

Two

WOODROW WILSON

A Misfit in Office

1

PRESIDENT Woodrow Wilson may **have looked like** a commander in **chief**, and because of the Constitution's description of the president of the United States he often **found** himself so described, but in truth the role was utterly **foreign** to his being. This chief executive has gone down in history as one of the great holders of his high office; yet his behavior during America's participation in World War I was almost never that of commander in chief.¹ The reasons Wilson did not fulfill this part of his constitutional role are many and relate partly to the time in which he lived, partly to his work as an **educator**—**first as a professor** at Bryn Mawr, Connecticut **Wesleyan**, and Princeton, then as president of the last **institution**—**and** partly to a personal outlook that brought him to a dislike of, almost an aversion for, military affairs and military men.

Wilson grew up in the high noon of the Victorian era when war seemed virtually abolished save for expeditions in Africa or Asia. To take part in a war between white men, between Anglo-Saxons as the usage had it, would be race **suicide**—to use another description of the time. Words were what advanced humankind: the words of literature, the words of oratory. Wilson

grew to manhood during this wonderful time, a poised **moment** in the **history** of the world, and neither he nor his contemporaries had any idea of the reckoning that was about to take place. They believed in Western Civilization because what they saw emboldened them. All was right with the world. For Wilson, this outlook was reinforced by his experiences in academe, where he was quickly a huge success: the most popular professor on the campus at Princeton and afterward the first nonclergyman to be president of that university. If the very fact of peace, he might have thought, could not remake the world of his time, it would be possible to educate the new generation to better ways. He lived at a time when people took the Latin root of the word *education* **seriously**. "**Princeton** in the Nation's Service" was the title of one of his best-known orations. A century ago Wilson and others believed in such words about education. Last, there was the view of life that came out of this president's Scottish and English inheritance, perhaps also out of Presbyterianism. Wilson wanted to believe that wars were a thing of the **past**—that war was against the nature of educated, modern **peoples**. For him even to consider himself a commander in chief was a kind of archaism from the eighteenth century. He was a student of English constitutional history as much as American, and in the English tradition the navy was important and the army was something to watch, for it could co-opt the state. European governments had fallen victim to the danger but not the **English**—**except** during the **Cromwellian** period, which was an interregnum in English **history**—and the American experience paralleled the English. George Washington had announced, although in the words of Alexander **Hamilton**, that the European experience was un-American. The only really large war in American history up to Wilson's time had been the Civil War. As a native Virginian he justified it and said on more than one occasion (which incidentally endeared him when election time came) that the South had "absolutely nothing to apologize fill"² But he did not believe that war was part of the nation's practical experience; he did not equate the War for Southern Independence with the kind of war the Europeans were talking about.¹

It is a curious, almost forgotten, fact that Wilson in 1917–1918 was a complete misfit as commander in chief, so far as the nation's war economy and the mobilization of the war department to conduct a fighting war on the western front in France were concerned. In regard to these vital elements of war making, his behavior was **paradoxical**, strangely apart from

his fighting words but apart also from his reputation, which was greatly deserved, for being a leader of Congress and the nation. The president in 1917 was only a few years from his extraordinary triumphs at the beginning of his first term, when he had confounded the nation, and certainly the nation's **informed** electorate, by showing that he could come from governing a diminutive college and a small **state**, New Jersey, to lead the country, that he would not merely **propose**—as had countless chief executives before **him**—**great** measures for passage by Congress but would force Congress to do his will. Years earlier he had published *Congressional Government*. Upon taking office he displayed himself as no academic, no closet intellectual, but as a man who could enforce his will upon what had always been (and would, of course, be again) the most recalcitrant governing body in history. But in **1917–1918** his leadership diminished virtually to nothing, **save** for a sudden and for him providential **reassertion** of authority in the spring of 1918 that got him out of what was surely the most dangerous crisis of his presidency before the failure of the League of Nations in the Senate some months **later**. The student of politics wonders what possessed the president to let things go, in regard to economic mobilization for war, and, in regard to the war department, to let everything cascade into crisis.

