



# World War I

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**An Online Professional Development Seminar**

**Ernest Freeberg**

Distinguished Professor of the Humanities  
The University of Tennessee Knoxville

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**AMERICA *in* CLASS<sup>®</sup>**

*from the* National Humanities Center



## FROM THE FORUM

### Challenges, Issues, Questions

- What was the political atmosphere and societal concerns that led to our involvement in WW1?
- Who were the key players and events in the first Red Scare?
- What was the effect of Wilson's policy of neutrality both on the home front and on the conduct of the War? Had we gotten into the War earlier, would it have ended sooner?
- Was the US ill-prepared for war when it entered the conflict?



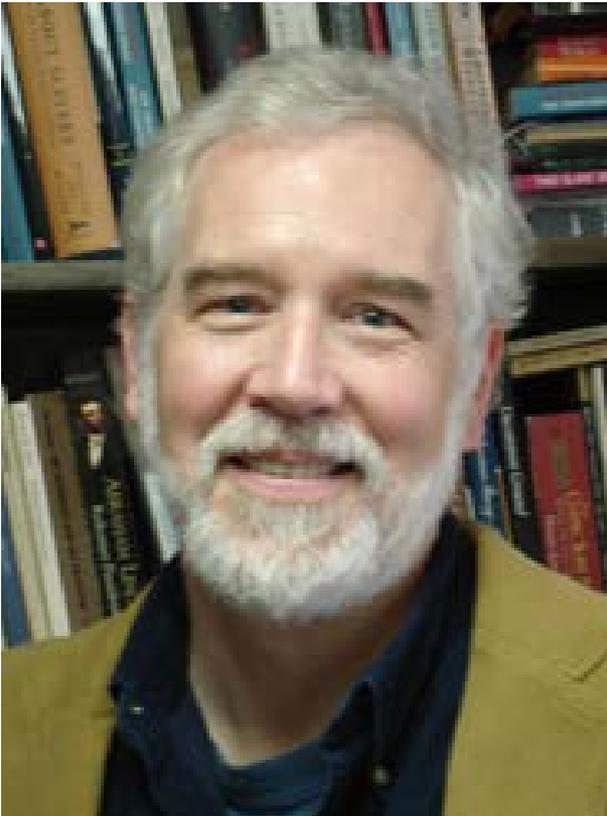
## Ernest Freeberg

Distinguished Professor of the Humanities  
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American cultural, social and religious history,  
with an emphasis on the 19th and early 20th  
century.

*Democracy's Prisoner: Eugene V. Debs, The  
Great War, and the Right to Dissent*  
(2008)

*The Education of Laura Bridgman*  
(2002)





# World War I



## **The Impact of World War One on the U.S. A “people’s war” or an assault on democratic liberty?**

- What caused World War One?
- Why did the U.S. favor neutrality at the start of the war, and why did it reverse course and enter the conflict in 1917?
- What did the U.S. hope to accomplish by entering the war?
- How did mobilization for a world war affect the U.S. on the homefront?
- Was this a progressive war, or was this experience the death of progressive reform in America?



# World War I

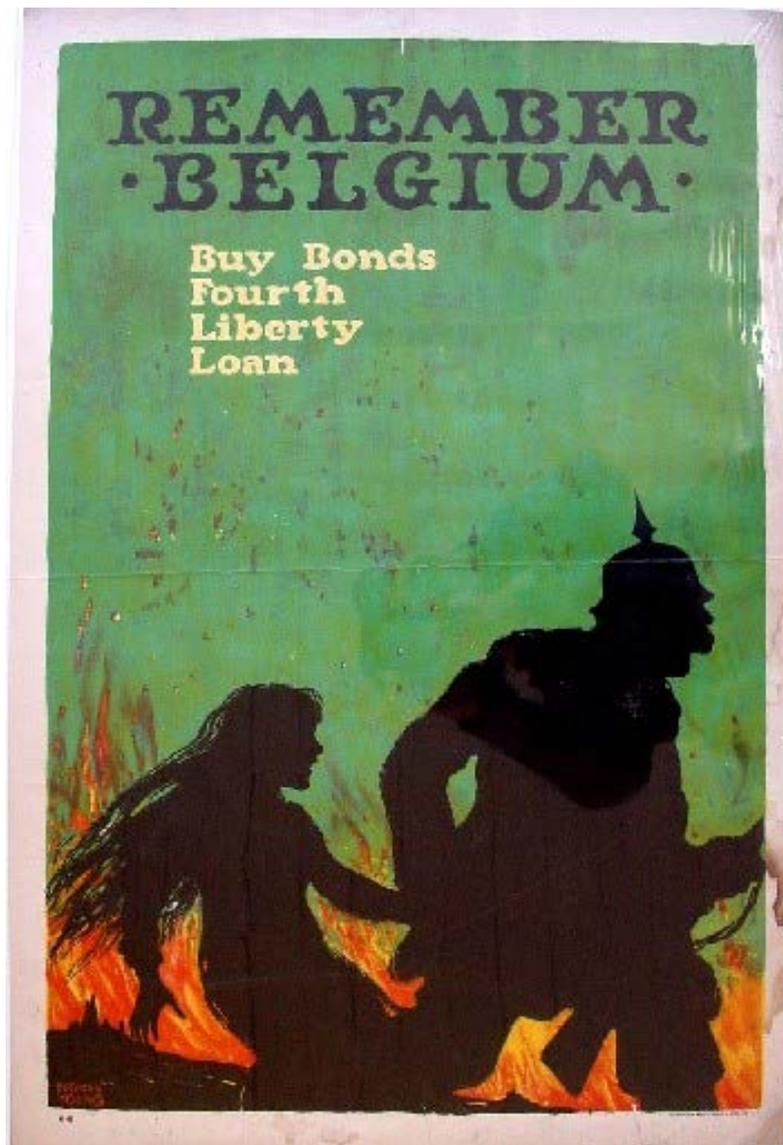


 European Alliances on the Eve of World War I. Alliance systems divided Europe into two great blocs with few countries remaining neutral.



