Introduction

The term *forgotten war* is often used in reference to the Korean War. World War I has also been characterized as a neglected war, at least the American involvement, especially the naval phase of it. The paucity of published scholarly works—books and articles—on World War I naval topics during the past quarter century or more suggests that indeed the "Great War," at least so far as naval history is concerned, has been generally ignored. In the 1975 supplement to *A Guide to the Sources of United States Military History* (Archon Books), William Braisted wrote, "the last full operational history of the Navy during World War I was completed more than a half-century ago." Today that is not altogether true as in 1994 the Naval Institute Press published Paul Halpern's excellent study, *A Naval History of World War I*, which does include the U.S. Navy's participation during the war. Nonetheless, there still is no up-to-date general history of the American Navy during World War I.

Why have historians "neglected" the Navy and its activities during the 1917–18 conflict? American involvement was relatively brief, lasting only eighteen months. Second, historians have been far more interested in the so-called neutrality period (1914–17), examining the issues of why the United States became an active participant, and the peacemaking period (1919–20) rather than the period of belligerency. In the third place, the Navy's role has been considered minor compared to that of the U.S. Army. Even Josephus Daniels, the secretary of the navy during the war, acknowledged this. After the June 1917 arrival in France of General John J. Pershing and the initial units of the American Expeditionary Force (AEF), American war correspondents concentrated on the land war and generally ignored the naval war. Throughout the postwar years, former sailors complained in magazines such as the ones published by the American Legion and Veterans of Foreign Wars about the neglect of their service.

The fact that there were no major engagements involving U.S. warships certainly contributed to this neglect. Few ships were lost, and few men in comparison to U.S. Army casualties. A large fleet of nearly four hundred ships and over seventy thousand men were gradually deployed in European waters. Naval units in Europe included bases, naval air stations, hospitals, supply depots, administrative offices in London and elsewhere, and even railway batteries. Units afloat included battleships, cruisers, destroyers, gunboats, converted yachts, subchasers, submarines, minelayers, minesweepers, auxiliary vessels, and seven Coast Guard cutters. Administratively, this force was under U.S. control; operationally, the American warships were assimilated with Allied naval units, a policy that contrasted to that favored by General Pershing. Whereas the naval policy of amalgamation was sound, it did contribute to the lack of awareness of the Navy's contributions both during and after the war.

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Reveille in Washington

On March 20, 1917, President Woodrow Wilson held a cabinet meeting to discuss the crisis with Germany over unrestricted submarine warfare, attacks on neutral vessels without warning. The members of the cabinet unanimously favored war with Germany. Although Wilson did not divulge his intentions on that day, he decided upon war. Secretary of the Navy Josephus Daniels noted in his diary: "President was solemn. Very sad!"[1]

The administration began preliminary mobilization. On March 23, the Council of National Defense urged the attorney general to overhaul the nation's security laws. A plan for voluntary censorship of sensitive information was announced on the following day. During the last days of March, the president approved an increase of 157,000 men for the Navy and Marine Corps and accepted the secretary of war's decision to call units of the National Guard into federal service. American diplomats were withdrawn from Belgium. On March 25, the Atlantic Fleet was ordered to the Chesapeake Bay despite Daniels's belief that it was safer at the winter rendezvous, Guantanamo Bay.[2]

In his diary, Daniels mentioned a meeting of the General Board of the Navy to discuss "how we could protect American lives and ships."[3] The president had instructed the naval secretary to discuss the submarine menace with the General Board. When the secretary informed Wilson that the General Board was pessimistic about any effective defenses against submarines, he was told to establish a plan of cooperation with the British Admiralty. "As yet," the president wrote, "sufficient attention has not been given . . . by the authorities on the other side of the water to the routes to be followed to the British ports."[4] Franklin D. Roosevelt, assistant secretary of the navy, called in the British naval attaché. Among items discussed was the nature of naval contributions. Could the Navy base thirty American destroyers on the Irish coast? Quickly, the Admiralty sent back a "shopping list," which included deployment of a large force of destroyers to British waters operating from a base provided by the Admiralty and provision for U.S. naval forces in the North Atlantic, the Caribbean, the coasts of South America, and in Asian waters.[5] Daniels on March 26 ordered Rear Admiral William S. Sims to London to establish liaison with the British Admiralty, and President Wilson ordered a special session of Congress to meet on April 2.

At 8:20 p.m. on April 2, when the president entered the House of Representatives, he found waiting a subdued Congress and the members of the Supreme Court. Among them was the chief justice, Edward Douglas White, a veteran of the Civil War. Wilson's war message lasted but thirty-six minutes. At its end, he voiced the agony

that had been forced upon him: "It is a distressing and oppressive duty . . . which I have performed in thus addressing you. . . . It is a fearful thing to lead this great peaceful people into war, into the most terrible and disastrous of all waters. . . . But the right is more precious than peace, and we shall fight for the things which we have always carried nearest our hearts—for democracy, for the right of those who submit to authority to have a voice in their own Governments. . . . [T]he day has come when America is privileged to spend her blood and her might for the principles that gave her birth and happiness and the peace which she has treasured. God helping her, she can do no other."[6] The Senate approved a declaration of war by 82 to 6, and the House followed by 373 to 50. The president signed the war resolution on Good Friday, April 6.

