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The Rochester Institute of Technology

Department of Communication

College of Liberal Arts

Veteran Identity and Gender Representation: A Critical Visual Analysis

by

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VETERAN IDENTITY AND GENDER REPRESENTATION:

A CRITICAL VISUAL ANALYSIS

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Abstract

This study reveals struggles over gender and identity in the military and shows how representations embody cultural, political, and ideological tensions over the role of women in the military and society. A chronological series of Veterans Affairs (VA) posters communicate this over a thirty year period. Visual communication and the area of representation and identity have long been studied across multiple disciplines, but no studies exist that examine the VA images. A critical visual analysis with the application of semiotics and gender theory revealed that veteran identity is significantly different between representation of men and representation of women.

Keywords: women veterans, veterans, military images, gender identity, representation, visual analysis

Veteran Identity and Gender Representation: A Critical Visual Analysis

Since 1978, the United States Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has released a poster each year on Veterans Day to commemorate and honor the men and women who served our country. The VA creates these posters internally and releases them to the public for educational purposes and veteran recognition. In total, there are 36 posters. About half of the posters use veteran representation, while the other half uses various patriotic representations such as the American flag, the Statue of Liberty, bald eagles, and stars. The posters “are distributed to schools, state governments, Veterans Day Regional Sites, the military services, and veterans’ service organizations” (“Office of Public,” 2013). Thousands of people see these posters, and to the veteran community, they are a well-known visual instrument.

According to Schroeder (2013), images “serve as a stimulus, a sign, or a representation that drives cognition, interpretation, and preference. Images constitute much corporate communication about products, economic performance, and social responsibility, and also inform municipal efforts to create positive attitudes for citizens, tourists, and organizations.” The poster series is a set of visual data that can be used to interpret the way military culture shapes society and communication.

To carry out this interpretation, a visual critical analysis with the application of gender and semiotics theory asks two questions: (1) What makes up a veteran, and (2) What is the difference between representation of men and representation of women?

Gender

Gender in this analysis must be recognized as a social construct. Gender focuses not on biological differences, but on sociological structures that groups and individuals create (Connell, 2002). “The most popular television broadcast in the world is said to be the American Super

Bowl, in which a hundred million people watch a strikingly gendered event; large armored men crash into each other in pursuit of a leather ball, and thin women in short skirts dance and smile in the pauses” (Connell, 2002, p. 3). The Super Bowl is a good example of how society develops roles that women and men play. Large armored men crashing into each other and women cheering in short skirts are sociological conventions that have been constructed by individuals and groups. People are not biologically programmed to dress in these roles, and these roles often change.

“Gender arrangements are in fact always changing, as human practice creates new situations and as structures develop crisis tendencies” (Connell, 2002, p. 10). Gender is created by our social life (Krijnen, Alvares, & Van Bauwel, 2010). Furthermore, our social life is shaped by “a specific set of roles, created by cultural traditions, moral modes, the economy and politics.” (Krijnen, Alvares, & Van Bauwel, 2010, p. 168). Schroeder (2013) has found that these visual constructions “and other forms of representation frequently ‘stand in’ for experience as a source of information and serve as a foundation for future knowledge” (p. 571). Images often serve to replicate experiences.

One of the first scholars credited with gender studies was Erving Goffman in *Gender Advertisements*. Goffman found significant differences between the representation of men and representation of women when he reviewed hundreds of advertisements. He noticed “women, more than men, are pictured using their hands to trace the outlines of an object or to cradle it or to caress its surface” (Goffman, 1979, p. 29). He also noticed men’s faces are much larger in comparison to women’s faces. The analysis will explore differences such as these among men and women in the military and the Veterans Affairs division.

The VA images attempt to accurately reflect who a veteran is and what they do; the images reflect veteran lifestyle and culture. Gender theory is important in the VA's visual media, as it describes differences between male and female veterans. Gender study provides invaluable information on the construction of veteran identity and helps to uncover new knowledge that may otherwise be overlooked.

History of VA Posters

The VA has released one poster every year in recognition of Veterans Day since 1978. The posters are created within the VA and the Veterans Day National Committee selects the poster each year. The committee consists of various federal leaders and members of veterans' service organizations including The American Legion, American Veterans of World War II and Korea, and many more. The committee "has an interest in ensuring that younger generations understand the true meaning of Veterans Day, and the sacrifices veterans have made to secure and defend the freedoms of the United States of America" ("History," 2013). Selecting this poster is a large responsibility for the committee, which seeks to portray an accurate message to the public.

Last year the VA handed out the 2012 poster to the press and public in Washington, D.C. at the National Veterans Day Ceremony. The Arlington National Cemetery hosts this ceremony on November 11 which begins exactly at 1100 hours. These images are essentially an advertisement, alerting the public to recognize veterans and celebrate the sacrifices they have made.

Historically, images produced and distributed by the federal government have been found to make the public believe or take action on a particular issue. Bird and Rubenstein's (1998)

Design for Victory, World War II Posters on the American Home Front publication is a good example of this. Bird and Rubenstein looked at World War II posters encouraging U.S. citizens to join the military and support the economy. “Poster campaigns aimed not only to increase productivity in factories, but to enlarge people’s views of their wartime responsibilities” (Bird & Rubenstein, 1998, p. 1). Well-known are the “Rosie the Riveter” and “I want you for the U.S. Army” images. Scholars Lasswell (1937) and Severin, and Tankard (1997) also argue federal posters aim to sway public opinion and change society’s perspective on military enlistment.

This study does not investigate the motives or underlying messages from the VA posters. This study analyzes the veteran identity that is depicted among the posters in comparison to the veterans of today. The public looks at these posters and forms an idea of who the veteran is based on what they see. However, veterans are not just service members, they are members of our community—veterans receiving health care at the VA hospital, veterans holding leadership positions in community, and veterans participating in military-related organizations.

Women make up about 14 percent of the active-duty military (“By the Numbers,” 2013). Figure 1 shows the “changing role of the woman veteran” and profiles female service members on the Veteran’s Health Administration web site (Women Veterans Health Care, 2013). This provides important statistical information on age, projected number of women veterans, and key issues that women face.

All Women Veterans

- The current projected percentage of U.S. Veterans who are women is 10 percent.
- In 2009, the average age of women Veterans was 48 years, compared to 63 years for their male counterparts.
- In 2009 and 2010 PTSD, hypertension, and depression were the top three diagnostic categories for women Veterans treated by Veterans Health Administration.
- About 1 in 5 women seen in VHA respond "yes" when screened for Military Sexual Trauma (MST).
- Though rates of MST are higher among women, because of the disproportionate ratio of men to women in the military there are actually only slightly fewer men seen in VA that have experienced MST than there are women.

Women Veterans of Operation Enduring Freedom, Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation New Dawn (OEF/OIF/OND)

- Women make up nearly 11.6 percent of OEF/OIF/OND Veterans.
- 57.4 percent of women OEF/OIF/OND Veterans have received VA health care; of these, 89.8 percent have used VA health care more than once.
- Nearly 51.3 percent of female OEF/OIF/OND Veterans who used VA care during FY 2002-2011 were born in or after 1970 (aged 43 or younger) compared to nearly 48 percent of male OEF/OIF/OND Veterans.

(Women Veterans Health Care, 2013)

Figure 1. Changing role of the woman veteran.

Schroeder and Campbell (2011) have stated the following:

As the shape, location, composition, and behaviors of people are increasingly generated and portrayed as visual information, and as consumption increasingly involves visual consumption, it is becoming vital to question what “truths” these visions tell about the body in its visual culture.” (p. 12)

The aim of the study is to find what “truths” are established in the poster series and gain a better appreciation of who the veteran is. Scholars such as Chouliaraki (2013) have studied visual

media to gain knowledge on cultural phenomenon such as the changing role of the woman veteran. Chouliaraki looked at photos of war from different eras to better understand ethical photographic principles and to discover new knowledge on social systems and social constructions. What images are acceptable by society? Furthermore, what makes them acceptable? Other scholars such as Schrock, Douglas, and Schalbe (2009), Ryan (2012), and Schroeder and Borgerson (1998) have looked at images as they relate to gender, culture, and identity. A good starting point in understanding VA visual media and what they mean in a broader, social content is to look at related research and findings, which will be examined in the literature review.

