The Food Administration of Herbert Hoover and American Voluntarism in the First World War

By John Allen

World War I was one of the most devastating events in human history. Homes and farm land throughout war-torn Europe was annihilated, millions were killed, and vital resources were left scarce. The United States was in a different position than most of Europe; it entered the war late and was removed from the battlefield. America’s food production industry was not affected by the gunfire, landmines, and trenches of Europe. American farms and factories were on safe ground and could still produce. America’s civilians had easy access to food while European civilians were victims of starvation. This is where America had a chance to be more than just an ally to the war effort; this was its chance to save millions of people. To combat starvation in Europe, the United States Food Administration was established on August 10, 1917 as part of Executive Order 2679-A of the Congressional Lever Act introduced by President Woodrow Wilson (1856-1924).¹ This was one of the most efficient and successful governmental initiatives in American history. The total amount of food delivered to Europe during the war and reconstruction period, was 33,841,307 pounds, equaling $5,234,028,208.56.² This great success, as stated by Head of the United States Food Administration, Herbert Hoover (1874-1964), was a result of “patriotic devotion and self-sacrifice” of American farmers, women, and families.³

³ Ibid., 43.
Herbert Hoover

President Wilson appointed the former head of the Belgian Relief Organization, Herbert Hoover, to the head of the Food Administration. Hoover was born August, 1874 in a small cottage in Iowa. His Quaker family, who helped settle his home town, West Branch, lived with the “principles of honesty, hard work, simplicity, and generosity.” All these values would influence Hoover’s future work at the Food Administration. He dealt with loss very early in life, becoming an orphan at nine years old. This loss helped Hoover empathize with those experiencing loss and hardships in the future war-torn Europe. The money saved from Hoover’s father’s farm was used to fund the Hoover children’s education. Herbert Hoover went to Stanford University where he graduated with a degree in geology. Hoover then used this degree to work in California’s gold mines, and later as a mining engineer in Australia. His mining experience allowed him to travel the world and eventually establish his own “international firm of engineering consultants in London.” Hoover’s work experience combined with his new firm made him a very wealthy man.

Prior to his appointment as head of the Food Administration, Hoover was an applauded humanitarian for his relief work. He fought for the job and convinced President Wilson that the organization would be more efficient with a singular “authoritative administrator.” In order to give himself “moral authority” to rally support for the cause of food conservation and voluntary service, Hoover took no salary. He later wrote in his memoirs that he hoped the American people would “go back to simple food, simple clothes, [and] simple pleasures. Pray hard, work hard, sleep hard, and play hard. Do it all courageously and cheerfully.” He became a nationally recognized humanitarian throughout the duration of the Food Administration. His actions within the Food

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6 National Park Service, “Herbert Hoover.”
7 National Archives, “Teaching with Documents.”
8 Ibid.
Administration positively helped his later political career and contributed to his election as President in 1928.

The Food Administration was relied on America’s voluntary spirit. The most incredible part of the Food Administration was that rationing never happened. Hoover opposed it because it would require a “hundred thousand bureaucratic snoopers.”\textsuperscript{9} Even halfway through the war, Hoover maintained that less consumption of certain foods would prevent mandatory rationing.\textsuperscript{10} Hoover was able to effectively coerce American citizens into changing their lifestyles through an extremely successful Food Administration. This was an astounding accomplishment, because Americans were fixated on what they ate for the past twenty five years. The growing number of early pathologists brought hysteria in the early twentieth century. The fascination and fear of germs united people together. Entire community movements were devoted to food sanitation purposes. In 1912, the “Greatest Anti-Fly Crusade Ever Known” occurred across America to eradicate fly populations – the widely accepted cause of typhoid.\textsuperscript{11} This early example of food related voluntarism, certainly could have contributed to Hoover’s successful use of voluntarism in the Food Administration.

