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Introduction by Ross Kennedy

Justus D. Doenecke. *Nothing Less Than War: A New History of America's Entry into World War I*. ISBN: 978-0-8131-3002-6 (cloth, printed on demand, \$40.00); 978-0-8131-3003-3 (PDF, \$40.00); 978-0-8131-4027-8 (EPUB, \$40.00).

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Introduction by Ross Kennedy, Illinois State University

Few episodes in the history of American foreign policy have been as controversial as Woodrow Wilson's approach to World War One from 1914 to 1917. To revisionist historians in the 1920s and 1930s, emotional sympathies for Great Britain and pressure from U.S. banks and corporations led Wilson to align America with the Allies – a disastrous course, in their view, that produced a needless war with Germany.¹ To 'realists' in the 1950s, Wilson foolishly ignored American security interests in the European conflict, preferring instead to base his policies on abstract legal and moral principles. Consequently, he failed to educate the American people about their nation's stake in the world's balance of power and left them ill-prepared to act responsibly in international politics.² Other scholars, like Arthur S. Link and John Milton Cooper, Jr., have vigorously defended Wilson's policies in the neutrality period. They argue that Wilson rightly saw that America's interest lay in remaining as neutral as circumstances permitted while promoting a 'peace without victory' that might lead to the reform of the international system.³

Justus D. Doenecke's *Nothing Less Than War: A New History of America's Entry into World War I* is a welcome addition to this long-running scholarly debate. It provides a detailed and exhaustive overview of all of the major events and decisions associated with Wilson's policies during the neutrality period. In his engagingly-written book, Doenecke covers not only well-known incidents such as the sinking of the *Lusitania*, but also topics less frequently addressed in the literature. These include American views of Turkey's massacre of Armenian civilians and early Congressional debates over the possibility of instituting an arms embargo against the European belligerents. Doenecke is particularly concerned with explaining the perspectives of a wide range of Americans as the war unfolded. He examines an impressive sample of press outlets, lobbying groups, opinion journals, and political factions and parties. Finally, Doenecke frequently sums up the historiography concerning significant policies and offers his own critique of Wilson's statecraft, suggesting that the president paid too little attention to the role of force in international diplomacy.

The reviewers agree that Doenecke's book is deeply researched, very readable, and thought-provoking. Rodney Carlisle notes several "counterfactual" arguments that are implied in Doenecke's narrative, such as the possibility that greater military preparedness would have enhanced America's ability to resist challenges to its neutral rights and thus increased its chances of staying out of the war. Robert Hannigan praises the extensive treatment Doenecke provides of the American reactions to the attack on the *Lusitania*, the

¹ See C.H. Grattan, *Why We Fought* (Vanguard, 1929); Walter Millis, *Road to War, 1914-1917* (Houghton Mifflin, 1935); Charles C. Tansill, *America Goes to War* (Little Brown, 1938).

² See George F. Kennan, *American Diplomacy* (Chicago, 1951); Robert E. Osgood, *Ideals and Self-Interest in America's Foreign Relations: The Great Twentieth-Century Transformation*, (University of Chicago Press, 1953).

³ See John Milton Cooper, Jr., *Woodrow Wilson: A Biography* (Knopf, 2009); Arthur S. Link, *Woodrow Wilson: Revolution, War, and Peace* (Harlan Davidson, 1979).

preparedness movement, and the renewal of the submarine crisis with Germany in early 1917. J. Simon Rofe similarly applauds Doenecke's detailed descriptions of the foreign and domestic circumstances in which President Wilson made his policy choices.

Carlisle and Hannigan do have some criticisms of the book, however. Carlisle thinks that Doenecke pays insufficient attention to the details of Germany's attacks upon U.S. merchant ships in early 1917, details which were crucial to the issues of international law that were connected with Wilson's decision to go to war. Hannigan suggests that Doenecke gets too absorbed in chronicling the views of Wilson's contemporaries and of later historians; he wishes the author had provided more of his own interpretation of the factors that lay behind American policy. Hannigan argues that historians might benefit by relating Wilson's choices to the broader goals in American foreign policy that had taken shape in the twenty years before the war started. This "longer view" of the neutrality period, he asserts, would reveal that Wilson favored Britain in the war not out of "Anglophilia," but because he did not want Germany to threaten a British-ordered international system that essentially accommodated the rising power of the United States.

Participants:

Justus D. Doenecke is Professor Emeritus of History at New College of Florida. He received his B.A. from Colgate University (1960) and Ph.D. from Princeton University (1966). Among his books are *In Danger Undaunted: The Anti-Interventionist Movement of 1940-1941 as Revealed in the Papers of the America First Committee* (1990); *From Isolation to War, 1931-1941* (with John E. Wilz, 3rd ed.; 2002); *Storm on the Horizon: The Challenge to American Intervention, 1939-1941* (2000); *Debating Franklin D. Roosevelt's Foreign Policies* (with Mark A. Stoler, 2005); and *Nothing Less Than War: A New History of American Entry into World War I*, scheduled for March 2011. He is currently writing a study on American debates concerning US engagement in World War I, the Paris Peace Conference, the League fight, and the 1920 presidential election.

