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INTRODUCTION

After drilling troops during the American Revolution, Baron Friedrich von Steuben was said to have noted that while you could tell a Prussian what to do and expect him to do it, you had to tell an American why he ought to do something before he would comply. Few of the officials who ran the United States Army's "Troop Information" programs from World War II through the Vietnam War failed to invoke von Steuben's observation in defending their mission. They saw themselves as explainers rather than persuaders, different from the enemy's propagandists not by degree but on fundamental principle. "Propaganda" seemed to them at odds with the democratic, individualistic genius of American society.

Nevertheless, the management of opinion lay at the heart of the Troop Information (or, later, "Command Information") mission. Between 1940 and 1973, millions of young Americans passed through the ranks of the U.S. armed forces. For officials who harbored doubts about the nation's ideological commitment to its battles, these draftees and volunteers made up a captive audience ripe for political indoctrination. For over three decades, the military subjected soldiers to an array of films, radio programs, pamphlets, and weekly lectures designed to stir their patriotism and activate their contempt for first fascist, then communist enemies.

Military sociologists, political scientists, and scholars of mass communication have analyzed the Troop Information program's effectiveness, but few historians have devoted much attention to the way the armed forces conducted political indoctrination. In this history of the formal political indoctrination of U.S. soldiers, I draw on the records of the army and the Department of Defense's information offices, the content of the indoctrination materials themselves, and the

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recollections of soldiers to analyze the political messages that the nation conveyed to its army over the three decades of American conscription. I examine how the Troop Information program took root as an army institution, how its indoctrination technique evolved over time, and how it interacted with America's larger political culture.

For the most part, the indoctrination campaign was mild in scope. The army's decision at the end of World War II to house Troop Information together with its better-funded, better-staffed public relations office damaged the program's prestige. In the field, commanders considered Troop Information a low priority, and many thought it a nuisance. The indoctrinators' conflicting impulses to inculcate patriotism and to shun propaganda as un-American further limited the program's reach. Still, their respect for freethinking individualism helped keep them within safe boundaries. Only rarely did they indulge in crass, overtly propagandistic appeals.

Nevertheless, the efforts to impose a political consensus on soldiers raised both practical and ethical questions. Did political indoctrination actually work? The social scientists who monitored the programs searched mostly in vain for evidence of success. Even the military's best-crafted propaganda, such as director Frank Capra's World War II *Why We Fight* films, failed to budge soldiers' opinions on issues closest to their immediate self-interest. The influence of families, peers, schools, and civilian political culture seemed to weigh far more heavily than military propaganda in forming soldiers' more abstract political beliefs. It is possible that the military establishment lost little, in the end, when it left the task of persuasion to the engines of opinion in society at large.

More importantly, the military maintained its cherished political neutrality better when it did so. When the nation attempted to use the army as a school of citizenship it forced it to take positions in Americans' unsettled political debates. The army was the destination of the majority of the millions of draft-era enlistees, and hence that service is the focus of the book. One army information chief remarked to his officers in the 1950s that it was their duty to salvage those soldiers who had "missed their schooling." Their program was "the last time that organized society can impress upon them their responsibilities as citizens." The

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idea of the army as a school of the nation had no real counterpart in the other services. The navy and marines tended to doubt that abstract ideology was an important motivational agent and accordingly stressed building pride in the unit or the service more than in the nation. They offered decentralized information programs and deemphasized broad political themes. Though the air force shared information materials with the army, its view of itself as an elite, technologically advanced organization made for a different approach to indoctrination than a would-be teacher of remedial citizenship. If the army also often lacked interest in propaganda, however, it could less easily avoid civilian and Pentagon propagandists' interest in the army.¹

It was not until World War I that Americans seized upon the army as a potential "school of the nation," and not until World War II that the military implemented a political indoctrination program from the outset of a conflict. Political indoctrination did not become an army institution until the Cold War, when Pentagon officials sought to provide American soldiers with ideological armor as impregnable as communist soldiers, they assumed, possessed. The program's inability to find a usable set of common political ideals in this period revealed the illusory nature of the apparent political consensus in the postwar United States. Citizen-soldiers, like their civilian countrymen, contained multitudes; what activated the patriotism of one could be diametrically opposed to the beliefs of another. This inherent conflict metastasized in the early 1960s, when Maj. Gen. Edwin A. Walker, commander of the Twenty-fourth Infantry Division stationed in the Federal Republic of Germany, tried to indoctrinate his troops with his personal brand of right-wing politics. After his recall, ultraconservatives attacked the army for being soft on communism. The controversy showed that anticommunism could not be taught as part of a national consensus though it also formed the very grammar of American party politics.

