

Unifying America:
The Use of American Propaganda During World War I

A Senior Project

presented to

the Faculty of the Communication Studies Department
California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Bachelor of Art

by

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December, 2009

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Introduction

Throughout the course of history evil dictators, prophets, messiahs, presidents, kings, queens, and even you and me have attempted to manipulate or sway public opinion to our benefit. Examples include gaining extra allowance from one's parents, as might be the case with a small child; gaining public support and votes, in the case of presidential candidates; or molding the mindset of millions into fighting a common enemy. All of these examples demonstrate the effectiveness of persuasion and how in the right or wrong hands it can be a powerful tool used for shaping the ideas and beliefs of millions. One commonly seen and used form of persuasion is propaganda. The definition of propaganda is: "information or publicity put out by an organization or government to spread and promote a policy, idea, doctrine, or cause." The ideas being promoted could be anything, they could attempt to raise country morale or support a good cause, like the mini-war clips shown in American movie theaters during the early 1940's. However, the general public most often associates propaganda with its more negative definition, "deceptive or distorted information that is systematically spread." The negatively perceived connotation of propaganda most likely stems from the ways Joseph Goebbels and Adolph Hitler used it during World War II, but propaganda has been used for thousands of years and for causes both good and bad. Although, with definitions like the latter and the patterns that have been seen throughout history, it is no surprise that people hear the word *propaganda* and think of its potentially negative consequences.

While the word is often seen as negative, few people ever connect the term *propaganda* with the United States when, in fact, the United States is one of the biggest users of propaganda in the world. The U.S. government used it heavily during the Spanish-American war to create feelings of disgust toward the Spanish (Wilkerson), and again during the two World Wars to increase American unity by unifying ideals and creating enemies. It is my goal to investigate and uncover the ways the United States used propaganda during the First World War to shape and mold American ideals. I will also discuss what post World War I critics thought of the U.S. government's use of propaganda and explain why I believe that some were too harsh in their criticisms of the government's actions. Shaping a country's beliefs through propaganda is no small task; it takes a superior knowledge of how public opinion operates and how those opinions can be manipulated to coalesce beliefs.

Propaganda

Some basic definitions of propaganda were listed above, but the importance and functions of propaganda need a bit more explanation. According to Leonard W. Doob in his book *Public Opinion and Propaganda*, "Propaganda can be called the attempt to affect the personalities and to control the behavior of individuals toward ends considered unscientific or of doubtful value in a society at a particular time" (240). The first part, "the attempt to affect personalities and to control the behavior of individuals," is self-explanatory. The goal of propaganda is to influence, which is achieved by shaping and molding attitudes, public perceptions, and beliefs. If it were possible to get everyone thinking along the same line, that is, sharing the same values and attitudes, then there would be no need to persuade anyone because everyone would already be thinking alike;

however, the world does not function this way. There are millions of contrasting viewpoints and opinions; propaganda works by narrowing that number down. If the propagandist can bring a majority of people within the same belief system then they have done their job effectively, since a majority opinion is usually all that is necessary to provoke change. Once the propagandist has control over a group of people's beliefs they can get the group to act towards whatever ends the propagandist deems fit.

The next line in Doob's passage discusses the types of knowledge, or information, that can be used to propagandize. He says propaganda should be used "...toward ends considered unscientific or of doubtful value..." Doob talks a great deal about knowledge that contains scientific value versus knowledge that has yet to reach such stages. The former could be described in terms of simple arithmetic. Two plus two equals four is a demonstrable equation. There is no debating that. The arithmetic is proven by empirical observation and cannot be argued unless a person's upbringing contained a different kind of math, maybe one where $2 + 2 = 5$. But if someone was taught that $2 + 2 = 5$, Doob argues that the arithmetic they learned is propaganda because there is no science, or empirical observation, that can prove the argument that two plus two equals five. According to Doob, knowledge that has yet to reach the scientific stage is information that can be used by the propagandist to change beliefs. To give an example of this kind of knowledge Doob uses the classroom setting. He asks readers to imagine potential arithmetic questions a teacher might give. The teacher could just ask the students to divide sixty-by-eighty if he or she wanted the answer, but teachers often pose the math problem in the form of a short story. Doob gives four examples of possible questions, but I am only going to cover two: the first is that the teacher simply asks what sixty divided

by eighty is, to which the students calculate the answer, 0.75. However, for the second example, the one expressing propaganda, Doob shares another potential question:

“Medical and health authorities agree that a family of four requires a minimum wage of \$80 per week. The John J. Jones company in our town pays most of its workers only \$60 per week. What percentage of a decent minimum wage do these workers receive?” Here the students are asked to do the same arithmetic problem, divide sixty-by-eighty, only this time the teacher added her viewpoint to the question. Now, the question is not just testing the students ability to do basic math, it is also instilling the idea that the John J. Jones Company underpays its workers, and should therefore be scrutinized for it.

Dividing sixty-by-eighty is knowledge that contains scientific value, but assessing the ethical practices of the John J. Jones Company is not. The teacher has become the propagandist according to Doob, who argues that there can be no scientific test applied to the “opinion” that the local company underpays its employees. Knowledge of this type, the type that cannot be disproved by science, is the type of knowledge that can be used effectively to manipulate opinions.

The last part of Doob’s definition of propaganda, “. . . in a society at a particular time,” merely states that the propagandist must be aiming to move people to act toward ends that are current or within the foreseeable future. Changing people’s attitudes and beliefs about what happened in the past is possible, but it is impossible to change the past. Therefore, the propagandist must make sure that they are directing people to act toward something that can be changed. The likelihood that one person could influence enough people to believe that the holocaust did not exist, and that all history books should be rewritten to exclude that event is unlikely. A few people may be persuaded, but enough

people know, scientifically, that six million people lost their lives in concentration camps during the Second World War, and would be hard-pressed to believe that it did not take place. How could someone convince a survivor, or a person who had a relative die in one of the camps that it never happened? The aims of the propagandist must be realistic.

Although Doob offers a good definition of propaganda, Terence H. Qualter gives a slightly different interpretation of the concept. He says in his book, *Propaganda and Psychological Warfare*, that propaganda is “defined as the deliberate attempt by some individual or group to form, control, or alter the attitudes of other groups by the use of the instruments of communication, with the intention that in any given situation the reaction of those so influenced will be that desired by the propagandist” (27). There are two main advancements in this definition that Doob did not mention in his. First of all, for Qualter, something can only be called *propaganda* if the message being promoted is deliberate and intended by the propagandist. If a group is persuaded, or motivated, accidentally, then it is not considered propaganda. A propagandist must exist and his attempt to control and manipulate attitudes must be systematically thought out and planned. The other new element that this definition offers is that propaganda is achieved through the instruments of communication. The instruments of communication can be thought of as all possible means of communication that can occur between people. Included in this list of possible instrument are the spoken and written word, graphic representations, music, exhibitions, and anything else that can be sensed with the eyes or ears.

How Does Propaganda Work

Now that the basic concept of propaganda has been outlined, an insight into why it is effective and how it works must be discussed. Qualter lists four basic criteria for

effective propaganda: “it must be seen, understood, remembered and acted upon” (75). The first thing he mentions is that the propaganda must be seen. This is an obvious, yet essential statement. If people are unable to see or hear the propagandist’s message, then it becomes impossible to influence them. Therefore, effective propaganda must be placed within an easily viewable location, usually one where there is frequent human traffic. Notice that in any city around the world, monuments, billboards, Public Service Announcements (PSA), and all other forms of propaganda are prominently displayed in easily viewable locations. Monuments are placed in the middle of large squares or plazas for everyone to look at. Billboards are placed on the sides of freeways where thousands of people view them daily. Also, the billboards themselves are massive pictorial and textual messages that are impossible to ignore. Announcements of all kinds, not just PSA’s, are delivered through media that reach vast amounts of people, like the television, radio, or newspaper. All of this shows that in order for propaganda to be effective it must reach the masses, and it must be easily viewed or heard.

