

American Radio and War Propaganda

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After the shooting and the bleeding have stopped and that armed truce which is called peace is once more arranged to give the victors a chance to consolidate their gains, and the vanquished the opportunity to revise their strategy and seek a new set of alliances, the larger part of the people begin to wonder what they got out of it—and how they got into it at all.

No nation enters into a war coldly and sanely. A handful—the chosen few—know what the stakes are and make up their minds to get them. The greater bulk of the people don't know what the stakes are and—since they wouldn't share in them—wouldn't fight for them if they did know. But this mass, though it may not share in the loot, is the instrument with which the war is waged and the individuals comprising it do the fighting—whether on the battleground or in the factories or in the fields. And they must be persuaded that it is their war.

Do you remember how Mark Twain tells it in "The Mysterious Stranger"? How the tens shout for war while the millions earnestly and indignantly protest that there is no necessity for it? How the shouters become louder while the protesters become more puzzled? How their enthusiasms are fanned and their hates whipped up until in the ensuing frenzy they are thoroughly convinced of the rightness of their cause and the necessity for its victory?

The means through which this conversion is effected is propaganda. And the principles of its technique remain pretty constant though the materials may vary and the volume and the tempo be altered as conditions change. Since the last war the propagandists have acquired a medium which is ideally suited to their needs. A mere laboratory playtoy during the last war, radio has, in twenty years, increased its scope until it has come to constitute almost the entire intellectual life of millions. It reaches directly into the homes of those who don't care—or are unable—to go to a motion picture. The careful modulations of its rhetoric are poured into the ears of those who wouldn't trouble to read a newspaper. Further, since any broadcast, to hold its listeners, must be whittled clean of any fatigue-producing elaboration it has become the god-sent tool of anyone who has something to sell.

Dorothy Thompson was fully aware of the potentialities of radio broadcasting

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and in a column in the Herald-Tribune just three days after war broke out, she wrote: "The spoken word is probably far more inflammatory than the written word. The human voice is a more potent conveyor of emotion than is the printed page; it is less likely to appeal to reason; it is more capable of being misunderstood; from time immemorial it has been used to sway and control masses, and this possibility has been incalculably augmented by the radio and the power of reaching millions." Her own broadcasts were evidence that she had learned, and was capable of putting in effective practice, her own lesson. In fact her hysterical enthusiasms and dislikes were sometimes embarrassing to the very people most in sympathy with them.

In this war both sides were tremendously interested in selling their causes to the neutrals.

But as far as the American radio audience was concerned the German side was handicapped from the very beginning. The very nature of the Government and the events and policies of its seven years in office left the American people decidedly uninterested in a German victory. The most the Germans could hope to do was to immunize American opinion and reduce active assistance to the Allies to a minimum. They were forced, therefore, to adopt paralytic arguments which would strengthen the isolationists by dividing and confusing their listeners. But direct propaganda was very nearly impossible since few Americans tuned in on the short wave band; and the local stations rebroadcast practically no programs from Germany.

But even with, according to a poll conducted during the early weeks of the war, 83% of Americans interested in an Allied victory, the case for active aid—much less for actual participation—was not a strong one. This was recognized as early as 1938 by Captain Sydney Rogerson who admitted in his "Propaganda in the Next War" that "on paper our case toward neutrals appears to lack a mainspring." This became quite apparent at the outbreak of hostilities. The keynote for American opinion was struck by President Roosevelt, in his radio talk at the opening of the war, in which he stressed America's determination to keep out of it. The distance travelled in somewhat more than a year can be measured by his fireside chat of early January, 1941, in which speaking over the radio to millions of listeners, he carefully left out his favorite phrase—"short of war."

During the months between those two broadcasts Americans had been carefully educated to the point of accepting the idea of intervention in some degree. They had, for example, been listening to newscasters of whom only one—Quincey Howe

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---could be considered isolationist. Raymond Gram Swing, with a very large following, was outspokenly pro-Ally from the very beginning and was early used to make America enlistment and draft conscious. Edwin C. Hill, trained in the Hearst school, made no pretense to objectivity; while H. V. Kaltenborn, Elmer Davis, and Lowell Thomas, though somewhat more restrained, did not, in any degree, conceal their pro-Ally sympathies. And Hendrick Willem Van Loon dug down into the remote past to prove that Germans were destroying civilization as early as the 17th century when a German lieutenant, serving with the Venetian fleet, helped in the shelling of the Acropolis.

The entertainment programs did not neglect the British cause. Kate Smith missed none of the emotional nuances in such songs as "When I Last Saw Paris" and "A Nightingale Sang in Berkeley Square." Lynn Fontanne gave such an evocative reading of Alice Duer Miller's "The White Cliffs" that she was called upon to repeat it on several succeeding broadcasts. "Information Please," one of the first half-dozen most popular shows, was presided over by the suavely witty Clifton Fadiman who seldom passed over an opportunity to inject a word or two of sympathy for Britain's cause. He managed to enlist, for at least three broadcasts, the aid of Miss Jan Struther whose charming and amiable personality proved an admirable vehicle for her kindly nostalgic statements about a purely ideal British Empire.

But all this was, of course, merely the back-drop against which the main business was acted out. So it was with a hint here and a nudge there that the listeners were prepared for the serious arguments. These being too important to be left in the hands of well-meaning amateurs were handled directly from London.

