

Processed Food and American Culture: A History of War and Advertising

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The consumption of processed food has become a controversial topic both in the United States and abroad. Numerous documentaries, TV specials, and news stories have been created to address the health issues caused by the prevalence of processed foods in the American diet.

Historians Paul Freedman, Joyce E. Chaplin, and Ken Albala in their collaborative work *Food in Time and Place: The American Historical Association Companion to Food History*, argue that the shift in the American diet towards processed foods began with the Second World War and ended with the Cold War. Predating the Cold War, processed food was already an integral part of American culture, and was therefore no longer “on the rise.” The authors claim that World War II jumpstarted the popularity of processed foods by introducing them to the civilian market, where women embraced processed foods due to their convenient, timesaving nature. When the Cold War began, Americans further embraced processed foods as a mark of their civil superiority over the USSR. Processed foods came to represent the affluence of American society, and with that definition, a piece of Cold War propaganda used to shame the USSR.¹

An opposing view to this is that of the economist Robert J. Gordon in his book, *The Rise and Fall of American Growth, The U.S. Standard of Living Since the Civil War*. Gordon argues that the shift to processed food in the American diet was caused by a period commonly referred to as the “age of advertising” that began with the end of the Second World War. Gordon points out that certain processed foods, particularly breakfast cereals, became popular through television and radio advertisements.² He also argues that frozen foods became popular because they were

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marketed to the American public offering the possibility of a “utopian” future: a world where women didn’t need to cook, where the cost of living was low, and where ample food existed in every household.³ Gordon argues that the most important shift in food marketing was the self-serve supermarket. These supermarkets offered a new level of convenience to the consumer, therefore becoming extremely popular, and paved the way for the further rise of processed foods.⁴

Many historians disagree about the origin of processed food’s prominent role in modern society. Answers to this question include advertising, Cold War politics, technological advances in industry, World War II, and even women’s rights. While all of these serve as valid parts of the answer, the important question is which factors had the greatest impact. Although advertising can be pinpointed as the most important factor in the shift in the American diet to processed foods between 1940 and 1960, the success of this national advertising campaign could not have been attained without the pre-established culture of processed food caused by World War II. Indeed, the Second World War popularized processed food by making it easily accessible to consumers both during and after the war, as well as making the purchase of processed foods a symbol of patriotism.

The American Illusion

Post-World War II advertising can be deemed the primary cause of the shift from fresh to processed food because it associated processed food with an ideal, desirable lifestyle. By 1955, nearly 65 percent of American homes had a television.⁵ TV shows such as “Leave it to Beaver” and “Father Knows Best” portrayed the perfect suburban American family. These families shopped at grocery stores and the presentable mother character had stereotypical female duties, such as cooking nightly family meals, doing house chores, and being attentive to her children. These TV families came to symbolize the ideal family that every American strived to match.⁶

Processed food was marketed as a shortcut to becoming one of these ideal American homemakers. An example of this is the television ad

for Pillsbury's instant mashed potatoes and cakes. It was marketed as a "woman's secret" to provide easy food that tasted so much like homemade potatoes, even your husband wouldn't recognize the difference, all while allowing mom to "swish into dinner un-steamed, serene."⁷ Processed food, like these instant potatoes, was marketed with the promise of creating the stereotypical lifestyle found on TV and in other media. Similarly, a 1956 magazine ad for sliced bread was marketed with the slogan, "We do... you should too!" in which a typical American housewife and her children were pictured flashing big white smiles and enjoying their slices of bread with jam (see Appendix A).⁸ In this ad, it wasn't just the food being marketed to the American people—it was the storybook family that came with it. Processed foods were highly valued for their convenience and became increasingly popular when those aspects were marketed because they allowed women to appear as the same diligent homemaker they were before the Second World War, when, in reality, many women were trying to expand their horizons out of the home.

Many women were in need of faster, more convenient ways to remain the ideal housewife in the eyes of society because, even after their husbands returned at the end of the war, many women wanted to continue working or participate in other activities beyond housework. The war put many women into factory jobs that disappeared with the return home of the World War II veterans. Published in 1946 after World War II, an article entitled, *How Come No Jobs for Women?* describes the desire of women to work after the war for both personal and economic reasons.⁹ The problem was that there wasn't time to be both a worker and the perfect American housewife.¹⁰ Processed food was advertised to the American women as the loophole that allowed for both, which is why the campaigns worked so effectively, making processed foods a popular commodity in nearly every American home.

