

Uncle Sam Needs Your Ideas: A Brief History of Embodied Knowledge in American World War II Posters

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Men and women who work with machines have good ideas.
—War Production Board, *War Production Drive:*
Official Plan Book

The armchair is not just an unbecoming site in anthropology. There is armchair sociology, armchair economics, armchair theory, and arm-

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chair travel.¹ There are armchair critics, historians, strategists, and even quarterbacks, who put forward nothing but secondhand knowledge. In figure 1, the seat that accommodated the armchair general indexed a lack of participation, a dearth of action. Given his suit-and-tie clothing, the man in the picture was probably an executive. Pressed to leave his comfortable position—which offered no actionable knowledge—he was urged to take part in the workforce, to fight like a soldier in production. This image is part of a collection of thousands of wartime posters produced by the US government, corporations, and civilian organizations during World War II.² A subset of these images popularized tactics for harvesting knowledge—sitting in an armchair was not one of them.³ Most of these idea posters featured *manual* workers who were implored to share their firsthand knowledge with the nation at war. With workers staged as thinkers whose thought mattered for the nation, submitting ideas was cast as a contribution to the war effort. In analyzing this set of posters, this article seeks to call attention to the historical particularities of how knowledge production, material production, and war were interrelated in this economy of ideas.

The posters were part of so-called idea drives, or suggestion campaigns, which showcased a nationwide search for—and interest in—ideas. These drives took place at a time when contentious labor relations and economic production were both subject to reorganization in the United States. Labor and management were cajoled to collaborate in labor-management committees, so as to participate in the industrial mobilization that, on the one hand, spurred wartime production and, on the other, realized a partial fade-out of civilian consumption. Ideas were believed to be valuable in this process. The posters, commissioned and distributed by labor-management committees, articulate a particular history of ideas in a

1. For an analysis of the armchair as a mode of knowledge production in economics, see Maas 2011.

2. For general introductions into the history of wartime poster production in the United States, see Bird and Rubenstein 1998; Bredhoff 1994; Gregory 1993; and Nelson 1991. My first reading of some of these posters and how they relate to the emergence of creative ideation and brainstorming appeared in Van Eekelen 2016.

3. The approximately one hundred posters under scrutiny in this article were commissioned and distributed by plant committees jointly operated by US employees and employers, called labor-management committees (United States Civilian Production Administration 1947: 711–12). They are stored in two record groups in the National Archives and Records Administration in College Park, Maryland. The majority are filed under Office of Emergency Management (OEM), War Production Board (WPB) (1942–1943), record group (RG) 179: Records of the War Production Board, 1918–1947. Later ones are filed under OEM, Office of War Information (OWI), Domestic Operations Branch, Bureau of Special Services (March 9, 1943–September 15, 1945), and can be found in RG 44: Records of the Office of Government Reports (1932–1947).

wartime economy and tout an unusual organization of knowledge production.

In providing a window on particular modes of knowledge production that were prevalent during the war, and the role of workers in their fabrication, these posters offer us first of all a historical perspective on what is often represented as something relatively new and unhistorical: a knowledge economy. This concept is often framed as having no history of its own: it is presented as supplanting other economies (agricultural, industrial, service) and therefore as in itself unprecedented, because new (Florida 2004; Moulrier Boutang 2011; Powell and Snellman 2004: 215; Van Eekelen 2015b). Challenging this commonsensical narrative, the wartime posters offer a situated history of war, economic organization, and knowledge production that occasioned a particular interest in ideas. Second, while historians have outlined the various contributions made to knowledge production during World War II (e.g., Kennedy 2013; Lemov 2005; Price 2008), they have underemphasized the particular *mode* of knowledge production, as well as the role of blue-collar workers in these processes. These historical studies often foreground the role of experts, including social scientists, in knowledge production (Price 2008). For instance, institutional histories of organizations that sprang from World War II, such as the RAND corporation (Ghamari-Tabrizi 2005) or the National Science Foundation (Solovey 2013) demonstrate the generative effects of the war's state of exception in shaping future knowledge (and knowledge about the future), but these studies revolve around the role of experts. If other workers were portrayed as playing a role, it was through a discussion of actual inventions. Paul Kennedy (2013), for instance, describes the ingenuity of (midlevel) engineers in overcoming obstacles in the various theaters of war. By foregrounding the various inventions themselves, however, he glosses over possible particularities of the organization of wartime knowledge production. Rebecca Lemov (2005), in her cultural history of human engineering, *does* discuss very particular modes of acquiring knowledge about the social world, but again she emphasizes the role of military or academic professionals in these processes. Social histories of the changing workforce during World War II *have* highlighted the role of manual



Figure 1 *Don't Be an Armchair General!* WPB (1942–1943), NAID 534526.

workers and the racial and gendered boundaries that were redrawn in large-scale industrial mobilization efforts (e.g., Endres 2000; Kryder 2000; Schweitzer 1980). They have not, usually, tended to the particular forms of ideation that these workers were requested to tackle. This article offers a historical case study of a mode of knowledge production and valorization in which manual work and ideation were intricately entwined.

My analysis of the war posters is organized as follows. The first section analyzes how workers, soldiers, and managers were framed in space and time and examines how these well-known spatial-temporal strategies reframed labor-management relations and enabled a nationwide search for ideas. This is followed by an examination of what type of knowledge mattered in this particular conjuncture, how its production was related to the laboring body, and what methods were suggested for capturing capricious thoughts. I conclude with an investigation into the value attributed to ideas. I describe the remuneration plans that were put in place, recount how ideas were rendered subject to calculation, and analyze the peculiar notions of property that were espoused. By examining the reconfigurations of time and space, the incorporation of workers' bodies and minds, and the campaign's particular understandings of expertise and property, I seek to draw attention to the historical particularities of the valorization of ideas and knowledge production in this time of war.

Uncle Sam Calls on You

At the start of US involvement in World War II, there was little love lost between management and labor. On January 16, 1942, a month after the Pearl Harbor attacks, the War Production Board (WPB) was established. The impetus was a need for a *centralized* agency to redirect civilian industry toward war production (Exec. Order No. 9024, 7 Fed. Reg. 329 [1942]).⁴ The task at hand was to improve the conservation of scarce materials—for instance, by salvaging scrap—and to increase and redirect production, to “outproduc[e] the Axis” (WPB’s chairman Donald M. Nelson quoted in *New York Times* 1942b).⁵ One of the ways to realize a “speedier manufacture of guns, tanks, planes, ships and machine tools” was the establishment of a labor-management committee in every war plant (McElroy and Moros 1948: 123; *New York Times* 1942c; Seinwerth 1948: 12; WPB 1945).⁶ By 1943, 2,100 such joint committees had come into their own, growing

4. For an extensive history of the WPB, see United States Civilian Production Administration 1947; see also Gropman 1996 and Levin 1942.

5. For an analysis of the posters that implore frugality, see Witkowski 2003.

6. This policy measure, initiated on February 27, 1942, was also known as the War Production Drive (United States Civilian Production Administration 1947: 423–24).

to 4,835 in 1944 (Stein 1957: 402; Terrio 1943: 26).

