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ADVISORY COMMISSION, COUNCIL OF NATIONAL DEFENSE
DURING WORLD WAR

by

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RESTRICTED

173

RESTRICTED

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DURING WORLD WAR

For a number of years previous to the outbreak of the great war there was much discussion throughout the United States concerning the necessity for creating a Council of National Defense. Responsive to this general feeling there was drafted as early as 1912 a bill providing for the creation of such a body. The bill as proposed had the endorsement of President Taft, the Secretaries of War and the Navy, and also of the Chief of Staff of the Army. However, the proposed bill failed to pass and nothing definite was done in that connection until 1916.

The Army Appropriation Act, approved August 29, 1916, contained the following language:

"Sec. 2. That a Council of National Defense is hereby established for the coordination of industries and resources for the national security and welfare, to consist of the Secretary of War, the Secretary of the Navy, the Secretary of the Interior, the Secretary of Agriculture, the Secretary of Commerce, and the Secretary of Labor.

"That the Council of National Defense shall nominate to the President, and the President shall appoint, an Advisory Commission, consisting of not more than seven persons, each of whom shall have special knowledge of some industry, public utility, or the development of some natural resource, or be otherwise specially qualified, in the opinion of the Council, for the performance of the duties hereinafter provided. The members of the Advisory Commission shall serve without compensation, but shall be allowed actual expenses of travel and subsistence when attending meetings of the commission or engaged in investigations pertaining to its activities. The Advisory Commission shall hold such meetings as shall be called by the Council or be provided by the rules and regulations adopted by the Council for the conduct of its work."

"That the Council of National Defense shall adopt rules and regulations for the conduct of its work, which rules and regulations shall be subject to the approval of the President, and shall provide for the work of the Advisory Commission, to the end that the special knowledge

RESTRICTED

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of such commission may be developed by suitable investigation, research, and inquiry and made available in conference and report for the use of the Council, and the Council may organize subordinate bodies for its assistance in special investigations, either by the employment of experts or by the creation of committees of specially qualified persons to serve without compensation, but to direct the investigations of experts so employed

"That the sum of \$200,000 or so much thereof as may be necessary, is hereby appropriated, out of any money in the Treasury not otherwise appropriated, to be immediately available for experimental work and investigations undertaken by the Council, by the Advisory Commission, or subordinate bodies, for the employment of a director, expert and clerical expenses and supplies, and for the necessary expenses of members of the Advisory Commission or subordinate bodies going to and attending meetings of the Commission or subordinate bodies

Although I know in a general way that Congress had legislated concerning the matter, I gave the subject no serious thought at that time. About the middle of October, the same year, I happened to be in Chicago and quite by accident read in the morning Tribune that President Wilson had announced the appointment of an Advisory Commission of the Council of National Defense as provided in the Act, and my name was included in the number. I was much surprised because I had talked with no one about the matter and in fact, as I said, had given it very little thought. Several days later I received a letter from the Secretary of War, the Honorable Newton D. Baker, informing me officially that the President desired me to serve as a member of the Advisory Commission and asking if I would accept the appointment. I considered the matter for a time and finally concluded it was my duty to accept, and so advised the Secretary of War.

Later on Secretary Baker arranged for a meeting of all the members of the Advisory Commission to be held at his office in Washington, and the first meeting took place December 6th, 1916.

The other six members of the Commission were Messrs Bernard M. Baruch of New York, Howard E. Coffin of Detroit, Hollis Godfrey of Philadelphia, Samuel Gompers of Washington, and Dr. Franklin H. Martin and Julius Rosenwald of Chicago. I had never met a single one of my associates on the Commission previous to my appointment. The first

RESTRICTED

174

RESTRICTED

Actual meeting of the members took place at a dinner in my room at the Willard Hotel in Washington on the evening of December 5th, 1916. We were practically all strangers to each other and we spent our first evening together trying to get acquainted. The first regular meeting, as I have already stated, took place the following day.

Mr. Walter S. Gifford, now President of the American Telephone and Telegraph Company, was appointed Director of the Council of National Defense and rendered very effective service to the Advisory Commission in the same capacity.