Ross A. Kennedy is Associate Professor of History at Illinois State University. He is the author of *The Will to Believe: Woodrow Wilson, World War I, and America's Strategy for Peace and Security* (2009) and the editor of *A Companion to Woodrow Wilson* (Wiley-Blackwell, forthcoming).

Rodney P. Carlisle is Professor Emeritus from Rutgers University, The State University of New Jersey. His published books include *Sovereignty at Sea: U.S. Merchant Ships and American Entry into World War I* (University Press of Florida, 2009); *The Afghanistan War* (Facts on File, 2010); *Eyewitness History to World War I* (Facts on File, 2007), and more than twenty other works in the history of technology, war, and maritime affairs.

Robert Hannigan teaches the history of American foreign relations at Suffolk University in Boston. He is the author of *The New World Power: American Foreign Policy, 1898-1917* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002) and is currently at work on a manuscript with the working title of *The Great War and American Foreign Policy, 1914-1924*.

J Simon Rofe is Senior Lecturer in Diplomatic and International Studies in the Centre for International Studies and Diplomacy at SOAS, University of London, United Kingdom. His research interests lie in the field of US Diplomacy and Foreign Relations in the twentieth century with a specific focus on the era of Franklin Roosevelt, and Presidential peacemaking and post-war planning. Publications include: *International History and International Relations*, with Andrew Williams and Amelia Hadfield (Routledge: Basingstoke, 2012); "Pre-war Post-war Planning: The Phoney War, the Roosevelt Administration, and the Case of the Advisory Committee on Problems of Foreign Relations" *Diplomacy & Statecraft*, 23:1–26, 2012; "Lord Lothian's Ambassadorship to Washington August 1939-December 1940" in *The British Embassy in Washington between 1939 and 1977*, Michael Hopkins, Saul Kelly and John Young (eds.), (Palgrave: New York & Basingstoke, 2009); and *Franklin Roosevelt's Foreign Policy and the Welles Mission* (Palgrave: New York, 2007).

Review by Rodney P. Carlisle, Rutgers University (Emeritus)

Nothing Less Than War is extremely well-researched; the conclusions are well-defended; the scholarship is thorough, and the issues raised are extremely thought-provoking. The author is to be congratulated on a fine piece of work that should stimulate not only new historical study, but serious consideration of contemporary issues of foreign policy and war-making. The book presents a comprehensive and newly-revisionist account of the American entry into World War One.

Doenecke provides an excellent starting point for discussion and understanding of the peculiar *casus belli* of U.S. entry into the war. By thoroughly covering the extensive secondary literature and taking a fresh look at many crucial primary sources, he raises numerous thought-provoking questions. Some of these questions have already existed in the literature, but other questions and issues he raises are entirely fresh ones, arising from his thorough approach and the perspective of the twenty-first century.

Some of the questions raised are left unresolved for the reader to consider. For example, Doenecke points out that Wilson surrounded himself with foreign policy advisers and crucial appointees who were biased, incompetent, or intent on sabotaging his own neutrality. In particular, this comment applies to Secretary of State William Jennings Bryan, 1913-1915, Colonel Edward House, personal adviser to Wilson, Robert Lansing, Secretary of State, 1915-1919, and U.S. Ambassador to Britain, Walter Hines Page. He leaves unanswered precisely why Wilson remained committed to such appointments, even after he knew they were incapable or disloyal.

Doenecke argues that the majority of the American people probably still opposed U.S. entry into the war in April 1917, suggesting that the majority of Congress supported Wilson's request for a declaration of war partly because many feared recording votes in opposition to his request. While such an explanation is plausible, we really have no way of assessing what the vote might have been in a secret ballot, which is not the conventional Congressional procedure in any case. Again, we are left with a sound observation and an open-ended issue to ponder.

Doenecke concedes that Wilson probably had no other alternative than the one he chose, once Germany announced and then implemented unrestricted submarine warfare February 1, 1917. He suggests that if Wilson had taken a firmer line, backed with the development of stronger armed forces (particularly naval forces), the United States would have been more capable of resisting both German and British infractions of American neutrality. Wilson seemed somewhat blind to the British infractions.¹

¹ The British had decided to interdict food supplies to Germany as part of the blockade, but traditionally food had never been considered "contraband" of war. The unratified Declaration of London (which attempted to codify existing blockade practice) did not contemplate the addition of food to the list of contraband items.

Given Wilson's rather idealized view of international affairs and of the role of the United States, of course he was unwilling (or simply not inclined) to develop strong military defense. Wilson's appointments of Secretary of War and Secretary of the Navy were both committed pacifists. Thus, arguments supporting the firmer line or a stronger defense, which would have changed events, are 'counterfactual' in that, given Wilson and his views, the views of the American people of the time, and those of his appointees, these alternate policies simply could not have been developed.

