Recruiting Civil War Soldiers: Posters and their Power

GRADE LEVEL: 4-8

INTRODUCTION

Civil War recruiting posters enticed men with patriotic appeals, enlistment bonuses, and promises of well supplied units with experienced officers. Patriotic imagery contributed to the plea, and might feature eagles with wings spread, cavalry officers with raised swords, battle scenes, or pictures of George Washington and other national figures. Most posters were intended for a broad-based audience but some targeted specific segments of the population, such as posters written in German or French or decorated with harps and shamrocks to appeal to Irish-Americans.

Over 100,000 German immigrants, over 100,000 Irish immigrants, and almost 200,000 free Black men joined the Union Army and fought to preserve the Union. Likewise, there were Irish-Americans and German-Americans in the Confederate Army, and at least one recorded regiment of Black Confederate cavalry. In this activity students are asked to analyze poster art as a device for wartime recruitment and ethnic distinction. They will then use these ideas to create recruitment posters of their own.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Union and Confederate forces mobilized for what each side assumed would be a short war following the fall of Fort Sumter in April 1861. General Winfield Scott, commander of the Union Army at the beginning of the war, hesitated to put untrained troops into battle, but public pressure demanded action. When opposing armies met at Bull Run (Manassas Junction, Virginia) in July of that year, Union troops were forced into a hasty retreat and hopes for a quick victory were dashed.

As the war progressed longer than any had imagined, traditional military volunteers became scarcer, and both sides looked for new ways to expand their forces. African Americans, for example, who sought refuge with the Union army, were often put to work digging trenches and generally providing support for the army. Even Confederate troops used African-American labor early on. General Benjamin Butler at Fortress Monroe in Virginia, for example, refused to return run-away slaves to a Confederate colonel who, under a flag of truce, demanded their return, citing the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850. Butler argued that, since Virginia considered itself out of the Union, the Fugitive Slave Act did not require him to return escaped slaves. Butler considered the slaves who had escaped as “contraband of war.”

A number of abolitionists, including Frederick Douglass and Horace Greeley, urged the federal government to permit African Americans to enlist in the armed services. The majority of whites in the North, however, were reluctant to support such enlistments. Many in the Union continued to oppose the establishment of combat regiments comprising African Americans. Others, however, sought to take advantage of the availability of black men to serve in the military by buying “substitutes” to fill their places.
As the war lengthened, recruiting troops became an even greater challenge, and in 1863 Congress passed and President Lincoln signed into law the Enrollment Act of Conscription. The Act made all single men between the ages of 20 and 45 and married men between the ages of 20 and 35 subject to a draft, unless they could afford to pay for a substitute. Several appeals for volunteers appeared in newspapers in the months before the draft went into effect. Most made generic patriotic calls for military support, but a significant proportion were tailored to specific ethnic groups and asked what contributions their communities could make to the American war effort.

When the draft began, draftees were chosen by lottery. In New York City, on July 12, 1863, the day after the first draftees were drawn, citizens rioted. Many of the rioters were Irish and German immigrants who were struggling to survive in low-paying jobs. Angry at the wealthy, who could buy their way out of service, and African Americans, who served as substitutes and with whom many felt they already competed for jobs, the rioters roamed the city, looting stores, attacking blacks, and burning a black church and orphanage. A number of people were killed in the rioting, and federal troops were called in to quell the riots.

Some of these same class and race tensions continued after the war ended, as conditions for working-class populations remained largely unchanged. Migrants and their children continued to form the majority of America’s laborers and federal and state resistance to unionization and other efforts to negotiate or change work conditions only grew stronger after the Civil War ended.

But the war did change some American racial attitudes, especially in the North. When Lincoln broadened the war’s objectives to include the abolition of slavery, he connected the success of the Union to freedom for the slave. By the end of the war, a majority of Northerners supported granting freedmen the right to vote and equal protection under the law even if they continued to believe, as many did, that black people were inferior to white people.

This activity includes posters using different arguments for enlisting. Students will find posters directed at Germans, Irish, other European immigrants, and African Americans. As they analyze posters that called for enlistment to avoid conscription, appealed for substitutes, and promised bounties for enlistment, students should consider the following questions:

- How did recruitment posters appeal to different groups of people?
- How did posters use patriotic imagery to attract recruits?
- What do the varying appeals used tell you about the perspectives of different groups of Americans during the Civil War era?
- From the recruitment posters, what can you discern about the effectiveness of the Union’s conscription policy during the Civil War?

**THEMES:** recruitment, enlistment, ethnicity, war, propaganda, patriotism

**LEARNING OBJECTIVES**

Students, following this activity, will be able to:

1. Analyze Civil War recruitment posters for ideas and imagery about patriotism and loyalty.
2. Compare and contrast generic appeals for recruitment with those targeting specific ethnic communities.

