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American Propaganda and the First World War: Megaphone or Gagging Order?

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On April 6th 1917 the United States of America officially declared war on Germany, joining the Allies against Germany and Austro-Hungaria on the Western Front in the First World War, which had been on-going in Europe since 1914.¹ This was despite President Woodrow Wilson's successful re-election campaign slogan of 1916: 'He Kept Us Out Of War'. Almost immediately after the States joined the conflict a multi-million dollar propaganda drive was launched, spearheaded by the Committee of Public Information (CPI). Its aim was to spread the positive reasons for America's involvement, both at home and abroad. Movies, speeches, books, adverts and a variety of other means were employed to help achieve this goal. In the foreword to *How We Advertised America* (1920: London), an account of the CPI's activities, Newton Baker, the Secretary of War, said that

It was of great importance that America should be represented not merely as a strong man fully armed, but as a strong man fully armed and believing in the cause for which he was fighting. (Creel 1920, p. xv)

The book was written by George Creel, head of the committee and mastermind of the CPI. Baker's words reflect the attitude that America took towards its propaganda: it was not just an afterthought; it was an

1 Thanks to Dr Philips O'Brien of the University of Glasgow, who pointed me in the direction of excellent sources regarding public opinion

essential part of the war. This article aims to examine CPI propaganda in the context of public opinion in America. A history of the committee will be followed by an exploration of four of its departments: the News Division, Advertising Division, Film Division and 'Four Minute Men'. They all helped back up the narrative of war which the CPI was attempting to create. In particular, CPI posters will be analysed for the illusions which they portray. Speeches from the 'Four Minute Men' have also been explored. I will then examine public reaction to the War through a variety of primary sources and secondary accounts. In particular, I have chosen the *Atlanta Constitution*, *The New York Times* and *The Crisis*, three periodicals representing very different sects of society (the North, the South and African Americans), to try and gauge opinion. From the *Constitution* and *Times*, I have focused on news articles rather than editorials, which other articles have tended to do. In *The Crisis*, the letters page following a controversial editorial has been examined. I will conclude that the CPI, in presenting an image of a united America in favour of the conflict, was in fact presenting an illusion, distorting the reality of a country which was far more divided than propaganda suggested.

Towards Censorship?: The CPI and Written Media

The Committee was launched shortly after entry into the conflict with an Executive Order. The order itself is fairly vague on what exactly this CPI would do:

I hereby create a Committee on Public Information, to be composed of the Secretary of State, the Secretary of War, the Secretary of the Navy, and a civilian who shall be charged with the executive direction of the Committee. As Civilian Chairman of this Committee, I appoint Mr. George Creel. The Secretary of State, the Secretary of War, and the Secretary of the Navy are authorized each to detail an

officer or officers to the work of the Committee. (Executive Order 2594, 1917)

It was divided into two sections, foreign and domestic. Whilst the importance of the foreign branch, with over 30 worldwide offices (Pinkleton 1994, p. 230), should not be easily dismissed, this article will focus on the domestic branch, with a selection of its 21 departments, all seeking to influence opinion at home. One of its roles was to ‘supervise’ how the nation’s media (at the time, mostly in newspaper form) reported on the war through the Division of News. Despite full rules and regulations not being published immediately, a ‘voluntary agreement’ was reached between the press and war departments in which newspapers ‘agreed’ not to publish anything unpatriotic (Mock, Larson 1939, p. 77). A variety of measures had already been taken to prevent ‘unsavoury’ messages going public. In Executive Order 2585, President Wilson allowed for the ‘Taking over Necessary and Closing [of] Unnecessary Radio Stations’ (Executive Order 2585, 1917). Radio transmissions from outside the United States were subject to restrictions, and required permission before sending (Executive Order 2604, 1917). On May 28, the official rules of the CPI were finally sent out to America’s editors (Mock, Larsen 1939, p. 80). On the front cover, the President assures them that

I can imagine no greater disservice to the country than to establish a system of censorship which would deny to the people of a free Republic of our own their indisputable right to criticize their own public officials (Preliminary Statement, 1917)

The document asks the press to lend ‘itself to the national defence’ and calls for ‘cooperation’ in reporting the conflict (Preliminary Statement, 1917). This ‘voluntary’ nature marks a central theme of the CPI that reoccurs on several occasions. The public aim of the CPI was not to

control, but to 'help' the nation in 'appropriate' war reporting. Despite not having any 'official' censorship powers, as head of the CPI Creel could suggest prosecution of editors, stop their mail flow or even cut off a newspaper's essential supplies (Pinkleton 1994, p. 231). He insisted many years later that the Committee was not 'censorship' per se, even going so far as to claim that 'real' censorship would have demoralised America (Creel 1947, p. 147).