Implicit in Doenecke's presentation is the suggestion that it was appropriate for the United States to be neutral in the years 1914-1916, and that, with a stronger degree of military preparedness, the United States would have been able to maintain neutrality until the end of the war. He also suggests that the United States could easily have survived the last years of the war without engaging in foreign trade with any of the belligerents. While his view again is quite plausible, it tends to raise the counterfactual questions of "What would have happened if...?" Without exploring alternative histories, it certainly makes one wonder how events would have transpired. Without food supplies from the United States, Great Britain would soon have sued for peace; with French troops already in mutiny, the war would probably have ended on terms more acceptable to the Central Powers. In any case, Doenecke does not pursue these alternate history questions, and simply points out, quite correctly, that Wilson had other alternatives.

The explanation for U.S. entry into World War I in this book derives from a biographical and individualistic explanation for events. That is to say, Doenecke explains the course of events by reference to the characters, personalities, and values of key players. In light of the evidence he presents, we are implicitly asked to consider whether a completely different set of persons in charge of U.S. policy at the time would have produced a different outcome. Given what Doenecke says about how the appointees were chosen, and how foreign policy was formulated in that era, he is suggesting a *systemic* problem, rather than a problem of individuals. A more rigorous attention to the quality of appointments and the development of more comprehensive policy-formation groups with experts (which has been characteristic of the period since the 1960s), might have avoided the issues, he suggests. Of course, like the possibility of U.S. embargo on exports to all belligerents, such a possibility is 'counterfactual.' The existing *system* produced the incompetent leadership and appointees of 1914-1918. Even so, this is an important insight, and goes far to explaining why the United States' neutrality eventually failed.

Doenecke does not quite explain satisfactorily how and why Wilson's presentation of the causes of his decision when speaking to Congress differed from the reality of those causes. That is, as the author points out, Wilson saw the sinking of neutral ships in ballast, without cargos, as direct violations of the "rules of war." Yet when asking Congress to vote for a Declaration of War, Wilson listed a whole host of other offenses, with very little attention to the specific *casus belli* that had convinced him and his cabinet to ask for war. The discrepancy between the *actual* cause and the appeal on idealistic grounds to Congress is not fully explained.

Doenecke does not accept the implication suggested by Barbara Tuchman that the Zimmermann Telegram was central to the decision process of either Wilson or the public as a whole.² This is an important corrective to a broadly-misunderstood explanation of the engagement of the U.S. in this war. A closer discussion of the exact extent of the Zimmerman Telegram's impact would support his conclusion.

A broader question arises. Why did Congress and the American people accept the characterization of the war on the side of the Allies as a war for Democracy, when Britain was an elitist-governed parliamentary monarchy, Japan a militarist empire, Serbia an irresponsible dictatorship and only nominally a monarchy (which had sponsored the terrorist act that initiated the war in Sarajevo), Russia was in the turmoil of overthrowing the Czar, and French troops were in outright mutiny against their government? Doenecke raises this question and provides answers for some, but not all, of these nations. The objection that the Allies were hardly all 'democracies' was raised to the claim that the United States was joining "a war to make the world safe for democracy" in 1917. The answer as to why such a view became broadly accepted can be found in the studies of the propaganda effort of the Wilson administration over the nineteen months of the war and the very foggy popular understanding of foreign governments that existed then (and now).

From the perspective of this reviewer, Doenecke does not explore sufficiently the detailed events of the ship sinkings between February 1 and April 2, 1917. In this period, the Germans sank seven U.S. merchant ships. The particular circumstances surrounding some, but not all, of these sinkings constituted acts of war by Germany, by the standards of 'international law' at the time. The U.S. ships that German submarines sunk in the period were these: *Housatonic*, *Lyman M. Law*, *Algonquin*, *Vigilancia*, *City of Memphis*, *Illinois*, and *Aztec*. After Wilson's speech to Congress, word of the loss of the *Missourian* came in. Lives were lost only on the *Vigilancia* and *Aztec*. In addition, the standard oil tanker *Healdton* was lost off the Netherlands, most probably due to a British mine. Rodney Carlisle's *Sovereignty at Sea*, cited by Doenecke, explores these specific events in more detail.³ Although Doenecke is accurate in noting that the *City of Memphis* and the *Illinois*, sunk in ballast, each represented a technical *casus belli*, he does not explain why the sinking of *Housatonic*, *Lyman M. Law*, and *Algonquin* were *not* violations of 'international law' and why none of them constituted a *casus belli*. Doenecke's focus on broader issues and personalities does not allow for the examination of the minutiae of these events, which in this situation, are crucially important.

