Diplomat in Khaki

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Published by University Press of Kansas

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Diplomat in Khaki: Major General Frank Ross McCoy and American Foreign Policy, 1898 –1949.

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In traditional military biography, campaigns and battles play a crucial part, framing the narrative and often furnishing its climax. The protagonist’s actions over the course of a few days or weeks of combat define his historical significance. But Frank Ross McCoy was no typical soldier. Not battlefield exploits but his career’s overall dimensions provide the measure of his importance. His signal achievement in the decades before World War II lay in straddling the then supposedly unrelated worlds of soldier and statesman, obliging us to revise our notion of the military’s role in that era. Although noted for his contributions as a diplomat and colonial administrator, McCoy remained in his own eyes first and foremost a military officer, “one of those lucky individuals who love to call themselves ‘poor soldiers.’” Nor was he an unblooded diplomat in uniform in the mold of Generals Tasker Bliss and Enoch Crowder. To a greater extent than other officers favored with opportunities for unconventional service, McCoy succeeded in establishing impressive credentials in the strictly military realm as well.¹

The pattern of McCoy’s career prior to 1917, punctuated with assignments of visibility and substance, established his reputation as one of the most promising officers of his generation. He served in the right places for the right people and performed well throughout. Yet the professional capital accrued over twenty years would have amounted to little had McCoy not proved himself yet again in World War I. In a profession in which shared experiences are key determinants of individual status, active service in France became a critical rite of passage. To remain in 1917–1918 on the wrong side of the Atlantic was not only embarrassing personally but also seemed a fatal blow to a military career. Able soldiers such as Dwight D. Eisenhower and Matthew B. Ridgway would overcome their lack of combat experience in World War I. Yet even decades later, in memoirs written
after they achieved high office, their disappointment and chagrin at being kept from France still lingered. Unlike Eisenhower and Ridgway, McCoy had the personal connections to preclude relegation to a stateside assignment. Indeed, barely two weeks after the first contingent of the AEF reached France on June 13, he arrived in Paris.

During their first year at war, Americans engaged in little actual fighting. Instead, under the tutelage of General Pershing, the AEF progressively grew in strength and prepared for combat. The instrument devised to assist Pershing in transforming an untested American army into a battleworthy force was his General Headquarters (GHQ), located originally in Paris, but after September 1917 at Chaumont. Assignment to GHQ became a mark of distinction. Not surprisingly, many of the service’s brightest officers gravitated to Pershing’s staff: James G. Harbord, Hugh Drum, William D. Conner, Fox Connor, George Van Horn Mosely, Billy Mitchell, and John McCaulay Palmer, among others. Collectively, they would become the “Chaumont circle”—envied and resented by those less favored. For many among them, this identification with Pershing early in the war became the first step toward continuing prominence in the army of the interwar period.

Assigned to GHQ as soon as he arrived in France, McCoy felt no qualms about joining such distinguished company. Members, like himself, of the elite of the officer corps, their paths had often crossed his in the past. “Every one of them I know well,” he remarked, “and have served with before.” Such common background made for a personal compatibility that eased the process of melding the staff into a team. It also added to the congeniality of life at GHQ. By the time McCoy arrived, his friend James Logan had already established himself as Pershing’s personnel officer. Sharing a villa at Chaumont, the two Family members dubbed their quarters “abri [dug-out] 1718” and made it a stopover for old friends now in uniform, such as Henry L. Stimson and Willard Straight. (In Straight’s biased view, “Thanks to Logan and McCoy largely,” the GHQ staff was “running everything over here.”) McCoy renewed his acquaintance with Robert Bacon, the former secretary of state and ambassador to France who was now a major on Pershing’s staff. Beginning each day with a prebreakfast gallop through the countryside around Chaumont, the two became close friends. Bacon described McCoy as “a perfect corker,” and told his wife, “I am crazy about him.” Of the old friendships McCoy now reclaimed, the most important was that of James G. Harbord, Pershing’s chief of staff and McCoy’s immediate superior. Bluff, influential, and highly respected, Harbord was GHQ’s self-made man. Failing to get into West Point, he enlisted and earned a commission from the ranks in 1891. He made his name in the army during extended service with the Philippine constabulary. The two officers had kept in touch since their days in the Moro Province where Harbord had been another of Leonard Wood’s admirers. In his new job as secretary of the general staff, McCoy coordinated the administrative functioning of GHQ while serving as Harbord’s key assistant. The chief of
staff especially appreciated McCoy’s buoyant sociability and his refusal to let the pressures of Chaumont interfere with an occasional meal at a fine restaurant or an outing away from the office. To his family, McCoy confided in September, “My personal and official relations with Harbord . . . are closer than ever.”

Certainly, in the nearly two decades that had elapsed since he embarked for Santiago de Cuba, McCoy had lost little of his enthusiasm for war. “The times are great and glorious,” he wrote in July. “We feel sorry for everybody before and hereafter for missing [the war].” In October he commented in a similar vein: “It is not done to confess it now-a-days I know, but I do love war and this war beats the Dutch both figuratively and literally, and is the grandest performance [there] ever was, and every day I’m thanking my lucky stars I’m all in it, and hope to be to the bitter end.”

Duty at GHQ was important, comfortable, and rewarding—promoted twice in short succession, McCoy was soon a colonel—but it kept him far from the front. As the AEF inched closer to actual combat, he became restive. Encountering his friend in Paris in January 1918, Stimson found McCoy “hungry to get into the line.” The desperate German offensive begun in March 1918 that forced the hasty commitment of American troops only added to his anxiety. To be a staff officer at such a time, he reflected, was “not . . . comforting to the soul.” Hearing of an opening in the First Infantry Division, he volunteered to give up his colonel’s eagles in return for command of a battalion. Although Harbord, himself jockeying for a frontline billet, endorsed the proposal, Pershing rejected it. Discouraged, McCoy could only comment: “Everything but the fighting seems banal.”

