Winning the War on the Home Front: 
World War II Propaganda Posters

Summary
In this lesson, students examine World War II posters from the United States to learn about propagandists’ objectives and tools during wartime. Working in pairs, the students will examine nineteen propaganda posters, record the objective they think each poster was designed to achieve, and the tools used in it. Students will also be given the opportunity to view four different posters created by the Lakeland-based Florida Citrus Commission during World War II.

Objectives
Students will:
1) Learn about propagandists’ tools during wartime;
2) Examine World War II propaganda posters from the United States;
3) Discuss and record the objective they think the poster was designed to achieve and the tools used in it.

U.S. History Event
World War II

Grade Level
Middle school and high school

Materials
Copies of Student Handouts #1 & #2 for each student (or pair), one copy each of Posters #2-19, transparencies of each poster (optional)

Lesson Time
This lesson could be completed in one block period. However, feel free to use a longer period of time in order to familiarize your students with the objectives and tools that propagandists use.
Lesson

**Procedures**

1) Before class, place students in pairs. Prepare a map of the classroom for the overhead projector showing the seating arrangements for the classroom.

2) Preview activity: Using magazines and newspapers, have students choose an example of an advertisement that they find particularly effective. Tell students to cut the ad out, paste or glue it to a piece of notebook paper, and write below the ad the objective they think the ad is designed to achieve. Have them use arrows to annotate the ad and show the tools—such as humor, celebrity endorsement, emotional images, and language—the advertiser uses to achieve that objective. Have several students share their work with the class. After they have shared their work, tell them that advertising and propaganda—the spreading of ideas or beliefs to further a particular cause or damage an opposing cause—are very similar. For instance, the purpose of advertising is generally to get people to buy a product or use a service. Likewise, the purpose of propaganda is to get people to think, act, or feel a certain way. Also, advertisers and the creators of propaganda use many of the same tools—such as humor, catchy slogans, emotional images or language, caricatures, and visual symbols—to make their work effective.

3) Inform students that in this activity they will examine WWII propaganda posters from the United States to learn about propagandists’ objectives and tools during wartime. Pass out **Student Handout #1**: Propaganda Objectives and Tools, and review with students the common objectives and tools of propagandists during wartime.

4) Once students understand the common objectives and tools of propagandists during wartime, tell them that they will now analyze the objective and tools of a propaganda poster as a class. Project **Poster #1** on either a transparency or a scan converter, which shows a WWII propaganda poster depicting two children wearing gas masks on their way to school with the inscription “Dear God, keep them safe!” Have students carefully examine the image and answer these questions: **What do you see here?** **What is happening in this poster?** **What objective is this poster designed to achieve?** (the sale of war bonds) **What propaganda tools are used in this poster?** (emotional appeals, evocative visual symbols)

5) After students have analyzed the poster, give a copy of **Student Handout #2**: Notes on WWII Propaganda Posters to each student (or each pair) and one of Posters #2-19 to each pair (links to individual posters are found in the “Resources” section of this lesson). Have pairs carefully examine the poster, determine what objective they think the propaganda poster is designed to achieve and what propaganda tools were used in it, and record notes in the appropriate spaces on **Student Handout #2**.

6) When pairs finish a poster, have one partner bring the poster and both copies of **Student Handout #2** to you. Check students’ notes for accuracy and thoroughness. If their notes are satisfactory, take their poster and give them another. You may also optionally award them points. Continue this process until most pairs have had a chance to examine at least half of the placards.

7) When most pairs have examined at least half of the posters, tell them that the poster on which they are currently working is the one they will present to the class. Give them a few extra minutes to make sure they have thoroughly examined the poster and completed **Student Handout #2**.

8) When students are ready to present their posters, project **Poster #2** (either on your scan converter or as a transparency), which shows a man in chains with a sack over his head and states, “This is Nazi brutality…” Ask one of the pairs that worked on **Poster #2** to come forward and present their answers to the class. Encourage students to point out details in the poster that support their answers. Use the **Teacher’s Guide to Posters** to give students more information about the poster. Have students add to their notes on **Student Handout #2**. Repeat this process for **Posters #3-19** (if time runs short, feel free to discuss only posters that you think represent a good cross-section of differing styles of propaganda).

