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F. Gunther Eyck

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SECRETARY STIMSON AND THE ARMY REFORMS, 1911-1913

by

PROFESSOR F. GUNTHER EYCK
HENRY L. STIMSON CHAIR OF POLITICAL SCIENCE

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Henry L. Stimson's long and distinguished service to the Nation extended through four decades and five administrations and encompassed a variety of major offices and challenges. His stewardship of the State Department in the crises years of the early 'thirties is as readily and respectfully remembered as that of the War Department in the even more challenging years of the Second World War.

US Army

Henry L. Stimson as Secretary of War in Taft's Administration.

What is less well known and yet perhaps of greater factual and symbolic significance is that this illustrious American statesman, at the age of 72, returned to the same office in the War Department which he held when first entering national service in 1911. That two American Presidents as different in their policies, personalities, and party affiliations as William Howard Taft and Franklin D. Roosevelt should call in two entirely different situations on the *same* man to fill the very important position of Secretary of War is of

Professor Eyck received his baccalaureate (History) from Alma College, a master's degree (History) from New York University, and another master's degree (Library Science) from Columbia University; his doctorate (History) was also awarded by New York University. As a political scientist and historian, he has held numerous professorships, including tenures at the University of Texas, The American University, and the US Naval War College. He has been an analyst, branch chief, and deputy division chief in the US Information Agency. Currently, he holds the Stimson Chair of Political Science at the Amy War College.

noteworthy uniqueness. These two appointments reflect not only the political astuteness of the incumbent Presidents, but also pay high tribute to Mr. Stimson's unvarying qualities as an administrator, a leader, and a public-minded citizen.

To be sure, there were substantial differences in the structure and functions, the issues and problems, the number of people and offices in the War Department on the eve of World War I and World War II respectively. The prime concern of Mr. Stimson in connection with the latter conflict was the necessity of winning it, while his primary interest during his first tenure of this office was the reorganization of the Army to have it better prepared for the remote contingency of war.

The problems facing Secretary Stimson from 1911 to 1913 included in order of their importance the role of the General Staff and specifically of its head, the Chief of Staff; the reorganization of the tactical structure of the Army; the length of individual service; the consolidation of posts and services; staffing patterns; and, finally, the creation of a National Defense Council.* Several of these issues existed before Mr. Stimson took office; others continued to be felt after he left; all of them were intertwined with the constitutional and institutional processes of the American political system. In order to accomplish his aims the Secretary had to seek uncertain support from the President, struggle with the Congress, balance special interests, and overcome inertia or hostility from high military quarters.

Soon after assuming office in 1911 the Secretary found himself involved in one of the fiercest conflicts in the history of the Army. This conflict centered on the Army's two most powerful officers, but had deeper origins and wider significance than merely the clash of personalities and prerogatives. The Chief of Staff, Leonard Wood, and the Adjutant General, Fred Ainsworth, ironically had more in common than would appear possible from their bitter enmity.

Both were assertive, even autocratic men; both were New Englanders; both were medical doctors who had risen to the top positions in the Army as much by their determination as by their connections. Well could such a doughty observer as General John F. Weston remark with evident glee: "Let the two doctors fight it out. They will use more strategy and have more war than in the field."

Actually, the origins of the dramatic and far-reaching struggle in which Henry Stimson became personally involved lay nearly a decade in the past. Since the creation in 1903 of the General Staff Corps, upon the initiative of Secretary Root, this new service branch had been in contest, if not conflict, with the old established bureaus and specifically with the Adjutant General's Department. This department, under the very skillful and powerful direction of Major General Ainsworth, had increasingly acquired more

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An 11 November 1895 photograph of Fred C. Ainsworth as a colonel.

*Reference is made here only to the problems facing the Regular Army. The Secretary also had responsibilities for the Panama Canal, inland water power, the militia, etc.

responsibilities, especially after 1904 when he became head of the newly established Military Secretary's Office.*

Not until Major General Wood became Chief of Staff in July 1910 were these powers first questioned and then challenged. Wood aspired to making the General Staff not only the brain but the nerve center of a reorganized and revitalized Army. Specifically, he wanted it to act as a superior coordinating organism to whose supervision and direction all other bureaus or departments were subject. Ainsworth, by contrast, had little use for what he called pejoratively the "general stuff." If anything, he favored an expansion of powers of his branch to include the General Staff and the Inspector General's Department. His focus was that of a desk officer whose eyes were on administrative detail and whose activities were bounded by Washington. Wood, on the other hand, had considerable troop and overseas experience and thought of the Army in terms of national military policies.

