

Committee on Public Information

At the outset of America's involvement in WWI, the Wilson administration needed to convince a reluctant country to fight, so mass media was enlisted to propagandize.



When U.S. government messaging combined with mass media: Headed by former journalist George Creel, the U.S. government's Committee on Public Information demanded public support for WWI through a comprehensive propaganda campaign.

by Michael Telzrow

German-born Robert Paul Prager had been living in the United States since 1905 when he was dragged from his home, stripped to his underwear, and lynched just outside the city limits of Collinsville, Illinois, in the early morning of April 5, 1918. His attackers were ultimately acquitted of the crime of murder, justified by a suspicion that Prager might have been a German spy. An aspiring miner and no spy, Prager was the unfortunate victim of an irrational wave of anti-German hysteria that gripped much of the United States after its entry into the First World War. How could this happen in the United States, a country that followed the rule of law? The roots of this wave of prejudice found fertile ground in a federal organization that President Woodrow Wilson had established to marshal support for the U.S. war effort.

On April 13, 1917, President Woodrow Wilson issued Executive Order 2549, es-

tablishing the Committee on Public Information (CPI). This governmental entity, unique in American history, became the official propaganda arm of the U.S. government. Led by outspoken journalist and social-justice reformer George Creel, the committee mobilized an astonishingly wide-ranging propaganda campaign in support of Wilson's war. Charged with shaping public opinion through a multi-layered effort, the CPI used every type of media available. By the end of 1918, its multiple branches had produced thousands of posters, publications, films, and speeches across the country.

When the United States entered WWI in 1917, Wilson made it clear that he intended to commit every resource available. "We are mobilizing a nation as well as creating an Army, and that means we must keep every instrumentality at its highest pitch of efficiency and guided by thoughtful intelligence," he remarked on April 9, 1917. America was a divided nation in 1917, divided by opinion over

whether the United States should join the war effort by sending troops to Europe. Concerned about securing popular support for the war, Wilson turned to former journalist Creel to head the newly formed CPI. Creel would later call the CPI "the world's greatest adventure in advertising."

The United States faced a formidable task on the eve of its involvement in WWI. Leaving aside the obvious challenges of raising and equipping a massive army, there remained the question of public support for the war. Although a large segment of the population was solidly sympathetic to England and France, there remained a sizable segment of the population in opposition to the war, including eight million Americans who traced their ancestry to Germany. Pacifism and noninterventionism remained strong in parts of the West and Northwest. Then there were those of Irish descent eager to see Britain, if not defeated, at least preoccupied. Many, too, had been calling for American involvement as early as 1914.

The task of uniting the opposing groups fell to Creel. Born in Missouri, Creel had embarked on a career in journalism, first starting in Kansas City, Missouri. It was there that he earned a reputation as an outspoken, if not indiscreet, reformer. Working as editor for *The Independent*, he publicly attacked politicians, in particular Kansas City boss Tom Pendergast. After relocating to Denver, Creel continued his politically active reform activities. He continued to call for child-labor laws, women's suffrage, direct primary recall, and a host of other popular reform remedies. A strong advocate of government involvement in everyday life, Creel conversely held an almost reverent optimism in the decision-making ability of American citizens. He was convinced that Americans would ultimately make the right decisions if they were merely presented with the facts, for within the facts lay the fundamental truths that no

amount of censorship could conceal. Speaking before the House Committee on Appropriations, Creel opined, “German propaganda failed in this country ... because honest, decent people inevitably turn against dishonesty.” Honest propaganda seemed the best approach in Creel’s estimation.

Convinced that nothing short of complete solidarity could ensure American success, Creel launched a movement that helped change American opinion from one of reluctance to acceptance. By employing artists, filmmakers, writers, reformers, and ordinary citizens, Creel and the CPI were able to convince a reluctant, anti-war public that the future of democracy hung in the balance. In doing so, Creel struck a deep chord within Americans who saw the United States as the most robust example of republican democracy on Earth. Driven by a moral imperative characteristic of reformers, Creel attacked the problem with an almost religious zeal. Thus, the CPI served as the mouthpiece of Wilsonian idealism, and it was that connection that swept America into a war few had wanted and many feared.

