

INTERNATIONAL CONFLICTS: WW1 & WW2

As we consider the different international conflicts in which the United States has been involved (and that have shaped our present foreign policy, and the world in general), it's important to learn the players of each conflict, how and why the U.S. became involved, and what the outcome was.

Let's unpack what "international conflict" means, first of all. *International* means between two or more nations. *Conflicts* are problems or disagreements. So **international conflicts** are problems on a global scale – disagreements between 2 or more nations. This can take the form of wars, but it can be managed by **diplomacy**, the business of maintaining relations with other nations.

In the United States, only Congress has the power to declare war, but the President has the final say on how the war is waged. This reflects the **separation of powers** built into the Constitution (that originates from the ideas of Montesquieu). All the branches of the military answer to the President, who is the commander in chief of all the armed forces. This is how the Constitution splits up wartime authority across the branches of government.

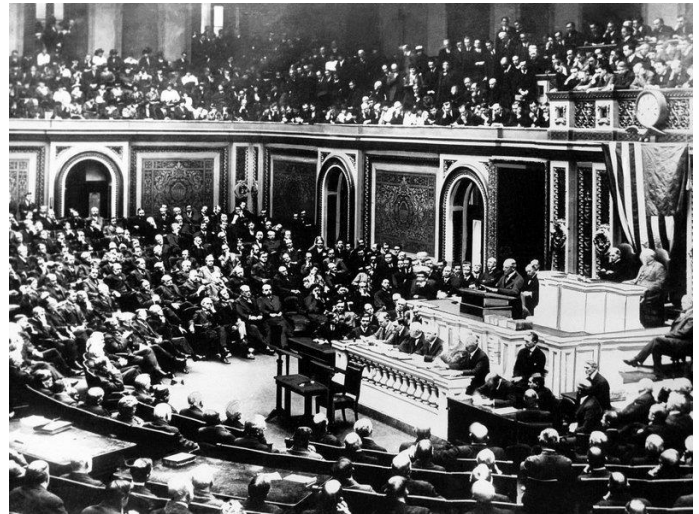


Image 1: The U.S. Congress declares war on Germany in World War I.

World War I ("The Great War")

The world had never seen a truly modern global war like this one. It was the first war to prominently feature airplanes, tanks, submarines, chemical weapons, and trench warfare. The opposing sides were known as the **Central Powers** (an alliance that included Germany, Austria-



Hungary, and the Ottoman Empire), and the **Allied Powers** (an alliance that included Great Britain, France, Russia, and eventually the United States). War broke out in 1914 with the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, who was the heir to the Austria-Hungary throne. It lasted four long years until Germany's surrender in 1918. The U.S. did not join the war until 1917.



Image 2: The Lusitania is sunk by a German U-Boat, causing over 1,000 passengers to lose their lives.

Why did it take the U.S. so long to join the fight? Well, the United States declared itself **neutral** at the start of the war, meaning that it would not take sides or get involved in the conflict. We used diplomacy to maintain relations with both sides, and the idea of getting involved in “Europe’s problem” was very unpopular with most Americans, who remained **isolationist** at heart.

But that changed. Germany and its allies sank hundreds of Allied ships in an effort to win the war. Some of them held American passengers, who died. Germany believed it had a right to do this, but they stopped for a while when Americans became very angry at these actions. Germany also wrote a secret

telegram to Mexico’s government suggesting that they work together to attack the United States. This message, called the Zimmerman telegram, became public knowledge when British spies discovered it. This angered Americans further, but the final straw was when Germany resumed its **submarine warfare** and targeted American merchant ships, sinking them in the middle of the Atlantic.

The U.S. Congress officially declared war against the Central Powers in 1917. President Woodrow Wilson said that America’s entry into the war would help make the world “safe for democracy.” In late 1918, the war ended when Germany and its allies surrendered and agreed to stop fighting. We mark this day as **Veterans Day**, on November 11th every year.

