

CHAPTER

5

Homogenizing a Pluralistic Nation: Propaganda During World War I

* THE PROBLEM *

One week after Congress approved the war declaration that brought the United States into World War I,¹ President Woodrow Wilson signed Executive Order 2594, which created the Committee on Public Information, a government agency designed to mobilize public opinion behind the war effort. Wilson selected forty-one-year-old journalist and political ally George Creel to direct the committee's efforts. Creel immediately established voluntary press censorship, which essentially made the committee the overseer of all war and war-related news.

The Committee on Public Information also produced films, engaged

some seventy-five thousand lecturers (called "Four Minute Men") who delivered approximately 7.5 million talks (each of which was to last no longer than four minutes), commissioned posters intended to aid recruitment and sell war bonds (seven hundred poster designs were submitted to the committee and more than 9 million posters were printed in 1918 alone), and engaged in numerous other propaganda activities.

Why did the federal government believe that the Committee on Public Information was necessary? For one thing, there appears to have been considerable concern in the Wilson administration that American public opinion, which had supported the nation's neutrality and noninvolvement, would not support the war effort. More important, however, was the

1. Wilson delivered his war message on April 2, 1917. The Senate declared war on April 3 and the House of Representatives followed suit on April 6.

fear of many government officials that large ethnic blocs of Americans would not support the United States' entry into the conflict. In 1917, the Census Bureau had estimated that approximately 4.7 million people living in the United States had been born in Germany or in one of the other Central Powers.² It was also known that the nation contained a large number of Irish Americans, many of whom were vehemently anti-British and thus might be expected to side with the Central Powers.³ Could such a heterogeneous society be persuaded to support the war effort voluntarily? Could Americans of the same ethnic stock as the enemies be rallied to the cause?

In this chapter, you will be examining and analyzing the propaganda techniques of a modern nation at war. The Evidence section contains material sponsored or commissioned by the Committee on Public Information (posters, newspaper advertisements, excerpts from speeches by Four Minute Men) as well as privately produced works (song lyrics and commercial

film advertisements) that either were approved by the committee or tended to parallel its efforts. After examining the evidence, you will work to answer the following questions:

1. How did the government attempt to mobilize the opinion of a diverse American public in support of a united war effort?
2. What were the consequences—positive and negative—of this effort?

On a larger scale, you should be willing to ponder other questions as well, although they do not relate directly to the evidence you will examine. To begin with, is government-sponsored propaganda during wartime a good thing? When it comes into conflict with the First Amendment's guarantees of freedom of speech, which should prevail? Finally, is there a danger that government-sponsored propaganda can be carried too far? Why do you think that was (or was not) the case during World War I?

* BACKGROUND *

By the early twentieth century, the United States had worldwide eco-

2. The actual figure was closer to 4.27 million people. See U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Historical Statistics of the United States* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1975), pt. I, p. 117.

3. According to the U.S. census of 1920, there were 1.04 million Americans who had been born in Ireland and 3.12 million native-born Americans who had one or both parents of Irish birth.

nomics interests and even had acquired a modest colonial empire, but many Americans wanted to believe that they were insulated from world affairs and impervious to world problems. Two great oceans seemed to protect the nation from overseas threats, and the enormity of the country and comparative weakness of its neighbors appeared to secure it against all dangers. Let other nations waste their people

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and resources in petty wars over status and territory, Americans reasoned. The United States should stand above such greed or insanity, and certainly should not wade into foreign mud puddles.

To many Americans, European nations were especially suspect. For centuries, European nations had engaged in an almost ceaseless round of armed conflicts—wars for national unity, territory, or even religion or empire. Moreover, in the eyes of many Americans, these bloody wars appeared to have solved little or nothing, and the end of one war seemed to be but a prelude to the next. Ambitious kings and their plotting ministers seemed to make Europe the scene of almost constant uproar, an uproar that many Americans saw as devoid of reason and morality. Nor did it appear that the United States, as powerful as it was, could have any effect on the unstable European situation.

For this reason, most Americans greeted news of the outbreak of war in Europe in 1914 with equal measures of surprise and determination not to become involved. They applauded President Wilson's August 4 proclamation of neutrality, his statement (issued two weeks later) urging Americans to be impartial in thought as well as in deed, and his insistence that the United States continue neutral commerce with all the belligerents. Few Americans protested German violation of Belgian neutrality. Indeed, most Americans (naively, as it turned out) believed that the United States both should and could remain aloof from the conflict in Europe.

But many factors pulled the United States into the conflict that later be-

came known as World War I.⁴ America's economic prosperity to a large extent rested on commercial ties with Europe. In 1914, U.S. trade with the Allies (England, France, Russia) exceeded \$800 million, whereas trade with the Central Powers (Germany, Austria, Turkey) stood at approximately \$170 million. Much of the trade with Great Britain and France was financed through loans from American banks, something President Wilson and Secretary of State William Jennings Bryan openly discouraged because both men believed that those economic interests might eventually draw the United States into the conflict. Indeed, Wilson and Bryan probably were correct. Nevertheless, American economic interests were closely tied to those of Great Britain and France. Thus a victory by the Central Powers might damage U.S. trade. As Wilson drifted to an acceptance of this fact, Bryan had to back down.

