

World War II: Posters and Propaganda



*"United We Win," US Office of War Information, 1942.
(The Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC09542)*

THE GILDER LEHRMAN
INSTITUTE of AMERICAN HISTORY

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TH THROUGH HISTORY

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World War II: Posters and Propaganda

BY TIM BAILEY

UNIT OVERVIEW

This unit is part of the Gilder Lehrman Institute’s Teaching Literacy through History resources, designed to align with the Common Core State Standards. These units were developed to enable students to understand, summarize, and evaluate original texts of historical significance. Through a step-by-step process, students will acquire the skills to analyze and assess primary and secondary source material.

Over the course of the three lessons in this unit, the students will analyze and assess a collection of posters that were produced, distributed, and displayed by the United States Office of War Information (OWI) during World War II as part of a propaganda campaign to encourage American patriotism and mobilize public support for the war effort. The students will examine, explain, and evaluate the meaning, mood, message, and theme of each poster as well as assess how effective the artist was in fulfilling the poster’s purpose to promote American participation and ultimate victory in World War II.

OBJECTIVES

Students will be able to

- Analyze primary and secondary source documents
- Infer subtle messages from primary source artwork and secondary source text
- Summarize the meaning of an informational text
- Respond to a thought-provoking essay prompt using textual and visual evidence

ESSENTIAL QUESTION

How did government-sponsored art reflect the priorities and values of American society during World War II?

NUMBER OF CLASS PERIODS: 3

GRADE LEVELS: 7–12

COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.1: Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, connecting insights gained from specific details to an understanding of the text as a whole.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.2: Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary that makes clear the relationships among the key details and ideas.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.6-8.1: Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.6-8.2: Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of the source distinct from prior knowledge or opinions.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.8.2: Analyze the purpose of information in diverse media and formats (visually, quantitatively, orally) and evaluate the motives (e.g., social, commercial, political) behind its presentation.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.11-12.1: Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 11-12 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.11-12.2: Integrate multiple sources of information presented in diverse formats and media (e.g., visually, quantitatively, orally) in order to make informed decisions and solve problems, evaluating the credibility and accuracy of each source and noting any discrepancies among the data.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.8.2: Write informative/explanatory texts to examine a topic and convey ideas, concepts, and information through the selection, organization, and analysis of relevant content.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.8.2.B: Develop the topic with relevant, well-chosen facts, definitions, quotations, or other information and examples.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.2: Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas, concepts, and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.2.B: Develop the topic thoroughly by selecting the most significant and relevant facts, extended definitions, concrete details, quotations, or other information.

LESSON 1

OVERVIEW

In this lesson, the students will read a secondary source about the purpose and content of posters sponsored by the US government during World War II. They will then answer critical thinking questions based on the essay. The focus of the lesson is on the campaign directed by the Office of War Information to increase and facilitate financing the war effort, recruiting soldiers, producing war materials, mobilizing loyalty and support, eliminating dissent and opposition, and conserving resources that were essential to the war effort.

OBJECTIVES

Students will be able to

- Read a secondary source text using close reading strategies
- Explain in their own words themes and messages represented by World War II posters

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

See “Every Citizen a Soldier: World War II Posters on the American Home Front” by William L. Bird Jr. and Harry Rubenstein in the student handouts, page 9.

MATERIALS

- Excerpts from William L. Bird Jr. and Harry Rubenstein, “Every Citizen a Soldier: World War II Posters on the American Home Front,” *History Now* 14 (Winter 2007), The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, gilderlehrman.org/history-now.
- Critical Thinking Questions: Every Citizen a Soldier

PROCEDURE

1. Hand out the excerpts from the essay “Every Citizen a Soldier: World War II Posters on the American Home Front” by William L. Bird Jr. and Harry Rubenstein.
2. “Share read” the text with the students by having the students follow along silently while you read aloud, modeling prosody, inflection, and punctuation. Ask the class to join in with the reading after a few sentences while you continue to read aloud. This technique will support struggling readers and English language learners (ELL).
3. Hand out the activity sheet for this lesson. Have the students complete the critical thinking questions as they read the essay. You can model the first two questions with the class before having the students complete the activity sheet in small groups or individually, depending on the level of support needed by your students.
4. Discuss different interpretations developed by the students or student groups.

LESSON 2

OVERVIEW

In this lesson, the students will carefully examine ten posters created as propaganda to appeal to the emotions of the viewers. The posters, often created by famous artists, exhibit both positive and negative messages to influence Americans' ideas and behavior. As part of this lesson, you will discuss the purposes, methods, and effectiveness of propaganda in playing on the viewer's emotions.

