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Civilian and Military Power (USA)

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During World War I, an unprecedented civil-military relationship developed among the U.S. government, its military, and civilian society. America struggled to find fair conscription policies despite class, ethnic, racial, and ideological differences. The effort to mobilize public opinion divided the country and created an atmosphere that made pacifism, ethnic pride, and radicalism difficult and even unacceptable. Moreover, a sense of loyalty to America's fighting men along with a fear that unemployed veterans could become subversives, motivated the War Department to actively find jobs for returning soldiers.

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Introduction

During World War I, a unique and unparalleled civil-military relationship formed. The U.S. government and its military worked closely with civilian leaders to bring about an Allied victory in Europe.

Conscription was complicated by America's diversity which reflected prevailing class, ethnic, racial, and ideological differences. Mobilizing public opinion spurred a super-patriotic and jingoistic fervor that escalated into mass hysteria and ultimately demanded total conformity. Demobilization efforts

included finding jobs for soldiers – an effort the War Department undertook out of a feeling of responsibility and fear of encroaching radicalism. This article will examine three complex issues in [America's World War I civil-military history](#): conscription, mobilizing public opinion, and demobilization.

Conscription

Executing a national draft in World War I posed a significant challenge to American political leaders, and the drafting of some 4 million men came with many complications. In 1917, President [Woodrow Wilson \(1856-1924\)](#) expressed concern that a national draft could be viewed as undemocratic and could result in resistance to the federal government. To implement conscription, the Wilson Administration sought to prevent serious draft problems that had been predominant during the American Civil War. Further complicating the World War I draft was the massive influx of immigrants predominately from Eastern and Southern Europe – some 23 million strong – who arrived in the United States between 1880 and 1917. Would these immigrants serve? Finally, racial issues continued to plague the nation and the disputed role of [black soldiers](#) helped to fuel the already volatile congressional draft debates.^[1]

The Civil War Enrollment Act of March 1863 had permitted drafted men to hire substitutes or make a commutation payment of \$300 to be exempt from service in the Union Army. This policy generated resentment among the lower classes who could not afford to pay their way out of the draft. The Union's draft crisis also centered on the registration process, which created much bitterness when federal provost marshals searched homes seeking men eligible for the draft and arresting deserters. Draft resistance and mob violence occurred in a dozen northern cities.^[2]

The Wilson Administration's conscription policies were aimed at avoiding the drama and resentment of the Civil War draft and defusing any ideological impulses to associate conscription with federal tyranny and class privilege. Initially, President Wilson planned to raise an army through a volunteer system, worried that conscription could lead to hostility from rural and industrial workers and from some ethnic groups who had insisted on U.S. [neutrality](#). Additionally, the controversial pre-war Preparedness Movement – that had recently pushed for but failed to achieve universal military training for all able-bodied men – had stoked opposition to possible government-mandated service. However, President Wilson soon argued that a national draft would be the fairest and most resourceful way to create a mass army in a democracy. Not all political leaders agreed, and Congress engaged in fiery debate over the [Selective Service Act](#) before it finally passed on 28 April 1917.

The new Selective Service Director, Provost Marshal General [Enoch H. Crowder \(1859-1932\)](#), banned both substitutions and commutation. In addition, Crowder shifted the responsibility for the draft from the federal government to local draft boards. Overwhelmingly, local draft board leadership came from the elite sector of the native-born, white communities, and Crowder provided guidelines to

the 4,647 local boards.^[3] Next, President Wilson established the Committee on Public Information (CPI), the nation's official government [propaganda](#) machine. Among other responsibilities, CPI had to convince Americans to support the Selective Service process and help local draft boards infuse patriotism and public celebration into the draft registration process. Conversely, the federal government made it clear that draft evaders would be arrested, face public trials, and have their names published as a way to shame the "slackers." The Espionage Act of 1917 levied considerable fines or prison terms (up to twenty years) for obstructing the draft or promoting antiwar antagonism.^[4]

