



The Changing Face of Women

Examining Propaganda and Public Opinion from WWII

A Lesson from
the Education Department

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American women played a vital role in the Allies victory in WWII. More than 400,000 served in the military and millions worked in defense industries on the Home Front. WWII gave women new opportunities for work and independence. Some people viewed these changes as positive, some as negative. Many people were ambivalent about the social changes that effected women during the war. This ambivalence can be explored in contemporary images of women from that era.

OBJECTIVE: Students will learn about the social expectations brought about by women entering the workforce during WWII by analyzing portrayals of women in wartime propaganda.

GRADE LEVEL: 7-12

STANDARDS: History Thinking Standard 4—the student interrogates historical data by uncovering the social, political, and economic context in which it was created. Historical Thinking Standard 5—the student identifies issues and problems in the past and analyzes the interests, values, perspectives, and points of view of those involved in the situation.

Content Era 8 (1929-1945) Standard 3C—the student understands the effects of World War II at home and can analyze the effects of World War II on gender roles and the American family.

TIME REQUIREMENT: One to two class periods.

DIRECTIONS:

1. Present a brief lesson on women's experiences of WWII. Included in the lesson is a Fact Sheet on American women in WWII that is helpful. Focus on the fact that large numbers of women went to work to increase war production. Ask students what social conflicts this may have caused. Discuss propaganda. Make sure students understand what propaganda is and how it specifically worked during WWII. There is a definition on the Rosie the Riveter page that is very clear.
2. Pass out copies of the two images of Rosie the Riveter. Explain what a riveter is: a person who bonds two pieces of metal together with a nail-like bolt. Ships, planes, and other wartime vehicles were constructed with rivets. Students may either answer the questions individually or as pairs on a separate sheet of paper, or you may hold a group discussion using the questions. Remind students to pay close attention to details when analyzing propaganda posters.
3. If students answer questions on their own, end the class with a class discussion. Discuss each question as a group.

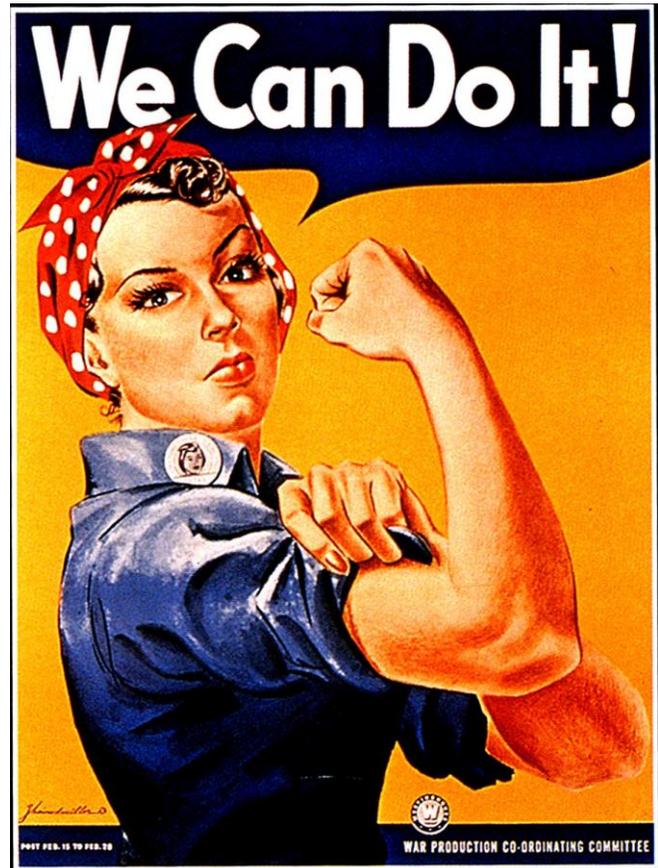
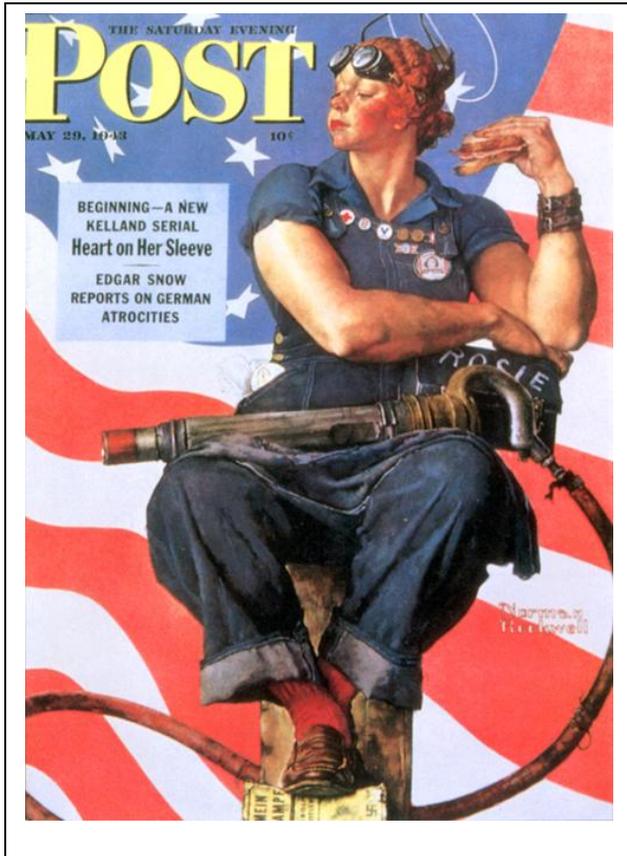
ASSESSMENT: Components for assessment include the written questions and the class discussion.

