Woodrow Wilson: “I Summon You to the Comradeship,”

A brief study on Wilson’s Red Cross and the direct approach

 1918, Christmas laurels deck the halls of New York City as you drift down an empty street, crunching through the thin snow, chin buried in your coat. The Great War ended less than a month ago; the remnants of streamers and small American flags still speckle the street and storm drains in spots. You pass by the side of a particularly long building, plastered with peeling posters demanding enlistment, purchasing of war bonds, conservation of wheat and sugar. You see in the middle a large beige print bearing the portrait of President Woodrow Wilson. He stares at you from the canvas, beseeching you underneath with a simple request to join the Red Cross for their Christmas drive, but more importantly making a summons. “I summon you to the comradeship,” he says.

The poster is unique in its utter lack of uniqueness, its beige blandness, its morose subject. Where many posters from the period took the opportunity to fill a page with patriotic symbolism and empty promises of heroic deeds to be achieved at the front, Leo Mielziner’s rendering of Wilson does little to elicit such grandeur; indeed, the poster is almost depressing to look at, but still somewhat arresting given Wilson’s size and stature before the viewer: the effectivity of this poster is in its casting aside of propaganda rhetoric in favor of the shameless direct approach.

First some historical contest: in 1918, portrait artist Leo Mielziner’s rendition of President Wilson ended up in a poster advertising Red Cross enrollment. It’s difficult to pin the exact date when the poster went into circulation, as it advertises enrollment in the Red Cross for their Christmas drive, and the armistice ending the war was signed about a month-and-a-half before Christmas that year. In her article “American Nurses in World War I,” Marian Moser Jones states that, “In May 1917, U.S. medical teams became the first American troops to arrive in the war zone, and many remained through mid-1919.” So, while American nurses remained overseas for some time after the armistice, it’s unlikely that recruitment would have continued. The Wilson poster probably went into circulation between May and November of 1918, given that the quote used seems to come from a speech Wilson made that May.

“I summon you to the comradeship,” he said in conclusion to said speech at the Metropolitan Opera House. “I summon you in this next week to say how much and how sincerely and how unanimously you sustain the heart of the world.” The words themselves were uttered in support of the Red Cross’s Second Fund Drive, though his conclusion emphasizes the virtue of volunteering as a nurse, and the poster’s creator adapted the quote to serve that express purpose. The conditions surrounding the quote are interesting: it seems almost as if Wilson surprised the public by walking in a Red Cross parade that day, unannounced, and delivering his speech at the end of the night. Wilson’s interest in the Red Cross and his call for recruitment is interesting, given his lack of direct affiliation. Though, it seems a year earlier he’d effected substantial changes in the organization’s administration. In *Wake Up, America! World War I and the American Poster*, historian Walton Rawls recounts how, “In early May, 1917, Wilson replaced the mostly female directorate of the American National Red Cross with a group of businessmen he named the War Council. Henry Pomeroy Davison, a banker and partner in J. P. Morgan & Company, was appointed its chairman…” (126). This rearranging of administration seemed to have still been in place at the time of Wilson’s speech, as he referenced Davison when opening his speech, mentioning how he hoped Davison hadn’t “curtailed” his own speech in anticipation of Wilson’s. Wilson’s inclusion behind the scenes indicates a president concerned with the humanitarian efforts of his country and quite eager to introduce an influx of both donations and membership. So, the inclusion of his quote on the poster seems appropriate and well in-line with Wilson’s own feelings.

Returning to the design of the poster: it’s interesting how simple it is. In *Picture This: World War I Posters and Visual Culture*, historian Pearl James mentions another poster bearing Wilson’s quote, one designed by Harrison Fisher featuring a “Christy-girl,” an idealized and buxom rendering of a woman in favor of the American war effort, in this case a blonde woman standing on capitol steps, holding an American flag, speaking Wilson’s words. “The female figure appears on at least two grounds,” James sais, “erotically… [for men, and] … patriotically [for women]” (283). This is quite different from Mielziner’s version, which features no overt patriotism, no eye-drawing eroticism, no female stand-ins for Liberty and Justice, no depictions of soldiers maimed and in need of nursing volunteers. Not even an American flag. In place of all this, the poster holds simply the cold gaze of Wilson at the viewer, his stoic image from the shoulders up, his near-scowl. The poster does not promise a better future, a better America, a world finally safe for democracy. It’s simple in its absolute direct approach: the President of the United States of America is asking you *directly* to join the Red Cross. Will you heed his call? Some may argue that the poster’s lack of symbolism or allegory could easily lend the poster an air of forgetfulness, and indeed the phrase “I summon you to the comradeship” seems to live on only in Fisher’s rendition in scholarly work, but the boldness of Mielziner’s rendering is still fascinating. Indeed, many people may have seen through the propaganda and shameless rhetorical strategies of other posters. Perhaps just a sensible request from the President is what may have jogged many Americans into action back in those concluding months to the Great War.

Works Cited

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