America in the First World War

Jennifer Keene explores the events that led up to the United States of America joining the First World War and describes the effect that participation in the war had on American social and political life.

‘The world must be made safe for democracy,’ proclaimed President Woodrow Wilson as he stood before Congress asking for a declaration of war against Germany. After remaining neutral for nearly three years, why did the United States finally decide to enter the war in April 1917? What did the war mean to Americans on the Home Front and those who fought overseas? Wilson’s idealistic pronouncements propelled the United States into a position of world leadership, but the war’s impact on American democracy was murkier.

The American path to war

When the First World War began in 1914, the United States resolved to sit on the sidelines. Neutrality, however, proved easier to proclaim than maintain. The expectation of a short war, the American people’s diverse ancestral ties to both Allied and Central Powers, and the lack of any clear danger to US territory made Wilson’s decision to remain neutral both practical and popular. In 1915, however, the political calculus changed when Britain and Germany both began targeting enemy supply lines on the high seas. The naval war directly affected the United States. The British blockade of the North Sea annoyed Americans, but rapidly increasing trade with Britain made up for losing access to German markets. The German policy of unrestricted submarine warfare, however, quickly became intolerable, especially when American lives were lost. On 7 May 1915, a German U-Boat torpedoed the Lusitania, a British passenger ship, off the coast of Ireland, killing 1,198 civilians, 128 Americans among them. Germany defended the sinking, pointing out that Americans had been warned to stay off ships heading into the war zone. Wilson nonetheless demanded that Germany amend its policy of unrestricted submarine warfare by curtailing attacks on passenger and merchant ships. After two more controversial sinkings, Germany temporarily agreed.

In 1916, domestic debates over the war became more heated. The ‘Preparedness Movement’

argued that the nation was vulnerable to attack and thus needed to strengthen its military, but pacifist groups such as the American Union Against Militarism saw any increase in defence spending as a step towards war. Midwesterners and southerners criticised Wall Street for loaning money to Britain, and pressed for an arms embargo. Meanwhile, people throughout the nation contributed food, clothes, and money to help ease civilian suffering in Belgium, France, Italy, and Russia. Few people, however, donated to help German civilians suffering from the effects of the blockade.

Finally, on 2 April 1917 Wilson went before Congress to ask for a declaration of war. Wilson cited Germany's decision to resume unrestricted submarine warfare, its spying and sabotage operations within the United States, and the Zimmermann Telegram (an attempt to lure Mexico into fighting the United States alongside Germany) as evidence of Germany's hostile intent against the United States. The president also declared that America was fighting for 'the ultimate peace of the world and for the liberation of its peoples, the German peoples included'. After a testy congressional debate, the United States declared war against Germany on 7 April 1917. It did not declare war against Austria-Hungary until 7 December. The United States entered the Allied coalition as an associated power with no obligation to accept pre-existing Allied agreements on post-war territorial settlements. Wilson was determined to press for a peace settlement based on the principles listed in his war address and, later, on the Fourteen Points.

Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points

Wilson issued his Fourteen Points at a perilous moment when revolution-torn Russia was negotiating a separate peace agreement with Germany. In his address to Congress on 8 January 1918, Wilson tried (unsuccessfully) to convince Russia to reject the punitive peace offered by Germany. Repeating the call for a peace without victory, Wilson assured Germany 'a place of equality among the peoples of the world' after it evacuated all occupied territories in Europe.

The majority of the Fourteen Points focused on settling the problems that Wilson believed caused

the war (nationalism, imperialism, the arms race, and territorial disagreements). The final point proposed the creation of a league of nations to guarantee ‘political independence and territorial integrity to great and small states alike’. This ambitious plan was also designed to please Americans. Wilson’s emphasis on maintaining freedom of the seas addressed the issue that had driven the United States to take up arms against Germany. His desire to reduce arms ‘to the lowest point consistent with domestic safety’ reflected America’s traditional preference for a small peacetime army. Finally, Wilson suggested redrawing boundaries in southern and eastern Europe to place populations with similar ethnic identities in the same nation-states, an idea that appealed to recent immigrants from these regions.

The Fourteen Points raised hopes that a better world might emerge from the terrible slaughter. Germany even requested an armistice based on the Fourteen Points in October, 1918, eager to avoid a harsh peace settlement. Wilson headed to the peace conference as the man of the hour, but French premier Georges Clemenceau was more sceptical. ‘God gave us the Ten Commandments and we broke them. Wilson gives us the Fourteen Points. We shall see,’ he quipped, foreshadowing the opposition that Wilson would encounter as the victors negotiated the terms of peace.

