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## **Government Wartime Propaganda Posters: Communicators of Public Policy**

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*This article examines government propaganda posters of World War II as vehicles of communication from the perspectives of social psychology, us versus them propaganda techniques, and twentieth century theories of semiotics. This article also discusses the symbols used in these posters from the perspective of art as a social utility and Robert Cialdini's tendencies of human behavior. The article concludes with an examination of propaganda posters in light of narratology and the critical theories of semiotics, in particular, the writings and theories of Roland Barthes.*

*KEYWORDS* *propaganda, posters, government policy, communication, social psychology, semiotics*

Propaganda is “the aggressive dissemination of a distinct point of view for a specific purpose” (Cagriota 1986, 5) and is also a “process within a social system” (Jowett 1986, 209). This should not be confused with persuasion, which is a “communicative process, the purpose of which is to influence” (Jowett 1986, 24). Propaganda uses persuasive techniques, images, wording and messages to convince the target audience that the specific perspective endorsed by the propagandist is the correct vantage point in a particular situation and should be adopted, believed or acted on by the target audience. Philosophically (and to some extent physically), political posters can claim descent from the 95 Theses that Martin Luther allegedly nailed to the door of the Wittenberg Castle Church, as well as the broadsides of the American Revolution full of liberty rhetoric. However, representations of military themes in art certainly date back to early periods, (i.e., the warriors in battle shown on some of the surviving frieze fragments from the Treasury of the

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Siphnians in Delphi and a number of battle scene depictions in Mesolithic rock paintings). The poster format was in evidence in the mid-nineteenth century where circuses were known for their colorful advertising posters. As far as considering the poster as art, many art historians credit the work of Jules Cheret for making the poster an art form, as well as an advertising medium. Cheret combined art images and text in his well-known late nineteenth century advertising posters. Cheret received the Legion of Honor from the French government primarily as recognition of his importance to this "new" art form (History of posters). He and his fellow contemporary poster artists Eugene Grasset, Alphonse Mucha, and especially Toulouse-Lautrec, created posters using images, that although still considered art, were simplified, with bolder strokes and less detail than work that had previously been judged to be art (Toulouse-Lautrec). This technique of simplification is also seen in the poster work of the American artist Edward Penfield in the same period (Edward Penfield).

The influence of these images with simplified details is readily seen in many of the propaganda posters of the two world wars. An example would be Ellsworth Young's 1918 "Remember Belgium" poster (Rawls 1988, 28). Almost two-thirds of the vertical height of the poster is a dull green background. Two black figures in silhouette fill the bottom one-third of the poster. One of the figures, a soldier wearing a German spike helmet and carrying a rifle, is pulling along a young girl who seems to be resisting. There are flames and ruined buildings in the background behind the figures. Sparks from the flames seem to go upward into the dull green background and the words "Remember Belgium" in black type take up almost the whole width of the very top of the poster. Under "Remember Belgium" in somewhat smaller white type are the words "Buy Bonds" and "Fourth Liberty Loan." There are only a few elements that make up this poster, just the starkness of the silhouetted figures against fire and ruins and the limited text. James Montgomery Flagg's poster showing Uncle Sam pointing his finger with the words "I Want You for U.S. Army" which was used in both World War I and World War II is a second example of a sparse wartime propaganda poster (American World War I Posters 2003, 5).

A parallel development in the "serious" art world was the Neo-impressionist/Post-Impressionist style as exemplified by George Seurat's "A Sunday on La Grande Jatte" exhibited in 1884 (Seurat, G. 1884). It is sometimes said that this painting, in and of itself, marked the end of Impressionism. The painting's elimination of non-essentials resulted in parsed figures, as well as precisely defined boundaries and shapes. This painting moved art in a different direction, a direction that was echoed in the simplified art of wartime propaganda posters and was a contributing factor to the acceptance of propaganda posters as art.

An examination of propaganda posters as public art makes it apparent that a successful propaganda poster surrounds its artistic forms with elements

of social influence and authority that are aimed at its target audience. A major influence in the study of the social psychology of persuasion has been Dr. Robert Cialdini. Cialdini's original six basic tendencies of human behavior can be used to judge propaganda posters from a social-psychological viewpoint.

Cialdini's approach to persuasion echoes Jowett and O'Donnell's definition of propaganda as a process within a social system. Art as a social utility is illustrated by the process of persuading through the format of a propaganda poster. This process only becomes viable when there is an audience to receive the message. In order for persuasion or propaganda to succeed, there has to be a level of social interactivity between a producer and an audience. An old philosophical riddle asks if a tree falling in the forest makes a sound if no one is there to hear it fall. Unless the laws of nature are temporarily disrupted, sound happens with or without a listener. Persuasion, by its very definition, needs two parties to succeed and a socio-cultural context within which the message or symbol will be understood.

