Embracing the Confusion: The United States and the Road to War, 1914-1917

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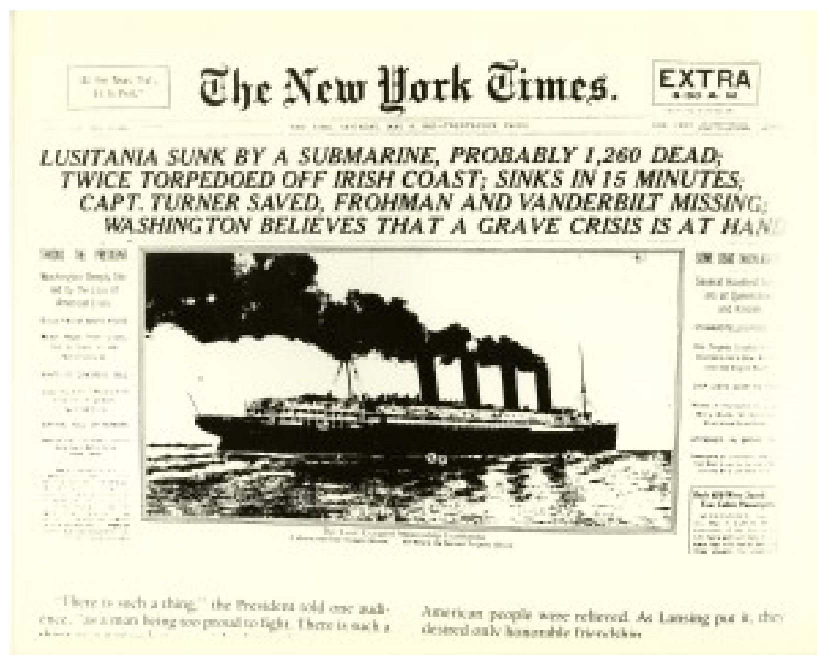

The New York Times. EXTRA

LUSITANIA SUNK BY A SUBMARINE, PROBABLY 1,260 DEAD;
TWICE TORPEDOED OFF IRISH COAST; SINKS IN 15 MINUTES;
CAPT. TURNER SAVED, FROHMAN AND VANDERBILT MISSING;
WASHINGTON BELIEVES THAT A GRAVE CRISIS IS AT HAN

"There is such a thing," the President told one audience, "as a man being too proud to fight. There is such a

American people were relieved. As Lansing put it, they desired only honorable friendship

This article is based on Neiberg's address to our History Institute for Teachers on America's Entry into WWI, hosted and cosponsored by the First Division Museum at Cantigny on April 9-10, 2016.

In early 1915, lyricist Alfred Bryan and composer Al Piantadosi scored a hit with "I Didn't Raise My Boy to Be a Soldier." It contained lyrics like "I didn't raise my boy to be a soldier, I brought him up to be my pride and joy. Who dares to place a musket on his shoulder, To shoot some other mother's darling boy?" The song had a mixed reception in the United States. Its sales of over 650,000 copies suggested that it had tapped into some kind of isolationist or pacifist nerve in the country. On the other hand, former president Theodore Roosevelt turned criticizing the song into an almost personal crusade. Anyone who would like such a song, Roosevelt thundered, would also like a song called "I Didn't Raise My Girl to be a Mother."

The song was popular and controversial, but its popularity proved to be short-lived. The reason had less to with the song itself than with intervening events like the German sinking of the *Lusitania*. By the end of the year even Bryan was saying that he had not meant the song as a statement of pacifism nor had he meant it to be in any way critical of American efforts to prepare its own armed forces for the possibility of war with Germany. He had, he insisted, meant

the song as a critique of unjust wars like the one the Germans were then waging in Belgium, Poland, and on the high seas.

Two years later, America's greatest living songwriter, George M. Cohan, wrote the stirring "Over There" upon hearing that his nation was at war. The song's sentiments were as far from those of Bryan and Piantadosi as could be with lyrics calling for the United States not to recall its soldiers until "it's over, over there." The song quickly became the most popular song in American history. Cohan sang a popular version, as did Jewish, Italian, and Irish singers, symbolic of the wide support that American belligerence had among various and diverse sectors of American society.

