

Fahrenheit 11/11/11

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Believe it or not, November 11th was not made a holiday in order to celebrate war, support troops, or cheer the 11th year of occupying Afghanistan. This day was made a holiday in order to celebrate an armistice that ended what was up until that point, in 1918, one of the worst things our species had thus far done to itself, namely World War I.

World War I, then known simply as the world war or the great war, had been marketed as a war to end war. Celebrating its end was also understood as celebrating the end of all wars. A ten-year campaign was launched in 1918 that in 1928 created the Kellogg-Briand Pact, legally banning all wars. That treaty is still on the books, which is why war making is a criminal act and how Nazis came to be prosecuted for it.

“[O]n November 11, 1918, there ended the most unnecessary, the most financially exhausting, and the most terribly fatal of all the wars that the world has ever known. Twenty millions of men and women, in that war, were killed outright, or died later from wounds. The Spanish influenza, admittedly caused by the War and nothing else, killed, in various lands, one hundred million persons more.” — Thomas Hall Shastid, 1927.

According to U.S. Socialist Victor Berger, all the United States had gained from participation in World War I was the flu and prohibition. It was not an uncommon view. Millions of Americans who had supported World War I came, during the years following its completion on November 11, 1918, to reject the idea that anything could ever be gained through warfare.

Sherwood Eddy, who coauthored “The Abolition of War” in 1924, wrote that he had been an early and enthusiastic supporter of U.S. entry into World War I and had abhorred pacifism. He had viewed the war as a religious crusade and had been reassured by the fact that the United States entered the war on a Good Friday. At the war front, as the battles raged, Eddy writes, “we told the soldiers that if they would win we would give them a new world.”

Eddy seems, in a typical manner, to have come to believe his own propaganda and to have resolved to make good on the promise. “But I can remember,” he writes, “that even during the war I began to be troubled by grave doubts and misgivings of conscience.” It took him 10 years to arrive at the position of complete Outlawry, that is to say, of wanting to legally outlaw all war. By 1924 Eddy believed that the campaign for Outlawry amounted, for him, to a noble and glorious cause worthy of sacrifice, or what U.S. philosopher William James had called “the moral equivalent of war.” Eddy now argued that war was “unchristian.” Many came to share that view who a decade earlier had believed Christianity required war. A major factor in this shift was direct experience with the hell of modern warfare, an

experience captured for us by the British poet Wilfred Owen in these famous lines:

If in some smothering dreams you too could pace
Behind the wagon that we flung him in,
And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,
His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin;
If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,
Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud
Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,
My friend, you would not tell with such high zest
To children ardent for some desperate glory,
The old Lie; Dulce et Decorum est
Pro patria mori.

The propaganda machinery invented by President Woodrow Wilson and his Committee on Public Information had drawn Americans into the war with exaggerated and fictional tales of German atrocities in Belgium, posters depicting Jesus Christ in khaki sighting down a gun barrel, and promises of selfless devotion to making the world safe for democracy. The extent of the casualties was hidden from the public as much as possible during the course of the war, but by the time it was over many had learned something of war's reality. And many had come to resent the manipulation of noble emotions that had pulled an independent nation into overseas barbarity.

However, the propaganda that motivated the fighting was not immediately erased from people's minds. A war to end wars and make the world safe for democracy cannot end without some lingering demand for peace and justice, or at least for something more valuable than the flu and prohibition. Even those rejecting the idea that the war could in any way help advance the cause of peace aligned with all those wanting to avoid all future wars — a group that probably encompassed most of the U.S. population.

As Wilson had talked up peace as the official reason for going to war, countless souls had taken him extremely seriously. "It is no exaggeration to say that where there had been relatively few peace schemes before the World War," writes Robert Ferrell, "there now were hundreds and even thousands" in Europe and the United States. The decade following the war was a decade of searching for peace: "Peace echoed through so many sermons, speeches, and state papers that it drove itself into the consciousness of everyone. Never in world history was peace so great a desideratum, so much talked about, looked toward, and planned for, as in the decade after the 1918 Armistice."

Let us try to revive some memory of that foreign world on the occasion of the latest "veterans day" this Friday in this brave new era of searching for more war.

David Swanson is the author of "[When the World Outlawed War](#)" from which this is adapted.

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