Implicit in Doenecke's analysis are a number of questions that are very pertinent to our own times. Doenecke points out, quite correctly, that given the size and economic strength of the United States and the more than two years' warning that war might come, the United

² Barbara W. Tuchman, *The Zimmermann Telegram*. New York: Random House (Ballantine Books), 1979.

³ Rodney Carlisle, *Sovereignty At Sea: U.S. Merchant Ships and American Entry into World War I*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2009.

States was scandalously un-prepared for that war, in terms of troops, ships, and weapons. Doenecke suggests that, if the United States had been better prepared, the Germans (and the British) would have been less cavalier with United States' neutrality rights. This fact supports the notion that strong military preparation is an effective deterrent to war, and also suggests that pacifists' objections to defense industry expenditures are self-defeating; on the other hand, a large weapons industry has usually been seen as an *incentive* for military adventurism. That dilemma is with us today.

The values and personalities of key players at the Presidential level and the level of advisers to the President may have led the United States into just or unjust war in our own times. Applying Doenecke's analysis, one wonders how historians using the same approach will evaluate U.S. decisions for war in the Persian Gulf War, the Iraq War, and the Afghanistan War.

Doenecke suggests that the development of new institutions for intelligence-gathering and foreign policy formation in the United States have significantly reduced the possibility of Presidential miscalculation or ineptitude. Some would argue that such modern institutions and instruments merely provide more plausible rationales for inappropriate actions.

The same method of analysis, that is, an examination of personalities and values of the leadership, can offer possible new insights into United States' entry into other wars, specifically, the U.S. Civil War, the Spanish American War, World War Two, Korea, and Vietnam. Applying his method, other historians suggest that limitations of presidential intelligence and the personalities of key appointees have led to disastrous or incorrect decisions that precipitated all of those wars.⁴ There is certainly ample evidence to support such interpretations.

Although the United States' entry into World War One can be seen as the consequence of incompetence, confusion, and poor judgment on the part of key leaders and advisors, one might conclude that the United States would be better off if it pursued a course of isolation, self-sufficiency, and neutrality in the case of major conflicts between foreign powers. The author expresses no such conclusion, but such a view appears implicit in his approach to Wilson and the fateful decisions of 1917.

⁴ The literature of analyses of causes of wars from the point of view of "What the President knew and when he knew it," is vast. Examples range from the classic: Kenneth M. Stampp, *And the War Came: The North and the Secession Crisis, 1860-1861* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1950); to the recent Steven McGillon, *Pearl Harbor: FDR Leads the Nation into War* (New York: Basic Books, 2011).

Nothing Less Than War is an important contribution to the literature on Americans' reactions to the First World War in the period from the outbreak of that conflict, in August 1914, up until the point at which the U.S. became a formal participant, in April 1917. It will henceforth have to be consulted by any serious student of these years. The book could also be useful, if the proper assistance is provided, in the education of undergraduates. Appended to the text is a bibliographic essay by the author that is of enormous value by itself.

Doenecke begins with a chapter, "Setting the Stage," which discusses then-President Woodrow Wilson's general views on American foreign relations as well as his ideas about the chief executive's proper role in the formulation of policy. Here the author also introduces the major dramatis personae of the story to come.

That introduction is followed by nine chapters that address key developments in essentially chronological order. These reflect the author's wide reading in both primary and secondary sources. Their great value derives from Doenecke's exceptional ability to find and render clearly a wide range of contemporary viewpoints about the war. Those familiar with Doenecke's prize-winning *Storm on the Horizon*, on the 1939-1941 debate over America's proper response to the Second World War, will be familiar with his approach.

Elite organs of northeastern opinion, and the views of establishment political, business, and military leaders jostle side by side on these pages with the ideas of others who, with some limited success, were trying to make their voices count in the America of a century ago. Represented are the opinions of southern and western political leaders, various factions of the labor movement, prominent leaders of the women's movement, and would-be spokespersons for various ethnic-immigrant groups. Differences within, as well as between, the two major political parties are discussed. So too are the views of the (at that time still vital) Socialist Party. Doenecke also explains the positions taken on major questions by such groups as the Navy League, the National Security League, the Women's Peace Party, the advocates of the League to Enforce Peace, and the American Union Against Militarism.

In each chapter, the author's basic approach is to provide detailed discussions of events or policy initiatives and then follow these with a survey of contemporary reactions in the press and Congress. Doenecke frequently also relates how historians have subsequently interpreted or appraised Wilson administration policies. One frustration with the book is that the author, having clearly immersed himself in this material, does not weigh in more, both on the factual accuracy of some of the claims made at the time and on the historical judgments and conclusions of others.

