

# The History of the Twentieth Century

## Episode 142

### “Lafayette, We Are Here”

#### Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

The night before he asked Congress to declare war on Germany, President Wilson met privately with Frank Cobb, editor of the New York *World* and Presidential confidant. Cobb later described a glum President, pessimistic over what involvement in the Great War would mean for the American people and for American democracy. According to Cobb, Wilson said to him, “If there is any alternative, for God’s sake, let’s take it!”

Cobb went on to write, “Well, I couldn’t see any, and I told him so. The President didn’t have illusions about how he was going to come out of it, either. He’d rather have done anything else than head a military machine. All his instincts were against it. He foresaw too clearly the probable influence of a declaration of war on his own fortunes, the adulation certain to follow the certain victory, the derision and attack which would come with the deflation of excessive hopes and in the presence of world responsibility. But if he had it to do over again he would take the same course. It was just a choice of evils.”

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening War Theme]

Episode 142. Lafayette, We Are Here.

Nearly three years have passed since the Great War began, and in the United States, the President, Woodrow Wilson, has throughout this time been ardent in the cause of keeping the US neutral. Just months ago, he had campaigned for re-election with the slogan, “He kept us out of war.”

But war had come anyway, and Woodrow Wilson had become only the fifth President in the history of the United States to lead the nation into a war—the others being James Madison,

James K. Polk, Abraham Lincoln, and William McKinley. Of these four, the only one comparable to Wilson in his reluctance to go to war was Lincoln.

Many Americans, perhaps most, in Congress, in the press, and in the broader public, recalled Wilson's valiant efforts to stay out of the war and expected that America's war effort most likely would be merely an extension of what America was already doing. The US would likely send food, supplies, arms, and ammunition to the Allies. The US would likely increase the Allies' line of credit to finance these purchases. The US Navy could assist the Royal Navy with blockade duties and anti-submarine patrols.

But in fact, nothing about the US declaration of war against Germany requires that US soldiers be sent to the Western Front, to fight and die in the trenches. If you'll allow me to editorialize for a moment, I'm not convinced there was any need to send American soldiers to France, although admittedly I'm drawing my conclusions with the benefit of hindsight. Instead of feeding and clothing and arming and equipping its own sons, the United States could simply have shipped all that food and clothing and arms and equipment to Britain and France and told its allies to use them to support their own soldiers. Why didn't it? Why was this option never even considered?

Why am I the only one asking this question?

The truth is, Woodrow Wilson may have been a reluctant warrior, but once war was upon him, he was in it to win it. He himself used the example of Abraham Lincoln as a cautionary tale of the danger of going to war half-heartedly. He judged that a quick and decisive intervention was preferable, because it would end the bloodshed as soon as possible. And so, Wilson intended to deploy all of America's formidable resources to defeat the German Empire, and he went at it with the zeal of a crusader, from the moment war was declared.

All the way back in the first episode of this podcast, I numbered the United States as one of the world's ten Great Powers. So it was seen in 1901, and so it was seen in 1917. Still, most Europeans would have regarded the US as in the second tier of Great Powers. A useful analogy would be Japan. Japan was a Great Power, yes, but she was a regional power. Japan is the most powerful nation in East Asia, but East Asia is far away from Europe, far enough that countries like Britain and Germany would be hard pressed to project power all the way into Japan's domain. No one in 1917 believes Japan can project military power into Europe. She does have a handful of cruisers and destroyers in the Mediterranean, helping the Allies patrol for U-boats, but it's hard to imagine Japan influencing the military situation in Europe any more than that.

Similarly, the United States was seen as a regional power in the Western Hemisphere and the Pacific, able to enforce its will in Panama or Haiti, or perhaps even as far away as Manila or Beijing, but few imagined large numbers of US soldiers on European soil. But that's only because imagination has not yet caught up to reality.

In reality, the military capacity of the United States has been increasing dramatically for the past fifty years. As we've seen, twentieth century warfare is heavily dependent on numbers of soldiers and the capacity of the industrial base supplying them. In that regard, here are a few statistics. In 1870, shortly after the American Civil War and just at the time of the Franco-Prussian War, the total population of the Anglophone British Empire—by which I mean the British Isles plus Canada, Newfoundland, Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa—was about 37 million. The population of the United States was about the same. So were the populations of France and Germany. In terms of industrial output, though, Britain was the undisputed master, at about double the US industrial output, and well above her continental rivals.

