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PUBLIC INFORMATION IN A WAR ECONOMY

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COLONEL BABCOCK: General Vanaman, distinguished guests, and gentlemen: The Public Opinion course, to date, has included only the peacetime consideration involved. We have found that information is the key to most of our problems. We might draw this same conclusion regarding the wartime public opinion problems; that is, the heart of the system is the administration of the information function.

Since you have all had the biographical sketch of Mr. Davis, I will only repeat that he was the Director of the Office of War Information from 1942 through 1945.

Thus, with the words which you hear every evening over Station WMAL, at 7:15, "I introduce America's foremost news commentator, Mr. Elmer Davis."

MR. DAVIS: General Vanaman, Colonel Babcock, and gentlemen: I hope you will bear with me if I read, more or less, from a script because I want to be particular in what I say since you gentlemen probably know a great deal more about the subject of industrial mobilization than I do.

During the late war the Army and Navy news releases on industrial mobilization were indeed normally checked with and approved by my office, but other men had the handling of them and they came to me only when there was a major argument. I attended some of the meetings of the War Production Board--but as a rule, only when there was an argument, a violent difference of opinion (which, as many of you probably know, happened fairly often) about some policy which my office was going to have the job of explaining, as satisfactorily as possible, to the public. Details of these problems were usually beyond my competence; but on the question of how to persuade the public to take what the experts had concluded had to be done I have indeed had a good deal of experience. So I can offer you some views on the broad general policies of public relations in a war economy; and I hope I can do so without intruding on what General Collins will tell you later.

The first thing to remember about public relations is that it can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear. It might make a purse, and try to persuade the customers that it was a good synthetic substitute; maybe, in such a well-indoctrinated country as Russia or Germany, it might even persuade some of them that it was silk, but it couldn't here. Which is to say that the popular acceptance of any governmental program depends primarily on its merits. And, unfortunately, it is much easier, by inept public relations, to make a good program look bad than to make a bad program look good by the most ingenious public relations in the

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and completeness of our industrial mobilization. And, remember, the decision will not be entirely ours; the enemy, too, will have his own ideas about what kind of war it is going to be.

It is worth remembering that no nation except England really fought a total war the last time, in the sense of reducing civilian consumption to the absolute necessary minimum. Possibly the Russians did, but Russian civilian consumption was so low before the war that it is pretty hard to figure out how much worse off they were, if at all, in wartime. But certainly we did not fight a total war, and the Germans did not, at least up till the last few months when they had increasingly less left with which to fight it. They even restored some factories from war production to civilian production in the fall of 1941; Hitler said he had hit the Russians so hard that they would never get up again, and he believed his own story to the point of actually reducing war production. The Germans felt the effect of that afterward. That very intelligent though amazingly misinformed man, Dr. Goebbels, was constantly complaining in his diaries about the inadequacy of German industrial and civilian mobilization. In this country we certainly mobilized more extensively than we ever had before in wartime, except, perhaps, the Southern States during the Civil War. But they had little except an agricultural economy to mobilize, and in the last year of the war they fell very short of completely mobilizing that.

But whatever we did in the late war, it was less than we might have to do next time. Again, you gentlemen know far more about that than I do. It seems to me it all depends on how long the war might last and what kind of war we decide to fight. I assume it would not be, at least in intention, at least at the outset, an absolute war, fought out to what used to be called integral victory. I don't know how many of you are old enough to recall that phrase from the Second World War, but it means the kind of victory we won the last time-- complete defeat of the enemy's armed forces, the overrunning and occupation of his country, and the assumption of responsibility for what happens to the conquered people afterward.