Finally, in late April, the American commander in chief relented. Interrupting McCoy’s plea for a friend seeking command of the 165th Infantry, Pershing surprised his subordinate by abruptly announcing, “I have selected you myself for that particular regiment.” It was the opportunity for which McCoy had waited. Better known as the Fighting Sixty-ninth, the 165th was one of four regiments composing the Forty-second (Rainbow) Division. After a farewell given by Stimson and Straight, McCoy hurriedly left Chaumont “full up with pride and happiness” and reported to the division at Baccarat.

The 165th was a national guard outfit composed of equal parts tradition, sentiment, and boisterousness. The regiment’s two previous commanders “had their heads cut off” for failing to restrain the Irish New Yorkers filling its ranks. As a “rank outsider,” McCoy judged it a “sporting proposition” to see whether or not he could succeed where his predecessors failed. Emphasizing his identification with his troops, McCoy declared half seriously that overnight he “changed from a canny Scot to a very hot hearted Irishman.” More relevant to his prospects for success was his relationship with Father Francis P. Duffy, the regimental chaplain. Father Duffy—in McCoy’s description, “a spicy and charming personality”—wielded great influence among the rank and file. His backing was essential if McCoy were to establish more than nominal authority over his
command. Fortunately, the two hit it off immediately. Father Duffy was taken by his colonel's "dignity of bearing, charm of manner and . . . alert and wide-ranging intelligence." For his part, the new regimental commander soon learned to appreciate the value of a chaplain who "not only . . . preach[ed] the gospel, but expounded with much force the rules of military discipline."8

Because the Baccarat sector was a quiet one, McCoy had the opportunity to become acquainted with other key subordinates while putting the finishing touches on the regiment's training. To judge from Father Duffy's account—one admittedly generous in praising anyone associated with the 165th—the men of the regiment soon held their new commander in high regard. "It is a delight to go to our mess with McCoy's stimulating wit," the chaplain recorded in his diary, and to discuss "the various aspects of war and life opened up by all sorts of interesting people—Bishops, diplomats, soldiers, and correspondents who drift in from afar, drawn by the magnetism of our colonel." McCoy's injunction to his officers—"to enjoy this war—the only war most of them can hope to have"—went well with the bellicose temper already existing in the regiment.9

The last spasms of the German spring offensive interrupted the 165th's stay at Baccarat and brought it into the fight for the first time. As part of an effort to reconstitute a reserve depleted by successive German attacks, the Forty-second Division in early July was reassigned to the French XXI Corps. The division assumed positions east of Rheims, on the shoulder of a salient that a German drive six weeks earlier had pushed south to the Marne River. While the bulk of the division remained in reserve, one of McCoy's three battalions occupied the forward defensive line alongside two French divisions. By July 7, the French determined that an attack toward Rheims, designed to widen the Marne salient, was imminent. All indicators pointed to the night of July 14 as the probable time of the assault.10 Alerted to the prospects of a major action, McCoy confessed that July 14 was "a very tense day." To ease that tension, he invited several Allied officers to lunch in the regimental mess and broke out some vintage French wine. By evening, the troops retired to their battle positions and McCoy to his command post to wait.11

General Henri Gourad, to whose Fourth Army the Forty-second Division was assigned, had no intention of waiting passively for the Boche to strike. To disrupt the offensive, Gourad unleashed an artillery barrage shortly before midnight against German attack positions. The enemy responded in kind but with little effect because his shells, in McCoy's words, were roaring over the regiment's positions "like freight trains." An hour before dawn, the Germans emerged from their trenches, and over the next six hours, the French 170th Division, with McCoy's Second Battalion, beat off seven separate German assaults. Further efforts to breach the Allied lines over the next two days were also repulsed. Failing to achieve a breakthrough, the German high command on July 18 suspended the attack. Although most of McCoy's unit remained out of the fight, his Second Battalion had been severely battered while fighting alongside the
French. Sustaining most of the regiment’s 269 casualties over the four-day battle, the battalion won high praise from Gourad.12

This baptism of fire was a mere prelude. Once the German offensive exhausted itself, the Allies took the initiative. To reduce the Marne salient, the Allies launched on July 18 a counteroffensive—the first in which the AEF figured prominently. Two American divisions—one of them commanded by Harbord—pierced the salient’s western face toward Soissons. Their line of communications threatened by the Allied thrust, the Germans withdrew their exposed units. By July 25, they had pulled back to strong positions on the high ground north of the Ourcq River near Sergy. Units deployed along the southern tip of the salient, including the U.S. I Corps, now received orders to pursue the retreating Germans.13

Having rested briefly after the fight at Champagne, the Rainbow Division joined U.S. I Corps, assigned to the French Sixth Army. On July 25, the division relieved the Twenty-sixth (Yankee) Division and the French 167th Division and assumed the corps mission of pursuing the Boche. As the Fighting Sixty-ninth began occupying the sector previously held by the 167th, departing French officers informed McCoy that the enemy was still retreating. McCoy passed this information to Col. Douglas MacArthur, the division chief of staff. MacArthur replied that the Forty-second’s general officers were temporarily absent, which made McCoy the senior officer present in the division. With that, McCoy announced that “the pursuit would be pressed with everything I could find at the front.” Throughout July 27, McCoy’s regiment advanced northward, delayed only by scattered German machine guns in otherwise abandoned positions. By nightfall, the regiment reached the Ourcq, where heavy shelling from the far bank and strafing German aircraft indicated that the enemy intended to make a stand.14

Anxious to keep pressure on an enemy it mistakenly believed was still withdrawing, French Sixth Army headquarters ordered a hasty crossing of the Ourcq to seize the heights overlooking the river. The pell-mell advance of the previous two days left the Rainbow Division in no condition to mount a coordinated attack, but the army commander was insistent. Still without support on either flank and short of artillery, McCoy received orders to cross the river before daybreak on July 28. Although the Ourcq itself did not present a major obstacle, the well-prepared German positions stretching along the commanding terrain on the far side made it a formidable challenge. McCoy questioned the wisdom of such a hastily prepared operation, but was told that the attack would be executed as planned and indeed that “if necessary, I must sacrifice my command to the effort.”15