The Vietnam War presented the information program with its greatest challenge. Hampered by a turgid bureaucracy, information officers (IOs) struggled to come up with fresh or inspirational approaches. Grave doubts about the conduct and purpose of the war pitted the program's message against draftees' deeper indoctrination as American citizens, making plain the weakness of the military's propaganda as a

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motivational tool. By the early 1970s it was clear that army culture had rejected formal political indoctrination. In abandoning the draft the country also abandoned the concept of its army as a forge of patriotic citizenship. The events of the 1960s cooled the nation's anticommunist ardor to the point where it was willing to leave the volunteer soldiers to their own politics and loyalties, concluding apparently that there never had been a place for political indoctrination in an army of a democracy.

[1]

Anxious to Work Bodily Destruction

Political Indoctrination in World War II

Shortly before the United States entered World War II, it set up a political indoctrination program for its draftees and volunteers. With little in the way of an inheritance from World War I, those who labored to counteract enlistees' flagging morale had to invent programs and procedures almost entirely anew. As in many other aspects of the nationwide undertaking, the creators of the war orientation program met their mission with an optimistic spirit of innovation. The army mobilized accomplished filmmakers, writers, and social scientists to craft occasionally stunning propaganda. It charged officers with the "indoctrination of hatred" in lectures to the troops. Implementation of the program revealed, however, that commanders often considered it a waste of time, and though troops enjoyed the films they sometimes found the weekly sessions oppressive. As the social scientists learned, these methods were only marginally effective. Propaganda, no matter how well made, could not overrule men's instinct for self-preservation.

After the fall of France in June 1940, and before the Germans turned on their Soviet allies a year later, the global peril was evident enough for the United States to raise an army for the defense of the western hemisphere, if nothing else. Although dwarfed by the outpouring of patriotism after the empire of Japan's attack on the U.S. fleet at Pearl Harbor, the reintroduction of Selective Service in 1940 produced its own wave of patriotic and willing volunteers and draftees. However, it also swept into the ranks many reluctant citizen-soldiers who blamed their boredom, confinement, and endangerment on what they took as America's decision to fight Great Britain's war. On August 12, 1941, Congress voted, quite narrowly, to extend the soldiers' term of service past the original year. Some disgruntled draftees, believing that the ex-

tension was a breach of contract and convinced that the international situation was not really that grave, spoke openly of going “Over the Hill in October” when their initial year of enlistment ended. *New York Times* reporter Hilton Howell Railey investigated the matter confidentially for the army and claimed that such talk was alarmingly common in the camps.¹

Given the reports of significant discontent, Gen. George C. Marshall, the army chief of staff, instructed the War Department’s Bureau of Public Relations to prepare a lecture series for the soldiers on the purpose of the war. Given the prevailing attitude that morale was best maintained by the time-honored device of keeping soldiers busy, there was little in the way of an established apparatus to carry out Marshall’s order. The decision to indoctrinate draftees politically thus came in response to this immediate morale problem rather than out of the army’s past experiences. Nevertheless, the World War II programs had antecedents in America’s previous wars.

Antecedents of Political Indoctrination

The army’s political indoctrination programs always claimed a lineage reaching back to George Washington, who on occasion tried to raise his army’s spirits with inspirational words invoking the political goals of the Revolution.² Washington’s distribution of pamphlets and other political speeches was opportunistic, rather than programmatic, morale building. The first nation in modern history to attempt to manufacture soldiers’ political attitudes systematically was revolutionary France in the 1790s. To thwart counterrevolutionary activity in its armies, the government’s Committee on Public Safety tried to educate the troops as to whom they owed their true allegiance. Soldiers received political journals, learned songs with patriotic lyrics, and attended ceremonies celebrating the revolution. With these tools, the government tried to undermine the soldiers’ immediate loyalties, especially toward their officers and generals, and replace them with a purer, abstract devotion to the *patrie*.³

Not until half a century later, in the American Civil War, did the United States become a nation-in-arms on the scale of revolutionary France. Associations of private citizens, concerned with soldiers’ dedi-

cation to the Union cause, circulated pamphlets and newspapers in the armies' camps. At the same time the administration of President Abraham Lincoln made some limited attempts to curtail soldiers' access to hostile pamphlets and newspapers. The materials soldiers received, however, were not generated under government or army auspices. The North's political parties vied for soldiers' hearts, minds, and votes just as they would any segment of the electorate.

