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0521022002 - Propaganda and Democracy: The American Experience of Media and Mass Persuasion

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CHAPTER I

PROLOGUE: DISCOVERING PROPAGANDA

For opponents of U.S. entry into the Great War, popular pacifist sentiment was at a low ebb in the summer of 1918. In late 1914, one could still attract a following by announcing formation of a group to fight increases in U.S. military spending, as when Oswald Garrison Villard, pacifist editor, founded the League to Limit Armaments. But by 1918, most of Villard's erstwhile followers had long seen the new light on the Great War. Among those now sounding the war tocsin were such former champions of the League as Nicholas Murray Butler, president of Columbia University, and the Reverend Newell Dwight Hillis of Plymouth Church, Brooklyn. Backing their new convictions with action, Butler was busy firing Columbia professors for pacifist expressions, and Hillis had become a sought-after speaker at Liberty Bond rallies on account of his repertoire of German war atrocity stories.¹

Eugene V. Debs still opposed the war. This socialist union organizer and four-time presidential candidate traveled to Canton, Ohio, in June 1918 to protest the jailing of fellow socialists for opposing U.S. participation in the Great War. Debs aimed to rally the socialists, some of whom now favored fighting for Bolshevik Russia, into standing by their earlier antiwar convictions. For his part, the old activist held fast to the April 1917 declaration of the Socialist Party that had characterized the war as a capitalist scheme to salvage U.S. loans to the Allies through the blood of the working class.

Addressing the crowd from a platform placed so that the three jailed socialists could see him, Debs spoke of the irony of free speech suppressed by a nation allegedly fighting for democracy. He charged that the Russian Bolsheviks had found in the Czarist archives evidence of secret Allied treaties "showing that the purpose of the Allies is exactly the same as the purpose of the central powers – plunder." Debs defended unionists and praised their defiance of Wall Street in contrast to the compliance of the preachers: "When Wall Street says 'war,' every pulpit in the land yells 'war.'" Predicting that capitalism in the United

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States would undergo the kind of crisis that had brought about the Bolshevik seizure of power in Russia, Debs preached continued resistance to capitalism's world war. "They want our eyes focused on the junkers of Berlin so we'll not see those in our own country," he contended. Declaring solidarity of sentiment with those imprisoned, Debs affirmed, "I'd rather be a free soul in jail than a coward on the street."²

Debs might have been more careful about what he wished for. By challenging the nation's reigning sentiments, by speaking against ideas put forth by America's first institutionally coordinated program of national propaganda, Debs soon would earn the right to conduct his final (fifth) run for the presidency from behind bars. Until many months after the Armistice, few would mourn his fate.

Debs v. The United States

June 16, 1918, was a risky time for Debs's antiwar rhetoric. By summer 1918, popular enthusiasm for war was the official order of the hour in America. The discursive atmosphere of the nation at large was reflected in patriotic storm clouds hovering over Debs in Northern Ohio. The commissioner of Cleveland, Ohio's, playground system was in the process of organizing a summer program of military regimen for children. Youngsters were trained to make replicas of rifles and bayonets for use in drills under direction of a military instructor. The loyalty of Frank B. Willis, former Ohio governor, was under attack as a result of the revelation that, in 1915, he had written a letter opposing shipments of U.S. arms to Britain and France. For those caught up in the mindset of 1918, such a peacetime expression bordered on treason. Stories appearing in Cleveland's *Plain Dealer* newspaper reported ten- and twenty-year sentences to "so-called conscientious objectors." Feature stories in the paper included a number of lurid tales, among them how the sinking of the passenger liner *Lusitania* in 1915 had been part of a plot involving the German ambassador to the United States.³

Eugene Debs was not unaware of the risks he ran in addressing the Ohio Socialist Party convention audience on the topic of war. Active as a speaker during the preceding weeks, Debs had been anticipating arrest for some time. As he looked down from his Canton platform, Debs could not have overlooked the presence of various federal agents, local police, and American Protective League operatives interspersed in the crowd of 1,200. Possibly he observed that many listeners, neatly attired in coat and vest, eagerly were scribbling down what he said to the throng gathered in Nimisilla Park. It would prove the case that the recollections of one energetic note jotter, Clyde R. Miller, would have

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significant impact on Debs's itinerary and place of residence for the next few years.

