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SWAYING A NATION: AMERICAN PROPAGANDA IN WORLD WAR I

With Austrian Archduke Franz Ferdinand’s assassination in Sarajevo by a group of Serbian terrorists on June 28, 1914, the events of World War I were set into motion, unfolding as one the bloodiest wars ever witnessed by humanity. Wanting to preserve the wellbeing and status of his nation, United States President Woodrow Wilson issued a neutrality proclamation soon after the onset of war in Europe, officially outlining America’s position of non-interventionism in the conflict. However, as the war raged on, America was slowly—yet not without some provocation by the U.S. government—dragged into World War I, until, on April 6, 1917, Congress, acting on request of Wilson, declared war on Germany, formally entangling the destiny of the United States with that of the warring nations of Europe.

By this time, though, the Wilson administration knew that the difficulty of the war was not limited to fighting battles overseas. A psychological mobilization of the American people was necessary to convince them to throw their support in favor of the war effort and to preserve what unity existed in the United States. The prospect of manipulating the very mindset of U.S. citizens was daunting—and more than a little controversial—and Wilson understood that it would demand comprehensive measures and techniques. Nevertheless, the intrepid possibility remained that, despite all the U.S. government’s initiatives, American pacifism would persist, the consequences of which could be devastating and could open the door to an uncertain future for the United States.

When Congress officially ended America’s neutrality in World War I, the U.S. government saw a formidable task in swaying the nation’s populace to support involvement in the war. Strong and decidedly antiwar sentiment had flourished among U.S. citizens in the mid-1910s, as they distantly watched Europe tear itself apart through petty warfare (Zieger 78). Less than one year before Congress’ war declaration, pacifist feeling had reached new heights, when, during San Francisco’s Preparedness Day parade—a festival designed by the Chamber of Commerce to raise awareness to the inevitability of American involvement in World War I—a group of “anti-war labor radicals” interrupted the carousal by detonating a concealed bomb, killing ten civilians and wounding forty more (“The Preparedness Day Bombing”).

In many ways, this definite opposition to any U.S. military action epitomized Americans’ misconception of the war as a far distant conflict, one lacking any threat to their own nation or personage. They felt the war was too exclusively of European concern and consequence for U.S. involvement: It had been instigated by European political turmoil and escalated through Europe’s spider-web of alliances and treaties. This promoted the belief among Americans that they were “insulated” and “impervious” to any warfare happening across the Atlantic, assuming the United States “should and could remain aloof from the conflict in Europe” (Wheeler and Becker 126). This sentiment was enhanced by the United States’ newfound status as the “world’s richest nation” in the early twentieth century, which generated a strong spirit of independence, nationalism, and disregard for foreign affairs among Americans (Spielvogel 441). This standing was a direct result of hardworking entrepreneurs’ advances in industry, allowing the nation to achieve a state of “unchallenged” affluence, a fact that fueled Americans’ sense of national pride and self-reliance, which, in turn, strengthened their long-held stance of non-interventionism in European affairs (Spielvogel 441).

Despite Americans’ desire to retain neutrality in the war, their ethnic ties divided their allegiance, splitting the nation down the lines of Old World heritage. Long considered a melting-pot nation, the United States in 1917 was home to a myriad of races and ethnic groups, including a large number of first-generation immigrants (Hagedorn 28). In the 1910s, two of the most prominent ethnic groups in North America were the German- and Irish-immigrants, who both had reason to sympathize with the Central Powers more so than the Entente Powers. The Wilson administration worried that citizens with strong ethnic ties, such as the German and Irish, might contest American involvement in the war, choosing instead to support their homeland over the United States or to become hostile toward America as it clashed with their native country (Wheeler and Becker 124).

Americans’ antimilitary feeling, delusions of separation and isolation from Europe, and ethnic divisions acted together to provide the Wilson administration with cause for concern about U.S. citizens’ reception of its war platform. The government was faced with the task of swaying a skeptical, diverse American public to support the war effort, and thus it undertook drastic—and often unnerving—steps to coerce the American people into agreement with its agenda. To head-off this effort, Congress, two months after joining the war, passed the Espionage Act of 1917, a piece of legislation shrouded in controversy. This law made it a crime to “obstruct the war” in any way, by illegalizing any attempt “to criticize the war, to discourage enlistment, to encourage mutiny, and to impede in any way the government’s campaign to build a military force”—altogether marking a drastic invasion of people’s constitutional freedoms of speech and expression (Hagedorn 29). Furthering the government’s vigilant censorship of public autonomy, a set of amendments to the Espionage Act, collectively dubbed the Sedition Act of 1918, was passed the following year, criminalizing any attempt to “willfully utter, print, write, or publish any disloyal, profane, scurrilous, or abusive language about…the United States” (Duffy “U.S. Espionage Act, 7 May 1918”).

