"Give It Your Best!"  
Civilian Contributions on the Home Front

Teacher's Background

"What did you do today . . . for freedom?" "Back the attack with War Bonds!" "Get in the scrap!"

"Loose lips sink ships!"

If you had lived in the United States during World War II, you would have come across messages like these all the time. They appeared everywhere: on posters in bus depots, factories, banks, and meeting halls; on movie screens; in magazines and newspapers; even on matchbooks and bottle tops. They were repeated many times a day over the radio. Why?

The Role of the Home Front

During World War II, no bombs were falling on cities, factories, and railroads here in the United States. No one was evacuating our homes, or starving our families or putting them to work at forced labor, as was happening in Europe, the Far East, and elsewhere.

Yet, though the United States was not under direct attack, it was at war. Thousands of American servicemen were fighting and dying in far-off places, and civilians back home were afraid that if we did not win this war, our country would be the next victim of the Axis powers.

To keep this from happening, and to bring home as many of our soldiers as possible, civilians in the United States were urged to do everything they could to support the war effort.

This civilian contribution was primarily to serve the needs of the wartime economy.

Our own troops and our Allies on the war fronts were depending on the U.S. home front for munitions, food, blankets, medical supplies, and other needs.

By the time the United States entered the war, in December 1941, the Europeans had been fighting for over two years. Germany had occupied France, invaded Russia, and was carrying out constant bombing raids on cities and industrial centers throughout Europe. Of the Allies, only the United States was still untouched, free to pour its resources into war production.

But such an all-out effort would require huge civilian sacrifices—of time, of ease, of material abundance. People on the home front would make these sacrifices voluntarily only if the reasons for doing so seemed clear and sensible and important to them.

Recognizing this, the U.S. government encouraged the use of the public media, including advertising, to get this message across: It's going to take everyone's personal help, day-to-day, in every way possible, to win this war fast. . . . Here are some of the ways you can pitch in:

- Work hard at your job! Production is the key to winning this war. We need food, arms, equipment for ourselves and our Allies. Work carefully. Put in extra hours.
- Take care of your health! Eat nutritious food, get plenty of rest. A sick person can't help the war effort in as many ways as a healthy one can.
- Don't waste! Many materials are in short supply. So. "Use it up, wear it out, make it do, or do without!"
- "Get in the scrap!" Turn junk into weapons to win the war. Contribute your old iron, tin, paper, used cooking fat.
- Buy War Bonds! "We lend our money—they give their lives." Invest at least a tenth of your earnings in War Bonds.

A Glance Backwards

Almost all of these pitches are intended to enlist civilians' aid in dealing with the problems created by the extraordinary wartime economy. To get a grasp of the production build-up that occurred around the beginning of the war, let's glance backwards.

As recently as the 1930s, the United States had been...
suffering the effects of the worldwide economic depression. Productivity was low and unemployment widespread.

During these years, isolationist sentiment was strong in the United States, putting a brake on America's movement toward direct involvement in conflicts abroad. After war broke out in Europe in September 1939, however, American business and political leaders were persuaded to allow sales of supplies to the combatant democracies. After the fall of France in 1940, our determination to stay out was weakened. In March 1941, the U.S. Congress passed the Lend-Lease Act, the basis of our wartime economic and military aid to our Allies. Americans might have doubted the wisdom of this defense spending, but they were appalled by the brutalities abroad that they were hearing about. Nevertheless, a great many Americans believed the military industry still balanced the budget and was a prospect of direct involvement in the conflict.

On December 7, 1941, this reluctance abruptly ended. The Japanese surprise bombing attack on the American naval base at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, sent a shock wave across the country. Public opinion coalesced into the view that fighting this war was a dirty job that had to be done. From now on, the country's commitment would be all-out.

The War Production Boom and Its Effects

Pervaded by this sense of urgency, the production built up to unprecedented levels. Would there be enough materials...enough workers...enough time...to produce what was needed to bring victory? Posters, magazines, ads, and radio dramas drummed home the importance of doing one's part.

Sure "I'm working harder," explained a war worker on the telephone, "and you're building arms for victory!

"We can do it!" another urged.

During the war years, the federal government poured about $236 billion into the private industry. Most government war contracts were written to ensure that companies would make a profit even if their costs ran considerably higher than originally estimated. This encouraged manufacturers to do whatever it took to turn out as much as possible, as fast as possible.

As millions of men took on line services, the need for workers grew more acute. Jobs that historically had been open only to white men (and there had been few of these) turned out to be open to women—and to a more limited extent to Blacks and teenagers.

