Preface

Few American Presidents have been more respected, admired, and loved than Franklin D. Roosevelt. In the eyes of many he was, and still is, looked upon as a man who could do no wrong. Thus, there has been a tendency to disregard, ignore, or ridicule those administrative officials who disagreed with his policies and did what they could to change them. The numerous accounts of United States foreign and military policy from 1937 through 1940 have been limited primarily to the activities of those members of the Roosevelt administration who, along with the President, worked to aid the Allies. There were, nevertheless, a few men in the War Department and in Congress who opposed sending military aid to Britain and France as long as the United States Army was so ill equipped. The men who opposed the President's military-aid policy were not ignorant or disloyal; they were intelligent, patriotic Americans who believed that such a program was endangering the national security. This is the story of one of those men.

Any person familiar with the administration of President Franklin D. Roosevelt is undoubtedly aware of many of the key figures who surrounded that well-known Chief Executive. The names of such cabinet members as Cordell Hull, Henry Morgenthau, Jr., Harry Hopkins, Harold Ickes, Frances Perkins, Henry Wallace, James Farley, Dan Roper, Claude Swanson, and Henry Stimson are all well known. There is, however, a colleague of those individuals who is virtually unheard of. That person is Harry H. Woodring, who served as Secretary of War from 1936 to mid 1940.
It is indeed surprising that Woodring should be the forgotten man of the Roosevelt administration. In terms of length of service he was by no means a short-timer, for he served on FDR’s “team” for more than seven years—three as Assistant Secretary of War and four as Secretary of War. Consequently, his anonymity does not stem from a short period of public exposure. Neither should the position that he filled have contributed to his obscurity. Although the activities of the Secretary of War and the War Department are generally ignored in peacetime, such was not the case in the 1930s. With the breakdown of world peace, the matter of national defense became a major concern, and the United States military establishment became increasingly important. With the expanding influence of the Army came considerable publicity; before long, most Americans knew at least a little about Secretary of War Woodring and his activities as head of the War Department. nor should he be forgotten and ignored because he was less significant or less interesting than other figures in the administration. His dealings with Roosevelt were extensive, and on many key issues his influence was considerable. Furthermore, it is doubtful that the story of any of Roosevelt’s cabinet members is more interesting than that of Woodring. He was one of the most controversial persons of the period, having the dubious distinction of being the only man that Roosevelt ever removed from his cabinet.

A primary reason that Woodring is an “unknown” is that virtually nothing has been written of his service as Secretary of War. Many members of the Roosevelt administration who were far less important than Woodring have either written, or have collaborated on writing, accounts of their activities in that period. Woodring, however, was one of the few individuals closely associated with Roosevelt who did not write an autobiography, memoirs, or some other personal account of what took place during those years. His reasons for never attempting to explain or justify his actions are not entirely clear, but in the years immediately following his removal, Woodring did not wish to offend or embarrass President Roosevelt. Several years after the latter’s death, Woodring started to work on an autobiography, but numerous business ventures, along with his political activities, kept him from getting beyond his childhood years.

Woodring’s lack of notoriety on the national scene is hardly surprising when one discovers that he is scarcely known within the confines of his home state. Even the residents of Elk City, the village from which he came, and Neodesha, the town that he considered home, seem to be unaware of, or at least unwilling to acknowledge, the fact that one of their own became Governor and later went on to influence national policy as Secretary of War.

After Woodring’s removal from the cabinet in June of 1940, Duke Shoop of the Kansas City Star wrote: “Some day, when the next chapter of the
career of Harry Woodring is written, the letters, reports, and records of the present day international intrigue—all of it centering on the issue of how far we should go in helping the Allies—will make interesting reading.” It is the purpose of this study not only to write the chapter that Mr. Shoop envisioned, but also to examine, for the first time, Woodring’s entire political career. Very few individuals, including historians, know who Harry Woodring was, what he attempted to do, and what he accomplished. This study will attempt to answer those questions. Perhaps, with a better understanding of the man, his problems, and his actions, it will be possible to place him in proper historical perspective.

Little did I realize when I originally undertook this study that it would ultimately involve so many people. I wish to acknowledge the help of all those who assisted me in some way, because without their help this book could never have been written. Special thanks must go to Cooper C. Woodring, of Plandome, New York, who permitted me to be the first person to examine his father’s personal papers. Not only did he give me complete access to those papers, but he placed no restrictions on my use of them; his only request was that I be objective. For his cooperation plus the fine hospitality that he and his wife, Sue, showed me during the period I was going through the papers, I will be forever grateful. Thanks must also go to Melissa Woodring Jager for granting me permission to utilize her father’s papers.

A number of friends and colleagues were of great help in this undertaking. I would especially like to express my appreciation to: Harry L. Coles of Ohio State University, who guided this study in its initial phase; to George H. Lobdell of Ohio University and Jack B. Gray of East Texas State University for their suggestions on ways to improve the content and style; to Debra Taylor Crawford, my typist, who somehow deciphered my handwriting and turned it into meaningful drafts and ultimately into a final manuscript; to Virginia Seaver and John H. Langley of the University Press of Kansas for their assistance and understanding in the editing and publishing of this book; to Dr. H. M. Lafferty and the Faculty Research Committee of East Texas State University for the confidence they expressed in me by the awarding of two research grants to assist in the preparation of this study. Special thanks go to my East Texas State University colleague Nancy R. Lenoir, who put her editorial pen to this work and greatly enhanced its value.

Many people took time out from their busy schedules to share with me their recollections of Harry Woodring or some aspect of his career; to all
of those people, whose names appear on pages 320–22, I express my deepest gratitude. Special thanks must go to Helen Coolidge Woodring, who gave me so much time and answered so many questions on three different occasions.

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Keith McParland