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The Uneasy Beginnings of Public Diplomacy: Vira Whitehouse, the Committee on Public Information, and the First World War

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THE UNEASY BEGINNINGS OF PUBLIC DIPLOMACY: VIRA WHITEHOUSE,
THE COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC INFORMATION, AND THE FIRST WORLD WAR

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
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in

The School of Mass Communication

by

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ABSTRACT

The established methods and practices of American public diplomacy are commonly credited to the publicity agencies created during and after the Second World War, such as the Office of War Information (OWI) and the United States Information Agency (USIA). However, the Committee on Public Information (CPI) was the first practicing public diplomacy agency. Created by President Woodrow Wilson in April 1917, the CPI and its Foreign Division became a tool for winning the First World War through the dissemination of newspaper articles, films, photographs, and other media techniques. The CPI was the first of its kind to engage with the people on behalf of the US government and to shape European public opinion and promote American war aims. Although the CPI was a trailblazing organization, it met problems and challenges during its foreign mission. Resistance on behalf of the State Department, poor management from the top-down, and unpredictable circumstances for representatives are all examples that serve to illustrate the uneasy beginnings of public diplomacy. This thesis will examine the efforts of Vira B. Whitehouse, who served as the director of the CPI office in Berne, Switzerland. The case study of a New York suffragist turned public affairs officer demonstrates the setbacks and challenges of early public diplomacy, such as strife with the Legation, poor management from Washington, and working in a male-dominated field.

INTRODUCTION

In 1953, the United States Information Agency (USIA) was the premier public diplomacy agency aboard. During the Cold War era, the USIA promoted our values and interests by engaging in government-to-people operations overseas in hopes of influencing behaviors and opinions. The USIA did this by using mass media, such as radio, newspapers, and pamphlets, as well as exchange programs. Notable departments of the USIA included the Voice of America (VOA), a radio broadcasting service committed to providing news coverage “with a consistent message of truth, hope, and inspiration,”¹ and the Fulbright Scholarship Program, a worldwide exchange program designed to create a mutual understanding between cultures. At its height, the USIA boasted a strong presence of 190 posts in 142 countries.²

And yet, as successful as the USIA was, on October 1, 1999, it was officially dissolved and absorbed fully into the State Department. Since the USIA’s conception, it faced challenges and difficulties, especially during the 1990s. First, after the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, the USIA’s original mission became obsolete. It was no longer necessary to criticize communism and promote the virtues of democracy. Moreover, many thought the USIA missed the opportunity to prove its relevance in a post-Cold War world. Second, the USIA had many opponents outside of its agency. Following the Cold War, Sen. Jesse Helms (R-NC), chairman of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, and informally known as the “Curmudgeon in Chief,”³ believed that the USIA and other foreign affairs agencies were obsolete. Sen. Helms, a faithful fiscal conservative, steadily fought to consolidate the USIA and other foreign activities

¹ “History of VOA,” Voice Of America, Accessed November 11, 2017. <https://www.insidevoa.com/p/5829.html>.

² “USIA Factsheet,” United State Information Agency-Office of Public Liaison, Last modified February 1999, Accessed November 11, 2017. <http://dosfan.lib.uic.edu/usia/usiahome/factshe.htm>.

³ Thomas Friedman, “The Big Deal of the Day,” *New York Times*, March 24, 1995.

in the State Department, which he did in 1999.⁴ As a result, the USIA's programs and activities were consolidated into other independent entities, such as the Broadcasting Board of Governors, or were directly absorbed by the State Department, which was eager to create a more streamlined approach and receive more funding.⁵

Third, beyond outside influences, the USIA suffered from poor leadership from within, especially in its final years. The last serving director of the USIA, Joseph Duffey, who despite believing in the overall values and effectiveness of the agency, simply could not defend it from budget cuts from President Clinton or Congress.⁶ And, lastly, while the USIA was successful in developing a relationship with foreign audiences and branding US values and interests abroad, it was unable to convince the American public of its worth, largely because it did not have a domestic constituency. Additionally, departments under the USIA, like the VOA, constantly faced public criticisms that the services abroad were not sources of legitimate news but were propaganda.⁷

The story of the USIA is a modern example of how public diplomacy has continuously faced complications, however, challenges to public diplomacy first date back to the First World War with the Committee on Public Information (CPI). Created by President Woodrow Wilson, the CPI and its Foreign Division became a tool for winning the war and paving the way for peace through the dissemination of newspapers, films, photographs, and a whole host of other media techniques. The CPI was the first of its kind to engage with the people on behalf of the US government and to shape foreign attitudes about US war aims.

⁴ Jesse Helms, "Rein in Foreign Affairs, Christopher Right About Shakeup," *Washington Post*, February 19, 1995.

⁵ Robert Hunter, "A Diminished USIA Dims Our Beacon Aboard," *Los Angeles Times*, October 1, 1999.

⁶ Nicholas Cull, *The Decline and Fall of the United States Information Agency* (New York: Palgrave Macmillian, 2012), 181.

⁷ Cull, *Decline and Fall of the USIA*, 181.

Though the CPI was a trailblazing organization for its time, it met problems and challenges during its foreign mission. The first persistent challenges included frequent strife with the State Department, largely due to the lack of precedence for such a publicity agency. The second problem included poor management from the top-down, starting with George Creel, whose leadership wavered in times of crisis. And the third problem included unpredictable circumstances for the staff and personnel abroad, such as a lack of materials or difficulties with navigating through local and national tensions within specific countries.

To explore the origins of public diplomacy and the uneasy beginnings of that process, we will examine the efforts of Vira Whitehouse, the director of the CPI office in Switzerland, and her efforts during the First World War. The case study of a New York suffragist turned public affairs officer illustrates the setbacks and successes of early public diplomacy long before the USIA.



Public diplomacy scholars have not adequately addressed the Committee on Public Information's foreign campaign and its performance. Tracing the history and evaluating the effectiveness and challenges of public diplomacy, scholars like Nicholas Cull and Wilson Dizard Jr. provide examples of how the Office of War Information (OWI) and the USIA faced management problems in times of war and the failure to coordinate with the other government agencies and branches.⁸ But both Cull and Dizard ignore or minimize the CPI as a precursor to public diplomacy or how the problems that the CPI faced were similar to those the OWI or USIA would face. Dizard merely mentions the CPI in a footnote as “a short-lived experiment,” and

⁸See Nicholas Cull, *The Cold War and the United States Information Agency: American Propaganda and Public Diplomacy, 1945-1989* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Wilson Dizard Jr., *Inventing Public Diplomacy: The Story of the U.S. Information Agency* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2004).

Cull uses the CPI only anecdotally in his introduction as an example of how US public attitude changed towards propaganda after the war ended.⁹ While Cull and Dizard offer thorough analyses of the OWI and the USIA, my thesis will add to the discussion about the origins of public diplomacy by tracing the history and evaluating the challenges of the CPI faced during its foreign mission.

Furthermore, this thesis will provide a complete picture of the problems facing the Committee on Public Information abroad in a neutral country such as Switzerland as a public diplomacy organization. Of the literature available about the CPI's foreign mission, there is a heavy focus on the general history of the foreign division. Also, the literature dedicates more attention to the CPI posts in Allied countries, such as Italy and Russia.¹⁰ Nevertheless, George Creel's *How We Advertised America* (1920) offers glimpses into the inner workings of the CPI abroad.¹¹ While necessary to examine, Creel's assessment relied too heavily on official reports of CPI representatives to plead his case. Also, his work reads less like a historical document and more like the long-awaited response to his enemies and critics about the effectiveness of the CPI and its foreign mission. Although Creel does mention the foreign mission, he does not address the shortcomings or problems many agents faced, including those of Vira Whitehouse. Creel over accentuates her "achievements" and minimizes her difficulties in Switzerland, describing this experience as "bitter first to happy last."¹²

⁹ Cull, *The Cold War and the United States Information Agency*, 9-12.; Dizard, *Inventing Public Diplomacy*, 14.

¹⁰ See George F. Kennan, *Soviet-American Relations, 1917-1920*, 2 vols, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1956-58); Louis J. Nigro, "Propaganda, Politics, and the New Diplomacy: The Impact of Wilsonian Propaganda on Politics and Public Opinion in Italy, 1917-1919," (PhD diss., Vanderbilt University, 1979); Daniela Rossini, *Woodrow Wilson and the American Myth in Italy: Culture, Diplomacy, and War Propaganda* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008).

¹¹ George Creel, *How We Advertised America: The First Telling of the Amazing Story of the Committee on public information that Carried the Gospel of Americanism to Every Corner of the Globe* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1920).

¹² Creel, *How We Advertised America*, 317.

James Mock and Cedric Larson's book, *Words that Won the War*, which was one of the first books to trace the history of the CPI's domestic and foreign divisions, dedicates a large section to the foreign campaign, but offers more summarization than deep analysis.¹³ Furthermore, Mock and Larson refrain from major criticisms of the propaganda agency and fail to illustrate the shortcomings of the CPI abroad. While these books look at the general history of the CPI and its foreign division in wartime Europe, my thesis contributes to the history by examining in-depth the problems facing Vira Whitehouse in neutral Switzerland, not just her accomplishments.

Although I will use Whitehouse's time in Switzerland as an example, my thesis is not the first to address Whitehouse's role in public diplomacy or the historical significance of having a woman as a pseudo-diplomat. Gregg Wolper offers a thorough examination of the origins of public diplomacy by using the examples of Switzerland, Italy, Spain, and Russia in his dissertation, "The Origins of Public Diplomacy: Woodrow Wilson, George Creel, and the Committee on Public Information." Wolper's work investigated the conditions in each country, described the activities of the CPI and measured the overall influence abroad.¹⁴ Wolper's analysis mentions some of the complications Whitehouse faced in Switzerland, but his dissertation lacks an in-depth analysis of the systematic problems Whitehouse faced in Berne.

Aside from Wolper, fewer scholars have addressed Whitehouse's experience as a female CPI agent or her personal life. One scholar, Tibor Glant, in his article "Against All Odds," examines the lack of historical information about female diplomats who participated in the First World War, like Vira Whitehouse and Rosika Schwimmer, the eventual Hungarian ambassador

¹³ James R. Mock and Cedric Larson, *Words that Won the War: The Story of the Committee on Public Information, 1917-1919* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1939).

¹⁴ Gregg Wolper, "The Origins of Public Diplomacy: Woodrow Wilson, George Creel, and the Committee on Public Information. Vol. 1," (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 1991).

to Switzerland.¹⁵ While Glant does a suitable job of identifying the problems both Whitehouse and Schwimmer faced because of their gender, he minimizes the effects poor management or sheer lack of precedent had on Whitehouse. Based on Glant and Wolper's research, I would like to add to the discussion by acknowledging that Whitehouse's problems in Berne were a combination of her being a woman, the inexperience of the CPI as a public affairs agency, and the poor management by the top leadership. Moreover, Whitehouse's time illustrates the problems that cultural diplomacy has had since its early beginnings during the war. Since 1917, US cultural diplomacy methods and activities abroad historically are not seamless or easy.

Before we can understand Whitehouse's pivotal role in public diplomacy and assess the problems that the CPI faced as a new propaganda agency, we must explore how foreign affairs operated before the First World War. In the first chapter, I will trace the history of the conduct of American diplomacy was conducted before 1914. There is little written about *public diplomacy* before the Second World War. Therefore, I will look at what was written about American *diplomacy* throughout the nineteenth century and the early years of the twentieth century. I will examine what roles foreign officials played, how they handled the public opinion, and how they handled other government officials. Furthermore, I will explain the methods, techniques, and activities of the CPI during the First World War. Subsequently, I will discuss the ways in which public diplomacy became institutionalized through the creation of the Committee of Public Information and how the established protocol of diplomatic culture would create challenges for the organization. The history of the CPI will serve as a prelude to discuss Vira Whitehouse's public diplomacy activities in Switzerland.

¹⁵ Tibor Glant, "Against All Odds: Vira B. Whitehouse and Rosika Schwimmer in Switzerland, 1918," *American Studies International*, no. 1 (2002): 34-51.

In the second chapter, I will provide biographical information about Vira Whitehouse. One aspect I will explore relates to her time as a formidable suffragist in New York. Whitehouse served as the chairwoman of the New York State Woman Suffrage Party (NYSWSP) in 1916, and in 1917 she helped to pass statewide suffrage in New York. Whitehouse's period as a suffragist helps to illustrate how she refined her skills in persuasion and publicity.

Using this information, in the third chapter, I will dive into the story of Vira Whitehouse as a government agent and the diplomatic practices she used in Berne, Switzerland, spanning from January to November 1918. I will use various secondary and primary sources, but most of my research will come from Vira Whitehouse's papers (1875-1957), from the Schlesinger Library at Harvard University, her memoir, CPI files relating to its foreign activities, and letters from her husband, Norman Whitehouse. These documents will help illustrate the problems she faced from the Legation, the poor management of the CPI, and from being a woman entering a male-dominated field.

In the fourth chapter, I will compare and contrast Whitehouse's role in Switzerland to that of other CPI representatives in Europe to demonstrate the persistent problems early public diplomacy faced during the First World War. The problems included creating a publicity bureau from the ground up, resistance with the State Department, poor management on behalf of Creel and the role of women in a field exclusively represented by men. I will also evaluate some similarities of President Roosevelt's Office of War Information and President Eisenhower's United States Information Agency with the Committee on Public Information. The Committee on Public Information served as a precursor to the established public diplomacy we are accustomed to today. Vira Whitehouse's time as the director of the Swiss office for the CPI provides an in-depth look at the trials and tribulations in developing the art of public diplomacy.

CHAPTER 1. FROM SECRET DIPLOMACY TO PUBLIC DIPLOMACY

It was equally necessary to teach the motives, purposes, and ideals of America so that friend, foe, and neutral alike might come to see us as a people without selfishness and in love with justice.

- George Creel, 1920¹⁶

The term “public diplomacy” was first cited in the mid-nineteenth century on two occasions. Although it does not mean that public diplomacy was being implemented, it serves as an indicator that the concept was formulating. One of the first uses of the term was in January 1856, by the London *Times*. Tensions between the United States and Great Britain were bubbling over, particularly because of U.S. President Franklin Pierce’s aim to expand American influence in Central America, which would halt Great Britain’s sphere of influence in the region. In a critical editorial regarding Pierce’s foreign policy agenda, it was noted, “if they[United States] have to make, as they conceive, a certain impression upon us, they have also to set an example to their own people, and there are few examples so catching as those of public diplomacy.” The article went on to ask if Pierce’s administration could “succeed in persuading the citizens in the Union.”¹⁷ The London *Times* editorial associated persuasion of a whole people with public diplomacy.

Another use of the term “public diplomacy” can be found in the *New York Times* in 1871 while covering the legislative agenda for the House of Representatives. It was revealed that various representatives were at odds on how to use funds from the Consular and Diplomatic Appropriation bill, speculating whether they would be used for purposes of annexing the Republic of Dominica. The debate was primarily about whether or not foreign affairs should act in secrecy. It was reported that Rep. Cox from New York, one of the strongest opponents of

¹⁶ Creel, *How We Advertised America*, 237.

¹⁷ “Editorial,” *The Times* (London, England), January 15, 1856.

secrecy, “did not believe in a secret service fund. He believed in open, public diplomacy.”¹⁸

These are the only two recorded uses of the term before 1914 and the uses this term do not share the connotation we have today of public diplomacy. The words “public diplomacy” do not become a part of international relations jargon until after the Second World War, but the methods and techniques have roots in the First World War.

Today, public diplomacy is a practice concerned with public attitudes, both at home and abroad, which aims to work with foreign governments and the press to serve American interests. It was not until the First World War that public diplomacy was taken seriously and professionalized. This chapter will examine what led to this revolutionary shift in how foreign affairs was perceived and conducted in such a short amount of time by looking at how diplomacy was managed and practiced throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Next, it will explore how public diplomacy was conducted during the First World War, by tracing the actions of the Committee on Public Information. And, lastly, we will look how public diplomacy was handled after the war. All these examples will serve as a prelude to Vira Whitehouse’s uneasy beginnings in Switzerland.

Public Diplomacy Before the First World War

Before 1914, the services of the State Department, including diplomatic and consular services, can trace their origins back to Revolutionary America. Immediately following America’s independence, the United States established diplomatic missions in Europe, such as France and Spain. The first American envoys, such as Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson were adept at dealing in European diplomatic protocol and asserted a sense of professionalism and preparedness when dealing with Europe. But by the 1830s, the Jacksonian era ushered in

¹⁸ “House of Representatives: Miscellaneous Bills and Resolutions,” *New York Times*, January 20, 1871.

amateurism in the field of foreign service, requiring little or no special training or experience of diplomats.¹⁹ Nonetheless, American diplomatic representation abroad increased throughout the nineteenth century, with many posts established during and after the Civil War. A majority of the diplomatic posts were in Europe and Latin America, while a few in Asia and Africa, such as Japan and Morocco.²⁰

In this world, diplomatic personnel were organized according to a three-tier hierarchy, including ambassadors, ministers, and secretaries. In charge of diplomatic services and embassies, ambassadors were men of national prominence, selected on their political connections, natural intelligence, and social refinement. Ministers, who headed legations, typically were in charge of the less prestigious work of consular services. At the very bottom of the hierarchy were secretaries of the embassies and legations, who served as essential representatives, but performed mundane work. While ambassadors operated in capitals and served the interests of U.S. government, the ministers and secretaries were stationed in less well-known cities and served the needs of private citizens' abroad, "offering them advice on local business conditions, protecting their interests and property, standing by them when they ran afoul of local law, and handling immigration."²¹

Despite the presence of a hierarchy, throughout the nineteenth century, especially towards the latter half, most of those who staffed the diplomatic and consular services of the State Department were typically amateurs to foreign service. Ambassadors, ministers, and secretaries got their roles through political connection, not by merit or examination.²² Many of

¹⁹ Henry Mattox, *Twilight of Amateur Diplomacy: The American Foreign Service and Its Senior Officers in the 1890s*, (Ohio: Kent State University, 1989), 1.

²⁰ Mattox, *Twilight of Amateur Diplomacy*, 57-59.

²¹ Robert Schulzinger, *Making of the Diplomatic Mind: The Training, Outlook, and Style of the United States Foreign Service Officers, 1908-1931*, (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1975), 5.