Relations between the Chief of Staff and the Adjutant General, at first cordial, quickly soured as the battle for control shaped up and tempers flared. The battle opened rather inconspicuously with a controversy over the then existing practice of excessive records keeping. Ainsworth, who had made his reputation as an outstanding administrator in the handling of this paper work, resented the initiatives of a newcomer, especially if the latter was the main rival for power.

Shortly before Stimson's arrival, Wood opened an investigation of the recruiting services which had become General Ainsworth's responsibility since 1904. Thus, the two contenders for supremacy were locked in decisive combat and the new Secretary could hardly remain for long either an amused or bemused onlooker.

Stimson's involvement was of both a professional and personal nature. He. was a friend of General Wood and the two men were friends of Theodore Roosevelt, who remained a very important person even while out of office and had something to do with their respective appointments. Mr. Stimson at first attempted to give Ainsworth an objective hearing, but admitted that he had not as yet "a sufficient grasp" to either understand or answer the contentions of the Adjutant General. The latter strongly complained of "usurpation" of powers by the Chief of Staff.

The climax of the conflict over ultimate authority was yet to come. Early in September 1911 the battle of the memos was renewed. General Wood requested that the Adjutant General limit his recommendations on appointments of commanding officers for recruiting depots to a list prepared by the Chief of Staff. Ainsworth, who had other candidates as well as other ideas in mind, furiously charged that this request constituted not only an usurpation of control in an area under his jurisdiction but also an alleged vindictiveness against his nominees. Unfortunately, Ainsworth's objections were couched in such strong terms as to cause Wood to accuse him of insubordination and to ask the Secretary for support.

Stimson lost no time in making his position clear and in taking, however gently, the Adjutant General to task. In a 19 September letter he acknowledged Ainsworth's zeal and concern, but admonished him not to ascribe ulterior motives to those "with whom we have to act in association." Above all, he backed Wood when he said that orders had to be given regardless of whether individuals or their bureaus agreed. He thus committed himself formally to the concept, espoused by Wood, that the Chief of Staff as the highest ranking military officer would act in behalf of the President and the Secretary of War.

General Ainsworth, however, was neither ready nor willing to concede this point in its totality. His position was facilitated by the fact that neither the law of 14 February 1903 nor subsequent amendments had fully delimited the authority of either the General Staff or its chief. There were repeated references to "supervision" over all other branches, but Secretary Root himself had opposed any stronger wording or authority.

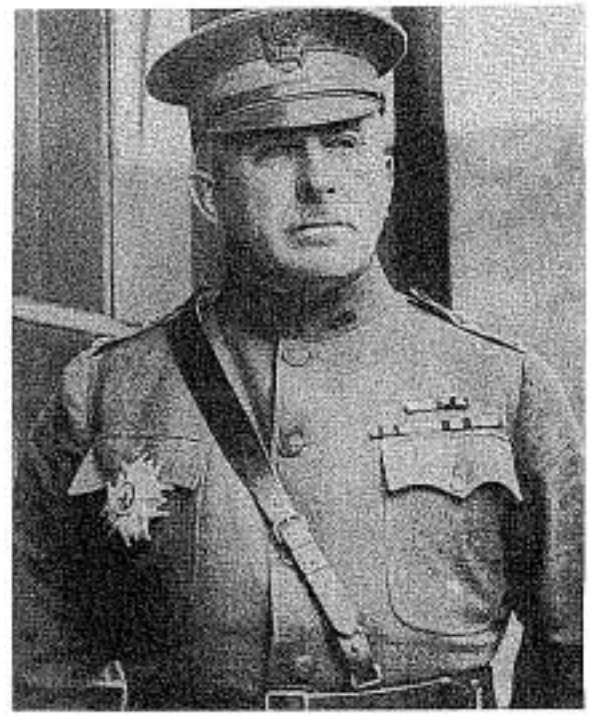
*The new office combined the Records and Pension and the Adjutant General's Offices but was reconstituted in 1907 with Ainsworth's support as the Adjutant General Department.

