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An Analysis of American Propaganda in World War II and the Vietnam War

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Submitted in Partial Completion of the  
Requirements for Commonwealth Honors in History

Bridgewater State University

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## Introduction

The history of the United States is riddled with military engagements and warfare. From the inception of this country to the present day, the world knows the United States as a militaristic power. The 20<sup>th</sup> century was a particularly tumultuous time in which the United States participated in many military conflicts including World War I, World War II, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, the Persian Gulf War, and several other smaller or unofficial engagements.

The use of propaganda acts as a common thread that ties all these military actions together. Countries rely on propaganda during wartime for a variety of reasons. Among other things, propaganda can motivate soldiers to fight, instill a strong hatred for the enemy, or drum up support on the home front for the war effort. Propaganda is a key tool utilized by warring nations, and it can often be the difference between winning and losing a war. The United States is no exception to the rule that propaganda helps win wars. If used ineffectively, however, propaganda may end up costing a country the war. Susan Brewer summed up the importance of analyzing war time propaganda when she wrote:

The question to consider about official propaganda is how closely what people are told aligns with the government's objectives. Does it illuminate or obscure the actual war aims? The fundamental issue after all is the worthiness of the policy. As we will see, propaganda can promote a legitimate war such as World War II or a flawed conflict such as Vietnam.<sup>1</sup>

The juxtaposition of World War II and the Vietnam War brings to light a stark contrast in American warfare. These two major wars still remain fairly fresh in the memory of Americans, often times for very different reasons. People remember World War II as the triumph of good over evil, while Vietnam proved to be a slow and painful failure for all involved. While it is

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<sup>1</sup> Brewer, Susan. *Why America Fights: Patriotism and War Propaganda from the Philippines to Iraq*. (New York. Oxford University Press. 2009), 7.

obvious that many factors contributed to the success or failure of these wars, it is particularly interesting to examine what role propaganda played in the war effort. By analyzing the types of propaganda used, the methodology for implementation, and the reception by the public, a clear picture can be drawn regarding how propaganda shaped each war, as well as how the propaganda reflected the goals of the leaders of the country during the wars. The American propaganda in World War II was more effectively used throughout the war to address the needs of the country than the propaganda used during the Vietnam War. While the propaganda used in these conflicts may share some similarities, their differences are so significant that one may argue that the propaganda acted as one of the key decisive factors during the wars. Many people fall victim to the misconception that propaganda is synonymous with blanket statements of support which can be applied to any given situation when, in fact, this is not the case at all. The American propaganda during World War II and the Vietnam War was uniquely crafted to fit the needs of the country during each respective conflict. The values of society as well as the goals of the American leaders played a major role in determining how to use the propaganda, and these unique characteristics make this topic worthy of further an in-depth analysis.

### Why World War II and the Vietnam War

World War II and the Vietnam War are prime choices for comparing and contrasting. The wars feature several similarities making a reasonable comparison possible. At the same time, the differences between the two wars are striking, and logical conclusions can be drawn regarding the impact of propaganda on the two very different outcomes of the wars.

The similarities between World War II and the Vietnam War help to establish a foundation upon which historians can analyze the differences in propaganda. The United States

fought both wars on foreign soil, and the interests of several different nations hung in the balance. This is not a particularly unique feature for wars involving the United States, but it remains noteworthy. In addition, both World War II and the Vietnam War featured modern warfare. World War II was on the early end of modern warfare as military strategy advanced to include the use of improved weapons and technology. The Vietnam War required the adaptation of modern warfare tactics to the unique Vietnamese landscape, which proved extremely challenging. Lastly, both wars featured gradual escalation of American involvement. In neither World War II nor the Vietnam War did the United States immediately commit itself to the war effort. Instead, the Americans started on smaller scales through the lend-lease policy and the use of military advisors in World War II and the Vietnam War respectively. Gradually the United States increased its commitment to both wars until the country found itself fully involved, for better or for worse.

Despite these similarities, there are striking differences between World War II and the Vietnam War which make them prime candidates for this analysis. Historians often refer to World War II as “The Good War” for the United States.<sup>2</sup> Histories of this war depict widespread support for the American war effort against the Nazis and the Japanese. World War II was truly an all-out war that affected everyone in the country. The home front became a battle ground that was just as important to the success of the United States as the troops on the ground overseas, or so the people were told. And in the end, the Americans and the Allies were victorious.

On the other hand, many view the Vietnam War as a black mark on the record of the United States abroad. Unlike World War II, the Vietnam War featured much less emphasis on the importance of the involvement of the public on the home front. This passive attitude combined with government actions shrouded in secrecy proved to be a fatal flaw. A clear

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<sup>2</sup> Brewer. *Why America Fights: Patriotism and War Propaganda from the Philippines to Iraq*, 87.

connection can be drawn between these actions, or inactions, and the use of propaganda, and these ideas will be discussed later in this analysis. In addition, the United States simply failed to accomplish its goals in Vietnam. The United States lost the war. Most Americans view the Vietnam War as a mistake which resulted in far more harm than good. In this way, the Vietnam War is almost the polar opposite of World War II.

Given the various similarities and differences, World War II and the Vietnam War seem poised for discussion of the use of propaganda in each conflict. Areas such as the nature of the wars, the types of propaganda produced, peoples' trust in the government, peoples' sense of civic duty, and the media's involvement will all be critical components for analysis to gauge the impact that propaganda had on each war.

### **A Tale of Two Wars**

In order to gain an understanding of the role propaganda played for Americans in World War II and the Vietnam War, one must first understand the nature of each of these wars in order to highlight some of major points which dictated the various propaganda-related actions throughout the conflicts. These basic background events provide a foundation upon which the propaganda of each war can be studied to analyze the reasoning behind it and the effect on the war. This is in no way a complete history of each war; it is intended to focus on some of the key areas of the war that will be relevant to the discussion later in this piece.

#### A Brief Background of World War II

In October 1929, the stock market crashed, and this began the worst economic depression in American history. The entire world faced economic hardship during this time period. Adolf

Hitler seized the opportunity to rise to power as he worked to rebuild Germany following the devastation of World War I and the embarrassing peace agreement that followed the conflict. Initially, the world viewed Hitler as a force of good rising out of the turmoil that World War I had left in its wake. *Time* magazine even named him Man of the Year in 1938.<sup>3</sup> Soon after, however, Hitler became aggressive and began his quest for European dominance. American allies Britain and France were in need of assistance, but the United States hesitated to get involved in another world conflict. American President, Franklin D. Roosevelt implemented a temporary strategy in which he sent aid to the Allies in the form of military supplies.<sup>4</sup> The aid progressively increased, and it seemed clear to many Americans that the United States was on its way to eventually joining the conflict; it was just a matter of when and how it would happen.

Meanwhile, in the Pacific, Japan worked to establish an empire of its own. The Japanese were taking aggressive action against several areas in Eastern Asia, including areas of interest for the Allies, the United States included.<sup>5</sup> In addition, in 1940 the Japanese entered into an alliance with Germany and Italy, which caused even greater concern. The United States decided to take a strong stand against the Japanese to try to prevent any further conquests. The Americans froze all Japanese assets in the United States and implemented an oil embargo which intended to prevent Japan from getting the fuel needed to continue its conquest.<sup>6</sup> Displeased by the actions of the United States, Japan agreed to enter into negotiations. At the same time however, Japan plotted a military attack in the event that negotiations failed. In early December 1941, negotiation between the United States and Japan finally broke down, and the Japanese launched an attack on the

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<sup>3</sup> "Adolf Hitler: Man of the Year, 1938." *Time Magazine*. January 2, 1939.

<sup>4</sup> Lend Lease Bill, dated January 10, 1941. Records of the U.S. House of Representatives, HR 77A-D13, Record Group 233, National Archives.

<sup>5</sup> Brewer. *Why America Fights: Patriotism and War Propaganda from the Philippines to Iraq*, 95-98.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

American naval base at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. The attack on Pearl Harbor killed over 2,500 people.<sup>7</sup>

In his now famous speech, the day after the attack on Pearl Harbor, President Roosevelt called for Congress to declare war on Japan.<sup>8</sup> Just days after the American declaration of war against Japan, Germany decided to support its ally and declared war against the United States. These actions finally forced the United States to officially declare war against Germany, although it had been supporting the Allied effort for some time.

World War II proved to be a clearly defined conflict for the American side in most areas. The American people were united by their anger and sense of patriotism following the devastating attack on Pearl Harbor. The Americans very well knew the enemies to be Nazi Germany, Mussolini-led Italy, and the Japanese. This proved to be particularly important for propaganda purposes, and it allowed the producers of propaganda to target the clearly identified enemies and their actions. The goals of the war were clear for the most part, as well. The American reasons for fighting included: to free conquered nations, to rescue victims of persecution, and to extract revenge against the Japanese. The nature of the war allowed for the simplification of the objectives through propaganda so the government could advocate on behalf of continued action and drum up support for the war.

### A Brief Background of the Vietnam War

The Vietnam War was much less clearly defined than World War II in nearly all aspects. Congress never officially declared war against Vietnam. Instead, the war progressively escalated until the United States found itself in over its head with no clear solution for how to end the

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<sup>7</sup> Brewer. *Why America Fights: Patriotism and War Propaganda from the Philippines to Iraq*, 95-98.

<sup>8</sup> "Day of Infamy" Speech by Franklin D. Roosevelt, December 8, 1941; SEN 77A-H1, Records of the United States Senate; Record Group 46; National Archives.



conflict. The North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong fought against the American soldiers as the United States battled to prevent its communist enemies from gaining more traction in Southeast Asia. The complexity of fighting the spread of an idea rather than a single nation proved to be difficult to manage, and the United States struggled throughout the war.

The situation in Vietnam was complex even before American intervention. For hundreds of years the Vietnamese had fought for their independence against several different enemies.<sup>9</sup> Following World War II, the Cold War began, and countries of the world were forced to choose between an allegiance with the United States promoting democracy and capitalism or with the communist Soviet Union. Vietnam featured factions supportive of both of the rival powers, and the country became the setting for a showdown between the United States and communism. Looking back on the situation, many historians argue that the actions of the Vietnamese were primarily driven by nationalistic ideals. It is believed that the Vietnamese tried to use the Soviets, the Chinese, and the Americans in order to advance their own agenda.<sup>10</sup> It is unlikely, however, that the Vietnamese imagined that the conflict would erupt into such a drawn-out and costly war.

For the United States, involvement of American personnel on the ground in Vietnam began with Eisenhower's presidency when the United States began to send military advisers to South Vietnam.<sup>11</sup> President Kennedy followed in Eisenhower's footsteps and continued to view Vietnam as a key site in the fight against communism. The policy of containment continued to be publically perpetuated. The Domino Theory, which emphasized the need of the United States to prevent the fall of several countries to communism, was also used to publically rationalize decisions, although American leaders knew it to be inaccurate.<sup>12</sup> After Kennedy's assassination,

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<sup>9</sup> Lawrence, Mark. *The Vietnam War: A Concise International History*. (New York: Oxford University Press). 2010.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

Lyndon B. Johnson took office, and the American involvement in Vietnam reached its most extreme point. Johnson progressively increased the American commitment to the war, and he took advantage of a largely fictionalized attack on an American ship in the Gulf of Tonkin to get Congress to grant him unlimited power to continue the war on communism in Vietnam.<sup>13</sup>

The mounting costs, lack of progress, and unrest at home led to the eventual withdrawal from Vietnam. The Americans struggled throughout the war because of a lack of understanding of the situation as a whole. The environment was not conducive to American military tactics, and the North Vietnamese and Vietcong forces proved to be daunting foes on their home territory. The Vietnamese people did not want the Americans in their country. And despite the military supremacy of the United States, American forces were matched at every turn and could not shift momentum in their favor for an extended period of time. On the home front, the war was shrouded in secrecy and people were expected to simply give passive acceptance for the actions of the government and military officials. The United States relied primarily on propaganda in the form of censorship and did not do much to promote hands-on involvement during the war. The end objectives of the Vietnam War were unclear and often changed, and this made it difficult for people to give their support. The instability of all aspects of the war contributed to the American failure in Vietnam.

### **World War II Poster Propaganda**

Among the most well-known forms of American propaganda are the World War II posters. These posters covered a variety of topics from American strength to enemy brutality. One may easily look back on these posters from today's perspective and find some of the messages overly-exaggerated or even borderline comical. However, one must attempt to view the

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<sup>13</sup> Young, Marilyn. *The Vietnam Wars 1945-1990*. (New York: Harper Perennial, 1991), 117-20.

posters from the perspective of an individual in the midst of the largest conflict in recorded history. From this perspective the content appears more realistic and relevant to the wartime situation.

The various posters that will be discussed below served as major sources of propaganda for perpetuating the government-desired messages and attitudes during the war. Posters were a particularly convenient form of propaganda because of their versatility. The posters could be hung almost anywhere, and the different designs prevented the messages from becoming monotonous. Each poster possesses a unique message meant to promote the American war effort and encourage people on the American home front to do their part.

