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To Speed Our Boys Home... Produce and Conserve. Share and Play Square. Home Front Propaganda and Food during World War II: Rewriting Gender?

Hélène Le Dantec-Lowry

- 1 American women were still active in various organizations and movements in the years following the landmark Nineteenth Amendment that gave white women the right to vote in 1920. However, the Great Depression and the concomitant high level of unemployment had driven many of them to retreat to the home and the raising of children, cooking, and cleaning. Such domestic responsibilities were automatically gendered as female and the expectation for women was that they would once again assume their place within the home. Again, women's identity in society came from within the family, the restricted space of the private sphere, rather than the workplace. World War II apparently produced significant changes, bringing women to the forefront of public discourse as essential actors in the fight to win the war, as military recruits (very few), workers (more numerous), and homemakers (the majority).¹
- 2 Historians writing on American female roles during World War II have acknowledged this evolution, but studies in the past two decades have reevaluated gender roles during the war as well as in the following years. Some maintain that women's war activities empowered them in ways that prefigured both their entry into the labor force in increasing numbers during the 1950s and the feminist movements of the 1960s and 1970s. For example, historian William Chafe argued early on in *The American Woman: Her Changing Social, Economic, and Political Roles*:

By any criterion, the war represented a turning point for women workers. It was responsible for millions of women joining the labor market for the first time. It forced the substantial elimination of barriers to the employment of wives. And it opened up the opportunity for a second vacation to thousands of older women

whose primary homemaking duties were over. Although female employment was initially conceived of as a temporary measure, the experience of work became an institution in many households as the war continued. Despite the built-in obstacle of demobilization, women succeeded in retaining their new economic role. (Chafe, 1972 184)

Later, Chafe notes that in spite of the unprecedented number of women who joined—and regularly stayed in—the labor force, “only minimal progress was made in the areas of greatest concern to women’s rights advocates—professional employment, child-care centers, and a uniform wage scale,” issues that would be at the heart of the demands by such feminist groups as the National Organization for Women in the 1960s (188).

- 3 Others—especially those focusing specifically on women’s connection to food—conversely argue that wartime propaganda aimed at rationing and conserving food in fact served to promote women’s place in the home, which situation in turn led in the 1950s to a strong emphasis on domesticity and a focus on the suburban nuclear family. Thus, Maureen Honey, a professor of Women’s and Gender Studies, notes that World War II was “a pivotal event paradoxically rolling back many of the gains secured by a feminist movement grown moribund after winning the vote in 1920” (1999 10; see also 1984).²
- 4 This article will examine the convergence of government and corporate interests in stressing the crucial role played by women in winning the war on the home front (meaning here both the American nation and private homes), thus exploring how women came to occupy a central position within the narrative about the nation. I shall argue that World War II was a period of transition for women who apprehended domesticity in different ways and that it contributed to *both* the normative suburban housewife model of the 1950s and the militant feminism of the following decades.
- 5 The iconic image of Rosie the Riveter dominates the collective memory of American women during the war. Yet, food propaganda was far more prevalent during that period, affecting a larger number of women, who often readily embraced the notion that the best way for them to help win the war was from their kitchens. When examining World War II domesticity, it is thus important to take into consideration the role of food propaganda and the socially-constructed gendering it produced. Moreover, as has often been correctly noted, the domesticity norm was primarily a white middle-class model that ignored class and ethnoracial heterogeneity.
- 6 I will argue also that women were indeed subjected to a dominant model but that they were not passive receptors of the propaganda directed at them. They regularly negotiated the messages they heard in ways that reflected their gender, class, and race.
³ To account for these varying influences, I will consider a range of sources, including government-issued posters, private-sector advertising, and cookbooks, as well as government and corporate pamphlets that provided recipes and advice about food preparation.

Women as Patriotic Soldiers on the Home Front: Asserting Traditional Gender Norms

- 7 During the First World War, the federal government had relied on voluntary rationing and on self-sacrifice by American citizens (Hayes 3).⁴ Unfortunately, food management had been poor, leading to hoarding and black markets, as well as rising prices and

inflation. Thus, at the beginning of World War II, the government took measures to control food distribution and stabilize prices. It created the National Defense Advisory Committee in May 1940, which included the Office of Price Administration (OPA), in May 1941. The OPA was meant to ensure equal distribution of food, avoid shortages, and control prices, thereby also preventing social unrest. OPA regulation and restrictions were not welcomed by producers and many consumers, but, under the guidance of Chester Bowles, a former advertising executive, it successfully organized rationing by appealing to the consumers' patriotism (Bentley 17; Cohen 66). By May 1942, sugar was rationed, followed in the next few months by meat, butter, and various other food items. Women were predominant in images of rationing, as shoppers for example (Image No. 1).⁵ They were also encouraged to save fat, which was ostensibly shown to produce ammunition.⁶ All in all, such rationing proved efficient and most Americans ended up following the OPA's recommendations, at least until the end of the war, when consumers, exhausted by months of restrictions, became less focused on rationing.

Image No. 1: "How to shop with war ration book two"

Poster, 1943

US Government Printing Office

- 8 The Committee of Food Habits (CFH) had been set up in 1940. One of its goals was to ensure that Americans maintained a nutritious diet and kept up their morale in times of food shortages and rationing. Both the OPA and the CFH saw women as naturally connected to food (buying, preparing, and preserving it). Government campaigns logically targeted women, who were often depicted on official posters and in pamphlets. When women were not shown as full-length figures, their hands were easily recognizable, with the result that the association of women and food was unmistakable. Cookbook authors, whose publications similarly encouraged American women to do their part in the kitchen, soon embraced their role as arbiters in matters of food and

family. Cookbooks endorsed women's responsibility in rationing, saving, and sharing food. Food definitely had political implications. Efficient food management was meant to help deal with shortages and prevent social unrest. As part of this effort, moreover, women asserted their role in civic life, demonstrating that, indeed, the so-called "private sphere" was necessarily connected to the public sphere. American women were given responsibilities of utmost importance: they were helping to feed the nation. Their role as protectors of the family and the nation, however, was etched within the traditional female identity as nurturer and as mistress of domestic space.

