

Women, Propaganda, and War

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prop·a·gan·da

the spreading of ideas, information, or rumor for the purpose of supporting or damaging an institution, a cause, or a person

Description: Randolph Bourne a progressive intellectual and political thinker, wrote that “war is the health of the state.” Although this may have been exaggerated rhetoric, it is undeniable that war efforts require and thrive on patriotism. Consequently, governments need to persuade their citizens to support their decisions through propaganda. This lesson examines how government posters portrayed women differently across three separate conflicts—Spanish-American War, World War I, and World War II. The lesson will further challenge students to think about how the US government’s public information campaigns might have affected American women’s social and economic choices.

Short Description: This lesson employs political posters and cartoons from the Spanish-American War, World War I, and World War II. The purpose is to determine how the government’s message changed throughout the three separate conflicts and the effect this had on women (and society in general).

Time: 2 class periods; 95 minutes

Grade Level: 11th Grade American History

Objectives:

- Students will be able to explain how the US government portrayed women in its political propaganda during the Spanish American War, World War I, and World War II.
- Students will be able to analyze how primary source images relate to Randolph Bourne’s description of war.
- Students will be able to evaluate the extent to which social and economic opportunities and expectations changed from 1898 to 1945.
- Students will ‘curate’ an exhibition using Power Point (or Google Slides) Presentation, Blog, Adobe Spark, or another technology platform, to discuss both the purpose of political posters and analyze the posters as pieces of art.

Prerequisites: Students need to possess an understanding of propaganda and how any government or group attempts to stir their citizens to action. In addition, a basic working knowledge of the three conflicts involved in the lesson—the Spanish-American War, World War I, and World II—will be critical. Students should know the wars causes, major players, and outcomes.

Pre-Lesson Overview of Symbolism in Propaganda Posters

Begin the lesson by explaining to your students that symbolism in art has been used as a persuasive tool throughout history. In this lesson, they will explore and analyze how symbolism was used in posters and other political propaganda to gain support for the war effort.

For most of American history, classical symbolism maintained a powerful sway in the public imagination. The Founding Fathers' classical ideal was tied up with their understanding of republicanism, one of the guiding ideologies of the American Revolution, which emphasized the dual loyalties to family and the nation. In order for the nation to be strong, however, it needed good and virtuous citizens. Early Americans believed that the only way to have a strong family was through a loving and virtuous mother. Under this classical ideal, women were celebrated for their fertility and innocence. In order maintain Americans' liberty, women were vital because they were the innocent mothers who possessed the task of raising virtuous citizens. The link below provides several classical-themed political posters, which demonstrate that the virtuous woman often embodied morality, justice, determination, and duty. In addition, the posters induced both an emotional response and a patriotic call to action. All of these factors proved effective in recruiting men and women to the war effort. Americans understanding of classicism is a major reason why many men (and women) argued that women should not vote or become politicians. These people believed that women would neglect their primary duties as mothers and ruin the nation's future. Until roughly World War I, women were portrayed in this classical light that required men to protect their beauty and feminine qualities against invaders.

After the suffragist movement and female employment gains, their image in the political discussion changed. Women were increasingly portrayed without complete dependence on their role as mothers. In many ways, World War II helped eliminate the classical image in American political discussion. Women were needed in the workplace and, consequently, national recruitment posters changed to meet this new need. For example, 350,000 women joined the military and the government required political propaganda to encourage women to fill other critical positions, as well, including: nurses, factory workers, any many clerical positions. During World War II, the propaganda that recruited these women was forever altered. On political posters, American women took on characteristics, such as shorter hair styles, working clothes, and more masculine physical features that change people's perceptions. These new trailblazing trends are best remembered in the political poster depicting "Rosie the Riveter," yet they were extremely common throughout the political propaganda. As you look at the posters, look for the differences in how the women are dressed, how they carry themselves, and what the text states about their actions as citizens.

Link to Classically-Themed Posters:

The teacher will search the link below. They can also type the following message into their search engine: "classical symbolism in WWI posters." If students have their own device or can share devices, then they can perform this individually at their tables.

The teacher or student(s) should:

1. Choose one poster
2. Be prepared to discuss the symbolism of the poster and its purpose
3. Whether or not it is effective propaganda

https://www.google.com/search?tbm=isch&q=classical+symbolism+in+WWI+posters&chips=q:world+war+i+poster+columbia,online_chips:personification&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwihn62IhoncAhWkhOAKHfVfAzgQ4lYIKCgC&biw=1366&bih=635&dpr=1

Procedures:

Opening Activity: 20 minutes:

Open with a class discussion over Randolph Bourne's famous line that "war is the health of the state." Divide your students into pairs (Pair Share) to consider and answer the discussion questions.

Discussion Questions:

1. What do you think Bourne meant by this?

After discussing the quote, read an excerpt from Bourne's writing on war and its importance to the state (link below) and consider the questions below.

