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Stewart, Amy, "The Need for Homefront Heroes: The Office of War Information And The Recruitment of Women Workers During World War II" (1999). *Student Theses, Papers and Projects (History)*. 292.
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**The Need for Homefront Heroes:
The Office of War Information
And
The Recruitment of Women Workers
During World War II**

**Hst 499
Amy Stewart
June 2, 1999**

World War II was a period of major shifts for women in America. The public image of the role of women in society underwent a rapid transformation as the war necessitated an increase of women in the labor force. For the first time, large numbers of women were performing jobs previously held only by men. The makeup of the female work force underwent a change as well, with more older and married women joining the ranks of the employed.¹

The work these women did is just one part of the story. Despite the changes in the public image of women, the more deeply rooted, traditional sex roles remained virtually unchanged. Intense propaganda campaigns by both the media and government agencies presented paradoxical images of women. Thus the burden of balancing a “man’s work” with a woman’s job of housekeeping and childrearing was placed on the woman worker; with the added requirement that, above all, she must not lose her femininity.²

The overriding focus of those studying this period of American history is whether or not these wartime experiences had any lasting impact on the post-war role of women.³ The opinion that “the war represented a turning point for women workers” by increasing the number of women in the work force is presented by William Chafe in his book *The American Woman*.⁴ Chafe notes, however, that numbers alone were only one part of the equation. Issues such as childcare and equal pay for equal work, which received less attention, reduced the overall benefit to women. Still, Chafe asserts that many of the gains made by female workers during World War II had long-term effects.⁵

Karen Anderson supports Chafe’s opinion of the war’s importance in increasing the number of women in the work force and altering, to some extent, public opinion

about women workers. She explains, however, that because the greatest gains for women came in the traditionally male defense jobs, this sector accounted for the greatest losses as veterans returned home and women were laid off. Having lost their high-paying wartime jobs, those women who chose to stay in the work force were forced to return to low-paying, traditionally female occupations. Thus, notes Anderson, while the number of employed women was affected by the war, the long-term status of female workers was not.⁶

Susan Hartman also supports the opinion that the experiences of World War II had a long-term impact on women in America. What Hartman considers most noteworthy is the public's ability to reorganize the acceptable image of women during the war. As she explains, the nation's need for laborers during the war provided an "ideological climate supportive of women's movement into the public realm."⁷ With this force behind them, more women were able to leave the home and test the boundaries of sex-segregation in the work place.⁸ Though many believed this shift was temporary, it demonstrated change was possible.⁹ Hartman believes this was a fundamental part of the re-emergence of feminism in the 1960's.¹⁰

Amy Kesselman also examines the issue of sex segregation in the World War II labor force. Her book, *Fleeting Opportunities*, is a study of the shipyards in the Portland and Vancouver area. Central to Kesselman's argument is the idea that while World War II did open many doors for wage-earning women, these opportunities were accompanied by a "uniform resistance" on the part of government and social institutions. Through an examination of shipyard newsletters, local newspapers, and state and federal government records Kesselman provides evidence of society's desire for working women to "retain

their primary identity as wives, girlfriends, and mothers.”¹¹ One way this was achieved was by imposing a sexual division of labor in the work place.

Another key element in *Fleeting Opportunities* is Kesselman’s use of oral history interviews with former shipyard workers. The experiences of these women allow the reader to personalize the vast amount of information Kesselman presents. These stories also provide examples of how the war and the period of reconversion influenced individual women.

Leila Rupp in her book, *Mobilizing Women for War*, argues against the interpretation that the war marked a major long-term advancement for women. She asserts that the public’s ability to accept a change in the female social image was strictly “for the duration.” She also interprets the rate of female participation in the labor force differently. Rupp believes that while there was a sharp increase in female employment during the war, the war itself “had no permanent impact on the trend in the size of the female labor force.”¹²

Rupp is also critical in examining *how* the images of employed women were transformed during the war years. Her comparative study of American and German government involvement in the mobilization of female workers makes the case that the Nazi’s were not the only side bombarding its citizens with propaganda. As she explains, “despite significant differences, the National Socialist government of Germany and the wartime government of Franklin Roosevelt in the United States had much in common.”¹³ The fact that each nation needed to mobilize women into its work force and chose propaganda as the means to that end affords propaganda a central place in the study of women’s history during the war.¹⁴

Like Rupp, Maureen Honey, another recent historian, studies the use of propaganda in shaping the acceptable public image of Rosie the Riveter. Through her examination of advertising and popular fiction in women's magazines, Honey draws out many clear examples of the two conflicting images of the American woman presented during the war. On one hand was the image of the "strong dependable patriot" personified by Rosie.¹⁵ On the other hand was the "innocent vulnerable homemaker who depended upon soldiers to protect her way of life."¹⁶ According to Honey, conflicting messages about the role of women played a major part in limiting the postwar realization of the gains made by working women during the war.

Whether or not their experiences during World War II catapulted women permanently into the labor force or lulled them into the "strange sleep" which Betty Freidan later labeled the feminine mystique, is still being debated. What is certain is that during the war women *did* enter the labor force in record numbers. To subscribe to the idea that Rosie the Riveter and her sisters made this trek into American mythology on their own is to ignore the extent to which they were courted by propaganda. The roots of this courtship can be found in the Office of War Information (OWI), with its many branches reaching into the major media fields of radio, advertising, magazines, and motion pictures. An examination of the OWI's efforts to mobilize female workers shows that the messages followed a pattern. This pattern contained conflicting messages which help explain both the shift in the public's image of women during the war and the return to more traditional views once the war was over.