Research Questions

No study has examined the poster series from a critical visual analysis standpoint incorporating the framework of gender and semiotics. To better understand this collection, perceptions, biases, history, and related research will be kept in mind to approach research questions with objectivity. These research questions are meant to explore this area with gender-specific focus.

RQ 1: Who is a veteran? What makes up a veteran?

RQ 2: What is the difference between representation of men and the representation of women over the last 30 years?

Project Rationale

Women in the armed forces currently face many real-life issues which make communication products that feature female veterans increasingly sensitive. The way that

women are featured among posters or images gives a certain reputation, idealization, and/or reality.

Sexual Harassment

One big issue that women face, for example, is sexual harassment. Sexual assaults are more likely to happen to women than men in the military—largely due to the male predominant environment as seen in Figure 1. Although the military has sexual harassment policies in place, it is found that “Sexual Harassment policies that do not consider power differentials between men and women may discourage women from reporting harassment” (Krijnen, Alvares, & Van Bauwel, 2010, p. 5). Furthermore, “despite their apparently gender-free rhetoric, policies and procedures that do not take gender into account may not be fair to women” (Krijnen, Alvares, & Van Bauwel, 2010, p. 4). There are daily news articles that suggest current military policy is not enough to help the ongoing sexual harassment and sexual assault problems. There is a communication issue here—image portrayal of women veterans may not be correct. Do the issues of sexual harassment in the military have an impact on the portrayal of women?

Women can be represented in many ways. They can be shown as weak and naïve or perhaps strong and daring. This is contingent on context. This issue calls for further exploration and investigation.

Women Veterans and their Image in Health Care

Women veterans are offered health care at the Veterans Affairs hospitals and the VA offers a number of gender-specific services. The VA Women’s Health Services program has just launched a 2013 health campaign focusing its efforts entirely on the identity of the woman (Women Veterans, 2013). According to the site, “Women Veterans Health Care is leading a VA-

wide culture change campaign to deliver the message: "It's everyone's job to care for women Veterans." The web source has a variety of outreach material including videos, posters, federal research, and brochures. The VA recognizes that due to the increasing force of women, they must provide health care services and make women aware of the benefits they qualify for as veterans. In one of the promotional videos on this site, a young woman veteran stated she thought the VA was a place only for men who served pre Gulf War. This is a great example of how images can have a big effect on how someone understands an individual, organization, or lifestyle to be. The woman veteran said she didn't realize that she was eligible for health care benefits because of the image of the VA she had in mind. She associated the VA hospital with care only for an older generation of male service members.

Figures 2 through 5 are posters created by the VA. One can see that the VA is trying to change a pre-existing portrayal of a veteran. The aim of this specific poster campaign is to re-educate society that veterans aren't all men.



Figure 2. Older male and female veterans.



Figure 3. Younger male and female veterans.

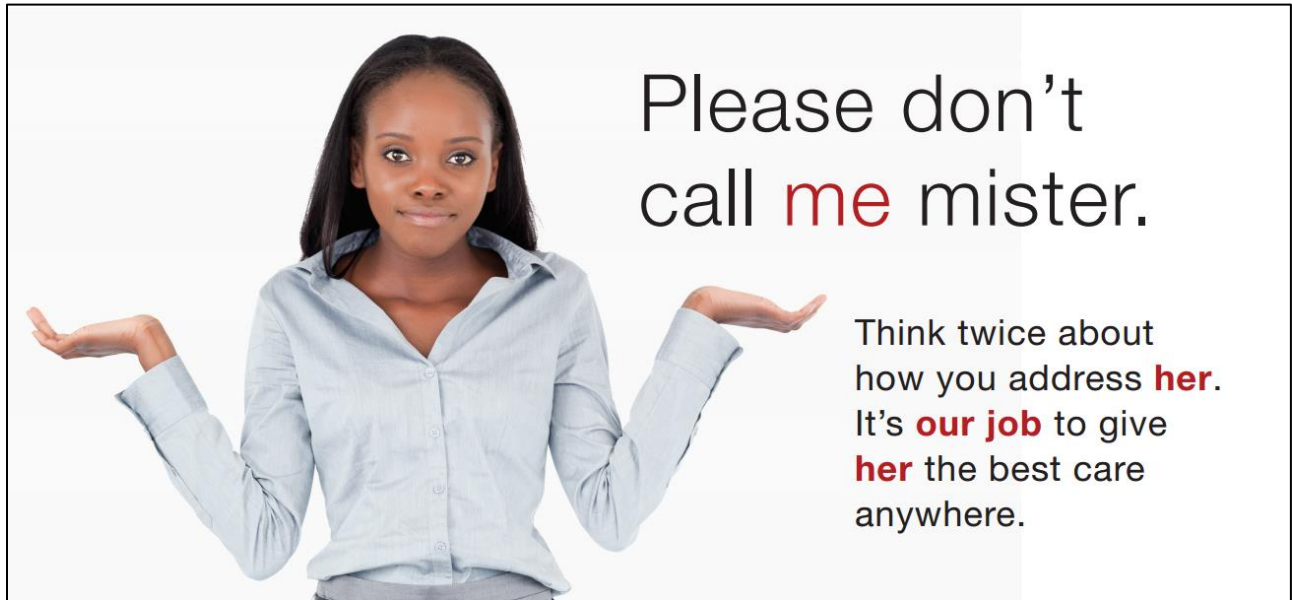


Figure 4. Young female veteran.



Figure 5. Young female veteran waiting to be seen by a provider.

Figures 2 and 3 posters ask, “Which one is the veteran?” In Figure 2, two elderly people are pictured smiling at the viewer. Both are veterans. A similar poster (Figure 3) uses a young male and female and asks the same question. Both are veterans. Figure 4 has a young woman in an “I don’t know” pose. The text reads, “Please don’t call me mister. Think twice about how you address her. It’s our job to give her the best care anywhere.” She is a veteran. Finally, Figure 5 shows a woman veteran being addressed incorrectly as “Mr.”

When someone hears the word “veteran,” an image of a white male in his 60s who served pre Operation Enduring Freedom, Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation New Dawn (OEF/OIF/OND) may come to mind for many people. According to VA statistics, the average age of the male veteran was 64 in 2004. Eight percent of those male veterans were white (“National Center,” 2013).

Women walk among us on a daily basis and we call them veterans. They represent us in Congress, hold important defense roles, and they are part of our families. The number of women serving in the armed forces is projected to reach an all-time high over the next few decades. The term “veteran” is changing and the VA has a campaign underway “to enhance the language, practice, and culture of VA to be more inclusive of women” (Women Veterans, 2013). The VA is supporting the growing number of women veterans by enhancing facilities and improving services tailored to women eligible for VA health care.

The representation of the women veteran gets complicated. Women are calling for their own identity in campaigns such as the one released by the Veterans Health Administration. On the other hand, the Armed Forces often represents women equal to men and forms their identity to reflect a masculine one. Most women in the VA posters series are reflective of a masculine

role. Do women want to be depicted like their male counterparts? Or do they want their own identity as women? Currently, the Armed Forces is a male-dominated force, but one day it may not be. The number of women serving in the military is only expected to go up in the future. Will the representation of the veteran change in the years to come?

Literature Review

Prior to the critical visual analysis, several studies were examined relating to sociological conventions and the role of gender in visual communication. The literature review includes aesthetics and military images, men and masculinity, visual persuasion and recruitment, gender identity, and visual analysis of gender. Chouliaraki's (2013) study was chosen because the scholar aims to understand images and how they are influenced from a social framework. Schrock and Schwalbe's (2009) study on men and masculinity was chosen because it expands on the identity of men beyond physical qualities. Ryan's (2012) visual persuasion in military recruitment posters provides perspective on effectiveness of posters. Zayer, Sredl, Parmentier, and Coleman (2012) were chosen for their research on the recent investigation of representation of women and men in popular media. Finally, Schroeder and Borgerson's (1998) research explains gender identity found in fashion advertisements based on social constructions. All studies are relevant to the area of visual communication, gender construction, and identity.

Aesthetics and Military Images

Chouliaraki (2013) examined the shift in war imagery towards an increasingly explicit visualization of war and the trend towards emphasizing the emotional impact of war on people. This study highlights the influence of political context on the creation of imagery in military communications. Charles Taylor's (2002:106) definition of "images, stories, and legends through

which people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others...and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations” was applied in the study and defined “war imaginary.” Iconic photojournalism from World War I, World War II, and the Global War on Terrorism, ranging from 1914 to 2012, was used as the basis for the analysis. Bodies on the battlefield and the landscape in which they were displayed were specifically studied.

