

In What Ways Did World War One Impact American Society?

World War One changed the lives of America socially, politically and economically. The war had a massive impact on almost every aspect of society, particularly women, workers and minorities.

The American public felt a great sense of nationalism and patriotism during the war as they were unified against a foreign threat. However, it also led to constant scrutiny and racial prejudice against minority groups such as the South Eastern Europeans. President Wilson had predicted that if the United States entered the war, a wave of intolerance would sweep through the nation and he turned out to be all too prescient. The loyalty of German immigrants was questioned by the general public, which consisted mainly of the original white English protestant settlers. Almost as soon as the United States entered the conflict, mobs forced German institutions and organisations to close. The Committee on Public Information (CPI), a government propaganda agency, produced a vast number of films, posters, pamphlets and books that stimulated animosity toward Germans.

The 'Red Scare' was a consequence of American socialists and anarchists opposition to U.S entry into the war. The infamous arrest of Sacco and Vanzetti had coincided with period of the most intense political repression in American History. The unjust detainment of these two Italian anarchists made an immense impact on American society. Neighbours suspected and reported each other for being communists as everybody was looking at each other as a possible threat to their supposedly democratic society. 60,000 workers went on strike in Seattle; Washington in 1919 further increasing the fear of bolshevism. Part of the reason for the strike was that wages were lowered for workers during the war because of the patriotic idea that everyone should be sacrificing for the country during wartime. Their strike was considered to be 'Bolshevik inspired' and it is speculated that many of the prime organizers of the strike were arrested and deported without trial under an American conspiracy to wipe out communist ideas. Generally, the strikes were ineffective for the workers.

Before the war, Wilson and Gompers (Head of Labour) worked closely together and managed to prevent strikes. But labour soon fell apart afterwards. There were many divisions, socialists, communists and radicals and they each tried to influence politics through local government. Workers realised that they were much more valuable and were essential for America to go to war as there was an increased demand for unskilled labour. This was because of the newfound technology of mass production. Blacks, women and other immigrants filled slots in the work place and consequently these groups had more income. However, there was a sharp recession after the war as the need for war materials stopped and Europe's industry picked up again. This caused unemployment to rise especially for unionised workers. Industrialists did not agree with craft modelled unions and backed by the new republican government, they simply fired all workers who went on strike. The idea of a "closed house" where union membership for worker was necessary was crushed by large businesses. The new set up of "welfare capitalism" which was more beneficial and appealing to the workers, than union membership. This eventually resulted in the unions being dissolved by 1925.

Tension and race riots between African Americans and White Americans increased rapidly during the war years of 1917-1919. Many Americans felt that African Americans ex slaves and other immigrants were inferior. Acts such as the Quota act in May 1921 tied immigration to 3% of the 1919 population. Asian immigration was considered a huge 'problem' in the west coast. Immigrants were completely unprotected from government. The re-emergence of the Ku Klux Klan and the support it was given by senior officials in government and businesses, led to an 'institutionalised' racism. As President Woodrow Wilson stated that he was fighting for democracy it gave hope for African Americans and other minority groups. Although they continued to be shunned by society, the government theoretically issued them equal rights. Although in practice, this was not the case.

As a result of men fighting, women were recruited to do men's jobs and their status in society was realised as they proved they could do equally demanding jobs as men. Women pushed their suffrage movement that started in Seneca Falls in 1848 even more during this period. They used and ridiculed Wilson's hypocritical view of fighting for democracy but still denying the vote to half its citizens as a key argument. They also attempted to justify themselves by saying that 'inferior' races such as African American men had been given the right to vote. Women were given the right to vote on August 18th 1920. However, this did not change the mentality of women in society very much as they tended to vote with their husbands or not vote at all. This was mainly because the viewpoint that women belonged at home and were inferior to men was still deeply rooted in American society.

Economically, the U.S.A benefited from the war in Europe. America sold food, munitions and medicine to Britain and the allies and this led to a boom in the economy. Financial aid and loans were also given to the belligerents. Agricultural prices boomed and farmers benefited due to the lack of competition and for supplying the whole of Europe as well as America. Government incentives encouraged farmers to produce even more. However, farmers and the agricultural industry suffered heavy cut backs because of the added competition from South America, deflationary federal reserve policies and a lesser demand for American goods from Europe. The end of the war period had cause a recession for them and a large portion of American society involved in farming had become bankrupt.

The war led to an expansion and increase in the federal government's power. Between 1921 and 1933, the Republican Party dominated American political life. . During the Republican Ascendancy 1921-29, there were three presidents. A classic president from this period was "silent Cal", Calvin Coolidge (1924-28), who believed that there was no reason for him to intervene except to veto suggestions from men in congress more active than him. No president during this period intervened to defend the rights of the workers or any other vulnerable members of society. Middle class Americans supported this 'new' policy and they had a clear majority in the poles. Presidents such as Coolidge were simply popular to the majority because kept taxes and interest rates low as the cost of war caused the standard of living for the middle class to drop drastically.

In conclusion, World War One had a massive impact on America from 1917 onwards and was the basis for many reformations and changes in American society.