



ARTIFACTS

A Journal of Undergraduate Writing

WWII Propaganda: The Influence of Racism

Hannah Miles



Figure 1

Images created in times of war reveal the tensions and fears ignited by the conflicts between nations. Close analysis shows that the attached World War II propaganda poster is one such image (Figure 1). This 1942 poster, titled *This is the Enemy*, circulated in the United States following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. Its purpose was to embody the entire Japanese nation as a ruthless and animalistic enemy that needed to be defeated. This image represents a clash between two nations at war and illustrates the biased perceptions that developed as a result. By dehumanizing the Japanese and instilling fear in the minds of Americans, WWII propaganda posters prompted cultural and racial hatred that led to massive historical consequences for the Japanese.

Forms of propaganda have permeated society for centuries and have evolved to become a common tool of warfare. In her journal article, Lynette Finch defined propaganda as the management of opinions and attitudes by the

direct manipulation of social suggestion.” (Lynette Finch, *Psychological Propaganda: The War of Ideas on Ideas During the First Half of the Twentieth Century*, *Armed Forces & Society* 26, no. 3 (2000): 368.)

In other words, propaganda is used to influence people psychologically in order to alter social perceptions. In the case of *This is the Enemy*, the purpose was to change American perceptions of the Japanese (Figure 1). One strategy used to accomplish this was fear tactic. When viewing the image, the thick lines and dark colors combine to create an ominous tone. The stark white of the teeth and eyes on both faces highlights their extremely emotional expressions: one of anger and menace on the Japanese soldier, and one of utter fear and terror on the woman. The large, looming position of the soldier adds to his intimidation, while the inferior position of the woman emphasizes her helplessness. The knife is pointed menacingly at the woman, indicating murderous intent. These features combine to instill fear and anger in the minds of Americans. The purpose of this was to rally the nation behind the war to defeat the Japanese enemy.

Aside from fear tactics, the visual elements in the poster also support racial stereotypes against the Japanese. The peach skin color of the woman is a typical depiction of a Caucasian American, while yellow is the color stereotypically assigned to people of Asian descent. Other differentiations of the soldier include slanted eyes and a face that resembles an animal. The slanted eyes illustrate another Asian stereotype, and the monkey-like face depicts the Japanese as animalistic monsters. The woman, on the other hand, has an ideal American appearance. She has attractive facial features and shows no hints of animalism. The American audience, young and old alike, could relate to her familiar facial features and human-like appearance. On the other hand, the subhuman depiction of the Japanese detached any human relation between the two races. These racial distinctions were purposefully included in order to further alienate the Japanese as the other people.



Figure 2

Analysis of a supplemental WWII poster further proves the influence of propaganda in spreading racial stereotypes. *Tokio Kid Say* depicts the Tokio Kid, a Japanese character that appeared in a sequence of WWII propaganda posters (Figure 2). According to *Time Magazine*, the Tokio Kid was created by artist Jack Campbell and

sponsored by Douglas Aircraft Company as part of the company's campaign to reduce waste. (Art: The Tokio Kid, *Time Magazine*, June 15, 1942.) In this particular poster, he is brandishing a bloody knife, which supports the aforementioned portrayal of the Japanese as dangerous murderers. The pointed ears and sharp fangs also add to the menace of the character and transform him into an animal-like creature. Again, fear tactics are supplemented by exaggerated racial stereotypes. Squinted eyes and enlarged buckteeth illustrate generalized physical attributes of the Japanese. The buckteeth also suggest a dopey quality, undermining the intelligence of the Japanese race. The drool hanging from his lips adds to his dim-witted appearance. Even the broken English in the caption mocks the intellect of the Japanese, and the use of the word Jap in the caption also demonstrates a racial slur used against the Japanese during WWII. This image verifies that multiple WWII propaganda posters achieved their purpose through virtually the same means: they instilled fear and racial prejudice against the Japanese in order to gain the United States support for the war.