While direct advertising to American women affected the popularity of processed foods as a means to achieve the lifestyle they desired, indirect advertising also associated processed food with a message of civil superiority, a message that Americans were determined to convey during the Cold War. In the kitchen debate of 1959, Vice President

Richard Nixon toured the American National Exhibition in Moscow with Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev. The American Exhibition took place at the height of the Cold War and was used to inform Russians about American capitalism. In order to do this, the U.S. State Department asked General Mills, General Foods, Pepsi-Cola, and other processed food companies to participate. General Mills and General Foods alone shipped seven tons of food including cake and brownie mixes, packaged cereals, and other processed foods to the exhibition.¹¹ While flaunting the abundance of processed food in the kitchen section of the exhibition, Vice President Nixon told Khrushchev, “the American system is designed to take advantage of new inventions and new techniques,” implicitly associating the superiority of capitalism over communism with the advanced technologies being used in the American processed foods on display.¹² Thousands of Americans watched Nixon make this parallel from their screens at home, and soon, Nixon’s association came to be that of the whole of American society. In the eyes of Americans, “processed foods ... became a metaphor for the political, economic, and cultural supremacy of the United States.”¹³ Additionally, the Space Race was also happening in 1959, a period when Americans were attempting to technologically outdo communist Russia by being the first country to dominate outer space. Processed foods became extremely popular because they were presented to the American people as a badge of supremacy in a time where Americans were desperate to cling to any evidence that their society was more advanced than the USSR’s.

Patriotic Food

The Second World War was a cause in the shift from fresh food to processed food because the United States government produced and distributed many pieces of war propaganda insinuating that eating and producing processed food was patriotic. Many posters like the propaganda piece entitled *Can All You Can: It’s a Real War Job!* from the Office of War Information in 1943 encouraged people, particularly women, to can foods at home for use during the winter because of rationing and insinuated that participating in food processing was patriotic, because it helped with the war effort (see Appendix B).¹⁴

The significance of this type of propaganda is that it demonstrates how home canning became a patriotic obligation for Americans on the home front therefore making Americans accustomed to processed food and eventually making canned foods an important staple in the American diet.

In a *Magazine War Guide* produced and distributed by the Office of War Information (OWI) in 1945, a list was provided of publications that could be ordered from the OWI that taught techniques of food preservation.¹⁵ The publications include *Oven Drying*, *Home Canning of Meat*, *Preservation of Vegetables by Salting or Brining*, and more.¹⁶ This publication about home canning and food preservation shows how the U.S. government pressured Americans to participate in and accept food processing during World War II. The government's push to make food processing commonplace in every American household meant that after the war, when home canning was no longer a nationalistic duty, Americans readily purchased factory-made processed food because they had already been consuming and producing similar products in their own kitchens.

Another call to Americans' patriotic duty to the war effort came from nutrition. However, little was actually known about nutrition during the war or in the proximate years to follow. For example, the U.S. War Food Administration (WFA) distributed a piece of propaganda entitled *Eat the Basic 7... Every Day! Eat a Lunch That Packs a Punch!* in 1943 implying that certain foods were of equal nutritional value whether raw, dried, frozen, evaporated, or canned (see Appendix C).¹⁷ The poster states that Americans should "eat a lunch that packs a punch ... every day," comprised of the seven food groups in order to be the "strong" citizens that the country "needs."¹⁸ In the subtext of each food group, the poster lists processed varieties of the original food that can be eaten as an equally beneficial substitute. Because processed food was often more accessible to consumers during the Second World War, and was deemed nutritionally equivalent to fresh food, it was often substituted for fresh. Therefore, being encouraged by patriotism to eat a product from each food group every day usually meant eating a majority of processed products over fresh to fill one's daily quota.

The U.S. government asked the American people to buy processed food during the war in order to maintain low war costs and keep the economy in check. The Price Control Act of 1942 was passed in order to keep factory wages low and avoid a slow down of the industrial work necessary to the war effort.¹⁹ A pamphlet published by the Price Administration Office in 1942 states, “when prices go sky high, everyone suffers,” and that in order to fulfill one’s patriotic duty to keep prices low, one should buy items under price controls.²⁰ Yet the only foods placed under price controls were processed: evaporated and condensed milk, corn meal, dried beans and onions, fresh and canned fruit juice, while fresh fruits and vegetables were not.²¹ The United States government convinced the American people that buying processed food meant being patriotic, associating the model citizen with someone who avoided fresh and chose processed instead. With this association, Americans increased the amount of processed food they bought in supermarkets; further popularizing processed food and making it an integral part of America’s food culture.

