

# The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters

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Volume 9  
Number 1 *Parameters* 1979

Article 31

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7-4-1979

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### Recommended Citation

Donald Smythe, "YOUR AUTHORITY IN FRANCE WILL BE SUPREME': THE BAKER-PERSHING RELATIONSHIP IN WWI," *Parameters* 9, no. 1 (1979), doi:10.55540/0031-1723.1191.

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# 'YOUR AUTHORITY IN FRANCE WILL BE SUPREME':

## THE BAKER-PERSHING RELATIONSHIP IN WORLD WAR I

by

DONALD SMYTHE

**D**uring World War I, President Woodrow Wilson had little direct contact with General John J. Pershing. The President met the general only once in that period, on 24 May 1917, four days before Pershing sailed for Europe. Their brief meeting was cordial, but Wilson frankly surprised Pershing by talking very little about the war and giving no particular instructions.<sup>1</sup>

The administration dealt with its field commander mainly through its Secretary of War, Newton D. Baker, who gave Pershing unqualified support. Baker is reputed to have said to him: "I will give you only two orders—one to go to France and the other to come home. In the meantime your authority in France will be supreme."<sup>2</sup> It certainly was. As George C. Marshall Jr. remarked to Pershing after the war:

Though we have a hundred more wars, I do not think we will ever be so lucky in the choice of a Secretary. I cannot conceive of any future field commander ever being accorded the support you received.<sup>3</sup>

### AMALGAMATION

Baker's support of Pershing was shown

most especially in the amalgamation controversy with the Allies, which began in December 1917 and continued to the following summer. To the hard-pressed British and French, amalgamation made good sense. The American buildup was terribly slow. Nine months after declaring war, the United States had only 175,000 troops in France. Of four combat divisions, only one had been in the front lines, and that only on a battalion level and in a quiet sector.<sup>4</sup>

But with Russia out of the war, many German divisions released from the east would soon be on the Western Front, giving the enemy an estimated 60-percent manpower advantage. Italy was still reeling after the Caporetto debacle in October. England had just ended the catastrophic campaign of Ypres and Passchendaele. France, hardly recovered from the failure of the Nivelle offensive and the army mutinies the previous spring, had reached her manpower limit. Thus, with strong German offensives expected in the spring, the war might well be lost before America could organize and train its own army.<sup>5</sup>

Accordingly, from December 1917 on, the Allies made strong attempts to amalgamate American companies or battalions into Allied

units, with the understanding that when the emergency had passed they could be recalled for service in American divisions. They contended that raw American recruits would train better and faster if associated with British and French veterans. American commanders and staffs were inexperienced and less apt to use competently the magnificent American manpower than their Allied counterparts, who had been tried and tested by more than three years of war. Furthermore, the trans-Atlantic transport problem was such that by the time America brought over the support troops and impedimenta to sustain a separate army, the war might well be lost.<sup>6</sup>

Concerned, President Wilson talked the matter over with Secretary Baker, who cabled Pershing on 18 December:

Both English and French are pressing upon the President their desires to have your forces amalgamated with theirs by regiments and companies, and both express the belief in impending heavy drive by Germans somewhere along the lines of the Western Front. We do not desire loss of identity of our forces but regard that as secondary to the meeting of any critical situation by the most helpful use possible of the troops at your command.<sup>7</sup>

In effect, then, the administration was willing to consent to amalgamation if the situation were sufficiently "critical." But it reserved judgment on that matter, not to itself, but to its overseas commander, Pershing, who was on the spot and who could more accurately assess the situation. The President, Baker told Pershing, "desires you to have full authority to use the forces at your command as you deem wise," although he did suggest consultation with French and British counterparts.<sup>8</sup>

Pershing did consult, but he was strongly opposed to amalgamation, except in extreme emergency and then only temporarily. "No people with a grain of national pride would consent to furnish men to build up the army of another nation," he said.<sup>9</sup>

In addition, he contended that no matter

what the Allies said, they would not easily permit him to reclaim amalgamated American troops (a contention borne out by subsequent experience); that Americans would have language difficulties in serving with the French; and that Americans would inevitably resent any British or French mistake which got large numbers of American troops killed. In addition, the Allies seemed to be training more for trench than for open warfare, which he advocated.<sup>10</sup>

