

# Purifying the World: Americans and International Sexual Reform, 1865-1933

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In the wake of the United States Civil War, a transatlantic network of former abolitionists launched a new movement that made sex – hitherto the jurisdiction of the family and the local community – into an international political issue, intimately linked to imperialism, militarism, immigration, labor, temperance, and women’s rights. My dissertation, “Purifying the World: Americans and International Sexual Reform, 1865-1933,” examines American reformers who saw sexuality as the key international humanitarian and political issue of their day. My project tracks this reform movement from its beginning – with the work of American abolitionists and missionaries who turned their attention to state-regulated prostitution in the British Empire after the Civil War – to its denouement in the activities of interwar Americans who traveled the globe investigating the "traffic in women" for the League of Nations. For over a half-century, American reformers participated in pitched international debates about how to address sexual wrongs. As they did so, they wove together religious, medical, and legal discourses in ways that made sexual matters the provenance of international politics.

Building on the recent scholarly recognition that American internationalism relied heavily on the actions of private citizens and foundations during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, I argue that Americans played decisive roles in shaping the moral and legal frameworks that eventually came to govern international policy about sexual issues such as the age of sexual consent, sex trafficking, and prostitution.<sup>1</sup> My dissertation traces how the movement for sexual reform shifted from its religious origins to a reliance on medical and social-scientific frameworks, epitomized by numerous quantitative and qualitative investigations, many of which were funded by John D. Rockefeller Jr. and the Rockefeller Foundation. As it tells this important story, my project makes two central contributions to ongoing debates about sexuality and politics. First, it will reshape scholarly understanding of the global politicization of sexuality by highlighting the influence of Americans’ international travel and activism on debates about sexual issues. Second, my research stresses the

centrality of religious faith for the reformers of the era, including those who stressed their scientific methods and credentials. I argue that a range of international projects focused on sexual issues were united by a particularly American vision of modernist Protestant Christianity, one in which creating healthy male and female bodies and minds was essential for molding men and women capable of citizenship in a democracy.

Through his financial and organizational contributions, John D. Rockefeller Jr. played a crucial role in the early twentieth century social hygiene movement, seeking to formulate and put into place what he viewed as scientifically sound and morally correct policy on issues like venereal disease, prostitution, and sexual continence.<sup>2</sup> These issues brought together two of Rockefeller Jr.'s significant interests: public health and its scientific management, and social and religious morality. Materials at the Rockefeller Archive Center help to chart the growing importance of Rockefeller, Jr., and Rockefeller Foundation personnel and money in shaping both the American and international social hygiene movement and its policy recommendations.

John D. Rockefeller Jr. had initially become involved in efforts to reform sexual problems through his work fighting “white slavery.” In the first decade of the twentieth century, many Americans had joined an international crusade against a pressing wrong that they believed was widespread, the traffic in women. “White slavery” had two main connotations: the transportation of white European women to the U.S. for the purpose of prostitution, and the kidnapping of white native-born American women by foreign or non-white men to be held in brothels. In 1910, Rockefeller was appointed as the foreman of a grand jury that investigated “white slavery” in New York City, a position that helped to launch his social reform career.<sup>3</sup>

After a year’s investigation, the grand jury reported that no organized system of white slavery existed. They did, however, argue that the widespread and visible

presence of prostitution in the city, as well as the power that pimps exerted over women, constituted a pressing threat to health and morality. Emphasizing the importance of social research and scientific expertise, the Rockefeller grand jury recommended more raids on the city's red light district, sex education curriculum in the schools, and a study of the laws related to prostitution in both Europe and the U.S. Given the political climate of New York City, however, these recommendations were never adopted. Frustrated by the inability of local government to act on the problem, Rockefeller, Jr. established a new branch of philanthropic effort, the Bureau of Social Hygiene (BSH), which would bring together scientifically minded experts who could exert influence at the federal and even international level. He also orchestrated the merger of other organizations focused on sexual vice and sexual morality, helping to create the American Social Hygiene Association (ASHA), an endeavor that he also funded.