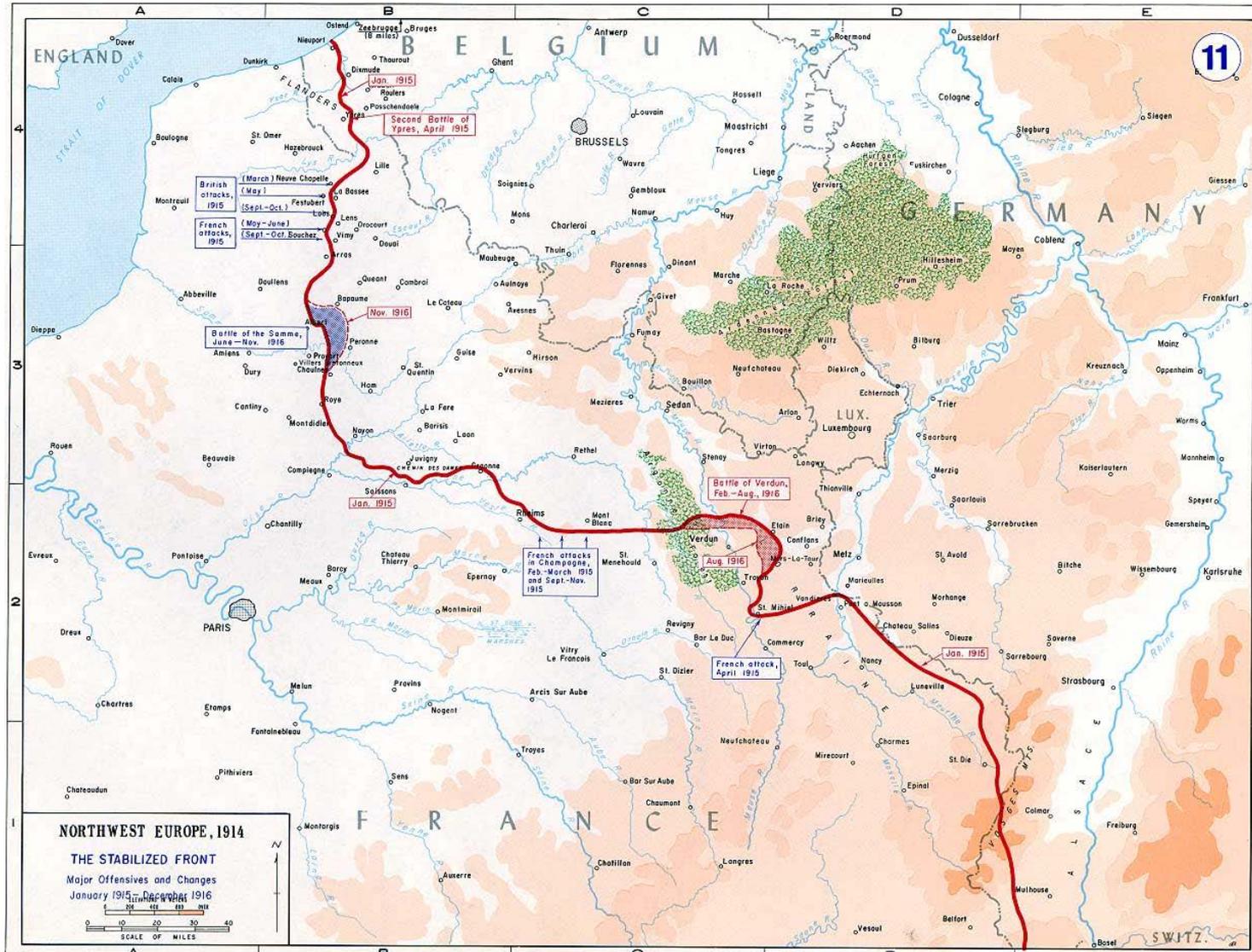


# World War I





# World War I





# President Woodrow Wilson Asks Americans to Remain Neutral

It will be easy to excite passion and difficult to allay it. Those responsible for exciting it will assume a heavy responsibility, responsibility for no less a thing than that the people of the United States, whose love of their country and whose loyalty to its government should unite them as Americans all, bound in honor and affection to think first of her and her interests, may be divided in camps of hostile opinion, hot against each other, involved in the war itself in impulse and opinion if not in action.

Such divisions amongst us would be fatal to our peace of mind and might seriously stand in the way of the proper performance of our duty as the one great nation at peace, the one people holding itself ready to play a part of impartial mediation and speak the counsels of peace and accommodation, not as a partisan, but as a friend.

Source: Woodrow Wilson, Message to Congress, 63rd Cong., 2d Sess., Senate Doc. No. 566 (Washington, 1914)

## **Discussion Question**

**Why was Woodrow Wilson so eager to declare US neutrality when the war broke out in 1914?**



# World War I



Having Their Fling





# President Wilson Responds to German Sub Warfare (1916)

Tragedy has followed tragedy on the seas in such fashion, with such attendant circumstances, as to make it grossly evident that warfare of such a sort, if warfare it be, cannot be carried on without the most palpable violation of the dictates alike of right and of humanity....I have deemed it my duty, therefore, to say to the Imperial German Government that if it is still its purpose to prosecute relentless and indiscriminate warfare against vessels of commerce by the use of submarines.... the Government of the United States is at last forced to the conclusion that there is but one course it can pursue and that unless the Imperial German Government should now immediately declare and effect an abandonment of its present methods of warfare against passenger and freight-carrying vessels, this Government can have no choice but to sever diplomatic relations with the Government of the German Empire altogether.

## Discussion Questions

- Why did the Germans consider the use of submarine warfare a necessary strategy in the war?
- How did this new technology make old ideas about the rights of neutral shipping obsolete?



# World War I



Woodrow Wilson's Campaign Slogan:  
"He Kept Us Out of War"

So far as I can remember, this is a government of the people,  
and this people is not going to choose war. — Wilson, 1916



# World War I

TELEGRAM RECEIVED.

FROM 2nd from London # 5747.

"We intend to begin on the first of February unrestricted submarine warfare. We shall endeavor in spite of this to keep the United States of America neutral. In the event of this not succeeding, we make Mexico a proposal of alliance on the following basis: make war together, make peace together, generous financial support and an understanding on our part that Mexico is to reconquer the lost territory in Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona. The settlement in detail is left to you. You will inform the President of the above most secretly as soon as the outbreak of war with the United States of America is certain and add the suggestion that he should, on his own initiative, ~~invite~~ <sup>invite</sup> Japan to immediate adherence and at the same time mediate between Japan and ourselves. Please call the President's attention to the fact that the ruthless employment of our submarines now offers the prospect of compelling England in a few months to make peace." Signed, ZIMMERMAN.