Thus, the Fighting Sixty-ninth “was made the spearhead of the entire army and pushed forward by a most explicit order as a forlorn hope against a whole German division.” At 3:45 A.M. on July 28, supported only by a handful of mortars, McCoy attacked with two battalions. His remaining unit, Maj. William J. “Wild Bill” Donovan’s First Battalion, stayed in reserve. The audacity of assaulting across the river with a single regiment won some initial gains. As
McCoy observed, "The attack was executed with such quickness and spirit that the Germans were entirely surprised, the crossings forced, and their machine gun company and defensive detachments captured with only a few casualties on our side." Although pleased to have gained a precarious hold on the far bank, McCoy knew that such an easy success merely signified the lull before the storm. In short order, the Germans counterattacked, aiming to throw the Americans back across the Ourcq. This began a bitter four-day sequence of attack and counterattack that, in McCoy's words, "tried the Regiment from colonel to private." Though alone initially, McCoy's regiment was soon reinforced. By midday on July 28, the remainder of the Forty-second Division had joined the battle. Eventually, elements of three other American divisions were thrown into the fight. 16

Like any good commander, McCoy positioned himself far forward on the battlefield. With his command post exposed to enemy fire, several members of his staff were killed or wounded, but McCoy himself remained unscathed. By the end of the first day, he had established telephonic communications with brigade headquarters and each of his battalions, giving him some control over the fight for the first time. For the rest of the battle, he maneuvered his units, provided for their logistical needs, inspired the downhearted (according to Father Duffy), and above all coordinated fire support as more and more field artillery was committed to the fight. Although surrounded at one point by most of the Fourth Prussian Guards Division, the regiment held on and even expanded its foothold on the north bank. Finally, American tenacity paid off. On the night of August 1-2, the Germans abandoned their positions and broke contact. The battle of the Ourcq was won. 17

At once, the high command pressed forward units in pursuit. Its ranks decimated, its survivors exhausted, the 165th limped forward several miles toward the Vesle River. Here, on August 3, the U.S. Fourth Division relieved the Rainbow in the line. As his weary regiment moved toward the rear, McCoy halted it to allow Father Duffy to deliver a "fiery and stirring sermon." Despite their success, McCoy's soldiers might well have needed some cheering up. In this one engagement, the 165th suffered nearly 2,000 casualties—about the same, McCoy observed, as the entire army had sustained throughout the Santiago campaign of 1898. 18

The 165th settled near Bourmont for a much-needed rest. McCoy emerged from the Aisne-Marne offensive, as it came to be known, with only a touch of mustard gas, but the stress of combat showed in the twenty pounds that he had lost. Envious friends who visited from GHQ reported that he was well but thin. Despite the stress and recollection of the casualties that the regiment had suffered, McCoy found combat command exhilarating. To his family he wrote: "I'm having the time of my life." 19 Yet his days as a regimental commander were numbered. As the combat of 1918 revealed the strengths and frailties of American military leaders at every echelon, shifts in personnel became frequent. Commanders found wanting were shunted off to less-demanding responsibilities.
Those proving themselves in battle advanced rapidly. Thus, by the time that the Rainbow Division prepared to return to the front in late August, McCoy was no longer in its ranks. Instead, he was assuming command of the Sixty-third Brigade, one of two brigades composing the Thirty-second (Red Arrow) Division. It took McCoy fourteen years of service as a captain to win promotion to major in early 1917. Now, barely a year and a half later, he pinned on the star of a brigadier general.  

The Sixty-third Brigade comprised the 125th and 126th Infantry Regiments, each formed from elements of the Michigan National Guard. McCoy took command on August 29 with the Thirty-second Division in the midst of the Oise-Aisne offensive. Having been battered in recent fighting near Juvigny, his unit spent several days in support of its sister brigade, the Sixty-fourth, which was leading the attack. Even in reserve, McCoy’s unit lay within range of enemy artillery. According to one witness, however, McCoy “strolled about the area with every evidence of unconcern.” He pointedly engaged in long conversations with his subordinates, drawing them out of their dugouts “to stand in the open with their brigade commander and set an example of steadiness.” On September 2, the division pulled out of the line and moved to Joinville to recuperate. Later that month, the Red Arrow became part of the newly formed First U.S. Army and moved to the vicinity of Verdun to prepare for the Allied counteroffensive scheduled to begin on September 26.  

At the beginning of the Meuse-Argonne offensive—the name given the American portion of the overall Allied attack—the Thirty-second Division formed the reserve of V Corps. On September 30, the Red Arrow relieved the Thirty-seventh Division near Nantillois and made contact with the enemy. On the following day, the division attacked with the Sixty-third Brigade in the van—a position it retained through the next nineteen days. McCoy’s brigade advanced methodically against a stubborn, entrenched foe and enjoyed considerable success. One of his regiments, the 126th, captured nearly 500 Germans in a single day in the Tranchée de la Mamelle. Similarly, the 125th mopped up 200 prisoners while penetrating the Kriemhilde Stellung, part of the Hindenburg Line. McCoy’s own performance was superb. From the vantage point of GHQ, one of Pershing’s aides reported that “McCoy has done awfully well[,] . . . he is winning fresh laurels continually.” Yet the brigade also sustained heavy casualties. In just under three weeks of fighting, 585 of McCoy’s men were killed and 1,780 wounded.  

