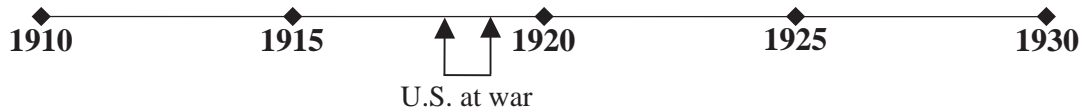


LESSON 3: GOVERNMENT CONTROL OF INFORMATION DURING WORLD WAR I

Student Handout 1



It is 1917. You are President Wilson, and under your leadership, the United States has just entered World War I. An atmosphere of patriotism pervades much of the country, and most people want to unite to fight the Germans. However, the war will not be easy. American soldiers will lose their lives, and citizens at home will face shortages and hardships. The war is far away, and some people question whether Germany poses enough of a threat to the United States to warrant American involvement in such a difficult struggle. As President Wilson, you realize that continued public support is essential to fighting the war, and you want to bolster Americans' patriotism and morale using information and ideas. In Problem 1, you will consider ways the government can control information to help the war effort. In Problem 2, you will decide how to deal with Americans you believe to be disloyal.

PROBLEM 1

As President Wilson, one of your priorities is to maintain public support for the war. You worry that people with dissenting views will become more vocal as the war drags on, and you want to make sure that no one inside the U.S. provides information to the enemy. Here are some proposals that may help you control information. Choose as many of these as you'd like and explain your choice(s):

- A. Suspend the First Amendment until the war is over. It is vitally important that the U.S. win the war, and anyone who criticizes the government and causes other Americans to doubt the war effort should be put in jail.
- B. Set up the Committee on Patriotic Perspectives to issue reports on the war for the public. These patriotic reports will keep morale high and encourage people to buy war bonds. The reports will be selective, describing the good and heroic deeds of Americans and the terrible deeds of the Germans. When necessary, the committee will go beyond selective reporting and use exaggerations and lies. It will justify this as a necessary measure, saying that the enemy countries lie constantly in their own propaganda.
- C. Set up a committee to select information that is favorable to America and unfavorable to the Germans. If at all possible, it will not lie and will minimize exaggeration. It will commission images for posters designed to inspire patriotism, and will use celebrities, songs, speeches, and pamphlets to keep morale high.

- D. Censor the newspapers, allowing them to print only positive news about the American war effort and negative news about the enemy. Also, censor the mail to prevent people from passing information to the other side; arrest those who attempt it.
- E. Don't do anything to control news and information. The First Amendment, granting Americans the right to free speech, is far too precious to throw away, despite the difficulties of wartime.

PROBLEM 2

As President Wilson, how will you deal with Americans you suspect of being disloyal during wartime? This perceived disloyalty could manifest itself in many ways, from expressing anti-war sentiments to spying for the enemy, to refusing military service when drafted. Below are descriptions of two possible acts: would you support one or both of these acts? You can object to some parts of an act and not to others.

- A. Espionage Act: Makes it a crime to spy, sabotage, refuse military service if drafted, or obstruct military recruitment. It also authorizes the postmaster general to prevent the mailing of subversive newspapers and magazines.
- B. Sedition Act: Makes it a crime punishable by prison for citizens to say anything "disloyal, profane, scurrilous, or abusive" about the government or the armed forces.