



## **Winning Over Hearts and Minds** Analyzing WWII Propaganda Posters

A Lesson from  
the Education Department

The National WWII Museum  
945 Magazine Street  
New Orleans, LA 70130  
(504) 528-1944

[www.nationalww2museum.org/learn/education](http://www.nationalww2museum.org/learn/education)

# Winning over Hearts and Minds

## Analyzing WWII Propaganda Posters

Propaganda played a key part in the United States' war effort. Although much more subtle, propaganda was as much a weapon of the war as manpower and ammunition. In addition to the radio broadcasts, movies, and comic books, over 200,000 poster designs were produced during WWII by the Office of War Information (OWI), The Treasury Department, branches of the armed force, and recruitment bureaus. These groups used many propaganda types (fear, bandwagon, etc.) and many themes (conservation, recruitment, etc.) to win over the hearts and minds of Americans.

**OBJECTIVE:** By examining propaganda posters from WWII students will increase their knowledge of propaganda tools and develop an understanding of the specific goals and strategies used by the U.S. government and OWI during WWII.

**GRADE LEVEL:** 7-12

**STANDARDS:** History Thinking Standard 2—the student comprehends a variety of historical sources and appreciates historical perspectives as revealed through the arts.

Content Era 8 (1929-1945) Standard 3C—the student understands the effects of the war at home.

**TIME REQUIREMENT:** One to two class periods.

### DIRECTIONS:

1. Distribute the following to students:

- Types of Propaganda Sheet
- Poster Analysis Sheet
- Student Worksheets

\*You can read the Propaganda Poster Fact Sheet aloud to students or make copies for them to read to themselves.

2. Using the “Types of Propaganda” sheet and the Propaganda Fact Sheet, have a brief discussion of the different types of propaganda. Make sure students are clear in their understanding of the types of propaganda before they begin their individual work.

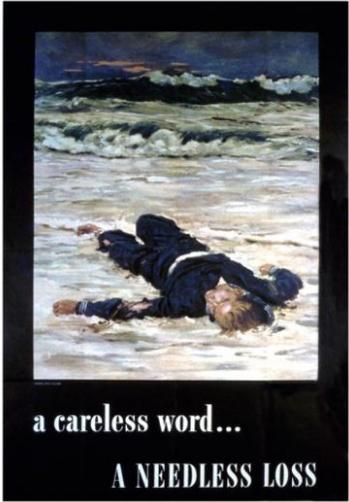
3. Have students first complete the worksheets and then the poster analysis.

4. As a class, go over the worksheets and poster analysis questions. Discuss any additional questions students may have about propaganda, the posters, or WWII.

**ASSESSMENT:** Assessment will include class discussion, completed worksheet, and poster analysis questions.

**ENRICHMENT:** Have students create a WWII era Propaganda Poster or a poster for a current social/political issue. Students may also write a research paper on WWII Propaganda or research WWII posters further and give a presentation to the class.

Student Worksheet

POSTER	TYPE(S) OF PROPAGANDA	DESCRIPTION/COMMENTS
 <p>"COME ON, GANG!" WE'RE BUILDING ARMS FOR VICTORY!"</p>		
 <p>Don't Let That Shadow Touch Them <i>Buy</i> <b>WAR BONDS</b></p>		
 <p>a careless word... <b>A NEEDLESS LOSS</b></p>		

Student Worksheet

POSTER	TYPE(S) OF PROPAGANDA	DESCRIPTION/COMMENTS
<p><b>"OF COURSE I CAN!"</b></p> <p>I'm patriotic as can be — And ration points won't worry me!"</p>		
<p>1778      1943</p> <p><b>AMERICANS</b> will <u>always</u> fight for liberty</p>		
<p><b>THIS YEAR</b> give a share in America</p> <p><b>DEFENSE</b> <i>Bonds and Stamps</i></p>		

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WWII Propaganda Posters  
Poster Analysis



## Poster Analysis Questions

**Directions:** After choosing a poster, examine it carefully and answer the following questions.

1. For whom is this poster intended?
2. What is the poster trying to get the audience to do?
3. What is the theme of the poster?
4. What symbols, key words or well known images are used?
5. Is the use of the symbol/image/word successful?
6. What is the emotion conveyed by the poster?
7. How would you change the image to make it more powerful?
8. What type of propaganda does the poster use?
9. How successful do you think this poster was during WWII?
10. Would a similar image have the same impact in today's society? Why or why not?

## 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.

## Winning over Hearts and Minds

### Answers for Student Worksheet

#### Poster One—(Bandwagon)

The poster encourages **everyone** join the war effort-to build arms for victory.

#### Poster Two—(Fear)

The poster shows children in the shadow of the Nazis. If you do not buy war bonds-the Nazis will come for your children (fear).

#### Poster Three—Euphemism and Fear

The poster shows a sailor dead on the beach-but his death is called a “loss.” The poster also uses fear as a motivator for not speaking out of turn.

#### Poster Four—Glittering Generalities

The poster shows a women canning food and supporting rationing. It is “patriotic” to do these things (it is a glittering generality because *patriotic* means different things to different people).

#### Poster Five—Transfer

The poster shows men fighting in the American Revolution and WWII. If you believe that the Revolutionary War was necessary (for liberty) then of course you should fight in this war (for liberty). The poster transfers the importance of and reason for the American Revolution to WWII.

#### Poster Six—Testimonial

The poster shows Santa telling everyone to buy war bonds. There are few more recognizable images then Santa. Children and adults would have recognized the image.

## 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 American—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.

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*"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