Cialdini's original six tendencies were: *reciprocation* (if someone has done something for us, we are more likely to feel obliged to do something for them); *commitment and consistency* (once we make a decision, we have a strong incentive to stay the course and remain consistent with our original decision); *social proof* (if other people believe what we do, or behave the way we have been behaving, their belief or behavior validates our belief or behavior); *liking* (it's easier to go along with someone's point of view if you like or respect them); *authority* (an innate sense that authority should know what's best and true and therefore their positions or opinions are worthy of our agreement); and *scarcity* (something becomes more desirable when it is available in limited quantities). Cialdini wrote these six tendencies in 1984 (Cialdini, 1984) and his more recent research has added three central motivations to the scenario of social influence: "to be accurate, to affiliate and to maintain a positive self-concept" (Cialdini 2004, 592).

These nine behavioral tendencies can be roughly divided into two groups. Four deal with outsiders or *them*: reciprocation, liking or respect, influence of authority and the desire to affiliate. Five deal with *us*: commitment and consistency, social proof, scarcity, the desire to be accurate and the desire to maintain a positive self-concept. A number of the nine behavioral tendencies can be seen to be in play in wartime propaganda posters—although not every tendency applies to every poster.

Before the attack on Pearl Harbor many Americans were isolationists, a worldview that went back to George Washington's Farewell Address in 1796: "The great rule of conduct for us in regard to foreign nations is . . . to have with them as little political connection as possible" (Washington, 1796). Pearl Harbor, however, dramatically shifted the political paradigm. In a country the size of the United States it is impossible to have universal agreement on any topic, but after December 7, 1941 even as prominent an America Firster as Charles Lindbergh supported the war effort. Pearl Harbor

had made the distinction between *us* and *them* very clear. This paradigm shift reflected several of Cialdini's behavior tendencies: reciprocation, the influence of authority, the desire to affiliate, social proof, the desire to be correct, and the desire to maintain a positive self-concept (i.e., the whole country is suddenly united behind the effort of the Armed Forces to defeat the Japanese and the Germans, so it's right for me to support the war).

Reciprocal behavior was the underlying theme of a number of propaganda posters (i.e., the Armed Forces are fighting for you and the American Way and it's only right that you do something for them in return). Examples include posters that encourage people to buy War Bonds and Stamps to support the troops, i.e., "Save for Security—Buy Defense Savings Stamps Here—This Store makes Savings Stamps available to encourage Thrift and Aid our Country's Defense" (Save for Security 1941) and "Help Equip G.I. Joe with Your War Savings" (Help Equip G.I. Joe 1944). Reciprocal behavior towards the Armed Forces was also the underlying theme in a series of posters that encouraged judicious use of resources and both increased and careful industrial production on the home front with the implied message that these activities were supporting the troops and by engaging in these activities you were doing your part to help win the War. Examples of the "use resources carefully" posters include "Use it Up, Wear it Out, Make it Do!—Our Labor and Our Goods are Fighting" (Use it up), "Save Waste Fats for explosives—take them to your meat dealer" (Koerner 1943) and "We'll have Lots to Eat this Winter, won't we Mother? Grow your own—Can your Own" (We'll have lots 1943). Industrial production encouragement posters include "She's a Swell Plane—Give us more! More War Production" (She's a swell plane), a Canadian poster, "The Lives of these Men Depend on your Work" (The lives) and a British poster, "The Attack Begins in the Factory" (The attack begins). There also were propaganda posters produced by businesses and companies supporting the industrial production theme of working hard for the war effort. An example would be the Oldsmobile Company's "Together We Can Do It" poster showing two arms with their sleeves rolled up, one, (white shirt) marked "Management" and the other arm, (blue shirt) marked "Labor" (Together we can do it).

Reciprocal behavior also often includes a certain element of either shame or guilt. Though shame and guilt are closely related, recent research indicates that shame is more likely to be felt when the transgression is made public, while guilt is a more private feeling (Smith, R. 2002). Because someone else has done something for you, you might feel guilty if you don't do something in return. A striking example of a propaganda poster that takes advantage of reciprocal behavior and explicitly plays on this human tendency towards guilt and shame is a British poster with a sketch of Winston Churchill pointing his finger at the audience. There are only two words of text, "Deserve Victory!" (Deserve victory), the underlying meaning of which

is that if you don't do your part in supporting the war effort, you are not worthy to be included in the population that will enjoy victory.

