

Selling the War

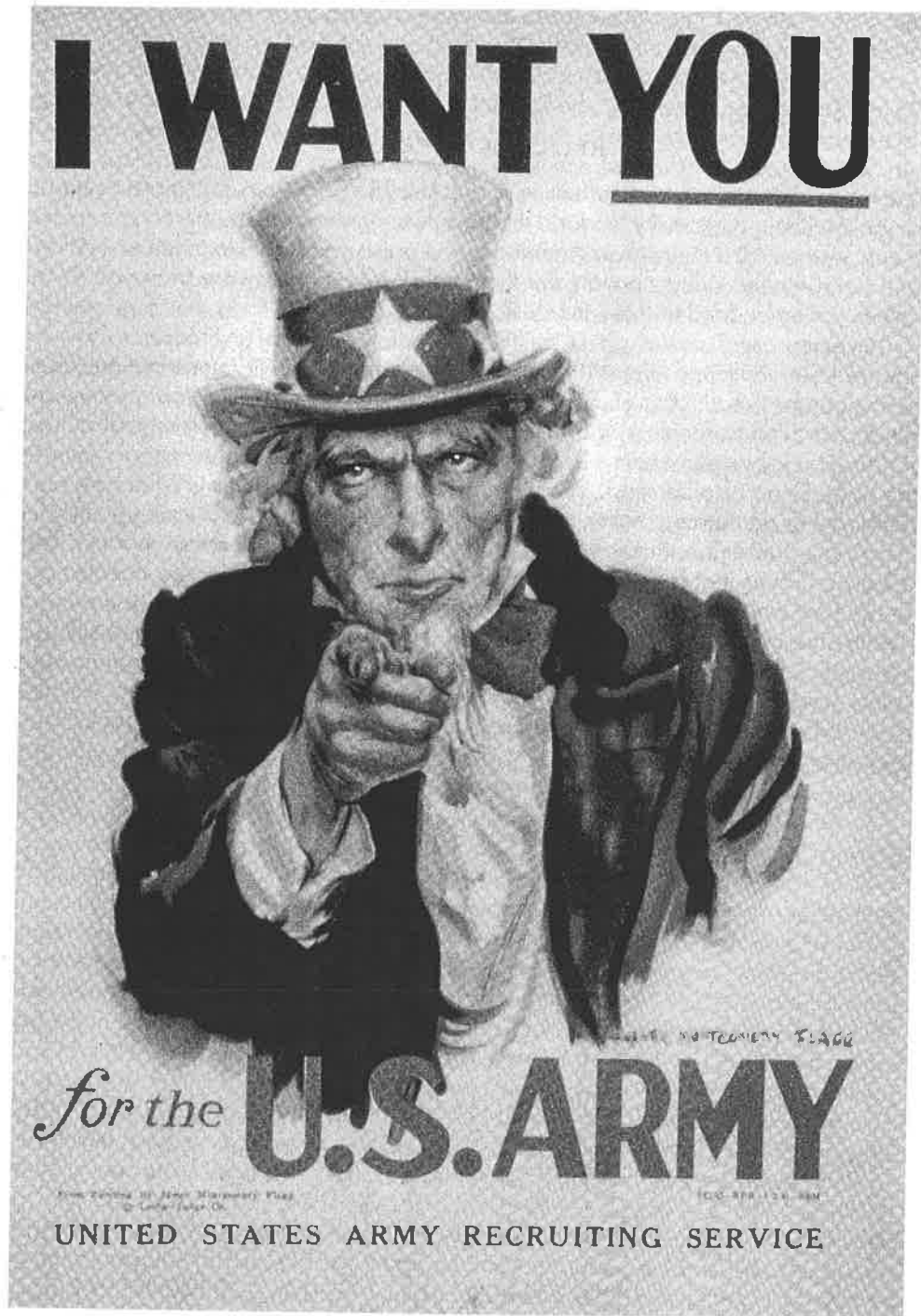
Recruitment Posters of World War I

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

If you have watched a televised sporting event—or any other program aimed at an eighteen- to thirty-five-year-old age group—you have seen commercials designed to encourage young men and women to enlist in one or another of the armed services. The commercials are slick and professional; they feature attractive, well-conditioned young people and promise a better life replete with friends, adventure, and perhaps a touch of romance. They also appeal to values that Americans hold most dear. What are those values? And how do the commercials address them? These are the central questions that may be asked about such promotional campaigns, and though the values and forms of the commercials may change over the years, the ultimate object—the encouragement of enlistments—remains the same.

