Was U.S. insistence on maintaining military independence a decisive element in the Allied victory?

Viewpoint: Yes. Military independence allowed the American forces to defend Paris successfully in the summer of 1918 and to spearhead the decisive counteroffensive in September of the same year.

Viewpoint: No. American troops performed poorly under their own officers, and the Allied victory can be attributed simply to the American role in introducing two million fresh troops at a time when the Central Powers had no more manpower reserves.

Viewpoint: No. General Pershing’s intransigence concerning the integration of U.S. troops into existing Allied units cost lives and time when both were in short supply.

The American Expeditionary Force (AEF) was employed more incrementally in World War I than General John Pershing—or anyone else, Allied and American—wanted. The rapid entry of the United States into the war from a position of near-total military unpreparedness meant that until the fall of 1918 the direct American contribution to the war effort was minor. It took almost a year for the U.S. Army to put a single division into the line, and even that formation was largely composed of poorly trained draftees, for all its designation as a “regular army” formation.

That in turn required the British and French to accept on faith—or rather, on Pershing’s word—that the United States could deliver combat-ready divisions in time to make a difference. Pershing’s approach to doctrine and training, especially his emphasis on rifle marksmanship and open-warfare tactics, has been sharply criticized. AEF levels of training, never impressive, diminished as high casualty rates forced men to the front, men who could often not load their rifles—and according to some accounts, were charged $5 a lesson by their capitalistic comrades in arms. Nevertheless, the Americans learned quickly enough to merit praise from those in the best position to know: the Germans. The AEF compensated for such structural weaknesses as a shortage of Allied officers. It organized a Service of Supply that overlaid French administrative structures. Without trivializing the consequences of the negative synergies of inexperience and improvisation in the AEF, by contrast the U.S. Army in World War II had a year and a half to train before committing division-sized units to battle. In eighteen months the war began and ended for the AEF.

Pershing not only formed an effective army but also used it well. That fact was manifested even in the Argonne campaign, the one most often cited as bringing the AEF nearly to gridlock. Pershing erred by using too many inexperienced divisions unnecessarily in the first wave and against key objectives. In the later stages of the operation, however, even less-experienced divisions performed well, while the administrative chaos of the initial attack was also coming under control. A reasonable case can be made that only the armistice kept Pershing from the kind of semimobile breakthrough-cum-pushback that the Allies were achieving in other
sctors. That the war might have ended before the Germans were convinced of their defeat was not the fault of Pershing or his men.

Viewpoint:
Yes. Military independence allowed the American forces to defend Paris successfully in the summer of 1918 and to spearhead the decisive counteroffensive in September of the same year.

The entry of the United States into World War I suggested to many British and French leaders that any commitment of American troops to European battlefields would mean their subordination to the more-experienced military commanders of Britain and France. Indeed, as the war progressed in the years before American involvement, Britain, France, Russia, and their lesser allies had developed an elaborate system of consultation on military matters. Given its limited military experience, the United States was expected to join this structure on a junior footing. When the French commander in chief, Marshal Joseph Joffre, said that he needed “men, men, men,” he was referring to foot soldiers that his field commanders and their British counterparts could command in battle, not to independent American commanders who would decide priorities and execute serious decisions. European expectations were disappointed. Under the leadership of General John Pershing, the American Expeditionary Force (AEF) sent to France maintained its independence from European commanders.

There were few reasons why American troops should have been placed under foreign command. Constitutionally, the president of the United States is commander in chief of the armed forces. This position has not been a mere ceremonial privilege that exists on paper, with the actual decision making left to others, as the British monarch’s military command authority is. From the first days of American nationhood, its presidents had used the army as an instrument of national policy to defend independence, expand the frontiers westward, to preserve the integrity of the Union, and to rise finally to a major international role. Day-to-day command may have been left to experts, but American presidents are empowered to take, and they usually exercise, broad authority over military affairs and strategic planning. Surrendering this power to foreign generals, and to their political leaders, represented an unacceptable breach of national sovereignty and an unwanted erosion of presidential power. Indeed, the precedent of preserving direct or de facto control of American armed forces remained a cornerstone of U.S. military policy until President William Clinton placed American troops under nominal United Nations command in Bosnia-Herzegovina in December 1995.

