

France and America, Movement and *Élan*

Colt Ricks

Faculty Introduction

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Colt Ricks' comparison of French and American combat attitudes during World War I brings together two topics that have traditionally been considered independently, and raises important ideas about their similarity. He claims that the can-do aggressiveness of American forces in the last battles of the war was also exhibited by the French in the first battles, and that war weariness above all separated them. The passing centenaries of the war have provoked scholars to reconsider the conflict from different angles, and this comparison follows this trend of fruitful reconsiderations. Incorporating a diverse array of interpretations and some of the best new work, Ricks concludes that it was timing and not attitude or aggression that separated the fighting styles of the American from the French armies on the Western Front and led to divergent memories of the conflict.

Abstract

Throughout World War I, there were two concepts that influenced how the conflict was fought: mobility and aggression. In this research paper, the application of these ideas by the French and American militaries, and their subsequent results, will be contrasted. Seven works were found through the JSTOR database, including academic journals and books on both the French and American military's conduct and experiences on the Western Front of the war. The works cited give a perspective into France's failed offensives culminating in a shattering of French martial spirit and America's good fortune from entering the war as the conflict swung in its allies' favor. These two stories of the Great War illustrate the unique challenges and advantages that produced some of the most contrasting experiences on the Western Front of World War I.

When Napoleon Bonaparte rampaged through Europe, he laid down a new way of war. Mobility became the defining factor of 19th century combat, and an army's ability to launch large-scale offensives became the key to victory. One decisive attack could break an enemy and secure victory, as Napoleon had done at Austerlitz, at Jena-Auerstedt, and at Friedland: grand offensives and counter-offensives that trounced those who stood against him.¹ While Napoleon would be defeated, the lessons learned from his campaigns, that of skillful maneuver and aggression, would shape the way Europeans conducted warfare in the years prior to World War I (WWI). Movement and offensive spirit would be the defining characteristics of military victory.

In the muck and gore of the trenches of France and Belgium, the West's modern conception of WWI was born: disease, rot, bloody frontal assaults, the rolling thunder of artillery, and men sitting in holes waiting to die. This perception of the war comes from how stagnant the Western Front of the war became in the first year of fighting. While other fronts featured wars of movement that the European generals had anticipated, fighting in France ground to a halt with precious little ground ever gained or lost by the combatants. In this quagmire, the war of movement and offensive spirit was confronted with the advent of industrial warfare. Nowhere is that better seen than in the contrasting experiences of France and America on the Western Front of the Great War. In this comparison, these contrasting experiences will be explored through France and America's shared application of movement and *élan*. These experiences resulted in devastation for France and a rising sense of glory and jingoism for America.

The Origins of French *Élan*

Before WWI, France became embroiled in conflict with the Kingdom of Prussia, the state that would unite the German peoples into a single German Empire. In six months, Prussia and its allies laid waste to the armies of France. When the smoke cleared, France's second empire under Napoleon III had collapsed, and the newly established German Empire had taken the border region of Alsace-Lorraine.² The military leadership

¹ Peter Paret, "Napoleon and the Revolution in War." In *Makers of Modern Strategy from Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age*, ed. Peter Paret, Gordon A. Craig, and Felix Gilbert (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 131.

² Eric W. Kaempfer, "Army Doctrine Development: The French Experience, 1871-1914," *Army History*, no. 28 (1993): 12.

of France, motivated by nationalism and an intense want for revenge against Germany, sought to understand why it had been defeated and what it needed to do to arise stronger. Eric Kaempfer, an American writing on France's development of army doctrine from 1871 to 1914, summarizes the prevailing thought that if France was to succeed, it needed to reinvokethe spirit of Napoleon and *élan*, or offensive spirit. He concluded that "only a return to the Napoleonic traditions of skillful maneuver and violent attack at the 'defensive point' could bring success."³

Offensive spirit is best described as a soldier's belief in his own capacity to attack and succeed in doing so. With enough tenacity and faith, the offensive will always achieve victory over the defensive.

