

National Defense Test (September 12, 1924)

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Essay by Cary O'Dell



General Pershing



A memento from September 12, 1924



John J. Carty

Today, it's a knee-jerk reaction to turn to our national broadcast media in times of crises. From Pearl Harbor to the Kennedy assassination to Hurricane Katrina, Americans immediately reach for the dial or remote control in the event of a national emergency to glean news, instruction, or even some level of comfort.

This response is probably as old as media itself, dating back to the earliest days of broadcasting, to small, regional stations who, no doubt, reported news of area fires, inclement weather and other urgent matters. But, if so, then all this news was local, isolated to its own geographic area, effectively leaving the rest of the country in the metaphorical dark. Such restricted access is unthinkable now; imagine the Twin Tower attacks reported only in and to New York City or coverage of Kennedy's assassination contained strictly to greater Dallas region, with the rest of the nation forced to play catch-up.

The advent of national network radio broadcasting, NBC and CBS, specifically, would rectify this situation but these entities would not launch until 1926 and 1927, respectively. And in the mid 1920s--only a few years after the end of World War I in 1918--the anticipated need, someday soon, for the nation to keep its citizenry promptly informed and alert was, perhaps, as timely, if not urgent, as it ever was. Radio--even without the existence of the networks and which at that time consisted of unaffiliated, unlicensed, relatively low-wattted and often Mom-and-Pop stations scattered across the country and broadcasting to homemade receivers--offered the best method to efficiently reach the entire nation, to put the "mass" in mass communication.

But could such a far-reaching broadcast be done? Could a simultaneous message be sent out, one that could reach a vast swatch of citizens, quickly and efficiently, throughout the USA?

On September 12, 1924, via the National Defense Test, a specialty-designed, experimental pre-network linking of 18 radio stations from coast-to-coast showed that it could.

The National Defense Test grew out of the now defunct National Defense Day, whose inaugural "celebration" also occurred on September 12, 1924. A product of the War Department, with the support of then President Calvin Coolidge, the National Defense Day was designated as a day of patriotism, practice and preparedness, to be "observed in a most practical way and with all the fervor and enthusiasm of which red-blooded Americans are capable," according to one source. On that autumn day, activities across the country were plentiful. In Joplin, Missouri, a ceremony was held to place a cornerstone for the Joplin Memorial Hall. In Fort Wadsworth, NY, a mock air attack was staged with sacks of flour standing in for bombs. And in Washington, Wilkes-

Barre and other cities, parades were held. Many businesses closed or closed early that day throughout the land. Meanwhile, to show their dedication, people (men and women) could enlist in the US Army for one day. Afterward, to show their temporary military affiliation, commemorative pins were issued. (The aged pins now sometimes show up for sale on eBay.)

The creation of a National Defense Day was not, however, without its detractors. The Governors of Maine, Nebraska, Colorado and Wisconsin all protested its launch and various pacifist groups across the country labeled it war mongering. The simmering controversy eventually put President Coolidge on the offensive. He later stated in a letter to one group, “In some unofficial and entirely unauthorized way the defense test has been denominated ‘Mobilization Day.’ The Government did not do this. It would be proper to call it ‘Inspection Day.’ But it is not mobilization, and the Government is not responsible for any such designation....”

Regardless of the controversy, the Day happened as plan. Happily coinciding with the new national observance was the AT&T corporation’s recent, ongoing experiments to link disparate radio stations through their long-distance phone lines, to truly *broadcast*, to establish a *network* of relayed radio signals where far flung audiences could listen to the same programming at the same time. The recently launched National Defense Day seemed, to AT&T and its Development and Research Head, John J. Carty, who had been heading the experiments, the perfect opportunity to demonstrate their new process, drum up some publicity and even serve the public interest in the process.

