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**Wartime and Womanpower: The Organization of the Women's Committee of the Council
of National Defense**

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Introduction

After years of promising to keep the United States out of the Great War, President Woodrow Wilson and Congress declared war on Germany in 1917. American leaders understood that the nation needed a strong home front if it was to be successful in the overseas conflict. With the passing of the National Defense Act in 1916, Congress created the Council of National Defense (CND) to direct national mobilization on the home front. American women displayed their call to civic duty through their protests for suffrage, and they were recognized as vital citizens of the nation in 1917 with the creation of the Committee of Women's Defense work. This subcommittee of the CND was tasked with mobilizing American women for the war effort.

The women of the executive Women's Committee had no small task ahead of them, as they had to organize American women without an existing bureaucratic structure in place. The federal Women's Committee began its strategy by focusing on the organizational structure of the committee and the creation of policies that encouraged support for the war. The executive Women's Committee used preexisting ties to women's organizations and the fundamental concept of federalism to organize, mobilize, and inform American women for the war effort. The women at the federal level worked to balance their personal beliefs, shaped by Victorian attitudes regarding gender roles, with wartime needs in their policies and actions. The federalist organization and the policies of the Woman's Committee would expand the role of women in the United States during the war despite the wishes of members of the executive board.

Historiography

The Woman's Committee has been studied through a variety of different lenses, with scholars focusing on different aspects of the Committee's work and methods. William Breen

studied the Women's Committee in the broader context of civilian mobilization and the Council of National Defense in his book *Uncle Sam at Home: Civilian Mobilization, Wartime Federalism, and the Council of National Defense, 1917-1919*. He argued that the organization of the Committee developed before a clear function for it was articulated, which led to the executive board creating a self-defined role for themselves.¹ Breen focused on the federalist aspects of the Committee's organization, and the interplay between the national, state, and local levels, arguing that overlapping responsibilities and lack of implementation on the national level impacted the effectiveness of the Committee. Breen also touches on how the war provided opportunities for women to promote social reform programs and uses the Illinois State Division as an example of the eagerness of women to adopt such programs. In the article "Black Women and the Great War: Mobilization and Reform in the South," Breen explicitly argues how federalism and voluntary cooperation were integral parts of the Women's Committee organization by using the issue of the mobilization of black women in the South to illustrate his points.² Breen also explores how the North Carolina State Division, despite the blight of southern expectations for women, showcased how the work and domestic reforms of committee women during the war displayed the changing attitudes about women in society.³ Virginia Boynton, in a similar pattern to Breen's works, examined the work of the Women's Committee on an individual state level, specifically in Illinois.⁴ Boynton argued that despite internal frustrations between local, county, and state officials, the Illinois Women's Committee was exceptionally active, promoting and implementing

¹ William J. Breen, *Uncle Sam at Home: Civilian Mobilization, Wartime Federalism, and the Council of National Defense, 1917-1919*, (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1984).

² William J. Breen, "Black Women and the Great War: Mobilization and Reform in the South," *The Journal of Southern History* 44, no. 3 (1978): 421-440. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2208050>.

³ William J. Breen, "Southern Women in the War: The North Carolina Woman's Committee, 1917-1919," *The North Carolina Historical Review* 55, no. 3 (1978): 251-283. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23535238>.

⁴ Virginia R. Boynton, "'Even in the Remotest Parts of the State': Downstate 'Women's Committee' Activities on the Illinois Home Front during World War I," *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society (1998-)* 96, no. 4 (2003/2004): 318-346. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40193619>.

policies to improve local communities and contribute to the war effort. Lynn Dumenil took her analysis of the Women's Committee a step down in the organizational rankings by focusing on the local work of the women in Los Angeles, California.⁵ She argued that the organizers pursued twin goals of aiding the war effort and advancing their social agendas, which consisted of suffrage and protecting the family. Dumenil would later explore the Women's Committee in the wider context of American women's mobilization and contributions to the home front.⁶ In her book *The Second Line of Defense: American Women and World War I*, Dumenil focused on how the Women's Committee organization of women promoted materialist social reforms, a carry-over from the Progressive era, alongside their war work. Anita Anthony VanOrsdal also focused on the social reform work of the Women's Committee, arguing that the Committee defined the home defense front as the protection of children and the family.⁷ VansOrsdal also argued that the federation of women's organizations that cooperated with the Women's Committee, while expanding women's political involvement, created a false sense of solidarity between the organizations. Penelope Brownell focused on exploring the political and societal implications of the Women's Committee.⁸ She argued that the Women's Committee signified a shift away from Victorian political activism (based on the separate spheres mentality) towards a more modern approach of women working alongside men in government positions. Brownell also argued that the opening of government positions for women by the Women's Committee decreased the power and effectiveness of individual women's organizations. Wil A. Linkugel and Kim Griffin explored the activities of the

⁵ Lynn Dumenil, "Women's Reform Organizations and Wartime Mobilization in World War I-Era Los Angeles," *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 10, no. 2 (2011): 213-245. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23045158>.

⁶ Lynn Dumenil, *The Second Line of Defense: American Women and World War I*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017).

⁷ Anita Anthony VanOrsdal, "'There Shall Be No Woman Slackers': The Woman's Committee of the Council of National Defense and Social Welfare Activism as Home Defense, 1917-1919," Dissertation, Michigan State University, 2016.

⁸ Penelope Brownell, "The Women's Committees of the First World War: Women in Government, 1917-1919," Dissertation, Brown University, 2002.

Women's Committee through the lens of an individual, specifically Dr. Anna Howard Shaw the first chairman of the executive board.⁹ They argued that her leadership was essential for the organization of the Committee and that the Committee helped open doors for women in government roles. All these studies have expanded the knowledge of the Women's Committee and have focused on specific elements to broaden the field's understanding. This paper will explore the Women's Committee through both political and gendered contexts, focusing on the impact of governmental power on the relationship between the federal and state Women's Committees and the contradictions of the leaders' personal beliefs with their wartime policies.

Methodology

I became interested in the organization of the Women's Committee while reading through Emily Newell Blair's contemporary report on the Woman's Committee.¹⁰ This report serves as a summary of the activities of the Committee, detailing its creation to its eventual disbandment after the armistice. The opening chapter is what specifically caught my interest, as it details the first meetings of the Committee as it was attempting to find its bearings. The nine women who comprised the executive board were essentially left to their own devices with little guidance from experienced government officials.¹¹ This raised questions that would serve as the foundation for my research. How did these women organize an institution that was capable of mobilizing America's women without a former bureaucratic structure in place? What was the relationship between the federal and state committees? How were the Women's Committee's organization and activities like voluntary women's associations of the period? Did the women on the executive

⁹ Wil A. Linkugel, and Kim Griffin, "The Distinguished War Service of Dr. Anna Howard Shaw," *Pennsylvania History: A Journal of Mid-Atlantic Studies* 28, no. 4 (1961): 372-385. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27770062>.