- 9 Of course, women—and more particularly those who had not worked before—were also encouraged to join the workforce and replace the soldiers who had left for the fighting front, especially in defense industry. Nonetheless, femininity was never forgotten and was even central to home front propaganda. Many of the images of female workers represented women in overalls, handling various tools and machines, but usually managing to look good, wearing make-up and with their hair nicely tied in a scarf (Image No. 2). Illustrations of this kind became undeniably rarer toward the end of the war: women would soon have to give their jobs back to returning male soldiers. Even though a majority of women surveyed stated that they would like to remain employed, the common notion was that they would eventually return home to their rightful place as homemakers. A 1944 advertisement, "Mother, When Will You Stay Home Again?" by Adel Company, shown in the *Saturday Evening Post* in 1944, also features an attractive woman on her way to work and her daughter dressed in the same pretty, new-looking outfit. The text reads: "Some jubilant day, Mother will stay home again, doing the job that she likes best—making a home for you and Daddy, when he gets back." This caption indicates that women's real work was deemed to be at home with their children and not in a factory or office. It implies that their situation as defense workers was temporary and due only to the momentary absence of their men ("when he gets back").

Image No. 2: "Do the Job He Left Behind"

POSTER, 1943

OFFICE FOR EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT. OFFICE OF WAR INFORMATION. DOMESTIC OPERATIONS
BRANCH. BUREAU OF SPECIAL SERVICES

- 10 The female workers shown on numerous government and advertising documents were typically middle class. Their clean appearance and attractive dress contrasted with and erased the grime associated with grueling factory work. The women in the images were also always white. Primarily targeting women who were not employed before the war, the government logically used such propaganda to convince middle-class housewives to fulfill their patriotic duty. These representations of women in the defense industry obliterated the many working-class women who had been in the labor force for generations, including many women from ethnoracial minorities. It thus whitened the female workforce and ignored working-class women's contribution. Howard Miller's iconic Rosie the Riveter illustration, which the government had commissioned, reinforces this notion.⁷ One exception was Norman Rockwell's painting of Rosie for the May 29, 1943 cover of *The Saturday Evening Post*, which shows a stronger, more masculine-looking worker (muscular, sitting in a way socially identified with a man, with a powerful tool on her lap, and wearing more authentic work overalls). There, a working-class worker comes to mind even though Rockwell obviously created a parallel with Michelangelo's Isaiah as a mighty character strong enough to help crush the enemy during the war.⁸ As a whole, then, war propaganda, supplemented by advertisers, naturalized gender by essentializing the experiences of all women into a dominant white middle-class model that did not provide any space for other women, thus erasing social disparities and ethnoracial diversity, and accentuating inequality and discrimination against nonwhite and poor women (Le Dantec-Lowry, 2017).

- 11 To help push Americans to conserve and use perishable items, the US government started a campaign to convince women to can their own food, which they were encouraged to grow in victory gardens. Such food-related propaganda also displayed white middle-class women exclusively. Indeed, middle-class housewives were the centerpiece of these images, which cultivated patriotic sentiments while also displaying qualities traditionally associated with womanhood (being maternal, caring, selfless, and putting your family first). Attractive women wearing make-up and pretty clothes protected by clean, nice-looking aprons were meant to represent accepted femininity. A 1943 poster entitled “Grow your Own” (Image No. 3) shows a mother—young and attractive—with her daughter surrounded by a large number of newly canned vegetables. Here also, patriotism is a key element since the food will not perish with the season, but rather will be available for this family in the future, allowing them to avoid possible shortages. The daughter is dressed exactly like her mother, suggesting that young girls be raised and groomed to resemble female adults and adopt the same values on womanhood and the family. The fact that the daughter includes herself in the task of canning with the pronoun “we” in “We’ll have lots to eat this winter, won’t we Mother?” makes her an actor in promoting and perpetuating the model of female domesticity. Mother and daughter look alike—a common occurrence in war posters, and also in advertising, as with the above-mentioned 1944 Adel advertisement—demonstrating the gendered reproduction, across generations, of a specific role for women.

Image No. 3: “Grow your own. Can your own”

POSTER, 1943

OFFICE OF WAR INFORMATION. PUBLIC DOMAIN

- ¹² In such documents, emanating from both the government and the private sector, there is clearly a narrow type of image that is constantly reiterated, demonstrating that American women were encouraged to conform to a restrictive model. In many ways this is akin to what Foucault defined as biopolitics and its associated biopower, i.e. a control apparatus targeting a population. For Foucault, biopower was essential in the development of capitalism and led to “the controlled insertion of bodies into the machinery of production and the adjustment of the phenomena of population to economic processes” (Foucault 141). World War II propaganda similarly controlled women’s bodies by projecting a single acceptable image that reinforced traditional gender norms and a patriarchal model, in an effort to maximize their participation in the war effort.
- ¹³ Cookbooks along with pamphlets and promotional booklets associated with food also participated in essentializing women and fostering a dominant model. Cookbook authors—overwhelmingly white middle-class women at the time—traditionally offered recipes and nutrition advice in ways that conveyed the manners and customs of their own class and ethnic group, projecting them onto other women in the nation (Le Dantec-Lowry, 2012).⁹ World War II cookbooks logically focused on the patriotic responsibility of all American women, independently of their class and ethnoracial backgrounds. However, since the women they depicted were all white, and because the majority of references to their daily routine implied that they were middle- and upper-middle-class housewives, this model remained dominant. There were rare references to employed women, and those that did appear implied that these women had no choice but to shoulder the double load of work in a factory or office and family care. Women were charged with cooking nutritious and balanced meals for their families at a time when the government was worried about the poor diet of most people after the Great Depression, including American soldiers. Consistent with the new guidelines set by scientists and home economists, Americans were encouraged to eat better. Cookbooks thus generally assumed that the proper role for wartime women was homemaking, even though some of them temporarily participated in the labor force—“for the duration” as mentioned in an oft-repeated phrase. Reflecting the belief that women should all work together in order to win the war, regardless of their class and ethnoracial origins, cookbooks were written for *all* American women. Nevertheless, middle-class values and ways of doing things remained predominant. Some referred to managing servants or coping with the lack of household help at a time when many domestics had left their employer to find better-paying jobs in industry, especially in war-related positions.¹⁰ Most included several pages devoted to preparing events that were clearly connected to a more bourgeois habitus: luncheons, tea and cocktail parties, etc. In spite of the communal spirit so essential during wartime, therefore, these books demonstrated a distinct class bias. As Mary Drake McFeely notes, the kitchen has traditionally defined what it means to be middle class: “it has been in the kitchen that a great deal of middle-class culture has been and is powerfully asserted as the American norm” (4). The war did not really challenge this common characteristic of culinary publications.
- ¹⁴ In spite of a few war-oriented publications such as the 1943 *Authentic Victory Cook Book* (Image No. 4),¹¹ most cookbooks issued during the world conflict were similar to those published in earlier periods: a collection of recipes organized in various chapters by food categories (soups, entrées, salads, cookies, etc.) and by tasks (canning, freezing,