Despite the claims made by Wilson, Creel and others following the official launch, the CPI proceeded to censor a whole variety of media forms. With regards to newspapers, the CPI split press releases into three categories: dangerous, questionable and routine (Preliminary Statement, 1917). The latter of these categories contained the overwhelming majority of news and was rarely the subject of censorship. Dangerous, it was said, could relate to on-going battles whilst questionable, though often mundane, could consist of details like soldier numbers and training routines (Mock, Larsen 1939). Newspapers, magazines and all written media were invited to submit their articles for 'verification' as the CPI checked whether they were suitable for publication (Rossini 2009 p. 107). As well as categorizing news the Committee produced wave after wave of press releases on a near constant basis, in a very real sense feeding the media the information required to report the war (Miles Watts, Tebbel 1985, p. 383). In 18 months until the war's conclusion, nearly 6,000 statements were released (Miles Watts, Tebbel 1985, p. 383). Mock and Larson wrote that 'the channels of communication were literally choked with official approved news and opinion' (1939, p. 11). Though the argument that the CPI's News Department was merely 'providing' information was repeated in earnest, there were occasions when the service seems to have been used in an effort to influence public opinion. It was discovered, for example, that the Allies were sending

ships to America to maintain their supplies of meat, which were running low on the continent. The CPI forcibly blocked newspapers from reporting this, claiming that 'publication would send meat prices up at once' (Mock, Larsen 1939, p. 85). In September 1917 the media in 24 states were asked to encourage their readers/listeners to conserve vegetables (Mock, Larsen 1939, p. 85). Perhaps the most blatant employment of media as propaganda came after the 4th July, 1917. In an effort to make heroes of the American convoy sailing to France on Independence Day, the CPI implied that German U-Boats had unsuccessfully attacked the Americans on the water (Tebbel, Miles Watts p. 383). A *New York Times* reporter on the boat later refuted the story, claiming that the crossing had been smooth (Lasswell 1938, p. 39). These episodes may seem trivial or mundane, but they show the titanic effort made to avoid *any* stories which may have made even a slightly negative taint on America's war. Overall, \$76,000, a large sum of money for the time, was spent on the News Division.

The News Department even had its own newspaper, *The Official Bulletin*. This was the first government sponsored daily in American history (Mock, Larson 1939, p. 92). Published in 1917, the CPI aimed to emulate the *London Gazette* and *French Gazette Officielle* (Walters 1992, p. 243). The price was set at \$5 a year for annual subscription (Pinkleton 1994, p. 232), deliberately high in order to avoid accusations of competition from other newspapers (Emery 2010, p. 446). I have chosen the edition on May 11, 1917 as a case study. It has a variety of stories, all positive about the war. For example, one page boasts about the large increases in navy size whilst reassuring the reader that the enormously high standards of the navy are not compromised 'in any respect' (Bulletin, 1917). The next page contains advice in how to deal with 'aliens' who you suspect are working with the enemy (Bulletin, 1917). The *Bulletin* also acted as an extension of the CPI, warning the media in

February 1918 not to print anything which may 'hinder the government's war policies and measures' (Emery, 2010, p. 446). By the end of the war, the Division of News had supplied information to 20,000 newspaper columns a week (Pinkleton 1994, p. 232), preparing everything from casualty lists to statistics for over 12,000 newspapers (Pinkleton 1994, p. 231). Here, we can see the origins of 24 hour war coverage, which would only be amplified throughout the century. Moreover, the *Official Bulletin* added to the CPI's message, in particular with its 'advice' on dealing with 'aliens'. The effect the bulletin had on the people themselves is difficult to quantify. However, it is clear that the paper's sections on dealing with the enemy are intended to create an image of a vigilant America. They also create an illusion of an enemy within that is active, and constantly helping the enemy

Advertising America

Another Presidential Executive Order created what may be the most flamboyant of the propaganda tools of the CPI: The Advertising Division. After its formation, William H. Johns, President of American Association of Advertising Agencies, was appointed as director (Pinkleton 1994, p. 232). Its aim was to advertise a positive message for America's participation in the war, but also to warn of the evils of 'The Hun' and her allies, Austro-Hungaria (Mock, Larson 1939, p. 98-9). A variety of methods were used, including posters, window displays, car/bus cards, cartoons and photos. Posters ranged from advertising 'liberty loans' to depicting 'barbarous' Germans (sometimes, a combination of both).² One flier depicts an American soldier stopping a crooked looking German from sexually assaulting a woman, with the headline, 'Halt the Hun!' (World War website, <http://digital.library.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metadc433/> , see

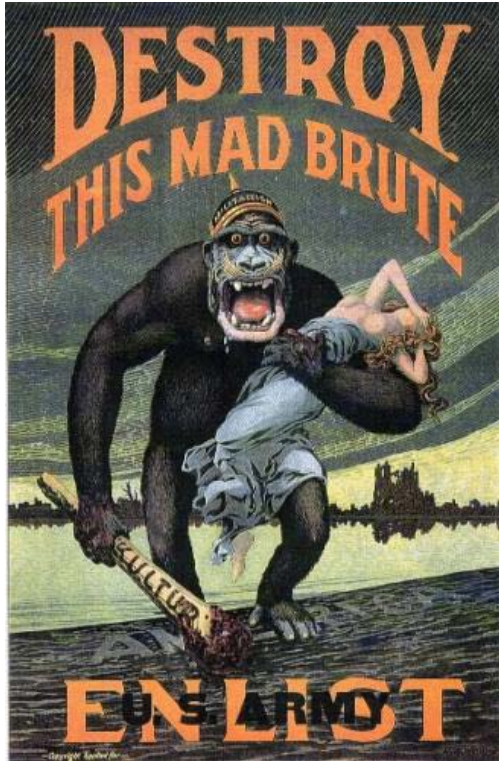
² Liberty Loans were a governmental bond system. In return for a favorable interest rate, Americans contributed with money which would help the War effort.

image 1). Another depicts an ape, complete with German spiked helmet, carrying a helpless woman with the caption, 'Destroy this mad brute' (Learn NC, <http://www.learnnc.org/lp/editions/ww1posters/4964> , see image 2). The use of women as helpless and under threat was surely intended to tap into the 'sanctity of womanhood' which so many Americans, particularly in the South, spoke of when defining American culture.³ At a time when technology was not of the same standards of today's 24 hour news and television pictures, these posters try to create an illusion, whether true or not, of a barbaric animalistic enemy.



