

PART ONE

Power and Persuasion

Popular Sovereignty, Public Opinion, and the Presidency

Any discussion of the political laws of the United States has to begin with the dogma of popular sovereignty. [. . .] When a man or party suffers from an injustice in the United States, to whom can he turn? To public opinion? It constitutes the majority.

ALEXIS DE TOCQUEVILLE, *DEMOCRACY IN AMERICA*, 1835¹

IN THEORY

Alexis de Tocqueville's systematic examination of U.S. political institutions devoted several pages to the issue of popular sovereignty and came to celebrate it as one American democracy's master tenets. Written a few decades after the presidencies of George Washington and Thomas Jefferson, *Democracy in America* surprisingly did not include a section on the presidency. For the French observer, the figure of the president was "an inferior and dependent power" before the legislature, "not a part of the sovereign power" but simply "its agent."² Half a century later, in a different media environment, a little-known political scientist named Woodrow Wilson translated Tocqueville's diagnosis into a denunciation. Wilson lamented the weakness of the executive office vis-à-vis not just Congress but also the new, dramatically expanded power of public opinion, by which he meant newspapers' much expanded commercial and political import. In *Congressional Government*, Wilson critiqued the American system for its parceling of power and lack of personal accountability, saying that it resulted in a presidency that was "too silent and inactive" and unable to represent "real leadership" against the press's "government by declamation' and editorial-writing."³ In 1893, exactly two decades before becoming president, Wilson was still describing the executive exactly as Tocqueville had, as "the agent, not the organ, of sovereignty."⁴ At the same time, however, Wilson was also devising an alternative approach to governance by articulating a critical difference between "the powers or processes of governing," lodged in the presidency, and the people's "relations of *assent* and *obedience*" to those powers and processes. The appreciation of "the degree of assent and obedience" as "the limits,

that is, the sphere, of sovereignty” would eventually change the perception of his office as executive in chief and ultimately mark his own presidency.⁵ The effectiveness of the chief executive, he came to argue, rested on its ability to *control* public opinion and thus to counter the “revolution in journalism,” which was dangerously and arbitrarily “assuming the leadership in opinion.”⁶ Similarly, in *Constitutional Government in the United States* (1908), he argued that the “part of the government [that] has the most direct access to opinion has the best chance of leadership and mastery; and at present that part is the President.”⁷

Together with the revolution in journalism, another major change was affecting presidential elections and politics. Although incomplete, by 1912 a new system of state primaries was gaining national significance by taking nominating power away from the party bosses and replacing their smoke-filled back rooms with the apparent openness of party conventions.⁸ For decades, aspiring or established political leaders had to master individual relationships inside the party machine through personal favors and exchanges that patterned their political life from nomination to governance. Steadily operating in the background, lifelong political professionals preferred unremarkable and easily controllable candidates who stood out for their personal honesty and ordinariness (so-called dark horses). The new primary system changed the game. “Direct popular choice of candidates has arrived,” George Kibbe Turner of *McClure’s Magazine* noted in 1912, “and candidates, not parties, must introduce themselves directly to the voters.”⁹ In the new system, the press became something of a platform: newspapers had to explain and popularize candidates’ personalities as much as their policies. “The democracy of the printing-press had come,” boasted Turner, with Theodore Roosevelt’s mastery of publicity in mind.¹⁰

Although to many observers the press was a force controlled by political and financial elites, its role in public opinion’s free exchange of ideas was undisputable. The First Amendment to the Constitution recognized and protected free speech and the press’s independence from government interference. In the mid-1910s the same right was explicitly denied to motion pictures even though by then cinema had been used for the propagation of news and opinions (and not just entertainment) and had already played a significant role in presidential politics. It is worth referring here to a very famous legal decision that included a specious and often overlooked assessment of cinema’s status in American society.

In early January 1915, the U.S. Supreme Court agreed to hear the appeal of the interstate film exchange Mutual Film Corporation, which had lost its case against the State of Ohio’s decision to create a censorship board. Motion pictures may be harmless per se, state judges had argued, but their effects were not. Before the highest court in the land, the Mutual lawyers retooled what had been their ancillary argument, an unconstitutional curtailing of free speech, behind their main charge of a curtailing of interstate commerce and thus of property rights. Censoring motion pictures, the Mutual lawyers now forcefully claimed, equaled

censoring such comparable “publications” as works of art and the press.¹¹ The Supreme Court unanimously rejected the moral and educational rhetoric linked to motion pictures, describing them as “insidious in corruption,” prone to rely on “prurient interest” for things that “should not have a pictorial representation in public spaces,” and thus rightly subject to government restriction. The formula that the U.S. Chief Justice Joseph McKenna used to reject the proposed equation of motion pictures with free speech and the press, has become quite well-known. “The exhibition of moving picture is a business, pure and simple,” Justice McKenna wrote, “originated and conducted for profit, like other spectacles.” Less cited, at least by film scholars, is the remainder of the sentence, which ruled that moving pictures could not be regarded “as part of the press of the country or *as organs of public opinion*.”¹² In refuting their status as a legitimate or responsible force in public discourse, the Supreme Court denied moving pictures protection from state or federal censorship. The court’s rejection impinged upon the deceptively neat but historically variable, knotty, and ultimately inaccurate distinction between private enterprise, represented by the film companies, and public interest or, to put it simply, between private gain and public benefit.¹³

While an obvious counterargument could stress that newspapers, like moving pictures, were private businesses created for a combination of private gain and public benefit, a whole range of actual practices had already contradicted and were about to challenge head on the Supreme Court ruling. Promotional synergies between cinema and political campaigning had already emerged at the turn of the twentieth century, but in the 1910s the same process underwent a remarkable development. During his tenure, President Wilson exploited motion pictures not only for his election campaigns but more significantly to secure support for his war policies. The film industry’s involvement in the war effort raised both the president’s favorability and Hollywood’s stature in American public opinion. During his presidency, the U.S. engagement in World War I effectively disproved any legal theory limiting cinema’s role to merely business and introduced new and enduring means of enhancing its political effectiveness. The office that the government instituted for its propaganda activities, the Committee on Public Information (CPI), did not bother to distinguish between motion pictures and the press. Instead, it sought to coordinate all sorts of mass communication media—including newspapers, periodicals, cartoons, photography, and advertising—to convey its wartime messages and shape America’s public opinion. In turn, the film industry relentlessly sought to contribute to the war effort by claiming that its business and cultural activities fulfilled a national necessity.

