Global Involvements and World War I, 1902–1920

It was April 6, 1917, and Jane Addams was troubled. By overwhelming margins, Congress had just supported President Woodrow Wilson’s call for a declaration of war on Germany. Addams belonged to the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR); her father had served in the Illinois legislature with future President Abraham Lincoln. But she believed in peace and deplored her nation’s decision to go to war. As the founder of Hull House, a Chicago settlement house, Addams had worked to overcome tensions among different ethnic groups. In *Newer Ideals of Peace* (1907), she had insisted that the multiethnic “internationalism” of America’s immigrant neighborhoods proved that national and ethnic hostilities could be overcome. Addams had also observed how war spirit can inflame a people. During the Spanish-American War, she had watched Chicago street urchins playing at killing “Spaniards.”

When war broke out in Europe in 1914, Addams worked to end the conflict and to keep America out of the fray. A founder of the Woman’s Peace party in January 1915, she attended an International Congress of Women in April that called on the warring nations to submit their differences to arbitration. Addams personally met with President Wilson to enlist his support for arbitration, but with no success.

Now America had entered the war, and Addams had to take a stand. Deepening her dilemma, many of her friends, including philosopher and...
educator John Dewey, were lining up behind Wilson. Theodore Roosevelt, whose 1912 Progressive party presidential campaign Addams had enthusiastically supported, was beating the drums for war.

Despite the pressures, Addams concluded that she must remain faithful to her conscience and oppose the war. The reaction was swift. Editorial writers who had earlier praised her settlement house work now criticized her. The DAR expelled her. For years after, the DAR, the American Legion, and other patriotic organizations attacked Addams for her “disloyalty” in 1917.

Addams did not sit out the war on the sidelines. She traveled across America, giving speeches urging increased food production to aid refugees and other war victims. Once the war ended, she resumed her work for peace. In 1919 she was elected first president of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom. She described her wartime isolation in a moving book, Peace and Bread in Time of War (1922). In 1931 she won the Nobel Peace Prize. During the 1960s, some opponents of the Vietnam War found inspiration in her earlier example.

Addams’s experience underscores how deeply World War I affected American life. Whether they donned uniforms, worked on farms or in factories, or simply experienced U.S. life in wartime, all Americans were touched by the war. Beyond its immediate effects, the war had long-lasting social, economic, and political ramifications.

Well before 1917, however, events abroad gripped the attention of government officials, the media, and ordinary Americans. From this perspective, World War I was one episode in a larger process of deepening U.S. involvement overseas. In the late nineteenth century, America had become an industrial and economic powerhouse seeking markets and raw materials worldwide. In the early twentieth century, these broadening economic interests helped give rise to a new international role for the nation. This expanded role profoundly influenced developments at home as well as U.S. actions abroad, and has continued to shape American history to the present. These broader global realities, culminating in World War I, are the focus of this chapter.

This chapter will focus on five major questions:

■ What general motivations or objectives underlay America’s involvement in Asia and Latin America in the early twentieth century?

■ Considering both immediate provocations and broader factors, why did the United States enter the European war in April 1917?

■ How did America’s participation in the war affect the home front and the reform spirit of the prewar Progressive Era?

■ How did the role of the federal government in the U.S. economy, and in American life generally, change in 1917–1918?

■ What was President Woodrow Wilson’s role in the creation of the League of Nations and in the Senate’s rejection of U.S. membership in the League?

**Defining America’s World Role, 1902–1914**

As we saw in Chapter 20, the annexation of Hawaii, the Spanish-American War, the occupation of the Philippines, and other developments in the 1890s signaled an era of intensified U.S. involvement abroad, especially in Asia and Latin America. These foreign engagements reflected a growing determination to assert American might in an age of imperial expansion by European powers, to protect and extend U.S. business investments abroad, and to impose American stan-
dards of good government beyond the nation’s borders. This process of foreign engagement continued under presidents Theodore Roosevelt, William Howard Taft, and Woodrow Wilson. The strongly moralistic tone of the progressive movement, whose domestic manifestations we examined in Chapter 21, emerged in America’s dealings with other nations as well.

**The “Open Door”: Competing for the China Market**

As the campaign to suppress the Philippines insurrection dragged on (see Chapter 20), American policy makers turned their attention farther west, to China. Their aim was not territorial expansion but rather protection of U.S. commercial opportunities. Proclaimed Indiana Senator Albert J. Beveridge in 1898, “American factories are making more than the American people can use; American soil is producing more than they can consume. . . . The trade of the world must and shall be ours.”

The China market beckoned. Textile producers dreamed of clothing China’s millions of people; investors envisioned Chinese railroad construction. As China’s 250-year-old Manchu Ch’ing empire grew weaker, U.S. businesspeople watched carefully. In 1896 a consortium of New York capitalists formed a company to promote trade and railroad investment in China.

But other nations were also eyeing the China market. Some pressured the weak Manchu rulers to designate certain ports and regions as “spheres of influence” where they would enjoy exclusive trading and development rights. In 1896 Russia won both the right to build a railway across Manchuria and a twenty-five-year lease on much of the region. In 1897 Germany forcibly secured a ninety-nine-year lease on a Chinese port as well as mining and railroad rights in the adjacent province. The British won various concessions, too.

In September 1899 U.S. Secretary of State John Hay asked the major European powers with economic interests in China not to interfere with American trading rights in China. Specifically, he requested them to open the ports in their spheres of influence to all countries. The six nations gave noncommittal answers, but Hay blithely announced that they had accepted the principle of an “Open Door” to American business in China.

Hay’s Open Door note showed how commercial considerations were increasingly influencing American foreign policy. It reflected a form of economic expansionism that has been called “informal empire.” The U.S. government had no desire to occupy Chinese territory, but it did want to keep Chinese markets open to American businesses.

As Hay pursued this effort, a more urgent threat emerged in China. For years, antiforeign feeling had simmered in China, fanned by the aged Ch’ing empress who was disgusted by the growth of Western influence. In 1899 a fanatical antiforeign secret society known as the Harmonious Righteous Fists (called “Boxers” by Western journalists) killed thousands of foreigners and Chinese Christians. In June 1900 the Boxers occupied Beijing (Peking), the Chinese capital, and besieged the district housing the foreign legations. The United States contributed twenty-five hundred soldiers to an international army that marched on Beijing, drove back the Boxers, and rescued the occupants of the threatened legations.

The defeat of the Boxer uprising further weakened China’s government. Fearing that the regime’s collapse would allow European powers to carve up China, John Hay issued a second, more important, series of Open Door notes in 1900. He reaffirmed the principle of open
trade in China for all nations and announced America’s determination to preserve China’s territorial and administrative integrity. In general, China remained open to U.S. business interests as well as to Christian missionary effort. In the 1930s, when Japanese expansionism menaced China’s survival, Hay’s policy helped shape the American response.

The Panama Canal: Hardball Diplomacy

Traders had long dreamed of a canal across the forty-mile-wide ribbon of land joining North and South America to eliminate the hazardous voyage around South America. In 1879 a French company secured permission from Colombia to build a canal across Panama, then part of Colombia (see Map 22.1). But mismanagement and yellow fever doomed the project, and ten years and $400 million later, with the canal half completed, it went bankrupt. Seeking to recoup its losses, the French company offered its assets, including the still-valid concession from Colombia, to the United States for $109 million.

America was in an expansionist mood. In 1902, after the French lowered their price to $40 million, Congress authorized President Theodore Roosevelt to accept the offer. The following year, Secretary of State Hay signed an agreement with the Colombian representative, Tomás Herrán, granting the United States a ninety-nine-year lease on the proposed canal for a down payment of $10 million and an annual fee of $250,000. But the Colombian senate, seeking a better deal, rejected the agreement. An outraged Roosevelt, using the racist language of the day, privately denounced the Colombians as “greedy little anthropoids.”

Determined to have his canal, Roosevelt found a willing collaborator in Philippe Bunau-Varilla, an official of the bankrupt French company. Dismayed that his company might lose its $40 million, Bunau-Varilla organized a “revolution” in Panama from a New York hotel room. While his wife stitched a flag, he wrote a declaration of independence and a constitution for the new nation. When the “revolution” occurred as scheduled on November 3, 1903, a U.S. warship hovered offshore. Proclaiming Panama’s independence, Bunau-Varilla appointed himself its first ambassador to the United States. John Hay quickly recognized the newly hatched nation and signed a treaty with Bunau-Varilla granting the United States a ten-mile-wide strip of land across Panama “in perpetuity” (that is, forever) on the same terms earlier rejected by Colombia. Theodore Roosevelt later summed up the episode, “I took the Canal Zone, and let Congress debate, and while the debate goes on, the canal does also.”

The U.S. canal builders’ first challenge was to overcome the yellow fever that had haunted the French. Leading this effort was Dr. Walter Reed of the Army Medical Corps. Earlier, in a brilliant research project in Cuba, Reed and his associates had used themselves and army volunteers as experimental subjects to prove that the yellow-fever virus was spread by female mosquitoes that bred in stagnant water. In Panama Reed organized a large-scale drainage project that eradicated the disease-bearing mosquito—a remarkable public-health achievement. Construction began in 1906, and in August 1914 the first ship sailed through the canal. In 1921, implicitly conceding the dubious methods used to acquire the Canal Zone, the U.S. Senate voted a payment of $25 million to Colombia. But the ill feeling generated by Theodore Roosevelt’s high-handed actions, combined with other instances of U.S. interventionism, would long shadow U.S.-Latin American relations.

Roosevelt and Taft Assert U.S. Power in Latin America and Asia

While the Panama Canal remains the best-known foreign-policy achievement of these years, other actions by Presidents Theodore Roosevelt and William Howard Taft
underscored their belief that Washington had to assert U.S. power and protect U.S. business interests in Latin America (see Map 22.1) and Asia. Two crises early in Roosevelt's presidency arose as a result of European powers' intervention in Latin America. In 1902 German, British, and Italian warships blockaded and bombarded the ports of Venezuela, which had defaulted on its debts to European investors. The standoff ended when all sides agreed to Roosevelt's proposal of arbitration. The second crisis flared in 1904 when several European nations threatened to invade the Dominican Republic, a Caribbean island nation that had also defaulted on its debts to European investors. The standoff ended when all sides agreed to Roosevelt's proposal of arbitration.

The second crisis flared in 1904 when several European nations threatened to invade the Dominican Republic, a Caribbean island nation that had also defaulted on its debts to them. Roosevelt reacted swiftly. If anyone were to intervene, he believed, it should be the United States. While denying any territorial ambitions in Latin America, Roosevelt in December 1904 declared that “chronic wrongdoing” by any Latin American nation would justify U.S. intervention.

This pronouncement has been called “the Roosevelt Corollary” to the Monroe Doctrine of 1823, which had warned European powers against intervening in Latin America. Now Roosevelt asserted that in cases of “wrongdoing” (a word he left undefined), the United States had the right to precisely such intervention. Suiting actions to words, the Roosevelt administration ended the threat of European intervention by taking over the Dominican Republic's customs service for two years and managing its foreign debt. Roosevelt summed up his foreign-policy approach in a 1901 speech quoting what he said was an old African proverb, “Speak softly and carry a big stick.” (He followed the second part of this rule more consistently than the first.)

The foreign policy of the Taft administration (1909–1913) focused on advancing American commercial interests abroad, a policy some called “dollar diplomacy.” A U.S.-backed revolution in Nicaragua in 1911 brought to power Adolfo Díaz, an officer of an American-owned mine. Washington feared growing British influence in Nicaragua's affairs, and also that a foreign power might build a canal across Nicaragua to rival the Panama Canal. In exchange for control of Nicaragua's national bank, customs service, and railroad, American bankers lent Diaz's government $1.5 million. When a revolt against Diaz broke out in 1912,
Taft ordered in the marines to protect the bankers’ investment. Except for one brief interval, marines occupied Nicaragua until 1933.