preserving, etc.). The most successful books were regularly reissued (e.g. *The Betty Crocker Cookbook*, *The Joy of Cooking*, *The Fanny Farmer Cookbook*). Authors adapted their books to the war by simply adding a preface or a new introduction and a few recipes factoring in both rationing and the shortage of certain items (using less sugar, meatless meals, for example). They espoused the government's recommendations while also showing patriotism. In the preface to the 1943 edition of her successful *Joy of Cooking*, Irma Rombauer mentions that she has included a few "emergency chapters [...] to meet the difficulties that beset the present-day cook." Ruth Berolzheimer's *The Victory Binding of the American Woman Cookbook* includes several pages (not numbered, after the index) added to the former editions of *The American Woman Cookbook* in order to take into consideration the hardships induced by the war. Shortages and rationing are mentioned; there is advice on how to save fats and oils (part B), and instructions on canning (part H). The author titles one part "Cheese is American," referring to the lack of imported cheese due to war restrictions, and she explains that cheese is "an excellent alternative for meats." In "How to Feed a Family of Five on \$20 per Week," she acknowledges the mounting difficulties met by some families at the time. She also sees food and its preparation as being a housewife's primary duty within the family: "This puts upon the homemaker the responsibility for careful selection and good cooking" (Berolzheimer, 1944 np).

- 15 Recipes devised to help women deal with challenges related to feeding a family during the war and advice about shopping wisely, nutrition, and even gardening appeared in new editions of cookbooks. These collections appealed to their readers' love of country, as did promotional booklets.¹² Patriotism was expressed in the text accompanying recipes, and also through other elements such as the names of recipes (the "Victory Spice Cake" in *Aunt Jenny's Sugar-Saving Recipes*), and the paratext—colors and various symbols. The American flag and its colors were commonly displayed (on covers, as chapter headings, as small drawings throughout the book); so were the letter "V" for victory (Image No. 4) and a blue star indicating that a member of a household was off fighting.

Image No. 4: *The Authentic Victory Cook Book* Front-cover of *The Authentic Victory Cook Book***AUTHOR'S COPY**

- 16 Government posters also routinely cultivated feelings of patriotism and sacrifice. Like cookbooks, such propaganda exploited the viewers' emotions. For example, a 1944 poster promoted home gardening, particularly the growing of beans, as a way to have enough food not only for Americans but also for their allies. It uses drab brown coloring to portray, in the foreground, an American soldier feeding beans to an obviously undernourished child in an unidentified bombed European city shown in the background. The slogan reads: "Plant more beans. Help those freed from axis rule." Cookbooks, however, usually provided an upbeat, optimistic message about women's ability to achieve their war goals in ways that underscore their crucial role as homemakers. These books reinforced the nurturing qualities traditionally associated with women. Emotion (guilt, fear, and concern) was sometimes a component of the intended message, as when women were advised to continue providing nourishing, healthy meals to their families no matter what obstacles they encountered, lest they became bad homemakers.
- 17 The intimate relationship between the government and advertising agencies was, as suggested above, a key element in the fashioning of women's roles.¹³ Links with the corporate world were evident in the common promotional booklets made for a specific company or brand that provided advice or functioned as small cookbooks. Like government propaganda and cookbooks, the company booklets cultivated feelings of patriotism and reinforced the idea that a woman's primary role was to be a homemaker. The companies, of course, distributed these booklets to advertise their own products, which were the featured ingredients of the recipes. In 1942, the Pet Milk Company, a maker of evaporated milk, issued a guide entitled *Tempting, Thrifty, Wartime*

Meals For 2 and 4 and 6. With Some Meatless Menus. It reminds its readers, presumed to be female, that “[n]ever before have we heard and read so much about the need for every American to be physically fit.”¹⁴ A few lines later, it explains: “Of course you have seen that milk heads the list of foods that our government recommends,” which remark was intended to encourage readers to buy what the company then called “Irradiated Pet Milk” (13).¹⁵

- 18 The government also issued its own pamphlets, often elaborated with women in mind. Created by the United States Office of Civilian Defense, the 1942 *What Can I Do? The Citizen's Handbook For War*, devotes chapter 7, “Specific Jobs For Women,” to its female readership. The text is interspersed with black-and-white drawings of a matronly white woman going about her daily activities, and has sections on “Converting Your Home” and “Jobs Outside the Home.” The authors assert that “the biggest industry in America is homemaking” (36) and add that “‘The family effort’ [mentioned by the president] is, of course, a cooperative affair, but more often than not, it is the wife and mother who finds herself in charge.” While one might expect that the second part on “Specific Jobs For Women” would concern women employed outside the home, it actually deals with some of the tasks housewives might be expected to perform during wartime: “you can write letters to the families of service men you have met in your town,” “You can concentrate club work on wartime activities, such as the study of conservation, rationing, price control, inflation” (np). The pamphlet makes no mention of women working outside the home, suggesting that housewives were at the center of the war effort on the home front and creating what historian Lizabeth Cohen calls “patriotic citizenship” (68).
- 19 Despite its earlier campaign to entice women to leave their family home in order to join defense jobs and, more generally, to replace men active on the fighting front, government propaganda and the accompanying promotional literature for the most part constructed a gendered vision of womanhood that restricted American women to the family home¹⁶ and almost exclusively defined their role as wives and mothers. At the end of the war, Rosie the Riveter and her co-workers were progressively encouraged to return home. The discourse related by propaganda drastically changed, as will be examined next.