In its top administration, economic mobilization was so badly handled that for a full year it was a travesty of what presidential administration should be. The president seemed to believe that all he needed to do was make a public statement, form a committee, and forget the problem. A later generation would describe much of what happened as a public relations problem, yet that is unfair to the president; Wilson appears to have believed that motion equaled achievement. The first formal organization to oversee what would become the war economy actually was not Wilson's doing but that of the U.S. Navy, perhaps because that part of what was then a two-part armed forces was better acquainted with industry than was the army, where manpower dominated rather than machines. The navy then had a far larger budget than the army, and most of it went for ships and maintenance, with only a small amount for men. The navy in **1916** organized a consulting board of scientists that included such prominent figures as Thomas A. Edison and Henry Ford. Its secretary, Grosvenor B. Clarkson, sent out **inventory** forms to discover the country's industrial resources. Thirty thousand forms came back, but the board and the secretary

of the navy unfortunately did nothing with them. The assistant secretary of the navy, young Franklin Roosevelt, privately sneered at the **effort**, considered that industrialists knew nothing of war, and told an assistant that Ford was so ignorant of naval matters he thought a submarine was something to eat.

In August 1916, **Congress—again**, not the president, whose business it might have **been—created** the Council of National Defense, another group of prominent citizens who worked without pay and whose private concerns limited their time spent on council duties. With war getting ominously close, the council met for the first time in December and, like its **predecessor**, appointed a **director**. **After** the United States went to war on April 6, **1917**, each **member** of the CND formed a committee to **super-vise** a part of industrial mobilization. The committees produced committees, and soon there were **150**. Throughout **1917** the CND accomplished little. It had three successive heads. At last the crisis in economic and military mobilization drove the president to appoint Bernard M. Baruch, a member of the War Industries Board (one of the **CND's** parts) as chairman of that board, to which the president gave control of the entire work of industrial mobilization. Baruch's appointment came in March 1918, and America's participation in the war was to end in **November**.⁴

But it is in the details of economic mobilization in World War I rather than in administrative confusion that one sees the proof of maladministration. Here it is instructive to turn to two major efforts at mobilization: shipbuilding and manufacture of powder. It would be possible to look to other programs, such as rifles, machine guns, artillery, tanks, and planes, in which there were successes with rifles and machine guns, failure with the others. The efforts to produce ships and powder, however, best illustrate how Wilsonian administration affected economic mobilization.

Undoubtedly some of the failure to turn out ships lay in the nation's near total **unpreparedness** for the task, for at the outset of the war it possessed a minuscule merchant marine, a very small number of ways in which to construct **ships**, and few workers and managers skilled in shipbuilding. The merchant marine had declined precipitously from the time of the Civil War, when attacks by Confederate raiders had driven much of the American merchant marine to foreign flags. The decline was visible indeed by **1917**, when the total American oceangoing tonnage was a bare one million tons, which was about what German submarines sank in the single

month of April **1917**. The number of American ways had declined to *sixty*, for both steel and wooden ships, grossly inadequate considering the need in **1917**. Ship construction had become a seldom practiced if not lost art.

More distressing than the long tradition of marine neglect were the officials whom the president installed to supervise the work of regeneration. None had experience in shipbuilding. Two had industrial experience, and the president neatly balanced them with two who did not. He first placed the Shipping Board in the hands of a city reformer, William E. **Denman**, who during a brief moment in the spring of **1917** enjoyed national prominence.⁵ It is true that Wilson balanced the inexperienced Denman with Major General George W. Goethals, whom Theodore Roosevelt had **picked** out of the army's **engineer** corps and told to go down to Panama and make the dirt fly. In building the Panama Canal, Goethals supervised one of the world's greatest engineering feats and might have done the same with shipping in 1917—1918. Instead, he got into a public argument with Denman, who had little respect for the aging general, and Goethals submitted his resignation to the **president** in the summer of **1917**. Wilson accepted with alacrity, asking for and receiving **Denman's resignation**, as if the two were on the same plane of incompetence.⁶

