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David R. Woodward

Excerpt

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Introduction

Despite its expanding population and booming economy, the United States had the smallest armed force of any major power prior to World War I, essentially an Indian constabulary. It is true that prewar reforms had federalized the National Guard, providing for a more ready and better-trained reserve, created a General Staff, and established an enhanced system of officer education that included the War College. This provided the framework for a modern military force, but the American public continued to associate universal military service and large and well-armed forces with militarism. With an authorized strength of only 3,820 officers and 84,799 men, the volunteer US Army consequently did not possess either the manpower or the modern weaponry to conduct a campaign in Europe, much less against a great power such as Germany, when the United States entered the war in April 1917.

Many Americans initially hoped to wage war against Berlin with the country's navy, finances, and industrial, agricultural, and natural resources such as oil. But it soon became obvious that soldiers must be dispatched to European battlefields.

Two men in particular are destined to dominate America's role in the war: President Woodrow Wilson, the son of a Presbyterian minister, and General John J. Pershing, a Missourian country boy of Alsatian ancestry. Wilson made a critical and war-winning decision when he abandoned the American tradition of voluntary military service and embraced conscription, which made possible an American force of some 2 million men in Europe by the Armistice of November 11, 1918. Never before had the United States fought a war without an army recruited by the states. At the same time conscription also required new and enlightened approaches by the army's leadership in dealing with the rank and file. The Progressive movement played an important role in this but pressure from citizen soldiers also created a new relationship between the leaders and the led.

After choosing Pershing as commander-in-chief of the American Expeditionary Force (AEF) Wilson gave him virtual control over America's military role in Europe. Although the United States was

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involved in a coalition war no American field commander has before or since been given a freer hand to conduct military operations. Convinced of the superiority of the American people and their traditions, Pershing planned to show the British and the French how to defeat the Germans. He and his staff subsequently developed plans for what they expected to be a war-winning American offensive against Metz in 1919, an objective destined to play a critical role in America's relationship with its war partners in 1918.

Pershing's vast powers created a dysfunctional chain of command between the War Department and GHQ which hampered the war effort. On the other hand, it can be argued that Pershing was right in both his determination to create an independent US Army in Europe and his opposition to amalgamating US troops with under-strength French or British divisions. Without question the British and French faced a perilous military situation during the spring of 1918 and feared that they would be overwhelmed by the series of powerful German offensives without the United States feeding troops into their battle-depleted divisions. At the same time the British and French frequently had ulterior motives. For example, the British sought to substitute US manpower on the British front for troops to be employed in the outer theaters to protect or expand the British Empire. Moreover, when Americans were placed under foreign command as was the case in the undeclared war in north Russia, the experience was not a happy one for the Americans. An independent US Army playing a key role in Germany's defeat also seemed essential if Wilson were to succeed in imposing a liberal peace settlement on both the enemy and America's coalition partners. Although the US Army's leadership did not have the benefit of a Joint Chiefs of Staff or a National Security Council to integrate political, economic, and strategic planning it embraced military policies generally in harmony with Wilson's political objectives.

Some readers may be disappointed that this is not triumphal or celebratory history. This wide-ranging account of the creation of a modern US Army and its role in World War I also does not examine American participation exclusively from a US perspective. Rather it places the role of the American Expeditionary Force within the larger war and examines the tactical and operational successes and failures of the opposing forces. Particular attention is paid to AEF doctrine that emphasized self-reliant infantry armed with rifles and bayonets. Although this doctrine may well have made US soldiers more aggressive than their European counterparts it contributed to unnecessarily high casualties. The rapid and unprecedented expansion of the US Army and the haste in which Doughboys were deployed on European battlefields also negatively

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affected combat readiness and increased casualties. Some soldiers were actually sent into battle without having previously fired the rifle they carried. Many junior officers were also almost as inexperienced as the men they led. This, however, was not Pershing's fault. He fought with the troops that the War Department sent him, and the American leadership believed that it had no choice but to send every available man to Europe to avoid a German victory during the first half of 1918.