PRESIDENTIAL LEADERSHIP AND PUBLICITY

Up to the late 1880s, political campaigns consisted mainly of public rallies and staged political oratory that limited candidates’ geography of reach and influence

no matter the newspaper coverage. At the turn of the twentieth century, presidents exploited the much-expanded circulation of print and, especially, visual media to elevate the power of the executive over the legislature and to expand their cultural currency. Quite significant in this regard were the 1892 and the 1896 presidential elections. The introduction of illustrated lectures using magic lanterns (or stereopticons) in 1892 visualized party platforms and extended candidates' familiar political oratory without the need for their physical presence. Even more remarkably, the introduction of motion pictures in 1896 shifted public attention away from candidates' policy positions and political eloquence toward their biography and personality. The case of the Republican candidate William McKinley is most symptomatic of this emerging trend of effective communication in absentia. His handlers staged a "front porch campaign" from his home in northern Ohio; produced illustrated lectures about his life, filled with cartoons; and hired the famous Edison inventor W. K. L. Dickson to film *William McKinley at Home* (American Mutoscope and Biograph Co., 1896). If until then, "political theater and theatrical entertainments were rivals of sorts," the few dozen feet of this film constituted an utter novelty: they gave the stationary McKinley visual ubiquity throughout the nation.¹⁴ Furthermore, the short one-shot film could produce a compelling personal narrative that the press expanded upon, contributing to what Charles Musser has defined as a "*politicized feedback loop* between vaudeville screenings and the press."¹⁵ Turning a campaign's planned effect into spontaneous reporting would become a decisive dynamic in media politics even outside the context of presidential elections.¹⁶

After McKinley's assassination six months into his second term, on September 6, 1901, Vice President Theodore Roosevelt was sworn in as president. Already a national icon thanks to his unique ability to manage press and publicity, which included the celebratory filming, real and not, of his Rough Riders' heroic feats in Cuba, Roosevelt soon became "the first U.S. president to have his career and life chronicled on a significant scale by motion picture companies."¹⁷ His ability consisted in cultivating personal relationships with top reporters inside and outside the White House, as well as in experimenting with press agency, which up to that point had been the exclusive domain of the theater, the opera, and the circus.¹⁸ Sooner than any other politician, he began to appreciate how motion pictures could offer a novel and expansive mode of mass communication beyond electoral campaigns. His life on screen amounted to more than one hundred films recorded from 1898 to his death in 1919, including his political campaigns, troop parades, and world trips. Roosevelt's experience of strenuous life on the frontier and his writings, filled with illustrations by Frederic Remington, inspired numerous Western films. On the other hand, his manipulative relationship with the press even inspired a few satirical films. Edwin S. Porter's *The Terrible Teddy, the Grizzly King* (Edison, 1901), which was based on a cartoon, parodied Roosevelt's management of publicity by featuring him as a hunter followed by

two characters carrying signs reading “My Press Agent” and “My Photographer.”¹⁹ With him, the link between motion pictures and presidential figures reached a novel level of mythopoetic intensity. In 1910, *Moving Picture World* described him, with typographical emphasis, as “A PICTURE MAN.”²⁰ Roosevelt’s celluloid performances enabled his swaggering personality, warrior temperament, and international fame to reach the widest possible audience. Before than any other politician, he realized that the film medium’s all-embracing appeal would enable him “to fuse polyglot audiences into a single mass following, albeit at the box office rather than the ballot box.”²¹

In 1912, in fact, while mired in a mutually destructive competition with his former protégé William Howard Taft for the Republican presidential nomination and being forced to run on the Progressive Party ticket, Roosevelt lost the election to a Democratic candidate who was temperamentally his opposite. Woodrow Wilson knew very well that he lacked TR’s personal magnetism and mass appeal. “He is a real, vivid person,” the then New Jersey governor wrote a friend before the elections. “I am a vague, conjectural personality, more made up of opinions and academic prepossessions than of [. . .] red corpuscles.”²² Yet, within a few years, Wilson managed to bring cinema to a level of partnership with the government that Roosevelt never managed to reach.

The 1912 campaign reveals how the co-optation of new media affected the reserved Wilson. Initially, he limited himself to the use of pamphlets that reproduced his printed speeches and magazine articles. Yet, to compete with Roosevelt, Wilson began to rely on phonographic recordings and motion pictures. The reproduction of his distinct oratorical talent for “modulated tones and precise selection and pairing of words” popularized the impression that Wilson was “a voice of reason and reform.”²³ It was a performative advantage that his campaign exploited by ensuring that newspapers advertised the phonographic records and sent them out along with motion pictures “in order to have him both seen and heard in theaters.”²⁴

These new media practices inaugurated a new campaign style. It did not matter that Wilson scorned the recordings as “canned speeches” nor that he felt uneasy before movie cameras to the point that *Motography* described him as “an involuntary actor in the ‘photo-play.’”²⁵ Over time he grew into being a media-savvy political candidate, particularly appreciative of the power of the moving image. In between his two elections, in fact, the rise of his political reputation was intertwined with the emergence of early newsreels, such as *Pathé Weekly* (aka *Pathé Weekly Review*), *Gaumont Weekly*, *The Mutual Weekly*, and *Universal Animated Weekly*.²⁶ With a multimedia campaign insisting on his level-headed temperament and rhetoric, Wilson gained the support of newspaper editors and common citizens and scored a landslide victory. More than a hundred still and motion-picture cameras captured his inauguration in March 1913. As a sign of things to come, Wilson enjoyed how the film cameras portrayed him like a royal dignitary, towering over cheering crowds before a Congress adorned in American flags.²⁷

Ultimately, Roosevelt's cinematic visibility, while intense, did not augment his "bully pulpit" in ways that radically affected his well-known public persona. On the other hand, Wilson began his presidential campaign without a national profile, but during his time in office, he intertwined politics and motion pictures in such a way that his political leadership came to complement what he once described as cinema's universal language.

