

For America “The War to End War” Was Just the Beginning

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THE MOST ENDURING LEGACY OF World War I for the United States has been the emergence of a unique set of internationalist principles, which has allowed the country to elevate itself to a self-defined pedestal of righteous virtue justifying the pursuit of its foreign policies. To this day, such supposedly righteous pursuits have pervaded U.S. foreign policy regardless of party loyalty or other circumstance. These pursuits were developed early in the American experience and were deliberate guides to policy. In advancing these ideals, President Woodrow Wilson was certainly a revolutionary to the European statesmen of his time. However, he was only reiterating a sense of political virtue that underlaid the American Revolution: a tradition that came to be known as American exceptionalism and is used to justify and explain the country's unique role in the world.

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American exceptionalism was founded upon moral and individualistic principles whose development was facilitated by two oceans and a vast continent that permitted the country to grow and flourish without natural enemies on its borders. In the nineteenth century, “manifest destiny” urged the United States to expand its frontiers; meanwhile, belief in exceptionalism assured Americans that their expansion was of providential design. At the same time, the isolationist tradition kept the country from intervening in European politics.

That changed in 1917, when the United States brought its system of political values to the global forefront, but found that it was shared by no other country, and was in fact greeted with hostility as an uninvited guest. Alone

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among the victors, Wilson nevertheless insisted on spreading American principles since he felt that a peaceful world was a democratic world. Thus began the democratic peace theory of international relations, which would become even more popular in political and scholastic circles later in the twentieth century. Nations and individuals were to be held to similar ethical standards of conduct and Wilson believed that the United States had a destiny to establish a global code of conduct. Inherent to this concept were supportive strains of democratic, representative government: open diplomacy rather than secret alliances, self-determination between the government and the people, collective rather than national defense mechanisms, and the ingrained belief that the United States would lead the way toward such a new world order.

These beliefs persist to this day—through world war, cold war, and today's War on Terror. They highlight the U.S. insistence on abstracting the aims of war: democracy, to end war, four freedoms, nation-building, collective security, a struggle against terror, kings, kaisers, and dictatorships wherever they exist. These beliefs and their pervasive terminology first surfaced in World War I, and there is no end in sight.

Wilson's internationalist views were inscribed both within his own orthodox Christian personality, as well as in the philosophy of the American founding. In part, they were best expressed as early as 1780, in Thomas Jefferson's call for the United States to establish an "Empire of Liberty" for all democratic nations, "thereby converting dangerous enemies into valuable friends."¹ Wilson echoed identical views even before the United States entered the war. On 27 May 1916, he told an audience at the Willard Hotel that the global purpose of the United States was rightfully "to become a partner in any feasible association of nations formed in order to realize these objects [a democratic peace] and make them safe against violation." According to an account by Professor Walter McDougall, "the room erupted. Wilson beamed, and the Progressive press likened the speech to the Declaration of Independence and Gettysburg Address." Thus, Wilsonianism was born, having been conceived within the depths of the American Revolution. McDougall describes this moment as the beginning of the crusader—as opposed to isolationist—stage of U.S. diplomacy, giving the country a global purpose to create a world order based exactly upon those values.²

When he addressed his war message to Congress on 2 April 1917, Wilson made it clear that through his convictions—grounded in the ideals of the American founding—these virtues would triumph. The conclusion of his historic address, while somewhat lengthy, deserves full attention for its illustration of the key tenets behind his convictions and the depths of this uniquely American

approach to the world. Noting that “civilization [was] in the balance,” he told Congress and the nation:

But the right is more precious than peace, and we shall fight for the things which we have always carried nearest our hearts—for democracy, for the right of those who submit to authority to have a voice in their own governments, for the rights and liberties of small nations, for a universal dominion of right by such a concert of free peoples as should bring peace and safety to all nations and make the world itself free. To such a task we can dedicate our lives and our fortunes, everything that we are and everything that we have, with the pride of those who know that the day has come when America is privileged to spend her blood and her might for the principles that gave her birth and happiness and the peace which she has treasured. God helping her, she can do no other.³

In short, a Wilsonian world recognized none of the forces guiding the European powers that waged World War I: no lasting rivalries, no major conflicts of interest, no compromises of principle, no secrecy, no balance of power, no spheres of influence, no monarchies, no geopolitical needs, no colonies, and no wars but for collective and universal purposes. In other words, Wilson proposed a world that had never existed before.