More women were working, and at more strenuous and responsible jobs than before. Rosie the Riveter, with her "We Can Do It!" sign, was the prototype. Women packed around her curbs, became a wartime stereotype.

War workers could combine self-interest with their patriotism. Many would rise before dawn, drive the factory overhead and to work at the clock, seven days a week, to maximize production.

Overtime hours—frequently a job requirement during the war—were more than a decade of depression! As Americans earned fat paychecks.

How welcome this steady, well-paid work was after the long, hard years of depression!

Students, including those in small towns and villages, were encouraged to do their part. "Give blood. Do civil defense work. Plant Victory gardens. Don't ride your bike too far."

With so many women in the workforce, one didn't even know one was working. The war cut us off from the world of goods we had been used to. The goods we made ourselves. What do we still need that we can make?


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Step 1: World War II—War Fronts and Home Front

Show the children the Oldsmobile advertisement reproduced on page one, and tell them that it appeared in Life magazine in July 1942. Ask what war the United States was fighting at that time (World War II).

Draw a timeline on the chalkboard indicating when the war began in Europe (1939); when the U.S. entered the conflict (1941); and when peace was declared (1945).

Now take a moment to help the children develop a rough idea of how long ago these events occurred. To do so, ask how old their grandparents were in a typical year (sixty years old or above) and write it on the board. Then have the children figure out how old a person who was just coming of age was going to be when the events on the timeline occurred. For example, a person who was around sixty now would have been an older teenager when the war began.

Now come back to the Oldsmobile ad. Give the children a chance to examine it more carefully. Ask them to note what is clearly visible on the picture in each half of the picture: an industrial worker on the left is handing a shell to a soldier on the right.

Ask, why does the soldier need the shell? What is going on where the soldier's arms are? Give a few basic facts about World War II. That American servicemen were fighting mainly in two parts of the world: against the Germans and Italians in Europe (and North Africa); and against the Japanese in the Pacific. In the latter, the fighting was mainly on land, in the air, and at sea.

Point out that the right side of the ad and ask your students to imagine that they are these soldiers. What nation or people does each soldier represent? What do they do? What do they need? What supplies and equipment does an army require? Write the answers on the board.

Now ask the children, where are these supplies to come from? Most must be made in factories and then transported to where the soldiers are. Even food has to be packaged and shipped where to these distant places? Where are all these fields and factories? All over the United States.

Point out that not only we but also our Allies needed these supplies. Explain that their countries (unlike the United States) were where the fighting was going on. This made it very hard to get most of the goods they needed to produce everything they needed. One way we could help was by sending supplies.

Now point out that the production of these supplies is what the left-hand side of the picture shows: this is the home front. Explain the term. The front is a war zone that is being fought, so the term home front emphasizes that the war is being fought at home as well as on the battlefields abroad. The fight at home is the struggle to produce enough, in time. On this home front, everyone can help out; without this home front, the war cannot be won.

Step 2: Life on the Home Front

Give each child a copy of the following list:

Don't waste
Collect scrap
Plant Victory gardens
Wear a badge, if you can
Stay healthy
Give blood
Buy War Bonds

Make a list of things that might lead many people to rent rooms to strangers: going off to the war, for instance; a blood drive in their community.

Lesson Plan*

Eileen Weymouth
Age 23
Husband is in navy, stationed in Alaska.
Lives with her baby son at his parents' home in Texas.
Teaches English in her community's junior high school.
Serves on a community's recreation committee.

Joseph DaCosta
Age 37
Enlisted in the U.S. Navy, has been in Europe for four years.
Has six children: two in the service, two in school, and two in foster care.

Sally Johnson
Age 10
In high school in Michigan with mother and eight-year-old brother.
Father was killed six months ago by a car.
Mother works shifts in the factory three times a week.
Mother is in the labor force 60 hours a week.

Harold Goldstein
Age 58
Entire family lives in a different state.
Six children: four in the service, one in college, and one in high school.

Rosa Marconi
Age 19
Married school sweetheart, stationed in the Pacific.
Followed him to Portland, Oregon, where he was in the military training camp.
Now that he has shipped out, she shares apartment with two other single women.

Jimmy Kowalski
Age 12
Fifteen miles from his school but went to school in a private school.
Doesn't like school; wants to go into the service.

Big brother is Air Force pilot stationed in England.