¹⁰ Emily Newell Blair, *The Women's Committee, United States Council of National Defense: An Interpretive Report* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1920).

¹¹ Blair, 17.

board try to use their position to advance women's roles in society? With these questions in mind, I turned to the executive committee's meeting minutes to investigate their initial organization and growth. However, I found the meeting minutes to be vague and contained, only offering the basic, necessary information. While this was helpful to see what and when actions were taken, it did not provide details on the women's thoughts or opinions. Blair's report quickly became one of my foundational sources, as it provided a detailed account of the Committee's growth and activities as well as nuggets of insightful justifications that provided more insight into the women's thoughts. Letters by the women on the federal committee were also helpful for learning their personal opinions, as they were more "off the record" compared to official minutes or publications. The book *American Women and the World War* provides fascinating contemporary documentation of women's activities during the war, focusing mainly on the Women's Committee but also on women's services abroad.¹² This book was particularly useful because it described the activities of the Women's Committee but was not an official publication by them, providing an outsider's view of their work. I then used a variety of secondary materials (discussed above) to explore the implementation of policies on the state and local levels and to investigate the gender roles of early twentieth century and wartime America. After this, I shifted between the secondary material, Blair's report, and government documents to further my research.

The Creation of the Woman's Committee

The Woman's Committee of the Council of National Defense stemmed from the need of the federal government to mobilize and prepare Americans for the war effort. In the early stages of World War I, it became increasingly clear that the American government was not adequately

¹² Ida Clyde Clarke, *American Women and the World War*, (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1918).

prepared for a large-scale military conflict. Not only did the American military need to grow and modernize, but the problems of industrial production, the economy, and civilian morale had to be accounted for. To address the concerns of modern war, Congress passed the Army Appropriations Act of 1916, which created the Council of National Defense (CND).¹³ The CND was composed of six cabinet members, including the Secretaries of War, Navy, Interior, Agriculture, Commerce, and Labor. The Act also created an Advisory Commission made up of seven industry experts to address the specific needs of the nation. The role of the CND and the Advisory Commission was the “coordination of industries and resources for national security and welfare, and the creation of relations which will render possible in time of need the immediate concentration and utilization of the resources of the Nation.”¹⁴ The CND created several subcommittees to address specific issues or needs, such as food production, shipbuilding, and trade. It was only natural to craft a separate workforce to manage the role of women in the war.

The men of the CND were well-aware of the growing desire of American women to participate in the war effort. Voluntary women’s organizations “were patriotically offering their services and clamoring for some definite task to do,” creating a need for formal leadership to organize the different woman’s groups into a united force.¹⁵ The leaders of the CND, while knowledgeable of the woman’s organizations’ existence, were not familiar with the complexities of their politics nor were they well-connected with their leaders. The men also understood that the Great War was “a people’s war” and agreed that no singular woman’s organization should control all of the others during wartime.¹⁶ Due to the CND’s need for a new leadership group and lack of

¹³ Breen, *Uncle Sam at Home: Civilian Mobilization, Wartime Federalism, and the Council of National Defense, 1917-1919*, 3.

¹⁴ Blair, *The Women’s Committee, United States Council of National Defense*, 14.

¹⁵ Breen, *Uncle Sam at Home: Civilian Mobilization, Wartime Federalism, and the Council of National Defense, 1917-1919*, 115.

¹⁶ Blair, *The Women’s Committee, United States Council of National Defense*, 15.

experience with woman's organizations, they designated "a central body of women... formed under the Council of National Defense" for "the purpose of coordinating the women's preparedness movement."¹⁷ On April 18, 1917, the CND agreed on the creation of this body of women and began to contact women's organizations' leaders to serve on the executive board. Dr. Anna Howard Shaw, honorary president of the National Suffrage Association, was appointed Chairman of the Committee. Shaw, a former Methodist minister turned national lecturer for women's suffrage, had the leadership experience and social connections, through her time as a senior and prominent member of the suffrage movement, to organize and manage a committee of this size and importance. The other women who made up the executive board were Mrs. Eva Perry Moore (President of the National Council of Women), Mrs. Ione Virginia Hill Cowles (President of the General Federation of Women's Clubs), Miss Maude Wetmore (Chairmen of the National League for Women's Service), Mrs. Carrie Chapman Catt (President of the National American Women Suffrage Organization), Mrs. Antoinette Funk, Mrs. Katherine Dexter McCormick, Mrs. Clarinda Pendleton Lamar (President of the National Society of Colonial Dames), Miss Ida M. Tarbell (a writer and publicist), Miss Agnes Nestor (President of the International Glove Workers' Union), and Miss Hannah J. Patterson.¹⁸ The Council of National Defense appointed this group of "prominent and able" women due to their dedication to service and their past leadership experience.¹⁹ These women were very active in different national voluntary organizations, but it was made clear that they did not serve as representatives for those organizations. These women

¹⁷ Blair, 15.

¹⁸ "Leadership of the Woman's Committee Council of National Defense," *Hankey Center for the History of Women's Education*, <http://exhibits.wilson.edu/items/show/2074>.; Ida Clyde Clarke, *American Women and the World War*, (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1918), 18.

¹⁹ Blair, *The Women's Committee, United States Council of National Defense*, 16.

treated their appointment as a “call to service for their country” and answered their conscription with patriotism and vigor.²⁰



Members of the executive board of the Woman’s Committee²¹

Before the executive committee could focus on organizing American women, they first had to organize themselves. The women of the executive committee, having been scattered across the country in their home states, joined together in Washington, D.C. to begin the Committee’s proceedings. Once they were set up in the Little Playhouse (1814 N Street) the board appointed roles and responsibilities for its members to ensure its functionality, such as secretary and treasurer. The board then began to create a broad plan to achieve their goal of coordinating the organized women of the country “in such a manner as to provide a direct and organized channel through which the Government could convey to women its requests and directions for war work.”²²

²⁰ Blair, 16.

²¹ “Leadership of the Woman's Committee Council of National Defense.” *Hankey Center for the History of Women's Education*. Accessed October 14, 2022. <http://exhibits.wilson.edu/items/show/2074>.

²² Blair, 18.