In Asia, too, both Roosevelt and Taft sought to project U.S. power and advance the interests of American business. In 1900, exploiting the turmoil caused by the Boxer uprising, Russian troops occupied the Chinese province of Manchuria, and Russia promoted its commercial interests by building railroads. This alarmed the Japanese, who also had designs on Manchuria and nearby Korea. In February 1904 a surprise Japanese attack destroyed Russian ships anchored at Port Arthur, Manchuria. Japan completely dominated in the Russo-Japanese War that followed. For the first time, European imperialist expansion had been checked by an Asian power.

Roosevelt, while pleased to see Russian expansionism challenged, believed that a Japanese victory would disrupt the Asian balance of power and threaten America’s position in the Philippines. Accordingly, he invited Japan and Russia to a peace conference at Portsmouth, New Hampshire. In September 1905 the two rivals signed a peace treaty. Russia recognized Japan’s rule in Korea and made other territorial concessions. After this outcome, curbing Japanese expansionism—peacefully, if possible—became America’s major objective in Asia. For his role in ending the war, Roosevelt, in the unaccustomed role of peacemaker, received the Nobel Peace Prize.

Meanwhile, U.S.-Japanese relations soured when the San Francisco school board, reflecting West Coast hostility to Asian immigrants, assigned all Asian children to segregated schools in 1906. Japan angrily protested this insult. Summoning the school board to Washington, Roosevelt persuaded them to reverse this discriminatory policy. In return, in 1908 the administration negotiated a “gentlemen’s agreement” with Japan by which Tokyo pledged to halt Japanese emigration to America. Racist attitudes continued to poison U.S.-Japanese relations, however. In 1913, the California legislature prohibited Japanese aliens from owning land.

While Californians warned of the “yellow peril,” Japanese journalists, eyeing America’s military strength and involvement in Asia, spoke of a “white peril.” In 1907 Roosevelt ordered sixteen gleaming U.S. battleships on a “training operation” to Japan. Although officially treated as friendly, this “Great White Fleet” underscored America’s growing naval might.

Under President Taft, U.S. foreign policy in Asia continued to focus on dollar diplomacy, which in this case meant promoting U.S. commercial interests in China—the same goal Secretary of State John Hay had sought with his Open Door notes. As it happened, however, a plan for a U.S.-financed railroad in Manchuria did not work out. Not only did U.S. bankers find the project too risky, but Russia and Japan signed a treaty carving up Manchuria for commercial purposes, freezing out the Americans.

Wilson and Latin America

Upon entering the White House in 1913 as the first Democratic president in sixteen years, Woodrow Wilson criticized his Republican predecessors’ expansionist policies. The United States, he pledged, would “never again seek one additional foot of territory by conquest.” But he, too, soon intervened in Latin America. In 1915, after upheavals in Haiti and the Dominican Republic (two nations sharing the Caribbean island of Santo Domingo), Wilson sent in the marines (see Map 22.1). A Haitian constitution favorable to U.S. commercial interests was overwhelmingly ratified in 1918 in a vote supervised by the marines. Under Major General Smedley (“Old Gimlet Eye”) Butler, marines brutally suppressed
Haitian resistance to U.S. rule. The marines remained in the Dominican Republic until 1924 and in Haiti until 1934.

The most serious crisis Wilson faced in Latin America was the Mexican Revolution. Mexico had won independence from Spain in 1820, but the nation remained divided between a small landowning elite and an impoverished peasantry. In 1911 rebels led by the democratic reformer Francisco Madero had ended the thirty-year rule of President Porfirio Díaz, who had defended the interests of the wealthy elite. Early in 1913, just as Wilson took office, Mexican troops loyal to General Victoriano Huerta, a full-blooded Indian, overthrew and murdered Madero.

In this turbulent era, Wilson tried to promote good government, protect U.S. investments, and safeguard U.S. citizens living in Mexico or along its border. Forty thousand Americans had settled in Mexico under Díaz's regime, and U.S. investors had poured some $2 billion into Mexican oil wells and other ventures. Reversing the long-standing U.S. policy of recognizing all governments, Wilson refused to recognize Huerta's regime, which he called “a government of butchers.” Authorizing arms sales to General Venustiano Carranza, Huerta's rival, Wilson also ordered the port of Veracruz blockaded to prevent a shipment of German arms from reaching Huerta (see Map 22.1). Announced Wilson, “I am going to teach the South American republics to elect good men.” In April 1914 seven thousand U.S. troops occupied Veracruz and engaged Huerta's forces. Sixty-five Americans and approximately five hundred Mexicans were killed or wounded. Bowing to U.S. might, Huerta abdicated; Carranza took power; and the U.S. troops withdrew.

But the turmoil continued. In January 1916 a bandit chieftain in northern Mexico, Pancho Villa, murdered sixteen U.S. mining engineers. Soon after, Villa's gang burned the town of Columbus, New Mexico, and killed nineteen inhabitants. Enraged Americans demanded action. Wilson dispatched a punitive expedition into Mexico under General John J. Pershing. When Pancho Villa not only eluded Pershing but also brazenly staged another cross-border raid into Texas, Wilson ordered 150,000 National Guardsmen to the Mexican border—a heavy-handed response that embittered U.S.-Mexican relations for years after.

Although soon overshadowed by World War I, these involvements in Asia and Latin America illuminate the U.S. foreign-policy goal, which was, essentially, to achieve an international system based on democratic values and capitalist enterprise. Washington planners envisioned a harmonious, stable global order that would welcome both American political values and American business. President Wilson summed up this view in a speech to corporate leaders: “[Y]ou are Americans and are meant to carry liberty and justice and the principles of humanity wherever you go. . . . [G]o out and sell goods that will make the world more comfortable and more happy, and convert them to the principles of America.” Wilson's vision of an American-based world order shaped his response to a crisis unfolding in Europe.

**War in Europe, 1914–1917**

When war engulfed Europe in 1914, most Americans wished only to remain aloof. For nearly three years, the United States stayed neutral. But by April 1917 cultural ties to England and France, economic considerations, visions of a world remade in America's image, and German violations of Wilson's definition of neutral rights all combined to draw the United States into the maelstrom.

**The Coming of War**

Europe was at peace through much of the nineteenth century, and some people concluded that war was a thing of the past. Beneath the surface, however, ominous developments, including a complex web of alliances, belied such hopes. Germany, Austria, and Italy signed a mutual-defense treaty in 1882. In turn, France concluded military treaties with Russia and Great Britain.

Beyond the treaties imperial ambitions and nationalistic passions stirred. The once-powerful Ottoman Empire, centered in Turkey, grew weaker in the 1870s, leaving in its wake such newly independent nations as Romania, Bulgaria, and Serbia.

Serbian patriots dreamed of creating a greater Serbia that would include Serbs living in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Serbia's neighbor to the west. Russia, home to millions of Slavs, the same ethnic group as the Serbian population, supported Serbia's expansionist ambitions. Meanwhile, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, with its capital in Vienna, also saw opportunities for expansion as the Ottoman Empire faded. In 1908 Austria-Hungary annexed (took over) Bosnia-Herzegovina, alarming Russia and Serbia.

Germany, ruled by Kaiser Wilhelm II, also displayed expansionist impulses. Many Germans believed that their nation had lagged in the race for empire. Expansion, modernization, and military power became the goal in Berlin.

Such was the context when Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria made a state visit to Bosnia in June
1914. As he and his wife rode in an open car through Sarajevo, the Bosnian capital, a young Bosnian Serb nationalist gunned them down. In response, Austria declared war on Serbia on July 28. Russia, which had a secret treaty with Serbia, mobilized for war. Germany declared war on Russia and Russia's ally France. Great Britain, linked by treaty to France, declared war on Germany. An assassin's bullet had plunged Europe into war.

This was the start of the conflict that we today know as World War I. Until the outbreak of World War II in 1939, however, it was simply called The Great War. On one side were Great Britain, Russia, and France, called the Allies. On the other side were the Central Powers: Germany and Austria-Hungary. Italy, although bound by treaty to the Central Powers, switched sides and joined the Allies in 1915.

### The Perils of Neutrality

Proclaiming U.S. neutrality, President Wilson urged the nation to be neutral “in thought as well as in action.” Most Americans, grateful that an ocean lay between them and the war, fervently agreed. A popular song summed up the mood: “I Didn’t Raise My Boy to Be a Soldier.”


But not all Americans felt emotional ties to England. Many German-Americans sympathized with Germany’s cause. Irish-Americans speculated that a German victory might free Ireland from British rule. Some Scandinavian immigrants identified more with Germany than with England. But these cultural and ethnic cross-currents did not at first override Wilson’s commitment to neutrality. For most Americans, staying out of the conflict became the chief goal.

Neutral in 1914, America went to war in 1917. What caused this turnabout? Fundamentally, Wilson’s vision of a world order in America’s image conflicted with his neutrality. An international system based on democracy and capitalism would be impossible, he believed, in a world dominated by imperial Germany. Even an Allied victory would not ensure a transformed world order, Wilson gradually became convinced, without a U.S. role in the postwar settlement. To shape the peace, America would have to fight the war.

These underlying ideas influenced Wilson’s handling of the immediate issue that dragged the United States into the conflict: neutral nations’ rights on the high seas. When the war began, Britain started intercepting U.S. merchant ships bound for Germany, insisting that their cargo could aid Germany’s war effort. Wilson’s protests intensified in late 1914 and early 1915 when Britain declared the North Sea a war zone; planted it with explosive mines; and blockaded all German ports, choking off Germany’s imports, including food. Britain was determined to exploit its naval advantage, even if it meant alienating American public opinion.

But Germany, not England, ultimately pushed the United States into war. If Britannia ruled the waves, Germany controlled the ocean depths with its torpedo-equipped submarines, or U-boats. In February 1915 Berlin proclaimed the waters around Great Britain a war zone and warned off all ships. Wilson quickly responded: Germany would be held to “strict accountability” for any loss of U.S. ships or lives.
On May 1, 1915, in a small ad in U.S. newspapers, the German embassy cautioned Americans against travel on British or French vessels. Six days later, a U-boat sank the British liner *Lusitania* off the Irish coast, with the loss of 1,198 lives, including 128 Americans. As headlines screamed the news, U.S. public opinion turned sharply anti-German. (*The Lusitania*, historians later discovered, had carried munitions destined for England.)

Wilson demanded that Germany stop unrestricted submarine warfare. He insisted that America could persuade the belligerents to recognize the principle of neutral rights without going to war. “There is such a thing as a man being too proud to fight,” he said.

The *Lusitania* disaster exposed deep divisions in U.S. public opinion. Many Americans, now ready for war, ridiculed Wilson’s “too proud to fight” speech. Theodore Roosevelt denounced the president’s “abject cowardice.” The National Security League, a lobby of bankers and industrialists, promoted a U.S. arms buildup and universal military training and organized “preparedness” parades in major cities. By late 1915 Wilson himself called for a military buildup.

Other citizens had taken Wilson’s neutrality speeches seriously and deplored the drift toward war. Some feminists and reformers warned that war fever was eroding support for progressive reforms. Jane Addams lamented that the international movements to reduce infant mortality and improve care for the aged had been “scattered to the winds by the war.”

As early as August 1914, fifteen hundred women marched down New York’s Fifth Avenue protesting the war. Carrie Chapman Catt and other feminists joined Jane Addams in forming the Woman’s Peace party. Late in 1915 automaker Henry Ford chartered a vessel to take a group of pacifists to Scandinavia to persuade the belligerents to accept neutral mediation and fulfill his dream of ending the war by Christmas.

Divisions surfaced even within the Wilson administration. Secretary of State William Jennings Bryan, believing that Wilson’s *Lusitania* notes were too hostile to Germany, resigned in June 1915. His successor, Robert Lansing, let Wilson act as his own secretary of state.

Some neutrality advocates concluded that incidents like the *Lusitania* crisis were inevitable if Americans persisted in sailing on belligerent ships. Early in 1916, Congress considered a bill to ban such travel, but President Wilson successfully opposed it, insisting that the principle of neutral rights must be upheld.