With labor and materials both in scarce supply, while industrial targets had expanded considerably, labor-management committees endeavored to collect ideas from workers that would aid in tackling this conundrum.⁷ Corporations and their labor-management committees were instructed by the WPB to run local “suggestion campaigns,” for example, by offering their employees cash or war bonds for ideas. Multiple media were used to incite this ideation, ranging from messages tucked in pay envelopes, such as the “idea stimulator” of figure 2, to decorative suggestion boxes, stickers, posters, bulletin boards, information stands, and plant bulletins (WPB 1942a: 1, 1942b). As a striking trace of this economy of ideas, the war posters provide a vivid entry into the history of these suggestion campaigns.



Figure 2 *To Encourage Contributions from Employees for Improving Plant Efficiency, This Suggestion Stimulator Is Being Inserted in the Pay Envelopes of the Employees of the RCA Manufacturing Company in Camden, New Jersey.* OWI (1940–1946), Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, call no. LC-USE6-D-006621 [P&P].

Some of the posters that were part of the idea drives riffed on the *I Want You for U.S. Army* poster from the preceding world war (fig. 3), as in the poster *Uncle Sam Wants Your Ideas* (fig. 4). In these posters, workers were made to participate in the space of war through interpellatory discourses and participatory practices. Workers were often addressed in the second person, *you*. As Louis Althusser (1971: 170–77) famously pointed out, a call to “you!” also constitutes *you* as a concrete subject who—in turning around, in responding—recognizes himself or herself as the person addressed in a particular social or institutional position. Framing *you* as a “production soldier,” and the war as *your* war, the posters offered workers ways of thinking about themselves and their social world and compelled them to act accordingly. By acting on the posters’ calls—which apparently many did (see below)—workers articulated and consolidated these positions. Submitting ideas allowed workers to submit themselves to the war: to self-identify as patriots-citizens and, collectively, to constitute a nation of workers-thinkers. Posters such

7. In this article, I limit my analysis to the widespread practice of ideation in war plants. Rank-and-file *government* employees were, however, also encouraged “to exercise their powers of observation, imagination, resourcefulness, and ingenuity” and make their ideas available for the government (Stats 1943: 579).

Figure 3 (top left)
I Want You for U.S. Army.
 James Montgomery
 Flagg, Library of Congress
 Prints and Photographs
 Division, call no.
 POS — MOT. PIC. —
 US .F63, no. 9 (C size)
 [P&P].



Figure 4 (top right)
Uncle Sam Wants Your Ideas. WPB (1942–1943),
 NAID 534244.



Figure 5 (bottom left)
Your Ideas Are Welcomed
 by US. WPB (1942–1943),
 NAID 534167.



Figure 6 (bottom right)
Your Patriotism—New Ideas Wanted. WPB
 (1942–1943), NAID 534161.



as *Uncle Sam Wants Your Ideas* encouraged workers to recognize themselves as thinkers whose thought mattered to the nation.

When posters cast the war as *your war*, they produced not only a subjective but also a spatial interpellation. In making war copresent with the responding workers, the posters reorganized space. The workers were first of all made copresent with the soldiers on the front. Many war posters—not only those from the suggestion campaigns—created seamless connections between the production front, the home front, and the fighting front.⁸ The home front spoke to two spaces: the nation as a home, as a front in addition to the battlefield, and the private home as a base from where to imagine oneself as engaged in war (e.g., by saving rubber diaper covers to recover rubber for gas masks).⁹ Sometimes “production soldiers,” a widely used term, were pictured as participants, literally, in the war. Running after Hitler with a hammer or a screwdriver, the message to the worker was “Tools are your weapons” or “Your job is your gun”—marking the worker as a body in war.¹⁰ A picture with smoke billowing from factory furnaces—which provided the backdrop to many posters—insisted, similarly, that “the second front is right here!,” turning the workplace into a space of war.¹¹ This coexistence and suturing

8. A point made by, for instance, John Morten Blum (1976: 15–21) and James J. Kimble (2006).

9. See *You've Got a Job to Do Too, Young Man*, WPB (1942–1943), National Archives identifier (NAID) 533901. The interest in ideas was directly related to very material conditions of scarcity in labor and material supplies, such as the rationing of rubber. Indispensable in the production of electrical cords and rubber tires, raw rubber was in short supply after the Dutch East India plantations were seized by the Japanese army. This resulted in a second rubber boom in Brazil, in increased investments in synthetic rubber, and in a keen interest in ingenious rubber-saving methods. Alex F. Osborn described how B. F. Goodrich, a company that developed synthetic rubber used in the war, accumulated about four thousand ideas per year from its rank-and-file workers on how to improve production. Its president made an impassioned plea for the production of ideas in wartime: “For victory’s sake, let us put our imaginations in overtime! . . . Our industry is vital to the war effort—rubber workers can do much to speed our armed forces onward. And the bigger our production of helpful ideas, the more war products and materials we can produce and thus help speed the day of victorious peace” (quoted in Osborn 1942: 15). Here imagination, manual labor, and the movement of armed forces were all made legible and interrelated under the aegis of speed. Other rubber companies followed suit. The rubber industry in Akron shelled out “cash for each idea that can be used.” With one in three ideas deemed useful, between two hundred and three hundred manual workers each month earned “extra cash and glory in this way” (ibid.: 18).

10. *Bar the Axis. The Soldier Must Keep His Weapons in A-1 Condition. Tools Are Your Weapons*, WPB (1942–1943), NAID 534997; *Your Job Is Your Gun. Give the Enemy Hell!*, WPB (1942–1943), NAID 533997.

11. *The Second Front Is Right Here! Produce More for Victory*, WPB (1942–1943), NAID 534399. Many posters depict factories with chimneys wafting smoke. See, e.g., *Think. Production Means Life or Death. Don't Lose One Minute. Work*, OWI (1943–1945), NAID 515717; *Our Fight Is Right Here. Work to Win*, WPB (1942–1943), NAID 533989.

of multiple fronts was evoked as well by a soldier and a worker depicted in the *same* picture, shaking hands, with the soldier telling the worker: “We’re depending on you!”¹² The coexistence of the soldier and the worker was both stipulated in space—through the handshake—and in time. Take, for instance, a poster that framed a soldier as “facing death this minute for you.”¹³ This minute was the soldier’s present and the worker’s present—recoding the present as a shared time-space in war.¹⁴ In these posters, the soldier abroad and the worker at home were thus spatially and temporally coeval, in that the production front, home front, and fighting front were depicted as interchangeable parts of a seamless whole.

Recoding the home and the workplace as a war front was also a way to enlist management and labor as a cooperative unit. A poster with workers saluting Uncle Sam stressed this collaborative ethic: “We’re all in the army now. Let’s all work to win.”¹⁵ Another one stated, “We must serve in fighting uniform or working uniform.”¹⁶ As contributors to the war, workers and management were called on to collaborate: “We have *one big* fight. Let’s work shoulder to shoulder.”¹⁷ The shoulders in question—dwarfed by the figure of a frantic soldier—were those of management and labor. Relatively few posters explicitly addressed the collaboration of management and labor—rather, most posters, by stressing the coexistence of the war abroad and at home, underlined that this was not a time to wage a divisive labor fight and that it was time to disclose any ideas that might advance production. “Do you want to lose the war?” a poster posited rhetorically, thereby gesturing at the complicated relationships workers may have had with ideas that

12. *We’re Depending on You! Produce to Win*, WPB (1942–1943), NAID 534395. Putting it even more bluntly, some posters correlated workers’ ideas directly to the lives of soldiers, e.g. “A production suggestion may save a soldier’s life” (*Effort for Victory*, WPB [1942–1943], NAID 534184).

