



U.S. ARMY

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## THE ARMY IN THE INTERWAR: TRAINING A PROFESSIONAL ARMY IN A TURBULENT ERA

Immediately following the Armistice in November 1918, the U.S. Army experienced its first significant victory on the world stage. Yet despite the peace declared in Europe, thousands of American soldiers remained deployed in far-flung and challenging environments. In northern Russia, for example, soldiers found themselves fighting in the bitter cold of the Arctic tundra. They were part of the Allied intervention in the Russian Civil War—a mission that had been launched by President Woodrow Wilson. Approximately 8,000 troops, under the command of Maj. Gen. William S. Graves, landed at Vladivostok to secure essential war materiel, keep a key segment of the Trans-Siberian Railway open, and support the stranded Czechoslovak Legion. Meanwhile, a smaller expedition known as the “Polar Bear Expedition” of about 5,500 men, deployed to Arkhangelsk, operated under British control. Despite the severe conditions—sub-zero temperatures, dense wilderness, and constant skirmishes—the Americans pressed on, only leaving the region in April 1920 after enduring roughly 400 casualties.

Back in the United States, the battlefield success overseas contrasted sharply with the political and military landscape at home. Between 1919 and 1922, Congress demobilized the Regular Army sharply, reducing its numbers from nearly three million to just over 130,000, with only 200,000 National Guardsmen retained for federal service. This rapid downsizing, allied with the murky outcomes in Russia, sparked a debate over the future character of America’s military. Many wondered how to maintain a ready, professional force in an era of shrinking budgets, persistent isolationist sentiments, and an uncertain international order.

At the same time, the interwar period spurred significant technological innovation. The innovations of World War I, such as tanks and aircraft, had set the stage for modern warfare. In the United States, however, the production and training related to these new technologies met with substantial challenges. For instance, an order was placed for over 1,000 International Tanks (the Mark VIII Liberty Tanks), yet the end of the war meant that none were completed as originally planned. Instead, between 1919 and 1920, only 100 tanks were produced at Rock Island Arsenal—with each costing around \$35,000 at the time. Chronic budget cuts forced many units to train with improvised equipment: jeeps or combat vehicles were re-christened as “tanks” and cardboard cutouts sometimes simulated machine gun turrets. Similarly, the Army Air Corps found itself grappling with technical limitations. Debates about the role of aviation in military strategy led to only modest investments in new aircraft throughout the 1930s, limiting the number of active pilots and the overall effectiveness of air power.

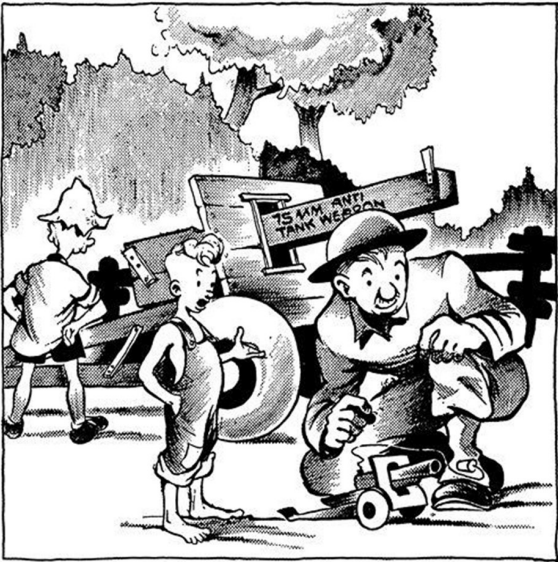
In response to these multifaceted challenges, military planners began to formulate comprehensive peacetime mobilization strategies. The 1923 General Staff plan envisioned six field armies, each comprising roughly 400,000 soldiers and capable of mobilizing over one million troops within four months if needed. The United States was divided into geographic zones, with each field army assigned to a specific region. In 1931, General Douglas MacArthur’s approval of a Field Army Headquarters marked another critical step toward rapid mobilization. Despite these preparations, budget constraints and the harsh realities of the Great Depression complicated the task of training and equipping soldiers. In 1935, the First Army conducted training exercises involving approximately 35,000 personnel, yet limited materiel and the use of surrogate equipment resulted in simulations that were far from ideal. These exercises were even observed by foreign military delegations from nations like Japan and Germany, who were keeping a keen eye on America’s military preparedness.

