

What Did It All Mean? The United States and World War I

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From the moment the First World War ended historians have tried to explain why the United States entered the war and, then having won the war, lost the peace. The nature of these questions shines the spotlight on President Woodrow Wilson, whose thoughts and actions dominate scholarship devoted to the politics and diplomacy surrounding the war. Military historians have weighed the American contribution to the eventual Allied victory, evaluated U.S. combat doctrine and leadership, and in recent decades thought more about the experiences of average soldiers. A range of scholars have examined the impact of the war on American society, taking up civil rights, female suffrage, civil liberties, immigration, and labor relations. Assessing the growing power and influence of the American state, at home and abroad, provides the unifying theme to these diverse studies on the American experience of war.

These studies vividly demonstrate the impact that the First World War had on American society. Nonetheless, non-specialist historians and the general public remain largely uncertain about the war's importance for the United States. The centennial, therefore, offers an opportunity for historians to highlight exactly why the war deserves a more prominent place in the American historical narrative.

American Entry into the War

Historians have disagreed continuously over which factor proved decisive in prompting the United States to abandon neutrality in 1917. Arguments privileging financial ties to the Allies, concerns about German aggression, or Wilson's desire to shape the peace have all found advocates throughout the twentieth century. The general contours of each position took shape in the 1920s and 1930s, although subsequent generations of scholars added important nuances amid new evidence.

During the interwar period many Americans believed that entering the war had been a mistake. Helmut C. Engelbrecht and Frank C. Hanighen, *Merchants of Death; a Study of the International Armament Industry* (Ludwig von Mises Institute, 1934) charged that American bankers and capitalists (dubbed the "merchants of death") had tricked the nation into fighting to ensure repayment of their private loans to the Allies. Other historians rejected this conspiracy theory while still accepting that the economic benefits of war-related trade gradually pulled America into the war.¹ In this formulation Wilson's desire to keep the shipping lanes open between the United States and Britain prompted him to accept the British blockade while demanding that

¹ Charles Beard, *Devil Theory of War* (New York: The Vanguard Press, 1936), C. Hartley Grattan, *Why We Fought* (New York, The Vanguard Press, 1929), and Charles Tansill, *America Goes to War* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1938).

Germany renounce unconditional submarine warfare. When Germany refused, the war came.

These studies provided the most critical "lesson" derived from World War I in the interwar period: to stay out of European conflicts, the United States needed to limit trade with belligerent nations. From 1935-1939 Congress consequently adopted a series of neutrality laws that restricted arms sales, loans, and transport of goods with nations at war. These laws hampered the ability of the United States to aid Britain in World War II from 1939-1941 until the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor and America entered the war. The economic causation argument still has adherents such as Ross Gregory, *The Origins of American Intervention in the First World War* (W. W. Norton & Company, 1971) and more recently, Benjamin O. Fordham.²

The German decision to resume unconditional submarine warfare in 1917 offered other scholars, such as Arthur Link (the editor of Wilson's papers), a more convincing explanation for why America entered the war.³ Kendrick Clements agreed that German aggression resulted in an American declaration of war, but blamed Wilson for boxing himself into a corner by 1917 with his insistence that Germany respect the rights of Americans to trade and travel where they liked.⁴ The Zimmermann Telegram also factored heavily into security-based arguments for American entry into the war. The intercepted telegram from German Foreign Minister Arthur Zimmermann promised Mexico territory within the United States in return for starting a German-backed border war. Barbara Tuchman (*The Zimmermann Telegram*, Random House, 1958), and Frederick Katz (*The Secret War in Mexico: Europe, the United States and the Mexican Revolution*, Chicago University Press, 1981) viewed the telegram as the culmination of a long German espionage and sabotage campaign intended to distract American attention away from Europe. More recently Thomas Boghardt expressed doubt that the Zimmermann Telegram had much impact on the domestic debate over entering the war or Wilson's decision-making process.⁵

Ross A. Kennedy has pushed the national security explanation in a different direction, emphasizing Wilson's larger geo-political worldview. Kennedy argued that Wilson increasingly came to see a German victory as threatening America's ability to steer clear of European power politics. With the naval war bringing the war ever closer to American shores, Wilson wanted to rebuild the international political system to protect the United States from the global reverberations of European power struggles.⁶

² Benjamin O. Fordham, "Revisionism Reconsidered: Exports and American Intervention in World War I." *International Organization* 61 (Spring 2007), p. 277-310.

³ Arthur S. Link, *Wilson: Campaigns for Progressivism and Peace, 1916-1917* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1965).

⁴ Kendrick Clements, "Woodrow Wilson and World War I," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 34:1 (March 2004), p. 63.

⁵ Thomas Boghardt, *The Zimmermann Telegram: Intelligence, Diplomacy, and America's Entry into World War I* (Annapolis, Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 2012).

⁶ Ross A. Kennedy, "Woodrow Wilson, World War I, and an American Conception of National Security," *Diplomatic History* 25, no. 1(2001), p. 13. See also Thomas J. Knock, *To End All Wars: Woodrow Wilson and the Quest for a New World Order* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992) and Ross A. Kennedy *The Will to Believe: Woodrow Wilson, World War I, and America's Strategy for Peace and Security* (Kent, Ohio: Kent University State Press, 2009).