Cialdini speaks of the influence of authority in persuasion. These posters, whatever their topic, were produced either directly or indirectly under governmental aegis, that aegis added an authoritative force to their message. Cialdini's identification of the importance of the influence of authority in persuasion was not a new concept. In May 1938 for example, the Institute for Propaganda Analysis published an article on "Propaganda Techniques of German Fascism." The techniques they identified included one they called *transfer*: "a device by which the propagandist carries over the authority, sanction and prestige of something we respect and revere to something he would have us accept" (Propaganda techniques 1938, 44); in other words, an earlier version of Cialdini's influence of authority. During World War II some propaganda posters took the authority theme approach in a fairly straightforward manner. The underlying concept of such posters was: "you should do this because the government says so." Examples of this approach include the posters "Your Government Warns—Prepare for Winter Now!" (Your Government Warns) and, "A Message to Our Tenants from the Government: Help Stop Fuel Waste" (A Message). Other propaganda posters that evoked governmental authority were a little more subtle, but there were two themes for which governmental authority was particularly important: the employment of women theme and the don't talk about what you know because you could be helping the enemy theme.

There were certainly women in the American workforce before Pearl Harbor, but many of the women who worked outside their homes in the prewar period were either employed in "traditional" female professions such as librarianship, teaching, or nursing, or in "service" occupations such as waitresses, secretaries, and shop clerks. Through it was not unknown before World War II for women in the United States to be employed in factories or industrial settings, (i.e., the nineteenth century Massachusetts and New Hampshire textile mills), it was not all that common.

The attack on Pearl Harbor occurred in December 1941 and by early 1942 there already were U.S. propaganda posters encouraging women to work in defense industries such as "Women in the War, We Can't Win Without Them" (Women in the war 1942) and "Women Make Army and Navy Equipment" (Women make 1942). There was a popular song in 1942 called "Rosie the Riveter" that described women working in factories and a year later Norman Rockwell created his famous "Rosie the Riveter" image (Rosie). In 1943 propaganda poster messages aimed at women had become more intense, such as "The More Women at Work, the Sooner We Win" (The more women 1943). By 1944, the message was positively blunt, "Longing won't bring him back sooner...Get a War Job!" (Longing 1944). These posters indicate that the U.S. Government realized, almost as soon as War was declared, that they needed women to work on the

home front in non-traditional occupations. These American posters are not ambiguous.

Employment by gender in prewar Britain was much the same as in the United States, including a parallel tradition of female employment in the textile mills of Lancashire and Manchester (Carruthers 1990, 236). The British government's thinking about working women was not so clear and the British confusion about the role of women was reflected in British propaganda.

Neither the British government, nor the general British population were able to fully reconcile two competing cultural cross-currents: the traditional view of women as homemakers and the need for women to join the Services and work in war industries. In the October 1939 issue of *Women's Magazine* (a month after Britain declared war on Germany), Elizabeth Lane wrote "Nothing—not even National Service—is of more vital importance than home-making and home-keeping" (Carruthers 1990, 234). As late as 1943, the then British Home Secretary Herbert Morrison described the members of the Women's Voluntary Service organization as "simply applying the principles of good housekeeping to the job of helping to run their country in its hour of need" (Westwood 1998, 3). Such a viewpoint echoed the Victorian vision of women as "angels on the hearth" but did not take into account the reality of the need for women wartime workers. In the summer before war was declared, Britain's Armed Forces and their munitions industries employed approximately 3 million men. A year later, Britain's Manpower Requirements Committee estimated that the requirement for the same two employment sectors would be over 8.5 million by the end of 1941 (Hancock 1949, 284). Ultimately more of Britain's female population was mobilized for war work than any other country (7,750,000 women or 46% of the workforce), (Carruthers 1990, 232), but early propaganda (and in particular, propaganda posters), were not particularly successful in mobilizing British women to volunteer. Britain's women became involved in war work largely due to the compulsory registration for women (between the ages of 19 and 40), introduced in 1941. Compulsory registration enabled the government to direct women into war employment where needed.

Early British propaganda posters were not very effective in prompting women to volunteer for the war effort. In 1939 the British government had commissioned a report that concluded that propaganda posters were not a particularly effective method of influencing women and that abstract concepts were not appealing to women (Carruthers 1990, 235, 242). Yet posters such as the abstract "Join the ATS" (Join the ATS 1941) poster featuring the profile of a single, well-coifed woman in what appeared to be an overseas cap, were still being produced several years into the war. (ATS was the Women's Auxiliary Territorial Service and ATS women served in such jobs as telephone operators, drivers, cooks and ammunition inspectors.) There were posters with more direct messages such as "Women of Britain Come

Into the Factories” (Women of Britain), while at the same time there were other posters conveying the message that work at home was as important as more “official” war work, [i.e., “She’s in the Ranks Too! Caring for Evacuees is a National Service” (She’s in the ranks) and “Women Wanted for Evacuation Service” (Women wanted)]. Both of these posters featured traditional images of women as nurturers, wearing aprons and holding out their arms to women and children who had been evacuated for safety reasons from urban areas.

