

## CHAPTER NINE

**I**N THE SPRING OF 1918 death was no stranger to the world. Indeed, by then the bodies of more than five million soldiers had already been fed into what was called "the sausage factory" by generals whose stupidity was matched only by their brutality.

German generals, for example, had decided to bleed France into submission by matching it death for death at Verdun, believing that Germany's greater population would leave it victorious. The French later replied with their own massive offensive, believing that their *élan vital* would triumph.

Only slaughter triumphed. Finally one French regiment refused orders to make a suicidal charge. The mutiny spread to fifty-four divisions, stopped only by mass arrests, the conviction of twenty-three thousand men for mutiny, with four hundred sentenced to death and fifty-five actually executed.

Yet nothing expressed the brutality of this war as did a sanitation report on the planned eradication of rats in the trenches to prevent the spread of disease. A major noted, "Certain unexpected problems are involved in the rat problem. . . . The rat serves one useful function—he consumes the corpses on No Man's Land, a job which the rat alone is willing to undertake. For this reason it has been found desirable to control rather than eliminate the rat population."

All of Europe was weary of the war. Only in the United States

Anglophiles and Francophiles, most of them concentrated on the East Coast and many of them holding positions of power or influence, were not weary. Only in the United States Anglophiles and Francophiles still regarded war as glorious. And they put intense pressure on President Woodrow Wilson to enter the war.

The war had begun in 1914. Wilson had withstood this pressure. A German submarine had sunk the *Lusitania* in 1915 and he had not gone to war despite outrage in the press, instead winning a German commitment to limit submarine warfare. He had resisted other justifications for war. He could fairly campaign for reelection in 1916 on the slogan "He Kept Us Out of War." And he warned, "If you elect my opponent, you elect a war."

On election night he went to bed believing he had lost, but woke up reelected by one of the narrowest margins in history.

Then Germany took a great gamble. On January 31, 1917, giving only twenty-four hours' notice, it announced unrestricted submarine warfare against neutral and merchant vessels. It believed that it could starve Britain and France into submission before the United States—if the United States did at last declare war—could help. The action utterly outraged the nation.

Still Wilson did not go to war.

Then came the Zimmermann note: captured documents revealed that the German foreign minister had proposed to Mexico that it join Germany in war against the United States and reconquer parts of New Mexico, Texas, and Arizona.

Wilson's critics sputtered in fury at his pusillanimity. In a famous essay, pacifist and socialist Randolph Bourne, who later died in the influenza epidemic, lamented, "The war sentiment, begun so gradually but so perseveringly by the preparedness advocates who come from the ranks of big business, caught hold of one after another of the intellectual groups. With the aid of [Theodore] Roosevelt, the murmurs became a monotonous chant, and finally a chorus so mighty that to be out of it was at first to be disreputable and finally almost obscene. And slowly a strident rant was worked up against Germany."

On April 2, three weeks after the disclosure of the note, after his cabinet unanimously called for war, Wilson finally delivered his war message

to Congress. Two days later he explained to a friend, "It was necessary for me by very slow stages and with the most genuine purpose to avoid war to lead the country on to a single way of thinking."

And so the United States entered the war filled with a sense of selfless mission, believing glory still possible, and still keeping itself separate from what it regarded as the corrupt Old World. It fought alongside Britain, France, Italy, and Russia not as an "ally" but as an "Associated Power."

Anyone who believed that Wilson's reluctant embrace of war meant that he would not prosecute it aggressively knew nothing of him. He was one of those rare men who believed almost to the point of mental illness in his own righteousness.

Wilson believed in fact that his will and spirit were informed by the spirit and hope of a people and even of God. He talked of his "sympathetic connection which I am sure that I have with" all American citizens and said, "I am sure that my heart speaks the same thing that they wish their hearts to speak." "I will not cry 'peace' so long as there is sin and wrong in the world," he went on. "America was born to exemplify that devotion to the elements of righteousness which are derived from the revelations of Holy Scripture."

He is probably the only American president to have held to this belief with quite such conviction, with no sign of self-doubt. It is a trait more associated with crusaders than politicians.

To Wilson this war was a crusade, and he intended to wage total war. Perhaps knowing himself even more than the country, he predicted, "Once lead this people into war, and they'll forget there ever was such a thing as tolerance. To fight you must be brutal and ruthless, and the spirit of ruthless brutality will enter into the very fibre of our national life, infecting Congress, the courts, the policeman on the beat, the man in the street."