The notion of placing the AEF under European command also contradicted the U.S. precedent of not entering into entangling alliances with foreign powers. Although the United States had long sympathized with Britain and France, entered the war on their side, and has been conventionally regarded as one of several Allied powers, there was never any formal alliance treaty defining it as such. The preferred phrase of the Wilson administration to describe the American position in the conflict was “associated power,” implying only that the United States and the Entente powers had a common enemy in Germany, and nothing more.

While the United States had broad strategic reasons for involvement in the war, especially preventing Germany from establishing hegemony over continental Europe, Congress and American public opinion would only contemplate armed participation in combat situations directed against the clear enemy. Despite the obvious biases of his administration toward Britain and France, President Woodrow Wilson had only been able to secure a Congressional endorsement for a declaration of war after a series of direct German submarine attacks on American merchant ships. Subordinating American troops to European military command would have meant that they could technically have been used for any purpose that foreign commanders decided. Since British and French political leaders, particularly British prime minister David Lloyd George and French premier Georges Clemenceau, intruded broadly into military and strategic planning, it was probable that they would at least try to use American troops for their own political ends. Conceivably these decisions could have included operations against Austria-Hungary, even though Congress only voted a symbolic declaration of war against it in December 1917, or against Bulgaria and the Ottoman Empire, even though no state of war ever existed between those two countries and the United States. Diverting American forces to fight on those fronts may seem extreme or impractical in retrospect, but it was entirely possible that Britain and France would have tried to pressure the United States to aid them in more places than the Western Front. In the diplomatic maneuvering of the postwar set-
tlement, moreover, the Entente powers suggested that the United States take up an expensive and resource-consuming mandate over distant Armenia after Britain and Italy determined that it would be too costly for them to do so. Keeping American troops under American command ensured that they would only be used in accordance with the predetermined policies and interests of Washington.

Maintaining independent American military command had implications that went far beyond wartime strategic concerns. As is the case in any conflict, the combatant powers of World War I established a preliminary outline of what they wanted to achieve in the peace settlement. A significant function of the American decision to enter the war came from the realization that if a new postwar order were made in the absence of U.S. influence or participation, that order could only be crafted to the detriment of its commercial and strategic interests. President Wilson and his foreign policy advisers had clear evidence that this situation would be the case as early as May 1916, when they learned of clandestine inter-Allied discussions on postwar economic relations. One item on the Allies’ agenda was a consideration of the role of American economic strength in world affairs, and the conclusion reached at the conference was that the rising power would have to be contained through aggressive protectionism and a coordination of Entente economic, trade, and financial policies.

This discovery was a source of both surprise and dismay to Wilson, who was even then supplying British and French armies in the field and edging toward war. He could not fail to consider that the dubious postwar plans of the Allies would remain the basis of their approach to peace, even if the United States entered the war on their side. Since the Entente powers could not prevail easily—or possibly at all—without American military help, the president and his advisers feared that the British and French would use any subordination of U.S. troops under their command to minimize the apparent decisiveness of their contribution to the victory. All the while, however, the Americans would be maximizing their battlefield usefulness. British and French planners, in other words, wanted to use the brawn of American manpower to win the war and then exclude the brains of its strategic planners from crafting the peace.

With a few notable exceptions, most British and French generals dismissed the quality and reliability of U.S. troops even before they were sent into combat. When the Americans acquitted themselves bravely and proved their combat effectiveness, the same naysayers argued that the American contribution was only partially effective, or that U.S. units simply had the luck to be engaged against German troops that were already preparing to retreat. In both cases, the implication was that American troops were a marginal asset and that their contribution to victory was not decisive. These assertions are best seen as politically motivated rhetoric. If America did, in fact, make an indisputably large contribution to victory, how could it be denied an equal role in forging the peace? Conversely, if its contribution truly had been marginal, how could it be given an equal role in forging the peace?

