THE DISTINGUISHED WAR SERVICE OF DR. ANNA HOWARD SHAW

By Wil A. Linkugel and Kim Giffin*

American women throughout our history have distinguished themselves by their war-time service. Barbara Fritchie has been immortalized by John Greenleaf Whittier:

"Shoot if you must this old gray head,
But spare your country's flag," she said.

But other women, some with equally gray heads, have performed more useful service. During the Civil War Dorothea Dix, at the age of sixty, headed the nursing service in Union army hospitals, while "Mother" Bickerdyke and Clara Barton administered to dying men close behind Union battle lines.

It was not until World War I, however, that the United States government decorated a woman for meritorious war service with the Distinguished Service Medal. The first award was made posthumously on May 7, 1919, to Jane A. Delano, Director, Department of Nursing, American Red Cross. The second medal was awarded to a living woman. This unprecedented event took place in Washington on May 24, 1919, when Dr. Anna Howard Shaw, a short, stout, silver-haired woman, calmly accepted the honor bestowed upon her. This signal award was the culmination of a lifetime of service.

Born in England, Anna Shaw migrated to Massachusetts with her family when she was four years old. But after eight years the Shaw household moved to a pioneer home in Michigan, where Anna spent the remainder of her youth. In 1871, twenty-four-year-old Anna defied custom and tradition, as well as friends and family, and prepared to enter the Methodist ministry. After abbreviated

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enrollments in Big Rapids, Michigan, High School, and Albion College, she entered Boston University Theological School and took a theological degree at the age of thirty-one. For seven years, from 1878-1885, Miss Shaw held a pastorate at East Dennis, Massachusetts. During this period she commuted to Boston during the week and took work in the Boston University Medical School, from which she received an M.D. in 1886.\(^1\)

Reform work now received her full attention. She initially became affiliated with the W.C.T.U., but soon devoted all her efforts to woman suffrage. In 1890, the newly unified National American Woman Suffrage Association appointed Dr. Shaw national lecturer. She was made vice-president-at-large of the organization in 1892, and held this post until 1904, when she was elected president. She headed the national organization for eleven years.

When Dr. Shaw left the ministry and embarked on a public career, she longed to build her own home, and in a few years built her first house at Wianno, Massachusetts, across the Cape from her old parish at East Dennis. However, in 1908, she acquired a

\(^1\) In later years Dr. Shaw was awarded an honorary D.D. from Kansas City University and an LL.D. from Temple University.
superbly scenic eight-acre tract of land at Moylan, Pennsylvania, and thereon constructed the cottage which she called home until her death. It was thus as a resident of Pennsylvania that in 1914 Dr. Shaw saw the war clouds gather in Europe.

American entry into the war becoming increasingly imminent, Congress, in August, 1916, passed an act creating the Council of National Defense, composed of the Secretaries of War, Navy, Interior, Agriculture, Labor, and Commerce. The council was to create needed machinery to meet the national crisis. The council decided that women could play an important role in the country's defense, and with the warm approval of the President, set out to create a committee of women responsible for women's defense work. The group agreed that Dr. Anna Howard Shaw should head the organization.

On April 19, 1917, Dr. Shaw, who was campaigning for woman suffrage in the South, received a telegram in Atlanta, Georgia, from W. S. Gifford, Director of the Council of National Defense, inviting her to a conference with Secretary Lane. She arrived in Washington the morning of the 27th, and upon meeting with the Secretaries, learned of the plans to form a woman's committee of the Council of National Defense and of her selection as its chairman. The seventy-year-old woman regretted that she was not twenty years younger, but her zeal for national service impelled her to accept the post.

Dr. Shaw asked to have a labor representative added to the committee, and Agnes Nestor, an officer of the National Women's Trade Union League, was appointed. In addition, she secured the appointment of Hannah J. Patterson, who had displayed great executive ability as an officer of the National American Woman Suffrage Association. On May 2, 1917, the newly organized Woman's Committee set up headquarters in a house at 1814 N Street in Washington.

