

## Espionage Act of 1917

This act, passed during World War I, strictly limited Americans' freedom of speech in the name of wartime security. Since the Alien and Sedition Acts of the late eighteenth century, America had struggled to find the proper balance of security and freedom during times of war. This law and its energetic enforcement inspired as much criticism as any similar law in the nation's history. As you read the act, consider the range of activities that it prohibits. In what part of the act did the government attempt to justify their nearly indiscriminate campaign against socialist or pacifist organizations and publications, and the long sentences of imprisonment for socialist leaders including Eugene V. Debs?

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Espionage Act of 1917  
(Amended, 1918)  
(Excerpts)  
Title I. Espionage  
Section 1. That

(a) whoever, for the purpose of obtaining information respecting the national defense with intent or reason to believe that the information to be obtained is to be used to the injury of the United States, or to the advantage of any foreign nation, goes upon, enters, flies over, or otherwise obtains information, concerning any vessel, aircraft, work of defense, navy yard, naval station, submarine base, coaling station, fort, battery, torpedo station, dockyard, canal, railroad, arsenal, camp, factory, mine, telegraph, telephone, wireless, or signal station, building, office, or other place connected with the national defense, owned or constructed, or in progress of construction by the United States or under the control of the United States, or of any of its officers or agents, or within the exclusive jurisdiction of the United States, or any place in which any vessel, aircraft, arms, munitions, or other materials or instruments for use in time of war are being made, prepared, repaired, or stored, under any contract or agreement with the United States, or with any person on behalf of the United States, or otherwise on behalf of the United States, or any prohibited place within the meaning of section six of this title; or

(b) whoever for the purpose aforesaid, and with like intent or reason to believe, copies, takes, makes, or obtains, or attempts, or induces or aids another to copy, take, make, or obtain, any sketch, photograph, photographic negative, blue print, plan, map, model, instrument, appliance, document, writing or note of anything connected with the national defense; or

(c) whoever, for the purpose aforesaid, receives or obtains or agrees or attempts or induces or aids another to receive or obtain from any other person, or from any source whatever, any document, writing, code book, signal book, sketch, photograph, photographic negative, blue print, plan, map, model, instrument, appliance, or note, of anything connected with the national defense, knowing or having reason to believe, at the time he receives or obtains, or agrees or attempts or induces or aids another to receive or obtain it, that it has been or will be obtained,

taken, made or disposed of by any person contrary to the provisions of this title; or

(d) whoever, lawfully or unlawfully having possession of, access to, control over, or being intrusted with any document, writing, code book, signal book, sketch, photograph, photographic negative, blue print, plan, map, model, instrument, appliance, or note relating to the national defense, willfully communicates or transmits or attempts to communicate or transmit the same and fails to deliver it on demand to the officer or employee of the United States entitled to receive it; or

(e) whoever, being intrusted with or having lawful possession or control of any document, writing, code book, signal book, sketch, photograph, photographic negative, blue print, plan, map, model, note, or information, relating to the national defense, through gross negligence permits the same to be removed from its proper place of custody or delivered to anyone in violation of his trust, or to be lost, stolen, abstracted, or destroyed,

shall be punished by a fine of not more than \$10,000, or by imprisonment for not more than two years, or both.

Section 2. (a) Whoever, with intent or reason to believe that it is to be used to the injury or the United States or to the advantage of a foreign nation, communicates, delivers, or transmits, or attempts to, or aids, or induces another to, communicate, deliver or transmit, to any foreign government, or to any faction or party or military or naval force within a foreign country, whether recognized or unrecognized by the United States, or to any representative, officer, agent, employee, subject, or citizen thereof, either directly or indirectly any document, writing, code book, signal book, sketch, photograph, photographic negative, blue print, plan, map, model, note, instrument, appliance, or information relating to the national defense, shall be punished by imprisonment for not more than twenty years: Provided, That whoever shall violate the provisions of subsection (a) of this section in time of war shall be punished by death or by imprisonment for not more than thirty years; and (b) whoever, in time of war, with intent that the same shall be communicated to the enemy, shall collect, record, publish or communicate, or attempt to elicit any information with respect to the movement, numbers, description, condition, or disposition of any of the armed forces, ships, aircraft, or war materials of the United States, or with respect to the plans or conduct, or supposed plans or conduct of any naval or military operations, or with respect to any works or measures undertaken for or connected with, or intended for the fortification of any place, or any other information relating to the public defense, which might be useful to the enemy, shall be punished by death or by imprisonment for not more than thirty years.

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 to promote the success of its enemies and whoever when the United States is at war, shall willfully cause or attempt to cause insubordination, disloyalty, mutiny, refusal of duty, in the military or naval forces of the United States, or shall willfully obstruct the recruiting or enlistment service of the United States, to the injury of the service or 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.

Section 4. If two or more persons conspire to violate the provisions of section two or three of this title, and one or more of such persons does any act to effect the object of the conspiracy, each of the parties to such conspiracy shall be punished as in said sections provided in the case of the doing of the act the accomplishment of which is the object of such conspiracy. Except as above provided conspiracies to commit offenses under this title shall be punished as provided by section thirty-seven of the Act to codify, revise, and amend the penal laws of the United States approved March fourth, nineteen hundred and nine.