The approximately 90-minute, “primetime” broadcast, “The National Defense Test,” originated from the War Department building in Washington, DC, in front of a small “studio” audience on the evening of September 12th. It began with the program’s de facto host, US Secretary of War John W. Weeks, welcoming the “ladies and gentlemen of the radio audience.” In a halting, formal cadence, he then proceeded with an impressive, if cumbersome, roll call of distant stations he was broadcasting “from.” (A few years later, NBC would solve this complicated laundry listing by instituting its trademark chimes.) The participating stations for the Test were: WCAP (Washington, DC); WEAJ (New York, NY); WJAR (Providence, RI); WNAC (Boston, MA); WOO (Philadelphia, PA); WGY (Schenectady, NY); WGR (Buffalo, NY); KDKA (Pittsburgh, PA); WSB (Atlanta, GA); WLW (Cincinnati, OH); WGN (Chicago, IL); KSD (St. Louis, MO); WDAF (Kansas City, MO); WLAG (Minneapolis, MA); WOAW (Omaha, NE); WFAA (Dallas, TX); KLZ (Denver, CO); and KGO (San Francisco, CA).

Though the producers had lined up an impressive list of speakers—including soon-to-retire General John J. Pershing—even Weeks admitted on the air that that day’s addresses were “incidental” to the new technology they were pioneering. The broadcast also served as a defense of sorts for the newly-christened National Defense Day, not surprising considering the military-heavy line-up of guests speakers. The opening remarks bore more than a bit of flag-waving and recapped the festivities earlier that day in DC which included a massive parade that the President proudly reviewed. It was noted that similar displays were taking place all across the country, as citizens nationwide answered “the Defense Day call.”

These same sentiments were echoed by the program’s first guest speaker, Major General Charles McKinley Saltzman, whose remarks took more than a mild jab at the pacifists who originally opposed the day. Those who predicted war from the day’s activities were “mistaken in their prophecy,” he stated before launching into a tribute to General Pershing, who was waiting in the wings.

General Pershing’s ascent to the microphone (“The next voice you’ll hear....”) was met with a round of grand applause from the DC audience. “America’s foremost soldier,” as he was introduced, was succinct in his speech, making only brief mention of his “humble service” and then, following the theme of the day, reiterated that a test of preparedness was a necessity, that

such matters could not be left “hap-hazard.” His final comments were a call to arms to the listening public as well as foreshadowing of John F. Kennedy’s famous “What you can do for your country” speech of 1961: “Your support must be given. Each man and woman within the sound of my voice has just as much an obligation in this matter as I have. This is your country and your responsibility.”

Though such urgent patriotism remained a theme of the overall broadcast, after Pershing, the focus shifted to the gifts of the radio medium with the arrival of the next keynoter, AT&T exec John Carty, who was referred to for the purposes of this program as Brigadier General John J. Carty of the Officer’s Reserve Corps. He began, “No plan for the national defense can be successful unless it provides for an adequate system of electrical communication. Even if millions of men had been trained and were ready to serve...the activities of our government and the people would be paralyzed without electrical communication.” He went on to list a variety of concerns, from household and factory accidents, to fires, acts of violence, floods and tornadoes, and noted how each has been immeasurably aided by radio communication. His litany of crises is one that’s impossible to hear today without thinking about recent natural disasters like Hurricane Katrina or the regular occurrence of California’s annual wilderness fires.

Soon, Carty’s comments turned to the broadcast at hand and he waxed poetic about “the marvels of radio,” stating that “today”:

Even in the most remote communities, among the mountains and the valley and by those upon the sea, the voices of Secretary Weeks and General Pershing have been heard speaking from the seat of government in Washington. Never before has it been possible for so many people...to hear at the same moment the voice of a speaker.... Everyone within the borders of the United States who is listening tonight is...participating in a historic event.

