

EPISODE 508

[INTRODUCTION]

[00:00:00] AH: Welcome to this week's episode of SpyCast, the birth of American propaganda. Manipulating the masses with Jack Hamilton. The Committee on Public Information is the first and only ministry of propaganda the United States has ever had. It started one week after the United States entered World War I in April of 1917. In fact, there wasn't even conscription for some weeks. But the Committee on Public Information was created right away. Why? To explore this question and to learn more about the CPI, I sat down with journalist, professor, Vietnam veteran, and award-winning author, Jack Hamilton.

[INTERVIEW]

[00:00:43] AH: Well, thanks for taking the time to join me. I wondered if you could just tell us a little bit more about your book. What's that about and why did you write it?

[00:00:51] JH: So the book is about the Committee on Public Information, which is the first and only ministry of propaganda the United States has ever had in its history. It started one week after the United States entered World War I in April of 1917. It was one of the first acts that the president actually – Pro-war acts that he actually put together. In fact, there wasn't even conscription for some weeks. But the Committee on Public Information was created right away.

And it's often written about, because many of the things it did were tangible, highly noticeable. And the Committee on Public Information was very controversial during the time that it existed. But nobody had ever put together the definitive history of the committee. And so what I wanted to do was to really figure out exactly what it did. There are a lot of people who would be critical of it. But there are some people who have been positive about it. I want to figure out exactly what it had done. And I wanted to, in effect, write the definitive book. But I also wanted to see, come to a real conclusion about its activities.

[00:01:48] AH: Like why this topic? How did you stumble across it? Or how did you come up on it?

[00:01:53] JH: Well, I'd written a previous book that meant to also be a definitive book, which was the History of American Foreign Reporting. It was called Journalism's Roving Eye. And the CPI is mentioned in there. It's mentioned in many histories because of its significance. So I decided – That helped me decide that maybe there was a story there. And of course I did some reading, and there have been some things written about the Committee on Public Information, or the CPI as we call it. But I realized there probably was a lot that hadn't been written.

And as it came to pass, two things can be said about what happened. First, there were lots and lots of things that hadn't been written about the CPI. In fact, an enormous amount of information exists that I was able to find doing the research, as you were talking about, that really is telling and helps you really understand this organization. The second thing that came through, which I hadn't expected, was that the CPI was the beginning of all American government propaganda.

And although the Committee on Public Information was put out of business when the war ended and we never again had a centralized propaganda ministry, everything that's done today, everything that's done today can be traced to the CPI. And of course as part of that, the Trump Administration and its use of propaganda, which was blatant, much in the way that Woodrow Wilson used propaganda in a blatant way, is also very telling. And that was an unexpected consequence. Because when I started this book, there was no prospect of Donald Trump being president of this country.

[00:03:19] AH: What our listeners can't see is the front cover, which is very evocative and striking. Could you just tell us a little bit more about the scene?

[00:03:28] JH: I can talk about the scene. And I can also use that to explain why the whole story hadn't been told. So this is a poster that was done by a British artist named Joseph Pennell. The CPI used every means of communication it could possibly find and enlisted the best people in advertising, the best people in illustrated art, the best journalists. They brought in the best of the best. In fact, that's part of the story, that it was really good people who ended up doing bad things. It wasn't bad people doing bad things.

And this poster shows German planes bombing the Statue of Liberty. In fact, if you look closely at the picture, you'll see that the head of the Statue of Liberty is on the ground. New York is in flames because the Germans have obviously invaded us. So there are a couple things about this. First of all, there was no possible way the Germans were going to invade the United States. And in fact, the Germans really posed no threat to us at all, which was an issue for the Committee on Public Information. Because how do you get people to conserve food, to enlist, to generally support the war if they don't see they have any stake in it other than the fact of course their children, young men, had marched off the war. I mean, that's an issue, a local issue. But the war had no urgency. And so the Committee on Public Information had to try to make it seem urgent. That you really need to care because it was about you.

And there were a number of ways they did it. And one of the ways in particular was to suggest there were German spies everywhere in the United States who were undermining our country. But they also had art that portrayed the Germans as beasts and gorillas, and this piece. But there's something else about this piece, Andrew, that's interesting.

So one of the few people who's written much about the CPI and wrote a bit about what they did domestically only, point out that you couldn't really be sure, to use a phrase that's very apt for this cover, how incendiary the CPI was, how emotional it was. And he said, for example, there's this poster that was put together for a Liberty Loan, and it doesn't have the CPI's name on it. The cpi wasn't responsible for everything this bad.

Well, one day I was kind of just – It was a Sunday morning actually, and I started looking up Pennell and I'm trying to figure out. And I know about this poster. And I find on the Internet – Usually I went to libraries. Actually I looked at about 150 different archival collections all over the world to put this book together. But this I did online. And I find a very small little monograph. A little essay that was bound that was in a library and happened to be digitized. And it was by Pennell talking about this poster. It's never been written about. I've never seen it cited in a literature or anything.

And what he says is that the Committee on Public Information held meetings in New York City regularly and they would bring people in with ideas of posters that they wanted themes they wanted. And these artists would get together for dinner. There was a set place, nice restaurant

they would all get together and they'd talk to the officials who came and then they'd put together a poster. And Pennell was at this meeting and they said they needed a poster for, I think, it was the fourth liberty loan. There were five liberty loan drives if I remember correctly.

And so Pennell went home and did this poster based on that conversation. So you could say, "Well, the CPI had nothing to do with it." But he brought it back to the CPI and the CPI produced it. It wasn't that it just happened without them being around. So it's a good example of how little was known about the CPI. How many pieces had not been put together in the jigsaw puzzle.

[00:06:42] AH: What is the story that's embedded in the book? And where do you come out on the other side?