What had happened between the release of "I Didn't Raise My Boy to be a Soldier" in 1915 and that of "Over There" in 1917? What can we learn from America's transition from the spirit of one song to the other? First and foremost, of course, we can learn (and teach to our students) that there was no homogenous "prewar" or "neutrality" period. The moods of the American people ebbed and flowed as international and domestic issues alike changed their relationship to the World War raging in Europe. By the time Cohan put pen to paper in April 1917 the American people were ready to enter the war with determination if not always with as much enthusiasm as the propaganda posters of the age might suggest.

The first theme to highlight is the high level of sympathy and support that the American people felt for the British and French from the start. So-called "native born" or "old stock" Americans, most of them Protestant, felt this pull the most in the war's first few months, although even they did not advocate American entry into the war in 1914 or 1915. These self-styled "native" Americans saw France and Britain as democracies fighting a justified war of self-defense against a militarist and aggressive Germany. As early as the war's first few weeks, they urged Americans to give their time and their money to the Allied cause in order that the Germans not stamp out democracy as it existed in the two states that had bequeathed it to the world, and, of course, to the United States. Such Americans generally turned a blind eye to the undemocratic nature of the European empires in Asia and Africa. Belgium provides an ideal case study of this process at work. Before 1914, Belgium had come in for heavy criticism in America and in Europe for the particularly brutal way in which it had exploited its colony in the Congo. After August 1914, Belgium quickly came to symbolize innocence and sacrifice in the face of unwarranted aggression.

Americans tended to see the German people themselves as victims of their own retrograde and undemocratic government. To most Americans, the "good" Germany of Beethoven and Goethe, the Germany of modern science, medicine, and educational advancement, had been strangled since 1871 by the backward and autocratic Prussian elite. The war, therefore, was not of, by, or for the German people, but a product of an undemocratic and militaristic elite trying to extend its power by ruthless conquest. Even if the British and the French were themselves flawed, in the case of this war, they stood for the same values American stood for, namely democracy, freedom, and stability.

These views mattered because Americans came to see the German government, not the German people, as their enemies. In this they differed greatly from the attitudes of the French and the British. Echoes of such beliefs appear in Woodrow Wilson's declaration of war speech in April 1917, and they deeply influenced the way Americans understood both their wartime goals and their visions for the postwar peace. Only an American head of state could have spoken about a peace without victory. In this belief as in so much else in his rhetoric, Wilson was following ideas common among the American people, not blazing any new ideological trail.

Germany's atrocious behavior in Belgium and northern France added to these sentiments. We should be very careful about depicting Americans as naïve dupes of British propaganda. Americans knew that much of the news they read came from the British, and many of them clearly suspected the British of coloring or distorting that news. But Americans could also read news from American reporters in France, many of them trusted household names. They included Mary Roberts Rinehart, then a popular writer of mystery novels, and William Harding Davis, a veteran war correspondent who had covered both the Spanish-American and Russo-Japanese Wars. They and many others reported first-hand on atrocities like the German burning of the Belgian university town of Louvain and the German

artillery's targeting of the French cathedral at Rheims. American reporters told their readers to focus their anger on these tragedies, not the ones coming out of the British media, because Americans could not verify most of the latter. Louvain and Rheims, however, American reporters saw with their own eyes.

Americans put money and even their bodies where their hearts were. They volunteered in the tens of thousands to help the Allies. Despite their president's call to remain neutral and despite occasional threats from the State Department about the possible loss of their citizenship, Americans rushed to France as soldiers, nurses, and doctors. They came from all classes and from all corners of the country. One study estimates that as many as 80,000 Americans may have volunteered for service in the Canadian Army. The volunteers included famous people like the poet Alan Seeger, the philanthropist Anne Morgan, and the rich scions who formed an all-American squadron in the French Air Service called the Lafayette Escadrille. Hundreds of thousands more Americans gave their money and their time to local community events to help victims of aggression in Belgium, France, Serbia, and Armenia.

Americans thus voted with their feet and with their wallets. No movement even remotely equivalent to this outpouring of assistance happened in support of the Central Powers. German and Austrian nationals often returned to Europe to fight in their native country's army, but virtually no American citizens followed their lead. Even when the Germans returned home, however, they angered Americans. In order to help the reservists get home, German agents purchased passports from American citizens and gave them to the reservists. By carrying American passports, the German reservists were immune from capture by the British even if they traveled through London. Once American newspapers began to report on the scheme, a small diplomatic crisis ensued, although the Wilson Administration claimed it could not definitively connect the scheme to the German government itself. The State Department did, however, begin to require photographs in passports for the first time in order to make the job of the German agents harder (German agents then began to buy birth certificates with which they hoped to obtain genuine, if fraudulent, passports). All of these incidents, plus a series of German sabotage schemes in American ports and factories, put American opinion firmly on the side of the Allies.

