

LESSON 3: GOVERNMENT CONTROL OF INFORMATION DURING WORLD WAR I

Student Handout 2

OUTCOMES

PROBLEM 1

The government felt that it needed to take an active role to convince the people of the war's importance. It chose C and formed the Committee on Public Information (CPI), often referred to as the Creel Committee after its leader George Creel. Similar propaganda agencies in Britain and France used strict censorship to suppress the news, but Creel wanted the CPI to be less heavy-handed in its tactics. Instead of censoring every piece of information, the Creel Committee emphasized the positive news of the war, hoping that enough positive information would drown out any criticisms. It put out patriotic posters, pamphlets, and movies, and had its own volunteer "army" of 75,000 "four-minute men"—respected community leaders who delivered pro-war speeches at local gatherings. Creel hoped that so much positive information would render censorship unnecessary.

In many ways, the CPI was successful: Americans remained mostly supportive of the war effort, and morale remained high. However, some felt that the CPI's practice of releasing only carefully selected information was in itself a form of censorship. Movies depicted the Germans as evil, and CPI-issued pamphlets warned Americans to beware of German spies. George Creel, who had stated that he wanted the agency to be completely truthful, was caught lying at least once, when he exaggerated the difficulty of U.S. soldiers going to France. "Creeling" became a common word for lying.

The actions of the Creel Committee had numerous **unintended consequences**:

- George Creel claimed that he wanted the CPI to be truthful and not create rumors. However, the CPI's emphasis on the danger of German spies helped create a climate of fear. This made life particularly difficult for German Americans, many of whose neighbors regarded them with suspicion.
- The committee stressed "100% Americanism," meaning that people should be entirely committed to the war effort and completely loyal to the U.S. This attitude led to discrimination against dissenters and nonconformists. For example, some colleges and universities fired professors who had opposed American entry into the war.
- "100% Americanism" also encouraged a distrust of immigrants. Foreigners and foreign ideas became suspect. Many high schools dropped German from their curriculums.
- Suspicion of foreigners and foreign ideas did not end with the war. But instead of focusing on Germans, Americans' fear and suspicion shifted their targets to

Russians and communists. The government deported members of radical labor unions in Seattle and strikers in West Virginia. The Palmer Raids from 1918 to 1921 and the anti-immigration laws passed in the 1920s further demonstrated the extent to which the government was willing to censor and punish foreigners and those who promoted “foreign” ideas.

- Some Americans became more skeptical of the government and questioned its willingness to manipulate public opinion. They worried that the government’s ability to promote one-sided versions of issues would undermine democracy.
- The “four-minute men” who delivered speeches at local gatherings were often already well-educated, prominent members of their communities. This is why people were so willing to listen to them; however, it also meant that the speeches often came from the perspective of the middle class and business owners. The speeches further cemented the places of these wealthier men in society and marginalized people from the working class and immigrant communities.
- Many historians volunteered their services to the CPI and wrote academic articles promoting the idea that Germany caused the war and that the U.S. was justified in fighting it. Working for an agency that endorsed a particular point of view undermined the reputation of many of these people as independent, objective scholars.
- These restrictions upset leftists, many who found themselves harassed and in some cases prosecuted for criticizing the government or the war. These leftists tended to belong to the Democratic Party—President Wilson’s party. The notion that Wilson had turned his back on his party by supporting these restrictions came back to haunt him later. When he asked Democrats to support his League of Nations (see Lesson 4), some party members opposed him.

PROBLEM 2

At the urging of President Wilson, the government passed the Espionage Act in 1917 and the Sedition Act in 1918. Wilson feared that any dissent would undermine the war effort. He fought for censorship of the press, even writing a letter to the New York Times explaining why he thought it was necessary. The Espionage Act made it a crime to spy against the U.S., sabotage the U.S., refuse military service if drafted, or obstruct military recruitment. It also prohibited the mailing of subversive newspapers. The Sedition Act prohibited “uttering, printing, writing, or publishing any disloyal, profane, scurrilous, or abusive language, or language intended to cause contempt” towards the government, as well as any “words or acts supporting or favoring the cause of any country at war with us.”

Many considered the acts violations of the First Amendment, particularly the rights to free speech and a free press. Civil libertarians denounced them and blamed both the acts and the Creel Committee for creating a vigilante atmosphere. People worried that the acts would be used not just for the war effort, but against anyone whose interests opposed those of the government.

- The acts were enforced: for example, many newspapers, especially socialist newsletters and German American papers, lost the right to issue their

- publications. Also, while the vast majority of men who were drafted accepted their military service, the few who refused were arrested.
- The Espionage Act led to one of the most famous Supreme Court cases in U.S. history: *Schenck v. United States*. Schenck, a socialist with anti-war views, published a pamphlet opposing the draft. The Supreme Court upheld his conviction for violating the Espionage Act, stating that Schenck's pamphlet presented a "clear and present danger" to the country during wartime. The justices used the following analogy in upholding Schenck's conviction: if a person is wrong to yell, "Fire!" in a crowded theater when there is no fire, then Schenck was wrong to criticize the war effort.
 - Even during the war, civil libertarians' fear that the government would use the acts against other groups became a reality when the government used the acts to target socialists and unions. Many socialist newspapers were denied use of the mail, for example.
 - **Unintended consequence:** After the war ended, the laws remained in force. Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer used them in what became known as the "Palmer Raids" of 1918–1921, in which suspected radicals were arrested and deported. These radicals were not German spies: instead, they were socialists, communists, and suspected anarchists.
 - The Sedition Act was repealed in 1921, but the Espionage Act remained in effect for decades after the war, and parts of it are still in effect in the 21st century.