There are a number of particularly good sections. These include Doenecke's discussion of the American debate over which European power bore the most guilt or responsibility for

the war. He provides very thorough treatment of the reactions Americans had to the sinking of the *Lusitania*, and the same is true of the debates over that loaded term 'preparedness.' The author's discussion of some of the invasion scenarios constructed by advocates of a military build-up is riveting. He also relates superbly the broad spectrum of responses articulated in the face of Germany's announcement of unrestricted submarine warfare at the beginning of 1917. These ranged from the assertion of the American Rights Committee that the U.S. should immediately embrace belligerency to the advice of Senator Wesley L. Jones (R-Wash.), who suggested that Americans and their ships should just "stay at home" (251).

Doenecke engages in more analysis and interpretation in his chapter on the spring of 1917. With regard to the decision to declare war, he concludes that Wilson "realized that American security was not in jeopardy" (285). He discounts the idea that his objective was to rescue the Allies from defeat. The decision, in his view, was not influenced in any fundamental way by the trade that had built up between America and the Allies or by the amount of money Americans had invested in the Allied cause. Rather, Doenecke places more emphasis on the President's desire to uphold American prestige and credibility and on his interest in influencing the peace.

The author provides an exhaustive and very illuminating discussion of the debates over the war resolution in the House and Senate. Doenecke argues that many voted without conviction, and he notes that the vote in favor (373-50 in the House and 82-6 in the Senate) was not received with enthusiasm in much of the country.

In his conclusion, the author is generally critical of the abilities of Wilson and his chief advisers as diplomatists. He spreads the criticism more widely when he argues that "the debate over preparedness did little to inform the public of the role America should play in international relations" (306).

Doenecke is also critical of how power was exercised. He is impressed, as many have been, by Wilson's ability to judge public opinion and know when it could be swayed. But he suggests that this may not have been American democracy's finest hour. Of the House-Grey memorandum (here, though not earlier in the text, mistakenly referred to as dating from 1915 instead of 1916), which laid out a scenario by which the president might commit to armed action on the Allies' side, Doenecke writes: "The fact that the American people knew nothing of parlays that could radically affect their lives appears particularly haunting in the days of the 'imperial presidency'"(302).

Some questions might be addressed more than they are. Most importantly, why did the Wilson administration find itself in the position it did in the spring of 1917? Was it merely because navigating through a world at war was so difficult? Doenecke explicitly rejects the 'national security' thesis, first ventured by Walter Lippmann in 1941 and advanced more recently, with modifications, by scholars such as David Esposito and Ross Kennedy. Simultaneously, he dismisses several of the arguments put forward by revisionists in the interwar years (historians such as Charles C. Tansill, Harry Elmer Barnes, Charles Beard, C. Hartley Grattan, H.C. Peterson, and Paul Birdsall) that pointed to pro-Allied sentiment in

America or economic ties as key factors. But these judgments ultimately only make the reader more eager for a thoroughgoing discussion by the author of what he does believe drove or governed American policy.

It may be that the way forward is to be found in a broader, longer view of these years than historians have generally been inclined to undertake. For example, many readers may, at least initially, respond to Doenecke's description of the so-called anti-preparedness forces by concluding that they were inordinately suspicious of where the proposals of their opponents were threatening to take the country. Their perspective might be appreciated more if it were noted that they had been watching for at least two decades while a relatively small, but powerful, number of figures in the nation's political, business, and military life had been demonstrating a growing interest in what strategist Alfred Thayer Mahan called "wealth and greatness" for America on the world stage.

The progressive era, before the outbreak of World War I, was one in which many in the U.S., from a variety of different perspectives, expressed concern about the future of American democracy. They saw it as threatened by domestic developments, like the rise of the "trusts." Increasingly, after the war with Spain, in 1898, many of the same people worried that it might also be undermined by the role the U.S. was coming to play in the world. The American republic might not after all, they worried, be able to avoid the temptations and inevitable corruption that came with overseas empire.

With regard to policy, this longer view suggests the potential value of examining official America's response to the outbreak of the Great War against the backdrop of U.S. diplomatic activity in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century. What, in other words, did the war in Europe potentially challenge with regard to Washington's preexisting desires and commitments?

The U.S. was in many ways both a rising and a status quo power in the early twentieth century. It 'emerged' on the world scene largely so as to try and shore up, and to stabilize as much as it could of an international environment already arranged – from the perspective of those interested in playing a major international role – in its favor. This was a global order that to a large extent had been set up and held in place by London during the nineteenth century. American leaders – acutely conscious of their country's burgeoning economy and strategic advantages – believed that if this world could be held intact it was inevitable that during the coming decades the U.S. would come to occupy a place in it comparable to or eclipsing that of Britain (thus Theodore Roosevelt's prophesy that the coming century would still be one of "men who speak English"). In the 1890s, Wilson spoke of England and America, if united, as holding in their hands "the future destinies of the world."