Although the Tokio Kid represented the enemy overseas, I believe that the image also tainted Americans' perception of Japanese Americans. The stereotypes represented in the poster attacked the entire Japanese race by linking their physical attributes to animalism and unintelligence. Japanese Americans shared the same physical characteristics as the Japanese, so Americans began to inaccurately associate them with the enemy. In this way, the racial stereotypes found in WWII propaganda prompted cultural hatred that transcended borders. The Japanese race became a common enemy, regardless of nationality.

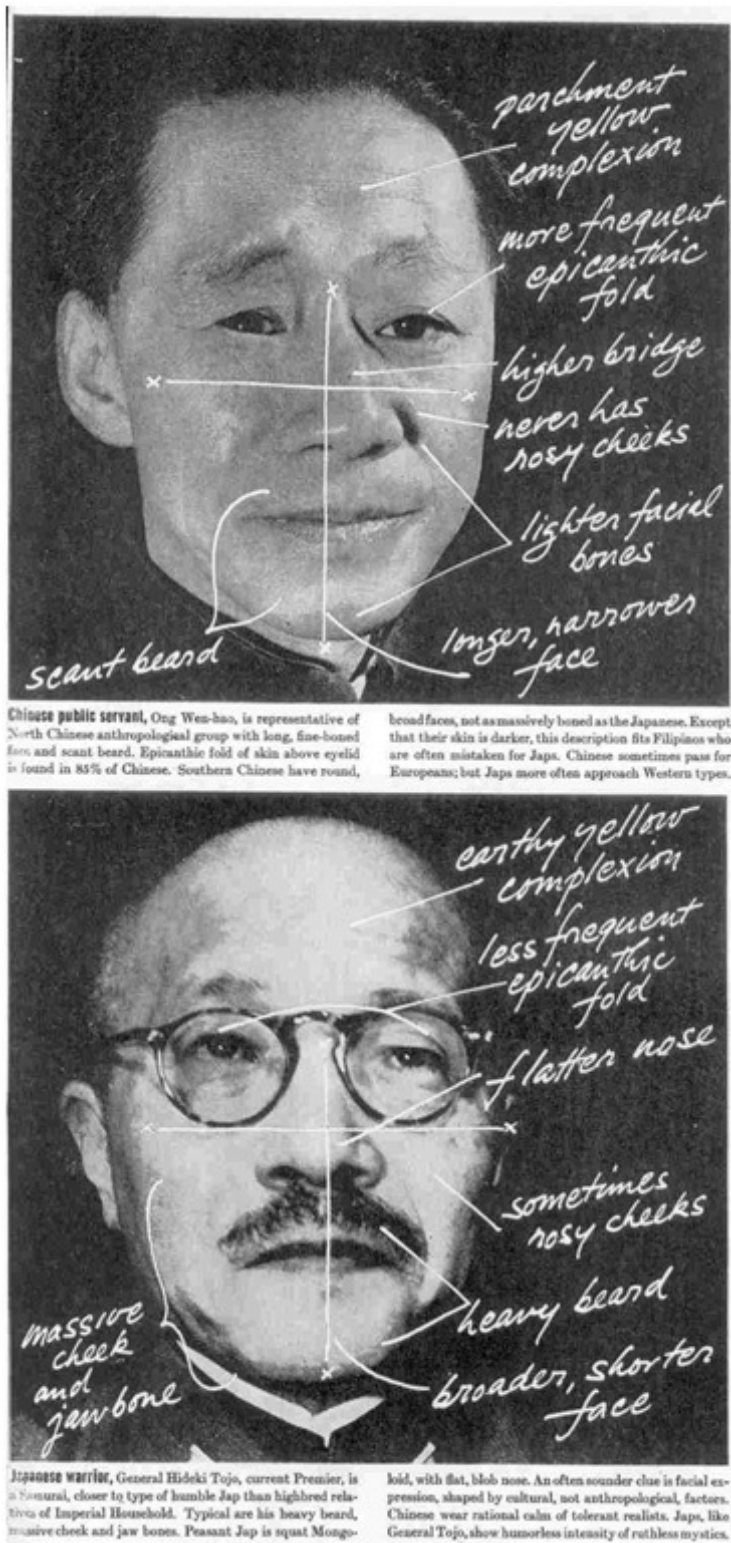


Figure 3

The biased and often fallacious depictions of the Japanese were not only limited to animated posters—even respected media sources such as *Life Magazine* aided the frenzy. By examining the photographs in the December 22, 1941 edition of *Life*, it becomes clear that they are a direct form of propaganda (Figures 3 and 4). The text states that the photographs distinguish friendly Chinese from enemy alien Japs.”(How to Tell Japs from the Chinese, *Life Magazine*, December 22, 1941, 81.) Skin color and facial features are generalized for each race, feeding into the stereotypes that permeated American psyches. These photographs put both races on display, treating them as

specimens rather than equal human beings. However, while both races are objectified, the Chinese are portrayed in a positive light and the Japanese are displayed negatively.



Figure 3 (Full Page)

The photographs in the *Life* article reveal racist stereotypes that are comparable to the biases in the aforementioned posters. In Figure 3, the Chinese man's smile gives him an amiable appearance. The Japanese man, on the other hand, is frowning and looks unpleasant and angry. The descriptions beneath the photos add to these portrayals: The Chinese man is described as a public servant, while the Japanese man is listed as a Japanese warrior whose face [shows the] humorless intensity of ruthless mystics." (How to Tell Japs from the Chinese, *Life Magazine*, 81.) The Chinese man's occupation implies that he helps people, while the title of Japanese warrior alludes to danger and disloyalty. By selecting these particular photographs, *Life* harmfully influenced American opinions of the Japanese.

In Figure 4, physical stereotypes of both the Chinese and Japanese are again reinforced, and the Japanese continue to be depicted as the dangerous race. The Chinese men are dressed casually, have carefree postures, and adorn slight smiles. However, the Japanese men are again frowning, and their military uniforms and stiff stances make them appear intimidating and bad-tempered. In the subheadings, the Chinese men are called brothers while the Japanese men are described as admirals. Similar to Figure 3, the captions in Figure 4 illustrate biases against the Japanese and differentiate them as an inhospitable race. In this way, *Life* used actual photographs to distinguish the Japanese as a disagreeable and dangerous race. By analyzing the subtle cues in the pictures, it becomes apparent that they serve the same physiological purpose as propaganda.



