THIS WILL OVERTURN EVERYTHING YOU THOUGHT YOU KNEW ABOUT THE FIRST WORLD WAR

Mud, Blood and Poppycock re-examines the old myths of incompetence and unnecessary slaughter that have coloured the popular view of the First World War. In so doing, Gordon Corrigan may well shatter precious libertarian illusions, but in explaining what war is really about, how an army does its work, and by examining the facts he overturns myths and legends and gets to the truth. British casualty rates were high, but less than those of France and Germany, and there was no 'lost generation'.

Gordon Corrigan, a retired officer of the Royal Gurkha Rifles and a noted military historian, has fashioned a case for the revisionist view of the First World War which is devastating trial by evidence.

'A CLEAR, CRISP, HIGHLY READABLE NARRATIVE'
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'CORRIGAN IS A COMBATIVE, PERSUASIVE AND VERY READABLE HISTORIAN'
INDEPENDENT

Increasingly, sales on credit to Britain and France gave American business a vested interest in Allied victory. While this was not the cause of eventual American involvement in the war, it was a sufficiently strong reason to lead to the passing of the Neutrality Acts of 1935 and 1936, so that in the Second World War only 'cash and carry' sales could be made, with no commitment of American money or ships.

Despite Wilson's preference for democracy over autocracy, relations with Britain actually declined up to 1916. As a trading nation America regarded the freedom of the seas as a paramount objective of her foreign policy. Britain blockaded Germany, blockaded German ships in American ports, and stopped and searched neutral shipping to ensure that no 'contraband' was being carried to the Central Powers. This irritated Wilson – America had gone to war with Britain in 1812 largely on this issue – and many were the notes of protest handed to the British ambassador. When relations became too strained, Britain either allowed goods regarded as vital to American exports to go through or, if the cargo was considered by Britain to be too important to be allowed to go to Germany (such as cotton), bought the entire output herself.

The Hearst press was openly hostile to Britain. Indeed, their correspondent in Berlin was later found to have been in the pay of the Germans, and the repression of the 'Easter Rising' in Ireland increased anti-British sentiment amongst the Irish-American community – feeling which was encouraged by German agents. There were a large number of Americans of German descent in the Midwest, with their own newspapers and clubs, many of which were under the influence of the German embassy. All of this meant that Wilson would have found it very difficult to go to war alongside the French and, particularly, the British in 1914. Nevertheless Britain relied on America as the provider of all manner of war materials that British industry could not itself produce. For horses, rifles, artillery pieces, ammunition of all types, aircraft, aero-engines and motor vehicles, the British government placed contracts with American suppliers and manufacturers, to say nothing of the thirty per cent of British foodstuffs that by 1916 were being imported from the United States. America was under no obligation, moral or legal, to provide any of this, and it would have taken but a nod and a wink from the US government to banks and

industrial magnates for credit to dry up and contracts to be unfulfilled. That no such censure was ever hinted at was, of course, partly commercial good sense; but it was also partly a mark of unwritten sympathy with, and understanding of, British war aims. American industry and American governmental tolerance were essential to the British war effort long before the United States entered the war, and while Britain might still have won the war without them, it would have taken far longer and would have cost many more lives.

While America disliked the blockade, Britain could make strong legal arguments for it, and these were always more convincing to the US government than German use of the submarine, which was seen as a terror weapon. The British did not sink ships or kill their crews; increasingly, German submarines were to sink merchant shipping without warning. With the failure of the Schlieffen plan and the onset of what would be a long war, informed opinion in Germany moved to regarding Britain, rather than France, as the major enemy. Initially this was not because of the size of Britain's army but because of her navy. The British blockade had an increasingly deleterious effect on the German war effort, not so much because it prevented the import of war-making items (oil could be extracted from coal and rubber replaced by synthetics), but because Germany had always relied on imports of food, mainly from France and Russia but also from further afield. All this was now denied to her, and as the war continued rationing became more extreme. If the Allies held their nerve, then, short of a quick victory on land (which looked increasingly unlikely), Germany would eventually starve.

