

Propaganda at Home (USA)

By [Robert A. Wells](#)

Summary

This article examines the role and activities of the Committee on Public Information (CPI) in mobilizing American public support for the war. As America's first wartime propaganda agency, the CPI utilized all major media outlets of the day coupled with a sophisticated targeted audience strategy to sell the war to a divided and skeptical nation. The committee's efforts were aided by a mostly compliant press; harsh government repression and censorship of dissent; and voluntary cooperation from various pro-war domestic groups.

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Introduction

Looking back at his wartime experience as head of the foreign division of the Committee on Public Information (CPI), journalist-turned-propagandist [Will Irwin \(1873-1948\)](#) referred to the period surrounding the Great War as ushering in "an age of lies."¹ The extensive CPI wartime propaganda efforts directed at the American public as well as foreign audiences would prove to be the basis for enduring historical controversy. Despite a few defenders of the CPI,² most commentary and analysis tend toward a critical assessment of America's wartime propaganda program during World War I.

In some respects, the overall historical significance of the CPI may in fact be substantially greater than that of subsequent propaganda efforts. The First World War turned out to be a watershed event in the development of modern propaganda. The world's first experience

with [total war](#) became wedded with the [United States'](#) first systematic and institutionalized national program of propaganda. In a classic work on propaganda, [Harold Lasswell \(1902-1978\)](#) noted, "the [First] World War led to the discovery of propaganda by both the man in the street and the man in the study."³

This essay will describe the organizational structure and activities of the Committee on Public Information and will note the role of private agencies in formulating propaganda messages for the home front. Since a substantial number of private social and civic organizations provided critical support for the war, with many enthusiastically cooperating with the CPI or acting on their own initiative, it is necessary to locate the governmentally directed propaganda campaign within a wider societal context that is linked with a variety of powerful private sources of propaganda. The public-private cooperative enterprise that mobilized the American public during World War I became an important development in facilitating enhanced state penetration into the lives of citizens in democratic societies.⁴

The Committee on Public Information

The Committee on Public Information was created via executive order one week following the American declaration of war. [George Creel \(1876-1953\)](#), a progressive journalist and long-time [Woodrow Wilson \(1856-1924\)](#) supporter, was selected to be the civilian chair of the CPI. The Secretaries of State, War, and Navy rounded out the executive committee membership. The personnel of the CPI consisted of some of the nation's most prominent progressives and other liberal and socialist reformers. Since many public intellectuals and journalists associated with the Progressive movement saw the war as an opportunity for further reform of society, the ideological composition of the committee helped to shape the CPI's approach and techniques. For progressive intellectuals and reformers, the CPI could be both an instrument to mobilize the country for war and an educational tool of domestic reform. In this context democracy promotion abroad became extrinsically linked with the democratic reform movement at home.

In addition to the CPI, other federal agencies and departments such as the Treasury and the Food Administration played substantial roles in the campaign to mobilize public opinion. According to one scholar, the propaganda activities of the Food Administration, "at times rivaled the CPI in volume and in its reach into American homes."⁵ Furthermore, the national effort was dependent upon considerable voluntary cooperation from state and local authorities. But without question it was the CPI under the leadership of its energetic chair, George Creel, which was the national agency of greatest significance in generating and organizing support for the war.⁶

Organizationally, the CPI consisted of two sections: one domestic and one foreign. The foreign section was the larger of the two and was concerned with directing American propaganda activities overseas where it had established offices in over thirty countries.⁷ The domestic section was composed of a variety of specialized divisions to mobilize the home front. The exact number of domestic divisions changed over time as new ones were added and others were consolidated as the need arose. At its peak, one estimate places the total number of CPI employees at 150,000.⁸ The title and subtitle of Creel's own 1920 account of the committee's activities, *How We Advertised America: The First Telling of the Amazing Story of the Committee on Public Information That Carried the Gospel of Americanism to Every Corner of the Globe*, reveals much about the purpose and goals that underpinned the thinking at the CPI. Creel thought he was not engaged in propaganda, but was merely publicizing the truth. Spreading the "gospel of Americanism" around the world reflected Creel's and the CPI's sincere idealism and view that the war was a moral crusade. Paradoxically, this moral certainty would lead President Wilson to warn in June 1917, "woe be to the man or group of men that seeks to stand in our way."⁹

In his post-war report to Congress, Creel describes the approach adopted by the CPI as follows:

At the very outset the Committee on Public Information made the decision that the three great agencies of appeal in the fight for public opinion were: The Written Word, the Spoken Word, and the Motion Picture. Even as the speaking forces and writers of the nation were mobilized, so were steps taken in the very first days to utilize every resource of the camera.¹⁰

Thus, one of the ways the CPI attempted to influence public opinion was through the spoken word. The Speaking Division and the Division of Four Minute Men both played prominent roles in achieving this task, since a considerable segment of the population was semi-literate or did not read at all. Typically, the Speakers Division recruited prominent national or foreign personalities to tour and speak across the country. In the era before radio, inspirational speakers could attract large audiences and have a significant impact on public opinion.