Breakdowns in logistics (or Services of Supply (SOS)) and the inability of US industry to provide the AEF with modern weaponry also undermined the American war effort. During the last months of the war the AEF found itself desperately short of the supplies and the SOS personnel it required to sustain American forces in the field. US industry had been capable of building great warships with powerful guns but failed to provide Doughboys with the required equipment to fight a modern war. As the war abruptly and surprisingly ended in November, the AEF remained a "beggar" army, dependent upon its allies, especially the French, for tanks, aircraft, and artillery.

Although many obstacles had to be overcome, the AEF eventually proved itself on the battlefield and played a decisive role in Germany's defeat. The French and the British were quick to criticize (belittle is not too strong a word) the AEF's performance at Meuse-Argonne (the costliest battle in American history), but Doughboys learned to fight as they fought. Faced with certain defeat, especially after the American First Army's breakthrough and rapid advance at the beginning of November, the German high command felt that it had no choice but to accept an armistice despite Allied terms that amounted to unconditional surrender.

For many Americans World War I remains the forgotten war. This may change with the 100th anniversary of the Great War in 2014. And it should. The United States mobilized some 4 million men in 1917–18 and sent half that number to Europe. Although involved in intense combat for only some 110 days, the AEF played an essential role in preventing the Second Reich from establishing hegemonic control of Europe. That US forces would have to return to European battlefields some two decades later to assist the Russians and British in destroying Hitler's Third Reich should in no way diminish this achievement.

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1 Birth of a modern army

On the evening of February 15, 1898, Captain Charles D. Sigsbee, the commander of the second-class battleship USS *Maine*, dispatched a shocking report to the Secretary of the Navy. His modern warship had been ordered earlier from Key West to Havana to protect US citizens from the turbulence of an insurgency against Spanish rule in Cuba. At 9:40 p.m. a tremendous explosion in the stern had rocked his warship which quickly sank to the bottom. This explosion killed 266 members of his crew.

What had happened? “The loss of this magnificent battleship is the most remarkable known to naval history,” editorialized the *Milwaukee Journal*. “Ships have floundered, burned, been wrecked, and in many ways destroyed; but it remained for a vessel of the best type to be blown up and burned in a peaceful harbor. It is difficult to imagine, in the absence of full information, how the accident occurred.”¹ A US Naval enquiry concluded that the explosion had been caused by a mine but did not attempt to fix blame. (Careful enquiries following the Spanish–American War suggested that the explosion had been caused by a spontaneous combustion in one of the *Maine*’s coal bunkers which ignited the forward magazines.)

Encouraged by an overheated popular press, many Americans concluded that Spain was responsible for the sinking of the *Maine*. Patriotic fervor swept the country. The war cry was sounded: “Remember the Maine! To hell with Spain!” On April 19, 1898, Congress authorized the President to employ force to secure the independence of Cuba. In response to the subsequent US naval blockade of Cuba, Spain declared war on the United States on April 23, 1898.

As Allan Millett has noted, the United States became involved in a “conflict that should not have been fought and could not have been lost.”² Nonetheless the US Army was not prepared to fight overseas. With five battleships to Spain’s one, the US Navy was ready for war. The same could not be said of the Regular Army, which existed as a small constabulary force designed to police Indians. The threat of Indian

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uprisings was now more imagined than real. The last major encounter with Indians had been the Massacre of Wounded Knee in South Dakota in 1890 when approximately 500 troopers from the 7th Cavalry had killed perhaps as many as 300 men, women, and children of the Lakota Sioux. The Army also manned the powerful 8-, 10-, and 12-inch guns of the coastal batteries mounted on both disappearing and barbette carriages. As tension had developed between Spain and the United States, Congress had authorized \$50 million to the Army and Navy for national defense. Secretary of War Russell A. Alger subsequently took his share of these Congressional funds and spent almost all of it on strengthening coastal defenses rather than modernizing the Regular Army, which had an authorized strength of only 28,747 officers and men at the outbreak of the Spanish–American War. By contrast, Spain had as many as 80,000 troops in Cuba.