To accurately understand the changes that occurred during World War II it is important to examine the nation's wage labor force prior to the war. At the outbreak of

war in December 1941, there were between twelve and thirteen million employed women according to Census Bureau information.¹⁷ As these numbers indicate, the woman working for wages was not an entirely new phenomenon. In fact, as Chafe points out, “the percentage of females at work [in 1940] was almost exactly what it had been in 1910.”¹⁸

Almost all of the women employed in 1940 could be found in positions deemed appropriate for females. In Seattle, for example, 67 percent of employed women worked in either the trade or service sectors.¹⁹ It is not surprising that these jobs “paralleled the sexual division of labor within the home.”²⁰ Clerical jobs, for example, required women to be in a subordinate position, while a career as a nurse or teacher could be accepted because the woman was fulfilling her “natural” feminine need to nurture and care for others.

Not only did jobs in the service and trade sectors mesh well with society’s expectations of women, they also decreased the likelihood of men and women competing for the same jobs. This became especially important during the Depression which “fostered a wave of reaction against any change in woman’s traditional role.”²¹ Social views and ideology that would later be part of the attempt to lure women into war work urged women to stay at home.

This attack was especially aimed at married women. The public could accept single women working in “appropriate” jobs until they were married. Married women, on the other hand, had already committed themselves to their “true calling”, the full time job of being wife and mother.²² Consequently, “only 15 percent of all married women were in the labor force in 1940.”²³ In the years leading up to the war, there were a

number of proposed measures at both the state and federal level restricting the rights of married women to work. As a result, twenty-six states had laws which prohibited the employment of married women.²⁴ In addition, the Economy Act of 1933 restricted Federal employment to only one member of a family. While the act did not explicitly state it, the implication was that the “expendable [female] family member” would leave the public sector.²⁵

Two points need to clarification when discussing the controversy surrounding the employment of women in general, and married women more specifically. First, of the 15 percent of married women employed in 1940, almost all were working to support their families. Perhaps their husbands were unable to find work, were disabled, or had deserted them. Whatever the situation, most married women worked out of necessity. Second, these working class working women were not the direct target of the government and media propaganda against working women. As Rupp explains, the working class women were below the public eye. Rather, it was the image of the middle class wife and mother, who neglected her domestic role for selfish motives, that resulted in the disapproval of the American public.²⁶

This public condemnation is evident in responses to polls on whether or not Americans believed married women should work outside the home. According to Chafe, more than 80 percent of respondents were against the idea in 1938.²⁷ This is equivalent to the 82 percent of similar responses to a 1936 Gallup poll cited by Hartman.²⁸ Even when the men responding to these polls did approve of outside employment for women in general, they almost always qualified that they were against it for *their* wives. Despite

these overwhelming disapproval ratings at the end of the 1930's, by 1944 the working wife had become a significant part of the labor force.²⁹

The change in the public's perception of working women during World War II was extreme, but not immediate. One explanation for this slow initial transformation is that at the beginning of the war such a change was not necessary. At the time of the attack on Pearl Harbor in December, 1941, there were still more than five million unemployed men in America. Of course, not everyone held the opinion that the supply of excess workers was endless. As early as July 1940, Mary Anderson, the head of the Women's Bureau of the Department of Labor, made a proposal on how to incorporate women into the defense industry.³⁰

Although the media was not as quick as Anderson to voice the potential of "womanpower" as an aid in the war effort, it was not far behind. Only two months after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, *Life* magazine ran an article with a full page picture showing "Pearl Harbor widows" doing their patriotic duty by applying for work at an aircraft factory.³¹ Such emotional appeals became increasingly common as the war went on. As Maureen Honey explains in her book, *Creating Rosie the Riveter*, it was all "part of a drive to weld the home front into an economic army, well disciplined, highly motivated by patriotism, and willing to make sacrifices."³² In this case, it was the image of women as merely wives and mothers that the government wanted to place on the sacrificial altar.

Convincing American industry to hire women proved more difficult than convincing *Life* to run a sensationalized article. As Honey explains, by late 1942 the supply of workers in defense plants and "other essential industries" was not meeting the

demand.³³ In spite of this, many employers refused to remove the obstacles that kept women out of industry. The government had two choices – take “unprecedented measures to control industry” or use publicity as a tool to rework America’s attitudes about female employment.³⁴ The Roosevelt Administration chose to try its hand at reshaping public opinion rather than take on business and industry directly.

The establishment of the OWI, by executive order on June 13, 1942, created the agency that would be most responsible for coordinating the shift in the public’s image of women during World War II. The OWI’s mission was to provide the public with information and explanations of government policies. The official line for carrying out this mission was a “strategy of truth” designed to convey information in a way that would avoid the label “propaganda.”³⁵ The actual implementation of the mission, however, was what Michael Renov labels a “saturation of public awareness” through various media sources that often played more on emotion than logic and truth.³⁶

Under the framework of the OWI, the Roosevelt administration consolidated a number of previously established information agencies, including the Office of Facts and Figures (OFF) and the Office of Government Reports (OGR). In theory, the new agency would serve as a central font of information for the American public.³⁷ In reality, while it had some “consolidating control,” it had no actual authority over the various information units that individual federal departments had retained.³⁸

Many Americans were distrustful of the new information agency. The experience of the Committee on Public Information during World War I had left many bitter and disillusioned. Under the “contentious journalist,” George Creel, the Creel Committee created a centralized system of propaganda aimed at gaining support for entry into the

war among the isolationist population. The use of posters, pamphlets, and speakers succeeded in generating a patriotic fervor. Unfortunately, the backlash resulted in an intense hatred and distrust of anything German. The failure of Wilson's plans for peace at the end of World War I left Americans confronted "with the sharp contrast between unfulfilled dreams and the realities of world politics."³⁹ Historians agree that many blamed their disillusionment on Creel and his use of propaganda.⁴⁰

The decades between the two wars saw an increase in the study of propaganda. Social scientists and policy analysts raised questions about the use of propaganda and its effects on American society. The first definition of the phenomenon to come out of this systematic study was by the social scientist Harold Lasswell. Lasswell concluded that "propaganda is the deliberate attempt to influence mass attitudes on controversial subjects by the use of symbols rather than force."⁴¹ A later definition put forth by The Institute for Propaganda Analysis echoed Lasswell, but focused more on the desired outcome: "the expression of opinion or action by individuals or groups deliberately assigned to influence action of other individuals or groups with reference to predetermined ends."⁴² During World War II the OWI would have to face this increasingly negative label of propaganda in its work. In spite of this, the agency held fast, at least publicly, to its mission statement of presenting the truth in a direct way.⁴³

