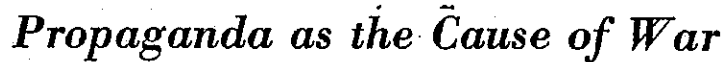
Unlike Barnes and Borchard, H. C. PETERSON (1902–1952) did not set out to prove that the United States was unneutral: accepting this as fact, he sought to show *why* it was. His book, which grew out of a Ph.D. dissertation on American entry into the war, attributes the unneutrality of the United States and its resulting involvement to the power and influence of British propaganda. A staunch opponent of the war, Peterson was at work on a study of American opponents of World War I at the time of his death. His manuscript has since been completed, substantially revised, and published by Professor Gilbert C. Fite, Peterson's friend and colleague at the University of Oklahoma.*



Propaganda as the Cause of War

The British campaign to induce the United States to come to their assistance affected every phase of American life; it was propaganda in its broadest meaning. News, money, and political pressure each played its part and the battle itself was fought not only in London, New York, and Washington, D. C., but also in American classrooms and pulpits, factories, and offices. It was a campaign to create a pro-British attitude of mind among Americans, to get American sympathies and interests so deeply involved in the European war that it would be impossible for this country to remain neutral.

The first problem confronting the directors of any such campaign was that of winning the sympathy of the general public. When Lord Northcliffe visited this country he remarked of Americans: "They dress alike, they talk alike, they think alike. What sheep!" Although he was not entirely correct, he was right in that the American public, like any public, demands uniformity of thought and conformity of action. In so far as Americans were sheep they had to be reached through their emotions. Although every public thinks with its hopes, its fears, and its affections, the pre-war American public was especially sentimental, excessively turbulent in comparison with European, and finally, was subject

* From *Propaganda for War: The Campaign Against American Neutrality, 1914–1917,* by H. C. Peterson. Copyright 1939 by the University of Oklahoma Press. Pp. 4–9, 12–17, 25–28, 32, 326. Footnotes accompanying this selection in the original have been omitted by permission of the publisher.

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to waves of emotion, apathy, interest, and boredom. The work of the British propagandist was to harness these feelings and put them to work for the Allies.

The British propaganda campaign naturally had to be based upon ideas Americans already had concerning the belligerent nations. In the first place it was soon found that people in the United States had but slight interest in countries other than those in Western Europe. Any "educational" efforts had to turn upon those lands west of the Vistula and north of the Danube. Among these, Germany was held in high esteem, but, fortunately for the Allies, this esteem had been diminished by certain actions of the German government after 1870. By the turn of the century, in some quarters, this had developed into positive dislike. The visit of Prince Henry, the Kaiser's brother, in 1902, occasioned somewhat of an outburst against Germany, but "it is interesting to note that the papers most vigorously assailing the Prince were often those of undisguised British sympathies." France was neither liked nor disliked. Her underdog position and the fact that she had assisted this country during the Revolutionary War created some sympathy but, to the average churchgoer, the French seemed a trifle wicked. Belgium was practically unknown, which was an advantage. England, up to 1914, had been the most popular enemy of Americans. People in the United States enjoyed disliking her, but it was the dislike of first cousins. The distinct advantage, in so far as Anglo-Amreican relations were involved, was that Americans thought they and the English were members of the same cultural scheme. The language factor here played a tremendously important part. Among many elements in the country there existed a tendency to be very friendly toward England, and even among those who disliked the British there was to be found a feeling of respect for "our English cousins."

The problem of gaining the sympathy and support of the American public turned upon the attitude of American newspapers. Here the British were greatly assisted by pre-war relations between the American press and the press of Great Britain. "For years the American public had received its day-by-day picture of Europe through a distinctly British perspective. Few American newspapers at that time maintained European staffs of their own; while those which did found few trained American foreign correspondents to man them. There were one or two capable American newspapermen in Berlin, but there were probably none at all in St. Petersburg, while even the Paris correspondents concentrated mainly upon social and artistic news rather than political reporting. Both our newspapers and press associations tended to cover European politics from London. Their London bureaus had general supervision over the correspondents on the Continent; the news was largely assembled in the London bureaus and forwarded by them. It was often heavily filled out with information or 'background' material derived from the British newspapers and magazines simply because they had so much better sources than the American staffs. . . . The New York *Times*, which perhaps gave more serious attention to European events than any other American newspaper, had an Englishman, Mr. Ernest Marshall, as the head of its London bureau, and his subordinates were largely Britishers. Its