The president then chose as head of the Shipping Board Edward N. **Hurley**; who had some experience as a businessman. To take charge of the board's operating **agency**, the Emergency Fleet Corporation, he chose another prominent figure, the steelmaker Charles M. **Schwab**—but not before he had tried a rear admiral, Washington **Lec** Capps, as **Goethals's** replacement; Schwab took over in April **1918**. Presumably Hurley would deal with the **president**, Congress, and the public, while Schwab handled the work of shipbuilding. A former assistant to Andrew Carnegie, who founded the Bethlehem Steel Corporation, Schwab moved across the country in a private railroad car urging shipyard workers to get on with their assignments. But he did not have enough time to produce the results he and the nation desired before the war **ended**.

With regard to ships one must conclude that almost everything that could have gone wrong did. The nation had allowed the merchant marine virtually to collapse and had nothing on which to build. Personalities chosen for the task were inadequate; lack of talent canceled out talent. Planning may have been on too large a scale. Planners decided to increase **twentyfold** the ways around the country, from sixty to twelve hundred.

Time did not permit such construction. The Shipping Board had to make do with confiscating ships under construction, appropriating enemy and neutral ships in harbor, and such legerdemain as bisecting lake ships to get them through the Welland Canal. The board planned to produce 2 million gross tonnage in the war's first year. It produced 664,000 tons in 1917 and 1,301,000 in 1918, far too small a tonnage considering the need.⁷

In examining the war economy it is also instructive to consider the production of powder for the American Expeditionary Forces, gathering in France under the leadership of General John J. Pershing, and see how presidential **prejudice**, really presidential populism, led to a second disaster for the war economy. If **the war** had lasted into 1919, powder production, like shipbuilding, might have sufficed. Had Pershing received the enormous reinforcements he **requested—he** sought one hundred divisions, each of forty thousand men, including twelve thousand support **troops**—there would have been great need for powder, and the final plan for its production would have supplied it. Instead a contention arose with the country's principal powder **maker**, the Du Pont Company, and the administration delayed for nearly a year in setting in motion an arrangement that would have guaranteed Pershing the ammunition he required. Fortunately the Allies, mainly the British, supplied it.

The story of powder in World War I is not well known; yet it stands revealed in an **authorized** biography of Pierre S. Du Pont.⁸ The authors show that the Wilson administration's problem with the company was that Pierre Du Pont's efficiency as a powder maker and his business acumen were too much for President Wilson and Secretary of War Newton D. Baker. The Allies in 1914 had gone to the Du Pont Company with huge orders, as it was far more economical to have Du Pont produce powder than to ship to Britain or France the four to nine pounds of raw materials required to make one pound of powder. The Du Pont Company took the orders, and knowing that the resultant plants would have little use in peacetime charged the Allies enough to amortize the plants. Unlike competitors, Winchester and Remington, which financed capital expansion by borrowing against payments they would receive, Du Pont wrote **off** everything by charging for it. Certainly the company made a profit, and even with a retroactive tax of 12.5 percent on **profits** in 1916, shareholders received \$62 million that **year**, the face value of the company's common stock.

The Du Pont Company's success, and profits, though not from American orders, excited the president and his **secretary**, and when the United States became involved in the war these two executives of the **nations** mobilization virtually ignored Du Pont. Baruch, who in March 1917 had an advisory role in one of the Council of National Defense's committees, wrote Pierre Du Pont and inquired about the status of all raw materials needed for **explosives**, but that was all. Confused, the company head wrote Baker that the company's production had been taken up until September 15, 1917, inferring that if the U.S. government wanted powder it would have to arrange new plants. Baker did not take the hint. One might contend that the secretary and his superior did not know at that time whether America's contribution to the war would be largely ships and supplies other than powder or perhaps only financing of Allied war orders. Baker and Wilson may **have** been confused. But Wilson had sponsored a draft bill within days of the declaration, which became law in May, and a sequel would be to equip the levies so raised. It would have been wise to keep in touch with the nation's powder maker.