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Such idealism continues into modern times. President George H.W. Bush promised a “new world order” in his 1990 speech prior to Desert Storm, echoing sentiments expressed centuries earlier: “We have a vision of a new partnership of nations that transcends the Cold War....A partnership whose goals are to increase democracy, increase prosperity, increase the peace and reduce arms.”⁴ His Democratic successor, Bill Clinton, was equally emphatic about America’s global mission: “our overriding purpose must be to expand and strengthen the world’s community of market-based democracies...that cooperate with each other and live in peace.”⁵

Wilson’s expressions of the United States’ role in international affairs raised the American purpose in both war and diplomacy to a point where Wilsonianism, as Dr. Henry Kissinger has noted, “has survived while history has bypassed the reservations of his contemporaries...It is above all to the drumbeat of Wilsonian idealism that American foreign policy has marched since his watershed presidency, and continues to march to this day.”⁶

POLITICAL IMPACT

On the eve of World War I, the British Foreign Secretary, Edward Grey, stated,

“the lamps are going out all over Europe, we shall not see them lit again in our lifetime.”⁷ In one of the great prophetic statements of the modern world, Grey predicted the eventual eclipse of Europe as the primary power in world politics. Grey’s comment would not fulfill itself until long after his death in 1933. However, Grey was essentially right. The most enduring result of the war for world politics was the eventual decline of Europe and the ascension of the United States. This would not occur until after World War II, at which point Grey’s prediction fulfilled itself far beyond the extent that he had foreseen.

Thus, it is more appropriate to assess the effects of Wilsonianism on the second rather than the first half of the twentieth century, since Wilson’s set of ideas laid largely dormant under isolationism until World War II and its aftermath. By and large, the United States’ role in the Great War was dismissed by contemporaries of the time, both by the victors and losers in Europe and the United States.

Since 1945, the U.S. worldview has taken hold over the world with the force of a political tsunami and has dominated U.S. policies as well as the global political system. It contains something of Franklin D. Roosevelt’s “Four Freedoms” from World War II, the creation of the United Nations itself, the global revolution against world colonialism, and the creation of the North Atlantic Alliance. Most Inaugural Addresses regarding foreign policy reflected this set of beliefs: Harry Truman’s call for “equal justice under law and equal opportunity to share in the common good;” President Eisenhower’s Inaugural Address declaration that the Cold War involved “freedom...pitted against slavery, lightness against the dark;” and John F. Kennedy’s unforgettable Inaugural call to “pay any price [and to] bear any burden...to assure the survival and success of liberty.”⁸

All recent U.S. presidents have employed similar rhetoric, especially President Reagan, who told the British Parliament that “the march of freedom and democracy...will leave Marxism-Leninism on the ash heap of history as it has

left other tyrannies which stifle the freedom and self-expression of the people.”⁹

President George W. Bush, waging the War on Terror, invoked the same sentiments when he declared in 2005: “The

survival of liberty in our land increasingly depends on the success of liberty in other lands.”¹⁰ President Barack Obama, previously an anti-war critic, defended the war in Iraq in 2011 since, “now we cannot hesitate to stand squarely on the side of those who are reaching for their rights, knowing that their success will bring about a world that is more peaceful, more stable.”¹¹

The power of Wilsonian ideology, planted in 1917, marches on in both policies and rhetoric.

STRATEGIC IMPACT

What President Dwight D. Eisenhower called the military-industrial complex in 1961 traces its origins to the skeletal American force of 1914. The buildup of the strongest army in the modern world started with World War I. With absolutely no experience in dispatching millions of men to fight overseas, the United States military establishment was small and inexperienced compared to the mammoth forces on the European front.

