

Progress and 'relapse' The Century and World War I: The *Century* and World War I

by [Mark Toulouse](#) in the [March 8, 2000](#) issue

Before the outbreak of World War I, the *Century*, not unlike many other American journals, regularly expressed an idealistic and basically isolationist position when considering America's role in the world. In this approach, the magazine reflected the attitudes of Presidents William Howard Taft (1909-1913) and Woodrow Wilson (1913-1921), both idealists who were shaped by the period of isolation enjoyed by America before the Spanish-American War of 1898. *Century* editorials challenged the politics of power and claimed that war could never be as productive as a policy of enlightened diplomacy.

It is not surprising, therefore, that the editors were reluctant to endorse the aims of either side of the "Pan-European" war as it developed in the summer of 1914. Nations on both sides possessed imperialistic reasons for entering the conflict, the editors explained, and none of them were worth defending. The cause of God could not be linked with either side. There simply was "no worthwhile moral issue at stake" (October 8, 1914).

Editor Charles Clayton Morrison assumed throughout 1914 and 1915 that the U.S. would not get involved in the war. "The war is in Europe, not here," declared an early editorial, "and we have no moral right to let it come here" (October 15, 1914). The interests of the church, however, were inescapably wrapped up in the conflict. This terrible conflict existed between Christian countries. "It is a solemn hour for the Church," which "smitten in its conscience with the sight of its own sons slaying one another, cannot help asking whether it has taught and trained these sons aright" (September 17, 1914). Only 14 years had passed since editors proclaimed the dawning of the "Christian century," and now Christians were killing one another for reasons no one in the editorial offices believed anyone could justify. In light of the *Century's* belief in human progress, it makes sense that editors would choose to use

the term “relapse” to describe the unspeakable “evil” associated with the war. While the editors struggled with the notion of progress because of the war, they did not lose their faith in its importance as a driving force within history. The war had to be interpreted in light of how God would use it to bring about progress for both the human race and religion.

Throughout the fall of 1914, the *Century* lamented the “staggering blow” the war dealt to Christian missions. Millions of dollars throughout the world were poured into war equipment while religious and philanthropic causes suffered. Editorials encouraged members of the American church to step up giving to missions and expressed confidence that the Western obsession with armaments would ultimately collapse, along with war, “through its own crushing costs, its horrible tragedies, and its merciless defiance of Christian virtue” (October 15, 1914).

In 1915 the editors mounted their own battle of words against the “militarists” who preached preparedness for war. Since Wilson resisted these militarists for most of that year, praise for the patience and wisdom of the “Christian president” regularly appeared. Though the editors did not consider themselves pacifists, they expressed disappointment in November when Wilson, now dubbed “The Lost Leader,” “so completely surrendered to political exigency” that he went “over to the camp of the militarists” (November 18, 1915). The *Century* repeatedly registered disagreement with the administration’s new policy of military preparedness.

Beginning with the sinking of the *Lusitania* in 1915, *Century* editorials began to reflect a subtle preference for the Allied Forces. By February 1917, the editors entertained for the first time the actual likelihood of war with Germany and urged American Christians to avoid jingoism. While urging America’s continued neutrality in the war, Alva Taylor conceded, “If we must fight, let it be for humanity and international law and not for any cause that is so intimately tied up with territorial aggression” (March 8, 1917). Though they could not support the expansionistic goals of many of the Allies, the editors often emphasized that war brought great changes in the world, many of which opened new doors of opportunity for the expansion of Christianity.

Once Wilson declared war, the *Century* offered complete support for the American war effort. The lead editorial after the president’s declaration cautioned against excess emotion and hatred while urging all Christians to “give up comfort for the sake of the nation” (April 12, 1917). Whereas before American entry the editors

questioned the war's moral credibility, in the months following they extolled its moral standing as the war "freeing our world from despotism" (May 10, 1917), the war waged "in behalf of democracy" (May 17, 1917) and the "war to end war" (June 21, 1917). Earlier concerns about Christians fighting Christians disappeared and were replaced by pleadings that members of the church do their part to win this war, as if true Christians could support only one side of the war effort.

Editorials condemned "slackers" in the church who refused to support the national effort and revealed little tolerance for those who chose the route of conscientious objection. "Shall we be 'conscientious objectors,'" one editorial asked, "or 'loyal Americans'" (June 7, 1917)? The possibility of both/and did not enter their minds. Christians needed to "fight or give" (June 28, 1917), sing "America" in worship (May 30, 1918) and buy liberty bonds (September 26, 1918).

In spite of its extensive support for the war effort, the *Century* did not exhibit an uncritical jingoism. The editors criticized British imperial aims, urged the church to do its part to keep down an "unreasoning hatred" of the enemy, criticized those who attached millennial interpretations to the war, and offered the theological judgment that war is waged properly only when it destroys evil systems rather than human beings. In its self-defined role as "interpreter," the *Century* emphasized that the war was not against the German people, whom God dearly loved, but rather against their government and the leaders who worked against their best interest. The church that "sees this war as another crucifixion of her Lord, a fresh and infamous putting of Him to an open shame, will not go into battle with the light heart of a jingo, but with a grief and tragedy of soul more poignant [by] far than the wounds and deaths of the battlefield" (December 13, 1917).

After the war, the editors declared, "It was God who united the conscience of the world against a proud and brutal power" (November 14, 1918). They warned Americans against the temptation to punish the German people and warned Wilson against politicizing the League of Nations. With prophetic insight, the *Century* denounced the Treaty of Versailles: "America has now become involved in the common guilt of Europe for a world scheme which produced Prussianism and which, unregenerated by the fires of war, is in a way to produce another Prussia and another debacle like the one we have just passed through" (September 18, 1919).

Later, they criticized Wilson, on the one hand, for trading "his support of the shameless treaty all too cheaply" (February 5, 1920) and, on the other, for failing to

make the political compromises at home necessary to bring America into the League of Nations (April 1, 1920). Alva Taylor analyzed the partisanship that kept America out of the league (December 2, 1920) but did not recognize how the *Century's* own approach to the war may have contributed to creating the cultural context that prevented America from being able to assume its place among the league's members.

During U.S. involvement in 1917 and 1918, the *Century*, following Wilson's lead, emphasized idealistic motivations for the war and advocated the formation of the League of Nations to enforce the peace. Like Wilson, the editors rarely addressed how potential German control of the Atlantic would threaten the national interests of the U.S. In the end, the failure to sell the war as a necessary response to the real national and economic threat foreshadowed Wilson's difficulty in selling the idea of the league at home. If the league had been promoted as a necessary vehicle to safeguard the American interests secured by the war, Congress might have passed some version of it. Instead, Wilson's moralistic and idealistic vision attached to both the war and the league failed to provide a compelling rationale for a long-term American commitment to enforcing peace in Europe. The lack of a clearly articulated foreign policy in defense of national interests during the war kept Americans from seeing how badly American security needed what Britain and France could provide after the war, and how closely American interests were connected to European problems.