9) After the class has discussed all of the propaganda posters, hold a class discussion centering on these questions:
• What were some of the common objectives you identified in the propaganda posters? Could you identify any other objectives besides the ones that were listed on Student Handout #1?
• What were some of the most common tools you identified in the propaganda posters? Could you identify any other tools besides the ones that were listed on Student Handout #1? (ex.- Poster #12 uses a celebrity endorsement; some students may know that Joe Louis was the heavyweight boxing champion of the world)
• To what extent does propaganda appeal to emotions and not reason? Why do you think this is so?
• Can you think of any forms of propaganda that affect your life? How do these forms of propaganda appeal to emotions of fear, hatred, sympathy, patriotism, or consumerism?
• Have you ever been personally affected by a piece of propaganda? Explain.
• How can you recognize propaganda in today’s world? Should the government try to limit or ban propaganda? Why or why not?

**Teacher’s Guide to Posters (#2-19)**

**Poster #2:** In this poster we see a man bound in chains, with a sack placed over his head. The poster is meant to unify the country behind the war effort by showing what the Nazis were doing to the people of the nations that they were conquering. The caption “This is Nazi brutality” is reinforced by the picture and the accompanying bulletin describing the treatment of the citizens of Lidice, Czechoslovakia, at the hands of their German occupiers. In this poster we see demonization, emotional appeals, name-calling, and evocative visual symbols.

**Poster #3:** In this poster we see caricatures of Adolf Hitler and Admiral Yamamoto sneaking around the globe to attack the United States from both sides. Both brandish weapons, with blood dripping from Yamamoto’s knife. America is shown clean and unspoiled, yet defenseless against the aggression of the Axis leaders, even though neither side really had the capability of launching a full-scale invasion of the United States. The objective of this poster is to increase factory production of war materials. In this poster we see evidence of the following tools: demonization, emotional appeals, half-truths or lies, evocative visual symbols, and caricatures.

**Poster #4:** In this poster we see a giant black boot affixed with a swastika, the German National Socialist symbol, crushing a small church. The symbolism is meant to show that the Germans had no regard for religion of any kind, which was the polar opposite of the American ideal of freedom of religion. The objective of this poster is to unify the country behind the war effort by showing that the Germans would crush religion here in the United States if victorious. The tools used are emotional appeals, patriotic appeals, and evocative visual symbols.

**Poster #5:** In this poster we see a Japanese soldier hitting an American POW with the butt of his rifle while in the background a line of Americans marches in chains. Below the American POW is a headline in an American newspaper describing the Bataan Death March. The objective of this poster is to increase factory production of war materials as evidenced by the caption “Stay on the job until every murderous Jap is wiped out!” The tools used are demonization, emotional appeals, name-calling, and evocative visual symbols.

**Poster #6:** In this poster we see a knife-wielding hand stabbing a Bible. On the sleeve, we see a symbol of the familiar German swastika. Much like Poster #4, except with much stronger imagery.

**Poster #7:** At first glance, the slogan “Waste helps the enemy” appears to be supported by an assortment of pins, paper clips, and the like. With a closer look, however, one observes that these trinkets actually help to form a caricature of Adolf Hitler. The objective of this poster is to get Americans to conserve materials, using tools such as catchy slogans and humor.
Poster #8: This is arguably the most famous poster in American history. A stern-looking Uncle Sam pointing his finger with the proclamation “I want YOU for US Army” seems to personalize the message for any potential recruit walking by. The objective of this poster is the recruitment of potential soldiers. The tools used are patriotic appeals, catchy slogans, and evocative visual symbols.

Poster #9: In this poster, a man drives with an outline of Adolf Hitler in his car under the caption “When you ride ALONE you ride with Hitler.” The objective of this poster is the conservation of resources, especially oil, by showing that anyone who drives alone is wasting gasoline, thereby depleting the availability of this resource to American soldiers and unwittingly helping the enemy. The tools used are catchy slogans, evocative visual symbols, and humor.

