

THE STATE OF THE UNION

Wanted: Opposition

BY GEORGE CREEL

FLAMING POSTERS exhort loyal citizens to "Serve in Silence" and from broadcasting stations and public platforms come appeals that call upon the people to close their ranks and stand together with the same unquestioning obedience demanded of soldiers and sailors. Newspapers, magazines, radio commentators, political leaders and other authoritative voices are being asked to believe that anything approaching dissent will be regarded as an evidence of disunity, thereby aiding the enemy.

This clamor proceeds initially from those perfervid souls who hold that patriotism must be unreasoning and unasking. There can be no doubt, however, that these breast-beaters are approved by the military high command in Washington, for no tradition is more firmly fixed in the military mind than that war is solely the business of the Army and the Navy. On the outbreak of hostilities, the first thought and hope of the average admiral and

general is to padlock the mouth of every civilian.

It is a tradition that does not have, and never did have, the slightest base in truth. In a democracy particularly, war is the deep concern of the *whole people*. The strength of a nation is not in the firing line alone, but in the morale of the civilian population from which the fighting men are drawn, and that morale depends largely, if not entirely, on *popular confidence*.

Public opinion — what a whole people think and feel — is as much a part of any sound system of national defense as ships and guns and planes. Attempts to prevent its free formation and expression can end only in disaster. "Serve in Silence" can only be regarded as a slogan so stupid as to be criminal, for it dooms the civilian population to apathy and exposes its members to every variety of cankering fear and suspicion. Worse, suppression or repression of criticism acts as a shield for the protection and con-

tinuance of incompetency and dishonesty.

These were the views of no less an authority than Woodrow Wilson. At the time of my appointment as chairman of the Committee on Public Information in April 1917, the President took full time to acquaint me with my powers and duties. Among the things that he insisted upon was the maintenance of a free and uninterrupted flow of news, the bad along with the good. There were military secrets to be guarded, of course, but Mr. Wilson did not trouble to hide his belief that concealments, in the great majority of cases, proceeded from a bureaucratic distrust of democratic common sense. What he most emphasized was that public discussion must be encouraged rather than suppressed. "There are laws on the statute books that take care of treasonable and seditious utterances," he declared, "but as far as everything else is concerned, interpose no obstacle or restraint. *We do not need less criticism in time of war, but more.* It is to be hoped that criticism will be fair and constructive, but better an unfair and destructive attack than autocratic repression. An alert, vocal public opinion is the one sure corrective of blundering and inefficiency."

Out of many painful memories,

I can bear witness that public opinion was never off the job. From first to last Woodrow Wilson was beaten upon by a storm of criticism that took no account of obstacles. Many powerful newspapers watched and waited for blunders with almost indecent eagerness and bitter partisans in the Senate and House refused to abate their hatreds. Even so, the daily attack was corrective and propulsive, for under its lash mistakes were acknowledged and remedied.

President Wilson's initial blunder, made by others before him, was his failure to place the mobilization of industry entirely under civilian control with *one* man the unquestioned boss. Acting in accordance with the revered tradition that admirals and generals must be given a free hand, he appointed a National Defense Advisory Commission of seven great industrialists — good men individually, but no more than a luncheon club collectively, for they could do nothing but *advise*. Naturally enough, the old-fashioned procurement methods of the Army and the Navy sabotaged plant conversion and subcontracting, and soon produced shortages and alarming price jumps.

The press and Congress lost no time in pointing out these disas-

trous results and President Wilson, junking the Advisory Commission, set up a General Munitions Board to coordinate government purchases and to assist in accumulating stockpiles of raw materials. This body, also without a vestige of executive power, proved a dud. Admirals and generals went their own sweet ways. Again, criticism rose to a sustained scream and President Wilson, scrapping the Munitions Board, created a War Industries Board. Lack of administrative authority, however, continued as a fatal weakness. Ignoring recommendations that checked their own independent activities, Army, Navy and Shipping Board engaged in reckless competition, not only with each other, but with rival government agencies, the Allies and civilian buyers. Prices went through the roof, thousands of small manufacturers faced ruin, and the whole industrial balance staggered drunkenly.

