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The Consent of the People: Presidential Secrecy and the First World War

IN JUNE 1918, federal agents invaded the plant of a small Washington, D.C., publisher, searching for the printing plates for a book that promoted "seditious" ideas. Why Your Country Is at War and What Happens to You After the War charged that a cabal of bankers and public officials had manipulated the country into joining the Great War in Europe. The author, a former Congressman from Minnesota named Charles A. Lindbergh Sr., claimed that he had discovered the real truth about the war. "I believe that I have proved," he argued, "that a certain 'inner circle,' without official authority and for selfish purposes, adroitly maneuvered things to ... make it practically certain that some of the belligerents would violate our international rights and bring us to war with them."[1]

In the federal government's view, those words endangered the republic. On the orders of the attorney general of the United States, A. Mitchell Palmer, the government agents found the plates and smashed them. For good measure, they also destroyed the plates for Lindbergh's earlier book, published in 1913, which decried the subversion of the republic by the "money trust."[2]

While the content of Lindbergh's books reflected the demonology of the nineteenth century—the "money sharks" and the Catholics—the treatment they received foreshadowed the defining villain of the twentieth. The destruction of Congressman Lindbergh's books marked a turning point in

the development of the U.S. federal government and of conspiracy theories about the government. When Lindbergh published his first book about the "money power" conspiracy that supposedly controlled the country, the federal government had neither the budget nor the inclination to view him as anything but a crank. The total federal budget was less than $1 billion. The fledgling federal police force, the Bureau of Investigation, had fewer than one hundred agents and no responsibility for suppressing dissent. And most American conspiracy theorists did not concern themselves with government crimes. Like Lindbergh, they worried about the money power or the Jews or the Catholics or the Masons, but not the government. It simply was not big or strong enough to merit their fear.

But just five years later, in 1918, the federal government controlled an almost $13 billion budget, employed more than eight hundred thousand civilian workers, and included several agencies charged with countering subversion.[3] Under the Sedition Act of 1918, public officials gained the power to arrest anyone who uttered or printed any "disloyal, profane, scurrilous, contemptuous, or abusive language" about the government—anyone who dissented, in other words, from the war effort. Empowered by the Sedition Act and its predecessor, the Espionage Act, government officials also destroyed books that challenged the official explanations for entering the war. In the process, these federal agents elevated Charles Lindbergh from harmless critic to Enemy of the State.

As the government defined conspiracy theorists like Lindbergh as the enemy, conspiracy theorists responded by redefining their enemy. Some Americans had worried for decades that malign forces might take over the government. Now, with the birth of the modern state, they worried that the government itself might be the most dangerous force of all.

The government could draft men to fight an unpopular war, imprison its most vocal opponents, and suppress the writings of dissidents. The locus of power had begun to shift, and American fears shifted along with it. Conspiracy theorists like Lindbergh now had some real enemies to worry about.

For the next twenty years, Americans would continue to debate the reasons for their nation's participation in the Great War and argue over whether it was fought for freedom or gold, for self-determination or England, for democracy or the narrow interests of a selfish inner circle.

For the rest of the twentieth century and into the next, they would continue to challenge, and to fear, the proto–national security state born of the war. In the end, World War I skeptics came to believe that it was the U.S. state itself—the expansive, militarized, twentieth-century state that emerged from the war—that truly imperiled the American republic.

WHEN THEY BEGAN examining the official government explanations of the Great War, many conspiracy theorists found it strange that Americans had marched off to join a European war in 1917. After all, when the war exploded across Europe back in 1914, almost no one, not even the bellicose Theodore Roosevelt, thought that the United States should fight.[4] President Woodrow Wilson proclaimed that the conflict was "one with which we have nothing to do, whose causes cannot touch us."[5] To many Americans at the time, the war seemed to provide proof of the folly and destructiveness of the Old World and the superiority of the New. As the president explained, future generations would see the United States as "blessed among the nations" because it worked for peace and stayed above the fray.[6] In his ideal world, Americans were "too proud to fight" the wars of Europe.[7]

But if the United States was too proud to fight in the war, it was not too proud to trade with both sides. Indeed, in the newly globalized world of the early twentieth century, the U.S. economy depended on trade with other industrialized nations for continued growth. The world had become so interconnected that "there was hardly a village or town anywhere on the globe whose prices were not influenced by distant foreign markets," according to historians of globalization. In this era of the "first great globalization boom," American wages, commodity prices, and infrastructure expansion—in sum, the health of the economy as a whole—were determined by the influx of foreign labor and capital.[8]

In theory, U.S. policy allowed both sides in the war to buy arms and food and manufactured goods from American companies. But the British blockade of Germany prevented American ships from trading with the Central Powers, and soon the "neutral" United States found itself effectively aligned with the Triple Entente of Britain, France, and Russia. This was especially true after late summer 1915, when Wilson quietly lifted restrictions on loaning money to countries at war. From 1915 to 1917, U.S. banks loaned $2.5 billion to the Entente, but less than one-tenth that amount to the Central Powers. By 1916, the United States was selling more than $3 billion in goods every year to Britain and France, but doing only $1 million a year in business with Austria-Hungary and Germany.[9]

This growing economic interest in an Allied victory was reinforced by a sentimental one: many American elites greatly admired the English. Top government officials, key bankers in New York, and even the president himself seemed from the start to hope secretly for a British victory, despite their officially neutral rhetoric.[10] The British claims of German atrocities in Belgium, later shown to be greatly exaggerated, deeply affected the president, whose eyes filled with tears when he discussed them with the British ambassador.[11] Most Wall Street banks, including the House of Morgan, which served as the British purchasing agent during the war, desperately wanted the Allies to win. "Our firm had never for one moment been neutral; we didn't know how to be," said Morgan's Thomas Lamont after the war. "From the very start we did everything we could to contribute to the cause of the Allies."[12]

As American ships transported arms and goods to the Allies, the United States was sucked into the vortex of the conflict. To combat the blockade, the Germans began to sink ships headed to the ports of their enemies, including passenger liners that might be carrying weapons. In 1915, a German submarine sank the luxury liner *Lusitania*, killing more than one thousand passengers, including 128 Americans. The United States vigorously protested the sinking—too vigorously for Secretary of State William Jennings Bryan, who quit over what he regarded as President Wilson's provocative policies. The Germans ultimately promised to be more judicious about their targets, and the United States avoided joining the war for two more years. In 1916, Wilson ran for reelection with the slogan "He Kept Us Out of War."

But in the winter of 1917, as the Germans made an all-out push for victory, the U-boats renewed their program of unrestricted submarine warfare. While the Wilson administration struggled to decide how to respond to the attacks on American ships, German Foreign Minister Alfred Zimmermann sent a coded telegram to Mexico urging the revolutionary government there to consider an alliance with Germany in exchange for a huge chunk of the southwestern United States. When the British intercepted and decrypted the Zimmermann telegram and triumphantly presented it to U.S. officials, Wilson decided that the time had come for the United States to enter the conflict.