America had never been and would never be so informed by the will of its chief executive, not during the Civil War with the suspension of habeas corpus, not during Korea and the McCarthy period, not even during World War II. He would turn the nation into a weapon, an explosive device.

As an unintended consequence, the nation became a tinderbox for epidemic disease as well.

Wilson declared, "It isn't an army we must shape and train for war, it is a nation."

To train the nation, Wilson used an iron fist minus any velvet glove. He did have some legitimate reasons for concern, reasons to justify a hard line.

For reasons entirely unrelated to the war, America was a rumbling chaos of change and movement, its very nature and identity shifting. In 1870 the United States numbered only forty million souls, 72 percent of whom lived in small towns or on farms. By the time America entered the war, the population had increased to roughly 105 million. Between 1900 and 1915 alone, fifteen million immigrants flooded the United States; most came from Eastern and Southern Europe, with new languages and religions, along with darker complexions. And the first census after the war would also be the first one to find more people living in urban areas than rural.

The single largest ethnic group in the United States was German-American and a large German-language press had been sympathetic to Germany. Would German-Americans fight against Germany? The Irish Republican Army had launched an uprising against British rule on Easter, 1916. Would Irish-Americans fight to help Britain? The Midwest was isolationist. Would it send soldiers across an ocean when the United States had not been attacked? Populists opposed war, and Wilson's own secretary of state, William Jennings Bryan, three times the Democratic nominee for president, had resigned from the cabinet in 1915 after Wilson responded too aggressively for him to Germany's torpedoing the *Lusitania*. Socialists and radical unionists were strong in factories, in mining communities in the Rockies, in the Northwest. Would they, drafted or not, defend capitalism?

The hard line was designed to intimidate those reluctant to support the war into doing so, and to crush or eliminate those who would not. Even before entering the war, Wilson had warned Congress, "There are citizens of the United States, I blush to admit, . . . who have poured the poison of disloyalty into the very arteries of our national life. . . . Such creatures of passion, disloyalty, and anarchy must be crushed out."

He intended to do so.

His fire informed virtually everything that happened in the country, including fashion: to save cloth, a war material—everything was a war material—designers narrowed lapels and eliminated or shrank pockets. And his fury particularly informed every act of the United States government. During the Civil War Lincoln had suspended the writ of habeas corpus, imprisoning hundreds of people. But those imprisoned presented a real threat of armed rebellion. He left unchecked extraordinarily harsh criticism. Wilson believed he had not gone far enough and told his cousin, "Thank God for Abraham Lincoln. I won't make the mistakes that he made."

The government compelled conformity, controlled speech in ways, frightening ways, not known in America before or since. Soon after the declaration of war, Wilson pushed the Espionage Act through a cooperative Congress, which balked only at legalizing outright press censorship—despite Wilson's calling it "an imperative necessity."

The bill gave Postmaster General Albert Sidney Burleson the right to refuse to deliver any periodical he deemed unpatriotic or critical of the administration. And, before television and radio, most of the political discourse in the country went through the mails. A southerner, a narrow man and a hater, nominally a populist but closer to the Pitchfork Ben Tillman wing of the party than to that of William Jennings Bryan, Burleson soon had the post office stop delivery of virtually all publications and any foreign-language publication that hinted at less-than-enthusiastic support of the war.

Attorney General Thomas Gregory called for still more power. Gregory was a progressive largely responsible for Wilson's nominating Louis Brandeis to the Supreme Court, a liberal and the court's first Jew. Now, observing that America was "a country governed by public opinion," Gregory intended to help Wilson rule opinion and, through opinion, the country. He demanded that the Librarian of Congress report the names of those who had asked for certain books and also explained that the government needed to monitor "the individual casual or impulsive disloyal utterances." To do the latter, Gregory pushed for a law broad enough to punish statements made "from good motives or . . . [if] traitorous motives weren't provable."

The administration got such a law. In 1798, Federalist President John Adams and his party, under pressure of undeclared war with France, passed

the Sedition Act, which made it unlawful to "print, utter, or publish . . . any false, scandalous, or malicious writing" against the government. But that law inflamed controversy, contributed to Adams's reelection defeat, and led to the only impeachment of a Supreme Court justice in history, when Samuel Chase both helped get grand jury indictments of critics and then sentenced these same critics to maximum terms.