There is nothing in the Act creating the Commission that indicates that it was ever the thought of those responsible for the law that it would be anything but an advisory body. Later on, however, because of the development of events which no one could foresee at the time of the passage of the law, the Advisory Commission, for a time at least, was a very active body. It not only endeavored to advise the Council of National Defense, but also upon request of the Council undertook and carried on activities of a far-reaching nature. This was due largely to the fact that there was no other agency of the Government at that time prepared or authorized, or perhaps equipped, to do the particular thing that needed doing because of conditions brought about by the World War, and more particularly after our entry into the war on April 6th, 1917.

I have no doubt that you have studied the records and are familiar with what is recorded concerning the organization and development of the Advisory Commission, of which I had the honor of being a member from the time when it was organized, and of which I was Chairman during the entire period of its activities except for the first two or three months. I think, therefore, if I should confine my comments chiefly to what I personally saw and helped to do, and to the conditions under which we operated, that such a statement might be of more value to you than if I were simply to review or recount what has already become part of the official record.

It should also be kept in mind that when the Council of National Defense was created, together with the Advisory Commission, it was expected that they would deal with peace-time conditions, although, of course, it was because of the fear of the possibility of war that the two agencies were created. It was not foreseen, however, that very soon after their creation they would be forced by the exigencies of the situation to deal with conditions brought about by actual warfare.

RESTRICTED

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I think most, if not all, of the members of the Commission soon came to the conclusion that no matter how much they might desire to do so, the United States would be unable to keep out of the World War as matters were then developing. The Lusitania had been sunk some months before, and other incidents of more or less serious and threatening character were happening and were certain to keep on happening as the war progressed. This belief on our part undoubtedly influenced our thoughts and decisions. Very soon after the organization of the Commission we decided that if and when the United States entered the war, reliable information concerning the resources of the country would be required, and so we proceeded to make a list of the subjects that we thought were of importance and concerning which preliminary studies might be helpful.

It was recognized that the demand for raw materials of certain kinds would be very greatly increased beyond what it then was, including such materials as manganese, nitrates, copper and other things made use of in modern war. Happily, Mr. Bernard M. Baruch, a member of the Commission, was particularly well informed concerning such matters, and he was named Chairman of a committee to deal with raw materials, minerals and metals.

It was recognized also, for instance, that there would be a greatly enlarged need for doctors and nurses, hospital and surgical supplies, and things of that kind, and so a committee was organized, with Dr. Franklin Martin of the Commission, as Chairman, to study those matters and related questions.

Similar action was taken concerning the labor problem, and Mr. Samuel Gompers was designated chairman of the committee on labor, including conservation of health and welfare of workers.

Mr. Howard E. Coffin, a man with broad experience in engineering and manufacturing, and who had at his own expense caused an inventory of our manufacturing capacity to be made, was designated chairman of the munitions and manufacturing committee.

Dr. Hollis Godfrey, President of the Drexel Institute, was familiar with problems in the educational and engineering field. He was designated as chairman of a committee on engineering and education, and was requested to develop the possibilities in that direction, including scientific research.

RESTRICTED

975

RESTRICTED

Mr Julius Rosenwald, at that time President of Sears Roebuck and Company, a large mercantile and mail order house in Chicago, was designated as chairman of a committee on supplies.

I was designated chairman of the committee on transportation and communication.

Thus did the Advisory Commission set up its skeleton organization in the beginning. We informed the Council of National Defense of what we had done, we arranged for offices for our Secretary, and for a meeting room for the Commission as a whole, and held ourselves in readiness to respond to any request of the Council, or to do any other thing that seemed relevant to our position and the authority granted by Congress.

There was very little that we could or did do during the first two or three months of our existence. It seems, however, as I look back upon that period, that after forming our skeleton organization we each individually began to inform ourselves more fully concerning the matters which we might be expected to advise about later on. In my own case particularly, I recall attending several conferences at the War College, of which General Kuhn at that time was the President. I discussed with him certain matters concerning army organization, such as the number of men and the animals and material involved in a full Division, and the accessory services connected therewith. I also attended one or more lectures at the War College concerning problems connected with the transportation of troops, etc. I recall one day sitting beside Major Harbord, as he then was, and listening to a talk by a young officer with regard to the imaginary movement of a Division, with the necessary animals, from a point like St. Louis, we will say, to the port of New York, and I was somewhat surprised to find that in planning the movement he had arranged to stop the train at some intermediate point for six hours in order to unload and feed the animals. Nothing was said about unloading, resting or feeding the men, and it impressed me as somewhat peculiar that in time of war the movement of the army should be subordinated to a ruling of the Agricultural Department concerning the handling of livestock in times of peace. I only mention this to show how very young we all were - perhaps without offense I may say, now very green we all were - as to matters involved in modern warfare. Later on I recalled to General Harbord the lecture we had attended and the particular incident that I have just referred to, and I judged from his reply that the problem of unloading, resting and feeding animals enroute was not one of the major problems of the S O S, which he so ably commended in France.

