Episode 884: The U.S. Enters World War I: Wilson's Folly Revisited, a Century Later

Guest: Hunt Tooley

WOODS: This particular episode is being released on April 6th, 2017, which is the 100th anniversary of the declaration of war passed by Congress that got the United States into World War I. How about that, that I managed to coordinate that? I knew it was April sometime. I got you on here —

TOOLEY: Very good.

WOODS: Yeah. Yeah, yeah, it's very interesting. And of course, how quaint it is that there was a declaration of war and they followed the steps and all that. I want to tell people I am a big, big fan of your book *The Great War*, so before we get into this, let's make sure everybody understands that this year, 1917 — or 2017, it's the 100th anniversary from 1917 — 2017 is the year of World War I studies for Americans, because it's 100 years since this really momentous decision. A lot of people are going to be commenting on it, thinking about it, and you're going to wish you knew more about it, so you should read — if you're thinking of all the zillions of books on the war, "Which one should I read?', you should read *The Great War* by Hunt Tooley, published by Palgrave Macmillan — good publisher. But also, it's a book by Palgrave Macmillan that also cites Murray Rothbard, so there's something unique about this. And I would just say — I'm just going to be perfectly blunt about this, Hunt. If you're not reading this book in 2017, you're a schmuck, all right? You should read *The Great War*. Is that good enough?

TOOLEY: [laughing] Oh, Tom, thank you so much.

WOODS: [laughing] That ought to do it.

TOOLEY: That is very kind coming from you, who has also written some very fine pieces on World War I, and in particular on American entry in *The Politically Incorrect History*. That section is really a favorite of mine for a short, punchy treatment. It really hits the right tone and high points.

WOODS: That's very good of you to say. You know, I don't insult my listeners for just anyone, Hunt. When I call somebody a schmuck, I really mean that they should be doing what I'm urging them to do. All right, so let's talk about before the U.S. intervention. Let's talk about 1916. By the end of 1916 — U.S. intervention comes in April, of course, so by the end of 1916, let's talk about what the scales are. Where

does the balance lie in terms of the Central Powers — which side has the upper hand by the end of that year?

TOOLEY: Yeah, I think we had to say it was the Central Powers — therefore, the Germans and the Austro-Hungarians and the Turks. This is a very important topic, and a lot of recent historians have discussed the military pros and cons. It was the year, remember, of all of the huge 1916 battles: the Battle of Verdun, the Battle of the Somme, the naval Battle of Jutland, the Brusilov Offensive in Russia. And to tell you the truth, this war had exhausted both sides by the end of 1916, and in a way, I think their leaders saw there was not much way to go forward. And if you do — and I think that's both sides. But if you put this into a question of who was winning, I think we have to say the Germans were winning. I think that the Germans and Austrians were simply killing Allied troops at a higher rate. I think that, although Germany was faced by this enormous collection of powers with probably twice the military manpower available, still in all I think that the indications are — and I believe we can find this in the writings of the British Field Marshal Haig, who was assessing all this at that time. And it looked bad for the Allied side.

WOODS: All right, now that alone would make a lot of people today — maybe not a lot, but some say, Well, therefore U.S. intervention was necessary because we simply could not allow the Central Powers to be victorious.

TOOLEY: Well, I think that's a part of American life since the propaganda of World War I and World War II, to assume that there was that kind of issue, that kind of necessity of saving the British and the French because the Germans were simply evil. But as I approach this whole subject, I tend to look at the state itself as being the source of evil, and so in a sense, all of these countries who were at war were products of statism and the growth of the nation state and its power. But as far as that goes, I'm not sure that the Germans were practicing evil at a more rapid rate than any of the Allies or all of the Allies, but I think that that is the propaganda residue that still lives in our minds and that historians often just take at face value.

WOODS: Well, certainly they all, among many other things, have colonial possessions; they were by and large imperial powers. Can we compare them in terms of how they administered these places, some more humanely, some less so?