Of course the chauvinistic pronouncements of the Allied generals were not true. Two million American troops were in France by the end of the war, taking the field at a time when the British could no longer replace their losses, when much of the French army was still stewing in near-mutinous conditions, and when revolutionary Russia had left the war permanently. Despite their relatively late start in combat, American units played a crucial role in defending the approaches to Paris in the summer of 1918, often attacking or counterattacking while the French units deployed beside them were retreating in confusion. If American troops were unnecessary, how could they also have been critical to the defense of the capital of France? The front-wide offensive of September 1918 was one of the greatest victories of American arms in history. In less than three weeks, Pershing and the six hundred thousand American troops under his command broke the stalemate on the Western Front, erased the German gains of 1918, and drove the Germans back beyond positions they had held since 1914. This success was decisive in convincing even the most reticent officers of the German High Command, including its de facto strategic chief, General Erich Ludendorff, that they could not win the war. The potential consequences of further massive American offensive operations were critical in the German decision to ask for an armistice.

If Pershing’s armies had been placed under European operational control, their singular contribution to victory would certainly have been much less prominent in the operational history of the war and much more easily obscured by the Entente generals’ self-serving and inaccurate depreciation of their role than was actually the case. By keeping American forces independent in 1917–1918, Wilson enjoyed full partnership with the other major Allied leaders at the Paris Peace Conference. While the decline in his health impacted his effectiveness, Wilson’s undeniable presence and prestige enabled him to compel the European powers to abandon many of their more extreme goals (such as the dismem-
berment of the German state) and to accept others that they viewed with clear skepticism (such as the League of Nations). It goes without saying that the prominent position of the United States, ensured by the independence of its military command, decisively prevented the European Allies from containing and marginalizing the international economic and strategic position of the United States after the war.

The political ramifications of surrendering American military independence had the most long-term significance, but apart from these paramount concerns, there were other sound, practical reasons for the United States to keep independent operational control of its armed forces. Despite the Entente commanders’ posturing about their superior experience and greater qualifications to lead armies in modern combat, their track record on the Western Front had little to recommend itself to American leaders. By the time the United States entered the war, Britain and France had already suffered millions of casualties. The huge losses often occurred not because their “expert” leaders had no other choice but to accept them but because they were generally unimaginative and
often highly detached from the harsh realities of modern mechanized warfare. Even though millions of men had fallen in pointless frontal assaults that won little ground, the same tactics were used over and over again with little modification. Attempts to make infantry attacks more successful through the saturation shelling of enemy positions or the close coordination of infantry advances and artillery barrages were only variations on a theme, and the Germans easily identified and countered them. Innovators who argued that tanks and armored cars would make all the difference—as they did in World War II—only saw their ideas implemented on an experimental scale.

For a new combatant such as America, where both the general public and the legislature had only reluctantly committed themselves to war, the prospect of combat losses on the standard scale for the Western Front would undoubtedly have stretched the tolerance of its citizens. Even as the first U.S. contingents were being organized, American strategists and officers were watching the terrible consequences of the British offensive around the Belgian town of Passchendaele, where 250,000 men fell in a futile three-month campaign that gained only a few miles of useless lowlands. Although the American commanders’ expertise was limited to chasing bandits in the Southwest, fighting the decayed Spanish army in 1898, and occupation duty in Latin America and the Philippines, they still had no reason to believe that their troops would be better off in British or French hands. Indeed, notwithstanding their paucity of recent experience, American officers could see plainly that Europe still placed its faith in defending strategic fortresses and executing frontal infantry attacks on nearly impenetrable positions—concepts that had been discredited in American strategic thinking since their disastrous application in the Civil War (1861–1865).

As it turned out, European claims that American troops and commanders were militarily ingenuous could not hide the British and French military commanders’ own sad lack of brilliance and inspiration. Nor did the American lack of experience stop them from successfully defending Paris from the approaching German armies or from playing the leading role in the decisive offensive of September 1918. It is also worth mentioning that the total battlefield casualties of Americans in the entire war were about half the number suffered by the British at Passchendaele alone. Total American combat deaths were two and a half times the number of British soldiers killed on a single day, 1 July 1916—the first day of the Battle of the Somme.