The most important areas of early interest, as reflected in the prominence given to the Monroe Doctrine and the Open Door Policy, were the rest of the Americas and China. In both, Washington was eager to uphold existing boundaries and frameworks for trade. But policy makers, well before Wilson, were quick to conclude that events in Europe could pose a challenge to their aspirations and, as they came to see it, obligations. In the decade and a

half before World War I, such concerns helped to propel forward a rapprochement with England and a commitment on the part of both powers to stabilization initiatives along the lines of the Hague conferences and an arbitral court. Both powers were looked at as rivals, but Germany throughout this period was already viewed as a more likely threat to American goals.

Likewise, well before 1914 the American public had also come to be registered as a threat to a 'responsible' role for the U.S. in the world. Roosevelt fumed from the 1890s on about a populace that didn't seem to thrill to the prospect of international greatness. Well before Wilson, other policy makers – like Roosevelt's Secretary of State Elihu Root, ex-President William Howard Taft, and even Taft's Secretary of State Philander C. Knox - were concluding that they might get further with the public if activity abroad was described in more altruistic terms.

A strong case can be made that Wilson and House both shared the basic foreign policy goals outlined above, and that a desire to shore up, reconstruct, and stabilize via reform the essentials of the preexisting international order were at the center of their response to the European crisis. Wilson very much wanted to avoid military involvement. But that was never his highest priority. Again and again he took steps designed to advance what had well before 1914 become Washington's fundamental goals. And these carried the risk of military conflict.

Wilson wanted to mediate, but on behalf of a particular conception of the peace. While never driven by Anglophilia, he did not want to see Germany's position in the world displace that of Britain. Early on these concerns led him to place a high value on impressing, and maintaining good relations with, England. They played a fundamental role in the administration's response to the maritime policies articulated by London and Berlin. Washington acquiesced in the British blockade. When Germany then decided to pursue a blockade of its own, using submarines instead of surface vessels and mines, the U.S. threatened Berlin. It announced that it intended to secure for American citizens the "full enjoyment" of (what it saw as) their rights at sea and declared that a "critical situation" would be created if any of them were violated.

Just how unneutral, indeed hostile, the American course was might have received more attention in *Nothing Less Than War*. The idea of U.S. 'neutrality' in the period 1914-1917 was viewed with skepticism by many revisionists of the interwar period. Arthur Link, in particular, refuted some of their charges in the years following World War II. But, by 1959, Ernest May was writing of a "benevolent neutrality" favoring the Allies. And historians since, focusing in particular on America's divergent responses to the two blockades, have been far more harsh. Retracing some of the ground first worked by Edwin Borchard and William Potter Lage in 1937, John W. Coogan and, more recently, Robert W. Tucker have constructed scathing indictments. More than two years after America's essential bearing toward the conflict had been set, a frustrated House spoke to the nature of the relationship with the Allies when he complained of London's unwillingness to act on the House-Grey memorandum. The ungrateful "Allied Governments and press overlook the weight the President has thrown on their side at almost every turn" he told the foreign secretary.

House's complaint spoke to the differences that had emerged between Britain and the U.S. as to when, and on what terms, the fighting should come to an end. With the passage of time, these differences looked likely to be settled on Washington's terms, as the Allies became increasingly dependent on the American economy. But the Wilson administration had no comparable leverage – only the threat of force – with Germany.

Fearing that Washington's luck had run out after visiting Berlin in early 1916, House told Wilson that he thought Germany might soon challenge the restrictions - in today's parlance, the 'red lines' – that the U.S. had insisted upon with regard to the use of its submarines. "They think," he wrote, "war with us would be not so disastrous as Great Britain's blockade."

In essence, that was the - ultimately misguided - calculation that Berlin made the following year. Like the Allies, it was still resistant to American ideas as to a settlement. And it is in this context, perhaps, that Doenecke's emphasis on credibility takes on its full meaning. For, having admonished that the U.S. would hold Germany to account if it did not adhere to Washington's strictures, Wilson ultimately felt that he had no choice. The key decision had long since been made. To back away from that threat would have been dramatically to compromise the ability of the U.S. to assert the kind of role in the world that he wanted, in particular to play a central role in the shaping of what he took to be the proper postwar peace.

This book contains a wealth of information. It is highly readable. And, above all, it is thought-provoking.

In Mark Stoler's *Diplomatic History* review of Justus D. Doenecke's 2000 book, *Storm on the Horizon: The Challenge to American Intervention, 1939-1941*¹ he pondered a "fundamental question that has been at the core of virtually all twentieth-century arguments regarding US Foreign Policy." That question: "to what extent is American security threatened by a single hegemonic power on the European (or Eurasian) land-mass?"² In a number of regards, this question is one Doenecke returns to in his equally impressive new volume looking at American intervention a generation earlier, *Nothing Less than War – A New History of America's Entry Into World War I*.

