

American Attachés in France, 1916

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In October 1915 the *Baltimore Sun* and the *Washington Post* reported that the US Army General Staff was preparing plans for the deployment of more than one million American soldiers to Europe in the event of war between the United States and Germany. President Woodrow Wilson grew so angry when he read those stories that he sent Assistant Secretary of War Henry Breckenridge to the War Department with orders for the officers involved to stop their planning or face dismissal from the Army. Breckenridge told the president that the Staff was only doing its job of preparing for any and all possible contingencies that the nation might face. Wilson relented, but he told Breckenridge to warn the officers to keep their deliberations better “camouflaged” from public view. Scholars have generally used this image of Wilson, “trembling and hot with passion” from anger at his own army, as a way of symbolizing the strict neutrality the United States supposedly tried to follow from 1914 to 1917.¹ Wilson, it would seem, saw merely thinking about war to be a provocative and partial act, even when done by professionals. This incident also fits in nicely with postwar narratives about the desires of the United States to avoid belligerence until the very last minute. If the Army faced presidential wrath for even planning for war, then the nation must have been either entirely neutral or completely blind to what was happening in Europe.

Alluring though it is, we have taken this narrative much too far. The Wilson administration’s desire for the appearance of neutrality notwithstanding, the US Army was in fact gathering as much information as it could about the war in Europe in anticipation of the day when the nation would enter the war. Most officers thought by 1916 that that day might arrive at any moment. The sinking of the *Lusitania* in May 1915 and the torpedoing of the *Sussex* in

¹ See Frederick Palmer, *Newton D. Baker: America at War*, volume 1 (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1931), 40-41.

March 1916 had both raised tensions high enough to have brought war. What future the nation might face the officers of the Army did not know, but they suspected that the days of American neutrality were rapidly coming to a close.

We now know a great deal about the activities of American military attachés in Europe from the papers of Colonel Spencer Cosby and Captain William A. Castle. Unavailable for many years, these papers have recently been made accessible to researchers at the US Army Heritage and Education Center in Carlisle, Pennsylvania. Cosby, serving as an attaché to the French Army, and Castle, serving as an attaché to the British Third Army in France, wrote detailed reports about the war.² Cosby made several trips to Verdun and Castle saw the Somme firsthand. Together the papers of these two officers provide a clear picture about how the US Army interpreted the war in Europe in the crucial year of 1916.

This short paper will discuss three themes that emerge from the Cosby and Castle papers. First, it will analyze what the Americans wrote to their superiors in Washington about the war and what lessons they thought the United States military should take away. Second, it will discuss the views American attachés held about the French and British as potential allies. Third, it will examine those elements of the attaché papers that may help us to see the events of 1916 more clearly, most helpfully in dispelling some persistent myths about the year of the titanic twin battles of Verdun and the Somme. At their most fundamental, these papers should prove once and for all that the United States military was neither blind to the war in Europe nor willfully ignorant of it in the hopes of maintaining a strict neutrality. Quite to the contrary, they show clearly why officers in Washington were working so hard to try to get the nation ready for war.

² Papers of Spencer Cosby, William Castle, and George Squier, United States Army Heritage and Education Center, Carlisle, Pennsylvania. The finding aids are searchable at <http://www.carlisle.army.mil/ahec/library.cfm>.

Not surprisingly, much of what Cosby and Castle wrote dealt with the transformations brought about on the battlefield by modern warfare. They reported on the effects of new and revolutionary weapons like flamethrowers, poison gas, and airplanes, weapons few American soldiers had ever seen let alone used. They noted the reduced utility of cavalry on the modern battlefield and the immense pressure that total war put on support staffs like logistics, training, and the medical corps. Above all, they remarked on the supreme power of modern artillery, with Cosby writing in July that “without it the bravest and most skillfully led troops cannot hope for success against a well-supplied foe.”³ He ascribed Britain’s battlefield reverses on the Somme to its inability to use artillery to its maximum power because of the inexperience of British gunners. Unlike the light artillery upon which mobile American forces were then relying in Mexico, Cosby urged the United States Army to follow the French model and turn to increasingly heavier and more powerful guns even at the expense of their limited mobility. In a speech to students at the Army War College in March 1917, Cosby argued that Germany’s superiority in heavy guns almost won them the war in 1914. America’s reliance on light guns, he feared, would prove costly in the European war.⁴ The sooner the United States made the necessary transition from thinking about mobile war to a war of positions, the sooner it would be able to acquire the needed shells and train men in the complex skills needed for modern gunnery. To wait any longer was to risk losing the war if the United States one day joined, as both Cosby and Castle assumed it would.

