



THE WAR

A KEN BURNS FILM



DIRECTED AND PRODUCED BY KEN BURNS AND LYNN NOVICK

Art and Propaganda

TEACHER NOTE: This lesson plan is structured as an online lesson to be conducted with the use of a computer. Since some classrooms are not equipped to provide computer access for all students and teachers may choose not to conduct the lesson in this manner, the materials presented can also be downloaded and printed for classroom use.

Subjects: History, English, Social Studies

When the United States was plunged into World War II, government officials initially worried about generating a “total war” effort from the civilian population. They knew the enemy had a massive headstart on building its armies and raising the consciousness of its population. By 1941, America had spent half of the past twenty years trying to forget its last war and for the past nine years had staggered under the continual body-blows of an economic depression. As devastating as Pearl Harbor was to the American spirit, the government knew it had to mount a massive effort to get the country emotionally mobilized for what it knew would be an unprecedented war effort.

Propaganda is a vital tool in any war. It can come in many forms through different media - film, print, radio and television broadcasts, and public rallies. Poster propaganda is an old method of solidifying the hearts and minds of the public, but in the 20th century with advances in photography and color printing, it became an effective art form and weapon in waging war. Soon after the attack on Pearl Harbor, the government launched an aggressive propaganda campaign to galvanize public support. It recruited some of the nation's most talented artists and filmmakers to wage this portion of the war effort.

Effective propaganda takes the complex and simplifies it down to a very basic message, couched in terms of good and evil - we're good, their evil. Period. The images and messages are choreographed to hammer at human emotions. The newsreels and posters targeted specific audiences for specific purposes. Warnings of what Americans would lose if victory wasn't achieved. Pleas for buying war bonds to fund funding the war effort. Encouraging people to gladly accepting societal changes like racial integration and women in the workforce. And always pushing and prodding for more effort, more production, more sacrifice because homefront

sacrifices could never compare with sacrifices on the battlefield. Most people understood the effort as oversimplification. But as the reality of war stormed into American's consciousness, on the battlefield and at home, people began to understand the importance of the messages sent through the newsreels and posters.

Procedure:

In this activity, you will view clips from the film series *THE WAR* that focus on key themes and examine how these themes were reflected in propaganda posters. The video clips often contain segments of newsreel stories that introduce the theme. These are followed by commentary from some of the reoccurring characters in the series. A set of discussion questions follow to help you explore the themes and propaganda messages in more detail. In culminating activities, you will create a presentation that examines the composition of propaganda posters and their effectiveness in communicating their message. You will also have the opportunity to create a propaganda poster on a current topic.

Objectives:

The student will -

- Understand the importance of propaganda posters and newsreel films in a nation's war effort.
- Identify the ways propaganda posters appeal to human emotions in conveying their message and motivating people to take action.
- Analyze how the propaganda posters created during World War II reflected real-life conditions and sent messages of encouragement and inclusion to civilians.
- Create a multi-media presentation that illustrates and analyzes ways propaganda poster art is an effective tool in a war effort.
- Create their own propaganda poster art on current issues of interest to them.

Lesson Content:

Why We Fight

U.S. government officials understood that the attack on Pearl Harbor had angered the American public, but that the initial shock could subside quickly into despair or uncontrolled anarchy. To bolster morale and focus the public's attention on gearing up for war, the government launched a full force media blitz that explained why fighting this war was necessary.

1. Begin by reviewing the film clip "Why We Fight".
[\(http://www.pbs.org/thewar/search_details.php?id=5245&type=3\)](http://www.pbs.org/thewar/search_details.php?id=5245&type=3)
2. Then discuss the following questions:
 - a. What are the messages presented in the newsreel "Why We Fight"?
 - b. Why do you think Burnett Miller at first believed the war time propaganda was "an awful lot of baloney?" How did his attitude change later as the war progressed?
 - c. Examine the propaganda posters individually, and describe how well each might shape the thinking of people like Burnett Miller.
 - d. Do you think such persuasion techniques in the posters would be effective today? Why or why not?

Suggestion: Review the first clip - *Why We Fight* - and discuss as a full class. Then divide students into small group and assign each group one of the following topics...

Buy Bonds

Fighting a war on several fronts would cost money. A lot of money. Taxes couldn't support it all, so the U.S. government asked Americans to purchase war bonds that would help fund the war in the short term and provide financial benefits to the buyer at a later date. On an almost continual basis, the government launched one bond drive after another, recruiting Hollywood movie stars, war veterans, and just common everyday folk to encourage investment in the war.

