

## The Role of American Posters in Supporting the Economy During World War II

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### Abstract

Posters as a visual communication medium has been utilized effectively throughout modern history. One of the most important applications of posters as a means of mass communication was during the World War II when the US government launched a massive awareness graphic design campaigns calling for Military Recruitment, Recycling and economic preservation. The American Poster Awareness campaign played a great role in changing the consumer culture during the World War II , and in unifying the American society around the idea of supporting the war efforts .

**Keywords:** Poster , Graphic Design , Awareness Campaign , Mass Communication , Consumer Culture .

### 1-Objectives:

1-This study discusses the effect of the Awareness Poster, its use as an effective medium and a key to success of Awareness campaigns.

2-This research will investigate the role of Graphic Design in changing the consumer culture of the American society in order to support the American economy during world war II.

### 2-Significance:

This research investigates the relevance of Graphic Design as a means of mass communication.

This research investigates the effectiveness of the poster awareness campaign and its impact on changing people's culture.

### 3-Introduction:

The advertising posters as a combination of text and figures on a paper for public display have been the most important advertising medium in many parts of the modern history of the world. Other forms of printed advertising such as hand-held pamphlets, newspaper and magazine ads were also used to advertise various objects and subjects mostly associated with commercial purposes. The In the US posters were adopted as a quick and direct means of public communication before and during the American revolutionary war (1775-1783).

Around 1860, there was an evolution in the design of posters and pamphlets by introducing colors and illustrations to designs. In the last quarter of the 19th century, posters and signs were spread to cover many commercial areas in cities because of the great progress in chromolithographic printing.

Before World War I , the federal government carried out a campaign to prepare for war using posters. After the declaration of war on April 6, 1917, about 20,000 posters of military recruitment were published. A large group of artists participated at that time. The work of James Montgomery Flagg, in which Uncle Sam points his finger, saying, "I want you for U.S. Army (Figure no.1), became the most popular American poster ever.

The world political map changed radically after the World War I, and with the beginning of World War II (1939-1945) new international geographic and social alterations were occurring .In that war the vast majority of the world divided in two main alliances. Different countries put its military, economic, industrial and scientific capabilities in the service of war. The Second World War is the most comprehensive and costly war in the history of humankind because of its breadth and multiplicity. More than 100 million soldiers participated in the war. It is estimated that Fifty to eighty-five million military and civilians, were killed during that war, equivalent to 2.5% of the world's population in that period.



Figure 1 - James Montgomery Flagg– I want you for U.S. Army – Lithography - US Library of Congress –

#### 4- American Poster Awareness Campaigns of World War II

There was a very wide range of awareness campaigns for World War II, targeting the American consumers. This trend received an official endorsement and support from the US government during the war to strengthen the home front. The awareness campaign included a huge number of posters urging citizens to reduce consumption of goods and services, recycle used materials, store household reserves, in addition to urging to purchase what was then called (war bonds), and urge merchants to reduce prices of essential goods. That awareness Graphic Design campaign caused an important turning point in the history of the American consumer culture.

During the World War II, the United States utilized various means of visual communications and graphic design methodologies to change the consumer consumption values. Images, slogans and advertisements became embedded with the content messages that combat the overconsumption behavior of the American society. However, there were effective contributions of journalists, philosophers, teachers, reformers and religious leaders to the overcome the overconsumption culture, the graphic design awareness campaigns were the most effective means of communication with the large majority of the American people.

By the beginning of 1940, it was clear that the utilization of posters are the most efficient means of visual communication. During the World War II, the American poster awareness campaigns addressed the concerns and emotions of the citizens using metaphors and images inspired by the popular American culture in order to unite the home front. The posters were visually simple, but high in artistic creativity and innovations, they were clear and direct.

In 1936, many artists' workshops were held in New York, and the government funded 6,000 fine artists who developed silkscreen printing techniques to produce quantities of brilliant posters printed by professional painters. By the middle of 1940 there were about 500 artists who presented about 1.6 million awareness posters.

Most of the American Posters of World war II focused mainly on manual illustrations, sometimes with comics, and photographs. The designs highlighted the positive forms of supporting the efforts of war economically and morally, unlike the posters of the First World War which was a source of fear of the enemy.

