



America Becomes the 'Reluctant' World Leader

The year 1917 saw America become a major player in world politics. President Woodrow Wilson had listed his Fourteen Points for world peace. The Allied powers formed a united command in the war effort under Marshal Foch. American troops began arriving in Europe under General John J. Pershing, called Black Jack, a nickname given to him when he led black troops.

As the troops arrived in Europe, they carried a new strand of influenza from Fort Riley, Kansas. The first American case diagnoses were made on March 11, 1918. The spread of the disease took the King of Spain as the first person of note to die from the disease—therefore the name Spanish influenza. At the same time, the Bolsheviks were withdrawing from the Great War to focus on grabbing power in Russia and renaming the party to the Communist Party.

Back in the United States, Congress passed a bill establishing Daylight Saving Time, which started March 31, 1918, so there would be more production time for the war effort. Congress also passed an amendment allowing women to vote, and later, the government issued its first airmail stamp on May 1, 1918, and activists formed a League to Save the Redwoods on the West Coast.

Robert Goddard demonstrated the value of rocket-propulsion solid fuel. The war ended, and the Army lost interest in aircraft. The world had turned to Woodrow Wilson and his Fourteen Points. The future of world peace took the Fourteen Points and settled on just one—Point Fourteen: to establish a League of Nations after the negotiations to write the Treaty of Versailles.

President Wilson came home to a reluctant nation that was happy to stay out of world problems. It would take another 25 years for America to step in front of the world and try to lead. America had stayed with President Washington's warning to stay out of European problems. It was with reluctance that America joined the Great War because the war came to us with the Zimmermann Note. Congresswoman Jeannette Rankin could not vote for war in 1917.

The American Congress rejected the Treaty of Versailles and signed a separate treaty with Germany. There were economic and political reasons that America did sign treaties. However, for the most part, America was an isolated nation until the Second World War.

Once again, Congresswoman Jeannette Rankin could not vote for the war that came to our shores. At the end of the war, America was the only superpower and reluctantly took up world leadership to rebuild Europe and control the spread of the Soviet Union's aggression in Eastern Europe that led to the Cold War. The Marshall Plan, Bretton Woods Conference, United Nations and Truman Doctrine were all steps making America the leader of the Western World.

The reluctance did not provide for a comprehensive plan for that leadership. The America idea that there should be an end to colonialism was sidetracked by fear of the spread of communism and other events. President Eisenhower had to step into the Mideast crisis (Suez) of 1956 and warn the French and English of serious consequences that essentially ended their rule as world powers.

World leadership has brought benefits and conflict to the world. It is still the best hope for freedom.

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