



The Home Front

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The Home Front

By the time the United States entered World War I, the belligerent powers were approaching total warfare, pitting their entire societies against one another. American leaders believed their country must do the same; yet the obstacles to mobilizing a united American society were formidable. This essay discusses the ways by which the United States government sought to overcome those obstacles, particularly how it attempted to unify the home front and to convert the nation's economy for war. It considers the interaction between government and elements of the society it sought to mobilize, examines the effectiveness of mobilization, and looks at precedents the war created for later emergencies.

Unity was a crucial requirement for success. Yet America in 1917 was far from unified. Race riots, lynchings, and increasing segregation characterized its racial system. Decades of business consolidation and industrial violence had left the nation's middle class citizens wary both of radical labor organizations and of the economic and political power of large corporations. With millions of Americans connected by ancestry to the warring nations, ethnic conflict threatened to tear the United States apart once it joined the Allies. And ominous signs were appearing that American women might divide over the war. Women had been prominent in the prewar peace movement. The first woman elected to congress voted against entering the war, and militant women suffragists had begun to picket the White House, publicizing the gaps between government slogans about making the world safe for democracy and a political system in which millions of women could not vote (1).

There were other threats to unity on the eve of war. Although some Americans—particularly those with ancestral ties to the

Allies—were willing and perhaps even eager to fight the Central Powers, other intellectuals and religious organizations strenuously opposed intervention. Pacifism, isolationism, antimilitarism, and apathy were so widespread that in the fall of 1916, President Woodrow Wilson ran for reelection with the slogan "He Kept Us Out of War."

To develop the support needed to mobilize America, the United States government followed several approaches. It directed massive propaganda at the American people and imprisoned those who openly challenged its war policies. Yet it often used a softer method, what one of its leaders called "engines of indirection" (2), to encourage rather than compel Americans to pay for the war, conserve scarce resources, and participate in home front activities. It offered rewards to those who cooperated and withheld benefits from those who declined to go along. The result was a wartime welfare state that benefitted millions of Americans, especially those with the power, resources, and organization needed to induce the federal government to respond to their needs. In the America of 1917-

1918 self-sacrifice, idealism and patriotism existed side by side with efforts to reap private gain from the war, with government management of interest groups, and with efforts by those groups to manipulate the government that sought to control them.

Foremost among the wartime propaganda agencies was the Committee on Public Information (CPI), headed by the journalist and social reformer George Creel. This committee sought to meld all Americans into what its director called "one white-hot mass. . . with fraternity, devotion, and deathless determination" to support an Allied victory. It deluged the country with press releases and



Albert Sterner paints the war poster "Over There," featured on page 7. Sterner was one of the many artists who worked for the government advertising the war and war efforts. (International Film Service, 1918. NARA NWDNS 165-WW-61 [8])

pamphlets, newspaper and magazine advertisements, and organized scores of pageants and parades. The CPI had educators explain to students the official reasons for fighting, stimulate their patriotism, and enhance their admiration for American and Allied armed forces. It told immigrants in their own languages why they owed it to America to assist it against its enemies. To those who could not read, the committee communicated with billboards, posters, motion pictures, and an army of patriotic speakers.

Although Creel's committee sometimes allowed its audience to know that the government was addressing them, it frequently followed an indirect or covert approach. It set up front organizations, such as the American Alliance for Labor and Democracy, led by conservative labor union leader Samuel Gompers, that opposed radicalism and pacifism among workers. Its own name was a euphemism, suggesting that it conveyed, not propaganda, but simply information. The head of the committee's film division observed that one of the CPI's objectives was to spread "telling propaganda which at the same time would not be obvious propaganda, but will have the effect we desire to create."