Such intertwining took time. Before examining the propaganda machine that Wilson set in motion during the U.S. involvement in the First World War, two series of events alerted him to the cinema's extraordinary power as a tool of public relations. The first began with the White House screening of D. W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* on February 18, 1915, ten days after its release and a week before the Supreme Court's *Mutual Film Corporation* decision (February 23).²⁸ News of the screening elicited accusations of racism against the president at a time of much-needed national solidarity, and the ensuing controversy possibly constituted one of the most glaring counterarguments to the justices' ruling. The second series of events relates to the rarely documented approaches that filmmakers, producers, distributors, and exhibitors made to Wilson in the form of letters, telegrams, and meeting requests on the subject of the war between 1914 and 1917. This unrelenting pressure and, at times, Wilson's own response reveal that industry representatives clearly understood the potential role film could play in the country's public life, as well as in their industry's future, if they could somehow personally involve the president.

POLITICS WRITTEN WITH LIGHTING

Film historians have often referred to D. W. Griffith's controversial blockbuster as one of the first motion pictures, if not the first one, to be screened at the White House. President Wilson allegedly commented on the screening with a memorable remark: "It is like writing history with lighting. And my only regret is that it is all so terribly true." Historians have repeatedly reported this unconfirmed comment since the 1930s, possibly the decade that saw the most systematic convergence between Hollywood and Washington.²⁹ Historian Mark E. Benbow and biographer A. Scott Berg have recently noted that Wilson almost certainly never said it.³⁰ What is true, however, is that the screening did take place and animated a huge controversy. When several commentators publicized the president's alleged endorsement, Wilson tried to deny it, both publicly and privately, without much conviction or success.

The decision to screen *Birth of a Nation* at the White House resulted from a unique set of overlapping factors. On a personal level, Thomas Dixon, the white supremacist author of the film's source novels, was a friend of Wilson's from Johns Hopkins University's graduate school. On a cultural level, while most screenings at the White House in 1915 were proposed in conjunction with pressing issues of

national neutrality and preparedness, a much-anticipated colossal production by the likes of D. W. Griffith was likely to have appeared capable of fostering national solidarity.³¹ As for the film's racist narrative and depictions—which should have been recognized as inciting divisions rather than unity—they could not have been a novelty to Wilson, who knew Dixon's personal convictions and work. What may have balanced them out was Wilson's fondness for a very attractive representation of President Lincoln as a compassionate and reconciliatory national figure, which Ida Tarbell had first popularized in a 1897 serialized biography and which Dixon had continued to expand upon in his works.³² A few months into the European war and a year before the heated 1916 presidential campaign, the image of Griffith's Lincoln as reuniting national figure and “a reaffirmation of the values of an older America” was also supposed to mute the divisive national loyalties of European immigrants on U.S. soil.³³

Yet, as soon as news of the event reached the press, Wilson began to receive countless requests of official confirmation from individuals and civic groups that opposed the film's racial politics and called for its ban from circulation.³⁴ He first hesitated to respond. When the volume of protests did not subsidize, he instructed his secretary Joseph Patrick Tumulty in early March 1915 to answer any letter on the topic with this standard, self-justifying rejoinder that denied prior knowledge or later approval of the film's ideological perspective:

It is true that *The Birth of Nation* was produced before the President and his family at the White House, but the President was entirely unaware of the character of the play before it was presented and has at no time expressed his approbation of it. Its exhibition at the White House was a courtesy extended to an old acquaintance.³⁵

The statement encapsulated what many came to consider the sad truth about his position: his public denial of an endorsement was not the same as a condemnation.³⁶ It would take years for Wilson to express publicly reservations about the film, and when he did, it was out of concern for the reactions of African Americans as both loyal civilians and U.S. soldiers and for the needs of the war effort, not because of the film's racist and manipulative historical revisionism.³⁷

The story of protests, disorders, and attempted bans of *The Birth of a Nation* is well known to film historians.³⁸ One of its less known but significant wrinkles is how the incessantly self-promoting Dixon, in his several contacts with Wilson, was both perceptive and boastful about cinema's unprecedented influence on Americans' electoral choices. In May 1915, he wrote a letter to the White House in response to the public controversy over Griffith's film. After describing cinema as not just “a new art” but “the mightiest engine for molding public opinion,” he contended, exaggerating the figures, that when a political message reaches the screens of thirty thousand theaters, “no group of politicians can resist the onslaught.”³⁹ He arrogantly claimed to have collaborated with Griffith not just to produce a revisionist account but also and ultimately to execute a major electoral

design. The film's "*real big purpose*," he contended, "*was to revolutionize Northern sentiments by a presentation of history that would transform every man in my audience into a good Democrat!*" He concluded by claiming to be the first person able to conjoin mass entertainment and electoral politics: "The next political campaign," he asserted with obvious reference to the coming elections, "will witness a revolution in political methods."⁴⁰

The archival record does not include Wilson's response, but the president likely recognized in Dixon's argument the familiar self-promoting efforts of several film industry representatives who had been pounding on Wilson's office door since 1914 with all sorts of requests for collaboration. Pressed by the risk of censorship legislation and engaged in lifting cinema's public moral stance in response to the discrediting charges of civic and religious groups, film industry representatives articulated an insightful awareness about cinema's role in the new climate of mediated mass politics. Meanwhile, while the nativist Wilson was not immediately concerned with the European war, others were, or appeared to be.

