On May 27, 1917, Maj. Gen. John J. Pershing and Secretary of War Newton D. Baker called on President Woodrow Wilson. It was the first and last time General Pershing was to see the Commander-in-Chief before the Armistice in 1918. The interview was brief. Wilson commented about shipping to Baker, then turned to Pershing with some words about the Mexican Punitive Expedition and added: "General, we are giving you some very difficult tasks these days." Pershing made a soldierly reply and waited for some guidance in his new role as Commander of the American Expeditionary Force in Europe. No other American general had received quite so challenging an assignment, nor one so complicated by distance and Allied demands. But the President was laconic and ended the interview with a terse comment: "General, you were chosen entirely upon your record and I have every confidence that you will succeed; you shall have my full support."

Did the President mean what he said about support? Much depended on the kind of backing the AEF received abroad. By the time the United States entered the European War, the struggle had mired into a mud-encrusted trench stalemate marked by astounding human sacrifice. French, British, and Germans alike had abandoned original hopes for a war of movement and concentrated on artillery and machine guns as efficient tools of slaughter. Lost to the war by 1917 were old concepts of reconnaissance carried out by gallant troops of cavalry—though some generals clung still to fond hopes of the coup de grace delivered by the arme blanche—old concepts of maneuver. Where Napoleon's, Wellington's, Grant's, and Lee's armies usually fought fluid campaigns across great sweeps of terrain, new generals and their men now measured victory in yards of ooze and wire. The kind of war waged in Europe ran against American tradition. The Revolution, the War of 1812, the Mexican and Civil wars, the Indian campaigns, the Spanish-American encounter, and the Philippine Insurrec-

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tion had all involved maneuver and movement. American training, such as had been administered recently, concentrated on open warfare. Pershing himself had drilled his Mexican Expedition in tactics of motion and harped constantly on the need for maneuver as essential for victory. Decisions could hardly be forced by men hunched behind sandbags and burrowed in bombproofs.

Pershing's experience convinced him of the truth in his prejudices. He remained devoted to training for open field operations. But his allies were not so devoted. Years of trench life had changed the military mind of Europe. Open tactics succeeded in the 1914 campaign only until infantry and cavalry masses encountered machine guns and field works. When momentum waned it never returned. The war made new rules of martial conduct, and the Americans were going to have to learn them. And as far as the Allies were concerned, the Americans were going to have to participate in the war pretty much on Allied terms. What did the Allies have in mind?

They were cagy at first. Initial military missions to the United States talked about an American Army participating as a partner in the enterprise of victory. But attrition and fears of defeat in 1918 brought expanded and noxious Allied assessments. But the full perfidy of Allied intents for America lay in the future. In the first heady days of American mobilization there were other concerns to plague Pershing and the Secretary of War. Scarcity of shipping certainly ranked high, as did the number of American troops scheduled to go abroad. A few absurd problems cropped up immediately: Which of several machine gun models should become the US standard? Which field piece should be adopted by the Ordnance Department? With such basic questions unanswered, the country obviously was in a poor state of war readiness. And because it was, the attitude of the President toward war loomed especially vital. What did Wilson think about the war?

He came to it reluctantly. When he read his war message to Congress, he put the conflict on a plane of ideals and lofty aims. If war was an instrument of policy, it was an instrument Wilson dreaded. Beyond public pronouncements, there was some indication that he disliked direct concern with military matters. His selection for the War portfolio in his cabinet, Newton D. Baker, had a sound reputation as Mayor of Cleveland and as a pacifist. For the War Office he lacked all obvious qualifications. Perhaps the President wanted a pacifist to tame the martial urges of the country?

A distinguished student of history and government, the President was fully aware of his duties as war leader. How did he intend to discharge these duties?

From the outset he chose to work through Baker. Direct relations with officers and field forces he rarely cultivated. Later on, when General Peyton
March assumed a strong role as Chief of Staff, the President tolerated joint visits from Baker and March, but beyond that left military affairs largely alone. Perhaps he felt that too much martial contact would damage his role as peace-seeker. Perhaps, as he said, he preferred to “follow experts in a war of experts.” At any rate, he did delegate wide powers to Newton Baker, who, in turn, delegated wide powers to John J. Pershing.

Pershing’s earlier experience in Mexico prepared him moderately well for modern war—that expedition had taught him something of the problems involved in using combined arms in hostile territory, something of such newfangled tools as the field radio, the machine gun and the airplane. But that experience had not prepared him for a unique and special freedom. While in Mexico, Pershing worked under the most binding orders ever given an American general. American troops in Mexico could use only north-south roads; railroads were denied them; access to towns depended on permission of local authorities. All these regulations Pershing obeyed scrupulously. He chafed under them, thought Wilson’s policy too timid, but did his subordinate duty to the letter. And now, with responsibilities beyond guessing, he received entirely different orders. Wilson did not send them, Baker did, and they were orders only in the widest definition.