²² Mattox, *Twilight of Amateur Diplomacy*, 1.

the ambassadors and ministers were politicians or contributors to campaigns in between jobs, looking for something to fill their time. The secretaries were typically young, independently wealthy men looking to gain experience before moving on to more serious occupations.²³ The amateurism of the early diplomats abroad was evident in their lack of language skills and general knowledge of the areas they served. Although diplomatic and consular officers had some foreign language skills they were strictly advised to hold important negotiations with a qualified translator present.²⁴ Thus it comes as no surprise that this form of amateurism also ignored public opinion and valued secrecy.

Aside from the amateur nature of American diplomacy in the nineteenth century, its affairs were also secretive and regarded public opinion as inconsequential. Secret diplomacy was not concerned with government-to-people contact, but exclusively with government-to-government contact. The secret diplomacy of nineteenth century, according to a former U.S. ambassador to China, Paul Reinsch, was "dominated entirely by the tactics and stratagems of war...a continuous struggle for political advantage and power."²⁵ Aside from secret diplomacy concerning itself with government-to-government contact, it was a game played by insiders, with little regard to outsiders, such as the press or the public. The outsiders were only considered as "material for statesmanship," or casualties in a game of tug of war.²⁶ And diplomats, or the insiders, considered it "dangerous" for the public to gain knowledge about matters of foreign policy.²⁷

²³ Waldo Heinrichs, *American Ambassador: Joseph Grew and the Development of the United States Diplomatic Tradition*, (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1966), 10.

²⁴ Mattox, *Twilight of Amateur Diplomacy*, 49-50.

²⁵ Paul Reinsch, *Secret Diplomacy: How Far Can it be Eliminated?*, (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1922), 22.

²⁶ Reinsch, *Secret Diplomacy*, 214.

²⁷ Harold Nicolson, *Diplomacy*, (London: Butterworth Ltd., 1939), 73.

Before the First World War, it was assumed that the public was incapable of understanding the complexities of foreign affairs. It was understood that average Americans rarely concerned themselves with the diplomatic matters and focused more on the pressing domestic issues of the day. Many diplomats considered the public's indifference a form of implicit trust, believing that the government would exhaust all options to maintain peace and fight for national interests when push came to shove.²⁸ Nevertheless, by the turn of the twentieth century, the criticism of foreign affairs began to form, suggesting those in foreign service were not qualified and recipients of political favor only.²⁹ This assumption was not entirely baseless for the Americans serving consulates abroad were typically more concerned with leisure than working. For example, most posts were usually opened only four hours a day, with two-hour lunch breaks breaking up the day.³⁰

American diplomacy throughout the nineteenth century was strictly a government-to-government process. The goal of a diplomat before 1914 was to deal with the foreign governments exclusively and maintain order, whether that meant preparing military alliances or preserving peace. However, when the First World War broke out, the old behavior of diplomacy was abandoned, and a new form took its place, known as public diplomacy.

Public Diplomacy During the First World War

For the United States, the shift from secret diplomacy towards public diplomacy during the First World War was a result of a change in American society. An increase in newspaper and magazine circulation and easier access to education helped to strengthen public opinion.

Moreover, there was a shift in presidential mindset on how to use and maneuver the press to

²⁸ Nicolson, *Diplomacy*, 10.

²⁹ Mattox, *Twilight of Amateur Diplomacy*, 4.

³⁰ Schulzinger, *Making of the Diplomatic Mind*, 3.

utilize policy better. Presidents Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson believed engaging with public opinion was vital to the health and success of democracy.

Unofficially known as the “public presidency,” Roosevelt’s tenure as president valued transparency and self-promotion. Roosevelt knew that to “command public attention” he must harness the power of the press.³¹ For example, during Roosevelt’s time as New York police commissioner, he worked with muckraking journalists, like Lincoln Steffens and Jacob Riis, letting their dedication to uncovering the truth to “guide him through the demimonde of criminals and cops.”³² Tapping into the pulse of public opinion was Roosevelt’s agenda, and he knew that was how social change began.

Although Roosevelt dedicated most of his efforts to cultivate domestic public opinion, he also asserted America’s image abroad. Until the beginning of the twentieth century, America practiced more or less a form of isolationism, only having a minor role in world affairs except a few places in Europe, Asia, and Latin America. The United States’ relations were almost exclusively oriented towards the Western Hemisphere. This reclusiveness was due to the adherence to the Monroe Doctrine. But by the turn of the twentieth century, the United States had begun to project itself abroad. After the United States entered the Spanish-American War of 1898, it propelled itself onto the world stage, promoting our culture and policy abroad. America became an empire overnight and with it came responsibility.

America for the first time in its young history believed it could solve the world’s problems through planning and regulation, as well as promote its interests through publicity programs.³³ For example, in 1908, Roosevelt signed legislation that provided scholarship funding

³¹ David Greenberg, *Republic of Spin: An Inside History of the American Presidency*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2016), 23.

³² Greenberg, *Republic of Spin*, 18-20.

³³ Cull, *The Cold War and the United States Information Agency*, 5.

for Chinese students to study in American universities, as well as funding schools in China. The goal was to spread American values and cultivate a positive image abroad. In 1910, international affairs organizations, such as the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and the Rockefeller Foundation, were created. Furthermore, under Roosevelt, an increase in humanitarian aid abroad also developed with the turn of the twentieth century.³⁴ But all of those initiatives were not referred to as “public diplomacy.”

It was Theodore Roosevelt who began the shift towards a more open, public diplomacy, but it was Woodrow Wilson who officially solidified its place in history. Wilson was a Progressive and recognized the threat that secrecy could have on democracy. Wilson supported transparency in government affairs and expected the same from the press. For example, Wilson argued against secrecy in congressional committees and elsewhere and insisted that “there ought to be no place where anything can be done that everybody does not know about...secrecy means impropriety...there is no air so wholesome as the air of utter publicity.”³⁵ And although Wilson felt that the press was sometimes preoccupied with drama and gossip, he felt it was necessary to engage with the press. Wilson was the first president to create biweekly press conferences, open to the White House press corps.³⁶ These conferences allowed him to deliver a direct message to the public, eliminating the chance for misinterpretation or miscommunication by the press.

By keeping in mind how presidents like Roosevelt and Wilson valued public opinion and recognized the power of the press, we can begin to see why there was such a dramatic shift in the way foreign affairs were conducted by the United States. Having a more open and public domestic policy led to a more open and public form of diplomacy. Considering the social and

³⁴ Cull, *The Cold War and the United States Information Agency*, 5-6.

³⁵ Greenberg, *Republic of Spin*, 80.

³⁶ Greenberg, *Republic of Spin*, 89.

political backdrop in the United States, public diplomacy was a natural step to take for Progressives like Roosevelt and Wilson during war. To truly assess the general impact of public diplomacy during the First World War, we will trace the actions of the Committee on Public Information.



When the U.S. entered the First World War, it required civilians to participate in the war any way they could, from enlisting to buying war bonds. For the first time, the U.S. government had to overshadow “all other sectors of society involved in systematic efforts to win over public opinion” both at home and abroad.³⁷ To influence public opinion, the government became the chief creator and dispenser of propaganda, taking over the role once filled by churches, political parties, philanthropists, and the press to create and assess public opinion. Given the nature of the First World War, it forced the United States to adopt public diplomacy because victory was only going to come through “a skillful combination of military power, economic power, and propaganda.”³⁸ And no other organization came closer than the Committee on Public Information to achieving America’s propaganda mission abroad.

Wilson created the CPI on April 13, 1917, through an executive order, merely a week after the United States officially entered the war, and charged the organization with influencing public opinion. The CPI served as a propaganda agency. It released official government news, it boosted American morale, it encouraged voluntary censorship of the press, and, most importantly, it developed propaganda abroad. The CPI’s mission penetrated the private lives of many ordinary Americans and shifted the individual’s relationship with the state.

³⁷ Gary Messinger, *British Propaganda and the State in the First World War*, (Manchester University Press, 1992), 2.

³⁸ E.H. Carr, *Propaganda in International Politics*, (Oxford pamphlets on world affairs, no. 16, 1939), 11.

The man chosen for the job was known muckraker and writer for the *Denver Post* George Creel. As chairman, Creel quickly gained both friends and rivals and experienced success and failure regarding the cooperation from other branches of the U.S. government. Although Wilson expected the full cooperation of the Department of State, the Department of War, and the Department of the Navy, men like Secretary of State Robert Lansing found it problematic to work with a civilian-led agency. Despite Creel's contentious relationship with Lansing's State Department, he "enjoyed the fullest cooperation of Military Intelligence, Naval Intelligence, and of certain Post Office officials."³⁹ Despite contention and setbacks, never before in U.S. diplomatic history had one person or committee had such access to these departments.

The CPI had two divisions, domestic and foreign, and twenty-two subdivisions. The Domestic Division oversaw the activities of the Division of News, the Official Bulletin, the Film Division, and the Four-Minute Men. All of these divisions used various media formats, such as newspapers, radio broadcasts, posters, telegraphs, cables, pamphlets, speeches, and silent films to broadcast its message. Ironically, however, Wilson believed the mass communication of the time, such as photography, phonograph recordings, and silent films were "artificial and undignified."⁴⁰

The *Official Bulletin*, first issued on May 10, 1917, was the first official daily newspaper of the United States government and its main purpose was to "eliminate a great deal of correspondence for the purpose of interdepartmental intelligence, to disseminate governed news throughout the country, and also to preserve 'without color or bias' a record of the nation's participation in the war."⁴¹ The Four-Minute Men was an organization responsible for giving

³⁹ Mock and Larson, *Words the Won the War*, 20.

⁴⁰ Greenberg, *Republic of Spin*, 87.

⁴¹ Mock and Larson, *Words the Won the War*, 68.

“four-minute talks in movie houses, theaters, and other public places” to encourage American enlistment in the war, buy war bonds, and explain the benefits of rationing.⁴² And at the height of the organization’s tenure, it boasted over 75,000 civilian volunteer speakers.

The Foreign Section, established formally in October 1917, had field offices in allied, belligerent, and neutral countries, such as Great Britain, France, Russia, Germany, Austria-Hungary, Italy, and Switzerland. The Foreign Section was comprised of three divisions: the Wireless and Cable Service, the Foreign Press Bureau, and the Foreign Film Division. The News Division dispatched daily prepared news to the foreign posts to clearly articulate American war aims. The Foreign Press Bureau sent agents aboard articles and photographs. And the Foreign Film Division exported CPI produced films.⁴³

Promoting America’s mission abroad was literally, as Creel put it, “the fight for the mind of mankind.”⁴⁴ Creel wasted no time assigning directors of the CPI Foreign section, including men like Arthur Woods, Will Irwin, Edgar Sisson, and H.N. Rickey. These men were in charge of creating a worldwide system of agents, like Vira Whitehouse in Switzerland and Charles E. Merriam in Italy, and “supplied [them] with a steady stream of American news and other American propaganda.”⁴⁵ The CPI’s public diplomacy mission had different objectives for different countries. For Germany and Austria-Hungary, it wanted to embolden separatist movements and destroy civilian morale. Even in Allied countries, such as France and Britain, the CPI aimed to procure the relationship and sell them on the Wilsonian dream of peace, multilateralism, and reconstruction.⁴⁶ For neutral countries, such as Denmark, Holland, and

⁴² Mock and Larson, *Words the Won the War*, 72.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 73-74.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 235.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 236.

Switzerland, the main objective was to keep them out of the war and conjure support for the Peace Conference. For Wilson, places like Switzerland became was a vital piece in the game of public diplomacy “to convince everyone that a peace such as was in his mind was the only hopeful peace for the world, and with establishing Americans rights as an unselfish, peace-loving, forward-looking democracy.”⁴⁷

The public affairs officers assigned to these posts acted as “jobbers and retailers of the news,” disseminating news stories, films, pamphlets, and other forms of media from Washington.⁴⁸ Although on the surface their work resembled propaganda, Creel felt that the CPI’s work ought to avoid the “lies and corruption” associated with German propaganda and “to teach the motives, purposes, and ideals of America so that friend, foe, and neutral alike might come to see us as a people without selfishness and in love with justice.”⁴⁹ Even the CPI agents believed that the American form of propaganda was “more truthful...and consecrated a higher cause.”⁵⁰ And in an effort to avoid suspicion and gain the trust of the foreign audiences, the agents of the CPI were sent openly to the countries they served.

The public diplomacy that the CPI practiced around the world from April 1917 to November 1918 was the first example the country had seen in terms of “winning the hearts and minds,” long before the Vietnam War. The purposes of the foreign mission aimed to convince people that America could never be beaten, prove that America was the land of the free and a pillar of democracy, and, most importantly, push for Wilson’s new vision of the world. Creel referred to the efforts as “the world’s greatest adventure in advertising.”⁵¹

⁴⁷ Mock and Larson, *Words the Won the War*, 264.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 238.

⁴⁹ Greenberg, *Republic of Spin*, 109; Creel, *How We Advertised America*, 237.

⁵⁰ Mock and Larson, *Words the Won the War*, 236.

⁵¹ Mock and Larson, *Words the Won the War*, 247; Creel, *How We Advertised America*, 4.

Public Diplomacy After the First World War

In 1918, the Committee of Public Information's foreign division was officially supposed to end with the November Armistice, but some elements continued well into 1919. And with this closure, public diplomacy went on a long-term hiatus by the end of the First World War.

Ironically, many felt that secret diplomacy was the leading cause of the war, whereas public diplomacy was going to end the war. For many democratic societies "propaganda was regarded as a necessary evil of war," and for Wilson propaganda was not revered as a long-term strategy for peace.⁵² Following the war, the United States and its allies reverted to the status quo, and public diplomacy initiatives were abandoned.

Diplomacy before First World War operated under the umbrella of secrecy. During the war, public diplomacy was developed as a tool for winning the war. And after the war, the United States reverted to business as usual and suspended its public diplomacy efforts, only resuming the techniques during the Second World War. By looking at the evolution of diplomacy, and more specifically, public diplomacy, we can better assess the operations of the Committee on Public Information under Vira Whitehouse in Switzerland.

⁵² M.L. Sanders and Philip M. Taylor, *British Propaganda during the First World War, 1914-1918*. (London: Macmillan Press, 1982), 248; Zara Steiner, *The Foreign Office and Foreign Policy, 1898-1914*, (London: Ashfield Press, 1986), 171.

CHAPTER 2. A BLOOMING PUBLICIST: WHITEHOUSE AND THE NEW YORK SUFFRAGE CAMPAIGN

I can't remember a time when I didn't believe in suffrage.

- Vira B. Whitehouse, 1913⁵³

Long before Whitehouse's stint as a public affairs agent for the CPI, she worked as a publicity agent for the suffrage movement in New York. By examining Whitehouse's early life and the obstacles she faced as a suffragist, we can connect her tactics and determination to her role as a public servant in Switzerland.

Originally Vira Boarman, she was born in New Orleans, on September 16, 1875.⁵⁴ And for a time she was educated at Newcomb High School, under Sophie Newcomb College, the South's first all-women's college.⁵⁵ Throughout most of the 1890s, as a young debutante, Whitehouse was the subject of many "Society" articles in the New Orleans' *Times-Democrat* and the *Times-Picayune*. Whether the report was on her attire, her social network, her travels, or parties she attended, words used to describe her were "southern belle," "young beauty," and of "the Creole type."⁵⁶ Aside from taking hold of the New Orleans society, she soon charmed those in New York.⁵⁷ In 1898, Whitehouse went on to marry New York banker James Norman de Rapelye Whitehouse at a simple ceremony in Huntsville, Alabama.⁵⁸ Whitehouse soon made a name for herself in New York.

⁵³ "Mrs. Norman Whitehouse Makes Her Maiden Speech for Suffrage," *The Sun* (New York: NY), December 10, 1913.

⁵⁴ "Alphabetical Birth Indexes for Orleans Parish, 1796-1900." *USGenWeb Archives - Census, Wills, Deeds, Genealogy*, Louisiana State Archives, Dec. 2002, files.usgwarchives.net/la/orleans/vitals/births/index/nobibobq.txt.

⁵⁵ According to the records from Newcomb Archives and Vorhoff Library Special Collections. Vira Whitehouse, née Boarman, was enrolled in the Newcomb High School, an affiliated school for young girls to prepare them for college, which lasted from 1888-1920. Some scholars have stated she attended Wellesley College and Sophie Newcomb College, but the records are not clear enough to make a definitive statement.

⁵⁶ "Miss Vera Boarman, Society's Reigning Belle," *The World* (New York: NY), January 8, 1898.

⁵⁷ "Miss. Vira Boarman Has Created a Sensation in New York Society," *Times-Picayune* (New Orleans: LA), January 8, 1898.

⁵⁸ "New York Banker Weds a New Orleans Society Girl," *Times-Democrat* (New Orleans: LA), May 1, 1898.

Prior to moving to New York, Whitehouse had been a longtime supporter of women's equality. "I can't remember a time when I didn't believe in suffrage," Whitehouse once noted in a speech given at the Women's Political Union, "and I wanted to do something for it, but I didn't know how to do anything except dance and go to dinner parties."⁵⁹ Whitehouse soon found an outlet for her cause. In 1913, Whitehouse briefly volunteered at Bellevue Hospital and tended the Women's Political Union (WPU) suffrage shop. Other suffrage organizations opened suffrage shops, but the shops typically served as the headquarters for organizations, like the NAWSA. The WPU suffrage shops, which included a storefront and a lunch van, served as a campaign space, allowing men and women to learn more about suffrage through daily programs about suffrage speeches, upcoming events, and how to volunteer. Aside from being informational, the shop also sold suffrage paraphernalia, such as buttons, pencils, and literature.⁶⁰ In 1914, the WPU's "shop" took a permanent position in an empty storefront on Fifth Avenue, and Whitehouse and her friend, Mrs. Helen Rogers Reid, wife of Ogden Mills Reid and a director of the New York *Herald Tribune*, managed the WPU's daily activities.⁶¹

In her early days as a suffragist, Whitehouse was an orator and volunteer. She worked her way through the ranks, and worked alongside major suffrage leaders such as Carrie Chapman Catt and Anna Howard Shaw. In 1915, she even served as the vice chairman of the New York State Women's Suffrage Party (NYSWSP). Whitehouse was a vocal and dynamic force for the suffrage movement and was not afraid to take risks. For example, Whitehouse made cold calls to gauge potential voters views on suffrage, serving as one of the first uses of telephone polling.⁶²

⁵⁹ "Mrs. Norman Whitehouse Makes Her Maiden Speech for Suffrage," *The Sun* (New York: NY), December 10, 1913.

