

World War I American Homefront Roleplay

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Americans suffer from an almost complete historical amnesia surrounding the First World War. Many adults can cite the assassination of the Archduke Ferdinand as a cause of the war, but otherwise, most citizens have no idea about the war. In Europe, however, many people talk about the war as if it only had happened a few years ago; the wounds are still raw and strongly felt. This amnesia is not by chance. America does not remember its involvement in the First World War because the events on the homefront violated almost every single principle that the country purportedly stood for.

Americans desperately need to learn history, and especially history as it surrounds this conflict, because the events of the war completely transformed the entire world. The war left nearly 40 million people dead worldwide. It destroyed three empires (the German, the Austrian-Hungarian, and the Ottoman Empires). It recreated a fourth empire through the transformation of Russia into the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics after the Bolshevik Revolution. It began a revolution in Ireland, removing it from

the United Kingdom, and created “the troubles” in Ulster, as Irish Catholics in Northern Ireland continued a fight to remove the entire island of Ireland from British control. The unfair armistice which severely punished Germany created the necessary conditions for the rise of Adolf Hitler in Germany. The conflict spread the seeds of decolonization, first in Africa, and eventually, across the globe. The war also created the conditions which led to the Great Depression, first in the United States, and eventually, through all of Europe.

The First World War did not leave America untouched, either. In an effort to gain the support of the entire country for the conflict, Woodrow Wilson at first created a propaganda machine in order to convince the nation that it should involve itself in a war in Europe; the first time ever that the country involved itself in a purely European conflict. When the Committee on Public Information (CPI) failed to convince all Americans to cooperate, Wilson used conscription to fill the ranks of the Army, along with a series of draconian laws such as the Selective Service Act, the Espionage

Act, the Threats Against the President Act, and finally, the Sedition Act, in order to quell dissent. These laws gave the Postmaster General the right to refuse mailing privileges to newspapers and magazines that were critical of the war. It also gave law enforcement agencies such as the Secret Service, the U.S. Marshals, and the Bureau of Investigation (the forerunner of the modern day FBI) sweeping powers to spy on average Americans, and the power to arrest anyone who criticized the war effort, the government, or the President. The Government also charted the creation of a vigilante group, The American Protective League, which gave thousands of untrained businessmen "Secret Service" badges, and the authority to keep suspected disloyal citizens under surveillance. Thousands of people were arrested, tried, convicted, and sent to federal prison for a variety of offenses, most of which involved the simple exercise of First Amendment rights to speak out against the conflict. One drunk man was sentenced to federal prison for using an expletive to describe President Woodrow Wilson. Many others went to prison for saying simply that "The United States should have kept out of this war." Eugene V. Debs, the well known trade unionist and five time candidate for President on the Socialist Party ticket, ran his last Presidential campaign from federal prison, after he was convicted under the Sedition Act for speaking out

against the war during a campaign speech.

While the history of homefront America during World War I sounds like something out of a dystopian novel such as 1984, all of these events happened during the war to "make the world safe for Democracy." For about eighteen months, the American government forgot that the Bill of Rights even existed. This role play will acquaint students with the events and historical actors that were involved in the repression of civil liberties during the war, and will also face the same real pressures and decisions that politicians, activists, and citizens dealt with during the period.

Materials Needed:

1. Construction paper, in order to create placards for each group; and pens, markers, or crayons.
2. Copies of the role play sheets, with enough individual role play cards for each student, as well as copies of the background sheet, and the proposed text of the Sedition Act.

Procedure:

1. Make sure to read through all of the materials, so that you are fully versed in all of the roles and what each role is attempting to accomplish.

