

War and the Radio Amateur

Electrical Experimenter vol. 5 no. 1

May 1917

DRAFT: Please do not share without permission of the author. Typeset versions in [web](#) / [pdf](#) / [doc](#)

THE Radio Act of 1912, under section 2 states:

Every such license shall provide that the President of the United States in time of war on public peril may cause the closing of any station for radio communication and the removal therefrom of all radio apparatus, or may authorize the use or control of any such station or apparatus by any department of the Government, upon just compensation to the owner.

We now stand on the threshold of war; indeed, before this issue is in the hands of our readers war will have been declared, or what is equivalent, this country will be in a state of war.¹

Let us then be perfectly frank with each other, and let us face the situation as it behooves upright, patriotic, law-abiding citizens. The European war has taught us that messages sent from secret radio plants by spies have been of priceless value to the enemy. Small wonder then that hysteric officials of all the warring nations have exterminated every possible as well as impossible private wireless plant in their respective countries. But to what good? True, every stationary outfit has been dismantled or confiscated by the warring Governments, but as always: where there's a will there's a way. When the German spies in England and in France found that it was not very healthy to operate their outfits in attics or in house chimneys—for a sending outfit is soon located—they simply put their radios in touring cars, cleverly concealing the aerial wires inside of the ear bodies. The apparatus too were easily concealed, and the English and French were outwitted simply because you cannot locate a moving radio outfit except by pure chance.

¹With Germany's decision to resume unrestricted submarine warfare in January 1917 and the publication of their secret Zimmerman telegram (which offered a military alliance to Mexico), the United States declared war on Germany on April 6, and on the Austro-Hungarian Empire the following day.

Which brings us face to face with the question: Did it pay the warring nations to kill the few private Radio stations they had before the war? We are honestly inclined to believe that far from being an advantage, it proved an actual disadvantage. No one at all familiar with the technique of the radio art, doubts for one minute that if a spy has the courage as well as the funds—and spies always have both—he cannot be stopt from sending wireless messages if he elect to do so. Working under cover and by moving from one place to another, nothing will stop him.

If we recognize this truth we realize how absurd it is to close all privately owned radio stations during the war. It will do no earthly good and can do only actual harm. Now we do not wish to appear selfish, nor do we wish to be classed as unpatriotic. Very much the contrary. If the administration, after carefully considering all the facts, decides to close all privately owned radio stations in this country, we will not as much as raise a single word of protest. The administration knows what is best for the welfare of the country and in time of national peril we would be the last ones to annoy our officials.

But is it not true that our splendid body of over 300,000 patriotic American Radio Amateurs, scattered thickly all over the country, can be of inestimable value to the Government? Can not our red-blooded boys be trusted to assist our officials in running down spies, who probably would not be readily located otherwise? In our big cities thousands of cars listen every minute of the day to what is going on in the vast ether-ocean. Trust our very capable American youths to ferret out the senders of questionable signals or strangely worded messages. The very multitude of these amateurs is a priceless protection. Then again both our Army and Navy badly need Radio operators. What other country can furnish such a vast army of well trained and intelligent operators as ours, thanks to the amateurs?²

When in 1916 the writer organized the *Radio League of America*, he incorporated

²Part of what worried the government about amateur signaling and open airwaves was the possibility of malicious interference, surveillance, and covert communications. Strategic planning for these problems began during debates over the 1912 Radio Act. By the time the United States entered the war five years later, it had already “begun construction of a massive network of stations from the Philippines to Puerto Rico” in preparation to take charge of all public and private long-distance radio communications.

The pace of change had quickly exceeded the ability of the government to keep up. The most recent legislation on radio, the 1912 Radio Act, did not dictate the citizenship of station owners. Theoretically, any government could open a radio station in the United States or subsidize a trusted company to act on its behalf. From such a lodgment, a station could monitor the navy’s operations or jam its signals, while to all outward appearances remaining a legitimate commercial firm. ... As Admiral [Robert S.] Griffin and others believed at the time, ‘radio is a natural monopoly.’ There was chaos in the new field of radio, but service seemed to be most efficient if under a single authority. That single authority, in the view of the U.S. Navy, ought to be the U.S. government. The security of the country compelled it.

Jonathan Reed Winkler, *Nexus: Strategic Communications and American Security in World War I*, (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2008), 97, 62-3.

in its statutes that every member should pledge in writing his station to the Government. Up to this moment the League has forwarded to Washington thousands of such pledges, among them every important amateur station in the country. These stations can be used by the administration at a moment's notice. At least our amateurs are fully prepared.

Would it not be questionable wisdom to shut down all these stations that can and will do enormously more good than possible harm?

Let our officials ponder and let them consider fairly the facts in the case. That is all that we desire.

TO ALL RADIO AMATEURS

THE Department of Commerce of Washington, by its Secretary, the Hon. Wm. C. Redfield, has kindly sent us the following information of particular interest to all amateurs in the United States at the present time.

Secretary Redfield has issued orders that for the present no new licenses to radio amateurs will be issued and the renewal of outstanding amateur licenses will be granted only by the Department upon special favorable reports by the radio inspectors. (This refers to sending outfits only.)

The Department also informs our readers, reminding them of the fact that the operation of transmitting radio instruments without licenses is prohibited under severe penalties, which, under the conditions of the time, would be exacted in the case of those who showed no regard for the requirements of the law.

Up to the time that we go to press, the Department has not formulated final plans as to what steps will be taken in regard to radio amateurs as a whole, and whether they will be allowed to continue to operate the same as before. It is our personal impression, however, that no drastic steps are likely to be taken by the Government as long as the amateurs cooperate with the department.

In view of this we most urgently and earnestly request all amateurs at the present time to refrain from using their transmitting stations except for regular work. In other words, all unnecessary gossip and fooling should be rigidly suspended for the present, particularly the "Q.R.M." nuisance which at best, only serves to irritate our officials, and makes their work harder. If amateurs do not voluntarily stop such annoyance the Government will certainly prohibit the use of all privately owned radio outfits.

These are no times to use the ether for a lot of nonsense; we all wish to help our country as much as we possibly can until normal conditions are restored again.

Always remember, that our Government has granted the radio amateurs more powers than any other country in the world, and in times of stress, it is up to the amateurs to show of what stuff they are made by cooperating with our officials to the fullest extent of their powers.

THE EDITOR.