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Letter From Francis Mairs Huntington-Wilson to Solomon S. Menken, January 23, 1918

Francis Mairs Huntington-Wilson

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Sent to

The President of the National Defense League,
American Rights League,
National Security League.

Washington, D. C., January 23, 1918.

I herewith enclose copy of a draft of the kind of an amendment that I think ought to be added to the Chamberlain Bill to create a War Council or Cabinet, if we are to hope that that bill if passed shall effectively serve the National interests. I am sure you agree with me that a War Council is absolutely necessary, but a War Council can be made mandatory by unsuitable appointments or by the President ignoring it. The check of a proper publicity is the only safeguard and that can only be effectively got through giving the War Council a relationship, at least morally ancillary to a small Congressional Committee on the conduct of the war. I think you must be quite as fully convinced of these facts and of the facts underlying them as I am. I will, therefore, not expand the argument in this letter.

The issue is now clearly drawn and must be fought out upon the question whether this war is to be conducted by something very like a secret autocracy or through a rational democratic efficiency. The matter in my judgment is very urgent and very serious for that reason I write to say that in my judgment the League has a great opportunity for national service of the first order in bringing to bear the influence of the League for the passage of the Chamberlain Bill expanded in its scope by some such amendment as I suggest.

A good War Council of three would multiply by four the President's ability to make quick and wise decision and to transmit to the administrative machine the vast powers given him. The War Council should also make possible the sweeping administrative and departmental reforms that are necessary. But, unless it be linked to a Congressional Committee I doubt its effectiveness. Moreover, none of these reforms nor the vital necessity for the appointment of able men, irrespective of party, can be achieved except through great pressure of Public Opinion. And just here and in encouraging Congress to stand fast for reform is a great opportunity I think for the influence of the League.

Yours sincerely,