Chouliaraki (2013) questioned the “moral agency” of these photographs and asked, “how war images operate as a resource of collective moralization—how, that is, they propose specific conceptions of humanity as legitimate and desirable for all” (p. 320). The scholar found that the images of World War I consisted primarily of soldiers posing with their equipment and gear. One recurring theme found among the World War I collection included soldiers depicted as heroic and brave. Images of dead bodies were, for the most part, of the enemy. The World War II posters carried many similarities of the World War I posters as far as capturing technology; however, many times bodies were completely removed and only the technology was displayed such as “aircraft carriers and armored vehicles” (p. 322). The World War II images also showed more action shots. For example, many of the photographs were of soldiers landing on Omaha Beach on D-Day running out of the water with full equipment.

When looking at the most current images the author stated, “The War on Terror is marked by a thoroughgoing technologisation of combat—a tight articulation of war with technology that goes beyond reporting from the battlefield and refers to the very constitution of war through a media logic” (p. 328). It was found that these photos captured and intertwined bodies with technology—almost as if the body were a weapon, an engineered advancement and

advantage in the war. War on Terror images not only portrayed technological advancements as a great benefit for health and survival, but also captured cultural and political communication occurrences. Overall, Chouliaraki based her study off of Susan Linfield's book, *The Cruel Radiance: Photography and Political Violence* (2010) to visually investigate the changing war images. The scholar argues, "Conflicts of the West continue to be informed by a moral imagination of humanity—one that wages war in the name of humanitarian benevolence" (p. 336).

The study looked at visualizations of deployed service members from a specific period (1914 to 2012) using aesthetics to better understand a cultural phenomenon such as national sovereignty or war ethics. Using concepts such as placement of the body and landscape helped to construct paradigms in military culture. This research provides insight on how a set of military images, such as VA posters, may be influenced by historical political framework.

Men and Masculinity

Another study focused its attention on the social construction of gender. In their research, Schrock and Schwalbe (2009) found that analyzing "manhood acts" generates new empirical knowledge on gender inequality. The scholars argue that traditional research on gender inequality has created a wealth of knowledge about diversity of men's behavior, however, little research concentrates on "the social construction of gender and the reproduction of gender inequality" (p. 289). In their words:

documenting and analyzing manhood acts—the identity work that males do to claim membership in the dominant gender group, to affirm the social reality of the group, to elicit deference from others, and to maintain privileges vis-à-vis women—may prove to be more useful...than merely cataloging more masculinities. (p. 289)

In other words, it is not enough to analyze men or women solely by characterizations of anatomy or sex, but also by acts of manhood which allow them to be members of “men.” Different contexts such as the home, workplace, or an academic environment are worth looking at in the area of gender representation.

The researchers based their study on work of sociological and communication experts including Goffman (1977), and West and Zimmerman (1987). The study also incorporated Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock’s (1996) findings of society categorizing and identifying themselves as “boys” and “girls” from a young age. Schrock and Schwalbe (2009) introduce their research on masculinity by stating that, “feminism has taught sociology that no account of life is complete if it ignores gender inequality” (p. 178).

This research moves beyond looking at men by their biological nature. One argument stated that,

female-to-male transsexuals, or transmen, flatten their chests, take hormones to grow facial hair and muscle tissue, deepen their voices, and cultivate gestures (e.g., giving firm handshakes) to publicly claim their chosen identities as men. (Schrock & Schwalbe, 2009, p. 284)

Other scholars who support this notion include Connell (2002), who stated that gender ambiguities are not rare.

There are masculine women and feminine men. There are women in love with other women, and men in love with other men. There are people who enjoy both leather jackets and ruffled skirts. There are women who are heads of households, and men who bring up children. There are women who are soldiers and men who are nurses” (Connell, 2002, p. 5). Schrock and

Schwalbe (2009) suggest that further research into the area of gender representation would benefit from their findings. They recommend further research specific to behavioral analysis of masculine acts.

Overall this study is meaningful to understanding the social constructions of masculinity and femininity. Exploring and applying concepts of “manhood acts” to images found on the VA posters may serve to better understand gender roles and deference in military culture.

Visual Persuasion in Military Recruitment Posters

Ryan (2012) was concerned with a set of images targeting women and encouraging them to enlist in the uniformed service. The scholar used propaganda theory to examine female recruitment poster campaigns of the U.S. Navy and U.S. Coast Guard. Ryan argued that few studies have applied propaganda theory specifically to military recruitment posters directed toward women.

The scholar found common themes among the posters including “pretty girl” and “pin-up.” Ryan found the following:

The posters not only convinced women of their patriotic duty, but also subtly contradicted the smear rumors about the nature of military women, “(glorifying and glamorizing) the roles of working women and (suggesting) that a woman’s femininity need not be sacrificed...women were portrayed as attractive, confident, and resolved to do their part to win the war.” (p. 259)

Ryan discovers themes such as ideal femininity, family pride, and patriotism found on the posters. To further pronounce themes of femininity, for example, Ryan describes women’s uniforms being “form fitting,” skirts “[clinging] slightly to her legs and blowing in the wind as

she walks.” The female body might be described as women having “exaggerated hips” with an “epitome” of fashion. Through her visually descriptive analysis Ryan found:

Women would choose to enlist because it was a “great opportunity.” Women could identify with the subtle differences manifest in the posters and become an elegant and sophisticated WAVE (Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service) or a more carefree and down-to-earth SPAR (Coast Guard Women’s Reserve). (p. 260)

The National Archives website highlights wartime efforts and has a “Powers of Persuasion” web page dedicated to teaching persuasion techniques used through posters during this time. There are approximately eleven posters cited with a description as to how they were influential and impacted society. One poster examining “Rosie the Riveter” is described as, “Rosie the Riveter—the strong, competent woman dressed in overalls and bandanna—was introduced as a symbol of patriotic womanhood. The accoutrements of war work—uniforms, tools, and lunch pails—were incorporated into the revised image of the feminine ideal.” Scholars such as Lasswell (1937) would argue that persuasion and propaganda go hand-in-hand during this period. Lasswell (1937) defines propaganda as, “in the broadest sense is the technique of influencing human action by the manipulation of representation. These representations may take spoken, written, pictorial, or musical form” (p. 109).

This study provides descriptive themes found among images of women in the armed forces. Do VA posters also suggest related themes? The visual collections studied by Ryan were released during the World War II era. Although the VA posters were not released as part of a recruitment effort, similar themes of the ideal woman are found among the set.

Gender Identity

Zayer, Sredl, Parmentier, and Coleman (2012) have conducted research in the area of consumption and gender identity in popular media. In their work, *Consumption and gender identity in popular media: discourses of domesticity, authenticity, and sexuality*, they explored contemporary representations of masculinity and femininity in two television series featured on HBO. The scholars argue that domesticity, authenticity, and sexuality are three predominant themes found among stereotypical representation among women in the popular television shows *Sex and the City* and *Entourage*.

Zayer et al.'s (2012) research looks at "changes in gender" over time and how gender is portrayed in the 21st century. This study dives deeply into "consumer and identity" and provides a functional guide for consumers. They asked, "What themes of gender emerge in these shows, and how do they relate to consumption?" (p. 352). It is well known from academic professionals from all backgrounds who study gender that the representation of the "ideal" woman has changed over time. Today, most, if not all women have "non-traditional" roles.

The *Sex and the City* and *Entourage* shows are interesting to examine because they break traditional roles of gender representation. In *Sex and the City*, women who are all friends live alone. They live in high rise buildings in upscale New York apartments and afford luxury shoes and trendy dresses with their own income. They represent feminine traits of what the modern woman is, the "single girl"—something that was once represented by males. This can be seen as one representation of the ideal woman in today's society. In *Entourage*, men are represented as "playboys." Men were found to, "simultaneously enjoy their new found pleasure in living a high-class Hollywood life and all that comes with it—a beautiful home, fast cars, and plenty of toys

and women to fulfill their Playboy indulgences” (Zayer et al., 2012, p. 351). Interestingly, the scholars found that for both shows, “consumption, at times, provides an opportunity for the characters of the shows to perform the new gender fluidity of post-feminism” (p. 353). This reaffirms our previous notion that gender is a social construct which has the ability to change. This is reflected in visual media and communications.

