

George Creel's  
Remembrance of  
the American WW I Poster  
Campaign:  
The "Battle of the Fences"  
from  
*How We Advertised America*  
(1920)



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Mr. George Creel

"Censorship and publicity" were named as the two functions of the Government's Committee on Public Information. Mr. George Creel, chosen to head the committee as a "writer of proved courage, ability, and vision," has just taken the people into his confidence by making public the censorship regulations.

**I**N some respects the Division of Pictorial Publicity was one of the most remarkable of the many forces called into being by the Committee on Public Information. Artists, from time immemorial, have been looked upon as an irresponsible lot, given over to dreams and impracticality and with little or no concern for the values that go to make up the every-day world. At America's call, however, painters, sculptors, designers, illustrators, and cartoonists rallied to the colors with instancy and enthusiasm, and no other class or profession excelled them in the devotion that took no account of sacrifice or drudgery. As a consequence, America had more posters than any other belligerent, and, what is more to the point, they were the *best*. They called to our own people from every hoarding like great clarions, and they went through the world, captioned in every language, carrying a message that thrilled and inspired.

Even in the rush of the first days, when we were calling writers and speakers and photographers into service, I had the conviction that the poster must play a great part in the fight for public opinion. The printed word might not be read, people might not choose to attend meetings or to watch motion pictures, but the billboard was something that caught even the most indifferent eye. The old-style poster, turned out by commercial artists

*\*Mr. Creel served as Chairman of the Committee on Public Information between the years 1917-19 and was appointed to that post by President Wilson .*

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Committee in Washington to serve as "contact man." He went to the heads of all the war-making branches of government, telling them of the mobilization of the artists, and obtaining from each department its list of poster needs. This list was then sent to Mr. Gibson in New York, who made the assignments as would the art manager of a magazine, picking the artists best fitted for the particular need. The work, when finished, was hurried to Washington, and after approval was followed through the printing by experts. Not only this, but every man associated with Mr. Gibson submitted poster ideas of his own, so that governmental routines were soon broken up by the inrush of new and more vivid thought.

Strange as it may seem, the Division of Pictorial Publicity traveled no royal road to the favor of governmental heads. Many of these executives knew nothing at all about art or artists, and others, with greater knowledge, were products of the "chromo school." As a matter of fact, Mr. Gibson had to spend days in Washington actually begging for the privilege of *submitting sketches* from men and women whose names stood for all that was finest in American art. Through it all he held to his patience and enthusiasm, and at last the importance of the offering penetrated the official consciousness, and that which had been ignored came to be wildly pursued.

It was not only the case that the artists were subject to call, like so many members of a volunteer fire department, but they held regular weekly meetings at which

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the task was discussed as a whole, every one present contributing criticism, ideas, and inspiration. These meetings of the division developed into the most interesting series of dinners ever held in New York City. Under the magnetic leadership of Mr. Gibson, the dominant note was patriotic fervor. Everybody felt it a duty to come. The most celebrated men in every branch of art met for the first time at the same board with the younger men of their profession. This set the highest standard for the division and was an assurance to the government that it could expect the best that American art could give. It was also an inspiration to the younger men to be associated in such a notable league of artists, and made it a distinguished honor to succeed in the friendly competition for government acceptance of work.

The character of the division was best described in the words of Mr. Gibson himself when he said: "This is a schoolroom. All are welcome. We come here to learn from one another, to get inspiration and get religion for the great task the government has set for us. No artist is too great to come and give his best. We are fortunate to be alive at this time and be able to take advantage of the greatest opportunity ever presented to artists."

Being chosen to speak through their work to the millions of their countrymen, the artists felt a great sense of responsibility that bound them into a harmonious unit. All worked together in the common cause, sank personal

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considerations, gave and received advice. A fine spirit of helpfulness prevailed, the one aim—the highest excellence in all commissions executed. The steady appearance of the division's work became a feature of the war, not only stirring patriotism, but awakening in the public mind the importance of artists. It was a wholesale education to the country in that the division made the billboard "safe for art," the work standing out in sharp contrast to the commercial disfigurations of the past.

To increase the scope of the committee and to stimulate the personal interest of the artists outside of New York, sectional branches were formed, and Oliver Dennett Grover of Chicago became the chairman of the Western Committee, Mr. E. Tarbell and Mr. Arthur F. Matthews taking charge in Boston and San Francisco.

The full contribution of the artists of America to the national cause, as well as the reliance placed upon the Division of Pictorial Publicity by every department of government, is shown by the following record of achievement:

	Poster designs.	Car. bus, and window cards.	Newspaper and other advertising.	Cartoons.	Seals, buttons, banners, etc.
American Red Cross, Washington and New York.....	100	25	100	50	.....
War Savings Stamps.....	50	50	25	50	.....
Liberty Loan (Third).....	3	10	15	.....	.....
Liberty Loan (Fourth).....	100	.....	25	.....	.....
Shipping Board.....	100	.....	.....	8	1
American Library Association..	7	.....	43	.....	.....

