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# A Moment in History Relevant to the Modern Era

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# A Moment in History Relevant to the Modern Era

## **Abstract**

April 6, 1917 is a date that deserves great recognition and remembrance in the United States. On that day, the United States chose to enter a war that it had previously so ardently tried to avoid. Upon entrance, the United States forged a new national identity that looked past racial and religious barriers with a new mission to protect global democracy. On April 6, 2017, the 100th anniversary of America entering the First World War, news and other media throughout the United States seemed to care so little about the significance of the date and unfortunately passed over an excellent history lesson. Despite the current division in the United States, the country has dealt with it before. Reforging a new national identity was the solution in 1917. Perhaps it is the solution needed in 2017.

## **Keywords**

First World War, United States, National Image, Neutrality

## **Disciplines**

European History | Military History | United States History

## **Comments**

Written for HIST 219: The Great War.

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### A Moment in History Relevant to the Modern Era

April 6, 1917 was a big day in American history. Previously, between 1914 and 1917, political stakes in the United States were set high by the First World War. It was also in this period that the United States stood at a crossroad of national identity. On April 6, 1917, the United States went to war. International relations forever changed. A modern national identity was forged. The Centennial of America's decision to enter the war, April 6, 2017, has now come and gone, gathering little attention in the national news. In April 2017, it appears as if we again are at a crossroads of forging a new national identity. Even though the media and people may have largely forgotten to remember our nation's involvement in the Great War, an effort to do so is now more important than ever. Examples can be taken away from how the United States performed politically and socially between 1914 and 1917. The power of principle and the creation of an American identity, highlights of that period, could provide valuable insight to Americans today on unifying, rather than dividing, the American people.

The United States was a nation that maintained a principle between 1914 and April 6, 1917. This principle was to stay out of the Great War. The war was thought of as a European, not American, fight. President Wilson, and scores of lower-level politicians helped maintain that principle, and so did the American people. The majority of the American people were for neutrality rather than intervention. Even when faced with a barrage of tests, like the sinking of the ship *Lusitania* and acts of suspected German sabotage, the principle of American neutrality endured. Each and every one of these incidents provided a reason for the United States to declare war on Germany, but it didn't. 1917, however, proved to be the death of neutrality. Two specific German acts dried up American stamina for neutrality and thoroughly changed the population's view of the war. The Zimmerman Telegram and resurrection of unrestricted German submarine warfare pushed popular opinion of the American people, as well as its politicians, over the edge. America entered the First World War against Germany on April 6, 1917, ending the principle they had once previously endured so much to maintain. The United States did what was reasonable, as at this point, it seemed more unreasonable to keep neutrality. Unrestricted warfare would have cost the United States more civilian lives. The Zimmerman telegram provided the impression that American borders were in jeopardy. America maintained neutrality for as long as it possibly could, and it was Germany, not the American people, that was the driving force behind abandonment of this principle.

When the principle of neutrality ended, the United States adopted a new principle and national image. The Americans entered the First World War no longer as isolationist, but as defenders of democracy. It was this new principle that unified the nation across racial, religious, and political barriers. German-Americans, African-Americans, Irish-Americans, Christians, and Jews entered the war with a lack of a hyphen; they entered the war as Americans. The American soldiers and civilians partook in the war effort firmly under the belief that they were defenders of

global democracy. American soldiers were willing to place their lives on the line for this new principle, and over 100,000 American soldiers died for it.

April 6, 2017, the Centennial of America's entrance into the war, passed Gettysburg, Pennsylvania as a rainy, dark and gloomy day. It was almost as if the weather was representing the present way many Americans choose to remember America's involvement in the Great War, if they remember it at all. The national headlines of most major news stations lacked any mention of the Centennial, and, if they did, it required some digging for the viewer to find. To me, the Centennial provided valuable time for remembrance and reflection. Even though the current political environment is certainly less than desirable, it is not something new. A remedy to this current divisiveness is finding principles worth serving and a new national image. A good place to start would be by actually remembering our role in the First World War, not despising and ignoring it. America's transition between 1914 and 1917 may provide the answers we now seek. The First World War certainly demonstrated how such a diverse nation can come together and serve a common principle, and we should look to it as an example.