Advertising the Great War: How the War Was Won on the Homefront and How Ad Men and the Government Merged

By Jared M. Leitzel

When America entered the Great War, the country was not ready. Americans were sold the war through decisions made by the United States government and by advertising firms. They mobilized citizens to increase productivity, lessen negativity “over here,” and help increase morale “over there.” Corporate models followed the government template to great success, and molded the American people through the process into a “one minded” society, which had the singular goal of winning the war on all fronts. In other words, corporate advertising successfully mirrored government propaganda and transformed American society into a unified culture that equated victory to profitability.

Nothing like this merger of government and corporations had ever been done before in the American experience. The era of Yellow Journalism had existed at least a generation before, but that was private abuse of media power by a few select individuals to sell newspapers. This marked the first time during a war that the White House made a concerted effort to get the media on board with government. More importantly, the creation of the Creel Committee was a major turning point in trust for both the government and the advertising industry in America, and they assisted each other handsomely. For its part, the government gained free publicity and free press to help move the people into a wartime spirit of acquiescence and mobility. On the other hand, advertisers healed the black eye that they had gained from false advertisements in the past, gained credibility with the
population, and kept the economy chugging along to break sales records in almost all categories of business through a formula they called “Truth in Advertising.”1

**Truth in Advertising**

Prior to the Great War, advertising specialists were a relatively new component within the long tradition of print. Advertising companies were as numerous as carnival barkers. They were part and parcel of every newspaper, but were also involved with posters for fences, painting the signs on buildings and roadside barns, billboards and placard printers and sandwich board makers just to name a few. Local ads were typically small, rarely included pictures, and made no mention of the larger world around them - the equivalent of present day Wanted ads. There were styles which came and went with the times, of course, but what Jackson Lears calls the American Anglo-Protestant approach of diminished sensationalism coupled with plain speech dominated in the United States.2 Creative attempts to bring interest to the common reader became more frequent around the turn of the century. Disguising advertisements within the columns of print ads that masqueraded as news articles, clever editors and advertising firms often “set the hook,” turning what appeared as a newsworthy story into a pitch to promote the material. Medicine, food additives, vitamins - practically anything consumable - was sold in this fashion, inserted alongside actual news articles, sports tables, and even between editorials and Letters to the Editor. All three “articles” in figure 1 were in fact advertisements.

The advertising industry was already experiencing a golden age, having just rebounded from the panic of 1907. Companies that invested in ads that year saw that their revenue followed standard recession-era expectations. The revenue results for the following year were eye opening,

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1 “Truth in Advertising” was an ongoing movement by professional ad men that emerged during the 1910s in response to unregulated media which caused many readers to dismiss advertising as a form of dishonesty. Prior to “Truth in Advertising,” many newspapers were willing to print anything that was paid for.

Figure 1. Advertisements from a local newspaper.³

³ Willimantic Chronicle, August 1, 1910.
shattering all predictions. Major changes in the philosophy of ad men propelled the industry towards new and lofty goals and increased the marketability of advertising.

Whenever a visual drawing, photograph, or lithograph was included as a sales pitch, it was usually a large ticket item. Prior to the war, cast iron stoves, Victrolas, records, encyclopedias, automobiles, and tires filled newspaper space as the most common visuals. A few companies owed their success to advertising campaigns early on in this era, gaining significant market shares for their visual marks. Advertising firms sprung up for regional and national distribution. The industry was still testing the limits when it began to take on large clients with sizeable accounts. Companies such as Mennen, Hotpoint Electric Heating Company, and Dow Chemical experimented with bigger and better; clearer ads targeting either mass numbers or specific programs to attract future clients. The Du Pont family of products targets its marketing to up to 10,000,000 consumers. Oral care products focused on young school children, dentists, and people training to be dentists (fig. 2). Obviously figure 2 is an advertisement for a toothbrush, but according to the claim, this particular toothbrush’s design is far superior over ordinary ones. You could brush your teeth with any toothbrush, but with the advantages of the Pro-phy-lac-tic toothbrush, you will really clean them.

