## "WOMAN POWER"

The War Manpower Commission's Campaign to Recruit Women Workers During World War II

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The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941 marked not only the entrance of the United States into World War II, but the beginning of what became an extreme labor shortage. During the depression, from which the United States did not completely recover until the war, unemployment was There was extensive bias against working women, most especially working wives, who were denounced as "double earners." Between 1932 and 1937 federal law prohibited more than one member of the same family from working in federal civil service. 1931 study by the National Education Association showed three out of four school boards surveyed would not hire married women teachers and most dismissed women teachers who married. In a 1936 Gallup poll, 82% of all respondents (and 75% of women respondents) said women should not work if their husbands had a job. This general public attitude, along with widespread discrimination toward minorities and the handicapped, made the labor shortage which accompanied World War Two all the more severe. In addition, in deference to public opinion against the war prior to Pearl Harbor, the Roosevelt administration had done little advance planning for labor mobilization.3

On April 18, 1942, an executive order established the War Manpower Commission (WMC) to "formulate plans and programs and establish basic national policies to assure the most effective mobilization and maximum utilization of the nation's manpower in the prosecution of the war."4 A number of agencies were placed under the WMC, including the United States Employment Service (USES), the Training Within Industry Service, and in December 1942, the Selective Service System. The National Commission initiated policy; regional commissions were established to implement programs. Paul V. McNutt was appointed National WMC Director and B. F. Ashe was the regional director for Region VII (Southeast). never had any women in decision making positions. Instead, in August 1942, the WMC created the Women's Advisory Committee (WAC), with Margaret Hickey as Chairperson. Although it produced a number of recommendations, the WAC never had any real power.

The WMC itself was reorganized several times before it was disbanded and absorbed by the Department of Labor in September 1945.<sup>5</sup>

In an effort to deal with the severe labor shortage, Paul McNutt supported a compulsory registration of women, such as England had, but was opposed by the Women's Bureau of the Department of Labor, among others. A bill was introduced in Congress for mandatory registration but never passed.

The WMC instead tried to conduct an extensive voluntary enrollment of women. In areas with critical labor shortages USES distributed registration forms through the mails. They were accompanied by extensive local advertising. Door to door follow-up canvasses were conducted. The WMC abandoned this approach after finding the results unsatisfactory.

Faced with these realities, the WMC had to depend on voluntary recruitment, accomplished through publicity. It launched a number of general recruitment drives for both men and women. In January 1943 the WMC began to focus specifically on women, especially married women, in a series of campaigns called "Woman Power." The stated objective of the Woman Power Campaign was "to persuade women - particularly housewives - in those cities designated as 'Labor Shortage Areas' to voluntarily accept jobs in war plants and essential civilian industries."

This paper concerns itself with the Woman Power Campaign of the WMC and its effects. It was a campaign which ran almost 2 1/2 years and had three components. First and foremost was the effort to appeal directly to women themselves. Second was the effort to convince husbands that their wives could and should work. Last, but of extreme importance, was the effort to convince employers to hire these married women, especially for jobs which were traditionally held only by men. Voluntary cooperation was critical because the WMC was essentially a policy forum, rather than an operating agency, and never had any real power to enforce its regulations. Under the labor stabilization program the WMC could limit the number of men a company could hire, as an incentive to hire But the government was concerned with more women. being no more "heavy handed" than absolutely necessary and therefore rarely used this measure.9

The WMC quickly realized the value of propaganda (though they never called it that) and salesmanship. "Getting these women to go into industry is a tremendous sales proposition," said McNutt. 10 From the beginning the WMC appealed to the women's patriotism, stating directly that the "campaign should be pitched on a highly emotional, patriotic appeal,"

(WMC underlining) the slogans developed for the campaigns bear out this directive.

"Do the Job He Left Behind"
"Women in the War - We Can't Win Without Them"
"The More Women Work, The Sooner We'll Win"
"Longing Won't Bring Him Back SoonerGetting A War Job Will."