The answer was the submarine. At the beginning of the war submarines were restricted to coastal defence, but improvements in diesel engines soon made them capable of being used offensively. In February 1915 Germany initiated unrestricted submarine warfare in war zones. This led to vehement American protests – so much so that on 1 September 1915 Germany announced the cessation of unrestricted submarine warfare. Germany tried the submarine again in 1916, and on 21 February announced that from 1 March armed merchant ships would be treated as warships. More American lives were lost (mainly in British ships), and further vigorous protests from America led to Germany's once more abandoning

her unrestricted campaign. By 1917 the situation had changed. Largely owing to their inability to switch sufficient reserves from fending off the British 1916 offensive on the Somme to defeat the French at Verdun, the German High Command saw little prospect of a victory on land. The British blockade was becoming increasingly effective, rations for civilians were not far above the bare minimum, and the only option seemed to be to force Britain out of the war by strangling her trade. Previously there had been too few submarines to mount a quick and overwhelming knockout blow; now it appeared that there were enough. The German High Command and the increasingly sidelined civilian government were well aware that this could bring America into the war on the Allied side, but considered that the war could be won before America was in a position to intervene decisively. In any event, they calculated, American attention could be diverted elsewhere.

Part of the process of consolidating the US as the major state on the American continent was the incorporation of Texas, California, Nevada, Utah, Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado and Wyoming at the expense of Mexico, who saw herself as the rightful inheritor of Spanish interests on the North American continent. In the years leading up to 1914, Mexico underwent a series of changes of government in which one dictator replaced another, usually by assassination or armed insurrection. America had large financial interests in Mexico, and the business world wanted nothing so much as stability, regardless of who actually supplied it. Britain too wanted stability, as most of Mexico's oil was British-owned and needed for the Royal Navy. Wilson, on the other hand, wanted democracy in Mexico, an unrealistic hope for a country where eighty-five per cent of the population were illiterate peasant farmers. The rise of the rebel Pancho Villa and his propensity to raid across the border into the United States eventually led to Wilson's reluctantly sanctioning military intervention in Mexico. From March 1916 four-fifths of the United States regular army, under Major General John J. Pershing, was tied down inside Mexico or on its borders. All this was grist to the German mill. Germany supplied arms and money to the various Mexican factions, and hoped that the US would be too preoccupied with her own borders to become involved in the European war.

Another factor that Germany hoped to use was Japan. Japan had

declared war on the Allied side in 1914. She had annexed Korea in 1910 and was now able to seize German bases in China and to obtain markets that the Europeans could no longer supply. Japan played little part in the war on land, but the use of her fleet in the Pacific, the China Seas and the Indian Ocean allowed Britain to withdraw ships from the Far East for use in the Atlantic. Relations between Japan and America were, however, fragile. Japan had now come to be seen as the 'Yellow Peril', competing with the United States for trade and influence in China, and posing a threat to American interests in the Pacific. Relations worsened with American restrictions on Japanese immigration, particularly with the passing by the California state legislature of a law forbidding Japanese nationals to own or lease land in that state. Rumours of Japanese ships off the Mexican coast and Japanese officers with the Mexican army abounded.

Up to this point Wilson was attempting to mediate between the belligerent powers. His efforts were directed towards 'peace without victory'. They were well-meaning but naïve, and were coming to naught. The Allies refused to accept that both sets of belligerents should receive equal treatment – it was their territory that was occupied – and Germany would not countenance a settlement that left her with no gains.

American mediation efforts were not helped by the man who was deputed to make them. Eschewing the normal diplomatic channels, Wilson used a trusted crony, Colonel Edward Mandell House. House was a wealthy Texan who had been active in state politics and whose organisational abilities and social contacts had been largely instrumental in securing the election of a succession of Democratic governors of Texas. In 1911 House met Wilson and played a crucial role in uniting the Democratic Party behind this somewhat unusual presidential candidate. Having succeeded to the presidency, Wilson found House to have no political ambitions of his own and began to use him more and more, although without giving him an official government position. As Wilson's emissary to Europe before the war, House had discussions with all the principal governments, but his somewhat unsophisticated attempts to broker a solution to great-power rivalry came to nothing. Once war broke out House believed, as did Wilson, that it was in America's interest to stay neutral, although his (and Wilson's) sympathies were with the Allies. The Allied governments found House difficult because

he did not fit the mould of the professional diplomat, a type with which they were used to dealing. The French and British generals assumed that his title of colonel implied that he had served in the American army, and thus understood the military imperative. When this was found not to be the case House's credibility was diminished, although Haig eventually formed the opinion that he was 'natural, sincere and capable'.[3] The French and British considered House's rank to be bogus, although this was a somewhat unfair description, as the conferring of honorary military ranks was common in the United States – Colonel Sanders of Kentucky being the best-known bearer of such today, at least in Britain.[4] House obtained his colonelcy from James Hogg, Governor of Texas in the early 1890s, and with it came a smart uniform, which House later said he had given away to a 'grateful darkie' in his employ.[5] In the spring of 1914 House sent a report to President Wilson describing his impressions of the European situation:

> ...It is militarism run stark mad...Whenever England consents, France and Russia will close in on Germany and Austria. England does not want Germany wholly crushed, for she would then have to reckon with her ancient enemy, Russia; but if Germany insists upon an ever increasing navy, then England will have no choice. The best chance for peace is an understanding between England and Germany in regard to naval armaments and yet there is some disadvantage to us by these two getting too close.[6]

The report was a mixture of misunderstandings and *Realpolitik*. France and Russia were in no state to 'close in' on Germany and Austria, whatever England might or might not consent to; and Russia was not England's ancient enemy – that accolade goes to France. House was quite right when he said that a naval armaments agreement was needed, something that England had tried very hard to get but which the Kaiser and the German government would not accept. No doubt House's worries that Germany and England might get too close was a realisation that a combination of the world's greatest sea power and the world's greatest land power would be unstoppable.[7]

In late 1916 the German High Command calculated that unrestricted submarine warfare would bring Britain to her knees in five months – far too short a time for America to intervene even if she could not be kept

neutral. On 31 January 1917 Germany announced unrestricted submarine warfare to begin the following day. On 3 February the United States broke off relations with Germany in protest. American ships refused to sail, and ports became clogged with ships and cargoes that could not be moved. In mid-February Wilson introduced a bill in Congress to permit the arming of United States merchant ships; he still hoped to keep America out of the war and intended the Armed Shipping Bill as a last warning to Germany. The pacifist faction in Congress began to organise a filibuster against the bill.

And then occurred something so momentous that it is difficult to believe that any rational government – and the German government was rational – could have sanctioned it. Zimmerman, the German Foreign Secretary, sent a coded cable to the German ambassador in Washington, to be passed on to the German minister in Mexico. As the Royal Navy had long ago cut all German undersea cables, the Germans could initially communicate overseas only by wireless or through (pro-German) Swedish channels. Since 1915 Wilson had permitted the German government to use the US State Department cable for communications to and from the German embassy in Washington. This had been authorised by Wilson because the Germans had assured him that these channels would be used solely for matters pertaining to Wilson's search for peace terms. The British had long ago cracked both the German naval and diplomatic codes, and had been monitoring American cables, but rather than protest against this flagrant breach of American neutrality they were happy to decipher enemy messages sent by this means. It is ironic that it was from the State Department cable that they intercepted and decoded the 'Zimmerman telegram'. Translated into English it read:

> Foreign Office telegram 16 January 1917: strictly secret yourself to decipher. We intend from the first February unrestricted U-boat war to begin. It will nevertheless be attempted to keep the United States neutral. In the event that this should not succeed, we offer Mexico an alliance on the following terms. Together we make war and together we make peace. Generous financial support and understanding on our part that Mexico reconquer the lost territories of Texas and Arizona. Settlement of the details to be left to Your Excellency. You will inform the President of Mexico of the foregoing in

> strictest secrecy. As soon as war with the US is certain it is suggested that Japan is added and that the President of Mexico should be invited to immediately negotiate between ourselves and Japan. Please point out to the President of Mexico that ruthless employment of our U-boats now points to the prospect of England being forced to make peace in a few months. Acknowledge receipt. Zimmerman.

The British naturally wished to pass on this information to the Americans, but had to do so in a way that did not expose British possession of German code books, or British ability to tap American government cable, wireless and telephone communications. Eventually they managed to lift the message again, while it was being transmitted from Washington to Mexico, thus giving the impression that they had obtained a decoded copy either in Mexico or in Washington. For the moment the message lay in the safe of the British Chief of Naval Intelligence in London.

On 5 February, after America had broken off relations with Germany, Zimmerman sent a further telegram instructing the German minister in Mexico to make the offer now, including Japanese participation, without waiting for America to enter the war. This too was intercepted and decoded by the British. On the same day Wilson finally withdrew the US army from Mexico.

It now appeared to the British that America might not enter the war after all, and there were fears in London that Wilson might even put economic pressure on Britain to make peace on disadvantageous terms. On 23 February the British gave the text of the Zimmerman telegram to the American ambassador in London, Walter Page, who sent it on to Washington on 24 February. Wilson was described as being 'indignant', and sat on the document until the following Monday, when he was due to address Congress on the Armed Merchant Ships Bill. Even as the President was speaking, news came in of the sinking of the Cunard Liner *Laconia*, with the loss of two American lives. Two days later Wilson, in order to defeat the filibuster against the bill, decided to publish the telegram. The story broke on 1 March 1917.