Organized Propaganda

As an organization, the CPI employed over 20,000 men and women (most of them volunteers), attracting writers, intellectuals, artists, and progressive reformers. Two sections (Domestic and Foreign) oversaw the activities of more than 20 subdivisions. There were divisions for almost every human activity, including business management and “women’s work.” No aspect of American life was left untouched by the CPI. Some of the most important subdivisions included the Film Division, Labor Publications Divisions, Pictorial Publications Division, and the Division of Four Minute Men.

The Four Minute Men Division employed over 15,000 volunteer public speakers who addressed the public in a variety of venues, including motion-picture theaters during intermissions. More than 3,000 local chairmen directed the activities of men whose four-minute speeches were carefully drafted and supervised by CPI writers. The subjects dealt with a range of war effort themes, including support for Liberty Bonds or the threat of

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Germany to the American way of life. The government considered all motion-picture theaters as a part of the Four Minute Men organization. In communities where no theaters existed, speakers were encouraged to find other suitable public venues. Questions were not to be entertained, and the speeches were not to exceed four minutes in length.

All encompassing, the numerous divisions managed to insert the CPI into virtually every human activity. It established rules for telegram censorship, produced films showing war progress, mobilized the advertising forces of the country, distributed and censored photographs, created pamphlets, and managed its own wireless and telegram news and wireless news service. So comprehensive was its reach that Joseph Goebbels would later look to it as the model propaganda machine.

Perhaps the most enduring legacy of the CPI may be found in the posters cre-

ated by the Division of Pictorial Publicity. Employing such artists as Charles Dana Gibson, James Montgomery Flagg, and Joseph Pennell, the pictorial division created powerful imagery designed to boost enlistments, demonize the enemy, sell war bonds, and galvanize the home front. So important was the task that America’s best illustrators be employed in the effort that after the war Creel remarked, “It was not only that America needed posters, but it needed the best posters ever drawn.”

Some of the most popular posters included Frederick Strothmann’s *Beat Back the Hun With Liberty Bonds*, showing a blood-dripping, monstrous Hun, peering over the edge of a destroyed Europe with his eyes on America; and Walter Whitehead’s *Come On!*, which depicted an American soldier standing defiantly over a dead German soldier. Other examples emphasized alleged German atrocities.



Controlling the message on a global scale: In order to control the wartime message globally, the CPI set up offices in Europe. Edward Bernays, historically known as the “father of public relations,” appears second from the right among a group of CPI delegates to Europe.

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As to the press, a Syndicate Features Division employed novelists and writers, such as Booth Tarkington and celebrated “muckraker” Ida Tarbell, in an effort to provide newspapers with appropriate material. It distributed “educational war articles” to more than 2,000 weekend papers throughout the country, reaching a circulation as high as seven million. The most popular article in a series entitled *Red White and Blue* was written by Elmer E. Still and Wallace Notestein of the University of Minnesota. Entitled “Conquest and Kultur,” it was a compilation of statements from German officials detailing Germany’s desire to dominate the world. “Only its full and fair presentation,” wrote the authors “can enable the American people to know it is from which they are defending their land.” Eschewing fact and reality, Stanford professor John S. P. Tatlock penned a fantastic imaginary story about an invasion of America by German troops, complete with gory

scenes of murder, arson, and rape. Tatlock concluded by saying that such scenes were being played out in Europe on a grand scale, while ignoring the unlikelihood of a trans-Atlantic invasion. At the series’ peak production, articles such as these were reaching 25,000,000 people each month.