While in such a large war effort it would not be unreasonable to see different propaganda themes aimed at different categories of women, the fact remains that British propaganda posters did not succeed in drawing women into voluntary war service and a national registration system had to be established. Much of the lack of propaganda success can be attributed to British reluctance to recruit women for war industries, (even though the women were needed); this duality can be traced to the government’s “fear of acting against the grain of tradition” (Carruthers 1990, 235). These conflicting social needs, (upholding traditional attitudes while at the same time encouraging women to volunteer for war work), resulted in inconsistent messages which confused the audience for whom the messages were intended. As Jowett states: “Successful propaganda campaigns tend to originate from a strong, centralized and decision-making authority that produces a consistent message” (1986, 157). The British propaganda message was anything but consistent. In order for propaganda to be persuasive, it cannot exist in isolation, but must be “immersed in social entity” (Ellul 1973, 264). By not paying attention to the social entity, by not addressing the oft felt hostility of British men towards women working, by encouraging women to volunteer for specific war work when at the same time actual jobs had not yet been created, by ignoring their own research as to the poor performance of abstract themes when addressing a female audience, by refusing to address the question of equal pay and by largely neglecting to provide child care for mothers engaged in war work, (in spite of promises to provide such care), (Carruthers 1990, 235, 237, 238, 241)—in short, by sending contradictory messages of equal strength, the British government itself was the basic cause of this propaganda failure.

Governmental authority on both sides of the war also supported another propaganda theme, that even seemingly innocent discussions about war work or troop movements, etc., could be overheard by the “wrong” people and the information passed on to the enemy. The basic thrust of these posters was that such behavior was both dangerous to your own side and helpful to the other side. This sentiment was shared across national boundaries as many of the fighting nations produced posters promoting this security-conscious message. Canadian posters included “A Workman Gossiped—An Enemy Agent Acted” (A workman) and “Shop Talk may be Sabotalk—The Walls have Ears” (Shop talk, 1943). Likewise a German poster shows a barber



shaving a man with a menacing shadow of a third man behind the barber and his customer. The translated text says “Well I can tell you that . . .” while underneath is a line of text which translates to “The Enemy is Listening!” (Well I can tell). Both the British and the United States governments also produced posters in this vein. British posters promoted silence with “He’s in the Silent Service, Are You?” (He’s in the silent service) and “Telling a Friend may mean Telling the Enemy” (Telling) while example of U.S. posters include “A careless word—A Needless Sinking” (A careless word 1942), the unambiguous “If you talk too much, this man may die” (If you talk 1942) and “Don’t Kill her Daddy with Careless Talk” (Don’t kill).

At least four more of Cialdini’s behavioral tendencies can be considered together and be applied to propaganda posters: the desire to affiliate, social proof, the desire to be correct, and the desire to maintain a positive self-concept. All four of these behaviors can be considered to be socially-oriented and can be viewed as behaviors that relate to group dynamics. While at first glance the desire to be correct and the desire to maintain a positive self-concept seem to be oriented towards the individual, the only way that one can judge whether an opinion is correct is to compare that opinion with the opinion of others. Similarly, a positive self-concept only makes sense in comparison to a group. This appeal to personal responsibility framed in a group dynamic which underlies these four behavioral tendencies is illustrated by the U.S. poster “What did you do today—for freedom?” (What did you do 1943). This text is underneath the image of a dead soldier lying on a battlefield. Another American example of this theme is “United we Win” (United we win 1943).

*We* is a powerful word in establishing identity with a group. *We* by very definition means us, our crowd, our side, as opposed to *them*, those others, those outsiders, those foreigners. The history of human warfare is littered with incidences of *us* versus *them* conflicts. One way nationalities establish the boundaries of their own group (*us*) and identify the excluded other (*them*) is by the use of language. The very name of the political wing of the Irish Republican Army, *Sinn Fein*, translates to “Ourselves Alone.” Much of Hitler’s original appeal to the German people in the early 1930s was based on the frequent evocation of the image of the German *Volk* (people), an almost mystical concept of Germans not so much as a country, but as a historic people.