President Roosevelt was well aware of the nation's opinion of the Creel Committee and of propaganda in general. In an attempt to avoid a public outcry about another use of the media as a tool for propaganda, he appointed Elmer Davis to head the OWI. Davis, a former *New York Times* reporter and CBS radio broadcaster, was well respected and known for presenting information in a clear, concise manner. His well-

known opposition to a government-controlled media made him the ideal man to help quiet the fears of the OWI becoming another Creel Committee.⁴⁴

Roosevelt divided the OWI into two branches in an attempt to deal effectively with the vast amount of information related to the war and the war effort. The Overseas Branch was responsible for the distribution of American propaganda throughout the rest of the world. One notable exception to the area covered by the Overseas Branch was Latin America, “which remained the preserve of the coordinator of inter-American affairs [CIAA], Nelson Rockefeller.”⁴⁵

The Domestic Branch handled the dissemination of information regarding war issues on the homefront. The homefront war waged by the Domestic Branch focused on what the American population could do to assist the soldiers overseas. A variety of the OWI campaigns dealt with explaining the rationale behind policies implemented by the government. Rationing of gas and food, for example, were very unpopular. It was the OWI’s task to help the citizens understand the benefits of these “personal sacrifices” to the nation as a whole. The wartime employment of women was placed into this category of personal sacrifices.⁴⁶

Because of public sentiment against and distrust of propaganda, it was important for the OWI campaigns to portray the changes they were trying to implement as “natural” and “commonsensical” while qualifying them as ‘for the duration’.⁴⁷ As Renov explains, the mobilization of women to work is a prime example of this. A confidential folder about the “Womanpower Campaign” which was distributed to different community offices provided assistance in how to persuade the public that a working woman was not only socially acceptable, but socially commendable.⁴⁸

Within the various official OWI statements regarding the Womanpower Campaign can be found the same conflicting messages that made their way into the daily lives of women during the war. The encouraging, if patronizing and patriarchal, messages of the strength and dependability of women are found next to messages that hint at women's "extraordinary leisure."⁴⁹ There is also the understanding presented in the statements that women's sole identity is based on "their relationship to men."⁵⁰

The task of redefining the public image of the role of women is evident in OWI's paperwork. The common stereotypes of women as hysterical, overly emotional, physically weak, and lazy are presented as facts that must be overcome. By presenting women who were not working both outside and inside the home as "slackers," the agency used guilt as a key element to prompt women to enter the work force. Thus the propaganda worked to not only shift the general public's image of women, but the image women held of themselves.⁵¹ In addition, the focus of OWI propaganda was on "typical" middle class women not already in the wage work force. Such women could fit easily into the "for the duration" needs of industry.

The following excerpts from the Womanpower Campaign folder provide a glimpse into the true intentions of the OWI in regard to women. As Renov explains, each OWI statement is followed by an "analysis of the implied message."⁵² These statements provide detailed examples of how the OWI intended to remold the stereotypes of women:

2) "The 'shorten-the-war' theme is obviously the one which appeals most deeply Mothers, grandmothers, sisters, wives, sweethearts – there isn't one who doesn't want her man back as fast as possible. Working will speed the day – and will help make the waiting easier."

Analysis: Since women are defined by their relationship to men, their patriotic efforts are linked to their personal attachments to soldiers rather than to ideals or

abstract values. Going to work will kill time until the men return and normal life resumes.

4) “The ultimate goal of the September campaign is to associate in the minds of the public the words ‘woman’ and ‘work’ just as firmly as the words ‘man’ and ‘fight’ are associated.

Analysis: Behavior modification and recasting of sex roles is possible through a vigorous and repetitive public campaign.

6) “Women can stand a lot, and actually they are workers by tradition. It is only in recent years, and mostly in the United States, that women have been allowed to fall into habits of extraordinary leisure.”

Analysis: The government is actually doing a great service for women by revitalizing a lost tradition of servitude which they were allowed (by men) to fall into. A great deal of free labor from this durable breed has been wasted.

9) “What kind of *hands* have you? Pretty, peacetime palms? Or slightly work roughened ones -broadened and strengthened and made far more beautiful by physical effort? Are the hands *capable*, can they accept *responsibility*, are they proud of honest dirt?”

Analysis: The old version of feminine beauty is out; in these new circumstances, physical effort is beautiful, dirt is honest – the virtues of womanhood must and can be reshaped.⁵³

It is hard to refute that these statements were “deliberate attempt[s] to influence mass attitudes on controversial subjects.”⁵⁴ Categorizing the efforts as mere “behavior modification,” as one statement indicates, does not do justice to the magnitude of change the campaign was aiming to achieve. The fullest understanding of the intentions of the OWI agenda can be found in one of the folder’s closing statements: “The repercussions of this program will be many because they involve complete dislocation of generations of established family routine. The accepted ‘American way of life’ is undergoing terrific readjustments.”⁵⁵

It was with this game plan for a temporary radical alteration of the American way of life in mind that the Domestic Branch began to recruit women to work. Establishing

links with the three major media industries through the Bureau of Motion Pictures (BMP), the Radio Bureau, and the Magazine Bureau, was a vital and necessary step in the success of this plan. Two other key players in the recruitment campaign were the War Manpower Commission (WMC) and the War Advertising Council (WAC).

