

CHAPTER 3

“BONDS OR BONDAGE?”: THE POCKETBOOK

Private financial matter took on a public urgency during World War II. The United States government sponsored propaganda that encouraged citizens to buy war bonds and stamps. National companies paid for advertisements that promoted war bonds and company products, thus linking the fate of the nation to the actions of citizens on the home front. Local retailers sponsored advertisements for national loan drives. The majority of local advertisements for all businesses contained the slogan, “Buy U.S. War Bonds and Stamps”. Government propaganda and national and local advertisements made it clear to citizens and consumers that financing the war was part of their patriotic duty.

Americans responded to the challenge. One quarter of the money borrowed during the war came from individuals who bought war bonds. Henry Morgenthau, Jr., Secretary of the Treasury under Franklin Roosevelt, envisioned that the propaganda for war bonds would be free of threatening images. He wanted the bonds to “sell the war, not vice versa.” However, as early as 1942, when the number of war bonds sold failed to meet government expectations, Roosevelt’s administration altered its strategy. So serious was the matter that the president contacted the Advertising Federation of America and asked for a partnership. The resulting propaganda played on fear and hysteria.¹

Advertisements and posters bombarded women with reminders to purchase war bonds. Advertisements for local and national products in the local newspaper and national posters relied more on images of mothers and children than soldiers to sell

bonds. A local advertisement sponsored by the newspaper reminded customers that, “the more stamps you buy, the more planes will fly.” Efid’s Department Store encouraged customers to, “keep ‘em backed with bonds” above a picture of marching soldiers. National posters for defense bonds included servicemen flying planes while reminding citizens, “you buy ‘em, we’ll fly ‘em!” and a sailor loading bombs while requesting, “give us more of these!”² While such advertisements were a common approach for retailers, many local advertisements and national posters hearkened to the safety of women and children and the preservation of home.

The *Wilmington Star News* frequently ran advertisements that encouraged women to purchase war bonds as a way to safeguard freedom at home and across the country. Local stores such as Wilmington Furniture and Pender Furniture and the newspaper itself sponsored full-page advertisement with a pledge for war bonds. Readers who filled out the pledge promised to purchase a certain sum of bonds or stamps from a specific location, or to have the cost deducted from their pay. The top of the pledge read, “Bonds-Or Bondage? *MAKE THIS YOUR ANSWER.*” The caption implied that the community and the country could fall into the hands of the enemy if citizens failed to purchase enough bonds. Such threats brought the war closer to home and suggested to citizens that their actions on the home front could affect the outcome of the war overseas.

More immediate than the threat to the community or the town was the threat to individual homes and families. An advertisement for Wilmington Furniture led with the

¹ David Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear: The American People in Depression and War, 1929-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 626; John M. Blum, *V Was for Victory: Politics and American Culture during World War II* (New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1976), 18-20.

² *Wilmington Star News* (Wilmington, North Carolina), 5 April 1942; 1 July 1942; William L. Bird, Jr. and Harry R. Rubenstein, *Design for Victory: World War II Posters on the American Home Front* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1998), 22, 23.

caption, “Let’s Keep Our Homes Off the War Maps”, sending the obvious message that the way to keep the homes safe was to buy war bonds. That same day, a rival furniture company, Pender Furniture, ran an advertisement that also reminded customers to buy war bonds and made reference to the American home. Companies advertised war bonds because the practice allowed them to support the thrifty wartime culture while keeping their company name present in the minds of consumers.³

The government also used posters to bolster the sale of war bonds. The government continued to play on citizens’ fears of the potential threat to communities and mothers and children. Kroger Grocery and Baking sponsored posters for company windows. Two posters in particular tied the purchase of war bonds to the safety of women and children. Instead of positive images of people buying bonds, the images illustrated the grim possibility of what could happen if citizens did not make such sacrifices. One poster pictured two children wearing gas masks holding hands while walking to school. Underneath the picture was the caption: “DEAR GOD, keep them safe! Buy War Bonds.” Another poster pictured a terrified mother clutching a frightened child to her chest as an enemy plane flew overhead. The caption pleaded, “before it’s TOO LATE! Buy War Bonds.”⁴

The government also attempted to sell bonds with propaganda that inspired fear of an enemy invasion. A poster displayed at the local Kroger Grocery store showed a Nazi soldier with his sword drawn and a sinister look on his face. The caption read, “keep him off Your street! Buy War Bonds.” A national poster pictured a woman and her defenseless infant daughter. Two disfigured hands, resembling those of a monster instead

³ *Wilmington Star News*, 26 April 1942; *Wilmington Star News*, 5 April 1942; Bird and Rubenstein, 89.

of a human, reached toward her. On claw bore a swastika, the other a rising sun. The message was clear: Germany and Japan were poised to invade America and their likely targets were women and children.⁵

As the war drew to a close, advertisements still promoted war bonds, but now they contained an air of optimism as the Allied victory became more certain. The focus of these campaigns shifted from fighting the war to planning for the future. In a national advertisement the *Wilmington Star News* ran for Schlitz Brewing Company, a middle-aged woman held a defense bond under the caption, “*This will bring my boy back.*” Under the picture, the caption read, “and WAR BONDS will give him a fresh start when the war is over.”⁶ The advertisement made war bonds attractive to citizens in two ways. First, they sped the war’s end; and second, they provided a solid future for those who purchased them.

