



THE UNITED STATES
WORLD WAR ONE
CENTENNIAL COMMISSION

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**Testimony of Edwin L. Fountain
Member, World War I Centennial Commission**

Before the Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Public Lands

of the

House Committee on Natural Resources

on H.R. 4489

“World War I Memorial Act of 2014”

Chairman Bishop and members of the Subcommittee:

My name is Edwin Fountain. I am a member of the World War I Centennial Commission, which was chartered by Congress in 2013. Commission members are appointed by the President, the majority and minority leaders of the House and Senate, the American Legion, the Veterans of Foreign Wars, and the World War I Museum in Kansas City.

The WWI Centennial Commission’s statutory mission is, among other things, to “plan, develop, and execute programs, projects, and activities to commemorate the centennial of World War I,” and to “develop recommendations for Congress and the President for commemorating the centennial of World War I.” Pub. L. 112-272, § 5(a).

In fulfillment of its statutory duty to make recommendations to Congress, the Commission is pleased to recommend that Congress pass H.R. 4489, the World War I Memorial Act of 2014. H.R. 4489 would in part authorize the Commission to proceed with one of its primary projects to commemorate the war, which is the establishment of a national World War I memorial at Pershing Park in the nation’s capital.

Throughout our country’s history, towns and cities have erected their own local war memorials, be they to local veterans of the Civil War, or of World War I, or of all the nation’s wars collectively. In Washington, there are of course numerous memorials to

generals and statesmen of the Revolution and the Civil War. But until the Vietnam Veterans Memorial was dedicated thirty years ago, there were no national war memorials.

Today we have on the Mall national memorials to three of the four great wars of the 20th century. There is, however, no national memorial to World War I. This is a significant omission, given the profound nature of the causes, courses, and consequences of “the Great War.”

Understanding how a conflict between Austria and Serbia in July 1914 caused a war that all but destroyed Europe can help us understand today how a regional conflict in Syria, Ukraine or elsewhere might spark another world war – and thereby prevent it from doing so.

Although the United States entered the war late, the appearance of American soldiers and Marines on the Western Front tipped the balance of the war, and American troops demonstrated the courage, sacrifice, and feats of arms that have been the hallmark of our armed forces for over two centuries. Over 4.7 million Americans served in uniform, and 116,516 gave their lives -- more than in Korea and Vietnam combined. The combat fatality rate during World War I was almost twice that of World War II. It was a horrific, world-changing war, in which our nation played a decisive role.

World War I profoundly transformed America and the world, and America’s role in the world. It was the first great conflict of what has come to be known as “the American century.” It led directly to the Second World War, and its consequences are still felt today in ongoing conflicts in the former Yugoslavia, Israel and Palestine, and Iraq.

Few Americans today know this history, nor do they appreciate the impact World War I has on the world we live in today. Without a national memorial to World War I, we fail to properly commemorate the service of our armed forces, and we lose an opportunity to educate the American people about the war. The centennial of the war, which is now upon us, provides a timely and essential opportunity to fill that void.

H.R. 4489 would do so by dedicating two national memorials to World War I. Soon after the war the good citizens of Kansas City took it upon themselves to erect a majestic memorial, not just to their local residents who served and died in the war, but to all the nation’s soldiers and sailors. H.R. 4489 would properly elevate the Liberty Tower, co-located with the World War I Museum in Kansas City, to national status.

H.R. 4489 would also establish a national memorial in the nation’s capital. It would designate Pershing Park, at the far end of Pennsylvania Avenue from the Capitol, as a national World War I memorial, and would authorize the Commission to re-develop the site into a true national memorial, worthy of that status.

The bill is consistent with the recommendation made by the National Capital Memorial Advisory Commission to Congress last October. That commission

recommended that “efforts to promote commemoration of World War I. . . . should be undertaken through enhancements and improvements at the existing World War I Memorial in Pershing Park and better interpretation of that site so that people’s understanding of the purpose of that memorial is increased.” (Letter of Oct. 28, 2013, from Peter May, Chairman, National Capital Memorial Advisory Commission, to Hon. Doc Hastings, Chairman, House Committee on Natural Resources.)

By establishing these memorials, the bill would thereby honor and commemorate the veterans of World War I in a way that is commensurate with the honor we have bestowed on the veterans of other major wars, while helping future generations of Americans to know the complete history of American’s 20th-century struggle against aggression and totalitarianism.

While it may be unconventional to have two national memorials, there is no reason not to do so, and there is every reason to commemorate a profound national event such as World War I more widely, rather than less.

We also point out that H.R. 4489 does not expand the jurisdiction of the National Park Service, nor should it add to the Park Service’s budget. The existing Pershing Park already belongs to the Park Service which has responsibility for its maintenance. Improvements to the site would be paid for by private funds raised by the Commission, which would include a separate fund for ongoing costs of maintenance.

Congress would be minimizing the sacrifice of almost five million Americans who served in World War I, including 116,000 dead, if it did not honor them in the nation’s capital, as well as in Kansas City, in the same manner as the veterans of the wars that followed.

Finally, we ask that Congress move promptly to pass this bill. July 28, 2014 will mark the 100th anniversary of the start of the war. The Commission hopes that the President would sign this bill on that symbolically important date. More to the point, designing and constructing memorials takes time. In order to dedicate a new memorial by Veterans Day in November 2018, which will mark the centennial of the armistice that ended the war, the process needs to begin now. We as a nation cannot delay any longer.

Respectfully submitted,

Edwin L. Fountain
Member, World War I Centennial Commission
(202) 879-7645
elfountain@jonesday.com
elfountain@worldwar1centennial.org