A look at the map is enough to show why you can't fight that kind of war against Russia. Aside from any other question, what would we do if we won? After the difficulties we have encountered in such relatively small areas as Japan and Southern Germany, I do not suppose that anybody would seriously suggest that we occupy eight million square miles and try to reeducate two hundred million people. Nor are we likely to try the somewhat more modest objective of landing an army and marching across country to Moscow. The three best armies of three successive centuries tried that--the Swedes in 1708, the French in 1812, and the Germans in 1941--and they all came to grief. Besides, as Napoleon discovered, when you've got Moscow where are you? From published statements of our military commanders--as well as from

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be willing to accept something close to total economic mobilization. But if such mobilization occurred and were followed by little military action for months to come--as is quite possible, since it might take us quite a while to reach the enemy in any force--we might have a dangerous reaction. There was such a feeling in the fall of 1942; we had been at war almost a year, but the only way most people were yet conscious of it was in dislocations and inconveniences at home. We started off with early and humiliating defeats, which, fortunately, the public did not recognize as humiliating as they really were. Then there was the great victory at Midway, and after that not much for months but the fighting in the Solomons. The sense that we were undergoing great discomfort and not seeing any results was in my opinion chiefly responsible for the outcome of the Congressional election of 1942, in which a great many negative characters were elected in both parties, a result which would have been very different if it had been held two weeks later, after the naval victories off Guadalcanal and the landings in Africa, which showed everybody that at last we had got going.

So, unless there were a possibility of prompt and large scale action early in the war--which in the present condition of our Armed Forces seems highly unlikely--an administration might be wise which let the country in gradually for more and more intensive ^{industrial} mobilization. It would depend on circumstances, of course. If the next war were started, as the last one was, by a sneak attack, people would be much more ready to make drastic sacrifices at the outset, especially if that sneak attack took the form of an air raid of an American city. It is worth remembering that we are the only one of the major nations that has never experienced attack on our cities from the air. I am not worried about how we would take it because every nation that has been so attacked has taken it, and far better than all the prewar forecasts had led us to expect. Assuming that such raids would not be, as in present circumstances they could not be, atomic attacks or even fire raids on anything like the scale of those we inflicted on Germany and Japan, their net effect would be to greatly intensify our war effort. It is always possible that the opposition appreciates the fact that the sneak attack at Pearl Harbor did more to unify American sentiment and make Americans mad than anything else they could have possibly done. They may be sensible enough not to attack the continental United States at all. But assuming they did, whatever physical damage they did would be far more offset by the stiffening of public resolution and readiness to do whatever may have to be done.

Well, one way or another, I assume that however we start we shall have to increasingly cut down civilian consumption, increasingly boost war production, and steadily move toward something approaching a total war economy. The task of public relations in explaining these successive steps would largely depend on where the principal opposition, or perhaps I should say the principal reluctance, might be expected, whether from

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The best kind of world-wide public relations for the United States at war would be the maintenance at home of justice, liberty, and the utmost possible equality of sacrifice. If the next administration, whether conservative or not, consists of men of intelligence and judgment--and we have a right to hope that it will, considering the character of most of the leading candidates--it will see that living conditions in wartime are as satisfactory as possible for the labor, both industrial and agricultural, on whose output victory will depend. If we get that, it is possible that the principal public relations problem, so far as labor is concerned, might be that of direction and distribution of manpower, seeing that there were enough workmen where they were needed, with no labor pools standing idle in other cities, waiting until employers got the orders they hope they will get.

I understand you gentlemen have just finished a close study of this problem. You probably know more about it than I do. But I can only say this was a constant problem in the late war, as many of you know. Its handling was far from satisfactory, which was more the fault of poor organization in the war administration in general than of the War Manpower Commission, which really had very little authority. It could try to persuade, but it had very little coercive power. As you may remember from some celebrated instances, it wouldn't always know what was going on. When the Director of the Manpower Commission picks up his morning paper and discovers the Administration has proposed a national conscription law, which, up to this time, he has not heard about, he is in a pretty embarrassing position. I devoutly hope we can handle it better next time than last time; but it is not primarily a problem of public relations but of organization, though public relations can help a good deal in its solution.

I am speaking of voluntary distribution, not of such distribution as might be necessitated by military misadventure. As I say, I am assuming that the United States will not be subject to atomic attack--assuming that because I do not think it is probable in the next few years; and also because if such an attack were successfully pulled off, the first target would be Washington, and most of us who happened to be still in town would no longer have occasion to worry about war policies or anything else. Also, in the present concentration of the Government, one well placed bomb could wipe most of it out; and with it all the files and paper work on which our war plans were based. It might be easier to fight a war without the files--I don't know; but that situation would certainly require the quick recasting of most of our war program.