PREPAREDNESS

After the early May 1915 sinking of the ocean liner *Lusitania*, which cost 128 American lives, and ahead of the 1916 election campaign, months of lively public debates about U.S. intervention shaped Wilson's public stance about the European war. In late 1915, the president began to promote domestic policies centered on "preparedness" or "armed neutrality." The new stance did not contradict his former pacifist one, but, given the post-*Lusitania* discussions about the state of America's military defense, it was better suited to his ambition for a second term. The subject of preparedness had newfound domestic relevance and was affecting ideas about the future of America's national unity, democracy, and, in Roosevelt's words, its "virility and moral fiber."⁴¹

The motion picture industry saw Wilson's need to communicate his new position on preparedness to the nation as a unique public relations opportunity. It was a critical time for an industry in search of responses to the threat of censorship, particularly after the Supreme Court's *Mutual Film Corporation* decision in 1915.⁴² The studios viewed gaining national relevance as one such response. To achieve it, they sought to expand their commercial reach through incorporations and alliances and through a full professionalization of their business practices. These restructuring efforts paralleled broader dynamics that were changing the country's social and cultural landscape. Since the turn of the century, America's transformation from a continent of discrete and scattered communities to broader, interconnected ones had radically altered processes of production, delivery, and consumption. From 1914 to 1917, the film industry sought to establish a national film distribution system, institutionalize a star system at all levels of its business activities, and, as the European war persisted, expand its markets in Europe and

South America. While the war was raging in the Old World, the film industry was experimenting with ways to instill the Wilson administration's neutrality and preparedness policies through a "mass produced and nationally marketed product."⁴³ These packaging efforts permeated both fiction and nonfiction productions and were intended to obviate any state-directed censorship initiatives. They were also meant to counter the flood of letters from representatives of local censorship boards and civic and religious groups petitioning for a federal motion picture censorship bill in response to what they viewed as films' pernicious influence on the country. To achieve their goals, film industry representatives sought Wilson's endorsement of their plan for Hollywood's self-regulation by making explicit promises of electoral votes and broad support for the president's new war-related position—from passive pacifism or neutrality to preparedness.⁴⁴

Two 1916 productions, *The Eagle's Wing* (Bluebird Photoplay) and *Civilization* (Thomas H. Ince Corp.), are key examples of the ways the film industry sought to aid the president's consensus building for his new policies. At the center of the production of *The Eagle's Wing* was the Motion Picture Board of Trade of America (MPBTA), an association created in September 1915 to represent the business of the entire film industry, in both internal and external matters. Chaired by J. Stuart Blackton, with Carl Laemmle as the manufacturers' vice president, the board met with Wilson, who granted it national recognition in late January 1916.⁴⁵ Fraught with internal divisions, however, the MPBTA was eventually disbanded, and in its place the industry created a new protective league, the short-lived National Association of the Motion Picture Industry (NAMPI), chaired by stage impresario and sports promoter William A. Brady.⁴⁶ Before its dissolution in June 1916, MPBTA had planned filming Wilson "in a speaking attitude" to illustrate a speech he had delivered in Cleveland the previous January.⁴⁷ The result was a fictionalized five-reel tale of war preparedness, entitled *The Eagle's Wing*, which Universal distributed for its subsidiary Bluebird Photoplay in early December. The film helped secure appropriate legislation.⁴⁸

Even more helpful to the president's cause was Thomas H. Ince's pacifist epic, *Civilization* (1916), a moral parable telling of the conversion of a brilliant inventor of deadly submarines whose losses turn his king from warmongering sovereign to servant of a greater power and thus of human civilization. Produced by Ince, the film signaled the ideological partnership of a producer-director with the president, rather than a rapprochement between the White House and a film trade association. In the spring of 1916, John H. Blackwood of the New York Motion Picture Corporation proposed screening *Civilization* for the president since the film, as he wrote in his letter, "is an eloquent and tremendous preachment in favor of peace, along the identical lines that President Wilson has been following for the past twenty months."⁴⁹ A year after the *Lusitania* tragedy, Wilson was still publicly supporting a pacifist stance even while promoting industrial and military buildup. Not only did the White House grant Blackwood's request, but the president also

invited Ince to his home in New Jersey and agreed to be filmed for what became the film's new prologue.⁵⁰ The new publicity emphasized how Wilson, as "Chief Director of the United States," warmly congratulated Ince, "Chief Director of the Cinema." In return, Ince publicly offered his vote for the president "because he is saving civilization by keeping us at peace."⁵¹ And he offered much more. The film's intertitles matched Wilson's rhetoric about peace and preparedness and became its cinematic feedback loop, propagating the president's message in a most effective way. A decade later, Terry Ramsaye, owner and editor-in-chief of the *Motion Picture Herald*, reported the Democratic National Committee press representative William Cochrane's comment on this novel synergy. *Civilization* had "a large influence in the Wilson victory at the polls," Cochrane declared. "It put pictorial meaning into the slogan 'He Kept Us Out of War' on which Wilson was re-elected."⁵²

Beyond fiction films, requests of public partnership from companies and individuals specializing in newsreels were particularly intense in this period. Paramount/Famous Players, Hearst, and Universal, for instance, were seeking endorsement for their commercial efforts, which they masked as patriotic. In spelling out the rationale for these schemes, industry representatives were quite articulate about the difference between films' and newspapers' modes of influence and about publicity's personalizing effects more broadly. For instance, in a March 1916 letter to Tumulty, noted war correspondent and *Paramount Pictographs'* editor Edward Lyell Fox stressed how, in contrast with the print press, newsreels compel viewers to consume their content and as such secure a much wider reach.