Four Minute Men

The Division of Four Minute Men is one of the more fascinating innovations in mass propaganda from World War I. The idea for the Four Minute Men originated with a group of Chicago businessmen who hit upon the idea of speaking during intermission in movie theaters as a way to communicate with large audiences concerning war issues. There was a double meaning to the term Four Minute Men. Four minutes was the time made available to a

speaker at intermission because that was the amount of time it took to change a movie reel. Additionally, the term minute man evoked the patriotic symbol from the American Revolutionary War. Once the United States entered the war, the Chicago organizers suggested the concept of the Four Minute Men to George Creel, who immediately created a national program under the auspices of the CPI. It is estimated that by war's end 75,000 Four Minute Men speakers had been recruited; they gave over 755,000 speeches to audiences totaling more than 314,454,000 persons.¹¹

Part of the success of the Four Minute Men must also be attributed to the care with which the speakers were recruited and supervised. Each speaker was screened by local members of the community and only those who were thought to possess good public speaking skills were selected. The four-minute time limit was strictly enforced, so as not to alienate theater patrons or theater managers. Finally, even though each speaker was allowed to compose their four-minute talk in their own words, the CPI provided periodic bulletins to suggest specific topics for the Four Minute Men as particular needs arose. These bulletins (forty-six were published in all) were at the "heart" of the Four Minute Men activities by providing centralized guidance to local speakers.¹² Most significantly, the Four Minute Men speakers were local residents speaking to local audiences in their own words, but participating in a nationally coordinated propaganda message campaign. Consequently, the Four Minute Men have been characterized as the "shock troops" of American propaganda.¹³

Visual Propaganda

Some of the country's leading illustrators were recruited to the Division of Pictorial Publicity to produce war posters and advertisements. This division had been created in part through the efforts of a group of pro-war artists known as the Vigilantes.¹⁴ The primary function of this division was the production of propaganda posters that were to blanket public spaces. With over 300 artists creating designs, this division had an astonishing record both in terms of quality and quantity of the art it produced.¹⁵ Many iconic images such as [James Montgomery Flagg's \(1877-1960\)](#) "Uncle Sam Wants You" poster were created to spur recruitment, promote food conservation, vilify alleged German [atrocities](#), and sell war bonds. The United States produced more war posters – over 20 million in total – than all of the other nations at war combined.¹⁶

Even the country's cartoonists were not beyond the reach of the CPI through its Bureau of Cartoons. In both posters and [cartoons](#), the creators drew upon familiar and comfortable cultural symbols. The nation was often symbolized through the image of Lady Columbia or

the Statue of Liberty, while women were portrayed in the traditionally safe roles of mother, nurse, or war victim.¹⁷ Romantic images of war as an adventure and the transformative effect it would have on young boys maturing into men were sentimental themes often used in posters and cartoons.

In addition to the spoken and written word, the CPI sought to utilize [film](#) and [photography](#) to promote the war. To this end, the CPI created the Division of Films and the Division of Pictures. The CPI promoted exhibitions of war photos and captured German war equipment through its Bureau of War Exhibition and Bureau of State Fair Exhibits. The latter exhibits drew up to 7 million visitors.¹⁸ Although the CPI had a slow start in using films, Creel was eventually able to secure an agreement from the Secretary of War that the CPI would be the sole distribution agency for Signal Corps photographs and motion pictures of the war. This agreement provided the foundation for the CPI's film and photography activities. The Division of Films produced a weekly newsreel entitled *Official War Review* and even produced some feature length films later in the war. Two of the more noteworthy feature length films produced by the CPI included *Pershing's Crusaders* and *America's Answer*. By the end of the war, the Division of Films was one of the largest and most successful divisions within the CPI.¹⁹

Self-Censorship

A News Division was established to coordinate the government's release of war-related information. The CPI's Division of News pioneered the use of the "handout" or news release. [Harry O'Higgins \(1876-1929\)](#), associate director of the CPI, wrote "The Daily German Lie" press releases from August to November 1918 in an effort to kill rumors that questioned the credibility of CPI propaganda themes.²⁰ This division also published a daily newspaper, the *Official Bulletin*, and the *War News Digest*. Although the CPI did not engage in [censorship](#) directly, self-censorship was the common response by the press; the fear of prosecution by the Justice Department under such measures as the Sedition and Espionage Acts, or denial of postal privileges by a zealous Postmaster General always loomed in the background. Voluntary self-censorship was a routine practice in libraries. As the director of an Iowa library bluntly put it, "during the past summer and fall we had a number of pro-German books donated, but I burned them as they came."²¹

For those members of the public who did not regularly read daily news accounts of the war, a Division of Syndicated Features was created to generate inclusion of war information in the feature sections of Sunday newspapers. A Foreign Language Newspaper Division to oversee the foreign language press was also established by the CPI. In sum, the CPI was quite

aggressive in shaping and controlling the content of press coverage of the war.²²