War is a Midwife

The Second World War made processed food popular because it supported processed food companies during the war, encouraging the mass production of processed food. By 1943 there were nearly 11 million men enlisted in the army, 7 million more than the previous year, fighting in various regions of the world.²² Not only was the U.S. government responsible for feeding these men, but also due to FDR’s Lend-Lease policy, nearly ten percent of the United States’ total food production output was being shipped to the allied forces.²³ Out of this necessity to provide, the processed food industry was born. Unable to send fresh meat, fruit, and vegetables that would spoil while being transported, the U.S. government looked to canning, freezing, powdering and other processing methods that allowed food to have prolonged shelf life and be easily packaged for shipping purposes. Out of this sudden interest food processing for the war effort came many scientific industrial developments and still well-known today products such as T.V. dinners, sliced bread, enriched white flour, fruit juice, instant coffee and hot chocolate, M & M’s, and more.

Government-set rationing point rules swayed Americans towards processed food because it made processed items more easily attainable than other products. Processed foods were added to the list of rationed items in March of 1942 along with meat, cheese, canned milk, and other goods.²⁴ On average, during the war processed foods required fewer rationing points than fresh food like meat and cheese, making processed foods popular as meatless meal alternatives. For example, 50 million boxes of Kraft macaroni and cheese were purchased in 1943 because two boxes could be purchased with only one rationing stamp. Although fresh fruits and vegetables were not rationed, supplies were limited unless you had your own victory garden, and even then most homegrown items were processed in the home by canning and other preservation methods for prolonged use.

The Second World War played a key role in the popularization of processed foods in the post-war era because it allowed food-processing companies the means to mass distribute food to the civilian market. When the Second World War came to an end, so did the U.S. government's need for processed food. Food processing companies used to producing at high levels were suddenly left with half of their previous product demand. But instead of operating at fifty percent capacity, companies adjusted, shifting all of their focus to the civilian market, where many of their products were already popular, but had been in limited supply due to the needs of the war.²⁵ With product availability no longer a concern, processed foods flew onto grocery store shelves and then into American homes.

An article entitled *Food Men Discuss \$4,000,000,000 Year*, published in 1950, explains that food production companies were beginning to hire food brokers "to secure distribution for their products."²⁶ Companies' use of food brokers brought more processed foods than ever before to the consumer market. Because many of the processed foods were already in high consumer demand, their sudden abundance in the market, which was made possible by continuation of Second World War production levels, allowed Americans to consume more processed items at a low cost. This only furthered the popularity of processed food and its association with the American identity.

Whereas certain products had been subject to limited availability during the war, processed food companies were able to easily capitalize on the civilian market by redirecting their already high production output to the consumers. In a letter from Charles Bowles, a price administrator at the Office of Price Administration (OPA), to the editor of *The New York Times* in 1944, Bowles expresses his concern for the post war economy.²⁷ Bowles' biggest concern was the inflation that would occur when consumers demand products for which "supplies for a considerable period will be running far behind."²⁸ Because of the war, there were few factories producing consumer goods—many had been modified to produce airplanes and other war materials instead. However, there was one product that met the constraints of both high demand and high abundance: processed food. Government support of processed food production during the Second World War gave processed food companies the ability to capitalize on a pre-disposed consumer market in the post-war era. For years, consumers had endured limited supplies of processed products, and with the end of the war, processed food companies no longer had to meet government allocations and could put their energies into mass consumer distribution. Suddenly, processed food was abundantly available in every supermarket across America.

Food is Fashion

Advertising and the Second World War greatly impacted the popularization of processed food in American society. And yet the Second World War and advertising are only two of the many causes for the shift to processed food in the American diet. Other big factors like technological developments in food processing between 1940 and 1960, such as the microwave oven, are beyond the scope of this paper. I chose to focus on the War and advertising because in my research, most of my evidence pointed to these factors as the primary causes for the shift to processed food.