One of the largest categories for American poster propaganda in World War II focused on the strength of the United States. These posters were patriotic and featured red, white, and blue designs and backgrounds. The posters made use of national symbols, and they often focused on the role each individual played in the collective war effort. The posters also promoted a sense of heroism through the portrayal of strong individuals and the messages of doing one's part for the good of the country. These posters served to promote the ideas of personal accountability and civic duty at home as the United States waged war against its enemies abroad.

A different style of propaganda posters addressed the war and the need for committed citizens by showing the darker side of the conflict. These posters emphasized the risks involved in fighting the war, and they began to portray the cost of the battles. The propaganda intended to stir hatred for the enemy by instilling fear and encouraging suspicion. The posters were dark, menacing, and intimidating in order to cause an emotional reaction. One of the primary goals of any effective propaganda is to get an emotional response. These emotions could then be

harnessed and directed towards action for the desired goals, in this case supporting the war effort.

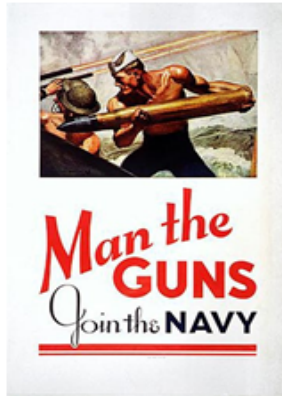
In addition to the poster discussion, the themes of the posters will be related to the Vietnam-era propaganda. During the Vietnam War, the United States did not use poster propaganda in the same manner as during World War II. As such, a direct comparison of similar works is simply impossible. However, the discrepancies between the two wars and the choice to use or not use this style of propaganda allows for a poignant discussion regarding why these decisions were made. In this manner, this section analyzes the various types of World War II propaganda while contrasting the general themes with the needs and actions of the United States during the Vietnam War.

### Masculinity and Strength

One way to gain support for an effort is to instill confidence in people. When people believe that they have the tools necessary to succeed, they are more likely to engage in a task. People do not want to go in thinking they are going to lose. The American propaganda posters promoting masculinity and strength were intended to show idealized images of people committing to the war effort. The images show strong figures at hard at work, and the propaganda producers hoped the public would desire to join the effort to fit this image. The people have hope at succeeding because they are on the same side as the heroic people portrayed on the poster.

Figure 1 is an example of a propaganda poster focusing on masculinity and strength. This poster, entitled *Man the guns- Join the Navy*, was produced for the Navy Recruitment Bureau

during World War II.<sup>14</sup> The image clearly depicts a muscular man hard at work loading artillery while on the ocean. The man appears heroic as he single-handedly loads the massive round. The



**Figure 1**

imagery likely encouraged many to do their civic duty and serve in the Navy during the war.

Not everyone would choose to join the Navy during World War II, and this was acceptable because there were still many more roles that needed to be played. Factory production proved to be one of the major roles during the war. The draft directed men of fighting age towards other the Army, but women and older men were targeted to meet other needs of a country at war. Fighting a major war means having to equip the military with all the necessary provisions and materiel to wage war effectively. Everything from uniforms to rifle rounds needed to be mass-produced, and it needed to be done quickly. Many factories that previously produced consumer goods were converted to produce military supplies during World War II.<sup>15</sup> These factories were staffed by everyday citizens trying to do their part to help the United States defeat its enemies.

Figure 2 shows a poster targeted workers in the factories producing war materials. This image is entitled *Keep 'em Fighting* and was produced for the National Safety Council.<sup>16</sup> Once

<sup>14</sup> McClelland Barclay. "Man the Guns- Join the Navy." Navy Recruiting Bureau: NARA Still Picture Branch. 1942.

<sup>15</sup> "Company History and Heritage." *General Motors*. 2003.  
<http://www.gm.com/company/historyAndHeritage/emotion.html>

<sup>16</sup> *Keep 'Em Fighting*. National Safety Council, Inc.: NARA Still Picture Branch.

again, the idealized image of a strong heroic man appears as he carries a large artillery round.

This image in factories would serve as motivation so workers would have a concrete image of



**Figure 2**

what they were working for each and every day. In addition, the poster promoted workplace safety. The factories needed to quickly produce as

much war materiel as possible, but accidents halted production

completely and needed to be avoided at all cost. The soldiers, such as the

one shown on the poster, were depending on the productivity of the

people in the factory, so the propaganda producers hoped that the workers

saw it as their civic duty to work carefully to get the materiel out safely.

The Vietnam War also required an increase in enlistment and the use of the draft, although this was nowhere near the same scale as in World War II. During World War II, approximately ten million men were drafted. Draftees made up sixty-six percent of the American armed forces for the war.<sup>17</sup> During the Vietnam War, on about two million men were drafted, and this comprised about twenty-five percent of the total American forces in Vietnam.<sup>18</sup> The reason for this major discrepancy is that the American military was much smaller prior to World War II. As tensions increased prior to the American involvement in World War II, the United States implemented its first peacetime draft to increase the size of the military for the potential war ahead.<sup>19</sup> The size and funding of the military increased exponentially under President Franklin D. Roosevelt, and this legacy carried on well into the future. As a result, by the time of the Vietnam War, the military of the United States was already much larger than it had been

<sup>17</sup> "America Goes to War." *National World War II Museum*. 2010.

<http://www.nationalww2museum.org/learn/education/for-students/ww2-history/america-goes-to-war.html> (accessed 2015).

<sup>18</sup> "Sobering Statistics for the Vietnam War." *Nation Vietnam Veterans Foundation*. 2004.

<http://www.nationalvietnamveteransfoundation.org/statistics.htm> (accessed 2015).

<sup>19</sup> Brewer, Susan. *Why America Fights: Patriotism and War Propaganda from the Philippines to Iraq*. 2009. 94.

prior to World War II, so fewer people needed to be drafted into service. In addition, the Vietnam War was a much smaller-scale war than World War II, so the numbers needed to fight proved to be fewer. Given the comparatively limited personnel needs of the United States during the Vietnam War, the United States produced far less propaganda to motivate young men to serve in the military. Drafting two million men instead of ten million helped the Kennedy and Johnson Administrations to conceal the fact that the conflict in Vietnam escalated, which served as an important goal. The secrecy of the American government during the Vietnam War limited the necessity and desire for major propaganda campaigns in the recruitment area.

### The Role of Women

American society in the World War II era featured much stricter gender roles than today's society. Women were largely restricted to a sphere of domesticity while men went out to work and provide for the family. However, during World War II a high percentage of the male workforce had to leave their normal jobs to serve in the military. This left an enormous labor shortage in the United States. The problem was compounded by the fact that the Americans needed to increase domestic production in nearly all fields in order to supply the military effort. The American government turned to women as the new supply of labor that the country so desperately needed.<sup>20</sup>

Overcoming the established gender roles of the period posed a formidable task. Not only were the women inexperienced at the jobs they would be asked to perform, but the government was also unsure that women would even be willing to enter the work force at all. The American government officials knew it would be necessary to make the jobs appealing to women in order

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<sup>20</sup> "It's a Woman's War Too!" *Powers of Persuasion: Poster Art from World War II*. Displayed May 1994-February 1995. The National Archives. Washington D.C. <http://www.archives.gov>

to help overcome the societal obstacles. An internal directive from the Office of War Information stated, “These jobs will have to be glorified as a patriotic war service if American women are to be persuaded to take them and stick to them. Their importance to a nation engaged in total war must be convincingly presented.”<sup>21</sup> This quote demonstrates the basic goals and challenges facing the Americans at the time. Times were desperate, and it was important to show women that their role would have a significant impact on the war effort. It was unlikely that women would stick to a job if it became a monotonous and thankless task, but if it could be portrayed as helping win the war then there was a greater chance they would stay.

Meeting the tall task these orders presented was left to the creators of American war propaganda who needed to rally the support and action of women. The posters produced focused on the importance of the war effort, but they also maintained a feminine touch. Similar to the portrayal of masculine men, the posters targeting women featured women who were attractive, confident, and committed to doing their jobs. The goal was to make the women on the posters relatable and role models that American women would aspire to be like.

Figure 3 entitled *Victory Waits on Your Fingers* was produced by the Royal Typewriter



**Figure 3**

Company for the U.S. Civil Service Commission.<sup>22</sup> This piece focused on the role of women in secretarial positions. The poster worked to empower women by showing that they could have a significant role in the war effort. The tagline “Keep ‘em flying, Miss U.S.A.” implied that it was up to the woman on the poster to keep the war effort going, and referring to the woman as “Miss U.S.A.” also added a sense of importance by

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Royal Typewriter Company. “Victory Waits on Your Finger Tips.” U.S. Civil Service Commission: NARA Still Picture Branch.



deeming them symbolic representatives of the United States and all this country stands for, which seems to be an appealing role. In addition, the poster continued the theme of patriotism. Red, white, and blue are the dominant colors on the poster, and subtleties such as the woman's blue eyes coupled with her red lips and white teeth perpetuated the patriotic ideals.

Given that secretarial work was not totally uncommon for women in the 1940s, recruiting them for positions such as the ones described in Figure 3 was not all that difficult. The same could not be said for all positions, though. Among the many jobs opened up to women because of the labor shortage during World War II were factory positions. Working in a factory had always been a stereotypically masculine task because of the heavy machinery involved and the unpleasant conditions inside. As such, propaganda producers needed to find a way to show women that it was acceptable to step up, be strong, and fill the factory positions all while still maintaining their femininity.

The solution to this difficult task came in the creation of a new female cultural hero: Rosie the Riveter. Figure 4, named for its tagline *We Can Do It!* was produced by Westinghouse



**Figure 4**

for the War Production Co-ordinating Committee.<sup>23</sup> Once again, the patriotic red, white, and blue colors are prevalent throughout the image. The poster portrayed Rosie as an attractive woman who willingly rolled up her sleeves and to work for the good of the country. The tagline comes in the form of a speech bubble, as Rosie encourages other women to join the war effort. Many women would likely have been hesitant about taking on a manual-labor position, but Rosie the

Riveter helped to instill confidence with her flexed muscles, stern look, and simple statement.

<sup>23</sup> Miller, J. Howard. "We Can Do It!" War Production Co-ordinating Committee: NARA Still Picture Branch.

Other posters utilized stereotypical female tendencies to help establish relatable characters that could motivate women to join the war effort. Figure 5 was produced by the Government Printing Office for the War Manpower Commission, and it is called *Longing won't bring him back sooner... Get a war job!*<sup>24</sup> The image depicts a woman whose husband has gone away to war. The papers she clutched in the picture are likely letters written by her husband. In the background a Service Flag



**Figure 5**

hangs upon the wall with a single blue star which indicates that one member of the family currently serves in the war.<sup>25</sup> She looks deep in a sad thought, likely “longing” for the return of her husband. This image of a woman in an emotionally delicate state was likely something to which many women from the time period could relate. The American government hoped to take these emotions and channel them to productivity. The poster challenges women by indicating that standing around being sad will not bring back their loved ones. Instead, women should get jobs and support the war effort. It could even be argued that the posters intended to imply that working women were helping to supply the military which would allow the United States to achieve its objectives, and the troops would be home sooner. So instead of standing around crying, the women had the opportunity to take an active role in helping their loved ones return sooner.

The role of the United States as a supplier of war materiel was as important, if not more important, to the success of the Allied nations than the contributions of the American soldiers on the ground. Prior to the outbreak of World War II, the isolationist mindset left the United States

<sup>24</sup> Wilbur, Lawrence. “Longing Won’t Bring Him Back Sooner... Get a War Job!” War Manpower Commission: NARA Still Picture Branch. 1944.

<sup>25</sup> “Blue Star Service Banner History.” *The American Legion- Post 13*. 2007. <http://www.floridalegionpost13.org/p13bluestarhistory.html#bshistory>

largely disarmed and unprepared for another worldwide military conflict.<sup>26</sup> When it became clear that the United States would once again involve itself abroad, the Americans needed to begin mass production of war materiel. The Germans believed that it would take the United States years to produce enough materiel to have an impact on the war which would have given the Axis powers enough time to defeat the Russians before having to take on the rest of the America-backed Allies. In June 1941, President Franklin Roosevelt confidently asserted that the United States was ready to produce quickly for the war at hand. He declared, “With our national resources, our productive capacity, and the genius of our people for mass-production we will... outstrip the Axis powers in munitions of war.” The American people came through on President Roosevelt’s promise, and they defied the German estimates; the re-armament production took months instead of years.<sup>27</sup> As a result, the Allies received materiel sooner, and the American military forces entered the war sooner than the Germans had anticipated or hoped. The American propaganda played a part in spurring on the public as they worked to produce war materiel which allowed for the Allied success.

During the Vietnam War, the role of women did not receive the same emphasis that it had during World War II. Women were primarily targeted during World War II because so many men had joined the service that women were needed to take over their jobs to keep up production. During the Vietnam War, this was not the case. As previously mentioned, far fewer men served in Vietnam than in World War II, so there were not nearly as many important production jobs left abandoned. The smaller scale of the war also meant that the United States needed less immediate production. The Vietnam War escalated slowly over a number of years, whereas the United States entered World War II in the thick of it and needed to play catch-up.