[00:06:46] JH: Well, there are lots of stories in the book. And before I give you the maybe what are some of the main ones, let me give you some smaller ones to tell you how this history can produce insights just because you look hard enough and they just jump out of the page. It's not because you have to be a genius. If you work hard enough, you can find a lot of really ingenious things. So one of them is that – Well, I'll give you three one is that the CPI always claimed that it didn't do propaganda. And in fact if you really look at the literature, everybody says they don't do propaganda. Every propagandist says only the enemy does propagandas. I call it the iron law of propaganda. And nobody's ever challenged this with regard to the CPI.

But in fact, the CPI worked very closely with the allied propagandists, and particularly the British. So it wasn't that they were separated. They didn't always agree. And sometimes they were competitive because the British were brilliant propagandists. In fact, they claimed they never did propaganda either. You could even look at their files in the British archives where they're writing minutes to each other which they say, "I can't believe how those Germans are really good at propaganda. We don't know anything." And they were vastly better than the Germans. They were much more skilled and much craftier than the Germans ever were.

So anyway, part of the story is that everything the CPI did was similar to what other countries did. And that's important to understand, because you may not like the enemy. But the enemy and you are doing the same things to manipulate people's attitudes. And while you may think you have a just cause, your means are often quite the same right down to lying, and

manipulation, and coercion, and using front organizations and all those kinds of things. So that's one lesson from the story.

And I thought because I went to archives overseas and I don't speak German, but I had a doctoral student who does, who is German, and she went to look at the German archives. We found a lot of information that showed that could really prove these connections. So that's one. Second is that this is just dumb luck. But I became interested in the fact that Wilson had a slogan when he won the election in 1916 right before he was inaugurated for his second term, which was he kept us out of war. And I thought to myself, "Well, that he was very cynical about using that phrase."

And I came to realize in time that actually he wasn't that cynical in using it. He really hoped to keep us out of the war. And I don't think it's fair to say he was – He actually claimed he didn't even like the phrase. But in fact he used the equivalent of it. But it's not fair to say he was cynical in that. He could be cynical in some things, but he wasn't cynical on that.

But what I came to find out was there was a youngish guy who was in charge of publicity for the Democratic National Committee. His name was Robert Wooley. And he had been a journalist and he had been a political operative for many years. And he had gotten a job as the head of the Mint after the first election. And he became the Chief of the Publicity Bureau for the Democratic National Committee. so I found his autobiography, which has never been published, and I started reading it. And I looked at what he was doing and how he did it, and two things jumped out at me. First was that he ran the best publicity bureau that ever been run up to that time in any campaign. And I think you could argue, nobody's ever said this but me, written this, but I think you could argue that Wilson won because of him. I mean, there are a lot of reasons why Wilson won. But that committee was exceptional. Even people like Teddy Roosevelt later said it was the best committee that ever existed, because it was disciplined and it was really tricky.

And also, what became clear to me, was it was an incubator for the committee on public information. The number two in that bureau was George Creel, who became the head of the Committee on Public Information. Many of the people who worked on the Democratic National Committee went to work for the Committee on Public Information and they used many of the

same techniques. And that gave me an insight in a way – And I've never seen this really talked about because it hasn't been used. Is that it gives you an insight about this dialectic that exists between running for office and governing.

We often think when a person runs for office they talk about a lot of things, but that's irrelevant. In the election between Kennedy and Nixon, they spent a lot of time talking about whether what would happen to Quemoy-Matsu, which most people in the United States can't even remember were it was a couple of tiny little islands and that maybe it could be bombed by the Chinese communists. And then when Kennedy won, he never talked about Quemoy-Matsu again.

But the way you campaign translates into the way you govern in the following way. Barack Obama uses social media. When he comes to the white house, he creates a social media office of about 24 people, which was bigger than the press office. When Trump wins, he becomes a Twitter president. He wins with Twitter to a large extent in a Twitter president. And the way he appeared on TV during the campaigns in the run-up to the election was very much like the way he appeared in TV otherwise.

And so there is this – It's a kind of dialectic. The campaign becomes a test kitchen for propaganda. Governing becomes a test kitchen for campaigning. And they work together because they're both interested in the same thing. Getting people to believe what you want them to believe. In one case to vote for you. Another case to endorse certain policies.

And the third piece that came out of this that wasn't expected was the extent to which journalists were very much supportive of the Wilson Administration. Wilson didn't like journalists per se. And this is a paradox. But one of the things about the CPI that was so helpful to him was he never had to really deal with journalists much because the CPI did it for him. He didn't like the give and take of dealing with the press at all. And he could be cynical. Like I said earlier, one way he was. He once said to Colonel House, there's only two times you can lie and one is when you tell a woman if she's pretty or not. Or tell her she's pretty if she's not. And the other is you can lie to journalists about foreign policy. He said that, which is an amazing thing for somebody who is as so-called religious as he was.

So anyway, but the press was very, very much involved, supportive of the Wilson Administration. Supportive of the war as the press often tends to be. But working behind the scenes to help him. And I'll give you one quick example. Carl Ackerman, a very young journalist who was quite accomplished and very ambitious, worked for the United Press. And then he went to work for the New York Times and other papers. So he was prominent. He would go to various countries when Colonel House told him to go. He said, "I'll go and work in Switzerland." He actually wanted to become a propagandist at the same time he was a journalist in Switzerland, but it didn't work out. And they planted information with him. We can get into it later if you want. But they planted information with him, but it was bogus. And he later on went to be the first dean of the Columbia School of Journalism.

So there were lots of levels of the way journalists worked. In some cases it was like Carl Ackerman. One of my great heroes, Ray Stannard Baker, one of the great, great journalists of all time, went to Europe ostensibly to be a reporter. But all he did was going to work for the State Department to assess labor attitudes toward the war because they were concerned that, for example, British labor might want to take the British government out of the war. And he never wrote any articles. Not one article for six months. And he sent back information. And he was an ethical person. Journalism was different then. And the rules were different. It's not that he was a bad person. So those are three, I think, examples of what comes out of here that I would never have predicted, but I think are highly significant. And the latter case is significant because we say, "Oh, the Cold War was when you had journalism cynicism," about journalists had been co-opted in the Cold War. And that's when they decided, and of course many of them had gone to work for the CIA and so forth. And then when the Cold War ends and they found out what they had done, there was the idea that they were disillusioned what happened to Cold War. They were disillusioned with the way they were used. And that that's the beginning of press government cynicism. But world War One I is where it starts. It just gets to be worse later on. So I think that is important from a historical point of view.