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During the time of which I speak I think there was a growing belief that some how or other the United States would eventually become involved in the war, but just how or where no one seemed to know. I remember that I invited a number of railroad presidents, some twenty or more, to meet with me in Washington and hear a talk by an officer from the War College concerning what might be expected from the railroads in case of war. I am sure we were all surprised by the picture which was placed before us. The net of what he said amounted to this - that if the United States should become involved in war against Germany, it was not unlikely that Germany would land a large army somewhere on our eastern coast or in eastern Canada, and drive back any troops which we might be able to get together and establish itself on a line reaching from the upper end of the Chesapeake Bay to some point on Lake Erie, probably near Cleveland. He pointed out that by doing this the Germans would secure control of the richest and most important industrial section of the United States, that it would be difficult to dislodge them after they were so established, and difficult also for the United States to equip itself with the war material necessary for carrying on the war. I know that while he was talking I could not help wondering - and I learned afterwards that some of my railroad associates were thinking of the same thing - what the United States and the people in that region east of Pittsburgh would all be doing while Germany was over-running New England, New York and Pennsylvania. In short, the picture that we were given of a German invasion at that time did not, for the reason I have mentioned, make a very serious impression upon the minds of the listeners. I concluded that probably the War College, in its study of all possible things and conditions that might happen, had, among others, considered an invasion of our eastern seacoast and industrial region, which was proper enough as a War College study, but as a matter for serious consideration at that particular moment it did not sink in so very deeply, and I think most of us thought, in any event we hoped, that probably the War College, or the Chief of Staff, or whoever the right person would have been, had plans of a much more definite and aggressive character which it was probably thought wise not to permit us to know about.

It so happened that when the war broke out in 1914 I was at Carlsbad in Austria. I had expected to stay there two weeks, but I was there nearly four weeks before I could get away because of the conditions resulting from the war. We were finally told that a train would be placed at our service on a certain date, that would take some 400 or 500 through to Amsterdam direct, but that this movement would not be made until the German armies, on their way to the

RESTRICTED

776

RESTRICTED

Western front, had passed south of and beyond the territory through which our train would move

I had opportunity while making that journey to note some of the precautions which the Germans were taking, particularly with the railroads. Over many portions of the line, for some reason unknown to us, the side curtains in the train were all drawn at times, and guards were also stationed at the toilet rooms in the cars, and no one was permitted to enter a toilet room while the train was moving in the vicinity of a bridge or tunnel. When we were permitted to look out we saw soldiers in uniform patrolling the bridges and other points, presumably of strategic importance. All this impressed me very much. After the lecture above referred to I told my associates of my experience in Germany after the war had begun, and suggested to them that it might be well if they would get in touch with the commanding officers in the several regions of the United States where they were located, and offer to assist in the protection of railroad property against possibly injury. Knowing as I did that the only two railroads from the south to New York both crossed the Susquehanna River on long and high bridges and that if these bridges were destroyed it might have a serious bearing upon the then military situation, I arranged for the Police Department of the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad to furnish day and night patrols for our Susquehanna River bridge. The Pennsylvania Railroad took similar precautions where its line crossed the same river. Other places were also dealt with in a similar way. I only mention this as indicating how we rather blindly moved on into the war, not knowing definitely at first that we were going in at all and not knowing where we would find the war when we did go in - whether it would be across the ocean or in the eastern part of the United States.

