

# The Plight of the Last Censor

By George Creel

America's first official censor hopes he will be our last. Mr. Creel feels that "voluntary" censorship won't work any better now than it did in 1917, when even generals and admirals disagreed on what should be shush-shushed, while editors never knew what they could publish safely. Here the author suggests a workable alternative



George Creel in 1917 when, as chairman of the Committee on Public Information, he was the first censor America has

**A**S MANY scars bear witness, I was the official censor during the World War. For two years I rode herd on the press, trying to enforce the concealments demanded by the Army and Navy. Two long, hectic years, and at the end of the disastrous experiment I fell to my knees and offered up a fervent prayer that just as I had been America's first official censor so would I live in history as the last.

Unhappily, it turns out that fighting men are like the Bourbons. They die but they never learn. Still insisting that secrecy is as much a part of war as ships and guns, a censorship of the press is again in operation, having been initiated by the Secretary of the Navy in conference with the heads of publishers' associations. Only a "voluntary" arrangement, however, as the announcement is careful to explain, lacking compulsory and punitive features. Nothing more than a patriotic pledge with one hand on the heart and the other on the flag.

Well, that is just what we had, and all we had, in 1917 and 1918. The war-making branches, to be sure, clamored for a law with teeth in it, but when Congress balked a plan was worked out that made the press its own censor. The desires of government with respect to the concealment of "military secrets" were set forth in careful detail, and sent to every newspaper in the land. On the printed card that carried them was this paragraph: "These requests are without larger authority than the necessities of the war-making branches. Their enforcement is a matter for the press itself."

Simple enough and proper enough on its face, but not only did the plan fall down in operation, but out of it came a long train of irritations that made for lasting angers and ill will. The resentments of the bedeviled press deepened into revolt, equally bedeviled officials fumed and what should have been a



## The Last Censor

friendly and co-operative relationship went rancid. By way of adding to tragedy, it soon became painfully apparent that the whole business had no real point, no justification in necessity.

### Why Our Censorship Failed

Secrecy is essential in connection with many activities of the war machine, although the need is often exaggerated beyond the bounds of common sense, but censorship of the press in any form is not the answer, never was the answer and never will be the answer. Not in this country at any rate. Just as it failed in the first World War, so will it fail again, for the causes of failure are inherent in the plan. I was a fool not to have seen it, but the "shush-shush" campaign impressed me, and "voluntary" was a magic word that soothed away all suspicion of trouble.

The physical difficulties of enforcement, for example, should have been plain, for European countries presented no such problem as the United States with its stretch of 3,000 miles from coast to coast, its forty-eight states and scores of great cities. Administration, therefore, had to be broken down to every metropolitan center, for it was obviously absurd to assume that San Francisco, Dallas, Minneapolis, New Orleans and Miami must telephone Washington whenever a ruling was required.

This huge machine, even when created, did not function with automatic precision, for "information of value to the enemy," or "definitely damaging to the progress and maintenance of the national defense," and "compatible with the national security" were phrases subject to as many interpretations as there were interpreters. Oftentimes generals and admirals were in sharp disagreement as to what should be suppressed or passed, so that rulings flatly contradicted each other. One group of high officials, with some appreciation of publicity values, would urge pictures and feature stories, while another group would not want to admit that we had either an army or a navy. It took me two months to get permission for correspondents to visit the Grand Fleet.

Quite naturally, this confusion at the source had its effect on junior officers in the field. In cases of doubt they "played safe," ruling against publication even when suppression was patently absurd. There were many instances where papers were denied permission to give the location of aviation plants although the information was to be found in every telephone and city directory. A powder factory was being built in plain view of a large city, an enterprise lauded by the Chamber of Commerce, but reporters were ordered to ignore its existence. Printing of ship news was forbidden, although notices of arrivals and departures were posted in hotel lobbies.

Now and then, however, some field man would go off the deep end. One very rigid prohibition was against the photographing of tanks, and although the papers implored, the rule was en-



## The Last Censor

forced. Imagine, then, our dismay when a newsreel concern burst forth with a complete set of tank pictures. The press raged, generals thundered and an investigation disclosed that a young captain had given the required permission, thinking it a help to recruiting. After much stewing around, everybody came to the conclusion that there was no good reason why tank pictures should not be taken.

