

Images of War

The posters reproduced for this article were donated to the Historical Society's Manuscript Collection by Ray Murray of Des Moines. The powerful symbols used in the three posters shown here operate directly upon the viewer's emotions. The huge eagle towering above Allied biplanes, produced by propagandist George Creel's Committee for Public Information, was drawn by Charles Livingston Bull. The image of the compassionate nurse, such as this one drawn by W. B. King, made an effective appeal for support from the home front. The triumphant American soldier became after the war an image sure to enlist support for any cause. The one here was painted by E. Fuhr.

In 1917 the world found itself still at war. Very little had been accomplished by the four-year carnage but the invention of a new and disenchanting "weapon"—the trench. Europe had machine-gunned and gassed itself to a standstill. Into this "Great War," Woodrow Wilson dragged his anxious and still wary people, trying desperately to convince his ethnic minorities and his embittered intellectuals that he had the best of intentions, the holiest of purposes. Without radio or television, with only an infant and mute film industry, Wilson's government had to rely primarily on the printed word—and the painted poster.

The poster was then a major device—perhaps *the* major device—of mass communication. Cheap and familiar, packing

an emotional wallop newspapers only dreamed about, it was a medium of some artistic pretension, widely accepted by the public at large. Americans, like almost everyone else, had joined the ballyhoo for *art nouveau* posters in the 1890s, perusing the pages of *Harpers Magazine* and *The Century* for commissioned work from Edmund Penfield, William H. Bradley, Maxfield Parrish, while their fellow enthusiasts in Paris slipped off with the latest Toulouse-Lautrec carefully sponged from a cafe wall. "Art" posters advanced the aesthetic and technical side of the medium, but they had very little immediate influence on the realistic and melodramatic images of the World War I propaganda posters.

Drawing on the tradition of popular





prints—of the kind found on calendars and post-card advertising—the propaganda poster used timely and vernacular images to develop something resembling universal archetypes—stern, father-like commanders and Uncle Sams; rugged, squarely handsome, heroic soldiers; compassionate, Madonna-like, motherly nurses; worn, lost, weeping war victims. And for the posters to sway the political sympathies of their audience as effectively as popular prints had been persuading and informing viewers since the mid 15th century, those images had to be something a Currier and Ives often was not—simple, even plain, and always blunt.

By the time America entered the war, off-set printing was well on the way to replacing the hand-made lithograph used for

posters since the '90s and on prints long before. Faster, cheaper, less cumbersome and more precise, using a photographic negative rather than etched metal or greased stone, the four-color process—essentially the same used here to reproduce these posters—allowed American poster-artists a brilliant, and sometimes distressing, range of tone and color value. Printed on the cheapest of paper-stocks in huge runs of 100,000, the posters reached an enormous audience in the American segment of the “Battle of the Fences.”