Take, for example, two popular marines commercials from the 1980s. The first begins with a scene from the court of King Arthur. Arthur, with his sword, Excalibur, in his hands, prepares to knight a young, handsome, physically ideal man. The knight-to-be dismounts from his powerful steed—the universal symbol in Western culture of nobility and masculine virility—and walks toward Arthur. The young man kneels, his head slightly bowed. Arthur lowers Excalibur to the man's shoulder, proclaiming him a knight. With a flash of lightning, the medieval knight is transformed into a modern marine. A voice and the on-screen message announce simply that the marines are "looking for a few good men." The second commercial centers on the process of forging and crafting a fine sword. It is filled with images of molten steel, a blacksmith forming a sword on his anvil, and an experienced craftsman finishing and polishing the sword. In the end, the sword finds its way into the hand of a marine, who demonstrates that he is trained fully in the handling of the weapon. Again a voice asserts that the marines are "looking for a few men with the mettle to be Marines."

Together the two commercials drive home the point of yet another marine slogan: "The few, the proud, the Marines." But what are the values to which these commercials appeal? Patriotism? At no point is patriotism mentioned or scenes of defending the United States shown. Upward mobility? Again, not really. Although many armed-forces commercials promise technical training or the opportunity of future education, here the images of horses, swords, and knights have an anachronistic appeal. ~~Few modern soldiers would care to go into battle mounted on a horse and~~



Poster by James Montgomery Flagg. (National Archives)

