

PROPAGANDA POSTERS OF WWII



When you think of the weapons of WWII, what comes to mind? Planes, tanks, money? Bullets, machine-guns, and grenade launchers? Yes, all of these were important tools in the effort to win the war. But so was information. In this case, government issued information. Over the course of the war the U.S. government waged a constant battle for the hearts and minds of the public. Persuading Americans to support the war effort became a wartime industry, just as important as producing bullets and planes. The U.S. government produced posters, pamphlets, newsreels, radio shows, and movies—all designed to create a public that was 100% behind the war effort.

In 1942 the Office of War Information (OWI) was created to both craft and disseminate the government's message. This propaganda campaign included specific goals and strategies. Artists, filmmakers, and intellectuals were recruited to take the government's agenda (objectives) and turn it into a propaganda campaign. This included posters found across America—from railway stations to post offices, from schools to apartment buildings.

During WWII the objectives of the U.S. government for the propaganda campaign were recruitment, financing the war effort, unifying the public behind the war effort and eliminating dissent of all kinds, resource conservation, and factory production of war materials. The most common objectives/ themes found in the posters were the consequences of careless talk, conservation, civil defense, war bonds, victory gardens, "women power", and anti-German and Japanese scenarios. It was imperative to have the American people behind the war effort. Victory over the Axis was not a given, and certainly would not be without the whole-hearted support of all men, women, and children.

To meet the government's objectives the OWI (Office of War Information) used common propaganda tools (posters, radio, movies, etc.) and specific types of propaganda. The most common types used were fear, the bandwagon, name-calling, euphemism, glittering generalities, transfer, and the testimonial.

The posters pulled at emotions—both positive and negative. They used words as ammunition. "When you ride alone, you ride with Hitler." "Loose lips might sink ships." Messages made the war personal—you can make a difference, the soldiers are counting on you.

Some posters also tapped into people's patriotic spirit— They were bright and happy, colorful and positive. Their key objective was to get Americans to join the war effort. The posters built morale. They showed Americans and her Allies in positive and upbeat situations. They were designed to keep Americans hopeful, instilling a feeling of pride in the country, and to build and sustain support for the war effort.

Other posters showed the dark side of war. They were filled with shocking images of what had happened to other countries and what could still happen in America if everyone did not do their part. The posters illustrated the reality of what would happen if the Allies did not prevail. Images included dead bodies, bloodshed, tombstones, and the enemy shown as inhuman. The posters aroused feelings of fear, hate, and suspicion and united the American people against their common enemy.

"The principal battleground of the war is not the South Pacific. It is not the Middle East. It is not England, or Norway, or the Russian Steppes. It is American opinion."

—Archibald MacLeish, Director of the Office of Facts and Figures,
forerunner of the Office of War Administration

"The function of the war poster is to make coherent and acceptable a basically incoherent and irrational ordeal of killing, suffering, and destruction that violate every accepted principle of morality and decent living."

—O.W. Riegel, propaganda analyst for the Office of War Information

Types of Propaganda

The purpose of propaganda is to systematically promote particular ideas, doctrines, or practices.

Common types of propaganda used during WWII

Name- Calling—the use of derogatory or negative words. It connects a person or a thing to a negative image or symbol. In this technique it is hoped that the audience will accept the connection without investigating the evidence.

Example: Fascist, terrorist, cowardly, radical (during WWII using Jap for Japanese).

Glittering Generalities—these are virtue words (good, democracy, religious, motherhood) for which we have deep seeded ideas. Words we believe in, live by, and are ready to fight for. This is dangerous because these words mean different things to different people. Propagandists will use these words to get people to choose a side or fight a war but their definition of the word may not be the same as yours. It is name-calling in reverse. Instead of wanting you to reject someone because of something negative they say, they want you to accept and support something because of what you support and believe in.

Example: If you are patriotic, you will fight in this war. Good people do this (fill in) and during WWII *good* mothers can and scrap.

Euphemism—this is used when propagandists make something awful or negative more palatable. Words that are bland or neutral are often used.

Example: civilian deaths are “collateral damage,” lying is “fabricating,” and murder is “liquidation,” and during WWII (and other times of war) death is “loss.”

Transfer—when the propagandist transfers the importance, power, or approval of something we respect and accept to something else they wish us to accept and respect. Symbols are often used.

Example: a picture of a cross or other religious symbol next to a politician, “science based” and during WWII they often used Uncle Sam in posters to show that something was “American.”

Testimonial—the recommendation or endorsement of something by a person whose opinion is valued (or who is famous). There is nothing wrong with someone qualified recommending someone or something but testimonials are often used in ways that are misleading and unfair.

Example: a doctor selling a medication on television, a famous singer endorsing a presidential candidate and during WWII President Roosevelt telling Americans to buy War Bonds.

Bandwagon—everyone is doing it and so should you. No one wants to be left out or ignored so people will join or agree when they believe “everyone” is doing it.

Example: peer pressure, joining a religious group or political party, buying a product or service and during WWII posters that said everyone has a Victory Garden, or scraps, or joins up.

Fear—the propagandist warns that something horrible will happen to the group or person if they do not follow a specific course of action. They play on fear and try to get you not to *think*.

Example: if you don't vote for me we will be attacked by our enemy, and during WWII posters that said if you don't conserve bacon fat, soldiers will die.