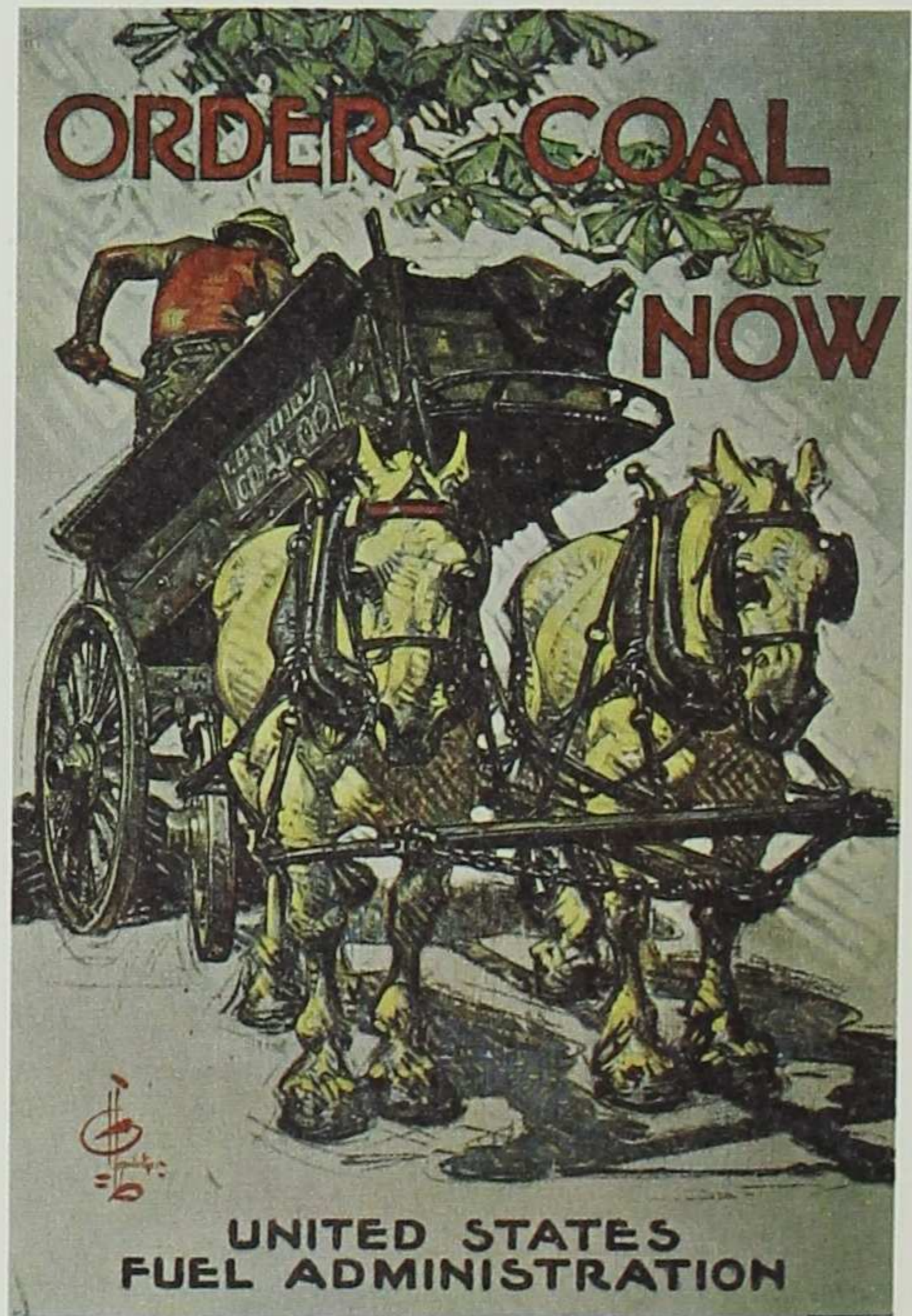
In America the artists usually came to the government through two means—the nation’s academies or Charles Dana Gibson’s Division of Pictorial Publicity — though there were other agencies, and the Navy had its own division. The network of uni-

versities and colleges in the United States rallied round the flag, organizing competitions and providing mass exposure for young artists. Gibson's outfit, consisting of experienced commercial artists, was a federal agency organized early in the war and produced by far the greater number of posters. The background of the artists and the propagandistic goal of the government does much to rebut the criticisms often leveled at the posters: they are academic, uniformly and spiritlessly realistic; they paint all too gay and carnival-like a picture of a dismal and deadly affair; they are factually inaccurate. Young, inexperienced painters and commercially successful illustrators working for cautious bureaucrats and politic generals to produce emotionally-charged images for a popular audience simply do not paint impressionistic masterpieces depicting without bias the horrors of war.

Conceding that the posters are not great art, we have no accurate way of measuring their effectiveness. But we do know they are valuable as historical documents. Maurice Rickards has argued in his *Posters of the First World War* that the posters appeared in marked phases forming a logical pattern. The pattern, he claims, followed the sequence of the war itself, mirroring the stages of the country's involvement. First there was the call for men and money, then the call for help for the fighting man and for comfort for the troops through sacrifice at home, and finally a call for help for the wounded, the orphan, the refugee.

Similarly, the posters form an index to national character and the nature of a country's war commitment. The near frivolous and slightly unreal images of American posters have often been commented upon, as well as the importance women play in

American poster imagery. If nothing else, the posters provide a clue to the things that worried Woodrow Wilson's wartime government. And perhaps, just as television advertisements and sitcoms tell us something about the way Americans today would like to conceive of themselves, these posters provide us with an insight into the mind of the generation that went to war in order to end all wars. — C.P.