Wilson's administration went further, yet engendered little opposition. The new Sedition Act made it punishable by twenty years in jail to "utter, print, write or publish any disloyal, profane, scurrilous, or abusive language about the government of the United States." One could go to jail for cursing the government, or criticizing it, even if what one said was true. Oliver Wendell Holmes wrote the Supreme Court opinion that found the act constitutional—after the war ended, upholding lengthy prison terms for the defendants—arguing that the First Amendment did not protect speech if "the words used . . . create a clear and present danger."

To enforce that law, the head of what became the Federal Bureau of Investigation agreed to make a volunteer group called the American Protective League an adjunct to the Justice Department, and authorized them to carry badges identifying them as "Secret Service." Within a few months the APL would have ninety thousand members. Within a year, two hundred thousand APL members were operating in a thousand communities.

In Chicago a "flying squad" of league members and police trailed, harassed, and beat members of the International Workers of the World. In Arizona, league members and vigilantes locked twelve hundred IWW members and their "collaborators" into boxcars and left them on a siding in the desert across the state line in New Mexico. In Rockford, Illinois, the army asked the league for help in gaining confessions from twenty-one black soldiers accused of assaulting white women. Throughout the country, the league's American Vigilance Patrol targeted "seditious street oratory," sometimes calling upon the police to arrest speakers for disorderly conduct, sometimes acting more . . . directly. And everywhere the league spied on neighbors, investigated "slackers" and "food hoarders," demanded to know why people didn't buy—or didn't buy more—Liberty Bonds.

States outlawed the teaching of German, while an Iowa politician warned that "ninety percent of all the men and women who teach the German language are traitors." Conversations in German on the street or over the telephone became suspicious. Sauerkraut was renamed "Liberty

cabbage." The *Cleveland Plain Dealer* stated, "What the nation demands is that treason, whether thinly veiled or quite unmasked, be stamped out." Every day the *Providence Journal* carried a banner warning, "Every German or Austrian in the United States unless known by years of association should be treated as a spy." The Illinois Bar Association declared that lawyers who defended draft resisters were "unpatriotic" and "unprofessional." Columbia University president Nicholas Murray Butler, a national leader of the Republican Party, fired faculty critical of the government and observed, "What had been tolerable became intolerable now. What had been wrongheadedness was now sedition. What had been folly was now treason."

Thousands of government posters and advertisements urged people to report to the Justice Department anyone "who spreads pessimistic stories, divulges—or seeks—confidential military information, cries for peace, or belittles our effort to win the war." Wilson himself began speaking of the "sinister intrigue" in America carried on "high and low" by "agents and dupes."

Even Wilson's enemies, even the supposedly internationalist Communists, distrusted foreigners. Two Communist parties initially emerged in the United States, one with a membership of native-born Americans, one 90 percent immigrants.

Judge Learned Hand, one of Simon Flexner's closest friends, later observed, "That community is already in the process of dissolution where each man begins to eye his neighbor as a possible enemy, where non-conformity with the accepted creed, political as well as religious, becomes a mark of disaffection; where denunciation, without specification or backing, takes the place of evidence; where orthodoxy chokes freedom of dissent."

But American society hardly seemed to be dissolving. In fact it was crystallizing around a single focal point; it was more intent upon a goal than it had ever been, or might possibly ever be again.

Wilson's hard line threatened dissenters with imprisonment. The federal government also took control over much of national life. The War Industries Board allocated raw materials to factories, guaranteed profits, and controlled production and prices of war materials, and, with the National War Labor Board, it set wages as well. The Railroad Administration virtually nationalized the American railroad industry. The Fuel Administration

controlled fuel distribution (and to save fuel it also instituted daylight savings time). The Food Administration—under Herbert Hoover—oversaw agricultural production, pricing, and distribution. And the government inserted itself in the psyche of America by allowing only its own voice to be heard, by both threatening dissenters with prison and shouting down everyone else.

Prior to the war Major Douglas MacArthur had written a long proposal advocating outright censorship if the nation did fight. Journalist Arthur Bullard, who was close to Wilson confidant Colonel Edward House, argued for another approach. Congress's rejection of censorship settled the argument in Bullard's favor.

Bullard had written from Europe about the war for *Outlook*, *Century*, and *Harper's Weekly*. He pointed out that Britain was censoring the press and had misled the British people, undermining trust in the government and support for the war. He urged using facts only. But he had no particular affection for truth per se, only for effectiveness: "Truth and falsehood are arbitrary terms. . . . There is nothing in experience to tell us that one is always preferable to the other. . . . There are lifeless truths and vital lies. . . . The force of an idea lies in its inspirational value. It matters very little if it is true or false."

