Notes on Wilson and the Great War

When war erupted in Europe in the summer of 1914, most Americans believed that the distant conflict did not concern them. Most Americans embraced neutrality. But many immigrants and second-generation Americans supported the cause of the countries of their ancestry, and many were influenced by the propaganda of the warring nations.

The actions of two of the principal belligerents also posed problems for Americans. British naval power interfered with neutral trade and German submarine warfare introduced a new, sinister note into maritime combat.

Americans widely believed that German methods were morally reprehensible and that a German victory would threaten American security. At the same time, because Britain controlled the Atlantic, American trade with the Allies increased proportionately during the war. In 1915, as German submarine attacks cost the lives of a number of Americans, the US protested vigorously. The sinking of the British liners the Lusitania and the Arabic brought German promises that passenger ships would not be sunk without warning and without providing for the safety of noncombatants.

Many Democrats, traditionally opposed to a standing army, resisted a large military build-up, but President Wilson called for preparedness in 1915. Despite opposition in Congress, in 1916, the government adopted measures to increase the size of the regular army and to expand the navy.

Then, in 1916, a German submarine sank a French passenger vessel, the Sussex, in violation of an earlier pledge, and Wilson threatened to break diplomatic relations. The Germans, who did not have enough submarines to maintain an effective blockade, backed down. They promised, again, that their submarines would not attack non-resisting passenger ships without warning and without providing for the safety of survivors.

Through 1916, as Wilson made several efforts to negotiate peace between the belligerents, both sides made extreme demands. The Germans increasingly distrusted him. By early 1917, Germany concluded that victory depended on its ability to starve the British. On February 1, Germany renewed submarine warfare. Two days later, Wilson broke off diplomatic relations, and on March 1, he made public the contents of the Zimmerman telegram, a diplomatic note intercepted by the US that proposed a German-Mexican alliance. The reward of this alliance, the telegram outlined, would be Mexico’s recovery of Texas and the Southwest from the US. The nation reacted with outrage.

The submarine attacks increased in number. On March 16 alone, three American vessels went down. American demand for war, hitherto largely confined to the East, now spread to the South and West. On April 2, Wilson presented a war message to Congress. On April 4, the Senate adopted the war resolution 82 to 6. The House followed on April 6 with a vote of 373 to 50.
VERSAILLES: Wilson personally participated in the Paris Peace Conference. His enthusiastic reception led him to conclude mistakenly that the European people shared his view of a postwar world. The Treaty of Versailles with Germany imposed a variety of restrictions on Germany, took away much territory, imposed substantial disarmament and forced Germany to accept responsibility for the war and pay heavy reparations. For Wilson the most important issue at the conference was the creation of the League of Nations. The Covenant of the League embodied Wilson’s conception of an association of nations that would replace the traditional resort to power with a commitment to use peaceful means in resolving international disputes.

The debate over ratification by the US Senate centered on the Covenant rather than the terms of settlement with Germany. Wilson’s position was weak from the start because Republicans controlled both Houses and the Congressional leadership believed that the League of Nations would weaken American sovereignty. Wilson tried to take the issue to the people. Despite failing health, he undertook a national speaking tour, traveling more than 8,000 miles in three weeks and delivering 37 speeches. The trip came to an abrupt end when he suffered a stroke that left him almost incapacitated. The Senate defeated the treaty 35 to 55. Thus the US never joined the League of Nations. Wilson’s health and his dream of a new international order had been smashed.

President Wilson, taking the general position of seeking a “peace without victory,” provided Congress with the following guide (his 14 Points) for a settlement to the Great War in 1918:

1. Open covenants of peace openly arrived at, with no secret international agreements in the future.
2. Freedom of the seas outside territorial waters in peace and in war.
3. Removal of all possible economic barriers and establishment of equal trade conditions among nations.
4. Reduction of national armaments to the lowest point consistent with domestic safety.
5. Free, open-minded and absolutely impartial adjustment of all colonial claims.
6. Evacuation of German troops from Russian territory and a welcome for Russia into the society of free nations.
7. Evacuation of German troops from Belgium
8. Evacuation of German troops from all French territory.
9. Readjustment of Italian frontiers.
11. Evacuation of German troops from Romania, Serbia and Balkans and guarantee of their independence.
12. Independence for Turkey.
13. Independence for Poland.
14. A general association of nations for the purpose of providing mutual guarantees of political independence and territorial integrity to great and small states alike.
Consequences and Outcomes:

So, Wilson proved to be a better diplomat than politician and the vision and the League it embodied was rejected by the US Senate amidst huge struggles among labor and capital.

America’s domestic battles in 1919 were part of a larger struggle over the shape of the post-WW I world. For a few moments during and just after the war it looked like a realization of Progressive hopes for controlled reform and a more peaceful, fairer international order based on liberal democratic capitalism might emerge from the bloodshed. A more radical alternative, the spread of state-socialism beyond the Soviet Union, also seemed possible. But neither came to pass.

Nonetheless, the US was forever changed by the war. After the war the government continued to play an enlarged if less visible role in the economy, in labor relations, and in shaping public attitudes. Wartime suspicion of “foreigners” contributed to the end of open immigration, while population shifts that began during the war, from the South to the North and from Mexico to the Southwest, continued. Women retained a greater degree of political equality even as most of their wartime economic gains were reversed. Immigrants, in spite of increased prejudice, held on to a greater sense of themselves as full-fledged Americans.

During the war, the labor movement had loomed large in national political and economic life, and unions had grown stronger, more political and more radical. But when the war ended, so did many of the conditions that favored labor. With production levels falling and four million men who had been in the armed services reentering the workforce, the labor shortage abated. Also, forces unleashed by war---intolerance, fear of foreigners, fear of radicalism-----played into the employers’ hands. Corporations, swelled by wartime profits and aided by government repression, were able to withstand even long interruptions in production while labor’s radical allies were weakened by bickering. As a result, business was able to turn back labor’s offensive in 1919 and after. By the early 1920s, business no longer had to deal with a confident, politicized working-class movement. It would be well over a decade before labor again exerted much weight on a national scale.