The third predominant explanation for U.S. entry into the war highlights Wilson's desire to play a leading role in reshaping postwar international relations around the principles of self-determination, open trade, and collective security. Wilson's supporters have tended to view his fervent attempts to create a new world order as an example of American humanitarianism. Wilson's detractors lament his paternalistic urge to remake the world in the image of the United States. All underscore the lasting influence of Wilson's ideals on twentieth century foreign policy.

In *Woodrow Wilson and World Settlement* (N.Y. Garden City, Doubleday, 1922), Wilson's press secretary Ray Stannard Baker described Wilson as an idealist who wanted to give the United States a new international role spreading democracy and capitalism. This perspective still has adherents, such as Wilson biographer John Milton Cooper, Jr., who puts a positive spin on Wilson's activist personality. Cooper, Jr. contends that by 1917 Wilson had come to believe that the United States needed to take an active part in the fighting to earn a leading role at the peace table.⁷ Wilson's critics depict him at best as naïve, and at worst as cloaking American imperial ambitions in democratic rhetoric.⁸ In the late 1950s and 1960s, many historians viewed Wilson's war goals as laying the groundwork for future American involvement into areas of the world that did not directly affect national security. Arno J. Mayer, *Political Origins of the New Diplomacy, 1917-1918* (Yale University Press, 1959) emphasized Wilson's success in blunting the appeal of communism as the basis for the new world order, positioning the United States to become a global economic hegemon in the twentieth century.⁹

More historical consensus exists that Wilson's ideals left a lasting impact on American foreign policy, making the First World War a pivotal moment for understanding the new international role that the United States played in the twentieth century. "Wilsonianism should be seen not as a transient phenomenon, a reflection of some abstract idealism, but a potent definer of contemporary history" because it established the framework by which the United States redefined itself as a global power, Akira Iriye wrote in 1993.¹⁰ Historians disagree, however, on whether Wilsonianism provided the foundation for the United States to do good or ill in the world. Whereas Cooper, Jr. credited Wilson with laying out fundamentally sound democratic values to guide future foreign policy, Lloyd E. Ambrosius lamented the birth of a destructive messianic impulse that would justify countless American interventions throughout the world in the twentieth century.¹¹

⁷ See, for example, John Milton Cooper, Jr. *The Warrior and the Priest* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983); *Woodrow Wilson, a Biography* (New York: Knopf, 2009).

⁸ Walter Lippmann, *U.S. War Aims* (London: H. Hamilton, 1944) and George F. Kennan, *American Diplomacy 1900-1950* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951).

⁹ For other negative critiques of the lasting effects of Wilsonianism see William Appleman Williams, *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy* (New York: Dell, 1959; 1962) and N. Gordon Levin, Jr., *Woodrow Wilson and World Politics: America's Response to War and Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968).

¹⁰ Akira Iriye, *The Globalizing of America, 1913-1945* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 71-72.

¹¹ Lloyd E. Ambrosius, *Wilsonianism: Woodrow Wilson and His Legacy in American Foreign Relations* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002).

Losing the peace

The next set of overarching questions concerns Wilson's role at the peace conference and his failure to secure ratification of the Versailles Peace Treaty by the U.S. Senate. In his 1920 bestseller, *The Economic Consequences of the Peace*, British economist John Maynard Keynes described the Versailles Peace Treaty as a Carthaginian peace that unjustly punished Germany. Was Wilson the bumbling, "contemptible hypocrite" hoodwinked by savvy European statesmen, which Keynes described? Was he responsible for the treaty's failings (and perhaps even World War II)?

Thomas Bailey (*Woodrow Wilson and the Lost Peace*, NY: The Macmillan Company, 1944), the first historian to work with records of the peace proceedings, censured Wilson for agreeing to exclude Germany from a peace process that made a mockery of his earlier demand for a "peace without victory." Klaus Schwabe, *Woodrow Wilson, Revolutionary Germany, and Peacemaking, 1918-1919* (University of North Carolina Press, 1985), believes that over the course of the peace negotiations Wilson changed his mind about the need to censure Germany. Wilson's key political mistake, Schwabe argues, was not explaining adequately to the American public why he believed Germany needed to accept responsibility for its wrongdoing before receiving a place in the League of Nations. Arthur Link and Arthur Walworth claimed that Wilson's compromises on the Versailles Treaty reflected the political strength of Wilson's political adversaries (both overseas and at home), not flaws in his character or principles.¹² More recently Cooper, Jr. (*Woodrow Wilson, a Biography*, Random House, 2009) argues that America's military contribution was too minor for Wilson to dictate the terms of peace.

America's refusal to join the League of Nations compounded the problems of a flawed treaty, other scholars argue. This line of reasoning shifts the focus from the treaty's flaws to Wilson's political failure to secure Senate ratification of the treaty. In 1919 Senate Democrats argued that the stroke Wilson suffered in October, 1919 at a critical juncture of the treaty fight impaired his political acumen. Edward Weinstein (*Woodrow Wilson: A Medical and Psychological Biography*, Princeton University Press, 1981) found this reasoning persuasive, as did Cooper, Jr., to explain why Wilson refused to compromise with Senate Republicans to secure ratification.

