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## The Evolution of the “We Can Do It” Poster and American Feminist Movements

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# The Evolution of the “We Can Do It” Poster and American Feminist Movements

## **Cover Page Footnote**

Maureen Honey, *Creating Rosie the Riveter: Class, Gender, and Propaganda during WWII* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1984).



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Major:  
History

Mentor: **Dr. Katherine Chilton**

*The Evolution of the “We Can  
Do It” Poster and American  
Feminist Movements*

***Biography***

*Reina Aguirre is a graduating senior with a major in history. After graduation she plans on obtaining her PhD in History and becoming a professor. Her research interests are women's accomplishments of equality in the U.S. and American social movements. Reina's other interests include exploring the outdoors, collecting historical stickers, and travelling.*

## ***The Evolution of the “We Can Do It” Poster and American Feminist Movements***

### **Abstract**

World War II created mass destruction and economic distress but was also responsible for creating new opportunities for women. The war had torn families apart and had altered family dynamics. The high demands of the wartime economy called for a reevaluation of American women’s roles in society.

In 1942, Pittsburgh artist J. Howard Miller was hired by the Westinghouse Company’s War Production Coordinating Committee to create a range of propaganda posters to encourage women to join the war effort.<sup>1</sup> The most iconic was christened “Rosie the Riveter” and further popularized by Norman Rockwell. These images exemplified how the government wanted women to be perceived in the workplace. Wartime propaganda determined how women acted and dressed. During World War II, the Rosie the Riveter image not only exemplified the nationalism felt amongst U.S. citizens but also came to represent the generation of women who broke down societal boundaries. These women were heavily influenced by the media and became confused about their role in society.

Throughout the twentieth century, the meaning behind the Rosie the Riveter image evolved as women continued to strive for freedom from societal norms. In the 1970s, women from the second-wave feminist movement rediscovered “Rosie the Riveter” and transformed the WWII era propaganda poster and her slogan “We Can Do It” into a symbol of women’s empowerment that has been carried across the generations and onto the banners of the contemporary feminists marching in the 2017 Women’s Marches.

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<sup>1</sup> Maureen Honey, *Creating Rosie the Riveter: Class, Gender, and Propaganda during WWII* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1984).



J. Howard Miller/War Production Co-Ordinating Committee, ““We Can Do It!”,” *The National Museum of American History*, accessed April 17, 2018, [americanhistory.si.edu/collections/search/object/nmah\\_538122](http://americanhistory.si.edu/collections/search/object/nmah_538122).

During the wartime effort, seven million women joined the American workforce. Between 1941 and 1945, many of these women journeyed far away from their hometowns to take advantage of these new job opportunities. Women were still able to contribute by developing home front initiatives to conserve resources, raise funds, and fill jobs left by men.<sup>2</sup>

The efforts of American officials and media outlets during the Second World War were focused on the belief that they could control the behaviors of women and use their employment to keep the wartime economy going. The war effort was not designed to help women increase their standing in society, but to use their physical labor to help the United States win the war. It was important to the government to motivate women

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<sup>2</sup> Doris Weatherford, *American Women and World War II* (Edison, NJ: Castle Books, 2008).

to take on these masculine roles, but to also ensure that their femininity was not at risk while doing so. Thus, the War Information Office and Advertising Executives carefully created the image of a feminine housewife going to the factory for the sake of her country. They believed a woman would only work because her country needed her. The woman they described was capable of achieving anything her country asked of her and when she was no longer needed, she would go home to welcome her husband.

The ideal woman was one who could perform all these duties with great skill while still maintaining a feminine image.<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, this feeling of independence and growth would not last long for women. When the war ended and the men returned home, a majority of working women did what society wanted them to and returned to their lives before the war. Throughout the mid-twentieth century, women were confused about their standing in society. They were unsure whether it was appropriate for them to continue in the labor force, or if they should stay home to take care of the children.

In 1960, right before the second-wave feminist movement began, Betty Freidan explained in her work, *The Feminine Mystique*, what the problem was with women's societal roles:

The problem with women is not sexual but a problem of identity. Our culture does not permit women to accept or gratify their basic need to grow and fulfill their potentialities as human beings, a need which is not solely defined by their sexual role.<sup>4</sup>

Women were not ready to overcome their submissive roles in society just yet. However, female roles in society started to be questioned after the war had ended. More women started to feel the power of earning their own money and providing for their family. As this confusion grew among women, wartime workers, and other activists, the desire to fight for equality became inevitable. Martha Weinman Lear describes the

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<sup>3</sup> Honey, *Creating Rosie the Riveter*.