TOOLEY: Well, I do think we can do that and it's certainly an important fact in the war that they were all imperialists. I think the Belgians had a terrible, terrible record in the Congo. I think the Germans had early on — I mean, the Germans got into imperialism late, but early on there were a lot of cruelties in their empire, especially right after the turn of the century and the massacre of the Hereros in southwest Africa and all that. But it's also true that the Germans did a self-investigation and tried to clean up their empire a little. Still, on balance, if you had given me a choice of being under the empire of the Germans or the Belgians, I think I would — or the British, I think I would have chosen the British pretty much instantaneously.

WOODS: You're saying you would have chosen the British?

TOOLEY: In most cases, yeah. I think the British were — although there were plenty of cruelties, I think they were slightly more evenhanded. They did tend to keep the local

people kind of pacified more, but I think on that score, I'd give Britain a B- and the Germans a C+ and the Belgians, I'd have to give them a D.

WOODS: Okay, let's say something, before we get into Woodrow Wilson, something about the Fischer thesis, because of course when we get into World War I, there's controversy about who really is most to blame. And just in case there are people who don't know about this, initially it was fashionable, certainly among the Allied Powers, to say that it was the Germans, and then of course with the Treaty of Versailles it was exclusively the Germans. They bear the responsibility. And then in the 1920s, the revisionist historians thought of it as a task that they were performing for the sake of world peace to try to show this was a lot of propaganda. Look, we're all to blame; there are a lot of different countries to blame. Somebody like Harry Elmer Barnes even said that the Germans might even be the least to blame.

TOOLEY: That's true.

WOODS: Well, then the pendulum swung way back with the Fischer thesis in the 1960s, and I'm curious to know your thoughts about it and where you feel like the profession stands today on that question.

TOOLEY: Well, that's a very interesting question. The Fischer thesis came from the work of Fritz Fischer, or it began there at the very earliest in 1959, but the main book, *Grab for World Power*, came out in the early '60s. And his thesis was that, Well, in fact, it was the Germans who did it. It was the Germans who — he had uncovered a plan for sort of global power, in which the Germans would not only link together Central Europe, but have a kind of central linkage across the globe, across the steppe to northern India and so forth. This was called the September Program, and this then made him think, Well, it's the Germans who are at fault, and he wrote two different books to demonstrate that. The historians of Germany all over the world, especially America, Britain, France, and Germany, got together many times to debate this point throughout the '60s. It became very acrimonious.

And I'd say the result, Tom, was that by the time we get to the 1980s, this has been fought over so much that, well, two things happened. First of all, some people reject the extreme claims of Fischer, but on the whole, they say, Well, okay, Germany did have some plans like this, at least contingency plans, at least sort of daydreams. But on the other hand, so did all the other powers. And so a lot of investigations started into British imperial plans for their empire. I mean, they already had one, right? They already had world power. And American plans and even French aggressive plans to sort of make a world power. So I think the Fischer thesis had some bad results and a few good ones. I mean, it got people talking about this whole issue of, Well, if we're going to blame the Germans again, let's look at least at the other powers this time.

WOODS: Indeed. Well, I think the United States, by the time the propaganda made its way through, obviously did come to accept the traditional view. Now, maybe some German Americans might not have accepted that. Who knows, because they were cowed into silence during the war, right?

TOOLEY: Yes, that's true.

WOODS: Okay, but all the same. Woodrow Wilson says we're going to try to have peace without victory, we're going to be magnanimous, we're not going to be one of these traditional powers of the past. We're going to be unique; we're going to be especially virtuous. So we'll see about how successful he is with that, but in terms of getting to the point where Wilson calls for intervention, what is the driving force behind it? Is it really just the submarines?

TOOLEY: I don't think so, Tom, and there's so much literature on this, it's a great fun — for those listeners who are interested in a great historiographical controversy, it is really fun to study this — even though the results are so tragic, but it's just an enormous topic. I don't think it was just the submarines, although historian Charles Seymour, Wilson's friend, said that it was. I don't think it was just some kind of a big business.