In posing questions examining American entry in April 1917 Doenecke produces a coherent and comprehensive analysis. The answers Doenecke provides in charting the details of transatlantic finance and trade, and the use of the submarine gravitate back to on one man: President Woodrow Wilson. The twentieth-eighth president is the central character to the masterful narrative the author presents: he offers "An examination of the president's leadership, how he interacted with all the players, and the judgement of historians is the subject of this book" (18). Doenecke explains in the first chapter – appropriately titled "Setting the Stage" – that Wilson's diplomacy reflected his own "distinctive views of America's role in the world" (2). Central to Wilson's view was a conspicuous belief in the exceptional qualities of the United States. Debates about American exceptionalism are longstanding, and Doenecke does not rehearse them at any great length here as he plainly states Wilson's belief that "...the United States had been founded to serve humanity..." (2). The author continues by stressing the 'sheer moral example' that Wilson believed the United States could set, and his articulation of what retrospectively became synonymous with the President's image. The linking of domestic and foreign realms of policy making were integral to Wilson's thinking: "...if the nation acted irresponsibly abroad, it would compromise its democratic values" (2). From the vantage point of the twenty-first century, governed by realism's hold on post-war thinking on international affairs, it is perhaps hard not to view Wilson's views as unrealistic, possibly even quaint. Yet what Doenecke does with considerable aplomb is to provide the appropriate context to explain the circumstance in which moral example was a palpable force in Wilson's time.

Further, during the ensuing 307 pages, Doenecke expertly describes the context and circumstance in which Wilson made his decisions. In mapping out the President's decision making that led from 'strict' neutrality to American entry into the conflict as an Associated Power in the spring of 1917, the text is richly sourced and eloquently written. Doenecke draws on the full range of opinion that existed on contending sides of the debate over U.S.

¹ Justus D. Doenecke, *Storm on the Horizon: The Challenge to American Intervention, 1939-1941* (Lanham, Md.: Rowan and Littlefield, 2000).

² Mark Stoler, Feature Review "Avoiding Entry into World War II", *Diplomatic History* 27:2 (April 2003): 283-286.

intervention. Wilson's own story is embellished in this fashion, given that he was criticised by those who thought him too timid – leading this charge was former President Theodore Roosevelt – and those who thought his actions were involving the United States in the woes of the Old World.

Reflecting on the detailed narrative that the author presents, what becomes clear is that the President's decision making was governed by a wholly different timeframe from those of subsequent generations. The evidence can be seen in the President's approach on a number of fronts. In regard to the press, Wilson marched to a different drummer than that imposed by a daily headline. Wilson was sceptical if not hostile to the press for much of his time in office. Doenecke states "mutual animosity marked the relationship between Hearst and Wilson" (15) – that is William Randolph Hearst whose newspapers had a daily circulation of four million readers. Doenecke points out, in what would surely see the demise of any contemporary president in the face of a crisis, that between "July 1915, as the *Lusitania* crisis unfolded, until late in 1916 [Wilson] did not hold a single press conference" (4). Wilson never sought to cultivate newspapers or journalists, though a number succumbed to his charm – as he hoped they would. Instead, as is evident throughout Doenecke's text, Wilson's supreme self-confidence meant he believed he spoke for the American people, and therefore he did not *need* the press.

The influence of time is also evident in the brand of foreign relations that Wilson practiced. The President's individual character was being imprinted on American diplomacy. While other Americans raged on both sides of the intervention debate, Wilson was measured by his reactions to events in Europe. His approach at the outset of the war, as explained by Doenecke, was governed by various factors: "a personal caution and conciliatory leanings; awareness of his nation's military weakness; a desire to serve as the world's peacemaker; and his belief, even shared by his more military advisors, that the American public, particularly in the Midwest and the West, opposed war" (86). Wilson certainly recognised the limits of U.S. abilities to influence events on the battlefield – the author states that American forces "were unprepared for major conflict", with their numbers "being only slightly larger than those of Mexico or Belgium" (37). – and instead he was focused on how he could steer the United States to a point where he could exert its influence on the outcome to the conflict. As Doenecke explains, for Wilson, "America's mission centered on neutrality and mediation, not preparation for war" (37). In the face of incidents such as the sinking of the *Lusitania* in May 1915, the exchange of diplomatic notes with Berlin allowed for emotions to cool while the issues were discussed. Doenecke points out that Wilson informed Robert Lansing, his Secretary of State in November – some six months after the ship sank – that "The matter of the *Lusitania* is just as important and just as acute now as it was the day the news of her sinking arrived" (129). Concurrently, the diplomacy Wilson allowed his envoy Colonel House to undertake to expedite 'parleys' as a first step to discussion of peace terms, also needed time (95). The temporal element was also facilitated by the transportation and communication technologies of the day, and the stalemate of the Western front. Wilson recognised his environs and was in no hurry to deploy U.S. forces. Equally, the President saw great opportunity to advance U.S. national interests while Europe's great powers ravaged themselves. He realised that the shape of the post-war world would matter to the United States and acted to that end. When arriving in Europe in

1919, he can therefore have been forgiven for thinking that it was 'his' moment. That moment, though, is the subject of many other books.