The WMC was a federal policy forum responsible for attempting to coordinate and mobilize the workers of America. Unfortunately, the WMC lacked the authority to enforce its directives.⁵⁶ Nor was the Commission able to muster enough support in Congress to pass a bill for universal conscription requiring all women eighteen to fifty to register for work. Denied this recruitment tool that was in place in Great Britain, Germany, and the USSR, the WMC had to rely on the OWI's propaganda campaign to draw women to work.⁵⁷

Unlike the WMC and the OWI, the WAC was a non-governmental agency established in the fall of 1941 by leaders of the advertising industry. By establishing the WAC, the advertising industry was serving a dual purpose. First, it was ensuring its own livelihood against the threat of a decrease in consumer goods due the conversion to wartime production. Prewar projections placed the potential loss of business for advertisers at 80 percent.⁵⁸ By converting the focus of advertising from selling goods to selling the war effort, advertisers were able to keep company names "before the public eye," and at the same time link those names to the nation's potential victory.⁵⁹ These self-serving motives helped avert the projected losses and cemented the WAC's involvement in the OWI's propaganda campaigns.

The second purpose of the War Advertising Council was to organize the advertisers and companies, with the goal of getting "the issues of the war before the

public.”⁶⁰ This helped the industry achieve the first objective of avoiding a loss of profits. In its role of organizer, the WAC functioned as the middleman between government agencies, including the OWI, and the advertising industry. This relationship between the OWI and the WAC provided the industry with a stable market, and provided the government with assistance in presenting homefront “campaigns modeled on commercial advertising techniques.”⁶¹

Key to the work of both the WAC and the Domestic Branch was the Magazine Bureau, with Dorothy Ducas as its head.⁶² Emerging from the reorganization of the information agency in June of 1942, the Magazine Bureau provided a link between the OWI in Washington and the nation’s various magazine publishers. This allowed the agency to keep publishers tied into various recruiting, rationing, and other homefront campaigns originating in Washington, thus allowing them to mold their articles and advertising to fit the OWI’s needs.

For an examination of the conflicting images of women in print during the war, perhaps no magazine serves as a better subject than *Life*. A prototypical example of photojournalism, *Life* had two characteristics that increased its value to the Magazine Bureau: high circulation and weekly publication. During the war *Life* served as “a mode of instruction” for many readers adjusting to the “altered lifestyles” the war brought on.⁶³

The Magazine Bureau’s campaign to put out the call for female laborers is evident in a many wartime issues of *Life*. The altered lifestyles resulting from an increase in employed women were also frequent topics for *Life* articles. True to OWI form, these propaganda pitches touched on a variety of issues related to the new female phenomenon. Given the active participation of the WAC and the Time-Life Group, it was often hard to

“distinguish between the advertising copy. . . and the feature articles.”⁶⁴ As a result, several issues contain page after page of images of working women.

The typical war worker layout in *Life* had one of three key elements; a beautiful young woman, a reference to her sacrifice, or a patriotic pitch. Many articles contained all three. The previously cited article from February 1942 about the Pearl Harbor widows is a prime example of how *Life*'s editors used photojournalism to play on the hearts of American women. The full-page photo shows the group of women, stoically displaying their willingness to work for the country their husbands had died protecting. Similarly, a 28 September 1942 article about female graduates of Smith College tells the story of a “girl” who “became a war bride last February...[and] a war widow last month.”⁶⁵ She did not let such personal tragedy interfere with her job; “she went right on working.”⁶⁶

Such courageous behavior was exactly what the OWI was trying to cultivate in the women of America through the “shorten-the war” and “keep busy till you man comes home – even if he never will” messages. “Soldier’s Wife at Work,” for example tells the story of Emily Harrison who “lost no time moping when her husband Arthur, a mechanic, was called up by his draft board last spring.”⁶⁷ As the article explains, she had no time to mope – she was too busy stepping in to run his business. In spite of the fact that the article refers to her as a ‘girl’, Emily not only stepped in, but also converted the plant to war production and landed a government contract.

Of course this idyllic story would not be complete by OWI standards if it failed to mention that Emily “likes pretty clothes” and wowed the WPB office “with her red hair.”⁶⁸ These are the elements that, combined with the photograph of the beautiful young woman beside a picture of her husband in uniform, allowed America a sense that

things weren't really changing *that* much. "Here is a woman," the article in essence says, "who is pitching in to help her husband and her country. But deep down she's the still the same old girl."

One approach the OWI took to equate "work" with "women" was the "glamour girl" articles. While such articles touched on the patriotic work being done by the women, the bulk of the copy made reference to their ability to work hard but stay beautiful. "Girls in Uniform" from 6 July 1942 is one such article. According to *Life*, "The woman worker in a war industry is the glamor [sic] girl of 1942."⁶⁹ The Boeing employees featured in the piece worked up to 70 hours a week as electricians or welders. Each still found time in the mornings, however, to make sure that "her hands were smooth, her nails polished, her makeup and curls [were] in order."⁷⁰ For this dedication to their work, their country, and their beauty, *Life* proclaimed them "the heroine of the new order."⁷¹

Another article focusing on the more glamorous version of Rosie was "*Life* Goes to a War Plant Beauty Dance." The 17 April 1944 layout shows a court of 19-30 year old Douglas Aircraft employees vying for the title of "Queen of Douglas Sweethearts."⁷² Such beauty pageants were not uncommon, as Kesselman notes in *Fleeting Opportunities*.⁷³ However, both the pageants and the *Life* article impressed upon the public the image that the work the women were doing came second to their innate desire to be beautiful and feminine.

The less glamorous, lower paying positions in the service and trade sectors received much less attention than jobs in defense. The need for women to fill vacancies in these areas increased as those previously employed in them left to work in defense

industries. Convincing a woman to take a job as a store clerk or waitress was not easy, especially when she was confronted every day with images of highly paid, highly respected Rosies.⁷⁴

Commercial laundries were especially hard hit. In a July 1943 article, which uncharacteristically lacked a picture of a beautiful woman, *Life* highlighted the plight of these employee-starved businesses. In the midst of the economic upturn, laundries nationwide were having to turn customers away and were seeing their profits drop. Most were operating with only 66 percent of the employees they needed.⁷⁵ This is not surprising considering wages in a laundry were only half of those available in an aircraft factory.⁷⁶ *Life's* mission, therefore, was to encourage women who might be "slacking" to do their part by either taking in laundry at home or taking a job in a commercial laundry.