The armistice found the Sixty-third Brigade across the Meuse River pursuing a crumbling German army. At the designated hour on November 11, McCoy reported, “we gathered under a tree nearby, flung out the colors and gave our heartiest cheer.” The officer who earlier described the war as “great and glorious” now admitted that he was “overwhelmed by Peace.” Although the Sixty-third Brigade marched on to the Rhine as part of the Allied occupation force, it did so without McCoy. James G. Harbord, now commanding general of the Services of Supply (SOS), faced the complicated task of returning the AEF to
McCoy as brigade commander during World War I: The strain of combat has taken its toll. (Courtesy U.S. Army Military History Institute)

the United States for demobilization. He needed help. Pulled out of division command by Pershing in July to straighten out a deteriorating logistical situation, Harbord discovered that his chief problem was a dearth of leadership. The logistics command, he complained, was staffed by a "constant stream of
misfits ... from the front. Every man tried out and discarded up there comes back discredited and with a grouch.” In his attempts to upgrade the SOS, Harbord told McCoy in September, “I have been sorely tempted to howl for you on several occasions. ... You can take it as an extraordinary tribute to my interest in your upward flight that I have not insisted to General Pershing that you be sent back here to me.” Once the fighting ended, such considerations no longer carried much weight, so Harbord wasted no time in summoning McCoy to his headquarters at Tours and appointing him director of the Army Transport Service (ATS). Disappointed at losing his command literally at the moment of victory, McCoy “gulped the bitter medicine” and did as he was told.24

A problem of monumental proportions awaited him. As he wrote in late November, with “124 ships in ports now, unloading 30,000 tons of cargo daily; and 2000000 men etc. to go home, I foresee I shall be busy.” Getting those troops home quickly was an issue to which the American command attached considerable importance. Writing to Maj. Gen. James W. McAndrew, Pershing’s chief of staff, Harbord noted that any ill feeling that the AEF carried back to civilian life would “have an influence on the future of the Regular Army and on any policy for proper preparedness.” He continued: “We of the Regular Army are tied up together in this matter and it is our duty ... to send these two million men homeward bound in a friendly mood toward a proper military policy.”25

McCoy measured up to the task. The ATS easily surpassed initial projections that at most 250,000 troops could be sent home per month. In June 1919 alone, 400,000 doughboys completed the return passage to the United States. In all, 600,000 troops reached home well ahead of schedule. McCoy’s work especially impressed his immediate superior, Brig. Gen. William W. Atterbury, the vice-president for operations of the Pennsylvania Railroad who had served as the AEF’s director general of transportation. Contemplating his imminent return to mufti, Atterbury nominated McCoy to be his successor.26

Along with new responsibilities, the end of the war brought new honors. In January 1919, Marshal Henri-Philippe Pétain decorated McCoy with the Legion d’honneur and the Croix de guerre with palm. That same month, Pershing personally awarded McCoy and nine other general officers the Distinguished Service Medal. Perhaps the most meaningful tribute came from Father Duffy, who reported from the Rhineland that, although the Fighting Sixty-ninth was now serving under its seventh commander since entering federal service in 1917, “you were our only colonel.”27 In January, McCoy became deputy director general of transportation under Atterbury. “If constant travel makes a transportation man, I am it,” he reported. The pace of his activities after the armistice on top of the campaigns of 1918 may well have increased his susceptibility to the influenza that laid him out later that month. The influenza epidemic that was sweeping much of Europe and the United States took the lives of thousands, including the effervescent Willard Straight. Although ill enough to be hospitalized, McCoy recovered. Released in mid-February, he left France on convalescent leave, which
he spent in Rome and Sicily as a guest of Thomas Nelson Page, American ambassador to Italy. Refreshed and reinvigorated by "the most leisurely gentlemanly loaf I’ve ever had," he was back on the job in early March.28

From France, McCoy corresponded with Wood, cheering up his old mentor and commenting on international developments, especially those pertaining to the ongoing Paris Peace Conference. (Wilson and Pershing deprived Wood of the wartime role that the latter believed ought to have been rightfully his. The most distinguished American soldier of the previous decade and a half had spent the war supervising trainees in Kansas.29) One such letter, written in March 1919, revealed McCoy’s support for the League of Nations—somewhat surprising given his prewar impatience with Wilsonian idealism. His only reservation stemmed from a concern that the United States enter the world organization on "a proper and American basis." He applauded the debate over the League at home because it guaranteed that "the American people are going to know what they are about and are not going to accept . . . the probable surrender of certain sovereign rights without a thorough thrashing out of the whole affair." As to the outcome of that debate he had no doubt: "Whatever the result . . . , the League of Nations is here and America cannot stay out of it." In passing, McCoy also predicted that the peace conference would grant the United States a mandate to provisionally govern Armenia and possibly other parts of Turkey, telling Wood that with his background in colonial affairs, the Wilson administration might see in such a new responsibility "a good place to bury you and hide your light under a bushel for some time to come."30

McCoy’s expectation in early 1919 that the United States might accept a mandate for Armenia was not as fantastic as it appears in retrospect. The currents of Wilsonian idealism, American public opinion, Allied disagreement, and rising nationalist aspirations in Asia Minor coincided briefly to make just such an outcome appear possible. As used by the victors in Paris after World War I, “Armenia” referred to the rugged, undeveloped area of the Ottoman Empire bounded by present-day Iran on the south, the modern Soviet republics of Georgia and Azerbaijan on the east, and the Black Sea on the north, with a western edge along a line drawn from the southeastern tip of the Black Sea to the Mediterranean near the city of Adana. The 3 million or so people inhabiting this region divided into several ethnic groups. Most numerous were the Turks and Kurds, both Moslem, and the Armenians themselves, who were Christian. In tracing the establishment of their church to A.D. 301, the Armenians claimed that theirs was the oldest of all national Christian churches.31