13. *Think. Production Means Life or Death. Don’t Lose One Minute. Work*, OWI (1943–1945), NAID 515717.

14. Johannes Fabian (1983) has famously shown how in anthropological studies time is a necessary element in the production of relationships between self and other. I argue here that creating a group of “selves” (not others) also requires work with time. Cotemporaneity was one of the strategies to fashion soldiers and workers as one. The soldier was situated in the time of the American worker, and vice versa. They inhabited a common time. The soldier was not framed as exploring the past but as inhabiting the present—and this copresence required continuous imaginative effort. Similarly, the imagery of multiple fronts blending into *one* emphasized proximity, not distance. In producing spatial and temporal coevalness, these strategies ultimately coded the worker as a participant in war, his or her praxis as seamlessly related to war, and the factory as a space of war.

15. *We’re All in the Army Now. Let’s All Work to Win*, WPB (1942–1943), NAID 533998.

16. *Our Duty!*, WPB (1942–1943), NAID 534370.

17. *We Have One Big Fight. Let’s Work Shoulder to Shoulder*, WPB (1942–1943), NAID 534001. This poster’s small print announced that it was approved by the United Auto Workers–Congress of Industrial Organizations labor management-committee.

could transform the production process. Alluding to this tension in the suggestion campaign, a shop worker is portrayed as imparting to his colleague: “The old way is good enough . . . besides it’ll make our jobs last longer.”¹⁸ Acute insights on ways to improve production could after all squeeze the position of the worker-thinker, through, for instance, layoffs, increased workload, or less work.¹⁹ The caption indeed stated, “It takes guts to sell a new idea.” By framing workers as part of the war, as defense workers or as soldiers in combat, they were implored to bracket any apprehensions over workplace transformations that might result from their ideas.

Rank-and-File Ideation: The Call for Embodied Knowledge

The recoding of space, time, and the interpellation of workers as production soldiers also contributed to the valorization of workers’ *embodied knowledge* as a patriotic good. *The Idea Round Table*, a poster featuring workers talking shop, cast workers as ideators (fig. 7).²⁰ Similarly, when Sam Adams pointed a finger at you, with the text “You can help by sending in that suggestion today,” imploring you to “do it now,” he emphatically addressed workers.²¹ In the drive for more ideas, useful knowledge was thought to come especially from “you—in the factory” and “you on the production line” (fig. 8).²² Workers at Aircraft Mechanics, Inc., in Colorado Springs, Colorado, were similarly addressed as having knowledge hailing from the everyday experience of their labor: “Remember, you know your own job best—and your best ‘ideas’ are most likely to concern your own job” (WPB 1942a: 4). Indeed, recasting workers as thinkers whose thought mattered for



Figure 7 *The Idea Round Table*. WPB (1942–1943), NAID 534146.

18. *Do You Want to Lose the War?*, WPB (1942–1943), NAID 534217.

19. A 1943 article, published in the *Public Opinion Quarterly* and authored by the chief of staff of the War Production Drive and the head of the its information department, offered a glimpse of the worlds the War Production Drive was up against. In an attempt to deflate what they called a few misconceptions—and anxieties—the authors argued that the War Production Drive was not “a threat to free enterprise,” it was not a “company union scheme,” it was not “a plan to take over industrial management,” and it was not a version of the “hated Bedaux speedup system” (Chalmers and Wolf 1943: 403).

20. Even as ideation was not remunerated in the same way as manual labor (see below).

21. *You Can Help*, WPB (1942–1943), NAID 534215.

22. National Cash Register, *Special 3-Months NCR Suggestion Contest*, WPB (1942–1943), NAID 534225.

You On The
Production
Line May Have
A Suggestion
PUT IN Your Idea TODAY

Figure 8 *You on the Production Line.* Fragment from *Brains Make Bullets!* WPB (1942–1943), NAID 535346.

the nation followed a particular logic of *embodied* knowledge. An early creativity expert, Alex F. Osborn (1942: 17), described how thousands of employees in Akron’s rubber industry submitted ideas in response to the looming rubber shortages. These workers who were “paid to work with their hands—they, too, are helping with their heads.” Manual work, in other words, was presented as a constitutive element of ideation. One poster’s text exemplifies how workers were enlisted as powerful thinkers:

You know industry must help win this war.
You know your job better than anyone else.
You have ideas to save time.
You have ideas to prevent accidents.
You have ideas to conserve material.
You have ideas to improve machinery.
You have ideas to increase production.
You have ideas to improve the other fellow’s job.
Industry needs your best thinking & experience.
Come on. C-H . . . do more! This isn’t peace—it’s war!!²³



Figure 9 *Think—It’s Your Job to Out-Think the Axis.* WPB (1942–1943), NAID 534909.

thinking and manual labor could take place in the same space and in the same time.²⁴ This move of casting everyday workers as thinkers—“out-think[ing] the Axis” (fig. 9)—bracketed the rise of disembodied expertise.²⁵ It was the imbri-

As the WPB (1942b: 10) put it in the epigraph above, “Men and women who work with machines have good ideas.” It was *because* they worked the machines, *because* they worked with their hands, that American workers on the shop floor were assumed to be good thinkers. The emphasis on workers was evident as well in the instruction to sign submitted ideas by name and clock number—a disciplinary tool that also indicates that ideation was not (yet) antithetical to clocked work:

23. *You Can Help Win This War with Ideas*, WPB (1942–1943), NAID 534228.

24. *Ideas for Uncle Sam*, WPB (1942–1943), NAID 534197.

25. As advanced, for instance, in Frederick Winslow Taylor’s (1998 [1911]) division of manual and mental work. It is an interesting question whether the contemporary policy concept of a “knowledge economy” could be usefully stretched to incorporate the embodied knowledge of all workers, not just “knowledge workers.”

cation of laboring and thinking—and the laboring body as the condition for knowledge production—that made thought possible.

In the call for embodied knowledge, it was not just workers' bodies that were depicted as part of the war and as capable of generating new ideas; their minds were explicitly summoned as well. The war posters often placed workers' brains, thoughts, and minds in full view. As is said in figure 10: "Your mind is your best tool—use it to work out new ideas!"²⁶ Another poster stated: "You are helping win the war with your hands. Help also with your brains."²⁷ Posters with calls such as "Think—it's your job to out-think the Axis" (fig. 9) and "Think. . . . We need your brain on the job" stressed the thought process of workers.²⁸ Figure 11 displays a worker dressed in a coverall. He looks inside the half-opened mechanical mind of a factory—a size reversal that in itself turned the worker into the master of operations. Standing outside of this cranium, he looks in and thinks. The factory may represent artificial—or mechanical—intelligence, but it was the worker



Figure 10 *Your Mind Is Your Best Tool—Use It to Work Out New Ideas!*
WPB (1942–1943), NAID 534179.

26. Note also the different use of the term *production economies*, which alludes here to saving—economizing—practices.

27. *You Are Helping Win the War with Your Hands. Help Also with Your Brains*, WPB (1942–1943), NAID 534221.