Do you want me to go on to the big CPI?

[00:13:59] AH: I think before we get there, so the book, Woodrow Wilson and the Birth of American Propaganda. So let's just talk for a minute a little bit more about the birth of the CPI or the birth of American propaganda. Why does this come about? How much is Woodrow Wilson

involved and the CPI being set up? Is this something that he's kind of out to lunch and has been put upon him or is he really the driving force? So we've spoke about the story about what's driving the plot.

[00:14:30] JH: So I said earlier that every country did more or less the same thing. But how they got to it and how they did the same thing can be different. The British, for example, the British military did not run propaganda. The foreign office did to a large extent. And it was civilians that ran it. Whereas in Germany, it was the military. And so it's done different ways. And there are different laws that are put in place and different rules and regulations. And there's a different history in each case.

In case the United States, there are several things at work. One is of course the war came. There would have always been government propaganda. And that's because of mass media, and all of a sudden the recognition that public opinion really mattered. And that was happening all over the world. Even in Germany, public opinion, even though it was a much more top-down country than, say, Great Britain or the United States. There was a recognition that public opinion mattered because now people could read and there were lots of organs of information. So that's a bedrock.

The war accelerates the process because it was a total war. And that meant you couldn't just put some people in the field and win. You had to make sure you had lots of production. You had to make sure that people were conserving food. You had to make sure people were in conscription. And of course the state was doing things that it had never done before, like pension systems for wounded soldiers. The state becomes much more pervasive in this process in the sense that it's not just about winning a war, producing uniforms and guns and bullets. You have to mobilize all of society. So those are the two underlying factors. The one leads us to understand that there would be propaganda eventually emerging. But the others accelerates that process.

In the case the United States, there are some particular things that work. One is progressive. The progressive movement believed very strongly in the importance of giving the public information. And they would use the term publicity. Not like we used today, like publicity to be tendentious. But publicity in the way that people needed to know things. They need to know

about drinking water. They needed to know about health conditions. And if they knew these things, if we publicized these things. I mentioned Ray Stannard Baker, the journalist I like so much. He would say I'm about to go out and do publicity to show what evils there were in society. He was going to shed light on it. It's really the original meaning of publicity the way Edmund Burke used it when he said government had to tell you what it was doing.

So anyway, so the progressives and progressive journalists believed in the so-called sunshine of publicity. The fact that sunshine is a disinfectant, disinfectant. And journalists practice that as muckrakers because they were going to bring all these facts to light. So that's one strain. And that's a strain that many of the propagandists had because they were journalists. Wilson himself believed that congress shouldn't have the power it had and the executive should have more power. He liked the British system as a matter of fact, where the prime minister had all the instruments at his control including control of the House of Commons.

And even though he would never say he didn't like democracy, he didn't like the give and take of democracy. He liked the ability for the chief executive to lead and to lead by giving speeches and presenting ideas and having this powerful voice. And in fact he thought and wrote about even before long before he was president the idea there should be a national newspaper, in which the government could put out information that people would have to know what was going on.

So when the war comes, there's like a two-step process here. First step is the immediate need is to suppress information that's of national security concerns. And by the way, it's important to always remember that propaganda has two sides; suppression of information and provision of information. Because we want to change what people know. You not only want to tell them what to think. You want to keep them from thinking things that would get in the way of your message.

And so the first goal was to try to control the cable systems and to suppress information that would leak information that would be of national security, where troops are and those kinds of things. And so that's why Creel got the job. He was very close to Josephus Daniels, who was the Secretary of Navy. And the Navy had control of cable systems. They took over all the cable systems. And they were the ones that did monitored and censored the cables. And the idea early on was that there would be a rather large censorship operation because Wilson, although

this is also not written about much, in fact at all, that I've ever seen, Wilson really wanted to have something like the Defense of the Realm Act in Great Britain, which is very heavy-handed in terms of what it suppresses. Even today, they can suppress what's in the canteen at Downing Street. I mean, like what you ate for lunch. And Wilson wanted that, but he couldn't get it passed.

So he gets Creel on the job to have this job. But it's unclear what exactly he's supposed to do. And most people think it's going to be heavy-handed censorship. Creel himself wanted to do the other part of this, which was the publicity part. But the immediate concern was this censorship. As it turned out, congress would not pass what Wilson wanted. They passed something called the Espionage Act, which under it, which was meant to deal with spies, but also in it had provisions to control speech, the limit speech. But nothing like Wilson had wanted initially.

So Creel had referred censorship authority because he worked with the post office department, which had censorship ability. He worked with the Navy. And he had real power that way. But he never had statutory responsibility for censorship. He also took it upon himself because he was kind of a wild card. Anytime a journalist said something, he'd get on the phone with them or write them a letter and tell them why they were unpatriotic, which was a problem, was a big mistake because the press was so patriotic.

But because Creel didn't have that statutory responsibility, he moved, however, to the provision of information very quickly. I mean, within days. And he would have done it anyway even if he had had control, direct control of the apparatus. And out of that then evolves this rather large organization. He was a terrible manager. He was a chaotic manager. But he was very creative. And so as a result, he was adding pieces to this organization right up to the end. And as I said at the beginning, every kind of means of communication you can think of, he put in place, but it happened in a chaotic way.

I want to say one other thing about this because I think it's important if I may and I don't want forget it. Wilson didn't even know what he was signing. When he signed the executive order to create, he just said, "Let's creat it." And it's going to have somebody in charge who's going to be a chairman, who's called a chairman. And there's going to be an advisory board of the Secretary of State, Secretary of Navy, and the Secretary of War. By the way, they only met once or twice

because Creel was left on his own. So it evolved. And there was no instruction into what it should be. There were no guidance.