Toward Peace... and Emancipation? Creating Mrs. Consumer, Fostering female Consciousness and Community

- 20 Not only did propaganda and the private sector stress the importance for women to go back home starting in 1944, so did various “experts.” These experts created the expectation that women would abandon their jobs.¹⁷ Among them was sociologist James Bossard,¹⁸ who wrote an article appearing in the September 1945 issue of the *Journal of Home Economics*.¹⁹ Bossard’s views may appear extreme today, but in fact they were commonly expressed at the time in political, corporate, and home economics discourse, that is why I quote his text at length below. In “Family Problems of the Immediate Future,” Bossard writes about the challenges for couples and families as men return home. He asserts (emphasis his):

Homemaking as an important occupation must be sold or re-sold to a large group of women. Some of these are war brides facing new duties. Others are matrons whose wartime

excursions into emergency aid jobs or uniforms have led them to think they have graduated from homemaking. Of the two million women under 55 years of age who left home duties for wartime jobs, many will soon lose their jobs; it is to the interest both of the American home and to men seeking employment that they return to their domestic pursuits. (387)

- 21 Several points are worth examining here. For Bossard and many others, whereas women “graduated” from homemaking—implying that working in salaried jobs had been somewhat empowering—their “duties” were first and foremost in the home, something that women were not allowed to forget. American society is conceived, here again, in terms of separate spheres: the public arena is reserved for men, while that of women is the home and “their domestic pursuits.” Men’s interests are mentioned, but those of women are simply equated with “the American home.” The message is the same as that which had been projected onto women since the mid-nineteenth century. War propaganda, advertising, and culinary literature “sold and re-sold” to American women the idea that their place was in the home, caring for their families. The use of such vocabulary associated with the consumer society is noteworthy. By 1944, American society was already preparing the way for a peace economy and for the rise in mass consumerism, in which women would be central actors (Cohen chapter 3). All sources likewise insisted on women’s unique, and substantial, position as homemakers.

Bossard continues:

Finally, there is that sizeable group of household employees who since the outbreak of the war have doffed their aprons to don overalls. As these lose their war jobs, it is to the public interest that they return to their former occupations. American home life needs an efficient servant class, and their element in the population must have positions in domestic service if any program for their peacetime employment is to be realized. The relatively smooth return of several million women to homemaking duties is a vital necessity in the months just ahead. (387)

- 22 Through his description of a postwar situation—even a partial and idealized version—what Bossard deems a “vital” necessity is nothing less than the restoration of society to its former order, as that vision encompasses privileges played out according to the norms of gender, class, race, and ethnicity. Bossard explicitly demonstrates the need for domestic service to provide essential support during the transition back to peacetime. Implicitly, however, he is arguing for a return to the former class and ethnoracial divisions, which had been somewhat blurred during the war years, when a large proportion of servants from ethnoracial minorities took advantage of wartime job opportunities to leave their jobs as household employees in order to hold better-paid positions in the defense industry.

At the end of his article, Bossard underscores women’s role as homemakers (emphasis his):

Finally it is vitally important to bring to American womanhood a white glow of appreciation in the role of homemaker in our rapidly changing society. Homemaking is more than housekeeping. It is more than the acquisition and utilization of technical skills and aids. It is, in its ultimate essence, the creation of a social situation in which a normal family life may develop. (387)

A traditional family, with a provider husband and a stay-at-home mother, was perceived as the normal state of things; it ensured the future of the nation. The survival of American families was undeniably in the hands of women. Bossard’s ideas were supported during the war and in the following months by food-related propaganda and the gendered discourses that placed women in the home exclusively.

- 23 At the same time, the government was also thinking about the end of the conflict and about the society it wanted for peacetime. Providing jobs for returning soldiers was seen as essential to ensure both social harmony and family happiness. Keeping women at home as both guardians of moral values and consumers was an essential part of the new equation. This would become evident when, after the war, the nuclear familial model and the suburban lifestyle would be exposed to the American population and to the rest of the world as the backbone of American values and the proof of US capitalist-style exceptionalism during the Cold War (Le Dantec-Lowry, 2012). As Lizabeth Cohen remarks: "Women may have made different choices in peacetime than Depression and war, but there is no denying that the options they had to choose from were constricted by the gender assumption prevailing in the Consumer's Republic" (136). The corporate world and its associated advertising partners would embark as well upon another type of campaign, even before the war ended, one made to push American families—and women in particular—to embrace mass consumption.
- 24 The promotional literature distributed by various companies as part of war propaganda actually set the scene for women's main role as consumers, a role they would be expected to fulfill in the 1950s suburban housing developments that grew around American cities as the country's businesses were successfully switching to a peacetime economy and as returning veterans took advantage of the 1944 GI Bill to advance their studies and, by extension, improve their careers and incomes, making it possible for young families to buy houses in the suburbs and, subsequently, spend money decorating and furnishing them.
- 25 The 1944 Adel advertising "Mother, when will you come home again?" mentioned above was made toward the end of the conflict in 1944. It demonstrates American corporations' growing concern about the near future when the war industry would have to be converted to peacetime activities. Referring to the American woman portrayed on the poster, the text assures that "[i]n her post-war home she'll want appliances with the same degree of precision" (as the war-related Adel products). In the following years, the normative model sold to Americans by advertisers and politicians would indeed put forward a white middle-class suburban lifestyle in which women were targeted as the prime consumers—and purchasers—and strongly encouraged to buy the new appliances and other household goods that American companies were producing *en masse*. Winning the war also meant having access to material happiness in a consumer-oriented suburban paradise that excluded ethnoracial minorities, just as advertising—and much of the popular media—did. Once more, the female model sold to the Americans would be mostly white and middle class—representative of a homogenized group and ignoring ethnoracial and social differences. Food would also continue to be largely associated with the white middle-class housewife in advertising and in culinary literature. This pervasive representation seems to acknowledge the analysis by historians (see footnote 1) that the war period had imprisoned women within a homemaker model, one that maintained gender hierarchies, did not disrupt the social order, and would persist in the ensuing years.
- 26 Still, it would be wrong to ignore alternate visions of womanhood during the war and to neglect women's power to read images and messages insightfully. Women in fact interpreted the media directed at them in ways that were consistent with their own experience, values, and agendas at the time. Cookbook authors, in particular, often described food as gender-oriented and as the almost exclusive responsibility of women.

