

DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY

III B A HISTORY V SEMESTER

CORE – X : HISTORY OF USA 1776 TO 1974 A. D(18BHI52C)

DR.SEETHALAKSHMI, ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR

DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY- GAC (AUTO)- 18

Cell: 9487087335

UNIT IV

FIRST WORLD WAR

In early 1917 Berlin forced the issue. Its declared decision on 31 January 1917 to target neutral shipping in a designated war-zone^[107] became the immediate cause of the entry of the United States into the war.^[108] Five American merchant ships went down in March. Outraged public opinion now overwhelmingly supported Wilson when he asked Congress for a declaration of war on April 2, 1917.^[109]

Public opinion, moralism, and national interest

Historians such as [Ernest R. May](#) have approached the process of American entry into the war as a study in how public opinion changed radically in three years' time. In 1914 most Americans called for neutrality, seeing the war as a dreadful mistake and were determined to stay out. By 1917 the same public felt just as strongly that going to war was both necessary and wise. Military leaders had little to say during this debate, and military considerations were seldom raised. The decisive questions dealt with morality and visions of the future. The prevailing attitude was that America possessed a superior moral position as the only great nation devoted to

the principles of freedom and democracy. By staying aloof from the squabbles of reactionary empires, it could preserve those ideals—sooner or later the rest of the world would come to appreciate and adopt them. In 1917 this very long-run program faced the severe danger that in the short run powerful forces adverse to democracy and freedom would triumph. Strong support for moralism came from religious leaders, women (led by [Jane Addams](#)), and from public figures like long-time Democratic leader [William Jennings Bryan](#), the Secretary of State from 1913 to 1916. The most important moralist of all was President Woodrow Wilson—the man who dominated decision making so totally that the war has been labeled, from an American perspective, "Wilson's War". In 1917 Wilson won the support of most of the moralists by proclaiming "a war to make the world safe for democracy." If they truly believed in their ideals, he explained, now was the time to fight. The question then became whether Americans would fight for what they deeply believed in, and the answer turned out to be a resounding "Yes".^[111] Some of this attitude was mobilised by the [Spirit of 1917](#), which evoked the [Spirit of '76](#).

Antiwar activists at the time and in the 1930s, alleged that beneath the veneer of moralism and idealism there must have been ulterior motives. Some suggested a conspiracy on the part of New York City bankers holding \$3 billion of war loans to the Allies, or steel and chemical firms selling munitions to the Allies.^[112] The interpretation was popular among left-wing Progressives (led by Senator Robert La Follette of Wisconsin) and among the "agrarian" wing of the Democratic party—including the chairman of the tax-writing Ways and Means Committee of the House. He strenuously opposed war, and when it came he rewrote the tax laws to make sure the rich paid the most. (In the 1930s [neutrality laws](#) were passed to prevent financial entanglements from dragging the nation into a war.) In 1915, Bryan thought that Wilson's pro-British

sentiments had unduly influenced his policies, so he became the first Secretary of State ever to resign in protest.^[113]

However, historian Harold C. Syrett argues that business supported neutrality.^[114] Other historians state that the pro-war element was animated not by profit but by disgust with what Germany actually did, especially in Belgium, and the threat it represented to American ideals. Belgium kept the public's sympathy as the Germans executed civilians,^[115] and English nurse [Edith Cavell](#). American engineer [Herbert Hoover](#) led a private relief effort that won wide support. Compounding [the Belgium atrocities](#) were new weapons that Americans found repugnant, like [poison gas](#) and the aerial bombardment of innocent civilians as [Zeppelins dropped bombs on London](#).^[110] Even anti-war spokesmen did not claim that Germany was innocent, and pro-German scripts were poorly received.^[116]

[Randolph Bourne](#) criticized the moralist philosophy claiming it was a justification by American intellectual and power elites, like President Wilson, for going to war unnecessarily. He argues that the push for war started with the Preparedness movement, fueled by big business. While big business would not push much further than Preparedness, benefitting the most from neutrality, the movement would eventually evolve into a war-cry, led by war-hawk intellectuals under the guise of moralism. Bourne believes elites knew full well what going to war would entail and the price in American lives it would cost. If American elites could portray the United States' role in the war as noble, they could convince the generally isolationist American public war would be acceptable.^[117]

Above all, American attitudes towards Germany focused on the U-boats (submarines), which sank the [Lusitania](#) in 1915 and other passenger ships "without warning".^{[118][119][120]} That appeared to Americans as an unacceptable challenge to America's rights as a neutral country, and

as an unforgivable affront to humanity. After repeated diplomatic protests, Germany agreed to stop. But in 1917 the Germany military leadership decided that "military necessity" dictated the unrestricted use of their submarines. The Kaiser's advisors felt America was enormously powerful economically but too weak militarily to make a difference.