During an advertising convention, speaker Joseph Appel aptly said, “Advertising is not to sell, but to help people to buy….We stand in the shoes of the customer. We are outside, not behind the counter. We are counselors for the public.” There was a concerted effort to separate advertisers from suppliers, and to align them with consumers, which had never been done before. Now, instead of selling a product, they were recommending them. Rather than producing advertisements geared for the company, they claimed to become more sophisticated for the reader.

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5 Lears, *Fables of Abundance*, 205
While there are no hard factual data sources on the U.S. industry as a whole, estimates total approximately $650,000,000 for circulation print ads alone in Canada and the United States. This does not include alternative forms of advertising, such as billboards, posters, store front displays and windows, traveling independent salesmen, or “electric” advertisements, such as light displays in

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6 The Outlook, vol. 95, 1910.
Times Square.\textsuperscript{7} Liberal estimates for advertising in the U.S. totaled $1.3 billion at the start of the conflict, and over $2.5 billion just after the war.\textsuperscript{8}

The Creel Committee

As Woolley wrote so aptly, “advertising is a theatre, and on its stage many casts have played. There is a continuous performance; and if this playhouse were to close, much of the resplendent in advertising would be gone.”\textsuperscript{9} Those who would not partake of this exciting new world of name recognition were buried in the unmarked grave of history. Countless companies that refused to partake of the twentieth century marketing progress were left behind. Indeed, the power of the printed ad could even be said to have had a first impact on politics. Many at the time believed that Woodrow Wilson’s re-election campaign owed a great deal to the Democratic National Committee’s choice to spend campaign capital for newspaper adverts. His opponent chose not to match Wilson’s voice in print and lost the presidency.

Perhaps that is when the President began to consider the option of men like George Creel. Six days after the official American entry into the Great War, President Wilson signed into existence the Committee on Public Information (CPI), also known as the Creel Committee. It consisted of Creel as well as the Secretaries of State, Navy, and War. In his own words, Creel stated that:

\begin{quote}
In no degree was the Committee an agency of censorship, a machinery of concealment or repression. Its emphasis throughout was on the open and the positive. At no point did it seek or exercise authorities under those war laws that limited the freedom of speech and press. In all things, from first to last, without halt
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{7} Woolley, “The Silent Voice,” 679


\textsuperscript{9} Woolley “The Silent Voice,” 685.
or change, it was a plain publicity proposition, a vast enterprise in salesmanship, the world’s greatest adventure in advertising.\textsuperscript{10}

George Creel started his career in journalism in 1896, and quickly moved up in the ranks of print. Having several posts in newsprint and a few years in public service as a police commissioner, he was known to be honest, non-partisan, and highly patriotic. He approached President Wilson with the idea of the CPI, proposing it as a foil to German propaganda. Until that time, the United States government had very little to do with propaganda. In fact, yellow journalism had a much stronger effect on national politics than officially sanctioned rhetoric. One of the men Creel had worked for was William Randolph Hearst. The last thing that Creel wanted was to engage in another war based on false ideals, misplaced questions, and rumormongering.

Taking a tip from modern advertising strategy, “the big concern, with its invested millions and its thousands of people involved, must break the traditional silence. This is an era when the dissemination of information and doctrine by the corporation must be part of the scheme of business.”\textsuperscript{11} In other words, it was better to be truthful in advertising than to break the consumers’ trust; to earn their trust would make better business sense, and the marketplace proved them correct. Creel took this to a whole new level by inviting corporate partners to work with the CPI. This would affect both the government’s ability to reach a large populace for less money. With this in mind, he created the National Advertising Advisory Board (NAAB) with the maxim: “Without cost, to aid in military recruiting and money-raising campaigns.” Through the NAAB, the CPI touched many Americans. It proved to men of all walks of life that advertising was as effective as any other manner of persuasion. Informally, the NAAB was taken into the Division of Advertising within the