Figure 4

Scholar Anthony V. Navarro commented that much of the social warfare between the United States and Japan involved instilling within their people both a strong nationalistic pride for their own country as well as an incendiary hatred for the other.”(Anthony V. Navarro, A Critical Comparison Between Japanese and American Propaganda During World War II, Michigan State University, <https://www.msu.edu/~navarro6/srop.html>.) This

hatred was one of the factors that led to inhumane treatment of the Japanese, even on American soil. In her journal article, Alison Renteln argued that one of the most repressive actions ever taken by the US government was the incarceration of Japanese Americans during World War II, and it was the idea of eugenics and virulent racism that was partly responsible for the occurrence of one of Americas worst civil liberty disasters.” (Alison Dundes Renteln, A Psychohistorical Analysis of the Japanese American Internment, *Human Rights Quarterly* 17, no. 4 (1995): 618.) Over 100,000 Japanese Americans were confined to filthy and unlivable concentration camps. This confinement led to the loss of Japanese property, the separation of families, and numerous deaths due to the conditions of the camps.(Renteln, 620-21.) Although the war was being fought against the Japanese overseas, Japanese Americans were ultimately mistrusted and mistreated by the members of the dominant Anglo American culture.

This mistreatment was in part a consequence of the propaganda images that pervaded America during WWII. Renteln hypothesizes that the fact that the Japanese Americans were portrayed as animals in much of the World War II propaganda may have helped convince the American public that inhumane treatment was acceptable. (Renteln, 620.) Posters such as *This is the Enemy* and *Tokio Kid Say* illustrated this perception of the Japanese as animals (Figures 1 and 2). Navarro observed that ones own nation was always the civilized one while the enemy was depicted as barbaric, sub-human, and in some cases, demonic. (Navarro, 1.) My previous analysis of *This is the Enemy* demonstrated this point. As a member of the dominant Anglo-American audience, I found myself sympathizing with the Caucasian woman while looking down upon the animal-like Japanese soldier with disdain. The two races were starkly separated, and in my mind the Japanese race became the other, the enemy.