The WMC made extensive use of radio ads to reach women. A pamphlet put out jointly by the WMC and the Office of War Information stated "advertising is a medium peculiarly fitted to present facts in ways that carry conviction." The advertisements often stated that working women could shorten the war and save lives, with appeals such as: "So long as our men must fight and die to win those battles for us - HOW CAN YOU REST?" This was sometimes carried to great extremes by implying that women who slacked off would create arms/munitions shortages which would cost lives. One such ad stated:

We realize that war cannot be fought without the loss of lives. But we do know that this loss can be reduced if we have enough equipment of the right kind . . . The job of providing this weight of machines is ours. We civilians, who are the makers of war materials . . . we are deciding right now how many of these men will return to their homeland. 13

Ad copy sometimes played on women's fears for their own personal safety.

Women in the axis countries are slaves under the ship of their masters. Millions of women from occupied countries have been impressed into labor battalions or into the vilest vocation known to enlightened people. Women, this is your war. 14

By today's standards, the campaigns seem incredibly condescending and paternalistic. The WMC repeatedly stated that it was necessary to liken machinery to the usual housework. Women were told sewing buttons was like spot welding, embroidery was like fuse assembly, kitchen mixers like drill presses, following recipes like loading shells, and sorting beans like inspecting and sorting small munition parts. The analogies were seemingly endless, even down to pushing a baby carriage being the same as

pushing a bin of supplies! The stated aim was to appeal explicitly to every woman and tap into something the WMC assumed she had done. It was also assumed women had a propensity for boring and repetitive work. Even the Women's Bureau of the Department of Labor, which often spoke up for woman's rights and generally had an enlightened attitude, seemed to follow this general thesis. One Bureau bulletin stated, "Women are particularly good at fine processes requiring painstaking application. They have patience and finger dexterity."

These radio ads were only one component of the campaign. In an effort to reach as many women as possible, the WAC of the WMC recommended that Women's Clubs and organizations be asked to aid in recruiting women. The WAC published a pamphlet called "The Wartime Responsibility of Women's Organizations" which outlined the need to form community committees of women, especially professional women, and the various things which could be done. These recruitment efforts were to be tied to the local office of WMC's USES.

The Business and Professional Women's Club of Atlanta became very active in this campaign. Under the strong leadership of its president, Mrs. Mamie K. Taylor, they adopted a resolution to begin work in Miss Patricia Ditsch, this direction on June 2, 1943. office manager for Bell Aircraft, was named Chairperson of the Club's Mobilization Committee. women began by compiling a registry of jobs for women and a list of places where training could be obtained. In October of 1943, they opened a free war job consultation service manned with club volunteers. Taylor appeared repeatedly in the paper and made numerous speeches to elicit responses. She reminded women that Dr. Ashe, regional director of the WMC, called almost any job a war job for a woman; out of 1900 war occupations, only 56 were considered unsuitable for women by the WMC. Taylor had an enlightened attitude for her time, saying, "When the history of this war is written, one of the brightest chapters will be the record of American women." The Business and Professional Club of Atlanta created its own radio ads with a distinctly southern tone. springtime in Dixie. We have our fruit trees - our flowers - our sunny skies. But overseas . . springtime means harder fighting than ever." of Atlanta - you can help bring your boy --- your neighbor's boy home sooner - by taking a war job . . . contact the War-Job Consultation Service . . established by the BPWC of Atlanta to help local women."16

The only group the Woman Power Campaign intended

to exclude were women with small children. In August 1942, the WMC issued a policy statement that women with children under fourteen were not to be recruited. However, it also stated that "barriers against the employment of women with young children should not be set up by employers, as the decision should in all cases be made by the woman herself."17 The WMC had a very ambivalent attitude about the employment of these women. It remained politically and socially unacceptable to "disrupt" families, but women workers were needed. The WMC policy further stated that adequate child care facilities should be developed as community projects, not by individual employers or employer groups. But the reality was, that although proportionately they were the smallest group, large numbers of women with small children did work, perhaps 1/2 million with children under ten.

