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# Why propaganda is more dangerous in the digital age

The techniques are the same, but now anyone can go viral.

March 12, 2019



James Montgomery Flagg's familiar Uncle Sam poster, used in World War I military recruiting, makes a revival appearance near recruiting headquarters on E street in Washington in 1961. (Bob Schutz/AP)



Perspective by Albinko Hasic

On July 6, 1916, a poster depicting Uncle Sam beckoning viewers to enlist in the U.S. Army appeared in an issue of *Leslie's Weekly*, a popular U.S. magazine. The poster's creator, James Montgomery Flagg, had no idea just how popular his creation would become. Working without a model or concept in a narrow window of time before publication, Flagg scrambled to embody the urgency of American participation in the Great War.

Despite the rush, Flagg created a masterpiece. It would go on to be reprinted more than 4 million times by 1918 and become a permanent part of American culture. Even though propaganda posters have been phased out in favor of more

modern, effective means of communication, the same psychological techniques of manipulation that made Flagg's masterpiece so effective continue to pervade our society.

Today, propaganda posters have been replaced by digital visuals, such as the meme, that are easily produced, mass-disseminated and politically pointed, with the potential to do even greater damage to American politics and society than propaganda posters did a century ago.

Partially because of the popularity of Flagg's Uncle Sam rendering, posters quickly became a wildly popular medium for disseminating information. They were relatively cheap to produce and could be plastered just about everywhere, from post offices to schools to sides of buildings. The government used emotional imagery to draw thousands of volunteers to the armed services and create broad support for the war effort at home. Officials zeroed in on increasing morale, encouraging conservation, reducing errors at work, promoting workplace safety and urging viewers to buy U.S. bonds to help fund the war.

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Flagg, a veteran artist and contributor to publications such as Life magazine, ended up creating almost 50 designs on behalf of the Committee on Public Information, the U.S. propaganda and intelligence arm, by the end of World War I.

Flagg's most iconic poster depicted the figure of a gallantly dressed Uncle Sam with the prominent text, "I Want You for the U.S. Army." Flagg found inspiration in Alfred Leete's image of [Lord Kitchener urging Brits to join the war cause](#). In an effort to save money by not hiring a model, Flagg used his own face (adding a goatee) to create Uncle Sam, a move later lauded by President Franklin D. Roosevelt. While Uncle Sam dated to the War of 1812, Flagg brought it to life, giving the character an air of purpose that has itself become iconic.

The poster, officially adopted by the Army in 1917, became an effective [recruitment tool](#) to swell the ranks of the military. It was such a resounding success that it would be reprinted

during World War II and pops up again and again in popular culture today.

These results explain why the propaganda poster became so popular with government officials: It was immensely effective. So effective, in fact, that coinciding with the publication of the original Kitchener recruitment poster in September 1914, the British army saw the highest number of volunteers enlist for the entire duration of the war. In the United States, striking visuals and simple slogans drove home patriotic ideals and nostalgic themes that stuck with people.

Many posters sought to tug at Americans' heartstrings with depictions of soldiers and their families, while others appealed to the population's sense of outrage by reminding viewers of the brutality of the enemy. Some even aimed to generate a sense of guilt. In one World War I poster, a man is playing with his children as they ask him, "Daddy, what did YOU do during the Great War?"

This messages reflected one element of why wartime posters were so effective: In the words of William Bird and Harry Rubenstein, propaganda posters were an "agent for making the war aims the personal mission of every citizen." The posters also capitalized on the ability of psychological messages inherent in visual art to alter the subconscious. Edward Bernays, called the "father of public relations," named his 1928 book "Propaganda," arguing that "engineering consent" through such means was vital for the survival of democracy. The truth is, modern advertising owes much of its existence to visual propaganda methods.

Posters remained a popular form of government communication in the interwar years. For instance, public wellness programs used posters to encourage exercise and conservation and promote national parks.

The popularity and effectiveness of Flagg's creation led the U.S. military to bring back the poster format during World War II, when some 200,000 designs were used. These posters featured such iconic characters as Rosie the Riveter saying "We Can Do It," as well as others calling citizens to

arms, reminding people about conservation and recycling and fomenting political and societal unity.

There was an occasional dark side to these posters as well: Many expressed racist, xenophobic and bigoted messages in an effort to demonize the enemy. While this was more common in countries such as Nazi Germany, where Hitler's brutal regime used propaganda to demonize the Jewish population, American posters were not above stereotypes and bigoted messages, sometimes depicting foes as barbarian brutes with racist depictions of their leaders.

Today, the poster has largely been relegated to college dorm rooms and movie theaters. But many of the principles that were at play in propaganda posters during World Wars I and II have evolved as methods of manipulation. The digital age has ushered in a new form of artistic expression: the meme.

While memes originally had a comedic purpose, they invaded the political realm in a far more sinister manner during the 2016 presidential campaign. Like the propaganda posters from the world wars, politically pointed memes employed a striking visual coupled with effective communication intended to alter the mind frame or subconscious of a viewer. In many cases, they also aimed to dehumanize the opposition and to personalize the political cause in question.

The alt-right in particular weaponized the meme format to spread disinformation through social media. Members of the alt-right turned characters such as Pepe the Frog into symbols for their virulently racist movement, building awareness of and even support for their cause. The meme propaganda came from foreign sources, too, as reports of Russian bots spreading disunity surfaced.

Most worryingly, the new political art format has far greater viral potential than the posters of yesteryear. Instead of just government-commissioned posters, any figure, domestic or international, with a political agenda can reach a mass audience with weaponized symbols, images and digital art to advance a political cause.

Ultimately, propaganda posters can teach us a great deal about the psychological effects of politically pointed art. While memes may seem like the silly clutter of Internet culture, studies of advertising and the way we consume information have shown that such images can alter our subconscious, often in ways we do not understand. Or as one Garfield meme put it, “You are not immune to propaganda.” And the longevity of propaganda is readily apparent — Flagg’s own creation of Uncle Sam pointing a finger at us has long outlasted its original intent. In many ways, it has become a staple of Americana.

The danger with memes is that the visuals are no longer centrally orchestrated pieces, designed to advance the public good. They spread in real time, seemingly from the depths of the Internet, and virtually anybody can achieve virality through the power of mass replication. Discerning facts from fiction has become the real challenge with this latest incarnation of visual propaganda. Time will tell if memes will become a permanent part of our political history, but for now, we are still experiencing their unpredictable effects.