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## To the Front Lines: America in World War I

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2016

*On July 28, 1914, Archduke Franz Ferdinand, the heir presumptive to the Austro-Hungarian throne, was assassinated by a Serbian nationalist, setting off a chain of events that would quickly culminate in the First World War. Despite this rapid development in Europe, the United States would not enter this war until April, 1917. The following text discusses American neutrality and isolationism leading up to the war, as well as how Americans helped win World War I. As you read, take notes on the events that eventually led to American entrance into World War I.*

[1] Isolation was a long-held American tradition. Since the days of George Washington, Americans attempted to remain secluded,<sup>1</sup> protected by the mighty oceans on either side. When European conflicts erupted, as they frequently did, many in the United States claimed exceptionalism: America was different. Why get involved in Europe's self-destruction? When the Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria-Hungary was killed in cold blood and his empire declared war on Serbia,<sup>2</sup> alliances forced most European countries to pick a side, igniting the most destructive war in human history until that point. But the initial reaction in the United States was the expectation to remain neutral.<sup>3</sup> As a nation of immigrants, the United States would have difficulty picking a side. Despite the obvious ties to Britain based on history and language, there were many United States citizens who claimed Germany and Austria-Hungary as their motherlands. Support of either the Allies or the Central Powers<sup>4</sup> might prove too divisive.<sup>5</sup>



*"Two American soldiers run towards a bunker"  
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1. **Secluded (adjective)** sheltered, private, or tucked away; undisturbed by outside forces
2. Archduke Franz Ferdinand (1863-1914) was the heir presumptive of the Austro-Hungarian throne. His assassination is considered the starting event of the first World War.
3. **Neutral (adjective)** impartial; not helping or supporting either side in a conflict
4. The Allied Powers were the countries that opposed the Central Powers in World War I and

In the early days of the war, as Britain and France struggled against Germany, American leaders decided it was in the national interest to continue trade with all sides as before. A neutral nation cannot impose an embargo<sup>6</sup> on one side, continue trade with the other, and still retain its neutral status. In addition, American merchants and manufacturers feared that a boycott<sup>7</sup> would cripple the economy. Great Britain, with its powerful navy, had different ideas. A major part of the British strategy was to impose a blockade<sup>8</sup> on Germany. American trade with the Central Powers simply could not be permitted. The results of the blockade were astonishing. Trade with England and France more than tripled between 1914 and 1916, while trade with Germany was cut by over ninety percent.

With American trade becoming more and more lopsided<sup>9</sup> toward the Allied cause, many feared that it was only a matter of time before the United States would be at war. The issue that propelled most American fence-sitters to side with the British was Germany's submarine warfare against Americans at sea.

The British, with the world's largest navy, had effectively shut down German maritime<sup>10</sup> trade. Because there was no hope of ever having more ships than the British, the Germans felt that the submarine was their only key to survival. One German "unterseeboot" (undersea boat), or "U-boat," could secretly sink many battleships, only to slip away unseen. This practice would stop only if the British would lift their blockade.

## Sinking the Lusitania and the Zimmermann Telegram

- [5] The isolationist American public had little concern if the British and Germans tangled on the high seas. The incident that changed everything was the sinking of the British ship Lusitania.

The Germans felt they had done their part to warn Americans about the danger of overseas travel. The German government purchased advertisement space in American newspapers warning that Americans who traveled on ships carrying war contraband<sup>11</sup> risked submarine

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notably included: France, the British Empire, Russia, Italy (which was originally allied with the Central Powers), Serbia, Japan, and the United States. The Central Powers included Austria-Hungary, Germany, Bulgaria and the Ottoman Empire.

5. **Divisive (adjective)** tending to cause disagreement and conflict between people
6. An embargo is an official ban on trade with a particular country.
7. A boycott is the refusal to support an organization or service as a form of punishment or protest.
8. A blockade is a means of sealing off a place to prevent goods or people from entering or leaving.
9. **Lopsided (adjective)** crooked or askew
10. of or related to the sea, especially in regards to trade and military activity
11. Contraband are goods that have been banned and are thus imported or exported illegally.

attack. When the Lusitania departed New York, the Germans believed the massive passenger ship was loaded with munitions<sup>12</sup> in its cargo hold. On May 7, 1915, a German U-boat torpedoed the ship without warning, sending 1,198 passengers, including 128 Americans, to an icy grave. The Lusitania, as it turned out, was indeed carrying over 4 million rounds of ammunition.