World War II

Just two decades later, another global war engulfed the world, with equally horrible results. This world war was even worse than the previous one, and it was the first to feature massive bombings of civilian targets by air, including the first ever use of atomic weapons. Efforts to create an international organization to prevent war, called the **League of Nations**, largely proved unsuccessful. The United States had retreated into its more traditional isolationist foreign policy, and the world saw both economic **depression** (hardship) and the rise of several dictators and totalitarian governments, which tried to rule over every aspect of daily life. These dictatorships in Germany, Italy, and Japan formed the **Axis Powers**. Their goal was nothing short of world domination. Opposing them were a group of **Allies** that included Great Britain, France, China, and eventually the Soviet Union (another brutal dictatorship, but fighting against the Axis Powers), as well as



Image 3: The Japanese launched a sneak attack by bombing Pearl Harbor in 1941.

the United States. The war broke out in 1939 when Nazi Germany invaded Poland. It didn't end until 1945, when Japan finally surrendered after the dropping of two devastating atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The U.S. did not join the Allies (and the war) until 1941.

The U.S. tried to remain neutral, like before, for the first two years of the war. Americans were no friends to the Axis Powers, but they didn't want to get involved in another global war. So why did the U.S. become involved? On December 7th, 1941, the Japanese attacked **Pearl Harbor**, a U.S. Navy base in Hawaii. It was a sneak attack. Japan planned to conquer more territories in Asia and wanted to make sure that the United States would be too weak to interfere. The attack destroyed 18 ships and hundreds of airplanes, and more than 2500 Americans lost their lives. Immediately after, the U.S. Congress officially declared war against Japan. Germany declared war against the United States several days later, and America was in another world war.

American military and economic might were crucial to Allied success during the war. The United States fought in two areas: in Europe and North Africa against Italy and Germany, and in the Pacific against Japan. Both campaigns were filled with hard, brutal fighting, but the Allies eventually won out. Nazi Germany surrendered in May 1945. Japan held out for longer and tried to fight on, but they surrendered in September 1945 after the two atomic bombs were dropped.

The end of World War 2 brought with it great joy for most Americans, as soldiers returned home to start new lives. But the end of the war also changed many things throughout the world. Its end saw the creation of the United Nations, an international organization dedicated to aid and world peace that still exists today. It saw the United States finally end its focus on an isolationist foreign policy to embrace alliances and its role of the leader of the free world. And it led to a new conflict with the Soviet Union that tended to stay "cold," one which involved words, ideas, and spies more so than it did weapons and fighting: the **Cold War**.

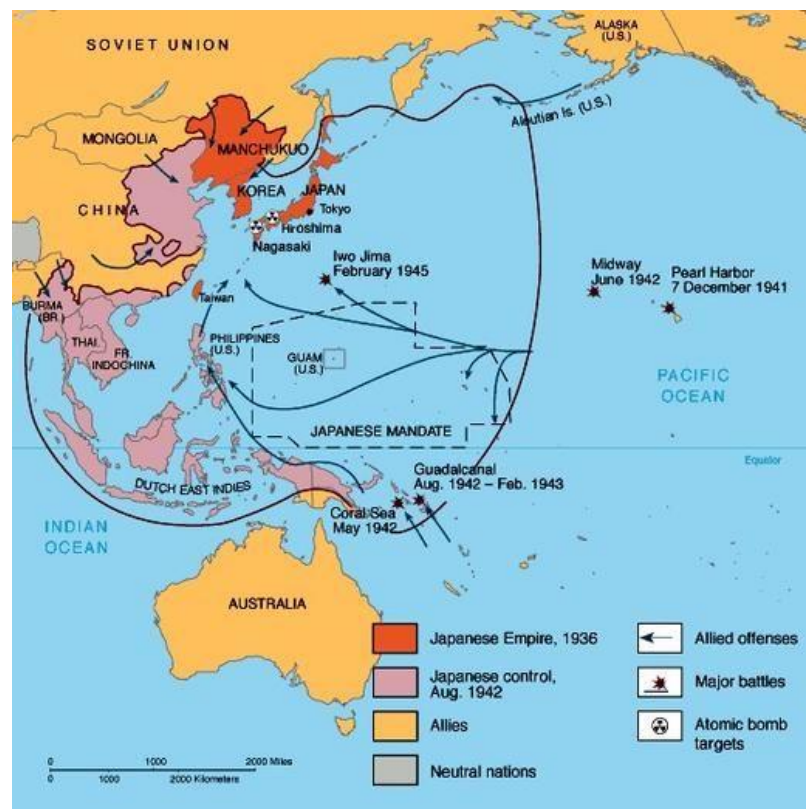


Image 4: A Map of the Pacific Theater of WW2. The circle in the middle of the map shows the largest extent of the Japanese Empire in 1942. The war ended in 1945.