The next important factor for effective propaganda is that it must be understood. If a propagandist is trying to influence human thought and action they must present their information in an easily understandable way. Information that is misunderstood, or not understood entirely, fails to achieve the desired effects of the propagandist. If a group does not understand the message being promoted to them, they will not be motivated to act. A message that is too complicated fails to achieve the intended goals of the propagandist, which negates the message as propaganda altogether according to Qualter. It becomes imperative that the propagandist forms their message in a way that all humans

can understand. By using a more simple method of conveying the propaganda, the propagandist will reach more citizens, which will influence more people toward change.

The third important factor of effective propaganda is that it must be remembered. People cannot be motivated to act, or persuaded to change their beliefs if they cannot remember the key points of the propaganda. A persuasive speech is not persuasive if the audience fails to remember what the key points of the speech were. Arguments in the message must be created and placed in important locales so that the audience remembers the main points. Often, catchy slogans are used, like Woodrow Wilson's re-election slogan, "He kept us out of war!" or, in a more recent election, Barack Obama's slogan, "Change." These slogans help the public identify with the cause and it makes it easy for general audiences to become familiar with the messages of the campaign.

The last ingredient essential for effective propaganda is that it must be acted upon. If the first three elements of effective propaganda are used correctly, but the fourth is never achieved, then nothing was really accomplished. The underlying goal of propaganda is to create action. Whether that action is a changing of beliefs, or a motivation to join the army, action is the result of effective propaganda. Without action the propaganda can be seen as ineffective, thus making this component the most important for effective propaganda.

In another book by Garth S. Jowett and Victoria O'Donnell the issue of why propaganda is effective is brought up. In the book, *Propaganda and Persuasion*, the authors say that the media does not directly influence everyone, but only a select group of people. An experiment done in 1940 by Paul Lazarsfeld studied whether mass media influenced political attitudes. What he found was that "people were receiving

information and influence from other people” (Jowett and O’Donnell 106). They determined that certain people were not influenced by the media, but rather by “opinion leaders,” in their social group. These “opinion leaders,” who were influenced by media propaganda, promoted their newfound beliefs to their friends and colleagues. In turn, the “opinion leader’s” friends and colleagues became influenced and persuaded. This “Multi-Step Flow” model “has people obtaining ideas and information from the media, but seeking out opinion leaders for confirmation of their ideas and forming [of] their attitudes” (Jowett and O’Donnell 106). Propaganda is effective because only one person needs to be moved toward change for an entire group to be persuaded. After one person is influenced, they will spread their beliefs to their friends and colleagues, who will then spread those ideas to others. The “Multi-Step Flow” model does a good job of explaining how ideas are circulated so quickly among different social groups. Also, the model helps explain why propaganda can be so influential because it only requires the manipulation of one person’s beliefs for those ideas and beliefs to spread to an entire community.

Propaganda During World War I

I have discussed what propaganda is, and how it works, but I have yet to talk about how America used propaganda during the Great War. I am now going to look at the people responsible for the massive propaganda campaigns created and how they managed to manipulate the minds of millions.

The Rise of George Creel

On June 28, 1914, the Archduke of Austria-Hungary, Franz Ferdinand, and his wife were assassinated, beginning the primary stages of the First World War. While country after country became entangled in the war due to different allegiances and

agreements, President Woodrow Wilson fought for neutrality. Even with the constant urging of his peers and the American people to go to war, Wilson insisted that the United States stay neutral. In fact, he centered his re-election campaign on the ideal that America would stay clear from the war, a point he emphasized via his campaign slogan, “He kept us out of war!” Yet, with the bombing of the Lusitania in 1915 and the sending of the Zimmerman telegram in January of 1917, President Wilson was forced to enter the war. But with his entire presidential career having been based on avoiding war, Wilson had to turn to someone who could change his campaign without losing the support of the American voters.

The man he turned to was George Creel, an up-and-coming muckraker, who was one of Wilson’s biggest fans and advocates. “As a reform minded journalist, George Creel was all about leading change, shaping opinion, creating public sentiment, mobilizing the collective will, and yet he repeatedly demonstrated a remarkable paucity of self-direction” (Axelrod 21). He had brought down prostitution and political corruption in Colorado, and had fought child labor in New York. Creel was an idealist, just like his icon Woodrow, and so for Wilson, Creel was the perfect man to help change his stance from pro-neutrality, to pro-war. He portrayed the United States’ entry to the war “as an idealistic and ideological imperative, a fight to ‘make the world safe for democracy,’ as the President most famously put it in his war message to Congress on April 2” (Axelrod 47). It seems ironic that only twelve months earlier Creel was writing how Wilson’s belief in neutrality was the best course of action for the country.