Berlin correspondent, Mr. Frederick William Wile, was an American, but the *Times* shared him with Northcliffe's *Daily Mail,* a leader in the anti-German propaganda in England. The New York *World's* London correspondent was an Irishman who had never worked in the United States; his staff, like Mr. Marshall's, was largely composed of British newspapermen. So was that of the *Sun.* Those correspondents who were American citizens, moreover, had often lived so long abroad as to absorb the British viewpoint. The dean of the American correspondents in London, Mr. Edward Price Bell of the Chicago *Daily News,* had arrived fresh from college, to remain there for the rest of his active life, and it was naturally impossible for the others not to reflect the atmosphere by which they were daily surrounded." The result was "that the American view of Europe was normally and unavoidably colored very deeply by the British attitude."

The problem of the press within the United States was much more complicated and much more important. American newspapers in the first two decades of the century were the dominant factor in controlling opinion. They comprised the sole reading material for ninety per cent of the American people. German propagandists informed their home office that "everything must be communicated to the American public in the form of 'news' as they have been accustomed to this, and only understand this kind of propaganda." Propagandists probably also realized that the American newspapers deal only incidentally with news —that their principal commodity is sensation. In case of a foreign war, the support of the press would tend to go to the side which provided the best sensations. This, of course, meant that newspapers were very undependable. Like the public, the American press is a volatile force. . . .

Finally, it should be borne in mind that the press bureaus and the great Eastern dailies exert a disproportionate influence on the American press as a whole. During the war years there were about twenty-five hundred daily papers in the United States. About a thousand of these were affiliated with the Associated Press and most of the rest were connected with the United Press or one of the other press organizations—all of which were dominated by prominent New York editors. The foreign news which came through these bureaus was primarily composed for the New York newspapers, so, in the last analysis, the control of the New York press practically meant the control of the entire American press.

The immediate problem for the British propagandists at the outset of the war was to obtain the support of the leaders of American life. In this regard they were very fortunate. The American aristocracy was distinctly Anglophile. To assume a pro-British attitude was the "thing to do" among cultured Americans. "Politicians might placate an Irish constituency or stir our bumptious nationalism with a little tail-twisting now and then; but those more cultivated elements which dominated our intellectual, political and financial life still found in London their unacknowledged capital." This was accentuated by the fact that the economic aristocracy did most of its foreign business through London. Nearly all foreign banking was handled through the English capital. One of the Morgan partners stated: "Like most of our contemporaries and friends and neighbors, we wanted the Allies to win the war from the outset.

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The intellectual leaders of the United States were also sympathetic toward England, largely as a result of the similarity of language and the fact that England was the one foreign country with which most of them were acquainted. College professors, ministers, and above all, public school teachers, saw in England all that they thought was missing from America; consequently they lavished upon her a great deal of affection.

The problem of winning the support of the political leaders of the United States appeared to be even less difficult than that of gaining the adherence of the economic, social, and intellectual leaders. Primarily politicians are reflectors of opinion, and the opinions they reflect are usually those given in the press. . . .

The agencies and organizations by means of which the British influenced the thinking of the American people were many and varied. Some, such as censorship and intelligence groups, were formally organized, but many of the most effective agencies were independent and connected with no responsible propaganda department. It would be impossible to list all the groups which spread British ideas about the war because, in the last analysis, all people who had been propagandized were doing this work. However, it is possible to deal with the major sections, or units, which were fighting the war of words.

The first propaganda organization to be set in motion was that of censorship. On August 5, 1914, the British cut the cables between Germany and the United States. No other means of rapid communication existed between these two nations, and as a result, the most effective instrument of propaganda, the news, was suppressed at the most crucial time in the history of the war—the time when first impressions were being made, when opinions were being established. Even after the inauguration of trans-Atlantic wireless, late in 1914, with its limited facilities for the transmission of news, German dispatches were slower than the British so that even the later, less important British interpretations of events became the accepted versions in America.

In November, 1917, an official of the State Department wrote to President Wilson advocating a censorship of the American press. His principal argument was that "the *first publication* is that which is *formative of public opinion* and which affects public emotion." By controlling these first impressions all the opponent could do was to "retrieve part of the unfortunate effect" created by the original publication, and, in words of one British propaganda agent, "no contradiction, no retraction, can quite overcome the harm of the first printing."