For a time, Wilson’s approach seemed to work. Germany ordered U-boat captains to spare passenger ships, and agreed to pay compensation for the American lives lost in the *Lusitania* sinking. In March 1916, however, a German submarine sank a French passenger ship, the *Sussex*, in the English Channel, injuring several Americans. Wilson threatened to break diplomatic relations—a step toward war. In response, Berlin pledged not to attack merchant vessels without warning, provided that Great Britain, too, observe “the rules of international law.” Ignoring this qualification, Wilson announced Germany’s acceptance of American demands. For the rest of 1916, the crisis over neutral rights eased.

U.S. bankers’ financial support to the warring nations also undermined the principle of neutrality. Early in the war, Secretary of State Bryan had rejected banker J. P. Morgan’s request to extend loans to France. Such loans, said Bryan, would be “inconsistent with the true spirit of neutrality.” But economic considerations, combined with outrage over the *Lusitania* sinking, undermined this policy. In August 1915 Treasury Secretary William G. McAdoo warned Wilson of dire economic consequences if U.S. neutrality policy forced cuts in Allied purchases of American munitions and farm products. “To maintain our prosperity, we must finance it,” McAdoo insisted. Only substantial loans to England, agreed Secretary of State Lansing, could prevent serious financial problems in the United States, including “unrest and suffering among the laboring classes.” The neutrality principle must not “stand in the way of our national interests,” warned Lansing.

Swayed by such arguments and personally sympathetic to the Allies, Wilson permitted Morgan’s bank to lend $500 million to the British and French governments. By April 1917 U.S. banks had lent $2.3 billion to the Allies, in contrast to $27 million to Germany.

While Americans concentrated on neutral rights, the land war settled into a grim stalemate. An autumn 1914 German drive into France bogged down along the Marne River. The two sides then dug in, in trenches across France from the English Channel to the Swiss border. For more than three years, this line scarcely changed. Occasional offensives took a terrible toll. A German attack in February 1916 began with the capture of two forts near the town of Verdun and ended that June with the French recapture of the same two forts, now nothing but rubble, at a horrendous cost in human life. Trench warfare was a nightmare of mud, lice, rats, artillery bursts, poison gas, and random death.

British propaganda focused on the atrocities committed by “the Huns” (a derogatory term for the Germans), such as impaling babies on bayonets. After the war, much of this propaganda was exposed as false. Documents seized in 1915 revealing German espionage...
in U.S. war plants, however, further discredited the German cause.

The war dominated the 1916 presidential election. Woodrow Wilson faced Republican Charles Evans Hughes, a former governor of New York (and future chief justice of the U.S. Supreme Court). The Democrats’ campaign theme emerged when a convention speaker, praising Wilson’s foreign policy, aroused wild applause as he ended each episode with the refrain “We didn’t go to war.”

Hughes criticized Wilson’s lack of aggressiveness while rebuking him for policies that risked war. Theodore Roosevelt, still influential in public life, campaigned more for war than for the Republican ticket. The only difference between Wilson and the bearded Hughes, he jeered, was a shave. While Hughes did well among Irish-Americans and German-Americans who considered Wilson too pro-British, Wilson held the Democratic base and won support from women voters in western states that had adopted woman suffrage. Wilson’s victory, although extremely close, revealed the strength of the popular longing for peace as late as November 1916.

The United States Enters the War

In January 1917, facing stalemate on the ground, Germany resumed unrestricted submarine warfare. Germany’s military leaders believed that even if the United States declared war as a result, full-scale U-boat warfare could bring victory before American troops reached the front.

Events now rushed forward with grave inevitability. Wilson broke diplomatic relations on February 3. During February and March, U-boats sank five American ships. A coded telegram from the German foreign secretary, Arthur Zimmermann, to Germany’s ambassador to Mexico promised that if Mexico would declare war on the United States, Germany would help restore Mexico’s “lost territories” of Texas, Arizona, and New Mexico. Intercepted and decoded by the British and passed along to Washington, the “Zimmermann telegram” further inflamed the war spirit in America.

Events in distant Russia also helped create favorable conditions for America’s entry into the war. In March 1917 Russian peasants, industrial workers, intellectuals inspired by Western liberal values, and revolutionaries who embraced the communist ideology of Karl Marx all joined in a revolutionary uprising that overthrew the repressive government of Tsar Nicholas II. A provisional government under the liberal Alexander Kerensky briefly seemed to promise that Russia would take a democratic path, making it easier for President Wilson to portray the war as a battle for democracy.

On April 2 Wilson appeared before a joint session of Congress and solemnly called for a declaration of war. Applause and shouts rang out as Wilson eloquently described his vision of America’s role in creating a postwar international order to make the world “safe for democracy.” As the speech ended amid a final burst of cheers, Republican Senator Henry Cabot Lodge of Massachusetts, one of Wilson’s staunchest political foes, rushed forward to shake his hand.

After a short but bitter debate, the Senate voted 82 to 6 for war. The House agreed, 373 to 50. Three key factors—German attacks on American shipping, U.S. economic investment in the Allied cause, and American cultural links to the Allies, especially England—had propelled the United States into the war.

Mobilizing at Home, Fighting in France, 1917–1918

America’s entry into World War I underscored a deepening international involvement that had been underway for several decades. Yet compared to its effects on Europe, the war only grazed the United States. Russia, ill-prepared for war and geographically isolated from its allies, suffered very heavily. France, Great Britain, and Germany fought for more than four years; the United States, for nineteen months. Their armies suffered casualties of 70 percent or more; the U.S. casualty rate was 8 percent. The fighting left parts of France and Belgium brutally scarred; North America was physically untouched. Nevertheless, the war profoundly affected America. It changed not only those who participated directly in it, but also the American home front and the nation’s government and economy.

Raising, Training, and Testing an Army

April 1917 found America’s military woefully unprepared. The regular army consisted of 120,000 men, few with combat experience, plus 80,000 National Guard members. An aging officer corps dozed away the years until retirement. Ammunition reserves were paltry. The War Department was a snake pit of jealous bureaucrats, one of whom hoarded thousands of typewriters as the war approached.
While army chief-of-staff Peyton C. Marsh brought order to the military bureaucracy, Wilson’s secretary of war, Newton D. Baker, concentrated on raising an army. Formerly the reform mayor of Cleveland, Baker lacked administrative talent but was a public-relations genius. The Selective Service Act of May 1917 required all men between twenty-one and thirty (later expanded to eighteen through forty-five) to register with local draft boards. Mindful of the Civil War draft riots, Baker planned the first official draft-registration day, June 5, 1917, as a “festival and patriotic occasion.”

By the time the war ended in November 1918, more than 24 million men had registered, of whom nearly 3 million were drafted. Volunteers and National Guardsmen swelled the total to 4.3 million. Recruits got their first taste of army life in home front training camps. Along with military discipline and combat instruction, the camps built morale through shows, games, and recreation provided by volunteer organizations. The American Library Association contributed books. YMCA volunteers staffed base clubs and offered classes in literacy, French slang, and Bible study. In Plattsburgh, New York, local women opened a “Hostess House” to provide a touch of domesticity for homesick recruits at the nearby training camp. The idea soon spread to other communities near military camps.

The War Department monitored the off-duty behavior of young men cut off from the watchful eye of family and community. The Commission on Training Camp Activities presented films, lectures, and posters on the dangers of alcohol and prostitution. Any soldier disabled by venereal (that is, sexually transmitted) disease, one poster warned, “is a Traitor!” Camp commanders confined trainees to the base until nearby towns closed all brothels and saloons. The army’s antiliquor, antiproduction policies strengthened the moral-reform campaigns of the Progressive Era (see Chapter 21).

Beginning in December 1917, all recruits also underwent intelligence testing. Psychologists were eager to demonstrate the usefulness of their new field of expertise and claimed that tests measuring recruits’ “intelligence quotient” (IQ) could help in assigning their duties and showing who had officer potential. Intelligence testing, declared Robert M. Yerkes, president of the American Psychological Association, would “help win the war.”

When the psychologists announced that a high percentage of recruits were “morons,” editorial writers bemoaned the wave of imbecility supposedly sweeping the nation. In fact, the tests mostly revealed that many recruits lacked formal education and cultural sophistication. One question asked whether mauve was a drink, a color, a fabric, or a food. Another—at a time when automobiles were rare in rural America—asked in which city a particular car, the Overland, was built. The testing also confirmed racial and ethnic stereotypes: native-born recruits of northern European origins scored highest; African Americans and recent immigrants lowest.

In short, the World War I training camps not only turned civilians into soldiers, they also reinforced the prewar moral-control reforms, and signaled changes ahead, including the national infatuation with standardized testing.

Some twelve thousand Native Americans served in the American Expeditionary Force (AEF). While some reformers eager to preserve Indian culture argued for all-Indian units, the army took a different view and integrated Native Americans into the general army. Some
observers predicted that the wartime experience would hasten the assimilation of Indians into mainstream American life, considered by many a desirable goal at the time.

In April 1917 the African-American leader W. E. B. DuBois urged African Americans to “close ranks” and support the war. While some blacks resisted the draft, especially in the South (discussed later in “Opponents of the War”), others followed DuBois’s advice. More than 260,000 blacks volunteered or were drafted, and 50,000 went to France. Racism pervaded the military, as it did American society. The navy assigned blacks only to menial positions, and the marines excluded them altogether.

One racist senator from Mississippi warned that the sight of “arrogant, strutting” black soldiers would trigger race riots. Blacks in training camps experienced crude racial abuse. Tensions exploded in Houston in August 1917 when some black soldiers, endlessly goaded by local whites, seized weapons from the armory and killed seventeen white civilians. After a hasty trial with no appeal process, thirteen black soldiers were hanged and forty-one imprisoned for life. Not since the 1906 Brownsville incident (see Chapter 21) had black confidence in military justice been so shaken.

**Organizing the Economy for War**

The war years of 1917–1918 helped shape modern America. As historian Ellis Hawley has shown, the war’s administrative innovations sped up longer-term processes of social reorganization. Many key developments of the 1920s and beyond—including the spread of mass production; the collaboration between government, business, and labor; and the continued growth of new professional and managerial elites—were furthered by the war.

The war led to unprecedented government oversight of the economy. Populists and progressives had long urged more public control of corporations. Wartime brought an elaborate supervisory apparatus. In 1916 Congress had created an advisory body, the Council of National Defense, to oversee the government’s preparedness program. After war was declared, this council set up the War Industries Board (WIB) to coordinate military purchasing; ensure production efficiency; and provide weapons, equipment, and supplies to the military. Wilson reorganized the WIB in March 1918 and put Bernard Baruch in charge. A South Carolinian of German-Jewish origin, Baruch had made a fortune on Wall Street. Awed by his range of knowledge, Wilson called him Dr. Facts. Under Baruch, the WIB controlled the industrial sector. It allocated raw materials, established production priorities, and induced competing companies to standardize and coordinate their products and processes to save scarce commodities. The standardization of bicycle manufacturing, for example, saved tons of steel.

Acting under the authority of a law passed in August 1917, Wilson set up two more new agencies, the Fuel Administration and the Food Administration. The Fuel Administration controlled coal output, regulated fuel prices and consumption, and introduced daylight-saving time—an idea first proposed by Benjamin Franklin in the 1770s. The Food Administration, headed by Herbert Hoover, oversaw the production and allocation of wheat, meat, and sugar to ensure adequate supplies for the army as well as for the desperately food-short Allies. Born in poverty in Iowa, Hoover had prospered as a mining engineer in Asia. He was organizing food relief in Belgium when Wilson brought him back to Washington.
These regulatory agencies relied on voluntary cooperation reinforced by official pressure. For example, a barrage of Food Administration posters and magazine ads urged Americans to conserve food. Housewives signed pledges to observe “meatless” and “wheatless” days. President Wilson pitched in by pasturing a flock of sheep on the White House lawn. Slogans such as “Serve Beans by All Means” promoted substitutes for scarce commodities.

Harriot Stanton Blatch, daughter of woman’s rights pioneer Elizabeth Cady Stanton, headed the Food Administration’s Speakers’ Bureau, which spread the administration’s conservation message. Blatch also organized the Woman's Land Army, which recruited women to replace male farm workers.