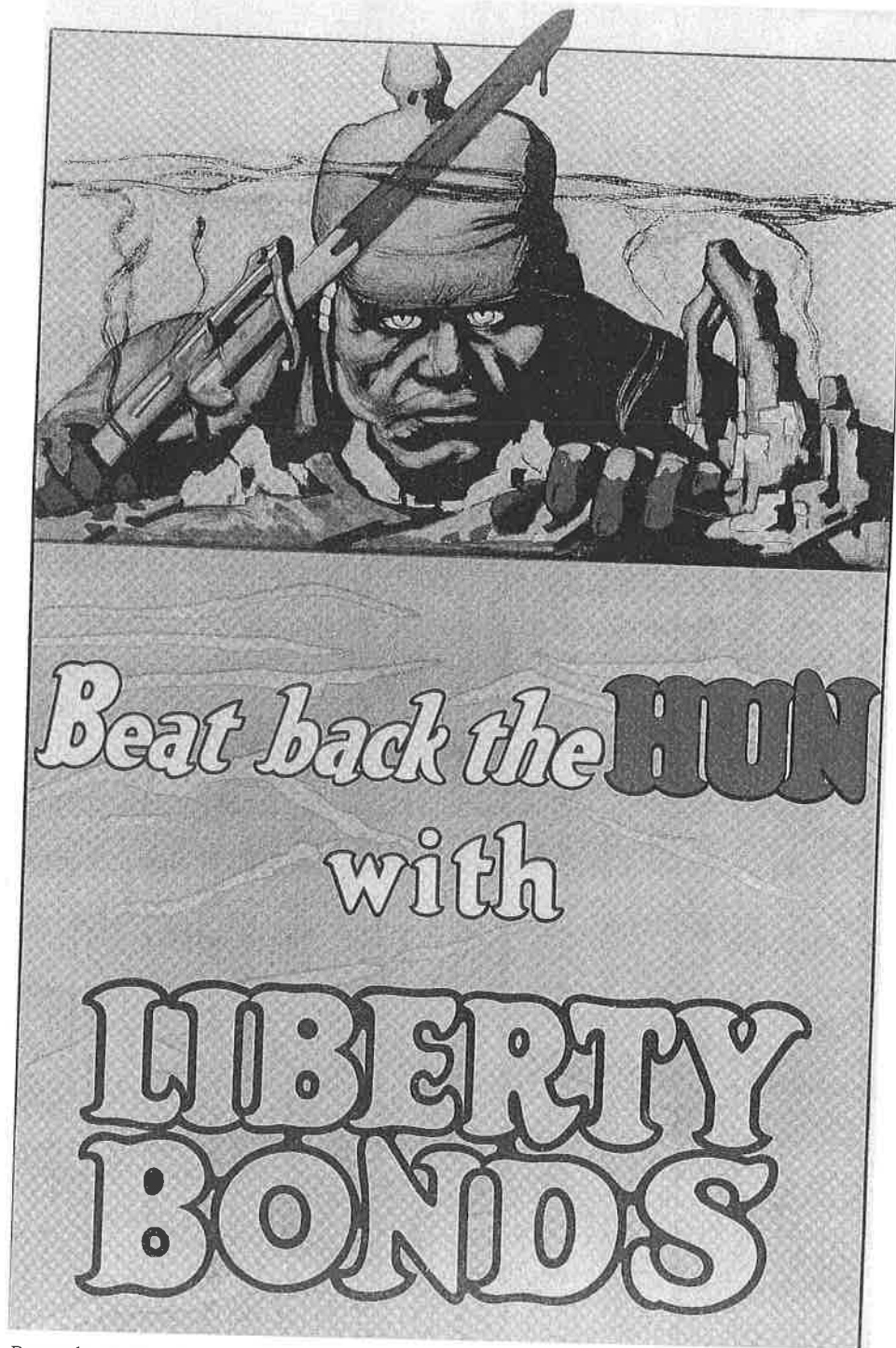


Poster by Howard Chandler Christy. (National Archives)