Here's how I put it together, just very briefly, and try to connect these dots a little bit. I think that Wilson wanted to be a man of peace, but he wanted to be a man of peace who got a trophy for it. I think that his alter ego, the shady Edward Mandell House, and Wilson had big plans for Wilson as a reorganizer of the world. And at first, I think they thought they could play that role, once the war started that they could play that role from the sidelines. Remember Theodore Roosevelt, whom Wilson defeated in the 1912 election, who had been obviously president before, he had won the Nobel Peace Prize for a peace treaty at the end of the Russo-Japanese War, and I think that they had looked at that and many other things and thought, Well, Woodrow Wilson's a far greater man — and I think Wilson would have agreed with me on this — Woodrow Wilson is a far greater man than Roosevelt, and we're going to go out and reorganize the world by making peace.

But on the other hand, at the same time, through the agency largely of Colonel House, as he was called, and others of his kind, the United States agreed to loan money to the Allies and agreed to become closer and closer. And pretty soon, the linkage was there on all sides. And I think Wilson at some point shifted. He tells House — early in 1915, even before the Lusitania, he tells House, Well, I was never sure that we shouldn't intervene in this war anyway. So at the very same time he's, well, three or four weeks later saying, We're too proud to fight; we want to create peace — even before this, he's saying, Well, I'm not so sure we don't want to intervene.

So I think this is a tactical thing for the goals of these two men, and once the British start to lose, there are so many American investments in the war in so many ways that I think Wilson and House see, Well, if the British lose, then how are we going to mediate this war? You can't mediate something where one side has really won big. So I think that was the impetus from the standpoint of those two to get the Americans into the war so that Wilson could become exactly what he became, in his own mind, anyway, the kind of messiah coming to Versailles to save the old world from itself and reorganize the new.

WOODS: Now, as somebody who's focused primarily on the European side of the war, tell me what the ultimate significance, practically and in the grand scheme of things, there is in the American entry.

TOOLEY: Well, that's a big question and there are some conditional parts and pieces to it. But I will say this: it used to be that the American part, especially for the last 25 or 30 years or so, was minimized. And to tell you the truth, although I have many good friends who are British and who are British historians, it does tend to be the fact that in British works, the American entry is minimized. I mean, they had fought so hard, they had lost so many dead, they had disrupted so many lives, it was really not in the British interest ever to tell the story, "And oh, by the way, the Americans came in and tipped the balance." So I think that this is out there, this idea that the Americans didn't impact it.

But in fact, by October 1918, the United States had over 5 million troops under arms, had 2 million troops in Europe, 1 million of whom were frontline, battle-ready, and most of them already fighting. So how could it possibly be that those numbers don't make an impact? So certainly it made an impact to the war effort.

Just to give a very small example, the salient on the Western Front, about two-thirds of the way down to the southeast of Saint-Mihiel, a famous American battle, that's a place where there had been stalemate for four years. The British and French just could not budge that line one way or the other. The America First Army was formed in the summer of 1918 finally, with all the training and logistics and everything — and George Marshall was the chief of staff, by the way. And the Americans reduced that salient in about a week of battle and with not very high casualties compared to what the British and French had been just having their in trench warfare.

So I think the American — the freshness, the well-armed quality, the traditions of the American army — and I'm not just saying this just out of some kind of jingoism. There are studies on American ways of attack and the kind of legacy of the Civil War attacks and the study of those and how do you get across the deadly ground covered by modern high-powered rifle fire. So there were studies of that, and I think those all came together to mean that the Americans made a huge contribution at Saint-Mihiel, the Argonne Wood, and other places. So that's certainly one way in which the American entry changed things.

You know, I'm not so sure that it — some say that it prolonged the war, and that's a toss up, I think. It may not have — it may have been that the American entry made it go a little long, but on the other hand, it may have been that the Allies were about ready to toss in the towel and negotiate at some point, if they didn't have the United States waiting in the wings. So I'm not sure whether that was a prolongation or now.

