

Time is Running Out to Properly Commemorate the Centennial of World War I

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As we remember all Americans who have given their lives in service to their country this Memorial Day weekend, let's work together to successfully resolve the legislative issues which threaten to sideline our country's centennial celebration of World War I.

Two congressional bills await action (Congressman Ted Poe's H.R. 938 and Senator Rockefeller's S. 253; two similar bills failed in the 111th Congress) that propose establishing a Commission to coordinate celebrations and events during the 2014-2018 centennial period but also include elements intended to resolve where a national memorial to World War I should be established. Both bills recommend recognizing the National World War I Museum in Kansas City by including the words, "and Memorial" and both would re-designate the District of Columbia War Memorial as the "District of Columbia and National World War I Memorial." The AOI, as the city's oldest civic organization, has testified before the National Capital Memorial Advisory Commission and the House Committee on Natural Resources opposing the renaming of the District's local memorial to our men and women who died during the First World War. John Kelly has covered these issues extensively in his columns. I don't want to debate that particular issue again, but instead want to focus attention to the AOI's proposal that Pershing Park and the American Expeditionary Forces Memorial located on Pennsylvania Avenue between 14th and 15th Street be recognized, honored and accepted as The National World War I Memorial here in the Nation's Capital.

While the AOI has made a compelling case to re-imagine this large, relatively well-maintained park with new interpretive elements, statuary and signage, the opponents of this plan believe that Pershing Park is 'unworthy' as a national memorial as it is not located directly on the National Mall as are memorials to WWII, Vietnam and Korea. But this entire city block -- directly across from the White House Visitors' Center, two blocks from both the White House and the National Mall, anchoring a prestigious place of prominence at the western vista of Pennsylvania Avenue -- is, according to the McMillan (Senate Park) Plan, technically on the Mall. The American Battle Monuments Commission considers its park dedicated to General Pershing to be a National Memorial to WWI according to ABMC Secretary Sen. Max Cleland in a letter to me on March 31, 2012. Current legislation prohibits any more memorials on the National Mall which Peter May, Chair of the National Capital Memorial Advisory Commission, emphasized in his testimony before the House Committee on Natural Resources on Jan 24, 2012.

We need to break this impasse and recognize that if the parties involved in the pending legislation do not act quickly, both bills will expire at the end of the 112th Congress and will need to be re-introduced in 2013; however, the centennial period commences in April 2014 when fighting first

broke out in Europe and this leaves little time to plan and implement a Centennial Commemoration. The AOI has proposed that the legislation instead focus on achieving the following goals and recognize Pershing Park as the National WWI Memorial:

1. July 28, 2014 – The World War Commences in 1914:

Rededicate Pershing Park as the new National World War I Memorial and announce the winner(s) of a design competition;

2. April 6, 2017 – The United States enters the conflict in 1917:

Have new interpretive signage in place;

3. November 11, 2018 – Armistice Day 1918:

Unveil the new sculpture(s)/displays and commemorate the centennial of the end of the World War at the newly designated, re-envisioned National World War I Memorial in Washington, D.C.

“Time will not dim the glory of their deeds...” according to General Pershing referring to those who served under him, but if we are to commemorate the centennial of World War I in an appropriate and timely manner, we believe it can best be accomplished by seeking to designate Pershing Park as the National World War I Memorial and do so before time dims this opportunity.

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