28. *Think. . . . We Need Your Brain on the Job*, WPB (1942–1943), NAID 535142. Compare this with the ways that American publics have been enlisted in the recent war on terror—they have been asked to use their eyes and ears, but not their minds. What accounts for this contemporary dearth of interest in public knowledge production and, more pressing, who does the thinking now?



Figure 11 *Ideas Will Help Beat the Promise—Let's Have Yours!* OWI (1943–1945), NAID 514574.



Figure 12 *Imagineering in the Office, Imagineering in the Shop* (Westinghouse). WPB (1942–1943), NAID 534198.

standing, untypically, outside who was able to look in and reflect on the industrial process. While this seems to suggest a changing conception of mechanical labor as also encompassing thought, this transformation was simultaneously unsettled by the lack of hourly remuneration for ideation (see below).

Whereas the posters depict a very particular subject engaged in knowledge production—the manual worker—the locus for his or her ideation mattered as well. One poster depicts an arrow pointing at a factory, accompanied by the statement: “Our fight is right *here*.”²⁹ In so doing, the poster recoded the factory space as a space of war but also, importantly, as a locus for ideation to happen. Similarly, figure 12 pictures a contemplative shop worker and a contemplative office worker;

29. *Our Fight Is Right Here*. *Work to Win*, WPB (1942–1943), NAID 533989.

they are both “imagineering.”³⁰ What interests me in this poster is not only that the shop worker and the office worker are put on equal footing but also that having an idea is spatiotemporally taking place in an office and on the shop floor. There was no separation, spatially or temporally, between having ideas and handling a machine: workers were not actively encouraged to seek ideas outside of the shop floor, nor was it deemed necessary to step outside in order to have a good idea. On the contrary, with the imbrication of laboring and thinking, these two processes were frequently depicted as spatially and temporally copresent. Workers’ industrial labor was a condition for thinking, and factory spaces were hence coexistent with—rather than antithetical to—thought.³¹

Ideas and the Disciplinary Measures to Seize Them

What, though, were these coveted ideas? What knowledge was being called for? In the war posters, ideas were staged in a twofold way. First, ideas were cast as ephemeral and visionary. Quite a few posters appealed to a civilizational discourse. The modern world was presented as created through the power of thought, and ideas were associated with progress through modern objects. Such an association is explicit, for instance, in one poster featuring planes, trucks, cars, buses, and ships. “Ideas are the basis of progress. Every improvement in this world was the result of someone’s idea. Your idea may be worth a substantial award. Put it in a suggestion box now!”³² The civilizational imaginary is also palpable in figure 13.

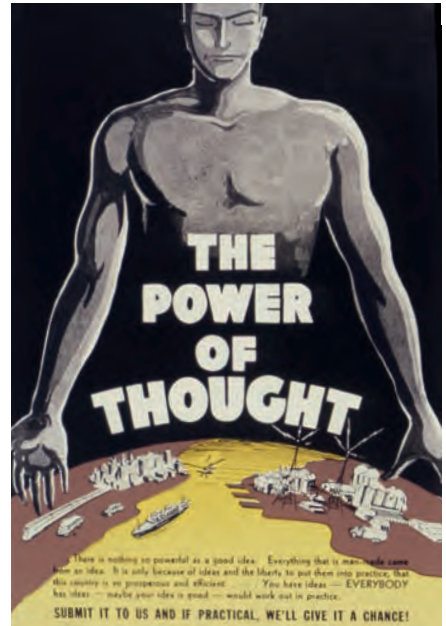


Figure 13 *The Power of Thought*. WPB (1942–1943), NAID 534178, RG 179.

30. This Westinghouse poster presents a very early—pre-Disney—use of the term *imagineering*. The contraction of *imagination* and *engineering* is usually attributed to Walt Disney. Several posters from suggestion committees employ the term, such as Westinghouse’s *It’s Payday for Imagineers* (WPB [1942–1943], NAID 534191) and *Man of the Hour. The Imagineer. He Is Doing Things* (OWI [1943–1945], NAID 534208). The Aluminum Company of America (Alcoa) seems to have coined the term. Its coinage can be traced to its wartime advertisements in 1942, in publications such as the *Michigan Technic*, *Time*, and the *Ohio State Engineer*.

31. It is also notable that experience, the experience of embodied labor to be precise, was seen as constitutive of knowledge production. In my larger project on the twentieth-century histories of creative thinking in military-industrial settings, I show how in the 1950s, experience came to be framed as hampering the production of new ideas (Van Eekelen, n.d.).

32. *Ideas Are the Basis of Progress. Every Improvement in This World Was the Result of Someone’s Idea*, WPB (1942–1943), NAID 534220.

His eyes closed, yet with the products of his mind at his fingertips, the poster presented the God-man who created the modern world. This world was, again, full of radio towers, trains, boats, and cars (which were not, in this conjuncture, framed as consumer goods).³³ The uncovered body, strong and powerful, appears to be the body of a working man—a manager would more likely be displayed as dressing his part (as in fig. 1). Interesting, too, is that his gesturing *body* stood in for thought. The accompanying text reiterated the power of thought that made this modern world: everything man-made came from an idea: “There is nothing so powerful as a good idea. Everything that is man-made came from an idea. It is only because of ideas and the liberty to put them into practice, that the country is so prosperous and efficient. . . . You have ideas—*everybody* has ideas—maybe your idea is good—would work out in practice.”³⁴ While ideas allude to this modern imaginary, they were at the same time presented as firm and practical in that thought was intertwined with the concrete world and only valuable when practicable (“if practical, we’ll give it a chance”).³⁵ This is where the addressees came in—“You have ideas . . . everybody has ideas.” Workers were understood not so much to be designing new things from scratch as they were to be *making* the cars, tanks, gas masks, and trains that were subject to conceivable improvements.

It was exactly this participation in production that was identified as a potentially precious source for new ideas. For instance, by musing, “Why can’t we use a double die instead of a single die in cutting out the face piece for these gas masks?” (Osborn 1942: 23), an employee in Goodyear’s gas mask department received \$75 and reportedly doubled the company’s gas mask production. At the W. L. Maxson Corporation of New York City, ideas that were implemented and awarded ranged from measures to protect the company’s “thousands of drawings from sabotage” to altering the swinging doors to the experimental room to avoid numerous accidents, from installing an air hose to prevent the wafting of “dust and gas fumes among the men at work benches” to methods to catch metal chips, emery, and oil when they were blown

33. The production of consumer automobiles, for instance, had been banned as of January 1942 (O’Brian and Fleischmann 1944: 4-5, citing Supplementary General Limitation Order L-2-g, 7 Fed. Reg. 473 (1942)).

34. *The Power of Thought*, WPB (1942–1943), NAID 534178.

35. *Ibid.* The use of ideas in this historical conjuncture resonates with creativity’s root, *create*—“to make or produce.” Raymond Williams’s social etymology of the verb *create* shows that until the sixteenth century this activity was strictly left to God. Only later—and first via the unfavorable sense of “imitation” (counterfeit Creation)—did *human* creation become thinkable and, gradually, commonsensical (Williams 1985: 82–84).

from new parts (WPB 1942a: 10). A suggestion provided by Helen O'Neill (*ibid.*), who worked in the manufacturing department, also led to a reorganization of the processing of correspondence at Maxson Corporation.