A man opens his newspaper or magazine; he reads an article, the subject of which he is prejudiced against, and he turns the page; he avoids it. In a moving picture theater he pays to get a seat; he finds our magazine reel sandwiched in the bill between plays and he cannot get away from it no matter how prejudiced he may be against a certain subject. In other words, when we run animated cartoons showing President Wilson to be doing big things for this country [. . .] 2,000,000 people a day are looking at them.⁵³

Fox's letter also included the suggestion of closely associating the Wilson administration's policy with the *personality* of its chief executive. Beyond the use of animated diagrams about the European and American situation, the proposed film was to consist of "a day with the President" to reveal to all Americans what kind of man he was and what kind of challenges he faced on a daily basis. For the shrewd Paramount official, a production like this would achieve "a better culminating effect by Election Time." Possibly out of temperamental reservations, Wilson rejected the offer of turning Paramount's publicity department into a presidential public relations office, but his decision did not stop others from making the same kind of proposal. In the summer of 1916, two weeks before being elected as NAMPT's first president, Brady sent an original proposal to the White House. His plan was to film President Wilson delivering "kindergarten" speeches on peace, prosperity,

“or any of the other slogans of the campaign” and interweave the footage with intertitles of the speech’s content and with “illustrations carrying out what he is talking about.”⁵⁴ As he did before, Wilson declined the offer, lamenting to Tumulty his “self-consciousness in the face of the camera” and limiting his personal involvement to writing rhetorical pronouncements that film companies could use as intertitles in their newsreels.⁵⁵ Still, he must have appreciated these professional suggestions detailing what cinema could do for his policies and governance. Barely a year later, he instituted the most effective public relations office ever established by an American president.

The following spring, in fact, while the censorship issue remained a preoccupation for the entire American media landscape, its critical and much-less-talked-about counterpart, *expression*, began to emerge. Designated as acceptable governmental publicity, expression implied a serviceable convergence of friendly political narratives with popular ones. As such it signaled a momentous change for political communication, one that duplicated what was occurring in the arena of corporate public relations. In the early twentieth century, as Karen Russell and Carl Bishop have noted, “‘publicity’ moved from being something that newspapers gave to a person, event or issue, to being something that businesses and industries provided” in response to charges of monopoly and lack of transparency.⁵⁶ Such a turning point led to the rise of corporate publicity programs and initiated the careers of many public relations consultants—beginning with Ivy Lee.⁵⁷ The emergency of the European war forced the Wilson administration to also enter the public relations business through strategies that were based on a systematic propaganda effort that ultimately trained countless individuals in the new promotional craft. On April 6, 1917, the U.S. Congress approved Wilson’s declaration of war against Germany. Shortly thereafter, the government mobilized the food, manufacturing, and weapons industries and passed mandatory conscription laws. It also instituted a public relations office that sought to shape the ways the war and the president’s actions were communicated and received. The once media-shy president was media shy no more.

WILSON AND WARTIME FILM PUBLICITY

I am no expert in publicity, as you know, but [. . .] deeply concerned about the apparent growth of the mob spirit in the country.

WOODROW WILSON TO GEORGE CREEL, JULY 21, 1918⁵⁸

About a week after the U.S. declaration of war against Germany, the president signed Executive Order No. 2594, which established the government’s first propaganda office, the Committee on Public Information (CPI). At its helm was one of his most loyal and combative campaign supporters, the journalist George Creel. “The idea of the Committee,” as the usually well-informed political scientist

Elmer E. Cornwell noted in 1959, “was the President’s so far as one can tell.”⁵⁹ It was not. But the attribution of its creation to Wilson perfectly dovetails with the views of the relationship between active leader and passive electors that the president had laid out as a political scientist.

Rhetorically aimed at broadcasting the “gospel of Americanism,” the CPI was given a vital and demanding goal: persuading the United States and other nations that the war had become tragically necessary and that *all* Americans and allied populations needed to appreciate and support the president’s plan for victory. In order to achieve its purpose, the CPI set out to control the flow of information domestically and internationally.⁶⁰ While Creel would regularly deploy the formulaic explanation that the CPI was interested in the “expression” of information and not in its “repression,” the specter of federal censorship raised fierce objections and harsh personal criticism—against him and the president. Nothing remotely comparable to the CPI had ever been created before in America.⁶¹ As Tocqueville had understood in the mid-1830s, the country had always taken pride in the free public circulation of information.⁶² Censorship appeared to many as an antidemocratic, European perversion. Participation in the European war, however, created new scenarios. At stake, according to the pro-war advocates, was the question of the country’s national defense, which justified the CPI’s *raison d’être*. In the letter to the president that allegedly led Wilson to sign the CPI executive order, the secretaries of state, war, and navy clarified the new organization’s dual purpose:

It is our opinion that the two functions—*censorship* and *publicity*—can be joined, in honesty and with profit, and we recommend the creation of a Committee on Public Information.⁶³

At first, great attention was given to the issue of censorship. Anticipating a press backlash against what could be viewed as an all-powerful censorship commission, the CPI’s first-issued document was the “Preliminary Statement to the Press” (May 28, 1917). It included a quote from President Wilson meant to appease the press and the country:

I can imagine no greater disservice to the country than to establish a system of censorship that would deny to the people of a free republic like our own their indisputable right to criticize their own public officials. While exercising the great powers of the office I hold, I would regret in a crisis like the one through which we are now passing to lose the benefit of patriotic and intelligent criticism.⁶⁴

The same document explained the use of censorship specifically in relationship to information that either would directly aid the enemy or was “likely to cause anxiety, dissent or distress.” Like a phenomenological treatise, the document distinguished between different categories of news and subtypes of censurable information.⁶⁵ Still, the justification for censorship went hand in hand with its constructive counterpart: publicity. In modern conflicts, the gathering and circulation

of news is key since “public opinion is a factor in victory no less than ships and guns,” the document read. The fighting role of the press was then “the creation and stimulation of a healthy, ardent national sentiment.”⁶⁶