OBJECTIVES

Students will be able to

- Analyze ten primary source posters from World War II
- Identify themes (from the essay in Lesson 1) represented in each poster using visual and textual evidence

MATERIALS

- Analyzing a Poster activity sheet
- World War II Posters #1–#10

#1: "He's Watching You," art by Glenn Grohe, Office of Emergency Management, 1942. (National Archives)

#2: "We Are Ready, What about You? Join the Schools at War Program," art by Irving Nurick, US Treasury Department, 1942. (Pritzker Military Museum & Library)

#3: "Help Win the War, Squeeze In One More," art by Lee Morehouse, US Office for Emergency Management, ca. 1941–1945. (National Archives)

#4: "WARNING! Our Homes Are in Danger Now!" General Motors Corporation, 1942. (National Archives)

#5: "Soldiers without Guns," art by Adolph Treidler, US Office for Emergency Management, 1944. (National Archives)

#6: "United/United Nations Fight for Freedom," US Office of War Information, Division of Public Inquiries, 1943. (The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GLC09520.30)

#7: "United We Win," US Office of War Information, 1942. (The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GLC09542)

#8: "Of Course I Can! I'm Patriotic as Can Be," art by Dick Williams, US War Food Administration, 1944. (UNT Libraries Government Documents Department, University of North Texas Libraries, Digital Library)

#9: "It Can Happen Here!" General Motors Corporation, 1942. (National Archives)

#10: "Do with Less, so They'll Have Enough!: Rationing Gives You Your Fair Share," US Office of War Information, 1943. (The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GLC09520.19)

PROCEDURE

1. Hand out World War II Posters #1–#2 and the “Analyzing the Poster” activity sheets.
2. You may want to display a list of the six themes described in “Every Citizen a Soldier”:
 - a. The Nature of the Enemy
 - b. The Nature of Our Allies
 - c. The Need to Work
 - d. The Need to Fight
 - e. The Need to Sacrifice
 - f. The Americans
3. The students will answer the questions on the activity sheet for each poster. For the first two posters this will be done as a whole-class activity with discussion. After analyzing the first two posters with the class, hand out posters #3–#10. The students will analyze these posters in small groups, pairs, or individually depending on the level of support they need. Depending on the time available, you may choose to distribute fewer posters or assign some for work outside of class.
4. Discuss different interpretations developed by the students or student groups. Ask the students to consider how effective these posters were as propaganda, playing on the emotions of the viewers in wartime. You may wish to display these definitions of *propaganda* from *Merriam-Webster*:
 - a. the spreading of ideas, information, or rumor for the purpose of helping or injuring an institution, a cause, or a person
 - b. ideas, facts, or allegations spread deliberately to further one’s cause or to damage an opposing cause

LESSON 3

OVERVIEW

In this lesson, the students will analyze an additional ten posters keeping in mind the themes introduced in Lesson 1. After completing the activity sheets, they will synthesize their knowledge in an argumentative essay addressing those themes, citing evidence from the posters and the essay to support their point of view.

OBJECTIVES

Students will be able to

- Analyze 10 primary source posters from World War II
- Identify themes (from the essay in Lesson 1) represented in each poster using visual and textual evidence
- Synthesize, analyze, and use visual evidence to present an argument in a short essay

MATERIALS

- Analyzing a Poster activity sheet
- World War II Posters #11–#20
 - #11: “We’re Fighting to Prevent This,” by the Think American Institute, Rochester NY: Kelly Read & Co. (National Archives)
 - #12: “Your Right to Vote Is Your Opportunity to Protect,” by the Think American Institute, Rochester NY: Kelly Read, ca. 1943. (Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division)
 - #13: “Plant a Victory Garden,” art by Robert Gwathney, US Office of War Information, 1943. (UNT Libraries Government Documents Department, University of North Texas Libraries, Digital Library)
 - #14: “Never!” US Office of War Information. (National Archives)
 - #15: “Rationing Means a Fair Share for All of Us,” US Office of Emergency Management, 1943. (National Archives)
 - #16: “Americans Will Always Fight for Liberty,” Office of War Information, 1943. (The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GLC09520.37)
 - #17: “This Man Is Your Friend: He Fights for Freedom,” US Government Printing Office, 1942. (UNT Libraries Government Documents Department, University of North Texas Libraries, Digital Library)
 - #18: “Every Day You Take Off Is an Aid to the Enemy,” Labor-Management War Production Drive Committee, ca. 1942–1943. (National Archives)
 - #19: “We’re Fighting to Prevent This” by the Think American Institute, Rochester, NY: Kelly Read, 1943. (Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division)
 - #20: “Starve the Squander Bug,” art by Theodor Geisel, US Office of War Information, 1943. (The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GLC09524)
- World War II Posters and Propaganda Essay response form