What is far more within the field of possibility, within the next few years, is a biological or bacteriological attack. That could have a very serious effect, of course, on the war economy, especially if it were directed, as it probably would be, at the chief industrial centers.

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it next time if we want to win an all-out war. (And however that next war might start, by whatever strategy it might be fought, it would probably be an all-out war before it was over if we mean to win it.) Once again, I know of no formula except to keep telling them why, as clearly and as specifically as you can, and count yourself lucky if you are so much as fifty-one percent successful in that field. Most people seem more willing to accept the necessity of positive effort, even of painful effort, than deprivation of something they have been used to. I hope I don't seem to be adopting any holier-than-thou attitude. I suffered no hardships in the late war, but once or twice I was badly scared when it looked as if there might be no coffee for breakfast. And wartime privations might have their compensations; with a scarcity of textiles, short skirts would come back.

It may seem to you that I have said little about industrial mobilization and indeed not too much about the war economy in general. But everyone of these things I have talked about touches on economic efficiency; in a total war or anything near a total war all problems become more and more intertwined, a fact which those of you who were engaged in production in the late war know better than I. Do we concentrate this month on rubber or on landing craft? You all remember that argument. Each side had its hot promoters at a time when we needed them both, and it was only one of a thousand such problems that came up in a war in which the country underwent a very extensive but by no means total mobilization.

Men who know more about the national economy than I do think that we shall have to mobilize more completely next time; even if we start slowly, we will be putting everything in toward the finish. It might be a long war; it would probably be a war of varying fortunes; and the immense size of our enemy, if nothing else, would make it all but impossible to deal him such devastating blows as the air force dealt to Germany and Japan. In a long war, with great privations, with final victory still a long way ahead, there would grow up that physical and mental fatigue which at a certain point comes to almost any belligerent nation; war weariness might spawn peace movements, in almost any section of the population. I have remarked that it does not seem to me possible that such a war could be fought out to the kind of victory we won over Germany and Japan, or that we should know just what to do with that kind of victory if we got it.

There has been a great deal of talk about the disadvantages of the unconditional surrender formula. Well, it happened to be more disadvantageous to my office than to anybody else. It made it very difficult to conduct effective propaganda against Germany and Japan. But I think from the political point of view unconditional surrender in that war was thoroughly sound. In the first place, the principal reason the policy was adopted was that we wanted to give the Germans no possible excuse for saying again, as they did after the war of 1918, that they had surrendered on terms and those terms had not been kept. Also, unconditional surrender made it very simple to deal with any possible negotiated-peace movements. Any movement for a negotiated peace accordingly was taken as a sign of weakness. The result was, there were no serious movements of that sort in the course of the war in this country.

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nominations are made, the two candidates should get together and issue a joint declaration on foreign policy, which would take at least the primary issue of foreign policy--on relations with Russia--entirely out of the campaign.

I think that is perfectly feasible for the reason that all the leading candidates have expressed substantially the same position on the chief elements of foreign policy. Of course, there are differences in emphasis here and there. But I do think it probably would be possible for both of them to get together and say, "All right; this is what we think. We do not want to argue about this this year. This is what either of us would do if elected. This is out of the campaign. That would help a great deal.

Nevertheless, there is going to be a lot of wild talk tossed around during the next six months. A great many people are going to say things that they will perhaps wish afterwards they hadn't said--at least, the rest of us will wish they hadn't said. We cannot count on things settling down, really, until next January.

QUESTION: Mr. Davis, as regards industrial mobilization, what is your opinion of the present policy or practice of the Armed Forces and the State Department in disseminating information?

MR. DAVIS: Well, I do not know a great deal about that. I understand they are starting on a vigorous distribution of--you mean technical information, such as getting the plants together and telling each plant what to do?

QUESTIONER: Right.

MR. DAVIS: You all know more about what is being done in that than I do.

