

PROPAGANDA AGAINST PROPAGANDA: DECONSTRUCTING THE
DOMINANT NARRATIVE OF THE COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC INFORMATION

A Thesis
by
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Abstract

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This thesis examines how the World War I-era Committee on Public Information, created by President Woodrow Wilson and chaired by George Creel, has been presented as a case study in the dangers of government propaganda. A thorough examination of the secondary literature on World War I propaganda, an extensive survey of United States History textbooks, and a gleaning of relevant websites confirms that a dominant narrative of the Committee exist. This narrative relies on common persuasive techniques to cast the Committee, and by extension propaganda, in a negative light. The dominant narrative's claims are substantially disproven through a careful study of the wartime correspondence between Wilson and Creel and through the application of current Department of Defense methodology for determining the effectiveness of Psychological Operations. By deconstructing this dominant narrative, this thesis argues in favor of a value-neutral interpretation of the Committee on Public Information.

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INTRODUCTION

We did not call it propaganda, for that word, in German hands, had come to be associated with deceit and corruption. Our effort was educational and informative throughout, for we had such confidence in our case as to feel that no other argument was needed than the simple, straightforward presentation of facts.

George Creel
How We Advertised America, 1920

Anyone consulting the Wikipedia article on the “Committee on Public Information” will find, as the article’s foremost image, a striking example of World War I propaganda. This image is a World War I-era propaganda poster portraying a mustachioed gorilla, mouth agape, fangs exposed, bearing a club labeled “Kultur” in one hand and a helpless, bare-breasted damsel in the other. The gorilla, crowned with a spiked helmet (*pickelhaube*) bearing the word “militarism,” is standing on a shore that is labeled “America.” Above the gorilla are the words “Destroy This Mad Brute.” Below this image, the poster reads “Enlist,” with “U.S. Army” superimposed over it. It is a stunningly vivid example of propaganda. It seems likely that this particular poster has proven to be such an enduring symbol of World War I propaganda because it is so overt. Its symbols are as clear as they are offensive to most modern eyes. Its message is so clear that it does not need interpretation—and yet there is so much going on. It takes some time to process all of the elements intellectually and yet its meaning is conveyed instantaneously. It is an image that has become synonymous with propaganda and, through a variety of both scholarly and non-scholarly sources, with the Committee on Public Information (CPI), America’s “propaganda ministry” during World War I.¹ The problem is that “Destroy This Mad Brute” was not the work of the CPI.

1. “Committee on Public Information,” *Wikipedia*, last modified November 23, 2013, accessed November 23, 2013, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Committee_on_Public_Information.

Errors such as the misattribution of “Destroy This Mad Brute” to the CPI are not uncommon. In the century since the CPI’s brief existence (1917-1919), it has been the subject of misinterpretation as much as interpretation. Successive generations of schoolchildren have learned about the CPI through textbooks that use “Destroy This Mad Brute,” among other evidence, to convey the excessiveness of the CPI. Scholars seeking to prove the charge that the CPI resorted increasingly to appeals to hate and fear as the war progressed produce “Destroy This Mad Brute” as evidence. They also present the CPI Chairman George Creel as a one-man show, a tactless bumbler, a petty tyrant or, worse yet, a villain who almost single-handedly suspended civil liberties in the name of wartime necessity. Generations of scholars have also highlighted the CPI’s alleged excessiveness to make a broader point about the dangers of propaganda in a democratic society. Over time, a dominant narrative of the CPI coalesced around these key tenets. It feeds off of negative impressions of propaganda, exemplified by the CPI, and embraces the cautionary message that the CPI must be studied lest it, or something worse, be inflicted on the American people in the name of patriotism.

This thesis argues that a dominant narrative of the CPI, as described above, exists and that it is not substantiated by the available evidence. The cautionary aspect of the dominant narrative hinges on assumptions of the CPI’s effectiveness that wither under scrutiny. Additionally, the singular focus on George Creel overlooks the working relationship between Creel and President Woodrow Wilson, meanwhile ignoring the role of the thousands of Americans who volunteered their often considerable talents to the work of the CPI. Finally, the dominant narrative excludes evidence of the CPI’s moderation because such evidence would undermine the cautionary message. Scholars should reject this narrative in favor of a

historical interpretation of the CPI that recognizes that it was a vast cooperative, progressive, and largely voluntary enterprise that was relatively moderate when compared with many of the other forces vying for the American mind during World War I.

Methodology

Chapter one traces the development of the three competing historiographical interpretations of the CPI that emerged during the 1920s and 1930s as part of a broader struggle over the usefulness, meaning, and moral implications of propaganda. The celebratory interpretation of the CPI was furthered mainly by those who had been directly involved in the work of the committee and is exemplified by the works of George Creel and Edward Bernays. The instructive interpretation emerged out of a desire to study propaganda, and later the CPI, from a value-neutral perspective. It is most thoroughly articulated in the works of James Mock and Cedric Larson, Stephen Vaughn, and David Kennedy. Finally, the cautionary interpretation resulted from the nascent revisionist movement of the 1920s and can be observed in the work of Charles H. Hamlin and Harry Elmer Barnes. More recently, this interpretation has been furthered by Stewart Halsey Ross and Thomas Fleming. Although the cautionary interpretation provides the cornerstone of the dominant narrative of the CPI, it is but one aspect of this narrative. Chapter one provides evidence of the dominant narrative's other components, drawing heavily from the recent secondary literature.

After establishing the characteristics of the dominant narrative in chapter one, chapter two examines how this narrative has been perpetuated through standardized public school United States History curricula, through commonly adopted United States History textbooks, through several popular U.S. histories, and through several common web-based reference sites. These sources are evaluated in order to determine compliance with the dominant

narrative of the CPI, as defined in chapter one. This evaluation involves both a broad survey of U.S. History textbooks, with a focus on more recent titles, and a longitudinal study of one representative title: Thomas Bailey's *The American Pageant*, which spans from 1956 to the present. Chapter two then examines two particular aspects of the dominant narrative that are commonly found in textbooks and reference materials and addresses the significance of each.

Chapter three considers the question of whether the dominant narrative is accurate in portraying George Creel as the solitary leader, both mastermind and dictator, of the CPI and in portraying President Woodrow Wilson as a watchmaker who created the CPI and then left it in the hands of Creel. This is done by examining Creel's relationship with President Wilson, as seen through their wartime correspondence. Chapter three also connects the CPI to the broader themes of the progressivism embraced by Wilson, Creel, and many of the CPI's foot soldiers.

Chapter four tests the dominant narrative's claim that the CPI created a climate of fear, intolerance, and xenophobia during the war and that it was responsible for postwar disillusionment. This is done by utilizing current Department of Defense doctrine for Psychological Operations (aka PSYOP or "Military Information Support Operations"). Chapter four also presents the operations of the CPI's Division of Four-Minute Men within the construct of the doctrinal process for conducting PSYOP. The case of the Four-Minute Men demonstrates that, despite the improvisational nature of the CPI, progressive inclinations toward bureaucratic efficiency resulted in strikingly modern operating procedures. Finally, chapter four explores the CPI's foreign operations and the role which the U.S. military played in supporting these operations. This collaboration presaged the

development of U.S. public diplomacy and, subsequently, the PSYOP mission of “Defense Support to Public Diplomacy.”

The Committee on Public Information: A Primer

This thesis does not present a comprehensive narrative of the CPI. James Mock and Cedric Larson’s *Words that Won the War* (1939) and Stephen Vaughn’s *Holding Fast the Inner Lines* (1980) are recommended reading for those desiring a complete overview of CPI operations. The following is merely a brief primer intended to familiarize the reader with some basic information on the CPI.

On April 14, 1917, President Woodrow Wilson issued Executive Order 2594 establishing the CPI for the purpose of handling the sensitive issue of censorship and, more generally, of building popular support for the American war effort.² The CPI consisted of Secretary of War Newton Baker, Secretary of State Robert Lansing, and Secretary of the Navy Josephus Daniels. George Creel, a progressive journalist from Denver and longtime Wilson supporter, was appointed as the CPI’s civilian chairman. Creel’s loyalty to Wilson was beyond question and Wilson responded in kind, particularly when Creel came under fire from enemies in Congress and elsewhere.

Although it quickly became known as the “Creel Committee,” many men and women who were leaders in their respective fields eagerly joined Creel’s organization, most on a volunteer basis. Many of the nation’s leading historians, led by Guy Stanton Ford of the University of Minnesota, volunteered their services writing pamphlets for the CPI that described, among other topics, the reasons for U.S. entry into the war and the true nature of the German enemy. Many of these pamphlets were printed by the million. Many of the

2. Executive Order 2594, April 14, 1917, in *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, ed. Arthur Link, vol. 42, (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1966), 59.

nation's most famous artists, led by Charles Dana Gibson (perhaps the most famous of all), contributed over a thousand poster designs as part of the Division of Pictorial Publicity. Some of America's leading journalists and authors lent their services to the CPI's Bureau of Syndicate Features. Leaders in America's nascent film industry joined the ranks of the CPI, producing several feature-length films, along with many shorter featurettes and newsreels. The advertising industry signed on as well, securing millions in free advertising space for CPI products. Other CPI divisions sprang up, as the need or opportunity dictated, until the total reached nineteen domestic divisions.³

The CPI also enlisted thousands of faceless volunteers, perhaps as many as 150,000, into the fight for what Wilson himself referred to as "the verdict of mankind."⁴ Half of this number, nearly 75,000 men, volunteered their services as "Four-Minute Men" who gave four-minute long speeches at movie theaters and in other public settings that encouraged their fellow citizens to support the war effort, among other ways, by purchasing liberty bonds, conserving food, donating blood, and registering for the draft. Countless other volunteers served as translators, social workers, artists, writers, and clerical staff.

Creel rejected strict censorship of the European mold and instead established guidelines for "voluntary censorship" on the part of the press. In keeping with his notion of

3. James Mock and Cedric Larson, *Words that Won the War: The Story of the Committee on Public Information: 1917-1919* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1939), 66-73. Mock and Larson's account remains, some seventy-five years after its publication, the best starting point for those seeking to learn about the CPI. It is more comprehensive than the accounts by either Stephen Vaughn (*Holding Fast the Inner Lines*) or Alan Axelrod (*Selling the Great War*) and, while there is a mild but discernable pro-CPI bias, it is widely considered to be factually accurate. Vaughn's is the second best source but does not address the CPI's foreign operations. Axelrod's provides the most detailed biography of Creel of the three but draws heavily on Creel's own writing and those of Mock and Larson.

4. George Creel, *Rebel at Large: Recollections of Fifty Crowded Years* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1947), 158. Written nearly thirty years after the war, Creel's autobiography contains five somewhat brief chapters of his experiences as CPI Chairman. His *How We Advertised America* (1920) provides a much fuller account of the CPI.

“expression, not suppression,” Creel believed that, by providing the press with war news, the CPI could simultaneously provide a valuable service and control the flow of sensitive information.⁵ Not all journalists agreed and, despite his intentions to avoid censorship, Creel came to be known as the “Chief Censor.” Nevertheless, other government officials, such as Postmaster General Albert Sydney Burleson, were much more aggressive censors than Creel.⁶

True to his muckraking past, Creel brought to his job the progressive’s faith in human rationality and the power of facts to persuade. Many other progressives enlisted in his battle for the American mind, although not all shared Creel’s belief in the power of facts alone. Some, such as Gibson, openly rejected the appeal to reason and actively used appeals to emotion. Such was the paradox of progressivism. The progressive faith in rationality encouraged appeals to fact and reason while the progressive drive for efficiency encouraged appeals to fear, hatred, and other negative emotions. It is the latter appeals for which the CPI is better known due to the fact that, unlike so much of its other work, its posters have survived.

The CPI engaged in America’s first large-scale experiment in what would become known as “public diplomacy” by promoting the justness of America’s cause, as well as President Wilson’s peace plan (the “Fourteen Points”) around the world. The CPI conducted operations in over thirty nations but its reach extended even farther than that. President Wilson’s speeches were widely disseminated by the CPI and citizens in places such as Spain and Italy came to view Woodrow Wilson as a heroic figure who was perhaps the only man

5. Ibid., 157.

6. David Kennedy, *Over Here: The First World War and American Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 75-77.

on the world stage who could bring about a just and lasting peace. The success of the CPI's foreign outreach has led to accusations that it had oversold the Fourteen Points and that this led to postwar disillusionment.

On the domestic front, the CPI has been accused of promoting intolerance of all things German. Ironically, wartime opponents of the CPI often argued that the CPI did not go far enough to promote such feelings. There is no objective way of determining how much the CPI contributed to vigilantism or anti-immigrant sentiment because many other organizations, such as the American Protective League and National Security League, aggressively promoted such behaviors and ideas through their own unsanctioned propaganda, as well as through direct action.

Assessing the legacy of the CPI has proven challenging. Both its domestic and foreign operations were clearly unprecedented in American history but the extent to which they were effective cannot be known. What is known is that subsequent propaganda efforts by the U.S. government have been comparably less overt than the CPI because of the backlash against propaganda that followed World War I. Even today, government efforts to rally public support in favor of military action are likely to draw comparisons with the CPI.

The total cost of the CPI, by Creel's accounting, was \$6,850,000 (\$5,600,000 from President's War Fund and \$1,250,000 from Congress).⁷ For sake of comparison, this would equal \$105,946,364 in 2013 dollars.⁸ Creel accounts for \$2,825,670 in receipts, which were

7. George Creel, *How We Advertised America: The First Telling of the Amazing Story of the Committee on Public Information That Carried the Gospel of Americanism to Every Corner of the Globe* (1920; repr., London: Forgotten Books, 2012), 13.

8. United States Department of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics, "CPI Inflation Calculator" *bls.gov*, accessed November 23, 2013, http://www.bls.gov/data/inflation_calculator.htm.

returned to the government, for a net operating cost of \$4,912,553. True to his effusive nature, Creel proclaimed:

These figures might well be put in bronze to stand as an enduring monument to the sacrifice and devotion of the one hundred and fifty thousand men and women who were responsible for the results. A world-fight for the verdict of mankind—a fight that was won against terrific odds—and all for less than five millions [*sic*]⁹—less than half what Germany spent in Spain alone!

While indispensable as a primary source, Creel's account has been used by both those seeking to praise and those seeking to bury Creel and his organization. The sheer volume of the numbers provided by Creel—150,000 workers, 75,000 Four-Minute Men, 75,000,000 pamphlets, 6,000 news releases—are often used as evidence of the CPI's overreach. Each number comes with its own caveat and yet critics of the CPI have found little need for investigation, let alone equivocation. There is little need to dig deeper when the raw numbers prove the point that the CPI was a propaganda machine of Orwellian proportions. In this way, the dominant narrative is more polemical than it is historical.

The dominant narrative is not entirely inaccurate but it is highly selective in its presentation of the CPI. It is, quite simply, propaganda against propaganda—a clarion call for greater awareness of government attempts at deception. Many of the propagandist's tricks and techniques enumerated in the 1930s by the Institute for Propaganda Analysis, most notably name-calling, transfer, and card-stacking, have been used for nearly a century, along with other persuasive techniques, to portray the CPI as a dark and regrettable episode in American history and George Creel as an irredeemable villain. Deconstructing this biased and value-laden narrative of the CPI is an essential first step to restoring a sense of objectivity to the subject. Examining the CPI for what it was, and was not, without imposing

9. Creel, *How We Advertised America*, 13.

moral judgments on its actions, its leaders, or on the broader issue of propaganda is the only way to arrive at an accurate assessment of its historical significance.

CHAPTER ONE

We Won't Get Fooled Again: Defining a Dominant Narrative of the Committee on Public Instruction

With a warning before them, the common people may be more on their guard when the war cloud next appears on the horizon and less disposed to accept as truth the rumours, explanations, and pronouncements issued for their consumption.

Arthur Ponsonby
Falsehood in War-time, 1928

In his 1941 doctoral dissertation “George Creel and His Critics,” Walton Bean argued that “historians should reject the idea that the Committee on Public Information (CPI) was largely responsible for the war-time excesses of patriotic emotion. Relative to general public opinion, it was actually a moderating influence.”¹ Bean’s name appears in the bibliographies of only three subsequent accounts of the CPI and his conclusions have been largely ignored. Rather than viewing the CPI as a moderating influence, most historians and commentators have drifted hard in the opposite direction, preferring to view it as a cautionary tale of the dangers of propaganda and overly-aroused patriotism. This interpretation provides the cornerstone of the dominant narrative of the CPI.

This chapter provides a detailed historiographical overview of the CPI in order to demonstrate that a dominant narrative of the CPI has emerged over the course of the past century. It then investigates some of the key components of this narrative. In brief, the dominant narrative disregards Walton Bean’s research and focuses instead on the perceived excesses of the CPI—the very ones that Bean endeavored to debunk—often with the stated goal of making the American public less susceptible to future propaganda campaigns. Thus, the tone

1. Walton Bean, “George Creel and His Critics: A Study of the Attacks on the Committee on Public Information, 1917-1919,” abstract, (PhD diss., University of California, 1941).

of the dominant narrative is one of caution. This narrative also includes: the misattribution of non-CPI propaganda to that organization, ad hominem and teleological attacks on CPI Chairman George Creel and CPI Foreign Bureau deputy Edward Bernays, an emphasis on the role of the CPI in promoting intolerance and suppressing dissent, and the inclusion of the CPI in a broader narrative of deceit on the part of the United States government.

Preconceived notions about the morality of propaganda have clouded attempts to understand the CPI from the beginning. To those holding a negative perception of propaganda, the CPI is presumed guilty—no further investigation is needed. If propaganda is bad then the CPI was bad because the CPI was America’s first “propaganda ministry.” The dominant narrative of the CPI hinges on this tautology.

Separating the CPI from the issue of propaganda, though essential to attaining a sense of objectivity, was difficult in the postwar years. The Great War had initiated a battle for the meaning of the word itself that lasted until the outbreak of another even greater war. Out of this battle emerged three distinct interpretations of the CPI. The celebratory interpretation, promoted mainly by CPI alumni, recognized great potential in the positive application of propaganda. The instructive interpretation viewed propaganda from a neutral perspective as a thing to be studied. The cautionary interpretation, rooted in wartime criticisms of the CPI by the press, disaffected progressives, and Republican legislators, presented the CPI as evidence of the dangers of propaganda.

The Battle for the Word “Propaganda”

According to the Oxford Dictionary, the word “propaganda” dates to the year 1622, when Pope Gregory XV founded a committee of cardinals responsible for foreign mission. The actual term comes from the Latin *congregatio de propaganda fide* or “congregation for propagation of

the faith.”² This remained the dominant definition until World War I, although it had already taken on a secular meaning in the context sense of spreading ideas. In his 1928 book *Propaganda*, CPI alumnus Edward Bernays quotes the following definition of propaganda from Funk and Wagnall’s Dictionary: “effort directed systematically toward the gaining of public support for an opinion or a course of action.”³ Bernays speaks to how the connotation of propaganda had changed as a result of the war. To make his point, he quotes at length from an article from *Scientific American*, in which the unidentified author states: “there is no word in the English language whose meaning has been so sadly distorted as the word ‘propaganda.’ The change took place during the late war when the term took on a decidedly sinister complexion.”⁴

Bernays wrote with the intention of redeeming the word, which he found to be essentially neutral. In 1923’s *Crystallizing Public Opinion*, Bernays argued that “the only difference between ‘propaganda’ and ‘education,’ really, is in the point of view. The advocacy of what we believe in is education. The advocacy of what we don’t believe in is propaganda.”⁵ Five years later, in *Propaganda*, he picked up on the same theme, stating, “I am aware that the word *propaganda* carries to many minds an unpleasant connotation. Yet whether, in any instance, propaganda is good or bad depends upon the merit of the cause urged, and the correctness of the information published.”⁶ George Creel was more cautious in his approach to the word propaganda, owing to its negative connotation: “We did not call [the CPI’s work] propaganda,

2. *Oxford Dictionaries*, s.v. “propaganda,” accessed November 22, 2013, http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/us/definition/american_english/propaganda.

3. Edward Bernays, *Propaganda* (New York: Ig Publishing, 1928). 48. The exact version of Funk and Wagnall’s Dictionary is unknown, as Bernays’s failed to provide a note for this definition. In this dictionary entry, the initial definition provided is the religious one (“A society of cardinals, the overseers of foreign mission...”).

4. *Ibid.*

5. Edward Bernays, *Crystallizing Public Opinion* (New York: Ig Publishing, 1923). 200.

6. Bernays, *Propaganda*, 48.

for that word, in German hands, has come to be associated with deceit and corruption.”⁷

Nevertheless, Creel, like Bernays, believed in the usefulness, even morality, of propaganda. The belief that propaganda could be employed to positive ends, and that the CPI had done so, is characteristic of the celebratory interpretation.

Harold Lasswell, perhaps the first to study World War I propaganda from a scholarly perspective, attempted to explain this new connotation of propaganda in his landmark study *Propaganda Technique in the Great War* (1927). Lasswell asserts that propaganda had “an ominous clang in many minds” which he traces to the feeling, among many Americans, that they had been fooled by wartime propaganda.⁸ He observes, “We live among more people than ever, who are puzzled, uneasy, or vexed at the unknown cunning which seems to have duped and degraded them.”⁹ This feeling of having been tricked, Lasswell argues, leads to a desire to know how it was done. He notes, “These people probe the mysteries of propaganda with that compound of admiration and chagrin with which the victims of a new gambling trick demand to have the thing explained.”¹⁰

During the 1930s, as propaganda aided the rise of totalitarian regimes abroad and demagogues at home, Bernays’s fight to restore respectability was all but lost. In 1933, the President’s Research Committee on Recent Social Trends noted that both “interest in

7. George Creel, *How We Advertised America: The First Telling of the Amazing Story of the Committee on Public Information That Carried the Gospel of Americanism to Every Corner of the Globe* (1920; repr., London: Forgotten Books, 2012), 4.

8. Harold Lasswell, *Propaganda Technique in World War I* (1927; repr., Cambridge, Massachusetts: The M.I.T. Press, 1971), 2.

9. Ibid.

10. Ibid., 2-3.

Americanization” and “anti-alien propaganda” peaked during the period from 1918 to 1924.¹¹ In a more general sense, the committee’s report expressed growing anxieties about the power of propaganda and its compatibility with democracy, noting that “the expensive control of masses of people through the arts of organized publicity and propaganda presents its dubious aspects to the observer of democratic trends.”¹² The committee’s report expressed the fear that this tendency could lead to the “emergence of some recognized and avowed form of plutocratic dictatorship.”¹³

It was into such a climate that the Institute for Propaganda Analysis (IPA) was born in 1937. Its founder, Columbia University professor Clyde R. Miller, had been a reporter during World War I and felt as if he, like so many others, had been “hoodwinked” by the propaganda effort.¹⁴ It concerned itself with propaganda of all sorts, defining it as “the expression of opinion or action by individuals or groups deliberately designed to influence opinions or actions of other individuals or groups with reference to predetermined ends.”¹⁵ *The Fine Art of Propaganda: A Study of Father Coughlin’s Speeches* (1939), their most famous work, outlined the seven basic propaganda techniques. By September 1939, the IPA’s materials were being used in 550 high schools and colleges.¹⁶ It disbanded in 1941 believing that, with war on the horizon, it would be unpatriotic to analyze, and to thus risk undermining, government

11. President’s Research Committee on Social Trends, *Recent Social Trends in the United States* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1933), 557.

12. *Ibid.*, lxviii.

13. *Ibid.*

14. Garth Jowett and Victoria O’Donnell, *Propaganda and Persuasion* (Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications, 2006), 163.

15. Alfred McClung Lee and Elizabeth Briant Lee, *The Fine Art of Propaganda* (1939; repr., San Francisco: International Society for General Semantics, 1979), 15.

16. Jowett and O’Donnell, *Propaganda and Persuasion*, 228.

propaganda during wartime.¹⁷ Nevertheless, it left as its legacy a desire, as Lasswell termed it, to have “the thing explained.”

Modern definitions of propaganda reveal how the word has taken on a decidedly different connotation during the century since World War I began. The Oxford Dictionary now has, as its primary definition of propaganda: “chiefly derogatory information, especially of a biased or misleading nature, used to promote or publicize a particular political cause or point of view” and traces the origin of this sense of the word “from the early 20th century.”¹⁸ Similarly, Merriam-Webster currently defines propaganda as “ideas or statements that are often false or exaggerated and that are spread in order to help a cause, a political leader, a government, etc.”¹⁹ The U.S. military, which, in cooperation with the CPI pioneered tactical propaganda techniques during World War I, currently uses the term propaganda to refer exclusively to enemy communications, defining propaganda as: “Any form of adversary communication, especially of a biased or misleading nature, designed to influence the opinions, emotions, attitudes, or behavior of any group in order to benefit the sponsor either directly or indirectly.”²⁰

Some recent propaganda scholars have attempted to restore neutrality to the term propaganda. In *Propaganda and Persuasion*, communications experts Garth Jowett and Victoria O'Donnell express their intention to evaluate propaganda “in a contemporary context free from

17. Lee and Lee, *The Fine Art of Propaganda*, xii.

18. *Oxford Dictionaries*, s.v. “propaganda.”

19. Merriam-Webster Dictionary, s.v. “propaganda,” accessed November 22, 2013, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/propaganda>.

20. Headquarters, Department of the Army, *Field Manual 3-53: Military Information Support Operations* (January 2013), Glossary-10.

value-laden definitions.”²¹ Just as was the case with Bernays eighty years earlier, those attempting to follow Jowett and O’Donnell’s value-neutral approach face an uphill battle, as propaganda has accumulated even more of a negative connotation in the century since World War I due to its frequent employment and the subsequent feeling, on the part of its victims, of having been duped.

The Celebratory Interpretation: History or Gloating?

Garth Jowett and Victoria O’Donnell trace popular disdain for the CPI to the perceived gloating of George Creel and his fellow wartime propagandists, saying, “The reaction against government propaganda was particularly virulent, as those responsible for creating the successful campaigns during the war seemed only too eager to explain how it was all done.”²² George Creel, Edward Bernays, and Guy Stanton Ford were among those who contributed to the celebratory interpretation of the CPI in the decade following the war. In fact, their perceived gloating started almost immediately upon the cessation of hostilities.

Guy Stanton Ford, Professor of History and Dean of Graduate Studies at the University of Minnesota, wasted no time in boasting of the CPI’s accomplishments. Ford had been the head of the CPI’s division of Civic and Educational Cooperation and assisted the CPI in other capacities, such as editing the *Four Minute Men Bulletin*. In an address to the Minnesota Historical Society on January 20, 1919, Ford boasted of the CPI’s importance: “I think that as time goes on and as the history of this committee’s work is written and its accomplishments are better understood, the executive order of April 14 [which formed the CPI] will be seen as one of

21. Jowett and O’Donnell, *Propaganda and Persuasion*, 2. They define propaganda as “the deliberate, systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions, and direct behavior to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist” (7).

22. *Ibid.*, 221.

the most perspicacious things that was done in preparation for the struggle.”²³ He also defends the CPI against charges of censorship, describes its organization and rapid expansion, and explains the functions of its various divisions. His speech was published in the February 1919 edition of the *Minnesota History Bulletin*, making it the earliest published overview of the CPI.

Drawing heavily from the *Complete Report of the Chairman of the Committee on Public Information 1917: 1918: 1919*, George Creel published an exhaustive retelling of the CPI in *How We Advertised America* (1920). Its subtitle gives evidence to Creel’s enthusiasm: *The First Telling of the Amazing Story of the Committee on Public Information That Carried the Gospel of Americanism to Every Corner of the Globe*. Critics of Creel and, more generally, of the CPI, were rankled by his exuberant treatment of the organization that he led from 1917 to 1919. Beyond simply describing the structure and functions of the CPI, Creel attempted to vindicate himself and his organization from its wartime critics, an undertaking that he had yet to complete to his own satisfaction in 1947 when he published his autobiography *Rebel at Large: Recollections of Fifty Crowded Years*.

During the decade following the war, CPI alumnus Edward Bernays published two influential books on the emerging field of public relations: *Crystallizing Public Opinion* (1923) and *Propaganda* (1928). While neither book dealt specifically with the CPI, the fact that Bernays openly and unapologetically touted the value of the “public relations counsel” led to *ex post facto* suspicion of the CPI. The way Bernays spoke of persuasion—coolly and scientifically—unnerved those who were already suspicious of propaganda.

One non-CPI writer who made a noteworthy contribution to the celebratory tradition was journalist Mark Sullivan. A contemporary observer of the CPI, Sullivan devotes two chapters of

23. Guy Stanton Ford, “America’s Fight for Public Opinion,” *Minnesota History Bulletin* 3, no. 1 (Feb., 1919): 7-8.

his multivolume series on the early twentieth century (*Our Times: The United States, 1900-1925*) to a discussion of Creel and the CPI. These chapters, entitled “A New Device in War” and “Wilson Makes War With Ideas,” span over thirty pages and cover the controversial personality of George Creel, the organization and scope of the CPI, Creel’s run-ins with Congress, his relation to Woodrow Wilson, and the CPI’s legacy and aftermath. Though not as unequivocally positive as Creel’s own account, Sullivan is sympathetic and, at times, expansive in his descriptions of the CPI—particularly when describing the success of the CPI’s foreign work. Sullivan presents the CPI as being synonymous with Creel, saying that “like most institutions, the Committee on Public Information was the shadow of a man; and the man was not Wilson, it was George Creel.”²⁴ Sullivan creates the impression that Creel was the mastermind of the CPI, seven times mentioning that Creel “mobilized” a specific group of people for the CPI’s purposes.²⁵

Walton Bean’s 1941 dissertation, “George Creel and His Critics: A Study of the Attacks on the Committee on Public Information, 1917-1919” is a rare scholarly work that falls within the parameters of the celebratory interpretation. Bean makes no attempt to describe the CPI’s organization or operations. Instead, his goal is to address, and then rebut, the major criticisms of George Creel. CPI historian Stephen Vaughn comments on Bean’s lack of objectivity by calling it a “ringing defense of the CPI’s chairman and his committee” and by saying “one is sometimes left with the impression that this study is an expansion of Creel’s *How We Advertised America*.”²⁶

24. Mark Sullivan, *Our Times: The United States, 1900-1925*, vol. 4, *Over Here, 1914-1918* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1933), 424.

25. *Ibid.*, 428-433.

26. Stephen Vaughn, *Holding Fast the Inner Lines: Democracy, Nationalism, and the Committee on Public Information* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980), 351.

Bean is convincing in parrying the charges of Creel's lack of qualifications to be CPI chairman and charges of Creel's partisanship. He provides evidence that most of Creel's enemies were Congressional Republicans who attacked Creel as an indirect way of criticizing Woodrow Wilson or Democrats with a personal vendetta against Creel. He also defends the CPI against the most publicized accusations of false reporting by tracing each of the four known instances of erroneous CPI reports to their source. Of the four, Bean found a CPI employee to be responsible for only one of the errors.²⁷ Finally, he notes the irony that critics had cast the CPI as a promoter of excessive patriotism and "100 percent Americanism" when, during the war, it was just as often criticized for not going far enough. For example, the CPI made only limited use of stories of German atrocities that would later be used as evidence, by adherents to the cautionary interpretation (most notably Stewart Halsey Ross and Thomas Fleming), as examples of the CPI's irresponsibility. That Bean's work has been overlooked by so many historians is unfortunate because his arguments in favor of the CPI's moderation are particularly compelling.

The Instructive Interpretation: Learning from the CPI

In early 1939, National Archives historian James R. Mock and historian Cedric Larson's article "The Lost Files of the Creel Committee of 1917-1919" appeared in *Public Opinion Quarterly*. They were the first historians to locate and study the CPI files that had been misplaced during the Committee's chaotic liquidation in 1919.²⁸ In the fall of 1939, Mock and Larson published the first full-length study of the Committee on Public Information: *Words that Won the War: The Story of the Committee on Public Information, 1917-1919*. As their title indicates, Mock and Larson cast the CPI in a positive light. The book is more descriptive than

27. Bean, "George Creel and His Critics," 166-167.

28. Cedric Larson and James R. Mock, "The Lost Files of the Creel Committee of 1917-1919," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 3, no. 1 (January 1939): 5.

argumentative but it was clear that Mock and Larson took no issue with the CPI's work and viewed the CPI as a suitable template on which to build the government's next propaganda agency. In fact, Mock and Larson's work would fall under the celebratory interpretation if not for the facts that they did not allow George Creel to escape his role in wartime censorship and that they avoided the sort of overtly congratulatory language that characterized the celebratory accounts. Since 1939, *Words that Won the War* has provided a starting point, along with Creel's *How We Advertised America*, for nearly all subsequent studies of the CPI. It remains the most comprehensive source for information about the CPI.

The instructive approach to the CPI continued after World War II but, after *Words that Won the War*, no full length study of the CPI appeared until 1980 when communications historian Stephen Vaughn published *Holding Fast the Inner Lines: Democracy, Nationalism, and the Committee on Public Information*.²⁹ Vaughn does what few historians of the CPI have

29. In 1948, Paul M.A. Linbarger published *Psychological Warfare*, which included the following brief but perceptive summary of the CPI's legacy: "The war propaganda left a rather bad taste in the mouth of many Americans, and the boisterous joviality of the arousers probably produced negative attitudes which encouraged pacifism and isolationism in the postwar years" [Paul Linebarger, *Psychological Warfare* (1948; repr., Landisville, Pennsylvania: Coachwhip Publications, 2010), 101].

In 1953, Ph.D. candidate Wayne Nicholas's dissertation "Crossroads Oratory: A Study of the Four Minute Men of World War I" (PhD diss., Columbia University, 1953) provided the first detailed study of the CPI's Four-Minute Men: "Crusading Oratory: A Study of the Four-Minute Men in World War I." Nicholas studies the topics and persuasive appeals used by the Four-Minute Men and makes an attempt to assess the effectiveness of the organization. He also includes samples of their four-minute speeches and the results of a survey of the surviving Four-Minute Men. Unfortunately, Nicholas's work has been overlooked by most historians, being cited only by Alfred Cornebise in 1984's *War as Advertised* (also a study of the Four-Minute Men). Stephen Vaughn acknowledges Nicholas's work in the bibliographic essay of *Holding Fast the Inner Lines*, noting the value of Nicholas's analysis of persuasive appeals but otherwise referring to the dissertation as being "heavy with quotations and repetitious" (355-356).

In 1974's *The Art of Psychological Warfare, 1914-1945*, Charles Roetter devoted relatively little space to the CPI but he found it to be generally effective. He complimented Creel, calling him "a man of great resourcefulness, determined, hard-working, and full of verve and energy" [Charles Roetter, *The Art of Psychological Warfare, 1914-1945* (New York: Stein and Day, 1974), 42].