William Widenor (*Henry Cabot Lodge and the Search for an American Foreign Policy*, University of California Press, 1983) argues that Wilson and Lodge (the Senator who led to fight against the treaty) disagreed ideologically over how the United States should exercise its new world power. Herbert Margulie (*The Mild Reservationists and the League Controversy in the Senate*, University of Missouri Press, 1989) broadens the conversation by focusing on those Senators in the middle whose support both sides coveted. These works suggest that there were both ideological and political reasons for the treaty's failure. Not all scholars agree that this was a tragedy that doomed the world to another war. For instance, Margaret MacMillan (*Paris, 1919: Six Months that Changed the World*, Random House, 2001) has argued forcefully that diplomatic missteps in the interwar period resulted in

¹² Arthur Link, *Woodrow Wilson, Revolution, War, and Peace* (Arlington Heights, Ill.: H. Davidson, 1979). Arthur Walworth, *Wilson and his Peacemakers. American Diplomacy at the Paris Peace Conference, 1919* (New York: Norton, 1986).

World War II, not imperfections in the treaty or the American refusal to join the League of Nations.

The Homefront

Most scholars who have written about the wartime home-front would only reluctantly call themselves historians of the First World War. Instead, they self-identify mainly as scholars with specialized interests in labour-capital relations, domestic reform movements, women's history, African American history, and civil liberties. These works connect the war-generated changes in American society to domestic trends preceding the war, situating these transformations within the context of U.S. history rather than a global framework. This "isolationist" approach to studying the war allows American historians to respond solely to each other, rarely taking into account the larger worldwide literature on the war's seminal impact.

The Economy

The war brought tremendous profits to America as trade with belligerent nations boomed and American businesses seized upon opportunities to move into markets (especially within Asia and South America) abandoned by the British. The war accelerated the process of integrating economies within the Western Hemisphere with America emerging as the regional hegemon. The position of the United States in the world economy also changed as exports increased, more goods travelled overseas on American merchant ships, and the United States became a major world creditor. The size and vigour of the domestic market, however, still continued to dazzle American businessmen more than the international. Mobilizing the American economy to support the war effort created a thriving economy fuelled by taxpayer dollars and war bond purchases. After a brief post-war recession, Americans "disproportionately employed their profits from the war years to fuel a spectacular expansion of the home economy, rather than extending still farther their position in the world economy," concludes David M. Kennedy.¹³ American scholars have therefore focused primarily on tracing the domestic impact of wartime mobilization, tabulating economic winners and losers during a time of enormous profits, technological innovations, and government oversight.

Immediately after the war, firsthand accounts by wartime administrators painted a glowing portrait of Americans pulling together voluntarily to win the war, downplaying issues of war profiteering or the array of financial incentives the government put in place to entice industrialists to fall in line with mobilization edicts. (See for example, Bernard Baruch, *American Industry in the War: A Report of the War Industries Board*, 1921). This narrative of initial chaos giving way to eventual success remained in place until the 1960s when revisionist historians began to trace persistent economic inequities back to World War I.

Rather than putting aside class antagonisms and ambitions to help the nation win the war, New Left historians argued that businessmen seized the opportunity to further their own economic interests. By serving on committees writing wartime regulations

¹³ David M. Kennedy, *Over Here: The First World War and American Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), p. 346.

and volunteering to head wartime agencies as "dollar a year men," business elites succeeded in derailing the momentum of prewar Progressive regulatory reforms aimed at limiting monopolies and stemming the growing power of industrialists. Gabriel Kolko, James Weinstein, Paul Koistinen, and Melvyn Urofsky portrayed business as dictating the terms of wartime mobilization, with the government now a willing partner advancing their interests.¹⁴

Robert Cuffalso challenged earlier accounts, albeit from a different direction. He examined "the gap between the rhetoric and reality," and concluded that wartime administrators tended to exaggerate their influence over the wartime economy.¹⁵ The complex economic relationships between individual industries and government agencies, however, defied easy categorization. Some were harmonious, others contentious. Cuff's path-breaking study encouraged other business historians to examine the hodgepodge of personalities, strategies, and policies present during the economic mobilization. In the Cuff-inspired narrative, the lack of uniformity in how different industries mobilized prevented either the government or businessmen from gaining unilateral control of the wartime economy.¹⁶

The most widely-read synthesis on the economic mobilization remains David M. Kennedy's *Over Here: The First World War and American Society* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1980). Kennedy amalgamated much previous work by the New Left and Cuff on the economic mobilization to argue that the war derailed the Progressive reform movement. Progressive reformers had built a reform agenda that relied on regulation to protect the public good. This mindset conditioned them to agree that wartime state needed extensive powers to mobilize American society efficiently and quickly. Kennedy argued that much to the Progressives' dismay, wartime economic mobilization also required renewed cooperation between the government and business. This government-business partnership ultimately undermined the Progressive regulatory approach to blunting the inequities of free market capitalism. Ellis Hawley's influential work, *The Great War and the Search for a Modern Order: A History of the American People and Their Institutions, 1917-1933* (NY: St. Martin's Press, 1979) put a more positive spin on this postwar business-governmental partnership. In his view government and business emerged from the war convinced that jointly-creating voluntary codes and guidelines offered a more harmonious path to managing the economy than regulation. Hawley's views still predominant, especially in works that detail the interwar economic policies of Herbert Hoover (as both Commerce Secretary and President). Recent studies on the institutional and behavioral legacy of economic mobilization have begun to tease out other lasting

¹⁴ Gabriel Kolko, *The Triumph of Conservatism: A Reinterpretation of American History, 1900-1916* (New York: The Free Press, 1963), James Weinstein, *The Corporate Ideal in the Liberal State, 1900-1918* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1968), Paul Koistinen, *Mobilizing for War: The Political Economy of American Warfare, 1865-1919* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas) and Melvyn Urofsky, *Big Steel and the Wilson Administration: A Study in Business-Government Relations* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 1969).