2. Advise your students that they will be engaging in a role play, in one of five different roles, either as a Wilson Administration official, an officer of the American Protective League, a Democratic member of Congress who is undecided on their position regarding the proposed Sedition Act, an officer of the National Civil Liberties Bureau (the forerunner of the ACLU), and a member of the Women's Peace Party.
3. Read through the proposed text of the Sedition Act, making sure that students understand what each provision of the act will outlaw.
4. While not required, you might consider discussing the extent of the foreclosure of Civil Liberties up to that point in 1918. The suppression of civil liberties was well publicized in the newspaper, so the participants in a debate of this type would have been well versed in what was occurring in the country at the time. You could also leave this discussion to a debriefing session after the role play, as well.
5. Divide your class into five similar sized groups, and assign roles to each student.
6. As an enrichment activity, you might consider asking your students to write a backstory from their character. A day in the library to do research would provide even greater enrichment for the activity.
7. When you are ready to begin the role play, direct the students to come together in their individual roles, and to plan a strategy for attempting to meet their objectives.
8. Once students have determined their strategy, have the group choose "travelers," who will meet with the other groups in an effort to convince those groups to help them meet their objectives. It is highly recommended that non-travelers be required to stay in their seats, and that travelers be allowed to only meet with non-travelers. Travelers should not be allowed to congregate together to talk, they instead should talk to those members who are not traveling. Circulate among groups to ensure that students stay on-task.
9. Once negotiations appear to have mostly subsided, you might consider having students write out a statement that they will read during the hearing phase. You can also allow students to "wing

- it” during their presentations if you so choose.
10. For the hearing phase, you might choose to run the hearing yourself as the chairman of the committee hearing the proposed text of the Sedition Bill, or, you can appoint a student to this task.
 11. The floor should be opened to each group, where members are each allowed to testify about their interests, in an attempt to sway the undecided Senators to their side. After each member of the group has testified, the floor can be opened to the Senators to ask questions.
 12. Once all the members of the class have testified, testimony may be closed.
 13. Once testimony is closed, the chairman of the committee can entertain any amendments to the text of the bill. Amendments will be carried by a majority of the votes of the Senators. Once amendments are considered, the chair can move to have Senators vote for or against the proposed bill. If they vote in favor of the bill, then it would move to consideration by the whole senate. If they vote in opposition, the bill will die in committee. The role play may end at this point.
 14. If you wish to go even further, you could even have students convene one of the chambers of Congress to debate and then vote on the bill as if your students were all now members of Congress.
 15. Some follow-up questions for class discussion or essay writing could include:
 - Which groups struck alliances or deals with each other? Do you think that similar deals were made in real life in 1918?
 - What was realistic about this process, and what was not?
 - What were the motivations of pro- and anti-Sedition Act forces?

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World War I Homefront Roleplay

Background Sheet

It is May 1, 1918. The Great War has been raging in Europe for four years. Beginning in 1914 after the Assassination of the Archduke Francis Ferdinand and his wife Sophie by the terrorist group “The Black Hand,” (a group funded by the officers of the Serbian Army), the war has already killed millions of soldiers and civilians from all over the world.

The United States stayed out of the conflict until April 1917, when Woodrow Wilson asked Congress for a declaration of war against Germany. Wilson brought the U.S. into the war for two reasons: in response to the resumption of unrestricted submarine warfare by Germany (meaning that German submarines would attack civilian targets carrying military munitions without warning), and because of the Zimmerman telegram, a diplomatic cable from the German high command to their ambassador in Mexico City, seeking to bring Mexico into the war *against* the United States if the U.S. declared war against Germany. The German high command promised Mexico funds for arms, along with assistance in retaking lands lost in the Mexican War in 1848.

Most Americans wanted to keep out of the war before Wilson asked for the declaration. Wilson himself ran for reelection in 1916 on the slogan of, “He Kept Us Out of War!” However, between the issues that moved Wilson towards

war, and the massive propaganda machine that the U.S. Government mobilized in order to prepare the nation for war, many Americans have come to believe that if the United States is going to enter the conflict, that the nation should make **every** effort to win.

However, while many Americans have embraced the war, many people who opposed American entrance into the conflict continue to oppose the war on a variety of grounds. Congress enacted a conscription law, which requires all able bodied males to register for the draft. Failure to register, or failure to report for duty once drafted, is a federal crime. Even so, many men, especially in the South, have refused to fight and have hidden themselves from federal authorities.

In addition to the draft and its opponents, the United States enacted the Espionage Act in 1917 in order for federal agents to have the authority to arrest spies. However, since its passage, the law has only been used to arrest American citizens and residents who have vocally opposed the war. However, President Wilson is now asking Congress for even more authority to arrest those people who state their opposition to the war. Congress is preparing to debate the passage of a Sedition Act, which will make it a federal crime to speak out against the war, the government, the President, or the military.