By 1901, the population of France had barely risen, to 39 million. The Anglophone British Empire now numbered about 50 million, while the German Empire had a population of 56 million. But the United States now beats them all, with a population of 76 million. This extraordinary population growth was largely driven by the flood of immigration into the US during this period. And in terms of industrial output, both Germany and the United States have caught up to Britain.

At the beginning of the Great War, thirteen years later, the French population is still about 39 million. The Anglophone British Empire has reached 59 million, and Germany is up to 65 million. The United States has reached 100 million, and US industrial output is now 175% of Britain's. Or to put it another way, the United States is now the equal of Britain and France combined, in both population and industrial output, and it is significantly ahead of Germany in both categories. In fact, the United States has a larger population than any of the other belligerent nations in the Great War, with the sole exception of Russia.

I gave you my argument for not wanting to send American soldiers to France, but, as I acknowledged, I have the benefit of hindsight. The outcome of the war was still uncertain, and at this moment in history, nations don't fight wars by carefully calibrating what would be the minimum contribution they can make to ensure victory. Nations of this era fight their wars with every resource at their command.

Those population and industrial output figures I just gave you tell you right up front what the United States has to offer the Allies. I'll come back to industrial output; first, let's look at population and manpower. The good news is, the United States has a large population, and therefore a large pool of men of fighting age. Unlike Britain or France or Russia, the US has not yet depleted its manpower pool. America's strongest and best are still available, and morale is high.

On the minus side, the United States is a nation that has traditionally eschewed standing armies. The entire United States Army, including the National Guard, at this moment numbers about 300,000. By Great War standards, that is a rounding error. The US will need to bring its army up to ten times that size if it wants to play a significant role in the Great War.

The United States has never faced a challenge like this. The largest war the US has previously fought was its own civil war. In that war, the United States Army numbered about a million soldiers at its peak. Now it will have to manage a much larger number. It's not just a matter of recruitment. It's also about training and equipment. It's about feeding and housing that many soldiers, then finding a way to transport them to the Atlantic coast and then aboard ships bound for France, and figuring out what role these US soldiers are going to play once they get there, and it's about doing all this while also answering requests for food and supplies and other assistance from America's new allies.

Let's discuss these problems one at a time, beginning with recruitment. One of the first decisions that needed to be made was whether the US would rely on a volunteer army, or whether there should be a draft. Historically, the United States Army has relied on volunteers in time of war. The only exception was the Civil War. There was a draft during the Civil War. It was extremely unpopular, and perhaps more to the point, contributed few soldiers. The vast majority of soldiers who fought in the US Army during the Civil War were in fact volunteers.

The US also has a tradition of regiments raised privately, by private citizens who would then gain command over the regiment they had raised. The most famous such regiment in US history is no doubt Theodore Roosevelt's First United States Volunteer Cavalry Regiment, the famous "Rough Riders" of the Spanish-American War, episode 12, and you should not be surprised to hear that a mere four days after the declaration of war against Germany, America's number one volunteer, the great man himself, literally turned up on Woodrow Wilson's doorstep to ask permission to form a volunteer regiment to fight in France.

Theodore Roosevelt was the man Wilson had run against for President in 1912, and has been Wilson's number one critic ever since. Wilson was chilly toward him at first, but Roosevelt declared that now that the US was at war, all his previous criticisms were "dust on a windy street," as he put it. Soon Wilson and Roosevelt were laughing at each other's jokes and parted on friendly terms. Wilson said of Roosevelt afterward, "[H]e is a great big boy... There is a sweetness about him that is very compelling. You can't resist the man."

Wilson did not give a firm answer to Roosevelt's request, but three days later, the Secretary of War, Newton Baker, sent Roosevelt a letter, informing him that the Army War College was recommending against forming volunteer regiments like the one Roosevelt was proposing. Baker framed the decision as a technical one, recommended by the military professionals, but Roosevelt would always believe that Wilson had denied him the opportunity out of pure spite. There may be truth in that; there may also be truth in the accusation that Roosevelt wanted the command to boost his political profile in time for the 1920 Presidential election.

