Within months of America’s entrance into World War I, Wisconsin became labeled the “Traitor State,” an epithet it did not manage to shake while the war was being fought. The editor of the *Louisville Courier-Journal* (Kentucky) may have been the first to describe the state in such a way, when in a July 17, 1917 editorial he asked, “Will Wisconsin be known when the war is over as the Traitor State?”¹ The national belief in Wisconsin’s disloyalty peaked in the Spring of 1918, at the time of a contentious state election. Evidence of the state’s position could be seen in comments from the *Montgomery Advertiser* (Alabama) describing the state as “the American hotbed of disloyalty,” the *Los Angeles Times* declaring, “There is probably more disloyalty per square foot in Wisconsin than anywhere else in the country,” and the *Washington Post* thinking, “There may be few spots as intensely pro-German as there are in Wisconsin.”²

Those who held the view that Wisconsin had a loyalty problem usually cited three reasons for their perception. First and foremost were the state’s national representatives, who had overwhelmingly voted against America’s entrance into the European War. When Congress voted on April 6, 1917, one of Wisconsin’s two senators and nine of its eleven representatives voted to keep the United States out of the war, a stance many viewed as unpatriotic. The state’s senior senator, Robert M. La Follette, continued to irritate self-described patriots by maintaining America should have stayed out of the war even after the vote. By the end of 1917, he had become identified as the most disloyal, unpatriotic American in the nation. Secondly, Wisconsin had an active Socialist party, which, like La Follette, had not supported America’s entrance into the war. Finally, Wisconsin had a large, vocal, and politically-active German-American population, who did not want the United States to go to war with its homeland.

In response to this perception of Wisconsin as a place rife with treason and disloyalty, a number of citizens throughout the state, but mainly in Milwaukee, made a concerted attempt to change the message. Historians have called those who pushed an extreme version of patriotism during World War I “super patriots” or “hyper-patriots,” my preferred term. In Wisconsin, hyper-patriotic groups generally consisted of those who identified as Stalwart Republicans (rather than Progressive

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Republicans, La Follette’s party, had a New England or New York pedigree, and considered themselves business or professional men. In 1917, Wisconsin’s hyper-patriots formed the Wisconsin Loyalty Legion, a voluntary organization created to clear Wisconsin’s name, primarily by replacing disloyal national representatives with loyal ones.

In March 1918, the Wisconsin Loyalty Legion created a map showing “Where Disloyalty in Wisconsin Chiefly Centres.” This “Sedition Map,” which was published in the New York Sun, used statistics from the U.S. Senate primary held on March 19, 1917. The shaded areas refer to places that voted for a candidate supported by La Follette. Besides using shame and embarrassment to control wayward Wisconsinites, hyper-patriots also used coercive tactics to bring the disloyal into line and became more violent as the war progressed.

After such a tumultuous experience and charged atmosphere, how would the war be remembered, commemorated, and acknowledged by Wisconsinites during the interwar years?

While Wisconsin’s World War I story may have been unique, the desire by powerful Wisconsinites, usually the hyper-patriots, to control war memories in the succeeding decades was probably duplicated in many states around the country. Americans tended toward three main sites of war memory: publications, monuments & memorials, and Armistice Day events. One message repeated throughout each of these forums: “Lest We Forget.” World War I saw more death than any previous conflict. All this death had to mean something. As a result, Americans were exhorted not to forget the sacrifices made for the war’s purposes as stated by President Wilson, specifically to make the world safe for democracy and to make this the war to end all wars.