In this same connection and after further discussion with the Chief of Staff it was thought desirable that there should be prepared a map showing how a combination of steam railroads and electric lines, if necessary, could be worked out giving the shortest possible rail route from somewhere on the coast of Maine to as far south as Florida. Studies were made of that matter by the officers of the several railroads involved and information was compiled showing what railroads could be used, the carrying capacity of the bridges, the side clearance of tunnels and other structures so that in case it should be necessary to move troops along the Atlantic Coast to some other point parallel with the ocean, we would know in advance what lines to make use of and how heavy loads could be carried, this latter information in case it should be desirable to move heavy ordnance from

RESTRICTED

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one place to another. This cat was compiled with blueprints and other necessary material, and I presume that it was filed with the War Department. Of course, this information was never needed but at the time when it was compiled it was thought that possibly it might be needed and that it would be well to have it prepared in advance. Many other things were done and much effort was wasted not only by the particular committee which I have referred to, but by all the other committees, until it finally developed with the passage of time just what was actually wanted and in what quantities. I suppose the successful General must prepare for innumerable campaigns that are never undertaken and for a great many battles that are never fought, in order that he may be prepared at some unexpected time to fight the actual battle at some unexpected place. I suppose the waste of effort of the kind I have mentioned is inseparable from the carrying on of war.

Among the problems brought to the attention of the Advisory Commission in the early summer of 1917 was the matter of clothing for the troops to be raised. One item alone consisted of four million pairs of shoes. It was hardly to be expected, in view of the fact that this country had virtually been at peace since the end of the war between the States, that there would be anyone in the Quartermaster's Department, for instance, who had had previous experience with regard to the best way to set about buying four million pairs of shoes, but that was a question concerning which Mr. Julius Rosenwald, a member of the Advisory Commission, was wholly and completely at home, and so he was asked not merely to give advice concerning the matter, but actually to take charge of the process and arrange to get the shoes as promptly as possible. Of course all this called for knowledge as to the different sizes of shoes that would be needed, the relative number of men that would wear a No. 8 as compared with a No. 9 or some other size, but Mr. Rosenwald was familiar with all phases of that problem, not only that, he had at his command an organization, or the key men of an organization, which he brought to Washington to take charge of the details. You have probably read how the matter was handled, how he arranged through conference with the leather manufacturers to secure the best terms for the leather required, how he arranged in a similar way for the eyelets and the linen thread needed, and then having protected himself, or the Government if you please, concerning prices for the actual material needed, he invited bids from manufacturers with the understanding that the necessary materials would be furnished by the Government. I do not recall the different prices that were quoted, nor does it matter. I do recall that the particular one of the shoe manufacturers who named the lowest price could only furnish, we will say, 250,000 pairs. Naturally he was given

RESTRICTED

977

RESTRICTED

all he could take at that price, and then the manufacturer who named the next lowest price was given all that he could take, and so on, the result being that the order as a whole was placed with several different manufacturers each of them receiving a price different from the price paid others. This in due time came to the attention of Congress and it was immediately assumed that there was something improper with the arrangement and an explanation was demanded why it was that all of the shoes required had not been bought at the lowest price quoted. The reply was that we would have been very glad to buy them all at the lowest price, but the man who named that price could make only a limited number of pairs and after he had been given all he could handle, it was necessary then to go to the next lowest bidder and keep on doing so until the entire number needed had been arranged for. The explanation was simple and, I suppose, satisfactory, because we heard nothing further about it at that time.

Four million suits of underclothes needed, presented another problem, and the Quartermaster's Department, which I suppose would usually deal with such matters, had not yet been put on a basis to handle problems of that character, and so Mr. Rosenwald as a member of the Advisory Commission, charged only by the law with the duty of giving advice when called for, continued to assist very effectively in the procurement of underclothes, shoes, overcoats, etc., needed for our new army, working in close understanding with the Quartermaster's Department, and of course with the approval of the Council of National Defense.

I could give innumerable instances of a similar kind that members of the Advisory Commission were called on to deal with and did deal with to the best of their knowledge and understanding, but no useful purpose would be served by further discussion of this particular phase of the problem. It should be sufficient to say that neither the War Department nor any other Department of the Government, was organized when we entered the World War to take up immediately such matters as the procurement of several million rifles, millions of shoes, overcoats and suits of underclothes, together with surgical equipment and hospital supplies for the greatest army that had ever been mobilized in the United States. Besides, those responsible for expenditures in the War and Navy Departments were under very definite responsibility to see that the money which they were authorized to spend for any given purpose, was spent for the purpose authorized by law and for no other. They were not as a matter of fact free agents because Congress had arranged things otherwise. It was different with

