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THE MOBILIZATION OF PUBLIC OPINION

14 June 1948

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LT. COLONEL BABCOCK: Captain Worthington, distinguished guests, and gentlemen of the class: The lecture today marks the culmination of our public opinion course conducted throughout the college year. We have taken up many aspects of public opinion both practical and academic. This morning we have called upon one of the formulators, you might say, of public opinion in this country. He has written broadly on the subject and has operated in many of its fields. Although he has not been able to see the transcripts of lectures that have been given here, he will attempt to recapitulate the outstanding points that must be considered in order to understand public opinion. You have already read his biographical sketch so I won't take up his lecturing time to repeat it. It is with great pleasure that I introduce to the Industrial College of the Armed Forces, Mr. Edward L. Bernays.

MR. BERNAYS: Captain Worthington, Colonel Babcock, and gentlemen: Public opinion, effectively mobilized, is our greatest strength in war. It enables us to use our physical and economic resources to the full. Foreign countries already impressed by the potentials of our physical and economic strength would be doubly impressed if they knew we were giving deep, constructive thought to the potentials of our public opinion. Such knowledge might act as a strong deterrent to aggression against us. Recognition by others of our latent ideological power might even prevent war from breaking out.

Justice William O. Douglas said recently that against a living democracy assault is unavailing. This is true, however, only if we are capable of swift mobilization for psychological as well as physical warfare.

From the experience of the last three decades, we know only too well that the outside world regards America as weakest in her most powerful latent resource--public opinion.

And yet today American public opinion tries to evade and avoid thought about any kind of mobilization. Good will toward the Armed Forces is at a low ebb. But the public's attitude is indefensible. Just as with its other resources, America must be prepared to mobilize public opinion in the event of war. The new weapons of ideas and words introduced by the dictatorships demand an entirely new approach to warfare, that of the expert in mass psychology. The tactics of terror, of divide and conquer, of psychological warfare have in some cases superseded actual force and attained bloodless victories.

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The long-term approach, by improving mental and physical health, economic security and education, by eliminating discrimination, frees the individual from insecurities and promotes high morale. Insecurity leads to frustration, which leads to aggression. Frustrated, we look for scapegoats. Everybody tries to "take it out" on somebody else, on religious, racial, or other groups--Negroes, Jews, Catholics, management, labor, and so on. In peacetime such frustrations cause strikes, lockouts, race riots, in war; disunity, which we dare not risk. The Government can take the lead now in this long-term approach to morale stockpiling for possible future conflicts. It can be started by immediate action to convince people of the realities of democracy in deed as well as word, in areas where it is lacking.

The great voluntary welfare organizations, from the American Cancer Society to the National Housing Council, can be instrumental in improving objective surroundings. They should be encouraged to provide insurance on this long-term basis. And we must not forget that knowledge of how the Armed Forces in peace and war are fed, clothed, housed, and officered strongly influences civilian morale.

For the short-term approach, a central government-operated bureau of persuasion and information for the duration of the emergency is demanded. We cannot trust to casual improvisation by amateurs or dilettantes. This field demands the experience and skill of experts.

We cannot bring ourselves to tolerate such a government bureau in peacetime, although it is a necessity in wartime. This is no contradiction. The fundamental nature of a democratic country at peace demands freedom for ideas in the market place. Unless we put our reliance on the freedom of ideas in peacetime, we are abolishing what we presumably are fighting for. This looks like inefficiency according to Fascist standards. But in the end this very freedom generates the power of the individual American and the country.

Overzealous members of our Armed Forces may feel inclined to foist a government bureau on the people here and now, in the belief that although a state of emergency does not yet exist, it may burst upon us without a moment's warning. For that reason, they tell themselves, it would be to the public's good if we were set up for psychological warfare today, while peace reigns. Then when the blow falls, we could ride it out instead of taking it full on the chin, as we did at Pearl Harbor.

The twilight zone between peace and war, those leaders argue, also justifies us in refusing to wait for the actual outbreak of hostilities before organizing a government bureau. The bureau should already be at work briefing civilian group leaders on day to day developments in the world arena, building up their morale for any eventuality. But the results desired can be achieved through regular peacetime democratic processes, through conferences between Armed Forces leaders and civilian leaders.

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"Public opinion" stems from the French Revolution, but 2,000 years ago the Greeks recognized the concept, the Romans later calling it "vox populi," the voice of the people. Contemporary social scientists classify as "static" that public opinion which bears on the national psychology, the folkways; and "dynamic", that which results from stimuli acting on the individual. Our national psychology is the sum total of the emotions and actions thrown off by all our countrymen. Dynamic public opinion kept pace with the growth of urban areas and with the expansion of communications media.

In ancient Greece, drama and oratory produced the dynamic opinion of the day. In Julius Caesar's time the Acta Diurna, a sort of daily gazette, spread official opinions broadcast. In the Middle Ages, the invention of printing accelerated the process through publication of sermons and pamphlets. The end of the Press Licensing Act in England broadened public opinion through the wider use of printed symbols, words, and pictures.