The cutting of the cables between the United States and Germany was the first act of censorship and the first act of propaganda. These Siamese twins of public opinion were from that time to dictate what the American people were to think. The second move in the same endeavor was the censorship of the press of England. This was done under the Defense of the Realm Act, the famous DORA, which gave control over "all statements intended or likely to prejudice His Majesty's relations with foreign powers." The year before the war there had been formed a Joint Consultative Committee of Admiralty, War Office, and Press for the purpose of planning censorship. This Press Censorship Committee

was replaced in August, 1916, by the Press Bureau with its duty to "supervise, largely on a voluntary basis, issue of news to and by the press." Sir John Simon, the Home Secretary, was responsible to the Cabinet, while in direct charge was F. E. Smith, the later Lord Birkenhead. He was replaced on September 3, 1914, by Stanley Buckmaster. It must be remembered, of course, that in addition to this committee, nearly every department of the British government maintained its own separate intelligence and censorship bureau.

As a matter of fact, the Press Bureau "was only a shield and recording angel for the naval and military censors who acted under direct instructions from the Admiralty and War Office." As one Englishman remarked, it was "the imaginative department, the body which dresses up the facts for presentment to the public, a most important function and one leaving scope for individual imagination." This censorship bureau in Great Britain must be considered a determining factor in controlling American opinion, because the news which it passed was the version which the American press released.

With their German source of information cut off, American newspapers had to secure their war news where it was available—and that was from England. The only way they could get even partially complete European news was to buy the advance sheets of London newspapers. Otherwise they were limited to official communiqués from the British or French governments. News obtained from other European countries also had to be filtered through the British censorship, so it can be seen that it was truly the British news that became American news. The American correspondents in Europe did attempt to send unbiased news to their papers. They struggled against the restrictions imposed upon them by the British, but to no avail —they were helpless victims of circumstance. "Schreiner of the Associated Press estimated that at this time [1915] nearly three-quarters of the dispatches written by American correspondents in Central Europe were perishing under the shears of the British censors."

The censorship of mail, similar to censorship of press and cable, served to control information passing between Europe and America. It also served as a source of information for the propagandists. The British mail censorship started on August 29, 1914, with fourteen persons on the original staff. By Easter of 1916 it had a force of approximately two thousand. Early in 1917 there were thirty-seven hundred persons in London alone censoring mail, and fifteen hundred in Liverpool. Colonel G. S. H. Pearson was Chief Postal Censor from 1914 to 1918. The main office of this group was in Salisbury House in London but most of its work was done at the Liverpool branch. There were also censors at Gibraltar, Alexandria, and Folkestone. In each case the censorship bureau consisted of a military and naval room, a cable department, and an issuing department. This last had charge of information to be turned over to the press.

Utilizing this censorship with great intelligence, the British were able to keep tab on all their enemies and the friends of their enemies. The censor summarized all information of interest which his organization intercepted and sent his reports to the departments which would be interested in the particular intelligence. It can readily be seen that such a source of information would be invaluable for every phase of propaganda work. It is also apparent that the elimination

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of information would cripple enemy propaganda. Occasionally the *Confidential Supplement* of the *Daily Review of the Foreign Press* would include information taken from "intercepted letters."

One British measure of immense importance to the propagandists, indirectly connected with censorship, was the interception of wireless messages to and from Germany. Eventually the staff taking care of this work grew to about fifty "and as many as 2,000 intercepted messages were often received and dealt with in 24 hours." "In 1916 the Germans contracted a habit of changing the key of the principal Naval Signal Book every night at 12 o'clock, but the deciphering staff of Room 40 had by that time become so expert that the changes caused the night watch no serious embarrassment." The work was done by the Naval Intelligence Department under Admiral Sir William Reginald Hall; the man in direct charge was Sir Alfred Ewing. The intelligence intercepted in this way was invaluable to propagandists as well as to statesmen and enabled the British government to anticipate many of the moves of her enemies.

The foregoing censorship controls could be called negative propaganda; they made it possible for the positive propaganda to achieve a more complete victory. In fact, it is difficult to see how the propagandists could have operated without the censor.

In September, 1914, Charles Masterman was authorized by the British Foreign Office to form a War Propaganda Bureau. Installed in Wellington House, the office of an insurance firm, it began to issue the propaganda which was soon to flood the United States. Developing by leaps and bounds, it became the principal outlet for books, pamphlets, and other instruments of British propaganda. Each branch of the work was controlled by a separate department under the direction of some individual of considerable prominence. Mr. Eric Maclagan was in charge of propaganda for France; Mr. William Archer directed the department for the Scandinavian countries; while Sir Gilbert Parker supervised the one which took care of propaganda for the United States—the American Ministry of Information. Parker had as his assistants Professor Macneile Dixon of Glasgow University, Mr. A. J. Toynbee of Balliol College, and others. Starting out with nine men, by 1917 he had fifty-four.