Although immigrants had served in the American military in every conflict since the War of Independence, World War I was unique in the sheer size and multiple [ethnicities of the foreign-born in the ranks of the U.S. Army](#). In 1917, after a series of congressional debates concerning drafting of immigrants, the Selective Service divided the foreign born into four groups: diplomatic, declarant, non-declarant, and enemy aliens. Only declarant immigrants were eligible for the draft – those who filed papers of intent to become citizens and were waiting to fulfill their five-year residency before completion of the naturalization process. While the Selective Service considered this a clear way to deal with the drafting of immigrants into the American army, challenges quickly followed. Protest from native-born communities soon arose over dissatisfaction with the quota system, which mandated that local boards draft a percentage of the total population in each district. With non-declarant and enemy aliens technically ineligible for conscription, many feared that American citizens would be disproportionately drafted, and national newspapers wrote of resentment over the "alien slacker."^[5]

Some members of Congress fiercely objected to over-drafting of the native-born and insisted that all foreign-born men be drafted into the army. However, the State Department counter-argued that drafting all immigrants would cause diplomatic problems by putting Americans abroad at risk of being drafted into foreign armies. After much discussion with allied countries, the State Department remedied numerous problems with reciprocal treaties of conscription and exemption that also satisfied Congress. Both declarants and non-declarants from allied nations had to choose between serving in the U.S. Army or the army of their native country. The U.S. government also accelerated the naturalization process for immigrant soldiers in its army to avoid further diplomatic problems. Enemy Aliens still technically could not serve.^[6]

Congress settled the unfair quota issue with a classification system that placed native-born and eligible foreign-born – those who were physically and mentally fit – into Class I. The selective service computed the quota system based only on Class I (instead of the total population of a given area), ending the dilemma of disproportionate drafting. However, confusion and errors frequently occurred, and enemy aliens along with non-declarant immigrants (from countries without reciprocal agreements) found themselves inducted into the U.S. Army. Most requested to waive their right of exemption and stay in the service of their adopted country. This was especially true of enemy aliens who [emigrated from the Austro-Hungarian Empire](#). This group considered itself to be from the

“oppressed races” of the empire and actively supported America’s fight to defeat the Central Powers. The War Department asked commanding officers to determine if immigrants from enemy nations were loyal to America. If so, the immigrants could remain in the army. Eventually, over 18 percent of the soldiers in the U.S. Army represented immigrants (declarant, non-declarant, and enemy aliens) from forty-six nationalities.^[7]

The drafting of African Americans represented a very different story, as it quickly became entwined with deep-seated racial issues. Despite some short-term gains toward full citizenship after the Civil War, political and economic advancement for blacks had deteriorated rapidly by 1917. Segregation and disenfranchisement defined life for southern African Americans, and the pre-war Great Migration to the north increased conflict in urban areas due to labor competition and racist attitudes. The situation quickly ignited Congressional debates over the Selective Service Act in 1917, as southern leaders forcefully battled against conscription of African Americans, fearing retribution from military trained black soldiers. At the start of the war, the General Staff resolved to use African American troops primarily in noncombatant units and to keep a black minority in the training camps to prevent conflict. On-going discussions over possible changes in the use of black troops continued, but fear of racial conflict stopped any significant shift in military policy. Overwhelmingly, military leaders assigned African Americans to segregated labor units, severely limiting combat opportunities. Many black leaders protested the limitations placed on African-American soldiers, but little changed.^[8]

The World War I national draft produced controversy, debates, and confusion, but overall there was a lack of resistance as some 24 million men successfully registered for the draft and some 4 million served. However, this cooperation should not be overstated, since resistance did occur. Between 2.4 and 3.6 million men refused to register and another 337,649 either did not present themselves for induction centers or ran away from training camps. In the American South, lack of support for Wilson’s patriotic draft methods was “sizable,” and “bands of white men” hid out in “mountains, forests, and swamps” to avoid service.^[9] World War I conscription helped to redefine civil-military relations. Despite the “localization” of the selective service procedure, the draft increased the power of the U.S. government and created a closer relationship between civilian and federal entities involved in the process. The war also drove the volatile debate over ethnicity, race, and military service to a national level.

Mobilizing Public Opinion

The 1916 Democratic Party’s presidential re-election campaign praised Wilson for keeping the nation out of war. This reflected the view of many Americans who thought that the United States should avoid the European conflict. However, by April 1917, with America now part of the Allied war effort, the nation’s home front experienced its own battle – “the fight for the minds of men [and] for the ‘conquest of their convictions.’”^[10] During World War I, the U.S. government conducted an elaborate propaganda effort, since U.S. leaders regarded a [mass propaganda campaign](#) as an effective tool to unify a reluctant nation behind the war. However, diversity within American society, along with the

initially unpopular nature of World War I, brought a new crisis to the United States.