Child care remained a problem. The Lanham Act of 1941 freed federal emergency funds to build child care centers. But national ambivalence and lack of coordination with the states resulted in underfunded, unsatisfactory programs which were never fully utilized. The centers tended to be expensive, inconveniently located and operated a short number of hours. Most women preferred to leave their children with other adult relatives or swap off with friends. What are known today as "latch key" children were common, but were referred to as "door key" children. So little use of child care centers was made that many were closed.

Occasionally, employers made their own arrangements. Holfast Rubber Company, Ordnance Division, in Atlanta, reported to the WMC that it had made arrangements with local churches to provide child care. But this was unusual. A community report was done by the Women's Bureau on conditions in Savannah. The Bureau stated that the Child Welfare Council of Chatham County had conducted a survey and found 4094 children under fourteen with working mothers. when the Catholic Church, which was interested in providing non-denominational child care, sent questionnaires to parochial school and war industries employing women, few were returned. The Women's Bureau representatives reported that firms were usually unwilling to hire mothers who had not made their own child care arrangements and many women workers who needed child care may have been afraid to fill out the questionnaire. They also reported that people had told them many women did not tell the plants about their children when applying for a job. 18

Problems with child care caused absenteeism among women which was reported by many companies to be

higher than among men. Additionally, a 48 hour work week was the norm and many shipyards worked a 60 hour week. In a survey by the Women's Bureau many women admitted they were absent because they were "tired," rather than ill. The WMC continued to plead with people to stay on the job and paid lip service to providing services for working women, but little was ever done. Women sometimes had to take time off to shop or do laundry. Businesses closed at 5 p.m. every night except one. Food shortages often required women to go to several stores. Most women reported they had sole responsibility for housework, shopping, cooking and child care, in addition to working. 19

Many women were willing to juggle these many roles with little support or help from husbands or the community because of monetary need. The Women's Bureau in 1948 interviewed 13,000 women who worked during the war and found that out of every 100 women, 84 worked to support themselves and others, 8 for some special economic reason and only 8 just because they liked working. Married women comprised 44% of the group interviewed. Of these married women, for every 100 women, 57 worked to support themselves and others, 21 for some special economic reason and only 22 just because they liked working. But the WMC paid little attention to the economic gain women could achieve by working. The Woman Power Campaign rarely made reference to the paychecks a working woman would receive. Business itself seemed more aware of the monetary incentive to work. Studebaker noted in company literature what seems obvious: "Most people work to make money." They further stated, "the number of women who are taking men's jobs solely because they 'want to help win the war' is still relatively small. "20

Because making money was not a traditional role for married women, except those at the very lowest socio-economic levels, husbands proved to be very resistant to the idea of working wives. The WMC launched a separate but parallel campaign directed at husbands. Much of it had the same themes as the campaign directed at the women. Men were reassured that factory work was really like housework. mothers of young children should work and disrupt family life. Additionally, there were rampant rumors that a working wife would adversely affect a man's draft status. This was not true and the WMC repeatedly stated there was no connection between the two. Most importantly, in campaigns directed at men, the WMC explicitly stated that working wives were "a disruption of normal routine" which was required by "a wartime economy." Studies shortly after the war

showed husbands' attitudes were the least changed by

the Woman Power Campaign. 21

Many husbands, of course, were also employers, and the WMC worked to convince employers they really had no choice but to hire women. (The WMC also conducted campaigns directed at employers to hire other "marginal" groups, i.e., blacks and other minorities, the handicapped, prisoners, and prisoners There was tremendous initial resistance. The employment in early 1942 of twelve women in a saw mill was called "an experiment to be studied and analyzed by trained men."2 A foreman in an aircraft plant said, "I honestly don't believe any of us expected them to last the day."2 But as the labor shortage became more severe and the in-migration of male workers strained community services, the resistance to women in industries and occupations from which they had been traditionally barred dissipated tremendously. In the spring of 1941 the Woman's Bureau reported only a fraction of 1% of the factory force in aircraft assembly plants were women. By the following spring women comprised 6% of aircraft workers on average, and as high as 15% in some plants.24 The WMC continued trying to persuade employers that the "line of demarcation for men's and women's job's is largely imaginary. "25 Mr. Channing Dooley, head of WMC Training-with-in-Industry program, said,