Yet ironically, the United States’ contribution to the war effort involved almost no weaponry. Rather, it was based solely on money and manpower. Aside from the eventual growth of the U.S. military and weapons industries, an equally important legacy from the war for today’s U.S. military was the use of financial aid to help the western bloc—a new phenomenon in international politics. By the time the United States entered the war in 1917, U.S. financial and productive contributions to the Allied cause kept Britain afloat. By 1916, U.S. loans to the Allies totaled over three billion dollars, while aid to Germany was kept to almost nothing by the British naval blockade. Later in the century, with the Marshall Plan in 1947 and the formation of the Agency for International Development in 1951, this same monetary base would be used to finance dozens of U.S. allies—including Israel, Egypt, and much of Latin America—as well as African and Asian areas such as Korea and Vietnam during the Cold War struggle against the Soviet Union. Although this struggle is long past, the use of modern-day American “dollar diplomacy” continues worldwide as a critical economic and strategic weapon against global terrorism.

Not only did World War I lead to the development of monetary and industrial aid to allies, it also molded U.S. and global warfare into the beginnings of what it is today. The American way of war that won both world wars would soon come to dominate the remainder of the century. It would eventually transform the United States into the only country with a truly global reach, able to fight foreign wars on multiple geopolitical fronts.

As expressed by U.S. Army strategist, Colonel W. K. Naylor in 1922, the United States’ aim in general warfare is total and full to the last man: “warfare means fighting, and war is never won by maneuvering....History shows that the surest way to take the fighting spirit out of a country is to defeat its main army.”¹²

This strategic mindset—based upon U.S. power and productivity—would

dominate the remainder of the century and lead to the Cold War—era doctrine of “Massive Retaliation” based upon the existence of over 35,000 nuclear warheads and thousands of missile and bomber delivery systems. However, these were never used. More importantly, the legacy of conventional war doctrines left by World War I was found to be of little success later when the country was involved with insurgencies in countries such as Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan. This legacy was stubbornly employed in these wars but served only to distract U.S. combat from classic—and largely European—doctrines of counterinsurgency that the United States would eventually employ only after much time, lives, and material had been wasted.

In the insurgencies since 1945, the United States found that the combination of Wilsonian political doctrines used to democratize the world and conventional war doctrines used to eliminate opposition were of little utility in ferreting out guerrillas hiding in dense swamps, remote mountains, or urban back alleys. Major General Robert H. Scales (USA, Ret.) caught this contradiction during the early part of the occupation of Iraq:

During the opening battles of World War I, the Germans taught the British a lesson in blood: in war the intellectually gifted will win over practiced dullards every time. Just as the British failed to understand how to transition from small to large-scale combat, perhaps we are facing a similar intellectual challenge transitioning from large to small wars.¹³

This contradiction continues to haunt U.S. policies into 2014 against global terrorists including, most recently, the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

COLD WAR

Though for different reasons, the United States and the USSR lacked appreciation for both the causes leading to and the conditions of World War I. Both countries refused to sign the Treaty of Versailles, preferring separate treaties with Germany, and neither joined the League of Nations at the outset. The United States never joined, while the Soviet Union finally joined in 1934. Instead of acting as territorial states in the geopolitical tradition of the European state system, they behaved as continents unto themselves and each expressed definitive worldviews that saw the future struggle for the globe from diametrically opposed systems. One posited the virtues of democratic capitalism, the other opted for Vladimir Lenin’s communist perspective. Hatched in lasting enmity, these two opposing worldviews would incite a global struggle for the remainder

of the twentieth century that has yet to be fully resolved.

The United States government officially came to recognize the Soviet Union under the presidency of Franklin D. Roosevelt in December 1933. The 16-year hiatus since 1917 reflected the deep suspicion with which the United States had come to view Bolshevism, which eventually grew into the deep suspicion of communism, Marxism, and socialism that has persisted in the U.S. political arena into the twenty-first century. Although we often associate the beginning of the Cold War with the end of World War II, it was actually conceived during World War I and officially burst on the scene in 1945, before World War II was even over.

