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Blame Woodrow Wilson for the U.S.' constant wars

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A century ago this month, the U.S. Congress declared war on Imperial Germany. The secure New World foolishly joined the Old World slaughterhouse, consigning more than 117,000 Americans to death.

The chief outcome of the war was to sweep away several reasonably benign if imperfect “ancien regimes” while loosing various totalitarian bacilli. The so-called Great War’s unfinished business was finally settled only in World War II, after consuming as many as 80 million more lives.

By April 1917, Europe had been at war almost three years. The resulting horror vindicated America’s decision to remain aloof.

There was little to choose between the two sides. The many failings of the German-led Central Powers were highlighted, and exaggerated, by brilliant British propagandists who were aided by the United States’ establishment Eastern press.

However, every combatant bore blame for the conflict, starting with Serbia, which engaged in an act of state terrorism. The Entente members were no tribunes of liberalism. Certainly not the anti-Semitic despotism of the tsar. Nor Italy, which sold its people’s blood for land.

The only sensible decision was for America to stay out. There was no conceivable threat to the United States.

It really didn’t matter much to the American people whether Tsar Nicholas or Kaiser Wilhelm was Europe’s dominant monarch, France regained territory it had lost, or ramshackle Austro-Hungary maintained its influence in the Balkans. To paraphrase Germany’s late “Iron Chancellor” Otto von Bismarck, the results weren’t worth the blood of a single American infantryman.

Unfortunately, there was perhaps no president more sanctimonious and certain of his own righteousness than U.S. President Woodrow Wilson.

He could not tell Americans he wanted to take them into war because of his megalomaniacal desire to dictate international affairs. Instead, he took Great Britain’s side in the war’s maritime disputes and allowed events to play out.

Britain violated international law and the rights of neutral nations, most importantly America, while imposing a starvation blockade on Germany. The latter retaliated with U-boat warfare, a new innovation.

American lives were lost and Wilson made an astonishing claim: U.S. citizens had an absolute right to book passage on armed merchant vessels designated as reserve cruisers carrying munitions through a war zone. The most famous case of allowing London to mix “bullets and babies,” as a frustrated Secretary of State William Jennings Bryan pointed out, was the Lusitania. It was torpedoed on May 7, 1915: It sank as a result of the secondary explosion of the ammunition it was carrying.

In an attempt to forestall U.S. intervention, Berlin backed away from unrestricted submarine warfare. Wilson won reelection as the man who kept America out of war. But as the conflict dragged on Germany decided to return Britain’s favor by trying to starve the island nation into submission. In January 1917, Berlin unleashed unrestricted submarine warfare.

On April 2, Wilson requested that Congress declare war on Germany. His eloquence was calculated dishonesty. There was strong resistance from a handful of senators more concerned about America’s interests than Wilson’s fantasies, but the reluctance of America’s heartland counted for little. On April 6, the House followed the Senate in voting for war and propelled America into the Europeans’ last imperial conflict.

Washington’s entry was a disaster. No American other than Wilson benefited as a result. Thousands of brave soldiers and marines died unnecessarily.

Without America’s involvement, a compromise peace loomed likely between the exhausted antagonists. Alas, the infusion of U.S. aid and troops put the Entente over the top.

However, Wilson’s subsequent attempt to dictate a glorious peace failed. Allied leaders plundered the losing powers, traded subject populations as casino chips, and manipulated the U.S. president’s idealistic vision to suit their pragmatic ends.

The losers had no stake in maintaining the settlement. French military commander Ferdinand Foch presciently said of the agreement: “This is not peace. It is an armistice for 20 years.” World War II followed naturally.

The most obvious modern Wilsonians are the neoconservatives, who pushed the Iraq invasion. The major difference is that Iraq was of minor geopolitical stakes compared to Europe.

Wilson inadvertently set in motion a process that destroyed Europe, Imperial Russia, and the Middle East, and slaughtered tens of millions of people. The neocons merely wrecked the Mideast and killed hundreds of thousands.

Wilson’s nominal idealism proved to be deadly. Americans should ponder the lessons of his fateful course. It’s time for U.S. presidents to work hard for peace rather than take what has become the far easier path to war.

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