On May 27, 1917, the day before the general was to leave for an inspection view of France, he received a letter from the Secretary of War which conferred on him the traditional powers of a field commander in wartime, plus those of a department commander; in addition, Pershing was given the extraordinary authority reserved to the commander of the Philippine Department. The general was specifically told that U.S. forces “are a separate and distinct component of the combined forces, the identity of which must be preserved.” Baker’s letter concluded with this paragraph: “You will keep the department fully advised of all that concerns your command, and will communicate your recommendations freely and directly to the Department. And in general you are vested with all necessary authority to carry on the war vigorously in harmony with the spirit of these instructions and towards a victorious conclusion.”

So Pershing could set his own limits of authority and duty.

In the months ahead Baker’s “orders” proved ample. Pershing learned to interpret them loosely and Baker acquiesced. The relationship between Secretary and general became close, cordial, and effective.

Consider how they functioned together. Their first test of friendship came over the issue of manpower assigned to France. The President, Baker, Chief of Staff General Hugh Scott, all had first thought in terms of sending a token force abroad—possibly a 12,000-man division. That idea faded even before Pershing left the United States, and shortly after he arrived in France and glimpsed the plight of the Allies, he recommended an American force of one million men in Europe by May 1918. He hinted,
even, that future planning should look toward an army of three million! Baker pointed out that manufacturing and shipping limitations might restrict expansion. But he accepted Pershing’s escalating figures. Baker accepted Pershing’s estimates on virtually everything concerning the AEF. Logistical details regarding wagons, horses, trucks, food, artillery and shells, all were left to him. The general negotiated with British and French authorities for local supplies, sent his own purchasing agents into the French back-country, and set about improving the tonnage capacities of southern French ports.

Pershing also had a free hand with AEF personnel. But there were interesting early complications which Baker helped remove. Perhaps the most embarrassing case involved former President Theodore Roosevelt who wanted to organize a modern counterpart of his Rough Riders for duty on the Western Front. So famous a politician, so famous a hero, so doughty a warrior posed special strains on administration diplomacy. Wilson naturally left the matter to Baker, who asked Pershing’s views. Pershing wanted no part of TR. That old campaigner likely would be too overwhelming for any commander to handle. Besides, he loved volunteers, and Pershing accepted the new professional ideal of a draft-raised army. And there was the matter of TR’s age. He was simply too old for the fierce warfare of France. But TR was not the only supplicant for appointment. General Leonard Wood and many lesser folk pressed for line and staff appointments. Pershing accepted those especially qualified, declined the rest.7 He specifically declined to use Wood.

Calls for preference continued, of course, after the AEF was in action. Baker hewed firmly to the line that the AEF’s commander alone decided who ought to be promoted. Mrs. Arthur MacArthur caused the Secretary of War a difficult moment when, in June 1917 she asked him to promote “my son Douglas.” Baker’s reply to the widow of a famed general was typical: “In the matter of recommendations for promotions of all kinds in the American Expeditionary Force I am relying upon General Pershing. Indeed, I do not know what discord and lack of harmony I might cause if I were to interfere with a personal selection among those officers under his direction and control.”8

Secretary Baker’s support of Pershing is best indicated in the long controversy over amalgamation of American troops with Allied units. As pressure mounted on the Allies throughout 1917—after the costly fighting along the Aisne and in Flanders—manpower shortages became critical. It looked logical to Lloyd George, Paul Painlevé and later to Georges Clemenceau, that so many fresh and eager American soldiers should be in action instead of kept in training and staging areas. True, American men needed training, but that could best be given in the trenches by experienced British and French fighters. American units, especially infantry and machine gun
companies, ought to be assigned as integral parts of Allied front line divisions. Language barriers in French units could be minimized through interpreters and combat esprit. American staff officers could be assigned with these men to learn the daily business of army housekeeping from tested teachers. Who could object, especially since Allied ships were bringing most Americans to France and since France supplied guns and shells for American use?9

Wilson had already objected. He made his position clear to Baker, who, in turn, had prescribed an independent American army in Pershing's original letter of instructions. Pershing never forgot Baker's exhortation that "the forces of the United States are a separate and distinct component of the combined forces."

Through a dreary series of Allied conferences Pershing argued for an American Army fighting on an American front. His campaign struck hard-pressed Allied commanders as stubborn, obstructionist, almost criminal. When the military situation deteriorated alarmingly by the end of 1917, when Russia's withdrawal from the war released fresh German divisions to the West, swift American participation loomed the only hope for the Allies. But Pershing hammered on his American theme. Clemenceau schemed for his removal; Lloyd George agreed; Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig considered his American colleague intransigent and wooden; Marshal Ferdinand Foch fumed at Pershing's selfishness. Diplomatic pressure mounted on the AEF's commander.