American observers saw clearly that the western front represented a great shift in the history of warfare. Cosby cleverly noted the transition to modern warfare by telling officials in Washington about the large number of cavalry officers who had transferred to aviation since 1914. Although the French had not yet given up the horse entirely, cavalry, he noted, was the

³ Cosby, Progress of the War, July 7, 1916, Box 4, Folder 20.

⁴ Cosby, “The Changes Brought About by the War in the French Army,” Washington, March 3, 1917, Box 4, Folder 45.

only arm of the French Army that had not grown in size since 1914; every other part of the French Army had grown exponentially. The power of artillery and machine guns meant that trench warfare was much more than a passing phase in war, as many Americans facilely assumed. Neither Cosby nor Castle thought that the war in France would see a return to mobility in the foreseeable future. Cosby frankly noted that “I am convinced that [trenches] will hereafter mark all fighting on a large scale.” Parts of the battlefield where soldiers tried to fight in open country were easy to find because of the “heaps of corpses” that such fighting left behind.⁵ The Somme and Verdun had proven to both men that the firepower of industrial armies could overcome any amount of personal courage that soldiers possessed.

Both officers warned that despite the overwhelming evidence from 1916 that war had become an affair of machines as much as of men, the United States Army had not made the necessary mental shift. Cosby bemoaned the fact that American officers still tended to see trench warfare as “exceptional” and temporary. He warned that such thinking failed to account for the basic reality starkly revealed by the major campaigns of 1916: trenches were difficult for attackers to break but easy for the defenders to reinforce and defend.⁶ Such conclusions put men such as Cosby and Castle in the group of officers trying to modernize and reform the American Army before it might have to face modern war in Europe. Unfortunately, they seem not to have had much influence among traditionalists like Gen. John Pershing, the future commander of the American Expeditionary Forces, who insisted on developing an “open warfare” doctrine that ignored the warnings of officers like Cosby and Castle.⁷ There is no evidence to suggest that Pershing ever read these reports, although his natural stubbornness might have led him to disregard their advice in any case.

⁵ Cosby, “Changes Brought About,” pp. 7 and 26.

⁶ Cosby, “Changes Brought About,” p. 25.

⁷ For more on this intellectual battle inside the US Army see Mark E. Grotelueschen, *The AEF Way of War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

The attachés also came to realize the importance of the global dimensions of the war. They knew that events in the Balkans or Russia were having major impacts on the war in the west. Cosby had concluded that the German attack at Verdun might well have been designed to forestall a combined British, French, Italian, and Russian attack in the summer of 1916. That attack, which the Allies did indeed design at the Chantilly Conference of December 1915, would have had the intention, as Cosby wrote, to “prevent the Germans from profiting, as they have heretofore, from their interior position” to transfer reserves to their most threatened front.⁸ The American observers therefore had a clear picture of the war’s progress at the tactical, operational, and strategic levels. Cosby even predicted the imminent entry of Romania into the war simply by analyzing the types of equipment the French were sending to the Balkan Front.

Both officers made sharp observations of the French and British as well. They recognized the heavy losses that the French and British people were enduring. Although both societies seemed willing to continue to pay the price, tensions were mounting. Castle reported on a “conscription raid” he had seen at London’s Marylebone Station in September at the height of the Somme campaign. Police stopped all military men aged 20 to 40 as they exited a commuter train and forced them to show their identity papers. More than 30 men suspected of evading the army or who had simply left their papers at home were rounded up and sent to a nearby police station for questioning. Castle noted that most people in the station grudgingly accepted the need for the raid, but denounced what seemed like unnecessarily heavy-handed methods; thirty or so men just trying to get to work would be humiliated in order to find the two or three who were genuinely shirking their wartime obligations. One man in the station told Castle, “We have already lost what we went to war for and here we are with a first-class sample of German militarism on our necks.”⁹

⁸ Cosby, “Positions and Commanders of the French Armies,” April 12, 1916, Box 4, Folder 3.

⁹ “A Conscription Raid,” September 11, 1916, Castle Papers, Box 2.

The attachés knew that the outcome of the war still remained very much in doubt. American scientist and communications specialist Lt. Col. George Squier reported on a conversation he had with Lord Kitchener in April 1916. Although Kitchener took great pride in the power of the New Armies he had built, he knew that they had just a fraction of the artillery they needed. The French, he estimated, had few reserves remaining and had never recovered from their massive losses of the mobile warfare of 1914. If the United States did not enter the war, Kitchener predicted that it would go on for at least three more years. If the United States did enter the war, as Kitchener expected it to do the next time the Germans sunk an American ship, the Allies could end the war in one year. Then, the “two English-speaking peoples” could work together to “ensure a lasting peace” in Europe, presumably at the expense of both Germany *and* France.¹⁰