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<sup>26</sup> Overy, Richard. *Why the Allies Won*. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1995). 180-82.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

Also, American culture had changed between World War II and the Vietnam War. The involvement of women during World War II empowered them to begin to break away from societal norms to enter the work force on a more regular basis. Women continued to work following the end of World War II, so by the start of the Vietnam War it was no longer as unusual to have women in the work force. Because of this cultural change, propaganda was perhaps not needed during the Vietnam War to convince women that it was acceptable to step outside of the home and enter the work force for the good of the country; they were already working. In some cases, women were already directly involved in the military by the Vietnam-era. It is important to note that the propaganda during World War II encouraged women to work out of a sense of civic duty and patriotism. The women working during the Vietnam War did not receive wide-range encouragement to completely change their lifestyles in order to commit whole-heartedly to the war effort. This type of mandate would have significantly impacted American society and drawn unwanted attention to the war as the American government attempted to maintain all signs of normalcy.

Along similar lines, during his Presidency Lyndon Johnson went out of his way to show that the United States continued to progress. In May 1964, Johnson gave his famous “Great Society Speech” in which he outlined ambitious goals for the American society. Johnson stated:

I have come today from the turmoil of your Capital to the tranquility of your campus to speak about the future of your country.

“The purpose of protecting the life of our Nation and preserving the liberty of our citizens is to pursue the happiness of our people. Our success in that pursuit is the test of our success as a Nation.

For a century we labored to settle and to subdue a continent. For half a century we called upon unbounded invention and untiring industry to create an order of plenty for all of our people. The challenge of the next half century is whether we have the wisdom to use that wealth to enrich and elevate our national life, and to advance the quality of our American civilization. Your imagination, your initiative, and your indignation will determine whether we build a society where progress is the servant of our needs, or a society where old values and new visions are buried under unbridled growth. For in your time we have

the opportunity to move not only toward the rich society and the powerful society, but upward to the Great Society.<sup>28</sup>

In this speech, President Johnson subtly acknowledges the Vietnam War as the “turmoil of your Capital,” before quickly shifting the focus of the address to be on how the United States can improve domestically. During World War II the time and resources did not exist for the American leaders to focus on domestic affairs. It was simply impossible to maintain a sense of cultural normalcy, and the war time situation forced everyone to adapt to roles which contributed to an all-out war. However, during the Vietnam War, the American leaders wanted the home front to continue to operate uninhibited as illustrated by these ambitious goals for the country as well as the lack of mandated involvement in war time production previously discussed.

### Uniting for Victory

A major area for concern during World War II was the ability for the people in the country to unite together under a single objective despite their many differences. Among the most difficult obstacles to overcome were the racial issues still plaguing American society. The American government needed to find a way to include people of all racial and religious backgrounds in the war effort in order to put the United States in the best position to succeed at home and abroad.

The United States also had other reasons for needing to overcome the societal issues of the country. Arthur Upham Pope, Chairman of the Committee for National Morale, described the situation at hand and said, “We say glibly that in the United States of America all men are free and equal, but do we treat them as if they were? . . . There is religious and racial prejudice everywhere in the land, and if there is a greater obstacle anywhere to the attainment of the

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<sup>28</sup> “Remarks at the University of Michigan by Lyndon B. Johnson.” *Miller Center*. May 22, 1964.

teamwork we must have, no one knows what it is.”<sup>29</sup> Some saw the United States as particularly hypocritical for preaching freedom and equality as the main reasons for entering World War II, while back in the United States some people were not guaranteed these rights. Japanese leaders frequently questioned the U.S. belief in freedom using just this argument.<sup>30</sup> In order to salvage the image of the country while also putting forth the best possible effort for the war, the United States needed to help people overcome their differences and work together.

A phrase coined during this time period to describe the American effort was the “Double-V.” The Double-V represented victory over fascism abroad and victory over racism at home.<sup>31</sup> Both aspects of the Double-V could be achieved together which made the plan reasonably attainable. The encouragement did not stop at the catchphrase, however. The government also produced several different posters meant to encourage and demonstrate the interconnection between winning the war and overcoming racial differences.

Figure 6, entitled *United We Win* was printed for the War Manpower Commission.<sup>32</sup> The



**Figure 6**

image shows an African-American man and a Caucasian man working together to build or repair something. In the background, and notably the only part of the poster in color, is the American flag. This poster took a fairly blunt approach to the problem by simply showing men of different races overcoming their differences to work together for the good of the country. Both men are shown doing the same type of job, so no hint of discrimination exists. The flag in the back is symbolic

<sup>29</sup> “United We Win.” *Powers of Persuasion: Poster Art from World War II*. Displayed May 1994-February 1995. The National Archives. Washington D.C. <http://www.archives.gov>

<sup>30</sup> “Five Months of Axis Propaganda on the Negro Question,” December 7, 1941-May 7, 1942, OGR, RG 44, Entry 171, Box 1849, NARA.

<sup>31</sup> Kennedy, David. *Freedom From Fear: the American People in Depression and War 1929-1945*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999). 768-771.

<sup>32</sup> Liberman, Alexander. “United We Win.” War Manpower Commission: NARA Still Picture Branch. 1943.

because it flies over both men equally. Both individual work together beneath the flag, and this implies that the country itself remains the most important, not the societal differences.

Despite the attempts to eliminate racial issues in the military, the government did not do everything possible to help the situation. During World War II, many restrictions were placed on the roles in which non-whites could serve. Although the government may have been attempting to prevent racial tensions from distracting from the war effort, it is still ironic to see the government preaching unity and teamwork while limiting the roles of certain groups of people.

In some rare occasions during the war, African Americans were able to step beyond their given station in the military. One such case was that of Dorie Miller, shown on the poster in Figure 7. The poster is entitled *Above and Beyond the Call of Duty* and was produced for the Office of War Information.<sup>33</sup> Dorie Miller served in the Navy as a messman, the only Navy



**Figure 7**

position available to African-Americans in the Navy. He served on the USS *West Virginia* when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor in December 1941. Having no previous training using anti-aircraft guns, Miller used the weapon to shoot down multiple Japanese planes.<sup>34</sup> For his heroic actions, the Navy awarded Miller the Navy Cross, the medal pinned on his left chest. The Navy Cross is the second-highest honor in the Navy, ranking only behind the Congressional Medal of Honor.<sup>35</sup>

Figure 7 also provided a heroic role model for the people of the United States. In particular, Dorie Miller would appeal to African-Americans who may have been skeptical about how they would be treated in military service. This poster acted as propaganda to quell their

<sup>33</sup> Martin, David. "Above and Beyond the Call of Duty." Office of War Information: NARA Still Picture Branch.

<sup>34</sup> "Ship's Cook Third Class Doris "Dorie" Miller." *National Geographic*. 2001.

<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/pearlharbor/ngbeyond/people/>

<sup>35</sup> "Military Awards for Valor." *U.S. Department of Defense*. 2009.

<http://valor.defense.gov/DescriptionofAwards.aspx>

fears of discrimination by showing off a unique situation in which an African-American exhibited tremendous bravery and earned himself prominent recognition. In addition, this poster served as useful propaganda to Caucasians who were skeptical of the abilities of African-Americans in the military. Showing the bravery of Dorie Miller could encourage a greater acceptance for other African-Americans who had something to offer to the war effort. The case of Dorie Miller was not a common one. What was important for the government was to expose people to his story to show that the involvement of African-Americans in the military could be positive and beneficial for all. In reality, however, racial turmoil continued to be quite prominent throughout the United States.

Major American cities during World War II were particularly important because of their manufacturing capabilities. As previously noted, production served as one of the greatest assets to the United States during the war, so it was important to keep the outputs flowing. During World War II, many people migrated from rural areas to cities to take up work in the war time production factories. One of the most prominent production cities was Detroit, Michigan which also became a major battleground between races. In June 1943 riots broke out between whites and blacks in the streets of Detroit resulting in the deaths of thirty-four people.<sup>36</sup> Similar events occurred in other major cities, such as Houston, Texas. The American leaders understood that these types of conflicts were a threat to the ability of the United States to wage war effectively, so propaganda producers targeted racial issues in an attempt to quell the violence.

In a similar manner, Joe Louis played upon the beliefs of both African-Americans and Caucasians to form a united American front. Louis, shown in Figure 8 created for the NARA Still Picture Branch, was a famous African-American boxer prior to World War II.<sup>37</sup> Louis

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<sup>36</sup> Kennedy. *Freedom From Fear: the American People in Depression and War 1929-1945*, 768-771.

<sup>37</sup> "Private Joe Louis Says-." NARA Still Picture Branch.



volunteered for service in the war, and the poster in Figure 8 shows one of Louis's most famous quotes from the period in which he stated, "We're going to do our part... and we'll win because



**Figure 8**

we're on God's side." Every American had a role to play in the war effort, and Joe Louis emphasized that each person was simply going out to do his or her part. His reference to doing God's work served to unite people under the common cause of achieving the godly objectives of bringing freedom and salvation to those being oppressed overseas.

Joe Louis served as a useful figure for a poster such as this because of his popularity. Members of the African-American community as well as the white community would have known Joe Louis because of his experience as a boxer. The Army placed him in the Special Services Division which allowed for the utilization of his personality and reputation to travel the country and sell war bonds. There was still some racial discrimination towards Louis despite his celebrity status, but his situation improved greatly when he became a prominent figure in the war effort. Louis fought in several charity fights to raise funds for the American war effort.<sup>38</sup> This type of publicity and the utilization of Joe Louis as a poster-child for the war worked as useful propaganda. Joe Louis was a cultural icon that attracted attention, and he used his celebrity status to direct people of all races towards helping with the war.

Uniting for victory was an area that could have used more effective propaganda during the Vietnam War. One of the main issues with the Vietnam War was the way that it slowly escalated instead of simply having a starting point when everyone needed to be committed to the effort. By the time the United States became fully involved in Vietnam, Americans had been in

<sup>38</sup> "Joe Louis (Barrow)." *Arlington National Cemetery*. 2006. <http://www.arlingtoncemetery.net/joelouis.htm>

the country for years. This situation forced the American government to come up with new propaganda tactics to gain the support of the public.

In a manner similar to the use of Joe Louis on posters in World War II, celebrities and politicians were used during the Vietnam War to appeal for public support. The celebrities and politicians were brought to Vietnam for short visits during which they were shown how well the war was going, and they got to hear about a successful mission.<sup>39</sup> The entire visits were planned out in order to show the American war effort in the best light so that these people could return home and tell the public that they saw with their own eyes that the United States was winning the war. However, over time the media became more aware of the disingenuity of these experiences, and support began to weaken. Such will be discussed later in this piece.

The lack of an event around which people could rally proved to be another issue related to the missing sense of unity for the United States during the Vietnam War. During the lead up to World War II, people were skeptical about the involvement of the United States in a war so far from home. Opinions shifted drastically following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. The American people wanted revenge, and they were united in their anger and their sense of patriotism. The Vietnam War did not feature any such event. The closest situation the Americans had was the attack on the USS *Maddox* in the Gulf of Tonkin. The U.S. government reported that the American ship sailed in international waters when the North Vietnamese it attacked on August 2, 1964. Two days later, the North Vietnamese once again allegedly attacked the *Maddox*.<sup>40</sup> President Johnson took advantage of this situation to attempt to unite the American people by showing that the North Vietnamese were the aggressors and the United States needed to escalate the war. Johnson's tactics worked to motivate Congress to give him the power to

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<sup>39</sup> Wyatt, Clarence. *Paper Soldiers: The American Press and the Vietnam War*. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1993). 129-163.

<sup>40</sup> Young. *The Vietnam Wars 1945-1990*. 117-20.

wage war in Vietnam.<sup>41</sup> Through the information provided in the *Pentagon Papers*, the public would later find out that the government largely fabricated Gulf of Tonkin incident. According to sources, the USS *Maddox* was not in international waters and was instead on a mission in North Vietnamese waters. In addition, following the incident, American sources reported that the second attack did not actually occur. Poor weather conditions and over-zealous sailors led the Americans on the *Maddox* to fire at non-existent targets. Sources indicate that President Johnson was well aware of the possibility of the incident being untrue, but he chose to move forward with the story to use it as a piece of propaganda to unite the American people.<sup>42</sup> When the truth was eventually revealed, the public resented being lied to and the distrust between the government and the public continued to grow.

### Rationing and Salvaging in War Time

The alteration of one's lifestyle in order to accommodate the enormous needs of the military proved to be one of the most difficult parts of war for people on the home front. During the war, the government limited the amount of key items the public could purchase. In some cases, civilians were not allowed to buy certain items at all because of their scarcity and the demand for them on the front lines. Some of the most common items that were rationed during World War II included: gasoline, rubber, sugar, butter, and meat. The military needed each of these items in high quantities to either supply or feed the soldiers. Limitations such as these could often cause unrest among the civilian population of the home front. As such, it was necessary to create propaganda which encouraged rationing and salvaging of materials and goods

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<sup>41</sup> Young. *The Vietnam Wars 1945-1990*. 117-20.

