

Forbes

Veterans Day Lessons: The Sheer Tragedy That Is War

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Another Veterans Day has passed. Tragically, Washington creates more veterans every day. American politicians are constantly going to war for no good reason.

Special Forces to Uganda. What vital U.S. interest is threatened there? Bombing Libya. Why should Washington bail out the Europeans yet again? Nation-building in Afghanistan. Did any American imagine that more than a decade after 9/11 U.S. personnel would be dying trying to create a modern centralized nation state in Central Asia?

There's the unnecessary, counterproductive, and duplicitous invasion of Iraq. The hypocritical and wasteful attack on Serbia over Kosovo. Foolish deployments in Somalia and Haiti. Bizarre little wars against Grenada and Panama. Crazy intervention in Lebanon.

American presidents appear to go to war simply because they can do so. The U.S. is the planet's most powerful military power. No one forces the president to obey the constitutional requirement for a congressional declaration of war. So why not unleash death and destruction from time to time? Sadly, doing so seems to be the best way for presidents to get a high rating from historians.

About the only positive thing is that today's wars are less costly than in the past—to America, at least. Some 200,000 Iraqi civilians probably died in the civil carnage following the U.S. invasion, more than 44 times the number of American deaths.

However, the consequences would be far worse for this nation if Washington managed to get into a shooting war with Russia or China. That may not seem likely, but it is possible. During the Russia-Georgia war in 2008 the Bush administration apparently considered military intervention; Washington has ambiguously committed to Taiwan's defense against China. Wars in both of those cases could lead to nuclear exchanges.

Unfortunately, past policymakers have exercised no better judgment. The U.S. ended up in an extended and costly conflict in Vietnam out of fear that dominoes would fall to the communists. America's Cambodian and Vietnamese allies collapsed—to be followed by the fall of *communist* dominoes years later.

The Korean War grew out of a series of dubious decisions by Washington—dividing and occupying the Korean peninsula, allowing the emergence of an authoritarian and belligerent ally, and failing to arm the Republic of Korea. Nearly six decades later the U.S. is still entangled in the Korean peninsula, defending its populous and prosperous dependent even as the latter subsidizes its bankrupt adversary, North Korea.

World War II at least featured serious aggressors with serious ambitions. But World War II did not occur in a vacuum. It reflected the unfinished business of the Great War, later called World War I. And it is World War I which gave birth to Veterans Day.

Veterans Day started out as Armistice Day, commemorating the armistice which on November 11, 1918 ended more than four years of mass killing. After the far more destructive World War II and surprisingly costly "limited" conflict in Korea, Congress changed the holiday to Veterans Day.

World War I may be the best illustration of stupid Washington policymakers unnecessarily getting involved in stupid wars which cost far more than any conceivable benefits. President Woodrow Wilson's decision to take America into this conflict offers powerful evidence that he was the worst president in American history.

Americans never were pacifists. They let neither moral scruples nor treaty technicalities get in their way of dispossessing Indians of the North American continent. Americans tried to conquer Canada, seized half of Mexico in a war with dubious justification, and killed some 200,000 Filipinos to impose Washington's will on what had been Spain's colony. However, Americans still generally followed George Washington's celebrated advice to avoid permanent "foreign entanglements" with the Old World.

That was smart advice. The Europeans continued to engage in periodic wars which were of no interest to Americans. In the 19th Century alone there were the seemingly endless Napoleonic wars, many conflicts in the Balkans, a couple of wars between Russia and Turkey, conflicts growing out of the 1848 revolution, multiple wars of Italian independence against Austro-Hungary, Britain, France and the Ottoman Empire battling Imperial Russia in the Crimean War, and Prussia's wars with Denmark, Austria, and France.

Americans wisely minded their own business as Europeans busily slaughtered each other again and again.

But Woodrow Wilson took a different approach. Arrogant and overbearing, with a touch of megalomania, he was determined to reshape the world in his image. His militaristic tendencies were first evident in Mexico and Central America.

World War I broke out in August 1914. It was a tragic and foolish war, wrecking Europe at a time of rising prosperity and increasing liberty. None of the European powers threatened America— whoever prevailed would not be launching an expeditionary across the Atlantic. Despite the historical bias towards the Entente, there really was little to choose from between the contending sides.