Now, what I do absolutely think is that the weight of the strongest economic power on the face of the earth — and that had been the case since the turn of the century. The strongest economic power on the side of the Allies, where it's touch and go and things are kind of balanced out and they might be negotiating at any moment and both sides were looking for back channels — the entry of the United States with all of that power on one side just simply meant that it was going to be over. The Germans gave it a shot in the Spring Offensive of 1918, but it wasn't enough. And it was, by the way, the Americans of the First and Second and Third Divisions of the First Army — well, what would become the First Army — who plugged the gap at Belleau Wood and other places in that German attack. So I think all of these things meant that by the time anybody

sets foot in Versailles for the negotiations, there's a sense that the Americans have paid for a lot of it and they're the least exhausted and the most powerful.

WOODS: All right, Hunt, we'll pick this back up in just a minute after we thank our very important sponsor.

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I'm curious about the state of the home front in 1917 in countries other than the United States. In the United States they haven't actually gotten involved yet, and obviously the American public wasn't completely on board if they had to do conscription and propaganda speeches on street corners and violations of civil liberties. But on the other hand, the U.S. wasn't completely demoralized by having been in an absolutely devastating war for three years. So I'm curious to know what's going on in these other countries. To the extent that we can figure out public opinion before the advent of polling, what is the mood?

TOOLEY: You know, there have been some very clever studies by historians about this very thing. You know, the French government, in fact, got school principals throughout the French school system, which is a kind of centralized system, and they got them to report on things that they heard at school, things that they heard from parents, things that they heard in the streets. And there's been a couple of books written based on these materials which are still available in France, and it's pretty fascinating. I mean, there are so many comments, it's hard to sort of shape those into some idea of how it happened. But it's more or less what you think. People were getting very, very, very tired of the war, year in and year out, and by the end of the war or over the last year of the war in France and more, people were tired of having their relatives killed in this war.

And moreover, of course, there's a huge French mutiny in 1917, in the spring of 1917, just after the United States declared war, even. But the French soldiers decide — being under the command of a very aggressive general who's launching murderous attacks, suicidal attack after suicidal attack, the French soldiers decide, Well, we're not going to run away from these trenches, but we're not going to attack anymore. Suicide will not be our policy. And so across maybe half of the French front — maybe a third, but possibly half — French soldiers just said — when they were ordered to attach, they just said no. It was a huge crisis. Disabled the French army for months and months for any offensive operations. And hundreds were shot, hundreds were sent to penal colonies and what not.

So sentiment was pretty bad. You can say the same thing for Austria-Hungary. You can say the same thing for Germany, where people were literally starving to death. It was the grimmest period— even though governments, of course, all governments tried the same thing, to adopt a happy-go-lucky attitude, smile, smile, smile. In Berlin, Tom, I ran across a collection of books on wartime nutrition put out by their equivalent of the government printing office and so forth, and I remember one in particular was a learned professor of nutrition who was lecturing people in 1917 about how good it was for you not to eat much. You know, cut down those calories. He said, you know, even below 1,000; you really do better on 800 or 900 calories. Basically the German equivalent of "Smile, smile, smile."

WOODS: Man, that is so typical. We'll make a virtue out of grim necessity.

TOOLEY: Absolutely.

WOODS: Now, I guess I want to know, given that I want to just get kind of a bird's eye overview from you today, I'd like to try to have you put on a hat that a lot of people ask historians to put on, which is the alternate-course-of-history hat. Because I'd like you to make the case that the intervention of the U.S. in particular was significant enough that it actually did harm — well, you know, I want to know your opinion. But I'm inclined to think that it did harm, and if you're inclined to think that it did harm and that it set European history on a very bad course, I'd like to know exactly the details of that scenario in your mind.

TOOLEY: Yeah, well, I absolutely agree with you. I think it did enormous harm to the world. I mean, for one thing, it created and set up the whole post-war scenario of American financial loans going to Europe — or at least to the defeated, to help pay for the reparations, the reparations going to the old Entente Powers, Entente Powers trying to pay off their loans — this triangular circulation of money, which then meant that any recession or depression was of necessity going to be a worldwide kind of situation. So I'm not saying that without that setup, based on American international banks in New York, without that setup things wouldn't have spread around so soon, but the Depression, as many Americans may not know, spread worldwide in 1930. And the big German and Austrian banks crashed. It threw everybody into a depression. And in the case of Germany and probably Britain itself, I mean, this was a much — in many ways, a much deeper kind of depression, partly because they were more urban. So that I think is one very clear kind of consequence.