The shift in the American diet to processed foods, dating back to 1940, is now beginning to show its adverse affects. Because of this shift, obesity and other health concerns plague our nation. Even though we live in a world today where butter and fortified margarine are not their own food group, and processed food no longer symbolizes the affluence and success of America, our society is still struggling to break its old, unhealthy habits.

Understanding the history of why we eat the way we do is a key factor in understanding how we can change those unhealthy habits. For years, people have been arguing that society should stop eating processed food because it's unhealthy, but we have seen minimal changes in the American diet as a result. But by looking at history, we can understand that eating food is about a lifestyle, not about the quality of the product. In order to see real results in American eating patterns, we have to make fresh fashionable.

Luckily, this is beginning to take place in American society, with social media at the forefront. Social media is serving as an advertising medium for the healthy lifestyles of many people and is beginning to make being healthy the contemporary choice in mainstream society. This is the first step to fixing America's processed food epidemic. ●

Appendix A

We do... you should, too!



Enjoy JANE PARKER WHITE ENRICHED BREAD
It's so good for you

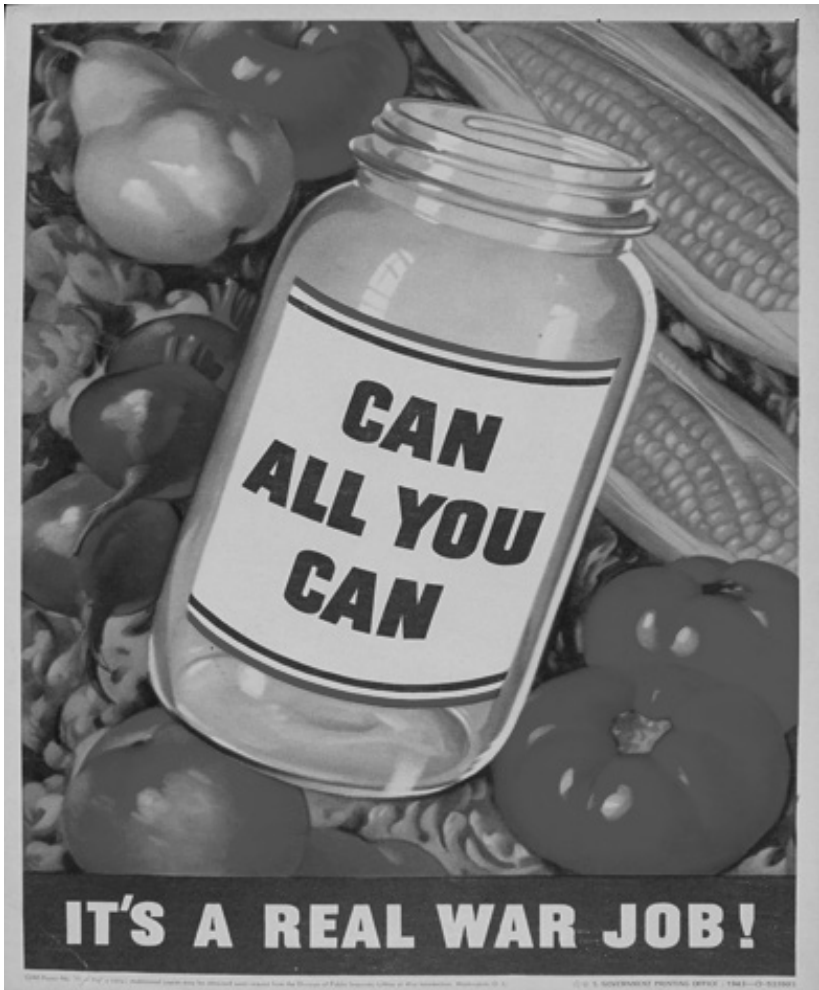
It's unanimous! Everyone in the family loves Jane Parker Bread. And your family will love the rich quality of the flavor... flavor that could come only from the finest ingredients, pridefully blended and baked to bread perfection. This is great bread... unsurpassed in taste and nourishment. Anyway you serve it, you'll enjoy it. Jane Parker White Enriched Bread is your best bread buy!