3. Utilize words and images to create their own recruitment posters.

NEW JERSEY STANDARDS

STANDARD 6.1 (Social Studies Skills) All students will utilize historical thinking, problem solving, and research skills to maximize their understanding of civics, history, geography, and economics.

STANDARD 6.2 (Civics) All students will know, understand and appreciate the values and principles of American democracy and the rights, responsibilities, and roles of a citizen in the nation and the world.

MATERIALS

- Appendices A1-A2 and B1-B2 (including two Union and two Confederate Civil War recruitment posters).
- Appendices C1-C2: German-American Civil War recruitment posters
- Appendices D1-D2: African-American recruitment posters
- Appendices E1-E2: Irish-American recruitment posters
- Appendices F1-F2: French-American recruitment posters
- Construction paper
- Makers, colored pencils, or crayons
- Glue
- Military and patriotic clip-art (several free examples are available online at: http://www.free-clipart-pictures.net/military_clipart.html and http://www.classroomclipart.com); or students can hand draw their images
- Military stickers (or stars, flags, etc.; optional)
- Glitter or other decoration (optional)

DETAILS OF ACTIVITY

Part 1: Recruiting Volunteers (10 min.):

Distribute the Civil War recruitment posters provided in Appendices A1-A2 and B1-B2 (or, if the classroom has access to Microsoft PowerPoint, teachers may chose to copy and paste these images into a presentation to view together as a class).

Each of these four posters encourages volunteers to enlist in the Civil War cause (A1 and A2 for the Union and B1 and B2 for the Confederacy). As a class, discuss what words and images appear in these posters and record responses on the board:

- What words do the posters use to inspire volunteers? What about ideas or words about property or rights to be protected?
- What payment or other incentives do they offer volunteers?
• What symbols do they use?
• How do they portray men, women, and children? And why might they illustrate them in these ways?

Part 2: Tailoring the Pitch (15-20 min.):

While the first four posters were intended to have broad-based appeal, the remaining posters in this exercise (which appear in pairs as Appendices C1-C2 through F1-F2) target specific ethnicities. Divide students into small groups and have each group focus on one pair of Civil War recruitment poster. If your class is larger, you may chose to divide these pairs and have more groups, assigning one poster to each group:

a) German-American  
b) African-American  
c) Irish-American  
d) French-American

Ask students to use their poster to answer the following questions:

1. What is the first thing you notice about this poster?
2. What does this poster tell you about the regiment being recruited?
3. What ethnic symbols or ideas can you find?
4. What is offered to entice volunteers to enlist (money, prestige, honor, clothing)?
5. Do you think this would be an effective means of attracting someone to join this unit?

Part 3: Reporting Out (15 minutes)

Have each group present their findings to the class and record them in columns on the board.

Next ask what common themes appear between groups’ specific posters and the first four more generic recruiting posters which began this lesson plan?

Finally, what recruiting differences appear between different ethnic groups? Are incentives—such as pay—higher or lower for different groups? Ask them to speculate about why this might be the case.

Follow-up: You’re the Artist

Discuss with students the basic difference between the poster and other advertising media. A poster speaks to the audience “on the move,” while newspaper ads, magazine ads, and mailing pieces such as folders brochures and booklets are designed for the reader who has time to stand or sit and read for a while. On the other hand, the poster must capture the attention and get the message across in a matter of seconds. It must spark the reader to take the desired action through a brief message packed with punch or veiled in subtlety.

With these ideas in mind, have students work individually or in small groups to design their own Civil War recruiting poster. You may chose to have them focus on one particular group of people (such as the German, Irish, African-American, and French recruiting posters above), or
create a poster with broad-based appeal. Either way, posters should include a simple message, have a strong visual impact, and make the viewer want to take the action suggested. Remind students that a successful poster should do the following:

1. Tell the story quickly.
2. Grab the viewer’s attention.
3. Be convincing.
4. Make striking use of color.
5. Reflect its ideas simply.

At the end of this activity, hang posters on the wall and encourage students to identify what themes, ideas, and images they chose in common and where they differed. Ask them to explain why they made the word and image choices that they did.

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REFERENCES and WEBSITES:

This lesson plan is adapted from Civil War Treasures of the New York Historical Society, available at the Library of Congress’ American Memory website (http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/ndlpcoop/nhihtml/cwnyhsarcpp.html), and “Black Soldiers in the Civil War,” a lesson plan of the National Archives (http://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/blacks-civil-war/).

For more information about Civil War recruitment tactics see:


Appendix A1: Civil War Recruiting Poster #1

$150 BOUNTY!
SPINOLA’S EMPIRE BRIGADE!

