

**AMERICA MOVES  
FORWARD**

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Gerald W. Johnson***

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FORWARD

by

*Gerald W. Johnson*

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*America Moves Forward*



“The only limit to our realization of tomorrow will be our doubts of today. Let us move forward with strong and active faith.”

*From Franklin Delano Roosevelt's last speech, written the day before he died.*



## CHAPTER ONE

# *“Safe for Democracy”*

ON APRIL 6, 1917, the day when the United States entered World War I, the course of American history turned in a new direction, the third since the colonists landed at Jamestown in 1607. At first we had had to clear away the forests, build houses, and plant fields, to make the country fit for civilized people. The work was not finished for a great many years, and it was the chief thing we had in mind up to the time of the Revolution. After Great Britain admitted that we were independent, in 1783, we had on our hands the problem of making first the thirteen states, and later the vast territory between them and the Pacific Ocean, into a nation. The great Civil War was a part of this process. Since 1917 we have had an entirely different kind of job on our hands. World War I thrust upon the United States the duties of a Great Power, in wealth the greatest

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in the world, and in military strength very great, perhaps the greatest.

When Woodrow Wilson became President of the United States on March 4, 1913, he had no idea that in less than two years a terrible war would break out in Europe. Neither did any other Americans except a handful of people, some in the State Department, others newspaper correspondents who had spent years in Europe, and still others men who had been doing business in Europe and therefore had to know what was going on there. Even these, who knew there was danger of war, never guessed how long and terrible the war would be.

In 1913 seven great empires ruled most of the world. They were Great Britain, Germany, Russia, Austria-Hungary, Turkey, Japan, and France, which although a republic at home held imperial colonies in Africa and Southeast Asia.

The war began in 1914 as a fight between the Central Powers — the German, Austro-Hungarian, and Turkish empires — on one side, and the Allies — the British, French, and Russian empires — on the other. Later the kingdom of Italy joined the Allies, and still later the empire of Japan did also.

Wilson's first thought was that the United States

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must by all means be kept out of the war, and he dropped almost everything else to work at the job of keeping us out. For more than two years he succeeded, but it was an impossible job, and a great many Americans realized that it was impossible long before Wilson would admit it. So they began to abuse him for wasting time trying to do what couldn't be done. Theodore Roosevelt, especially, was indignant. He accused Wilson of cowardice and said he was actually helping the Central Powers by stalling along instead of acting.

If the war had been only a fight among rival empires, we might have kept out of it. But it was more than that. It was a sign that the whole imperial system was going to pieces. That meant that some other system would have to be set up, and Wilson finally realized the United States had to be part of any new system. The question was, then, which of the fighters in Europe, the Central Powers or the Allies, would be more likely to join in setting up the kind of system we could accept.

There wasn't much doubt about that. The Central Powers were led by the German empire, and the German empire was led by men who believed in the imperial system and could not see that it was falling down. If they won, they would insist on carrying

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things along in the old way, and the old way was bound to end by setting up one great tyranny that would rule the world.

It wasn't the invasion of Belgium or the sinking of the *Lusitania* or the torpedoing of American ships that made Wilson decide on war. All these things he regarded as wrongs, but they were the kind of wrongs for which the wrongdoer could make amends. But to make the world a place in which no free republic could exist except armed to the teeth and ready to fight at any instant was a wrong for which there could be no amends. It would be the end of American liberty.

When Wilson was completely convinced of this, he knew that the United States could no longer remain neutral. On April 2, 1917, he went before Congress and asked it to declare war against Germany. "The world must be made safe for democracy," he said. "Its peace must be planted upon the tested foundations of political liberty. We have no selfish ends to serve. We desire no conquest, no dominion. . . . The day has come when America is privileged to spend her blood and her might for the principles that gave her birth and happiness and the peace which she has treasured. God helping her, she can do no other."

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The part the United States played in the war was short, lasting only nineteen months, but it was sharp and it decided the victory. All the experts knew in 1917 that if a strong American Army landed in France to help the French and British, the Germans could not possibly stop it. But they did not believe that such an army would ever get there. That was their mistake.