Members of American immigrant communities may have had greater doubts about supporting the Allies in 1914, but they, too, soon moved toward a pro-Allied position. This transition is remarkable, given the anti-Russian position of most American Jews and the deep suspicions of the British among many members of the German and Irish-American communities. We have for too long simplistically assumed that growing support for a pro-Allied position in these communities was a product of top-down pressure from government officials, but a deeper look reveals much more complex patterns at work.

Space forbids going into great detail about each community, but we can draw a few general conclusions common to most, if not all, Americans.[1] First, Americans from immigrant communities were as appalled as any other Americans by German behavior. Jewish-Americans came to see in the wartime anti-Semitism of Germany and Austria-Hungary a future that looked no better for Eastern Europe's Jews than life under Russia had been. The influx of rural Jewish refugees to German and Austrian cities had triggered a wave of anti-Semitism, and German armies had devastated Jewish communities in Eastern Europe. Similarly, Germany's ham-fisted support of the rebels of the Easter Rising in Dublin in 1916 proved to most Irish-Americans that however much they distrusted the English, the Germans were surely no better option.

Second, immigrant groups were all proud by 1917 of their assimilation and acculturation into American society. Irish and Jewish Americans were becoming governors, Supreme Court justices, and prominent entertainers. German-born Americans alternately praised and bemoaned how un-German their children and grandchildren born in the United States had become. The younger generations showed no interest in going back to Germany, spoke little of the native tongue, and held scant sympathy for the German government's explanations of its wartime actions. Many of their parents spoke of Germany as their mother and the United States as their wife. They may have been influenced by the former, but they had chosen to make their lives with the latter. In short, German-Americans (and especially their American-born children) saw no contradiction at all between their "ethnic" identity and their "American" one. For Italian-Americans the case was perfectly clear cut after Italy joined the war on the side of the

Allies in May 1915.

Finally, by 1917 immigrant groups came to see much they could support in Woodrow Wilson's ideology of national self-determination. If implemented as written, national self-determination might mean independence or Home Rule for Ireland, a homeland for Eastern European Jews, territorial gains for Italy, and protection for German lands from acquisitive enemies hoping to carve Germany up after the war. But for these postwar outcomes to happen, the Allies had to win the war and the United States had to play a dominant role in the victory. Thus between 1914 and 1917 the United States and the world had changed enough to bring the goals of Americans across the political and ethnic spectrum into a reasonable alignment, even if hard-core nativists still worried about the loyalty of immigrants or tried to score political points by exaggerating the minimal threat they actually posed.

The Germans did themselves few favors by creating a common threat around which all Americans could mobilize. Few Americans wanted to go to war in response to the deaths of 128 Americans on board the *Lusitania* in May 1915, and some looked (at least for a few weeks) with favor on arguments that the Germans had warned passengers not to travel in waters their submarines were patrolling. But virtually all Americans were furious with the Germans not only for sinking the ship, but for then celebrating it with medals and ceremonies. Many Americans even observed that because the German people had offered no criticism of their government, then perhaps the American division of the decent German people from their wicked government had been mistaken.

The furor over the *Lusitania* did eventually ebb, but other incidents soon followed. A series of suspicious fires (soon traced to a German network operating in New Jersey) occurred in trans-Atlantic shipping, German agents tried to dynamite railroad bridges connecting the United States to Canada, and sabotage occurred in a number of key American munitions plants. Only Germany benefited from these incidents. In July 1915 a deranged German student named Eric Muenter set off a bomb in the Capitol building then went to Long Island were he shot financier J. P. Morgan (Morgan survived). All of these incidents, and many others, heightened tensions in the United States and all pointed to Germany, even if the Wilson Administration claimed that it could not definitively prove that the German government itself was directly involved. It did, however, declare two German attachés *personae non gratae* and ordered them sent home. One was Franz von Papen, who went on even greater dubious fame 16 years later when he helped Hitler to power.

The following year brought even greater tensions. In July a massive explosion tore through the Black Tom munitions depot in Jersey City, New Jersey. Black Tom linked the munitions plants of the Midwest and Pennsylvania with the ships transporting weapons and ammunition to Great Britain and France. Investigators had no doubt that the blast had been intentionally set, and they knew that only the Germans benefitted. The docks were too badly damaged, however, to allow for the collection and analysis of definitive forensic evidence until after the war. Germany admitted its guilt in the 1930s and in 1953 agreed to pay $50 million in damages. The final payment was made in 1979, helping to repair the Statue of Liberty's right arm, closed to tourists since the blast had damaged it. Black Tom is today part of Liberty State Park in Jersey City.