1. 'Halt The Hun!', Henry Patrick Raleigh, 1918

3 At this time the American South in particular had a problem with lynchings. The defense of many contemporaries was that in carrying out lynchings (many of which were in retaliation of alleged rape), Americans were simply defending (white) womanhood. More information on this can be found in W. Fitzburgh Brundage 1993, *Lynching In The New South: Georgia and Virginia 1880- 1930* Chicago: University of Illinois Press and Stephen Kantrowitzm 1998, 'White Supremacist Justice and the Rule of Law: Lynching, Honor and the State in Ben Tillman's South Carolina' in Pieter Spierenburg, ed, *Men and Violence: Gender, Honor and Rituals in Modern Europe and America*, (USA: Ohio State University Press).



2. 'Destroy This Mad Brute' from Learn NC's World War One Propaganda Collection, Creator unknown, date unknown

Several of the CPI posters present illusions about the war itself to the viewer. One is 'Wake Up America!' (Learn NC, <http://www.learnnc.org/lp/editions/ww1posters/4963> , see image 3). In this picture, America is portrayed as a young innocent girl, fast asleep. Draped in the stars and stripes, the poster urges Americans to become alert to the realities of war and the danger of the enemy, having presumably been unaware of them up to this point. The image created here is one of an America which was ignorant before, blissfully unaware of the horrors of war and, more importantly, the necessity to enter it. The reality was that newspapers were certainly reporting the events of war all the way through the conflict. The *Atlanta Constitution* and *New York Times*, for example, had kept their readers informed on a variety of events such as the fighting which took place in the winter of 1916

across the Somme (Author unknown 1916, 'The Battle on the Somme, *The New York Times*, Sept 6, p. unknown; Author unknown 1916, 'GERMANS BATTLE TO CHECK ALLIES ON SOMME FRONT, *Atlanta Constitution*, Nov 7, p. 1). Neither article spare details, with the *Times* explaining how there had never been fighting 'on such a scale in the West' (Author unknown 1916, 'The Battle on the Somme, *The New York Times*, Sept 6, p. unknown).⁴ These articles are a miniscule proportion of the vast array of war reporting which was taking place before April 1917.



3. 'Wake Up, America!' from Learn NC's World War One Propaganda Collection, James Montgomery, 1917.

Another illusion is an advertisement for the navy, depicting a sailor happily walking by a beach filled with palm trees (Learn

⁴The Battle of the Somme was one of World War One's most brutal exchanges, lasting nearly five months. For a rough account of the conflict, see <http://www.firstworldwar.com/battles/somme.htm> (checked on 23/08/12). Robin Prior and Trevor Wilson, 2004, *The Somme* (London: Yale University Press) provides a more detailed analysis of the battle itself.

NC, <http://www.learnnc.org/lp/editions/ww1posters/5043> , see image 4). In what is perhaps an early example of small print advertising, the bottom caption reads ‘Ashore, on leave’, much less visible than the main caption: ‘A Wonderful Opportunity for YOU’.



4. ‘A Wonderful Opportunity for You’, from Learn NC’s World War One Propaganda Collection, Charles E. Ruttan, 1917.

Religious imagery is also used in the posters. In ‘Our Greatest Mother’, the CPI is calling on American women to become nurses for the War (Learn NC, <http://www.learnnc.org/lp/editions/ww1posters/4981>, see image 4). A nurse is pictured holding a child of toddler age and in the background ancient warriors can be seen riding on horses. The picture bears resemblance to traditional paintings of the Virgin Mary holding her son Jesus Christ. The poster’s name even implies that the American nurse can be placed on the same level, spiritual or otherwise, as the Mother of Christ. In a Liberty Bonds Poster, the red nursing cross is

used in dramatic fashion, covering almost the entire poster (Learn NC, <http://www.learnnc.org/lp/editions/ww1posters/5067> , see image 5). Resembling the crucifix, standing in front is a woman dressed in a manner resembling the Virgin Mary, in a traditional white gown. However, the gown is adorned in the stars and stripes. The woman is also walking on water. The object of such posters is to link the War with that of a religious crusade. America *must* fight in the conflict as it is her Christian duty, to do otherwise would be both a betrayal of the country and its religion. This, of course, is an illusion as the First World War bore little resemblance to The Crusades. But its effect is nonetheless striking.



4. 'Our Greatest Mother- Join!' from Learn NC's World War One Propaganda Collection, Cornelius Hicks, American Lithographic Company, USA, date unknown.



5. 'They Are Giving Their Lives Over There' from Learn NC's World War One Propaganda Collection, Charles W. Barnett, 1918.