On 1 January 1918, Pershing cabled Baker:

Do not think emergency now exists that would warrant our putting companies or battalions into British or French divisions, and would not do so except in grave crisis.<sup>11</sup>

That crisis occurred on 21 March 1918, when the Germans launched a massive offensive against the British. Suddenly the Western Front, which since October 1914 had scarcely moved 10 miles in either direction, had a hole in it 40 miles deep and 40 wide.<sup>12</sup>

Six days later, on 27 March, the military representatives of the Supreme War Council unanimously passed Joint Note Number 18, which stated:

It is highly desirable that the American Government should assist the Allied armies as soon as possible by permitting, in

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principle, the temporary service of American units in Allied army corps and divisions. . . . In execution of the foregoing, and until otherwise directed by the Supreme War Council, only American infantry and machine-gun units . . . [should] be brought to France.<sup>13</sup>

The text was written by an American, General Tasker H. Bliss, and passed over Pershing's objections. The following day, Secretary Baker, who happened to be in Europe, also overruled Pershing and recommended to the President that he approve Joint Note Number 18 "in view of the present critical situation."<sup>14</sup>

**O**ne should note that the decision by Bliss and Baker to give priority shipment to infantry and machine-gun units necessarily postponed organization and training of complete American divisions and thus made impossible the formation of an independent American army, at least for the time. Pershing is frequently presented in American history books as a great white knight battling the evil Europeans in their scheming machinations to prevent the formation of an American army, but the situation was not so black and white. Bliss and Baker supported the Europeans, as did General Leonard Wood, Admiral William S. Sims, and Colonel Edward M. House—all Americans and all as patriotic as Pershing. As House said:

Pershing's feeling that an American army under his command should be established and made as formidable as possible is understandable. Nevertheless, the thing to be done now is to stop the Germans and to stop them it is evident that we must put in every man that is available.<sup>15</sup>

A case can be made that Pershing was myopic and narrow in his view of the crisis. David Lloyd George, the British Prime Minister, felt that Pershing was impervious to "intelligence and common sense," preferring to build up a separate American army even if it meant losing the war.<sup>16</sup>

One should note also that Joint Note Number 18 made no specific mention of the number of infantry and machine-gun units that were to be shipped, nor of the length of time that they would be given preferential shipment. Later Lloyd George filled in the details by asking that 120,000 be shipped each month for the next four months (April, May, June, and July 1918). On 19 April, after returning to America and consulting with the President, Baker approved the request. On that date, he handed Lord Reading, the British High Commissioner in America, a memorandum stating that his decision was made because of "the exigencies of the present military situation."<sup>17</sup>

When Pershing read the 19 April memorandum later, he exclaimed, "If this isn't amalgamation what is it?"<sup>18</sup> Even though Baker specified that the troops, when transported to Europe, were to be under Pershing's direction and trained and used at his discretion, what else could he do with them except feed them into Allied ranks in an emergency? It was either that or sit out the war. He lacked the auxiliary and supply services to build up separate American divisions, much less separate corps and armies.<sup>19</sup>

**B**y some inexplicable quirk, the Administration failed to inform Pershing of Baker's important memorandum until 26 April, one week after it had been given to Lord Reading.<sup>20</sup> Although Pershing heard a rumor of it through the British liaison officer at his headquarters at Chaumont, he disbelieved it, feeling there must have been some mistake.<sup>21</sup> Hence, when the British in London produced a cable from Reading quoting Baker's memorandum of 19 April, Pershing insisted that Reading must have misunderstood Baker (Pershing was in London from 22 to 24 April to confer about shipping). Such a concession about amalgamation could not possibly have been made, he contended, and he would not be bound by it.<sup>22</sup>

Although the British gnashed their teeth at Pershing's refusal and were sure he was wrong, they decided to come to terms with

him. Even under the 19 April memorandum, he had something they very much wanted—discretion to decide where American troops went after they arrived in Europe. Thus far the British could expect only 60,000, and those only during the month of April under an earlier agreement made by Baker and Pershing.<sup>23</sup>

Accordingly, Lord Alfred Milner, the British War Minister, signed an agreement with Pershing on 24 April (the London Agreement), whereby during the month of May infantry and machine-gun units of six divisions would be brought over for training and service with the British. Artillery personnel were to be brought over next, and should any surplus shipping be available, it would bring over whatever Pershing wanted to balance out his forces.<sup>24</sup>