\textsuperscript{11} Woolley, “The Silent Voice,” 680
CPI (DACPI) to streamline the production values in December of 1917. All four Liberty Bond programs were operated by the NAAB or the DACPI quite successfully.12

New Types of Advertisements

The ad industry itself had begun to self-regulate for the first time in June 1917 through the American Association of American Advertisers (AAAA), which established the first rules of the trade, setting a policy of standards, a constitution with by-laws, and a mission statement. This national trade association continues today and its modern day members contribute to about 80 percent of all the advertisements in the United States.13 Changes from the end of the 1800s to the beginning of the 1900s were not subtle. One does not need to be an expert to see the stark differences of the war years and before, but even before then, advertising became much more refined, shifting from the sensationalist carnival barkers of P.T. Barnum to the “Truth in Advertising” movement. Ad men brought about a subtle yet substantial difference. Instead of selling the product, now they promoted it. They sought to move themselves above the sales floor, and into the mind of the consumer. When the Great War finally did come, the creation of the CPI and the inclusion of the majority of ad men allowed for cooperation and success, unthinkable a few short months before. The government was able to save valuable resources in time, money, and manpower with free advertising, businesses capitalized upon the growing patriotism for increased revenue, and the advertising companies’ fresh new strategy of “Truth in Advertising” gave them a new reputation for decency and honesty.

Ivory Soap ads are iconic examples of the early 1900s. Not only have they stood the test of time, they shaped consumer values; equating the product to moral and wholesome choices. Ads

such as the in figure 3 are perfect examples of American Anglo-Protestant ideology. Note the innocence portrayed; the mothers look, her hair pulled back, she is wearing a long dark pillowy dress with ruffled neckline – clearly a Puritan look. A young mother brushes her child’s hair as she sits quietly her in sleeping gown, perhaps suggesting that the mother herself is a young girl and her child,

Figure 3. Ivory Soap Advertisement.  

a porcelain doll. How personal and private is a moment such as this? The shadows suggest that they are facing a fireplace, an old symbol of warmth and comfort from an earlier day. The image gives you a sense of comfort, of cleanliness and of satisfaction with the clean you can get from Ivory soap.

Figure 4 is another excellent example of *Truth in Advertising*. The manufacturers of this shaving brush claimed that the bristles do not fall out, and they provided proof: a dog holding onto it suspended in midair.

![Figure 4. Rubberset Shaving Brushes Advertisement, 1909.](image)

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15 Jim Hefmann and Steven Heller eds., *All-American Ads 1900-1919* (Cologne: Taschen, 2005), 283.
Wartime Advertising

The following two ads show the change in advertising strategy from 1910 to 1918. Both are from the same store, The Jordon Hardware Company, located at 670 Main Street in Willimantic, Connecticut. These local ads show striking differences.

Figure 5. Jordan Hardware Advertisements.16

Willimantic Chronicle, July 29, 1910 (left) and July 1, 1918 (right).
The figure on the left is a relatively simple advert for a hardware store. It lists the items available there including a price range for many choices, specifically for information on shaving supplies and cutlery. Note the differences on the right of figure 5. From the introductory statement, in bold, the advertisement begins to talk about the war. Instead of discussing the need for a new product such as a razor, it goes on to parrot the governmental points of buying War Savings Stamps and Liberty Bonds and conserving food. The products advertised range from varied domestic needs to canning and preserving materials for the war effort.

Figure 6. Post Toasties Little Angel Advertisement.\textsuperscript{17}

\textsuperscript{17} Willimantic Chronicle, July 26, 1910.
The “Little Angel” in figure 6 is eating out of the box of “sweet, crisp, fluffy and irresistible” Post Toasties. Advertisements like this come from America, and practically disappear from print during America’s involvement in the European conflict.