The final opportunity of challenge by either side arose at the turn from 1911 to 1912. In the continued efforts at streamlining administrative practices and tightening the antiquated organizational machinery, the War Department reformers led by Wood and backed by Stimson leveled their sights at the mainstay of the Adjutant General's control system, the muster rolls. General Ainsworth had greatly facilitated the utilization of these rolls by the introduction of a card index file. He was as convinced of its usefulness as of its symbolic importance to his successful tenure of office. When some of Wood's "young men" recommended replacing the rolls by the Descriptive List, a transferable record of each soldier, General Ainsworth became incensed and determined to lay his professional life on the line.

He looked upon General Wood's request of 15 December 1911 (to state in writing any objections to the replacement of the muster rolls) as the ultimate challenge to his authority and expertise. Consequently, he did not heed the request. Only after repeated prodding did he finally draw up an elaborate answer whose technical effectiveness was compromised by the scathing language employed. Wood, with this reply in hand, had no choice but to put it before Mr. Stimson, who rightly felt personally affronted by such remarks as "incompetent amateurs" whose proposals would be "scorned by honorable men."

The Secretary called on President Taft and his old friend Root for advice and support. Assured by both men, he proceeded with Root's help to draw up a letter which suspended General Ainsworth from duty on 14 February 1912. In this letter Stimson censured Ainsworth for his "intolerance of subordination" and his "insolence to superiors." And in his own *Diary* he remarked that Ainsworth had opposed "all progressive measures ever since the administration of Mr. Root."

Believing when so challenged "in striking hard," Mr. Stimson prepared to have the suspended Adjutant General court-martialed. Only the intervention of powerful members of Congress averted this predicament and



US Army

Major General Leonard Wood, Army Chief of Staff during Stimson's first tenure of office as Secretary of War.

General Ainsworth was allowed to retire. The battle royal appeared won for the reformers and Henry Stimson wrote to his father that Ainsworth's influence "even in Congress has departed." But on this score he proved to be badly mistaken. The battle with the Congress was just about to begin.

Though the Adjutant General had been physically removed from the War Department, his spirit—if not his presence—forthwith reasserted itself with a vengeance in the precincts of Capitol Hill. Over the years, he had built a very strong, perhaps unique, relationship with the Congress, and had become the primary link between the Army and Legislature. Many Congressional leaders were among his best friends as, for instance, James Hay and Francis Warren—the respective chairmen of the military committees in the House and the Senate.

These men now took up where Ainsworth had been compelled to leave off. Secretary

Stimson quickly was requested to make available to the House all of the documents bearing on the Ainsworth case. The Democratic majority of the Military Affairs Committee soon afterwards criticized the Secretary's action as unwarranted and vindictive and the cry was raised of "a Dreyfus-like" conspiracy.

Worse was to follow. The House had loaded up the Army Appropriation Bill with substantive provisions that were objectionable to the War Department reformers and passed it within two days of Ainsworth's resignation. The Senate, however, struck out all riders and the bill went to a conferees' session. As a result of deliberations there a compromise was reached. Several of the bill's more objectionable features were retained and others added. Among the more troublesome items were the lengthening of service with the colors to five years (two years more than originally advocated by Stimson and Wood); the requirement for the sanction of a Congressional study commission before the Executive Branch could close an "obsolete" post; a reduction in the number of General Staff officers from 45 to 36; and last but not least a proviso which stated, as Root put it, that "no man whose initials were L. W. could serve as Chief of Staff."

Stimson and Wood easily could guess who was behind these provisions and realized that once more they would have to stand and fight. The Secretary tried his utmost to convince his Republican friends and the "progressive" Democrats in the Senate of the disadvantages of the bill. His efforts proved in vain. The bill cleared the Senate by three votes and the House by a wide margin.