<sup>4</sup> Betty Freidan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1963).

beginning of the new wave and the actions they first took to achieve equality in her *New York Times* article, “The Second Feminist Wave,” published in 1968.<sup>5</sup> During the start of the second-wave, the attitudes of women were not ambitious and willing at first. Lear also attributes initial difficulties to the work of women anti-feminists and the misunderstanding the public had about feminism.

As women stepped into the workforce, they were pressured to conform to the government’s ideal image of the female worker and when the war was over their efforts were left unnoticed. Due to the government’s influential use of propaganda, the *We Can Do It* poster was first used against women. It was not until later where the poster was used by women themselves as a symbol of empowerment during the second-wave feminist movement. Throughout the decades of feminism the poster has been recreated to promote gender equality.

## **Two Rosie the Riveters in World War Two: Managing the Contradictions of Women’s New Roles**

As Maureen Honey notes, the Rosie that we first see in the *Saturday Evening Post* is problematic and imaginary. Mary Keefe, the model that Norman Rockwell chose, was not a riveter, but a telephone operator. She had never worked in the defense industry and had no experience in riveting. In Rockwell’s painting, her body appears to be bulkier and her arms are made more muscular. In the painting she is holding her riveting gun in her lap and is eating a sandwich. She looks dirty and is dressed in manly work clothes while stepping on Hitler’s autobiography, *Mein Kampf*.<sup>6</sup>

Her manly stature was created to symbolize the strength and endurance of the United States. Although she has masculine characteristics in the painting, Rockwell makes sure to include feminine features. Her hair is styled and she is painted with red lipstick and nail polish. There is also a delicate handkerchief and makeup compact coming out of her pocket. The way she is positioned, with her welding shield above her

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<sup>5</sup> Martha W. Lear, “What do these women want? A Second Feminist Wave,” *New York Times*, March, 1968.

<sup>6</sup> Honey, *Creating Rosie the Riveter*.

forehead, gives her an angelic look. Her body language expresses the sacrifice of her domestic role for an overlooked and underappreciated job that she would later have to leave behind.

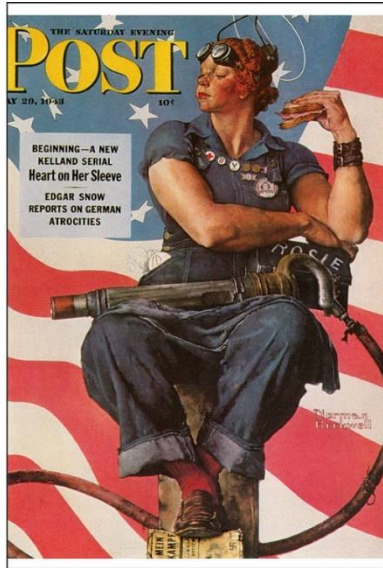
Unlike Rockwell's Rosie, which used masculinity to represent the nation itself rather than American women per se, many of the images of Rosie in popular culture depicted her as hyper-feminine, reflecting a concern that industrial work would take away a woman's femininity. Every form of propaganda made sure to remind women to keep their femininity while doing so. Women were able to wear feminine work uniforms and their work appeared glamorized in U.S. propaganda posters. The government constantly reminded them that these new opportunities were not made for them but for the sake of their country.

The media did its best to get the word around that women were needed in the defense industry. All female roles that promoted working women featured a beautiful female character who made a selfless sacrifice by joining the workforce for the sake of her husband and her country. Rockwell's painting was given to the Second War Loan Drive by the *Saturday Evening Post* to promote war bonds. Wartime movies focused on stories that followed women in the defense industry. Such movies included *Swing Shift Maisie* (1943), *Meet the People* (1944), and *Since You Went Away* (1944). These movies featured popular actresses like Claudette Colbert, who played a welder in *Since You Went Away* (1944). Other forms of entertainment also focused on women wartime workers, including Broadway plays like *Rosie the Riveter* and memoirs like *Shipyard Diary of a Woman Welder* (1944).<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Heidi A. Strobel, "Rosie the Riveter, Rose Will Monroe, and Rose Bonavita," *American National Biography Online*, accessed April 16, 2018, <http://www.anb.org/view/10.1093/anb/9780198606697.001.0001/anb-9780198606697-e-2001920>.