More surprisingly, the justification for the entire enterprise seemingly challenged the foundation of democratic participation. “The motive for the establishment of this internal censorship,” the document stated, “is not merely fear of petty criticism, but *distrust of democratic common sense*. The officials fear that the people will be stamped by false news and sensational scare stories.”⁶⁷ By investing the notion of “democratic common sense” with such negative connotations, Creel’s apparent dismissal of the basic tenet of democracy—“the will of the people”—may appear shocking today. In truth, his statement relied on the even more popular (and recent) theory of “crowd psychology,” which many of his readers knew quite well. Elaborated in Europe by Gabriel Tarde, Scipio Sighele, and, most famously, Gustave Le Bon, crowd psychology held that popular masses were drawn like “primitive beings” to impressionable images and analogies, ignored “logical argumentation,” and thus did “not reason or [...] reason[ed] falsely.”⁶⁸ Not only was the CPI in a position to tame the herdlike impressionability of democratic common sense, but it had to for the nation’s security. Referring to the 1914–1917 period, Creel later argued that after three years of “divisive prejudices,” the CPI could finally replace selfish and irrational inclinations with a “mass instinct of fraternity, devotion, courage, and deathless determination.”⁶⁹

To reach his goal, Creel shaped the CPI into a multidimensional public relations agency, with several divisions all aimed at fostering national unity, the righteousness of the cause, and revulsion for the enemy. With \$100 million to spend at its own discretion, the CPI promoted various initiatives that were greatly facilitated by its institutional alliance with the Association of National Advertisers. The committee printed a daily diet of government news and pronouncements, known as the *Official Bulletin*. With a print run of 100,000 copies per issue, it effectively constituted America’s first national daily newspaper. The CPI also printed over 75 million pamphlets, mostly of Wilson speeches, as well as posters and cartoons to be given to the press or distributed freely. Furthermore, Creel oversaw a speakers’ bureau of 75,000 individuals, the so-called Four-Minute Men, in charge of delivering talking points in movie theaters during intermissions. Their speeches were printed in more than 750,000 copies and reached about 5,000 communities.⁷⁰ And, of course, the committee entered the business of visual communication by playing all sorts of roles in producing and commissioning posters, illustrations, still photographs, and motion pictures. Its Division of Pictorial Publicity relied on the work of established illustrators including Charles Dana Gibson, Joseph Pennell, and James Montgomery Flagg, the creator of the famous Uncle Sam recruiting poster *I Want You for U.S. Army*.⁷¹ The CPI also produced photographs and films about military preparedness and European battles, and it did so while maintaining close relations with a film industry that was keen to please the government.

From the start, the choice of Creel raised questions. *Collier's Weekly* writer Mark Sullivan initially found that, for a job that he believed required effective and smooth diplomacy, Creel was "the most unsuitable of men."⁷² Why would the allegedly media-wary Wilson choose an acrimonious muckraker who had brought trouble wherever he worked, from Kansas City to Denver, with his sanctimonious anti-vice and pro-suffrage crusades? The answer requires an understanding of the specific job demands that Creel helped design and that Wilson gladly endorsed knowing with whom he was dealing.

Creel was a long-standing reformist, extremely loyal, and quite resourceful; most importantly, he was both well connected and fearless about managing the press. Although he personally knew several media players, he was not compromised by cozy business relationships with them. Over the years, instead, he managed to remain both inside and outside of the country's small community of public opinion operators.⁷³ In the early 1910s, he raised his national profile by publishing books in favor of suffrage and against child labor and by writing muckraking articles for *Everybody's Magazine* and *Century Magazine*. In 1916, he strengthened his political prominence as a member of the Democratic National Committee's publicity division and as a *New York Times* contributor.⁷⁴ A loyal Wilson supporter for years, he also published a pro-campaign volume, *Wilson and the Issues*, praising the president "as a leader, as a nucleating force." On trial in the electoral competition that pitted the reasonable Wilson against what Creel called the "bonfires of jingoism" was one of democracy's key values: "the capacity of a people for self-government."⁷⁵ A few months later as head of the CPI, Creel found himself challenging that very tenet.

In his many prewar articles, Creel advocated the mobilization of all national resources, not just the armies, and maintained that, while updating the president's older political diagnosis, "confusion and indirection are not so much an indictment of President Wilson, as they are an indictment of our governmental system."⁷⁶ While his reputation for being confrontational followed him, he also developed new imaginative and practical ideas about leadership that boldly combined political management and celebrity appeal. In December 1916, Creel wrote about one of Hollywood's biggest stars in relation to what the country's mood ought to have been and rarely was. "The Government ought to hire Douglas Fairbanks," he noted in *Everybody's Magazine*, "and send him over the country as an agent of the Bureau of Grins."⁷⁷ These inventive and ironic public expressions of party loyalty and support for strong and idealized leadership did not go unnoticed.

The evidence suggests that the CPI was probably his idea. Wilson, in fact, accepted the proposal that Creel had sent him a few days after the declaration of war. In that letter the journalist stressed the need "for expression not repression"—as he recounted years later.⁷⁸ Publicly, however, to give the CPI maximum political leverage, Wilson wanted to convey that the CPI was his idea and responsibility: "I would suggest that Creel say that the Committee on Public Information was

created by me," he wrote in a letter to Tumulty.⁷⁹ On April 13, while officially acting on the recommendation of the secretaries of the State, War, and Navy Departments for the creation of an "authoritative agency to assure the publication of all the vital facts of National defense," the president announced that he had selected Creel for the agency's top job.⁸⁰

Immediately criticized as "the censor" and the "publicity manager of the war," Creel was "repeatedly damned by a large portion of the press and distrusted by a certain portion of the public."⁸¹ It must be noted that what also fueled widespread opposition to the issue of voluntary and involuntary censorship were the public debates and Congressional negotiations about the Espionage Act (June 1917) and the Sedition Act (May 1918), which covered wartime expressions of opinion. The persistence of those debates on the un-American character of censorship kept informing arguments against Creel during the war and long after its end.⁸²

WASHINGTON TURNS TO HOLLYWOOD

The initial institutional rapprochements between the film industry and the government were not difficult. NAMPI's recently appointed director, Brady, had friends everywhere and was acquainted to both Creel and Tumulty. Brady was quick to realize that an alliance with the government was a unique opportunity for the film industry. In June 1917, after meeting Creel and several Hollywood representatives in his New York office, he wrote the White House with a remarkable pledge. He had a plan to "bring the motion picture [industry] under full control," without the interference of any political or private interest, and turn it into "the most wonderful system for spreading the National propaganda at little or no cost." The industry, he boasted, "could in two weeks to a month place a message in every part of the civilized world." It had a method in place that was "far more effective than the newspapers."⁸³ It was an impressive pitch.