By way of adding to the magnitude of the task, it was not only the news columns that had to be watched. What good for the city desk to suppress transport sailings and troops movements when the society columns contained every detail in the account of the wedding of an Army lieutenant or a Navy captain? Nor was the rural press any less important than the metropolitan, for country editors, going down to the depot to see "the boys" off, rarely failed to report their destination.

### Editors Will Be Editors

With the best will in the world on both sides, violations soon came to be daily occurrences. New York censors would kill a story to which Chicago officials offered no objection. A paper in Kansas City or Milwaukee, asking for an interpretation, would be told not to print a story. A rival paper, exercising its own judgment, went ahead and slapped the story on the front page. Straightway a scream from the city editor who had telephoned for a ruling and had abided by it. A lieutenant would bar one newspaper from taking plane pictures and the next day a colonel would give the right to a rival sheet.

Along with unintentional violations there were many bold and open breaches of the agreement out of the average editor's sheer inability to resist an "exclusive story." The publication, for example, of testimony given by Army or Navy men before supposedly secret sessions of a congressional committee. As a matter of course, the papers that had been "scooped" howled to high heaven.

In order to minimize the danger of submarine attacks, our first transports sailed in separated detachments, and the papers were asked to print nothing until the last of the four groups reached France. The Associated Press announced the arrival of the first group while the other three were still in the danger zone, and straightway rival associations erupted with Vesuvian fury. A month later the Associated Press scored another scoop by ignoring the agreement.

"In the name of our papers throughout the country," wired Roy Howard, then head of the United Press, "we file most vigorous protest against action of Associated Press today in publishing arrival of American troops in Europe in violation of voluntary censorship, and request reply as to what steps are being taken to protect those who keep faith from Associated Press or individual papers which break faith."

Every correspondent, before sailing for France, was required to post a bond



## The Last Censor

that he would submit all dispatches to the press section of the American Expeditionary Force. As a rule, faith was kept, but in several notable instances, men evaded it by returning to the United States and writing their articles on this side of the water. One metropolitan daily accompanied the announcement of such a series with this self-justifying blurb:

"In December last Mr. ——— joined the staff of the New York ——— and went to France as general correspondent. He was so affected by conditions there that on his own initiative he returned to bring to the American people an uncensored message that would not wait . . . Light is curative. Truth is compelling. The mind of a great democracy requires to be moved."

The articles appeared in due course, all highly critical, and, anxious to know just how authoritative they really were, I cabled General Pershing, who replied as follows: "Mr. ——— came December 14th, remained two days, returned United States. Do not know he ever visited front. No record of unofficial information at Red Cross, embassies or elsewhere. Only information comes from Red Cross worker who happened to meet him and to whom ——— said he was on 'journalistic mission.' Unable to learn he ever saw any official. Nolan. Pershing."

Still another journalist of standing returned to the United States after spending only five days in Paris, and burst forth with a sensational series based entirely on gossip that he heard in hotel lobbies. General Pershing cabled explicit denials in due course, but there was nothing else that could be done except to forfeit the bond, a penalty so trifling as to lack any punitive value.

That was the rub then, and it will be the rub today. Without any law to back them up, the military authorities are powerless to take action even when violations of the agreement are bold and repeated. Punishment is up to the press, and the press itself is powerless for the very good reason that it has no ethical code, no rules governing individual conduct. The shyster lawyer can be disbarred, the quack doctor can have his license revoked and the unworthy minister can be unfrocked but the newspaper profession is powerless to expel its black sheep. But will the press acknowledge the fault as its own? Not if past experience is any criterion.

### When Secrecy Was a Joke

Throughout 1917 and 1918, every violation, whether innocent or intentional, was the signal for a deluge of telegrams, demanding that instant and severe punishment be visited on the offender. This was absurd, for the printed card stated specifically that enforcement was a matter for the press itself, yet when this obvious answer was made, a general cry arose that the agreement was a "farce" and "to hell with it."

As a matter of truth, that was my own opinion. Not only was the plan plainly unworkable, but every passing day



## The Last Censor

strengthened the conviction that it was of a piece with the hysterical "shush-shushing" that warned against unguarded speech, just as though every citizen possessed some important military secret that would reach the Germans unless he kept close watch on his tongue. Virtually everything we asked the press not to print was seen or known by thousands, making secrecy a joke. As the present "voluntary censorship" is a carbon copy of the old, the joke may be expected to persist. In support of my claim of uselessness, here are the prohibitions in news reporting asked by the Secretary of the Navy:

1. The actual or intended movement of vessels or aircraft; or enlisted personnel or divisions of mobilized reserves, or troop movements of the Marine Corps.