Several articles were consulted for this study that fit within the instructive tradition. These include: Daniel Pope, "The Advertising Industry in World War I," *The Public Historian* 2, no. 3 (Summer 1980): 4-25; Eric Van Schaak, "The Division of Pictorial Publicity in World War I," *Design Issues* 22, no. 1 (Winter 2006): 32-45; James R. Mock, "The Creel Committee in Latin America," *The Hispanic American Historical Review* 22, no. 2 (May 1942): 262-279; Gregg Wolper, "Wilsonian Public Diplomacy: The Committee on Public Information in Spain," *Diplomatic History* 17, no. 1 (January 1993): 17-34.

bothered doing, which is to shift the focus off of the person of George Creel. Instead, Vaughn profiles other key members of the CPI apparatus, many of whom acted largely independently from Creel (including Guy Stanton Ford, Charles Dana Gibson, Edgar Sisson, Arthur Bullard, Carl Byoir). By breaking Creel's monopoly on the CPI, Vaughn discredits the view (which persists to this day) that the CPI was Creel's one man show. Vaughn also makes the link between the CPI and progressivism more clearly than any other CPI historian. Vaughn's account largely vindicates the CPI and Creel but he deftly avoids excessive praise, caution, or condemnation. Vaughn also provides a forty-two page bibliographic essay that thoroughly addresses the historiography of the CPI up to the time of his writing. Vaughn does not seek to acquit the CPI but he does present it as less ominous and more moderate than it is sometimes portrayed, noting in his conclusion, "Much of the Committee on Public Information's work was well intentioned, and much was worthwhile. For the most part the committee stressed antimilitarism, antiauthoritarianism, and the defense of democratic government."³⁰

Appearing in the same year (1980) as *Holding Fast the Inner Lines* was historian David Kennedy's *Over Here: The First World War and American Society*. This has become the standard work for those studying the American home front during World War I. Kennedy devotes one lengthy chapter to the "The War for the American Mind," in which he provides a rather even-handed account of the CPI that recognizes that the CPI was not the sole enemy, or even the greatest enemy, to civil liberties during the war. He describes Creel "as both the agent and the symbol of the usually benign democratic impulse sometimes run amok under the strain of war."³¹ For Kennedy, the American Protective League, Postmaster General Albert Sidney

30. Vaughn, *Holding Fast the Inner Lines*, 238.

31. David Kennedy, *Over Here: The First World War and American Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 75.

Burleson, and Attorney General Thomas Gregory were all more menacing to individual freedom than Creel or his Committee. This does not, however, get Creel and the CPI entirely off the hook. Kennedy makes it clear that, while the CPI was not the bogeyman that some make it out to be, it was complicit in the suppression of civil liberties during the war. *Over Here* straddles the boundary between the instructive and cautionary interpretations. While Kennedy echoes certain themes that are characteristic of the cautionary interpretation, his focus is more on explaining the CPI within the broader propaganda war than on persuading the reader of the dangers of propaganda.³²

In 1991, historian Gregg Wolper provided the most complete scholarly study to date of the CPI's foreign operations in his dissertation "The Origins of Public Diplomacy: Woodrow Wilson, George Creel and the Committee on Public Information." He presents the CPI as the first case of what would come to be known as "public diplomacy," which may be defined as the selling of U.S. policy goals, culture, and ideas to foreign audiences. He notes in his introduction that "the CPI used news articles, feature stories, lectures, movies and more in an effort to publicize the American military contribution, spread the words of Woodrow Wilson, and, in general, create a more positive image of the United States."³³ Wolper focuses his research primarily on CPI operations in Spain, Russia, Italy, and Switzerland—all countries in which the CPI was quite active. His work is original and important to understanding the full scope of the CPI's operations but it has been largely overlooked.

The most recent book-length treatment of the CPI appeared in 2009, in the form of popular historian Alan Axelrod's *Selling the Great War: The Making of American Propaganda*.

32. Kennedy notes the similarities between the World War I propaganda effort and George Orwell's Oceania (from his novel *1984*), observing that they share "an overbearing concern for 'correct' opinion" (62).

33. Gregg Wolper, "The Origins of Public Diplomacy: Woodrow Wilson, George Creel, and the Committee on Public Information" (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 1991), 3.

Axelrod presents the CPI, if not as Walton Bean's "moderating force," then certainly as one undeserving of its sullied reputation. Axelrod provides the most thorough, and most favorable, account of the life of George Creel available outside of Creel's own writings.³⁴ It should come as no surprise that Creel's own autobiography (*Rebel at Large*) provided the vast majority of Axelrod's material, particularly in the early biographical chapters of the book. For details on the formation and operation of the CPI, Axelrod consults Creel's *How We Advertised America* frequently. Of the standard historiography of the CPI, only Creel's works and Mock and Larson's *Words that Won the War* appear in Axelrod's notes. That he relies so heavily on these older, less critical accounts helps to explain why Axelrod's treatment of Creel and the CPI is more sympathetic than other recent accounts tend to be.³⁵

Despite Axelrod's generally positive presentation of the CPI, there is also an inescapable presentism in his writing. He begins and ends his book by making references to the attempts of President George W. Bush's use of propaganda and deception to sell the Iraq War to America. This is the essence of the cautionary interpretation of the CPI.

The Cautionary Interpretation

While the cautionary interpretation began to take shape during the war with the criticism of Creel and the CPI coming from both the right and the left, it solidified during the interwar period. In *Historians on the Homefront: American Propagandists for the Great War* (1970),

34. No full-length biography of George Creel exists.

35. In a 2009 interview, Axelrod explained why he chose to write a favorable portrayal of Creel. He said, "I decided Creel was an honorable man, and that the news that he reported was probably as accurate as any that any fully independent set of correspondents would have gathered." Given the references to the Iraq War in both the Preface and, more fully, in his final chapter ("Legacy"), the interviewer asked Axelrod what role that war played in his decision to write about the CPI. Axelrod replied that, while his interest in Creel predated the Iraq War, "The Bush administration's manipulation of media did become increasingly naked and obvious" (Alan Axelrod, interview by Brian Doherty, reason.com, April 3, 2009, accessed October 27, 2013, <http://reason.com/archives/2009/04/03/how-america-was-sold-on-world>.)

historian George Blakey provides an account of how historians were mobilized in the World War I propaganda effort by focusing on the activities of three organizations: the CPI, the National Board for Historical Service, and the National Security League. Blakey offers two explanations for why opinion turned against the CPI so quickly after the end of the war. The first was political in nature. Republicans identified the CPI with their mortal enemy, President Woodrow Wilson. More specifically, they targeted George Creel as a way of getting to Wilson. The historians who worked for the CPI (and other organizations) got caught in the postwar recriminations. Blakey observed: “The irony of much of the Republican criticism is that it was intended for Wilson, aimed at Creel, and hit the historians.”³⁶ This left many of these historians on the defensive and somewhat discredited professionally. While few among them ever refuted their wartime work as propagandists, and some (such as Guy Stanton Ford) defended it vigorously, most simply “kept silent or made their assessment (of their wartime work) so circumspect as to be uninformative.”³⁷

The second explanation of hostility towards the CPI resulted from the rejection of Wilsonian idealism by revisionist thinkers and historians. This started during the war, as Blakey noted: “Even before the war ended the crippled and bitter pacifist of Greenwich Village, Randolph Bourne, had pointed out that ‘there is work to be done to prevent this war of ours from passing into popular mythology as a holy crusade.’”³⁸ Blakey continued, “This invitation to rebuke Wilsonian idealism became the keynote of many American historians during the 1920s

36. George Blakey, *Historians of the Homefront: American Propagandists for the Great War* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1970), 128. Blakey’s work itself fits nicely within the instructive interpretation of the CPI. He recognizes the sincere patriotic motives of the historians who worked for the CPI and other organizations but is critical of their willingness to sacrifice their professional standards in the name of patriotism.

37. *Ibid.*, 146.

38. *Ibid.*, 131.

and 1930s and revisionism grew into an academic and publishing industry itself.”³⁹ This scholarship provided the foundation for the cautionary interpretation of the CPI.

Of these revisionists, none was more hostile toward the wartime propaganda work of historians, or the perpetuation of its themes in postwar historical texts, than the disenchanted National Security League alumnus Harry Elmer Barnes. Starting in the early 1920s, Barnes engaged in a vigorous crusade to bring what Herbert Croly of the *New Republic* termed “historical integrity” to the study of the late war.⁴⁰ Barnes took particular exception to the notion of Germany’s sole war guilt, which had been a theme of multiple CPI pamphlets and speeches. His most enduring work on this front was *The Genesis of the World War* (1926). Barnes stirred a passionate debate within the historical community and his campaign to dispel the myths of Wilsonian idealism continued until his death in 1968.⁴¹

Harry Barnes’s fellow revisionist, Charles Hunter Hamlin, was shocked by the revelations of fellow historians regarding the extent of propaganda in the recent World War.⁴² In 1927, Hamlin published *The War Myth in United States History*, which would become the first work of history that placed the First World War within the context of a greater tradition of wartime deception.⁴³ Hamlin’s assessment of the CPI was unequivocally negative. He asserts

39. Ibid., 131-132.

40. Ibid., 133.

41. Ibid., 134-136.

42. Charles Chatfield, introduction to *The War Myth in United States History*, by Charles H. Hamlin (1927; repr., New York: Garland Publishing, 1973), 6. Chatfield relates an event that took place at the 1921 meeting of the American Historical Association in St. Louis: “Having supported World War I with full confidence in the wisdom of Woodrow Wilson, he was unprepared for the revelations of C.J.H. Hayes in a session on ‘Causes of the World War.’ He had even used Hayes’s book, *A Brief History of the World War* (1920) as a text, and so he was shocked to hear the Columbia University scholar expose false propaganda which not only had been generally accepted in America but had been incorporated in his own book.”

43. Charles H. Hamlin, *Propaganda and Myth in Time of War* (1927; repr., New York: Garland Publishing, 1973), 91-92. The 1973 reprint includes two of Hamlin’s works on World War I: *The War Myth in the United States* (1927) and *Educators Present Arms* (1939).

that “no effort was made to present the truth” and the CPI “was the greatest fraud ever sold to the public in the name of patriotism and religion.”⁴⁴

In 1928, the same year that Edward Bernays published *Propaganda* with the hope of redeeming that word, a British Member of Parliament by the name of Arthur Ponsonby published a critique of World War I propaganda entitled, tellingly, *Falsehood in War-time: Containing an Assortment of Lies Circulated throughout the Nations during the Great War*. Ponsonby was clear on the cautionary purpose of his study: “With a warning before them, the common people may be more on their guard when the war cloud next appears on the horizon and less disposed to accept as truth the rumours, explanations, and pronouncements issued for their consumption.”⁴⁵

Ponsonby’s refutation of the wartime Bryce Report on German atrocities in Belgium served as an indictment of the CPI, which had utilized some of the Bryce Report’s claims. Ponsonby’s cautionary message has been embraced by many historians of the CPI. This cautionary interpretation is demonstrated in the forward to the 1971 reprint of Ponsonby’s book, in which Blanche Wiesen Cook of John Jay College, City University of New York, opens: “With the publication of the *Pentagon Papers*, Americans have been brutally reminded that war always subverts truth.”⁴⁶

The cautionary interpretation is sometimes found in unlikely places. In a review of James Mock and Cedric Larson’s *Words that Won the War* for the Winter 1939 issue of *The North American Review*, the anonymous reviewer notes: “the history of that period [World War I] is repeating itself” and recommends *Words that Won the War* be listed as “required reading”

44. Ibid.

45. Arthur Ponsonby, *Falsehood in War-time: Containing an Assortment of Lies Circulated throughout the Nations during the Great War* (1928; repr., New York: Garland Publishing, 1971), 14-15.

46. Ibid., 5.

lest the CPI be reactivated in the coming conflict.⁴⁷ Taking a source that was neutral, if not positive, towards the CPI and turning it into a cautionary tale about the menace of propaganda was to become characteristic of the cautionary interpretation. In this case, the reviewer barely addressed the contents of the book, let alone the authors' pro-CPI bias. The CPI had become a thing to be molded to serve his or her purposes.

Writing in the wake of the 1991 Persian Gulf War, historian Stewart Halsey Ross invokes the cautionary tradition in the most unequivocal language in *Propaganda for War* (1996), stating: "This book is about how the United States was conditioned to fight the Great War of 1914-1918. Its focus is on the hypocrisies and deceptions of propaganda, and how the war was packaged, promoted, and sold to a gullible nation as a holy crusade against evil."⁴⁸ Ross notes the similarities between America's first great crusade of the twentieth century and its last, saying: "Seventy-five years after Americans were assigned an alliterative "Beast of Berlin" (Germany's Kaiser Wilhelm II), they were given a "Butcher of Baghdad" (Iraq's president, Saddam Hussein) as the hated-enemy symbol for the 1992 Persian Gulf war [*sic*]."⁴⁹ So clearly does Ross articulate the key tenets of the cautionary interpretation that he deserves to be quoted at length:

As before, Americans were charged with fighting an enemy "now" rather than "later," and the timeworn atrocities of 'rape and pillage' made headlines. Crushing wartime news censorship by the Pentagon mocked America's press freedoms, and again, big-business communications media enthusiastically

47. Review of *Words that Won the War*, by James Mock and Cedric Larson, *The North American Review* 248, no. 2 (Winter 1939): 412.

48. Stewart Halsey Ross, *Propaganda for War: How the United States Was Conditioned to Fight the Great War of 1914-1918* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, 1996), 1.

49. *Ibid.*, 3. The fact that Ross incorrectly identifies the year of the Persian Gulf War is disconcerting, given that he was writing so close to the event.

followed Washington's lead. Propaganda for war in the United States was alive and well in the last decade of the twentieth century.⁵⁰

Inspired by the same war as Ross, Boston reporter Larry Tye begins his biography of CPI alumnus Edward Bernays by saying, "the selling of the Persian Gulf War on America was a public relations triumph."⁵¹ Tye continues, "but the whole notion that the United States had been rallied to war by a massive hidden PR campaign left many Americans doubting the soundness of their own opinions and wondering whether our very thoughts were being tampered with right here in the hub of democracy."⁵²

Less than a decade later, new conflicts would inspire new treatments of the CPI as a cautionary tale. In 2003's *The Illusion of Victory: America in World War I*, historian Thomas Fleming surpasses Stewart Halsey Ross in his disdain for both Creel and the CPI. He introduces a phrase missing in other accounts of the CPI: "creeling." Fleming claims that this was a term in use by "many papers" by the summer of 1917 and was "synonymous with government hot air."⁵³ One specific instance of "creeling" mentioned by Fleming involved the erroneous report, presumably by the CPI, that the first American military aircraft were on their way to France. His source for the incident was George Creel's *How We Advertised America*, in which Creel attempted to defend himself—an attempt that failed to persuade Fleming.⁵⁴ One can only

50. Ibid.

51. Larry Tye, *The Father of Spin: Edward L. Bernays and the Birth of Public Relations* (New York: Random House, 1998), 1.

52. Ibid.

53. Thomas Fleming, *The Illusion of Victory: America in World War I* (New York: Basic Books, 2003), 120.

54. Ibid., 173.

speculate how Fleming's opinion might have been affected had he consulted Walton Bean's explanation of the "Airplane incident," an explanation which largely exonerates Creel.⁵⁵

Fleming's invective against Creel, as part of his broader attempt to discredit Woodrow Wilson, might easily be dismissed except for the fact that his book is the single most-cited source in the Wikipedia article on the CPI (it appears in thirteen of the thirty-three footnotes).⁵⁶ It is worth noting that, aside from Creel's own *How We Advertised America*, not one note in the Wikipedia article comes from the standard bibliography of the CPI, a list that would include the work of James Mock and Cedric Larson, Stephen Vaughn, and David Kennedy (although Vaughn's *Holding Fast the Inner Lines* does rate mention in the "Further Reading" section).⁵⁷

In a 2004 article for *Cinema Journal* entitled "9/11, the Useful Incident, and the Legacy of the Creel Committee," Christopher Sharrett, a professor of communications at Seton Hall University, draws a straight line from the CPI to 9/11 and the Iraq War. Sharrett describes the CPI as "a monstrous specter hanging over U.S. history in its empire-building phase, reminding us that media cooperation with the state apparatus is not an occasional aberration but a natural function of the press as it aids in the enforcement of ruling-class interests."⁵⁸ Sharrett invokes the cautionary tale by reminding readers that "long before President George H. W. Bush hired a

55. Bean, "George Creel and His Critics," 165.

56. "Committee on Public Information," *Wikipedia*, last modified March 28, 2014, accessed March 29, 2014. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Committee_on_Public_Information. While serious scholars naturally question the veracity of Wikipedia and reject it as a credible source, this does not change the fact that Wikipedia reaches a far broader audience than any work of scholarship. It matters what Wikipedia says because it is, so often, the first stop (and possibly the last) for research ranging from mild curiosity to undergraduate level research.

57 Also listed as "Further Reading" are: Ronald Schaffer, whose treatment of the CPI in *America in the Great War: The Rise of the War Welfare State* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991) is limited part of one chapter entitled "Managing American Minds," George Blakey's *Historians on the Homefront*, William J. Breen's *Uncle Sam at Home: Civilian Mobilization, Wartime Federalism, and the Council of National Defense, 1917-1919* (1984), and George Creel's *How We Advertised America*.

58. Christopher Sharrett, "9/11, the Useful Incident, and the Legacy of the Creel Committee," *Cinema Journal* 43, no. 4 (Summer 2004), 127.

public relations-instructed Kuwaiti refugee to present bogus tales to Congress of Iraqi atrocities as a rationale for Gulf War I, the government created a propaganda apparatus designed to involve the United States in one of the worst conflagrations of the twentieth century.”⁵⁹ The final part of this statement is remarkable in that it represents one of the most significant distortions of fact about the CPI, which is that it predated U.S. entry into World War I. This is but one of several false claims and insinuations that Sharrett makes with regard to the CPI.

In Sharrett’s view, “perhaps the most important element of the Wilson-Creel years relevant to an understanding of the portrayal of 9/11 and the new ‘war on terror’ is the sinking of the *Lusitania* and the release of the Bryce Report.”⁶⁰ He neglects to mention that both of these incidents occurred in 1915, a full two years prior to the formation of the CPI. Why he considers this part of the “Wilson-Creel” years is a mystery. Regardless of his reasoning, his facts are incorrect. In 1915, George Creel was nowhere near Washington, D.C. and largely unknown to Woodrow Wilson. That year, Creel had divided his time between crusading for causes, such as a failed campaign for women’s suffrage in New York, and ghostwriting an autobiography for the Heavyweight Champion boxer Jess Willard.⁶¹ The mistakes of Sharrett’s article may be the result of poor research or they may be intentional but they are not uncommon in popular retellings of the CPI.

The dominant narrative often places the CPI within a broader tradition of deception by the U.S. government. From an influence standpoint, this is a tactic known as “framing.” It can be observed in three recent historical works that discuss World War I propaganda and the CPI

59. Ibid.

60. Ibid., 128.

61. Alan Alexrod, *Selling the Great War: The Making of American Propaganda* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 39.

within the context (i.e. “frame”) of how America was conditioned to support military operations throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty-first. The use of framing leads the reader to a predetermined conclusion about the topic.

In 2007, Eugene Secunda, a professor of marketing and media studies, and Terrence P. Moran, a professor of media ecology, collaborated on *Selling War to America: From the Spanish American War to the Global War on Terror*. Secunda and Moran waste no time invoking the cautionary tradition, stating on the first page:

We wrote this book because we believe that the U.S. public should better comprehend how U.S. presidents and their administrations exploit the media and execute marketing strategies to win support for war policies. With this understanding, we believe that the U.S. public will become a more informed and empowered electorate.⁶²

The authors expound on this theme for several pages before declaring: “Our task is to help people to become more careful customers when buying a war.”⁶³ Seldom has the cautionary tradition been more clearly or thoroughly articulated.

In surveying propaganda during World War I, Secunda and Moran draw a direct line from the CPI, through nearly a century of subsequent propaganda, to the present day, asserting that “His (Creel’s) basic strategy has guided American war marketing policy since its entry into World War I to today’s War on Terrorism.”⁶⁴ Their attempt to define what exactly that strategy was is problematic. They appear to apply some basic public relations/influence conventions in an effort to understand the CPI’s effectiveness. For example, they note that the CPI succeeded in the following ways: analyzing the situation and defining their goals, identifying key target

62. Eugene Secunda and Terrence P. Moran, *Selling War to America: From the Spanish American War to the Global War on Terror* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger Security International, 2007), 1.

63. *Ibid.*, 10.

64. *Ibid.*, 33.

audiences and employing effective strategies and tactics to reach these audiences, their creative strategies and executions were clear, concise, and reinforced through repetition, and they made extensive and adroit use of all available media.⁶⁵ This analysis is problematic because the authors do not demonstrate that any of these accomplishments were the result of conscious planning. In fact, they provide little evidence that some of these things occurred at all. Instead, they appear to interpret successful outcomes as evidence that these things must have happened in the way that they would in a modern public relations or psychological operations campaign. There is little evidence to support this assumption, which makes Secunda and Moran's analysis rather teleological.

In *Why America Fights: Patriotism and War Propaganda from the Philippines to Iraq* (2009), historian Susan Brewer provides a survey of how Americans were conditioned to support military intervention in a series of conflicts spanning from 1898 to 2003. Starting with President William McKinley, she locates the source of this persuasion in the White House. In her chapter on World War I ("Crusade for Democracy"), Brewer provides a decent primer in CPI operations. She also specifically notes that the CPI "objected to the extreme nature of hate films *To Hell with the Kaiser* and *The Kaiser, Beast of Berlin*" but she adds that "the agency itself repeatedly promoted the theme of German brutality."⁶⁶ Brewer notes that Creel claimed that his organization had served as a moderating force but, true to the cautionary tradition, she notes that the CPI "shifted from its emphasis on education and information to the promotion of unquestioning patriotism."⁶⁷

65. Ibid., 46.

66. Susan Brewer, *Why America Fights: Patriotism and War Propaganda from the Philippines to Iraq* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 67.

67. Ibid., 85.

The final entry into this trilogy of cautionary tales, *Selling War in a Media Age: The Presidency and Public Opinion in the American Century* (2010), contains an essay by historian Emily Rosenberg entitled, “War and the Health of the State: The U.S. Government and the Communications Revolution during World War I.” Rosenberg argues that President Woodrow Wilson used mass advertising, censorship, and surveillance in a three-pronged strategy to build and maintain support for the war and to quell dissent. Rosenberg also furthers the theme of a mid-war transition in the sort of persuasive appeals used by the CPI. She notes, “By 1918 the campaigns became more rousing and graphic, emphasizing German atrocities. Pictures of large, hideous animalistic brutes, representing German soldiers, suggested pillage and the endangerment of women and children.”⁶⁸ Rosenberg calls into question the effectiveness of the CPI but acknowledges that “most commentators believed that the CPI had exerted a great impact, and they either heralded it or blamed it for being able to whip up the spirit of ‘100% Americanism’ that pervaded wartime and postwar American culture.”⁶⁹ Rosenberg’s final observation indicates a recurring theme of the dominant narrative—the role of the CPI in promoting intolerance towards immigrants and opponents of the war in the name of patriotism.

Errors in Fact and Interpretation

As evidence of the CPI’s blatant appeals to fear and hate, the dominant narrative often presents works of propaganda that were not produced by the CPI. One of the most common examples of the misattribution of wartime propaganda to the CPI is the poster “Destroy This Mad Brute” by H.R. Hopps. This poster has no known connection to the CPI and yet serves as

68. Emily S. Rosenberg, “War and the Health of the State: The U.S. Government and the Communications Revolution during World War I,” in *Selling War in a Media Age: The Presidency and Public Opinion in the American Century*, ed. Kenneth Osgood and Andrew K. Frank, (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2010), 53.

69. *Ibid.*, 59.

the image associated with the CPI on Wikipedia. It also appears in the first line of results when searching for either the “Committee on Public Information” or “Creel Committee” in Google images. It is referenced in several of the more widely cited books of World War I propaganda, including historian Ronald Schaffer’s *America in the Great War* and Stewart Halsey Ross’s *Propaganda for War*, in which it serves as the frontispiece.⁷⁰

“Hang the Kaiser” films, the most notable of which was *The Kaiser: The Beast of Berlin*, are also misattributed to the CPI with alarming frequency. Walton Bean noted this error in 1941, tracing it to a *Time* magazine article in October of 1939.⁷¹ This error caught on quickly and yet none of the four books devoted exclusively to film in World War I consulted attribute *The Kaiser: The Beast of Berlin* to the CPI.⁷² The Progressive Silent Film List’s Carl Bennett identified the Renowned Pictures Corporation as the production company for *The Kaiser: The Beast of Berlin* and dates the copyright to March 11, 1918.⁷³ Rupert Julian, a New Zealand native, wrote, directed, and produced the film, in addition to playing the lead role of Kaiser Wilhelm II.⁷⁴

70. Schaffer, *America in the Great War*, 9.

71. Review of *Words that Won the War* by James R. Mock and Cedric Larson, *Time* 34, no. 16 (October 16, 1939): 108; Bean, “George Creel and His Critics,” 200. The *Time* article read: “not easily forgotten were the Creel Committee’s Halt the Hun posters, with their spidery villains; its movies, with riotous queues fighting to see that gory thriller, *The Kaiser, the Beast of Berlin*.”

72. Leslie Midkiff DeBauche, *Reel Patriotism: The Movies and World War I* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1997); Michael Isenberg, *War on Film: The American Cinema in World War I, 1914-1941* (East Brunswick, New Jersey: Associated University Presses, 1981); Michael Paris, ed., *The First World War and Popular Cinema: 1914 to the Present* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2000); Andrew Kelly, *Cinema and the Great War* (New York: Routledge, 1997); see also James Latham, “The Kaiser as the Beast of Berlin: Race and the Animalizing of German-ness in Early Hollywood’s Advertising Imagery” *West Virginia University Philological Papers* 50, Special Issue Race and Racism in Literature and Film (Fall 2004): 16-29.

73. Carl Bennett, “The Kaiser, the Beast of Berlin,” *Silent Era*, accessed November 14, 2013, <http://www.silentera.com/PSFL/data/K/KaiserTheBeastOfBerlin1918.html>.

74. *Ibid.*

In both cases listed above, the error in fact is used to support a specific interpretation of the CPI, which is that it grew more extreme in its appeals during the course of the war. A reference book on the 1920s demonstrates this tendency: “At the outset of the publicity campaign, the committee made films with innocuous titles such as *Our Colored Fighters* and *Pershing’s Crusaders*. By war’s end they had turned to producing movies such as *The Kaiser: The Beast of Berlin* and *The Prussian Cur*.”⁷⁵ This is incorrect on two accounts. First, neither of the latter two movies mentioned had any connection to the CPI’s Division of Films. Second, *Pershing’s Crusaders* did not debut until May 1918.⁷⁶ *The Kaiser: The Beast of Berlin* had opened two months earlier, on March 9, 1918. In fact, all four films mentioned appeared in 1918. “Destroy This Mad Brute” is dated to either 1916 or 1917.⁷⁷ Regardless of whether or not a shift in the tone of CPI propaganda occurred in 1918, no such shift can be ascertained based on either “Destroy This Mad Brute” or *The Kaiser: The Beast of Berlin*, as neither of these were CPI products.

Other errors in fact, while not as conspicuous as those listed above, appear regularly in accounts of the CPI. One explanation for this is that, in the dominant narrative, anything that indicates the excessive nature of the CPI is admissible as evidence. For example, in *The Nervous Liberals: Propaganda Anxieties from World War I to the Cold War* (1999), Brett Gary, a professor of media, culture and communication, writes that “the CPI’s much-celebrated Four-

75. Vincent Tompkins ed., *American Decades: 1910-1919* (Detroit: Gale Research, 1996), 355. The author was paraphrasing David Kennedy (*Over Here*): “The Committee, which early in the war had produced upbeat films like *Pershing’s Crusaders* and *Our Colored Fighters*, turned to promoting movies like *The Prussian Cur* and *The Kaiser, the Beast of Berlin*” (62). The only substantial difference is that Kennedy says “promoting,” which may have contained an element of truth, whereas the reference article says “producing,” which is patently false.

76. James Mock and Cedric Larson, *Words that Won the War: The Story of the Committee on Public Information, 1917-1919* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1939), 140.

77. Ross, *Propaganda for War*, 251; James Pearl, *Picture This: World War I Posters and Visual Culture* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009), 68-69. Ross dates the poster to 1916, whereas Pearl places its appearance in 1917.

Minute Men—of which there were several million—used atrocity stories in their four-minute speeches, promoted hate films, [and] urged Americans to keep track of one another and report on suspect utterances.”⁷⁸ There were, at their peak, a total of 75,000 Four-Minute Men and not, as Gary claims, “several million.”⁷⁹

Sometimes, the errors in fact could be viewed as inconsequential, and perhaps innocuous, if not for the perception of the CPI that they convey. Take, for example, the following quote from cultural historians Robert Rydell and Rob Kroes’s *Buffalo Bill in Bologna* (2005): “On April 14, 1917, within hours of asking the U.S. Congress to declare war on Germany, Wilson moved with lightning speed to issue an Executive Order creating the Committee on Public Information.”⁸⁰ The obvious error here is that President Wilson asked Congress to declare war in a speech given on April 2, 1917 (and Congress complied on April 6). The CPI was, in fact created, on April 14. This nearly two-week gap between the two events does not imply “lightning speed.” By portraying the interval between Wilson’s war address and the creation of the CPI as “within hours,” Rydell and Kroes give the impression that such a committee was a foregone conclusion when, in point of fact, the serious discussions between Wilson and his

78. Brett Gary, *The Nervous Liberals: Propaganda Anxieties from World War I to the Cold War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 19.

79. Nicholas, “Crossroads Oratory,” 45. The other charges levied by Gary may have a degree of validity, although Nicholas does not list any of the themes cited by Gary as being among the twelve “Principal Appeals” of the Four-Minute Men (164-172). Creel estimated that the 74,500 Four-Minute Men gave over 755,000 speeches, nearly all of which were written by the speakers themselves based on guidelines provided in the *Four-Minute Men Bulletin*. This certainly allowed ample opportunity for the themes that Gary mentioned to have been featured in four-minute speeches. However, to highlight these specific themes from among the dozens of topics spoken on by the Four-Minute Men is a form of the propaganda technique known as card stacking.

80. Robert Rydell and Rob Kroes, *Buffalo Bill in Bologna: The Americanization of the World, 1869-1922* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), 134.

advisors regarding the formation of what would become the CPI did not take place in earnest until after war was declared.⁸¹

Casting Aspersions

In addition to errors in fact, the dominant narrative features attacks on the personality, fitness, and character of its director, George Creel. These are the very sort of ad hominem attacks that Walton Bean felt had distracted the generation that immediately followed the war from understanding and evaluating the CPI on its own merits.⁸² One frequently quoted criticism of Creel appeared in *The Nation* on November 22, 1917:

That the President, whom he [Creel] exalted so lustily in print, should have wished to give him some notable mark of favor will not seem strange to anyone who recognizes the time-honored custom of partisan politics in this country; but why he should have chosen a writer of Creel's touch-and-go sort to head a bureau of which the most important duty would be to suppress touch-and-go writing on the part of other people, remains to this day as much a mystery as ever.⁸³

In referring to Creel's "touch-and-go" nature, the anonymous critic is questioning Creel's credibility and fitness for his position without addressing any particular deficiency in Creel's work.

On October 7, 1917, Ryley Grannon of *The Washington Post* wrote an article about Creel and his CPI entitled "Why Pay For Comedy When We Have a Creel Committee."⁸⁴ In it, Grannon highlights Creel's hypocrisy on issues of censorship, complains about his exorbitant

81. Josephus Daniels diary entry, April 9, 1917, in *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, ed. Arthur Link, vol. 42, (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1966), 23; Woodrow Wilson to Daniels, April 12, 1917, *Wilson Papers* 42: 23.

82. Merriam-Webster Dictionary, s.v. "ad hominem," accessed March 27, 2014, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ad%20hominem>; an ad hominem argument is a logical fallacy that attacks the person making a claim instead of addressing the claim itself.

83. Tattler *pseud.*, "National Miniatures: George Creel," *The Nation* 105 no. 2734 (November 22, 1917): 574.

84. Ryley Grannon, "Why Pay For Comedy When We Have a Creel Committee," *The Washington Post*, October 7, 1917.

salary (rumored to be \$10,000 per year), and mocks Creel's tendency to emphasize his close relationship with President Woodrow Wilson. Grannon's complaints about Creel, which are accompanied by unflattering characterizations of other CPI officials, are used to discredit the CPI without providing evidence of actual malfeasance.

Some critics of the CPI resorted to the propaganda technique of name-calling to attack George Creel.⁸⁵ Writing in the early 1960s, novelist John Dos Passos (a relic of the "Lost Generation") was still able to summon the kind of disdain for Creel that was felt by many of Creel's contemporaries. In *Mr. Wilson's War*, Dos Passos described Creel as "a little shrimp of a man with burning dark eyes set in an ugly face under a shock of curly black hair" and labeled him as Wilson's "human megaphone."⁸⁶ He went on to note, disapprovingly, "In an astonishingly short time George Creel had the entire nation—except of course for the disreputable minority who insisted on forming their own opinions—repeating every slogan which emanated from the President's desk in the wordy war to 'make the world safe for democracy.'"⁸⁷ Dos Passos's scathing assessment stands out from others mainly for its descriptiveness. Though not flattering of Wilson, he reserved a special vitriol for Creel.

In *Propaganda for War*, Steward Halsey Ross continues the tradition of Creel-bashing by describing Creel as "Indefatigable, brash, unprincipled, and hypocritical."⁸⁸ To Ross, American wartime propaganda was "a reflection of his [Creel's] own vigorous personality and strong

85. In *The Fine Art of Propaganda*, name calling is listed as one of the seven propaganda devices (the others being glittering generalities, transfer, testimonial, plain folks, card stacking, and bandwagon). Name calling is defined as "giving an idea a bad label—[it] is used to make us reject and condemn the idea without examining the evidence (Lee and Lee, 22-23).

86. John Dos Passos, *Mr. Wilson's War* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Company, 1962), 300, 304.

87. *Ibid.*, 302.

88. Ross, *Propaganda for War*, 220.

will—and of his narrow interpretation of patriotism.”⁸⁹ Ross declares Creel a dictator over the propaganda effort without explaining how such a leadership style could maintain unity of effort among a propaganda corps consisting largely of volunteers, many of whom were leaders in their respective fields. In 2010’s *For Home and Country*, English professor Celia Malone Kingsbury makes only passing mention of the CPI in her analysis of World War I propaganda before pronouncing in her conclusion that Creel “must go down as one of history’s villains.”⁹⁰

Few other CPI members attract much attention from scholars, no doubt due to the tendency to consider the “Creel Committee” the work of one man. The exception to this tendency is Edward Bernays, to whom many CPI scholars assign a disproportionately large role in the CPI. This attention is somewhat understandable, given Bernays’s prolific post-war writing, his longevity (he died in 1995), and his close association with the emerging field of public relations (of which some consider him the father). Within ten years of World War I’s end, Bernays had published two popular books that drew, in part at least, from his wartime experiences with the CPI.⁹¹ Nevertheless, Bernays was not a central figure in the CPI. Bernays’s biographer Larry Tye admits as much, noting that “Eddie (Bernays) wasn’t part of the CPI brain trust.”⁹² Bernays worked for the Export Section of the CPI’s Foreign Bureau, which was under the leadership of Ernest Poole. Later on, he worked at the Foreign Bureau’s Latin American desk. Bernays was also not a personal friend of George Creel and he was pointed in his criticisms of what he perceived to be Creel’s failures.

89. *Ibid.*, 225.

90. Celia Malone Kingsbury, *For Home and Country: World War I Propaganda on the Home Front* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2010), 263; Kingsbury also uses a fictionalization of George Creel by John Dos Passos as a means of discrediting Creel.

91. *Crystallizing Public Opinion* (1923) and *Propaganda* (1928).

92. Tye, *The Father of Spin*, 19.

Bernays's arguments for the value of the "public relations counsel" and "propaganda" in his postwar writings raised suspicion, albeit after-the-fact, of the CPI and continue to draw criticism. This criticism is compounded by the fact that Nazi Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels boasted of having read all of Bernays's work.⁹³ The correlation with Nazism has proven too enticing for many of the CPI's critics to pass up and has led to the employment of a second propaganda device against the CPI: transfer.⁹⁴ Conservative radio and television personality Glenn Beck cites the Bernays-Goebbels connection as proof positive of the evilness of the CPI.⁹⁵ More sagacious commentators than Beck have noticed the connection, as it adds a sinister element to the CPI. That Bernays was a Jew (and the nephew of Sigmund Freud), and was in no way complicit with Goebbels, does not seem to matter.⁹⁶ In addition to being a form of transfer, this attack on the CPI is blatantly teleological, as it is based on something that occurred well after the CPI was disbanded and does not even directly relate to the CPI.