\textsuperscript{10} \textit{The Hartford Courant}, Jan 12, 1918.
\textsuperscript{11} Harvey Levenstein, \textit{Fear of Food: A History of Why We Worry about What We Eat} (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2012), 10.
Decentralization

Most of the Food Administration was decentralized; each state appointed a food administrator. These “food administrators” were volunteers that used their own time and did not get paid.¹² In Connecticut, Robert Scoville, of Hartford and Salisbury, served in that capacity.¹³ President Wilson created the Food Administration with the intention of it being a temporary organization. Each state’s Food Administration was different depending on that state’s needs. Since it was meant to be temporary, there was never any official chart depicting all the branches of the Food Administration: it was a “needs-based” organization.¹⁴ As a representative of the industrialized northeast, Connecticut serves as an ideal case study of the Food Administration’s local implementation. In order to further coerce people into food conservation efforts, the Food Administration, both state and federal, created countless forms of propaganda. A vital component of the Food

¹² Mullendore, in History of the United States Food Administration, 72.
¹³ Ibid., 359.
¹⁴ Ibid., 67.
Administration’s success was through the use of its literature, posters, pledge cards and use of local and national news’ media. Newspapers were a crucial part of this success: a constant focus of The Hartford Courant was to promote and support food conservation and volunteer opportunities in Connecticut. The themes of voluntarism followed American food conservation throughout the war.

Food and Education

American schools heavily emphasized food conservation. Requests from teachers for literature on this subject flooded into the Food Administration. In response, the administration created several books designed to help teach people what food to consume and what they should avoid. One copy of Food and the War was distributed to each college and normal school in the country.\textsuperscript{15} This book is divided into numerous sections describing all aspects of food. It provides nutritional values on foods but it also asks civilians to avoid certain foods. It was aimed at college women. In fact, the first page is an address “to the Women of the Universities and Colleges” by Herbert Hoover. In this address, Hoover calls them heroes: “The time is coming soon when the souls of men will be tried as never before. They must have the truth that will make them free. They will listen to you if you can give them that truth.”\textsuperscript{16} In conjunction with that plea for “truth,” Herbert Hoover also asked women “to pursue those studies which deal with food, and to train yourselves for real leadership.”\textsuperscript{17}

The Importance of Women’s Support

The Food Administration convinced civilians that food conservation was a just and selfless cause. They needed to make people feel good about what they were doing and how they were, in many ways, helping to win the war. A year before Herbert Hoover’s call to College women, President

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 67.
\textsuperscript{16} Herbert Hoover, “United States Food Administration: To the Women of the Universities and Colleges,” in United States Food Administration, Food and the War, (Cambridge, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1918)
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid.
Wilson also asked American women for help. In his “Call to the Women of the Nation,” he asked for women’s help in conserving food and eliminating waste. Some women, like Hull-House founder Jane Addams (1860-1935), used this opportunity of voluntarism to enter into politics. Many women in Connecticut responded enthusiastically to President Wilson’s call. The National League for Woman’s Service in Hartford met with plans to work with the “Connecticut Agricultural College at Storrs,” to give public demonstrations about food conservation techniques. These women also emphasized the idea of “food detachment” to support food conservation. In addition, the Connecticut Agricultural College worked with the state Committee on Food Supply and Conservation and planned exhibitions on dried vegetables and fruits. A common practice throughout the war was that of women going out of their way to learn ways to help the food conservation campaign. In New Britain, this Woman’s Committee for Food Conservation wanted to learn Italian style canning for their vegetables. Learning to can foods was one of the most popular methods of support.

Nationally, canning advice was given in journal and newspaper articles. The National Canners’ Association’s chief chemist, W.D. Bigelow, wrote an entire journal article about storing partially opened canned foods. Canning was emphasized in journals, and many food organizations tried to sell the idea that canned foods were good foods. Libby, McNeill, & Libby, a Chicago based canning company, worked to promote “the high quality of canned foods,” stating that “canned foods are frequently far superior to foods in bulk.” The spokesperson for this company, Lawrence V. Burton, goes on to say that corned beef packed in 1887 would still be in “first class condition” to

22 Ibid.
Canning gained popularity with women throughout the war and was one of the most important contributions women made to conserve and sustain the food supply over the winter. Women’s place in food conservation cannot be understated; they were paramount to the mission of the Food Administration.