In New York, I work in the RCA building, where a vigorous school has been going on for a number of months in that field.

I think that, in general, in a sense, not enough information is being disseminated; in another sense, far too much. The fault right now seems to be one of excess rather than of shortage especially, as I say, when the three services go up to Congress competing for appropriations. Each one of them knows its own problems, knows what it needs for ideal solutions of those problems. Each one of them is naturally under the temptation of emphasizing its own situation and the things it might have to do.

So you get all kinds of stories coming out of these hearings, which have to impress the general public. In some cases, they probably have a

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existed between Wilson and Creel or between Churchill and Brendan Bracken.

It would be fine if you were able to have a President who had such close personal relationship with a technical expert in the news business. It happened that of the men closest to President Roosevelt none of them was a technical news expert. We got the cooperation from him that our duties required, but it would have been much better if there had happened to be someone who had the relation to him that Creel had to Wilson. We got along very well with Mr. Early. Hopkins was not in the news field.

But the Government Information Service, in its relations with the White House, which has the most important government news, should not have to be dependent on the accident of good personal relationships. I am convinced that if we need one again, as we shall if we get into a major war, that it should be directed by the White House Press Secretary and definitely as an extension of the President's own office.

COLONEL McCULLOCH: I wonder if there is very much the Military can do, actually, about public relations. I am thinking of Universal Military Training where some effort was made, in the interest of national defense, through the selection of speakers to go out to the Rotary Clubs and so forth, just to explain this thing. But the reaction, instead of being favorable, was that the taxpayers' money should not be spent for that purpose.

MR. DAVIS: Well, I think that depends on two things: What kind of emergency you have and on whether Congress and the White House are in the hands of the same party. Now, there is going to be some friction between Congress and the Executive Branch on that issue even if they are of the same party.

You are familiar, of course, with this ancient statute they have been resurrecting, forbidding the use of any governmental funds for propaganda for the agency which has the funds, or whatever that is. Well, strictly speaking, under it they would refuse permission to any agency of the Executive Branch to give out any information at all. If the State Department announces one of its policies, that policy might affect public opinion so that they think the State Department should have more money in order to carry it out. You cannot reduce it to that ridiculous level; though there are a few men in Congress who are trying to make a campaign issue just on that.

I do not know how you would interpret that law. Obviously, such an interpretation would have to be made by the courts in particular cases.

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As you all know, the matter of the Japanese fire balloons was hushed up for months. Hundreds of them had fallen in the United States. They had done practically no damage. There was an admirable job done of getting the story around by word of mouth over the Western States--it was done largely by military intelligence and public relations officers working not only with the newspapers and radio stations but also with the civic groups and similar organizations--explaining to everybody why it would not be a good thing to let the Japanese know where these balloons were dropping, or, indeed, to let them know they were dropping at all.

That policy had to be abandoned because an enthusiastic public relations officer in the Southwest attending a meeting of the Rotary Club said, "I'm going to tell you gentlemen something you're not allowed to print in the newspapers." Every newspaper in the area got up and squawked about it. It was finally decided to bring the news out. That job, I think, was very well handled.

I think there is a case where it was quite legitimate to keep the news from the public. Nobody tried to keep the news from the people in those States. It was passed around through this word-of-mouth campaign, through the local sheriffs, the mayors, and people like that. So far as possible, everybody in the West was told these things were dropping, told why we did not want to mention them, told what to do if one landed in the vicinity.

Of course, in case of a major air-raid, it would be a different story. It would depend largely on what one thought the enemy had been able to find out about what he had accomplished. I do not think news of disasters in general should be minimized in any sense. On the other hand, you would have to be very careful not to bring it out in an inflammatory style. It would certainly be legitimate to minimize information about particular disasters.

In case of an attack on one of the large cities, which perhaps would cause serious loss of life, I certainly think you ought to reveal that fact. I think the damage of a serious raid on New York, the fact that a serious raid had occurred, could not be concealed from world publicity. There would be very sound reason for refusing to admit they had hit any specific target.

QUESTION: Would you discuss the relationship of censorship to information?