<sup>42</sup> Brewer. *Why America Fights: Patriotism and War Propaganda from the Philippines to Iraq*, 191.

by showing people why these actions were important, or in some cases what the consequences would be for not doing so.

Figure 9 is a poster entitled *Waste Helps the Enemy*, and it was produced by the Douglas Aircraft Company, NARA Still Picture Branch.<sup>43</sup> The image features various pieces of scrap



**Figure 9**

metal arranged on a paper to form the face of Adolf Hitler, the leader of Nazi Germany. The message in the poster is straightforward, and it argues that materials that are wasted and end up thrown away take away from the American war effort. These actions end up helping the American enemies, such as Hitler. During a time when metal was in particular high demand, the American government needed to emphasize the importance of conserving and not being wasteful. The

propaganda producers hoped to equate wastefulness with the heinous and treasonous crime of aiding the enemy. No one wanted to be labeled as a traitor or have it said that he or she was not doing his or her part, so everyone needed to put forth the extra effort to monitor the use and conservation of material.



**Figure 10**

The utilization of Hitler-related imagery became a common theme for American propaganda during World War II. Figure 10 uses Hitler's image to emphasize the conservation of gasoline. The image is entitled *When You Ride Alone You Ride With Hitler!*, and it was printed by the Government Printing Office for the Office of Price Administration.<sup>44</sup> The image shows a man driving alone in his car with

<sup>43</sup> Vanderlaan. "Waste Helps the Enemy." Douglas Aircraft Company; NARA Still Picture Branch.

<sup>44</sup> Pursell, Weimer. "When You Ride Alone You Ride With Hitler!" Office of Price Administration; NARA Still Picture Branch. 1943.

an outlined figure resembling Adolf Hitler in the passenger seat. The outlining of Hitler intended to show him riding along in a metaphorical sense. Much like the metal materials discussed in the previous image, gasoline was an important resource to conserve during the war effort. Because of this, the government used propaganda such as Figure 10 to encourage people to car-pool to their various destinations, such as work. Car-sharing clubs, as they were known during the time period, became a popular way for people to limit their use of gasoline as a resource by driving with other people instead of each individual having his or her own vehicle.<sup>45</sup> Once again, this type of propaganda played upon people's perceptions of each other, as to whether or not they were fully committed to the war effort. If someone was seen driving around alone that could hurt his or her reputation, and no one wanted to be accused of not backing the American war effort wholeheartedly in the fight for freedom against the enemy regimes abroad.



**Figure 11**

Figure 11 takes a slightly different approach to the goals of rationing and conservation. The image was produced by the Government Printing Office for the Office of War Information and is titled *Save Waste Fats for Explosives*.<sup>46</sup> While this poster does feature conservation, it appears to also be informational. The previous two posters, Figures 9 and 10, equated inaction with helping Hitler, but this poster shows how one's actions can help the Americans in the war. The

image on the poster helps to establish a simple message: waste fats lead to explosives. The correlation between the fats and the explosives was not nearly as simple as the poster implied, but this type of imagery allowed people to feel that their actions played an important role in the war effort. It is unlikely that people would have understood the intricacies of using waste fats

<sup>45</sup> Nelson D. Chan & Susan A. Shaheen (2012): Ridesharing in North America: Past, Present, and Future, *Transport Reviews*, 32:1, 93-112.

<sup>46</sup> Koerner, Henry. "Save Waste Fats for Explosives." Office of War Information: NARA Still Picture Branch. 1943.

within an explosive device, so propaganda such as this simplified the message to give people clear and basic information to guide their actions. This poster also served as an educational directive. Previously, most people would have simply discarded their waste fat after cooking, but this poster told them that they needed to bring it to the meat dealer. The propaganda in Figure 11 kept everything simple: people were told what to do, and they were told why.

Rationing and salvaging serve as ways for people to feel directly connected to a war effort. While doing so may be inconvenient in the moment, people have the ability to look back and know that their efforts contributed to the war effort. Even in the moment, this contribution can be a meaningful expression of civic duty. Not everyone has the ability to go out and enlist in the military to directly fight the enemy, but during war time the actions of those on the home front become nearly as important as those of the soldiers fighting the physical war abroad. The propaganda in World War II effectively harnessed the public's desire to contribute to the war effort through the various rationing and salvaging campaigns. While some people still may have not felt whole-heartedly connected to the war effort, being directly involved and having a tangible contribution helped to promote widespread support.

The Vietnam War simply lacked these types of contributions from the home front. As previously mentioned, the scale of the Vietnam War was significantly smaller than that of World War II. The Vietnam War was not truly an all-out war, so the United States was not forced to take the drastic actions utilized in World War II to ensure the military was adequately supplied. The Vietnam War did not require wide-range rationing and salvaging of materials, so people did not have the connection to the war effort that their counterparts did during World War II.

The government officials during the time period likely viewed the lack of rationing and salvaging during the Vietnam War as a positive. The limiting of the use of particular materials or

goods would have drawn greater attention to the escalating conflict in Vietnam, and this could have had negative ramifications. The American government relied on the public's passive acceptance of the war in Vietnam in order to be able to conduct war time operations on their own accord. If rationing and salvaging measures had been implemented, then more attention would have been drawn to the war, and this could have led the public to question the war itself. During World War II, the general consensus was that the United States had no choice but to go to war, so rationing and salvaging were accepted as the necessary effects of joining the war. During the Vietnam War, no such consensus existed. Because of this, it was in the best interest of the American government to keep the public in the dark as long as possible.

To further illustrate this point, in July 1965 President Johnson discussed the current economic position of the United States. A reporter asked President Johnson if he felt that the United States could have guns and butter for the foreseeable future. President Johnson replied:

I have not the slightest doubt but whatever it is necessary to face, the American people will face. I think that all of us know that we are now in the 5 ad month of the prosperity that has been unequaled in this Nation, and I see no reason for declaring a national emergency and I rejected that course of action earlier today when I made my decision. "I cannot foresee what next year, or the following year, or the following year will hold. I only know that the Americans will do whatever is necessary. At the moment we enjoy the good fortune of having an unparalleled period of prosperity with us, and this Government is going to do all it can to see it continue."<sup>47</sup>

The ability of the American people to continue and prosper despite the war proved to be beneficial to both the public and to Johnson. If the American people continued to succeed economically, then there would be less attention placed on the war in Vietnam. Typically when a country at war struggles financially, the citizens argue that the war wasted important government funds which should be spent domestically. President Johnson hoped that the economy would continue to grow in order to prevent people from questioning the war due to economic unrest.

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<sup>47</sup> "Press Conference by Lyndon B. Johnson." *Miller Center*. July 28, 1965.

## The Dangers of War

While most of the previous propaganda examples were intended to instill feelings of patriotism and motivate people to join the war effort, some propaganda meant to frighten the public into committing to the war. This genre of posters focused on the risks and costs associated with the war being waged abroad. World War II was a unique conflict, and officials felt that a the public needed a different type of propaganda to truly get the people to commit their support. A statement on the current information objectives from the Office of Facts and Figures read, “Commercial advertising usually takes the positive note in normal times... But these are not normal times; this is not even a normal war; it's Hell's ideal of human catastrophe [sic], so menace and fear motives are a definite part of publicity programs, including the visual.”<sup>48</sup> This quote sums up the objectives of the propaganda producers. The previous propaganda posters discussed, Figures 1-11, would have been examples of the commercial advertising that was normally applicable to this area. However, conflicts before World War II were dwarfed in comparison to the scale and magnitude of the Second Great War, so new methods for drumming up support were needed. This new style of propaganda focused on the visuals that could instill



**Figure 12**

feelings of fear to direct people towards the proper war time actions as decided by the government officials.

Figure 12 was produced by the General Motors Corporation and is entitled *WARNING! Our Homes Are in Danger Now*.<sup>49</sup> The poster shows Japanese leader Hideki Tojo (left) and German leader Adolf Hitler (right) peering over the edges of a globe and looking at

<sup>48</sup> “Warning!” *Powers of Persuasion: Poster Art from World War II*. Displayed May 1994-February 1995. The National Archives. Washington D.C. <http://www.archives.gov>

<sup>49</sup> “WARNING! Our Homes Are in Danger Now!” General Motors Corporation: NARA Still Picture Branch. 1942.



the United States. Both men are armed, and Tojo's knife even has blood on it. This poster uses an aggressive depiction of the enemy to try to get people in the United States motivated for action. The phrase at the bottom of the poster reads, "Our homes are in danger NOW!" This phrase coupled with the image would have been sure to get people's attention. The poster instills a sense of fear and urgency, and the propaganda producers hoped to channel these emotions into positive action. The circular logo in the bottom right corner of the poster directs people on where to channel these emotions. The logo features an American tank and plane, and it says, "Our job: Keep 'em firing." During World War II General Motors Company was among several manufacturing groups converted from normal commercial production to military supplier. As such, the employees of the General Motors Company would have been among the people helping to supply American soldiers who were on the front lines defending American homes against the likes of Tojo and Hitler, or so the propaganda posters would have them believe.<sup>50</sup> A poster such as this in the workplace at General Motors intended to inspire a stronger work ethic and by instilling a sense of civic duty to the soldiers as they fought against those threatening the United States.

Some of the propaganda hoped to motivate people in other ways besides promoting a stronger effort in the work place. One of the other areas of focus for war time propaganda was war bonds. The American government sold war bonds to the public to help finance the war. People would exchange money for a war bond, and after the war finished the bonds could be cashed. The system basically functioned as the government taking loans out from its citizens. World War II was shaping up to be the most costly war in American history to date, so the government needed people to buy war bonds so that the military production could continue uninterrupted.

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<sup>50</sup> "Company History and Heritage." *General Motors*. 2003.



**Figure 13**

One of the primary ways the government hoped to motivate people to buy war bonds was through the emotional appeal of propaganda posters. The American government conducted a study and found that images showing women and children in danger were the most effective for appealing to the emotions.<sup>51</sup> Figure 13 entitled *Keep These Hands Off!* was a Canadian propaganda poster used in World War II, and it was among the posters analyzed by American propaganda producers as they set out to create their own images.<sup>52</sup> This poster advertised the selling of war bonds, and it featured a mother holding a baby as menacing hands stamped with the Japanese flag and the Nazi Swastika reached toward them. The endangerment of the innocent mother and child meant to appeal to people's emotions in order to motivate them to buy war bonds to "keep these hands off."

The propaganda producers in the United States used the Canadian examples, such as Figure 13, to create their own Americanized version of the war bond poster. Figure 14 was one of the American products inspired by the Canadian work. The poster was entitled *Don't Let That Shadow Touch Them*, and it was produced for the U.S. Treasury.<sup>53</sup> The Treasury oversees and handles all government funds, so it only makes sense that a poster for war bonds would come from that department. The image features three small children playing outside as the shadow of a Nazi Swastika closes in on them. The children are both innocent and patriotic, as shown by the carrying of an American flag and a model U.S. military plane. The shadow of the Nazi Swastika symbolizes the dark and ominous threat that the Nazi regime posed. The use of the children

<sup>51</sup> "Warning!" *Powers of Persuasion: Poster Art from World War II*. The National Archives.

<sup>52</sup> Odell, G.K. "Keep These Hands Off!" *How to Make Posters That Will Help Win the War*: Office of Facts and Figures.

<sup>53</sup> Smith, Lawrence B. "Don't Let That Shadow Touch Them." U.S. Treasury: NARA Still Picture Branch. 1942.



Figure 14

appeals to the emotions of the viewers who could have pictured their own children in the image. People will go to great lengths to protect their children from harm, and these propaganda posters hoped to play upon this fact for the benefit of the war effort.

During the Vietnam War, a similar style of propaganda was attempted by various government agencies in order to convince people that the war was just and necessary. During

World War II, propaganda creators often utilized Adolf Hitler and Hideki Tojo as the primary focus of their material, as seen in Figure 12. These leaders were well-known to the public, and their brutality was one of the primary reasons given for the war. The public truly felt animosity towards these leaders, and the government stirred those emotions with the propaganda and channeled them into positive action. Learning from their predecessors, the propaganda creators during the Vietnam War hoped to imitate these techniques in order to encourage public support for the American war effort. The difficulty facing the propaganda creators in Vietnam was that they lacked a true subject toward whom they could direct public hatred. The Americans decided to target the most famous leader of the North Vietnamese war effort, Ho Chi Minh. President Johnson made Ho Chi Minh out to be his most threatening rival, and Johnson viewed Ho as the primary driving force behind the communists in the North.<sup>54</sup> This turned out to be entirely inaccurate.

Ho Chi Minh, above all else, was a nationalist advocating for a free and independent Vietnam. He saw the Western powers, such as the United States, as a potential ally, but the United States failed to offer the support he desired. Instead he turned to the Soviet Union and

<sup>54</sup> Lawrence. *The Vietnam War: A Concise International History*. 2010.

accepted communist backing in hopes of achieving his nationalistic goals.<sup>55</sup> The United States felt threatened by the Soviets involvement in Southeast Asia, so it sent in military advisors to promote democracy and capitalism.<sup>56</sup> By the time of the Vietnam War, Ho Chi Minh was old, and he took a back seat in domestic affairs as pro-communist leaders took control of the North. Ho's persona continued to be used by the North Vietnamese for propaganda purposes of their own.<sup>57</sup> The people of Vietnam loved Ho Chi Minh, so his association with the war effort prompted others to join. So, as it turned out, while the United States was making Ho Chi Minh out to be the mastermind behind the entire North Vietnamese war effort, he actually served as no more than a figurehead.