Mr. Stimson was aware that at stake here were not only the careers of his close associates, perhaps even his own, but also the very reforms promoted by him and General Wood. His last recourse now was the President. Mr. Taft was not easily persuaded. He was none too fond of "the stormy petrel," as he had characterized Wood. Moreover, he needed more than ever support from such influential Republicans as Senator Warren, now that on the eve of the GOP convention in Chicago a rift with Teddy Roosevelt seemed most likely. In a meeting with the President, Warren hinted strongly that if Wood were dropped, he would see to it that the appropriations bill would be passed without objectionable riders.

Stimson, who occasionally felt that he had to take the President's fist in "trying to drive it forward for him," succeeded, however, in convincing Taft that should Wood be replaced now under Congressional pressure, this would be tantamount to a limitation of the Presidential choice in the appointment of the Chief of Staff. The President ultimately refused to yield. On 5 June 1912 he advised Warren, upon the urgings of Stimson and Root, that he could "for the time being" not agree, since it would look too much like a case of "stand and deliver."

Mr. Stimson realized at once that stronger measures of persuasion as well as of dissuasion were needed. He drafted a veto message which summarized all his principal objections to the appropriations bill. His cabinet colleagues agreed to support this veto draft and President Taft commented that it sounded "authoritative." Yet the President waited for three days in the hope that it could be put off until after the GOP convention, finally signing it on 17 June 1912. The Congressional opposition was taken aback. They had expected neither the President's firmness nor the Secretary's toughness.

Stimson had made clear beyond doubt his views as well as his determination regarding reforms. Speaking in rebuttal for the Chief Executive, the Secretary elaborated in the veto draft on the following points summarized below:

> First, the Presidential power of appointment to "the most important military position" that of the Chief of Staff, would be much limited. A premium would be placed on the eligibility of officers with mere routine service while those who had come up fast due to their exceptional abilities would be excluded. Finally, the proposed legislation would confine the choice for the principal staff position to men with the least staff experience.

Second, the requested reduction of the number of General Staff officers would cripple "the most important corps of the Army." This corps performed essential work in devising "a consistent military policy" and in creating a restructured Army organization. The detail system of a maximum of four years service with the General Staff should be preserved as being most conducive to an effective organization and composition of that corps.

Third, arbitrary limitations on the length of detached service would deprive certain departments or units of all or most of their qualified officers.

Fourth, the lengthening of service with the colors from three to four years would make "difficult or impossible" the creation of a proper reserve force.

Fifth, the appointment by Congress of a commission on Army posts would "deprive the regularly constituted authorities, notably the President and the Secretary of War, of all voice in the formulation of one of the most important policies now confronting the Nation. . . ."

Sixth, the contention that great savings would be effected by the bill was "unfounded." Close examination showed the contrary to be true with an estimated deficit of $2 1/4 million.

On most of the issues outlined in the veto message the conflict continued for some months. In an exact replica of the first go-around, the House reinstated the same bill that had been vetoed, and the Senate then struck out the riders. At the conferees' sessions, however, some concessions were made. Most important among them was the discontinuation of the study commission on posts. Also, service with the Reserves was to be increased to three years. What remained virtually unchanged was the hardly disguised proviso to remove Wood, who was still considered by the Ainsworth supporters as the primary opponent.