Then, probably at the request of House, Walter Lippmann wrote Wilson a memo on creating a publicity bureau on April 12, 1917, a week after America declared war. One outgrowth of the Progressive Era, of the emergence of experts in many fields, was the conviction that an elite knew best. Typically, Lippmann later called society "too big, too complex" for the average person to comprehend, since most citizens were "mentally children or barbarians. . . . Self-determination [is] only one of the many interests of a human personality." Lippmann urged that self-rule be subordinated to "order," "rights," and "prosperity."

The day after receiving the memo, Wilson issued Executive Order 2594, creating the Committee on Public Information—the CPI—and named George Creel its head.

Creel was passionate, intense, handsome, and wild. (Once, years after the war and well into middle age, he literally climbed onto a chandelier in a ballroom and swung from it.) He intended to create "one white-hot mass . . . with fraternity, devotion, courage, and deathless determination."

To do so, Creel used tens of thousands of press releases and feature stories that were routinely run unedited by newspapers. And those same publications instituted a self-censorship. Editors would print nothing that they thought might hurt morale. Creel also created a force of "Four Minute Men"—their number ultimately exceeded one hundred thousand—who gave brief speeches before the start of meetings, movies, vaudeville shows, and entertainment of all kinds. Bourne sadly observed, "[A]ll this intellectual cohesion—herd-instinct—which seemed abroad so hysterical and so servile comes to us here in highly rational terms."

Creel began intending to report only facts, if carefully selected ones, and conducting only a positive campaign, avoiding the use of fear as a tool. But this soon changed. The new attitude was embodied in a declaration by one of Creel's writers that, "Inscribed in our banner even above the legend Truth is the noblest of all mottoes—'We Serve.'" They served a cause. One poster designed to sell Liberty Bonds warned, "I am Public Opinion. All men fear me! . . . [I]f you have the money to buy and do not buy, I will make this No Man's Land for you!" Another CPI poster asked, "Have you met this Kaiserite? . . . You find him in hotel lobbies, smoking compartments, clubs, offices, even homes. . . . He is a scandal-monger of the most dangerous type. He repeats all the rumors, criticism, and lies he hears about our country's part in the war. He's very plausible. . . . People like that . . . through their vanity or curiosity or *treason* they are helping German propagandists sow the seeds of discontent. . . ."

Creel demanded "100% Americanism" and planned for "every printed bullet [to] reach its mark." Simultaneously, he told the Four Minute Men that fear was "an important element to be bred in the civilian population. It is difficult to unite a people by talking only on the highest ethical plane. To fight for an ideal, perhaps, must be coupled with thoughts of self-preservation."

"Liberty Sings"—weekly community events—spread from Philadelphia across the country. Children's choruses, barbershop quartets, church choirs—all performed patriotic songs while the audiences sang along. At each gathering a Four Minute Man began the ceremonies with a speech.

Songs that might hurt morale were prohibited. Raymond Fosdick, a student of Wilson's at Princeton and board member (and later president) of the Rockefeller Foundation, headed the Commission on Training Camp

Activities. This commission banned such songs as "I Wonder Who's Kissing Her Now" and "venomous parodies" such as "Who Paid the Rent for Mrs. Rip Van Winkle While Mr. Rip Van Winkle Was Away?" along with "questionable jokes and other jokes, which while apparently harmless, have a hidden sting—which leave the poison of discontent and worry and anxiety in the minds of the soldiers and cause them to fret about home. . . . [T]he songs and jokes were the culmination of letter writing propaganda instigated by the Huns in which they told lying tales to the men of alleged conditions of suffering at home."

And Wilson gave no quarter. To open a Liberty Loan drive, Wilson demanded, "Force! Force to the utmost! Force without stint or limit! the righteous and triumphant Force which shall make Right the law of the world, and cast every selfish dominion down in the dust."

That force would ultimately, if indirectly, intensify the attack of influenza and undermine the social fabric. A softer path that Wilson also tried to lead the nation down would mitigate—but only somewhat—the damage.

The softer path meant the American Red Cross.

If the American Protective League mobilized citizens, nearly all of them men, to spy upon and attack anyone who criticized the war, the American Red Cross mobilized citizens, nearly all of them women, in more productive ways. The International Red Cross had been founded in 1863 with its focus on war, on the decent treatment of prisoners as set forth in the first Geneva Convention. In 1881 Clara Barton founded the American Red Cross, and the next year the United States accepted the guidelines of the convention. By World War I, all the combatants were members of the International Red Cross. But each national unit was fully independent.