In the 1940s, this image probably resulted in a similar audience reaction. Rentelns article quoted an American political figure as testifying, The Japanese are less assimilable and more dangerous as residents in this country with great pride of race they have no idea of assimilating They never cease to be Japanese. (Renteln, 634.) This was a firsthand example of how negative attitudes toward the enemy Japs ultimately turned into prejudiced opinions toward Japanese Americans. In the minds of Anglo Americans, these perceptions justified the internment of Japanese Americans. Stereotypes portrayed in WWII propaganda images were used to rationalize the horrific conditions that were imposed upon this minority group. The anger, fear, and contempt felt toward the barbaric Japanese figures in propaganda images led Anglo Americans to treat Japanese Americans as if they were actually barbarians. By generalizing Japanese characteristics, propaganda images became one factor that led to the mistreatment of the entire Japanese race even those who were American citizens.



Figure 4 (Full Page)

A war can bring nations together or tear them apart. It can be the catalyst that allows new alliances to form, or it can cause discrimination against other nations. Furthermore, a war can cause furious hatred and distrust of a nation's own people. *This is the Enemy* is an example of such hatred in bloom. After the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, U.S. citizens cried out for vengeance and rallied support through media forms such as propaganda posters. Accuracy was often ignored in favor of fear tactics and brutal portrayals of the enemy. Images such as *This is the Enemy* demonstrate these features and are an important tool to help historians analyze the biased perceptions that developed as an outcome of WWII, as well as the consequences that resulted.

Reference List

Art: The Tokio Kid. *Time Magazine*, June 15, 1942.

<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,795843,00.html>. Accessed October 1, 2010.

Finch, Lynette. Psychological Propaganda: The War of Ideas on Ideas During the First Half of the Twentieth Century. *Armed Forces & Society* 26, no. 3 (2000): 367-86.

Navarro, Anthony V. A Critical Comparison Between Japanese and American Propaganda During World War II. Michigan State University. <https://www.msu.edu/~navarro6/srop.html>. Accessed October 1, 2010.

Renteln, Alison Dundes. A Psychohistorical Analysis of the Japanese American Internment. *Human Rights Quarterly* 17, no. 4 (1995): 618-48.

Figures

Figure 1: This is the Enemy. Maximum Advantage in Pictures: Propaganda as Art and History, March 2, 2010. <http://chumpfish3.blogspot.com/2010/03/this-is-enemy.html>. Accessed October 1, 2010.

Figure 2: Worth, Stephen. Theory: Propaganda Part Two. ASIFA- Hollywood Animation Archive, August 7, 2007. <http://www.animationarchive.org/2007/08/theory-propaganda-part-two.html>. Accessed October 1, 2010.

Figure 3: How to Tell Japs from the Chinese. *Life Magazine*, December 22, 1941, 81. http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/a_f/foster/lifemag.htm. Accessed October 1, 2010.

Figure 4: How to Tell Japs from the Chinese. *Life Magazine*, December 22, 1941, 82. http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/a_f/foster/lifemag.htm. Accessed October 1, 2010.

Part of Issue 6, published in March 2012

Topics: Arts, Film

About *Artifacts*

Artifacts is a refereed journal of undergraduate work in writing at The University of Missouri. The journal celebrates writing in all its forms by inviting student authors to submit projects composed across different genres and media.

Artifacts is sponsored by [The Campus Writing Program](#).

Published by the [Campus Writing Program](#).

Copyright © 2017 — Curators of the [University of Missouri](#). All rights reserved. [DMCA](#) and [other copyright information](#). An [equal opportunity/access/affirmative action/pro-disabled and veteran employer](#).