

## FROM: CHAPTER 4 – MOBILIZING THE NATION

“The most unfit army the United States has had since the Revolution.”

“From a military point of view, America is nothing.”

“I do not think that it will make much difference whether America comes in or not.”

The first statement is by an American popular magazine in 1914; the second by a German Navy officer in early 1917; the third by the Chief of the British Imperial General Staff just days before America declared war. In their unanimity, they were not far off the mark. While the question for the world no longer was would America get into the war, it now was the equally pressing: Could America fight the war? The safe answer would be “No.”

The United States was not at all prepared to fight in spring 1917. Its highest-ranking officers were five major-generals and they barely had an army to lead. Compared to the more than six million British, French, Belgian and German troops battling on the Western Front, the U.S. Regular Army was puny, numbering a minuscule 127,000, not even enough to replace Britain’s losses in its brutally costly mid-1917 offensive to capture Passchendaele in Flanders (where the unrelenting slaughter became, and remains, with Verdun, the eternal symbol of the Great War’s insatiable appetite for life).

By size, the U.S. Army ranked seventeenth in the world, along with Chile, Denmark and the Netherlands and smaller than some Balkan countries. It had, calculates military historian Rod Paschall, 3,000 trucks but needed 85,000 to fight in Europe; 600,000 modern rifles but needed 2.5 million; fewer than 1,500 machine guns but needed tens of thousands; 544 modern artillery pieces but needed thousands; no military aircraft at all suitable for the Western Front; no flamethrowers, gas masks or trench mortars and few of the 15,000 pigeons required by the Signal Corps. Incalculable were its shortages of horses and mules, still the battlefield’s main means of transport.<sup>2</sup> Sorely lacking too were the fleets of ships required to carry a huge army and its equipment across the Atlantic and the logistical troops and logistical systems needed to support those troops once they arrived.

Washington, moreover, had no blueprints or contingencies for fighting an offensive war and certainly not for sending troops overseas. In his memoirs, Secretary of War Newton Baker recalls that America was so unprepared for a major war that he had to buy obsolete rifles from Canada, use “leftovers of the [Spanish-American] war...and ransack the museums of city police departments for confiscated ‘concealed weapons.’” It truly was, as eminent military historian B.H. Liddell Hart has declared, “a giant armed with a penknife.” Or, as other experts have put it, more a constabulary than a fighting force.

No U.S. officers since the Civil War had organized or led anything as large or complicated as a division; the regiment, about 3,900-men strong, not the 25,000-men-plus division, was the army’s basic organizational unit. And though the Western Front, where Americans soon would be fighting, had come to be defined by its layers of solidly-protected trenches embedded with tens of thousands of machine guns, the U.S. Army had given scant thought to trench warfare tactics. It still viewed the horse cavalry as its most important unit and rifle marksmanship as its most important skill. The top American forces, as always, were the Marines, but they numbered only 15,500 and were scattered about the world in the nation’s overseas possessions and in areas of recent U.S. intervention, such as Central America, where most probably would have to remain.

The blinding truth on April 6, 1917 was that if the U.S. declaration of war was to do more than supply and finance British and French armies and if it actually was a declaration that Americans

were heading overseas for combat, Washington would have to mobilize the nation. An army—a huge army—would need to be recruited and then trained and then supplied and then shipped to Europe. Dozens of reception and training centers would have to be built in the U.S. and base camps built in Britain and France. Factories would have to shift from their civilian consumer output to rifles, machine guns, artillery, ammunition, tents, blankets, field kitchens and the thousands of other items devoured in enormous quantities and at unprecedented speed by the mass armies fighting the world's first industrial-age war. And, of course, needed still were huge numbers of harnesses and shoes for the tens of thousands of horses and mules required for transport. (The typical U.S. Army regiment counted 325 mules and sixty-five horses plus 161 horseshoers, saddlers, waggoners and mechanics.)

So gargantuan were the tasks that the smart money bet would be against the U.S. doing all of that fast enough to make a difference on the European battlefield. It would have been the prudent bet. As it turned out, it would have been a losing bet.

There were, to be sure, a rash of speed bumps, potholes, crack-ups and scandals on the road of America's rush to mobilize. At the time, these problems loomed as catastrophes, igniting public outrage and congressional investigations. In the end, however, what is extraordinary is that the Wilson Administration ultimately managed to field and supply eighty divisions, create an air corps and even deploy a fledgling tank company, commanded by a young Lt. Colonel George C. Patton, Jr. (His tanks, though, were French-designed and -made.) Within just a bit more than a year of America's declaration of war, not only had its army swollen to 3,700,000 men, but nearly 300,000 of them each month were arriving at British and French ports. The cost may have been great—in dollars, in economic dislocation and inefficiencies, in infringements (at times savage) of the nation's constitutionally protected individual liberties—but the undeniable fact is that America mobilized in what, in retrospect, was an astonishingly short time..