¹⁵ Robert D. Cuff, *The War Industries Board: Business-Government Relations during World War I* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973).

¹⁶ Terrence J. Gough, "The Battle of Washington: Soldiers and Businessmen in World War I," (Ph.D. diss., University of Virginia, 1997); Gail Radford, "William Gibbs McAdoo, the Emergency Fleet Corporation, and the Origins of the Public-Authority Model of Government Action," *Journal of Policy History* 11: p. 59-88; Julie Strickland, "War Making and State Building: The Dynamics of American Industrial Development, 1917-1935." (Ph.D. diss., Stanford University, 1988).

economic shifts. These works investigate the increased fiscal capacities of key state agencies, especially the Treasury Department, and the war's impact on the savings strategies of average citizens. Julia Ott suggests, for instance, that the public relations campaign to sell war bonds created a postwar "investor democracy" by schooling Americans in the value of investing their money in stocks and bonds.¹⁷

Labor historians have also measured how the war affected the labor movement. At first, moderate unions experienced a short resurgence due to supportive federal policies that built maximum hours, minimum wages, and protection for unions into wartime contracts awarded to American businesses. They lost these rights, however, at the war's conclusion.¹⁸ Scholarly works tracing radical labor groups (which often opposed the war) reveal how draconian state suppression and harassment eliminated radical political discourse in America for the next ten years.¹⁹

War Culture

The growth of federal power serves as the dominant theme for multiple genres of works tracing the impact of the war on American society. Among European historians the debate over coercion or consent refers mostly to questions over why men fought. Within the United States, the scholarly argument over coercion or consent centers primarily on whether citizens resisted or abetted the war-fueled expansion of state power. Collectively, this body of works presents the First World War as a pivotal moment in state-society relations for the United States.

During World War I America broke with its previous tradition of relying mostly on volunteers and used conscription to raise the bulk of the wartime force. Analyzing the impact of conscription, John Whiteclay Chambers (*To Raise an Army: The Draft Comes to Modern America*, NY: Free Press, 1987), argued that the federal government's new ability to monopolize manpower hastened the transfer of power from the local and state level to the national government. Jeannette Keith's *Rich Man's War, Poor Man's Fight: Race, Class and Power in the Rural South during the First World War* (University of North Carolina Press, 2004) took a grassroots approach to studying draft resistance throughout the rural South. The introduction of wartime sedition laws, along with the engagement of local elites in the conscription process, made draft evasion difficult. The creative means that men devised to evade the draft impressed Keith more than the centralization of state police power. "During 1917-1918, more men evaded military service than during the Vietnam era,

¹⁷ Ajay Mehrotra, "Lawyers, Guns, and Public Moneys: The U.S. Treasury, World War I, and the Administration of the Modern Fiscal State," *Law and History Review* 28: p. 173-225. Julia Ott, *When Wall Street Met Main Street: The Quest for an Investor's Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011).

¹⁸ Joseph A. McCartin, *Labor's Great War: The Struggle for Industrial Democracy and the Origins of Modern American Labor Relations, 1912-1921* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997). Robert H. Zieger, *America's Great War: World War I and the American Experience* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2000).

¹⁹ Melvyn Dubofsky, *We Shall Be All: A History of the Industrial Workers of the World* (Chicago, IL: Quadrangle Books, 1969). James Weinstein, *The Decline of Socialism in America, 1912-1925*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1969). Carl R. Weinberg's *Labor, Loyalty, and Rebellion Southwestern Illinois Coal Miners & World War I* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2005).

often held to be the height (or nadir, depending on one's politics) of draft dodging," Keith wrote.²⁰

Christopher Capozzola's *Uncle Sam Wants You: World War I and the Making of the Modern American Citizen* (NY: Oxford University Press, 2008) implicates local civilians in this drive for political conformity, arguing that an under-staffed federal government needed the active and willing participation of local communities to enforce most of its wartime regulations. He coined the term "coercive voluntarism" to describe the enlistment of local civic groups in the campaign to ensure active compliance with wartime edicts on food conservation, liberty bond purchases, and curtailing dissent. Community leaders on the local and state level, Capozzola contends, helped the federal government create a culture of patriotic obligation that pressured citizens to provide the needed manpower, material, and food.

Like labor historians, Capozzola sees the emergence of a permanent surveillance state that monitored and suppressed radical political expression as a crucial legacy of the war for modern America. Christopher Sterba disagrees that an empowered state was the war's primary legacy. In *Good Americans: Italian and Jewish Immigrants during the First World War* (NY: Oxford University Press, 2003), Sterba challenged the longstanding assumption that nativist demands for complete assimilation (100 % Americanism) defined the immigrant experience during the First World War. Instead, Sterba argued that Italian and Jewish immigrants, both on the homefront and overseas, used the war to assimilate into mainstream culture on their own terms. A mixture of concern for events in their homelands, a desire for recognition in their adopted country, and pride in their communities' wartime contributions fueled their willing participation as soldiers and civilians in the war effort. Undergoing their first sustained interaction with the federal government and native-born Americans, these immigrant communities would use their participation in wartime civic activities as a springboard for future political engagement.