Miller, reporter for the *Plain Dealer*, was the product of a central Ohio family characterized by its deep Methodist faith and traditional Republican politics. Miller was typical of the idealistic young men and women of the era who found themselves pulled along in the shifting currents of sentiment both for war and peace. Counting himself among those who "resented the invasion of Belgium and France by the Germans," Miller nevertheless came under the spell of Woodrow Wilson's policy of American neutrality. Casting aside his "congenital" preferences for the Republican Party, Miller voted for Wilson and for neutrality in 1916. Within months, however, Miller ardently supported American entry into the Great War.

Backing his new pro-war convictions with action, Miller tried to enlist in the Canadian armed forces some weeks in advance of the U.S. declaration of war, failing only because of his poor eyesight. After America's decision for war in April 1917, Miller similarly was rejected by the three branches of the U.S. armed forces. He continued working as a reporter but remained, as he later recalled, "eager to do what I could to win the war." Assigned to the federal beat, Miller found it possible to make patriotic contributions to victory through stories boosting the U.S. district attorney and the regional office of the Justice Department's Investigation Bureau. "There were many front-page stories to write about spy-hunts, about saboteurs in munitions factories, about persons guilty of treasonable utterances, about worthless slackers who sought to evade selective service." Miller even accompanied members of the American Protective League, the patriotic group loosely affiliated with the Justice Department, on their raids of homes in the ethnic working-class neighborhoods of Cleveland. As did many others at the time, he condoned such lawlessness as worthy enthusiasm in support of a holy cause. Miller's goal as reporter was to help the war effort by fanning the emotions of war, promoting the righteous fears and hates that made the conflict so compelling to Americans formerly accustomed to disinterest in European intrigues and military operations.

Responding to a call by his city editor to cover the Canton meeting of the Ohio socialists, Miller set out with explicit instructions to report Debs's position on the war. Accordingly, Miller sought out the renowned socialist in Canton's Courtland Hotel somewhat before the scheduled address. Miller questioned Debs about his views on the fight for democracy. Miller later recalled that "from his eyes, his look, his manner I had the feeling that he was the kind of man my dear old Methodist aunt would call Christlike, and yet he said things which I

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thought were horrible.” Debs told Miller of his disgust at the idea of American and German youth extinguishing each other’s lives so that the rich and powerful in both lands might enjoy continued prosperity. Dismissing pro-war arguments as efforts to take in vain the names of God and country, Debs affirmed his intention to “do all I can to oppose this war, to oppose our young men going over to fight in this war.” Miller was struck by the contrast between Debs’s inspiring personal charisma and the traitorous heresy he espoused.⁴

Later in the day, Miller was among those in the audience as Debs addressed the Ohio socialists. Miller wired to the *Plain Dealer* enough about Debs’s speech and the preceding interview to fill two or three front-page columns. Soon after sending the story, the thought came to Miller that Debs’s utterances clearly violated the Espionage Act. Miller placed a long-distance call to E. S. Wertz, the U.S. district attorney, to inquire about the possibility of prosecution.

After I had sent in the main story, I called up the District Attorney, whom I knew well enough to call by his first name, and said, “Ed, this is what happened. Are you going to let this fellow get away with it?” Said the District Attorney: “No man is too big to violate the Espionage Act. I will ask for his indictment.” And so I phoned that in. It made a nice Page One box. The story was given a big play. The Press Services picked it up; it became Page One all over the country.⁵

Although officials in the Department of Justice in Washington cautioned against prosecuting Debs for his remarks at Canton, Wertz, now quoted nationally as likely to ask for an indictment, proceeded to put the case to a grand jury. Within two weeks, Debs was under arrest on charges of sedition.

It was apparent at the time of Debs’s arrest that his case would be a matter of national significance in determining the potency of the Espionage Act as a weapon against wartime dissenters. Debs came to be charged with ten violations of the Espionage Act of 1917, as amended in 1918, including making false statements to interfere with the operation of U.S. military forces, promoting the success of enemies of the United States, attempting to cause insubordination of military forces, attempting to obstruct recruiting, speaking disloyally about the government, making statements calculated to bring the government and its symbols and agencies into disrepute, encouraging resistance to the government, and opposing the cause of the United States. Although the government initially had thrown the book at Debs, only four of the ten charges were presented to the jury, those regarding incitement of

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insubordination, obstructing recruitment, encouraging resistance, and opposing the cause of the United States.⁶

