

War time ads: propaganda or persuasion

War



The words propaganda and war during the twentieth century go hand in hand. Where there have been wars there have been governments ready to use all types of propaganda to gain public support. World War II was no exception, in fact, it was one of the greatest producers of political propaganda in history. The purpose of this work is to examine an ad produced by the United States government during World War II with the aim of showing that the ad does indeed reflect elements of propaganda as opposed to persuasion.

Persuasion and propaganda are inextricably linked to the history of politics. Opposing ideologies have often resorted to means of persuasion to get support from their citizens, most notably in war times. While historically crowds were persuaded through more traditional methods such as speeches and gatherings the invention of technology such as the printing press changed the methods of getting their ideas across. Politicians were able to reach a greater number of people through images and written messages. Posters and pamphlets became used with greater and greater frequency.

While Menon (2001) states that “propaganda is as old as civilization” and that “Alexander the Great understood its symbolic power and had his image etched on coins” it wasn’t until around this time that the word propaganda achieved its bad fame. While propaganda has not always been a dirty word persuasion by politicians through propaganda has made it so. A greater examination of the meanings of these two words is useful. When you look up the word persuasion in a dictionary definitions such as “causing someone to believe something by urging, arguing and convincing” comes up.

Yet, when you look up the word propaganda you get such definitions as, “ the systematic efforts to spread opinions or beliefs, especially by distortion and deception” (Gage Canadian Dictionary, p. 901). The very difference between the words convince and deceive is abysmal. Jowett and O’Donnell define propaganda as “ a form of communication that attempts to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist” (p. 1).

Yet persuasion is described as “ interactive and attempts to satisfy the needs of both the persuader and the persuadee” (Jowett and O’Donnell, 2005, p.). Although they do agree that the two are closely linked in that propaganda is a subcategory of persuasion (p. 3). In fact the word propaganda comes from the Latin root propagare, which defines the act of planting shoots (Sapre, 2004, p. 91). Spare (2004) states that “ In the same way, the authors of wartime propaganda plant an idea in the minds of the audience so that the idea becomes a part of the audience's own mind and ideology, thereby influencing not only their attitudes but also their actions” (p. 91).

In no time was it more necessary for leaders of countries to plant their ideas in their populations heads as at war time. Some of these types of propaganda may include: allusions to patriotism, glittering generalities, appealing or simple slogans, stereotyping, over simplification of complex issues and the introduction of red-herring issues (Lee, 1945, p. 126-130). When we talk of the politics of the Second World War political propaganda and its many forms are common in political speeches and paper propaganda. Propaganda was widely used by all sides in the war to form public opinion and most importantly build intense patriotism. While American

propagandists focused on the braveness of their soldiers who went off to fight the evils of fascism and defend the principles of liberty, Nazi propagandists used propaganda such as banners, posters and mass rallies to promote the notion of the Aryan race and anti-Semitic nature (Sapre, 2004, p. 95). Sapre (2004) claims that, “ The main task of the propagandists was to convince civilians that the war was their war and that survival depended upon victory” (p. 5). American propagandists took a different approach. Because the war was not brought to the American home front, American propagandists focused to a large extent on their soldiers and the support of their soldiers. In fact, propaganda reaching soldiers often reached them long before they left American soil.

Sapre claims that in World War II as in most wars soldiers entered battle “ with distorted views of the enemy because of intentional propagandistic influence. This distorted view assisted the soldier as an aggressor and met his need to justify his actions against the enemy” (p. 6). On the home front different sectors of society were bombarded with propaganda of all types and on various issues. Propaganda was spread with the intent of controlling inflation, selling war bonds, giving awards to corporations with the greatest production, selling V-mail and welcoming and integrating into society once more American soldiers. In fact, even before the war had begun the United States had “ already undertaken the largest, broadest, and most ambitious advertising campaign ever” (Brief History...).

From selling war time bonds to promoting rationing and raising moral the propagandist organizations involved, “ The work of these organizations produced the greatest volume of advertising and publicity ever given to any <https://assignbuster.com/war-time-ads-propaganda-or-persuasion/>

product or agency in the history of America” (Brief History...). It is here that the propaganda that this work has been set out to analyze should be introduced. Rationing was an essential element of controlling prices at home during the wartime. Both government and industry knew it was necessary for Americans must be more cautious in their spending habits.

In addition, beyond rationing the American populace was called upon to avoid wasting products that could be put to better use. Not only did the government and corporations call upon Americans to use their goods wisely but they attempted to convince them that the interests of all would be best served if they avoided black market purchases (Brief History...). The end result would be the control on inflation and the accessibility by everyone to less common goods. The ad analyzed here clearly falls under posters intended to persuade Americans, namely American house-wives, to ration and use their goods wisely.

A mother and daughter happily do their part in the war time effort by handing in fats and greases left over from their kitchen. In large letters are the words “ Pass the Ammunition” which is clearly a play on words of dinner time talk. More importantly there is the message that the fats and greases are equal to ammunition and that by throwing away this product she is in fact throwing away valuable ammunition needed by sons and fathers overseas. In fact, women were often told that “ food is a weapon” during the Second World War (Brief History...).

The National Wartime Nutrition Program was created and produced pamphlets and posters such as this in order to convince women to consume

less, have meatless days and to avoid throwing away anything that may be of further use (Brief History). In this particular case “ the glycerin in recycled fats was used in gunpowder, sulfa anti-infection drugs, the smallpox vaccine, and ammunition” (Brief History...). This add clearly states that, “ The fats and greases you save in your kitchen are ammunition when they reach the fighting front” (Brief History...).

Whether this ad can be considered propaganda or whether it is a simple means of persuading Americans to help out in the war effort should be closely examined. As outlined in the definition of persuasion this add does seek to “ convince” the viewer that they will be helping the war effort by providing the means of valuable ammunition. It also “ argues” that even the smallest effort makes a difference to soldiers abroad. Yet, the ad also “ distorts” the facts by claiming that left over grease and fat are the same as ammunition.

Most importantly it plays with human emotions by insinuating that women who throw away fat are in actuality directly harming soldiers on the battle field. In this sense it is to an extent deceiving because it does not fully inform those looking at it that there is a whole process that transforms fat into ammunition. Under the definition given by Jowett and O’Donnell (2005) this ad does indeed “ attempt to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist” (p. 1). Whether the needs of the persuadee would be met by her turning in fats and greases to make into weapons is questionable.

While it is clear the persuader is having its needs met by producing more ammunition with left over greases and fats the person reading this ad could very well be against the war effort and feel pushed into doing their part by insinuations that they are unpatriotic. There is a clear assumption there that all Americans support the war. If we look under the different types of propaganda listed earlier we see that this add could easily fall under propaganda that alludes to patriotism, uses simple slogans, stereotypes and over-simplifies a complex issue.

This is all done with the clear intent of influencing attitudes on wartime behavior. Upon closer reflection we can conclude that this ad attempts to play with the human emotions of the viewer. At the time anyone reading this ad would have had a brother, a son, a friend or a neighbor overseas. The insinuation that they are directly affecting the well-being of these loved ones by throwing away fats and greases distorts the reality of the situation. This ad is a good example of wartime propaganda spread by the American government and its political influences.