**Publications**

Wisconsin’s leaders made every attempt to help Wisconsinites remember or at least not forget. On July 22, 1919, Wisconsin’s governor authorized...
the creation of the Wisconsin War History Commission with the purpose “to provide for a memorial history of the part taken by the State of Wisconsin and its citizens” in the Great War. Legislation for this commission required that it publish two books: one on the homefront and another on the state’s soldiers, sailors, and marines. The Commission actually produced three books: one on the military and two “designed to give a general historical survey of the part taken by the state and its citizens” during the war. Wisconsin journalists R.B. Pixley and Fred Holmes wrote the latter two books, which were mainly descriptive and avoided mentioning Wisconsin’s disloyalty issues, except in the subtitle of Pixley’s book, *Wisconsin in the World War*, where he noted he was “…Giving in Part the Record of a Loyal State…” Pixley and Holmes downplayed the disagreements and divisiveness that pervaded the state during the war and instead portrayed Wisconsin as having a unified mission. Holmes in his book, *Wisconsin’s War Record*, even wrote that the war years were a time when “men of all racial [ethnic] extractions coalesced and became one.”

Milwaukee’s hyper-patriots did not believe the state-produced books went far enough, so they published their own book, *Wisconsin in the Great War*, to leave a record of the disloyalty, treason, and lack of patriotism they had been up against. Wheeler Bloodgood, a lawyer and leading

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4 “Proposed Program for Organizing War History Committees and Collection Material,” Wisconsin War History Commission (WWHC), general correspondence, 1918-1925, Series 1693, Box 1, Miscellaneous folder, WHS.

Milwaukee hyper-patriot dispensed with the sense of unity mentioned in the official state books and wrote that Milwaukee had been “a hotbed for German propaganda…and an active field for Socialist agitators and haranguers.” Another contributor spoke of the “notable strides [made] in the eradication …of strong, deep-seated racial ties.” Although, he did not mention how this was done.

A manuscript, “War Hysteria,” written in the early 1930s by a friend of Senator La Follette, attempted to correct the history of Wisconsin’s war years as provided by the state and hyper-patriots with information about the ugly tactics used to eradicate ethnic ties and bring those perceived as disloyal into line. The author left money in his will to have it published, but that never happened.

Monuments and Memorial Buildings

Mass-produced memorial statues had “cluttered” town squares and battlefields after the Civil War and government officials around the country wanted to avoid this mistake after the Great War ended. The question became what should a fitting monument or memorial be? In February 1919, the Wisconsin War History Commission may have been the first to publish a document on this matter, the pamphlet “Concerning War Memorials.” Historian G. Kurt Piehler in Remembering War the American Way has suggested that the rush to build monuments may have been the method local leaders used “to camouflage the divisions created by the war. They wanted Americans to expiate their doubts, and sometimes their guilt, about this ambiguous conflict.”

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8 Henry A. Huber, “War Hysteria,” unpublished manuscript, 40-41, Henry A. Huber papers, Box 15, WHS.

9 Wisconsin War History Commission, “Concerning War Memorials, Bulletin No. 4” (Madison: The Committee, 1919). The pamphlet mentions “the experience we have had in connection with our memorials of the Civil War affords numerous illustrations of the pitfalls which lie in the path of the American community which resolves to erect a memorial to its soldier dead” (p. 1).

Geographer Yi-Fu Tuan has suggested that monuments and buildings give permanence to important, but fleeting events, like wars. World War I monuments were also closely tied to the idea of American heritage and mythmaking. Their main story focused on the war as an American victory and the American military as saviors of a victimized Europe. Europeans were generally left out of the story. Wisconsin’s war monuments fell into this mold by centering on a mythologized patriotic story of soldier bravery and citizen unity, and on an American democratic narrative. At the unveiling of the Soldier-Sailor Memorial in Manitowoc, a speaker noted that the monument “will be…a shrine at which every lover of his country may kneel and worship.”

Many of Wisconsin’s World War I monuments were built during the 1920s with 1923 being the peak year. In every case their stated purpose was to honor the war dead. At the unveiling of the Merrill cenotaph, for example, one speaker noted the monument allowed Merrill to show “its appreciation to our war heroes” better than Memorial Day, which was only once a year, while the cenotaph “will carry the observance 365 days in the year.” At the public event for the Manitowoc monument, another speaker stated its purpose was to remind the public “of the soldiers who went forth to battle and the sailors who faced both battle and storm to preserve this constitutional government.”