Along similarly misguided lines, throughout the war the United States continued to perpetuate the Domino Theory. The Domino Theory argued that if one country succumbed to the evils of communism, then its neighbors would inevitably fall, as well. This would begin a chain reaction in which countries fell to communism, one after another, until the entire world implemented communism.<sup>58</sup> The United States relied on this theory as a propaganda technique for rationalizing the war in Vietnam. The idea of the United States as the last one standing against an entire world of communists was meant to instill fear in the public so they would be encouraged to back the actions of the government. In reality, the government officials knew full well that the Domino Theory was severely exaggerated, but it made for a useful propaganda tool, so they continued its use.<sup>59</sup> Eventually, it became clear to the public that this theory did not hold water, and the government lost one of its major points of reasoning for the rationalization of the war in Vietnam.

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<sup>55</sup> Lawrence. *The Vietnam War: A Concise International History*. 2010.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

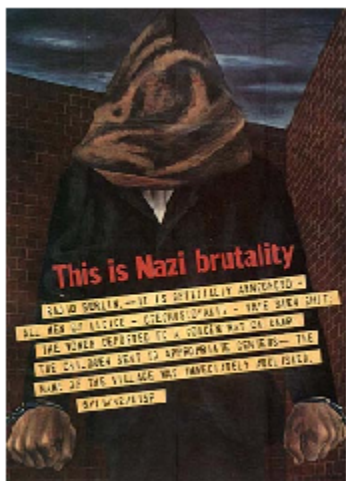
<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

## Enemy Brutality

War impacts people as much psychologically as it impacts them physically. For many, especially for civilians drafted into military service, it is often difficult to get into a mindset in which war time actions can be rationalized. In order to help both soldiers and civilians overcome this potential internal conflict, the government created propaganda depicting Nazi brutality. The following posters were intended to instill fear and to promote disdain for the enemies of the United States, particularly the Germans. In a similar manner to Figures 13 and 14, these images play upon people's emotions. The propaganda creators hoped to inspire particular emotions with



**Figure 15**

their work, and these emotions were intended to motivate people to support the American war effort in any way possible.

While some of the propaganda posters utilized stereotypes of the enemy to perpetuate their message, others relied on actual events to clearly show people the threat at hand. Figure 15 features an example of an actual event. The poster is entitled *This is Nazi Brutality*, and it was produced for the Office of War Information.<sup>60</sup>

The poster shows a man with a burlap sack over his head and his hands are chained. The text reads, “Radio Berlin.—It is officially announced:—All men of Lidice-Czechoslovakia- have been shot: the women deported to a concentration camp: the children sent to appropriate centers—the name of the village was immediately abolished. 6/11/42/115P.” Lidice was a small mining village where someone shot a Nazi official in 1942. The Nazis brutally retaliated and performed the actions described in the aforementioned text.<sup>61</sup> For Americans, posters such as this served to humanize the war. It is often tempting for people to

<sup>60</sup> Shahn, Ben. “This is Nazi Brutality.” Office of War Information: NARA Still Picture Branch. 1942.

<sup>61</sup> “This is Nazi Brutality.” *Powers of Persuasion: Poster Art from World War II*. The National Archives.

wonder why the United States bothered to get involved in foreign conflicts so far from home, but images such as this showed the American people who the United States fought against and why.

The fictionalized posters utilized the same tactics for appealing to the emotions of the American people to lend their support. Figure 16 shows a group of French workers with their



**Figure 16**

hands up. The quote, intended to be from the perspective of one of the men in the picture, reads, “We French workers warn you... defeat means slavery, starvation, death.” This image, entitled *We French Workers Warn You* was produced in 1942 after France had already fallen to the Nazis.<sup>62</sup> The French worker pleads for help from the

American people, and he warns of the dangerous future ahead if the United States fails to end the war in victory. It was up to the people of United States to uphold American’s primary ideal of supporting freedom from oppression and want by joining the war effort. The plea seems particularly meaningful because it comes from a humbled French worker and not a stereotypical overly-proper aristocrat. Americans tended to identify themselves with the plight of the working class, and given the country’s history of overcoming an oppressor’s rule, this image would have been likely to appeal to a wide audience.

For the American propaganda producers during the Vietnam War making the enemy out to be some brutal oppressor proved to be difficult, primarily because it was not true. During World War II, actual events inspired the American propaganda. Adolf Hitler and the Nazi regime were merciless beasts, and the propaganda captured these aspects of their character to motivate the American public. Vietnam, however, did not feature a clear and concise battle between good and evil. The whole situation remained unclear, and more often than not the United States

<sup>62</sup> Shahn, Ben. “We French Workers Warn You...” War Information Board: NARA Still Picture Branch. 1942.

appeared as the savage aggressor. As a result, the American propaganda producers during the Vietnam War were more focused on salvaging the image of the United States as opposed to depicting the enemy in a negative light, although they still attempted this as well.

Throughout the Vietnam War, American soldiers were involved with or accused of committing a number of atrocities which damaged the image of the United States. American troops in Vietnam were frustrated by the unconventional warfare fought in the jungles of Vietnam, and this mental toll led many troops to lash out at the Vietnamese when given the opportunity to do so. American soldiers committed heinous crimes including murder, rape, and the burning of Vietnamese villages, and these actions were utilized by the North Vietnamese for propaganda to show the inhumane tactics of the Americans.<sup>63</sup>

Given the media presence in Vietnam, the military leaders knew they needed to be careful about the information released and the sights seen by the reporters on the ground. The military acknowledged that the number of villages that soldiers arbitrarily burned was becoming a public relations issue, so the leaders released an order to adjust the conduct of the troops in battle.<sup>64</sup> In addition, the Americans wanted to help protect the image of the American war effort by avoiding torture pictures. It was well-known that the South Vietnamese tortured North Vietnamese prisoners, so American troops were asked to make sure that they were not in any photos taken of these actions.<sup>65</sup> Many would find it troubling that the United States did not take an issue with the torturing of prisoners while being fully aware of the situations taking place. However, the United States primarily focused on its own image and credibility, and the leaders chose not to attempt to control the actions of the American allies. Given this environment, it is

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<sup>63</sup> Lawrence. *The Vietnam War: A Concise International History*, 2010.

<sup>64</sup> Wyatt. *Paper Soldiers: The American Press and the Vietnam War*. 144-45.

<sup>65</sup> Greenfield, James, and Jorden, William. Department of State to Mr. Moyers, "Public Affairs Problem in the Vietnam Conflict," August 13, 1965, NSC Country File, Vietnam, Public Affairs Policy Committee, Reel 6.

no wonder why the American propaganda producers were forced to focus on cleaning up the American image instead of attacking the North Vietnamese. The American military forces created a hostile situation in Vietnam, and no amount of propaganda could have possibly overcome the negative situation that the United States created for itself.

Besides the propaganda attempting to salvage the image of the United States, the Americans produced some propaganda targeting the American enemies in Vietnam. A newspaper article from the period stated, “The move [to drop leaflets] was ordered to exploit the belief among some American officials that the morale of the North Vietnamese has plummeted since heavy American air raids were resumed April 6.”<sup>66</sup> The American military leaders hoped to bomb the North Vietnamese into submission, and the leaflets stated that the bombings would stop if the Northern government called off its attacks on the South. Other similar propaganda techniques were also used to encourage the surrender of the North. Radios pre-tuned to South Vietnamese radio stations were dropped so that Northerners could listen to pro-South messages. The United States also dropped toys, food, and clothes on the North in an attempt to demonstrate that the South experienced tremendous wealth through the alliance with the United States.<sup>67</sup> The article acknowledged that these propaganda campaigns were not as successful as the American leaders had hoped. The piece stated, “Hundreds of millions of leaflets were dumped on North Vietnam between 1965 and 1968, although little evidence existed that they did any good at their purpose of lowering North Vietnamese morale.”<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> U.S. Propaganda Leaflets Dropped in North Again, 28 May 1972, Folder 11, Box 14, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 03 - Insurgency Warfare, The Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University. Accessed 28 Apr. 2015. <http://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=2171411004>>.

<sup>67</sup> U.S. Propaganda Leaflets Dropped in North Again, 28 May 1972, Folder 11, Box 14, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 03 - Insurgency Warfare, The Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.



### **Media's Involvement in Propaganda**

The American home front during the Vietnam War did not feature the same up-front style of propaganda that World War II did, as seen in the various propaganda posters previously discussed. Instead, American propaganda producers during the Vietnam War spent more time controlling the public's access to war-related information. The misrepresentation of facts and general censorship were among the primary techniques used by the American propaganda producers throughout the course of the war in order to allow the American government to conduct the war with limited public interference.

During the Vietnam War news networks played an important role and held a great deal of power. Only a handful of networks featured nightly newscasts, and the American people turned to these networks each evening for updates on world affairs. These few network organizations addressed the majority of the public on a daily basis. This ability to influence and control the information received by the public was magnified during the conflicts because people were desperate for updates on the wars and needed direction. The political leanings of the different media outlets often determined in which directions the stories went. During World War II, the media mostly sided with FDR and his administration, and the media became a tool for the perpetuation of pro-government propaganda.<sup>69</sup> During Vietnam, the presidential administrations attempted to follow a similar pattern, but the members of the media became frustrated as the war dragged on and questions were asked regarding the involvement of the United States. The support from the media in World War II versus the increasingly critical questioning of the government actions during the Vietnam War stands as one of the most important differences between the conflicts, and propaganda existed at the heart the issue.

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<sup>69</sup> Steele, Richard. *Propaganda in an Open Society: The Roosevelt Administration and the Media, 1933-1941*. (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1985).143-44.

## War Time Media Coverage

Media technologies were more advanced during the Vietnam War than World War II. The Vietnam War was the first war that had substantial televised coverage. By the 1960s, ninety percent of homes in the United States had televisions.<sup>70</sup> CBS, NBC, and ABC provided coverage of the war during their nightly news segments. People all across the country would tune in for updates on the war in Vietnam. In addition, major newspapers such as the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, *Time Magazine*, and *Newsweek* provided coverage of the war.<sup>71</sup>

From the onset of the war, the United States shrouded the Vietnam War in secrecy. War against Vietnam had not been declared in Congress, as it had been during World War II. The American government used the lack of public knowledge to keep people from asking too many questions. As time went by, and the war became common knowledge, the American government needed to start releasing information. However, the government wanted to continue the war uninhibited, so it attempted to utilize the media as a propaganda weapon by censoring the information released.

One of the primary areas of censorship during the Vietnam War was controlling and limiting with whom the members of the media spoke.<sup>72</sup> Part of the expanded war time media coverage involved hundreds of reporters and journalists providing coverage from the ground in Vietnam. The American leaders worried that granting the reporters free access to anyone in Vietnam would lead to the revelation that the war was not going well and that the troops were unhappy.

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<sup>70</sup> Baughman, James. *The Republic of Mass Culture: Journalism, Filmmaking, and Broadcasting in America since 1941*. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 91-142.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Otten, Alan. "Blurred 'Backgrounders:' How Washington Uses Press Briefings to Manage News." *Wall Street Journal*. January 11, 1963.

The American government made sure that the media avoided certain topics. The United States did not want news stories reporting on American advisors leading missions, civilian casualties, or the use of napalm.<sup>73</sup> If stories covering these topics were released to the public back in the United States, then it is likely that they would have sparked debate and led to the questioning of the American decision-making in Vietnam. The government of the United States hoped for passive acceptance of the Vietnam War, and it did not want to be bogged down by public opinion. One speaker summed up the feelings of the period when he stated, “War is not a time for citizens to have an informed debate and make up their own minds even as they fight in the name of freedom to do just that.”<sup>74</sup> The irony of the situation remains clear, but the American government took this as its primary stance of during the war. As a result, news stories coming out of Vietnam were often turned into propaganda that emphasized the positives of the war while they downplayed or completely eliminated the negatives.

### Operation Maximum Candor

Operation Maximum Candor served as an attempt by the United States government to improve the relationship between the members of the media and the Americans leading the war effort. As the United States became more committed to the war in Vietnam, the media focused greater attention on the conflict. Networks sent more and more correspondents to Vietnam to provide daily on-the-spot coverage of the war.<sup>75</sup> Initially, the reporters were not given much official help in covering the stories. Both the American military leaders as well as the leaders of South Vietnam avoided the press and did not provide the media with the stories they desired.

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<sup>73</sup> Hammond, William. *Reporting Vietnam: Media and Military at War*. (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1998), 2-10.

<sup>74</sup> Brewer. *Why America Fights: Patriotism and War Propaganda from the Philippines to Iraq*, 7.

