

The Offshore Balancing Thesis Reconsidered: Realism, the Balance of Power in
Europe, and America's Decision for War in 1917

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Introduction

In his book *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, John Mearsheimer presents a unique and in many ways compelling theory about the workings of the international system. In Mearsheimer's view, the anarchic structure of world politics engenders fierce security competition among states. Indeed, because the primary goal of every state is to ensure its own survival, great powers seek to gain as much power as possible. Even if a state was in principle satisfied with its share of the global distribution of power, he claims, the fact that great powers can never be sure of another state's intentions means they have "powerful incentives... to think and act offensively with regard to each other."¹ As a result, "great powers are primed for offense," because the most effective method for ensuring their security is to gain additional power whenever possible. Thus, there are few status quo powers in international politics, since only "a misguided state would pass up an opportunity to be the hegemon in the system because it thought it already had sufficient power to survive."² In short, states have "aggressive intentions" and always look for ways "to take advantage of other states and gain power at their expense."³ Mearsheimer, therefore, describes world politics as a "tragedy," as this sort of competition cannot be mitigated so long as the current structure of the international system remains in place.

One of the distinctive components of Mearsheimer's theory is his argument that although every state would like to ultimately become a "global hegemon" and dominate the entire world, such an

¹ John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001), 2-3, 29-35.

² *Ibid.*, 3, 35.

³ *Ibid.*, 18-22, 34-36. As Mearsheimer observes, his emphasis on power maximization is what gives his theory of "offensive realism" its distinctive edge. Whereas defensive realists argue that states stop the pursuit of power after a certain point, Mearsheimer's view includes no such "status quo bias." Offensive realism also differs from Hans Morgenthau's theory of "classical realism," which, though it also posits that states pursue the goal of power maximization, attributes such behavior to human nature, rather than to the structure of the international system. See Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, 5th Edition (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1973). For major works on defensive realism, see Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979); Robert Jervis, "Cooperation Under the Security Dilemma," *World Politics*, vol. 30, no. 2 (1978): 167-214; Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987); Charles L. Glaser, "Realists as Optimists: Cooperation as Self-Help," *International Security*, vol. 19, no. 3 (1994-1995): 50-90. On the differences between offensive and defensive realism, see Stephen G. Brooks, "Dueling Realisms," *International Organization*, vol. 51, no. 3 (1997): 445-477. See also Peter Toft, "John J. Mearsheimer: An Offensive Realist between Geopolitics and Power," *Journal of International Relations and Development*, vol. 8, no. 4 (2005): 381-408; Robert D. Kaplan, "Why John J. Mearsheimer is Right," *The Atlantic*, vol. 309, no. 1 (2012): 80-89.

achievement is not currently possible. Due to the fact that no state has or is likely to achieve “clear-cut nuclear superiority,” as well as to the “stopping power of water,” states instead view the attainment of “regional hegemony” as their foremost objective. Only in instances in which a state is fortunate enough to gain such a preponderant geopolitical position does it then become a status quo power. According to Mearsheimer, however, states do not stop competing for security even if they do become dominant in their region of the world; to the contrary, regional hegemons “seek to prevent great powers in other regions from duplicating their feat.” The reason for this behavior is that regional hegemons “fear that a rival great power that dominates its own region will be an especially powerful foe that is essentially free to cause trouble in the fearful great power’s backyard.” Hence, “Regional hegemons prefer that there be at least two great powers located together in other regions, because their proximity will force them to concentrate their attention on each other rather than on the distant hegemon.” Consequently, if a regional hegemon believes another state is likely to gain dominance in its own area of the world, “it would no longer be a status quo power” and “would go to considerable lengths to weaken and maybe even destroy its distant rival.”⁴ Although “the distant hegemon’s first preference would be to stand aside and allow the local great powers to check the threat,” when circumstances make such a “buck-passing” strategy impossible it will intervene to assist its rival’s enemies.⁵

According to Mearsheimer, however, regional hegemons are a “rare species,” and in his view the United States is the only great power in modern history to achieve the status of regional hegemon.⁶ As a result, it is hardly surprising that his interpretation of American foreign policy plays a key role in supporting his theory. In Mearsheimer’s view, the United States intervened in great power wars on four separate occasions after it achieved regional hegemony in the Western Hemisphere at the end of the

⁴ Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 41-42. On the “stopping power of water,” see 114-128.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 140-141, 157-162. At its heart, this is an argument about preventive war. Indeed, in Mearsheimer’s view this sort of state behavior can be explained as a way of dealing with an aggressive foe before it grows too powerful to be checked militarily. On preventive war theory, see Stephen Van Evera, *Causes of War: Power and the Roots of Conflict* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999), chapter 4; Dale C. Copeland, *The Origins of Major War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000); Jack S. Levy, “Declining Power and the Preventive Motivation for War,” *World Politics*, vol. 40, no. 1 (1987): 82-107. On the tradition of preventive war in American foreign policy, see Marc Trachtenberg, “Preventive War and U.S. Foreign Policy,” *Security Studies*, vol. 16, no. 1 (2007): 1-31.

⁶ Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 41, 143.

nineteenth century; in all four cases, he contends, it did so “to prevent a dangerous foe from achieving regional hegemony.”⁷ Washington, he argues, chose to enter the First World War in Europe in order to keep Imperial Germany from becoming dominant in the region. Likewise, the Americans came in again during World War II, both to check Imperial Japan in Northeast Asia and to put a stop to Nazi Germany’s quest for hegemony in Europe. Finally, America provided security guarantees to its allies in Western Europe and kept troops in the region throughout the Cold War to ensure it was not overrun by the Soviet Union.⁸ Thus, Mearsheimer refers to the United States as an “offshore balancer” and points to these four cases as evidence of the power of offensive realist theory.⁹ In assessing Mearsheimer’s general argument, then, it is important to closely analyze his interpretation of American foreign policy.

One can certainly make a strong case that Mearsheimer is on solid ground when he argues US intervention in the Second World War, in both the European and Pacific Theaters, and America’s competition with the Soviets during the Cold War were driven by power political considerations.¹⁰ His account of American entry into the First World War, however, is more problematic. To be sure, a number

⁷ *Ibid.*, 265. Morgenthau makes a similar argument in his classic discussion of American foreign policy. See Hans J. Morgenthau, “The Mainsprings of American Foreign Policy: The National Interest vs. Moral Abstractions,” *American Political Science Review*, vol. 44, no. 4 (1950): 834-835, 838.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 252-261.

⁹ For other works on offshore balancing, see Christopher Layne, “From Preponderance to Offshore Balancing: America’s Future Grand Strategy,” *International Security*, vol. 22, no. 1 (1997): 86-124; Christopher Layne, *The Peace of Illusions: American Grand Strategy from 1940 to the Present* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006), chapter 8; Stephen M. Walt, *Taming American Power: The Global Response to U.S. Primacy* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2005); Robert Pape, “Soft Balancing Against the United States,” *International Security*, vol. 30, no. 1 (2005): 7-45; Robert J. Art, *A Grand Strategy for America* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003), chapter 5.

¹⁰ The case of America’s road to war with Japan in 1941 is, admittedly, somewhat more difficult to classify, as historians disagree on what the causes of Tokyo’s attack on Pearl Harbor were. There are, however, a number of scholars who have argued that the primary goal of the Roosevelt Administration in the Pacific was to bring about an “incident” which would alter public opinion in the United States and allow FDR to bring the Americans into the war in order to prevent Germany from becoming a regional hegemon in Europe. Although this case is by no means clear-cut, as a number of historians disagree with this account, and a close analysis of it is well beyond the scope of this paper, such an interpretation would provide strong evidence for Mearsheimer’s theory. I am indebted to Mark Stoler and Marc Trachtenberg for taking the time to discuss this particular historical episode with me. For works which claim Washington was being deliberately provocative in the Pacific in order to bring about a Japanese attack on the United States, see Marc Trachtenberg, *The Craft of International History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), chapter 4; John M. Schuessler, “The Deception Dividend: FDR’s Undeclared War,” *International Security*, vol. 34, no. 4 (2010): 133-165. For competing perspectives, see Mark A. Stoler, *Allies and Adversaries: The Joint Chiefs of Staff, the Grand Alliance, and U.S. Strategy in World War II* (Chapel, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), chapter 3; Waldo Heinrichs, *Threshold of War: Franklin D. Roosevelt and American Entry into World War II* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988). See also Scott D. Sagan, “The Origins of the Pacific War,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, vol. 18, no. 4 (1988): 893-922.

of scholars and journalists have argued that Washington's concern with the balance of power in Europe was what was driving American policy in the spring of 1917, when the United States entered the conflict. Among the most well known proponents of this view is Walter Lippmann, who has argued that realistic factors were at the heart of America's entry into the war. Indeed, Lippmann claims that the "superficial reasons" President Woodrow Wilson gave for going to war "would never have carried the day if a majority of the people had not recognized *intuitively*, and if some Americans had not seen clearly, what the threatened German victory would mean to the United States."¹¹ Most scholars of the realist school, however, have argued just the opposite. For example, George Kennan laments the fact that the United States did not pursue a more realistic foreign policy during this period, and argues that Washington's failure to do so is what ultimately caused problems for the Americans.¹²

With this in mind, it is rather unsurprising that most scholarship pertaining to the entry of the United States into the war takes a more balanced approach than Mearsheimer and points out that a variety of factors drove Washington to intervene.¹³ The prevailing view among most experts is that the United

¹¹ Walter Lippmann, *U.S. Foreign Policy: Shield of the Republic* (Boston: Brown, Little and Company, 1943), 33-34 (emphasis added). The fact that Lippmann is forced to claim that Americans only "intuitively" understood why the United States had gone to war is symptomatic of his failure to present any sort of powerful evidence to support his general argument. Indeed, in his entire discussion of this case, he includes only a single footnote. In addition, Lippmann first outlined this interpretation in 1941, leading some scholars to question whether he had retroactively applied the logic governing America's entry into the Second World War to the events of 1917. On this point, see Richard W. Leopold, "The Problem of American Intervention, 1917: An Historical Retrospect," *World Politics*, vol. 2, no. 3 (1950): 422-423; Layne, *The Peace of Illusions*, 199, 276-277. A number of other works also claim that power political considerations were what brought the United States into the First World War. See Forrest Davis, *The Atlantic System: The Story of Anglo-American Control of the Seas* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1943), 227; Peter Trubowitz, *Politics and Strategy: Partisan Ambition and American Statecraft* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011), 130; Alfred Vagts, "The United States and the Balance of Power," *Journal of Politics*, vol. 3, no. 4 (1941): 431-433; Stephen M. Walt, "The Ties That Fray: Why Europe and America are Drifting Apart," *The National Interest*, no. 54 (1998-1999): 3; Stephen M. Walt, "Explaining Obama's Asian Policy," http://walt.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2011/11/18/explaining_obamas_asia_policy, accessed Nov. 18, 2011. Stephen Van Evera also appears to support this logic, arguing that Great Britain and the United States have "traditionally played balancers to Europe, providing a counterweight to potential continental hegemons." See Stephen Van Evera, "Offense, Defense, and the Causes of War," *International Security*, vol. 22, no. 4 (1998): 21. Likewise, Morgenthau claims US intervention was the result of power political considerations, though in his view Wilson himself was not entirely aware of this fact. See Morgenthau, "The Mainsprings of American Foreign Policy," 840, 844, 847-850.

¹² George F. Kennan, *American Diplomacy, 1900-1950*, Expanded Edition (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1984), chapter 4. See also Robert E. Osgood, *Ideals and Self-Interest in America's Foreign Relations: The Great Transformation of the Twentieth Century* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1953), 171, 191, 252-254.

¹³ There is also a great deal of literature which claims realistic considerations played little or no role at all in the American decision for war. For a sampling of this historiography, see Charles Seymour, *American Diplomacy*

States did not enter the war solely due to concerns about the balance of power in Europe; geopolitical considerations were a factor in the decision to intervene, but, as one leading historian has put it, they played only a “subsidiary” role.¹⁴ Indeed, the basic belief expressed in most scholarship is that Wilson was certainly partial to the Entente powers but that his bias toward them was not by itself enough to lead to the intervention of the United States. Thus, even scholars like Arthur S. Link, who has argued at various times that such considerations were a factor, have noted, “There is little evidence that [Wilson] accepted the decision for war because he thought a German victory would seriously endanger American security.”¹⁵

This does not mean, however, that the offshore balancing thesis can simply be dismissed out of hand. As Mearsheimer notes, a particularly strong theory can sometimes serve as a “powerful flashlight,” which can enable scholars to identify certain aspects of a historical case study that they may otherwise have missed.¹⁶ In addition, it is important to note that few historians have delved into the specific issues

during the World War (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1964), 209-210; Thomas A. Bailey, *Woodrow Wilson and the Lost Peace* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1944), 5-6, 12-14; John M. Blum, *Woodrow Wilson and the Politics of Morality* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1956), 96, 129; Newton D. Baker, *Why We Went to War* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1936); Kendrick A. Clements, “Woodrow Wilson and World War I,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, vol. 34, no. 1 (2004): 62-82; Thomas J. Knock, *To End All Wars: Woodrow Wilson and the Quest for a New World Order* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 118-121; Alexander L. George and Juliette L. George, *Woodrow Wilson and Colonel House: A Personality Study* (New York: The John Day Company, 1956), 158-159, 174-176; Layne, *The Peace of Illusions*, 161-163, 176, 184, 199; David Stevenson, *Cataclysm: The First World War as Political Tragedy* (New York: Basic Books, 2004), 254-261.