Indeed, the recent clash of interests over Russian behavior in Ukraine exposes the ongoing nature of this rivalry, a holdover from both World War I itself and the Cold War. Political scientist John Mearsheimer has recently reminded us that the deep and divisive world views stemming from World War I still determine the clash of interests:

Elites in the United States and Europe have been blindsided by events only because they subscribe to a flawed view of international politics. They tend to believe that the logic of realism holds little relevance in the twenty-first century and that Europe can be kept whole and free on the basis of such liberal principles as the rule of law, economic interdependence, and democracy.¹⁴

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Before World War I was over, the two systems had found themselves locked in actual combat as the United States and the allied coalition of 1918 to 1920 attempted to strangle Bolshevism in its cradle. The result was a fiasco, but it marked the beginning of hostilities that would break into a truly global and titanic conflict once the common struggle against Germany ended in 1945.

The U.S.–Soviet antagonism came to dominate the twentieth century. Like World War II, the Cold War was a truly global contest. It expanded into all corners of the globe, including wars in Korea and Vietnam, missiles in Cuba, tensions in Berlin, hostility at the United Nations, and competition for global areas of influence, most noticeably in the Middle East and Africa. Over the next half-century, Wilsonian ideals framed the contest as an ideological one between freedom and tyranny, with no room in between and demanding absolute defeat. Nowhere was this belief more evident than the debate on U.S. adherence to the North Atlantic Treaty in 1949. Administration witnesses before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee were instructed to define NATO in purely American terms, to the point of denying that it was even an alliance at all. This definition reflects Wilson's original point that only collective security and global, rather

than selective organizations can keep the peace:

THE CHAIRMAN (Senator Thomas Connally): Now, Mr. Secretary, you brought out rather clearly...that this treaty is not aimed at any nation particularly. It is aimed only at any nation or country that contemplates or undertakes armed aggression against the members of the signatory powers. Is that true?

SECRETARY ACHESON: That is correct, Senator Connally. It is not aimed at any country; it is aimed solely at armed aggression.¹⁵

Such rhetorical advice, however removed from reality, was classically drawn from the Wilsonian playbook—as were many of the global realities that came to dominate the Cold War in all arenas of contention.

SOLE REMAINING SUPERPOWER

The title used here has been employed almost universally as a descriptive phrase acknowledging the position of the United States as the only great power on Earth to grow and increase its position and strength since the end of World War I. The term “superpower” implies a combination of military, political, economic, and cultural influence on a sustained and worldwide basis. Alternatively, it implies the ability to absorb regional setbacks, such as Vietnam, without an appreciable change in the global hierarchy. The dominant nature of Wilsonianism and the use of Wilsonian principles have not ended in the twenty-first century and seem unlikely to end in the foreseeable future.

The ideas that supported the United States’ Cold War victory over the Soviet Union in 1991 essentially matched Wilson’s ideas and still continue as a natural byproduct of U.S. political culture. The same holds true for the War on Terror. Traces of World War I can be found prominently here as well, as it seems that the political value system and its expressions offer a definition of reality by itself that has guided the modern U.S. worldview from the inception.

Practically every issue involving former colonial regions has a direct link to World War I. While U.S. involvement came much later, the legacy of post-colonialism and the mantle picked up by the United States thrust U.S. interests into those regions once ruled by European powers. To take only one example, Ho Chi Minh himself had observer status at the 1919 Paris Peace Conference and began his war against the French occupation of Vietnam almost immediately thereafter. Ho admired the Wilsonian approach to self-determination and modeled his perceptions of Vietnamese freedom upon this. His “Declaration”

of Vietnamese independence contained the expression that “all men are created equal, the creator has given us inviolable rights, life, liberty and happiness.”¹⁶ Ironically, what originally inspired him was also the motivation for the United States’ intervention into Vietnam years later. Thus, in Vietnam, both sides were fighting for principles that first emerged at the Paris Peace Conference after World War I.