When Pershing returned to Chaumont, he was startled to receive a copy of Baker's memorandum of 19 April, promising priority shipment of 120,000 infantry and machine-guns a month from April through July. Only then did he realize how far off base he had been in London. Whereas Baker had committed himself to a priority shipment of 480,000 infantry and machine-guns stretched over four months, Pershing had allowed the British only 126,000, and this only for the month of May, exacting a promise that the British bring over artillery personnel and other troops "immediately thereafter."<sup>25</sup>

The question now was, Which agreement would the United States honor?

By all rights, it should have been the Baker memorandum of 19 April, made by Pershing's superior, the Secretary of War. But once Baker learned of the 24 April London Agreement, he decided to support it, perhaps thinking that if the British were willing to agree to it, things were not as bad as they had seemed. Furthermore, Pershing was on the scene. His London Agreement preserved American freedom of action, kept future options open, and did not so drastically postpone the formation of a separate American army.<sup>26</sup>

The fact that two separate and contradictory agreements had been made

brought home to Secretary Baker the inevitable confusion of trying to carry on negotiations simultaneously on both sides of the Atlantic. Accordingly, he strongly recommended to President Wilson that any future arrangements be made only by Pershing, "so that we would have one agreement made at one place, rather than several agreements made in several places which were more or less irreconcilable in some of their terms." To their great vexation, the British and French Ambassadors were told that Baker would make no further agreements with them concerning troop shipments; on this question the man to see was Pershing.<sup>27</sup>

Pershing was to have subsequent battles over the amalgamation question, but his hand was strengthened by knowing that he had the backing of the Secretary of War, to whose judgment the President of the United States would ordinarily defer. George C. Marshall Jr. was right when he told Pershing: "Though we have a hundred more wars, . . . I cannot conceive of any future field commander ever being accorded the support you received."<sup>28</sup>

#### THE GOETHALS PROPOSAL

A second instance in which Baker supported Pershing was the logistic crisis during the summer of 1918, which led to the so-called Goethals Proposal. Because of priority shipments given to infantry and machine-guns in the spring, producing a consequent lack of supply troops, the American Expeditionary Force (AEF) began to fall progressively behind in moving supplies from the ships, through the ports, and to the troops inland. A massive bottleneck was building up at the ports.<sup>29</sup>

In Washington the feeling grew that Pershing was trying to do too much, attempting to wear too many hats. Sir William Wiseman, a British agent there who had the ear of both Colonel House and President Wilson, warned that the AEF was heading for a supply crisis and that something must be done about it.<sup>30</sup>

Secretary Baker agreed and decided to

appoint as logistical chief in Europe General George W. Goethals, an engineer who had carried the construction of the Panama Canal through to completion and a man with an international reputation as an administrator. On 6 July Baker wrote Pershing that he planned to send Goethals to Europe to handle supplies and that, in order to free Pershing to devote full time to training and fighting his army, Goethals would be in a coordinate, rather than subordinate, position to Pershing.<sup>31</sup>

Pershing gagged on the letter, which arrived 26 July. To him an independent supply chief violated a fundamental military principle—unity of command. In all the major armies the field commander also controlled the supply lines. Only thus could military operations and their logistical support be properly coordinated.<sup>32</sup>

Fortunately for Pershing, Baker's proposal was only a suggestion. As always, the Secretary was extraordinarily deferential to his field commander. "Will take no action until we are in perfect accord," he promised. "My whole purpose in this matter is to get all of the data before you and rather to aid you to come to a right conclusion than to impose my own."<sup>33</sup>

To tell the truth, Pershing knew that his supply organization needed shaking up.<sup>34</sup> On 27 July, the day after receiving Baker's letter, Pershing relieved the Services of Supply commander and appointed Major General James G. Harbord, a trusted subordinate, in his stead. That same day he sent off a confidential cable to the Secretary of War marked "RUSH RUSH RUSH RUSH." The supply system, he said,

includes transportation up to the trenches and is intimately interwoven with our whole organization. The whole must remain absolutely under one head. Any division of responsibility or coordinate control in any sense would be fatal. The man who fights the armies must control their supply through subordinates responsible to him alone. The responsibility is then fixed and the possibility of conflicting authority avoided. This military principle is vital and cannot be violated without inviting failure. It is the

very principle which we all urged upon the Allies when we got a supreme commander. . . . I very earnestly urge upon you Mr. Secretary that no variation from this principle be permitted.<sup>35</sup>