But many Americans still agreed with the president's original view, that the United States should never descend to the European level of barbarism. When the president asked Congress to pass a law giving him the power to arm American merchant ships against submarines, a group of eight senators filibustered the bill to death in a marathon twenty-six-hour floor session. Wilson remarked angrily that a "little group of willful men" had hijacked U.S. foreign policy.[13] The senators argued that they were defending the Constitution against executive tyranny. "Under this bill the President can do anything; his power is absolutely limitless," said Senator George Norris of Nebraska. "This, in effect, is an amendment of the Constitution, an illegal amendment. We are abdicating, we are surrendering our authority."[14] Norris refused to surrender his authority, but Wilson took it anyway. The president declared that the Constitution already gave him the power to arm the ships, and he quickly issued orders allowing American gun crews to shoot German submarines on sight in war zones.[15]

In April 1917, Wilson took the next step and asked Congress to declare war. Some antiwar senators continued to insist that bankers and industrialists with investments in Britain were forcing the United States into a pointless bloodbath. Using a phrase that later became famous, Senator Norris eloquently explained his vote against intervention. "We are going into war upon the command of gold," he said. "I feel that we are about to put the dollar sign upon the American flag."[16] Norris lost his battle in 1917, but his words would be revived and revered two decades later.

The six senators and fifty representatives who voted against the war represented a substantial minority of Americans who opposed intervention and distrusted the Wilson administration from the start. Some of these Americans opposed the war because they had relatives in Germany or their ancestors had come from Germany, or because they deplored the brutality of the British suppression of the Irish revolution.

Many antiwar Americans, though, saw the conflict through the lens of populism. The People's Party of the 1890s had mobilized the farmers of the South and Midwest to fight the predatory practices of eastern and British railroads and banks. At times, the Populists had used conspiracist language—sometimes overtly anti-Semitic or Anglophobic—to attack the "secret cabals of the international gold ring."[17] Many midwesterners and southerners saw U.S. military intervention as yet another case where the government listened to the command of gold, not the needs of the people.[18]

Once the United States entered the war, the government embarked on a massive campaign to manufacture support and eradicate dissent. Just

as Senator Norris had feared, the presidency took on expansive powers as executive agencies proliferated. The executive branch gained the authority to control the newspapers, take over the railroads, set wages, and even move the hands of the clock with the beginning of Daylight Saving Time. Above all, with the first comprehensive draft in U.S. history, the government secured the power to pluck reluctant farmers out of their cornfields and dispatch them to the killing fields of France. No wonder the antiwar senators trembled: the traditionally small federal government was extending its reach into the lives of every American.

President Wilson assured Americans that the war was worth all their sacrifices: it was no mean struggle for "conquest and domination," but a crusade to "make the world safe for democracy." In his Fourteen Points he laid out the principled aims for this "culminating and final war for human liberty," including self-determination and the end of secret deals between imperialistic nations. In the postwar world, there would be "open covenants of peace, openly arrived at," which guaranteed all people justice, equality, liberty, and safety. "The day of conquest and aggrandizement is gone by; so is also the day of secret covenants entered into in the interest of particular governments," he pledged. He would not ask Americans "to continue this tragical and appalling outpouring of blood and treasure" for anything less.[19]

For the Americans who questioned the president's idealistic rhetoric, the Wilson administration launched an unprecedented propaganda effort to convince them of the justice of the Allied cause and of the evils of both the "Hun" abroad and war resisters at home. The director of the propaganda campaign, George Creel, saw it as his duty to "bring home the truths of this great war to every man, woman, and child in the United States, so that they might understand that it was a just war, a holy war, and a war in self-defense."[20] Americans encountered government posters in subways and on street corners, government advertisements in their magazines, and government pamphlets in their post offices and schools.

These posters and pamphlets had one purpose: to spread the official conspiracy theory set forth by the Wilson administration. According to this theory, the Germans started the war as part of a plot to conquer innocent nations. The "military masters" of Germany, Wilson said, planned to "throw a belt of German military power and political control across the very center of Europe and beyond the Mediterranean into the heart of Asia." The German Empire was a "sinister power" that had "stretched its ugly talons out and drawn blood from us."[21]

Even worse, this "sinister power" received help from people within the United States, according to the official conspiracy theorists. Wilson proclaimed that Germany "filled our unsuspecting communities and even our offices of government with spies and set criminal intrigues everywhere afoot against our national unity of counsel, our peace within and without, our industries and our commerce."[22] In Wilson's view, some naturalized Americans had poured the "poison of disloyalty" into the nation's arteries.[23] The administration knew how to respond to these traitors. "If there should be disloyalty," the president said as the nation entered the war, "it will be dealt with with a firm hand of stern repression."[24]

This hand of repression came down hard on American dissidents. With the Espionage and Sedition Acts, the U.S. government outlawed criticism of the government, the president, and the war effort, thus effectively criminalizing opposition to the war. When Jacob Abrams printed antiwar leaflets and his friends tossed them from a Manhattan building, government officials arrested them for sedition. In their pamphlets, the radicals charged that President Wilson had "hypnotized the people of America to such an extent that they do not see his hypocrisy."[25] For their criticism of their government, they received prison terms and a place in history as defendants in a famous Supreme Court case, *Abrams v. United States*. Despite an eloquent dissent by Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, the Court upheld their convictions in 1919. The government also charged hundreds of other war opponents with sedition: the socialist leader Eugene V. Debs went to jail for saying the war was being fought by the poor for the rich; another man was indicted for proclaiming that the war was "a Morgan war and not a war of the people."[26] Twenty years later, millions of Americans would agree with that statement, but in 1918 public support for it could land one in prison.

At the Department of Justice, a young former librarian named J. Edgar Hoover began tracking enemy aliens and dissenters. Hoover started by targeting German Americans but moved smoothly to surveillance and harassment of communists after the war. In 1919, he would set up an index card system that catalogued every suspected subversive person, group, and publication in the country; by 1921, he had 450,000 cards.[27] Hoover and his domestic surveillance system would continue to haunt American dissidents for over five decades.

The expanding security state worked in tandem with extralegal societies of superpatriots to keep dissenters in line. As Attorney General Thomas W. Gregory explained, antiwar Americans should ask God for mercy, "for they need expect none from an outraged people and an avenging Government."[28] Taught by their government that opposition to the war was both illegal and immoral, many pro-war Americans turned with fury on dissenters.

Two of the most extreme examples of vigilantism occurred in Minnesota and Montana. When former congressman Charles Lindbergh ran for governor of Minnesota in 1918, his supporters were shocked by the vehemence and the violence of the campaign against him. During his repeated attempts to deliver an antiwar message to throngs of potential voters, frenzied mobs pelted him with eggs and vegetables and drowned his speeches in boos and jeers. As his teenage son, also named Charles, waited anxiously by the family car to drive his father to the next campaign stop, vigilantes hanged the candidate in effigy, turned fire hoses on his supporters, and shot at him as he leaped into his car and sped away. On one occasion, his campaign was forced to retreat to Iowa, which, Congressman Lindbergh said, "is still part of the United States and where free speech still prevails."[29]

Lindbergh lost the election, but at least he escaped with his life. Other opponents of the war were not so lucky. In wartime Montana, some citizens were infuriated when the federal prosecutor there refused to bring charges of espionage against the anarchist leader Frank Little, who had criticized the government and the war effort. The prosecutor, a young lawyer named Burton K. Wheeler, insisted that Little's antiwar speeches were not against the law, however objectionable the local community found them.