Although Rockefeller, Jr. wanted to work outside of municipal politics, he saw the federal government as an important ally in his efforts. Through the BSH and ASHA, Rockefeller, Jr. provided financial support for the development of military social hygiene policy and many wartime social hygiene efforts, all of which were developed with an emphasis on social scientific investigation and medical science. In 1916, American troops massed on the Mexican border in response to raids conducted by Pancho Villa. Within months, news of widespread prostitution and drunkenness near the military camps reached leaders of ASHA, the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA), and the Rockefeller Foundation. Concerned, they sent Raymond B. Fosdick to investigate. Fosdick was a social reformer and researcher who had previously conducted an investigation into policing in Europe for the BSH. During a five-week investigation, Fosdick confirmed that conditions among troops were worse than expected, with prostitution tolerated and even encouraged by commanding officers. Moreover, the rates of venereal disease were high, hurting both the health and the morale of the troops.<sup>4</sup>

On the eve of the U.S.'s entrance into the First World War, the U.S. military became a significant site for new policies to be tested and spread, policies that Rockefeller, Jr. and other reformers believed could remake the American moral and sexual landscape. Members of the social reform community viewed the United States' entrance into the First World War with both trepidation and excitement. Innocent American men, they worried, would face dangers on and off the battlefield. Moral dangers in France – particularly the temptations of liquor and prostitution – struck fear into the hearts of seasoned reformers, military men, and the American public alike. Yet at the same time, the war provided an opportunity for new kinds of social experiments and new forms of social organization.

Fosdick's reports, along with pressure from the reform community, led Secretary of War Newton Baker to create the Commission on Training Camp Activities (CTCA), a military commission run and staffed largely by men who worked for ASHA and the BSH, with hundreds of thousands of dollars of funding from the Rockefeller Foundation.<sup>5</sup> Fosdick served as its chairman. The CTCA marked the emergence of a powerful public-private social hygiene partnership, though one that was controversial, as documents in the RAC illustrate. A letter between a CTCA official and the President of the Rockefeller Foundation warns that General William C. Gorgas, Surgeon General of the U.S. Army, "does not wish the Social Hygiene Association to permit it to be generally known that gifts of this kind are being directly and fully applied to government activities." Gorgas did, however, emphasize that he was "deeply appreciative of this cooperation and assures you of the value of the measures which may be taken both inside and outside the Army, for the control of the venereal disease."<sup>6</sup>

These "measures" that the CTCA put into place to control venereal disease and prostitution were far-reaching, ranging from sex education and opportunities for wholesome recreation, to the arrest and internment of women suspected of selling sex within a ten mile radius of a military encampment. Through the

CTCA's work, brothels were placed "out of bounds" for American soldiers, a policy that reversed the U.S. military's previous toleration of prostitution and represented a break with the policies of the Allies and Central Powers. Correspondence in the RAC provides insight into the development of these policies, as well as their focus on controlling the bodies of women. Rockefeller Foundation secretary Edwin Embree, for example, suggested the "internment of diseased men and women for the duration of the war.... If it were possible to have such legislation adopted it would certainly simplify the problem of dealing particularly with women and might prove a great help from a standpoint of physical fitness of the soldier and public health."<sup>7</sup> While that particularly extreme policy was never adopted, the letter illustrates the social reform community's growing focus on women as disease vectors. This focus on women was not limited to the U.S. The 1919 budget for the YMCA in France showed an allocation of \$100,000 to the Union Chretienne de[s] Jeunes Filles for work with young women in French cities where American soldiers were located, in an effort to keep the women away from the soldiers.<sup>8</sup>

In addition to financing CTCA programs, Rockefeller, Jr. had a powerful vision of what he wanted them to accomplish, one that was far reaching. Many in the military, most notably General Pershing, supported efforts to suppress prostitution, keep men sexually continent, and improve morality as a means to prevent venereal disease and maintain the health and morale of troops. The personnel of the CTCA, BSH, and ASHA, however, believed that wartime policy would translate to a sexually moral citizenry in peacetime, both in the U.S. and across the Atlantic. Two months after the U.S. entered the War, Rockefeller, Jr. reflected on the Rockefeller Foundation's financing of the CTCA, BSH, and ASHA, stating "I believe that the Foundation can make no more important contribution to the well-being of this country than through the cordial support of the work of these several important organizations."<sup>9</sup> For Rockefeller, Jr. and many other reformers, the sexual morality and fitness of American troops was tied to that of their allies. Noted Rockefeller, Jr., "it is obvious that in order to

protect the morals of our troops in France, the whole standard of morality of the French and English and Canadian troops there will have to be raised and the same safeguards thrown about all.”<sup>10</sup> Although the war was awful, Rockefeller, Jr. also saw it as “an opportunity for the United States to advance the standard of morality in the countries of the Allies not only among the men of the armies, but throughout these countries at large, such as under ordinary circumstances we could hardly have expected for years to come.”<sup>11</sup>

Sources at the Rockefeller Archive Center provided invaluable insight into the motivations and goals of Rockefeller, Jr., the organizations he funded, and the people who ran them. They illuminate the disagreements and contestations over particular programs and how they were to be carried out, as well as how they were to be presented to the public. Research at the RAC has allowed me to chart the professionalization and masculinization of the previously female and voluntary reform networks in the early twentieth century, as well as the ways in which they intertwined with state power. The Rockefeller Foundation, BSH, ASHA, and CTCA played crucial roles in the development of American sexual politics and policy, which then shaped international policy about sexual issues throughout the twentieth century.