Satisfied by the pledge, Wilson wrote back and asked Brady to "organize the motion picture industry in such manner as to establish direct and authoritative co-operation" with the CPI.⁸⁴ Wilson's stated intention was not just to bring Hollywood "into fullest and most effective contact with the nation's needs" but also "to give a measure of official *recognition* to an increasingly important factor in the development of our national life."⁸⁵ While Brady understood the proposed recognition as legitimation for the industry, it was Creel who had first suggested the concept and it was Wilson who gave it a broad cultural articulation that matched his policies' idealism and universalism. In his response to Brady, the president noted:

The film has come to rank very highly as a medium for the dissemination of public intelligence, and since it speaks the universal language it lends itself importantly to the presentation of America's plans and purposes.⁸⁶

This memorable characterization would soon be published in both American and British film periodicals.⁸⁷ On June 30, Brady telegraphed the president his appreciation for the U.S. government's invitation to the motion industry to "throw its weight to the last ounce into the task confronting the American people," and he pledged the "undivided conscientious and patriotic support of the industry in America."⁸⁸ Brady did not reveal the tensions that NAMPI had experienced with key members of the Motion Picture Exhibitors' League of America. Instead, in an effort to give leverage and prestige to NAMPI and prevent individual member producers from establishing independent relationships with the White House, he preferred to show a unified industry front.⁸⁹ Initially, the trade periodicals expressed some caution about the convergence between film and government, but they did not deny their support. The commercial and public relations advantages promised to be significant.⁹⁰ What Hollywood continued to request was to be classified by the U.S. government as one of the "essential industries," a recognition that the War Industries Board apparently granted in the winter of 1917.⁹¹ Notwithstanding this recognition, the archival record shows that the industry continued to press the government to declare movie theaters critical to the war effort—even by way of rebranding them "temples of democracy."⁹²

NAMPI's first institutional actions were forming the War Cooperating Committee (WCC) and supporting the First Liberty Loans. The WCC, whose illustrious membership included William Fox, Thomas Ince, Jesse Lasky, Carl Laemmle, Marcus Loew, Joseph Schenck, Lewis Selznick, and Adolph Zukor, made a significant public assurance to work with several government branches. Several initiatives were put into place in conjunction with the War, Navy, and Treasury Departments; the Departments of Agriculture and Labor; the United States Food Administration (USFA); and the United States Civil Service Commission.⁹³ For instance, the USFA collaborated with the War Cooperation Committee in producing and distributing short-subject films, including newsreels of Wilson and USFA director Herbert Hoover, and involving film exhibitors in screening slides and filmed advertisements about food conservation under the motto "Food will win the war."⁹⁴

Still, the most popular form of collaboration between NAMPI and the government was the series of Liberty Loan campaigns, which received exceptional newspaper coverage due to the involvement of Mary Pickford, Douglas Fairbanks, Charlie Chaplin, and Sessue Hayakawa. This initiative was not under the purview of the CPI. Treasury Secretary William A. McAdoo had devised it a month before the WCC's formation.⁹⁵ The Liberty Bond drives were extraordinarily successful: four were held during the war and one, the Victory Bond drive, afterwards. The film industry participated in all of them by cooperating in the production and exhibition of posters, slides, and star-studded short films. It also planted advertisements in trade papers and newspapers and solicited stars to speak on behalf of bond sales at so-called Liberty Bond rallies.⁹⁶

Covered nationwide by the press, the Liberty Loan campaigns represented the most sensational face of the alliance between Hollywood and the government, united in the effort of selling the war to a largely isolationist American public. Alliances between politicians and performers were nothing new. Notable precedents included Lincoln's celebrated trips to Matthew Brady's photographic gallery during the Civil War. What was new, however, was that through the Liberty Bond drives a new generation of politicians "were able to view their constituencies as audiences," as Leo Braudy famously put it.⁹⁷

The democratic appeal to the crowd meant a reliance more on leaders' symbolic draw than on their actual policies. The intertwining of film and government publicity infused both American moviegoing and everyday life. Advised by trade periodicals, movie theaters began advertising the war effort by plastering their lobby and outside walls with portraits of Wilson and posters of Liberty Bond campaigns and war films; allowing Four-Minute Men to speak during intermissions; instructing musicians to play the national anthem or other patriotic tunes; and screening patriotic slides that celebrated both the war effort and motion pictures' contribution to the cause. The goal of these initiatives was to make sure audiences viewed movie theaters not only as sites of relief from the inconveniences of the war but also as places where they could contribute, in a pleasurable communal gathering, to the material and moral needs of the nation. The ultimate aim of the film industry was to ensure its essential relevance to the cause.

While several governmental agencies dealt with motion pictures, the CPI sought to centralize and coordinate most film initiatives through its Division of Films, established by presidential order on September 25, 1917. Under the direction of Charles S. Hart, a former advertising manager of *Hearst's Magazine*, the CPI Division of Films developed five major tasks: turn the footage provided by the Navy and Signal Corps—the government agencies for still and motion picture war documentation—into weekly film releases; write pro-government scenarios for commercial film productions; produce documentaries; distribute and promote war films, whether produced by the CPI, the Allies, or private companies; and coordinate their international distribution with the Foreign Film Division.⁹⁸

It became increasingly clear that the Wilson administration, even with all its agencies, could not act alone from both production and distribution standpoints. While the photographic section of the Signal Corps, as Creel later maintained, produced "an enormous amount of material [of] the very highest propaganda value," its one-reel films were widely deemed to be of inferior quality.⁹⁹ They were not made by professional cameramen, did not have high production values, and were repetitive in the choice of subject (i.e., military parades, domestic preparedness, behind-the-frontline preparations). While screened for free, they rarely found exhibition in regular movie theaters.