In the autumn, word came from the **presidents** personal representative in London and Paris, Colonel House, that a crisis in the war was at hand. Collapse of the Russian front and the imminent dissolution of the provisional regime in Russia might allow the Central Powers to transfer hundreds of thousands of troops to the western front and bring a breakthrough in the spring. When word came from House, the war **department** got into action, without getting in touch with the machinery of **mobilization**—the War Industries Board and, behind it, Secretary Baker and the president. Major General William **Crozier** signed Du Pont to a \$250 million contract, the largest government contract ever arranged up to that time, that included \$90 million for powder plants. Within days Baker canceled the contract.

It became clear that Wilson and Baker feared giving such a contract to Du Pont, feared the public reaction. At one juncture Baker said privately that he had "**just** come from the White House" and the country was going to win the war without Du Pont. President Wilson appointed a western mining executive, Daniel C. Jackling, to head the powder program, and Jackling went to Du Pont and asked for help. A large contract went to a construction firm with no experience in powder making, the **Thompson-Starrett** Company, which insisted that Du Pont take half of it. By this time Baker realized his error, saw the possibility of losing the war

without Du Pont, and allowed the Delaware company to take half, and more, of the contract. Du Pont's **plant**, Old Hickory near Nashville, was in production just as the war ended. On the war's last day **the Thompson-Starrett plant**, Nitro at Charleston, West Virginia, began production.

2



Some years before World War I, in the **1890s**, Professor Wilson of Princeton taught a course on the theory of administration at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore and took meals in the same **boardinghouse** as one of his young students, **Newton Baker**. This chance encounter was to have fateful results for the management of the war department in 1917-1918. The student went to **Cleveland**, where he assisted the reform mayor, Tom L. Johnson, was himself elected mayor, and made a considerable reputation championing a three-cent ice cream cone, a three-cent streetcar fare, and a three-cent admission to a municipal dance hall where young men and women could meet under wholesome circumstances. Under his administration the city made an annual contribution **of ten** thousand dollars to the municipal orchestra, an unheard of profligacy. Wilson watched Baker's rise with pride and in **1913** offered him a position as secretary of the interior, which the mayor declined. In **1916**, with no experience with the military, Baker accepted the secretaryship of war, succeeding Lindley M. Garrison of **New Jersey**, who resigned after the president refused to reform the highly politicized National Guard.

Baker made a reputation in Washington. Boyish in appearance, so short in stature that he was accustomed to sitting behind his massive desk in the war department with one leg curled under him, he was almost inconspicuous standing next to the bulk)' generals. He was an attractive civilian figure in a forest of uniforms. On his desk was a fresh flower. His ideas were those of a **reformer**; he was a friend of Frederic C. Howe, with whom he had roomed in college. He made impressive speeches. He spoke so rapidly, 225 words a minute, that stenographers had difficulty following **him**.⁹

Baker's modus operandi in the war department pleased his military subordinates. He seemed to hold a reverence for military men, liking all the officers he met. He liked the two chiefs of staff in the critical year of 1917, Major Generals Hugh L. Scott and Tasker H. Bliss. Whatever these chiefs

desired, he backed them, once saying to Scott: "You know all about this, I know nothing. You must treat me as a father would his **son**."¹⁰ He informed his first biographer, Frederick Palmer, that he had learned subordination of civilians to the military from his father, who had told him of an episode involving General Robert E. Lee and President Jefferson Davis. According to the story, when Davis was giving **Lee** military advice the latter unbuckled his sword and **handed** it to Davis, who ceased the advice. Such an arrangement, Baker believed, was far more beneficial to the Confederacy than the way in which President Abraham Lincoln, Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton, and Major General Henry W. **Hallck** interfered in the operations of General Ulysses S. **Grant**." Baker thus was much like his chief, the president. His private secretary, Ralph Hayes, believed the reason Baker and Wilson got along so well, apart from their fond relationship as student and teacher, was that "their mental processes were either so much alike or so **harmonious**."¹² Baker looked and talked like the civilian he was. At the same time he let the war department do what it wanted.

