By midsummer of 1939 Secretary Woodring and his War Department advisers were generally satisfied with developments at home and abroad. Congress had just increased the strength of the Army from 165,000 to 210,000, had appropriated $110 million for "critical and essential war supplies," and had approved an operating budget in excess of $500 million—the largest amount of money ever made available to the Army during peacetime. Along with these developments the possibility of war in Europe seemed to be declining. The growing optimism in government circles over events in Europe was expressed in June by President Roosevelt when he said, "Last winter I thought the chances of war were about three to two, but now they seem to be even." Because of the relaxing of world tensions and because there were no pressing problems facing him, Woodring decided to get away from Washington; therefore, on 3 August he set sail with his family on a two-week's visit to Panama. The trip was more than a vacation, for the Secretary utilized it to inspect the canal and its defense system.

When Woodring departed from the United States, the international scene appeared relatively calm, but that condition soon changed. In mid August, Germany succeeded in engineering a nonaggression pact with Russia. This agreement was of great significance to Hitler, because with it he felt he could now attack Poland without fear of becoming involved in a war on two fronts. Although the official announcement of the pact did not come
until 21 August, President Roosevelt and the State Department learned of its imminence on 16 August.3

On 17 August Acting Secretary of State Sumner Welles called Acting Secretary of War Johnson, Acting Secretary of Navy Charles Edison, and a few other officials from the State, War, and Navy departments together in order to inform them of the impending Nazi-Soviet pact. At that time, Welles told the group, “The European situation is now so bad that I think we ought to be ready for the worst.”4 Johnson immediately passed the information on to General Marshall, who ordered the General Staff to prepare a detailed plan of action to be taken when war came.5 On 19 August, Woodring returned to Washington and assisted in the final preparation of the War Department’s recommendations. A few days later he sent Roosevelt a memorandum recommending the measures that the Army felt should be taken if and when war broke out in Europe.6

The proposals were divided into two groups. First, there were “Immediate Action Measures,” which the President could initiate without congressional action; these proposals were designed primarily to speed up procurement. In the second category were “Measures Requiring Congressional Authorization or Appropriations.” Included in the latter group were recommendations that the authorized strength of the Regular Army be increased from 210,000 to 280,000 and that the strength of the National Guard be raised from 190,000 to 280,000. It was also proposed that all necessary equipment and a year’s supply of munitions be provided for the Initial Protective Force and that certain “critical items” be procured to further implement the Protective Mobilization Plan. Additional aircraft and increased training for National Guard units were also requested. In presenting these proposals to the President, Woodring indicated that they were not mobilization steps but were measures necessary “to place the Regular Army and the National Guard in a condition of preparedness suitable to the present disturbed world situation.”7 Since the measures suggested were to be taken only in case of war and could be implemented only with presidential and congressional support, it was uncertain whether they would ever be carried out.

Having made the Army’s desires known to the President, Woodring turned his attention to the Panama Canal. Woodring’s deep interest in the canal was based on his firm conviction that it was “the vital link in our chain of national defense.”8 He believed that the canal was of such great importance because the defense of the continental United States rested on the ability of the fleet to move quickly between the Atlantic and the Pacific oceans. If the canal were to be closed, the nation’s ability to defend itself would be seriously jeopardized. Therefore, he considered protection of the canal to be
of utmost importance to our national security." This matter of canal security was what led Woodring to embrace the concept of hemisphere defense. He admitted that he did not visualize hemisphere defense as a Pan-American protective alliance, but as a United States defense measure. According to Woodring, "Any hostile air base established anywhere within effective striking proximity of the Panama Canal would prove a vital threat to that waterway—and, therefore, a threat to the very security of these United States." Thus, he concluded that steps would have to be taken to ensure that no such air bases were established.

From the time that he had become Secretary of War, Woodring had continually stressed the importance of the canal and had urged that proper measures be taken to provide for its defense. Such efforts finally paid off, for in 1939 he was the person primarily responsible for getting Congress to appropriate $30 million for air bases, harbor defenses, and antiaircraft guns for the Canal Zone. That same year Woodring achieved a hollow victory when Congress, heavily influenced by his testimony, authorized the construction of a third set of canal locks, but failed to appropriate the funds necessary for constructing them.