The government started to convey a message to consumers to save goods and services, as shown in the poster (Figure no. 2) entitled "Food is a weapon, Do not waste it!" and published in 1943. The poster contained the phrases "buy wisely -- cook carefully -- eat it all: follow the National Wartime Nutrition Program." It showed how to economize in the process of purchase and good nutrition to gain the necessary strength during war. The poster had a significant impact on encouraging Americans to keep their health for war.

Poster (Figure no. 3) , entitled "Serve our fighting men abroad - conserve these services at home", is a red and black poster urging consumers to economize on the use of electricity, telephones, water and transportation.



Figure 2 - Food is a weapon: don't waste it! : buy wisely -- cook carefully -- eat it all : follow the National Wartime Nutrition Program - Digital Library - National Union of Workers - Washington - War Information Office - 58 x 41 cm – 1943.



Figure 3 - Serve our fighting men abroad - conserve these services at home - Digital Library - Washington - War Information Office - 58 x 41 cm – 1943.

There are several posters calling for the preservation on the use of gas, as in poster (Figure no.4) entitled "Have you really tried to save gas by getting into a car club?" which carries a message to maintain car petrol to provide oil needs during the war.

Poster (Fig no.5), entitled "I'll carry mine too - Trucks and tires must last until victory", depicts a group of soldiers carrying their weapons and walking into the battlefield, and in front of them a woman carrying her household objects in her hands. The poster urges women to help in a behavioral initiative to save the gas used for transportation to the warfare.

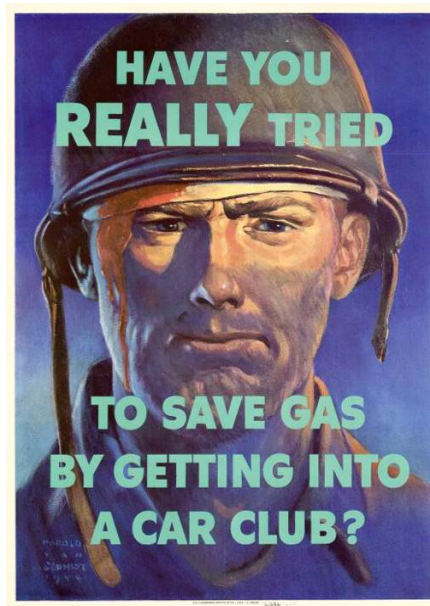


Figure 4 - Harold Von Schmidt - have you really tried to save gas by getting into a car club? –Government printing presses - 51 x 71 cm – 1944.



Figure 5 - Harold Von Schmidt - I'll carry mine too - Trucks and tires must last until victory Government printing presses - 56 x 71 cm – 1943.

Poster (Fig no.6) is entitled "Save Your Cans Help Pass the Ammunition", published in 1943 by McClelland Barclay, showing the arm of a woman extending a necklace of tomato cans. The cans are repeated into a series of bullets that feed the soldier's gun. In the background, there are large red explosions and a plane falling from the sky. In the bottom left corner, there are steps that must be followed by consumers.

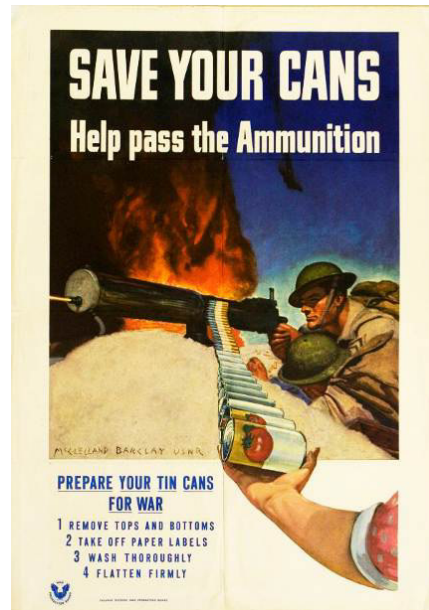


Figure 6 - McClelland Barclay– Save Your Cans, Help Pass the Ammunition - Digital Library - National Union of Workers - Washington - War Information Office -41 × 58 cm – 1943.

The Posters (Fig No.7) and (Fig No.8) , entitled “Save Waste Fats for Explosives”, carry an amazing visual connection represented by a female hand pouring a stream of fat from a pan turning into fuel for bombs. In the bottom part of both posters, consumers are given guidance to transfer fat to the meat dealer and grocery stores that take part in recycling waste fat.