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# President Wilson Asks Congress to Declare War



It is a fearful thing to lead this great peaceful people into war, into the most terrible and disastrous of all wars, civilization itself seeming to be in the balance. **But the right is more precious than peace, and we shall fight for the things which we have always carried nearest our hearts,—for democracy, for the right of those who submit to authority to have a voice in their own Governments, for the rights and liberties of small nations, for a universal dominion of right by such a concert of free peoples as shall bring peace and safety to all nations and make the world itself at last free.**

To such a task we can dedicate our lives and our fortunes, every thing that we are and everything that we have, with the pride of those who know that the day has come when America is privileged to spend her blood and her might for the principles that gave her birth and happiness and the peace which she has treasured. God helping her, she can do no other.

## **Discussion Question**

**How do the war aims outlined by President Wilson reflect his values as a progressive reformer?**



# Wisconsin Senator Robert M. La Follette Votes Against a Declaration of War

**August 4, 1917**

....I venture to say that the response which the German people have made to the demands of this war shows that it has a degree of popular support which the war upon which we are entering has not and never will have among our people. The espionage bills, the conscription bills, and other forcible military measures which we understand are being ground out of the war machine in this country is the complete proof that those responsible for this war fear that it has no popular support and that armies sufficient to satisfy the demand of the Entente Allies cannot be recruited by voluntary enlistments. . . .

### **Discussion Question**

Wilson and his administration claimed to be rallying the country to fight a “people’s war,” one that reflected America’s idealism and spirit of sacrifice. Critics argued Americans were being dragged into the conflict by a “war machine.” What evidence supports each view?



# World War I

**Randolph Bourne protests against progressive intellectuals who once rejected war, but in 1917 reverse course and “flood us with the sewage of the war spirit”.....**

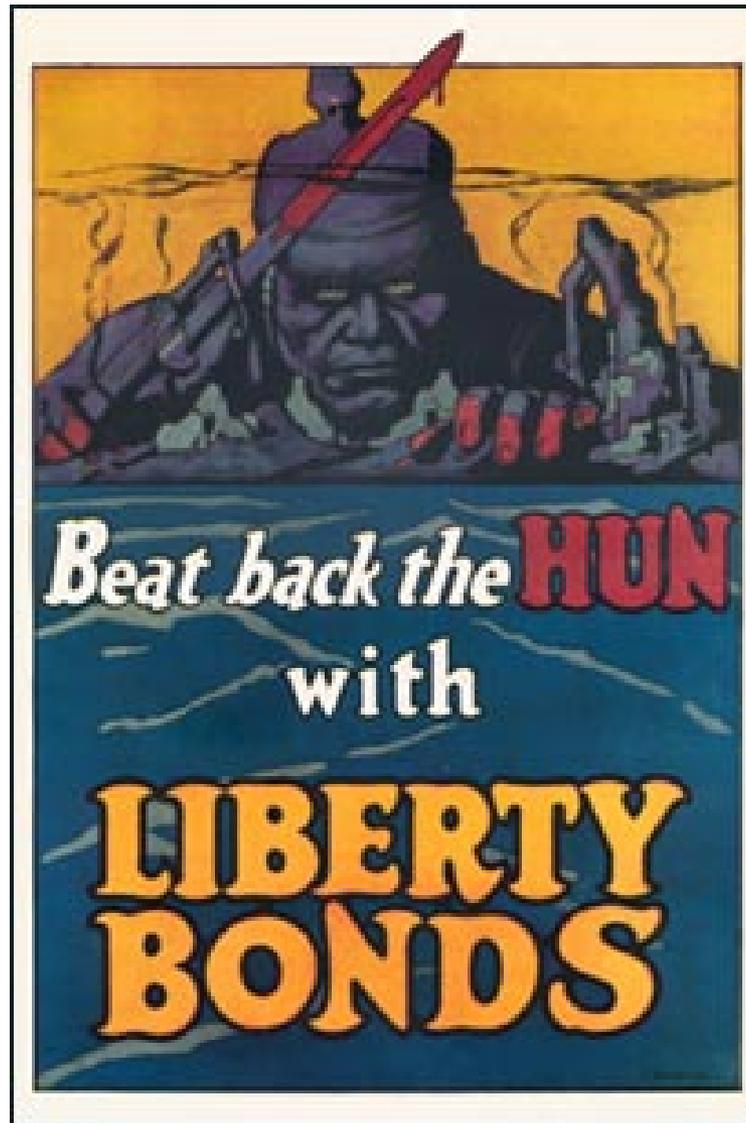
The pacifist is roundly scolded for refusing to face the facts and for retiring into his own world of sentimental desire. But is the realist, who refuses to challenge or criticize facts, entitled to any more credit than that which comes from following the line of least resistance? The realist thinks he at least can control events by linking himself to the forces that are moving. Perhaps he can. But, if it is a question of controlling war, it is difficult to see how the child on the back of a mad elephant is to be any more effective in stopping the beast than is the child who tries to stop him from the ground.