![Post Toasties Advertisement](image)

Figure 7. Post Toasties Advertisement.\(^{18}\)

Compare the previous advertisement to figure 7, where the product ad begins with the patriotism associated with the product. In bold lettering, people are not only reminded to save wheat, but to do so by eating this cereal. The cereal itself seems a secondary consideration; the advertisement only states that the corn flakes are pretty good. Compare this to the above “Little Angel,” with descriptors of the product: the careful addition of the wholesome image of a little scamp eating the cereal out of the box before he gets it home to his mother.

\(^{18}\) *Willimantic Chronicle*, July 11, 1918.
Early twentieth century ads used wholesome goodness to sell cereal, as in figure 8 below. The earlier panel, on the left, follows the idealistic image of Grape Nuts as a wholesome food. “There is only one disease, wrong living.” The 1910 version clearly concerns itself with “No Waste,” “Nourishing, Economical” and then finally using the shared slogan, “There’s a Reason.” Surely nothing has changed in Grape-Nuts cereal over these eight years. What changed were the values consumers wanted to believe in, or more accurately, the values Grape-Nuts wanted to associate with their cereal. Wholesomeness does not appear in the ad on the right, which cleverly includes considerations from the CPI. The interest of healthy living and nutrition gave way to glossing over said information, all under a symbol of military strength, a bi-plane.

Figure 7. Grape-Nuts Advertisements.\textsuperscript{19}

\textsuperscript{19} \textit{Willimantic Chronicle}, August 25, 1910 (left) and October 27, 1918 (right)
Some of the products that most heavily supported the war effort were consumables, especially alcohol and tobacco. Several major name brand cigarettes became heavily involved in advertising on the home front promoting the Allied Forces. Pall Mall (figure 8) ran a series of

![Pall Mall Advertisements](image)

Figure 8. Pall Mall Advertisements.\(^{20}\)

\(^{20}\) Hefmann and Heller eds., *All-American Ads*, 70.
high quality artistic military picture ads. Note that each contains a valued weapon in the background and focuses on the hat of the fighting allies: French, British, Russian and American. The pack of cigarettes brightly standing out next to the display, suggesting that the men of all nationalities wanted them. Other brands, such as Helmar and Murad (figure 9), also took strong pro-war approaches,

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21 *Willimantic Chronicle*, July 26, 1918 (left) and July 31, 1918 (right).
but were much more direct. Often using cartoonish drawings depicting military action on the front lines, these brands found their success in the heat of battle. “I’m going after them!” and “After the smoke of battle, the most refreshing smoke is Murad!” were typical catchphrases as likely to be used with “Going over the top!” and “Wish some friendly Ace would drop some Murads around here!”

Figure 10. Advertisement for Lydia E. Pinkham’s Vegetable Compound.22

22 Willimantic Chronicle, September 18, 1918.
Lydia E. Pinkham’s Vegetable Compound advertised in figure 10 was another producer which changed marketing ads to fit the war. Lydia E. Pinkham Medicine Company advertised its product for nearly thirty years prior to the war and can still be found in some limited areas today. An often run pre-war advertisement for Lydia E. Pinkham’s Vegetable Compound is shown in Figure 1 above in the right column; a “set the hook” style presentation. During the war the company encouraged women “to do their duty” by taking this medicine, which was supposed to cure menstrual cramps and symptoms of menopause. The message is reminiscent of the famous poster “Women Help America’s Sons Win the War,” and other advertisements put forth by the CPI.

Figure 11. Women! Help America’s Sons Win the War.23

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Lady Mackworth quotes a former cabinet minister as remarking that Sanatogen is “a rational necessity to preserve good nerves.” For eighteen years previous to the war Sanatogen had been building up its remarkable prestige among the English people. Sir Gilbert Parker, Arnold Bennett, Hall Caine—many indeed are the leaders of British thought who have long been publicly endorsing it.

Today, therefore, when national good health has become a necessity, when the sick list must be kept low and the convalescent made well in the least possible time, England knows she can place utmost reliance upon its wonderful tonic and rebuilding qualities in any emergency.