For reasons only partially rooted in religious differences, these people found it impossible to live with one another in peace. Beginning in the late 1870s, their long-standing antipathy erupted into genocidal atrocities directed against Armenians. Attacks by Turks and Kurds escalated in scale and brutality, culminating in 1915 when the Turkish government ordered the extinction of the Armenian population remaining in the Ottoman Empire. This directive resulted
in the massacre or starvation of from 600,000 to 1 million victims, with a further half million pouring into neighboring countries as unwelcome refugees. Word of these events received in the predominantly Christian United States provoked a wave of revulsion against Turkey, already tainted by its wartime alliance with Germany. Church groups and humanitarians mounted campaigns to provide relief for the targets of Turkish persecution. Not surprisingly, the Armenians' plight enlisted the sympathy of the humanitarian in the White House. Point 11 of Wilson's Fourteen Points promised both "undoubted security of life" and "an absolutely unmolested opportunity of autonomous development" for nationalities currently under Turkish rule. Thus, for many Americans, Armenia by 1919 came to symbolize not merely a place name but a cause.32

To Allied statesmen convened in Paris to negotiate the peace, Armenia was never more than a peripheral issue, although one involving complicated political as well as humanitarian considerations. During the war, Britain, France, Italy, and czarist Russia agreed secretly to partition the Ottoman Empire into spheres of influence—an arrangement whose implementation Wilson resolutely opposed. The American president proposed instead that areas detached from Turkey become mandates to be administered by disinterested powers with the welfare of the local population uppermost in mind. Under such an arrangement, the Armenians would establish a homeland carved out of remnants of the Ottoman Empire, live for a time under the tutelage of a great power, and eventually gain full independence. Wary of each other's ambitions in the Near East and therefore unable to agree upon a division of spheres, the Allies reluctantly accepted Wilson's alternative. On January 30, 1919, the Council of Ten adopted a draft resolution that called for the creation of several mandates out of Turkish territory, one of them to be set aside for the Armenians.33

With Britain and France checking one another's designs in the region, the European powers looked to the United States as the logical candidate to undertake the mandate for Armenia. In the European view, because the United States lacked a tradition of imperial involvement in the Middle East, it could be counted on to administer an Armenian mandate impartially. Having acquiesced in the president's scheme, the Allies now pressed him to accept his country's share of the responsibility. Notwithstanding the domestic clamor to do something for Armenia, Wilson balked, citing the uncertainty of both popular and congressional reaction to the reality of a mandate. In all likelihood, the president decided to defer a decision on Armenia until the more important issue of American membership in the League had been resolved.34

Yet the issue could not be disposed of quite so neatly. Throughout the spring of 1919, reports from Armenia spoke of widespread famine among the survivors of Turkish persecution. In addition, the Allied-supported Greek landings in Smyrna in May—a development ostensibly unrelated to Armenia—incited Turkish nationalists and raised fears that the Turks's desire for retribution against Christian enemies could lead to a recurrence of the bloody events of 1915.
perception that the long-suffering Armenians were about to be engulfed by yet another wave of terror evoked concern in the United States and increased the pressure on Wilson to take some action in Armenia before returning home from Paris. A cable sent to the president on June 22, 1919, illustrates the political sensitivity of the Armenian question. "When the unspeakable Turks were perpetrating their diabolical crimes [in 1915]," the message said, "American hearts were stirred with impotent horror." American entry into the war ended that impotence. With the war over, the United States needed to act. "Without regard to party or creed the American people are deeply interested in the welfare of the Armenian people and expect to see the restoration of the independence of Armenia." The cable was signed by a bipartisan group of American leaders. Heading the list were Elihu Root, elder statesman of the Republican party, Charles Evans Hughes, Wilson's opponent in the campaign of 1916, and Henry Cabot Lodge of Massachusetts, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.35

The president could not ignore the views of Republican leaders whose support he sorely needed if the United States were to enter the League. Even before the signing of the Treaty of Versailles, the opposition party signaled its dissatisfaction with the League Covenant, most tellingly with the famous Senate "Round Robin" of March 1919. Wilson could ill-afford to give further offense over Armenia. On the other hand, for the president to embrace the role of Armenia's protector too enthusiastically could jeopardize ratification by giving credence to fears that Wilsonian internationalism knew no bounds. The president needed to satisfy the pleas of those calling for Armenia's rescue while avoiding any irrevocable commitment that could provide ammunition to those skeptical of the growing American role in world affairs.36 The president's solution, urged upon him by Henry Morgenthau and Herbert Hoover, was to dispatch a military mission to assess conditions in Armenia. Such a mission would serve three purposes: It would demonstrate Wilson's support of the pro-Armenia lobby; as an expression of official American interest in Armenia, the mission might deter renewed attacks against the Christian minority; and the mission's findings would provide information on which to base future policy, including a possible American mandate.37

While President Wilson was seeking a way to dispose of the Armenian issue, Frank McCoy, his work as director general of transportation nearly complete, prepared to assume command of the Second Brigade, First Infantry Division, the last AEF unit to return home from France. But when Harbord received word on August 2 of his appointment to head the Armenian mission, he told McCoy to scrub his plans. Harbord needed someone to serve as his chief of staff, and he drafted McCoy for the job.38 McCoy's specific assignment makes it difficult to analyze his contribution to the mission. A chief of staff serves as his commander's alter ego. He must be loyal and self-effacing. Disagreements between a commander and his chief remain behind closed doors. Barring Harbord himself, McCoy enjoyed more influence and authority than any member of the mission.
Yet, because he consistently used that influence to support Harbord, differentiating between the views and roles of each is next to impossible. Given their common background and long association, differences were probably rare. An attempt, therefore, to isolate McCoy’s personal contribution to the mission holds little promise. A better approach is to accept the episode as Harbord’s mission, remembering that if McCoy’s impact was seldom decisive, nowhere was it absent.

