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OPINION & COMMENTARY

Plain Talk

# Our macho ways mean no war will ever end all wars

America paused briefly earlier this month to remember that it was 100 years ago that our country, after a long and incredibly bitter debate, jumped into World War I — the war U.S. citizens were told would be the war to end all wars.

A century has passed, the veterans who were living reminders of the sacrifices made are gone, and all too many treated the anniversary as just another day on America's historic calendar. Yet that decision back in 1917 created one of the biggest upheavals in world history — one for which we're undoubtedly still paying the price this very day.

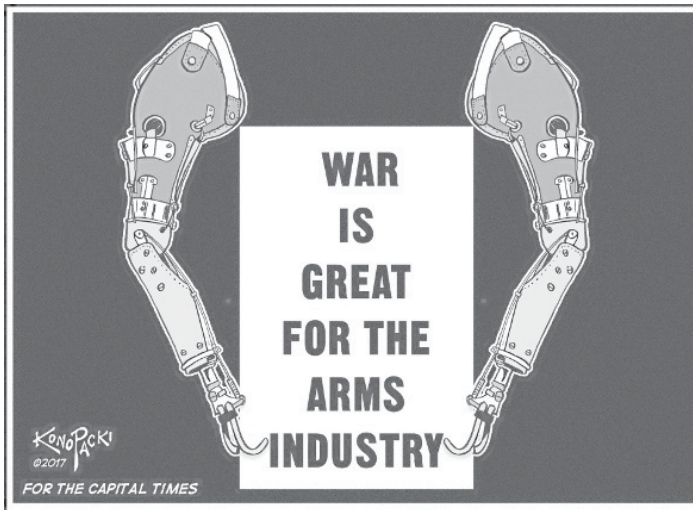


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Nowhere did the war debate rage more contentiously than right here in Wisconsin, the home state of a U.S. senator named Robert M. "Fighting Bob" La Follette, who took it upon himself to relentlessly oppose America joining a war where all sides were at fault. This wasn't a war between good and evil, he maintained, but a war among imperialists who were vying to expand their influence and power into other sovereign cultures.

It was a strange time in Wisconsin politics, to be sure. La Follette, who had been governor for six years and now was in his 10th year in the U.S. Senate, had become a Wisconsin political hero, praised for wresting control of the state's politics from corporate special interests and spearheading a progressive movement that became a model for many other states. But the war trumped all. The Wisconsin State Journal, which had been an ardent Fighting Bob backer, turned against him — with a vengeance.

Earlier this month, the State Journal reprinted an editorial the paper ran on April 6, 1917, the day the war began, depicting the Wisconsin senator as a dupe of the German kaiser. This wasn't about war vs. peace, but patriotic Americans vs. traitors. People perceived as not supporting the war were held up to ridicule. A mob of "patriots" in



Evansville paraded a German couple around Main Street in a tiger cage on a circus wagon for failing to fly the American flag.

Mobs of UW students, often led by their professors, would crash meetings of "socialist" clubs, demanding that the attendees sign loyalty oaths or risk being tarred and feathered. Intolerance and fear ruled the day.

The State Journal break with La Follette famously wound up causing one of its executives, a young newspaperman named William T. Evjue, to resign and found his own newspaper that same year. The war, unfortunately, was already under way by the time The Capital Times appeared on the scene that December.

World War I did indeed change the world, and surely not for the better. La Follette had argued relentlessly that wars like this sacrifice the lives of young people and the only true beneficiaries are the industrialists who manufacture arms and munitions. This has always been so — even Donald Trump's volley of Tomahawk cruise missiles into Syria a few days ago shot up the market value of the American arms industry.

There's an important book about La Follette's seemingly politically suicidal battle against U.S. intervention in World War I that has, unfortunately, flown under the radar since it was published in 2013. "The Education of an Anti-Imperialist" by University of Montana history professor Richard Drake, published by the UW Press, digs deeply into what drove Fighting Bob and his small group of supporters to look beyond what appeared to be a war with no

downside for true blue Americans.

But, as Drake points out, World War I inaugurated 80 years of Muslim humiliation at the hands of the West.

"At war's end, the entire Islamic world fell under Crusader banners, under the British, French and Italian government," his introduction quotes the terrorist Osama bin Laden as saying. "They divided up the whole world between them and Palestine fell into the hands of the British."

Eventually, America was left to help pick up the pieces — and we're paying for it to this day.

"The political struggle over America's intervention in World War I brought individuals to the fore who understood the true stakes of the conflict and sensed its long-term consequences that we have with us still, including, above all, the legacy of the postwar decisions about the Middle East," the author adds.

Wars, like elections, do have consequences, but are not as easily undone. Instead, we have failed to heed the lessons we should have learned 100 years ago, intoxicated by an "America First" mantra that we can do no wrong and only those who are weak stand in the way.

We did it in World War I, in Vietnam, in Iraq and now in Syria, where our macho habits continue to make our world more dangerous. There is no war to end all wars. ❌

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