



THE GREAT DEPARTURE

THE UNITED STATES AND WORLD WAR I
1914-1920

Daniel M. Smith



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DANIEL M. SMITH

Professor of History, University of Colorado

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Foreword

"THE UNITED STATES always wins the war and loses the peace," runs a persistent popular complaint. Neither part of the statement is accurate. The United States barely escaped the War of 1812 with its territory intact, and in Korea in the 1950's the nation was forced to settle for a stalemate on the battlefield. At Paris in 1782, and again in 1898, American negotiators drove hard bargains to win notable diplomatic victories. Yet the myth persists, along with the equally erroneous American belief that we are a peaceful people. Our history is studded with conflict and violence. From the Revolution to the Cold War, Americans have been willing to fight for their interests, their beliefs, and their ambitions. The United States has gone to war for many objectives — for independence in 1775, for honor and trade in 1812, for territory in 1846, for humanity and empire in 1898, for neutral rights in 1917, and for national security in 1941. Since 1945 the nation has been engaged in a deadly struggle to contain communism and defend the democratic way of life.

The purpose of this series is to examine in detail eight critical periods relating to American involvement in foreign war from the Revolution through the Cold War. Each author has set out to recount anew the breakdown of diplomacy that led to war and the subsequent quest for peace. The emphasis is on foreign policy, and no effort is made to chronicle the military participation of the United States in these wars. Instead the authors focus on the day-by-day conduct of diplomacy to explain why the nation went to war and to show how peace was restored. Each volume is a synthesis combining the research of other historians with new insights to provide a fresh interpretation of a critical period in

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American diplomatic history. It is hoped that this series will help dispel the illusion of national innocence and give Americans a better appreciation of their country's role in war and peace.

ROBERT A. DIVINE

Preface

AMERICAN INVOLVEMENT in World War I signified, in the phrase of historian C. Vann Woodward, the passing of the Age of Free Security. In the nineteenth century the United States had been the fortunate beneficiary of a century of general peace in Europe and the usually benevolent role of British seapower. The resultant peace and prosperity, however, had been too often wrongly attributed to America's deliberate choice of an isolationist policy toward European politics. Thus President Grover Cleveland, in his inaugural address in 1885, assured his fellow citizens that: "The genius of our institutions, the needs of our people . . . dictate the scrupulous avoidance of any departure from that foreign policy commended by the history, the traditions, and the prosperity of the Republic. It is the policy of independence. . . . It is the policy of peace suitable to our interests. . . . It is the policy of neutrality, rejecting any share in foreign broils and ambitions upon other continents. . . ." ¹ As Cleveland indicated, by the late nineteenth century American isolationism had come to mean not total separation from Europe, particularly in the cultural and economic areas, but political abstention from foreign wars and an adamant refusal to enter into alliances with other states. The years 1914 and especially 1917, however, revealed that the nation could not be isolated from the effects of a major world war and that, in contrast to the past, a much higher cost in manpower and money would have to be paid for national security in a turbulent age. Yet an

¹ James D. Richardson, ed., *A Compilation of the Messages and Papers of the Presidents, 1789-1897* (Washington, 1900), VIII, 301.

isolationist psychology was retained by most Americans and helps account for the subsequent popular disillusionment with America's participation in the war and the peacemaking. It was within such a climate that the great historical debate about the causes of the involvement raged in the 1920's and 1930's.

Two main questions are raised by study of this period: Why did the United States reluctantly depart from its traditions of neutrality to become a belligerent in 1917? And why did Americans, after entering the conflict and having decisively tipped the balance to ensure an Allied victory, reject the peace treaty which their own president had largely shaped and which presumably justified the sacrifices of the war? The fruits of victory were tossed aside, with the result that the United States tried to retire into an isolationist shell and to a large degree abandoned control over future world developments.

