encouraged their parishioners to embrace the holy cause.²⁵ The extent to which Wilson’s call to arms was truly embraced by the American people remains difficult to gauge. Across the United States, however, patriotic expressions abounded and echoed the official position that the nation had embarked on a military crusade to crush tyranny and secure a lasting peace.²⁶

Dynamics of War Mobilization

Despite conspicuous detractors and numerous reasons to oppose military participation in the First World War, the vast majority of Americans accepted their nation’s slide toward belligerency. Initially they had blamed the war on amorphous causes. But in the minds of Americans, Germany would ultimately become the specific culprit for triggering the war and a symbol of aggression. By 1917, Americans were indignant about Germany’s submarine predations in the Atlantic, Berlin’s forced deportations of Belgian laborers, and its efforts to incite Mexico and Japan to attack the United States.²⁷

Once the United States declared war on Germany in April 1917 and [Austria-Hungary](#) in December 1917, the state unhesitatingly wielded its forbidding instruments of coercive power to silence recalcitrant foes. Most Americans willingly aided government-dominated efforts to crush dissent and build a war machine.²⁸ They joined Wilson’s crusade to destroy Prussian militarism and its purported stranglehold over the Austro-Hungarian and [Ottoman empires](#) whose decrepit leadership and fraying multinational composition encouraged

dissolution.²⁹ Americans viewed the dispatch of a military expedition in 1917-18 as the necessary analogue to the vast quantities of humanitarian relief supplies they had been channeling toward Europe since 1914. Many volunteers engaged in humanitarian services in Europe joined the U.S. army, navy, or Allied forces.³⁰

A historically fragmented American society swiftly experienced the efflorescence of a new [nationalism](#) steeped in a zealously aggressive and messianic-inspired war culture. The brief period of belligerency (April 1917 – November 1918) witnessed the erosion of civil liberties and the promotion of homogeneity through Americanization initiatives including conscription, English-only language instruction in immigrant strongholds, and nationwide marketing campaigns of government propaganda. The abandonment of neutrality also greatly intensified anti-German sentiments domestically.³¹

American children actively participated in the war culture spreading across the United States. Twelve million school children enrolled in the American Junior Red Cross (JRC). Each JRC child volunteer pledged “to honor and serve the flag of my Country and to work, save and give, in order that the Red Cross, the emblem of humanity, sacrifice and service, may bring relief and happiness to suffering people throughout the world.”³² Even as the civic and moral virtues of child participation in war were stressed along Rooseveltian lines in the JRC, American school children were indoctrinated with anti-German beliefs. Classroom instruction for grades six and seven, for example, included lessons on German [atrocities](#) in Belgium. In this heated atmosphere, one JRC student member from New England exclaimed, “Gee, ain’t it awful the way those dirty Germans are treating the kids in Belgium.”³³ From cradle to the grave American society powerfully embraced the Wilsonian crusade.

Wilson was not the exclusive inspiration for this dynamic reordering of American life by a flurry of war activity, but his leadership and rhetorical flourishes gave its direction great inspiration. On the first anniversary of the U.S. declaration of war, 6 April 1918, Wilson proclaimed:

“America and all who care or dare to stand with her must arm and prepare themselves to contest the mastery of the world—a mastery in which the rights of common men, the rights of women and of all who are weak, must for the time being be trodden underfoot and disregarded and the old, age-long struggle for freedom and right begin again at its beginning.”

Wilson insisted that “if it [the war] should be lost, their own great nation’s place and mission in the world would be lost with it.”³⁴

Conclusion: Embracing the Inevitability of War

It is safe to say that most Americans viewed the declaration of war on Germany by Congress as inevitable when it occurred on 6 April 1917. Some of war's fiercest critics reconciled their opposition with commitments to humanitarian service. Other implacable adversaries were jailed for their principled resistance. Yet such diehard opponents hardly dispelled the outburst of enthusiasm and resignation that war had finally come, and that the surest way to bring about its climax was to fight with vigor. Most Americans understood this now-inevitable war as a just war, forced upon a peaceful people by an unrestrained aggressor, Germany.³⁵ Confident in achieving a decision by arms, Americans marched headlong into war.

Branden Little, Weber State University

Notes

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External Links

- [Collins, Ross F.: This is Your War, Kids. Selling World War I to American Children \(North Dakota State University\) \(Article\)](#)
- [Keene, Jennifer D.: Why World War I Matters in American History, in: The American Historian, February 2015 \(Organization of American Historians\) \(Article\)](#)
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