Harbord and McCoy spent most of August in Paris preparing for their expedition. Gathering background information on Armenia—most of which was biased or badly dated—took up much of McCoy’s attention. He also assembled a staff to accompany the mission and report on the various military, political, and economic facets of the region. The team he recruited included regular officers, citizen-soldiers awaiting discharge, and civilian academics. In the first category was Brig. Gen. George Van Horn Mosely, like Harbord and McCoy, a veteran of the Philippines and Chaumont. The second group included Capt. Stanley K. Hornbeck, a political scientist from the University of Wisconsin and later a prominent State Department official; Lt. Col. Jasper Brinton, a noted Philadelphia lawyer; and Lt. Col. John Price Jackson, former dean of the School of Engineering at Pennsylvania State University. McCoy recruited Benjamin Strong, governor of the Federal Reserve Bank of New York and a member of the Family, to assess economic conditions in Armenia. When ill health forced Strong’s withdrawal, William Wilson Cumberland, an economist at the Univer-

*The American Military Mission to Armenia, 1919. In front, from left, are an intense George Van Horn Mosely, a jovial James G. Harbord, and McCoy. (Courtesy Library of Congress)*
of Minnesota and adviser to the American mission at the peace conference, agreed to fill in. Other members of the mission included former Harvard football All-American Edward Bowditch, who spent several years as aide to the Philippine governor general. No member of the mission, either military or civilian, had previously visited Armenia.39

Meetings with American officials in Paris gave Harbord and McCoy a more detailed understanding of their assignment. General Tasker Bliss told Harbord that the administration hoped to persuade Americans “that pending action by Congress the President was doing all he could by sending someone for moral effect.” Harbord agreed that an expression of American interest in the region might exercise some restraining influence, but he worried about the effect if such interest was not followed up by action.40 The American Mission in Paris also provided Harbord with recent reports from Asia Minor, giving, in the words of one staff member, “a terribly black, but I fear truthful picture of the region.” Such a characterization was appropriate. The situation was “fast approaching crisis,” wrote American relief officials from Constantinople, and without prompt action, Armenia would “succumb to starvation and aggressions of neighboring peoples.” An American diplomat who advocated a mandate predicted, “Unless prevented, the Turks apparently intend the total extinction of [the] Armenian race.”41

Forewarned by such bleak predictions, the American Military Mission to Armenia departed Brest on August 24. Their ship, the Martha Washington, was a seedy, cockroach-infested ex-Austrian transport. The party consisted of fourteen principals, a number of aides and enlisted men, and a French chef, Louis Lutard, who purportedly cooked for Marshal Pétain during the war. The ship stopped briefly at Gibraltar where, recalled Cumberland, Harbord and McCoy “regaled us by explaining how they felt sure they could capture the place.” Proceeding to Constantinople, the mission arrived on September 3. Harbord and McCoy immediately set to work, spending the next few days calling on Allied representatives and local leaders. Harbord then divided the mission into two groups: Personnel assigned to examine questions of trade, finance, and government remained in Constantinople, the region’s political and commercial center, while the main body, including the three generals, mounted in motorcars and armed with sawed-off shotguns, set off on a firsthand inspection of conditions in Turkish Armenia and the Caucasus.42

For the next five weeks, Harbord’s party covered the length and breadth of Asia Minor from Constantinople to Baku on the Caspian Sea. In all, according to Mosely’s log of the trip, the mission travelled 8,734 kilometers (5,415 miles) by rail, automobile, and horseback, stopping at most of the region’s major cities and numerous villages. Conditions were miserable. Vehicles broke down or were hung up on primitive roads; on one occasion, Kurds ambushed the caravan, wounding two Americans. Worst of all, Monsieur Lutard’s talents soon proved “unequal to turning out bacon and fried onions” in quantity over an open campfire.43

Despite such inconveniences, the mission took its responsibilities seriously.
According to Harbord, “We literally dreamed Armenia and massacres.” Yet, whatever their dreams, Harbord’s party drew from their own observations and from numerous interviews with missionaries, relief workers, and local officials a picture that, although harsh, differed greatly from what they expected. “We heard the sad tale of deportation and sad return,” wrote McCoy from Adana on September 11. “But I must say that now there is no sign of hunger or misery nor present complaint.” Ten days later, Harbord expressed a similar view: “Nothing I have seen thus far indicates to me that any state of danger exists.” Armenians returning home were meeting with no violence. 

In addition to concluding that the immediate plight of the Armenians had been exaggerated, the mission’s members developed two other general impressions that informed their overall conclusions. The first concerned the Turks. Journalistic opinion and diplomatic reports relentlessly portrayed them as the villains of the Near East; that there was more to the story came as a revelation. As McCoy told a British official in Constantinople near the end of the mission, “He had been prepared to find that the Christians had suffered greatly, but not to discover that the Turks had suffered quite as much or more.” Indeed, he attributed the region’s surprising tranquility to the exhaustion of the Turkish people as a result of war. Harbord estimated that not more than 20 percent of the men who went to war returned. Typhus alone killed 600,000 Turkish soldiers. In the eyes of these Americans, some manner of Turkish salvation was at hand in the nationalist movement of Mustapha Kemal Ataturk. Harbord and McCoy had a lengthy interview with Kemal on September 20 at Sivas in Turkish Armenia. Telling the
Americans what they wanted to hear, Kemal made a favorable impression. He pledged that there would be no new attacks against Armenians. Vowing to resist any attempt to dismember Turkey, he persuaded Harbord that his aim was to preserve "the integrity of the Ottoman Empire under the mandate of a disinterested great power, preferably America." McCoy had the wit to recognize that the sincerity of Kemal’s "eulogy" of the United States was on a par with that of "a Mexican . . . talking face to face with an American." Yet he too was impressed by the nationalists and believed that "the people are all solid for Mustapha Kemal." 45