The American Red Cross was a quasi-public institution whose titular president was (and is) the president of the United States. Officially chartered by Congress to serve the nation in times of emergency, the American Red Cross grew even closer to the government during the war. The chairman of its Central Committee was Wilson's presidential predecessor William Howard Taft, and Wilson had appointed its entire "War Council," the real ruling body of the organization.

As soon as the United States entered World War I, the American Red

Cross declared that it would "exert itself in any way which . . . might aid our allies. . . . The organization seeks in this great world emergency to do nothing more and nothing less than to coordinate the generosity and the effort of our people toward achieving a supreme aim."

There was no more patriotic organization. It had full responsibility for supplying nurses, tens of thousands of them, to the military. It organized fifty base hospitals in France. It equipped several railroad cars as specialized laboratories in case of disease outbreaks—but reserving them for use only by the military, not by civilians—and stationed them "so that one may be delivered at any point [in the country] within 24 hours." (The Rockefeller Institute also outfitted railroad cars as state-of-the-art laboratories and placed them around the country.) It cared for civilians injured or made homeless after several explosions in munitions factories.

But its most important role had nothing to do with medicine or disasters. Its most important function was to bind the nation together, for Wilson used it to reach into every community in the country. Nor did the Red Cross waste the opportunity to increase its presence in American life.

It had already made a reputation in several disasters: the Johnstown flood in 1889, when a dam broke and water smashed down upon the Pennsylvania city like a hammer, killing twenty-five hundred people; the San Francisco earthquake in 1906; major floods on the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers in 1912. It had also served American troops in the Spanish-American War and during the insurrection in the Philippines that followed.

Still, the American Red Cross began the Great War with only 107 local chapters. It finished with 3,864 chapters.

It reached into the largest cities and into the smallest villages. It made clear that to participate in Red Cross activities was to join the great crusade for civilization, and especially for American civilization. And it used subtlety and social pressure to all but compel participation. It identified the most prominent and influential man in a city, a person whom others could refuse only with difficulty, and asked him to chair the local Red Cross chapter; it appealed to him, told him how important he was to the war effort, how needed he was. Almost invariably he agreed. And it asked the leading hostess, the leader of "society" in cities—in Philadelphia, Mrs. J. Willis Martin, who started the nation's first garden club and whose family and husband's family were as established as any on the Main

Line—or whatever passed for "society" in small towns—in Haskell County, Mrs. Loring Miner, whose father was the largest landowner in southwest Kansas—to chair a woman's auxiliary.

In 1918 the Red Cross counted thirty million Americans—out of a total population of 105 million—as active supporters. Eight million Americans, nearly 8 percent of the entire population, served as production workers in local chapters. (The Red Cross had more volunteers in World War I than in World War II despite a 30 percent increase in the nation's population.) Women made up nearly all this enormous volunteer workforce, and they might as well have worked in factories. Each chapter received a production quota, and each chapter produced that quota. They produced millions of sweaters, millions of blankets, millions of socks. They made furniture. They did everything requested of them, and they did it well. When the Federal Food Administration said that pits from peaches, prunes, dates, plums, apricots, olives, and cherries were needed to make carbon for gas masks, newspapers reported, "Confectioners and restaurants in various cities have begun to serve nuts and fruit at cost in order to turn in the pits and shells, a patriotic service. . . . Every American man, woman or child who has a relative or friend in the army should consider it a matter of personal obligation to provide enough carbon making material for his gas mask." And so Red Cross chapters throughout the country collected thousands of tons of fruit pits—so many they were told, finally, to stop.

As William Maxwell, a novelist and *New Yorker* editor who grew up in Lincoln, Illinois, recalled, "[M]other would go down to roll bandages for the soldiers. She put something like a dish towel on her head with a red cross on the front and wore white, and in school we saved prune pits which were supposed to be turned into gas masks so that the town was aware of the war effort. . . . At all events there was an active sense of taking part in the war."

The war was absorbing all of the nation. The draft, originally limited to men aged twenty-one to thirty, was soon extended to men aged eighteen to forty-five. Even with the expanded base, the government declared that all men in that age group would be called within a year. *All men*, the government said.

The army would require as well at least one hundred thousand offi-