

## HOW WWI CHANGED AMERICA:

# Selling the War

### VIDEO TRANSCRIPT:

Christopher Capozzola, Ph.D.:

After the United States enters the war in April 1917, President Woodrow Wilson knows that he needs to mobilize not just the American army but the American people. And he knows that's a difficult task.

So what Wilson does, is he launches a massive campaign of propaganda that taps into every media that's available in America at the time. This includes newspapers, movies, posters, toys and games for children, all aspects of popular culture. In some ways, this new propaganda machine is not so different from this new industry called advertising. But now, all of those techniques are being turned to advertising the American war effort.

The primary person behind this effort is George Creel, who presents Wilson with the opportunity to turn this propaganda machine into a government agency, the Committee on Public Information, or CPI.

Libby H. O'Connell, Ph.D.:

The major mission of the CPI is to get all of Americans on board with the war effort. Creel gets 75,000 men to volunteer to be what were called The 4 Minute Men. They went all over the United States, they were speaking in movie theaters, they were speaking in libraries, they were telling people to support our efforts in the war. Buy Liberty Bonds, follow our food policies, eat less, conserve more and grow your own food. And then supply the labor that's needed, not just in the war industries but also on farms.

Christopher Capozzola, Ph.D.:

The beauty of the 4 Minute Men is that they are doing the government's work but they are, in fact, actually volunteers, neighbors, people you might already know who are volunteering to, sort of, spread the message and to create the kind of national unity that President Wilson worried wasn't actually there under the surface.

Libby H. O'Connell, Ph.D.:

George Creel is also having newspapers follow the articles that he is actually giving to them through a daily bulletin. This is the day of newspapers being abundant and they're looking for ways to fill their columns, the daily bulletin provides these things copyright free, so you can just take an article that was written by a staff member of George Creel's. So newspapers will have a lot of pro-war articles.

Christopher Capozzola, Ph.D.:

Americans are seeing propaganda images at the movies, they're seeing it in the newspapers but they're also seeing it everywhere they go in the form of posters. Some of the most famous artists in America are making them and millions of them are being printed and distributed all around the country.

John H. Morrow, Jr., Ph.D.:

It is, in particular, a poster war. They're graphic, they're violent, they're bloody. There's one of the Kaiser as a giant spider attempting to spread his hairy legs all over the globe.

Libby H. O'Connell, Ph.D.:

Sometimes it's how awful Germans are, there's an image of a German soldier dragging a young girl. Posters that encourage people to leave the meat and the bread for the soldiers, you'll see images of women for the Land Army, support for the YMCA.

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Christopher Capozzola, Ph.D.:

Probably the best known is a poster that was made by James Montgomery Flagg. Uncle Sam had been around for a long time but James Montgomery Flagg's version, which is the one with Uncle Sam pointing at the viewer and saying, "I want you", is a product of the First World War and in some ways one of the biggest icons of the war that we remember a century later.

Libby H. O'Connell, Ph.D.:

Creel is hugely successful. There are a lot of people who hate Creel, and there'll be people who protest against him and many First Amendment rights will be squashed. But the majority of Americans are influenced by his propaganda machine and get behind the war effort.

John H. Morrow, Jr., Ph.D.:

You do have these pockets of people who are reluctant, who say, "I don't believe in war, I don't think this war is just, I won't fight." You are likely to end up in prison for your ideas in these conditions.

Christopher Capozzola, Ph.D.:

Not everybody believed what they were hearing and in the years after the war they were concerned that propaganda was a powerful and dangerous tool.

The Committee on Public Information shuts down almost as soon as the war is over, but its messages were remembered a generation later. And in fact, when the Nazis were developing their propaganda machine on the road to World War II, they studied George Creel and tried to adapt some of that to their political ends.

Libby H. O'Connell, Ph.D.:

I think World War I sets the stage for propaganda that we see today in one very important way, it was ubiquitous, it's everywhere. The difference is that in World War I, it was pretty clear where this information was coming from. And today, we might be getting messaging that we don't quite necessarily recognize as propaganda.

Christopher Capozzola, Ph.D.:

We see that although propaganda is necessary in any modern war, you have to convey what you are fighting for. It's also dangerous. It can distort messages, it can get people to experience emotions, like fear and hate.

A century later, we still live with those powerful and dangerous legacies of what we created in World War I.

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## CREDITS

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SHUTTERSTOCK  
THE U.S. WORLD WAR ONE CENTENNIAL COMMISSION  
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Music

"YOU'RE LOST AND WERE FOUND"  
WRITTEN BY SHIPS & S. R. BROWN  
COURTESY OF EXTREME MUSIC

"ALL NIGHT"  
WRITTEN BY J. C. ENRIQUEZ  
COURTESY OF EXTREME MUSIC