<sup>75</sup> Wyatt, Clarence. “Operation Maximum Candor,” in *Encyclopedia of Media and Propaganda in Wartime America, Volume 1*, ed. Martin Manning and Clarence Wyatt. Santa Barbara, CA: ABC CLIO, LLC, 2011. 656-58

Because of this, media correspondents went out on their own and talked to the troops about their experiences and the war itself. This proved to be problematic because the American troops were often overly-candid and would question the commitment of the South Vietnamese government to the war.<sup>76</sup> This type of commentary added strain to an already tense relationship between the Americans and the South Vietnamese, so it became clear that the Americans needed to do something to control the flow of information.

The solution to this problem came with the implementation of Operation Maximum Candor. Given that the American involvement in Vietnam had escalated and garnered the attention of the public back home, it was evident that the reporters were going to find stories to report whether or not they were given official press releases. James Greenfield, Assistant Secretary of State for Public Affairs, summed up the situation when he said, “The press will write whether or not we brief. You can’t prevent stories by not providing information.... Whenever we have taken the pains to keep the press abreast of what is happening it has worked to our advantage.”<sup>77</sup> With this knowledge the United States went forward with the implementation of Operation Maximum Candor.

Operation Maximum Candor focused on the controlled flow of information from the American military leadership in Vietnam to the reporters stationed among the troops. The operation gave six hundred journalists direct access to three thousand military leaders, troops, and civilians in Vietnam.<sup>78</sup> In addition, the Americans increased the number of briefing updates in order to provide the reporters with a consistent flow of information. While Operation Maximum Candor served as a way for the news correspondents to gather more information to

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<sup>76</sup> Wyatt. “Operation Maximum Candor,” in *Encyclopedia of Media and Propaganda in Wartime America, Volume I*, 656-58.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Wyatt. *Paper Soldiers: The American Press and the Vietnam War*, 144-45

provide to the American public, the American leaders used this relationship to their advantage to control what information the media released. The censoring and the selecting of what information to release and focus on became a major propaganda tool for the United States. The government was largely able to monopolize the information, and they did everything they could to focus attention on the positives and successes while downplaying the negatives. An official from the State Department during the time period described the situation when he said, “The preoccupation of the press with each day’s story can be made to our advantage to minimize the impact and duration of unfavorable events.”<sup>79</sup> This statement clearly demonstrated that the government did not simply decide to open up and provide full and open access of information to the press. American leaders carefully orchestrated Operation Maximum Candor in a manner that allowed the government to utilize the flow of information as a source of pro-war propaganda indicating that the war was going well for the American side.

In March 1967 Walter Lippmann of the *New York Herald Tribune* wrote a two-part column in which he called out the President and other American political leaders for the tactics used to censor the media’s coverage of the war in Vietnam. Lippmann wrote:

There is no longer much pretense that the news is not being manipulated in order to make the Congress, the newspapers, the networks, and the public at large support the President... The purpose of this manipulation is to create a consensus for the President, to stifle debate about his aims and his policies, to thwart deep probing into what has already happened, what is actually happening, what is going to happen.<sup>80</sup>

In this piece, Lippmann sums up the frustration of the members of the media by claiming that the President drastically manipulated the spread of information in order to forward his own political agenda. Operation Maximum Candor simply played a part in the censorship process,

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<sup>79</sup> Wyatt. “Operation Maximum Candor,” in *Encyclopedia of Media and Propaganda in Wartime America, Volume I*, 656-58.

<sup>80</sup> Lippmann, Walter. “Credibility Gap,” in *New York Herald Tribune*. March 1967.

and Lippmann wanted the public to know that there was more to the war than what the government allowed to be reported.

During World War II, the United States faced a similar dilemma regarding how much information the American people needed or could handle. Similar to Operation Maximum Candor, the American propaganda agencies utilized the Strategy of Truth. Under the Strategy of Truth, the government believed that informed citizens could be trusted to make up their own minds about the war.<sup>81</sup> The propaganda agencies were charged with providing the information to help these citizens make *informed* and *independent* decisions. In reality, the government spoon-fed the American people pro-war propaganda, but it was done in a way that did not lead the public to feel lied to as they did during the Vietnam War. The primary reason the World War II propaganda succeeded more in this area than the Vietnam War propaganda was simply because more truth existed behind the World War II information. During the Vietnam War, the government used the propaganda in an attempt to hide the fact that the United States was locked in a stalemate with the enemy, and the war showed no signs of turning in the Americans favor any time in the near future. During World War II, the propaganda drastically over-simplified the international turmoil, but the premises of the propaganda were at least accurate. The World War II propaganda focused on clichés such as the fight between good and evil as well as the imagery of the United States as the defender of democracy on a world scale.<sup>82</sup> The decisions to be more honest with the American people during World War II helped the government to win over the public.

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<sup>81</sup> Baughman. *The Republic of Mass Culture: Journalism, Filmmaking, and Broadcasting in America since 1941*, 91-142.

<sup>82</sup> Brewer. *Why America Fights: Patriotism and War Propaganda from the Philippines to Iraq*, 4.

## Media Reactions

As time progressed the media became less satisfied with the information provided through Operation Maximum Candor. It was clear that the government censored the information, and the sources were limited in what they were allowed to say. The reporters on the ground in Vietnam wanted to report honest stories about the state of the war, but they were unable to do so because of the lack of information provided. As the skepticism of the reporters grew, the American government found itself unable to utilize the media as a propaganda source. The inability of the American government to direct the media contributed to the shift in public opinion against the war.

The relationship between the American government and the civilian population, including the members of the media, became strained as people began to question what was actually happening in Vietnam. People resented any possibility of a cover-up by the United States.<sup>83</sup> They wanted the government to be open and honest, but the entire Vietnam War was shrouded in secrecy to prevent the public from asking too many questions. Looking back on the Vietnam War, it is clear that the actions taken by the American government were in fact a cover-up designed to shield the public from the truth that the United States was struggling to fight a hopeless war.

One of the areas that the media picked up on as a form of censorship was the language used by the government officials in their reports. The government filtered the language to eliminate any negative connotations which could affect public opinion. This propaganda technique intended to help the Americans maintain a sense of credibility by eliminating negative buzz words to show the war effort as more human and less damaging, but it actually had the opposite effect. People began to pick up on the true meanings of the sugar-coated language used

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<sup>83</sup> Greenfield, James. "Recent Public Affairs Handling of Viet-Nam." December 8, 1964, Box 24, Thomas Papers.

by the government officials, and the people questioned the actions and motives of the government. Examples of the language changes included: “soft ordnance” in place of napalm; “surgical precision” in place of large-scale bombings; and “collateral damage” in place of killed or wounded civilians.<sup>84</sup> The language changes were meant to take the edge off of the reports which could upset the public, while also simply misleading the American people to believe that the war was not that bad.

Members of the media coined the phrase “credibility gap” to refer to the growing distrust of the American government by the media and the general public. Each report issued by the government which featured white-washed storylines and softened language contributed to growth of the credibility gap. The media members disliked the system in place in which the government provided the sources and stories on which they could report, and one person described it as, “undue reliance on centralized sources.”<sup>85</sup>

The more the media began to question the government’s actions in Vietnam, the more outspoken the public became. A symbiotic relationship existed between the public and the media in which each group empowered the other to further question the situation abroad. The American government was not just losing the media as its main tool for propaganda; the media became a major opponent of the government as many members took strong stances against the government’s actions in Vietnam. For a time, the support of many people teetered back-and-forth as the war in Vietnam continued inconclusively. The opinions of some members of the media meant more than others, so when these individuals took a stance against the war it impacted and represented a shift in the opinion of the general public. One of these key members of the media was Walter Cronkite.

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<sup>84</sup> Hammond. *Reporting Vietnam: Media and Military at War*, 57-76.

<sup>85</sup> Wyatt. “Operation Maximum Candor,” in *Encyclopedia of Media and Propaganda in Wartime America, Volume 1*, 656-58.



Walter Cronkite served as the anchorman for the *CBS Evening News* from 1962-1981. Before becoming an anchorman, Cronkite established himself as a reliable correspondent from his World War II news coverage.<sup>86</sup> As the anchorman of the prominent *CBS Evening News*, Cronkite held a position of tremendous power from which he had the ability to influence the opinion of the public. During the early years of the war, Cronkite defended the actions of the Americans in Vietnam, and he even went so far as to criticize the reporters who complained about a lack of information or government secrecy.<sup>87</sup> However, as the war progressed and public unrest regarding the war increased, Cronkite was convinced to go over to Vietnam and see the situation for himself.

On February 27, 1968, following his visit to Vietnam, Walter Cronkite closed the *CBS Evening News* with an editorial regarding the war. Cronkite stated:

We have been too often disappointed by the optimism of the American leaders, both in Vietnam and Washington, to have faith any longer in the silver linings they find in the darkest clouds. They may be right, that Hanoi's winter-spring offensive has been forced by the Communist realization that they could not win the longer war of attrition, and that the Communists hope that any success in the offensive will improve their position for eventual negotiations. It would improve their position, and it would also require our realization, that we should have had all along, that any negotiations must be that – negotiations, not the dictation of peace terms. For it seems now more certain than ever that the bloody experience of Vietnam is to end in a stalemate. This summer's almost certain standoff will either end in real give-and-take negotiations or terrible escalation; and for every means we have to escalate, the enemy can match us, and that applies to invasion of the North, the use of nuclear weapons, or the mere commitment of one hundred, or two hundred, or three hundred thousand more American troops to the battle. And with each escalation, the world comes closer to the brink of cosmic disaster. To say that we are closer to victory today is to believe, in the face of the evidence, the optimists who have been wrong in the past. To suggest we are on the edge of defeat is to yield to unreasonable pessimism. To say that we are mired in stalemate seems the only realistic, yet unsatisfactory, conclusion. On the off chance that military and political analysts are right, in the next few months we must test the enemy's intentions, in case this is indeed his last big gasp before negotiations. But it is increasingly clear to this reporter

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<sup>86</sup> “Reporting America at War: Walter Cronkite.” *PBS*. 2003.  
<http://www.pbs.org/weta/reportingamericaatwar/reporters/cronkite/#>

<sup>87</sup> Brewer. *Why America Fights: Patriotism and War Propaganda from the Philippines to Iraq*, 208.

that the only rational way out then will be to negotiate, not as victors, but as an honorable people who lived up to their pledge to defend democracy, and did the best they could.<sup>88</sup>

Historians often cite this powerful statement from Walter Cronkite as a major turning point for public opinion of the American war effort in Vietnam.<sup>89</sup> This is somewhat exaggerated given the fact that public support for the war had already started to decline, but the blunt opposition to the war from someone as prominent as Walter Cronkite was still noteworthy. It was during this time period that many people considered Walter Cronkite to be “the most trusted man in America,” so one may find it unsurprising that people would take his opinions to heart.<sup>90</sup>

Cronkite’s report was a major blow to the American government in its attempt to use propaganda to garner support. As previously mentioned, the government used the media as a tool for the spreading of propaganda messages; even Cronkite himself had reported on behalf of the American government. Cronkite’s new stance on the war represented a symbolic shift in public opinion that had been slowly developing. Cronkite’s public declaration during the evening news now lent credibility to those who had been questioning the war, and this would lead to an increase in support for the anti-war movement. According to some sources, when President Johnson heard about Cronkite’s report he stated, “If I’ve lost Cronkite, I’ve lost middle America.”<sup>91</sup> While the quote itself may not have been stated directly, the principles behind it were believed to be true. Many viewed Cronkite as an opinion leader, and throughout the Vietnam War the American government relied on passively-supportive statements from these types of leaders to keep public opposition at bay. Having an opinion leader of Cronkite’s magnitude speak out against the war would inevitably have an impact on the public support.

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<sup>88</sup> "Who, What, When, Where, Why: Report from Vietnam by Walter Cronkite," CBS Evening News. February 27, 1968. Retrieved August 3, 2012.

<sup>89</sup> Brewer. *Why America Fights: Patriotism and War Propaganda from the Philippines to Iraq*, 227.

<sup>90</sup> "Reporting America at War: Walter Cronkite." PBS. 2003.

<sup>91</sup> Wicker, Tom. "Broadcast News." *The New York Times*. January 26, 1997.

## **Rationalizing the Vietnam War**

The United States spent the entirety of the Vietnam War attempting to convince the government leaders, the American public, and the world that the war was necessary and that the United States handled the situation appropriately. Opinion polls taken around 1964 indicated that sixty-three percent of Americans paid little or no attention to the situation in Vietnam. More than half of the country remained unaware of the American actions in Vietnam, and this ignorance equated to passive acceptance of the war. The American government understood this situation and realized that large-scale propaganda campaigns would just attract attention to the war which could lead to interference.

During the war, each of the American Presidents expressed a different reason for why the United States went to war in Vietnam. President Eisenhower and President Kennedy focused on the idea of the Domino Theory that has been discussed previously. It remains unclear whether or not they truly believed that the Domino Theory was accurate, but the theory served as a useful piece of propaganda in the event that the public began to question the American involvement in Vietnam. Eisenhower and Kennedy benefitted from the limited involvement of the Americans in Vietnam during their presidencies, so limited backlash from the American people occurred.