PROCEDURE

1. Hand out World War II Posters #11–#20 and the “Analyzing a Poster” activity sheets.
2. The students will answer the questions on the activity sheet to analyze each poster.
3. Discuss different interpretations developed by the students or student.
4. Hand out the response form. Students will answer the prompt in a short argumentative essay that uses what they have learned from their analysis of the posters. This assignment should be done individually.

Prompt

The United States produced more than 200,000 different posters in an effort to build support on the home front during World War II. Of the posters you have studied, select three that you believe were the most effective in meeting their objective(s) and make an argument for your choices. It is important that you use evidence taken directly from the posters. Clearly cite this evidence in your essay.

EXTENSION

Based on the knowledge and understanding that the students acquired from the lessons, they can orally present or write a response to this unit’s essential question: “How did government-sponsored art reflect the priorities and values of American society during World War II?” In their oral or written response they should present their ideas and views with supportive evidence from specific posters.

Every Citizen a Soldier: World War II Posters on the American Home Front

by William L. Bird Jr. and Harry Rubenstein

World War II posters helped to mobilize a nation. Inexpensive, accessible, and ever present, the poster was an ideal agent for making victory the personal mission of every citizen. Government agencies, businesses, and private organizations issued an array of poster images, linking the military front with the home front and calling upon every American to boost production at work and at home. Deriving their appearance from the fine and commercial arts and expressing the needs and goals of the people who created them, posters conveyed more than simple slogans.

Wartime posters, which addressed every citizen as a combatant in a war of production, united the power of art with the power of advertising. Their message was that the factory and the home were also battlefields. Poster campaigns aimed not only to increase productivity in factories, but to enlarge people's views of their responsibilities in a time of Total War. Government officials incorporated the poster medium into their plans to convert the American economy to all out war production during the defense emergency of 1941. Plant managers, company artists, paper manufacturers, and others quickly followed suit, creating and posting incentive images that eventually dwarfed the efforts of the government in variety and number.

Those who advocated the use of posters believed they directly reflected the spirit of a community. As one government official put it, "We want to see posters on fences, on the walls of buildings, on village greens, on boards in front of the City Hall and the Post Office, in hotel lobbies, in the windows of vacant stores—not limited to the present neat conventional frames which make them look like advertising, but shouting at people from unexpected places with all the urgency which this war demands." "Ideally," another confirmed, "it should be possible to post [all over] America every night. People should wake up to find a visual message everywhere. . . ."

To control the content and imagery of war messages, the government created the Office of War Information (OWI) in June 1942. Among its responsibilities, the OWI sought to review and approve the design and distribution of government posters. . . . National distribution utilized organizations and trades such as post offices, railroad stations, schools, restaurants, and retail store groups. At the local level, OWI arranged distribution through volunteer defense councils, whose members selected appropriate posting places, established posting routes, ordered posters from supply catalogs, and took the "Poster Pledge." The "Poster Pledge" urged volunteers to "avoid waste," treat posters "as real war ammunition," "never let a poster lie idle," and "make every one count to the fullest extent."

Over time the OWI developed six war information themes for major producers of mass media entertainment:

The Nature of the Enemy—general or detailed descriptions of this enemy, such as, he hates religion, persecutes labor, kills Jews and other minorities, smashes home life, debases women, etc.

The Nature of Our Allies—the United Nations theme, our close ties with Britain, Russia, and China, Mexicans and Americans fighting side by side on Bataan and on the battlefronts.

The Need to Work—the countless ways in which Americans must work if we are to win the war, in factories, on ships, in mines, in fields, etc.

The Need to Fight—the need for fearless waging of war on land, sea, and skies, with bullets, bombs, bare hands, if we are to win.

The Need to Sacrifice—the need for Americans to give up all luxuries and devote all spare time to help win the war.

The Americans—what we are fighting for: the four freedoms, the principles of the Atlantic Charter, democracy, and an end to discrimination against races and religions.