President Wilson<sup>13</sup> was enraged. Wilson's Secretary of State, William Jennings Bryan,<sup>14</sup> recommended a ban on American travel on any ships of nations at war. Wilson preferred a tougher line against the German Kaiser.<sup>15</sup> He demanded an immediate end to submarine warfare, prompting Bryan to resign in protest. The Germans began a 2-year practice of pledging to cease submarine attacks, reneging on that pledge, and issuing it again under U.S. protest.

Wilson had other reasons besides the Lusitania for leaning toward the Allied side. He greatly admired the British government, and democracy in any form was preferable to German authoritarianism.<sup>16</sup> The historical ties with Britain seemed to draw the United States closer to the Allies.

Many Americans also felt a debt to France for their help in the American Revolution. Several hundred volunteers, appropriately named the Lafayette Escadrilles after the French general<sup>17</sup> who served in the American Revolutionary War, volunteered to fight with the French in 1916. In November of that year, Wilson campaigned for re-election with a peace platform. "He kept us out of war," read his campaign signs, and Americans narrowly returned him to the White House. But peace was not to be.

[10] In February 1917, citing the unbalanced U.S. trade with the Allies, Germany announced a policy of unrestricted submarine warfare. All vessels spotted in the war zone would be sunk immediately and without warning. Wilson responded by severing diplomatic relations with the German government.

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12. Munition is a term that refers to military weapons, ammunition, equipment, and stores.
  13. Woodrow Wilson (1856-1924) served as the 28th President of the United States from 1913 until 1921. Wilson presided over American participation in WWI.
  14. William Jennings Bryan (1860-1925) was an American public speaker and politician from Nebraska. He was also a great force in the populist wing of the Democratic Party.
  15. "Kaiser" is the German word for "emperor" and refers specifically to either the German or Austrian emperor, or the head of the Holy Roman Empire. The German Kaiser at the time was Wilhelm II (1859-1941), the last German emperor and king of Prussia.
  16. Authoritarianism is the enforcement or advocacy of strict obedience to authority at the price of personal freedom.
  17. The Marquis de Lafayette (1757-1834) was a French aristocrat and military officer and a close friend of key revolutionary figures such as George Washington, Alexander Hamilton, and Thomas Jefferson. He was also a major figure in the French Revolution of 1789 and the July Revolution of 1830.

Later that month, British intelligence intercepted the notorious<sup>18</sup> Zimmermann Telegram. The German foreign minister Arthur Zimmermann sent a message proposing an alliance with Mexico in the event that the United States should enter the war. Zimmermann promised Mexico a return of Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona — territories it had lost to the U.S. in 1848.

Relations between the U.S. and Mexico were already strained. Despite the recent souring between Mexico and its northern neighbor, the Mexican government declined the German offer. In a calculated move, Wilson released the captured telegram to the American press.

## War Declared on Germany

A tempest<sup>19</sup> of outrage followed. More and more Americans began to label Germany as the true villain in the war. When German submarines sank several American commercial ships in March, Wilson had an even stronger hand to play. On April 2, 1917, he addressed the Congress, citing a long list of grievances<sup>20</sup> against Germany. Four days later, by a wide margin in each house, Congress declared war on Germany, and the U.S. was plunged into, what was at the time, the bloodiest battle in history.

After two and a half years of isolationism, America entered the Great War. Unfortunately, the United States was developing a nasty pattern of entering major conflicts woefully<sup>21</sup> unprepared.

- [15] When Congress declared war in April, the army had enough bullets for only two days of fighting. The army was small in numbers at only 200,000 soldiers. Two-fifths of these men were members of the National Guard, which had only recently been federalized.<sup>22</sup> The type of warfare currently plaguing Europe was unlike any the world had ever seen.

The Western front, which ran through Belgium and France, had been in a virtual stalemate since the early years of the war. A system of trenches had been dug by each side. Machine-gun nests, barbed wire, and mines blocked the opposing side from capturing the enemy trench. Artillery shells, mortars,<sup>23</sup> flamethrowers, and poison gas were employed to no avail.