The refusal of the United States to concede authority over its armed forces was necessary for both political and military reasons. Giving over command to British and French commanders would have meant that British and French generals would have been able to use them as an instrument of their national policies while also intruding on an important traditional prerogative of the American presidency. As a result, U.S. troops would almost certainly have been diverted from the goals that their own government had assigned them. They were also likely to have been used for their military power and then denied the proper credit and glory that the United States both deserved as a matter of national honor and needed to assume an equal role at the peace conference. Since the European Allies were already determined to limit American influence in the postwar world, building political capital through military victory was a vital priority that Wilson could not ignore and could not accomplish without insisting on independent military command. Further, American leaders had no logical reason to believe that they could turn over operational command of their armed forces to European officers without needlessly suffering the massive losses that had resulted from almost every other Western Front campaign. Keeping American armed forces under the control of its own commanders was a valuable lesson and remained an important principle of American military policy long after.

--PAUL DU QUENOPY, GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY

**Viewpoint:**

No. American troops performed poorly under their own officers, and the Allied victory can be attributed simply to the American role in introducing two million fresh troops at a time when the Central Powers had no more manpower reserves.

When the United States entered into World War I on the Allied side it suffered from many disadvantages. First of all, the total strength of the U.S. Army in April 1917 was considerably less than the trained manpower available to Bulgaria. In a war that often swallowed up the lives of tens of thousands of soldiers in a day, the total strength of the U.S. Army and National Guard could have been exhausted in one short battle. Second, the United States, although a great industrial power, did not have the means to
The German artillery would show this upstart American division its mistake in thinking that it could hold what it had gained. Eight-inch shells were the favorites in the bombardment of our men, who now had Cantigny at their backs as they dug in, while showers of shrapnel and gas added to the variety of that merciless pounding that kept up for three days. We suffered serious casualties now; but we did not go back, and we took revenge for our casualties in grim use of rifle and machine gun which, with the aid of prompt barrages, repulsed all counter-attacks, until the Germans were convinced of the futility of further efforts.

Later, when I did the usual thing of rising at three in the morning in order to go over our positions at Cantigny, the sector had become settled in its habits though still active. Part of the walls of the chateau which had had a single hit when I first saw it were still standing; all the surrounding village was in ruins almost as complete as if it had been in the Ypres salient.

From the front line I watched the early morning “strafe” of the German guns; the selected points of “hate,” here and there along the front receiving a quarter of an hour’s attention, while the crushed remains of Cantigny were being subjected to additional pulverization. We held the line, but with cunning men hidden in the earth. You hardly knew of the presence unless you stumbled on them.

Everybody you met at the front had a certain air of proprietorship in the sector, and back at headquarters the thoroughbred veteran chief of staff and all the other officers of that much-schooled First received you with their habitual attitude, which seemed to say, “Any suggestions or criticism? We are always listening—but, understand, please, we are the First Division.”

and trained officers but suffered from a grave shortage of men. However, as the nineteenth-century Prussian military strategist Carl von Clausewitz might have reminded the World War I generals, America simply had to field its own army on the Western Front, no matter how inefficient, in order to meet President Woodrow Wilson's political objective of being the primary player at the peace conference that would shape the postwar world.

When President Wilson committed the United States to war in April 1917, American military preparedness was in even worse shape than the president imagined. Only months before, the Army general staff had been rebuked by Congress because the Army War College, which served as the planning staff for the U.S. Army, had actually drawn up the outline for plans in case of war against Germany. Congress had been outraged that the officers charged with planning for war had actually planned for war! Faced with this attitude, the army had done little prior to the declaration of war to prepare for the task ahead. The U.S. Army of 1917 had about 120,000 regular soldiers, as well as 200,000 National Guard troops. The National Guard, in the long tradition of the American militia, was poorly trained and equipped. The U.S. Army was scattered around the country in small garrisons and had rarely trained in a formation larger than a regiment or brigade. The trouble caused by the Mexican bandit Pancho Villa on the American Southwest border in 1916–1917 was a great benefit to the United States because the army was forced to mobilize a large number of National Guard units and concentrate large forces into provisional divisions on the Mexican border. Yet, in Europe, soldiers were being committed to battle on a much larger scale—in armies and army groups.