At that time the American Army consisted of about a hundred thousand full-time soldiers, with about twice as many members of the National Guard, who had learned most of what they knew about soldiering by guarding the Mexican border. The British and French generals believed that the Americans could be made into good soldiers, but they thought it would take British and French officers to do it. So they wanted our men to join the British and French divisions commanded by British and French generals.

Woodrow Wilson did not believe that we could fight a war that way, and still less did John Joseph Pershing, the General sent over to command the American troops. The soldiers called General Pershing Black Jack, but behind his back. Nobody dared speak disrespectfully of the General to his face. He was a man who had very little to say, but

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he knew what he meant to do and how he meant to do it, and he allowed nobody to interfere.

He was willing to let the British and French tell him where to fight, but not how to fight, and when he took his men into battle he was going to command them himself. He made that very plain at the start and it set off a great argument at the headquarters of the Allies. When the British and French could do nothing with Pershing, they went over his head and appealed to the President, who is the Commander in Chief of all American armed forces, and can give orders even to generals. Wilson said the American Army must be commanded by an American general.

This decision was important for several reasons. In the first place, it encouraged General Pershing. In the second place, it encouraged the American soldiers, who didn't want to fight under foreign officers. In the third place, it gave our officers of high rank a chance to learn how to handle armies bigger than any American general had ever commanded before.

When we declared war on April 6, 1917, a few Americans were much alarmed, believing that the Germans would beat us easily, but that idea never entered the minds of the vast majority. The great

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offensive began in 1918 — British on the left, French in the center, Americans on the right — and crashed through the German lines so fast that they sued for an armistice, and fighting ended on November 11, 1918. Most Americans were not at all surprised. It was just what they expected.

But all Europe was astonished, because our success upset two ideas that most Europeans had accepted, one about war, the other about Americans.

The idea about war was that no nation could have a really good army without having a great many men who had spent a large part of their lives studying war — what is called a warrior class — and the Americans had never had anything of the kind. We had a few thousand officers, most of them educated at West Point and other military schools. We had a larger number of enlisted men, who had spent many years in the regular Army, but nowhere near enough to fight a great war. In 1917 it was known that we would have to create a large Army very rapidly, and it was believed that an Army created rapidly could not be much good on the actual field of battle.

The foreign idea about Americans was that we were not really a nation, but a mixture of many nations loosely held together. In 1917 nearly fifteen

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per cent of our people had been born in some other country, and twenty per cent more were children of people born in other countries; that meant that more than a third of all Americans were either foreign-born or the children of foreign-born parents. Many Europeans believed that a man born in, say Germany, was still a German, although he might have lived many years in the United States, and that even his son would not be loyal to the United States in a fight with Germany.

But it wasn't so. The vast majority of American citizens born in Germany — or in Italy or in Russia or in any other country — had become completely American, as far as loyalty in wartime was concerned. It was hard on them, especially on those who had relatives and friends still living in Europe, but most of them met the test, and those who didn't were quickly rounded up by the police.

So for the first time Europe learned that the word *American* means something more than merely one who lives in this country. It means a kind of man who is really different from the European kind, even though he may have been born in Europe.

Everyone could see that we were a very large nation. Everyone knew that we were active in business and skillful at making all kinds of things.

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Everyone knew that we had a continent capable of producing much wealth, and that by work and skill we had produced it. But not until we enrolled, trained, and equipped four million men with amazing speed and transported half of them across the Atlantic, did the rest of the world realize that not only were we a real nation, but a Great Power, as dangerous to attack as any in the world.

If Pershing had not been determined that the Americans should fight under their own officers, in their own Army, nobody would have seen this. Even if the American soldiers had fought well, Europe would have believed that it was because they had European officers. That is why his decision was more important than anyone knew at the time. It made the rest of the world look at America in a different way.

