

## The American Press in World War I, Part I



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Photograph from her War Correspondent's Pass in October, 1918

The following represents the opinion of the author and is not a referenced academic article. In this article I use the word “press” for the news media—which in WWI was the press. Many of the principles I talk about will translate to modern media as well.

When I started my research for *An American Nurse in Paris*, my intent was to have Alice Simmons be a war correspondent. I found that was impossible, since no American women were allowed to serve in that role in Europe during World War I.

The relationship between the press and warring nations is fraught with conflict and difficulty. Things are simple when autocratic nations use their “press” as a propaganda tool. However, any nation that has or purports to have a “free press” is faced with a number of problems.

The free press is one of the pillars of American democracy. This inconvenient truth has been the bane of politicians and generals alike. Many generals probably wanted the press to leave them alone. But some, like Patton or MacArthur seemed to thrive on the attention, as long as reporters fawned upon them or reported the news as the general saw it. But, when they had the audacity to tell the truth, like Patton slapping a soldier suffering from acute battle fatigue, things changed.

During World War I, the British and French militaries allowed limited press access from war zones and heavily censored all reports or articles before publication. Neither allowed female correspondents to report anywhere near the war zones, and never from the front. Press briefings were often deliberately inaccurate. Part of this was to mislead the enemy, or the public. For example, casualty figures provided by military briefers to the British press grossly underestimated casualties. I'm not an expert on the details, especially the motivation.

The American press was a more free-wheeling and independent enterprise than the others probably were during the WWI era. Reporters scrambled to get as close to the action as they could. General Pershing and the American Expeditionary Forces (AEF) know they had to allow the press in, but wanted to keep a tight rein on the reports that saw the light of day. There were a number of reasons. I'll examine those next.

The war was not wildly popular on the home front. President Wilson's slogan in his campaign for his second term was "He Kept us out of the War". There was a great deal of opposition to American entry into the war. Even many who favored American involvement were less than enthusiastic. Negative reports would make things more difficult on the home front. The Vietnam experience is later proof of that problem. The American government sought to control the message and keep it positive through censorship and other forms of press manipulation.

Very few correspondents were allowed to venture to Europe early during American involvement. Later, many more were allowed "over there", after intense pressure forced the government's hand. Even then, only a handful of reporters became credentialed war correspondents. As pressure to report on the war mounted, the AEF established a main location for the American press and the few credentialed correspondents in Neufchâteau, far from the front. There was a press office in Paris, but most American assets were located far from that city.

The AEF held regular press briefings. These apparently were mostly the AEF telling the press what the AEF wanted the press to report. That was the extent of the information available to the many uncredentialed journalists. Those with full credentials were allowed closer to the front. However, all reports were heavily (and at times heavy-handedly) censored.

Women, like my fictional character Alice Simmons, were shut off from the briefings and isolated to Paris. The French and British were hostile to the concept of women reporting on the war. Since the AEF was a guest of France, the French had input in where correspondents could travel.

The “lid” the AEF hoped to keep the press under was not fully successful. A number of correspondents managed to get uncensored stories out. Some had their credentials revoked as a result, and several were declared persona non grata by the French and were forced to return to the US.

I have included reference material in the bibliography and more details in Part 2.