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Sedition Act - Proposed Text

A Bill to Amend Section Three of the Espionage Act of 1917:

SECTION 3. Whoever, when the United States is at war, shall willfully make or convey false reports or false statements with intent to interfere with the operation or success of the military or naval forces of the United States, or to promote the success of its enemies, or shall willfully make or convey false reports, or false statements, ...or incite insubordination, disloyalty, mutiny, or refusal of duty, in the military or naval forces of the United States, or shall willfully obstruct ...the recruiting or enlistment service of the United States, or ...shall willfully utter, print, write, or publish any disloyal, profane, scurrilous, or abusive language about the form of government of the United States, or the United States, or the military or naval forces of the United States ...or shall willfully display the flag of any foreign enemy, or shall willfully ...urge, incite, or advocate any curtailment of production ...or advocate, teach, defend, or suggest the doing of any of the acts or things in this section enumerated and whoever shall by word or act support or favor the cause of any country with which the United States is at war or by word or act oppose the cause of the United States therein, shall be punished by a fine of not more than \$10,000 or imprisonment for not more than 20 years, or both....

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Wilson Administration Official

You are a member of the Wilson Administration's Department of Justice, reporting to Attorney General Thomas Gregory. AG Gregory and President Wilson have asked Congress to pass the Sedition Act, an amendment to the Espionage Act. The Department of Justice has used the Espionage Act in order to arrest, prosecute, and imprison anti-war activists, those who have spoken out against conscription, and people who have publicly criticized the war effort. However, AG Watt and the President are concerned that the Espionage Act does not go far enough, and have asked you and other specialists in the Department to testify before Congress to push for the passage of the Sedition Act.

Some judges have refused to find people guilty under the Espionage Act, claiming that the First Amendment protects freedom of speech. Furthermore, federal agents are often frustrated because they believe the Espionage Act does not allow them to arrest people for simply speaking out against the war. This is dangerous, because President Wilson needs 100% of the support of the American people, and anti-war activists and others who criticize the government during war time often sway the opinions of average

Americans who love their country, but who don't want to participate in this important and necessary war that threatens America's national security.

Your goal is to testify before Congress, to sway undecided Democratic Senators to support the bill, and to convince others to support your version of the Sedition Act.

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American Protective League Member

You are an officer of the American Protective League (APL), a vigilante organization created by advertising executive A.M. Briggs to help secure the nation during this conflict. Mr. Briggs convinced the Director of the Bureau of Investigation (the forerunner of the FBI), as well as the attorney general and the President, to charter the APL as the official auxiliary of the Bureau. APL agents and officers typically work full time for a business, and are recruited to root out spies, saboteurs, and unreliable employees at their individual places of business. They are also often asked by the Bureau to complete background investigations of war workers and government employees. Additionally, they also often engage in other investigations where espionage or unloyal citizens or aliens are suspected. While APL agents and officers aren't technically allowed to carry firearms or make arrests, they often do both, and they are often involved in the detention of disloyal Americans. APL agents regularly file reports with the Bureau, using the Bureau's own paperwork, and

they carry badges that say, "SECRET SERVICE, AMERICAN PROTECTIVE LEAGUE."

As a member of the APL who has conducted many Espionage Act investigations, you believe that the Espionage Act does not go far enough. In fact, based on your work, you believe that even the Sedition Act does not go far enough to protect the United States from foreign influence, slackers, and enemy aliens who seek to impair the war effort.

Your goal is to testify before Congress, to sway undecided Democratic Senators to support the bill, and to convince others to support an amended version of the Sedition Act that criminalizes many other acts, such as: making negative statements against the Red Cross, refusing to purchase Liberty Bonds or Stamps, making negative comments about England, France, or other American allies, or otherwise making **any** statement against the government or in support of Germany or Austria.