Later that day Pershing sent another cable, asking Baker to postpone a decision until a letter on the subject could reach him. He also urged the Secretary to visit Europe again "just as soon as possible." Pershing was obviously worried by what he considered a threat, in the person of Goethals with coordinate authority, to his AEF organization.<sup>36</sup>

The following day Pershing wrote a letter repeating his arguments, especially that of unity of command and responsibility.<sup>37</sup> Still later that day he wrote again, suggesting that if Baker felt strongly on the matter, Goethals could be sent to Europe to look things over, but with no promise of command. Pershing could ascertain his attitude and decide if he would fit in. He was insistent, however, that it must be as a subordinate.<sup>38</sup>

Two cables and two letters within 48 hours! The Secretary had touched a sensitive nerve.

Baker realized this and decided to drop the Goethals idea. He was won over by Pershing's arguments against divided authority and realized that Goethals, while extremely competent, was not an easy man to work with, whereas Harbord worked well with Pershing and had his entire confidence. Urged on by Baker and House, whom Pershing had contacted, the President decided that "nothing would be done contrary to Pershing's wishes."<sup>39</sup> Rarely has an overseas commander received greater support from his superiors.

## THE ARMISTICE

The only time during the war when Pershing overreached himself with his superiors concerned the armistice. On 25 October 1918, Marshal Foch called a conference of the Allied commanders to determine, not whether an armistice should be granted, but—assuming one was—what the precise terms should be.<sup>40</sup>

Since Foch had not called the meeting to

discuss alternatives, Pershing did not bring up the question of surrender. He felt strongly about it, however, and had serious reservations about granting any armistice at all. Such was the Allies' progress that he felt they were justified in demanding unconditional surrender.<sup>41</sup>

On 25 October Pershing cabled the War Department, reporting the meeting and summarizing the proposed armistice terms. Baker's reply, dated 27 October, gave the President's reaction to the terms and added this significant sentence:

The President . . . is relying upon your counsel and advice in this matter and . . . will be glad to have you feel entirely free to bring to his attention any consideration he may have overlooked.<sup>42</sup>

Baker and the President were thinking about modifications in the armistice terms. Pershing took the message to mean he was authorized to suggest modification of the basic approach, that is, to propose surrender rather than an armistice.

In retrospect, it is clear that Pershing should have proposed his idea of unconditional surrender directly to the War Department and awaited a decision. But events were moving swiftly in Europe. The Supreme War Council was scheduled to meet on 30 October, and Pershing did not receive Baker's message of 27 October until the day before. Colonel House was in Europe, but as bad luck would have it, Pershing was unable to talk to him, being confined to his room with a bad case of the grippe.<sup>43</sup>

On Wednesday, 30 October, the first day that Pershing was back in circulation, he met Colonel House five minutes before the Supreme War Council met and gave him a copy of a document he had sent to it that very day, summarizing his arguments against an armistice and calling for unconditional surrender. A copy was simultaneously sent to the War Department.<sup>44</sup>

House was dismayed by the document. While Pershing was quite within his rights to suggest specific armistice terms when requested, he was obviously out of place in suggesting that the war should not be

terminated at all, or should eventually be terminated one way rather than another—especially when unasked. President Wilson had determined on an armistice, as had other Allied leaders. Pershing was meddling where he did not belong. He was that worst of all things: a general mixing in politics.<sup>45</sup>

Pershing's document produced consternation in Washington. Baker told the President: "He is obviously on record one way with you and another way with the Supreme War Council! It is really tragic."<sup>46</sup>

Baker was wrong in thinking that Pershing's 25 October and 30 October documents contradicted each other. The first one, as Foch said in opening the meeting that day, addressed what the armistice terms should be if there were an armistice. The latter addressed simply whether there should be an armistice.

