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When America and France Were Friends

This scholarly and highly readable study provides a definitive account of the contribution of the American Expeditionary Force to the defeat of Germany on the Western front in the First World War. It is solidly based on American and French archives, and on all the relevant printed primary and secondary sources in English and French. No previous account has dealt in such a comprehensive fashion with this particular topic. Indeed, there has been remarkably little published in English on this subject, although there is, of course, an abundant literature on the wider question of the role of the United States in the war. In French there have been two theses, by Y.-H. Nouailhat and A. Kaspi, published almost thirty years ago.[1]

Nouailhat’s study, covering the period of United States neutrality, is not directly relevant, and Kaspi, although he covers much of the same ground as the present book, has a rather different focus. Kaspi concentrates on high politics and strategy, primarily on the question of "amalgamation"—amalgamation, that is, the extent to which the American Expeditionary Force would function as a separate army as opposed to being incorporated into the British and French forces. The amalgamation controversy is discussed by Professor Bruce, as are the broad strategic questions of 1917 and 1918, but his emphasis is more on the grassroots, on the experience of the American fighting men of all ranks.

Looking at matters from this viewpoint, it is natural that he begins with a chapter on the role of American volunteers in France from the outbreak of war to April 1917, either in the French Foreign Legion, or as pilots in the flying squadron, the Escadrille Americaine. He then turns to the French mission to the United States, led by Marshal Joffre and Rene Viviani. It has to be admitted that one of the motives in the choice of both of these men was the desire of Ribot (prime minister) and Painleve (minister of war) to have them removed from center stage in France. Nevertheless Joffre in particular was highly successful in generating immense enthusiasm in the United States; Joffre was also important in accepting from the first that the United States would insist on fielding a separate army, and that there could
be no question of incorporating small American units in the Allied forces.

The British government was slower to accept this principle, and this was certainly one reason why it is completely correct to talk of American aid to France, rather than to the Allies as a whole. Although it is obvious that in an allied struggle aid to France was also aid to Britain, the American Expeditionary Force went, except for brief emergency calls, to the French sector of the front. The French were far more involved in training the inexperienced American officers and men, in spite of the language problem, and it was primarily France that provided the munitions and military equipment needed to equip the expeditionary force. For, in contrast to the Second World War, when the United States became the “arsenal of democracy” in 1917-1918, although America was vital as a source of raw materials and of finance, it was French factories that played the leading role in arming the American forces.

The third chapter outlines the crisis of April-July 1917 with the widespread mutinies in the French army following the failure of the Nivelle offensive, as background to the arrival of the first few American troops. He continues with a chapter on the French role in the arming and training of the AEF, as it arrived with painful slowness in the desperate days that ended 1917, when Russia had withdrawn from the war, and the Italians had to be rescued from the collapse of their front at Caporetto.

Professor Bruce states that this slowness was inevitable as “in April 1917 the US Army had been little more than a small frontier constabulary, neither armed nor trained for modern warfare.” He goes on to note sardonically that “the biggest obstacle the French army faced in its task of preparing the US army for modern warfare was the commander of the American Expeditionary Force, General John J. Pershing.... Yet the French succeeded, in spite of Pershing, in teaching the American soldiers the fundamental lessons of how to live and fight in the trenches” (pp. 142-143).

The first four months of 1918 saw the high point of the amalgamation controversy, and also the related question of whether Britain would be totally deprived of any American help. British reserves of manpower had not been as completely exhausted as had the French, but British preponderance in shipping gave her government a strong hand of cards: was it reasonable that British ships should transport over half of the American forces to Europe, only for them all to be devoted to supporting the French army? Nevertheless, apart from small-scale emergency relief to the British forces, it remained the case that the American Expeditionary Force worked with the French, and not with the British armies. It is one of the major contributions of this book to state this so clearly and unequivocally.

The crisis created by the German breakthrough in March 1918 produced a compromise solution to the amalgamation controversy. On the one hand relatively small American units were deployed temporarily to help the hard-pressed allied forces, British as well as French. But the principle of an independent American army under Pershing’s command was maintained. It was all the easier to maintain this principle now that Foch had been given the post of overall commander in chief on the Western front, with the three national commanders in chief under him, Petain, Haig, and Pershing. In reality Foch could not simply issue orders to either Haig or Pershing, nor for that matter to Petain: high-level strategic decisions remained a matter for negotiation that also involved the political leaders, especially Clemenceau.

The final months of the war saw the American Expeditionary Force at last capable of acting as an effective military force. However, although there was no longer any question of small American units being incorporated into British or French armies, as Professor Bruce states, both St.
Mihiel and the Meuse-Argonne offensive at the end of September were Franco-American battles. French artillery, tanks, and aviation provided support to the Americans, and the U.S. First Army was part of an army group under Petain's command. Failure to achieve a German defeat in this sector led Clemenceau in October to demand Pershing's removal from command, but Foch refused to endorse this in spite of his own criticism of the American offensive.

However, by this stage the armistice negotiations had commenced. Ludendorff was ousted, and German resistance crumbled, making such controversies irrelevant. Professor Bruce's verdict is that "the Allied victory in 1918 was just that, an allied triumph brought about by the concerted military efforts of the great armies of the west," that is, by British, French, and Americans together. He does not agree with those British historians who claim "the lion's share of credit" for the German defeat in August-September 1918, and argues that the Franco-American contribution was crucial. "The great story of America's contribution to the Allied victory was not an autonomous American effort, for such a concept was illusory, but rather the establishment of a Franco-American force that was instrumental in the final defeat of Germany" (p. 284).

This eminently sensible verdict brings us back to the amalgamation question. Given that President Wilson refused to make the United States an ally in the full sense of Britain and France, but an "associated power," engaged in joint action against the Central Powers, the American government would never have accepted incorporation of relatively small units into the British and French armies. His overall political conception reinforced the professional desire of Pershing and his superior officers to have their own command. These politico-strategic considerations were overridden by fear that the German military machine might achieve victory over the Anglo-French forces before the American Expeditionary Force could be deployed independently.

Thus there emerged the compromise which Professor Bruce has clearly analyzed. No doubt if the war had continued beyond November 1918, as all parties envisaged until only a few weeks before that date, the possibility of a fully autonomous United States army would have greatly increased. Among other reasons this certainly encouraged the allies to accept an armistice rather than a march forward to Berlin, as Pershing would have liked.

The book concludes with a plea, made all the more cogent by current controversies, for Franco-American fraternity. Professor Bruce argues that the Franco-American military relationship of 1917-1918 was "more than just a marriage of convenience ... it created a true 'fraternity of arms'" (p. 295). This reviewer is not totally convinced of the reality of such emotional considerations in international relations, tending more to General de Gaulle's view that states are "cold monsters," and that gratitude and sentiment are not considerations for statesmen. But of course, it would not seem so to men who fought and risked their lives together in the epic struggles of those years. The great merit of this book is that it both encompasses discussion of the politics and strategy of the war and recreates the experience of the men of the American Expeditionary Force. One small complaint: an aspect of their experience which has been ignored is the influenza epidemic which probably killed more than did German action. This apart, this book gives an overall account of its subject in a clear and lively way. Its readability is added to by nine maps and numerous illustrations.

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