Shaping Modern Liberalism

Stettner, Edward A.

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Liberalism and War

In domestic affairs, Croly could draw heavily upon his previous thinking and writing in developing positions for the *New Republic*. The same was not true of foreign affairs. He had devoted modest attention to foreign policy in *The Promise of American Life*, developing only the outlines of an internationalist outlook. Croly had even expressed mild concern about the militaristic competition he saw developing in Europe. But domestic policy was clearly much more important to him. *Progressive Democracy* had focused exclusively on domestic reform, and the initial planning for the *New Republic* also had been almost exclusively domestic in focus. As Walter Lippmann later wrote: "We never dreamed that there would be a World War before our first issue was printed." Still, Croly tried to be optimistic: "The war will also, I hope, prove in the end an active help to the 'New Republic.' It will tend to dislocate conventional ways of looking at things and stimulate public opinion to think about the greater international problems. . . . It will create, that is, a state of mind in which a journal [of] political and social agitation will find its words more influential." 

Croly's associates were as unprepared in foreign policy as he. As Ronald Steel remarks, "until August 1914 Lippmann had hardly given a thought to foreign affairs." Walter Weyl had written primarily on domestic economic issues. Thus all the New Republicans had to learn fast about foreign policy; they had to develop categories and concepts of analysis as well as individual positions on each issue. But of course the same was true of progressivism and indeed of the country as a whole. World War I came as a shock to the American political system, and it took a while to adjust.
Croly acknowledged this national unpreparedness in the first issue: "The American people were as ill-prepared to meet the spiritual challenge of the war as they were to protect themselves against its distressing economic effects. Their sense of international isolation has bred in them a combination of crude colonialism with crude nationalism." Croly drew on his previous arguments to prove that laissez-faire had given rise to isolationism: "Independence in the sense of isolation has proved to be a delusion. It was born of the same conditions and the same misunderstandings as our traditional optimistic fatalism; and it must be thrown into the same accumulating scrapheap of patriotic misconceptions." Instead, the United States would need to become better organized and take charge of its destiny internationally as well as domestically.4

This was a clear but not distinctive position—blaming laissez-faire, calling for national organization, and most important, renouncing isolation. But Croly did go further: it was also clear that the United States in renouncing isolation had to develop a positive policy of its own. In this first article on the war, he argued for "the positive and necessary policy of making American influence in Europe count in favor of international peace." This emphasis on peace was to become a consistent theme, though Croly did not yet propose any specific steps that the United States should take.

The editors held to these basic points for the next several months, while largely responding to the unfolding military action. They were clear that the United States could not remain isolated from the war; that would not be realistic for a modern economic and political power. At the same time, we should not get directly involved. Rather, the proper course in international as in domestic affairs was the middle way: the United States should work for peace, should seek to conciliate the parties, and should also support its own and other nations' neutral rights to trade with all belligerents. In addition, the country should modestly build up its own forces to be able to support these positions. Thus, in late December, the editors argued that America should remain pacifist, but that was not the same as "passivism." Remaining passive "repeats in the larger region of international politics the error which the advocates of laissez-faire used to make in domestic policies." At the same time, the editors argued from the early days of the war that the United States probably could not commit to remaining outside the conflict forever. "A nation does not commit the great sin when it fights. It commits the great sin when it fights for a bad cause or when it is afraid to fight for a good cause."5 The "pacifism" of the editors was thus very definitely not a principled opposition to war. Rather, it was a pragmatic judgment that the United States was not (yet) appropriately involved in this conflict. In the meanwhile, it was wise to anticipate
trouble, and in the winter and spring of 1915, the editors amplified their arguments for a moderate U.S. "preparedness."

Another theme of their policy early in the war was the need for multilateral action. The paper issued a very ambiguous initial verdict on the idea of a "League to Enforce Peace" as a way to prevent future wars, praising the idea but adding that "the fatal objection to any alliance of this kind is that it does not really meet the difficulty that no state will abandon its sovereignty." The editors went on to provide a "realistic" view of a League in international politics: "The vice of all such schemes is that they are based too one-sidedly on the idea of preventing wars. They take a static view of the world. . . . They ignore the fact that life is change. . . . We must deal with causes, must provide some means alternative to war by which large grievances can be redressed." However, the league was at least a positive proposal, and in the next several months the editors began to warm to the idea. As Croly wrote to Lippmann in June 1915: "We ought to adopt a fundamentally sympathetic attitude toward the League of Peace. Of course we can be critical as well as sympathetic and point out its limitations and dangers, but . . . it [the League] seems to me [to be], the most promising concrete proposal that has been made since the war began." This support would shortly become considerably more enthusiastic.

In terms of the actual course of the war, the editors also protested (but relatively mildly) against the British policy of preventing trade with Germany. This virtual blockade violated the accepted rights of neutrals. However, they were determined to be realistic: there was nothing that could be done about it at the moment, "but the day will come when neutrals, instead of begging belligerents for a few crumbs of legal observance, will insist upon a set of rules the advantage of which lies with people who keep rather than people who break the peace."

While protesting British behavior, the editors had remarked that the Germans would do the same thing, but didn't have the means. "The German threat to innocent neutral commerce with England was wanton, but it was incidental." This judgment was proven dramatically wrong in the first major incident of submarine warfare, the sinking of the *Lusitania*, in May 1915. This disaster, in which over 100 American citizens were killed (as well as many more British subjects), in the editors' opinion nearly led to war between the United States and Germany. In addition, it showed them that this country was very closely tied to Great Britain, demonstrating that British shipping was necessary for American commerce, which was consequently jeopardized by the German determination now to attack all kinds of British shipping.