Communities around the country wanted to do more than build statues and monuments that commemorated the war dead. They wanted to express its ideals and purpose by building memorial buildings dedicated to servicing the community, veterans in particular, and promoting humanitarianism. Historian James Mayo has noted that the best memorial buildings were places


12 “Memorial Dedicated,” Manitowoc Pilot, November 15, 1923, WWHC, Clipping files, 1917-1945, Series 1701, Box 5, folder 1/2, WHS.

13 “Lest We Keep on Forgetting,” Manitowoc Herald-News, May 26, 1923, WWHC, Clipping files, Series 1701, Box 5, folder 2/2, WHS.
“where people can conceive that human betterment be presented.” A number of Wisconsin communities created war memorials for the improvement of humanity, primarily humanity living nearby. Parks were popular, since they improved the urban environment. Of the Menasha Community Building, the Milwaukee Journal wrote, it was not just “a statue of a soldier…but a community building dedicated to the soldiers and sailors of the World war and established for the use of citizens of today.” Planners of other buildings, like the University of Wisconsin’s Memorial Union, quickly learned they could raise money more easily if they labelled it a “memorial” building.

**Armistice Day Events**

With the announcement of armistice on November 11, 1918, spontaneous parades, celebrations, and parties occurred throughout America, including Wisconsin. The Milwaukee Journal described the day as one when “the pent-up feelings of the people broke loose in a celebration

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14 Mayo, 7-8.

that is unforgettable.”

For the next eighteen years (1919-1937), Americans often celebrated and honored the anniversary, even though it was not an official holiday. Armistice Day anniversaries not only provided Americans with a chance to remember the sacrifices of the country’s soldiers and sailors in a public and interactive way, they also became a forum where the meaning of the war could be discussed. Over time a fitting and proper format evolved that included blowing whistles and ringing church bells in the minutes before 11:00am when activities suddenly ceased and quiet reigned for one to two minutes. Followed by singing, parades, and speeches. In 1938 Armistice Day became an official federal holiday.

The year 1921 may have seen the peak of unofficial Armistice Day celebrations. In any case, it was definitely memorable. President Harding declared Armistice Day 1921 a national holiday in observance of burying the Unknown Soldier at Arlington National Cemetery. The American

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Legion noted that year “that interest in the proper observation of the new American holiday is widespread.”

After 1921, a fear arose that Americans were forgetting war sacrifices. A speaker at the 1922 Armistice Day celebration in La Crosse, for example, spoke of the “dangers of forgetfulness.” “Last year,” he continued, “Armistice Day meant something…Beautiful exercises were held over the body of the Unknown Soldier…This year is somewhat different.”

Armistice Day, because it was ephemeral, could be molded to new societal needs, political situations, and community desires. The rhetoric spoken around this day revealed how discussion of war memories changed over time, especially as the world’s political climate changed. In 1922, the Beloit News noted, “We have descended from the high peaks into the valleys of disappointment and indifference. This is the fault of the cynics and the scoffers. Let us highly resolve today that [our soldiers] did not die in vain.” But by 1930, the Milwaukee Journal, a major voice of the hyper-patriots during the war years, wondered, “Where are we after twelve years? Alarmed by world depression in a world we fear may catch fire. . . . Afraid and more than half convinced that all these dead died in vain.” Finally in 1945, the Milwaukee Journal believed, “This is not a day of rejoicing. This day marks the anniversary of broken promises and shattered dreams.” As World War II ended, Armistice Day reminded Americans of failure, not of a proud heritage. Many thought the glories previously celebrated on Armistice Day were best forgotten along with the war. To help forget its existence, the federal government changed its name to Veterans Day in 1954.

In Wisconsin there was little connection between the way the war was experienced and the way it was remembered. Once the war ended, the hyper-patriots tried to control the war history narrative. They managed, as much as possible, to expunge any blemish of treason or un-American activities from the record. Yet in the end it was all for naught. World War I became the “forgotten war.” Despite the constant repetition of the words “Lest We Forget” in memorial publications, on monuments, and in Armistice Day speeches and editorials, Wisconsin and America did forget.