The first step was to decide what war work women should do, and how to perform present work during wartime. To gain an understanding of current war initiatives already underway, the Committee had existing national women's organizations report their present work in each state.²³ For their organization, they sought "to separate the work and thus avoid duplication" and "to suggest new lines of work not already existing" to create an efficient method for designing and implementing policies for the states.²⁴ This led to the creation of eight different departments: organization, finance, registration, food, educational propaganda, industry and labor, morale - camps, patriotism and democracy, and special training for service. The board's second step was to determine how many organizations were operating in each state, their reach, and their actions for the war effort. This information would aid them in determining what war work they should pursue, as well as in their efforts to create a robust, well-rounded organization. Because voluntary organizations' influence can vary by region and the fact that different organizations could be involved in similar work, it became clear early in the planning process that individual states had to coordinate the voluntary organizations' efforts within their jurisdiction. Allowing local organizations to report to state divisions instead of the national board would make communication easier and the implementation of policies more flexible to the needs of each region. The Woman's Committee decided to work through its state divisions "to bring to the women of the country the messages of the Government."²⁵ The creation and management of the State Committees would be the next organizational effort for the executive board, which would lay the foundation for their wartime operations.

²³ "Book I of the Minutes of Meetings of the Committee on Women's Defense Work, 5/2/1917-9/26/1917," NARA—Minutes of Meetings, 1917-1919—Records of the Council of National Defense, 1916-1933. ARC identifier 55309456, 1.

²⁴ "Book I of the Minutes of Meetings of the Committee on Women's Defense Work," 1.

²⁵ *Third Annual Report of the United States Council of National Defense*, (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1919), 44.

Creation of the State Committees

The women on the executive board of the Women's Committee understood that the best way to coordinate existing organizations within state lines and to connect with the women of different states was to create individual state agencies. These state agencies were to be representative of the women in their state, and they were to serve under the State Divisions of the Council of National Defense, modeling the executive Committee. The relationship between the State Women's Committees and the State Defense Councils varied by state, but for many, it involved cooperation and the financing of Women's Committee activities.²⁶ The state divisions of the Women's Committee were to "organize local units of all women's associations and societies, without regard to creed, purpose, or color" as well as provide a role for women not belonging to an "organized society."²⁷ For the initial creation of the state divisions, the Woman's Committee drew up a Plan of Organization, which was a broad outline of how the state divisions were to be set up and organized. Each state division was to have a temporary chairman appointed by the federal Women's Committee. The temporary chairman was to call together a State Committee comprised of the presidents or representatives of the state branches of national women's organizations, representatives of state-wide women's societies (including clubs, religious, fraternal, patriotic, philanthropic, literary, or other women's associations of all kinds) and representatives for all unorganized women. This State Committee would then vote on permanent chairmen and other officers for their division and create a smaller State Executive Committee, which would be "authorized to do business for the State Committee" in the fashion defined by the State Committee's bylaws and expectations.²⁸ An example of this appointment can be seen with

²⁶ United States, *Woman's Committee of the Council of National Defense* (Washington, D.C., 1918), 4.

²⁷ United States, 4.

²⁸ "Book I of the Minutes of Meetings of the Committee on Women's Defense Work," 164.

the how the Women's Committee dealt with the appointment of state leaders for the Women in Industry department. If a State Committee was loosely organized or uncooperative, appointments for the State Women in Industry representative would be done by the Woman in Industry Committee of the Advisory Commission of the Council of National Defense and or the Bureau of Registration and Information of the National League for Woman's Service.²⁹ It was expected that the state boards would be in frequent communication with the Executive Committee, receiving and "transmitting the messages to the women" of their state.³⁰ The goal of the state divisions was to connect all women's organizations together under the Women's Committee "to make one great machine, through which the information and instruction of the government may be disseminated in an orderly and in a constructive manner."³¹ Once the state divisions were created and functional, the Woman's Committee could focus on crafting and implementing policies to mobilize American women.

THE WOMAN'S COMMITTEE OF THE COUNCIL OF NATIONAL DEFENSE.

Chairman
DR. ANNA HOWARD SHAW.

President	Vice Chairman	Secretary	Treasurer
Mrs. Hannah J. Patterson	Mrs. Ida M. Tallied	Mrs. Phyllis North Moore	Mrs. Stanley McCook
State Organizers: Mrs. J. H. Latta	Public Relations and Publicity: Mrs. Frank M. McCombs	Chairman: Mrs. Ida M. Tallied	Secretary: Mrs. Phyllis North Moore
Alabama: Mrs. James F. Hanger Alaska: Mrs. P. G. Smith Arizona: Mrs. V. H. Johnson Arkansas: Mrs. R. H. Smith California: Mrs. H. A. Johnson Colorado: Mrs. W. S. Miller Connecticut: Mrs. J. H. Latta Delaware: Mrs. J. H. Latta District of Columbia: Mrs. J. H. Latta Florida: Mrs. J. H. Latta Georgia: Mrs. J. H. Latta Idaho: Mrs. J. H. Latta Illinois: Mrs. J. H. Latta Indiana: Mrs. J. H. Latta Iowa: Mrs. J. H. Latta Kansas: Mrs. J. H. Latta Kentucky: Mrs. J. H. Latta Louisiana: Mrs. J. H. Latta Maine: Mrs. J. H. Latta Massachusetts: Mrs. J. H. Latta Michigan: Mrs. J. H. Latta Minnesota: Mrs. J. H. Latta Mississippi: Mrs. J. H. Latta Missouri: Mrs. J. H. Latta Montana: Mrs. J. H. Latta Nebraska: Mrs. J. H. Latta Nevada: Mrs. J. H. Latta New Hampshire: Mrs. J. H. Latta New Jersey: Mrs. J. H. Latta New Mexico: Mrs. J. H. Latta New York: Mrs. J. H. Latta North Carolina: Mrs. J. H. Latta North Dakota: Mrs. J. H. Latta Ohio: Mrs. J. H. Latta Oklahoma: Mrs. J. H. Latta Oregon: Mrs. J. H. Latta Pennsylvania: Mrs. J. H. Latta Rhode Island: Mrs. J. H. Latta South Carolina: Mrs. J. H. Latta South Dakota: Mrs. J. H. Latta Tennessee: Mrs. J. H. Latta Texas: Mrs. J. H. Latta Utah: Mrs. J. H. Latta Vermont: Mrs. J. H. Latta Virginia: Mrs. J. H. Latta Washington: Mrs. J. H. Latta West Virginia: Mrs. J. H. Latta Wisconsin: Mrs. J. H. Latta Wyoming: Mrs. J. H. Latta	Public Relations and Publicity: Mrs. Frank M. McCombs Chairman: Mrs. Ida M. Tallied Secretary: Mrs. Phyllis North Moore Treasurer: Mrs. Stanley McCook	Public Relations and Publicity: Mrs. Frank M. McCombs Chairman: Mrs. Ida M. Tallied Secretary: Mrs. Phyllis North Moore Treasurer: Mrs. Stanley McCook	Public Relations and Publicity: Mrs. Frank M. McCombs Chairman: Mrs. Ida M. Tallied Secretary: Mrs. Phyllis North Moore Treasurer: Mrs. Stanley McCook

²⁹ "Book I of the Minutes of Meetings of the Committee on Women's Defense Work," 133.