Among the CPI's great variety of messages, certain themes appeared repeatedly. One was the notion that the enemies were vicious, subhuman monsters who had committed unspeakable atrocities and were preparing to bring horror and devastation to America. Thus one wartime poster showed lower Manhattan in flames, a decapitated Statue of Liberty, and enemy warplanes hovering overhead. Another depicted Germany as a spike-helmeted slobbering ape-like creature standing on the American shore. A second theme was the crusade motif, that America was engaged in a holy war to avenge those atrocities, safeguard democracy and assure lasting peace. Third, there was the theme that Americans of all classes, national origins, occupations, and genders must stand together to support that crusade.

Like other warring nations, the United States used forceful methods, along with exhortation, to control the way its people felt. Although President Wilson expressed concern that war would deeply curtail American freedoms, his administration rarely hesitated to crack down on dissenters. With the authority of legislation, such as the Espionage Act of 1917 and the Sedition

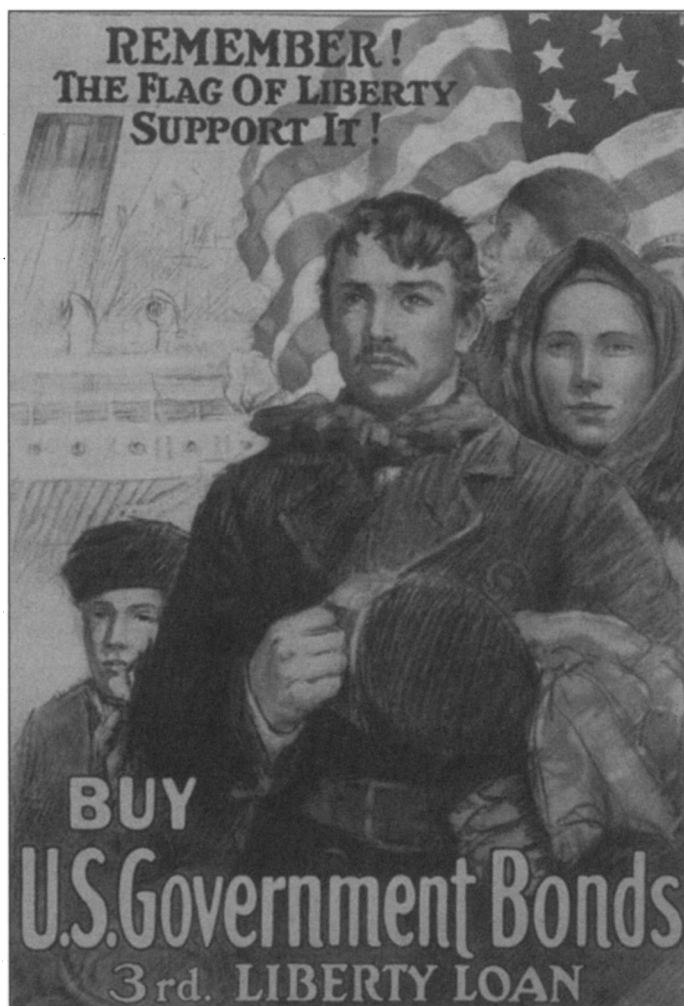
Act of 1918, it denied the mails to publications it believed would embarrass or hamper it in the prosecution of the war. It jailed members of a radical labor organization, the Industrial Workers of the World, that threatened to disrupt production of war materials. It imprisoned a former Socialist candidate for president, Eugene V. Debs, and hundreds of other persons for statements that government prosecutors claimed would interfere with the government's war programs. At times, the administration also stifled dissent subtly and indirectly, as when the CPI urged editors to censor themselves or face penalties, without specifying what would cause the government to silence their publications.

In its efforts to clamp down on pacifists, radicals and persons too friendly to the enemy, the federal government allied itself with state and private groups. It sponsored a quarter million volunteer members of the American Protective League, who sought to root out opponents of war. State governments authorized councils of defense that not only assisted mobilization in positive ways but also attacked persons the councils considered pro-German, antiwar, or too favorable toward social reform. Other groups, some of them nameless organizations, or just mobs, joined in the repression of alleged internal enemies.

