

The “Buy War Bonds” poster from World War 2 illustrates how state-sponsored imagery can manipulate the public’s subjective sense of power to encourage militant foreign policy attitudes. I argue this poster effectively shifts public opinion toward hawkishness, as defined by Pomeroy, not *just* by appealing to fear, but by using “first image reversed” causation to activate the viewer's behavioural approach system, thereby transforming even dovish citizens into supporters of aggressive state action.

The poster shows “Uncle Sam” (a personification of the U.S. government and America) towering over the viewer, holding the American flag, with U.S. soldiers and aircraft massed behind him. It conveys a large military and triggers an “intuitive sense” of strength in the American viewer. Although the poster has cues associated with fear and danger, these are visually subordinated to symbols of overwhelming strength, ensuring that aggression through power, not avoidance through fear, dominates the viewer. By showing all actors facing a shared threat with a confident demeanour, the poster conveys that “our (united) state” is stronger than “your state,” easing the burden of supporting war (p. 8). According to Pomeroy, this sense of state power is from “first image reversed” causation, where, rather than individual traits shaping international politics (bottom-up), the systemic balance of power shapes the *individual* from the top down (pp. 3, 5). Thus, the poster uses the macro-level reality of U.S. military strength (planes and troops) to alter the micro-level psychology and make citizens feel powerful and supportive of aggressive state efforts.

This shift in felt power translates into militant internationalism, the belief that force and deterrence are the most effective tools for securing national interests. The poster visually normalizes this by showing military force as coordinated and already successful and turns support for war into a common-sense extension of national strength. Rather than showing chaos or sacrifice, the image reframes U.S. military force as controlled, reinforcing Pomeroy’s claim that felt power makes coercion appear effective and low-risk (p. 9). Thus, by instilling a sense of power, the poster reduces perceived risk, making war bond purchases appear rational. Psychologically, this operates through what Pomeroy calls Approach-Inhibition Theory (AIT), where felt power activates a behavioural approach system (pp. 2, 7). Uncle Sam’s commanding gesture and forward-leaning posture are assertive, action-oriented responses that Pomeroy argues are activated by felt power. Consequently, the poster does not rely on avoidance and instead frames buying war bonds as an expression of confident aggression and coercive resolve.

Pomeroy’s research suggests that the sense of power silences empathy, which “makes hawks of even the most dovish” (p. 2). By making regular citizens feel powerful, the government transforms “doves,” who might prioritize caring or fairness, into “hawks” willing to fund a war. By linking this felt power to national identity, the poster lowers inhibitions among otherwise dovish citizens. As Pomeroy concludes, any explanation of hawkishness that ignores state power is incomplete, as the subjective feeling of strength alone makes the use of force seem both rational and efficacious (p. 9). In this way, the poster demonstrates that state power does not merely constrain choices at the international level but reshapes the psychology of citizens. Ultimately, by making strength feel intuitive and action feel natural, the image helps convert subjective power into public support for aggressive state policy.

Pomeroy, C D. "Hawks Become Us: The Sense of Power and Militant Foreign Policy Attitudes." *Security Studies*, 28 Sept. 2023, pp. 1–27, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2023.2252736>.