As is well known, the Middle East itself—particularly the Israel–Palestine dispute—is a direct product of World War I, both geographically and politically. Israel was originally defined as a territory under British jurisdiction by Foreign

Secretary Arthur Balfour in 1917, before the post–World War II settlement saw the creation of the sovereign state of Israel and the transfer of British responsibility to the United States in 1948. Iraq became a British mandate in 1920 and obtained its independence in 1932. This transfer of sovereignty continues to occupy the American people into the twenty-first century as the United States found itself leading the 13-year Iraqi intervention, which has today reappeared. World War I, it seems, is a war without end.

Since 1980 the United States has intervened militarily—through bombing, invasion, and occupation—in 14 Islamic countries with ambiguous results. The United States has become what McDougall calls a “crusader state,” and that crusade began in 1917.¹⁷

The recent decision to intervene once again in the Middle East in the newly declared war against the ISIS also finds its roots in WWI. Since WWI, there has been continuity in the United States’ worldview, similar to the logic of the famous domino theory of the 1950s—also a Wilsonian derivative—that holds that even small retreats against an enemy can be catastrophic, since practically every U.S. war is somehow a “world” war. That is why the U.S. intervened in 1917 and how the country has seen almost all of its major conflicts since. The fact that the War on Terror is “global” also finds its roots in WWI. Since the First World War, almost every U.S. intervention or war has been in some form global: the global struggle against communism, the global war against drugs, and now the global war against terror.

The current global War on Terror draws remarkable Great War comparisons. This conflict is already long, and has been promised to last even longer by almost all U.S. commentators. The existence of non-state actors such as al-Qaeda and now ISIS makes it nearly opposite any conventional wars fought in U.S. history.

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This, of course, helps explain its longevity.

But the political parallels are compelling. Both the First World War and the War on Terror are idealistic wars waged for or against ideological enemies, one for democracy and the other against terror. In this respect, both conflicts can be considered open-ended insofar as they are defined as global rather than territorial in scope and, by the same token, become wars without end. Wars against abstractions are difficult to define or end; there can be no peace treaty with either democracy or terrorism. Ideological or Wilsonian wars involve unclear and protracted tactical and strategic offensives with equally vague definitions of either victory or defeat. Regardless of circumstances, ideological wars, being crusades, do not end.

Both conflicts witnessed the persecution, or at least suspicion, of entire demographics, whether it is the Germanic “Huns” of World War I or the Muslims of the current era. They also witnessed the passage of legislation that restricted a measure of civil liberties within the body politic: the PATRIOT Act of today and the Espionage and Sedition Acts of 1917 and 1918, respectively. Both involved enrollment of various propaganda outlets to support the ideological war aims of the administration. Today, the political administration has a vast array of media channels to propagate its policies, as does the opposition. But the originator of the modern wartime media was the Committee on Public Information (CPI), a pro-war propaganda unit founded one week after the declaration of war in 1917.

The quotation by Edward Grey on the eve of the war, provided earlier, offers the most succinct and profound interpretation of the lasting meaning of the First World War: the “lamps” were indeed “going out all over Europe.”¹⁸ But Grey’s observation was only half true; the second half, unknown to him, was the replacement of Europe by the United States. Yet that act of replacement remains the most important fact of the twentieth century and continues its momentum into the twenty-first. That is the bottom line of modern history: the end of Europe as the epicenter of world politics and its replacement by the United States. All else are but derivatives of this central event, as all the virtues and vices of the old world have been exchanged for the same from the new.

Whether or for how long this lasts is speculation, but at least one thing is certain: it will last as long as the so-called American “lamps” remain lit. The metaphor refers to both American global influence and its Wilsonian roots. Once they go out or “dim” (to continue Grey’s usage), either from domestic or foreign causes, a new world order will have arrived. But, as in the Europe of 1917, nobody will know it and, when they do, it will be too late. 

NOTES

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18. Grey, *Twenty-Five Years*.

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