93. Axelrod mentions the significance of Bernays in the previously-cited interview with *reason.com* saying, "Joseph Goebbels told a reporter who conveyed this to Edward Bernays, that Goebbels read all of Bernays books, and Hitler himself in *Mein Kampf* cited the propaganda efforts of America in World War I as a model for what propaganda would do."

94. "Transfer carries the authority, sanction, and prestige of something respected and revered over to something else in order to make the latter acceptable; or it carries authority, sanction, and disapproval to cause us to reject and disapprove something the propagandist would have us reject and disapprove" (Lee and Lee, *The Fine Art of Propaganda*, 24).

95. Glenn Beck, "Propaganda in America," last modified March 28, 2010, accessed November 6, 2013 <http://www.glennbeck.com/content/articles/article/198/41221/>; Beck draws heavily from fellow conservative commentator Jonah Goldberg's *Liberal Fascism* (Jonah Goldberg, *Liberal Fascism: The Secret History of the American Left from Mussolini to the Politics of Meaning* [New York: Doubleday, 2008], Kindle). In his chapter entitled "Woodrow Wilson and the Birth of Liberal Fascism," Goldberg quotes Creel's *How We Advertised America* but otherwise gives no indication that he consulted any of the major works on the CPI. Instead, he provides information that might be found in most any common U.S. History textbook. He refers to the Four-Minute Men as "one of Creel's greatest ideas" and considers them an example of "'viral marketing' before its time" (Kindle Loc. 2087). Goldberg also makes the common error of attributing the films *The Kaiser: Beast of Berlin* and *The Prussian Cur* to the CPI (Kindle Loc. 2093).

96. Stuart Ewen, introduction to *Crystallizing Public Opinion*, by Edward Bernays (New York: Ig Publishing, 1923), 9; Stuart Ewen, *PR! A Social History of Spin* (New York: Basic Books, 1996), 4.

Conclusion: A Dominant Narrative Established

The narrative of the CPI that has evolved over the past ninety-five years is one that views the CPI as a cautionary tale that should place Americans on the alert for government attempts at mass persuasion, particularly leading up to and during wartime. To reinforce this message, the dominant narrative utilizes a variety of propaganda techniques. It frames the CPI within a long tradition of government deception. It uses ad hominem arguments and name-calling to discredit the work of the CPI. It skews facts and misappropriates evidence to prove that the CPI turned increasingly to appeals to fear and hate during 1918. Finally, the dominant narrative treats the legacy of the CPI in almost exclusively negative terms. The CPI is alleged to have fostered an intolerant attitude towards immigrants and dissenters that encouraged wartime vigilantism and lingered well into the 1920s. It is also purported to have been too effective in selling Wilson's idealistic war aims and, as a result, it inevitably led to postwar disillusionment.

It is important to remember that, when discussing narratives of the CPI, "dominant" should not be confused with "only." Other narratives, such as that proposed by Stephen Vaughn in *Holding Fast the Inner Lines* , continue to be influential. New accounts that deviate from the dominant narrative, such as Alan Axelrod's *Selling the Great War* , continue to appear. Nevertheless, the dominant narrative holds sway. Stewart Halsey Ross's jaded version of the CPI has influenced most subsequent accounts, including those of Christopher Sharrett, Emily Rosenberg and Thomas Fleming. As easy as it is to discount Fleming's caustic and cynical account of Creel and the CPI, his book is the single most prevalent on the one-stop shop for non-scholarly research that is Wikipedia.

Given the pervasiveness of the dominant narrative, it is difficult to imagine that Walton Bean ever believed that the CPI could be viewed as a moderating force. Then again, Bean

defended his dissertation in May of 1941—seven months prior to the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. In the seventy-three years since, the United States has fought another World War and numerous undeclared wars from Korea to Vietnam to Iraq to Afghanistan. Propaganda has played a role in all of these conflicts. Despite the apparent ineffectiveness of the dominant narrative in preventing war, it is invoked with renewed vigor with each successive conflict. Having been “fooled” into yet another foreign war, it is all too easy for Americans, including scholars, to look into the distant mirror for warning signs and observe the specter of George Creel and his committee. The victims of the most recent hoodwink are determined to render future propaganda inert by tearing down this early instance of officially-sanctioned propaganda. They thus resort to propaganda against the CPI in the hope that, if Americans only heed its lessons, they won’t get fooled again.

CHAPTER TWO

Propagating the Dominant Narrative: The Committee on Public Information in Instructional and Reference Materials

Disregarding the grosser charges, we may still have grave doubts whether there were beneficial results of the Committee's activities to any degree commensurate with the millions of dollars which it spent.

David S. Muzzey
The American Adventure, 1927

In high schools and institutions of higher learning around the United States, students memorize the name “George Creel” as part of their study of World War I and are taught to associate his “Committee on Public Information” (otherwise known as the “Creel Committee” or “CPI”) with propaganda during that war. Some students are shown a few examples of CPI propaganda, almost certainly in the form of wartime posters, blissfully unaware that some of these posters may not even be the work of the CPI. They may be introduced to the “Four Minute-Men” and told that they were an “army of 75,000 public speakers” who spoke on behalf of the war. Depending on their personal biases and the biases of the sources they use, teachers and professors may present America’s propaganda effort during World War I as commendable, neutral, or contemptible. What is lost on students, because it is most likely lost on their instructors, are the errors in fact and interpretation that accompany the dominant narrative of the CPI that is found in many common United States History textbooks, reference materials, and on some of the most readily available online sources. These errors and biases prevent students from developing an accurate understanding of the CPI. Furthermore, the transmission of these errors and biases from teacher and textbook to student ensures the perpetuation of the dominant narrative of the CPI to the next generation.

The dominant narrative of the CPI is pervasive in the historiography. Its tone is one of caution. Its goal is to make the American people more aware of the dangers of propaganda in hopes of preventing another CPI, another Vietnam, or another Iraq War. This narrative also includes the misattribution of non-CPI propaganda to the CPI, ad hominem attacks on CPI Chairman George Creel, and the interpretation of the CPI as an agency of suppression, not expression (which George Creel professed to be its aim). As such, the dominant narrative holds that CPI was responsible, perhaps solely, for censorship, anti-immigrant hysteria, and vigilantism in America during World War I. In short, the dominant narrative presents the CPI as something exclusively negative and yet it is something that all American students should learn about for the expressed purpose of preventing its emulation in future conflicts.

Determining to what extent the dominant narrative of the CPI is perpetuated in common instructional texts and informational websites required several steps. The first step was an examination of how the CPI is addressed in the social studies curricula of selected states. The next step was a survey of forty United States History textbooks to determine the degree to which their accounts of the CPI conform to the dominant narrative. This step included a longitudinal evaluation of changes in interpretation over time. Stanford historian Thomas Bailey's venerable textbook *The American Pageant* provides the framework for the discussion of the highlights of this survey (the full results of the survey are presented in several appendices). The third step was a consultation of four popular U.S. histories that have affected the way teachers understand and teach American history. The fourth step was to canvass informational websites by performing a Google search, as would the typical student, for the terms "Committee on Public Information" and "Creel Committee" and then an assessment of the information found on each of the top ten

search results. The chapter culminates in an examination of two prominent obstacles to student understanding that are found in the available learning materials.

The results of this study clearly indicate that the dominant narrative of the CPI is strong in instructional literature, particularly in its portrayal of the CPI as the work of one man (George Creel) and its charge that the CPI promoted intolerance and suppressed dissent. Beyond this narrative are a number of significant factual errors, particularly in online sources. Due to the proliferation of user-edited research sites, these errors are more easily perpetuated than ever. While errors in textbooks take years to replicate, and are subject to editorial review, errors online can replicate in a matter of seconds with little or no expert oversight. As a result, an accurate narrative of the CPI seems more elusive than ever.

The CPI in the Social Studies Curriculum

Twenty state social studies standards, to include those of the five most populous states, were surveyed in order to determine the extent to which the CPI is addressed in public school curricula. The results of this survey are presented in Appendix A: Mentions of “Propaganda” and “Committee on Public Information” in State History Curricula. The proposed national standards for U.S. History were also consulted. All totaled, seven of the twenty states surveyed specifically require instruction in propaganda as part of a study of World War I.

The National Center for History in the Schools at the University of California at Los Angeles has developed a set of national standards for United States History. While these standards are not binding, they do provide a common reference point for state-level curriculum developers. A survey of twenty states’ curriculum standards for high school-level U.S. History demonstrated a significant degree of alignment with the national standards. It is worth asking, then, to what extent these national standards deal with the topic of World War I propaganda.

Under the theme “The Emergence of Modern America (1890-1930),” there are three standards. The most applicable of these standards is Standard 2: The changing role of the United States in world affairs through World War I. Under Standard 2, there are two supporting objectives that deal with propaganda.¹ The first is Standard 2B: “The student understands the causes of World War I and why the United States intervened.” For this objective, the curriculum specifies that the student will be able to “analyze the impact of American public opinion on the Wilson administration’s evolving foreign policy from 1914 to 1917.” The second supporting objective is Standard 2C: “The student understands the impact at home and abroad of the United States involvement in World War I.” For this objective, the student is expected to be able to “analyze the impact of public opinion and government policies on constitutional interpretation and civil liberties.” Taking all of this into consideration, there is a clear opening for teaching about propaganda and the CPI.

In California, tenth grade World History students are expected to be able to “Analyze the arguments for entering into the war presented by leaders from all sides of the Great War and the role of political and economic rivalries, ethnic and ideological conflicts, domestic discontent and disorder, and propaganda and nationalism in mobilizing the civilian population in support of ‘total war.’”² In Florida, students examine the CPI as one of several war measures that the U.S. government used to prepare the nation for war (the others being the Selective Service Act, War Industries Board, war bonds, Espionage Act, and the Sedition Act).³ In New York, it is

1. National Center for History in the Schools, University of California at Los Angeles, “United States History Content Standards for Grades 5 -12” accessed February 5, 2014, <http://www.nchs.ucla.edu/Standards/us-history-content-standards/us-era-7#section-1>

2. California Department of Education, *History-Social Science Framework for California Public Schools CDE.ca.gov*, 2005, accessed February 4, 2014, <http://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/documents/histoesciframe.pdf>, 137.

3. State of Florida, “Sunshine State Standards for Social Studies, Grades 9-12: SS.912.A.4.6,” *CPALMS.org*, accessed February 4, 2014, <http://www.cpalms.org/Public/PreviewStandard/Preview/3405>.

recommended that students “analyze World War I posters and identify propaganda techniques used.”⁴

In North Carolina, Goal 7.1 of the U.S. History curriculum states that students will know “How the United States government used propaganda to appeal to American patriotism and sell the nation’s war efforts (e.g., Committee on Public Information, Four-Minute Men, “Meatless Tuesdays”).”⁵ Per Goal 7.3, students are expected to “explain the impact of wars on American society and culture since Reconstruction (e.g., relocation of Japanese Americans, American propaganda, first and second Red Scare movement, McCarthyism, baby boom, Civil Rights Movement, protest movements, ethnic [*sic*], patriotism, etc.).”⁶ This requires that students be able to understand:

- 1) How, why and to what extent Americans mobilized and sacrificed on behalf of United States military efforts in world wars (e.g., rationing, war bonds, “Wheatless Wednesdays”).
- 2) How, why and to what extent United States participation in world wars restricted the civil liberties of various groups of Americans. (e.g., German Americans, Japanese Americans, Muslim Americans)
- 3) How communication technologies and mediums, such as newspapers, television, film and radio influenced American patriotism and propaganda during warfare.⁷

Each of these “enabling objectives” relates to the activities of the CPI. What, then, enables teachers to effectively explain the CPI to their students? The three main sources that were surveyed for this study are U.S. History textbooks, other commonly-referenced U.S. histories,

4. New York State Department of Education, “Social Studies Core Curriculum,” *NYSSED.gov*, accessed February 5, 2014, <http://www.p12.nysed.gov/ciai/socst/pub/sscore1.pdf>, 75.

5. North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, “Instructional Support Tools: American History II,” accessed February 5, 2014, <http://www.dpi.state.nc.us/docs/acre/standards/support-tools/unpacking/social-studies/american2.pdf>, 33.

6. *Ibid.*

7. *Ibid.*

and the websites gleaned from a Google search for “Committee on Public Information” and “Creel Committee.”

The CPI in Selected U.S. History Textbooks

The CPI has not been neglected in U.S. History textbooks but it bears asking how accurately do they portray the CPI and to what extent do they conform to the dominant narrative of the CPI? A gleaning from several textbooks from the past six decades provides some indication. In 1951, *A History of the United States* highlighted the negative aspects of the CPI’s work by saying: “at the same time that Creel’s committee created an atmosphere of 100 per cent Americanism, it opened the door to bitter hatreds. Hatred of Germany and all things German became universal and wholly indiscriminate.”⁸ *The United States: A History of Democracy* (1960) picked up on this theme a decade later saying: “There was little tolerance for anyone suspected of not supporting the war, and freedom suffered.”⁹ Little had changed by the 1980s, as seen in 1984’s *America: A Narrative History*: “By arousing public opinion to such a pitch of excitement, the war effort channeled the crusading zeal of progressivism into grotesque campaigns for ‘Americanism’ and witch-hunting.”¹⁰ The theme of intolerance was proving quite durable. In 2007, *The American Journey* said of the CPI: “Obsessed with national unity and conformity, Creel promoted fear, hatred, and prejudice in the name of a triumphant Americanism.”¹¹ One of the most recent textbooks surveyed, *The Enduring Vision* (2008),

8. Cecil Bining and Philip Shriver Klein, *A History of the United States: Volume II* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1951), 391.

9. Henry W. Bragdon and Samuel P. McCutchen, *History of a Free People* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1960), 489.

10. George Brown Tindall, *America: A Narrative History* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 1984), 964.

11. David R. Goldfield, et. al, *The American Journey: A History of the United States* (Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Pearson/Prentice Hall, 2007), 677.

echoes this recurrent theme: “Responding to wartime propaganda, some Americans became almost hysterical in their strident patriotism and their hostility to radicals and dissenters.”¹² If one judged the treatment of the CPI in textbooks based on this sampling alone, it would be difficult to deny the presence of a strong anti-CPI bias that is consistent with the dominant narrative. Does this verdict stand up to closer scrutiny?

Until the 1950s, treatment of the CPI in U.S. History textbooks was sporadic. By the early 1950s, however, the CPI had become a staple of the American historical narrative, as seen in the fact that no high school or college textbook surveyed from 1950 onward failed to address the CPI (see Appendix B for a master list of textbooks consulted). During the 1950s and 1960s, the dominant narrative of the CPI was still in its formative years. As a result, characterizations of the CPI varied significantly. Every textbook surveyed after 1950 (*The Making of Modern America*) mentioned George Creel but their descriptions of him ran the gamut from laudable to contemptible (see Appendix E). Various textbooks highlighted various aspects of the CPI’s work. One textbook mentioned only the CPI’s pamphlets. Another mentioned only the Four-Minute Men. Most provided the number of Four-Minute Men (75,000) but otherwise generalized about “millions of pamphlets” (see Appendix F). Anti-CPI bias was not absent, as seen in *A History of the United States Volume II* (1951), but there were also instances of pro-CPI bias (1952’s *A Short History of the American People Volume II*). The most influential textbook to emerge from this period was Stanford historian Thomas Bailey’s *The American Pageant*.

First published in 1956, *The American Pageant* is now in its fifteenth edition. Over the past sixty years, it has become a staple U.S. History text. In 1956, Bailey’s 316-word treatment of the CPI was ahead of its time, in that it captured several key tenets of the dominant narrative.

12. Paul S. Boyer, *The Enduring Vision: A History of the American People* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2008), 679.

This makes *The American Pageant* a fitting point-of-comparison for how other textbooks address the CPI.

How textbooks label the section on the CPI often reflects their bias. Some choose rather neutral verbiage, such as “Selling the War” or “Mobilizing Public Opinion” (See Appendix D for a complete list of headings). Thomas Bailey went in a somewhat different direction by giving his section on the CPI the leading heading “Manipulating Minds.” By the sixth edition of *The American Pageant* (1979) the heading had become even more leading: “Creel Manipulates Minds.”¹³ This change, while subtle, is important. No longer is the reader, presumably a student, required to read on in order to determine *who* it is who is “manipulating minds.” The student is being told in the heading that it is George Creel who is doing the manipulating. This is, somewhat ironically, manipulating the mind of the reader to arrive at the predetermined conclusion.

Bailey begins by presenting the purpose for the CPI: “Mobilizing the mind for war, both in America and abroad, was an urgent task facing the Washington authorities. For this purpose, the Committee on Public Information was created.”¹⁴ Other textbooks do a better job of defining the CPI (see Appendix C for a comparison of definitions). Bailey then uses an interesting combination of positive and negative adjectives to describe George Creel and the task before him: “a youngish journalist...who, though outspoken and tactless, was gifted with zeal and imagination. His job was to ‘sell’ America on the war, and the world on Wilsonian war aims.”¹⁵ Bailey’s description of Creel is more colorful than what is found in most textbooks, many of

13. Thomas Bailey and David Kennedy, *The American Pageant: A History of the Republic*, 6th ed. (Lexington, Massachusetts: D.C. Heath, 1979), 682.

14. Thomas Bailey, *The American Pageant: A History of the Republic* (Boston: D.C. Heath and Company, 1956), 735.

15. Ibid.

which identify him simply as a “journalist” or a “newsman,” with some adding adjectives like “progressive” or “muckraking” (see Appendix E).

Bailey next attempts to capture the scope of the CPI by observing: “The Creel organization, employing 150,000 workers at home and overseas, proved that words were weapons. It sent out an army of 75,000 ‘Four-Minute Men’ – often longer winded than that – who delivered over 7,500,000 speeches containing much ‘patriotic pep.’”¹⁶ Bailey is no doubt citing George Creel’s own numbers (150,000 workers and 7,500,000 speeches) but both numbers deserve clarification. No complete roster of CPI employees exists but there is an abundance of evidence that the overwhelming majority of those 150,000 were volunteers (a full one-half of them, 75,000, were involved in just one division—the Four-Minute Men). Committee records indicate that there were perhaps a few hundred paid employees.¹⁷ Most textbooks neglect to mention the degree to which the CPI was a volunteer enterprise (see Appendix E). As for the 7,500,000 speeches, this is a factual error traceable to George Creel’s postwar account of the CPI (*How We Advertised America*).¹⁸ Elsewhere, Creel identifies the number of speeches as 755,190. Most historians accept this as the more accurate number. Finally, the claim that the Four-Minute Men were “often longer winded than that” appears unsubstantiated. There is nothing in the two full-length studies to indicate that long-windedness was a pervasive problem. In fact, exceeding

16. *Ibid.*, 736.

17. Wayne Allen Nicholas, “Crossroads Oratory: A Study of the Four Minute Men of World War I.” (PhD diss., Columbia University, 1953). 50. Nicholas cites a report from Creel to President Wilson dated January 27, 1918 that indicated that the CPI had 250 paid employees.

18. George Creel, *How We Advertised America: The First Telling of the Amazing Story of the Committee on Public Information That Carried the Gospel of Americanism to Every Corner of the Globe* (1920; repr., London: Forgotten Books, 2012), 85. Elsewhere in *How We Advertised America* (p. 94), as well as in his *Complete Report* (p. 22), he lists the figure as 755, 190. In later editions of *The American Pageant*, the 7,500,000 number is dropped in favor of “countless.”

the four minute time limit was one of the surest ways for a Four-Minute Man to lose his credentials (the slide which introduced him as an official representative of the U.S. government).¹⁹

In addition to *The American Pageant*, many of the textbooks, websites, and other sources consulted for this study rely heavily on the weight of numbers to tell the story of the CPI (see Appendix F). The truth is that numbers do not tell the whole story. The story is just as much in the fact that so many people, from all walks of life, donated their time and talent to what they perceived to be a worthy cause.

As part of his discussion of the scope of CPI operations, Bailey makes his most significant and enduring error by stating that: “Hang-the-Kaiser ‘movies,’ with such titles as ‘The Kaiser the Beast of Berlin’ and ‘To Hell with the Kaiser,’ revealed the ‘Hun’ in his bloodiest colors.”²⁰ These films were *not* produced by the CPI nor is there any evidence that the CPI officially promoted them. The misattribution of these films (along with *The Prussian Cur*) is the single most common factual error concerning the CPI found in the textbooks surveyed. It is an error that goes back at least as far as 1939, when two reviews of James Mock and Cedric Larson’s *Words that Won the War* indicated that *The Kaiser: The Beast of Berlin* was a CPI film. However, Bailey’s mention of these movies is the earliest found among the U.S. History textbooks consulted in this study. This error has only grown more common with time. Nearly half of the textbooks surveyed that were published from 2000 onward contain this particular error (see Appendix G).

19. Ibid., 213. See also: Alfred E. Cornebise, *War as Advertised: The Four Minute Men and America’s Crusade 1917-1918* (Philadelphia: The American Philosophical Society, 1984), 43-44.

20. Bailey, *The American Pageant*, 736.

Bailey then attempts to assess the immediate impact of the CPI. In tribute to Creel's effectiveness, Bailey says, "Creel was unsurpassed as a mobilizer of emotion. Unlike most propagandists, he had to merely tell the truth about America's tremendous war effort –the truth was incredible enough."²¹ This homage is qualified by what follows: "But he (Creel) rather oversold the ideals of Wilson, and led the world to expect too much. When the President proved to be a man and not a god, the resulting disillusionment at home and abroad was disastrous."²² For the third edition (1966), Bailey adds the cautionary epitaph "paper bullets can be overdone."²³ While many textbooks since have made note of the CPI's role in promoting postwar disillusionment, they more commonly focus on the CPI's role in promoting intolerance towards immigrants (particularly German-Americans) and toward opponents of the war and its role in suppressing civil liberties (see Appendix H).

The earliest editions of *The American Pageant* include one additional paragraph in which Bailey provides a longer-term assessment of the legacy of the CPI. He observes: "America's most noteworthy contribution to the 'science' of warfare was in mobilizing the mind of the world. Regrettably, some of Creel's techniques were later copied by the master propagandists serving Adolf Hitler and other dictators."²⁴ This ominous final paragraph was eliminated at some point after Bailey's death in 1983. Given the frequency of other aspects of the dominant narrative, it is surprising how few textbooks attempt to link the CPI to the rise of the World War II-era totalitarians.

21. Ibid.

22. Ibid., 736-737. Later editions substitute the word "mortal" for "god."

23. Thomas Bailey, *The American Pageant: A History of the Republic*, 3rd ed. (Boston: D.C. Heath and Company, 1966), 737.

24. Bailey, *The American Pageant*, 1st ed., 737.

What *The American Pageant* has to say about the CPI is important because it is widely used in honors-level and Advanced Placement (AP) U.S. History classes. Other AP and college-level texts tend to have similar biases, and to make similar errors. Such texts are the sort used by college-bound students, including future teachers. Thus, the errors made by Bailey (and other textbook authors) tend to become institutionalized—and perpetuated. However, textbooks are not the only source of information on the CPI that students, or their teachers, are likely to consult.

Other Sources

Lies My Teacher Told Me

In addition to textbooks, a source frequently consulted by history teachers is sociologist and historian James W. Loewen's *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong* (1995). As the subtitle indicates, Loewen's book is a study of perceived errors in eighteen common U.S. History texts, including several that were surveyed for this chapter. While Loewen devotes considerable space to debunking myths concerning Woodrow Wilson's progressivism and humanity, he fails to provide any context for understanding the CPI (which he refers to as the "Creel Committee on Public Information.")²⁵ For Loewen, the CPI is simply evidence of Wilson's nativism and intolerance. He finds it significant that at least one textbook (*The American Tradition*) acknowledges that Wilson "set up" the CPI but that it, along with other textbooks, shields Wilson from the "domestic fallout" that resulted from the CPI's activities (in reference to the wartime surge of nativism).²⁶ As an example of these xenophobic activities, Loewen provides a full-page copy of the CPI poster "Spies and Lies" with a lengthy

25. James Loewen, *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 31.

26. Ibid.

caption that began: “To oppose America’s participation in World War I, or even to be pessimistic about it, was dangerous.”²⁷

A People’s History of the United States

In a similar vein as Loewen’s work is Howard Zinn’s 1980 tome *A People’s History of the United States: 1492-Present*. If anything, *A People’s History* has had an even deeper impact on American history teachers than *Lies My Teacher Told Me*, given that the former predates the latter by fifteen years and is commonly required as supplemental reading for prospective history teachers. Zinn devotes a mere paragraph to the CPI, in which he calls it “a massive effort to excite a recalcitrant public.”²⁸ Zinn contends that the formation of the CPI is evidence of the low level of popular support for American involvement in the war.²⁹ However, his only specific mention of a CPI activity was the Four-Minute Men. He cites, as most do, the figures of 75,000 speakers and 750,000 speeches. While it is fitting that the most participatory of CPI endeavors would be the one cited by Zinn in his “people’s history,” the willingness of so many to voluntarily join the pro-war propaganda campaign actually would seem to undermine Zinn’s broader claim that popular support for the war was lacking.

Zinn later connects George Creel to the formation of the American Alliance for Labor and Democracy, which was headed by noted labor leader Samuel Gompers. Zinn condemns the complicity of labor leaders with the government’s war effort and notes that rank and file union members did not embrace the pro-war stance of their leaders as eagerly as Creel and Gompers

27. Ibid., 30. “Spies and Lies” serves as the smoking gun for those seeking to pin responsibility for wartime intolerance and vigilantism on the CPI. While it undoubtedly originated from the CPI’s Division of Advertising, it was but one of 1,438 visual products produced by the Division of Pictorial Publicity.

28. Howard Zinn, *A People’s History of the United States of America, 1492-2001* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2003), 364.

29. Ibid.

might have hoped. In fact, Zinn declares, with apparent delight, that the “Alliance did not work.”³⁰ A dearth of relevant data makes it impossible to assess the accuracy of Zinn’s claim with any degree of precision but his verdict on the wartime struggle for the loyalty of American workers should not be accepted as the final word on the matter. In *Words that Won the War*, CPI historians James Mock and Cedric Larson devote an entire chapter—nearly thirty pages—to the topic of labor (entitled “The People’s War: Labor and Capital”). In it, they present a more positive assessment of the CPI’s outreach to labor than that offered by Zinn. They acknowledge that the challenge of keeping labor “in line” was “perhaps the biggest of all the big jobs assigned to the CPI.”³¹ They do not overlook the obstacles and setbacks but they provide a much more thorough, and nuanced, account of the war for the mind of labor than that provided by Zinn. They note that Creel’s own long history of support for labor made him wary of crass attempts to manipulate the workingman into giving up legitimate rights in the name of patriotism.³² Despite their impressive recounting of CPI efforts directed at labor during the war, Mock and Larson fail to make a convincing case for effectiveness of these efforts for the same reason that Zinn fails to make his case against them: a lack of data. For the purposes of communal memory, however, it is important to note that Zinn’s work is much more widely read and consulted than that of Mock and Larson.

Conservative Voices

If Loewen and Zinn’s treatment of the CPI is representative of the intellectual left, then it bears asking how those on the right perceive it. One such work, Larry Schweikart and Michael

30. Ibid., 364.

31. James Mock and Cedric Larson, *Words that Won the War: The Story of the Committee on Public Information, 1917-1919* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1939), 189.

32. Ibid., 210-211.

Allen's *A Patriot's History of the United States* (2004) devotes only one paragraph to the CPI. Before doing so, they note that the government "launched an all-out propaganda offensive" during the war that led to "a culture [*sic*] sanitization" of all things German.³³ It is curious that, unlike so many authors, they do not make any attempt to pin this on the CPI. They do, however, note that the CPI "encouraged citizens to report anyone engaging in antiwar behavior to the Justice Department."³⁴ While this is true (as noted by Loewen, among others), it barely scrapes the surface of what the CPI did. There is no mention of the CPI's prolific production numbers or the Four-Minute Men, only a general reference to "posters" and "war literature."³⁵

In contrast to the relatively moderate tone of *A Patriot's History*, conservative British historian and journalist Paul Johnson demonstrates thinly-veiled contempt for the CPI in 1997's *A History of the American People*. It is apparent that the British author's conservative bent colors his opinion of Woodrow Wilson and thus the CPI—which he considered one of Wilson's "ruthless" war policies.³⁶ What is remarkable about Johnson's account—and what makes it worthy of inclusion in this study—is that he seems to so thoroughly misunderstand the CPI. He claims that Creel not only "recruited 75,000 speakers, 'Four-Minute Men,' to give short war-aims talks" but that these speakers were also used to "distribute 100 million pamphlets in various languages, to make movies, such as *The Kaiser: Beast of Berlin*, and to hold expositions of 'frightfulness' by the 'Barbaric Huns.'"³⁷ In point of fact, Creel did not recruit the speakers (a

33. Larry Schweikart and Michael Allen, *A Patriot's History of the United States* (New York: Sentinel, 2004) accessed online pdf version February 21, 2014, <http://mhsamericanhistory.wikispaces.com/file/view/A+Patriot's+History+of+the+United+States.pdf>.

34. Ibid.

35. Ibid.

36. Paul Johnson, *A History of the American People* (New York: Harper Collins, 1997), 645.

37. Ibid., 646.

common mistake) and there is no indication that these speakers were the main distributors of CPI pamphlets. Furthermore, the Four-Minute Men neither made movies nor held war expositions. They most certainly had no part in the making of *The Kaiser: The Beast of Berlin*, a film which, as noted elsewhere in this study, was not a product of the CPI. Johnson’s narrative is as tidy as that provided by Howard Zinn but even less accurate.

Online Resources

When conducting research on the CPI, history teachers and students alike are likely to turn to the internet. After typing “Committee on Public Information” into a search engine such as Google, Yahoo, or Bing, they are presented with a list of relevant websites.³⁸ The first page of search results is often as far as most cursory attempts at research ever get.

| Rank | Title | Website |
|-------------|--|----------------------|
| 1 | The Committee on Public Information | wikipedia.com |
| 2 | Images for “Committee on Public Information” | google.com |
| 3 | Records of the Committee on Public Information | archives.gov |
| 4 | World War I: Committee on Public Information | propagandacritic.com |
| 5 | What is the Committee on Public Information? | Wisegeek.com |
| 6 | American Experience: Woodrow Wilson Gallery | pbs.org |
| 7 | Committee on Public Information? | Ask.com |
| 8 | Committee on Public Information in ww1 | wiki.answers.com |
| 9 | Definition of Committee on Public Information | boundless.com |
| 10 | Committee on Public Information | sourcewatch.org |

Table 2.1: Top Google Search Results for “Committee on Public Information”

Wikipedia

A favorite online resource for students and teachers alike is the user-edited reference site Wikipedia. The Wikipedia article entitled “Committee on Public Information” is commendable for its factual accuracy and relative lack of bias. This is surprising given that so many other,

38. A search of “CPI” yields a wide variety of results, given that this is a common acronym. A search of “Creel Committee” (as the CPI is often known) yields substantially the same results as those listed in Table 2.1.

more credible sources (ranging from scholarly articles to textbooks) inaccurately portray the CPI. The Wikipedia entry leans heavily on Thomas Fleming's *The Illusion of Victory* (2003)—easily one of the most caustic treatments of the CPI—citing it more than any other source. The article is notably lacking in references from the standard historiography of the CPI.³⁹ Despite its general accuracy, there are errors in the Wikipedia article. Of these, none is more glaring than the choice of the poster “Destroy This Mad Brute” as the article’s foremost image (this poster has no known connection to the CPI). The article also asserts that the World War II era Office of Censorship “did not follow the CPI precedent. It used a system of voluntary cooperation with a code of conduct, and did not disseminate government propaganda.”⁴⁰ This demonstrates a fundamental misunderstanding of the CPI’s role in censorship. It was Creel who, in the spring of 1917, successfully advocated for a policy of “voluntary cooperation” in lieu of a strict censorship law.⁴¹

National Archives

The next search result is the National Archives’ Guide to Federal Records.⁴² This site provides only the most basic of information about the CPI. Its primary function is to provide the serious researcher with information on the location of the CPI files in the National Archives (Record Group 63). None of these files have as of yet been digitized and an infinitesimally small

39. “Committee on Public Information,” *Wikipedia*, last modified January 8, 2014, accessed February 17, 2014, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Committee_on_Public_Information. Aside from one citation of James Mock’s 1942 article on the CPI’s activities in Latin America, the article does not cite any of the foremost authorities on the CPI (James Mock and Cedric Larson, Stephen Vaughn, David Kennedy and Alan Axelrod).

40. *Ibid.*

41. Mock and Larson, *Words that Won the War*, 19-20.

42. “Records of the Committee on Public Information,” *archive.gov*, accessed February 21, 2014, <http://www.archives.gov/research/guide-fed-records/groups/063.html>.

percentage of students or teachers will ever visit the National Archives in person to research the CPI.

Propaganda Critic

The third Google search result for the CPI is *propagandacritic.com*. This website was started and maintained, until 2011, by Aaron Delwiche, an assistant professor of communications at Trinity University in San Antonio, Texas. The entry that appears on Delwiche's website under the heading "Committee on Public Information" is actually one of four entries that deal with the CPI and its role in World War I propaganda. These four items appear, in the form of an article entitled "Of Fraud and Force Fast Woven: Domestic Propaganda during the First World War," on the website *firstworldwar.com*.⁴³ This article also provides background information for an online lesson plan on World War I propaganda.⁴⁴

Delwiche's article fits well within the dominant narrative of the CPI. Much of the information is factually accurate and yet there is an unmistakable bias. He misattributes propaganda to the CPI, asserting that "movies with titles like *The Kaiser: The Beast of Berlin*, *Wolves of Kultur*, and *Pershing's Crusaders* flooded American theatres."⁴⁵ Of these three films, only *Pershing's Crusaders* was a product of the CPI. He goes on to say that "one picture, *To Hell With The Kaiser*, was so popular that Massachusetts riot police were summoned to deal with an angry mob that had been denied admission."⁴⁶ This was also not a CPI product.

43. Aaron Delwiche, "Of Fraud and Force Fast Woven: Domestic Propaganda During The First World War," *firstworldwar.com*, August 22, 2009, last modified August 22, 2009, accessed February 5, 2014, <http://www.firstworldwar.com/features/propaganda.htm#The Committee on Public Information>

44. "Use of Propaganda During World War I," accessed February 17, 2014, <http://greatwarpropaganda.weebly.com/content-summary.html>

45 Delwiche, "Of Fraud and Force Fast Woven."

46. Ibid.

Additionally, Delwiche makes the error of presuming that the CPI was guided by an expert grasp on human cognition and persuasion, noting that “the CPI blended advertising techniques with a sophisticated understanding of human psychology.”⁴⁷ In the section of his article labeled “Demons, Atrocities, and Lies,” he makes several references to Harold Lasswell’s landmark 1927 study *Propaganda in the Great War*. He fails to note, however, that Lasswell was analyzing *all* propaganda during World War I and devoted very little of his time to the CPI. In fact, many of the examples that Lasswell used predated American entry into the war and the formation of the CPI.

Delwiche makes other common errors. He discounts the intention to appeal to reason and fact, so important to men like George Creel and Guy Stanton Ford (head of the CPI’s Division of Civic and Educational Cooperation), and insists that “CPI propaganda typically appealed to the heart, not to the mind.”⁴⁸ He also dismisses Creel’s aversion to censorship by asserting, through the use of an unsourced quotation, that “the CPI was not a censor in the strictest sense, but ‘it came as close to performing that function as any government agency in the US has ever done.’”⁴⁹ This claim ignores the role that the U.S. Post Office Department, the Department of Justice, the Department of War, and the Department of the Navy all played in wartime censorship.

