WWI began in August, 1914, and was the most terrifying and brutal conflict the world had ever seen. No American interest was at stake, and American security was not threatened. As the war progressed and degenerated into a hopeless quagmire, Americans counted their blessings that their sons had been spared the senseless fate of European men, hundreds of thousands of whom were being sacrificed in battles that moved the front only a matter of yards. Injuries were unspeakable. It was this war, for instance, that introduced the term “basket case” into our vocabulary; it referred to a quadruple amputee. No American in his right mind was eager to involve his country in such slaughter.

In February 1917, Wilson greeted Jane Addams and a group of peace activists at the White House. His guests caught a glimpse of his rationale for war. The president explained that “as head of a nation participating in the war, the president of the United States would have a seat at the peace table, but … if he remained the representative of a neutral country, he could at best only ‘call through a crack in the door.’”

Persuaded that the European powers, left to themselves, would produce a vindictive and unworkable peace, Wilson believed that an impartial America could contribute much to the future peace of Europe and of the world. (The Congress of Vienna of 1814–1815, worked out by European powers without any American assistance, had produced a peace settlement that endured for a full century.) In order to get a seat at the peace table, Wilson believed that he had to be the head of a nation that had taken part in the war.

Despite Wilson’s promise to keep out of it, America entered the war in 1917. In hindsight, this was probably a misguided, albeit foregone, intervention. But the complaint that the war wasn’t in America’s interests misses the point. Wilson boasted as much time and again. “There is not a single selfish element, so far as I can see, in the cause we are fighting for,” he declared.

Wilson’s supporters — the ‘progressivists’ and the Democratic Party — were desperate to get their hands on the levers of power and use the war to reshape
society. WWI was an excuse to allow the government to intervene in all areas of life and to control the ordinary citizen. Most Progressives supported the war enthusiastically, even fanatically (the same goes for a great many American Socialists). And even those who were ambivalent about the war in Europe were giddy about what they called the “social possibilities of war.” The Progressives saw an “immense impetus to reorganization afforded by this war.”

Wilson’s supporters spoke of “The moral effect of taking boys off street corners and out of saloons and drilling them is excellent, and the economic effects are likewise beneficial.” Wilson clearly saw things along the same lines. “I am an advocate of peace,” he began one typical declaration, “but there are some splendid things that come to a nation through the discipline of war.”

The demands of war fed the arguments for socialism. The Progressives thought that the war might force Americans “to give up much of our economic freedom … We shall have to lay by our good-natured individualism and march in step.” If the war went well, it would constrain “the individualistic tradition” and convince Americans of “the supremacy of public need over private possessions.” Another Progressive wrote: “Laissez-faire is dead. Long live social control.”

Wilson the great centralizer and would-be leader of men moved overnight to empower these would-be social engineers, creating a vast array of wartime boards, commissions, and committees. Overseeing it all was the War Industries Board, or WIB, which whipped, cajoled, and seduced American industry into the government’s control. The Progressives running the WIB had no illusions about what they were up to. “It was an industrial dictatorship without parallel — a dictatorship by force of necessity and common consent which step by step at last encompassed the Nation and united it into a coordinated and mobile whole,” declared a member of the WIB.

More important than socializing industry was nationalizing the people for the war effort. “Woe be to the man or group of men that seeks to stand in our way,” Wilson threatened in June 1917. Harking back to his belief that “leaders of men” must manipulate the passions of the masses, he approved and supervised one of the first truly Orwellian propaganda efforts in Western history. He set the tone when he defended the first military draft since the Civil War. “It is in no sense a conscription of the unwilling: it is, rather, selection from a nation which has volunteered in mass.”