

WAR POSTER: THE HOME FRONT REFLECTED ON A SINGLE PRINTED PAGE

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War often demands attention to the battlefield. However, there is a uniqueness in the case of World War II, as the home front became an equally important element in creating an atmosphere of obligation. Although there were many mediums that facilitated this obligation, the use of government-issued posters was perhaps the most common and most effective means by which to garner support for America's war efforts. This effort to rally the American population is evident in Jon Whitcomb's 1944 naval poster, simply phrased, "I'm Proud of You Folks Too!" The study of this poster allows for an overall understanding of the period, the importance of "home-front" initiatives, and the evolving role of women in the workforce.

As it hangs in the Museum of Southern History, Whitcomb's poster, published by the US Government Printing Office, represents one of various types of propaganda posters popular during the 1940's. "To be effective, these posters depended on symbols that would be recognizable and readily understood by their viewers, conveying what their creators hoped were clear messages."¹ Although each poster had a specific theme, whether it be for buying American bonds, growing a Victory Garden, or in the case of Whitcomb's poster, idealizing the need for work, what the posters had in common was a psychological push to create a more nationalistic and socially aware population.

By understanding the significance of this poster, one can arrive at an overall understanding of the period. Because there was an increasing number of men going off to war, between 1941 and 1945 there was also an increase in the number of laborers needed to continue at-home industrialization. An underlying need for an atmosphere of nationalism arose; the level of industry needed to aid an increasingly involved world war required an enormous backing by almost everyone. Although the purchase of war bonds made up a large portion of the propaganda, at 14.8%, "home effort" themed posters, such as this one, made up a significant 6.8% of all war propaganda posters.² These posters put into perspective the efforts made by the government to include everyone in the war effort, the growing trend of nationalistic-centered advertising, and the glorification of workers and soldiers. Thus, an abundance of history is inherently a part the poster's past, enabling its more modern viewer to understand the time in which it was printed.

Furthermore, the importance of home-front initiatives becomes apparent from understanding the period. Whitcomb's piece highlights this extreme need for workers. The poster presents a Navy sailor, shaking the hand of an industrial worker, admirably looked upon by a female worker. The male industrial worker is clearly a middle-aged man, too old to enlist. The

¹ Peter Karsten, *Encyclopedia of War and American Society* (New York: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2005), 668.

² Terrence H. Witkowski, "World War II Poster Campaigns: Preaching Frugality to American Consumers," *Journal of Advertising* 32, no. 1 (2003): 72.

female, wrench in hand, is an idealized version of the female war contributor. Whitcomb's poster sheds light on the efforts made by the US government to bolster support and encouragement for those that were not able to go off to battlefields. The purpose of this poster is subtle yet understandable. It helps reassure those at home that they are a part of the war effort, while also encouraging more people to do more for the betterment of their country. Additionally, the use of brightly colored, eye-catching posters was not a mistake. "Unlike the hyperbolic propaganda of World War I, which inspired fear and hatred of the enemy, Roosevelt preferred more positive imagery that involved citizens and personalized their own war efforts."³ These positive images of war, perfectly exhibited in Whitcomb's piece, helped to incentivize those at home. Why would someone *not* want to be congratulated for one's service by a soldier?

The poster also illuminates another aspect of history: the role of women in the 1940's and their effects on the labor force. There should be no misconception, however, that women only began working during this upsurge in a need for labor. However, because of the significant increase in jobs available for women during this period, the topic is still of great significance. Between 1940 and 1945, the male labor force decreased by 16%, while female labor increased by 6%. Although there was a decline after the war, by 1947, their employment was 90% of what it was in 1944 and 140% of employment in 1940.⁴ This means that women's roles were very important to the overall production of war. This is important to Whitcomb's poster because the role women played in the propaganda posters of this century also help develop the role the posters themselves played in encouraging women to participate in larger numbers.

It is essential for the government to create posters that display women happily and pleasantly doing the work needed to continue the war effort. This is important because it shows that the posters, especially this one, attempted to "address every citizen as a combatant in a war of production; wartime posters united the power of art with the power of advertising to sell the idea that the factory and the home were also arenas of war."⁵ Women more than any other group of individuals were able to combine their efforts on the home front with their efforts made in their physical, individual homes.

This poster as a museum piece helps one see a snapshot of a past era. WWII is encapsulated in both its written and auditory history as well as its physical history. Whitcomb's poster helps develop an understanding of the period, the ideas of home front initiatives, as well as the changing role of women in society. This piece helps its viewer better understand the persistent efforts during this period to create an atmosphere of obligation.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Daron Acemoglu and David H. Autor, "Women, War, and Wages: The Effect of Female Labor Supply on the Wage Structure at Midcentury," *Journal of Political Economy* 112, no. 3 (2004): 520.

⁵ William L Bird and Harry Rubenstein, *Design for Victory: World War II Poster on the American Home Front*, (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1998), 1.

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