Poster #10: A smiling, handsome young American fighter pilot looks the viewer in the eyes with the message “You buy ‘em, we’ll fly ‘em!” In the background, dozens of other fighter planes take to the sky. The objective of this poster is to convince Americans to finance the war effort through the purchase of bonds, by means of patriotic appeals, catchy slogans, and evocative visual symbols.

Poster #11: Uncle Sam joins hands with an American industrial worker to crush a walnut marked by the flags of Japan, Nazi Germany, and Italy: the Axis Powers. The picture and the slogan “Crush the Axis with unlimited production” signify the importance of American industry in the war effort. This poster has the objective of increasing factory production by using patriotic appeals, catchy slogans, evocative visual symbols, and humor.

Poster #12: Many American celebrities and athletes put their careers on hold to fight in World War II, including baseball’s Ted Williams (flew fighter planes in WWII and the Korean conflict five years later), Hollywood’s Jimmy Stewart (“It’s a Wonderful Life”), and boxing’s Joe Louis (who was heavyweight champion of the world when Japanese planes attacked Pearl Harbor). In this poster, Joe Louis is shown in basic training with the caption “Pvt. Joe Louis says ‘…we’ll win because we’re on God’s side.’” There could be more than one objective of this poster, including recruitment of soldiers and eliminating dissent. Tools used are patriotic appeals, catchy slogans, and evocative visual symbols, as well as a celebrity endorsement.

Poster #13: In this poster, three young children are seen playing in the relative security of their yard until a Nazi swastika casts an imposing shadow over them. The poster exclaims, “Don’t let that shadow touch them! Buy war bonds!” The objective is to get Americans to finance the war effort. The tools used are emotional appeals and evocative visual symbols.

Poster #14: During WWII, millions of American women left the home to take jobs in factories, and they helped to produce an unprecedented amount of war materials. This poster shows “Rosie the Riveter,” an imaginary symbol of working women across America, showing her might with the phrase “We can do it!” The objective appears to be the increase of factory production, but it could also be to unify the country behind the war effort. The tools used in this poster are patriotic appeals, catchy slogans, and evocative visual symbols.

Poster #15: “Do with less—so they’ll have enough!” is the slogan accompanying the smiling GI enjoying his rations. The objective of this poster is the conservation of resources necessary to wage war, in this case the need to ration food at home so that the troops overseas will have plenty. Tools used are emotional and patriotic appeals, catchy slogans, and evocative visual symbols.

Poster #16: An American soldier preparing to go to war hugs his child as the child cries. The caption, “We can’t all go…but we can all help!” seems to mean that the child wishes that he could go fight like Daddy. The objective is the financing of the war effort through war bonds, using tools such as emotional and patriotic appeals, catchy slogans, evocative visual symbols, and a slight touch of humor.

Poster #17: In this poster, the caption “Give ‘em both barrels!” describes the picture of the industrial worker and the soldier working together for victory almost perfectly. The objective of
this poster is the increase in factory production for the war, using the tools of patriotic appeals, catchy slogans, evocative visual symbols, and humor.

**Poster #18:** A U.S. Cadet Nurse is in the foreground, while two girls walk behind her, the expression on their faces showing that they are apparently impressed with her status. The caption reads “A lifetime education free.” The objective is the recruitment of wartime personnel (women were not allowed to be soldiers in WWII; they could only serve in support positions), using the tools of patriotic appeals and evocative visual symbols.

**Poster #19:** An oil tanker burns while sinking in the Atlantic after being torpedoed by a German U-boat under the caption “Should brave men die so you can drive?” This powerful image has the purpose of convincing Americans to conserve resources, especially oil, so that less tankers would have to risk encountering U-boats off the Atlantic coast. The tools used are emotional appeals, catchy slogans, and evocative visual symbols.
Activities

Assignments (Optional)

1) Give each student (or all pairs) all four Citrus Posters included with this lesson. Have them discuss in pairs the objectives and tools used in these posters, and answer the included questions pertaining to each poster (Citrus Posters provided with permission from Bruce Graetz at the Museum of Florida History).