It was not until July 7th, 1940, that the BBC arranged for a series of re-broadcasts through a North American Transmission Service which was further enlarged on September 29th to include six hours of daily broadcasting. The programs were timed to come in during the best part of the evening from eight o'clock to eleven o'clock, with speakers who had all attained a recognizably international distinction.

The American listener was immediately disarmed of a large part of his suspicion by Vernon Bartlett who inaugurated the "Britain Speaks" program by admitting, "But of course I'm a propagandist. Who isn't? Passionately I want my ideals—our ideals—of freedom and justice to survive." Were freedom and justice the ideals for which Britain was fighting? If they were, one could only feel that his use of the pronoun in the first person plural was entirely correct. (Cont. on p. 24)

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But the listener must not only be made to feel the reasonableness of the arguments. He must be made to feel at home with them. This was no stranger at our gates who was trying to sell us a bill of goods. It was an old friend who had dropped in for an intimate discussion. Indeed, J. B. Priestley said this very thing: "It is two o'clock in the morning here, at the end of a long tiring day. . . . I can't do any fancy work for you. I can only talk to you as plainly and as frankly as I would to an old friend at this late hour. So consider that I'm smoking a last pipe with you, and turning out for your inspection the contents of my mind."

References were made, in pleasant accents, to the New York skyline—the Rocky Mountains—the hoot of the Santa Fe train—a flask of rye—all typically American phenomena which, with the use of such Americanisms as "girl friend," "smart," "tough guys," and the like, would convince the audience that this man was one of their own kind—a neighbor from across the way.

Now it was necessary to inspire confidence and admiration in those who might remember the foreign policy of Great Britain which, beginning some five hundred years ago, culminated in Munich. Miss Lloyd George posed a problem to historians and psychologists when she declared that, "A miraculous change has taken place within the last three weeks." And J. B. Priestley emphasized this statement with one of his own: "The British people are now sustained by a deep moral—you might almost say religious—detestation of the whole Nazi way of life and they will never make a truce with it." Later he reaffirmed this: "There is something in our nature that will not allow us to be beaten." And Lord Elton, speaking from the upper ranks of society, was able to assure his hearers that the war would not be in vain. "It is clear," he said, "that this war is going to put an end to what there is left of economic privilege."

Of course, Americans might believe in the rightness of Britain's cause—might be convinced of the Empire's ability to survive—and might admire the fight they were showing without feeling moved to help them out. To break down this reserve and make such Americans feel that aid to Britain was, after all, a matter of self-interest, Leslie Howard was chosen to assure them that "although you and we may have many superficial differences, when the world goes mad, the English-speaking peoples come very close together—so much so that there are many more Americans here with the British forces than is realized." And Wickham Steed affirmed that "this is a civil war—not a national—not imperialistic—certainly not capitalistic—but a war for the

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right of men to lead decent, law-abiding lives—to think their own thoughts—to speak their own minds—to be able to call their souls their own.” But there is no evidence that this broadcast reached India, except perhaps indirectly. J. B. Priestley clinched the argument by asserting that “You’re just around the corner.” Britain, it was suggested, represented the “first line of defense for the other side of the Atlantic.” Nor could he understand the desire of any Americans to keep out of it. “Good God,” he burst out one night, “when we think of the misery brought to such decent simple folk all over Europe, perhaps soon all over the world, by these power-crazed Nazis and their hordes of screaming demented followers it makes one wonder why the whole world doesn’t rise up in its wrath and put an end to these lunatics once and for all. All this patter about non-belligerence is like sitting down in front of a pack of ravening wolves.”

A little oil was applied by Vernon Bartlett when he commented upon the excellence of such war materials as had arrived. “American planes,” he said, “can stand punishment better than any other machine.” And he implied that there was really a strong movement under way already by hinting at “little slips of paper from the men who pack them (war materials) in California wishing us good luck.” A. P. Alexander added his bit of flattering unctiousness as First Lord of the Admiralty: “It was with the greatest pleasure also that I read of the ships, when handed over, reflecting the high professional standards of the American Navy. . . . The white ensigns will fly at their ensign staffs in the future, but many of us will, in our mind’s eyes, see the Stars and Stripes still fluttering there as well.”

With exhaustive detail Americans were made to feel the very presence of the war—they were made familiar with it not only through news broadcasts and eye-witness reports of air battles but were taken into the daily life of the people. Where actual events failed to give the proper emotional lift, dramatizations were used, sometimes to such good effect that a result was achieved comparable to our own “War of the Worlds” panic. As far back as April of 1940 listeners in South America hearing the sound of exploding bombs during one of the broadcasts from London were certain that the raids had finally begun. For a while anxious inquiries flooded the wires to New York only to be met with reassurances that the BBC was merely broadcasting a recording made by one of its observers at the Western Front.

By the opening of the new year American radio audiences were ready to participate in a forum on WEAJ on the

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question "What further aid to Britain now?" During the same week the Town Hall of the air asked, "Is a Hitler defeat essential to the United States?" And Lord Marley discussed over WOR the "Effect of the War on Christianity."

If Ludendorff was right when he wrote, "Good propaganda must keep well ahead of political events. It must act as the pacemaker of policy," a critical radio listener would be pretty well prepared to chart the course of American history for at least a little time into the future.

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