2. The development of secret technical weapons.

3. New ships or aircraft.

4. Navy construction projects ashore.

5. The arrival in American ports of damaged British ships for repairs under the Lease-Lend Act.

These are virtually the same prohibitions that we laid down in 1917, and every whit as unnecessary. The arrival and departure of ships and planes are about as secret as the trips of a sight-seeing bus. Until war comes to these shores, or expeditionary forces are sent abroad, the movements of troops possess little significance, for the location of training camps is a matter of common knowledge. Pin down any member of Army or Navy Intelligence, and he will admit that there is no single activity in the field today that can be kept secret or needs to be kept secret.

This holds good for new ships, new planes and Navy construction projects ashore, for shipyards and aviation factories are not of a size to be hidden, nor of a nature to be located in some remote mountain fastness. In addition to thousands of workmen, other thousands see these yards and factories every day and have a fairly good idea of what is going on in them.

### History Repeats Itself

Within a week after the call for secrecy in connection with damaged British warships, the wounded Malaya limped into the harbor of New York on a bright Sunday afternoon, the hole in her side looming large. Several newspapers and press associations respected the Navy's request, but others cut loose with full descriptions and interviews with the crew, every article carrying photographs. Why not? Every vantage point was black with spectators.

Even before the "voluntary censorship" was well under way, a newspaper announced the construction of six new cruisers, giving the cost and many other circumstantial details. When he was taken to task by agitated officials who were convinced that he had been guilty of espionage, the reporter calmly explained that he had obtained his information from the Congressional Record.

Just two illustrative absurdities. Of all the prohibitions, the only one that



## The Last Censor

has any real meaning is that dealing with the development of secret technical weapons. Here, of course, secrecy is an essential, but it is not going to be provided by any censorship of the press, for if the information comes to the ears of a reporter, most certainly it will have been learned by any spy worth his pay. Concealment of new inventions and technical developments, along with war plans, is the business of the military authorities. Secrecy at the source is the one and only answer. That is where enemy agents are going for their information—peeping, prying and bribing.

This was the conclusion forced on me back in 1917, and at a date when the "voluntary censorship" had been in operation less than two months. Although convinced in my own mind that the plan was both unworkable and useless, I felt the need of making sure, and before taking any action had a heart-to-heart talk with a man high up in one of the Intelligence units.

"Tell me," I asked him, "do you honestly believe that the enemy is stupid enough to rely for its information on something as slow and haphazard as the indiscretions of the press?"

"I do not." The answer came without a moment's hesitation. "Speed in transmission is the essence, and it takes days, not minutes or hours, for newspapers to reach the enemy or a neutral country in direct communication with the enemy."

"Then common sense," I insisted, "indicates the employment of spies, and the use of cables?"

"Of course."

As a result of this conversation I went to President Wilson, and in July, 1917, he issued an executive order subjecting all cable communications to rigid censorship. This done, what the newspapers printed ceased to be of importance. Even when enemy agents succeeded in getting hold of military secrets, they could not get the information out of the country, and attempts to do so resulted in their detection and arrest.

That is what should be done today. Not any trifling press censorship, as unworkable as unnecessary, but censorship of cables and, of course, the radio: a censorship that will not touch opinion in any degree but that *will* prevent communication between "potential enemies" and their undercover agents in the United States.

Riding herd on the cables is simple, but keeping tab on the air, at first glance, may seem to present a difficult problem. What easier than for an enemy agent to install a sending set in the top floor of a New York apartment house, or in a Colorado mountain cabin, and transmit to his home country the information gathered by efficient operatives? Locating him would be about as difficult as finding the needle in a haystack. On the contrary, radio censorship is as simple as cable censorship, for already the Federal Communications Commission has worked out a system by which it polices the ether as methodically and efficiently as a policeman patrols his beat.

At the center of this system are eleven



## The Last Censor

primary monitoring stations located at these points: Millis, Massachusetts; Baltimore; Atlanta; Grand Island, Nebraska; Allegan, Michigan; Portland, Oregon; Corpus Christi, Texas; San Pedro, California and in Puerto Rico, Alaska and Hawaii. In addition there are eighty secondary stations, one or more in each of the forty-eight states.