Montanans were even more anxious, intolerant, and polarized than Minnesotans. The powerful mining companies that controlled politics in the state supported the war, but thousands of local immigrant workers, who were subject to the draft even though they were not yet citizens, opposed both the war and the copper companies' brutal union busting. The strength of opposition to the war caused some citizens to imagine German conspiracies in Montana, six thousand miles from the fighting. Residents reported seeing German spies on the streets of Helena, bomb-toting German saboteurs deep in the mines, German wireless communication stations high in the Bitterroot Mountains, and spectral German "airships" in the big Montana sky.[30]

After draft riots rocked Butte, pro-war Montanans organized vigilante groups to force dissenters to buy war bonds and perform public acts of patriotism such as kissing the flag. Resisters were tarred and feathered, beaten, and lynched. The day after Wheeler's decision not to bring charges against Frank Little, six men dragged the union leader from his bed and hanged him from a railroad trestle.[31]

The vice president of the United States praised the lynch mob—the hanging had a "salutary effect," Thomas Marshall proclaimed—but Wheeler learned a different lesson. Like Congressman Lindbergh and his son, Wheeler had seen firsthand that war hysteria could cause Americans to become "unpatriotic, lawless, and inhuman."[32] Fearing a repeat of the wartime hysteria, Wheeler and Charles Lindbergh Jr. would fight bitterly against U.S. intervention in the next world war.

The opponents of vigilantism during the Great War were shocked to discover that Americans were capable of perpetrating these outrages against civil liberties and human life. But one aspect of the vigilantism outraged these nascent civil libertarians more than anything else: the federal government itself, they believed, had deliberately fanned the flames of irrational fear and thereby encouraged the violence.

The government's responsibility for this assault on constitutional rights was horrifying to many Americans. As the historian Charles Beard later wrote, "Never before had American citizens realized how thoroughly, how irresistibly a modern government could impose its ideas upon the whole nation and, under a barrage of publicity, stifle dissent with declarations, assertions, official versions, and reiteration."[33] Americans realized that their government could not only suppress dissent: it could also control the terms of debate.

The Wilson administration had set forth a narrative of the war, featuring sinister Germans, democratic war aims, and noble allies. It had suppressed, censored, spied on, and jailed anyone who attempted to present a different story about the war. Over the next decade, some citizens' anger at the government's manipulation of public opinion slowly evolved into profound doubt about the government's truthfulness and trustworthiness. As more Americans grew suspicious of the government's official history of the conflict, they resolved to find the "real reasons" for U.S. intervention and to expose the lies and evasions of wartime leaders.

LIKE MANY OF HIS generation of historians, the leading historical revisionist of the Great War began his career as a propagandist for the U.S. government. Harry Elmer Barnes, who received his Ph.D. from Columbia University in 1918, had been among the many scholars who volunteered to write anti-German propaganda for the government and for pro-war organizations.[34] These historians produced syllabi for schools, explanatory pamphlets, and a "war cyclopedia" that contained cross-referenced entries such as "rumors, malicious and disloyal" and "German government, bad faith of."[35] Barnes was among the most enthusiastic of these propagandists, searching German history for examples of the evils of German society and the virtues of the Allied cause.[36]

Two years after the end of the war, Barnes read a disturbing article in the *American Historical Review* by Professor Sidney Fay. The essay, titled "New Light on the Origins of the World War," questioned whether the Germans deserved the blame for the war. As he devoured Fay's article, Barnes discovered that his propaganda articles had been wrong. He learned that the Germans were not directly responsible for "all the loss and damage" of the war, as the Versailles Treaty had claimed. The German leaders were at times clumsy or stupid, but they were not the insidious Huns of Allied propaganda.[37]

Barnes soon exchanged one set of villains for another. If the Germans were not criminals plotting war, then perhaps the *real* criminals had escaped detection. Determined to find the true conspirators behind U.S. entry into what he saw as a pointless war, Barnes sparked a wave of revisionism on the causes of U.S. intervention. Reviving the arguments of the peace movement of 1917, he helped to mold a generation of alienated intellectuals and activists who found deception, incompetence, and conspiracy in the foreign policy of Woodrow Wilson's administration.

Revisionist historians like Barnes were able to write their alternative histories of the war thanks to the revolutionaries in Russia, who had thrown open the doors of the czar's secret archives. Giddy with power and determined to prove Lenin right, the triumphant revolutionaries allowed Western scholars to mine their archives for copies of the secret treaties of the Allies. These treaties outlined the Allies' plans for gobbling up parts of Eastern Europe after the war. The Moscow papers showed that the British and French were at least partly guilty of the charge that their war aims were based on selfishness and greed.

Yet Wilson had claimed that the war was fought for democracy, self-determination, and open covenants. To Barnes, Wilson's grand statements were "the grossest form of compensatory, if partially sub-conscious, hypocrisy to assuage him for his unpleasant knowledge of the Secret Treaties."[38] The president had lied to him, Barnes believed, and had manipulated him and his fellow historians into producing provably false and misleading propaganda.

Regretting his part in helping the government create the myth of the "black devilishness of the Central Powers and the lamb-like innocence of the Entente," Barnes and other disillusioned propagandists set out to revise the world's understanding of the causes of the war.[39] A torrent of books and articles challenged earlier interpretations.[40] Every year, new books expanded on the revisionists' arguments: Austria-Hungary was justified in declaring war on Serbia; the Germans had not committed atrocities in Belgium; if any one nation deserved blame for the war, it was Russia, not Germany or Austria-Hungary.

As the revisionists examined German guilt, they began to question the truthfulness of the U.S. government. If in fact the Germans had not started the war and committed war crimes, they reasoned, then the United States had no reason to wage war against them. By the mid-1920s, Americans were publishing a flood of revisionist writings on U.S. entry into the war. Barnes's *Genesis of the World War* and *In Quest of Truth and Justice*, Frederick Bausman's *Facing Europe*, and C. Hartley Grattan's *Why We Fought* sought to discover why the United States had made what these writers saw as a colossal mistake. These historians all posed the same question: Why, given initial resistance to joining the war, had the people of the United States been pushed into what Barnes called an "unmitigated disaster"?[41]

The earliest revisionist works posited three answers, all of which emphasized the power of wicked individuals. First, they revived the arguments of Norris, Lindbergh, and the Populists to decry the influence of a few powerful bankers and industrialists over U.S. policy. Norris, they decided, was right: the war *had* been fought on the "command of gold." Barnes summed up this view in 1924: "We did not actually go into the World War to protect ourselves from imminent German invasion, or to make the world safe for democracy, but to protect our investment in Allied bonds."[42] The United States, wrote John Kenneth Turner in his 1922 book *Shall It Be Again?*

"is a financial oligarchy," with the president a mere servant of the money power.[43] The "money power," of course, referred to bankers, but sometimes the revisionists conflated "the bankers" with "big business." According to this argument, the arms makers, particularly the Du Pont family, and the big bankers, particularly the House of Morgan, worked together to ensure that their demand for profits trumped the American people's innate desire for peace.

Second, the revisionists blamed a handful of English officials for "poisoning" American public opinion. In their view, some wily English propagandists had cleverly prepared the United States for the war by spreading a distorted view of German actions. The propagandists themselves provided evidence for this argument by bragging about their enormous influence. Sir Gilbert Parker, the chief British propagandist in the United States, boasted in a *Harper's* article in 1918 that his prewar activities had been "very extensive" and hugely successful.[44] In singling out men like Parker for calumny, the revisionists drew on a strong tradition of American Anglophobia. Many working-class and rural Americans had a long list of grievances against the English: they were snooty; they were imperialistic; and, before the war at least, they owned a lot of the loans held by Americans. In the Midwest, where admiration for England smacked of elitism and pretension and just plain un-Americanism, many residents found it easy to believe that Englishmen had stacked the deck against them.

Finally, the revisionists blamed the evil individuals who worked in the executive branch and exercised power over the president. Just who, they wanted to know, had convinced President Wilson to abandon his earlier, wiser policy of neutrality? Which individuals had colluded with the economic royalists to change his weak mind? Increasingly, they pointed the finger of blame at two Wilson aides who, the revisionists believed, had an unusual and ultimately un-American affection for British aristocrats. In the revisionists' view, these two men had singlehandedly changed the course of history.

