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# WHEN BUBBLE-GUM CARDS WERE **THE RAGE**

Parents were appalled by the graphic war imagery Gum Inc. was selling to their kids. But government propagandists told the company to keep its cards coming.

by Lee W. Jones

**A**S CLOUDS OF WAR DARKENED OVER ASIA AND EUROPE IN 1938, how shocking did a children's candy store item have to be to pique and polarize a nation? Rochester Divinity School representative Donald Hobbes labeled the product "the rankest kind of poison," whose "crassly commercial thoughtlessness" showed "a disregard for international understanding." *Life*, the leading magazine of the era, said the item exposed preadolescents to such "severe anti-Japanese prejudices" that "future historians" might see it as the "cause of a future US-Japan war." And many parents and schools were so disturbed by the gruesome nature that they confiscated their children's purchases. The product that so angered America's citizenry? Bubble-gum cards.

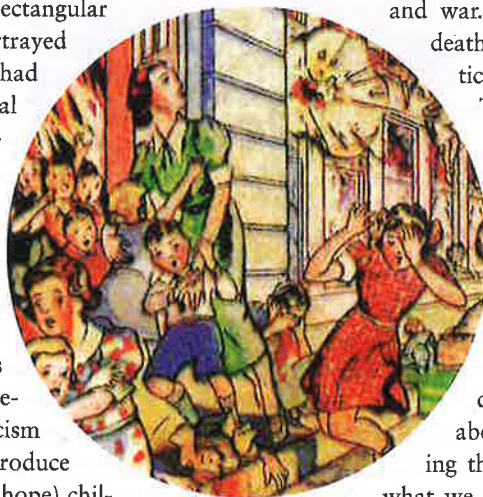
Sold in one-cent packages with one card and a stick of gum, the trading cards of *Horrors of War*, the first-ever WWII bubble-gum card set, covered in detail Japan's brutal invasion of China—the beginning of the Asian phase of what would become World War II—and contemporary conflicts in Spain and Ethiopia. Almost square in shape (different from latter-day rectangular baseball cards) the war cards graphically portrayed subjects that the film industry's Hays Code had outlawed for general audiences, namely brutal killings and cruelty to children. Warren Bowman, owner of Philadelphia-based Gum Inc., the producer of the set, defended his product by saying his goal was simply "to teach [young people] by exposing them to the horrors of war." Indeed the back of each card (image on the front, text on the back) bore the slogan "To know the horrors of war is to want *peace*." The set's artistic creator, George Moll, responded to *Life*'s criticism with the argument that his purpose was to produce "a new means of influencing (favorably we hope) children's opinions" and that he was "anti-war not anti-Japan."

The strong negative reaction to the set was evidence that the American public intensely desired that the United States remain neutral and avoid war—even if that meant ignoring the horrors unfolding in Japan's invasion of China, which would ultimately leave 15 million Chinese dead.

The card set *was*, despite the criticisms, antiwar. Though some may have questioned whether a bubble-gum card set was a suitable platform for exploring such a matter, the set did educate its preadolescent audience about foreign conflicts while it held a position matching the nation's majority stance on militarism and war. In graphically presenting war's horrors of death and loss, the cards strove to prevent romantic illusions and excessive jingoism in the young. Their depictions were stylistically parallel to what historian John M. Harris described as *Life* magazine's "new way of covering war," with graphic images of "women and children reacting to war's totality."

One card that sent a particularly strong message was "Bombing an American School Building," which imagined a devastating attack with children bleeding and students jumping out of windows. It cautioned about a terrible fate for the United States, asserting that the image is "not an exaggeration as to what we could expect if America should be attacked from the air..., surprised by cruel enemy bombers." It elaborates in gory detail: "When the rain of death is ended, a smear of gore and of bones is all that remains of what was once a playful band of children."