George Creel had a knack for selecting key points that strengthened his arguments, regardless of the cause. This made him the perfect journalist, muckraker, and

conveniently, a great campaign strategist, which the president quickly recognized. Shortly after President Wilson changed his stance on war, he decided to utilize propaganda to increase support for his new policies, which were vital to the war effort at home and abroad. Having been impressed by the work George Creel had done on changing his public stance from neutrality to pro-war, Wilson charged Creel with the task of discovering a way to propagandize the American people.

For Creel, propaganda was not necessarily a bad thing. He believed “that propaganda could be factually based and that, as such, it could be presented to people as evidence, which, after weighing, would inevitable [sic] persuade them to decide correctly—that is, to make the decisions the state wanted them to make” (Axelrod 49). This concept of propaganda contrasts with the negative definition the public was, and still is familiar with. Creel believed that if the people thought he was just laying out the facts, and the facts pointed to his cause, which happened to be beneficial to America, then they, the public, would inevitably conclude that Creel was right. With this method, Creel could get people to believe and act how he wanted them to without them being aware of it. Society just thought they were deciding to do what was best for their country. In a sense, they felt they were being patriotic by following Creel, and since Creel had this technique mastered from his early days as a muckrake journalist, he had no problem changing the beliefs of millions. The belief he wanted to spread was that war was the best course of action; and certain freedoms should be limited in order to protect the troops abroad and the civilians at home.

Creel decided that the name of the government’s propaganda machine should not be associated with any terms that leave people feeling like they were being controlled.

Terms like bureau, agency, department, and ministry would just not suffice, but a term like *committee* that “seemed to resonate from the epoch of the American Revolution” (Axelrod 63) was perfect, and so the Committee on Public Information was born.

The Committee of Public Information

Also known as the Creel Committee, the Committee on Public Information (CPI) was established to “oversee a program of voluntary censorship and to flood the media with news from essentially official sources in a comprehensive effort to manage the war information that reached the public” (Axelrod 74). Censorship was accomplished by first convincing the media that they were releasing stories that were informative to the enemy, which led to the deaths of U.S. troops. One example in particular came when a gun exploded aboard the USS *Mongolia*, causing a blast that killed two nurses on board. One paper, the *Herald*, heard about this and reported the incident and location of the vessel. Shortly after, the Secretary of the Navy, Josephus Daniels, issued a statement that the article the *Herald* printed gave Germany a four-day advance notice of where the United States’ fleet of destroyers was headed. The statement allowed the Germans to prepare for the fleets arrival, thus increasing the level of danger to American troops. Creel saw this and realized that “voluntary censorship” was only so effective, because some papers might print a story that seems irrelevant, but is actually damaging to the war strategy.

Based on this realization, Creel issued the “Preliminary Statement,” which listed a number of regulations to be placed on the media preventing them from printing whatever they wanted. The statement was said to prevent the enemy from gaining any sort of advantage due to leaks from the press, but the list was essentially an extension of government censorship. The list was extensive and included three categories of

information, “Dangerous, Questionable, and Routine,” with each category having separate guidelines. The first category, *Dangerous*, had three subcategories, General, Naval, and Military, and included all stories pertaining to Naval and Military operations that were in progress. Stories that fell under this category included those that gave away the position and number of ships or troops, any threats to the President, advancements in experimental weaponry, and the location of foreign born U.S. workers to name a few. The *Questionable* category was all material that “might” be acceptable for publication. However, the CPI strongly advised that the newspaper use caution when printing these stories, and only with the Committee’s permission. Stories within this category were military training camp routines, general advancements in technology, and any sensational rumors such as an outbreak of disease among Military divisions. All material not in these two categories was placed in the *Routine* category and was deemed harmless to America by the CPI; nonetheless, Creel urged all newspaper to submit an article to the CPI for approval if there was even the slightest bit of doubt about the story. When the Preliminary Statement was released on May 28, 1917, violating these regulations was not against the law, so the press was still free to print what they pleased until the Espionage Act was passed on June 15, which made all regulations issued by the Preliminary Statement official laws.

