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100 Years Ago: Wilson Loses Another Cabinet Member

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*Now all roads lead to France and heavy is the tread
Of the living; but the dead returning lightly dance.*

Edward Thomas, *Roads*

Wednesday, February 10, 2016

100 Years Ago: Wilson Loses Another Cabinet Member

By **Keith Muchowski**

Secretary of War Lindley M. Garrison resigned 100 years ago today. When he did, it was the second major resignation within the Wilson cabinet in less than a year; Secretary of State William Jennings Bryan had stepped down the previous June over differences with President Wilson over how to respond to the sinking of the *Lusitania*. Now Garrison was leaving the administration after Wilson withdrew his support for the secretary of war's plan for expanding the military. What made Garrison's resignation so dramatic—and public—was that the secretary and the president had once been of the same mind on the issue.



Lindley Garrison (1864–1932)

Garrison was an advocate of the Continental Army Plan, a proposal that would have expanded what was still a very small U.S. Army into a more ready force of nearly half-a-million men. Though Garrison and Wilson were never personally close—they were too much alike to get along—the president backed his war secretary on this issue in a number of public appearances. Wilson spoke to an enthusiastic dinner crowd at New York's Biltmore Hotel on 4 November 1915 outlining Garrison's plan to expand the Army by 400,000 incrementally over the next three years. The Navy would expand too, the president duly noted. Less than a month later Wilson mentioned the plan again in his State of the Union Address, explaining to Congress that the nation must be made “ready to assert some part of its real power promptly and upon a larger scale, should occasion arise.”

Many Congressmen were skeptical, so, facing opposition, Wilson did what he would do years later when confronted with resistance to the Treaty of Versailles—he went on the stump and appealed to the American people. In January 1916 he traveled throughout the heartland to pitch his administration's vision for a Continental Army.

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Mr. and Mrs. Garrison Take in a Horse Show

Opposition was indeed intense. It was an old-fashioned turf war in which the National Guard—and the Congressional and gubernatorial politicians who supported it—refused to give up state control over what they saw as their domain. By late January the plan was losing support from many sides. Major General Leonard Wood—former chief of staff, current commander of the Department of the East, and onetime Continental Army Plan backer—came out against it in a report to the Adjutant General. General Wood advocated conscription, not the voluntary reserve system Garrison's plan would have entailed. The House Military Affairs Committee, chaired by powerful Dixiecrat James Hay, was increasingly hostile. Many of the 48 governors were equally in opposition until finally Wilson succumbed to the inevitable and withdrew his support in early February. Garrison found this unacceptable and so had no choice but to tender his resignation. He stepped down on 10 February and left Washington immediately, taking a train to New York City without uttering a word. When a mob of reporters met him at Pennsylvania Station at 9:00 p.m. he still had nothing to say. That did not stop a scrum of photographers from snapping his picture. The political fallout was immediate. The *New York Times* declared Garrison's departure “a distinct shock and a complete surprise.” Henry L. Stimson, a past and future secretary of war in his own right, called the resignation a “national calamity.”



Garrison with President Wilson in Happier Times

The Continental Army Plan never came to fruition, which may well have been for the best. Had it done so, the White House, Congress, and the Army itself would have had to overcome a number

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of logistical, financial, and other obstacles to put the plan into effect. What is more, Lindley Garrison, for all his positive qualities, was not the man to lead the U.S. military into war. He was an accomplished lawyer and capable administrator who would return to his lucrative private law practice after leaving politics. Despite his dedication and work ethic Garrison, was a bad fit for Washington's political culture. He clashed frequently with senior military officers, Congress, and even President Wilson himself. Like Wilson, he did not always accept criticism well and often took it personally. Secretary Garrison's resignation 100 years ago today exposed strains within the Wilson Administration which would be even more apparent and tragic when the nation went to war 14 short months later.

Our contributor, Keith Muchowski, is outstanding blogster, who looks at American History from a New Yorker's viewpoint. Visit Keith's Blog, [The Strawfoot](#), for more interesting insights on the history of the First World War.

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Labels: KW edited

5 comments:

theamazingbirdcollection February 10, 2016 at 5:05 AM

Another fascinating link to understanding history! I've just finished a manuscript in which I edited my grandparents' letters during WW I. My grandfather was a captain in the National Guard, and his brother at home was chairman of the draft board. I read that the local draft boards were established because in the Civil War, the officers who delivered draft notices were often beat up (or worse). My great uncle wrote that after serving notices they lost a lot of lifelong friends.

Reply

Anonymous February 10, 2016 at 6:03 AM

Margaret, indeed the WW1 draft boards were set up along civilian lines with local control to avoid a repeat of the rioting that had occurred during the Civil War.

I can't wait to read the book of letters you are editing.

Keith

Reply

 **beedub** February 10, 2016 at 9:23 AM

how can this article say the plans failure was for the good since only a year or so later the country was scrambling to put together a national army for overseas duty; as we have seen with the end of each major conflict in USA history the military is substantially reduced and not ready for the next conflict - especially qualified noncoms and young officers.

Reply

 **Unknown** February 10, 2016 at 10:16 AM

Without the Mexican crisis, showing the states and everyone else where the glaring problems were with the Guard would have been impossible. And that was just a month away. But, too, Wilson's reelection campaign would have suffered because his "he kept us out of the war" slogan would have rung somewhat hollow with a draft getting started.

Reply

 **bill o'neill** February 10, 2016 at 11:28 AM

Very good article. Though I am not an admirer of Wilson, given the overwhelming opposition to the plan, he bowed to the inevitable and shelved the plan. The Mexico intervention provided some training to the National Guard, but entering the war against Germany the nation was woefully unprepared. Virtually every

problem with mobilization had plagued the British and French. The Continental Plan would have been in its most rudimentary form. They lacked heavy guns, experienced officers and NCOs, no rifles, uniforms etc. Wilson was also involved in his reelection campaign and an increase of the army and navy would appear he was contemplating entering the war, not a good message when he kept us out of war was a cornerstone of his campaign

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