And in fact, this is something else that I say in the book that's never been said. I think it was unconstitutional, because that's a job that should have had senate confirmation. His budget did not have senate confirmation. It came out of Wilson's war fund, which he could spend the money on it any way he wanted. And until the very end when Creel had finally made many people angry, they finally got control of part of the budget in the senate, but the war was almost over at that point. So I think the CPI was arguably unconstitutional the way it was created and unconstitutional in the way that Creel was appointed.

[00:21:07] AH: I want to stick to this, but just very briefly, if you will indulge me, talking about Woodrow Wilson and the executive order to set this up and running with authority, as you say, maybe beyond the bounds of what he should have went beyond. Are there any parallels there between Johnson's behavior in Vietnam, or George W. Bush's with the war in Iraq and so forth? Yeah, I wondered if you'd thought across those administrations a little?

[00:21:37] JH: Right. So if we say, one iron law is that you're never a propagandist, only the enemy is. Another iron law is the seductiveness of propaganda that you start out was the case with virtually everyone. I can't identify one person who wouldn't fit this description who was well-meaning. They were people who had been trying to clean up slums and prove life for immigrants and all the things we think of as part of the progressive movement.

But as time went on, they began to think that the outcome they wanted was more important than the process, the democratic process. They were willing to take shortcuts because they believed that they were so right. And so this is always a problem for every propagandist that it's so easy to begin to justify your action because your cause is just.

In the case of the Vietnam War, we know that there are a lot of people who knew a lot of things about what was happening in the war but they didn't say anything about it because they thought the war had to be won. Of course they also would become embarrassed when the Pentagon papers came out of course. In the case of the Bush Administration invading Iraq. And as you know, because I know you've read the book, the book begins with the Iraq war. And the fact that

they were saying we were winning the war and weapons of mass destruction and all the rest and suppressing information that wasn't true. Because, again, there were a group of people in the government who believed it was so important to evade Iraq and they had an idea of what that was about.

But it's not just Wilson, not just Johnson. It's every president. We can talk about this later if you want, but we don't have adequate laws to fence back what presidents do. And Barack Obama, and Trump on occasion, one to more to a greater extent than the other, use the tools of the government had to inform the country to misinform them or try to persuade them rather than just give them the facts. It's just too easy to do it.

[00:23:15] AH: The other thing that comes to mind, and given the nature of our podcast where we focus on intelligence and espionage, could you just set that landscape out for us? Because, of course, there's no FBI at this time. There's no CIA. What intelligence agencies are there? What's involved? What role, if at all, do they play and manipulating the masses?

[00:23:38] JH: They didn't play a supporting role. They played a central role. And that's another truism about propaganda. Maybe for today we'll call it the third iron law. I mean, for one thing, just think about the act that was put in place. The first act. There were three different acts that were put in place that controlled speech and the use of media. And the first one was called the espionage act. And the idea was that this idea of suppressing speech was meant to suppress this idea of dealing with spies and how they could do something in the country that was untoward was tied with the idea of suppressing speech. And in fact the CPI referred to a speech, they didn't like a spy talk.

Donald trump uses the word fake news. CPI used the word spy talk. If you said something that you want a defense back, you didn't want people to talk about, you want to discredit it, it was spy talk. And they had ran a column that basically told you what to think. Let Washington inform you. Or let Washington tell you what's happening.

But this was also structurally existed. It wasn't just that law. So in every country, I mean, I guess, I don't know for sure about some smaller countries. I mean, there might be some I don't know. But every one of the major belligerents. Press relations and intelligence were in the same unit in

the military. And in fact the first head of the AEF, the American Expeditionary Force, press unit, his name was Frederick Palmer, one of the great war correspondents of his time, once said this about how the AEF – How it worked and how propagandists and censors together. And he said when the censor and the propagandists meet behind the black curtain, they are as friendly as two lawyers in the anti-room after slugging each other in court. And they go the lawyers one better by plotting together since, unlike lawyers, both are employed by the same client. And his point was that – And of course intelligence wasn't responsible for censorship of letters, for example, from soldiers and also prisoners that they captured. And the idea was that these two work together and that the press officer's main idea was not to tell you anything if they get away with it, right? There's a censorship side to that. But it was the same in every country that the intelligence sections tended to be populated by people who were both involved in intelligence and involved in propaganda. So that's one side.

The other is that the CPI was constantly working with what would become the FBI later on but wasn't then. They worked with the Navy and military army intelligence very closely, exchanging information. So if you think about propaganda. Step back and think about how this works, these weren't formal lines. There wasn't like a line that said here's where you must send information. But in the case of a propagandist, propagandists need to know what people think that's sort of one side of this. The other is they need to measure how effective they are by learning what people are saying or reading. That's how you decide how well you're doing.

So the CPI, they would find people who they would identify that they sent their names to the justice department. Or the post office would send something and say, "We found this guy –" and I don't have it right here in hand, "but we found this guy in Ohio and he's saying these things, and he was writing letters to his cousin in Mexico. You better go find him and talk to him." So there was this constant back and forth between all of these agencies to work together. And sometimes they actually worked on operations together. For example, Sweden. We don't think of this today, but the Swedes actually – Many Swedes were not that enthusiastic about the allied cause because they never liked Russia, because Russia for them had been an invader. They were much more happy with the Germans. And the Russians, of course for a long time, they eventually got out of the war. But for a long time they were on the allied side. So they were more disposed of the Germans who worked very hard to try to make inroads into Sweden.

