THE UNITED STATES AND WORLD WAR I

I. KEY QUESTIONS:
-- Why did the United States enter World War I?
-- Could the U.S. have prevented or stopped the war? Could it have avoided/stayed out of the war? If so, how?
-- Effects of U.S. entry on the U.S.: good or bad? Effects on the world: good or bad? (Effects of allied victory: good or bad?)
-- The ideas of the 1919 Versailles peace settlement: wise or foolish? Grounded on sound or unsound factual and theoretical assumptions?
-- Lessons of the war: what can we learn from this episode?

II. BACKGROUND FACTS & EVENTS, 1895-1914
A. US vast economic strength, military weakness in 1914.
D. British naval supremacy, 1914. Britain rules the waves; Germany has few submarines. But Germany has Europe's strongest army.
E. International maritime "rules," 1914: quite pro-neutral, pro-free trade:
   1. Neutral states can ship any goods other than war materiel ("contraband of war") to belligerents, except through a blockade.
   2. A blockade must be effective to be recognized (requiring a "close" blockade). Neither Britain nor Germany could impose a close blockade on the other, so US non-contraband trade with both was ok.
   3. Contraband is narrowly defined as weapons and war material.
   4. Even belligerents' merchant ships cannot be sunk without warning.

III. CHRONOLOGY
A. World War I begins, August 1, 1914. Germany is the chief instigator. The "Triple Entente" (Britain, France, & Russia) fights the "Central Powers" (Germany & Austria-Hungary).
B. US adopts a strict neutrality policy, August 1914: US restricts US loans to belligerents, asserts a US right to trade with both sides.
C. Britain conducts a propaganda campaign in US: "the Western Hemisphere is the Kaiser's next target!" and "this is a war for democracy!"
D. US abandons neutrality policy, late 1914. Key decisions:
   -- Washington decides to permit large US arms sales to belligerents.
   -- Washington accepts severe British restrictions on US trade with Germany.
Net result: the U.S. arms Britain but not Germany.
Contending explanations:
   -- Wilson is shortsighted, doesn't foresee that this will lead to war with Germany.
--Wilson is pro-ally (for security and/or cultural reasons).
--Inexorable economic forces--US needs export trade.

E. Germany retaliates, slowly & in stages, 1915-1917: Lusitania sunk, May 1915; unrestricted submarine warfare, January 1917; German-Mexican alliance pursued, and revealed in the Zimmermann telegram, April 1917.

F. US decision for war, March 1917. But what kind of war--limited or total? (Answer: total.)

G. US war aims grow, 1917-1918, from "war without victors" to total defeat of Germany.

H. Victory, November 1918; and Versailles Treaty, 1919. Key elements of Versailles:
--A League of Nations will keep peace, provide security.
--Germany loses colonies, pays reparations. But Germany is not occupied or partitioned.
--US and Britain guarantee French security.

IV. COULD THE US HAVE AVOIDED THE WAR? ALTERNATIVE US POLICIES, 1914-1917:
A. Full neutrality, 1914ff: either compel both sides to allow US trade with the other, or halt trade with both.
B. Limited naval war against Germany: convoy US shipping to allies, otherwise leave Germany alone.
C. Use US economic & military leverage to force the belligerents to make peace.

V. EVALUATING US ENTRY, 1917: A GOOD IDEA?
A. What threats were averted? (If Germany had won the war--then what?)
B. What benefits did victory provide? (Hitler, Naziism, World War II ... does anyone spot a problem here?)

VI. EXPLAINING US ENTRY--CONTENDING THEORIES:
A. Three economic explanations:
   1. Neutral rights, commerce protection--"we must protect our 2-way trade with Britain, to capture the efficiencies of the international division of labor."
      What kind of U.S. war does this explanation predict? A limited U.S. war to protect U.S. commerce with Britain, with no land war on the continent against Germany?
   2. Neutral rights, business cycle variant (export protection)--"we must protect our 1-way exports to Britain, to ease US unemployment."
      What kind of U.S. war does this explanation predict? A limited U.S. war at sea to protect U.S. commerce with Britain? A strategy of prolonged stalemate rather than a push for decisive victory?
   3. "Merchants of Death"--protection of munitions makers--"we must protect/expand our munitions exports to Britain, to keep US munitions makers and workers prosperous."
      Again, does this explanation predict a U.S. strategy of prolonged stalemate?
B. National security/balance-of-power: the US fought to contain German military power.
What does this explanation predict we should find in the U.S. archives? In U.S. public rhetoric justifying the war?

C. US mobilization strategy ---> US was unable to prevent the war, tempted Germany to cut US trade with Britain before the US could mobilize.

What does this explanation predict we should find Germans saying about the U.S. in the German archives?

D. US misperceptions: Wilson didn't foresee a long war, the German submarine campaign, or the growth of US dependence on exports to allies.

E. Common US/allied democratic culture.

F. British propaganda, manipulation of US opinion.

VII. THE IDEAS THAT GUIDED WILSON AT VERSAILLES: TRUE OR FALSE?

National self-determination ---> peace.
Colonial rivalries ---> war.
Free trade & economic interdependence among states ---> peace.
Large armies & navies ---> war.
Power-balancing & alliance making ---> war.
Open diplomacy ---> peace.
Democracy ---> peace.

Were these the real causes/lessons of WWI?

VIII. GENERAL IMPLICATIONS & LESSONS OF WWI

A. Interdependence ---> war? (Was the US sucked into WWI by interdependence?)

B. War ---> wider war? (Does WWI show that wars have a propensity to spread, & to engulf the US?)