The "policeman" in a primary station can make a complete circuit of the ether, and no signal is too weak for it to pick up and record accurately. When the receiver runs across a strange signal, then a "direction finder" is brought into play. Maybe three or four more stations will join in and lay down their bearings as lines on the map. Eventually and inevitably, two lines will cross, and at that crossing point or "fix" is the sending set.

Now a call goes out to the secondary stations, each furnished with a fully equipped automobile to do monitoring work in the field. By the same method in which the general location was determined, the exact position of the illegal radio can be found.

## The 1918 Plague of Rumors

There, then, is your answer. With cables and radios under watch and guard, preventing communication with the enemy, what need to devil the press with foolish and unnecessary restrictions? Even more important, there will be no impairment of people's confidence in the news. That was the result of the "voluntary censorship" that hurt us most, just as it will work irreparable harm today if the foolish plan is not discontinued. When the public knew that *something* was being kept from them, the conviction grew that a *great deal* was being hidden, and this feeling lent itself to the manufacture and spread of every variety of wild and disintegrating rumor. Nothing was more amazing than the speed with which some whisper raced from coast to coast, causing untold anxiety and distress.

Throughout 1917 and 1918 we were constantly harassed by this sort of thing. Now it would be that epidemics had broken out in the training camps, with cholera, smallpox, the plague, etc., etc., killing soldiers in such number that the bodies were being dumped into trenches without burial ceremonies. Then would come a whisper that a German submarine had crept into New York harbor, sinking ships by the score, and that every morgue and every hospital was filled with dead and dying. One of the most circumstantial lies was to the effect that a Missouri family had received the body of a son, sent home from camp for burial, with the casket marked "Contagious: Do not open." Nevertheless, the parents did open the coffin; and found that the corpse had two bullet holes in the head.

Many of these whispers were started by the type of gossip that likes to give the impression of being "on the inside," but the vast majority bore unmistakable signs of enemy origin. I remember two in particular: One told how Ger-



## The Last Censor

man agents in the Government Printing Office had injected some kind of germs into Liberty Bonds so that they would crumble to dust in a few weeks, leaving the holder with nothing to show for his money. The other, and one that persisted, was that the Red Cross made members of the A.E.F. pay for sweaters, socks, chocolate, tobacco, etc.

Nothing stood more clearly proved than that the atmosphere created by common knowledge that news was being suppressed, even in small degree, provided an ideal "culture" for the propagation of the bacteria of enemy rumor. That statement is as valid today as it was in 1917. No one knows who starts a rumor, but there is an editor behind every printed word. A newspaper story is tangible even if untrue. It can be denied, and its falsity proved.

### Frankness Means Confidence

By way of illustration, a disgruntled sailor told a reporter for a metropolitan daily that hospital conditions were disgraceful, and the care of the sick attended by cruelty and neglect. The story was flashed across the country, forcing the mothers of the nation to bear a new anxiety, but the fact that it was printed gave opportunity for full refutation. A competent committee of physicians and surgeons, headed by Dr. Welch of Johns Hopkins, instituted an immediate inquiry, and reported that the charges were without foundation, Navy hospitals ranking with the best in the world.

By way of completing this indictment of press censorship, no matter what the form, there is its relation to the important question of domestic morale. The needs of the day are confidence, enthusiasm and service, and these needs will not be met fully until every citizen is given the feeling of partnership that comes with frank statements concerning every phase of the national-defense effort. Billions are being spent, and many more billions will be spent, putting heavy burdens on every taxpayer.

What wiser, then, and more helpful, than to let people know what is being done with their money—to provide them with the assurance that the preparedness program has *not* bogged down, but is going ahead at full speed? Information, and detailed information, as to the progress of plane and ship construction is *good* news for Americans and *bad* news for potential enemies.

Common sense commands that newspapers be given the green light! With a censorship of the cables and the radio, there is no reason why the flow of information to our own people should not be full and free, no reason why we should not have the generous co-operation of the press instead of grudging obedience to resented orders; good will instead of ill will; an end to rumor-mongering, and above all, an invincible domestic morale.

**Collier's**

May 24, 1941: p. 13

[OldMagazineArticles.com](http://OldMagazineArticles.com)