

Background: During World War I, the Woodrow Wilson Administration and Congress took unprecedented steps to mobilize public support for the war and silence dissent. In the process, American Civil Liberties were severely restricted.

Directions: Respond to the following prompt in a well-written argumentative response. You MUST have organized paragraphs that use transitions where appropriate, relevant evidence, facts, examples, and demonstrate logical reasoning.

Prompt: Was the American government justified in limiting civil liberties?

In 1917, the United States entered World War I on the side of the Allies. With the ultimate goal of winning the war, the US government introduced legislation and took unprecedented actions which limited the rights of Americans. There are many who criticize the actions of the United States, for they suppressed freedom of speech and violated many other constitutional freedoms. Nevertheless, the American government was justified in limiting civil liberties during World War I because they needed to build public support and mobilize for war.

In order to build public support for the war, it was important for Americans to agree that all efforts to defeat the German empire were necessary. One way to accomplish this task was through a government-sponsored propaganda campaign, which identified Germans and their culture as the enemy. To this end, posters were created which demonized Germans and sparked patriotic fervor. The campaign was so successful that the American populace took it upon themselves to rename hamburgers to *liberty steak* and sauerkraut to *liberty cabbage*, German music from composers such as Beethoven and Wagner was no longer played, and movies such as *The Kaiser*, *The Beast of Berlin*, and *To Hell with the Kaiser* were prohibited (Document 1). This clearly reflects the success of the campaign, as Americans voluntarily took action to eliminate German influence in society and the economy.

Additionally, the government built public support for the war through the creation of The Committee on Public Information. The organization was headed by George Creel and its goal was to convince citizens of the righteousness of the war. The CPI hired 150,000 workers nicknamed "four-minute men" (Civil Liberties). These patriots gave speeches throughout the country and called for public support of the war. Their

speeches fueled patriotism and anti-German sentiment by making claims that German-Americans were acting as spies and sabotaging the war effort (Document 3). While not all German-Americans were spies, these speeches helped to unify Americans towards the common goal of winning the war, while at the same time silencing dissenters.

Another reason the American government was justified in limiting civil liberties during World War I was because of the need to mobilize for war. The United States needed to ensure support for the war on all levels, social, political, and economic. As a result, Congress passed the Espionage and Sedition Acts. This unprecedented legislation made it illegal for any person in the United States to interfere with the war effort in any way, shape, or form. Although extreme, these laws were necessary to transform a peacetime economy into the war-time economy needed to win the war. The government needed to ensure workers met the new labor demands, and thus forced wages to remain stagnant and suppressed union activity. Anyone who was found guilty of breaking the Espionage or Sedition Acts faced twenty-years in prison and a fine of up to \$10,000 (Document 2). The CPI also played a major role in mobilizing the country for war. The *four-minute men* called for Americans to purchase war bonds, which financed war operations. As a result, the CPI was able to raise millions from loyal citizens.

Critics argue that the government's actions were not justified for they violated the civil liberties of the American people. They point out that the U.S. Constitution was created for the sole purpose of protecting civil liberties and stress the importance of freedom of speech in a democracy. References are made to the case of Eugene V. Debs, a socialist leader, who was wrongly imprisoned simply for openly criticizing the war effort. While it may be true that the government limited some constitutional freedoms, these actions were necessary because of the inherent danger Americans faced. Failure to win the war would have resulted not only in the loss of land but of freedom as well. In addition, the large number of immigrants in the US during this time caused division amongst the public regarding which side the nation should support. Many Germans, Italians, French, and English were hoping the US would support their nation. As a result, the drastic steps taken by the government were not only just, but absolutely necessary.

To conclude, civil liberties became a paramount issue for Americans during World War I. Questions regarding the constitutionality of America's actions brought about public discourse. However, the temporary suspension

of civil liberties were necessary to ensure victory and secure the nation's future.