we have so many requests from nervous employers for special material on the training of women that I've asked my secretary to buy a rubber stamp to use on every printed piece we send out reading 'This includes women, Negros, handicapped, Chinamen and Spaniards.'26

The WMC collected data to show women generally had lower accident rates, higher production levels and caused less damage to tools and materials. Foremen began reporting their amazement that women could do as well or even better than men. And by July 1943, the proportion of employers willing to hire women had increased from 18% to 63% in professional and managerial occupations, from 16% to 40% in skilled occupations and from 46% to 70% in the semi-skilled.<sup>27</sup>

The literature the WMC sent to prospective employers shows that many things which are illegal today were then standard operating procedure. Companies were allowed to set arbitrary age and weight restrictions. The WMC stepped in only when it felt the labor supply was being unduly restricted. USES sent letters to women about work in the Naval Ordnance

Plant in Macon stating that they must be 20 - 35 years old and less than 50 pounds overweight. Some companies would employ only unusually tall women. Pregnant women were not hired, and women were usually let go when they first became pregnant. The Women's Bureau does note one case where the factory nurse "took the matter to top management over the foreman's head" and was able to have a pregnant woman transferred to a job where she could sit. This action was definitely presented as the exception rather than the rule. Companies were encouraged by the WMC to thoroughly examine such things as marital status and home background and to question prospective women employees about responsibilities at home. 28

The official government policy was one of equal pay for equal work and the WMC promoted the "ideal" of equal pay to employers. But wage discrimination continued and women frequently complained to representatives of the WAC and Women's Bureau. General order 16 required equal pay only for equal work, not comparable work, and industry often created "women's jobs," which were different in some way. speed training in factories, an individual woman was often taught only one small component of a job and was therefore paid less. Unions became strong proponents of equal pay, if only to keep from eroding men's pay Unions did not actually support equality and most allowed women only provisional status. Kessler-Harris points out that although women's factory wages were higher than wages in traditional "women's jobs," the gap in wages between men and women actually increased during the war.29

The Woman Power Campaign run by the WMC was somewhat successful in the short run. How successful depends on how the numbers are viewed and the weight given to the various other factors. According to a study done in 1948 by the Department of Labor's Women's Bureau using census data, 13,015,000 women were working in 1940, comprising 24.4% of all workers and 36.8% of all women of working age. Between five and six million women worked for the first time. such numbers are hard to determine because even WMC studies at the time revealed the numbers were affected in part by the re-employment of women made jobless by the depression. A study done of working women by the Women's Bureau in 1944 showed 61% reported they had been in the labor force at some time before Pearl Certainly it is to be assumed most or all of Harbor. these women would have sought jobs when they became available, even without the Woman Power Campaign. Estimates vary, but Alice Kessler-Harris believes that perhaps only 3.5 million women workers entered the

labor force who ordinarily would not have. significant, however, that between April 1940 and March 1944, the number of working married women increased by 2 million to 72.2% of the total increase. For the first time in U.S. history, married women outnumbered single women in the work force. Nevertheless, Karen Anderson points out that the wives of servicemen who were away were three times as likely to work as women whose husbands were present. Additionally, older married women represented most of the increase. Those over age 45 entered the labor force at a rate 20% higher than what would normally have been expected. According to Anderson, women between 25 and 34 years old, those most likely to have small children, probably exceeded expected numbers by less than 1/2 of 1%. It should be remembered, however, that the stated policy of the WMC was not to actively recruit women with children under fourteen years of age. Perhaps the most significant change was the number of women in heavy industry, which increased 460%. In these jobs wages averaged 40% higher than traditional women's jobs. And although war industry work was the most publicized, labor shortages created new opportunities for women in banking and as lawyers, musicians, pilots, scientists, athletes and college professors. Nancy Woloch calls it a new opportunity to move up the ladder, "or at least off its bottom rungs."30