*This Lesson Plan, obviously suitable for a U.S. history course, may also be used in language arts and consumer education. For the lesson plan, go to page 6.
Loose talk got there first!

1. THE RUMOR: Again and again, John and his wife read the letters they found pasted on their door. In the letters, while John is a hard worker, he often goes missing without calling. He has never answered one of their letters. Naturally, they worry, and speculate about his being a "communist" spy.

2. THE RUMOR SPREADS: The news is too good to be lost. John gets letters from all over the country. They tell him that his letter is going to be shown on a local TV show. Naturally, he is excited.

3. THE RESULT: When a "communist" letter is brought by our troops, the enemy is shown, and with a loud explosion, the letter is destroyed. The message is written on a polaroid film strip and sent to the enemy. This is a quick and effective way to destroy messages without hurting the enemy's morale.

Keep it under your 51.
toothpaste tubes (made of tin in those days) at the drugstore—"no tube, no toothpaste!" Once in a while they were even paid coupons for their ticket to the local movie theater with a pound of fat instead of with money.

They were coming forward to make active contributions too. Men were volunteering for civil defense, acting as air raid wardens, enforcing the blackouts, arguing about the best way to put out incendiary bombs. Women were volunteering for Red Cross courses on first aid and nutrition, helping out at Victory canteens, visiting wounded servicemen in hospitals and running errands for them, and sending off packages for British soldiers. They were working as block leaders to transmit and explain government messages to their neighbors.

All over the country, people were planting Victory gardens and donating blood. They were boxing their old books and magazines to send to men in the service. They were saving their cooking fat in cans at the back of the stove, and giving it to the butcher to forward for use in explosives. They were forcing themselves to go to work even when they had headaches or colds. They were concocting oddball recipes to make up for the lack of available ingredients—learning how to cook mustard and mayonnaise instead of potato peels.

Children were among the most enthusiastic volunteers. They used their wagons to haul junk for scrap drives, they saved medicine bottles for re-use, distributed government pamphlets and anti-black-market pledge cards. They soaked the labels off tin cans, washed them, removed the ends, stamped them flat, and once a week piled them by the curb to be collected by city trucks for recycling. They knitted scarves for the soldiers. The nickels and dimes that boys and girls all over the country brought to school to be accumulated and distributed, and accumulated, and accumulated, and accumulated. School sales, usually accounted for, contributed many billion dollars worth of War Bond and Stamp purchases—just one example of how countless individual contributions added up to the horse power.

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want their product associated with a cause that many consumers would judge to be foolish or wrong. After the children have chosen a cause, have them spend a short while discussing the differences in style and format that they notice between the World War II and present-day publicity materials for a cause they have chosen. Then have them put on a short program for their classmates; find out if they or anyone else can think of other ways to say the same thing. These are novels set on the U.S. home front:

Bibliography

Books for Teachers

Books for Children
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Smithsonian Institution Bookstore

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Axis naval attacks on merchant shipping were making imports (and exports) unreliable and costly—in money and in human life.

If output of war materials was to remain high, these shortages had to be dealt with—by reducing consumption, recycling, and using substitutes.

Production of an increasing number of items deemed nonessential was banned by the government. To save steel for tanks and guns, the manufacture of safety pins, clothes irons, and children's wagons was halted. To save copper and brass, the production of alarm clocks was banned.

Individual citizens were encouraged to conserve: "Use it up, wear it out, make do, or do without!"

All over the country, communities organized scrap drives to collect materials for recycling: paper, cooking fat, rubber, tin, and iron. Rationing was established, to distribute the burden of decreased consumption as evenly as possible.

Substitutes were sought; the biggest success was the development of a synthetic rubber industry, but all kinds of simpler stand-ins were used too. The down feathers of pillows were replaced by plastic shreds; walnut oil lubricated machines; peanut oil, instead of cottonseed or linseed, was used to make soap and varnish; shredded paper gave way to corrugated cardboard for packaging; frankfurters were made from vegetable protein; carpets were gathered up by the yard, and once a week piled them by the curb to be collected by city trucks for recycling.

In this boom economy, inflation was a constant threat; wages were increasing faster than prices. Even paying for their ticket to the local movie theater might seem like a luxury. The things people appear to buy most are not the things they spend most money on. To save copper and brass, the production of alarm clocks was banned. To save steel for tanks and guns, the manufacture of safety pins, clothes irons, and children's wagons was halted.

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Acabas de llegar a la casa de la oficina de correos, el silencio afuera. Esto es porque la gasolina es racionada y nadie puede comprar carros nuevos o llantas, solo pocos automóviles andan en la calle.