¹⁴ Ernest R. May, *The World War and American Isolation, 1914-1917* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1966), 437. See also Daniel M. Smith, *The Great Departure: The United States and World War I* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1965), 80-82; Daniel M. Smith, “National Interest and American Intervention, 1917: An Historiographical Appraisal,” *The Journal of American History*, vol. 52, no. 1 (1965): 24; Arthur S. Link, *Woodrow Wilson and the Progressive Era, 1910-1917* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1954), 280-281; Ross A. Kennedy, *The Will to Believe: Woodrow Wilson, World War I, and America’s Strategy for Peace and Security* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2009); Ross A. Kennedy, “Woodrow Wilson, World War I, and an American Conception of National Security,” *Diplomatic History*, vol. 25, no. 1 (2001): 1-31; Edward H. Buerhig, *Woodrow Wilson and the Balance of Power* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1955); Manfred Jonas, *The United States and Germany: A Diplomatic History* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984); Ross Gregory, *The Origins of American Intervention in the First World War* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1971). While each of these accounts argues that balance of power considerations were not absent in Wilson’s thinking, none of them offers an argument similar to Mearsheimer’s. To the contrary, while they all assert that such factors did influence American policy during the war, none claims that the United States entered the war because it appeared the Entente powers were on the verge of defeat.

¹⁵ Arthur S. Link, *Wilson the Diplomatist: A Look at His Major Foreign Policies* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1957), 88. See also Gregory, *The Origins of American Intervention*, 132, 139.

¹⁶ Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 11. On this point, see also Trachtenberg, *The Craft of International History*, chapter 2.

which Mearsheimer discusses in any great depth—that is, on the basis of a targeted study of archival sources. To the contrary, while a number of scholars have attempted to analyze how important the balance of power was in bringing the United States into the war on the side of the Allies, I know of no major study which focuses exclusively on this issue and which makes use of both military and civilian documents to do so. Such a gap in the literature is quite puzzling, given what is at stake when it comes to analyzing the causes of American intervention in the First World War. Indeed, this particular case is of great significance for understanding the relative importance between unit-level and personality factors on the one hand and structural influences on the other in the study of international relations. Given that neorealist scholars pride themselves on their ability to explain the causes of international conflict and typically point to great power wars as evidence, the entry of the United States into World War I should be a case in which systemic theorists like Mearsheimer get it right. A study of this issue, which carefully employs a methodology of robust process tracing, therefore, is important for both empirical and theoretical reasons.

My goal in this paper, then, is to address Mearsheimer's account of the immediate causes of US intervention in the First World War on its own terms by examining his specific arguments in light of the historical evidence. Those claims are not difficult to find. According to Mearsheimer, the United States entered the war in the spring of 1917 because Russia, France, and Britain were all in bad shape militarily. Thus, he asserts,

The United States entered World War I in good part because it thought that Germany was gaining the upper hand on the Triple Entente and was likely to win the war and become a European hegemon. America's buck-passing strategy, in other words, was unraveling after two and a half years of war.... Consequently, the United States was forced to enter the war in the spring of 1917 to bolster the Triple Entente and prevent a German victory.¹⁷

Mearsheimer's argument, then, is laid out quite clearly, and this makes a systematic examination of his claims a relatively straightforward process. Thus, my discussion includes six parts. I begin by briefly examining the Wilson Administration's views on the war during the period of American neutrality. Next, I analyze Mearsheimer's argument about Russia, then move on to his claims about France, and thereafter

¹⁷ Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 253-254.

look at what he says about Great Britain. Following this analysis, I include a section on what the Americans thought about the military strength of the Central Powers in early 1917, as it is impossible to determine what Washington's overall assessment of the balance of power in Europe was without examining these perceptions. Finally, I conclude by summarizing my findings and considering their implications for Mearsheimer's theory of offensive realism, as well as for the study of international relations more broadly.

Wilson's Views during the Period of American Neutrality, 1914-1917

Close analysis of Washington's thoughts about the conflict in Europe during the period of American neutrality suggests that the United States was not especially concerned with the balance of power on the continent. To be sure, the Wilson Administration disliked the idea of a German victory and at times expressed concern about how such an outcome would affect American security in the future. For instance, in September 1915 the president told his principal foreign policy adviser Edward M. House "he had never been sure that [America] ought not to take part in the conflict and if it seemed evident that Germany and her militaristic ideas were to win, the obligation upon us was greater than ever."¹⁸ Indeed, that Wilson occasionally conveyed such thoughts is not especially surprising, given that American military planners had been expressing their concern about Berlin's designs on Latin America and in the Caribbean since at least the early years of Theodore Roosevelt's presidency.¹⁹ The president also preferred that the Germans

¹⁸ Diary of Edward M. House, Sept. 22, 1915, in Arthur S. Link et al., eds., *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson, Volume 34, July 21-September 30, 1915* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980), 506. The Wilson Papers will hereafter be referred to as *PWW*, followed by the appropriate volume number. For other evidence of Washington's concern with the balance of power in Europe during the period of American neutrality, see Edward M. House to President Woodrow Wilson, Aug. 22, 1914, in *PWW*: 30; 432-433; House Diary, Aug. 30, 1914, in *PWW*: 30; 462; Ambassador Cecil Spring-Rice to Foreign Secretary Edward Grey, Sept. 3, 1914, in *PWW*: 30; 472; House Diary, Nov. 25, 1914, in *PWW*: 31; 355; Spring-Rice to Grey, Sept. 8, 1914, in *PWW*: 31; 13-14; House to Wilson, June 16, 1915, in *PWW*: 33; 406.

¹⁹ John A.S. Grenville and George B. Young, *Politics, Strategy, and American Diplomacy: Studies in Foreign Policy, 1873-1917* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1966), 305-307, 309, 325-326; Richard D. Challener, *Admirals, Generals, and American Foreign Policy, 1898-1914* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1973), 16-19, 24-29, 32-35, 44, 66-68, 88, 102-103, 120-121; Holger H. Herwig, *Politics of Frustration: The United States in German Naval Planning, 1889-1941* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1976), chapters 2-4; Layne, *The Peace of Illusions*, 183. See also Alfred Vagts, "Hopes and Fears of an American-German War, 1870-1915," *Political Science Quarterly*, vol. 54, no. 4 (1939): 514-535. Immediately following the outbreak of war American naval officials made these fears explicit, arguing that Berlin did not accept the Monroe Doctrine and would attempt to secure "the position she covets on this side of the ocean." Such anxieties were somewhat well founded, as there is

not win the war due to his belief that peace was “only possible between democracies.”²⁰ In addition, American neutrality policies, in practice, were heavily biased in favor of the Allied powers, reflecting the administration’s partiality toward the Entente.²¹

These facts, notwithstanding, most of the evidence from this period points to the conclusion that Wilson was not particularly worried about the possibility of a total German victory in Europe. To the contrary, it seems Washington was not overly concerned about what an Allied defeat in Europe would mean for the security of the United States. Despite several of his advisers’ attempts to convince him of the risks associated with a German victory, Wilson claimed Berlin would be so worn out by the end of the war that it could not possibly pose a danger to America’s safety. As the president told House in late 1914, “no matter how the great war ended, there would be complete exhaustion, and, even if Germany won, she would not be in a condition to seriously menace our country for many years to come.” When House attempted to convince Wilson otherwise by claiming that Berlin would have between two and three million men under arms by the war’s end, the latter replied that “the available men would be completely wiped out.”²² Moreover, the president did not believe the Germans, even if they won a complete victory,

evidence that the Germans had at least been considering the possibility of invading the Western Hemisphere since the turn of the century. Whether or not the Germans could have actually succeeded in carrying out a successful attack on the region, however, is a much different question.

²⁰ Cable 458 from Sir William Wiseman to British Foreign Office, Dec. 16, 1916, Papers of William Wiseman, Box 4, Folder 91, Yale University Library Manuscript Division, New Haven, CT (hereafter referred to as YULMD). Wilson often expressed his dismay at Germany’s autocratic system of governance, a fact which would ultimately prove to be a factor in his decision to bring the United States into the war.

²¹ Smith, *The Great Departure*, 39; Daniel M. Smith, *Robert Lansing and American Neutrality, 1914-1917* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1958); Daniel M. Smith, “Robert Lansing and the Formulation of American Neutrality Policies, 1914-1915,” *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, vol. 43, no. 1 (1956): 59-81; Arthur S. Link, *Woodrow Wilson: Revolution, War, and Peace* (Wheeling, IL: Harlan Davidson, 1979), 29; Gregory, *The Origins of American Intervention*, 44; Manfred Jonas, *The United States and Germany: A Diplomatic History* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984), 96; Michael H. Hunt, *The American Ascendancy: How the United States Gained and Wielded Global Dominance* (Chapel, Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 59-60; Osgood, *Ideals and Self-Interest*, 178-188; Edward H. Buerhig, “Wilson’s Neutrality Re-examined,” *World Politics*, vol. 3, no. 1 (1950): 1-19; Kennedy, *The Will to Believe*, 80, 96, 100-101. The documentary evidence also overwhelmingly supports this conclusion. For example, in late 1914 House went so far as to tell British Ambassador Cecil Spring-Rice that although the United States would have to make “serious protests” against England’s violations of American neutral rights in order to appear truly impartial, “general sentiment inside [and] outside the administration was sympathetic [to the Allies] and was gradually realising the true nature of the struggle and that it affected this country most nearly.” See Spring-Rice to Grey, Nov. 9, 1914, in *PWW*: 31; 292.

²² See House Diary, Nov. 4, 1914, in *PWW*: 31; 265-266. See also Osgood, *Ideals and Self-Interest*, 201-202. House lamented his inability to persuade Wilson to reconsider his views, saying, “The President does not seem to fully grasp the importance of such matters.” A number of White House counselors, as well as other prominent Americans

would pose a threat to American security, as he believed Berlin “could never hope to keep the whole of Europe in military subjection.”²³ Thus, Wilson appears to have not been especially concerned about the implications a German victory would have for American security, his occasional comments to the contrary notwithstanding.

In addition, the president was not desirous of a victory by the Entente powers either, and his attitude toward Britain cooled considerably in late 1916. Indeed, by the autumn of that year, when Anglo-American relations reached their wartime nadir, it appears American policymakers were perhaps just as wary of England as they were of Germany. In response to House’s claim that the Allies would regard the president’s efforts to pressure them into peace negotiations with Germany as “an unfriendly act,” Wilson stated, “if the Allies [want] war with us we [will] not shrink from it.”²⁴ For this reason, as Link notes, “It is perhaps conjectural to say [Britain and America] were heading toward a break in relations, yet such a catastrophe was not impossible.”²⁵ Furthermore, as late as February 1917, immediately after Germany adopted a policy of unrestricted submarine warfare, the president clearly had no desire to intervene for the sake of aiding the Entente. Whereas most of his advisers argued that it was necessary to immediately

in the “foreign policy establishment,” believed a victorious Germany would constitute a significant threat to US security. See James W. Gerard, *My Four Years in Germany* (New York: George H. Doran Company, 1917), vii-xii; Burton J. Hendrick, *The Life and Letters of Walter H. Page, Volume 2* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1923), 219; Robert Lansing, *War Memoirs of Robert Lansing, Secretary of State* (New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1935); David F. Houston, Houston, *Eight Years with Wilson’s Cabinet, 1913 to 1921, Volume 1* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1926), 236-237; Lewis Einstein, “The United States and Anglo-German Rivalry,” *National Review*, LX (1913): 736-750; Osgood, *Ideals and Self-Interest*, chapter 8; Priscilla Roberts, “The Anglo-American Theme: Americans Visions of an Atlantic Alliance, 1914-1933,” *Diplomatic History*, vol. 21, no. 3 (1997): 343-346. As Roberts notes, however, the concerns of many prominent Americans who favored closer relations with the Allies were often voiced in moral, rather than strategic, terms, even though “the underlying strategic rationale... would have provided the strongest possible justification for pro-Allied policies.”

²³ As quoted in Link, *Woodrow Wilson: Revolution, War, and Peace*, 25. This quotation comes from the draft of a peace note (which was never sent) the president was working on in the autumn of 1916.

²⁴ House Diary, November 14, 1916, Papers of Edward M. House, Box 301, Folder 1, 280; House Diary, November 15, 1916, House Papers, Box 301, Folder 1, 284, YULMD, New Haven, CT. Even House, who initially replied “that it would be stupendous folly to wage war against the Allies,” told the president just a month later that London might be just as much of a threat as Berlin after the war ended, saying, “I am not at all afraid of Germany after the war unless, indeed, England is put out of commission, but it is conceivable that we might have trouble with England in the event she is victorious. Conditions have changed in as much as she now has a navy equal perhaps to all the other nations of the world and an army equal to that of any single nation. In my opinion it will not be as safe for this country to be as belligerent towards her in the future as we have been in the past. Most of Great Britain is as war mad as Germany was when I visited there in 1914 and we can no longer count upon their looking at things from the same viewpoint as heretofore.” See House to Wilson, Dec. 20, 1916, in *PWW*: 40; 294.