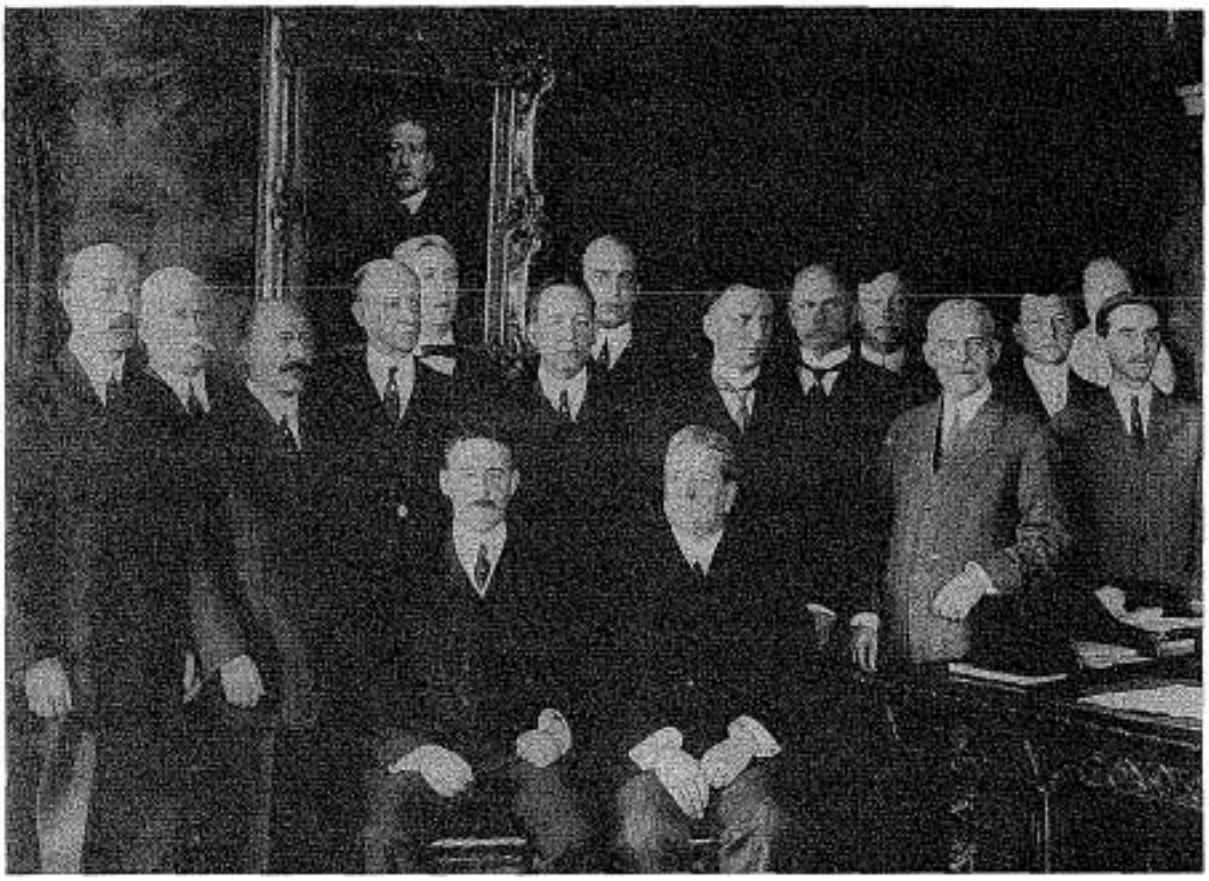
However, Mr. Stimson proved as loyal to his Chief of Staff as he proved determined to outlast Congressional opposition. He favored, if necessary, a second veto and gained, not without difficulties, the backing of the President. As things turned out, the veto did not have to be used a second time. Congress was even more averse than the Chief Executive to seeing the bill making the rounds anew, only to have it end where it started—in the House of Representatives. Therefore, the conferees yielded and on 24 August 1912 the bill became law without a single major provision unacceptable to the War Department chiefs.

Henry Stimson in his quiet but determined way had scored his greatest legislative victory. At the same time his resolute action and cool calculation had finally cleared the road for the reforms so eagerly and consistently espoused and so long delayed. The Secretary declared himself "well satisfied." Before leaving Washington on an inspection trip, he pointed out that "important and constructive" legislation had been enacted. The two issues which he stressed most in several press interviews were the creation of an Army Reserve and the reorganization of the tactical structure of the Army.

Ever since he assumed office Stimson had reiterated the need for a substantial reserve force. On numerous occasions he referred to the likelihood that in case of war Regular units would be quickly depleted without a commensurate replacement from trained and ready reserves. He pointed to the Spanish-American War as having shown the difficulties in filling up whole regiments. He also referred to the fact that an effective reserve system existed in most Western countries and that the United States was the exception to this rule.

His ideal was the creation of a large citizen-army on which the Republic's security could safely rest. He was much impressed by the Swiss model, which allowed for the mobilization of several hundred thousand men at short notice. In his view it was "the duty of the citizen to train himself as promptly as possible . . . as a soldier. . . and to return as quickly as possible to his normal civil life."