RESTRICTED

RESTRICTED

the Advisory Commission. While the Commission, as I have shown, had no authority to do anything but give advice, at the same time they were under no definite inhibition in the shape of laws forbidding them to do this, that or the other thing, so it came about, if it was clear that something really ought to be done and done at once in order to promote our war program, that the Advisory Commission did not hesitate to do it, providing always there was no one else in position to do so. In this respect the Secretary of War set a worthy example for all who may hold that office hereafter. He never hesitated to assume authority in any case provided only he was convinced that the thing recommended was right, and with such a man behind them, the members of the Advisory Commission were quite willing to do things that they felt convinced ought to be done, even though they had no authority to do so, feeling certain that they would be supported to the limit by the Chairman of the Council if support were ever needed.

Upon our recommendation the Council of National Defense authorized the appointment or the creation of a War Industries Board, of which later on Mr. Bernard Baruch became the distinguished and effective Chairman, not, however, until by the passage of the Overman Act he was given authority, as the representative of the President, to act definitely after decisions had been reached.

One of the most interesting statements concerning the Advisory Commission was made after the war by Congressman Graham of Illinois, in a report which he made to the Select Committee on War Expenditures of the House of Representatives on July 7, 1919, using the following language:

"I have been asked by the Committee to prepare such portions of the minutes of the Council of National Defense and Advisory Commission as seem to be pertinent to the subject matter we are inquiring about. An examination of these minutes discloses the fact that a commission of seven men chosen by the President seem to have devised the entire system of purchasing war supplies, planned a press censorship, designed a system of food control and selected Herbert Hoover as its director, determined on a daylight saving scheme, and, in a word, designed practical every war measure which the Congress subsequently enacted, and did all this behind closed doors, weeks and even months before the Congress of the United States declared war against Germany. So far as

RESTRICTED

778

RESTRICTED

I can observe, there was not an act of the so-called war legislation afterward enacted that had not before the actual declaration of war been discussed and settled upon by this Advisory Commission. I have selected from the minutes such portions as I think bring out the matters I have mentioned clearly, and will have these portions now read into the record for the information of the Committee. These portions, it seems to me, fully develop the interior workings of this Advisory Commission, which seems to have had more to do with the actual conduct of the affairs of the War Department in the early days of the war than any other function of the Government.

Undoubtedly the honorable member from Illinois from whom I have just quoted, gave too much credit to the foresight and influence of the Advisory Commission, nevertheless his report throws some light upon the activity of the Commission during the early days of the war.

It is a fact that inasmuch as there was no department of the Government organized and authorized to inquire into and do many of the things with which the Advisory Commission dealt, the Commission did on its own initiative take action, but always with the approval, if not at the direct request, of the Council of National Defense. While the Commission might have been a wholly irresponsible body of men, actually it was not such a group, and under the constant scrutiny of the able men constituting the Council of National Defense, the Commission could not have gone very far with an unwise or destructive program even if it had wished to do so before being called to account. What actually happened was this, and I repeat what I have already said or implied, that when our country went into the war the War Department was not organized to do the things immediately required to be done and the members of the Advisory Commission gave the best that they had in an effort to be helpful during the period that must elapse before the appropriate or additional departments of the Government might be organized or reorganized, strengthened or enlarged, and put in shape to take on and carry the burden which the members of the Advisory Commission had earnestly endeavored to carry while the Government was getting ready.

My friend, Mr. Newton Baker, with whom I have discussed this general subject many times, thinks that the Advisory Commission was a very useful agency of government and that the arrangement upon the whole was a good thing. I agree with Mr. Baker that in the then

RESTRICTED

RESTRICTED

existing circumstances the Advisory Commission performed a very necessary and important service for which there seemed to be no agency of the Government available or equally well qualified at that time (even so), I think that in light of our past experience we should and can develop better organization to deal with a similar situation in the future. It seems to me, in view of the experience which we have now had, that our governmental departments and agencies should be so established, in skeleton at least, as to be able to deal promptly with situations such as arose during the last war. I do not mean that the officers of the War Department in Washington, or any of them, should necessarily be skilled in the manufacture of all kinds of material or in the purchase of equipment. I do mean that they ought, by preliminary study, to be as well informed as possible concerning the problems that are likely to arise in case we should again find ourselves in a state of war, and a study of the records of what actually happened during the last war should be very helpful. It might be thought desirable, even so, to have an Advisory Commission, but it should be clearly what the name implies. The Quartermaster General, with such advice as a man like Julius Rosenwald could give, could have handled efficiently the purchase of four million pairs of shoes, in fact, a few days later on. The Department of Labor should be able to deal with its own problem, seeking, if desired, advice from any quarter. The Surgeon General of the Army should be equipped to deal with the problems arising in his department, calling to his assistance, if necessary, men from all parts of the country who are competent to advise concerning such matters. In short, I would leave the administrative and executive matters in the hands of the properly selected officers of the Government in the several departments involved, though with greater latitude than is allowed in time of peace, but, if thought desirable, valuable assistance could undoubtedly be obtained from an Advisory Commission.