Next, after relating the technical aspects of this revolutionary broadcast—the chain of messages crisscrossing the nation, the thousands of feet of wire “across the country, like a great net”—Carty proceeded with the closest thing the broadcast had to any sort of dramatic tension. One by one, he called up the telephone offices of distant cities, initiating the two-way capabilities of that day’s broadcast. First, the Big Apple, where he was greeted with a deep-voiced salutation of “New York telephone office.” Then Harrisburg, PA. Then Beaver Dam, OH, then Chicago, Davenport, IA; Omaha; Denver; Rawlins, WY; Salt Lake City; Winnemucca, NV; Sacramento; and, finally, San Francisco. The City by the Bay noted that it was only four minutes after 7 in the evening. “Is it dark there?,” Carty inquired.

With the US now successfully yoked together by radio, General Pershing returned to “the wire” to talk individually with various “core” Generals stationed around the nation--General Robert L. Bullard in New York, General Henry Clay Hale in Chicago, General George B. Duncan in Omaha, and General Charles Gould Morton in San Francisco. Conversations with each were brief. Though Bullard briefly engaged in singing an off-key old West Point song, mostly Pershing inquired of the men what had happened in each of their communities on this special day with a special emphasis on how that day’s “testing” went. General Bullard called it the “best day” of his life and General Hale hailed the day as a “great peace demonstration.” The other Major Generals also spoke, perhaps apocryphally, of multi-thousand person turnouts while also wishing Pershing a happy retirement.

Secretary Weeks returned to close the broadcast and placed it in a historical perspective. “You have just listened to a most remarkable conversation,” he said, “...such an achievement in communication has never before been attempted in the history of the world. It shows the ability of a great communication system to meet any great emergency. It has been an epic-making event in the history of communication.”

Yes, despite the landmark nature of the broadcast, the dry nature of the speakers that day made it hard to imagine that anyone but the most defense-inclined, or the biggest technophiles, or those with a particularly well-tuned ear for history, listened for the entire broadcast. Since formal radio listening surveys and ratings were still more than a decade away, it's impossible to determine how many people actually tuned in or stay tuned in, though an estimate in the millions seems reasonable.

But regardless of the broadcast's content or the size of its audience, these factors are far less important than the impressive process that brought this program to the people. And in that respect, the first National Defense Test achieved its goal: it did indeed establish a system that, should the need arise, could be employed for simultaneous national notification. It was a well-executed broadcast, efficient and audible, a triumph for AT&T and its own army of experts and technicians. There was precious little "dead air" during the program, there were no lost connections despite the multitude of real-time "switching" needed to make the relay of sound happen. It also illustrated the cooperative nature of broadcasting companies, a trend which has continued throughout the years: via FDR's "Fireside Chats," Norman Corwin's "We Hold These Truths" broadcast of 1941 and, more recently, broadcast and cable TV's multiple carriage of the "America: A Time for Heroes" telethon in 2001, a few days after the 9/11 attacks, and their similar treatment of the "Hope for Haiti Now" special in early 2010.

Recorded live by Western Electric, the surviving recordings (two sides were damaged in their original processing and could not be salvaged) of the National Defense Test is one of the earliest existing transcriptions of American radio from that time. The recordings are a fascinating document of radio's embryonic stage. But listening to them today, as entrenched as we are now in the 2000s and the commonplace instant-messaging ways of the world, it is difficult to truly appreciate the radical, then cutting-edge aspects of the National Defense Test. Moreover, listening today, knowing subsequent historical events, the broadcast gains a poignancy and resonating feel it could not have had then. Though Pearl Harbor was more than a decade away, from the vantage point of today, it seems to loom over the Test and undermines the hopeful yet cautionary tone of the broadcast. And the Test's inaugural date, now, in retrospect, so eerily close to 9/11, only further recasts this experiment's place in American (and broadcasting) history.

Cary O'Dell is with the Motion Picture, Broadcast and Recorded Sound division of the Library of Congress. He is the author of the books "June Cleaver Was a Feminist!" (2014) and "Women Pioneers in Television" (1997). He also served as assistant editor of "The Concise Encyclopedia of American Radio" (2009) and "The Biographical Encyclopedia of American Radio" (2010).