Mass communications, during the last 150 years, developed and speeded up technology, concentrated the economic growth of these media and spread democracy from coast to coast. With them came greater understanding of human behavior, greater literacy, and a growing knowledge of the techniques of leadership. The power of public opinion grew apace.

From a psychological standpoint public opinion is the aggregate of individual psychologies, multiplied by the cumulative force of outside persuasions and pressures. This is quite different from the classic concept of mob psychology which, incidentally, operates only in rare crises.

At this time we can give no more than the sketchiest suggestion of the psychological factors that go into the making of public opinion. A great deal of information is available. More must be obtained. However, these factors should never be overlooked in forming or carrying out policies or programs. For instance, it is extremely useful to be up on the mechanism of rationalization, that familiar process by which people suppress, even from themselves, the real reasons behind their decisions, and invent instead more satisfying reasons. We have to know the difference between rationalizations and the underlying motivations, if our appeal for the support of the public is to meet with success. Identification with group aims is another factor that needs to be taken into consideration. Mass pressure has no little part in making public opinion. The same is true of compensation for the many economic, social and cultural frustrations of present-day life.

In dealing with public opinion all the psychological factors motivating behaviour should be kept in mind.

When public opinion is effectively mobilized for a war effort a strong morale results. What is a strong morale and just how is it brought about?

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How can public opinion be mobilized most effectively, once war has begun? I think you will agree that it cannot be done unless the goals we set for the war effort demanded on the people are to their advantage --that, in other words, the things we fight for will outlast the war and bring the people permanent benefits.

Our war aims must not endanger our national traditions of freedom, equality and justice. These aims must recognize the kind of world Americans want. For example, there is no doubt that the preponderant number of Americans want expanding freedom, economic, educational and social opportunities and full civil rights, what we loosely call the good life. Woodrow Wilson's "Make the World Safe for Democracy," his "war to end all wars," veered in that direction. But the idea never got past the stage of talk. The Four Freedoms of Roosevelt in World War II restated some of these ideas. But our aims should be more realistic than either of theirs. Disillusionment plus cynicism follows discovery that war aims are only words. Public opinion should rather be based solidly on facts and emotions, on truth truthfully presented, on the justice of the cause defended, on an understanding of the immediate danger, and on the faith of the people in one another. These factors must, furthermore, be backed up by the realities of the good life in this country.

Research should precede any approach to a problem of this kind. What is our national psychology? At whom are we aiming? What tools best convey our ideas? What ideas appeal to the public? Which are the most important groups and who are their leaders, and how are leaders and groups affected by words, pictures and events? What organization is best fitted to carry on the work? Such research would disclose the relative public awareness of the situation at the time, the public's agreement or disagreement with war objectives, the extent of its determination to achieve these objectives, its belief in our achievements, its awareness of the size of the task ahead. It would be a check on public confidence in various leaders, in the Armed Forces, in the allies, in the veracity and completeness of the news. How the public felt about the progress made toward the genuine unification of the country, including its farmers, Negroes, Latin Americans, foreign born, Protestants, Catholics, Jews, labor, business and other sections of the public, would be indicated by such research, as would the distortions, apathies, ignorance, and prejudices of the people. Such research should tell us whose attitudes need to be intensified, whose need to be converted to our point of view, whose point of view should be negated.

Interpretation provides us with a road map for action. On such research we base our blueprint. From it we can plan organization, methods and tactics, ideas and appeals.

Researches must be carried on throughout the period of war emergency. Naturally we haven't made such researches, but it may be profitable to sketch in some of the background information we already have.

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The problem of presenting the facts on which understanding is to be based is a most difficult one therefore. We know, too, that the educationally underprivileged tend to be prejudiced, jingoistic and chauvinistic. Leadership on broad political issues remains in the hands of the better informed, because the least educated include the largest percentage of nonvoters. But there is always the danger of mass hysteria under provocation. Thomas Bailey in a recent study "The Man in the Street" stresses the bad influence ignorance has had on our national policy in the last 150 years.

If we study the mental age of the public, we find that 58 percent of our population have an intelligence quotient of 95 to 105, only 21 percent being above that level, while 21 percent are below it. To convey information to large percentages of these people so that they will understand and act on their understanding presents another challenge to those who deal with public opinion.