It is not hard to understand that Hitler’s promises of a German rebirth, based on the view of the Germans as a historic and worthy people, would be welcomed by a population suffering from mass unemployment, inflation, and economic hardship, a large proportion of which many Germans blamed on the harshness of the Armistice terms (10) which ended the Great War in 1918. (Welch 2004, 217). This concept of *Volk* had evolved out of the romanticism of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In *Mein Kampf* Hitler recalls being at an early political meeting when the assembled audience

sang an old German folk song “Wir Sind ein Einig Volk” or, “We are a United People.” (Hitler 1939).

During World War II German troops were frequently reminded that they were fighting for the “Fatherland,” while Soviet Commanders spoke of “Mother Russia.” Both terms are packed with emotion and remind those who hear them of that most intimate and first group to which most people belong—the family: “In the context of persuasion, the judgments of other people in a reference group designate the social meaning [socially shared values] of attitude objects” (Cohen 2003, 808). When *I* is part of *we*, Cialdini’s social proof behavior is married to group dynamics. The behavior and beliefs of the other people in the group validate my behavior and beliefs and I in turn validate theirs. Social identity and self-categorization theorists envision an even closer relationship between individuals and the group. These theories “assume that once people start to identify with their group, their welfare becomes intertwined with the welfare of the group. According to this view, people who identify with their group may engage in activities to help the group even if it would involve making a personal sacrifice” (Van Gugt & Hart 2004, 586).

This concept of personal sacrifice for the good of the group is particularly relevant in a wartime setting and this theme was portrayed in a number of propaganda posters, [i.e., a poster showing an American soldier drinking a cup of coffee with the text, “Do with less so they’ll have enough” (Do with less 1943)]. Another sacrifice for the group-themed poster is “Millions of troops are on the move . . . is YOUR trip necessary?” (Melbourne 1943). Propaganda posters which stressed inclusion in the group include a poster quoting President Roosevelt (demonstrating government authority, as well as the group-building theme), “Every man, woman and child is a partner” (Stech 1942), and a poster showing the raising of the American flag at Iwo Jima with the text “Now . . . All Together” (Now). The U.S. government wanted the countries that were allied with America also to be viewed as part of the Allied group. Posters were produced to encourage this mind set, e.g., “The United Nations Fight for Freedom” (The United Nations 1942) where Allied national flags were displayed with an image of the Statue of Liberty, and “This Man is Your Friend: Ethiopian. He Fights for Freedom” (This man 1942).

In addition to language, propaganda posters used commonly shared symbols to encourage both goal framing and group identification including either identification with one group (*us*) or negative identification of other groups (*them*). Hitler acknowledged the importance of symbolism (and of posters) in connection with the designing of the National Socialist flag (the swastika flag): “The new flag had not only to become a symbol expressing our own struggle but on the other hand it was necessary that it should prove effective as a large poster . . . And indeed a symbol it proved to be” (Hitler 1939). Cassirer defines a symbol as “part of the human world of meaning”

(Cassirer 1944, 32) and in order for symbols to be effective, their intended audience has to share the meaning of the symbol. Visual symbols function as a kind of shorthand for an audience that understands the shared history that the symbol represents. For both the Allied and Axis Powers during the Second World War the image of the swastika, either by itself or as part of the National Socialist flag, represented Adolf Hitler, the Nazi Party and the German government. The use of the swastika as a negative symbol can be seen in American propaganda posters such as “Don’t Let that Shadow Touch Them” (Smith, L. 1941), which features an image of three young children (one holding an American flag) with the shadow of a swastika behind them and “This is the Enemy” (This is 1943) showing the image of a man’s arm in what seems to be a uniform sleeve stabbing a dagger through a bible. There is a swastika on the cuff of the uniform sleeve.

The American flag, or various versions of it, has been a symbol representing the United States since the first Flag Act was passed by the Continental Congress on June 14, 1777. Some American wartime posters showed the flag as a flag, while other posters used the general design and colors of the flag to imply the flag concept. Examples of posters using the flag as a flag are the “Remember Dec. 7th!” poster (Remember) in the middle of which is an image of a tattered American flag at half-mast, and the “Give it Your Best” (Give it 1942) poster in which the American flag takes up approximately three-quarters of the poster and the four words run across the bottom. On the other hand, the “1943 Victory Book Campaign” poster presented the image of an open book, of which the left-hand page has a dark blue background, while the right-hand page is made up of alternating red and white stripes (1943 Victory 1943). This rather abstract presentation of the design of the American flag works because the collective self of the intended audience was so familiar with the overall design of the flag, that even this abstract image evoked the actual flag and its emotional representation of patriotism.

There also were times when symbols didn’t work in wartime propaganda posters. An example of this is the “He’s Watching You” poster (Grohe 1942) produced in 1942. The symbol failed in this case, not because of the symbol itself (a German soldier), but because the image was drawn in such an exaggerated Art Deco style that a modern audience would easily be forgiven for thinking that the image was a representation of the Darth Vader character in *Star Wars*. Most Americans couldn’t identify what the image was or what it was supposed to represent and so the poster was withdrawn.