2) Give students a choice of one of the following four posters and instruct them to list the objectives and tools used, then explain their choices:

- "The Sound that Kills"

- "Go Ahead, Please-Take Day Off!"

- “This is the Enemy”

- “Pitch In and Help”
Propaganda Objectives and Tools

Common Objectives of Wartime Propaganda
1. Recruitment of soldiers or other wartime personnel, either through a draft or voluntary enlistment
2. Financing the war effort through the sale of war bonds—loans from citizens to the government—or new taxes
3. Eliminating dissent and unifying the country behind the war effort
4. Conservation of resources—such as food, oil, and steel—necessary to wage war
5. Increase factory production of war materials

Common Tools Used in Wartime Propaganda

Demonization This tool involves portraying the enemy as purely evil, menacing, murderous, and aggressive. The propagandist attempts to remove all confusion and ambiguity about whom the public should hate. The enemy may be portrayed as a hairy beast or the devil himself. This tool becomes more powerful when the enemy can be blamed for committing atrocities against women, children, or other noncombatants.

Emotional Appeals This tool involves playing on people's emotions to promote the war effort. Since the strongest emotion is often fear, propagandists create their work based on the premise that the more frightened a person is by a communication, the more likely he or she is to take action. Thus, propagandists are careful to explain in detail the action that they want the consumer of the propaganda to carry out.

Name Calling This tool involves using loaded labels to encourage hatred of the enemy. Labels like “Commies,” “Japs,” and “Huns” reinforce negative stereotypes and assist propagandists in demonizing the enemy.

Patriotic Appeals This tool involves using patriotic language or symbols to appeal to people’s national pride.

Half-Truths or Lies This tool involves deception or twisting the truth. The propagandist may attempt to include some element of truth in the propaganda to make an argument more persuasive. For example, blaming the enemy for complete responsibility for the war and portraying one's own country as a victim of aggression is a common propaganda tool.

Catchy Slogans This tool involves using memorable phrases to foster support for the war effort. For example, short phrases like “Remember the Maine!” and “Remember the Alamo!” have been very successful in motivating Americans to strongly support the use of arms against Spain and Mexico, respectively.

Evocative Visual Symbols This tool involves using symbols that appeal to people's emotions—like flags, statues, mothers and children, and enemy uniforms—to promote the war effort.

Humor or Caricatures This tool involves capturing the viewer's attention through the use of humor to promote the war effort. The enemy is almost always the butt of the jokes used by propagandists.
Notes on WWII Propaganda Posters

Directions: Carefully examine each propaganda poster with your partner. Discuss and record which of the objectives listed on Student Handout #1 the poster is designed to achieve. Finally, identify and record at least two propaganda tools evident in the poster.

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This is one of a series of posters created and distributed by the Florida Citrus Commission (based in Lakeland, FL) during WWII. The virtues of grapefruit juice are extolled in this poster, as well as the reason why it and other citrus juices were in short supply during the war.

1) For what two reasons were people called upon to drink Florida grapefruit juice “over here?”

2) Why was grapefruit juice so important for American soldiers?

3) What do you think was/were the objective(s) of this WWII poster? (Hint; why would grapefruit juice be important to fight “fatigue” and “absenteeism?”)
This is another in a series of WWII posters created and circulated by the Florida Citrus Commission (Lakeland, FL). Two American soldiers are depicted here disabling a German tank.

1) In explaining to civilians why they may be unable to purchase Florida grapefruit juice, what objective(s) do you think that the creators of this poster had in mind?

2) What visual tools are employed?
This is another WWII poster created by the Florida Citrus Commission in Lakeland, FL. In this poster, an American fighter pilot drinks from a can of Florida grapefruit juice before taking to the air again to face Japanese Zero fighter planes.

1) What is/are the objectives of this poster?