However, the government knew judicial enforcement alone could not alter public opinion. Thus, with Executive Order 2594, Woodrow Wilson established the Committee on Public Information (CPI), a government agency charged with “portraying the ‘absolute justice of America’s cause [and] the absolute selflessness of America’s aims’” (Zieger 79). Headed by journalist George Creel, the CPI was founded on the principle that “America’s vast network of newspapers, libraries, schools, universities, and citizen associations could be used to promote the country’s war aims” (Zieger 79). The CPI was to accomplish its psychological mobilization of Americans by both “[disseminating] its own propaganda” and “[coordinating] the propaganda activities of other federal…agencies” (Zieger 79). Thus, it allied itself with the media to create a pervasive propaganda machine determined to coerce Americans into endorsing the country’s military efforts. A bevy of films praising American involvement in the war and demonizing the enemy were produced soon after Congress’ war declaration. Among these were Charlie Chaplain’s *The Bond*, which aimed to promote the sale of war bonds; the documentary feature *America Goes Over*, structured to contrast the war before and after America became involved, emphasizing the many improvements U.S. soldiers had brought about; and *The Kaiser, the Beast of Berlin*, which aimed to show the “political greed of the [German] Kaiser Wilhelm” (Beaver). Working in tandem with professional advertising agencies, the CPI printed millions of posters, billboards, pamphlets, and illustrations and developed catchy slogans for products—all intended to “recruit workers into war industries, encourage food conservation, persuade citizens to subscribe to war bond drives, and most dramatically, promote Selective Service registration and enlistment in the armed forces” (Zieger 79). The CPI expanded its range of impact by using libraries, schools, and churches as distribution centers for propaganda materials.

Perhaps the CPI’s most “distinctive” and “widely publicized” initiative, the Four-Minute Men program advanced the government’s agenda through face-to-face interaction with the American people, focusing especially on the endeavor to “bring the war home…in a particularly vivid and insistent way” (Zieger 79). Under this initiative, speakers, usually local politicians or businessmen, would deliver quick, pro-war speeches during the four-minute-long reel changes at movie theaters, reaching an audience of ten million Americans each day (Zieger 79). However, this program did not restrict its speakers to theaters alone, and thus it soon expanded into schools, church groups, clubs, and even Indian Reservations. Overtime, a junior Four-Minute Men program developed, where young schoolchildren were trained “for classroom and assembly orations” (Zieger 80). By the end of the war, the Four-Minute Men program’s employees included Whites and Blacks, men and women, who together had collectively delivered 750,000 speeches and reached an audience of 314 million people with the CPI’s war propaganda (Zieger 80).

The U.S. government’s legislation criminalizing dissent against the war and the Committee on Public Information’s efforts to create positive feeling toward military action were greatly influential. Altogether, the Wilson administration’s extensive war-promoting techniques had lasting consequences on the nation. With the “outstanding success” of the CPI’s pro-war campaign, the American people surged with support for the nation’s war aims (Zieger 83). Entirely forgetting their initial apprehension at the United States joining the European conflict, Americans embraced the war effort, jubilantly supporting the soldiers and military wherever possible, forming a new kind of pro-war patriotism. The Wilson administration had effectively completed its campaign for the mobilization of American opinion, an extremely tedious, political task, and the “polyglot population showed few signs of disloyalty or disaffection” (Zieger 83).

In part, U.S. involvement in World War I represented the nation’s declining sense of isolation and foreshadowed its future openness to worldwide political connections. The United States was, from very early in its existence, steered away from political involvement with Europe. As outlined by colonial-president George Washington, “Europe has a set of primary interests which to us have none,” and through decades of America’s growth as a nation, it remained a distant figure in European affairs, adopting an aura of anonymity toward the continent (“Washington’s Farewell Address 1796”). However, with America’s voluntary involvement in World War I, a slow trend was set in motion, leading the U.S. away from the isolationism of its early days toward its political prowess of modern times.

On the flipside, however, the CPI, in its fervor to rally enthusiasm for the war, ignored many moral boundaries, paving the way for continued racial division. Not only had the government “helped create a climate of mass fear and suspicion,” with everyone taking on a mentality of wariness toward possible German-sympathizers, but the bigoted propaganda encouraged racism among Americans (Wheeler and Becker 125). Much of the CPI’s materials painted Germans as “monstrous” and “irremediable”—descriptions taken to heart by the American people, fueling their racist tendencies, and by U.S. scholars and historians, who became “infected” by the CPI’s “hatred and demonization” of Germans and their culture (Zieger 83).

With this sort of unreliable journalism, the CPI greatly contributed to the “corruption of public discourse,” setting precedent for support of the media’s biased stance on political issues and attempts to control private attitudes (Zieger 83). Much of the CPI’s propaganda played “fast and loose with the facts,” both exaggerating some information and preventing some from reaching the public (Zieger 83). All of this was done with the aim of talking up American involvement in World War I, trying to establish and maintain American’s support of U.S. military efforts. This exemplified the media’s continued tendency to function as a strong influence on popular opinion, shaping Americans’ perception of world events—an ability the media still possess even today.

Over the course of only a few years, the Wilson administration completely changed the position on war held by the United States’ public. The American people, in 1917, were far from ready to approve of their nation’s involvement in the war. They had fallen prey to an undeniably antiwar stance, which was enhanced by their feelings of disassociation from the conflict and independence from its consequences—all precariously teetering on their Old World heritage. To counteract this general consensus and to garner support for U.S. involvement in the war, the government passed a series of legislative maneuvers and established the Committee on Public Information, which immediately pioneered a campaign to manipulate popular opinion. In the end, the government was successful in swaying the American attitude in favor of the war, a symbolic departure from the nation’s primitive isolationism, yet at the same time blatantly provoking continued divisions along racial lines and augmenting the prowess of the media. Ultimately, the Wilson administration’s promotion of the war united a disjointed country, one divided by the strain of Progressivism and frazzled at its newfound prosperity and authority, and set the stage for World War II, where many of the same techniques of manipulation would be used.