

Remembering ‘Rosie the Riveter’



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Since 1995, U.S. presidents have issued proclamations declaring the month of March as Women’s History Month. Every year, including this past month, March becomes a month-long observance and remembrance of the vital role women have played in American history. During this year’s celebration came the announcement of the passing of Rosalind P. Walter, the woman credited with inspiring the 1943 “Rosie the Riveter” song, which depicted civilian women employed in manufacturing jobs to assist the war effort during World War II.

As more men were going off to war in Europe and the Pacific in the early 1940s, manufacturing companies, aided by the U.S. government, propagated a concerted marketing campaign aimed at drawing women into a much-decimated workforce. The iconic “Rosie the Riveter” was one such campaign. Accompanying the song was a poster, which illustrated a strong, proud woman, donning a red and white bandana and wearing a blue work shirt. The slogan “We Can Do It!” was inscribed on the poster. Some accounts suggest that the poster was commissioned by the Westinghouse Electric Corporation and was based in corporate greed as a means to pressure women to work harder on the job. A later version of the poster was adopted by the U.S. government as a propaganda tool to entice women out of the role of homemaker and into the role of laborer on behalf of the war effort. Whatever the original intent, the imagery was clearly a patronization of the women’s place in the workforce.

With WWII raging on, many women abandoned their traditional role of housewife and took up jobs in the airplane, munitions and other manufacturing industries. However, the plan was that, as the men returned from war, they would once again resume their roles in the workplace, resulting in the women being cast aside. And it goes without saying that the wages paid to the women was a mere pittance of the wages paid to their male counterparts. As WWII ended, so did the need for this type of patronizing propaganda campaigns.

Years later, the same imagery used to entice women into the workplace became a guidon of sorts, displaying solidarity, strength and determination to combat chauvinism. The iconic poster was dusted off and once again used to motivate women, but for a different reason. Women sought social liberation and were driven by the pursuit of equality in the workplace. The imagery of the poster was transposed into a symbol of unification in women’s pursuit of empowerment.



The iconic poster that inspired a feminist movement

So, as history would have it, Rosie the Riveter was born of a time in which a marginalizing attitude existed with regards to the contributions and rights of women in the workplace. Her rebirth helped galvanize a movement, the roots of which embodied the ideals of dignity, personal freedom and equality for women in society. The “We Can Do It!” slogan, initially coined as part of a patronizing propaganda campaign, became a rallying cry for social and workplace justice for women.

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In 1999, the United States Postal Service created a stamp depicting Rosie the Riveter. That iconic poster, which displayed Rosie the Riveter with the “We Can Do It!” slogan, played a pivotal role in our nation’s history and lives on today as a tribute to and reminder of the tenacity of the female spirit.