In the diplomatic realm Pershing appeared vulnerable. Alone among western field commanders, he had no civilian superior looking over his shoulder. American ambassadors to Paris and London could not deal equally with heads of Allied states; the ubiquitous Colonel E. M. House, who carried so much unofficial authority from Wilson, was outshone by Britain's Lion and France's Tiger. Without powerful civilian support Pershing ought to have been overwhelmed at every high Allied gathering. But in the conferences called to discuss Inter-Allied cooperation it became increasingly clear that Pershing held trump cards. He needed no civilian superiors present because he had the full backing of his government.

Pershing felt that amalgamation would irk Americans at home, would perhaps embarrass Wilson's administration, might dissipate American field strength, and likely would make impossible the final concentration of a national force.11 He reiterated these objections each time amalgamation was mentioned. And there was power in his position. Baker agreed with these objections, persuaded the President, and with their unremitting support Pershing stuck to his crusade.12

When Allied diplomatic pressures against Pershing reached a peak in Washington, Wilson, through Baker, told the General that he had "full authority to use the forces at your command as you deem wise in consulta-
tion with the French and British commanders in chief," and added that Pershing was empowered "to act with entire freedom in making the best disposition and use of your forces possible to accomplish the main purposes in view." With this kind of backing, Pershing succeeded in keeping the bulk of his men together—and though he may have irked his Allied confreres, he pleased his civilian superiors.

Pershing pleased Wilson and Baker in every decision save one—and that one failure was really the result of a misunderstanding. The trouble erupted late in the war when terms of an armistice were under discussion. Pershing, thinking he reflected an early Wilsonian urge to destroy German power in the field, prepared a letter for the Supreme Allied War Council in which he urged unconditional surrender by the Germans. This document caused considerable consternation. Wilson was now talking grandly of his Fourteen Points while his field commander talked of uncompromising victory.

Most of the disagreement arose because Pershing was incommunicado briefly with the flu and during that period Colonel House did not see the General, and because Wilson and Baker had inadvertently answered Pershing’s cabled views on armistice with what sounded like an open invitation to participation: “The President . . . is relying upon your counsel and advice in this matter, and . . . he will be glad to have you feel entirely free to bring to his attention any consideration he may have overlooked which in your judgment ought to be weighed before settling finally his views.” Pershing took this to mean that he could express his ideas to the Supreme War Council; Baker and Wilson meant it as a courteous invitation to private correspondence with them. At any rate, Colonel House finally smoothed the issue and Baker filed away the only letter of reprimand he ever thought of sending to John J. Pershing.

So Pershing was supported steadily and left to do his work. Seldom in American history had a field commander been so independent. What prompted Wilson to turn his general loose? Where did the President get his ideas of command? Apparently he never specifically stated his command philosophy. But he had some distinct views on the nature of war and the nature of supreme command—views reflected in things he wrote before the First World War.

Wilson’s study of history helped him evolve his command theories. A southerner, Wilson nonetheless had special admiration for Abraham Lincoln and for General U. S. Grant. He recalled Lincoln’s bumbling experiments in personal command until Grant took charge of the Union armies. “Grant was Lincoln’s suitable instrument,” Wilson wrote in 1896, “a great American general, the appropriate product of West Point. . . . a man of the common people, he deemed himself always an instrument, never a master, and did
his work, though ruthlessly, without malice; a sturdy, hard-willed, taciturn man, a sort of Lincoln the Silent in thought and spirit.”

Grant, then, was the ideal subordinate who did Lincoln’s will. Pershing was much like Grant, both in efficiency and subordination—the Mexican Punitive Expedition proved the analogy. How should Wilson lead his general? The President had already given a hint in his book, *Constitutional Government.* “In respect of the strictly executive duties of his office,” Wilson wrote, “the President may be said to administer the presidency in conjunction with the members of his cabinet, like the chairman of a commission. He is even of necessity much less active in the actual carrying out of the law than are his colleagues and advisers. ... His executive powers are in commission, while his political powers more and more centre and accumulate upon him.”

Here was Wilson’s policy. There could be no doubt that the President was commander-in-chief, but the functions of that office were in the hands of the Secretary of War. Because of distance, the Secretary had to delegate much of his authority to the AEF’s commander—as Lincoln and Stanton had delegated power to Grant. Still, there was no real precedent for the massive authority given to Pershing. He had to define his own job, and he was able to do that because the President and the Secretary of War were firm in the channels of responsibility.

From the strict military formality which persisted from President through War Secretary to field commander came brilliant success, a success that gives special luster to Wilson, to Baker, and to their general.

NOTES


3. Quoted in ibid., p. vii.


14. See Pershing to Wilson, June 27, 1918, in Pershing Papers, Manuscripts Division, Library of Congress, Folder Wilson, President. This collection is used with the kind permission of Mr. F. W. Pershing, New York, N.Y.

15. Baker to Pershing, Oct. 27, 1918, in Baker Papers, Box 8.