Norman Rockwell, “Rosie the Riveter”, *The Saturday Evening Post*, <http://www.saturdayeveningpost.com/2013/07/01/art-entertainment/norman-rockwell-art-entertainment/rosie-the-riveter.html>.

“Rosie the Riveter” was designed to target a specific audience. White, middle class women were the main focus of the War Information Office and Advertising Executives. According to Maureen Honey in *Creating Rosie the Riveter: Class, Gender, and Propaganda during World War II*, the Office of War Information (OWI) catered its propaganda to manipulate middle-class white women into thinking they needed to leave their domestic lifestyles. The OWI believed these women were the most worthy and fit for the job. The propaganda convinced women that it was their patriotic duty to join the workforce. The OWI believed women needed to stop being selfish and get down to business. It was told that women who worked long hours performing a man’s job were seen as more attractive than women who did not want to get their hands dirty. The government assured these women that by joining the workforce, they were also helping their husbands on the frontline. They developed story plots in media that portrayed the ideal worker they wanted women to live up to.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Honey, *Creating Rosie the Riveter*.

The OWI used specific media outlets to capture the attention of their targeted audience. *The Saturday Evening Post*, which featured Rockwell's iconic paintings, is known as the most widely circulated and influential to middle-class families.<sup>9</sup> *The Saturday Evening Post* pushed women to retain their femininity because the government knew that these women would soon return to their domestic roles.

The OWI did not entirely restrict its action to middle class women, however. Another media outlet used to capture the attention of women was *True Story*, a magazine that was popular among the working class.<sup>10</sup> It was not a challenge for the OWI to convince women who were already working and living in low-income households to join the defense industry. Through propaganda, the OWI gave off the impression that hard work could increase your social status by marriage. Story plots showed that hard-working, single women were very attractive and could possibly attract a male white-collar coworker.<sup>11</sup> Again, the government instilled the idea that despite these new opportunities, women were still dependent on men and their domestic lifestyles. During this time, the purpose of the Rosie the Riveter propaganda poster did not change and symbolized a woman's patriotic duty to help her country.

Although the OWI mainly encouraged employment in the defense industry to white middle class women, many minority women also took on the new opportunities. African American women joined the defense industry at equal rates as white woman. Many sought out work in the factories for different reasons, but primarily for income. However, despite the positives of working in the defense industry, African American women faced a lot of discrimination and segregation in the workplace. Many companies did not want to hire African American women. In an interview from the documentary film, *Life and Times of Rosie the Riveter*, an African American woman describes her experiences in the workforce. She explains how every women had to take riveting classes before they started working. Although she performed at a higher level than her white coworkers, she was the last to find work and was given more difficult

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

tasks.<sup>12</sup> Unfortunately, African Americans were always the last to get hired and the first to get fired. In some cases, white defense workers refused to work alongside their black coworkers.

Although the Rosie the Riveter “We Can Do It” propaganda poster was temporarily used to motivate all women to join the workforce during WWII, this did not mean that all races of women were given equal opportunities. It was not until the second-wave feminist movement that the poster was seen as a universal symbol of women empowerment.

### **After the War: Forced Retreat of Rosie The Riveter**

Throughout the World War II era, women were being empowered and beginning to feel more comfortable with the idea of stepping beyond societal boundaries. However, despite this new freedom, a majority of women still understood that these were men’s jobs and knew they would have to return home. When the war had finally ended, the home front was once again the place for women. At the end of the day, Rosie the Riveter was just a form of propaganda and did not promise anything for the future.

Women were not mentally ready to fight for their rights and keep the new jobs they had proven to themselves they could do. In 1987, Sherna B. Gluck conducted interviews of women wartime workers and published them in *Rosie the Riveter Revisited: Women, the War, and Social Change*. Gluck’s interviews revealed that although defense workers supported women’s empowerment and feminism, this did not mean they were ready to actively participate in the women’s movement. The opportunities that were given to these women did not fully affect the lives of their families. Women were still expected to manage their roles and duties as mothers and wives. The interviewees were chosen based on their prewar work roles, plans for the postwar period, marital status, and migration. They were categorized by their prewar work status and their interviews focused on their societal roles and feelings about entering a male-dominated workforce. Gluck found that the women she interviewed

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<sup>12</sup> Connie Fields, “The Life and Times of Rosie the Riveter - PBS American Experience,” Documentary, directed by Connie Fields, featuring Wanita Allen, Gladys Belcher, Lyn Childs, Lola Weixel, Margaret Wright (New York: PBS American Experience, 1980).

worked a “double- shift” during the war. Dependent on their marital status, women defense workers still fulfilled their domestic duties while working an eight hour shift.<sup>13</sup> These women took pride in their new roles that challenged boundaries, but still had concerns and anxiety over losing their femininity. In order to maintain their identities, working women were cautious in choosing their work attire and constantly displayed their devotion to domesticity.