The paradoxical nature of the OWI's messages to women are apparent in many *Life* articles and provide evidence of the magazine industry's willingness to comply with Magazine Bureau directives. Whether motivated by patriotism or profits, editors of magazines like *Life* cooperated in influencing the public image of women. By presenting articles that simultaneously praised the female wage earner and emphasized her beauty or role as wife, magazines added to the confusion of the true role of women.

The second medium used by the OWI to influence public opinion was motion pictures. Like radio and magazines, the film industry had become a major component in the creation of popular culture by 1941. Industry estimates from the period place weekly viewership at between 85 to 90 million.⁷⁷ Of this total, up to 80 percent were estimated to be part of the Womanpower Campaign's target market – women.⁷⁸ In spite of this

marketing potential, *Hollywood Quarterly* figures show only 21 of the 374 war related films from 1942 to 1944 were about the “production front.”⁷⁹

Like the advertising industry, Hollywood was a willing participant in the government’s propaganda efforts. While the film industry leaders actively supported the war effort, this was not their only incentive to comply with the OWI. Like other medial sources, Hollywood’s involvement was largely motivated by profits. One major concern for movie makers was getting their films approved for export so they could cash in on the large foreign market for American movies.

Beginning in December of 1942 the OWI’s overseas branch, under Ulric Bell, had the power to ban from export any film it felt would harm America’s image abroad. Included in this ban were films “that showed rationing or other economic preparations for a long war, scenes of lawlessness in which order was not restored and the offenders punished (this aimed primarily at gangster films), and portrayals of labor or class conflicts in the United States.”⁸⁰

The Bureau of Motion Pictures served as a bridge between OWI headquarters in Washington and Hollywood. Under the leadership of Lowell Mellet, the Domestic Branch’s BMP tried to imprint OWI ideals into as many films as possible. One approach to this involved requesting producers to submit scripts and films to the BMP for content recommendations. Hollywood grudgingly gave into the Bureau’s request, but the relationship between the BMP and the industry remained tumultuous. It was made worse by the fact that most Domestic Branch’s BMP leaders lacked experience in the industry.⁸¹

The relationship between Mellet’s agency and Hollywood came to an end in the summer of 1943, when Congress drastically cut the Domestic Branch budget. For the

remainder of the war the film industry dealt with the Overseas Branch. However, the influence of Mellet and his Domestic Branch staff was not obliterated. Due in large part to the BMP's "Manual for the Motion Picture Industry," written by Mellet's assistant, many government propaganda messages made their way on to the screen.⁸²

Three of the movies that film historians note as receiving the most acclaim from the OWI incorporated women war workers into them.⁸³ The extent to which working women were portrayed in the films varied from a short display to basing the entire storyline around them. Like all media types utilized by the OWI, motion pictures presented conflicting images of female workers.

The 1942 Universal film *Pittsburgh* sparingly presents images of actual working women. For example, the film opens with a war production plant ceremony celebrating the plant's successful contribution to the war effort. The employees shown in the crowd are both men and women, and reference is made to the contribution workers of each sex had made to the plant and the nation.

Pittsburgh presents the OWI's conflicting messages at the more subtle level of plot. Through the use of flashbacks, a technique used often in wartime films to create a link to the "good old days", the viewer learns that the success of the plant was due largely to a woman.⁸⁴ Josie Evans, played by Marlene Dietrich, exemplifies the characteristics of strength and determination the OWI wanted American women to display.

Born the daughter of an immigrant coal miner who died in a cave-in, Josie vows to improve her lot. Along the way she encourages the male leads, Cash Evans and Pittsburgh Markham to improve their lives as well. Josie's only outstanding flaw in the film, besides a lack of breeding, is her tendency to drink excessively. She overcomes this

blemish on her character and completes her fairy tale when she marries the right man, Cash. Josie's move from the working class to social affluence fits well into the OWI's recruitment ideals. By taking her place in the world of middle class women the OWI was targeting, Josie becomes a more representative symbol of the type of woman the agency was hoping to recruit to war work.

The personal redemption theme of the movie does not in itself indicate the OWI's influence on *Pittsburgh*. Nor, for that matter, does the appearance of women in the opening scene. Its use as a recruitment tool for women workers, however, is boldly stated in the final moments of the film when the narrator makes the following statement,

It takes a lot of muscle and sweat to pull off a job as big as this one. And that's where the women of the nation came in. Josie Evans and thousands of others like her, doing their part wherever they could. And there were others who found they could run a drill press, drive a thirty ton tank, or run a stamping machine as well any man. Yes, millions of Americans, men and women, on the production line to feed the supply lines to the courageous Americans fighting on battle fronts all over the world.

Not surprisingly, the one complaint BMP staff had for the producers of the film was that too much of the dialogue sounded as if it had been lifted directly from the pages of an OWI manual. The BMP's well-founded fear was that such overt propaganda would aggravate an already suspicious public.⁸⁵

To its credit, and in contrast to the overly dramatic patriotic presentation of its message, *Pittsburgh* did succeed in showing a more realistic image of the woman worker than was found in the other films. Rather than posed close-ups of perfectly proportioned, impeccably dressed young women, the film showed actual footage from inside a plant – complete with pictures of older female employees.

The second film, a 1944 Selznick production entitled *Since You Went Away*, is the story of an upper middle class family. Claudette Colbert plays the wife and mother, Anne, whose husband has joined the service, leaving her to raise two teenage daughters alone. The theme of women taking an active role in the war effort reoccurs throughout the film in an almost check-list format. In one scene, an artist friend presents Anne with a WAVE recruitment poster as a gift. At the oldest daughter, Jane's, graduation ceremony, the class president delivers a speech entitled "Women's Place in the War." Later in the film, Jane enrolls in a Red Cross Nurse assistant program and goes on to serve the country in that capacity.