This is why such vast quantities of Sanatogen are used by the British in the convalescent hospitals at home, in the base hospitals, in the trenches, —in fact, wherever the burdens and horrors of war make it necessary to preserve and restore steady nerves and build up weakened bodies.

Sanatogen Long Made in America

In this country, too, Sanatogen has the highest standing. It is endorsed not only by many prominent men—such as Colonel Henry Watterson and John Burroughs—but by thousands of physicians. The Sanatogen sold here is made in an American factory by an American Company.

Civilian and soldier alike find benefit in Sanatogen. It strengthens and sustains, it promotes fitness and recuperates after fatigue. The delicate child, the anemic young girl, the nursing mother, the run-down business man—all find help in Sanatogen.

A trial will convince you—do you not owe it to your health to give Sanatogen this trial today?

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“*The Art of Living,*” a charming booklet by Richard Le Gallienne, touching on Sanatogen’s kindly help and giving other aids in the quest of contentment and better health, sent free on request. Address The Baus Chemical Co., Inc., 248 Irving Place, New York City.

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24 *The Outlook*, 102/509 (1917).
Not all products were meant specifically for soldiers’ consumption; nor were all needed for an individual to perform his or her duty to the country. Sanatogen (figure 12) was a fortified milk protein powder marketed to be used as a nerve tonic. Realizing that the American market was not as saturated as those in the U.K., the manufacturer Bauer Chemical Company pointed out that if Sanatogen is good enough for the troops, then surely it must be good for everyone else. Note the pretty nurse mixing up a drink for the wounded soldier, sitting in a bucolic scene, relaxing while recovering from the war, pipe in hand. Sure the war is far off, and it can be taxing on the nerves, but try some Sanatogen and all those troubles will melt away.

Although many advertisers took advantage of holiday events, many continued the patriotism all the way to the end of the war. Not only is an American Bald Eagle depicted in a glorious pose in Figure 13; it is flying across a sky mimicking the American flag. The record selections were all patriotic, from the iconic “Over There” and “I May Be Gone for a Long Time” to “America” and “The Star Spangled Banner.” They made sure to remind people that the Fourth of July was quickly approaching and that if you did not have a Victrola to hear these great songs, they could send one home with you today.
Figure 13. Patriotic Victor Records for the Fourth of July.\textsuperscript{25}

\textsuperscript{25} Norwich Bulletin, July 1, 1918.
In conjunction with the CPI, many advertisers chose to not push products with their ads but “piggybacked” them on pleas to help support the American cause. Figure 14 provides a few short examples. This was a clever way to help promote the product while showing that the company cares more for the war message than selling gum or cigarettes. These marketing strategies also played a heavy role in promoting delivery of these pre-packaged consumables to be sent to the troops.

Figure 14. Buy Liberty Bonds.²⁶

²⁶ Willimantic Chronicle, October 8, 1918 (left) and October 2, 1918 (right).
overseas by caring family members. Note that the product is quite small relative to the rest of the frame. Centered in each is the concept of buying Liberty Bonds for victory: in the cigarette ad, a star spangled eagle is carrying Uncle Sam’s hat filled with wads of cash. They wanted the consumer to purchase their product, but the heartfelt message of winning the war was conveyed, quite literally and figuratively, over their gum or cigarettes.

The Rockville-Willimantic Lighting Company Advertisement in figure 15 asks that the consumer buy and keep Liberty War Bonds in conjunction with the CPI. Haunting images such as drowning individuals highlighted the disgust of enemy warfare, and were direct takes from similar posters which were nationally produced. Some advertisements became practically indistinguishable from actual official CPI posters, and for the length of the war, it was promulgated that such work would not be discouraged, for the good of the country. Although the American experience in the war was relatively short compared to the other major powers involved, it had a profound transformative impact on the economy and was extremely effective in producing emotional responses. Sadness and upset quickly turns to anger and reciprocity, which were the desired effects. Remembering the SS Tuscania, the first US Troop ship to be sunk by German submarines, was supposed to fan the white hot war furor, increase morale on the home front, and ultimately, to boost production and the purchase of Liberty Bonds.
Figure 15. Rockville - Willimantic Lighting Company.27

27 Willimantic Chronicle, September 10, 1918.
When meat packing companies made record profits due to military demand, many thought that they were profiteering with unscrupulous business tactics against the people and Uncle Sam.