The Central Powers, especially Bulgaria and the Ottoman Empire, had obvious faults. But Imperial Germany and Austro-Hungary were complicated semi-democratic systems. Indeed, Germany's franchise was broader than that in Britain and France.

On the Entente side, Britain, France, and Belgium were democracies, but also colonial powers which held tens of millions in bondage. Belgium's record in the Congo was particularly appalling. Italy joined the allies in search of territorial booty. Serbia was a blood-stained regime, built on the murder of the prior monarchs. Indeed, a Serb terrorist with links to the Serbian government triggered the war by assassinating the Austro-Hungarian Archduke, the empire's heir-apparent.

The only sensible policy for America was to stay out.

For a time President Wilson did so. But his administration was filled with fans of Great Britain, a perspective magnified by the nation's financial, media, and political elite. London also ran a brilliant propaganda campaign, cutting the trans-Atlantic cable connecting Europe to America and concocting fake German atrocities. The result was a concerted campaign to push the U.S. into war.

In time President Wilson came to lead this effort. Europeans rejected his mediation efforts and he realized that the only way he could influence the war's settlement was to make America a participant. His excuse for taking the U.S. into the conflict was Germany's resumption of submarine warfare. Yet he did little to overturn Britain's starvation blockade of Germany, which harmed American commerce and was illegal under international law.

More important, Wilson's position regarding submarine warfare was ludicrous. He claimed that Americans had an absolute right to book passage on British ships acting as reserve cruisers carrying munitions through a war zone. The British could mix bullets and babies with U.S. support. Indeed, the famed passenger liner Lusitania went down after a secondary explosion of the ammunition that it was carrying.

Although it took time for the U.S. to mobilize, American forces made a critical difference. Germany defeated Russia, but it was not enough. When Germany's Western Front cracked Berlin had to ask for an armistice, which took effect on November 11, 1918. A peace treaty was reached the following year, but Wilson proved to be an ineffective negotiator, mercilessly rolled by the far more adept and ruthless European leaders.

The peace settlement at Versailles turned into a scandalous grab for plunder, violating most of Wilson's celebrated "Fourteen Points." Critics pointed out that almost every provision planted a seed for conflict, that the agreement was but an armistice for 20 years. The allies fell between two stools: a Carthaginian peace which might have kept Germany down and a conciliatory peace which might have strengthened the new Kaiser-less German democracy. Instead, the allies managed to antagonize Germans of all perspectives, aiding Adolf Hitler's rise to power without preventing Berlin from eventually rearming and taking revenge.

As a result of Wilson's delusions of grandeur, 117,000 Americans died and another 206,000 were wounded in World War I. For them the U.S. marked Armistice Day, which in 1954 became Veterans Day in order to honor all American veterans.

But it is worth remembering the original name. Americans who fought and died in World War I should be honored, but those who sent them into combat deserve to be disgraced. The U.S. should not have entered that conflict. America was not threatened by the war and gained no advantage from the peace.

To the contrary, Woodrow Wilson helped make possible the rise of fascism, Nazism, and communism and create the conditions which sparked World War II. Without American intervention, there likely would have been a compromise peace. Reconstructing the continent would have been difficult, but there may have been no fascist government in Italy and almost certainly no Nazi regime in Germany. Even communism might not have existed: it was only because the liberal revolutionaries in Russia foolishly continued the war after deposing the Tsar that the Bolsheviks took power. Without the prospect of American aid, the provisional government might have made peace, forestalling Lenin's catastrophic coup.

Moreover, no power likely would have had an incentive and ability to start another war a couple decades later. The consequences of a continuing stalemate would have been unpredictable and ugly, but almost any outcome would have been better than what occurred. There may be no better example of the unintended consequences of war than what followed the Great War.

Sometimes war is a tragic necessity. However, most of America's conflicts have been unnecessary wars of choice. When Veterans Day makes its next appearance we again should honor America's veterans. But we also should denounce the scoundrels who continue to foolishly sacrifice the lives of so many of America's best and brightest. That is the most important lesson of Veterans Day.