The emphasis on participation in production as a source of knowledge construction is also evident in a series of pictures from the Office of War Information. They showcase workers whose ideas had been implemented. It is notable that these photographs stage the thinkers/workers in their workplace, bringing home once more the idea that factory spaces were coexistent with knowledge production. David Danzig, an employee of the American Locomotive Company of Schenectady, New York, was for instance captured applying the fixture that he had designed and suggested “for the facing and cutting clamper on the small turret ring for the M-4 tank” (fig. 14). While he didn’t invent the entire turret ring, he was staged as having the product of his mind in his fingertips, not unlike the godlike figure in figure 13. Figure 15 features Herbert Rudolph James almost floating in his mechanical workplace. An organist and conductor by profession, he worked as a machinist in the Shell Finish Department of the National Tube Company in McKeesport, Pennsylvania. James received a Certificate of Individual Production



Figure 14 *David Danzig, an Employee of the American Locomotive Company, Schenectady, New York, Applies the Fixture He Suggested and Designed for the Facing and Cutting Champer [sic; Clamper] on the Small Turret Ring for the M-4 Tank. Danzig was a plant award winner. Photographer: Howard R. Hollem. OWI, 1943, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, call no. LC-USE6-D-008286 [P&P].*



Figure 15 *Herbert Rudolph James, Machinist, Shell Finish Department, National Tube Company, McKeesport, Pennsylvania, Has Been Awarded a Certificate of Individual Production Merit. Photographer: unknown. OWI, 1942, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, call no. LC-USE6-D-010695 [P&P].*



Figure 16 *Mary Petillo, Forelady of a Newark, New Jersey Factory Making Lamp Bulbs and Tubes for the Signal Corps, . . . Made a Suggestion to Conserve Bakelite Lamp Bases Formerly Discarded—a Suggestion Now in Use at the Plant—and Is Also the Inventor of an Apparatus Which Prevents Short-Circuiting during Tests of Lamps.* Photographer: unknown. OWI, 1942? [question mark in archive], Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, call no. LC-USE6-D-010675 [P&P].

Merit for his suggestion to incorporate a “mechanism into the torch whereby the oxygen and acetylene mixtures could be varied to create the desired flame.”³⁶

While women were entering the wartime workforce in large numbers, they were not proportionately represented in the suggestion campaigns—most posters and other media featured men (for exceptions, see, e.g., figs. 17 and 20). But there are ample traces suggesting that they did actively partake in this economy of ideas by inventing, making suggestions that were subsequently implemented, and receiving awards. Mary Petillo, a forewoman in a factory in New Jersey that produced lamp bulbs and tubes for the Signal Corps, suggested making use of Bakelite lamp bases that were being discarded (fig. 16). This suggestion was applied at the plant. She was also the “inventor of an apparatus which prevents short-circuiting during tests of lamps.”³⁷ At Douglas Aircraft Company, Inc., in Santa Monica, California, Mrs. Kirilla’s implemented suggestion provided “safety chains and blocks at leading platforms for the electrically-powered trucks and trailers which distribute[d] all materials used in the Douglas plants.” At the same plant, Mrs. Isabelle Daniel, a teacher of Latin, physics, mathematics, and music, had started working as an inspector in the department of lines and conduits. Her suggestion, which made sure that airplane tubing could be banded and lacquered in a single operation, saved Douglas thirty-two production hours a day (WPB 1942a: 12).³⁸

The savings made by inventions were oftentimes reported, measured in man-hours, materials, or time saved. M. Pearson, a worker at the General Motors plant in Pontiac, Michigan, received a prize of \$786 for his innovation to stencil data on truck bodies rather than on separate signs, which saved the company thirty-

36. Archival information for figure 15, Library of Congress, call no. LC-USE6-D-010695 [P&P].

37. Archival information for figure 16, Library of Congress, call no. LC-USE6-D-010675 [P&P].

38. Daniel had started at Douglas Aircraft after her husband returned to the navy (WPB 1942a: 12).

five thousand feet of board lumber as well as 484 man-hours in sixty days (Terrio 1943: 27). At Morey Machinery Company of Astoria, New York, Robert Cohen's \$25 suggestion for a jig to number feed deals cut time from fifty minutes to nine minutes (WPB 1942a: 13). Danzig's fixture (fig. 14) was designed for three generations instead of two, which would save one setup. Some corporations also gave an account of the overall consequences of implemented suggestions. The shop suggestion head of Douglas Aircraft, for instance, reported in 1942 that "500 ideas [had] improved production at Douglas plants by 2000 man-hours daily or a total of 730,000 man-hours per year" (A. M. Meyer cited in WPB 1942a: 7). Workers' ideas would "speed up," as it was framed, the end of the Axis powers: "If it'll save a second, it's a great idea—let's have it. Short cuts can shorten the war."³⁹ Many posters in fact played on the multiple natures of "speed." The objects produced, such as cars, boats, buses, trains, often indexed speed. And the workers' practical suggestions, in a "race for national defense," also accelerated victory by speeding up the making of these contraptions.⁴⁰ Ideas in these posters thus functioned as dual objects, speaking, on the one hand, to modernity and progress and, on the other, to very concrete firsthand knowledge that could accelerate production—which, in turn, would curtail the time spent in war.

With "everybody" deemed to have ideas, the question was what it would take to harvest the ideas and usefully employ them. In the posters, ideas were often cast as irrational and erratic, likened to animals that needed to be caught, and framed as something that could dissipate and disappear.⁴¹ "When an idea gets to circulating in your mind," one poster read, "we recommend the following treatment: let it circulate until it begins to settle down and take form—then write it out on a suggestion blank and drop it in the cabinet."⁴² As part of the effort to constitute workers as thinkers, posters instructed workers on how they could discipline themselves. "*Ideas drop in on us like the unexpected guest,*" the imagineering poster explained

39. *If It'll Save a Second*, OWI (1943–1945), NAID 513582.

40. *After a New Speed Record!*, OWI (1943–1945), NAID 513754; *Progress. Your Suggestion Helps Speed the Progress of Victory*, OWI (1943–1945), NAID 515248.

41. In some posters, ideas were imagined to be not of the body, or of the self, but temporarily in the vicinity of the receiver. One poster, for instance, featured a worker tugging at a big fish. Its message was straightforward enough: "Don't let that big idea get away" (OWI [1943–1945], NAID 514156). The worker was prodded to write the idea down on a suggestion blank. In another poster, the idea was cast as a bug, circling a shop worker who sported the production soldier's badge on his coverall. With machines in the background, the text read: "Got an idea buzzin'? If it's good we'll use it! It may help win the war!" (OWI [1943–1945], NAID 514417).

42. Morton Manufacturing Company, *An Idea May Mean Wealth in Your Wallet!*, WPB (1942–1943), NAID 534155.



Figure 17 *Jot It Down*. OEM, WPB (1942–1943), NAID 534180, RG 179.

In all these spaces, and at all these times, the worker was instructed to write down his or her thoughts. Not unlike the ethos of contemporary academics, workers were advised: “Keep a suggestion blank in your possession at all times.” The ephemeral material—neither of the author nor entirely separated from him or her—could be apprehended, turned onto paper and submitted to a bureaucratic machinery, so that it could have a second life, altering practices, procedures, and, most of all, war production.