2) What are the tools that the creators utilize to show the importance of Florida grapefruit juice in the war effort?
This is a WWII poster created and distributed by the Florida Citrus Commission in Lakeland, FL. A Patrol Torpedo (PT) boat is shown in combat against the Japanese Navy. The PT Boat was an 80-foot-long wooden craft that carried more firepower per pound than any other boat in the US Navy. It could accelerate from 8 to 40 knots in about 11 seconds, and was capable of reaching a top speed of roughly 48 knots. Each boat carried a fourteen-man crew, and each crewmember specialized in one or two jobs, but had a working knowledge of all duties.

1) Why would it be important for all crewmembers of a PT boat to have knowledge of all needed duties?

2) What objective (s) did the creators of this poster have in mind?

3) What are the tools used?
Assessment

Display the following WWII propaganda posters and have students decide what the objectives are for each, and the tools used:

1. **Objective**: Recruitment of soldiers  
   **Tools**: catchy slogan, evocative visual symbols

   ![Man the Guns](http://www.archives.gov/exhibit_hall/powers_of_persuasion/man_the_guns/images_html/man_the_guns.html)

2. **Objective**: Conserve resources  
   **Tools**: emotional appeals, patriotic appeals, evocative visual symbols

   ![Conserve resources](http://www.library.northwestern.edu/govpub/collections/wwii-posters/img/ww1645-54.jpg)

3. **Objective**: Increased production  
   **Tools**: catchy slogan, evocative visual symbols

   ![Increased production](http://americanhistory.si.edu/victory/9110320a.gif)

4. Which one of the following is **not** an example of objectives of wartime propaganda?
   a. Recruitment of soldiers or other wartime personnel  
   b. Financing the war effort through the sale of war bonds  
   c. Emotional appeals  
   d. Eliminating dissent and unifying the country behind the war effort  
   e. Conservation of resources necessary to wage war  
   f. Increase factory production of war materials
5. Which one of the following is **not** a common tool used in wartime propaganda?
   a. Demonization
   b. Emotional appeals
   c. Name calling
   d. Patriotic appeals
   e. Half-truths or lies
   f. Evocative visual symbols
   g. Catchy slogans
   h. Celebrity endorsement
   i. Humor or caricatures

6. True or false. Wartime propaganda is most often based on factual information.

7. True or false. Advertising and wartime propaganda are very similar in that both attempt to get people to think, act, or feel a certain way, and both use many of the same tools to make their work effective.
Resources

WWII Propaganda Poster Websites

http://www.archives.gov/exhibit_hall/powers_of_persuasion/four_freedoms/four_freedoms.html - The National Archives
“Power of Persuasion: Poster Art from World War II”

http://www.library.northwestern.edu/govpub/collections/wwii-posters/ - Northwestern University Library’s World War II Poster Collection

http://userpages.aug.com/captbarb/posters.html - World War II Women’s Recruiting Posters

http://www.wavethemes.org/~usa/posters.html - Patriotic Posters in American History

http://bss.sfsu.edu/tygiel/Hist427/1940sphotos/posters/WWIIPOSTERS.htm - World War II Propaganda Posters

http://americanhistory.si.edu/victory/ - Produce for Victory: Posters on the American Home Front (1941-45)

Special thanks to Bruce Graetz at the Florida Museum of History for providing all four posters from the Florida Citrus Commission.

The following are the URL’s for each specific poster in this lesson:

1) http://americanhistory.si.edu/victory/903773a.gif
2) http://www.library.northwestern.edu/govpub/collections/wwii-posters/img/ww0207-03.jpg
5) http://bss.sfsu.edu/tygiel/Hist427/1940sphotos/posters/antijapanese.jpg
6) http://www.library.northwestern.edu/govpub/collections/wwii-posters/img/ww1647-78.jpg
8) http://www.wavethemes.org/~usa/posters-a/uncle-sam-poster-2a2.jpg
10) http://www.library.northwestern.edu/govpub/collections/wwii-posters/img/ww0207-76.jpg
13) http://www.library.northwestern.edu/govpub/collections/wwii-posters/img/ww1646-75.jpg
14) http://www.archives.gov/digital_classroom/lessons/powers_of_persuasion/images/we_can_do_it.gif
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