

## THE UNITED STATES AND WORLD WAR I

### I. KEY QUESTIONS

- Why did the United States enter World War I?
- Could the U.S. have prevented or stopped the war? Could it have stayed out of the war? If so, how?
- Effects of U.S. entry on the U.S.: good or bad? Effects on the world: good or bad? (Effects of allied victory: good or bad?)
- The ideas of the 1919 Versailles peace settlement: wise or foolish? Were they grounded on sound or unsound factual and theoretical assumptions?
- Lessons of the war: what can we learn from this episode?

### II. BACKGROUND FACTS AND EVENTS, 1895-1914

- A. U.S. vast economic strength, military weakness in 1914.
- B. The U.S. economy in 1914: recession-plagued. The U.S. wallows in a cyclical recession in 1914.
- C. Britain appeases the U.S., 1895-1914 ---> U.S./British amity. German naval belligerence, 1898-1914 - --> chilly U.S.-German relations.
- D. Britain has naval supremacy in 1914. Germany has a smaller surface fleet and few submarines. But Germany has Europe's strongest army.
- E. International maritime "rules," 1914: quite pro-neutral, pro-free trade:
  - 1. Neutral states can ship any goods other than war materiel ("contraband of war") to belligerents, except through a blockade.
  - 2. A blockade must be effective to be recognized (requiring a "close" blockade). Neither Britain nor Germany could impose a close blockade on the other, so U.S. non-contraband trade with both was ok.
  - 3. Contraband is narrowly defined as weapons and war material.
  - 4. Even belligerents' merchant ships cannot be sunk without warning.
- F. Woodrow Wilson: a world-class ego. Much hubris. The American people: innocents abroad.

### III. CHRONOLOGY

- A. World War I begins, August 1, 1914. Germany is the chief instigator. The Triple Entente (Britain, France, and Russia) fights the Central Powers (Germany and Austria-Hungary).
- B. The U.S. adopts a strict neutrality policy, August 1914. The U.S. restricts U.S. loans to belligerents to inhibit them from buying U.S. weapons and war materiel, asserts a U.S. right to trade with both sides.
- C. Britain conducts a propaganda campaign in the U.S.: "The Western Hemisphere is the Kaiser's next target!" and "This is a war for democracy!"
- D. The U.S. abandons its neutrality policy, late 1914. Key decisions:
  - Washington decides to permit large U.S. arms sales to belligerents.
  - Washington accepts severe British restrictions on U.S. trade with Germany.Net result: the U.S. arms and trades with Britain but not Germany.  
Contending explanations:
  - Wilson is shortsighted. He doesn't foresee that this will provoke Germany to war-causing belligerence against the U.S.
  - Wilson is pro-ally for security reasons and/or cultural reasons.
  - Economic forces--the U.S. needs export trade to mitigate recession.
- E. Germany retaliates in fits and starts, 1915-1917. Sinks Lusitania, May 1915; starts unrestricted submarine warfare, January 1917; German-Mexican alliance pursued, and revealed in the Zimmermann telegram, April 1917.

- F. U.S. decision for war, March 1917. But what kind of war--limited or total? Answer: total.
- G. U.S. war aims grow, 1917-1918, from "war without victors" to total defeat of Germany.
- H. Victory, November 1918; and Versailles Treaty, 1919. Key elements of Versailles:
  - A League of Nations will keep peace and provide security.
  - Germany loses colonies, pays reparations. But Germany is not occupied or partitioned. Was this a mistake?
  - The U.S. and Britain guarantee French security.

#### IV. COULD THE U.S. HAVE AVOIDED THE WAR? ALTERNATE U.S. POLICIES, 1914-1917

- A. Full neutrality, 1914ff. Either compel both sides to allow U.S. trade with the other, or halt trade with both.
- B. Limited naval war against Germany. Convoy U.S. shipping to Britain and France but otherwise leave Germany alone.
- C. Use U.S. economic and military leverage to force the belligerents to make peace.

#### V. EVALUATING U.S. ENTRY, 1917: A GOOD IDEA?

- A. What threats were averted? (If Germany had won the war--then what?)
- B. What benefits did victory provide? (Hitler, Naziism, World War II ... does anyone spot a problem here?)

#### VI. EXPLAINING U.S. ENTRY--CONTENDING THEORIES

- A. Three economic explanations:
  1. Neutral rights, commerce protection--"we must protect our 2-way trade with Britain, to capture the efficiencies of the international division of labor."  
What kind of U.S. war does this explanation predict? A limited U.S. war to protect U.S. commerce with Britain, with no land war on the continent against Germany?
  2. Neutral rights, business cycle variant (export protection)--"we must protect our 1-way exports to Britain, to ease U.S. unemployment."  
What kind of U.S. war does this explanation predict? A limited U.S. war at sea to protect U.S. commerce with Britain? A strategy of prolonged stalemate rather than a push for decisive victory?
  3. "Merchants of Death"--protection of munitions makers--"we must protect/expand our munitions exports to Britain to keep U.S. munitions makers and workers prosperous."  
Again, does this explanation predict U.S. pursuit of decisive victory or prolonged stalemate?
- B. National security/balance-of-power. The U.S. fought to contain German military power.  
What does this explanation predict we should find in the U.S. archives? In U.S. public rhetoric justifying the war?
- C. U.S. mobilization strategy ---> U.S. was unable to prevent the war, tempted Germany to cut U.S. trade with Britain before the U.S. could mobilize.  
What does this explanation predict we should find Germans saying about the U.S. in the German archives?
- D. U.S. misperceptions. Wilson didn't foresee a long war, the German sub campaign, or the growth of U.S. dependence on exports to allies.
- E. Common U.S./allied democratic culture.
- F. British propaganda, manipulation of U.S. opinion.

#### VII. THE IDEAS THAT GUIDED WILSON AT VERSAILLES: TRUE OR FALSE?

- National self-determination ---> peace.
- Colonial rivalries ---> war.
- Free trade and economic interdependence among states ---> peace.

Large armies and navies ---> war.  
Power-balancing and alliance making ---> war.  
Open diplomacy ---> peace.  
Democracy ---> peace.

Were these the real causes/lessons of WWI?

#### VIII. GENERAL IMPLICATIONS AND LESSONS OF WWI

- A. Interdependence ---> war? (Was the U.S. sucked into WWI by interdependence?)
- B. War ---> wider war? (Does WWI show that wars have a propensity to spread, and to engulf the U.S.?)