These agencies were the tip of the regulatory iceberg. Nearly five thousand government boards supervised home-front activities. These included the Shipping Board, which oversaw the transport of goods by water; the National War Labor Board, which resolved labor-management disputes that jeopardized production; and the Railroad Administration, headed by Treasury Secretary William McAdoo. When a railroad tie-up during the winter of 1917–1918 threatened the flow of supplies to Europe, the Railroad Administration stepped in and soon transformed the thousands of miles of track owned by many competing companies into an efficient national rail system.

American business, much criticized by progressive reformers, utilized the war emergency to improve its image. Corporate executives ran regulatory agencies. Factory owners distributed prowar propaganda to workers. Trade associations coordinated war production.

The war sped up the ongoing process of corporate consolidation and economic integration. In place of trustbusting, the government now encouraged cooperation among businesses, and corporate mergers jumped sharply. Commenting on the epidemic of “mergeritis,” one magazine observed, “The war has accelerated...a tendency that was already irresistible...Instead of punishing companies for acting in concert, the government is now in some cases forcing them to unite.”

Overall, the war was good for business. Despite added business taxes imposed by Congress, wartime profits soared. After-tax profits in the copper industry, for example, jumped from 12 percent in 1913 to 24 percent in 1917.

This colossal regulatory apparatus was quickly dismantled after the war, but its influence lingered. The wartime mergers, coordination, and business-government cooperation affected the evolution of American business. The old laissez-faire suspicion of government, already weakened, eroded further in 1917–1918. In the 1930s, when the nation faced a different crisis, the government activism of World War I would be remembered (see Chapter 24).

**With the American Expeditionary Force in France**

When the United States entered the conflict, Allied prospects looked bleak. Germany’s resumption of unrestricted U-boat warfare was taking a horrendous toll on Allied shipping: 1.5 million tons in March and April 1917. A failed French offensive on the Marne that spring caused such losses that French troops mutinied. A British offensive along the French-Belgian border in November 1917 gained four miles at a cost of more than four hundred thousand killed and wounded. That same month, the Italian army suffered a disastrous defeat at Caporetto near the Austrian border.

Worsening the Allies’ situation, Russia left the war late in 1917, after the communist faction of the revolutionary movement, the Bolsheviks (Russian for “majority”), won control. The Bolsheviks had gained the initiative in April when its top leaders, including Vladimir Lenin, returned from exile in Switzerland. On November 6, 1917 (October 24 by the Russian calendar), a Bolshevik coup led by Lenin and Leon Trotsky, another exile recently arrived from New York City, overthrew Alexander Kerensky and seized power. Early in 1918 the Bolsheviks signed an armistice with Germany, the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, freeing thousands of German troops on the Russian front for fighting in France.

The stalemate in the trenches continued, broken by periodic battles. In November 1917, in an important breakthrough in the technology of war, the British mobilized three hundred tanks along a six-mile section of the front near Cambrai, France, shattering the German defenses.

Initially, U.S. assistance to the Allies consisted of supplying munitions and organizing a convoy system that safeguarded Allied ships crossing the dangerous Atlantic. The first U.S. troops arrived in France in October 1917. Eventually about 2 million American soldiers served in France as members of the AEF under General John J. Pershing. Ironically, Pershing was of German origin; his family name had been Pfoersching. A West Point graduate and commander of the 1916 expedition against Pancho Villa in Mexico, Pershing was an iron-willed officer with a ramrod bearing, steely eyes, and trim mustache. The death of his wife and
three of their children in a fire in 1915 had further hardened him.

Most men of the AEF at first found the war a great adventure. Plucked from towns and farms, they sailed for Europe on crowded freighters; a lucky few traveled on captured German passenger liners. Once in France, railroad freight cars marked “HOMMES 40, CHEVAUX 8” (forty men, eight horses) took them to the front. Then began the routine of marching, training—and waiting.

The African Americans in the AEF who reached France worked mainly as mess-boys (mealtime aides), laborers, and stevedores (ship-cargo handlers). Although discriminatory, the latter assignments vitally aided the war effort. Sometimes working twenty-four hours non-stop, black stevedores unloaded supply ships with impressive efficiency. Some whites of the AEF pressed the French to treat African Americans as inferiors, but most ignored this advice and related to blacks without prejudice. This eye-opening experience would remain with blacks in the AEF after the war.

For the troops at the front, aerial dogfights between German and Allied reconnaissance planes offered spectacular sideshows. Germany’s legendary “Red Baron,” Manfred von Richthofen, shot down eighty British and French planes before his luck ran out in April 1918. In 1916 a group of American volunteers had joined the French air corps as the Lafayette Escadrille. Secretary of War Baker, grasping the military importance of air power, pushed a plane-construction program. Few planes were actually built, however—a rare failure of the U.S. war-production program.

France offered other diversions as well, and the U.S. military mobilized to warn young male recruits of the danger of venereal disease. One poster declared, “A German bullet is cleaner than a whore.” When the French premier, Georges Clemenceau, offered to provide prostitutes for the American troops (as was the custom for French soldiers), Secretary of War Baker exclaimed, “For God’s sake, don’t show this to the President, or he’ll stop the war.”

The YMCA, Red Cross, and Salvation Army, including many young American women volunteers, provided a touch of home. Some 16,500 U.S. women served directly in the AEF in the United States and in France as nurses, telephone operators, canteen workers, and secretaries.

President Wilson, eager to underscore the distinctiveness of the U.S. role in the war, and to ensure a strong voice for America at the peace table, insisted that the United States be described as an “Associate Power” of the Allies. The French and British generals, however, facing desperate circumstances, wanted to absorb the Americans into existing units. But for both military and political reasons, Pershing and his superiors in Washington insisted that the AEF be “distinct and separate.” A believer in aggressive combat, Pershing abhorred the defensive mentality ingrained by three years of trench warfare.

In March 1918, however, when Germany launched a major offensive along the Somme, the Allies created a unified command under Marshal Ferdinand Foch, chief of the French general staff. Some Americans participated in the fighting around Amiens and Armentières that stemmed the German advance.

The second phase of the Germans’ spring 1918 offensive came in May along the Aisne River, where they broke through to the Marne and faced a nearly open
route to Paris, fifty miles away. On June 4, as the French government prepared for evacuation, American forces arrived in strength. Parts of three U.S. divisions and a marine brigade helped stop the Germans at the town of Château-Thierry and nearby Belleau Wood, a huge German machine-gun nest. (An AEF division at full strength consisted of twenty-seven thousand men and one thousand officers, plus twelve thousand support troops.)

These two German offensives had punched deep holes (or salients) in the Allied line. A German drive aimed at the cathedral city of Rheims between these two salients was stopped with the help of some eighty-five thousand American troops (see Map 22.2). This was the war’s turning point. At enormous cost, the German offensive had been defeated. Contributing to this defeat was the fact that many German soldiers, already weakened by battle fatigue and poor diet, fell victim to influenza, an infectious disease that would soon emerge as a deadly worldwide epidemic (see the section “Public Health Crisis: The 1918 Influenza Epidemic”).

**Turning the Tide**

The final Allied offensive began on July 18, 1918. Some 270,000 American soldiers fought in the Allied drive to push the Germans back from the Marne. Rain pelted down as the Americans moved into position on the night of July 17. One wrote in his diary, “Trucks, artillery, infantry columns, cavalry, wagons, caissons, mud, MUD, utter confusion.” Meanwhile, another 100,000 AEF troops joined a parallel British offensive north of the Somme to expel the Germans from that area.

Pershing’s first fully independent command came in September, when Foch authorized an AEF campaign to close a German salient around the town of St. Mihiel on the Meuse River, about 150 miles east of Paris. Eager to test his offensive strategy, Pershing assembled nearly five hundred thousand American and one hundred thousand French soldiers. Shelling of German positions began at 1:00 A.M. on September 11. Recorded an American in his diary, “[I]n one instant the entire front . . . was a sheet of flame, while the heavy artillery
made the earth quake.” Within four days the salient was closed, in part because some German units had already withdrawn. Even so, St. Mihiel cost seven thousand U.S. casualties.

The war’s last battle began on September 26 as some 1.2 million Americans joined the struggle to drive the Germans from the Meuse River and the dense Argonne Forest north of Verdun. The stench of poison gas (first used by the Germans in 1915) hung in the air, and bloated rats scurried in the mud, gorging on human remains. Americans now endured the filth, vermin, and dysentery familiar to veterans of the trenches. Frontline troops would never forget the terror of combat. As shells streaked overhead at night, one recalled, “We simply lay and trembled from sheer nervous tension.” Some welcomed injuries as a ticket out of the battle zone. Others collapsed emotionally and were hospitalized for “shell shock.”

One all-black division, the ninety-second, saw combat in the Meuse-Argonne campaign. In addition, four black infantry regiments served under French command. One entire regiment received the French Croix de Guerre, and several hundred black soldiers were awarded French decorations for bravery. The Germans showered the ninety-second division with leaflets describing American racism and urging blacks to defect, but none did.

The AEF’s assignment was to cut the Sedan-Mezières Railroad, a major German supply route. In the way lay three long, heavily fortified German trenches, called Stellungen. “We are not men anymore, just savage beasts,” wrote a young American. Death came in many forms, and without ceremony. Bodies, packs, rifles, photos of loved ones, and letters from home sank indiscriminately into the all-consuming mud. Influenza struck on both sides of the line, killing thousands of AEF members at the front and in training camps back home. One day as General Pershing rode in his staff car, he buried his head in his hands and moaned his dead wife’s name: “Frankie, Frankie, my God, sometimes I don’t know how I can go on.”

Religious and ethical principles faded as men struggled to survive. “Love of thy neighbor is forgotten,” recalled one, with “all the falsities of a sheltered civilization.” The war’s brutality would shape the literature of the 1920s as writers such as Ernest Hemingway stripped away the illusions obscuring the reality of mass slaughter.

But the AEF at last overran the dreaded German trenches, and the survivors slogged northward. In early November the Sedan-Mezières railroad was cut. The AEF had fulfilled its assignment, at a cost of 26,277 dead.

Promoting the War and Suppressing Dissent

In their own way, the war’s domestic effects were as important as its battles. Patriotic fervor gripped America, in part because of the government’s propaganda efforts. The war fever, in turn, encouraged intellectual conformity and intolerance of radical or dissenting ideas. Fueling the repressive spirit, government authorities and private vigilante groups hounded socialists, pacifists, and other dissidents, trampling citizens’ constitutional rights.

Advertising the War

To President Wilson, selling the war at home was crucial to success in France. “It is not an army we must shape and train for war, it is a nation,” he declared. The administration drew on the new professions of advertising and public relations to pursue this goal. Treasury Secretary McAdoo (who had married Wilson’s daughter Eleanor in 1914) orchestrated a series of five government bond drives, called Liberty Loans, that financed about two-thirds of the $35.5 billion (including loans to the Allies) that the war cost the United States. These bonds were essentially loans to the government to cover war expenses.
Posters exhorted citizens to “Fight or Buy Bonds.” Liberty Loan parades featured flags, banners, and marching bands. Movie stars like Mary Pickford and Charlie Chaplin worked for the cause. Schoolchildren purchased “thrift stamps” convertible into war bonds. Patriotic war songs reached a large public through phonograph recordings (see the Culture and Technology feature). Beneath the ballyhoo ran a note of coercion. Only “a friend of Germany,” McAdoo warned, would refuse to buy bonds.

The balance of the government’s war costs came from taxes. Using the power granted it by the Sixteenth Amendment, Congress imposed wartime income taxes that reached 70 percent at the top levels. War-profits taxes, excise taxes on liquor and luxuries, and increased estate taxes also helped finance the war.

Journalist George Creel headed the key wartime propaganda agency, the Committee on Public Information (CPI). While claiming merely to combat rumors with facts, the Creel committee in reality publicized the government’s version of events and discredited all who questioned that version. One of CPI’s twenty-one divisions distributed posters drawn by leading illustrators. Another wrote propaganda releases that appeared in the press as “news” with no indication of their source. The Saturday Evening Post and other popular magazines published CPI ads that warned against spies, saboteurs, and anyone who “spreads pessimistic stories” or “cries for peace.” Theaters screened CPI films bearing such titles as The Kaiser: The Beast of Berlin.