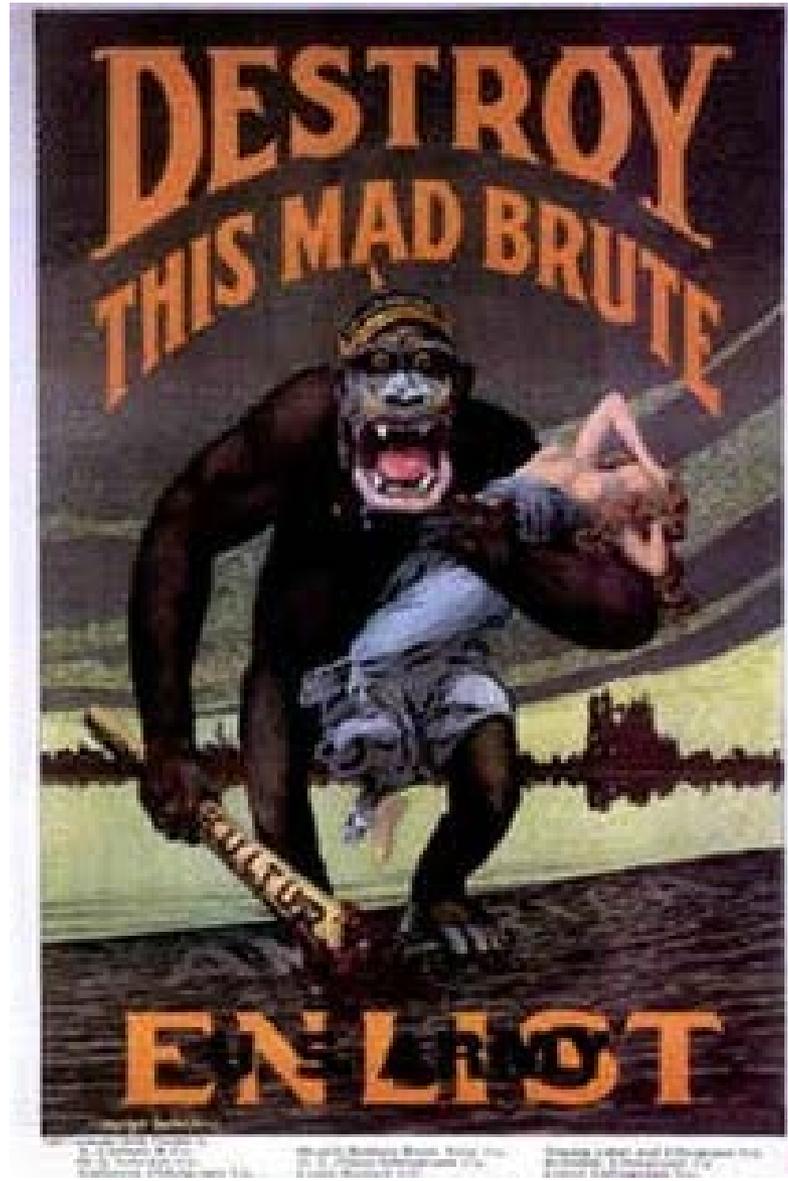
### Discussion Question

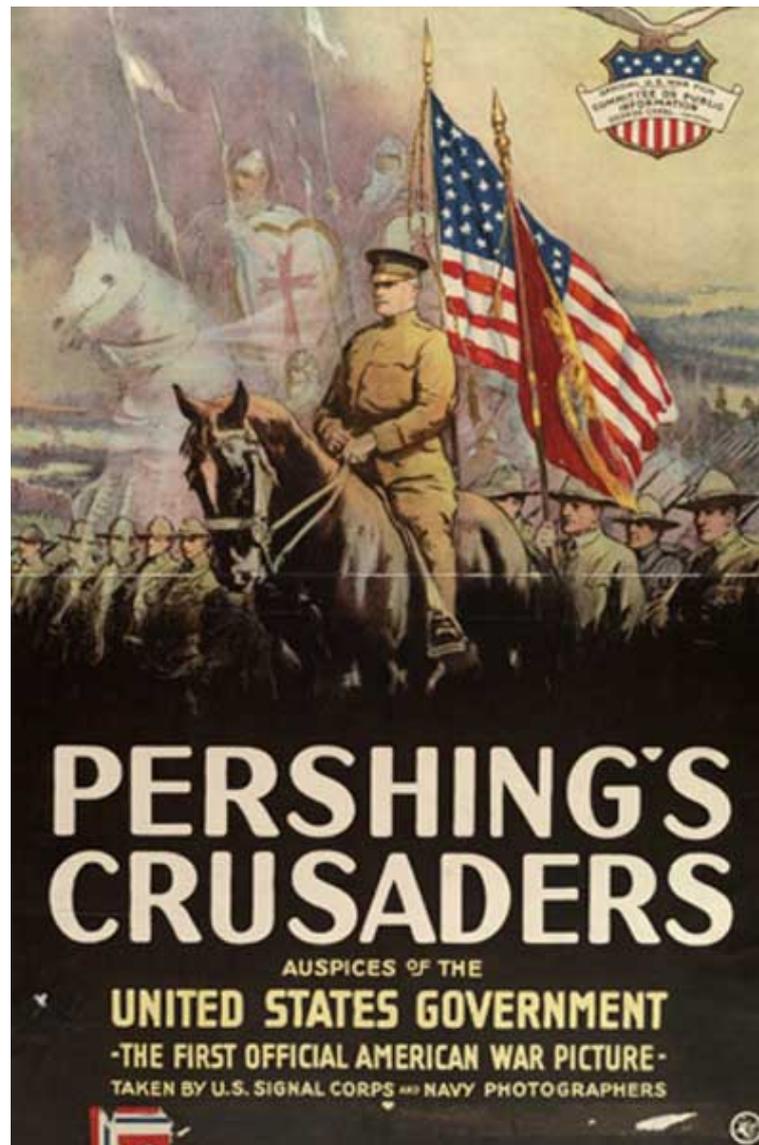
The US used all the latest techniques of modern advertising to promote the war.

- Why were these propaganda images so effective?
- How do they reflect and use the era's ideas about gender and ethnicity to sell the war?



