**“The War to End All Wars”**

**Mark A. Stoler**

In the summer of 1914, the archduke of the Austro-Hungarian

Empire, Franz Ferdinand, was assassinated by a Serbian nationalist.

This started a chain reaction that soon engulfed most of the major

powers of the world in a devastating war. On one side stood the

Central Powers: Germany, Austria-Hungary, and the Ottoman

Turkish Empire; on the other side were the Allied Powers: France,

Russia, Great Britain, Japan, and—by l9l5~ltaly. President

Woodrow Wilson quickly declared American neutrality in this

conﬂict, and he asked Americans to remain neutral in thought as well

as action. But in reality, neither Wilson, nor his advisers, nor the

American people, for that matter, were neutral in thought or

in action.

2

For economic, cultural, and ideological reasons, a majority of the

American people, as well as the president and most of his advisers,

favored the Allied side—specif1cally, the British and the French.

Britain and France were both democracies, both had deep cultural

ties to the United States, and they also had deep economic ties to the

United States. All of this was reinforced by British propaganda

during the war, which portrayed the Germans as barbarians,

especially after their 1914 invasion of neutral Belgium and reference

to the treaty guaranteeing the neutrality of Belgium as “a scrap of

paper.” The British also maintained that the Allies were defenders of

democratic values. This did present a problem since czarist Russia

was on the Allied side, which British propaganda tended to ignore.

The majority of Americans clearly did favor the Allied side, but

favoring one side is by no means the same as being willing to fight

for that side. lt is easy to watch a football game on television and

root for one side; it is quite a different matter to get onto the field to

help that side. The same is true with a boxing match; it is one thing

to root for one side in a boxing match and another thing to actually

get into that fearful ring.

3

More important than American thoughts was the fact that American

actions were not neutral. They were supposedly neutral, but in

reality, they were not. Nor were they neutral in their impact on the

two sides, nor in how they were viewed by the Germans. As a result,

the United States would enter the war in April of l9l7 on the

Allied side.

4

A war that began in 1914 and continued into April of 1917 and

beyond that into late 1918 was rather extraordinary. lt was primarily

the result of the unexpected military stalemate that took place on

land. When the war had begun in 1914, each side had believed that it

could end the war quickly and decisively through offensive action.

What just about everybody missed was the fact that the new and very

lethal weaponry and transportation of the lndustrial Revolution had

given an enormous advantage to the defense in warfare.

5

This had first been seen during the American Civil War, but most

observers had missed it. Let me give you just one or two examples of

how the defense had obtained such an advantage in war. Railroads:

Theoretically, you could now run railroads right up to the front lines,

deliver your troops, deliver supplies, and deliver whatever

reinforcements were needed. But if you were attacking, you could

not exactly build a railroad line as your troops advanced. They

advanced on foot, whereas the enemy remained supplied by the

railroads. The enemy also had in place heavy artillery, machine guns

that would mow you down by the thousands, and a host of other

weapons, all of which gave an advantage to the defense.

6

Consequently, with offensive operations stymied, a deadlock ensued

on the Western front. The soldiers began to do what they had done

during the last days of the Civil War when faced with this lethal

bombardment from these new tools from the lndustrial Revolution:

They began to dig in. Very quickly, a series of trenches was created,

running all the way from the English Channel to the Swiss border.

What followed were years of bloody and fruitless “trench warfare,”

wasting, first, thousands; then, hundreds of thousands; and

eventually, millions of lives for a few hundred yards in Belgium and

in northern France.

7

ln this stalemate, both sides turned to economic warfare. The British did so with their fleet via a naval blockade of Germany and its allies. The Germans turned to a new naval weapon, the submarine. This economic warfare would, in turn, eventually bring the United States into the war. The official reason for U.S. entry into the war in April of 1917 was violation of American neutral rights on the high seas by these German submarines. Behind this

stood a host of other reasons that need to be delved into.

8

The submarine was a new weapon of war. It sank ships without

warning, and in doing so, it violated the established international

rules of warfare on the high seas. By those rules, established

centuries earlier, a warship was required to give advance warning to

unarmed enemy ships before sinking them so that passengers and

crew could escape. Indeed, the warship was required to ensure the

safety of those passengers and crew. The submarine did not do this.