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This offensive spirit, or *élan* as the French referred to it, would be what drove forth the armies of France in their new offensive doctrine. Ferdinand Foch, Marshal of France, believed that "the offensive...can alone give results...modern war can admit of no other arguments than those which help destroy an army."⁴ Soldiers would throw themselves into the fire, their sheer force of determination would guarantee their success. "To charge, but to charge in numbers as one mass, therein lies safety...numbers give us moral superiority by the sentiment of strength which they create."⁵

This belief in mass infantry charges was mirrored by the advancement of firepower, through improved artillery and the advent of the machine gun. These modern weapons could inflict tremendous casualties against infantry, especially over open ground with opposing soldiers grouped together as infantry doctrine came to dictate. These conflicting notions were justified as "the necessary price of success in the age of modern weaponry; the key to victory was not the technology and firepower employed, but the morale of the nation wielding them and its ability to withstand terrible casualties."⁶

³ Kaempfer, 13.

⁴ Kaempfer, 13.

⁵ Kaempfer, 14.

⁶ Kaempfer, 14.

Those terrible casualties would come as WWI bloomed in the summer of 1914. According to the German historian Jörn Leonhard, the “overlapping of old military traditions and strategic operational thinking with advanced techniques and infrastructures of mass-slaughter”⁷ resulted

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in the concepts of movement and *élan* being confronted with the realities of industrial war. France, boiling with confidence and nationalism, planned to launch an all-out offensive to take

back Alsace-Lorraine. Agency on the Western Front is often assigned to the Germans as their invasion was the first action of the war. What is often overlooked is France’s willingness to go on the offensive with its own invasion plans. France’s Plan XVII called for a general assault through the borderlands and towards the Rhine River. Meanwhile, the German Empire faced the probability of a two-front war against France and its ally, the Russian Empire.⁸ The great size and natural resources of Russia meant that German strategists would target France first. France would need to be quickly defeated in a rehearsal of the previous Franco-Prussian War, then all available manpower would be turned to deal with the Russian horde.⁹ To this end, the Schlieffen Plan was developed. German forces would advance through neutral Belgium, then push through Northeast France and capture Paris: an aggressive and foolhardy strategy that shows France was not the only nation engrossed in ideals of grand offensives.

Both offensives would be launched in 1914. “Germany’s northern assault took France totally by surprise; the Germans gained an enormous amount of territory for little loss,” but the plan fell apart at the Marne River and so “the Schlieffen Plan succeeded tactically but was a strategic failure.”¹⁰ The German violation of Belgian neutrality prompted Great Britain to enter the war and deploy their army to assist the French. Known as the “Miracle of the Marne,” combined Anglo-French forces stalled the German march around Paris. Subsequently, France’s assault

⁷ Jörn Leonhard, *Pandora’s Box: A History of the First World War*, trans. Patrick Camiller, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018), 129.

⁸ Leonhard, 24.

⁹ Eric W. Kaempfer, “Army Doctrine Development: The French Experience, 1871-1914,” 16.

¹⁰ Kaempfer, 16.

into Alsace-Lorraine proved much worse. According to Leonhard, “the French Plan XVII...based itself on...trust in the *élan* of French soldiers, and the underlying principle ‘advance with all forces united to attack the German armies.’”¹¹ These concentrated French formations were then butchered by German gunfire as they threw themselves into assault after assault. *Élan* proved insufficient in the face of strong German defensive positions and firepower. In the first four days of fighting, over 140,000 Frenchmen were killed, wounded, or captured trying to recapture Alsace-Lorraine.¹² As the opposing armies dug in, they expanded their fortifications to their flanks eventually reaching the English Channel to the North and the Alps to the South. Thus began the birth of the Western Front and a years-long nightmare.

Now, with the advent of trench warfare, an idea would develop across the Western Front: the need for a decisive breakthrough, that a grand offensive would break through enemy fortifications and resume the war of movement, lifting the men from the trenches and back onto open ground. To this end, France’s Commander-in-Chief, General Joseph Joffre, planned twin offensives in Artois and Champagne to drive the Germans back to the Rhine.