MR. DAVIS: There was very little to discuss in the late war because we got along fine. I think it was a sound idea to separate the two. I do not think the same people should be in charge of telling what is to be told and of deciding what is not to be told.

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to run the risk of having some adverse propoganda made against us abroad. But, naturally, the people whose job was foreign propoganda didn't like that.

That same problem will come up over and over again in every war. I favor putting the two kinds of information together for the simple reason that it is more easily done when one man makes the decision than when two agencies have to fight it out and then carry it up to the White House to bring more grief for the President, who has grief enough already.

Foreign information, at present, is under the control of the State Department. I had supposed when the State Department once got it they would never let it go, even in wartime, to any other agency. I understand that there are some studies being made, and it is being regarded as at least conceivable that the State Department might be willing to turn it over to another agency in time of war. But no decisions have been made as yet. Unquestionably, the State Department is the place for it in time of peace. In war, you can save a lot of trouble if you have that decision made in one office.

QUESTION: My question is directed at the organization of the Office of War Information. Assuming we would have some type of integrated organization for the control of mobilization, such as the Office of War Mobilization, would you divorce public information from that organization since you would have to report directly to the President?

MR. DAVIS: There were a great many things we had to do that did not fall within the field of the Office of War Mobilization. In that field we worked for Mr. Byrnes. I mean we put out all of the news direct, but we worked very closely with him and we pretty well took his directions as to where we might go to get certain kinds of information in the field which he covered. But we also did a great deal more, outside of that, which would not be the function of the Director of War Mobilization.

You would have to have someone who would get along with him, obviously. We assigned one of our ablest men on his staff and worked in very close relationship with him at all times. But I think you couldn't give him all of it. He is a piece of the President in wartime. The Director of Information should be another piece of the President.

QUESTION: Mr. Davis, how would you evaluate the press release of the tests held at Eniwetok? I understand it took about twelve hours to prepare that, although it says nothing. Was it designed to scare someone else or to bolster our own hopes?

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outstanding voice from either party telling the people they have got to tighten their belts and do without, until after the first day in November.

Or, it may be someone who is not a candidate for an elective office and has reason to suppose he may not hold an appointive office very long, he might say it. But nobody who is running for anything is going to say it unless things grow a lot worse than they are now.

QUESTION: Mr. Davis, what do you think about the impact on public opinion in banning the Communist Party?

MR. DAVIS: Well, I think if you probably took a vote of the American people on the question, "Shall the Communist Party be outlawed?", there would be a very large majority in favor of it. But it depends on what you mean. Perhaps you heard Mr. Stassen and Mr. Dewey last night, both of them giving all-out support to the Mundt Bill. Stassen is for it because it outlaws communism. Dewey is for it because it doesn't outlaw communism. They are both right, of course. I mean it definitely refuses to attempt to outlaw the doctrine of communism or the Communist Party, as such, but it provides very severe penalties for certain things that all Communists have to do if they are good Communists. So you can take either side of that argument and still be for the Mundt Bill.

I have always, along that line, paid most attention to the opinions of J. Edgar Hoover. He is the one who is going to have the job of handling them if they have to be handled. He thinks you had better leave them out in the open because they would be hard to get out from underground. Without any very comprehensive, special knowledge of my own, I would be willing to rest on his judgment on that because he is the fellow who is going to be blamed if they don't succeed in doing it well.

QUESTION: In view of the apparent political reluctance to inform the public on plans of mobilization, what do you suggest as a means of getting over to the American people what they may expect as a result of certain strategic concepts?

MR. DAVIS: Well, I should say that private sources of information who have nothing to gain or lose ought to be informing the public as well as they can of what sacrifices may be required. But, you see, we don't know until someone in an official position decides what he wants to do. We do not know, for instance, what they are going to do up on the Hill about military manpower, whether there will be a draft or not. We assume there will be. The Rules Committee was meeting this morning to decide what to do about the Andrews bill, and there was strong reason to believe Joe Martin told them they had to let it go ahead--for them to stop fooling around with the provision offering bonuses on enlistments. I think we will probably get that.

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