**The Hard Work of America’s Young People**

Children also contributed during the war to help with food issues. The United States School Garden (USSG) Army was an organization developed by the Bureau of Education. This organization sought to organize the youth of the country to do volunteer work relating to food. The USSG set up school gardens that taught children how to grow and maintain a garden. After a crop was harvested, it was sold. This money was not kept by the student; their work in the United States School Garden was voluntary. One of Herbert Hoover’s essential values was hard-work; this was supported through programs such as the USSG. In Windsor Locks, Connecticut for example, in order to avoid paying a substantial amount of money for a canal to be built, the youth of the USSG did the work. According to *The Hartford Courant*, Connecticut was the first state to mobilize a School Garden Army with the goal to produce $1,000,000 worth of food for the 1918 season.*27 The Hartford Courant* boasted that “Connecticut is justly proud that she always goes ‘over the top,’ and her young people are demonstrating that they are chips off the old block.” Old children were also utilized for the food conservation effort. The United States Boy’s Working Reserve was created for boys between the ages of sixteen and twenty one.*29 During May, 1918, ninety seven boys in this

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26 *The Hartford Courant*, Mar 25, 1918.
27 *The Hartford Courant*, Mar 30, 1918.
28 *The Hartford Courant*, May 8, 1918.
29 *The Hartford Courant*, Feb 21, 1918.
organization were trained to be farmers at the Connecticut Agricultural College. After being
trained for two weeks, the boys were sent to different farms throughout the state for the rest of the
summer. The Working Reserve was highly praised by former President, Theodore Roosevelt
(1858-1919), who appreciated the fact that the Reserve made boys realize they were “part of Uncle
Sam’s team.”

Boys were not the only ones working to conserve food. Young girls were part of both the
infamous Wilson “Call to the Women of the Nation,” and the Food Administration’s call to
children. The Women’s Committee, a subsection of the Council of National Defense, appealed to
the “girls of Connecticut” to join the Junior U.S. Food Army. The Committee asked girls to “dry,

Figure 2: The United States School Garden Army, “We Eat Because We Work” (1918).

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30 *The Hartford Courant*, May 23, 1918.
31 Ibid.
salt or preserve [food] in some way.” If a singular girl could preserve one hundred pounds of food, they would receive “a special certificate in recognition of her work, bearing the signature of the governor, the chairman of the committee of food supply, the president of the Connecticut Agricultural College and the director of the extension service of the U.S. department of agriculture and Connecticut Agricultural College.”33 These “prizes” made people feel good about their free and voluntary labor – something that Herbert Hoover had in mind when designing the Food Administration.

**Pledge Cards**

Part of the way that Herbert Hoover was able to coerce people into volunteer work and conservation efforts was to have them sign a “pledge card.” The pledge card was used to make people feel a moral obligation to stay true to the ideals of the Food Administration and conserve food. From October 29 to November 5, 1917, the Food Administration ran “Food Pledge Week” when Hoover hoped to enlist “as nearly as possible one hundred per cent of America’s twenty-two million households” to support conservation.34 The timing of the “Food Pledge Week” was important because winter was coming up. Hoover used the Food Administration’s bulletin to advertise this. He appealed to “older folk,” patriotic, and religious people by relating a waste of food to a sin. He asked everyone to join: “Can we not all of us, every patriotic man and woman, help spread that sense of sin?”35 Wasted food resulted in unanimous uproar. At one point in the war, 7,000,000 pounds of food was lost in New York City because of transportation complications. Apparently the “New York sunshine” was too harsh on the perishable food items and they were not refrigerated correctly. *The Hartford Courant* urged that “waste of that sort” should be “morally if not

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35 Ibid.
Pledge cards created a sense of guilt regarding waste, which worked to reduce the amount of items thrown out. In the first year of World War I, Hartford significantly decreased the number of cubic yards of garbage it produced compared to the previous two years even though the city was growing.  

Women were one of the main targets of the pledge cards. Hoover once again included them in his words, saying “Mrs. Woodrow Wilson was the first woman to sign this food pledge card.”

Figure 3: USFA, *Food and the War* (1918)

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36 *The Hartford Courant*, Feb 20, 1917.  
38 Hoover, “Food Pledge Week,” 4.
In Hartford, the “Kitchen Army” organized housewives to sign pledge cards and even imitated President Wilson in their efforts, their mission was “to make the world safe for domesticity.”