Series after series of posters directed employees to get to work, anything less was tantamount to treason. Employers did not necessarily expect their workforce to take all poster slogans literally. Rather, businesses placed these displays at the scene of production to create an atmosphere of unity and urgency. Posters called upon workers to conserve, keep their breaks short, and follow their supervisors' instructions. The main thrust was to convince workers, many of whom participated in the violent labor conflicts of the 1930s, that they were no longer just employees of GM or US Steel, but rather they were Uncle Sam's "production soldiers" on the industrial front line of the war.

The posters did not carry the message that hard work would result in personal or company gain. The motivation was purely patriotic duty. Many posters also played directly on the guilt of those who were not in the military by reminding workers that, if they were not risking their lives on the battlefield, the least they could do was keep their bathroom breaks short.

Posters castigated workers for punching in late, taking long breaks, damaging the company's equipment, and even drinking after work. Artists turned what had been considered common infractions against a company into acts of betrayal, murder, and disloyalty against the nation. . . .

Source: Excerpts from William L. Bird Jr. and Harry Rubenstein, "Every Citizen a Soldier: World War II Posters on the American Home Front," *History Now* 14, The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, gilderlehrman.org/history-now. William L. Bird Jr. and Harry Rubenstein were curators in the Division of Political History at the National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution, and published *Design for Victory: World War II Posters on the American Home Front* (1998).

NAME

PERIOD

DATE

Critical Thinking Questions: Every Citizen a Soldier

World War II posters helped to mobilize a nation. Inexpensive, accessible, and ever-present, the poster was an ideal agent for making victory the personal mission of every citizen. Government agencies, businesses, and private organizations issued an array of poster images, linking the military front with the home front and calling upon every American to boost production at work and at home. Deriving their appearance from the fine and commercial arts and expressing the needs and goals of the people who created them, posters conveyed more than simple slogans.

Wartime posters, which addressed every citizen as a combatant in a war of production, united the power of art with the power of advertising. Their message was that the factory and the home were also battlefields. Poster campaigns aimed not only to increase productivity in factories, but to enlarge people's views of their responsibilities in a time of Total War. Government officials incorporated the poster medium into their plans to convert the American economy to all-out war production during the defense emergency of 1941. Plant managers, company artists, paper manufacturers, and others quickly followed suit, creating and posting incentive images that eventually dwarfed the efforts of the government in variety and number.

Using specific examples from the text, explain the purpose of the World War II posters:

Summarize this paragraph using evidence from the text:

NAME

PERIOD

DATE

Those who advocated the use of posters believed they directly reflected the spirit of a community. As one government official put it, “We want to see posters on fences, on the walls of buildings, on village greens, on boards in front of the City Hall and the Post Office, in hotel lobbies, in the windows of vacant stores—not limited to the present neat conventional frames which make them look like advertising, but shouting at people from unexpected places with all the urgency which this war demands.” “Ideally,” another confirmed, “it should be possible to post [all over] America every night. People should wake up to find a visual message everywhere” . . .

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According to the text, what was the difference between these posters and conventional advertising?

In a few sentences, using words from the text, summarize this paragraph:

NAME

PERIOD

DATE

Over time the OWI developed six war information themes for major producers of mass media entertainment:

The Nature of the Enemy—general or detailed descriptions of this enemy, such as, he hates religion, persecutes labor, kills Jews and other minorities, smashes home life, debases women, etc.

The Nature of our Allies—the United Nations theme, our close ties with Britain, Russia, and China, Mexicans and Americans fighting side by side on Bataan and on the battlefronts.

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The Need to Fight—the need for fearless waging of war on land, sea, and skies, with bullets, bombs, bare hands, if we are to win.

The Need to Sacrifice—the need for Americans to give up all luxuries and devote all spare time to help win the war.

The Americans—what we are fighting for: the four freedoms [freedom of speech, worship, from want and from fear] the principles of the Atlantic Charter [August 1941], democracy, and an end to discrimination against races and religions.

In your own words, describe the six themes that the Office of War Information wanted represented by the posters:

NAME

PERIOD

DATE

Series after series of posters directed employees to get to work, anything less was tantamount to treason. Employers did not necessarily expect their workforce to take all poster slogans literally. Rather, businesses placed these displays at the scene of production to create an atmosphere of unity and urgency. Posters called upon workers to conserve, keep their breaks short, and follow their supervisors' instructions. The main thrust was to convince workers, many of whom participated in the violent labor conflicts of the 1930s, that they were no longer just employees of GM or US Steel, but rather they were Uncle Sam's "production soldiers" on the industrial front line of the war.