Document Link:

[Randolph Bourne - War is the Health of the State Excerpted.docx](#)

1. Bourne never published this essay, it was found after his death. What, if anything, should that tell us about this essay? What reasons might someone have for not publishing their writing?
2. Disregarding any potential bias, focus purely on his message: making war is critical for governments to maintain power. Do you believe he is correct, partially correct, or wrong? Why?
3. What is propaganda?
4. Once you have discussed the definition, attempt to think of two or three examples of propaganda. The following definition encompasses both the positive and negative aspects of propaganda as it relates to messaging.

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5. What role does propaganda play in encouraging people to fight for their country and support their government during difficult times?

After covering the link between war and popular public opinion, examine the role of women in this process.

1. Throughout world history, men have been the primary warriors in most societies. Women have fought bravely in many wars and have even commanded armies, but men generally make up the majority of the combatants. Understanding this, how were (are) they portrayed differently in political information? propaganda posters?
2. How do you think attitudes and roles have changed over time?

Developmental Activity: 50 minutes:

Set up six stations around the room with one political poster or cartoon at each station. For each illustration, provide only the title, any caption, and date. No more information will be given at the outset of the activity. There will be six total images with two from the Spanish-American War, two from World War I, and two from World War II. The illustrations are linked below.

Image Links:

Spanish-American War:

1. Columbia's New Easter Bonnet: <https://www.loc.gov/item/2010651396/>.
2. Cuban Melodrama: <https://herb.ashp.cuny.edu/items/show/630>.

World War I:

1. War Bonds Poster: <http://www.ww1propaganda.com/ww1-poster/women-help-americas-sons-win-war-buy-us-government-bonds-2nd-liberty-loan-1917>.
2. Don't Waste Bread: <https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/31468>.

World War II:

1. Factory Recruitment Poster: <https://vphibbswomensroles.wordpress.com/use-of-propaganda/dothejobheleftbehind/>.
2. Work Recruitment Poster: https://vphibbswomensroles.wordpress.com/use-of-propaganda/wow_woman/.

Procedures:

Divide students into six groups. Each group will assign a note taker who is responsible for completing an *Observe, Reflect, and Question* graphic organizer. The graphic organizer is linked below.

1. **Five observations:** anything that they see in the image. No observation is too small or insignificant. They should list everything that they can.
2. **Three reflections.** A reflection is an inference or hypothesis about what the students believe something means or the purpose behind it.
3. **One question.** A question can include anything that is unclear or requires additional information, three reflections, and one question at each station

Graphic Organizer Link:

[Unpacking the Box - Women, War and Propaganda.docx](#)

Working together, each group will analyze the six images and provide the outlined feedback for EACH

Allow 5-6 minutes per image and rotate until each group has interpreted each image.

Next, project each image, beginning with the Spanish-American War illustrations and continuing chronologically. Students can shout out, proceed group-by-group, or raise their hand to share their observations and reflections. Use the students' questions and an exchange of ideas to examine the themes in depth.

In closing, answer the following questions:

1. How were women portrayed during the Spanish-American War? In what ways did that image help convince Americans to go to war?
2. How were women portrayed during World War I? In what ways did that image help convince Americans to go to war?
3. How were women portrayed during World War II? In what ways did that image help convince Americans to go to war?
4. Overall, how did propaganda in regard to women change between 1898 and 1945?

Curating an Exhibit Activity: 95 minutes (1 class period)

First, as a class, consider the following question:

Women's history scholar, Doris Weatherford stated that *“War holds many ironies, and among them is its liberating effect on women.”*

1. What did Doris Weatherford mean?
2. What can this tell us about war and its effect on women?

Working together, each group of three or four will search for World War II posters that depict women. World War II era posters they believe illustrate the diverse roles and opportunities provided women in World War II. After the students have had time to look through the political posters, discuss with the students how these posters can be compared with art.

Posters as Art Discussion Points:

1. How effective was the poster's artist in creating images that emotionally impacted the viewing audience?
2. How did the artist attempt to capture “urgency” and create support?
3. Are any of the posters they selected in museums and private collections today?
4. How can art and history be linked together?

Purpose Discussion:

1. After looking at the posters, each group should pick out one poster and be prepared to discuss the main point of that propaganda poster.

After concluding the discussion, the students should set about selecting their posters, defining the purpose behind them, and analyzing their effect. The final outcome will be a technology-based presentation (on essentially any platform) and the requirements are enumerated below.