As war approached Europe in late August 1939, Woodring became quite concerned over the safety of the canal. What he feared was not an air attack but sabotage. He worried that a German, Japanese, or Italian crew might destroy a ship inside a lock and thereby block the canal. Consequently, in order to reduce the possibility of any such attempt at sabotage, Woodring began on 28 August to advise canal authorities of the make-up, by nationality, of the crews of ships about to go through the canal. This led to especially close observation of those ships having crewmen from the Axis nations. Furthermore, on 19 August he directed that an Army guard be placed on every ship going through the canal. It was hoped that the presence of the military guards would discourage any attempts at sabotaging the ships while they were in the canal.

At a few minutes after three o'clock on the morning of 1 September 1939, Secretary Woodring was awakened by a phone call from President Roosevelt, who informed him that Germany had just attacked Poland. Within thirty minutes, Woodring and Chief of Staff Marshall were at the Secretary's office discussing what action had to be taken immediately. They first notified the Military Commander of the Canal Zone to take extra precautions to ensure the safety of the canal. Next the Commanding Generals of the nine Corps areas and the Hawaiian, Philippine, and Puerto Rican departments were advised of Germany's attack and ordered to take any necessary precautions.

The days immediately following the German attack were especially
hectic for Woodring. Daily trips to the White House to confer with the President, as well as numerous conferences with officials of the State, War, and Navy departments, consumed most of his time. During this period a problem that he devoted considerable attention to was the reinforcement of the canal’s defenses. By 10 September, Woodring had ordered several thousand troops to supplement the fifteen thousand that were already there, and plans were made to raise the total strength to twenty-two thousand. In addition, more than thirty aircraft, all that could be spared at the time, were sent, and arrangements were made to increase the air strength from one hundred and fifty to three hundred planes as soon as possible.18

Increasing air and ground strength in the Canal Zone was a matter on which Woodring could take direct action; however, two other things that he wanted to do could be accomplished only by presidential order. The first thing that he wanted was to have the control of the canal transferred from the Civil Governor to the Military Commander, so that the latter could do a better job of coordinating local defense matters. Consequently, on 5 September the President, acting upon Woodring’s recommendation, issued an executive order placing the military in charge of all activities in the Canal Zone.19 Over this request there was no problem, but over Woodring’s second proposal a bitter controversy developed.

In a conference with the President on 1 September, Secretary Woodring asked for authority to let the Army inspect every ship desiring to pass through the canal. The purpose of the inspection was to see that no ship was carrying explosives or other devices that could be used to destroy the canal while it was passing through the locks. Woodring’s proposal was bitterly opposed by Undersecretary of State Sumner Welles, who argued that such action might be interpreted by some nations as unjustified harassment and thus might develop into a point of bitter controversy between the United States and the offended nation. Woodring answered Welles’s argument by claiming that no nation would have a right to complain, since all ships, regardless of the country from which they came, would be inspected. Furthermore, he added, any protests that might be received were a small price to pay for the security that the inspections afforded the canal.20 Woodring’s arguments ultimately carried the day, and on 5 September the President issued an order granting the Army the authority to make the inspections.21

Defense of the Panama Canal was just one of many problems facing Woodring in September of 1939. He had hoped that once war started in Europe, the President would take action to implement the measures that the General Staff had drawn up in August; but, much to his consternation, such was not to be the case. The first setback for the War Department came on the question of increases in troops. Both Woodring and General Marshall
considered it essential that the authorized strength of the Regular Army be increased by 70,000, so as to bring the total figure to 280,000. As far as the National Guard was concerned, they believed an increase from 190,000 to 280,000 was necessary.22 The President, however, fearing public and political reaction against such large increases, was unwilling to go along with these requests. Consequently, on 8 September he proclaimed a "limited national emergency" and issued an executive order which authorized a Regular Army strength of 227,000, an increase of only 17,000. The same order provided for the National Guard to add only 45,000 men, instead of the 90,000 that the Army had asked for.23 When Woodring privately expressed considerable disappointment over the small increases that the President had granted, Roosevelt told him that under the present conditions such increases were "all the public would be ready to accept without undue excitement." The President did, however, assure Woodring and Marshall that more troops would soon be authorized.24