Four local companies, Alex Sprunt and Sons, The Wilmington Furniture Company, Dorsett’s Clothing Store, and Larkin’s Clothing Store, jointly sponsored a full-page advertisement near the 1944 Thanksgiving holiday. The picture featured an extended family smiling and sharing a traditional Thanksgiving family dinner. The caption read, “Most thankful indeed will be the mother and father of sons who will be able to join them in the intimacy of the family circle on Thanksgiving Day this year. But there will be many homes in which service flags hang, where vacant chairs will be mute evidence of the fact that sacrifices must continue...” The advertisers chose words they believed inspired gratitude. The last one suggested, “let’s give thanks for the Peace

⁴ Bird and Rubenstein, 89, 90.

⁵ Bird and Rubenstein, 91; Victor Margolin, ed., *Propaganda, The Art of Persuasion: World War II* (London: Angus and Robertson Publishers, 1976), 169.

ahead!” The advertisement stressed the importance that the fight at home continued with the mention of the soldiers still overseas, but gave hope for an upcoming peace by mentioning soldiers home for the holidays.⁷

No doubt the defense of “home and hearth” appealed to both men and women; however, such themes were directed more at women than men. Women viewed national posters such as those in the windows of Kroger Grocery stores more often than men, as they probably frequented the grocery store more often because of traditional gender responsibilities. Local advertisements that emphasized the theme of community and family security ran on or near the society page, while those that appeared near the sports section or national news invoked feelings of revenge and retaliation. In addition, these “masculine” advertisements contained graphic images of wounded soldiers and demon-like enemies instead of family dinners and frightened children.

A full-page advertisement sponsored by several local companies- Fox’s Royal Bakery, Sellers Furniture Company, Becker Coal and Builders Supply Company, and Fountain Oil Company- promoted the sixth war loan in late 1944. The caption read, “THERE’S MORE TO REMEMEBER THAN PEARL HARBOR!” A three-quarter page advertisement pictured Japanese troops brutally attacking American men. Below the picture the caption played to emotions of revenge and retaliation: “We’ve got to stop them. We’re going to stop them. We’re going to teach all such fanatics an unforgettable lesson. They’ll remember Pearl Harbor, too.” The advertisement requested that citizens purchase \$100 bonds.⁸ In addition to the location of the advertisement and the strong

⁶ *Wilmington Star News*, 27 January 1944.

⁷ *Wilmington Star News*, 27 January 1944; *Wilmington Star News*, 23 November 1944.

language used, the amount of money requested also signified a male audience. It was unlikely that women, even those receiving pay from their husbands in the service, would have \$100 to spend on war bonds because of the lower wages women earned compared to men.

Images of wounded and dead American servicemen were prevalent in the advertisements directed at men. One such image displayed an actual photograph of a sickbay in a military camp with bandaged men laying on cots. Below that photograph the caption read, “Pin-up picture for the man who ‘can’t afford’ to buy an extra war bond...” The caption attacked male honor by picturing men who sacrificed their bodies and possibly their lives and comparing these heroes to those men who remained safe at home. These servicemen had sacrificed enough. Those “slacker” men at home who sat out the war needed to prove their masculinity and their patriotism by purchasing war bonds. Another advertisement included a picture of men lying dead with their hands tied behind their backs under a sign, presumably painted in blood that read, “MURDER”. The Japanese did not kill the men in battle, but instead captured them, restrained their hands, and killed them. Under this picture a caption sparked feelings of revenge. “You remember your reaction when you read that the Japs slaughtered our fliers. You felt wrathful, and still do. Well- here’s a wonderful chance to do something about it.”⁹

Despite the obvious connection between purchasing war bonds and patriotism, none of the women interviewed mentioned patriotism as reason for buying war bonds.

⁸ *Wilmington Star News*, 23 November 1944.

⁹ *Wilmington Star News*, 23 January 1944; *Wilmington Star News*, 1 July 1943. It should be noted that much of the propaganda targeted Japan. While the Pacific Theatre fell after the European Theatre, certainly the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor conjured up more emotion than did the atrocities of Hitler and Mussolini in Europe.

Some women interviewed said they could not afford to purchase bonds. Others recalled the ways in which they budgeted for stamps or bonds, or chose to have the purchase deducted from their pay. The war itself brought changes in the general budget of families. Some women recalled their budgets being tight, while others remembered having more money during the war because of their husbands' defense jobs or military salaries.