⁶⁰ Ellen Carol DuBois, *Harriot Stanton Blatch and the Winning of Woman Suffrage*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 154.

⁶¹ "Mrs. Whitehouse, Suffrage Leader," *New York Times*, April 12, 1957.

⁶² Johanna Neuman, *Gilded Suffragists: The New York Socialites Who Fought for Women's Right to Vote*, (New York: New York University Press, 2017), 114.

Whitehouse and other New York suffragists utilized publicity and dedicated themselves to making it impossible to ignore. The “Empire State Campaign,” a press and publicity council, used posters, buttons, and advertisement placements in banks, theatres, and newspapers.⁶³ In February 1915, Whitehouse secured three hundred billboard spaces to promote suffrage and enlisted supporters to submit poster ideas. She even created subcommittees for the Empire State Campaign to create strategies to efficiently publicize suffrage in theaters, art galleries, and newspapers.⁶⁴

She was also a proponent of peaceful demonstrations as effective means of political action. For example, in 1915, in objection to the claim that a “woman’s place is in the home” Whitehouse encouraged women to stay home for one day to “call a political bluff” many men propagated.⁶⁵ Whitehouse, who believed that women were valuable both inside and outside the home, encouraged all women, poor or rich, working or not, to literally stay home, refraining from purchasing and working. Whitehouse believed this form of protest would not necessarily win women suffrage on November 2, 1915, but that it was a symbolic gesture “to awaken the opponents of woman suffrage who use the phrase ‘woman’s place is in the home’ to its meaninglessness as applied to modern conditions.”⁶⁶

Whitehouse became the chairman of the New York State Woman’s Suffrage Party immediately following the failure of the 1915 vote. She was actively involved in a yearlong campaign to ensure that the vote would reappear on the ballot by the fall of 1917. From February to April 1916, it is difficult to find any newspaper article that reported on the progress of suffrage

⁶³ Margaret Finnegan, *Selling Suffrage: Consumer Culture and Votes for Women*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 61-63.

⁶⁴ “Suffragists to Pay \$50 for Campaign Poster,” *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* (Brooklyn: NY), February 27, 1915.

⁶⁵ “City Tie-Up Strike Gets New Backing,” *New York Times*, August 19, 1915.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

legislation without mentioning Whitehouse. Whether the articles merely mentioned her role as chairman, quoted her directly, or reported her actions, Whitehouse was an integral part to any report in New York prior to the November 1917 vote.

New York tried to pass suffrage in November 1915. The effort failed by a nearly 200,000 margin difference, with 433,800 in favor and 627,400 against.⁶⁷ By spring of 1916, Vira Whitehouse, as the newly elected chairman of the NYSWSP, launched a vigorous statewide to put suffrage on the 1917 ballot. Under Whitehouse, the NYSWSP developed new tactics that it had learned from its previous mistakes in the 1915 campaign. For example, according to Whitehouse, the movement's members acted like "amateurs" and not "professionals," which is why the suffrage campaign failed.⁶⁸ Whitehouse noted that despite the endless meetings, distribution of leaflets, and tireless volunteer work, they had allowed themselves to get carried away with other idle endeavors, "we thought of pleasure and other duties. In the heat of the summer, when our efforts for our campaign should have been greatest, many of us left our posts in the cities and took holiday."⁶⁹

Whitehouse deployed a number of traditional and nontraditional tactics to garner statewide support of suffrage. Aside from old tactics, such as door-to-door canvassing and petitioning, she adopted new tactics, such as soliciting powerful men to raise funds, associating the passage of suffrage as a form patriotism, and encouraging women to contribute to national wartime services.

⁶⁷ "Vote on Suffrage Amendments," *New York Times*, November 3, 1915.

⁶⁸ "Suffrage First is Plea of Mrs. Whitehouse," *New York Evening Post*, November 21, 1916.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*



Prior to Whitehouse's role as leader of the NYSWSP, the campaign funds at the disposal of the New York suffrage leaders were dependent on donations from women, both working and stay-at-home. When Whitehouse took over, she made it known that she felt it was unfair to ask women to donate because they were not economically independent. Scholars Susan Goodier and Karen Pastorello noted that Whitehouse exhibited a natural ability to fundraise in most of the leadership roles she filled.⁷⁰

Whitehouse believed that the suffrage campaign should solicit money as did political parties by acquiring large donations from wealthy men. Men like James Lees Laidlaw, a New York banker and husband of suffragist Harriet Laidlaw, and Samuel Untermeyer significantly contributed to the suffrage cause. Laidlaw, who was considered a "pioneer in woman's suffrage," donated and served as the New York State Men's League for Woman Suffrage, which influenced prominent judges, lawyers, bankers, and other businessmen.⁷¹ Untermeyer, a prominent New York lawyer, philanthropist, and stalwart supporter of President Wilson, provided around \$10,000 to the suffrage campaign as well.⁷² Even her husband, Norman Whitehouse, served as a member and treasurer of the Men's League for Woman Suffrage. George Creel also served the organization most heavily from 1915-1917, even was the publicity chair until the April 1917.⁷³

By the time suffrage passed in 1917, according to Helen Odgen Reid, the treasurer of the NYSWSP, it cost the suffrage campaign a little over \$400,000 to win, avoiding debt. Whitehouse

⁷⁰ Susan Goodier and Karen Pastorello, *Women Will Vote: Winning Suffrage in New York State*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2017).

⁷¹ "James L. Laidlaw's Funeral Will Be Held on Thursday," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* (Brooklyn: NY), May 10, 1932.

⁷² "Samuel Untermeyer," *Wilkes-Barre Record* (Wilkes-Barre, PA), March 19, 1940; Robert P.J. Cooney, "Articles/Photographs," *How New York Women Won Equal Suffrage 100 Years Ago*, American Graphic Press, 2017, americangraphicpress.com/articlesphotographs.html.

⁷³ Brook Kroeger, *The Suffragents: How Women Used Men to Get Votes*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2017), 199-200, 213.

noted this significance by stating, “I bet we are the first campaign committee that ever wound up our affairs without having to call on our underwriters for a penny.”⁷⁴ Although Whitehouse cannot be credited with raising all funds for the movement, the steps she and others took in 1916 and 1917 to target rich donors helped the suffrage movement to go from \$90,000 in 1915 to around \$700,000 by 1917.⁷⁵



By April 1917, the United States entered the First World War, and with it brought obstacles and opportunities for the suffrage campaign. In terms of drawbacks, on the state and national levels, members of the suffrage movement had to combat allegations that they were traitors and political partisans. Anti-suffragists referred to suffragists as pro-German, socialists, or pacifists. Many of these allegations stemmed from suffragists either picketing in front of the White House or receiving public support from more radical political organizations, like the Socialist Party. Those claims forced Whitehouse to clarify that suffrage was a concept equally supported across party lines and ideologies, “the anti-suffragists say the pro-Germans gave us suffrage. They forget our Governor and our President, and the Republican party and the Democratic party and all the women present and all the workers upstate who have helped, and we know we are not pro-Germans.”⁷⁶ Even when New York suffrage passed, the anti-suffragists never abandoned their claims that the suffragists were traitors and credited the passage to popular support by pro-Germans and Socialists.

Aside from funding, Whitehouse knew it was necessary to associate women’s suffrage with patriotism and national service. Despite the drawbacks, the war emboldened suffragists and

⁷⁴ “Women Plan Battle at the Polls Against Enemies of Suffrage,” *New York Tribune*, November 21, 1917.

⁷⁵ Cooney, “*How New York Women Won Equal Suffrage*,” (2017).

⁷⁶ “Women Plan Battle at the Polls Against Enemies of Suffrage,” *New York Tribune*, November 21, 1917.

provided new opportunities for them to amend their platform. The war presented two needs for all citizens to meet: (i) to defend and preserve democracy at home; (ii) to support the war efforts. Under Whitehouse's leadership, the NYSWSP made it its mission to fulfill and meet these needs. First, Whitehouse drew parallels between support for suffrage and patriotism. Although the war never came to the shores of the U.S., Whitehouse, and her colleagues, asserted that the war had two fronts: one in which women defended the home front and the other in which men fought overseas. Days before the New York suffrage vote in November 1917, Whitehouse and a delegation of suffragists met and spoke with President Wilson, who already openly supported women's suffrage, to gain state and national coverage of women's dedication to patriotism. Whitehouse, as the spokesperson, reminded Wilson and members of the press that women canvassed to sell Liberty Bonds, raised money for the Red Cross, and increased enrollment in the Hoover food campaign.⁷⁷

Suffragists were required to express and demonstrate support for the war effort. Whitehouse's NYSWSP, the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA), and the New York City Woman Suffrage Party (NYCWSP) called for a Woman's Parade to demonstrate women's patriotism. Held on October 27, 1917, suffragist leaders, members, mothers, wives and sisters of soldiers and sailors, tax-paying women, government service women, such as war nurses, munition workers, and liberty loan volunteers, and, even men, flooded the streets of New York City.⁷⁸ While Catt and Shaw were there, a local paper reported that Whitehouse was active on the ground and represented the party and her district, "after walking the Seventy-seventh street as a State chairman, she[Whitehouse] dashed back to Forty-

⁷⁷ "The President's Message," *The Woman Citizen* 1, 23 (November 3, 1917): 432.

⁷⁸ "Woman's Parade Oct. 27," *Springville Journal* (Springville, NY), October 4, 1917.

second street and walked up again with her own Fifteenth Assembly district.”⁷⁹ Aside from waving American flags, women even carried boards with all the 1,014,000 signatures of New York women who supported suffrage. There were even banners used to appeal to men that included text like “President Wilson says, ‘This is the time to support woman suffrage.’”⁸⁰

Furthermore, following the passage of suffrage, the NYSWSP determined that in order to make the most of suffrage, they must make good, educated, and informed citizens. Several committees were formed at one of the Suffrage Party’s annual conventions, such as the Americanization Committee and the War Service Committee. The Americanization Committee was dedicated to educating wives of immigrants who became citizens. As newly enfranchised voters, and representing nearly 400,000 immigrant women in the state, the NYSWSP reached these women to provide information about “citizenship, naturalization, voting, and important war matters.”⁸¹⁸² By having informed citizens, through the Americanization Committee, the NYSWSP believed the war could be won at home.

Second, Whitehouse promoted and encouraged national service of women. In general, women were already being asked to contribute to the national war effort. For example, the government created the Woman’s Advisory Committee of the Council of National Defense, which suffragists led. Leaders in New York, Anna Howard Shaw, who was named the Council President, and Carrie Chapman Catt, served this organization. Suffragists also made clothing, generated supplies, and cultivated gardens to raise food for the war effort. Suffragists even assisted in military census taking.⁸³

⁷⁹ “20,000 March as Living Plea for Suffrage.” *The Sun* (New York: NY), October 28, 1917.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*,

⁸¹ Vira Whitehouse, “Women Suffrage in New York,” *The Nation* 106, 2761 (June 1, 1918): 647.

⁸² “Will Americanized Immigrant Women,” *New York Times*, December 23, 1917.

⁸³ “Suffrage Forces Ready to Start Census Activity,” *Ithaca Journal* (Ithaca: NY), May 3, 1917.

In New York, for example, women in Westchester and Nassau counties were “given entire responsibility for taking census, providing enrollment, reports, etc.”⁸⁴ Furthermore, after the suffrage victory in November 1917, Whitehouse’s NYSWSP held its forty-ninth convention and further committed to preparing women in the state to be good citizens and demonstrate women’s dedication to national service. Aside from the previously mentioned Americanization Committee, the War Service Committee was created to serve “as a clearing house for all kinds of war service, cooperates with existing agencies for war work.” Its purpose was to cooperate with the State-wide initiative to raise Liberty Loans, canvas for war stamps, and aid organizations such as, the Woman’s Land Army of America and the Council of National Defense in the Children’s Year campaign.⁸⁵



Suffrage was passed, and largely carried by the five boroughs of New York City. In key upstate areas such as Binghamton, Buffalo, and Westchester suffrage won by large majorities, but lost a majority in Albany, Kingston, and Rochester.⁸⁶ The final votes total for suffrage was 641,500 in favor and 547,500 opposed.⁸⁷ Whitehouse achieved many accomplishments while serving as the chairman of the NYSWSP. By November 1917, membership for suffrage enrollment reached a little over one million statewide, adding about 10,000 memberships since September.⁸⁸ In light of that news, Whitehouse once remarked that despite the war effort, the suffrage movement received more support because it “recognized that the demand for woman suffrage is based on love of country and a desire to serve.”⁸⁹

⁸⁴ “Suffrage Party to Aid Census,” *Springville Journal* (Springville: NY), June 14, 1917.

⁸⁵ Vira Whitehouse, “Women Suffrage in New York,” *The Nation* 106, 2761 (June 1, 1918): 647.

⁸⁶ “Women Carry City,” *New York Times*, November 7, 1917.

⁸⁷ “Suffrage Fight Won in Cities,” *New York Times*, November 8, 1917.

⁸⁸ “The President’s Message,” *The Woman Citizen* 1, 23 (November 3, 1917): 432.

⁸⁹ “Is America to Lag Behind?” *The Woman Citizen* 1, 15 (September 8, 1917): 273.

Whitehouse was a realistic leader, with a humble view of the events that took place. Upon receiving news of the victory, Whitehouse noted that it was not won with luck, but with determination, “we didn’t expect such a landslide. We didn’t have hope for such a victory, but oh, we have worked hard and honestly for it and we are glad.”⁹⁰ Moreover, many in the NYSWSP honored Whitehouse for her efforts by giving her a golden wreath. “It’s not a crown; it’s a wreath,” was the distinction made by most of the party, which asserted that “a crown would be most undemocratic, while a wreath would be merely a fitting symbol of victory.”⁹¹



Vira Whitehouse’s employed unconventional methods to get results for suffrage in New York. Whitehouse once noted in her memoir that Creel offered her the job as director of the foreign office in Berne because “he remember[ed] how hard I had made him work,” admitting that she had “slave-driven him.”⁹² The skills Vira Whitehouse’s developed during the suffrage campaign, such as organization, oratory, and efficiency, prepared her for the position as the first female public diplomacy officer in Switzerland. Whitehouse knew that serving in Berne would assist the eventual passage of nationwide suffrage, “wherever women are permitted to show their ability our great cause is helped.”⁹³ Nevertheless, despite Whitehouse’s qualifications and relentless determination, the difficulties she faced in Switzerland can be credited to poor management of the CPI back home, the lack of precedence for such a propaganda bureau, and her gender.

⁹⁰ “Cheers and Kisses for Suff Victory,” *The Sun* (New York: NY), November 7, 1917.

⁹¹ “Mrs. Whitehouse Will Take Emblem,” *New York Times*, December 1, 1917.

⁹² Vira Whitehouse, *A Year as a Government Agent*, (New York: Harper and Brothers Publisher, 1920), 2.

⁹³ “Women Exult Over U.S. Mission for Mrs. Whitehouse,” *New York Tribune*, January 01, 1918.

CHAPTER 3. TRIALS AND TRIBULATIONS: VIRA WHITEHOUSE IN BERNE, 1918

I came here to fight Germans, not American officials.

- Vira B. Whitehouse, 1918⁹⁴

What Vira Whitehouse accomplished during her brief time in Berne is nothing less than impressive. As a novice public affairs officer, Whitehouse established relationships with Swiss editors and news outlets and maintained a stable relationship between neutral Switzerland and the US during and after the war. However, Whitehouse's publicity campaign abroad was not free from struggles and challenges. Aside from dealing with isolation and homesickness, Whitehouse was troubled from the very start because of the general novelty that surrounded the Committee on Public Information. When Whitehouse first arrived in Berne on January 29, 1918, many problems ensued that stemmed from the lack of precedence for such a publicity bureau, sparking an intergovernmental rivalry with the State Department. Additionally, poor management on behalf of George Creel and the CPI and the simple fact of her being a woman working in a male-dominated field sparked problems and challenges. Whitehouse's time in Berne serves to illustrate the uneasy beginnings of public diplomacy.



Whitehouse became the CPI director in Switzerland through her close association with George Creel. In December 1917, following the suffrage victory in New York, Creel approached Whitehouse at the National American Women Suffrage convention in Washington D.C.⁹⁵ This coincidental meeting served both Creel and Whitehouse differently. Creel was looking for a competent person, trained in publicity campaigns, and Whitehouse was looking for a way to join the war effort. Foreshadowing the events that would await her in Berne, Whitehouse once noted,

⁹⁴ Whitehouse, *A Year as a Government Agent*, 307; Whitehouse to Creel, March 23, 1918, VBW.

⁹⁵ Whitehouse, *A Year as a Government Agent*, 3.

“I had longed to join the women who were doing their share directly to help toward the final victory, although I had never had any dreams of being a heroine...[but] I knew that my part at best would be only hard, unpicturesque work at an office desk in safety.”⁹⁶ At first, Creel suggested she work someplace in South America, but Whitehouse was opposed to that option because she believed “the general attitude toward women in South American would make such work on the part of a woman impractical.”⁹⁷ Instead, Whitehouse went with the second choice, Switzerland. The experiences Whitehouse was set to face in Berne were far more “unpicturesque” when she set sail for Europe.

In theory, Switzerland appeared to be a good fit for Whitehouse given her professional career, especially due to its size and population. Based on Whitehouse’s experience as publicity director for the New York State Women Suffrage Party, she was familiar with promoting messages across a wide array of audiences. And Switzerland would prove to be no different. Whitehouse went from directing a political campaign in New York, a state spanning nearly 50,000 square miles, with a population of 10,000,000, to directing a publicity bureau in a country a third of the size, with half the population. Moreover, Whitehouse had basic knowledge of French, which was useful for a nation that was divided ethno-nationally and linguistically between French, German, and Italian speakers. Switzerland’s role in the war served the interests of the US, which was to weaken Germany and Austria-Hungary and prepare for peace after that. Because Switzerland bordered on both Allied and Central Power countries, it was useful because it published articles in German and served as a conduit of information to Austria-Hungary and Germany.

⁹⁶ Whitehouse, *A Year as a Government Agent*, 3.

⁹⁷ Whitehouse, *A Year as a Government Agent*, 4.

Before departing for Switzerland, Whitehouse set several conditions that she wanted met by Creel. She expected the work of the CPI to be seen as “legitimate and friendly” in the eyes of the Swiss. To fully execute this stipulation, Whitehouse required she be given a diplomatic passport and have official recognition as director of the Swiss post by Creel.⁹⁸ Through these measures, she would effectively handle and distribute news cables to the Swiss press, prepare pamphlets and special articles, show films, and create a bilateral relationship with the Swiss and US press.