Other steps taken by the President to meet the "limited national emergency" were just as feeble as the troop increases. A very modest $12 million was made available for the purchase of additional motor vehicles, but virtually no additional funds were made available for "critical and essential" war supplies or for additional training. The only other action taken by the President that approached the recommendations submitted in August was the provision for additional training for the National Guard.25

In spite of the President's refusal to provide, or even ask Congress for, anywhere near what the Army had requested, Woodring and Marshall did not give up hope, because by mid September they sensed that there was a growing sentiment in Congress for adequate defense. Their optimism was based on personal assessments as well as on reports from Maj. James McIntyre, the War Department's liaison officer with Congress. In a letter of 20 September to General Marshall, McIntyre stated that after sounding out a number of Congressmen on defense matters, he had concluded: "Now is the time to ask for everything the War Department needs. We will get it. Let us strike while the iron is hot."26 With such encouragement the General Staff prepared an $850-million supplemental armament program, which embodied most of the measures that Woodring and the War Department had previously requested the President to provide in case of war in Europe, but that had not been implemented.27

In early October, Woodring presented the new plan to the President and asked that it be implemented immediately. Roosevelt refused, claiming that such vast military expenditures were completely out of the question. To this, Woodring replied that the nation's defense needs would have to be placed first, even if it meant violating the law by creating a financial deficit.
Then he added, "Mr. President, I would rather be impeached for providing the country with means of defense, than impeached in time of emergency for failure to make such provision." In spite of such pleas, however, the President refused to go along with the $850-million program recommended by his Secretary of War and by his Chief of Staff. Finally, in late October, when Roosevelt decided to ask Congress for a supplemental appropriation for the Army, he requested only $120 million, or about 15 percent of the amount that the War Department sought.

Woodring was quite upset that the President had not seen fit to ask Congress for the men and matériel that the Army considered essential in order to provide properly for the national defense. The President felt that the Army was asking for entirely too much, but Woodring considered the requests both reasonable and necessary. Woodring was not one to seek what was not needed, and he continually impressed that idea on his subordinates. During the fall of 1939 he told the General Staff, "We must not take the position of grabbing all we can just because the grabbing is good, but rather ask for what we need to make the military establishment what it should be." It was apparent that the Commander in Chief and the Secretary of War had vastly different views of what the Army needed at that particular time. The War Department had presented a program for increased military readiness that it considered essential and that Woodring did not consider excessive; but in October 1939 the President was not yet ready to accept such a far-reaching program.

With no hope of getting more than $120 million in supplemental funds for the current fiscal year, Woodring, in late October, turned his attention to the Army program for fiscal year 1941. As the General Staff prepared its recommendations, Woodring adopted and began to put into effect a plan to bring about acceptance of them. Whereas the contents of the $850-million program put forth in October had been known only to War Department officials and to the President, the Secretary's new strategy was to give the new plans as much publicity as possible. Woodring felt that by letting Congress and the public know what the Army needed and how much it would cost, he would be able to stimulate interest and support for the new program.

The first thing that the Secretary felt he had to do in order to sell the new program was to convince people that he was a peace-loving man who advocated strengthening the Army for defensive purposes only. Woodring went a long way toward achieving that goal when he made a speech before the National Guard Association on 27 October. In that address Woodring started off by saying, "In all sincerity and in all honesty let me tell you there is no man in public life today who is more determined than your Secretary
of War that your sons and my sons shall not march forth to war!” He then went on to claim that while the security of the United States did not demand a military force larger than the peacetime strength provided by the National Defense Act, it did, “demand the maintenance of an Army in being at all times. This force must be fully, perfectly equipped and adequately trained at all times.”

Woodring had hoped that his statement concerning an “Army in being” would be the part of the speech that was remembered; however, it was his phrase that American “sons shall not march forth to war” that was singled out and widely publicized. The speech caused columnist Ernest Lindley to write: “For those who believe that this war in Europe is not our war and that we should keep out of it, no matter which side wins or loses, October 27 must be underlined.” Lindley then proceeded to discuss the speech, after which he reported that Woodring had vowed to his friends that “no American boys will be sent to fight on European soil so long as I am Secretary of War.”