Criticism, coming from every part of the country, swelled into a continuous roar. Then, and only then, Woodrow Wilson threw off the blindfolds of tradition, and saw that the mobilization of industry was a task for *civilians*, a task that called for an all-powerful single chief. Removing the War Industries Board from Army and Navy

control, he gave it independent status, with Bernard M. Baruch as the undisputed boss. Only then did America's war machine begin to hit on all cylinders. Production began to meet all needs and water foamed to the plunge of new ships. In May, our soldiers fought side by side with veterans at Cantigny; in June, they whipped the Germans at Belleau Wood; in July, they refused to join in the Allied retreat and won the day at Château-Thierry; in September, Pershing wiped out the St. Mihiel salient, and in October, with two million men in the front lines, he dealt the enemy the succession of hammer blows that brought the Germans to their knees.

II

Another case in point was our experience with airplanes. We started, of course, far behind scratch, for on April 6, 1917, the United States had just two fields and fifty-five serviceable planes, of which fifty-one were obsolete and the other four obsolescent. Only one or two factories had any equipment for the new industry, few workers were familiar with plane manufacture, and the bulk of necessary material was in the raw. Railroads had to be built to spruce

and fir forests; lack of mahogany for propellers forced experiments with walnut, oak, cherry and ash. Castor beans had to be imported from Asia to sow ten thousand acres. Unable to get flax from Ireland, we had to develop long-fibre cotton for surface covering, ten factories had to be built for the manufacture of acetone, and so on.

Editorial and fireside experts, ignorant of these lacks, demanded that America become the greatest air power in the world overnight.

Many authoritative voices refused to admit any difference between planes and flivvers, and sounded off wildly about turning out bombers in hourly batches. Instead of confessing their difficulties, the men in charge of the aircraft program caught the fever, and went in for over-optimistic reports. Unfortunately I accepted their statements without question and soon the people were being assured that our plane program was exceeding every sanguine expectation. When the facts came out, as facts always do, Congress, the press and the people went berserk. A great deal of real accomplishment was ignored and the degree of failure was magnified until people believed that nothing had been done at all. Public confidence received a blow from which it was long in recovering and my

Committee on Public Information in particular got a black eye that never lost its discoloration. Yet, had the truth been told at the outset, there was every reason for pride.

One group of our first transports to France was attacked by German submarines and we announced it in a highly emotional press release. The story was questioned by the Associated Press, and while upheld at every point by correspondents on board at the time, our "hip-hip-hurrah" description of the battle gave editorial writers a field day. A valuable lesson: after that we stuck to the factual, avoiding ballyhoo and "color." An unhappy experience in connection with a flu epidemic in the camps also taught us the wisdom of giving out bad news *instantly* without attempt to minimize it. Holding back the report on a defeat, a disaster or a casualty list does not soften the blow, and *does* impair popular confidence.

A free people do not have to be wheedled, press-agented or kept in the dark. Sooner or later, the truth explodes and the effect on public morale is far more disastrous than if chilling, disheartening facts had been given frankly in the first place. When people know that something is being held back, the

feeling grows that a great deal is being hidden. Out of my experience as chairman of the Committee on Public Information, I emerged with the firm conviction that any form of internal censorship, voluntary or compulsory, is both unworkable and unnecessary. What "information of value to the enemy" can possibly come to the ears of a reporter or a citizen that cannot be found out by an enemy agent worth his salt? Never, at any time, could I find any agreement as to where the line should be drawn respecting "aid and comfort to the enemy." The publication of casualty lists and ship sinkings may afford comfort to the Japs and Germans, but if such news is suppressed, what of the effect on our own people? Production figures may give aid to the enemy, but what about the boost to our own morale to know that assembly lines are rolling out planes and guns? Good news for us is bound to be bad news for the enemy.