Creel knew that these regulations would not sit pretty with the press because the rules limited the newspapers freedom of speech as well as the number of available stories to report on. His plan to eliminate such frustrations was to send out a bulletin to all the newspapers. In this bulletin was an extensive list of stories that the government had come across and deemed printable by the papers. The bulletin made it easy for newspapers to

fill their pages without any scrutiny or negative attention from the government. “Under the CPI war regime, news was not to be the result of investigation [...] of private enterprise, but public property to be apportioned equally to all. The Creel Committee effectively nationalized the news. Not only did it come from a government source, it was treated as government property” (Axelrod 105). All the big newspapers were sent story updates via the ticker, and for smaller newspapers that could not afford a ticker, the CPI issued a newsletter that any town could subscribe to. In that newsletter were a number of current stories that the papers could print without scrutiny from the government. Semi-thrilled with the prospect of not having to work as hard for stories, many small towns subscribed to the newsletter, and almost all major cities received ticker updates from the CPI. The newsletter allowed the CPI to monopolize the news and control the stories Americans were reading. But Creel realized that the newspapers were only one source of information for Americans, and that there were other ways to spread American propaganda. Creel devised a plan to create numerous propaganda agencies so that propaganda could be manipulated to address specific audiences. “A Division of Industrial Labor spoke to workers. A Division of Women's War Work mobilized women. To reach schoolchildren, the committee published a weekly bulletin, the *National School Service* [. . .] The Bureau of Cartoons offered commentaries on events. The Division of Film, with its subsidiary departments, captured the war with photography and moving pictures and produced newsreels. The Bureau of War Expositions and the Bureau of State Fair Exhibits created numerous displays seen by an estimated 7 million people at 60 sixty state fairs” (Vaughn 156). But none of the agencies created proved to be more successful than The Division of Pictorial Publicity and the Four-Minute Men.

The Division of Pictorial Publicity and the Four-Minute Men

When Creel was first pondering how he was going to propagandize America, he realized the need for controlling the newspapers, which, at the time, were the largest and most followed of all forms of media, but he also wanted to tap into other styles of propaganda to increase support for the government and America in general. Those other forms of propaganda included pictures and public speaking. In April 1917, Creel sent a telegram to Charles Dana Gibson, the most popular name in American illustration at the time, and asked him to gather a group of artists together to aid the government in war related “pictorial publicity.” A few days later, and only nine days after the Committee on Public Information was created, Creel and Gibson met. Shortly after this meeting the Division of Pictorial Publicity was formed.

The mission of the Division of Pictorial Publicity was to create images that conveyed a message that every passerby would read and understand. Creel really liked the idea of pictorial propaganda because the entire message could be viewed as opposed to read, and while not everybody was going to read an article in a newspaper, every walker and runner would be a witness to the message and idea of the poster. When the government first tried to use the Division of Pictorial Publicity it only wanted the artists to show images of people conserving things such as coal and food. While these concepts are essential for victory during war time, the artist themselves believed that their talents could portray much more vivid images, images that stirred up emotion in people. Gibson wanted his artists to draw posters that would create feelings of empathy. Gibson realized, much like Creel, that propaganda was effective because it intruded on the emotional and spiritual dimension of the human psyche, it was not merely information to be taken at its

face value, a concept that most bureaucrats did not understand. Many department heads in the CPI only wanted pictures of food and ammunition to portray the countries need to conserve those things. It was Gibson who thought that making someone realize what it feels like to be hungry, or what it feels like to be scared is much more effective in producing change because it creates those feelings of understanding. Empathy is a powerful tool for the propagandist and both Creel and Gibson knew this, and while the government wanted the division to *tell* the story, Gibson wanted to *show* the people the story and inspire them to change their ways.