And Americans were concerned that the kind of news that was getting into Swedish newspapers was news that was too supportive of the Germans. So an intelligence officer in the Navy, some CPI people. And then with the British, again, Lord Northcliff, who was involved in intelligence, but also was a press lord and in charge of foreign propaganda at that point for the British, and others got together and they created a front organization to start a new service that was funded by the allies secretly and to try to put the Germans out of business. And they did things like they bought copper so they'd have communication facility. They've got paper for them, that is the newsprint. So there was an example of really working very closely together to get the result they wanted, because all sides, that is to say, the propagandists and the intelligence agencies, had the same thing. And intelligence agencies also operate like journalists and like propagandists, right? They're always trying to gather information. I mean, that's part of what they do, and they also do disinformation campaigns.

[BREAK]

[00:27:54] AH: I want to take a moment to thank this week's sponsor, Talkspace. I once heard a CEO in New York say that there's only two types of people in the world, those who think their information hasn't been stolen, and those who know it has. I think you could apply the same logic to therapy. Talkspace makes it possible to speak with a licensed therapist right from your phone tablet or computer. And unlike traditional therapy, you can message your therapist anytime via text video or voice. It's 100% secure and stigma free. You also won't have to spend two hours on a round trip getting to the therapy appointment.

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[INTERVIEW CONTINUED]

[00:29:00] AH: And I don't want to fall down too much of a wormhole with this. But just so we're clear, what are we talking about when we talk about propaganda? Just for people out there that

are not familiar with the term or how it gets defined, you don't need to give a definition. But just give us a sense of roughly the terrain or what we're talking about here.

[00:29:21] JH: All right. So the Encyclopedia Britannica in Britain had no entry for the word propaganda before World War I. In those days, the encyclopedia was a huge undertaking that took – It was all on paper of course. It wasn't digitized. And when you put a new one out, it was every 30 years it was put out, and the staff was spending 30 years collecting information. But they realized they had to put out a supplement after World War I because so many things had changed as a result of World War I. Not just propaganda, but all kinds of – Our lives have changed in all kinds of ways because the war was such a monumental event.

And the man who was given the job to write the propaganda section, which went on for something like 10 pages of closely packed type, had worked in the British War Mission in New York, which was involved in propaganda in the United States. And he'd also been a military officer working on propaganda. And so he got the job to write this. And here's what he said, he said, "Those engaged in a propaganda may genuinely believe that the success will be an advantage to those whom they address. But the stimulus to their action is their own cause. The differentia of a propaganda is it is self-seeking, whether the object be worthy or unworthy, intrinsically or in the minds of its promoters." And it's actually a wonderful thoughtful essay. It's one of the best essays I've ever read on propaganda. He does an extraordinarily good job.

And another way of saying what he does is the goal is to try to get somebody to think the way you want them to think. It's not to get them to think. It's get them to think the way you want them to think about whatever you want them to think about and come to the conclusions you want them to come to. It's not about a process where you're trying to give them all sides so they can arrive at a considered opinion. You know what your goal is. And I think that's the best way to describe propaganda.

[00:31:00] AH: I love your epilogue where you talk about what some of the main characters of the book go on to do. And there's some fascinating people there, Douglas MacArthur, Walter Littman, all kinds of people. Tell us about some of the main characters in the book and the role that they play in the story that you tell.

[00:31:20] JH: Right. So there's quite a long list of colorful characters in this book because of the quality of the people who went to the CPI. One is George Creel himself, who was a born propagandist. He never did anything by half measures. He was bombastic.

[00:31:33] AH: Why is he a born propagandist? Sorry to interrupt.

[00:31:35] JH: Yeah, because everything he did – He wasn't interested in balanced journalism. Everything for him was a crusade. I mean, there's a story once where he worked in Denver where he was a wild character. I mean, actually this tells you a lot. And he wrote for two different newspapers. One fired him and then he went to work for another one. So he wrote a story about a play. He always wrote in a white heat. So he was a very fast writer. He wasn't subtle. He was a sledgehammer. So he panned this play. And then he heard that the lead actor was unhappy with this. So he goes down to the hotel where the actor staying and beats him up. I mean, that's George Creel, he's a piece of work.

And this story is often told. Actually, while he was still working at the newspaper, he became the police commissioner. And he had three other commissioners and he was always fighting with him because Denver was rather corrupt. And he finally had to get fired. The mayor had to try to fire him. Actually he was right about what he was doing, but he just alienated everybody. And he was constantly being disputatious. And so as a result of that, he finally was fired. But that was Creel. And he was a very strong and early supporter of Woodrow Wilson. Very loyal to him. But because he was so aggressive, he actually did a lot of damage because there were people who really wanted the CPI to succeed. But he was so heavy-handed and so – As one person once said to him, an editor, he said, "It's very hard to work with you, George, because you don't leave anybody any room to disagree, or you're constantly stopping on them. So it's hard to sort of say, "Okay, I guess you're right." And he was very influential in Washington. He was considered one of the three or four most influential people partly because he had this power and also because he was very close to Wilson. And we use the word today spinning for what politicians do. In those days, the word was creeling. That was the phrase. So he's one character.

[00:33:16] AH: I think one of the things that I also was hoping to do was for people that you've went back, done all of this reading, done all of this research, and really try to immerse yourself in the context of the time. But I find that, in general, in the west, we struggle to get back beyond

the second World War. It's almost like pre-second world war was like the dark ages. So help us understand that America the time when the CPI was operating, we're talking about a smaller population. We're talking about a much higher percentage of the population of German ancestry. I know that New York plays quite an important role in your book. I know there's a lot that we could pull out there. But just help us understand the America of that time.

[00:34:05] JH: Well, I think looking back today at the way the United States existed and thrived, it was also a country that many of the institutions we take for granted today as being effective or at least we understand how they operate as an institution were very nascent. Journalism is one of them. We didn't have press codes. Journalists are still trying to figure out what it meant to be a journalist. They were still trying to figure out when they should be resisting the government and when they shouldn't. And they were still learning to be a profession. Now, journalists in legacy media, I mean, there's all kinds of people on Twitter who may think they're journalists, but they don't work by any rules or any canons that can be considered admirable.