Not sure as to what the Woman's Committee was expected to do, Dr. Shaw solicited ideas. From the Secretary of the Navy she learned that the committee was to be a coordinating agency. To avoid duplication and wasted effort, it should coordinate all

2 Telegrams in the Shaw Papers, folder No. 64. Radcliffe Women's Archives.
3 The Public Ledger (Philadelphia), May 27, 1917.
the women's societies engaged in war work. At the same time, the committee should channel governmental orders pertaining to women's defense activities to the nation's women.

With this in mind, Dr. Shaw set to work. She called a meeting of the Woman's Committee and on May 2, the nine women met in a room of the Munsey Building in Washington. Dr. Shaw laid before them the task of “coordinating and centralizing the organized and unorganized forces of women throughout the country.”

A great organization was set up. Temporary chairmen were appointed in each state to call together state women’s organizations, and without creating any new machinery, to coordinate the work of all state societies. Once the state agency was composed, this group formed county and local units which tried to reach women in every community. Local organizational problems were overcome by electing school teachers as chairmen.

Branches of women’s defense workers were established in every state and in Hawaii, Alaska, and Puerto Rico. The organization eventually embraced 18,000 units, capable, in at least one state,

of reaching 82,000 women. A plan of operation was devised which functioned through various departments. At the head of each department was placed an expert, who, in cooperation with the national departments of the government, was the connecting link between the national government through the state divisions and the individual woman.

Women responded vigorously to their nation’s call for war service. Many applied to the Woman’s Committee with requests for information on the kind of war work for which they were fitted. In response to these requests, the Information Department of the Committee compiled a pamphlet called *War Work for Women*. The booklet catalogued occupations, paid and volunteer, open to women in war work, and listed addresses to which applications could be made for further information.

Women were encouraged to participate in food conservation, gardening, farming, selling Liberty Bonds, health and recreation, child welfare, education, and industry. In June, 1917, Dr. Shaw met with the Medical Woman’s National Association and secured that group’s cooperation. The War Service Committee of the Medical Association created a commission known as the American Women’s Hospitals, and established a number of hospitals in France. A call was sent out for women physicians and trained nurses, and as many as a thousand women physicians eventually registered with this commission.

Despite the committee’s apparent success, Dr. Shaw, in August, 1917, was seized by grave doubts concerning her position. Still fresh in her mind was the friction which had existed in the National American Woman Suffrage Association during much of her eleven-year tenure as president. Possessing an aggressive personality, she was never able to placate and conciliate hostility. Two other factors entered her thinking. First, the work took too much time from her suffrage activities; she had dedicated her life to this cause and did not want to desert it in her declining years with victory seemingly at hand. Second, being seventy

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5 *The History of Woman Suffrage*, V, 737-738.
years old, she felt that a younger woman might be more capable.

Dr. Shaw contemplated resigning the chairmanship, but before acting, asked Ida Tarbell, a committee member but not a suffrage sympathizer, for advice. Miss Tarbell emphatically opposed her resignation, saying:

I will tell you not only my own but Mrs. Lamar's opinion: we are both agreed that if we had the whole country to choose from we would select you, and I can not think of another woman in the country who has the love and confidence of so many women, or who is more respected or whose judgment is considered more by men; then you are broad-minded and fair and generous and human in your attitude toward other people and other societies; in fact I could not work on the Committee if you did not remain Chairman; Mrs. Catt is a remarkable woman but she has not the broad human vision. No, do not think of giving up, it would be a calamity.

Her spirit and confidence buoyed by this conversation, Dr. Shaw decided not to resign and approached the task with new vigor. She tried to stimulate war effort by holding a Food Production Conference and a meeting with the Women in Industry Committee. To the Commercial Economy Board she proposed economy and simplification of dress. At Christmas time she made a special plea for war orphans, telling the nation to sacrifice for love of Him who said: "Inasmuch as ye have done it unto the least of these, ye have done it unto me."

To promote good will among women workers, Dr. Shaw wrote letters of appreciation whenever a worker accomplished some noteworthy feat. This special recognition created an immense amount of good feeling. An exuberant letter written by Elizabeth Green demonstrates how some women reacted to a letter of commendation from Dr. Shaw.