Delwiche furthers a critical myth about the CPI, which is that it was used to encourage American intervention in the war: “When one considers the horrible legacy of the war, it is tempting to pin complete responsibility for American involvement on hate-mongering militarists

47. Ibid.

48. Ibid.

49. Ibid.

in the CPI.”⁵⁰ As a student of propaganda, Delwiche must certainly realize the impact of such value-laden language as “hate-mongering militarists.” In fact, he appears to rely on such language to frame his argument on the incompatibility of propaganda, as exemplified by the CPI (and, it would appear, only the CPI), with democracy. He ignores the fact, as many commentators and historians do, that, during the war, the CPI was charged with what Walton Bean terms “treasonable moderation”—which is to say that the CPI did not go far enough in condemning all things German. Such accusations would no doubt have detracted from his argument.⁵¹

By the end of the article, Delwiche has turned what seems like an informative entry on the CPI into a classic application of the cautionary aspect of the dominant narrative, stating that “ultimately, their (the CPI’s) guilt is less important than the questions their activities raised about the role of propaganda in a democratic society.” He devotes the final five paragraphs of his article to a discussion of the incompatibility of propaganda and democracy. While he is certainly within his right to do so, it is worth noting the impact that such polemical writing must have on those seeking to learn about the CPI.

Wiki Answers

Sites that allow users to submit and answer questions are potential fountainheads of misinformation. *Wiki answers.com* is no exception. The response to the question, “What was the goal of the Committee on Public Information,” contains a critical error by asserting that the

50. Ibid. Delwiche correctly notes the date of the CPI’s formation (April 13, 1917) earlier in his article and yet there is no way to “pin” American involvement in the war on the CPI unless the CPI predated that involvement.

51. Walton Bean, “George Creel and His Critics: A Study of the Attacks on the Committee on Public Information, 1917-1919” (PhD diss., University of California, 1941), 197. Bean’s final chapter (p. 197-265) is devoted to addressing the charges of “treasonable moderation,” by the National Security League and other groups, against the CPI.

purpose of the committee was to “encourage and push them (Americans) into entering the war!”⁵² A second inquiry on Wiki Answers (“Committee on Public Information WW1?”) provides some accurate information but directly ties CPI propaganda to vigilante violence against German-Americans by saying, “It caused people to be so against the Germans that some people would go around killing Germans that lived in the U.S.”⁵³ This is, at best, an unsubstantiated claim. The answer to a third question (“Committee on Public Information and propaganda?”) simply reads, “it tried to convince people of one side of a story by appealing to emotions.”⁵⁴

PublicDiplomacy.wikia

The search results for “Creel Committee” are substantially the same as those for the “Committee on Public Information,” with the notable exception of an article on the website *publicdiplomacy.wikia.com* entitled “Creel Committee.” Of all of the textbook entries and online articles consulted for this study, this short entry is far and away the least accurate. Among its errors, it lists the other members of the CPI (in addition to Creel) as being “Secretary of State, William Jennings Bryan; Secretary of War, Lindley M. Garrison; and Secretary of the Navy, Josephus Daniels.”⁵⁵ Of the three, only Daniels was a member of the CPI. Bryan had resigned as Secretary of State in 1915 and was replaced by Robert Lansing. By 1917, Lindley Garrison had been replaced as Secretary of War by Newton Baker. The entry also says that Walter

52. “What was the goal of the Committee on Public Information,” *wiki.answers*, accessed February 21, 2014, http://wiki.answers.com/Q/What_was_the_goal_of_the_committee_on_public_information#slide=1.

53. “Committee on Public Information WW1,” *wiki.answers*, accessed February 21, 2014, http://wiki.answers.com/Q/Committee_on_public_information_in_ww1?#slide=10.

54. “Committee on Public Information and propaganda,” *wiki.answers*, accessed February 21, 2014, http://wiki.answers.com/Q/Committee_on_public_information_and_propaganda#slide=2.

55. “Creel Committee,” *publicdiplomacy.wikia.com*, accessed February 21, 2014, http://publicdiplomacy.wikia.com/wiki/Creel_Committee.

Lippmann, along with Edward Bernays, “played key advisory roles to Creel.”⁵⁶ In fact, Lippmann was highly critical of the CPI and played no part in it while Bernays’s role in the CPI has been overinflated by historians.⁵⁷ Most inexplicably, the entry asserts: “in the months before Wilson formally asked Congress to enter the war, the Committee mailed out thousands of pamphlets, cartoons, magazines, movies, and prowar paraphernalia warning of the dangers of the ‘Terrible Hun.’”⁵⁸ What makes it inexplicable is that the article starts out by correctly identifying the date of the CPI’s creation as April 13, 1917—eleven days after Woodrow Wilson called for a declaration of war against Germany. It is telling that the sole source cited in the entry is an article by communications professor Christopher Sharrett that makes the same outlandish accusation.⁵⁹ Sharrett, in turn, relies exclusively on Thomas Fleming’s *The Illusion of Victory* (2003) for his information of the CPI.

This string of errors, traced only three steps back, provides some insight as to how misconceptions of the CPI are perpetuated. Imagine a teacher, in preparing a lesson on World War I, performing a search for the “Creel Committee” and landing on this particular website (publicdiplomacy.wikia.com). Unaware of its errors, this teacher decides to copy and paste the text, which seems plausible enough, into a PowerPoint slide and then presents it to one or more U.S. History classes. This “knowledge” becomes what these students will know about the CPI from that point onward. Now imagine that it is a student, in high school or college, who is performing the research. He or she is even less prepared to determine the veracity of the claims

56. Ibid. This inaccuracy is furthered by conservative radio personality Glenn Beck.

57. Larry Tye, *The Father of Spin: Edward L. Bernays and the Birth of Public Relations* (New York: Random House, 1998), 19.

58. “Creel Committee,” publicdiplomacy.wikia.com.

59. Christopher Sharrett, “9/11, the Useful Incident, and the Legacy of the Creel Committee,” *Cinema Journal* 43, no. 4 (Summer 2004): 127-128. The major inaccuracies of Sharrett’s article are discussed in Chapter 1 of this thesis.

made on this website (or others) about the CPI. In fact, this student may feel well-informed enough to get onto a site such as Yahoo Answers or Wiki Answers and unwittingly spread the misinformation. And so it goes. Errors beget errors. After nearly a century of errors, it is easy to understand why the truth about the CPI is so elusive.

Obstacles to Understanding

The suggested activities related to the CPI found in state curricula, history textbook inserts and supplemental materials, and online World War I lesson plans indicate two major obstacles to understanding the true nature of the CPI. The first of these is the tendency to rely almost exclusively on the visual products of the CPI as primary source evidence. The second is the tendency to focus on George Creel to the exclusion of anyone else. Both tendencies contribute to an inaccurate, or at best highly incomplete, portrait of the CPI.

The primacy of the visual medium

The innumerable Four-Minute Men speeches are lost to time. *Pershing's Crusaders*, *America's Answer*, *Under Four Flags* and other shorter CPI films are either lost or otherwise unavailable to popular audiences. The "Red, White, and Blue" pamphlets churned out for the CPI by America's leading historians exist mainly in archives. What remains for students studying the CPI are its posters. Many of these are stunning examples of visual propaganda. Even today, they are tailor-made for reproduction. They can be resized to fit within the pages of a textbook (see Appendix I). Many of them have been digitized, which makes them easy to import into documents, PowerPoint presentations, or onto websites. Posters have, to a large

extent, become the solitary evidence of the work of the CPI—and yet they represent but one small part of what the CPI was and what it did.⁶⁰

The posters skew our understanding of the CPI because poster artists relied heavily on emotion-laden symbols and slogans. To some extent this is inherent to the medium. The logical arguments and the appeals to fact that Creel prided himself on were not effectively conveyed in the visual medium. Added to this, many of the artists who volunteered their services to the CPI's Division of Pictorial Publicity (DPP) had been members of a prewar readiness organization known as the Vigilantes (to include one of its most famous artists, James Montgomery Flagg). As the head of the DPP, Creel selected Charles Dana Gibson—a nationally-known artist, president of the Society of Illustrators, and leader of the Vigilantes.⁶¹ Far from embracing Creel's "faith in fact," Gibson is quoted as saying:

One cannot create enthusiasm for war on the basis of practical appeal. The spirit that will lead a man to put away the things of his accustomed life and go forth to all the hardships of war is not kindled by showing him the facts. We are being purged with fire, and the work of the artist will be to catch the new spirit of the people, to blow on the new flame.⁶²

The fact that the DPP departed from the other divisions' emphasis on education, and Creel's own "faith in fact," has led to a distorted view of the CPI's body of work. Few teachers are likely to know, and their U.S. History textbooks do not tell them, that the DPP was but one

60. Public Broadcasting's website (pbs.org), which rated as the sixth highest search result in Google (see Table 2.1), contains an exhibit on "Poster Art of World War I" as part of its "American Experience" feature on Woodrow Wilson. This article includes a brief paragraph explaining President Wilson's motive for forming the CPI, one paragraph that discusses Creel and the broad work of the committee, and two paragraphs on the Division of Pictorial Publicity (DPP). The photo gallery contains ten of the most iconic posters from the war, most of which were products of the DPP.

61. Stephen Vaughn, *Holding Fast the Inner Lines: Democracy, Nationalism, and the Committee on Public Information* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980), 149.

62. Eric Van Schaak, "The Division of Pictorial Publicity in World War I," *Design Issues* 22, no. 1 (Winter 2006): 38.

source of wartime posters.⁶³ Furthermore, these teachers may not even be aware of the dangers of presenting the products of the DPP as the primary work of the CPI, given that this skews the student's understanding of the CPI. Finally, they are not likely to know that the DPP, first created in April 1917, did not become fully operational until November 1917, that its headquarters were in New York City (and not in Washington, D.C.) or that George Creel gave Gibson a large degree of latitude in managing the Division (as he did to the heads of all CPI divisions).⁶⁴

In short, the work of the DPP is presented to, and studied by, students today as the chief tangible documentary evidence of the CPI and yet neither these students, nor their teachers, are likely to understand much of anything about the DPP or its relation to the CPI. All they know is that George Creel was the head of the CPI and the CPI produced posters. This is reflective of another obstacle to understanding the CPI, which is the "Great Man Theory" of history.

George Creel: The Not-So-Great Man

As seen in textbook headings like "Creel Manipulates Minds," there is a tendency to reduce the CPI to the person of Creel. Many textbooks do not read "it" (i.e. the CPI) did this or that. Instead, they read that "he" (Creel) did it. Thus it is Creel who "recruited an army of public speakers"—while in reality the Four-Minute Men was not the idea of Creel and the speakers were all recruited locally. Creel is very straightforward about how the Four-Minute Men came into being in both the *Complete Report of the Chairman of the Committee on Public*

63. Ibid., 43. Van Schaak notes that "the Marine Corps Recruiting Bureau, the YMCA, the YWCA, the Red Cross, and the U.S. Navy all ran their own (poster) campaigns."

64. Ibid., 35-36.

Information and How We Advertised America.⁶⁵ The tendency to view the CPI in terms of one man began shortly after the committee was formed.⁶⁶

Creel became a lightning rod for criticism, not only of the CPI but of Wilson.⁶⁷ Ad hominem attacks on Creel are as old as the CPI itself. Such attacks prevent a more thorough understanding of the CPI and thoroughly obscure the true nature of the organization. While textbooks present Creel's leadership of the CPI as singular, this is simply not the case. Creel could not have exercised dictatorial power over the CPI even if he had so desired. Thousands of CPI workers served, the vast majority on a volunteer basis, in twenty different, largely distinct divisions across the country and in approximately thirty foreign countries. If the example of Charles Dana Gibson's Division of Pictorial Publicity proves anything, it is that Creel did not exercise dictatorial control over all aspects of the CPI. It seems more accurate to say that he barely controlled some of his subordinates at all—and yet textbooks and reference texts, websites, etc. insist on reducing the CPI to Creel.

As a result, the names of important men such as Gibson, Donald Ryerson, Guy Stanton Ford, Edgar Sisson, and Arthur Bullard have been lost to all but the most devoted students of the World War I propaganda. These men were not Creel's minions. They were the men, among many others, who made the CPI happen. A Division of Pictorial Publicity without Charles Dana Gibson and his existing network of artists (the "Vigilantes") seems as inconceivable as a Division of Civic and Educational Cooperation without Guy Stanton Ford. It was Ford, a history

65. U.S. Committee on Public Information, *Complete Report of the Chairman of the Committee on Public Information 1917: 1918: 1919* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1920), 22 (hereinafter *Complete Report*); Creel, *How We Advertised America*, 84-85.

66. Ryley Grannon, "Why Pay For Comedy When We Have a Creel Committee," *The Washington Post*, October 7, 1917.

67. Bean, "George Creel and His Critics," 128.

professor and Dean of Graduate Studies at the University of Minnesota, who did more than any other CPI member to mobilize the historians of America in support of the war effort—therefore making him the man most responsible for the oft-cited 75 million pamphlets. Beyond the monumental task of running his own expansive division, Ford also assisted in the preparation of the Four-Minute Men’s *General Bulletin*.⁶⁸ Without Donald Ryerson, there would undoubtedly have been no Division of Four-Minute Men at all—as he was the man who conceived of it, tested out the idea, pitched it to Creel and led it during its formative period.⁶⁹ According to at least one CPI historian, without Arthur Bullard, there would have been no CPI at all.⁷⁰ After lobbying for the creation of the CPI, Bullard, a progressive reporter and novelist, went on to serve for a year and a half as the director of the CPI’s “Russian enterprise.”⁷¹ Edgar Sisson left a lucrative position in the employ of William Randolph Hearst as editor of *The Cosmopolitan* to serve in various capacities, to include a stint as the head of the CPI’s Foreign Section.⁷² Reflecting specifically on the services rendered to the CPI by Sisson and Bullard (along with Ernest Poole), Creel remarked, “when I think of their unselfish drudgeries, their contributions from loyal hearts and driving minds, I find fault with every phrase designed to convey appreciation.”⁷³

The contributions of these men, and many others, are far less appreciated by those writing history texts. In fact, this study located only two history books that mentioned any CPI

68. Cornebise, *War as Advertised*, 8.

69. The History Committee of the Four Minute Men of Chicago, *The Four Minute Men of Chicago* (Chicago, The History Committee, 1919), Kindle loc 25; Creel, *How We Advertised America*, 84.

70. Vaughn, *Holding Fast the Inner Lines*, 7. Vaughn asserts that Bullard “should receive much of the credit for the (Wilson) administration’s decision to establish the Committee on Public Information.”

71. *Complete Report*, 212.

72. *Ibid.*, 108.

73. Creel, *How We Advertised America*, 70.

personnel aside from George Creel (see Appendix E). The first was the first edition of George Brown Tindall's college text *America: A Narrative History* (1984), which mentions Gibson, Ford, and the famous artist James Montgomery Flagg (best known for his poster "I Want You").⁷⁴ The other source to mention individuals other than Creel is the online textbook provided by *US history.org*. It mentions Flagg, to whom it assigns inflated importance, and songwriter George M. Cohan, who did not even work for the CPI.⁷⁵

Content on focusing exclusively on Creel, the overwhelming majority of textbooks surveyed make no mention of the volunteer nature of the CPI. By this omission, they miss the entire essence of the CPI. It was a volunteer enterprise made up of men and women, some experts in their fields but most anonymous outside of their own communities. These were, in many cases, the true believers in Wilsonian idealism. They were not, in their own eyes, instruments of government repression. They were contributing, each in his or her own way, to President Wilson's colossal struggle to "make the world safe for democracy." It is therefore ironic that they have been passed down, in much of the instructional literature, as villains. Many, though certainly not all, of these volunteers would fall under the broad heading of "progressives."

Conclusion

A survey of forty U.S. history textbooks, other U.S. history resources, and reference websites reveals that the dominant narrative of the CPI remains strong. The CPI is presented in

74. Tindall, *America: A Narrative History*, 964. Tindall had excised these names from his narrative by the eighth edition (2010).

75. UShistory.org, "Over Here," *U.S. History Online Textbook* 2014, accessed March 26, 2014, <http://www.ushistory.org/us/45c.asp>. The text states: "He (Creel) commissioned George M. Cohan to write patriotic songs intended to stoke the fires of American nationalism." In point of fact, George Cohan was not affiliated with the CPI and there is no evidence that Cohan wrote "Over There" or any other patriotic song at the behest of George Creel.

terms of numbers, in terms of posters, and in terms of one man. It is associated, often through value-laden language, with intolerance, xenophobia, and vigilantism. It is a symbol of something incompatible with democracy and something to be avoided. George Creel remains, as *Time* magazine observed in 1939, “Horrible Exhibit No. 1 of...anti-war propaganda.”⁷⁶ His deep roots in progressivism and his faith in democracy, if acknowledged at all, are presented as ironic when juxtaposed against his sinister side as chief censor and master propagandist. This tendency to reducing the CPI to the personage of one man or to the work of one of its component parts (e.g. the Four-Minute Men or the Division of Pictorial Publicity) is nothing more than history poorly done. Students deserve better. They deserve to be presented with a more objective and more nuanced narrative of the CPI—not for the CPI’s sake but for the sake of historical accuracy.

76. Review of *Words that Won the War* by James R. Mock and Cedric Larson, *Time* 34, no. 16 (October 16, 1939): 108.

CHAPTER THREE

Woodrow Wilson, George Creel, and the Committee on Public Information: An Alternative Narrative

He, with Wilson; Wilson as forger of verbal thunderbolts, Creel as propagandeer of them; Wilson as Napoleon of ideas, Creel as Marshal Ney of dissemination – the two would conquer the world.

Mark Sullivan
Our Times, Vol. 5, 1933

In the 1916 presidential campaign, progressives rallied behind President Woodrow Wilson and his policy of neutrality in the “Great War” that raged in Europe. One of these progressives was a muckraking journalist from Denver by the name of George Creel, whose foremost contribution to Wilson’s campaign was a book-length defense of the president’s policies, including that of neutrality, entitled *Wilson and the Issues*. Five months after securing his reelection under the banner “He kept us out of war,” Wilson led a reluctant nation into that very war. Knowing that he must mobilize public opinion in support of this fateful decision, Wilson issued Executive Order 2594 creating a new executive bureaucracy, the Committee on Public Information (CPI), and naming George Creel as its chairman.¹ In doing so, Wilson made Creel one of the first progressives enlisted into the war for the American mind—the war that was to “make the world safe for democracy.” Working through Creel’s CPI, Wilson conducted the first executively directed war of ideas in American history, selling the war to the American people, and ultimately to the world, as a progressive venture based on American ideals of democracy and freedom.

¹ Executive Order 2594, April 14, 1917, in *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, ed. Arthur Link, vol. 42, (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1966), 59. Hereinafter *Wilson Papers*.

The dominant narrative of the CPI, as defined in the preceding chapters, makes two critical errors with regard to President Wilson's relation to the CPI. First, historians cast Wilson in the role of the watchmaker who created the CPI and then left it in the hands of its chairman, George Creel. For most historians, George Creel was both mastermind of the CPI and dictator over it. At most, historians acknowledge that Wilson provided many of the messages that the CPI broadcast throughout the world. However, the wartime correspondence between Wilson and Creel reveal that Wilson was much more involved in CPI affairs than most accounts of the CPI would indicate. Wilson was by no means the driving force behind the CPI, nor was he involved in every aspect. However, given the vast and varied nature of the tasks facing an American President during wartime, Wilson's level of interest and involvement in the business of the CPI was telling. It revealed the priority that he placed on the CPI's mission.

A second error that is characteristic of the dominant narrative of the CPI is the tendency of historians to excoriate Creel for a variety of abuses while temporizing on Wilson. Many historians present Creel as the face of wartime intolerance, excessive "patriotism," vigilantism, and censorship. Wilson, on the other hand, is often presented as a tragic yet sympathetic figure—the naïve idealist who promised the world more than he could deliver but who was driven by the noblest of intentions. This can be seen in the recent work of cultural historian Jackson Lears. In *Rebirth of a Nation* (2008), Lears dismisses Creel's efforts as "chauvinistic" and the "last gasp of a discredited dogma" and yet Lears is much more ambivalent towards Creel's boss.² While critical of Wilson's decision to participate in the Great War, Lears acknowledges Wilson's sincere (though, to Lears, misguided) intentions: "He (Wilson) would fight a war, he finally decided, in the service of all humanity—a war that would lead to the

2. Jackson Lears, *Rebirth of a Nation: The Making of Modern America, 1877-1920* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2008), 353.

regeneration not merely of the individual and the nation, but of the world.”³ Such characterizations overlook, intentionally or by accident, the fact that Wilson and Creel were very much kindred spirits who shared a progressive interpretation of the war and a progressive view of the importance of public opinion.

Additionally, the dominant narrative overlooks the role of progressivism as the driving force behind the government’s propaganda effort. Many historians note that progressives, as individuals, largely supported the war, and that some participated in the CPI, but they seldom focus on the impact that progressivism, as an ideology, played in the war for what Wilson referred to as the “verdict of mankind.”⁴ The fact is that the progressives’ confidence in the efficacy of bureaucracy, their faith in human rationality, and their desire for moral regeneration all combined to make the war for the American mind a decidedly progressive venture.

An examination of ninety-nine wartime correspondences between Woodrow Wilson and George Creel, drawn from *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, provides a view of the CPI that does not come across in the historiographical literature or in the instructional literature studied in previous chapters. It is an alternate narrative that presents the CPI as a collaborative venture between Woodrow Wilson and George Creel; one as idealistic as the other, both driven by progressive ideals, and both convinced of the justness of a “war to end war.” Together they formed a partnership that convinced much of the country, and a large part of the world, that America’s was a fight for right.

3. Ibid., 328. Other historians, most notably Thomas Fleming (*The Illusion of Victory*) and Stewart Halsey Ross (*Propaganda for War*), make no such distinction and portray both Wilson and Creel as equally reprehensible.

4. Historian John Thompson notes the benefit, to the CPI, of cooperation with more established reformers: “Creel energetically built up his contacts with others in the insurgent movement, and he relied on better-known muckrakers...to open doors for him in the East” (John Thompson, *Reformers and War: American Progressive Publicists and the First World War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

The CPI's Progressive Roots

In his classic 1967 work *The Search for Order*, political and social historian Robert Wiebe makes the case for Woodrow Wilson as the progressives' beau ideal: the "public man." In defining progressivism, Wiebe argues, "Idealism supplied most of the new theory's superstructure—the philosopher-kings, the rational public, the social consensus."⁵ Wiebe then notes that "bureaucratic thought filled the interior—the beautifully functioning administration, the perfect administrative types, the interacting groups, the society in indeterminate process."⁶ At the head of this "beautifully functioning administration" Wiebe places "the public man, a unique and indispensable leader."⁷ Woodrow Wilson, as philosopher-king, believed in the "rational public" and "the social consensus," which led him to perceive a war for the American mind as both a just and necessary undertaking. George Creel was an example of Wiebe's "perfect administrative types" and his CPI drew from, and appealed to, the various "interacting groups."

Other historians of progressivism have built on Wiebe's construct of progressivism. Jackson Lears adds to it the theme of moral regeneration. For Lears, the entire period from the end of Reconstruction through World War I was about a longing for rebirth. For many Americans, Lears argues, progressivism provided an avenue to fulfill that longing.⁸ This helps to explain why so many progressives were drawn to the war effort. On this note, Lears says, "Progressive hopes for wartime regeneration went far beyond the managerial vision of efficient

5. Robert H. Wiebe, *The Search for Order: 1877-1920* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1967), 162. Wiebe does not specifically address the CPI in this, his seminal work on the Progressive Era.

6. *Ibid.*, 163.

7. *Ibid.*, 160.

8. Lears, *Rebirth of a Nation*, 310.

social engineering.”⁹ This is to say it went beyond Wiebe’s conception of progressivism. Lears continues: “the war, many felt, would be an opportunity for remaking both the polity and the self—erasing class differences, elevating women, eliminating selfishness, disciplining indolence and pleasure.”¹⁰ Thus, for Lears, progressives chose to support the war as a way of accomplishing goals beyond merely making the world safe for democracy.

In *The Tyranny of Change* (2006), military and cultural historian John Whiteclay Chambers introduces the idea of the “progressive ethos.” According to Chambers, the progressive ethos “combined the nineteenth century sense of Protestant evangelism with the new methods of science and large-scale organization.”¹¹ This blending of a religious sense of mission with the desire for scientifically-enhanced efficiency made progressives, to Chambers, “evangelical modernizers (who) worked for specific reforms while seeking to restore a sense of community and common purpose to a nation they saw splintering into diverse ethnic and interest groups.”¹² This definition is helpful in determining why progressives rallied not only behind President Wilson’s war but also behind his war of ideas. Of particular interest is the final observation from Chambers above, which notes the progressives’ sense that America was being pulled apart by centrifugal forces. This gave rise to the idea among many progressives that unity was, in and of itself, a worthy goal. This was a goal that Wilson and Creel pursued through the CPI.

9. Ibid., 341.

10. Ibid.

11. John Whiteclay Chambers II, *The Tyranny of Change* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2006), 140.

12. Ibid.

In 1980's *Holding Fast the Inner Lines*, CPI historian Stephen Vaughn gives the relationship between progressivism and the CPI fuller treatment than any other historian. He observes that "most workers for the CPI were dedicated to the preservation, if necessary the revitalization, and indeed the expansion of democratic government."¹³ He goes on to note that "to mobilize public opinion was their immediate goal. But there was a forward-looking, progressive aspect to the work of the committee that has often been overlooked."¹⁴ What Vaughn does not highlight, however, is the role of President Woodrow Wilson, in collaboration with George Creel, in this great progressive struggle. That is the central theme of this narrative.

Woodrow Wilson: Propagandist in Chief?

In *Propaganda Technique in World War I*, Harold Lasswell labels Woodrow Wilson "the great generalissimo on the propaganda front."¹⁵ Lasswell is referring specifically to Wilson's role in the eyes of Europeans but it was equally true on the home front. Jackson Lears notes in *Rebirth of a Nation* (2008) that "from the outset, Wilson knew he would have to mobilize public opinion as well as men and guns."¹⁶ Historian David Kennedy observes that Wilson "had all of his life been a moralizing evangelist who longed with religious fervor to sway the public mind with the power of his person and his rhetoric."¹⁷ Thus, it is clear that historians have not totally divorced Wilson from the propaganda effort. They acknowledge that Wilson created the CPI and that this organization propagated Wilsonian themes and messages. Beyond this, however,

13. Stephen Vaughn, *Holding Fast the Inner Lines: Democracy, Nationalism, and the Committee on Public Information* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1980), 236.

14. Ibid.

15. Harold Lasswell, *Propaganda Technique in World War I* (1927; repr., Cambridge, MA: The M.I.T. Press, 1971), 216.

16. Lears, *Rebirth of a Nation*, 340.

17. David Kennedy, *Over Here: The First World War and American Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 48.

the watchmaker view prevails. Additionally, the tendency to view the CPI as the work of George Creel, has left little room for an examination of the role of Wilson. Nevertheless, it was Wilson who led the national, even worldwide, war of ideas from 1917-1919.

The story of the Committee on Public Information typically begins with its creation by Executive Order on April 14, 1917. Historians continue to debate about who deserves credit for the idea of a “Bureau of Publicity” (Creel’s initial term). The list of possible candidates, all notable progressives, includes Walter Lippmann, David Lawrence, Arthur Bullard, George Creel, Secretary of War Newton Baker, and Secretary of the Navy Josephus Daniels.¹⁸

Historians omit Wilson from this list, despite his great faith in the power of persuasion and advocacy for mobilizing public opinion, for the simple reason that there is no evidence that the idea of the CPI originated with him.¹⁹ This, however, overlooks the seemingly obvious fact that it was Wilson who created the CPI with a stroke of his pen. Who receives credit for the idea is, ultimately, trivial when one considers that, had Wilson not embraced the concept, it would have remained just an idea. He was not merely present at the creation of the CPI; he was its creator.

Josephus Daniels recalled the President’s intent for the CPI: “The purposes of the Committee on Public Information as President Wilson conceived them were two: the mobilization of the *mind* of America, and the fight for the ‘verdict of mankind.’”²⁰ Thus it was President Wilson who established what might be referred to as the “mission statement” of the CPI. Although he would delegate the day-to-day operations of the CPI to its civilian chairman, it

18. Of all the accounts of the CPI’s creation, Stephen Vaughn devotes the most time to the discussion in chapter one of *Holding Fast the Inner Lines* pages 3-22.

19. On this point, there is evidence that Wilson considered a “publicity agency” as early as June 1914 to counter a biased press. This is found in Henry Turner’s “Woodrow Wilson and Public Opinion” from *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 21, no. 4 (Winter 1957-1958): 515.

20. Josephus Daniels, *The Wilson Era: Years of War and After—1917-1923* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1946), 224.

was clear that the President had a firm vision of what it was to accomplish. Throughout the war, Wilson held the final authority over CPI operations. Wilson expressed his wish “to keep the matter of propaganda entirely in my own hands.”²¹

Before the CPI was even officially formed, Wilson had no doubt as to whom he wanted to lead the CPI on his behalf. Secretary Daniels, a friend of George Creel, noted in a diary entry dated April 9, 1917 that he had met with the President to discuss the censorship issue and that Wilson indicated that he would appoint Creel to head some as-yet unformed and undefined bureau that would deal with the issues of censorship and publicity.²² Two days later, on April 11, Daniels met with Wilson again to discuss Creel’s appointment and forwarded him Creel’s memo proposing a Bureau of Publicity that would allow the government to avoid strict censorship. The following day, April 12, Daniels wrote that he and Secretary of War Newton Baker had “sent letter to W.W. as to Committee of Publicity and suggested appointment of George Creel.”²³ Wilson replied that same day: “Do I understand that I now have the authority to designate Creel? If so, I shall be glad to do so. I like his memorandum very much.”²⁴

The endorsement of Creel as CPI Chairman by Wilson, Baker, and Daniels left a reluctant Secretary of State Robert Lansing with no choice but to go along. Tensions between the older, more conservative Lansing and Creel were evident from the very beginning. In his diary, Daniels related how Lansing had insisted that the memo creating the CPI be rewritten on

21. Turner, “Woodrow Wilson and Public Opinion,” 516.

22. Josephus Daniels diary entry, April 9, 1917, *Wilson Papers* 42: 23.

23. Daniels diary entry, April 12, 1917, *Wilson Papers* 42: 23.

24. Woodrow Wilson to Daniels, April 12, 1917, *Wilson Papers* 42: 23. This was in reference to Creel’s memorandum, dated April 11, 1917, in which Creel describes his plan for a Bureau of Publicity that would make strict censorship unnecessary (Daniels to Wilson, April 11, 1917, *Wilson Papers* 42: 39).

State Department letterhead and that Lansing's be the first signature.²⁵ These tensions had not eased by the end of the war. As late as December 15, 1918, Wilson's friend and advisor "Colonel" Edward House wrote in his diary: "I told him (Wilson) that a 'head-on collision' was about to occur with Creel on the one side and with Lansing on the other... I told him Lansing's dislike for Creel was only equaled by Creel's dislike for Lansing."²⁶

Relations between Creel and the other two committee members were better. Daniels, a newspaperman by trade, was the most involved of the three cabinet members but he deferred to Creel, which was not as difficult for him since he considered Creel a personal friend. However, it did not appear to matter very much what any members of the Committee felt, given that Creel held the unwavering confidence of the President. Given Creel's leadership, the CPI quickly came to be known as the "Creel Committee."

In appointing George Creel to lead the Committee on Public Information, Wilson enlisted the services of both a "prominent muckraker" and a loyal admirer.²⁷ Both of these characteristics would serve Creel well as CPI chairman. By 1917, the forty-one year old Creel had experienced a lot in his restless life; he had been a newspaper owner/editor, Denver police commissioner, muckraker who opposed local political bosses, friend of labor, campaigner for women's suffrage, and political renegade. Popular historian Alan Axelrod observes that Creel was "always an advocate, a crusader for whom journalism was merely a means to an end."²⁸ The most significant

25. Daniels diary entry, April 14, 1917, *Wilson Papers* 42: 59.

26. Edward M. House diary entry, December 15, 1918, *Wilson Papers* 53: 402. "Colonel" was an honorary title (he held no military rank). He is widely considered one of Woodrow Wilson's closest advisors, if not his closest.

27. Kennedy, *Over Here*, 59.

28. Alan Axelrod, *Selling the Great War: The Making of American Propaganda* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009), 38.

of the causes embraced by Creel, in terms of its impact on Creel's life, turned out to be Woodrow Wilson's 1916 reelection campaign.

Over the course of the 1916 campaign, Wilson developed a fondness for George Creel. Journalist Mark Sullivan remarked that Wilson treated Creel "as one of the very small number of men whom Wilson enjoyed having near him."²⁹ Sullivan noted that "Creel's appeal for Wilson lay in his robustious [*sic*] vitality, from which Wilson could absorb some for his own habitually depleted stores."³⁰ For his part, Creel was a true believer in Woodrow Wilson. This demonstrated loyalty was what distinguished Creel from some of his would-be competitors for the job of CPI chairman and continued to pay dividends for him throughout his tenure in that position. In 1920, Creel wrote to Mrs. Edith Wilson, "Aside from my faith in the President and my deep admiration for him, there is a personal devotion to him formed as a result of association."³¹

Beyond the matter of likability was the equally important issue of like-mindedness. Wilson and Creel had much in common. In addition to a general agreement on political issues, both shared the progressive faith in the power of public opinion and believed it to be based in human rationality and malleable for political ends.³² According to Henry Turner, Wilson's conception of the relationship between public opinion and government predated his entry into the world of politics by over two decades and was based on his reading of Edmund Burke and

29. Mark Sullivan, *Our Times: The United States, 1900-1925*, vol. 5, *Over Here, 1914-1918* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1933), 425. Elsewhere, Sullivan refers to Creel, along with Bernard Baruch and Newton Baker, as the "three tines of Wilson's fighting trident" (369).

30. *Ibid.*, 367.

31. George Creel to Edith Bolling Galt Wilson, August 13, 1920, *Wilson Papers* 66: 33.

32. Kennedy, *Over Here*, 47.

Walter Bagehot.³³ Wilson himself wrote in *Constitutional Government in the United States*: “Let him (the President) once win the admiration and confidence of the country, and no other single force can withstand him, no combination of forces will easily overpower him.”³⁴ By selecting a man he trusted to head the CPI, and by forging a close working relationship with him, Wilson was attempting to secure such a level of admiration and confidence from his country.

Creel was happy to oblige. The relationship between the President and Creel was in many ways symbiotic. Wilson provided Creel with a cause and Creel, in turn, used that cause to the benefit of the President in multiple ways. Without the war, it seems likely that Creel would have continued to bounce between the East Coast and the Midwest, fleeing success in search of an elusive sense of fulfillment.³⁵ Without Creel, Wilson would have been forced to choose between the other progressive journalists (such as Lippmann, Lawrence, and Bullard) who may or may not have proven as apt as Creel at running the CPI or as personally loyal to Wilson. How any of these alternatives might have performed is unknowable but it is known that Wilson was quite pleased with his choice of Creel. Secretary Daniels, Creel’s partner on the CPI, characterized the President’s opinion of Creel as such: “The President had an affection for Creel, who had won his heart, while his brilliancy compelled his admiration. Their common devotion to real liberalism cemented the regard.”³⁶

From the very beginning, Wilson served as Creel’s top advocate in the U.S. government. In May 1917, one month after forming the CPI, Wilson expressed his concern over the fact that

33. Turner, “Woodrow Wilson and Public Opinion,” 507.

34. Woodrow Wilson, *Constitutional Government in the United States* (New York: The Columbia University Press, 1908), 68.