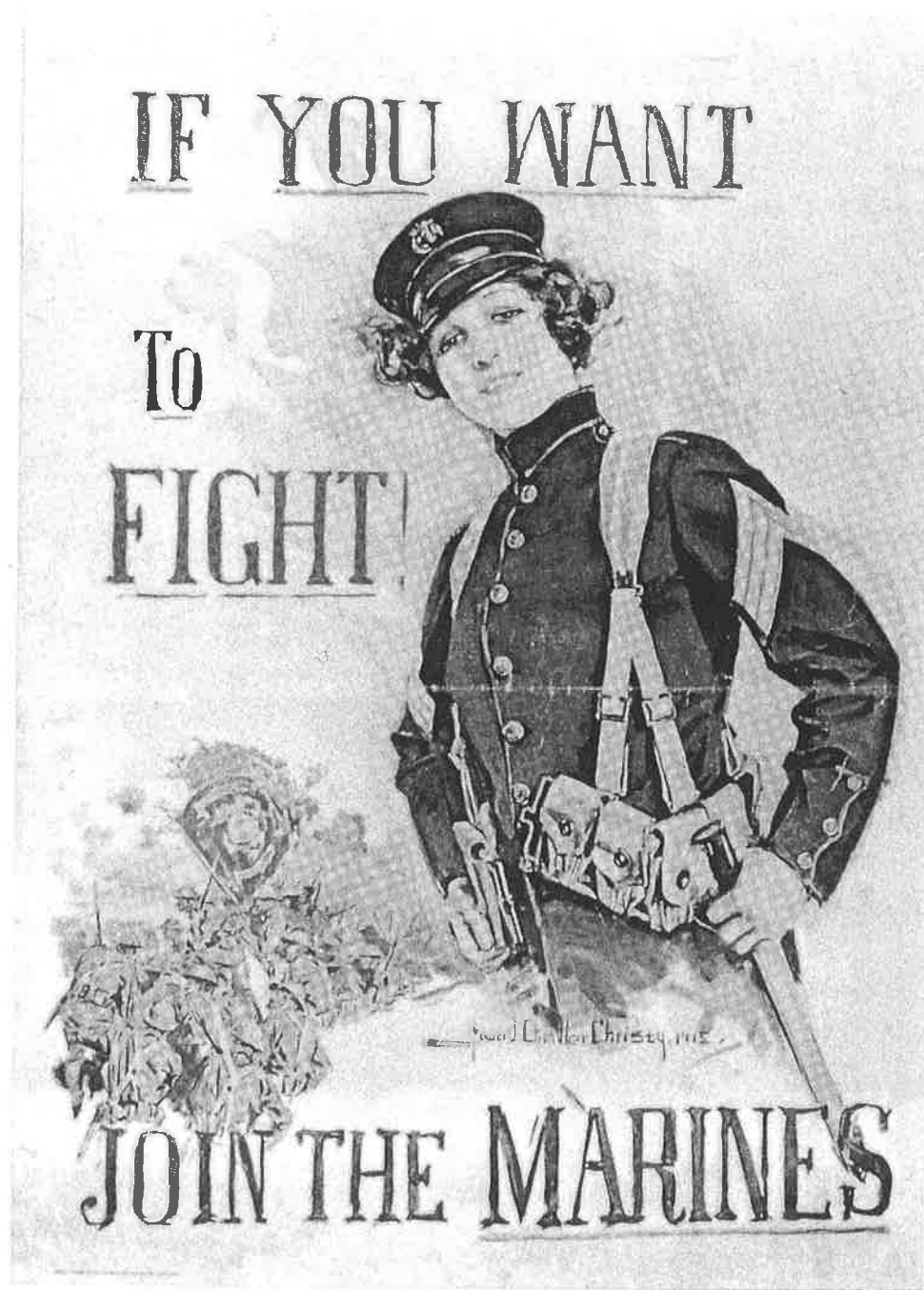


Poster by James Montgomery Flagg. (National Archives)

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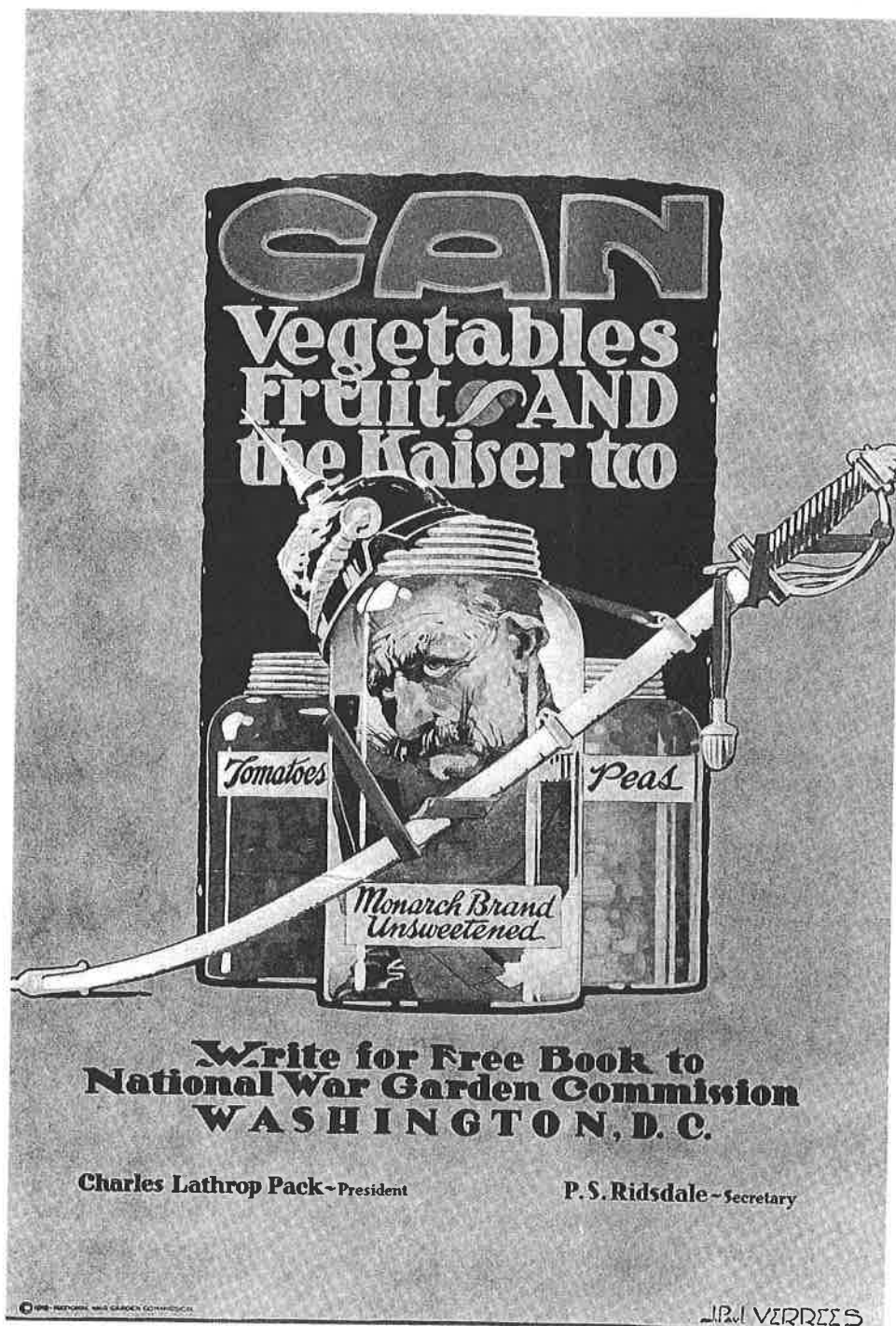
Poster by F. Strothmann. (National Archives)