The CPI poured foreign-language pamphlets into immigrant neighborhoods and supplied prowar editorials to the foreign-language press. At a CPI media event at George Washington’s Mount Vernon home on July 4, 1918, an Irish-born tenor sang “The Battle Hymn of the Republic” while immigrants from thirty-three nations filed reverently past Washington’s tomb. The CPI also targeted workers. Factory posters attacked the charge by some socialists that this was a capitalists’ war. Samuel Gompers of the American Federation of Labor headed a prowar “American Alliance for Labor and Democracy” funded by the CPI. An army of seventy-five thousand CPI volunteers gave short prowar talks to movie audiences and other gatherings. Creel later calculated that these “Four-Minute Men” delivered 7.5 million speeches.

Teachers, writers, religious leaders, and magazine editors overwhelmingly supported the war. These custodians of culture saw the conflict as a struggle to defend threatened values. Historians wrote essays contrasting German brutality with the Allies’ lofty ideals. In The Marne (1918), expatriate American writer Edith Wharton expressed her love for France. The war poems of Alan Seeger enjoyed great popularity. A Harvard graduate who volunteered to fight for France and died in action in
The Phonograph, Popular Music, and Home-Front Morale in World War I

Today’s compact disks, MTV videos, and Internet music websites all trace their ancestry to technologies developed in the late nineteenth century. Along with the movies and nationally distributed magazines, recorded music laid the groundwork for an American mass culture in the early twentieth century, and helped build support for the U.S. war effort in 1917–1918.

Thomas Edison first recorded the human voice in 1877. (Historians differ over whether the first recorded words were “Halloo,” in July or “Mary had a little lamb” in December.) The following year, Edison patented a “phonograph” utilizing cylinders wrapped in tin foil. Other inventors patented recording machinery involving wax-coated cylinders, which proved superior to tin foil. The first known recorded musical performance was by an eleven-year-old pianist, Josef Hoffmann, in Edison’s laboratory in New Jersey in 1887.

Emile Berliner patented a new technique of recording on disks in 1887, and disks quickly proved superior to cylinders. In a critical breakthrough, Berliner also developed a technique for mass producing hard-rubber records from a zinc master disk.

In sound reproduction by means of a phonograph, the sound being recorded is converted to electrical impulses, which in turn create slight mechanical variations in circular grooves on a rotating master disk. When a record manufactured from the master disk is played, a stylus, or needle, attached to a tone arm tracks the circular grooves, converting the variations back into electrical signals that are amplified and converted into sound by a loudspeaker.

The new technology became commercially available in 1890 when the Columbia Phonograph Company published a catalog of cylinder recordings. By 1894 Emile Berliner’s U.S. Gramophone Company was selling around a thousand phonographs and some twenty-five thousand records a year, including hymns, classical works, and popular songs. The United States Marine Band conducted by John Philip Sousa was an early favorite. The first commercial jazz record, “Livery Stable Blues,” appeared in 1917, recorded by a white New Orleans group called the Original Dixieland Jass [sic] Band. The Sears Roebuck catalog, widely distributed in rural and small-town America in the early twentieth century, devoted several pages to “talking machines” on which buyers could play commercially produced records or make their own recordings.

In 1900 Eldridge Johnson bought Emile Berliner’s company and formed what soon became the industry leader, the Victor Talking Machine Company. Six years later Victor marketed the Victrola, a handsome cabinet-style phonograph that proved so popular that “Victrola” became a generic name for all record players. The earliest phonographs had amplified the sound by a large and rather unsightly external speaker horn. The Victrola concealed the horn inside the cabinet, making the unit more attractive for the living room or parlor. The “volume control” had two settings: open the cabinet doors to increase the volume, close them to reduce it.

Early Victrolas were expensive, ranging from $75 for the cheapest table model to far more luxurious models.
featuring exotic woods, lacquer finishes, and painted decorations. Despite the prices, annual sales reached 573,000 by 1917. Although electric-powered Victrolas became available in 1913, most buyers preferred the hand-cranked model well into the 1920s.

Records made of laminated shellac with a paper core (1906) and then of Condensite, an early form of plastic, introduced in 1913, proved more durable than the older hard-rubber disks, with less surface noise. The first vinyl records did not appear until 1929.

The American home front during World War I resonated to the sound of patriotic music blaring from thousands of Victrolas and phonographs produced by rival companies. War songs ranged from the sentimental, such as the waltz “Till We Meet Again,” to novelty numbers, including “Oo-La-La Wee, Wee”; the tongue-twister “Sister Susie’s Sewing Shirts for Soldiers,” and Irving Berlin’s comic soldier’s lament “Oh! How I Hate to Get Up in the Morning.”

Other songs were rousingly patriotic, such as “America, I Love You” and George M. Cohan’s 1917 hit “Over There.” Born in Rhode Island in 1878, Cohan appeared in vaudeville as a child with his parents and sister in “The Four Cohans” and went on to become a successful producer of Broadway musicals.

“Over There,” pledging America to fight to the end, became the unofficial anthem of the war. With many Americans opposed to U.S. intervention, prowar songs played an important propaganda role, and Cohan received a Congressional citation for his song. In September 1918 the great Italian tenor Enrico Caruso sang “Over There,” popularized by his earlier recording of the song, before a huge audience in New York’s Central Park.

In the nineteenth century, new songs had been introduced by music-hall performers and then sold in sheet-music form, allowing families and social groups to sing them at home around the piano. Sheet music remained popular, but by 1917–1918 the recording industry was firmly established, and many thousands of phonograph owners purchased recordings of popular wartime songs for repeated listening at home.

By the war’s end, American popular music was firmly linked to the recording technology pioneered by Edison, Berliner, Johnson, and others. Early records were played mainly in the home, but with the coming of radio in the 1920s, recordings of classical music and popular songs could reach a mass audience simultaneously.

By the middle of the twentieth century, phonographs and phonograph records, incorporating many technological advances, played a huge role in American popular culture, accounting for millions of dollars in annual sales and spreading the fame of recording artists from Ella Fitzgerald and Bing Crosby to Elvis Presley, Bob Dylan, and the Beatles.

Focus Questions

• What key technical developments made it possible for the phonograph to evolve from a laboratory novelty into a major commercial product?

• How did popular songs spread by phonograph recordings help build support for American participation in World War I?
1916, Seeger held a romantic vision of the conflict as a noble crusade. An artillery barrage was for him “the magnificent orchestra of war.”

Many progressive reformers who had applauded Wilson’s domestic program now cheered his war. Herbert Croly, Walter Lippmann, and other progressive intellectuals associated with the New Republic magazine zealously backed the war. In gratitude, Wilson administration officials regularly briefed the editors on the government’s policies.

The Progressive educator John Dewey supported the war and condemned its opponents in a series of New Republic essays. Socially engaged intellectuals must accept reality and shape it toward positive social goals, he wrote, not stand aside in self-righteous isolation. The war, he went on, presented exciting “social possibilities.” Domestically, government activism stimulated by the war could be channeled to reform purposes when peace returned. Internationally, America’s entry into the war could transform an imperialistic struggle into a global democratic crusade.

**Wartime Intolerance and Dissent**

Responding to the propaganda, some Americans became almost hysterical in their strident patriotism, their hatred of all things German, and their hostility to aliens and dissenters. Isolated acts of sabotage by German sympathizers, including the blowing up of a New Jersey munitions dump, fanned the flames. Persons believed to harbor pro-German sentiments were forced to kiss the flag or recite the Pledge of Allegiance. An Ohio woman suspected of disloyalty was wrapped in a flag, marched to a bank, and ordered to buy a war bond. In Collinsville, Illinois, a mob lynched German-born Robert Prager in April 1918. When a jury freed the mob leaders, a jury member shouted, “Nobody can say we aren’t loyal now.” The Washington Post, although deploiring the lynching, saw it as evidence of “a healthful and wholesome awakening in the interior of the country.”

An Iowa politician charged that “90 percent of all the men and women who teach the German language are traitors.” German books vanished from libraries, towns with German names changed them, and on some restaurant menus “liberty sandwich” and “liberty cabbage” replaced “hamburger” and “sauerkraut.” A popular evangelist, Billy Sunday, proclaimed, “If you turn hell upside down you will find ‘Made in Germany’ stamped on the bottom.”

Even the music world suffered. The Boston Symphony Orchestra dismissed its conductor, Karl Muck, for having accepted a decoration from Kaiser Wilhelm. Except for Bach, Beethoven, Mozart, and Brahms, the Philadelphia Orchestra banned all German music.

The zealots also targeted war critics and radicals. A Cincinnati mob horsewhipped a pacifist minister. Theodore Roosevelt branded antiwar Senator Robert La Follette “an unhung traitor.” Columbia University fired two antiwar professors. In Bisbee, Arizona, vigilantes forced twelve hundred miners who belonged to the Industrial Workers of the World onto a freight train and shipped them into the New Mexico desert without food or water. The IWW opposed the war, and its members were accused of aiding the German cause.

Despite the climate of intolerance, many Americans persisted in opposing the war. Some were immigrants with ancestral ties to Germany. Others were religious pacifists, including Quakers, Mennonites, and Jehovah’s Witnesses. Congresswoman Jeannette Rankin of Montana, a pacifist and the first woman elected to Congress, voted against the declaration of war. “I want to stand by my country,” she told the House of Representatives, “but I cannot vote for war.”

Of some sixty-five thousand men who registered as conscientious objectors (COs), twenty-one thousand were drafted. Assigned to noncombat duty on military bases, such as cleaning latrines, these COs sometimes experienced considerable abuse. When two Hutterite brothers who had refused to wear military uniforms died in prison, their bodies were dressed in uniforms before they were shipped home.

Woodrow Wilson heaped scorn on the pacifists. “What I am opposed to is not [their] feeling . . . , but their stupidity,” he declared in November 1917; “my heart is with them, but my mind has contempt for them. I want peace, but I know how to get it, and they do not.”

Socialist leaders such as Eugene Debs and Victor Berger viewed the war as a capitalist contest for markets, with the soldiers as cannon fodder. The U.S. declaration of war, they insisted, mainly reflected Wall Street’s desire to protect its loans to England and France. Other socialists supported the war, however, dividing the party.

The war split the women’s movement as well. While some leaders joined Jane Addams in opposition, others endorsed the war while keeping their own goals in view. In Mobilizing Woman-Power (1918), Harriot Stanton Blatch offered a variant of Woodrow Wilson’s theme: women who wished to help shape the peace, she said,
must support the war. Anna Howard Shaw, a former president of the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA), accepted an appointment to chair the Woman’s Committee of the Council of National Defense, a largely symbolic post.

Carrie Chapman Catt, Shaw’s successor as president of NAWSA, had helped start the Woman’s Peace party in 1915. But she supported U.S. entry into the war in 1917, sharing to some extent Wilson’s vision of a more liberal postwar world order. Catt continued to focus mainly on woman suffrage, however, insisting that this was NAWSA’s “number one war job.” For this, some superpatriots accused her of disloyalty.

Draft resistance extended beyond the ranks of conscientious objectors. An estimated 2.4 to 3.6 million young men failed to register at all, and of those who did, about 12 percent either did not appear when drafted or deserted from training camp. Historian Jeanette Keith has documented high levels of draft resistance in the rural South. The urban elites who ran the draft boards were more inclined to defer young men of their own class than poor farmers, white or black, fueling class resentment. In June 1918 a truck loaded with U.S. soldiers seeking draft evaders in rural Georgia crashed when a wooden bridge collapsed, killing three soldiers and injuring others. Investigators found that the bridge timbers has been deliberately sawed nearly through.

Southern critics of the war included the one-time populist Tom Watson of Georgia. (Watson was also notoriously racist and anti-Semitic.) The war was a rich-man’s plot, Watson charged in his paper The Jeffersonian, adding that draft boards discriminated against the poor.