One such image that the Division created was drawn by James Montgomery Flagg, the most famous of all the Division's artists. He was the artist that made the famous picture of Uncle Sam pointing at the onlooker with the caption that says, "I Want YOU for U.S. Army." Another well known, but not as popular image that Flagg drew depicts a redheaded young man on a white background. The young man is clearly angry, as shown by his tense jaw and thrust out chin. He is pulling of his jacket as if he wants to hit someone. At his feet is a crumpled up hat and right next to the hat is a newspaper with the headline "HUNS KILL WOMEN AND CHILDREN!" (See Appendix A). At the top of the poster are the words:

TELL THAT TO THE MARINES!

At 24 East 23rd Street

This poster symbolizes the Marines mission to end the inhumane acts of the enemy, and should the viewer want to do something about those acts, the poster tells where the local enlisting office is. The poster is dramatic, it is a great example of graphic propaganda,

and the type of image Creel had in mind when envisioning how effective the Division of Pictorial Publicity could be.

Another idea to promote government policy and strengthen American unity was forced upon George Creel by what he called a “handsome rosy-cheeked youth” named Donald Ryerson. Ryerson barged into the office of the CPI one day, grabbed Creel by his jacket lapel and proceeded to explain his idea of the Four-Minute Men. The Four-Minute Men was a large group of public speakers, around 75,000 of them, that gave informative and persuasive speeches in the four minutes it took to change the reel at a movie theater. Their name directly related to the time frame and to the Minute Men of the revolutionary army, and Creel instantly viewed them as the most effective resource in his propaganda machine. Speakers were chosen locally, so they could identify with their audience. One main reason this was done was because there were so many different nationalities and factions of people in the United States at the time. Creel realized that by choosing locally prominent, and favorably viewed individuals, he could reach and unify the different ethnic sects more easily. The speakers were given a list of topics to speak on from the CPI, and the speakers changed the location and organization of their speeches to avoid sounding like they were delivering government propaganda. Some examples of topics that the Four-Minute Men spoke about were protesting German propaganda, as well as, support for the Red Cross, the YMCA, Liberty Loans, and food conservation. These speakers were very influential in promoting Creel’s war aims and they instantly became his favorite propaganda tool during the war. Since the three main information outlets in 1917 were Newspapers, Magazines and Movies, Creel now had propaganda reaching almost every American in every town across the country.

Post World War I Critics of U.S. Propaganda

Following the Great War, a number of critics started discussing the ethical concerns they had with regards to the United States' use of propaganda on the American people. Some critics, like Edward L. Bernays, believed that propaganda was a necessary tool that the government had to use; however, he recognized that it was a tool that could be misused as easily as it could be used properly. He says, "The instruments by which public opinion is organized and focused may be misused. But such organization and focusing are necessary to orderly life" (Bernays 12). The American people are already busy with their lives; therefore, a lot of the decision-making that they do is based on the information provided to them by so-called "experts." These experts differ from field to field, but in every field they are present, and the American people rely on them to narrow decisions down so a simple choice is all that remains. "In theory, every citizen makes up his mind on public questions and matters of private conduct. In practice, if all men had to study for themselves the abstruse economic, political, and ethical data involved in every question, they would find it impossible to come to a conclusion about anything. We have voluntarily agreed to let an invisible government sift the data and high-spot the outstanding issues so that our field of choice shall be narrowed to practical proportions" (Bernays 11). No one has enough time to research every particle of data that goes into the decision making process, so we appoint people, or experts, in high ranking positions to narrow the types of decision we have to make. For Bernays, the ethical concerns of propaganda depend "upon the merit of the cause urged, and the correctness of the information published" (20). He believes that as long as the information being presented is truthful, and not deliberately false, then it can be seen as ethically viable, but when a

propagandist deliberately tells lies, or their goal is to promote ideas that are not beneficial to the common good, then they are unethical. In fact, Bernays argues that propaganda is absolutely necessary for government to be successful. “Governments, whether they are monarchical, constitutional, democratic or communist, depend upon acquiescent public opinion for the success of their efforts and, in fact, government is only government by virtue of public acquiescence” (38). Without propaganda, the government would be able to accomplish very little because public opinion may be too diverse to legislate new policy. In times of war, the ability to create new legislation is essential to success because necessity changes daily when a country is at war. One day, the country may need to conserve food, while the next day it may need to subdue media reports that jeopardize American troops. Regardless of the circumstance, the government needs to be able to form new policy to meet the demands of the country. This could not be accomplished without the use of propaganda, which molds and unifies the ideals and beliefs of the masses and helps to approve the new laws that are essential for success.

