

# Council of National Defense

By [Nathan K. Finney](#)

## Summary

The Council of Defense System coordinated U.S. mobilization during the First World War through federal, state, and local councils. Led by the Council of National Defense in Washington, D.C., this associational network integrated private business and civil society into government activities, enabling broad participation while preserving local autonomy in implementation.

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## Introduction

The Council of Defense System was a key organizational structure created by the [United States](#) government to coordinate home front mobilization efforts during the First World War. Headed by the Council of National Defense, it was established through the Army Appropriations Act of 1916, largely for President [Woodrow Wilson \(1856-1924\)](#) to shore up his support for election later that November to take away political opposition from the Republican-dominated Preparedness Movement. Originally a Republican idea that pursued preparedness goals, such a coordinating board was created through bipartisan consensus and ultimately expanded after the U.S. entry into the war in 1917. This system represented an innovative approach in using the federalism of U.S. governance to manage wartime mobilization by integrating federal, state, and local [governments](#) with private enterprise and civil society organizations. This innovative approach also implemented lessons learned, and avoided mistakes from, the [United Kingdom](#) and [France](#) as they struggled to transform their economies, societies, and militaries for the massive war they encountered beginning in 1914. Such lessons translated by the Council of Defense System into the U.S. context included the conversion of the [economy](#) to war production, deliberately coordinating resource allocation, and managing labor shortages for war production as men were conscripted for military service overseas. The Council system exemplified an “associational state” model that

balanced centralized federal coordination with decentralized state and local implementation.

## The Council of National Defense

The Council of National Defense was created in August 1916 as the federal assessment body for U.S. preparedness, focusing on the research efforts of its Advisory Commission of civilian industry and business leaders. The Council was designed to understand supply chains and governmental readiness for war, should the U.S. enter the European war that broke out in 1914. The Council was chaired by Secretary of War [Newton Baker \(1871-1937\)](#) and included six cabinet secretaries, the Advisory Commission, and a small staff. Prior to the outbreak of war, the Council established committees and sub-committees to investigate core elements of U.S. industrial capacity, such as [transportation](#), [raw materials](#), munitions and manufacturing, medical care, and general supplies like food and clothing. They also began research into how the U.S. could manage the prices of goods, manage [labor disputes](#), and enhance military [technological development](#) in the event of a war.

After the U.S. entry into the war in April 1917, the Council of National Defense expanded its role to become the chief planning and coordinating body for civilian mobilization. It established specialized sections and committees focused on key areas like transportation, munitions, raw materials, labor, and [women's war work](#). However, with no formal authorities of control, the Council functioned primarily through voluntary cooperation. The State Councils Section, led by George Porter, worked to establish and coordinate with state and local defense councils across the country. In effect, this meant the Council of National Defense created broad policies or provided specific guidance that it believed should be implemented. Whether the state councils implemented these policies or undertook the advice provided was largely dependent on the leadership at state and local levels, their personal and local interests, and the amount and types of resources the state could generate. Northern states had more capability to enact manufacturing and industrial efforts, while Southern states could generally provide agricultural materiel. Both regions initially found volunteer support plentiful for wartime work, though as the war continued increasing coercive pressure was required to gain cooperation.

While lacking direct administrative authority, the national Council served as an important clearinghouse for information between federal agencies and state organizations. It provided guidance on mobilization priorities and best practices while allowing significant latitude to states in implementation. Many of its specialized committees eventually evolved into independent wartime agencies like the [War Industries Board](#) led by [Bernard Baruch \(1870-1965\)](#), the U.S. Food Administration headed by [Herbert Hoover \(1874-1964\)](#), and the U.S. Railroad Administration.

## State and Local Councils of Defense

Lacking the authority to demand support or the police powers to enforce policies, the Council of National Defense could not gain the resources or manpower necessary for a national mobilization without support from individual states and their local communities. Immediately following President Woodrow Wilson's speech requesting a declaration of war on [Germany](#) by Congress, the Council of National Defense brought together representatives of the forty-eight states' governments to encourage each to establish its own Council of Defense to coordinate mobilization activities at the state level. By the end of the war, every state and territory had created some version of a Council of Defense. These state councils typically included prominent business, civic, and political leaders and were usually appointed by state governors.