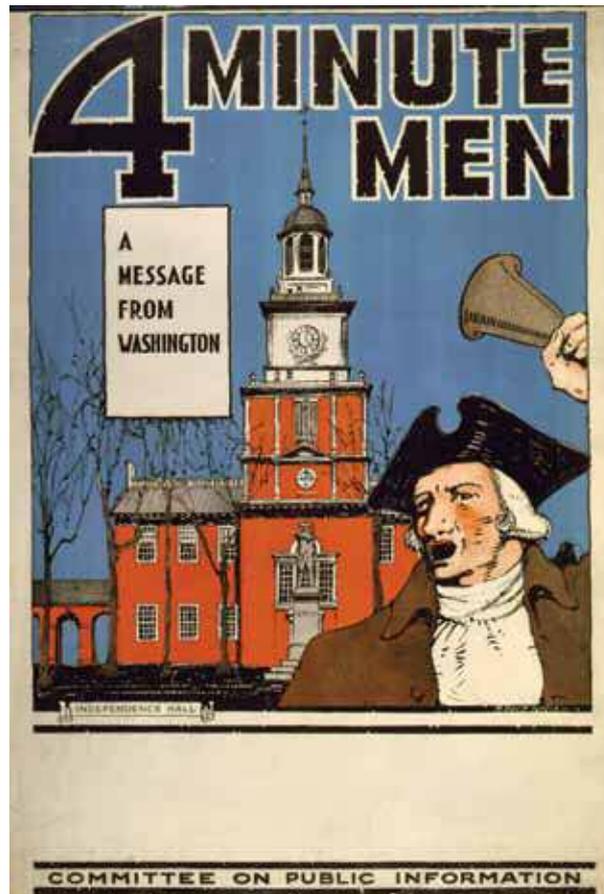
Anti-German Sentiment

A toxic byproduct of the efficient depiction of Germans as beasts was the emergence of a growing anti-German sentiment at home. When America entered the war, many American citizens of German

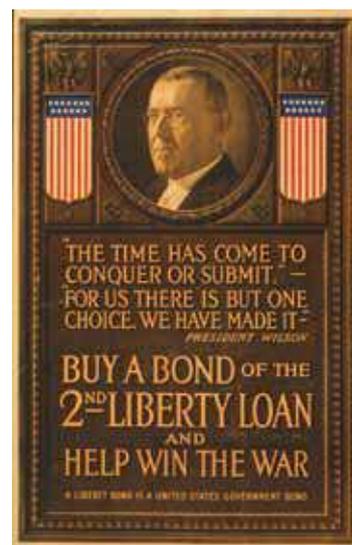
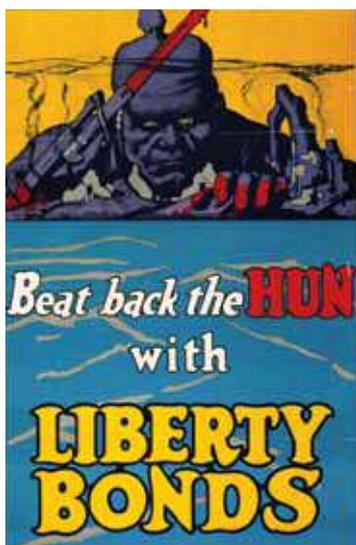
descent were suspected of disloyalty, particularly those who held strong feelings of affection for their German heritage. This assumption, fanned by the CPI’s highly efficient propaganda campaign, manifested itself in a negative reaction to all things German. In a show of patriotism, symphonies refused to perform works of German composers, schools dropped German language courses, and demands were made on the Treasury Department to force banks to drop the name “German-American” from their title.

Americans of German descent were also subjected to insults that in some cases took on a physical dimension. Most of these acts were petty in nature, but the case of the aforementioned Robert Paul Prager illustrates the tragic side of CPI-fueled anti-German prejudice. Robert Paul Prager, a one-eyed, unnaturalized 33-year-old from Dresden, became the target of a union mob in south central Illinois. Prager, who had a history of unemployment, possibly due in part to his irascible demeanor, had come to Collinsville, Illinois, for work and had made application to the local chapter of the United Mine Workers Union. It was summarily rejected by the union president on the grounds that Prager harbored socialist sympathies, and that he was a bad risk. At the time, the nearby community of Maryville, where the mine was located, was overcome by the frenzy of anti-German sentiment. Rumors were circulated claiming that German spies were working in the area with plans to detonate explosives in the local mine. Prager, a German alien, unmarried and a lukewarm socialist, was a likely suspect.