It is testament to Doenecke's account that the reader is minded to contemplate the full manifestation of what American diplomacy means in the century that has very nearly passed since Wilson took the fateful decision for the United States to enter the First World War. Doenecke alerts us in his detailed analysis of American intervention, how much of the diplomatic practice that emanated from Washington subsequently was shaped during this period, notably in the consideration of the role of public opinion. Given that Wilson's era was one before opinion polls were in use, it is testament to the author's research that the book has such depth and breadth to the intervention debate drawn from contemporaneous press reports and accounts of the protagonists. The author skilfully blends these with subsequent historiography to make a compelling argument about Wilson's decision-making on behalf of the United States and the Great War. As such, in addressing the question of why the United States entered the First World War, for students and scholars alike Doenecke's work should be a first port of call.

Author's Response by Justus D. Doenecke, New College of Florida (Emeritus)

Needless to say, I feel highly complemented by the gracious and enthusiastic response to my book by all three readers and grateful as well for their thoughtful critiques. One is blessed to have such careful and generous reviewers. Let me respond to each in turn.

Rodney P. Carlisle calls attention to some unresolved questions, particularly those that concern the caliber of Wilson's foreign policy advisers. Regarding the case of William Jennings Bryan, although Wilson retained Bryan until the crisis over the second *Lusitania* note and consulted with him, he always kept crucial matters concerning Europe in his own hands and those of Colonel Edward House. In a sense, Bryan was always superfluous, having been chosen to be Secretary of State because of his domestic political influence. As for Robert Lansing, the question is why Wilson did not fire Lansing in December 1916, when the Secretary of State was guilty of gross insubordination? I note the delicate matter of timing, for such a change could only injure the sensitive negotiations Wilson was fostering with the belligerents. At best, the United States would appear confused and vacillating. As for House, his role has frequently been exaggerated, particularly by the colonel himself. His influence declined once Wilson remarried. Despite the efforts of Alexander L. and Juliet L. George¹, the basis of the Wilson-House relationship remains puzzling.

Carlisle notes Wilson's downplaying of the specific *casus belli* that convinced him war was necessary when he justified his actions to Congress. In his war message, Wilson did not simply indict Germany on the submarine issue but added all sorts of other factors, ranging from the espionage issue to the Zimmermann telegram. Over close to three years the president had accumulated many grievances and now was undoubtedly the time to let loose. Wilson stressed such war aims as democracy, the rights of small nations, and "a concert of free peoples." The inclusion of such idealistic motives should not be surprising, given his speech to the League to Enforce Peace on May 17, 1916 and his 'peace without victory' speech of January 22, 1917. If the argument that the Allies were not exactly Simon-pure democracies was not raised when the United States entered the war, it certainly was during the fight over the ratification of the League Covenant, particularly by such irreconcilables as Senator James A. Reed.

Carlisle notes that I did not explain why the sinking of certain ships in February and March 1917 were grounds for war. I simply defer to Carlisle's own recent and excellent book on the subject, *Sovereignty at Sea: U.S. Merchant Ships and America's Entry into World War I*.²

¹ Alexander L. and Juliet L. George, *Woodrow Wilson and Colonel House: A Personality Study* (New York; Dover Publications, 1956).

² Rodney Carlisle, *Sovereignty at Sea: U.S. Merchant Ships and America's Entry into World War I*, New Perspectives on Maritime History and Nautical Archaeology, (Gainesville, FL; University Press of Florida, 2010).

As for the comments of J. Simon Rofe, one can only be thankful for his friendly tone and able summary.

Robert E. Hannigan wonders why I did not weigh in more directly on claims made by other historians, particularly those that concern matters of factual accuracy and conclusions. To engage in point-by-point response distracts the reader from the narrative and at times is in bad taste. The type of refutation offered, let us say, by Fred Shannon in regard to Walter Prescott Webb's *The Great Plains* or Robert E. Brown in regard to *Charles Beard on the Constitution* might involve some legitimate points but it is not a path I chose to follow.³ Hopefully my own views on all controversial matters are covered in my concluding chapter.

To ask why the Wilson administration found itself where it did in the spring of 1917 is a tall order and I don't know if even Arthur S. Link did full justice to this topic.⁴ Hannigan's effort at putting Wilsonian diplomacy in a wider context, of which he gives us a sample here, has the making of another exciting book on his part.

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³ See Fred A. Shannon, *An Appraisal of Walter Prescott Webb's The Great Plains: A Study in Institutions and Environment* (New York: Social Science Research Council, 1940); Walter Prescott Webb, *The Great Plains* (Boston: Ginn and Co., 1931); Robert E. Brown, *Charles A. Beard and the Constitution: A Critical Analysis of "An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution"* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1956).; Charles A. Beard, *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States* (New York: Macmillan, 1913).

⁴ For Link, see Arthur S. Link, *Wilson: Campaigns for Progressivism and Peace, 1916-1917*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965), 409-15.