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NEWS FROM ASCA

An ongoing series of reports, articles, and news items about the Arlington Sister City Association's programs and activities, plus news from its Sister Cities

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The War That Changed Everything in America

by Thomas W. Skladony

On April 22, 2017 Col. Robert J. Dallesandro (U.S. Army-Ret.), a military historian and chairman of the U.S. World War One Centennial Commission, delivered a lecture entitled "World War I and the American Century" at Arlington Central Library.

"World War I is the war that changed everything in America," Col. Dalessandro began. Yet it is neglected in American culture and underappreciated by students and the general public alike. World War I was quickly overshadowed by the Great Depression and World War II. World War II provided more moral clarity and, along

with the Korean War, was captured on dramatic radio broadcasts and newsreel footage. The Vietnam War came into our homes on nightly television news programs. These later conflicts were also dramatized in numerous Hollywood films and television shows. And yet, he argued, "You cannot understand the world we live in today without understanding World War I."

U.S. Neutrality before World War I

The United States had little interest in European problems or wars before World War I, Col. Dallesandro said. The country had a tradition of avoiding foreign entanglements that dated to the presidency of George Washington. By the time of the outbreak of World War I, however, the population of the United States included millions of immigrants, many from the warring countries in Europe. President Woodrow Wilson wanted to help *end* the war, not *join* it, and ran for reelection in 1916 on the campaign slogan, "He kept us out of war!" But while Wilson wanted the United States to remain neutral, the American people, moved by the suffering in Europe, were becoming much less neutral.

What tipped the balance toward war, Col. Dallesandro said, was the German sinking of commercial and passenger ships such as the *Lusitania* in 1915, and the publication of the so-called Zimmermann Telegram, which exposed a secret German offer to help Mexico recover territories lost to the United States in the 1840s. By April 1917 President Wilson had no choice but to ask Congress to declare on Germany and Austria-Hungary "to make the world safe for democracy."



Col. Robert J. Dallesandro

How the Great War Changed America

At the start of the war, the United States had a small army and had no experience with a major military mobilization. It took more than a year for the United States to begin sending significant numbers of troops to Europe. In the spring of 1918 Germany launched an all-out effort to win the war before these U.S. forces could arrive, but by that summer the United States had started to roll back German advances. The final six months of the war claimed the lives of 53,000 U.S. soldiers from fighting and another 60,000 from disease - but also led to the German surrender on November 11, 1918.

World War I gave the United States a true national army in which Americans from all parts of the country served in a common cause. As many as 500,000 immigrants served in World War I, and those who did were given an expedited path toward citizenship.

With so many men away fighting, women entered the domestic labor force in a big way and made major contributions to the war effort. Partly as a consequence of their war-time efforts, women achieved the right to vote with the ratification of the 19th Amendment in 1920.



World War I Propaganda Poster

Before World War I the United States was an inward-looking, agrarian society. Most Americans never travelled outside the counties in which they were born. After the war many Americans, especially veterans, flocked to big cities to take factory jobs, a trend that would contribute to the urbanization and industrialization of the United States for the rest of the twentieth century.

Of course, World War I was not the "war to end all wars," as Wilson hoped, but merely a prelude to other major events like the Russian Revolution, Great Depression, and World War II. Many of today's most pressing international problems can be traced directly to World War I. The carving up of the Ottoman Empire and the redrawing of political borders in Europe led to ethnic conflicts that continue to this day, Col. Dallesandro said.

For these reasons and more, Col. Dallesandro concluded, World War I was truly "the most consequential event of the twentieth century."

ASCA WWI Centennial Series

This lecture was the second in an ongoing ASCA series commemorating the centennial of World War I. Carl Lankowski and Anne-Marie Daris, presidents of the Aachen and Reims Committees, conceived of the series, recruited the speakers, and organized the events. Future events in this series will include discussions of the 1918 armistice and the 1919 Versailles Peace Conference.

Thomas W. Skladony is chairman of ASCA and a coordinator of the Arlington-Aachen High-School Exchange.

The Arlington Sister City Association (ASCA) is a nonprofit organization established in 1993. ASCA works to enhance and promote Arlington's international profile and foster productive exchanges in education, commerce, culture, and the arts.

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