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America's 20th Century Interventionist Doctrine: New Opportunities, Drastic Measures

In his Farewell Address, George Washington advised the United States to avoid entanglement in European affairs, and America did so faithfully for 125 years… until American troops landed in Europe in 1917. Whereas previously US foreign policy had been primarily concerned with conquering new land, such a direct assertion of military power to impact European events indicated a sharp turn in its foreign policy. Yet the US had several powerful incentives to intervene in World War I, because its momentous ramifications for the US motivated Americans to protect their interests. On the one hand was an unprecedented threat: an Allied defeat would mean German domination over France and Britain; and with the democracies of Europe broken, the German monarchy would stand as the unopposed superpower of Europe, discrediting democracy and threatening the security of the democratic United States. On the other hand was an unprecedented opportunity: a victory of the democratic Allied Powers over the German kaiser would be a compelling ideological validation of democracy over monarchy; meanwhile the US would rise out of the post-war ashes free and uncontested, the newest political, economic, and military superpower of the world. The combination of these incentives motivated the US to assert its military power to achieve a greater footprint of political and economic influence in Europe. The United States demonstrated its new power as it exercised hands-on influence of the world's political and economic affairs in the decades after the war. Indeed, the United States reversed its long-standing isolationist trend during World War I not merely to mitigate the German threat but also in order to seize an unprecedented opportunity to expand its international political and economic influence.

Firstly the arrival of US troops in Europe displayed a tectonic shift in US foreign policy because it attempted to manipulate the outcomes of conflicts between European nations, whereas most of the US's previous military excursions were motivated by the genuine American passion for outward expansion. For instance, in the War of 1812 American troops attempted to conquer Canada for the United States. So fervent was the American war fever that Thomas Jefferson called the annexation of Canada "a mere matter of marching" (Nugent 73). Speaker of

the House Henry Clay boasted that the militiamen of Kentucky could do it themselves (Bailey 138). In fact, the American conquerers were repelled easily, but such confident rhetoric from the nation's leaders displayed a true fervor for expansion as a central objective of foreign policy. Similarly the US's invasion of Texas and Mexico in the Mexican War (1846-1848) sought to solidify the US's annexation of Texas; but the US also claimed New Mexico, the Nueces strip south of Texas, and California in the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. Though the annexation of Texas had sparked the war, in the end Americans claimed a slice of the American Southwest larger than the 1803 Louisiana Purchase (Nugent 215). The Americans' zealous land-grabbing in this instance demonstrated that a passion for expansion still pervaded the American mind in the 1840s. Finally the Spanish-American war confirmed the survival of this expansionist mentality at least up to 1898. Since hearing of the native rebellion in the Spanish colony of Cuba, the American yellow press was evoking terrible images of unspeakable horrors inflicted upon the Cuban revolutionaries by Spanish oppressors. For example, an illustrator sent to Cuba to detail the massacres telegraphed home: "Everything is quiet. There is no trouble here. There will be no war," to which his editor replied: "You furnish the pictures and I'll furnish the war." In addition, war hawks exploited the explosion of the American battleship *Maine*[1] in Havana harbor by citing it as evidence of Spanish aggression. In fact other evidence suggested that the explosion had been an accident; completely unrelated to Spanish treachery (Williamson 453-4). By painting the Spaniards as cruel oppressors, through shameless falsehoods and bloated exaggeration, the American presses mobilized America to fight a moral war to stop the Spanish tyranny over Cuba. The United States claimed Puerto Rico, Guam, and the Philippines while forcing Spain to recognize Cuban independence (Brinkley 560). So ingrained was expansionism in the US conscience by this time that the presses could lie and exaggerate events simply to justify invasion. Therefore, why the US would change the objectives of its foreign policy to European intervention when the expansionist passion seemed to be at high tide is certainly a subject of intrigue. In short, America's history of restricting foreign conflict to local expansionist crusades made World War I the single greatest instance of military foreign intervention at that point, marking a tectonic shift in the foreign policy of the United States.

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[1] The *Maine* had been anchored in the Spanish harbor "on a 'friendly' visit" to protect American lives and property from the mounting violence in Cuba (Williamson 455).

