**U.S. Entry into WWI**

**Mobilizing the Nation for War**

In April of 1917, President Woodrow Wilson received a declaration of war from Congress. Even as America prepared for war, the country remained split over the prospects of sending American troops to fight the nations that comprised the Central Powers. In an attempt to unify the nation, the Wilson administration undertook a remarkable propaganda campaign to sway American opinion toward intervention in the European conflict. The centerpiece of this campaign was the Committee on Public Information, also known as the Creel Committee.

Headed by George Creel, a well-known progressive journalist, the committee’s purpose was to sell the American public on the war, to communicate the aims and goals of the Allied Powers, and to demoralize the Central Powers in the eyes of Americans. The committee mobilized about 75,000 individuals, known as “four-minute men,” to deliver pro-American addresses in public places. The committee also created and distributed millions of copies of pamphlets, posters, and leaflets exhorting the dangers of the Central Powers.

The Food Administration, headed by Herbert Hoover, worked to ensure the well being of the nation’s food supply. Hoover sought voluntary compliance for the food administration’s policies. To save food for export, Hoover asked Americans to observe “meatless Tuesdays” and “wheatless Wednesdays” in the name of patriotism. He also asked Americans to plant “victory gardens,” small gardens that sprouted up in backyards and empty lots, to help make Americans more self-sufficient and less dependent on the national food supply.

Hoover’s efforts paid off for both the U.S. and the Allies. Food produced in America increased in yield by 25 percent, while food exported to the Allied nations swelled to over three times the amount before the push of voluntary conservation. The success of the Food Administration did not go unnoticed by other agencies. The Fuel Administration enacted similar voluntary measures by proposing “heatless Mondays” and “gasless Sundays.”

During this time of conservation, Congress also restricted the use of food materials for manufacturing alcoholic beverages. The exercise of self-denial that emerged among citizens in reaction to the war accelerated the prohibition movement, which was already sweeping across the country.

As Americans struggled with conservation on the home front, the government struggled with how to provide the necessary food and munitions to troops. Although Wilson was a powerful and inspiring war leader, he found himself unable to build the necessary cooperation between military and civilian agencies. As a result of disorganized and often conflicting information about the amounts of food, munitions, and money required to wage the war, the American government found itself unable to provide troops and the other Allied Powers with much-needed supplies.

Wilson placed the task of organizing this crucial information into the hands of the War Industries Board, headed by stock speculator Bernard Baruch. The board was charged with effectively allocating scarce resources, standardizing the production of war goods, fixing prices, and coordinating American and Allied purchasing.

To minimize potential labor disputes that would hinder production, and therefore the country’s war efforts, Wilson formed the National War Labor Board. The board, chaired by former President William Howard Taft, was charged with maintaining order in the nation’s commercial sector by settling disputes between management and workers. The board used its power to strong-arm management into establishing higher wages and eight-hour workdays; however, the board’s most significant contribution was its recognition of workers’ rights to unionize, which revolutionized management-labor relations. In fact, union membership had nearly doubled to three million by the war’s end.

As a part of the American government’s propaganda effort to bolster public support for the war, the Committee on Public Information established powerful anti-German sentiment in the U.S. As a result, Americans rejected all things German, including German music, literature, and food. Some American citizens readily reported, without factual knowledge, spying and sabotage in the U.S. by German agents.

To reassure American citizens and to quash the dissenting political opinions of the anti-war factions, the U.S. government established the Espionage Act of 1917. Under this act, anyone convicted of aiding the enemy, obstructing military recruiting, or inciting rebellion in the military was subject to fines of up to $10,000 and imprisonment for up to 20 years.

Almost one year later, Congress passed the Sedition Act of 1918. In an effort to expand the powers of the Espionage Act, the Sedition Act made it illegal to speak against the purchase of war bonds or to “utter, print, write or publish any disloyal, profane, scurrilous or abusive language” against the U.S. government or the Constitution.

These two acts provided the legal foundation for almost two thousand prosecutions, many of which involved antiwar Socialists and members of a radical group called the Industrial Workers of the World. In 1918, Socialist Eugene V. Debs was convicted under the Espionage Act and sentenced to 10 years in a federal penitentiary for giving an anti-war speech. Industrial Workers of the World leader William D. Haywood and 99 of his associates were also convicted.

Many in America argued that the Espionage and Sedition Act were in violation of the Constitution’s First Amendment. The argument was ultimately debated in the Supreme Court in the case of Schenck v. U.S. in 1919. Charles Schenck was the general secretary of the Socialist Party. Schenck believed that the military draft was unlawful and mailed letters to draftees urging them not to report for military duty, an action clearly in violation of the Espionage Act. Like Debs and Haywood, Schenck was arrested, charged, and convicted for the crime of criticizing a government initiative.

During Schenck’s appeal, the Supreme Court upheld the legality of his conviction, thereby supporting the structure and purpose of the Espionage Act. Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes argued that during a time of war the nation had the right to protect its interest even if that meant suppressing certain freedoms.

Holmes argued that if Schenck had mailed his letters challenging the draft during peacetime, he would be safe from prosecution. During a time of war, however, Holmes contended that Schenck’s actions represented a “clear and present danger” to the United States. If words are used to create a clear and present danger to the nation, Justice Holmes said, the government has the right to suppress such behavior.

Copyright © 2004 The Regents Of The University Of California