



John Maxwell Hamilton. *Manipulating the Masses: Woodrow Wilson and the Birth of American Propaganda.* Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2020. 656 pp. Ill. \$49.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8071-7077-9.

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In this excellent book, John Maxwell Hamilton examines the darker side of US president Woodrow Wilson's administration during the First World War. In historical scholarship, the president has been identified with progressivism at home and liberal internationalism abroad. When he led the United States into war against Germany in 1917, he promised to make the world safe for democracy. Yet Wilson authorized and encouraged wartime practices that denied civil liberties to Americans in the name of winning the war in Europe. "This book," Hamilton writes, "is about the profound and enduring threat to American democracy that rose out of the Great War—the establishment of pervasive, systematic propaganda as an instrument of the state" (p. 4).

A week after the United States entered the war, Wilson established the Committee on Public Information (CPI) under the leadership of progressive journalist George Creel. The CPI and Creel are the central focus of Hamilton's book, which recognizes their positive contributions but also their negative impact on the nation. "The CPI's accomplishments are not its whole story, however." Hamilton emphasizes, "More than anything else, this book is a cautionary lesson about the intoxic-

ating power of propaganda.... The CPI subverted the democratic ideals it espoused. It sanitized news, distorted facts, and was tendentious. It appealed to emotions of home and hearth, which was relatively benign, but aroused fear and hatred, which was not.... Working with federal intelligence agencies eager to sniff out subversives and stifle dissent, the CPI was an accomplice to the Wilson administration's trampling of civil liberties" (pp. 7-8). Hamilton warns against the long-term consequences of what began during the Great War: "The quest for more effective propaganda—and the danger to democracy—intensifies when a nation is at war. This is the case today" (pp. 13-14).

Hamilton notes a pattern of leadership that characterized Wilson's presidency. Those who managed the publicity for his 1916 presidential campaign emphasized the "He Kept Us Out of War" slogan. He knew he might be unable to keep that promise of peace because the demands of his policies toward the European belligerents might culminate in America's entry into the war. Yet he embraced that false promise.

After winning reelection, Wilson issued a peace note to the belligerents but failed to control

the public message. Hamilton notes, “The badly plotted peace note added to Wilson’s difficulties achieving his peace goal. The fundamental error was rooted in his disdain for journalists. He wanted them to keep their pens in their pockets until he told them when it was time to write. His efforts to control the message this way produced exactly the opposite of what he wanted. By taking the press into his confidence, even if on background, he could have avoided confusion about his peace proposal.” Hamilton emphasizes, “This episode revealed a fundamental aspect of Wilson’s thinking about the presidency: the great faith he put in leading the public with soaring appeals through diplomatic notes and speeches from behind a lectern. This concept of leadership, which sprang from his thinking about government as a professor, was informed by progressive belief in the need to engineer citizens’ opinions. That reasoning lay behind his creation of the Committee on Public Information when, within the next few weeks, the country went to war” (p. 77).

While Wilson touted pitiless publicity, Hamilton observes, he often remained quite secretive and even uninvolved in his own administration. “Wilson’s weakness warred with—and undermined—his greatness,” writes Hamilton. “He expanded the role of the office and enlarged the scope of the federal government, yet he was detached from crucial aspects of governing” (p. 82). Wilson strongly supported Creel and his aggressive leadership of the wartime CPI, yet he sought to keep his distance from some of its worst abuses.

Hamilton provides a detailed account of the CPI’s operations, ranging from propaganda to censorship both at home and abroad. “Wilson’s administration revolutionized press relations like the steam engine revolutionized manufacturing,” he writes. “Theodore Roosevelt had made effective use of press releases, to the point of annoying Congress, but these handouts were largely the products of a few bureaus and amounted to a trickle compared to what gushed from the CPI.

Creel mass-produced news and established impersonal routines to reach the press day in and day out. The CPI was not limited to handling the flow of news from government agencies. Because Wilson did not hold press conferences and [his secretary Joseph] Tumulty ceased giving daily press briefings, the CPI was the principal source of White House news” (p. 127). It also stopped alternative sources of information. “Creel and the president were largely shoulder to shoulder with regard to censoring. In May 1918, Creel forwarded an analysis by British correspondent Arthur Willert of the president’s attitudes toward Irish independence. ‘Acting under my blanket instructions, to the effect that censors should not pass matter purporting to give your views,’ Creel wrote, ‘the whole cable was killed with the exception of the opening [para]graph.’ The first [para]graph was one sentence. The portion killed amounted to more than three pages. Creel asked if Wilson approved. Wilson did. He said the reporter ‘had no authority’ to speculate on his thinking. This despite Willert’s close cooperation with the CPI” (p. 245).