Women continued to believe that they were not allowed to lose their domestic role in society. They felt that it was all they had and overlooked their hard work in the defense industry. In an interview conducted by David Dunham, a real-life Rosie, Bettye Branan, shares her experiences riveting in the factories. She moved to Richmond, California right after high school and started working at Douglas Aircraft as a riveter. In her interview with Dunham, she explained that working as a riveter was dangerous. Branan worked on B-17s (heavy bombers) and explained, “If that rivet gun wasn’t held steady, it would cut a hole in the skin; then they’d have to put a bigger rivet in.”<sup>14</sup> Women carried out jobs that they never imagined doing. These riveters completed tasks that were viewed as difficult for anyone not just women.

On top of their hard work and long schedules, women also needed to fulfill their roles as homemakers. Most women, regardless of ethnicity or race, worked while dealing with the “double burden” of having responsibilities in the defense industry and with the family at home. During this time, it became more difficult to overcome home front obstacles. Women had to deal with food shortages, finding childcare, transportation, and housing. The San Francisco Bay Area was a prime spot for the defense industry due to its geography, and the population of Richmond went from twenty-three thousand to a hundred and twenty-five thousand in a couple of years. The many women defense workers that flocked to the Bay Area were mostly married with families. The largest shipyards estimated that up to half of their female workforce had children

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<sup>13</sup>Sherna Berger Gluck, *Rosie the Riveter Revisited: Women, the War, and Social Change* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1987).

<sup>14</sup> Bettye Branan, interviewed by David Dunham, *World War II Homefront Oral History Project*, The Regents of the University of California, 2011.

at home.<sup>15</sup> Most defense plants ran around the clock, and many women worked a six-day week, leaving little time to manage their numerous motherly duties in their limited “off” hours. For the thousands of women who traveled to the defense factories on the West Coast, finding stable housing in the WWII boomtowns became a very difficult task to overcome on top of trying to make a life in a foreign place.

After the war, the family dynamic was in jeopardy and women were needed in the household. As women’s independence increased, so did the independence of youth. The war created a sense of freedom that this young generation had never felt before.<sup>16</sup> It was important to the United States that domesticity was brought back into society during the postwar years. According to Emily Yellin in *Our Mother’s War*, “American women also were under immense pressure from their country to protect and defend steadfastly the very idea of traditional home and family, and their central place in it, that was transforming so quickly.”<sup>17</sup> Society was not ready to free women from their domestic roles. Women were being asked to forget the skills they learned and the wages they earned in order to once again make their families and homes the center of their lives. The same magazines and media outlets that had encouraged women to leave their home lives were now giving them advice on how to run their homes. Ads of washing machines, dishwashers, and refrigerators encouraged women to buy goods that supported their new domestic life.

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<sup>15</sup>Honey, *Creating Rosie the Riveter*.

<sup>16</sup>Emily Yellin, *Our Mothers’ War: American Women at Home and at the Front during World War II* (New York: Free Press, 2004) 417-528.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, 417-528.



“You’ll feel like a queen in your kitchen...”, *LIFE Magazine*, 1959.

This was designed to convince women to commit to their renewed family obligations and was created to discourage any thoughts of moving forward in the workforce or even continuing to work outside of the home. Women were not given a fair opportunity to grow in society. Although they had proved to themselves that they could do a man’s job and achieve much more socially, the power of media took over once again and forced them to believe that it was necessary to go back to their domestic lifestyles. In *The Feminine Mystique*, Betty Friedan argues that the media was manipulative in choosing what women should be interested in. The content that was presented to them in different forms of media strongly influenced how women perceived their role in society. Friedan cited the words of one of her magazine-editor colleagues:

They are only interested in the family and the home. They aren’t interested in politics, unless it’s related to an

immediate need in the home [...] You just can’t write about ideas or broad issues of the day for women. That’s why we’re publishing 90 percent service now and 10 percent general interest.<sup>18</sup>

At the same time, husbands were coming back from war and were ready to settle down and continue to grow their families. During the 1950s, the number of marriage licenses and birth certificates issued increased.<sup>19</sup> The Rosie the Riveter campaign revealed the fact that the change of societal roles took a social backseat due to women’s obligations to the many husbands and boyfriends returning home. This did not mean the women’s movement was not going to continue. The striving for the equality of women came to a halt. It was not a top priority to the many working women living during this era in the United States. The hard lesson to be learned was that women had to relinquish the jobs and the new opportunities they experienced during the war to reward men. The sacrifices women made in the 1950s are known to be a dark time for the women’s movement.