The mailing list of Wellington House (as a whole), being carefully compiled was expanded till it contained 260,000 names of influential persons throughout the Union." Sir Gilbert Parker's list was made after consulting the American *Who's Who*. From this compilation he made separate groupings of prominent Americans, according to their profession, supposed intelligence, or standing in the community.

Nicholson has stated that "Wellington house was . . . concerned with the production, translation and distribution of books, pamphlets, government publications, speeches and so forth dealing with the war, its origin, its history and all the varied and difficult questions which arose during its development; the production and distribution of special pictorial papers; assisting in the placing of articles and interviews designed to influence opinion in the world's newspapers and magazines, especially in America; the wide distribution of pictorial matter, cartoons, pictures and drawings, photographs for insertion in newspapers and periodicals and for exhibition; the production and distribution of cinemato-

graph films; personal correspondence with influential people abroad, especially in America; arrangements for the interchange of visits, of personal tours to neutral and allied countries and of visits of distinguished neutrals and of representatives of the Allies to this country; the production and distribution of maps, diagrams, posters, lantern slides and lectures, pictures, postcards, and all other possible means of miscellaneous propaganda."

Sir Gilbert Parker has remarked that "besides our private correspondence with individuals we had our literature sent to a great number of public libraries, Y.M.C.A. societies, universities, colleges, clubs, and newspapers."...

Just as they used natives in Africa and Asia, the British did all in their power to enlist Americans as propagandists to overcome the resistance of Americans. One distinguished English expert in this field wrote: "Better than any pumped-in propaganda abroad was [the] . . . method of making the leaders of the Imperial, neutral or Allied press themselves the propagandists when they returned home." In doing this the British did not attempt bribery. Instead, the "method chosen was that of direct personal approach." Most educated Englishmen are socially delightful and in this phase of propaganda they were able to put their charm to work to good advantage. There is a compulsion in friendship which makes disagreement very distasteful and before long the British had eliminataed "disagreement" from their American friends.

Sir Gilbert Parker has stated that he "advised and stimulated many people to write articles" and "asked . . . friends and correspondents to arrange for speeches, debates and lectures by American citizens." Especially did he utilize the "friendly services and assistance of confidential friends." Here was the real genius of British propaganda organization. In other circles this procedure would be called a "confidence game." Eventually, as a result of the propaganda and the campaign to get the friendship of American leaders, almost all articulate Americans were taken into the Allies' camp, to become Crusaders for England.

The first of the "native" propagandists were newspapermen. Their enlistment was, in origin, quite accidental. In order to make the stifling of news more acceptable to the dissatisfied correspondents, an "official eye-witness" at the front had been appointed by the British. His efforts pleased no one. In March and April, 1915, a step forward was made when parties of British correspondents were taken on a tour of the battlefields. In doing this it was discovered that the news writers could be pacified and at the same time be made to serve as propagandists. By stationing the reporters at the various army headquarters, and by making them personal friends, they became apologists for the British cause. In June, 1915, when the British General Headquarters received one American (Frederick Palmer) and six British correspondents, this system of propaganda was formally started.

After this, the British propagandists constantly had the American newspapermen in mind. Nicholson has stated that Wellington House was vitally interested in "helping to provide information and facilities to London correspondents of neutral, especially American, papers." In 1916 Wellington House endorsed the recommendations of one of its agents that "special correspondents from this country [the United States] . . . should be sent to the front and be allowed to see actual fighting." Explaining, he

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stated: "The French have, on the surface, done no propaganda work of any kind" but have been very cordial to American correspondents in France "and these correspondents have come back here and written the most enthusiastic articles for France. The last and most convincing . . . is to be found in the visit of Frank Simonds." The British went even further; they entertained all people of importance who visited France. "Editors, novelists, political experts, essayists, statesmen, university presidents, and men of importance in all walks of life, especially Americans, were given tours of the front. A visitor's chateau was provided for them and there the cuisine was excellent, while food rationing in England tightened under the growing submarine menace. They were chaperoned by most attentive and diplomatic reserve officers who had notes in hand from the Foreign Office about the standing and character of each visitor which made ingratiating hospitality the easier on the part of hosts. The guests were shown what was good for them to see. . . ."

