

# 1910 – 1920

## Major Themes:

*Election of 1912*  
*World War I*  
*Progressives at home and abroad*

## Presidencies:

*William Howard Taft (R) – 1909 – 1913*  
*Woodrow Wilson (D) – 1913 – 1921*

## Overview:

So we finally get President Taft out of the bath tub and he does get a little bit done during his Presidency. Not much, but a little. Mostly in terms of trustbusting, where he was much more aggressive than Teddy Roosevelt had been. Most notably, he breaks up the Standard Oil monopoly, which had come to control about 90% of the oil business by that time.

In 1912, he looked to be re-elected to another term against a Democrat no one was that wild about. But safe to say, Teddy Roosevelt was disappointed in Taft, who he thought, wasted most of his time in office, and let a number of progressive opportunities go by. So he decided to run against him not as a Republican, but as the nominee of the Progressive Party. To complicate things more, Eugene V. Debs ran as a socialist too, so now we had a four way Presidential race. The result was predictable: TR and Taft split the republican vote while Wilson got elected President with only 41% of the vote.

Wilson was a Progressive too, but in a different way. Anyone who read the papers in that day could tell that World War I was on the horizon. There were no less than six empires in Europe competing over resources and colonies, and by this time, they had already started to form into the two major alliances, the Central Powers (Germany, Austria-Hungary and the Ottoman Empire) and the Allied Powers (Britain, France and Russia). What you need to remember is not how the war started in Europe, but how the U.S. became involved in it.

American factories were gaining more strength even before the war started, but now that it had, Wilson proclaimed our “neutrality” even at the same time as we started to ship weapons and build ships for our friends, Britain and France. This grew into a full scale “Merchants of Death” economy, with billions of dollars of arms going overseas. That meant more jobs here at home, for better wages, and the beginnings of a middle class. Wilson got himself re-elected in 1916 on the slogan “He Kept Us Out of War,” even as he knew we were soon likely to be in it. The Germans had adopted a policy of unrestricted submarine warfare, meaning their U-Boats could shoot at any ship they believed to be carrying weapons. This meant the Sussex, and the Lusitania, two

passenger ships, would be sunk with hundreds of lives lost, many of them American. It enraged Americans and led to more support for entering the war. Most Americans were still isolationist, though. The last straw was the Zimmerman Note. Germany had grown desperate, and was now offering to Mexico financial and military help if it attacked the US to regain territory lost 70 years before. We intercepted the message and viewed it as an act of war. Just in time, as the Allies were weakening. Russia left the war in late 1917, and France and Britain found themselves alone. The US declared war and it was game on.

One of the problems Wilson faced was convincing Americans that it was a war we should fight. To help convince them, he created the Committee for Public Information (CPI), put George Creel in charge, and started to issue propaganda against the Germans. The threat was greatly exaggerated, but it worked, and Americans soon fell in line behind Wilson for the war. It took us a while to get an army together, trained and organized, so by the time we were in Europe in large numbers, the Germans were launching a last ditch offensive on the Western Front. America's main role in the war was stopping the last German attacks towards Paris. Economically devastated, Germany had to sue for peace.

Wilson had dreamed of this day when he could rush into Europe and save the day, preventing all future wars with his Fourteen Points plan for peace. He was disappointed, as Both France and Britain wanted punishment for Germany, and some wealth or colonies to show for their sacrifice. In the end, the Treaty of Versailles punished Germany harshly, especially in terms of reparations, charging Germany \$40 billion for starting the war. Only four of Wilson's points made it into the treaty, and in the end, the US Senate would not even approve it.

An important court case that would be used as a precedent later on, *Schenck vs. United States*, upheld the constitutionality of the Espionage Act, which outlawed "giving aid or comfort to the enemy." Schenck had been handing out pamphlets urging Americans not to answer the draft notices they received in the mail. Having lost the case because Schenck's actions represented a "clear and present danger to the national security of the United States", it was a ruling that would be quoted again and again, up until the present day, to give the President more power in times of national emergency.

There was some progressive progress at the time. The 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> amendments were passed for direct election of Senators, Prohibition and Women's suffrage. The 16<sup>th</sup> had been passed earlier to start an income tax, largely used to pay for the war. Women had gained their vote, finally, because of their role in society and industry during the war, working harder and better than men had in the same jobs, jobs that few of them were able to keep once the war was over.

As Wilson was fighting the Senate for passage of the treaty, we also experienced the first Red Scare in the form of the Palmer Raids. Afraid of a communist revolution in the US just as Russia had had, Attorney General Palmer deported about 900 Russians, of which virtually none were communist. It was an example of how silly and irrational America would be in the decades to come about communism's threat to the US.