Pledge cards aided women who were trying to become politically active. Members of women’s organizations signed the Food Administration’s pledges. Later they sought out women who were unsigned, thus speeding up the process and gaining practice campaigning.

Food conservation efforts would have been hindered without the support of women. Throughout the existence of the Food Administration, Herbert Hoover secured pledges from 14,000,000 families, 7,000 hotels and restaurants, and 425,000 “dealers in food.”

What Should Be Eaten?

Herbert Hoover’s bulletin gave directions on both “what to eat” and “what to save.” He advised people to eat local foods so that transported foods could go to people overseas. This was especially true in Connecticut, with its numerous farms and orchards. Eggs and poultry were recommended to the local population, but most meats were to be avoided. Hoover recommended using meat scraps, when a family ate meat, in “soups, gravies, and flavorings” rather than throwing them away. He recommended that Americans eat potatoes daily and created new dishes using them. Connecticut, which is not recognized as a “potato state,” responded to this call in the Hartford Food Administration’s propaganda. In February 1918, Hoover sent a letter to Connecticut’s Robert Scoville promoting the use of “home gardens” to grow more potatoes and beans, and less perishable

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40 Capozzola, Uncle Sam Wants You, 97.
41 Hoover, “Introduction,” in Mullendore, History of the United States Food Administration, 12.
42 Hoover, “Food Pledge Week,” 3.
foods. In this letter Hoover noted that potatoes are easy to grow and “can be preserved in the household without artificial treatment.”

The Food Administration used pamphlets, bulletins, books, and posters to spread their message. The anonymous author of Food and the War said that weight loss from a diet would be “harmless or even advantageous” for the obese but “dangerous” for the thin or emaciated. They also said that an inadequate diet would leave a person “still fat, but pale and flabby.”

![Image of a poster](image.png)

Figure 4: The United States Food Administration Committee of Food Supply “Here Sir’ at Your Service” by, 1917.

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43 The Hartford Courant, Feb 25, 1918.
44 Ibid.
45 USFA, Food and the War, 47.
46 Ibid.
In one of the Food Administration’s books, *War Economy in Food with Suggestions and Recipes for Substitutions in the Planning of Meals*, the administration listed eight foods that civilians should avoid: wheat, butter, lard, sugar, bacon, beef, mutton, and pork. The foods that “folks at home can use” were: “corn, oats, barley, rye, cooking oils (cottonseed, peanut, corn, and dripping), molasses, honey, sirups, chicken, eggs, cottage cheese, fish, nuts peas, and beans.”\(^{47}\) It is unusual that potatoes were not included in that list, because they are mentioned in so many other pieces of Food Administration literature. By listing the foods that should be avoided, the Food Administration made people morally accountable for their decisions. Propaganda posters created by the United

![Figure 5: Lloyd Harrison, “Corn: The Food of the Nation” (1918).](image-url)

States Food Administration also displayed the foods one should buy. For example, one of the most common foods to be utilized by the American public was corn. Corn was popular because it could be grown in bulk and harvested quickly. Farmers could produce four times the amount of corn than wheat. Also the book explained that “pop corn should be better recognized as a valuable part of the diet.” There were thousands of corn-based recipes that people could create. The nutritional value of corn was emphasized in the literature as well because people could get a lot of nourishment out of corn.

**Substitute Foods**

Many substitutes, like corn, were used to assist civilians in their mission to eat better without consuming the needed foods. Since butter was one of the foods to be avoided, an additive like “nut margarine” was created. In literature like *The American Food Journal*, the process of making these new foods was documented. Aside from “nut margarine,” the journal include “cereal substitutes for wheat,” “aquatic products as food,” and “sugar other than cane or beet.” Again and again, wheat was considered one of the required foods. Wheat was easy to grow, ship, and process, so it was a priority for the soldiers. *The Hartford Courant* ran Food Administration articles throughout the war. Similar to the books put out by the Food Administration, newspaper articles gave recipes and quips about what citizens should be eating. One article from May, 1918 had a poem relating to eating local Connecticut fruits:

Canned fruits as sauce,

Short Cakes and fritters,

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48 USFA, *Food and the War*, 152.
49Ibid., 154.
Will do more good than
All the “bitters.”