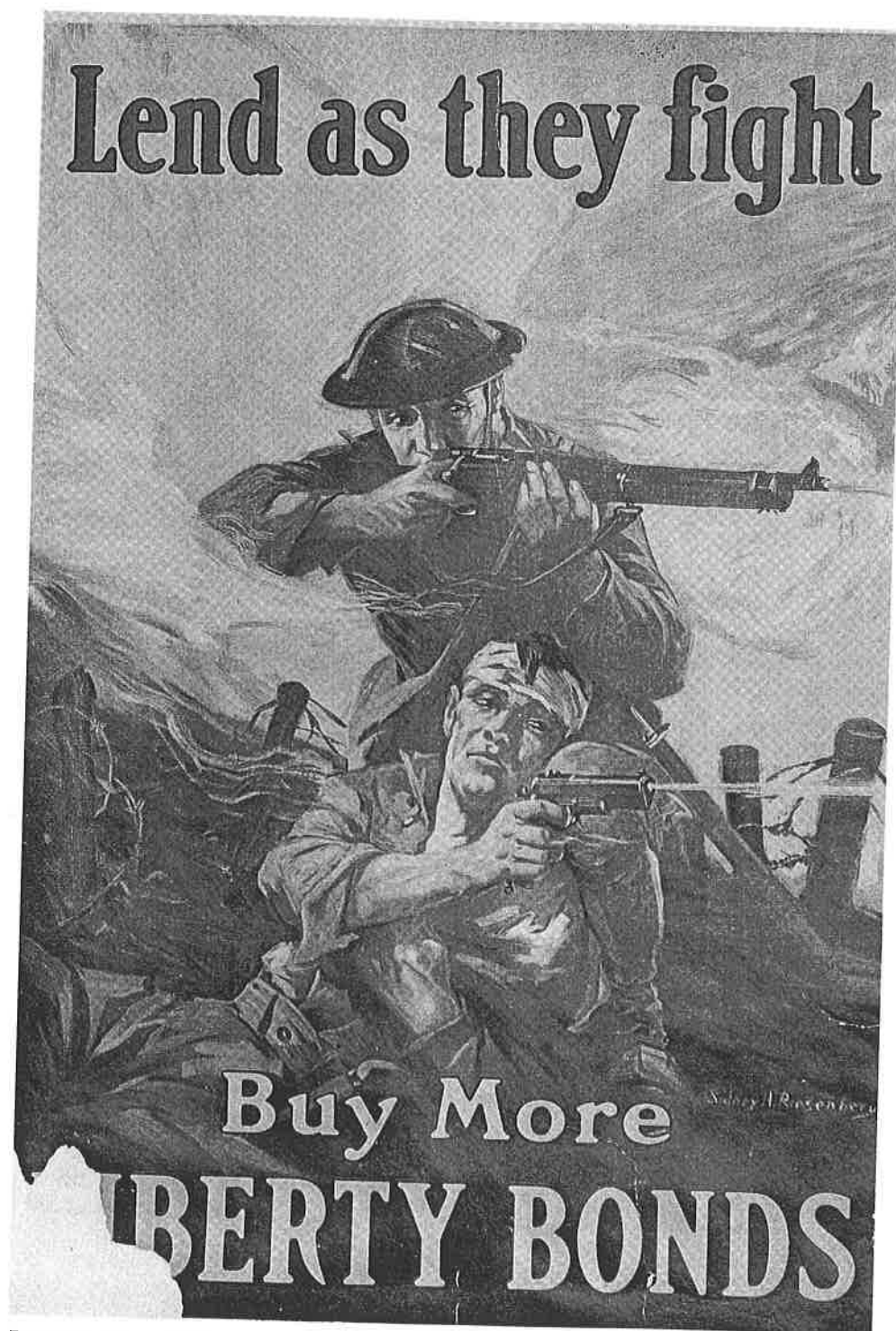
Poster by Howard Chandler Christy. (National Archives)