²⁵ Link, *Woodrow Wilson and the Progressive Era*, 253.

declare war on the Central Powers, the president “was insistent that he would not allow [the resumption of submarine warfare] to lead to war if it could possibly be avoided.”²⁶ Thus, it is not at all clear that Wilson was committed to assisting the Allies for the sake of preserving a favorable balance of power in Europe.

The ideal outcome for the Americans, therefore, was a draw between the two sides. Although it is true that early in the war the president noted he could not “see... that it would hurt greatly the interests of the United States if either France or Russia or Great Britain should finally dictate the settlement,” it is clear the Americans hoped neither side would win a total victory.²⁷ Thus, immediately after the outbreak of war House wrote Wilson that the conflict’s “saddest feature” was that it had “no good outcome to look forward to. If the Allies win, it means largely the domination of Russia on the Continent of Europe, and if Germany wins, it means the unspeakable tyranny of militarism for generations to come.”²⁸ Wilson appears to have been thinking along similar lines; a “peace without victory,” he believed, would be the best possible outcome for the United States. Indeed, scholars who argue that balance of power considerations played a key role in Wilson’s decision to bring America into the war often point to the president’s famous “peace without victory” speech of January 1917 as evidence.²⁹ However, while such logic might help explain why Wilson, until March 20, 1917, had decided to keep the Americans out of the war, it can scarcely explain his decision enter it, as once the United States intervened, a “peace without victory” was no longer possible.³⁰

²⁶ House Diary, Feb. 1, 1917, in *PWW*: 41; 87. Although, according to House, Wilson referred to Germany during their meeting as “a madman that should be curbed,” he clearly was still opposed to war. Indeed, when House asked the president “if he thought it fair to the Allies to ask to them to do the curbing without our doing our share,” Wilson reportedly winced noticeably, “but still held to his determination not to become involved if it were humanly possible to do otherwise.” For other evidence which indicates Wilson was not interested in intervening for the sake of aiding the Allies at this point, see Unmarked Cable from Wiseman to British Foreign Office, April 13, 1917, Wiseman Papers, Box 4, Folder 92, YULMD, New Haven, CT; House Diary, Jan. 5, 1917, in *PWW*: 40; 409.

²⁷ Memorandum by Herbert Bruce Brougham of an Interview with Wilson, Dec. 14, 1914, in *PWW*: 31; 459.

²⁸ House to Wilson, Aug. 22, 1914, in *PWW*, 30; 432-433. House maintained his support for a stable equilibrium of power in Europe throughout the war, saying in early 1917, “In my opinion, the worst thing that could happen to the world would be a decisive victory for either side.” See House Diary, Jan. 19, 1917, House Papers, Box 301, Folder 2, 28-29, YULMD, New Haven, CT.

²⁹ For the text of this speech, see Wilson’s Address to the Senate, Jan. 22, 1917, in United States Department of State, *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States, Supplement 1 on the World War* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1931), 24-29 (hereafter referred to as *FRUS*, followed by the appropriate year).

³⁰ Buehrig, *Woodrow Wilson and the Balance of Power*, 144, 169, 186, 265, 274. Wilson did not ask Congress for a declaration of war until April 2, and the Americans did not officially enter the conflict until April 6, but it is clear

At first glance, then, it does not appear the Wilson Administration was pursuing the sort of policy Mearsheimer argues was in place by the spring of 1917. Indeed, this impression is reinforced by the fact that the United States was not seriously preparing for war prior to April of that year. If, as Mearsheimer claims, Washington had formulated a policy whereby the Americans would intervene once it became clear that the Allies were in danger of losing the war, one would expect that the United States would have been in the process of building a strong military establishment. It is clear, however, that this was not the case; in fact, quite the reverse was true. Indeed, Army Chief of Staff Hugh L. Scott was constantly expressing his frustration throughout this period at the inability of Congress to pass legislation to prepare the United States for war.³¹ More importantly, it is clear Wilson himself was not in favor of a large military buildup and noted on numerous occasions that a preparedness program was unnecessary.³² By December 1916 House had grown so frustrated with the White House's refusal to take any sort of steps in this direction that he claimed Wilson, if the Americans ultimately got involved in the war, would be considered "one of the most discredited Presidents we have had," as he had "done nothing" to prepare the

the president had already made his final decision by March 20, as the following day he decided to call Congress together early to hear his war address.

³¹ See Army Chief of Staff Hugh L. Scott to Mr. Timothy H. Murphy, Feb. 15, 1917, Papers of Hugh L. Scott, Box 27, Feb. 1917 Folder, Library of Congress Manuscript Division, Washington, D.C. Documents from these collections will hereafter be referred to as LOCMD. For some of Scott's other frustrations with the lack of effort to prepare the country for war, see Scott to U.S. Stewart, Jan. 27, 1917, Scott Papers, Box 27, Jan. 1917 Folder, LOCMD, Washington, D.C.; Scott to Colonel John W. Vrooman, March 23, 1917, Scott Papers, Box 28, March-April 1917 Folder, LOCMD, Washington, D.C.; Captain J.C. Beardsley, April 10, 1917, Scott Papers, Box 28, April 1917 Folder, LOCMD, Washington, D.C.; Hugh L. Scott, *Some Memories of a Soldier* (New York: The Century Company, 1928), 544, 555-560. Scott differed from other presidential advisers like House in that he blamed Congress, rather than Wilson, for this state of affairs. Indeed, the chief of staff actually credits the president and his cabinet for taking the necessary measures to ensure the Americans eventually won the war after the United States intervened in early April.

³² As far as I know, the first instance of Wilson expressing this opinion came in late November 1914. See House Diary, Nov. 25, 1914, in *PWW*: 31; 355. The Americans did begin a significant naval buildup in 1916 but this was a long-term project and it is clear that at the time the United States decided to intervene the American military was woefully unprepared to take part in the war. Indeed, it was not even until late March 1917 that the first war plans for an American expeditionary force to Europe were even drawn up. As David Stevenson notes, by the time the country entered the war, "as a land military power, America was starting virtually from scratch." See Stevenson, *Cataclysm*, 301; Grenville and Young, *Politics, Strategy, and American Diplomacy*, 334-336. In addition, even the naval program was not specifically designed to balance German power in Europe. To the contrary, as Secretary of War Newton D. Baker notes in his memoir, the naval buildup was not meant to target any country in particular. See Baker, *Why We Went to War*, 99.

country for war.³³ As late as mid-February 1917 the president stated “he was not in sympathy with any great [military] preparedness,” because he believed “Europe would be man and money poor by the end of the war.”³⁴ It goes without saying that this is not the sort of approach one would expect American officials to have pursued if they were in fact thinking that a German victory would pose a dire threat to the security of the United States and that such an outcome was imminent.

It seems, therefore, that Wilson neither believed the Germans were on the cusp of defeating the Entente powers in the spring of 1917, nor was especially worried about what the consequences of such an outcome would be. While it is certainly true that the president adopted policies which favored the Allies and at times expressed concern about the implications of a German victory, most of the evidence supports the conclusion that the White House was not overly concerned with that prospect. This analysis notwithstanding, the real test of whether realistic factors were what drove the Wilson Administration to enter the war is what US policymakers were saying about the military balance in Europe during the period immediately preceding the intervention of the United States. It is to this issue that I now turn.

Russia

In accordance with the logic of his offshore balancing thesis, Mearsheimer argues the Russians were close to military defeat in the spring of 1917. “The Russian army,” he writes, “which had been badly mauled in almost every engagement it had with the German army, was on the verge of disintegration by March 12, 1917, when revolution broke out and the tsar was removed from power.”³⁵ There is no doubt as to the accuracy of this characterization of the state of affairs, as by early 1917 the Russian military was on its last legs.³⁶ What is more, the March 12 revolution exacerbated this already dire situation. For the purpose

³³ House Diary, Dec. 14, 1916, House Papers, Box 301, Folder 1, 310-316, YULMD, New Haven, CT. House even went so far as to say that the United States would have difficulty standing up to a challenge by the armies of Rumania and Bulgaria. For other instances of House’s frustration with Wilson’s views on military preparedness, see House Diary, Nov. 4, 1914, in *PWW*: 31; 265-266; House Diary, Nov. 18, 1916, House Papers, Box 301, Folder 1, 291, YULMD, New Haven, CT; House Diary, March 22, 1917, House Papers, Box 301, Folder 2, 79-80, YULMD, New Haven, CT; House Diary, March 27, 1917, House Papers, Box 301, Folder 2, YULMD, New Haven, CT.

³⁴ Anne Wintermute Lane and Louise Herrick Hall, eds., *The Letters of Franklin K. Lane: Personal and Political* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1922), 236.

³⁵ Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 254.

³⁶ On Russia’s military and economic weaknesses, as well as its domestic instability during this period, see Nicholas N. Golovine, *The Russian Army in the World War* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1931); Alfred Knox,

of explaining American intervention in the war, however, the important question is not what the *reality* of the situation was, but what the *perceptions* of Russia's condition were in Washington.³⁷ Did US officials recognize how critical the circumstances on the Eastern Front were, especially militarily?

It is clear that some American policymakers did evince concern about the situation in Russia during the lead-up to US entry into the war. Indeed, in early November 1916 reports from the American Embassy expressed marked concern over conditions in Petrograd. According to the US Ambassador David R. Francis, the situation in Russia was “disturbing,” and he noted he had “heard it charged... that the Government [was] attempting to bring about an up-rising of the people in order to give Russia an excuse to negotiate a separate peace....” In short, Francis claimed conditions were “deplorable,” especially for a country “in a struggle for its existence....”³⁸ Although Francis reversed himself in early December, writing that the danger of a separate peace had been effectively “squelched,” the Americans continued to worry about Petrograd's stability as 1917 began.³⁹ In the middle of January Wilson and his advisers reportedly were “particularly anxious about the Russian situation, fearing that power [had] gone back into the hands of the reactionaries.”⁴⁰ Indeed, Secretary of State Robert Lansing pointed out on January 28 that Russia was “not succeeding in spite of her man power.”⁴¹ Given the fact that most news from Russia during the winter of 1916-1917 “had portrayed a country on the verge of economic collapse,”

With the Russian Army, 1914-1917, Volume 2 (London: Hutchinson & Company, 1921); Norman Stone, *The Eastern Front, 1914-1917* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1975); W. Bruce Lincoln, *Passage through Armageddon: The Russians in War and Revolution, 1914-1918* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1986); Spencer C. Tucker, *The Great War, 1914-1918* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1998); 148, 204; Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Russian Revolution, 2nd Edition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), chapter 2; John Keegan, *The First World War* (London: Hutchinson, 1998), 358-369; Stevenson, *Cataclysm*, 247-254.

³⁷ On the importance of perception in international relations, see Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976); Arthur A. Stein, *Why Nations Cooperate: Circumstance and Choice in International Relations* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990), chapter 3. On how misperception can lead to war, see Van Evera, *Causes of War*, chapter 2.

³⁸ Ambassador to Russia David R. Francis, Petrograd, to Frank L. Polk, Personal and Confidential, Nov. 7, 1916, Papers of Frank L. Polk, Box 6, Folder 189, YULMD, New Haven, CT.

³⁹ Francis to John F. Lee, Dec. 12, 1916, in Robert Chadwell Williams and Robert Lester, eds., *Russia in Transition: The Diplomatic Papers of David R. Francis, U.S. Ambassador to Russia, 1916-1918* (Frederick, MD: University Publications of America, 1986), Roll 2.

⁴⁰ Sir William Wiseman to British Foreign Office, Jan. 16, 1917, in *PWW*: 40; 503-504.

⁴¹ Lansing, *War Memoirs of Robert Lansing*, 208. House was also worried at this time, calling Russia “the danger point for the Allies....” See House Diary, Jan. 12, 1917, House Papers, Box 301, Folder 2, 20, YULMD, New Haven, CT; House to Wilson, Jan. 22, 1917, House Papers, Box 121, Folder 4272, YULMD, New Haven, CT.

it is not surprising that Washington was evidently quite worried about the country's political stability, especially since on January 21 Francis cabled that "affairs in Russia [were] so unsettled that anything [was] likely to happen."⁴² In early March the news got no better, as the American naval attaché in Petrograd reinforced these claims by pointing out that Russia's army was in bad shape and the country was in the midst of a major economic crisis.⁴³ Likewise, on March 20 the American consul in Moscow reported that military discipline in the Russian army had been "shaken, perhaps irreparably," and claimed there was "imminent danger of a debacle."⁴⁴ Clearly, then, some US officials understood quite well that the Russians were in serious trouble.