The Wilson Administration embraced the view that modern warfare required a modern draft, one that was comprehensive and fair, treating all draft-eligible young men equally, including African-Americans. A centralized draft could also more efficiently grant exemptions to young

men working in war-related industries. The worst abuse of the Civil War draft had been that it allowed substitution, that is, a man drafted could recruit or pay someone else to serve in his place. There would be no substitutions permitted under what became the Selective Service Act of 1917.

There was opposition to conscription, most notably from Champ Clark, Democratic representative from Missouri and Speaker of the House. He gave a fiery two-hour speech on the House floor against conscription, which became noted for the line: "In the estimation of Missourians, there is precious little difference between a conscript and a convict." It failed to sway many votes, and the bill passed overwhelmingly.

In the first round of draft registration, all American men between the ages of 21 and 30 were required to register by June 5. There was a certain amount of anxiety in Washington over how the American public would respond to the first-ever draft registration on this scale—about ten million young men in all. Government officials from Wilson down gave speeches, and the US government publicized the registration requirement, and in the end, it all went very smoothly.

Now, the next question: how are we going to get them to Europe and how long is this going to take? There were certainly problems. American railroads were cutthroat competitors, and it would take government intervention to persuade them to coordinate their schedules and allow trains from other companies to ride on their tracks. Once these new soldiers reach the Atlantic coast, more problems crop up.

One was a shortage of American merchant shipping. This may surprise you a bit. If you know your US history, you know that in the days of sailships, American merchant ships crisscrossed the globe. But that has changed. The Civil War took a toll on US merchant shipping, steamships made sail ships obsolete, and the rapid growth of the US population and industrial production had the effect of encouraging a focus on domestic markets rather than exports. The US government became sufficiently alarmed by this decline in merchant shipping that in 1916, a few months before America entered the war, the United States Shipping Board was created to encourage the growth of American merchant shipping. The declaration of war came only a few months later, and the Shipping Board evolved into an important wartime office that pushed a massive program of ship construction, and requisitioning of existing ships for wartime purposes. The requisitioning began with the 91 German merchant ships and passenger liners that have been interned in American waters since the war began. These were seized, and some of Germany's proudest passenger liners began second careers as American troop ships.

The other problem is the German U-boat campaign, which I'm sure you recall is in full swing right now. By autumn, though, shipping losses will begin to decline once convoys are organized. If you don't know, convoys are groups of merchant ships that travel across the Atlantic together, escorted by warships tasked with defending them against submarine attack. The British Admiralty didn't like them. Ships have to wait around for the convoy to gather and organize,

which delays the arrival of their cargo, and a convoy can only travel as fast as the slowest ship in the group, which creates further delays. The US Navy, on the other hand, badly wanted convoys, not least as a way of protecting all the millions of US soldiers projected to be traveling to Europe, and pressed the British to embrace them. As it turned out, convoys proved an effective defense against U-boats, and the numbers of ships sunk began to decline. The US Navy also dispatched 27 destroyers to the waters around the British Isles to assist in U-boat patrols.

And the next question: What role exactly will US forces play in the Great War? The British and French governments were eager to integrate American military units into their own armies on the Western Front, while Woodrow Wilson was...not. In France and Britain there was strong talk about inflicting a decisive defeat on the Central Powers and imposing harsh peace terms. Wilson remained a proponent of peace without victory. He believed that a punitive peace would plant the seeds of a future war, much in the same way that the harsh conditions imposed on France after the Franco-Prussian War of 1870 had produced hostility between France and Germany for two generations that in turn had contributed to the Great War. The United States was not going to war to assist France or Britain in a land grab; America had higher motives.

But Britain and France had their own ideas. They wanted American support on the battlefield, and they wanted it PDQ. A British delegation led by the new Foreign Secretary, Arthur Balfour, arrived in New York less than three weeks after Congress declared war, and right behind them was a French delegation, led by former prime minister and current justice minister René Viviani, and it included our old friend Marshal Joffre. The British wanted to talk about war aims, the French had more practical concerns, since, as you know, French army morale was crumbling and the ranks were growing thin.