The material situation of the U.S. military at the start of the war was nothing short of disastrous. The United States had not a single aircraft suitable for combat over the Western Front. There were few machine guns. The Army had only 544 modern artillery field-pieces, with enough ammunition stockpiled to last about one day at the normal firing rates of the Western Front. America was not even able to equip a mass army properly, as it only had 600,000 modern rifles on hand. However, material shortages could, and were, to be made up by Britain and France, whose factories had been geared up to produce vast quantities of equipment and munitions by 1917. An even more-troublesome problem that faced America in 1917 was the lack of trained military leaders.

The junior officers of the U.S. Army were as good as officers anywhere. Standards were high, small-unit training was good, and the military academy at West Point provided a rigorous education to most of the regular army officers. No one doubted that America could find some first-rate leadership material among its National Guard officers or could recruit young men of intelligence, courage, and talent to fill the junior leadership ranks of the U.S. Army. The lack of senior leaders troubled the Allied powers. In April 1917 the entire U.S. Army general staff numbered only nineteen officers. While the U.S. Army offered a sound education program for higher officers, only twenty-three men had gone through both the staff college at Ft. Leavenworth, Kansas, and the Army War College at Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania. While the United States might be able to recruit and conscript a large army quickly from its population of one hundred million, there were hardly enough officers trained and qualified to fill a division or corps staff—much less provide competent leadership for a large army. Despite every effort, the decision to field a large independent U.S. Army on the Western Front was also a decision to go into battle with weak and untrained military leadership.

While General John Pershing and President Wilson get the blame for most of the strategic decisions made by the United States at the start of World War I, there were several other major players who had an equally significant role in the creation of a large, independent U.S. Army on the Western Front. When the United States declared war on 6 April 1917, Britain and France immediately sent large and high-ranking political/military delegations to the United States to set up a process of Allied strategy. In many cases, strategic direction depends more on personalities and personal relationships than upon logic—and U.S. military strategy in World War I was such a case. The French had the wisdom of sending a delegation headed by a former premier, René Viviani, and including Joseph Joffre, Marshal of France and chief of the French army to late 1916. The British sent a delegation headed by Lord Arthur Balfour, with Major General George Bridges as its military adviser. The two delegations offered opposing strategies to the Americans and, in the end, Gallic charm overcame British logic, and the U.S. military strategy was mapped out.

From the beginning of his visit, Joffre charmed the Americans and, in turn, the Americans greatly admired the modest hero of the Marne. Joffre had been tasked by his government to establish a "general outline of a
policy of cooperation between the US and Allied nations.” Joffre had a better grasp of political reality than most politicians. At the start of his visit he determined that any scheme to simply fit U.S. forces into the Allied ranks would be politically unacceptable. Even if President Wilson countenanced it (which he would not), the U.S. Congress would not tolerate it. When he met with the U.S. Army chief of staff, General Hugh Scott, on 27 April 1917, Joffre proposed that the United States immediately form a division and send it to France as a symbol of the American contribution to the war. The U.S. unit would initially serve under French command and the French would train and equip other U.S. divisions until there were enough forces to form a full army. The drawback of the plan was the long time it would take for the Americans to have an effect upon the battlefield.

The British proposed an “amalgamation” scheme by which American soldiers, or small U.S. units not larger than a battalion, would be quickly trained and directly incorporated into the British army. With no unit larger than a battalion at the front, the critical lack of trained senior American officers would not be a factor. It made tremendous military sense and it meant that the United States could quickly have a major impact on the war. Yet, this proposal met with a hostile reaction from the senior U.S. military leadership, as well as from President Wilson and Secretary of War Newton Baker. They believed that the U.S. flag had to be prominently displayed on the Western Front—and this decision meant an independent U.S. army. In May 1917 the U.S. Army drew up plans that endorsed Joffre’s concept in toto. When General Pershing was appointed as the commander of the American Expeditionary Force (AEF) his instructions from Secretary Baker were quite clear. While U.S. troops might at first serve under British and French command, the U.S. Army would field force under its own flag as soon as possible.