Visual Analysis of Gender

Other scholars argue that “advertising images are a central part of the experienced world” (Schroeder & Borgerson, 1998, p. 161). Their study uses a content analysis and applies art criticism, social psychology, and feminist theory to examine fashion advertisements from magazines and catalogs. Drawing from an art perspective, the scholars describe images beyond what they signify at first glance. “Every representation of a woman or a man has the potential to construct the way society represents and performs gender” (p. 193). Tools used for the descriptions included using a formal analysis, photographic analysis, interpretive analysis, and social psychological factors. The study looked specifically at physical bodies of both genders.

Traditionally, when one hears the term “veteran” an image of a man wearing fatigues may come to mind. The VA is asking the public to rethink what it means to be a veteran. Perhaps this veteran served in World War I, World War II, or Operation Enduring Freedom. A recent newspaper article quoting a VA source suggested that many women veterans themselves do not know or consider themselves a “veteran”—perhaps this is due cultural upbringings or little understanding in changing roles in the military.

Schroeder and Borgerson (1998) would argue that images of VA posters need to be examined beyond simply asking, “What do I see in this image?” Instead of asking “What do I see

in this image,” one may ask, “What does this image represent,” “What are the bodies in this image representing” and, furthermore, “What is this saying about a culture or society?” Asking the question, “What does this image represent,” and applying it to each image of a woman represented on the poster series may help in understanding the culture behind the service and how it has changed since 1978.

Methods

Critical visual analysis is a research method that involves descriptive interpretation of images. For this study, all posters with a clear representation of a woman will be analyzed. Additionally, the first poster that came out and the most recent poster will also be looked at. At least two posters from each decade will be interpreted. According to Schroeder (2013),

In recent years, visual culture analysis has been concerned with how abstract, ephemeral, or “invisualizable” aspects of the universe are brought into visibility. One of the most significant things about contemporary visual culture is the tendency to visualize things that are not in themselves visible.

This study attempts to make the invisible visible. We must look at images further than asking what one sees on the surface.

“Critical visual analysis offers researchers an interdisciplinary method for understanding and contextualizing images—crucial concerns, given the cultural centrality of vision” (Schroeder, 2006, p. 303). The critical visual analysis will attempt to find truths and sociological conventions that shape representations and communication of the veteran identity.

Semiotics Analysis

The study will also incorporate semiotics concepts by Bates (2009). In his research, Bates explains the importance of images and various perspectives of the field. Bates introduces his readers to key concepts and introductory resources and information helpful in understanding why studying visual communication is important. Furthermore, the study will conceptualize semiotic research by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006). “A social semiotic visual analysis provides a detailed and explicit method for analyzing the meanings established by the syntactic relations between the people, places and things depicted in the images” (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 3). This resource will provide key points on various depictions.

Visual semiotics essentially answers questions of representation (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 92). In semiotics theory, the key idea is the layering of meaning. The first layer is the layer of denotation, of “what, or who, is being depicted here?” The second layer is the layer of connotation, of “what ideas and values are expressed through what is represented, and through the way in which it is represented?” (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001, p. 94)

Like scholar Chouliaraki (2013) has done, this study will look at bodies and the setting in which they lie.

“Gender is a large theme. To understand it well, one must be prepared to travel—both intellectually and culturally” (Connell, 2011, p. 1). Facts of gender difference and similarities narrow the broad topic of gender down and help the reader understand masculinity, femininity, and how they are constructed and represented in this series. For further analysis, the Checklist

for Analyzing Print Advertisements (Berger, 2011, p. 95) will be applied and kept in mind. This analysis is seen in Figure 6.

Context and Content
What is going on in the [poster], and what significance does this action have? Assuming that the [poster] represents part of a narrative, what can we conclude about what has led to this particular moment in time? That is, what is the plot?
Signs and Symbols
What symbols and signs appear in the [poster]? What role do they play in stimulating positive feelings about or desire for the product or service being [depicted]?
Language and Typefaces
How is language used in the [poster]? What linguistic devices provide information or generate emotional response? Does the [poster] use metaphor? Metonymy? Repetition? Alliteration? Comparison and contrast? Sexual Innuendo? Definitions? What typefaces are used, and what messages do these typefaces convey?
Themes
What are the basic themes in the [poster]? What is the [poster] about? What product or service is being [depicted]? What role does it play in American society and culture? What political, economic, social, and cultural attitudes are reflected in the [poster] – such as alienation, sexism, conformity, anxiety, stereotyped thinking, generational conflict, obsession, elitism, loneliness, and so on? What information do you need to make sense of the [poster]? Does it allude to certain beliefs? Is it a reflection of a certain lifestyle? Does it assume information and knowledge on the part of the person looking at the [poster]?

Figure 6. Checklist for Analyzing Print Advertisements (Berger, 2011, p. 95).

Posters are designed to draw someone's attention to a particular event, organization, or campaign (Posters, 2002). Designing a poster requires careful thought and placement of words and images for readers to take action on what they see (O'Keefe, 2012). Some posters, such as one for an event, will typically have a lot of textual data exhibited and include who, what, when, and where information on it. This allows for the user to call a phone number, visit a web page, or show up to the address displayed. Other posters don't have as much textual information on them, but are made primarily of an image instead—perhaps these posters are designed to represent or show support for an individual or organization. A recent example includes the political poster designed by artist Shepard Fairey during the 2008 presidential campaign. The poster had only one word: hope. The background consisted of multi-faceted shapes and colors composing Barack Obama.

The poster went viral and people were sharing it everywhere—it was posted in subways, sent out via electronic mail, shared on social media sites, and debated on television news. What was displayed on this poster was enough for society to know what it was asking them to do: vote for Barack Obama. Posters send out messages. They are communication mediums. Posters influence perception and understanding of identity. With this understanding and knowledge, VA posters tell us who a veteran is.

Critical Visual Analysis

As stated previously, this study analyzes the veteran identity that is depicted among the posters in comparison to the veterans of today. A representative selection of the VA posters is reproduced in Figures 7-13. A critical visual analysis follows its respective poster.

