


## Frank W. Buckles: American Witness Against War

By Doug Bandow

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Frank W. Buckles died at the end of February. He was 110 years old, the last living American veteran from World War I. Now only two participants in that war -- of the 65 million originally mobilized -- live on, one in Australia, the other in Great Britain.

World War I was the formative event of the 20th century. The conflict started in the Balkans, triggered by the terrorist assassination of the Austro-Hungarian Archduke, the heir to the throne. Every major European power jumped into the conflict, along with the Ottoman Empire and Japan.

The U.S. came in three years later. The Wilson administration instituted conscription, but some Americans enthusiastically volunteered. Born in Missouri and living on a farm in Oklahoma, Buckles dropped out of school and joined the military at age 16. He said he was aware of the war and thought at the time, "I want to get over there and see what it's about."



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# FOREIGN FOLLIES

AMERICA'S NEW GLOBAL EMPIRE



DOUG BANDOW

Some 4.7 million Americans served during the "Great War." Buckles was a corporal and avoided the trenches. He outlived everyone else.

That did not, however, end Buckles' contact with war. He worked for a steamship company in the Philippines when the Japanese invaded in 1941. He was interned for more than three years by the Japanese. Back in America he eventually bought a farm in West Virginia. In his final years Buckles campaigned for increased recognition of World War I veterans.

Buckles appeared to be the quintessential American soldier. Brave and unsophisticated, largely indifferent to the causes of the conflict in which he served, and among the chief victims of Washington's promiscuously interventionist foreign policy.

Buckles lived his life well. He illustrates the need for a new approach to international affairs.

The United States was birthed in revolution, and early Americans consciously sought to avoid getting entangled in European affairs. For the nation's first century continental, not international, expansion was the norm. Few Americans were interested in taking sides in Europe's periodic wars.

However, the so-called Progressives changed America. They were inveterate social engineers. At home they wanted to discard the values of limited government and individual liberty. Abroad they wanted to junk the virtues of humility and prudence. Presidents Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson were the most malicious exemplars of this statist and militarist philosophy.

President Wilson, reelected in 1916, imagined personally remaking the international order. In the name of ending war and promoting democracy, he took the U.S. into a senseless conflict in which the nation had no interest. No one was threatening America. No one had the slightest interest in threatening America.

Despite Washington's calculated propaganda campaign presenting the conflict as good versus evil, there was little to choose between the two sides. The supposed bad guys were a motley lot: Imperial Germany, noted for its military prowess; Austro-Hungary, a ramshackle multi-ethnic empire which kept numerous groups down at the behest of the ruling Austrians and Hungarians; the Ottoman Empire, which oppressed a different set of peoples; and the undemocratic monarchy of Bulgaria.

None of the so-called Central Powers look very good by today's standards, but none of them lived up to their fearful billing. In freely choosing its

parliament Germany had a broader franchise than in Britain, Austro-Hungary mixed limited elections with liberal authoritarianism, Turkey was notably inefficient in its repression, at least until the war-time slaughter of the Armenians, and Bulgaria was inconsequential.

Nor were the good guys very good. The Entente, with which America ended up as an "associated power," included the anti-Semitic despotism of Imperial Russia (with the Tsar overthrown by revolution shortly before Congress declared war on Germany); Serbia, which practiced state terrorism and thereby started the conflict; the undemocratic monarchy of Romania; and colonial powers Belgium, France, and Great Britain, which collectively held hundreds of millions of people in bondage. It may have been understandable why more Americans identified with the British and French, but that hardly constituted just cause for war.

Worse, the literal trigger for Washington's entry into the conflict was worse than stupid. It was idiotic.

Great Britain imposed a starvation blockade on Germany, applying practices which broke international law. Hundreds of thousands of German civilians ultimately died as a result. President Wilson expressed little more than annoyance at British interference with American shipping.

Berlin employed a new weapon, the submarine. When German commanders attempted to apply traditional rules of naval conflict, such as having U-boats surface to challenge British merchantman, the latter rammed the German submarines. London also employed faux-merchantmen which fired on subs which surfaced with disguised guns. It didn't take many U-boat sinkings for the Germans to retaliate with unlimited submarine warfare.