The underlying theme of personal sacrifice that permeates the movie reaches a climax when Anne decides to take a war job.⁸⁶ The catalyst to this important decision is an argument between Anne and her divorced socialite acquaintance, Mrs. Hawkins, about the appropriateness of Jane's Red Cross work. Anne realizes that she "hasn't *really* made any sacrifices," but is now determined to pitch in and really do her part. The scene serves two main OWI womanpower campaign objectives. First it makes a recruitment pitch for women workers using Anne as the role model. Second, it let the women of America know what wasn't wanted from them, by using Mrs. Hawkins as the embodiment of all the negative characteristics the OWI assigned to women who wouldn't work: excessive leisure, gossiping, a hoarding, and above all a slacking.

The final film, *Tender Comrade*, a 1943 RKO production, is a story about four female Douglas Aircraft employees. Like Anne in *Since You Went Away*, all four of the women in *Tender Comrade* have a husband fighting overseas. In an attempt to cut costs the women decide to pool their resources and move in together. This new arrangement

had the added bonus of allowing them to save fuel and rubber by carpooling. The plot of the film centers around the heroine, Jo, played by Ginger Rogers, and focuses on how the war has changed her life. A series of flashbacks revealing Jo's early married life as an "idle housewife" are interspersed throughout the film in an attempt to present a negative stereotypical image of women in prewar America. In contrast to this image of the younger, more selfish Jo, is Jo the war worker, dedicated to her husband, her country, and her newborn son.

An important point in highlighting the conflicting images of women as both worker and housewife is the amount of time the women spend at each task during the films. *Tender Comrade*, a movie centered around the lives of women defense workers, includes only one scene of the women at the plant. *Since You Went Away* also contains only one war work scene. By contrast, for the remainder of each film the women are in the home, with the exceptions of a trip to the hospital for Jo to deliver her son, and a canteen dance and graduation ceremony for Anne.

If the value placed on the two roles held by these women was directly proportional to the amount of film time allotted them, then one would conclude that the public perception of the role of women had not changed at all. If the public perception had changed the expectation would be to see more than just a glimpse of Ginger Rogers driving a fork lift or Claudette Colbert donning a welding mask. Such contradictions allowed the OWI to put the image of the female worker before the public, in the hopes of recruiting more women, without radically rearranging the traditional American home on screen.

Of all the types of media utilized by the OWI, the collaboration between its Radio Bureau, the WAC and the radio industry was perhaps the most successful. The extent to which radio had permeated American society by 1941 was a vital component to this success. As Gerd Horten explains, only ten percent of American families had no radio at the outbreak of the war. The other ninety percent had at least one radio and listened to an average of three to four hours of programming each day. This resulted in an estimated audience of thirty million listeners for popular “prime-time” programs.⁸⁷

The size and established daily listening habits of the radio audience made the industry the “central wartime propaganda vehicle.”⁸⁸ Through the Network Allocation Plan, Bureau head William Lewis and radio industry leaders created a tool to make the most of radio’s potential. The Allocation Plan provided a regulated stream of government messages without completely jamming the airwaves with propaganda or interfering with established programming schedules.⁸⁹ Network programs were asked to include OWI messages at scheduled intervals. For example, a sponsor of a weekly program was asked to include a message in one show out of four. The plan also called for including government messages in program plots.

The popular weekly comedy, *Fibber McGee and Molly*, provides one example of how the Network Allocation Plan was used to recruit female war workers and alter public images of women.⁹⁰ During the three-month period of December 1942 through February 1943, three programs aired that demonstrated the integration of government messages about women into the storylines. These messages, in keeping with the examples found in other media sources, presented conflicting images of the role of women.

The 8 December 1942 program entitled “Women Taking Over” was evidence of the change that was taking place in the United States just a year after Pearl Harbor. No actual recruitment message aired during the broadcast, but the entire half-hour program was dedicated to showing the numerous jobs women could perform successfully. In the course of the program Fibber and Molly encounter women working in eight different occupations including a phone repairer, a “lady cop,” and a female department store Santa Claus. In presenting the vast array of jobs women could do, “Women Taking Over” emphasized women’s ability to be “conscientious” and thorough.

At the same time women were being praised for their dedication and dependability, an entirely different message about women was interwoven into the program. This message, voiced by Fibber, contains many deeply rooted beliefs held by the collective male voice of America at the time. At the beginning of the program Fibber states that while women are “sweet and nice,” to actually accomplish anything it “takes a man.” As a direct contradiction to this statement, he encounters the highly competent women throughout the show. Each encounter with an employed woman increases his annoyance until he finally erupts, “This is too much. I’m going home and learn how to crochet.” The message that working women were disrupting the status quo is presented humorously, but is no less apparent.

“Molly Joins the WAACS” is the title of the 19 January 1943 program. Although the program focuses on recruiting women into military service rather than wartime employment, the intention of altering images of women was the same. The storyline involves Molly accompanying a friend to the WAAC recruitment center. There they are told the basic requirements for joining, as well as the benefits women receive. As the

recruitment officer explains, joining the WAACS is “a great opportunity for American women” where they can get the same pay as men, including living expenses. More importantly, of course, the message notes that the women will be helping win the war by freeing up men for front line duty. Once again Fibber voices messages for the other side by protesting loudly that Molly not join because he was her “dependent.”

The intent of the final program, from 16 February 1943, was obvious from its title, “Looking for War Workers.” The show opens with a visit from the new female mailcarrier. She delivers a government circular to Fibber advertising the need for experienced tack welders, plate hangers, and press operators. Fibber takes it upon himself to find someone to fill the government’s need. In keeping with his character, he does not go out directly recruiting women.

However, the message he reads repeatedly from the circular states “persons needed” not “men needed.” In addition, in the closing moments of the program, Jim and Marion Jordan, who played Fibber and Molly, request that any men and women who have the required skills report to the U.S. Employment Service.