I already had my reward for any small service which I may have rendered the Woman's Committee, for I have counted every moment of my association with you a privilege. I know that you can never realize until you get

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8 This quotation is taken from a letter by Dr. Shaw to Lucy E. Anthony. Washington, D. C., August 20, 1917. Shaw Papers. The statement's authenticity depends on how accurately Dr. Shaw reported it.
to Heaven, what your leadership has meant to the women of the country, and I am afraid that not even then will you fully understand what it has meant to one humble but loyal follower.³

Dr. Shaw became the spokesman, as well as the vital and energizing force, for the woman's defense organization. She tried to fill as many requests for speaking engagements as she could, delivering many addresses at Liberty Loan Conferences. The Education Department of the Woman's Committee arranged an extensive speaking tour for Dr. Shaw through the South, and in April, 1918, she set out for Dixie. Once a day she addressed large audiences in leading Southern cities. She reported that in Nashville, Tennessee, more than 7,000 people heard her speech on the war effort.⁴

Dr. Shaw told her listeners that the war called for the efforts of all citizens. The army in the trenches and the army of men and women at home could not exist without each other. For this reason, the Woman's Committee had been organized and given powers to mobilize the nation's women for war service. However, she warned women that not all would be able to fill fascinating jobs, such as wireless telegraphy; some would have to do ordinary work. She believed that the greatest need was for plumbers, and that if she were young, she would study to be one. Although past seventy, she replied to a letter which asked her to make bandages and pads: "Why that kind of work is for old women and for old men and for children. Every vital or active woman like myself should be doing real work in the world. I am going to be a plumber."⁵

Early in the war, Dr. Shaw expressed the hope that conscription of women need never come; in her later speeches, however, she advocated a women's army. Conscripted women should train for special jobs in technical schools.⁶ Dr. Shaw's speeches were received with considerable acclaim. Even an anti-suffragist saw fit to write: "God bless you for your speech at the Liberty Loan Conference. I wish every woman in the country could have heard

³ Letter from Elizabeth Green to AHS, October 4, 1918. Shaw Papers.
⁴ Report written by Dr. Shaw on her southern tour, April 15, 1918. Shaw Papers.
⁵ Speech by AHS, "Women's War Service." Shaw Papers.
⁶ The New York Times, April 17, 1918.
it. I was never so moved in my life." Unquestionably, Dr. Shaw was one of the most popular orators for a great cause.

How did Dr. Shaw blend her work on the Woman’s Committee with her woman suffrage activities? At one of the first meetings of the Woman’s Committee, she instructed committee members not to mention suffrage in connection with defense work. “I am only a patriotic citizen,” she said afterwards, “working for my country. That is the way with all of us and there is a beautiful spirit of cooperation.” At the same time, she felt that suffrage work should continue, and told the group, which included several opposed to woman’s enfranchisement, that she intended to continue to speak for suffrage, and if there was any objection on the part of any members, she would tender her resignation at once. None of the ladies objected. She also talked with the Secretary of War, head of the Council of National Defense, and learned that he hoped she would continue to speak for suffrage.

Some people held that agitation for woman suffrage should be discontinued for the duration of the war. Suffrage leaders, however, recalled that women had done this during the Civil War, only to be told afterwards that their cause must wait because it was the “Negro’s hour.” Anti-suffragists condemned the war-time activities of woman suffragists as acts of disloyalty.

Since Dr. Shaw was still one of the most painful thorns for the anti-suffragists, they sought to discredit her by what would later be called “smears,” such as the charge that she had made insulting remarks about the American flag. They quoted a passage from one of her speeches, “What is the American flag but a piece of bunting?” The Antis widely circulated a charge that Dr. Shaw, in this passage, had been debasing and ridiculing our flag.

