

Ten Points for Reflection: The U.S. and World War I

1. Although American deaths in World War I pale in significance to allies, opponents, and a substantial number of U.S. military personnel that died from disease, the 116,516 U.S. soldiers who died make the war the third leading costly war involving loss of American lives in U.S. history. Only the American Civil War (Confederate and Union deaths combined) and World War II rank higher (Department of Defense). American forces were instrumental in turning the tide of the war as Germany and its allies were defeated. However, World War I did not succeed in making the world safe for democracy: Germany and the Western Powers were at war again twenty years later.

2. World War I helped spawn the growth of Fascism and Communism in Europe, which resulted in the deaths of hundreds of millions of people. In contrast to the former destructive belief systems, Wilson's liberal internationalism committed future U.S. presidents in words and sometimes actions to global promotion of democracy, capitalism, and freedom. This U.S. stance has been evidentially liberating for a massive amount of people globally but has caused unintended domestic and foreign negative consequences as well.

3. World War I was the first conflict where a president orchestrated a massive national government propaganda campaign using mass media, such as more effective print technology and movies previously unavailable. Wilson created the Federal Committee on Public Information that recruited 75,000 speakers ("Four Minute Men") to give short war aims talks in theater intermissions and other similar events, and printed 100 million pamphlets in several languages, as well as promoted movies supporting the war.

4. Once the U.S. was in the war, the event created some government-initiated, and private discrimination against German-Americans, then and now, the largest ethnic group in the U.S.* "Hamburger" was replaced by "liberty sandwich" and sauerkraut was replaced by "liberty cabbage." Public schools in German-American-dominated cities like St. Louis, Missouri, had to stop using German as their primary language, and many German-American families changed their names from German to English.

5. World War I was by far the most expensive conflict in American history at the time. World War I cost the federal government ten times more than the Civil War. Americans, because of World War I, faced much higher federal taxes than any time since the Internal Revenue was created during the Civil War.

6. Although both because of the relatively short time the U.S. was in the war, and strong cultural pro-freedom attitudes, the federal government cajoled and persuaded citizens, rather than commanded them, to make economic sacrifices and mobilize for various war efforts. Federal Food Commissioner Herbert Hoover exhorted housewives to be patriotic and observe "Meatless Mondays" and "Wheatless Wednesdays," and Secretary of the Treasury William McAdoo sponsored

massive rallies to promote the purchase of war bonds. Nevertheless, the Wilson administration took over the railroads in late 1917 so precedents were set regarding central government control of the economy that would be expanded during World War II.

7. The federal government initially had relatively low numbers of volunteers for World War I. The Selective Service Act of May 18, 1917, enabled the size of the American army to increase from 200,000 in May 1917 to nearly four million by war's end in 1918. About two million Americans served overseas.

8. Government also, through the 1917 Espionage Act and the 1918 Sedition Act, was able to prosecute pacifists, left-wing political groups, and unions that opposed the war.

9. World War I planted the seeds for improvement in the lives of women and African-Americans in that industrial jobs opened to these groups because of a shortage of manpower due to the war. Although these gains were short-lived when returning soldiers reclaimed jobs, the precedent was set for future social change.

10. New technology often emerges as a result of war. In addition to new military technology such as the tank, examples of World War I technology that now have widespread use include the zipper, the wristwatch, radio communications technology, daylight saving time, stainless steel, sun lamps, and tea bags.

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