The initial reaction was mixed. For the pro-Allied party and the eastern press it was a godsend; to the Hearst press, the German Midwest and the

pacifist faction it was a British fake. The filibuster succeeded and the Armed Ships Bill did not pass. Three-quarters of the American people were still indifferent to the war, and very few believed that the Zimmerman telegram could possibly be genuine.

Then Zimmerman did something that is still inexplicable – unless in terms of German arrogance. He publicly admitted, at a press conference in Berlin, that the telegram was authentic. This admission was the catalyst that changed American thinking about the war. On 9 March Wilson, using his executive authority, ordered the arming of American merchant ships. Goods began to move again. On 18 March three American ships were sunk without warning by U-boats. On 19 March the abdication of the Tsar of Russia removed one of Wilson's objection to the Allies – they were now all democratic.

On 20 March Wilson met with his cabinet and the decision was taken to enter the war. On 2 April the President announced the decision to Congress, and on 6 April 1917 America declared war on Germany (she did not declare war on Austria-Hungary until December). By this time British losses due to U-boat attacks had soared to 875,000 tons and Admiral Beatty calculated that Britain would run out of foodstuffs and essential supplies by July. In May the convoy system was instituted and the results were spectacular. British, and increasingly American, escort vessels were able to ensure the safe passage of more than enough supplies, and to sink more U-boats, which were now deprived of easy victims. Although shipping losses were over eight million tons by the end of the year, Allied shipbuilding more than replaced them.

In the spring of 1917 America was in no state to go to war. The American army, along with that of Argentina, ranked seventeenth in the world and was but 70,000 strong. It had 400 obsolete artillery pieces, 1,500 machine guns of four different and non-interchangeable calibres, and while there were 285,000 Springfield rifles in store, there was only enough ammunition for one regimental (three-battalion) attack. Although America had invented powered flight it was regarded as little more than a circus attraction, and the Aviation Section of the Army Signal Corps had only fifty-five obsolete aircraft and thirty-five pilots to fly them. The United States now had to raise an army. The enormous expansion required was achieved by

conscription, although many Americans volunteered before they were called up. Despite American law's forbidding enlistment in foreign armies, Americans had crossed the border into Canada and joined the Canadian army; some had even joined the British army. There were American volunteer ambulance units on the Western Front and there was even a combat group of American flyers fighting with the French – the *Escadrille Lafayette* – but this was but a handful compared to what would be needed.[8] Having learned from their own experiences in the Civil War and the British experience of the present conflict, the American army eschewed territorial recruitment, and while the spearhead of the American Expeditionary Force (AEF) would be the few regular divisions and the United States Marine Corps, they would be followed by the National Guard (the equivalent of the British Territorial Force but recruited state-wide) and conscript divisions deliberately formed from men from all over the Union (known as National Army divisions).

Promotion in the tiny pre-war American army was painfully slow, and as promotion was in the hands of Congress, which wished to save money, there were only seven major generals in the whole army in 1917. The junior major general was John J. Pershing, selected to command the expeditionary force partly because of his record, but also owing to political contacts – his father-in-law was Chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee. When telephoned and asked if he could speak French, Pershing saw what was in the wind and claimed to be fluent. America is a genuinely egalitarian society, and it loves a poor boy made good. Pershing was often referred to as the 'Missouri Ploughboy', and while he may have done some ploughing on his father's land, he was in fact well educated and his family, which originated from Alsace, had good political connections. Born in 1860 he was for a while a teacher, then decided to read for the bar until he received a nomination to West Point where he graduated in 1886. He was commissioned into the cavalry and took part in the Indian Wars, during which he was Chief of Scouts in the suppression of the North Dakota Sioux. He was still a second lieutenant at the age of thirty-two; he served as Captain of Cadets at Nebraska University, where he also took a law degree, and as a captain served in Cuba and the Philippines.[9] His nickname of 'Black Jack' may date from his command of a troop of Negro cavalry in Cuba (the US

army was segregated until the early 1950s). Pershing so impressed Theodore Roosevelt, who fought as a volunteer in Cuba and was later President of the United States, that he was promoted from captain to brigadier general over the heads of 882 others, which must have enhanced his popularity. He spent most of 1915 and 1916 on operations on the Mexican border, during which his wife (a senator's daughter) and three daughters were burned to death in a fire at their married quarters (a son survived).

Pershing and his staff arrived in France in June 1917 to a tumultuous welcome from the French, who immediately whisked him off to visit the tomb of Lafayette.[10] Pershing never said, '*Lafayette, nous sommes voici*' – the words were uttered by Colonel C. E. Stanton, an officer on Pershing's staff – but Pershing was widely credited with them, and they were a shrewd comment that went down very well with the French. The French were very anxious to take the Americans under their wing. After all, they frequently proclaimed, it was France that had given America liberty, freedom and democracy. That neither Bourbon, Revolutionary nor Napoleonic France had been liberal, free or democratic was conveniently ignored.