In “L’Affaire De Soissons,” Glen Torrey gives an overview of the fighting that occurred around the French village of Soissons in Champagne. His coverage gives an excellent look into the difficulties French soldiers faced in trying to restart the war of movement. “During the Winter of 1914-1915, the French high command pursued a strategy of ‘aggressive defense’” while it built up reserves of men and material.¹³ French forces would launch small scale attacks to gain more favorable positions in preparation for the upcoming offensives. In one instance, near the village of Soissons, the French made use of an innovative explosive known as the ‘chariot bomb,’ a “tank of liquid oxygen carried into the lines...and then exploded by a round from a rifle.”¹⁴ The purpose of this device was to destroy barbed wire and allow soldiers to advance unimpeded. However, most failed to

¹¹ Leonhard, *Pandora’s Box*, 130.

¹² Kaempfer, “Army Doctrine Development: The French Experience, 1871-1914,” 16.

¹³ Glenn E. Torrey, “L’Affaire De Soissons”, January 1915.” *War in History* 4, no. 4 (1997): 398.

¹⁴ Torrey, 401.

detonate, and the French chose to rely on artillery fire to open holes in the mazes of German barbed wire. The attack at Soissons, though bloody, would succeed, and the French “held their gains despite violent, repeated attacks by German artillery and infantry.”¹⁵

This small conflict represented the problem that the war of movement faced on the Western Front. Opposing armies would dig defenses bristling with machine guns and rifles, supported by artillery behind their lines. Fields of barbed wire before them would force attacking soldiers into narrow channels where they could easily be fired upon or forced to stop their offensive altogether to try and cut through the barbed wire. Masses of infantry could not maneuver; they were too vulnerable on open ground. French troops tried to deal with the issue of barbed wire with innovations like the ‘chariot bombs,’ and after those failed, they relied on their own artillery, which in this instance “opened only four breaches in the barbed wire.”¹⁶ Once the attacking infantry cleared this first obstacle, they were “sent against defensive trenches in the orthodox method of attacking in waves.”¹⁷ Soldiers would then have to engage in brutal hand-to-hand combat as they “cleared” the enemy trenches, assuming enough of the attackers survived the hail of bullets and shells as they charged across no-man’s land. Then came another threat to deal with: the possibility of an enemy counteroffensive to retake the lost trenches. This possibility was the reality at Soissons where, four days after the French success, a German counterattack “had completely retaken [Soissons], overrun some of the original French trenches, and even threatened French artillery positions.”¹⁸ The French launched their own counterattacks in a desperate hope to reverse the situation, but these became bogged down in rain and mud. As Torrey puts it, “the battle was over. A promising operation in which French forces had fought sacrificially and heroically had resulted in a costly defeat.”¹⁹

In defense of this defeat, General Joffre stated the fault lay in “the defective organization of certain attacks” and the “state of morale of certain troops.”²⁰ This belief that the French defeat came from inadequate

¹⁵ Torrey, 402.

¹⁶ Torrey, 402.

¹⁷ Earl L. Ringer, “Infantry—Past, Present, and Future.” *The Military Engineer* 39, no. 266 (1947): 523.

¹⁸ Torrey, “‘L’Affaire De Soissons’, January 1915,” 404.

¹⁹ Torrey, 405.

²⁰ Torrey, 408.

organization and morale shows that the reality of the industrial and mechanical aspect of war was still disregarded or not fully understood.

The strength of German artillery and defensive works exhausted French infantry, making them susceptible to counterattacks once they had bled seizing enemy positions. The voracity of German gunfire inflicted terrible casualties on the attacking French, so their primary concern “became one of advancing in the attack with fewer losses.”²¹ Technological innovations at the start of the war favored defense over offense, hampering the capacity for an army to conduct a war of movement.