While many Americans felt intense exhilaration and national pride during this war, a large number experienced it as a time of terror. People spied on one another; intimidated those who seemed slow to purchase government war bonds or to join the military; forced suspected pro-Germans to kiss the American flag or painted them yellow; threatened, tortured, and, in two cases, murdered those who seemed to oppose the war. Citizens and governments attacked

the country's German American subculture, suppressed German music, threatened German American religious sects, forbade the speaking and teaching of the German language, and sought to remove words of German origin from American speech, turning "frankfurters" into "liberty sausages" and "dachshunds" into "liberty dogs".

Some of these actions were an outgrowth of the patriotism that led Americans to volunteer spontaneously for military service, to enter war industries, to roll bandages or become Red Cross nurses,



America's different ethnic groups were encouraged to support the United States during World War I. (Library of Congress, LC-USZC4-9560)

to join local home defense leagues, and to buy government bonds. Some were responses to government propaganda that encouraged suspicion of strangers or reactions to fear of sabotage at home or to the loss or potential loss of loved ones overseas. Repressive activities on the home front sometimes grew from long-standing ethnic conflicts, were ways of settling old scores, or represented efforts to secure political power under the guise of patriotism or to use the war to secure economic advantages. Much of the war hysteria grew from a community of interest between the United States Government and those who used the war for their own purposes. This interplay of public and private interests similarly characterized the mobilization of the economy.

The experience of other belligerents and early breakdowns in American economic systems showed that conversion for total war would be difficult and made clear that there had to be some kind of centralized control of economic mobilization. But who would do it? The armed forces lacked the capacity; yet to give them enough power to control the economy would be to emulate Germany. People called it "Prussianization." Large industrial and financial corporations might have the skills and organization to run a war economy, but many citizens thought they had too much power to begin with. Although some government regulatory agencies had developed before the war, there was as yet no large civil service to guide mobilization, and the notion of creating a war bureaucracy troubled businessmen and other Americans who believed in limited government.

The solution, which responded both to fears of excessive government regulation and of expanded corporate influence, was an improvised administrative apparatus, staffed largely by volunteer "dollar-a-year" persons on leave from their companies, designed to self-destruct once the war ended. When the national transportation system collapsed in the winter of 1917-1918 the U.S. government created a Railroad Administration to coordinate and manage the important lines. Actual running of the railroad system was assigned to former private railroad executives under temporary government direction. Volunteer food industry executives ran the Food Administration. Staffed with thousands of American women, the FA promoted food production and conservation and saw that food supplies were sent where the government considered them most needed. Such people were unlikely to perpetuate a government food bureaucracy.

The leading economic mobilization agency was the War Industries Board (WIB), which arranged for American industries to supply Allied and American armed forces and civilians with industrial products. Like most other economic mobilization agencies, it was dominated by volunteers from American busi-

nesses. Its powers evolved gradually. The Wilson administration, reflecting prewar public distrust of the power of big business, continued to keep those powers in check, leaving the board's legal authority vague and permitting the War Department to retain substantial control over military procurement.

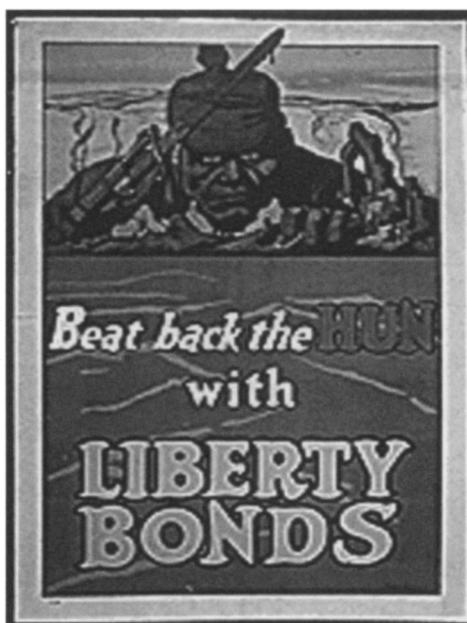
The WIB typified the operations of the wartime welfare state. It often used an indirect approach, inducing companies to produce voluntarily what the government wanted them to provide. Together with cooperating businesses that supplied materials needed for production and with government agencies that regulated labor supplies, fuel and transportation, it developed a priority system,

the essential mechanism for regulating wartime businesses. If a company chose to produce essential items it received high priorities for what it needed. If it decided to make items deemed nonessential, its priorities dropped to the bottom of the list.