Cualquiera que tenga un radio de onda corta las reconocerá: son la letra 'V' en el código Morse.

**Instrucciones para un Formulario de Correo-V**

Si estás usando el original: Recorta el formulario. Escribe tu carta, pon la dirección, doblala como se indica, y usa goma para pegarla.

Si estás usando fotocopias: Tienes que tener dos fotocopias, una del frente del formulario y otra del reverso. Pégalas cuidadosamente asegurándote que los bordes y líneas donde se dobla correspondan exactamente (pon las hojas de papel una en contra de la otra frente a una luz para darte cuenta que están bien alineadas).

Después de que se seque la goma, trata de que las dos hojas pegadas son solo una y procede como si estuvieras usando el formulario original. (Tal vez necesites añadir otro papel. Si es así, tu maestro(a) te explicará cómo hacerlo.)
V-Mail Service provides the most expeditious dispatch and reduces the weight of mail to and from personnel of our Armed Forces outside the continental United States. When addressed to points where micro-film equipment is operated, a miniature photographic negative of the message will be made and sent by the most expeditious transportation available for reproduction and delivery. The original message will be destroyed after the reproduction has been delivered. Messages addressed to or from points where micro-film equipment is not operated will be transmitted in their original form by the most expedient means available.

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Write the entire message plainly on the other side within marginal lines.
2. PRINT the name and address in the two panels provided. Addresses to members of the Armed Forces should include rank or rating of the addressee, unit to which attached, and APO or Naval address.
3. Fold, seal, and deposit in any post office letter drop or street letter box.
4. Enclosures must not be placed in this envelope and a separate V-Mail letter must be sent if you desire to write more than one sheet.
5. V-Mail letters may be sent free of postage by members of the Armed Forces. When sent by others postage must be prepaid at domestic rates (3¢ ordinary mail, 6¢ if air mail is desired. - POST OFFICE DEPARTMENT FORM 512)

... And who are you writing to—your father? your brother? your husband? your son?
As you write, remember that you don’t even know exactly where your correspondent is: his location is a
he has passed it. Find the place on the form where his
After you have finished writing your letter, thing
about whether you would want to use this kind of fornp
letters to their boyfriends and husbands. But this lip
stick would get into the machines that photographed
the V-Mail letters and clog them. People called this
problem “the scarlet scourge.”

people who were leaving the country. Tanta gente
provisiones eran
mudadas al extranjero durante la guerra, que había
poco espacio en los barcos y aviones: 150,000 micro­
ofotos de correo-V cabían en una bolsa de correo—y
las cartas de tamaño normal habrían llenado 22 bolsas
de correo!

Antes de que comiences a escribir tu carta, tu maestro(a) te dará información acerca de seis de las
personas que puedes ver en los anuncios que está usando. Cuando escribas la carta, piensa que eres una de esas
seis personas... ¿Cuál persona quieres ser?

... ¿Y a quien le vas a escribir?—¿A tu padre? ¿A tu hermano? ¿A tu esposo? ¿A tu hijo?
Mientras escribas, recuerda que no sabes exacta­
donde se encuentra la persona a quien le es­
cribes: el lugar donde el está es un secreto militar.
Cuando escribas la dirección en la carta, simplemente
escribirás su nombre y otra información que identifique
la sección del ejército al que pertenece. Los mil­
tares van a hacer llegar la carta al lugar correcto.

También te das cuenta que alguien que no conoce va a leer cada palabra que escribas... ¿Qué piensas
de ésto? Este extraño es un militar encargado de la
censura. El leerá tu carta para asegurarse que no
escribes sobre secretos militares. Si el ve información
cuando haya terminado de leer tu carta, el le pondrá
un sello que indica que la carta ha pasado inspección.
Encuentra el espacio en el formulario donde se pondrá
este sello.

... Después de terminar de escribir la carta, piensa si quisieras usar este tipo de formulario regularmente.
Mucha gente envió una carta por correo-V una vez
porque era algo nuevo. Después, mucha de esta gente
prefirió enviar cartas normales, usando papel y sobre.
Las cartas de correo-V no fueron muy populares por
mucho tiempo.
Para comenzar, no contengan mucho espacio para
escribir. Además, no podías adjuntar nada—ni foto­
grafías, ni cabellos, ni artículos del periódico local.
Hasta lápiz labial en las cartas podía causar problemas.
En ese tiempo, el lápiz labial obscuro era popular, y
las mujeres, a menudo, besaban las cartas para sus
novios y esposos. Pero este lápiz labial causaba prob­
lemas a las máquinas que fotografiaban las cartas de
correo-V. La gente llamaba este problema “el azote
escarlata.”
English continued

being sent overseas during the war that there was little room in the holds of ships and planes: 150,000 microphotos of V-Mail letters could fit into a single mailbag—while the full-sized letters would have filled 22 bags!