Poster by Haskell Coffin. (National Archives)



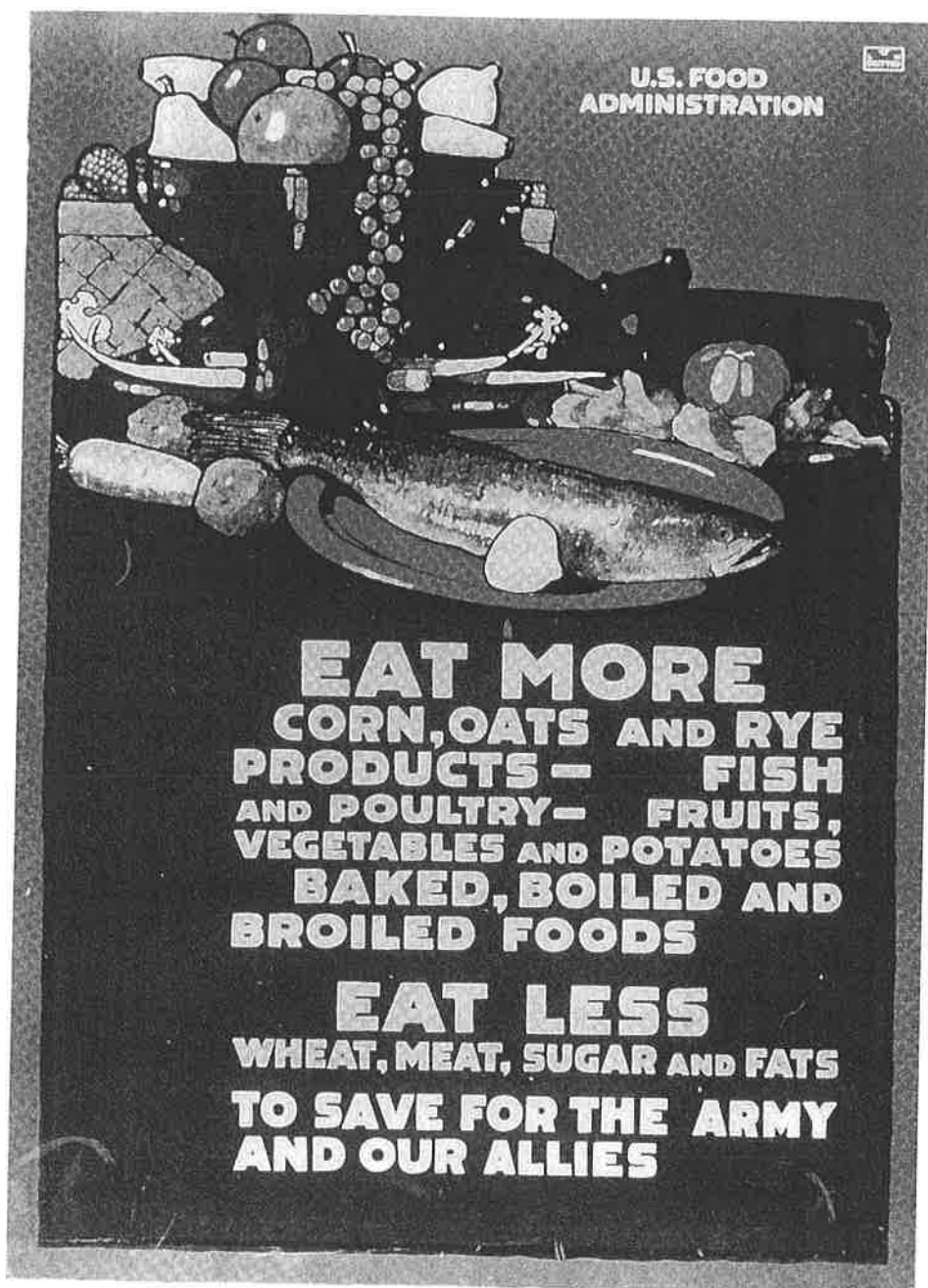
Poster by J. Paul Verrees. (West Point Museum)