Despite the fact that women were addressed directly in the closing pitch, men seem to have been the targeted audience for the message. This is illustrated by the fact that the skilled person Fibber finally succeeds in locating is a man. Another message about the role of women is presented by the mailcarrier who states she will be bringing the mail “for the duration”. This is a direct attempt to diminish the scope of women’s change by imposing a time limit on their labor force involvement.

While Fibber succeeded in presenting a number of traditional messages about women, perhaps the most striking images came from another source: the sponsor. The

Fibber McGee show was sponsored by the Johnson's Wax Company and thus contained three of their advertisements per program. These ads targeted housewives by stressing the importance of having an exceptionally clean home. The belief that women must "Make the grade as a good housekeeper" appears to go against the notion that they should leave the home to work. This is a prime example of how radio writers and advertisers succeeded in presenting conflicting messages to the women of America.

The examination of these three media sources, though limited, provides evidence of the messages the American public received during the war about the role of women in society. The extent to which these messages were present made it virtually impossible for women to escape an awareness of what the government expected of them. They were to serve their country through active participation in the work force, but this was not to come at the expense of their "natural role" as wife and mother.

By presenting these conflicting messages, the OWI and the media were able to place the role of the female war worker in the narrow category of "helpmate." This role, by not conflicting with traditional images of women as nurturing and assisting others, allowed women to move beyond the confines of the home.⁹¹

The belief that women were taking on this new role in large part to bring their own men home added to the implication that the change was a temporary one necessitated by the war. Women were portrayed as "homefront soldiers" defending the most sacred of all institutions: the American family. It was, however, this very portrayal as the representative of the family that worked to limit real changes in the status of women.⁹² By emphasizing the link between women's "primary identity" as wives and

mothers and their relationships to men, wartime propaganda helped ensure the “proper place” for American women would continue to be in the home.

When the government recruitment campaigns ended in the spring of 1944, the media images of women began to change. The messages shifted from “happy family scenes with war workers at the center” to focusing on the negative effects that working women created on the home and family.⁹³ Images of neglected children became a prevalent way to impress on America that it was time Rosie returned home.

The fact that as many as two-thirds of the women employed at the wartime peak had been in the labor force before Pearl Harbor was an issue the OWI failed to address as it began to shift to more traditional images of women.⁹⁴ Also absent from the newest round of propaganda was the extent to which women wanted to keep their new jobs. As early as 1942, as Kesselman notes, 60 percent of female shipyard workers in an *Oregonian* survey responded that they “planned to continue the same kind of work after the war.”⁹⁵ Another survey conducted during 1944 and 1945 by the Department of Labor’s Women’s Bureau found 75 percent of those who had joined the labor force during the war wished to remain in it. More specifically, they wanted to stay in the job they had.⁹⁶

Unfortunately, the desires of these women were no match for the propaganda of the OWI. The government’s focus had moved away from women as a source of labor and homefront defense to their role of preparing the homefront for the returning veterans. As Kesselman explains, “the message for women workers was that any ambition to continue in industrial work was deviant and threatening to men [returning home].”⁹⁷ Many of the women who had joined the work force during the war felt let down. Lola

Wiexel, a welder from Brooklyn, summed up what a number of these women felt: “they prepare women psychologically for whatever role society feels at that particular point they want her to play . . . After losing so many men America wanted babies. We wanted babies . . . but we gave up everything for that.”⁹⁸

The study of women’s history during the Second World War has raised many questions about the war’s impact on women. Questions remain as to the long-term influence female war workers had on the employment trends of women following the war, and on the second wave of feminism in the 1960’s. Closely linked to these investigations are studies of the government’s use of propaganda to recruit women to work.

Numerous studies of the Office of War Information provide support to the argument that the agency was actively involved in propaganda rather than a “strategy of truth.”⁹⁹ This is evidenced in the recruitment of female workers, where the agency ignored the “truth” about the number of wage earning women already employed in the labor force. By presenting an inaccurate image of the “typical war worker” as middle class, married, and in the labor force only for the duration, the OWI set the stage for a series of conflicting messages that would play throughout the war.

The OWI’s success in conveying these dual messages rested heavily on the agency’s connections with the media. Through the Magazine Bureau and War Advertising Council, the OWI was able to influence American images of women with virtually every publication sold. Likewise, the Bureau of Motion Pictures asserted its influence in Hollywood, the result being wartime movies that presented an almost unrealistic America oozing with patriotic fervor and personal sacrifices. Finally, the

OWI's Radio Bureau succeeded in harnessing the potential audience of 90 percent of Americans and fed them regular doses of propaganda.

Examination of the BMP, the Magazine Bureau, and the Radio Bureau is important to further the understanding of the magnitude and content of OWI propaganda aimed at women. The process of analyzing the media sources reveals that paradoxical images of women were frequent. Furthermore, these conflicting images of Rosie the Riveter and the helpless housewife often appear side by side in magazines, or one after another in radio programs or movies.

Given the mixed messages American women received, there is little wonder many were confused as to their proper place when the war ended. Relegated to the kitchen, many middle class women were left to lead lives that lacked the sense of fulfillment and personal satisfaction they had experienced during their wartime employment. At the same time their working class sisters were forced back into low-paying, female jobs that were deemed acceptable by society's post-war, ultra-traditional image of women. Further study of the role of the OWI in the creation and destruction of Rosie the Riveter will help increase understanding of the lives of women war workers during the war. In addition, further study will add to the academic discourse of the connection between World War II and the feminist movement of the 1960's.

¹ U.S. Department of Labor, Women's Bureau, *Changes in Women's Employment during the War*. Special Bulletin 20 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1944), 3.