Back in England, "American journalists, publicists, authors, statesmen, greeters, and munition-makers" were courted assiduously. "Clubs were open to them, teas and dinners were given for them." "The American wives of Englishmen, who had already given their proof that blood is thicker than water, led by Lady Astor, formed a battalion of solicitude lest Americans in London become homesick."

John St. Loe Strachey had a meeting of American correspondents each week at his home in London. There reporters were given the opportunity to meet some important personage, such as a cabinet member or a military leader. Men formerly aloof and inaccessible to reporters became very cordial. The personal contacts established at these meetings made censorship less distasteful to the correspondents, and also made it more difficult for those attending to give any but a British interpretation of news —even if it had been possible to get such a version past the censor. The same type of meeting was held by the foreign editor of the London *Times*.

In order to exert the same influence over American press bureaus, the British Naval Censor kept "in closest touch" with the British agents of the Associated Press (Mr. Collins) and the United Press (Mr. Keen). The European press bureaus had, of course, already been turned into propaganda agencies. The British had Reuters while the French used Havas. Even the German colonies had to copy their news from the dispatches of these two organizations. Reuters sent out more than a million words a month, making up every week approximately four hundred articles.

In conducting such a propaganda system of native workers, it was necessary to go beyond those important individuals whom they could reach in Europe. In order to influence those small newspapers in the United States which had no press service and no correspondents abroad, Sir Gilbert Parker, "supplied three hundred and sixty newspapers in the smaller cities of the United States with an English newspaper which [gave] a weekly review and comment of the affairs of the war."

Few opportunities to influence writers were left unexploited and although newspaper people objected strongly to the control which was placed upon them, their resistance was unavailing. News was essential to the success of their papers and in order to secure news they had to conform—which they did. The almost complete capture of American news-

writers resulted in a press consistently friendly to the Allies. The American division of the British propaganda ministry made a weekly analysis of this success for the information of the Cabinet. A terse statement such as, "The week supplies satisfactory evidence of the permeation of the American press by British influence" means a great deal more in this connection than would seem at first glance. It means that even British propagandists were satisfied with their control.

But newspaper people were not the only Americans who were enlisted to fight Britain's battles. Appeal was systematically made to all classes. One discussion of this problem divided Americans first as to "particular faiths"; second, "particular nationalities"; third, "labor"; fourth, "intellectuals"; and fifth, the "average man." In all these cases it should be remembered that the motive was to secure the active support of the leaders of that particular class. . . .

The great success of British propaganda in the United States should not be attributed to a professional group of propagandists but to native Americans —volunteer propagandists. These were individually enlisted in some cases, but in the main were regimented into "soldiers of the king" by a process of eliminating, or at least curtailing, enemy interpretations of the war and by dominating the news with exaggerated and warped pro-Ally accounts of what was happening or had happened. Once these natives had acquired the "correct" frame of mind, they were enlisted for the "duration of the war." The formal propaganda groups acted merely as connecting and reinforcing elements of the British propaganda organizations. The real propagandists were Americans—our preachers, teachers, politicians, and journalists. . . .

The reasons back of the American decision of April, 1917, were not unlike those which had governed the European nations in the crisis of August, 1914. There was the same overcharged atmosphere of hate and distrust; there was the same helplessness resulting from an entanglement of interests; and there was the same stubbornness and political ineptitude on the part of the statesmen. Even the immediate cause for American entrance into the war was brought about by a political impasse similar to that of 1914. Like Grey, Poincaré, and the Kaiser, the American and German officials had taken an extreme position from which they could not retreat without a loss of prestige to themselves and their nations. Wilson, like his European contemporaries, chose war rather than accept a diplomatic defeat, and, again like them, justified himself by claiming that the United States was entering the war to uphold peace, liberty, democracy, and the rights of small nations.

The most important of the reasons for the American action in 1917, however, was none of these things—it was instead the attitude of mind in this country—the product of British propaganda. People under the influence of the propaganda came to look upon the struggle of 1914–18 as a simple conflict between the forces of good and evil; they felt that all that was wrong was that certain malevolent individuals had gained control of an autocratic government and were attempting to dictate to the rest of the world. In the minds of American leaders there was developed a blind hatred of everything German. After this hatred had distorted American neutrality, it created a willingness to sacrifice American youth in an attempt to punish the hated nation.