Once at war Congress quickly raised the authorized size of the Regular Army to 64,719 officers and men. Granted the authority by Congress, President William McKinley also asked for 125,000 volunteers. Many of these volunteers came from state militias. The courts had not determined that the President had the authority to order militiamen (or National Guardsmen) to serve outside the country so they volunteered individually for federal service. Later, in May, the President issued a second call for 75,000 volunteers. Manpower, however, did not prove to be a problem as many young Americans flocked to the colors. When the war ended in August 1898, the nation had 263,609 enlisted men and 11,108 officers under arms.³

Equipping, training, supplying, and transporting these eager recruits to foreign battlefields, however, initially had seemed beyond the War Department's capabilities. Many American soldiers marched off to war carrying single-shot, breech loading, black-powder .45–70 Springfields. The allegedly backward Spanish soldiers were equipped with smokeless Mausers with twice the range of the .45–70 Springfield. Spanish artillery also outgunned American artillery with its smoke powder and limited range. The Chief of Ordnance, General Daniel Flagler, later offered the following justification for his department's failure to provide the Army with modern weapons. "A nation that does not keep a standing army ready equipped is still less likely to undergo the great cost of changing arms in store in order to be always ready to furnish the latest and most improved patterns immediately."⁴ Flagler, of course, was correct that money could be saved by not adopting the most current advances in weaponry and standardizing the production of them. This pleased Congress which controlled the purse strings but it meant that the US Army would always be at a disadvantage if forced into a war with

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another great power. Doughboys, for example, needed the superior American-made Browning machine guns and automatic weapons in 1917–18, not during the final weeks of the war when they at last began to arrive on the battlefield.

As a constabulary force, the Regular Army began the war with no unit larger than a regiment and tactics and weapons more suited to fighting Apaches than Europeans.⁵ The press had a field day with the confusion, congestion, and delay at Port Tampa that characterized the War Department's efforts to load men and supplies on transport ships destined for Santiago. Tampa was the closest US port to Cuba but it lacked the necessary rail and port facilities. Rations, critical to the morale of any army, also proved to be a serious problem. The Commissary Department supplied troops with tasteless canned boiled beef which was never intended to be eaten uncooked and unseasoned. During the siege of Santiago, "the very sight of canned beef began to nauseate the men, and fewer and fewer of them could keep it down if they could manage to eat it at all."⁶ There had been no up-to-date information on Spanish forces or accurate maps of either Cuba or the Philippines. Medical services for the sick and wounded had also been deplorable.

America's most spectacular victory in the Spanish–American War came at sea. On May 1, Commodore George Dewey's ships destroyed an entire Spanish fleet at Manila Harbor. "The guns of Dewey at Manila have changed the destiny of the United States," trumpeted the *Washington Post*. "We are face to face with a strange destiny and must accept its responsibilities."⁷ And indeed the United States emerged from the war as a world power with an overseas empire that included the Hawaiian Islands, Guam, the Philippines, and Puerto Rico.

American forces were now deployed well beyond North America and would continue to remain there until the present day. But at the turn of the century this had been done almost unconsciously. Unlike other world powers, most Americans did not associate their new global position with military strength. They continued to believe that they should base their country's diplomacy on a superior morality rather than on armies or even navies. Entangling alliances should be avoided at all cost. "Blinding themselves to the inescapable obligations of their new world role," Foster Rhea Dulles has written, "they somehow thought they could avoid responsibility – in Asia and in Europe – by merely declaring their right to go their own way. Had isolationism really been abandoned in realistic acceptance of the twentieth-century world, history would have followed a quite different course."⁸

Protected by two great oceans, weak neighbors, an established balance of power on the European continent, and a benevolent domination of the

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high seas by the British navy, Americans had reason to feel secure from foreign threats at the beginning of the twentieth century. This was not true of European great powers with the possible exception of Great Britain. Although the English Channel did not provide the British with the same sense of security that the Pacific and Atlantic afforded Americans, a successful cross-channel invasion still seemed unlikely as long as the British maintained their naval supremacy and the Low Countries remained independent. This largely explains why, among the world's great powers, only the United States and Great Britain, which shared a historical aversion to large standing armies, had small volunteer forces. As for the Continental powers, their insecure borders and powerful neighbors encouraged them to train a majority of their able-bodied young men for war. When war erupted in August 1914 anywhere between 15 million and 19 million men were quickly mobilized.⁹

The creation of mass conscript armies coincided with a revolution in military technology that dramatically altered the face of war. The industrial revolution brought forth advanced weapons of unprecedented killing power, and the emergence of two rival blocs, the Triple Entente (France, Russia, and Great Britain) and the Triple Alliance (Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Italy), served as the catalyst for an unprecedented arms race.