Blacks had added reasons to oppose the draft. Of southern blacks who registered, one-third were drafted, in contrast to only one-quarter of whites. White draft boards justified this by arguing that low-income black families could more easily spare a male breadwinner. As an Alabama board observed: “[I]t is a matter of common knowledge that it requires more for a white man and his wife to live than it does a negro man and his wife, due to their respective stations in life.” But the dynamics of race worked in complex ways: some southern whites, fearful of arming black men even for military service, favored drafting only whites.

The war’s most incisive critic was Randolph Bourne, a young journalist. Although Bourne admired John Dewey, he rejected Dewey’s prowar position and dissected his arguments in several penetrating essays. He dismissed the belief that reformers could direct the war to their own purposes. “If the war is too strong for you to prevent,” he asked, “how is it going to be weak enough for you to control and mould to your liberal purposes?”

Eventually, many prowar intellectuals came to agree. By 1919 Dewey conceded that the war, far from promoting reform, had encouraged reaction and intolerance. Bourne did not live to see his vindication, however. He died in 1918, at the age of thirty-two, of influenza.

### Suppressing Dissent by Law

Wartime intolerance also surfaced in federal laws and official actions. The Espionage Act of June 1917 set stiff fines and prison sentences for a variety of loosely defined antiwar activities. The Sedition Amendment (May 1918) imposed heavy penalties on anyone convicted of using “disloyal, profane... or abusive language” about the government, the Constitution, the flag, or the military.

Wilson’s attorney general, Thomas W. Gregory, used these laws to stamp out dissent. Opponents of the war, proclaimed Gregory, should expect no mercy “from an outraged people and an avenging government.” Under the federal legislation and similar state laws, some fifteen hundred pacifists, socialists, IWW leaders, and other war critics were arrested. One socialist, Rose Pastor Stokes, received a ten-year prison sentence (later commuted) for telling an audience, “I am for the people, and the government is for the profiteers.” Kate Richards O’Hare, a midwestern socialist organizer, spent over a year in jail for declaring, “The women of the United States are nothing more than brood sows, to raise children to get into the army and be made into fertilizer.” Eugene Debs was imprisoned in 1918 for a speech discussing the economic causes of the war, and served for three years until his sentence was commuted by President Warren Harding.

Under the authority of the Espionage Act, Postmaster General Albert S. Burleson, a reactionary superpatriot, suppressed socialist periodicals, including The Masses, published by radicals in New York City’s Greenwich Village, and Tom Watson’s Jeffersonian. Burleson “didn’t know socialism from rheumatism,” according to socialist Norman Thomas, but he pursued his repressive crusade. In January 1919 Congressmen-elect Victor Berger was convicted under the Espionage Act for publishing antiwar articles in his socialist newspaper, the Milwaukee Leader. (The Supreme Court reversed Berger’s conviction in 1921.) Upton Sinclair protested to President Wilson that a man of Burleson’s
“childish ignorance” should wield such power; but Wilson did little to restrain Burleson’s excesses.

A patriotic group called the American Protective League and local “Councils of Defense” operating with vague governmental authority further enforced ideological conformity. The 1917 Bolshevik takeover in Russia sharpened the wartime attacks on domestic radicals. As communists, the Bolsheviks believed in a one-party state and anticipated the violent overthrow of the capitalist system. Some Americans feared that the United States could fall to communism as well.

In three 1919 decisions, the U.S. Supreme Court upheld the Espionage Act convictions of war critics. In Schenck v. United States, Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., writing for a unanimous court, justified such repression in cases where a person’s exercise of the First Amendment right of free speech posed a “clear and present danger” to the nation.

The early wartime mood of idealism had degenerated into suspicion, narrow conformity, and persecution of all who failed to meet the zealots’ notions of “100 percent Americanism.” The effects of this wartime climate would linger long after the armistice was signed.

The war’s social impact took many forms. The stream of job seekers pouring into industrial centers strained housing, schools, and municipal services. The consumption of cigarettes, which soldiers and workers could carry in their shirt pockets more conveniently than pipes or cigars, soared from 14 billion in 1914 to 48 billion in 1918. Reflecting wartime prosperity, automobile production quadrupled, from 460,000 in 1914 to 1.8 million in 1917, then dipped briefly in 1918 as steel went for military production.

Farmers profited, too. With European farm production disrupted, U.S. agricultural prices more than doubled between 1913 and 1918, and farmers’ real income rose significantly. Cotton prices rose from twelve cents a pound in 1913 to twenty-nine cents a pound by 1918, and corn prices surged upward as well.

This agricultural boom proved a mixed blessing. Farmers who borrowed heavily to expand production faced a credit squeeze when farm prices fell after the war. In the 1920s and 1930s, hard-pressed farmers would look back to the war years as a golden age of prosperity.

**Blacks Migrate Northward**

The war speeded up the exodus of southern blacks. An estimated half-million African Americans moved north during the war, and most settled in cities. Each day fresh arrivals trudged through the railroad stations of Philadelphia, New York, Detroit, and Pittsburgh. Chicago’s black population grew from 44,000 in 1910 to 110,000 in 1920, Cleveland’s from 8,000 to 34,000. Economic opportunity beckoned. The war nearly halted immigration from Europe, so booming industries hired black workers to help take up the slack. African-American newspapers like the Chicago Defender spread the word of job opportunities. Some companies sent labor agents south to recruit black workers. Letters and word-of-mouth reports swelled the ranks of blacks heading north. One southern black, newly settled near Chicago, wrote home, “Nothing here but money, and it is not hard to get.” A Pittsburgh newcomer presented a more balanced picture: “They give you big money for what you do, but they charge you big things for what you get.”

To the southern black sharecropper, the prospect of earning three dollars a day or more in a region where racism seemed less intense appeared a heaven-sent opportunity. By 1920, 1.5 million African Americans were working in northern factories and other urban-based jobs.
These newcomers brought with them their social institutions—above all, the church. Large churches and storefront missions met the spiritual and social needs of deeply religious migrants from the South. The concentration of blacks in New York City laid the groundwork for the Harlem Renaissance, a cultural flowering of the 1920s (see “A Place in Time: Harlem in the Twenties” in Chapter 23). This migration also strengthened black organizations. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) doubled its membership during the war.

Once the initial elation faded, newly arrived African Americans often found that they had exchanged one set of problems for another. White workers resented the labor competition, and white homeowners lashed out as jammed black neighborhoods spilled over into surrounding areas. A bloody outbreak occurred on July 2, 1917, in East St. Louis, Illinois, home to thousands of recently arrived southern blacks. In a coordinated attack, a white mob torched black homes and shot the residents as they fled for their lives. At least thirty-nine blacks died, including a two-year-old who was shot and then thrown into a burning house.

A few weeks later, a silent march down New York’s Fifth Avenue organized by the NAACP protested racist violence. One banner bore a slogan that echoed Wilson’s phrase justifying U.S. involvement in the war: “Mr. President, Why Not Make AMERICA Safe for Democracy?” Like other wartime social trends, growing racial tensions did not end with the return of peace.

**Women in Wartime**

From one perspective, World War I seems a uniquely male experience. Male politicians and statesmen led their nations into war. Male generals sent other men into battle. Yet war touches all of society, not just half of it. The war affected women differently, but it affected them profoundly.

Feminist leaders like Carrie Chapman Catt and Anna Howard Shaw hoped that the war would lead to full equality and greater opportunity for women. For a time, these goals seemed attainable. In addition to the women who served with the AEF and in wartime volunteer agencies, about 1 million women worked in industry. Thousands more held other jobs, from streetcar conductors to bricklayers. “Out of...repression into opportunity is the meaning of the war to thousands of women,” wrote Florence Thorne of the American Federation of Labor in 1917.

Hope glowed brightly as the woman suffrage movement sped toward victory on a tide of wartime enthusiasm. Through their war service, President Wilson wrote Catt, women had earned the right to vote. As we saw in Chapter 21, New York passed a state woman-suffrage referendum in 1917. In 1919, barraged by pro-suffrage
petitions, the House and Senate overwhelmingly passed
the Nineteenth Amendment granting women the vote. Ratification followed in 1920.

Beyond this victory, hopes that the war would permanently better women’s status proved unfounded. Relatively few women actually entered the work force for the first time in 1917–1918; most simply moved to more highly paid jobs. Despite women’s protests and War Labor Board rulings, even in these better-paying jobs most earned less than the men they replaced. As for the women in the AEF, the War Department refused their requests for military rank and benefits.

At the end of the war, many women lost their jobs to returning veterans. The New York labor federation advised, “The same patriotism which induced women to enter industry during the war should induce them to vacate their positions after the war.” Male streetcar workers in Cleveland went on strike to force women conductors off the job. By 1920 the percentage of all U.S. women who were in the work force was actually slightly lower than it had been in 1910. As industrial researcher Mary Van Kleeck wrote in 1921, when the war emergency ended, traditional male attitudes toward women “came to life once more.”

Public Health Crisis: The 1918 Influenza Epidemic

Amid battlefield casualties and home-front social changes, the nation also coped with influenza, a highly contagious viral infection often complicated by pneumonia. The 1918 epidemic, spread by a particularly deadly strain of the virus, killed as many as 30 million people worldwide. Despite medical and public-health advances, doctors had few weapons against the flu in 1918 (see Figure 22.1).

Moving northward from its origins in southern Africa, the epidemic spread from the war zone in France to U.S. military camps, striking Fort Riley, Kansas, in March and quickly advancing to other bases and the urban population. In September an army health official visiting Camp Devens in Massachusetts wrote, “I saw hundreds of young stalwart men in uniform coming into . . . the hospital. . . . The faces wore a bluish cast, a cough brought up blood-stained sputum. In the morning, the dead bodies are stacked about the morgue like cordwood.”

The flu hit the cities hard. In Philadelphia on September 19, the day after 200,000 people had turned out for a Liberty Loan rally, 635 new influenza cases were reported. Many cities forbade all public gatherings. The worst came in October, when the flu killed 195,000
The total U.S. death toll was about 550,000, over six times the total of AEF battle deaths in France. The epidemic stimulated research, partially funded by a $1 million congressional appropriation to the U.S. Public Health Service, that eventually isolated the virus and produced vaccines and antibiotics that made future flu outbreaks less lethal.

**The War and Progressivism**

In assessing the war’s effects on Progressive Era reform movements, historians paint a mixed picture.

The war strengthened the coercive, moral-control aspect of progressivism, including the drive for the prohibition of alcohol. Exploiting anti-German sentiment, prohibitionists pointed out that the nation’s biggest breweries bore such German names as Pabst, Schlitz, and Anheuser-Busch. Beer, they hinted, was part of a German plot to undermine Americans’ fitness for combat. With Herbert Hoover preaching food conservation, they stressed the wastefulness of using grain to make liquor. When the Eighteenth Amendment establishing national prohibition passed Congress in December 1917, it was widely seen as a war measure. Ratified in 1919, it went into effect on January 1, 1920.

As we have seen, the War Department reinforced the Progressive Era antiprostitution campaign by closing brothels near military bases, including New Orleans’s famed Storyville. (As Storyville’s jazz musicians moved north to Memphis, St. Louis, Kansas City, and Chicago, jazz reached a national audience.) The Commission on Training Camp Activities hired sixty female lecturers to tour the nation urging women to uphold standards of sexual morality. “Do Your Bit to Keep Him Fit” one wartime pamphlet advised women.

Congress contributed to the antiprostitution campaign by appropriating $4 million to combat venereal disease, especially among war workers. In San Antonio, a major military hub, an antiprostitution leader reflected the war mood when he declared, “We propose to fight vice . . . with the cold steel of the law, and to drive in the steel from the point to the hilt until the law’s supremacy is acknowledged.”

The surge of wartime moral-reform activity convinced some that traditional codes of behavior, weakening before the war, had been restored. One antiprostitution crusader exulted, “Young men of today . . . are nearer perfection in conduct, morals, and ideals than any similar generation of young men in the history of the world. Their minds have been raised to ideals that would never have been attained save by the heroism of . . . the World War.”

