



Spring 2017

The Centennial of the Great War

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Crafa, Thomas J., "The Centennial of the Great War" (2017). *Student Publications*. 558.
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The Centennial of the Great War

Abstract

A personal reflection on the centennial of America's entry into The Great War.

Keywords

WWI, Memory, Centennial, America

Disciplines

European History | Military History | United States History

Comments

Written for HIST 219: The Great War.

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4/11/17

The Centennial of the Great War

The United States entry into the Great War was a difficult and controversial decision. If one were to look at it from today's prospective, that controversy has almost been lost to history. In today's culture, World War I is very obscure, you can almost find no media references about it (except for a handful of movies, and that one videogame that's a lot of fun). The big issue with the Great War today is not just how we remember it, but remembering it in general. If America was involved since 1914, then things would be very different. There would have been a lot more American casualties, a much broader propaganda campaign, and a much clearer national memory for sure. This is not the case. In fact, American entry into the war is referred to as an intervention, a phrasing that suggests sticking one's nose where it does not belong. The biggest problem with our historical prospective is hindsight bias, and the fact that there is nobody alive today who remembers what America was like at that time. This was America's big entrance onto the global stage, the first real struggle in a worldwide crisis, and the dawn of modern warfare as we know it. So many events happened during this era that shaped the modern world, that we take them for granted.

For all of American history up until 1917, America was an isolationist nation, but also participated in imperialism. Imperialist policies included, the occupation of the Philippines, and several wars in Central America, but the United States was never really involved in frontline combat in Europe itself until the Great War. Those past wars (with the exception of the Philippines) could be justified to the American public as an exercise in the Monroe Doctrine, but

World War I simply could not, this was America's first true overseas war, which would then lead to an era of many, many overseas wars. The fact that it was an overseas war plays into the idea that the war had zero effect on the American public, and that all the fighting was for nothing. Although that thinking is partially true, America is home to a very large European immigrant population, who were affected by the war. Along with the sizeable immigrant population, America has always had close ties to Europe, and although there were no formal alliances, it was in America's best interests to help out Western European powers like Britain and France.

When it comes to America's memory of the Great War, it almost seems blurry in a way. If you ask anybody, they'll know that America fought in the War, but most can't tell you what actually happened. American entry into the war changed the world forever, it marked the beginning of an era where America was willing to put its foot down globally. When I looked to the media for sources about the centennial, all I could find were either articles reading like a textbook entry, saying what happened and why, or articles questioning the decision. For example, the exact title of the *New York Times* article about the Centennial posed the question "Should America have entered World War I". It ended on a positive note saying that we need to remember those who fought, but right at the end of the article was a stream of self-righteous comments (as NYT opinion pieces seem very skilled at attracting) decrying our entry and blaming it on the Military Industrial Complex, racism(?), or (humorously) blaming President Donald Trump. It almost seems as if the lost generation has been forgotten by America, and some people might even say that the deaths of our soldiers were in vain. But I refuse to believe that. Yes, the war happened, and we can debate about it until our tongues fall out, but at the end of the day, we need to remember our soldiers and honor them, no matter what conflict they

fought in. It may have been one hundred years ago, but that is no excuse for forgetting their sacrifices.