

1917-1918: World War I

Study: World War I (James E. Hewes, Jr., *From Root to McNamara: Army Organization and Administration, 1900-1963*. U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1975)

Purpose: The National Defense Act of 1916 left the War Department unable to effectively manage the vastly expanded force required after the United States entered the war in April 1917. The War Department General Staff could oversee the force structure, training, and deployment scheduling functions, but Secretary of War Newton D. Baker permitted the technical and administrative bureaus to operate without close supervision or coordination of their efforts. By December 1917, the frictions this method produced had almost crippled American mobilization. Responding to pressure from Congress and recommendations from the General Staff, Baker took action to centralize and streamline the logistical activities along functional lines in the General Staff.

Outcome: In December 1917, Baker established a new General Staff agency, the Storage and Traffic Division, to establish control over these functions. In January 1918, a separate Purchasing Service was created to coordinate this function in the War Department. The next month, the General Staff reorganized itself from an operational planning staff to a directing staff responsible for supervising all War Department activities not falling under the Assistant Secretary of War. In April 1918, Congress authorized a second and third assistant secretary of war. The National Defense Act of 1916 prohibited such changes, and so the bureaus refused to cooperate with the new General Staff agencies. In May 1918, Congress passed the Overman Act, which authorized the President to reorganize the Executive Branch, even in violation of existing law, for the duration of the war. General Peyton C. March, Chief of Staff of the Army since March 1918, used that authority to exert General Staff control over the bureaus. In August 1918, he reorganized the General Staff into four main divisions: Operations; Military Intelligence; Purchase, Storage, and Traffic; and War Plans. The Overman Act also allowed General March to create staff agencies and services required by the war's new technologies: aviation, previously a Signal Corps function; chemical warfare, previously functions of the Surgeon General, the Chief of Ordnance, and the Chief of Engineers; and tanks, previously a functions of the Chief of Ordnance and the Chief of Engineers.

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