Figure 7 - Henry Koerner–Save Waste Fats for Explosives - Government printing presses – 1943.



Figure 8 - Walter Richards–Save Waste Fats for Explosives - Government printing presses – 1943.

The poster (Fig No.9) , entitled “Wanted for victory”, shows a mother, a father and a son appear to be recycling, collecting paper waste, old scrap, metal scrap, and old rubber, and selling it to a scrap collector or giving it to a charity as written at the bottom of the poster.



Figure 9 - Wanted for victory - Library of Congress – Washington -1942.

Also Considerable recycling efforts were undertaken through schools and youth groups to turn their neighborhoods clean of paper and scrap and even tires of old cars. Many campaigns promoted recycling through maintaining food at home using posters distributed outside the densely populated urban centers, as most Americans live in farms and small towns.

Poster (Fig No.10) deals with the rationing of the use of household resources, and the is entitled “Can all you can - It's a real war job!”, that title has been used in a series of posters for the war food program. The poster shows a group of vegetables and fruits in the front there is a glass container to store food in a message to the consumer to store and pack the products for preservation and use during the war.

(Poster No.11) also deals with the same topic under the title “Grow More ... Can More ... “ and it belongs to the War Food Program as well.

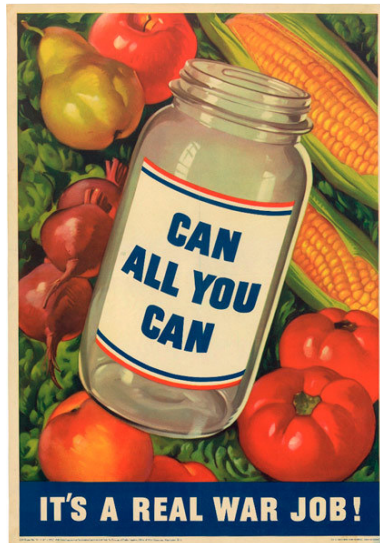


Figure 10 - Can all you can – It’s a real war job! - Digital Library - National Union of Workers - Washington - War Information Office - 27 × 19 cm – 1943.



Figure 11 - Grow More ... Can More In 44  
- Food War Program - 1944.

In the poster (Fig.No.12) entitled “Your victory garden counts more than ever!”, the War Food Department began to address citizens with the messages such as, “start planting your garden corner this year; it's easier than you think ,” “We and you are side by side growing vegetables” , “we'll teach your family agriculture. Let's face it; your children will know more about the environment when you show interest in the issues of society”, “You will be in less need for food that you eat, and this is a good thing.”



Figure 12 - Your victory garden counts more than ever!  
Food War Program - 68 × 48 cm – 1945.

Rationing has been a difficult, long-term endeavor that required concerted efforts by the government and the American society. The Awareness posters began to be distributed by volunteers, schools, local newspapers, radio stations and, above all, countless retail grocery stores. There were four different programs of rationing. The first one is the certificate of rationing, which began in January 1942, and allowed for, in case of need, the purchase of one commodity of cars, tires, etc.

The second is the special rationing coupons that allow some sectors, such as the medical sector, to obtain more goods such as fuel for free. The third is the consolidated rationing coupon used for shoes and food supplies and its equivalents to apply the principle that everyone should share. The fourth and final program is rationing points which began in February 1943 based on the British model, where the government gave each person a personal coupon book to determine their food needs according to their preferences. The US government was very persistent to control prices by urging consumers to implement the rationing rules. The rationing stage includes three important posters encouraging this type of economy. The first poster (Fig. No.13) is entitled "Rationing Safeguards Your Share" by Herbert Roesse. The poster shows a woman carrying a basket in a store full of supply goods, and there is a message behind her calls for rationing within the economic support program during the war.

The second poster is (Fig. No.14) entitled "Rationing Means a Fair for All of Us", was published in 1943, and consists of two parts. In the upper part, there is the phrase "Without Rationing" and it shows a woman holding the only merchandises and another woman who seems annoyed for having nothing. In the lower part of the poster, there is the phrase "With Rationing" and it shows the two women share the merchandises and seem satisfied and happy, in a direct message to the consumer of the necessity of rationing and sharing.

