



THAT LIBERTY SHALL NOT
PERISH FROM THE EARTH
BUY LIBERTY BONDS
FOURTH LIBERTY LOAN

Victoria McGouran

Professor Drouin

ENGL 3373

21 February 2013

That Liberty Shall Not Perish

The idea of inundating societies with propaganda is not a new concept; however, the widespread use of leaflets, posters and other forms of media to spread propaganda did not become commonplace until after WWI erupted. During the conflict and its aftermath, posters were in widespread use to propagandize the message of the day and stir their target audiences towards action. The methodical and deliberate attempts by these war posters to shape the perceptions of their audiences and manipulate human behavior were unparalleled in effectiveness and efficiency. One poster in particular, issued for the fourth Liberty Loans campaign of 1918, manages to capture the overall intentions and techniques used by propagandists of the time as well as preserving the general political atmosphere of the era. This poster, which was created by Joseph Pennell, manages to simplistically manipulate the emotions of its viewers with the use of unreality and violent imagery, as well as playing on ubiquitous nationalism and ideology.

Joseph Pennell, the artist behind the poster, was a Philadelphia born illustrator and lithographer who was commissioned by the United States Treasury to craft the poster for the fourth Liberty Loan bond campaign (Pennell). However, initial reactions to the Liberty bonds were unenthusiastic and the common consensus was that more had to be done in order to advertise and sell the bond to the common man. This problem

caused Secretary of the Treasury, William Gibbs McAdoo to create “an aggressive campaign to popularize the bonds” which resulted in the recruitment of famous actors to popularize purchase of the bonds and the creation of the 1917 Liberty Bond Air Show promotion. This campaign used elite Army pilots in their Curtis J-4 training aircraft to attract crowds in various cities by performing complex stunts and mock dogfights. When the performance was over the pilots would land nearby and offer plane rides to anyone who purchased a Liberty bond (Liberty).

These tactics used to promote and sell Liberty bonds were incredibly successful but had the unintentional effect of redefining conventional ideas about private and public space. Because the Liberty Loan flyers could go to any city in the United States, people could potentially be pressed upon to purchase a bond at any moment. More importantly, the posters created for the campaign were circulated so extensively throughout the nation that people who wanted to escape the propaganda simply could not. This phenomenon caused a radical change in how people began to perceive media while also changing the manner in which propagandists spread their messages. In particular, the concepts discovered through that phenomenon became specifically relevant with the fourth Liberty Loan campaign because of the enormous size and impressive coloring of the poster.

The poster reads “that liberty shall not perish from the earth, buy liberty bonds”, and that line is a permutation of a statement from Abraham Lincoln’s powerful Gettysburg Address. The original line reads “...that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom—and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth” (Lincoln), and by rephrasing that particular sentiment,

Pennell undoubtedly wanted for viewers of the image to recall the ideals surrounding one of America's most famous presidents and become inspired to act accordingly. However, the inclusion of this quote would have been rendered ineffectual had it not been for Pennell's violent, passionate and alarming image that accompanied it.

The body of the poster is an almost dizzying array of red, yellow and orange that form into an image of the New York City harbor. However, Pennell does not show the image of the harbor that so many know and revere. Instead, beheaded Lady Liberty is engulfed in flame while her torch explodes in the air and enemy bombers are circling the sky. German U-Boats can be seen floating in the mouth of the Hudson River, skyscrapers are crumbling and everything is on fire. It is a scene of total chaos and destruction and although fictitious, would have undoubtedly been able to jar passersby out of their stupor and inspire them to action. In fact, it would have been almost impossible for passersby to ignore the image and its message while feeling nothing. However, while the iconographic denotations of a failing power in this image are unquestionably moving, one does have to wonder what effect this blatant emotional manipulation had on the American public.

By playing on the abounding nationalism during wartime and insinuating that not purchasing war bonds would lead to a German invasion of America, propagandists behind this poster appear to have become slightly heavy-handed in their treatment of an already emotional public. The deliberation of purpose and inherent manipulation in this image is just as upsetting now as it would have been to the general public in 1918 and forcing viewers of this image to confront the idea of a German invasion visually in the name of propaganda is nothing less than exploitation.

References

“Joseph Pennell”. *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia*. Wikimedia Foundation Inc.

10 February 2013. Web. 19 February 2013.

“Liberty Bond”. *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia*. Wikimedia Foundation Inc.

21 January 2013. Web. 19 February 2013.

Lincoln, Abraham. “Gettysburg Address”. *Quotable Lincoln*. Web Publishing Group LLC.

2004. Web. 19 February 2013.