Sold at all A&P Food Stores
 (Except on Pacific Coast)

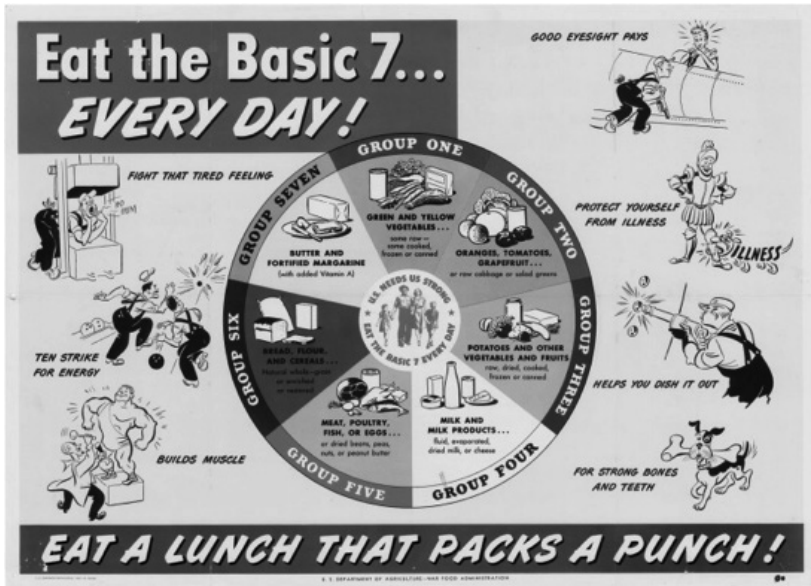
A&P Jane Parker Bread. Magazine advertisement. 1956.

Appendix B



Office of War Information. "Can All You Can: It's a Real War Job!" Illustration. 1943. World War II Poster Collection. Northwestern University Library.

Appendix C



War Food Administration. "Eat the Basic 7... Every Day! Eat a Lunch That Packs a Punch!" Illustration. 1943. UNT Digital Library. University of North Texas.

Notes

1. Paul Freedman, Joyce E. Chaplin and Ken Albala, *Food in Time and Place: The American Historical Association Companion to Food History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 171-172.
2. Robert J. Gordon, *The Rise and Fall of American Growth: The U.S. Standard of Living Since the Civil War* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016), 351.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid., 352.
5. “Number of TV Households in America,” chart, 1980, Television History.
6. Sherri Machlin, *American Food by the Decades* (Santa Barbara: ABC- CLIO, 2011), xv.
7. *Pillsbury Instant Mashed Potatoes*, television advertisement (1954; Durham NC: Duke University Libraries).
8. *A&P Jane Parker Bread*, magazine advertisement (1956).
9. Margaret Barnard Pickel, “How Come No Jobs for Women?,” *New York Times*, January 27, 1946.
10. Norma Yerger Queen to Office of War Information, 1944.
11. Monte Olmsted, “Nixon, Khrushchev, and Betty Crocker at the 1959 ‘Kitchen Debate,’” *Taste of General Mills* (blog), July 24, 2014.
12. Richard Nixon and Nikita Khrushchev, “The Kitchen Debate,” July 24, 1959, transcript, Teaching American History.
13. Freedman, *Food in Time and Place*, 172.

14. Office of War Information, "Can All You Can: It's a Real War Job!" illustration, 1943, World War II Poster Collection, Northwestern University Library.

15. *Magazine War Guide* (Washington D.C.: Office of War Information, 1945), 10.

16. *Ibid.*

17. War Food Administration, "Eat the Basic 7... Every Day! Eat a Lunch That Packs a Punch!" illustration, 1943, University of North Texas Digital Library.

18. *Ibid.*

19. Roosevelt to Congress, "Message to Congress on the Food Program."

20. *How You Can Help Keep Wartime Prices Down!* (Washington D.C.: Price Administration Office, 1942),1; *Ibid.*, 17.

21. *Ibid.*, 16.

22. Franklin D. Roosevelt to Congress, "Message to Congress on the Food Program," November 1, 1943, The American Presidency Project, University of California, Santa Barbra.

23. *Ibid.*

24. Robert Higgs, "The Two Price System," *The Freeman*, April 24, 2009.

25. "Grocery Retailers' Head Calls For Removal of Price Controls," *New York Times*, February 4, 1946.

26. "Food Men Discuss \$4,000,000,000 Year," *New York Times*, January 25, 1950.

27. Chester Bowles to the editor of the *New York Times*, June 18, 1944.

28. *Ibid.*

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