

H-Net Reviews

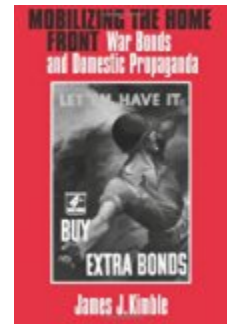
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

James J. Kimble. *Mobilizing the Home Front: War Bonds and Domestic Propaganda*. College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2006. 224 pp. Illustrations. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-58544-485-4.

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Citizens as Soldiers

James J. Kimble analyzes the nexus between World War II-era war bond campaigns and home-front morale. He argues that “through the U.S. Treasury Department’s war bond drives, Franklin D. Roosevelt’s administration strategically cultivated national morale by creating the largest single domestic propaganda campaign known to that time,” as well as one of the most effective (dust jacket). This program raised more than 185 billion dollars, well over half of the war’s cost. Kimble’s exploration of how and why this campaign worked provides an object lesson for policymakers, and an illuminating case study for military and cultural historians, rhetoricians, psychologists, ethicists, and scholars of public opinion, among others. Teachers will also find over twenty illustrations they might co-opt for classroom use.

Kimble begins with an overview of earlier war financing and propaganda efforts, going all the way back to Salmon P. Chase’s labors on behalf of the Union during the Civil War. He asserts that Roosevelt and his cabinet learned from historical examples that propaganda efforts publicly recognizable as such would quickly lose credibility, and so shied away from establishing a wartime bureaucracy dedicated solely to producing domestic propaganda. (Although the Office of War Information certainly must be considered a domestic propaganda agency, it also did other things, and as Kimble points out, this agency saw its budget shrink considerably by 1943). However, the same historical lessons suggested that an appeal to volunteerism “inviting Americans to loan the

U.S. government their money while simultaneously—and surreptitiously—using the Treasury’s bond publicity machine to target public morale” (p. 5) might reinforce and prolong support for what promised to be a long, arduous conflict by offering bond purchasers a “sense of personal participation in the war” (p. 7). The same sensitivity to national mood contributed to the decision to have a series of limited-duration war bond drives, rather than one continuous public finance campaign.

Moreover, these drives evolved to reflect what Kimble calls “a manner echoing the strategies used to condition the military’s soldiers for war” (p. 11). Kimble contends that the rhetorical phases of the war bond drives paralleled the stages of psychological development seen in soldiers preparing for and facing battle. These are: “training,” “cohesion,” “apprehensive enthusiasm,” “resignation,” and a “terminal period” (p. 11). For the most part, this analytical device works, and provides the book’s organizational structure.

In his first chapter, “A History of Bonds to 1942: The Path to Training and Cohesion,” Kimble cites the importance of optimistic messages and calls for positive action to the bond program’s success. Using words like “protect,” “home,” and “freedom” as touchstones, planners realized they could also affect public unity (p. 25). Moreover, this language would teach audience members what they were fighting for (“training”) and persuade them to see themselves as having a common culture (“cohe-

sion"). It was during this period—when the United States had yet to enter combat and war bonds were still called “defense bonds”—that the Treasury Department adopted Daniel Chester French’s sculpture, the “Minute Man,” as the bond program’s official symbol. Notably, this statue of the quintessential citizen-soldier, which portrays a farmer with one hand holding a musket and the other resting on his plow, was in war bond literature nearly always depicted with the weapon in the foreground. This image did more than provide a way to identify bonds and the advertising that marketed them, it also “recalled the American Revolution’s sudden transformation of ... citizens into soldiers” (pp. 26-28). Other key decisions of 1941 involved choosing to market bonds in denominations ranging from \$1,000 to “E bonds” that sold for as little as \$18.75, and even stamps sold in ten-cent increments. These choices brought contributions to the war effort within the reach of the working class, and even school children.