Closely linked to the Advertising Division was the Division of Pictorial Publicity, chaired by Charles Dana Gibson, at the time one of America's most famous illustrators for *Life* magazine (Pinkleton 1994, p. 233).⁵ As well as sharing responsibility for posters, the Pictorial unit produced drawings for the press and was involved in a number of pro war campaigns, including that of the YMCA (Pinkleton 1994, p. 233).⁶ They worked tremendously hard, one particular example being when, in the space of a month, nearly fifty pictures were produced by fifty

5 He was particularly famous for designing 'The Gibson Girl', a famous personification of feminine beauty (Shaack 2006, p.32), http://www.vintagevictorian.com/images/99dl_1_1small.jpg [23/08/12]

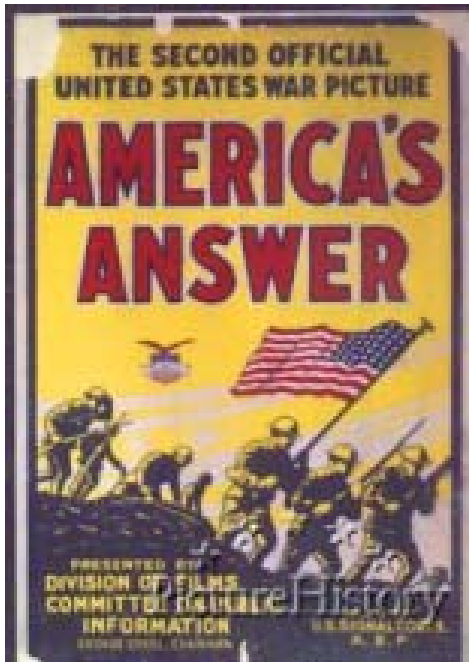
6The YMCA and YWCA sponsored two war fund drives, providing entertainment, education and relief for many of the troops. See *Atlanta Constitution*, August 28, 1918, http://nationalheritagemuseum.typepad.com/library_and_archives/2009/08/ymca-girls-in-france-during-world-war-i.html [23/08/12] and <http://www.worldwar1.com/dbc/ymca.htm> [23/08/12].

artists to promote liberty loans (Shaack 2006, p. 39). Just ten were used (Shaack 2006, p. 40). One particularly inventive one saw a pair of German boots with the caption, saying “Keep these off American Soil” (Shaack 2006, p. 41). Another closely linked department was the Bureau of Cartoons, which released its weekly *Bulletin for Cartoonists* to a mailing list of around 750, encouraging them to write cartoons on certain themes, including the popularisation of the draft (Pinkleton 1994, p. 234). By the end of the war, over \$1.5 million was spent on over 9,000 adverts, 700 poster types and 287 cartoons (Mock, Larson, 1939, p. 98-9). The estimated advertising worth of the material was \$5 million and are estimated to have circulated amongst (at least) 500 million faces (Pinkleton 1994, p. 233). The desired effect of the CPI’s use of pictures is to create an illusion of a necessary war against an evil enemy. Moreover, America is portrayed as on the side of God throughout.

Making Movies: The CPI Goes to Hollywood

One of the most enduring legacies of the CPI is the production of mass budget films. When the Division of Films was first formed, the movies were not usually intended for cinematic release, instead distributed for free at smaller venues (Pinkelton 1994, p. 236). Before long, however, the project was expanded and large cinema films were made. All such films intended for export abroad, particularly those which used real footage, had to be reviewed for ‘military interest’ and to check that any ‘negative images’ were removed (Rossini 2009, p. 109). The most high profile films which were produced for distribution in America were *Pershing’s Crusaders*, *America’s Answer* and *Under Four Flags* (Creel 1920, p. 117). Like the exports, all were examined to ensure they were fit for public exhibition (Creel 1920, p. 117). One of the leading producers was George Bowles, who had made a considerable fortune from the marketing of Ku Klux Klan epic *The Birth of a Nation* (Creel 1920, p.

121).⁷ The poster for *America's Answer* depicts 'brave' soldiers planting the stars and stripes on German soil (*America's Answer* poster, http://www.picturehistory.com/images/products/0/2/4/prod_2495.jpg , see image 6). *Under Four Flags* shows soldiers 'admirably' fighting alongside her French and British allies (*Under Four Flags* Poster, <http://images.moviepostershop.com/under-four-flags-movie-poster-1918-1020547841.jpg> , see image 7).



6. *America's Answer* Poster

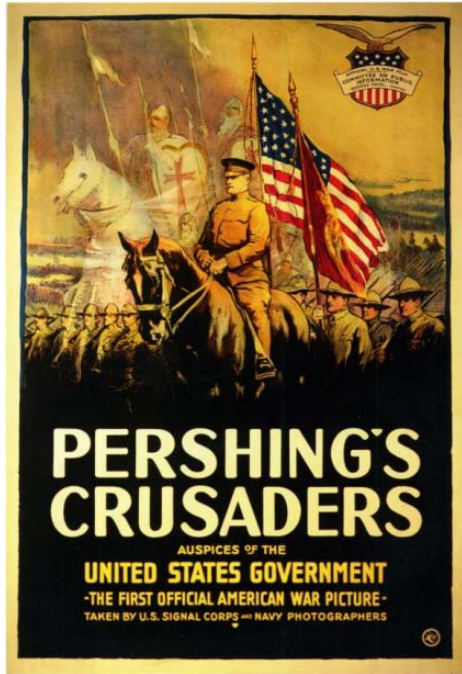
⁷ *Birth of a Nation* (1915) was a hugely successful film which told the story of American 'redeemers' reclaiming power in the South from African Americans after the Reconstruction phase in the Civil War, were they had been given numerous rights. The historical accuracy of the film was doubted at the time, and remains so today. The film can be viewed for free on several popular video websites. In 2007, Melvyn Stokes published *D.W. Griffith's The birth of a Nation: a history of "the most controversial motion picture of all time"* (Oxford University Press) which offers a definitive account of the film's impact on America.