The great bulk of the evidence, however, suggests that the Americans were not particularly concerned about the Russian military situation. To the contrary, during the lead up to the March 20 cabinet meeting at which war was decided upon, the Wilson Administration spent most of its time discussing the March 12 revolution, about which US policymakers were, ironically, quite optimistic.⁴⁵ Whereas earlier in the month Ambassador Francis had expressed concern over food shortages and the possibility that certain members of the government were attempting to conclude a separate peace with

⁴² Norman E. Saul, *War and Revolution: The United States and Russia, 1914-1921* (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 2001), 90, 105; Francis to F.A. Sterling, Jan. 21, 1917, in Robert Chadwell Williams and Robert Lester, eds., *Confidential U.S. Diplomatic Post Records: Russia and the Soviet Union, Part I, Russia: From Czar to Commissars, 1914-1918* (Frederick, MD: University Publications of America, 1986), Roll 4. See also Military Observers and Military Attaché of the American Military Mission, Paris, to the Office of the Chief of Staff of the War College Division, "Subject: Politico-Military Notes," 8690-543, No. 36, Sent Jan. 26, 1917, Received Feb. 10, 1917, in National Archives Microfilm Publications, *Correspondence of the War College Division and Related General Staff Offices, 1903-1919*, Record Group 165, M1024, Roll 217, National Archives II, College Park, MD. All microfilm cited in the War College Division Correspondence documents will hereafter be abbreviated with the following terms: *CWCD*, RG, NA.

⁴³ From the American Naval Attaché, Petrograd, to the Office of the Chief of Staff of the War College Division, "Subject: General Conditions," 6497-14, No. 12, March 6, 1917, 10, 14, 16, 26, 38-39, in *CWCD*, RG 165, M1024, Roll 89, NA, College Park, MD.

⁴⁴ American Consul in Moscow to Secretary of State Robert Lansing, "Confidential: The Political and Economic Situation in Moscow," March 20, 1917, in National Archives Microfilm Publications, *Records of the Department of State Relating to the Internal Affairs of Russia and the Soviet Union, 1910-1929*, Roll 9 (Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Service General Services Administration, 1960), hereafter referred to as *RDS*. A report which drew similar conclusions was also submitted that same day by the Office of Naval Intelligence. See Office of Naval Intelligence Report, "Revolution in Petrograd," March 20, in *RDS*, Roll 9.

⁴⁵ For its part, the American press was overwhelmingly positive in its reaction to the revolution, with most of the major newspapers claiming that it would strengthen the Allied war effort. See "New Russia and the War," *New York Times*, March 17, 1917, 12; "The Russian Revolution," *Los Angeles Times*, March 16, 1917, 114; "Rival Factions in Russia Seek an Agreement," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, March 26, 1917, 3; "Russian Revolution Will Speed Up War," *Los Angeles Times*, March 16, 1917, 14; "Washington Knew Revolt Was Coming," *New York Times*, March 17, 1917, 3.

Germany, once the tsarist government fell his views changed markedly. Indeed, on March 15 Francis wrote,

This is undoubtedly a revolution, but it is the best managed revolution that has ever taken place, for its magnitude. The Duma is assuming control and is exercising its authority in Petrograd with rare good judgment.... Upon the whole Russia is being congratulated in my judgment on the prospect of getting through an important change in government with so little bloodshed and without material interference with the war she is waging with powerful antagonists.⁴⁶

Likewise, a report by Samuel N. Harper, a Russian expert at the University of Chicago, argued the primary aim of the revolutionists was to “make it possible for Russia to bring into force all her strength.” The result, therefore, would be a “more effective prosecution of [the] war” and a refusal by the Russians to stop fighting “till victory....”⁴⁷ Lansing was evidently at least somewhat convinced by this analysis, as he considered Harper’s report important enough to send it to Wilson on March 16. In addition, several high-ranking American policymakers viewed the events in Petrograd favorably because they appear to have been at least partially convinced, as much of the Russian population, as well as many French and British officials were, that the tsarist government had been secretly pro-German throughout the war.⁴⁸ Indeed, Lansing went so far as to tell Wilson, “My own impression is that the Allies knew of this matter and I presume are favorable to the revolutionists since the Court party has been, throughout the war, secretly pro-German.”⁴⁹

Other than discussing the revolution’s impact, which they believed would be a positive one, it seems American officials simply did not focus much attention on the military situation in Russia prior to the decision to intervene. Indeed, at the March 20 meeting of the cabinet at which war was decided upon there was hardly any discussion of the war on the Eastern Front at all. What is more, what few comments

⁴⁶ David R. Francis, *Russia from the American Embassy, April, 1916-November, 1918* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1921), 72. For the ambassador’s views on the internal conditions of Russia prior to the revolution, which reveal that he had been quite apprehensive about Petrograd’s fate, see Francis to Polk, March 10, 1917, Polk Papers, Box 6, Folder 190, YULMD, New Haven, CT.

⁴⁷ Lansing to Wilson with enclosure by Samuel N. Harper, March 16, 1917, in *PWW*: 41; 416-417.

⁴⁸ This view was surprisingly typical among key officials in the Wilson Administration. See House to Wilson, Jan. 20, 1917, House Papers, Box 121, Folder 4272, YULMD, New Haven, CT; E. David Cronon, *The Cabinet Diaries of Josephus Daniels, 1913-1921* (Lincoln, NB: University of Nebraska Press, 1963), 114. This belief was also commonly expressed in the press (see footnote 45). For a superb discussion of how the rumors about there being pro-German sympathizers in the Russian Imperial Court impacted Russia during the war, see William C. Fuller, Jr., *The Foe Within: Fantasies of Treason and the End of Imperial Russia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006).

⁴⁹ Personal and Confidential Note from Lansing to Wilson, March 16, 1917, in *RDS*, Roll 7.

were made about Russia were simply expressions of satisfaction that the new regime was democratic in nature. Indeed, Lansing argued that the revolution “had removed the one objection to affirming that the European War was a war between Democracy and Absolutism,” and that “the present time seemed... especially propitious for action by us because it would have a great moral influence in Russia....” As for the president, he merely noted “that he did not see how he could speak of a war for Democracy or of Russia’s revolution in addressing Congress.”⁵⁰ While Wilson ultimately reversed himself on this point, as in his April 2 address he referred to the “heartening things” taking place in Russia as adding “assurance” to Americans’ “hope for the future peace of the world,” he at no point expressed doubts about Petrograd’s ability to remain in the war.⁵¹ The administration, then, was much more concerned with nurturing what it perceived as a democratic movement in Russia than it was with the military state of affairs.

It is clear, therefore, that Washington was not especially disturbed by conditions on the Eastern Front. If anything, the Americans believed the March 12 revolution would assist the Russians in their war effort. In short, the Wilson Administration decided on war basically unaware of how bad things were in Russia and under the false impression that the fall of the tsar would probably aid the Allied war effort. Thus, contrary to Mearsheimer’s theory, the dire condition of the Russian army was simply not a major factor in the thinking of high-ranking US policymakers, as the Americans clearly did not comprehend that

⁵⁰ Memorandum by Lansing of the Cabinet Meeting, March 20, 1917, in *PWW*: 41; 440-441. For additional accounts of this part of the meeting, see Cronon, *The Cabinet Diaries of Josephus Daniels*, 117; Houston, *Eight Years with Wilson’s Cabinet*, 244. Lansing had been making the argument that the March 12 revolution presented the Americans with an opportunity to intervene without compromising their ideological values for several days. See United States Department of State, *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States: The Lansing Papers, 1914-1920, Volume 1* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1939), 627, 629 (hereafter referred to as *Lansing Papers*). See also Lansing to House, April 4, 1917, House Papers, Box 69, Folder 2274, YULMD, New Haven, CT. House made similar comments in the immediate aftermath of the tsar’s overthrow. See House Diary, March 17, 1917, House Papers, Box 301, Folder 2, 75-76, YULMD, New Haven, CT.

⁵¹ Wilson’s War Address to a Joint Session of Congress, April 2, 1917, in *PWW*: 41; 524. Wilson, at least since mid-January, had made it clear that the authoritarian nature of the Russian regime had stood “in the way of complete sympathy between [the] United States and [the] Allies.” See Wiseman to British Foreign Office, Jan. 16, 1917, in *PWW*: 40; 503-504. As a result, Wilson’s words should not be considered mere rhetoric, as it is quite clear he was pleased about the implications of the tsar’s overthrow. See also Cronon, *The Cabinet Diaries of Josephus Daniels*, 119-120; “Revolt of Russians Praised by Wilson,” *Washington Post*, March 30, 1917, 3. From his station in Petrograd, Francis had formed a similar opinion. See Francis, *Russia from the American Embassy*, 90-91.

the March 12 revolution was a sign of Russia's imminent collapse.⁵² As Kennan argues, although the revolution meant political instability in Petrograd would continue and that Russia's future military prospects were extremely poor, "neither of these realities was widely noted in the United States; it is, indeed, not an exaggeration to say that the policy of the United States government toward the Russian Provisional Government was founded largely on ignorance...." Consequently, the Americans were under the mistaken impression "that Russia would evolve rapidly... in the direction of democratic stability, and that she would continue to prosecute vigorously, as a loyal and enthusiastic member of the western coalition, the war against Germany."⁵³

France

Mearsheimer also supports his basic argument about why the United States entered the war by making a point about France. "The French army," he writes, was "in precarious shape, and it suffered mutinies in May 1917."⁵⁴ Once again, it is certainly true France was having significant problems by the spring of 1917. However, the fact that the mutinies did not occur until May means they cannot explain the decisions American officials had already made earlier in the year, especially since the collapse of discipline in the French army had been triggered by the failure of the Nivelle Offensive, which did not begin until April 16, nearly a month after Wilson had already chosen to take the country to war.⁵⁵ It is certainly possible that France was "in precarious shape" and that the mutinies were, at least to some extent, the result of a situation which had been building up for some time. Even if this were true,

⁵² The real effect of the revolution, therefore, was to make an alliance between the United States and Russia more acceptable to the American public. See Saul, *War and Revolution*, 93-97; George F. Kennan, *Russia Leaves the War: Soviet-American Relations, 1917-1920, Volume I* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1956), 14, 19.

⁵³ Kennan, *Russia Leaves the War*, 12. According to Kennan, Americans' commitment to democracy and their belief in its "universal validity" blinded them to the reality of Russia's situation.

⁵⁴ Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 254.

⁵⁵ All the literature I have reviewed suggests the mutinies were a response to the disappointment felt by the French troops due to their utter failure during the April attacks. See Bentley B. Gilbert and Paul P. Bernard, "The French Army Mutinies of 1917," *The Historian*, vol. 22, no. 1 (1959): 24-41; Leonard V. Smith, *Between Mutiny and Obedience: The Case of the French Fifth Infantry Division during World War I* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994); Richard M. Watt, *Dare Call It Treason* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1963); John Williams, *Mutiny 1917* (London: Heinemann, 1962); Hubert C. Johnson, *Breakthrough! Tactics, Technology, and the Search for Victory on the Western Front in World War I* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1994), 193; Tucker, *The Great War*, 125, 130-131.

however, what matters here, once again, is not so much what the reality of France's condition was, but rather how the circumstances looked from Washington.

There is in fact some evidence which indicates the Americans believed the French were struggling militarily at this stage of the war. At the beginning of December Major James Logan reported from Paris that "an undoubted wave of pessimism, or, to say the least 'malaise,'" had swept over the French public.⁵⁶ More alarming than this, however, were reports from mid-February, which claimed Paris possessed only enough manpower to make one more major offensive.⁵⁷ As a result, the new US military attaché in Paris, Carl Boyd, was quite anxious about the situation, saying, "I am of the opinion that France is in bad shape and that the majority of the civil and military population do not believe that the war can last but a few months longer."⁵⁸ US civilian officials expressed some concern as well, as on January 28 Lansing claimed there was "no doubt but that the Allies in the west are having a hard time...."⁵⁹ Similarly, on March 9 House sent the president a letter which claimed that if "France should cave in before Germany it would be a calamity beyond reckoning." Wilson's principal foreign policy adviser also enclosed a note from an aide at the American Embassy in Paris, which reported that the French had "nearly reached the limit." Commenting on the letter, House said, "I fear [it] is true."⁶⁰ There is also some evidence that the president agreed with this assessment. According to the memoir of Secretary of Agriculture David F. Houston, at a February 23 cabinet meeting Wilson agreed with the former's argument that the United States had to act, as the Americans "could not afford to let Germany dominate us or cut England off and then crush France" because "we would be next on her list." Although this

⁵⁶ Lieutenant Colonel Spencer Cosby, Military Attaché, Paris, with Enclosure from Major James A. Logan, Military Observer, Paris, to the Office of the Chief of Staff of the War College Division, "Politico-Military Notes," 8690-518, No. 3,209, Prepared Nov. 29, 1916, Sent Dec. 1, 1916, Received Dec. 19, 1916, in *CWCD*, RG 165, M1024, Roll 217, NA, College Park, MD.

⁵⁷ O1 and R.E., American Military Mission, Paris, to the Office of the Chief of Staff of the War College Division, "Military and Economic Situation in France," 8690-549, No. 49, Feb. 16, 1917, in *Ibid.* Curiously, the report also expressed alarm over the fact that France would soon fall behind Germany in total steel production. Given that the French never came close to matching Berlin's output in this sector throughout the course of the entire war, such a claim seems quite strange. I thank Marc Trachtenberg for calling this point to my attention.

⁵⁸ Captain Carl Boyd, Military Attaché, Paris, to Major Andrew Moses, Army War College, Washington, D.C., 8690-551, Feb. 15, 1917, in *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ As quoted in Lansing, *War Memoirs of Robert Lansing*, 208.