One lesson was that the United States had to build up its own resources. Another and even more important lesson, in the editors' view,
was that the United States was correct in now leaning toward the Allied side in the war. Germany’s violation of the rights of neutrals to travel on passenger liners (even those of belligerent nations) confirmed and compounded its violation of the rights of neutral nations such as Belgium. Of course, Britain was also violating neutral rights in blockading Germany, but in a less “barbarous” fashion. “We have a fair chance of living amicably with the fellow countrymen of the majority of the Lusitania victims, but we cannot live amicably with the nation who so deliberately and remorselessly condemned them to death.”

From then on, the *New Republic* clearly favored Great Britain in the war. This leaning toward Britain was strengthened by the many British contributors to the paper, contributors often from the British Left but still sympathetic to the Allied cause. Indeed, a year later, Lippmann wrote to Graham Wallas that the *New Republic* had been committed to England from the *Lusitania* incident on, but that American public opinion was such that this position needed to be carefully constructed and partially concealed: “We decided just about a year ago, precisely at the time the *Lusitania* was sunk, to devote the paper to the creation of an Anglo-American understanding. We felt then that the traditional hostility to England in this country could not be overcome by a paper which didn’t take what might be called a strongly American view of the situation.” When he wrote, Lippmann was trying to overcome Wallas’s concern that the journal was not sufficiently supportive of the Allied cause, and he may have exaggerated the commitment. Still, the editors usually did come down against Germany from early 1915 on.

*From the Lusitania* sinking through much of the rest of 1915, the *New Republic* thus sought to maintain American neutrality, while leaning toward and usually arguing for the Allies. As a lead article noted in June 1915: “The cause for which the Allies began fighting . . . was on the whole a good cause. Germany was the immediate aggressor.” The United States could not stand apart entirely. She would have to enter the war if forced by Germany. The editors even went so far as to argue that if the Allies “were in danger of being overwhelmed, a sufficient reason may have existed for American participation in the war, provided a sufficient pretext was presented. But the Allies are now in no danger of being overwhelmed.” Therefore, “it would be well for the world to keep one great Power disinterested. The United States ought to be that Power.”

Croly’s signed articles in this period show his own personal ambiguity on the war, displaying a skepticism about Allied war propaganda, but also an ultimate support of the Allied cause. “If we cannot acquiesce in the
formulas which seem to consecrate the war, neither can we acquiesce in unqualified condemnation of it." He resisted pressure to join the Allies (perhaps more than Lippmann did) and instead called for an "attitude of judicious skepticism." It was clear that Croly would never support Germany. But the Allies were not perfect either, and liberalism could not be too closely identified with their aims in the war: "The cause of liberalism would be perverted and impoverished by being subordinated to the necessities of the anti-German combination." Croly therefore concluded that "if we are forced into the war we ought not to lose sight of our special work. . . . Our participation should be made on some basis of limited liability [for the Allied policies]. . . . If we remain neutral our work . . . should consist in making neutrality articulate and discriminate. If we become a belligerent we should adapt our belligerency to the attainment of our own special purposes." 16

The New Republic did support Wilson's plans for increased "preparedness"—for an increase in American forces. The editors noted that this was both necessary and good politics, otherwise militant nationalists would be appropriating the issue. Wilson's "policy has the enormous merit of being one on which good citizens who are neither alarmists nor non-resistant pacifists can unite." 17 Of course, the editors also criticized the president for not making his policy more clear. 18

True to Croly's original emphasis on peace, the editors wrote with enthusiasm about a possible end to the war in November 1915. A few "timid voices" had recently been raised on both sides wondering whether "the time is ripe, if not for an official statement by the belligerents of the terms of an acceptable treaty of peace, at least for the partially . . . public discussion of those terms." For their part, the editors expressed the hope that these voices would grow into a "voluminous chorus," and they judged that "an inconclusive ending to the war and a treaty of compromise and adjustment has a much better chance of contributing to the ultimate peace of Europe than has the ruthless subjugation of Germany." 19 For these thoughts, the New Republic was sometimes called pro-German, a charge they naturally rejected. They were, they argued, simply trying to hold to the requirements of a neutral position. 20

In early 1916, the editors were encouraged by Wilson's success in extracting concessions from Germany on submarine warfare (the "Sussex Pledge"), and they were optimistic that American neutrality could be maintained, though they were increasingly explicit that it was a neutrality tilting toward the Allies. 21 Indeed, they were quite explicit about their preference for the Allies. "The New Republic has supported the policy of emasculating the submarine and of confining American protests against
the British embargo within the bounds of ineffectuality." They thought Wilson’s policy was similar: a neutrality clearly slanted toward the Allied side.

The editors still saw their (and Wilson’s) policy as a middle way: “Aggressive pacifism is the third alternative which will rescue the United States from the fatal choice between sheer belligerence and neutral isolation.” This optimism survived several submarine attacks, one of which, in April 1916, brought Wilson close to a break with Germany. The editors would have supported a break, but questioned whether it was yet appropriate. However, Germany backed off, and the situation continued relatively stable through the election.

The major event in the spring and summer of 1916 was Wilson’s endorsement of the idea of a league, which came in a speech of May 27 to a meeting of supporters of the League to Enforce Peace. Wilson did not endorse all aspects of that group’s program, but he did argue eloquently that the war showed that a new kind of diplomacy was needed in the future. In a full statement of his own values, Wilson emphasized the principles of national self-determination, for small as well as for large nations, and he argued that aggression was unacceptable as a means of settling disagreements. Most important, he asserted: “I am sure that I speak the mind and wish of the people of America when I say that the United States is willing to become a partner in any feasible association of nations formed in order to realize these objects.”

