Course Learning Outcomes for Unit II

Upon completion of this unit, students should be able to:

7. Describe the role of the United States in various world political and trade associations.

Reading Assignment

Chapter 12:
Military Policy Between the Two World Wars, 1919-1939

Unit Lesson

The United States and its military had been unprepared for the First World War, and civilian and military leaders were determined that would not happen again. A reworking of the military command structure, an evaluation of the place of technology in the military, and a new procurement system were in order to insure the United States could protect itself and its new allies in the coming decades.

Other challenges faced the military as well. The hangover of the First World War and the neglect of the League of Nations by the U.S. Senate, encouraged the world’s naval powers to bypass the League and set limits on warship class and tonnage several times through the 1920s and early 1930s. Foremost among the obstacles faced by the United States was the Great Depression. The 1930s was a time of retrenchment rather than expansion in the American economy, and necessarily, the military. It would need to become smarter, more diverse, more powerful, and be prepared to defend on all fronts.

It would be no simple task to define the place of the military at war’s end. In the first place, the United States was now truly a world power and the only major economy in the world not devastated by the war. What role the military should play in this new world was open to debate. Many still believed the oceans that surrounded the nation were defense enough, and the Navy was given priority as a result. Secondly, the world war had been an unsatisfying experience for the American public. Many, especially those recently arrived of European ancestry, had been opposed to entry in the first place, and a strong pacifist movement had lobbied hard against the war from the start.

Though the peace negotiations at Versailles had fostered great hope, and the establishment of the League of Nations promised of no more war, an isolationist push among American conservatives disallowed the U.S. to join in the peace until 1923, and the U.S. did not join the League at all. Many Americans were very tired of war, and this was reflected in their attitudes toward the military. If the world was generally at peace and the League of Nations was in place to reduce the likelihood of war, why, asked many, would we want a large, active military?

Another disquieting event that plagued the view of the military was the demobilization necessary at war’s end, which released back into the workforce nearly 3.25 million men. Despite a lack of advanced planning, this influx of workers did not dramatically threaten the economy, though the ending of wartime contracts with some companies did force bankruptcies. The prospect of a large standing army was anathema to the American public historically. There were also practical economic reasons since it was expensive to maintain and expensive to demobilize. By the end of 1919, the Regular Army was reduced to its more traditional and relatively small volunteer force, with few outside the Army noticing.

This force was stretched thin in the coming years. It was asked to patrol the Mexican border due to the fear of pre-war hostilities rising again. The force also served as occupation forces in Germany, Italy, and elsewhere in Europe until the separate American peace was signed in 1923, and it was routinely called upon to put down
strikes and quell various domestic conflagrations. Garrisons were also posted in Hawai'i and the Canal Zone in Panama.

The most deadly post in the early 1920s was that which occupied Murmansk in the west and Vladivostok in the east of the new Soviet Union. The latter event, often referred to as the Great Siberian Expedition, was part of a multinational force in which 15,000 American soldiers supported local Russian forces opposed to the socialist regime there. The mission was an abject failure and a diplomatic black eye that would continue to cause stress between the nations for decades.

The most immediate strategic threat in the 1920s was seen as Imperial Japan, now the dominant power in the Pacific. With the hopes of balancing power between naval powers in both oceans—as a two-ocean war was certainly a possibility—the U.S. State Department sponsored the Washington Conferences beginning in 1921. A number of essential naval and diplomatic treaties evolved from these. These ultimately formed what was called the “Treaty Navy” and tended to fully satisfy none of their signatories, a mark of successful diplomacy. In reality, the powers in Washington were, in the form of these treaties, attempting to insure that the next war would be a fair fight. The contents of these treaties can be found in the Suggested Readings.

Another important change came with the National Defense Act of 1920 that, building on the National Defense Act of 1916 which was hastily written with war on the horizon, reorganized the military to better-reflect potential threats. Millett, Maslowski, and Feis (2012) expertly outline the basic changes and examine alterations made in the status and use of the National Guard and the military’s relationship with the ROTC. This Act also allowed the new Army Air Corps to become a focal point of great controversy as its champion, Army General William “Billy” Mitchell, pushed and proved the value of air power. A similar debate took place regarding the place of submarines in the national defense system. The military was redefining itself as a result of its world war experience.

Perhaps the most overlooked change, and arguably most important, established in the National Defense Act was the creation of the Army Industrial College. This implicitly acknowledged the importance of industrial mobilization and logistical training for the conducting of modern warfare. This, as much as any front-line navy, air, or submarine corps, signaled acknowledgement that the United States could not be underprepared for war as it had been before the last war; thus, a policy of constant readiness took shape. This institution was charged with educating officers for the procurement division in the War Department and planning demobilizations that did not harm suppliers, as happened after the First World War.

When Douglas MacArthur became Chief of Staff in 1931, the Great Depression had a firm grip on the economy, which led to budgets falling. MacArthur made modernization and training the priorities of the War Department, and it worked! During World War II, more than 90% of the Army Industrial College procurement recommendations went to firms surveyed in the 1920s and 1930s by the college (Gropman, 2008). War in the 20th century had become organized and total.

Among the tasks assigned to the Army in this period were the dispersing of the Bonus Marchers—World War One veterans encamped outside Washington, DC, awaiting the benefits promised to them—and the administration of the Civilian Conservation Corps camps, a job creation program within the New Deal.

World events, many driven by depression, continued to vex military policy through the 1930s. As the Second World War steadily approached in Europe through the mid-1930s, beginning with Hitler’s Germany renouncing the Versailles Treaty, Britain worked hard to gain U.S. support. In 1936, Japan renounced its adherence to all treaty limitations and invaded Manchuria the following year. In 1939, war came to Europe with British and French defense of Poland, and the United States began to increase the strength of its Air Corps and build a military to lend and lease to the western Allies.

The massive military potential of the United States was recognized by Japan and Germany, as was the reticence of the American public to go back to war. The hangover of the First World War and of the Great Depression was strong. The President realized mobilization was necessary, and the Army and Navy were as prepared as they could be to fight the war that civilian and military leadership expected, but that was not the war that came.
References


**Suggested Reading**

Here are some of the key treaties and other documents that had an important impact on the military operations of the United States from 1919-1939. Please take a look at the documents to learn more.

**The Treaty of Versailles**


**The Covenant of the League of Nations**


**Five Power Treaty**


**Four Power Treaty**


**Nine Power Treaty**

Treaty between the United States of America, Belgium, the British Empire, China, France, Italy, Japan, the Netherlands, and Portugal, February 6, 1922. Retrieved from http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/tr22-01.asp


**The London Treaty, 1930**