In addition to putting a positive spin on conscription, Wilson charged the Committee on Public Information (CPI) with mobilizing public opinion. Well-known progressive journalist George Creel (1876-1953) headed the government propaganda machine using new advertising and marketing methods and working with a small army of volunteers in an attempt to unify the nation in support of the war effort. Creel brought together an impressive group of writers, advertising executives, marketing managers, historians, filmmakers, artists, photographers, and entertainers. He asked the group to educate the public about the conflict, appeal to the emotions and patriotism of the people, and generally sell the war. CPI's Speakers Division included some 75,000 local volunteers called Four Minute Men who gave hundreds of thousands of short patriotic speeches and delivered stories of alleged German atrocities before social gatherings, civic meetings, and motion-picture features. The American Protection League (APL) – an extremist volunteer civilian organization with over 250,000 members - worked with the Justice Department as loyalty watchdogs, reporting supposed dissent or any “suspicious” activities to the U.S. Attorney General. The Liberty Loan Campaign (LLC), closely associated with CPI's efforts, adopted the dual role of raising money for the war and eliciting patriotic support.^[11]

CPI and the LLC also directed their propaganda efforts towards the millions of newly arrived immigrants. Knowing little of the lives, traditions, or politics of ethnic communities, the native-born population also knew little about the immigrants' views of the war. Long-established preconceptions and prejudices developed into anti-immigrant nativism and turned the drive for patriotism into a drive for Americanism. CPI, APL, and LLC tapped into this nativist strain, demanded “no more hyphens in America,” and asked immigrants to prove their loyalty.^[12]

Anti-German propaganda directly affected the large population of Americans of German descent, since the CPI campaign bombarded the public with “evidence” that Germany was a sinister nation based on militarism and was responsible for the current war. CPI pamphlets told of the horrors the Germans inflicted upon the French and Belgian citizens and emphasized the difference between American democracy and German autocracy. LLC posters used animalistic portrayals of the German “Hun” as a predator of children and an abuser of virtuous women. As a result, many German Americans became targets for harassment and violence during the war. Neighbors and APL members' spied on immigrants, especially German Americans, and sent thousands of reports to the U.S. Department of Justice. In many cities, public orchestras eliminated Bach and Beethoven and museums removed German art. Hamburgers, sauerkraut, and German measles became liberty sandwiches, liberty cabbage, and liberty measles, and many American schools banned German language classes.^[13]

After the 1917 Communist Revolution in Russia, CPI also attacked Bolshevik philosophy. It instructed the Four Minute Men to emphasize the dangers of Bolshevism as the antithesis of American democracy. CPI pamphlets poured into working-class communities refuting socialist

views that the war was a struggle between oppressive capitalist countries at the expense of workers. The U.S. government continued its efforts to stop socialists, [pacifists](#), and other war dissenters from speaking out against the war and the growing loss of American civil rights.^[14]

As the war progressed, CPI drifted away from war education and became more of a “crude propaganda mill.”^[15] Ultimately, CPI and its counterparts used conformity and fear as finely honed weapons to fuel an already combustible atmosphere. In addition to the Espionage Act of 1917, the Sedition Act of 1918 – which made it a crime to write or say anything against the U.S. government, its flag, or its military – became an instrument used against members of the peace movement, certain ethnic groups, and radicals. The federal government’s reliance on tens of thousands of unsupervised volunteers led to disastrous results. Fueled by super-patriotism, government war propaganda created a jingoistic fever that escalated into mass hysteria. Vigilantism accelerated, and free speech was severely restricted. War time anxiety, anti-radicalism, and [xenophobia](#) collated with emotionally charged propaganda and created a volatile and repressive atmosphere. Radicals, pacifists, [conscientious objectors](#), and members of ethnic communities faced imprisonment, harassment, violence, and even death.^[16]

America’s centralized wartime propaganda agencies solidified a new working relationship between the federal government and community leaders who marshaled an army of civilian volunteers. CPI’s Creel later bragged that “there was no part of the great war machinery that we did not touch, no medium of appeal that we did not employ... to make our people and all other peoples understand the causes that compelled America to take arms.”^[17]

Demobilization

The [demobilization](#) of some 4 million American soldiers at the end of World War I occurred simultaneously with widespread social unrest, rising unemployment, and economic hardship characterized by frequent labor strikes and the nation's first [Red Scare](#). Successful solutions to combat the political and economic crisis did not come from the U.S. Labor Department, Congress, or the White House, but from an unlikely source - the U.S. War Department. Its Emergency Employment Committee for Soldiers, Sailors and Marines of the Council of National Defense brought together leading economists and well-educated officers (many with prior business experience) to formulate inventive reemployment strategies.

