

US ENTRY INTO WWI

Note:
Woodrow Wilson fought his re-election campaign on a neutrality platform in 1916, taking particular care not to offend the anti-British Irish-American vote.

Wilson maintained US neutrality in spite of the huge anti-German outcry in the USA caused by the deaths of 128 American citizens who were aboard the British liner Lusitania when it was sunk in the Atlantic, without warning, by a German submarine.

However, once Wilson was re-elected as president in 1916, the likelihood of war with Germany grew. The British blockade was severely damaging to Germany. Food and materials were in short supply. The Germans began to feel they were losing the war. In January 1917, Germany decided to begin a policy of unrestricted submarine warfare. The Germans would sink any ship from any country that they felt might be bringing supplies to its enemies. The German High Command felt that this would do immense harm to the British and French, who were so dependent on imports such as food and iron ore. This new German policy led to many US ships being sunk and many US citizens being killed. Popular opinion in the USA began to turn in favour of joining Britain and France in the war. Wilson broke off diplomatic relations with Germany, but he did not immediately go to war.

REASONS U.S. WENT TO WAR AFTER TRYING TO BE NEUTRAL

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The real trigger for US entry into the First World War came early in 1917, when the British intercepted and then decoded a telegram from the German foreign secretary, Arthur Zimmerman, to the German ambassador in Mexico. This telegram ordered the ambassador to confer with the Mexicans about the possibility of Mexico invading the United States from the south if it entered the war on the side of Britain and France. The British – desperate for a new and powerful ally – made sure the Americans were aware of the content of the Zimmerman telegram. A furious Wilson did not find it hard to persuade Congress to declare war in April 1917. He had lost faith in the honesty and integrity of the Germans, and he wanted to 'make the world safe for democracy'.

The USA in the First World War

Once the decision was taken to enter the war, Wilson and the United States threw themselves into the conflict with enormous effort and commitment. The US navy played an important role in ensuring that the German submarines were finally defeated in the Atlantic, and that vital supplies for Britain and France, as well as US soldiers, could cross the ocean. Participation in the war had a major impact on the United States:

HOW THE U.S GOT INVOLVED

- More than 2 million American men crossed to France, and they played a key role in the fighting in 1918. By the end of the war, over 112,000 US soldiers had died.
- On the home front, Wilson organised a massive anti-German propaganda campaign.
- Huge sums of money were raised by taxation and borrowing to fund the war, and large loans were made to Britain and France.
- There was considerable federal government involvement in industry, to ensure that sufficient war materials were manufactured.

Like many of America's earlier wars, for the USA the First World War was short, successful and not fought on US soil, and it brought in a great deal of money and commerce. By 1918, the USA was the greatest financial power in the world, and had been able to take over a large number of former British and German markets. The war had proved to be very good for the American economy and American business.

IMPACTS

President Wilson and the post-war peacemaking process

President Wilson was a central figure in the post-war peacemaking process in 1919. He faced enormous challenges as he hoped to end the tradition of the 'winner takes all' approach to peace treaties, believing that it simply led to greater resentment and conflict. When Germany had defeated France in 1871, it had imposed harsh terms on France. This meant that France was determined to seek revenge in 1918.

WILSON THE PEACEMAKER
→ AT LEAST HE TRIED...

Wilson hoped to make the sort of peace that the USA had established with the British in 1783 – a peace designed to prevent further conflict and bitterness. To this end, he produced a remarkable plan, the famous Fourteen Points. Wilson hoped this would provide a basis for dealing with the enormous problems facing Europe, such as the collapse of the German, Russian and Austro-Hungarian empires, while at the same time trying to prevent future conflict.

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The Fourteen Points



WILSON'S PLAN

DO YOU THINK THIS WILL WORK? WHY OR WHY NOT?

Over the course of 1918, Wilson took enormous care in preparing for the peace he knew would come. In January 1918, in a statement to the US Congress, he issued what became known as the Fourteen Points, his blueprint for a peace that might also prevent future wars. The most important of the Fourteen Points were:

- There should be open covenants (treaties/agreements), and no more secret treaties and alliances that might cause fear and suspicion between nations.
- There should be freedom of the seas, so nations could sail and trade freely.
- Armed forces should be reduced.
- Germany should leave France, and Alsace-Lorraine be returned to France.
- There should be agreement to 'reasonable' colonial claims by nations.
- The Germans should leave the Russians (now under communist control) to deal with their own future.
- Poland should be granted independence and access to the sea.
- Self-determination (the ability of a nation or people to decide its own future) should be a major principle in the settlement.
- There should be a general 'association' of all countries, guaranteeing the sovereignty and independence of member states; this was the League of Nations.

Note:
In the 1871 Treaty of Frankfurt, after France's defeat by Germany in the Franco-Prussian War, France lost its territories of Alsace and Lorraine and had to pay reparations (damages) to Germany.