

THE UNITED STATES AND WORLD WAR I

I. KEY QUESTIONS

- Why did the United States enter World War I?
- Could the U.S. have prevented or stopped the war? Could it have stayed out of the war? If so, how?
- Effects of U.S. entry on the U.S.: good or bad? Effects of U.S. entry on the world: good or bad? Effects of allied victory: good or bad?
- The ideas of the 1919 Versailles peace settlement: wise or foolish? Were they grounded on sound or unsound factual and theoretical assumptions?
- Lessons of the war: what can we learn from this episode?

II. BACKGROUND FACTS AND EVENTS, 1895-1914

- A. The U.S. had vast economic strength but small military forces in 1914.
- B. The U.S. economy in 1914: recession-plagued. The U.S. wallowed in a cyclical recession in 1914.
- C. Britain appeased the U.S., 1895-1914 ---> U.S./British amity. German belligerence toward U.S., 1898-1914 ---> chilly U.S.-German relations.
- D. Britain had naval supremacy in 1914. Germany had a smaller surface fleet and few submarines. But Germany had Europe's strongest army.
- E. International maritime "rules," 1914: quite pro-neutral, pro-free trade:
 - 1. Neutral states can ship any goods other than war materiel ("contraband of war") to belligerents, except through a blockade.
 - 2. A blockade must be effective to be recognized (requiring a "close" blockade). Neither Britain nor Germany could impose a close blockade on the other, so U.S. non-contraband trade with both was ok.
 - 3. Contraband is narrowly defined as weapons and war material.
 - 4. Even belligerents' merchant ships cannot be sunk without warning.
- F. Woodrow Wilson: a world-class ego. Much hubris. He thought he knew the answers to the war problem. The American people: innocents abroad.

III. CHRONOLOGY

- A. World War I begins, August 1, 1914. Germany is the chief instigator. The Triple Entente (Britain, France, and Russia) fights the Central Powers (Germany and Austria-Hungary).
- B. The U.S. adopts a strict neutrality policy, August 1914. It restricts U.S. loans to belligerents to inhibit them from buying U.S. weapons and war materiel and asserts a U.S. right to trade with both sides.
- C. Britain conducts a propaganda campaign in the U.S.: "The Western Hemisphere is the Kaiser's next target!" and "This is a war for democracy!"
- D. The U.S. abandons its neutrality policy, late 1914. Key decisions:
 - Washington decides to permit large U.S. arms sales to belligerents.
 - Washington accepts severe British restrictions on U.S. trade with Germany--contrary to U.S. rights under international law (see above).Net result: the U.S. arms and trades with Britain but not Germany.
Contending explanations:
 - Wilson is shortsighted. He doesn't foresee that this will provoke Germany to war-causing belligerence against the U.S.
 - Wilson is pro-ally for security reasons and/or cultural reasons.
 - Economic forces--the U.S. needs export trade to mitigate its recession.
- E. Germany retaliates in fits and starts, 1915-1917. Sinks Lusitania, May 1915; starts unrestricted submarine warfare, January 1917; German-Mexican alliance pursued, and revealed in the Zimmermann telegram, April 1917.
- F. The U.S. decides for war, March 1917. But what kind of war--limited or total? Answer: total.

- G. U.S. war aims grow, 1917-1918, from "war without victors" to total defeat of Germany.
- H. Victory, November 1918; and Versailles Treaty, 1919. Key elements of Versailles:
 - A League of Nations will keep peace and provide security.
 - Germany loses its colonies, pays moderate reparations. But Germany is not occupied or partitioned. Was this a mistake?
 - The U.S. and Britain guarantee French security.

IV. COULD THE U.S. HAVE AVOIDED THE WAR? ALTERNATE U.S. POLICIES, 1914-1917

- A. Full U.S. neutrality, 1914ff. Either compel both sides to allow U.S. trade with the other, or halt trade with both.
- B. Limited U.S. naval war against Germany. Convoy U.S. shipping to Britain and France but otherwise leave Germany alone.
- C. Use America's vast economic and military leverage during 1914-1917 to force the belligerents to make peace.

V. EVALUATING U.S. ENTRY, 1917: A GOOD IDEA?

- A. What threats were averted? (If Germany had won the war--then what?)
- B. What benefits did victory provide? (Hitler, Naziism, World War II ... does anyone spot a problem here?)

VI. EXPLAINING U.S. ENTRY--CONTENDING THEORIES

- A. Three economic explanations:
 1. Neutral rights, commerce protection--"we must protect our 2-way trade with Britain, to capture the efficiencies of the international division of labor."
 - What kind of U.S. war does this explanation predict? A limited U.S. war to protect U.S. commerce with Britain, with no land war on the continent against Germany?
 2. Neutral rights, business cycle variant (export protection)--"we must protect our 1-way exports to Britain, to ease U.S. unemployment."
 - What kind of U.S. war does this explanation predict? A limited U.S. war at sea to protect U.S. commerce with Britain? A strategy of prolonged stalemate rather than a push for decisive victory?
 3. "Merchants of Death"--protection of munitions makers--"we must protect/expand our munitions exports to Britain to keep U.S. munitions makers and workers prosperous."
 - Again, does this explanation predict U.S. pursuit of decisive victory or prolonged stalemate?
- B. National security/balance-of-power. The U.S. fought to contain German military power.
 - What does this explanation predict we should find in the U.S. archives? In U.S. public rhetoric justifying the war?
- C. U.S. mobilization strategy made the U.S. unable to prevent the war and tempted Germany to cut U.S. trade with Britain before the U.S. could move forces to Europe.
 - What does this explanation predict we should find Germans saying about the U.S. in the German archives?
- D. U.S. misperceptions. Wilson didn't foresee a long war, the German sub campaign, or the growth of U.S. dependence on exports to allies.
- E. Common U.S./allied democratic culture.
- F. British propaganda, manipulation of U.S. opinion.

VII. THE IDEAS THAT GUIDED WILSON AT VERSAILLES: TRUE OR FALSE?

- National self-determination ---> peace.
- Colonial rivalries ---> war.
- Free trade and economic interdependence among states ---> peace.
- Large armies and navies ---> war.
- Power-balancing and alliance making ---> war.
- Open diplomacy ---> peace.
- Democracy ---> peace.

Were these the real causes/lessons of WWI?

VIII. GENERAL IMPLICATIONS AND LESSONS OF WWI

A. Interdependence ---> war? (Was the U.S. sucked into WWI by interdependence?)

B. War ---> wider war? (Does WWI show that wars have a propensity to spread, and to engulf the U.S.?)

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