Five major meat packing companies took out a national ad campaign to quell any uproar and dispel rumors as shown in figure 16. They used this full page ad to try to explain to the average American, who was scrimping and saving every dollar for War Bonds, and conserving and canning every available food scrap possible, why they made so much money. They did make windfall profits, but it was not from unsavory business tactics. Those who invested in the company and reaped those rewards were more than free to divest their profits back into the war effort.

Norwich Bulletin, July 9, 1918.
In an economy where everyone was spendthrift and a keyword was savings, there were those who would question every cost, including money spent on ads. This situation required, ironically, ads for advertisements. For example, one local newspaper chose to advertise selling advertisements (figure 17), justifying the costs. The paper argued that not only did advertising make good business sense, but by purchasing ads advertisers paid for the paper and ink, which supported the war. Ultimately everyone was apparently supporting the American cause.

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29 Norwich Bulletin, July 20, 1918.
The Committee on Public Information

Figure 18. U.S. Government Official Advertising.\textsuperscript{30}

Included above are official CPI billboards (figure 18) for comparison to previous examples. The similarities are striking, with many of the same messages repeated through corporate American advertising. “Help Us Win The War”, “Buy Bonds” and “Food – don’t waste it” are common themes.

\textsuperscript{30} The Outlook, 102 (1917).
The CPI’s major push used recruitment posters, but was not limited to convincing people to enlist. Creel felt that what was needed was a constant reminder of the need of self-sacrifice. If you did not read magazines or newspapers, signage was needed for you. Roadside billboards certainly got the attention of drivers and passengers alike. Barns were painted with patriotic messages along

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31 Willimantic Chronicle, September 26, 1918.
country roads and flyers were handed out on street corners to pedestrians. Whether they were wrapped in red, white and blue flags, adorned with eagles, showing troops marching in order or depicting Uncle Sam kicking the Kaiser in the unmentionables; the message was clear: Win the war. Times may be tough, but it helps the war effort if people do not change jobs (figure 19). It costs producers time and money to find and train replacements, which equates directly to production value. Leaving a job could cost us uniforms, ammunition and weapons; holding back deployment and the ability to fight the Kaiser’s evil army. Ads such as these were made into flyers and posters, distributed to newspapers as well as manufacturing industries to be handed out to the workers. Similar messages were pasted to fences, handed out as leaflets on street corners and placed in subways and buses.

Conclusion

With recruitment posters asking people to enlist, advertisements in newspapers and magazines asking one to buy war bonds while advising consumers on how to conserve food, energy and materials, or simply by merely inundating the ‘water cooler’ talk for victory, the CPI achieved an amazing success. What is fascinating about its success was the relative ease of which industry went along with the government approach. From artwork conception, realization, publication and distribution, almost all of the expenses for production were donated by private businesses, even beyond the ad men themselves. The cost of the entire CPI was a net of $4,912,553.32. A staggeringly small total for the millions of documents produced, let alone the official poster count of 1,438, were practically at no cost due to donations.

There is no possible way to account for each advertisement that included the influence of the CPI, but it was infectious. It pervaded the whole of society, and while there were clearly some

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32 Creel, How we Advertised America, 13.
companies who chose to not take part in the militarization and patriotism of advertising in print journalism, those who did were successful. All of the Liberty Bond Drives were wild successes, and many communities took their generosity as a badge of honor. The National Association of Greeting Card Manufacturers (figure 20) captured the spirit of the war: Keep the message of cheerfulness around, but never forget the stars serving abroad in the war, and post that proudly on your front door.


33 Hefmann and Heller eds., All-American Ads.