35. Axelrod, *Selling the Great War*, 21.

36. Daniels, *The Wilson Era*, 222.

Creel had yet to make provision for his own salary in the CPI budget. Wilson wrote to Creel: “I cannot be content with that arrangement and write to beg that you will do me the favor to provide you a proper compensation for your services.”³⁷ Creel conceded and granted himself a modest annual salary of \$8,000.³⁸ By comparison, President Wilson’s salary was \$75,000 per year.³⁹

Wilson also provided what might be termed “top cover” for Creel by recommending that all inquiries about the CPI and its work be directed to him. In July 1917, Wilson wrote his personal secretary, Joseph Tumulty: “I would suggest that Creel say that the Committee on Public Information was created by me, that Mr. Creel is my personal representative, and that he feels constrained in the circumstances to refer all inquiries about the committee and the work is doing to me.”⁴⁰

Wilson frequently expressed his pleasure with the CPI’s work to Creel and others. On January 14, 1918, Wilson wrote Creel in response to Creel’s report of CPI activities for 1917: “I have just finished reading the report of the Committee on Public Information which you were kind enough to bring me last week, and I want to say how much it has gratified me and how entirely the work of the Committee meets with my approval.”⁴¹ In a letter to House Appropriations Committee Chairman Swager Sherley, dated 11 May 1918, Wilson states:

May I not say a word of special emphasis with regard to the work which the Committee on Public Information is doing? Mr. Creel in conducting this work is in a very special sense my personal representative. I have kept in close touch with the work that he is doing, and it has at all times been based in large part upon my

37. Wilson to Creel, May 14, 1917, *Wilson Papers* 42: 291.

38. James Mock and Cedric Larson, *Words that Won the War: The Story of the Committee on Public Information, 1917-1919* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1939), 67.

39. “Salaries of the President, Vice-President, and Other U.S. Officials,” *Infoplease* accessed March 15, 2014, <http://www.infoplease.com/ipa/A0875856.html>.

40. Wilson to Joseph Tumulty, July 11, 1917, *Wilson Papers* 43: 146.

41. Wilson to Creel, January 14, 1918, *Wilson Papers* 45: 580.

advice. It has been admirably done and I think it very likely that nobody, not even those most intimately connected with the Government, are aware of the extent, the variety and the usefulness of that work or of the really unusually economical manner in which it has been accomplished, so far as the expenditure of money is concerned. I should feel personally crippled if any obstacle of any kind were put in the way of that work.⁴²

From this quote, it is clear that Wilson approved of Creel and his conduct of the propaganda war. Unfortunately for both Wilson and Creel, his pleas for additional funding from Congress were to no avail, due in part to the hostility Creel was about to generate with a particularly ill-advised comment about the U.S. Congress.

George Creel possessed a seemingly limitless ability to engender controversy. Journalist Mark Sullivan noted that “Creel’s pugnacity, his gift for biting sarcasm, and a talent he had for epithets at once caustic and accurate, brought him into row after row with Congress.”⁴³ One such “row” presented Wilson with the greatest test of his loyalty to Creel. In May 1918, after delivering a speech at the Church of the Ascension in New York, Creel fielded questions for an hour. In *How We Advertised America*, Creel recalled that “when the questions were getting fewer and weaker, and when fatigue had robbed me of mental quickness, some fool asked what I thought about the ‘heart of Congress.’”⁴⁴ He remembered his “quick and thoughtless answer” as being “I had not been slumming for years.”⁴⁵ Creel claimed to have realized his error immediately, stating that “the moment the words left my mouth I could have bitten my tongue

42. Wilson to Swager Sherley, May 11, 1918, *Wilson Papers* 47: 602.

43. Sullivan, *Our Times* vol. 5: 437.

44. George Creel, *How We Advertised America: The First Telling of the Amazing Story of the Committee on Public Information That Carried the Gospel of Americanism to Every Corner of the Globe* (1920; repr., London: Forgotten Books, 2012), 60.

45. Ibid; in *Our Times*, Mark Sullivan remembered Creel’s answer as “Oh, it’s been years since I’ve been slumming” (438).

out.”⁴⁶ He noticed that, on the day following his comment, the morning papers gave full attention to his “slumming” remark and its implications that he “had accused Congressmen of being ‘poor, dirty, degraded, and often vicious.’”⁴⁷

Creel’s enemies were quick to seize on the ill-advised comment. Josephus Daniels noted that a “fire of denunciation of Creel” broke out in Congress, accompanied by cries for Creel’s head.⁴⁸ George LaBarre, a city commissioner from Trenton, New Jersey, wrote Wilson to inquire: “Is George Creel a damn fool or just a plain nut?”⁴⁹ For his part, Wilson publicly rushed to Creel’s defense, telling a group of Senators, “Gentlemen, when I think of the manner in which Mr. Creel has been maligned and persecuted I think it a very human thing for him to have said.”⁵⁰ Privately, however, Wilson expressed doubts. Colonel House noted in his diary that Wilson sought his advice as to what to do with Creel in the wake of the controversy.⁵¹ Wilson feared that retaining Creel would cost the CPI any chance of an appropriation from Congress. House suggested sending Creel abroad and replacing him with Frank Cobb. According to House, Wilson was amenable to the idea, but it never happened. Creel remained at his post and Wilson remained by his side. There is no indication that Wilson ever regretted this decision.

Creel was hardly more popular with the press than he was with Congress. In the early months of the war, while censorship was still being hotly debated, Wilson wrote to journalist

46. Ibid.

47. Ibid., 61.

48. Daniels, *The Wilson Era*, 227.

49. George LaBarre to Wilson, May 14, 1918, *Wilson Papers* 48: 11-12; Edmond Whittier, Secretary/Treasurer of the American Free Trade League, also wrote Wilson to complain of the comment and to let him know that Creel had boasted of Wilson’s offer to personally represent Creel before Congress, if necessary (Edmond Whittier to Wilson, May 15, 1918, *Wilson Papers* 48: 17). Josephus Daniels had wrote of this expression of support by Wilson for Creel (Daniels diary entry, April 12, 1918, *Wilson Papers* 47, 334).

50. Daniels, *The Wilson Era*, 228.

51. Edward M. House Diary, May 17, 1918, *Wilson Papers* 48: 51.

David Lawrence that he believed “continued intercourse with Creel such as the newspaper correspondents will have will more and more convince them of his unusual qualities, not only of sense but of trustworthiness.”⁵² This turned to be less than prescient. Journalist Frank Cobb reported to House in August 1917: “Creel is hopelessly discredited...the newspaper correspondents distrust him. They have no respect for him. They are suspicious of everything he gives out.”⁵³ Throughout the war, Creel struggled to convince the press that his form of “voluntary censorship” was the least of evils.

Given the extent to which the CPI promoted Wilson and his ideas, Wilson’s loyalty to Creel, even in the face of opposition from the press and from Congress, was not entirely selfless. Wilson had long believed that the presidency deserved to occupy the premiere spot in the national government and he used the CPI for this purpose.⁵⁴ Furthermore, one of the overarching purposes of the CPI was to spread Wilson’s words and ideas into every crevice of the country and to the far corners of the earth. The CPI’s exaltation of the person of Wilson and its amplification of his messages led to accusations of partisanship and, more specifically, of Creel’s serving as the President’s press agent. In his study of select CPI messages, historian Elmer Cornwell found that “Creel was the President’s unconscious publicity agent, if not his conscious propagandist.”⁵⁵ While historians of the CPI agree that its messages were in harmony with Wilson’s ideals, Cornwell goes a step further by demonstrating that many of its messages

52. Wilson to David Lawrence, May 25, 1917, *Wilson Papers* 42: 396-397.

53. Frank Cobb to Edward House, August 2, 1917, *Wilson Papers* 43: 366.

54. Turner, “Woodrow Wilson and Public Opinion,” 507.

55. Elmer E. Cornwell, “Wilson, Creel, and the Presidency,” *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 23, no. 2 (Summer 1959): 197. Cornwell examined the thirty-nine campaigns of the Four-Minute Men (an army of CPI-guided public speakers) and found that 26 per cent were specifically about the President, while another 20 per cent featured the president prominently. Only 10 per cent of the topics related by the ubiquitous Four-Minute Men made no mention of the President (193-194).

were explicitly about the President. Whether this is reflective of Wilson's direct involvement, or merely of Creel and his fellow progressives' devotion to the President, is unknown. Regardless, no less a personage than Theodore Roosevelt claimed that the CPI was a partisan venture, stating: "Mr. Creel's activities are exercised nominally on behalf of the country, but in reality primarily on behalf of the administration. Mr. Creel announces and publishes himself as the special representative of the President, and is permitted by the President to so announce and publish himself."⁵⁶

In addition to promoting Wilson's image, Creel served as Wilson's lightning rod. The critics of Woodrow Wilson and the critics of George Creel were often one in the same. Criticism of Creel was easier and safer than direct criticism of Wilson. CPI historian Walton Bean explains this phenomenon as such: "The opposition...is in war-time under one tactical disadvantage of its own; its criticisms of the administration's conduct of the war cannot be too direct, lest they be successfully branded unpatriotic and even treasonable."⁵⁷ Bean then describes Creel as a "whipping boy, an exposed flank of the administration which could be attacked with relative impunity."⁵⁸ In a letter to George Creel, Democratic Representative Edward Pou explained the situation this way: "The Republicans hate President Wilson as the devil hates holy water. They know he is founding a new dynasty which is going to endure...for years to come. If they can attack him without coming out in the open, they are glad to do so."⁵⁹

56. Walton Bean, "George Creel and His Critics: A Study of the Attacks on the Committee on Public Information, 1917-1919" (PhD diss., University of California, 1941), 36.

57. *Ibid.*, 58.

58. *Ibid.*

59. Edward Pou to Creel, September 19, 1918, in Bean, 59.

This strategy was certainly on full display in the Sixty-fifth U.S. Congress, which was somewhat deferential, out of necessity, to Wilson but treated Creel with thinly-veiled contempt. In *Historians on the Homefront* (1970), historian George Blakey quotes Democratic Representative James F. Byrnes as saying that Wilson's critics in Congress used Creel and the CPI as a "goat" in lieu of other avenues for getting their opinions on the record.⁶⁰ Evidence that Wilson recognized this form of indirect attack comes from Josephus Daniels's account of an April 12, 1918 cabinet meeting in which Wilson stated that, "in [if] the House cited George Creel for contempt he would go up to the House as his attorney & say 'It's me you are after. Here I am. Be brave enough to go after me.'"⁶¹

A Productive Partnership: Wilson and Creel as Mutual Advisors

The Wilson-Creel relationship was not merely one of the supporter and the supported. They were also collaborators in the great war of ideas. Josephus Daniels noted that "Wilson took the deepest interest in the work of the Committee, making suggestions from time to time."⁶² One such suggestion for which Wilson deserves full credit was the creation of a government daily. Wilson had long believed that the nation's leaders were less effective than the press in shaping public opinion because they lacked "a national organ of opinion."⁶³ On May 10, 1917, the first edition of the *Official Bulletin* was published. Historian Stewart Halsey Ross refers to the

60. George Blakey, *Historians on the Homefront: American Propagandists for the Great War* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1970), 128.

61. Daniels diary entry, April 12, 1918, *Wilson Papers* 47: 334.

62. Daniels, *The Wilson Era*, 222.

63. Turner, "Woodrow Wilson and Public Opinion," 509.

Official Bulletin as Wilson's own "propaganda sheet, a medium through which he could present information in the form he wished, without the press interposing its editorial interpretations."⁶⁴

Wilson made other suggestions and offered advice to Creel on a variety of issues. In September 1917, Wilson wrote Creel granting his authorization to the formation of a Speaking Division and approving the appointment of Arthur Bestor, one of the nation's foremost orators, as its chief.⁶⁵ In early October 1917, Creel sought input from Wilson concerning a shift in the loyalties of the Yiddish-language newspaper *Volwarts*.⁶⁶ Wilson wrote back two days later to assure Creel that Postmaster General Albert S. Burleson was on the case and that Wilson believed that "the thing is being worked out with some degree of equity and success."⁶⁷ In December 1917, Creel informed Wilson of a controversy regarding the use of the words "Our Allies" in a Food Administration poster.⁶⁸ In May 1918, Wilson wrote Creel waiving rights to his *History of the American People* so that it could be freely distributed by the Italian-American Union.⁶⁹ In late June 1918, Wilson and Creel exchanged letters making arrangements for the President's Fourth of July speech to a gathering of twenty-three different ethnic groups at Mount

64. Stewart Halsey Ross, *Propaganda for War: How the United States Was Conditioned to Fight the Great War of 1914-1918* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, 1996), 230.

65. Wilson to Creel, September 25, 1917, *Wilson Papers* 44: 248.

66. Creel to Wilson, October 25, 1917, *Wilson Papers* 44: 446.

67. Wilson to Creel, October 27, 1917, *Wilson Papers* 44: 452.

68. Creel to Wilson, December 8, 1917, *Wilson Papers* 45: 246. Wilson responded two days later affirming his support for Creel's decision (*Wilson Papers* 45: 257).

69. Wilson to Creel, May 23, 1918, *Wilson Papers* 48: 120.

Vernon.⁷⁰ In September 1918, Wilson proposed to Creel the “immediate publicity task” relating to the efficacy of the government’s food program in regulating the price of food staples.⁷¹

George Creel ensured that the President was involved in the domestic work of the CPI by sustaining the morale of the CPI’s vast network of volunteers. In November 1917, he drafted a letter on behalf of Wilson commending the work of the 15,000 Four-Minute Men.⁷² Wilson signed the letter, which was distributed to each member of the all-volunteer organization. Wilson issued a second letter of commendation a year later, on November 29, 1918, that summarized the impact of the speakers’ collective efforts: “Each member of your organization...may justly feel a glow of proper pride in the part that he has played in holding fast the inner lines.”⁷³

Sometimes, Creel made suggestions that Wilson felt compelled to decline. For example, Wilson rejected Creel’s proposal of August 10, 1917 that Wilson be filmed signing a critical piece of legislation. Wilson protested, “I am the worst possible subject for moving pictures and I hope you will let me off from having my picture taken when signing the Food Bill.”⁷⁴ In August of 1918, he declined Creel’s suggestion that Mrs. Edith Wilson make a public statement in favor of the War Savings Stamp drive, citing the First Lady’s desire to stay out of the limelight.⁷⁵ Perhaps most significantly, Wilson rejected Creel’s suggestion that he meet with African-

70. Creel to Wilson, June 25, 1918, *Wilson Papers* 48: 428; Wilson to Creel, June 26, 1918, *Wilson Papers* 48: 440.

71. Wilson to Creel, September 4, 1918, *Wilson Papers* 49: 432-433.

72. Creel to Wilson, November 4, 1917, *Wilson Papers* 44: 504-505. The Four-Minute Men was a division of the CPI that, by war’s end, consisted of 74,500 volunteer speakers who gave short speeches at public venues (most often movie theaters) in support of the war effort.

73. Creel, *How We Advertised America*, 98.

74. Wilson to Creel, August 10, 1917, *Wilson Papers* 43: 415.

75. Wilson to Creel, August 8, 1918, *Wilson Papers* 49: 216.

American newspaper editors. Creel noted that “the colored population of the country, from a variety of causes, has been torn by rumor and ugly whisperings ever since we entered the war” and that “their leaders have been working with the Administration splendidly in combatting this dangerous unrest.”⁷⁶ Wilson declined Creel’s invitation to speak at the gathering, noting, “I have received several delegations of negroes and am under the impression that they have gone away dissatisfied.”⁷⁷

There were other matters on which Creel failed to convince Wilson. One example of this came from a letter dated February 26, 1918 in which Creel asked Wilson to intervene on behalf of a group of Swedish-American men who had been imprisoned by a Federal judge, Kennesaw Mountain Landis, for failure to register for the draft. Creel vouched for the loyalty of the Swedish-American community and said that the release of the resisters would have a positive effect on their attitude towards the war.⁷⁸ Wilson seemed inclined to go along until he received a report from Attorney General Thomas Gregory in late March that indicated the Swedish draft resisters were in fact socialists with connections to the International Workers of the World.⁷⁹ Upon being informed of Wilson’s agreement with Gregory’s report, Creel replied “it was not justice I asked (for)...but clemency.”⁸⁰ While this example alone does not exonerate the CPI of all charges of promoting intolerance, it does reveal a side of George Creel that seldom comes across in textbooks or in histories of the CPI. It is the story of a man with a heart who, true to his

76. Creel to Wilson, June 17, 1918, *Wilson Papers* 48: 341-342.

77. Wilson to Creel, June 18, 1918, *Wilson Papers* 48: 346.

78. Creel to Wilson, February 16, 1918, *Wilson Papers* 46: 458-459.

79. Wilson to Creel, March 25, 1918, *Wilson Papers* 47: 134-136.

80. Creel to Wilson, March 27, 1918, *Wilson Papers* 47: 169.

muckraking past, attempted to stand up for the “little man” and to give voice to those groups, such as African-Americans or immigrant communities, who may not otherwise be heard.

One group that Creel found in particular need of an advocate was the Non-Partisan League (NPL), which David Kennedy describes as “a militant farmers’ organization in the upper Midwest” that had its roots in the “Populist debacle of the 1890s.”⁸¹ The Minnesota Historical Society adds that the NPL was “decried as socialist from its inception” and, once the war began, that “Leaguers were ruthlessly attacked as disloyal pacifists.”⁸² These attacks were sanctioned by the Minnesota Commission on Public Safety, which was intent on destroying the League.⁸³ At a meeting in October 1917, the Commission appointed an agent for the purpose of investigating the NPL and its founder/leader, Arthur Townley, citing allegations “that said organization is disloyal and guilty of disseminating sedition and disloyal propaganda.”⁸⁴ Creel took up the cause of the beleaguered Non-Partisan League (NPL) by inviting Townley to the White House to meet with Wilson in November 1917.⁸⁵

President Wilson, unconvinced of the NPL’s loyalty, shared the report of the Minnesota Commission of Public Safety with Creel in February 1918.⁸⁶ Creel immediately rushed to the NPL’s defense. Wilson and Creel exchanged several letters on the matter in the early months of 1918 and, at one point, Wilson told Creel that “I think it will be your judgment, as it is mine, that

81. Kennedy, *Over Here*, 23, 121.

82. Minnesota Historical Society, “Nonpartisan League,” accessed March 19, 2014, http://www.mnhs.org/library/tips/history_topics/102nonpartisan.html.

83. *Ibid.*

84. Minnesota Commission of Public Safety. *Report of Minnesota Commission of Public Safety* (Saint Paul: Louis F. Dow, 1919), 163 at *Archive.org*, accessed March 19, 2014, <https://archive.org/details/reportofminnesot00minnrch>.

85. White House Staff to Wilson, November 30, 1917, *Wilson Papers* 45: 167.

86. Wilson to Creel, February 18, 1918, *Wilson Papers* 46: 369; Wilson forwarded Creel a letter from journalist Louis Seibold reporting on the questionable activities of the NPL in Minnesota.

we had better pull away from them [the NPL].”⁸⁷ Creel was undeterred. He assured Wilson that the League “has been loyal absolutely, and is loyal now, and the Safety Commission is willing to drive it into disloyalty in order to further its own mean political end.”⁸⁸ To strengthen his case, Creel had a CPI speaker by the name of Dixon Williams, who had spoken on behalf of the NPL in Minnesota, write to Wilson vouching for the League’s loyalty.⁸⁹ Wilson was finally convinced. He wrote to his personal secretary Joseph Tumulty on April 5, 1918 “this is politics, pure and simple, or rather impure and simple.”⁹⁰ In September 1918, Creel twice wrote Wilson to endorse Charles Lindbergh, Sr.’s appointment to the War Industries Board, which had been blocked because of his affiliation with the NPL.⁹¹ It is difficult to explain Creel’s tenacity on this issue beyond his own belief that the NPL was being unfairly persecuted for political reasons by an overly “patriotic” organization.⁹² Once again, Creel stood up for the little man.⁹³

87. Wilson to Creel, April 1, 1918, *Wilson Papers* 47: 215-216.

88. Creel to Wilson, April 2, 1918, *Wilson Papers* 47: 226.

89. Dixon Williams to Wilson, April 3, 1918, *Wilson Papers* 47: 235-237.

90. Wilson to Tumulty, April 5, 1918, *Wilson Papers* 47: 260.

91. Creel to Wilson, September 12, 1918, *Wilson Papers* 49: 536; Creel to Wilson, September 18, 1918, 51: 64-65.

92. Minnesota History Center, “Commission of Public Safety,” accessed March 19, 2014, <http://libguides.mnhs.org/publicsafety>. The overview of the Commission of Public Safety found on this site helps to explain the wartime mentality that drove the Commission: “Who were the enemies among us? Not only the Germans, but all immigrants, those who spoke a foreign language, those who belonged to unions and supported strikes and those who belonged to suspect organizations such as the Nonpartisan League or the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). ‘Patriotism’ became a powerful political weapon, legitimized by the creation by the Minnesota Legislature of the Commission of Public Safety, whose excessive jurisdictional latitude allowed for unbounded control and trampling of civil rights. . . Foreign language instruction was discontinued in many schools. Foreign language speakers were disparaged as unpatriotic. It was a dark chapter in the history of Minnesota, a state usually thought of as progressive.”

93. Creel also used his position to advance the cause of women’s suffrage. On September 25, 1918, Creel wrote to Wilson to encourage him to make a personal plea to the U.S. Senate in favor of the women’s suffrage amendment. In this instance, Creel appealed to Wilson’s pragmatism on this particular matter saying, “I feel deeply that the passage of this amendment is a war necessity” (Creel to Wilson, September 25, 1918, *Wilson Papers* 51: 117).

Such stories are noteworthy because so many historians have labeled the CPI as a promoter of intolerance and a violator of civil liberties. Despite such characterizations, the correspondence of Wilson and Creel reveal their sensitivity to these issues. The first matter before the CPI, in fact the very reason for its creation, was how to handle what Creel later referred to as the “censorship bugbear.”⁹⁴ Creel was adamant from the start, despite the objections of Secretary of State Lansing and other high-ranking government officials, that the U.S. avoid strict censorship. In May 1917, Creel had solicited input from Wilson on his proposal for voluntary censorship of the press, entitled the “Preliminary Statement to the Press of the United States.” After suggesting a few changes, Wilson remarked that it otherwise “seems to be excellent.”⁹⁵ Wilson then defended the proposal to journalist David Lawrence saying, “I fear that it would not be wise for me to pursue the course you suggest... because...it might look as if I were trying to correct mistakes which Creel is thought to have made when I do not in my heart believe that he has made any.”⁹⁶

While some in the press regarded Creel and the CPI with contempt, not all felt this way. Thomas Logan, correspondent for the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, wrote Wilson on April 13, 1918—the one year anniversary of the CPI’s formation—to express gratitude for Creel’s work saying, “I have had the occasion to observe very closely the splendid work done by Creel” and calling his work “one of the most helpful influences in the war.” Logan also attempted to explain the criticisms of Creel coming from the press: “the attacks that are made on him now are so unjust...that I felt constrained to give expression of my own knowledge that these criticisms are unjust and unfounded and that they do not represent the view of the country or of the men who

94. Creel, *How We Advertised America*, 16.

95. Wilson to Creel, May 17, 1917, *Wilson Papers* 42: 305.

96. Wilson to Lawrence, May 25, 1917, *Wilson Papers* 42: 395-396.

have the opportunity and take the time to study conditions in Washington.”⁹⁷ Logan closed by assuring Wilson that those criticizing Creel were not the majority.

Wilson and Creel also discussed the banning of the German language in American schools and elsewhere. On February 26, 1918, Creel sent Wilson a letter soliciting his opinion on the matter.⁹⁸ Wilson responded two days later, telling Creel that “the opposition to teaching German in our schools is childish.”⁹⁹ When the topic came up again in the summer of 1918, Creel’s opinion was somewhat more opaque. In a letter to Wilson dated August 6, 1918, Creel stated that he opposed the practice of banning all foreign languages, noting that it hampered CPI operations among immigrant communities, but he left the door open for the banning of German. However, Creel indicated that he considered this a matter best decided by Congress.¹⁰⁰

Wilson took particular interest in the CPI’s foreign activities, most notably in Russia. In fact, a full twenty per cent of the wartime correspondence between Wilson and Creel addressed some aspect of the Russian situation. In spring 1917, in the wake of the Russian Revolution, Wilson assembled a mission, under the leadership of former Secretary of State (and retired U.S. Senator) Elihu Root, to investigate the situation in Russia and to establish relations with Russia’s Provisional Government.¹⁰¹ Creel suggested to Wilson that Arthur Bullard, a CPI deputy and a progressive writer of known socialist leanings, accompany the Root Mission as the CPI’s representative. Wilson endorsed Creel’s appointment of Bullard in a letter to Secretary of State

97. Thomas Logan to Wilson, April 13, 1917, *Wilson Papers* 47: 342.

98. Creel to Wilson, February 26, 1918, *Wilson Papers* 46: 458-459.

99. Wilson to Creel, February 28, 1918, *Wilson Papers* 46: 491.

100. Creel to Wilson, August 6, 1918, *Wilson Papers* 49: 200-201.

101. This mission would take the name of its leader and be known as the “Root Mission” (aka: “Root Commission”).

Lansing.¹⁰² However, Lansing rejected Bullard's appointment on the grounds that Root's mission already contained a journalist.¹⁰³ The Root Mission sailed for Russia in May 1917 without a CPI representative.

The Root Mission returned home in July 1917. It reported on the need for a "wide-ranging publicity campaign" that could bolster the flagging morale of Russia's soldiers, as well as its war-weary civilian population.¹⁰⁴ Wilson viewed this as a task for the CPI and forwarded the Root Mission's report to Creel, to which Creel responded with a list of recommendations.¹⁰⁵ The following month, Wilson wrote Creel to suggest a meeting with Basil Miles, who had been the secretary of the Root Mission, saying that Miles "would be a capital man to use in making our plans for the enlightenment of Russia."¹⁰⁶ In October 1917, Wilson and Creel discussed the work of William Thompson, the head of the American Red Cross Mission to Russia, who had made a donation in the amount of one million dollars that was earmarked specifically for use in Russia. Bothered by the decentralized and ad hoc nature of the publicity work in Russia, by Thompson's group and by others, Wilson decided to place Creel in charge of all publicity work in Russia.¹⁰⁷ Creel, in turn, decided that one of his top deputies, Edgar Sisson, would be the best man for the job.

102. Wilson to Lansing, May 14, 1917, *Wilson Papers* 42: 289.

103. Gregg Wolper, "The Origins of Public Diplomacy: Woodrow Wilson, George Creel, and the Committee on Public Information" (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 1991), 170-171. Wolper notes that Bullard's socialist leanings may also have impacted Lansing's decision. Bullard ultimately sailed for Russia in November 1917 to assist the CPI's Edgar Sisson and, upon Sisson's return home, Bullard assumed the role of the CPI's Russian chief—a post which he would hold for the duration of the war.

104. *Ibid.*, 171-172.

105. Creel to Wilson, August 20, 1917, *Wilson Papers* 43: 526-527.

106. Wilson to Creel, September 4, 1917, *Wilson Papers* 44: 142.

107. Mock and Larson, *Words that Won the War*, 303.

Acting on the recommendation of Creel, Wilson approved Sisson, formerly the editor of *Collier's* and *The Cosmopolitan*, as CPI agent to Russia in October 1917. In fact, Sisson was the first CPI “agent” sent overseas, thus marking the start of the CPI’s experiment in what would later be termed “public diplomacy.”¹⁰⁸ Creel assured Wilson that Sisson was the right man for the job saying: “He is a twenty thousand dollar-a-year executive; he gave up everything to serve his country. He is an organizing genius, a man of the highest ideals, and has more real moral courage than almost anyone I know. It means double work for me to let him go, but he is the only one in whom I have absolute trust.”¹⁰⁹ Creel also drafted a letter to Sisson for Wilson’s signature. It included the following admonition: “Guard particularly against any effect of officious intrusion or meddling, and try to express the disinterested friendship that is our sole impulse.”¹¹⁰ This advice would prove ironic in the wake of the controversy that was to come.

Before Sisson reached Russia, the Bolsheviks overthrew the Provisional Government of Alexander Kerensky.¹¹¹ Within a month of setting foot in Russia, Sisson reported to Creel “Russia is out of the war.”¹¹² In May 1918, Sisson sent Wilson what were to become known as the “Sisson Documents.” These documents had been passed to Sisson while he was on station in Russia and purported that “the present Bolshevik government is not a Russian government at all but a German government acting solely in the interests of Germany and betraying the Russian people.”¹¹³ The documents were released by the CPI to the press in September 1918 despite

108. Gregg Wolper, “Wilsonian Public Diplomacy: The Committee on Public Information in Spain,” *Diplomatic History* 17, no. 1 (Winter 1993): 18.

109. Creel to Wilson, October 24, 1917, *Wilson Papers* 44: 434-435.

110. Wilson to Edgar Sisson, October 24, 1917, *Wilson Papers* 44: 435.

111. Mock and Larson, *Words that Won the War*, 303.

112. Sisson to Creel, December 5, 1917, *Wilson Papers* 45:216.

113. Mock and Larson, *Words that Won the War*, 314.

questions as to their authenticity. In October 1918, the CPI published a thirty-page pamphlet entitled “The German-Bolshevik Conspiracy” that was based on the Sisson Documents. Colonel House wrote in his diary that both he and Wilson doubted authenticity of the Sisson Documents and recognized that publication amounted to “a virtual declaration of war upon the Bolsheviki [sic] Government.”¹¹⁴ Nevertheless, House lamented that Creel had persuaded Wilson to publish these documents without State Department approval.¹¹⁵ Postwar studies would all but confirm that the Sisson Documents were forgeries, thus casting a cloud of doubt over CPI’s credibility.¹¹⁶

Aside from Russia, Wilson and Creel corresponded about a number of other foreign issues, often exchanging advice and sharing ideas. Creel and Wilson discussed the CPI’s work in Scandinavia, Lithuania, Mexico, Italy and Great Britain. Eager to have his words transmitted to as broad an audience as possible, Wilson readily agreed to Creel’s suggestion that Wilson provide him with advance copies of presidential addresses so that they could be translated and disseminated in a timelier manner.¹¹⁷ Creel shared news from his far-flung network of

114. House diary entry, September 24, 1918, *Wilson Papers* 51: 104.

115. This view was supported by Sir William Wiseman who, in a letter to Sir Eric Drummond, wrote: “Creel saw the president without the knowledge of the State Department, and persuaded him that the Sisson papers were authentic, and that it was advisable to publish them” (Wiseman to Drummond, October 5, 1918, *Wilson Papers* 51: 252).

116. Mark Sullivan credits Edgar Sisson with another, less notorious, contribution to the war effort that would have a lasting impact. This was the idea of condensing Wilson’s peace proposals into brief paragraphs that would be easily digested by Russian and German audiences. This idea was the genesis of Wilson’s “Fourteen Points.” The Fourteen Points, along with the lesser-known “Four Points,” were widely disseminated by the CPI’s foreign offices (*Our Times* vol. 5, 445-446). Creel corroborates this story in his 1947 autobiography *Rebel at Large* by saying, “President Wilson himself was pressed into service, for his famous Fourteen Points were laid down as the result of this cable from Edgar Sisson, the CPI representative in Russia: ‘If President will restate anti-imperialistic war aims and democratic peace requisites of America, thousand words or less, short almost placard paragraphs, I can get it fed into Germany in great quantities in German translation, and can use Russian version potently in army and everywhere’” (George Creel, *Rebel at Large: Recollections of Fifty Crowded Years* [New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1947], 168).

117. Creel to Wilson, February 21, 1918, *Wilson Papers* 46: 410-411; Wilson to Creel, February 22, 1918, *Wilson Papers* 46: 413. Wilson was not always as compliant, as seen in his rejection of Creel’s suggestion that he make an address on the occasion of “Remembrance Day” in Great Britain on the grounds that he had not done so in previous years (Creel to Wilson, August 2, 1918, *Wilson Papers* 49: 168-173; Wilson to Creel, August 3, 1918, *Wilson Papers* 49: 172-173).

representatives with Wilson. In October 1918, Creel forwarded Wilson news from the head of the CPI's new bureau in Rome, Italy regarding the Vatican's official appraisal of the situation and of the willingness of the Austrians to conclude a separate peace based on Wilson's Fourteen Points.¹¹⁸ Such news gave evidence that the CPI's commitment to promoting Wilson's peace program was having the desired effect.

As the war drew to a close, George Creel accompanied the delegation to the Paris Peace Conference, not as an official delegate but as a member of Wilson's personal party. Creel was grateful to Wilson for including him but chafed at his lack of a meaningful role to play.¹¹⁹ In fact, his presence generated suspicion, as his name had come to be associated with propaganda and censorship. In order to avoid the distraction, Wilson dispatched Creel on a tour of Europe to inspect the CPI's various foreign offices.

On March 1, 1919, George Creel wrote Woodrow Wilson to announce his resignation from his position as CPI Chairman and noting that "all domestic work of the Committee on Public Information has been closed up. All the foreign work has been discontinued save the news distribution machinery with offices in New York, Paris, and London."¹²⁰ Creel added, "I have dismissed myself from the payroll today."¹²¹ Creel closed his letter, "Let me thank you for

118. Creel to Wilson, October 9, 1918, *Wilson Papers* 51: 282-283.

119. Cary T. Grayson to Joseph Tumulty, December 12, 1918, *Wilson Papers* 53: 376. Grayson tells Tumulty, "Creel, by the way, is very much disturbed as to what his duties with the President are to be when he arrives." Other members of the American delegation expressed similar sentiments. In his autobiography (*Rebel at Large*), Creel explains how Wilson "saved my face" by taking him to Paris. To have left him behind (as Colonel House had suggested) would have made it look as if Creel no longer held the President's confidence (205).

120. Creel to Wilson, March 1, 1919, *Wilson Papers* 55: 363-364.

121. *Ibid.*

your support that has always been generous and an association that has been inspiring. Please count always upon my devotion.”¹²²

In his reply, dated March 20, 1919, Wilson expressed his deep appreciation for Creel’s work: “The work has been well done, admirably well done, and your inspiration and guidance have been the chief motive power in it all...I want you to know how truly grateful I am.”¹²³

Wilson closed his letter by saying, “It is with real emotion, therefore, that I sign myself, Your sincere friend, Woodrow Wilson.”¹²⁴ It was the only time in the forty-nine letters from Wilson to Creel consulted for this study that Wilson had used this particular closing sentiment.

In the year that followed, Creel all but disappeared from Wilson’s correspondence. On June 5, 1920, he wrote his former boss to report, with some bitterness, on the liquidation of the CPI by order of the Republican-controlled Congress.¹²⁵ In August of that year, Creel signed on as Wilson’s literary agent.¹²⁶ By that point in time, Creel was busy writing about his wartime experiences, as well as those of Wilson. He would publish two of his best-known works in that year: *How We Advertised America* and *The War, the World and Wilson*. In the latter work, Creel touted “the projectile force of the President’s idealism” as a major reason for the Allied victory in the Great War.¹²⁷ Creel continued to defend Wilson long after the latter’s passing, authoring an article for *The Saturday Evening Post* in 1931 that recounted “Woodrow Wilson’s Last Years.” In it, he reaffirmed his late hero’s belief in public opinion and the power of fact. Creel

122. Ibid.

123. Wilson to Creel, March 20, 1919, *Wilson Papers* 56: 124-125.

124. Ibid.

125. Creel to Wilson, June 5, 1920, *Wilson Papers* 65: 374-375.

126. Creel to Edith Bolling Galt Wilson, August 13, 1920, *Wilson Papers* 66: 33-34.

127. George Creel, *The War, the World and Wilson* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1920), 124.

writes, “It was all very simple as he saw it, and he kindled to evangelical fervor as he talked of the people—the people he loved and in whom he believed with all the passion of his soul. Give them the facts and victory was assured.”¹²⁸ This was a fitting way for Creel to eulogize Wilson since it was this very confidence in the power of fact to steer public opinion, which both Wilson and Creel shared, that guided the activities of the Committee on Public Information.