But what unprecedented conditions in the world politic merited such an unprecedented military response from the United States as an invasion of Europe? On the one hand was a colossal threat to the United States—indeed, certainly unmatched in the brief history of the modern democratic world: if the German monarchy was allowed to win the war, then Britain and France, the only stable democracies in Europe, could be wiped off the map. Firstly it is disconcerting enough that the democratic experiments in the world would be significantly discredited by the Allies defeat. In his Gettysburg Address, Abraham Lincoln reminded the world that America had its roots in a great democratic experiment, "conceived in liberty and dedicated to proposition that all men are created equal." He described the American Civil War as a test of whether "that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, could long endure" (Lincoln). When he described a nation "so conceived and so dedicated," he meant any nation founded upon liberty, freedom, and power derived from the consent of the governed. That the States remained United after the Civil War proved that democracy could "endure" a period of such great civil unrest, but arguably the aggression of monarchial Germany against democratic Britain and France once again took the *"democracy v. monarchy"* case back to court —"is democracy as effective as monarchy in war?"—and on the largest scale to date. If just one monarchy were allowed to defeat the two most powerful democracies in Europe, some could blame democracy itself for being an ineffective system in times of war. One could say democratic government is too cumbersome to effectively provide for the common defense in times of war. If the democratic systems were defeated, to some this would confirm them to be less effective in war, and one more argument for maintaining Europe's monarchies would be validated, certainly to the disadvantage of the democratic US. Thus a German victory would have firstly threatened the United States by damaging the validity of democracy as a governmental system.

Yet even worse, secondly Europe might become again a realm of kings, queens, and subjects; given the expansionist tendencies of monarchs, it is not unreasonable to further conclude that the new German empire would seek to expand overseas… perhaps to crush the last belligerent democracy in the world. The United States, militarily puny in 1914 compared to Europe's armies, would crumple under such a large-scale European assault as a German Empire of Europe would be capable of delivering. Such a blatant threat to the US's domestic security had not been equated since British soldiers sacked Washington, D.C. and burned the White House in

the War of 1812 (Brinkley 211), indicating just how novel and alarming the possibility of European invasion—and or domination—was to Americans in 1914; after a monarchial German Empire was covering two continents there would certainly be no more governments "of the people, by the people, for the people" anywhere in the world. In addition this possibility was not far from the German conscience: in February 1917 Wilson received from Britain an intercepted telegram, sent from Germany to Mexico. The "Zimmermann telegram" proposed that in the event of war between Germany and the US, Mexico should invade the United States; in return Mexico would regain its "lost provinces"—Texas and much of the American southwest—after the Allies were defeated (Brinkley 609). The Zimmermann telegram granted US policy-makers a haunting perspective into Germany's vision of the future: the continental United States cut up like a cake to be divided amongst itself and its allies. In this sense World War I was not merely a war to make the world "safe for democracy" as Woodrow Wilson proclaimed (Wilson), but also a war safeguarding the democracies of the world against certain extinction by monarchial domination. Therefore a German victory and a renewed monarchial order in Europe would prove an unprecedented menace to the national security of the democratic United States.

On the other hand was an equally motivating and equally unprecedented opportunity for the United States. The Allies seized an opportunity to validate democracy, morally and militarily, by exercising a strategic slander campaign while ruthlessly seeking military victory. Recall that the Allied superpowers Britain and France were democratic, while the Central Powers' de facto leader Germany was a monarchy. Thus World War I was not merely a war between the Entente and the Central Powers, but also a war of democracy versus monarchy, determining the merits of each and producing a verdict, a court case with an international jury: "*democracy v. monarchy*". President Wilson may have been expressing the very goal of eliminating the German monarchy when he asked Congress to declare a war which would make the world "safe for democracy" (Wilson). Such high rhetoric from the President certainly indicated a commitment to moral ideals, demonstrating how the US used World War I to associate democracy with highly moral objectives. The American press as well utilized World War I to slander monarchy while exalting democracy. The sinking of the British cruise liner *Lusitania* by German U-boats, for instance, was exploited by the American press as proof of the German's unspeakable brutality (Brinkley 608). Indeed US propaganda throughout the war