Since she was the head of a governmental defense committee, the accusation was especially serious. Frank E. Woodruff of Bowdoin College brought the matter to her attention and asked her for clarification. It was apparent that if Dr. Shaw had really meant to insult the American flag she must relinquish the chairmanship

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23 Letter from AHS to Ida Husted Harper, October 3, 1917. In this letter Dr. Shaw enclosed a letter from Eleanor Wilson McAdoo and an extract from a letter she received from an anti-suffragist. Harper Papers, Library of Congress.

of the Woman's Committee. Deeply hurt by the charge, she authorized this reply for general publication:

Everybody who knows anything about me or about woman suffragists knows very well that if I said the flag was "but a piece of bunting," I said it in such a connection that that part of the sentence extracted from its context is worse than a deliberate falsehood. I made this statement in the presence of several members of the President's Cabinet at a great public meeting where Senators and members of Congress were also present, and it was after this speech that I was selected by the President and the Council of National Defense as the head of the Women's Committee. Do you think it would have been possible for them to choose me for that position if I had made any disrespectful reference to the American flag, or if in any way I had shown a disloyal attitude toward the Government?15

The anti-suffragists had clearly lifted the "piece of bunting" passage out of context, for she had used it in talking about loyalty and patriotism and the ideals of our form of government, saying that although our government had not yet reached its ideals, it nevertheless stood for them. This is how Dr. Shaw usually used the passage:

This is the American flag. It is a piece of bunting and why is it that, when it is surrounded by the flags of all other nations, your eyes and mine turn first toward it and there is a warmth at our hearts such as we do not feel when we gaze on any other flag? It is not because of its artistic beauty, for other flags are as artistic. It is because you and I see in that piece of bunting what we see in no other. It is not visible to the human eye but it is to the human soul.

We see in every stripe of red the blood which has been shed through the centuries by men and women who have sacrificed their lives for the idea of democracy; we see in every stripe of white the purity of the democratic ideal toward which all the world is tending, and in every star in its field of blue we see the hope of mankind that some day the democracy which that bit of bunting symbolizes

15 A news release, quoting Dr. Shaw's authorized statement. Harper Papers.
The last picture ever taken of Dr. Shaw.

shall permeate the lives of men and nations, and we love it because it enfolds our ideals of human freedom and justice.  

She used this passage many times, and in one instance at the University of Virginia, the Director of Music sprang to the platform after the speech, struck up the band, and the audience sang

16 The History of Woman Suffrage, V, 758.
“The Star Spangled Banner” with gusto. The anti-suffragists’ charge concerning her loyalty must be viewed as a deliberate misquotation, designed to impugn her prestige as a public leader.

Despite the Antis’ clamor, Dr. Shaw continued as chairman of the Woman’s Committee. But by 1918, the committee’s work was confronted by so many perplexing problems that Dr. Shaw concluded it to be impossible to separate the war work of men from that of women. For example, she felt that the Liberty Loan Committee in some states was not working in harmony with the Woman’s Committee. She thought that the Liberty Loan group was building a rival organization along lines similar to those of the Woman’s Committee, and was seeking cooperation with various societies and groups that had differences of some sort with the committee. She protested that this procedure divided and confused the workers, saying “... there are so many difficulties in the way of harmonious cooperation that there is little wonder that women are discouraged.” She also claimed that many men’s councils sought authority over the women, and that they either refused to let women work, or else worked along lines not in accord with the plans of the Woman’s Committee.17

Another important problem was that of poor organization on the local level. Many chairmen were not accustomed to exact organization, and often a shallow and loosely collected group, without any definite aim, was reported as well organized. Such practices led Dr. Shaw to conclude that the war work of women, as well as of men, should be under military rule. This plan would allow the removal of inefficient officers and the transferring of certain good workers to lines of service for which they would be better suited. She favored the creation of a Field Division which should have joint direction of the State Councils of Defense and the State Divisions of the Woman’s Committee in their relation to the war measures of the government. This division should consist of twelve members, six men and six women, including a Director and an Associate Director. The chief functions of the Woman’s Committee and all of its departments should pass over to the Field Division.