The second matter requiring attention concerned the long-term prospects of an independent Armenian state. Completing its tour of Turkish Armenia in late September, the Harbord mission proceeded to Transcaucasia to visit Georgia, Azerbaijan, and the Republic of Armenia. These small, struggling nations had achieved a tenuous existence following the overthrow of the czar. Though created from territory traditionally Russian, the new Armenian state declared its intent to encompass Turkish Armenia as well, providing a single homeland for people of Armenian origin. If the United States were to accept a mandate for Armenia, this embryonic republic would constitute its basis. Thus, the outlook for its survival demanded careful scrutiny. 46 In fact, conditions in these three states were dismal. Russian Armenia still contained some 300,00 hungry refugees from Turkey, the countryside lay in ruin, and, with no crops planted, starvation seemed imminent. The vulnerability of the three republics ought to have inspired cooperation, but their governments instead bickered about conflicting territorial claims. Each was "corrupt, inefficient, [and] bankrupt," and all were surviving only on the "salvage from [the] Russian collapse" and showed signs of Bolshevik influence. As for the Armenian republic’s expansionist aspirations, Harbord advised the American Mission in Paris that the Armenians "cannot govern themselves much less Turks . . . who are in [the] actual majority." 47

By October 15, the mission reassembled on the Martha Washington for the return to France. During this voyage, the members of the mission refined their conclusions and prepared the report that Harbord had been ordered to present to the president. The result was imposing: Harbord’s portion ran to forty-three pages of typescript, supplemented by eleven voluminous appendices. Yet, however thorough, it was a perverse, even outlandish document. Apart from the domestic political purposes it served, Woodrow Wilson had sent the mission to Armenia to gain a realistic, dispassionate appraisal of conditions in the Near East. Perhaps to avoid the hyperemotion that Armenia regularly evoked, the mission had been explicitly organized as a military one—its leaders were hardheaded soldiers, well-versed in the problems of ruling subject peoples. Yet the florid rhetoric of the final product recalled nothing so much as a missionary tract. And its conclusions overreached any that the progenitor of "missionary diplomacy” himself might have drawn.
To the modern reader, the Harbord Report’s most striking characteristic is its sententious and melodramatic tone. Embroidering a brief historical narrative of Armenia—a nation “evangelized by apostles fresh from the memory of our Lord”—Harbord wrote, “mutilation, violation, torture and death have left their haunting memories in a hundred beautiful Armenian valleys; and the traveller in that region is seldom free from the evidence of this most colossal crime of all the ages.” Surely, he continued, “no faith has ever been put to . . . harder test or has been cherished at greater cost.” Turning to the current situation in the Near East, Harbord decried “political conditions which shriek of misery, starvation, ruin and all the melancholy aftermath . . . of beastial [sic] brutality unrestrained by God or man.” Conspicuous by their absence are references to the surprisingly tranquil countryside or to Turkish suffering, views that Harbord and McCoy earlier expressed through official channels.48

The report envisioned only one possible remedy to this appalling situation: to designate a disinterested power to control the area. Yet Harbord boldly proposed not merely protection for Armenians but “a single mandatory for the Turkish Empire and the Transcaucasus” stretching from Constantinople to the Caspian Sea. Economic realities and political tensions dictated that the region be treated as a unit. Harbord did not intend to understate the difficulty of such an undertaking—to accept such a responsibility would mean “facing a long period of tutelage for possibly unappreciative and ungrateful pupils, much expense, probably diplomatic embarrassment . . . , and little reward except the consciousness of having contributed to the peace of the world and the rehabilitation of oppressed humanity.”49

What nation would accept such a mandate? Of necessity, it would be one motivated by “a strong sense of altruism and international duty to the peace of the world, [willing] to steadfastly carry out a continuity of policy for at least a generation and to send only its most gifted sons to leadership in the work.” What nation in 1919 could claim such ideals? Describing Europe as “‘without pretensions to altruism or too much devotion to ideals,’” Harbord discounted the likelihood that one of the traditional Western powers would assume the mandate. If, on the other hand, the United States were to accept the responsibility, Harbord observed that other nations would “expect of America . . . the same lofty standards shown in Cuba and the Philippines—the development of peoples rather than material resources and commerce.” The mission concluded that Americans alone possessed the capacity for such an undertaking and that others wished the United States to take on the job. Harbord believed that the United States possessed advantages “enjoyed by no other great power.” Similarly, Hornbeck wrote that other nations viewed the United States “as the one great power which can approach the local problems with unbiased mind and without ulterior motives.”50

Indeed, Hornbeck believed that the job could be accomplished with comparative ease, a view with which others on the mission concurred. Harbord
estimated that an American mandate for the entire region would initially require 59,000 American troops and would cost $275 million in its first year. In his appendix on military considerations, Mosely wrote that establishing the mandate would require 69,450 troops supported by an air service and a dozen naval vessels. Both the expense of administering the mandate and the size of the garrison would decrease over time. According to Harbord’s projections, the total costs over the first five years would be $756,014,000.51

But should the United States actually commit itself to accept such an obligation? Here, Harbord became coy. “This mission has not felt that it is expected to submit a recommendation,” he wrote. The reason for this reticence is not entirely clear. One possibility is that opposition to a mandate existed within the mission itself. Cumberland later recalled that an attempt to poll the members on the question produced seven votes in favor of a mandate and seven opposed. Or perhaps Harbord received oral instructions not to state an opinion. Whatever the reason, Harbord concluded his report with an ostensibly objective cataloging of those factors favoring an American mandate and those against. Although not including an outright recommendation, this exercise effectively signalled Harbord’s clear support of a mandate.52

Harbord listed thirteen reasons militating against an American mandate. Generally, these cited the need to husband American resources for problems closer to home and the undesirability of involvement in an area of marginal strategic importance. Couched in understated terms, they suggested an attitude of prudent realism. With little subtlety, the report also provided President Wilson with fourteen points in favor of a mandate. The significance of that number can hardly have been lost on either Harbord or his intended reader. In discussing the reasons favoring a mandate, Harbord reverted to his previous grandiloquence and emphasized moral responsibility, divine mission, and the capacity of American idealism. The Near East was the “greatest humanitarian opportunity of the age”; the United States was Armenia’s “only hope”; a mandate would provide Americans with an “outlet to a vast amount of spirit and energy.” Reason 13 quoted Cain’s question to God: “Am I my brother’s keeper?” And reason 14—the only one not balanced against a corresponding drawback—stated: “Here is a man’s job. . . . America can afford the money; she has the men; no duty to her own people would suffer. . . . Shall it be said that our country lacks the courage to take up new and different duties?”53

