

Selling a Better America: Advertising Strategies of World War II on the American Home Front

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During World War II, U.S. businesses devised marketing strategies that encouraged consumers to believe that their country's wartime experience would launch a better America.

Many wartime commentators and businessmen were concerned about the Great Depression's stagnating standards of living, uneven distribution of technology, and a housing shortage left over from World War I. The housing problems exacerbated by the Depression, and the fear of diminishing hygienic standards, dominated wartime discourse, from advertising to presidential speeches. As a result of America's backlog of social problems, the war generated a great deal of speculation about ways to radically improve American society and ignite economic prosperity by harnessing wartime lessons in a variety of growth industries. Wartime advertisements and promotional articles celebrated the immense industrial output that corporations achieved during the war. These commercial messages positioned wartime technologies and corporate expertise as the means to streamline America and invent a socially hygienic future free from poverty, slums, drudgery, filth, and—for some businessmen—the New Deal administration.

In my book, *From Submarines to Suburbs* (2006), I surveyed the development, strategy, and effect of these advertising campaigns in the U.S. between 1939 and 1959. This paper, based on the research for my book, will focus specifically on the war years and wartime advertising about the postwar world.

Through examples of advertisements and articles found in women's, business, and general interest magazines, my paper will demonstrate how wartime forecasters described and illustrated the "world of tomorrow." Visions of a utopian postwar world built on the progress of wartime industry were not only about selling Americans the business of victory, as this paper will reveal, but also about enticing these consumers with the benefits of capitalism, as opposed to the state-controlled economic plans of the New Deal. Such a strategy was intended to not only publicize the patriotic "sacrifices" of manufacturers and big business, but also reestablish public confidence in the power of America's corporate/industrial infrastructure. Wartime advertising was structured to habituate consumers to the idea that victory and postwar prosperity were achieved by big business, not the federal government—especially the New Deal. Through a variety of examples pulled from wartime media, this paper will expose the interplay between advertising content produced during the war and corporate calculations to undermine the New Deal.