The interwar period also saw the development of the famed Rainbow Plans—a series of contingency war strategies designed to address potential conflicts with a range of global adversaries. Each plan was tailored to specific regions: War Plan Black focused on Germany; War Plan Grey and Violet on Central America and the Caribbean; War Plan Brown on the Philippines; War Plan Tan on Cuba; and War Plans Red, Yellow, Gold, Green, Indigo, Purple, Blue, and White covered a broad spectrum from Britain and China to domestic defense and internal unrest. In particular, War Plan Orange was devised for Japan—and served as the blueprint for U.S. operations in the Pacific Theater.

By the eve of World War II, it was clear that the United States faced a dilemma. While the rapid mobilization of its industrial base had been demonstrated in World War I, the process of fielding equipment overseas had been sluggish. Under the strain of economic depression and persistent resource shortages, American military planners recognized that maintaining and training a professional army was a complex balancing act. Leaders like Lieutenant General Hugh Drum, and later LTG Lesley J. McNair, underscored the urgency of continuous training and the development of robust mobilization plans. Soon after Germany invaded Poland and France fell, the nation’s first peacetime draft was launched, mobilizing around 900,000 men and signaling that, despite its rocky start, the U.S. military was committed to rising to the challenges of a new era of warfare.

### THE NATIONAL DEFENSE ACT 1920

The National Defense Act of 1920 was passed by congress on 4 June 1920 and would be instrumental in the development of the American Army that will win WWII. The Act established the Army of the United States as an organization of three components: the Regular Army, the National Guard, and the Organized Reserves. It charged the War Department with mobilization planning and preparation for war. The National Defense Act of 1920 also would divide the country into nine corps areas, and authorizing each corps a Regular Army division, two National Guard divisions, and three Reserve divisions. This would allow a mobilization base of fifty-four divisions to be raised quickly in the time of war. Additionally, it assigned the industrial procurement function to the Assistant Secretary of War and the military aspects to the General Staff. The act defined the functions and responsibilities of the Chief of Staff, emphasizing that he was to act under the direction of the Secretary of War and the President as their agent. Congress added several new wartime agencies as permanent bureaus: the Finance Department, the Chemical Warfare Service, the Air Service, and a new one, the Chief of Chaplains. It also extended the bureau system to the combat arms by creating the Office of the Chief of Infantry and the Office of the Chief of Cavalry in addition to the existing Chiefs of Field Artillery and Coast Artillery. Congress did not prescribe the General Staff’s organization. When General John J. Pershing became Chief of Staff in 1921, he reorganized the General Staff along the lines he had used for his American Expeditionary Forces General Headquarters staff during the war. The reorganized War Department General Staff had five divisions: G-1, Personnel; G-2, Intelligence; G-3, Training and Operations; G-4, Supply; and a War Plans Division. Congress, however, retained the provision of the National Defense Act of 1916 that prohibited the General Staff from interfering with the technical and administrative bureaus’ activities.



O.K. it’s a swap,  
if ya thrown in yer tin hat.”

### TRIVIA

1. What was the main reason U.S. troops deployed to Russia during Russian Civil War?
2. What was the purpose of the Rainbow Plans?
3. How many tanks were produced at Rock Island Arsenal between 1919 and 1920?

### LAST MONTH’S ANSWERS

1. What was one of the biggest challenges to the U.S. Army’s expansion at the beginning of World War I?  
Lack of qualified training officers and facilities
2. How did the U.S. Army address logistics challenges during World War I?  
Commandeering of Civilian Vessels and Coordination with the Navy
3. What would be the primary challenge of the Medical Corps?  
Spanish Influenza



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