Catherine Stribling did not mention patriotism when she recalled war bonds. "There were so many things you couldn't spend it [money] on. So that's why you bought war bonds. You had money; people were making good salaries working for the government that sort of thing."¹⁰ She linked an increase in salary and a lack of consumer products to the purchase of war bonds. Ms. Stribling's recollection mentioned nothing of patriotism, but rather focused on an increase in personal finances. The government encouraged women to take war jobs as their patriotic duty, not as a means to financial gain. While people who took these jobs were happy to support the nation, jobs in defense work came with desirable salaries.

When asked about patriotism in Wilmington during the war, Mary Bellamy recalled a man who spoke about his defense job as a means of financial gain, instead of a patriotic duty. She recalled the reaction of an infuriated woman:

I was riding the city bus one day. The bus I was on would go to the Shipyard. It went straight down Front Street and go to the Shipyard. It was always heavily laden with people and it was getting toward the end of the war and I was getting on the bus and somebody, a man, said, 'I wish this war would last right on and on. I never had so much money in my life, and I don't want it to end.' And this little old lady had an umbrella and she got up. She got up out of her seat and she walked back there. And she started to hit him over the head with her umbrella. She hit him and she said, 'You-' and she used some choice words, she said 'you

¹⁰ Catherine Stribling, interview by author, 9 December 2002, Wilmington, North Carolina, tape recording.

so-and-so my son is fighting this war, and you are a no-good so-and-so, you are not worth'. Well, she beat him soundly with her umbrella.¹¹

That the woman recalled this story some sixty years later when asked about patriotism showed the connection people made between war jobs and patriotic duty. Certainly people took war jobs as a means to improve their finances, but they also understood that it was not socially acceptable to admit publicly that money motivated their decisions.

Women who were too young to hold full time jobs recalled the ways in which they budgeted for war bonds. Ms. Stribling remembered, "We bought stamps in school. They would come around once a week, little stamps, ten cents a piece and you'd give 'em a dollar, or however much money you had. You had a little book and you'd keep your book and when you got a whole book full, you'd have enough to buy a twenty-dollar war bond."¹² Ms. Bellamy shared similar recollections of purchasing bonds. "Well, I didn't buy many, but students, or anybody could buy twenty-five cent stamps, and put them in a war bond stamp book. So anybody could do without a coke or an ice-cream cone and buy a stamp. So I guess I just did without something else."¹³ Although neither woman had much money to spend, they were eager to share their memories of personal financial sacrifice. They remembered themselves as actively participating on the home front.

Women old enough to have full time jobs remembered how they managed their budgets. Glenn Higgins recalled, "I made one hundred dollars a month and I bought a one [a bond] every month." Clara Welker and Manette Mintz had the cost of the bonds taken out of their paychecks. Aline Hartis recalled simply, "I just bought them when I

¹¹ Mary Bellamy, interview by author, 15 November 2002, Wilmington, North Carolina, tape recording.

¹² Catherine Stribling.

had the money to buy them.”¹⁴ Budgeting for war bonds was a new activity for these women, and certainly their financial sacrifices affected their budgets; however, they interpreted purchasing war bonds as a mundane activity. None of them mentioned specific things or activities they sacrificed in order to finance war bonds. Such connections would be unpatriotic. In addition, connecting themselves to wartime activity- in this case providing financial assistance to the war effort- made the women feel that they contributed to the Allied victory.

Not all women invested money in war bonds. Two women interviewed said they could not afford to buy bonds.¹⁵ Sallye Crawford stated she did not make enough money teaching and Evalina Williams stated that with young children to feed and clothe, her budget did not allow it. Neither woman apologized nor indicated that they had failed to live up to their patriotic duties, but both women felt compelled to provide reasons why they did not purchase bonds.

Personal finances became part of the public discourse during the war. The contents of the once private pocketbook of citizens across the country and in Wilmington became a subject of debate for the nation. National and local companies ran advertisements for war bonds in an attempt to combine patriotism with the promotion of their products. Government propaganda and advertisements conjured up images of communities threatened by the enemy and depicted women and children as the vulnerable

¹³ Mary Bellamy.

¹⁴ Glenn Higgins, interview by author, 14 January 2003, Wilmington, North Carolina, tape recording; Clara Welker, interview by author, 14 January 2003, Wilmington, North Carolina, tape recording; Manette Mintz, interview by author, 21 November 2002, Wilmington, North Carolina; Aline Hartis, interview by author, 19 November 2002, Wilmington, North Carolina, tape recording.

¹⁵ Sallye Crawford, interview by author, Wilmington, North Carolina, 14 January 2003, tape recording; Evalina Williams, interview by author, 11 December 2002, Wilmington, North Carolina, tape recording.

targets. Images of wounded soldiers and brutal enemies spoke to men. Sixty years after the war, women in Wilmington did not associate the once obvious connection between patriotism and war bonds. Instead, they interpreted their participation in the financial support of the war effort as significant, but a routine expectation of the era.