

# World War I & the Home Front: Mobilization, Propaganda, and Civil Liberties

**Grade Level:** Secondary (8–12 adaptable)

**Length:** 3 Class Periods (45–60 minutes each)

**Disciplines:** U.S. History, Civics, Government, ELA, Media Studies

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## Learning Objectives

Students will:

1. Explain why the United States entered World War I.
  2. Analyze how the federal government mobilized the home front.
  3. Examine propaganda and public persuasion.
  4. Investigate limits on civil liberties during wartime.
  5. Evaluate how war reshaped American society.
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## Essential Questions

- Why did the U.S. enter WWI?
  - How did the government mobilize industry and citizens?
  - What role did propaganda play?
  - How were civil liberties restricted?
  - Did wartime unity justify repression?
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## Teacher Historical Background Script (Opening Mini-Lecture)

“When World War I began in 1914, the United States declared neutrality. But economic ties to the Allies, unrestricted submarine warfare, and the Zimmermann Telegram pushed the U.S. toward intervention.

When the U.S. entered the war in 1917, fighting occurred overseas—but mobilization transformed life at home. The government controlled industry, promoted patriotism, restricted dissent, and reshaped labor and gender roles.”

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# Lesson Sequence Overview

Day 1 – U.S. Entry & National Mobilization

Day 2 – Propaganda & Public Persuasion

Day 3 – Civil Liberties & Social Change

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## PRIMARY SOURCE EXCERPTS

(All public domain)

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### Primary Source 1

#### President Woodrow Wilson – War Message to Congress (April 2, 1917)

##### Instructional Excerpt

“The present German submarine warfare against commerce is a warfare against mankind...

American ships have been sunk... American lives taken...

The world must be made safe for democracy...

We have no selfish ends to serve...

We are but one of the champions of the rights of mankind.”

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### Primary Source 2

#### Selective Service Act (1917 Excerpt)

“All male persons... between the ages of twenty-one and thirty...

Shall be subject to registration...

And shall be liable to training and service in the military forces of the United States.”

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## **Primary Source 3**

### **Committee on Public Information – Propaganda Statement**

“It is the duty of every citizen to support the war...

To speak against the cause is to aid the enemy...

Public opinion must be mobilized as effectively as armies.”

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## **Primary Source 4**

### **Espionage Act (1917 Excerpt)**

“Whoever... shall willfully cause insubordination...

Or obstruct recruiting...

Or attempt to do so...

Shall be punished by fine or imprisonment...”

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## **Primary Source 5**

### **Eugene V. Debs – Anti-War Speech (1918 Excerpt)**

“The master class has always declared the wars...

The subject class has always fought the battles...

You have never had a voice in declaring war...

And you never will so long as the ruling class controls the system.”

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## **Primary Source 6**

### **Schenck v. United States – Supreme Court Decision (1919 Excerpt)**

Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr.

“The most stringent protection of free speech would not protect a man in falsely shouting fire in a theatre...

The question... is whether the words... create a clear and present danger...

That Congress has a right to prevent.”

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## **Primary Source 7**

### **Women’s War Work Statement**

“Women have taken the places of men in factories...

In offices...

In transportation...

Proving their ability to serve the nation in time of war.”

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## **DAY 1 – U.S. Entry & Mobilization**

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### **Activity 1 – Neutrality Debate**

## **Student Instructions**

Should the U.S. remain neutral in European war?

Consider:

- Trade
  - Security
  - Alliances
  - Ethics
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## **Teacher Script**

“In 1914, Americans were deeply divided about entering the war.”

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## **Activity 2 – Wilson War Message Close Reading**

Students annotate excerpt.

### **Focus Prompts**

- Moral language
  - Democratic ideals
  - Justification for war
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## **Teacher Modeling Script**

“Wilson frames war as moral obligation—not conquest.”

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## **Activity 3 – Draft Registration Simulation**

Students complete mock registration forms.

Debrief:

- Age eligibility
- Exemptions

- Public reactions
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## **DAY 2 – Propaganda & Persuasion**

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### **Mini-Lecture Script**

“The government created the Committee on Public Information (CPI) to shape public opinion through posters, films, speeches, and media.”

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### **Activity 1 – Propaganda Language Analysis**

Students annotate CPI excerpt.

Questions:

- How is dissent framed?
  - What emotional appeals exist?
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### **Teacher Script**

“Propaganda simplifies war into moral binaries—loyal vs. disloyal.”

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### **Activity 2 – Four-Minute Speech Project**

Students write short pro-war speeches modeled on CPI speakers.

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### **Activity 3 – Media Ethics Discussion**

Prompt:

“Is propaganda necessary in wartime?”

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# **DAY 3 – Civil Liberties & Social Change**

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## **Mini-Lecture Script**

“Wartime unity often came at the expense of civil liberties. Anti-war activists were arrested under the Espionage and Sedition Acts.”

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## **Activity 1 – Espionage Act Close Reading**

Students annotate legal excerpt.

Focus:

- Criminalized actions
  - Limits on speech
  - Enforcement scope
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## **Teacher Script**

“Criticism of the government could now be prosecuted as a crime.”

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## **Activity 2 – Debs Speech Analysis**

Students compare anti-war perspective to Wilson’s pro-war message.

Prompt:

“Which argument is more democratic?”

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## **Activity 3 – Supreme Court Hearing Simulation**

Roles:

- Charles Schenck
- Federal prosecutor
- Justice Holmes
- Civil liberties lawyer

Task: Debate free speech limits.

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### **Teacher Facilitation Script**

“You must determine: When does speech become dangerous?”

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## **Social Impact Mini-Lesson**

Discuss:

- Great Migration acceleration
  - Women in workforce
  - War industries
  - Liberty Bonds
  - Rationing
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## **Writing Assessment**

### **DBQ Prompt**

“How did World War I reshape American society on the home front?”

Students must cite:

- Wilson
- Selective Service Act
- CPI propaganda
- Espionage Act
- Debs speech
- Schenck ruling

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## Exit Ticket

1. Was propaganda ethical?
2. Were civil liberties fairly restricted?
3. Who benefited from wartime change?

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## Teacher Content Notes

Clarify:

- War Industries Board
- Food Administration
- Liberty Loan drives
- Sedition Act additions
- German-American persecution

Script:

“War mobilization required national unity—but unity came with costs.”

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## Differentiation

- Paraphrased legal excerpts
  - Guided annotations
  - Vocabulary supports
  - Oral debate roles
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## Extension Activities

1. Compare WWI civil liberties to WWII internment
  2. Study modern wartime surveillance laws
  3. Analyze propaganda across wars
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# Portfolio Artifact

Students submit:

- Annotated war speeches
- Draft simulation reflection
- Free speech hearing notes
- DBQ essay