A second factor pulling the United States into the war was the deep-seated feelings of President Wilson himself. Formerly a constitutional historian (Wilson had been a college professor and university president before entering the political arena as a reform governor of New Jersey), Wilson had long admired the British people and their form of government. Although technically neutral, the president strongly, though privately, favored the Allies and viewed a German victory as unthinkable. Moreover, many of Wilson's key advisers and the people close to him were decidedly

4. Until the outbreak of what became known as World War II, World War I was referred to as the Great War.

pro-British. Such was the opinion of the president's friend and closest adviser, Colonel Edward House, as well as that of Robert Lansing (who replaced Bryan as secretary of state)⁵ and Walter Hines Page (ambassador to England). These men and others helped strengthen Wilson's strong political opinions and influence the president's changing position toward the war in Europe. Hence, although Wilson asked Americans to be neutral in thought as well as in deed, in fact he and his principal advisers were neither. More than once, the president chose to ignore British violations of America's neutrality. Finally, when it appeared that the Central Powers might outlast their enemies, Wilson was determined to intercede. It was truly an agonizing decision for the president, who had worked so diligently to keep his nation out of war.

A third factor affecting the United States' neutrality was the strong ethnic ties of many Americans to the Old World. Many Americans had been born in Europe, and an even larger number were the sons and daughters of European immigrants. Although these people considered themselves to be, and were, Americans, some retained emotional ties to Europe that they sometimes carried into the political arena—ties that could influence America's foreign policy.

Finally, as the largest neutral commercial power in the world, the

5. Bryan resigned in 1915, in protest over what he considered Wilson's too sharp note to Germany over the sinking of the passenger liner *Lusitania*. Wilson called the act "illegal and inhuman." Bryan sensed that the Wilson administration was tilting away from neutrality.

United States soon became caught in the middle of the commercial warfare of the belligerents. With the declaration of war, both Great Britain and Germany threw up naval blockades. Great Britain's blockade was designed to cut the Central Powers off from war materiel. American commercial vessels bound for Germany were stopped, searched, and often seized by the British navy. Wilson protested British policy many times, but to no effect. After all, giving in to Wilson's protests would have deprived Britain of its principal military asset: the British navy.

Germany's blockade was even more dangerous, partly because the vast majority of American trade was with England and France. In addition, however, Germany's chief method of blockading the Allies was the use of the submarine, a comparatively new weapon in 1914. Because of the nature of the submarine (lethal while underwater, not equal to other fighting vessels on the surface), it was difficult for the submarine to remain effective and at the same time adhere to international law, such as the requirement that sufficient warning be given before sinking an enemy ship.⁶ In 1915, hoping to terrorize the British into making peace, Germany unleashed its submarines in the Atlantic with orders to sink all ships flying Allied flags. In March, a German submarine sank the British passenger ship *Falaba*. Then on May 7, 1915, the British liner *Lu-*

6. International laws governing warfare at sea, as well as neutral shipping during wartime, were written in the mid-eighteenth century, more than one hundred years before the submarine became a potent seagoing weapon.

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sitania was sunk with a loss of more than 1,000 lives, 128 of them American. Although Germany had published warnings in American newspapers specifically cautioning Americans not to travel on the *Lusitania*, and although it was ultimately discovered that the *Lusitania* had gone down so fast (in only eighteen minutes) because the British were shipping ammunition in the hold of the passenger ship, Americans were shocked by the Germans' actions on the high seas. Most Americans, however, continued to believe that the United States should stay out of the war and approved of Wilson's statement, issued three days after the *Lusitania* sank to the bottom, that "there is such a thing as a man being too proud to fight."

Yet a combination of economic interests, German submarine warfare, and other events gradually pushed the United States toward involvement. In early February 1917, Germany announced a policy of unrestricted submarine warfare against all ships—belligerent and neutral alike. Ships would be sunk without warning if found to be in what Germany designated as forbidden waters. Later that month, the British intercepted a secret telegram intended for the German minister to Mexico, stationed in Mexico City. In that telegram, German Foreign Secretary Arthur Zimmermann offered Mexico a deal: Germany would help Mexico retrieve territory lost to the United States in the 1840s if Mexico would make a military alliance with Germany and declare war on the United States in the event that the United States declared war on

Germany. Knowing the impact that such a telegram would have on American public opinion, the British quickly handed the telegram over to Wilson, who released it to the press. From that point on, it was but a matter of time before the United States would become involved in World War I.