Section 5. Whoever harbors or conceals any person who he knows, or has reasonable grounds to believe or suspect, has committed, or is about to commit, an offense under this title shall be punished by a fine of not more than \$10,000 or by imprisonment for not more than two years, or both.

Section 6. The President in time of war or in case of national emergency may by proclamation designate any place other than those set forth in subsection (a) of section one hereof in which anything for the use of the Army or Navy is being prepared or constructed or stored as a prohibited place for the purpose of this title: Provided, That he shall determine that information with respect thereto would be prejudicial to the national defense.

Section 7. Nothing contained in this title shall be deemed to limit the jurisdiction of the general courts-martial, military commissions, or naval courts-martial under sections thirteen hundred and forty-two, thirteen hundred and forty-three, and sixteen hundred and twenty-four of the Revised Statutes as amended.

Section 8. The provisions of this title shall extend to all Territories, possessions, and places subject to the jurisdiction of the United States whether or not contiguous thereto, and offenses under this title, when committed upon the high seas or elsewhere within the admiralty and maritime jurisdiction of the United States and outside the territorial limits thereof shall be punishable hereunder.

Section 9. The Act entitles "An Act to prevent the disclosure of national defense secrets," approved March third, nineteen hundred and eleven, is hereby repealed.

## Title II. Vessels in Ports of the United States

Section 1. Whenever the President by proclamation or Executive order declares a national emergency to exist by reason of actual or threatened war, insurrection, or invasion, or disturbance or threatened disturbance of the international relations of the United States, the Secretary of the Treasury may make, subject to the approval of the President, rules and regulations governing the anchorage and movement of any vessel, foreign or domestic, in the territorial waters of the United States, may inspect such vessel at any time, place guards thereon, and, if necessary in his opinion in order to secure such vessels from damage, or injury to any harbor or waters of the United States, or to secure the observance of the rights and obligations of the United States, may take, by and with the consent of the President, for such purposes, full possession and control of such vessel and remove therefrom the officers and crew thereof and all

other persons not specially authorized by him to go or remain on board thereof.

Within the territory and waters of the Canal Zone the Governor of the Panama Canal, with the approval of the President, shall exercise all the powers conferred by this section on the Secretary of the Treasury.

Section 2. If any owner, agent, master, officer, or person in charge, or any member of the crew of any such vessel fails to comply with any regulation of rule issued or order given by the Secretary of the Treasury or the Governor of the Panama Canal under the provisions of this title, or obstructs or interferes with the exercise or any power conferred by this title, the vessel, together with her tackle, apparel, furniture, and equipment, shall be subject to seizure and forfeiture to the United States in the same manner as merchandise is forfeited for violation of the customs revenue laws; and the person guilty of such failure, obstruction, or interference shall be fined not more than \$10,000, or imprisoned not more than two years, or both.

Section 3. It shall be unlawful for the owner or master or any other person in charge or command of any private vessel, foreign or domestic, or for any member of the crew or other person, within the territorial waters of the United States, willfully to cause or permit the destruction or injury of such vessel or knowingly to permit said vessel to be used as a place of resort for any person conspiring with another or preparing to commit any offense against the United States, or in violation of the treaties of the United States or of the obligations of the United States under the law of nations, or to defraud the United States, or knowingly to permit such vessels to be used in violation of the rights and obligations of the United States under the law of nations; and in case such vessel shall be so used, with the knowledge of the owner or master or other person in charge or command thereof, the vessel, together with her tackle, apparel, furniture, and equipment, shall be subject to seizure and forfeiture to the United States in the same manner as merchandise is forfeited for violation of the customs revenue laws; and whoever violates this section shall be fined not more than \$10,000, or imprisoned not more than two years, or both.

Section 4. The President may employ such part of the land or naval forces of the United States as he may deem necessary to carry out the purpose of this title.

### Title III. Injuring Vessels Engaged in Foreign Commerce

Section 1. Whoever shall set fire to any vessel or foreign registry, or any vessel of American registry entitled to engage in commerce with foreign nations, or to any vessel of the United States as defined in section three hundred and ten of the Act of March fourth, nineteen hundred and nine, entitled "An Act to codify, revise, and amend the penal laws of the United States," or to the cargo of the same, or shall tamper with the motive power or instrumentalities of navigation or such vessel, or shall place bombs or explosives in or upon such vessel, or shall do any other act to or upon such vessel while within the jurisdiction of the United States, or, if such vessel is of American registry, while she is on the high sea, with intent to injure or endanger the safety of the vessel or of her cargo, of persons on board, whether the injury or danger is so intended to take place within the jurisdiction of the United States, or after the vessel shall have departed therefrom; or whoever shall attempt or conspire to do any such acts with such intent, shall be fined not more than \$10,000 or imprisoned not more than twenty years, or both.