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<sup>1</sup> On Rockefeller philanthropy and public-private partnerships see Judith Sealander, *Private Wealth & Public Life: Foundation Philanthropy and the Reshaping of American Social Policy from the Progressive Era to the New Deal* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997). On the role of American private citizens in international politics, see Daniel Gorman, *The Emergence of International Society in the 1920s* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

<sup>2</sup> For general histories of the social purity and social hygiene movement see David J. Pivar, *Purity Crusade: Sexual Morality and Social Control, 1868-1900* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1973); David J. Pivar, *Purity and Hygiene: Women, Prostitution, and the “American Plan,” 1900-1930* (Greenwood Press, 2002).

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<sup>3</sup> On “white slavery” in the U.S. see Christopher Diffie, “Sex and the City: The White Slavery Scare and Social Governance in the Progressive Era,” *American Quarterly* 57, no. 2 (2005): 411–37; Frederick K. Grittner, *White Slavery: Myth, Ideology, and American Law* (Garland Pub., 1990); Jessica R. Pliley, *Policing Sexuality: The Mann Act and the Making of the FBI* (Harvard University Press, 2014), Chapter 1–3; Grace Peña Delgado, “Border Control and Sexual Policing: White Slavery and Prostitution Along the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands, 1903-1910,” *Western Historical Quarterly* 43, no. 2 (Summer 2012): 157–78.

<sup>4</sup> “Fosdick Makes Border Inquiry: Former Commissioner of Accounts Back from Secret Mission in Texas,” *New - York Tribune (1911-1922)*, August 13, 1916; Max Joseph Exner, “Prostitution in Its Relation to the Army on the Mexican Border,” *Journal of Social Hygiene* 3, no. 2 (April 1917): 205–20; Donald Smythe, “Venereal Disease: The AEF’s Experience,” *Prologue* 9 (Summer 1977).

<sup>5</sup> On the CTCA see Nancy K. Bristow, *Making Men Moral: Social Engineering During the Great War* (NYU Press, 1997); Allan M. Brandt, *No Magic Bullet : A Social History of Venereal Disease in the United States Since 1880* (Oxford University Press, 1985), Chapter 2, 3.

<sup>6</sup> William F. Snow to George E. Vincent (nd), Folder 740, Box 79, Series 100.N, International – War Relief, RG 1.1, Projects, Rockefeller Foundation Records, Rockefeller Archive Center.

<sup>7</sup> Edwin Embree to Raymond Fosdick, April 6, 1918, Folder 740, Box 79, Series 100.N, International – War Relief, RG 1.1, Projects, Rockefeller Foundation Records, Rockefeller Archive Center.

<sup>8</sup> YMCA in France Budget, 1919, Folder 751, Box 80, Series 100.N, International – War Relief, RG 1.1, Projects, Rockefeller Foundation Records, Rockefeller Archive Center. For more on policy focused on women, see, for example, Raymond Fosdick to George E. Vincent, July 27, 1917, Folder 751, Box 80, Series 100.N, International – War Relief, RG 1.1, Projects, Rockefeller Foundation Records, Rockefeller Archive Center.

<sup>9</sup> John D. Rockefeller, Jr. to George E. Vincent, July 14, 1917, Folder 739, Box 79, Series 100.N, International – War Relief, RG 1.1, Projects, Rockefeller Foundation Records, Rockefeller Archive Center. For more on the far-reaching effects Rockefeller, Jr. and others hoped for see, for example, John D. Rockefeller, Jr. to George E. Vincent, July 30, 1917 Folder 749, Box 80, Series 100.N, International – War Relief, RG 1.1, Projects, Rockefeller Foundation Records, Rockefeller Archive Center; Max J. Exner to John D. Rockefeller, Jr., June 23, 1917, Folder 749, Box 80, Series 100.N, International – War Relief, RG 1.1, Projects, Rockefeller Foundation Records, Rockefeller Archive Center.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*