The next chapter covers the first three war bond drives, all held in 1942 and 1943, and is subtitled “Developing Apprehensive Enthusiasm.” The Treasury Department did this, Kimble says, by actively conflating the actions of citizens and soldiers in the minds of bond purchasers. Posters from this period invited Americans to “make your own declaration of war” (p. 46) or “make your dollars fighters” (p. 48). Words and images equated bonds with weapons ranging from rifles to airplanes and ships. Bond purchasers were identified as “the next best thing to a soldier” (p. 48). The managers of the bond program also worked out other key strategies in 1942. Advertising was targeted at women and children, encouraging them to also identify with soldiers by purchasing bonds. Finally, drive managers realized that drives of limited duration had several benefits. The “concentrated propaganda” seemed to resonate with the public, whereas never-ending efforts might have left them numb; moreover time between drives allowed officials to evaluate the effectiveness of earlier efforts, and adjust accordingly.

Chapter 3 focuses on the fourth through sixth drives, all of which occurred in 1944, and is subtitled “Struggling with Resignation.” It is in this chapter that Kimble’s application of the language of military psychology to the performance of the bond campaign works least effectively, if only because certain nuances of that performance beg other interpretations. He asserts that as Roosevelt and others began worrying concurrently about higher casualties, war-weariness, and complacency, the Treasury Department adopted more polemical strategies.

These changes took several forms, including, for the first time, depicting the enemy in war bond literature, and depicting American casualties. More significantly, the earlier positive conflation of citizen and soldier gave way to a negative one, implying “civilians were performing their militarized role poorly,” with language and images that taunted or scolded potential bond buyers. Examples include an image of a deceased soldier chillingly staring back at viewers as he declares, “I died today ... what did you do?” (pp. 79-80), and verbal admonitions about the sacrifices those in uniform made “the day you threw a party instead of buying a War Bond” (p. 76).

Kimble’s book focuses more on the Treasury Department’s successes than those strategies that fell flat with other market segments. While the fourth, fifth, and sixth war bond drives each surpassed subscription goals (as did all bond drives), each also did proportionately less well in producing revenue from the “E bonds” that targeted individual citizen-investors. In fact E bond sales actually declined overall with the fifth drive, despite the drive’s start mere days after the invasion of Normandy. What we are left with is a proportional shift toward large purchases: arguably, purchases of bonds as investment instruments that might have been made regardless of the marketing strategy. Kimble notes, but does not connect and analyze, the rhetorical shifts of 1944 with this reversal of sales trends. Certainly, some of the polling data or other internal documents which Kimble mines so well elsewhere could have had something to say on this issue. If they did not, that too would be notable, and such an absence would not preclude the author from proffering his own explanation.

Chapter 4 addresses “The Mighty Seventh and the Victory Loan: The 1945 War Bond Drives as a Terminal Period.” The Treasury Department shifted rhetorical positions again, praising those on the home front as it had earlier in the war. In the postwar Victory Loan campaign the enemy disappeared as the appeal shifted to postwar U.S. responsibilities in the world and the re-conversion of soldiers to peaceful citizens—what Kimble calls “psychological demobilization” (p. 98). In the starkest invocation of the latter message, the cover of the last issue of the *Minute Man*, the bond program’s newsletter, again depicted its namesake statue, but this time from an angle that emphasized the tools of his peacetime trade, captioned “the plow remains” (p. 127).

The final chapter, “Assessing the Treasury’s War Bond Legacies: Militarized Propaganda, Enemy Constructions, and the War’s Perfecting Myth,” could be

culled of redundancies and made to start with discussion of the “legacies” referenced in its title. Such a change might let Kimble go into greater depth regarding the complex issues raised therein, and do so via analysis of primary sources. As it stands, the capstone chapter (the monograph contains no concluding essay as such) largely consists of summations of secondary material by other authors.

Kimble’s effort suggests many opportunities for further study. Scholars might apply his approach to the other work of the War Advertising Council, of which, as the author notes, the bond program was only the largest client. They might also compare his findings to wartime labor recruitment campaigns by the War Department and other agencies, as well as private-sector advertising. Finally, parallel studies of other nations, and of other conflicts, await their historians.

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