



Spring 2017

The Great War Then and Now: Reflections on America's Declaration of War

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Potter, Thomas S., "The Great War Then and Now: Reflections on America's Declaration of War" (2017). *Student Publications*. 560.
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Abstract

This short essay explores the many impacts of the 1917 U.S. entry to World War I on the author's hometown of Pennington, NJ, and the reaction of its residents at the time.

Keywords

World War I, The Great War, US Declaration of War 1917, US Involvement in World War I

Disciplines

European History | Military History | Political History | United States History

Comments

Written for HIST 219: The Great War.

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April 11th, 2017
History 219/Dr. Isherwood
Centennial Reflection

The Great War Then and Now: Reflections on America's Declaration of War

The United States experienced dozens of momentous events during the 20th century, with each successive event seeming to push the last into the forgotten shadows of history. The events that figure prominently in America's collective memory range from the hard times of the Great Depression, the explosive battles of World War II, Vietnam, the Cold War, and so on, with each event often inspiring extensive literature, media representations, memorials, patriotism, and public events in remembrance. However, one important event, the declaration of war against the Central Powers on April 6, 1917, is notably absent from the public memory. When the United States finally entered World War I, it marked a dramatic shift for the formerly isolationist nation. Across the country, from small towns to large cities, young men streamed to recruiting stations to help form the largest American army ever sent into combat at that time. Armed guards patrolled public places, and warranted fears of enemy sabotage dominated the news. Of the soldiers sent off, some would never return, as hundreds of thousands were lost to enemy action or disease. Despite the gravity of these developments, it seems the true scale of the war and its consequences have been lost to history. In retrospect, the United State's entry to the Great War produced profound national policy changes, precipitated devastating casualties, and was felt by every American in every town and city across the nation.

Nationally, American involvement in World War I is the forgotten turning point in American history. It is easy to forget that the United States was once an introverted, neutral nation, with a population that seemed to have little interest in any sort of foreign affairs. Since the time of Washington's farewell address, in which the first president famously argued against

dangerous foreign entanglements, the United States had never been involved in a conflict with as much significance as the Great War. For the first time, as German submarines sank American ships and as enemy agents attacked vital industries from within, it became clear that the United States was no longer safely isolated from the rest of the world's problems by the Atlantic Ocean. The decision to go to war reflected this sad reality, and implied that the United States had finally realized that it had to take direct action to keep itself from eventually being overcome by a hostile world. Moreover, the decision to enter the conflict elevated the United States to a position of prominence in international affairs, and President Wilson's ill-fated negotiations at Versailles reflected this newfound use of American power. However, the failure of Wilson's lofty ideals for peaceful post-war seems to have further dampened World War I's memory in the eyes of the public.

The national memory of the Great War's military losses is similarly marred by the passage of time. The war declaration created an inevitable expectation of casualties, but the exact toll inflicted by just over a year of fighting is staggering. Official casualty listings show that over 116,000 men died of combat wounds or of disease and over 300,000 were wounded, with slightly more dying of the equally devastating 1918 influenza pandemic than in the war itself. The dead and wounded ranks a grim third out of all American wars, and yet, despite these heavy casualties, no memorial currently exists on the national mall, even as prominent monuments to World War II, Korea, Vietnam, and other conflicts are duly enshrined. Moreover, all American veterans of the war and most people who witnessed the conflict have since died, leaving no living veterans or families to pay respects to and relegating the war to history. Given the scale of the conflict and the heavy death toll, it would seem likely there would be more

remembrance of the sacrifices and efforts made by veterans and communities from across the nation.

Nothing better abridges the impact of the declaration of war more than the wartime history of my hometown of Pennington, New Jersey. One hundred years ago in April 1917, Pennington was nothing like the quiet, peaceful town that it has grown into today, as the impact of the war declaration was immediately felt in houses, churches, business, and schools throughout the area. Changes happened immediately, and historical sources show that by May 1917, there was the first of many patriotic rallies in the center of the town, which was well-attended and was complete with a large parade, band performances, patriotic speakers and prayer services. Victory bond drives were common and popular, and at one such event attendees enjoyed live music, speakers, and the chance to win one of four distinctive German *Stahlhelms* that were being auctioned off in exchange for bond purchases. Residents organized home guard committees to guard public places such as the local railway station, which reflected the widespread fear of enemy sabotages, and at one point National Guard troops even encamped on a nearby farm while mobilizing for the coming war.

Further, records show that over 80 Pennington residents served with the American Expeditionary Force in some way, with several women serving as red cross nurses and most of the others serving in a military capacity. Citizens of all ages answered the call, such as one resident and future town mayor, William P. Howe Jr, who was only 14 when he joined the army and is believed to be the youngest soldier from New Jersey to fight in the Great War.¹ Two residents, Edgar C. Frisbie and Edward F. Cudney, died overseas; the former died of Spanish flu and the latter was killed in action during the Argonne offensive. They were 24 and 22 years old,

¹ Margaret J. O'Connell, *Pennington Profile: A Capsule of State and Nation* (Pennington, NJ: Pennington Library, 1986), 158.

respectively, and news of Frisbie's death shock waves through the community, as his father and uncle were prominent figures in the town and Frisbie had been sending letters "speaking cheerily of his homecoming" only two weeks before his unexpected passing.² To this day, it is likely few people are aware of the scale, sacrifice, and commitment to the war effort that was so strong from even the smallest of towns. There is no local memorial or ceremony for the war effort in Pennington despite several existing for other conflicts, and even the names of the dead servicemen are likely only commemorated with small bricks at the local veteran's monument. With the passage of time, the impact of the momentous sacrifices and contributions soldiers and civilians made to the war effort can easily fade away, especially considering how calm Pennington is today. To this end, the decision to go to war caused serious change that rippled through the fabric of town and nation, and it is likely America would not be the same today without that fateful choice.

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