³⁰ Blair, *The Women's Committee, United States Council of National Defense*, 20.

³¹ "Book I of the Minutes of Meetings of the Committee on Women's Defense Work," 56.

A detailed chart depicting the vast leadership of the 48 State Divisions of the Woman's Committee.³²

The Women's Committee devised a Plan of Work to begin their mission of using America's womanpower to help support the war. This plan was accepted by the CND in July 1917, and it recommended that the state divisions create certain departments to distribute and guide their work. Eleven departments were developed at the state level: Registration for Service, Food Production and Home Economics, Food Administration, Women in Industry, Child Welfare, Maintenance of Existing Social Service Agencies, Health and Recreation, Educational Propaganda, Liberty Loan, and Home and Foreign Relief.³³ Each state division appointed chairmen for each of these departments to provide leadership towards their specific duties. The departments would also be organized on the national Committee, where they would coordinate with the corresponding federal executive departments. The creation of identical committee structures at the federal and state level showcases how the women of the Executive Committee assumed a top-down approach to organizing American women. This multi-level structure of the Women's Committee would force its leaders to entrust certain duties to the state divisions, opening the door for a federalist approach to the division of power.

Federalism's Influence on the Women's Committee

The rise in federal power during World War I effectively ended a period of social reform now understood as the Progressive Era. The Progressive Era, spanning from the late 1890s to the mid-1910s, was focused on eliminating corruption, monopoly, and social degeneracy that grew out of post-Civil War industrial expansion. While the work of progressives ranged from anti-trust

³² "Organization of the Woman's Committee," *Hankey Center for the History of Women's Education*, accessed October 10, 2022, <http://exhibits.wilson.edu/items/show/2046>.

³³ United States, *Woman's Committee of the Council of National Defense*, 4-5.

laws to public health, two primary areas that were targeted for improvement were politics and government. Progressive reformers implemented reforms to make American politics more democratic, especially on the state and local levels. Key examples of this are the 17th Amendment (requiring the direct election of senators), the increase of direct primaries in state and local races, and the introduction of initiative, referendum, and recall provisions to state constitutions. Wartime needs, however, would lead to an expansion of federal power and anti-democratic behavior from Wilson and the federal government. The clearest example of this is the Espionage Act of 1917, which restricted any written or spoken opposition to the military to stifle dissent and limit the work of spies or saboteurs. This act was expanded with the 1918 Sedition Act, which effectively restricted American's freedom of speech by outlawing "any disloyal, profane, scurrilous, or abusive language" about the government or military as well as anything with the intent to bring about resistance or discredit the United States.³⁴ These laws and the sentiments they stoked would lead to the targeting and arrest of government critics, primarily communists and socialists as seen with the Palmer raids. These anti-democratic behaviors of the federal government were not just the product of wartime paranoia and stress, but also the results of Wilson's personal beliefs about the role of government. Wilson viewed America's congressional government as a "Committee government," where the administration was done by "semi-independent executive agents who obey the dictation of a legislature to which they are not responsible."³⁵ This idea is a direct disregard for the check-and-balance relationship between Congress and the Executive, and it showcases Wilson's more realistic, direct, and involved methods for governing. Wilson saw government in a Darwinian sense, "modified by its environment, necessitated by its tasks, shaped

³⁴ Petra DeWitt, "'Clear and Present Danger': The Legacy of the 1917 Espionage Act in the United States," *Historical Reflections* 42, no. 2 (2016): 118.

³⁵ Woodrow Wilson, *Congressional Government: A Study in American Politics*, (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1885), xvi.

to its functions by the sheer pressure of life”³⁶. This explains why, as America entered the stressful and uncertain period of World War I, Wilson would lead a strong central government in his second term and take new measures for the mobilization of society for the war. This overall trend of the federal expansion of power during the war displays the unique position of the Women’s Committee, having to rely on the federal level for the dissemination of information and the state level for the implementation of the desired policies.

The key divisions of power and responsibility between the federal and state Women’s Committees were the formulation and the implementation of policy. The executive Women’s Committee was tasked with the creation of organizational policies and guidelines to mobilize American women. As an extension of the Council of National Defense, the Women’s Committee’s “legal function was to consider and advise,” and they “could not execute the plans which they labored so earnestly to perfect.”³⁷ While the Women’s Committee took a more active role compared to other CND subcommittees, it relied upon federal executive departments and (primarily) the state divisions to coordinate the activities of women’s societies. These limitations frustrated the women of the executive board, especially with the lack of clear communication of the expectations of their committee from the Council of National Defense.³⁸ During the early months of the Committee, Dr. Shaw expressed how she had “grown utterly impatient with the kind of work we [the Women’s Committee] are permitted to do,” citing the nonexistent “definite line of cleavage between what we may and may not do.”³⁹ In an effort to combat the lack of coherent guidance from the CND, the women of the executive committee viewed themselves as a

³⁶ Wilson, 56.

³⁷ Blair, *The Women’s Committee, United States Council of National Defense*, 6.

³⁸ Shaw to Ida M. Tarbell, December 5, 1917, *The Documents of Ida M. Tarbell*, Allegheny College Special Collections, 05.1657.0009, <http://hdl.handle.net/10456/22071>.

³⁹ Shaw to Ida M. Tarbell, December 5, 1917.

“committee for action”⁴⁰ and their role as “a directing agency and a link between the government and individual women in every state,” giving themselves more power than an advisory board but not enough to enact national-level policy.⁴¹ The state divisions of the Committee could more effectively implement the policies as they had more influence and better communication with county and local units. State divisions could easily reach local units through meetings, conferences, bulletins, and publications.⁴² This can be seen in the beginnings of the Committee, as the state divisions had “great latitude” in developing their departments to suit their “local needs and conditions.”⁴³ When laying the foundations for these state divisions, the executive committee was a guiding force to instill “uniformity in organization and unanimity in effort” instead of demanding strict, definitive roles from all state departments.⁴⁴ The executive committee relied upon the voluntary cooperation of the state chairmen and boards to execute their policies because they had no official means of enforcement. Committee leadership lacked sufficient means to enforce their policies because they were not an official executive department, and the entire organization was based on volunteers.⁴⁵ The Women’s Committee’s federalist organization would lead to different methods, strategies, and success rates for mobilizing women in the states.

⁴⁰ “Book I of the Minutes of Meetings of the Committee on Women’s Defense Work,” 56.

