

## Remarks on Armistice Day, November 11, 2018: Galloway Ridge

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### **"The Armistice: November 11, 1918**

#### **An Ending and a Beginning: Reflections a Century Later"**

At 11 a.m. on the 11<sup>th</sup> day of the 11<sup>th</sup> month of November 1918, the guns fell silent. After four years of ghastly warfare, "All was quiet on the western front."

In the weeks since late September 1918 and talk of a possible armistice, a veritable revolution had occurred in Europe. Though formally called an armistice, American President Woodrow Wilson and his erstwhile European allies had converted the prospect of an armistice into a German surrender. In the process they hastened the end of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, doomed the Ottoman Empire, and brought the collapse of the German government in Berlin. While the final peace treaty would be signed at Versailles on June 28, 1919, the armistice of November 11 became the pivotal day in European history. When the changes were later assessed, they were monumental, fundamental, and not necessarily a harbinger of future peace. But the killing had stopped with a total

of nine million combat deaths and another ten million deaths from the flu and assorted medical issues. What had begun in late July 1914 as an expected short war had ended badly.

## I

Twenty months ago, many of you were present when we analyzed America's entry into the First World War on April 6, 1917. Today, in very abbreviated form, we want to track America's mobilization and then the deployment of more than 2 million troops to France in 1918. In doing so, we slide pass the various measures taken for domestic mobilization, including some very unfortunate efforts by Wilson to silence those who opposed the war while whipping war hysteria to heights not seen since the Civil War. Those are important topics but we do not have time this afternoon.

When the U.S. declared war, it had 100,000 troops plus 112,000 National Guard troops, an army smaller than many European countries. But the draft was instituted and troops began pouring

into training camps across the nation. By the late fall of 1917 some troops were ready for shipment to France though the bulk arrived in the late winter of 1917-18. By early 1918 they were coming at the rate of 10,000 troops a day to France. By the Armistice there were 2.8 million American troops in France ready for battle. Overall, the total American forces mobilized came to 4,355,000, an astounding achievement. At the same time the navy had mobilized its forces, added some new ships and with the British virtually subdued the German submarine menace. The future US Army Air Force had also expanded dramatically, going from 6 planes to 185 aero squadrons and 86 balloon companies. A squadron might have as many as 24 aircraft. America's industrial might had met the challenge.

Eventually over a million U.S. troops would be deployed in battle, almost always as the AEF (American Expeditionary Force) and seldom with French or British troops. Some American units were excellent, others including hastily mobilized National Guard divisions were poorly led and trained. The final casualty toll would be over 49,000 combat deaths. Later historians would estimate that the casualty toll was at least 25% larger than it should have been.

American officers, prone to go it alone, often ignored well-earned advice from French and British troops on what not to do, especially broad frontal attacks against seasoned enemy troops. [MAP OF AEF]

TRACK ALONG WITH THE MAP HANDOUT  
THEN SWITCH TO COLOR MAP: SEE ANOTHER  
PERSPECTIVE OF THE WAR IN FRANCE AND BELGIUM

In the late spring of 1918, as the Germans launched their final offensive efforts in the west, American troops fought first at Cantigny and impressed the allied officers. Their commander, General Pershing, could be happy.[SHOW PICTURE OF PERSHING] Then 27,000 army and marine troops fought together at Bellau Wood, repulsing a German attack. Soon they helped French troops stop another German move at Chateau Thierry.

Among the Americans fighting at Chateau Thierry was Sergeant L.P. Nickerson, a rare regular army soldier who had earlier fought in Mexico against Pancho Villa. [PICTURE OF NICKERSON] A native of Dubberly, Louisiana, near where Joan and I grew up, he had arrived in France in November 1917. His letters home, because of censorship, revealed little of his military

action. But in late May he wrote his parents that his lieutenant had been killed. The officer, he said, “was a good fellow and we all hate to lose him but you know the best must go sometimes.” In July Nickerson would be wounded severely in the battle for Chateau Thierry and die in September.