Although generally critical, Hamilton credits the CPI with effective public diplomacy abroad. “The CPI’s signal achievement was not individual accomplishments in one country or another. It was,” he explains, “the implementation of Wilson’s New Diplomacy, a progressive idea of international relations. The CPI went over the heads of governments to shape the attitudes of their citizens about the United States, about their own domestic politics, and about creating better ordered world comity” (p. 294). Yet the CPI failed in its propaganda aimed at bolstering the morale of US and Allied soldiers and undermining that of enemy soldiers. “Creel’s mismanagement of field propaganda exceeded the bungling of CPI propaganda in allied and neutral countries. Nothing redeemed the CPI apart from its belief that field propaganda was a good idea. The spare account in Creel’s *Complete Report* swept the embarrassing episode under the historical carpet. Little has been written

about it. The story is worth telling not only because it fills out the history of the CPI. Field propaganda against enemy combatants, which the AEF [American Expeditionary Force] eventually oversaw, marked the advent of a species of psychological warfare deemed essential today but was then, in many military minds, considered a waste of time” (pp. 297-98).

Hamilton regards the Sisson documents, which purported to prove a German-Bolshevik conspiracy that enabled Vladimir I. Lenin and the Bolsheviks to seize power in the Russian Revolution of 1917, as the worst example of the CPI’s operations. Although these documents were forgeries, Edgar Sisson, who headed the CPI’s Office of War Propaganda, vowed for their authenticity. Both Creel and Wilson strongly supported this falsehood, disregarding warnings from other officials about the evident forgery. It served their short-term interests in promoting democracy abroad through propaganda. “The administration badly miscalculated,” Hamilton concludes. “It assumed the great mass of Russians could be induced to throw off the Bolsheviks for a democratic government and enthusiastically fight the Germans. ‘It was perfectly possible to make them have heart in the war,’ Charles Edward Russell told Wilson when the [Elihu] Root mission, of which he was part [in 1917], returned to the United States. An education campaign was needed. ‘If it is addressed to Russian’s passion for democracy, and if it shows him that his beloved Revolution is in peril, he will be ready to fight with all his strength.’ Wilson replied that Russell’s thinking ‘runs along the lines of my own thought.’ If one believed that Russians really wanted to fight, it was an easy next step to believe the Bolsheviks, who took the country out of the war, were an alien political element acting on behalf of the Germans” (pp. 384-85). This falsehood not only contributed to failure abroad but also helped promote the Red Scare at home.

“The Sisson-Creel combination played to both men’s weaknesses, the one being inclined to sensationalism and the other to impetuosity,” Hamilton observes. “Wilson’s reliance on two men with no credentials for pronouncing judgment on a German-Bolshevik conspiracy and his failure to tell the State Department that he approved publication constituted administrative malpractice. Wilson had warned Sisson to stay away from ‘political entanglements’ and then followed him into an adventure that haunted policy toward the Soviet Union for years to come” (p. 390). The United States thus became a victim of its own false propaganda.

Hamilton concludes that the CPI left a negative legacy. Ironically, it helped undermine Wilson’s vision for a new world order. “CPI propaganda had other postwar liabilities besides accentuating partisanship,” he notes. “CPI images of Hun brutality and CPI stories of German-Bolshevik conspiracies worked against the fair treatment that Wilson had promised—a promise that Germans believed when they signed the armistice” (p. 429). Despite the accuracy of Hamilton’s criticism, there were other reasons for the failure of Wilson’s peacemaking. If he had succeeded in convincing the Allies to accept all his ideas for the peace treaty with Germany, it would still not have satisfied the postwar German claims. No propaganda, even more accurate and less harsh than the CPI’s, could have resolved those deep international conflicts.

In Hamilton’s view, Wilson ultimately failed to use propaganda effectively when he most needed it to persuade the American people to support the Versailles Treaty with the League of Nations Covenant. The president’s illness and his abrupt ending of the CPI were contributing factors to his inability to convince the Senate to approve the peace treaty. But his personality and style of leadership also influenced this outcome. “Wilson’s stubbornness and sanctimoniousness and his aversion to courting the press and political oppon-

ents were not new. These traits had existed for a long time. Illness only exacerbated them” (p. 450).

Wilson’s legacy was mixed, as Hamilton convincingly demonstrates in this outstanding book. “Wilson profoundly transformed the communication functions of the American government, but he did not grasp how much. He enlarged the executive branch in his first years in office and expanded it more during the war. This growth required a presidency that was more engaged in persuasion—persuasion of members of his administration, of Congress, of key constituencies, and of citizens.... All this, and yet, when the need for propaganda was as great, if not greater, than at any other time, he treated it as a secondary matter” (p. 451).

Hamilton believes that the president’s misguided use of propaganda contributed to his failure at the Paris Peace Conference of 1919 and in the treaty fight over the League of Nations and other parts of the peace treaty with Germany. Wilson failed to understand the proper role of propaganda in democratic governance. “Democracy privileges process. It presupposes that open, vigorous deliberation ensures better outcomes. The CPI subverted this. It did all the things that Creel insisted it did not do. It ignored facts and opinions that spoiled its narrative. Its publicity was tendentious” (p. 458). Hamilton’s book makes a convincing case for this critical conclusion.

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