National Archives





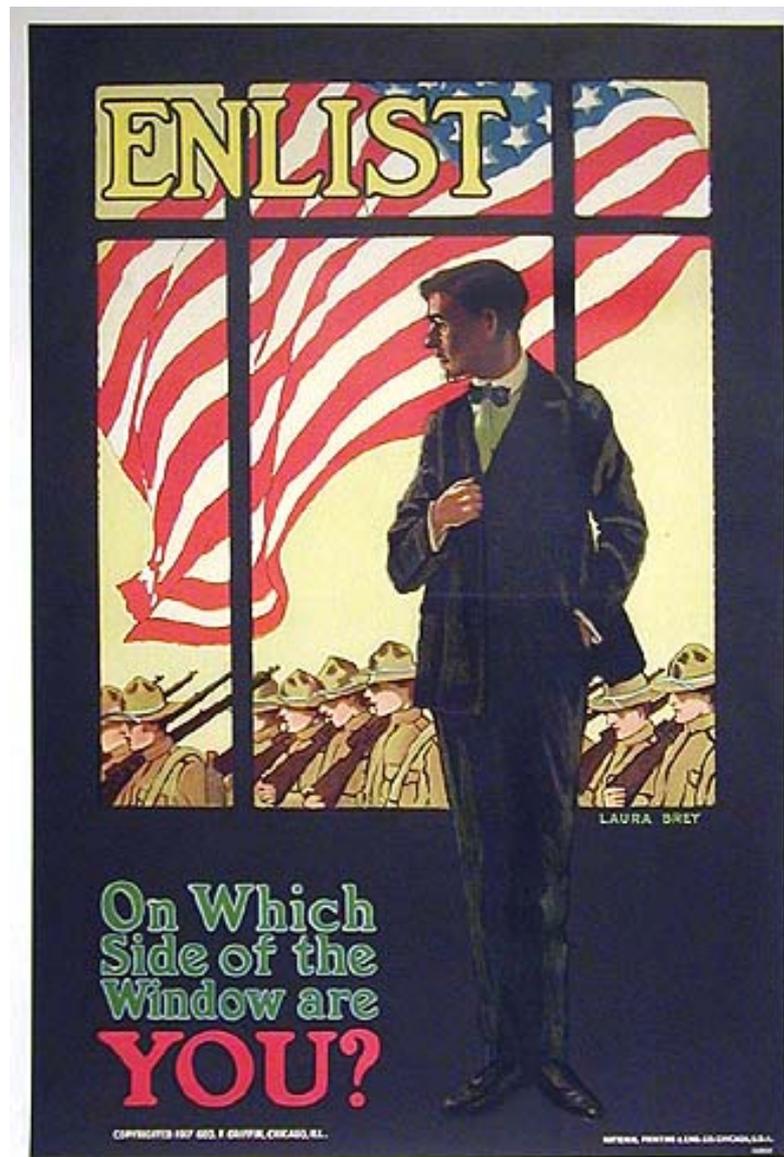


National Archives



**TELL THAT TO THE MARINES!**  
AT 24 EAST 23rd STREET

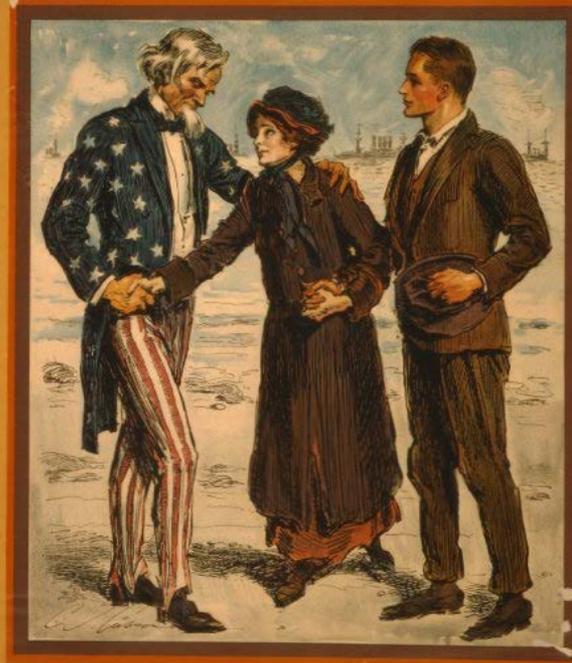






www.WW1propaganda.com

# U.S. NAVY



*Illustration by L.S.P.* *Drawn by Charles Dana Gibson*

**“Here he is, Sir.”  
We need him and you too!  
Navy Recruiting Station**





ARE YOU 100%  
AMERICAN?  
PROVE IT!  
BUY  
U.S. GOVERNMENT BONDS  
THIRD  
LIBERTY LOAN

U.S. TREASURY  
WILL PAY  
INTEREST  
EVERY SIX  
MONTHS





**FOOD WILL WIN THE WAR**

You came here seeking Freedom  
You must now help to preserve it

**WHEAT** is needed for the allies  
Waste nothing





# Anti-German Sentiment in the U.S. After the War Declaration

Germany has denatured men and boys, has wantonly defaced the living and the dying and the dead. An eye-witness tells of seeing women dead at a table with their tongues nailed to the table and left to die. Germany has stolen things little and big: playthings from children, finery from women, pictures of incalculable worth, bank-deposits, railroads, factories. Germany has sunk hospital-ships, has bombed hospitals and Red Cross camps. Germany has disclosed neither decency nor honor from the day it started war, nor has a single voice in Germany to date been lifted up against the orgies of ruthlessness which turn the soul sick and which constitute the chief barbarity of history. Germany remains unblushing and unconscious of its indecency. Germany's egotism still struts like a Kaiser. And to climax its horrid crimes, Germany has inflicted compulsory polygamy on the virgins of its own land.

## Discussion Question

In his call for a declaration of war, Wilson said the US would fight against the Kaiser and his government, not against the German people. Is such a distinction possible when a country goes to war?



# World War I

## **ESPIONAGE ACT (1917)**

Whoever, when the United States is at war, shall willfully make or convey false reports or false statements with intent to interfere with the operation or success of the military or naval forces of the United States or to promote the success of its enemies **and whoever when the United States is at war, shall willfully cause or attempt to cause insubordination, disloyalty, mutiny, refusal of duty, in the military or naval forces of the United States, or shall willfully obstruct the recruiting or enlistment service of the United States,** to the injury of the service or of the United States, shall be punished by a fine of not more than \$10,000 or imprisonment for not more than twenty years, or both.

## **SEDITION ACT (1918)**

Illegal to “willfully utter, print, write, or publish any disloyal, profane, scurrilous, or abusive language” about the us war effort, constitution, flag or military uniform....

### **Discussion Question**

Until war was declared, anti-war speakers were usually free to promote their views. Did their right to protest government policy change once the country committed to war?