Conclusion

Woodrow Wilson, not George Creel, led the nation to war in 1917 to make the world safe for democracy. The correspondence between the two men indicates that Wilson was neither a watchmaker who, after creating the CPI and appointing Creel as its chairman, walked away; nor was Wilson merely an interested observer. He was an active participant. It was his fight for the “verdict of mankind” even more than it was Creel’s. The question is not so much whether or not this fight was won but at what cost. In *The Tyranny of Change*, John Whiteclay Chambers concluded that it was the very ambitiousness of this cause that ensured its ultimate defeat. Chambers asserts, “Wilson justified American entry into the war in terms of idealism and mission, rather than mundane self-interest. He thereby established war objectives that were so unrealistic that virtually no future peace conference could attain them.”¹²⁹ Nevertheless, few Americans believed in Wilson’s lofty ideals more than George Creel.

Given the failure of Wilson’s most soaring war aims, it seems only fitting that the legacy of the CPI has failed to be appreciated for its high-minded ideals. The slogans “the war to end all wars” and “a war to make the world safe for democracy” have become sadly ironic punch lines in the history of American involvement in World War I—but this was unknown to anyone

128. George Creel, “Woodrow Wilson’s Last Years,” *The Saturday Evening Post* (January 10, 1931): 11.

129. Chambers, *The Tyranny of Change*, 229.

in 1919. For the moment, Wilson and Creel shared credit for America's great victory. Their war of ideas had been won. They could not have known at the time that it would be lost in the retelling.

CHAPTER FOUR

Learning All Over Again: A Psychological Operations Perspective on the Committee on Public Information

*I rode with Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar, Genghis Khan and Sun Tsu.
I saw action in both World Wars and in Korea and Vietnam.
I helped bring a speedy victory in Just Cause and Desert Storm.
I brought the hope of peace to Haiti, Somalia, Bosnia, Kosovo and Afghanistan
I was and I am...PSYOP.*

From the "PSYOP Creed"

The "PSYOP Creed" traces the legacy of Psychological Operations from the Trojan War to the current conflict in Afghanistan. Along the way, it invokes Hannibal's elephants, Gideon's trumpets, Patrick Henry's words of defiance, and the Texans' cry of revenge.¹ The omission of any mention of the Committee on Public Information (CPI) is fitting, as it reflects a greater neglect on the part of the PSYOP community to explore the lessons of what is widely considered America's first propaganda ministry. The price of overlooking such an expansive enterprise in influence is high. PSYOP methodology can be used to better understand the CPI and, in turn, the CPI holds lessons for modern practitioners of PSYOP.² The difficulties that historians face in assessing the effectiveness of the CPI are not unlike the difficulties facing today's PSYOP community. The improvised process that emerged in one section of the CPI, the Division of Four-Minute Men, bears a remarkable similarity to the seven-step process used in modern

1. Ed Rouse, "PSYOP Creed," *Psywarrior*, accessed January 24, 2014, <http://www.psywarrior.com/creed.html>.

2. First conducted under the label of propaganda (or "public information") during World War I, influence operations were rechristened "Psychological Warfare" (Psywar) during World War Two. During the Vietnam War, Psywar became "Psychological Operations" (PSYOP). This label was retained until 2010, when the term "Military Information Supports Operations" (MISO) was adopted for active-duty Army PSYOP (under the jurisdiction of the United States Special Operations Command). The Army Reserve PSYOP components, under the U.S. Army Civil Affairs and Psychological Operations Command (USACAPOC), have retained the term "PSYOP." The U.S. Air Force prefers the label of "Influence Operations." In this paper, Psywar, PSYOP, MISO, and Influence Ops all refer to the selective use of information to influence the attitudes, opinions, and behaviors of *foreign* Target Audiences. The term "PSYOP" will be used throughout for purposes of consistency.

PSYOP. Finally, the CPI's efforts to persuade foreign target audiences invites comparisons to the modern PSYOP mission of Defense Support to Public Diplomacy. In each of these areas, examining the CPI through the lens of PSYOP yields a better understanding of the effectiveness and limitations of the CPI while providing a useful point of comparison for modern PSYOP.

A survey of the historiography of PSYOP might lead one to conclude that the CPI is barely worth mentioning, let alone studying. In his history of PSYOP, Major Ed Rouse (US Army, Retired) mentions Alexander the Great, Sun-Tzu, and Genghis Khan before skipping ahead to World War II.³ In "A History of Modern-Day Psychological Warfare and Operations," Joshua Beninga leaps from Sun-Tzu directly to World War II.⁴ In a lengthy article entitled "Allied PSYOP of World War I," Sergeant Major Herb Friedman (US Army, Retired) devotes a few sparse paragraphs to George Creel and the CPI. In fact, of the dozens of articles on the history of PSYOP found on the website psywar.com, only three deal with World War I. Of these three, all are by Friedman and only the one cited even mentions the CPI. The CPI is similarly neglected in Colonel Frank Goldstein (USAF) and Colonel Benjamin Findlay's (USAFR) edited volume *Psychological Operations: Principles and Case Studies*. Only one of the twenty-four essays in that volume even mentions the CPI, and that is a passing reference in an endnote.⁵ A detailed discussion of the CPI is similarly missing from Major Brett Bemis's 2011 thesis

3. Herb Friedman, "Allied PSYOP of World War I," *Psywarrior*, accessed January 9, 2014, <http://www.psywarrior.com/psyhist.html>.

4. Josh Beninga, "A History of Modern-Day Psychological Warfare and Operations," *Psywarrior*, accessed January 9, 2014, <http://www.psywarrior.com/ModernDayPSYOPBeniga.html>.

5. Frank Goldstein and Benjamin Findlay, editors, *Psychological Operations: Principles and Case Studies* (Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama: Air University Press, 1996), 145. The note reads, "Relatively little has been written in recent years about the so-called Creel Committee, the Committee on Public Information, created by United States President Woodrow Wilson after the United States entered World War I." Thus, the only acknowledgement of the CPI is to say that it is no longer being studied to any significant degree. While true, this is hardly instructive.

“Cooking Up Psychological Operations: The Ingredients of Successful PSYOP.”⁶ Military and diplomatic historians have demonstrated a preference for case studies of PSYOP (e.g. “Psychological Warfare in Vietnam”).⁷ While the CPI, as a whole and in its component parts, could provide a variety of interesting and informative case studies for PSYOP, the existing PSYOP literature does little to arouse the curiosity of would-be researchers.

Perhaps the most basic reason for this omission is that the CPI was not a military undertaking. It was conducted by civilians and, despite its unprecedented and expansive Foreign Section, it is best remembered for its efforts on the domestic front. Present-day PSYOP is strictly forbidden from targeting domestic audiences. This prohibition was codified into law by the United States Information and Education Exchange Act of 1948 (better known as the Smith-Mundt Act) and subsequent policy directives.⁸ The result is that the CPI seems, to many in the PSYOP community, to be an incongruent, apples-to-oranges comparison, as if there is a substantial difference between the sort of persuasion attempted on domestic audiences by the CPI and the sort attempted on foreign audiences by military PSYOP.

6. Brett Bemis, “Cooking Up Psychological Operations: The Ingredients of Successful PSYOP,” (master’s thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, 2011), Kindle Loc. 285-290; Bemis notes that the CPI (along with the Army’s “Propaganda Section”) were disbanded after the war and that “almost all of the experiences and lessons learned during the war were lost over the next twenty years.”

7. See James O. Whittaker’s “Psychological Warfare in Vietnam” *Political Psychology* 18, no. 1 (March 1997): 165-179; S.R. Joey Long’s “Winning Hearts and Minds: U.S. Psychological Warfare Operations in Singapore, 1955-1961” *Diplomatic History* 32, no. 5 (November 2008): 899-930; Brett Bemis’s thesis also uses several specific case studies from the Korean War.

8. The Smith-Mundt Act was effectively repealed by an amendment to the National Defense Authorization Act of 2013 (Emily Metzgar “Smith-Mundt Reform: In with a whimper?” *Columbia Journalism Review*, *cjr*, January 21, 2013, accessed January 26, 2014, http://www.cjr.org/behind_the_news/smith-mundt_modernization_pass.php?page=all). The Smith-Mundt Modernization Act of 2012 (aka H.R. 5736 or “Smith-Thornberry”) authorized “the domestic dissemination of information and material about the United States intended primarily for foreign audiences, and for other purposes” (Smith-Mundt Modernization Act of 2012, H. Res. 5736, 112th Cong., 1st sess. *Library of Congress THOMAS*, accessed January 26, 2014 <http://thomas.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/z?c112:H.R.5736>).

Another explanation for the neglect of the CPI is that it is tarred with the brush of propaganda, which is a taboo term even in PSYOP circles. The United States Department of Defense (DoD) currently reserves the term “propaganda” exclusively for enemy communications efforts. To the DoD, propaganda is “any form of adversary communication, especially of a biased or misleading nature, designed to influence the opinions, emotions, attitudes, or behavior of any group in order to benefit the sponsor either directly or indirectly.”⁹ For nearly a century, historians have made the CPI synonymous with propaganda. This leads to the fear that by studying the CPI, PSYOP personnel are somehow indicating a desire to replicate it.¹⁰

At best, the PSYOP community studies the surviving products of the CPI in search of lessons in content analysis (e.g. persuasive appeals, symbolism, etc.). Such analysis is based almost exclusively on the many surviving visual products of the CPI’s Department of Pictorial Publicity. This would include posters with titles such as “Halt the Hun,” “The Greatest Mother in the World,” and “I Want You!” These posters have become, to many observers, the primary substance of the CPI. This sort of content analysis, while not without value, neglects the lessons the CPI holds for the PSYOP community in the areas of measuring effectiveness, the origins of a process for conducting influence operations, and the earliest instances of Defense Support to Public Diplomacy. Such lessons are the focus of this chapter.

9. Headquarters, Department of the Army, *Field Manual 3-53: Military Information Support Operations* (January 2013), Glossary-10.

10. The United States Department of Defense does not conduct any form of propaganda or influence operations aimed at U.S. citizens. It does, however, conduct such operations directed at foreign audiences at the discretion of the President of the United States or his designee. Due in part to the negative connotation of the word “propaganda” that emerged from World War I, the U.S. Government defines propaganda as an exclusively foreign enterprise intended to mislead.

Obstacles to Measuring the Effectiveness of the CPI

The first aspect of the CPI to be taken into consideration from a PSYOP perspective is that of measurement. Many historians assume that the CPI was effective, often citing Creel's professed goal of raising the level of public opinion to a "white hot mass" as if this statement itself somehow represented proof of the CPI's effectiveness.¹¹ In fact, the dominant narrative of the CPI presumes its effectiveness. This narrative holds that the CPI did its job too well, as evidenced by the widespread intolerance of all things foreign, the suppression of any form of dissent, and the pervasiveness of postwar disillusionment. These assumptions of effectiveness are not, however, based on any sound empirical evidence.

In order to assign causation for increased wartime intolerance to the CPI, its critics utilize a form of *cum hoc, ergo prompter hoc* fallacy.¹² While it is true that certain CPI propaganda products emphasized the negative qualities of the German enemy and attempted to increase awareness of German espionage and propaganda, this alone cannot be taken as proof of causation—let alone sole causation—for anti-immigrant sentiment or violence simply because this propaganda was being disseminated at the same time that such sentiments were becoming more prevalent. In order to make such a determination, one must know who was exposed to, comprehended, internalized, and acted specifically on CPI propaganda. Similarly, those blaming the CPI for postwar disillusionment, xenophobia, and incidents such as the "Red Scare" are demonstrating a form of *post hoc, ergo prompter hoc* fallacy by assigning causation to the CPI

11. George Creel, *How We Advertised America: The First Telling of the Amazing Story of the Committee on Public Information That Carried the Gospel of Americanism to Every Corner of the Globe* (1920; repr., London: Forgotten Books, 2012), 5.

12. "Cum Hoc, Ergo Prompter Hoc," *fallacyfiles*, accessed March 28, 2014, <http://www.fallacyfiles.org/cumhocfa.html>. "Cum Hoc is the fallacy committed when one jumps to a conclusion about causation based on a correlation between two events, or types of event, which occur simultaneously."

for developments that have many causes. The CPI can only be counted among these causes if it can be established that postwar sentiment and actions were directly and decisively influenced by CPI propaganda.¹³

In addition to fallacious assumptions of causation, scholars appear to be overwhelmed by the sheer size and scope of the CPI. They often quote George Creel's estimate that 150,000 Americans were involved in the work of the CPI.¹⁴ They reference the 75,000 Four-Minute Men with their 755,000 speeches, the CPI's 6,000 news releases, and its 75 million pamphlets. The assumption is that, given the volume of propaganda churned out by the CPI, it must have worked. From a PSYOP perspective, this is not a safe assumption.

There is much less agreement on the need for the CPI in the first place. Some historians hold that, by the time of the official declaration of war on April 6, 1917, public opinion had largely shifted in favor of U.S. intervention in the war. Others maintain that resistance remained high well after America entered the war. The inability to quantify the actual level of support for the war, at any given point from April 1917 through November 1918, dooms any effort to assess the overall effectiveness of the CPI. The inability to assess the CPI's effectiveness, in turn, undermines feasibility of the dominant narrative.

13. "Post Hoc," *fallacyfiles*, accessed March 28, 2014, <http://www.fallacyfiles.org/posthocf.html>. "The Post Hoc Fallacy is committed whenever one reasons to a causal conclusion based solely on the supposed cause preceding its 'effect.' Of course, it is a necessary condition of causation that the cause precede[s] the effect, but it is not a sufficient condition. Thus, post hoc evidence may suggest the hypothesis of a causal relationship, which then requires further testing, but it is never sufficient evidence on its own."

14. If there is any truth to this claim, it is only in the broadest sense. The vast majority of the work of the CPI was performed by volunteers. For example, all 74,500 Four-Minute Men were volunteers and yet they are almost certainly counted in Creel's total. As of January 27, 1918, Creel reported to Wilson that the CPI had 250 paid employees, as compared to 5,000 volunteer artists and writers and 289 volunteer translators and 20,000 volunteer speakers (Wayne Alfred Nicholas, "Crossroads Oratory: A Study of the Four Minute Men of World War I" [PhD diss., Columbia University, 1953], 50).

An Absence of Data

The problem in determining the actual level of public support for the war results from an absence of the sort of data required to make such assessments. While some Americans were awakening to the importance of public opinion in the second decade of the twentieth century, the field of public opinion research would not take shape for another twenty years.¹⁵ The absence of polling data does more than simply prevent an accurate determination of support for the war. It also makes it virtually impossible to assess the effectiveness of the CPI. If the primary goal of the CPI was to build support for the war, then the level of support for the war at its outset is one of the most important pieces of information. If it existed, it would provide the baseline against which the effectiveness of the CPI could be judged. It does not.

In PSYOP, baseline data is relative to the target audience's desired behavior. For example, if the goal of an operation is to increase the number of tips reported to the Host Nation authorities, the baseline is the number of tips per unit of time prior to the start of the operation. Behavioral change cannot be tracked in the absence of such data. Thus, the degree to which the CPI moved public opinion towards support for the war cannot be assessed if it is not known how many Americans supported the war before the CPI began its operation.

The absence of data by which effectiveness can be determined has led historians to rely on what the PSYOP community refers to as "measures of performance" (MOP). It is important to distinguish between MOP and "measures of effectiveness" (MOE) because the two are often confused and conflated. The former (MOP) is defined in Department of Defense doctrine as "a

15. George Gallup formed the American Institute of Public Opinion, forerunner of the Gallup Organization, in 1935 ("George Gallup," *gallup.com*, accessed January 27, 2014, <http://www.gallup.com/corporate/21364/george-gallup-19011984.aspx>); *Public Opinion Quarterly* began publication two years later in 1937.

criterion used to assess friendly actions that [are] tied to measuring task accomplishment.”¹⁶ The latter (MOE) is defined as “a criterion used to assess changes in system behavior, capability, or operational environment that is tied to measuring the attainment of an end-state, achievement of an objective, or creation of an effect.”¹⁷ The difference is critical. Measures of effectiveness directly correlate to mission accomplishment (which, in PSYOP parlance, means SPO accomplishment), whereas MOP indicate the existence of conditions that enhance the *likelihood* of effectiveness. Such indicators include: evidence that the message is reaching the desired audience (and to what degree), evidence of how the audience is reacting to the message, or evidence of the theoretical reach or saturation of a message (based on production numbers). There is an abundance of MOP to indicate that the American population was exposed to CPI messages (75 million pamphlets, 750,000 four-minute speeches, 6,000 news releases, etc.) but this data alone does not indicate effectiveness, merely exposure to the message. Historians tend to mistakenly assume that exposure to a message (which may be termed “opportunities to view”) correlates to message reception, internalization and ultimately to behavioral change.

The absence of reliable effectiveness data also leads to an overreliance on anecdotal evidence of effectiveness. The CPI’s effectiveness has often been judged, by supporters and detractors alike, based on such evidence. Perhaps the most noteworthy example of this was the public lynching of German-American Robert Praeger in St. Louis in April 1918.¹⁸ Such acts of

16. U.S. Department of Defense Joint Publication 1-02, *Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms* (November 8, 2010), 230.

17. *Ibid.*

18. David Kennedy, *Over Here: The First World War and American Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 68. In *Rebel at Large*, Creel blames “chauvinistic” state councils of defense and non-governmental organizations such as the National Security League and the American Defense Society for the “hymns of hate” that led to the Praeger incident. He credits his own outrage over that incident, which drew a “public denunciation” from President Wilson, for slowing the momentum of what he calls the “superpatriots” (George Creel, *Rebel at Large: Recollections on Fifty Crowded Years* [New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1947], 197-199).

vigilantism have been used to blame the CPI for promoting a climate of violent xenophobia. Some historians also point to riots that broke out at the playing of films such as *To Hell with the Kaiser* and *The Kaiser: The Beast of Berlin* (films that did not originate from the CPI) as evidence of the CPI's effectiveness in promoting vigilantism and intolerance.¹⁹ Such evidence seldom provides an accurate gauge of effectiveness, given that it is not representative in nature. In fact, much of what is presented as anecdotal evidence of effectiveness stands out because it is exceptional and not representative of broader trends.²⁰

Lack of Measurable Objectives

A second problem that complicates any attempt to measure the effectiveness of the CPI was that its vague mandate, coupled with its ad hoc nature, prevented the establishment of clear and measurable objectives. Executive Order 2594, the founding document of the CPI, included no statement of the committee's purpose.²¹ The improvised nature of the CPI prevented the development of concrete objectives beyond the overarching goals of increasing public support for the war effort at home and building support for President Wilson's peace proposal abroad—a goal which took shape later in the war.

19. Carlos A. Schwantes, "Making the World Unsafe for Democracy: Vigilantes, Grangers, and the Walla Walla 'Outrage' of June 1918," *Montana: The Magazine of Western History* 31, no. 1 (Winter 1981): 25, 29. See also: H. Bruce Franklin "From Realism to Virtual Reality: Images of America's Wars," *The Georgia Review* 81, no. 1 (Spring 1994): 47-64.

20. Anecdotal evidence is compiled, sometimes supported by measures of performance, to create the impression of a preponderance of evidence of effectiveness. This is an example of a propaganda technique known as "card stacking" (see Alfred McClung Lee and Elizabeth Briant Lee, *The Fine Art of Propaganda* (1939; repr., San Francisco: International Society of General Semantics, 1979), 24.

21. The text of E.O. 2594 reads: "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, April 14, 1917, in *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, ed. Arthur Link, vol. 42, [Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1966], 59; hereinafter *Wilson Papers*).

In modern military PSYOP, such broad objectives are known as PSYOP Objectives (PO). Under each PO are two or more specific objectives, known as Supporting PSYOP Objectives (SPO), that are supposed to be aligned with the changes in attitudes, beliefs, or behaviors required to accomplish the PO. Any given military operation may have, as part of its Operations Order, an Information Operations Annex. This annex, in turn, includes a PSYOP Tab that specifies the objectives and supporting objectives (POs and SPOs), along with potential target audiences (TA) and a list of themes to stress and themes to avoid. The CPI lacked anything that could be considered analogous to a PSYOP Tab with its POs and SPOs.

U.S. Army Major Greg Seese, a PSYOP officer, psychologist, and PSYOP doctrine-writer, emphasized the importance of Supporting PSYOP Objectives in his 2009 essay “Measuring Psychological Operations: It’s all about the SPO.”²² He argues that the absence of a doctrinally-sound, behaviorally-focused SPO handicaps efforts to measure the effectiveness of PSYOP. This approach cannot be applied to the CPI without acknowledging one important difference between the mission of the CPI and that of modern PSYOP. Modern PSYOP is founded on the ultimate goal of behavioral change, whereas the ultimate goal of the CPI was an attitudinal change. Even with the aid of modern opinion polling, attitudinal changes are far less observable than behavioral change. Nevertheless, it remains theoretically possible that the desired attitude sought by the CPI (perhaps best expressed as “support for the war effort”) could be measured based on how it manifested itself in the form of actions: registering for the selective service, purchasing war bonds, donating blood, etc. Such an approach might make at least certain aspects of the CPI measureable.

22. Greg Seese, “Measuring Psychological Operations: It’s All about the SPO,” *Special Warfare* 22, no. 5 (September-October 2009): 10-11.

A PSYOP series, the most basic doctrinal exercise of PSYOP, consists of efforts toward the accomplishment of one SPO that are directed at one target audience. The most basic level of measurement for PSYOP, per doctrine, is the evaluation of a PSYOP series. If specific behaviorally-focused campaigns of the CPI (ex: "Third Liberty Loan") are taken as series, then they might be measured with some accuracy. This has been attempted, to a limited extent, to assess the effectiveness of the Division of Four-Minute Men. Unfortunately, it is confounded by the greatest obstacle to measuring the effectiveness of the CPI, which is the cluttered nature of the wartime information environment.

A Cluttered Information Environment

Even if reliable data regarding public opinion and a list of measurable objectives for the CPI existed, it would remain virtually impossible to determine the degree to which the CPI was responsible for any change in public opinion for or against the war. This is due to the difficulties in determining causation for the shifts (or lack thereof) in public opinion in America from 1917 to 1919. Noting that a change in attitude, opinion, or behavior took place is much more straightforward than determining *why* that change took place. While the intricacies of determining causation is beyond the scope of this study, it is necessary to note that the problem of determining causation becomes exponentially more complex and tedious the more variables that are introduced into the equation. If the CPI had been the sole source of propaganda in America during World War I, it would still be difficult to determine whether or not it was responsible for shaping public opinion. In reality, it was far from the only source of propaganda, a fact that is overlooked by many historians. The truth is that, during World War I, the information environment in America was quite cluttered. There were simply too many other actors at play on the propaganda front to determine the CPI's effectiveness. Some of these actors

worked towards positive ends by promoting the virtues of patriotism and America's mission to "make the world safe for democracy." Others engaged in the decidedly more negative ends by stifling any form of dissent through censorship, intimidation, and even violence.

In the years preceding America's entry into the war, the belligerent nations on both sides were actively courting American support. In this war for America's allegiance, most historians judge the British to have been most successful. In addition to foreign propaganda, domestic agitators, both for and against intervention, sought to sway public opinion. A list of these actors would include various "preparedness" organizations and the press (particularly newspapers within immigrant communities).

Preparedness forces and pro-intervention agitation began to emerge within a year of the onset of hostilities in Europe. The foremost of these was the National Security League (NSL), which predated the CPI by nearly two years. In *Over Here* (1980), historian David Kennedy judges the NSL to have been the "best-heeled and most formidable of the preparedness groups" and one that was "as intimately tied to conservative interests as the peace groups were to progressive elements."²³ Historian George Blakey notes in *Historians on the Homefront* (1970) that once the war started the NSL "transitioned to loyalty crusades and Americanization programs."²⁴ In contrasting the NSL to the CPI, Blakey observes that the former "did not quibble" and that its president Stanwood Menken "instructed his scholars to rouse and shock the American public into patriotic action."²⁵ The NSL produced a large quantity of pamphlets, some with circulations rivaling the most popular CPI publications, and organized its own network of

23. Kennedy, *Over Here*, 31.

24. George T. Blakey, *Historians on the Homefront: American Propagandists for the Great War* (Lexington, Kentucky: The University of Kentucky Press, 1970), 28.

25. *Ibid.*, 32.

over 500 public speakers.²⁶ It was the NSL, and not the CPI, that led the fight against the teaching of the German language and against the German-American press.²⁷ There is evidence that both Wilson and Creel were concerned about the activities of such “patriotic” organizations that acted outside of government control.²⁸

Another organization emerged in April 1917 that sought to mobilize academia in support of the war effort. This was the National Board for Historical Service (NBHS). Its founders included eminent historians James Shotwell of Columbia University and Frederick Jackson Turner of the University of Wisconsin.²⁹ Historian J. Franklin Jameson of Johns Hopkins University gave the NBHS free publicity in the *American Historical Review*, of which he was the managing editor.³⁰ While technically independent of the CPI, it often cooperated with the CPI’s Division of Civic and Educational Cooperation, under the leadership of the University of Minnesota historian Guy Stanton Ford. Although the NBHS was not generally considered as inflammatory or xenophobic as the NSL, George Blakey concludes that its historians nevertheless bent the standards of historical scholarship in their zeal to promote the war.³¹

Scholars were not alone in contributing their services to promote the war effort. The Vigilantes were a group of pro-war authors and artists led by James Montgomery Flagg and

26. Ibid., 62. While this number pales in comparison to the 75,000 Four-Minute Men, it is worth noting that many of the NSL speakers were prominent historians and members of society, while the vast majority of Four-Minute Men were known only within their own communities.

27. Ibid., 85-86.

28. Woodrow Wilson to George Creel, September 30, 1918, *Wilson Papers* 51: 162. Wilson wrote Creel to make sure that “none of the stuff of this so-called American Defense Society gets out of the country.” Creel replied the following day by saying “like the National Security League, this organization is one of our most difficult problems, and I think it is being solved very rapidly by my constant refusal to recognize either of them in any way” (Creel to Wilson, October 1, 1917, *Wilson Papers* 51: 175).

29. Blakey, *Historians on the Homefront*, 16-17.

30. Ibid., 19.

31. Ibid., 148-150.

Mark Sullivan.³² Some of the Vigilantes, such as Flagg, eventually offered their services to the CPI via Charles Dana Gibson's Division of Pictorial Publicity. In this semi-official capacity, Flagg produced perhaps the single best known work of propaganda of the entire war: an enlistment poster of Uncle Sam with the caption "I Want You!" This cooperation with the CPI should not be taken as evidence that the Vigilantes worked exclusively through the CPI or that all of their work was even acceptable to the CPI. Artists belonging to the Vigilantes were known to favor appeals to emotion over the appeals to reason favored by George Creel and Guy Stanton Ford.³³ If the CPI failed to accept their illustrations, other groups and media outlets almost certainly would.

Such was the boundless and unrestrained nature of the propaganda war, that nothing prevented journalists, artists, filmmakers, or speakers from developing and disseminating their own propaganda. One of the best examples of this was a film by Rupert Julian, an actor and recent immigrant from New Zealand who is said to have born a striking resemblance to Kaiser Wilhelm II.³⁴ Julian's film *The Kaiser: The Beast of Berlin* came to be erroneously and inextricably linked to the CPI. H.R. Hopps's famous poster "Destroy This Mad Brute" was also, almost certainly, an example of freelance propaganda. Even within the federal government, the CPI was not the sole source of propaganda. Other U.S. government bureaus conducted their own publicity efforts. The Treasury Department, for example, conducted its own campaign in support

32. Kennedy, *Over Here*, 41.

33. Stephen Vaughn, *Holding Fast the Inner Lines: Democracy, Nationalism, and the Committee on Public Information* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980), 149-150.

34. "Rupert Julian Biography," *IMBD*, accessed March 26, 2014, http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0432216/bio?ref_=nm_ov_bio_sm.

of war bond drives.³⁵ With so many sources of propaganda, it is impossible to determine the degree to which any one source, including the CPI, contributed to shifts in public opinion or to any other theoretically measurable objective.

Further obstructing any attempt to measure the effectiveness of the CPI is the fact that the “war for the American mind” was not merely a propaganda war. It involved both legal and extra-legal suppression of dissent. The suppression of the free-flow of information and ideas was just as much a form of influence as more traditional propaganda. The best known example of wartime suppression came in the form of censorship.

From his earliest days as CPI chief, George Creel advocated “expression” over “suppression.”³⁶ His objection to strict censorship is well-documented. He steadfastly maintained throughout his life that the CPI was not a censorship organization and that he had no authority as a censor.³⁷ Despite Creel’s stringent and frequent protestations on charges of censorship, most historians dismiss these claims as inaccurate and disingenuous, arguing that Creel and the CPI were engaged in wartime censorship.³⁸ Regardless, it is clear that the CPI was nowhere near the foremost threat to civil liberties during the war. There were much more aggressive forces of suppression at play.

35. Walton Bean, “George Creel and His Critics: A Study of the Attacks on the Committee on Public Information, 1917-1919” (PhD diss., University of California, 1941), 200.

36. George Creel, “Public Opinion in War Time,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 78 (July 1918): 187.

37. In *How We Advertised America*, Creel devotes an entire chapter to “The ‘Censorship’ Bugbear.”

38. James Mock and Cedric Larson, who provided the first full-length historical account of the CPI in the form of 1939’s *Words that Won the War*, concluded that the CPI “enjoyed a censorship power that was tantamount to direct legal force” (James Mock and Cedric Larson, *Words that Won the War: The Story of The Committee on Public Information 1917-1919* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1939], 20). Outside of Walton Bean, few historians have disagreed with this assessment.

The U.S. Post Office Department, under the leadership of Albert Sydney Burleson, was an active and enthusiastic agency of censorship and suppression during the war. David Kennedy considers Burleson to have been “the foremost official enemy of dissidents” during the war years.³⁹ The Department of Justice, under the leadership of Attorney General Thomas Gregory, also aggressively enforced the Espionage and Trading with the Enemy Acts.⁴⁰ Creel’s relations with both Burleson and Gregory were strained and he opposed their anti-liberal tendencies.⁴¹

The most often cited evidence that the CPI encouraged suppression comes in the form of CPI propaganda products (posters, pamphlets, and speeches) that encouraged Americans to report on the suspicious and disloyal activities of their fellow citizens. Such charges are seldom accompanied by an explanation that the CPI lacked the ability to enforce loyalty or that it took a more moderate stance on “100 percent Americanism,” and suppression in general, than many other “patriotic” organizations. In fact, Walton Bean points out that groups such as the NSL routinely criticized the CPI during the war for weakness on the loyalty issue that bordered on treason.⁴² While historians have been eager to blame the CPI, the war to enforce loyalty was actually fought largely by vigilante groups such as the American Protective League (APL), which enlisted as many as 250,000 volunteers by war’s end, and by state councils of defense.⁴³ The APL was a group of self-appointed domestic spies that operated with the sanction of the Department of Justice. David Kennedy states that the APL “bugged, burglarized, slandered, and

39. Kennedy, *Over Here*, 75.

40. *Ibid.*, 78.

41. Bean, “George Creel and His Critics,” 99-101.

42. Bean devotes an entire chapter of his thesis “George Creel and His Critics” to the “charges of treasonable moderation” that were made against the CPI. Such charges have been long forgotten by many historians, who prefer to view the CPI as anything but moderate.

43. Kennedy, *Over Here*, 82.

illegally arrested other Americans.”⁴⁴ This is the sort of behavior that many have come to associate with the CPI, although it seems safe to assert that, in the field of “enforced loyalty,” the CPI has been unfairly accused. This is not to say, however, that the willingness of a large number of Americans to spy on their fellow citizens (or to do worse) is not evidence of successful propaganda but rather that such propaganda originated from a wide variety of sources and therefore cannot be solely attributed to the CPI.

The combined efforts of the Council of National Defense and its many subsidiary state and local councils in propaganda, censorship, and the suppression of dissent must also be taken into consideration when attempting to measure the effectiveness of the CPI. In *Uncle Sam at Home* (1984), historian William Breen calculates that, by the end of the war, there were 184,000 county, municipal, and community councils in existence.⁴⁵ It is difficult to make generalizations about the impact of the state and local councils because there were so many of them and they were largely unregulated. In fact, Breen asserts that diversity emerged as the “dominant motif” in his study of the council of defense system.⁴⁶ For example, historian Gerald Senn argues that the Arkansas State Council of Defense was an organization that left “few aspects of civilian life untouched.”⁴⁷ This may be true of Arkansas but is not helpful in determining the degree of influence of state and local councils in other states. More specifically, this inability to generalize extends to cooperation between the CPI and the various councils of defense. While William

44. Ibid.

45. William Breen, *Uncle Sam at Home: Civilian Mobilization, Wartime Federalism, and the Council of National Defense, 1917-1919* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1984) xvi.

46. Ibid., xiii.

47. Gerald Senn, “Molders of Thought, Directors of Action: The Arkansas State Council of Defense, 1917-1918,” *The Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 36, no. 3 (Autumn 1977): 280-290. Senn leads off his article by mentioning the council member’s approving reactions to an October 15, 1918 showing of the film *The Kaiser: The Beast of Berlin*.

Breen characterizes the relationship between the CPI and the State Councils Section as “harmonious” and “fruitful,” this does not mean that the state and local councils were mere foot soldiers of the CPI.⁴⁸ In fact, George Creel appeared to consider demobilization of these councils to be a high priority as the war drew to a close. Creel recommended to Wilson that even the officially-sanctioned Council of National Defense be demobilized “so that the Chauvinistic, reactionary state organizations may be put out of business.”⁴⁹

It is clear from the wide variety of both official and unofficial sources of propaganda and the equally varied forces of suppression that the CPI was but one participant, albeit a major one, in the war for the American mind. The CPI’s contribution to this war was primarily positive, in that it focused on actively persuading Americans to support the war. That Creel has been passed down to history as the great censor of World War I is sadly ironic, given his limited involvement in censorship, his objection to the methods of more aggressive censors such as Postmaster General Burleson and Attorney General Gregory, and his abiding belief that the less censorship, the better. For the purposes of assessing the effectiveness of the CPI, it is essential to understand that the committee had relatively little role in the official suppression of information or of civil liberties relative to other government agencies, state and local councils of defense, and the army of self-appointed loyalty police.

If studied, the many obstacles to measuring the CPI’s effectiveness would undoubtedly resonate with the PSYOP community in light of ongoing and recently-concluded conflicts in Afghanistan, Iraq, and elsewhere. In the case of the Iraq War (a.k.a. “Operation IRAQI FREEDOM” or “OIF”), the data available was often insufficient to provide a suitable baseline

48. Breen, *Uncle Sam at Home*, 34.

49. Creel to Wilson, November 8, 1918, *Wilson Papers* 51: 646.

for measurement or to track changes in the attitudes, opinions, and behaviors of discrete target audiences.⁵⁰ Just as was the case with the CPI, the absence of sufficient effectiveness data led to the highlighting of measures of performance (MOP) and an overreliance on anecdotal evidence.⁵¹ Additionally, while there was an approved list of PSYOP objectives (POs and SPOs) for OIF, these were not always clearly focused on measurable behaviors. Finally, the most instructive parallel between the CPI and modern PSYOP is the problem of a cluttered information environment. Iraqi audiences were bombarded by messages from regional and strategic level PSYOP, operational-level PSYOP, tactical PSYOP, non-PSYOP Department of Defense influence capabilities (such as the Information Operations Task Force), Department of State Public Diplomacy efforts (assisted by military PSYOP), other U.S. Government agencies, non-governmental organizations, other foreign nations (such as Iran and Saudi Arabia), domestic insurgent and terrorist groups (such as Muqtada al-Sadr's *Jaysh al-Mahdi* and the Islamic State of Iraq), foreign terrorist groups (such as Al Qaida), the pan-Arab media (influenced by any number of unseen and unknown actors) and the Iraqis' own newly-constituted government. Determining which of these entities, or which combination of entities, were successfully affecting a given audience's attitudes or behavior was essentially impossible. The task of measuring the effectiveness of influence operations in Iraq must have seemed, to PSYOP personnel in Iraq, every bit as hopeless as that of a historian attempting to measure the effectiveness of the CPI.