When Whitehouse arrived in Berne in late January 1918, on the surface it appeared her biggest challenge would be battling German subterfuge. Whitehouse first settled in Berne’s Bellevue Palace hotel, which she described as a hub where “the diplomats of all the warring nations met,” as well as journalists, artists, and even spies of both the Allied and Central Powers.⁹⁹ At the Bellevue Palace, Whitehouse found it was standard for grown men of the warring countries to block each other in pathways, refusing to budge, or for spies go through personal belongings for the purpose of sabotage and to collect intelligence.¹⁰⁰ Wartime Switzerland was a place where German spies spied on everyone, Swiss spies monitored others spies and protected Swiss neutrality laws, and Entente spies attempted to hinder German deception.

In addition to espionage, wartime Switzerland served as a place where ideologies clashed and Germans exploited class cleavages. As illustrated in Tom Stoppard’s fictional play, *Travesties* (1974), wartime Switzerland served as a place where complex ideas such as modernism, communism, and Dadaism formed and men such as James Joyce, Vladimir Lenin,

⁹⁸ Whitehouse, *A Year as a Government Agent*, 6.

⁹⁹ Whitehouse, *A Year as a Government Agent*, 25-26.

¹⁰⁰ Whitehouse, *A Year as a Government Agent*, 26, 34.

and Tristan Tzara had spirited debate.¹⁰¹ Moreover, according to American Minister to Switzerland, Pleasant Stovall, being pro-German or anti-German was a sentiment based on one's class. Stovall stated that "bankers, the clergy, university professors, the doctors and lawyers, the capitalists, and the heads of the police department were mainly Pro-German" whereas Entente sympathizers were those of the working class, for they believed Germany was going to exploit Switzerland of its resources and would threaten the country's independence.¹⁰² Because of this climate, Whitehouse's mission abroad had to take into account that many people in neutral countries, like Switzerland, were concerned with U.S. motives for entering the war. The Swiss backdrop served as a challenge to the overall effectiveness of the CPI office in Berne.



Although Whitehouse first arrived in Switzerland in late January 1918, she would not begin her official work until July 1918. During her first few months in Switzerland, Whitehouse faced numerous diplomatic delays, stemming from strife between her and the American Legation to having to dispel rumors of her post. Moreover, poor management on behalf of Creel further caused trouble for Whitehouse's public diplomacy mission.

Before Whitehouse arrived in Berne, suspicion over her role and duties came under question both at home and abroad. Nearly two weeks before her departure, media reports suggested disapproval of her appointment by Secretary of State Robert Lansing. Reports began to circulate that Secretary Lansing was not consulted about her position and disliked, even opposed, her diplomatic role in Europe, thus denying her credentials and formal recognition of the State Department.¹⁰³ However, the following day, Lansing "indignantly" denied the reports

¹⁰¹ Tom Stoppard. 1975. *Travesties*, New York: Grove Press.

¹⁰² Pleasant Stovall, *Switzerland and the World War*, (Savannah: Mason, 1939), 51.

¹⁰³ "No Credentials for Mrs. Whitehouse," *New York Times*, January 09, 1918.

that he protested her appointment and stated that Whitehouse had his “sympathetic support” and would be “assisted in every way by the State Department,” but would not work under the official status of the State Department.¹⁰⁴ When Whitehouse left for Switzerland, she did not receive a diplomatic passport, a stipulation she presented to Creel beforehand.

To make matters worse, both in Paris and Berne, rumors circulated about her role in Switzerland. Before her arrival, the American Embassy in Paris and the American Legation in Berne were notified that she was coming, but the purpose was still unclear. A pro-German Swiss newspaper, *La Feuille*, critically reported that Whitehouse’s mission in Switzerland was to promote American propaganda, meanwhile stressing that warring Switzerland was in desperate need of “wheat, not words.”¹⁰⁵ And the State Department did little to help the situation. Hugh Wilson, the First Secretary of the Legation in Switzerland, under Minister Pleasant Stovall, created difficulties for her immediately. After the article in *La Feuille*, Wilson cabled Washington and argued that because of the hostility of the report, it would be best if he officially denied America’s intent to establish a propaganda office in Switzerland. In addition to denying the propaganda claims, Wilson wanted to reassure Swiss audiences that Whitehouse was “selected by a Department of the Government of the United States to visit France, Switzerland, and England for the purposes of studying the economic conditions relating to women and children.”¹⁰⁶

Weeks before her arrival, Creel told the Legation that she was not a representative of the CPI, but in Berne to study “women and children.”¹⁰⁷ The “women and children” story

¹⁰⁴ “Lansing Will Aid Mrs. Whitehouse,” *New York Times*, January 10, 1918.

¹⁰⁵ Whitehouse, *A Year as a Government Agent*, 15.

¹⁰⁶ Whitehouse, *A Year as a Government Agent*, 15-18, 291; Wolper, “The Origins of Public Diplomacy,” 26.

¹⁰⁷ Creel to Frank Polk, January 21, 1918, Box 4, FLP; “Paraphrase of Telegram Received from Department of State dated January 26 [1918],” VBW.

exacerbated an already difficult situation for Whitehouse's relationship with the Legation. The story set in motion acrimony between Whitehouse and the Legation and made it more difficult for her to begin her work. There is no explanation for why Creel told those in Paris and Berne this story, but it served to negate his promise to her that her work would be official, legitimate, and independent.¹⁰⁸ Subsequently, a denial letter about Whitehouse's mission to spread propaganda was issued by Acting Secretary of State Frank Polk, through the sentiments of Hugh Wilson, to the Swiss press. This scenario forced Whitehouse to defend her role as legitimate public affairs officer and forced her to fight against the false impression that surrounded her. Furthermore, Creel's claim that she was in Switzerland to study women and children put the Legation in a tricky spot for if it contradicted or retracted the denial, it would jeopardize the reputation of the Legation.¹⁰⁹

On the surface, it appeared that Hugh Wilson and others in the Legation were concerned with the arousing Swiss hostility, but in reality, they were threatened by the CPI. Foreign affairs and diplomatic service were matters of the State Department, not to be shared with a rookie publicity bureau. Furthermore, the creation of the CPI threatened the State Department's role as a diplomacy agency. While the CPI aimed to spread information through the most transparent and open means possible, even valuing government-to-people initiatives, the State Department, wrapped in tradition, did not value the new practice of public diplomacy. Men who practiced traditional diplomacy, like Hugh Wilson and Pleasant Stovall, believed open propaganda was ineffective on foreign audiences, especially the Swiss because they would dismiss the information as inauthentic and resent it as a threat to their neutrality.¹¹⁰ The Legation's attitude

¹⁰⁸ Creel to Whitehouse, December 31, 1918, VBW; Wolper, "Origins of Public Diplomacy," 27.

¹⁰⁹ Hugh Wilson to Lansing, February 8, 1918, VBW.

¹¹⁰ Stovall to Lansing, May 4, 1918, WW-LOC; Wolper, "Origins of Public Diplomacy," 32.

about open publicity work was further supported by Carl Ackerman, a reporter for the *Saturday Evening Post*, who while working on a propaganda study for Colonel House and the State Department, stated, “I do not think we should advertise what we are doing.”¹¹¹ The Legation in Berne agreed with Ackerman’s assessment of propaganda in Switzerland, but those in the CPI, like Whitehouse, felt that the Swiss would welcome open and transparent American news and recognize its value.¹¹²

The antagonism Whitehouse experienced from her State Department cohorts in Berne came from a general resentment of the CPI. In the eyes of the State Department, the introduction of the CPI was another impediment to the synchronization and professionalization of foreign service. By the twentieth century, the diplomatic services were becoming more professionalized. For example, President Theodore Roosevelt implemented consular service examinations to replace those in service with connections with those of merit.¹¹³ Deviating from Roosevelt’s attempt to professionalize and create a merit-based system, the Wilson administration went back to the spoils system. The regressive shift was a jolt to the general morale of the men in Europe because they were seeing ambassadors and ministers replaced by politicians favorable to Wilson. Thus when Wilson created the CPI and appointed a civilian chairman like Creel, and further expected the cooperation of the State Department, it heightened the resentment.¹¹⁴ Whitehouse was not ignorant of this situation. As she once remarked to Creel, “the whole Legation is poisoned by antagonism to your department....It seems that it must come from instructions or lack of instructions from Washington.”¹¹⁵

¹¹¹ Stovall to Lansing, May 4, 1918, WW-LOC.

¹¹² Whitehouse to Creel, n.d., VBW; Whitehouse mentions this is in response to a Feb. 8th telegram.

¹¹³ Schulzinger, *Making of the Diplomatic Mind*, 42.

¹¹⁴ Schulzinger, *Making of the Diplomatic Mind*, 59-61.

¹¹⁵ Whitehouse to Creel, Feb 24, 1918, VBW.

In the meantime, Whitehouse was denied access to the cable and the wireless services from Washington. She hoped that Wilson was providing the information to the Swiss press, which he was not. Whitehouse demanded that he turn the cables over to her, and he refused.¹¹⁶ Furthermore, without proper credentials such as diplomatic passport Swiss editors would not work with Whitehouse without a clear confirmation that she was with the American Legation.¹¹⁷ Furious over the matter, Whitehouse frantically wrote to Creel for clarity and assurance, but he only offered inaction and hesitation.

After much back and forth, Acting Secretary Polk put an end to the confusion once and for all by issuing a reply to Wilson in Berne, by President Wilson, allowing her to begin her publicity campaign and “commence the handling [of the] cable service, motion pictures and other work.”¹¹⁸ With Wilson’s confirmation of her role in Berne, it appeared that Whitehouse was set to begin her work nearly six weeks after her arrival. However, her problems continued when Minister Pleasant Stovall returned from a brief absence from the American Legation in Berne on March 8, 1918. Stovall made it clear that he not only disapproved of a woman working in such an official capacity, but he also condemned the propaganda work of the CPI. Again the dilemma of who was in charge resurfaced.

Upon Stovall’s objection to the CPI and Whitehouse’s role as the director, Whitehouse reached out to Creel to resolve the matter and received little satisfaction. Creel suggested Whitehouse rely on the letter of authorization he gave her before she left and work “without connection with the legation or endorsement by it.”¹¹⁹ After much resistance and acrimony, Whitehouse decided it was best to return to the United States and issued a letter of resignation on

¹¹⁶ Whitehouse, *A Year as a Government Agent*, 29.

¹¹⁷ Wolper, “Origins of Public Diplomacy,” 35.

¹¹⁸ Wolper, “Origins of Public Diplomacy,” 36.

¹¹⁹ Creel to Whitehouse, March 15, 1918, VBW.

March 18, 1918.¹²⁰ Whitehouse saw her resignation as a lesson to be learned, “no more blind acceptance for me! Next time everything would have to be explicitly defined and understood!”¹²¹ The entire situation must not have been easy for Whitehouse to endure, for both of her previous stipulations had been unfulfilled by Creel, and her efforts to support the war effort were postponed. Whitehouse consistently battled claims of her illegitimacy. Not only did Whitehouse not have a diplomatic passport, but she was forced to compromise her values of remaining transparent and open.

Although Whitehouse resigned, that did not stop Creel from trying to convince her to reconsider either staying in Berne or assisting with the CPI work in Paris. Whitehouse, however, felt that leaving and resolving the matter back in the U.S. was the only way possible to complete her work and expressed that she did “not feel my effectiveness has been destroyed if the Legation’s misrepresentation and suggestions of mystery about my work cease.”¹²² Whitehouse’s return to the U.S. placed doubt in the mind of Creel about the feasibility of her return to Berne. “It is her idea of course to have things settled here, and go right back to Switzerland,” Creel wrote Norman Whitehouse, “but my own feeling is that they have prejudiced her work so thoroughly in Switzerland, that a return would be useless.”¹²³ The Legation, specifically Stovall, did not see the value of her return based on the social and political conditions in Berne. “The Swiss are not only not influenced by efforts recognizable as ‘propaganda’ but they positively resent them,” Stovall wrote to President Wilson. He added that “the ‘antagonism’ to Mrs. Whitehouse did not arise from the Legation but grew out of Switzerland itself.”¹²⁴

¹²⁰ Whitehouse to Creel, March 18, 1918, VBW; Whitehouse, *A Year as a Government Agent*, 306-307.

¹²¹ Whitehouse, *A Year as a Government Agent*, 90.

¹²² Whitehouse to Creel, March 29, 1918, VBW.

¹²³ Creel to Norman deR. Whitehouse, April 12, 1918, Entry 1, CPI.

¹²⁴ Stovall to WW, March 27, 1918, WW-LOC.

Whitehouse's renowned determination inevitably brought her back to Switzerland. Whitehouse not only learned information about her role in Berne, but also presented a full strategy on what she wanted to accomplish, which was approved by Creel and President Wilson. Furthermore, for her work to appear legitimate to the Swiss Press, Whitehouse sought the support of Hans Sulzer, the Swiss Minister to the U.S. By authority of the Swiss government, Sulzer provided her the necessary credentials to work in Switzerland under the direction of the CPI.¹²⁵ On May 23, 1918, President Wilson heard she was returning to Berne and wrote:

I am glad to learn that your own convictions and investigation lead you to endorse the unreservedly American policy of absolute openness. We have nothing to conceal, no secret ambitions to further, and our activities in every foreign country are confined to a very frank exposition of America's war aims and national ideals.¹²⁶

Whitehouse returned to Berne with a diplomatic passport and two letters from President Wilson. Wilson sent one letter to Stovall that said Whitehouse "comes with my entire approval."¹²⁷ With these endorsements, she set sail for Europe in mid-June and began her official work on July 1, 1918.

Whitehouse felt it was immediately necessary to assure the Swiss government that her work would pose no threat to their neutrality. Thanks to her connection with Professor Rappard, of the University of Geneva, who was of national prominence and a friend of President Wilson, Whitehouse met Swiss President Felix Calonder. During her exchange with President Calonder, she guaranteed that the CPI would respect the neutrality laws of Switzerland and, in an effort to demonstrate transparency, suggested that a delegation of Swiss journalists visit the U.S. to see our war activities.¹²⁸ Finally, after five months of inaction, Whitehouse was able to execute the

¹²⁵ Creel to Whitehouse, May 17, 1918, VBW.

¹²⁶ WW to Whitehouse, May 23, 1918, WW-LOC; Whitehouse *A Year as a Government Agent*, 311.

¹²⁷ WW to Stovall, May 23, 1918, WW-LOC.

¹²⁸ Whitehouse, *A Year as a Government Agent*, 114.

assignment she was appointed to accomplish. Nevertheless, formal authorization did not guarantee a smooth operation on the ground.



The lack of precedents for an organization such as the CPI created strife with the State Department, caused Whitehouse delays, and demonstrated the general weakness of early public diplomacy. Another impediment surrounding Whitehouse resulted from poor management from the CPI, both in Washington and in Paris. Efficiencies were sacrificed because Whitehouse not only had to build a publicity office from scratch, but also had to procure materials and staff, as well as navigate the local tensions of Switzerland, all on her own.

Poor management on behalf of the CPI came from its inability to provide necessary materials to agents when needed, especially in Whitehouse's case. When Whitehouse resumed her work in Berne, she was responsible for building a press bureau from the ground up. Aside from numerous delays, Whitehouse found it difficult to secure a proper location to conduct official business. Small victories, such as finding furniture, working typewriters, and mimeographing machines, were considered "triumphs."¹²⁹ Basic issues of finding suitable materials and resources served to be a constant problem for Whitehouse, as well as securing a reliable staff.

Conducting the daily activities of the CPI in Berne was done with a barebones staff. Frequently, Whitehouse would ask James Kerney, director of the CPI office in Paris, to provide staff and personnel for her office. Securing a competent, dependable staff was not easy for Whitehouse. She once noted her bewilderment during a conversation with an Italian journalist, who said, "oh, there's no reason to be discouraged. It will be eight or nine months before you are

¹²⁹ Whitehouse, *A Year as a Government Agent*, 116.

organized. You can't expect anything else."¹³⁰ This inefficiency was not entirely the fault of Kerney in Paris or from Creel in Washington. Whitehouse had high expectations for the staff. Whitehouse would frequently write to Kerney to provide her assistance with typing and translations, but she would swiftly decline the assistance. For example, Whitehouse turned down the help of Marcelle Sinner because of her perceived high maintenance character. Whitehouse suggested to Kerney that she "would rather close up the office and leave the field to the Germans" than to chaperone and accommodate the young woman.¹³¹ Whitehouse's stubbornness did not amuse Kerney. "I must say that I cannot keep up with your activities," Kerney wrote to Whitehouse, "One minute you are frantically wiring for a typist, and, when we do[send you a typist]...you cancel the order."¹³² The only consistent people on Whitehouse's team was her assistant, George B. Fife, who had worked with the American Red Cross doing propaganda work, and Edith White, a stenographer. All other employees came and went, especially translators.¹³³

As an immediate issue, Whitehouse stated that it was not only necessary "to find assistants who could translate from English into German and into French," but to have others to do day-to-day clerical activities, like answering the telephone or typewriting.¹³⁴ Out of desperation, Whitehouse accepted a detained German spy, in the custody of the Americans, to type and translate for the CPI office. Although Whitehouse had to remain vigilant of her ability to sabotage, Whitehouse characterized her as a "good, hard worker."¹³⁵

¹³⁰ Whitehouse, *A Year as a Government Agent*, 117.

¹³¹ Whitehouse to Kerney, July 22, 1918, Entry 148, CPI

¹³² Kerney to Whitehouse, July 25, 1918, Entry 148, CPI.

¹³³ Whitehouse, *A Year as a Government Agent*, 118.

¹³⁴ Whitehouse, *A Year as a Government Agent*, 119.

¹³⁵ Whitehouse, *A Year as a Government Agent*, 121-123.

Although desperate for suitable employees, Whitehouse had to remain vigilant that German spies would not take advantage of the hiring notices. She developed a method to weed them out. For example, if the person was suspected, Whitehouse would “give him more to do than he could do. When his efforts relaxed, or if he began to prove troublesome, we would send him away.”¹³⁶ Nevertheless, Whitehouse derived pleasure from employing suspected German spies, “I was immensely amused to feel that our enemy, the Germans were doing the drudgery of our office for us and were enabling us to do work.”¹³⁷ While it appeared to amuse Whitehouse that she exploited German spies to work on behalf of the United States, having little to no support from the Legation and Creel was not ideal. Time spent finding headquarters, monitoring employees, and finding necessary supplies, was time not spent on the spreading truthful propaganda.