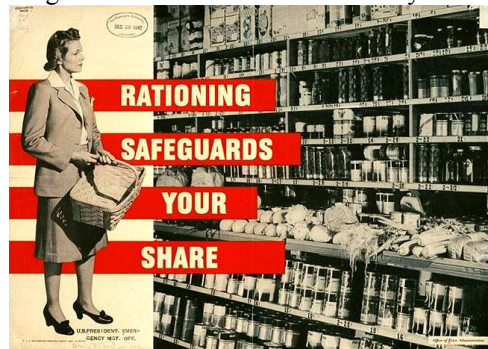


Figure 13 - Herbert Roesse - Rationing Safeguards Your Share - Digital Library - National Union of Workers - Washington - War Information Office - 51 × 41 cm – 1942.

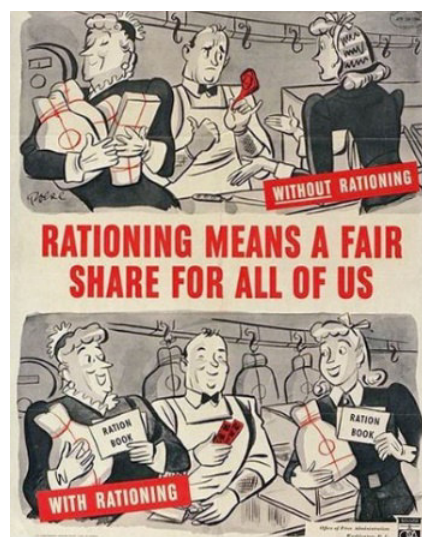


Figure 14 - Rationing Means a Fair Share for All of - Digital Library - National Union of Workers - Washington - War Information Office - 53 × 68 cm – 1943.

The third poster is (Fig. No.15) entitled "Keep the home front pledge", at the bottom of the poster there is the phrase "pay no more than the ceiling prices, pay your points in full". The poster contains a clear message from the government to the citizen within the program of food preservation and price control. There is a woman raising her right hand as a gesture of undertaking the provisions of the law, and at her shoulder there is a sign



with a picture of a hand carrying the food basket, reading: 'Food Battles for Freedom'.

The US Treasury also sponsored posters urging US citizens to immediately abandon consumption and buy war bonds and defense stamps instead.

Poster (Fig. No.16) by Lawrence B. Smith is entitled "Don't let that shadow touch them, buy war bonds,". The design represents a group of children playing while being surrounded by the shadow of the Nazi emblem expressing the imminent threat of the enemy, in order to induce the American citizens to purchase War bonds.



Figure 15 - Fred G. Cooper - Keep the home front pledge, pay no more than ceiling prices, pay your points in full - Digital Library - National Union of Workers - Washington - War

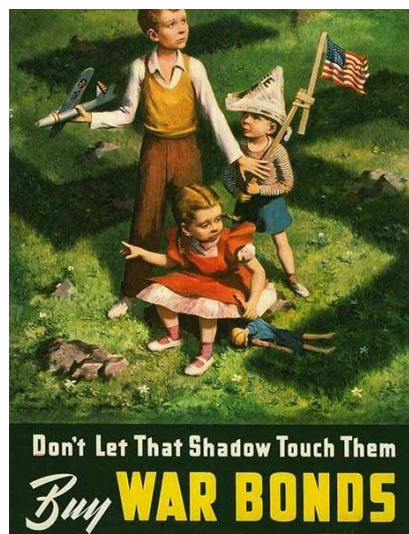


Figure 16 - Lawrence B. Smith- Don't Let That Shadow Touch Them, Buy war Bonds - US Treasury Printing Office - 61 × 91.5 cm – 1942.

Poster (Fig. No.17) is entitled "Wanted - Fighting Dollars", in the center of the poster is the phrase "Make every pay-day bond-day, United states defense bonds stamps". In this design, the artist shows an optimistic affirming perspective by using red, white and blue colors, in combination with a picture of a smiling worker wearing a distinctive uniform and holding one of his war bonds.

Poster (Fig. no.18) is entitled "This is my fight too!" celebrates the contribution of female factory workers, and depicts the initiative of one of the female factory workers whose arms are stained with work traces and carrying a few dollars to buy war bonds. At the bottom of the poster there is a phrase reading "Put at least 10% of the daily salary in war bonds."