This article explained that fruits should be “liberally used” in the diet because “they provide nourishment, keep the blood alkaline, stimulate the appetite, relieve monotony in the die, furnish valuable mineral salts and acids, and aid digestion.” As mentioned earlier, local food was important. Hoover urged citizens to eat their state’s grown food as much as possible, so that everything shipped was going to the soldiers.

Organizational and Religious Support

Many organizations worked to support and sell food conservation. In Connecticut, the Windsor Business Men’s Association held a meeting to discuss “food production and conservation.” The speaker proclaimed that the nation’s greatest defenses were “Navy, Army, and Food.” Supporting food conservation had become as patriotic in the public sphere as supporting the armed forces. The Woman’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) used prohibition as yet another reason to support food conservation. The WCTU president, Anna Gordon, said that the manufacture of beer and wine works against food conservation efforts because the process requires food and fuel.

The WCTU was one of many religious organizations that backed the Food Administration’s efforts. Churches also played a part in selling food conservation. One Baptist minister in Hartford, Connecticut said that Herbert Hoover was a “modern Joseph.” He went on to say that “we must

51 *The Hartford Courant*, May 12, 1918.
52 Ibid.
53 *The Hartford Courant*, Mar 6, 1918.
54 Ibid.
55 *The Hartford Courant*, Feb 2, 1918.
56 *The Hartford Courant*, Dec 10, 1917.
Hooverize, or we shall be pulverized.” The Reverend’s sermon, posted in *The Hartford Courant* was full of religious rhetoric connecting Christianity and the need to feed the hungry. Roman Catholic churches throughout Connecticut were read the Lenten “rules” of fast and abstinence with extra effort because the uneaten food would be going towards the war effort. Connecticut’s Roman Catholic churches even cancelled Lenten services to conserve fuel. Lent fell early in 1918, so cancelled Lenten services preserved a substantial amount of the fuel that would be needed for heat. Father John G. Murray, the chancellor of the Catholic Diocese of Hartford, was the subject of the Food Administration’s praise for supporting food conservation with foreign speaking Catholics (French, Italian, and Polish). Father Murray was even recruited by the Food Administration to help reach these foreign speaking citizens. Conservation efforts transcended religions. In conjunction with Christian churches, Jewish temples also spoke of food conservation during their services. The Young Women’s Hebrew Association met at Talmud Torah Hall in Trumbull to discuss the need to save “fats, meat, wheat and sugar” for American soldiers in France. Food conservation practices and support had engulfed many aspects of life on the home-front in World War I.

**The Importance of Wheat**

Hoover asked the American people to reduce wheat consumption to one and a half pounds a week. The Food Administration reported that at the start of 1918, there were only 20,000,000 surplus bushels of wheat. By September of that year, 120,000,000 bushels of wheat were saved from...

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57 Ibid.
58 *The Hartford Courant*, Feb 11, 1918.
59 Ibid.
60 *The Hartford Courant*, July 19, 1918.
61 *The Hartford Courant*, Feb 13, 1918.
American tables. Hoover, once again, made people feel good about conserving food: “Every grain of wheat and every ounce of flour and bread saved now is exactly the amount supplied to some man, woman and child among the allies.” One of the strategies to reduce wheat consumption was “wheat-less” days. The idea of a “wheat-less” day was that a family would find substitutions to avoid eating wheat that day. The Hartford Courant reiterated this, stating that a “wheat-less day is better than a meat-less day.” Wheat conservation was one of the most popular subjects discussed in newspapers. Six months after a single “wheat-less” day was asked for, Hoover pressed citizen’s to have two “wheat-less” days a week. By January, 1918, Hoover further asked for one “meat-less” day and two “pork-less” days a week. To support “wheat-less” days, bakers in Hartford made “victory loaves” of bread, which were made with no wheat. These bakers even received exemptions from the government for making the “wheat-less” recipe. Through buying and conserving more sustainable food choices, civilians on the home front could support the war effort.