In an article by Lippmann, the journal reacted enthusiastically, indeed with almost indiscriminate enthusiasm. Wilson’s declaration, Lippmann guessed, “may well mark a decisive point in the history of the modern world. No utterance since the war began compares with it in overwhelming significance to the future of mankind. For us in America it literally marks the opening of a new period of history and the ending of our deepest tradition [of isolationism].” Lippmann judged (erroneously, as it turned out) that “the whole preparedness agitation, which has been running wild of late by piling jingoism on hysteria, is given a new turn. It becomes our contribution to the world’s peace.” Indeed, Lippmann hoped that “our offer to join in a guaranty of the world’s peace opens up the possibility of a quick and moderate peace. It gives to the liberals of Europe a practical thing to work with.” In the result, Wilson’s speech unfortunately did not have the effect of ending the war, jingoism did not subside, and European liberals did not revive. But Wilson’s support of a league and of a push for peace did help to tie the New Republic to his cause, and it was for reasons of foreign as well as domestic policy that Lippmann, and eventually Croly too, supported Wilson’s re-election.
WILSON'S SPEECH and the New Republic's support brought the editors, especially Lippmann but also Croly, into increasingly close touch with the administration—with Wilson directly and especially with Colonel Edward M. House, his informal adviser, who lived in New York. The editors seem to have met with House first in March 1916, at which time Croly wrote to Willard Straight: "We were not able to find out just what the object of the interview was unless . . . Col. House wished to look us over." Croly noted that House "seems to be reading The New Republic regularly" and he judged that "it will be a useful thing to have established a means of communication with him so that in the future we can get at the President through him, or get information from him when we critically need it." No doubt House and Wilson also thought the connection would be useful in securing progressive support!

Lippmann met with Wilson later in March and again in August, when he wrote to Graham Wallas that after talking with Wilson he had no doubt about the president's firm commitment to the idea of a league. He predicted that Wilson would go "so far even to accept the doctrine The New Republic has been preaching that in the future the United States cannot be neutral in a world war." In December, Lippmann even rode the train to Washington with Colonel House for dinner at the White House.

The editors were thus optimistic in early 1917, optimistic that the administration was pushing for a peace based on the idea of a League and optimistic that their own views were once again directly influential on a major political figure.

Croly summed up his current thinking about the war, and especially about the idea of a league and the goal of peace, in a long January 1917 editorial. He reviewed his own previous commitment to the ideal of nationalism and asked whether this conflicted with the internationalism of a league. His very interesting answer was that it did not. Rather, "the peculiar merit of the plan of a League to Enforce Peace, as compared to other plans of pacifist organization, consists in the promise of its proposed method. . . . It establishes international order on the foundation of national responsibility. It seeks to create a community of living nations rather than a community of superseded nations of denationalized peoples." The former nationalist thus convinced himself that it was not illogical now to support internationalism as well. Indeed, while terming the international arena an inferior "medium in which liberal democratic nations have been obliged to live," Croly now discovered a fact about nationalism that he had overlooked in 1909: "The spirit of nationalism has always needed for its fruition the organization of an international community."

This article, Croly's last major piece before the United States entered
the war, reveals his continued hope that the step would not be necessary, and indeed that the war could be ended by agreement rather than force of arms. He argued that a peace treaty at present, by itself, would simply constitute "an invitation to future wars." However, by adding the force of a league, particularly with "the new stabilizer formed by the accession of existing neutrals to a league of nations," a more effective continued balance of power might be restored. The plans for the league were still rudimentary, but Croly was hopeful. His former moralism was now projected on an international level: "Those nations who had formerly conceived their highest duty to be that of neutrality in a world of conflicting national ambitions would all acknowledge the higher duty of being aggressive and even belligerent on behalf of the common security. For the first time in the history of Europe it might be less important for any one nation to be powerful than to be right." The plans for the league were still rudimentary, but Croly was hopeful. His former moralism was now projected on an international level: "Those nations who had formerly conceived their highest duty to be that of neutrality in a world of conflicting national ambitions would all acknowledge the higher duty of being aggressive and even belligerent on behalf of the common security. For the first time in the history of Europe it might be less important for any one nation to be powerful than to be right." Croly’s and Lippmann’s arguments for peace and the League reinforced Wilson’s "peace offensive" in this period, and he in turn signaled appreciation of their efforts. For instance, the *New Republic* had just sent Charles Merz to open a new Washington bureau when Wilson pulled him aside after a press conference and said: "I wish you would write Mr. Croly and Mr. Lippmann and tell them that I appreciate the work they are doing and that I am in entire agreement with their articles on peace." A high point of this interaction came on January 22, when Wilson made his famous "Peace without Victory" address to the Senate. The president had written on December 18 to all of the warring governments, asking them to state the terms on which they would make peace. He now came, he said, to report to the Senate on the replies, which were sufficiently forthcoming for him to propose U.S. participation in encouraging a general peace settlement. A central part of Wilson’s proposal was that this must be a "peace without victory," that is, that there could be no clear victors and no clear vanquished. The rights of all nations must be recognized, as must the rights of neutrals. Wilson didn’t specifically endorse the idea of a league in this speech, but he certainly implied it when he said that the "people and Government of the United States will join the other civilized nations of the world in guaranteeing the permanence of peace." Perhaps most appealing to the liberal journalists at the *New Republic* was the president’s comment toward his closing: "May I not add that I hope and believe that I am in effect speaking for liberals and friends of humanity in every nation and of every programme of liberty? I would fain believe that I am speaking for the silent mass of mankind everywhere." The editors were ecstatic. Wilson had in fact used one of their titles for his speech, and even if that article hadn’t really provided the basis of
Wilson's argument, his speech was in very close agreement with their general line of argument and included an eloquent appeal to liberals to support an internationalist foreign policy. Colonel House reported to Wilson (perhaps exaggerating, as he often did) about the reaction to the speech: "Lippman[n], Croly, Bainbridge Colby etc. etc. all characterize it in unmeasured terms of praise. Croly told me that he felt that it was the greatest event in his own life." The next day, Croly wrote (if less deliriously): "Dear Mr. President: I should like to add one small word of congratulation to the many letters which you must be receiving. . . . It seems to me that . . . you marshall with great lucidity and eloquence every important fact . . . and every important principle. . . . It is, I am sure, a document which will leave a permanent mark on the moral consciousness of, and I hope in the actual institution, of the American people, and which will reverberate throughout history."