Women were not ready to give up their new roles because it was easier to return to what they knew. At the time, the idea of women staying home to take care of their children and husbands was the norm. In an interview from the WWII American Homefront Oral History Project, Peggy Cook, another real-life Rosie the Riveter, tells of her journey as a riveter both during and after the war. Peggy explains how she felt when the war had ended and what it was like giving up her job. She told of the confusion and the struggles of having to figure out what to do next. Peggy explained, “Yes. Some of us didn’t know what to do with our, quote, ‘new-found freedom.’ You’re raised a certain way; your grandmother, we always did it this way. Well, okay. It’s hard to change.”<sup>20</sup> From the post-war era until the beginning of the second-wave feminist movement,

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<sup>18</sup> Freidan, *Feminine Mystique*, 112.

<sup>19</sup> Barbara Welter, “The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860,” *American Quarterly* 18, no. 2, 1966.

<sup>20</sup> Peggy Cook, interviewed by Robin Li, *World War II Homefront Oral History Project*, The Regents of the University of California, 2012.

women did not know how to feel. It was easier for women to go back home, especially with the media constantly telling them what to do next.

However, not all women returned to their old lives. According to Sheila Tobias, approximately six million real-life Rosies did not return home to take care of their families; instead, they remained in the workforce.<sup>21</sup> Women had to settle for lower paying jobs after being laid off. A majority of these women were minorities who had no choice but to work. The Rosie the Riveter campaign of putting women to work outside of the home inevitably created a significant change in American women.

But while some women were able to keep their wartime jobs and others fought and won their right to stay, most were demoted to the feminized sectors of the economy, back to “women’s work.” According to the interviews from the documentary film, *Life and Times of Rosie the Riveter*, after four years of welding and steady attendance at after-work classes, Gladys, a black riveter, could find no company willing to hire her as a welder. She became a cook in a school cafeteria for the rest of her working life. No factory in Brooklyn could hire another riveter to do the welding that she had done to help win the war. Her dream was to make a beautiful ornamental gate. “Was that so much to want?” Gladys questioned.<sup>22</sup>

For minorities, losing their jobs was a substantial issue that greatly affected them. This was the first time they were able to fully provide for themselves and their families. Even though some factories in the defense industry sometimes paid them less than white workers, it was still much more money than they were given before. According to an another interview by the Oral History Project, Matilda Foster, a black woman, explained her job in the shipyards and how she had to start off with the most disliked tasks and low pay. She explained, “Working and picking up and cleaning the streets and things like that. And then the next couple of months, they told me it would pay more scaling. And I took a test to get that job. They paying a \$1.45.”<sup>23</sup> Foster enjoyed the higher pay and the

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<sup>21</sup> Sheila Tobias, *Faces of Feminism: An Activist’s Reflections on the Women’s Movement* (Westview Press: March, 1998).

<sup>22</sup> Connie Fields, “The Life and Times of Rosie the Riveter - PBS American Experience.”

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*



companionship she gained while working in the shipyards. She said it was the most money she had ever been paid before. When the war ended she was the first to get laid off. It was a struggle to make a living after that. She told of her working experiences in the post war era. She explained,

“Farm work took over again in California. People were picking beans and things. You’d go pick beans, tomatoes, there’d be so many people... We did that for several months, making living. You got a dollar a lug for them—no, \$.60 a lug.”

Foster tells of how difficult it was after the war and the struggles with discrimination. She explained, “...here is not only discrimination in society but the economy is bad for colored folks.”<sup>24</sup> The frustration of the postwar era was tolerable for most women; some did not have a choice and had to make it work. Women would not come together to fight for equality until the late sixties.