The idea that involvement in wartime mobilization served as a politicalizing experience forms the prevailing narrative in a host of works devoted to veterans, African Americans, and women. Implicit in all these works is the notion that wartime service (whether voluntary or coerced) created a social contract between the state and various sub-sets of the American population. Whether or not the state honored its side of the social contract helped to determine whether the war proved an aid or hindrance to the social justice campaigns mounted by these groups. Most recent studies also seek to balance an acknowledgement of the state's coercive power with a narrative that emphasizes individual agency and empowerment.

In *Doughboys, the Great War and the Remaking of America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001) I argued that conscription created a social compact between the state and conscripted soldiers that endured well after they returned home. Veterans argued that conscription, which deprived soldiers of their livelihoods, gave the state the responsibility to distribute the profits of war fairly. Returned servicemen focused on the large sums acquired by wartime manufactures, and

²⁰ Jeannette Keith, *Rich Man's War, Poor Man's Fight: Race, Class and Power in the Rural South during the First World War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), p. 58. Overall, 2-3 million men failed to register for the draft, while 338,000 never reported for induction or deserted from their training camps. By comparison, 571,000 men evaded the draft between the years of 1965-1975.

successfully demanded that some of these profits be retroactively given to them. World War I veterans extended this argument into World War II to shape the modern system of veterans' benefits created with the GI Bill in 1944. In *Beyond the Bonus March and GI Bill: How Veteran Politics Shaped the New Deal Era* (NYU Press, 2010), Steve Ortiz argued that by critiquing the limits of Franklin D. Roosevelt's Depression-era New Deal policies, World War I veterans played a major role in redefining the larger social contract between all Americans and the federal government that ultimately led to old-age pensions and federal labor standards.

For years, Arthur Barbeau and Florette Henri's *The Unknown Soldiers: African-American Soldiers in World War I* (Philadelphia, Pa.: Temple University Press, 1974; reprint NY: Da Capo Press 1996) served as the stand-alone study of American black troops. African Americans demanded recognition of their civil rights in exchange for their active participation in the war effort, but neither the federal government nor American society recognized the existence of this social contract. Barbeau and Henri told an unrelenting story of racial prejudice and discrimination. By contrast recent works emphasize the ways in which African Americans "fought back" against systemic discrimination and white vigilantism. This new interpretative framework recasts the wartime era as a pivotal time when new militancy, ideologies, members, and strategies infused the civil rights movement.

African American soldiers are "unknown" no more. In what is now a crowded field, several works stand out for their singular contributions. In two important books, *"Seeing Red." Federal Campaigns Against Black Militancy, 1919-1925* (Indiana University Press, 1999) and *Investigate Everything: Federal Efforts to Compel Black Loyalty During World War I* (Indiana University Press, 2002), Theodore Kornweibel traced the widespread federal surveillance of black civil rights organizations. Chad Williams, *Torchbearers of Democracy: African American Soldiers in the World War I Era* (University of North Carolina Press, 2010) emphasizes the diverse political responses to military service within the African American community. He surveys the career ambitions of college-educated blacks to secure commissions, the desires of poorer southern blacks to provide financially for their families, and civil rights leaders' hopes of using the war to advance the cause of racial justice.

Williams and Adrienne Lentz-Smith (*Freedom Struggles: African Americans and World War I*, Harvard University Press, 2009) view the war as a transformative moment in the civil rights movement. Lentz-Smith considers how African American soldiers experienced a rising political consciousness, as did their civilian advocates. Williams provides an extensive investigation postwar veteran political activism within the African American community, which left many frustrated with the lack of racial progress. Together, these works demonstrate how postwar veteran activism, not all of it successful, laid the groundwork for how activists would respond to the next world war. In several articles, I also trace how military service served as a vehicle for politicizing black soldiers by considering the structural, not just ideological, opportunities for soldiers to organize and how civil rights activists took up the banner of equal medical treatment for black veterans to advance the entire civil rights movement.²¹

²¹ Jennifer D. Keene, "The Long Journey Home: African American World War I Veterans and Veteran Policies," in *Veterans' Policies, Veterans' Politics: New Perspectives on Veterans in the Modern United States*, ed. Stephen R. Ortiz (Melbourne, FL: University Press of Florida, 2012), p. 146-172. Jennifer D.

The 1920 ratification of the 19th Amendment granting women the right to vote guaranteed the First World War a prominent place in historical works voted to the suffrage movement.²² Unlike African Americans, female activists successfully convinced male politicians that the wartime social contract required rewarding women with the vote for their loyal service on the homefront. "We have made partners of the women in this war. Shall we admit them only to a partnership of suffering and sacrifice and toil and not to a partnership of privilege and right?" proclaimed Wilson in announcing his support of a constitutional amendment granting female suffrage.²³