In a passage eerily suggestive of the events of two years later when they would be on different sides, Croly also asked: "May I make one suggestion? There seems to be a tendency among Republicans all over the country, but particularly in Congress, definitely to oppose the participation of the United States in a League of Nations under any conditions. . . . Of course they are making a great mistake in doing this. . . . Would it not be well after Congress adjourns to make a certain number of speeches throughout the country appealing directly to the people?" Wilson's reply must have provided a most gratifying sense of influence: "My dear Mr. Croly: Your letter of January twenty-third has given me the deepest gratification. I was interested and encouraged when preparing my recent address to the Senate to find an editorial in the New Republic which was not only written along the same lines but which served to clarify and strengthen my thought not a little. In that, as in many other matters, I am your debtor."

Croly was thus once again influential with a major political figure, and he must have been optimistic that his ideas would have real, positive influence. The New Republic also benefited from public perception of the editors' influence, and its circulation, which had begun in late 1914 with 875 subscribers and had reached only 17,000 by August 1916, suddenly went over 20,000 and then over 30,000, even reaching as high as 45,000 for some issues in the next few years. The New Republic was an influential journal, a leading voice for American liberalism.

Years later, Walter Lippmann downplayed the imputed connection to the Wilson administration:

Our relations with Wilson were never personal. I don't think Croly ever saw Wilson when he was President; in the winter of 1916 I had
two or three interviews, such as any journalist has with the President. Croly and I did begin to see something of Colonel House. It was a curious relationship. . . . He never told us what the President was going to do. We never knew anything that hadn't appeared in the newspapers. . . . Partly by coincidence, partly by a certain parallelism of reasoning, certainly by no direct inspiration either from the President or Colonel House, The New Republic often advocated policies which Wilson pursued. The legend grew that The New Republic was Wilson's organ, and once to our intense surprise the stock market reacted when an issue of The New Republic appeared on the newsstands. The paper was never the organ of the Wilson administration. We never knew any secrets, we never had a request to publish or not to publish anything, and we were not in a confidential relationship. Colonel House made it his business to see all kinds of people, and we were among the people he saw. Occasionally the President and Colonel House took an idea from The New Republic as they took it from many other sources.\(^49\)

These comments may be strictly true, but Lippmann and Croly would probably have phrased them quite differently in early 1917.

**The Optimism** of January 1917 was dashed when Germany began unrestricted submarine warfare at the end of the month, breaking the "Sussex Pledge" of the previous year.

The editors, in a special postscript, called for an immediate break in diplomatic relations, for the seizure of German ships, and for plans to aid the Allies economically and militarily. They did not call specifically for a declaration of war, but suggested that was likely: "With all clearness possible the terms and conditions of our entrance into the war should be discussed and announced." Americans must unite: "Partisanship within the country must disappear, and every bit of effort and mind [be] concentrated on clarifying American purpose and making it effective."\(^50\)

Wilson's policies were similar: he broke relations and began mobilization, but waited for two months to take the final step of asking Congress to declare war. In this period of waiting, the editors argued various justifications for American entry if it came, especially the defense of neutral rights.\(^51\) Probably the most significant argument was Lippmann's defense of an "Atlantic community": "What we must fight for is the common interest of the western world, for the integrity of the Atlantic Powers. We must recognize that we are in fact one great community. . . . Our entrance into it would weight it immeasurably in favor of liberalism, and make the
organization of a league for peace an immediately practical object of statesmanship." For all the editors, Germany was a barbarous "rebel nation." Once several American ships were sunk in the new submarine offensive, they hesitated no longer: war was inevitable. "The United States will never have a better justification for declaring that as a consequence of German violence a state of war exists between the two countries." However, the editors made it immediately clear that in their view war could and should not be carried through to the "utter humiliation of Germany. . . . So far as the United States is concerned, it will not be a party to schemes of conquest and subjugation." Croly, Lippmann, and Dewey were willing to justify war, but it must be war with a limited and moral objective.

When Wilson did ask Congress to declare war, the editors supported the decision and pledged their support: "Mr. Wilson is to-day the most liberal statesman in high office. . . . He represents the best hope in the whole world. He can go ahead exultingly with the blessings of men and women upon him."

In private, Croly was pleased with the New Republic's role in thinking through these issues and also extremely optimistic about the changes that war might make possible in American society. Writing in response to letters from Willard Straight praising the editors, he replied: "We have, I think, in spite of all our errors been more nearly right than any other paper in the country; and we have exerted a little actual influence. . . . But what a rare opportunity is now opened up, my dear Willard! During the next few years, under the stimulus of the war and its consequences there will be a chance to focus the thought and will of the country on high and fruitful purposes, such as occurs only once in every hundred years. We must all try. . . . to make good use of it." Croly was probably never to be so optimistic about politics again.