As early as July 1917, I came to the conclusion that a censorship of the press was neither operable nor needed. I asked President Wilson for an executive order placing all cable communications under rigid control and strict supervision. This done, what was said or printed inside the United States ceased to

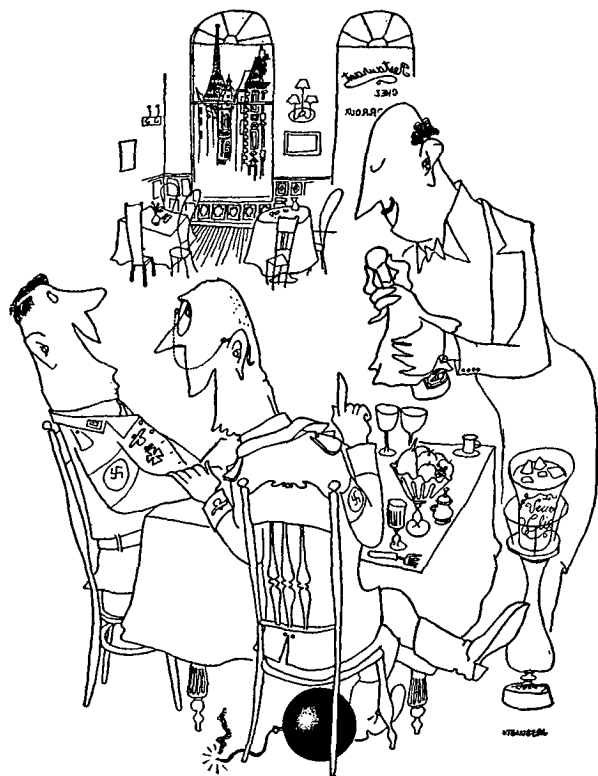
be a matter of any large concern, since enemy agents could not get their information out of the country. That is what should be done today, and all that should be done in the way of repression. A censorship of the cables is now in effective operation and the Federal Communications Commission has worked out a monitoring system that takes care of the radio.

A strong and sustained civilian morale can be achieved only when people have confidence in the news, and feel that they are being told the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. Instead of being repressed, public discussion should be stimulated and encouraged, for it is the lifeblood of a democracy. As Woodrow Wilson pointed out twenty-five years ago, there are laws to punish treason and seditious utterance. That sort of talk should and must be left to the courts, not to some second lieutenant in a censorship bureau. Discussion of everything, even of peace beyond the war, is essential. Hitler may be right in saying that an "idealistic note" in propaganda holds no appeal to the German people, but it is only to flaming ideals that Americans respond.

In sheer self-defense, our government at this critical hour needs strong, stubborn, patriotic opposi-

tion. Heaven help America if the perfervid patriots, the admirals and the generals and the army of government press agents succeed in inducing a suspension of the nation's critical faculties "for the duration." Washington must be made conscious of the difference between support and rubber-stamp apathy. The very magnitude of

the job is another reason for critical scrutiny by Congress, by the press, by radio, rather than an excuse for muzzling these agencies of criticism. Concealment is self-defeating. Criticism, the asking of questions, the demand for an accounting — these are the tools of democracy in action. The alternative is apathy and festering doubt.



"— and now it pops!"

► *Millions of tons of used rubber
can be reclaimed to end shortage.*

SCRAP RUBBER TO THE RESCUE!

BY BLAIR BOLLES

MORE dust has been kicked up in Washington over the rubber shortage than over any other result of the war. The air has been so filled with accusations and counter-accusations that, as yet, almost no progress has been made along the one direction which promises immediate relief. Scrap rubber! There are millions of tons of scrap rubber in the United States. It needs only to be collected and reclaimed. Thus far, no comprehensive plan for the collection, reclamation and exchange of rubber articles has been instituted.

The post-haste development of a synthetic rubber industry is imperative. So is the development of a Latin-American natural rubber industry. But relief from these sources can come only in a period of one to seven years. For *immediate* relief, we must comb our city dumps and look inside our closets and pantries. Competent authorities contend that there are ten million tons of rubber articles lying at hand — more than enough to ease the “rubber shortage” until the

synthetic and Latin-American developments can become effective.

We have been so prodigal in the use of rubber in past years that, while we have used as much as eight hundred thousand tons of crude in a year, we have never bothered to reclaim more than three hundred thousand tons a year. This reclaim has been used in the manufacture of shoes, mats, plumbing specialties, hose, and other such items. But reclaim activity in this country has been slight, compared to activity in Germany which is now fighting its second great war on reclaimed and synthetic rubber. At present, we have only about a dozen reclaim plants scattered around the country and their annual capacity does not exceed four hundred thousand tons.

A plan to expand American reclaim capacity quickly to *two million* tons a year has been presented to the government by a group of smaller rubber manufacturers, headed by Elliott E. Simpson, of New York. These manufacturers