Notwithstanding the weaknesses they saw, the American attachés retained great faith in the abilities of the Allied armies, especially the French. Cosby had no doubt that France could outlast Germany, even if a faltering Russia allowed Germany to transfer more men from the east to the west. He wrote in early July 1916 that French methods on the Somme had shown how much the French Army had learned from the Champagne offensive of 1915 as well as the mistakes the Germans had made by attacking along too narrow a front at Verdun. The superiority of French methods, most notably in artillery, allowed the French to hold the Germans at bay at Verdun and at the same time make better progress on the Somme than the British had done. Cosby believed that at Verdun “the wearing out process is bearing out much more heavily on the Germans than on the French” due to the superior ability of the French to adapt their methods to the conditions of modern war.¹¹ America’s potential allies, especially the French, were not, in his view, beaten by the massive twin campaigns of 1916. To the contrary, he told a

¹⁰ George Squier, Memorandum for the Ambassador, April 27, 1916, George O. Squier Papers, Box 1.

¹¹ Cosby, “Progress of the War,” May 31 and July 7, 1916, Box 4, Folders 12 and 20.

gathering of Army War College students in 1917 that the French Army “commands the respect and admiration of the world to an extent even greater than in the days of Napoleon.”¹²

From the papers of the attachés it is easy to see how officials in Washington might have drawn two conclusions. First, American entry on the Allied side would mean joining the side most likely to win; the Allies did not need American entry to avoid an imminent defeat on the battlefield, although they needed help to ensure that the war ended before the sacrifices became greater than any potential gains could be realized. Neither Cosby nor Castle gave any suggestion that the British or French armies or societies more generally were showing signs of giving up. Although they clearly saw that American strategic goals did not entirely overlap with those of the British and French, they believed both that the Allies were on the side of the right and that the United States would be helping the Allies to win a war that they would likely win in any case, even if victory would only come after several more bloody years.

Finally, we can use the papers of the American attachés to dispel at least two persistent myths about the First World War. The first involves supposed French ignorance about German intentions at Verdun. This idea was popularized by Alistair Horne in the 1960s and has remained current despite the recent work of Paul Jankowski, Robert Foley, and others. Horne depicted a German Army led by Erich von Falkenhayn that had devised such a fiendishly clever plan for mass attrition that the French could not divine its outlines.¹³ Cosby, however, reported that the French had long seen the offensive coming because they knew Germany could not wait for the Allies to launch a coordinated attack on all of Germany’s flanks. What surprised the French was not the attack itself. Rather, Cosby wrote, “the magnitude of the efforts made and of the price paid seem disproportionate to the value of Verdun from a military point of view.” In other words, the French understood the offensive’s strategic purpose but not the German

¹² Cosby, “Changes Brought About,” p. 1.

¹³ Alistair Horne, *The Price of Glory* (London: Penguin, 1962). For a much better account, see Paul Jankowski, *Verdun: The Longest Battle of the Great War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

operational or tactical approach which seemed to get men killed to no larger purpose.¹⁴ By the end of May, Cosby was reporting both that the French had divined the basic attritional purpose of the German attack and had decided on a counteroffensive. That counteroffensive would turn the tables on the Germans by using attrition as a French weapon while still permitting the joint summer offensive on the Somme to occur. This evidence shows that the view of Verdun popularized by Horne for Anglo-American audiences is wrong and that Jankowski, Foley, and William Philpott are closer to the truth.¹⁵

Perhaps more importantly, the evidence from the attachés allows us to reject the image of a United States sitting in ignorant isolation from the horrors of the war. Quite to the contrary, the attachés reinforced the views of those Americans like former President Theodore Roosevelt and American Ambassador to Great Britain Walter Hines Page that the war in Europe threatened the basic strategic position of the United States. Castle warned that if the United States did not begin to prepare for belligerence then the nation would remain nothing more than a “fine fat juicy plum” for some coalition of the war’s victors to pick at its leisure.¹⁶ Cosby praised the bravery and the spirit of the American aviators, soldiers, and medical personnel volunteering on the western front and thereby repaying “the courtesy formerly paid to our country by La Fayette (*sic*) and Rochambeau.”¹⁷ Both attachés wanted to see their country take a much firmer stand against Germany, even at the risk of war, exactly as the American ambassadors in Europe and an increasing share of the American people did.

¹⁴ Progress of the War, March 8, 1916, Cosby Papers, Box 3, Folder 48.

¹⁵ Progress of the War, May 31, 1916, Cosby Papers, Box 4, Folder 12; William Philpott, *War of Attrition: Fighting the First World War* (London: Overlook, 2014).

¹⁶ Castle to Mox, February 8, 1916, Box 2.

¹⁷ “Americans in the French Army,” May 9, 1916, Cosby Papers, Box 4, Folder 7.