On March 20, 1917, President Wilson called his cabinet together at the White House to advise him on how to proceed in the deteriorating situation with Germany. Wilson's cabinet officers unanimously urged the president to call Congress into session immediately and ask for a declaration of war against Germany. When the last cabinet member had finished speaking, Wilson said, "Well, gentlemen, I think there is no doubt as to what your advice is. I thank you," and dismissed the meeting without informing the cabinet of his own intentions.

Yet even though Wilson had labored so arduously to keep the United States out of the war in Europe, by March 20 (or very soon after) his mind was made up: The United States must make war on Germany. Typing out his war message on his own Hammond portable typewriter, Wilson was out of sorts and complained often of headaches. The president, devoted to peace and Progressive reform, was drafting the document he had prayed he would never have to write.

On April 2, 1917, President Wilson appeared in person before a joint session of Congress to deliver his war message. Congress was ready. On April 4, the Senate approved a war declaration (the vote was 82-6). The House of Representatives followed

suit two days later (by a vote of 373-50).⁷

As noted earlier, at the outset of the United States' entry into the war, the Wilson administration feared that the ethnically diverse American public might not unite in support of the nation's involvement in the Great War. Without a decisive event to prompt the war declaration (some Americans even suspected the Zimmermann telegram was a British hoax), would the American people support the war with sufficient unanimity? No firing on Fort Sumter or blowing up of the battleship *Maine* would force America's

entrance into this war, nor would the *Lusitania* sinking, which had occurred two years before the 1917 war declaration. Without the obvious threat of having been attacked, would the American people rally to the colors to defeat a faraway enemy? Could isolationist and noninterventionist opinion, very strong as late as the presidential election of 1916, be overcome? Could an ethnically heterogeneous people stand together in time of war? To bind together a diverse people behind the war effort, President Wilson created the Committee on Public Information.

* THE METHOD *

For George Creel and the Committee on Public Information, the purposes of propaganda were very clear:

1. Unite a multiethnic, pluralistic society behind the war effort.
2. Attract a sufficient number of men to the armed services and elicit universal civilian support for those men.
3. Influence civilians to support the war effort by purchasing war bonds or by other actions (such as limit-

7. The fifty-six votes in the Senate and House against the declaration of war essentially came from three separate groups: senators and congressmen with strong German and Austrian constituencies, isolationists who believed the United States should not become involved on either side, and some Progressive reformers who maintained that the war would divert America's attention from political, economic, and social reforms.

ing personal consumption or rolling bandages).

4. Influence civilians to put pressure on other civilians to refrain from antiwar comments, strikes, anti-draft activities, unwitting dispersal of information to spies, and other public acts that could hurt the war effort.

To achieve these ends, propaganda techniques had to be used with extreme care. For propaganda to be effective, it would have to contain one or more of the following features:

1. Portrayal of American and Allied servicemen in the best possible light.
2. Portrayal of the enemy in the worst possible light.

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3. Portrayal of the American and Allied cause as just and the enemy's cause as unjust.
4. Message to civilians that they were being involved in the war effort in important ways.
5. Communication of a sense of urgency to civilians.
5. Two excerpts of speeches by Four Minute Men and one poem by a Four Minute Man. (Sources 16 through 18).
6. Material concerning American-made feature films, including suggestions to theater owners on how to advertise the film *Kultur* ("Culture"), two film advertisements, and one still photograph used in advertising a feature film (Sources 19 through 22).

In this chapter, you are given the following six types of World War I propaganda to analyze, some of it produced directly by the Committee on Public Information and some produced privately but examined and approved by the committee:

1. One popular song, perhaps the most famous to come out of World War I, performed in music halls and vaudeville houses (Source 1). Although the Committee on Public Information did not produce this kind of material, it could—and did—discourage performances of "unpatriotic" popular songs.
2. Three newspaper and magazine advertisements produced directly by the Committee on Public Information (Sources 2 through 4).
3. Nine posters either commissioned or approved by the committee and used for recruiting, advertising liberty loans,⁸ and other purposes (Sources 5 through 13).
4. Two cartoons, one an editorial cartoon and the other a prize-winning cartoon in a contest sponsored by a U.S. Army camp publication (Sources 14 and 15).

8. Liberty loans were loans made by U.S. citizens to the government to finance the war effort. They were repaid with interest, and were similar to liberty bonds.

As you examine the evidence, you will see that effective propaganda operates on two levels. On the surface, there is the logical appeal for support to help win the war. On another level, however, certain images and themes are used to excite the emotions of the people for whom the propaganda is designed. As you examine the evidence, ask yourself the following questions:

1. For whom was this piece of propaganda designed?
2. What was this piece of propaganda trying to get people to think? to do?
3. What logical appeals were being made?
4. What emotional appeals were being made?
5. What might have been the results—positive and negative—of these kinds of appeals?

In songs, speeches, advertisements, and film reviews, are there key words or important images? Where there are illustrations (advertisements, posters, cartoons), what facial expressions and images are used? Finally, are there any common logical and emotional themes running through the govern-