

U.S. as a World Power (1898–1920)



The period from 1898 to 1920 marked the transformation of the United States from a relatively isolated, continental power into a prominent force on the global stage. Several key events—such as the Spanish-American War, the construction of the Panama Canal, the Roosevelt Corollary, and the nation’s involvement in World War I—played a significant role in this shift. These events demonstrated the United States’ increasing military, political, and economic influence across the world, fundamentally changing its role in global affairs. The period also saw the emergence of debates about American foreign policy, national security, and the country’s place in the international order, particularly concerning the Treaty of Versailles and the League of Nations.

I. Spanish-American War (1898):



A. Causes of the Spanish-American War

Imperial Ambitions:

By the late 19th century, the United States was becoming increasingly interested in imperialism, particularly the acquisition of territories overseas. This was driven by economic, strategic, and ideological considerations, as well as the desire to compete with European powers, who were expanding their empires.

The U.S. was also influenced by the notion of **Manifest Destiny**, which had previously justified westward expansion. Now, this idea evolved to suggest that the U.S. had a responsibility to spread democracy and civilization globally.

Cuban Struggle for Independence:

Cuba had been under Spanish colonial rule for centuries, and by the 1890s, Cuban rebels were fighting for independence. This rebellion, coupled with the

brutality of Spain's suppression tactics, caught the attention of the American public.

The yellow journalism of publishers like William Randolph Hearst and Joseph Pulitzer exaggerated Spanish atrocities, stirring American public opinion against Spain and pushing the nation closer to war.

The Explosion of the USS Maine:

In February 1898, the U.S. battleship USS Maine exploded in Havana Harbor under mysterious circumstances. While the cause remains debated, the American press blamed Spain, rallying public support for war with the slogan "Remember the Maine! To Hell with Spain!"

Although no definitive proof existed linking Spain to the explosion, the incident, combined with growing anti-Spanish sentiment, pushed the U.S. to declare war in April 1898.

B. Key Events of the War

Declaration of War:

On April 25, 1898, after a series of diplomatic failures, the United States declared war on Spain. The war was fought on multiple fronts, including Cuba, Puerto Rico, the Philippines, and Guam.

Battles in Cuba:

The U.S. achieved quick victories in Cuba. The most notable battle was the Battle of San Juan Hill (July 1, 1898), where Theodore Roosevelt and his Rough Riders gained fame for their charge up the hill. This helped secure the U.S. victory in Cuba.

Naval Battles:

The U.S. Navy, under Admiral George Dewey, decisively defeated the Spanish fleet in the Battle of Manila Bay in the Philippines on May 1, 1898, which led to the eventual surrender of Spain in the Pacific.

Puerto Rico and Guam:

American forces also quickly seized Puerto Rico and Guam, both Spanish territories, expanding U.S. influence in the Caribbean and the Pacific.

C. Outcomes of the War

Treaty of Paris (1898):

The war officially ended with the Treaty of Paris signed on December 10, 1898. As a result, Spain ceded control of Puerto Rico, Guam, and the Philippines to the United States. Cuba was granted independence, though the U.S. maintained significant control over Cuban affairs through the Platt Amendment (1901).

The U.S. emerged as a global power with overseas territories, signaling its new imperialist stance.

Domestic and International Impact:

The war marked the end of Spain's colonial empire and established the United States as an imperial power. The acquisition of territories like the Philippines sparked debates about imperialism and the U.S.'s role in world affairs.

This expansionism prompted opposition from anti-imperialist groups, who argued that the U.S. should focus on domestic issues and avoid entanglements abroad.

II. Panama Canal and Roosevelt Corollary: Expanding U.S. Influence

A. The Panama Canal

Strategic Importance:

The construction of the **Panama Canal** was a major U.S. project aimed at linking the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, reducing shipping times and boosting military mobility. The canal would also enhance U.S. economic and naval power.

The Canal's Construction:



Initially, the French attempted to build the canal in the 1880s under Ferdinand de Lesseps, the engineer behind the Suez Canal, but their efforts failed due to engineering difficulties and a deadly malaria outbreak.

In 1903, following a failed treaty with Colombia, the United States supported Panama's independence movement. The newly independent Panama signed a treaty with the U.S., granting the U.S. control over the **Panama Canal Zone**.

Construction of the canal began in 1904 and was completed in 1914, opening a vital maritime route that would serve U.S. and global trade and military needs.