THE PRIMARY "ANGLOMANIACS" in the Wilson administration, in the view of Barnes and other critics, were the president's closest friend and adviser, Col. Edward House, and his ambassador to Great Britain, Walter Hines Page. The revisionists had some difficulty deciding which man was more diabolical. Page was clearly more biased than House toward Britain, but House had more influence over the president, at least for a time. Both men had been seen as pro-English during the war, but their attempts to aid Britain were not fully exposed until they began to boast of them in their memoirs. The first volume of Page's autobiography was released in 1922, and House's own multivolume account reached the public beginning in 1926. These self-serving memoirs ironically became the primary source material for the two men's harshest critics.

Colonel House was a natural villain for conspiracy theorists. The "colonel" had never actually seen battle or served in the military, but had received his honorary title from one of the many grateful Texas politicians he had helped to put into power. He never held political office, or ran for office, or even held any official governmental post. He wrote a utopian novel in which a hero suspiciously similar to himself overthrew the U.S. government and appointed himself dictator. Yet this shadowy man of apparent authoritarian proclivities became one of President Wilson's most important advisers.[45]

When the colonel first met Wilson in 1911, he was already known as the political mastermind behind four successive governors in his home state of Texas. House was a Democrat, as were all politically ambitious Texans in the early twentieth century, and eager to find a candidate for president who was deserving of his support and capable of winning. A sickly man with no identifiable illness, House liked to hover in the background and exercise power through other men. He arranged to meet the rising star from New Jersey who had the best chance of winning the White House for the Democrats. For his part, Wilson was pleased to win the support of the fabulously wealthy donor who had a reputation as a political fixer. The men liked each other from the start. "We found ourselves in such complete sympathy, in so many ways," the colonel remembered later, "that we soon learned to know what each was thinking without either having expressed himself."[46]

Once Wilson took office in 1913, House became his top adviser and controlled access to him. He decided who could see the president, whose requests were passed along to him, and who received jobs in the administration. The colonel believed that it was his duty to "offset the criticism and lighten the burden of detail that weighs upon every President."[47] Yet he refused to take a formal post or draw a government salary. The lack of an official title only added to House's air of mystery.

Although he advised Wilson on virtually every issue, his main responsibility lay in foreign policy. Beginning in 1913, the president directed House to make several peacemaking trips to Europe. During his sojourns in England and Germany, House grew convinced that the United States needed to enter the war and ensure victory for the Allies. In one of his most deceptive and convoluted maneuvers, he tried to persuade Wilson to offer an ultimatum to the kaiser in 1916. Either the Germans agreed to attend a peace conference, House suggested, or the United States would join the war. But Wilson insisted on softening the ultimatum's language, and the British lost interest in the proposal.[48] House's influence with the president was clearly on the wane.[49]

But House *thought* that he had tremendous power. At times, he seemed to claim an almost demonic influence over the president. "I was like a disembodied spirit seeking a corporeal form," he wrote in his memoirs. "I found my opportunity in Woodrow Wilson."[50]

Reviewers of his memoirs accepted at face value House's claims of omnipotence. "Wilson relied on House alone, and in everything," declared a writer for the *Saturday Evening Post*, an admirer and defender of the colonel.[51] House's critics also emphasized his power over Wilson, but they cast him more as Rasputin than Talleyrand. Oswald Garrison Villard, the publisher of the *Nation*, read House's memoirs with increasing amazement. He was appalled by "the trickery, the insincerity, the double-dealing, the hypocrisy" displayed by the colonel, not to mention his "supernatural, not to say diabolical, cleverness."[52] House's belated claim of authorship of his 1913 novel, *Philip Dru: Administrator*, which had been credited to "anonymous," only confirmed his critics' suspicions. In its endorsement of a military coup by a benevolent dictator, House's book did not reassure those who were concerned about his possible subversion of democracy.

Hatred of Colonel House performed a useful function for the war's opponents. If he was to blame for the war, then the way to avoid future wars was simple: expose and remove wicked advisers like the colonel. When he died in 1938, some anti-interventionists seemed to hold him personally responsible for all the American lives lost in 1917 and 1918. "The American people to the last man and woman," wrote Villard in the *Nation*, "ought to be told again how Colonel House's activities helped to bring on war in 1917 and how the fate of their children may still be settled by two or three men in and out of office."[53] Villard neatly triggered historical American anxieties—an inner circle was trying to subvert the republic and institute dictatorship—and provided a solution to them at the same time. By blaming these "two or three men," Villard granted himself more control over an increasingly frightening world situation. Expose the handful of evil men in Washington, he implied, and we can avoid a second great war.

The only man in the Wilson administration more odious than House, in the view of the revisionists, was the American ambassador to Britain, Walter Page. Like House, Page used his memoirs to reveal the extent of his influence on Wilson's decision to go to war. In Page's telling, Wilson's State Department had been willfully blind to the clear moral superiority of the "sacred cause" of the Allies in the early years of the war. As Wilson's representative in London, Page had worked to moderate what he saw as his government's unnecessarily hostile stance toward the British, who, he believed, should be supported because they were democratic and racially pure. In one case, a State Department missive protesting British violations of American rights had lacked the tenor that he thought Anglo-Saxons should use when communicating with their equals. "There is nothing in its tone," he complained to Colonel House, proving "that it came from an American to an Englishman: it might have been from a Hottentot to a Fiji Islander."[54]

Outraged by this disrespect toward fellow Anglo-Saxons, Page worked assiduously to signal to the British that the State Department did not represent real U.S. interests. The most flagrant example of Page's preference for the English appeared in the memoirs of his close friend, British Foreign Secretary Sir Edward Grey. In Grey's account, Page came to him one day with a State Department demand that the British stop seizing American ships. "I am instructed to read this dispatch to you," Page explained. After performing his official duty, Page then said, "I have now read the dispatch, but I do not agree with it; let us consider how it should be answered." When the story became public in 1925, the *New York Times* editorialized that Page's decision to undermine his own government set a "demoralizing and disastrous" precedent.[55] Revisionists went further. Page, wrote C. Hartley Grattan, was a latter-day Benedict Arnold.[56]

According to his critics, Page had subverted the peaceable members of the Wilson administration—and the will of the American public—by manipulating the president into war. Without Page and his "virulent pro-English attitude," Harry Barnes contended, "the story of American foreign policy from 1914–1919 would have been far different from what it was."[57]

In Barnes's view, Page was an unelected figure whose access to power had world-changing consequences. Barnes was propagating a classic conspiracist view of historical causation. In a mirror image of Wilson's denunciation of antiwar senators as "a little group of willful men," Barnes believed that a different but equally insidious group had dragged a reluctant country into an unnecessary war.

By the end of the 1920s, the skeptics' theory of the reasons for U.S. entry had assumed its broad outlines. They believed that they had uncovered several "truths": the American people had not wanted to enter the war; certain "interests" had subverted their democratic preferences; and these interests included bankers and Anglophile presidential aides. At this point, these theories were standard fare for American conspiracists. The theories about House and Page were reminiscent of earlier fears of evil advisers like the Illuminati, or the secret brotherhood that allegedly controlled the world, insinuating themselves into the president's inner circle. In fact, some later theorists would charge that House was a key agent of the Illuminati conspiracy.[58]

In the 1930s, though, as the size of the government mushroomed during the New Deal and as another world war loomed, American conspiracy theorists would shift their sights from individual targets to more systemic and institutional ones. Domestic and international crises suddenly provided the opportunity for one of the most radical and extensive investigations of a war decision in the nation's history. In 1934, the Senate voted to begin a probe that would raise searching questions about the reasons for intervention in the previous war. With the Senate Munitions Inquiry, the skeptics of the Great War would eventually focus on a modern enemy: the expanding powers of the presidency.