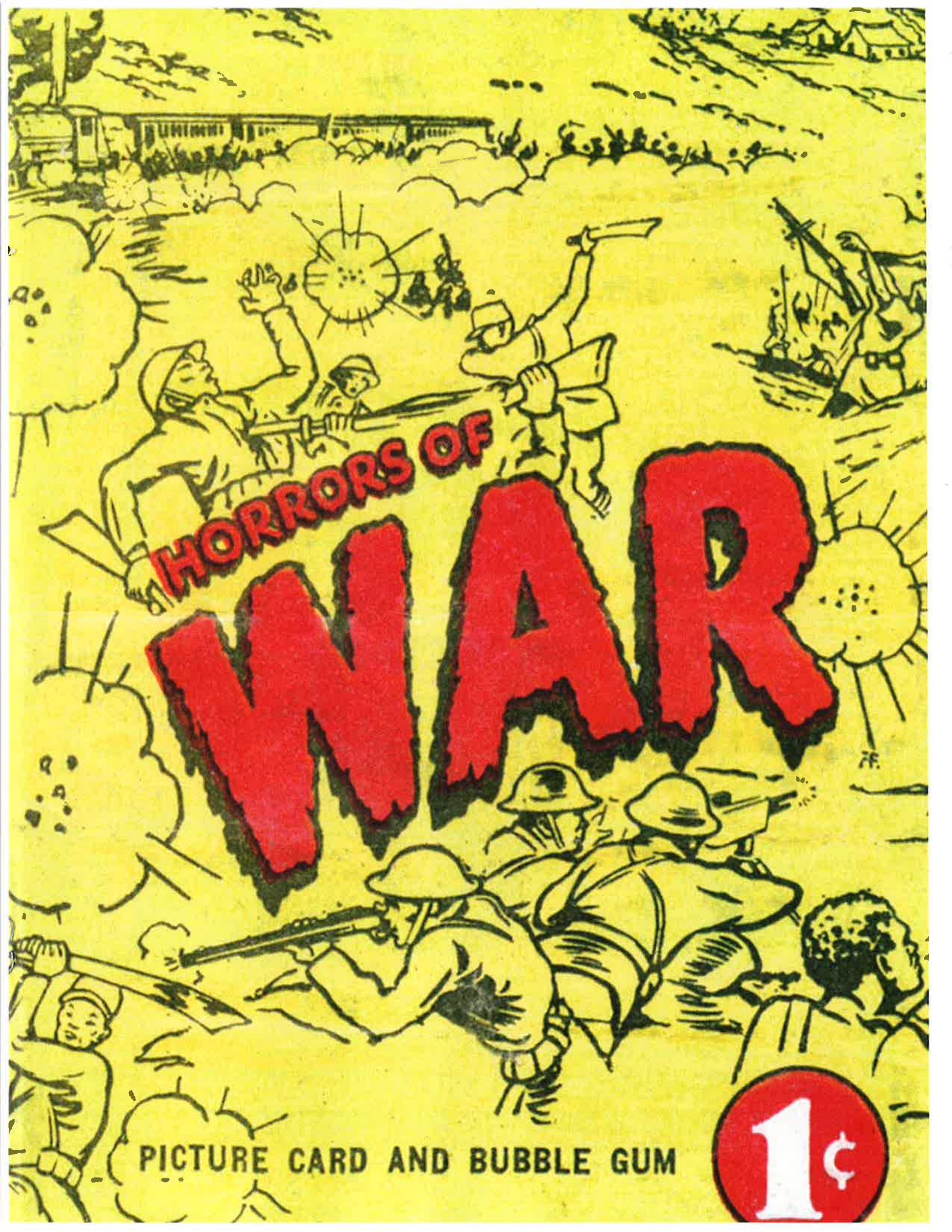
Gum Inc.'s message urging America to avoid this nightmare scenario was both realistic and idealistic. Realistically, there was the



Opposite: Gum Inc. designed its first set of WWII bubble-gum cards, *Horrors of War*, to indoctrinate its young customers against war. The packaging gives a hint of the brutality depicted in full color on the cards themselves. Above: Cards such as "Bombing an American School Building" (a detail from which appears here) went a bit too far for many parents, teachers, and cultural critics.

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# HORRORS OF WAR

PICTURE CARD AND BUBBLE GUM

1¢



## WHEN BUBBLE-GUM CARDS WERE **THE RAGE** by Lee W. Jones

warning that “imminent peril surrounds our country” as improvements in travel decreased its “ocean security” (true). The cards contended mysteriously and somewhat hysterically that South American interests (fascist sympathies?) “bring the chances [of war] closer” and that Mexico is “just across the border!” (perhaps remembering World War I’s Zimmerman Telegraph proposing an alliance between Germany and Mexico). Idealistically, the company held that “a condition of Patriotic Peace is the only substitute for the threat of war” and that “peace workers be given every encouragement.” On this point—recommending a leadership role for the United States as peacemaker—the set’s message differed from popular attitudes and policies. But true to its pacifist ideology, it made no recommendation for America to begin military preparations.

**W**ITH THE BEGINNING OF the European phase of the war in 1939, the United States continued to rely on its geographic isolation and diplomatic separation. When Germany swept through Europe in the spring of 1940 and defeated France in 40 days, however, Americans were shocked and panicked. Military appropriations drastically rose and the first-ever peacetime draft was begun.

America’s delayed response to the global conflict contributed to military weakness and backwardness. Rick Atkinson, author of *An Army at Dawn: The War in North Africa, 1942–1943*, described America’s equipment and weaponry in the late 1930s as woeful, including an air force of 1,700 mostly obsolete planes and army of men carrying 1902 Springfield rifles. Even with increased military spending and the draft, he wrote, the nation was hesitant “to move to a full war footing.”

