Promoting Democracy: Mobilizing a Nation Through War Posters

Dave Wilson and James L. Knutson
INTRODUCTION

Throughout the history of the United States, some form of poster has been used in promoting democracy. The poster served to motivate the need for enlistment and to call upon every citizen to make it their private mission to fight the war from the home front. Reproduced at times in the millions, the poster proved to be an effective and economical method for getting the message out to the public. The mission was to display as many posters as possible in all public places, both interior and exterior. The message was clear, emotional, and simple.

The poster would vary in size from approximately 7” by 10” to 40” by 60,” and their design was democratic. Designers were usually urged to incorporate red, white and blue wherever possible. Shortly after the onset of World War II, the primary theme of war posters shifted from “defense” towards “victory.” The posters movement also united the talents of many fine illustrators and designers with the world of advertising, such as the poster by Norman Rockwell which depicts soldiers from 1812 to 1943.

This project is devoted to posters created during the 20th century to the present and covers a variety of issues dealing with both war and peacetime activities. In their interpretation, the researchers provide commentary on various posters for their aesthetic, democratic message, and propaganda. They will also identify the influences the posters had on everyday mass media, such as advertising illustration and movie poster design.

Due to the substantial number of posters in the Army and Navy archives and reproductions from various other sources, the researchers of this project feel this collection is an ample sampling. This project is also designed to display in collaboration with the researchers’ previous project “Rendering Democracy”, which features 36 two-dimensional combat artworks.

This exhibition is another example of the use of visual art for the promotion of democracy.
I WANT YOU FOR U.S. ARMY
NEAREST RECRUITING STATION
Probably the most recognized images from all the war posters features the classic image of Uncle Sam created by James Montgomery Flagg, “I Want You for the U.S. Army.” During the research, we found that this image has been used in many different forms over the years for recruitment, the solicitation of funds and other forms of advertising, both combat and non-combat alike. From its conception to contemporary time, “Uncle Sam” has been and is still being used both in and out of the original context. It is very similar to the use of the 1930 painting “American Gothic” by Grant Wood. The painting depicts an aging Iowa farmer with a pitchfork and his unmarried daughter standing in front of their Victorian style farmhouse. As a result of being frequently recycled for parody over the years, both “Uncle Sam” and “American Gothic” have become recognizable American icons and continue to have an impact on America’s image.
NAVY!
Uncle Sam is calling YOU
ENLIST in the Navy!
Recruiting Station.

"I WANT YOU IN THE NAVY
and I WANT YOU NOW"
Fight! Let's Go! Join the NAVY.
JOIN THE NAVY
THE SERVICE FOR FIGHTING MEN
KEEP 'EM FLYING!

Air Crews Are Vital For Victory

Young men, 18 to 26 inclusive, can be aviation cadets for air crew training as bombardiers, navigators and pilots.

Apply at any U. S. Army recruiting and induction station
IT'S A WOMAN'S WAR TOO!

JOIN THE WAVES
YOUR COUNTRY NEEDS YOU NOW

Apply to your nearest
NAVY RECRUITING STATION OR OFFICE OF NAVAL OFFICER PROCUREMENT
TRAVEL WITH THE U.S. ARMY
No More Men Are Needed for the Watch on the Rhine, but 26,000 Men Are Wanted to Relieve the Watch on the Rio Grande
THAT'S THE SPOT TO HIT!

ADMIRAL CHESTER W. NIMITZ
COMMANDER IN CHIEF
PACIFIC FLEET

GIVE US THE STUFF AND WE'LL HIT IT!

OFFICIAL NAVY POSTER, UNITED STATES NAVY
HERE'S ONE FOR THE HUN

KEEP ON THE JOB TO "KEEP 'EM FLYING"

...bomproof your toes in safety shoes!
HE'S WATCHING YOU
...we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain...

REMEMBER DEC. 7th!
The Hun — his Mark
Blot it Out with
LIBERTY BONDS
THAT LIBERTY SHALL NOT PERISH FROM THE EARTH
BUY LIBERTY BONDS
FOURTH LIBERTY LOAN
MUST CHILDREN DIE AND MOTHERS PLEAD IN VAIN

Buy More LIBERTY BONDS
MY SOLDIER

Now I lay me down to sleep
I pray the Lord my soul to keep.
God bless my brother gone to war
Across the seas, in France, so far.
Oh, may his fight for Liberty,
Save millions more than little me
From cruel fates or ruthless blast—
And bring him safely home at last.

HOW CAN YOU HELP?

SAVE

BUY WAR STAMPS - KEEP ON BUYING

4% COMPOUNDED QUARTERLY
GIVE WAR BONDS

The Present with a FUTURE
During the process of proposing a poster's design, artists and illustrators were called upon to complete a series of preliminary sketches. For example, the image above left was the preliminary sketch for the poster on the right. Rendered with chalk pastel and charcoal, the sketch was generally smaller in size but proportional in scale to the actual finished poster. What is interesting from an artistic standpoint is the evidence of the creative process and how much of the original sketch was retained. When compared to the finished poster, notice the slight layout modifications for the sake of clarifying the message.
GIVE US LUMBER FOR MORE PT'S

BACK 'EM UP WITH MORE METAL
HAVE YOU REALLY TRIED TO SAVE GAS BY GETTING INTO A CAR CLUB?
...because somebody talked!
if you talk too much

THIS MAN MAY DIE
BE A
Cadet Nurse
THE GIRL WITH A FUTURE
A Lifetime Education FREE
FOR HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATES WHO QUALIFY

For information go to your local hospital or write
U.S. CADET NURSE CORPS
Box 88, New York 8, N.Y.

U.S. PUBLIC HEALTH SERVICE • FEDERAL SECURITY AGENCY
DISTRIBUTED BY COMI
In many earlier war posters, as shown by the popular illustrator Howard Chandler Christy, women are placed into a demeaning position for the sake of recruitment. The illustrations depict a playful, casual female enticing men to enlist. After WWI, women played a more important role in the armed services with their own branches such as the WAVES (Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Services) and the WAC (Women’s Army Corps). The posters then began to recruit women with distinguished illustrations of women in a more serious role.
The recruitment and propaganda posters created by the government even had a strong influence on the advertising world, such as in this 1952 “Chesterfield Cigarettes” ad. Flashy catch phrases, patriotic colors, and posed figures dominate both examples; however, when further comparing the 1940’s WAVES poster with the ad, the military poster seems much more sincere and honest than the cigarette advertisement. It is, after all, “from the report of a well-known research organization.”
As shown in the Vietnam era poster for the Green Berets, the era of the illustrator has passed on to an era of the photographer. However, the contemporary Marine recruitment poster acknowledges the importance of the illustrators by merging the WWII illustration with today’s multi-media technology. We feel that combining the old with the new also acknowledges the impact of the original illustrator’s image.
This recent example of an Army recruitment poster is very much designed in the format of a movie poster - the extreme layout of the action-packed imagery, the design of the type and even the direct relationship to the rated “R” symbol making reference to the U.S. Army Rangers. Just as this poster’s design relates to recent movie posters, it was common during and after WWII for movie studios to design their movie posters similar to those of the U.S. Government.
AMERICA CALLING

REGISTER AT YOUR NEAREST POLICE OR FIRE STATION
BUFFALO COUNCIL OF DEFENSE

Take your place in
Civilian Defense
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