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Posters castigated workers for punching in late, taking long breaks, damaging the company's equipment, and even drinking after work. Artists turned what had been considered common infractions against a company into acts of betrayal, murder, and disloyalty against the nation. . . .

In a few sentences, using evidence from the text, summarize this section of the essay:

NAME _____

PERIOD _____

DATE _____

Analyzing a Poster

Poster # _____

Give the poster a title: _____

What is the significance of the central figure(s) or object(s)? _____

What action is taking place in the poster? _____

What mood or tone is created by the poster and what in the picture is creating that mood or tone? _____

What message is the artist giving to the viewer? _____

Which of the six themes of the OWI would this poster fit into? Why? _____

Poster # _____

Give the poster a title: _____

What is the significance of the central figure(s) or object(s)? _____

What action is taking place in the poster? _____

What mood or tone is created by the poster and what in the picture is creating that mood or tone? _____

What message is the artist giving to the viewer? _____

Which of the six themes of the OWI would this poster fit into? Why? _____

Poster #1



National Archives

Poster #2



Pritzker Military Museum & Library

Poster #3



National Archives

Poster #4



National Archives

Poster #5



National Archives

Poster #6



The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History

Poster #7



The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History

Poster #8



UNT Digital Library

Poster #9



National Archives

Poster #10

**Do with less—
so they'll have
enough!**



RATIONING GIVES YOU YOUR FAIR SHARE

The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History

Poster #11



National Archives

Poster #12



Library of Congress

Poster #13



UNT Digital Library

Poster #14



National Archives

Poster #15



National Archives

Poster #16



AMERICANS

The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History

Poster #17

This man is your **FRIEND**



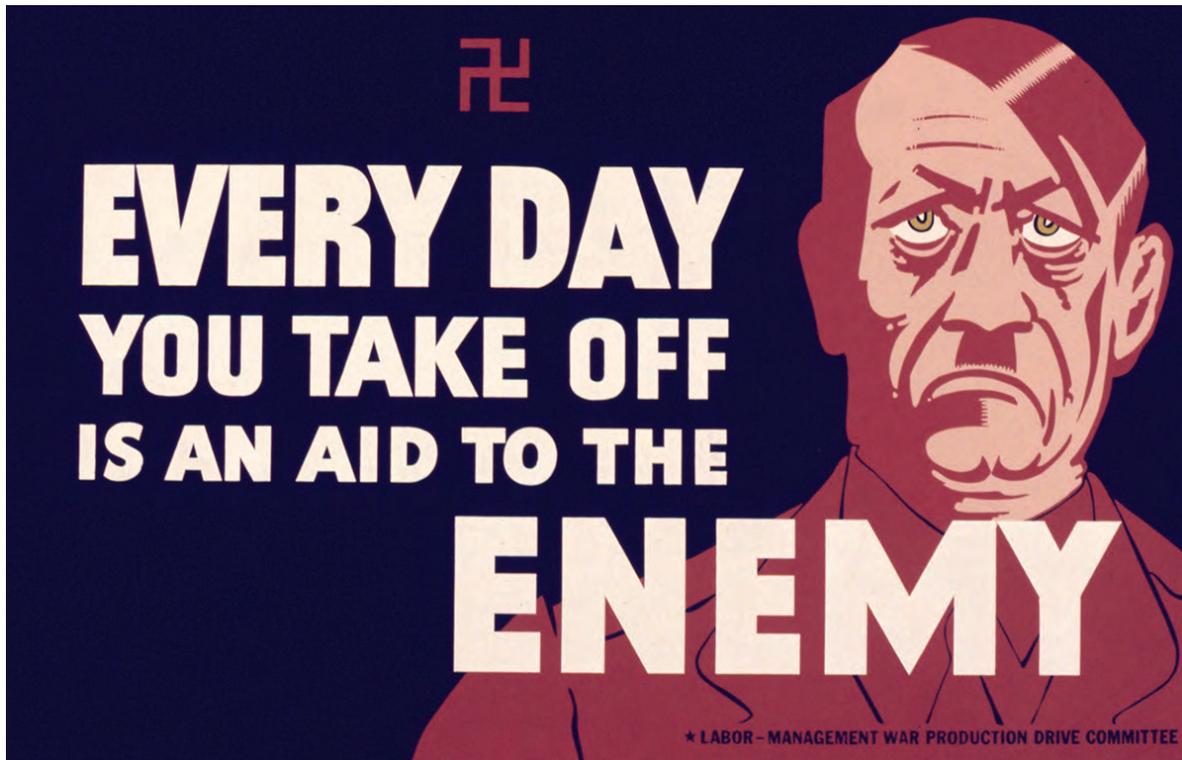
Russian

He fights for **FREEDOM**



UNT Digital Library

Poster #18



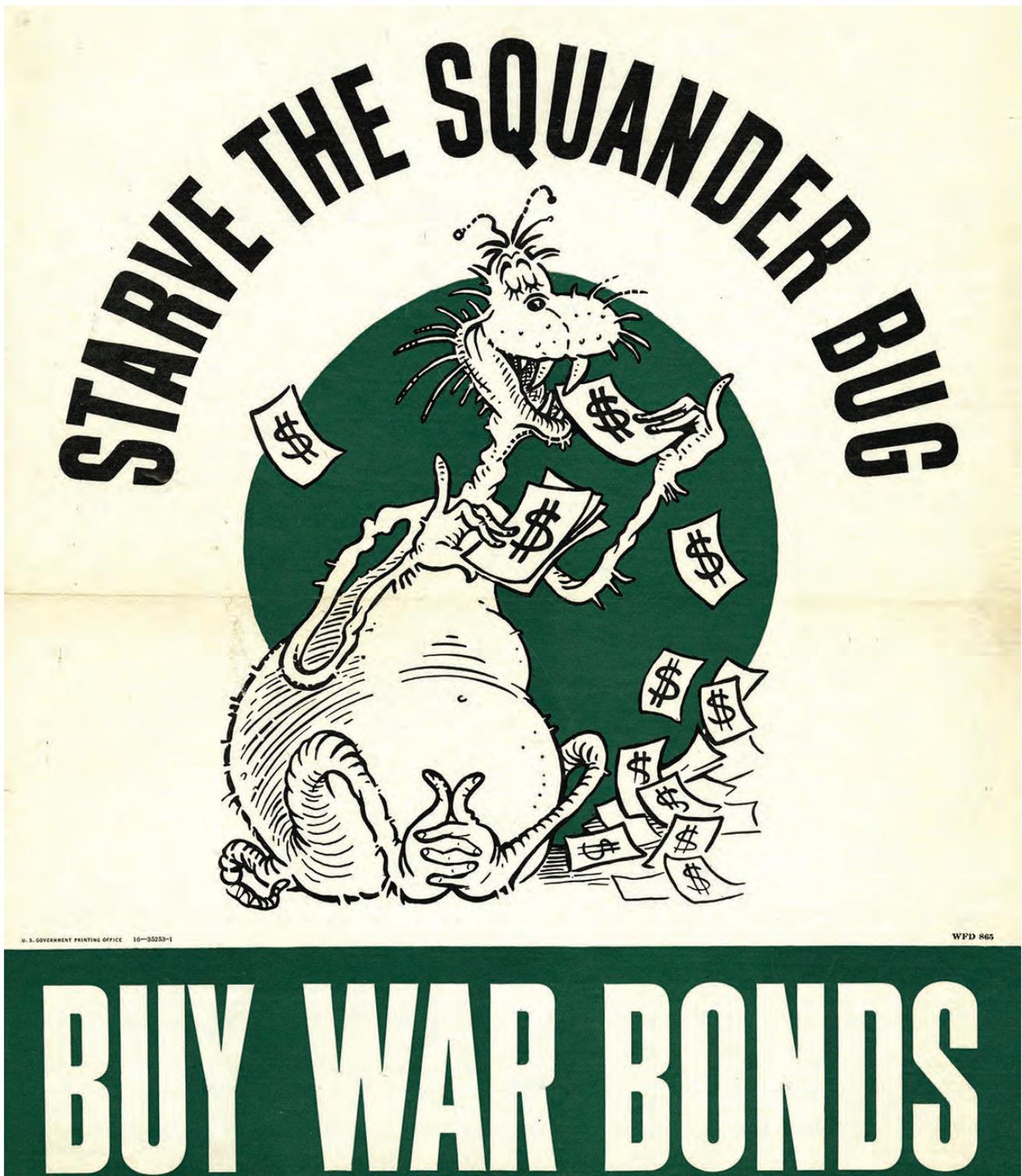
National Archives

Poster #19



Library of Congress

Poster #20



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