43. For a historical take on the slightly neurotic practice of note taking among academics, see Herbert 1991.

(fig. 12). To capture these capricious thoughts, workers “should be ready to jot down an idea the moment it occurs” to them. Ideas needed to be entrusted to paper, and workers were compelled to “keep a notebook and pencil handy—at home, in the office, and the shop—and use it.”

Figure 17, unusually addressed to white-collar workers, also emphasized the ephemeral nature of ideas: “Very often valuable thoughts and ideas come and go quickly.” As though chasing a spirit, the knowledge had to be captured before it would slip back into the unknown: “[An idea] may be lost forever unless ‘recorded’ at the moment.” It was not the desire to stand out as a lone genius (who might want to patent his or her idea) but laziness and lack of discipline that was cast as the major threat to shared ideation. Workers, in this poster, were asked to be constantly diligent and were implored not to hesitate to use the suggestion blank when an idea comes to you.⁴³ The left pane of figure 17 emphasized that ideas may come to the worker at home, on the way to work, or at lunch.

Remuneration, Calculation, and the Idea of Property

Uncle Sam Needs Your Ideas

Ideas were supposed to move into the space of the nation. Figure 18 portrays a secretary at General Motors, in Detroit, sifting through ideas submitted by workers in the Cadillac division. Local suggestion committees—depicted in figure 19 as including workers sitting in coveralls and management in suits—vetted the



Figure 18 Checking workers' submissions from a suggestion box installed in the Cadillac motorcar division of General Motors Corporation, Detroit. Photographer: Arthur S. Siegel. OWI, 1942, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, call no. LC-USW3-016341-C [P&P].

ideas that were dropped in workplace suggestion boxes.⁴⁴ These committees were made up of “men of technical and practical experience” (WPB 1942a: 1). They included representatives from labor, beginning with one or more union

44. The WPB (1942b: 9–10) official plan book stipulated that the boxes should be vetted once a week (see also *New York Times* 1942a). Suggestion boxes were not new. The corporations credited with instituting early suggestion systems were, for instance, the William Denny Shipyard in Scotland, in the 1880s, and, in the United States, Yale and Tome, in the 1880s; National Cash Register, in 1892; and Kodak, in the early twentieth century (Dickinson 1932; Hunger 1917; Klotz 1988; Stats 1943). The scale of the practice during World War II, however, was unprecedented. Suggestion systems up to that moment had been activated primarily by offering cash incentives and were restricted to collection within—and to the benefit of—single corporations. During the war, workers were motivated by both cash incentives and patriotism, the system was led by labor-management committees, and ideas were sent to Washington, DC, to be reinvested into the nation.

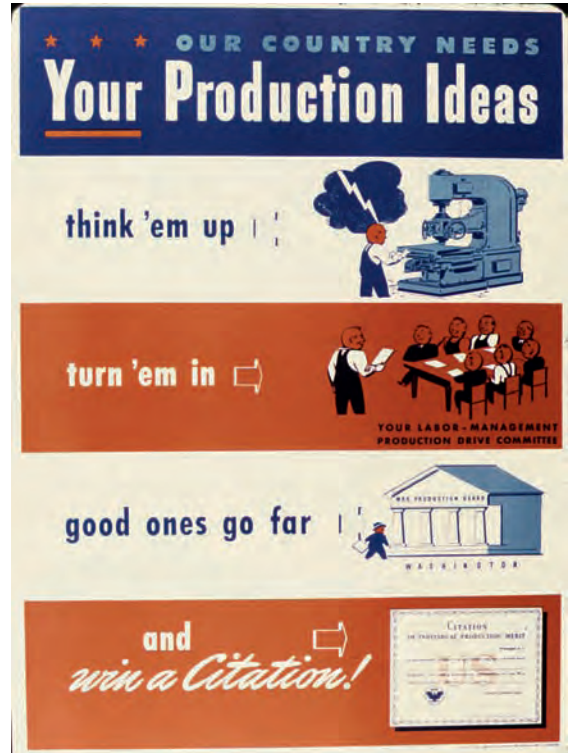


Figure 19 *Our Country Needs Your Production Ideas*. WPB (1942–1943), NAID 534251.

representatives. The representatives from management would sometimes be flexible, based on “their intimacy with the subject . . . to be discussed” (ibid.: 2).

Workers were frequently the only group eligible to win a reward for a useful suggestion. In an acknowledgment that experts were already paid to use their minds, those excluded from such rewards were “foremen, job foremen, and company office managers in the field.”⁴⁵ Similarly, a call for suggestions at the Ford Instrument Company of Long Island, New York, was open to all “except research, engineers, draftsmen, tool designers, methods men, and salaried supervisors.”⁴⁶ General Motors, too, stipulated that only those whose work did *not* normally involve creative thinking were eligible for war bonds (Osborn 1942: 14). The National Cash Register pleaded with workers to seek assistance in their ideation from their “job foreman, foreman, supervisor, section head, department head and all other executives,” since the latter were not eligible to win.⁴⁷

Rather than redefining manual labor as, in part, knowledge work, the posters presented an ambivalent economy. Workers were encouraged to share their ideas freely with the nation at war; Uncle Sam needed ideas.⁴⁸ At the same time, however, workers were enticed as entrepreneurial thinkers whose usable ideas might garner rewards. “It pays to *think*”—a poster explained, elaborating that submitting ideas supported the war effort, gave personal satisfaction, and could reap “real value” through awards.⁴⁹ In figure 20, similarly, we see a thoughtful woman with an arrow directed toward her head—“An idea on paper is worth 2 in the head.” The background addressed the cash awards that had been distributed: “\$73,000.00 paid for suggestions so far. Hand *your* idea in!” And indeed, thoughts were not a dime a dozen. While symbolic gifts such as Victory Fleet flags, lapel pins, badges, and burgees were handed out, so were war bonds and cash awards. One poster pledged, “1000 pennies for your thoughts.” This was broken down into \$100, \$50, and \$25 war bonds for ideas from workers.⁵⁰ Akron’s rubber industry also shelled

45. *U.S. War Bonds and War Stamps for New Ideas*, WPB (1942–1943), NAID 534223.

46. Ford Instrument Company, *Win \$325.00 Monthly for Your Ideas*, WPB (1942–1943), NAID 534232.

47. National Cash Register, *Special 3-months NCR Suggestion Contest*, WPB (1942–1943), NAID 534225.

48. This is one way the idea drives differed from earlier uses of suggestion systems, which were not geared toward the *national* collection and dissemination of ideas.

49. *Some Recent Suggestion Awards*, WPB (1942–1943), NAID 534186.

50. *One Thousand Pennies for Your Thoughts*, WPB (1942–1943), NAID 534149. Based on the consumer price index from the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2014), \$1 in 1943 was the equivalent of \$14.47 in April 2017.

out cash prizes for each usable idea. With one in three ideas deemed useful, between two hundred and three hundred manual workers each month earned “extra cash and glory” (Osborn 1942: 18).