Unfortunately for the French, the US was in no position to make a deployment of a meaningful number of soldiers this quickly. The very first soldiers of the American Expeditionary Force, or AEF, were sent to France in May. Their departure from New York and their arrival at St. Nazaire was accomplished under the strictest of secrecy, out of fear of the U-boat menace. With them went the new commander of the AEF, the now Major General John “Black Jack” Pershing.

Pershing was an obvious choice, as the US military commander with the most recent combat experience, which he had gained in Mexico last year, but there were other reasons. Most senior US military commanders took a dim view of Woodrow Wilson. They didn’t approve of the way he’d handled the 1914 and 1916 interventions in Mexico. Some thought him too slow to join the war in Europe, and while it is likely that Pershing shared many of these opinions, he was a prim man, proper and tight lipped, and careful about publicly criticizing the Commander-in-Chief, which was more than you could say for many of his peers in the US Army at that time, and so Pershing it was. He was recommended to the President by the Secretary of War, Newton Baker, and Wilson promptly agreed. Wilson and Pershing met for the first and only time on May 24. Wilson instructed Pershing to maintain the AEF as a separate force within the Allied armies in

France, but also to cooperate with the French. How to thread that particular needle was left to Pershing to work out.

Black Jack Pershing would prove to be an excellent choice for a difficult command. The United States was not a party to any formal alliance agreement with either Britain or France, but Pershing would have to balance the demands made upon him by British and French commanders, who had good reasons to want American help and want it yesterday, against his instructions from Wilson and Baker to keep the AEF a distinct force. Pershing's habit of keeping his private opinions private would serve him in good stead, as would his ferocious stubbornness. Pershing was the kind of guy who could listen thoughtfully while Allied commanders told him what they wanted of the Americans, and then go off and do things his own way anyway. Which is exactly what this situation called for.

One of the first of these US units to arrive in France was the 16<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment. On July 4, Independence Day in the United States, the Second Battalion of the 16<sup>th</sup> paraded through Paris with General Pershing in an ostentatious display meant to convey to the French that the Americans had indeed arrived. Most memorably, the Americans visited the grave of the Marquis de Lafayette where, despite what you may have heard, it was not General Pershing himself but his aide, Colonel Charles Stanton, who famously declared "Lafayette, we are here!" This is, of course, a reference to the Marquis's support during the American Revolution with the implication that the US Army was now in France to repay the debt. Colonel Stanton, by the way, was the nephew of Edwin Stanton, who had served as Secretary of War during the Lincoln Administration.

These first US regiments were collectively designated the "First Expeditionary Division," but two days later, on July 6, they would be renamed simply the "First Infantry Division." The First Division has been in existence ever since, making it in our time the oldest division in the Regular Army. It is sometimes known as "The Big Red One," after the unit's shoulder insignia, which is...a big red numeral "one."

In spite of the pageantry, even these earliest units would continue to train for more than three months in France before the First Division would take up positions in the front-line trenches. On November 2, 1917, a German raid into an Allied trench would result in the deaths of Corporal James Gresham and Privates Thomas Enright and Merle Hay, and these three soldiers would become the first American combat fatalities of the Great War.

[music: "Hail, Columbia!"]

By this time, some were already referring to the Great War as the "World War." And by the way, within months of the end of the war, there would already be a few misanthropes bandying around the phrase "First World War," which is taking a very cynical view of human nature, if you ask me. The bulk of the fighting was in Europe, but we have seen fighting in various places in

Africa, with more to come, in East Asia at Qingdao, and in the Middle East, with more to come there as well.

But with the United States gearing up to fight, now might be a good time to take a moment to talk about the Western Hemisphere generally. There was no land combat here during the Great War, but the nations of the New World played a role. Let's consider Brazil for a moment.

When the war began, Brazil declared its neutrality, as had the other nations of South America. Brazil was a nation of great inequality, with modern, even cosmopolitan, cities on the coast, but poverty and illiteracy rampant in the interior. The year 1912 saw an uprising in the rural region of the state of Paraná by peasant farmers made landless by the construction of a railroad line by American investors—there's a story we've heard before. Led by a charismatic religious leader preaching the end of the world, the displaced peasants rose up in a revolt that required most of the Brazilian Army to put down, in a conflict history knows as the *Contestado War*. This fighting was ongoing when the Great War began, so Brazil was not really in a position to get involved in a war in Europe just then.