In 1918 the CPI produced a few feature films of distinction, including the most successful of them, *Pershing's Crusaders*, an eight-reeler that secured more

than four thousand bookings, as well as the five-reelers *America's Answer* and *Under Four Flags*.¹⁰⁰ The Signal Corps's best footage, with additional material provided by the United Kingdom, France, and Italy, was used for the *Official War Review*, also known as the *Allied War Review*. By the end of the conflict, the CPI's official newsreel output amounted to thirty-one weekly issues and about seven thousand domestic bookings. Its distribution, however, was the source of distressing negotiations with Pathé, Universal, Mutual, Gaumont, and other foreign newsreel companies.

No matter their lengths, the CPI productions exuded a recognizable patriotic idealism, which was greatly heightened in the feature-length films. For instance, *Pershing's Crusaders*, which focused on war preparations from weapon production and the arrival of U.S. soldiers in France to Liberty Loan rallies, opened with an intertitle that deployed pure Wilsonian rhetoric to echo its religious title. Its final section read as follows:

The young men of America are going out to rescue Civilization. They are going to fight for one definite thing, to save Democracy from death. [. . .] This mighty exodus of America's manhood to the plains of Europe may well be called "the Eight Crusade."¹⁰¹

Unsurprisingly, the film's last intertitle was devoted to Wilson, "Champion of Humanity's Cause."¹⁰² Similarly hagiographic, another feature, *America's Answer*, opened with a montage of the build-up to the war—"a glowering sky, men of different walks of life poised for action"—and of Wilson simply introduced as "Our Leader."¹⁰³

By the late 1910s, at least until Congress's refusal to ratify the peace agreement and the U.S. entry into the League of Nations, Wilson had established himself as a familiar and reassuring presence to American and international audiences alike. His explicit cinematic visibility was mostly in newsreels, produced with different promotional purposes. As he grew more comfortable in front of the cameras, he appeared in numerous short films while signing laws, taking part in the draft lottery, inspecting military equipment and troops, and attending parades.¹⁰⁴ Also, Wilson's image had circulated extensively in still pictures, advertisements, and postcards. By the war's end, his media ubiquity had allowed him to reap the remarkable political benefits of a strengthened executive office.¹⁰⁵

On his way to the Paris peace conference in 1919, several newsreels documented his journey to Europe, entertained on board the ship by the films of Griffith, Pickford, Fairbanks, and Chaplin; being greeted as a hero in France, London, and Rome; and finally meeting heads of state in Versailles. One of the few postwar dramas dedicated to him, *The Great Victory, Wilson or the Kaiser* (Screen Classics, January 1919), dramatically juxtaposed the American and the German leaders, from youth to mature age, and the forms of government they stood for—autocracy versus democracy.¹⁰⁶ It did not document his deteriorating health. Four months



FIGURE 4. Mary Pickford sending Liberty Bond films to President Wilson, 1919. Photograph from the Mary Pickford Collection (General, 1911–1920), Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences. Courtesy of AMPAS.

after his death, on February 3, 1924, the Woodrow Wilson Memorial Society released a compilation documentary, *The Woodrow Wilson Film Memorial*. It alternated views of the president giving speeches, signing documents, and meeting world's leaders with, among others, images of Pickford directly delivering the latest propaganda film to the president during the fifth Liberty Bond drive (figure 4). Boasting intertitles filled with laudatory narratives and eulogies, the film praised him as “world-known authority” and “model of intelligence, sobriety and determination.” Beyond the moral and intellectual tribute, however, the film also advanced a notion of charisma that combined Francis Galton’s eugenics with Gustave Le Bon’s crowd theory: “The personal magnetism of the man [...] the light of his gray eyes—the fine poise of his well-shaped head—the beautiful rhythm of his vigorous sentences—held audiences breathless under their mystic spell.” In the end, the film proposed a clear rationale for Wilson’s failure to have the Republican-held Congress approve the peace treaty and the U.S. membership in the League of Nations in 1920: “While foreign peoples were idolizing him,” a final intertitle read, “our own yellow press kept stabbing at him with cutting headlines.”¹⁰⁷

Wilson's indirect management of publicity initiatives affected the presidency in ways that Theodore Roosevelt's physical and oratorical skills did not. On Wilson's behalf and to his advantage, the CPI and the Treasury Department mobilized loyal journalists, editors, speakers, artists, publicists, advertisers, celebrities and film-makers capable of devising novel ways to reach vast sections of the electorate and influence their opinion. As political scientist Elmer Cornwell noted, these pervasive publicity activities "were a major factor underlying this growing public tendency to see the Federal Government personified in Presidential terms."¹⁰⁸ Neither Warren Harding nor Calvin Coolidge would set in motion anything comparable. Despite Wilson's reserved and intellectual temperament, he became, at least for a brief period, a celebrity in his own right in the United States and an even bigger one beyond the national borders.

During the nineteen months of the United States' involvement in the First World War, Hollywood played a direct and indirect role in heightening the status and appeal of presidential leadership. The film industry produced fiction films that were sympathetic to the war effort but also contributed to expanding the reach of Wilson's moral and military decisiveness. In a sort of cultural loop, both war films and stars' off-screen patriotic engagement infused a disparate range of moving pictures with a nationalistic dimension. On the ground, the range of collaborations between Hollywood and the executive branch anointed cinema as an organ of public opinion, akin to the press. As such, they strikingly contradicted the pronouncements of another branch, the judiciary. The CPI distinguished motion pictures from the printed press and other journalistic venues not according to juridical categories that separated commercial activities from civic ones but in medium-specific terms—News Division, Films Division, Pictorial Publicity Division. On a more speculative level, from the late 1910s the pressing issue of public opinion and its relationship to the changing, multinational face of American democracy came to dominate key public debates. Even the most learned observers could not avoid looking at cinema as a paragon of mass-mediated public opinion influence and management. It is to these debates that we shall turn to identify the political frameworks at stake in how observers and practitioners viewed the increasingly dominant role of public opinion—and of moving pictures—in American society.