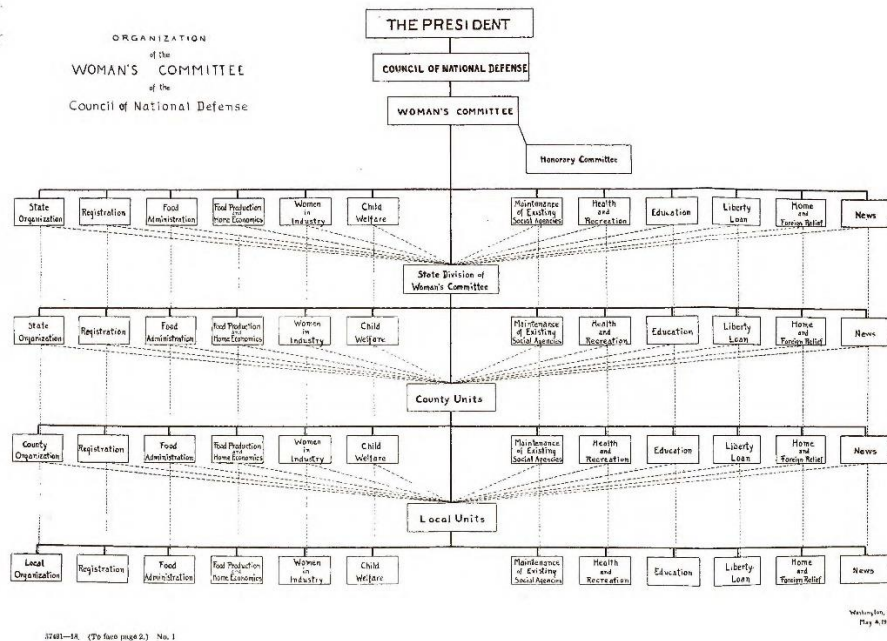
⁴¹ Breen, *Uncle Sam at Home*, 121.

⁴² *Third Annual Report of the United States Council of National Defense*, 46.

⁴³ Blair, *The Women’s Committee, United States Council of National Defense*, 21.

⁴⁴ Blair, 21.

⁴⁵ *Third Annual Report of the United States Council of National Defense*, 45.



This visualization displays the different levels that composed the federalist organization of the Women’s Committee.⁴⁶

The impact of the Women’s Committee’s federalist organization and its reliance on volunteerism can be seen in the different programs implemented by the states. One of the main areas that the Women’s Committee was involved in was food conservation. It was well understood by the U.S. government that the nations that had a constant and beneficial food supply would be the ones to win the war. Herbert Hoover, the director of the U.S. Food Administration, spoke to the Women’s Committee on June 19, 1917, on the importance of conservation to maximize America’s exports to make up for Europe’s dwindling supply. That very day, the executive Women’s Committee unanimously moved to pledge themselves to “carry out any food program deemed necessary by our government.”⁴⁷ While food conservation was a serious goal for the Women’s Committee, there was no official program that the states had to follow. States would

⁴⁶ “The Organization of the Woman's Committee,” *Hankey Center for the History of Women's Education*, accessed October 10, 2022. <http://exhibits.wilson.edu/items/show/2045>.

⁴⁷ “Book I of the Minutes of Meetings of the Committee on Women’s Defense Work,” 66.

incorporate similar strategies, but it was rare for all 48 states to follow the exact same program. For example, liberty gardens (also known as victory gardens), perhaps the most well-known wartime food conservation effort, were reported remarkably successful by only 34 state chairmen in 1917.⁴⁸ States also used a variety of different community-oriented programs, such as community canning, community kitchens, community markets, and curb markets. This pattern of broad guidelines or policies from the executive committee combined with the more individualistic execution by the state divisions was applied, in varying degrees, across the Committee's departments. The state divisions, being closer and more connected to ordinary women, would be responsible for the implementation and success of the Women's Committee's programs.

Overall, the Women's Committee organized 80 percent of counties in the United States by 1918, a brilliant success rate for a committee barely two years old. However, the quality of organization in each state was not consistent due to the different conditions, levels of funding and personal attitudes each state division had to work with. A chief example of the varying quality of mobilization can be seen by comparing the Southern and Western regions of the United States with the rest of the country. The state divisions of these two regions were hindered by external circumstances, specifically "tradition and the difficulty of securing financial support" in the South and "vast distances to be covered" in the West, both of which made "intensive organization difficult."⁴⁹ The U.S. South also provides an example of how state organization was reliant on the personal drive of state chairman. In 1918, the Women's Committee was facing increasing pressure from the War Department to better incorporate African American women into their mobilization efforts. The executive Women's Committee appointed Alice Dunbar Nelson as its field

⁴⁸ *Report of the Woman's Committee, Council of National Defense: Covering a Year's Activities up to April 21, 1918*, (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1918), 20.

⁴⁹ *Third Annual Report of the United States Council of National Defense*, 46.

representative to investigate and report on the Southern state divisions' inclusion of African American women. Most state divisions "favored some form of minimal organization of the black population that would ensure a degree of cooperation and coordination with the least likelihood of upsetting existing social relations" but would differ in how they would organize black women.⁵⁰ A few states, such as Mississippi and Florida, appointed a black state chairman to organize black women in their states, essentially creating a subcommittee that emulated the organization of the Women's Committee. Mississippi's enthusiasm for this issue stems from its State Chairmen Mrs. Edward McGehee of Como, who wished African American women to be organized "along the same lines that we are" and worked with the black chairman to extend her efforts to the county level.⁵¹ However, most of the southern states worked to only include cooperation with black women on their county councils and made no serious efforts at statewide organization. An example of this lack of effort by the state chairmen was Georgia, who refused to meet with Ms. Nelson. Nelson characterized black organization in Georgia as "stultified by the self-satisfaction in Atlanta," highlighting how the poor effort by the state Women's Committee, specifically the chairman, reverberated down into the local units and mindsets of everyday women.⁵² The issue of Southern state committees and African American organization showcases the relative weakness of the federal Women's Committee, and how they were reliant upon the personalities of the state divisions to implement their policies.

The subjectivity of the state committees did not always mean a decrease in the efficiency or quality of women's mobilization. The Illinois State Women's Committee is widely regarded as the most active and involved sector of the Woman's Committee, surpassing "the other forty-seven

⁵⁰ William J. Breen, "Black Women and the Great War: Mobilization and Reform in the South," 427.

⁵¹ Breen, 431.

⁵² Breen, 434.

states in the size and reach of its statewide Woman's Committee organization."⁵³ The Illinois State Division headquarters was in Chicago, and they were frustrated by the inconsistencies at the county level. Harriet Vittum, an Illinois Committee leader, stated "the farther south one goes [in Illinois], the less understanding one finds of the plans and purposes," highlighting the worries of the Chicago women.⁵⁴ Despite the leadership's worries, women at the county level were determined to organize, and in some cases draft, women to aid the home front. The Illinois Women's Committee at its height would bolster "2,136 counties, city, town, and township units with 7,700 local departmental and unit chairmen and 326,333 active members" and be praised as "the only completely organized State in the Union."⁵⁵ The Illinois Committee would utilize this vast organization to encourage women's registration, distribute wartime propaganda, promote war gardens and food conservation programs, and other wartime activities. The success of the Illinois Women's Committee showcases how the decentralized structure of the Committee could lead to positive change in local communities. The success of the Woman's Committee would also be influenced by using voluntary women's organizations to help aid with their efforts on the home front.