During the war, however, these authors had also regularly suggested that cooking enabled women to have a role in the public arena and provided outlets toward female consciousness. For example in *The Joy of Cooking* preface to the 1943 edition, Irma Rombauer notes that “tradition speaks to us in [the book’s] pages, a tradition of plenty which should always be ours, and which will be, with the intelligent use of our mighty weapon, the cooking spoon” (np). She obviously accepts the notion that women’s primary role is in the kitchen, but she also empowers them with an active part to play in civic life. Although women are homemakers first, their participation in building and preserving the nation is reiterated.

- 27 War propaganda had stated that beyond canning food, women were also supposed to participate in the war effort by growing their own vegetables in victory gardens. At the peak of the victory garden movement in the summer of 1943, it is estimated that there existed nearly 20 million such gardens in the United States (Hayes 53). Women were not solely targeted in this case, however, and gardening was not regarded as an exclusively female activity. Victory garden posters often represented happy women in beautiful settings, thereby providing a bucolic image reminiscent of Jefferson’s agrarian ideal. Still, men were also pictured, suggesting that the garden was a site for mixed-gender as well as inter-generational activity. At the same time, gardening and canning were often done within a female setting: indeed, women shared tips and exchanged goods and materials, creating a sense of communality.
- 28 It must also be remembered that many women, comprising those linked with the war reasoning on food, were actually “out of” the home due to their administrative or militant activities. Indeed, a sizeable number of American women, including many who were not employed in paid activities, participated in various organizations and movements, some of which were associated with food. Thus, many women were members of official committees that dealt with propaganda, rationing programs, nutrition, etc. In *Eating for Victory*, Food Studies professor Amy Bentley mentions for example that many of them were involved in the CFH, including nutritionists, psychologists, and anthropologists—among whom were Margaret Mead and Ruth Benedict (Bentley 24-26). This fact calls into question Bentley’s own conclusion that the war imprisoned women into a restrictive gender construct that would have lasting consequences. Female advisers to government programs often concurred with the dominant discourse on gender in war propaganda, which stated that women were best suited to food-related matters. Concomitantly though, their position as recognized scientists and members of a governmental organization proves that food matters offered venues for the recognition of women’s expertise outside of the home.
- 29 For her part, Lizabeth Cohen refutes the notion that women’s involvement on the home front during the war necessarily precluded any role for them outside of home-related activities. On the contrary, in the chapter devoted to World War II in her *Consumers’ Republic*, she points to the active role of women in decision making as proof that they were not simply homemakers and passive recipients of war propaganda. Cohen’s focus on consumption—and much less on food, it is true—specifically leads her to recall the role played by women in government organizations—at the federal, state, and municipal levels—such as the OPA, whose Consumer Advisory Committee included members like Caroline Ware, a well-known consumer activist. Cohen also mentions the numerous female volunteers who served on War Price and Rationing Boards, organized consumer centers in their neighborhoods, and often, when already consumer activists,

steered the OPA as much as possible toward pro-consumer policies (Cohen 66). These women were taking part in the work done on the home front and felt that female citizens had a special role to play there. The activists among them never forgot their cause, and they exemplified through their own commitment that women could and did play a role outside the home. Even though housewives collectively had no organization to represent them, the war did not suppress traditional and pre-existing women's organizations, such as the General Federation of Women's Clubs, the American Association of University Women, the National Congress of Parents and Teachers, the National Consumers League, and the National Council of Negro Women among others, which remained active throughout the period considered (Bentley 52).

- 30 Beyond unions and other such official organizations—and closer to the home—many women also set up neighborhood, church, and civic groups in order to ensure fair distribution and rationing of food items and to denounce hoarding or black-market practices. Many women were also part of government-sponsored community programs that encouraged them to make sandwiches for troops as they moved about the country (Hayes 174). These programs functioned as more or less informal female communities in which women would sometimes interact with peers whom they would not have met otherwise. While usually restricted to their family and neighborhood communities, these women met other women in groups that sometimes reached across class—and more rarely racial—lines and also allowed them to work with men—in a “working” setting—outside of their usual familial and social environments. Such changes reinforced a female sense of collective belonging and empowerment that often continued in the years after the war. These women also acquired organizational skills and some degree of political experience. Some banded together and functioned as pressure groups. A case in point is when some decided to demand grade labeling on canned food, which would have guaranteed more consistent quality standards and better choice for consumers. The complex rationing system during the war rendered efficient informed shopping difficult and a majority of women, spearheaded by consumer activists within the CFH, had sought such labeling for years. In the end, however, the women did not achieve what they wanted, due to resistance by the producers and a negative vote by Congress in 1943. Even though, as Bentley correctly notes (Bentley 52), housewives were not directly involved in this fight and the activists' demands were not met, this type of communal action supported by a majority of American women nevertheless served as a powerful example of women's agency and collective potential.
- 31 Similarly, the absence of minority women in war narratives does not mean that they did not react to government and corporate messages. As noted above, through its nearly exclusive representation of white middle-class women, food propaganda consistently gave the impression that the United States was ethnically and socially homogeneous. One would indeed expect government campaigns during wartime to stress harmony and social cohesion in order to create a united front in support of victory. Thus, the absence of other women—their systematic erasure from the public consciousness—does demonstrate the nation's will not to disturb a social order largely defined by white middle-class hegemony; it also illustrates the inferior position of poor and working-class women, and those of ethnoracial minorities.²⁰ Recently, however, interest in World War II has broadened to include forgotten populations into the war's history, offering these groups the place they deserve as active participants. One common goal has been to unearth sources that demonstrate the role played by women

and men from different ethnoracial groups. For example, a wide range of primary documents about the experiences of Latina and Asian-American women are now available online and researchers are increasingly focusing on the experience of minority women.²¹ African American women, however, have been more widely studied, and it is this group on which I will now focus.

