

Selling the War

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CONTEXT

Shortly after entering World War I in 1917, President Woodrow Wilson established the Committee on Public Information (CPI or "Creel Committee") to help Americans understand the country's reasons for fighting in the war. The CPI also revealed the role that citizens could play in supporting the Allied cause. This new pro-war campaign was a hard shift from the United States' former policy of "isolationism," and lack of direct participation in the war. Under the direction of George Creel, the CPI began publishing propaganda in the form of posters, speeches, films, advertisements, and other varieties of mass media that were designed to influence public opinion. This activity is designed to help students analyze the effectiveness of CPI propaganda on the American public during World War I.

PRIMARY SOURCES

Complete Report of the Chairman of the Committee on Public Information (excerpt)

Internet Archive

<https://archive.org/details/completereportofocounit/page/n9>

Poster Collection, World War I Posters

Library of Congress

<https://www.loc.gov/collections/world-war-i-posters/>

Sound recording, Richard A. Purdy, *The Third Liberty Loan*, 1918 (excerpts)

Library of Congress (2004650683)

<https://www.loc.gov/item/2004650683/>

OBJECTIVES

At the end of this activity, students will be able to:

- Identify the purpose of the CPI and the ways in which it attempted to influence public opinion; and
- Analyze the effectiveness of propaganda produced through the CPI in inspiring American participation in the war effort.

Teacher Instructions

- Print copies or (or distribute electronically) the excerpt from the *Complete Report of the Chairman of the Committee on Public Information*.
- Divide the class into three groups.
- Make three copies of the Analyzing Propaganda Organizer (one for each group).
- Allow students to read the excerpt from the Complete Report of the Chairman of the Committee on Public Information. As a group, discuss questions found on the following page.
- Divide the class into three groups. Explain that among the many issues that the CPI needed to address were:
 - *Why is the United States fighting in World War I?*
 - *Why should I support the war effort?*
 - *How can I support the war effort?*
- Assign each group one of these questions and direct the groups use the links provided to locate three primary sources that attempt to address that question.

***Teacher Tip:** Depending on the needs of your students, you may wish to pre-select certain posters or audio excerpts in advance. If so, either print off copies of the selected documents for the group, or direct them to look at only the documents that you have chosen on the website.
- Invite a spokesperson from each group to present their findings to the class.
- Project (or distribute) the Selling the War Reflection Questions. Allow students time for individual reflection and, if time permits, hold a class-wide discussion about their answers.

***Teacher Tip:** These questions could be assigned for homework and the discussion held the next day.

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Questions for Discussion

What was the United States' policy prior to entering the war?

The United States was isolationist prior to the war.

On what date did the United States enter World War I?

The United States declared war on Germany on April 6, 1917.

On what date was the Committee on Public Information created?

The CPI was established on April 14, 1917.

What does this suggest about the Wilson administration's position on the need for such a committee? Why does Wilson need to convince the American people to join/support the war?

Given that Wilson created the CPI within the first week of U.S. entry into the war, it seems that this was a high priority. The administration must have felt that Americans needed a better understanding of the war and what America's role in that war would be.

How does committee chairman George Creel describe the purpose of the committee? Use a direct quote from the document to support your answer.

Creel stated that the CPI's purpose was to, "...drive home the absolute justice of America's cause, the absolute selflessness of America's aims," by "...devis[ing] machinery with which to make the fight for loyalty and unity at home, and for friendship and understanding of the neutral nations of the world." *Other quotations may be used.

How does Creel suggest the committee accomplished its task? Use a direct quote from the document to support your answer.

Creel stated that, "There was...no medium of appeal that we did not employ. The printed word, the spoken word, the motion picture, the poster, the signboard - all these were used in our campaign to make our own people and all other peoples understand the causes that compelled America to take arms in defense of its liberties and free institutions." *Other quotations may be used.

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COMPLETE REPORT OF THE CHAIRMAN OF THE COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC INFORMATION (EXCERPT)

Internet Archive

COMPLETE REPORT

OF THE

CHAIRMAN OF THE COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC INFORMATION.

NEW YORK, June 1, 1919.

To the President:

I have the honor to submit herewith a full report of the activities of the Committee on Public Information from the time of its establishment to the period of its conclusion.

Created under your Executive order of April 14, 1917, in the very first hours of the war, and forced into instant operation by imperative necessities, the committee had to start with a purpose only, rather than any predetermined program, and grew under pressure instead of the orderly sequence provided by deliberated plan. This primary purpose was to drive home the absolute justice of America's cause, the absolute selflessness of America's aims.

Realizing public opinion as a vital part of the national defense, a mighty force in the national attack, our task was to devise machinery with which to make the fight for loyalty and unity at home, and for the friendship and understanding of the neutral nations of the world.