Other reform causes gained momentum as well. The woman-suffrage movement finally achieved success. And the proworker side of progressivism made some gains. The War Labor Board (WLB), spurred by progressives interested in the cause of labor, encouraged workers to join unions and guaranteed unions’ right to bar-
gain collectively with management. The WLB also pressured factory owners to introduce the eight-hour workday, end child labor, provide worker-compensation benefits, and open their plants to safety and sanitation inspectors. William McAdoo’s Railroad Administration also recognized railway workers’ right to unionize. Under these favorable conditions, union membership rose from 2.7 million in 1916 to more than 5 million by 1920.

Another wartime agency, the United States Housing Corporation, built housing projects for workers, including some that encompassed schools, playgrounds, and recreational centers. Several state legislatures, concluding that worker-protection laws would help the war effort, passed wage-and-hour laws and other measures benefiting factory laborers.

The Bureau of War Risk Insurance (BWRI), created by Congress in October 1917 to aid soldiers’ families, established an important precedent of government help for families at risk. As Julia Lathrop, head of the Federal Children’s Bureau, observed, “The least a democratic nation can do, which sends men into war, is to give a solemn assurance that the families will be cared for.” By the war’s end, the BWRI was sending regular checks to 2.1 million families.

Despite some gains, however, the war’s long-term effect was to weaken the progressive social-justice impulse. While the years 1917–1918 brought increased corporate regulation—a major progressive goal—the regulatory agencies were often dominated by the very business interests supposedly being supervised, and they were quickly dismantled when the war ended.

The government’s repression of radicals and antiwar dissenters fractured the fragile coalition of left-leaning progressives, women’s groups, trade unionists, and some socialists that had provided the momentum for prewar worker-protection laws, and ushered in a decade of reaction. The 1918 midterm election signaled the shift: the Democrats lost both houses of Congress to a deeply conservative Republican party.

Nevertheless, taking a still longer view, the Progressive Era reform coalition would reemerge in the depression decade of the 1930s. And as Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal took shape in 1933 (see Chapter 24), ideas and inspiration came from World War I precedents such as the War Labor Board, the United States Housing Corporation, and the Bureau of War Risk Insurance.

**Joyous Armistice, Bitter Aftermath, 1918–1920**

In November 1918 the war finally ended. The peace conference that followed stands as a high point of America’s growing internationalist involvement, but it also triggered a sharp domestic reaction against that involvement. Woodrow Wilson dominated the peace conference but failed in his most cherished objective—American membership in the League of Nations. At home, as racism and intolerance worsened, the electorate repudiated Wilsonianism and in 1920 sent a conservative Republican to the White House.

**Wilson’s Fourteen Points; The Armistice**

From the moment the United States entered the war, President Wilson planned to put a “Made in America” stamp on the peace. U.S. involvement, he and his reform-minded supporters believed, could transform a sordid power conflict into a crusade for a more democratic world order. As the nation mobilized in 1917, Wilson recruited a group of advisers called The Inquiry to translate his vision into specific war aims. The need for a clear statement of U.S. war objectives grew urgent
after the Bolsheviks, having seized power in Russia, published many of the self-serving secret treaties signed by European powers prior to 1914.

In a speech to Congress in January 1918, Wilson summed up U.S. war aims in fourteen points. Eight of these goals dealt with territorial settlements in postwar Europe; Wilson stated that the subject peoples of the Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman empires should have the right to determine their own political futures (self-determination). A ninth point insisted that colonial disputes take into account the interests of the colonized peoples. The remaining five points offered Wilson's larger postwar vision: a world of free navigation, free trade, reduced armaments, openly negotiated treaties, and “a general association of nations” to resolve conflicts peacefully. The Fourteen Points helped solidify American support for the war, especially among liberals. The high-minded objectives seemed proof that the United States had entered the war not for selfish reasons but out of noble motives.

In early October 1918, with the Allies advancing on several fronts, the German high command proposed an armistice based on Wilson's Fourteen Points. The British and French hesitated, but when Wilson threatened to negotiate a separate peace with Germany, they agreed. Meanwhile, in Berlin, Kaiser Wilhelm II had abdicated and a German republic had been proclaimed.

As dawn broke over the forest of Compiègne some fifty miles north of Paris on November 11, 1918, Marshal Foch and his German counterparts, seated in Foch's private railway car, signed an armistice ending hostilities at 11:00 A.M. An American air ace, Captain Edward Rickenbacker, flew over the lines and watched as the booming guns fell silent. Rockets burst over the front that night not in anger but in relief and celebration. Back home, cheering throngs (some wearing face masks against the influenza epidemic) filled the streets. "Everything for which America has fought has been accomplished," Wilson proclaimed.

Troop transports soon ferried the soldiers home. One returnee, artillery captain Harry Truman of Missouri, described his feelings in a letter to his fiancée, Bess Wallace:

I've never seen anything that looks so good as the Liberty Lady in New York Harbor. . . . [T]he men have seen so much and have been in so many hard places that it takes something real to give them a thrill, but when the band . . . played "Home Sweet Home" there were not many dry eyes. The hardest of hard-boiled cookies even had to blow his nose a time or two.

The Versailles Peace Conference, 1919

Eager to play a central role in forging the peace, Wilson made a crucial decision to lead the U.S. delegation to the peace conference. This was probably a mistake. The strain of long bargaining sessions soon took its toll on his frail nerves and slim reserve of energy.

Wilson compounded his mistake by his choices of his fellow negotiators. All but one were Democrats, and the sole Republican was an elderly diplomat with little influence in the party. Selecting one or two prominent Republicans might have spared Wilson future grief. The Democrats' loss of Congress in the 1918 midterm election was a further ill-omen.

Nevertheless, spirits soared on December 4, 1918, as the George Washington, a converted German liner, steamed out of New York bearing Wilson—the first president to cross the Atlantic while in office—to Europe. Ships' whistles blared as Wilson waved to the crowd on the docks. The giddy mood continued when Wilson reached France. In Paris, shouts of "Voodrow Veelson" rang out as he rode up the Champs-Élysées, the city's ceremonial boulevard. When Wilson visited England, children at the dock in Dover spread flowers in his path. In Italy an exuberant local official compared him to Jesus Christ.

The euphoria faded once the peace conference began at the palace of Versailles near Paris, where the treaty ending the Revolutionary War and granting American independence had been signed 136 years before. Joining Wilson were the other Allied heads of state: Italy's Vittorio Orlando; the aged and cynical Georges Clemenceau of France; and England's David Lloyd George, of whom Wilson said, "He is slippery as an eel, and I never know when to count on him." Japan participated in the conference as well.

The European statesmen at Versailles represented nations that had suffered greatly and were determined to avenge their losses. Their goals bore little relation to Wilson's liberal vision. As Clemenceau remarked, "God gave us the Ten Commandments and we broke them. Mr. Wilson has given us the Fourteen Points. We shall see."

Differences surfaced quickly. Orlando demanded a port for Italy on the eastern Adriatic Sea. Japan insisted on keeping the trading rights that it had seized from Germany in the Chinese province of Shandong (Shantung). Clemenceau was obsessed with revenge. At one point, an appalled Wilson threatened to leave the conference.
Reflecting this poisonous climate, the peace treaty forced upon a sullen German delegation on June 28, 1919, was harshly punitive. Germany was disarmed, stripped of its colonies, forced to admit sole blame for the war, and saddled with whopping reparation payments of $56 billion. France regained the provinces of Alsace and Lorraine lost to Germany in 1871 and took control for fifteen years of Germany’s coal-rich Saar Basin. The treaty demilitarized a zone of Germany thirty miles east of the Rhine and transferred a slice of eastern Germany to Poland. All told, Germany lost one-tenth of its population and one-eighth of its territory. The treaty granted Japan’s Shandong claims and gave Italy a slice of Austria where two hundred thousand German-speaking inhabitants were then living. These harsh terms stirred bitter resentment in Germany, planting the seeds of a future, even more devastating, world war.

Wilson’s theme of self-determination and democracy did influence some of the treaty’s provisions. Germany’s former colonies went to the various Allies under a “mandate” or trusteeship system that in theory would lead to eventual independence. The treaty also recognized the independence of Poland and the Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania (territories that Germany had seized in its peace treaty with Bolshevik Russia in 1918). Separate treaties provided for the independence of two new nations carved from the old Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman empires: Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia.

Palestine, a part of Turkey’s collapsed Ottoman empire, went to Great Britain under a mandate arrangement. In 1917, after gaining military control of Palestine, the British had issued the Balfour Declaration supporting a Jewish “national home” in the region and also acknowledging the rights of the non-Jewish Palestinians.

But the treaty makers rejected the efforts of colonized peoples in Asia and Africa to throw off European rule. For example, Ho Chi Minh, a young Vietnamese nationalist who would later become head of his nation, visited Versailles in an unsuccessful effort to secure Vietnamese independence from France.

The framers of the Versailles Treaty and the other treaties shaping the postwar world made little effort to come to terms with revolutionary Russia. Indeed, in August 1918 a fourteen-nation Allied army, including some seven thousand U.S. troops, had landed at various Russian ports, ostensibly to protect Allied war materiel and secure the ports from German attack, but in fact to assist in efforts to overthrow the new Bolshevik regime, whose communist ideology and practice stirred deep fear in the capitals of Europe and America. Wilson, having welcomed the liberal Russian revolution of March 1917, viewed Lenin’s coup that autumn and Russia’s withdrawal from the war as a betrayal of the Allied cause and of his hopes for a democratic Russian future. The Versailles treaty reflected this hostility. Its territorial settlements in eastern Europe were designed to weaken Russia. Before leaving Versailles, Wilson and the other Allied leaders agreed to support a Russian military leader who was still fighting the Bolsheviks. Not until 1933 did the United States recognize the Soviet Union.

The Fight over the League of Nations

Dismayed by the treaty’s vindictive features, Wilson focused on his one shining achievement at Versailles—the creation of a new international organization, the League of Nations. The agreement or “covenant” to establish the League, written into the peace treaty itself, embodied Wilson’s vision of a liberal, harmonious, and peaceful world order.

But Wilson’s dream would soon lie in ruins. A warning sign had come in February 1919 when thirty-nine Republican senators and senators-elect, including Henry Cabot Lodge, signed a letter rejecting the League in its present form. Wilson had retorted defiantly, “You cannot dissect the Covenant from the treaty without destroying the whole vital structure.”

When Wilson sent the treaty to the Senate for ratification in July 1919, Lodge bottled it up in the Foreign Relations Committee. Furious at Lodge’s tactics and convinced that he could rally popular opinion to his cause, Wilson left Washington on September 3 for a western speaking tour. Covering more than nine thousand miles by train, Wilson defended the League in thirty-seven speeches in twenty-two days. Crowds were large and friendly. People wept as Wilson described his visits to American war cemeteries in France and cheered his vision of a new world order.

But the grueling trip left Wilson exhausted. On September 25, he collapsed in Colorado. The train sped back to Washington, where Wilson suffered a devastating stroke on October 2. For a time, he lay near death. Despite a partial recovery, Wilson spent the rest of his term mostly in bed or in a wheelchair, a reclusive invalid, his mind clouded, his fragile emotions betraying him into vindictive actions and tearful outbursts. He broke with close advisers, refused to see the British ambassador, and dismissed Secretary of State Lansing, accusing him of disloyalty. In January 1920 his physician advised him to resign, but Wilson refused.

Wilson’s first wife, Ellen, had died in 1914. His strong-willed second wife, Edith Galt, played a crucial
behind-the-scenes role during these months. Fiercely guarding her incapacitated husband, she hid his condition from the public, controlled his access to information, and decided who could see him. Cabinet members, diplomats, and congressional leaders, even Vice President Thomas R. Marshall, were barred from the White House. When one political leader seeking a meeting urged Mrs. Wilson to consider “the welfare of the country,” she snapped, “I am not thinking of the country now, I am thinking of my husband.” Since Wilson remained alive and the twenty-fifth amendment, dealing with issues of presidential disability, was not adopted until 1967, the impasse continued.