7. *Under Four Flags* Poster

Perhaps most interesting is the poster for *Pershing's Crusaders*, which depicts a squadron of 'brave' American soldiers in the midst of a sunset, waiting for battle against the Germans (*Pershing's Crusader* poster, http://www.moviegoods.com/Assets/product_images/1020/174144.1020.A.jpg, see image 8). Notably, however, in the background there are the ghosts of white robed men in the sky. They look particularly similar to the Ku Klux Klan from *Birth of a Nation* as they watch over the new, modern American before battle. As this was a beacon of patriotic film at the time, the efforts to link *Pershing's Crusaders* to what many at the time viewed as the bravest of American conquests (against African Americans in the South) is clear. Following on from the religious themed posters, the film also reinforces the idea that America has a religious duty to take part in the war, as a Christian nation. *Pershing's Crusaders* was shown in 24 cities and made \$181,741 at the Box Office (Creel 1920, p. 122). In total, the Film Division made

over \$850,000 (Creel 1920, p. 122).⁸ The CPI's Film Division reinforces the idea that America *must* fight this war. It is not merely a case of economics or international relations: the War is about morality.



8. *Pershing's Crusaders* Poster

An Army of Speakers: The Four Minute Men

The phenomena of 'Four Minute Men' has, for Bruce Pinkleton, received more attention than any aspect of CPI propaganda (1994, p. 234). Proof that there was at least a sizable support for the war among the public, the 'Four Minute Men' were groups of volunteers who signed up to read speeches on certain themes prepared by the CPI (History Matters, <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/4970/>). Mock and Larson describe it as America's 'nationwide hook up' during the conflict

⁸ At its peak, the Bureau of Distribution handed out 500 feet of film a week for the express purpose of making these films and by the end of the war, over a million feet of film had been used (Pinkleton 1994, p. 237)

(1939, p. 113). Speeches were heard everywhere from cinemas before and after movies, to supermarkets, churches, railway stations, bars and cafes (History Matters, <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/4970/>). 75,000 men across nearly 8000 branches made around 8 million speeches, covering every state in the union (Creel, 1920, p. 85, Pinkleton 1994, p. 235). Stephen Vaughn estimates that as many as four hundred million people may have heard the speeches (Vaughn 1979, p. 103). Topics varied from 'What Our Enemy Really Is', 'Unmasking German Propaganda' and 'Why We Are Fighting' (Creel 1920, p. 85). Often, the *Official Bulletin* served as an instruction manual. For example, one bulletin displayed a map of Germany's would-be European Empire, calling on the minute men to spread the word (Official Bulletin in Walter 1992, p. 225). I have chosen an example Four Minute speech to display the illusions which they attempted to create. It warned of a German 'spy' keeping a close eye on Americans, so afraid was he of 'liberty loans' (History Matters Four Minute Men speech, <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/4970/>). He concludes by warning Americans not to let this 'spy' see them slacking (History Matters Four Minute Men Speech, <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/4970/>). Another speech contains a poem, 'It's Duty Boy', in which comparisons are drawn between the War in Europe and the Civil War at Gettysburg many years ago (History Matters Four Minute Men Speech, <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/4970/>). The speeches are an attempt to portray the War as a grassroots movement, one which the American people have demanded and are enthusiastically participating in.

The speeches even endured for a time after the war, until Christmas Eve 1918 (Creel 1920, p. 87). Contests were held in schools up and down the country to select who would get the opportunity to

read them out (Creel 1920, p. 92). Generally speaking, the absolute detail of the four minutes was left to the men, as the speaker was left to improvise (Pinkleton 1994, p. 235). Around \$100,000 was spent on advertising these speeches to the American public (Creel 1920, p. 95). In his praise of American propaganda, Harold Laswell claimed that

A nation of one hundred million[...]was welded into a fighting whole[...]the name of this new hammer and anvil of social solidarity is propaganda (Laswell 1938, p. 218-221)

Perhaps in no other department is this statement truer than the ‘Four Minute Men’. The CPI, quite simply could not have managed to employ the thousands of men to give the speeches, even with its large budget. The largely organic nature of the speeches indicates at the very least that those in favour of the war were enthusiastic and determined. The CPI bombarded the American People with propaganda. The sections examined in this paper are to say nothing of the Speaking Division (a lecture tour of sorts), the Women’s division and many others. But was all of this necessary? Was public opinion so against the war that millions of dollars’ worth of propaganda was vital? The next section of the article will explore this further.

Gagging Order?

Daniel M. Smith claims that the ‘general reaction’ to the war’s outbreak in 1914 was

One of horror and dismay mingled with a feeling of relief that America was immune from the insanity gripping the old world (1965, p.2)

Wesley M. Bagby largely agrees with this, claiming that most Americans thought themselves too civilised for such a ‘horribly destructive’ war (Bagby 1999, p. 21). T. Harry Williams further argued that America’s

entry into the conflict was done whilst the American people were 'blindfolded' (1981, p. 370). Peter Buitenhuis claimed that there were three opinions largely held by the public: neutral, pro-German and pro-British (Buitenhuis 1989, p. 54). Of these, the first option was held by the 'overwhelming majority' (Buitenhuis 1989, p. 54). Even George Creel seems to partly agree, stating in his autobiography that

The sentiment of the West was still isolationist; the Northeast buzzed with talk of a 'rich man's war', waged to save Wall Street Loans; men and women of Irish stock were 'neutral', not caring who whipped England, and in every state demagogues raved about 'warmongers' (1947, p. 157)

This is despite the fact that her elected representatives in both houses voted overwhelmingly for war. The Senate passed a resolution with 82 votes to 6, whilst The House of Representatives saw an anti-war campaign which mustered only 50 votes out of 435 (Williams 1981, p. 370). The outbreak of war had led to some military expansion. In 1915 Wilson had switched to a 'preparedness' stance, pushing for army increases, a new federal reserve force and increases in navy equipment (Milton Cooper Jr. 1969, p. 90). A National Defence Act was passed which, in particular, put the National Guard under the Federal Government's umbrella for the first time (Williams 1981, p. 379).