- 32 The sense of unity displayed in government discourse and the involvement of African Americans in the armed forces and in defense industry²² gave much hope to the black population that the dominant views on race and gender would finally change. The “Double V” campaign was launched by the famous black newspaper *Pittsburgh Courier* in February 1942. African Americans were striving for victory abroad, as was the entire nation. Within the United States, they additionally sought equal status with other American citizens.²³ While this campaign quickly waned, it epitomized the persistent problems Blacks encountered during the war. Segregation was still very much in place in many areas of the country and violence against Blacks was not rare. Lynching was still regularly practiced in Southern states.²⁴ Discrimination was common, including in the military. Blacks, civilian or not, continued to be refused service in shops, restaurants, and other public places (Cohen 83). Soldiers were often relegated to minor positions, many of which involved food service, and these jobs maintained stereotypes by linking African American men, especially women, to the cooking and serving of meals. Amy Bentley recalls that black enlisted men were more often than not relegated to kitchen duty, even when they were skilled in other areas (Bentley 80-81). Many Black women managed to leave domestic work and obtain better-paid positions during the war. They still filled most positions as servants, however, and they did not cross gender barriers as often as their white counterparts (Honey, 1999 10). They had lesser jobs in industry and often ended up with service positions (cleaning, maintenance) (Bentley 7). They were very active on the home front, participating as much as others in rationing, victory gardens, and government-sponsored food distribution for soldiers, but their contribution was rarely acknowledged, except in black-owned publications (Honey, 1999 2-3).
- 33 Continuing inequality led to disappointment and sometimes bitterness, with the result that African Americans reacted, demanding equal treatment (Rolland-Diamond). Even though they were not always heard, they staged boycotts of segregated places; they rioted (as in Detroit in 1943), and organized marches such as with the 1941 black-led March on Washington Movement initiated by black labor activist A. Phillip Randolph. Planned for July 1941, this march was ultimately cancelled after President Roosevelt issued Executive Order 8802, which established the first Fair Employment Practices Committee. This event confirmed to Blacks their power to defend their rights collectively; it marked a major victory for African Americans and what is sometimes considered as being among the organizational roots of 1950s-style militancy and later civil-rights campaigns (see “March on Washington Movement”).
- 34 African American women, for their part, were mostly not the focus of government messages, especially food-related campaigns, and these women were therefore not as influenced by a gendered discourse on homemaking. The vast majority among them had always worked outside the home, and they were therefore less likely to abide by restrictive definitions of womanhood. Moreover, persistent discrimination against the black population as a whole meant that many of them saw race as superseding gender during the war years (Honey, 1999 21-22). The black press and publications by militant

organizations such as the NAACP's *Crisis* showed images of black women at work and in the arts, thus providing a counter-narrative to the official one. These publications usually avoided pictures of food and its preparation, and in doing so they distanced themselves from the Mammy stereotype and the connection between black women and domestic work. The food front did not represent African American women. For all these reasons, black women circumvented their association with food and elected instead to focus their agency as black citizens on the struggle to combat racism and inequity.

Conclusion

- 35 During World War II the food-related campaigns organized by both government and industry constantly restricted women to their single role as homemakers. These campaigns inculcated in women the idea that their major contribution as citizens was to serve as models of morality and generosity. As wives and mothers, they were expected to maintain the family, through their attention to food, and the economy, through their support of consumption, activities geared toward building a favorable environment for peacetime prosperity. Food propaganda was mostly a white middle-class construction; it largely avoided mentioning a class and ethnoracial heterogeneity that might have threatened social harmony. Home front messages targeting women would later be transposed onto the suburban ideal that would confine women—those of the middle and upper classes, at least—to the home. The 1950s nuclear family model would indeed turn out to be very powerful and would fill popular culture with visions of prosperity. Women's position as homemaker was integrally connected to mass consumption, as it was in turn linked both to home ownership within an expanding suburban middle class and to politics as it promoted American exceptionalism around the globe. As a result, it was undeniably difficult for many women to avoid the messages about their role in society and not comply with it, at least to a certain extent.
- 36 Nevertheless, as women partook in the definition and appropriation of rationing, canning, and food distribution during the war, they acquired a structure for cooperation and community work, a “grammar of solidarity” which, I argue, lasted beyond the war. Evidence of this solidarity would be found again in community and volunteer work performed by many middle-class women, including the homebound female residents in suburban developments.²⁵ Their war participation created a sense of individual achievement and community that would later be translated, for some, into a feeling of sisterhood, as stated by feminist activists in the 1960s, and of sharing a common experience, including the alienation and exploitation described by Betty Friedan in her commonly-read *The Feminine Mystique*. These experiences would eventually lead some toward membership in feminist organizations and they would also foster a community spirit and a sense of shared experience that they would then transmit to their daughters. Some of these young women, raised in the suburbs in the 1950s would, of course, react against the lifestyle of their mothers and the strong normative gendered discourse that kept them chained to the stove—and to their babies' cribs. They would join various political movements in the late 1950s and in the 1960s (the civil rights, student and peace movements, feminist organizations, and the counterculture). For many, private life at home led to political consciousness-raising, an evolution that explains the radical feminists' affirmation, later on, that “the personal is political.”²⁶