The defeat of the Central Powers at the end of 1918 meant that the whole idea of empire had been defeated. Empire is the notion that any nation is entitled to rule as much of the earth's surface as it can control. That had been the rule by which nations had always acted. In ancient times, for example, it was regarded as right and proper for Rome to rule the world, or as much of the world as she wanted to rule. This was called the right of

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conquest, and it was the right by which white men took North and South America from the Indians. Some people never admitted that it was a right at all, but most did, and that is the way the world was run. As time passed, the right of conquest appeared less and less justified. But all the great nations held some areas that they had taken, simply because they were strong enough. Even the United States had been holding the Philippine Islands, ever since the war with Spain. We told the world, and we told ourselves, that we had taken them because Spain was ruling them badly, and that we would release them as soon as the Filipinos had learned to govern themselves. In fact, we did this twenty years later.

In 1918 Wilson knew that beating the Central Powers was only the smaller part of the job that the United States and other civilized nations had on their hands. The larger part was setting up something in place of the imperial system that had broken down. Very few Americans realized this.

It must be remembered that Wilson knew a great deal more about the world situation than any other American. A President of the United States always knows more than anybody else about what is going on in the world. The reason is plain — the President has thousands of people, scattered all over,

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whose business it is to know what is going on in the place where they are, and to send that information to him.

There was a good deal Wilson knew that he could not tell the people, partly because it might have been misunderstood, partly because telling it would have helped our enemies or hurt our friends. Besides, from the moment we declared war the President’s time was so occupied with endless pressing decisions that there was little opportunity for him to explain to the American people what he felt must be done after the war.

One of the hundreds of decisions the wartime President had to make, for example, concerned a plan suggested by some of our admirals. They believed that we could bottle up the German submarines by laying mine fields in the rather shallow water of the North Sea. Most of the British admirals thought this wouldn’t work, and if it didn’t it would be a frightful waste of time and money, to say nothing of the danger of blowing up a lot of innocent Swedish and Norwegian ships. So the decision was put up to Wilson, and he said do it. It worked, and shortened the war; but if it had been a mistake we might not have won at all.

In any case, it would have been very difficult in

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1918 to convince the American people that winning the war was not the important thing; that setting up a new system to replace imperialism was far more important. American soldiers were being killed by thousands. The people at home were working their heads off turning out guns and ammunition and food and uniforms and all the many other things that an army must have. Nearly everybody had a son or brother or at least a nephew or a cousin fighting somewhere, and every time they saw a telegraph messenger they were afraid he might be bringing terrible news. How could they believe anything could be more important than the war?

The remarkable thing is that the American people did become almost convinced. Wilson had some able helpers, many of them members of the opposition party. One was the very man whom Wilson had defeated in 1912, William H. Taft. Because he had been President himself, Taft understood better than most people what Wilson was talking about. He went up and down the country making speeches, saying that while he did not pretend to like Wilson, in this matter the man was right. It was a fine and honorable thing for Taft to do.

Finally, it became plain that the German

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submarine campaign had failed. The American Army in France was already big, and more troops were pouring in; in one month they came at the rate of ten thousand a day, and the Navy guarded them so well that not a man was killed by the submarines on the way over. Then Germany in a roundabout way asked on what terms America would make peace. Wilson did not reply directly. Instead, he made a speech to Congress in which he named fourteen things that would have to be done before this country would stop fighting. These were the famous Fourteen Points on the basis of which the Central Powers at last gave up.

Most of these demands were what everybody expected — the Germans must lay down their arms, get out of France and the other countries they had invaded, admit the independence of Poland, and so forth. The new and extremely important points provided that a new system should be set up to replace imperialism. This system would be exactly opposite to the idea of empire. It was to be based on the idea that no nation should rule any territory simply because it was strong enough to do so, but only by consent of the people living there.

This came to be called the Doctrine of Self-Determination, and it is often said to be Wilson’s

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idea, but it wasn't. It was nothing but a different way of saying what the Declaration of Independence had said eighty years before Woodrow Wilson was born. The Declaration had said that governments derive "their just powers from the consent of the governed." So the Fourteen Points was a proposal that the whole world adopt this old American idea.

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