

America's History of Isolationism or Engagement.  
Posted On: December 31, 1969

November 11, 1918, was Armistice Day. On that date a century ago, World War I ended with a cease fire. The clear loser, Germany, collapsed in exhaustion after fighting on two fronts: France and Britain on one end and Russia on the other. The war was stalemated until the United States, very late in the war, entered on the side of France and Britain and won it. Although we do not make much of this holiday, it is still terribly important to the British and French, who lost a whole generation of young men before the war ended.

And how did it end? Britain and France punished Germany, demanding huge reparations. Germans were beggared and bitter, until the Nazi party, led by an demagogue, Adolph Hitler, won by a plurality in a democratic election, after which there were no more elections until 1945, when Germany was in ruins. One man, one vote, one time, is not a formula for happiness.

World War I also ended with the collapse of three old empires, Russian, Austro-Hungarian, and Ottoman Turk. Russia's Empire was replaced by a new empire, the USSR, which quickly absorbed most of the ethnic colonies that enjoyed a brief independence after the fall of the Russian Empire.

The Ottoman collapse gave rise to a new country, Turkey, which had cleansed itself largely of its Christian populations (Greeks and Armenians). Its former Muslim colonies, most of them Arab, struggled with self-rule, which they did very badly. They tried monarchy, dictatorships, and one (Lebanon) tried a multi-ethnic election system which also failed to work because one sect cheated.

The European countries spawned by the death of the three empires did try democratic elections, but most failed to survive, and were swallowed up by the Nazis or the USSR on the eve of World War II.

The United States, the winner of World War I, tried, under President Woodrow Wilson, to promote a vision of a world "safe for democracy" and governed by a system of laws accepted by every country, laws that would replace warfare. Unfortunately, Wilson's vision was denied by a growing desire of the American public to withdraw from the expense and bother of being the world's cop. Our withdrawal from this responsibility left a vacuum, one filled by much more evil visions.

World War I gave birth to World War II, an even more violent World War, that ended with only two great powers: the US, undamaged by that war, and the very damaged Soviet Union, which quickly swallowed up whole swaths of Europe and eyed the rest of the world hungrily. Because the US did not withdraw from its global responsibility, the USSR not only failed to conquer the world, but ultimately collapsed, leaving us the single superpower in the world.

Today, however, there are voices among us urging that we just withdraw from the job of world cop. Why spend our tax money? Why not just let the uglies, who have risen from desert sands, fight it out, or the once-more awakened Russia chop off pieces of their neighbors who were once their colonies?

Taking the long view of American history, we have been an inspiration for many and fear by tyrants that our kind of democracy might be contagious. We were isolationists between 1830-1865, primarily because the Northern senators did not want slavery extended to the Caribbean (which the Southern senators wanted). Until the issue of slavery was resolved, we had few international aspirations. This ended early in the 20th century when President Theodore Roosevelt won a Nobel Prize for mediating a peace treaty for ending the Russo-Japanese war.

With the exception of the years between World Wars I and II, when we were again isolationist, we have been the world's most essential player. Our labors have guaranteed that the world became a better place, a world largely governed by global norms, rule of law, and the rise of more people out of poverty than ever before in history.

Will we be short-sighted again and withdraw from our global responsibilities? Who might replace us as the world's champion of rule of law?

680 words

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