Although historians have not been able to agree on the answers to these questions, this brief study will try to offer one. Most Americans lacked an understanding of the basic reasons why the country entered the war and of the nation's specific stake in the peace settlement. The United States entered the war, in an involved controversy over neutral rights, because of national self-interests and an even greater concern in the creation of a stable and just postwar world society. American foreign policy, throughout the neutrality and the war periods, was in general practical and based on these national interests. Even the Wilsonian concept of an idealistic peace and a global collective security system was related to practical national interests. But the majority of citizens was not made fully aware of that fact and was too easily wearied by the responsibilities of world leadership. There lay the tragedy of America in World War I.

In a volume of this brevity on so large a topic, I have been compelled to be selective and interpretive rather than encyclopedic. Footnotes, except to acknowledge the source of quotations, have necessarily been omitted. In addition to my research in the relevant unpublished materials, the bibliographical essay on published books and articles indicates my indebtedness to the work of others. I am grateful to the Council on Research and Creative Work of the Graduate School of the University of

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DANIEL M. SMITH

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CHAPTER I

The Shock of War

THE ERUPTION OF WAR in August of 1914 caused nearly universal disbelief and shock. Despite many indications of impending catastrophe in the preceding decade, at each crisis a major conflict had been narrowly averted. The two rival blocs, the Central Alliance of Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Italy versus the Triple Entente of France, Russia, and Great Britain, were locked in an arms race and competition for prestige. Yet many thoughtful people, inspired by nineteenth-century concepts of liberalism and free trade, believed that the modern world had outgrown war. Actual armed struggles between the major powers, the centers of civilization and industry, were viewed as almost impossible for the world presumably had so advanced morally and materially as to render a large-scale war anachronistic.

History buttressed that conviction, for there had been no general European war since the final defeat of Napoleon in 1815. Peace societies flourished, schemes for the peaceful adjustment of international conflict abounded, and the Hague conferences of 1899 and 1907 had apparently made progress toward the codification of international law and the creation of arbitration machinery. The optimism engendered by these developments was rudely shattered by the events of June–August in 1914: on June 28, in the comparatively remote Balkans, Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne, was assassinated by Slav nationalists at Sarajevo; attributing the deed to Serbian nationalists seeking to disrupt the empire, the Vienna government followed an ultimatum with a declaration of war against Serbia on July 28; resultant Russian and French mobilization quickly led to a German declaration of war against those two

allies, on August 1 and 3; and on August 4, after Germany invaded Belgium, Great Britain entered the struggle on the side of France and Russia. Ultimately, almost all of Europe was engulfed in the struggle, and in the Far East Japan, allied to Great Britain since 1902, also entered the war.

The general reaction to the war in the United States was one of horror and dismay mingled with a feeling of relief that America was immune from the insanity gripping the old world. The long-established tradition of abstention from Europe's politics and wars, and the barrier of the Atlantic moat, seemed to ensure that the United States would remain aloof. When President Woodrow Wilson formally proclaimed American neutrality and subsequently appealed for neutrality in thought and speech as well, most citizens reacted with complete approval. A *New York Sun* editorial summed up the general view: "There is nothing reasonable in such a war . . . and it would be folly for the country to sacrifice itself to the frenzy of dynastic policies and the clash of ancient hatreds which is urging the Old World to destruction."¹

I

The impartiality in speech and thought requested by the president quickly proved impossible to attain. America was composed of too polyglot a population, with ethnic groups still emotionally involved in the old world lands of their origin. Of a population of nearly ninety-two million people in 1914, approximately one-third could be classified as "hyphenated" Americans, in the sense of being either foreign born or of having one or both parents as immigrants. German-Americans numbered over eight million and, judged by the attitudes of their newspapers and social organizations, they were inclined to be strongly sympathetic to the cause of the fatherland. To them, imperial Germany was waging a defensive war against the Slavic peril represented by czarist Russia. The Irish-Americans, over four million strong, embodied centuries of bitterness at English rule and tended to

¹ As quoted in *The Literary Digest*, 49:215-217 (August 8, 1914).