To their credit, the Allied powers, especially the French, put forth an enormous effort to train and equip the American army in World War I. The French worked especially hard to train the U.S. military leadership. Thousands of American officers and noncommissioned officers (NCOs) were trained in specialist courses run by the French army. The French also set up a short general staff course before the end of the war. U.S. divisions were trained by experienced French units and instructors before being committed to combat, and the U.S. Army was rapidly equipped with French machine guns, artillery, and airplanes.

The first major engagements of the AEF in June/July 1918 proved that the doubts held by the British and French officers concerning U.S. leadership and the ability to fight effectively were well justified. The Americans were unable to plan, or to coordinate artillery fire and troop movements. In the corps counteroffensive at Soissons, the First and Second U.S. Divisions captured 143 German guns and 6,500 German prisoners of war, but at the appalling cost of 12,200 casualties. The Americans had proven tactically and operationally deficient and had only accomplished the mission through incredible bravery.

Despite the poor performance of the U.S. Army leadership in the summer fighting of 1918, Pershing pressed the Allied high command to field an independent U.S. Army as soon as possible. The war was going against Germany by this time, and the United States was determined to play an independent role on the battlefield. In September 1918 the First U.S. Army took to the field to eliminate a fairly minor German salient at St. Mihiel. In October, the U.S. Army, now with more than 2 million men in France and more arriving daily, was given a long stretch of the front in the Meuse-Argonne.

The Meuse-Argonne offensive of October-November 1918 was the one major U.S. offensive in the war. The Americans were successful in pushing back part of the German line and contributing to the final Allied victory—but at a tremendous cost. While poorly trained American soldiers carried the day with almost suicidal bravery and a willingness to take horrendous losses, the officers and staffs proved unequal to the task of fighting veteran German formations. Planning and logistics were poor, infantry/artillery coordination failed, and American units attacked with methods more suitable for 1914 than 1918. In just a month, the U.S. Army took more than two hundred thousand casualties in a secondary offensive. If the U.S. Army had been under experienced foreign commanders, the losses would certainly have been much lower.

While the U.S. Army performed poorly as an independent army in the 1918 campaigns, it had a decisive effect on the war simply by its arrival. The Germans, faced with two million fresh and highly aggressive American troops, knew that they would be getting no more replacements for their losses. The numbers alone made the German request for an armistice necessary.

—JAMES CORUM, USAF SCHOOL OF ADVANCED AIRPOWER STUDIES
In 1916 Woodrow Wilson ran for a second term for the presidency of the United States, and one of his most consistent slogans on billboards, celluloid buttons, and the like was "He Kept Us Out Of War." He made promises not to send American troops to fight on the Western Front, or on any front of the European war, for that matter. When World War I broke out in August 1914, Wilson promised that the United States would be the great neutral—the struggle old Europe was of no concern to the New World. There were nagging doubts, however, about the course of the war: it had not been settled by 1917; a Central Powers victory could well submerge democracy in a tide of authoritarianism; and the Imperial German government was becoming more and more difficult to deal with over questions of free navigation of the seas, the use of the submarine, and diplomatic relations with one of the closest U.S. neighbors, Mexico. Then there was Wilson himself—a man Italian premier Vittorio Emanuele Orlando called "a kind-of clergyman." If Wilson listened to such things—in 1916 and early 1917, the most popular song from Tin Pan Alley was "I Didn't Raise My Boy To Be a Soldier"—and if noninterventionists needed a sign from 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, it came on 9 March 1916 when Wilson named an old friend and a well-known pacifist, Newton Baker, as secretary of war. Wilson had had grave differences with Baker's predecessor, Lindley Garrison, over questions of preparedness, but many thought Baker's arrival was a signal that Wilson would keep the United States out of the Great War.