Although these developments were important in terms of military organisation, they hardly signalled the beginning of aggressive military strategy towards anyone, let alone the Germans. Indeed, during his re-election campaign of 1916, Wilson presented himself as the man 'who kept us out of war' (Tebbel, Miles Watts 1985, p. 380). A key ally, Governor Martyn Glynn of New York, claimed that Wilson would 'satisfy the mothers of the land at whose hearth and fireside no jingoistic war has placed an empty chair' (Tebbel, Miles Watts 1985, p.

380). The President's Democratic nomination was voted for by all but one delegate, who voted against out of concern that his party were becoming 'pacifist' (Tebbel, Miles Watts 1985, p. 380). After his re-election, he gave his famous 'peace without victory' speech, in which he claimed America, like all 'neutral' nations, saw the war as a conflict which put her most 'vital interests' in 'constant jeopardy' (Wilson 1917, <http://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/ww15.htm>). He went on to call for a negotiated peace, with America as the main arbiter (Wilson 1917, <http://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/ww15.htm>). Although there was an obvious change in tone and the failure of said negotiations as war drew ever closer, the message of non-intervention arguably carried at least some resonance with the public, as they endorsed him at the polls for a second term. It would be unwise, of course, to attribute the opinions of the President directly with those of the American people.

John Milton Cooper Jr., in *Pivotal Decades* (1990), argues that the war was so elusive and insignificant to the American people that they were genuinely unsure what to call it, the terms 'World War' and 'The Great War' making little headway in the nation's mind-set (1990, p. 268). Although many were shocked at stories of German brutality in 'brave little Belgium', he argues that this served merely to harden many Americans in their aversion to entering a war which was entirely the concern of 'barbaric' Europe (Milton Cooper Jr. 1990, p. 231). Whilst indifference does not necessarily translate to outright opposition, by 1917 there were cases across the country of Americans being more vocal in their opposition. Socialists, for example, continued to oppose the war throughout (Milton Cooper Jr., 1990, p. 269). In *The Great Silent Majority*, Christopher C. Gibbs, in his fascinating study of the anti-war movement in Missouri, claimed that 90% of letters to state representatives were bemoaning the Government's decision to declare

war, calling for a referendum on the issue (1988, p. 29). He claims that a 'sprinkling' of articles noting lack of support for the war or occasional rural editorials are evidence of outright opposition (Gibbs, 1988, p. 28). For Gibbs, it is unwise to rely on mainstream editorials (most of which supported the war) for proof of support amongst the people as the newspapers knew that, economically at least, America was wise to side with The Allies (Gibbs 1988, p. 28). An opinion poll taken by the *St Joseph's Gazette* found 20:1 results against America's involvement in the conflict (Gibbs 1988, p. 35). Taking the argument into our concern (the country as a whole), Gibbs argues that these opinions were prevalent outside Missouri as well, dismissing the notion that the state was 'different' from others, that is, it contained more 'hyphenated' Americans who would likely be against the allies, in particular pointing out that only 10% of the state was German-American, and only 82,000 were of Irish stock (Gibbs 1988, p. 41). The points which he raises are interesting and there is no doubt that, in Missouri at least, there was sizable opposition to the war. Opposition in Missouri was such that even one of the state senators who had voted against war felt compelled to write an open letter urging his fellow Missourians to lend their support after war was declared (1917, 'Stone Issues Appeal to Missouri Loyalty', *The New York Times*, April 8, p. 2). William R. Douglas (1997) examined opposition in Minnesota, in particular the court marshalling of eight draft registers from St. Paul who had resisted (Douglas 1997, p. 287). Socialists were strongly against the conflict, including the Minnesota leaders Allen Strong-Broms, Morris Kammen and Gunnard Johnson (Douglas 1997, p. 288). One leader told a Minnesota newspaper that over 9,000 had avoided the draft (Douglas 1997, p. 288).

Opposition to the war was not widely reported, but there are several instances in which it occurred. A close look at the *Atlanta Constitution* and the *New York Times*, two newspapers from opposite end of the

country, reveal an interesting portrait of what America was thinking. Joseph F. Smith, President of the Mormons in America, used a speech in November 1914 to condemn the war (1914, 'Great War Deplored by Mormon Leader, *Atlanta Constitution*, Nov 28, p. 9). Evidence also shows that the African American community was divided by the war. In a controversial editorial for *The Crisis*, W. E. B. Du Bois had urged the community to unite and, for the duration of the conflict, put aside their grievances with the white majority and join the War Effort (DuBois, W.E.B. 1918, 'Close Ranks', *The Crisis*, Vol. 16, No. 3, July, p. 111).⁹ The letters section of a future issue show that some disagreed. William H. Wilson of Washington DC was 'astounded' to read the editorial, claiming that grievances should not be buried just because there happened to be a war (Letters Page 1918, *The Crisis*, Vol. 16, No. 5, Sept, p. 218). The Washington branch of the NAACP also expressed concern, although it accepted that the War should be supported (Letters Page 1918, *The Crisis*, Vol. 16, No. 5, Sept, p. 218).