Why Baker acted this way is not difficult to understand. He must have allowed Scott and the others to do what **they** wished because of a sense of his own inadequacies in military **matters**. He did not believe, as Elting E. Morison has shown so **perspicaciously**, that it was his task as a public servant to run the enterprises he presided over. Morison has written that Baker acted as if he held "a sort of pastoral office." His duty was to exhort, to elucidate, and above all to persuade, not to order or **command**.¹³

It is possible that Baker learned such a procedure from Wilson's course on the theory of administration at Hopkins. But one can only add that such a procedure in a brassy place like the war department in Washington was fantastically wrong. A recent biographer of Baker has written that the secretary was the head, not the figurehead, of a great and successful enterprise.¹⁴ The first of these judgments seems **difficult** to believe. As for the latter, the enterprise was great, but Baker's contribution was great only in its **inceptitude**. Success came after Baker passed the duties of army chief of staff to Major General Peyton C. March in March 1918. This efficient general gave little attention to his nominal chief, who had an adjoining **office**. At the beginning of his tenure, March discovered that on Baker's desk was a buzzer that the secretary could press when he wanted the chief of staff. The first time Baker pressed it, March pulled out the buzzer's wire.

What had all this to do with President Wilson? The most obvious connection, as **mentioned**, was the **president's** quixotic appointment of an erstwhile student. Having made this mistake, the president should have watched the result and taken measures to remove Baker from the war department. **Instead**, the president took every occasion to protect Baker. Colonel House, always deft and careful, especially when approaching the president, suggested to Wilson before the beginning of the war that Baker and his counterpart in the navy department, Secretary **Joseph** us Daniels, should be relieved. They were good men, he wrote in his **diary**, but goodness could be effective only in peacetime, and they "did not fit in with war." The colonel thought they did not have public support and the mistakes they were sure to make would be laid upon the shoulders of the president. He believed that Wilson had "taken a gamble that there would be no war and had lost" and must deal with the needs of a war administration. To all **this**, or something close to it, the president "listened with a kindly and sympathetic attention and while he argued with me upon many of the points, he did it **dispassionately**."¹⁵

The most remarkable testimony to Wilson's judgment in supporting Baker came some years later, in 1929, and Baker in innocence made it himself. The former **secretary**, back in **Cleveland**, wrote Pershing's former supply **officer**, Major General James G. Harbord, that "I think the world and you would be very much surprised indeed if you could realize how completely President Wilson let **mc** run the War department without ever an order, and with only the rarest suggestion, from him." Baker said he tried to keep Wilson informed by reports, formal and otherwise, "but his time was much taken up with other things and I frequently found it difficult to keep him in touch with the larger activities of the department much less the detail." He told Harbord that as far as selection of officers was concerned, he did not consult the president about anything except the appointment of Pershing and the refusal to allow Major General Leonard Wood to go to France. He did give the president the lists of promotions to general officer, but that information was required as the president had to nominate general officers to the **Senate**.¹⁶

In examining the Wilson war department in **1917-1918** one turns finally to the army's first two wartime chiefs of staff, Scott and Bliss, as much misfits in their office as were the secretary of war and his chief, the president.

How the president could have tolerated them is difficult to comprehend, other than by the fact that Wilson himself was so unwarlike, so unimpressed, even repelled, by the work of war.

The case of Scott is alarming. He appears to have received the rank of brigadier general because after Wilson's inauguration in **1913** the president asked General Wood, then chief of staff, if he, as **president**, had the authority to appoint a general. Wood said he did. The president thereupon promoted Scott, whose brother had been a **member** of the faculty at Princeton and supported Wilson during disputes with the faculty over student membership in the eating clubs and the organization of the graduate school. Having attained general officer rank by preferment, Scott managed to become chief of staff. He was troubled with sleepiness. Secretary of the Interior Franklin **K. Lane** wrote privately in February 1917 that at a meeting Scott fell **asleep**—"Mars and Morpheus in One!" Scott knew little about the war. He asked a colonel on his staff, Robert E. Lee Michie, about the Battle of the Marne. "Michie," he said, "everybody's talking about the Battle of the Marne. What happened at the Battle of the **Marne** anyway?"¹⁷