France and Great Britain would be defeated at Artois and Champagne for much the same reasons as the French defeat at Soissons. No great breakthrough would come in 1915, and the war would drag on. 1916 was dominated by two great offensives on the Western Front: the German attack on Verdun and the British attack on the Somme. At Verdun, the Germans sought to ‘bleed France dry’ by forcing them to defend a city of great strategic and symbolic value. Verdun served as a major stronghold on the Meuse river and was glorified by the French as a stalwart and ancient fortress. There, in a vicious battle lasting from February to December, the French *élan* would be put to the test.

The German assault on Verdun and its outlying forts was meant to draw in French soldiers where they would then be slaughtered by machine gun fire and artillery. But Thomas Morgan, writing for *Army History*, notes that the Germans “fell victim to their own plan.”²² Their initial successes prompted the German command to funnel more and more soldiers into the attack, resulting in ever more casualties. Given that, by the end of the battle, the French and Germans had lost a similar number of soldiers with a difference of only 100,000 men, the German strategy never unfolded as intended.²³ Though the battle did not progress quite as Germany had expected, it did succeed in drawing in large amounts of French soldiers. As a result, the year-long fight would see half a million Frenchmen dead and “would undermine the enthusiasm for the war

²¹ Ringer, “Infantry—Past, Present, and Future,” 523.

²² Thomas D. Morgan, “The Legacy of Verdun,” *Army History*, no. 46 (1998): 23.

²³ Morgan, 23.

effort in France.”²⁴ *Élan* meant nothing in the face of the meat-grinder that was Verdun. The battle escalated into a crisis for the French, a crisis that was then stabilized with the arrival of the French commander Phillipe Pétain (1856-1951).

Pétain had joined the French army in 1876, in the aftermath of its defeat by the Prussians and subsequent soul-searching. Rejecting the popular notion of massed, aggressive infantry assaults, he argued that superiority of firepower was the key to victory. Described by Leonhard as a “savior in the hour of crisis,” he placed a far greater emphasis on defense, artillery

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support, and minimizing casualties by rotating exhausted soldiers out of frontline positions to calmer fronts.²⁵ This tactic not only made him popular amongst his soldiers, but also kept up

French morale during the prolonged fighting. The strengthened French defense forced Germany to devote more and more soldiers to their attack. Between the increasing casualties and the British offensive at the Somme meant to relieve pressure on Verdun, the German army’s situation became increasingly grim until they finally called off their offensive. The battle of Verdun ended in a costly French victory; a victory that would be dashed to pieces the following spring.

Riding on the coattails of Pétain’s victory, the newly appointed French supreme commander, Robert Nivelle, tried to rekindle the *élan* of the French army with another grand offensive, which ended much like every other grand offensive on the Western Front. In the spring of 1917, “the bloody failure of the Nivelle offensive...led to a crisis of the French army.”²⁶ Mutinies began to break out amongst the French army following the failed counter-offensive. Angered by the perceived callousness of the French command’s throwing away of soldiers’ lives, French infantrymen refused to take part in any more doomed offensives. It would be Pétain who ended the mutinies by speaking with soldiers face-to-face and promising an end to suicidal attacks. This was possible, according to Leonhard, as he “enjoyed a good reputation...because of his defensive tactics.”²⁷ Nivelle’s emphasis on the old tactics of offensive

²⁴ Morgan, 24.

²⁵ Leonhard, *Pandora’s Box*, 399.

²⁶ Leonhard, 402.

²⁷ Leonhard, 402.

maneuver, in contrast, earned him the ire of French soldiers. Verdun and its aftermath mark the death of France's offensive spirit. After sustaining such a brutal campaign, French soldiers refused to sacrifice themselves in vain attempts to rekindle the desired war of movement. The men were tired and dejected. These sentiments are best summed up by the French author Marc Boasson: "What kind of nation will they make of us tomorrow, these exhausted creatures emptied of blood, emptied of thought, crushed by superhuman fatigue?"²⁸ Pétain's arrival and newfound adoration symbolized the end of France's will for *élan* and maneuver warfare. Now, the French military would seek to preserve itself and minimize casualties where it could. Verdun was the death of French *élan*.