As well as studying outright opposition to the war in my study of whether the CPI's claim of a country united against Germany was an illusion, it is also important to examine the widespread support for President Wilson's previous policy of neutrality and negotiated peace. Shortly after the re-election of Wilson, Members of the National Democrat Club pledged to support Wilson in 'any steps he may see fit' towards the ending of the conflict (Author unknown, 1916, 'Democrats Support Wilson Peace Note', *The New York Times*, 22 Dec, p. unknown). They qualify this, however, by aligning themselves with the 'He Kept Us Out of War' slogan and look forward to the day when Europe might say 'He has drawn us out of war and into peace' (1916, 'Democrats Support

⁹*The Crisis* was the official magazine of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and widely read amongst the African American community. W. E. B. DuBois was one of the NAACP's co founders.

Wilson Peace Note', *The New York Times*, 22 Dec). The Democrat Club's support for Wilson, at this point, seems only to stretch towards peaceful means. Before the election, some German-American leaders had praised the President's policy, claiming that his opponent did not have the best intentions for them (1916, 'See Gain By Wilson', *The New York Times*, Oct 13, p. 2). A German-American Newspaper, *The St Louis Times*, claimed that the typical view of German-Americans towards Wilson could be easily represented in a letter from one of their readers who claimed that with him as president, they knew where they stood and could count on his policies (1916, 'See Gain By Wilson', *The New York Times*, Oct 13, p. 2). Interestingly, a 1935 Poll found that 70% of Americans believed that their country's participation in the War had been a mistake (Digital History, http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/disp_textbook.cfm?smtID=2&psid=3483). Of course, the respondents had the benefit of hindsight and in no way should this poll be used to reflect the views of those during the conflict itself. However, if America was indeed, as propaganda claimed, heavily in favour of the war, then this is a large swing in opinion. If Americans were actively opposed or indifferent to the idea of joining the war, then foreword of *How We Advertised America* was correct to suggest that the public needed to be convinced of the war's merits.

Megaphone?

However, most evidence for outright opposition to the war tends to be focused on small, isolated incidents. It may well be true that many Americans were privately sceptical about The War. However, there is also a variety of evidence which suggests that there was in fact a sizeable proportion of Americans who supported the war. If this was the case, then the CPI was merely a 'megaphone', accentuating views that were already in the public domain. Williams wrote that American opinion was strongly affected by what was perceived as the 'aggressive' nature of

German tactics, particularly their submarines (Williams 1981, p. 372-3). On May 7, 1915, these tactics affected the American consciousness in brutal fashion when the British passenger ship *Lusitania* was sunk, costing the lives of over a thousand (128 of whom were Americans) (Milton Cooper Jr. 1990, p. 231). Although only 6/1000 newspaper editorials called for war in the immediate aftermath of the sinking (Milton Cooper Jr., 1990, p. 231), incidents like this still contributed to a growing mistrust of German aims (Miles Watts, Tebbel 1985, p. 380-1). Moreover, the interception of the Zimmerman telegram further 'inflamed' the American Public (Miles Watts, Tebbel 1985, p. 381) The intercepted telegram allegedly represented a promise from Kaiser Wilhelm to Mexico that Arizona, New Mexico and Texas would be placed under her control if she joined German efforts to conquer the country (Zimmerman Telegram, <http://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?flash=true&doc=60>).¹⁰ It is important not to underestimate these events, however much hindsight may or may not have discredited them. The threat of German invasion may have affected a great deal of previously isolationist citizens, whilst German tactics ran against the sensibilities of many influential Americans.

¹⁰The telegram read "We intend to begin on the first of February unrestricted submarine warfare. We shall endeavor in spite of this to keep the United States of America neutral. In the event of this not succeeding, we make Mexico a proposal or alliance on the following basis: make war together, make peace together, generous financial support and an understanding on our part that Mexico is to reconquer the lost territory in Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona. The settlement in detail is left to you. You will inform the President of the above most secretly as soon as the outbreak of war with the United States of America is certain and add the suggestion that he should, on his own initiative, invite Japan to immediate adherence and at the same time mediate between Japan and ourselves. Please call the President's attention to the fact that the ruthless employment of our submarines now offers the prospect of compelling England in a few months to make peace." Signed, ZIMMERMANN.

A survey of newspaper editorials in the immediate aftermath of declaration shows that just 1 from 68 examined was opposed to intervention (Smith 1965, p. 79). Even before the war, in 1914 a poll of newspaper editors had found that whilst around half were impartial, the rest were 5:1 in favour of the war (Milton Cooper Jr. 1990, p. 229). Although newspaper editors, like politicians, may not reflect the general view of the country, it is hard to believe that so many publications would take a view which was in fact completely contrary to the views of the American people; they were, after all, businesses looking for increased circulation. Milton Cooper Jr. argued that the pro war speeches and articles by Theodore Roosevelt eventually came closest to mirroring public opinion (1990, p. 230). Although Wilson did win re-election on 'He Kept Us Out of War', the main issues of the campaign were not foreign policy but an Income Tax and Interstate Road Worker Bill (Smith 1965, p. 25-6; Milton Cooper Jr., 1990, p. 230). His other slogans, 'Who Stands for an Eight Hour Day?' and 'Who Gave The Farmer Rural Credits?' had little to do with a pacifist peace policy which the nation was seemingly embracing (Milton Cooper Jr., 1990, p. 250). Also crucial when examining the supposed electoral vindication of peace policy is that the election itself was an extremely close affair, with just 600,000 votes between Wilson and his Republican opponent. Moreover, the Democrats saw their majority slashed in the Senate (Milton Cooper Jr. 1990, p. 252-3).

