

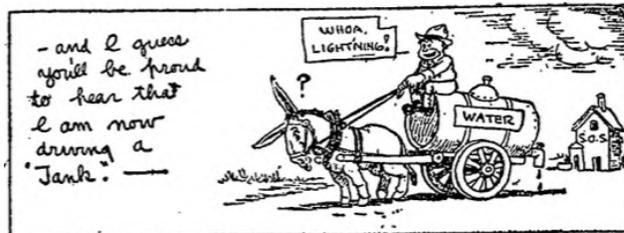
# Censoring the Soldier

## Editing the Realities of War on the Front Lines

THE STARS AND STRIPES, FRIDAY, AUGUST 16, 1918.

### IT'S NOT WHAT YOU MEAN, IT'S WHAT THEY THINK

**Directions:** Complete the "Soldiers Letters Home" writing activity, then working in groups of three (soldier, editor, recipient) trade letters. Using removable paper strips or carefully cutting out sections of the text, censor any sensitive or identifying information contained in the letters in accordance with American Expeditionary Forces correspondence standards during the World War I era. Trade letters a second time and attempt to discern the contents and meaning of the original letter by filling in missing information with assumptions. Take turns comparing the original, edited, and interpreted versions of the letter with each participant.



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## Censorship in the Great War

When the United States entered World War I in 1917 many Americans were opposed to joining the fight. To turn the tide of public opposition into enthusiastic support for the war effort the



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American advertising industry employed iconic imagery eliciting sympathy for Allied war victims and emphasized patriotism, economic opportunity and protection from an encroaching enemy. To convince a reluctant public to support American participation in the Great War the Committee on Public Information was created by the U.S. government with the primary focus of selling the war to Americans. In this capacity, the committee recruited over 300 volunteer artists and copy writers from the advertising industry to change the hearts and minds of Americans by creating posters and media employing the same strategy used for selling consumer goods. This enterprise in salesmanship played on the public's emotions, telling them how to think, act, and conform with an idealized form of American patriotism.

### The American Press During War

Once in battle, the U.S. press did its part to persuade Americans to continue supporting the war. In European locations under General John J. Pershing's command American war correspondents had the freedom to closely observe the military actions of the American Expeditionary Forces (AEF). Correspondents could go to the front lines without military escorts, follow fighting troops as they advanced, and roam in rear areas after troop forward movement, as well as shelter where they chose.

Despite this relative freedom, reporters for the American based *Stars and Stripes* newspaper were required to submit their material to military authorities for review. Each week, the Army's Board of Control and its General Headquarters examined the content proposed for the forthcoming issue. To receive approval for publication, articles were required to support the mission of the newspaper, maintain high morale, and promote the idea of a justified American presence in the war. News reports were also vetted by the censorship-of-the-press section of the Military Intelligence Service. Facts regarding troop engagements, casualties suffered, and soldier identifications were only released to the public if the information had already been reported in official statements from the military.



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## Soldiers Letters Home Portray a Bleak Reality

Reporters were not the only ones required to follow censorship guidelines during war time as the letters soldiers sent home were also reviewed for compromising information. The *Stars and Stripes* newspaper kept soldiers in the field apprised of the extent to which they could expect censorship of their personal correspondence from 1917 to 1918. Informative articles on censorship helped soldiers determine what was permissible by explaining in simple terms the regulations and their rationale. Even still, many letters home were able to communicate the devastation of war.

Relaxation of the censorship requirements for soldiers personal letters to family and friends in the United States came on 22 November 1918, after the 11 November 1918, armistice signing. Letters after the armistice were permitted to mention the town the soldier was in and give unfiltered personal accounts of the war and the soldiers present circumstances, however bleak.



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Despite the ease in editing enforcement, soldiers were cautioned that some restrictions would still be imposed. Unauthorized information from casualty reports, immoral pictures or text would be excised from personal correspondence. A result of stringent rule enforcement led many soldiers to keep personal diaries for later use, with letters home brief and to the point, communicating their sentiments for home and for those left behind.

For more information on the personal experiences of soldiers during World War I please see the Library of Congress Veteran's History Project at [www.loc.gov/vets](http://www.loc.gov/vets).