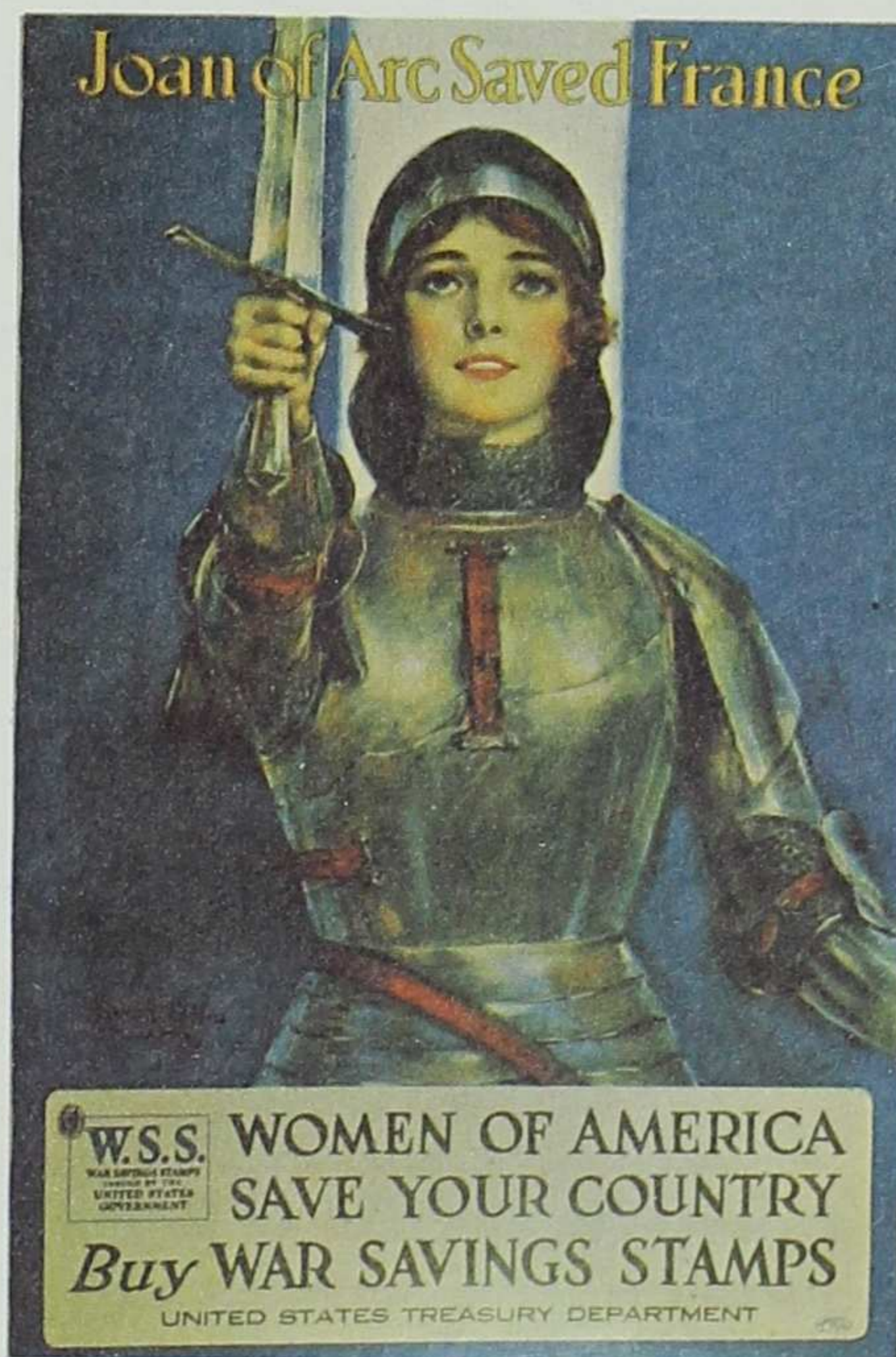