50. Despite nearly a century of advances in the science of opinion measurement, difficulties remain in obtaining reliable data on public opinion. These difficulties are compounded in war zones due to security concerns. The data that was available to PSYOP personnel in Iraq was seldom specific to the audiences being targeted (audiences which, per PSYOP doctrine, should be highly-refined).

51. In Iraq, the effectiveness of PSYOP was often inferred from word-of-mouth accounts that the Iraqis responded positively to specific PSYOP products. The main difference between the CPI and PSYOP in Iraq was that, in the case of the former, anecdotal evidence was used to negative ends (condemnation) whereas, in the case of the latter, it is used to positive ends (celebration).

The Four-Minute Men: Evidence of a Process

Just as there was no PSYOP Tab in which the CPI's objectives were listed, there was no established doctrine for propaganda operations during World War I. George Creel has been given much credit, as much by his detractors as by his supporters, for masterminding an elaborate propaganda bureau. To the extent that this is true, he was making it up as he went. The CPI was an exercise in improvisation.⁵² In fact, one of the greatest myths about the CPI was that it provided a blueprint for conducting propaganda. Creel, in his postwar writings, boasted about how the CPI had accomplished its mission, but he spoke only of its organizational structure. His expansive postwar writings are devoid of anything that could even loosely be considered a doctrine for propaganda. This absence helps to explain why Creel and the CPI are of relatively little interest to students and historians of PSYOP. It was not until the aftermath of World War II that wartime propagandists and theoreticians, starting in 1948 with Paul M.A. Linebarger, began to lay the foundations for what was to become PSYOP doctrine. That being said, there is evidence that a process for conducting influence operations was taking shape, perhaps unwittingly, under the auspices of the CPI in at least one of its many divisions: the Four-Minute Men.

Background

The idea of the Four-Minute Men did not originate from within the CPI but rather from a group of pro-war Chicago businessmen led by Donald Ryerson. The Four-Minute Men were officially recognized by Creel on June 16, 1917.⁵³ Upon being subsumed by the CPI, Ryerson

52. Mock and Larson, *Words that Won the War*, 48. Mock and Larson say of the CPI: "It was developed according to no plan. It was improvised on the job, and the job was never completed."

53. Alfred E. Cornebise, *War as Advertised: The Four-Minute Men and America's Crusade 1917-1918* (Philadelphia: The American Philosophical Society, 1984), 6.

was appointed by Creel to be the head of the Division of Four-Minute Men. In the summer of 1917, Ryerson left to join the Navy and was succeeded by William McCormick Blair. Blair led the Division of Four-Minute Men until the summer of 1918, at which time he enlisted in the Army and was replaced by William Ingersoll, who led the division for the remainder of the war.⁵⁴

The general concept for the Four-Minute Men was for the speakers to deliver short speeches promoting pro-war attitudes and behaviors to captive audiences and nowhere provided a more captive audience for the speakers than movie theaters. With the approval of theater management, the Four-Minute Men delivered their speeches during the intermission. The exact length of four minutes was set after determining how long it took the projectionists to change reels. During the four-minute intermission, the projectionist would present a slide that announced his purpose to the audience (see Image 3.1).

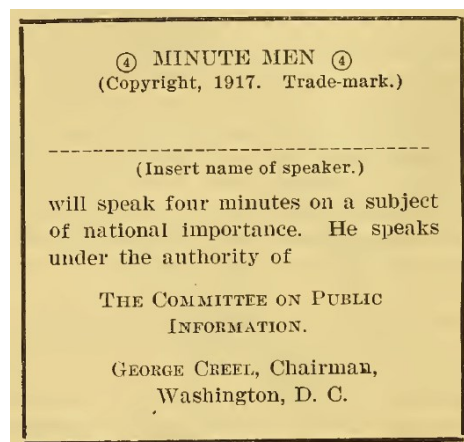


Image 3.1: Slide used by projectionists to introduce Four-Minute Men⁵⁵

54 Creel, *How We Advertised America*, 93.

55. U.S. Committee on Public Information, *Complete Report of the Chairman of the Committee on Public Information 1917: 1918: 1919* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1920), 22. Hereinafter *Complete Report*.

The Division of Four-Minute Men was a volunteer enterprise from the bottom up, to include the Division’s director.⁵⁶ In select cases, they were even asked to contribute to the operating expenses of their local chapter.⁵⁷ Nevertheless, it was a sought-after job. While no training in public speaking, advertising, or marketing was required, speakers were expected to be able to develop their own speeches and to keep the attention of the audience. Given the specific skill-set required, speakers tended to come from the professional middle class. However, there was a specific warning issued against “well-known speakers” who “are too accustomed to longer speeches.”⁵⁸ Instead, the “General Instructions” for the Four-Minute Men recommended recruiting “young lawyers and business men who will present *messages* within the four-minute limit forcefully rather than originate speeches.”⁵⁹

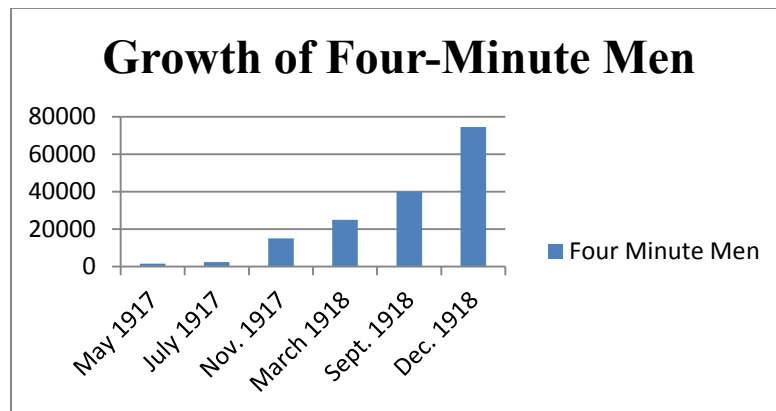


Figure 3.1: Growth of Four-Minute Men 1917-1918⁶⁰

56. Nicholas, “Crossroads Oratory,” 67.

57. Ibid., 72. In one Tennessee unit, speakers were assessed \$5 each to pay for printing and other expenses.

58. Corneise, *War as Advertised*, 10.

59. Ibid.

60. Nicholas, “Crossroads Oratory,” 68-69.

The Process

The process used by the Division of Four-Minute Men, though improvised at the time, has not been substantially improved upon by influence specialists for nearly a century. This point is best illustrated by comparing the operations of the Division of Four-Minute Men with the current seven-step process for conducting PSYOP. There is little, if any, indication in the available histories of PSYOP that subsequent doctrine was based explicitly on the example of the Four-Minute Men. However, the establishment of such a functional and efficient process for such a large undertaking (there were 74,500 Four-Minute Men by war's end) stands as a testament to the genius of the CPI personnel who were directly involved with the Four-Minute men. It also helps the current practitioner of PSYOP to see the basic process that is used today in practice nearly one hundred years ago.

The first step of the PSYOP process is to establish overarching objectives and supporting objectives.⁶¹ While no such objectives existed for the CPI as a whole, the Four-Minute Men did establish objectives for their speaking campaigns. Each of the thirty-nine campaigns of the Four-Minute Men were coordinated centrally through the publication of the *Four-Minute Men News*, edited by Professor Guy Stanton Ford, head of the Division Civic and Educational Cooperation.⁶² Furthermore, PSYOP doctrine stresses that supporting objectives be behaviorally focused. In the case of the Four-Minute Men, this criterion was generally met. Examples of this were the liberty bond and draft registration campaigns. In both cases, the audience was being asked to take a specific action. On the whole, there is sufficient evidence of planning and

61. Headquarters, Department of the Army, *Field Manual 3-05.301: Psychological Operations Process Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures* (August 30, 2007), ix-x.

62. Vaughn, *Holding Fast the Inner Lines*, 123.

coordination to say that the Four-Minute Men at least partially fulfilled the doctrinal requirements of Step One of the PSYOP process.

Step Two of the PSYOP process is to conduct target audience analysis in order to develop themes, messages, and persuasive appeals. In the case of the Four-Minute Men campaigns, systematic target audience analysis was unnecessary because the speakers were drawn from the local population. Hence, the speakers were members of the target audience or, at the very least, lived among the broader audience and were thus familiar with its customs, traditions, and other factors affecting persuasion. Their major task was to relate the approved themes from CPI leaders to audiences throughout the nation. The *Four-Minute Men News* provided the conduit for conveying approved themes and messages from the CPI to the ever-expanding network of speakers.

Step Three is to plan (i.e. “stage”) dissemination of messages for the optimal effect. This was also managed centrally and related via the *Four-Minute Men News*. An example of staging comes from the Second Liberty Loan drive. Speakers were instructed to spend the first ten days of the drive to “arouse enthusiasm; plant the thought; explain the facts” and the final ten days of the drive encouraging action (in this case actually subscribing to the loan).⁶³

The fourth step of the PSYOP process is the development of the actual influence products which, in this case, were the four-minute speeches. This was the first step of the process that was performed locally by the Four-Minute Men. Each speaker, following the guidelines set forth in General Bulletin 7A and in the *Four-Minute Men News*, developed his own speech. Historian Alfred Cornebise explains the relationship between the guidelines in the bulletin and the actual speeches by saying that “Individual speakers were to deliver original and spontaneous talks but

63. Cornebise, *War as Advertised*, 71.

each speaker was to emphasize the lines of argument and general information contained in each specific bulletin.”⁶⁴ The following is an “Illustrative Four-Minute Speech” provided by the CPI:

While we are sitting here tonight enjoying a picture show, do you realize that thousands and thousands of Belgians, people just like ourselves, are *languishing in slavery* under Prussian masters?

Driven into slavery, after they were lured back home by Prussian promises—Prussian scraps of paper.

Read the stories of deliberate *governmentally ordered* brutalities as told in the book, *German War Practices*, recently published by the Government’s Committee on Public Information.

Read how the Prussian war lords robbed Belgium, pilfered and stole. How they extorted fines of millions of francs for trivial reasons—e.g. 5,000 francs [5,000,000?]) (\$1,000,000) in Brussels because of an attack by a policeman; 200,000 marks at Tournai for refusal to send a list of citizens. Taxes went to 50,000 francs a month and more in Belgium.

Prussian “Schrecklichkeit” (the deliberate policy of terrorism) leads to almost unbelievable besotten brutality. The German soldiers—their letters are reprinted—were often forced against their wills, they themselves weeping, to carry out unspeakable orders against defenseless old men, women, and children, so that “*respect*” might grow for German “efficiency.” For instance, at Dinant the wives and children of 40 men were forced to witness the execution of their husbands and fathers.

Now, then, do you want to take the *slightest* chance of meeting Prussianism here in America?

If not, then you’ll have to help in summoning all the resources of this country for the giant struggle. For resources will win the war.

Here’s the way you can help save our resources. Instead of throwing money away on unnecessary things, buy Thrift Stamps, 25 cents, and War-Savings-Stamps, \$4.12, worth \$5 in five years, 4 per cent compound interest. They’re good as government money; like a mortgage on the U.S.A. Here’s one of the War-Savings Certificates, and here’s a Thrift Card. Ask at any post office, any bank, or store wherever you see a W.S.S. sign.

64. Ibid., 11.

It is up to us. We, the people, must win the war.⁶⁵

The fifth step in the process is the approval of products. Although there was no official process for approval, local Four-Minute Men chairmen were responsible for performing quality control of their speakers. The chairman had the power to remove speakers for exceeding the Four-Minute time limit, for straying too far from the assigned topic, for injecting political opinions, or even for being too boring.⁶⁶ This step in the process bears the least resemblance to the intricate approval process used today and yet there is still evidence that oversight and accountability mechanisms were in place for the Four-Minute Men.

Step Six is the distribution and dissemination of messages. This was done according to the plan established in Step Three and typically lasted from two to four weeks.⁶⁷ Given that no specific technology was involved in dissemination, the only logistical considerations were obtaining the approval of theater owners (by far the most common venue for Four-Minute Man speeches) and the presence of the actual speaker. While it was not unheard of for speakers to be heckled or to have their audiences walk out, such behavior seldom prevented speakers from performing their mission.⁶⁸

The seventh and final step in the modern PSYOP process is measurement and evaluation. While there is some evidence that the Division of Four-Minute Men attempted to measure their effectiveness during the war, the most enduring attempts at measurement occurred immediately after the war, when Creel and his colleagues took stock of what the CPI had accomplished.

65. Mock and Larson, *Words That Won the War*, 123–124.

66. *Ibid.*, 46.

67. Creel, *How We Advertised America*, 86-87.

68. Cornebise, *War as Advertised*, 54-55.

Creel provided a wealth of data that attested to the reach of the Four-Minute Men's messages. This data falls mostly in the category of measures of performance. Creel's own estimate of the activities of the Four-Minute Men projected that they had delivered a total of 755,190 speeches to an audience of 314,454,514 Americans.⁶⁹ By this calculation, every single American was exposed to approximately three speeches each. Of course not all Americans attended the movies and not all moviegoers were exposed to speeches but the very attempt at quantification reflects a progressive inclination for efficiency. This tendency is clearer when Creel presents the Four-Minute Men in terms of a cost-benefit analysis. After calculating the \$101,550.10 spent on the salaries, printing, slides, travel, and general expenses of the division, he exclaims, "what a showing!"⁷⁰ He concludes that it was his "proud claim that no other war organization, with the exception of the Food Commission, paid such large returns on such small investment as the Committee on Public Information."⁷¹

Measures of effectiveness for the Four-Minute Men are more difficult to come by, although many Four-Minute Men campaigns were measurable because those directing the division tied the objectives to actions (as seen in Step One). For example, the effectiveness of the Liberty Loan campaigns could be measured by the subscriptions to the loan. Draft registration drives were equally measurable. In his 1953 Ph.D. dissertation, "Crossroads Oratory: A Study of the Four Minute Men of World War I," Wayne Allen Nicholas attempted to measure the effectiveness of the Four-Minute Men using available data. While he found some empirical evidence of success, he admitted to the difficulty of assessing their overall

69. *Complete Report*, 22.

70. *Ibid.*, 95.

71. *Ibid.*, 94.

effectiveness by saying, “The contribution of the Four-Minute Men was made principally in the area of morale, and is difficult to appraise for this reason.”⁷²

There is another, less scientific form of measurement that can be seen in the example of the Four-Minute Men. This is anecdotal evidence, which often comes in the form of testimonials. In the case of the Four-Minute Men, President Wilson testified to the success of his army of speakers. In his letter of November 9, 1917, Wilson praises them by saying:

Upon you Four-Minute Men, who are charged with a special duty and enjoy a special privilege in the command of your audiences, will rest in a considerable degree, the task of arousing and informing the great body of our people so that when the record of these days is complete we shall read page for page with the deeds of the army and navy the story of the unity, the spirit of sacrifice, the unceasing labors, the high courage of the men and women at home who held unbroken the inner lines.⁷³

A year later, as the war drew to a close, Wilson penned another letter of thanks to his army of public speakers. While Wilson’s assessment is not backed by any empirical evidence, it does carry the credibility of the messenger. As previously noted, such anecdotal proof of effectiveness has the power to transcend more empirical evidence—or the lack thereof.

The CPI as an Experiment in Public Diplomacy

Public diplomacy was a term that did not exist during World War I. It was not coined until 1966 when former diplomat and Dean of the Fletcher School at Tufts University Edmund Gullion defined it as “the means by which governments, private groups and individuals influence the attitudes and opinions of other peoples and governments in such a way as to exercise

72. Nicholas, “Crossroads Oratory,” 4.

73. George Creel to Woodrow Wilson, November 4, 1917, *Wilson Papers* 44: 504-505.

influence on their foreign policy decisions.”⁷⁴ By 2010, the definition had come to be defined by the Department of Defense as “those overt international public information activities of the United States Government designed to promote United States foreign policy objectives by seeking to understand, inform, and influence foreign audiences and opinion makers, and by broadening the dialogue between American citizens and institutions and their counterparts abroad.”⁷⁵ Department of Defense PSYOP personnel currently support Department of State public diplomacy efforts through what is known as “Defense Support to Public Diplomacy” (DSPD)—which falls under the PSYOP mission of Intergovernmental/Interagency Support (IIS).⁷⁶ During World War I, however, public diplomacy was not conducted by the Department of State. It was conducted by the CPI.⁷⁷

Under the DSPD mission, PSYOP personnel are deployed to U.S. Embassies, at the request of the Department of State, to assist in the respective Country Team’s public diplomacy efforts. This practice finds its roots in World War I, when the U.S. military (Departments of War and Navy) supported the CPI in the first large-scale experiment in public diplomacy in American history. In fact, this cooperation was one of the few things that President Wilson specifically stipulated in the Executive Order that created the CPI. In that order, Wilson authorized the

74. The Fletcher School, Tufts University, “Definitions of Public Diplomacy,” *fletcher.tufts.edu*, accessed January 31, 2014, <http://fletcher.tufts.edu/Murrow/Diplomacy/Definitions>.

75. Joint Publication 1-02, 297. IIS is one of the three primary missions of DoD PSYOP.

76. The others being Military Information and Civil Authorities Information Support (U.S. Department of Defense Field Manual 3-53).

77. This point is best made by Gregg Wolper in his 1991 dissertation “The Origins of Public Diplomacy: Woodrow Wilson, George Creel, and the Committee on Public Information,” which is the only dissertation or book-length study of the CPI’s foreign operations.

Secretary of State, Secretary of War, and Secretary of the Navy to “detail an officer or officers to the work of the committee.”⁷⁸

The Foreign Section of the CPI conducted influence operations in approximately thirty nations. It is given credit by many historians for increasing support for Woodrow Wilson’s peace program (the Fourteen Points) and, consequently, is blamed for the high degree of post-Versailles disillusionment. In *Buffalo Bill in Bologna* (2005), historians Robert Rydell and Rob Kroes extrapolate the CPI’s importance beyond the war, arguing that the CPI “globalized American culture.”⁷⁹ Rydell and Kroes do not provide enough evidence to support such a bold claim but they are correct in presenting the CPI as a significant experiment in using American culture as a vehicle for American policy. Military personnel were critical to this effort.

Perhaps the single best example of “Defense Support to Public Diplomacy” during World War I is that of Lieutenant F.E. Ackerman (U.S. Navy) who was, according to National Archives historian James Mock, “the individual who did the most in shaping and organizing the work of the Creel Committee in South America.”⁸⁰ Lt. Ackerman sought to employ Americans already “in country,” preferably newspapermen. When no qualified candidates were available, Ackerman turned to his fellow service members. This was the case in Brazil, where Lieutenant William Y. Boyd, assistant naval attaché at the American Embassy in Brazil, was selected to perform “most of the work desired” (by the CPI).⁸¹

78. Executive Order 2594, April 14, 1917, *Wilson Papers* 42: 59.

79. Robert Rydell and Rob Kroes, *Buffalo Bill in Bologna: The Americanization of the World, 1869-1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 134.

80. James Mock, “The Creel Committee in Latin America,” *The Hispanic American Historical Review* 22, no. 2 (May 1942): 266.

81. *Ibid.*, 266.

Captain Charles Merriam (U.S. Army Signal Corps), erstwhile professor of political science at the University of Chicago, served for a period of six months as the CPI's chief in Italy. He was on loan to the CPI from Colonel Marlborough Churchill's Military Intelligence Branch. Assisting Merriam in Italy were fellow officers Lieutenant Walter Wanger and future New York City mayor Captain Fiorello La Guardia.⁸² The CPI's work in Italy, chronicled by Italian historian Daniela Rossini in *Woodrow Wilson and the American Myth in Italy* (2008), was quite effective in elevating Woodrow Wilson to hero status among the Italian populace.⁸³ However, Merriam's work demonstrated the difficulties in what would over time become known as "interagency cooperation." Rossini observes that "the CPI commissioner's (Merriam) work ran on a collision course with the work of the American embassy."⁸⁴ This collision was not, in Rossini's view, the result of "any arrogance or misguided intentions of the CPI overseas staff; rather, the problem lay in an objective overlapping of responsibilities created by the way that Wilson organized his diplomatic services."⁸⁵ Regardless of intentions, Creel cited Merriam's disputes with Ambassador Thomas Nelson Page and Major General Treat (chief of the American military mission in Italy) for his recall from Italy in October 1918.⁸⁶

Overlapping jurisdictions between the CPI and State Department also threatened to derail the CPI's mission in neutral Spain. In November, 1917, Creel appointed Frank Marion, a film

82. Creel, *How We Advertised America*, 299-300.

83. Daniela Rossini, *Woodrow Wilson and the American Myth in Italy: Culture, Diplomacy, and War Propaganda* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 133.

84. *Ibid.*, 115.

85. *Ibid.*

86. Mock and Larson, *Words that Won the War*, 290.

executive, to head the CPI mission in Madrid.⁸⁷ From the outset, Marion did not get along with Ambassador Joseph E. Willard, who balked at the CPI's plan for a coordinated film campaign in Spain and Italy. Willard was also frustrated by Marion's lack of knowledge of Spain, as well as Marion's misreading of the political situation in Spain. Specifically, Willard judged, correctly, that Marion grossly underestimated the level of residual anti-American sentiment among the Spaniards resulting from the Spanish-American War.⁸⁸ In February 1918, President Wilson was forced to settle the dispute between the CPI and the State Department, siding, as was his tendency, with the CPI.⁸⁹

War Department personnel provided invaluable support to Marion's mission in Spain. Marion appointed assistant naval attaché Lieutenant George A. Dorsey, a personal friend of Creel, to act in his absence.⁹⁰ Based on his assessment of the Spanish target audience, Lt. Dorsey proposed that American propaganda should use a bandwagon appeal to highlight the inevitability of an Allied victory over Germany.⁹¹ Ambassador Willard ultimately approved Dorsey's plan over the one proposed by military attaché Major John Lang.⁹²

87. Gregg Wolper, "Wilsonian Public Diplomacy: The Committee on Public Information in Spain," *Diplomatic History* 17, no. 1 (January 1993): 18-19.

88. *Ibid.*, 22.

89. *Ibid.*, 24. Wolper explains Wilson's decision as follows: "The president had little trouble making up his mind. He had never been fond of diplomats or traditional diplomacy, and he often bypassed normal channels and appointed special agents to conduct important diplomatic missions. He also possessed, in the words of John Milton Cooper, Jr., 'a near mystical faith in the efficacy of informed public opinion.' Thus, he placed a high priority on educating the general public abroad, a task that American diplomats were neither willing nor able to undertake. In addition, Wilson had established close ties with Creel and worked well with him, while his relations with Secretary of State Lansing were frosty at best. Therefore, in the Madrid case, as in nearly every other dispute between the CPI and the diplomatic corps, Wilson sided with the CPI."

90. *Ibid.*, 25.

91. *Ibid.*, 26.

92. *Ibid.* By May 1918, Major Lang had become the primary obstacle to CPI efforts in Spain. Creel eventually intervened and convinced Brigadier General Marlborough Churchill, chief of the U.S. Army's Military Intelligence Branch, to replace Lang with the more amenable Lt. Col. Thomas Van Natta.

Further evidence of DSPD comes in the form of a series of “Psychological Estimates” for various countries that were produced by the U.S. Army’s Military Intelligence Branch. While overlooked by most PSYOP historians, these estimates were the product of Captain Heber Blankenhorn’s G-2-D “Psychologic Subsection” (aka “Propaganda Subsection”).⁹³ Blankenhorn’s section, which also conducted tactical propaganda operations on the Western Front from August through November 1918, could be judged to have been the first PSYOP Task Force (POTF) in American military history.⁹⁴

George Creel singled out Captain Blankenhorn’s boss, Brigadier General Dennis Nolan, (AEF General Headquarters G2) and Brigadier General Edgar E. Russel (Chief of the Signal Corps) for praise, saying that these two members of General Pershing’s staff provided invaluable support to the CPI’s efforts in France.⁹⁵ Such support may not have been reciprocated. PSYOP historian Paul M.A. Linebarger asserts that claims by members of the CPI to have assisted the American tactical propaganda campaign are largely unsubstantiated.⁹⁶ Nevertheless, the contributions made by those in uniform to the CPI should not be overlooked.

To avoid the obvious anachronism, the support provided by officers such as Lieutenants Ackerman and Boyd could more precisely be labeled “Defense Support to the CPI.” Regardless, it is fair to consider the efforts of the CPI’s Foreign Section to be “proto-public diplomacy” and,

93. For more on Captain Blankenhorn’s wartime propaganda mission, see Clayton Laurie’s “The Chanting of Crusaders: Captain Blankenhorn and AEF Combat Propaganda in World War I” in *The Journal of Military History* 39, no. 3 (July 1995): 457-481.

94. In this context, the term “POTF” is used in a general sense (in that the AEF GHQ G-2-D Section was a unit that conducted PSYOP). However, in PSYOP doctrine, a POTF is a specific type of PSYOP mission. It is not my contention that the G-2-D Section fit the criteria for a POTF better than the other possible labels (e.g. PSYOP Support Element, PSYOP Development Center, Tactical PSYOP Development Detachment, etc.). I am arguing that, labels aside, CPT Blankenhorn’s section was a proto-PSYOP mission that has gone largely unappreciated by PSYOP historians.

95. Creel, *How We Advertised America*, 293.

96. Paul M.A. Linebarger, *Psychological Warfare* (1948; repr., Landisville, Pennsylvania: Coachwhip Publications, 2010), 101.

by extension, the involvement of US military personnel to have been “proto-DSPD.” While each case listed above is different, and many other cases existed, each holds its own lessons for the PSYOP community. The most basic of which is to acknowledge that this sort of work was being done during the First World War.

Conclusion

In his 1959 study *The Weapon on the Wall: Rethinking Psychological Warfare*, Operations Research Office analyst Murray Dyer acknowledged the peril of neglecting to study the CPI, noting that, as a result of this neglect, “we went into World War II...faced with learning all over again.”⁹⁷ The reasons that the CPI continues to be neglected by the military PSYOP community are not that difficult to understand and will not be restated here. Whatever the reason, the fact remains that the CPI, as America’s first government-led experiment in mass persuasion, holds valuable lessons for today’s PSYOP community. The difficulties in measuring the CPI’s effectiveness mirror those faced by those attempting to assess contemporary influence operations. The process used by the Four-Minute Men, while not an exact fit, presaged the development of a doctrinal process for conducting PSYOP. Finally, the assistance provided by U.S. military personnel to the CPI’s foreign operations foreshadowed the advent, in the latter half of the twentieth century, of the PSYOP mission known as “Defense Support to Public Diplomacy.”

As important as what the PSYOP community can learn *from* the CPI is what can be learned *about* the CPI by viewing it through the lens of PSYOP. Chief among these lessons is that the CPI’s effectiveness cannot be measured with any precision due to a lack of relevant data,

97. Murray Dyer, *The Weapon on the Wall: Rethinking Psychological Warfare* (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1959), 98.

a lack of measurable objectives, and a highly cluttered information environment. Interpretations of the CPI that are based on its presumed effectiveness, for good or for ill, are therefore invalid.

CONCLUSION

I think that as time goes on and as the history of this committee's work is written and its accomplishments are better understood, the executive order of April 14 [creating the CPI] will be seen as one of the most perspicacious things that was done in preparation for the struggle.

Guy Stanton Ford
January 20, 1919

Late in the summer of 2013, President Barack Obama took the case for limited military intervention in Syria to the American people. Following in the footsteps of George W. Bush's critics a decade earlier, and those of Bush's father a decade before that, President Obama's critics, on both ends of the political-ideological spectrum, raised the century-old specter of the Committee on Public Information. Stephen Lendman, host of the Progressive Radio News Hour, drew a direct line from the CPI to the "drumbeat for war on Syria."¹ Two weeks later, he blogged: "Obama wants war. One way or another he intends to launch it. False flags are pretexts to do so. They're a longstanding US tradition."² Also actively blogging against U.S. military action in Syria was James Tracy, a professor of Media Studies, who a year earlier had traced "'Progressive' Journalism's Legacy of Deceit" all the way back to the CPI.³ Thus it can be seen that, while this study of the interpretations of the CPI was in its infant stage, the cautionary component of the dominant narrative of the CPI was on full display.

1 Stephen Lendman, "Drumbeat for War on Syria," August 24, 2013, accessed March 20, 2014, <http://sjlendman.blogspot.com/2013/08/drumbeat-for-war-on-syria.html>. In the latter article, Lendman stated: "Big Lies launch wars. They're weapons of mass deception. They work when repeated ad nauseam. It's the same every time. They facilitate America's permanent war agenda. They advance imperial lawlessness."

2 Stephen Lendman, "AIPAC Lobbies for War on Syria," September 9, 2013, accessed March 21, 2014, <http://sjlendman.blogspot.com/2013/09/aipac-lobbies-for-war-on-syria.html>.

3 James F. Tracy, "'Progressive' Journalism's Legacy of Deceit," *global research*, July 20, 2012, accessed March 20, 2014, <http://www.globalresearch.ca/progressive-journalism-s-legacy-of-deceit/31996>. There is another video from Tracy dated September 24, 2013 entitled "Endless War, Public Opinion and the Pictures in Our Heads" that revisits the topic of military intervention in Syria. In this video, he mentions Walter Lippmann and Edward Bernays but does not tie them directly to the CPI (as he does in his earlier article).

Those invoking the CPI in the case of Syria overlooked one glaring discrepancy: the CPI was not used to promote American intervention in World War I. The analogy between the CPI and Obama's case for military intervention in Syria, or Bush's case for an invasion of Iraq, breaks down from the beginning because the CPI was formed after the United States Congress had declared war on Germany. While it is true that the CPI presented the war as a just war that had been forced on America, these were *ex post facto* justifications. The most important decision—the one to declare war—had been made a week prior to the CPI's formation. The main domestic task of the CPI was to build support for the war effort by encouraging draft registration, food conservation, blood donation, the purchase of war savings stamps and liberty bonds and a variety of other behaviors that were deemed desirable by the U.S. government. In the case of Iraq (in either 1991 or 2003), no such full-scale mobilization was needed, nor would it have been needed to sustain the sort of military action that President Obama supported against Syria in 2013. A serious, scholarly comparison of the use of propaganda to increase support for military operations in Iraq or Syria with the use of propaganda by the CPI during World War I would inevitably yield many more differences than similarities. Nevertheless, very few Americans, even among those considered educated, were in a position to understand this due to the general acceptance of the dominant narrative of the CPI.

The cautionary aspect was certainly not the only theme of the dominant narrative that appeared in the writings of the anti-interventionists in 2013. Lendman focused almost exclusively on the role of Edward Bernays in the CPI without bothering to mention that Bernays's role in the CPI was relatively minor and limited primarily to CPI operations in Latin

America.⁴ Tracy made the same error by stating of the CPI: “New Republic editor Walter Lippmann and ‘father of public relations’ Edward Bernays were also brought on board the elaborate domestic and international campaign to “advertise America.””⁵ They were, perhaps unwittingly, following the lead of conservative commentator Glenn Beck, who had pronounced in 2010 that Bernays, along with Walter Lippmann (who had no role in the CPI), were “close advisors” to Wilson and Creel.⁶

It bears asking what these observers made of Walton Bean’s argument that “historians should reject the idea that the Committee on Public Information (CPI) was largely responsible for the war-time excesses of patriotic emotion” and that “relative to general public opinion, it was actually a moderating influence.”⁷ It seems doubtful that they were even aware of it but, if they were, they clearly rejected it.

Given the immeasurable nature of wartime propaganda in America, there is no way of proving that the CPI was in fact a “moderating influence.” However, Bean’s argument is important because it provides a carefully-reasoned and well-documented corrective to the dominant narrative which, as noted in chapter one, began to take shape in the 1920s. If Bean’s treatment of Creel seems hagiographic, then it is because so much of what has been written about

4 After the war, Bernays articulated his ideas on “engineering consent” and “regimenting the public mind” in two influential: *Crystallizing Public Opinion* (1923) and *Propaganda* (1928); both are addressed in chapter one of this study.

5 Tracy, “‘Progressive’ Journalism’s Legacy of Deceit.”

6 Glenn Beck, “Progressives’ Fight for American Hearts and Minds,” *foxnews.com*, May 27, 2010, accessed March 21, 2014, <http://www.foxnews.com/story/2010/05/27/glenn-beck-progressives-fight-for-american-hearts-and-minds/>. Judging from the information available in *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson* and the letters provided online through the Woodrow Wilson Presidential Library, Lippmann’s involvement with the CPI and Creel could best be described as that of an unimpressed observer—and at some point even a critic.

7. Walton Bean, “George Creel and His Critics: A Study of the Attacks on the Committee on Public Information, 1917-1919,” abstract, (PhD diss., University of California, 1941).

Creel since World War I has conditioned the reader to think negatively about the CPI and its chairman. Such is the pervasiveness of the dominant narrative.

It is fair to say that this thesis has been guided by the spirit of Walton Bean, not with the intention to offer an apologia for the CPI but rather a corrective. There is something revealing in the fact that full-length works on the CPI, whether published or unpublished, tend to paint a more favorable view of the CPI than do those works that devote a lesser amount of space to the subject. Of the six secondary works exclusively on the CPI consulted for this study (three books and three dissertations), none conforms strictly to the dominant narrative of the CPI.⁸ While this might be explained away as evidence of bias, it should also be taken as evidence that the better one understands what the CPI actually did, the more one recognizes that the dominant narrative is poor history.

The CPI was but one of many organizations disseminating propaganda during the period 1917-1918 and, as demonstrated in the work of Bean and George Blakey (*Historians on the Homefront*), CPI propagandists were relatively restrained when compared to those working for other wartime organizations (such as the National Security League and the various state councils of defense). Furthermore, the correspondence between Woodrow Wilson and George Creel demonstrates that they were aware, and did not approve, of the activities of what Creel termed “chauvinistic” and “reactionary” organizations.⁹ Thus, while the CPI cannot be entirely exonerated from charges of promoting intolerance and the suppressing of civil liberties, there is

⁸ Books: *Words that Won the War* (Mock and Larson, 1939), *Holding Fast the Inner Lines* (Vaughn, 1980), and *Selling the Great War* (Axelrod, 2009); dissertations: “George Creel and His Critics” (Bean, 1941), “Crusading Oratory” (Nicholas, 1953), and “The Origins of Public Diplomacy” (Wolper, 1991).

⁹ George Creel to Woodrow Wilson, November 8, 1918, in *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, ed. Arthur Link, vol. 51, (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1966), 646; see also: Wilson to Creel, September 30, 1918, *Wilson Papers* 51: 162 and Creel to Wilson, October 1, 1917, *Wilson Papers* 51: 175 (regarding American Defense Society and National Security League).

ample evidence that its leaders were at least sensitive to the issues. On the issue of censorship, Creel and the CPI may have been more involved than Creel (or Walton Bean) would have cared to remember but they were not, as David Kennedy points out, the worst offenders on this front.

Attacks against the CPI that highlight Adolf Hitler's praise of CPI propaganda and his propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels's possession of Edward Bernays's postwar writings are blatantly teleological. Ad hominem attacks on the character, qualifications, personality, political beliefs, and management style of its chairman, George Creel, should be likewise rejected. Pronouncing Creel a dictator, as evil, or as a villain does nothing to further an understanding of the CPI and should studiously be avoided. An in-depth study of the relationship between Woodrow Wilson and George Creel, and between Creel and his CPI subordinates, reveals that the CPI was not a one-man show with Creel as its dictator.

Those attempting to use the CPI to make a point about contemporary political issues undoubtedly find such a nuanced interpretation of the CPI inconvenient. Likewise, those needing to condense the CPI into a two or three hundred word textbook or encyclopedia entry face a similar problem, although for different reasons. Nuance and brevity are often at odds. Many historians find that the dominant narrative solves this problem by offering a highly concise (even if incomplete and inaccurate) description of the CPI that comes complete with clear-cut conclusions about the CPI's effectiveness and legacy.