AMERICAN ENTRY into the war put increased burdens on Croly. Lippmann left the paper in June to become a special assistant to Secretary of War Newton D. Baker. In October, he returned to New York but to participate in "The Inquiry," the research team assembled by Colonel House (and directed by House's brother-in-law, Sidney Mezes) to gather data on all issues likely to be discussed at a peace conference. (Wilson based his "Fourteen Points" speech of January 8, 1918, on work from this group.) In June 1918, Lippmann then left the inquiry team and went to Europe to do propaganda work for the War Department, continuing on as staff support during the Paris Peace Conference. He only returned to the New Republic in March 1919, at the close of the conference. Walter Weyl was also often
away from the journal, partly because of increasing illness. The result was that Croly carried a large bulk of the political commentary in the war period, often to the point where Willard and Dorothy Straight were concerned about his own health.

Croly always expected that the Allies would win the war, even after Russia's withdrawal. He also remained supportive of Wilson's statement of war objectives. However, as the war progressed, there were a number of points that troubled him deeply. As early as June 1917 he was concerned that the Allies were not as clear in stating their war aims as Wilson had been. Croly rejected the idea that the war should be won before post-war aims were discussed: "This is to reckon without democracy and its insistence upon sufficient reason to justify the sacrifices involved in defeating Germany." Croly particularly wanted a firm Allied commitment to the concept of a league. He became even more concerned about Allied intentions in the fall of 1917, after the Bolshevik government published the "secret treaties" that Russia had signed with her allies in 1914.

At home, Croly supported conscription for the army. Liberals, he argued, must learn to depend on force. "The world cannot afford thus to have liberalism a noncombatant attitude. It must find its roots deep amongst our soldiers." He thus firmly rejected pacifist arguments. However, he became increasingly concerned that America was forgetting Wilson's original aims, which Croly very much saw as insiting upon a limited victory. He wrote that public opinion and "an important section of the American press" were displaying a "blinding bitterness of temper which, if it increases, can only end by making wise decisions concerning [the war] impossible." Croly was finding that the American public did not hold to the middle way of liberalism very consistently. His previous assumptions about the rationality of public opinion were increasingly called into question.

By December 1917 Croly had come to a more radical position, one that very much reflected the moralism of his earlier writings. In a long, signed article, he continued to support the war as based on a "clear violation of right by one of the combatants," but he deplored those who were "fighting jubilantly or thoughtlessly or with absolutely righteous self-satisfaction." To Croly, the heroes were those who fought, "but who have never ceased to regard the performance of that obligation with abhorrence." Croly expressed the depth of his increasing frustration with the war by suggesting a turning away from politics altogether: "If wars are to be prevented, the agency of prevention will not be leagues of peace and political democracy, but a chastening of the human spirit, a profound conviction of the inability of government, even when infused with good will and enlightened by science, to heal the spiritual distempers of mankind."
Croly's positions alarmed some of his associates. Lippmann, now committed to the war effort, noted in his diary a conversation with Croly: "I told him, he couldn't afford to... simply express his vexation every week because the war is a brutal and unreasonable thing." Lippmann thought the *New Republic* now "sounded as if it were bored with the war and was ready to snatch at any straw, no matter how thin, which pointed toward peace." But the point was that Croly *did* desire peace—so long as it was a "peace of justice" based on the original war aims that Wilson had stated, and Croly had made that clear from the beginning of the war.

The approach of the end of the war found Croly caught between optimism and pessimism. His optimism depended heavily on Wilson and his continued eloquent defense of a nonpunitive peace, and particularly on what was now called the League of Nations. Wilson restated his positions in a speech at the Metropolitan Opera House on September 27, 1918, which the journal judged "luminous" and "triumphant." Wilson had "infused into his reiterated programme a fresher, larger and more definite meaning. . . . His speech is both an appeal to the peoples of the world for support in building his programme into the structure of an international society and a warning to the statesmen both in friendly and in enemy countries not to stand in the way." Wilson "must insist on impartial justice for a beaten Germany," a policy which would "bring about revolutionary changes in the traditional relationship among nations." But Wilson's task was not easy. Even at home, other leaders had other views. For example, Senator Henry Cabot Lodge had recently issued a statement that in Croly's view "did not propose to be just. . . . On the contrary, he planned to use victory for the purpose of writing into the treaty of peace discrimination against Germany. He confuses justice with punishment." Croly also wrote to Hand about his forebodings about the Allies: "The indications are increasing day by day that our friends abroad have not the slightest intention of writing anything but a punitive peace, and they will do this with Mr. Wilson's consent if possible, or against it if necessary. In that case, any League of Nations formed as a result of the war would merely be an organization for force." A lot would depend on Woodrow Wilson.

Before examining the results of the Versailles Conference and Croly's break with Wilson, we need to consider his views on two policies at home during the war, government regulation of the economy and the increased censorship practiced by the Wilson administration, and on a major international development, the Russian revolution. All of these were important in defining Croly's liberalism during the war and the postwar period.
For Croly, as for many progressives, the war was an important opportunity to advance many previous policies. From the beginning, the editors emphasized the need for government control over the economy. As they often reiterated: "The war has thrust upon us the necessity of extending the power of government over our economic life." An important part of this policy was government ownership of the railroads. This was the perfect opportunity to put into practice what Croly had long favored—complete government control of this vital industry. The editors also favored government recognition and organization of labor and welcomed the "loyal co-operation of the workers" in the war effort. They also called for financing the war through higher income and inheritance taxes, as opposed to a heavy reliance on borrowing. The claims of social justice required that the wealthy should carry a major part of the war's costs.

Many of these themes are summarized in a January 1918 article (clearly written by Croly). Government nationalization of the railroads and of ocean shipping and greatly increased control of the coal mines and of food supplies are all praised as working well. Also praised are the "official attempt to recognize organized labor and to secure its loyal cooperation... [and the] schedule of taxation for large incomes and excess profits, which a few years ago would have been considered sheer confiscation." These changes in the American economy reflected many of Croly's previous goals. But they were not necessarily permanent: "Those who look with favor on the increasing nationalization of the business and labor organization of the country have no right to demand that innovations... during the war be retained." However, "they are entitled to demand that automatic restoration of the status quo ante should not be promised or expected." The war thus might usher in a new economic system. Croly couldn't resist adding that "every one of these emergency measures was adopted to meet evils in the old system to which its critics had long called attention in vain and which the war had rendered intolerable." In this respect, the war was a progressive force for liberalism.