FOR YEARS PACIFISTS and socialists had been calling without success for an investigation of war and war profits. But as the world lurched toward war in the 1930s, the question of U.S. involvement in a foreign war suddenly seemed urgent to many Americans. Japan invaded Manchuria in 1931, Hitler became chancellor of Germany in 1933, and Mussolini prepared to invade Ethiopia. A world conflagration was on the horizon, and most Americans wanted no part of it.

Americans worried even more about the collapse of their own economy. During the Great Depression, the years of spiraling unemployment and poverty eroded the nation's faith in businessmen and in an unregulated market. In this climate, many citizens supported public officials who attacked corporate and financial titans.

As the Great Depression continued and the world crisis escalated, many Americans came to agree with the revisionists that the war had been a waste of lives and money. More than a hundred thousand Americans had died in the war, but for what? To make the world safe for Hitler, Stalin, and Mussolini?

The popular culture of the 1930s reflected this revulsion against war. Scholars began questioning the wisdom of U.S. participation in just about every war. Walter Millis exposed the ignorance and deceit behind the Spanish-American War in *The Martial Spirit*, and historians argued that the Civil War had been the product of a "blundering generation." Even the kaiser's soldiers—rapacious brutes of government propaganda just fifteen years earlier—became heroes in popular culture. The German antiwar novel *All Quiet on the Western Front* humanized the German soldiers and caused more Americans to question the official history of the war. Young Americans were particularly moved by the books and movies about the mistakes of the previous war. As the journalist Eric Sevareid remembered, the students of the 1930s were "revolted by the stories of the mass hysteria of 1917, the beating of German saloon keepers, the weird spy hunts, the stoning of pacifists, the arrests of conscientious objectors."[59]

When the Democrats recaptured the White House and Congress in the election of 1932, they seemed eager to rethink and reexamine established policies. Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal for the American people had not been clearly defined during the campaign, but the new president quickly indicated his intention to use government to solve the economic crisis. He was particularly receptive to attacks on the corporate leaders who opposed his expansion of the federal government.

The economic, diplomatic, and political shocks of the 1930s, in short, gave pacifists a chance to teach Americans about the futility of war. One veteran peace activist seized this opportunity and pushed her advantage to secure a congressional inquiry into the causes of wars. Dorothy Detzer, one of the most influential female lobbyists of the interwar years, had been representing the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) on Capitol Hill since the 1920s.[60] She had nursed casualties of war with Quaker relief societies in postwar Europe for three years, before returning home to find her beloved twin brother, Don, suffering the

corrosive effects of mustard gas from his wartime service.[61] As she watched him die, she resolved to do everything she could to make sure that other men would not have to fight and suffer.

As the national secretary of the WILPF in the early 1930s, Detzer buttonholed members of Congress and urged them to launch a massive investigation of the arms makers, who, she argued, tried to foment wars in their quest to make more money. In her view, if Congress took the profits out of war, peace would follow.[62]

By stressing the role of the arms dealers, Detzer and other pacifists departed from the arguments of most revisionist historians. In the view of the scholarly skeptics of the war, the bankers had played a much more pivotal role than the munitions makers in influencing the Wilson administration. As Barnes wrote in 1934, arms manufacturers "never exerted so terrible an influence upon the promotion of warfare as did our American bankers between 1914 and 1917."[63]

But in the mid-1930s, a series of journalistic exposés suddenly pushed the arms makers to the forefront of the public debate. In March 1934 the business magazine *Fortune* published "Arms and the Men," charging that the privately owned, profit-motivated arms industry helped to foment wars. At the same time, George Seldes's *Iron, Blood, and Profits* exposed the international "munitions racket," and Helmuth Engelbrecht and Frank C. Hanighen took aim at the "merchants of death" in their best-selling book. Both books argued that wars would continue to ravage the world unless governments investigated and tamed the arms makers.

In contrast to the conspiracy theorists later in the century, these World War I skeptics were elites who used the traditional print media to bring their ideas to the public. These journalists and historians wrote books, magazine articles, and newspaper columns disputing the Wilson administration's history of the Great War. With Detzer's help, they were hoping to use another traditional means—the congressional investigation—to promote their ideas.

The popularity of the books on the death merchants helped Detzer to build a broad coalition of unlikely allies. Detzer was an internationalist and a leftist, yet she drew support from conservative and nationalist groups and individuals. The American Legion, for example, worked against her on almost every other issue, but in this case its members shared her concern that arms merchants' desire for profits might lead to unnecessary wars.[64] Henry Ford, the auto magnate and noted isolationist, also endorsed an investigation. If the world could rid itself of "scheming munition makers looking for enormous profits," Ford proclaimed, then "the people would enjoy peace."[65]

President Roosevelt decided to support the investigation as well. Besides his general approval of greater government oversight of the arms industry, Roosevelt saw potential political benefits in an inquiry. A high-profile Senate investigation of the arms makers would inevitably target Pierre Du Pont, the wealthy arms manufacturer who was pouring millions into the effort to defeat Roosevelt's reelection bid in 1936. As Roosevelt nurtured America's infant welfare state and called for more government involvement in the economy, Du Pont organized his fellow industrialists into the Liberty League, a group dedicated to the defeat of the New Deal. In Roosevelt's view, a high-profile investigation of the merchants of death seemed politically advantageous: it would annoy Du Pont, confirm the selfishness of Roosevelt's most determined opponents, and please the eight hundred thousand members of the American Legion.[66] Once the president gave his approval, the Senate quickly passed the resolution and set up a select committee to investigate the arms industry.

The members of the committee and its staff represented the breadth of the coalition supporting the munitions investigation. Populist Republicans, conservative Democrats, democratic socialists, and even secret communists hoped to use the committee to demonstrate the dangers of a privately owned munitions industry. The committee's chairman, Gerald Nye of North Dakota, was an agrarian Republican whose state had strongly supported the People's Party in the 1890s and still retained a popular fear of banks and eastern "interests." After Nye, the most important committee member was Missouri Senator Bennett Clark, a Democrat and son of the legendary speaker of the House, Champ Clark. One of the founders of the American Legion, Clark was at once populist, conservative, anti–big business, and anti–New Deal.

The committee's staff also included some energetic socialists, including Stephen Raushenbush, the chief of staff. Raushenbush, who had simplified the spelling of his name, was the son of Social Gospel minister Walter Rauschenbusch, who, as early as 1907, had blamed arms makers for starting wars. During the investigation, conservatives attacked Raushenbush and other leftist staffers as Marxists who were conspiring to destroy

republicanism and promote "socialistic control of all American private enterprise."[67] Indeed, though no one knew it at the time, the committee's counsel, Alger Hiss, was a Soviet spy who had been ordered to infiltrate the committee to obtain secret military documents for the communists.[68] Finally, the committee employed as consultants several well-known critics of the arms industry, including *Merchants of Death* coauthor Engelbrecht and the journalist John T. Flynn, the author of a *New Republic* column titled "Other People's Money" and a forceful conspiracist in the next war.

The Nye Committee, in short, was nothing if not eclectic in its composition. However, its conservative Democrats, progressive Republicans, and avowed socialists all shared a passion to challenge the established "interests," whether they resided on Wall Street or in the White House. They may have argued vehemently about the merits of the expansion of the welfare state, but they all agreed that the warfare state threatened American democracy.