The submarine, first of all, was underwater when it attacked. It could

surface, but it did not do so because the British navy was also

violating established rules of international warfare, not only by its

blockade of the Central Powers and its ship seizures on the high

seas—actions that had led to U.S. entry into war with Britain a

century earlier, in the War of 1812—but also by arming its own

merchant ships, by flying the American flag or some other neutral

flag on its ships. If a submarine surfaced, it was extremely fragile. It

could very easily be rammed by these British merchant ships, or the

deck gun on the merchant ship could sink the submarine.

9

The Wilson administration protested what it labeled the illegal

actions of both Britain and Germany, but the protests to Germany

were much more vehement. Wilson warned the Germans that they

would be held to “strict accountability.” His rationale for this

distinction was that the British violations of neutral rights affected

American property; the German violations affected American lives.

This became apparent—and, indeed, it almost led to war—in 1915

when, in May of that year, a German U-boat torpedoed and sank the

British passenger liner Lusitania off the coast of Ireland, killing

1,198 people, including 128 Americans. War fever spread.

10

Wilson rejected calls for war, arguing that there was such a thing

as——as he put it—“too proud to fight.” But in two harsh notes to

Berlin, he demanded German disavowal of this act and an end to

submarine warfare. The Germans proved willing only to express

regret over the incident, but in the so-called Arabic pledge of 1915,

Berlin did agree not to sink unarmed passenger ships. When the

French passenger ship Sussex was mistakenly attacked in 1916, the

Germans promised not to attack unresisting passenger or merchant

ships without warning, thereby resolving the crisis, at least

temporarily.

11

The Germans had protested. The Lusitania, they argued, was

carrying arms and ammunition, which it was. It was, thereby, a valid

target. But they were not about to go to war with the United States.

They did find Wilson’s position hypocritical. As we will see, they

had agreed to his demands only on a temporary basis. From their

perspective, Wilson ignored numerous critical facts. What about the

German loss of life suffered as a result of British violations of

neutral rights, most notably, the illegal food blockade that Britain

had instituted against Germany? What about the fact that the

Lusitania had been carrying munitions? The Germans had also

warned Americans against travel on Allied ships. Allied merchant

ships, the Germans pointed out, were armed and could easily destroy

the fragile submarine via deck guns or ramming if the submarine

surfaced and gave warning. The submarine also was incapable of

putting passengers and crew on board and taking them to safety. It

simply was not big enough. It was a small, fragile craft.

12

Behind all these diplomatic arguments over international law, and

the validity of international law, and whether it should be applied in

this way at this time, in German minds also stood some very un-

neutral American economic and financial ties to the Allies. American

trade with the Allies had been much higher than with the Central

Powers when the war started. With the Allies, it had been $825

million in 1914; with the Central Powers, only $169 million. But

between 1914 and 1916, trade with the Allies exploded, jumping

from $825 million to more than $3 billion. In the process, it ended an

economic recession at home. At the same time, trade with the Central

Powers declined to only $2 million, largely as a result of the actions

Of the British fleet.

13

This enormous expansion of trade with the Allies had led the Wilson

administration to reverse its original ban on loans to the warring

powers. Loans technically were allowed by international law, but

Secretary of State William Jennings Bryan had argued that actually

loans constituted the worst of all contraband goods. As he put it: “It

commands all else.” But as the trade boomed, the United States first

allowed the Allies credit and then allowed outright private loans

when the Allies ran out of funds so that they could continue to

purchase American war material. By 1917, $2.3 billion in private

loans had gone to the Allies. The trade increased further, and the

total result was one of the greatest economic boom periods in U.S.

history. But that also meant that the United States was economically

and financially supporting the Allied war effort. In the process, the

United States shifted from a debtor nation to a creditor nation. New

York replaced London at this time as the financial capital of

the world.

14

Furthermore, as previously noted, neither Wilson, nor most of his

key advisers, nor the American people were neutral in thought.

Almost all were pro-Allied in their sympathies, and many saw a

German victory as a mortal threat to American security and to

American values. Indeed, Wilson—as an academic, a political

scientist writer—had virtually worshiped the British parliamentary

system. His ambassador in London was vehemently pro-British. The

bulk of his cabinet was pro-British. Only Secretary of State Bryan

was truly neutral, and Bryan resigned in protest over Wilson’s harsh

stand during the Lusitania crisis. He would be replaced by the very

pro-British Robert Lansing. With Bryan gone, his ban on loans

disappeared, as well.

