**The U.S. and World War I**

**The U.S. Tries to Remain Neutral**

From its start, the U.S. has been traditionally neutral in European affairs. President George Washington, for instance, advocated the policy of neutrality in his Farewell Address. Thus, when World War I began, President [Woodrow Wilson](javascript:;) reaffirmed America's traditional neutrality. He insisted on America's right, as a neutral nation, to transport non-war materials to warring nations.

At the beginning of hostilities, Great Britain quickly used its naval strength to blockade Germany. Although Germany's navy was second in the world to Britain's, it was a distant second. Germany's navy could not effectively break the blockade or establish one around Britain. Germany relied on submarines (U-boats) to retaliate. They sank merchant vessels trying to take supplies to Britain, including those of the U.S. and other neutral nations. In an effort to protect American shipping, Wilson demanded that Germany identify the nationality of a ship and the nature of its cargo before sinking it. However, the submarines' success relied on the element of surprise. In order to identify a ship, a submarine would have to come to the surface, thus making it vulnerable to be attacked.

Unwilling to place its submarines in danger, Germany continued its submarine campaign in spite of Wilson's protests. On May 7, 1915, a German submarine sank the British passenger ship **"Lusitania."** Approximately 1,200 people died, including 128 Americans. Although Germany apologized, Germany argued (correctly) that the "Lusitania" had been carrying armaments, in addition to its passengers. Germans also argued that U.S. policy was not truly neutral because it hurt the Central Powers more than it did the Allied Powers. Under international pressure, however, the Germans decided to suspend unrestricted submarine warfare.

**America’s Neutrality is Difficult**

In February 1916, under internal pressure to end the war, the German navy resumed unrestricted submarine warfare. On March 24, 1916, a German submarine sank the "Sussex," a French passenger ship with Americans on board. Two Americans were wounded. Wilson protested to Germany and threatened to break off diplomatic relations. On May 4, 1916, Germany again decided to restrict their submarine activity. They promised not to attack ships without warning and to provide for the safety of those on board. This became known as the "Sussex" pledge.

Wilson often found himself at odds with the Allied Powers as well. The British continued to increase the items defined as contraband under their blockade of Germany. As a result, American merchant ships were denied trade with the Central Powers. Beyond these specific issues, Wilson disliked the Allies' reliance on the theories underlying imperialism and on old notions of balance of power. In addition, all combatants (including the Allies) had been involved in secret agreements against a perceived threat, instead of working together to promote peace and stability.

**Wilson is Re-elected**

In 1916, Wilson campaigned for re-election on the promise that he would keep the U.S. out of the European conflict. He narrowly won over the Republican candidate -- the first Democrat to win a second consecutive term since Andrew Jackson. In his "peace without victory" speech given before Congress on January 22, 1917, Wilson stated that any peace settlement negotiated amongst the warring parties should not involve punishment or reparations. He argued that the Allies should work to restructure the world system on the basis of cooperation. He called for self-determination for everyone, the end of secret alliances, and freedom of the seas. Although the U.S. would eventually enter the war on the side of the Allies, Wilson was already making it clear that the U.S. would have different goals.

**The U.S. Enters the War**

By January 1917, the British blockade had created severe food and supply shortages in Germany. German leaders decided to take a gamble: resume unrestricted submarine warfare and hopefully knock Britain out of the war before the U.S. would be angered enough to either mobilize its forces or declare war. Britain, as an island nation, was more dependent on merchant ships for supplies than France, and was thus more vulnerable to this policy. The policy was implemented in February.

Soon after, in protest, the U.S. severed diplomatic relations with Germany, and began arming its merchant ships for self-defense. Relations between Germany and the U.S. continued to deteriorate after the British government gave the Zimmermann Telegram to President Wilson, who had it published in March. In the telegram, Arthur Zimmermann, Germany's Foreign Minister, asked Mexico to ally with the Central Powers if the U.S. should declare war on Germany.

Germany believed that Mexico might be agreeable to such an alliance because of Mexico's anger over America's violations of her sovereignty. Only the year before, American troops had violated Mexico's sovereignty in their pursuit to apprehend Pancho Villa. As an incentive, Zimmermann suggested that Mexico could regain the territory it lost to the U.S. as a result of the Mexican War. Americans were outraged. Meanwhile, German submarines continued to attack American merchant ships, sinking many of them. On April 2, 1917, Wilson asked Congress for a declaration of war against Germany. On April 6th, the U.S. officially entered World War I on the side of the Allies.

**The Home Front**

American businesses and factories were not only supplying the American war effort, but that of their allies as well. The economic contribution of America was critical to the Allied effort. The Central Powers could not match the Allied Powers in either industrial power to produce goods or merchant shipping needed to import goods not produced by themselves. However, the U.S. economy had been completely unprepared for war, so entering World War I very quickly brought many changes to life in the U.S. The government exercised unprecedented control over American business and people's lives -- railroads were nationalized, industry was placed under government control, and food and fuel were rationed.

**Women** experienced the greatest changes. With so many American men going overseas, industry was in desperate need of labor. Women entered the workforce in greater numbers than before, weakening traditional social beliefs that maintained that the ideal employment for women was in the home. **African-Americans** migrated from the more rural South to the more industrial Northern cities in large numbers, which also helped alleviate the labor shortage. During the war, unions agreed not to strike so as not to hamper the war effort. They hoped that their support would lead to increased acceptance for the labor movement after the war was over. The government moved quickly to stimulate support for the war and discourage criticism. Anti-German sentiment spread through American society and took many forms. Even food with German names was renamed -- for instance, sauerkraut became "victory cabbage."