In order to be a successful method of communication, the images on propaganda posters should to be part of a substantially shared cultural narrative. The successful communication of ideas does not only rest in the knowledge of the creator, but also in the knowledge of the audience. We all are a compilation of what has gone before, but not every person’s “before” is the same as everyone else’s “before.” Differences in pre-existing knowledge exist between the producer and the receiver, but just as importantly also

exist between different receivers. While specific differences do exist, there are also major images or symbols that exist which are recognizable to a vast majority of the intended audience.

An example of such a universally recognized image would be the image of a country's national flag, or in the case of Japan, the image of a cherry blossom. Cherry blossoms have been part of the Japanese experience since at least the Heian Period (784–1185), and in the Edo Period (1603–1867) they became a symbol representing the Japanese warrior class or Samurai. At first thought, such a fragile blossom would not be one's first choice to represent warriors, but the cherry blossom's extremely short blooming period (one week to 10 days) came to represent the too-often short life of Japanese warriors. This almost universally accepted (in Japan) sign/symbol of cherry blossoms as a representation of Japanese warriors was used by the Japanese government during World War II. An example of such usage is seen in the image on the front cover of the April 2004 issue of *Anthropology Today*. The image is that of a young Naval pilot, Kazuyo Umezawa, as he prepares to take off on a kamikaze flight on April 18, 1945. This modern Japanese warrior knew that his was a one-way flight, that he would not return, and that he would die that day. A large sprig of cherry blossom is tucked into his uniform. Japanese "state propaganda anaesthetized their fatal missions, using the symbol of the cherry blossom to the extent that some pilots themselves fastened branches of cherry blossoms on their uniforms and headgear before taking off" (Front cover 2004). The symbol of cherry blossoms worked to support the Japanese war effort exactly because it was such a well-known and understood symbol or sign. Because the meaning and history of cherry blossoms was so well known in Japanese culture, the use of them was effective in wartime propaganda. The cherry blossoms told a story as well as communicating messages to their intended audience, the citizens of Japan, both those in uniform and those who were part of the home front.

Because of the intertwining position of cherry blossoms in Japanese history, that sprig of blossoms tucked into the warrior's uniform was, in and of itself, a narrative: it told a story and it was a story that was understood by its targeted audience. When one looks at wartime propaganda posters through the prism of narratology, it becomes apparent that the more skilled the artist is in narrative, the more successful a propaganda poster will be in persuading its audience to accept its point of view. The "Darth Vader" poster discussed above was a failure and had to be withdrawn because its component parts (words, image, and colors) did not tell a coherent story and its audience didn't "get it." This poster was unsuccessful because its narrative was unsuccessful. A second example of narrative meltdown was the failure of British propaganda to successfully recruit women as volunteers for war work. This failure was also very much a failure of narrative. In this situation, two opposing narratives not only competed with each other, but to add more confusion, each narrative (women are needed for war work

vs. women's work is or should be grounded in her home and children) was presented by the British government, the ultimate authority figure, especially during wartime. The narrative was further compromised by an existing, widely held concept that British women's place was in the home and on the hearth was not only accepted by many men, but by many women as well.

Looking at this scenario from an advertising or persuasion point of view, it's clear that in this instance the British government did not tailor its message to its audience. The British government was ignoring the historical continuum of its own national narrative. One of the reasons Adolf Hitler and his National Socialist Party were so successful in the 1930s was their emphasis on the concept of the German *Volk* (historic people). The National Socialists did pay attention to their own national narrative.

One-way wartime propaganda posters can be examined as vehicles of communication is by examining their self-contained narratives. For example, in Norman Rockwell's 1943 "Save Freedom of Speech—Buy War Bonds" poster (Save Freedom 1943) our eyes are drawn to the center of the image where a young man is standing surrounded by other people, all of whom are sitting. The man is dressed in what appear to be work clothes, with no tie and what looks like a rumpled plaid flannel shirt. There seems to be dirt around his fingernails, which implies he might be employed as a mechanic or handyman. Several of the people around him seem to be middle class, but even the men with ties are not wearing expensive clothes. The clothes of both the central character and the man sitting next to him on his right are somewhat crumpled, implying the gathering is being held at the end of a work day. The edge of a flag is hanging in the upper left hand side of the picture. The whole setting evokes for the viewer the atmosphere of an old-fashioned New England town meeting. The text "Save Freedom of Speech" in capital letters runs along the top frame of the picture, while the phrase "Buy War Bonds" runs along the bottom. All the visual elements, plus a number of implied elements combine together to make up the narrative of this image.