⁶⁰ House to Wilson with Enclosures, March 9, 1917, in *PWW*: 41; 373, 376.

comment tells us nothing about how Wilson viewed the military balance, it would at least indicate that he was thinking, to a degree, in power political terms.⁶¹ There is, therefore, some evidence to support Mearsheimer's contention about US perceptions of France's military position.

Most of the evidence, however, points overwhelmingly to the conclusion that the United States was fairly confident in the Allies, or at the very least believed the conflict would remain a stalemate.⁶² On December 22 the American Military Mission in Paris submitted a set of "Politico-Military Notes" which, though they claimed the mood in France was still pessimistic, argued that Britain's "apparent positive determination... to fight the war out to a finish" had bolstered French public opinion. More importantly, the report was careful to point out that it in no way meant "to convey the impression... that there [had] been any appreciable falling off in *morale*, insofar as the *French Army* itself [was] concerned."⁶³ Moreover, US military estimates from late 1916 claimed that in terms of overall manpower reserves, the Entente held a nearly two to one advantage over its enemies.⁶⁴ It is rather unsurprising, therefore, that when Colonel William Lassiter, the American military attaché in London, visited the British zone of the front in early December he failed to report any sort of concern about the possibility of a German breakthrough. To the contrary, Lassiter implied that the war would remain stalemated for the foreseeable

⁶¹ Houston, *Eight Years with Wilson's Cabinet*, 221, 227-228, 232, 236-237. One should not assign tremendous weight to Houston's recollections in this instance. At various other times in his memoir he argues that he believed the Allies were actually winning the war and also claims that it was the resumption of submarine warfare, not an interest in preserving a stable equilibrium of power in Europe, which precipitated the war with Germany. In addition, although it is clear Wilson took Houston's views seriously and asked for his advice at several important cabinet meetings during the months preceding American intervention, he does not appear to have had much influence in the administration. Finally, it is important to note that it was not Wilson who spoke these words; Houston's memoir merely claims that he "felt confident that [Wilson] held the same views that we did." It is possible, therefore, that Houston simply miscalculated what the president's actual thoughts were. Indeed, given there is no direct evidence Wilson ever made such a claim, it seems likely Houston simply overestimated the influence he had on Washington's official thinking.

⁶² This was also the prevailing view expressed in most of the major American newspapers. See By a Military Expert, "Slackening of Their Offensive Apparently Foreshadows Trench Warfare—Next German Attack Will Probably Be on Southern Russian Front," *New York Times*, Jan. 21, 1917, XX1; By a Military Expert, "Germans Are Checked," *New York Times*, Dec. 24, 1916, XX1; By a Military Expert, "Analysis of the War Situation at the End of 1916 Shows Net Result Favorable to the Allies," *New York Times*, Jan. 7, 1917, SM5; "Comment on the Situation," *Los Angeles Times*, Jan. 1, 1917; "Says Allies Want America in the War," *New York Times*, March 1, 1917, 7.

⁶³ Military Observers of the American Military Mission, Paris, to the Office of the Chief of Staff of the War College Division, "Politico-Military Notes," 8690-528, No. 18, Sent Dec. 22, 1916, Received Jan. 4, 1917, in *CWCD*, RG 165, M1024, Roll 217, NA, College Park, MD (emphasis in original).

⁶⁴ See Captain Edward Davis, Military Attaché, Athens, to the Office of the Chief of Staff of the War College Division, "Reserves of the Entente and of the Central Powers," 8690-538, No. 33, Sent Nov. 25, 1916, Received Jan. 17, 1917, in *Ibid.*

future, writing, “The opinion of the officers in France seemed to be that [the] war would last for at least two years more, unless something unforeseen happened. No estimates of under two years were heard.”⁶⁵ Washington, apparently, thought these views accurate, as Wiseman, in a cable to London, noted, “the drawn war theory is generally held by the Cabinet.”⁶⁶

More importantly, it is clear Wilson had been advised on the situation on the Western Front and that he did not believe a German breakthrough was imminent. On January 15 the president received a letter from the American Ambassador in France, William Graves Sharp, claiming the military situation was unlikely to change in the near future. According to Sharp, the nature of trench warfare made any sort of breakthrough by either side unlikely; the most likely outcome, therefore, was that the war would “continue for another year or two.”⁶⁷ The following day, during a conversation with Sir William Wiseman, the head of British Military Intelligence in the United States, the president reportedly said that while the war had “entered the final phase which may last three to twelve months,” he did not think either side was on the brink of victory. Rather, as Wiseman’s summary of the conversation notes, Wilson probably meant Washington would be able to mediate a peaceful conclusion to the war, since he expected the “peace discussion [to] go on from now to the end.” Based on Wiseman’s account this seems the only plausible interpretation, as American “military advisers” had “told [the president] not to expect any great military change as a result of next Spring’s fighting.”⁶⁸ The British agent reinforced this message on January 26, writing that both House and Wilson had been “convinced... that the war must be a drawn one.” Wiseman, therefore, claimed that American intervention was unlikely, unless Berlin committed “some flagrant submarine frightfulness.”⁶⁹ That same day US military officials in France, though they

⁶⁵ Colonel William Lassiter, Military Attaché, London, to the Office of the Chief of Staff of the War College Division, “Recent Visit to the British War Zone in France,” 8690-533, No. 4,165, Composed Dec. 18, 1916, Sent Jan. 5, 1917, Received Jan. 15, 1917, in *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ Cable 467 from Wiseman to British Foreign Office, Dec. 15, 1916, Wiseman Papers, Box 4, Folder 91, YULMD, New Haven, CT. This was apparently House’s view as well, as he told the French ambassador on December 3 that in his opinion “the war might last for another year or for another two years, and the lines remain practically as they now are.” See House Diary, Dec. 3, 1916, House Papers, Box 301, Folder 1, 308-309, YULMD, New Haven, CT.

⁶⁷ Cable from Ambassador to France William Graves Sharp to Wilson, Jan. 15, 1917, in *PWW*: 40; 484-485.

⁶⁸ Wiseman to British Foreign Office, Jan. 16, 1917, in *Ibid.*, 504.

⁶⁹ Wiseman to British Foreign Office, “Cable: Further Notes on Conversation with [House],” Jan. 26, 1917, Wiseman Papers, Box 4, Folder 91, YULMD, New Haven, CT.

pointed out the country's civilian population continued to experience "privations," noted that the morale of the army was "undoubtedly good."⁷⁰

During the seven weeks between the German resumption of submarine warfare and the American decision for war these views do not appear to have changed significantly. A February 13 "general report" noted that although the French had been "extended to the limit of their resources and power," the army would not suffer from "any slackening." The report also claimed that, based on information received from a "very well-informed" Swiss colonel, neither side would "pay the necessary price for breaking through the other's lines, even if such a breaking through was possible." The war, then, "could last into another year...."⁷¹ By March, it appears the Wilson Administration had actually grown more confident in the Allies.⁷² Indeed, on March 19 Lansing noted an American declaration of war "would give moral support to the Entente Powers already encouraged by recent military successes and add to the discouragement of the Teutonic Allies...."⁷³ During the cabinet meeting of the following day the secretary of state added that US entry "would put new spirit in the Allies already flushed with recent military successes."⁷⁴ That neither the president, nor a single member of the cabinet other than Lansing, who argued the Entente Powers were actually winning in the west, commented on France's military condition in the course of this crucial meeting suggests it was not a major factor in the American decision to intervene. Although the secretary of state expressed the belief that "to go to war solely because American ships had been sunk and

⁷⁰ Military Observers and the Military Attaché of the American Military Mission, Paris, to the Office of the Chief of Staff of the War College Division, "Subject: Politico-Military Notes," 8690-543, No. 36, Sent Jan. 26, 1917, Received, Feb. 10, 1917, in *CWCD*, RG 165, M1024, Roll 217, NA, College Park, MD.

⁷¹ To the Office of the Chief of Staff of the War College Division, "General Report on Visit to British Front in France, January 29th to February 1st, 1917," 8690-548, No. 4,261, Sent Feb. 13, 1917, Received Feb. 23, 1917, in *Ibid.*

⁷² This was certainly the view of the American press. See Arthur S. Draper, "Kaiser's Forces Reel Before Allies' Smash," *Los Angeles Times*, March 18, 1917, 11; By a Military Expert, "Fighting on Big Scale Due in France," *New York Times*, Feb. 25, 1917, 29; By a Military Expert, "Recent British Gains Are Important," *New York Times*, March 4, 1917, XX1; "British Go Forward Like Huge Machine," *New York Times*, March 18, 1917, 7; "Liberation of France is Well Under Way," *Los Angeles Times*, March 20, 1917, 12.

⁷³ *Lansing Papers*, 628.

⁷⁴ Lansing Memorandum of the Cabinet Meeting, March 20, 1917, in *PWW*: 41; 440. Perhaps if the Wilson Administration had had access to a March 23 report that was submitted to the War College Division and which stated that the recent German withdrawal from the Somme salient would actually make the Allies' spring offensive more difficult, these views would not have been so sanguine. See "Recent German Withdrawal on the Somme Salient," Submitted to the Office of the Chief of Staff of the War College Division, 8690-556, No. 71, Sent March 23, 1917, Received April 9, 1917, in *CWCD*, RG 165, M1024, Roll 217, NA, College Park, MD.

Americans killed” was a rather weak premise for entering the conflict, and that the United States would be on a “sounder basis” if it argued it “was the duty of this and every other democratic nation to suppress an autocratic government like the German nation because of its atrocious character and because it was a menace to the national safety of this country,” at no point in the discussion was the existing balance of power mentioned as a reason to go to war. To the contrary, Wilson merely noted “that he did not see from a practical point of view what else could be done to safeguard American vessels more than had already been done unless we declared war,” before asking his counselors for their advice as to what he ought to do.⁷⁵ While Washington may not have been as sanguine as some newspaper reports, which claimed that, for Berlin, “all hope of successful war in France [had] gone,” US officials do not appear to have believed Paris was in imminent danger.⁷⁶

Perhaps the most compelling evidence that Washington did not believe the situation on the Western Front to be overly critical, however, is the fact that the Wilson Administration did not expect to have to provide the Allies with a significant contribution of troops until after the decision for war had already been made. Although shortly after the American declaration of war the Army General Staff recommended sending US troops to France “with a minimum of delay” in order to shore up the Allied position, the White House did not recognize the necessity of such a move until after March 20.⁷⁷ As David F. Trask observes, “the President’s military advisors assumed that the United States would concentrate on assisting the Entente Powers with materials, shipping, naval support, and financial aid but would not place a large army in the field.... No one seems to have anticipated the eventual size of the American mobilization, largely because the Entente initially did not ask for extensive manpower.”⁷⁸

⁷⁵ Lansing Memorandum of the Cabinet Meeting, March 20, 1917, in *PWW*: 41; 436-444. See also Houston, *Eight Years with Wilson’s Cabinet*, 243; Cronon, *The Cabinet Diaries of Josephus Daniels*, 117-118.

⁷⁶ “The British Victory,” *New York Times*, March 20, 1917, 10.

⁷⁷ “Study of a Possible Line of Action,” Prepared by the Army General Staff, Bureau of Exterior Operations and the American Military Mission, April 11, 1917, House Papers, Box 184, Folder 179, YULMD, New Haven, CT.

⁷⁸ David F. Trask, *The United States in the Supreme War Council: American War Aims and Inter-Allied Strategy, 1917-1918* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1961), 9. See also Daniel R. Beaver, *Newton D. Baker and the American War Effort, 1917-1919* (Lincoln, NB: University of Nebraska Press, 1966), 39; May, *The World War and American Isolation*, 431. There were some observers who, prior to America’s entry into the war, believed it would be necessary for the United States to play a large role militarily, but even these individuals usually did not argue that the Allies were the verge of defeat. For example, see Frank J. Mather, Jr., “Not a Separate War If We

Indeed, according to an April 28 memorandum on Germany's projected military strength in 1917, it had been "impossible" for the Americans to obtain "accurate non-propaganda information" prior to US entry into the war and, thus, Washington apparently did not recognize a major commitment of troops would be needed.⁷⁹ Thus, it is not surprising that on March 19, the day before Wilson chose to go to war, House wrote to the president that although it would be necessary to act as "a huge reservoir to supply the Allies," he did not foresee a large American military commitment to the Entente. To the contrary, House noted, "No one looks with favor upon our raising a large army at the moment, believing it would be better if we would permit volunteers to enlist in the Allied armies."⁸⁰ It would appear, therefore, that the Americans did not even consider aiding France with US military support as essential until well after March 20.

Thus, although Mearsheimer does find some empirical support for his claims about US perceptions of French military strength, most of the evidence works against the offshore balancing thesis. With few exceptions, it would appear that by the time Wilson chose to address Congress most top officials in the American government did not believe the French were on the verge of military collapse. Indeed, even House, who appears to have been the most pessimistic of the president's advisors, did not believe it necessary to send a sizable ground force to the Western Front. Though there can be no doubt the Wilson Administration soon realized, after entering the war, that France would need significant US

Take Up Arms," *New York Times*, March 11, 1917, SM3; "Americans Urged to Enter Fight for Liberty," *New York Times*, March 4, 1917, E12; Houston, *Eight Years with Wilson's Cabinet*, 242. It was not until late April, when Paris sent a military mission to the United States to inform the Americans about the Western Allies' need of military assistance against the Germans, that US officials realized the French army, both as a result of the failed Nivelle Offensive and general war weariness, was in bad shape, though there is no evidence Washington was aware of any instances of mutiny. See House Diary, April 30, 1917; Conversation between Wilson and Marshal Joseph Joffre, May 2, 1917, in *PWW*: 42; 170, 184-187. For an excellent discussion of the French military mission to the United States and its impact on American policy, see Robert B. Bruce, "America Embraces France: Marshal Joseph Joffre and the French Military Mission to the United States, April-May 1917," *Journal of Military History*, vol. 66, no. 2 (2002): 407-441.