Many businessmen contributed to the war with pride and patriotism. Also, they were offered tangible incentives for converting to war work, such as the priorities that enabled them to keep their companies operating. The fact that the people who negotiated with them for the government were executives from their own industries rather than uninformed bureaucrats was bound to reassure them. And finally they had the incentive of substantial profit, particularly for companies that sold something the government badly needed. In the steel industry, for instance, prices were set high enough for inefficient producers to make money. For efficient producers, the returns were awe inspiring. An excess profits tax was supposed to recapture some of these returns but ways were found to limit its effects.

For certain business leaders the war government provided special incentives. Executives of leading companies were allowed to set priorities for their own industries because only they knew enough about those industries to assess priority requests. These corporate leaders really ran much of industrial mobilization in the government's name. For one group of businessmen the wartime system of business self-regulation, cooperation, and government sanctioned profitability offered a model for the future. These men wanted to replace competitive capitalism with a permanent welfare state for business.

The war brought benefits to other groups that served America at home. Emerging professions gained recognition for wartime activities—psychiatrists, for example, for treating victims of battle stress, and psychologists for testing the mental capacity of recruits. Intellectuals, in a country that rarely paid attention to them and often scorned them, found opportunities to serve their nation by writing propaganda or lecturing on the war. Wheat farmers benefitted from government price supports. Conservative, prowar labor unions won government endorsement for



Propaganda posters often depicted a brutish German soldier towering over ruins to convince Americans their nation entered the war to save them from evil. The United States Food Administration's Education Division produced this poster in January 1918. (NARA NWDNS-4-P-200)

collective bargaining and improved wages, hours, and working conditions by arguing that these benefits would increase productivity at a time when labor shortages hindered mobilization. Housing reformers developed model towns for workers near shipyards and war factories.

A number of the wartime programs helped advance reforms of special interest to women. Suffragists drew a variety of arguments from the war for granting women the right to vote—for example, women should be rewarded for their patriotic service on the home front, and that in a “war to make the world safe for democracy,” it was absurd to deny women the vote. Advocates of temperance, including many women, successfully argued against producing alcoholic beverages that took grain supplies needed to make bread for soldiers and civilians. A government sponsored program to close brothels near army camps and provide troops with healthy sports and clean entertainment as a substitute for sex, also appealed to women in the vice reform movement.

War also brought economic benefits to women and their families. Labor shortages enabled more than one million women to find work in arms factories and in other occupations previously closed to them. It created what amounted to a system of “mothers’ pensions”. To sustain families whose male wage earners were in uniform and to free the troops from some anxiety over their families’ financial conditions, the federal government arranged for service personnel to buy cheap life and disability insurance. It withheld money from the pay of enlisted men, sending it to their dependents along with direct government allowances for wives and children. It also aided war widows and orphans.

Yet not all groups were strong enough and influential enough to secure rewards from the war welfare state. Some African American leaders, such as the scholar and editor W. E. B. Du Bois, encouraged blacks to support the war on the ground that fighting for democracy abroad would advance racial equality at home. African Americans did make certain wartime gains, but in ways limited by the existing color line. For instance, they were allowed to fight for their country, but were segregated and shunted mainly into noncombatant roles requiring physical labor. By threatening that color line, the war may have made racial conflict even more intense. The prospect of trained and armed black soldiers returning home after living in France, a less racist society, troubled many



Suffragettes register to work as war volunteers. (NARA NWDNS-165-WW-[600A]1)



The United States Food Administration mobilized the nation to save food for soldiers and to send to the war-torn Allies. (NARA NWDNS-4-P-154)

white Americans. The allotments and allowances the federal government sent to female dependents of black troops disturbed the prewar racial equilibrium by making those women less willing to accept low-wage jobs (3). Wartime demand for labor drew African Americans, who were already migrating from the rural South, to the cities and to the North where they competed for jobs and living space with white workers. That competition helped set off an explosion of race riots during and just after the war. Such events left Du Bois and other blacks deeply dissatisfied by the “war to make the world safe for democracy.”