Pressed by allegations that their client's remarks at Canton were treasonable, Debs's attorneys sought to characterize the Nimisilla Park address as exercise of the Constitutional freedom to discuss the war's general aims and objects. In this connection, Clyde Miller took the stand as a star witness for the prosecution. Attorneys for the government questioned Miller about his hotel-lobby interview with Debs and employed this testimony to establish the defendant's attitude at the time of his address. Miller specifically contributed to the government's effort to enter into the record certain statements from the 1917 antiwar Declaration of the Socialist Party. This declaration had used inflammatory language to characterize the war as capitalist "trickery and treachery" against the working classes and, further, encouraged socialists to use demonstrations, petitions, and persuasion to oppose legislation that would conscript the citizenry and censor the rights of free speech. Miller had ascertained during his interview with Debs that the socialist leader supported this statement of policy by his party.⁷

Critical to Debs's case was the judicial construction of the Espionage Act. Unfortunately for Debs, as for others tried at the time, the presiding judge allowed the law to be interpreted broadly, such that Debs could be convicted on three counts of promoting insubordination, obstructing recruiting, and encouraging resistance even though his Canton address did not specifically incite the listeners to any of these particular acts. Debs was sentenced to ten years in prison by U.S. District Judge D. C. Westenhaver, who characterized Debs's address as "anarchy pure and simple" in that it might have the effect of making citizens less eager for enlistment and for other wartime services to their country. Hopes that Debs's conviction might be reversed upon appeal were dashed by the U.S. Supreme Court when Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes affirmed the propriety of convicting Debs for treason on the basis of the "reasonably probable effect" of his words to obstruct the war effort. According to Holmes, Debs's treasonous intent was proved, not only by the words of the Canton speech itself, but also by his stated opposition to the war as shown both in remarks (to Miller) before the speech as well as in his own statement to the jury.⁸

As Debs and Miller walked together from the Cleveland courtroom, the old socialist put his arm around the young reporter and told Miller not to feel badly for what he had done. Debs remarked that Miller had testified honestly about the interview and speech, and he reflected that the two of them had honestly come to different conclusions about the

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facts of the war. Debs added: "Perhaps in twenty years you will think differently about this matter; perhaps in twenty years I too might think differently, because neither of us knows all the facts."⁹

As it turned out, only a few months were to pass before one of the two changed his opinion about the war. Soon after the trial of Debs, Miller took service in France with the Education Corps of the American Expeditionary Force. His observations and conversations abroad convinced Miller that "Debs had been more right than wrong about the war." Upon his return to the United States, Miller labored to secure a pardon for Debs, speaking to such fellow Ohioans as Secretary of War Newton D. Baker and Senator Warren G. Harding. Much later, in 1937, Miller founded the Institute for Propaganda Analysis to consummate his atonement for having helped to prosecute and, in effect, to persecute Debs for the exercise of critical free speech. Miller's institute, as will be shown, became a focal center in the effort to sort out the relationship of free speech and social survival, of democracy and propaganda.

Miller's discovery of a forest of propaganda within the tall trees of wartime public opinion was representative of how, in the aftermath of the Great War, many Americans took a new look at the agencies of mass communication. This revolution in opinion, however, does not explain why skepticism about the war's origins and ideological trimmings carried so little weight in 1917–1918 among writers, teachers, preachers, and other intellectuals. The explanation lies in the wartime work of the literati who were deeply implicated in the era's rampant opinion control. What set leading Americans against Debs was a propagandized climate of opinion that, until after the Armistice, was seldom recognized as such even by alert commentators.

Wartime Persuasions

A simplistic mindset on the Great War began to work its way into American public opinion within days of the first cannon shots on the Western Front. The British Navy immediately cut Germany's cable links to the United States, forcing American newspapers to rely on reports filtered through censorship in London. In July 1914, 30 percent of the front-page news from Europe originated in German sources as contrasted to 4 percent during the first half of August. The tendency for war news to be filtered through London and Paris was most pronounced during the first weeks of belligerency and also during the *Lusitania* crisis of May 1915, the two periods when European hostilities commanded maximum front-page treatment in American papers.¹⁰