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War Camp Community Service.....	101	2	3		1
Ordnance Department.....	18	1	15	1	4
Training-camp Activities.....	10	1	3	10	
Food Administration.....	50	15	10	50	
Fuel Administration.....	25	10		23	
Department of Agriculture.....	11			1	1
War Department.....	11				1
Public Health Service.....	14	6	3		
Young Men's Christian Association.....	6		7		
Young Women's Christian Association.....	6		7		
Signal Corps.....	4		3	15	
Signal Corps, Aviation.....	1		2		1
Division of Films.....	33		4		1
Committee of Patriotic Societies.....			3		2
Turner Construction Co.....				20	
United States Boys' Working Reserve.....	5	1	2	7	
Committee on National Defense.....		1			3
Western Newspaper Union.....			2		
War Risk Insurance.....	2		2	1	
Committee on Public Information.....	4		6	5	
Division of Advertising.....	11		10	3	1
Squad A, Magazine Gun.....	2				
Mothers' Day.....	2				
Chain Stores.....	2				
Food for France.....	3				
Department of Labor.....	6				
Department of Interior.....	2		1		1
United States Tank Corps.....	1				
Salvation Army.....	5				
Treasure and Trinket Fund.....	1				
Boy Scouts.....	3		9		1
Jewish Welfare.....	5		1		
Trades for Disabled Soldiers.....	6		2		
Railroad Administration.....	8				
Motor Corps.....	1				
Southern Pine Association.....	1				
Federation of Neighborhood Associations.....			1		
Office of Chief of Staff.....	1				
International Arms & Fuse Co.....	1				
Bastille Day.....	3			14	
Marine Corps.....	5				
Fifth Avenue Association.....	2				
American Poets' Committee.....	2				
Federal Food Board.....			3		
Rehabilitating Wounded Soldiers.....			2	2	1
Dewey Recreation Committee.....	1				
Italian War Work.....				1	
Mayor's Committee.....	1				
Official Bulletin.....	1				
Photograph Recruiting Records.....	3			25	

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Connecticut Defense Council...	1		.....	.....	.....	.....	.....	.....	.....
Pelham Naval Station.....	5		.....	.....	1		1		.....
United War Work Campaign...	5		.....	.....	.....	.....	.....	.....	.....
Departments and committees requesting work.....									58
Poster designs submitted.....									700
Cards requested.....									122
Newspaper and other advertising.....									310
Cartoons submitted.....									287
Seals, buttons, etc., executed.....									19
Total material (drawings, designs, etc.).....									1,438

In addition to the above, Lieut. Henry Reuterdaahl and N. C. Wyeth worked on a painting ninety feet long, twenty-five feet high, which was placed at the Subtreasury Building for the Third Liberty Loan. Lieutenant Reuterdaahl made also three paintings, each over twenty feet, for the publicity of the Fourth Liberty Loan in Washington, D. C.

During the United War Work Campaign the same plan was followed, seven artists painting on days assigned, in front of the Public Library, two others assigned in front of the Metropolitan Museum. This work was carried on by a committee of this division. These artists were:

- F. D. Steele, Young Men's Christian Association.
- Middleton Chambers, Knights of Columbus.
- C. B. Falls, Salvation Army.
- I. Olinsky, Jewish Welfare.
- Denman Fink, Library Association.
- Jean McLane, Young Women's Christian Association.
- Howard Giles, War Camp Community Service.
- Charles Chapman and Luis Mora, Metropolitan Museum.

As showing the manner in which the artists rose to

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high esteem, when General Pershing asked that the artists be sent to the firing-line in France, the task of selection was turned over to the Division of Pictorial Publicity and these men received commissions: Capts. J. Andre Smith, Ernest Peixotto, Harry Townsend, Wallace Morgan, George Harding, William J. Aylward, W. J. Duncan, and Harvey Dunn.

Almost three hundred drawings were received from them, which were framed and sent throughout the country for exhibition, and in addition to this the majority of them were given exquisite reproduction in the great magazines. The following characteristic comment, lifted out of a recent letter from Mr. Gibson, gives a hint of the spirit that made the Division of Pictorial Publicity a force and an inspiration:

It always struck me as more than fortunate that your telegram on the night of April 17, 1917, should have reached me when and where it did. It was at a dinner at the Hotel Majestic, the first gathering of artists after the declaration of war. We were there to offer our services to the country, but were in some doubt as to the method of procedure. We were sparring for an opening. Some of the speeches were about half over and some of them threatened to get us off the track, when just at the psychological moment your telegram was handed to me and we had a focusing-point. If it had all been prearranged it could not have happened better.

If I remember rightly, it was the following Sunday we met at your house, where the Division of Pictorial Publicity was formed. As you say, the division met some rough going in the early days,



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but for that matter so did every one who tried to elbow his way into the front trenches. I dare say no one knows this better than yourself. At any rate, it is easy to forget all those bumps now. In fact, the suspicion with which some of those in Washington looked upon the artists was not to be wondered at and bothered me less as I became better acquainted with the men I met down there. After all, we were offering something for nothing and that in itself was suspicious. We always felt that your experience was more or less like ours, only on a much larger scale, and you understood and were with us, so it was easy to wait. There is nothing like good company when the going is rough, and now that I look back upon it I dare say it really made the job more interesting.

The Associate Chairmen were most useful in allaying the fears of the heads of the different departments, and the work done by Casey was invaluable. He had great knowledge of the work and in addition possessed tact, even temper, and modesty.