How well did the American home front achieve the American government’s objectives? If the measure is unity of thought and behavior, the answer is well enough. There was general support for the war by the time of the Armistice, although continuing resistance to the draft suggests that some Americans had not been welded into “one white-hot mass” in support of victory (4). If the criterion is production and delivery of war materials, the results were also mixed. By 1918, more than one-fifth of the nation’s Gross National Product reflected war spending (5). Yet the GNP as a whole rose by less than four percent from 1916 through 1918. Although the country spent some seven billion dollars for ordnance, American forces in Europe commonly used French artillery and projectiles. Aircraft manufacturers consumed millions of dollars, but produced only sixteen thousand planes during 1917-1918, far fewer than government projections. As David Lloyd George, the British prime minister noted, “one of the inexplicable paradoxes of history” was that “the greatest machine-producing nation on earth failed to turn out the mechanism of war after 18 months of sweating and toiling and hustling” Still, it might be argued that the fighting ended too soon for the United States to reach full war production.

The most important contribution America made to the defeat of its enemies was its armed forces, or more exactly, the notion of what those armed forces could do if the war continued. To German leaders, the prospect that a huge American army would soon join the doughboys

already fighting alongside the Allies, made an early armistice seem prudent. By helping to motivate those troops to volunteer or accept conscription, by supporting them morally once they were in uniform, by helping to pay for them and to arm, clothe, feed and equip them, the home front did much to make that armistice possible.

The World War I home front provided important precedents for future crises. To fight the Great Depression, the Hoover and Roosevelt administrations employed wartime ideas, like business self-regulation, publicity campaigns like those used in wartime, and restyled wartime agencies, such as the National Recovery Administration. Finally, the Wilson administration's efforts to create unity on the home front left a problematic legacy for civil liberties in future wars, raising the question of whether the United States Government could be strong enough to defend the nation without destroying American freedoms. □

Endnotes

1. This article is based chiefly on Ronald Schaffer, *America in the Great War: The Rise of the War Welfare State* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991). For other accounts of the home front in World War I see David M. Kennedy, *Over Here: The First World War and American Society* (New York: Oxford

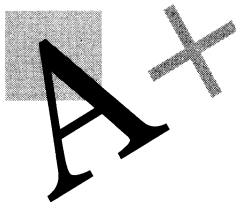
University Press, 1980), and Robert H. Zieger, *America's Great War: World War I and the American Experience* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2000).

2. Herbert Hoover quoted in George H. Nash, *The Life of Herbert Hoover*, vol. 3, *Master of Emergencies, 1917-1918* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company), 15.
3. For the effects of federal payments to dependents of black troops see K. Walter Hickel, "War, Region, and Social Welfare: Federal Aid to Servicemen' Dependents in the South, 1917-1921," *Journal of American History* 87 (March 2001): 1362-91.
4. Jeanette Keith, "The Politics of Southern Draft Resistance, 1917-1918: Class, Race and Conscription in the Rural South," *Journal of American History* 87 (March 2001): 1335-61.
5. For the war component of GNP, see Paul A. C. Koistinen, *Mobilizing for Modern War: The Political Economy of American Warfare, 1865-1919* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1997), 265.

Ronald Schaffer is an emeritus professor of history at California State University, Northridge, where he taught from 1965 through 1999. He previously taught at Columbia University and Indiana University. His publications include *America in the Great War: The Rise of the War Welfare State* (1991); *Wings of Judgment: American Bombing in World War II* (1989); and *The United States in World War I: A Selected Bibliography* (1978).

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