Indirect control of war news through cable censorship and courting

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of American correspondents was accompanied by direct efforts to win over the sympathy of Americans. Britain's attempt at positive promotion was organized by Sir Gilbert Parker, a Canadian novelist, who set up an official, though secret, propaganda bureau in the United States. Beginning with names drawn from *Who's Who in America*, Parker's group developed a mailing list of some 200,000 U.S. opinion leaders. Parker's bureau sent out to this selected group round after round of pamphlets, interviews, and speeches articulating Britain's official view that the Great War was simply a matter of stemming German aggression and atrocities. The British materials usually arrived with a friendly letter from Parker or a note from a source known to the recipient. The publications themselves contained no indication that they were prepared and sent out as part of an official government publicity campaign. Parker also sent English newspapers to 360 U.S. papers, provided films of the war, sent volumes of documents on the war to U.S. colleges and libraries, and, as Parker put it, "advised and stimulated" many Americans to write favorably of Britain's cause. Parker's organization kept up correspondence with prominent Americans of every profession and kept liaison with Anglophilic organizations and groups.¹¹

Early installments of English propaganda had carried allegations of German atrocities; however, it was the Bryce Report that became most significant in helping these inflammatory tales to win a respectful hearing in the United States. Sensing the advantage of making German atrocities a centerpiece of Allied war communications, the British government appointed a committee, headed by Lord James Bryce, former British ambassador to the United States, to investigate charges of German horror in Belgium. Bryce's report, based on more than a thousand depositions taken from Belgian refugees, possessed considerable credibility not only because of its status as an official government document but also since the report itself took pains to argue for the validity of the accounts given by the refugees. In the United States, the Bryce Report carried additional prestige owing to its appearance under the editorship of a familiar friend whose book, *The American Commonwealth*, was a widely used college textbook on government.¹²

The sixty-one pages of the *Report of the Committee on Alleged German Outrages* were organized both geographically, according to region, and topically, according to the type of atrocity. The atrocities were further divided into offenses against civilians (e.g., attacks on women and children) and those against combatants (e.g., killing of prisoners). The depositions themselves, presented in a 296-page documentary appendix, were organized geographically and were followed by other evidences of German horror, including both excerpts from

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diaries purportedly taken from German soldiers and official proclamations by German occupation authorities.

Will Irwin, American muckraker and U.S. war correspondent, had no illusions about the harshness of German conduct in Belgium; but he nevertheless identified the “two tricks” on which the Bryce Report was based. First, there was no cross-examination of witnesses; second, “consciously or unconsciously the commission took advantage of a small immorality common among story-tellers – the human impulse to make yourself the hero or the eyewitness of an interesting episode which you have picked up in conversation or in your reading.”¹³ From my own close examination of thirty of the depositions, nineteen appeared to be essentially hearsay renderings. Furthermore, five alleged firsthand reports contained glaring internal improbabilities as when one respondent described events allegedly taking place inside a house observed from a distance outside. Of the six apparently credible depositions, four are highly sketchy as to the details of what happened. Yet, despite the internal weaknesses of the Bryce document (and regardless of its having been discredited by the 1930s), its effect on American public opinion in 1915 was significant. Proof positive seemingly was at hand to sustain the Allied claim that theirs was a contest of good versus evil.

German officials and pro-German Americans established a competing propaganda cabinet to coordinate a program similar to that of the British, although smaller. The German effort, “always logical, but never psychological,” tended, more than Britain’s, toward lawyerly technicalities.¹⁴ Further, unlike the British, who carefully kept propaganda work separate from secret intelligence operations, many of Berlin’s operatives worked on propaganda by day and participated by moonlight in efforts to foment strikes or to sabotage American plants producing war materiel for the Allies. Pro-Ally agents in the German camp leaked incriminating documents about Berlin’s machinations to the American press, thereby alarming the Wilson administration. When U.S. Treasury agents gained possession of a cache of receipts documenting Berlin’s disbursements for propaganda and sabotage, Secretary William G. McAdoo forwarded the information to Frank Cobb, whose *New York World* exposed the secret German campaign in four days of front-page unmasking. Among the *World’s* revelations was that *The Fatherland*, George S. Viereck’s Germanophilic publication, regularly requested and received subsidies and that the Kaiser’s agents had intrigued not only to gain control of newspapers and news services but also to stimulate lecturers and authors who favored the Central Powers. Covert German efforts to buy war supplies similarly were laid bare, as was the endeavor

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of Capt. Franz Von Papen, German military attaché, to foment strikes in munitions plants.¹⁵

The dark shadow of “The German Propaganda” prompted fears that led to a change in the popular understanding of the term *propaganda* itself. Before the war, propaganda, if it had any meaning for an ordinary American, signified chiefly the spreading of self-interested opinions through publicity. Under the influence of anti-German exposés, however, the term by 1915 had begun to take on more sinister connotations of manipulations and half-truths secretly sowed by society’s avowed enemies. Britain’s more extensive covert propaganda operation would be exempt from censorious treatment until after the Armistice.