The issue of censorship was a totally different story. Croly and the other editors had been somewhat worried from the beginning about the effects of war propaganda. By October 1917 they were extremely concerned: "How is it possible to pretend that a war conducted in such a spirit can make for enduring peace?" they asked. In the editors' view, "the government cannot escape some measure of responsibility for the ugly and sinister mask which is being fastened on the face of American patriotism. . . . It was not prepared to resist a militarist agitation which was dangerous to its work on behalf of enduring peace, and it could think of no answer to an agitation in favor of immediate peace except violent suppression."
Among the policies they protested were the suppression under the Espionage Act of the Industrial Workers of the World (I.W.W.) in the summer of 1917 and the denial of mailing privileges to socialist papers in the fall of that year. As John Dewey wrote in all-too-prophetic words: "It behooves liberals who believe in the war to be more aggressive than they have been in their opposition to those reactionaries who also believe in war. . . . Let the liberal who for expediency's sake would passively tolerate invasions of free speech and action, take counsel lest he be also preparing the way for a later victory of domestic Toryism."\(^78\)

Croly also wrote directly to Wilson: "The censorship over public opinion which is now being exercised through the Post Office Department is, I think, really hurting the standing of the war in relation to American public opinion." Croly went on to protest the suppression of socialist papers and suggested instead that the government "negotiate with the Socialist press and persuade them to keep their agitation within certain limits without at the same time forcing them to abandon . . . their convictions."\(^79\) Croly noted that the New Republic had even come in for criticism and therefore found it difficult to state the moderate position that he was sure Wilson shared: "We are constantly being crowded between two extremes. When we try to draw attention to the pacific and constructive purposes which underlie American participation in the war we are accused of being half-hearted, and even of being pro-German, and we necessarily do look half-hearted as compared to the war propagandists."\(^80\)

Croly clearly had written a careful letter, framed as coming from a supporter with common objectives. Wilson's cold, formal reply to the effect that Postmaster General Albert S. Burleson had been "misunderstood" and that he was "inclined to be most conservative in the exercise of these great and dangerous powers,"\(^81\) coupled with Wilson's sponsorship of the Espionage Act in the first place, must have been very worrisome to Croly.\(^82\)

As the war drew to a close, patriotic fervor built, and the incidents of repression increased. The New Republic was quite explicit in response. For example, in June 1918 the editors remarked that America was winning the war, but "might still be losing her democratic soul. Intolerance of minority opinion, blind hatred for . . . enemy peoples might be steadily undermining our morale as a free people."\(^83\) In this period, the Nation was denied mailing privileges at least once, and Croly was afraid the New Republic would be also. He wrote to Dorothy Straight: "I received from an indirect but authoritative source a threat that the N.R. was in danger of suppression, because we published the advertisement signed by John Dewey and others, asking for the means to secure to the I.W.W. a fair trial. . . . What do you think of that?"\(^84\)
Croly could sometimes make light of the situation, as in writing to H. L. Mencken that "so far from wishing to burleson it, we have decided to publish your article immediately." But he knew the seriousness of the principle and drew on his friendships with Frankfurter and Hand to persuade Zechariah Chafee of Harvard to do a careful analysis of the legal basis of the Espionage Act, the law under which Burleson was acting. Chafee's research was published in several long articles in the *New Republic* and led to his later extended and important work on free speech.

After the war, the censorship issue continued and in fact grew during the "Red Scare" of 1919 and 1920. The *New Republic* stood strongly against the tide, attacking mobs that broke up socialist meetings and the establishment acquiescence in and even encouragement of such behavior: "The really dangerous revolutionists in America at the present moment are those conservatives who are wantonly and frivolously overthrowing the moral supports of the American democracy." The editors opposed the deportation of aliens, continually hammered at the free speech issue, and called for the release of Eugene V. Debs from prison.

Perhaps the intellectual culmination of the *New Republic*'s stand against the Red Scare came in Croly's strong support of Justice Holmes's dissent (Brandeis concurring) in *Abrams v. United States* (250 U.S. 616; 1919), in which the conviction of Jacob Abrams for distributing circulars critical of Wilson's policy of sending troops into Russia was upheld by a majority of the Court under the Espionage Act.

In this famous dissent, Holmes challenged the developing series of cases in which the Supreme Court had upheld restrictions on free speech in wartime. Holmes had stated his famous "clear and present danger" standard in *Schenck v. United States* (249 U.S. 47; 1919), where he wrote for the Court in upholding Schenck's conviction for distributing leaflets to draftees opposing conscription. Holmes had reiterated this standard in again upholding the government in *Debs v. United States* (249 U.S. 211; 1919). However, he had subsequently been influenced to reconsider his views by discussions with Learned Hand, Chafee, and Harold Laski (all New Republicans), by articles in the *New Republic* by Chafee and Ernst Freund, and by his own dismay at the developing hysteria. The result was what Holmes's most recent biographer has called one of the "most-quoted justifications for freedom of expression in the English-speaking world." Holmes argued in *Abrams* that "the best test of truth is the power of the thought to get itself accepted in the competition of the market. . . . I think we should be eternally vigilant against attempts to check the expressions of opinions that we loathe."