#### Title IV. Interference with Foreign Commerce by Violent Means

Section 1. Whoever, with intent to prevent, interfere with, or obstruct or attempt to prevent, interfere with, or obstruct the exportation to foreign countries of articles from the United States shall injure or destroy, by fire or explosives, such articles or the places where they may be while in such foreign commerce, shall be fined not more than \$10,000, or imprisoned no more than ten years, or both.

#### Title V. Enforcement of Neutrality

Section 1. During a war in which the United States is a neutral nation, the President, or any person thereunto authorized by him, may withhold clearance from or to any vessel, domestic or foreign, which is required by law to secure clearance before departing, to forbid its departure from port or from the jurisdiction of the United States, whenever there is reasonable cause to believe that any such vessel, domestic or foreign, whether requiring clearance or not, is about to carry fuel, arms, ammunition, men supplies, dispatches, or information to any warship, tender, or supply ship or a foreign belligerent nation in violation of the laws, treaties or obligations of the United States under the law of nations; and it shall thereupon be unlawful for such vessel to depart.

Section 2. During a war in which the United States is a neutral nation, the President, or any person thereunto authorized by him, may detain any armed vessel owned wholly or in part by American citizens, or any vessel, domestic or foreign (other than one which has entered the ports of the United States as a public vessel), which is manifestly built for warlike purposes or has been converted or adapted from a private vessel to one suitable for warlike use, until the owner or master, or person having charge of such vessel, shall furnish proof satisfactory to the President, or to the person duly authorized by him, that the vessel will not be employed by the said owners, or master, or person having charge thereof, to cruise against or commit or attempt to commit hostilities upon the subjects, citizens, or property of any foreign prince or state, or of any colony, district, or people with which the United States is at peace, and that the said vessel will not be sold or delivered to any belligerent nation, or to an agent, officer, or citizen of such nation, by them or any of them, within the jurisdiction of the United States, or, having left that jurisdiction, upon the high seas.

Section 3. During a war in which the United States is a neutral nation, it shall be unlawful to send out of the jurisdiction of the United States any vessel built, armed, or equipped as a vessel of war, or converted from a private vessel into a vessel of war, with any intent or under any agreement or contract, written or oral, that such vessel shall be delivered to a belligerent nation, or to an agent, officer, or citizen of such nation, or with reasonable cause to believe that the said vessel shall or will be employed in the service of any such belligerent nation after its departure from the jurisdiction of the United States.

Section 4. During a war in which the United States is a neutral nation, in addition to the facts required by sections forty-one hundred and ninety-seven, forty-one hundred and ninety-eight, and, forty-two hundred of the Revised Statutes to be set out in the masters' and sippers' manifests

before clearance will be issued to vessels bound to foreign ports, each of which sections of the Revised Statutes is hereby declared to be and is continued in full force and effect, every master or person having charge or command of any vessel, domestic or foreign, whether requiring clearance or not, before departure of such vessel from port shall deliver to the collector of customs for the district wherein such vessel is then located a statement duly verified by oath, that the cargo or any part of the cargo is or is not to be delivered to other vessels in port or to be transshipped, on the high seas and, if it is to be so delivered or transshipped, stating the kind and quantities and the value of the total quantity of each kind of article so to be delivered or transshipped, and the name of the person, corporation, vessel, or government, to whom the delivery or transshipment is to be made; and the owners, shippers, or consignors of the cargo or such vessel shall in the same manner and under the same conditions deliver to the collector like statements under oath as to the cargo or the parts thereof laden or shipped by them, respectively.

Section 5. Whenever it appears that the vessel is not entitled to clearance or whenever there is reasonable cause to believe that the additional statements under oath required in the foregoing section are false, the collector of customs for the district in which the vessel is located, may, subject to review by the Secretary of Commerce, refuse clearance to any vessel, domestic or foreign, and by formal notice served upon the owners, master, or person or persons in command or charge of any domestic vessel for which clearance is not required by law, forbid the departure of the vessel from the port or from the jurisdiction of the United States; and it shall thereupon be unlawful for the vessel to depart.

Section 6. Whoever in violation of any of the provisions of this title, shall take, or attempt or conspire to take, or authorize the taking of any such vessel, out of port or from the jurisdiction of the United States, shall be fined not more than \$10,000 or imprisoned not more than five years, or both; and in addition, such vessel, her tackle, apparel, furniture, equipment, and her cargo shall be forfeited to the United States.

Section 7. Whoever, being a person belonging to the armed land or naval forces of a belligerent nation or belligerent faction of any nation and being interned in the United States, in accordance with the law of nations, shall leave or attempt to leave said jurisdiction, or shall leave or attempt to leave the limits of internment in which freedom of movement has been allowed, without permission from the proper official of the United States in charge, or shall willfully overstay a leave of absence granted by such official shall be subject to arrest by any marshal or deputy marshal of the United States, or by the military or naval authorities thereof, and shall be returned to the place of internment and there confined and safely kept for such period of time as the official of the United States in charge shall direct; and whoever, within the jurisdiction of the United States and subject thereto, shall aid or entice any interned person to escape or attempt to escape from the jurisdiction of the United States, or from the limits of internment prescribed, shall be fined not more than \$1000 or imprisoned not more than one year, or both.