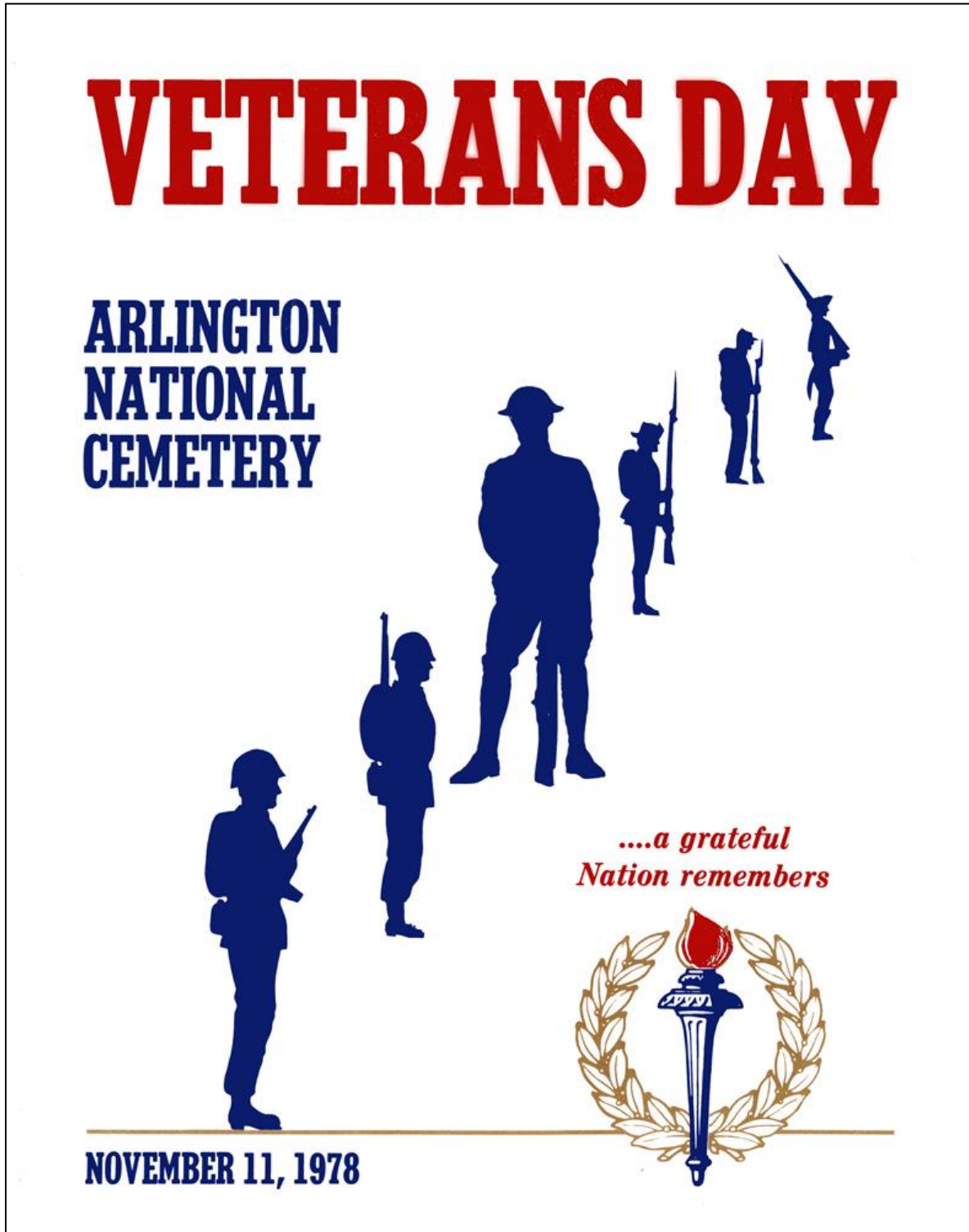


Figure 7. The 1978 VA Poster for Veterans Day

Analysis. The oldest poster presented on the Veterans Affairs web site is from 1978. Six silhouette-soldiers form diagonally across the page—all of them men. They are highlighted in blue along with Arlington National Cemetery. “Arlington National Cemetery was established by Brig. Gen. Montgomery C. Meigs, who commanded the garrison at Arlington House, appropriated the grounds June 15, 1864, for use as a military cemetery,” according to the Arlington National Cemetery official web page.

At the top of the poster is “Veterans Day” in a deep red. Overall, the poster is composed of red, white, and blue colors giving a patriotic appreciation. “Deriving their appearance from the fine and commercial arts, posters conveyed more than simple slogans. Posters expressed the needs and goals of the people who created them” (Bird, 1998, p. 1).

The use of color is effective and attractive to the reader—it is clean and clear to understand; the background is pure white and simple. There are no women, but the men represented have a “tough” look to them. The veterans shown here look like foot soldiers. They are wearing backpacks and rifles, and look like they are ready to go to war. They represent readiness and discipline.

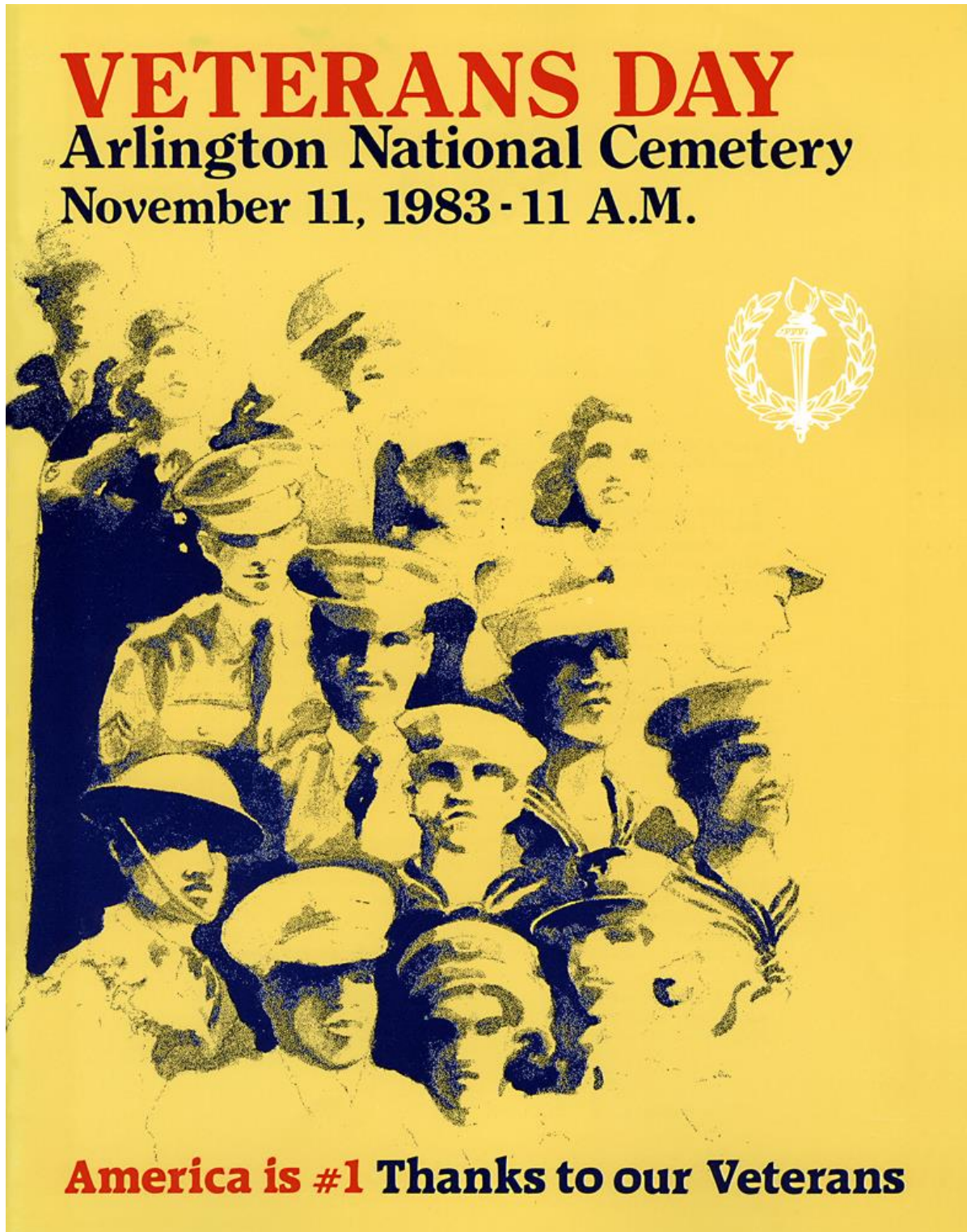


Figure 8. The 1983 VA Poster for Veterans Day

Analysis. This is the first poster with a woman on it, though it's not clearly noticeable. The eyes are struck by the gold background that pushes cartoon-like veterans forming a cluster on the center of the page. Most of them are men—at least twelve. The cluster represents all branches of the military. Three of them represent the Navy dressed in a Sailor's Necktie. There's also a grunt soldier on the left wearing a Kevlar strapped tightly around his chin. The other men look like officers, wearing dress uniforms with sleek ties and military hats.

The three women, one at the bottom and two at the top, have dark hair. They may or may not be in the military, but if they are, they're not wearing battle-ready uniforms. Perhaps they are nurses or secretaries. Overall, the men have a serious look to their faces, whereas the women seem to be looking up and away—they're in a daze. The words "veterans day" appears in bright red at the top. "Arlington National Cemetery November 11, 1983 – 11 A.M." and "America is #1 Thanks to our Veterans" are also displayed. This poster represents a fashionable force. The men and women are clean cut. Their clothes are ironed and pressed for the day. Women are not part of combat positions and men are not represented in office positions. The veterans appear to be white, middle class Americans. The veterans reflect a strict, disciplined force. Masculine traits include broad shoulders, strong physique, and short hair. Men dominate the page. Women are drawn in from the sides and their presence is not obvious—they have long hair, dress blouses, and a smaller physique.

