The "Wartime Congress" of 1945

The national media has made many comparisons between the American mobilization for World War II and measures taken to stop the spread of the novel coronavirus. Another parallel may be found in the AOA’s cancellation of Optometry’s Meeting in 2020. This is only the second time in history the convention has been called off in defense of the common good—the first time was 75 years ago in 1945.1

At the outset of the war, a new agency, the U.S. Office of Defense Transportation (ODT), was formed to “assure maximum utilisation of the domestic transportation facilities…for the successful prosecution of the war.”2 The ODT placed restrictions on “non-essential travel” so the roads would be clear for military vehicles and so resources such as gas and tire rubber were preserved for the war effort.

Then as now, the guidelines were voluntary, enforced mainly through a propaganda campaign, and they were not always well-received. The country was still recovering from the Great Depression, and many feared preventing leisure travel would cause the economy to backslide. Another complaint came from religious leaders who bristled at the government dictating the size of church gatherings.3

In January of 1945, the ODT’s Committee on Conventions asked organizations to keep meeting attendance under 50.4 The AOA was happy to do its patriotic duty and in May told members: “optometry…has again as always-come through and gladly accepts these restrictions in true patriotic spirit.”

Thus the "Wartime Congress" of 1945 was born. The AOA Bylaws required that the House of Delegates meet each year, so the 48th Congress was held June 24-27, 1945 in Cincinnati, OH with 49 participants, many acting as proxies for state delegates. Ironically, the Americans won the last battle of the war on June 21, just days before the meeting. Perhaps by the end of June 2020, we too will be able to declare “victory” in the war against COVID-19, thanks to the willingness of all Americans to make similar sacrifices.

References

The 48th Annual AOA Congress Banquet, June 26, 1945 at the Hotel Gibson. Notice the arrangement of the tables in a “V” formation to recall the “V for Victory Campaign.” The striped tablecloths and photographer’s perspective technique accentuated effect. This image (2016. IMG.1048) is curated by The Archives & Museum of Optometry., St. Louis, MO.

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