1. Review the poster images.
[\(http://www.pbs.org/thewar/search_results.php?subjects_id=20&search_type=subjects&keyword=Propaganda\)](http://www.pbs.org/thewar/search_results.php?subjects_id=20&search_type=subjects&keyword=Propaganda)
2. Discuss the following questions:
 - a. Why were movie stars recruited to help sell war bonds?
 - b. Examine the themes in the each poster example and identify the different messages each makes to appeal for funds.
 - c. Why do you think buying war bonds was important to the American public?
 - d. Why do you think Al McIntosh's editorial in the Rock County Star-Herald tried to down play the importance of movie stars on War Bond sales drives? Why might the story about Maude Jochims be more appealing to his audience?

Sacrificing and Rationing

The United States was caught almost totally unprepared for waging a total war. It had only a skeletal defense force and nearly all its industrial production was toolled for consumer products. All this changed as businesses converted peace time production to war time goods. The government imposed wage and price controls and rationed consumer goods to divert their raw elements to the war effort. The government also encouraged the public to sacrifice even more by voluntarily donating anything they could toward to help war production. The public responded with scrap drives and victory gardens.

1. Review 'rationing and recycling' in the Search and Explore
[\(http://www.pbs.org/thewar/search_results.php?subjects_id=19&search_type=subjects&keyword=Rationing%26+Recycling\)](http://www.pbs.org/thewar/search_results.php?subjects_id=19&search_type=subjects&keyword=Rationing%26+Recycling) section on the web site.
2. Discuss the following questions:
 - a. Identify items mentioned that at first glance might not be considered usable in a war. Then discuss ways rationing these items would contribute to the war effort.
 - b. According to several people featured in the film, rationing helped make people on the Home Front feel they were a part of the war effort. Review the poster examples and describe how the creators of the posters capitalized on this emotion.
 - c. Identify examples in the posters of how individuals and communities were asked to ration and sacrifice. Why do you think this generation of Americans felt such sacrifice was not only a patriotic duty, but just part of their lives? Do you think Americans today could make the same sacrifice under similar circumstances? Explain your answer.
 - d. Describe the tone of the message to the public in of many of these posters. How do they express a sense of urgency? Are they asking for cooperation or giving commands? Do you think such techniques would work today with the American public? Explain your answer.

Wartown

The Second World War changed the nature of the U.S. urban population for ever. Millions of Americans came to the cities in search of work and to do what they could to contribute. Old prejudices and social customs were deeply entrenched in the attitudes of many original residents and sometimes these became evident as the strains on increased populations and shortages of basic necessities made the newcomers less welcome. But most Americans understood the importance of war production and set aside racial prejudices and old social customs to accept the influx of new people into their communities.

1. Review the film clip and poster images. You can also download and print the transcript for review.
[\(http://www.pbs.org/thewar/search_details.php?id=5382&type=3\)](http://www.pbs.org/thewar/search_details.php?id=5382&type=3)
2. You can also download and print the transcript for review.
3. Discuss the following questions:

- a. What messages to you find in the newsreel segment called “Wartown?” How in some ways does this brief newsreel segment provide a history and geography lesson about America?
- b. The immediate conversion from peace time to war time production was nothing short of miraculous. What assets and advantages did the United States have that made such production possible?
- c. Identify the different messages these posters presented to workers in America’s defense plants. What types of emotions are inspired by these messages?
- d. In what ways might this emotional inspiration help workers feel they too were fighting the war?

Women in the War Effort

One of the more unprecedeted propaganda campaigns launched by the U.S. government was aimed at encouraging women to join the war effort. Following the lead of the Office of War Information's campaign “Women in Necessary Services,” the Saturday Evening Post commissioned artist Norman Rockwell to create the cover of its Labor Day issue featuring an illustration of a woman clad in red, white, and blue and encumbered with the accouterments of defense work, including tools for victory gardens, nursing equipment, construction gear, and surveillance and air raid warning equipment. Once again, women were asked to do it all.

1. Review the film clip and poster images.
http://www.pbs.org/thewar/search_details.php?id=5359&type=3
2. You can also download and print the transcript for review.
3. Discuss the following questions:
 - a. Describe how women like Emma Belle Petcher challenged the stereotypes about women in the workforce. Identify the ways her inherent talent helped her move up the ranks of the factory hierarchy.
 - b. Besides women having to make adjustment from the traditional role of homemaker to factory worker, wartown residents also had to adjust. Summarize the attitudes presented in the video clip as women began to work in the factories and explain why such change was difficult for some people to accept. How are some of these same issues present today?
 - c. How do the posters encourage female participation in the war effort and address the stereotypes held by many that disapprove of such participation? Describe how you see the women depicted in the posters. How realistic do you feel these representations are?
 - d. Comment on the impact of women entering the workforce during WWII and the precedent this set for later generations of women. How did the newsreels and posters help contribute to this effort? Do you feel similar media messaging on a woman's role in the work world is necessary today. If so, how might it be presented? If not, why not?