Fears of German subversion only added to the sentiment that America should enter the fray. Interventionism already was on the move on account of the preparedness movement, popular in the business community and nominally headed by former president Theodore Roosevelt, and because of the defection of many formerly pacifistic intellectuals to the League to Enforce Peace, a group promoting peace through victory. By 1916, such major progressives as John Dewey, James T. Shotwell, and Walter Lippmann also had made their decisions in favor of participation in the war.¹⁶

Although slower than the advocates of preparedness to embrace war, adherents of the progressive movement took up the cause with a greater discursive fervor. Dewey and Lippmann preached the thesis that U.S. participation in the war provided the chance to enact democratic reforms on a worldwide scale. A few skeptics, such as Randolph Bourne, scorned Dewey’s conversion to the idea of “Rough Riders” sowing reform. Bourne contended that the warrior intellectuals were making themselves mere instruments of military agencies without demanding that the war’s so-called reformist purposes be specified in advance.¹⁷ A few other leaders of socialist or progressive opinion supported Bourne’s protests of the martial spirit, notably Gene Debs and Senator Robert La Follette; but theirs were isolated eddies in a great river of opinion moving in the direction of participation in the European war.

When Woodrow Wilson threw down the gauntlet in April 1917, the nation’s business and intellectual communities were ready to follow. But what of the masses? Policy-makers were horrified by mail addressed to Wilson’s new Committee on Public Information (CPI) begging for clarification of why the United States had entered the war. The sight of letters piled two to three feet high in the CPI’s office gave impetus to a broadening of the committee’s mission from that of coordination to that of promotion. Chaired by George Creel, progressive journalist,

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Wilsonian, and minor prewar muckraker, the CPI evangelized for a uniform national opinion keyed to Wilson's new view of the war as Right versus Wrong conducted to spread democracy around the globe. Even when Americans spontaneously began to support the declaration of war, the CPI's campaign continued apace, helping to impart a manic quality to wartime public opinion.¹⁸

The most high-toned of the CPI's programs was its pamphlet campaign, directed by Guy Stanton Ford, University of Minnesota professor of history, and assisted by academic historians working with James T. Shotwell's National Board for Historical Service. Creel, Ford, and Shotwell defended vehemently the historical accuracy of the CPI's pamphleteering, for instance, by emphasizing how they successfully had resisted pressures from Newell Dwight Hillis and others to use undocumented atrocity stories. More striking, in retrospect, is how scholarship compromised itself when devoted to promoting a national cause. For example, in *Conquest and Kultur*, CPI historians showered the reader with chauvinistic quotations plucked here and there from sundry German writers. This mélange was cited as proof of an enormous pan-Germanist plot to annex vast territories, including portions of Argentina and the United States, to the Kaiser's empire.¹⁹

Fifty million pamphlets distributed by Creel's committee represented only one source by which wartime public opinion took on antic vehemence. Other of the CPI's programs gave even more visceral exaggeration of the danger posed variously by Germany and by Debs-style pacifist expression. Under Creel's ministrations, Wilson's war pervasively enveloped American citizens at every venue in their personal lives. For those traveling to work, there were trolley posters illustrating all manner of ways that the ordinary citizen personally could help win the war. Poster art, prepared by the CPI's Division of Pictorial Publicity, sparked many a campaign for the Treasury Department, War Department, Department of Agriculture, and Red Cross. Displayed in locales urban and rural, posters supplied some of the most evocative and best-remembered propagandas of the war in accordance with the belief of Division-chief Charles Dana Gibson (of Gibson Girl fame) that wartime art needed to "appeal to the heart." If Guy Ford had proscribed the use of the term *Hun* in CPI pamphlets, this scruple did not extend to Gibson's artists. One image created by J. Allen St. John for the Treasury Department showed a handprint in blood red with accompanying text: "The Hun – his Mark / Blot it Out / with / Liberty Bonds." Others sounded the call to "Beat back the HUN with LIBERTY BONDS" or simply to "HALT THE HUN!"²⁰

The Treasury Department's imperative to stoke enthusiasm for bond