Under these trying circumstances, the League drama unfolded. On September 10, 1919, the Foreign Relations Committee at last sent the treaty to the Senate, but with a series of amendments. The Senate split into three groups: Democrats who supported the League covenant without changes; Republican “Irreconcilables,” led by Hiram Johnson of California, Wisconsin’s Robert La Follette, and Idaho’s William Borah, who opposed the League absolutely; and Republican “Reservationists” led by Lodge, who demanded amendments to the League covenant as a condition of their support. The Reservationists especially objected to Article 10 of the covenant, which pledged each member nation to preserve the political independence and territorial integrity of all other members. This blank-check provision, the Reservationists believed, limited America’s freedom of action in foreign affairs and infringed on Congress’s constitutional right to declare war.

Had Wilson accepted compromise, the Senate would probably have ratified the Versailles Treaty, bringing the United States into the League of Nations. But Wilson’s illness aggravated his tendency toward rigidity. From his isolation in the White House, he instructed Senate Democrats to vote against the treaty with Lodge’s reservations. Although international-law specialists believed that these reservations would not significantly weaken U.S. participation in the League, Wilson rejected them as “a knife thrust at the heart of the treaty.”

Despite the positive responses to Wilson’s speaking tour, the American people did not rally behind the League. The reactionary political mood that Wilson’s own administration had helped create was not conducive to a grand gesture of political idealism. As the editor of The Nation magazine observed, “If [Wilson] loses his great fight for humanity, it will be because he was deliberately silent when freedom of speech and the right of conscience were struck down in America.”

On November 19, 1919, pro-League Democrats obeying Wilson’s instructions and anti-League Irreconcilables joined forces to defeat the Versailles treaty with Lodge’s reservations. A second vote the following March produced the same result. The United States would not join the League. A president elected amid high hopes in 1912, applauded when he called for war in 1917, and adulated when he arrived in Europe in 1918 lay isolated and sick, his leadership repudiated. What might have been Wilson’s crowning triumph had turned to ashes.

Racism and Red Scare, 1919-1920

The wartime spirit of “100 percent Americanism” left a bitter aftertaste. The years 1919–1920 saw new racial violence and fresh antiradical hysteria. Mobs in various parts of the country lynched seventy-six blacks in 1919, the worst toll in fifteen years. The victims included ten veterans, several still in uniform. Some lynchings involved incredible brutality. In Omaha, Nebraska, a mob shot a black prisoner more than a thousand times, mutilated him, and hung his body in a busy intersection.

The bloodiest violence exploded in 1919 in Chicago, where the influx of southern blacks had pushed racial tension to a high level. On a hot July afternoon, whites at a Lake Michigan beach threw stones at a black youth...
swimming offshore. When he sank and drowned, black neighborhoods erupted in fury. A thirteen-day reign of terror followed as white and black marauders engaged in random attacks and arson. Black gangs stabbed an Italian peddler; white gangs pulled blacks from streetcars and shot or whipped them. Before an uneasy calm returned, the outbreak left fifteen whites and twenty-three blacks dead, over five hundred injured, and more than a thousand families, mostly black, homeless.

The wartime antiradical panic crested in a postwar Red Scare. (Communists were called “reds” because of the red flag favored by radical and revolutionary organizations, including the new Bolshevik regime in Russia.) Fears of “bolshevism” deepened when a rash of strikes broke out in 1919. When the IWW and other Seattle labor unions organized a general strike early that year, the mayor accused the strikers of seeking to “duplicate the anarchy of Russia” and called for federal troops to maintain public order. Anxiety crackled again in April, when various public officials received packages containing bombs. One blew off the hands of a senator’s maid; another damaged the home of Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer. When 350,000 steelworkers went on strike in September, mill owners broke the strike in part through newspaper ads describing the walkout as a Bolshevik plot engineered by “Red agitators.”

The antiradical paranoia soon took political form. In November 1919 the House of Representatives refused to seat Milwaukee socialist Victor Berger because of his indictment under the Espionage Act. Milwaukee voters promptly reelected him, but the House stood firm. The New York legislature expelled several socialist members. The Justice Department set up a countersubversion division under young J. Edgar Hoover, future head of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, who ordered the arrest of hundreds of suspected communists and radicals. In December 1919 the government deported 249 Russian-born aliens, including radical Emma Goldman, a leader of the birth-control movement. The government’s antiradical crusade won applause from the American Legion, a newly founded veterans’ association, as well as the National Association of Manufacturers.

On January 2, 1920, in a dragnet coordinated by the Justice Department, federal marshals and local police raided the homes of suspected radicals and the headquarters of radical organizations in thirty-two cities. Without search warrants or arrest warrants, they took more than 4,000 persons into custody (some 550 were eventually deported) and seized papers and records. In Lynn, Massachusetts, police arrested a group of men and women meeting to plan a cooperative bakery. In Boston, police paraded arrested persons through the streets in handcuffs and chains and then confined them in crowded and unsanitary cells without formal charges or the right to post bail.

Attorney General Palmer, ambitious for higher office, coordinated these “Red raids.” A Quaker who had compiled a reform record as a congressman, Palmer succumbed to the anticommunist hysteria. Defending his actions, Palmer later described the menace he believed the nation faced in 1919:

> The blaze of revolution was sweeping over every American institution of law and order . . . eating its way into the homes of the American workman, its sharp tongues of revolutionary heat . . . licking at the altars of the churches, leaping into the belfry of the school bell, crawling into the sacred corners of American homes, . . . burning up the foundations of society.

The Red Scare subsided as Palmer’s lurid predictions failed to materialize. When a bomb exploded in New York City’s financial district in September 1920,
killing thirty-eight people, most Americans saw the deed as the work of an isolated fanatic, not evidence of approaching revolution.

**The Election of 1920**

In this unsettled climate, the election of 1920 approached. Wilson, out of touch with political reality, considered seeking a third term, but was persuaded otherwise. Treasury Secretary McAdoo and Attorney General Palmer harbored presidential hopes. But when the Democrats convened in San Francisco, the delegates sang “How Dry I Am” (prohibition had just taken effect), tepidly backed Wilson’s League position, and nominated James M. Cox, the mildly progressive governor of Ohio. As Cox’s running mate they chose the young assistant secretary of the navy, Franklin D. Roosevelt, who possessed a potent political name.

The confident Republicans, meeting in Chicago, nominated Senator Warren G. Harding of Ohio, an amiable politician whose principal qualification was his availability. As one Republican leader observed, “There ain’t any first raters this year. . . . We got a lot of second raters, and Harding is the best of the second raters.” For vice president, they chose Massachusetts governor Calvin Coolidge, who had won attention in 1919 with his denunciation of a Boston policemen’s strike.

Wilson proclaimed the election a “solemn referendum” on the League, but a nation psychologically drained by the war and the emotional roller-coaster ride of the Wilson presidency ignored him. “The bitterness toward Wilson is everywhere. . . .”, wrote a Democratic campaign worker; “he hasn’t a friend.”

Harding, promising a return to “normalcy,” delivered campaign speeches empty of content but vaguely reassuring. One critic described them as “an army of pompous phrases moving over the landscape in search of an idea.” Whatever the shortcomings of his campaign, Harding piled up a landslide victory—16 million votes against 9 million for Cox. Nearly a million citizens defiantly voted for socialist Eugene Debs, who was behind bars in an Atlanta penitentiary (see Table 22.1).

The election dashed all hope for American entry into the League of Nations. During the campaign Harding had spoken vaguely of some form of “international organization,” but once elected he bluntly declared the League question “dead.” Senator Lodge, who had praised Wilson’s idealistic war message so highly in 1917, now expressed grim pleasure that the voters had ripped “Wilsonism” up by the roots. The sense of national destiny and high purpose that Woodrow Wilson had evoked so eloquently in April 1917 survived only as an ironic memory as Americans impatiently turned to a new president and a new era.

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<td>919,799</td>
<td>3.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P. P. Christensen</td>
<td>Farmer-Labor</td>
<td></td>
<td>265,411</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Conclusion

The early twentieth century, an era of reform at home, also saw intensifying U.S. involvement abroad. Focused initially on Latin America and Asia, this new globalism arose from a desire to promote U.S. business interests internationally; export American values to other societies; and extend the power of a newly confident, industrialized United States as a counterweight to the expansive ambitions of Great Britain, Germany, and other imperial nations.

After 1914 this new internationalism focused on the European war, which in 1917 became an American war as well. Like many Americans, President Wilson felt deep cultural ties to the Allies. He took the nation into the conflict in defense of his understanding of neutral rights and, in a larger sense, to further his vision of a transformed world order that would emerge from the struggle.

By conservative estimate, World War I cost 10 million dead and 20 million wounded. Included in this toll were 112,000 deaths in the American military—49,000 in battle and 63,000 from diseases, mostly influenza. The conflict brought marked advances in the technology of slaughter, from U-boat torpedoes and primitive aerial bombs to tanks, toxic gases, and more efficient machine guns.

The social, political, and economic effects of the war extended far beyond the battlefield. The war furthered the goals of some reformers, particularly the advocates of woman suffrage and prohibition. As a result of war mobilization, the federal government expanded its regulatory power over corporations and took steps to ensure

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1899</td>
<td>First U.S. Open Door note seeking access to China market. Boxer Rebellion erupts in China.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1900</td>
<td>Second U.S. Open Door note.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1904</td>
<td>President Theodore Roosevelt proclaims “Roosevelt Corollary” to Monroe Doctrine.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1905</td>
<td>Roosevelt mediates the end of the Russo-Japanese War.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1906</td>
<td>At the request of Roosevelt, San Francisco ends segregation of Asian schoolchildren. Panama Canal construction begins.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1911</td>
<td>U.S.-backed revolution in Nicaragua.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1912</td>
<td>U.S. Marines occupy Nicaragua.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1914</td>
<td>U.S. troops occupy Veracruz, Mexico. Panama Canal opens. World War I begins; President Wilson proclaims American neutrality.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1917</td>
<td>U.S. troops withdraw from Mexico. Germany resumes unrestricted U-boat warfare; United States declares war. Selective Service Act sets up national draft. War Industries Board, Committee on Public Information, and Food Administration created.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1920</td>
<td>“Red raids” organized by Justice Department. Nineteenth Amendment added to the Constitution (woman suffrage). Warren G. Harding elected president.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
workers’ well-being and efficiency. Wartime regulatory agencies and social programs offered models that would prove influential in the future.

But the war also undermined the best aspects of progressivism—its openness to new ideas, its commitment to social justice, and its humanitarian concern for the underdog. As government war propaganda encouraged intolerance of dissent, ideological conformity and fear of radicalism smothered the prewar reform impulse. The climate of reaction intensified in 1919–1920, as the nation repudiated Wilsonian idealism.

The war at least temporarily improved the economic lot of many workers, farmers, blacks, and women, and enhanced the standing of the corporate executives, psychologists, public-relations specialists, and other professionals who contributed their expertise to the cause. Internationally, despite the wrangles that kept America out of the League of Nations, the conflict propelled the United States to the center of world politics and left the nation’s businesses and financial institutions poised for global expansion.

Some of these changes endured; others proved fleeting. Cumulatively, however, their effect was profound. The nation that celebrated the armistice in November 1918 was very different from the one that Woodrow Wilson had solemnly taken into battle only nineteen months earlier.

**For Further Reference**

**Readings**


**Websites**

**Influenza 1918**

*http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/influenza/timeline/index.html*  
The American Experience  
A wealth of information on the deadliest epidemic in American history.

**The Unkindest Cut: The Down and Dirty Story of the Panama Canal**  
*http://www.discovery.com/stories/history/panama/1907.html*  
by Patrick J. Kiger, The Discovery Channel  
Text, sound, video, a slide show, statistics, and maps covering the historical background and the building of the canal.

**World War I: Trenches on the Web: An Internet History of the Great War**  
The History Channel  
A rich resource, including documents, song clips, the soldiers’ experience, the home front, specific battles, and much more.

For additional works, please consult the Bibliography at the end of the book.