Aside from her problems with staff, Whitehouse also had to deal with local problems. As mentioned previously, Switzerland was a hotbed for German spies and dissemination of false propaganda. Not only did the German presence frequently challenge Swiss neutrality, but also their clandestine activities were antagonistic to Whitehouse’s values of transparency and accuracy. One of Whitehouse’s only avenues to spread American wartime information was through the newspapers. However, deciphering which Swiss news agencies and newspapers to use was problematic because many were secretly subsidized by Germans. German influence over newspapers in Switzerland occurred because Germans would secretly buy or subsidize many papers, “which under an appearance of neutrality, championed the German cause in every way.”¹³⁸ For every fact published about the war, another was published by pro-German

¹³⁶ Whitehouse, *A Year as a Government Agent*, 121-122.

¹³⁷ Whitehouse, *A Year as a Government Agent*, 123.

¹³⁸ Whitehouse, *A Year as a Government Agent*, 132.

newspapers citing falsehoods and disseminating disinformation. As Whitehouse noted, the Germans took any chance to make American look weak and create doubt in the minds of the Swiss. Whitehouse noted in her final report that “they[the Germans] were maintaining that America could not raise an army in spite of her draft law, that she could not train it, could not arm it.”¹³⁹ To better combat German propaganda efforts, Whitehouse made it her mission to find trusted newspapers to print information from the cable service.

To properly distribute American news, Whitehouse not only had to overcome Swiss editors’ prejudices towards secrecy and propaganda but also had to find a non-German news service. With little help on behalf of the CPI, she individually visited each editor and conducted personal interviews across Switzerland, noting offices which were German-owned. Once her survey was complete, through persistence, Whitehouse was able to secure a relationship with the *Agence Télégraphique Suisse*, the official news agency of Switzerland. The *Agence Télégraphique Suisse* agreed to publish daily news stories from the cable news service, as well as information coming from the navy communications and the diplomatic pouch in newspapers across the country. According to Whitehouse, this was a great accomplishment because “it saved us from the necessity of establishing of our own to reach each paper daily, and because news sent out by them had an authority which a foreign service could not hope to obtain.”¹⁴⁰ Furthermore, other press agencies, such as *Havas* and *Reuters*, were not “interested in presenting America’s position or the American effort,” as Creel once noted, but Whitehouse’s efforts changed that.¹⁴¹ Whitehouse’s ability to secure a press agency alone was a considerable accomplishment.

¹³⁹ Vira Whitehouse, “Report of Mrs. Norman Der. Whitehouse, Director for Switzerland of the Committee on Public Information,” n.d., VBW.

¹⁴⁰ Whitehouse, *A Year as a Government Agent*, 125.

¹⁴¹ Whitehouse, “Report of Mrs. Norman Der. Whitehouse,” n.d., VBW; Creel, *How We Advertised America*, 319.

After securing the relationship, Whitehouse had to ensure transparency with the *Agence Télégraphique Suisse*. For example, each article circulated by the *Agence Télégraphique Suisse* was marked “A.S.” meaning “American Service” and the press was given exclusivity in publishing articles at their discretion. It was reported that the *Agence Télégraphique Suisse* would receive and publish four to eight paragraphs daily of American news topics, reaching over 120 daily newspapers.¹⁴² Whitehouse was also successful in placing special articles in the papers on American topics ranging from surgical problems during wartime to hog raising in the Midwest.¹⁴³ A weekly bulletin about the chief news items in the U.S. was sent to editors and gave them the discretion to publish them or not. Whitehouse estimated that nearly 2,000 paragraphs from the cable service appeared weekly in the Swiss press, and that only increased until the end of the war in November.¹⁴⁴

Nevertheless, with every breakthrough came a setback for Whitehouse. Once she was able to secure a trusted news agency, not owned by a German, she ran into problems with receiving and properly translating the articles she received from the U.S. Often sending and receiving cables was inconsistent, the open mail was subject to censorship and to being lost, and the diplomatic pouch system was slow. To make matters more complicated, the articles that came from the U.S. were to be edited to satisfy the Swiss neutrality laws and first written in simple English before being translated into German and French.¹⁴⁵ Moreover, in spite of one of Whitehouse’s successes in establishing a good relationship with the *Agence Télégraphique Suisse*, one of the difficulties with the Swiss press for Whitehouse was spending time monitoring

¹⁴² Whitehouse to Kerney, July 22, 1918, Entry 148, CPI.

¹⁴³ Whitehouse, *A Year as a Government Agent*, 127.

¹⁴⁴ George Creel, “Complete Report of the Chairman of the Committee on Public Information, 1917-1919,” (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1920), 185; Whitehouse, *A Year as a Government Agent*, 135.

¹⁴⁵ Whitehouse, *A Year as a Government Agent*, 125.

the publications. Frequent misprints were accidentally published due to the system of translation. And in addition to the errors of Swiss press, monitoring of the German-Swiss newspapers was crucial for they would print false or inaccurate statements about the U.S., even using advertisements to be subversive.¹⁴⁶ In order to combat German propaganda efforts, Whitehouse and her staff devoted special attention to German-language Swiss papers in an effort to regulate the false or inaccurate statements.

Identifying German-owned newspapers was not the only concern. Another was navigating German-owned theaters. One of the main reasons that the motion picture distribution activities under Whitehouse were not successful was because Germans also outright owned or controlled German-Swiss theaters. To make matters worse, the theaters' primary function was to disseminate pro-German and anti-Entente or anti-American content, making it impossible to play films from the United States. To curtail this issue, Whitehouse proposed the distribution of American commercial films, instead of war propaganda films, sent via the diplomatic pouch.¹⁴⁷ But with every solution came more headaches. Another reason the motion pictures initiative was unsuccessful was due to the sheer volume of the films. "One of the most troublesome of my effort," Whitehouse claimed, "was the motion picture situation" because she was tasked with censoring the films given to her in order to avoid violation of neutrality laws.¹⁴⁸ The CPI was slow at getting sending wartime efforts photos, especially to Whitehouse, and photographs were expensive to print.¹⁴⁹ She was forced to compete with the already plentiful imagery produced by the Germans and the Swiss. It forced her to display the photos in exhibits or at the discretion of Swiss newspaper editor to avoid the daunting task of censorship.

¹⁴⁶ Whitehouse, *A Year as a Government Agent*, 132.

¹⁴⁷ Creel, *How We Advertised America*, 324.

¹⁴⁸ Creel to Whitehouse, n.d., VBW; Whitehouse, *A Year as a Government Agent*, 151-153.

¹⁴⁹ Whitehouse, *A Year as a Government Agent*, 147.

Aside from the complications that arose from establishing a publicity bureau and navigating local nuances, planning and orchestrating initiatives on behalf of the CPI were burdensome for Whitehouse. On many occasions, Whitehouse was tasked with completing projects that even a large staff would have trouble executing, such as organizing a Swiss delegation trip and disseminating one of Wilson's speeches into enemy territory.

In an effort to be more transparent, explain U.S. war interests, and demonstrate America's military might, Whitehouse thought it best to directly engage members of the Swiss press, especially ones of prominence. Before her return to Berne, in late April 1918, Whitehouse noted to President Wilson that members of the Swiss press "seemed unanimous in complaining of the injurious effects of withholding from the public so much of the happenings of vital interest," citing secrecy as the main culprit of misunderstanding and suspicion between the countries.¹⁵⁰ President Wilson was sympathetic to Whitehouse's claims and even admitted that he was unaware that secrecy had existed in Switzerland.¹⁵¹ In May 1918, Whitehouse proposed hosting a Swiss delegation in France and American to help better illustrate "the great work we had done there[France], and others invited to come to American to see what we are doing."¹⁵²

Initially, Whitehouse thought it was important to choose influential men of neutral standing to visit men who would "carry greater weight in the enemy countries, as well as in Switzerland."¹⁵³ First, selecting members of the delegation proved to be a hardship because Whitehouse had to find prominent men, whose political or religious standpoints were not going to compromise the transparent nature of the event. Furthermore, after selecting the members, simply getting them to accept the invitation was a daunting task. And most importantly, those

¹⁵⁰ Whitehouse to Tumulty, April 27, 1918, WW-LOC.

¹⁵¹ WW to Tumulty, May 8, 1918, WW-LOC.

¹⁵² Whitehouse to Edgar Sisson, May 11, 1918, VBW.

¹⁵³ Whitehouse, *A Year as a Government Agent*, 181.

who accepted wanted total assurance that they would be invited by another organization of stature, such as the State Department or Congress, and not by the CPI, to avoid suspicion.¹⁵⁴ Due to those demands and conflicts that arose, Whitehouse scrapped her plan of inviting notable Swiss leaders, and instead invited editors of six major Swiss newspapers, as guests of the CPI. Those who were invited were carefully selected due to the audiences their reports were likely to influence. For example, of the six papers, four were chosen because they printed in German, while the remaining two were picked because they printed in French. As guests of the CPI, the Swiss journalists were invited, according to Creel, “to bring the people of Switzerland into the closer touch with the people of America” and that Switzerland was important in establishing relations because it was “the one open window into the sick room of Europe.”¹⁵⁵

Planning the trip required patience, perseverance, and clear communication. For example, procuring visas for the Swiss journalists’ to the U.S. required jumping over lines of government red tape. The trip almost did not occur because of a technical rule by the State Department that required those from neutral countries to get special permission from the State Department. This formality forced Whitehouse to make many calls and special trips to government offices to assist in getting permission, all while she was in Paris.¹⁵⁶

Another issue that arose was the matter of supervision of the delegation. For the trip to run smoothly, it was necessary to find a formal chaperone to escort them throughout the East Coast and the Midwest. Whether out of desperation or endorsed confidence, Whitehouse assigned her husband, J. Norman Whitehouse, the task of hosting the men. For Norman Whitehouse, chaperoning these men was difficult. In his letters, he reported that the Swiss

¹⁵⁴ Whitehouse, *A Year as a Government Agent*, 168-170.

¹⁵⁵ “George Creel Talks to Swiss Journalists,” *New York Times*, October 27, 1918.

¹⁵⁶ Whitehouse, *A Year as a Government Agent*, 176-179.

journalists were irritating, “insufferable,” and hard to manage in that first month.¹⁵⁷ He even admitted to her that he did “this stunt because I know that you desired that I should.”¹⁵⁸

Nevertheless, the trip was a success, as Norman highlighted, “they are quite convinced that Germany cannot win with America in the game, with all its might and strength.”¹⁵⁹ Not only did they rave about the American wartime efforts, but also about Whitehouse, “they all just love you...and tell how you took care of them and all you solitude on their behalf.”¹⁶⁰

While the trip was successful in the U.S., it did not yield the desired results back in Switzerland. The trip had to combat rumors and misrepresentations. Before the departure of the Swiss delegation, rumors via German newspapers mocked the trip in its entirety. Aside from seeing skyscrapers and industrial plants, the *Vossische Zeitung* sarcastically suggested the Swiss press could also see the American “high culture” through “how German-Americans are bound to posts and martyred, and German-American who are unwilling to fight are tarred.”¹⁶¹ In addition to vicious rumors, the trip came to an end just as the war was ending, thus any articles printed about the stay did not garner any influence Swiss audiences.

Another example of Whitehouse exercising tenacity and determination came from distributing Wilson’s speech across enemy lines. Due to Whitehouse’s eagerness to promote accurate information, it came as no surprise that President Wilson wanted Whitehouse to circulate his speech regarding the fall of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. On November 7, 1918, to appeal to practicality, Wilson pleaded with the people of Austria-Hungary to wait until the peace conference to officially divide the assets of the former empire. Wilson believed that the CPI

¹⁵⁷ Norman deR. Whitehouse to Creel, n.d., JNW.

¹⁵⁸ Norman deR. Whitehouse to Vira Whitehouse, October 19, 1918, JNW.

¹⁵⁹ Norman deR. Whitehouse to Creel, n.d., JNW.

¹⁶⁰ Norman deR. Whitehouse to Vira Whitehouse, October 14, 1918, JNW.

¹⁶¹ “Honor Swiss Journalists,” *New York Times*, September 14, 1918.

division in Berne would be the best to translate and distribute the speech to the across the Swiss border. Whitehouse was responsible for translating, printing, and somehow get the speech across the Swiss border into Austria-Hungary all in a matter of forty-eight hours. Days before Wilson's request, Berne was not only dealing with an outbreak of Spanish flu but also was in the midst of a labor strike, paralyzing all industries, including printing presses. And to make matters worse, communication to Austria-Hungary was an impossibility for the mail service halted, and even the telegraphs wires were down.¹⁶² These challenges put the mission in jeopardy.

Despite the strike, Whitehouse managed to find a printer and translate the messages into German, French, Hungarian, and Italian, but getting the printed speech across the border was the most challenging. Due to Whitehouse's official position in Berne, it was dangerous for her to cross the border into the enemy lines. Leaving Whitehouse with few options, she relied on the help of Rosika Schwimmer, whom Whitehouse had met during the suffrage campaign in the U.S., and was serving as a government agent of the Hungarian Republic in Switzerland. Schwimmer agreed to help Whitehouse in delivering, translating, and publishing the message to Austria-Hungary.

But getting Schwimmer across the border required sponsorship on behalf of the Legation to satisfy any concerns the Allied forces could having with the nature of the errand. Unfortunately, that required Whitehouse to seek assistance from Stovall, who did not want to take on any official responsibility for the endeavor, but wrote a vague letter for Schwimmer reading, "I trust that the representatives of the Allied powers, who may be in control of communication in Austria-Hungary will facilitate the passage of the messenger whom you may accredit for the purpose of publishing this message in these countries."¹⁶³ After printing the

¹⁶² Whitehouse, *A Year as a Government Agent*, 230-234.

¹⁶³ Stovall to Whitehouse, November 7, 1918, VBW; Whitehouse, *A Year as a Government Agent*, 316.

speech, securing official paperwork for crossing the border, Whitehouse personally accompanied Schwimmer across the border of Austria-Hungary for her to spread the message. On November 9, 1918, Schwimmer notified Whitehouse that the speech had been sent to every Austro-Hungarian newspaper and was translated and sent to Czech, Slovak, Romanian, Serbo-Croatian, and Polish press.¹⁶⁴

Whitehouse was charged with doing nearly impossible deeds with little support from the CPI directly. From organizing a delegation to getting Wilson's words to print and across the border, those tasks required Whitehouse to practice persistence, spontaneity, and resourcefulness, even in the most challenging circumstances.



Finally, Whitehouse's challenges were not only the result of a rivalry between the CPI and the State Department or the CPI's poor management from abroad, but also the problems that Whitehouse faced were undoubtedly related to the fact she was a woman serving in a male-dominated sphere. Before the outbreak of the war, with exception of states like California or Illinois, women's suffrage was not yet universal. Moreover, women had yet to fill roles in Congress or cabinet members, let alone serve in a diplomatic capacity.

As a woman, Whitehouse had the cards stacked against her. She could not belong to the privileged pseudo-club of men like Allen Dulles and Hugh Wilson. Aside from being Anglo-Saxon males, those in diplomatic or consular services had shared backgrounds before their time abroad, such as similar occupation, education, and residences. Ambassadors, ministers, and especially secretaries came from industries of law, business, and journalism.¹⁶⁵ These men also went through an educational system that included private secondary, Ivy League, or Foreign

¹⁶⁴ Whitehouse, *A Year as a Government Agent*, 216.

¹⁶⁵ Mattox, *Twilight of Amateur Diplomacy*, 37-39.

education. One-third of the secretaries were educated at Harvard, while the remainder went to Ivy League schools like Yale and Princeton.¹⁶⁶ Aside from having common professional and educational backgrounds, the diplomatic and consular officers came primarily from the Midwest and the northeast Atlantic coast, especially from New York.¹⁶⁷ Due to the shared backgrounds and their flair for tradition, secretaries of embassies and legations saw this as a pseudo-club, or what would be famously referred to as “a pretty good club.”¹⁶⁸ The club had no room for Whitehouse, despite her formal education and wealth.

One concrete example of how Whitehouse’s gender posed a problem relates to her attempts to get a diplomatic passport. While on the surface it appeared to be a routine clerical error, those in State Department were not thrilled about a woman’s role in diplomatic affairs. Whitehouse admitted her suspicions that the stalling of her official documents came from Secretary Robert Lansing, once referring to him as not a “liberal man in his attitude toward women.”¹⁶⁹ Whitehouse’s skepticism was not unwarranted given Lansing’s anti-suffrage views. Even his wife, Eleanor Foster Lansing, who served as the national secretary of the anti-suffrage movement, fought hard against Whitehouse’s suffrage efforts in New York.¹⁷⁰ As mentioned previously, this acrimonious relationship between Lansing and Whitehouse was evident before her departure. The headlines and reports stated Lansing’s displeasure and opposition to Whitehouse’s appointment to Europe, although Lansing formally addressed these rumors and denied any such rationale.¹⁷¹

¹⁶⁶ Heinrichs, *American Ambassador*, 97.

¹⁶⁷ Mattox, *Twilight of Amateur Diplomacy*, 45.

¹⁶⁸ Heinrichs, *American Ambassador*, 98.

¹⁶⁹ Whitehouse, *A Year as a Government Agent*, 57.

¹⁷⁰ “Suffrage’s Cost High, Effect on Elections Nil,” *New York Times*, November 4, 1917.

¹⁷¹ “Lansing Will Aid Mrs. Whitehouse,” *New York Times*, January 10, 1918.

Aside from Secretary Lansing's anti-suffrage ideology, Minister Stovall's views were not entirely different. Aside from the roadblocks Stovall created for Whitehouse, his attitude towards women was not much help either. For example, in regard to her possible return after her resignation in March 1918, Stovall wrote Lansing and Polk and advised them not to send her back to Switzerland, but complimented her on a superficial level, "she is a very attractive lady...and the impression she made among Americans was pleasing."¹⁷² While Stovall was cordial and respectful to Whitehouse outside of the diplomatic offices, his displeasure for Whitehouse's role as director and her past as a suffrage campaigner worked against her in the official capacity.¹⁷³ Stovall, aside from his views on suffrage, did not enjoy the possible reality of his peers becoming women. For example, Stovall openly remarked to Whitehouse that he was bothered by Rosika Schwimmer's "unforgivable combination" of being a woman and a Jew, negatively implying that the diplomatic institutions as a whole "ought to do better than that."¹⁷⁴

And although many of her problems stemmed from her American counterparts' discomfort with a woman working in diplomatic affairs, Whitehouse had to be careful about how her gender and her past role as a suffragist would affect Swiss government officials. Despite her good relationship with the Swiss government officials and the intelligentsia, Whitehouse sought to quell fears that the CPI office in Berne was not a means to promote suffrage.¹⁷⁵ Whitehouse had to be careful that her office did not appear to be a woman's only endeavor. Whitehouse was ever cognizant of this and referred to it in her writings to Kerney:

The Swiss have only now recovered from the shock of this office being run by a woman, and if we were all women they would probably deduce from that fact that the United

¹⁷² Stovall to Wilson, March 27, 1918, WW-LOC.