The Senate charged the committee with investigating the arms trade and recommending new laws to regulate it. At first, this seemed a question of current policy, but the committee discovered that it could not recommend future laws to regulate the arms makers unless it fully understood their role in the previous war. Over the next two years, the committee's task evolved from a simple exposé of war profiteers into a historical investigation of the government's mistakes and lies from two decades earlier.

The committee initially targeted the group of men vilified by Detzer, Walter Rauschenbusch, and the recent best-selling books: the merchants of death. Throughout the committee's first set of hearings, Senator Nye tried to find proof for his conviction that greed led arms traders to promote wars. His investigators did discover internal industry documents that proved highly embarrassing to the arms merchants, including memos denouncing the State Department's peacemaking efforts as "pernicious" and deriding U.S. diplomats as effeminate "cooky pushers."[69] Some individuals, such as Sir Basil Zaharoff, the "munitions king" of Switzerland, had amassed fortunes from war; other arms merchants had tried to start wars in South America. The Du Ponts came across as mustache-twirling villains. Lammot, Pierre, and Irenée Du Pont, clad in dark suits and protected by a phalanx of lawyers, smugly insisted that they had never profited from the war, despite their company's $1.25 billion in sales and their personal annual incomes of more than $1 million during the years of the Great War.

The Nye Committee's investigation of the arms makers succeeded in convincing the public that the "death merchants" had played a role in causing the war. As a result of the investigation, Americans became even more determined to avoid future wars. In 1936, as part of the largest mass student movement in U.S. history up to that point, half a million college students marched out of class to protest war.[70] The same year, Robert Sherwood won the Pulitzer Prize for his play criticizing European arms merchants, *Idiot's Delight*. In 1939, 68 percent of Americans agreed that the United States should not have joined the Great War, and 34 percent said that "propaganda and selfish interests" were to blame for this mistake.[71]

Yet despite its success in helping to influence the public's memory of the war, the Nye Committee could not prove that the merchants of death had any direct influence on policy makers. The committee could discover no documents or witnesses to show that the Du Ponts and their fellow munitions makers had any sway over the president. At the same time, a staff investigation into the role of British propaganda also ended in failure. Investigators spent months trying to prove that "London gold" had financed the purchase of key newspapers and then planted pro-British stories in them.[72] But the detectives never found enough evidence to justify public hearings on that subject.

After failing to prove that arms makers or British bribes played any meaningful role in the intervention drama, the committee at last turned to more promising lines of inquiry. Eighteen months into the investigation, the senators began to focus their public hearings on the men the revisionists had always viewed as the real problem: the classic villains of the Populists, the bankers.

By following the money, the committee hoped to discover if, as George Norris had charged back in 1917, the United States had gone to war on the command of gold. This investigation had the potential to produce real evidence of official blunders and crimes. After the war began in Europe, the Wilson administration had changed its policy on loans to allow bankers to send more money to the Allies. Some committee members believed that these loans had tied the United States to one side and effectively forced U.S. intervention in the war. If the committee could show that bankers had *pressured* Wilson to loosen credit, they could prove the bankers' responsibility for America's decision to join the war.

When the committee talked about "the bankers," they really meant the House of Morgan. The Morgan bank had handled more than $3 billion in British money as the sole purchasing agent for the British government from 1915 to 1917. Through its Export Department, it had bought the British war supplies in the United States—horses, airplane engines, machine guns, corned beef, bugles, and TNT—and arranged for their shipment across the submarine-infested Atlantic. Eighty-four percent of the munitions bought in the United States by the Allies from 1915 to 1917 passed through Morgan hands.[73] When the British could no longer pay for their purchases, the Morgans arranged to loan the Allies hundreds of millions of dollars. During the war, anti-interventionists had pointed to the House of Morgan as the most powerful symbol of the commanding power of gold. Now, in the depths of the Great Depression, the white-haired Morgan executives who represented the "money power" were obvious targets for the committee's wrath.

The Morgan executives rolled into the capitol ready to do battle. Outside their post at the Shoreham Hotel, where they occupied an entire wing, the bankers stationed plainclothes security guards to keep pesky reporters and curiosity seekers at bay. Photographers were allowed in their rooms in the evening to take reassuring pictures of the avuncular officials donning their dinner jackets and reading the newspapers. Messengers dashed about the bank's forty hotel rooms with dispatches from New York, and aides consulted the voluminous files and ledgers from the Great War that overflowed into the bankers' main living room.[74] The documents refreshed the memory of the two most important witnesses before the committee: Thomas Lamont, the former executive who had helped set Morgan policy twenty years earlier, and John Pierpont "Jack" Morgan Jr., the heir to the Morgan empire.

The head of his family business since his father's death in 1913, Jack Morgan was less ambitious and more casual than his legendary father. But he was equally determined to protect the House of Morgan from what he saw as the probes of impudent, provincial congressmen. Though he was approaching seventy, Jack Morgan was still a tough businessman and a formidable opponent in the boardroom and the hearing room. He had survived three assassination attempts, including one in 1915 by a pro-German gunman who invaded his home, and a prolonged congressional investigation of Wall Street investment bankers in 1932, which revealed the very unpopular fact that he had paid no income taxes for two years. Morgan had come off poorly in that previous investigation, which had been chaired by a feisty Sicilian immigrant, New York's Ferdinand Pecora. Reporters waited eagerly to see how the blue-blooded Anglophile would handle the folksy but determined investigators from the Midwest in this latest probe.[75]

The Nye Committee members aimed to answer one question that they deemed essential to proving a conspiracy behind intervention: Why did the U.S. government decide, once in October 1914 and again in August 1915, to loosen American regulations to allow more loans to the Allies? At the start of the war, the United States had maintained a "money embargo" and prohibited loans to both sides. Secretary of State William Jennings Bryan, whose suspicion of banks stretched back to his denunciation of the international gold ring in his "Cross of Gold" speech in 1896, urged the embargo on Wilson. "Money is the worst of all contrabands because it commands everything else," Bryan warned the president prophetically in August 1914.[76] Yet just two months later, the president, on the advice of State Department counselor Robert Lansing, decided that American banks could offer some short-term "credits" to Allied countries when they could not pay for their purchases. Wilson had reasoned that credits were quite different from loans. Yet at the Nye Committee hearings, even Jack Morgan had to admit that credits and loans were basically the same. He insisted, however, that his bankers "never had anything to do with any effort, if one was made, to get President Wilson to change his mind."[77] Indeed, the committee could find no evidence that they did.

However, the committee did find a more promising paper trail related to the second presidential decision to allow more loans. The committee investigators grew convinced that a key event had occurred in August 1915. That summer, after months of buying American goods, the British began to run an enormous trade imbalance with the United States. The value of the pound started to drop against the dollar, and officials in both countries believed that the dollar was so overvalued that the British would have to halt their American purchases immediately.

Indeed, the drop in the value of the pound could bring about a U.S. economic collapse, argued the U.S. treasury secretary, William McAdoo, and Robert Lansing, secretary of state following Bryan's resignation. "Our prosperity is dependent on our continued and enlarged foreign trade," McAdoo wrote the president. "To preserve that we must do everything we can to

assist our customers to buy." Great Britain, he said, "is and always has been our best customer."[78] Lansing went even further and predicted "industrial depression, idle capital and idle labor, numerous failures, financial demoralization, and general unrest and suffering among the laboring classes" unless the U.S. government did something to increase British purchasing power.[79]

To avert this disaster, Lansing and McAdoo persuaded the Federal Reserve Board to relax its regulations on loans, which would allow the British to buy more arms. They also urged the president to encourage banks to make large loans to nations at war. In the view of some Nye Committee members and staff, these two cabinet members served as agents of the bankers. "I think it is highly significant," wrote one staff member to Raushenbush, "to show that the line of reasoning which Lansing presented to the President...was a line developed by [Federal Reserve] Governor Strong *at the instigation of the Morgans*."[80] The investigators were growing convinced that the bankers had secretly manipulated U.S. policy to bring America closer to war.