There are one or two exceptions, however, that I would make. I am not quite clear how the work which was so ably handled by the War Industries Board under Mr. Baruch's chairmanship, could be taken over by any particular department of the Government. The official report of the War Industries Board should throw much light on the matter. The problem was handled effectively, however, by Mr. Baruch with authority from and reporting to the President. I think some similar arrangement might be found in case of a future war.

Our experience in the last war clearly established the importance of the railroads in connection with any important war program.

RESTRICTED

779

RESTRICTED

The Railroad Managers were quick to recognize this and to take the necessary action. On the 11th of April, 1917, five days after we entered the war, some seventy or more Presidents of the more important railroads in the United States met in Washington in response to a message which I sent as Chairman of the Advisory Commission. They assembled in the Willard Hotel and after listening to a brief statement explaining why the conference had been called and outlining what we desired they should do in order that they might better meet the requirements of the Government in the then existing circumstances, they immediately and without debate passed the following resolution:

"RESOLVED, That the Railroads of the United States, acting through their chief executive officers here and now assembled and stirred by a high sense of their opportunity to be of the greatest service to their country in the present national crisis do hereby pledge themselves, with the Government of the United States, with the Governments of the several States, and one with another, that during the present war they will coordinate their operations in a continental railroad system, merging during such period all their merely individual and competitive activities in the effort to produce a maximum of national transportation efficiency. To this end they hereby agree to create an organization which shall have general authority to formulate in detail and from time to time a policy of operation of all or any of the railroads, which policy, when and where announced by such temporary organization shall be accepted and earnestly made effective by the several managements of the individual railroad companies here represented."

They also appointed a committee of five of their members to sit continuously in Washington to carry out the spirit of their resolution. This arrangement continued in effect until December 31, 1917, when the control and operation of the railroads was taken over by the Government. It was said by some that the railroads broke down under private operation and that it was necessary on that account for the Government to take them over. This was not correct. What happened was this: The roads actually moved such a large volume of traffic to the places ordered by different, uncoordinated, and unregulated governmental agencies, that the eastern terminals and even

RESTRICTED

RESTRICTED

portions of the main line became blocked with loaded cars that could not be unloaded and released because of lack of ocean shipping and of an orderly governmental program in other directions. For instance, 1,000 cars of piling were ordered for Hog Island Shipyard and reached there before any arrangements had been made for unloading them. In such circumstances the railroads' terminals became blocked in the East - but not through any fault of the carriers. The railroads today, through the Association of American Railroads, with headquarters here in Washington, and in close cooperation with the War Department, can handle the problems of rail transportation in case of another war much better than they could be handled by any emergency organization set up by the Government.

During the time of its existence the Advisory Commission was called upon to do many things that needed to be done because no other agency of the Government was prepared to do them. I do not think it was a good form of organization and could only be justified because there did not seem to be anything better to take its place. I am speaking now more in reference to the work which it did of an administrative character.

As a pinch-hitter the Advisory Commission had its proper sphere of usefulness and this is perhaps best proven by the fact that within a year after the United States had entered the war, the duties of the Advisory Commission which in the beginning it had been called on to perform, had practically ceased and had gradually been taken over by the appropriate agencies of government. If my suggestion is thought worthy of consideration and if additional legislation is found to be necessary in order to give it effect, then it seems to me that the duty should rest upon the War and Navy Departments, to seek, through proper channels, such legislation, if any, as may be necessary to enable them to do promptly and effectively, in the event of some future emergency, the things they were prevented from doing at the beginning of the World War, or at least were not equipped to do effectively at that time.

RESTRICTED