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Undecided Democratic United States Senator

You are a United States Senator, and a member of the Democratic Party (the President's Party). You were against the United States' involvement in the Great War, and you supported President Woodrow Wilson's reelection campaign because he pledged to keep the United States out of the war. You opposed the Conscription Act, because you don't believe that people should be forced to fight in a war that they do not support. However, you supported the Espionage Act, because you believed that the government needed a legal mechanism to deal with the German spies that the Secret Service caught before the United States entered the conflict. However, you are very worried about reports you have heard about the act being used not to arrest and prosecute spies, but to arrest American citizens and residents who have spoken their mind negatively about the government and the war.

However, while you oppose the war and conscription, you believe that if the country is going to engage in war, that it must do so 100%. You believe that citizens should support their country, because doing so is less of an evil than allowing Germany to dominate Europe, and possibly, the Western Hemisphere. Therefore, if the country chooses to fight, and it has, then it must fight to win.

While you harbor worries about the use of the Espionage Act, you are also very concerned by some of the shrill voices that were heard in the press before Postmaster General Burleson used the Espionage Act to cancel the mailing privileges of newspapers and magazines that spoke out against the war or the government. You are especially worried about radical unions, such as the IWW, and Socialists, many of whom support the very worrisome Bolshevik Revolution which has just taken place in Russia. Because of these worries--especially the real threat of communism here at home--you are carefully considering your vote on the Sedition Act. You want to speak to people from all sides of the issue before you make your final decision. However, whatever your vote will be, it is motivated first and foremost by your love for this country and its liberties, as well as by your concern for its wellbeing and safety.

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National Civil Liberties Bureau Member

You are an officer of the National Civil Liberties Bureau. The Bureau was founded in 1917, and was originally part of the American Union Against Militarism (AUAM), an anti-war organization. The NCLB was founded by Roger Nash Baldwin, who called on the AUAM to create a legal bureau to help protect the rights of conscientious objectors. Roger Baldwin himself even went to prison for a year for refusing to register for the draft. The NCLB regularly provides legal advice to soldiers in Army camps who have been drafted against their will, as well as to those men who oppose the war but who are in the process of being drafted by the military.

The NCLB opposes the war, it opposes conscription, and it also opposes the Espionage Act and the proposed Sedition Act. The NCLB has provided some legal support to those arrested under the Espionage Act and the Threats Against the President Act, and in these cases, average Americans were arrested and prosecuted by the government for simply speaking their mind and exercising their first amendment rights. You believe that if the government cannot be trusted not to abuse those pieces of legislation, it absolutely cannot be trusted with even more power that would allow the

government to silence anyone who disagrees with it. Therefore, you believe it is absolutely imperative that no version of this bill--even a watered down version--pass Congress and make it to the President's desk.

Your goal is to testify before Congress, and to sway undecided Democratic Senators to oppose the bill at all costs.

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Women's Peace Party Member

You are a member of the Women's Peace Party, a pacifist organization founded by women in 1915 to oppose the Great War as well as American participation in the conflict. As such, you opposed the declaration of war and conscription. You also oppose those portions of the Espionage Act which allow Postmaster General Burleson to shut down newspapers and magazines that cover the war in such a way that it is not positive for the Wilson Administration.

However, you and the rest of the members of the Women's Peace Party are also suffragettes, fighting for the right of women to vote. Women's suffrage has made much headway in the last few years, with many states enacting laws allowing women to vote in their jurisdictions. However, a hodgepodge of states allowing some women to vote is not enough: you will not stop until women's suffrage is the supreme law of the land, enshrined in the United States Constitution.

While the Peace Party opposes the Espionage Act, as well as the proposed Sedition Act, some Party members are currently concerned that making a strong stand against the Sedition Act--which many Americans argue is necessary to protect the country from the brutal German huns--will hurt other

efforts being made by the Party to work for women's suffrage. To many, the goal of women sharing the benefits and responsibilities of citizenship is much more important than opposing the Sedition Act--a temporary war measure. Furthermore, you are worried about being branded "a slacker" yourself for opposing war measures, because of the current political climate in this country.

Since the war is ongoing, and Peace Party measures to call an end to the war are falling on deaf ears, it is your goal to testify before Congress, to sway undecided Democratic Senators to oppose the Sedition Bill, all while doing so in such a way that will not turn average Americans and Congress against women's suffrage.