Another line of inquiry examines the leadership roles that politically mobilized women assumed within local communities. Capozzola and Lentz-Smith, for instance, discuss how middle-class women (who belonged to an array of social clubs) became essential grassroots organizers mobilizing white and black communities across the nation to support the war. The laurels bestowed on working-class women for their tireless sacrifice and volunteer activities, Capozzola argues, simply camouflaged state-sanctioned exploitation of unpaid female laborers. Julia F. Irwin's *Making the World Safe: The American Red Cross and a Nation's Humanitarian Awakening* (NY: Oxford University Press, 2013) details a different sort of political awakening among women by focusing on their humanitarian relief work, often initiated to help women overseas. Women also served as vessels of memory in the postwar period, playing quasi-official roles in helping the nation commemorate the war. In *Of Little Comfort: War Widows, Fallen Soldiers, and the Remaking of the Nation after the Great War* (NYU Press, 2012), Erika Kuhlman investigates how war widows became public symbols through which an entire society could grieve for the war dead. Lisa M. Budreau (*Bodies of War: World War I and the Politics of Commemoration in America, 1919-1933*, NYU Press, 2010) echoes this theme with her discussion of the government's willingness at the height of the Great Depression to fund pilgrimages for mothers and widows to visit their fallen soldiers' overseas graves.

Fighting the War

Assessing the combat performance of the American army and its ultimate contribution to the Allied victory occupies a central place in military histories of U.S. participation in the war. General John J. Pershing, the commander of the American Expeditionary Forces (AEF), set a triumphant tone in his two-volume autobiography,

Keene "Protest and Disability: A New Look at African American Soldiers during the First World War," in *Warfare and Belligerence: Perspectives in First World War Studies*, ed. Pierre Purseigle (London: Brill Academic Publishers, 2005), p. 215-242.

²² Sally Hunter Graham, "Woodrow Wilson, Alice Paul, and the Woman Suffrage Movement," *Political Science Quarterly* 98 (Winter 1983-84), p. 665-79 and *Woman Suffrage and the New Democracy* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996). Eleanor Flexner, *Century of Struggle: The Woman's Rights Movement in the United States*, rev. ed. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975). Christine A. Lundardini, *From Equal Suffrage to Equal Rights: Alice Paul and the National Women's Party, 1910-1928* (New York: New York University Press, 1986). Christine A. Lunardini and Thomas J. Knock, "Woodrow Wilson and Woman Suffrage: A New Look," *Political Science Quarterly* 95 (Winter 1980-1981): p. 655-671.

²³ Woodrow Wilson, "An Address to the Senate," September 30, 1918, in Arthur S. Link *et al.*, eds., *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, 69 vols. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1966-94), vol. 51, p. 158.

My Experiences in the World War (NY: Frederick A. Stokes Company, 1931). This autobiography argued forcefully that under Pershing's command the American army became an elite force that won the war for the Allies along the Western Front. Feeling slighted by Pershing, Pershing's chief of staff Peyton March, *The Nation at War* (NY Garden City, Doubleday, 1932), wrote his own memoir that severely criticized Pershing's leadership but did not challenge the central role that the United States played in the conflict. These early accounts essentially set the parameters for the scholarly debate over how effectively Pershing led and the American Army fought.

Carrying Pershing's story of success in the 1960s, Harvey A. DeWeerd, *President Wilson Fights His War: World War I and the American Intervention* (NY: The Macmillan C°, 1968) and Edward Coffman, *The War To End All Wars: The American Military Experience in World War I* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1968) saw the AEF as eventually overcoming its "growing pains" to fight successfully on the Western Front. In *Learning Lessons in the American Expeditionary Forces* (U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1997), Kenneth Hamburger also praised the AEF for studying its mistakes and correcting them in time to win the war.

Other scholars built upon March's more critical appraisal of the American war effort. A revisionist school in the 1980s and 1990s viewed the high U.S. casualty rate as a sign of poor leadership, rather than a necessary part of the army's learning curve. Timothy K. Nenninger and Paul Braim argued that AEF commanders made key mistakes that affected training, supply lines, and strategic decisions.²⁴ James W. Rainey was scathing in his assessment of AEF doctrine, training, and combat performance. "In having to grope its way to victory, the AEF succeeded not because of imaginative operations and tactics nor because of qualitative superiority in open warfare, but rather by smothering German machine guns with American flesh," Rainey wrote.²⁵

Pershing had lauded his success in resisting Allied demands that he allow the British and French to amalgamate American soldiers into their armies. Pershing's triumph was creating an independent American army that controlled its own sector of the Western Front. David Trask, *The AEF and Coalition Warmaking, 1917-1918* (University Press of Kansas, 1993), Robert Bruce, *A Fraternity of Arms: America and France in the Great War* (University Press of Kansas, 2003) and Mitchell Yockelson, *Borrowed Soldiers: Americans under British Command, 1918* (University of Oklahoma Press, 2008) instead emphasize how the United States fought as part of an Allied coalition. Cooperation, rather than the introduction of uniquely American strategies and values (the Pershing view) brought about victory, according to Michael S. Neiberg. His *The Second Battle of the Marne* (Indiana University Press, 2008) offers the first monograph-length study of this pivotal battle in which British, French, and American forces fought together.

²⁴ Timothy K. Nenninger, "American Military Effectiveness in the First World War," in *Military Effectiveness*, Vol. 1: *The First World War*, eds. Allan R. Millet and Williamson Murray (Boston: Allen and Unwin, 1988), p. 116-156. Paul Braim, *The Test of Battle: The American Expeditionary Forces in the Meuse-Argonne Campaign* (Newark, Del.: University of Delaware Press, 1987).