¹⁷³ Whitehouse, *A Year as a Government Agent*, 71-72.

¹⁷⁴ Whitehouse, *A Year as a Government Agent*, 264-265.

¹⁷⁵ Women's suffrage in Switzerland was a sensitive issue during most of the twentieth century. It was not until 1971 that Switzerland constitutionally recognized suffrage, and even then full suffrage across the country did not occur until 1990.

States was failing entirely in man-power. Therefore I am willing to sacrifice efficiency to the prejudices of the people and ask for a man.¹⁷⁶

While some may argue that Whitehouse's troubles were similar if not identical to what other CPI directors faced, it is undeniable that her being a woman added to the endless obstacles. Whitehouse was rejected by the male-dominated Legation, whose status quo she challenged.



Whitehouse left Berne on December 25, 1918 and continued her publicity work in Paris under the leadership of CPI during the Peace Conference.¹⁷⁷ In Whitehouse's final report, she was surprisingly modest in her evaluation of the complications surrounding her time as director of the CPI office in Berne, citing difficulties arose due to a lack of "assistance either in Switzerland itself or from America."¹⁷⁸ While many of Whitehouse's problems stemmed from Creel's poor efforts to intervene or create an air of transparency, such as inventing the "women and children" cover, there appeared to be no bad blood. Throughout Creel's assessment of the CPI in his book, *How We Advertised America*, he frequently mentioned his admiration and appreciation of Whitehouse's work in Switzerland, while conveniently leaving out the trouble he caused, "[it]was a notable victory and full credit must go to Mrs. Whitehouse."¹⁷⁹ The appreciation continued on the side of Whitehouse. She dedicated her book to Creel citing that his freedom from prejudice and support with combating prejudice made her work possible. A casual observer would never notice that at one point Whitehouse resigned from her post in indignation to Creel's inefficiencies and ineptitude.

¹⁷⁶ Whitehouse to Kerney, August 14, 1918, Entry 148, CPI; Wolper, "Origins of Public Diplomacy," 72.

¹⁷⁷ "Welcome Home to Woman Suffragists," *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle* (Brooklyn: New York), February 9, 1919.

¹⁷⁸ Whitehouse, "Report of Mrs. Norman Der. Whitehouse," n.d., VBW.

¹⁷⁹ Creel, *How We Advertised America*, 317.

She also was met with success, such as garnering admiration of Swiss government officials and journalists. When the CPI office in Berne officially came to an end in late February 1919, many members of the Swiss press had nothing but appreciation and admiration for the work that she did. Writing Guy Crosswell Smith, Whitehouse's successor, Prof. Rappard stated, "your office has certainly contributed to establish the good understanding which now so fortunately prevails between our two republics."¹⁸⁰ Moreover, the director of the *Agence Télégraphique Suisse* expressed similar sentiments, "we shall always remember the agreeable and courteous relations between our office and the Committee on Public Information and its representatives in Switzerland... America has showed to our country such kind sympathy and such a wide understanding of our needs."¹⁸¹ Establishing a relationship with *Agence Télégraphique Suisse* effectively organizing a delegation of Swiss journalists, and in other ways Whitehouse demonstrated the effectiveness of public diplomacy in terms of government-to-people affairs.

What Whitehouse was able to endure from her brief year in Berne is remarkable, despite the challenges presented to her, such as battling the Legation, dealing with poor management, and fending off sexist stereotypes about women. Although the CPI's activities in Berne officially ended on February 22, 1919, the impact and legacy it left behind serves to illustrate the advantages of public diplomacy, as well as the uneasiness that comes along with diplomatic matters.

¹⁸⁰ Rappard to Smith, February 16, 1918. Entry 108, CPI.

¹⁸¹ Filliol to Smith, February 17, 1919. Entry 108, CPI.

CHAPTER 4. THE MORE THINGS CHANGE, THE MORE THEY STAY THE SAME: PUBLIC DIPLOMACY AFTER THE CPI

I am more sorry than I can say that your control over the Army, Navy, and State is not real in any sense of the word...and while you may think you have established an arrangement that will permit a free flow of news, just wait until an issue arises.

- George Creel, 1942¹⁸²

Following a disastrous military defeat in Caporetto in October 1917, Italian soldiers and civilians found themselves depleted of resources and morale. The military setback was an embarrassment for the Italians and caused concern for the United States. The problem at hand was whether the defeat would become a disaster for the Allies.¹⁸³ While many speculated the repercussions of the defeat, others soon realized that the reason for the defeat was enemy propaganda. Many weeks prior to Caporetto, Italian soldiers were being sent letters urging them to return to their homes. Many Italians were bombarded by fake news stories that reported a looming revolution, one with similar magnitude to Russia, would strike Italy. The enemy propaganda even utilized people-to-people initiative and brought Austrian troops from the Russian border to fraternize and engage with the Italians. The enemy propaganda aimed to weaken spirits of the troops, put fear in the minds of the people, and charm the Italians into cooperation.

To combat the enemy propaganda, it was believed that the most effective means to maintain and strengthen the morale of the Italians was to remind them of the American contribution and commitment to the war effort.¹⁸⁴ And no two people better understood the necessity than the CPI's Charles Merriam and the American Ambassador Thomas Nelson Page.

¹⁸² Quoted in Allan Winkler, *The Politics of Propaganda: The Office of War Information, 1942-1945*, (Yale University Press, 1978), 35.

¹⁸³ "Defeat or Disaster," *New York World* (New York), October 31, 1917.

¹⁸⁴ Charles Merriam, "American Publicity in Italy," *American Political Science Review* 13, 4 (Nov., 1919), 544.

Before the CPI arrived in Rome and the defeat in Caporetto, Ambassador Page recognized the danger and value of propaganda. Page was also deeply concerned about the lack of communication between the U.S. and Italy. And unlike his diplomatic cohorts in Europe, Page recognized the positive impact of propaganda. In 1915, Page organized the American Relief Clearing House in Italy to distribute necessary medical supplies, food, and monetary aid.¹⁸⁵ It was the first of its kind to establish a friendly and sympathetic relationship between Americans and Italians during the war, “carrying the message of America’s friendship directly to soldiers themselves.”¹⁸⁶ In the winter of 1917, Page wasted no time creating his own propaganda and intelligence office. The intelligence section was headed by Gino Speranza, who was in charge of information gathering. And the propaganda section was headed by John Hearley, who was responsible for publicity.¹⁸⁷ Although innovative for its time, Page’s efforts were lacked focus and direction.

When Charles Merriam, the CPI director in Rome and University of Chicago political scientist, arrived in April 1918, he was warmly welcomed by Page. Merriam even noted to Creel that Page was cordial and supportive of the CPI’s work.¹⁸⁸ Page not only gave Merriam access to his propaganda office but also offered services and support of Speranza. Merriam, unlike Vira Whitehouse, enjoyed open and cooperative relationships with the Embassy in Rome, and even the Red Cross, the Y.M.C.A, and several American journalists in Rome.¹⁸⁹ But this rosy relationship did not last long.

¹⁸⁵ Nigro, “Impact of Wilsonian Propaganda,” 79-80.

¹⁸⁶ Charles Blackwell, *The Story of the American Red Cross in Italy*, (N.Y. Macmillan, 1920), 14-16.

¹⁸⁷ Nigro, “Impact of Wilson’s Propaganda,” 81-82.

¹⁸⁸ Merriam to Creel, April 15, 1918, Entry 166, CPI.

¹⁸⁹ Nigro, “Impact of Wilsonian Propaganda,” 119-121.

Despite Creel's efforts to avoid what happened with Whitehouse and other CPI agents, his efforts failed. One month before Merriam's arrival in Rome, Creel wrote to Page clarifying Merriam's role, "Captain Merriam is to have full charge, work in closest cooperation with you....Ask him for anything you desire, and you may be sure that all of our resources will be devoted to strengthening you in the work[of the propaganda campaign]." ¹⁹⁰ Creel's attempt to delineate role and responsibilities would soon prove to be a fool's errand.

One of the first problems for Merriam was the matter of authority. At the end of April 1918, Merriam was in the midst of planning the CPI's campaign strategy for Italy, but unbeknownst to Merriam, Creel sent Hugh Gibson of the American Embassy in Paris to help coordinate the CPI's general European propaganda effort. Immediately Merriam became hostile and uncooperative with Gibson because it appeared to be a threat to his status, which prompted Gibson to ask William Irwin, the director of the Foreign Section, to tell Merriam about Gibson's role. Irwin wrote to Merriam to assure him of his authority and clarify Gibson's supporting role of ensuring efficiency for the European campaign, which Merriam rejected. Merriam was under the illusion that Gibson was trying to plan his own campaign and turn the CPI staff against him, telling Creel, "if he is a diplomat" then "God help diplomacy." ¹⁹¹

Aside from Merriam's inability to cooperate with Gibson, he soon lost the favor of Ambassador Page. Merriam's problems with Page originated because Merriam consistently overstepped his bounds. For example, two weeks after his arrival Merriam sent Creel a political analysis of the current situation in Italy, which was the domain of the Embassy. To make matters worse for Merriam, he used the Embassy's cable services. And from that point on, Page demanded that no CPI telegrams or political analyses could be sent over the cables without being

¹⁹⁰ Quoted in Wolper, "Origins of Public Diplomacy," 77-78.

¹⁹¹ Wolper, "Origins of Public Diplomacy," 80-83.

read or approved by the Embassy. Merriam responded by claiming this was an infringement of his duties to report on Italian public opinion to his superiors, in which Page responded, “Irwin and Creel were not the government.”¹⁹²

And although Page established clear rules of communication between the CPI and the Embassy, it was inconsequential to Merriam. In August 1918, Merriam went on a visit to the Italian front to discuss with military officers matters of propaganda and military developments. Merriam returned to Rome upset by the apparent lack of cooperation of the American military officers and wrote a scathing cable to Edgar Sisson, the new director of the Foreign Section, Creel, and a personal friend, through the Embassy cables. Merriam charged General Charles G. Treat and his assistant, Major Bergen, as unfit to lead the American Military Mission in Italy. Whether or not Merriam’s criticisms were valid, transmitting such a critique over the Embassy’s cables was considered taboo. Merriam’s disregard for orders and a lack of respect for protocols upset those in the diplomatic and military circles. No matter the problem, airing one’s grievances was to be done face-to-face or through other means, not via the diplomat cables.¹⁹³

While Merriam was busy using the Embassy’s cables to denounce those in the military, Page was on vacation. When Page returned, he was forced to clean up the mess Merriam left in his wake. Page saw Merriam’s actions as an “invasion” of the entire Embassy, which was not to be tolerated. Page subsequently sent Secretary Lansing four messages in ten days and another twenty-one-page document detailing other conflicts that Merriam created.¹⁹⁴ A disappointed and frustrated Page requested the Lansing pass along his complaints to President Wilson.

Unsurprisingly, despite Page’s plea to have Merriam removed from his post, Wilson instead

¹⁹² Wolper, “Origins of Public Diplomacy,” 89-90.

¹⁹³ Wolper, “Origins of Public Diplomacy,” 94-96.

¹⁹⁴ Wolper, “Origins of Public Diplomacy,” 105-106.

encouraged cooperation between the two departments. But by the time the information reached Lansing and Wilson, Merriam had already resigned and returned to the U.S. Merriam elaborated that his resignation was because “the Embassy is weak, but vain and jealous, and it will be very difficult to go ahead without encountering not only their silent but still more open opposition.”¹⁹⁵

The crux of these disputes between Merriam and Page were the direct result of unclear boundaries and roles of the newly-created publicity agency and the established diplomatic structures. In addition to Whitehouse’s experience in Berne, Merriam’s story further serves to highlight the persistent problems that plague public diplomacy. Inventing a new system from the ground up is always a challenge, but is further complicated when the responsibilities and duties are undefined. President Wilson’s creation of the CPI was negatively received from the beginning because its functions overlapped with the State Department. For example, Ambassador Page established a propaganda office before the introduction of the CPI, but it was ignored and undervalued. And because of the blurred lines of roles between the two departments, it invited resentment and created embassy resistance to Merriam and the CPI.

The problems for Merriam were not entirely the faults of Wilson or the State Department but were the product of Creel’s poor management. Although Merriam overstepped his bounds often, Creel failed to properly establish Merriam’s authority to those in the Embassy and to Merriam. While it was his duty to report on Italian public opinion and the day-to-day activities of the CPI office in Rome, it was not his role to critique military matters. Furthermore, Merriam’s lack of diplomatic training did not prepare him for international service. And Creel’s lack of communication did not help Merriam’s mission in Rome.

¹⁹⁵ Wolper, “Origins of Public Diplomacy,” 121-122.



When Mock and Larson wrote *Words that Won the War*, they were the first to examine CPI documents that were once collecting dust in a basement. The original number of documents decreased, shrank “to less than a quarter of their former bulk,” because according to Mock and Larson, “of the administrations of the ‘Useless Papers Committee’ and partly for unexplained reasons.”¹⁹⁶ Following the CPI’s dissolution, the documents were given to the Army Industrial College, in a wing of the old Munitions building of the War Department. After Mock and Larson found the documents and they were transferred to the National Archives, they found that the army had destroyed many of the documents.¹⁹⁷ They were to first to examine the documents of the CPI and write about its successes and challenges. However, they failed to deeply examine the persisting problems that plagued the CPI, such as inventing a publicity bureau, resistance from the State Department, poor management on behalf of Creel, and the role gender in public diplomacy.

The problems that plagued many representatives of the CPI largely came from the fact that it was entirely a new operation. Never before had the U.S. launched a global propaganda campaign or established a ministry of propaganda. There simply was no precedent and no guarantee it would work. Furthermore, time was also not on the CPI’s side for the Foreign Division was established in October 1917, but many branches did not open until Spring 1918. When the Foreign Division of the CPI entered Europe, it competed with the well-established German propaganda machine and other press associations, such as *Havas* and *Reuters*. The U.S. had no cables or no press associations when it entered the scene in late 1917. Creel and his CPI

¹⁹⁶ Mock and Larson, *Words that Won the War*, viii.

¹⁹⁷ Robert Jackall and Janice M. Hirota, *Image Makers: Advertising, Public Relations, and the Ethos of Advocacy*, (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 234.

representatives relied on their tact and blind faith that what they were doing was going to turn the tides of the war. Creel saw his Committee as the remedy to “combat the prejudice of the years, to buck a vast propaganda machinery with millions behind it” by disseminating open and honest information.¹⁹⁸



If building a publicity bureau from the ground up was not challenging enough, the CPI frequently encountered resistance from the State Department. For the CPI representatives abroad, diplomats and military officers frequently created roadblocks. In general, the State Department was against propaganda and valued government-to-government relationships. Whitehouse was required to defend the CPI’s mission to spread propaganda to those at the Legation, like Stovall and Wilson, who saw propaganda as impractical and potentially dangerous to Swiss neutrality. Furthermore, the CPI’s small staff was no match for the State Department’s vast set of employees at the embassies and legations, including ambassadors, ministers, secretaries, or military or naval officers. The embassies and legations often withheld services and facilities, for they controlled the cables and access to the diplomatic pouch. The constant antagonism set Whitehouse’s work back many months until she was later able to work in July 1918.

Aside from Whitehouse’s problems, Frank Marion, director of the CPI office in Spain, had his own set of challenges with American embassy. In December 1917, Marion arrived in Madrid and was warmly welcomed by Naval Attaché, Captain Benton Decker, and his assistant, Lieutenant Commander Carlos Cusachs. Aside from other propaganda techniques, Marion’s primary responsibility was the motion-picture campaign. With help and support from Decker and Cusachs, Marion was able to quickly begin his mission. This friendliness encouraged Marion to

¹⁹⁸ Creel, *How We Advertised America*, 242.

establish his office in Madrid and reported in the CPI final report that he received “great assistance and unstinted support” from them.¹⁹⁹ However, Marion was met with immediate resistance from the U.S. Ambassador Joseph E. Willard.

Following Marion’s arrival, Willard wrote Lansing to discourage the American attempt at propaganda in Spain, “the Embassy suggests that no independent American propaganda be undertaken, but that we lend quiet support to the propaganda work of the Allies, if and when the propaganda becomes intelligent.”²⁰⁰ By the time the letter was issued, Marion had already begun his film campaign. Willard’s objection to the use of propaganda was similar to the sentiments of Stovall and Hugh Wilson in Switzerland, such as wakening hostilities and breeding distrust amongst the native population. Willard was concerned that the anti-American sentiments that developed from the Spanish-American War would further provoke resentment of the U.S. Furthermore, he was worried that the volatile political structure of Spain could not handle an American propaganda campaign.²⁰¹

Unsurprisingly, Marion disagreed with him and carried on the film campaign because he had a letter from President Wilson, Creel’s support, and approval of the Spanish censors to carry on.²⁰² For Willard, Marion’s letter from Wilson that detailed the purpose of his work, backing from Creel, and cooperation of the Naval Attaché, was not enough to endorse Marion’s work in Spain. Marion wrote to Creel that “such a rotten state of affairs as exists over here among the American governmental employees I never have seen in all my life...I would rather be on the firing line than here.”²⁰³ By February 1918, after much back and forth between Spain and

¹⁹⁹ George Creel, “Complete Report of the Chairman of the Committee on Public Information, 1917-1919,” (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1920), 195.

²⁰⁰ Quoted in Mock and Larson, *Words that Won the War*, 266.

²⁰¹ Wolper, “Origins of Public Diplomacy,” 136-137.

²⁰² Wolper, “Origins of Public Diplomacy,” 141; Creel, “Complete Report Committee on Public Information, 1917-1919,” 196.

²⁰³ Quoted in Wolper, “Origins of Public Diplomacy,” 142.