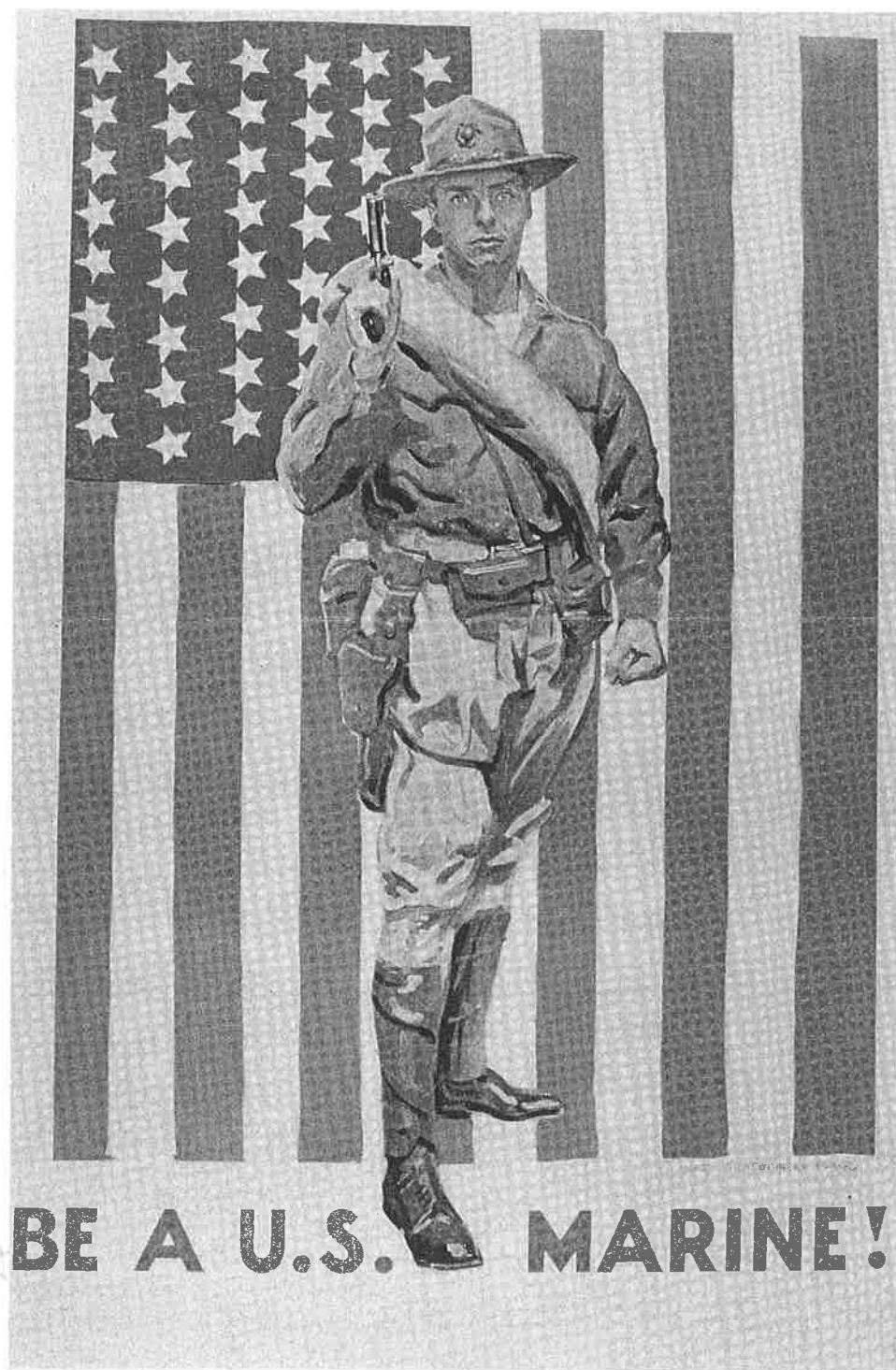
Poster by Sidney H. Rosenberg.