Baker liked Scott and described him fondly, although in **1918** under pressure from General March he concurred in Scott's relief from command of a training camp at Fort Dix, New Jersey. March and Baker had gone up to Dix and there listened while the general took **forty-five** minutes to describe the meaning of the feathers in an Indian **warbonnet**. Scott had been an Indian fighter in the old days and once had stood on a high peak with Captain Frederick **Benteen**, of Custer fame, and there they had seen herds of buffalo that filled the plains for twenty miles. Those had been Scott's good days. In 1917-1918 he should have been on the front porch of the Old Soldiers Home in Washington, **D.C.**¹⁸ After the relief from Fort Dix, Scott's wife wrote Baker plaintively asking that her husband receive the four stars of a full general that had gone to Pershing, to March as chief of staff, and to Scott's successor as **chief, Bliss**.¹⁹

Tasker Bliss did not fit the war department's needs in **1917-1918** any more than did Scott, if for a different reason. Scott had written orders on little pads of paper, in a large, bold hand, a symbol of his inefficiency. Bliss in comparison was a scholar; he knew Greek and Latin and would have done well as a professor of classical languages and literature in a small college. Instead he seems to have believed that he could analyze not merely warfare but also international relations, although he had no **experi-**

cncc in either. Robert L. Bullard, who **became** commander of the Second Army under Pershing and was one of the two officers to receive the rank of lieutenant general during the war, despised Bliss, who he said was a theorist with almost no experience with troops. As for the international analyses, Bliss later made them when he was one of the five American commissioners at the Paris Peace Conference. He wrote dozens of memorandums about foreign affairs in Europe and **elsewhere**, memos that President Wilson may not have read. But, to be sure, in the war department it did not matter if one wrote notes, as did Scott, or memorandums, as did Bliss. Neither officer was a sufficient mover of the bureaucracy; the extraordinary shuffling and paper passing disgraced the department during the first year of participation in World War I.²⁰



As the year **1917** drew to an end, criticism of both economic and military mobilization began to be heard. The furies were **gathering**. Everything moved into a crisis, and, as commander in **chief**, President Wilson had to face the crisis.

Some of the criticism of the administrations' handling of economic and military mobilization was personal and political. At the beginning of the war, former president Theodore Roosevelt had asked to lead a division, and the administration properly turned him **down**—**Roosevelt** was intellectually keen but physically worn, no longer the Rough Rider of **1898**. His proposed division would have drawn off the best officers the army possessed, which Baker and Wilson could not have allowed. His commissioning as a major general would have ruined the decision of the war department to appoint most field-grade officers for the line, majors and above, from the regular army. The result was that Roosevelt, who never liked "that skunk in the White House," went into opposition and soon was writing editorials published and syndicated by the *Kansas City Star* that were increasingly critical of the **slowness**—**he** used other **words**—**of** the Washington leadership.

There was a personal element about the criticism, and yet it was more than that. Wilson and Baker watched the criticism mount and consoled **themselves**—**and** believed it was **true**—**that** the critics were inspired by

personal and Republican irritation. But mobilization had been so poorly handled that the critics had much more in mind. Senator Henry Cabot Lodge expressed their feeling when he wrote Lord Bryce, "The fact is that the president has no administrative capacity. He lives in the sunshine. He wants nobody to tell him the truth apparently and he has a perfect genius for selecting little men for important places."²¹ The critics had tired of Denman and his argument with Goethals, would have been outraged over the president's treatment of Pierre Du Pont had they known of it, and were exasperated by Baker and Scott and Bliss. When Roosevelt criticized the president he undoubtedly had himself in mind as civil head of a new administration and General Wood in mind for the war department. Many critics would have supported such changes, and the combination might have led to accomplishment—what a combination they might have been in wartime Washington!

At the beginning of the crisis over mobilization the president's opponents chose to focus not on Wilson, although the target was tempting, but on the war department. The president could exert the power of his office against critics however well informed, but Baker and Scott and Bliss had no such protection. It was easier to take on the war department than the war economy, a scattered proposition compared to the war department, which was concentrated in the State, War, and Navy Building next to the White House.