ENRICHMENT: Have students look through current magazines for pictures of women and answer the following questions: What is the purpose of the picture? Do you consider it to be propaganda? Why or why not? What characteristics does each woman possess? Do you like the picture—why or why not?

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Compare these two images from 1943 of a woman war worker. The one on the left was painted by Norman Rockwell and appeared on the cover of the popular weekly magazine *Saturday Evening Post*. Graphic artist J. Howard Miller for the Westinghouse Corporation produced the one on the right.



Rockwell's woman has a big, muscular body and a dirty face. She holds her rivet gun and her lunch box with the name *Rosie* in her lap. Her feet are resting on a copy of Hitler's *Mein Kampf*. The woman in Miller's image has fingernail polish, lipstick, rouge, plucked eyebrows and mascara. She is wearing a bandanna and a work shirt and her company's identification button.

Propaganda

Propaganda is the widespread, systematic promotion of particular ideas, doctrines, or practices. All governments used propaganda to educate, inspire, and encourage their citizens to support the war effort. The U.S. government produced posters, pamphlets, newsreels, radio shows, even comic books to rally the country's spirit and resolve.

AMERICAN WOMEN IN WORLD WAR II

On the Home Front and Beyond



American women played important roles during World War II, both at home and in uniform. Not only did they give their sons, husbands, fathers, and brothers to the war effort, they gave their time, energy, and some even gave their lives.

Reluctant to enter the war when it erupted in 1939, the United States quickly committed itself to total war after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. That commitment included utilizing all of America's assets—women included. The Axis powers, on the other hand, were slow to employ women in their war industries. Hitler derided Americans as degenerate for putting their women to work. The role of German women, he said, was to be good wives and mothers and to have more babies for the Third Reich.

When the war began, quickie marriages became the norm, as teenagers married their sweethearts before their men went overseas. As the men fought abroad, women on the Home Front worked in defense plants and volunteered for war-related organizations, in addition to managing their households. In New Orleans, as the demand for public transportation grew, women even became streetcar “conductorettes” for the first time. When men left, women “became proficient cooks and housekeepers, managed the finances, learned to fix the car, worked in a defense plant, and wrote letters to their soldier husbands that were consistently upbeat.” (Stephen Ambrose, *D-Day*, 488) *Rosie the Riveter* helped assure that the Allies would have the war materials they needed to defeat the Axis.

Nearly 350,000 American women served in uniform, both at home and abroad, volunteering for the newly formed Women's Army Auxiliary Corps (WAACs, later renamed the Women's Army Corps), the Navy Women's Reserve (WAVES), the Marine Corps Women's Reserve, the Coast Guard Women's Reserve (SPARS), the Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASPs), the Army Nurses Corps, and the Navy Nurse Corps. General Eisenhower felt that he could not win the war without the aid of the women in uniform. “The contribution of the women of America, whether on the farm or in the factory or in uniform, to D-Day was a *sine qua non* of the invasion effort.” (Ambrose, *D-Day*, 489)

Women in uniform took office and clerical jobs in the armed forces in order to free men to fight. They also drove trucks, repaired airplanes, worked as laboratory technicians, rigged parachutes, served as radio operators, analyzed photographs, flew military aircraft across the country, test-flew newly repaired planes, and even trained anti-aircraft artillery gunners by acting as flying targets. Some women served near the front lines in the Army Nurse Corps, where 16 were killed as a result of direct enemy fire. Sixty-eight American service women were captured as POWs in the Philippines. More than 1,600 nurses were decorated for bravery under fire and meritorious service, and 565 WACs in the Pacific Theater won combat decorations. Nurses were in Normandy on D-plus-four.

At the war's end, even though a majority of women surveyed reported wanted to keep their jobs, many were forced out by men returning home and by the downturn in demand for war materials. Women veterans encountered roadblocks when they tried to take advantage of benefit programs for veterans, like the G.I. Bill. The nation that needed their help in a time of crisis, it seems, was not yet ready for the greater social equality that would slowly come in the decades to follow.

The National WWII Museum recognizes the contribution that women played in the success of the Allied victory in World War II and explores that contribution in depth in its Home Front gallery.