Democrats argued that men in uniform could not act as freethinking citizens. They feared a moblike "bayonet vote" that would uniformly favor the commander in chief. The Republicans, confident of their campaign's popularity with the troops (and, not inconsequentially, their superior ability to communicate with the armies), upheld the political integrity of the citizen-soldier. In their campaign materials Republicans flattered the soldiers' judgment and played on their contempt for Copperheads (peace Democrats). One of their 1864 pamphlets, entitled, *A Few Plain Words with the Rank and File of the Union Armies*, stated: "Napoleon wittily warned governments to 'beware when bayonets should learn to think;' but with us far from being a subject of fear, it is our glory and pride that the war for the Union has been upheld by a million of 'thinking bayonets.' . . . This election touches you, because in becoming *soldiers* you did not cease to be *citizens*." Given these differing approaches, it was hardly a surprise that when they went to the polls the soldiers endorsed the Republicans' prosecution of the war to an even greater degree than did the civilian electorate.⁴

The American military itself did not set up a program to indoctrinate troops politically until late in World War I. As in the Civil War, the government provided channels through which civilian propaganda could reach soldiers. In 1917, however, President Woodrow Wilson's administration did not merely pass on the products of patriotic leagues and party loyalists. It centralized control of the propaganda under its own agency, the Committee on Public Information (CPI), led by progressive journalist George Creel. The CPI produced films, pamphlets, posters, and slide shows that promoted American war aims and crafted a frightening portrait of the enemy. It deployed seventy-five thousand speakers, known as Four Minute Men, to cover the countryside, making four-minute speeches or singing patriotic songs. Early in 1918 the

War Department asked the CPI to reissue some of the Four Minute Man presentations to company commanders to deliver to the troops. Creel remembered that “We went far beyond the request and furnished hundreds of officers with regular Four Minute Men bulletins as well as with the Committee’s pamphlets. All were expected to make ‘morale talks’ to their men, yet nothing was done to aid them, and the publications of the Committee were their one hope.” In 1917 and 1918 the CPI and the Signal Corps produced newsreels and longer films and sent them, “free of charge, to the encampments in the United States as well as to the picture-shows on the firing line in France.”⁵

The potential effects of military life on citizen-soldiers worried segments of the American public, and they urged the Wilson administration to guard against socially unacceptable behavior in and around the camps. In response the government set up the Commission on Training Camp Activities (CTCA), an organization under whose umbrella various civilian groups (such as the Young Men’s Christian Association and the American Library Association) strove to make army life more wholesome. Nancy K. Bristow, in her 1996 book *Making Men Moral*, located these moralizing efforts in the Progressive Era tendency of white middle-class Protestants to exalt their own value system as the American standard. Like the settlement houses established to aid immigrants, the CTCA simultaneously provided comforts to soldiers and demanded social conformity.⁶

Political indoctrination was not a primary concern of the CTCA. Rather, its first mission was to safeguard soldiers’ sexual purity. The fact that venereal diseases impaired military efficiency goes only so far in explaining the zeal that animated the organization on this point. As Bristow described it, the CTCA’s methods for actively policing soldiers’ sexual behavior included forming civilian leagues to harass camp followers and distributing pamphlets and films to dramatize the dishonor that befell sexually active men—a fate far worse than death on the battlefield. The CTCA discouraged drinking, close dancing, the reading of improper books, and the watching of improper movies. Never before had a civilian agency tried to exert such control over soldiers’ lives.⁷

Although many of the reform-minded organizers who flourished in the early part of the twentieth century feared that their social work

would be thrust aside when America entered the war, some, including the CTCA officials, realized that the war would be a vehicle well suited for promoting their values. In this way the Great War and the progressives were made for one another. The administrators of the American Expeditionary Force and their civilian allies made unprecedented efforts to impose order on the process of raising an army. They created the Selective Service system to manage the flow of inductees, then sorted and rated the recruits with intelligence and psychological tests. Volunteers and draftees made up a sizable captive audience for experiments in citizenship training and social engineering.

Not all interested observers agreed with the CTCA's premise that camp life degraded soldiers. Prewar advocates of universal military training and service invited young men to their encampment in Plattsburgh, New York, with the idea that paramilitary training was a character-building experience. Some Plattsburghers, such as Theodore Roosevelt, claimed that mixing men in the training camps would help them overcome class and ethnic differences and forge instead a common identity as equal, democratic, and robust citizens. Former army chief of staff Leonard Wood was just as optimistic about the benefits for industry if universal military training could accustom a workforce to regimented life and condition it to obey orders.⁸

Whether their purposes were democratic or undemocratic, supporters of the conscription movement assumed that the army could properly teach citizenship to Americans. Many progressives wanted American education to level class distinctions amongst students and bring them up as political equals. When the army assumed the role of a "school of the nation" through the World War I draft the goals of its civics training was quite different, however. Implicit in its vision was the idea that military discipline promoted good citizenship, not the other way around. This model was the opposite of philosopher John Dewey's blueprint for democratic education, which advocated teaching democracy by immersing students in its practice.⁹

In May 1918 the army established its own Morale Branch to tend to the soldiers' mental well-being, with Brig. Gen. Edward Lyman Munson from the Medical Corps as chief. Since the previous January Munson had lobbied for a means to formalize the manufacture of enthusiasm.