The defensive technology was simply better than the offensive technology. Even if an enemy

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18. **Notorious** (*adjective*) famous or well known, typically for some bad quality or deed
  19. **Tempest** (*noun*) a violent, windy storm
  20. **Grievance** (*noun*) a real or imagined wrong or other cause for complaint or protest
  21. **Woefully** (*adverb*) depressingly; badly
  22. To federalize something is to approve of and bring it under the control of the central, or federal, government. In this case, this means that the National Guard, which is a reserve military force for the U.S. Army, were officially brought under federal control.
  23. a type of gun used for firing shells (technically called bombs) at high angles

trench was captured, the enemy would simply retreat into another one dug fifty yards behind. Each side would repeatedly send their soldiers “over the top” of the trenches into the no man’s land of almost certain death with very little territorial gain. Now young American men were sent to these killing fields.

## Feeling a Draft

The first problem with entering the war was raising the necessary number of troops. Recruitment was of course the preferred method, but the needed numbers could not be reached with only volunteers. Conscription<sup>24</sup> was unavoidable, and Congress passed the Selective Service in May 1917 to enforce a draft.

All males between the ages of 21 and 30 were required to register for military service. The last time a draft had been used resulted in great rioting because wealthy people could purchase exemptions. This time, the draft was conducted by random lottery.

- [20] By the end of the war, over four and a half million American men and 11,000 American women served in the armed forces. 400,000 African Americans were called to active duty. In all, two million Americans fought in the French trenches.

The first military measures adopted by the United States were on the seas. Joint Anglo-American operations were highly successful at stopping the dreaded submarine. Following the thinking that there is greater strength in numbers, the U.S. and Britain developed an elaborate convoy<sup>25</sup> system to protect vulnerable ships. In addition, mines were placed in many areas formerly dominated by German U-boats. The campaign<sup>26</sup> was so effective that not a single American soldier was lost on the high seas in transit to the Western front.

The American Expeditionary Force<sup>27</sup> began arriving in France in June 1917, but the original numbers were quite small. Time was necessary to inflate the ranks of the United States Army and to provide at least a basic training program.

When the Bolsheviks<sup>28</sup> took over Russia in 1917 in a domestic<sup>29</sup> revolution, Germany signed a

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24. Conscription is compelled enlistment into the armed forces, such as a draft.
  25. A convoy is a group of ships or vehicles that travel together, typically accompanied by armed troops or warships for protection.
  26. In this context, “campaign” refers to a series of military operations intended to achieve a particular goal in a specific area.
  27. The American Expeditionary Force (AEF) was made up of the U.S. Armed Forces. They were sent to Europe under the command of General John J. Pershing in 1917.
  28. The Bolsheviks were the majority faction of the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party (RSDLP) and were also known as the “Reds,” especially during the Russian Civil War. The

peace treaty with the new government. The Germans could now afford to transfer many of their soldiers fighting in the East to the deadlocked Western front. The seemingly infinite supply of fresh American soldiers countered this potential advantage and was demoralizing to the Germans. Were it not for the fresh supply of incoming American troops, the war might have followed a very different path. The addition of the United States to the Allied effort was as elevating to the Allied morale as it was devastating to the German will.

## Counting the Casualties

The new soldiers began arriving in great numbers in early 1918. The “doughboys,” as they were labeled by the French, were green<sup>30</sup> indeed. Many fell prey to the trappings of Paris nightlife while awaiting transfer to the front. African-American soldiers noted that their treatment by the French soldiers was better than their treatment by their white counterparts in the American army. Although the German army dropped tempting leaflets on the African-American troops promising a less-racist society if the Germans won, none took the offer seriously.

- [25] By the spring of 1918, the doughboys were seeing fast and furious action. A German offensive came within fifty miles of Paris, and American soldiers played a critical role in turning the tide at Chateau-Thierry and Belleau Wood. In September 1918, efforts were concentrated on dislodging German troops from the Meuse River.<sup>31</sup> Finding success, the Allies chased the Germans into the trench-laden Argonne Forest,<sup>32</sup> where America suffered heavy casualties.<sup>33</sup>

But the will and resources of the German resistance were shattered. The army retreated, and on November 11, 1918, the German government agreed to an armistice.<sup>34</sup> The war was over. Over 14 million soldiers and civilians perished in the so-called Great War, including 112,000 Americans. Countless more were wounded.

Contributions to the war effort were not confined to the battlefield. The entire American economy was mobilized to win the war. From planting extra vegetables to keeping the furnace

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Bolsheviks were led by Soviet dictator Vladimir Lenin and made up the Communist Party, which controlled the Soviet Union.