Most probably, the staunch Presbyterian Wilson had no blinding conversion "on the road to Damascus" in 1917—deep in his heart there was a firm commitment to the concepts of democracy and progressive reform. What would the world look like if indeed Germany and Austria won the war? The final blow to Wilson's neutrality was the declaration by Germany in mid January 1917 that it would begin again a campaign of unrestricted submarine warfare. On 4 April 1917 Wilson went before Congress to ask for a declaration of war; after two days of bitter debate, on 6 April, the United States went to war.
ary Forces (AEF) and given the command to go to France, build his army, win, and bring the troops back home. How Pershing did that was his own concern.

The great problem was that there was no real American army to take to France to fight or to assure Wilson his place at the peace table. The British and French preached the need for amalgamation, the integration of American soldiers into their existing, but weary, weakened forces. On the surface amalgamation made sense. The Doughboys, as they were now known, were in fine physical condition and their morale was high, unaffected by three years in the trenches or by such slaughter pens as the Somme (1916) or Verdun (1916). That was not how Wilson or Pershing, however, envisioned the contribution of the United States, nor would the American people, turned almost overnight into a warrior nation, support such a use of their fathers and sons. The newest hit song from Tin Pan Alley was “Over There,” and almost everyone from the president to the laborer believed that the new world would rescue the old and show them the ways of progressive democracy. From the first day Pershing and his absurdly small staff arrived in France, it was clear that Pershing had no intention of allowing American soldiers to serve in anything but an American army. The French and British, however, looked around and asked just where this army from the new world was. By Christmas 1917 the AEF consisted of only four combat divisions and a growing number of support troops, a far cry from the hundreds of Allied and enemy divisions deployed along the Western Front. Training and more training, usually by highly competent French and British instructors, were what his men needed to prepare for the day the AEF was hurled at the enemy.

Pershing firmly believed that the trenches had dulled the fighting spirit of the British and French, and only “open” or maneuver warfare would break the stalemate of the Western Front and bring defeat to the German army. The infantryman, supported by artillery and other weapons such as the tank and airplane, was the key to open warfare and to final victory. For Pershing, orthodoxy was the “Cult of the Rifle,” and he insisted that soldiers preparing to arrive in France be fully trained in the care and use of the infantryman’s basic weapon, the rifle. As Pershing constructed the 28,000-man division, he made certain that it was a combined-arms team with infantry being the largest element. There were, in addition to four 4,000-soldier infantry regiments, an artillery brigade of three regiments; machine-gun battalions; and communications, medical and supply units. It was a first-rate organization for conducting open or maneuver warfare, and it was not a division for static trench warfare. Normally an aero-observation squadron and a company with one balloon was assigned to each division. Pershing saw that airpower could extend the battlefield further than was ever needed if troops simply remained in the deep, muddy, lethal trenches. When the AEF fought—Pershing made this an article of faith—it would fight in the open, closing with the enemy by means of fire and maneuver.

When would the Americans fight? The British and the French were furious with Pershing, and French premier Georges Clemenceau suggested that perhaps it would be best if Pershing were relieved and sent back to the United States. The American people would not have stood for Pershing’s removal, as he had become a hero. In March 1918 the Germans launched a series of offensives, and the Western Front was rocked by five major offensives from March into July. The Allies screamed for American troops as the casualty lists grew alarmingly large. While Pershing reluctantly agreed that infantry and machine-gun units be sent to France, he steadfastly held to the idea that the Americans could only function best when, as a combined-arms team, they served under their own flag and commanders. Some AEF divisions fought during the period of the great German onslaught, and Pershing won a commitment to form the U.S. First Army with its own sector of combat. The first great American offensive was in the St. Mihiel salient, a triangular-based piece of France that the Germans had held since 1914.

For Pershing and the AEF the mission to reduce the St. Mihiel salient had to be accomplished. To this end he committed his best-trained combat divisions to the operation, and the French gave more than one hundred thousand soldiers to supplement the AEF. The Allies—British, French, and Italians—contributed airplanes to the fledgling U.S. Air Services to bring the number of aircraft to more than 1,400. Lieutenant Colonel George Patton, fresh from training with the French, moved his Allied-built tanks into position to begin the campaign on 12 September 1918.