### **Second-Wave Feminism: Retaking of Rosie The Riveter**

The “We Can Do It” poster was viewed in a different light by second-wave feminists. To them, Rosie could be both feminine and strong. As the movement took off, Howard Miller’s “We Can Do It” propaganda poster became better known as “Rosie the Riveter.” The poster was adopted by the National Organization of Women and played an important role in pushing for the equality of the sexes.<sup>25</sup> The caption of the poster inspired women to believe anything was possible. This is a reason why the symbolism of Miller’s poster was able to evolve and Rockwell’s was not. Instead of focusing on American women themselves, Rockwell took a more nationalistic approach by emphasizing masculine characteristics to symbolize the U.S.

Rosie the Riveter was found everywhere during the second-wave feminist movement; in magazines, newspaper headlines, and in march posters. In 1971, *Ms. Magazine* made its debut in *The New York Times* as

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Tobias, *Faces of Feminism*.

a sample insert. The magazine was created by Gloria Steinem, a social activist, writer, editor and lecturer, and her co-founder Dorothy Pittman Hughes. . *Ms.* was the first U.S. magazine to talk about controversial women's issues that gave a voice to the second-wave feminist movement.<sup>26</sup> According to "Ms., Herstory 1971- to the Present," the magazine featured

"American women demanding the repeal of laws that criminalized abortion, the first to explain and advocate for the ERA, to rate presidential candidates on women's issues, to put domestic violence and sexual harassment on the cover of a women's magazine, to feature feminist protest of pornography, to commission and feature a national study on date rape, and to blow the whistle on the undue influence of advertising on magazine journalism."<sup>27</sup>

Different portrayals of Rosie the Riveter were featured on the cover of *Ms.* throughout the years. Howard Miller's model for the "We Can Do It" poster, Geraldine Doyle, had recognized herself in a magazine. In 2002, she was interviewed by the *Lansing State Journal*. She stated that she was too busy with her daily life to notice the image, until the second wave of the feminist movement.<sup>28</sup> According to *American National Biography*, Miller's Rosie the Riveter poster became one of the ten most requested images from the National Archives during the 1970s.

During the late 1950s and early 1960s, America was experiencing a lot of prosperity and growth. The economy was booming and more people were pursuing a higher education. As America continued to prosper, people began to seek out new ideas and developed a new culture. They were beginning to think more futuristically and perceive things in a

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<sup>26</sup> "Ms. Magazine Online | More Than A Magazine - A Movement," *Ms. Magazine*, April 16, 2018.

<sup>27</sup> "Ms. Magazine Online | Herstory 1971- to the present", *Ms. Magazine*, April 16, 2018.

<sup>28</sup> Timothy Williams, "Geraldine Doyle, Iconic Face of World War II, Dies at 86," *New York Times*, December 2010.

new light. Social movements were emerging, and people began to question the establishment of social constructs such as segregation and inequality in the workplace. By the early 1960s, equality for women rose to the top of the political agenda in America. When the Civil Rights Act of 1964 came to Congress, feminists were inspired and decided to fight for the addition of an amendment that would prohibit sex discrimination in employment. Feminist leaders of the movement focused on fighting against sexual harassment and fighting for reproductive freedom, work rights, and the acceptance of sexual preference. Betty Friedan gave women a voice in society and brought wider social awareness of feminism.

In March of 1968, *The New York Times* published the article, “What Do These Women Want? A Second Feminist Wave.” The article broke down the first feminist movement and the start of the second wave. Martha Lear began the article by introducing the “new” feminists of the 1960s women’s movement, including the National Organization for Women. In 1966, The National Organization for Women (NOW) had been founded by 28 women at the Third National Conference of Commissions on the Status of Women. Lear’s article was published two years after NOW was established. In her article, she reported on the activities of the NOW that included: Picketing newspapers (including *The New York Times*) in protest of sex-segregated help wanted ads, standing up for airline stewardesses at the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, advocating against of all state abortion laws, and campaigning for the Equal Rights Amendment (also known as ERA) in Congress. NOW adopted Howard Miller’s iconic “We Can Do It” poster--better known as the Rosie the Riveter image--to promote their movement. Rosie the Riveter now not only symbolized the generation of women who first gained a presence in the workplace during WWII, but also symbolized the women who would continue their legacy by breaking down social boundaries. Lear also discusses the lack of feminist history and women who were anti-feminist and chose to separate themselves from the movement. These women argued that they were “comfortable”

in their societal role and felt they were already the most privileged.<sup>29</sup> Lear goes on to explain feminist organizing tactics. Their goal was to organize women for women's rights, and not for other single focuses like protesting against war. Radical feminists felt that men would not take them seriously in politics if they organized as ladies' auxiliaries. It was crucial for feminists to organize politically for the cause of women's equality. Lear's work "What do these women want? A Second Feminist Wave" is remembered as an important early article about the second wave women's movement that reached a national audience and emphasized the importance of the resurgence of feminism.