State councils established committees addressing key mobilization needs like military conscription and support to their families, food production and conservation, industrial resources, transportation, and [public information](#). They coordinated between federal agencies, local communities, and private organizations to implement wartime programs. Many state councils also created women's committees to organize women's war work, though these were often constrained by contemporary gender roles. In North Carolina, for example, women were able to coordinate and execute activities such as food production and preservation, providing relief for those in need, caring for the home and family, and actions supporting the "social hygiene" (morality) of state citizens. Other areas, such as those that contested political or economic power like advocating for child welfare, financing the war, and women in industry, were more difficult to find purchase.

Below the state level, county and municipal councils of defense formed to coordinate local mobilization efforts. This three-tiered system - national, state, and local councils - allowed for coordinated national policies, adaptable local implementation, and the inclusion of civic and other private organizations and associations. State and local councils could tailor programs to local conditions while still supporting broader national objectives, or if required, push back against national policies they felt disrupted the stability of their communities. There was broad support by state and local councils for the Selective Service System, with councils establishing and running the local registration boards and state exemption boards. Additionally, the councils resourced and supported food and fuel conservation efforts for the war effort.

The decentralized nature of the system had both advantages and drawbacks. As the primary intermediary organizations between the federal government and local citizens, its main advantage was that it enabled broad participation and leveraged existing state and local

institutions. However, negative implications led to variations in effectiveness between regions. Some councils included women robustly in their efforts, while others actively prevented their activities in wartime work. Few councils included [African Americans](#) in the coordination of mobilization activities, with many excluding them from all activities aside from drafting them as soldiers or employing them in basic agricultural and manufacturing labor. The exclusion of women and African American citizens from activities diminished both the capacity and the capability of the U.S. to fully mobilize for the war. Because of this, while the system expanded federal influence, state councils often acted to maintain local control and existing social hierarchies, particularly regarding race and gender relations.

## Conclusion

The Council of Defense System represented an innovative approach to organizing U.S. governance for [total war](#) while working within the constraints of U.S. federalism and voluntary association. Though sometimes inefficient, the system successfully mobilized civilian resources and coordinated between federal, state, and local efforts. It demonstrated how the U.S. state could expand its capacity through cooperation with private enterprise and civil society, rather than direct central control. Only in existence for about eighteen months, the system was able to primarily use positive inducements, peer pressure, and cooperation to accomplish its goals, though toward the end of the war more coercive methods were discussed and enacted selectively. Had the war continued, the Council of Defense System could have either become ineffective at generating support for mobilization activities, or slipped into more direct and coercive measures, creating increased backlash against the war effort.

The Council of Defense System was disbanded shortly after the war ended in 1918 but provided important lessons for future U.S. mobilization efforts. The System was briefly revived in 1940 as the U.S. prepared for possible entry into another global war. The primary reason for relying once again upon the Councils was the same as in 1917 - the need for military manpower. The Council System fell away, however, as the War Department took greater control of the draft system throughout the nation, as well as the ability of the [Franklin Roosevelt \(1882-1945\)](#) administration to better incorporate business, political, and labor elites into the prewar mobilization effort following a decade of federal centralization under the New Deal. However, predecessor organizations from the Council of Defense System influenced New Deal organizations. For example, the National Recovery Administration borrowed from the [War Industries Board](#) to combat the effects of the Great Depression by establishing the same cooperation between government and industry introduced during the First World War. Subsequent federal centralization of military mobilization for the Second World War completed the centralization trend that began in the First World War. Every war

since has depended more upon federal centralization than the decentralized power of the states.

Despite this, the Council of Defense System illustrated both the strengths and limitations of U.S. wartime mobilization through associational governance. While it enabled broad participation and preserved local autonomy, it also reflected and sometimes reinforced existing social and political inequalities. Nevertheless, across the differing levels of implementation among the states, the Council of Defense System proved successful in coordinating the necessary tasks required to mobilize U.S. society for the First World War and accelerated twentieth-century state building in the New Deal and beyond.

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## External Links

- [Greg Bradsher: The Council of National Defense: Now a Little Known or Appreciated World War I Federal Agency, n. p., August 15, 2017 \(Textual Records Division at the National Archives; The Text Message\) \(Article\)](#)
- [Linda D. Wilson: Oklahoma Council of Defense, n. p., n. d. \(Oklahoma Historical Society\) \(Institutional Website\)](#)

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[North America](#) > [USA](#)

### Thematic Section(s)

[Home Front](#)

### Subjects

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[Economy](#) > [War economy](#) > [Food and nutrition](#)

[Economy](#) > [War economy](#) > [Mobilisation, economic](#)

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