

Every Citizen a Soldier: World War II Posters on the American Home Front

(abridged from *History Now* 14, Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History)

by William L. Bird Jr. and Harry Rubenstein

World War II posters helped to mobilize a nation. Inexpensive, accessible, and ever-present, the poster was an ideal agent for making victory the personal mission of every citizen. Government agencies, businesses, and private organizations issued an array of poster images, linking the military front with the home front and calling upon every American to boost production at work and at home. Deriving their appearance from the fine and commercial arts and expressing the needs and goals of the people who created them, posters conveyed more than simple slogans.

Wartime posters, which addressed every citizen as a combatant in a war of production, united the power of art with the power of advertising. Their message was that the factory and the home were also battlefields. Poster campaigns aimed not only to increase productivity in factories, but to enlarge people's views of their responsibilities in a time of Total War. Government officials incorporated the poster medium into their plans to convert the American economy to all-out war production during the defense emergency of 1941. Plant managers, company artists, paper manufacturers, and others quickly followed suit, creating and posting incentive images that eventually dwarfed the efforts of the government in variety and number.

Those who advocated the use of posters believed they directly reflected the spirit of a community. As one government official put it, "We want to see posters on fences, on the walls of buildings, on village greens, on boards in front of the City Hall and the Post Office, in hotel lobbies, in the windows of vacant stores—not limited to the present neat conventional frames which make them look like advertising, but shouting at people from unexpected places with all the urgency which this war demands." "Ideally," another confirmed, "it should be possible to post [all over] America every night. People should wake up to find a visual message everywhere"...

To control the content and imagery of war messages, the government created the Office of War Information (OWI) in June 1942. Among its responsibilities, the OWI sought to review and approve the design and distribution of government posters... National distribution utilized organizations and trades such as post offices, railroad stations, schools, restaurants, and retail store groups. At the local level, OWI arranged distribution through volunteer defense councils, whose members selected appropriate posting places, established posting routes, ordered posters from supply catalogs, and took the "Poster Pledge." The "Poster Pledge" urged volunteers to "avoid waste," treat posters "as real war ammunition," "never let a poster lie idle," and "make every one count to the fullest extent."

Over time the OWI developed six war information themes for major producers of mass media entertainment:

The Nature of the Enemy—general or detailed descriptions of this enemy, such as, he hates religion, persecutes labor, kills Jews and other minorities, smashes home life, debases women, etc.

The Nature of our Allies—the United Nations theme, our close ties with Britain, Russia, and China, Mexicans and Americans fighting side by side on Bataan and on the battlefronts.

The Need to Work—the countless ways in which Americans must work if we are to win the war, in factories, on ships, in mines, in fields, etc.

The Need to Fight—the need for fearless waging of war on land, sea, and skies, with bullets, bombs, bare hands, if we are to win.

The Need to Sacrifice—the need for Americans to give up all luxuries and devote all spare time to help win the war.

The Americans—what we are fighting for: the four freedoms, the principles of the Atlantic Charter, democracy, and an end to discrimination against races and religions.

Series after series of posters directed employees to get to work, anything less was tantamount to treason. Employers did not necessarily expect their workforce to take all poster slogans literally. Rather, businesses placed these displays at the scene of production to create an atmosphere of unity and urgency. Posters called upon workers to conserve, keep their breaks short, and follow their supervisors' instructions. The main thrust was to convince workers, many of whom participated in the violent labor conflicts of the 1930s, that they were no longer just employees of GM or US Steel, but rather they were Uncle Sam's "production soldiers" on the industrial front line of the war.

The posters did not carry the message that hard work would result in personal or company gain. The motivation was purely patriotic duty. Many posters also played directly on the guilt of those who were not in the military by reminding workers that, if they were not risking their lives on the battlefield, the least they could do was keep their bathroom breaks short.

Posters castigated workers for punching in late, taking long breaks, damaging the company's equipment, and even drinking after work. Artists turned what had been considered common infractions against a company into acts of betrayal, murder, and disloyalty against the nation . . .