

FROM THE INTRODUCTION

It was April 5, 1917 and characteristically cloudy along almost the full 475-mile line running from the North Sea to the Swiss border. It was a line of brutal devastation, of rows upon rows of fortified trenches, dividing two massive military machines, millions of men in each, which had battled and bloodied each other for almost three years. For almost as long they had been stalemated and deadlocked along that line, known as the Western Front, despite hurtling unprecedented numbers of troops at each other in one massive offensive and counteroffensive after another, suffering unprecedented casualties, counted not in the tens or even hundreds of thousands but in the millions, in futile attempts to break their deadlock.

The following day, that deadlock would start coming undone. On that day, April 6, 1917, the United States entered what was being called The Great War, bringing its extraordinary industrial and manpower resources to the side of Britain and France and against Germany. With that decision, America transformed the conflict into a true world war. More significant, much more consequential, with that decision America transformed the war from a conflict that not only, as historians long have recognized, dropped the curtain on the 19th Century and its optimistic belief in perpetual progress, but simultaneously raised the curtain on a new century, one that was to be cursed by almost nonstop war and tension.

With today's enviable and indulgent perspective of a century's hindsight, it can be said that America's decision to enter the Great War was one of history's rare pivot points. As the few others before it—an English monarch accepting the Magna Carta, Luther nailing his theses to a church door, thirteen British colonies declaring independence and Napoleon carrying the French Revolution across Europe—it too changed history profoundly. The dispatch to Europe of more than two million American doughboys, as they affectionately became known, sharply tilted the balance on the stalemated Western Front and, in effect, won the war against Germany. This allowed Britain and France to impose a punishing peace on the vanquished, thus setting in train events and actions that helped make the 20th Century the West's most destructive as it subsequently suffered the horrors of Nazism, the devastation of yet a second great and even broader war and the often terrifying tensions and at times bloodshed of a Cold War

Without America's 1917 entry into Europe's war, the 20th Century would have been extraordinarily different: No punishing Versailles peace treaty, no humiliation of Germany, no toxic German drive for revenge, no Hitler, no World War Two and likely no Cold War. Entering Europe's war truly was a gigantic and fateful American decision. As it turned out, it was America's greatest blunder of the century...

How and why America's neutrality withered, despite its almost unanimous backing by the American public, and how and why America turned against Germany are the first half of the tale of how America's entering the war transformed the century. This half of the tale is a fabric of many interwoven strands: of skilled British propaganda in America trouncing German propaganda, distorting and even fabricating facts to convince the American public that Germany was America's enemy and that Germans were committing unspeakable atrocities and behaving as barbaric Huns; of growing American banking, manufacturing and farming dependence on sales to Britain and France, with the simultaneously growing fear that a British or French defeat or even setback would destroy profits and plunge America into deep recession; of a Wilson policy that putatively prohibited all American loans to every belligerent but in fact opened a spigot of dollars to the Allies (as Britain, France and their allies were known) while completely shutting out Germany; of actions that selectively defended America's freedom of the seas, protesting strongly and issuing ultimatums against German submarine attacks on shipments of goods to Britain and France while looking the other way

when Britain's massive naval blockade prevented American ships from, as custom and law entitled them, reaching German ports.

The second half of the tale relates how America changed the dynamics on Europe's battlefield. By entering the Great War, America dramatically shifted the balance of forces against Germany, ultimately ending the stalemate on the war's Western Front. This half of the tale begins even before the troops arrived in Europe. The mere prospect of America, with its seemingly bottomless reservoir of manpower, mobilizing an army of millions—named the American Expeditionary Force or AEF—instantly cast its shadow on the European battlefield. Indeed, many historians argue convincingly that the certainty that vast numbers of Yanks were coming immediately influenced the combatants' military plans and strategies. And then, when the doughboys started arriving by the shipload, then began training in camps in France and then began going onto the line, they made not only a difference. They made the key difference.

It wasn't just a matter of their bravery, though by every account they (as had the British, French, German and Russian troops for three years) fought bravely, their ranks full of individual heroes; and it wasn't just a matter of superior American tactics or leadership, though both tipped the scales in particular battles (but, in other battles, proved no better than the stale British/French tactics which had been unable to break the deadlock). Rather, the decisive factors—at the battles of Cantigny, Belleau Wood, St. Mihiel, Meuse-Argonne and other places whose names became instantly familiar to those back at home and landmarks in America's military history—were the sheer numbers and enthusiasm brought to the field by the arriving doughboys and their officers. In striking and crucial contrast to the British, French and Germans who then were fielding their third or maybe even fourth generation of recruits, those who repeatedly had been rejected as defective in the war's early years, those who otherwise would have been judged far too young or too old or too infirm to fight and those who now were exhausted and weary, the Yanks and their officers were fresh, eager and represented the best of American youth. Most were, in one way or another, heroic Sergeant Yorks.