Let me return to the action after Nickerson fell. In late July and early August more than 270,000 American troops helped to reduce the German presence in the Amiens redoubt. [POINT OUT] In September more than half million troops went against the Germans at St. Mihiel and made substantial gains, though in miles and not tens of miles. That effort did much to convince the German military leadership that victory had been lost and that a pause, an armistice, was needed. YOU TUBE ON MEUSE ARGONNE

From late September to the actual armistice as many as 1,200,000 American troops attacked the Germans in the Meuse-Argonne section. Again, the gains were in miles and the casualty costs high; indeed, the battle may have been the costliest in American military history with the death of 26,000 Americans in a period of less than two months. Overall in the war, 53,402 soldiers were killed and another 70,000 wounded. Further, another 70,000

died from the flu. Many of those were killed just days before the armistice took effect, days when many commanders pressed on even as they knew that the armistice was about to take place. These efforts brought military advances but German troops still remained in Belgium and France; indeed, no allied troops had actually reached Germany before the armistice.

Perhaps the best way to visualize these unnecessary losses on the very eve of the Armistice can be seen from the plaque in the small village church of Sewanee, TN, population less than a thousand. [SHOW POWER POINT]

**"Who Gave Their Lives for the Freedom of the Earth"**

**Albert A. Bonholzer Private, 32 Division, 128 Infantry, Born at Sewanee, December 7, 1890. Killed in action in France November 10, 1918. We are all in God's Hands. His will be done.**

**Ernest J. Campbell, Private, 77 Division, 307 Infantry, Born at Sewanee December 18, 1893 Killed in action in France November 7, 1918. He went to his reward with the highest respect of the officers and men."**

And from our Galloway family, there was the uncle of Sallie Holmberg, Alexander Morrison, also killed on the 10<sup>th</sup> of November. [SHOW POINT POINT]

These deaths were no longer in Flanders fields among the poppies that we remember even today with the poppies that you have, but rather in the rough terrain of eastern France. Sad deaths came on the very eve of victory.

The American military presence in 1918 made the difference between victory and a negotiated settlement. By late September the German military and civilian leadership realized that they could no longer resist. They needed an armistice, a chance to regroup, and an opportunity to see if negotiations would succeed in allowing some German territorial gains in the west. And they still hoped, best of all, that the allies of Britain, France, and Italy, along with the United States might break their own ranks.

This takes us to the crucial role played by Woodrow Wilson in negotiating with the leadership in Berlin. We discussed Wilson at length in the entry to war and the key part played by Colonel Edward M. House, who would be invaluable again in the fall of 1918. As the American part in the war unfolded, Wilson became

more dominating, less prone to negotiate, and more convinced of his own moral righteousness, not an attractive trait for a political leader. For their part London and Paris allowed Wilson to take the leadership, assuming correctly that if he erred, they would fix it later. Not all of the allied leadership were for an armistice as traditionally practiced: French General Ferdinand Foch and American General John J. Pershing wanted to continue the fighting and to move allied troops into Germany and to show the German domestic home front that Germany had been defeated. The failure to do that, would, of course, influence the “unconditional surrender” stance in the Second World War.

Wilson disagreed with the generals; he believed that another winter of war would ensure large casualties and put extreme pressure on the French and British politicians. Nor could he ignore the impact of propaganda from the emergent Soviet government in Moscow that was winning support from the war weary populations in Germany and Austria-Hungary; what if the Bolsheviks upended those governments?



I want now to show you a video that tracks these momentous moments for the war and for Europe and indeed for the world. [VIDEO HERE]

We saw in the video how Wilson and the allies had escalated the western demands in October and November. The Germans would have to allow an occupation of German territory including troops in the Rhineland, the naval blockade would continue and thus deprive the enemy of needed foodstuffs, and the German navy would have to surrender. In short, Germany would not be able to resume military action, the very purpose of armistice from the German generals' point of view.

The German military high command at this point balked only to be tossed aside, as we saw, by an emerging coalition of Germany's civilian political leadership. A fact worth noting is that these civilian leaders had long pressed for negotiations and for peace; only the prospect of a victorious peace had kept them at bay. Now new leaders emerged, ready to create a new government and seek peace. Eventually, as we saw, they persuaded Kaiser Wilhelm II to abdicate and flee to neutral Holland. In Austria-Hungary the Habsburgs abandoned a thousand-year rule and the multinational

kingdom soon disappeared. All of these seismic events took place before the armistice had ever been signed.

In the background were Wilson's other demands incorporated in his Fourteen Points for peace. But the most damaging effect of Wilson's success in tossing aside the Hohenzollerns and the Habsburgs came from virtual noose that the defeat put around the necks of the new civilian leaderships. It would not be hard later to cry "Stab in the Back" and that the civilians had "lost" the war, as the inept German and Habsburg military leadership later shifted the blame for their own failures. Hitler had inadvertently been given a political platform.