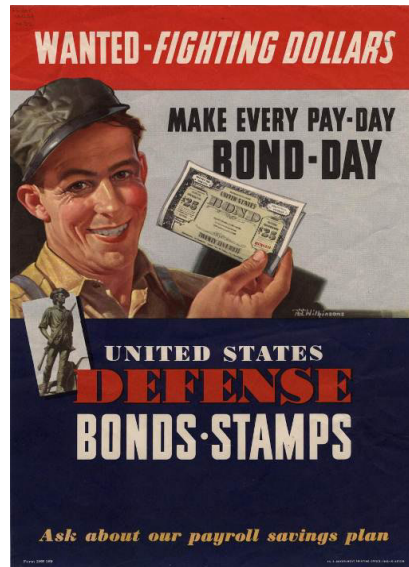


Figure 17 - Wilkinsons - Wanted Fighting Dollars - US Treasury Printing Office - 71 × 51 cm – 1942.



Figure 18 - Anonymous- - This is my fight too! put at least 10% every payday in war bonds - US Treasury Printing Office - 71 × 56 cm – 1942.

### 5- Consumer Response:

The US government used a series of posters targeting mostly American women through a series of awareness graphic design campaigns about the responsibility of rationing, recycling and conservation.

In addition to the government directed awareness campaigns, food stores distributed recipes for economic meals using low cost ingredients. Women also took part in warfare jobs through an initiative called “Victory Gardens.”. Due to a shortage of workers, laundry and dry-cleaning services became scarce, forcing some women to wash clothes at home.

The evaluation of the impact of posters on the war is not definite because other media such as radio and television also contributed with similar campaigns, focusing on the consumption and economics.

In conjunction with the awareness campaign to preserve fat remains, Walt Disney produced his third film on war, “Out of the Frying Pan into the Firing Line.” Film and radio stars appeared in giant bond rallies.

The American Gas Association Texaco began encouraging customers to change behaviors that cause waste of gas and gasoline. An exciting poster campaign by the Bell Telephone System was launched to economize the use of phones with the slogan “A call for you” to help keep the phone-lines open to soldiers and reduce the pressure on telecommunication sector during the war.

The overall cost of the awareness campaigns, was estimated at about \$ 400 million at that time. Consumers' response to the economic appeals was impressive, about 538 million liters of fat waste, about 23 million tons of

paper and 800 million ton of Tin were recycled. 50 million gardens of Victory Gardens were planted, and inflation was kept under control after rising by 12% during the years 1941 and 1942. Then the food prices rose by only 4% during the remainder of the war.

In a survey carried out by Gallup in the fall of 1943, the question, “Did you or your family pack homemade food this year?” was raised, an impressive 75% of the answers were “Yes”.

In addition, about 135 billion dollars were sold through war bonds, the largest share of which went to banks, insurance companies and some companies. Individuals acquired about 36 billion dollars in the bond purchase chain. Children alone bought more than \$ 1 billion of defense stamps and small-value bonds. The awareness campaigns utilizing posters and other media unified the majority of the American people and kept them committed to the practices and the measurements of war economy.

The Roosevelt administration took advantage of a large number of local institutions to implement its awareness campaign through more than 5,500 volunteers to manage the system. The media also allocated space to disseminate information on compliance with the requirements of the war period. Oral instructions reinforced what was shown in the posters through slogans, drawings and bold images. The recycling engines also relied on local companies, schools and local scout forces to collect and carry scrap. Furthermore, popular organizations in the United States mobilized people to support the cause of the economy during the war.

The harsh realities of the World War II had in fact ensured the success of these initiatives. However, given the tendency of the American people to personal freedom, it is striking that most people were willing to accept such restrictions on their own consumption, where collective action and self-sufficiency replaced individualism.

By 1946, most of the poster campaigns and the call for the preservation of commodities, recycling and domestic production had disappeared.

After the end of the war, awareness poster campaigns were no more a valid communication tool, other media such as television, became more effective as means of mass communication.

Given all the above, I would like to point out that the American posters had an effective and strong influence in supporting the economy during the Second World War by urging citizens using addressed messages through posters to raise awareness of what to do in support of the war. It is worth mentioning that these campaigns were very successful at that time, and posters are still one of the most popular means of communication with the public up till now.

## 6- Conclusion:

1-The American awareness poster campaigns during world war II, had a great impact on the consumer culture of the American society and contributed effectively to the US economy during the war.

2-The Poster awareness campaigns altered the behavior of the American people and unified them in support to the war efforts during World War II.

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