The Origins of American *Élan*

Across the Atlantic Ocean, the US watched as the Great War raged on. The American people had little interest in joining the war in 1914 as the conflict was perceived as a solely European affair. Though many were sympathetic to the plight of France, significant portions of German and Irish Americans had little interest in entering the war on the side of Great Britain. The then president, Woodrow Wilson, even made use of popular slogans like "He kept us out of war" during his 1916 reelection campaign. Not much would be gained by joining the fighting, but supplying said fighting was a different matter entirely. There was money to be made staying neutral while selling guns, munitions, and food to the warring European powers. The bulk of trade was conducted with France, Britain, and their allies. As the war dragged on however, mounting German attacks on American merchant marines and fears of a potential German victory preventing any financial returns on investments finally drew the nation into the conflict as an active combatant in 1917.

America's delayed entrance into the war is best captured in Richard Faulkner's book, *Pershing's Crusaders*. The American army, more experienced with policing efforts in the Caribbean and the Mexican border, was not prepared for the horrors of the Western Front. French and British officers were brought to the US to instruct American troops and officers. Problems would soon arise as "the U.S. Army was reluctant to allow the French and British to 'interfere' with the Americans' tactical

²⁸ Morgan, "The Legacy of Verdun," 24.

doctrine.”²⁹ The commander of the American Expeditionary Force, John Pershing, and many other senior officers believed “that the French and British were wrong in their approach to the war” and were “so tied to trench warfare that they had lost the ability and will to return mobility to the battlefield.”³⁰ The Americans, who had not bloodied themselves in three years of war like the French and British, still believed in the war of movement. American officers and soldiers had yet to experience industrial warfare and failed to understand the full situation of the Western Front. Grand ideals of glorious offensives that would break the Germans and end the stalemate were alive and well among American officers. Pershing would form these ambitions into his “open warfare” doctrine that planned to drive the Germans from their defensive positions with “superior American rifle marksmanship, aggressiveness, and skilled maneuvering.”³¹ Much like the French, there was an offensive spirit among the Americans—though motivated by ideology rather than nationalism. With the phrase “Making the world safe for democracy,” the drive to prove and even enforce American ideals onto the unruly European powers was established as the justification and motivation for American involvement. American generals believed that with their own *élan*, they could win the war that the French and British could not. These feelings were tempered somewhat as American soldiers received their first taste of combat on the Western Front.

American infantrymen advanced forward “with heavy losses against hostile fire, with no apparent effort to utilize cover.”³² The French would instruct them to run from “shell-hole to shell-hole” like the “European veterans.”³³ American soldiers came to respect the more experienced French troops they fought alongside of, more so than the British. In *Pershing’s Crusaders*, Richard Faulkner describes Anglo-American relations as being soured by “the belief that the [British] had succumbed to pessimism and defeatist attitudes.”³⁴ The American push for mobile warfare persisted as they often found themselves on the attack.³⁵ The 1st

²⁹ Richard S. Faulkner, “After England Failed: Tommies, Poilus, and the American Soldiers.” In *Pershing’s Crusaders* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2017), 284.

³⁰ Faulkner, 284-285.

³¹ Faulkner, 285.

³² Faulkner, 298.

³³ Faulkner, 298.

³⁴ Faulkner, 293.

³⁵ Richard S. Faulkner, “The Big Show: The Doughboy in Combat.” In *Pershing’s Crusaders* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2017) 450.

Division of the American Expeditionary Force was “engaged on the first American offensive, taking and holding Cantigny,” and by July of 1918, “all divisions were on the offensive until the end of the war.”³⁶ American soldiers threw themselves upon the Germans with a ferocity unlike that of the French or British, forcing them back from their defensive lines. Leonhard writes that the Allies had even come to rely on the “offensive tactics of the early months of the war”

as the Germans “had fewer and fewer [resources] with which to parry the attacks.”³⁷ American manpower and supplies began to pour into France, motivating the Allies to take a much

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more aggressive and perhaps reckless approach to the war. The war of movement, though not quite as imagined in 1914, was returning to the Western Front. Perhaps, the Americans’ good fortune of having not exhausted themselves in three years of stagnant fighting allowed for this.

