

Pre-Screening Worksheet

Documentary: *The Century: America's Time — 1914–1919: "Shell Shock"*
Theme: What happens to democracy during total war?

Name: _____

Date: _____

What Is Shell Shock?

"Shell shock" was the name given during World War I to a cluster of psychological symptoms — tremors, nightmares, paralysis, memory loss — suffered by soldiers exposed to sustained artillery bombardment and trench warfare. It was among the first widely recognized cases of what we now call post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

The title of this documentary uses "shell shock" metaphorically: total war traumatized not only individual soldiers but democratic societies. As you work through this worksheet and watch the film, consider — **what does a democracy sacrifice when it wages a war of this scale?**

PART I — WAR AND POWER

Before watching, consider the following questions.

1. In wartime, should a government have more power than usual? Explain your reasoning in 3–4 sentences.

2. What freedoms might be at risk during a national emergency? List two or three and briefly explain each.

PART II — KEY WARTIME LAWS AND POLICIES

Note for students: The documentary focuses on human experience — soldiers, families, and the emotional cost of war. It will not detail the laws below. That is intentional. Your job is to carry this legal context **into** the screening and ask: what kind of government produced both this war effort and these laws at the same time?

The Espionage Act (1917)

Made it illegal to interfere with military operations, recruit for enemy forces, or promote insubordination among U.S. troops during wartime.

PRIMARY SOURCE · ESPIONAGE ACT (1917), SECTION 3
“Whoever, when the United States is at war, shall willfully make or convey false reports or false statements with intent to interfere with the operation or success of the military or naval forces of the United States... or shall willfully obstruct the recruiting or enlistment service of the United States... shall be punished by a fine of not more than \$10,000 or imprisonment for not more than twenty years, or both.”

3. In your own words: what kinds of actions or speech might fall under this law?

4. This law targets interference with military operations — but who decides what counts as “interference”? Why does that question matter?

The Sedition Act (1918)

Extended the Espionage Act by criminalizing a broad range of speech about the U.S. government, its flag, and military forces during wartime.

PRIMARY SOURCE · SEDITION ACT (1918)
“Whoever, when the United States is at war, shall willfully utter, print, write, or publish any disloyal, profane, scurrilous, or abusive language about the form of government of the United States... or the flag... shall be punished by a fine or imprisonment.”

5. What kinds of speech does this law appear to prohibit?

6. How broad does this language seem? Could it be applied selectively? Why or why not?

Schenck v. United States (1919)

The Supreme Court unanimously upheld a conviction under the Espionage Act. Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes wrote the opinion, coining one of the most famous phrases in American constitutional history.

PRIMARY SOURCE · JUSTICE OLIVER WENDELL HOLMES

“The most stringent protection of free speech would not protect a man in falsely shouting fire in a theatre and causing a panic... The question is whether the words used... create a clear and present danger.”

7. What does Holmes mean by “clear and present danger”? What standard is he trying to establish?

8. Who decides what counts as “dangerous” speech — and does that matter? Was Holmes protecting speech or restricting it?

Committee on Public Information (CPI)

A government agency created in 1917 under George Creel to produce and distribute pro-war propaganda through posters, pamphlets, films, and public speakers called “Four Minute Men.”

9. Why would a democracy organize propaganda during wartime? What does this suggest about the relationship between war and public opinion?

PART III — PREDICTION

Based on the laws and context above, make a prediction before you watch.

10. How might dissenters — people who publicly oppose the war — be treated under these laws? Give a specific example of the kind of person at risk.

11. How might immigrants or political radicals be viewed during wartime? What historical forces might intensify that suspicion?

12. The documentary ends at Versailles. Based on what you already know: if the peace treaty failed to produce a lasting settlement, what might that suggest about the wartime sacrifices to democracy?