B. Roosevelt Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine

Background:

The Monroe Doctrine (1823) had declared that the Western Hemisphere was off-limits to European colonial powers. By the early 20th century, however, there were increasing concerns about European intervention in Latin America due to debts owed by Latin American nations.

The Roosevelt Corollary (1904):

In response to these concerns, President Theodore Roosevelt announced the Roosevelt Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine in 1904. This policy asserted that the United States had the right to intervene in Latin American countries to stabilize their economies or prevent European interference.

The Roosevelt Corollary extended U.S. influence in the Caribbean and Central America, particularly in countries like the Dominican Republic and Nicaragua, where U.S. military and economic interventions became common.

Impact:

The Roosevelt Corollary marked a significant shift in U.S. foreign policy, establishing the U.S. as the dominant power in the Western Hemisphere. This interventionist stance laid the foundation for later U.S. actions in Latin America during the 20th century.

III. World War I (1914–1918): U.S. Entry and Role in the War

A. Causes of World War I

Militarism, Alliances, Imperialism, and Nationalism (MAIN):

The war's underlying causes included militarism (arms buildup), alliances (competing European powers), imperialism (competition for colonies), and nationalism (ethnic tensions and national pride).

The Spark: Assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand:

The immediate cause of World War I was the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne, by a Serbian nationalist in June 1914. This event triggered a series of alliances and declarations of war across Europe.

B. U.S. Entry into World War I

Neutrality at First:

Initially, the U.S. sought to remain neutral, following a tradition of avoiding entanglement in European conflicts. President Woodrow Wilson promoted the idea of “neutrality” in both thought and action.

Factors Leading to U.S. Involvement:

German unrestricted submarine warfare: Germany's decision to resume unrestricted submarine warfare, including attacks on civilian ships like the Lusitania (1915), which killed 128 Americans, pushed the U.S. closer to war.

The Zimmermann Telegram: In 1917, British intelligence intercepted a German telegram to Mexico promising military aid in regaining lost territories (Texas, New Mexico, Arizona) if Mexico sided with Germany against the U.S. This further swayed public opinion in favor of war.

Declaration of War:

On April 6, 1917, President Wilson asked Congress to declare war on Germany, citing the need to make the world “**safe for democracy.**” The U.S. joined the **Allied Powers**, including the United Kingdom, France, and Russia, against the Central Powers (Germany, Austria-Hungary, and the Ottoman Empire).

C. U.S. Role in the War

Military Contributions:

The U.S. provided significant manpower, resources, and financial support to the Allies. Approximately 2 million American troops served in Europe, primarily under the command of General John J. Pershing in the American Expeditionary Force (AEF).

The U.S. played a critical role in the Battle of Belleau Wood, Second Battle of the Marne, and the Meuse-Argonne Offensive, where American forces helped turn the tide in favor of the Allies.