The Brazilian economy was heavily dependent on exports, principally of coffee and to a lesser degree, rubber. The rubber boom was over by now, but rubber was still a sought-after commodity. The US was Brazil's number one market and number one source of investment income, and the war didn't change any of that, but first, the British blockade cost Brazil the German market, then the German U-boat campaign made things worse. On May 3, 1916, a Brazilian cargo ship, *Rio Branco*, was sunk by a German U-boat, which caused an uproar in Brazil, but in fact the ship had been flying a British flag and had a foreign crew and had been sunk in the declared German blockade zone, so the Brazilian government had few grounds for protest.

That changed in early 1917, when Germany declared unrestricted submarine warfare. On April 5, just as Woodrow Wilson was preparing to ask Congress to declare war on Germany, the Brazilian freighter *Paraná*, flying a Brazilian flag and carrying a cargo of coffee, was sunk in the English Channel by a German U-boat. Three of her crew died in the attack; all three were Brazilian. Thousands of Brazilians marched in protest in Rio de Janeiro and Porto Alegre. German businesses and properties were attacked. The Brazilian foreign minister, Lauro Müller, who was born in Brazil to German immigrant parents, was forced to resign in the face of these anti-German protests.

Brazil responded by breaking diplomatic relations with Germany. Over the course of 1917, more Brazilian merchant ships were attacked by U-boats. The Brazilian government retaliated by seizing the 42 German merchant ships interned in Brazilian ports. Then Brazil suffered further economic losses when the British government, in response to the U-boat threat, barred imports of non-essentials into Britain, including, unfortunately for Brazil, coffee.



Whether you want to blame that last one on the Germans or the British might be a matter of opinion, and indeed, there were counterdemonstrations in Brazil, organized by labor unions, socialists, and anarchists, opposing Brazilian involvement in the war, but the Brazilian government would declare war on Germany on October 26, despite the opposition, becoming the only South American country that would join the war. In 1918, Brazil would begin sending soldiers to France and contribute a squadron of destroyers to hunt for U-boats, although the war would end before Brazil had fully committed the land and naval forces it was preparing to deploy.

Further north, Haiti and the Central American nations would declare war on Germany in 1917 and 1918. Mexico, on the other hand, still nursing the wounds from its civil war and resentful of the Americans' two military interventions, is going to sit this one out.

And that leaves Canada. Now, Canada, as you know, went to war when Britain did because she was part of the Empire. Most English-speaking Canadians of this era did not see a conflict between being Canadian and being a subject of the British Empire. For Francophone Canadians, it was a different story. In this community, you would find a much stronger Canadian identity, distinct from either France or Britain. When the war began and the call went out for Canadian volunteers, the young men who answered that call were mostly English-speaking, and in particular, a good number of them, about half, were British-born immigrants to Canada. This is naturally the demographic group you'd expect to feel the strongest loyalty to Britain.

Canadian agriculture and industry helped feed and arm the British and French war effort, just as US agriculture and industry did, and collectively, these two North American countries were a vital part of the Allied war effort, even though one was fully committed to the war and the other neutral. Here's a statistic I think helps underscore the role of Canadian industry to the war effort. Remember that shell shortage? By 1917, one-third of the shells used by British forces in France had been manufactured in Canada.

Canadians also invested their dollars in the war effort. In 1917, these investments began to be called Victory Bonds, and they would raise close to two billion dollars for the war effort. The United States began a similar program when it joined the war, called Liberty Bonds. In the US, celebrities like film stars Charles Chaplin and Mary Pickford and the Detroit Tigers' star outfielder Ty Cobb appeared in advertisements and in person at rallies to help sell \$15 billion dollars of bonds, which funded most of the cost of the war in the US.

Then there was the issue of conscription. Conscription went relatively smoothly in the United States, as we have already seen, but it had become a contentious issue in Canada by 1917, as it would in Ireland and Australia. To understand why, you have to consider our old friend, selection bias. The most pro-British Canadian young men had already volunteered early in the war. Canadian casualties were heavy at the Battle of the Somme in 1916, and the numbers of

new volunteers were insufficient, so much so that by 1917, the Canadian government turned to conscription.