**Farmer’s Work**

Avoiding foods like wheat and pork did not put farmers into poverty. Farmers were consistently informed about the food situation throughout the war. In March, 1918, farmers met with the state’s Food Administrator, Robert Scoville, and officials from the Connecticut Agricultural College. He gave farmers the facts about what foods were needed most. In addition, Joseph W. Alsop, of the State Council for Defense, was also there to discuss problems that faced farmers. Much of the food grown by farmers was bought by the government and sent overseas. In fact, many grain producers

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64 *The Hartford Courant*, Jan 12, 1918.
65 *The Hartford Courant*, July 15, 1917.
66 *The Hartford Courant*, Jan 23, 1918.
67 Ibid.
69 Ibid.
70 *The Hartford Courant*, March, 16, 1918.
made as profit during the war. The money that the Food Administration appropriated throughout the war’s entirety was $7,862,669. All the money borrowed to pay for food appropriations was returned, and the profits of the Grain Corporation and Sugar Equalization Board (both created within the United States Food Administration) was more than $60,000,000. As Herbert Hoover put it, “therefore the Administration cost the government over $50,000,000 less than nothing.” The voluntarism and efficiency of the Food Administration actually made the government money.

The Food Administration Relief Efforts

Herbert Hoover used the Food Administration to further America’s humanitarian efforts during and after the war. His humanitarian effort in Belgium was essential to millions of the war’s survivors. Of the 120,000,000 bushels saved, 42,500,000 bushels were sent to Belgium to feed around 10,000,000 Belgians and French people. During the fighting, Spanish and Dutch governments oversaw the food distribution to ensure that the German army would not interfere with the food reaching people. The Food Administration used images of starving people to further inspire food conservation work. One of their most popular pieces of propaganda was the image of a starving mother and children in war torn France. This was another tactic used by the Food Administration to rally support-guilt. Hoover’s used morality to prevent waste. No one would feel good about wasting food if they saw what was happening in Europe.

72 Ibid.
73 “Food Program for Relief in Belgium,” The American Food Journal, 13/10 (1918): 578.
Patriotism’s Importance

Americans were patriotic, and not supporting the war effort was downright treasonous. Hoover used several opportunities to ignite Americans’ patriotic loyalties during the war. In one of the Food Administration’s bulletins he alleged that “a German family can live on the things an American family throws away.”\(^74\) An entire article in *The American Food Journal* is devoted to the way Germany fed its prisoners of war. That article from January 1918 stated that German y’s prisoners of war were “dieted precisely like domesticated animals.”\(^75\) One article from October, 1917, said that “pro-Germans” in America were hindering distribution and action of the Food Administration’s pledge

Figure 6: L.C. Clinker & M.J. Dwyer, “Don’t Waste Food While Others Starve!” (1917).

\(^{74}\) Herbert Hoover, “Food Pledge Week,” 3.

The article accused “pro-Germans” of spreading lies to housewives, stating that signing pledge cards granted permission for the U.S. Army to seize their food pantries. There were a small number of defectors who did not support conservation, but they were usually portrayed in a negative light. In Glastonbury, a man was fined for slapping someone over a dispute relating to his tobacco crop. The government also sought out and punished “food gamblers” during the war. The Hartford Courant called the underground gamblers “selfish and unpatriotic.”

Patriotism meant supporting America’s troops and allies through food. The Food Administration threatened flour dealers in Connecticut who sold flour out of state. One of the Food Administration’s main pitches was that “no town, city, state or district receives more than its share.”

Conclusion

The United States Food Administration was one of the most successful and efficient government initiatives in the history of the United States. After the war ended, Herbert Hoover rallied the country to continue to support the efforts of the United States Food Administration. In his address at the end of the war, discussing the “World Food Situation,” Hoover said that America needed to be opened “as a nation of obligation.” American aid organizations were heavily involved in reconstruction in post-war Europe and the Food Administrations helped save millions of lives in Europe after the war.


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76 The Hartford Courant, Oct 31, 1918.
77 Ibid.
78 The Hartford Courant, Mar 7, 1918.
79 The Hartford Courant, Aug 26, 1917.
80 Ibid.
81 The Hartford Courant, Feb 15, 1918.