Croly's response to the *Abrams* dissent was enthusiastic. He praised Holmes's "clear and imminent danger" standard as a reasonable balance
between the need for order and individual rights and argued that Abrams's behavior did not exceed this standard. Croly also affirmed Holmes's pragmatic reasoning: the Constitution "is an experiment associated with certain convictions about government and property and human liberty which cannot be more than tentatively true at any one time, but which, if the American Republic is to remain a free democracy, American public opinion must constantly re-adjust in the light of its collective experience." At the same time, Croly sought to reaffirm the "traditional American ideal of toleration of opinion" and the "constitutional safeguards on freedom of speech." 91

Croly's stand against the Espionage Act and the "many outrageous cases" under that act, 92 and against the Red Scare in general, was a major contribution to American liberalism. As Walter Lippmann later recalled:

The most exhilarating experience we had, as I look back now, was the resistance of The New Republic in 1919 and 1920 to the Red hysteria. It is difficult today to remember the idiotic intolerance which descended upon the country in those days. . . . It was the most disgraceful exhibition of general cowardice and panic which any of us is likely to experience. The New Republic stood firm and took its punishment, and the credit is Herbert Croly's. He had the cold courage of a man who does not enjoy martyrdom. He was as brave and as imperturbable as any editor can hope to be. I have no pleasanter memory than of those days with Herbert Croly. 93

Major factors in the Red Scare were, of course, the Russian revolution of 1917 and the postwar fear in the West that bolshevism would spread to central Europe and even to some of the Allied countries themselves.

The editors' initial response to the February–March revolution overthrowing the czar was most positive. It came as a "great victory" in the dark period of the war, for "the most corrupt government, the most detestable despotism, which has survived among the nations of the modern world" was ended. As long as the czarist regime survived, "true liberalism, wherever it existed . . . could count on one ultimate and uncompromising enemy." 94 In succeeding months, however, the editors were disturbed at the provisional government's seeming willingness to make what they viewed as a too easy peace with Germany. 95 However, the New Republic opposed early "White" reactions and supported the Provisional Government and Alexander Kerensky as a promising democratic alternative. 96

The journal's reaction to the Bolshevik November revolution was muted, in part because information was scarce and the editors were not sure how permanent the regime was. However, they continued to deplore
(out of American self-interest, they admitted) the willingness to make a separate peace. They continued to hope that the Constituent Assembly in Russia, which they termed the "last symbol of progressive nationalism," could stand against the Bolsheviks. But they also supported Wilson's abortive attempt to establish ties to the "Moscow Soviet" as an appropriate contact between democracies. "The American democracy has no reason to fear the revolutionary ferment, has, indeed, every reason to encourage the people of Russia in their efforts at emancipation."

Holding to liberalism's "middle way," the editors made it clear that they did not support the Bolsheviks: "The New Republic holds no brief for the present leadership of the Russian Revolution. . . . We consider the social and political programmes of the Bolsheviks wholly unsound, and wherever a general or sustained attempt is made to put them into practice the result would in our opinion be calamitous." Or as they later remarked, "the ideal of Lenin, if realized, does not appear to us a beautiful ideal."

But they strongly opposed United States military intervention in Russia in a series of editorials over the several years when that policy was discussed and implemented. Indeed, at the height of the Red Scare, the New Republic published a long article comparing its own beliefs to communism. The editors rejected communism but also rejected American fears of it, appealing to "our governments and ruling class press" to "abandon the incredibly stupid, arbitrary, timid policy of treating the Russian Bolshevik organization as an ideal so seductive as to draw to itself everybody who is permitted to know anything about it." It was, the editors urged, "not our business to go crusading for our particular conception of social and political organization."

George F. Kennan later wrote that the New Republic had "no monopoly on the expression of American liberal thought in the years 1917-1920. . . . But there was certainly no more powerful and lucid voice within this camp than that of the remarkable circle of men grouped around Herbert Croly in the editorial rooms of the New Republic." In Kennan's view, "their vision had its imperfections," but he concludes that "had the views of the New Republic on the Russian problem in the final stages and aftermath of World War I been heeded, the Western governments could have saved themselves some grievous mistakes. . . . What more could the editors of a weekly journal hope to have said of their labors from a distance of forty years?"

THE CRISIS in the New Republic's foreign policy came with the publication of the Versailles Conference peace treaty and the editors' very difficult and painful decision to oppose ratification. The journal had argued that the
war was being fought for a better world, and they had consistently sup-
ported Wilson’s framing of the issues, which they took to insist that the
treaty not embody the conservative, nationalistic aims they saw as so
prevalent in both Europe and America. If it did express these aims, it
would fail to lay the basis for a just and lasting peace. Indeed, the editors
were prescient in predicting that a policy forcing a punitive peace on the
Central Powers would encourage their peoples both to seek revenge and
to embrace bolshevism.

Croly and his associates were fearful in late 1918 that their ideals
would not be realized. They admitted that Wilson had weakened his
own political position at home by failing to include the Senate in the ne-
gotiation process: “He never sufficiently shared his responsibility with
those of his fellow countrymen who were entitled to share it . . . . He is left
dangerously isolated.”

However, on the eve of the peace conference, Croly still defended the
possibility of a moderate peace combined with a league of nations. In
response to charges that he was trying to throw away “the legitimate fruit
of victory,” Croly recalled Wilson’s “Peace without Victory” speech. Aban-
donment of the ideals that Wilson had articulated then would simply
yield a “Victory without Peace”—it would only set the stage for a new
war. Croly wrote that “the immediate outlook, be it admitted, is not cheer-
ful. The victorious statesmen who are about to assemble in Paris have not
learned what should be for them the ultimate lesson of the war . . . . They
betray little or no disposition to repent and reform.” Invoking an increas-
ingly heavy religious imagery, Croly continued: “They have failed to di-
vote that unless their work begins in contrition, renunciation and prayer
they will betray the millions of young men who have expiated with their
lives the past sins of European statesmen.” For Croly, the “issue is being
clearly drawn between the friends and the enemies of international social-
ization.” He concluded by appealing that “that the law of retaliation may
be renounced and men will look candidly and trustingly into one anoth-
er’s eyes.”