Although demobilization was under way by January 1919 (mostly men stationed on the home front), some 2 million men still anxiously awaited their homecoming and a return to the job market. Demobilization was not an easy task. The Secretary of War, [Newton D. Baker \(1871-1937\)](#), emphasized that it was important to return the men “back into the normal life of the country without filling the country with unemployed men.”^[18] When military units returned to American de-embarkation centers, soldiers were divided into groups based on home territory. The men were deloused, bathed, and inspected before receiving back pay, a bonus of sixty dollars, and a new

uniform, shoes, and a coat. Social welfare volunteers took soldiers directly to railroad stations so the men could buy tickets home (at reduced prices).^[19]

The military demobilization process had its share of critics in Congress and the press. Communities suffering from the closing of munitions factories objected to the return of soldiers, since the unemployed men would escalate the local economic crisis. Production quickly eroded in most cities and industrial areas that had lost war contracts and now faced escalating unemployment. Although Congress approved the original financing of the U.S. Labor Department's Employment Service, the agency was struggling by 1919. The Labor Department's newly created Bureau for Returning Soldiers, Sailors, and Marines proved ineffective due to financial constraints. In March 1919, Congress refused to provide additional funding to the Labor Department's employment agency citing mismanagement and pro-union influences, thus further reducing its effectiveness.^[20]

The nation clearly faced a major crisis. Baker declared that the War Department would intervene, and he approved a massive campaign to find jobs for returning soldiers. At the helm was Colonel Arthur D. Woods (1870-1942), the new Assistant to the Secretary of War. Woods saw the War Department's reemployment efforts "not as a charity..., but as a duty...to assist the Government in meeting its moral...obligations to those who have served it so heroically." In addition to a moral commitment to help returning soldiers, the post-war return of intense labor and capital hostilities also spurred military leaders to act.^[21]

The 1919 Red Scare also served as the key motivation for the War Department. Workers' wartime gains – brought on by labor shortages and lucrative government war contracts – led to temporarily improved wages and labor conditions. This helped fuel an increase in labor union membership. However, the sudden end of the war brought an economic downturn. Worker demands to retain economic advances made during the war and fears of rapidly rising inflation led to widespread labor agitation. Faced with reduction of wages and hours, mounting economic uncertainty, and increasing job competition, workers reacted. In 1919 more than 3,300 strikes involving some 4 million workers plagued post-war America. This widespread labor unrest collided with post-war social stress and the lingering super-patriotic hysteria stemming from a war that demanded total conformity. Unionism became synonymous with radicalism. The harsh and prolonged reaction from the American public and government to the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution in Russia left no room for radicalism, perceived to be on a rapid rise in America. The acute tension in the nation climaxed in 1919 and 1920 when Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer (1872-1936) arrested thousands of suspected communists and deported numerous foreign-born radicals in the legendary "Palmer Raids."^[22]

Assistant Secretary Woods feared that the outcome of labor strikes would create an unstable work place that would prevent the assimilation of soldiers back into American society. With the growing antagonism between capital and labor, Colonel Woods also warned of the impending danger if millions of disgruntled soldiers became tempted by radicals. In March 1919, the War Department estimated that some 3 million discharged men needed assistance securing work. To remedy the

situation, the military allowed officers and rank-and-file men to remain in the service - if desired - until the economic situation improved. Woods took the next step in solving the unemployment situation by successfully overseeing the operation of the U.S. Labor Department's deteriorating Bureau for Returning Soldiers, Sailors, and Marines, located in more than 2,000 cities.^[23]