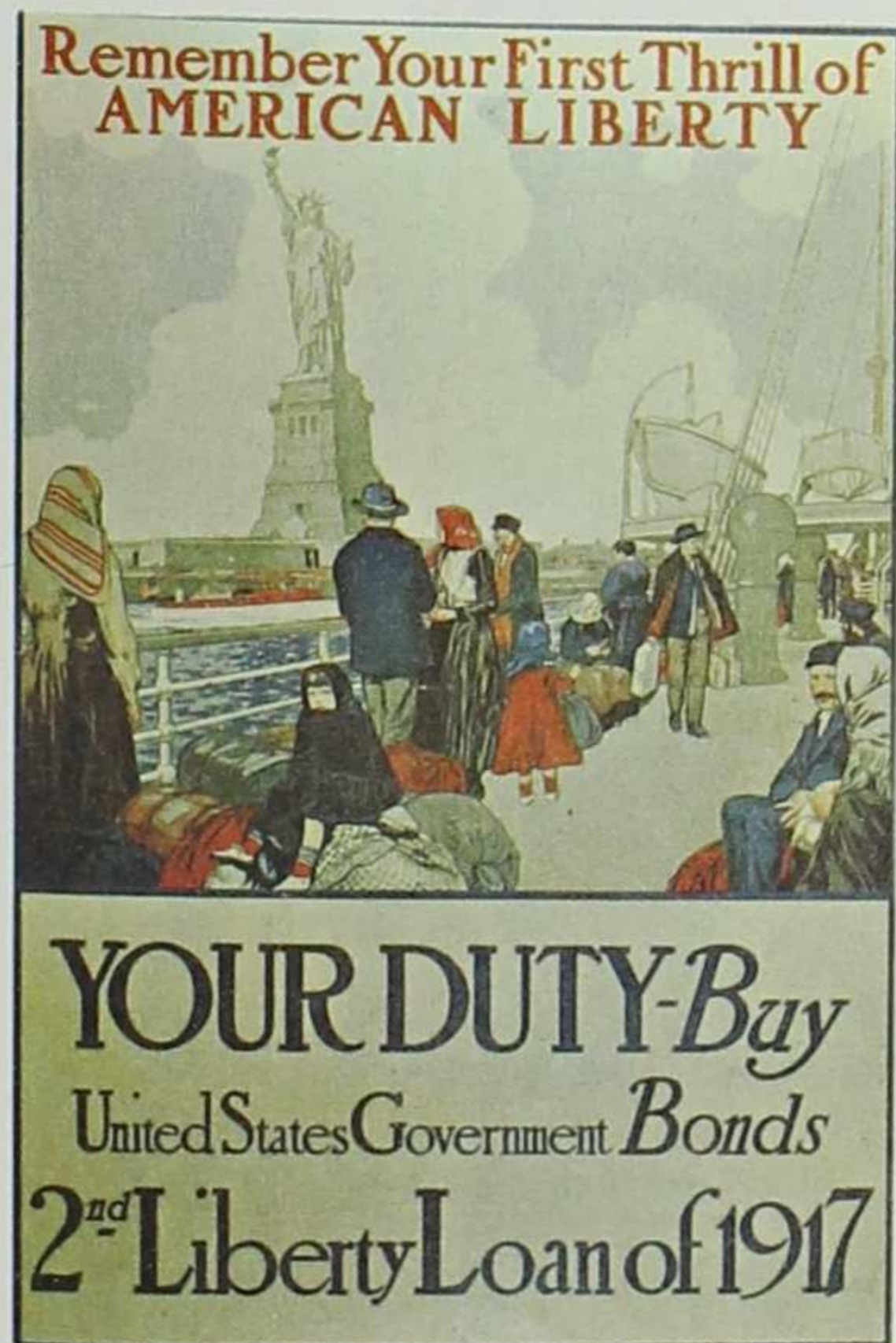