Examples of incentives:

- Some posters actually offered cash for poster ideas. “Cash in on ideas for safety posters! . . . Ideas accepted will be paid for.”⁵¹
- The National Cash Register ran a poster with the title *U.S. War Bonds and War Stamps for New Ideas*.⁵²
- The Ford Instrument Company offered monthly awards of \$25–\$100 for ideas: “Win \$325.00 monthly for your ideas. . . . Out-think the Axis. Out-produce the Axis. Out-fight the Axis.”⁵³
- Pratt and Whitney Aircraft ran a poster announcing that awards had been increased again. Any accepted suggestion would be awarded \$10. It offered a monthly prize of \$200 for the best suggestion and \$1,000 for the annual prize.⁵⁴
- One unmarked poster presented the following text: “Bonds for brainstorms. Something you don’t have to pay for [you don’t have to pay for the bond]. . . . But we will. Put your ideas in the suggestion box.”⁵⁵
- A poster from the Morton Manufacturing Company portrayed a beaming man and a



Figure 20 *\$73,000.00 Paid for Suggestions So Far. Hand Your Idea In! An Idea on Paper Is Worth Two in the Head.* OWI (1943–1945), NAID 515386, RG 44.

51. *Cash in on Ideas for Safety Posters!*, OWI (1943–1945), NAID 514041. There were more posters that invited workers to share poster ideas, such as *Let Us Put Your Ideas for Posters into Print*, WPB (1942–1943), NAID 534183.

52. National Cash Register, *U.S. War Bonds and War Stamps for New Ideas*, WPB (1942–1943), NAID 534223.

53. Ford Instrument Company, *Win \$325.00 Monthly for Your Ideas*, WPB (1942–1943), NAID 534232.

54. Pratt and Whitney Aircraft, *Suggestion Awards Increased Again!*, WPB (1942–1943), NAID 534224.

55. *Bonds for Brainstorms*, WPB (1942–1943), NAID 534148.



Figure 21 *Production for Victory. Ford Instrument Co. Grand Prize. Win a Pin.* WPB (1942–1943), NAID 534171.

wallet alongside the text: “An idea may mean wealth in your wallet!”⁵⁶

- Figure 21 features an image of the lapel pin that was offered to prizewinning suggestions at the Ford Instrument Company. The grand prize was gold-filled, and the first and second prizes were sterling silver.

While one poster identified the highest prize awarded as \$1,544, there was also ambivalence in how to gauge these payouts.⁵⁷ Take Goodyear’s employee who received \$75 for his suggestion to use a double die for cutting out the face pieces of gas masks. “For some thought and the toil of writing about 20 words, the company paid him \$75,” Osborn (1942: 23) enthused. “Few authors ever receive \$3.75 a word” (ibid.).⁵⁸ Osborn’s appreciative calculation did not, however, take into account the value of the savings for Goodyear or the nation: doubling production likely reaped benefits well in excess of \$75. Moreover, while workers were put on a par with management, designers, or engineers in terms of their ability to have ideas (as

evidenced in the imagining poster [fig. 12]), manual labor was in another sense not redefined as knowledge work. Whereas managers were remunerated for their thoughts as an integral part of their jobs—which barred them from participating in the idea drive—workers’ wages did not reflect compensation for having ideas. That is, while the work space was recoded as a fighting front, production soldiers were not paid a *wage* for their wartime ideation. Hence workers on the shop floor *were* depicted as having ideas while working the machine (see figs. 12, 14, 15, 16, and 19) and could reap a reward for a useful idea, but they were only paid a wage for their manual work.

Reports with tallies of the suggestions received and reviewed, and how many of those were accepted, awarded, and implemented, were sent to the War Production

56. Morton Manufacturing Company, *An Idea Means Wealth in Your Wallet!*, WPB (1942–1943), NAID 534155.

57. *Some Recent Suggestion Awards*, WPB (1942–1943), 534186. That would amount to \$22,340 in April 2017 (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2017).

58. This department was increasingly run by women and was integrated in 1944 (Endres 2000: 83–84).

Drive in Washington, DC (WPB 1942a: 6). Those ideas that were granted an award by a local suggestion committee were also passed on to the WPB and “made available to all American war plants and interested United Nations [Allied countries] through the system of plow-back into industry as a further benefit to war production” (ibid.). The War Production Drive had its own jury, the Board of Individual Rewards, which handed out national honors to outstanding “Thinkers for Victory” in American factories (Steel 1942: 49). Figure 22 shows the board, made up of engineers and other technical experts, mulling through ideas.⁵⁹ The highest award, the Citation of Individual Production Merit, was granted for ideas or suggestions that were useful in many plants (Terrio 1943: 26). James (see fig. 15), the organist and conductor who worked as a machinist in the Shell Finish Department of the National Tube Company, received one of the first Citations of Individual Production Merit from President Franklin D. Roosevelt.⁶⁰



Figure 22 War Workers' Ideas. Jury Votes on War Workers' Ideas That Save Man-Hours and Critical Materials. Photographer: Alfred T. Palmer. Farm Security Administration—OWI, 1942, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, call no. LC-USE6-D-009370 [P&P].

Because ideas were dropped in the suggestion box, ideas also became calculable and measurable. As a result, the idea drives displayed a remarkable confidence in the existence, number, and value of ideas, as evidenced in posters, industrial studies, and newspaper articles. The *New York Times* (1943, 1944) published scores of articles in 1943–44 chronicling the explosion of ideas sent to Washington, DC, set forth by the pressures of the war and the lure, no doubt, of cash and other symbolic gifts. In April 1944, for example, the newspaper ran the following subtitle: “Under Plan 1,788 Production Drive Awards Made for Ideas from within Industry” (*New York Times* 1944). These were the ideas that received national recognition from the Board of Individual Rewards. Ideas mushroomed locally as well. Some posters figured as animating scorecards. One poster reported, for instance, that a corporation had adopted 2,746 suggestions in 1942, resulting in a total of \$25,410 in awards.⁶¹ The

59. Seven men are named in the archive: Charles B. Francis, Carnegie, Illinois Steel Corporation (engineer); J. L. Bray, Purdue University (coal mining); Paul H. Stanley, Pitcairn Auto-Gyro Company (engineer); L. A. Poole of War Production Drive's Awards Field Operations Branch; Whiting Williams of Cleveland (consultant on labor relations); James B. Gent, United Steel Workers; and William P. Hill, Bethlehem Steel (engineer).

60. See *Citation Winners. President Roosevelt, Shown Awarding a Certificate to Herbert R. James, an Employee of the Christy Park Works, National Tube Company, McKeesport, Pennsylvania*, photographer unknown, OWI, 1942, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, call no. LC-USE6-D-007234 [P&P].

61. *Man of the Hour. The Imagineer. He Is Doing Things*, OWI [1943–1945], NAID 534208.