Civic Education

The CPI had a stable of talented academic writers who made significant contributions to the propaganda program through the Division of Civic and Educational Cooperation. This division was responsible for the famous *Red, White and Blue* and *War Information Series* pamphlets. Millions of these pamphlets were distributed at home and around the world. Some 200-300 scholars worked in this division writing books and pamphlets justifying the war. The Division of Civic and Educational Cooperation also published a bi-monthly bulletin designed to promote patriotism among school children. According to the bulletin's managing editor, the *National School Service* was sent to public schools throughout the country in an effort to assist teachers in making "every school pupil a messenger for Uncle Sam."²³ Editors of children's magazines, also recipients of CPI propaganda, peppered their issues with war-related themes specifically directed at informing children about the benefits of war and how they could assist with the war effort.²⁴

The CPI also created the Division of Advertising in order to help the government take advantage of the advertising industry's skills to develop advertisement copy and utilize space donated from newspapers and magazines. The success of the CPI in forging links with the private advertising industry and facilitating non-governmental sources of propaganda suggests a complex narrative surrounding the totality of America's propaganda campaign. The Division of Advertising not only serviced the advertising needs of the CPI, but assisted in the campaigns of several agencies, including the [Young Men's Christian Association](#), [Red Cross](#), the Fuel and Food Administrations, and the Departments of War, Treasury, and Agriculture. The Division of Advertising in collaboration with the Division of Pictorial Publicity was instrumental in arousing nationalistic sentiment among the public in favor of a variety of war related causes, from war loan drives to food and fuel conservation. For obvious reasons, this division was one of the most critical in communicating the CPI's war messages.

The CPI had specific concerns about generating support for the war among women, immigrants, and labor. Consequently, the CPI set up a Division of Women's War Work, Division of Work with the Foreign Born, and a Division of Industrial Relations in order to encourage support for the war among these groups. The latter division was later transferred to the Department of Labor, which flooded American factories with pro-war messages. Additionally, the CPI funded the pro-war labor organization, the American Alliance for Labor and Democracy.²⁵

President Wilson also personally contributed to the propaganda campaign. As a very talented communicator in his own right, the CPI published and widely distributed many of Wilson's speeches. The impact of Wilson's contribution to the propaganda effort was substantial as described below by Harold Lasswell in his pioneering work on the topic:

Such matchless skill as Wilson showed in propaganda has never been equalled in the world's history. He spoke to the heart of the people as no statesman has ever done...Just how much of this Wilsonism was rhetorical exhibitionism and how much was the sound fruit of sober reflection will be in debate until the [First] World War is a feeble memory. From a propaganda point of view it was a matchless performance, for Wilson brewed the subtle poison, which industrious men injected into the veins of a staggering people, until the smashing powers of the Allied armies knocked them into submission. While he fomented discord abroad, Wilson fostered unity at home.²⁶

This summary and overview of the organizational structure and activities of the CPI suggests an extensive and comprehensive effort to propagandize the American public during the First World War. Few, if any, communications media of the day were ignored by George Creel and his staff, nor were any major social groups neglected in the CPI's focused appeals. [Women](#), farmers, [children](#), workers, ethnic groups, and immigrants were all specifically targeted in a nationally coordinated propaganda campaign.

The CPI's Legacy

In the short term, the CPI was successful in unifying a nation at war and, in Creel's words, turning the American people into "one white-hot mass...with fraternity, devotion, courage, and deathless determination."²⁷ But this national unity came with an extravagant price tag. Not only was truth often casually dismissed, but the repression of dissent and hatred of all things German were also casualties of American's propaganda campaign.²⁸ Once the propaganda induced fog of war was lifted, all that remained was butchery. And that deception, according to one war critic, was what makes propaganda such a serious matter.²⁹ The powerful legacy of World War I propaganda haunts us still. One contemporary student of the war notes how the conflict led Americans to fundamentally redefine their relationship with the state. The foundational structures of state power for surveillance and coercion that we live with today were constructed during World War I.³⁰ President Wilson was not unaware of the heavy price that the CPI's propaganda would eventually extract. On the voyage to the [Paris Peace Conference](#) he confided to Creel that, "It is a great thing you have done, but I am wondering if you have not unconsciously spun a net for me from which there is no escape."³¹

Conclusion

The CPI is historically important because it represents the birthplace of modern American wartime propaganda. While the key objective of the domestic propaganda program was to mobilize and sustain support for the war, there was also little hesitation to silence critics of government policy. Despite their genuine idealism and noble intentions to make the “world safe for democracy,” American propagandists during the First World War contributed to the backlash of disillusionment and isolationism that followed.

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External Links

- [Collins, Ross F.: This is Your War, Kids. Selling World War I to American Children \(North Dakota State University\) \(Article\)](#)
- [Creel, George: How We Advertised America. The First Telling of the Amazing Story of the Committee on Public Information That Carried the Gospel of Americanism to Every Corner of the Globe, New York 1920 \(Internet Archive\) \(Book\)](#)
- [Four Minute Men: Volunteer Speeches During World War I, in: Cornbise, Alfred: War As Advertised: The Four Minute Men and America's Crusade, 1917-1918, Philadelphia 1984 \(History Matters\) \(Article\)](#)
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