²⁵ James W. Rainey, "The Questionable Training of the AEF in World War I," *Parameters: Journal of the US Army War College*, 22 (Winter 1992-93), p. 100. See also Rainey, "Ambivalent Warfare: The Tactical Doctrine of the AEF in World War I," *Parameters: Journal of the US Army War College*, 13 (September 1983): p. 34-46.

Mark E. Grotelueschen and Edward G. Lengel shifted the focus to decision-making within companies and divisions rather than among the top-level leadership.²⁶ Grotelueschen's *The AEF Way of War: The American Army and Combat in World War I* (NY: Cambridge University Press, 2007) and Lengel's *To Conquer Hell: The Meuse-Argonne, 1918* (Henry Holt & Company Inc, 2008) argued that the most substantial and effective learning occurred from the bottom-up. These authors considered the average soldier experience while still writing in the genre of operational, military histories.

Paul Fussell's study of the British trench experience in *The Great War and Modern Memory* (Oxford University Press, 1975) offered American cultural and social historians inspiration for expanding military history beyond questions of strategy and command. Mark Meigs, *Optimism at Armageddon: Voices of American Participants in the First World War* (NYU Press, 1997) examined the "unofficial" daily rituals of troops, arguing that collectively a new military mass culture emerged during the war. In *Doughboys, the Great War and the Remaking of America* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001) I examined the internal strife over training, combat, discipline, race relations, and demobilization to argue that civilian soldiers exerted tremendous power in shaping the policies and behavior of the wartime military. More recently Jonathan Edel, *Faith in the Fight: Religion and the American Soldier in the Great War* (Princeton University Press, 2010) has examined soldiers' religious practices. David Laskin (*The Long Way Home: An American Journey from Ellis Island to the Great War*, HarperCollins, 2011) and Richard Slotkin (*Lost Battalions: The Great War and the Crisis of American Nationality*, Holt, Henry & Company, Inc, 2005) use a biographical approach to dissenting American soldiers' wartime lives. Pershing remained convinced that the American army was essential to the final victory. John Mosier, *The Myth of the Great War: A New Military History of World War I* (HarperCollins, 2001), agreed that the U.S. Army deserved the lion's share of credit for defeating Germany. World War I historians Tim Travers, Robin Prior, Trevor Wilson, and Gary Sheffield disagreed. They viewed British and French tactical innovations, especially improved coordination between infantry and artillery, as the key element ending the trench deadlock in 1918.²⁷ The majority of American scholars of the AEF shy away from Mosier's bold pronouncements, while still arguing for the centrality of America's role in the ultimate victory. Most accounts point to America's part in stemming the 1918 German spring offensives and Germany's decision to request an armistice once faced with the prospect of millions more Americans arriving in 1919.

²⁶ There are few scholarly American operational histories. In addition to those discussed in this essay, see Douglas V. Johnson and Rolfe L. Hillman's *Soissons, 1918* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 1999) and James H. Hallas, *Squandered Victory: The American Army at St. Mihiel* (Westport, CN: Praeger, 1995).

²⁷ Tim Travers, *The Killing Ground: The British Army, the Western Front and the Emergence of Modern Warfare, 1900-1918* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1987). Robin Prior and Trevor Wilson, *Command on the Western Front: The Military Career of Sir Henry Rawlinson, 1914-1918* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992). Gary Sheffield, *Forgotten Victory* (London: Headline, 2001) and *The Chief: Douglas Haig and the British Army* (London: Aurum Press, 2011).

Remembering and Forgetting the War

In the immediate aftermath of World War I, Americans remembered the war through novels, films, monuments, memoirs, burials, and ceremonies. Lost Generation novelists (such as Ernest Hemingway, John Dos Passos, F. Scott Fitzgerald) wrote rite of passage stories in which young, often naïve, main characters lost their illusions and innocence by fighting in the war. The government and veterans organizations enshrined a different memory of the war in elaborate monuments, overseas cemeteries, and annual Armistice Day ceremonies which underscored the heroism and valor of American soldiers. The desire to learn lessons from the war also permeated American political culture, as policymakers in the 1930s tried to avoid the mistakes of their predecessors while crafting their own neutrality policies.

Unlike the Somme for the British or Verdun for the French, the Meuse-Argonne (the culminating U.S. battle in WWI) found no lasting place in American memory. Despite the high death toll (53,000 men in six months) General John J. Pershing remained a publically revered figure. Americans saved their animosity for Woodrow Wilson whose reputation plummeted in the post-war period. The quick return of prosperity in the 1920s, the financial crisis of the Great Depression, and World War II all served to weaken the place of World War I in the American imagination.

It was not until the 1960s, at the height of another unpopular war in Vietnam, that the first scholarly account on memory appeared. Stanley Cooperman's *World War I and the American Novel* (The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1967) accepted the Lost Generation's message of disillusionment as the main cultural legacy of the war. Fast forward another twenty-five years, and G. Kurt Piehler's path-breaking *Remembering War the American Way* (Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995) included only one chapter on World War I, reflecting the still limited scholarly interest in the topic. Piehler suggested that memorialization in the 1920s took a utilitarian turn, with Americans choosing to remember the war by building edifices that improved community civic life. Dedicating these structures to the memory of those who lost their lives trying to spread democracy in "the war to end all wars" offered physical evidence of community progress which countered claims that these men had died in vain. Distance from the event, however, dimmed the connection that average American made between the war and eating their lunch in a Pershing Square or driving on an Argonne Street.