More accurate portrayals of the CPI are available, to include James Mock and Cedric Larson's *Words that Won the War* and Stephen Vaughn's *Holding Fast the Inner Lines*. However, these sources are not widely read or cited. More commonly read are the textbooks, popular histories, and websites that conform, to varying degrees, to the dominant narrative of the CPI. This thesis argued against such a narrative and in favor of a more balanced narrative of the

CPI that avoids value judgments, factual errors, ad hominem attacks and the seductive tendencies of presentism. It presented an alternate narrative of the CPI that presents Woodrow Wilson as both a supporter of, and advisor to, George Creel. The evidence dispels the notion that Wilson was not actively involved in the work of the CPI and dispenses with the myth of Creel as a one-man show. Finally, this thesis examined the CPI through the lens of PSYOP and proved, using current Department of Defense doctrine for assessing influence operations, that the effectiveness of the CPI's propaganda cannot be determined with any degree of precision.

Scholars accept that a period of disillusionment and intolerance followed World War I. According to the dominant narrative, George Creel and the CPI did much to create this postwar climate. In order to make such a determination, one must be able to measure levels of disillusionment and intolerance before, during, and after the war. No such measurements exist. Furthermore, it is impossible to isolate the effect of CPI's propaganda from that of all other sources of propaganda, just as it is impossible to isolate the impact of CPI propaganda from that of all other factors—such as the loss or maiming of loved ones in the war or other life-altering wartime sacrifices that might lead to disillusionment. Based on the lack of evidence required to determine the impact of the CPI, it should be acquitted of the charges that it was the cause of intolerance, suppression, and disillusionment.

This thesis stands not as an endorsement of the CPI or of propaganda but as a repudiation of the dominant narrative of the CPI and an admonition to those who knowingly propagate it. The dominant narrative, like all propaganda, encourages specific attitudinal or behavioral outcomes. Just as the CPI used propaganda to promote support for the war effort during World War I, the dominant narrative uses propaganda to promote a greater awareness of the dangers of propaganda. This thesis makes no attempt to assess the worthiness or justness of this goal.

However, those making the case against propaganda in general, or the CPI specifically, should not rely on factual errors, fallacious assumptions, transfer, oversimplification, name-calling, card-stacking or any other tricks of the propagandist's trade. Proponents of the dominant narrative should instead heed the words of George Creel: "we had such confidence in our case as to feel that no other argument was needed than the simple, straightforward presentation of facts."¹⁰ If facts alone are not enough to make the case, then one must reconsider whether the case truly needs making.

10. George Creel, *How We Advertised America: The First Telling of the Amazing Story of the Committee on Public Information That Carried the Gospel of Americanism to Every Corner of the Globe* (1920; repr., London: Forgotten Books, 2012), 4-5.

Appendices

Appendix A: Mentions of “Propaganda” and “CPI” in State History Curricula

| State | Reference to Propaganda | Reference to CPI |
|--------------------|---------------------------|------------------|
| Alabama | No | No |
| Alaska | No | No |
| Arkansas | No | Yes |
| Arizona | No | No |
| California | Yes | No |
| Colorado | No | No |
| Connecticut | No | No |
| Delaware | No | No |
| Florida | No | Yes |
| Georgia | No | No |
| Hawaii | Yes | No |
| Idaho | No | No |
| Illinois | No | No |
| Massachusetts | No | No |
| Michigan | No | No |
| New York | Yes | No |
| North Carolina | Yes | Yes |
| Ohio | No | No |
| Tennessee | Yes | No |
| Texas | <i>Eliminated in 2010</i> | No |
| Virginia | No | No |
| National Standards | No | No |

Appendix B Master List of U.S. History Textbooks and Other Reference Books

| Textbook Title | Author(s) | Publication Date |
|--|---|-------------------------|
| <i>The American Adventure</i> | David Saville Muzzey | 1927 |
| <i>The Making of Modern America</i> | Leon H. Canford and Howard B. Wilder | 1950 |
| <i>A History of the United States, Volume 2</i> | Cecil Bining and Philip Shriver Klein | 1951 |
| <i>A Short History of the American People, Volume , 1865-1952 2nd ed.</i> | Frank L. Owsley, Oliver Perry Chitwood, and H.C. Nixon | 1952 |
| <i>The American Pageant 1st ed.</i> | Thomas Bailey | 1956 |
| <i>A History of the United States Since 1865</i> | Harry T. Williams, Richard Current, and Frank Freidel | 1959 |
| <i>History of a Free People</i> | Henry W. Bragdon and Samuel P. McCutchen | 1960 |
| <i>The United States: A History of a Democracy 2nd ed.</i> | Wesley M. Gewehr, et. al. | 1960 |
| <i>The Adventure of the American People</i> | Henry F. Graff and John A. Krout | 1960 |
| <i>The American Pageant 2nd ed.</i> | Thomas Bailey | 1961 |
| <i>The American People A History Vol. II Since 1865 3rd ed.</i> | Oliver Perry Chitwood, Rembert W. Patrick, and Robert E. Corlew | 1962 |
| <i>The American Pageant 3rd ed.</i> | Thomas Bailey | 1966 |
| <i>A History of the United States Since 1865</i> | Oscar T. Barck, Jr. and Hugh Talmage Lefler | 1968 |
| <i>A History of the American People</i> | Norman Graebner, Gilbert C. Fite, and Philip L. White | 1970 |
| <i>The American Nation</i> | John A. Garraty | 1971 |
| <i>The American Pageant 5th ed.</i> | Thomas Bailey | 1975 |
| <i>The American Pageant 6th ed.</i> | Thomas Bailey and David Kennedy | 1979 |
| <i>American History, A Survey 6th ed.</i> | Richard Current and Alan Brinkley | 1983 |
| <i>America: A Narrative History</i> | George Brown Tindall | 1984 |
| <i>The American Past: A Survey of American History</i> | Joseph R. Conlin | 1987 |
| <i>The American Pageant 11th ed.</i> | Thomas Bailey, David Kennedy, and Lizabeth Cohen | 1998 |
| <i>Pacemaker United States History 3rd ed.</i> | Globe Fearon Educational Publishers | 2001 |
| <i>Holt American Nation</i> | Paul Boyer | 2003 |
| <i>United States History</i> | Wayne E. King and John L. Napp | 2005 |
| <i>The American Pageant 13th ed. (AP).</i> | David Kennedy, Lizabeth Cohen, and Thomas Bailey | 2006 |

| | | |
|--|---|-------------------------|
| <i>American History, A Survey</i> 12 th ed. | Alan Brinkley | 2007 |
| <i>The American Journey</i> | David R. Goldfield et. al. | 2007 |
| <i>America Past and Present</i> 8 th ed. | Robert A. Divine et. al. | 2007 |
| <i>The American Promise: A Compact History</i> | James L. Roark, et.al. | 2007 |
| <i>America's History</i> 6 th ed. | James Henretta, David Brody, and Lynn Dumenil | 2008 |
| <i>Creation and Development of North Carolina in United States History</i> | William Devereell and Deborah G. White | 2008 |
| <i>The Americans</i> | Gerald A. Danzer et. al. | 2008 |
| <i>American Anthem</i> | Edward L. Ayers | 2008 |
| <i>The American Journey</i> | Joyce Oldham Appleby, Alan Brinkley, and James M. McPherson | 2008 |
| <i>Liberty, Equality, Power</i> | John M. Murrin et. al | 2008 |
| <i>The Enduring Vision</i> AP ed. | Paul S. Boyer | 2008 |
| <i>The American Vision</i> | Joyce Oldham Appleby et. al. | 2008 |
| <i>Prentice Hall United States History</i> NC ed. | Emma Lapsansky-Werner | 2009 |
| <i>United States History: Reconstruction to the Present</i> TN ed. | Emma Lapsansky-Werner | 2009 |
| <i>America: A Narrative History</i> 8 th ed. | Gerald Brown Tindall and David Shi | 2010 |
| <i>U.S. History Online Textbook</i> | ushistory.org | 2014 |
| Book Title | Author | Publication Date |
| <i>A People's History of the United States</i> | Howard Zinn | 1980 |
| <i>Lies My Teacher Told Me</i> | James W. Loewen | 1996 |
| <i>A History of the American People</i> | Paul Johnson | 1997 |
| <i>A Patriot's History of the United States</i> | Larry Schweikart and Michael Allen | 2004 |

Appendix C: Definitions of the CPI in Selected Textbooks and Websites

| Textbook | Defining the CPI |
|--|--|
| <i>The Making of Modern America</i> (1950) | “A Committee of Public Information was therefore appointed for the purpose of keeping the morale of the people high.” (669) |
| <i>A History of the United States, Volume 2</i> (1951) | CPI’s purpose: “to keep the public informed about the purposes and the progress of the war.” (390) |
| <i>Holt American Nation</i> (2003) | “Agency created in 1917 to increase public support for World War I” (R21) |
| <i>American History, A Survey</i> 12 th ed. (2007) | “The most conspicuous government effort to rally public support was a vast propaganda campaign orchestrated by the new Committee on Public Information.” (625) |
| <i>The American Journey</i> (2007) | “Government agency during World War I that sought to shape public opinion in support of the war effort through newspapers, pamphlets, speeches, films, and other media.” (G-3) |
| <i>America Past and Present</i> 8 th ed. (2007) | “Created in 1917 by President Wilson and headed by progressive journalist George Creel, this organization rallied support for American involvement in World War I through art, advertising, and film. Creel worked out a system of voluntary censorship with the press and distributed colorful posters and pamphlets. The CPI’s Division of Industrial Relations rallied labor to help the war effort.” (G-3) |
| <i>The Americans</i> (2008) | CPI’s purpose: “To popularize the war, the government set up the nation’s first propaganda agency, the (CPI)” (596) |
| <i>American Anthem</i> (2008) | “Created by President Wilson, this committee’s objective was to maximize national loyalty and support for World War I.” (R93) |
| <i>The American Journey</i> (2008) | “The mission of the committee was to persuade Americans that the war represented a battle for democracy and freedom.” (685) |
| <i>Liberty, Equality, Power</i> (2008) | “U.S. government agency established in 1917 to arouse support for the war and, later, to generate suspicion of war dissenters.” (G-3) |
| <i>The American Vision</i> (2008) | “President Wilson created the [CPI] to ‘sell’ the war to the American people.” (558) |
| <i>United States History: Reconstruction to the Present</i> (2009) | “Government agency created during World War I to encourage Americans to support the war.” (861) |
| <i>Wikipedia.com</i> | “The Committee on Public Information, also known as the CPI or the Creel Committee, was an independent agency of the government of the United States created to influence U.S. public opinion regarding American participation in World War I.” |
| <i>Wisegeek.com</i> | “The Committee on Public Information (CPI) was a government agency established in the United States during World War I with the aim of supporting the war effort.” |
| <i>Ask.com</i> | “The Committee on Public Information was also called the CPI or the Creel Committee. It was an independent agency of the United States government. The committee was formed to influence the U.S. public opinion on the participation of World War I.” |
| <i>Sourcewatch.org</i> | “The Committee on Public Information, also known as the Creel Committee, organized publicity on behalf of U.S. objectives during World War I.” |

Appendix D: Headings and Subheadings for CPI Sections

| Textbook | Heading/Subheading |
|--|---|
| <i>The Making of Modern America</i> (1950) | “Public Opinion is Mobilized” |
| <i>A History of the United States, Volume 2</i> (1951) | “Mobilization of Public Opinion” |
| <i>A Short History of the American People, Volume 2 (1865-1952)</i> (1952) | “Creating and Regulating Public Sentiment” |
| <i>The American Pageant</i> 1 st ed. (1956) | “Manipulating Minds” |
| <i>A History of the United States Since 1865</i> (1959) | “Molding Minds Toward War and Peace” |
| <i>History of a Free People</i> (1960) | “Control of Opinion” |
| <i>The Adventure of the American People</i> (1960) | “Mobilizing on the Home Front” and “The Creel Committee” |
| <i>The United States: A History of a Democracy</i> (2 nd ed.) (1960) | “Victory and Peace Terms” |
| <i>The American People A History Vol. II Since 1865</i> 3 rd ed. (1962) | “Creating and Regulating Public Sentiment” |
| <i>A History of the United States Since 1865</i> (1968) | “Problems of the Home Front” |
| <i>A History of the American People</i> (1970) | “The Quest for National Unity” |
| <i>The American Pageant</i> 6 th ed. -onward (1979 -) | “Creel Manipulates Minds” |
| <i>America: A Narrative History</i> (1984) | “Mobilizing a Nation” |
| <i>The American Past: A Survey of American History</i> (1987) | “Manipulating Public Opinion” and “Crushing Kultur” |
| <i>Holt American Nation</i> (2003) | “Influencing Attitudes” |
| <i>American History, A Survey</i> 12 th ed. (2007) | “Selling the War and Suppressing Dissent” |
| <i>The American Journey</i> (2007) | “Conquering Minds” |
| <i>America Past and Present</i> 8 th ed. (2007) | “The Conquest of Convictions” |
| <i>The American Promise</i> (2007) | “Rally around the Flag, or Else” |
| <i>America’s History</i> 6 th ed. (2008) | “Promoting National Unity” and “George Creel and Wartime Propaganda” |
| <i>The Americans</i> (2008) | “Selling the War” |
| <i>American Anthem</i> (2008) | “Influencing Public Opinion” and “Winning American Support” |
| <i>The American Journey</i> (2008) | “Mobilizing Support” and “Controlling Public Opinion” |
| <i>Liberty, Equality, Power</i> (2008) | “Arousing Patriotic Ardor” and “Wartime Repression” |
| <i>The Enduring Vision</i> (2008) | “Promoting the War and Suppressing Dissent” and “Advertising the War” |
| <i>The American Vision</i> (2008) | “Shaping Public Opinion” and “Selling the War” |
| <i>United States History: Reconstruction to the Present</i> (2009) | “Shaping Public Opinion” |
| <i>USHistory.org</i> (2014) | “Rallying the Country” |

Appendix E: George Creel as the “Great Man”

| Textbook | Descriptions of Creel | Mention of Other CPI Personnel | Mention Role of Volunteers | Mention of Progressives in CPI |
|--|--|--------------------------------|----------------------------|--------------------------------|
| <i>The Making of Modern America</i> (1950) | No mention of Creel | None | No | Not surveyed |
| <i>A History of the United States, Volume 2</i> (1951) | “Combining a prodigious vitality, a soaring imagination, and an uncanny ingenuity in devising ways and means, Creel launched a program of words and ideas that imposed a rigid conformity of thought on Americans” (309) | None | Yes | Not surveyed |
| <i>A Short History of the American People, Volume 2</i> (1952) | “energetic and enthusiastic journalist” (505) | None | No | Not surveyed |
| <i>The American Pageant</i> 1 st ed. (1956) | “a youngish journalist... who, though outspoken and tactless, was gifted with zeal and imagination” (735) | None | No | No |
| <i>A History of the United States Since 1865</i> (1959) | “A progressive newspaperman who had worked in the 1916 presidential campaign” (395) | None | Yes | Not surveyed |
| <i>History of a Free People</i> (1960) | No description | None | No | Not surveyed |
| <i>The Adventure of the American People</i> (1960) | Creel “so dominated it (the CPI) that it came to be known popularly as the Creel committee.” (533) | None | No | Not surveyed |
| <i>The United States: A History of a Democracy</i> 2 nd ed. (1960) | “ex-Socialist journalist” (489) | None | No | Not surveyed |
| <i>The American People A History Vol. II Since 1865</i> 3 rd ed. (1962) | “energetic and enthusiastic journalist” with “active imagination which served him in good stead” (339) | None | No | Not surveyed |
| <i>A History of the United States Since 1865</i> (1968) | No description | None | No | Not surveyed |
| <i>A History of the American People</i> (1970) | “vigorous and thoroughly dedicated” (943) | None | No | Not surveyed |

| | | | | |
|--|---|---|------------------------------|--|
| <i>America: A Narrative History</i> (1984) | “Denver newsman” (964) | Charles Dana Gibson, James Montgomery Flagg, Guy Stanton Ford | No | Not surveyed |
| <i>The American Past: A Survey of American History</i> (1987) | “a progressive newspaperman who had devoted his career to fighting the very intolerance and social injustice he now encouraged” (671) | None | No | Not surveyed |
| <i>Holt American Nation</i> (2003) | No description | None | No | No |
| <i>American History, A Survey</i> 12 th ed. (2007) | “Denver journalist” (625) | None | No | No |
| <i>The American Journey</i> (2007) | “journalist” (677) | None | No | No |
| <i>American Past and Present</i> 8 th ed. (2007) | “an outspoken progressive journalist” (706) | None | No | Ida Tarbell, Ray Stannard Baker |
| <i>The American Promise</i> (2007) | No description | None | Four-Minute Men ¹ | No |
| <i>America’s History</i> 6 th ed. (2008) | “journalist” (693) | None | Four-Minute Men | Tarbell and Baker |
| <i>The Americans</i> (2008) | “a former muckraking journalist” (569) | None | Implied | No |
| <i>American Anthem</i> (2008) | “newspaper reporter and political reformer” (603) | Flagg | No | No |
| <i>Liberty, Equality, Power</i> (2008) | “a Midwestern progressive and a muckraker” (701) | None | No | Yes (No names given) |
| <i>The Enduring Vision</i> (2008) | “journalist” (678) | Samuel Gompers ² | Four-Minute Men | Herbert Croly, Walter Lippmann, John Dewey |
| <i>United States History: Reconstruction to the Present</i> (2009) | “former journalist and passionate admirer of American institutions” (294) | None | No | No |
| <i>America: A Narrative History</i> 8 th ed. (2010) | “Denver newsman” | None | No | Yes |
| <i>Ushistory.org</i> (1984) | No description of Creel | Flagg, George Cohan ³ | No | No |

1. Most textbooks mention the Four-Minute Men but not all specify that these speakers were volunteers.

2. Gompers headed the “Alliance for Labor and Democracy,” which this textbook alleges was funded by the CPI (678).

Appendix F: The CPI “By the Numbers”

| Textbook | Numbers Provided |
|---|--|
| <i>The Making of Modern America</i> (1950) | Pamphlets were “distributed by the millions” (669) |
| <i>A History of the United States, Volume 2</i> (1951) | 75,000 Four-Minute Men, “millions of articles and pamphlets,” (390) |
| <i>A Short History of the American People, Volume 2 (1865-1952)</i> (1952) | Millions of pamphlets, 75,000 speakers |
| <i>The American Pageant</i> 1 st ed. (1956) | 150,000 workers, “an army of 75,000 ‘four-minute men’... who delivered over 7,500,000 speeches,” “millions of leaflets and pamphlets.” (735-736) |
| <i>A History of the United States Since 1865</i> (1959) | 150,000 writers, lecturers, actors, and artists; 75 million pieces of printed matter (397) |
| <i>History of a Free People</i> (1960) | “millions of pamphlets” (527) |
| <i>The Adventure of the American People</i> (1960) | “An army of 75,000 volunteers,” (533) |
| <i>The American People A History Vol. II Since 1865</i> 3 rd ed. (1962). | Millions of pamphlets, 75,000 speakers (“Creel Organized”) (339) |
| <i>A History of the American People</i> (1970) | “Creel unleashed on the country thousands of public speakers” (944) |
| <i>America: A Narrative History</i> (1984) | 75,000 Four-Minute Men (964) |
| <i>The American Past: A Survey of American History</i> (1987) | 75,000 Four-Minute Men (672) |
| <i>Holt American Nation</i> (2003) | No numbers provided |
| <i>The American Pageant</i> 13 th ed. (2006) | 150,000 workers, “an army of 75,000 ‘four-minute men,’” “millions of leaflets and pamphlets” (707-708) |
| <i>American History, A Survey</i> 12 th ed. (2007) | “75 million pieces of printed material in all” (625) Primary source: poster “Keep these off the USA: Buy more liberty bonds” |
| <i>The American Journey</i> (2007) | “75,000 speakers, who delivered a million speeches to 400 million listeners” (677) |
| <i>America Past and Present</i> 8 th ed. (2007) | “more than 75 million pamphlets,” “Creel also enlisted 75,000 ‘four-minute men” (706) |
| <i>The American Promise</i> (2007) | Four-Minute Men “a squad of 75,000 volunteers” (574) |

3. The text states: “He (Creel) commissioned George M. Cohan to write patriotic songs intended to stoke the fires of American nationalism.” In point of fact, George Cohan was not affiliated with the CPI and there is no evidence that Cohan wrote “Over There” or any other patriotic song at the behest of George Creel.

| | |
|--|---|
| <i>America's History</i> 6 th ed. (2008) | "The CPI touched the lives of practically every American. It distributed seventy-five million pieces of patriotic literature and, by enlisting thousands of volunteers—'four-minute men'—to deliver short pro-war speeches at local movie theaters, reached a huge audience." (693) |
| <i>The Americans</i> (2008) | "thousands of paintings, posters, cartoons, and sculptures," "He (Creel) recruited some 75,000 men to serve as 'Four-Minute Men,' "he (Creel) ordered a printing of almost 25 million copies of "How War Came to America," "He distributed some 75 million pamphlets, booklets, and leaflets." (596) |
| <i>American Anthem</i> (2008) | None given (no mention of Four-Minute Men) |
| <i>The American Journey</i> (2008) | "millions of pro-war pamphlets, posters, articles, and books" (685) "It was the greatest propaganda campaign the nation had ever seen." |
| <i>Liberty, Equality, Power</i> (2008) | "75 million copies of pamphlets," "it (CPI) trained a force of 75,000 'Four-Minute Men,'" thousands of press releases," (701) |
| <i>The Enduring Vision</i> (2008) | 75,000 Four-Minute Men (678) |
| <i>The American Vision</i> (2008) | "The CPI distributed pamphlets and arranged for thousands of short patriotic talks," "some 75,000 speakers, known as Four-Minute men" (558) Primary sources: Pershing's Crusaders poster, War Saving Stamps poster, Red Cross poster, excerpt from a CPI pamphlet from Feb. 1918, newspaper column on German atrocities from May 1915 |
| <i>United States History: Reconstruction to the Present</i> (2009) | 75,000 million pamphlets, 6,000 press releases, an "army of 75,000 speakers," "millions of posters" (294) |
| <i>America: A Narrative History</i> 8 th ed. (2010) | 75,000 Four-Minute Men (1001) |

Appendix G: Evidence of Misattribution, Factual Errors and Anti-CPI Bias

| Textbook | Errors and Misattributions | Other Evidence of Anti-CPI bias |
|---|--|--|
| <i>A History of the United States, Volume 2</i> (1951) | Blames the CPI for banning of German language, music, etc. (391) | “Creel launched a program of words and ideas that imposed a rigid conformity of thought on Americans” (390). |
| <i>The American Pageant</i> (1956-2012) | <i>The Kaiser, the Beast of Berlin</i> and <i>To Hell with the Kaiser</i> | None |
| <i>The United States: A History of a Democracy</i> 2 nd ed. (1960) | None | “George Creel saw to it that American’s were well instructed in the purposes of the war, the wickedness of the enemy, and the need to buy war bonds” (489). |
| <i>A History of the United States Since 1865</i> (1968) | None | “In thus stirring the public and silencing critics, Creel and his agents were most effective, though much of this propaganda made strange reading after the war was over.” (270) |
| <i>America: A Narrative History</i> (1984) | <i>The Kaiser, Beast of Berlin</i> (starring “as the spike-helmeted embodiment of Prussian villainy, Erich von Stroheim”) (964) | “Hardly any public group escaped harangue by one of the 75,000 Four-Minute Men.” (964) |
| <i>The American Past: A Survey of American History</i> (1987) | “Film stars such as Douglas Fairbanks, Charlie Chaplin, and Mary Pickford (“America’s Sweetheart”) appeared at Liberty Bond rallies and spoke anti-German lines written by the CPI.” ⁴ (672) | “Second (to censoring the news), and far more ominously, the CPI took up the task of molding public opinion so that slight deviations from full support of the war were considered disloyal.” (671) |
| <i>Holt American Nation</i> (2003) | Tacit attribution of <i>The Claws of the Hun</i> and <i>The Kaiser: The Beast of Berlin</i> (645) | “The CPI initially put out fact-based material that presented an upbeat picture of the war. Soon, however, the CPI began creating propaganda that pictured the Germans as evil monsters.” (645) |
| <i>American History, A Survey</i> 12 th ed. (2007) | <i>The Kaiser: The Beast of Berlin</i> and <i>The Prussian Cur</i> “Government-promoted posters and films, at first relatively mild in tone, were by 1918 becoming lurid portrayals of the savagery of the Germans, bearing such titles as <i>The Prussian Cur</i> and <i>The Kaiser: Beast of Berlin</i> , encouraging Americans to think of the German people as something close to savages” (625). | “Many believed that a crucial prerequisite for victory was an energetic, even coercive, effort to unite public opinion behind the military effort.” (625) “The CPI attempted at first to distribute only the ‘facts,’ believing that the truth would speak for itself. As the war continued, however, their tactics became increasingly crude.” (625) |

4. The same review in *Time* (see note 4 above) states “Few have forgotten the CPI’s war expositions, its traveling French officers, such stunts as Theda Bara in her Liberty Bond booth before the New York Public Library (receipts: \$300,000 in one day).” Creel’s writings provides no evidence that he “hired” any of the movies stars who participated in Liberty Bond rallies or that the CPI provided them with “anti-German lines.” In *Words that Won the War*, James Mock and Cedric Larson connect movies stars such as Theda Bara, Douglas Fairbanks, and Mary Pickford to the Liberty Bond drives but credit this to the Department of Treasury.

| | | |
|--|--|---|
| <i>The American Journey</i> (2007) | None | “Despite its title, the CPI sought to manipulate, not inform, public opinion.” (677) |
| <i>America Past and Present</i> 8 th ed. (2007) | “Exploiting a new medium, the CPI promoted films such as <i>The Prussian Cur</i> and <i>The Kaiser, The Beast of Berlin</i> ” (706) | “At first they (Four-Minute Men) were instructed to stress facts and stay away from emotions, particularly hatred, but by the beginning of 1918, the instructions shifted; the Germans were to be depicted as bloodthirsty Huns bent on world conquest.” (706) |
| <i>The American Promise</i> (2007) | Indirect connection to <i>The Kaiser: The Beast of Berlin</i> (which is described as a musical that opened on Broadway in 1918). (574) | None |
| <i>The Americans</i> (2008) | “He (Creel) ordered a printing of almost 25 million copies of “How War Came to America,” (596) | None |
| <i>American Anthem</i> (2008) | “Creel hired popular movie stars such as Mary Pickford and Douglas Fairbanks to speak on behalf of the war effort.” (603) | None |
| <i>Liberty, Equality, Power</i> (2008) | “Destroy This Mad Brute” and <i>The Kaiser: The Beast of Berlin</i> and <i>The Prussian Cur</i> | <i>Caption to image of the poster “Destroy this Mad Brute”</i> : “The Campaign of Fear—By 1918, the government’s appeal to Americans’ best aspirations—to spread liberty and democracy—had been replaced by a determination to arouse fear of subversion and conquest. Here the German enemy is depicted as a terrifying brute who violates Lady Liberty and uses his <i>kultur</i> club to destroy civilization” (703) |
| <i>The Enduring Vision</i> (2008) | <i>The Kaiser: The Beast of Berlin</i> | “While claiming merely to combat rumors with facts, the Creel committee in reality publicized the government’s version of events and discredited all who questioned that version.” (678) |
| <i>America: A Narrative History</i> 8 th ed. (2010) | <i>The Kaiser, Beast of Berlin</i> (including still photo) (1001) | None |
| <i>UShistory.org</i> | “He (Creel) commissioned George M. Cohan to write patriotic songs intended to stoke the fires of American nationalism.” | None |

Appendix H: References to the CPI’s Role in Promoting Intolerance and Censorship

| Textbook | CPI and Intolerance | CPI and Censorship |
|---|--|--|
| <i>A History of the United States, Volume 2</i> (1951) | “But at the same time that Creel’s committee created an atmosphere of 100 per cent Americanism, it opened the door to bitter hatreds. Hatred of Germany and all things German became universal and wholly indiscriminate.” (391) | Yes. “It (CPI) was not intended to be a censorship agency, although some aspects of censorship necessarily followed the selection or omission of material offered for public consumption.” (390) |
| <i>A Short History of the American People, 1865-1952</i> 2 nd ed. (1952) | No | Explains voluntary censorship. “There was no censorship...except the withholding by the military authorities of information such information as might aid the enemy.” (339) |
| <i>A History of the United States Since 1865</i> (1959) | No | Explains voluntary censorship (same as in <i>A Short History</i> above). |
| <i>History of a Free People</i> (1960) | CPI “promoted the very intolerance which Wilson dreaded.” (527) | No |
| <i>The United States: A History of a Democracy</i> (1960) | “There was little tolerance for anyone suspected of not supporting the war, and freedom suffered.” (489) | No |
| <i>The American People A History Vol. II Since 1865</i> 3 rd ed. (1962) | No | Explains voluntary censorship |
| <i>A History of the United States Since 1865</i> (1968) | No | “Through the daily <i>Official Bulletin</i> , it published those ‘facts’ about the war that government officials believed should be released” (270) |
| <i>America: A Narrative History</i> (1984) | “The ultimate irony in Creel’s ‘expression, not repression,’ however, was that one led to the other. By arousing public opinion to such a pitch of excitement, the war effort channeled the crusading zeal of progressivism into grotesque campaigns for ‘Americanism’ and witch-hunting.” (964) | Yes. Explains Creel’s concept of “expression, not repression” but notes that this failed (964) |
| <i>The American Past: A Survey of American History</i> (1987) | “The CPI could and did launch a massive propaganda campaign that depicted German <i>Kultur</i> as intrinsically vile.” (671) | Yes. CPI censored news from Europe to shield the American public from any news that would be demoralizing (671) |
| <i>Holt American Nation</i> (2003) | “The groups (including the CPI) were particularly hard on German-Americans, many of whom had lost their jobs.” (645) | No |
| <i>American History, A Survey</i> 12 th ed. (2007) | No | Reference to “self-censorship” and the “veiled threats” that accompanied it (625) |

| | | |
|--|--|---|
| <i>The American Journey</i> (2007) | <p>“Obsessed with national unity and conformity, Creel promoted fear, hatred, and prejudice in the name of a triumphant Americanism.” (677)</p> <p>“This emphasis on unreasoning conformity helped prompt hysterical attacks on German-Americans, radicals, and pacifists.” (677)</p> | No |
| <i>America Past and Present</i> 8 th ed. (2007) | No | Voluntary censorship (706) |
| <i>The American Promise</i> (2007) | “A firestorm of anti-German passion erupted. Across the nation, “100% American” campaigns enlisted ordinary people to sniff out disloyalty.” (757) | No |
| <i>American Journey</i> (2008) | “During the war, the Committee on Public Information began trying to silence dissent and portrayed people who were against the war as unpatriotic.” (686) | No |
| <i>The Americans</i> (2008) | “Creel’s propaganda campaign was highly effective. However, while the campaign promoted patriotism, it also inflamed hatred and violations of the civil liberties of certain ethnic groups and opponents of the war.” (597) | No |
| <i>American Anthem</i> (2008) | “As many Americans became more patriotic and supportive of the war, some began to distrust all things German as well.” (603) | No |
| <i>America’s History</i> 6 th ed. (2008) | Links CPI to Americanization campaign (banishing of German music, language; renaming sauerkraut and hamburgers) (693) | No |
| <i>Liberty, Equality, Power</i> (2008) | “By 1918, the CPI’s campaign had developed a darker and more coercive side. Inflammatory advertisements called on patriots to report on neighbors, coworkers, and ethnics whom they suspected of subverting the war effort”... The CPI aroused hostility towards Germans by spreading lurid tales of German atrocities and encouraging the public to see movies such as <i>The Prussian Cur</i> and <i>The Beast of Berlin</i> . (702) | No |
| <i>The Enduring Vision</i> (2008) | “Responding to wartime propaganda, some Americans became almost hysterical in their strident patriotism and their hostility to radicals and dissenters.” (679) | “Propaganda releases... appeared in the press as ‘news’ with no indication of their source” (678) |
| <i>United States History: Reconstruction to the Present</i> (2009) | “The CPI also stressed the cruelty and wickedness of the enemy, particularly Germany, which in some cases aggravated resentment towards German-Americans.” (294) | No |

Appendix I: Examples of CPI Products Found in Textbooks

| Textbook | Posters | Other Examples |
|---|--|--|
| <i>A History of the United States, Volume 2</i> (1951) | “I Want YOU!” (389) | |
| <i>History of a Free People</i> (1960) | “That Liberty Shall not Perish from the Earth” (for war bonds drive) | |
| <i>A History of the United States Since 1865</i> (1968) | “I Want YOU!” (271) | |
| <i>The American Nation</i> 2 nd ed. (1971) | “Remember the Flag of Liberty and Support It” (for Third Liberty Loan) (287) | |
| <i>The American Pageant</i> 6 th ed. (1979) | “Destroy This Mad Brute” (668) | |
| <i>The American Past: A Survey of American History</i> (1987) | “Halt the Hun” (657) “We will never be sunk!” (671) “Will you have a part in victory” (666) | Excerpt from Four-Minute Man speech captioned: “The Four-Minute Men were as melodramatic as the films they interrupted.” (673) |
| <i>The American Pageant</i> 11 th ed. (1998) | “Halt the Hun!” | “Over There” |
| <i>Pacemaker United States History</i> 3 rd ed. (2001) | “The Navy Needs You!” ⁵ | |
| <i>Holt American Nation</i> (2003) | “Can Vegetables and Fruit AND the Kaiser too” and “Over the Top for You” (Third Liberty Loan) (645) | |
| <i>The American Pageant</i> 13 th ed. (2006) | “Remember Belgium” (Fourth Liberty Loan) (698) “Enlist: On Which Side of the Window are You?” (700) | |
| <i>American History, A Survey</i> 12 th ed. (2007) | “I Want You!” (612) “Keep these off the U.S.A.” (Liberty Bonds) (625) | |
| <i>The American Journey</i> (2007) | “Beat Back the Hun” (678) | |
| <i>America Past and Present</i> 8 th ed. (2007) | “Food Will Win the War” (709) | |
| <i>America’s History</i> 6 th ed. (2008) | “Your Duty—Buy United States Government Bonds” (683) “Halt the Hun!” (in “Documents to Accompany, p. 199) | George Creel’s account of the Four-Minute Men (in “Documents to Accompany”) |

5. This textbook’s treatment of the CPI comes in the form of an activity (“Connecting History and Language: Propaganda”). After explaining how the CPI used a combination of facts and opinions in its propaganda, the exercise asks “Sometimes propaganda includes statements that are not true. Do you think it is right to use false statements to help a good cause?” (318) The answer (from the Teacher’s edition) is: “Using false statements is unnecessary; often fails. Using false statements is morally wrong” (318).

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| <i>The Americans</i> (2008) | “Food is Ammunition – Don’t Waste It.” | |
| <i>American Anthem</i> (2008) | “I Want You!” “Over the Top for You” | |
| <i>The American Journey</i> (2008) | “Food is Ammunition – Don’t Waste it” and “Spirit of 1917” (687) | “You’re a Grand Old Flag” |
| <i>Liberty, Equality, Power</i> (2008) | “Destroy This Mad Brute” | |
| <i>The Enduring Vision</i> (2008) | None | “Over There” |
| <i>The American Vision</i> (2008) | “Help Stop This” (War Savings Stamps) (562) Poster for <i>Pershing’s Crusaders</i> “Civilization vs. Barbarism” (Red Cross) (563) | Newspaper column from New York Times on German Atrocities (563) |
| <i>Prentice Hall United States History, North Carolina ed.</i> (2009) | “Over the Top for You” (Third Liberty Loan) (499) | Postcard (with flags of allies) “To make the World Safe for Democracy” (498) |
| <i>America: A Narrative History</i> 8 th ed. (2010) | None | Still photo from <i>The Kaiser: The Beast of Berlin</i> (1001) |
| <i>USHistory.org</i> (2014) | “I Want You!” “Beat Back the Hun with Liberty Bonds” | |

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