But the institutions of journalism were just beginning to decide what they ought to be. That was one of the reasons they were so easily sucked into helping the CPI not only by writing things positive, which happens during wars generally, but also because they've become so directly involved with government. Today, Ray Stannard Baker would never be – A great journalist would never work privately for the government pretending to be a journalist. It just wouldn't happen. So that's one.

Second of all the, institutions like intelligence barely existed. There was like one intelligence officer in the war college on the general staff. And even when the war started, it took a long time to even get the idea that intelligence was an important component of war. Our military was much less developed than the militaries in many other countries. And things like intelligence or press relations, you mentioned MacArthur. General MacArthur, who was then just a major, was the first press officer we ever had and he helped the committee on public information at the beginning get its offices, which are right in a building that still exists right across from the White House.

And so think about that. We never had a press officer until 1917. So the institutions and the institutions that related to propaganda were really not only undeveloped, but almost non-

existent. No intelligence officers? I mean, that's just incredible. And also Washington, D.C. itself was a town that was undeveloped. When Taft was a president, he had a cow on the lawn of the White House. Who, I guess, was giving him milk. I don't know. But this was a town with muddy streets. And it was a town that was not that well-developed. And the institutions that existed – We only recognized the turn of the century, we only had embassies in six countries in the world. That's all.

So you have to think how would you be a great power and be represented to have such a thin representation overseas? In fact, we had a foreign service that was not at all professional. It was mostly dilettantes. Not all, but many. So we were a country that was both extremely powerful and influential, but didn't have the tools that you would expect of a great power.

And also, although Theodore Roosevelt had started to build up government bureaucracy, for example, Food and Drug Administration, it was Wilson that took it much further in terms of creating the federal reserve and creating a number of other institutions that became very important that lasted after the war. And the idea that government needed to play a much bigger role in people's lives. Now, we can debate whether it's too big or too little. And I think that's always worth debating. As I wrote this book, it made me realize that even though I'm a liberal, you have to sometimes think about the cost of big government and its capacity to intrude in our lives. And on whichever side of the political equation you are, you need to be thinking about that balance because it's important. And so, yeah, we were wealthy and healthy and had a lot of power because of all that wealth. But we weren't built like a major power at that point. And when the war ended, that had changed.

[00:37:24] AH: I think another thing that I thought would be quite interesting to look at – So we spoke about the war as an external driver of some of these changes or as an influence and factor. But I wonder if you could tell us a little bit more about the extent to which internal developments played into this, Black Tom, anarchists, other things that are happening on the home front. If I remember just from some of my reading in the past, there was this whole hysteria about German spies underneath on every corner and so forth. So tell us about some of those internal factors that are playing into this.

[00:38:03] JH: Right. In the years leading up to our entry into the war, from 1914 when the war started until 1917, there was a good deal of espionage in the United States of two types. One type was the German type. And the intelligence officers who were responsible for propaganda were also responsible for sabotage. And they also came up with some ideas that were as crazy as you could imagine. But it didn't work. And eventually they were PNG. They were made persona non grata and told to leave. And they were very clumsy, and they got caught a lot. So that was one side.

The other side was the British who were very smart and really insinuated themselves into our government process. So the Germans would fund German-American groups and try to lobby German-American members of congress, who by the way weren't very enthusiastic about the war. Because of those, they're constituents. And being Germans by Germans, wanted to protect the homeland. And just like British people, who were like my grandparents who were British, they would be for protecting the British. I mean, that's your heritage. But the British were very clever. And they planted stories in newspapers. One of them worked very closely with Colonel House. And basically one actually ended up writing some speeches for Wilson, William Weissman, who was a very, very clever guy. And he was a spy but also a propagandist. Again, this nexus between the two roles. So yeah, there was a real effort at that time to control what Americans thought and belligerence on both sides tried very hard to do that.

[00:39:30] AH: Tell us a little bit more about the Four Minute Men. And the numbers are quite staggering, the amount of them and the amount of speeches that they gave. I believe it was three-quarters of a million.

[00:39:40] JH: Right. So the Four Minute Men is a good example of Creel's enterprise. Before the war came, a group of young men, wealthy young men in Chicago who often socialized together, decided that they – And they were republicans. Decided that they would create a speaking group that would go to movie theaters. And those days, movie theaters, the reels were changed. And so there had to be a small intermission. And so they would go and they would stand up and they would give speeches about why war preparation was very important. And there was a big movement in the country on the part of many people like Teddy Roosevelt, for example, to make sure that the war – We were preparing to go to war. In fact, Teddy Roosevelt really wanted us to go to war.

So when the war came, this group decided to send one of them, the guy who was acting as president, to Washington, D.C. to suggest there'd be a national organization like this. And so he went and found – Creel was put in the job on a Friday, or a Saturday I guess it became official. And on Monday he's in the job. And this guy arrives like on Tuesday. I can't remember the exact date. Finds him in an office. In those days, Creel had in the beginning just a tiny little office. Finds Creel and says, "Hey, how about if we do this?" Creel says, "Great idea. We'll do it."

So initially they were thinking about maybe locating in Chicago, but that was lasted only very short time, a couple of days. And eventually decided to bring it back to Washington, D.C. And they put a guy named Blair. And so he began to organize Four Minute Men. They were people who spoke for four minutes when the reels were changed in theaters. And it's an extraordinary organization. But, first, to go to your point, there were 75 – At the end of the war there had been 75,000 four minute men, which is a monumental effort. Now some of them only gave two speeches. But some gave a hundred. So, I mean, there were lots and lots of speeches being given. Just that's an accomplishment. But the accomplishment is even greater because of the way it looked and the control that was exerted by Blair in Washington, D.C. So the speakers were local people. And that's important, because they were people you trust. It was your local lawyer, your local mayor, your local journalist, the guy who was your pediatrician. They were town leaders who would agree to be four minute men and wanted it because it was status.