Support from the home front required careful consumption and conservation not only of food, but of scarce commodities such as coal and scrap iron. The artist here is J. C. Leyendecker.

recruitment was not limited to stern appeals to conscience and self-sacrifice. Work experience and job opportunity became attractive as selling points for the army that so efficiently conquered the Hun. Horst Schreck painted this poster.



Wilson's government had to convince a very heterogeneous audience and overlooked no opportunity to appeal to common concerns such as the immigrant experience and religious sentiment. Two examples are the anonymous poster below and H. Coffin's rendering of Saint Joan.



CAN

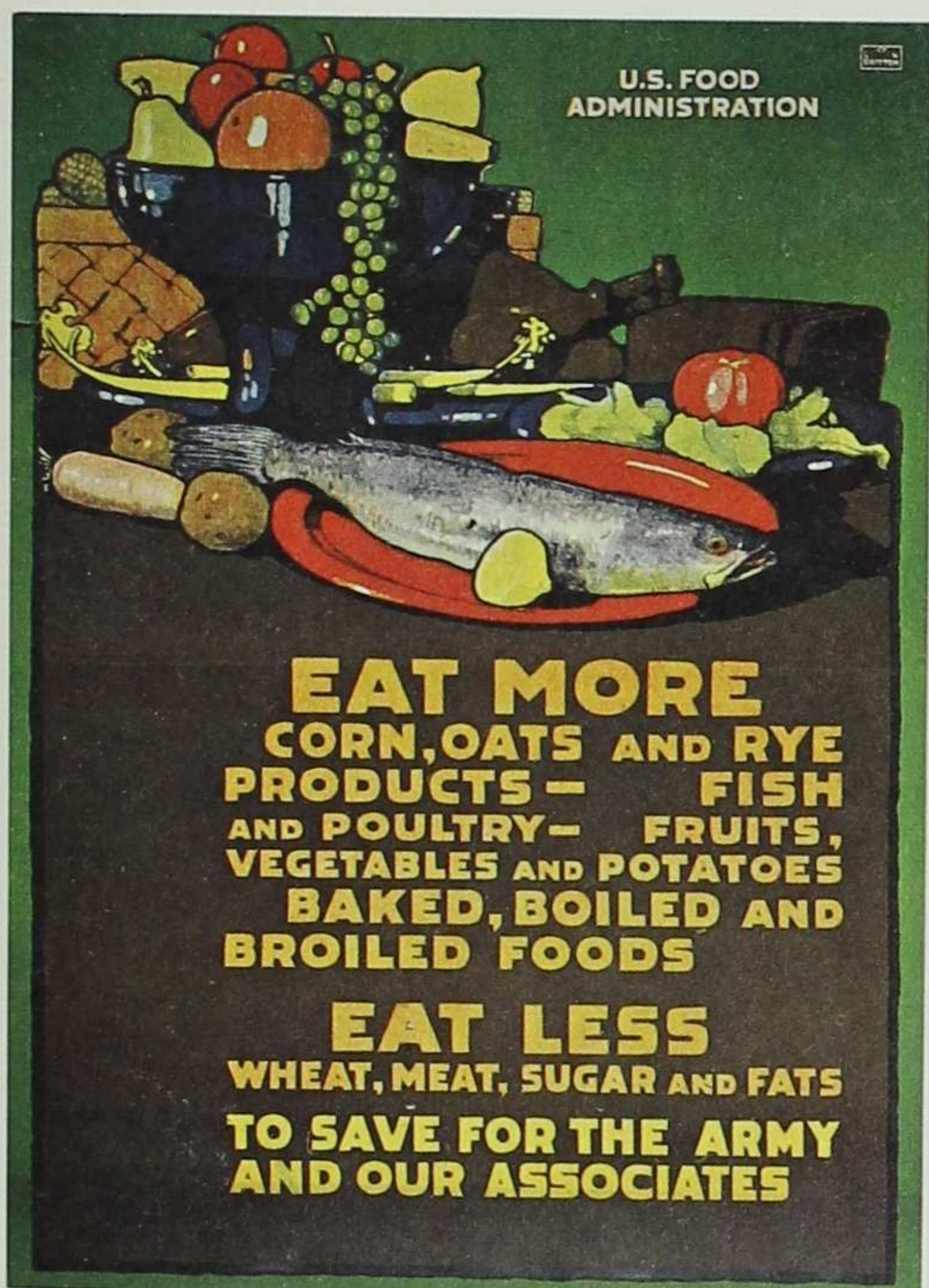
Vegetables Fruit AND the Kaiser too



**Write for Free Book to
National War Garden Commission
WASHINGTON, D. C.**

Charles Lathrop Pack ~ President

P. S. Ridsdale ~ Secretary



Food conservation was an integral part of the war relief effort. Herbert Hoover, as head of the U.S. Food Administration, was instrumental in mobilizing support for this program. Americans were encouraged to plant victory gardens, observe meatless Tuesdays and wheatless Wednesdays, and to build silos to store surplus grain. The four posters here show various ways food could serve as a weapon in "the war of the fences." The artists were J. Paul Verrees (opposing page), L. N. Britton (above), L. C. Clinker and M. J. Dwyer (above right), and an unknown commercial artist, whose poster was used by the Iowa State Council of National Defense (right: from the Metcalf Collection).