In a driving rainstorm, the St. Mihiel offensive began with spectacular results. Unknown to Pershing and his staff, the Germans had decided to abandon the salient to shorten their lines, but they exacted a price for the American success with well-placed artillery and machine-gun positions. It seemed to Pershing, however, that his insistence on keeping American fighting forces intact and preparing for open warfare was justified. While the best-trained divisions were assailing the St. Mihiel salient from two sides, the remainder of the AEF was moving into staging areas to launch the Meuse-Argonne Offensive on 26 September 1918. The euphoria that
infected Pershing’s First Army Headquarters masked the reality—the divisions preparing to attack into the tangle of the Argonne Forest were poorly prepared, with many divisions having been in France only a few weeks and lacking the benefit of seasoning under the tutelage of the Allies. What basically happened was a direct frontal assault against entrenched and determined troops, the German staff having decided to contest every inch of ground. A series of well-prepared defensive infantry positions, expertly supported with artillery and machine guns, awaited the Doughboys, and the result was a bloodbath in which the first attacking divisions could make almost no headway. The offensive ground to a halt until Pershing decided to push forward on 4 October, this time using those old divisions of the AEF that had been in France for some time and were veterans of St. Mihiel.

The First Infantry Division, Pershing’s pride, was used up by 11 October, with casualties exceeding 60 to 70 percent in most infantry companies. They had attacked directly into the teeth of the major German line, known as the Kriemhilde Stellung, and paid dearly for a little more than a mile of ground. They were relieved by the Forty-Second “Rainbow” Division, which was almost combat ineffective because of battle casualties and disease. To the left of the Rainbows was the Eighty-Second Division, another veteran of the St. Mihiel fight, and in a few days some infantry companies had to be consolidated, commanded by sergeants. While the German lines were breached and the Doughboys moved toward the Meuse River, the AEF was worn out. Not only were men breaking down as a result of constant battle, poor food, and terrible weather conditions, but their rifles, machine guns, and artillery pieces were also a point of being combat ineffectual. Despite superhuman efforts the supply trains could not bring needed food and ammunition fast enough. Weeks of battle and cold, rainy weather turned roads into impassible quagmires. Open warfare had boiled down to constant battle, poor food, and terrible weather conditions, but their rifles, machine guns, and artillery pieces were also to a point of being combat ineffectual. Despite superhuman efforts the supply trains could not bring needed food and ammunition fast enough. Weeks of battle and cold, rainy weather turned roads into impassible quagmires. Open warfare had boiled down to a direct, costly attacks against a well-positioned and expertly led German army. The armistice of 11 November 1918 did not come soon enough.

The AEF, however, did fight; their bravery was well noted, and troop ships were bringing Doughboys by the tens of thousands into France. Pershing went to France with his own agenda, and his intransigence concerning amalgamation left the Allies shorthanded at critical times. His faith in “the Cult of the Rifle” and open warfare cost lives because the AEF was too inexperienced to adjust battlefield techniques quickly enough. The St. Mihiel victory obscured the fact that the AEF, leadership and troops, was not ready to take on the monumental Meuse-Argonne Offensive. As soon as the guns fell silent on the Western Front, President Wilson announced that he would personally come to Europe to help negotiate the peace. On 8 January 1918 Wilson gave his “Fourteen Points” speech, which outlined his views on a just peace based on democracy and self-determination, with no annexations and no harsh indemnities. He ended his speech with a call for the establishment of a League of Nations, an international body that would solve disputes and assure the peace of the world. Frankly, after four years of war, Clemenceau of France, Lloyd George of Britain, and Orlando of Italy were in no mood to agree to such idealism: Germany was defeated and was made to pay for four years of slaughter and destruction. Wilson had his place at the Versailles Conference (1919), but his view of the postwar world did not. To be sure, the Great War was a turning point for the United States, but it did not assure to either Wilson or Pershing the results they wanted.

—JAMES J. COOKE, UNIVERSITY OF MISSISSIPPI

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