Not all Americans supported the war, while others opposed certain war measures. For instance, some people opposed the Selective Service Act because they felt that it violated the 13th Amendment, which prohibits "involuntary servitude." Nations in times of war are less tolerant of dissent of official government policies, fearing that it will weaken their ability to win. Thus, Congress passed the **Espionage Act** in 1917 and the **Sedition Act** in 1918. Under these laws, an individual could be arrested for obstructing the war effort or for criticizing the government or the military. Thus, opposition to the war was firmly suppressed. In addition, political radicals of all kinds were prosecuted. During the war, the government used the Espionage Act to prosecute the Socialist leader Eugene V. Debs for criticizing sedition prosecutions. In a series of court cases such as **"U.S. v. Schenck"** (1919), the Supreme Court ruled that the government's efforts to suppress dissent were constitutional and that the constitutional right to free speech had limits.

President Wilson was very idealistic as he tried to prepare for a permanent world peace after the war. Lenin had called for communist revolutions throughout the world. This worried Wilson, who feared that the suffering, war-exhausted people of Europe would take up Lenin's call. Towards this end, Wilson announced in early 1918 his famous plan for world peace, called the [**Fourteen Points**](javascript:;)**.** The provisions of the Fourteen Points were wide-ranging. They included open covenants (treaties) of peace; freedom of navigation upon the seas; equality of trade conditions; reduction of armaments; the application of self-determination to "all colonial claims" and to the different nationalities contained within Austria-Hungary; and the evacuation of all Russian territory (some Allied troops were in Russia after the revolution). Most dear to Wilson, however, was Point 14: "A general association of nations must be formed under specific covenants for the purpose of affording mutual guarantees of political independence and territorial integrity to great and small states alike." By urging the creation of such a **League of Nations** and U.S. membership in it, Wilson was proposing that the U.S. abandon its old policies of isolationism and neutrality. Instead, Wilson proposed a new foreign policy of internationalism -- cooperation with other nations for the good of the world.

**The Treaty of Versailles**

The Treaty of Versailles imposed a harsh peace on Germany. The "war guilt" clause of the treaty specifically assigned blame for the war to Germany. Thus, Germany was required to pay reparations totaling $33 billion. Germany also lost territory to Denmark and to the new nation of Poland. Germans were very upset by the treaty, particularly the "war guilt" clause. They had hoped for better terms on the basis of Wilson's speeches indicating that the U.S. did not want to punish Germany.

Wilson returned to the U.S. with the Treaty and the League of Nations Covenant. Under the U.S. Constitution, treaties have to be ratified by the Senate. In 1918, the Democrats (Wilson's party) had lost control of Congress. Wilson had also failed to ask a single Republican to go with him to Paris. In addition, Wilson's intervention in Russia, his support for the Espionage and Sedition Acts, and his inability to obtain the Fourteen Points in the Treaty of Versailles weakened his status among liberals. Two groups of Republicans formed the opposition to the League of Nations. Senators William Borah and Hiram Johnson led the **"Irreconcilables."** They opposed U.S. membership in the League of Nations under any circumstances. In particular, they feared being drawn into European conflicts. The **"Reservationists"** had reservations (doubts) about the treaty. They also feared being drawn into foreign wars. On November 19, 1919 and again on March 19, 1920 the Senate rejected the Treaty of Versailles and the League of Nations with it. The U.S. never joined the League.

Europe lay in shambles at the end of the war. Historians estimate that over 8 million combatants had died and at least 13 million civilians had perished during the conflict. Indeed, an entire generation of Europeans lay dead on the battlefield. A large part of Europe was a wasteland, devastated by war. Even those nations that had not experienced war on their land had had their economies devastated. Many European countries suffered economic disruption for years afterward.

By the end of World War I, the U.S. was on the verge of replacing Great Britain as the primary economic, financial, and military power in the world. To actually do this, however, the U.S. would have to commit itself to internationalism, instead of reverting back to isolationism. The defeat of the Treaty of Versailles and the League Covenant created doubts as to whether the U.S. was ready to grasp the mantle of power from the British.

Name:

The U.S. and World War I

1. Why did President Wilson decide to remain neutral? What wartime strategy brought conflict between Germany and the U.S.? How was this conflict resolved?
2. What were Wilson's problems with the Central Powers? What were Wilson's problems with the Allied Powers?
3. What promise did Wilson make during his re-election campaign? What did he say in his "peace without victory" speech?
4. What tactic did Germany adopt in hopes of knocking Britain out of the war? What effect did this have on relations with the U.S.? What was the Zimmermann Telegram? When did the U.S. declare war?
5. What kinds of changes did the U.S. experience during wartime? How did the government respond to anti-war sentiment? What was the Supreme Court ruling in "U.S. v. Schenck"?
6. Why did President Wilson issue his Fourteen Points plan? What were some of the provisions of the plan? What, in Wilson's opinion, was the most important of the Fourteen Points?
7. Why did the U.S. Senate reject the Treaty of Versailles and the League of Nations?

1. What condition was Europe in after the war? What position was the U.S. in after the end

of World War I?

Use this SPRITE chart to document the impacts of World War I on each category. You must have 4-5 bullet points for each category.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Social** Family Gender Relations Social Classes Inequalities Life Styles |  |
| **Political** Leaders, Elites State Structure War Diplomacy Treaties Courts, Law |  |
| **Religious** Holy books Beliefs, Teachings Conversions Sin/Salvations Deities |  |
| **Intellectual/Arts**  Art, Music writing, Literature Philosophy Math & Science Education |  |
| **Technological** New Inventions New tools, Weapons Ways to improve life Technical Solutions Infrastructure (water, Roads, etc) |  |
| **Economic** Types of System Technology, Industry Trade, Commerce Capital/ Money Types of Business |  |