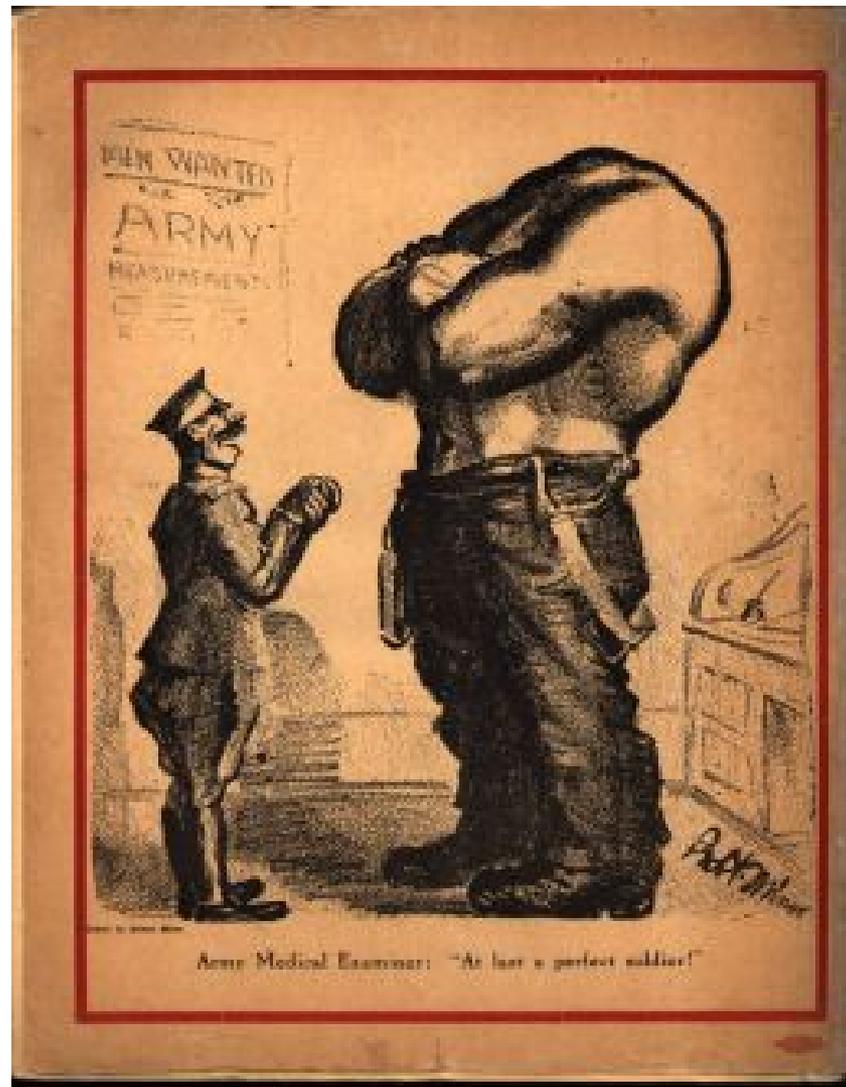


## April 1917

We brand the declaration of war by our Government as a crime against the people of the United States and against the nations of the world...

**We pledge ourselves to** the following course of action:

1. **Continuous active and public opposition to the war**, through demonstrations, mass petitions, and all other means within our power.
2. Unyielding opposition to all proposed legislation for military or industrial conscription...



**At last a perfect soldier!**



# World War I





# World War I



The working class who fight all the battles,  
the working class who make the supreme sacrifices,  
the working class who freely shed their blood and furnish the corpses,  
have never yet had a voice in either declaring war or making peace.

It is the ruling class that invariably does both...

You need to know that you are fit for something better than slavery and cannon fodder.



# Eugene V. Debs on Trial

I have been accused of having obstructed the war. I admit it. Gentlemen, I abhor war. I would oppose the war if I stood alone....

I believe in patriotism. I have never uttered a word against the flag. I love the flag as a symbol of freedom. I object only when that flag is prostituted to base purposes and sordid ends, by those who, in the name of patriotism, would keep the people in subjection....

While there is a lower class, I am in it;  
while there is a criminal element, I am of it;  
and while there is a soul in prison, I am not free.



# Holmes on the Schenck Case (1919)

The character of every act depends upon the circumstances in which it is done. The most stringent protection of free speech would not protect a man in falsely shouting fire in a theatre and causing a panic.

The question in every case is whether the words used are used in such circumstances and are of such a nature as to create **a clear and present danger** that they will bring about the substantive evils that Congress has a right to prevent. It is a question of proximity and degree.

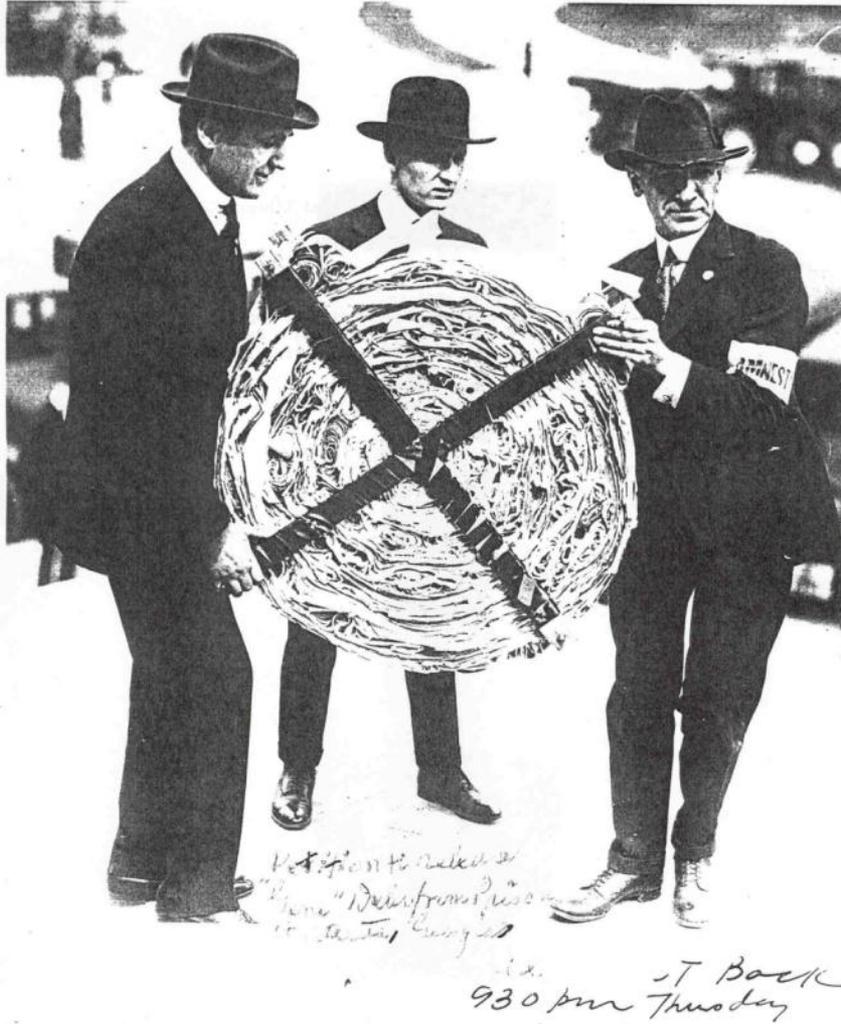
When a nation is at war many things that might be said in time of peace are such a hindrance to its effort that their utterance will not be endured so long as men fight and that no Court could regard them as protected by any constitutional right.