The Allies, and Pershing, were well aware that it would take time for the American army to build up and be trained for warfare on the Western Front. The French suggested that building up a separate army was really not necessary – manpower was what was needed, and American soldiers could be incorporated into the French army. The British, who had the advantage of a common language, were equally in favour of having American units in the BEF; but when it swiftly became apparent that this was unacceptable, they came up with a better suggestion. To begin with, offered the British generals, there could be American battalions in British brigades. Once experience had been gained, American brigades could be put into British divisions (with American divisional commanders to avoid offence to American pride), and then American divisions into British corps, and American corps into British armies, until a separate American army could be formed. This made sound military sense and would have worked, but that it was proposed at all was to fail to understand the American psyche. The British had a long history of sending their tiny land forces to serve as members of a coalition, often under allied commanders. America was very reluctant ever to have her soldiers serve under a foreign flag, and she still is.[11]

Pershing saw the state of the French army in 1917, riven with discontent and mutiny, and to place his men under command of the British would be seen by the American public as a reversion to the colonial status that they had broken away from. Most Americans would have heard stories about the War of 1812, a forgotten campaign to the British, to whom the fight against Napoleon was what mattered, but important to the United States as their first foreign war; the President's official residence was a constant reminder of the episode, not having been the White House until after the British set fire to it.

It was not Pershing alone, however, who refused to integrate American troops into Allied formations. Wilson had been quite clear as to America's role in Europe. She was not an 'Ally' of France and Britain, but an 'Associated Power' – hair-splitting to some, but in fact a genuine indication that Wilson did not see French and British war aims as necessarily coinciding with his own. His instructions to Pershing were categorical: there was to be no American involvement in the fighting until there was an American force ready to take the field, with its own sector of front and operating as an army in its own right, and not under the command or direction of anybody else. This, of course, infuriated the French and the British, but from the American viewpoint it was reasonable and right. American soldiers were not in Europe to act as anybody's poodles, or to win the war for the French and the British. They were there to strike a blow in their own right, and to end the war in accordance with Wilson's principles of a just and lasting peace. Pershing did not necessarily agree with his commander-in-chief – indeed he said later that the inclusion of half a million Americans in the Third Battle of Ypres could have ended the war in 1917[12] – but he could not flagrantly disobey him, although he did bend the rules on a number of occasions by allowing American troops to help out.

America had no great difficulty in finding men for the American Expeditionary Force (AEF) but, like the British in 1914, they had a small regular army, and finding officers and NCOs was not easy. Nor was finding senior officers to command regiments, brigades and divisions. The final arbiter of promotions and appointments for the AEF was the Secretary of War, Newton D. Baker, who generally accepted Pershing's advice; but in the early days all sorts of highly unsuitable people who had seniority or

political connections on their side were sent out. In a letter to the Secretary of War dated 4 October 1917, Pershing said: '…we have some general officers who have neither the experience, the energy, nor the aggressive spirit to prepare their units or to handle them under battle conditions…'[13] Pershing had to be hard, and he made few friends in the AEF by insisting that only the best was good enough. He irritated the doctors when he inspected a medical unit and found them under the impression that they were still civilian practitioners translated abroad. They were left in no doubt by Pershing that, doctors or no, they would wear uniform, stand to attention and salute – and be inspected again the next day. Brigade and divisional commanders were refused commands for being too old, too fat, or deficient in combat experience.

The Germans did not believe that American forces could ever reach Europe in sufficient strength and in time to make a difference, but a combination of the Royal Navy (which transported fifty-one per cent of US troops bound for France), American shipping and confiscated German ships stranded in American harbours delivered them in increasing numbers. The first American division (1 Division, the Big Red One), an amalgam of regular army units, arrived on 28 June 1917 and thereafter the build-up of the AEF is shown below:[14]

Table 13

Date	*Strength of AEF (all ranks)*
30 June 1917	14,359
31 July 1917	16,748
31 August 1917	36,658
30 September 1917	61,531
31 October 1917	81.055
30 November 1917	125,950
31 December 1917	174,884
31 January 1918	215,788
28 February 1918	251,889
31 March 1918	318,621
30 April 1918	429,659
31 May 1918	651,284
30 June 1918	873,691
31 July 1918	1,169,062
31 August 1918	1,415,128
30 September 1918	1,705,392
31 October 1918	1,867,623