Several months of international and domestic skirmishing ensued,
with the New Republic essentially defending the administration position, while urging Wilson to hold firm to his principles.

In late April, just before the treaty was to be made public, Croly again
summed up his thought in a long article that both contains increasingly
radical political positions and illustrates his increasing reliance on religion.
It was, he wrote, “chiefly capitalism which is on trial at the Peace Confer-
ence.” If the Allies continued to try to extract too high reparations and
other punishments from Germany, “they condemn the German nation to
revolutionary socialism.” Croly proposed that political power must be
shared with the workers in all the advanced democracies. If power and economic resources were thus shared, "the social democratic commonwealth will for the first time have a fair chance." Claiming that his prescription was "precisely the opposite of Marxian socialism," and that the conference by their stubbornness were really aiding bolshevism, Croly suggested in his conclusion that a middle way between "unredeemed capitalism and revolutionary socialism" should come from the Christian religion. The conference "must reach towards the peremptory gospel of human brotherhood."108

In early May, the feared event occurred: the treaty was made public, and it was clear to Croly that the peace was punitive. To make matters worse, President Wilson argued that his original statement of war aims was embodied in this peace. Croly led his editorial board to the decision that the treaty violated everything they had stood for over the last two years, and that they must oppose its ratification. As Lippmann later recalled:

The decision to oppose ratification was Croly's. I followed him, though I was not then, and am not now, convinced that it was the wise thing to do. That the Treaty was a deplorable breach of faith was clear; the question was whether the Covenant of the League was an instrument for perpetuating or for correcting the evils of the Treaty. We decided that it would perpetuate them if America ratified, whereas if America abstained, revision was inevitable. . . . A strong case can be made for and against this view. If I had to do it all over again I would take the other side; we supplied the Battalion of Death with too much ammunition.109

Croly's own thoughts were summarized in "Peace at any Price." He was both unbending and consistent in his arguments: "If liberals and humane American democrats who seek by social experiment and education to render their country more worthy of its still unredeemed national promise" were to "connive at this treaty," they would "be delivering themselves into the hands of their enemies, the reactionaries and the revolutionists." Croly returned to an old theme: "The future of liberal Americanism depends upon a moral union between democracy and nationalism." But he explained it in more radical ways: "Such a union is compromised so long as nationalism remains competitive in policy, exclusive in spirit and complacently capitalist in organization."110

The betrayal of Wilson's original war aims thus pushed Croly to a more radical position. America's allies had proven themselves unreconstructed nationalists, unmoved by morality or even long-range consider-
ations of self-interest. Perhaps even worse, America's liberal leader, Woodrow Wilson, had concluded and then endorsed this peace; Croly's national executive had betrayed his own principles. Finally, public opinion, on which Croly had previously depended to check governmental power, had shown itself dangerously receptive to the most primitive kind of nationalist hysteria. Very substantial elements of Croly's political theory were thus severely challenged.

Croly admitted that "the Treaty of Versailles subjects all liberalism and particularly that kind of liberalism which breathes the Christian spirit to a decisive test. Its very life depends upon the ability of the modern national state to avoid . . . irreconcilable class conflict to which, as the Socialists claim, capitalism condemns the future of society. In the event of such a conflict, liberalism is ground, as it is being ground in Russia, between the upper and lower millstones of reaction and revolution." He concluded that "it is essential that the ratification should not take place with the connivance of the sincerely liberal and Christian forces in public opinion. . . . Liberal democrats cannot honestly consent to peace on the proposed terms." Not even the League of Nations, which Croly supported, could save this punitive peace. 111

The discussion of the treaty persisted for many months. The New Republic hoped at times that a compromise might be reached in the ratification process, but the intransigence of Wilson on the one side and Senator Lodge and the even more extreme senators in the "Battalion of Death" on the other allowed the tragedy to continue. The editors were particularly concerned to show that Wilson's speeches after the treaty were not at all consistent with his previous positions, and that he had thus failed as a negotiator, however understandable that failure was. Wilson's suffering a stroke on the very kind of cross-country campaign that Croly had suggested two years earlier put an end to any hope that he might be willing and able to reverse things.112

The Republican Senate soon completed the rout. As the editors wrote, the European authors of the treaty had seemed to argue "that the old-fashioned diplomacy of the secret treaties was valid for Europe while the newer ideal of the League was valid for America." By its insistence on reservations, even then failing to ratify, "the Senate liquidated the inconsistency." The final verdict was clear: "There is no permanence in any of it."113 The end of the tragedy (or perhaps the beginning of the next act) came with the election of Warren G. Harding in November 1920.

Developments in foreign policy—a field that Croly had come close to ignoring before 1914—had thus forced many changes in his theory and ultimately brought him to question a number of fundamental assumptions. The war had initially led him to move further from his nationalist
positions of 1909. Indeed, Croly and his associates were instrumental in influencing American liberalism to adopt an internationalist perspective, emphasizing the importance of international institutions as a limit to national self-interest. This identification of liberalism with an internationalism that provided a middle road between isolationism and imperialism was certainly important for later American liberalism. However, the failure of Wilson's policy and in particular the popular hysteria during the Red Scare forced Croly to reexamine his rather optimistic assumptions that a national executive, restrained by democratic public opinion, could bring liberal progressivism to fruition. Instead, the experiences of the war taught that personal liberties needed stronger support against public opinion, as the classical liberals had argued. They also taught that liberalism's basic assumptions needed to be rethought.