He also adduced evidence of the



US Army

Secretary of War Stimson (seated, left) and Mr. John Schofield, Chief Clerk, War Department (seated, right), with other Departmental personnel in 1913. (The portrait of Elihu Root in the background still hangs today in the Pentagon Office of the Secretary of the Army. It was from this portrait that Parameters' cover photograph was taken.)

effectiveness of short-term service, being an "ardent volunteer" himself. One example to which he referred with obvious pleasure was that of the 11th Cavalry with 70 per cent of its ranks filled by recruits. He had watched them train at Western posts which he inspected in the fall of 1911 and was so impressed that he commented that their achievement finally convinced him of the correctness of the short-term enlistment theory.

Even before the Ainsworth-Wood controversy reached its climax, it had become evident to the War Department reformers that their views differed substantially from those of many members of Congress. A majority in the House Committee on Military Affairs favored longer rather than shorter service. Stimson, however, held out steadfastly for three years with an additional four in the reserves. Although he had warned in January 1912 that longer service would give to the Army the character of a professional army of "a century and a half ago," a majority in Congress thought otherwise.

A prolonged hassle ensued which only ended with the passage of the second appropriations bill in August 1912. Under its provisions active duty was extended from three to four years. This was one year more than the reformers wanted, but one year less than Congress had originally proposed. The concurrent lengthening of reserve duty to three years was at least a first step, as Mr.

Stimson put it, toward the building up of an efficient reserve.

The other major reforms, tactical reorganization and concentration of the mobile Army, also took final shape with the passage of the August bill. The phasing out of obsolete posts could now begin. As the Secretary had pointed out repeatedly, the garrisons were dispersed across 24 states and 49 posts. Many of these consisted of only about 650 men, and Stimson had poignantly commented that "we have scattered our Army over the country as if it were merely groups of local constabulary instead of a national organization."

He was aware of sectional and even personal interests in the Congress, whose members were especially sensitive in an election year to the closing of posts in their home states. Yet, he staunchly maintained that "the bold course was the best thing" and hopefully proceeded with the phasing-out plans.* Not only did he anticipate substantial savings but also an effective redeployment of troops and specialists thus released.

Stimson had long been convinced that the splintering of available forces was counterproductive to his and Wood's goal of a highly mobile, well trained and organized Army. Both men favored a return to a tactical rather than a continuation of geographic organization into a dozen administrative departments. Wood had already prepared plans for the restructuring of units along divisional lines when Mr. Stimson assumed office. The new Secretary quickly concurred and also authorized additional studies by the General Staff and the Army War College.

On the basis of these studies and his own analysis he recommended a thorough reorganization of the mobile Army, then numbering about 30,000. He proposed that between six to nine command groups be established in three main areas (the Atlantic and Pacific seaboards and the Central region). In each of these areas there would be stationed at least one skeleton division composed of infantry, artillery, cavalry, and technical troops. Stimson and his advisers maintained that such division was "the fundamental army unit" for field operations.* In addition there would be in each region from one to three brigades with support troops.

The Secretary repeatedly emphasized the advantages of reorganization. It would allow for integrated training. Commanding officers would be in actual control of the training and movements of their troops. Mobilization would be quicker and more effective. More officers and men would be available from detached service. Finally, considerable savings could be made; a War College study put these at $5.5 million per annum.

A month before Mr. Stimson left office a general order of 6 February 1913 provided for the organization of the mobile Army into divisions and brigades. Within a week its effectiveness was first tested. An uprising in Mexico against President Madero caused anxious moments in Washington and a midnight cabinet session in the White House. The President and his associates remembered only too well previous troubles along the Mexican border and in Mexico City. Not only had they resulted in loss of American lives but also in numerous frustrations and delays concerning the mobilization of adequate protective forces. In spring of 1911 when Madero had led his uprising, it had taken nearly two weeks to assemble a regiment or two at San Antonio and no less than three months to concentrate a full-strength division there! To add irony to inefficiency, no sooner had this force been assembled than it was again disbanded.