The department was in saddening shape. Its administrative apparatus, its bureau system, had broken down. Secretary John C. Calhoun had created the system after the War of 1812, placing each activity of the department in a bureau, and by the Wilson administration a general known as a chief headed each bureau. The system had collapsed before, during the war against Spain in 1898, when the army put into Cuba in the vicinity of Santiago a force smaller than a single division under Pershing's command in France.

During the presidential administration of William H. Taft, General Wood had sought to enforce reforms sponsored by Secretary of War Elihu Root, but the chiefs were long accustomed to maneuvering, and they soon bounded back when an act of Congress in 1916 stipulated that no officer of the general staff could hold an administrative post. Baker accepted this attenuation of the authority of Generals Scott and Bliss, which perhaps was not a bad idea, but the result when war was declared was that the department was again operating as a fragmented organization, each chief

doing what seemed right in his own eyes. Baker **compounded** the situation by giving each chief what amounted to a hunting license to search out and obtain, or make contracts for, scarce supplies. After the war a war department colonel wrote that the result was a "slowing down" that almost paralyzed the department in the winter of **1917-1918**. An official study of army **administration** later excoriated the bureau system and Baker's part in enlarging its inefficiencies. Baker "had had little contact with **the** management of large-scale enterprises where the necessity for firm executive control was taken for granted____Without effective leadership the war department bumped its way from one crisis to another toward **disaster**." ²²

At this juncture a combination of an act of God and an act by the administration brought the crisis. The war economy was creaking along, not getting far; Pershing had been in France for six months and received four of the thirty divisions Baker promised. Then the winter of **1917-1918** turned appallingly cold, the worst in fifty' years, minus twenty degrees in Boston, minus sixteen in **Albany**. There were two huge snowstorms. On January **5**, 1918, winds of fifty-five miles an hour brought the first, a fifteen-inch snowfall that blocked railroad terminals around the country. The second storm struck six **days** afterward. Then came one of the most inept orders by a federal administrative official in the twentieth century, perhaps since 1789. The president in his mobilization effort had appointed a Princeton colleague and later president of Williams College, Harry A. Garfield, son of the assassinated president, as head of the Fuel Administration. Garfield found a perfect mess, which in fact had been caused by the president himself. Wilson had fixed the price of bituminous coal at two dollars a ton, when a price of three was necessary to keep marginal mines in operation. Production losses began late in the summer of 1917, and by December production was down by six million tons a month. At that time, when almost all energy was produced by **coal—for** houses, factories, and **ships—the** loss produced a coal crisis. Ships were unable to leave eastern ports, and freight cars full of war materiel piled up from eastern harbors to Pittsburgh. Matters became so critical that the army used ships for storage. Garfield appears to have had no **guidance**, and on January **16**, the coal crisis upon him, ordered a five-day embargo on the use of coal in almost all factories east of the Mississippi, beginning the next day, after which nonessential industry was to go to a five-day week, shutting for nine "heatless Mondays" from January 28 until March 25.

The storm that burst upon the administration was one of the two crises of Wilson's presidency, the other being the controversy with the Senate over the League of Nations. It was fortunate for the president that only after the coal shortage did the economic cost become **evident**—in lost wages and production the coal embargo cost an estimated \$4.3 billion; a coal journal calculated that it saved 3.4 million tons, but measured against losses the cost per ton was **\$1,256.94**. People sensed this disaster, if they did not know the **details**, Senator George E. **Chamberlain** of Oregon, chairman of the committee on military affairs and a Democrat, spoke in New York and called for a cabinet minister of munitions. Realizing that such a **secretary** would be dominated by the other cabinet secretaries, he amended a bill to that effect to propose a war cabinet or council of "three distinguished citizens of demonstrated ability" to function independently of the cabinet, directly under the president, with almost unlimited control of the war, economic and **military** preparations alike. Had the bill passed, it would have taken direction of the war out of President Wilson's hands.