Washington was right, however, in feeling that Pershing had violated instructions. He had been told in Baker's 27 October cable that if he had any other ideas, he was to communicate them to the President; he was also urged to confer with Colonel House, who was on the spot. Pershing did neither of these things. He sent his ideas on unconditional surrender directly to the Supreme War Council and let the President know about it afterwards. He did the same with House, merely handing him a carbon of his document on the way into the meeting. On both points he was clearly out of order.<sup>47</sup>

Called upon to explain his conduct, Pershing cited Baker's 27 October cable authorizing him to "feel entirely free" to bring up other considerations.<sup>48</sup> Baker was unsatisfied with this explanation. "A bad matter is made much worse by this," he said, and drew up a letter of reprimand, stressing that political matters were outside military jurisdiction. On the President's advice, however, he decided not to send it. After all, the war was almost over.<sup>49</sup>

**W**ith this sole exception, Pershing had his own way in Europe as far as the President and Secretary of War were concerned. "Your authority in France will be supreme," Baker had told Pershing when he

went to Europe.<sup>50</sup> That supremacy is borne out by the record.

#### NOTES

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7. Baker, VII, 417.
8. *Ibid.*
9. Pershing, *My Experiences*, I, 254-55.
10. *USAWW*, II, 132.
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14. *Ibid.*, pp. 261-62.
15. Seymour, III, 444; Frederick Maurice, "General Pershing and the A.E.F.," *Foreign Affairs*, 9 (July 1931), 602; Lloyd Griscom to Pershing, 16 July 1918, Box 85, Pershing Papers.
16. Lloyd George, V, 3018.
17. *USAWW*, II, 336-37.
18. Pershing notation penciled on Baker memorandum of 19 April 1918, in Box 19, Pershing Papers.
19. Pershing, *My Experiences*, II, 8; *USAWW*, II, 283-85 and 336-37.
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31. Pershing, *My Experiences*, II, 185-86.
32. *Ibid.*, pp. 180-81; Harbord, *American Army*, p. 352.
33. Baker to Pershing, 30 July 1918, Box 19, Pershing Papers.
34. Pershing to James G. Harbord, 30 January 1935, James G. Harbord Papers, New York Historical Society; Harbord, *American Army*, p. 353; Harbord, *Leaves*, p. 339.
35. Pershing, *My Experiences*, II, 177; *USAWW*, II, 553. Later that year, during the great Meuse-Argonne campaign, Pershing stripped his Services of Supply of every available man because of a manpower crisis. He did so simply by ordering it. Had the supply services been under an independent commander, responsible not to Pershing but to Washington, it might not have been so easy (*My Experiences*, II, 180-81).
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37. Pershing, *My Experiences*, II, 190-91.
38. Pershing to Baker, 28 July 1918, Box 19, Pershing Papers.
39. Baker to Pershing, 30 July 1918, Box 19, Pershing Papers; Pershing to House, 7 August 1918, Box 97, Pershing Papers; House diary, 17 August 1918, and Gordon Auchincloss to Arthur Frazier, 21 August 1918—both in House Papers; Wilton B. Fowler, *British-American Relations, 1917-1918: The Role of Sir William Wiseman* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1969), p. 156.
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41. *USAWW*, X, 29; Pershing, *My Experiences*, II, 368-69.
42. Baker to Pershing, 27 October 1918, Box 8, Baker Papers; Pershing, *My Experiences*, II, 360.
43. Pershing diary, 26-30 October 1918, Box 4, Pershing Papers; House diary, 27 October 1918, House Papers; Gordon



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47. Pershing, *My Experiences*, II, 364-65.

48. Baker, *Wilson*, VIII, 561; Pershing cable No. 1869, 4 November 1918, Series II, Box 187, Wilson Papers; Pershing diary, 3 November 1918, Box 4, Pershing Papers.

49. Arthur Walworth, *Woodrow Wilson* (New York: Longmans Green, 1958), II, 192; Baker to Wilson, 5 November 1918, and Wilson to Baker, 7 November 1918—both in Series II, Box 187, Wilson Papers. The Baker letter of reprimand to Pershing, 5 November 1918, can no longer be found in either the Baker or Wilson Papers, but I am indebted to Dr. Bullitt Lowry of North Texas State University for furnishing me a copy of the letter which he copied years ago from Box 8 of the Baker Papers.

50. Palmer, I, 180. See n. 2. above.

