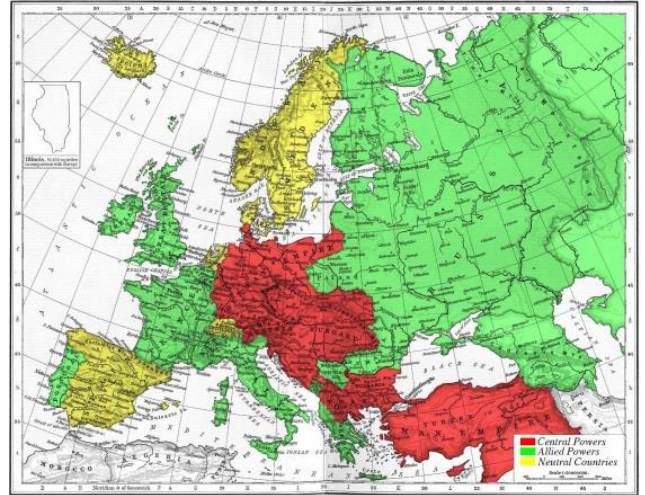


# JOURNALISM DURING WWI

In the years leading up to 1914, tension was building in Europe over boundaries and land ownership, as the European governments fought for power, wealth, and natural resources through imperialism. The ensuing disputes over land led many countries in Europe to make mutual defense agreements, or alliances. These alliances would eventually pull Europe into the Great War, or World War I (WWI). The built up pressure turned to aggression when the Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria, heir to the throne of Austria-Hungary, was assassinated in Serbia. Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia, which caused Russia to fight in order to defend Serbia. Germany saw Russia mobilizing for war, and declared war on Russia. Due to their alliance, France was drawn into the war against Germany and Austria-Hungary. When Germany attacked France by going through neutral Belgium, Britain was also pulled into the war against Germany.



## AMERICAN NEUTRALITY

The United States of America was isolated from the war in Europe, and President Woodrow Wilson remained neutral in the conflict. Many Americans agreed with the President, that the United States should not engage in a “European War.” The diversity of the population of the United States also swayed public opinion towards isolationism, as there wasn’t a clear side to support. The majority of American citizens had been born in Europe or was of European descent, making them sympathize with their home countries. Many sided with Britain, sharing the same heritage, the language, and political ideals. However, millions of German immigrants supported the Central Powers, and Irish-Americans also supported the Central powers, due to long standing hatred towards British rule.

While physically isolated, and officially neutral, the United States government would continue its trade relations with the Allied nations (Great Britain and France). American production allowed the Allies to fight against the Central powers by supplying the weapons, munitions, and supplies needed for war, and American banks boomed as they continued to lend money to Britain.

With a heavy dependence upon the United States for supplies, Britain needed to influence American popular opinion to side with the Allies in hopes it would eventually enter the war.

## GETTING THE NEWS

During this period, the average American relied on newspapers to receive the fastest and most reliable news about the war in Europe. Since this was a time before computers, television, and home radios, Americans received information by word-of-mouth, letters from loved ones, newsreels, and newspapers. Word-of-mouth was often incorrect and exaggerated, and newsreels were not a reliable source of factual news, as they often focused upon entertainment rather than news. Therefore newspapers became the most reliable source of news the American people received. Many newspapers had two editions a day, allowing the newspaper to continue to update stories as they unfolded. However, newspapers were a for-profit business, and would write stories and have eye-catching headlines to capture the interest of the reader, and keep them buying more papers. This kind of reporting was not new however, examples of this kind of yellow journalism spread rampantly across the United States in 1898 after the explosion of the USS *Maine* in Havana, Cuba.

Early in the war, in 1914, Great Britain destroyed German Atlantic telegraph communication lines to the United States. This left only the British telegraph line. Cutting the German telegraph line effectively blocked German news from being transmitted to the United States, and any news about the war in Europe had to first pass through Britain, and their censors. Soon, news from Europe was heavily biased towards the Allies, painting a negative picture of the Germans and Central powers. Eventually, American opinion began to see Germany as the “bully of Europe” due to their invasion of Belgium. However, other nations, including Germany, saw Wilson’s continued trade with Britain as a violation of America’s claim of neutrality.

In 1915, Germany began unrestricted submarine warfare around Great Britain, and warned the United States with newspapers advertisements it would sink any vessel, warship or civilian, sailing to Great Britain. Not believing the warnings from Germany, the United States continued its trade with the Allied nations. In result, on 7 May 1915, a German submarine torpedoed and sunk the RMS *Lusitania*, an ocean liner traveling from New York to



Liverpool, England, killing 1,198 people, including 128 Americans.

While the German government could argue the validity of their actions, their story was not headline news. Most Americans read about the unprovoked loss of life, further swaying their allegiance to the Allies. Further still, in March 1917, American newspapers would publish the breaking story of the the Zimmerman telegram: a secret communication between Germany and Mexico, solidifying the majority of American opinion towards war with Germany. Woodrow Wilson would ask Congress to declare war in April 1917.