29. “Domestic” means internal or non-foreign; it is not a comment on the degree, significance, or violence of the revolution.
30. **Green (adjective)** new, untrained, or immature
31. The Meuse is a major European river, beginning in France, flowing through Belgium and the Netherlands, and emptying into the North Sea.
32. The Battle of Argonne Forest (September 26, 1918 – November 11, 1918), also known as the Meuse-Argonne Offensive, was a major battle of the Allied offensive in World War I.
33. Roughly 26,000 American casualties. Comparatively, Germany suffered about 28,000 in losses.
34. An armistice is an agreement made by enemy sides to stop fighting, like a truce.

turned off, American civilians provided extra food and fuel to the war effort. The United States government engaged in a massive propaganda<sup>35</sup> campaign to raise troops and money. Any opposition against this effort was stifled, prompting many to question whether American civil liberties were in jeopardy. In the end, the war was won, but peace was lost. The Treaty of Versailles,<sup>36</sup> presented by President Wilson, was eventually rejected by the Senate from U.S. ratification,<sup>37</sup> which prevented the U.S. from joining the League of Nations, unlike the countries that did ratify the treaty. Without the support of the United States, the League of Nations was unable to soften some of the more damaging effects of the treaty, such as worldwide economic crises between 1929 and 1933. The bitterness that swept Europe and America would prevent the securing of a just peace, imperiling<sup>38</sup> the next generation as well. Two dangerous decades of political isolationism followed, only to end in an ever more cataclysmic<sup>39</sup> war.

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35. Propaganda is information, especially of a biased or misleading nature, that is used to promote a political cause or point of view.
  36. The Treaty of Versailles was a peace treaty at the end of World War I, ending the war between Germany and the Allied Powers. It was signed exactly five years after Archduke Franz Ferdinand's death on June 28, 1919.
  37. Ratification is the act of signing or giving formal consent to a treaty, contract, legislation, etc. and making it officially valid.
  38. **Imperil** (*verb*) to put at risk of being harmed
  39. **Cataclysmic** (*adjective*) extremely violent

## Text-Dependent Questions

**Directions:** For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: What does the word "renege" most likely mean as used in paragraph 7?
  - A. to keep true to
  - B. to break (a promise)
  - C. to reinstate
  - D. to negotiate
  
2. PART B: Which of the following phrases from paragraph 7 best supports the answer to Part A?
  - A. "President Wilson was enraged."
  - B. "a tougher line against the German Kaiser"
  - C. "pledging to cease submarine attacks"
  - D. "issuing it again under U.S. protest"
  
3. Which of the following best describes the significance of Wilson's reelection slogan, "He kept us out of war"?
  - A. Wilson's reelection slogan emphasizes his trustworthiness and honesty, as well as his ability to keep his promises.
  - B. Wilson's reelection slogan highlights the greatest concern of the time (staying out of the war) and emphasizes the American value of neutrality.
  - C. Wilson's reelection slogan emphasizes the irony of his campaign, as Wilson was in favor of joining the war but he still needed popular support to validate his decision.
  - D. Wilson's reelection slogan highlights the major American values at the time, rooted in peace and prosperity, avoiding serious conflict in favor of blissful ignorance.
  
4. How did the Zimmerman Telegram affect the United States participation in WWI?
  - A. The Zimmerman Telegram made Americans paranoid about fighting Germany, thus strengthening the resolve to stay out of the war.
  - B. The Zimmerman Telegram did little to change Americans' minds; the sinking of the Lusitania did much more to motivate them to join WWI.
  - C. The Zimmerman Telegram, along with the submarine attacks, outraged the American public and strengthened support behind joining the war.
  - D. The Zimmerman Telegram reaffirmed Mexico's loyalty to its alliance with the United States, boosting American confidence to join the war.



5. In your own words, summarize the United States' foreign relations policies and values throughout the course of World War I. Be sure to explain key ideas such as neutrality and isolationism in your answer.

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## Discussion Questions

***Directions: Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.***

1. Do you think the United States should have joined the war when it did? Should it have entered earlier? What, do you think, might have happened if it had stayed out of WWI entirely?
2. What conditions or events created a strong sense of isolationism in American society before WWI? Are these conditions or ideas still present today?
3. In the context of this passage, how has America changed over time? Consider America's current foreign relations policies — how, if at all, have they changed? Is the United States still an overall neutral or isolationist country? Cite evidence from this text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in your answer.
4. In the context of this passage, how are we changed by war? What were the consequences of WWI on a global scale? How did it change or affect America? How did it change how war is fought or conducted? Cite evidence from this text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in your answer.