The War Department committee clearly understood that publicity was vital in achieving their goals. With firsthand experience from his days working with the CPI, Woods knew the value of a creative and passionate propaganda campaign. Therefore, both he and his team stepped up efforts by using the same high-pitched, super-patriotic propaganda used by the CPI during the war. Woods' publicity section used automobile stickers, movie picture-slides, and posters, along with Liberty Loan workers, "Four-minute men" and recruited school children to help spread a strong message that ex-servicemen should be hired as soon as possible. Over 13,000 newspapers published daily press releases and photographs educating the public about the scope of the War Department's new role in finding jobs for soldiers. To appeal to both English-speaking and foreign-speaking communities, the employment team produced booklets, press releases, and other employment information in various languages. Woods' staff also sent out 2,000 letters a week to companies throughout the nation. The Colonel attempted to "sell" the ex-soldiers as an "excellent buy," since the returning men were "animated by an elevated spirit of citizenship, "trained by army discipline, and in top physical condition."^[24]

To help convince employers to cooperate, Woods' team designed an award program directly connected to patriotism. Any business that rehired their former workers after being discharged from the military received a "War and Navy Department Citation." Similar to the patriotic symbols used during the war, this citation shield – to be displayed in store and office windows or on service flags – showed the public that this employer was doing his duty. Each company or retail merchant also received newspaper publicity – a special thank you from the War Department. By the end of the year, Woods' team had distributed some 70,000 citations.^[25]

Understanding the desire for veterans' advancement, the War Department began to oversee an "on the job" industrial retraining program to help turn soldiers into skilled workers. In July 1919, Woods and his officers convinced companies to provide returning soldiers on-the-job training in schools that replicated shop conditions. Industrial retraining classes for returning soldiers also took place in more than 300 plants throughout the country that allowed the men to earn a living while learning a new skill. Woods argued that the program benefited both the soldiers and the companies, since it supplied employers with well-trained veterans who were mature, disciplined, and loyal.^[26]

Perhaps the most challenging post-war effort was the War Department's attempt to create new construction jobs and promote public works projects to "stimulate" employment. Invigorating the economy through public works projects served as a way of creating jobs for discharged soldiers. Colonel Woods' military officers worked with community leaders to help raise funds, engineer contracts, and solve problems – all associated with new public works construction. In addition,

Woods' team publicized a "Spruce-up Campaign" designed to encourage homeowners, industrialists, and storekeepers to make repairs or improvements in order to help generate more jobs.^[27]

For the first time in American history, the War Department tried to find jobs for returning soldiers, creating another opportunity for civil-military cooperation. To aid American soldiers, the War Department worked directly with American business owners, local and state leaders, newspaper editors, and community volunteers. The rhetoric of success never matched the reality, but this experience established an important precedent. It would fall upon the military to orchestrate a planned demobilization after World War II that did not unduly disrupt the civilian economy.

Conclusion

World War I created a tremendous strain on American society, as the nation struggled to balance its democratic principles with its need for a national draft and a united home front. American leaders were resolved to find fair and equitable conscription policies. Drafting was complicated by past national experiences and the country's diverse class, ethnic, racial and ideological makeup. Mobilizing the public in support of the war effort also strained American society and greatly exacerbated animosity toward radicals, immigrants, and pacifists. In its crusade to "save democracy" in Europe, U.S. government policies magnified and ignited local anxieties and subsequently tarnished American democracy. The Espionage and Sedition Acts and the jingoistic fever created by federal propaganda agencies and civilian community assistants became powerful weapons that threatened and even violated American civil liberties. With the Armistice of 11 November 1918, the United States looked forward to a brighter future. But rising unemployment, relentless labor conflicts, and the Red Scare coincided with the return home of some 4 million soldiers. A sense of loyalty to America's fighting men and a fear that unemployed veterans could become subversives, motivated the War Department to actively find jobs for returning soldiers. Ultimately, issues of class, race, ethnicity, and citizenship made America's World War I civil military relations – especially those concerning the national draft, mobilization of public opinion, and demobilization efforts -- extraordinarily complex.