Curated Exhibition Requirements:

1. Create an exhibit using some type of technology platform
 - a. Power Point (or Google Slides) Presentation
 - b. Blog
 - c. Adobe Spark
 - d. Any Other Technology Platform

2. A Minimum of 4 Key Goals for the Political Propaganda
3. An Example of Each Goal
 - a. The selection of a specific poster that visually addresses that goal
4. Labeling Each Piece in their Exhibit
 - a. Date (if known)
 - b. Artist (if known)
5. Brief Explanation of Each Poster
 - a. How does the poster represent women in the war effort?
 - b. Were their contributions essential?
 - c. How do posters shape that perception?
6. An introduction (or headnote) or conclusion that examines the importance of World War II as a turning point for women.
 - a. Can be placed at the beginning or end of the exhibit, but must:
 - i. Describe why or why not World War II was a turning point, socially and economically, for women.
 - ii. Explain the overall change (or lack thereof) that came about as a result of World War II.

Closing Activity (Assessment or Homework): 5 minutes:

Return to Bourne's analysis and close with the following questions.

1. If governments depend on the people's support to successfully fight wars, how have different conceptions of women's role been used to produce a fighting spirit in the country?
2. To build on that, how did women, consciously or unconsciously, use that to their advantage in creating social or economic change?

Future Research/Resources: Optional:

Students, in groups or individually, will create a modern-day propaganda poster illustrating women. The purpose should be to think critically about women's role in society and how a government, business, or other type of entity might use that to gain popular support for a war or other cause. Students can personalize their cause, if they have a solid plan. Otherwise, they should focus on modern women and the propaganda that might be used to push war aims on the country.

Before they begin, consider the following discussion questions.

1. Is social media the propaganda tool of the 21st century?
 - a. If yes, how? Draw comparisons to messaging through propaganda posters and social media.
2. How effective is social media as a tool of propaganda?
3. Who benefits or is hurt by it?
4. Are there any rules that should be placed on it? Why or why not?

Specifications: Teachers can allow students to use any or all of the following formats:

1. Poster (any available size)
2. Slide presentation
3. Adobe Spark
4. Any other online formatting option

Grading Criteria:

1. Creativity
2. Demonstrates understanding of the complexity surrounding American women's social expectations and economic circumstances today
3. Full participation by all group members

Materials:

Teacher will need access to a project and their images, copies of the Bourne reading (electronic delivery if possible), and computers for additional research.

Sources/Links:

“Columbia’s Easter bonnet.” <https://www.loc.gov/item/2010651396/>.

“Do the job he left behind – Apply U.S. Employment Service.”
<https://vphibbswomensroles.wordpress.com/use-of-propaganda/dothejobheleftbehind/>.

Don’t waste bread! <https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/31468>.

Randolph Bourne, “War is the Health of the State.” <http://www.panarchy.org/bourne/state.1918.html>.

“The Cuban Melodrama.” <https://herb.ashp.cuny.edu/items/show/630>.

“The girl he left behind is still behind him: She’s a WOW.”
https://vphibbswomensroles.wordpress.com/use-of-propaganda/wow_woman/.

“Women! Help America’s sons win the war – Buy U.S. Government Bonds, 2nd Liberty Loan of 1917.”
<http://www.ww1propaganda.com/ww1-poster/women-help-americas-sons-win-war-buy-us-government-bonds-2nd-liberty-loan-1917>.

Common Core Standards:

- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.2: Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary that makes clear the relationships among the key details and ideas.
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.7: Integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information presented in diverse formats and media (e.g., visually, quantitatively, as well as in words) in order to address a question or solve a problem.
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.9: Integrate information from diverse sources, both primary and secondary, into a coherent understanding of an idea or event, noting discrepancies among sources.

C3 Standards:

- D1.5.9-12. Determine the kinds of sources that will be helpful in answering compelling and supporting questions, taking into consideration multiple points of view represented in the sources, the types of sources available, and the potential uses of the sources.
- D2.His.1.9-12. Evaluate how historical events and developments were shaped by unique circumstances of time and place as well as broader historical contexts.
- D2.His.14.9-12. Analyze multiple and complex causes and effects of events in the past.
- D2.His.16.9-12. Integrate evidence from multiple relevant historical sources and interpretations into a reasoned argument about the past, multiple sources, while acknowledging counterclaims and evidentiary weaknesses.

Additional Standards – Visual Arts, literacy, and technology.

- Anchor Standard #8. Interpret intent and meaning in artistic work.
- Anchor Standard #11. Relate artistic ideas and works with societal, cultural and historical context to deepen understanding
- VA:Pr6.1.IIIa Curate a collection of objects, artifacts, or artwork to impact the viewer's understanding of social, cultural, and/or political experiences
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.W.6: Use technology, including the Internet, to produce and publish writing and to interact and collaborate with others.
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.W.7: Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects based on focused questions, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.
- CCSS.SMP 3, SL 5 Create presentations for a variety of audiences and purposes with use of appropriate transitions and animations to add interest.

- **Unpacking the Box**
- **Women, War, and Propaganda**

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- Poster Title
- Date:

Caption:

Five Observations

Anything you see in the image. No observation is too small or insignificant.

Three Reflections

A reflection: What do you believe is the meaning and/or purpose of this image?

One Question

What is unclear or requires additional information?