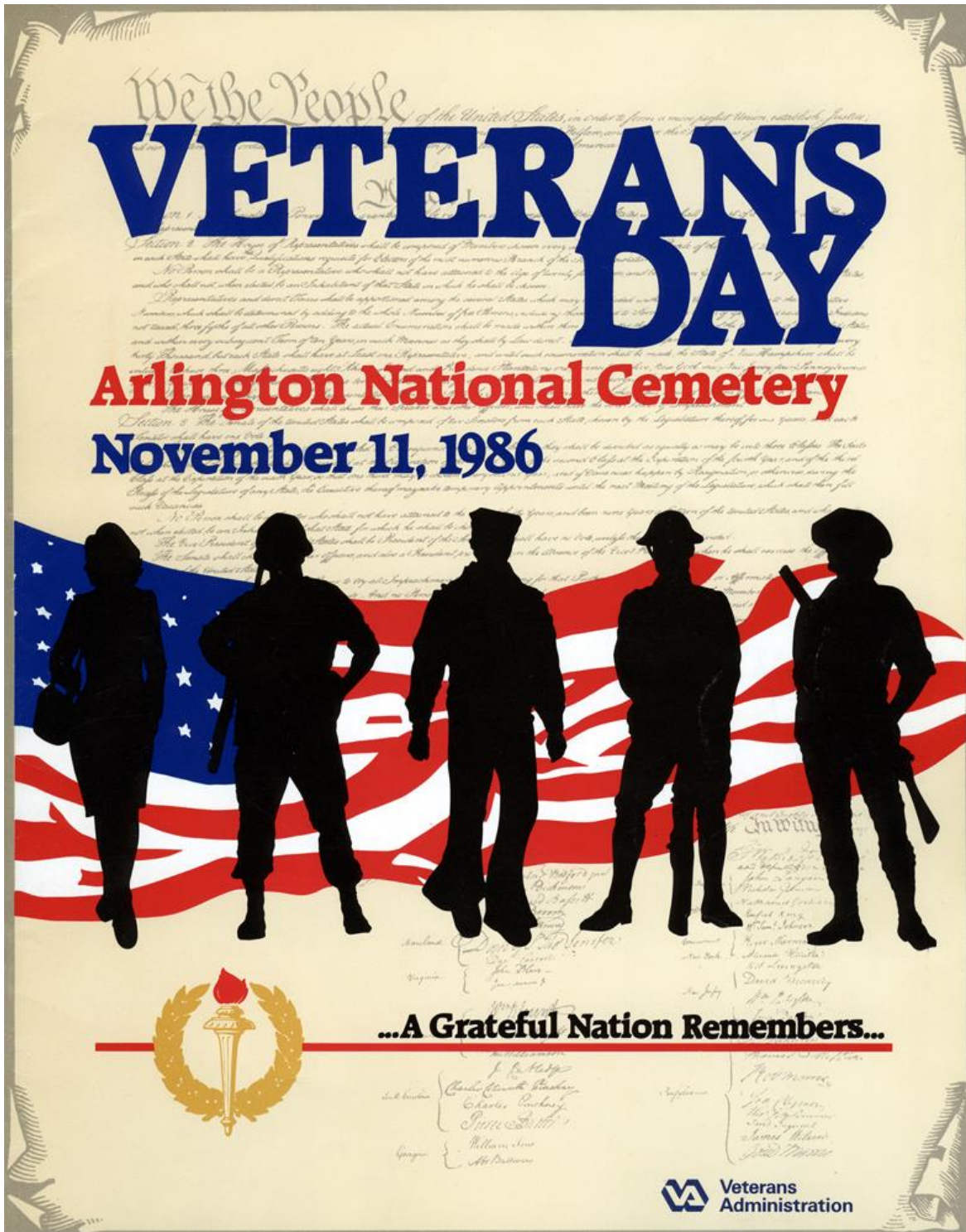


Figure 9. The 1986 VA Poster for Veterans Day

Analysis. In the 1986 poster, the VA uses the U.S. Constitution as the foreground with bright red and blue wording to celebrate Veterans Day. The title “Veterans Day” takes up about one third of the page. Silhouettes of four men and one woman stand in the center. All of the men appear to be wearing military uniforms—holding rifles in hand, in combat boots, and fatigues.

The woman, like the women in the 1983 poster, may or may not be in the military. The woman wears a form-fitting dress revealing an hourglass figure. Her legs cross over one another in a very feminine pose and she holds a purse in her right hand. Her head is slightly tilted and she wears a fashionable hat.

The men look like they are ready for war on the frontlines. They stand with their weapons in hand and appear almost “hero-like.” Overall, the service members reflect combat-readiness. The American flag hugs the silhouettes from the background indicating “America has their back.” “Arlington National Cemetery” and “A Grateful Nation Remembers” are displayed. The text has changed from the 1983 poster of “America is # 1 Thanks to our Veterans.” Rather than focusing on America as a great country from winning the war, the text reveals a feeling of gratefulness and appreciation from the war.



Figure 10. The 1992 VA Poster for Veterans Day

Analysis. Of all the posters, the 1992 version draws attention because of the two women in the photo, women have become a central focus. Even though the women are central to the page, the male service members continue to dominate and take up most of the space. This poster is unique from the others because it clearly depicts a racially diverse group. It also shows a variety of professions from the foot soldier and medic to the pilot. The poster is colorful and truly conveys the “honoring all who served” text at the top. Veterans here are well-cultured and come from all different backgrounds. Men’s hair continues to be extremely short. Women’s hair is noticeable, sticking out of the hats they wear. This reflects a diverse force and an organization with many positions and backgrounds. The veterans look like they “will get the job done.” They don’t look as clean cut as the veterans represented in the 1980s posters.

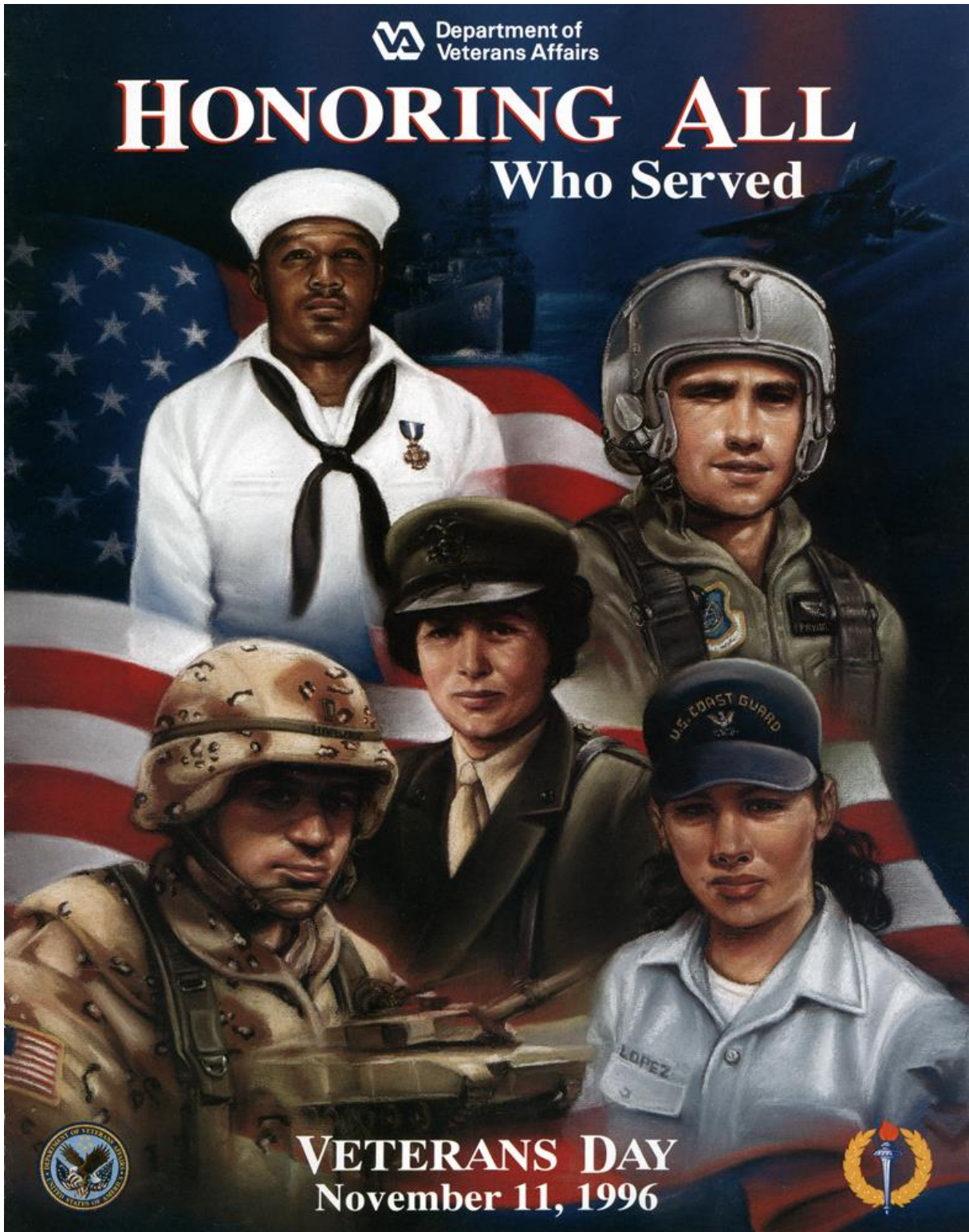


Figure 11. The 1996 VA Poster for Veterans Day

Analysis. The 1996 poster is similar to the 1992 poster. The poster shows a variety of professions and backgrounds. Darker reds, blues, and greens are used giving the poster more of a dramatic look. All of the service members look serious. We can see a change in women's bodies and faces. They no longer have a gaze or are featured on the outskirts. Both women are looking directly into the camera and there's a tone of sternness or seriousness. The images do not reveal the lower half of the body.