Although the American people could conceive of no necessity that would require embracing the European military model of mass armies based on universal service, the perceived mismanagement of the war with Spain revealed command-and-control weaknesses that Army reformers exploited to effect change. America's chaotic mobilization was blamed on the absence of prewar planning and a lack of professionalism. The left hand frequently did not know what the right hand was doing.

Technical advances and the existence of armies of unprecedented size certainly made military campaigns more complicated. Warfare now required more than just a "great captain" of war such as Napoleon Bonaparte. The Prussians, with their efficient and complete victories over the Austrians in 1866 and the French in 1870, had apparently mastered the complex problem of mobilizing, transporting, deploying, and supplying mass armies. Rather than relying on a single "genius," the Prussians waged war with a committee composed of technicians and highly trained officers who served as the "brain" of the army and taught a philosophy (or doctrine) of war. Located in a red brick building (the Red House) on Königsplatz opposite from the Reichstag, the German General Staff had been widely copied by other great powers.¹⁰

Secretary of War Elihu Root, a prominent corporation lawyer, emerged as the champion of the Army's modernization. In 1899, when

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President McKinley had asked him to replace Secretary of War Alger, whose competence was widely being questioned, Root's response had been: "I know nothing about war. I know nothing about the army."¹¹ Nonetheless, he proved to be the right man for the job. He understood that the existing Army establishment was unsuited to America's new role as a world power and he had political skills to gain Congressional support. He was soon telling Congress that America's military system had no "directing brain which every army must have to work successfully. Common experience has shown that this cannot be furnished by any single man without assistants, and that it requires a body of officers working together under the direction of a chief and entirely separate and independent from the administrative staff of an army."¹²

Ironically, some of the strongest opposition to reform, especially the creation of a general staff, came from within the War Department, especially from the Commanding General of the Army, Nelson Appleton Miles, who had risen through the ranks. Headstrong, ambitious, and egotistical, Miles had presidential aspirations. Teddy Roosevelt famously called him a "brave peacock." A self-educated soldier, he had won promotion on the battlefield and held officers who had attended West Point in contempt. He strongly opposed the creation of a committee of "educated soldiers" modeled after the German General Staff that would supplant the Commanding General of the Army, who in reality received his authority from the Secretary of War and was not truly a "commanding" general in anything but name. Miles was joined in his opposition by many other senior officers who "having learned by practice, discounted the power of study, soft officers weakened by swivel chairs, lazy officers who wanted no post-commission education, and political officers with friends in Congress."¹³ The bureau chiefs, who controlled armaments, the flow of information, and logistics, proved to be especially formidable opponents. Because of their long tenure in the War Department, the bureau chiefs were embedded in the Washington establishment and had powerful friends on Capitol Hill because of their power to award lucrative army contracts.

Moving cautiously, Root first concentrated on broadening military education beyond the military academy at West Point. He reorganized the Infantry and Cavalry School at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas and opened it to officers who had been commissioned from the ranks as well as to West Pointers. From 1902 to 1904, a one-year course, named the General Service and Staff College, served largely as a remedial program for junior officers, most of whom had never attended college. In 1904, a second-year and more rigorous program of study was established. The first-year program, renamed the School of the Line in 1907, emphasized

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tactics. The second and more selective year of study, called the Staff College, focused on war games and military history with little attention being given to strategic planning and administration.¹⁴ After gaining an appropriation of \$20,000 from Congress, Root by a general order in November 1901 also established the War College Board (the forerunner of both the Army War College and the General Staff), which he envisaged as a war planning agency in association with a future general staff.¹⁵