Every week the CPI would put out a topic for the week. It might be buy liberty bonds. It might be look for spies. It might be turn in binoculars, because the Navy doesn't have binoculars. If you have binoculars, donate them. And then these speakers were supposed to give a speech on this topic. They could give their own speech if they wanted to. But they were also given sample speeches. And they were monitored, and very carefully monitored, and told how to speak, and to stay on the topic, and only speak for four minutes. And in fact, if they ran over they would be – If they consistently didn't follow the rules, they'd be dismissed.

And to show you just how carefully this was constructed, I happened to go just on a lark. I thought, "I'll just go to Tennessee and see what the four minute men files look like in Tennessee." So here's a tiny little file. But this always happens in research. Maybe you only find one document. There's this wonderful document, which was a letter from the Committee on

Public Information to the head of the four minute men in Tennessee, who was quite an interesting guy. He had been the treasurer. He was the treasurer. So there'd be a state head of the four minute men and then there'd be ones in each city. And he told him that he needed to bring people in. Each city needed to bring people in for talks with their head four minute men leader. And it said the meeting will start at 10:30. And then you will say the following things until 10:35. And then at 10:35 to 10:40, you will deal with these things. It was very, very closely scripted. This isn't exactly right, but it's maybe kind of amusing and not all wrong. It was like the way communist party used to use cells where everybody was very closely monitored and directed. And the idea was to get a certain kind of outcome.

And so at the end of the war, they were everywhere. And not just in movie theaters, although principally there. They were in logging camps. They were in churches. They were at Sunday schools. There were four minute men singers. There were junior four minute men. There were four minute men that spoke in different languages in places like New York, or in Spanish if it was in the southwest part of the United States. So it's an extraordinary effort that looked local but was national, and very carefully scripted. And that's quite an accomplishment.

[00:43:40] AH: So it was right across the country?

[00:43:42] JH: Everywhere. I think the way to look at this because we don't have the exact numbers of how many people they spoke to, but there are cards that had to be filled out that said where you went. That's how we know how many there were. And we do know, in my case, John Hamilton, gave this many speeches. And you can see how many were given. But you don't know how many people were in the audience necessarily. And you don't know how many were paying attention.

But what I think is important in this story apart from the fact that this accomplishment of making it effective by making it local even though it was national, and therefore really a mouthpiece of the administration. I think what's also really important when you look at this is that wherever you were in the United States, you could decide not to pick up a newspaper and see all the ads that the CPI put in newspapers. You could decide you weren't going to a movie theater. But the CPI was so ubiquitous that you couldn't miss these messages. They had posters everywhere. In fact, the head of the advertising division wrote back at one point to the CPI. He was taking a

little vacation. He was talking about there's a poster called the great mother poster CPI had created for the Red Cross. And it was this woman who looks like the Virgin Mary who is helping people who are in distress.

And he says, "It's amazing to be out in the hinterland, out in the vast deserts where you're in towns no bigger than this postcard." And there's a picture of the greatest mother right on the wall. So you couldn't resist the CPI messages. I mean, in that sense, this is an important – I think, to this story. It was non-consensual. The government was using your money to tell you what to think, whether you ask for it or not.

[00:45:08] AH: Anyway, in your book you're talking about some of the pathologies between the press and the government. And we can see this again just to continue with the examples we spoke about earlier, Vietnam and Johnson, or we can think about say the New York times after Iraq apologizing and so forth. I know that you look at the way the modern propaganda in the United States was born in this period. Do you also trace some pathologies that may or may not exist between the press and the government back to this era? Or do you think that this is really just something of its time?

[00:45:48] JH: I think, like I said, I think that distrust between the government and the press does come out of the war after it was over. Also, our views of public relations. Actually, one of the members of the Committee on Public Information invented the term public relations, a famous public relations man named Edward Bernays. And so the press worked closely with the administration. And we see today that we have a reprise of that. We see that there are people who think of themselves as journalists who are institutionally supportive of political parties.

So one way to think about this is Fox News being supportive of Donald Trump. Not everybody. There's some good journalists on Fox News, but there are a lot of commentators on Fox News and people who have shows, host shows, who are clearly very partisan. And you can say, "Okay. Well, that's just Fox News." And I know maybe some liberal readers will be unhappy with this. But I'll give you an example on the other side. So we have CNN. And we have Jake Tapper. So Jake Tapper just the last couple of days said he'll never interview anybody who's a denier about June 6th. He'll never have McCarthy on, speaker the minority leader of the house.

Now think about this. Your job is a journalist and you're going to decide who you'll have on who you want based on their level of truthfulness? McCarthy, you may not like McCarthy, but he has things to say that are important because he's a decision maker. And as a journalist, you're not supposed to deprive your audience of who they can hear because you have a disagreement with them and you don't like them. And I can understand why Jake Tapper may not like them. But that's not what a journalist should do, because it's not a service to the public. So if you look at that, you have to say that sounds like the kind of things that happened in World War I, when journalists weren't really trying to be of service but were trying to help somebody out.

[00:47:27] AH: I was just thinking when you were talking about CNN. In the evening, if ever I'm flicking through the news channels and I come across CNN and Chris Cuomo is on there, it reminds me of being back in the Presbyterian church in Scotland where I've not been given information. I'm being like there's like a sermon that if I don't do X or Y then the world's going to come to an end and was very fire in brimstone. And the title of the book, Woodrow Wilson and the Birth of American Propaganda, you're a global fellow at the Wilson center. A public policy fellow at the Wilson Center. And Wilson's reputation, as like every president, is constantly being reassessed. And Wilson's definitely on a downward kind of trend. How does your book feed into? Where does it take place in that conversation about the legacy of Wilson?

[00:48:23] JH: So I know I'm a historian, and have been for some years. But I was originally a journalist. And although I went to school to be trained to do history, I really think of myself as a journalist. In an old-fashioned way, that your job is really to be fair. And I used to. And to some extent I still do, although I'm better at the job than I used to be. I lie awake at night if I've been fair to people. Sometimes I realize I have to give one side of the story or another. But I think it's really important to stick to facts. And you can interpret those facts and you bring your own sensibility to the interpretation. But you have to feel a kind of responsibility to the job beyond your just self-gratification.