Incorporation of Women's Voluntary Societies

Voluntary women's societies were a common part of 19th and early 20th century America. In the nineteenth century, women were disenfranchised and discouraged from the populist politics that took place in saloons and streets (outside of their traditional sphere, the home). Due to women being barred from politics and government, voluntary organizations were a way for women to

⁵³ Virginia R. Boynton, "'Even in the Remotest Parts of the State': Downstate 'Women's Committee' Activities on the Illinois Home Front during World War I," 318.

⁵⁴ Boynton, 320.

⁵⁵ Boynton, 321.

carve out spaces for themselves to organize around common goals. Pre-Civil War women's associations grew out of a sense of charitable and moral reforms, and they gained traction in the late nineteenth century with the goals of temperance and purity. The women in these associations tended to be white, middle-class, and educated, and did not want to involve the masses. These societies resembled the nonpartisan interest group politics of modern times and would be used to "educate and pressure public officials and other men."⁵⁶ By the early twentieth century, women's societies had robust organization, a broad support base, and new political strategies of advertising, education, and more populist politics (such as parading). The women's associations were seen as the leaders of American women, and it was a common strategy at the time to "deal with women, you go to their organizations; when you deal with men you go to the governor or a legislature."⁵⁷ These women's associations focused on a range of topics, such as women's suffrage, social welfare and reform, labor movements, charitable causes, religious associations, and simply socialization, but were often connected through interpersonal relationships or political alliances.⁵⁸ These voluntary associations provided both aid and obstacles to the Women's Committee, especially in its early stages.

One of the clearest needs for the Women's Committee, in the eyes of the Council of National Defense, was to coordinate the wartime activities of the country's various women's associations. This was seen in the early stages of the war, as "each of the great women's organizations immediately offered its services to assist in the prosecution of war" upon its official

⁵⁶ Michael McGerr, "Political Style and Women's Power, 1830-1930," *The Journal of American History* 77, no. 3 (1990): 867.

⁵⁷ Blair, *The Women's Committee, United States Council of National Defense*, 24.

⁵⁸ "Woman's Committee of the Council of National Defense," The Hankey Center for the History of Women's Education at Wilson College, C. Elizabeth Boyd '33 Archives at Wilson College. Accessed September 10, 2022. <http://exhibits.wilson.edu/exhibits/show/hannah-j-patterson-feminist/woman-s-committee-of-the-counc>.

declaration.⁵⁹ War work was a natural extension of the usual efforts of women's associations, as they were often centered on social reform, religion, or political motivations. The social welfare policies that would become prominent elements of the Women's Committee (such as child welfare, health and safety, and food conservation) were already dominant issues that women's societies were involved in. Besides the obvious want to help, the sheer numerical power these organizations possessed could not be ignored by governmental leadership. Two of the most prominent national organizations, the General Federation of Women's Clubs (GFWC) with 3,000,000 members, and the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR) with 1,000,000 members immediately went to work to support the war effort. The GFWC began a systematic registration of its members and would be of immense help when the Women's Committee completed its own registration. The leadership of the GFWC opened a Service Office in Washington, D.C. as well as an office for the Federated Clubs Magazine so that "the National organization might keep in close touch with national affairs at Washington and disseminate among its member such information as might be helpful to them in their war work."⁶⁰ DAR formed a War Relief Service Committee, and the organization's war work was largely coordinated by its president-general Mrs. Sarah Elizabeth Mitchell Guernsey, who was later appointed to the Women's Liberty Loan Committee due to DAR's liberty bond success. DAR's War Relief Service Committee comprised four branches of usefulness for members to efficiently participate in the war effort. The four branches were knitting garments for American sailors, clipping articles for sailors, preparing jellies for hospitals, and adopting French orphans.⁶¹ Other associations that were eager to help with the war were the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA), the Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU),

⁵⁹ Ida Clyde Clarke, *American Women and the World War*, 189.

⁶⁰ Clarke, 191.

⁶¹ Clarke, 192-193.

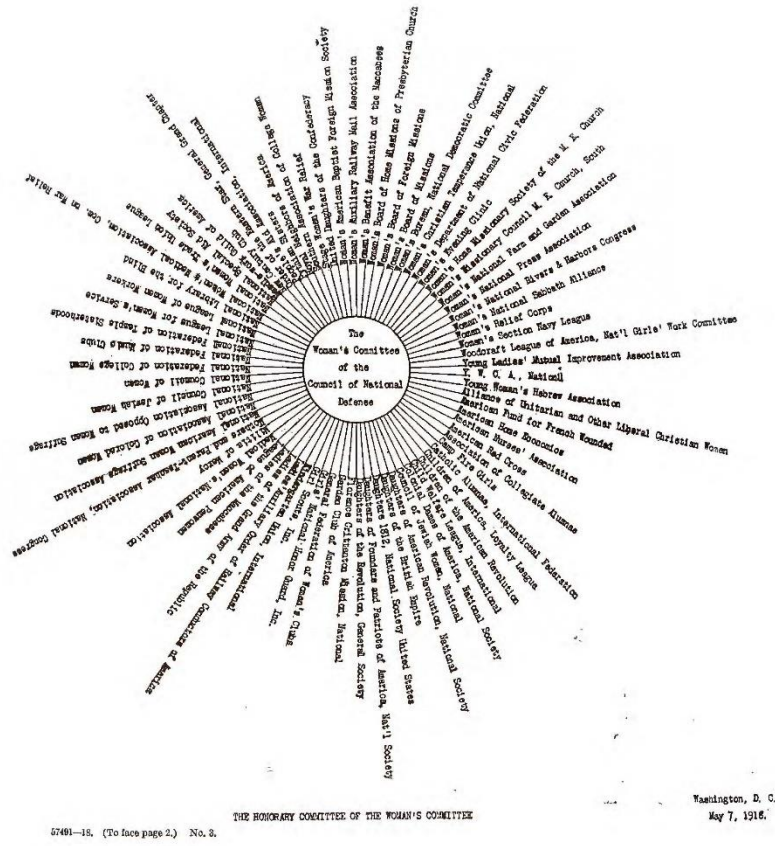
the National Congress of Mothers, the Women's Section of the Navy League, the League of American Pen Women, the Camp Fire Girls of America, the Girl Scouts of America, the Woodcraft Girls, the Associate Collegiate Alumnae, the Colonial Dames, and many more. While the work of these organizations was invaluable, the government wished to see it centralized and more directly coordinated with its official policies, ushering in the creation of the Women's Committee.