There was much opposition to conscription and nowhere more so than in the Francophone community. As I said, Francophone Canadians didn't feel the same kind of patriotic connection to either Britain or France that Anglophone Canadians did. The Canadian military's insistence on using English didn't help matters any.

Allow me to remind you of the Canadian general election of 1911, which we talked about back in episode 60. That was when the Liberal government of Wilfred Laurier was defeated by the Conservatives. One of the big issues of that election was a proposed free trade agreement with the United States, which the Conservatives attacked as a threat to Canadian independence.

Since that time, Canada has had a conservative government led by the now 62-year old Nova Scotia born Robert Borden. There should have been a general election by 1916, but it was postponed due to the war. Borden hoped to put together a national unity government with the Liberals, as had been done in Britain and France, but the Liberals, still led by Wilfred Laurier, refused to participate over the issue of conscription.

Borden formed his unity government anyway with dissident Liberals willing to split from Laurier's leadership to form what Borden called a Unionist cabinet, which went ahead and passed the conscription bill and called a general election for December 17, 1917, in the hope of consolidating the Unionist government.

The resulting election campaign was one of the most bitter in Canadian history, splitting the nation along the very sensitive linguistic divide between French- and English-speaking Canadians. Meanwhile, the Borden government was passing legislation designed to help secure an election victory. One such bill disenfranchised Canadian citizens who were recent immigrants from Germany. Another gave the right to vote to women for the first time in Canada, but only women who were mothers, daughters, wives, or sisters of men serving in Europe. A third bill allowed soldiers serving overseas to vote, and allowed the party they voted for to decide which riding to apply the vote to, which of course gave the Unionists, who got the lion's share of the military vote, the freedom to apply those votes strategically to flip marginal ridings.

The election results gave the Unionists an increased majority in Parliament, but the way the vote divided among language communities was troubling. Laurier's Liberals carried 62 out of the 65 ridings in Quebec province, while the Unionists took 150 out of 170 seats in the rest of the nation, which gives you an idea of how sharp the divide was, and the months following the election there would be political violence breaking out in Quebec.

But that is a story for another episode. We'll have to stop there for today. As always, I thank you for listening. I'd also especially like to thank Gabrielle for making a donation, and thank you, Anne, for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons help keep the words flowing

and the bits going, so if you have a few extra currency units to spare, I hope you'll consider becoming a donor or a patron. Visit the website, [historyofthetwentiethcentury.com](http://historyofthetwentiethcentury.com), to find out how, and while you're there, please leave a comment and let me know what you thought of today's episode.

And I hope you'll join me next week, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, as we return to the situation in Russia. Germany may not have the soldiers and equipment to execute a conventional military offensive against Russia, but they do have a secret weapon: Bolshevism. Disabling the Russian Colossus, next week, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. On December 6, 1917, just days before that general election, two ships collided in Halifax harbor. One of them, SS *Mont-Blanc*, a French cargo ship, was carrying a load of high explosives. It caught fire and exploded at 9:04 AM.

Now, I've used some variation of the phrase "the most powerful artificial explosion in history until this time" in a few different episodes now. But this explosion dwarfs them all. It amounted to something like 2.9 kilotons, making it three times as powerful as the 1916 Black Tom explosion in New York harbor, and this explosion will hold the title of most powerful artificial explosion ever until 1945, when nuclear weapons are developed.

It was also much more devastating than the New York harbor explosion. Exact figures are unavailable, but the explosion killed about two thousand people in and near Halifax and injured a further nine thousand. Hundreds of buildings were simply destroyed. Property damage is estimated at about C\$35 million, or about maybe US\$500 million in today's money. Making the situation worse, Halifax was hit by a heavy snowstorm the very next day. It dropped sixteen inches on the wounded town, cutting off telegraph communications and delaying the arrival of rescue workers.

Halifax was small enough that everyone who lived in or near town and wasn't killed or wounded knew someone who was. At first the explosion was thought to be German sabotage, but there was no evidence that it was anything other than a tragic accident.

In 1918, Halifax donated a Christmas tree to Boston, Massachusetts, in gratitude for the aid the city and state had given to Halifax in the aftermath of the explosion. In recent years, this has become an annual custom, with the Nova Scotia government donating a tree to Boston every year, which becomes Boston's official Christmas tree, and is decorated and displayed on Boston Common.

[music: Closing War Theme]