Before you begin your letter, your teacher will give you some information about six of the people you can see in the ads you have been using. You are going to pretend you are one of these people and write in a way that they will forward the letter to the right place. You will read every word you write. How do you feel about that? This stranger is the military censor. He will read your letter to make sure you haven’t told any military secrets. If he sees information that he thinks should not be told, he will black it out. When he has finished with your letter, he will stamp it to show that it tells some community how brave the hero overseas is.

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Regularly. Lots of people sent a V-Mail letter once, because it was something new. But after one try, many of these people went back to regular paper and envelope. V-Mail letters were not very popular in the long run. For one thing, they didn’t give you much space to write in. For another, you couldn’t enclose anything—no photos, or locks of hair, or clippings from your hometown newspaper. Even lipstick on the V-Mail blanks could cause problems. In those days dark lipstick was normal, and women often put a kiss-mark on the full-sized letters would have filled 22 bags!

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Imagine that you have traveled back through time... over forty years... to World War II America. It is 1943 on the home front: there are no home computers, no pocket calculators, no Velcro, no satellites, no atomic weapons. Few things are made of plastic. No one knows what is on the far side of the moon. Television is in its infancy: it's the radio that people switch on for news or entertainment.

Yet 1943 is not so very long ago—the number of years since then is far less than the average lifetime: if you had been in grade school then, you would be only in your fifties now.

As you sit at your desk back in 1943 you notice how quiet it is outside. Because gasoline is rationed and no one can buy new cars or tires, only a few automobiles are passing in the street.

When it arrives at a receiving station near the soldier to whom you are writing, the picture will be made full size again, and delivered.

**Anyone who has a ham radio will recognize them: they are the letter V in Morse code.**

"You’re Never Too Busy to Write V-Mail!”*

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**Tell him things are running smoothly... including your Emerson-Electric Fan**

**Write your service man V-Mail letters full of the honey sweeter than any to be found from home.** "The garden’s in..." you might write. "You should see the tomato plants..." "Your little brother came Saturday to help me with the barn..." "Your uncle looks more like you every day..." "I got your mother’s letter today—Old Emerson Electric Fan this morning and how glad just made it up. It will run just like new..."

Mrs. Mark, our new neighbor, dropped in when I first turned the fan on. She couldn’t believe it was 20 years old. She could not get through the Emerson Electric Company's yearbook without the Emerson-Electric Fan number..."

He wants to know every little thing that goes on. V-Mail is the means for frequent letters that can be written in space moments when news and the impulse to write are fresh in mind. Remember, too, V-Mail is secure, fast, and never void valuable space space. Emerson Electric Fans will be back... As soon as critical material can be delivered by the Government, Emerson Electric Fan servicable fan number have been made for civilians. When full as your letter blanks were written and sent in, your picture will go to the nearest Repair Shop in divisional areas repaired and returned. Generally, if your Emerson Electric Fan is not more than 20 years old, parts are available.

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**Nunca Estas Demasiado Ocupado Para Escribir Correo-V**

Traducido por Dr. Ricardo Inestroza

¿Imagina que has viajado a través del tiempo... a los Estados Unidos de la Segunda Guerra Mundial? En los Estados Unidos, en 1943: no hay computadoras, ni calculadoras, ni Velcro, ni satélites, ni armas atómicas. Se producen pocas cosas de plástico. Nadie te dirá lo que hay al otro lado de la luna. La televisión está en su infancia: es el radio lo que pone en el corazón de las personas para escuchar noticias y divertirse.

Pero 1943 no hace mucho tiempo—el número de años que han pasado desde entonces es mucho menos que el tiempo promedio de una vida humana: si tu hubieras estado en la escuela primaria en ese tiempo, ahora solo tendrías cincuenta y tantos años.

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*La información sobre V-Mail que aparece en este artículo es extraída del artículo "Little Letters of World War II" de James H. Bruns, en la revista March-April 1985 de Stamp Action.

**You’re Never Too Busy to Write V-Mail!”**