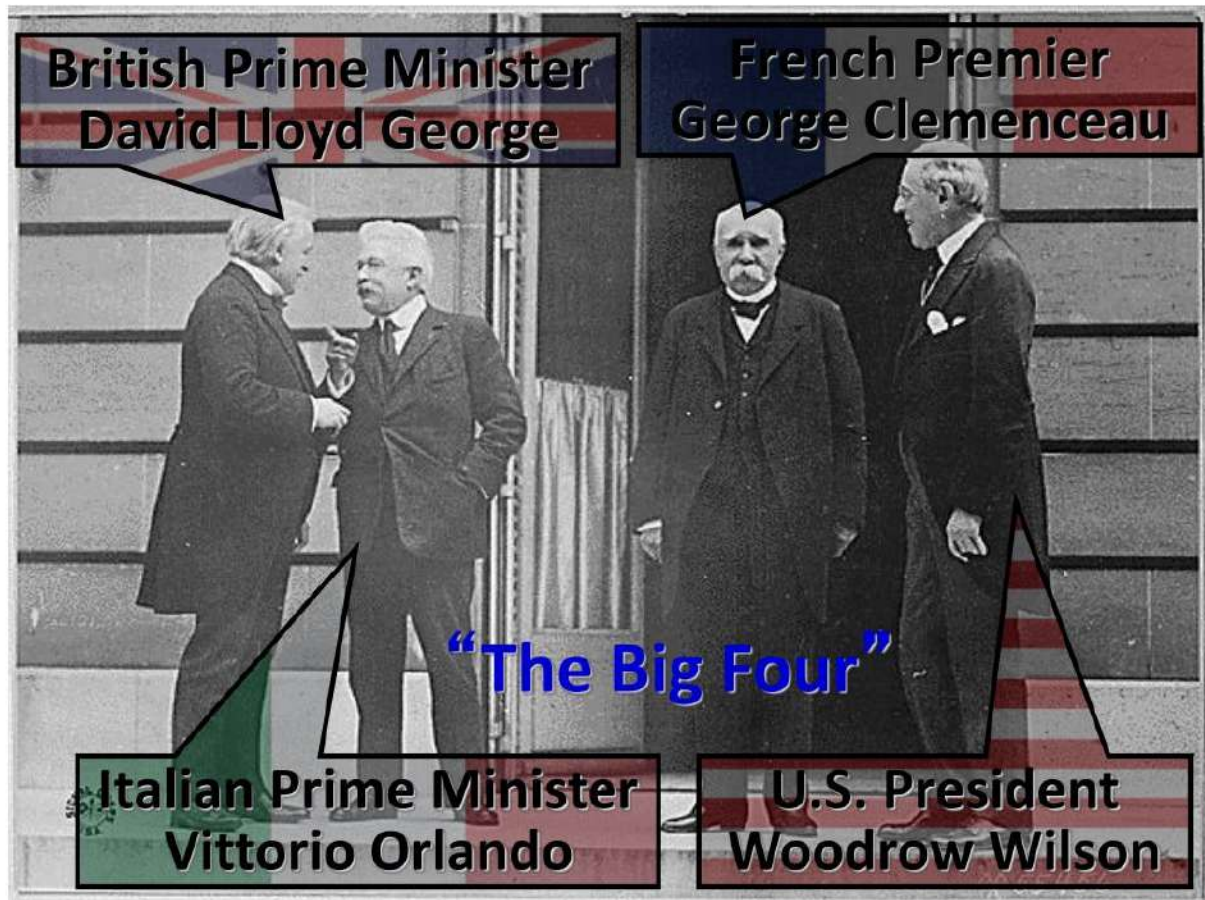
Economic Contributions:

U.S. factories produced war materials and foodstuffs for the Allies, helping to sustain their war effort while also stimulating the American economy. U.S. loans to the Allies helped finance their war effort.

Casualties and Impact:

The U.S. suffered approximately 116,000 deaths during the war, many of which were due to the 1918 influenza pandemic, which also spread rapidly among troops.

IV. Treaty of Versailles and League of Nations Debate



A. Treaty of Versailles (1919)

Peace Negotiations:

The Treaty of Versailles officially ended World War I. The peace conference was dominated by the “Big Four”: Woodrow Wilson (U.S.), David Lloyd George (Britain), Georges Clemenceau (France), and Vittorio Orlando (Italy).

Wilson advocated for a 14-point plan to create a just and lasting peace, emphasizing self-determination, freedom of the seas, and the establishment of the League of Nations. However, most European leaders were more focused on punishing Germany for its role in the war.

Key Provisions:

Germany was forced to accept full responsibility for the war and pay heavy reparations. It lost territories and had its military greatly restricted.

New national boundaries were drawn in Europe, with new nations like Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia created from former empires.

The League of Nations was established as part of the treaty, aiming to promote collective security and prevent future conflicts.

B. League of Nations Debate

Opposition in the U.S. Senate:

Despite Wilson's efforts, the Treaty of Versailles and the League of Nations faced strong opposition in the U.S. Senate. Many senators, particularly Republicans led by Henry Cabot Lodge, feared that joining the League would undermine U.S. sovereignty and entangle the country in European conflicts.

Failure to Ratify the Treaty:

The U.S. ultimately did not ratify the Treaty of Versailles and did not join the League of Nations. This marked a significant moment in American foreign policy, as the U.S. retreated from internationalism and returned to a more isolationist stance.

Conclusion

From 1898 to 1920, the United States emerged as a global power, shifting from an isolated nation to one with significant military, economic, and political influence. The Spanish-American War, the construction of the Panama Canal, and the involvement in World War I reshaped U.S. foreign policy, establishing the nation as a key player in international affairs. The debates surrounding the Treaty of Versailles and the League of Nations highlighted the tension between isolationism and global leadership, a theme that would continue to influence U.S. policy throughout the 20th century.