

Production

In a fireside chat in December 1940, one year before Pearl Harbor, President Roosevelt called on the country to become the “arsenal of democracy.” That year, Nazi Germany had overrun Denmark, Norway, Holland, Belgium, and France. Only Britain, bombarded from the air, stood in the way of Nazi domination of the Atlantic. The United States would soon unleash its productive might to send armaments, raw materials, and food to Britain and its allies.

“As the government is determined to protect the rights of the workers,” the president said in the talk, “so the nation has a right to expect that the men who man the machines will discharge their full responsibilities to the urgent needs of defense.”

By the end of the war in 1945, American civilian workers had built 14,000 ships, 88,000 tanks, 300,000 airplanes, and millions of guns. Posters were the ideal medium for the message that every bit of effort was a contribution to this feat, and that



every sick day, every extra minute on a break, and every broken tool was a boon to the enemy. Posters could be mounted at the factory itself as a reminder that this, too, was a battlefield.

As most young men were entering the military, millions of women entered the workforce, many in places that had not seen women before. The Ford Motor Company, for instance, lifted a ban on hiring women for any but secretarial positions, and women would soon make up nearly half of the workforce at Ford's Willow Run bomber plant in Michigan.

While these “Rosie the Riveters” were often figures of fun in popular culture, posters created for the factory reflected back to women an idealized image of themselves. A labor-management committee of the Westinghouse Company commissioned the now-famous poster on which a young woman flexes new muscles while remaining as glamorous as Rita Hayworth. There seems a bit of defiance in the caption: *We Can Do It!*