Public perception of the war

Official propaganda and expansive wartime sedition legislation shaped how Americans talked and thought about the war. Speaking out against the war meant risking arrest and possible jail time, with the result that only the most committed pacifists continued to criticise the war. Even remaining silent was not enough. The government urged everyone to actively contribute to the war effort. Propaganda posters whipped up patriotic fervour, encouraging Americans to enlist in the armed forces, conserve food, buy liberty bonds, sing patriotic songs, knit socks, and keep on the lookout for German spies. The Committee on Public Information orchestrated the government’s wartime propaganda campaign which permeated the workplace, cinema, music halls, and even classrooms.

Wilson led the nation into war with high ideals, but once American soldiers began dying, sentiment hardened against anything German. States outlawed teaching German, symphonies stopped playing works by German composers, and among the large population of German Americans, citizens changed their last names in droves to demonstrate their loyalty. Vigilantes attacked people identified as ‘pro-German’, often forcing the accused to kiss an American flag, sing the national anthem, or endure physical torture.

The fight for democracy ‘at home’

Female suffragists and African American civil rights activists drew inspiration from Wilson’s promise to spread democracy. Radical female suffragists pioneered a new protest tactic when they decided to picket the White House to draw attention to their demand for the vote. Moderate suffragists chose a strategy of loyalty, volunteering extensively for wartime committees to demonstrate that the nation depended on its female citizenry to defend the nation. The mounting pressure eventually convinced Wilson to become the first president to publicly support a constitutional amendment guaranteeing female suffrage, a major step towards the eventual ratification of the 19th Amendment in 1920 which officially granted the vote to women. However, citizenship and state laws meant that black women, Native American women, Asian women, women unable to pay poll taxes and more besides were prohibited from exercising their right to vote.

Much to their dismay, African Americans discovered that it made little difference whether they served the nation loyally or protested loudly, and that the nation’s commitment to white supremacy hardened over the course of the war. However, the war was a transformative moment for the African American community. Community-based mobilization during the war, whether to rally the black community to buy war bonds or to protest discriminatory treatment of African American soldiers, benefitted the civil rights movement. New leaders emerged, membership in fledgling groups like the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) grew, and the war’s

democratic rhetoric infused the movement with a new ideological focus. Returning black soldiers, angry about the racial discrimination they encountered within the segregated wartime army, helped form an ethos of ‘fighting back’, both literally and figuratively, which laid the foundation for a more militant post-war civil rights movement.

The experiences of troops

Through conscription, the US army grew from a constabulary force of 300,000 peacetime troops to a 4.2 million-strong American Expeditionary Force (AEF) over the course of 18 months. The army reflected the ethnic and racial diversity of the American population, and included non-English speaking immigrants, Native Americans, African Americans, Hispanic Americans, and second-generation German Americans. The propaganda slogan ‘Americans All!’ promoted wartime service as a unifying, Americanising experience that rendered differences in language, culture, and religion irrelevant. Race still mattered, however. The entrenched racism of white Americans shaped the experiences of all troops and racial discrimination remained widespread. The US wartime army was rigidly segregated and black troops, who were largely under the command of white officers, were subjected to poor living and working conditions.

Germany had taken a gamble by resuming unrestricted submarine warfare, hoping to defeat the Allies before the United States could make a difference in the war. Germany launched a series of spring offensives along the Western Front trying to secure a definitive break-through, but ultimately lost this race against time. In the late spring, the Americans fought their first battles at Cantigny, Belleau Wood, and Château-Thierry on the outskirts of Paris, then helped the Allies drive the German army back throughout the summer.

In the fall, General John J Pershing took command of an American-controlled sector along the Western Front, an important development that made the American military contribution highly visible. Pershing had successfully fended off British and French efforts to permanently amalgamate

the American forces into pre-existing Allied armies. Wilson wanted American troops to play a crucial, independent part in the ultimate victory, thereby earning him a prominent role in shaping the peace. The AEF fought its last and largest battle in the Meuse-Argonne from 26 September to 1 November 1918, its contribution to the final Allied offensive that ended the war. This 47-day operation involved 1.2 million American troops and is the second most lethal battle in American history.

Overall, the American army engaged in six months of active fighting at the cost of 53,000 lives. In addition, nearly 63,000 men died of disease, primarily from influenza, and 200,000 veterans returned home wounded. Although we have recently seen a small revival of public interest in these men, they, and the battles they fought, have been largely forgotten by most Americans