⁷⁹ "Memorandum on Germany's Strength in 1917," Secret, April 28, 1917, House Papers, Box 184, Folder 1/180, YULMD, New Haven, CT.

⁸⁰ House to Wilson, March 19, 1917, in *PWW*: 41; 428-429. Though one could certainly argue that House's suggestion that the United States serve as an "arsenal for democracy" for the Allies could be construed as a form of support for an offshore balancing strategy, such an approach would not have differed markedly from the course the United States had been pursuing since the war's initial stages, as the Americans had been providing Britain and France with vital war materiel and financial loans throughout the conflict.

military assistance, it is clear American officials had not recognized the reality of the situation while considering whether or not to intervene.

Great Britain

Mearsheimer's final claim regarding the military balance in Europe at the time of US intervention is that the United Kingdom, though not in as bad of shape as Russia or France, was "in desperate straits by April 1917" due to Germany's adoption of an unrestricted submarine campaign, which raised the prospect of a British surrender in only a few months.⁸¹ Again, this assessment appears accurate, as by April 1917 Germany's submarines were taking a severe toll on British shipping and creating the potentiality that London might not be able to import enough supplies to outfit its armed forces and provide for its civilian population.⁸² Again, however, what matters here is not what the reality of the British situation was, but how Washington perceived it.

Mearsheimer once again does find some empirical support for his theory. Indeed, there can be no doubt that American military officials, at least since late 1916, were expressing concern about the danger Berlin's submarines posed to England's geopolitical position. On December 4 Lassiter cabled that the feeling in England was "one of discouragement... on account of the activity of the German submarines and the real fear of a food famine." He added, "Of course, if this keeps up England's food supply is seriously threatened; and there seems to be no effective way of dealing with these large submarines...."

⁸¹ Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 254.

⁸² See Paul G. Halpern, *A Naval History of World War I* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1994); Arthur J. Marder, *From the Dreadnought to the Scapa Flow: The Royal Navy in the Fisher Era, 1904-1919, Volume 4, 1917* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969); Henry Newbolt, *History of the Great War: Naval Operations, Volume 4* (London: Longmans, Green and Company, 1928); Keegan, *The First World War*, 379-380; Holger H. Herwig and David F. Trask, "The Failure of Imperial Germany's Undersea Offensive Against World Shipping, February 1917-October 1918," *The Historian*, vol. 32, no. 4 (1971): 611-636; John Jellicoe, *The Crisis of the Naval War* (London: Cassell and Company, 1920); Elting E. Morison, *Admiral Sims and the Modern American Navy* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1942), chapter 19; "Admiral William S. Sims' Personal File, Letter to Lieutenant Commander J.K. Taussig, U.S.N.," Sent from US Embassy, London, Confidential, April 29, 1917, Papers of William S. Sims, Box 22, April 1917 Folder, LOCMD, Washington, D.C.; "Progress of the War," Prepared for the Office of the Chief of Staff of the War College Division, 8690-573, No. 4,440, Sent April 13, 1917, Received April 26, 1917, in *CWCD*, RG 165, M1024, Roll 217, NA, College Park, MD; Lassiter to the Office of the Chief of Staff of the War College Division, "Progress of the War," 8690-580, No. 4,482, Sent April 26, 1917, Received May 11, 1917, in *CWCD*, RG 165, M1024, Roll 217, NA, College Park, MD. Britain was also in an untenable financial situation by this point in the war. See Kathleen Burk, *Britain, America and the Sinews of War, 1914-1918* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1985), chapter 5.

Certainly Great Britain appears to have lost the mastery of the seas for the time being, in that she cannot protect her commerce.”⁸³ Likewise, on December 23 Wiseman informed the Foreign Office that Wilson now believed “that [the] Allies greatly underrate [the] long-distance submarine danger.”⁸⁴ Similarly, after receiving a disturbing report from an acquaintance in London earlier in the month, House told the president on December 20 that “the submarine is a serious menace to [London]. . . .”⁸⁵ Following Germany’s declaration of unrestricted submarine warfare, Wilson evidently grew slightly more disturbed, as by February 6 the idea that U-boat warfare might prove successful for Germany had “somewhat impressed [him]. . . .”⁸⁶ A March 12 report on the progress of the war probably added to the White House’s fears, as it claimed London possessed “less than 20 days’ supply of cereals on hand,” and noted that Great Britain would probably have to begin rationing in the near future.⁸⁷ Clearly, then, it cannot be denied that Britain’s naval problems were on the minds of top policymakers in Washington during the winter of 1916-1917.

Once again, however, the great bulk of the evidence indicates Washington was not concerned with the possibility of Great Britain being knocked out of the war. On December 29 Lassiter issued another report which stated that despite the troubles Germany’s submarines were causing, there did not appear to be widespread alarm in London. The military attaché claimed the “general feeling” in the United Kingdom was “more optimistic” than he had previously stated, and pointed out that “the aggressive attitude” of the new government of Prime Minister David Lloyd George appeared to have

⁸³ Lassiter to the Office of the Chief of Staff of the War College Division, “Present Status of the War,” 8690-519, No. 4,076, Sent Dec. 4, 1916, Received Dec. 19, 1916, in *CWCD*, RG 165, M1024, Roll 217, NA, College Park, MD.

⁸⁴ Cable 469 from Wiseman to British Foreign Office, December 23, 1916, Wiseman Papers, Box 4, Folder 91, YULMD, New Haven, CT.

⁸⁵ House to Wilson, December 20, 1916, in *PWW*: 40; 293; William Hepburn Buckler to House, enclosed for Wilson, Dec. 7, 1916, in *PWW*: 40; 187. See also House Diary, Jan. 2, 1917, House Papers, Box 301, Folder 2, 1-3, YULMD, New Haven, CT.

⁸⁶ Cable 539 from Wiseman to British Foreign Office, Feb. 6, 1917, Wiseman Papers, Box 4, Folder 91, YULMD, New Haven, CT.

⁸⁷ “Progress of the War,” Prepared for the War College Division, 8690-554, No. 4,346, March 12, 1917, in *CWCD*, RG 165, M1024, Roll 217, NA, College Park, MD.

reinvigorated Britain's fighting spirit.⁸⁸ In addition, Lassiter pointed out, it appeared that London's military was gaining momentum. "[W]hile the future is by no means bright," the cable stated, "it may be said that, so far as war on land is concerned, England's war power is steadily increasing and that her most formidable effort is still to come." Though Lassiter acknowledged that shipping losses continued to be a concern, he argued that there was "no reason as yet why people who have money to buy should go hungry."⁸⁹ As for House, he appears by mid-January to have somewhat altered his views regarding London's position, writing in his diary on January 15 that of the active European belligerents only Great Britain had "taken a firm grip and shut her eyes to all outside influence and proposals."⁹⁰ The president's closest adviser on foreign policy added that he "thought the Allies would have plenty of time to find out whether their spring and summer offensive would be effective," implying that he did not foresee the Entente's imminent collapse.⁹¹ Chief of Naval Operations William S. Benson also seemed relatively unconcerned; rather than try to convince Wilson of the necessity of intervening to prevent London's defeat, he merely stated that he hoped the United States would remain out of the war, as he "had the same abhorrence of becoming enlisted with either side of the combatants...."⁹²

There is also indirect evidence that the president did not view England's condition with alarm at this stage, as his thoughts on the issue of revising the rules under which U-boats were forced to operate

⁸⁸ The American Ambassador to Great Britain William Hines Page echoed these sentiments, writing on December 30 that "the new Government seems to promise well—very well. There's a snap to it that the old Government lacked." As a result, Page surmised, "the Germans [would] give in within a year—perhaps within half-a-year," as their "invincibility" legend [was] fading out, between guns and hunger." These comments cannot be considered particularly valuable, however, as it is clear Page had completely lost his influence within the administration by this time. See Ambassador Walter Hinges Page to Wilson, Dec. 30, 1916, in *PWW*: 40; 366-368; Wilson to House, Aug. 21, 1915, in *PWW*: 33; 272; House Diary, Dec. 14, 1916, in *PWW*: 40; 240; W.B. Fowler, *British-American Relations, 1917-1918: The Role of Sir William Wiseman* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969), 9-10.

⁸⁹ Lassiter to the Office of the Chief of Staff of the War College Division, "Notes on the Progress of the War, as affecting England," 8690-532, No. 4,147, Sent Dec. 29, 1916, Received Jan. 11, 1917, in *CWCD*, RG 165, M1024, Roll 217, NA, College Park, MD. See also Reverend D. Anderson Report prepared for Wilson, Dec. 1, 1916, in *PWW*: 40; 125-127.

⁹⁰ House Diary, Jan. 15, 1917, House Papers, Box 301, Folder 2, 25, YULMD, New Haven, CT.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 21-22.

⁹² As quoted in David F. Trask, *Captains & Cabinets: Anglo-American Naval Relations, 1917-1918* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1972), 44. See also Morison, *Admiral Sims and the Modern American Navy*, 338. In the days following the German resumption of U-boat warfare Benson was much more concerned about the effect the move would have on American merchant shipping. See Admiral William S. Benson to Commodore J.B. Collins, Feb. 13, 1917, Papers of William S. Benson, Box 2, Feb. 8-13, 1917 Folder, LOCMD, Washington, D.C.

demonstrate. On January 31, the day before the Germans officially announced their unrestricted submarine campaign, Wilson wrote to Lansing that it might be wise for Washington to adjust its policy on requiring submarines to surface before firing on armed merchantmen. The president noted that the British were “going beyond the spirit, at any rate, of the principles hitherto settled in regard to this matter” and admitted that “the method in which their ship captains are instructed to use their guns has in many instances gone beyond what could legitimately be called defense.” Wilson concluded the note by asking the secretary of state whether or not it was unreasonable for the United States to continue with such a policy, and if an adjustment was in order.⁹³ The president clearly did not think the British were in dire straits, then, as he almost certainly would not have been considering whether or not to strip London of its most effective retaliatory weapon to the submarine if he truly believed the United Kingdom was struggling to import items necessary to its continued prosecution of the war.

The most compelling evidence of the fact that the United States was largely unaware of the extent of England’s plight, however, are the recollections of British Admiral John Jellicoe and Admiral William S. Sims, the latter of whom led the US naval mission to Britain after the American declaration of war. Throughout February the American and British press had reported nothing which would indicate that London was in real danger of being coerced out of the war.⁹⁴ To the contrary, within weeks of Germany’s resumption of submarine warfare *The New York Times* reported Berlin’s U-boat offensive did not represent a significant threat to US shipping, and pointed to Britain’s perceived success in dealing with Germany’s naval policies as evidence.⁹⁵ In fact, as shall be discussed below, Berlin’s adoption of the unrestricted submarine campaign was actually viewed as a sign of weakness for the Central Powers. Public perception in the United States of the situation in Britain, therefore, was actually quite positive.

⁹³ Wilson to Lansing, Jan. 31, 1917, in *PWW*: 41; 581-582.

⁹⁴ See “Germans Desperate says Lloyd George,” *New York Times*, Feb. 4, 1917, 17; “The Submarine Campaign,” *The Times*, Feb. 8, 1917, 9. Even those articles which noted that the submarine campaign was beginning to take a toll on British imports did not express considerable alarm over the situation. See “The Navy and Its Work,” *The Times*, Feb. 22, 1917, 7; “Grappling With the Submarine,” *The Times*, Feb. 2, 1917, 6.

⁹⁵ “Submarines Futile in Stopping Trade,” *New York Times*, Feb. 18, 1917, E8.