- 37 After the war, women from ethnoracial minorities, who had been largely underrepresented in food-related propaganda,²⁷ were certainly influenced to a lesser degree by the suburban ideal which most of them could not reach, at least until the mid-1970s. Persistent discrimination and bitterness over the fact that for them the fruits of victory were not equally shared with whites led many of them into activism.
- 38 Thus, for all American women—whether in the 1950s or in the following decades—the idea that the woman’s place was in the home, and the home only, was increasingly disputed and contested.
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NOTES

1. In 1944, 35% of women were in the labor force, including $\frac{1}{4}$ of all married women. They had been 25.8% in 1940 as a whole, including 15.6% of married women (Bowers 24). The increase in the percentage of women who worked can be explained by the rise in the number of white middle-class women in salaried positions. Historian Eleanor Straub stresses, however, that even though the government counted on rising employment for women to face labor shortages during the war, it had a hard time convincing the defense industry to hire women, seen as unsuitable for work in steel, shipping, and aircraft for example. As the government was unwilling to put too much pressure on the private sector to comply with the needs of the War Manpower Commission, it focused on convincing the public directly, through propaganda, that women's labor was necessary. After 1942, corporations changed their position and focused also on hiring women in defense jobs (Straub).
2. While William Chafe gave a strong argument early on in favor of the evolution in women's status during the war in *Women and Equality* (1977), others, e.g. Leila Rupp (1978), Karen Anderson (1981) and D'Ann Campbell (1984) argued that conventional attitudes about women prevailed. For further discussion and examples, see Honey (10) and Staub (6).
3. Of course, regional differences might be considered as well. Indeed, the strong focus on domesticity in the white South may have led southern white women to embrace more readily the propaganda about their important role as housewives, while urbanized educated women elsewhere may have seen it with more reservations. Still, the strong nationalistic messages about winning the war addressed to the whole nation and gathering all Americans into one united force precluded these differences from being stressed in the propaganda at the time.
4. Independent writer Joanne Lamb Hayes also notes that shortages as early as the summer of 1941 had led grocers to devise their own rationing rules and that, after the attack on Pearl Harbor in December that year, which led the US to enter the war, a survey showed that American customers preferred organized, official, and fairer rationing. Rationing went into effect in May 1942 (Hayes 3-4).
5. Image No. 1, which explains the rationing system, not only associates women with shopping for food, it also depicts a patriarchal vision of a man explaining to a woman how to use a ration book.
6. Saving cooking fat was a major part of advertising toward women, reinforcing their desire to participate in the war effort. Still, in reality, household fat was never a large component in the production of ammunition.
7. This illustration (visible on the National Museum of American History's website) was made by Howard Miller based on a photograph of a real-life worker in Michigan called Geraldine Doyle. It has been known as "Rosie the Riveter" since the 1980s, when the image was rediscovered and widely distributed. "Rosie the Riveter" became associated with women joining the workforce after an eponymous song from 1942 by Redd Evans and John Jacob Loeb (Paramount), sung by various artists, became popular. Miller's "We can do it!" poster became a US postage stamp in 1999. Even though a real worker was used as a model, the image was sober and neutral enough to appeal to all middle-class women at the time.
8. Michelangelo's Isaiah, in the Sistine Chapel at the Vatican, obviously inspired Rockwell's Rosie who holds the same position. Rosie, sitting in front of the American flag, is crushing a copy of Hitler's *Mein Kampf* under her right foot and seems to have a halo above her head. Her patriotism is thus interspersed with religious imagery. By comparison, Rosie's patriotism in Miller's rendition appears simply through the use of the colors of the flag in the worker's clothing (red, white, and blue). Rockwell's painting is at the Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art in Bentonville, Arizona (see "'Rosie the Riveter' 1941-1945").

9. Cookbook authors had long been women from the middle and upper classes, who were more literate and who had greater access to the publishing world. This article focuses on books written by women but, of course, a more complete picture of gender construction during the war would also examine the few books published by men. These insisted on patriotism, but also demonstrated many of the same characteristics as male-authored books from earlier years: the lack of very technical information, as if men did not require it, the focus on meat dishes, associated with masculinity, and, more specifically during World War II, the notion that the preparation of food was not part of men's identity but that they could and would cook if necessary (Staub 55-58). Authorship is indeed a further element conveying essentialized gender norms. See also Neuhaus.

10. For example, the number of African American women employed in domestic service fell from 60 to 44 percent between 1940 and 1944 (Honey, 1999 8). See also Bentley, 1998 48.

11. See also Berolzheimer, 1942; *Authentic Victory Cook Book*.

12. Of course, fostering patriotism was not a new component of culinary literature or of World War II propaganda. Nationalistic feelings had also been promoted during earlier conflicts. But the breadth of material available, the means to spread it (posters, radio and television announcements, published books and pamphlets, political speeches, etc.), and the sophisticated methods used by government-sponsored advertising agencies at that time made their message particularly significant and powerful.

13. Advertising agencies had suffered much during the Great Depression, and many had folded or were on the verge of bankruptcy when the war started. Their involvement in propaganda revived them. They were also given specific advantages by the government and, for example, did not pay taxes for the duration of the war. Thus, even though not always part of government propaganda per se, advertising agencies still played a role in influencing women's behavior for specific national purposes.

14. The American government was very worried about the poor physical condition of its troops at the beginning of the war—as discovered through the physical examination required for new recruits—and it made a concerted effort to insist on good nutrition, with the help of home economists. Women were made specifically responsible for providing healthy meals at home and they sent nutritious treats to soldiers stationed in the US and abroad (cookies, jams, candy, canned goods, including fish and meat).

15. According to the FDA, irradiating—including canning and pasteurizing—is a process meant to prolong the shelf life of foods by “reducing and eliminating microorganisms and insects” (“Food Irradiation”). Irradiated milk is described as “simply rich whole milk, evaporated to double richness, irradiated for ‘sunshine’ vitamin D, homogenized to break up the cream particles, and sterilized for safe keeping,” in Mary Blake’s promotional *Carnation Cookbook* issued by the Carnation Company in 1943. It was very popular during the war as a substitute for fresh milk.