Dr. Shaw expressed her dissatisfaction with the *modus operandi*

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17 Report written by AHS, April 15, 1918. Shaw Papers.
of conducting the war effort on the home front to Secretary of War Baker, who at once wrote President Wilson:

The fact that the Treasury Department, Food Administration, and to a lesser extent, some other departments, have created their own national organizations of women to assist in Liberty Loan, Food Conservation, and other special work, has caused the feeling on the part of the Woman's Committee of the Council and many of their State Committees that their nation-wide organization is unnecessary and tends to confusion. The Council believes it is unfortunate that it has been impossible to develop closer working relations between the organization of the Woman's Committee of the Council, but it feels strongly that much would be lost if the Woman's Committee of the Council and the organization it has created throughout the country were dissolved.18

The President concurred with the Secretary's views.

Thus, a series of conferences was held between the Council of National Defense and the Woman's Committee, and a new plan was devised. A Field Division was created, to be presided over by the Honorable Franklin K. Lane, Secretary of the Interior and a member of the Council of National Defense. The Division of six men and six women should conduct the war effort on the home front. The Woman's Committee was retained as an Advisory Committee of the Council of National Defense to meet any emergency which might arise in connection with women's war work. Dr. Shaw was named a member of the division. In September, 1918, the greater part of the Woman's Committee was merged into the Field Division.

The Woman's Committee gradually terminated its affairs. On February 12, 1919, Dr. Shaw wrote to the Secretary of War that she believed the committee's work to be at an end. The committee tendered its resignation to him, with the stipulation that it should take effect when the group's services should no longer be required. Fifteen days later, President Wilson accepted the committee's resignation and paid eloquent tribute to the group, declaring: "It would be difficult to overestimate the importance of the function

18 Letter from Newton Diehl Baker to President Woodrow Wilson, June 15, 1918. The President replied June 19, 1918. Radcliffe Women's Archives.
the committee has served in being both a vast bureau for the dissemination of information, and itself a wellspring of inspiration and zeal."

Other dignitaries also praised the work of the Committee. Herbert Hoover, head of the Food Administration, expressed his sincere gratitude for the women's and Dr. Shaw's role in the food conservation campaign. Secretary of War, Newton D. Baker, concluded a preface to the official report of the National Council of Defense with the remark that Dr. Shaw and her committee "wrought a work the like of which has never been seen before and her reward was to see its success."

The Woman's Committee was formally dissolved on March 15, 1919, and Dr. Shaw wrote to her private secretary, "Well, I am honorably discharged and I feel a great relief." Nevertheless, she was most reluctant to see this large army of women demobilize. She thought that the organization should be preserved for civic and humanitarian purposes. But once the Woman's Committee was dissolved, its far-reaching organization quickly disintegrated.

Dr. Shaw had performed her job out of a deep sense of duty. Often she longed for rest, and sometimes she wished that she were lecturing full-time for woman suffrage, the cause to which she had devoted her life; but receiving official recognition from the United States government in May gave her great satisfaction. It was a moment of triumph for herself and for womanhood. After the Distinguished Service Medal was presented to her, Dr. Shaw acknowledged that she was "prouder to wear this decoration than to receive any other recognition save... political freedom, which is the first desire of a loyal American."

Dr. Shaw treasured the award until her death on July 2, 1919; and as mourners viewed her body, they saw this shining medal pinned to the lapel of her dress. The medal symbolized a life of

19 President Wilson is reported to have said this by Ida Husted Harper. Unpublished biography of AHS, chap. 16. Shaw Papers.
20 Letter from Herbert Hoover to AHS, August 21, 1917. Shaw Papers.
21 Numerous letters from foreign dignitaries, expressing appreciation of the work of Dr. Shaw and the Woman's Committee are found in the Shaw Papers. For a complete picture of the accomplishments of the Woman's Committee, see Emily Newell Blair, Report of the Woman's Committee, Council of National Defense.
22 Letter from AHS to Lucy E. Anthony, Chicago, March 5, 1919. Shaw Papers.
23 The History of Woman Suffrage, V, 758.
service and dedication; it revealed to all that women were capable of full citizenship. "Dr. Anna Howard Shaw!" proclaimed the Omaha Bee; "The name stands for character, courage, intelligence, patriotism and—greater than all else—service."

24 Omaha Bee, May 25, 1919.