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- ² Maureen Honey, *Creating Rosie the Riveter: Class, Gender, and Propaganda during World War II* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1984.)
- ³ *Ibid.*, 2.
- ⁴ William H. Chafe, *The American Woman; Her Changing Social, Economic, and Political Roles, 1920-1970* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), 183.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, 184.
- ⁶ Karen Anderson, *Wartime Women: Sex Roles, Family Relations, and the Status of Women During World War II* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1981), 160-167.
- ⁷ Susan M. Hartmann, *The Home Front and Beyond: American Women in the 1940's* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1982), 23-27.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, 20.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, 15-20.
- ¹⁰ Honey, *Creating Rosie*, 2.
- ¹¹ Amy Kesselman, *Fleeting Opportunities: Women Shipyard workers in Portland and Vancouver During World War II and Reconversion* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), 3.
- ¹¹ Leila J. Rupp, *Mobilizing Women for War: German and American Propaganda, 1939 – 1945* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), 176.
- ¹² Rupp, 94.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, 3.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 4.
- ¹⁵ Maureen Honey, "The 'Womanpower' Campaign: Advertising and Recruitment Propaganda during World War II," *Frontiers* 6 (1981), 53.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁷ U.S. Department of Labor, vi.
- ¹⁸ Chafe, 135.
- ¹⁹ Anderson, 32.
- ²⁰ Hartmann, 16.
- ²¹ Chafe, 135.
- ²² Rupp, 61.
- ²³ Hartmann, 16.
- ²⁴ Susan Douglas, *Where the Girls Are: Growing up female with the Mass Media* (New York: Times Books, 1995), 44; Eleanor F. Straub, "United States government Policy toward Civilian Women During World War II," *Prologue* 5 (1973); 245.
- ²⁵ Michael Renov, *Hollywood's Wartime Woman Representation and Ideology* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1988), 34.
- ²⁶ Chafe, 144; Hartmann, 16; Rupp, 61.
- ²⁷ Chafe, 174.
- ²⁸ Hartmann, 17.
- ²⁹ Straub, 242.
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*, 243-246.
- ³¹ "Pearl Harbor Widows," *Life*, 16 February 1942, 26-27.
- ³² Honey, *Creating Rosie*, 6.
- ³³ *Ibid.*, 28.
- ³⁴ *Ibid.*, 29.
- ³⁵ Renov, 38.
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*
- ³⁷ Honey, 28-31; Rupp, 87; Straub, 243; Koppes article 87-8.
- ³⁸ Allan Winkler, *The Politics of Propaganda The Office of War Information 1942-1945* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978), 34-5.
- ³⁹ *Ibid.*, 3.
- ⁴⁰ Honey, *Creating Rosie*, 30; Thomas Doherty, *Projections of War Hollywood, American Culture, and World War II* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 24-25; Clayton R. Koppes and Gregory D. Black, *Hollywood Goes to War How Politics, Profits and Propaganda Shaped World War II Movies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 48-49.
- ⁴¹ Renov, 78.

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- ⁴² Ibid, 84.
⁴³ Ibid.,78-84.
⁴⁴ Ibid, 1-37.
⁴⁵ Clayton Koppes and Gregory D. Black, "What to Show the World: The Office of War Information and Hollywood, 1942 -1945," *The Journal of American History* 64 (1977), 88; Winkler, 38-148.
⁴⁶ Winkler, 38-72; Honey, *Creating Rosie*; Koppes and Black, "What to Show",
⁴⁷ Renov, 85.
⁴⁸ Ibid.
⁴⁹ Ibid.
⁵⁰ Ibid.
⁵¹ Ibid., 85-86.
⁵² Ibid.
⁵³ Ibid.
⁵⁴ Ibid, 78.
⁵⁵ Ibid., 86.
⁵⁶ Honey, *Creating Rosie*, 28-31; Rupp, 87; Straub, 243.
⁵⁷ Renov, 37.
⁵⁸ Honey, *Creating Rosie*, 32.
⁵⁹ Ibid.
⁶⁰ Renov, 37.
⁶¹ Ibid., 30.
⁶² Honey, *Creating Rosie*, 31.
⁶³ Renov, 89.
⁶⁴ Ibid.
⁶⁵ "Smith Girls," *Life*, 28 September 1942, 54.
⁶⁶ Ibid.
⁶⁷ "Soldier's Wife at Work," *Life*, 7 September 1942, 39.
⁶⁸ Ibid.
⁶⁹ "Girls in Uniform," *Life*, 6 July 1942, 41.
⁷⁰ Ibid.
⁷¹ Ibid.
⁷² "Life Goes to a War Plant Beauty Dance," *Life*, 17 April 1944, 122.
⁷³ Kesselman,53.
⁷⁴ Rupp, 94.
⁷⁵ "Laundries," *Life*, 12 July 1943, 59-62.
⁷⁶ Chafe, 144.
⁷⁷ Doherty,11.
⁷⁸ Ibid.,150.
⁷⁹ Renov, 57.
⁸⁰ Koppes and Black, *What to show*, 100.
⁸¹ Renov, 49-67; Doherty, 60-84.
⁸² Ibid..
⁸³ Doherty, 155-174; Renov, 216-223; Koppes and Black, *Hollywood Goes to War*, 97-98,156-169
⁸⁴ Renov, 216-217.
⁸⁵ Koppes and Black, *Hollywood Goes to War*, 97-98.
⁸⁶ Ibid., 156.
⁸⁷ Gerd Horten, "Radio Days on America's Home Front", *History Today* 46 (1996), 46-52.
⁸⁸ Horten, "Radio Days," 47.
⁸⁹ Gerd Horten, " 'Propaganda Must Be Painless': Radio Entertainment and Government Propaganda During World War II," *Prospects* 21(1996), 374.
⁹⁰ Ibid.
⁹¹ Honey, "The 'Womanpower' Campaign," 53.
⁹² Ibid, 54.
⁹³ Ibid.
⁹⁴ Renov, 39.

⁹⁵ Kesselman, 99.

⁹⁶ Chafe, 178-179.

⁹⁷ Kesselman, 109.

⁹⁸ *The Life and Times of Rosie the Riveter*, prod. And dir. Connie Field, 65 min., Direct Cinema Limited, Inc., 1987, videocassette.

⁹⁹ Honey, *Creating Rosie*; Horten, "Radio Days", Koppes and Black, *Hollywood goes to War*.

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