

CAN DESIGN STOP A WAR & SAVE THE PLANET?

Cinque manifesti che hanno cambiato la storia

— CAROL A. WELLS

Attivista, storica d'arte, curatrice e founder del Center for the Study of Political Graphics, un archivio con più di 90,000 poster. L'archivio è consultabile sul sito: www.politicalgraphics.org

The short answer is "Yes". This essay discusses five posters made between 1970 and 2011 that changed the course of history. One even changed the history of graphic design.

Q: AND BABIES? A: AND BABIES

On March 16, 1968 US soldiers killed between 343 and 567 women, children, and elders in My Lai, a village in South Viet Nam. The US military documented the massacre, but public knowledge was suppressed for more than a year. The American public and the world learned of the My Lai Massacre in November 1969, in an article by journalist Seymour Hersh.

US public opinion turned against the war after Ron Haerberle's photo was reproduced in the press and in this widely disseminated poster. When TV journalist Mike Wallace asked Paul Meadlo, one of the soldiers who participated in the massacre, "And babies?" he responded, "And babies." The typeface on the poster was photographically enlarged directly from the New York Times quoting the widely televised interview.

HIGH NOON FOR POLAND

Shortly before the 1989 parliamentary elections in Poland — the first election since 1948 in which non-Communist Party members participated — Tomasz Sarnecki was working on a class project using collages from US western movies. The 23-year-old art student had made several mock election posters using a photo of Gary Cooper from "High Noon" academy award winning film from 1953. He titled it "High Noon for Poland." His teacher called an organizer from Solidarnosc, a Polish trade union that was campaigning. The organizer took a poster without saying a word to Sarnecki.

Sarnecki next saw his poster on the Sunday of the elections, posted all over Warsaw. Solidarnosc won the election and this poster is credited with inspiring large voter turnout and changing Polish history.

Thousands of copies of this poster were reproduced in Italy, air-dropped into Poland the night before the election, and wheat-pasted throughout



the country by members of the Solidarnosc. Although the exact funding source for this expensive and tightly organized action is not known, Solidarnosc was praised by Ronald Reagan and Pope John Paul II — all vehemently anti-Communist — and had received millions of dollars from the Catholic Church, AFL-CIO and the CIA.

Ten years later, the poster was printed on the cover of Polityka, a major Polish magazine, and called "the poster that changed Poland's history".

HOPE

In 2008, when Barack Obama began his campaign for president, the majority of the American people were dissatisfied after eight years of President George W. Bush, seven years of the war in Afghanistan, and five years of the Iraq War. Shepard Fairey's "Hope" poster captured what they needed: hope for a better future. Like "High Noon for Poland" the image and slogan inspired people by promising change.

It also changed design history. The style Fairey used continues to be adopted and appropriated for countless causes and individuals,

including Edward Snowden, the Occupy Movement and most recently, Volodymyr Zelenskyy. As the style became identified with liberal values, it has also been usurped by conservatives using negative words such as "NOPE" or "DOPE" under a stylized portrait of someone they dislike.

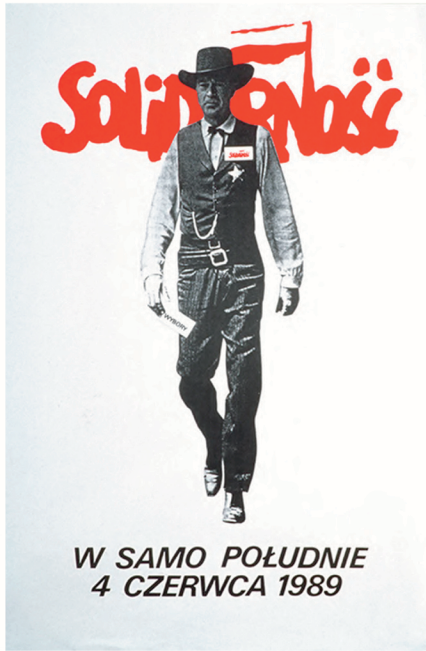
WHAT IS OUR ONE DEMAND?

This poster by the Canadian-based Adbusters Media Foundation is credited for starting the Occupy Wall Street movement in the US; yet it is perhaps the least familiar poster of the five featured here. In June 2011, Adbusters sent subscribers an email saying that "American needs its own Tahrir," referring to Tahrir Square in Cairo, occupied by hundreds of thousands of Egyptians from January 25 to February 11, 2011 when Egyptian President Mubarak resigned.

In July 2011, Adbusters proposed a peaceful occupation of Wall Street to protest corporate influence on democracy, the lack of legal consequences for those who brought about the global crisis of monetary insolvency, and an increasing

A sinistra, Q: And Babies? A: And Babies, Poster Committee of Art Workers Coalition, Frazer Dougherty, Jon Hendricks e Irving Petlin. Offset. Collezione del Center for the Study of Political Graphics, New York (NY), foto di R. L. Haerberle, 1970

A destra, High Noon for Poland, di Tomasz Sarnecki. Progettato a Varsavia (Polonia) e stampato a Rome (Italia). Offset. Collezione del Center for the Study of Political Graphics, Offset, 1989



IRAQ [ABU GHRAIB PRISONER]

As with "Q: And Babies" this poster was inspired by shocking photographs. In April 2004, the now infamous photos of American soldiers torturing detainees in Abu Ghraib, the US-run prison near Baghdad, went viral. As with the My Lai Massacre poster 35 years earlier, the American people were horrified to see crimes against humanity committed by their own soldiers. Seymour Hersh, the journalist who exposed the My Lai Massacre, also exposed the war crimes in Abu Ghraib.

In March 2003, 72% of Americans supported the Iraq War. By late June 2004, it had dropped to 39% support. The use of this image in



countless posters contributed to the effective anti-war campaign that was gaining momentum in early 2004.

Two of the earliest and almost identical protest posters were produced simultaneously in New York by Cooper Greene and in Los Angeles by Forkscrew Graphics. Both merged the Christ-like photo of the hooded man with Apple's contemporaneous iPod ads.

Both artists used pseudonyms to protect their identity and inserted their anti-war posters into displays of the real ads, provoking a lot of attention. These posters and the many others that included the hooded man, helped turn the US public against the Iraq War by focusing on the atrocities committed in their name and with their tax dollars.



None of the impact on society discussed above would have happened without countless activists organizing around the issues and using the posters to educate, agitate, and inspire people to action. The posters are an essential and central tool for organizing support for or opposition to a cause or candidate. As we are living in arguably the most existential moment in history - when life as we know it is deteriorating rapidly - the need for graphic designers to work with activists to get the messages out is now more critical than ever. "What difference could a poster make?" We can't definitively prove that a single poster changes anything, but if we don't try to make things better, things will get a lot worse a lot faster.

A sinistra, What Is Our One Demand?, Adbuster Media Foundation. Offset. Collezione del Center for the Study of Political Graphics, Vancouver, Canada, 2011

iRaq [Abu Ghraib prisoner], Forkscrew Graphics. Silkscreen. Collezione del Center for the Study of Political Graphics, Los Angeles, CA 2004