Two Federal Reserve board members adamantly resisted the change in regulations at the time. Paul Warburg and Adolph Miller, both of German descent, strongly believed that the government should continue to oppose unlimited loans. Warburg angrily told the governor of the Federal Reserve Bank that the U.S. plans to ease credit for the British were nothing short of immoral. "To think that this war must go on to keep our trade going is an abomination," he wrote.[81] But McAdoo told the president to disregard the two bankers because their objections were based on their sympathy for their ancestral nation. "If they were thinking of our interests instead of Germany's, they would not [object]," he wrote.[82]

The Nye Committee saw Warburg as something of a hero, and here they departed from one aspect of the American conspiracist tradition. In contrast to many Populists, the Great War investigators believed that the Jews were on their side. The most vociferous opponents of American aid to the Allies had been Paul Warburg, a Jew, and his German Jewish American firm, Kuhn-Loeb. During the war, in fact, some British officials blamed "the Jews" for the U.S. government's reluctance to help London.[83] Twenty years later, the Nye Committee members viewed Warburg as an ally, and Protestant Anglophiles like Jack Morgan and Thomas Lamont as the enemy. As a result, in all of their attacks on "the bankers," the Nye Committee members never stooped to anti-Semitism.[84]

Though Warburg's angry dissents impressed some Nye Committee members in 1935, they had no effect on policy in 1915 and 1916. The Federal Reserve Board relaxed its credit regulations—though without a strong public statement of support from the president—and the House of Morgan quickly arranged a massive loan to the English and the French.[85] Morgan money bought more dynamite and mules and wheat for the Allies, which enabled them to win the war. It also brought more American ships into the sights of German submarines and, thus, American boys to the trenches of France.

Senator Bennett Clark believed that he could identify the moment when the Morgans forced the United States to abandon neutrality. The key issue, he decided, was the drop in the value of the pound. The ensuing exchange crisis had caused the U.S. government to allow the Anglo-French loan, and the loan had led the United States into war. So why, he wondered, did the exchange crisis occur? It was obvious: the House of Morgan, as the chief holder of British securities in the United States, created the crisis, and thus brought on the war. The Morgan bank, he charged, "stepped out from under and permitted the sterling exchange to flop," and then pressured McAdoo to facilitate the huge loan. "The question of exchange," Clark charged, "was used as a lever to bring about a complete change in our neutrality policy."[86]

The bankers could barely conceal their fury at this interpretation. Thomas Lamont disputed the committee's allegation that the "money power" ever influenced U.S. governmental policy. "Bankers do not bring leverage on governmental Departments over here, and if they attempted to do it they would be very badly rebuffed," he said huffily. The committee members could not contain their disbelief. "Do you mean they do not do it, or that they do not admit that they do it?" Nye sneered in response.[87] Jack Morgan chose a more limited, and effective, defense: he categorically denied that he or his firm had helped to cause the exchange crisis. "That is one of the most discreditable actions which is foreign to our history and it is foreign to our tradition, and we never did such a thing in our lives," he said.[88]

To prove his case, Morgan dramatically produced a cable proving that his bank had offered to lend the British $100 million as the pound began to slip. The British had declined the offer. In other words, Morgan had tried to *prevent* the exchange crisis, not create it. But Clark refused to allow the facts to get in the way of a good theory. It did not matter "whether

the British Government was responsible for pulling the props out from under the exchange market," he explained, "or whether Morgan & Co. was responsible for it." The point, he said, was that the British wanted to "use our money" to fight the war.[89] British bureaucrats, American bankers—what difference did it make? Rich, deceitful, and un-American, they had all conspired to send American boys to die for foreign capital.

Although Clark could not prove that the House of Morgan forced U.S. intervention, he did have documents showing that the bank had bullied American companies and forced them to support the British loans. Back in 1915, once the bank received government permission for the Anglo-French loan, the Morgans needed to find companies to underwrite it. For this, they turned to American munitions manufacturers. The Morgan bankers wrote letters to arms makers suggesting, in language Clark found overtly threatening, that these companies would not get any more orders from the English unless they subscribed to the loan. The Missouri senator managed to make Wall Street sound like a mafia operation. "In the parlance of the street, that was 'putting the heat' on those people?" Clark asked the bankers. Lamont reacted angrily. "We do not use that parlance," he retorted.[90]

Some committee and staff members believed that the bankers were not only gangsters but also liars. They were convinced that the full truth of the exchange crisis and the Anglo-French loan had disappeared along with crucial Morgan documents. "Confidentially," Stephen Raushenbush wrote to one committee member, "we think that they have cleaned out their files and have lied to us at length."[91] But the committee could not prove this. As Morgan effectively parried Clark's attacks, the Missouri senator and his colleagues began to lose the support of much of the press.

Up to this point, the Nye Committee was attacking the standard villains of American conspiracy theories. Congressman Charles Lindbergh and even the writers of the Populist movement would have felt at home in a hearing room in which Morgans and Du Ponts were assailed as greedy speculators intent on thwarting the will of the people. But near the end of the investigation, Nye, Clark, and the other investigators came to focus on a much more elusive and nebulous target. Though the committee failed to find proof that individual bankers had manipulated the international monetary system to force intervention, it did make another discovery that some members found even more disturbing: the lack of transparency and democracy in the U.S. government.

The intense debate over loans and credits took place not in Congress, but in secret meetings of the Federal Reserve. For Americans in the mid-1930s, it was surprising and frightening to find out how little they had known about their nation's policies during the war. The Nye Committee members raised "the dark velvet curtain of history" on the shadowy actors in the drama, the historian Charles Beard wrote in 1936. "They disclose[d]," he continued, "the starkness of the ignorance that passed for knowledge and wisdom in those fateful days."[92]

Most explosively, the Nye Committee learned that the president had actively fostered this ignorance: he had lied to Americans and to Congress about the Allies' real aims in the war. Near the end of the inquiry, the Nye Committee staff learned from secret documents that Wilson and Secretary of State Lansing had known soon after intervention in April 1917 that the Allies had written secret treaties divvying up territory in the event of their victory, though Wilson had stated categorically during the war that the "processes of peace" would be "absolutely open" and would involve "no secret understandings of any kind."[93]

After the war, Wilson explained that he had believed these statements to be true at the time that he made them. In a meeting with the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in August 1919, he answered definitively—and inaccurately—a direct question from Senator William Borah of Idaho about his knowledge of the treaties. Earlier in 1919, he said, the "whole series of understandings were disclosed to me for the first time."[94]

The Nye Committee proved what Harry Barnes and others had claimed in the 1920s: the president had not told the truth. Secretary of State Lansing's diary and other formerly secret papers showed that Wilson had indeed known of the treaties in 1917. When Senator Clark produced the papers at a hearing, Nye proclaimed that Wilson had lied to the nation.[95] Moreover, he alleged, the Wilson administration had misled the nation throughout 1915 and 1916. Before intervention, the Wilson administration was just "pretending neutrality" while "actually hoping for a break with Germany, inviting that sort of break," he concluded.[96]