Nationwide news coverage, along with Lindley’s column on the speech of 27 October, convinced many Americans of Woodring’s desire to arm strictly for defensive purposes. The publicity also did much to endear him to those individuals in Washington and throughout the country who leaned toward an isolationist policy. Although the isolationists never counted Woodring among their number and while he never considered himself one of them, there is no doubt that they shared identical views when it came to the question of American involvement in a foreign war. In fact, one of Woodring’s statements, “Every man and every dollar necessary for the defense of America, but not one man, not one dollar to fight the wars of other nations,” could well have served as the isolationists’ creed. According to Woodring, he was a noninterventionist—whose major goal was to stay out of the war in Europe—and not an isolationist. Unfortunately, he was never able to satisfactorily explain the difference between the two. While such a distinction would have been difficult for anyone to explain, it was even more so for Woodring because of his making common cause with such outright isolationists as Senators Wheeler, Clark, and Nye.

Having convinced many Americans that any readiness program that he might advocate would be solely for defense, Woodring was ready to set forth the new program. By early November the Secretary of War, the Chief of Staff, and the General Staff had decided on the broad outlines of the program, but the detailed plans still had to be worked out. At that point, Woodring began to hold conferences with key members of both the House Military Affairs Committee and the Appropriations subcommittee to explain the Army’s needs. He recommended that the Regular Army be increased to 280,000 men, but he said that even more important than the number of
troops was the need to provide them with proper training and equipment. Woodring warned the Congressmen against authorizing a large force and then failing to provide funds to supply and train it. He then went on to explain that the two objectives that the Army hoped to achieve were a completely trained and equipped Initial Protective Force, and such organization, training, and equipment as would be necessary to provide adequate hemispherical defense. When several Congressmen expressed concern about the high cost of fulfilling the objectives, Woodring sharply replied, “It is time that national defense shall be determined on the basis of our needs and not on a dollar and cents basis.” The House members with whom the Secretary talked seemed to be impressed with his views and reasoning, and they indicated a willingness to support his upcoming requests. To further enhance congressional understanding of the Army’s needs, the War Department arranged for a total of eighteen members of both the Military Affairs and the Appropriations committees of the Senate and House to make a month-long inspection tour of military installations throughout the United States and the Canal Zone. Most, but not all, of the Congressmen returned from the trip convinced of the need to implement the recommendations of the War Department.

The Secretary of War made the Army’s objectives known not only to Congressmen but to the public as well. Throughout November and December, Woodring utilized public speeches and press interviews to expound on what the Army needed and hoped to get from the next Congress. He made clear to the press his determination to have “1,000 percent perfection in training, 1,000 percent perfection in equipment, motorized and mechanized, [and] 1,000 percent in air provision,” even if the cost were high.

In mid November the General Staff completed detailed plans and budget requests for Army expansion in the upcoming fiscal year. After granting his approval, Woodring forwarded the recommendations to the Bureau of the Budget and the President, so that they could be utilized in preparing the annual budget message. In addition to operating expenses, the program called for vast expenditures for “critical and essential” war supplies, more arsenal and depot facilities, and additional training. The cost of the entire package was a whopping $1,500 million. The new proposals were received by the President with no more enthusiasm than the supplemental program that had been recommended a month before. Again the primary objection was one of excessive cost. This time, however, Roosevelt chose not to argue the question of military expenditures with his increasingly recalcitrant Secretary of War. Instead, he turned to advisers in the Bureau of the Budget, and together they came to the conclusion that the request for critical items, arsenals, depots, and additional training was unnecessary.

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ring's request for additional supplies and training had once again been rejected by the President.