If we are to deal effectively with the people through symbols that penetrate the media, we must know the extent of the network of communications available to us at any specific time. Today there are 66 million users of radio sets; 51 million readers of 1,764 daily newspapers; there are 8,381 weekly, semiweekly and triweekly newspapers that are read by 13 million. Every week some 11 million Americans go to 18,765 moving picture houses where features, newsreels, short subjects and cartoons influence them in various ways. No less than 257 consumer magazines have a total circulation of 170 million copies monthly and there are over 7,346 periodicals all told. More than 6 billion dollars are spent annually on advertising to affect millions of Americans. Further, there are some 275,000 billboards in the United States. Approximately 225 million telegrams were handled by Western Union in 1947, which figure does not include the millions of messages sent over special service wires. And the mail--40 billion pieces were handled in 1947. There are 1,962 broadcasting stations; in 1947 there were 253,762 churches in the United States, with inclusive membership of 73,673,182, and as an index of groups, one group alone, the General Federation of Women's Clubs, reports an individual membership of approximately 3 million.

This will give you a notion of the network available for carrying your message. But it is always well to remember that paper bullets never make a wiser man; the media serve only as conduits to the public. The policy and idea they carry are paramount.

We cannot depend on intuition or inspiration for ideas. The ideas we use as themes must be based on thorough-going research into what people respond to at the moment. These consist of the basic truths underlying our system and those ideas brought into prominence by current events. Ideas are the most important elements in our activity, whether presented in words, pictures or dramatic events.

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Justice Holmes summed up this competition of the idea in the marketplace when he said, "The ultimate good desired is better reached by free trade in ideas; the best test of the truth is the power of the thought to get itself accepted in the competition of the market."

One more job of research is trying to find out in advance what cooperative effect may be secured from all the conduits to all the publics including advertising. Ideas are channelized to the groups they are intended to influence. An idea passed on by the Farm Bureau Association to its state chapters and thence to its members gains strength through this very process. It is an example of identification.

A number of serious studies have been made of the machinery set up to carry on activities of the kind I have outlined, based on the experience of World Wars I and II. Congressional reports on the Committee of Public Information in World War I and the Office of War Information in World War II are also available. Studies have been made of how activities were carried on in both democratic and totalitarian regimes. Authoritative articles regarding World War II activities have appeared in the Public Opinion Quarterly. Numerous studies are reported in the two authoritative bibliographies on propaganda, the one published by the University of Minnesota in 1947 and the other by the University of Princeton in 1947. Numerous personal memoirs have been written that cast additional light on the operation.

From these and from personal observations in World War I and World War II, we can deduce general principles and make certain recommendations as to the kind of organization best fitted to carry on such activities in the future.

The main lesson to be derived from all these studies so far as the United States is concerned is this: That psychological defense measures at home are integrally linked to any total war effort, and their importance must not be underestimated. In any possible future conflict psychological warfare will be even more important, due to the vast increase of technological proficiency in communications as well as our knowledge of human behavior. It is evident that in both World Wars activities were not so effectively handled as prevailing knowledge in the field made possible. In World War I the field of mass persuasion and information, to be sure, had not yet been brought to its present expert level. In World War II, this was not the case.

There are obvious reasons for what occurred. The value of ideas as weapons is a new concept that has still to gain general acceptance. A government-controlled central organization for persuasion and for disseminating information is by its very nature abhorrent to democratic thought and action. It conflicts basically with the freedom of ideas. Also it runs contrary to the thinking of the people who own and operate the great media of communications, including the newspapers and the radio, because it is interpreted as government encroachment on a free

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the public continually through press associations, radio, motion pictures, news syndicates, magazines, books, television. The truth would be used; distortion, lies, twisted ideas are unsound and dangerous.

Limiting factors on the effectiveness of this activity would be events beyond our control; namely, the extent to which the communications network could penetrate the minds of the people, the expertness with which the work was carried on. The battle is one for men's minds. The side that wins is the one that most effectively engineers the consent of those it is trying to reach. Only the keeping of the strictest military secrets justifies censorship, since our citizens learn the truth anyway through such modern devices as the short-wave radio or such accurate sources as the underground, despite suppression, as the Goebbels' Diaries show. Efforts at suppression had little effect in Germany.

So far as the organization's general structure is concerned, it should be patterned after that of the Committee on Public Information in World War I and the Office of War Information in World War II, but with the difference--the organization would not be regarded by government leaders as a nuisance or a sop to public curiosity, but as a vital part of our defense, and it would receive the support and the expert guidance required.

A wide variety of activities would be covered by such an organization. It might be divided into three sections--administrative, domestic, and foreign. In the domestic section many subordinate agencies would be at work. There would be a foreign language newspaper division, a picture division, a film division, a pictorial publicity division, a speaking division, a syndicate feature division, a women's war work division and supervisory censorship division. Tomorrow, such an operation might be of necessity more complex, covering a wider variety of efforts.

George Morris Cohen Brandes, the great Danish philosopher said, "It is useless to send armies against ideas."

But it is about time we acknowledged the fact that we have to send ideas against armies.

LT. COLONEL BABCOCK: Due to the lateness of the hour, we will defer the questions to the seminar this afternoon.

Sir, on behalf of the Commandant and the College we certainly appreciate your valuable addition to our public opinion course.

(2 July 1948--450)S.