Washington, Lansing reported that President Wilson urged full cooperation between the CPI and the State Department. While Willard was put in his place, his last point of revenge came with the recommendation to Navy Secretary Joseph Daniels to recall Decker and Cusachs, stifling Marion's efforts temporarily.²⁰⁴ This also did not end Marion's problems. He further experienced setbacks with Major John W. Lang, the Military Attaché, on disagreements concerning the content of CPI propaganda and coordination with the Allies. In May, the disagreements caused Marion to leave Spain and resolve the matter stateside, causing him to delay his work, similar to Whitehouse.²⁰⁵ But not everyone experienced resistance from the embassies or legations. For example, Carl Crow while in China had "inspiring cooperation" from Minister Paul Reinsch.²⁰⁶ However, Crow's work in China was not as pressing as was the work in Europe.

The CPI was not unique with its struggle with the embassy and other major U.S. government departments. During the Second World War, the Office of War Information (OWI), created in 1942, faced resistance from not only the State Department but also the War Department and the Office of Strategic Services. Elmer Davis, the director of the OWI, appointed by President Roosevelt, faced many challenges with the State Department. Similar to Creel, Davis wanted the work of the OWI to help "see that the American people are truthfully informed," for he believed that those in a democracy had the right to have the full picture and truth. But the embassies or legations did not share his objective. Anticipating resistance, Creel wrote to Davis following his appointment, "I am more sorry than I can say that your control over the Army, Navy, and State is not real in any sense of the word...while you may think you have established an arrangement that will permit a free flow of news, just wait until an issue arises."²⁰⁷

²⁰⁴ Wolper, "Origins of Public Diplomacy," 144-145.

²⁰⁵ Wolper, "Origins of Public Diplomacy," 148-153.

²⁰⁶ Creel, "Complete Report Committee on Public Information, 1917-1919," 274.

²⁰⁷ Winkler, *The Politics of Propaganda*, 35.

Similar to the CPI, the OWI regularly endured conflicts with other agencies and departments because of the unclear role of who was in charge and role of information. For example, the ambiguity of Wilson's executive order hindered the CPI. It mentioned no creation of a foreign division or the use of propaganda, much less who was to be in charge of the information.²⁰⁸ The executive order created problems for the OWI regarding the specifications of what the public was entitled to know. The opening lines read, "in recognition of the right of the American people and of all other peoples opposing the Axis aggressors to be truthfully informed about the common war effort," but this did not factor in matters of national security.²⁰⁹ Both the military and the State Department felt that a "frank disclosure of losses or weaknesses... would compromise their position" of the U.S. and believed that foreign policy was not included in the war information, claiming exclusive jurisdiction over this information.²¹⁰

Aside from resistance on the home front, the OWI experienced resistance by the State Department in Europe. The OWI's Overseas Branch, despite orders that the State Department was to provide general guidance for the OWI, endured many problems, such as OWI agents being denied passports or transportation and would obstruct the flow of cables to OWI outposts. Furthermore, the State Department demanded that the OWI present them with copies of their correspondence, in and out of the Overseas Branch.²¹¹

In addition to the resistance that the CPI and OWI endured with the State Department, the United States Information Agency (USIA) faced disadvantages during the Cold War years. But unlike the CPI and the OWI, the USIA operated as a subdivision of the State Department.

²⁰⁸ Executive Order, 2594, "Creating the Committee on Public Information." April 13, 1917. Accessed March 2018 <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=75409>.

²⁰⁹ Executive Order 9182, "Establishing the Office of War Information." June 13, 1942. Accessed March 2018 <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=16273>.

²¹⁰ Winkler, *The Politics of Propaganda*, 35, 48.

²¹¹ Winkler, *The Politics of Propaganda*, 101-102.

On August 1, 1953, President Eisenhower created the USIA as a means to “provide real unity and greater efficiency” in promoting U.S. information and goals abroad, in order to create a lasting peace following the Second World War.²¹² Through instruction under Eisenhower, the State Department was to assist the newly formed USIA and its director regarding information on foreign policy to assist with public diplomacy initiatives. Although the USIA and the State Department were to be cohesive in their strategies, the State Department frequently did not consult with the USIA in policy creation despite the fact that that USIA wanted more policy coordination. Furthermore, the USIA and the State Department battled each other for influence over information programs, such as the VOA, and cultural programs, such as the Fulbright scholarship program. It was not until 1979 that the USIA was given full control over both the information and cultural programs.²¹³

Whether the resistance came from a disagreement about the role of propaganda or not, resistance from the State Department was a struggle over authority. In the cases of Whitehouse and Marion, resistance from Stovall and Willard was a matter of establishing authority. Moreover, both Whitehouse and Marion had to have Wilson intervene on the matter, which did not guarantee an end to their problems. Furthermore, Lansing was not the boss of any CPI representatives, nor was Creel the boss of any ambassador, minister, or secretary. Both Creel and Lansing’s hands were tied when skirmishes between the organization occurred. This is largely due to Wilson’s creation of parallel departments and often kept out of the matters as best as he could.

²¹² Executive Order 10477. “Authorizing the Director of the United States Information Agency to exercise certain authority available by law to the Secretary of State and the Director of the Foreign Operations Administration.” August 1, 1953. Accessed March 2018 <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=59220&st=10477&st1=>

²¹³ Dizard, *Inventing Public Diplomacy*, 149.



Resistance from embassies and legations was not the only problem facing the CPI. Creel's poor management of the CPI led to many delays and mishaps for the CPI representatives in Europe. And despite the overall success of the CPI, Creel's personality, reliance on improvisation, staffing practices, inability to provide necessary resources, poor communication skills, and his inability to provide necessary resources created difficulties and misunderstandings.

Personality and Temperament

Creel's personality often hindered the progress and efficiency of the CPI at home and abroad. And character and temperament frequently put his organization in jeopardy due to harsh scrutiny and negative criticism he attracted. In 1919, *Everybody's Magazine* best characterized Creel's enigmatic character when it reported that "to some he was a fearless crusader, untamed, untamable. To others he was the obnoxious muckraker, with a record of spectacular conflicts in print and in public office, Creel is a man who always attracts bitter enmities and wins ardent support."²¹⁴

During Creel's tenure as CPI chairman, Creel was constantly at odds with Congress, with both Democrats and Republicans, and the press. For many in Congress, the problem with the CPI was that it was created through an executive order, without a hearing or congressional approval. And by Wilson doing so, it allowed the CPI to act unregulated and enjoy boundless authority. In the beginning, the CPI did not rely on Congressional budget approval; it practiced its own censorship techniques, and established offices overseas. Congress also disliked that a civilian had such unfettered access to matters of the government. In their eyes, Creel was an illegitimate leader. As Lodge pointed out, Creel was simply "an unknown somebody plucked from the

²¹⁴ "Creel: An Announcement," *Everybody's Magazine* 40 1, (1919): 25.

bushes the day before yesterday.”²¹⁵ Other opponents of Creel, such as Representative Harold Knutson (R) of Minnesota and Senator Henry Cabot Lodge (R) of Massachusetts, accused Creel of overstepping his boundaries as chairman of the CPI and that the CPI’s materials were merely Democratic propaganda. Others in Congress felt that the CPI was more of a burden than a benefit to the country. For example, Representative Allen Treadway (R.) of Massachusetts, and one of Creel’s fiercest critics, asserted that “Creel’s Committee” filled the mail to France with so many pamphlets that soldiers of the American Expeditionary Force were not able to get letters from loved ones back home.²¹⁶

But most importantly, Congress disliked the Creel’s temperament. Creel was thin-skinned and sharp tongued. Creel’s direct and personal battles with Congressmen led to major problems for the CPI. In May 1918, while making a speech in New York, Creel was asked whether he thought all Congressmen were loyal, to which he replied with little hesitation, “I do not like slumming, so I won’t explore into the hearts of Congress for you.”²¹⁷ Following Creel’s “slur,” both houses of Congress were immediately angered and called for his resignation, with Treadway serving as one of the loudest cries for Creel’s resignation. Despite a timely apology for the comment, Creel’s sharp tongue led to the removal of the CPI from President Wilson’s emergency war fund and placed on the Congressional appropriations list. And in June 1918, Congress voted to cut nearly half of Creel’s 1918-1919 desired budget of \$2,000,000 to \$1,250,000.²¹⁸ The cut in funding required several divisions of the CPI to reduce their operations or shut down, while some were forced to shut down, such as the Division of Women’s War

²¹⁵ *Philadelphia Public Ledger*, July 26, 1917.

²¹⁶ Creel, *How We Advertised America*, 54.

²¹⁷ Mock and Larson, *Words that Won the War*, 61; “Creel Slur Here Arouses Congress,” *New York Herald*, May 14, 1918.

²¹⁸ Creel, *How We Advertised America*, 69.

Work. Moreover, the skirmish between Congress and Creel weakened the organization's prestige and morale at home and abroad.²¹⁹

Not only did he have problems with Congress, he also experienced resistance and criticism from the press. While in many cases, the press was eager to contribute and facilitate information regarding the war, it also loathed being dependent on the CPI for that information. Despite the CPI's mission to openly and truthfully inform the public, the press saw its actions as a means to manipulate opinion and its materials were treated with suspicion.²²⁰ Because the information, like the Official Bulletin, was highly centralized, it was hard for the press not to see it as propaganda.

In addition to the regulation of information, censorship also caused friction between the press and Creel. Just a month after the creation of the CPI, Creel announced advisory censorship to all newspaper editors, especially concerning matters of wartime information. However, there was no law vesting it with censorship power.²²¹ The voluntary censorship upset many editors and journalists. It probably did not help that Creel was a member of the Censorship Board, which made recommendations regarding war news coverage. However, journalists were not entirely against censorship, they simply wanted a more egalitarian system of regulations. For example, as proposed in the *Baltimore Sun*, newspapers should be "represented in Washington through a leading journalists of their own selection...let the man so chosen keep in close touch with the President" in order to determine what should and should not be published.²²² However, the press' ideas were never met.

²¹⁹ Mock and Larson, *Words that Won the War*, 62.

²²⁰ Stephen Vaughn, *Holding Fast the Inner Lines: Democracy, Nationalism, and the Committee on Public Information*, (University of North Carolina Press, 1980), 235.

²²¹ "Regulations for Censorship Given," *The Tennessean* (Nashville: TN), May 28, 1917.

²²² "The Censorship Problem," *Baltimore Sun* (Baltimore: MD), August 2, 1917.

By July 1917, the number of censorship rules increased and more defined. The first censorship rules were too vague and placed a lot of responsibility on the shoulders of the editors. As stated, editors were only to censor if their suspicions were aroused because all the cables and wireless messages had been censored at the point of dispatch. Creel's new rules consisted of a twenty-one point list, concretely prohibiting the publication of the activities of American troops, such as arrival at European ports.²²³ Censorship rules consistently changed as often as did the seasons, with another set of changes that came in January 1918. The CPI censored other forms of communication including the mail service. Mail censorship was established in December 1917. It is no wonder that many in the press and the public believed the CPI's main function was censorship. Unsurprisingly, the CPI quickly earned the nickname the "Censorship Committee" while Creel received the nickname "Chief Censor."²²⁴ Creel's reputation of being the censorship czar carried over after the war, particularly during his facilitation of the Peace Conference negotiations. Many in the press criticized Creel for going to Versailles and suspected that information was going to be highly regulated, "If there is to be no censorship of the news from the peace conference," one writer of the *Nashville Tennessean* asked, "why is George Creel taken along?"²²⁵

Back in Europe, Creel's controversies reached Berne and affected Whitehouse's work. For example, Whitehouse originally wanted to send a delegation of notable and distinguished men from Switzerland, such as politicians and intellectuals, to the U.S. However, Creel's problems with the press and Congress made the potential guests uneasy and they requested not to be associated with the CPI in an official capacity. Due to these concerns, Whitehouse was forced

²²³ "New Censorship Rules Given," *The Tennessean* (Nashville: TN), July 31, 1917.

²²⁴ "Chief Censor of the United States," *The Tennessean* (Nashville: TN), April 21, 1917.

²²⁵ No title, *The Tennessean* (Nashville: TN), December 11, 1918.

to abandon her plan and instead ask six Swiss journalists to come instead. Moreover, Whitehouse accredited poor communication of Creel to his distraction with Congress, “it was time stolen from the great and serious war work of winning the war,” which forced her to wait for Creel’s intervention.²²⁶

Improvisation

As Mock and Larson described Creel’s management style of CPI, “it was improvised on the job, and the job was never completed.”²²⁷ The CPI’s bureaus and division, under Creel’s leadership, experienced frequent modifications and complications. Because the CPI was responsible for the entire creation and distribution of pertinent wartime information, it often had to improvise. Strategies that worked for some CPI posts did not work for other ones. Rarely were they instructed on whether or not to abandon certain endeavors and many were left to decide what to pursue and what to abandon. Sometimes improvisation worked in favor of Creel and the CPI representatives abroad, but this did not guarantee success.

Whitehouse soon realized that there were no news agencies she could use to circulate CPI news stories. She was forced to establish her own relationship with the *Agence Télégraphique Suisse* before she could get her news division off the ground. Additionally, she singlehandedly had to weed out German-owned newspapers and establish trustworthiness with Swiss editors. In Denmark, director Edward Riis had to avoid using overt propaganda. By the time the Riis arrived in Denmark, as a neutral country, it already fatigued by German propaganda. To ensure that the information given by the CPI would be well received and not discarded, Riis had to devise his own strategy. Riis first, established friendly and open relationships with Danish editors. Second, he hid the true identity of the CPI and referred to it as a “straight news bureau.” He allowed the

²²⁶ Whitehouse, *A Year as a Government Agent*, 59, 171.

²²⁷ Mock and Larson, *Words that Won the War*, 48.

editors to pick and choose which American interest stories to run.²²⁸ Third, Riis and his associates wrote most of the news material they received from cables to avoid appearing as propaganda. Riis believed that clear and crisp sentences would be most effective and opted for an American approach to journalism, where the story “would hit the reader between the eyes.”²²⁹ And, last, Riis established a relationship with the chief censor of Denmark and convinced him that the intent of the CPI articles was mainly to bring about a mutual understandings between our countries. For Riis, openness and transparency worked to his favor with the Danes, “frankness on our part begot frankness on their part.”²³⁰ Like Whitehouse, Riis was not given instructions by Creel on how to establish the CPI’s credibility and trustworthiness. Whitehouse and Riis had to devise new methods for forming relationships with the local press and appear honest to censors.

While in Madrid, Marion had to improvise regarding message promotion. Aside from Marion’s successful motion-picture campaign, he had to embrace other forms of educational methods to spread propaganda. For example, through his relationships with the American Chamber of Commerce in Spain, he relied on “word of mouth” publicity to articulate U.S. interests to Spanish locals. And he even coordinated a series of informational lecture at Italian universities’ concerning American ideals.²³¹

While not identical to the situations that face Whitehouse, Riis, and Marion, the CPI directors in South America faced their own unique set of improvisational strategies in appealing to Latin audiences. For Argentina, Uruguay, and Paraguay, CPI Commissioner H.H. Sevier discovered early on the importance of focusing his energies on the news division. Because literacy rates were high and the Associated Press and the United Press were established in these

²²⁸ Creel, “Complete Report on the Committee on Public Information, 1917-1919,” 202-203.

²²⁹ *Ibid.*, 204.

²³⁰ *Ibid.*, 209.

²³¹ Creel, “Complete Report on the Committee on Public Information, 1917-1919,” 198-200.

regions, Sevier guaranteed there was steady access to news articles. However, motion-pictures were not as successful because they did not receive films until October 1918.²³² In contrast, the CPI Commissioner C.N. Griffis, who oversaw Peru, Ecuador, and Bolivia, found that news articles would not influence native attitudes about the war. Griffis noted in his final report that “communication and transportation are slow and uncertain,” largely due to the nature of journalism being “provincial.”²³³ Moreover, pamphlets were also less popular because the local populations were already desensitized due to British efforts before the U.S. entered the war. Therefore, instead of investing energy in the news section, he and his team focused on the distribution of photographs, especially placing them on bulletin boards. The photographs were a huge success because they were easy to circulate and appeared in public areas people most frequented, like the train stations.²³⁴ For Sevier and Griffis, they were required to adopt new strategies that worked best for them, despite the fact that these strategies were successful in other regions.

Poorly Trained Staff

In addition to creating controversy and relying on improvisation, Creel was not qualified to lead a foreign publicity bureau. Not only did he not speak any foreign languages, but also he had barely been out of the country. It was impossible for him to truly know the political and cultural landscapes awaiting his CPI representatives abroad. Creel’s hands-off management approach is clear in the fact that he never went to any post of the Foreign Section during the entire war. The only occasion he went abroad was after the war to assist President Wilson

²³² Ibid., 280, 283.

²³³ Ibid., 283.

²³⁴ Ibid., 280, 289.

throughout the Paris Peace Conference. However, he resigned as chairman of the CPI “to return to private life” in March 1919 and the rest of the CPI continued without him until June 1919.²³⁵

But Creel’s lack of international experience was not exclusive to him for he recruited many CPI representatives who knew very little about the countries they were entering. To give Creel credit, he did recruit people with tenacity and vigor, perfect for chaotic and unpredictable environments. Many CPI representatives were trained in journalism, filmmaking, education, and, most importantly, political organizing. Most were also liberal reformists, who were not content with the status quo and set its aims on eliminating corruption and inefficiencies in both the government and society. For example, Whitehouse was a known suffragist, Creel was a muckraker, Merriam an academic, and James Kerney was a newspaper publisher. However, despite these virtues in social reform and justice, most were inherently inexperienced with matters of foreign policy, international relations, and the process of cultural diplomacy. The lack of qualifications created problems for them to run a smooth publicity campaign in their perspective countries. Rarely did they know the language, culture, or politics of the assigned country.

Whitehouse spoke poor French and even worse German. Her lack of language skills often created hiccups for her when translating documents and negotiating terms with Swiss editors. She often had to rely on translators, which were already difficult to procure, to properly handle the distribution of news. Whitehouse admitted that her language skills often got in the way of the overall efficiency of the daily duties.²³⁶ Charles Merriam, as brilliant as he was a political scientist, his Italian and knowledge of the political landscape of Italy was unsatisfactory. The only preparation he had was on the ship heading for Europe, where he read books about Italy and

²³⁵ “Creel to Return to Private Life,” *The Tennessean* (Nashville: TN), March 12, 1919.

²³⁶ Whitehouse, *A Year as a Government Agent*, 129.

the language.²³⁷ Most of his knowledge of Italy and how to effectively use propaganda came after he arrived as he used his skills as a social scientist to study the political and social dynamics of Italy. And James Kerney did not speak French, although probably the most important given he worked in Paris.

