

United States into the war on the Allied side, expressed regret and agreed to respect international agreements on naval warfare.

Secretary of State William Jennings Bryan urged Wilson to avoid any appearance of taking sides in the European conflict and even recommended breaking commercial ties with the combatants. The president refused, arguing that the United States had to maintain free trade and freedom of the seas and that submarine warfare was immoral, a clear reason to oppose Germany. Bryan—one of the few members of the administration who was genuinely committed to neutrality—resigned over Wilson's reaction to the *Lusitania* affair. The British blockade, Bryan insisted, was equally immoral, because it was starving Germany's civilian population, and he warned that Wilson's actions would lead to war. Bryan's successor, the pro-British Robert Lansing, believed as early as 1915 that the United States "would ultimately become an ally of Great Britain." Lansing's appointment further skewed U.S. policy toward the Allies.

The Debate over American Involvement Increasingly, the war presented Americans with a profound dilemma. Wilson agreed with most business and political leaders that continued U.S. prosperity and tranquility depended on international investment and trade. The main obstacle, in his view, was European-style imperialism—the competitive rush for colonies and exclusive spheres of influence that had secured European domination of world markets and, indeed, the world's people. Wilson opposed high tariffs and advocated an international free-trade system. U.S. producers, Wilson explained in 1912, "have expanded to such a point that they will burst their jackets if they cannot find a free outlet to the markets of the world." Wilson meant his policies not simply to aid industry and raise the standard of living in the United States; a devout Presbyterian, he also saw the spread of free trade and democratic capitalism as a concrete expression of Christian values.

The war that was raging in Europe epitomized the very sort of imperialism Wilson detested, and violations of neutral rights now threatened U.S. peace. The United States faced no immediate military threat. But the president sympathized emotionally and ideologically with Great Britain and feared that an Allied defeat would make Germany a dangerous economic and military rival and an opponent of the U.S. Open Door policy. Furthermore, he worried that a neutral America would be powerless to help shape the postwar world and ensure the openness of world markets to what he called "righteous conquest" by American business.

The public was deeply divided over the war. One in nine Americans had been born in a Central Powers country or had a parent who was born there. German Americans generally favored the Central Powers; those with British

“Let the Capitalists Do Their Own Fighting”

Eugene Debs, industrial union leader and Socialist Party presidential candidate, expressed an intense antiwar attitude in this August 1914 editorial in the working-class newspaper National Rip-Saw. Radicals and socialists opposed the war believing it resulted from inevitable capitalist rivalry for international markets and raw materials.

The capitalists tell us it is patriotic to fight for your country and shed your blood for the flag. Very well! Let them set the example.

It is their country; they own it and therefore according to their logic it is their patriotic duty to fight and die for it and be brought home riddled with bullets and covered with flowers as shining examples of patriotic duty to the youth of the nation. . . .

You never had a country to fight for and never will have as much as an inch of one as long as you are fool enough to make a target of your bodies for the profit and glory of your masters.

Let the capitalists do their own fighting and furnish their own corpses and there will never be another war on the face of the earth.

Frederick C. Griffin, *Six Who Protested: Radical Opposition to the First World War* (1977).

Singing Against the War

One of the hit songs of 1915, “I Didn’t Raise My Boy to Be a Soldier,” by lyricist Alfred Bryan and composer Al Piantadosi, captured widespread American skepticism about joining in the European war. In response to the popularity of this antiwar song, Theodore Roosevelt suggested that the place for women who opposed war was “in China—or by preference in a harem—and not in the United States.”

backgrounds tended to back the Allies. Most Irish Americans, though no special friends of Germany, opposed aid to Britain. Their opposition intensified—as did the struggle for independence in Ireland—after the British crushed the abortive Easter Rebellion of 1916. Nonetheless, when war broke out, the strongest impulse in America was for peace. Peace forces mobilized activists who had previously focused on the domestic reforms favored by progressives.

Across the country, people rallied to oppose U.S. intervention in the conflict. Many radicals and reformers argued that war would suspend domestic reform, endanger civil liberties, and profit big business. Some activists joined an internationalist movement that promoted world order based on international law. Those who opposed the war included the midwestern progressives, such as George Norris and Robert La Follette, and a large bloc of Democratic congressional representatives from the South and the Midwest. William Jennings Bryan, commenting on what he saw as the pro-British, prowar bias of the East Coast, complained to his daughter that “the president does not seem to realize that a great part of America lies on the other side of the Allegheny Mountains.” Most feminists and suffragists also opposed the war. Jane Addams and Carrie Chapman Catt, president of the National American Woman Suffrage Association, together founded the Women’s Peace Party, which attracted 40,000 members.