Another advocate of U.S. propaganda during World War I is Stephen Ponder. In an article titled, “Popular Propaganda: The Food Administration in World War I” Ponder argues that America’s use of propaganda was vital in the conservation of resources during the First World War. He says that the Food Administration, headed by Herbert Hoover was seen by many as a positive use of propaganda, most likely due to the fact that it involved a “humanitarian appeal” (545). Even though the Food Administration worked in direct contact with the CPI, society and journalists viewed the Administration’s efforts as a positive use of propaganda that was essential during war. According to Ponder, “Government use of [. . .] techniques of mass persuasion [were] not universally

condemned but, in the case of the U.S. Food Administration, sometimes regarded as inspirational” (545). However, Ponder continues on to say that the methods of the Food Administration were very similar, if not identical, to the methods being used by the CPI during the war, and if not for the “humanitarian appeal” that was associated with food conservation, the Administration would have probably been viewed in the same negative light as Creel and the CPI.

While I have listed some proponents of American propaganda during the Great War, there are many who opposed the idea of a government-controlled propaganda machine. One such opponent is Stephen Vaughn, who wrote in his article, “Committee on Public Information,” that “Although many of the people who contributed to the CPI had a genuine commitment to democracy, the excessive ideological fervor that Creel and others brought to their work left an unfortunate legacy. The CPI encouraged a type of nationalism that too often endangered democracy. It was too ready to suspend free speech. [...] Too many of its posters and other forms of propaganda appealed to fear and other emotions, and the apparent success of such endeavors encouraged postwar cynicism about democratic theory and the rationality of public opinion” (156-7). Vaughn makes a point that is hard to argue with since the *Division of Pictorial Publicity* did use the fear appeal as its primary motivator. But what Vaughn fails to account for is the realistic fear that existed. The United States was at war, and in war, fear is a tool to be used for survival, which is necessary for victory. A country cannot fight if it has no soldiers to fight with; therefore, a fear appeal to get citizens to enlist could be seen as essential to the success of America in the Great War. Still, the idea that the CPI encouraged a type of nationalism that hindered democracy is truthful, but in times of war, unity is more

important than democracy. Manipulating information to unify a country and protect its citizens is more important than giving everyone unlimited access to potentially hazardous information. If a threat of an upcoming attack on American soil were released to all Americans, it is not hard to imagine that panic would ensue. If everyone were panicking, how would the country prepare for the attack? In times of war it is essential to suppress certain freedoms that democracy affords for the benefit of the entire nation. Freedom of press and freedom of speech are powerful things that can be of great importance to a nation, but in times of war the same tools can be detrimental to the outcome of the battle, and if they are not limited in some respects, it can lead to the deaths of thousands of lives.

The Perception of Propaganda Following the War

In June 1919, directly following the end of World War I, Congress abolished the CPI. The main reason the CPI was abolished was due to “American distrust of propaganda and Congress's fear that the president would utilize the committee for domestic political purposes” (Propaganda). The reason American’s had formed a distrust of governmental propaganda was due, in large part, to the discovery of Britain’s use of propaganda on the U.S. to get them to enter the war. While the United States was still neutral in the early half of the 1910’s, British propaganda was hard at work fabricating stories of inhumane German crimes to influence America into joining the War. “Tales of Germans cutting off the hands of children, boiling corpses to make soap, crucifying prisoners of war, and using priests as clappers in cathedral bells were nauseating yarns widely believed among both Allies and friendly neutrals” (Brown 85). These kinds of stories came to be viewed as primary reasons for the United States’ entry into the war among American citizens, which was to stop the German atrocities abroad. Once people

became aware that Britain had created propaganda to motivate the United States to join the Allies, they started to blame the British, and their propaganda, for getting America involved in such a “wasteful and ruinous war” (Propaganda). The association between British propaganda and America’s entry into a wasteful war created most of the negatively perceived functions of propaganda, which caused the public and Congress to become skeptical of Wilson and Creel and their CPI, leading to the eradication of the Committee on Public Information. The “atrocities propaganda” used by the British in America was widely popularized and used by the newspapers, which informed the public of the so-called “truths” the government was presenting to the public. One such paper that reported atrocities propaganda was *The Times*, which wrote a story on the German’s use of corpses to make soap. The story goes:

The bodies are transported on this endless chain into a long, narrow compartment, where they pass through a bath which disinfects them. They then go through a drying chamber, and finally are automatically carried into a digester or great cauldron, in which they are dropped by an apparatus which detaches them from the chain. In the digester they remain from six to eight hours, and are treated by steam, which breaks them up while they are slowly stirred by the machinery.

From this treatment result several products. The fats are broken up into stearin, a form of tallow, and oils, which require to be redistilled before they can be used.

The process of distillation is carried out by boiling the oil with carbonate of soda, and some of the by-products resulting from this are used by German soap makers.

The oil distillery and refinery lie in the south-eastern corner of the works. The

refined oil is sent out in small casks like those used for petroleum, and is of yellowish brown color. (Grubach)

Stories like this, which are provided with extremely vivid detail, go a long way toward persuading someone to prevent such atrocities. Of course, this was the goal of the British newspapers, to motivate people toward action. Once the public realized that governments were fabricating stories to influence action, they began associating the term *propaganda* with more negative ideologies, which led to the differentiation between what was the truth, and what was propaganda.

Conclusion

When the CPI formed and began censoring and restricting certain liberties, American's Started feeling betrayed by their government, but it is important to realize that the circumstances of war require unique actions. Information becomes invaluable for both our allies and our enemies during battle. In the wrong hands, certain information could cost America the war and many American lives, but by controlling what was published, the CPI was able to succeed in its goals of unifying and protecting America. By unifying the country the CPI was able to pass legislation and conserve resources. Through censoring the media, Creel was able to protect troops abroad and civilians at home. Creel was so effective at manipulating public opinion because he utilized propaganda in the right ways. I mentioned the criteria for effective propaganda that Leonard Doob described above, and Creel did a great job of following the guidelines of effective propaganda. He affected personalities and directed the behavior of individuals by molding public opinion via inspirational speeches delivered by the *Four-Minutemen* and graphic posters hung across the country. Creel chose goals and messages that had

little scientific value, which made his messages that much more potent because there was no science to disprove him. Lastly, because the war was underway, Creel managed to make his goals possible within the foreseeable future. All American's wanted victory and Creel offered them the belief that it was obtainable, but only if they followed him.

Bernays and Ponder offer the American people a reasonable excuse for the CPI's actions, saying that what it accomplished was for the benefit of society as a whole. I believe that they are right in their conclusions. There are certain liberties that need to be restricted when human lives are on the line. Individuals in general, are more concerned with the small picture, the self, and that is why they feel cheated when the news they receive is censored. Americans started to believe that their government had deemed them unworthy of knowing such information, which created resentment between the people and their government. But the government is generally concerned with the big picture, the nation, and what is best for its inhabitants, and Wilson and Creel realized what needed to be done to protect America and win the war.

While there are critics on both sides of the argument about whether or not Creel was ethical in his course of action, few can argue against how impressive the propaganda campaign during the First World War was. The ability of one man to create an organization that extended its influence to almost every country in the world, as well as his tactful control and manipulation of the ideals of American's is amazing. He is one of the greatest examples of how effective propaganda can be. By unifying the American people through pictures, print and speeches, he drove Americans toward eliminating a real enemy, making the world, as Wilson and Creel put it, "Safe for Democracy."

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Appendix A

QuickTime™ and a
decompressor
are needed to see this picture.

Flagg, James Montgomery. Tell That to the Marines. Circa 1914-1918. 7 Dec. 2009
<http://pictopia.com/perl/get_image?provider_id=207&size=550x550_mb&ptp_photo_id=138906>.