Gaining Congressional approval for a general staff, however, proved much more difficult. General Miles fired the first broadside, telling the Senate Committee on Military Affairs that the establishment of a general staff represented a threat to American principles and democratic values. Root fought back by taking his case to the press and enlisting the support of prominent military leaders. Root won in the end. The General Staff Act in 1903 created a Chief of Staff, two other general officers, and forty-two junior officers. These officers, assigned to one of three divisions, dealt separately with the following areas: administrative matters, military intelligence, and military education and technical questions such as mobilization. The last of these divisions, the 3rd Division, was later renamed the War College Division because of its close relationship with the Army War College.

The creation of the General Staff also led to abolishing the office of General Commanding the Army, which traditionally went to the senior officer in the Army. After the Civil War this approach had resulted in the leadership of the Army by experienced and middle-aged officers such as Grant, Sherman, and Sheridan. This distinguished line of proven soldiers, however, had run its course leaving the position to the longest living major-general.

One problem in replacing the ranking line officer in the Army by a chief of the General Staff was that his role appeared to be that of another bureau chief. Root got around this difficulty by using the title “chief of staff” instead of “chief of *the* general staff” which indicated that the head of the general staff supervised line officers as well as staff officers.¹⁶ Although the chief of staff now coordinated the work of the War Department he still, of course, did not have commanding authority. That authority came from the Secretary of War who got his authority from the President. Another important change rotated staff officers between their desk jobs in the War Department and the line.¹⁷

Root’s emphasis on professional training for officers proved critical to the Army’s modernization. The War Department dispatched some American officers abroad to further their understanding of the armies of other great powers. In 1912, some Leavenworth graduates visited and observed the French, British, and German armies. Captain Fox Conner,

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who later became John J. Pershing's Chief of Operations, and some other junior officers actually served in French units. Earlier, Pershing, Peyton C. March, and Douglas MacArthur had been American military observers during the Russo-Japanese War, 1904–05. As Coffman has noted, "These officers in 1918 represented the harvest of the Root education system."¹⁸ But the impact of his reforms on the efficiency and professionalism of the Army prior to America's entry into World War I should not be exaggerated. Less than 10 percent of the small officer corps in 1916 had actually graduated from either the Staff College at Fort Leavenworth or the War College in Washington, DC. Moreover, less than one-half of the officers selected to serve on the supposedly elite General Staff had actually received postgraduate military education.¹⁹ Nonetheless, Leavenworth men dominated Pershing's staff in France, and of the twenty-nine US divisions that experienced combat on the Western Front only three did not have Leavenworth men as their chiefs of staff.²⁰

As the "brain" of the army, the General Staff focused on the planning and directing of military operations rather than on day-to-day administration of the War Department. Yet General Staff members frequently found themselves dealing with trivial matters, which ranged from whether or not to issue toilet paper to determining the color of the stripes on army trousers.²¹ The first Chiefs of Staff were also confused about their responsibilities. The bureau chiefs, who dominated the Army's logistics, filled this vacuum. As Russell Weigley has astutely noted: "The bureaus administered the Army *now*; the General Staff Corps, like the commanding general before it, was important for a war that only *might* happen."²²

Having increased the authorized size of the Regular Army (the Army Reorganization Act of 1901), Root addressed the role played by the National Guard, the country's only reserve force in time of war. Indifferently trained and equipped and with questionable leadership, the National Guard operated on the basis of the Militia Act of 1792 which did not define the militia's relationship with the Regular Army. Root sent Colonel William Gary Sanger, the Inspector of the New York National Guard, to Europe to study how other great powers organized their reserve forces. Sanger found the British military organization with its volunteer army backed up by a reserve of militia and yeomanry cavalry to be most congenial with the American system.²³

Not surprisingly Regular Army officers wanted a federal reserve that would be under its direction. Acutely conscious of the strong public support for the traditional militia, Root was not prepared to go that far. Convinced, however, that it was vital to have a better-trained militia closely aligned with the Regular Army, he pressed Congress to pass the