It is only in the last few years that American scholars have finally joining the decades-long conversation among European scholars on memory and mourning. This is now one of the promising and exciting areas of new scholarship, one that focuses on both how Americans remembered and why they forgot. Like Piehler, Lisa Budreau documented an "American way of remembrance," that reflected American political and cultural values. She focused on the controversies surrounding the burial of American war dead, especially the debate over whether a dead soldier became a private citizen or remained in service of the state.²⁸ Families demanding repatriation of fallen soldiers back to their local communities meant fewer coffins to bury in France and Belgium. The government constructed overseas memorials and

²⁸ Lisa Budreau, *Bodies of War: World War I and the Politics of Commemoration in America, 1919-1933* (New York: New York University Press, 2010).

cemeteries to underscore the emergence of the United States as a permanent major world power by leaving a visible presence of American sacrifice for Europe. The cemeteries, however, had ample space between gravestones to camouflage the fact that so few American soldiers were buried in them. Today it is mostly Europeans, not Americans, who visit these cemeteries.

In their works on the influenza epidemic, Carol R. Byerly, *Fever of War: The Influenza Epidemic in the U.S. Army during World War I* (NYU Press, 2005) and Nancy K. Bristow, *American Pandemic: The Lost Worlds of the 1918 Influenza Epidemic* (NY: Oxford University Press, 2012) attempt to recover what they consider a "lost memory" of the war. To explain why Americans forgot the devastating consequences of the influenza epidemic so quickly forgotten, Byerly and Bristow contend that American society privileged optimism and progress. Within this cultural environment sustained despair and grief were culturally unacceptable.

Americans never intentionally purged the war from their collective consciousness, according to Steven Trout.²⁹ Instead, different groups of Americans remembered the war in too many diverse ways, preventing a unifying national narrative of the war's significance from taking root. Popular memory-makers (novelists, playwrights, poets) often borrowed from British modes of memory that emphasized the horrors of trench warfare, a trope that resonated poorly with American veterans who saw the war as reaffirming their valour and the exceptionalism of the United States.

Not all Americans forgot the war quickly. The above discussion summarized how war memories fueled veteran political activism. Memory of the war also remained strong within the African American community. Besides energizing the postwar civil rights movements, the war heavily influenced the art, prose, and poetry produced by Harlem Renaissance artists. Mark Whalen argues that this war-inspired cultural response, when put alongside the new political militancy, demonstrates how African Americans attached an empowering narrative to their memory of the war. Their sense of betrayal, rather than leading to paralyzing disillusionment, instead emboldened African Americans to innovate with new art forms and political strategies.³⁰

Conclusion

Competing memories of the war reflected existing political and social divisions within American society during the twenties and thirties, as Americans differed on whether the war's impact should be celebrated or condemned. Did the war signify triumph or tragedy; equality or discrimination; humanitarianism or imperialism; voluntarism or coercion; democracy or oppression? These questions are still with us, along with some new ones. American scholars have just begun to investigate the wide-range of American responses to the war during the period of neutrality, calling into question whether 1917 is even the right date for marking American entry into the war. Similarly, the new work on disabled soldiers questions when the war ended for the individual soldier. Old questions or new, in many respects every scholarly account of the war written since its conclusion tries to offer a clear, compelling case for why the

²⁹ Steven Trout's *On the Battlefields of Memory: The First World War and American Remembrance, 1919-1941* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2010).

³⁰ Mark Whalen, *The Great War and the Culture of the New Negro* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2008).

war mattered for the United States. None however has yet succeeded in defining an unambiguous and uncontested place for the war in the American historical narrative.

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Abstract

"What Did It All Mean? The United States and World War I"

Americans' memory of World War I faded after World War II, but historians have continually debated nearly every aspect of America's experience in World War I. Woodrow Wilson looms large in the scholarship examining the reasons America entered the war and the rocky peace settlement. Historians have weighed both America's contribution to the overall war and how effectively America mobilized for total war. Assessing how the war transformed American society and international relations provides a unifying theme for these historical studies which all seek to define why the war mattered for the United States.

Keywords: United States, World War I, Woodrow Wilson, Versailles Peace Treaty, African Americans, American Expeditionary Forces

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Résumé

« *Les États-Unis et la Première Guerre mondiale : signification et interprétations* ».

Si la mémoire de la Première Guerre mondiale s'est effacée aux États-Unis après la Seconde Guerre mondiale, les historiens ont néanmoins continué à explorer tous les aspects de l'expérience américaine de la Grande Guerre. La personnalité et l'action de Woodrow Wilson en faveur de l'entrée en guerre des États-Unis puis de l'établissement de la paix tiennent une place importante dans l'historiographie américaine de la Grande Guerre. Les historiens ont également étudié la contribution des États-Unis à l'effort de guerre mais aussi l'efficacité et l'impact de la mobilisation américaine dans la guerre totale. La manière dont la guerre a transformé la société américaine et les relations internationales est un thème qui parcourt l'ensemble des études historiques cherchant à définir ce qu'a représenté la Grande Guerre pour les États-Unis.

Mots clés : États-Unis ; Première Guerre mondiale ; Woodrow Wilson ; traité de Versailles ; Afro-américains ; corps expéditionnaire américain.



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