15

Similarly, Wilson used his patronage powers to squelch a

congressional resolution, the so-called McLemore-Gore Resolution,

which would have prohibited Americans from traveling on armed

belligerent ships. Wilson insisted that the Senate and the House

reject these bills, which they did on the grounds that they infringed

upon American rights and his concepts of international law, which

his critics labeled archaic.

16

But this did not mean that Wilson wanted to enter the war. He did not, and he attempted on numerous occasions to have the United States mediate a negotiated settlement. In fact, he ran for reelection in 1916 on the platform that he’d kept us out of war. After his narrow reelection in 1916, he also launched a major mediation effort. On January 22, 1917, in a major public

address, he openly called for a mediated “peace without victory,” a

negotiated settlement. But his blindness to the one-sidedness of his

neutrality led him into a diplomatic corner from which he could not

escape by April of 1917.

17

Let’s go back to the Sussex pledge. The German armed forces had

agreed to the Sussex pledge in 1916 only because they did not have

enough submarines to achieve decisive victory. They thus agreed

with the civilian leadership not to push the United States into the war

at that time. Indeed, in retrospect, what may be truly extraordinary is

how few of these underwater craft were actually involved in this

entire crisis. The entire German submarine fleet in 1914 consisted of

only 21 vessels. At their peak in October of 1917, there were only

127 such vessels, of which only one-third operated at any time, but

there was no defense against them. By January of 1917, the German

armed forces concluded that the number that they had was sufficient to make a difference—and quickly.

18

On January 31, 1917, only a little over a week since Wilson’s peace

without victory address, Germany thus reversed policy and

announced the resumption of unrestricted submarine warfare—now

against all ships, unarmed as well as armed, neutral as well as

belligerent-—in a final gamble to starve Britain into submission and

win the war before Germany itself collapsed from the sheer

exhaustion of the years of fighting. From Berlin’s perspective, the

United States was already a belligerent from an economic and a

financial point of view, and the Germans gambled that they could

starve Britain out in five months and end the war before the United

States could mobilize and send any soldiers to Europe. Four days

after the German declaration of unrestricted submarine warfare,

Wilson severed diplomatic relations with Berlin, but that did not

mean war. He still tried to avoid entering the war during February

and March of 1917; that effort failed.

19

Berlin believed that its declaration of unrestricted submarine warfare

would lead to an American declaration of war, and as a result, it

secretly sought to keep the United States preoccupied in the Western

Hemisphere. The best way to do that was a military alliance with

Mexico, with [which] Wilson——as we saw in the last lecture~—had

almost gone to war in 1916. The German foreign minister, Arthur

Zimmermann, thus asked the German ambassador in Mexico to

sound out Carranza on a possible military alliance against the United

States and, in the event of war, to offer help in reconquering the

territories Mexico had lost to the United States in the 1830s and the

1840s: Texas, California, and New Mexico. Zimrnermann also

proposed getting Japan to change sides in the war as a means of

keeping the United States preoccupied in the Paciﬁc, as well as the

Western Hemisphere, and thus, out of Europe. But British

intelligence intercepted this so-called “Zimmermann Telegram” and

handed it over to Wilson, who released it to the press on March 1,

1917. Wilson had also asked Congress for the authority to arm U.S.

merchant ships by this time. The telegram infuriated previously

neutral segments of the public and made Germany appear even more

of a threat than it had merely by the declaration of unrestricted

submarine warfare.

20

Then, in mid-March, the Russian czar was overthrown. He was

forced to abdicate, and a provisional representative government was

established in Russia. That made it appear that this was, indeed, a

war of democracy on one side against autocracy on the other, as

British propaganda in the United States had long argued. By this

time, Wilson had, on his own executive authority, ordered the arming

of U.S. merchant ships. He did so because of a filibuster in the

Senate [conducted by] dissidents that Wilson referred to as a “band

of willful men.” At the same time, Germany began to sink U.S.

merchant ships.