Culminating Activities

Construct a multimedia presentation featuring selections from the poster collection or go to the National Archives Powers of Persuasion website at (http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/powers_of_persuasion/powers_of_persuasion_home.html) or the University of Minnesota's Library Poster collection at (<http://digital.lib.umn.edu/warposters/warpost.html>) and make your own selections. Include period music and narration if possible. Describe the use and impact of propaganda poster as a tool in fighting a war. Use examples to illustrate how propaganda poster art targets enemies, allies, neutrals, and the Home Front. Describe the effects of propaganda poster art on how the enemy is portrayed, the civilians' acceptance of the war and the hardships it brings, and long term changes in social customs.

Construct a propaganda poster on an issue America faces today. This can be related to foreign policy, as was the propaganda posters of World War II or it can be related to other areas such the environment, the economy, community concerns or other areas of interest. In planning your poster, think about your intended audience, the overall message you want to communicate, what symbols and statements you will use to convey this message, the use of color, and how you will emotionally draw the viewer to take some sort of action.

Visit the “SEARCH AND EXPLORE”

(http://www.pbs.org/thewar/search_home.htm) section of *THE WAR* web site for more information about propaganda during World War II.

Resources

“A Summons to Comradeship” World War I and II Posters and Postcards

An extensive collection of over 8,000 posters and other items chronicling the World War experience from a multinational perspective. Collection contains posters from government, commercial, and charitable organizations covering a wide variety of subjects from war bonds to civil defense, to prices and rationing, to anti-war movements. Over 5,000 images of full-size posters are accessible and available for educational purposes.

(<http://digital.lib.umn.edu/warposters/warpost.html>)

Powers of Persuasion - The National Archives Collection of Poster Art from WWII

This online exhibit features 11 posters and 1 sound file from a more extensive exhibit that was presented in the National Archives Building in Washington, DC, from May 1994 to February 1995. Like the original, this exhibit is divided into two parts, which represent two psychological approaches used in rallying public support for the war.

(http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/powers_of_persuasion/powers_of_persuasion_home.html)

WWII Propaganda, Cartoons, Film, Music, & Art - Teacher Oz's Kingdom of History

This site offers a wide range selection of websites on war propaganda from public and private collections. The sites cover both world wars from international sources.

(<http://www.teacheroz.com/WWIIpropaganda.htm>)

War, Propaganda and the Media - Global Issues

An extensive review of the power of propaganda in a war effort, this site contains sub-sections that cover the basic elements of propaganda, its use during wartime, and how it works psychologically. Examples are also provided.

(<http://www.globalissues.org/HumanRights/Media/Military.asp>)

"wartimepropaganda" - ThinkQuest

This web site explores wartime propaganda, by detailed examination of its possibilities, ideas, and consequences. Propaganda techniques and examples of propaganda in the Spanish-American War and World War II are featured. Site also contains several lesson plans.

(<http://library.thinkquest.org/C0111500/>)

Standards

Mid-Continent Research for Education and Learning (McRel) at (<http://www.mcrel.org>)

United States History

Level III (Grades 7-8)

Standard 25: Understands the causes and course of World War II, the character of the war at home and abroad, and its reshaping of the U.S. role in world affairs

Historical Understanding

Level III (Grades 7-8)

Standard 2: Understands the historical perspective

Benchmark 2: Analyzes the influence specific ideas and beliefs had on a period of history.

Benchmark 6: Knows different types of primary and secondary sources and the motives, interests, and bias expressed in them.

Level IV (Grades 9-12)

Standard 2: Understands the historical perspective

Benchmark 11: Knows how to perceive past events with historical empathy

Visual Arts

Level IV (Grades 9-12)

Standard 4: Understands the visual arts in relation to history and cultures

Benchmark 1: Knows a variety of historical and cultural contexts regarding characteristics and purposes of works of art

Arts and Communication

Level IV (Grades 9-12)

Standard 2: Knows and applies appropriate criteria to arts and communication products

Language Arts

Level IV

Standard 4: Gathers and uses information for research purposes

Benchmark 4: Uses a variety of criteria to evaluate the validity and reliability of primary and secondary source information (e.g., the motives, credibility, and perspectives of the author; date of publication; use of logic, propaganda, bias, and language; comprehensiveness of evidence).

Standard 7: Uses reading skills and strategies to understand and interpret a variety of information texts

Benchmark 4: Uses a variety of criteria to evaluate the clarity and accuracy of information (e.g., author's bias, use of persuasive strategies, consistency, clarity of purpose, effectiveness of organizational pattern, logic of arguments, reasoning, expertise of author, propaganda techniques, authenticity, appeal to friendly or hostile audience, faulty modes of persuasion)

Thinking and Reasoning

Level IV (Grades 9-12)

Standard 2: Understands and applies basic principles of logic and reasoning

Greg Timmons has been a social studies teacher for more than 30 years. He has written lessons for and serves as an educational consultant to various PBS programs including Frontline, the NewsHour, and Washington Week. He resides in Washington state and Montana.