America's problems in Mexico also seemed to be linked to Germany. Mexican strongman Pancho Villa, who raided Columbus, New Mexico in March 1916, bragged that the German government was supporting him with money and weapons. Americans, including most members of Wilson's own cabinet, believed the claims and saw Germany as trying to build a tight ring around the United States. The Wilson Administration even took the proactive step of buying the Danish West Indies (today the United States Virgin Islands) from Denmark in 1916 to keep their ports out of German hands. Former Secretary of State William Jennings Bryan floated a scheme to buy strategic parts of Canada from the British to keep them out of German hands in the event that a German battlefield victory in Europe led the British to offer Canada to the Germans as the price of peace.

Conservatives and nationalists criticized Woodrow Wilson for allowing the war to undermine American security, but they had few answers to the difficult questions of neutrality that the war had raised. Thus did the Republicans critique Wilson in the 1916 election campaigns without offering much substance about policy alternatives. Both Wilson and the Republican nominee Charles Evans Hughes spoke of keeping the United States out of the war as

long as neutrality was consistent with American interests and honor. Both knew that America did not fully control its own fate. As Wilson told his secretary of the navy, any German lieutenant could drag the United States into the war through “some calculated outrage.” On the campaign trail in Cincinnati, Wilson told a crowd that the era of neutrality was coming to end.

Nineteen-seventeen brought still more horrors. In February, the Germans announced a resumption of unrestricted submarine warfare (USW). Coming so soon after Wilson’s last-ditch attempts to start peace talks between the belligerents, Americans read USW as a virtual declaration of war against the United States on the high seas. Just a few weeks later came the Zimmermann Telegram, which offered Mexico the return of all the lands it had lost in 1848 in exchange for declaring war on the United States. It also asked Mexico to approach Japan about joining an anti-American alliance. Both the Mexican and Japanese governments refused Germany’s advances, though the damage to German-American relations was already done.

These threats struck at all Americans regardless of class, ethnicity, or region. They posited a future that Americans found dangerous, with Germany allied to Japan and Mexico and seeking territorial gains in North America. Despite, or perhaps because, of their neutrality they had seen themselves end up in a dangerous and defenseless strategic position. Under such circumstances, few Americans were any longer interested in whistling “I Didn’t Raise My Boy to be a Soldier.” Americans instead looked back on the months of indecision as an opportunity lost to prepare for war. Even Wilson, who still hoped to keep the country out of the war, saw that he had no choice. The war Germany threatened to wage on the United States was, he said, was an extension of the “warfare against mankind” that they had been waging since 1914.

An understanding of the road to war such as the one laid out above changes the grand narrative of American history, especially the narratives surrounding American entry into wars. However wrong it is historically, the common view that the sinking of the *Lusitania* drew America into the war fits the narrative of a country peacefully minding its own business until some foreign entity attacks us with no warning and for no good reason. This pattern fits the sinking of the *Maine* in 1898, Pearl Harbor in 1941, the Gulf of Tonkin incident in 1964, and even the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.

The narratives are not so much wrong as they are terribly incomplete. They dehistoricize the story of America’s wars by starting with the commencement of hostilities. Thus it becomes difficult for students to understand why Japan would attack Pearl Harbor, Al Qaeda would hijack airplanes, or, to use the present example, Germany would sink a civilian liner. It is not, of course, necessary for students to sympathize with any of these actions, but it is important that they can both understand them and place them into a wider historical time stream. In the case of World War I, we as a community of scholars and teachers have done a particularly poor job of helping our students to understand the reasons for American entry.

As a result, the First World War has failed to find its place in the wider understandings of American history. Perhaps the amnesia and ignorance of Americans regarding the First World War is not too surprising, given the complexity of the topic. To borrow a line from Edward R. Murrow about another complex era, "Anyone who isn't confused doesn't really understand the situation." To understand why America entered the war, we need to understand not just the war as it was being fought in Europe, but the nature of assimilation and acculturation in American society as well as the way Americans came to feel threatened by early 1917. Little wonder, then, that students, teachers, and scholars are confused. Perhaps they should be.

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[1] I cover these patterns in much greater detail in my forthcoming, *Path to War: How the First World War Created Modern America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).