In spite of this setback, Woodring still had hopes of rallying support for the program of his department. He intended to do that by utilizing one of the strongest propaganda devices at his disposal—the *Annual Report of the Secretary of War*. That document, which was released on 27 December, was short and concise. After quickly reviewing the progress made by the Army in the past several years, Woodring revealed what he considered to be the three most critical needs of the Army: First, the need to further strengthen the defenses of the Panama Canal. Second, the need for a strong Air Corps. Then he came to the third point, the one that he emphasized most: the need for proper equipment and training. In regard to the last he stressed that he was making no recommendation as to military strength, since that was a decision for Congress to make. However, he did say that all American fighting men

must be afforded complete equipment, clothing, supplies, subsistence, transportation, training, and instruction to prepare them for any eventuality presupposed by any military exigency. Whatever . . . the size of our Army . . . I must urgently insist that that force . . . be complete as to personnel, as to matériel, and that it be 100 percent efficient as to training. Our Military Establishment must be an "Army in being!"45

From this time on, Woodring always cited an “Army in being” as his major goal.

Woodring hoped that a favorable public reaction to his report might convince the President to change his mind and restore some of the requests made by the Army, but such a reaction did not occur. The newspapers carried accounts of the report on the back pages and failed to comment on it in their editorials.46 The Secretary placed his final hopes in a nationwide radio broadcast that he made on 31 December. At that time he explained the proposed program for the Army, and he asked for congressional and public support for it.47 Unfortunately, the broadcast received even less attention than his *Annual Report*. All of Woodring’s efforts to create public support for the program had failed—he simply could not convince President Roosevelt of the need for additional funds. Therefore, in early January 1940, when the President presented to Congress the proposed Army budget for fiscal year 1941, he asked for only $853 million—or about 55 percent of what the War Department had requested.48

Roosevelt’s refusal to accept the War Department’s program was in all likelihood influenced by a strong nationwide sentiment that the United States should avoid involvement in the European war at all cost. Going hand
in hand with that sentiment was a widespread feeling that the larger the armed forces, the more likely it was that the country would be drawn into a war. For such reasons the President feared a public reaction against large expenditures for the military. Furthermore, there was considerable pressure from Republican Congressmen to hold down all government expenditures. Still another factor that influenced FDR's attitudes was the conduct of the war in Europe. After Germany took Poland in late 1939, the fighting in Europe came to a virtual halt, and the war assumed a "phony" character. As the fear of the Nazi menace began to decline, so did the pressures for materially strengthening the nation's defenses; thus, Roosevelt did not feel so compelled to take action.

Regardless of the reason for the President's decision, the fact remained that he had asked Congress for only about half as much money as the Army had requested. Almost immediately, Woodring indicated that he considered the proposed budget to be inadequate, but he did so in such a way as not to sound insubordinate. On 16 January he appeared before the House Military Affairs Committee, where he discussed the strengths and weaknesses of the Army. At that time he maintained that the Army budget proposed by the President was "a wise step toward the fulfillment of our objectives"; however, he added, "It does not provide for the deficiency of some $300,000,000 worth of critical ordnance and engineer items and a smaller amount of other less critical munitions for the 3/4 million men in the Protective Mobilization Plan." In late February the House opened its hearings on Army appropriations. General Marshall served as the primary spokesman for the War Department, and he did a fine job of explaining the Army's needs. Unfortunately for the Army, the "phony war" had cooled the enthusiasm of a number of Congressmen who, just a few months before, had been so willing to strengthen the Army. Thus, on 4 April the House responded by cutting the President's request from $853 million to $785 million. The measure was then sent to the Senate for action, but before the measure could be considered, events in Europe were to cause a radical change in congressional attitudes.

On 9 April 1940 the phony war came to an end as German troops attacked Norway and Denmark. Suddenly many Americans who had not previously shown an interest in national defense wanted to know what had to be done to provide for adequate national security. At the same time a large number of Congressmen began to ask, not how much a sound Army, Air Corps, and Navy would cost, but how soon they could be provided. On 30 April the Senate, with a new sense of urgency, opened its hearings on the Army appropriations bill.

Ten days after the Senate hearings opened, Germany attacked Belgium
and Holland and then moved into France. With that attack, President Roosevelt, who just the day before had received a memorandum from Woodring asking for additional war matériel, decided that the time had indeed come to materially strengthen the Army. After five days of hectic conferences a plan was worked out, and on 16 May the President asked Congress to grant the Army $546 million more than he had previously requested. The new funds, Roosevelt said, would be used “to procure the essential equipment of all kinds for a larger and thoroughly rounded-out Army.” Specifically, he asked for an increase in Regular Army strength from 227,000 to 255,000 and for the equipment and munitions required for a Protective Mobilization Force of 750,000 men. At last the President had asked Congress for some of the important things that Woodring had been advocating for the past eight months.