painted Germany as cruel and savage. For example one poster endorsing citizens to buy liberty bonds declared “Remember Belgium,” and presented the German invasion of little Belgium as a rape by depicting a brutal German soldier leading away a frightened young girl (Young). That the government would so specifically target Americans’ sense of morality to cultivate support for the war indicates a firm belief that their side was morally benevolent, and the other purely evil. Significantly, the German kaiser was actually overthrown by his own people in late 1918 (Watson). That a democratic revolution occurred during the war in Germany of all places implies that the Allies were wildly successful in promoting their government’s moral and military supremacy; so successful that the Germans agreed with them. Furthermore it was the new Weimar Republic, not the old monarchy, which eventually surrendered to the Allies (Watson). This distinction fortifies Wilson’s assertion that it was monarchies who were the aggressors in the conflict, and America the benevolent shield of liberty and peace alongside other republics. In brief, highly moral rhetoric and successful propaganda campaign enabled the US to use World War as a compelling confirmation of its democratic experiment in government.

If it wasn’t rewarding enough to avert domination by a German Empire, Americans saw in an Allied victory the opportunity to expand American influence over the globe. The last time the United States faced a comparable opportunity to manipulate European politics in its favor was when Britain was repelling Napoleon’s invasion; in fact many New England Federalists supported sending ships overseas to assist the British constitutional-monarchy against the French empire. Ironically the United States had declared the petty War of 1812 near the same time to force the end of impressment (Bailey 140). This was a tragic diplomatic error in several ways. Most importantly the fledgling republic essentially allied itself with Emperor Napoleon by declaring war on Britain while they resisted his invasion. Secondly what is the livelihood of an American sailor who tragically became a British sailor, when compared to the possibility of an expanding Napoleonic empire in Europe? New England Federalists in particular opposed Napoleon so strongly that their militias boycotted the war, and sold large quantities of supplies to the British invaders (Bailey 146). Once one recalls that New England had the most active ports in America and therefore exported the most potential victims of impressment, the Yankees’ resistance to the anti-impressment war becomes all the more symbolic. But the Yankees’ sense did not matter; policy-makers on the Potomac had little, and so the War of 1812

was declared, eliminating any possibility of an alliance with Britain, which may indeed have proved fruitful for the US in the event that the two English-speaking nations conquered France together. The War of 1812 was a disaster in that the US worked against its own interests by indirectly endorsing Napoleon. In short this complete political and factional fiasco prevented the US from influencing European events to its advantage when it had the chance. Fortunately the United States, in World War I, was given an opportunity not to make such a grave diplomatic error again. Moreover the Selective Service Act allowed the US to assemble sizable armies and navies by May 1917 (Brinkley 611). With a powerful military force, the US could finally seize an opportunity which it had missed by a deplorable error of diplomacy one hundred years before: to turn temporarily threatening European events to its favor. Perhaps the Spanish-American war as well had granted Americans a taste of imperial indulgence, which they craved more of. Recall that the interventionist conflict with the Spanish at the turn of the 20th century had indeed produced immense territorial, economic, and political benefits for the United States, including the acquisition of the Philippines, Guam, and Puerto Rico (Brinkley 560). Puerto Rico in particular was an island of massively lucrative sugar-plantations; a tariff-free sugar supply was surely welcome to the merchants of the continental US. If such a recent imperial crusade was so beneficial, perhaps some Americans saw another "splendid little war" in World War I, where the US could reap similarly fantastic benefits while suffering a fraction of the losses that their opponents—and allies, in the case of World War I—did. In fact, this is almost exactly what happened. Thus it seems that World War I was viewed as a critical opportunity for the US to exercise international influence to its own economic and political advantage.