It was in this turbulent atmosphere that the German leaders negotiated and finally agreed to sign the armistice agreement. In turned they notified the respective commands that the armistice would take place at 11 a.m. on November 11. Once signed there would be further peace negotiations that started in January 1919, again with the Germans essentially excluded from any negotiations.

Let me summarize the situation as news of the armistice spread across Europe and America. The governments of Germany

and Austria-Hungary that had made the decisions for war in 1914 were gone, replaced by untested and inexperienced new civilian governments. The left bank of the Rhine would be occupied by allied troops and Alsace and Lorraine would once again become French, and all of this before any final peace treaty. Entirely ignored would be the ever-strengthening Bolshevik government in wide swaths of Russia.

With the armistice signed, the task now became that of a final peace treaty, signed finally at the Palace of Versailles on June 28, 1919. After November 11, Wilson made the crucial decision to become the first American president to leave the country during his presidency, convinced that only his presence could assure the implementation of the Fourteen Points, the most important of which was the creation of a new League of Nations structure to prevent further wars. Wilson arrived in France in early December and had a reception that would have been the envy of the Caesars of Roman days. [PICTURE OF WILSON AND EDITH]

In his entourage came experts to help with the peace negotiations that finally started in January 1919 among the Big Four leaders: Wilson, David Lloyd George, the prime minister of Britain,

Georges Clemenceau, the premier of France and skilled in speaking English, and Vittorio Orlando, prime minister of Italy and not an English speaker. [PICTURE OF BIG FOUR]

Four quick comments about domestic politics among the Big Four: each of the leaders, including Wilson, had major political problems at home: Wilson with the Republican victory in the off-year elections, France where labor unions and food issues dominated, England where pent up demands from the Irish and the Indians challenged colonial rule, and Italy where domestic instability and disastrous losses in the war poisoned the atmosphere. Second, these domestic issues made negotiations very hard for the leaders; they had very little flexibility. Third, they would try to ignore the threat posed by the Bolsheviks, the uninvited guests whose absence would lead to later troubles. And finally, it must be remembered that all of the negotiations in Paris were taking place in societies shell shocked by the extent of war deaths and terrible injuries. Almost equally important, the civilian populations dealt with huge deaths from the so-called Spanish influenza, now seen as the worst pandemic in history. Overall, flu deaths reached as high as 50 to 100 million worldwide. Young

people were especially vulnerable and the crowded military conditions made it worse. Deaths in the U.S. ranged from 500 to 675,000 and in France 400,000. Historians and commentators often ignore the social and psychological impact of these deaths but they framed the background of the peace negotiations after Wilson had gotten his armistice.

Wilson eventually got his League of Nations but everything was dependent on the Republican controlled Senate that eventually would reject all of the arrangements. The French and British took over Ottoman territory and German colonies in Africa; the Middle East saw mandates with the French and British expanding their control and their problems; China was shoved aside. For many it soon became apparent that Wilson favored the traditional views about race and color; the world had been made safe for democracy if that meant white democracy.

Lurking behind all of the political and territorial issues stood the mammoth problem of war debt for all of the countries, though less for the United States which had become the great creditor nation. The four years of war and carnage had been financed by debts and promissory notes. Now those governments had

disappeared, their revenues collapsed, and the debt was coming due, usually to American holders. Coupled with this was the practical problem of how would Germany pay to rebuild huge areas of Belgium and France that had been destroyed by the war and long under German occupation. Moreover, who would help to pay those wounded or maimed by the war and whose presence in civilian societies made the war a continuing reality. Over time, with wild variations of numbers, reparations for Germany would be set at 33 billion dollars. For the 1920s, the issue of war debt and would the Germans actually pay became tense political issues.

[SHOW MAP OF EUROPE AFTER 1919]S

But now we are veering toward the 1920s and away from the war. Perhaps the most succinct way to judge the impact of the armistice and the peace negotiations came from an astute military observer, French General Ferdinand Foch who spoke, presciently: “we have created a twenty-year truce” and it would be when war came once again to Europe in September 1939.

Let us turn back to the mood of Western Europe and the United States one hundred years ago today, as word of the

Armistice and the end of the war came to the publics. [Huns  
Defeated]

Let us stop and once more see how the victorious powers  
celebrated the First Armistice Day.

[LAST YOUTUBE HERE]

Then book to George Meinig.