Figure 23 *Ideas Going to Waste!* OWI, (1943–1945), NAID 514572.

sation” (fig. 23). Contrary to contemporary anxieties about intellectual property, the perceived problem was not that the conversation partner might walk away with the idea. Sharing ideas was not the problem; rather, it was that they would not be shared—and circulated—*enough*. Ideas had to be donated to the nation, to Uncle Sam via the War Production Drive. “Ideas for Uncle Sam . . . The nation wants them now . . . This is your chance to Help Uncle Sam win your war.”⁶⁵ This giving necessitated committing ideas to paper—to catch them and *not* keep them to yourself or between you and your colleague. That ideas needed

Packard Motor Car Corporation, in collaboration with the United Auto Workers, reportedly garnered 19,398 ideas within a year of collecting them, and 2,610 were adopted and used (Chalmers and Wolf 1943: 409).⁶² Similarly, after offering \$1,000 in war bonds *a day*, General Motors received ideas “at the rate of 200 a day. . . . In 5 months 31,777 ideas [had been] received from the rank and file” (Osborn 1942: 15). By the end of 1942, labor-management committees had collected four hundred thousand suggestions.⁶³

The rather remarkable numbers and tangibility of collected ideas notwithstanding, the process of collecting ideas did, emphatically, not focus on private property. The posters exemplified an effort, aided by a variety of awards, to get ideas out of the heads of citizens, out of the minds of workers, and—via paper—into the nation. “Don’t keep it to yourself,” a poster featuring a worker’s safety hat counseled—doing so was framed as unpatriotic.⁶⁴ Out of concern that ideas might go to waste, another poster cautioned against giving ideas away in “idle conver-

62. Compare this with current accounting discourse on “intangibles,” including ideas. Ideas and knowledge production are nowadays often depicted as resisting calculation. They can come into view only if one “looks beyond the numbers” (see Van Eekelen 2015a).

63. Archival information for figure 22, Library of Congress, call no. LC-USE6-D-009370 [P&P].
64. *Is There an Idea under Your Hat?*, WPB (1942–1943), NAID 534145.

65. *Ideas for Uncle Sam*, WPB (1942–1943), NAID 534197. As one reviewer pointed out, this concern over ideas lost in idle conversation is quite reminiscent of the “careless talk” campaigns that were waged by the same offices (the Office of War Information). Whereas in the idle conversation poster the problem was that ideas were not shared enough, in careless talk posters the concern was that ideas and information could fall into the hands of enemy forces (“loose lips sink ships”).

to be donated was, finally, also invoked in a poster in which the spectral presence of a soldier said: “Come on, buddy, *give!*!”⁶⁶ The addressee was a worker who was having an idea while working his machine (note, again, that knowledge production was spatiotemporally taking place on the shop floor—the worker did not need to be “free” in order to ideate). The text underneath stressed the importance of circulating this precious material: “Ideas locked up in your head have no value. Release them now. Your country and your company need them. Use the suggestion box.” To realize the value of ideas, they had to be moved out of the domain of individuals and into the space of the nation. They were “nationalized” in the sense that the challenge was not primarily to cash in on them privately but to distribute them to as many military and industrial sites as possible. Ideation in this particular economy of ideas was a way to connect the war abroad with the workers at home, and its particular moral economy called for collective access, not private property.⁶⁷

Conclusion: Economies of Ideas

This article described the nexus of knowledge production, economy, and war, by exploring how nonexpert knowledge, valuable exactly because manual workers were using their bodies and minds, became a coveted object for the United States in the crisis presented by World War II. The posters that incited ideation from workers operating war machines provide a window on this particular economy of ideas. Economies of ideas are mobilized and modified in concrete settings—in this instance, manual workers’ ideas were deliberately incorporated in a national war effort—and in response to specific social, political, and economic pressures.

In my analysis, I have shown how the posters reconfigured time and space, how they incorporated workers’ bodies and minds, and what particular understandings of expertise and property they proffered. In this wartime economy, the soldier abroad and the production soldier at home were cast as spatially and temporally coeval, in that the production front, home front, and fighting front were presented as interchangeable parts of a seamless whole. This reframed workers in relation to soldiers—the workplace became a place of war—but also in relation to management. Labor-management committees were tasked to jointly ameliorate wartime production, among other things, by instigating idea drives. Workers in war plants were implored to help Uncle Sam win the war by submitting ideas that in the short

66. *Suggest Ways to Save*, WPB (1942–1943), NAID 534181.

67. One booklet by the WPB stipulated that “you are free to copy exactly” the ideas offered (on production charts). The publication continued, “If they don’t just fit the conditions in your own plant, change them around until they do” (WPB, n.d.: 11).

term may have run counter to their labor interests but that would aid in shortening the time of war.

In a departure from a hierarchical predilection for disembodied expertise, the particular organization of knowledge production in this economy of ideas—where there was no separation between handling a machine and having an idea—framed blue-collar workers as good thinkers who could outthink the Axis. Factory spaces and work time were depicted as coexistent with—rather than antithetical to—thought. The laboring body and thought were represented as coconstitutive and copresent. It was the imbrication of laboring and thinking, and the laboring body as the condition for thinking, that made thought possible.

In this economy of ideas, several threats to the idea drive had to be circumvented, the most pressing one being contentious management-labor relations. Moreover, the lone worker could keep ideas to himself or herself, whether out of self-preservation, unfamiliarity with the value of his or her ideas for the war effort, or purported languor in committing an idea to paper. The war was used to reframe labor-management relations, to bracket any apprehensions over workplace transformations that might result from employee suggestions, and to discipline workers to carry a suggestion blank at all times. Ideas were harvested in suggestion boxes and plowed back into the nation, and their flow was monitored in posters, war production bulletins, and newspaper accounts. Posters such as *Uncle Sam Wants Your Ideas* offered workers a way to recognize themselves as thinkers whose thought mattered to the nation.

The ideas that were wanted from workers were cast as ephemeral and firm, visionary and practical. They appealed, on the one hand, to modernity and progress and, on the other, to very concrete firsthand knowledge that could accelerate industrial production. While prizes and rewards for useful suggestions were shelled out, the award schemes also prevented a full-fledged redefinition of manual labor as knowledge work, as wages stayed the same. With ideation cast as a way to connect the war abroad with the workers at home, the idea drives' particular moral economy called for collective access, not private property.

This wartime account of a mode of knowledge production in which manual workers' experiences in the workplace and ideation were intricately entwined provides one of the prehistories of what is nowadays called a knowledge economy. This concept is often framed as having no history of its own: it is presented as supplanting other economies (agricultural, industrial, service) and therefore as in itself unprecedented, because it is new. Instead, I argue that present-day valorizations of creativity have multiple prehistories—that they build on different (and contradictory) historical moments in which ideas, knowledge, and creativity have

been absorbed or meshed into discourses about the economy. This article, part of a larger project on the history of “undisciplined thought,” suggests that the seeds of a modern knowledge economy and an appreciation of ideation germinated within rather than outside (spatially or temporally) military-industrial contexts. I have argued elsewhere that what is nowadays called a knowledge economy is still coeval with a manufacturing economy: the current valorization of ideas connotes not so much a supersession of an industrial economy—a temporal displacement—but a spatial displacement of production processes. That is, even though a knowledge economy often prides itself as a next stage of civilizational existence and value production, without the plethora of offshored production processes, there would be no knowledge economy (Van Eekelen 2015b). As a graphic historical trace of a moment in which a particular interest in ideas was configured in a nexus of war, economic organization, and knowledge production, the wartime posters highlight the potential (and import) of situating economies of ideas—and the valorization of knowledge—in time and space. They offer us a glimpse of a moment when ideas became part of a wartime economy and showcase how, in the process, imaginations of knowledge, economy, workers, and (self-)government were redefined.

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