The news reached Europe almost immediately. "I first heard the news of the entry of America into the war in quite a dramatic fashion," a British naval officer recalled after the war. "We were out on a four day patrol in the North Sea . . . it was a raw misty morning . . . and we had just gone alongside an isolated lightship to give them some newspapers, when all at once out of the mist loomed a destroyer. Challenge and reply by searchlight Morse followed, and apparently being reasoned that we were not a Hun submarine, the destroyer sheered off to carry on her patrol. Just as she was disappearing again into the bank of fog her searchlight started morsing [code] to us once more. . . . 'America has declared war;' our searchlight replied, 'Good luck to her,' and we disappeared from each other to depart on our respective vigil."[7]

On the Western Front and on ships from the North Sea to the Adriatic, the news of the American intervention received mixed responses. Many felt relief, and others thought that it was about time, but everyone rejoiced. It is impossible to overestimate the improvement in the morale of the Allied forces.[8]

England was ecstatic. "London to-day is expressing its thanksgiving to America for taking her stand with the Allies," wrote one observer. "The great flagstaff of the Victoria Tower of the Palace at Westminster has hitherto been reserved for the Union Jack, to indicate that Parliament is sitting. For the first time in the history of Parliament the Stars and Stripes is flying alongside the Union Jack on the Victoria Tower. A historic incident indeed!"[9]

In Germany, the announcement of the U.S. entry into war surprised few, and certainly none of her leaders. Since the resumption of unrestricted submarine warfare early in February, American participation became increasingly probable. American entry did nothing to change Germany's belief in ultimate victory. Military officials were convinced that the United States could not train and transport to Europe an army in time to influence the outcome. Vice Admiral Eduard von Capelle, Admiral Tirpitz's successor as head of the German navy, declared in the Reichstag that the military significance of American intervention would be "zero, zero, zero!"[10] The German Naval Office reassured the press: "the American navy cannot possibly play a decisive role as far as we are concerned." On April 17, Captain Boy-Ed, formerly the Kaiser's naval attaché in Washington, argued that "in the foreseeable future there can be no talk whatever of American military aid to the Entente. This applies fully also to the American Navy."[11] One week later, the first six American destroyers departed from

Boston for European waters. At the Navy Department, preparations had already been made for what most considered inevitable. Daniels sent his aide, Lieutenant Commander Bryon McCandless, to the White House with a signalman. As soon as the president signed the war declaration, the news was wigwagged to the Navy Department. Lieutenant Commander Royal Ingersoll carried it to the communication office. Immediately an "Alnav" (all Navy) dispatch announcing the formal declaration of war was sent to all naval vessels, stations, and other installations.[12]

A diarist, Commander Joseph Taussig, wrote that night: "At 7:00 p.m. today the *Pennsylvania*, flagship of the Atlantic Fleet, sent the following signal to all vessels present at Base 2 [York River, Virginia], 'Mobilize for war in accordance with department confidential mobilization plan.'" On the destroyer *Fanning*, the boatswain's mate passed the word that Congress had declared war, but the crew had little time to contemplate the news. They spent the morning of April 7 "dragging for a [missing] . . . anchor and chain." On the *Cummings*, according to a junior officer, "There was no excitement. . . . A signal that the *Seattle*, flagship of the destroyer force, had mail for us, would have caused more bustle. War had been a possibility too long. Its novelty was lost."[13]

In August 1914, when the war began, few in the fleet and few Americans believed that thirty-two months later, the United States would become a belligerent, or that it would dispatch a large army to France and deploy hundreds of warships to European waters.

Although the United States initially declared neutrality, such a policy proved impossible to maintain. American business interests quickly took advantage of the conflict. Within a few months, millions of dollars in foodstuffs and war materials flowed across the Atlantic to the warring nations, primarily to the Entente powers. The British blockade of Germany and her allies proved to be effective almost from the beginning. American investors loaned large sums of money to the British and her allies. Influential British propaganda and German disregard of public opinion gradually increased pro-Allied sentiment. In time, the majority of the American people decided that a moral difference existed between the Allies and their enemies. Propaganda contributed to this belief, but the atrocities in Belgium, German espionage, and, of course, the sinking of the noncombatant *Lusitania* and other vessels carrying civilians were not propaganda. German submarine warfare eventually rendered neutrality impossible, although other motives also contributed to the outcome.

German submarine warfare had a dramatic effect on the public but little on the United States Navy. The number of built or authorized submarines grew during 1914–17, but little thought was given to the impact of undersea warfare on tactics or to the need for antisubmarine craft. The president and many of his cabinet members and advisors were ignorant of conditions in Europe. Wilson refused to send observers to the war zone. Only a few within the Navy Department such as Rear Admiral Bradley Fiske, the aide for operations, warned of being drawn into the war, but as the admiral later said: "if you brought up anything in connection with the efficiency of the Navy and its part in the war, why that was not good. We must avoid that subject."[14] Daniels and other naval officials were fully in accord with the president.