Lack of Resources

Under Creel's direction, the officers of the Foreign Division often faced challenges with access to viable materials and resources. Frequently, materials sent over to CPI offices in Europe had to be altered and edited. Sometimes the materials were not useful. Sometimes there was no material at all. The CPI offices around the world were often treated as mini replicas of the CPI in the U.S. They were sent the same information and materials, such as films and news stories, with little regard to the local conditions of each post. Whitehouse was often given materials that were overtly anti-German, which had to be edited or rewrote in order to obey Swiss neutrality laws. Some materials that were given to her were simply useless, like the *Stars and Stripes*. As a military newspaper, published by the American Expeditionary Forces, its purpose was to boost morale and promote unity of the American troops in Europe. However, due to Switzerland neutral status, there were no soldiers to read it and was deemed "useless" by Whitehouse.²³⁸

Whitehouse was repeatedly left to her own devices when it came to getting materials because requests for such things often were never addressed. "Supplies and information came as slowly as assistants did" Whitehouse noted about her time in Berne, and for two months her library was empty, and only consisted of an out-of-date *World Almanac*.²³⁹ Also, her office lacked trained stenographers and translators. While her office built up strength in the remaining

²³⁷ Rossini, *Wilson and the American Myth*, 114.

²³⁸ Whitehouse to Kerney, September 27, 1918. Entry 148, CPI.

²³⁹ Whitehouse, *A Year as a Government Agent*, 148.

half of her time in Berne, Whitehouse could only rely on two people to help her, her assistant, George Fife and her secretary, Edith White. A lack of personnel and materials were a constant source of struggle for Whitehouse in Berne.

In Siberia, the CPI representatives ran into problems about lack of materials and adequate staff. As G.S. Bothwell, the technical director of the Film Division for eastern Russia, he noted in the final report that he experienced an absence of necessary equipment and crew to make films. While in Vladivostok, the CPI representatives began their work in September 1918. It was hard for them to find proper facilities to make films. They had no apparatus or chemicals to make titles. They were required to make equipment out of raw materials imported from Japan. And once they found a suitable location for filmmaking, they discovered the building had no running water or sewage system. And of the thirty people on the film division, only one had ever seen a film.²⁴⁰

But not all offices were understaffed and provided useless materials. Merriam enjoyed a staff of about fifty to do the work of the News, Speakers, Cinema, and Photographic divisions for the CPI. In addition, the office in Rome received a \$10,000 monthly budget.²⁴¹ In Paris, Kerney also had a robust staff of journalists, translators, and academics. He also was provided access to the Masion de la Press as an office space, provided by the French Ministry of Affairs.²⁴² However, Kerney probably enjoyed these privileges given that Paris was the information hub for most CPI posts, including Berne, Rome, Madrid, and Lisbon. Today, however, lack of resources for public diplomacy is not a problem.

²⁴⁰ Creel, "Complete Report on the Committee on Public Information, 1917-1919," 244-245.

²⁴¹ Rossini, *Wilson and the American Myth*, 116.

²⁴² Creel, "Complete Report on the Committee on Public Information, 1917-1919," 167-168.

Poor Communication

Under Creel's leadership, many CPI representatives were displeased with his infrequent communication. Whitehouse noted in her final report that communication between the America and Switzerland was delayed, taking "as long as twelve days to received or send a message."²⁴³ But communication does not just mean responses to cables and wireless services, Whitehouse's problems in Berne relate to her lack of proper credentials and the facilitation of misinformation. Not only did Creel fail to uphold his promise of providing her a diplomatic passport, but he was also the creator of the "women and children" cover. While the reasons for this remain unknown, it is safe to speculate the Creel was attempting to avoid a clash with the Legation, which ultimately backfired. Creel's miscommunication resulted in a nearly a four-month delay of CPI initiatives in Switzerland after Whitehouse left for the U.S.

In the case of Marion, he had not heard from Creel in the first five months of being in Madrid, "I have not received a letter nor a piece of printed matters of any character from our Committee...None of the Official Bulletins of the Committee are sent to me, and I know nothing whatever about the Committee's policies."²⁴⁴ Furthermore, poor communication between the embassy and the CPI forced Marion to return to the U.S. from May-July to sort out the mess about the CPI's role in Spain. Marion's colleague, George Dorsey, the assistant to the Naval Attachè, took over his role while he was gone, and wrote to Creel to encourage better communication, "Madrid is four to eight weeks from Washington by post and hence very far off—but by cable is farther if cables are unanswered."²⁴⁵ To make matters worse for Marion, the news service was forced to temporarily suspend its operation in mid-March due to telegraph and

²⁴³ Whitehouse, "Report of Mrs. Norman Der. Whitehouse," n.d., VBW.

²⁴⁴ Marion to Irwin, April 2, 1918, Entry 110, CPI.

²⁴⁵ George Dorsey to Creel, May 13, 1918, Entry 110, CPI; Wolper, "Origins of Public Diplomacy," 149.

mail communication difficulties on the Spanish side. Marion was forced to press on and encourage a “scraping together of available sources” until the suspension was over.²⁴⁶

Creel’s poor communication skills were a result of being spread too thin. He in charge of the entire Domestic Division’s activities back home and was waging a battle with Congress. For Creel, he felt that his management style “exercised personal direction of all the work until various trails were well blazed” and only dedicated “undivided executive attention” when it was crucial.²⁴⁷ On many occasions Creel was unavailable during crucial moments that resulted in two CPI representatives returning to the U.S. to resolve matters based on poor communication.

Creel’s managerial style can best be described as erratic. Referring to him as a micro-manager would be inaccurate and describing him as handoffs is unfair. While Creel’s accomplishments during the CPI are extensive, his failures and mismanagement created problems for public diplomacy.



Another problem that plagued the CPI, as well as public diplomacy today, is the role of gender. Many of the difficulties Whitehouse encountered in Berne were largely attributed to her being a woman in a male-dominated field. Trying to penetrate the “pretty good club” of Ivy League men was a fool’s errand for women during that time. For example, it was not until 1925 that Berne had its first official U.S. female diplomat Lucile Atcherson. Similar to the life of Whitehouse, Lucile Atcherson, a former activist, was the first woman Foreign Service officer and was met with antagonism by her male cohorts. In 1920, Atcherson was the first woman to take the Foreign Service exam and passed.²⁴⁸ By 1922, President Warren Harding nominated her

²⁴⁶ Mock and Larson, *Words that Won the War*, 267.

²⁴⁷ Creel, *How We Advertised America*, 247.

²⁴⁸ “May be First Woman to Enter Diplomatic Service,” *Evening Star* (Washington D.C.), April 02, 1921.

as the first woman in the U.S. Foreign Service but those in Senate were apprehensive about letting a young woman serve overseas as a diplomat. Therefore they denied her appointment to serve overseas and assigned her to the State Department's domestic division of Latin American Affairs in Washington D.C.²⁴⁹ By late 1922, the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations recommended her apportionment overseas and received full support from Senate.²⁵⁰ In spring 1925, she was appointed officially as the third secretary of the American Legation in Berne, Switzerland.²⁵¹

From the very beginning, Atcherson experienced problems with the Legation. By 1926, according to one evaluation by Hugh Gibson, who became Minister of Switzerland, in a efficiency report stated that "she is by nature reserved and formal with little facility in personal relationships....She does not possess the savior vivre necessary to meet a difficult situation." Moreover, Gibson noted that she required more help than others in her position and her gender hindered her from accessing the male-dominated sphere, for a male secretary, he wrote, "cultivates the society of colleagues and officials of the Government. He frequents their company in spare time, encourages them to come to his home and otherwise seek to cultivate their...confidences....A woman secretary is at a disadvantage."²⁵² In addition to Gibson's comments, the Office of Foreign Personnel's evaluation was no better. The report noted that Atcherson lacked "resource, tact, judgment and sense of what is fitting," and worst of all, assessed her personality as "egotistical" and that her gender was "a handicap to useful official friendships."²⁵³ Due to the negative evaluations, Atcherson was never promoted. Before her

²⁴⁹ Marylin S. Greenwald, *A Woman of the Times: Journalism, Feminism, and the Career of Charlotte Curtis.*, (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1999), 6.

²⁵⁰ "First Girl Diplomat," *Dayton Daily News* (Dayton: OH), December 13, 1922.

²⁵¹ Greenwald, *A Woman of the Times*, 7.; "Woman is a Diplomat," *Lincoln Journal Star*, (Lincoln: NE), April 16, 1925.

²⁵² Quoted in Greenwald, *A Woman of the Times*, 10.

²⁵³ *Ibid.*,

transfer to Panama in mid-1927, Atcherson inquired about her stagnant position as a Foreign Service officer, but was never told about her evaluations and was told that her performance did not merit promotion. Atcherson's time as a diplomat came to an end in late 1927 when she married George Curtis, a physician from Chicago. Atcherson, as many of her female successors would face, had to choose between career or family because diplomatic service was only limited to unmarried women.

The role of women in diplomacy, much less in public diplomacy, did not improve until recently. Since Whitehouse and Atcherson's time as diplomats, there has been progress for women in diplomatic positions. For example, thirty-six percent of the 158 total ambassadors serving across the world today are women.²⁵⁴ In addition, three women have served as Secretary of State over the last twenty years, including Madeleine Albright, Condoleezza Rice, and Hillary Clinton. Moreover, after USIA's merger into the State Department in 1999, there have been twelve Under Secretaries of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs, with eight being women. Currently, the position is held by a woman, Heather Nauert.²⁵⁵

However, despite those advancements, women in diplomatic roles have endured many set-backs. From the beginning of U.S. Diplomatic relations through today, of the 4,600 total ambassadors that served foreign nations, only nine percent have been women. More discouraging is female ambassadors serve countries that are not vital to U.S. security or foreign policy interests. For example, ambassadorships for women are lowest in countries like Russia, China, and Saudi Arabia. For Russia and Spain, where both have enjoyed a total of seventy-four

²⁵⁴ Andrea Strano, "Foreign Service Women Today: The Palmer Case and Beyond," *The Foreign Service Journal*. Last modified March 2016. Accessed April 20, 2018 www.afsa.org/foreign-service-women-today-palmer-case-and-beyond.

²⁵⁵ "Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs," *U.S. Department of State*. Accessed April 15, 2018 www.state.gov/r/.

ambassadors each, none were women. The numbers are not better for nations who border us or are our allies. The U.S. has never had a female ambassador to Canada and only one served in Mexico. In the U.K., of the sixty-nine ambassadors only one has been a woman, with similar numbers to France.²⁵⁶ However, female ambassadors to Switzerland have improved, with five out of the fifty-seven being women. And in the case of women serving as Foreign Service Officers, either as generalists or specialists, women represent only thirty-four percent in total.²⁵⁷

What accounts for the sluggish progress of women in diplomatic positions? For one, it was not until 1972 that the State Department ended its requirement of women to quit foreign service once they got married and started a family. For example, Atcherson was required to resign once she married her husband, ending her diplomatic career for good. And while Whitehouse did not work for the State Department, being a wife and a mother was not something she spoke of freely. While one paper revered Whitehouse as “one of the very finest examples” of a woman who can perform “her duties to society and at home,” she rarely mentioned her husband Norman or her daughter Alice in her memoir.²⁵⁸ Furthermore, the progress is slow due to a change in attitudes toward public diplomacy. Whether it is the Bureau of Education and Cultural Affairs or the Foreign Service’s introduction of public diplomacy track, many bureaus and sections of the State Department have adopted and acknowledged the general benefit to engage, inform, and influence opinion and promote a mutual understanding between cultures. Unlike Whitehouse’s experience, there is no longer a backlash to public diplomacy. However, it remains to be seen if women will be equally represented in diplomatic positions.

²⁵⁶ “Female U.S. Ambassadors,” *American Foreign Service Association*. Last modified February 17, 2016. Accessed April 14, 2018 www.afsa.org/female-us-ambassadors.

²⁵⁷ “Department of State-Diversity Statistics Full-Time Permanent Workforce,” *U.S. Department of State*. December 31, 2017. Accessed April 14, 2018 www.state.gov/m/dghr/workforce/.

²⁵⁸ “Motherhood an Inspiration to a Career,” *Lincoln Star* (Lincoln, NE), June 23, 1918.



Finally, since the creation of the CPI, public diplomacy agencies have experienced sudden endings. As quickly as they form, they also end. This occurs primarily because a lack of congressional support, a shift in public attitude towards propaganda, and a lack of purpose after war.

The CPI failed to demonstrate its usefulness after the war to Congress. By and large, public diplomacy agencies are typically the first to go after the dust settles and chaos ends. The CPI was forced to close its doors to the foreign section on June 30, 1919, after Congress refused to extend its authority. Congress withdrew funding from the CPI amid allegations that it was too partisan and this was apparent in its constant strife with Creel.²⁵⁹ Similar to the CPI, the OWI's abrupt ending also was a result of congressional pushback. Since its inception, the OWI's budget was under strict scrutiny by Congress, especially among conservative Republicans and Southern Democrats, that is was Democratic propaganda machine and it is too expensive.²⁶⁰ After the war, voices on the Hill lobbied for the dissolution of the OWI . In hope to avoid political conflict controversy, after the surrender of the Japanese in August 1945, Truman moved swiftly to close down the OWI through an executive order transferring the agency's functions to the State Department and renaming is as the "Interim International Information Service."²⁶¹ And as mentioned previously, the USIA faced backlash from members of Congress following the Cold War, seeing it as too expensive and a unnecessary Cold War relic.

Similarly, as swiftly as Congress' attitude changed toward public diplomacy and propaganda, as does the public's. In regard to the CPI, Wilson felt that the use of propaganda

²⁵⁹ Cull, *The Cold War and the United States Information Agency*, 9.

²⁶⁰ Dizard, *Inventing Public Diplomacy*, 37.

²⁶¹ Dizard, *Inventing Public Diplomacy*, 37-38.

was a “necessary evil of war” to win war, but not a means toward a long-term peace.²⁶² Moreover, following the First World War, the American public became exhausted by propaganda.²⁶³ More and more people began to consider America’s involvement in the Great War as a mistake and that a retreat from international politics was necessary, ushering in a new era of isolationism.²⁶⁴ Without an audience, propaganda is useless. For the OWI, many recognized the need to combat the well-established Nazi system, but did not see a need for it after the war. Similarly, following the Cold War, the use of propaganda became associated with the Soviet Union and was no longer needed to promote the virtues of democracy.

Aside from the roles that propaganda and Congress play in the dissolution of public diplomacy agencies, as does the inability to recognize its value. Following the First World War, the CPI offices in Europe were still open and staffed. Wilson failed to recognize the need to publicize the objectives of the League of Nations and the realization of an international community to preempt another war like that.



Upon Whitehouse’s return to the U.S., and the subsequent release of her memoir, *A Year as a Government Agent*, her mission in Berne was met with praise by many in the press. “She battered down prejudice, she held to her woman’s way,” *Woman Citizen* enthusiastically declared, “she proved that worth of women’s judgment, intuition and wit; and she did what she had set out to do.”²⁶⁵ The *Evening Public Ledger* declared it “a book of illuminating side-lights on secret diplomacy,” and the *New York Tribune* hailed “it took a woman to cut the Gordian knot

²⁶² M.L. Sanders and Philip M. Taylor, *British Propaganda during the First World War, 1914-1918*. (London: Macmillan Press, 1982), 248; Zara Steiner, *The Foreign Office and Foreign Policy, 1898-1914*, (London: Ashfield Press, 1986), 171.

²⁶³ Dizard, *Inventing Public Diplomacy*, 2.

²⁶⁴ Allan M. Winkler, *The Politics of Propaganda: The Office of War Information, 1942-1945*, (Yale University Press, 1978), 4.

²⁶⁵ “One Woman and a Good Many Diplomats,” *Woman Citizen*, 4, 33 (February 14, 1920): 864-866.

of diplomatic red tape.”²⁶⁶ While the press quickly identified the significance of having a strong woman contributing to diplomatic work in Europe, they failed to accurately identify the problems she faced, such as poor communication from Creel or outright resistance from Pleasant Stovall and Hugh Wilson. Even Whitehouse appeared to have given her time in Switzerland a more positive reappraisal, for she left no words of reflection or constructive criticism for future publicity agents, “I am not going to end by drawing any conclusions from this...they seem to me either too obvious or too confused, I shall simply leave the record as it is.”²⁶⁷ She even dedicated her book to Creel and referred to him as her “friend.”

Whitehouse was truly a pioneer. What Whitehouse was able to achieve during her time in Berne illustrates the first time public diplomacy was applied, despite the pitfalls along the way. Whitehouse worked tirelessly to influence public attitudes through her dedication to fully printing many of Wilson’s speeches, including his speech appealing to the Austrian-Hungarians peoples. And Whitehouse’s dedication to transparency better served the needs of the Americans and the Swiss beyond the limiting parameters traditional diplomacy posed. She not only cultivated public opinion in Switzerland by working closely and directly with the Swiss press, such as the *Agence Télégraphique Suisse* and sending a delegation of editors to the US. Through dissemination of news cables, special featured articles, and film and picture exhibitions, Whitehouse was able to communicate Wilson’s message of securing democracy and creating a lasting peace. And, whether amicable or not, Whitehouse worked with members of the Legation and the Paris Embassy to ensure a remnant of unification based on a shared interest in ending the war and securing a peaceful transition.

²⁶⁶ “Review.” *Evening Public Ledger* (Philadelphia: PA), Jan 23, 1920; “Review.” *New York Tribune*, February 4, 1920.

²⁶⁷ Whitehouse, *A Year as a Government Agent*, 286.

By the time the CPI foreign offices began closing in February 1919, there were mixed feelings of accomplishment and letdown amongst those of the foreign section. While they endured hardships in the name of victory and were able to contribute to the war effort, nevertheless Wilson's plan for a League of Nations and lasting peace never came to fruition. Ultimately, people like Whitehouse were forced to work with an inadequate grasp of local nuances and sufficient resources, unpredictable inferences with the State Department, no guidelines and no guarantees. In general, the CPI, as demonstrated through Whitehouse's time in Switzerland, serves an example of the persisting problems other American public diplomacy agencies. The practice of public diplomacy has never been easy. But throughout times of war and national security, public diplomacy has been used to spread war aims and influence public attitudes in its favor. The trajectory of public diplomacy is still being written, however, one can be sure that it will face challenges and obstacles along the way.

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