Incensed by this apparent injustice, Prager attacked the local union official in an open letter, prompting a contingent of miners to take action. Convinced that Prager was a German spy, 75 miners removed Prager from his home and subjected him to a night of terror. He was forced to march through the town draped in the American flag. He was subsequently taken into protective custody by the authorities, but a



Propaganda people: An army of volunteers, called Four Minute Men, gave patriotic speeches in movie theaters and churches, and on street corners. The speeches were officially approved.



Demonizing the enemy and playing on patriotism: To move the American war effort into high gear, the U.S. government hired America's finest illustrators to lead the people down the correct path. CPI posters motivated Americans to buy bonds, work harder, and despise the enemy.

drunken mob forcibly removed him from the jail, stripped him to his underwear, and marched him through the streets. Despite Prager's pleas of innocence, a mob of over 200 onlookers watched a handful of miners clumsily attempt to hang Prager from a tree. Unsuccessful on the first try, the miners freed Prager momentarily so he could make a last statement. Prager took the time to write a short note to his parents in Germany, said a few prayers in German, and allegedly told the miners, "Go ahead and kill me, but wrap me in the flag when you bury me." At 12:30 a.m., April 5, 1918, 15 miners and two witnesses taught Robert Paul Prager what it meant to be a true patriot. Prager's assailants were charged with murder, but escaped conviction on the grounds that he was a spy. Writing about the tragedy, the *Washington Post* unabashedly endorsed anti-German hysteria as a laudable thing, opining, "In spite of excesses such as lynching, it is a healthful and wholesome awakening in the interior of the country."

Destruction of Free Speech and Civil Liberties

It is often said that during war, freedom of speech is the first casualty. World War I was no exception. Believing that they were engaged in an existential struggle with the forces of evil, many Americans accepted a temporary suspension of civil liberties. At the same time, there were many who strongly criticized such policies that limited speech and expression.

The issue did not escape the notice of George Creel and members of the CPI.

Hoping to avoid the strict military censorship that plagued the Europeans, Creel conveyed to Wilson that "expression, not suppression" was the wisest approach. On May 28, 1917, the CPI issued a Preliminary Statement to the Press of the United States. Drafted largely by Creel, it explained that the exigencies of war called for a re-evaluation of the method in which news was handled.

Arguing for minimum censorship, the statement divided news into three categories: dangerous, questionable, and routine. Dangerous news concerned releases on military operations, movement of official missions, and other potentially sensitive concerns, which were not to be reported. Material deemed sensitive was to be published only after approval by the CPI. News items that fell into the routine category, the most common news items, were left up to the discretion of editors and writers. The CPI encouraged the submission of routine material in questionable cases. Once the material was approved, it received the CPI stamp "Passed by the Committee on Public Information." While these regulations were entirely voluntary, the CPI made it clear that they were to be followed to the letter. An irresponsible press could prove to be a "menace when the Nation is at war." So the burden of responsibility fell squarely upon the shoulders of editors and writers across the nation. Creel hoped that these

editors might come together, compelled by "aroused patriotism," in a show of solidarity and self-regulation.

Despite his public aversion to censorship, Creel was appointed to the Censorship Board. This committee was charged with regulating the government's censorship activities, and Creel's association with it seemed to contradict his policy of voluntary censorship. When asked whether the First Amendment guaranteed freedom of speech and press, Creel replied, "We have never had absolute freedom of speech. In war, ... there is a difference between free speech and seditious speech." Indeed, others such as constitutional law professor and friend of Woodrow Wilson Edward S. Corwin echoed Creel's sentiment, claiming that Congress possessed the right and authority to restrict speech during wartime.