By mid May, alarm over the German advance through the Low Countries made the Senate willing to go even further than the President had suggested, and on 22 May it passed a $1,500 million Army Appropriations Bill. The House responded to the new state of affairs by scrapping its bill of 4 April and adopting the Senate version, and on 13 June the President signed the bill into law. As large as the new appropriation bill had been, it was evident even before its passage that it would not be sufficient. In fact, President Roosevelt had no sooner made his defense speech on 16 May than he realized the need for even further military spending. Therefore, during the last week of May the President and General Marshall discussed the Army’s additional needs and what they would cost. Throughout May and June, Woodring, for reasons to be discussed in the following chapter, was again out of favor with the President and thus played virtually no role in these crucial discussions. Consequently, during this time it was Marshall who fought the War Department’s battles at the White House. On 31 May, Roosevelt asked Congress for still another $700 million for the Army. Again it responded with more than he requested, this time providing $821 million. This measure—which became law on 25 June—along with the June 13 measure, provided $2,300 million for the Army for fiscal year 1941. Included in these appropriations bills were the funds and the authorization to increase Army strength to 375,000 and to secure an additional 3,000 aircraft. At last the War Department had enough money to create an “Army in being”; however, Woodring never got the opportunity to make that dream become a reality, because on 19 June the President was to ask for, and receive, his resignation.

Although Woodring spent a considerable amount of time from September 1939 to June 1940 seeking more money for the Army, there were other ways in which he sought to provide increased military readiness. One
matter to which he devoted considerable attention was that of the reorganiza-
tion of combat units. For many years there had been talk in military cir-
cles of changing the organization of the infantry division. After the outbreak
of war in Europe, Woodring decided that the long-overdue change should
take place immediately. In mid September the Secretary, acting upon the
recommendation of the Chief of Staff, announced that the 22,000-man
“square” infantry division would be replaced by a 9,000-man “triangular”
division. It was felt that new weapons and mechanization would permit
such a reduction in manpower without a corresponding reduction in fire-
power. The new divisions also offered more command flexibility, since they
could be used en masse or as three separate, highly mobile combat teams.
Under the new organization, three new divisions were to be formed imme-
diately and two more in the near future. This change in the infantry division
was just the beginning of a vast program of reorganization. According to
the Army and Navy Journal of 21 October 1939, “The Army has plunged
into probably the greatest peacetime reorganization in its history . . . sweep-
ing changes are being made in nearly every arm and service.”

The reorganization looked good on paper, but the Secretary of War and
the Chief of Staff were anxious to see how it would really work. Therefore,
in October they drafted a field-training program that called for extensive
exercises at the division and corps levels. Several months later, in February
and March 1940, the new infantry and cavalry divisions underwent consider-
able field training, and in April the first corps maneuvers since 1918 were
held. The following month seventy thousand men participated in the first
corps-versus-corps exercises in the history of the Army. These maneuvers
were valuable in that they showed the “triangular” division to be tactically
sound; they also revealed a serious need for more tanks as well as antitank
and antiaircraft guns at the corps level. The new organization had many
shortcomings, some of which would take years to overcome, but at least
Secretary Woodring had played a major role in getting this badly needed
reorganization under way.