Men have never been smaller than women in the posters so far. Men are never short or scrawny. Men's uniforms have changed slightly with new camouflage patterns. The American Flag is once again used as a backdrop and gives an impression of independence. The 1990's posters seem to incorporate the "working woman," revealing various military uniforms. Women have gone from wearing skirts to wearing the same uniforms as men.

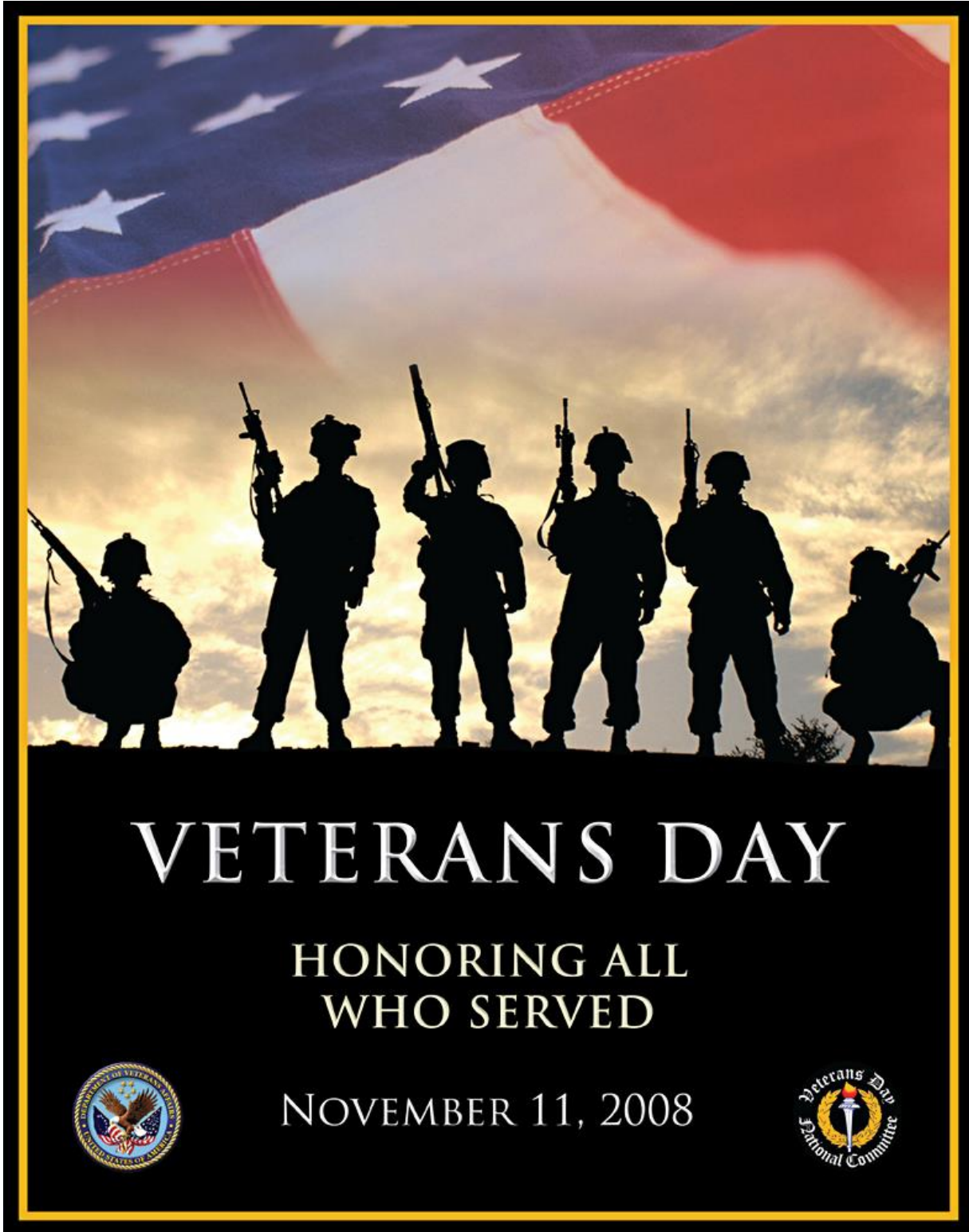


Figure 12. The 2008 VA Poster for Veterans Day

Analysis. This poster features an American flag as part of the sky. It's almost a religious implication reflecting America is watching over soldiers or God is watching over. The stripes fall beam-like onto six service members. This poster brings several questions to mind. Are the veterans depicted here intended to be men and women? This information from the VA is yet to be discovered and yet to be confirmed. From the other posters, one can see that images of women have changed from a petite woman wearing a skirt to a strong woman wearing the same uniform as men. Are women included in this picture? Probably. It's unlikely the VA would completely leave women out of the picture. Or perhaps they have and all of these service members are men. Either way—the service members here look intimidating. They look like a very strong force, holding rifles into the air. The service members may be in some kind of rugged terrain, but it's difficult to pinpoint where. It is clear that the majority of the posters don't associate the service members in a "real" place. The background is always mysterious. Sometimes service members are shown with national monuments in Washington, D.C. or with the Statue of Liberty. For the most part the background is one solid color, using the American flag or images of bald eagles.



Figure 13. The 2012 VA Poster for Veterans Day

Analysis. Here is the 2012 poster, in the wing of an eagle. It has been constructed with silhouette-style soldiers walking through a flat, isolated terrain. “Veterans Day” and “Honoring All Who Served” are centered and surrounded by a deep red and cream color. According to van Leeuwen (2001), a title “indicates who or what is represented” (p. 103). The scholar deems this is a fair representation of a veteran, supported by textual information. The question comes to mind, are the service members depicted here both men and women? It was just last year that the military lifted the ban on women in combat positions in the military (“Defense Department,” 2013). Perhaps women, if pictured here, reflect an identity equal to men. There is no confirmation if the poster includes both men and women; however, veteran identity appears to be inclusive of both genders. A few words that describe the service members include young, solid, and unstoppable. This poster represents all of the branches of the military; military branding covers the bottom portion.

Findings

Research Question 1: Who is a Veteran? What makes up a Veteran?

None of the veterans represented on the VA posters reflect the statistical identity of the veteran, which is an association of a white male who served pre OIF/OEF/OND. The most frequent representation of the veteran is a young, healthy soldier with masculine characteristics. These characteristics include broad shoulders and strong arms. He is tall, well-proportioned, and hero-like. The veteran is attractive and wears a uniform that conforms nicely to the body.

If one were to look at all 36 posters released, he/she would notice only five posters have a clear representation of a woman. This doesn’t mean that women aren’t inclusive of the posters

—women veterans have been represented throughout each decade. It is clear, though those women are never the essential focus. No single poster is made entirely of women.

Currently-serving members of the military are depicted and the images used by the VA reflect youth and strength. No representations of older male and female veterans are represented.

Research Question 2: What is the Difference between Representation of Men and the Representation of Women over the Last 30 Years?

It's unclear whether the women depicted in the 1980s are in the military or not. They look like pin-ups. The men look strong and battle ready. As the viewer moves into the 1990s the posters show women working in roles such as pilots and commanding officers. The 1996 poster has a central focus of a woman in charge. Representation of men has shifted slightly from a “clean” combat appearance to a more rugged one. The 1992 poster features a male foot soldier wearing a Kevlar. As the images move along to the 21st century most of the photos are gender neutral. Women lose their identity over time—or perhaps are portrayed equal to men. The feminine characteristics that once defined a woman are no longer applicable. No more hourglass shapes, no more skirts, no more fashionable hats, no more long hair. Both genders wear loose clothing. They both carry weapons and stand in the same upright stance.