(National Archives)



(National Archives)



Poster by James Montgomery Flagg. (National Archives)



Poster by James Montgomery Flagg. (National Archives)

QUESTIONS

Defining Terms

Identify in the context of the chapter each of the following:

patriotism	"Be all you can be"
"100 percent Americanism"	George Creel
CPI	Fred Spear
the Gibson Girl	Liberty Bonds
James Montgomery Flagg	"GEE! I WISH I WERE A MAN"

Probing the Sources

1. What are the core values to which the posters speak? How do they compare to recruitment efforts that you have seen?
2. How are women portrayed in the posters?
3. How are Germans portrayed in the posters?
4. What emotions do the posters arouse?
5. According to the posters, why did America fight?

Interpreting the Sources

1. What advantages do visual appeals have over written appeals?
2. What similarities are there between the posters and such provocative writings as *The Jungle* and *How the Other Half Lives*?
3. How do you feel about the use of propaganda in a democracy?
4. Do you think advertising is a source of knowledge or deception? Give examples from your own experience.
5. How does World War I advertising differ from today's advertising for the military?

ADDITIONAL READING

Poster art and propaganda appeals are considered in George Creel, *How We Advertised America* (1920); Joseph Darracott and Belinda Loftus, *First World War Posters* (1972); Philipp Fehl and Patricia Fenix, *World War I Propaganda Posters* (1969); Maurice Richards, *Posters of the First World War* (1969); and E. McNight Kauffer, *The Art of the Poster* (1924). David M. Kennedy, *Over Here: The First World War and American Society*, (1980), explores the impact of the war on American society. Opposition to the war is discussed in H. C. Peterson and Gilbert C. Fite, *Opponents of War, 1917-1918* (1957), and William Preston, Jr., *Aliens and Dissenters: Federal Suppression of Radicals, 1903-1933* (1953). For the views of Randolph S. Bourne, see James R. Vitelli, *Randolph Bourne* (1981). Other works on the war include James Joll, *The Origins of the First World War* (1992); and Thomas Knock, *To End All Wars: Woodrow Wilson and the Quest for a New World Order* (1992).