favor the cause of the Central Powers, as did most of the Russian-hating American Jewry. Conversely, most "native" or old-stock Americans were at least mildly pro-Entente in sentiment, the result of cultural, ethnic, and language bonds with Great Britain and of the traditional Franco-American friendship. Of equal importance, probably, was the Anglo-American *rap-prochement* which had occurred at the turn of the century. During the same period, when major Anglo-American disputes over an isthmian canal and the Alaskan boundary with Canada were being settled to the satisfaction of the United States, German-American relations had experienced a slow deterioration. In large part this development merely reflected the parallel growth of the two latecomer great powers, with the virtually inevitable result of rivalry over markets and naval coaling stations. Suspicions and rivalry in Samoa and the Philippines, no doubt exaggerated, together with the unfortunate penchant of Germany's ruler, Kaiser Wilhelm II, for swashbuckling gestures, helped create an American image of imperial Germany as autocratic, militaristic, and expansionist.

Belligerent propaganda campaigns aimed at America began early in the war. Although the German effort has usually been evaluated as lagging far behind that of the Allies, recent studies reveal that it was by no means inept and ineffective. In August the German Information Service was established in New York City. Under the direction of Dr. Bernhard Dernburg, aided by Dr. Heinrich Albert and others, this agency issued news bulletins and distributed pamphlets and books which sought to justify Germany's actions and to place responsibility for the war on the Allied powers. French desires for revenge for the losses to Germany in 1870 and Russian expansionism were allegedly the causes of the conflict, whereas Germany fought to defend western civilization against the Slavic peril. But certain handicaps confronted German propaganda efforts in America. Most of the major newspapers were pro-Ally, so reliance had to be put on German and Irish journals. Cables to Europe either had been cut or were under Allied control. Although it was more difficult to get a flow of materials and news from Germany than it was from the Allies, much material got to America via indirect cable routes, by mail, and by wireless. Moreover, German propaganda

activities were exposed and at least partly discredited by a series of disasters in the summer of 1915. First came the famed affair of Dr. Albert's briefcase, which he accidentally left behind him when debarking from a New York City elevated train; seized by an American secret service agent, the contents of the briefcase revealed the extent of German propaganda operations and created a sensation when released through the *New York World*. The affair was followed by the expulsion of the Austrian ambassador, Constantine Dumba, and subsequently of the German naval and military *attachés*, for diplomatic improprieties and violations of American neutrality. Despite such reverses, effective propaganda was continued through the embassy in Washington and its able head, Ambassador Johann von Bernstorff.

Great Britain naturally assumed chief responsibility for Allied propaganda activities in America. Although initially trailing the German efforts, British propaganda soon surpassed its rival in extensive organization and effectiveness. A centralized and secret propaganda ministry was established in Wellington House in London under the direction of Charles Masterman. It contained divisions for the principal belligerent and neutral countries, and sought to maintain a careful scrutiny of public opinion abroad and to tailor propaganda accordingly. The American section was in the charge of Sir Gilbert Parker, well known to many prominent Americans. Parker's staff conducted weekly surveys of the American press, compiled mailing lists of influential Americans and organizations, and sent to these a stream of materials skillfully designed to appeal to various ethnic, religious, and social groups.

British propaganda utilized to good effect alleged German atrocities in northern France and Belgium and such incidents as the execution of Nurse Edith Cavell as a spy in 1915. In May of that year, Lord Bryce released a report which contained numerous depositions and accounts charging deliberate German violations of the rules of warfare. Supposedly an objective documentation of atrocities, endorsed by well-known scholars, the report contained much second- or thirdhand testimony by unnamed witnesses and the accounts fell into the stereotyped categories familiar in other wars. Although such stories, especially

the Bryce Report, undoubtedly affected many Americans, the general propaganda themes that German aggression alone was responsible for the war and that the Allies were fighting in defense of civilization against ruthless militaristic and authoritarian opponents were far more effective in molding opinion. Allied propaganda also benefited enormously from the obvious fact that Germany had violated Belgian neutrality and that the war in the west was being fought against German invaders on Allied soil. Germany also experimented with new forms of warfare, which probably were not essentially more inhuman than the usual practices but which aroused widespread shock and condemnation: dirigible bombardment of cities, poison gas bar-rages, and submerged submarine attacks against enemy merchant and passenger vessels. These novel weapons, unsanctioned by past usage, made it far easier to portray Germany's masters as brutal and utterly ruthless.