Scholars such as Connell (2002) have asked, “Why is there a difference at all between women’s and men’s bodies?” Connell argues, “common-sense compromise would suggest that gender differences arise from both biology and social norms” (p. 35). Perhaps the posters are reflective of gender synchronization.

Throughout the years, the posters continue to use a silhouette look. The lines that once depicted small waists, curvy busts and hips, and thick, long hair are no longer composed to

identify women as women. Instead, women's waists, hips, and busts are composed like men's—straight, tall, muscular. Both genders have broad shoulders, an upright stance, and combat headgear.

Men have not undergone dramatic changes in their appearance like the women have. In Figures 14 and 15 below, one can see the similarities of the men despite the 30 year time difference. Why have representations of men remained the same throughout the years? And why have women's appearances changed so much?

Which one is the woman in Figure 14? The answer is easy—the one on the left. What about Figure 15? It's unclear. Whether or not Figure 15 depicts both men and women is a question left unanswered. There has been an obvious cultural shift for women veterans over the last three decades. Representation of the female body changes depending on the historical, political, or sociological framework. It can be presumed that women are included in the poster from 2008, given the changed role of women serving in positions that were previously unobtainable. Women can essentially be seen in two ways today. First, women are seen as equals to their male counterparts, carrying the same weight and shown with similar body structures. These women may have a rugged, neutral look. Second, women can be seen as having lost their identity, no longer carrying once apparent feminine characteristics such as long hair and a small physique.

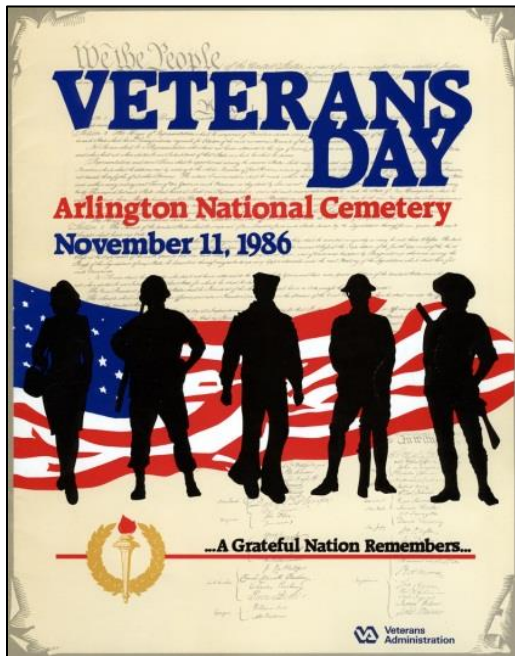


Figure 14. 1986 VA Poster

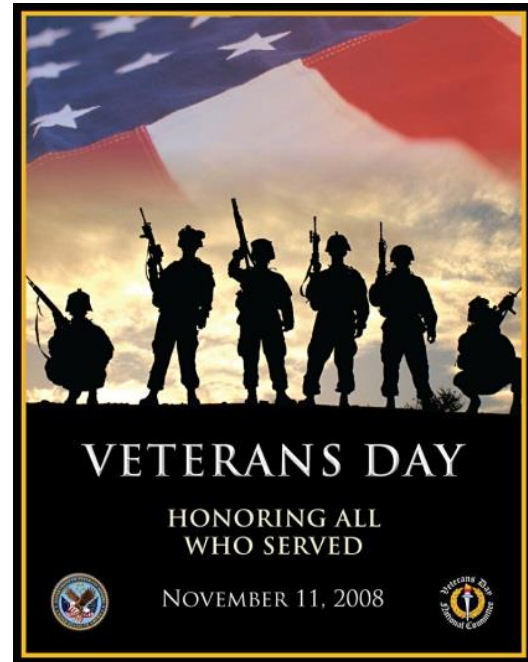


Figure 15. 2008 VA Poster

Conclusion

This study explored veteran identity and female representation over the last three decades found on a VA poster series. A formal analysis with the application of semiotics and gender theory was used for interpretation within a visual communication framework. Research questions included what makes up a “veteran” and what differences there are between women and men. Overall, the posters reflect a positive, patriotic association of service members and Veterans Day. Veteran representation frequently reflected a masculine ideal and formed a male representation rather than a feminine one. Women no longer wear form-fitting uniforms, pose delicately, or let their hair flow loosely as once shown three decades ago—today, women’s bodies, build, and facial features are similar to their male counterparts.

Gender in this study was seen as a social construct. “Gender is the structure of social relations that centers on the reproductive arena, and the set of practices (governed by this structure) that bring reproductive distinctions between bodies into social processes” (Connell, 2002, p. 10). Social structures and systems define ideal representations. In the poster series, the military and veteran communities are key players in accurate and ideal veteran representation.

Limitations

Perhaps the biggest criticism on critical visual analysis is that it is subjective in nature. Meaning is produced through interpretive methods drawn from sociological and historical positions.

One of the most difficult methodological problems in working with images is how to access and assess information from them. Of course, one of the major reasons for this is that images do not render exact readings or interpretations, thus posing problems for managerial and positivist image researches that emphasize external validity, replication, and instrumental meaning-making. (Schroeder, 2013)

There are various methods for interpreting visual messages, but this study only used critical visual analysis. Content analysis was considered, however, given the small collection of visual data to work with, the deployed method seemed apt.

It is important to remember the focus of visual culture—it is not a discipline that creates step-by-step methods to get the “answer” to an image. Rather, it is perhaps better to [understand] visual culture as a set of tasks performed on the image. Visual culture research tries to problematize, to demystify, to historicize, and to visualize the image. (Schroeder, 2013)

The method draws from historical, political, and social conventions. Visual culture is created by society. Since the area of gender, culture, and history are so comprehensive, not all details were explored. This study is investigative and attempts to conceptualize visual data on a widespread position.

Implications

Veterans are represented in many ways—especially women veterans. News reports cover women in combat roles, women trading in skirts for fatigues, and the expansion of specialty health care. Women in the military are unique because they only make up twelve percent of the work force and are currently serving in a male-dominated environment. They also make up a unique minority group in VA health care. Today women must carry their own load and meet the same standards as men—this may have a great impact on how and why women are represented the way they are. This can be seen as “sex similarity” and gender equality. Sex similarity is looked at by researchers such as Connell (2002) who stated, “Bodily differences and social effects are often linked through the idea of character dichotomy” (p. 40). According to Connell (2002), much of society is reluctant to represent gender as one:

A large part of the explanation, I am sure, lies in the cultural background.

Dichotomous gender symbolism is very strong in Western culture, so it is not surprising that when researchers think about sex and gender, what they “see” is difference. Within our usual mindset and our usual research design, gender similarity is not a positive state; it is merely the absence of proven difference. (p.

42)

Given the recent combat change for women veterans, these posters may aim to represent the new face of women.

On the other hand, based on communication materials such as the VA campaign on women's health, women want their own identity and do not want to be represented as "one." This is a question that falls under a cultural context. How should women veterans be depicted? Should women veterans be depicted equal to their male counterparts, given their new role in the military? Or perhaps women veterans should be depicted more inclusive to their gender? This is an opportunity for service members and service member organizations to look closely at veteran visual media and provide feedback on representation of both male and female veterans.

Areas of Further Study

The analysis provides a starting point for further research on the VA's cultural change campaign to be more inclusive of women veterans, historical conventions that shape gender identity, and organizations such as the military that influence representation. It may be interesting to conduct interview-based studies or send out a survey to service members on ideal visual representation. It may also be interesting to compare veteran identity in the years to come, assuming the VA will continue releasing Veterans Day posters.

The chronological VA poster series is a set of visual data that can be used to interpret military culture and the role of women in the military. Images such as these provide insight to the way historical and political conventions such as the woman combat veteran and the increasing female force shape visual communication.

This analysis is useful for female service members combating gender stereotypes and facing real-world issues, academic scholars focusing their efforts on visual communication,

identity, and representation; leaders of veteran and military communities, and federal communication professionals. The role of women in our military has evolved significantly over the last 30 years. This is apparent not only on the battlefield but also in visual media at home. Through the military's effort to combat gender stereotypes, it has led to the fragmentation of traditional female identities and left a void that requires the attention of future female veterans and the veteran community.

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