



The Path to War: How the First World War Created Modern America

by Michael S. Neiberg.

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The Path to War opens with an anecdote about George M. Cohan's World War I-era patriotic tune "Over There." Written the day after the United States declared war on Germany in April 1917, it sold over 2 million copies during the war. Historian Michael Neiberg¹ (US Army War College) sees the song's popularity as an index of the dramatic shift in American public opinion about the First World War. The antiwar song "I Didn't Raise My Boy to Be a Soldier"² was a bestseller as late as 1915. Neiberg seeks to explain this change in attitude toward the war, as Americans lived through a period of increasingly uneasy neutrality, until "they finally saw the inescapable necessity of taking part in, to that point, the most murderous conflict in human history" (7).

Neiberg goes beyond the typical political, diplomatic, and economic justifications for the United States' entry into the war. Instead, he concentrates on "how over time Americans understood its causes, its evolution, and their relationship to it" (7). By 1917, he writes, Americans recognized that their political leaders, having exhausted all other options, had no choice but to go to war on the side of the Allies. The German resumption of unrestricted submarine warfare and the audacity of the Zimmermann Telegram sounded the death knell for Pres. Woodrow Wilson's policy of keeping the United States out of the war.

According to Neiberg, most Americans perceived "two Germanys"—one a nation known for its contributions to technological innovation, scientific discovery, medicine, education, literature, philosophy, and the arts; the other dominated by Prussian militarism and autocratic tyranny under Kaiser Wilhelm II. Americans thus "saw the essentially good and decent German people as victims of their own government, and the excessive militarism of the regime as a product of its retrograde system of autocracy" (12).

In summer 1914, many Americans, including those of German descent, decided the only way to support the "good and decent" Germans was to oppose their government's rank militarism in the pre-war years. From the very beginning of the Great War, they heaped blame on the Germans for their violation of Belgian neutrality, and British propaganda in the United States further enflamed anti-German sentiment. The inept "German Information Service" in New York, created and staffed by German officials, tried to publicize Germany's view of the war, but most Americans saw it as simply promoting the Prussian militarism they had already rejected. This service was further compromised by the insidious work of naval attaché Karl Boy-Ed and military attaché Franz von Papen³ before both were expelled

1. His previous work on the First World War includes *The Second Battle of the Marne* (Bloomington: Indiana U Pr, 2008) and *Dance of the Furies: Europe and the Outbreak of World War I* (Cambridge: Harvard U Pr, 2011).

2. Written by lyricist Alfred Bryan and composer Al Piantadosi.

3. Neiberg makes a rare slip in misidentifying von Papen as *commercial* attaché in the United States. That post belonged to Heinrich Albert, who had arranged to work for the Hamburg-Amerika shipping line, but later became the banker for the German Information Service. See Chad R. Fulwider, *German Propaganda and U.S. Neutrality in World War I* (Columbia: U Missouri Pr, 2016) 69.

from the United States in late 1915 for organizing sabotage campaigns and independent espionage cells that could act without direct oversight from the German government.

In a chapter entitled “The Impossible Middle,” Neiberg unravels the intricacies of the German espionage campaign, which did little to slow munitions shipments to the Allies, but shifted suspicion to pro-German activists in the United States. German-Americans began to distance themselves from such activists and to stress their commitment to their adopted homeland. Hence, the author notes, one result of sabotage activities and the sinking of the *Lusitania* was that “applications for American citizenship from German nationals increased fourfold” (86). By 1917, the “campaign against the hyphen” had reached a fever pitch among both assimilated Germans and German nationals and other suspected enemy aliens who were placed in internment camps.

Other scholars have noted the economic effects of American involvement in the war. US trade with the Allies at the end of 1914 was \$825 million, compared to just \$172 million with Germany and Austria.⁴ Though debates raged over a proposed billion-dollar loan to the Allies, underwritten in part by J.P. Morgan, Neiberg observes that support for it shows the importance of war credits to the war-time American economy. When the loan was funded in late 1915, it made millions of dollars available to Britain and France as US businesses rapidly expanded into the European economy. The United States’ incredibly profitable “neutrality” raised troubling ethical issues about financing the slaughter in Europe, particularly in light of the horrors of Verdun and the Somme in 1916.