## Discussion Questions

- What does Holmes mean by a “clear and present danger?”
- Did Debs and other violators of the Espionage Act pose this sort of danger?



# World War I



A “monster” amnesty petition on its way to the White House.

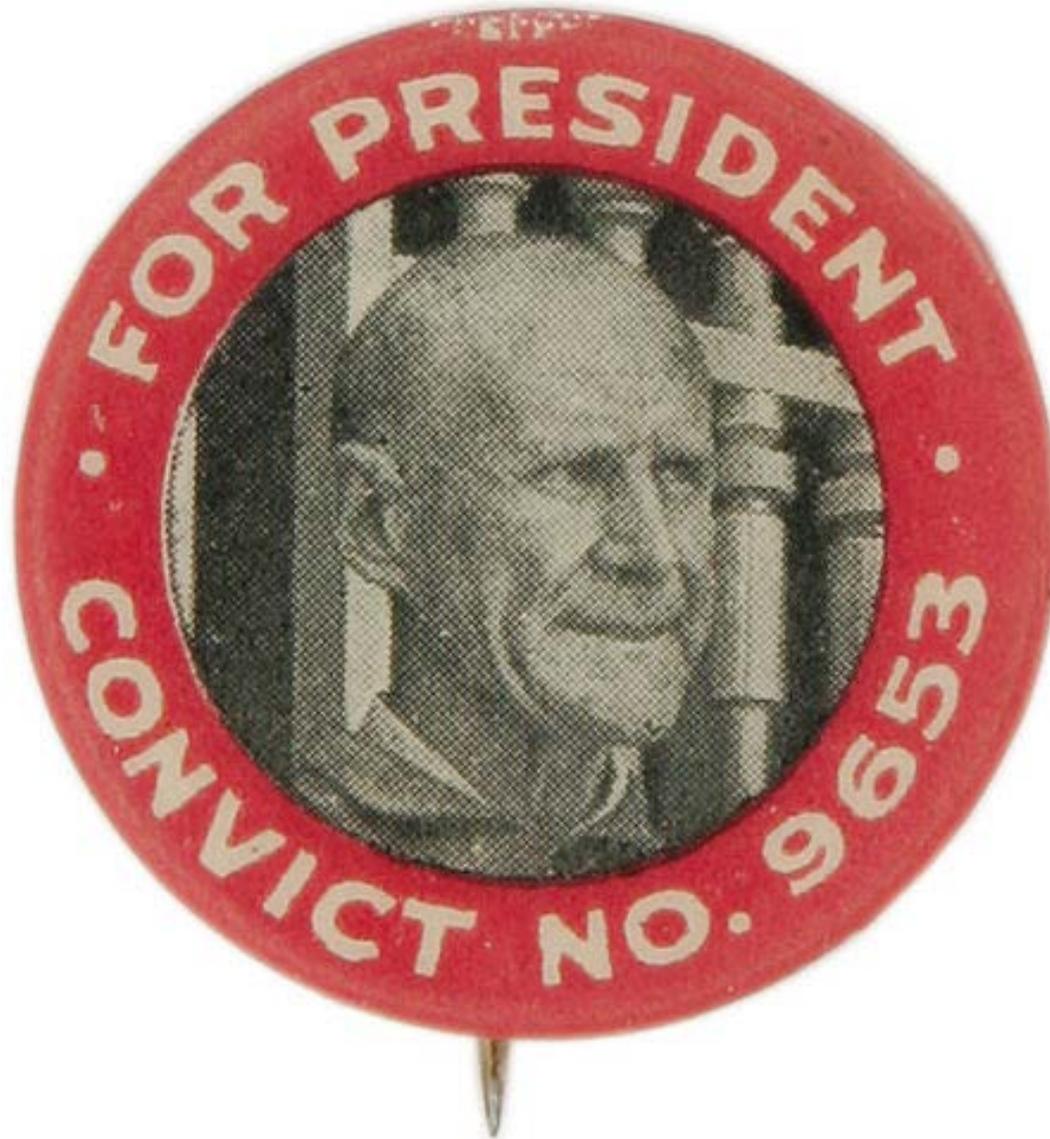


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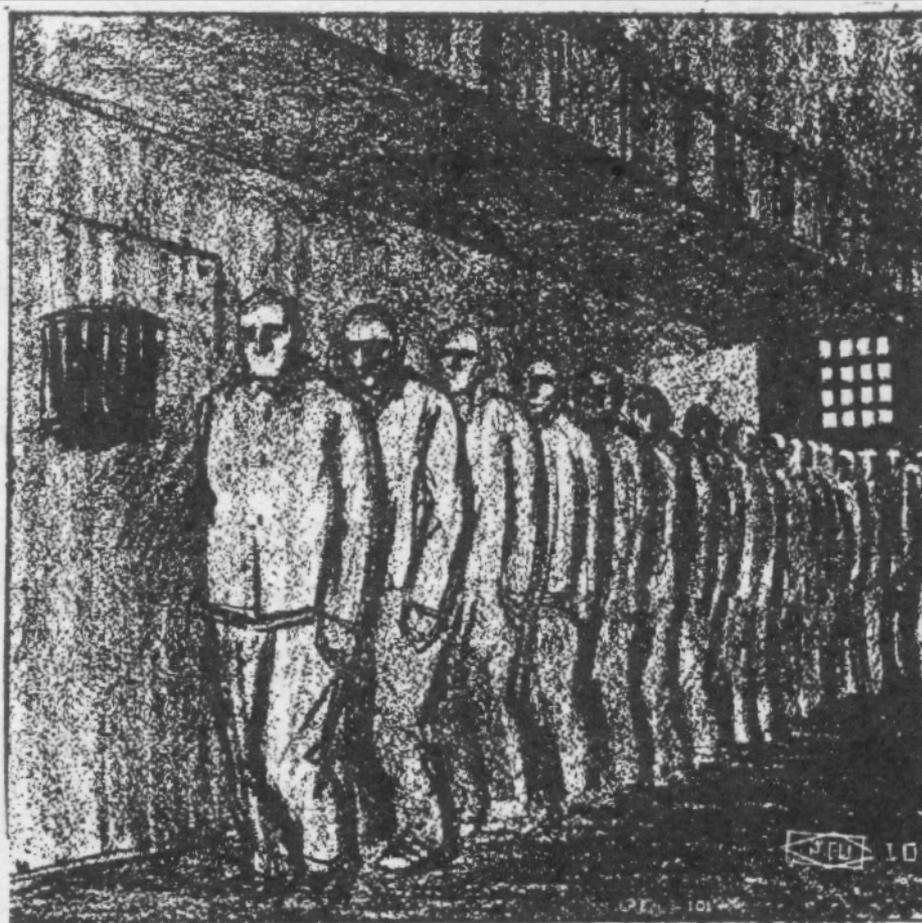