There were no adequate covering forces at the border when Madero was challenged, in turn, in February 1913; neither did there exist an emergency strike force to protect the US Embassy and citizens in Mexico City. Much to the relief of the President and his

*Evidently Mr. Stimson did not reckon with the longevity of special interests. When he returned to the War Department in 1940, 18 of the 25 posts that he had recommended in 1912 for abandonment were still operative!

*Up to this period the largest operational peacetime unit was the regiment.

cabinet, Stimson simply and quickly dispatched a five sentence order. It immediately prepared the New England brigade for intervention from its embarkation point at Newport News, Virginia. The brigade was ready to move the next day, but intervention proved unnecessary. Yet the reformers had the satisfaction of knowing that their new organization worked smoothly and fast.

Among the lesser reforms effected during Stimson's tenure of office, the consolidation of the supply services was the most significant. The Secretary had supported the proposed merger of the Quartermaster, Subsistence, and Pay Departments as likely to benefit both the efficiency and the economy of the supply services. However, he expressed opposition to proposed cuts of general officers in these services. When the consolidation of the various service departments into a Quartermaster Corps was finally enacted through the appropriations bill of 24 August 1912, Stimson declared himself well pleased. A further organizational anachronism and administrative monstrosity had been removed. In addition, some savings could be made from this long overdue merger.

Progress was also made toward a reduction in the ever present overflow of paper work. The General Staff had worked out a master plan for the simplification of the entire records system. It was approved by Mr. Stimson on 11 July 1912 and published in General Order No. 23. Yet he showed both his common sense and his sense of fairness when he retained, after due consideration, a modified version of the muster rolls, the very item that had touched off the final showdown between Generals Ainsworth and Wood.

Some small reductions were also made in overall operating costs. Stimson had figured that the individual US soldier was five times more expensive to maintain than his European counterparts—and this did not take into account the much higher subsistence and pay requirements of the American soldier. The Secretary took some pride in the fact that he had succeeded in reducing by $1.75 million the Army estimates for 1914. The budget for that year remained well below the hundred million mark.

But his major concern was with the larger problems of organization and operation. One of his most innovative plans was the creation of a National Defense Council. Such body, he rightly thought, would bring closer together the civilian and military branches of the Government. It would also ensure "a continuous intelligent treatment of our military and naval problems."

In actuality, it took nearly half a century to accomplish several of these reforms and embody such visions. However, the fact that he had seen the need for these changes attests to Secretary Stimson's farsightedness and proves him all the more justified in having asked three decades earlier for essential and oftentimes overdue modifications. Given the brief span left to him in office after the settling of the all-consuming conflict over authority, Mr. Stimson did remarkably well.

It stood to reason that men like General Wood, so much indebted to him, would praise his improvements in Army organization and operation. But testimony as to his achievements and his conduct was also forthcoming from other and less biased quarters. Few of the testimonials were more impressive than that by General William Crozier. The new President of the Army War

US Army

Brigadier General William Crozier, President of the Army War College from 1 September 1912 to 1 July 1913.

College wrote on 7 March 1913 when Henry Stimson left office:

> I wish to express to you my sense of the great prominence with which your methods of administration and your interest and industry in informing yourself as to the spirits and needs of the military machine over which you have presided stand out in comparison with what I have been in a position to closely observe for nearly forty years. It is keen pleasure to work under a chief in such conditions.

In perspective, such laudatory comments appear completely valid. Mr. Stimson in his first tenure of office at the War Department had effectively carried forward the Army reform movement initiated by Secretary Root a decade earlier. He had given plentiful evidence of the energy, integrity, tenacity, and perspicacity which were to mark his later career and, specifically, his second tour of duty as Secretary of War. Above all, he had convincingly demonstrated in his conduct and actions alike that a man could be deeply rooted in a traditional value system yet not cut himself off from the winds of change and the light of progress. Among his many valuable services, his strengthening of the authority of the Army General Staff must rank as a contribution of profound significance. Yet it was only one of many accomplishments in a long life dedicated alike to national service in peace and war. Even now some of the innovations of Henry L. Stimson as Secretary of War before 1914 continue to prove their enduring viability.

Reform, that you may preserve.

—Lord Macaulay
1831