Yet how, specifically, would winning a world war with its British and French allies ensure the US the position of heightened international influence on the world theatre which it desired? To put it bluntly it did not. By an apparent accident of fate, the economic, military, and political toll which World War I took on Britain unseated it as arbiter of the world, allowing the US to rise into world superpower status in its place. In truth the US was a poor ally to Britain and France, allowing Germany to batter them nearly to submission before the United States came to a heroic rescue in 1917 (Bailey 593). This particular form of Allied victory was closer to US victory, and it allowed the US to vastly increase its international influence by arguably saving the Entente from German domination; and simultaneously establishing itself as a world superpower

in political, economic, and militaristic terms. In addition, it required indiscriminate warfare upon American shipping by German submarines to motivate the US to finally declare war (Bailey 593). Some historians may cite this as evidence of the US's opportunity-focused self-interest. While that is a relevant and notable analysis, it misses an even more crucial detail: warfare on American shipping was not merely crippling to the US economy; it was too crippling to the Allied war effort since millions of dollars of precious war-supplies headed for Britain were being sunk by German submarines. For example in April 1917, sinkings of Allied ships totaled almost 900,000 tons. In fact one of every four ships sailing out of British ports did not return (Brinkley 610). In light of Germany's newest aggression the US then seemed to finally understand that the Allies were at last becoming truly defenseless and thus a military response was necessary. To its credit the United States did finally come to the European democracies' aid, yet the delay underscores some inconsistencies in its ideology: if the US was truly fighting a war for democracy, there should not have been hesitation at all; the very first instance of monarchial aggression should have been enough to provoke a full-scale military response, in defense of its allies, and in defense of democracy. Although Wilson proclaimed otherwise in his rather sanctimonious declarations of a war to make the world "safe for democracy" (Wilson), it seems difficult to conclude that the war was entirely moral. Rather, the US's belated support of its allies and the disparities between its behavior and its supposed ethics suggested that its real objective in entering the war may have been a pragmatic furthering of its own interests: the manipulation of European events to its advantage, and the seizing of an international position of power. Truly, none of Wilson's propositions conveniently granted the United States a grand seat of influence in world affairs more than his League of Nations (Brinkley 621); being the origin country of its founder, the United States would perhaps be "the nation that ended all wars," guaranteed a powerful say in all future affairs of the world, if the League did succeed as an international peacekeeping force. World War I conveniently expanded American international influence by weakening Britain and providing moral justification for intervention in European affairs.

Like so, many aspects of the US's conduct in World War I allowed it to outpace its allies in the growth of its international power. Indeed the United States was certainly the only true victor of World War I in terms of intact infrastructure, comparatively few military casualties, and post-war financial stability at least. Historian Harold F. Williamson elaborates on the

remarkable influence—particularly in terms of economics—the US enjoyed after the war [emphasis mine]:

> … World War I could be said to have *ended the period of British leadership* and predominance *in the world economy* and to have *opened the way* for the *assumption of leadership by the United States*. We [The US] had emerged from the war unmatched in productive power, capacity for economic expansion, and ability to accumulate surpluses for investment at home and abroad. We had a skilled and adaptable industrial population, dynamic leadership in business and industrial technology, and an immense variety of natural resources (Williamson 785).

Williamson's testimony contributes to the assertion that only the United States truly enjoyed a victory in WWI, meaning it was conceivably the only nation that benefitted from the war. Government investment in the economy, generous loans to European countries, and the US's uniquely intact treasury contributed to its new role as the economic leader, primary creditor, and democratic superpower of the world. Notably the US's surpassing of Britain and France may have involved intentional instances of inaction, even in sight of clear German aggression. For example, the nation made no military response when the Germans sank the British cruise-liner *Lusitania* (Brinkley 608). Recall again that only unrestricted submarine warfare on American shipping could motivate the US to declare war (Bailey 593). Recall also that while some historians would say that the US was responding to threat to its shipping, the more adept would realize that the US was also responding to a severe drop in the Allies' chances at victory. Given the colossal two-fold threat to the United States—discussed in considerable length earlier—which would arise in the case of an Allied defeat, the US needed to ensure that the British did not lose. Yet at the same time, if it was truly fighting to support the freedom-loving democracies against the evil monarchy, there should not have been a two and a half year deliberation in declaring war. But considering the US's suspicious failure to come to the immediate aid of its democratic siblings, it may not be completely impossible that the US had intended to wear down British and French power so that it could subsequently save the Entente, reaping maximum benefits from its own glorious victory and enjoying sweeping gains to its international political prowess. Furthermore in the Versailles peace conference, Wilson insisted that the Allies refer to the United States as a "associate," rather than an ally (Brinkley 621). That he would so pompously keep distance from who were, in fact, his allies, perhaps suggests that he never felt a

