

C. America in the World Wars

1. The history of the world, and especially the history of Europe, Russia, and America (three of the five cardinal cultures) pivots on the world wars.
2. For America, the key to its changing role in the world is the new concept of political *interconnection* that was put forward by Woodrow Wilson. Wilson's idea was that America could use its strength to make the world a better place.
3. This idea of political *interconnection*, paired with nationalism, is known as "internationalism." To encourage political interconnection, Wilson wanted a "League of Nations" formed.
6. The problem for Wilson was that 117,000 Americans had died in World War I. It was a profound shock, and Americans recoiled from the role that had been thrust upon them by their president.
7. In the **1920** presidential election, Americans rejected Wilson's concept of giving up their lives to a global cause. They opted instead to elect Warren Harding, who offered them a "return to normalcy"—which, at that time, meant a return to the "normal" policy of political separation.
8. In keeping with this idea, the United States did *not* join the League of Nations.
9. Unfortunately, despite Harding's promise, the truth is that the American government became entangled in European affairs, even if the people didn't want it. When Germany complained that its financial penalties for attacking its neighbors in the war were too great, the United States stepped in and loaned Germany the money to pay off its neighbors. The *Dawes Plan*, named after American diplomat Charles Dawes, was supposed to convince Germany to be a good neighbor, but it actually allowed Germany to evade its responsibility for the war and made it more likely that they would choose war again as a means to what they wanted as a nation in the future.
10. As Hitler rose to power in Germany, and countries like Italy and Japan (both eventual allies of Nazi Germany) began to attack their neighbors and others, Americans were worried about the advent of a new war, so they passed a series of "Neutrality Acts" starting in 1935, hoping not to get dragged into another terrible war.

D. World War II (1939-45)

1. Americans, of course, were relieved to not be directly involved in World War II when it finally arrived, but they could not pretend that neutrality was a proper response. It was clear that they needed to help Britain and its allies in some way. They responded by sending supplies to those countries in a program called "Lend-Lease."
2. Since this included sending supplies to Asia, where the war began even earlier, to stop Japan (an ally of Nazi Germany), that country correctly feared that when America eventually joined the war as a direct participant, it would not be able to win.
3. The Japanese launched the infamous sneak attack on Pearl Harbor in December of 1941, destroying a large portion of the American fleet there, but not as much as they had hoped, resulting in the immediate entry of the United States into the war.

4. The American navy and marines gradually forced the Japanese out of their empire in the South Pacific, and on “D-Day” in 1944, invaded continental Europe from Britain.
5. With Russia, empowered by Lend-Lease aid, fighting back the Germans in the east, America and its allies were able to push them back in the west. Unlike in World War I, the goal was the total conquest and subordination of Germany. In the words of president Franklin Delano Roosevelt, the goal was Germany’s “unconditional surrender.”
6. American and Russian forces converged on Germany, and Germany surrendered in May of 1945.

E. De-nazification and Control of Germany

1. To punish Germany, four countries – the United States, the Soviet Union, Great Britain, and France – took control of all of its territory.
2. The Germans were not allowed to organize their own government. They were ruled by the armies of these nations. Because they had been truly defeated, they did not resist this process. For years, most Germans lived in squalor.
3. The leaders of Nazi Germany were put on trial for starting the war and for ordering the Holocaust. The Russians preferred to engage in “show trials” before killing them all. The British preferred “summary execution,” believing they deserved no special treatment. American leaders, however, were convinced that the war should end with the rendering of *justice*. They insisted on a legal demonstration of the “war crimes” of the German leaders, especially those who had participated directly in the planning and execution of the mass murder of the Jews. This arduous task became the *Nuremberg Trials*, where the full horror of the Holocaust was first confronted. Consequently, many of the Nazi leaders were sentenced to life in prison or death.
4. This began the cultural task of “de-Nazifying” Germany, i.e. of forcing the Germans to abandon their ultranationalist beliefs and ambitions, and accepting their place as a peaceful member of a world that they did not—and would not—control.

F. The New Bully

1. Although Germany had been defeated, it was now obvious that the Soviet Union had emerged as the next bully.
2. The Soviets had conquered Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia at the beginning of the war, as well as parts of Poland and Finland.
3. After stopping the Germans, the Soviets had pushed them back through eastern Europe, only to take over countries like Hungary and Czechoslovakia for themselves, and force the people there to accept communist governments.
4. In the words of British prime minister Winston Churchill, an “iron curtain” had descended over Eastern Europe.