Apparently, these reports had a major impact on how US naval officials believed London was dealing with the U-boat threat, as is demonstrated in Sims's memoir. After arriving in Britain only a few days after Congress declared war on April 6, the admiral soon realized that the views of American naval experts were completely misinformed. According to Sims's account, neither he nor the American naval establishment recognized how dire the situation was, prior to his trip to England:

Before arriving in England I myself had not known the gravity of the situation. I had followed the war from the beginning with the greatest interest; I had read practically everything printed about it in the American and foreign press, and I had had access to such official information as was available on our side of the Atlantic. The result was that, when I sailed for England in March, I felt little fear about the outcome. All the fundamental facts in the case made it appear impossible that the Germans could win the war. Sea power apparently rested practically unchallenged in the hands of the Allies; and that in itself, according to the unvarying lessons of history, was an absolute assurance of ultimate victory. The statistics of shipping losses had been regularly printed in the American press, and, while such wanton destruction of life and property seemed appalling, there was apparently nothing in these figures that was likely to make any material change in the result. Indeed it appeared to be altogether probable that the war would end before the United States could exert any material influence upon the outcome.⁹⁶

Sims later wrote that his "conclusions were shared by most American naval officers whom I knew, students of warfare, who, like myself, had the utmost respect for the British fleet and believed that it had the naval situation well in hand." After only a short time in London, however, Sims realized that the Americans' "confidence in the defeat of the Germans rested upon a misapprehension." Indeed, he notes, "The Germans, it now appeared, were not losing the war—they were winning it." After the British Admiralty disclosed to him the actual figures of their shipping losses, which had not been released to the general public, Sims recollects, "It is expressing it mildly to say that I was surprised by this disclosure. I was fairly astounded; for I had never imagined anything so terrible."⁹⁷

So shocked was Sims by the reality of Britain's shipping situation that he delayed sending the information to Washington, as he was unable to initially overturn his original beliefs. Indeed, in his "First Detailed Report on the Allied Naval Situation," which he sent to Secretary of the Navy Josephus Daniels on April 19, the admiral wrote that he had waited four days to alert the Wilson Administration of the

⁹⁶ William S. Sims, *The Victory at Sea* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1984), 5-6.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 6-7, 9. Sims claims that the British figures indicated their losses were between three and four times as much as what was being released to the press, something the admiral referred to as an "astounding fact." Indeed, this new information convinced him that if something was not done to check the submarine threat, "the unconditional surrender of the British Empire would inevitably take place within a few months."

crisis, as he was “somewhat deterred by a natural reluctance to alter so radically my preconceived views and opinions as to the situation.”⁹⁸ As a result, when Sims informed Daniels that Britain’s circumstances were “critically serious and daily growing worse,” and that it was of the “utmost urgency that [the United States] give maximum assistance immediately” to the British, Washington must have been stunned.⁹⁹ Sims reported the reason the Americans had been so misinformed was that the British had intentionally censored the actual details of the submarine campaign. After speaking with Jellicoe, Sims realized the “stories” British policymakers had been giving the press “had been circulated merely for the purpose of depreciating enemy morale.” Indeed, Sims continued, “I even found that members of the government, all of whom should have been better informed, and also British naval officers, believed that many captured German submarines had been carefully stowed away at the Portsmouth and Plymouth navy yards.”¹⁰⁰ Hence, Sims wrote Daniels on April 14, “The submarine issue is very much more serious than the people realize in America.... The reports of our press are greatly in error. Recent reports circulated concerning surrenders are simply to depreciate enemy morale and results are [not] very satisfactory....”¹⁰¹ The Americans, then, clearly did not know the reality of the situation. Indeed, the views of one cabinet member, who informed a correspondent for *The New York World* on May 5 that the United States had only realized “within ten days that... the end of the war will be one of defeat unless we build [ships] twice as fast as we proposed to build [previously]” due to the submarine danger, make Sims’s analysis seem indisputable.¹⁰²

If this were not proof enough, Jellicoe confirms Sims’s recollections in his own memoir. The admiral of the fleet opens the first chapter of his book by saying that the British public was “generally...

⁹⁸ Sims to Daniels, “Subject: Confirmation and Elaboration of Recent Cablegrams Concerning War Situation and Recommendations for U.S. Naval Cooperation,” Sent from London, April 19, 1917, Papers of Josephus Daniels, Box 100, LOCMD, Washington, D.C. A copy of the dispatch is also included in Sims’s memoir. See Sims, *The Victory at Sea*, 378.

⁹⁹ Daniels to Wilson with Enclosure from Sims, April 21, 1917, in *PWW*: 42; 121.

¹⁰⁰ Sims, *The Victory at Sea*, 10. The British had actually had tremendous difficulty in targeting German submarines, despite their attempts to use their surface fleet offensively against U-boats.

¹⁰¹ Telegram from Sims to Daniels, Sent via the State Department, April 14, 1917, Sims Papers, Box 53, Correspondence with Josephus Daniels, LOCMD, Washington, D.C.; Sims, *The Victory at Sea*, 374.

¹⁰² Lane and Wall, eds., *The Letters of Franklin K. Lane*, 253. For a summary of what Sims reported back to Washington in April 1917, see Morison, *Admiral Sims and the Modern American Navy*, 341-347.

unconscious of the extreme gravity of the situation,” noting that it would have been impossible to disclose Britain’s actual shipping losses “without benefiting the enemy.”¹⁰³ If people in the United Kingdom had no idea of the reality, it would only seem logical, as Jellicoe points out, that the Americans could not have either, given the “great difficulty... experienced by those far removed from the theatre of war in understanding the conditions in the war zone.”¹⁰⁴ More importantly, Jellicoe notes that during his first meeting with Admiral Sims the latter informed him, “that neither he nor anyone else in the United States had realized that the situation was so serious. This was, of course, largely due to the necessity which we were under of not publishing facts which would encourage the enemy or unduly depress our own people.” Jellicoe adds, “[Sims] informed me that an idea was prevalent in the United States that the [morale] of the German submarine crews had been completely broken by their losses in submarines. This impression was the successful result of certain actions on our part taken with intent to discourage the enemy....”¹⁰⁵ Not only does Sims’s memoir demonstrate beyond a shadow of a doubt that the Americans did not know the true gravity of the situation, then, but Jellicoe’s own notes bear the former out. As a result, it is rather unsurprising that, as Trask observes, most American naval planning in February and March 1917 was devoted to continental defense rather than to offensive operations in European waters, reflecting the Wilson Administration’s “general lack of accurate information about the true nature and extent of the submarine emergency and the measures required to cope with it.”¹⁰⁶ Thus, it seems safe to say that Sims’s claim that it “was not until the spring of 1917 that [the United States] really awoke to the actual situation... that Britain did *not* control the seas,” is accurate.¹⁰⁷

The Central Powers

¹⁰³ Jellicoe, *The Crisis of the Naval War*, 1.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 159. This view seems especially convincing since, unlike at later points in history, the Americans and British did not discuss combined operations prior to US intervention. As Trask points out, “Strict American neutrality precluded detailed Anglo-American discussions of joint naval strategy before the declaration of war.” See Trask, *Captains & Cabinets*, 52-53.

¹⁰⁵ Jellicoe, *The Crisis of the Naval War*, 158-159.

¹⁰⁶ Trask, *Captains & Cabinets*, 49.

¹⁰⁷ Sims, *The Victory at Sea*, 21 (emphasis in original).

Although Mearsheimer does not address what the United States thought about the military strength of the Central Powers in his discussion of America's entry into the war, it is necessary to analyze how Washington viewed the situations of Austria-Hungary and Germany in order to get a more complete picture of how American officials viewed the overall balance of power in Europe when the decision to intervene was made.¹⁰⁸ Since Mearsheimer's argument is based on the premise that the Wilson Administration chose to enter the conflict because of power political factors, it is hardly fair to focus solely on the Allied side without examining what the Americans believed about Vienna and Berlin. A brief analysis of what Washington thought about the Central Powers, therefore, is in order.

Regarding Austria-Hungary, it is overwhelmingly clear Washington believed the empire to be so weak militarily that it might be possible to convince Vienna to sign a separate peace with the Allies. Indeed, by early 1917 the American Embassy in Vienna went so far as to report, "It cannot be denied that Austria-Hungary is in a desperate situation."¹⁰⁹ As for Germany, there is ample evidence the Wilson Administration believed it was suffering from the war as well. While the Americans did not necessarily believe the Germans were close to defeat, with individuals such as House arguing that Berlin's army would have sufficient manpower and supplies to "go through" in 1917, neither did they think the Kaiser's forces were close to a breakthrough.¹¹⁰ To the contrary, if anything Washington appears to have thought Germany was worse off than its enemies, due to domestic shortages and general weariness from the war

¹⁰⁸ Since Mearsheimer's account is much more concerned with Germany, and because he makes no specific claims about Washington's fears of Austro-Hungarian power in Europe, I have chosen to limit my analysis of US perceptions of Austria-Hungary's situation to a minimum.

¹⁰⁹ Ambassador to Austria-Hungary Frederic C. Penfield to Lansing, enclosed to Wilson, Feb. 28, 1917, in *PWW*: 41; 300-301. For the American views of Austria-Hungary's situation during the period from the summer of 1916 to the US declaration of war, which make clear the Americans did not consider Vienna a major factor militarily, as well as evidence that the United States was trying to force a separate peace with Vienna, see *FRUS, Supplement 1 on the World War, 1917*, 40-41, 64-65; House to Wilson, February 8, 1917, House Papers, Box 121, Folder 4273, YULMD, New Haven, CT; Penfield to House, June 24, 1916, House Papers, Box 88, Folder 3064, YULMD, New Haven, CT; Penfield to Wilson, March 13, 1917, in *PWW*: 41; 398-399; Lansing to Wilson, March 17, 1917, in *PWW*: 41; 421; "Austria-Hungary at the End of Thirty Months of War," Impartial Report Prepared by Ambassador Frederic Courtland Penfield, January 28, 1917, Vienna, House Papers, Box 178, Folder 1/6, YULMD, New Haven, CT; Cable CX 658 from Wiseman to British Foreign Office, April 4, 1917, Wiseman Papers, Box 4, Folder 92, YULMD, New Haven, CT; "Is Austria-Hungary Weakening," *Los Angeles Times*, Jan. 2, 1917, I14.

¹¹⁰ House Diary, Jan. 4, 1917, House Papers, Box 301, Folder 2, 9-10, YULMD, New Haven, CT. See also Aide to the American Embassy in Berlin Joseph Grew to House, Dec. 3, 1916, House Papers, Box 52, Folder 1655, YULMD, New Haven, CT.

effort. Thus, in mid-January the American Embassy claimed the Germans' situation was so desperate that even if they were "victorious in a military sense, [they] would probably be so far exhausted as to render a victory barren of results." Hence, one US diplomatic official in Berlin argued, Germany would be forced "to make great sacrifices at the present time in order to try to secure a peace.... The [morale] of the masses is low."¹¹¹ Likewise, on January 18 House wrote to Wilson that the Germans were surely concerned about the military situation, saying, "There can be no question that Germany is badly pinched at present and that her rulers are greatly alarmed."¹¹²

While one might expect American views to have changed after the Germans recommenced with submarine warfare on February 1, this does not appear to have been the case. In fact, Washington actually viewed the German resumption of U-boat attacks as a sign that Berlin was weakening militarily, as American officials considered the new policy a somewhat desperate act to turn the tide of the war. Thus, on February 10, House informed Wilson that, in his opinion, Germany had adopted the unrestricted submarine campaign because of domestic pressure due to internal suffering on account of a lack of food. Though he noted it would be necessary for the United States to maintain a "united front" and for the British to "hold down the submarine warfare to a minimum," House noted that if the campaign failed, the Germans would "go to pieces before long," and that there would "be general collapse."¹¹³ Washington,

¹¹¹ Grew to Lansing, Dec. 21, 1916, sent to Wilson, January 10, 1917, in *PWW*: 41; 435-436. Reports about Germany's domestic problems, especially the government's inability to feed and supply its civilian population, were by this time nothing new in Washington. See Gerard to Lansing, April 4, 1916, in *PWW*: 36; 414; Grew to Lansing, sent to Wilson, Dec. 4, 1916, in *PWW*: 40; 141-146; Grew to House, sent to Wilson, Dec. 5, 1916, in *PWW*: 40; 160-161; Cable 469 from Wiseman to British Foreign Office, Dec. 23, 1916, Wiseman Papers, Box 4, Folder 91, YULMD, New Haven, CT.

¹¹² House to Wilson, Jan. 18, 1917, in *PWW*: 40; 517.

¹¹³ House to Wilson, February 10, 1917, House Papers, Box 121, Folder 4273, YULMD, New Haven, CT. For other indications that the Americans viewed the resumption of submarine warfare as a sign of German weakness, see House to Wilson, Feb. 3, 1917, House Papers, Box 121, Folder 4273, YULMD, New Haven, CT; Gerard to Lansing, Jan. 31, 1917, in *FRUS, Supplement 1 on the World War, 1917*, 103-104. For the reactions of various newspapers in the United States and Great Britain to the resumption of submarine warfare, which were almost unanimous in describing the policy as an act of German desperation, see "Germany Wars Against the World," *New York Times*, Feb. 1, 1917, 10; "Triumph for Von Tirpitz," *New York Times*, Feb. 1, 1917, 2; By a Military Expert, "The Maximum Effort," *The Times*, Feb. 16, 1917, 5; "Food Very Short, Berlin Now Admits," *New York Times*, Feb. 4, 1917, 17; "Sees War Entering on Its Final Stage," *New York Times*, Feb. 18, 1917, 5; "The Savagery of Despair," *The Times*, Feb. 2, 1917, 7.

then, agreed with the assessment that, as several newspapers put it, the resumption of submarine warfare represented Berlin's "last card."¹¹⁴

More importantly, however, are the views of American military officials from early March, which indicate, quite explicitly, that the United States did not believe the Germans would be able to break through the Allied lines at any point in the near future. For example, Joseph E. Kuhn, who had served as the American military attaché to Berlin prior to the severance of diplomatic relations on February 3, stated publicly on March 10 that the German people were "on the edge of starvation," adding, "Germany is prepared to entertain terms of peace and to go a long way to get them." Given the deadlock in Europe, Kuhn observed, it seemed unlikely "from a purely military standpoint" that an end to the war could "be reached in the immediate future."¹¹⁵ Even more indicative of the American position are the thoughts of Army Chief of Staff Scott, who argued that the military balance in Europe was not in jeopardy. To the contrary, though still frustrated with the failure of the government to adequately prepare the country for war, Scott noted on March 12 that the United States would have plenty of time to remedy the situation if it did enter the war, because "France and England are holding Germany by the ears, and she can not get at us," meaning the Americans "would have a year or more to get ready."¹¹⁶ Thus, the evidence suggests that policymakers in Washington thought the Central Powers were having their own troubles and that the Wilson Administration did not believe they were on the verge of a total victory in Europe.