When they went to battle, even in those early, troubling encounters with the German Imperial Army when American training, tactics and leadership were found wanting and green, they impressed all with their energy. "Lusty arrogance" was one admiring description of them. Within months, as they gained experience and understanding of the Western Front's unique pock-marked, barbed-wired and trench-encrusted battlefield, that energy and their numbers would make the difference that counted. It broke the stalemate and won the war—a judgment that may spark finger-wagging from offended British and French, but which a century's perspective can make with great confidence.

By ending the stalemate, the U.S. guaranteed not only a British/French victory, but a victory that was overwhelming in its devastating finality. It guaranteed that there would be no mediated end to the conflict, no negotiated tradeoffs, no compromises, but rather what turned out to be an imposed harsh armistice and an even harsher peace, which even then was seen almost guaranteed to sow seeds of future conflict. It guaranteed that what would result certainly would not be Wilson's long proclaimed American goal—a "peace without victory," a peace with neither victor nor vanquished, "a peace between equals"—but just the opposite.

What emerged from the later Versailles peace conference were triumphant victors on one side and a defeated Germany on the other, brought to its knees and saddled with a huge financial burden and political and psychological humiliation. It meant, not only in hindsight but recognized at that time too, that the infant, fragile democracy just taking root in Germany, by being forced to accept this painful peace, would be wounded severely; in hindsight we know that it was wounded fatally.

Though declaring war on April 6, 1917 was agonizing and obviously painful for Wilson and Congressional leaders, as the following pages describe, they ultimately felt that it was justified and, more importantly, served America's interests well. Yet even here, their case was weak. In his speech to Congress asking for war, judged by many historians as among the most eloquent orations of any president, Wilson was unable to depict Germany as any threat to American security or interests—because it wasn't. He didn't even try. Instead he urged his nation to go to war to defend and advance lofty ideals, including, in one of history's most memorable presidential phrases, to “make the world safe for democracy.” We know, of course, that it did not.

Much more important, we also now know that the decision by Woodrow Wilson and the 65th Congress to take America into Europe's Great War on the British and French side shaped the fate of most of the rest of the century in the West and, indeed, for much of the world. From that decision of April 6 flowed the actions that made Nazism a possibility, along with all the horrors and agony inflicted on mankind by the Nazis, including a World War Two and a collapse of Germany in 1945 which opened half of Europe to nearly a half-century of Soviet domination and subjected America and much of Western Europe to a trying, costly and at times very bloody Cold War.

And if America had not declared war? What then?

History offers guidance towards an answer. Without America's intervention, the Great War's exhausted belligerents almost certainly would have been forced—by the mounting food and other shortages on their home fronts, by their looming economic bankruptcies, by the plunging morale and rising restlessness of their populations and frustrated despair of their political leaders and by the fast-dwindling supply of fresh manpower for their armies—to drag themselves, however distastefully, to a negotiating table. There they would have ended the conflict as all of Europe's continent-wide wars had been ended since the Thirty Years War of 1618-1648, by compromises and tradeoffs.

With such a compromise peace, it in hindsight is possible to speculate, though, of course, not state with certainty, about several crucial subsequent developments: that the movement towards constitutional monarchy in Germany, which had been gaining momentum before the war, would have accelerated and a democratic Germany would have emerged in Central Europe; that the Austro-Hungarian Empire, seething with subjected nationalities verging on revolt, well may have begun its peaceful devolution, marked certainly by sporadic violence but no longer smoldering as Europe's tinderbox; that there would have been a more manageable burden of international postwar debts and financial reparations (very possibly, no reparations at all), hence sparing the West those financial uncertainties and severe distortions that derailed economic growth and, in great part, contributed to the cascade of events triggering the stock market, currency and bank crashes and even, perhaps, the Great Depression.

All of this, understandably, falls into focus only through a century's hindsight and is highly speculative. The following pages, in fact, will not linger on the details or permutations of such “what if” speculation. What is not speculative, however, is that American intervention in the war changed history's course. And it is nearly impossible to imagine a worse, uglier, more self-destructive course than that which the 20th Century took...[American intervention] was a huge mistake: a fateful decision with extraordinary consequences.

A full century later, when other mistakes, still fresh in the memory, have taken America into wars, it remains intriguing and illustrative (possibly even useful) to ask anew those quintessential historical questions of “How did this happen?” of “How did America end up fighting a war it never thought it would fight and in which no national interests were at stake?” and of “What difference was made by America's fighting?” The following pages are a 21st Century stab at exploring answers.