It is difficult to measure accurately the effects of belligerent propaganda in America. Writers in the 1930's tended to exaggerate the impact of Allied propaganda and to attribute the subsequent involvement of the United States in the war to its success. Atrocity stories and ideological appeals presumably explained how neutral America was pulled into the great struggle. Later historians have found that explanation too simple and largely unsubstantiated. Propaganda was extensive, and probably had some effect in strengthening the pro-Ally sentiments held by most Americans — to that extent America was more prone to accept Allied control of the seas while objecting to the German submarine challenge. British propaganda thus scored some success in persuading Americans to accept the Allied blockade and in strengthening wartime economic bonds. Yet it was partially offset by German propaganda efforts, at least until late in the neutrality period. Furthermore, most Americans appear to have formed their basic attitudes toward the war before extensive propaganda could be launched by either belligerent. And finally, although most Americans were at least mildly pro-Ally in sentiment, the great majority obviously believed neutrality was the wisest course and were reluctant to enter the war until early in 1917.

II

The European war also gave a severe shock to the American economy. A recession had been underway prior to August 1914, and the outbreak of hostilities at first caused a further deterioration. International exchanges were disrupted, stock market prices tumbled, the cotton market nearly collapsed with the threatened loss of the German and Austrian market, and many European investors liquidated their American holdings. Thousands of frantic citizens were stranded in Europe, temporarily bereft of credit and with their relatives in America bombarding officials with inquiries as to their safety. American export trade with Europe, in large part dependent on British and other foreign shipping, was adversely affected. The Wilson administration reacted with speed to cushion the impact of war, adopting measures ranging from the issuance of special credits to citizens stranded in Europe to use of emergency currency at home.

Within a short time the economy began to adjust to the war and under the impetus of Allied war purchases recovered from the recession and began an upward spiral of prosperity. War orders flooded in for foodstuffs, raw materials, and munitions. American production of iron, steel, copper, oil, meat, wheat, and other materials was vastly increased and the value of exports to Europe steadily mounted. Despite the virtual loss of the German market and Allied controls over European neutral imports, American exports to Europe rose from an excess over imports of 500 million dollars in 1914 to three and a half billion in 1917. Trade with the Allies increased 184 per cent over peacetime. A virtually new munitions industry was created by Allied purchases, and by 1917 America had exported over one billion dollars' worth of explosives and arms to Europe.

In view of these facts, it was not surprising that many citizens and scholars in the 1930's, disillusioned by the war and affected by the sensational Nye Committee investigation of the munitions industry, concluded that the country had been pulled into World War I by the golden chain of economic forces. It was alleged that the one-sided American war trade with the Allies

and the vast loans of money had made the United States a silent member of the Allied camp. Involvement in the war had been the inevitable result, since an enraged Germany had been driven to ruthless U-boat warfare in order to halt the burgeoning flow of war supplies to its enemies. Some also suggested that the United States had entered the fray as an active belligerent in order to prevent an Allied defeat and the consequent loss of American loans. Little evidence exists to substantiate these interpretations. Although the Wilson administration was seriously concerned with the health of the American economy and defended the war trade as legitimate, it never contemplated hostilities to ensure continued prosperity or to protect the American stake in the Allies. Most citizens and high officials in the government were confident throughout the neutrality period that the Allied powers would eventually triumph over Germany. In any case, the majority of the loans to the Allies were amply secured by pledged collateral, regardless of the outcome of the war. And as for Germany's adoption of unrestricted submarine warfare, the evidence reveals conclusively that the motive was not merely to sever the war trade between America and England but was to cut off all trade with the British Isles and to starve that nation into submission.

