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Jonathan Reed Winkler, **NEXUS: Strategic Communication and American Security in World War I**. Cambridge, MA : Harvard University Press, 2008. 347 pp. 6 maps; 3 charts.

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Jonathan Winkler's impressive book is a highly readable study that mines numerous archival collections in the U.S. and Great Britain to explore uncharted territory at the intersection of military, diplomatic, and technological history. Winkler shows how participation in the Great War forced American military and political leaders – chief among them Woodrow Wilson, to confront the crucial role of global communications.

In their attempts to mobilize and project American military power on the Western Front, American leaders were alarmed to discover that they were dependent on a global communications network that was not only inadequate to their needs, but was also under British control. In the years following the Armistice, some of these leaders tried to forge national policies designed to strengthen America's strategic communications. Winkler argues persuasively that these attempts failed to effectively harness and coordinate military, political, and commercial interests.

Winkler begins with the state of global communications on the eve of the Great War. In 1914, Britannia ruled not only the waves, but the telegraph cables beneath them. Strategic, imperial, and entrepreneurial interests, combined with technological innovation and engineering expertise, had enabled Great Britain to dominate the undersea cable industry. British cable firms, integrated under the Eastern Telegraph Company, controlled

an undersea network with links to the European continent, North America, Africa, India , Australia , New Zealand , and the Far East . The United States also had an international cable network, based on thirteen cables, but all these cables ran through Canada and were thus also under British control. Up to 1914, Germany alone had attempted to challenge British control, laying its own global network of undersea telegraph cables. In the last years leading up to the war, Germany had also begun an ambitious system of long distance radio communications based on high-power stations in Germany , West Africa, and New Jersey . Establishment of additional high-power stations around the globe was interrupted by military hostilities that quickly dealt fatal blows to Germany 's networks. In the first week of the war, a British naval crew cut the five Atlantic cables that linked Germany to Spain and hence to the United States and the rest of the world. By late August, the British had also destroyed or incapacitated Germany 's high-power radio stations in Africa and in the Far East .

Although the British now controlled virtually all international cable networks, German officials soon found ways to "run the cable blockade," as Winkler terms it. In Washington , for example, President Wilson gave the German ambassador the privilege of sending and receiving messages under U.S. diplomatic cover. But British Admiralty had set up an intelligence and decryption office (Room 40) to decode and analyze cable traffic (including American diplomatic dispatches). In January, 1917, cryptographers in Room 40 decoded a German diplomatic message sent under American diplomatic cover, and divulged its contents to the American government. This was the notorious Zimmermann Telegram, which provided Wilson and his pro-war allies with the clinching argument for war with Germany .

Even before the war ended, the United States began efforts to redress the weakness of its global communications. State Department officials pressured South American governments to grant concessions for a U.S. controlled cable network linking major countries in Latin America . This initiative led to a sharp commercial fight between American and British cable firms, which the American firm won. Despite this apparent success, the United States had neither a cable-production industry, nor access to the

necessary raw materials, and therefore remained dependent on the British cable industry. Efforts to improve cable networks in the Pacific met with even less success.

On the surface, the radio sector seemed more prepared to handle the communication challenges of America's new global role. Maintained and operated by the U.S. Navy during the war, the American radio network in 1918 was second to none in the world. But as Winkler clearly demonstrates, the American advantage was more apparent than real. Commander Stanford Hooper, who headed naval radio development, believed that the technological and capital resources of American business were essential to developing a radio network capable of serving American strategic needs. Once mobilized, these resources could be effectively channeled through a single firm that would serve American strategic interests as well as the interests of its major stockholders.

To this end, the Radio Corporation of America (RCA), owned by General Electric, came into existence in 1919. RCA did not, however, live up to the hopes of Commander Hooper and other strategic planners who had helped bring it into existence. RCA's primary interest – reaping the profits from commercial radio, were often at odds with the goals of the military officers and government officials responsible for strategic communications.

In his conclusion, Winkler asks “Why, then with its tremendous industrial power, financial resources, and involvement in world affairs, did the United States not sustain the wartime momentum and take a predominant position in global communications commensurate with its newfound role?” (p. 271) The author finds the answers in organizational failure, divergence of strategic and commercial interests, and, finally, geographic problems, specifically the huge distances that had to be linked by cable and radio.

All this is quite valid, but the development of a strategic communications network required first of all a broad consensus on the part of America's power elite, and this consensus could not exist given the ambivalent attitude of the American elite towards the

projection of American power in the world. While giving lip-service to the global expansion of American military power, American elites have often proven less willing to accept the burdens (financial or otherwise) that were and are implicit in this expansion. In discussing the divergence of military and commercial interests, Winkler touches on one aspect of this ambivalence, but does not integrate elite attitudes into his analysis. Given the skills he has brought to this study, one hopes that he will take up this problem in a future work.



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