As a result, Americans risked dying when they traveled on British vessels, such as the infamous Lusitania. Secretary of State William Jennings Bryan reasonably suggested that U.S. citizens not book passage on ships which carried both bullets and babies. For instance, the Lusitania was armed as a reserve cruiser and sank after a secondary explosion from its cargo of ammunition. It was a legitimate military target.

However, President Wilson responded to Germany's tactics with hypocritical fury. He insisted that Americans had the absolute right to book passage on armed merchantmen carrying munitions through a declared war zone, ships of a power which itself was violating the laws of the sea and of war. The president's claim was nonsensical.

Nevertheless, Berlin suspended its attacks until February 1917, when German officials decided that they could wait no longer. President Wilson pressed

Congress to declare war.

In the remaining 19 months of war some 117,000 Americans died. That was a small number compared to at least 16 million dead overall. But it was a high toll for such unnecessary, purposeless involvement in an unnecessary, purposeless contest. While Washington might have preferred a relatively equal balance of power in Europe, none of the contending nations was capable of or interested in attacking America or interfering with Americans' way of life.

Worse, Washington's involvement radically unbalanced postwar Europe. Without U.S. entry in the war, the conflict's most likely outcome was a compromise peace satisfying no one. The result might have been unstable, but the desire for more territorial gains or other war booty would have been tempered by recognition of the cost of renewed conflict. Unfortunately, the Versailles Treaty, the "Diktat" against Germany which leavened greed with hypocrisy, poisoned German politics while weakening British willingness to enforce what was rightly seen as an unjust and unrealistic treaty.

Indeed, World War I was a catastrophe in every respect. It resulted in mass slaughter, wreaked economic havoc, and weakened the social fabric of every major European nation. The conflict destroyed the Austro-Hungarian, German, Ottoman, and Russian Empires and loosed communism, fascism, and Nazism upon the world. Then came the Great Depression, which further aided the "terrible simplifiers" as they reached for power. The natural, almost inevitable, result was World War II, in which Frank Buckles suffered, along with tens of millions of others.

World War II was not a conflict of choice for America like its predecessor. Japan attacked the U.S. and Adolf Hitler declared war on America four days later. But World War II cannot be understood in isolation. World War I was necessary for the occurrence of the second. So was American intervention. The prospect of Washington's involvement in World War I stiffened the allied decision to reject peace negotiations. America's participation allowed the allies to impose the Versailles "Diktat" on the so-called Central Powers.

Without America's misbegotten intervention, the world would have looked very different. The Bolsheviks might not have been able to stage the second, totalitarian Russian Revolution and Benito Mussolini could not so easily have marched his way to power in Italy. The Austro-Hungarian Empire probably would not have dissolved into a gaggle of small, fragile, ethnic-based states and Germany, unlikely to have been humiliated at Versailles, would not have elevated Hitler to chancellor. There would have been no World War II and Holocaust. And the Soviet Union would not have ended up as the world's second superpower, overshadowing all of Europe.

Without World War II, at least as we knew it, there would have been no Cold War, Korea War, and Vietnam War. Even if another conflict eventually occurred -- unfortunately, the era of eternal peace is likely to remain far distant -- the consequences likely would have been far less bloody and destructive.

Woodrow Wilson's current philosophical heirs are the neoconservatives, ready to start wars anywhere for any reason. Like Wilson, they tend to be ivory tower warriors, convinced of the beneficial impact of war without ever serving themselves. They currently take credit for Iraq, which probably has killed at least 200,000 civilians, and Afghanistan, nearing the tenth year of U.S. involvement, longer than American combat in World Wars I and II combined. And the neoconservatives constantly are advocating new militaristic adventures: Syria, Iran, Lebanon, and most recently Libya. Despite past debacles, they continue to receive a respectful hearing in Washington.

Frank Buckles represents every American serviceman and woman. As well as their tragic sacrifice in wars which bizarrely have reduced American security and threatened American liberty. The Obama administration has honored Frank Buckles by burying him at Arlington National Cemetery even though he did not see combat. Even better would be committing to reject the siren call of war that has unnecessarily cost so many young Americans their lives.

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—Thomas Jefferson



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