Let's depack the background and surrounding conditions in which this image first existed. This painting by Norman Rockwell was one of a series of four images (Powers of Persuasion) which Mr. Rockwell was inspired to paint following Franklin Delano Roosevelt's "Four Freedoms" speech delivered to Congress on January 6, 1941. The speech itself was at the time extremely well known and had been delivered a scant two years before, so the context of the four American freedoms identified in the speech by President Roosevelt (Freedom of Speech, Freedom of Worship, Freedom from Want, Freedom from Fear) was general knowledge. Mr. Rockwell was also then (and now) a very well-known artist with a reputation of capturing the ordinary American middle and working classes, and who illustrated what people thought of as the "American Way of Life." The flag hanging in the

corner is not identifiably an American flag, but in the above contexts, it seems a natural assumption. The inferred feeling of a town-meeting setting reflects back on one of the earliest American governance structures, the New England town meeting, and implicitly draws upon a shared history of citizen participation in government. Indeed, as of this writing, New England town meetings still exist and Vermont's State Legislature is a citizen's legislature in which anyone can serve who has lived in Vermont for two years. Vermont's legislature is a citizen-oriented governing body and reflects the history of citizen governance in New England. The figure of the working man standing up and being listened to by other citizens reinforces the concept of a historical commitment to American values, character, and citizen governance.

The timing of the publication of this image also reinforces the message, President Roosevelt's speech came in early 1941 before the United States entered the War, but by 1943 when this image was published, the country was at war and it would have been nigh impossible to find anyone in the United States who was not aware of this. The text at the bottom of the image ("Buy War Bonds") is an additional reinforcement of the government's war policy. In the main, bonds are only issued by governments to pay for government policies and programs. But bonds are not the equivalent of printing money. Bonds have to be bought in the marketplace. Rockwell's picture draws upon traditional American citizen involvement in government to encourage those same American citizens to personally contribute to the war effort by buying bonds and joining the national government as it works to protect what is thought of as traditional American freedoms.

Interestingly enough, while discussion of freedom of speech and freedom of worship are contained in early Federalist documents, freedom from want and freedom from fear were President Roosevelt's additions to the national narrative. The Declaration of Independence, after all, only declared the truth of the pursuit of happiness to be self-evident—just the pursuit, not happiness itself. Authority played a role in the President's additions being accepted so quickly into the stream of national consciousness. President Roosevelt was, after all, the president, and that office is the embodiment of authority in the United States, especially during a period of international uncertainty. President Roosevelt used his position to not only reinforce both his and the government's authority, but also used that authority to urge acceptance of his desire to spread American values, freedoms, and beliefs to the rest of the world. The President also supported his case by skillfully setting up a traditional *us vs. them* scenario in the speech's first paragraph: "At no previous time has American security been as seriously threatened from without as it is today" (Roosevelt). Combining all these elements in the speech was important because in January 1941 the United States was not yet at war. There was a large and publicly vocal isolationist sentiment among the American public, which could be traced as far back in American

public consciousness as Washington's Farewell Address: "It is our true policy to steer clear of permanent alliances with any portion of the foreign world" (Washington 1796).

Another way of examining the communications of propaganda posters is from the perspective of semiotics, or the study of signs. Arthur Asa Berger defines a sign as simply "something that can be used to stand for something else" (Berger 1984, 19), while Roland Barthes, building on the work of Ferdinand de Saussure, sees a sign as having two parts: the *signifier* (the thing itself) and the *signified* (the meaning or representation). For Barthes the *signifier* functions somewhat as a substrate (the surface upon which another substance adheres), while the *signified* is that second substance. A practical example of a substrate is a shelf (the *signifier*) to which paint (the second substance, the *signified*) is attached. Barthes' view of the relationship between the *signifier* and the *signified* goes far beyond the corporal however. In *Rhetoric of the Image* (Barthes 1995, 32–51), he deconstructs an advertisement for pasta and finds within this advertisement three messages: a linguistic message, a literal image, and a symbolic image. The linguistic message is literally comprised of the words printed as part of the advertisement. In our example above of the Rockwell propaganda poster, the linguistic message would be the actual text, "Save Freedom of Speech" and "Buy War Bonds." Barthes then goes beyond the denoted linguistic message of the text and points out that the name of the pasta manufacturer, *Panzani*, obviously is Italian and therefore this Italian name, which is part of the written text, also is a connoted or symbolic image. It connotes what Barthes calls *Italianicity*. A similar identification could be made with the term *War Bonds* in the Rockwell image. One might say that the linguistic interpretation of *War Bonds* is the war bonds themselves, while the connoted or symbolic image is support for your country in time of need.