Declaration of war[\[edit\]](#)

Germany[\[edit\]](#)

On April 2, 1917, Wilson asked a special [joint session of Congress](#) to declare war on the [German Empire](#), stating, "We have no selfish ends to serve".^[121] To make the conflict seem like a better idea, he painted the conflict idealistically, stating that the war would "make the world safe for democracy" and later that it would be a "war to end war". The United States had a moral responsibility to enter the war, Wilson proclaimed. The future of the world was being determined on the battlefield, and American national interest demanded a voice. Wilson's definition of the situation won wide acclaim, and, indeed, has shaped America's role in world and military affairs ever since. Wilson believed that if the Central Powers won, the consequences would be bad for the United States. Germany would have dominated the continent and perhaps would gain control of the seas as well. Latin America could well have fallen under Berlin's control. The dream of spreading democracy, liberalism, and independence would have been shattered. On the other hand, if the Allies had won without help, there was a danger they would carve up the world without regard to American commercial interests. They were already planning to use government subsidies, tariff walls, and controlled markets to counter the competition posed by American businessmen. The solution was a third route, a "peace without victory", according to Wilson.^[122]

On April 6, 1917, Congress declared war. In the Senate, the resolution passed 82 to 6, with Senators [Harry Lane](#), [William J. Stone](#), [James Vardaman](#), [Asle Gronna](#), [Robert M. La Follette, Sr.](#), and [George W. Norris](#) voting against it. In the House, the declaration passed 373 to 50, with [Claude Kitchin](#), a senior Democrat, notably opposing it. Another opponent was [Jeannette Rankin](#), who alone voted against entry into both World War I and [World War II](#). Nearly all of the opposition came from the West and the Midwest.^[123]

Austria-Hungary[\[edit\]](#)

The [United States Senate](#), in a 74 to 0 vote, declared war on [Austria-Hungary](#) on December 7, 1917, citing Austria-Hungary's severing of diplomatic relations with the United States, its use of unrestricted submarine warfare and [its alliance](#) with Germany.^[124] The declaration passed in the [United States House of Representatives](#) by a vote of 365 to 1.^[125]

President Wilson also came under pressure from Senator [Henry Cabot Lodge](#), and from former President [Theodore Roosevelt](#), who demanded a declaration of war on the [Ottoman Empire](#) and [Bulgaria](#), as Germany's allies. President Wilson drafted a statement to Congress in December 1917 which said "I... recommend that Congress immediately declare the United States in a state of war with Austria-Hungary, with Turkey and with Bulgaria". However, after further consultations, the decision to go to war against Germany's other allies was postponed.^[126]

Great Depression in the United States

The [Great Depression](#) began with the [Wall Street Crash in October 1929](#). The stock market crash marked the beginning of a decade of high unemployment, poverty, low profits, [deflation](#), plunging farm incomes, and lost opportunities for economic growth as well as

for personal advancement. Altogether, there was a general loss of confidence in the economic future.^[1]

The usual explanations include numerous factors, especially high consumer debt, ill-regulated markets that permitted overoptimistic loans by banks and investors, and the lack of high-growth new industries. These all interacted to create a downward economic spiral of reduced spending, falling confidence and lowered production.^[2] Industries that suffered the most included construction, shipping, mining, logging and agriculture (compounded by [dust-bowl conditions](#) in the heartland). Also hard hit was the manufacturing of durable goods like automobiles and appliances, whose purchase consumers could postpone. The economy hit bottom in the winter of 1932–33; then came four years of growth until the [recession of 1937–38](#) brought back high levels of unemployment.^[3]

The Depression caused major political changes in America. Three years into the depression, President [Herbert Hoover](#), widely shamed for not doing enough to combat the crisis, lost the [election of 1932](#) to [Franklin Delano Roosevelt](#) by an embarrassingly wide margin. Roosevelt's economic recovery plan, the [New Deal](#), instituted unprecedented programs for relief, recovery and reform, and brought about a major realignment of [American politics](#).

The Depression also resulted in an increase of [emigration](#) for the first time in American history. Some immigrants went back to their native countries, and some native U.S. citizens went to [Canada](#), [Australia](#) and [South Africa](#). There were mass migrations of people from badly hit areas in the [Great Plains](#) (the [Okies](#)) and the South to places such as California and the cities of the North (the [Great Migration](#)).^{[4][5]} Racial tensions also increased during this time. By the 1940s immigration had returned to normal, and emigration declined. A well-known example of an emigrant was [Frank McCourt](#), who went to [Ireland](#), as recounted in his book *Angela's Ashes*.

The memory of the Depression also shaped modern theories of economics and resulted in many changes in how the government dealt with economic downturns, such as the use of [stimulus packages](#), [Keynesian economics](#), and [Social Security](#). It also shaped modern American literature, resulting in famous novels such as [John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*](#) and [Of Mice and Men](#).

