

The Path to War: How the First World War Created Modern America. By Michael S. Neiberg (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016). Pp. 320. Cloth, \$29.95.

In *The Path to War*, historian Michael S. Neiberg examines the various ways Americans thought about World War I, and how this psychology shifted from a desire for neutrality to an increasingly interventionist perspective. By bridging the boundaries of cultural and military history, Neiberg offers an excellent analysis of the years leading up to the decision to enter the Great War, which not only fashioned American character, but also the new psychology of internationalism. This experience framed the way American leaders such as Franklin Roosevelt and Harry Truman understood political, economic, and military dynamics of future conflicts such as World War II, a war that Neiberg views as a continuation of World War I rather than a separate conflict.

How exactly did Americans decide to enter World War I, and how did this shape the transnational character of the United States? In eight thematic chapters, Neiberg examines issues of identity, arguing that Americans did not give into the persuasive nature of Woodrow Wilson, nor were they fooled by propaganda. Rather, the decision to enter World War I in April 1917 emerged from three years of reflection on what it meant to be a democracy in an age of empire and how the United States must engage with a global community. The greater level of connectivity between the United States and Europe reduced the sense of security the Atlantic Ocean previously offered, creating a sense of urgency to defend Western civilization.

When the war erupted in Europe, American journalists for *Outlook* and the *Chicago Tribune* viewed the militarist German government as a dominating force over the innocent German people, marking a duality within German society. The “Two Germanys” thesis portrayed the German government as the chief provocateur, an experience which produced an image of Wilhelm II as a transcendent force attempting to shift the boundaries of civilization from Western democracy toward German militarism. Famous American journalists such as Mary Roberts Rinehart, the first woman to report from the front line, portrayed the war as a struggle against barbarism. Even with journalistic appeals to the American sense of benevolence and the desire to defend civilization, however, Americans maintained a sense of neutrality during the first three years of the war. A 1914 survey reported that 49 percent of Americans were neutral toward the war while 46 percent of Americans supported the Allies and just 5 percent—most of whom spoke German—supported the Central Powers.¹

Struggling to remain politically neutral while also profiting from both sides of the conflict produced moral tensions within the United States, especially for those with European heritage. Neiberg argues that the war aided in assimilating various ethnicities to an ‘American’ perspective. German-Americans, Irish-Americans, Italian-Americans, Jewish-Americans, and even African-Americans took part in an “Anti-Hyphen campaign,” detaching themselves from their European ties to become ‘American.’ Even before the United States entered the war, Americans were forced to demonstrate their commitment to their nation, a process that reinforced the connection between patriotism and Americanism and determined who could be

¹ Michael S. Neiberg, *The Path to War: How the First World War Created Modern America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 32.

considered American.

In particular, Western Europe was the closest to the United States in terms of not only substantial ethnic ties, but also economic culture and structure. Neiberg argues that World War I played a critical role in shifting economic power from London and Paris to New York City, a process that offered the United States a greater role in the global economy. While the emergence of the United States as a burgeoning economic power played a critical role in the decision to enter World War I and the creation of “modern America,” questions remain about how the economic dynamics of the decision to go to war shaped the transnational identity of Western capitalism.

Though Neiberg shows how Americans had the perceived responsibility to make the world safe for democracy, he leaves lingering questions about whether Americans desired to make the world safe for capitalism just as much as they did for democracy. The centrality of capitalism in American culture may have played an important role in framing the perceived meanings of liberty and civilization in the years leading up to the decision to enter the war. While Neiberg could have offered a deeper look into the cultural dynamics of capitalism in the decision to enter World War I, this is not necessarily a shortcoming of his well-researched book, but a prospective avenue for future scholarship.

Johnny Fulfer

University of South Florida