The leaders of the Women's Committee understood the importance of persuading voluntary organizations to work for their cause because many of them were involved as leaders in the voluntary organizations as well. They all were a part of the same social circles and had connections with each other, which would be beneficial for administering and implementing policies. Voluntary organizations also provided women with leadership experience before the creation of the Committee, allowing them to hone their organizational and political skills. However, the voluntary associations were also a "rock" on the road toward united, succinct cooperation of women for the war effort.⁶² Competition for membership, which was the base that allowed these associations to achieve their goals, was stiff, and it discouraged cooperation between the groups. This "individuality of responsibility" also made the associations skeptical to join the Woman's Committee for fear of losing their members to another cause.⁶³ Many viewed the task of creating a federation of women's associations as an "impossible" feat.⁶⁴ The Woman's Committee, with patriotic confidence and urgency, needed to find a way to unite these autonomous societies for the war cause.

⁶² Blair, *The Women's Committee, United States Council of National Defense*, 23.

⁶³ Blair, 23.

⁶⁴ Blair, 23.



A chart displaying the various women’s voluntary associations that made up the Honorary Committee of the Woman’s Committee.⁶⁵

The leaders of the Women’s Committee in their plan of organization created an Honorary Committee that was composed of the leaders of the national women’s associations. On June 19, 1917, the Women’s Committee hosted the Honorary Committee’s first meeting, and it was composed of about 200 women from sixty different women’s associations.⁶⁶ Notable associations that were represented on the Honorary Committee were the GFWC, the DAR, the American Red Cross, the National Association of Colored Women, the WCTU, the YMCA, and the National

⁶⁵ “Honorary Committee of the Woman's Committee,” *Hankey Center for the History of Women's Education*, Accessed October 10, 2022, <http://exhibits.wilson.edu/items/show/2047>.

⁶⁶ Blair, *The Women’s Committee, United States Council of National Defense*, 24.

Women's Trade Union.⁶⁷ This cross-section of the present organizations showcases how the Women's Committee made a deliberate effort to include associations, and their members, from all walks of life to reach as many American women as possible. In her opening remarks, Dr. Shaw stated to the gathered women the importance of their associations to the war and mobilization effort, saying "The only way we can get at the individual woman is through organized women."⁶⁸ The Women's Committee leadership then presented the role of their organization and vowed that any association that cooperated with their government committee would not lose its line of work and no woman had to give up her membership. The representatives then gave short reports on their organization's numerical strength, any current participation in war work, their specific interests or strengths, and their current decision on wartime support. This meeting was a success, as "the women's organizations had sunk their individual claims and desires for individual efforts, and pledged themselves through the Government's agency committee, thus standing behind the Woman's Committee to furnish the power to make its message effective and lend it weight."⁶⁹ While the executive Women's Committee had secured the support of the national voluntary associations, it would be up to the state divisions to coordinate mobilization efforts at the more local level.

It is important to make the distinction that the voluntary organizations were not under the direct control of the Women's Committee. The women's associations' "response is voluntary on their part and if they respond it means in the case of hundreds of thousands of them the sinking of some special interest or association which they have always put before anything else in their public

⁶⁷ *Report of the Woman's Committee, Council of National Defense: Covering a Year's Activities up to April 21, 1918*, 48-49.

⁶⁸ "Book I of the Minutes of Meetings of the Committee on Women's Defense Work," 54.

⁶⁹ Blair, *The Women's Committee, United States Council of National Defense*, 24-25.

and social activities.”⁷⁰ The relationship between the voluntary women’s associations during the war could best be described as a “federation of organizations” headed by the Women’s Committee.⁷¹ The Women’s Committee encouraged input and recommendations by women’s organizations on all levels. The coordination of this federation of voluntary organizations was directed by the state committees, as different organizations had varying levels of support or reach depending on the region or state. The coordination of the voluntary organizations also emphasized the federalist and decentralized nature of the Women’s Committee. This can be seen in the publicized role of the national organizations, which were stated to aid the Woman’s Committee “by furnishing information to the Committee as to the personnel of their State branches” and “by using every means in their power to secure complete co-operation between their State branches and the State Divisions of the Woman’s Committee.”⁷² This reliance on the state committees’ ability to organize its local women and coordinate with its local voluntary associations showcases the communicative ties of organized women at the time and their patriotic dedication to the war effort.

Early 20th Century Gender Roles

The women involved with the Women’s Committee had to operate within the context of the expected gender roles of the early 20th century. These gender roles operated not only in the privacy of the home, but also impacted women’s public life. In the early 20th century, gender expectations for women were evolving from the restrictive 19th century. The basis for 19th-century gender roles was the Victorian belief of the “separate spheres.” The Victorians believed that men

⁷⁰ Woman’s Committee to Woodrow Wilson, May 18, 1918, The Documents of Ida M. Tarbell, Allegheny College Special Collections, 06.2049.0001, <http://hdl.handle.net/10456/23349>.

⁷¹ Women’s Committee to Woodrow Wilson, May 18, 1918.

⁷² United States, *Woman’s Committee of the Council of National Defense*, 4.

and women inherently belonged to two different aspects of life. Women were expected to be homemakers and mothers, centering their life on the home and family. Men were seen as the breadwinners and protectors of the family as well as active in the community through politics and business. These gender roles extended into wartime, as women's "traditional part as mother or wife of the soldier" was seen as the extent of their usefulness.⁷³ While Victorian gender roles could only be perfectly practiced by the upper classes, their ideology trickled down and affected all of society.

By the 20th century, the gender roles of the Victorian age were still very present in American society, but they were beginning to wane. The growth of the industry across the country created more jobs for women, as "perhaps 10,000,000 American women were earning their own livelihood in workshop, factory, and office."⁷⁴ The suffrage movement was growing and increasing women's political participation, despite the continued barring from full recognition as American citizens. Women during this time were acutely aware of how their voices were silenced by the government. For example, it was generally acknowledged that the importance of women's associations stems from the fact that "they [women] could not, under the political system, function directly through the Government."⁷⁵ The expectation of women during wartime also shifted in the 20th century due to the widespread patriotic enthusiasm of women's organizations and the new understanding of women's contribution to American industry. Secretary of War Newton Baker viewed American women's sacrifice to the war effort as traditional personal suffering and "the dignified gift of the worker who brings mind and hand to add to the aggregate of the Nation's strength in an emergency which demands that all bring all."⁷⁶ The most distinct change from

⁷³ Blair, *The Women's Committee, United States Council of National Defense*, 7.

⁷⁴ Blair, 7.