Free speech is the foundational freedom enjoyed by all Americans, but during WWI, that right was suppressed with the passage of the Espionage and Sedition Acts. These acts made unlawful the public criticism of government leaders and war policies. Although the CPI was not responsible for their passage or enforcement, these acts gave the CPI some level of coercive power when dealing with the press, and law-enforcement agencies were all too willing to use the Espionage Act to force compliance with the CPI's policy of "voluntary censorship." In particular, section 3 of Title I and Title XII gave the Justice Department the authority



Belt tightening: During WWI Americans were encouraged to eat less by the CPI, and they did. Americans altered their eating habits to ensure victory over the Germans.

to prosecute approximately 2,000 cases. Penalties were severe and included a possible 20-year prison sentence. The Sedition Act of May 16, 1918 extended the lens to anyone caught obstructing the sale of Liberty Bonds. In an effort to make the law all-inclusive, the writing, printing, or saying of anything “disloyal, profane, scurrilous, or abusive” about America became illegal.

The censorship that Creel had wished to avoid found acceptance. Postmaster Albert S. Bursleson effectively denied access to the mail for a subset of Americans. Publications deemed unpatriotic (e.g., anti-British, anti-war, pro-Irish independence) were banned from the mail. Overt censorship reached every aspect of American life, including the arts. Robert Goldstein’s film *The Spirit of '76* was seized under Title XI of the Espionage Act. Goldstein made the mistake of showing Loyalist British troops and their Indian allies slaughtering retreating Patriots during the American Revolution at the Battle of Wyoming. Whether or not the film was historically accurate, the nation could not allow the viewing of a film about a particularly brutal episode with England — a country with which the United States was now allied in a quest to defeat Germany. Not only was the film seized, Goldstein was sentenced to 10

years in federal custody. President Wilson subsequently commuted his sentence to three years.

From Noninterventionism to Global War

Creel’s crusade to reach all Americans with a message of conformity and unity as regards the war effort was largely successful. The CPI was unlike anything anyone had seen before. Its national network of information and propaganda was responsible for mobilizing the nation for World War I. Creel’s CPI was a model of efficiency that sold the war to an ambivalent public. But the work of the CPI held dangerous implications for liberty. The CPI’s support of “voluntary censorship” allowed for the suspension of freedom of speech and the press.

Despite Creel’s faith in the judgment of the average American, his success in rousing the general public to high levels of anti-German sentiment proved his theory false. The success of the CPI rested on its ability to appeal to emotion, rather than rationality. Before the war, Creel had written in defense of Wilson’s pacifism. Speaking of those who wanted to enter the war, he wrote, “It is the intent to keep the people so busy feeling, that they will have no time for thinking.” Ironically, Creel’s CPI did just that dur-

ing the war. In 1916, Wilson had run for president on the slogan “He kept us out of war.” One year later, his propaganda arm under the leadership of Creel had relegated that slogan to the trash heap. The CPI’s total monopolization of public information through an enormous and unrelenting megaphone of pro-war propaganda convinced Americans that war with Germany was not only necessary, but morally justified.

Creel’s propaganda machine was so effective that in *Mein Kampf*, Hitler himself acknowledged the success of the CPI as a model for what could be accomplished with propaganda. Although Creel’s intent was to present an honest and objective view of the war, the unifying message was that America was engaged in a struggle against evil. Anyone disagreeing with that premise was subject to patriotic shaming, and in some cases prosecution.

Modern-day CPI

On the face of it, though the CPI appears to be the product of another age and of no concern for us today, Americans are now faced with a similarly conformist national press — one in which a progressive message of globalism and socialism is peddled with all of the religious fervor and intolerance for dissent that characterized Creel’s CPI. Whereas Creel’s intentions were honest — he believed that his objective presentation of the facts honored the capacity of Americans to make the right decisions — the present day media distrust the average American, and force-feed the public dishonest and destructive messages in pursuit of fundamental changes to America’s culture and political landscape. Although not an official arm of the government, the establishment media functions in a state of near complete monopoly that would have appalled even the likes of George Creel.

Fortunately, a growing number of freedom-loving Americans have found alternative sources for information, such as THE NEW AMERICAN and other publications and online resources that offer a different worldview than the establishment press. Despite occasional challenges to their survival, these outlets will continue to enlighten Americans about threats to their liberties, and will serve as a bulwark against the conformist message of the establishment media. ■