The NOW members' first picket was in August of 1967. Feminists dressed in old fashioned clothing to symbolize the outdated policies of *The New York Times*, who at the time segregated help-wanted ads by gender. In December of the same year, NOW held its first national day of demonstrations in five cities, targeting the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission for issuing guidelines approving of the ads.<sup>30</sup> In May of 1976, marches on behalf of the Equal Rights Amendment kicked off. NOW brought 16,000 supporters to Springfield, Illinois to push for the approval of the Illinois legislature. Activists arrived from the East Coast on the ERA Freedom Train. In August 1977, approximately 4,000 women and men marched down Pennsylvania Avenue to force President Carter to be aggressive in his efforts to ratify the ERA. Activists organized five annual walk-a-thons in support of the ratification of the ERA campaign. The walk-a-thons together raised over \$1.7 million.<sup>31</sup> After the defeat of the ERA in 1982, NOW did not organize another major march for women's rights until the East Coast/West Coast March for Women's Equality/Women's Lives. In March of 1986, over 120,000 women and men demonstrated in Washington, D.C. Women and their male allies were determined to fight for equality of the sexes and would not give up.

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<sup>29</sup> Martha W. Lear, "What do these women want? A Second Feminist Wave," *New York Times*, March 1968.

<sup>30</sup> National Organization of Women Official Website, "NOW's History." *National Organization of Women*, 2017.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

The Rosie the Riveter Campaign had continued. Real-life Rosies, who were mostly in their sixties at the time, started to speak up. The newspaper article, “Rosie the Riveter is Still on the Assembly Line,” was published by *The New York Times* in November of 1966. The name Rosie the Riveter had appeared in many headlines during the second-wave feminist movement, due to its strong correlation between Rosie and women in the workplace. In the article, Mrs. Flora Danner, a 61 year old real-life Rosie the Riveter, tells of her experience in the workplace. During WWII, she joined the Douglas Aircraft Corporation in Long Beach, California. Danner talks about her positive experience in the workforce and how she wished to continue working. Approximately two decades later, her daughter would have a similar working experience. As the Red Scare began to sweep across the nation, working opportunities for women increased. Danner explained “... because of the increased electronic miniaturization, there was also an increase in demand for women, who tend to have dexterity and patience for the delicate work.”<sup>32</sup> Her daughter began working for the Douglas Aircraft Corporation. The beginning of the Cold War is what led to this increased demand for electronic and space assembly. The demographics of Douglas Aircraft Corporation is now composed with thirty percent of women in its missile and space systems division<sup>33</sup>. Again, we see during a time of need that women were empowered to overlook gender roles. As this new generation of “Rosies” entered the workplace, the mindset of women changed. This new generation did not follow in the footsteps of their mothers and were not going to give up so easily. With the emergence of the second-wave feminist movement, these women would fight for their rights in the workplace. The Rosie the Riveter campaign allowed them to see how capable they were of changing and the improving their lives, not as wives or daughters but as individuals.

### **The 2018 Women’s March: Rosie the Riveter Reemerging**

The evolution of the Rosie the Riveter poster followed the actions of the generation it first represented. As women questioned their place in

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<sup>32</sup> “Rosie the Riveter is Still on the Assembly Line,” *New York Times*, November, 1966.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

society, the meaning behind the poster was also beginning to be viewed differently. It was never formally stated that Rosie was a symbol of women's empowerment during the second-wave, but the implications were there. She is constantly referenced during every major breakthrough for women. The relationship the poster has with women in the workforce is the reason why NOW chose the image to represent their fight for equality in the workplace. It only made sense to use an important figure that had already inspired women to make a change in their lives. This image became important to many feminist groups because it portrayed a strong, independent woman, and included an inspiring caption that encouraged women to do the unthinkable.

In 1963, the United States Congress made the decision to confront the problem of discrimination in the workplace. The Equal Pay Act reassured that discrimination of race and gender would be prohibited in the place of work. The number of female employees increased, but their pay still fell behind their male co-workers. After the 35th anniversary of the Equal Pay Act was established, women still dealt with a significant gap between male and female wages. According to the Population Reference Bureau, between 1980 and 1994 the ratio of women's earnings to men's earnings increased to seventy-two percent from sixty percent. The Equal Pay Act of 1963 was an accomplishment for the "real-life Rosie's" that wanted to continue on with their careers in the workplace.