The Flag of Our Union Forever and Ever!

COME ONE! COME ALL!

HILLHOUSE LIGHT INFANTRY!
Col. P. J. CLAASSEN, Commanding 2d Reg’t.

40 Good Men Wanted Immediately
TO FILL UP A COMPANY.

Pay, $13 to $23 per month, from date of enlistment.

One month’s pay and $75 Bounty before leaving the State. Comfortable Quarters and Subsistence. Clothing furnished as soon as muster’d in. Competent non-commissioned Officers will be chosen from the ranks and all subsequent promotions made from the ranks. $5-$8 paid to any one bringing an accepted recruit.

Capt. W. R. CUMMINGS, 286; Third Avenue, 
RECRUITING OFFICER.

BOOZE & SON, PRINTERS, BRIGHAM CITY, ILLINOIS

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Source: Civil War Posters, New York Historical Society.
Appendix A2: Civil War Recruiting Poster #2

Source: Civil War Posters, New York Historical Society
Appendix B1: Confederate Civil War Recruiting Poster #1

Head Quarters, Virginia Forces,  
STAUNTON, VA.  

MEN OF VIRGINIA, TO THE RESCUE!

Your soil has been invaded by your Abolition foes, and we call upon you to rally at once, and drive them back. We want Volunteers to march immediately to Grafton and report for duty. Come one! Come ALL! and render the service due to your State and Country. Fly to arms, and succour your brave brothers who are now in the field.

The Volunteers from the Counties of Pulaski, Highland, Bath, Alleghany, Monroe, Mercer, and other Counties convenient to that point, will immediately assemble, and report at Monticello, in Highland County, where they will join the Companies from the Valley, meeting at Grafton. The Volunteers from the Counties of Hardy, Hampshire, Randolph, Pocahontas, Greensburo, and other Counties convenient, will be in the manner report at Beverly. And the Volunteers from the Counties of Upsher, Lewis, Barbour, and other Counties, will report at Philippi, in Barbour County. The Volunteers, as soon as they report at the above points, will be furnished with arms, supplies, &c., &c.

Action! Action! should be our rallying motto, and the sentiment of Virginia’s inspired Orator, “Give me Liberty or give me Death,” animate every loyal son of the Old Dominion! Let us drive back the invading foot of a brutal and desperate foe, or leave a record to posterity that we died bravely defending our homes and firesides—the honor of our wives and daughters—and the sacred graves of our ancestors!

[Done by Authority.]

M. G. HARMAN, Maj. Commd’g  
at Staunton.


May 30, 1861.

Source: Poster Reproduction, Yellowstone Trading Post
Appendix B2: Confederate Civil War Recruiting Poster #2

FREEMEN!
OF
TENNESSEE!

The Yankee War is now being waged for “beauty and booty.” They have driven us from them, and now say OUR TRADE they must and will have. To excite their hired and ruffian soldiers, they promise them our lands, and tell them our women are beautiful—that beauty is the reward of the brave.

Tennesseans! your country calls! Shall we wait until our homes are laid desolate; until sword and rape shall have visited them? NEVER! Then

TO ARMS!

and let us meet the enemy on the borders. Who so vile, so craven, as not to strike for his native land?

The undersigned propose to immediately raise an infantry company to be offered to the Governor as part of the defense of the State and of the Confederate States. All those who desire to join with us in serving our common country, will report themselves immediately.

J. B. Murray.
H. C. Witt.

May 17th, 1861.
Neal & Roberts, Printers, Merriestown, Tenn.

Source: Printed Ephemera Collections, Digitized Historical Collections, Library of Congress
Appendix C1: German-American Recruiting Poster #1

Source: America Singing Collection, Nineteenth-Century Song Sheets, Library of Congress
Appendix C2: German-American Recruiting Poster #2

Source: Civil War Posters, New York Historical Society
Appendix D1: African-American Recruiting Poster #1

Source: Civil War Recruiting Posters, New York Historical Society
Appendix D2: African-American Recruiting Poster #2

Source: Civil War Posters, New York Historical Society
Appendix E1: Irish-American Recruiting Poster #1

Source: Civil War Posters, New York Historical Society
Appendix E2: Irish-American Recruiting Poster #2

Source: Civil War Posters, New York Historical Society
Appendix F1: French-American Recruiting Poster

Note: As this is in French, students should pay special attention to the images!

Source: Civil War Recruiting Posters, New York Historical Society
Appendix F2: French-American Recruiting Poster

Note: Zouave was the title given to certain French infantry units that served in North Africa between 1831 and 1962.

Source: Civil War Posters, New York Historical Society