So I say that by way of saying this, I went out of my way to try to say good things about Wilson in this book. I personally don't like Wilson. I didn't like him when I got started. And I didn't like him any better when I got into the book. But I also recognize that he just doesn't speak to me as a person at all. But I also realize he did some very good things. And although he failed to get the league of nations, and it's largely his fault. There was a league of nations, but we didn't get in it.

And he failed to sell the treaty. And that could be placed on him. He was ill at the time. It exacerbated traits he already had that were not ones that were conducive to working with other people and. And so that's not to his credit. But I think the idea of the League of Nations was a good idea. I think in many ways he did very good things.

One of the things he didn't do was he was not supportive of free speech and First Amendment issues, which, by the way, in World War, there's another example. We didn't have really constitutional law in the First Amendment at that point. CPI actually wrote in a handbook that the First Amendment was whatever congress said it wanted to be, which is an amazing statement, right? Because, today, we would never say that. The First Amendment gives you guarantees that congress can't just decide what First Amendment is. That's another case where we had kind of in Kuwait thinking about what that should be about. And initially, the supreme court of course kind of sided with Wilson. And later after the war began to realize that wasn't a good idea.

So this book obviously has to be a critique of Wilson. And I think it's a deserved critique based on what this book is about. It's not a biography of Woodrow Wilson. It's also true that a lot of people today look at Wilson's view on race. And he was a racist. There's no question about it. And he actually introduced segregation, reintroduced segregation to Washington, D.C. So here's what it gets to be controversial. I guess I'll probably have some people be in touch with me. But Wilson's a complex figure and he existed in a certain time. People always say these kinds of things if they're trying to be balanced and fair. And I don't support what he did. I'd like to think I wouldn't have supported it then. But he wasn't just an isolated figure who had these points of view.

And so here we are, and they've just taken his name off at the Woodrow Wilson School at Princeton. In fact, when he was the president of Princeton, he made it into a much better institution. It had been a good university, but he made it into a great university. And many of the principles he stood for internationally were good ones. I mean, there were some things that he thought about internationally that I don't agree with that we would see is anti-diluvian today. So I think it's important to see the whole person. There's lots to not celebrate with Wilson. But I think it's also important to be balanced in understanding that it's complicated.

[00:51:25] AH: With your book, there's a lot that we can look back and trace some developments taking place today back to your book. And the other way to have gone from your book up to the present day. I was just wondering, to what extent, like as a journalist, as a historian, when you're looking at a particular era or you're looking at a particular subject, how do you deal with that understandable temptation to see all roads leading back to whatever it is you're studying or the time period that you're looking at? So my wife teases me that I'm always like, "Oh, Allan Pinkerton was born in Glasgow. Woodrow Wilson's got Scottish ancestry." She's like the whole history of bloody America can't be interested back to Scotland. So do you think, since you've written the book, or do you ever think to yourself, "Well, maybe those other developments." Help me understand.

[00:52:17] JH: So I said that I think everything you see today you can see the germ of it in the committee on public information. And a good example of that is the four minute men. They operated like social media do today. You look at your phone –

[00:52:30] AH: That's a good point, yeah.

[00:52:30] JH: Yeah. You look at your phone to see, I don't know, see what the baseball score is. But all of a sudden there's a message across the bottom that you didn't ask for. It just shows up. Well, you go to a movie theater and during the intermission there's a four minute man telling you to buy war bonds. But of course, there are big changes. And I think I make the argument that what the CPI did helps us understand what happens today. And I think I do believe that's a fair statement. But of course, there are many changes today. But I think they're matters of degree rather than the fundamentals. Like what we talked about, we've come up just in this conversation three or four laws of propaganda. Those apply. Those always apply. They're quintessential aspects of propaganda. But of course there are changes. One thing is technology, which allows you to send out information a lot more easily than you could before. It also allows you to do disinformation a lot more easily than you could before. It allows you to bypass the press in a way you couldn't before, because now you can send your tweet out all by yourself. The journals have to sit around and follow your tweets and write about them. But basically they don't intermediate what you said. And we have DARPA is doing all kinds of work. It's our defense research organization. They're the ones that invented the Internet. And DARPA

is spending lots of time trying to figure out how you persuade people overseas, and what the chemistry of the brain is, and how you can say things that help get the brain to be accepting.

So, of course, those are vastly different in terms of power and scale than perhaps existed in – Not perhaps. It did exist in 1917 and 1918. And I'd be foolish not to say that's not true. I mean, obviously let's just argue against my own book. You could say propaganda didn't really begin in World War 1. It had existed forever. And it's true. Every time a king put on a crown and a urban robe, that was propaganda. That was a way to show that you were important and to be admired. And it gave you authority. But the change came, the big turning point comes in World War I because all of a sudden you have systematic pervasive propaganda. Not just a king putting on a robe, but systematic propaganda. You're doing every day systematically and sending far and wide. That's a change. That's a major change. And I think that's why I see that as ground zero for what we have today.

[00:54:36] AH: It's like the model TFORT version of propaganda that comes around then, right?

[00:54:41] JH: Yeah, absolutely. I think that's a good way to put it. But there were – There's one little example I came across. There was a Prussian prince who realized that having people get together and talk was a problem. And one of the places they were doing it was in coffee shops. So he wanted to outlaw coffee. You couldn't drink coffee together. Well, the point was that's a kind of censorship, right? I mean, it's a stupid kind. And they were wrestling with it. That's not systematic and pervasive. In fact, it's a little crazy. But it shows that it existed before. But all of a sudden you said we're not doing it that way. We're institutionalizing it. That's the difference.

[00:55:12] AH: Well, thanks so much for your time, John. It's been great to chat.

[00:55:15] JH: Thanks. You asked great questions. It was fun.

[END]