16. It is interesting to note that food-related propaganda did not target single women as a rule. Women were represented as wives—albeit temporarily left alone by their soldier husbands—and mothers, or sometimes grandmothers. It is true that the war had precipitated early marriages, sometimes with very young brides. For example, 2,434 marriage licenses were issued in St Louis, Missouri in the month after Pearl Harbor, compared to only 1,843 one month earlier (Burnett 20). Still, the image of younger females in the propaganda regularly represented entertainers, in a mostly complimentary fashion, or, much more negatively, the women—found around military bases—associated with prostitution, spreading venereal diseases, and distracting men from their war duty.

17. There was indeed a change in the discourse on American women compared to earlier in the war. For example, in 1942, another “expert,” conservative psychiatrist Leslie Hohman, advocated shared parenting for the children's sake and defended women holding a job. In an article in the popular women's magazine *Ladies' Home Journal* in October 1942, he explained that as long as

working mothers “deliberately and determinedly plan to spend ample time with their children” and fathers necessarily “help their wives with home duties and with the children’s training,” women’s salaried work was acceptable. Hohman obviously adjusted his discourse to the necessity of war as shown in propaganda. In 1963, in her founding essay *The Feminine Mystique*, feminist Betty Friedan criticized similar “experts” for constraining women to the private sphere.

18. James H. S. Bossard, then director of the William T. Carter Foundation, was interested in child and family relations. He worked as a marriage counselor and had been the president of the Pennsylvania Federation for Planned Parenthood. He was associated with the eugenics movement, which explains some of his statements.

19. The *Journal of Home Economics* was launched in February 1909 by the American Home Economics Association, whose purpose was “the improvement of living conditions in the home, the institutional household and the community” (American Home Economics Association 2). It lasted until 1993. Home economists have been active in food education, science, and management since the late nineteenth century. They were very much involved in food propaganda during World War II, providing advice on rationing, cooking under restrictions, and nutrition.

20. The generalized erasure of minority women from the propaganda narrative shows the various regimes of oppression to which they were subjected: as “colored” and largely working-class women, they were discriminated against based on their race, gender, and class, a position later defined under the term of “intersectionality” by Kimberlé W. Crenshaw (1989). See also Le Dantec-Lowry (2017).

21. Some of these documents have emerged on mainstream Internet sites such as You Tube and Daily Motion, proving a general interest for minority women during the war and Internet users’ desire to make them known to a larger public. Others are available on university, museum, and local historical societies’ websites. See also recent publications such as: Yamaguchi; Escobedo; Rivas-Rodriguez. Rivas-Rodriguez also created a website at the University of Texas at Austin as part of an oral history project entitled Voces (<https://legacy.lib.utexas.edu/voces/>). This site aims at stressing contributions of Latinos and Latinas during World War II, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War. Such productions are also proof of continuing activism by populations seeking recognition for their role in American history. For example, Latino critics challenged PBS for their World War II Series, which, in their eyes, underestimated the role played by ethnoracial minorities (Hylton).

22. During the war, many African Americans had access to industrial jobs for the first time. This was especially true of the many black women who were employed in defense industry positions that were usually much better paid than the jobs in which they had been confined before: domestic work and other low-service positions, farm jobs, etc. Many actually joined the continuing black migration into urban areas where war jobs were usually located.

23. The *Courier’s* campaign was endorsed by other black newspapers and by several African American organizations. It also obtained the support of some white papers. However, it had faded by October 1942, when African Americans started making gains as they were increasingly hired in the war industry. Moreover, the campaign was sometimes criticized by middle-class blacks who thought such an aggressive move would have negative repercussions. In the following months, the *Courier* chose instead to publish positive stories about black progress. On the limits of such campaigns see Rolland-Diamond.

24. Lynching was also sometimes performed outside the South, without much response from the authorities. For example, in January 1942, in the town of Sikeston, in southwestern Missouri, a black man was dragged out of a local prison and lynched by a group of white men on the grounds that he had accosted a white woman (Burnett 40).

25. White middle-class women, who first complied with the recommendation that they leave paid work at the end of the war, eventually returned to employment outside the home, whether married or not, resuming a trend that would last.

26. “The personal is political” was made popular by feminist Carol Hanisch in an essay by the same title in February 1969, while Robin Morgan coined the notion of sisterhood within 1960s feminism.

27. It must be noted however, that the federal government made a concerted effort at times to acknowledge the contribution of non-white women, both to encourage them to take part in the war effort and to avoid social unrest, thus fueling the budding civil rights movement in the case of African Americans.

ABSTRACTS

This article examines propaganda targeting American women during World War II, especially the numerous messages linked to the home and cooking. It shows that the posters and booklets issued by the federal government, along with advertising and cookbooks, constructed a very narrow class, gender, and ethnoracial vision that confined women to their home, even when some of them were encouraged to replace men in industrial jobs. This construction had two concomitant consequences: first, the focus on 1950s white suburban housewives in middle-class suburbs during the Cold war, and second, the creation of female solidarity, which, in part, led to feminist demands in the 1960s.

Cet article examine la propagande destinée aux Américaines pendant la Seconde Guerre mondiale et notamment celle, plus abondante, liée au foyer et à la cuisine. L’auteure démontre que les affiches et livrets édités par le gouvernement fédéral, de même que les publicités et livres de cuisine construisaient une vision genrée, ethnoraciale et classiste étroite qui inscrivait avant tout les femmes dans leur foyer au moment même où l’on enjoignait à certaines d’entre elles de remplacer les soldats dans l’emploi salarié. Cette construction eut deux conséquences concomitantes : l’essentialisation des femmes au foyer dans les banlieues aisées qui fut au cœur du discours familialiste pendant la Guerre froide dans les années 1950, d’une part, et la création d’une solidarité féminine, qui conduisit en partie aux revendications féministes dans les années 1960, d’autre part.

INDEX

Keywords: American women, World War II, propaganda, housewives, cooking, advertising, female solidarity, white middle-class suburbs, ethnoracial minorities

Mots-clés: Américaines, Seconde Guerre mondiale, propagande, femmes au foyer, cuisine, publicité, solidarité féminine, banlieues blanches, minorités ethnoraciales

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