When America entered the war in April 1917, President Wilson wanted full support of the American people. To ensure that the American public's opinion continued to support the Allies, the federal government asked the news media to voluntarily restrict and censor what they reported. This included not publishing information about: American merchant shipping to and from Europe, harbor defenses, any information (rumor or true) about international policies the government was working on, the number of troops in the American Expeditionary Forces (Army, Navy, and Marines), the location of bases abroad, or the location or future of American forces. While these restrictions were voluntary, approximately 99% of the press observed these censorship regulations.

## COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC INFORMATION

The Committee on Public Information was created to create positive publicity to convince the American people to support U.S. involvement in WWI. The chair of the Committee, George Creel believed that they were not spreading malicious propaganda, but true information, based on fact. However, that did not mean the committee wanted the *full* truth to be published. When the committee was created, the list of restricted topics for the news was lengthened, and Creel believed it was the patriotic duty of the news media to follow these restrictions.

The committee used various media outlets to spread information about the war: newspapers, posters, speeches, radio, and movies. Topics included the draft, rationing, war bonds, victory gardens, and the reasons behind why America was fighting. The committee was so successful in monitoring and releasing information, that any American could read the same news about the war anywhere in





the country.

In addition to the news, the American people were also subject to censoring what they said about the war. In 1917, President Wilson asked that the Espionage Act be passed to prevent the American people from interfering with military operations or the recruitment of new military members through speeches, gatherings, articles, etc. It also made it a crime to support the enemies of the United States during war.

## AMERICAN JOURNALISTS IN EUROPE

At the start of the war in 1914, American journalists were not allowed to accompany British troops to the front lines. However, even when the Americans entered the war in 1917, only 80 American war correspondents were allowed access to the front, and all of their reports, articles, and photos were subject to review by military censors. Unlike journalists in the United States, these war correspondents who traveled to France to report on the war were subject to involuntary censorship. These censors made sure that no article or photo was deemed harmful to the American war effort, showed disrespect to the federal government, American flag, or American Soldier's uniforms. Both civilian journalists in France working for newspapers in America, and military journalists working for *The Stars and Stripes*, a newspaper for servicemen, were subject to these regulations.

One of the most important restrictions was that a correspondent was not allowed to give the name or location of any unit. This was to ensure that the Germans could not use the information to their advantage. Further, German intelligence knew that some American divisions were experienced, while others did not have experience at the front. If the Germans could learn which division was where, they could avoid the more experienced troops to focus on the new recruits. For the American people, censoring this information meant that any news from the front they were reading back home was a generalized version of events. They were not aware of who, the Army or Marines, was fighting, and exactly where in France they were.

## FLOYD GIBBONS AND THE MARINES AT BELLEAU WOOD

Floyd Gibbons was a war correspondent for the *Chicago Tribune*. He had a very charismatic personality, and was one of radio's first news reporters. Due to his experience covering international news like the Pancho Villa expedition in 1916, and the sinking of the British vessel RMS *Laconia*, by a



German torpedo in February 1917, the *Chicago Tribune* sent him to France to cover the war.

On 6 June 1918, he and Lt. Oscar Hartzel of the Intelligence Division entered Belleau Wood. Belleau Wood was made up of patches of forest with wheat fields in between. The Germans, pushing towards Paris were waiting with artillery and machine guns among the trees. When he arrived, Gibbons sent a dispatch to the news censor's office: "I am up at the front and entering Belleau Wood with the U.S. Marines."

When the Marines began to march through the wheat field, Gibbons ignored the suggestion to stay back, rather, he joined the advance. Since war correspondents could not carry weapons, Gibbons could only march ahead. During the march forward, he was struck by a bullet in his left arm, and left shoulder blade. Eventually he was struck in the left eye, and had to lay in the field for three hours until dark, when he was taken to a field hospital. He would survive, but would eventually lose his left eye. The Battle for Belleau Wood would rage for three more weeks, and the Marines would emerge triumphant however, at a cost. In a single day of fighting at Belleau Wood on 6 June 1918, more Marines were killed in this battle than any previous battle in the Marine Corps' history.

Before the dispatch driver could reach the censor's office, the news of Gibbons' injury had reached the censors. Believing that Gibbons would die from his injury, the censor allowed his dispatch through without deleting "Marines." For three days during the battle, the censors allowed information about the Marines to be reported, uncensored. After the third day, the restrictions were once again enforced.



When Floyd Gibbon's dispatch went through without censoring out "Marines," and the subsequent articles that came out during the early part of the battle, the American people had, for the first time, something to truly rally around. All throughout the country American newspapers were hailing the courage and dedication of the United States Marines making it appear as though the Marines were the only American troops to fight in the actions at



Belleau Wood. The American public was hungry to hear more news about the “Marines” in the trenches, and the Marine Corps reputation for a fierce fighting force was born.

While the 6,000 Marines did show incredible fortitude, the 250,000 American Soldiers and French Infantry would do most of the fighting in the Spring and Summer of 1918. However, because the censorship of the newspapers was reinstated, their stories would not be told after the conclusion of the war in 1919.

To this day, Belleau Wood remains a sacred place for Marines, many of whom travel to France to visit the spot where the U.S. Marines marched straight into artillery and machine gun fire, and created the determined and courageous ethos of a Marine.