who helped their men conquer a wilderness and hold it against all comers. 31

A writer for the Mobile Register wrote bluntly, "It is not a call to become glamorous or to satisfy the ambition for a career." But the WAC and the Women's Bureau warned the WMC that women might not want to quit and go home. One Women's Bureau study of ten areas showed 75% of the women expected to be part of the post-war labor force; in Mobile, Alabama, 80% expected to continue working. A UAW poll in 1944 found 85% would like to continue working outside their homes after the war and another UAW poll of women at the Martin plant in Seattle revealed 98% wanted to keep the job they had after the war. The local steelworkers union in Atlanta had a woman president who said "we did not go back after the last war and we are not going to go back now."

But many women did go home; by 1947 only 16,323,000 women were working, dropping to 27.6% of all workers and 29.8% of all women of working age. The women who continued to work were almost entirely forced out of heavy industry and manufacturing and

back into lower paying jobs. Clerical jobs began expanding rapidly and were filled almost entirely by women. The breakdown of a sex-segregated labor market did not survive the war. Employers once again began to claim the work was too physically demanding, too skilled, or required too much responsibility for women. Margaret Hickey, Chairperson of WAC of the WMC, wondered aloud if society's wartime courtship of women had been "honorable." 35

In the last twenty-five years a number of historians have studied working women in World War Two to discover what significance, if any, the wartime experience had in the context of the larger picture. As outlined by Karen Anderson, the central issue of the debate has been whether to stress the widening opportunities for women in paid work or the persistence of sexist values and discriminatory practices. Was this a time of continuity or a time of change? The view of William Chafe, writing in 1972, can be seen as one end of the spectrum. He believed the 1940's marked "a turning point for women workers" which permanently accelerated women into the labor force. He called it a "revolution in the lives of women in America." Writing in more recent years a number of women historians have challenged his conclusions. At the far other end of the spectrum from Chafe is Leila Rupp, who believes the experience had essentially no impact on women and their position in society.

The mobilization propaganda directed at women allowed the public to accept the participation of women in unusual jobs without challenging basic beliefs about women's roles.

A number of other historians have concluded that although World War Two did create sometimes profound change by accelerating the tendency of women to seek paid work, it ultimately did little to improve women's condition significantly. Karen Anderson points out that the demonstration by women that they could do the job caused a reassessment not of the nature of women, but of the nature of the job. Maureen Honey says

the progressive idea that women could perform all kinds of work in society was accomplished by a shrill patriotic appeal that undermined its potential as a feminist reordering of national values.

Anderson, Honey and Susan Hartman all stress that the conservative post-war emphasis on family roles and

values was not a dramatic break with the wartime themes. During and after the war the importance of women being supportive and subordinating their own goals was emphasized. Honey states:

War work became a vehicle for women to shoulder their civic and moral responsibilities as good citizens rather than a way to become more independent and powerful.

As the national goal changed from a military victory to social stability, she concludes that

the desire for rest, tranquility, comfort fed easily into the depiction of women in the traditional helping role, and they were idealized as healers who would salve men's wounds while nurturing the generation that would harvest the rich fruit of post-war prosperity.

By the end of war a Gallup poll showed 86% of all Americans opposed the employment of married women. The post-war economy was robust and the number of working women resumed climbing. By the end of the decade women made up 31% of the work force. Hartman believes this economic regeneration was what had the most profound and lasting effect on women. Some wartime characteristics were maintained. Women workers were more likely to be middle class, older, and married. But they were working almost entirely in "service" jobs and "women's" fields. It would be the 1960's before women began agitating for equal opportunity in the work place, and years more before there would be lasting, meaningful change. "

## NOTES

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