particularly keen loyalty to them in the first place. Moreover many leaders of the Allied powers resented "Wilson's tone of moral superiority" (Brinkley 621); that he would project such self-aggrandizing, condescending arrogance to fellow diplomats perhaps indicates that he never intended to cooperate with them in the first place. In fact the reason the United States didn't join the League of Nations that he successfully founded was due to Wilson's own stubbornness; his complete refusal to compromise with the Republican party led to Congress not ratifying the Treaty of Versailles at all (Brinkley 623). Thus Wilson was evidently quite poor at making friends; a stoic conquerer rather than a charmer, he embodies the US World War I policy which harbored little convincing loyalty to its allies and perhaps even aimed to undermine them for its own gain. Intentional or not, this aim succeeded spectacularly. Militarily the United States lost only 126,000 soldiers in the war, waging far less destruction upon the American workforce at home which powered its economy—by contrast the European nations involved lost at least 900,000 each. France faced particularly crippling losses, with 2.5% of its population killed in the war (Gordon 293). After Britain wore down the German resolve and weakened its armies, the US took the victory with comparatively minimal loss to its own forces (Brinkley 614). Thus the US's late entry into World War I served as a means to win the war without paying the economic and political price of an extended war, conveniently positioning it to emerge from the war as the undisputed military victor. The US was just as fortunate in economic terms: in 1914 the US was the largest debtor-nation in the world with $3.5 billion in investments abroad. In contrast, European investments in the US were worth $7.2 billion. But by the end of the war the tables had turned: foreigners held $3.3 billion in American securities while Americans owned foreign investment worth $7 billion (Gordon 293). Thus it is undeniable that the war was in fact immensely financially fruitful for the United States. Financially the US went from a debtor nation to a creditor nation, certainly facilitating the massive economic boom beginning during the war and continuing into the Roaring '20s. Thus the United States handled its international affairs in a way which maximized its own power gains while allowing the extended war to crumple the British and French in terms of money and military.

The United States made its new power tangible to the world in its hands-on manipulation of political and economic world-affairs in the next decades. For instance, when Germany was facing difficulty paying its crippling reparations costs, the US drew up the Dawes

plan to assist with its payments. The Dawes Plan essentially granted Germany additional loans to pay the debts it already owed (Brinkley 710). Never before World War I would the United States have had any justification to interfere in European economic affairs, but now that it was unquestionably a world power of the Entente, the Allies welcomed its assistance. Furthermore when World War I was ended, as part of the Treaty of Versailles a League of Nations was organized as envisioned by Woodrow Wilson (Brinkley 621). The idea of a union of nations which was not an empire was unprecedented in modern history, yet Europeans were more keen to the novel concept than the US Congress which ironically did not vote to join Wilson's League of Nations. That the ideas of a US president could have such influence on Europe further demonstrates the reality of the new influence and respect that the United States commanded on the world stage. Economically, US corporations became doubly active in their investments abroad after World War I (Williamson 786). The economic boom of the Roaring Twenties could surely be reasonably labeled as a result of this increasing globalization, and in particular, the US's role as the primarily creditor to an entire European continent; the profits from these loans surely contributed to the mounting wealth of the United States in the 1920s. Thus the United States' new international power was made evident in its mounting influence upon the world's political and economic affairs.

The United States dramatically reversed 125 years of isolationism during World War I certainly as a response to German aggression but also, crucially, as a means to seize a convenient and indeed unprecedented opportunity to expand its international political and economic influence. Until World War I, the US limited its foreign wars to primarily land-conflicts, and exclusively to the Western hemisphere; thus invading Europe marked a tectonic shift in its foreign policy. But notably there were compelling motives for this shift. On the one hand was a colossal threat to the integrity of democracy and to the national security of the United States. On the other hand was a colossal opportunity to validate democracy against monarchy and greatly enhance the international power of the United States; indeed, to world superpower status. Together these incentives prompted the US to exercise its military to achieve greater political and economic influence in Europe. Finally America would demonstrate this newfound power again and again in the next decades, through its hands-on manipulation of the economic and political affairs of the world.

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