Another problem that Woodring devoted considerable time to was that
of eliminating overage and physically unfit officers. He knew that many
older officers would be physically unable to carry out their responsibilities
should they ever be placed in a combat situation. This problem stemmed
from promotion stagnation, which became especially acute in the thirties
when a large number of officers who had entered the Army during World
War I could not be promoted because there were no openings at the next
higher rank. Since promotion was strictly on a seniority basis, it meant that
an officer could not be advanced to the next rank until all others with more
time in grade had been promoted. Consequently, it was not unusual to find
a forty- or forty-five-year-old captain or a thirty- or thirty-five-year-old first lieutenant. When this was the case, it frequently was not because the man was incapable or inefficient but because there simply was no need for more majors or captains. By the late thirties the prospect of remaining in the same grade indefinitely was seriously affecting the morale of many young officers.65

To overcome the problem of officers who were overage or unfit, Secretary Woodring, in April 1939, initiated a “vitalization” program. The first part of the program centered on the “Woodring Age-in-Grade Plan.” This scheme, which was originated and developed by the Secretary, called for automatic promotion of an officer after a specific number of years in grade.66 The plan was rejected by Congress, because it was set up in such a way that many able-bodied officers under sixty years of age would be forced to retire.67 After war broke out in the fall of 1939, Woodring urged that his plan be reconsidered, since, he argued, it was more important than ever that younger officers find their way into the upper ranks. When opposition appeared again, he agreed to a new plan, which provided promotion based on total length of service and grade and did not force the retirement of so many officers. This measure was ultimately passed on 13 June 1940.68

The purpose of the second part of Woodring’s “vitalization” program was to eliminate those officers who were physically unfit. This was accomplished by administrative action in the spring of 1939. Rigorous physical exams were given to all those in the grades of captain and above, and those who failed the exams were then forced to resign or retire.69 The “vitalization” program actually had little effect on the Army, because the rapid expansion that began in mid 1940 eliminated the problem of promotion stagnation, and the physically unfit were placed in positions where they could still function. What the Secretary’s program did was to pave the way for the next step in promotions reform—a selective advancement system that promoted a man on merit rather than seniority. Such a system was ultimately approved by Congress and was instituted in September 1940, several months after Woodring had left Washington.70

In June of 1940 Harry Woodring was forced to resign as Secretary of War, thus ending seven years of continual effort to provide increased military readiness. Much progress had been made under his leadership, first as Assistant Secretary and then as Secretary, and the Army’s future looked brighter than ever. Although the strength of the Regular Army was only 257,000, authorizations and appropriations had just been received to raise that figure to 375,000. Funds had also been provided for “critical and essential” items for a 750,000-man Protective Mobilization Force, and provision had been
made to secure 3,000 planes above and beyond the 5,500 already on hand or on order. The reorganization of combat units and a more effective training program were also reasons for optimism. It appeared as if Woodring's "Army in being" could, and soon would, become a reality.

The future looked bright, but what was the present status of the Army? How adequate, how prepared, how ready was the United States Army to defend the country when Woodring left office in June of 1940? Perhaps that question could best be answered by Chief of Staff Marshall, who, in describing the state of the armed forces, wrote: "As an army we were ineffective. Our equipment, modern at the conclusion of the World War, was now, in a large measure, obsolescent. In fact, during the postwar period, continuous paring of appropriations had reduced the Army virtually to the status of that of a third-rate power." Several other observers shared the same view. In late May, J. G. Norris, the military editor of the Washington Post, reported that recent testimony of ranking War Department officials revealed the well-known fact that the Army "needed many war planes and pilots . . . [and] arms and equipment were sadly lacking in many categories." At about the same time another Washington reporter wrote: "A gloomy view is taken here of our readiness for war. Our Army is so small, so badly equipped that one military leader asserts, 'I would even go to Munich to get a year or more to prepare.' There seems to be no doubt that in June 1940 the United States Army was far from being an effective military force.

Secretary of War Woodring had labored long and hard to receive the funds necessary to make his "Army in being" a reality, but no sooner had the money for it been secured than he was forced to leave his post. The large appropriations needed to materially strengthen the Army had been sought by Woodring for several years, and he had intensified those efforts after the outbreak of war in Europe. However, prior to the spring of 1940 his pleas to the President, Congress, and the public had gone largely unheeded. Finally, the German attacks on Norway, Denmark, the Low Countries, and France did what Woodring had been unable to do: they convinced the President and Congress that there should be no further delay in strengthening the Army. While it is true that the Army was quite weak in mid 1940, it was not because Woodring had not made every effort to improve it. If the President had followed the advice of his Secretary of War in the fall of 1939, the country could have been well on its way to having an "Army in being" in June of 1940; instead, it was just beginning.