

WWII Propaganda

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Prior to the bombing of Pearl Harbor, Americans were extremely reluctant to enter the war overseas. Having just recovered from the economic crises caused by the First World War, the American public felt they needed to concentrate on their own homes. Propagandists, therefore, needed to create documents that would convince Americans it *was* worth their while to enter the war. After the bombing at Pearl Harbor, propaganda became more successful and the focus shifted, as propagandists then strove to convince Americans they had no choice but to enter the war, since it was now on American soil. Through their emotional appeals to the American public, propagandists created effective, though seemingly overly-dramatic, images to further the American cause.

In 1942, the year following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, a propaganda leaflet created by Lawrence B. Smith for the U.S. Treasury Department began to circulate; it featured children being shadowed by a swastika. In the drawing, three children, two boys, and one girl are playing in the grass. They appear to be quite patriotic, as one of the boys is waving an American flag and wearing a newspaper hat. The oldest boy is holding a toy plane, reminiscent of those flown by the military during the war. Instead of appearing playful and happy, however, these children look distressed and fearful because the shadow of a large swastika looms over them. The bottom of the picture reads, "Don't let that shadow touch them. Buy war bonds" (Smith). As the foregoing description demonstrates, Smith's leaflet is an excellent example of the intentions of these propagandists.

First, the use of children in the leaflet automatically gains the sympathy of the American public. Children are pure and wholesome, making them the least deserving of the violence of war. Using children as victims cuts straight to the heart of the viewer, causing him to pay more attention than if the characters were adults. Additionally, the style of the artwork creates a sympathetic tone for the viewer. It is reminiscent of the simple pictures which many people had hanging in their homes during this time period. Because both the colors and the children's faces are gentle, a striking contrast is created between the softness of the innocent children's faces and the harshness of the large, black swastika. Also, the positioning of the swastika adds to the tension of the leaflet. Namely, the children are located so that, while the swastika does not touch them, it does touch the little girl's doll; this suggests that her corruption is imminent, and the swastika's influence will proceed from her to the next child, until it has possessed them all.

Through his production of this overly dramatic message, the propagandist was desperately trying to instill fear into the hearts of American citizens by raping their senses and causing striking emotional reactions. While it seems unnecessary to the modern observer for the message to be so vivid when the action desired is simply the purchase of war bonds, it was through these purchases that the American government was financing its side of the war. To explain, by buying war bonds, the American public was removing currency from circulation and allowing the government to use it instead. The overall message of this leaflet—buy war bonds before the Nazi party corrupts your children—is just one of many harsh implications perpetuated by propagandists during WWII.

A similar leaflet was created by G.K. Odell and featured a mother holding a child, while the dark hands of the Nazis and the Japanese reach for them. The background of the picture is a gentle blue, contrasting with the pinkish, white colors used for the woman and her child; these

shades suggest the traditional American colors of red, white, and blue, thereby making the source of this material unquestionable. Moreover, because the woman and her baby are rosy cheeked with blond hair, they seem to bear an all-American quality. In addition to the patriotic significance of this coloring, the image also is reminiscent of the Gerber baby. The Gerber baby is a trademark with whom nearly any American could readily identify and sympathize.

Therefore, not only does the viewer feel compassion for this woman and her child simply *because* they are a woman and a child, but he also associates them with an American icon. Any attack on this representation of American innocence and values strikes hard at the emotions of the average American viewer, and two black hands at the corners of the picture appear to be doing just this. Also, each hand bears a swastika to symbolize the Nazis and the colors of the Japanese flag. The fingernails on these black hands are long and are reminiscent of Nosferatu, the subject of one of the first horror figures introduced to the public through film.

Like the first leaflet, this picture communicates the desire of the propagandist for the American public to buy war bonds. In this picture, however, they are called “victory bonds,” which communicates an additional meaning. In contrast to the word “war,” which suggests that the citizens still are in the middle of a war that is being won by neither side, the word “victory” indicates that the United States has taken charge and is on the offensive. This impression leaves the viewer feeling as though his efforts will not be in vain. It also makes him feel as though he is aiding in the success of his country.

One of the most famous leaflets promoting war bonds is the painting created by Norman Rockwell for the *Saturday Evening Post*, featuring a soldier returning home to his family. This soldier’s home appears to be a building located in a larger city, as opposed to a suburb. A line of laundry is hanging outside of the building, which conveys a “homey” feel. The soldier’s back is

turned to the viewer so that he can see his family members running to him, arms outstretched. At the top of the leaflet, written in blue and white, is, “Hasten the homecoming” (Rockwell). At the bottom are the words, “Buy victory bonds” (Rockwell). This image suggests that if the average American citizen increases the amount of war bonds he purchases, loved ones who have been overseas will greet him soon. By appealing to emotions held by the public, such as loneliness and yearning, propagandists increased war bond sales and aided in funding the war.