Conclusion

What is to be made of Mearsheimer's explanation of the causes of American intervention in World War I? Although one could certainly make a strong case that the Allies were close to military defeat in the spring of 1917, the key point that emerges from the foregoing analysis is that the United States simply did

¹¹⁴ By a Military Expert, "Ruthless Submarine War Germany's Last Card?" *New York Times*, Feb. 4, 1917, X5; D. Thomas Curtin, "Germany's Last Card," *The Times*, Feb. 3, 1917, 7.

¹¹⁵ "Kuhn Says Germany is Near Starvation," *New York Times*, March 11, 1917, 2.

¹¹⁶ Scott to General Eben Swift, Jr., March 12, 1917, Scott Papers, Box 28, March 1917 Folder, LOCMD, Washington, D.C. Scott would later write that France and Britain "were losing manpower at a fearful rate" in the spring of 1917 and referred to this stage of the war as a "dangerous period," but he did so in the context of discussing American views of the situation after the United States had already entered the war. See Scott, *Some Memories of a Soldier*, 552, 562.

not comprehend this reality. To be sure, the Wilson Administration believed there were some problems on the Entente side, but American officials do not appear to have been overly concerned about the situation.¹¹⁷ Moreover, though Mearsheimer does not address what the United States thought about the condition of the Central Powers, it is clear the Americans believed they were in bad, maybe even worse, shape than the Allies.

It would appear, then, that Mearsheimer's offshore balancing theory lacks robust empirical support. While he argues the United States believed the Russians, French, and British were all close to military defeat in the spring of 1917, none of these claims appear justified. Although, as Secretary of the Interior Franklin K. Lane wrote on May 5, it is true the Americans "did not come in a minute too soon" and that "England and France... were gone if [the United States] had not come in," this was not recognized at the time the decision for war was made.¹¹⁸ To the contrary, US officials evinced little concern about Russia's fate during the lead-up to war and actually appear to have been quite optimistic about the implications of the March 12 revolution. Likewise, there is little evidence the administration feared France's fall at this time, as most reports of the situation on the Western Front indicated the Germans were checked and that France and Britain would be able to hold. Moreover, though the state of affairs in the United Kingdom was quite critical, it is clear Washington was largely unaware of this reality, due to Britain's tight censorship of the actual shipping loss figures. Finally, though Mearsheimer does not discuss US perceptions of the military health of the Central Powers, Washington also thought Germany and Austria-Hungary were arguably worse off than the Allies were. Thus, the prospect of the Entente Powers' imminent collapse cannot be considered a plausible explanation for America's entry into the First World War in the spring of 1917. Indeed, the case of the Wilson Administration's decision for war seems to represent a "false positive" in support of realist theory; although the timing of the

¹¹⁷ In some ways this is understandable. Given that the Allies were incredibly demanding with the peace terms they outlined for the Americans in early January 1917, one cannot necessarily blame Washington for assuming the Entente was not in any serious trouble. Indeed, the Wilson Administration must have thought the Allies were actually in decent shape, as it seems logical that the latter would have otherwise been far less stringent in their demands. I am indebted to Marc Trachtenberg for calling my attention to this point. For the text of the Allied peace terms, see *FRUS, Supplement 1 on the World War, 1917*, 6-9.

¹¹⁸ Lane and Wall, eds., *The Letters of Franklin K. Lane*, 252.

intervention of the United States in the war appears to offer strong empirical backing for the offshore balancing thesis, careful process tracing and analysis of the relevant archival material suggest that balance of power considerations were not what drove Washington to enter the conflict in the spring of 1917.¹¹⁹

What, then, were the causes of American intervention in the First World War? Although a thorough response to this question is well beyond the scope of this paper, a few brief remarks on this issue may be helpful in highlighting several of the shortcomings in realist theory, as well as in understanding cases in which states go to war for purposes not having to do with balance of power politics. Indeed, only by performing this sort of exercise can we hope to improve our general understanding of international relations.

In my view, two key factors, Germany's decision to commence with a policy of unrestricted submarine warfare and Wilson's desire to acquire a seat for the United States at the postwar peace conference in order to be able to reform the structure of the international system, were ultimately what brought the Americans into the war on the side of the Allies. The first of these claims is somewhat more demonstrable than the second. Indeed, the fact that the American decision to intervene came shortly after Berlin's announcement that it would no longer abide by the rules of "visit and search" while conducting submarine operations against neutral shipping, a policy which Washington had protested in the past and had repeatedly warned would lead to US entry into the conflict, strongly suggests that the resumption of U-boat warfare is what caused Wilson to abandon neutrality. Even Lansing, who perhaps more than any other top American official desired a declaration of war against Germany due to concerns about the balance of power, indicates in his memoir that were it not for Berlin's decision to unleash its U-boats, the United States may have never become involved in the conflict:

I have wondered sometimes what would have been the result if [German Ambassador Count Johann Heinrich] von Bernstorff's advice had prevailed with his government and if submarine warfare had been abandoned.... An American today, reviewing the two years preceding the declaration of war by Congress in April, 1917, may feel a chill of fear as he sees how the mere change of policy at Berlin in regard to submarine warfare, a change that nearly took place, might have reversed the whole course of events, and how that change did not take place because those

¹¹⁹ I would like to thank the students in UCLA's Fall 2011 Political Science 239 dissertation seminar for their suggestion of the term "false positive."

then in control of the German Government turned a deaf ear to the wise counsel of the German Ambassador at Washington. The Allied Powers may thank German stupidity and stubbornness for saving the situation. Submarine warfare may have been a blessing in disguise.¹²⁰

It is important to note, however, that it was not mainly Germany's violations of American neutral rights which led to the intervention of the United States, but rather the affront to US prestige which Berlin's policy represented. Indeed, having confronted Germany on this issue a number of times over the course of the previous two years, Wilson felt he could not afford to back down without compromising his own dignity or the honor and international credibility of the United States, especially since American public opinion now favored war.¹²¹ As Ernest May observes, the submarine issue had "become the symbol of Wilson's willingness to stand up for the rule of law, for international justice, and, as he termed it, for the rights of humanity. If he [had] retreated he would, in effect, [have proved] America incapable of exercising influence with her population, resources, and ideals."¹²² When coupled with the effects of the infamous Zimmerman telegram, which further engaged Washington's prestige, Wilson, in his mind, was left with no choice.¹²³ Thus, due to the threat it posed to the national honor and reputation of the United States, submarine warfare led directly to the March 20 decision for war.

A less visible motivation for American intervention was Wilson's belief that only by involving the United States in the war could he hope to achieve his dreams of restructuring international relations

¹²⁰ Lansing, *War Memoirs of Robert Lansing*, 25, 41, 53. The secretary of state also claims that the resumption of submarine warfare was "one of the chief, if not the chief, ground for the United States declaring a state of war with the Imperial Government of Germany." The president, for his part, clearly believed the resumption of U-boat attacks was what ultimately undermined American-German relations, telling House in mid-February that Berlin would have to "renew and carry out the pledge of last April [to not target US merchant ships without abiding by the rules of international law] if they want to talk to us now,—or else propose peace on terms they know we can act upon." See Wilson to House, Feb. 12, 1917, House Papers, Box 121, Folder 4273, YULMD, New Haven, CT.

¹²¹ For theoretical works which deal with the issue of whether backing down in crises undermines a state's credibility, see Daryl G. Press, *Calculating Credibility: How Leaders Assess Military Threats* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005); Jonathan Mercer, *Reputation and International Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996). On the concept of prestige, see Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 30-33. Gilpin defines prestige as a "reputation for power, and military power in particular." In this case, however, I use the term to refer to a country's honor and credibility.

¹²² May, *The World War and American Isolation, 1914-1917*, 427. See also Lansing to Wilson, Jan. 31, 1917, in *Lansing Papers*, 584; Lansing to Wilson, Feb. 2, 1917, in *Lansing Papers*, 591-592; Lansing to Wilson with Enclosure, Feb. 2, 1917, in *PWW*: 41; 96-99. Wiseman also noted the Americans' determination to defend their honor, telling Spring-Rice, "If the United States goes to war with Germany—which she probably will—it will be to uphold American rights and assert her dignity as a nation." See Wiseman to Spring-Rice, March 6, 1917, in *PWW*: 41; 348.

¹²³ On the effects of the Zimmerman telegram on public opinion in the United States, see Barbara Tuchman, *The Zimmerman Telegram* (London: Constable, 1958).

and ending balance of power of power politics once and for all. As both a moralist and idealist, the president had tried unsuccessfully throughout the conflict to mediate between the two sides in order to transform the existing world order, thereby ending the violent cycles it sometimes produced. Following the breakdown in American-German relations in early February 1917, however, Wilson finally abandoned all hope for that approach and decided that only by defeating Berlin militarily could he pursue his goal of establishing a new world order. Indeed, not only had American officials claimed throughout the war that democracies were inherently more peaceful than other types of regimes, leading them to distrust Germany's geopolitical objectives and to desire domestic political reform for that country, but Wilson also firmly believed that without restructuring the international system it would not be possible to do away with balance of power politics, which he so despised.¹²⁴ As Link points out, "the compelling reason for Wilson's decision to accept belligerency was his conviction that only by going to war could he win the goals for which he had been working since August 1914—a reasonable peace settlement and the reconstruction of the world order.... To wage war in order to make peace—that was Wilson's intention."¹²⁵ To be sure, America's entry into the conflict ultimately benefited the security interests of the United States as well, but it was the president's dedication to reforming the international system, as well as the threat to Washington's domestic and international prestige, which ultimately led to the American declaration of war.¹²⁶

Thus, although these arguments are admittedly cursory and a more thorough analysis of the true causes of US entry into the First World War would require many more pages, realistic considerations do not seem to have played a significant role in Wilson's decision to intervene. While there can be no doubt that self-interest overlapped nicely with the president's moral beliefs and his desire to uphold the nation's honor and international credibility, as well as his standing with the American public, without the German resumption of submarine warfare in early February it is highly unlikely that he would have brought the

¹²⁴ Ironically, a structural realist would agree with this assessment.

¹²⁵ Link, *Woodrow Wilson: Revolution, War, and Peace*, 71. See also Kennedy, *The Will to Believe*, 130.

¹²⁶ For an excellent bibliographical summary of the literature debating the relative influence of power political considerations versus moral, reputational, and idealistic concerns on Wilson's decision to intervene, see Smith, "National Interest and American Intervention, 1917."

United States into the war. It was not primarily systemic forces relating to the balance of power, therefore, which led to the intervention of the United States.

What do these findings suggest about Mearsheimer's theory of offensive realism? For starters, it appears that statecraft, individuals, and variables at the unit level play a larger role in world politics than his structural theory allows. Indeed, the fact that Wilson's moralism, dedication to restructuring international relations, and his need to maintain his standing with the American public played arguably a larger role than the international security environment did in bringing about the American declaration of war demonstrates that first and second image models can be more convincing than neorealist theory suggests.¹²⁷ In addition, the president's belief that Germany's U-boat campaign jeopardized American prestige, arguably the principal factor motivating the March 20 decision, shows that where power political concerns did matter in bringing the United States into the war, they were largely unrelated to Mearsheimer's offshore balancing argument. Hence, offensive realism does not appear to adequately address states' concerns with maintaining honor and minimizing reputational costs.

This analysis, however, is not meant as a sweeping criticism of Mearsheimer's entire theory of international politics. As he himself notes, there are limits to what models like offensive realism can explain. Indeed, since Mearsheimer's theory "tends to treat states like black boxes or billiard balls," it will not have as much power when it encounters cases in which systemic pressures are not decisive in influencing the actions of states. As Mearsheimer observes, such factors "occasionally dominate a state's decision-making process; under these circumstances, offensive realism is not going to perform as well." Indeed, "there is a price to pay for simplifying reality."¹²⁸ Thus, the case of American intervention in the First World War appears to be an instance in which the limits of structural realism are highly visible. Regardless of what the true balance of power was in Europe in early 1917, from Washington's perspective there did not appear to be any reason to think Germany was on the verge of achieving a

¹²⁷ On the three "images" of international relations, see Kenneth N. Waltz, *Man, the State, and War: A Theoretical Analysis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1954). On how individual personalities can influence foreign policy, see Daniel L. Byman and Kenneth M. Pollack, "Let Us Now Praise Great Men: Bringing the Statesman Back In," *International Security*, vol. 25, no. 4 (2001): 107-146.

¹²⁸ Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 11.

position of regional hegemony on the continent. To put it in somewhat different terms, there was a world of difference between Woodrow Wilson and Franklin Roosevelt, and 1917 was not 1941.¹²⁹

¹²⁹ This comparison is taken from Roberts, "The Anglo-American Theme," 363.