Mosely, for one, supported Harbord’s conclusions. “From a disinterested, humanitarian point of view,” he argued, the mission had “convinced [him] it is our duty to step in and take over the task entirely.” “If the American people could witness what we have witnessed,” he added, “I do not believe they would hesitate for a moment to accept the task, gigantic though it is. No nation has ever been offered such an opportunity.” As for McCoy’s views, the evidence is sparse. He never committed himself on paper to a particular position. But Cumberland recalled years later that McCoy viewed the prospect of a mandate skeptically.
because he “saw America wedged in between Russia[...and British interests ... without its own communications, thousands of miles from the United States and utterly indefensible.” Although such considerations argued against a mandate restricted to the Transcaucasia, they were less relevant to the mandate for the Turkish empire outlined in the Harbord Report. Moreover, Harbord’s correspondence with McCoy after the mission suggests that he considered McCoy an ally regarding Armenia. 

Delivering its report to the American Mission in Paris in late October, the American Military Mission to Armenia ceased to exist. In large measure, it accomplished its short-term objectives. By sending Harbord to the Near East, Wilson placated those calling for American action in behalf of Armenia. And certainly, so long as the mission remained in Armenia, the renewed violence that many observers feared did not occur. Indeed, the mission discovered that such fears had been largely misplaced. Yet events occurring during the life of the mission ended any possibility that the mission’s report would be useful as a brief in favor of an American mandate. Whatever the prospects for a mandate during the summer of 1919, by autumn they had evaporated. Even before the mission’s departure, the New York Times, itself favoring a mandate, noted the nation’s shifting mood. “The American people are eager to save Armenia,” the paper commented, but only “if it can be done without any trouble or inconvenience to us.” Wilson’s own recognition of the country’s changing attitude regarding the role of the United States in world affairs inspired his decision in September to take his case for the League directly to the people. The subsequent train of events—Wilson’s stroke and incapacity, the Senate’s partisan debate of the League, and ultimately the rejection of the Versailles Treaty on November 19, 1919—buried the idea of an American mandate for Armenia once and for all.

A month before, Secretary of State Robert Lansing ordered the American Mission in Paris to forward Harbord’s findings as soon as possible, saying that they were urgently desired for a Senate subcommittee. By the time the report became available, such urgency no longer existed. It is doubtful that the president ever read the report. Had he done so, he would have found little use for it. The report’s crusading spirit and the breadth of its conclusions ran directly counter to the emerging postwar temper of the country. If rejection of the Versailles Treaty obviated efforts to secure a mandate for Armenia, publication of the Harbord Report would only have hindered efforts to resuscitate the League.

Only after the Senate’s second and final rejection of the League in March 1920 did the Harbord Report briefly resurface—and then for partisan rather than substantive reasons. In a gesture designed to signify its interest in Armenia, Congress petitioned Wilson to release Harbord’s findings. On April 3, Wilson honored the request, sending the report to the Senate, in the words of the New York Times, “several months after it had ceased to have any practical value.” The report did retain value as political ammunition for use against Wilson himself. The following month in a quixotic gesture probably intended to embarrass Congress by
exposing the shallowness of its concern for Armenia, Wilson formally proposed that the United States accept a mandate. Rejection of the proposal was a foregone conclusion. In the brief debate that preceded final congressional action, opponents of a mandate repeatedly cited data from the Harbord Report to support their views. The religiosity and idealistic rhetoric that characterized the report retained no more cogency in the late spring of 1920 than did Wilson’s own Fourteen Points. Yet Harbord’s projections of troops to be deployed and dollars to be spent possessed concrete meaning. According to the New Republic, “General Harbord’s report . . . has been quoted by half the editorial writers in the United States to combat our acceptance of a mandate.” During congressional debate, speaker after speaker cited facts and figures from the Harbord Report to substantiate his opposition to an Armenian mandate. As expected, on May 31, by a margin of fifty-two to twenty-three, the Senate denied President Wilson the authority to accept a mandate. Similar action by the House soon followed.57

The congressional action sealed the demise of a cause whose decline began the previous summer. For Harbord, however, the lack of support for his position was difficult to accept. In a futile effort to drum up interest in Armenia, he published a series of articles that called attention to Armenia’s plight and to the work of his mission. Even after formal congressional rejection of the mandate, Harbord insisted that the issue was not dead. “The American conscience will not stand for more than a certain amount more of Armenian atrocities,” he told McCoy. He disputed the conventional wisdom on the public’s fading interest, arguing that it “underestimated the number of church people of all denominations who wish America to do something for Armenia besides lend or give her money.” He predicted that there would be a revival of the question in Congress.58 With greater realism—and evident regret—McCoy accepted Congress’s action as final. He placed the real blame for the abandonment of Armenia on Britain and France. Although many “fine Britons are in sympathy with their government,” he told James L. Barton of Near East Relief, “these men talk one thing and their government does another.” Until European policies changed, “no individual American would be safe in touching” any scheme to assist Armenia.59

The American Military Mission to Armenia illustrated again the involvement of soldiers in foreign policy. Although the principal product of the mission, the Harbord Report, was overtaken by events before its completion, it is not entirely without interest. The report vividly illustrates the military’s support for expanding American global presence—even into an area of marginal strategic and economic importance to the United States. Officers who twenty years before enthusiastically civilized Cuba and the Philippines welcomed a similar opportunity in the Near East. Only the rationale had changed: The ideals of Wilson superseded those of Kipling. The report also shows how completely the mission misread public opinion. As a brief in favor of American assistance to Armenia, the Harbord Report was irrelevant. Only as a source document for those opposing a mandate did it achieve a brief, ironic usefulness.