Another consequence is of course what happened to the defeated powers. You can only kick people so much when they're down, and I think that the whole process of being defeated and then called guilty in the treaty — and that of course came from the Americans. Actually, that whole idea of the war guilt clause was the idea of a young John Foster Dulles. And I think you can only kick a people, a society so many times. And they begin to say, Well, how do we respond to this? I mean, we all know this happens in society. At some point, you get so many of these sort of burdens that people look for a way out, and Hitler and Mussolini offered people a way out.

Of course the war really allowed the Bolsheviks in many ways to come to power, although Wilson feared the Bolsheviks. He thought they were I guess a rival world organizer, and he didn't want any competition. But that's very much related too. So yeah, I would say in any analysis, you have to say that the world made a huge turn, and I think for the better. I think that make the world safe for democracy, we set up a situation where Europe had dictatorships in all of the brand new successor states, the new states created by the Allies by 1930, where dictatorship became a kind of way that replaced monarchy, which had been in many cases authoritarian, but at least a kinder and gentler kind of authoritarian.

And so yes, I think there's a set of enormous waves of impact here that really shaped the century. I think it sets the violence that was to come.

WOODS: I'd like to let you go because I promised you only X minutes, but I've just got to ask you, do you think what you just said to me is a common view among historians? Is this a view that — is this a position that a lot of historians have taken a stand on, in your experience, and do they tend to hold to our take on it?

TOOLEY: You know, I think some historians would go a little way down that road. I don't think it's an idea that's completely out of the question. And all historians discuss the financial impact and the movement of creditor status from Britain to America and these kinds of technical things; it's just that I don't think — it's a little like historians' view of inflation in the mainstream of history. They just don't think it mattered very much, whereas I think it's a crucial kind of moral issue in a way, as well as an economic issue. But I think they just don't think it matters very much and don't see that in the long run.

And especially, I think the idea that we hammered the Germans and the other defeated powers so much at the end of the war, that Hitler and Mussolini came as a result, I think that would tend to be something that's not necessarily rejected, Tom, but just completely off their radar. I mean, the old revisionists thought this way. You think this way. Ralph Raico, our dear friend who is recently departed, thought this way. Robert Higgs thinks this way. So I do know historians in that camp and I'm very firmly in that camp. I think it's an idea, however, that is perfectly discussable today. In a way, it might even sell better today than when people tried to represent this truth and sell people on the truth in the 1960s and '70s.

WOODS: Yeah, I'm inclined to think so too, and I bet you could find good folks on the left if — that's not an oxymoron. You can find some, especially on this sort of issue. I think you could get people on board, especially because Wilson, although he was a Progressive with a capital P, was not really progressive in the 2017 sense, let's say, so he has his enemies. And in fact, his stature — I did a recent survey of what historians say about the presidents, and his stature has fallen. He's fallen at least five or six slots just in the past six years.

TOOLEY: My goodness.

WOODS: And I think that's because — unfortunately, I think it's not because of the reason that led to 120,000 deaths; I think it's more that he favored segregation, government-enforced segregation, which I don't cheer for either, but as far as I know nobody died from that. So it's the usual thing. It's like with Donald Trump today. I can find 27 things to complain about, and the left is upset that he might want a rapprochement with the Russians. Like, they picked the one thing he might be halfway decent on, they focus on that. You can't deal with these people.

TOOLEY: It's amazing.

WOODS: Again, I want to repeat: don't be a schmuck. Get *The Great War: Western Front and Home Front*. I dare say, Hunt Tooley, no one has ever promoted your book quite that way in the past.

TOOLEY: I think you are the very first, Tom, and I thank you for it.

WOODS: Well, the pleasure is mine. The book is linked at TomWoods.com/884, our show notes page for today. Hunt, thanks as always for your time.

TOOLEY: Thanks so much, Tom.