21

Still, Wilson held back. “Once lead this people into war,” he

supposedly warned, “and they will forget what a thing tolerance

is” something that proved quite true. He was also afraid that by

entering the war, the United States would be so preoccupied in

Europe that what he referred to as the “yellow peril,” Japan, would

be able to run amok in the Pacific. But the pressure for war was now

simply overwhelming. As a result of all of these factors, Wilson

reluctantly asked for and received from Congress in April a

declaration of war against Germany. It was not a unanimous vote-

far from it: 373 to 50 in the House of Representatives and 82 to 6 in

the Senate——but clearly, the war vote passed by large majorities.

Rather than limit his war aims to a defense of U.S. neutral rights,

however, Wilson argued in his war message to Congress that the

nation must fight to “make the world safe for democracy.” What he

called for was a war to remake the entire international order so that

another world war could never take place. In doing this, Wilson was,

in effect, reasserting and expanding the old American “mission”

concept, which we have referred to again and again in this course.

He was reasserting it, and expanding it, and saying that the United

States was, indeed, now going to remake the world in its own

image—this time via the sword.

22

To maximize his voice vis-a-vis the leaders of the Allied Powers

who might not support this program and to deal with the military

crisis at hand—and the Allies were facing a military crisis at this

time—Wilson decided to fight the Germans on land in Europe, as

well as on the high seas. Stop and think about this for a minute. lf

you’re going to war because of the German declaration of

unrestricted submarine warfare, theoretically, you could have gotten

away with simply a naval war, as you had had against France in

l798~l799. But Wilson decides, no, the United States will fight on

land, as well. There is a military crisis, but also this will strengthen

his hand at the peace conference. Consequently, the United States

establishes a military draft and sends a large army to Europe, the

American Expeditionary Forces under General John J. Pershing.

Both Pershing and Wilson insist that this force remain separate from

the British and French armies. The British and French wish to

amalgamate American units into their armies. Wilson and Pershing

said no, the American army is to remain separate.

23

U.S. forces would play a major role in halting the final German land

offensive in the spring of l9l 8. They would also play a major role in

the ensuing Allied counteroffensive in the fall of l9l 8, most notably,

at St. Mihiel and in the Meuse-Argonne. The success of this

offensive, this Allied offensive, all along the line in the fall of l9l8.

after their own offensive had been halted during the summer, led the

German military to request an armistice. The Allies agreed but on

terms that made clear that Germany could not resume hostilities

again. On the 11th hour of the l1th day of the l1th month of l9l8, an

armistice went into effect——which, in effect, halted one of the

bloodiest wars in human history. By that time, Germany’s allies had

already surrendered, and U.S. forces occupied approximately 23

percent of the Allied line. Clearly, those forces had played a major

role in Allied military successes, and Wilson would play a major role

in the ensuing peace conference.

24

In January of l9l8, Wilson had outlined his peace program in his

famous “Fourteen Points” speech. He had amplified upon this in

other public statements in l9l8. What Wilson wanted to do was

nothing less than [to] create a new world order to replace the old

system of European power politics that he argued had led to this war,

as well as countless previous wars. Secret treaties and secret

diplomacy would be replaced by “open covenants, openly arrived

at.” Those open covenants would secure freedom of the seas [and]

the removal of tariff barriers, would establish equal trade

opportunities, and would lead to a dramatic reduction in armaments

to a level needed only for “domestic safety.” Furthermore, nations

occupied during the war were to be evacuated and restored to

sovereignty, while the old multinational empires run by kings and

emperors were to be destroyed and replaced by national self-

determination for their minority groups and democratically elected

governments, with appropriate territorial adjustments.

25

Furthermore, the balance-of-power system that had failed to keep the

peace in 1914 would now be replaced by what Wilson referred to as

“The general association of nations” that would guarantee the political

independence and territorial integrity of all via the use of

“collective security”—that is, the establishment of an international

body and legal system whereby all nations would agree to resolve

their disputes peacefully and to act in unison against any aggressor

nation. Collective security was to be the wave of the future; the

balance of power had failed and would be rejected.

26

Historians still debate whether the United States should or could

have avoided entry into the First World War. Would a German

victory have threatened the security of the nation? Did such thoughts

of security even enter Woodrow Wilson’s calculations? Were there

alternative policies that should have been pursued‘? Historians still

argue over all of these questions. What is clear is that Wilson’s

policies did lead to American entry into the war, despite his desire

not to do so, and that he decided to join the war as a crusade to

remake the entire international order. The ensuing peace negotiations

in Paris, which Wilson would attend personally, would determine

whether or not he would succeed.