## *New York Times, March 12, 1919*

There is no reason for sympathy with Debs, except such as goes to a fighter who asks no odds....

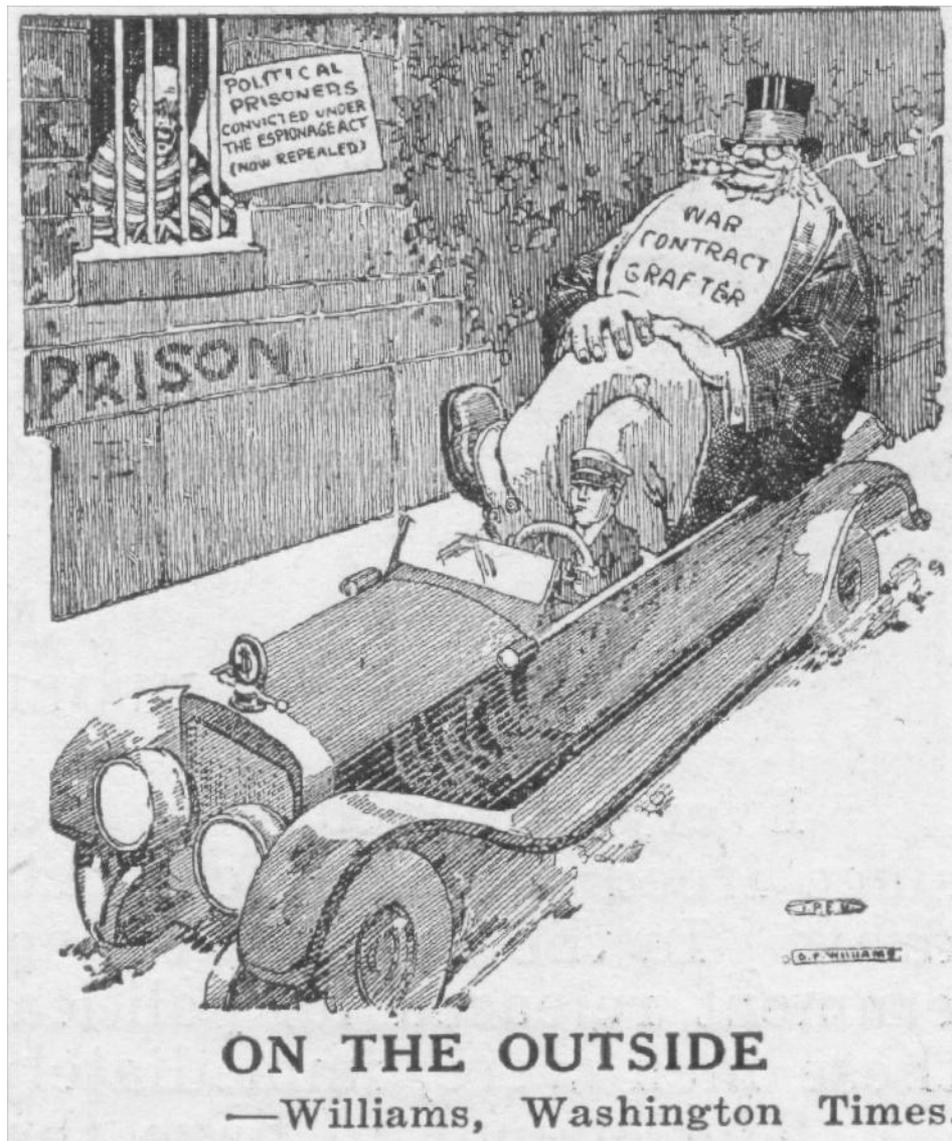
His theory amounted simply to the impossible doctrine that he had full liberty to overturn the Constitution, but that the Government had no power to stay him. Debs made his fight and lost it...

So the consequences which Debs invited have now fallen on his head. That is all there is of the case.



**A PRISON FOR YOUR  
THOUGHTS**

—Fitzpatrick, St. Louis Post-Dispatch.





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**When a nation is at war many things that might be said in time of peace are such a hindrance to its effort that their utterance will not be endured so long as men fight and that no Court could regard them as protected by any constitutional right.**



# Oliver Wendell Holmes, *Dissenting in Abrams Vs. U.S. (1919)*

Persecution for the expression of opinions seems to me perfectly logical. If you have no doubt of your premises or your power and want a certain result with all your heart you naturally express your wishes in law and sweep away all opposition.....

But when men have realized that time has upset many fighting faiths, they may come to believe even more than they believe the very foundations of their own conduct that the ultimate good desired is better reached by free trade in ideas-that the best test of truth is the power of the thought to get itself accepted in the competition of the market, and that truth is the only ground upon which their wishes safely can be carried out. That at any rate is the theory of our Constitution. It is an experiment, as all life is an experiment...

While that experiment is part of our system I think that we should be eternally vigilant against attempts to check the expression of opinions that we loathe and believe to be fraught with death, **unless they so imminently threaten immediate interference with the lawful and pressing purposes of the law that an immediate check is required to save the country.**

### **Discussion Question**

**In what way does the dissent in the Abrams case represent a change of mind for Oliver Wendell Holmes, and why?**



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Final slide.

Thank You.