All the while the critics were moving toward Baker, demanding his resignation. Criticism turned savage, people **saying** the country needed a **butcher**, not a Baker. Colonel George Harvey of *Harvey's Weekly*, once a Wilson supporter, discovered that if one rearranged the letters of Baker's name it spelled BRAKE. Colonel **House**—no more a colonel than Harvey but still a Wilson **supporter**—**did** not know what to do about **Baker**, whom he had tried to get out of office nearly a year **before**. A month earlier he had suggested that Baker might become private secretary to the president, but that raised in Wilson's mind the question of his own loyalty to Joseph P. Tumulty, the secretary who had been with him since his governorship of New Jersey. The Texas colonel wrote in his diary that everything was in chaos and Baker did not realize its seriousness. "He does not at all appreciate the fact that everyone who knows the situation in Washington has lost confidence in the organization." And how to tell the president? "Neither does the president appreciate this, so there you **are**."²³

House always believed that his influence on the president varied with the subject; in foreign affairs, the president would probably accept House's advice, but in domestic matters he would listen and do nothing. House was highly unsure of his ability to change domestic arrangements, yet, somehow, when we piece together what House wrote in his diary and Baker's subsequent actions, it appears to have been House who resolved

the crisis over economic and military mobilization. House talked with Baker and **may** have stirred the secretary to the action that saved the **day**.²⁴

Beginning on January 12, 1918, the secretary had testified before the Senate military affairs committee, for four days, but after talking with House he went **before** the committee a second time, on January 28, speaking for four and a half hours, and by all testimony did so with success. According to Senator Reed **Smoot**, Republican of Utah and no supporter of the **president**, "all agreed it was a fine presentation of a very poor **case**." A British diplomat in Washington not altogether friendly to his American hosts wrote Foreign Secretary Arthur Balfour that the secretary of war had done well, giving "a masterly performance." The newspaperman David Lawrence, another of Wilson's former students, at Princeton, sent the president an enthusiastic note saying he had just come from the Capitol after listening to Baker, and his presentation had been a masterpiece of convincing **description**.²⁵ The secretary had said that although General Pershing had few divisions at the moment he would have a million and a half men by the end of the year and **Americas** soldiers would have all the equipment **they needed**.

The president, too, like Baker, was now showing steel. Senator Henry F. Ashurst of Arizona, a Democratic enthusiast to be sure, wrote in his diary that he "called upon WW. and found him in a fighting mood. His jaw was set. His eyes shot fire."²⁶ The president said publicly that Senator Chamberlain's charges were "astonishing and absolutely unjustified distortions of the **truth**."

Then two more chance events **intervened**, this time in the president's favor. Roosevelt was hospitalized for a serious illness, and a similar affliction took Senator Chamberlain out of the fray. The president in his own hand wrote out a bill that became the Overman Act, conferring virtually dictatorial powers upon himself to organize and direct the nation's resources. Public opinion may have begun to tire of all the accusation, and there were suggestions in the press that a few speechless days on Capitol Hill would help win the war as much as **heatless** days imposed by the Fuel Administration.

The administration made two brilliant moves. On the side of economic mobilization the president on March 4 appointed Baruch chairman of the War Industries Board. Almost at the same time Baker brought General March back from France, where he had been Pershing's chief of **artillery**,

to be chief of staff of the army. During the months of war that remained Baruch did what was possible, mainly a rewriting of war **department** orders, and by voluntary **measures—to** which he gave the appearance both of patriotism and of immense power, even though he did not possess **it—**brought some order into war production. March took on the Baker-Scott-Bliss war **department** and turned it upside down, doing a magnificent job in snatching order out of chaos.¹⁷

A triumphant outcome is not a fitting conclusion to any measurement of President Wilson as commander in chief during the first major foreign war the United States fought. Looking back on **1917–1918** from the vantage of a new century, the historian cannot help but conclude that blame for the errors in mobilization, economic and military, should lie with the commander in chief. The responsibility was Wilson's, if behind it was the confidence of the Victorian era, his dogmatic hatred of **war**, and his successes as a university professor.