⁷⁵ Blair, 24.

⁷⁶ Blair, 8.

Victorian gender roles was the gradual abandoning of the separate spheres mentally. By the end of World War I, it was evident that on a logistical and organizational level the “attempt to conduct the war activities of women as distinctly separate from the war work of men was resulting in confusion and duplication.”⁷⁷ The need for efficiency in the public sector would end the separation of men and women in government. This growing political consciousness of American women and the shift in public gender roles would influence the policies and priorities of the Women’s Committee.

Committee Leadership and their View on the Committee’s Impact

The women on the executive board of the Women’s Committee, who felt drafted into service for their country, had to put aside their personal politics and beliefs to administer the policies that would best support the war effort. However, when the war was nearing its end and the effects of the Women’s Committee’s work began to surface, the leaders began to develop opinions on how their organization impacted American women and society. One of the clearest areas that the Women’s Committee leaders hoped to see change was the nation’s opinion on women’s suffrage. Many of the women on the executive board were suffragists, the most prominent was the Committee’s Chairmen and previous president of the National Women’s Suffrage Association Dr. Anna Howard Shaw. These women made efforts to separate their personal political beliefs from their wartime service, especially the issue of suffrage. This was explicitly clear to the American public through Dr. Shaw’s statement in the early days of the Committee: “Do not mention suffrage in connection to this work.”⁷⁸ However, in private, Dr. Shaw saw her appointment to the Women’s Committee as “the greatest opportunity to work for suffrage

⁷⁷ *Third Annual Report of the United States Council of National Defense*, 44.

⁷⁸ “Mobilizing Women for Unity in Work,” *New York Times* (New York City, NY), May 10, 1917.

that has ever been open to me.”⁷⁹ Because the Women’s Committee was founded on voluntary service, the leaders viewed their position as a way to prove their sex worthy of citizenship. The members of the Women’s Committee “served without compensation,” sacrificing their time and labor for the war effort.⁸⁰ These women were happy to serve their country this way, viewing it with patriotism and honor.⁸¹ However, the leaders of the Women’s Committee understood the value of womanpower to the nation, especially during wartime with the absence of vast amounts of men. Many expected politicians and the government to acknowledge this value through the enfranchisement of women. In a letter to President Wilson, the chairmen of the News Department asked him for “a little more definite recognition” regarding American women’s mobilization effort.⁸² This could be interpreted as an appeal for more financial or executive department support for the Women’s Committee or as an ask to upgrade the Women’s Committee to a federal department. The line from the letter could also be a call to give American women, in general, more recognition in society and politics, which would mean a request for women’s suffrage. Whichever the case, the president received a clear message of the Women’s Committee’s success and a request for greater support for American women. The leaders of the Women’s Committee viewed crafting an image of American women as engaged citizens as a positive effect of their work during the war, contributing to some of the members’ long-term goals of suffrage.

Despite most committee members hoping for the expansion of women’s political involvement, there were areas where some leaders hoped little would change. It is essential to keep in mind that most of the leaders of the Women’s Committee were older, white, upper-class women who had been raised and lived in times when the Victorian ideals of womanhood and gender were

⁷⁹ Anna Howard Shaw to Mrs. Walther, July 24, 1917.

⁸⁰ United States, *Woman’s Committee of the Council of National Defense*, 6.

⁸¹ “Mobilizing Women for Unity in Work,” May 10, 1917.

⁸² Woman’s Committee, *Woman’s Committee to Woodrow Wilson*, May 18, 1918.

firmly cemented in the culture. The women who held more conservative beliefs sought to restrict certain social issues, such as those involving race, labor, or the sexual behavior of women, to their prewar state, usually in contrast to the effect of their policies. For example, one of the issues that worried many older committee women was the interaction between the sexes at the military's training camps. Committee leaders "feared that the destabilizing effects of war mobilization might erode further the power of social sanctions to regulate 'respectable' behavior by women."⁸³ The Department of Health and Recreation in certain states took care to protect "girls from the evils tending to prevail in camp communities," which included sexual deviance, prostitution, and venereal diseases.⁸⁴ The shock of the more progressive outcomes from committee actions also stems from initial efforts from leaders to enact policies that stuck with their conservative viewpoints. These policies emphasized women's prominence in domestic work, a traditional role that was still present when the war began. This is seen in the creation of the Women's Committee's departments with half of them being designated to areas within women's traditional maternal and domestic role (Food Production and Home Economics, Food Administration, Child Welfare, Educational Propaganda, and Maintenance of Existing Social Service Agencies). The leaders of the Women's Committee viewed "the greatest duty of women in war times is to keep social conditions as normal as possible."⁸⁵ This perception of their duty helped justify women's entry into more masculine areas, such as industry, since they were filling jobs to keep society running as smoothly as possible. Social conditions, however, would fail to remain normal as the increasing opportunities for inter-sex jobs and operations, as well as the widening of women's role in public

⁸³ Brownell, "The Women's Committees of the First World War: Women in Government, 1917-1919," 100.

⁸⁴ *Third Annual Report of the United States Council of National Defense*, 55.

⁸⁵ Blair, *The Women's Committee, United States Council of National Defense*, 21.

life, left Victorian ideals in the 19th century and made way for a more modern definition of womanhood.

Conclusion

American women's involvement in World War I displays a critical transition in the societal expectations for women, shifting away from Victorian values to more modern beliefs. The creation, action, and support for the Women's Committee of the Council of National Defense is a clear example of how it was no longer acceptable for women to be constrained to the home, especially in the case of the national emergency of wartime. Womanpower was recognized, through the creation of the Women's Committee, as an essential resource for the U.S. government. The mass support for the Women's Committee and the widespread participation of American women in war relief programs showcase how women wanted to aid their country despite the personal sacrifices it required. The Women's Committee's decentralized and federalist structure highlights the limited power the national committee had to implement policies itself. The reliance on the state and local divisions, in addition to the voluntary associations, to carry out the goals of the organizations emphasizes how the Women's Committee was initially created to advise activities on women's mobilization. The restrictions on the Committee's power can be attributed to its legal role as a subcommittee to an advisory board (CND), but they also display how the U.S. government did not view the issue of women's mobilization as worthy enough of federal power. By opening the door to women's political participation through the appointment of the Women's Committee yet still barring them from national voting rights and wielding legitimate power, the government embodies the transitional attitudes towards women in this period. The leaders of the Women's Committee would also internalize these complexities, as most of them wished for the advancement of women's place in society but only in their own specific (white, upper-class) terms.

The post-war years would see national enfranchisement for women, and women would build upon their wartime experience and involvement as they entered the political sphere. The Women's Committee was dissolved in 1919, but their organizational work showed the drive and commitment of American women to the war effort and the potential of womanpower in a new modern age.

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