President Wilson also received support from many civic and religious groups. The YMCA and YWCA supported two war fund drives, along with the War Camp Communities Service and the American Liberty Association (Author unknown 1918, 'YMCA-YWCA Predicts Great Success for War Fund Drive, *Atlanta Constitution*, 28 August, p. 7). In 1915, Veterans of the Spanish War sent Wilson a telegram in which they supported his neutrality, but also supported any

course that he intended to take, 'no matter what' (Author unknown, 1915, 'Veterans Support Wilson', *The New York Times*, 13 June, p. 2). The United States War Policy was given 'wholehearted' support in 1918 by the Catholic Educational Association (Author unknown 1918, 'Catholics Vote Support of Wilson', *The New York Times*, 26 July, p. unknown). The Presbyterian Church, representing six million Americans, backed the President a month after war was declared (Author unknown 1917, 'Presbytery Backs Wilson', *The New York Times*, 23 May, p. unknown). Just as many rebuked Du Bois' request regarding the war, so too did many African Americans praise his words and pledge to support America. I. Garland Penn of Ohio congratulated him, claiming that he spoke the true feelings of the black community (Letters Page 1918, *The Crisis*, Vol. 16, No. 5, Sept, p. 218). T. G. Steward, also from the Buckeye state, expressed similar feelings (Letters Page 1918, *The Crisis*, Vol. 16, No. 5, Sept, p. 218). A follow up editorial to Du Bois' article elaborated on his feelings when it claimed that African Americans could secure better rights if they fought against the Germans. Their 'evidence' came from their assertion that fighting in the war of independence had gained them emancipation in the North and participation in other wars had resulted in the slow advancement of rights (Author unknown, 1918, Editorial, *The Crisis*, Vol. 16, No. 5, Sept, p. 217). In a lecture given after the War began, the Democrat William J. Bryan claimed that he found the desire of the American people to support the war to be 'almost universal' (Author unknown 1917, 'Popular War, Says Bryan', *The New York Times*, 28 August, p. 8) .

Some of the activities and figures concerning the CPI itself also indicate a fairly broad support for the war. Barring some notable exceptions, the press generally consented without much protest the new regulations and expectations which were forced on them (Miles Watts, Tebbel, 1985, p. 384, Rossini, 2009, p. 110). There were, of course,

exceptions. After the 4 July Navy incident, the *New York Times* were not shy in criticizing the CPI's manipulation of the situation (Lasswell 1938, p. 39). Larger newspapers like the *Times* and *Evening Post* resisted censorship on a number of occasions (Lasswell 1938, p. 39). On one occasion, an editor of a Minneapolis magazine printed a story about U Boat submarines despite being expressly warned not to. Their punishment, perhaps indicative of the CPI's lack of real clout, was a warning (Lasswell 1938, p. 37-8). However, such incidents were rare and, even in the face of light punishment, the country's newspapers and editorials more or less towed the party line. Whilst the 'voluntary' claim the CPI made again and again may have been cynical, with regards to the press it was not far off the truth. The sheer enthusiasm with which the 'Four Minute Men' project was greeted may indicate that large sections of the population were enthusiastically pro war after all. Perhaps most interestingly of all, the NET cost of the CPI was just under \$4 million (Creel 1947, p. 165). The CPI, then, was not far from making a profit. Despite spending millions of dollars, the people of America, at least partly, endorsed the CPI by going to see lectures, buying tickets to movies and other activities. This perhaps demonstrates that although public opinion was largely neutral in the years leading up to the conflict, America wasn't adverse to the idea that she may end up taking part. For example, in August 1914, 400,000 took to Times Square, New York, to cheer the declaration of war in Europe. The same article did note, however, that many good natured arguments were clearly taking place amongst different nationalities (Author unknown 1914, 'MULTITUDES CHEER AT BULLETIN BOARDS', *The New York Times*, 5 August, p. unknown).

Conclusion

The CPI was an early example of mass state funded propaganda which operated with efficiency and reached out to millions. The Committee

took propaganda to a national level with news coverage, films, adverts, posters and the 'Four Minute Men' project. Public opinion in America is a complicated matter, not least because of the millions who considered themselves Irish-American, Anglo-American, German-American and scores of other 'hyphenated' nationalities. Work by other scholars and evidence from the time shows that the CPI was certainly not a 'megaphone', amplifying widely held views. The pockets of anti-war protests and indifference are too large to neglect. However, there is evidence of widespread support in certain sections of society in the *Atlanta Constitution*, *The Crisis* and the *New York Times*, including religious groups, politicians, academics and others. More research is required in this area. In particular, a broad study of the hundreds of newspapers and publications in America at this time is needed. The general compliance with which the CPI was met indicates that entering The Great War was not an unreasonable proposition for Americans. Nonetheless, through its work the Committee created many illusions about the enemy, America's attitude (past and present) and the nature of the conflict which distorted from reality.

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