Dueling messages: Propaganda in the Civil War

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Broadly speaking, propaganda is the dissemination of information to promote an idea or belief and influence the opinions of the public. It can take the form of the written word, drawings, works of art, performances, and the like. The term usually connotes selective omission or presentation of facts.

One purpose of war propaganda is to rally the populace in support of the war. The Civil War saw the widespread use of propaganda to raise troops, vilify the opponent, and promote the righteousness of the cause, whether North or South.

Media

Throughout the Civil War era, newspapers were the primary means of spreading information, and due to the recent development of the telegraph, newspapers were able to receive and report on remote events such as political debates, battle results and casualty reports. They were also able to
editorialize and propagandize for one side or the other. Many published reports of battle results, enemy atrocities, and heart-rending testimonials of those affected by the conflict.

During the Civil War, propaganda as illustrated journalism and cartoons in print media came into widespread use for the first time. The Civil War was the first time an event had been so widely covered pictorially, and the public clamored for images of the war. Visual propaganda featured prominently as editorial cartoons in magazines such as Harper's Weekly and Vanity Fair.

At least in the early years of the war, one of the most popular forms of propaganda media was the pictorial envelope. These were envelopes for stationery that had designs printed on them, which letter writers used to express their patriotism and other views.

Another medium through which propaganda was spread in both the North and South was the recruitment poster or broadsheet. Union recruitment posters made appeals to patriotism and liberty, often urging prospective conscripts not to wait to be drafted. Confederate posters likewise appealed to liberty and emphasized defending against Northern oppression.

Themes Of Propaganda: Union

Union propaganda was based on portraying the patriotism of the cause, depicting Southerners as duplicitous and treacherous rebels, and promoting the abolitionist cause. Printed materials in the North emphasized patriotic symbols, such as the United States flag, the Constitution, and images of George Washington. Others poked fun at Confederate leaders and the rebels in general. In addition, a large number of publications emphasized that the fight was against slavery and slaveholders.

In addition, cartoons in magazines such as Harper's Weekly supported the war and, in particular, encouraged enlistment. Some showed women rejecting men who did not volunteer. Others suggested that those who paid for draft deferrals were shirkers, trying to avoid their duty to their country.

Themes Of Propaganda: Confederacy

Confederate propaganda likewise appealed to patriotism. Southern printed materials characterized Union soldiers as thieves, raised fears of miscegenation (race-mixing), and played up the potential dangers of conscripting African-Americans to fight for the Confederacy. Confederate newspapers supported the cause by vilifying Union soldiers and generally trying to inspire hatred of the North. They highlighted or manufactured tales of atrocities, publishing accounts of theft, destruction of property, assaults on women, and mistreatment of prisoners. At the same time, Confederate newspapers downplayed military setbacks and played up successes. This included, for example, characterizing the defeats at Antietam and Gettysburg as "defensive victories."

Propaganda For The Overseas Audience
Propaganda organs for both the Union and the Confederacy were also active overseas during the Civil War. An important aspect of foreign policy for both the North and the South was whether any foreign nation would recognize the Confederacy and lend it aid. London, England, was a particular focus, as the South hoped that Britain would intervene to ensure access to cotton supplies, which had been threatened by the Union blockade of Southern ports.

To this end, London saw the publication of both pro-North and pro-South propaganda newspapers. The London American supported the Union cause, while The Index supported the Confederacy. The London American was somewhat less effective, in part due to the Anglophobia of its publisher. The Index did a better job of garnering sympathy for its cause. For example, it was able to generate outrage when a Union general issued a declaration stating that women in New Orleans, Louisiana, would be prosecuted as prostitutes if they demonstrated against Union troops. Ultimately, though, Britain did not recognize or give significant aid to the Confederacy.

Conclusion

The Civil War saw active propaganda efforts from both the Union and the Confederacy. At the same time, the telegraph allowed media reports to be carried relatively rapidly from the field. Illustrated journalism showed readers images of the conflict and partisan, editorial messages.