Neiberg also provides popular culture evidence that US public opinion was shifting toward intervention. The cover of the 10 Feb. 1916 issue of *Life* magazine bore a map of a future North America dominated by Germany—if the United States refused to defend itself. The eastern seaboard and much of middle America are labeled “New Prussia” and German-sounding city names replace those of major cities. Germany’s ally Mexico is labeled as the site of an “American Reservation.” The west coast of the United States is designated “Japonica” and features Japanese-derived city names. The whole effect is of a vast conspiracy of authoritarian powers from Berlin to Mexico City to Tokyo that seemed to be confirmed less than a month later by the publication of the Zimmermann Telegram (1 Mar. 1917), which offered Mexico territory in the United States in return for joining Germany in the war. Rather than a buffer from European affairs, the Atlantic Ocean appears renamed on the *Life* cover as “von Tirpitz Ocean,” after the German admiral. Subsequent *Life* covers reflected ongoing diplomatic disputes in 1916, as Americans became increasingly discontent with their country’s neutrality. Neiberg culls evidence of this from contemporary magazines like *Life* and *Literary Digest*, as well as newspapers, memoirs, diaries, and novels.

Some Americans had already volunteered to serve as soldiers, pilots, and medical personnel. Neiberg points out that men who had joined the French Foreign Legion early on later formed a volunteer squadron in the French Air Service in 1916. These flyers, known as the Lafayette Escadrille, soon became media heroes. By mid-1916, doctors and nurses from forty-six of the forty-eight states were serving in France. Americans also donated money to fund field hospitals, purchase equipment, and care for wounded soldiers. Scholars have shown how investors also backed the Allies—by April 1917, Americans had purchased \$2.3 billion in Allied war bonds versus just \$20 million of their own bonds purchased by citizens in Germany.⁵ Clearly, Americans, unhappy with neutrality, were becoming more inclined to protect their own interests and defend the just cause in the war.

4. Ross Gregory, *The Origins of American Intervention in the First World War* (NY: Norton, 1971) 43.

5. See Phyllis Keller, *States of Belonging: German-American Intellectuals and the First World War* (Cambridge: Harvard U Pr, 1979).

The American preparedness campaign, too, reflected citizens' shifting views of their nation's military strength. Before the war, most Americans wanted to restrain military spending. The 1915 US Army, "scattered mostly across isolated garrisons in the American West, had fewer than 5,000 officers and 102,000 soldiers. It had no field armies, no corps, no divisions, no brigades.... Numerically, the United States had the seventeenth largest army in the world" (125). Achieving true preparedness would require modernizing the nation's military and authorizing the funding to do so. Political and military leaders would have had a very hard time making the necessary changes to the nation's core values before 1914, but, by the end of 1915, "Preparedness became a central issue, even if there was little consensus on the details; Americans agreed on the need to prepare far more than they agreed on how, exactly, to do it" (131).

By analyzing such developments, the author reveals the range of public opinion in the United States prior to its entry into the war. But he also credits the American people with a prudent sense of agency often denied them in other accounts of World War I.

The American people had their own reasons for reacting to the war as they did, when they did. Part of a large and diverse society, they did not always agree on those reasons, but by March 1917 they had reached a remarkable degree of consensus on a few fundamental points. First, they recognized that, although the war in Europe was horrific, they felt they had no choice but to enter it to secure Europe's future, and their own as well. Europe may have been over there, but it was also close to home. During the course of three years, the two had become more connected as the safety once provided by the Atlantic Ocean vanished. Second, they collectively believed that they themselves had had little role in starting the war, hence they were acting in self-defense and in the wider interests of mankind against a German imperial government that had, in Wilson's words, gone "mad dog." Third, they agreed that their disparate ethnic identities meant less than their common identity as Americans. The war galvanized assimilation as nothing had done before. (235)

Besides the sources mentioned above, Neiberg canvasses reports, letters, and other accounts written during and right after the war. He is also plainly conversant with the relevant secondary literature, but does not place himself within any specific school of historiography. Specialists in the field, but not his envisioned popular audience, will lament the absence of a bibliography. *The Path to War* stands as a thorough, thoughtful, and lucid account of how the First World War shaped an American foreign policy consensus and defined the nation's role in the twentieth century.