### Johnson's "Why Vietnam?" Speech

President Johnson did not have as easy of a time maintaining the support of the American people or convincing them that fighting in Vietnam was a necessary and proper decision.

President Johnson believed that the United States needed to win the Vietnam War in order to preserve the image of American leadership and military superiority. He refused to be the first American President to lose a war, and he especially thought that defeat at the hands of a third-

world country such as North Vietnam would be a permanent stain upon the reputation of the United States.<sup>92</sup>

On September 29, 1967 President Johnson made his famous “Why Vietnam?” speech to explain the reasons for American involvement in Vietnam. The speech focused on a central question regarding the war. President Johnson stated:

At times of crisis—before asking Americans to fight and die to resist aggression in a foreign land—every American President has finally had to answer this question: Is the aggression a threat—not only to the immediate victim—but to the United States of America and to the peace and security of the entire world of which we in America are a very vital part?<sup>93</sup>

Johnson goes on to answer this question and argue that the situation in Vietnam met these criteria, and the United States needed to act. Throughout the speech, Johnson relied on classic Cold War rhetoric in which he described Americans fighting for freedom against the communist oppressors. Johnson stated that he was unsure whether or not the Domino Theory was accurate, but he was not willing to gamble on the safety of the United States.<sup>94</sup>

This speech served as a form of propaganda which attempted to rally the American people around a common cause. The President did not ask for any direct action from the American people, but he solicited acceptance for the government actions. Johnson wanted to appear as if he was being up front and honest with the American people in order to garner their trust in his decision-making. Johnson intentionally focused on the potentially dangerous outcomes should the United States not continue its efforts in Vietnam, and these statements act as propaganda in a similar manner to that of the threatening poster propaganda from World War II previously discussed in this piece.

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<sup>92</sup> Brewer. *Why America Fights: Patriotism and War Propaganda from the Philippines to Iraq*.

<sup>93</sup> “Speech on Vietnam by Lyndon B. Johnson.” *Miller Center*. September 29, 1967.  
<http://millercenter.org/president/lbjohnson/speeches/speech-4041>

<sup>94</sup> “Speech on Vietnam by Lyndon B. Johnson.” *Miller Center*. September 29, 1967.

Another propaganda effort undertaken by the Johnson administration was the More Flags campaign. Under the More Flags campaign, the United States appealed to its allies for military assistance in Vietnam.<sup>95</sup> However, the United States hoped to receive more than troops to contribute to the war effort. The Johnson administration hoped that the American war effort in Vietnam would gain renewed credibility if some of the major American allies agreed to back the United States. This allegiance in Vietnam would serve as propaganda for the American public and the entire world to show that the United States was not alone in its beliefs regarding Vietnam, and the Americans had taken the right course of action. This plan, however, back-fired on the United States. Although the Americans did recruit some token support from Australia, New Zealand, South Korea, Thailand, and the Philippines, prominent American allies such as Great Britain, France, Canada, West Germany, and Japan all refused.<sup>96</sup> The opposition to the Vietnam War by the major allies of the United States further damaged American credibility.

President Johnson also had to deal with opposition to the Vietnam War on the home front. Beginning in 1965, anti-war protests on college campuses began to garner attention. The first such protest occurred in the form of a teach-in at the University of Michigan in March of 1965.<sup>97</sup> Other colleges throughout the United States followed suit and started their own anti-war movements. The Johnson administration attempted to counter this movement by sending “Truth Squads” to various universities. The Truth Squads were tasked with spreading the messages of

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<sup>95</sup> Logevall, Fredrik. *Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and the escalation of War in Vietnam*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999). 133-181.

<sup>96</sup> Logevall. *Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and the escalation of War in Vietnam*, 133-181.

<sup>97</sup> Brown, Clyde, and Gayle Brown. “Moo U and the Cambodian Invasion: Nonviolent Anti-Vietnam War Protest at Iowa State University,” in *The Vietnam War on Campus: Other Voices, More Distant Drums*, ed. Marc Jason Gilbert. (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2001). 120-22 .

the government in an attempt to quell the protesters.<sup>98</sup> The implementation of these groups for the dispersal of information serve as a clear example of propaganda attempted during the Vietnam War. Unfortunately for the Johnson administration, the protests had gained too much momentum, and the Truth Squads were unable to convince the protesters to change their views. Instead, the Truth Squads were viewed by the protesters as a feeble attempt by the government to limit the voice of the people, and this contributed to the growing animosity between the public and the American government.

An article in the New York Times from May 1965 attempted to capture the atmosphere and sum up the general feelings of the participants of one of the teach-ins at the University of California at Berkeley. The article stated:

Orators addressing the 33-hour teach-in demonstration on the University of California's Berkeley campus this weekend never did run out of things to say, or of students to say them to.

The Demonstrations, billed as a protest against government policies in Vietnam attracted a peak crowd of nearly 10,000 to hear speaks...<sup>99</sup>

The article continued, describing the presence of various reform groups handing out leaflets. The article stated, "One leaflet urged students to 'join the revolutionary organization of your choice,' arguing that any revolution would be better than the status quo."<sup>100</sup> This type of mentality speaks to the atmosphere of unrest present in the United States during this time period. The people wanted change, and they believed leaving Vietnam needed to be the first step.

Along similar lines, the American government under President Johnson and President Nixon attacked the credibility of protesters in order to argue that the protesters were the reason

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<sup>98</sup> Brown and Brown. "Moo U and the Cambodian Invasion: Nonviolent Anti-Vietnam War Protest at Iowa State University," in *The Vietnam War on Campus: Other Voices, More Distant Drums*, 120-22.

<sup>99</sup> "33-Hour Teach-In Attracts 10,000; Many Camp Out for Night at Berkeley Vietnam Debate," *The New York Times*. May 23, 1965.

<sup>100</sup> "33-Hour Teach-In Attracts 10,000; Many Camp Out for Night at Berkeley Vietnam Debate," *The New York Times*. May 23, 1965.

the United States struggled in Vietnam. Attention was directed toward violent or crude acts by protesters in order to damage their credibility.<sup>101</sup> The American leaders believed that if the general public could be convinced that the protesters were a small, unruly fraction of the population, then less people would be inclined to support the anti-war movement. A public poll revealed that eighty-one percent of Americans believed that the protesters raised legitimate questions about the Vietnam War, but fifty-one percent of people disapproved of the methods used by protestors.<sup>102</sup> This propaganda technique intentionally ignored the peaceful protests focused on the educational side of the issues in Vietnam, and it instead honed in on a few protests that got out of hand in order to draw a generalization.

### Nixon's "Silent Majority" Speech

On November 3, 1969 President Nixon made his famous "Silent Majority" speech in which he directly addressed the students protesting at colleges across the country as well as the citizens who were less outspoken throughout the war. After expressing his respect for the protesters and his understanding of their concerns, Nixon explained to them why he wanted to end the war in Vietnam for their sake. He stated:

And I want to end the war for another reason. I want to end it so that the energy and dedication of you, our young people, now too often directed into bitter hatred against those responsible for the war, can be turned to the great challenges of peace, a better life for all Americans, a better life for all people on this earth. I have chosen a plan for peace. I believe it will succeed.<sup>103</sup>

Through this statement, Nixon attempted to convince the protesters that he supported their side. If the protesters believed that the President had their best interests in mind, then they

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<sup>101</sup> Small, Melvin. *Antiwarriors: The Vietnam War and the Battle for America's Hearts and Minds*. (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, 2002), 78.

<sup>102</sup> Small. *Antiwarriors: The Vietnam War and the Battle for America's Hearts and Minds*, 78.

<sup>103</sup> "Address to the Nation on the War in Vietnam by Richard Nixon." *Miller Center*. November 3, 1969. <http://millercenter.org/president/speeches/speech-3873>

were more likely to reduce their protests. This, in turn, would improve the image of the President. Nixon went on to make a more general appeal to the American people. He said:

Two hundred years ago this Nation was weak and poor. But even then, America was the hope of millions in the world. Today we have become the strongest and richest nation in the world. And the wheel of destiny has turned so that any hope the world has for the survival of peace and freedom will be determined by whether the American people have the moral stamina and the courage to meet the challenge of free world leadership. Let historians not record that when America was the most powerful nation in the world we passed on the other side of the road and allowed the last hopes for peace and freedom of millions of people to be suffocated by the forces of totalitarianism.<sup>104</sup>

In this quote, Nixon argued in favor of American superiority and the necessity of the United States to act as a protector of the weak on an international scale. This message can be related back to the posters from World War II which displayed American strength in order to promote a sense of civic duty. Nixon hoped that his speech would inspire people to see the actions of the United States in Vietnam as a justifiable defense of the weak and powerless. Nixon directed this appeal to the group of the country he deemed the “Silent Majority.” He implied that only a small fraction of the country that was actually protesting the war, but their protests were receiving a disproportionate amount of attention. Nixon attempted to isolate the protesters by asking the “majority” of the country to stand by him and support his decisions as he worked for an honorable peace in Vietnam.<sup>105</sup>

Peace with honor became the expressed goal for the Nixon administration.<sup>106</sup> The phrase “peace with honor” itself can be seen as a form of propaganda in the way that it intended to appeal to the masses. By 1969, sixty percent of Americans viewed the Vietnam War as a mistake, so clearly the public wanted peace.<sup>107</sup> However, because the American government stated that the United States wanted the peace to be honorable, Nixon felt justified in his

<sup>104</sup> “Address to the Nation on the War in Vietnam by Richard Nixon.” *Miller Center*. November 3, 1969.

<sup>105</sup> “Address to the Nation on the War in Vietnam by Richard Nixon.” *Miller Center*. November 3, 1969.

<sup>106</sup> Kinnard, Douglas. *The War Managers*. (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1977). 25.

<sup>107</sup> Small. *Antiwarriors: The Vietnam War and the Battle for America's Hearts and Minds*, 78.



continuing the war as he saw fit. One reason that Nixon justified the war was for the American prisoners of war (POWs). The government cited the rescuing of the POWs as a main reason the United States needed to keep fighting.<sup>108</sup> This decision served as useful propaganda because it made the Nixon administration seem more committed to the well-being of the American servicemen fighting in Vietnam. In addition, any protests against this decision would seem to be in bad taste because they would be actively encouraging the abandonment of Americans. Bracelets began being sold featuring the names of different servicemen who were POWs in Vietnam which drew more attention to this issue. People who bought the bracelets were encouraged to wear them until the soldier was returned home.<sup>109</sup> These bracelets served as a marketing technique which humanized the war for many Americans, and they wanted to see their designated POW returned home. While this propaganda strategy may not have bought the Nixon administration a tremendous amount of time, it did serve to quiet some of the opposition to the war for a time.

### **Keeping the End in Mind**

Whether or not a country has the support of its people, war is Hell, as the old saying goes. The killing of other human beings in the name of peace is ironic, and it confuses the psyche of even the strongest individuals. As such, countries at war must guarantee to the public that the end of the war remains in sight. People become restless as conflicts drag out, and they want to see peace and normalcy restored sooner rather than later. One of the roles of war time propaganda producers was to keep the public focused on the benefits that will come after the war, so that the

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<sup>108</sup> Allen, Michael. "‘Help Us Tell the Truth About Vietnam’: POW/MIA Politics and the End of the Vietnam War," in *Making Sense of the Vietnam War: Local, National, and Transnational Perspectives*. Ed. Mark Phillip Bradley and Marilyn B. Young. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 268.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

people will be distracted as the wars waged onward. In order for this type of propaganda to be successful, the government needs clearly outlined objectives that the public can support. During World War II, propaganda producers focused on the theme of internationalism in order to promote world-wide unity following the war. The propaganda outlined the post-war goals of the United States, and it worked to keep the public motivated and focused on the war itself. During the Vietnam War, the government attempted this strategy, but the effort was feeble compared to that of World War II. Vietnam propaganda focused on intangible objectives and relied on the disingenuous staging of events in an attempt to drum up public support. The public saw right through the propaganda, and support for the war crumbled.

#### Focusing on World War II Objectives

Following World War I, the United States turned its attention inward and hoped to avoid major international conflicts in the future.<sup>110</sup> People labeled World War I as “the war to end all wars,” and the United States hoped that this would be the case. However, as tensions mounted across Europe and war once again broke out, President Franklin D. Roosevelt felt the United States was obligated to get involved. Early in the conflict, Roosevelt implemented the Lend-Lease system which provided war materials to American allies, particularly the British. Roosevelt used propaganda to defend his decision by comparing the aid the United States agreed to give to lending a neighbor a hose when his house caught fire.<sup>111</sup> This description humanized the struggles of the British while also making the American gesture seem perfectly innocent when, in fact, it drew the United States into the war.

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<sup>110</sup> Butler, Smedley. *War is a Racket*. (New York: Round Table Press, 1935), 26-36.