Examining the [causes of the Great Depression](#) raises multiple issues: what factors set off the first downturn in 1929; what structural weaknesses and specific events turned it into a major depression; how the downturn spread from country to country; and why the economic recovery was so prolonged.^[6]

Many banks began to fail in October 1930 when farmers [defaulted](#) on loans. There was no [federal deposit insurance](#) during that time as [bank failures](#) were considered a normal part of economic life. Worried depositors started to withdraw savings, so the [money multiplier](#) worked in reverse. Banks were forced to liquidate assets (such as calling in loans rather than creating new loans).^[7] This caused the [money supply](#) to shrink and the economy to contract (the [Great Contraction](#)), resulting in a significant decline in aggregate investment. The decreased money supply further aggravated [price deflation](#), putting more pressure on already struggling businesses.

The U.S. Government's commitment to the [gold standard](#) prevented it from engaging in [expansionary monetary policy](#).^[clarification needed] High [interest rates](#) needed to be maintained in order to attract international investors who bought foreign assets with gold. However, the high interest also inhibited domestic business borrowing.^[citation needed] The U.S. interest rates were also affected by [France's](#) decision to raise their interest rates to attract gold to their vaults. In theory, the U.S. would have two potential responses to that: Allow the [exchange rate](#) to adjust, or increase their own interest rates to maintain the gold standard. At the time, the U.S. was pegged

to the gold standard. Therefore, Americans converted their dollars into [francs](#) to buy more French assets, the demand for the [U.S. dollar](#) fell, and the exchange rate increased. One of the only things the U.S. could do to get back into equilibrium was increase interest rates.^[*citation needed*]

Nobel laureate economist [Milton Friedman](#) and his fellow [monetarist Anna Schwartz](#) argued that the [Federal Reserve](#) could have stemmed the severity of the Depression, but failed to exercise its role of managing the [monetary system](#) and ameliorating [banking panics](#), resulting in a [Great Contraction](#) of the economy from 1929 until the [New Deal](#) began in 1933.^[8] This view was endorsed by [Fed Governor Ben Bernanke](#) who made this statement in a speech honoring Friedman and Schwartz:

FDR and World War II

As early as 1937, FDR warned the American public about the dangers posed by hard-line regimes in Germany, Italy and Japan, though he stopped short of suggesting America should abandon its isolationist policy. After World War II broke out in September 1939, however, Roosevelt called a special session of Congress in order to revise the country's existing neutrality acts and allow Britain and France to purchase American arms on a "cash-and-carry" basis. Germany captured France by the end of June 1940, and Roosevelt persuaded Congress to provide more support for Britain, now left to combat the Nazi menace on its own. Despite the two-term tradition for presidents in place since the time of [George Washington](#), Roosevelt decided to run

for reelection again in 1940; he defeated Wendell L. Wilkie by nearly 5 million votes.

Roosevelt increased his support of Great Britain with passage of the [Lend-Lease Act](#) in March 1941 and met with [Prime Minister Winston Churchill](#) in August aboard a battleship anchored off Canada. In the resulting [Atlantic Charter](#), the two leaders declared the “[Four Freedoms](#)” on which the post-war world should be founded: freedom of speech and expression, freedom of religion, freedom from want and freedom from fear.

On December 8, 1941, the day after Japan bombed the U.S. naval base at [Pearl Harbor](#), Roosevelt appeared before a joint session of Congress, which declared war on Japan. The first president to leave the country during wartime, Roosevelt spearheaded the alliance between countries combating the Axis, meeting frequently with Churchill and seeking to establish friendly relations with the [Soviet Union](#) and its leader, [Joseph Stalin](#). Meanwhile, he spoke constantly on the radio, reporting war events and rallying the American people in support of the war effort (as he had for the New Deal).

Yalta Conference and Franklin D. Roosevelt's Death

In 1944, as the tide of war turned toward the Allies, a weary and ailing Roosevelt managed to win election to a fourth term in the [White House](#). The following February, he met with Churchill and Stalin in the [Yalta Conference](#), where Roosevelt got Stalin's commitment to enter the war against Japan after Germany's impending

surrender. (The Soviet leader kept that promise, but failed to honor his pledge to establish democratic governments in the eastern European nations then under Soviet control.) The “Big Three” also worked to build foundations for the post-war international peace organization that would become the United Nations.

After Roosevelt returned from Yalta, he was so weak that he was forced to sit down while addressing Congress for the first time in his presidency. In early April 1945, he left [Washington](#) and traveled to his cottage in Warm Springs, [Georgia](#), where he had long before established a nonprofit foundation to aid polio patients. Roosevelt suffered a massive cerebral hemorrhage and died on April 12, 1945. He was succeeded in office by his vice president, [Harry S. Truman](#).