Barthes moves on to the advertisement's literal image and here he mentions a number of elements, or what he calls *discontinuous signs*, in no particular order. There is more than pasta in the image. There are also tomatoes, onions, mushrooms, etc., which are shown as partially falling out of a string shopping bag. Barthes sees this image as a signification that these items were very recently brought from the market and that since the items have just been purchased, that they are fresh. Barthes also sees a *signifier* in the yellow, green, and red colors of the produce and the corresponding *signified* is *Italianicity*. Barthes' third sign or *signifier* is the variety of food stuffs, (i.e., tins, produce, pasta) which he sees as a corresponding *signified* which transmits "the idea of a total culinary service" (Barthes 1995, 34). Barthes' fourth sign is the careful arrangement of the objects comprising the image and he compares it to the careful arrangement of a still life. Barthes sees this as a coded-iconic message and that the very perfection of the arrangement, its placement in the magazine and the text that accompanies the image, tells the viewer that this is an advertisement.

Similar items contained in the Rockwell image include the actual image or sign of the inexpensive clothes and in particular, the style of these clothes that are worn by the central character in the image, as well as his dirty hand. The corresponding *signified* is the concept that he is a working-class man who has probably come to this meeting straight from work without having time to clean up. The inference is that whatever the topic of this meeting may be, it was more important to this man to be there and be able to give voice to his opinion, than to stop and change his work clothes. It is also possible to see a coded-iconic message in the Rockwell image.

Barthes' image is a photograph and the objects in the image are real. They have obviously been intentionally arranged and each item has been chosen to be in that particular physical place. Rockwell's image was originally a painting. The audience sees everything in this painting, from the central character's dirty hand, to his flannel work shirt, to the edge of the flag peeping in at the top-left, the way Rockwell wanted the viewer to see it. We experience the scene from Rockwell's point of view. If he had wanted to paint the man with a red flannel shirt instead of a blue one, he could have done so. Both Rockwell's image and Barthes' pasta advertisement were therefore planned compositions and the *signifiers* and the *signifieds* were planned as well.

But the planning, intention, and execution of the image by the producer may not always be recognized or responded to in the same way by different people: "What gives this system its originality is that the number of readings of the same lexical unit or *lexia* (of the same image) varies according to individuals" (Barthes 1995, 46). One viewer seeing Rockwell's image and knowing that Rockwell was from the Northeast and in fact had been living in New England for several years when the Four Freedoms images were painted, might naturally assume that the image is one of a New England town meeting. Another viewer without the same pre-existing knowledge might see the main character as a Southern or a Western farmer.

## CONCLUSION

Individual propaganda posters may or may not have been successful in communicating government policy during World War II, but by examining a large number of such posters, trends and patterns emerge. It seems fairly clear that the poster program run by the United States government was, especially in the attempt to involve women in war work, more successful than a similar poster program under the aegis of the British government. Both programs were given the stamp of approval of governmental authority, a powerful motivator in times of national crisis. Although Robert Cialdini only began to write on behavioral tendencies long after World War II had ended, most of the behavioral tendencies he later identified can be found



in many, if not most, of the posters produced by both governments. Both governments also used the *us vs. them* approach in a number of their posters. Though not every poster was equally convincing to their target audiences, both governments produced many posters with credible internal narratives that contained what Roland Barthes would later call the *signifier* and the *signified*. Ovid said: “an image is more than it appears to be” (Theories of media 2003) and as a group, many of these wartime propaganda posters had multiple levels of complexities.

In a number of ways, both the American and British posters had many of the same aims and used many of the same techniques. Why then couldn't the British poster program communicate more effectively with British women in the attempt to convince those women to do war work? I suggest that the British did not, to use a more modern term, “stay on message.” Rather than focusing on a single theme aimed at their feminine audience, they confused that audience with two wildly divergent views of the place of women in a war economy. In addition, the British government ignored the practicalities, especially the need for child care, of suddenly bringing a generation of 1930s/1940s women into the labor force. A large number of these women had never worked outside the home. Many of the women had not only to cope with the disapproval of their husbands, fathers and brothers, but their own disapproval of working women as well.

While the British ultimately had large numbers of women employed in war industries, they had to enact compulsory registration to make that happen. For any kind of communication to be successful you have to have something to say and you have to know to whom you will be saying it. The failure of the British poster program in regards to women and their involvement in war work was firstly, a failure to examine the government's own needs and their audience and secondly, a lack of a focused policy. The combination of these two elements resulted in the British propaganda poster program being a far less effective vehicle of communication of their wartime government policy than it could have been.

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