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Notes

1. † Much of this essay comes from two of the author's books: Ford, Nancy Gentile: *The Great War and America. Civil-Military Relations during World War I*, Westport 2008; Ford, Nancy Gentile: *Americans All. Foreign-born Soldiers in World War I*, College Station 2001; Ford, Nancy Gentile: *The Espionage and Sedition Acts. Promoting War and Suppressing Dissent in World War I*, in: Ford, Nancy Gentile (ed.): *Issues of War and Peace*, Westport 2002.
2. † Geary, James W.: *We Need Men. The Union Draft in the Civil War*, Dekalb 1991, pp. 73-74.
3. † Schaffer, Robert: *America in the Great War. The Rise of the War Welfare State*, New York 1991, p. 176; Chambers II, John Whiteclay: *Draftees or Volunteers. A Documentary History of the Debate over Military Conscription in the United States, 1787-1973*, New York 1975, pp. 206-209, 349-350. For additional information on the World War I draft see: Ford, Nancy Gentile: *Drafting and Training Citizen-Soldiers. New Civil-Military Relations*, pp. 27-50, in: Ford, *The Great War and America*.
4. † Kennedy, David: *Over Here. The First World War and American Society*, Oxford 1980, p. 153; Schaffer, *America in the Great War*, p. 176.
5. † Ford, *Americans All* 2001, pp. 52-55; Kennedy, *Over Here* 1980, pp. 150-153; Jennifer D. Keene: *Doughboys, the Great War, and the Remaking of America*, Baltimore 2001, p. 11.
6. † Ford, *Americans All* 2001, pp. 53-58.
7. † *Ibid.*, pp. 3, 43-66.
8. † Keene, *Doughboys* 2001, pp. 83-84, also see: Keene, Jennifer: *The Politics of Race. Racial Violence and Harmony in the Wartime Army*, pp. 83-104, in: Keene: *Doughboys*; Johnson, Wray R.: *Black American Radicalism and the First World War. The Secret Files of the Military Intelligence Division*, in: *Armed Forces & Society* 26 (1999), pp. 30-3; Also see: Kornweibel, Theodore: "Investigate Everything." *Federal Effects to Compel Black Loyalty during World War I*, Bloomington 2002.
9. † Keith, Jeanette: *The Politics of Southern Draft Resistance, 1917-1918. Class, Race, and Conscription in the Rural South*, in: *The Journal of American History* (2001), pp. 1360, 1361, 1336.
10. † Kennedy, *Over Here* 1980, pp. 61, 45-92.
11. † *Ibid.*, pp. 59-68; Farwell, Bryon: *Over There. The United States in the Great War, 1917-1918*, New York 1999, p. 44; Ford, *Issues of War and Peace* 2002, pp. 178-200. Also see Vaughn, Stephen: *Holding Fast the Inner Lines. Democracy, Nationalism and the Committee on Public Information*, Chapel Hill 1980.
12. † *Ibid.*
13. † *Ibid.*
14. † Kornweibel, "Investigate Everything" 2002, p. 19.
15. † Kennedy, *Over Here* 1980, p. 61; Ford, *The Great War and America*, pp. 53, 55, 57-59; Ford, *Issues of War and Peace* 2002, pp. 178-200.
16. † Rehnquist, William H.: *All the Laws but One. Civil Liberties in Wartime*, New York 2000, p. 173; Ford, *Issues of War and Peace* 2002, pp. 178-200. For addition information see Ford, Nancy Gentile: *Mobilizing Public Opinion and Suppressing Dissent. Civil-Military Cooperation and Conflict*, pp. 51-70, in: Ford, *The Great War and America* 2008; and Ford, Nancy Gentile: *The Espionage and Sedition Acts*, pp. 178-202 in: Ford, *Issues of War and Peace* 2002.
17. † George Creel quoted in: Ford, *Issues of War and Peace* 2002, p. 187.

18. ↑ Baker quoted in: Ford, *The Great War and America* 2008, pp. 93-94, also see Ford, Nancy Gentile: *Demobilization and Reemployment. The War Department Steps In*, pp. 93-116, in: Ford, *The Great War and America* 2008.
19. ↑ *Ibid.*, p. 94.
20. ↑ *Ibid.*, pp. 95-97.
21. ↑ *Ibid.*, pp. 97-98.
22. ↑ *Ibid.*, pp. 98-100.
23. ↑ *Ibid.*, pp. 100-102.
24. ↑ *Ibid.*, pp. 106-106.
25. ↑ *Ibid.*, pp. 106-107.
26. ↑ *Ibid.*, pp. 108-109
27. ↑ *Ibid.*, pp. 109-111.

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