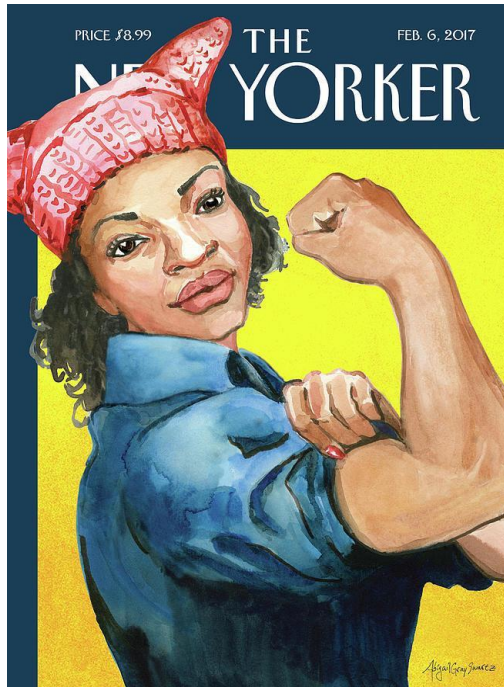
In an article written on the occasion of California governor Jerry Brown's signing of the California Fair Pay Act in 2015, the National Organization For Women President, Terry O'Neil, referenced Rosie the Riveter in celebration of this achievement. In a clear act of symbolism, Governor Brown chose to sign the Act at the newly created e Rosie the Riveter National Park near San Francisco. He called it "smashing one of the biggest barriers to equal pay for work of equal value."<sup>34</sup> This was a step forward in eliminating gender and gender-race wage gaps. It prohibited employers from paying employees less than the rates paid to coworkers of the opposite sex for the same work. It is absurd that The California Fair Pay Act took this long to be passed and shows how further

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<sup>34</sup> Terry O'Neil, "A Good Day For Rosie the Riveter," *National Organization For Women*, October 6, 2015.

women have yet to go. The signing of the California Fair Pay Act provides evidence that the accomplishments of real-life Rosies are still unfolding. Their actions in the workforce were used as a foundation for the later second-wave feminist movement, and the famous icon is still used to signify accomplishments of equality for women.

In the context of the contemporary Women’s March, the same fight for women’s rights has been continued. On February 6, 2017, *The New Yorker* recreated Miller’s “We Can Do It” poster and featured a woman of color. The cover was titled “The March,” and was inspired by the Women’s March in Washington held on January 21, 2018. It was estimated that 2.6 million protesters came together from all over to fight against President Trump’s anti-reproduction rights policies. Protesters wore unique pink knit hats in the shape of cat ears, known as



“The March”, *New Yorker*, February 6, 2017.

“pussyhats.”<sup>35</sup> On the cover, a portrait of an African American woman positioned in “Rosie’s” iconic pose wore the recognizable hat from the Women’s March. The cover symbolized the fight for the rights of *all* women. Throughout this new phase of feminism, the evolution of the Rosie the Riveter poster continues.

## Conclusion

The creation of the iconic Rosie the Riveter image was never made to promise a future of workplace and general societal equality for women. It was a product of the government’s focus on manipulating women’s societal roles. This was the only idea behind the poster for a long time. Immediately after the war, women were not ready to continue their fight in the workplace. It is apparent in the interviews of real-life Rosies that there was confusion on what to do next. At the time, going back to their domestic lifestyle made sense when their husbands returned home.

However, the Rosie the Riveter campaign did change the way women perceived themselves. They had realized that they could step out of social boundaries and be successful. It would not be until the second-wave feminist movement that women would fight for equality in the workplace and their freedom. The retaking of the Rosie the Riveter poster during the second-wave supports the transformation of the image from a form of propaganda to a symbol of women’s empowerment. Due to its strong connection between Rosie and the reevaluation of female gender roles, the poster has been involved with the evolution of society’s new ways of thinking. In the courses of successive phases of feminism, Rosie the Riveter is constantly referenced.

The poster has developed such a strong cultural presence today that it is either mocked or used for everything from campaigns promoting the improvement of women’s lives to the marketing for cleaning products. Rosie the Riveter has been reimagined to complement the campaigns of female leaders across the world. The iconic image now symbolizes the fight of the new generation of women.

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<sup>35</sup> “The March,” *New Yorker*, February 6, 2017.