In the spring of 1918, the German army launched its final offensive, one last desperate attempt to end the stalemate before the arrival of American soldiers en masse. Though they made stunning advances, their assault ground to a halt, and the hope for a German victory on the Western Front withered away. Now a series of reinvigorated allied counter-offensives came and began to slowly drive the Germans from France. This point marked the effective return of the war of movement, which was a brutal slog against fortified German defenses: mass maneuvers over open ground with valiant infantry charges, but men sprinting from crater to crater, then clearing out trenches and bunkers by explosives and bayonet point before moving on to the next defenses. Nevertheless, casualties were still horrific. “During its capture and defense of Cantigny...the 28th Infantry lost...60 percent of its company officers and 32 percent of its enlisted men in five days of fighting.”³⁸

³⁶ Jonathan D Bratten, “‘Your Men Don’t Know How to Fight’: The American Expeditionary Forces Incorporating Lessons Learned.” *Army History*, no. 108 (2018): 29.

³⁷ Jörn Leonhard, *Pandora’s Box*, 760.

³⁸ Faulkner, “The Big Show: The Doughboy in Combat,” 453.

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During this wave of allied assaults, the relationship between the French and Americans began to break down. This ultimately

stemmed from the fact that France lost its sense of *élan*, while the Americans had yet to be challenged. Verdun scarred the French psyche, resulting in their rejection of the aggressive tactics of their American allies. Faulkner points out;

tension arose...because the French tended to stop their attacks as soon as they reached their objectives and were prone to retreat 'when it might have been best to hold positions gained.' The Americans, on the other hand, pushed their attacks whenever they smelled blood and 'never stopped until victory crowned their efforts.'³⁹

This account contrasts with the French perspective described by René Arnaud, a French Infantryman, who wrote of the Americans that:

An inexperienced officer newly arrived at the front...would probably have assumed he should continue advancing, which would have led to the majority of his men being killed for nothing. But by 1918 we had enough experience of the realities of the battlefield to stop ourselves in time. The Americans...did not have this experience...and we all know the enormous losses they suffered during the few months they were active.⁴⁰

Arnaud's comments come from Leonhard's work and serve as an interesting contrast against Faulkner's more jingoistic take on American *élan*. The bloodbath at Verdun followed by yet another suicidal attack shattered the French army's sense of *élan*. French soldiers were unwilling to throw themselves into another meat grinder. A mentality that the newly arrived Americans completely lacked. They had no similar experience to relate to, and so their perception of the French worsened over time.

³⁹ Faulkner, "After England Failed: Tommies, Poilus, and the American Soldiers," 300.

⁴⁰ Jörn Leonhard, *Pandora's Box*, 754.

While both nations came into the war believing in aggressive maneuvering, the French had lost theirs by 1918, yet the Americans did not. Soldiers from both armies had experienced the horrendous conditions of trench warfare, so it was not wholly a sense of naiveté that kept American spirits high, but rather that they had not been involved long enough to suffer to the extent as the French had, nor had they experienced a traumatic event like Verdun. The Americans chose to fight at a high point in the war, when the German Spring Offensive had failed and the Allies began their own counter-offensives, which would not stop until the end of the war. Faulkner writes that the Americans “often castigated the French for being slow and overcautious”⁴¹ and that during the Champagne-Marne campaign, “the sight of the [French] retreating back to the Marne... was proof that the French Army was spent.”⁴² The French and American experiences created two very different mindsets. While the Americans retained their *élan* and belief in the war of movement, the French had abandoned these ideas for fear of taking any more unnecessary casualties. After four years of fighting, the French had lost the stomach for such great loss of life.

