

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

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World War II propaganda posters (National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution)

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.”<sup>[1]</sup> “Ideally,” another confirmed, “it should be possible to post [all over] America every night. People should wake up to find a visual message everywhere.”<sup>[2]</sup>



1942 Office of War Information poster warning against the careless leaking of sensitive information.

However, officials also expressed a growing uneasiness with the large number of posters emerging from non-governmental sources and the resulting lack of control over content and distribution. As one government official privately explained, “You just can’t let all the painters in the country paint their heads off and make a lot of posters and then slap them up somewhere.” [3] After Japan’s December 7, 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor, complaints about government poster design intensified.

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. Eventually, contending groups within the OWI clashed over poster design. While some embraced the poster to demonstrate the practical

value and utility of art, others hoped to use the poster to demonstrate the power of advertising.

The OWI established systems of distribution modeled upon the elaborate volunteer organizations set up during the First World War. [4] 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.” [5]

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

1. 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.

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2. 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.
3. 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.
4. 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.
5. The Need to Sacrifice—the need for Americans to give up all luxuries and devote all spare time to help win the war.
6. 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.[6]



1943, Unattributed

As the war progressed, the government's desire to promote expertise in poster design and distribution coexisted uneasily with the democratic rhetoric that embellished the medium's war contribution. For many, the idea of posters made-by-all and seen-by-all better fit the democratic message the government hoped to convey. Yet advertising professionals succeeded in shaping the appearance of the posters after 1943. Gone was the esthetic of "war art" and in its place stood the conventions of commercial illustration. In an attempt to speak to the lower third of the American population, commercial illustration rejected symbolism and abstract images for literal representation and emotional pull. If, as critics charged, the turning over of poster design to Madison Avenue art directors made government posters as bland and inoffensive as advertising, in most instances this was in fact what the OWI's poster clients desired: a selective reality of sacrifice and struggle without troublesome detail.

Across Washington, officials of the US Office of Emergency Management's War Production Board (WPB) specialized in production-incentive images for factories. The WPB led the way in contracting for posters with commercial illustrators and designers.[7] Distributing posters and streamers free for the asking, the WPB only asked in return that factory managers "select your posting spots with care, and stick to these posting spots . . . use your imagination in displaying posters and in building up exhibits composed of two, three, or a dozen different kinds of posters."

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



1943, Office of War Information

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.[8]

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.



1941, US Office for Emergency Management, Division of Information

The posters of J. Howard Miller for the labor-management committee at the Westinghouse Electric and Manufacturing Company are good examples of how companies blended traditional themes of workplace discipline with the imagery of sacrifice and patriotism. Patriotic workers were expected to respect their superiors in the factory. While the now-famous image of a woman with raised arm proclaimed "We Can Do It!," another Westinghouse poster

clarified what "It" meant—"Any Questions About Your Work? . . . Ask Your Supervisor."

The posters also served to help reconstruct a positive image of business and American capitalism that had been badly shaken during the 1930s. Through aggressive advertising campaigns public relation specialists during the war turned this image around. Yet even the National Association of Manufacturers (NAM) found this bragging about America's

industrial might excessive at times. Toward the end of the war



US Office of War Information

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the NAM vice president noted that, “if this trend kept up, the boys in the foxholes would, on their return, be forced to employ a press agent to convince the public that soldiers, too, had something to do with our victory.”<sup>[9]</sup>

With the war’s successful conclusion in sight, posters turned toward idealized images of the comforts and conveniences of life far from the factory scene of production. At war’s end the poster returned to the familiar confines of political campaigns and bulletin boards.

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[1] Walter F. Conway to Glen L. Alt, 9 November 1942, folder: OWI Misc., box 1138, E-243, NC-148, Records of the Office of War Information, RG 208, National Archives at College Park, MD (hereafter NACP).

[2] Thomas D. Mabry, “Outline for the Coordination of Government War Graphics,” 1 June 1942, folder: Division of Visual Arts, box 55, E-7, RG 208, NACP.

[3] George A. Barnes to Morse Salisbury, 16 February 1942, folder: posters, box 42, E-7, RG 208, OFF-OWI alpha subject file, NACP.

[4] OWI’s poster distribution system was designed by Fred Werts, the president of the Window Display Advertising Company, who had been in charge of government poster distribution in the First World War, and Thomas Luckenbill of J. Walter Thompson, a manager of philanthropic campaigns for, among others, the Navy Relief Society. See Mabry, “Outline for the Coordination of Government War Graphics.”

[5] US Office of War Information, *Poster Handbook. A Plan for Displaying Official War Posters* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, ca. 1943).

[6] Alan Cranston to Norman Ferguson, 17 November 1942, folder: California trip, box 1078, entry E222, NC 148, RG 208, NACP.

[7] “Posters for Factories,” *Time* 37 (March 7, 1941): 23; “Bulletin Board Patriotism,” *Time* 38 (July 28, 1941): 57.

[8] The term “production soldier” was widely used on government and privately issued posters. Cyrus Hungerford has been credited as the first poster designer to use the phrase on a series of poster in 1941. See Derek Nelson, *The Posters that Won the War: The Production, Recruitment and War Bond Posters of WWII* (Osceola, WI: Motorbooks, 1991), 62.

[9] Richard H. Rovere, “Advertising in Wartime,” *New Republic* (February 21, 1944): 233.

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