<sup>111</sup> <http://docs.fdrlibrary.marist.edu/odllpc2.html>

Once fully embroiled in World War II, the United States focused its propaganda on the theme of internationalism in order to convince the public that the war needed to occur, and that it would work out in favor of the Americans. Given the fact that turmoil following World War I was one of the primary causes on World War II, the United States hoped to avoid a similar situation by promoting the idea of an international community. American propaganda producers attempted to avoid reliance on racial stereotypes when producing materials for the war. The goal of the American propaganda was not to promote a hatred of the common citizens of other countries; these people were mostly innocent and had no role in the decision-making of the countries' leaders. Instead, the propaganda targeted the leaders of the enemy countries.<sup>112</sup> The actions of these select individuals were thought to be enough to motivate the American people without having to target an entire race of mostly innocent citizens. The leaders would be ousted once defeated in war, but the common people would remain members of the international community, so preserving their integrity was important.

In contrast, the propaganda regarding the American allies focused on the common people of the allied countries instead of the leaders. In reality, the Americans had many reasons to distrust its allies, and the United States felt particularly uncomfortable partnering with Stalin's Russia. The skepticism of the American government could not be outwardly expressed without risk of damaging the alliance which was necessary for the war's success. As such, the American propaganda avoided controversial allies such as Stalin, and it instead focused on the similarities between the common people in allied nations and the American public.<sup>113</sup> Drawing this comparison was another manner in which the American propaganda worked to humanize the war

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<sup>112</sup> MacLeish, Archibald. "Basic Policy Directive: The Nature of the Enemy." October 5, 1942. OWI, RG 208, Entry 6A, Box 1, NARA.

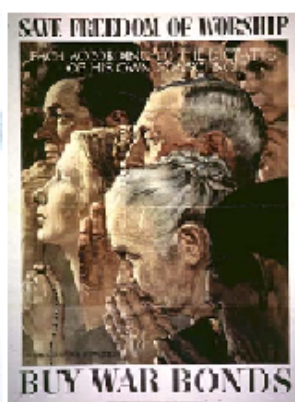
<sup>113</sup> Bennett, Todd. "Culture, Power, and *Mission to Moscow*: Film and Soviet-American Relations During World War II," *Journal of American History*, 88. September 2001. 489-518.

by showing the American people that the allies in need of assistance were no different than themselves.

Before the United States became officially involved in World War II, President Roosevelt made his famous *Four Freedoms* speech on January 6, 1941. During the speech, Roosevelt outlined four freedoms that all people across the world should be guaranteed: freedom of speech; freedom of worship; freedom from want; and freedom from fear.<sup>114</sup> Because the people of the



**Figure 17**



**Figure 18**



**Figure 19**



**Figure 20**

United States viewed their country as an international symbol of freedom, the American leaders argued that the United States possessed the responsibility for defending freedom on an international scale. The declaration of the four freedoms was used as a justification for the American involvement in World War II. The imagery of the statement, depicting the United States as the world-wide protector of freedom, served as impactful propaganda, and it motivated people to support the war effort.

Inspired by President Roosevelt's *Four*

*Freedoms* speech, Norman Rockwell created four paintings depicting each of the freedoms.

Figure 17 depicts freedom of speech; Figure 18 depicts freedom of worship; Figure 19 depicts freedom from want; and Figure 20 depicts freedom from fear. The paintings were published in

<sup>114</sup> "State of the Union (Four Freedoms) Speech by Franklin D. Roosevelt." *Miller Center*. January 6, 1941. <http://millercenter.org/president/speeches/speech-3320>

the *Saturday Evening Post* in 1943.<sup>115</sup> The paintings served as a form of propaganda which reminded the American public why the United States needed to fight the war. Each of the paintings depicts a different scene to which everyday American people could relate. Given the other American propaganda which worked to establish common ground between the American public and the citizens of other countries, it was hoped that American citizens would see the paintings and be motivated to help provide these freedoms to the rest of the world.

Finally, government leaders utilized the media to keep the American people motivated during the war. As the war dragged on, the American leaders feared complacency. Unlike during the Vietnam War, the American government encouraged realistic news coverage, and the media was allowed to report on the triumphs of the Allies as well as the costly defeats.<sup>116</sup> American



**Figure 21**

leaders believed that people needed to see the negative side of the war in order to fully understand the situation at hand. On the American home front people had to deal with the rationing and other similar inconvenient changes from their societal norms. The government wanted to remind the people that their sacrifice served as just a small part of the overall effort, and that some people, particularly the American soldiers, were asked to give much more. Figure 21, provides an example of this type of propaganda. The image shows a dead soldier slumped over barbed wire, and the message reads, “You talk of sacrifice... He knew the meaning of sacrifice!”<sup>117</sup> Images such as this likely instilled a certain level of guilt in people on the American home front who complained about the sacrifices of rationing. Thousands of young

<sup>115</sup> Rockwell, Norman. “Four Freedoms.” Office of War Information: NARA Still Picture Branch. The Curtis Publishing Co. 1943.

<sup>116</sup> Kimble, James. *Mobilizing the Home Front: War Bonds and Domestic Propaganda*. (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2006), 6-7.

<sup>117</sup>“You Talk of Sacrifice.” Winchester: NARA Still Picture Branch.

men were drafted into the armed forces and asked to pay the ultimate sacrifice during the war, so those on the home front were expected to be grateful for what they had.

This type of propaganda which showed the deadly consequences of World War II managed not to alienate the people of the United States. The American government successfully provided the public with true information about the drawbacks of war, but the government officials spun this information in a way to benefit the war effort. During the Vietnam War, the American government attempted to prevent the media from seeing anything that could indicate that the war had any drawbacks. The government censored information about American casualties and the deaths of civilians. American leaders accurately believed that this information would become a rallying cry for anti-war protesters, and the American government proved unwilling to provide protesters with ammunition, if at all possible. In addition, the United States could not use this propaganda tactic during the Vietnam War because of the nature of the war. During World War II, the American enemy was clearly defined, and the United States fought to defend freedom against tyranny. The American government had spread these messages about the American war goals, and the public bought into them. During the Vietnam War, the government shrouded all aspects of the conflict in secrecy, so there was never an initial rallying of public support for a great morally-just battle. Instead, the American government hid the war from the public for as long as possible. When people did finally begin to ask questions, the war was already a stalemate, and the American government lacked positive action which could serve as the foundation for building a support system. As such, the United States had to work to limit the release of negative information, such as statistics on American casualties, because this information would compromise any potential public support.

### Focusing on Vietnam War Objectives

Some may argue that the idea of Vietnam War objectives is an oxymoron because the goals of the war were never completely clear to anyone. No one, from the President to the public, ever truly knew who the United States was fighting, as evidenced by President Johnson's view of the war as a showdown between himself and the elderly figurehead with no actual power, Ho Chi Minh.<sup>118</sup> A poll revealed that seventy percent of American generals admittedly did not understand the American war objectives in Vietnam.<sup>119</sup> Given these circumstances, it is no wonder why American propaganda producers failed to inspire the public in a comparable manner to the work done during World War II. During World War II, the messages focused on citizen participation, the goals of the war, and the effort was clearly justified. This type of attention was undesired at the onset of the Vietnam War, and by the time that the government needed the public support, it was simply too late.

In the final years of the Vietnam War, the propaganda focused primarily on the war ending in an attempt to buy the American government a little more time to act. One popular propaganda tactic was the use of homecoming parades. The government organized and staged parades for troops returning home in order to perpetuate the image of support for the troops, which they felt equated to support for the war.<sup>120</sup> In scheduling the parades, the American government tried to target areas with limited numbers of protesters which would detract from the image they attempted to portray. In addition, the troops themselves had to be coached and censored so that they would not interfere with the positive image being created. Many American soldiers who participated in these events felt uneasy with the celebration.<sup>121</sup> Often they were not

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<sup>118</sup> Lawrence. *The Vietnam War: A Concise International History*, 2010.

<sup>119</sup> Kinnard. *The War Managers*, 25.

<sup>120</sup> Hammond. *Reporting Vietnam: Media and Military at War*, 57-76.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

proud of having served in Vietnam, and they simply wanted to put the events in the past. This was particularly true later in the war as the press reported information about civilian casualties, and terrible event such as the My Lai massacre came to light.

Under President Nixon “peace with honor” became the slogan for the war. This was finally a propaganda message that the America people were willing to support; anything to get them out of Vietnam. In October 1972 the United States, South Vietnam, and North Vietnam came close reaching an agreement, but the United States rejected the terms in hope of cutting a more favorable deal. Three months later, in January 1973 the United States signed an agreement. The agreement did not feature any major changes from the terms offered back in October, although the American government claimed the new agreement was better.<sup>122</sup> The government needed this claim in order to cover up the fact that the Unites States wasted an extra three months fighting for the exact same peace agreement.

As the war drew to a close, the American government attempted to protect its image by claiming success during the war. The American “accomplishments” were three-fold: the prisoners of war were released; South Vietnam maintained its independent; and the United States maintained international credibility by seeing the situation out until the end.<sup>123</sup> The reality of the situation was much different that the government depiction. In all likelihood, the war prisoners would have been released at the end of the war anyway, so this was no major feat. South Vietnam fell to Northern forces about three months after the United States signed the peace agreement which confirmed the failure of the United States to accomplish one of the only actual goals the Americans had during the war.<sup>124</sup> And the image of the United States on the

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<sup>122</sup> Kimball, Jeffrey. “‘Peace with Honor’: Richard M. Nixon and the Diplomacy of Threat and Symbolism,” in *Shadow on the White House*. Ed. Anderson, 176-77.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

<sup>124</sup> Lawrence. *The Vietnam War: A Concise International History*, 2010.



international level took significant damaged. As previously mentioned, many of the major allies of the United States refused to support the American action in Vietnam. The stubbornness of the American side combined with the fact that the United States was defeated contributed to an all-around negative image.

### **Conclusion**

President Dwight D. Eisenhower said it best when he argued plainly, “Public opinion wins wars.”<sup>125</sup> This simple statement epitomizes the importance of war time propaganda. The principle goal of propaganda is to control public opinion by generating support for the war and channeling the efforts of the general population towards beneficial actions. When governments utilized propaganda effectively, it acts as a powerful weapon; when it is not, the failed propaganda can be the downfall of a country at war. This is not to say that other factors do not play major roles in deciding the outcome of a war, but clearly the propaganda and the resulting public opinion can impact the outcome of a war.

As this study demonstrated, American war time propaganda has come in a variety of forms. Posters, speeches, and policies, among other things, were all used at different times to act as forms of propaganda. Some of these messages were direct calls to action, particularly in World War II, while others served to simplify the American objectives for public understanding. One source described the role of war time propaganda producers by saying, “They condense complex foreign policy into easily communicated messages: ‘to make the world safe for democracy’ or ‘to lead the Free world.’”<sup>126</sup> War time policy and actions are never going to be

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<sup>125</sup> Moeller, Susan. *Shooting War: Photography and the American Experience of Combat*. (New York: Basic Books, 1989), 191.

<sup>126</sup> Brewer. *Why America Fights: Patriotism and War Propaganda from the Philippines to Iraq*, 8.

black and white, but American propaganda producers hoped to make them appear clearly defined in order to control and direct the public opinion.

Based on the research conducted, it appears evident that the American propaganda implemented during World War II was more effective than the propaganda used during the Vietnam War. Although the events of the wars themselves drive the production of propaganda, the ability still exists for the messages to significantly sway the public. Throughout the course of World War II, American propaganda effectively combated the isolationist sentiment that previously dominated the country following World War I. The propaganda emphasized the importance of civic duty as the United States prepared for participation in the largest war in recorded history. The propaganda during World War II emphasized the role of each individual while utilizing patriotic themes and emotional appeals behind which everyday citizens could rally. A clear depiction of the battle of good versus evil became a hallmark of the war as the United States fought to free its oppressed allies from the tyranny and cruelty of the Axis powers.

The same clarity cannot be found in the propaganda during the Vietnam War. One critic wrote that World War II propaganda served to mobilize the public for a total war, while propaganda during the Vietnam War served to “elicit its passive support for a faraway conflict.”<sup>127</sup> This passiveness seemed to have been the downfall of the United States in Vietnam. The United States began the Vietnam War in secrecy, so the government did not put forth any major propaganda effort to drum up support for the cause. As the war escalated, and the situation was not in favor of the American side, it became necessary to implement propaganda as a form of damage control. This propaganda came primarily in the form of the dissemination of information. This information was largely censored and spun to reflect the war in a positive light when, in fact, the United States was struggling. The public became aware of the growing

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<sup>127</sup> Brewer. *Why America Fights: Patriotism and War Propaganda from the Philippines to Iraq*, 8.

credibility gap between the official government narratives of the war and what took taking place in Vietnam. The American propaganda was too little too late to quell the dissatisfaction of the public, and anti-war protests became more common and attracted more attention. The American people wanted out of Vietnam, and in the end they forced the hand of the government, and troops were withdrawn. Even in the end, however, propaganda played a role as the Nixon administration attempted to claim success based on a few questionable points.

People often underestimate the power of propaganda during warfare. People tend to focus on the weaponry, the military strategies, and the leaders when discussing the history of conflicts, and they overlook the concept of propaganda, all together. The power of the people of a country should never be underestimated, and harnessing this power should be a priority for all leaders when preparing for war. With proper propaganda tactics, the power of the public can be used to contribute to military victory. Without the proper strategy, however, this power can turn against the war and contribute to defeat.

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