In addition to sending messages promoting the purchase of war bonds, WWII propagandists also sought to instigate conservation among American citizens. In a leaflet created by Weimer Pursell in 1943, a man is riding in his convertible. It appears he is traveling either to or from work, as he wears a business suit. Though he seems to be traveling alone, he actually is accompanied by an apparition-like figure shaped like Adolph Hitler. Accompanying the picture are the words, “When you ride alone you ride with Hitler! Join a car sharing club today!” (Pursell). This picture insinuates that the act of wasting fuel by riding alone aids Hitler’s war effort instead of America’s. The underlying message seems to be, “if you are using fuel so selfishly, you are stealing fuel from America and giving it to the Nazis.” Though the message is not without merit, it is presented extremely dramatically and causes one to wonder whether it was as laughable in the 1940s as it is today.

A poster that more accurately presents this type of message without such dramatic flair was created by Vanderlaan for the Douglas Aircraft Company. Contrasting sharply to a white piece of paper is a red background. On this paper are various office supplies, which are arranged to create an image of Hitler’s face. The leaflet says, “Waste helps the enemy. Conserve material” (Vanderlaan). The image gives the appearance of a silly cartoon, yet conveys its message with a seriousness that makes the leaflet more successful than Pursell’s image. Presented as a cartoon-

like poster, his leaflet attracts the average person's eye because cartoons give the impression of being more interesting and easier to understand than a page full of text. Through its straightforwardness, Vanderlaan's leaflet clearly sends its serious message to the viewer without being ridiculous.

In addition to promoting conservation among American citizens, propagandists also used leaflets to prompt silence in the country. For instance, there was much propaganda suggesting that loose lips would lose the war for America. One of the most striking of these posters features the sad face of a dog pining for its owner. Behind the floppy-eared puppy is a banner signifying the death of a soldier. Below the banner are the words, ". . . because somebody talked" (Wesley). This message suggests that someone's lack of restraint caused this dog's owner to die. While propagandists had already learned that the use of innocent women and children was an effective way to stimulate the sympathies of their audience, they realized animals could be considered even more innocent than either a woman or a child. Furthermore, because animals depend on their human masters to care for them, the leaflet suggests that this dog no longer has anyone to care for it.

Another method used by propagandists was racism, with many posters depicting the Germans and the Japanese in ways that perpetuated the commonly-held stereotypes of that time. For example, most Germans were presented with a Hitler-like moustache. The Japanese were often yellowish in color with squinty eyes and buckteeth. The purpose for using this method was to prevent Americans from seeing the opposing side as individuals and was particularly successful in a leaflet concerning the Japanese. This orange poster shows a Japanese soldier thrusting his gun into the face of an American soldier. Next to this image is a newspaper headline reading, "3200 Yank Prisoners Killed by Jap Torture in Philippines, Cruel 'March of Death'

Described” (*What Are You Going To Do*). The poster asks the viewer, “What are you going to do about it?” (*What Are You Going To Do*). It also instructs them to “Stay on the job until every murdering Jap is wiped out!” (*What Are You Going To Do*). This message suggests that all of the Japanese are murderers, as opposed to followers of the fascist regime in power at the time. While it may seem tasteless and intolerant to the modern viewer, this leaflet would have been effective at the time of its creation. Specifically, it played into the commonly-held stereotypes of most Americans. This likely led the viewer to feel comradeship with his fellow Americans, as if they were united against a common cause.

A final method used by propagandists during WWII was the suggestion of sacrifice on the part of U.S. soldiers. One such leaflet presents this message in a graphic nature, obviously hoping to shock the viewer into paying attention. In the leaflet, a dead soldier is slumped over a barb-wire fence. The leaflet reads, “You talk of sacrifice . . . he knew the meaning of sacrifice!” (*You Talk of Sacrifice*). The intention of this illustration is to demonstrate to the American public that the sacrifices they make at home are nothing compared to the lives being sacrificed on the battlefield. Namely, Americans then may have felt repressed by the current lack of luxuries, as they were constantly being told to conserve, buy war bonds, and support the cause of the war. Being so far removed from the lives they had known before the war likely caused Americans to feel as though they were sacrificing greatly for their country, but not being adequately rewarded for their efforts. Therefore, this poster sought to create feelings of guilt in those who felt doubtful. Propagandists accurately surmised that guilty people would be more likely to bend to their will, whether it be to buy more war bonds or conserve valuable supplies.

Overall, propagandists of WWII accurately gauged the feelings of the American public and used their estimations to instigate the actions they desired from people in the United States.

By exploiting Americans' feelings of loneliness, defensiveness, and helplessness, propagandists achieved their desired results. While some of the messages presented likely seem melodramatic and, at times, even a bit ridiculous, the efforts of the propagandists were successful. Through their suggestions that Americans could pay for the war, save their country and its soldier, and even bring a soldier home, propagandists took advantage of people's raw emotions for the good of their country.

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