

Four Minute Men: Volunteer Speeches During World War I

During World War I, the United States fought a war of ideas with unprecedented ingenuity and organization. President Woodrow Wilson established the Committee on Public Information (CPI) to manage news and solicit widespread support for the war at home and abroad. Under the energetic direction of Mississippi newspaper editor George Creel, the CPI churned out national propaganda through diverse media. Creel organized the “Four Minute Men,” a virtual army of volunteers who gave brief speeches wherever they could get an audience—in movie theaters, churches, synagogues, and labor union, lodge, and grange halls. Creel claimed that his 75,000 amateur orators had delivered over 7.5 million speeches to more than 314 million people. CPI publications from the Four Minute Man crusade offered tips on developing and delivering a brief, effective speech—the predecessor to today’s “sound bite.” They also recognized diverse audiences, with reports of Yiddish speakers in theaters and workplaces, a Sioux Four Minute Man, and a speech called “The Meaning of America” delivered in seven languages.

General Suggestions to Speakers

The speech must not be longer than four minutes, which means there is no time for a single wasted word.

Speakers should go over their speech time and time again until the ideas are firmly fixed in their mind and can not be forgotten. This does not mean that the speech needs to be written out and committed [memorized], although most speakers, especially when limited in time, do best to commit.

Divide your speech carefully into certain divisions, say 15 seconds for final appeal; 45 seconds to describe the bond; 15 seconds for opening words, etc., etc. Any plan is better than none, and it can be amended every day in the light of experience.

There never was a speech yet that couldn’t be improved. Never be satisfied with success. Aim to be more successful, and still more successful. So keep your eyes open. Read all the papers every day, to find a new slogan, or a new phraseology, or a new idea to replace something you have in your speech. For instance, the editorial page of the *Chicago Herald* of May 19 is crammed full of good ideas and phrases. Most of the article is a little above the average audience, but if the ideas are good, you should plan carefully to bring them into the experience of your auditors. There is one sentence which says, “No country was ever saved by the other fellow; it must be done by you, by a hundred million yous, or it will not be done at all.” Or again, Secretary [William] McAdoo says, “Every dollar invested in the Liberty Loan is a real blow for liberty, a blow against the militaristic system which would strangle the freedom of the world,” and so on. Both the *Tribune* and the *Examiner*, besides the *Herald*, contain President [Woodrow] Wilson’s address to the nation in connection with the draft registration. The latter part is very suggestive and can be used effectively. Try slogans like “Earn the right to say, I helped to win the war,” and “This is a Loyalty Bond as well as a Liberty Bond,” or “A cause that is worth living for is worth dying for, and a cause that is worth dying for is worth fighting for.” Conceive of your speech as a mosaic made up of five or six hundred words, each one of which has its function.

Get your friends to criticize you pitilessly. We all want to do our best and naturally like to be praised, but there is nothing so dangerous as “josh” and “jolly.” Let your friends know that you want ruthless criticism. If their criticism isn’t sound, you can reject it. If it is sound, wouldn’t you be foolish to reject it?

Be sure to prepare very carefully your closing appeal, whatever it may be, so that you may not leave your speech hanging in the air.

Don’t yield to the inspiration of the moment, or to applause to depart from your speech outline. This does not mean that you may not add a word or two, but remember that one can speak only 130, or 140, or 150 words a

minute, and if your speech has been carefully prepared to fill four minutes, you can not add anything to your speech without taking away something of serious importance.

Cut out “Doing your bit.” “Business as usual.” “Your country needs you.” They are flat and no longer have any force or meaning.

Time yourself in advance on every paragraph and remember you are likely to speak somewhat more slowly in public than when you practice in your own room.

If you come across a new slogan, or a new argument, or a new story, or a new illustration, don't fail to send it to the Committee. We need your help to make the Four-Minute Men the mightiest force for arousing patriotism in the United States. Committee on Public Information,

Four Minute Men Bulletin 1, May 22, 1917

Speech by a Four Minute Man

Ladies and Gentlemen:

I have just received the information that there is a German spy among us— a German spy watching *us*.

He is around, here somewhere, reporting upon you and me—sending reports about us to Berlin and telling the Germans just what we are doing with the Liberty Loan. From every section of the country these spies have been getting reports over to Potsdam—not general reports but details—where the loan is going well and where its success seems weak, and what people are saying in each community.

For the German Government is worried about our great loan. Those Junkers fear its effect upon the German *morale*. They're raising a loan this month, too.

If the American people lend their billions now, one and all with a hip-hip-hurrah, it means that America is united and strong. While, if we lend our money half-heartedly, America seems weak and autocracy remains strong.

Money means everything now; it means quicker victory and therefore less bloodshed. We are *in* the war, and now Americans can have but *one* opinion, only *one* wish in the Liberty Loan.

Well, I hope these spies are getting their messages straight, letting Potsdam know that America is *hurling back* to the autocrats these answers:

For treachery here, attempted treachery in Mexico, treachery everywhere—*one billion*.

For murder of American women and children—*one billion more*.

For broken faith and promise to murder more Americans—*billions and billions more*.

And then we will add:

In the world fight for Liberty, our share—*billions and billions and billions and endless billions*.

Do not let the German spy hear and report that *you* are a slacker.