Nye's accusations against Wilson provoked a furious reaction from the president's defenders. The Republican senator's charge against "a dead man, a great man, a good man," as Democratic Senator Tom Connally of Texas put it, outraged many Democrats in Congress. The Senate had not charged the committee with rewriting history, Connally contended. Yet

now the Munitions Committee, "out of the depths of its wisdom, out of its occult powers, out of its marvelous connection with the stars of the heavens which we ordinary mortals never understand," presumed to tell the majority of Americans that they were wrong in 1917.[97] Connally was so furious that he pounded his Senate desk until the first knuckle on his left hand became permanently misshapen. The next day, Senator Carter Glass of Georgia banged his desk so hard as he denounced Nye's "miserable and mendacious suggestion" that his knuckles bled.[98]

At first, Senator Nye did not appear in the Senate to defend himself, apparently believing that it would be better to leave the explanation to a Democrat. Senator Clark gamely tried to defend the committee from the attacks of his fellow Democrats, arguing that Nye had said Wilson "falsified" rather than "lied." Clark insisted that the committee had no partisan motives. The historical inquiry, he explained, was necessary so that the committee could prevent such mistakes in the future.[99]

But Clark's defense was swept away in the flood of angry press coverage. Journalists and public officials rushed to defend the late president. "There are lies forced upon statesmen by patriotic duty," wrote Arthur Krock in the *New York Times*, "which are writ in letters of gold in the books of the Recording Angel."[100] Krock claimed that Senator Clark's attack on the late president was motivated by his desire to avenge his father, who had lost the Democratic presidential nomination in 1912 to Wilson. Another Wilson supporter, Joseph Tumulty, one of his closest confidantes, proclaimed that "envy" had motivated the committee to attack Wilson's "genius and statesmanship."[101] Two Democrats on the committee, Walter George and James Pope, angrily distanced themselves from the chairman and repudiated "any effort to impugn the motives of Woodrow Wilson and to discredit his great character."[102]

To the skeptics, though, Nye's charge revealed a startling truth: Wilson had systematically misled U.S. citizens about the war. In the revisionists' view, Wilson knew that the United States had abandoned neutrality with the Anglo-French loan of 1915, yet he bragged in 1916 that he had kept the country out of war. He also knew that the Allies were not fighting a war to make the world safe for democracy, but to grab lands controlled by Germany. To his critics, it was clear that Wilson thought that Americans would never support the war if they knew its real aims. So instead he had crafted a fiction for them, a story about sinister empires with sharp talons and a lovely postwar world without victors or vengeance. Then he had imprisoned anyone who dared to tell the truth.

What could they do to stop this from happening again? They could not turn the clock back and strip the executive branch of its current powers; President Roosevelt was far too popular for them even to attempt this. So they decided to limit the president's opportunities to misuse his powers—to draw an unwilling nation into a foreign war—by restricting profits and trade during wars.

First, the committee wanted to confiscate war profits and nationalize the munitions industry. If no one made money from war, they believed, then no "interests" could manipulate the country into war. But the Roosevelt administration's opposition helped to doom these efforts. The president lost patience with the committee once it stopped attacking the Du Ponts and began championing open government and limits on presidential power. Privately, the Nye Committee staff members believed that the president did not want them to propose any legislation "with real teeth in it."[103] But even if Roosevelt had endorsed these radical reforms, they would not have saved the United States from the horrors of the war to come.

The other solution was to limit international trade during wars. Members of the Nye Committee realized that Wilson had made his decision to abandon neutrality because the U.S. economy was increasingly dependent on transatlantic trade. Nye began groping toward an understanding of this issue near the end of the hearings. "It was commercial activity as a whole, in which the bankers had a hand," he explained to Jack Morgan in 1936, "which did finally break down completely our neutrality." Morgan agreed with him, but disputed his assertion that the bankers played a prime role. Everyone, he retorted, had a hand in the trade that led to intervention.[104]

If the United States had been drawn into war by "commercial activity as a whole," then the revisionists believed the country must isolate itself from future conflicts. Charles Beard suggested that the United States needed to till its own garden and cut off loans and the munitions trade to belligerents in times of crisis.[105] Some senators agreed. "I would rather temporarily abandon all our world commerce," said Nye Committee member Homer T. Bone, "than to have this Republic, which my father fought to preserve, destroyed or irreparably injured by another great war."[106]

With this goal in mind, Nye succeeded in persuading Congress to approve the Neutrality Acts of 1935 and 1936, which prohibited Americans from loaning money and selling arms to countries at war. Nye and other anti-interventionists wanted to ban all trade with belligerent nations during wars, but here he was not successful. A 1937 law allowed countries at war to buy nonlethal supplies from the United States as long as they paid cash for them and carried them away in their own ships. The Nye investigators hoped that these laws would tie the hands of future would-be conspirators in the White House. The acts, Raushenbush wrote, "will make it far less likely that a President will dare to involve us in a foreign war through misuse of his great powers."[107]

Years later, with the experience of World War II behind them, many historians came to see the Neutrality Acts as terribly misguided.[108] Scholars agreed with Franklin Roosevelt, who wrote to Colonel House in exasperation that the anti-interventionists seemed to reduce the whole war to a few acts of individual "skullduggery" by House, Lansing, and Page.[109]

The Nye Committee was certainly guilty at times of blaming a few conspirators for complicated events. The members became distracted by their outrage over the manifest immorality of "merchants of death," the enormity of the Morgan profits, and the curtain of secrecy concealing the changes in loan policy. But they also proved willing to wrestle with disturbing questions about the growing militarization of the American state and society.[110] They were outraged by what they saw as the imbalance between Americans' heroic sacrifice in the war and the petty, vengeful results, by the disjuncture between the president's idealistic rhetoric and the despair of the postwar world.

By the end, the investigators believed that the dangers to the republic were much greater than a few individuals. The growing secrecy and power of the presidency was the real problem. "I am enough of a democrat to want more than one man to pass on the war decisions and the major pre-war policies," Raushenbush wrote in a private letter. Mocking Wilson's rhetoric about open covenants of peace, he continued: "If there are going to be wars, let them be open wars openly arrived at with the consent of the people."[111]

This fear of the president abusing his powers and deceiving the country into war would resonate with many Americans for the next century. The Nye Committee had discovered the taproot of modern conspiracism.

AS THE NYE COMMITTEE wound up its work, it struggled to explain the meaning of its investigation for future government policy. For many of the investigators, the inquiry showed that modern presidents could make decisions about war and peace in complete secrecy. And as they contemplated the implications of this growing presidential power in the current world climate, they became alarmed.

President Roosevelt first troubled the investigators and Great War revisionists when he tried to stymie any real reforms the munitions inquiry might propose. A former assistant Navy secretary who had focused on domestic problems in his first term, Roosevelt seemed to become more internationalist, and perhaps more interventionist, in his second. When the Nye Committee investigators compared the current president to the one they had just investigated, they grew worried. As Raushenbush explained, Woodrow Wilson was "never a big-Navy, four-Army man." Furthermore, he presided over "the most idealistic administration this country has ever had." Yet he made secret decisions that led to war, and then lied about them. What could Americans now expect from the big-Navy, four-Army man in the White House, a man whom even his most ardent supporters would never describe as idealistic?[112]

As the world slid toward crisis in the late 1930s, many anti-interventionists awoke to the terrifying realization that the brilliant politician in the White House could be their greatest enemy of all. Shrewder than Colonel House and more powerful than Jack Morgan, the president might be even more dangerous to U.S. democracy than the plotters of the previous war. Perhaps, they worried in their darkest moments, he might even create an "incident" to force the country into another unwanted war.