At no point were our functions negative. We dealt in the positive, and our emphasis was ever on expression, not suppression. We fought indifference and disaffection in the United States and we fought falsehood abroad. We strove for the maintenance of our own morale by every process of stimulation; we sought the verdict of mankind by truth telling. We did not call it "propaganda," for that word, in German hands, had come to be associated with lies and corruptions. Our work was educational and informative only, for we had such confidence in our case as to feel that only fair presentation of its facts was needed.

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2 REPORT COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC INFORMATION.

Under the insistence of this necessity, the committee grew to be a world organization. Not only did it reach deep into every community in the United States, but it carried the aims and objects of America to every land.

There was no part of the great war machinery that we did not touch, no medium of appeal that we did not employ. The printed word, the spoken word, the motion picture, the poster, the signboard—all these were used in our campaign to make our own people and all other peoples understand the causes that compelled America to take arms in defense of its liberties and free institutions.

Besides the daily war news, issued officially to the whole press of the country, the committee supplied the specialized press with feature articles and selected services. We had deep appreciation that it was not the war of an administration, but the war of 110,000,000 people, and even to the point of military indiscretion we opened up the activities of the Government to the inspection of the citizenship. Of 6,000 releases, dealing with the most vital importances, only three were questioned as to accuracy, and inquiry upheld two of these.

In the Four Minute Men alone the committee commanded the volunteer services of 75,000 speakers, operating in 5,200 communities, and making a total of 755,190 speeches.

Through the speaking division it toured great groups, like the Blue Devils, Pershing's Veterans, and the Belgians, arranged mass meetings, conducted 45 war conferences, sent famous speakers from coast to coast, and coordinated the speaking activities of the entire Nation.

Through a pamphlet division it prepared and published the war literature that was issued in pamphlet form. It commanded the services of any writer that it chose to call, and at its back were over 3,000 of the leading historians of the country, every man in the service. These pamphlets, covering every phase of America's ideals, purposes, and aims, were printed in many languages. Seventy-five millions reached the people of America, and other millions went to every corner of the world, carrying our defense and our attack. Experts planned the most effective circulation schemes, and experts directed the distribution, in order that every printed bullet might reach its mark.

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Analyzing Propaganda Organizer

DIRECTIONS

Visit the following websites to locate and analyze three primary source documents that illustrate the CPI's efforts to answer the question that your group has been assigned. Complete the graphic organizer as a team.

- Library of Congress World War I Poster Collection (<https://www.loc.gov/collections/world-war-i-posters/>)
- Sound recording, Richard A. Purdy, *The Third Liberty Loan*, 1918 (excerpts) (<https://www.loc.gov/item/2004650683/>)
 - Note that additional sound recordings from the era are linked at the bottom of this page.



MY GROUP'S QUESTION:

EXAMPLE ONE	EXAMPLE TWO	EXAMPLE THREE
Title & Contributors:	Title & Contributors:	Title & Contributors:
What is the message of this piece of propaganda? Does this address an immediate need, or a long-term goal?	What is the message of this piece of propaganda? Does this address an immediate need, or a long-term goal?	What is the message of this piece of propaganda? Does this address an immediate need, or a long-term goal?
How does this piece convey its message? Does it rely on facts, emotions, moral/ethical values, etc. to make its point? Is there any obvious bias present?	How does this piece convey its message? Does it rely on facts, emotions, moral/ethical values, etc. to make its point? Is there any obvious bias present?	How does this piece convey its message? Does it rely on facts, emotions, moral/ethical values, etc. to make its point? Is there any obvious bias present?
Could this piece appeal to anyone, or is it targeting a particular type of person / group?	Could this piece appeal to anyone, or is it targeting a particular type of person / group?	Could this piece appeal to anyone, or is it targeting a particular type of person / group?
In your opinion, how effective would this piece be in motivating Americans to support the war effort? Explain your answer.	In your opinion, how effective would this piece be in motivating Americans to support the war effort? Explain your answer.	In your opinion, how effective would this piece be in motivating Americans to support the war effort? Explain your answer.

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Selling the War Reflection Questions

DIRECTIONS

Answer each of the following questions in complete sentences. Be sure to provide detailed explanations to support your answers.

1. Taken as a whole, what do the messages conveyed in these posters suggest about the CPI's understanding of the values and beliefs of the American public during World War I? Do you believe that the CPI was accurate in this assessment?

2. Do you believe that the CPI's advertising campaign did an adequate job of encouraging a wide variety of Americans to contribute to the war effort in a multitude of ways? What, if anything, could have been done to improve their effectiveness?

3. Do you believe the efforts of the CPI were a necessary and justifiable use of government resources? Why, or why not?
