**Learning Objective:**

Explain the causes and consequences of U.S. involvement in World War I.

**Thematic Focus:**

*Diplomatic, economic, cultural, and military interactions between empires, nations, and peoples shape the development of America and America’s increasingly important role in the world.*

1. World War I and its aftermath intensified ongoing debates about the nation’s role in the world and how best to achieve national security and pursue American interests.
2. After initial neutrality in World War I, the nation entered the conflict, departing from the U.S. foreign policy tradition of noninvolvement in European affairs, in response to Woodrow Wilson’s call for the defense of humanitarian and democratic principles.
   1. The War in Europe
      1. The war began in 1914 when Germany and Austria-Hungary went to war with Britain, France, and Russia.
   2. American Neutrality
      1. President Wilson sought to distance America from World War I by issuing a proclamation of neutrality. Wilson’s policy of neutrality was consistent with America’s traditional policy of avoiding European entanglements. Wilson was reelected President in 1916 using the slogan, “He kept us out of war.”
      2. President Wilson insisted that all belligerents respect America’s neutral rights on the high seas.
      3. Faced with a stalemate in the trenches across France and a British blockade that was exhausting its ability to continue fighting, Germany launched a campaign of unrestricted submarine warfare in early February 1917. Germany pursued the blockade and submarine warfare to counteract British naval supremacy.
      4. The *Lusitania* and *Sussex*, civilian vessels believed to be carrying supplies, were both sunk by German submarines in 1915. In 1916, Germany made the *Sussex* Pledge, promising not to sink anymore merchant vessels without first trying to save civilian lives.
      5. Germany renewed its policy of unrestricted submarine warfare in 1917.
      6. In late February 1917, the German foreign secretary, Arthur Zimmermann, sent a secret telegram to the German minister in Mexico. Intercepted by British intelligence, the telegram asked Mexico to join a military alliance against the United States. In return, the Germans promised to help Mexico recover territories it had lost following the Mexican War. It is important to remember the Tampico incident and the invasion of Vera Cruz when thinking about the likelihood of Mexico invading the United States. The secret nature of the note showed Americans that the Germans were not trustworthy and would eventually go to war against the U.S.
   3. U.S. Entrance into the War
      1. Few Americans and Wilson administration officials were capable of neutral thoughts and deeds. American traditions as well as economic and cultural ties, coupled with Allied propaganda, pulled most Americans to the pro-Allied position. American exports to Allied Powers went from $750 million to $2.75 billion from 1914-1916 while American exports to Central Powers dropped from $350 million to $2 million during the same time period. The U.S. loaned $2.3 billion to the Allies and only $27 million to Germany from 1914-1917.
      2. Passing Britain as the leading financial power, the U.S. became the arsenal of the Allied war effort.
      3. Wilson accused the Germans of violating freedom of the seas, killing innocent Americans, and interfering with Mexico.
      4. In his war message, Wilson galvanized public opinion by calling on America to launch a noble crusade “to make the world safe for democracy.” He sought to reshape the world according to progressive principles.
3. Although the American Expeditionary Forces played a relatively limited role in combat, the U.S.’s entry helped to tip the balance of the conflict in favor of the Allies.
   1. U.S. Military Mobilization
      1. Thanks to the build-up of the military, particularly the Navy, under Theodore Roosevelt, the U.S. was actually quite prepared for war and very effective in combat.
      2. In November 1915, Woodrow Wilson proposed a major increase in the Army and National Guard.
      3. Despite the enlistment of many volunteers, a draft was necessary. The Selective Service Act was passed in May of 1917. There were more soldiers drafted into service than volunteered.
      4. The U.S. raised revenue by increasing income taxes and excise taxes on the wealthy.
   2. War Boards
      1. Wilson received powers from Congress to direct the economy for the duration of the war. The President exercised authority over railroads, farms, and power plants. The administration even fixed prices.
      2. War boards mobilized the economy. They relied on aroused passion and voluntary compliance rather than law measures.
      3. The War Industries Board (Bernard Baruch) allocated raw materials and organized production.
      4. The War Labor Board mediated labor disputes to prevent stoppages.
      5. The Fuel Administration Board organized the production of coal, gas, and oil.
      6. The Food Administration Board (Herbert Hoover) increased farm output and organized rationing.
   3. Wartime Propaganda
      1. The Committee on Public Information (George Creel) used propaganda to arouse public support for the war and stifle dissent. The CPI was successfully thanks to a system of voluntary censorship of the press.
      2. Americans were persuaded to buy war bonds and believe that Germany was a particularly barbarous nation.
      3. Prohibition was partially passed because of the need for American troops to be sober and because the Germans were portrayed as disgusting beer drinkers by propaganda.
   4. U.S. Soldiers During the War
      1. The soldiers and marines sent to France under the command of Major General John J. Pershing were called the American Expeditionary Force.
      2. African Americans fought in strictly segregated units, usually under the command of White officers.
4. Despite Wilson’s deep involvement in postwar negotiations, the U.S. Senate refused to ratify the Treaty of Versailles or join the League of Nations.
   1. Wilson’s Fourteen Points
      1. The goal of the Woodrow Wilson’s ***Fourteen Points*** was to eliminate the causes of war.
      2. Woodrow Wilson’s peace plan for the world following the First World War included open diplomacy, freedom of the seas, the creation of an international organization to preserve the peace and security of its members, and national self-determination for oppressed minority groups.
      3. The 14 Points did not recognize Allied economic and territorial agreements made during the war.
   2. Treaty of Versailles
      1. In the Treaty of Versailles, the French and English insisted on punishment of Germany. German colonies were made the mandates of the League of Nations, and given in trusteeship to France, Japan, and Britain. The treaty crippled the German economy and ultimately led to the rise of the Nazi Party.
      2. National boundaries were redrawn, creating many new nations.
      3. The League of Nations was created out of a provision of the Treaty of Versailles.
      4. The treaty did not resemble any agreement the United States had made in the past.
   3. American Rejection of the Treaty
      1. Republicans won the majority in Congress in the 1918 elections, so their support was critical in order for the Treaty of Versailles to be ratified.
      2. Senators such as Robert LaFollette were known as reservationists, who were wary about joining the League of Nations. Senators such as Henry Cabot Lodge were known as irreconcilables, who under no circumstances would approve the treaty.
      3. Reservationists wanted a guarantee that America would not go to war to defend a League member without the approval of Congress.
      4. Opponents believed that the League of Nations would lead to further involvement in foreign wars.
      5. Wilson’s opponents used Washington’s Farewell Address to justify their opposition to the League.
      6. Wilson refused to compromise on the issue of America’s unconditional adherence to the charter of the League of Nations. This hardened Senate opposition to the Treaty of Versailles. Senator Henry Cabot Lodge was a skillful opponent of the League. The personal and political rivalry between Wilson and Lodge precluded any chance of a compromise.
      7. Wilson had a stroke in late 1919 that impaired his ability to compromise on the treaty.
      8. The League of Nations failed because it was a weak confederation that did not include all of the major nations, most notably the U.S.