France and America held similar views about how the war should be fought. French soldiers in 1914 were eager for combat, and their officers were sure that their *élan* and force of will would sweep the Germans from the field. A glorious Napoleonic assault into the heart of Germany would follow, and the defeat of 1870 would be avenged. Three years later, Pershing was confident his “open warfare” doctrine would reinvigorate the Western Front and that American aggressiveness would put Germany on the run. Both states held high expectations of the type of mobile warfare that they had trained for. Both nations believed that their offensive spirit and maneuvering would overcome material and men alike. Both were faced with the reality of industrial warfare. Willpower meant nothing in the face of superior war material. Machine guns, artillery, and barbed wire killed masses of soldiers. To survive, the men dug trenches to keep themselves out of the enemy’s line of fire. The development of ever more effective ways to kill meant that the armies of the Western Front could not achieve a breakthrough. Attacking forces took such heavy casualties mounting frontal assaults that they were

⁴¹ Faulkner, “After England Failed: Tommies, Poilus, and the American Soldiers,” 300.

⁴² Faulkner, 300.

unable to hold newly captured positions and were often thrown back by the defenders' counterattacks. The French lost over 300,000 men in the first two months of the war alone and that number would grow to a million by the end of 1918.⁴³ Armies could not conduct a war of movement: the killing power of industrial states had become too great. There were no short, decisive campaigns of maneuver to be found on the fields of France.

A great sense of self-importance was born in the minds of American soldiers during WWI. Participating in the war reinforced their "faith in the superiority of the American society from which they were drawn."⁴⁴ As *Pershing's Crusaders* describes, "When doughboys...shouted, 'Who won the war?' when passing Allied soldiers, most Americans...clearly and assertively responded 'the Unites States.'"⁴⁵ America came out of WWI as the greatest victor of the conflict, rich from arms sales and without any notable military setbacks. France in turn received horrific casualties, a ruined economy, and the return of Alsace-Lorraine as its reward. But it was through France's sacrifice of blood and treasure that the German armies were worn down to their weakened state in 1918. America's victory in WWI as built on the backs of millions of French soldiers who fought and bled for much longer than their American counterparts. These contrasting experiences gives a more holistic understanding of the advantages of initiative America possessed in choosing when to enter the fight, and the endurance and suffering of the French on the Western Front.

The French fought for survival following Verdun and the Nivelle Offensive, while the Americans fought to prove themselves and the might of their ideals. Their willingness to partake in aggressive campaigns of maneuver was (therefore) greater than that of the French. The French did not need to seek a glorious victory; they just needed to survive the German invasion. There was no need to bleed themselves even further than they had already. The Americans, on the other hand, had not the experience of the French. This war was a foreign and far-off affair that did not affect the American people directly. An American defeat did not pose a threat to the existence of the state or its people. This isolation was

⁴³ Leonhard, *Pandora's Box*, 912.

⁴⁴ Faulkner, "After England Failed: Tommies, Poilus, and the American Soldiers," 303.

⁴⁵ Faulkner, 304.

a luxury that France lacked. The fighting men of France and America entered WWI with a belief in *élan* and war of movement. Between trenches and industrialized slaughter, these notions were challenged, but ultimately survived to form the basis of future military doctrines. Movement returned to the Western Front during the Allied counter-offensives of 1918, but what had come to differentiate the Americans from the French was France's own loss of its offensive spirit. The death and destruction dealt upon France sapped its men of the *élan* necessary for the aggressive campaigning of old, but America came through the conflict with these ideas unscathed. In the brief period American soldiers fought on the Western Front, they found themselves victorious and justified in their use of these tactics. America retained its faith in offensive maneuver, going on to continue implementing this style of warfare in the next global conflict, WWII. ■

***The fighting men of France
and America entered WWI
with a belief in élan and
war of movement.***

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Student Biography

Colt Ricks is a history major from Sam Houston State University. During a senior seminar on the World War I, he developed an interest in the event and the various experiences of its participants. With the assistance of his professor, Dr. Jadwiga Biskupska, he advanced his understanding of the conflict, becoming fascinated with the unique stories of World War I and how the conflict affected the future development of the warring nations. Following his graduation in Spring 2020, Colt intends to further his studies in graduate school.