Adding to the military’s concerns was a muckraking article in *Life* in 1941 charging that morale was low in the army and that roughly 50 percent of draftees were planning not to reenlist after their mandatory one year of service. The US government reached out to Gum Inc. for public relations help, and soon the war card set *Uncle Sam* was issued. The company announced that it was “glad as always to cooperate with Uncle Sam” and that it hoped to bring to the “attention of millions of young Americans” the work of the nation’s “splendid military services.”

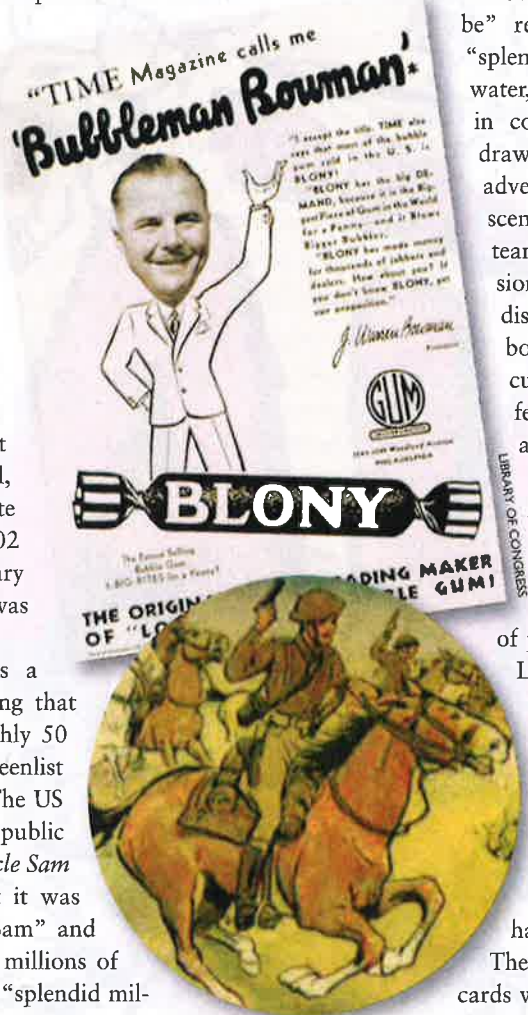
The new card set profiled the training and laid out the weaponry of all four military branches that would fight the war overseas: the army, navy, marines, and army air corps. It represented a major shift in ideology from the extreme pacifism of the first set. The tone and imagery was different, too, due to the furor over the original. Featuring bright, warm background colors and innocent,

Boy Scout–like faces of young soldiers, the *Uncle Sam* set presented military training as akin to learning to play a sport rather than to kill an enemy. There is no hint of danger or physical harm. America is presented in a global, diplomatic vacuum with no mention of troubling world events or concerns.

The US military depicted in this second set seems to fit historian John Keegan’s characterization of a “warfare suited to the American character,” combining “moral scruples, historical optimism, and technological pioneering.” Young men are shown along with state-of-the-art equipment such as jeeps, radios, bomb-sights, carrier planes, submarines, and anti-aircraft guns. The cards promote the idea that the men’s training prepared them not just for war, but also “for good-paying positions on the outside when their period of enlistment is ended” (foreshadowing the 1980s and 1990s “Be all you can be” recruiting campaign). Members of the “splendid services” are shown working underwater, patrolling on skis, and even taking part in cowboy-like cavalry charges with guns drawn—all likely to appeal to the young, adventurous target audience. Other attractive scenarios depict service camaraderie and teamwork. Some cards tout a moral dimension, showing peacetime aid being given to disaster victims and “friendly small neighbors,” such as Santo Domingo being rescued from “revolutionists” variously referred to as “troublemakers,” “bandits,” and “desperadoes.”

A little fact-checking on Gum Inc.’s idealized portrayals reveals a somewhat less favorable picture. Much military equipment was actually in very short supply, with sometimes as much as half of production being sent overseas as Lend-Lease Act support for Great Britain and the Soviet Union. In some cases, GIs had to train with props rather than weapons—“drainpipes for anti-tank guns, stovepipes for mortar tubes..., brooms for rifles” and “eggs as grenades,” according to Rick Atkinson.

Many of the weapons the men did have were dated and otherwise flawed. The standard artillery piece shown on the cards was the “modified French” 75 millimeter gun, which US officers had labelled inadequate as early as 1918. The 37mm anti-tank gun would prove not powerful enough to stop German tanks. Submarine and plane-launched torpedoes were defective and, in the estimation of military historian Ronald Spector, the “worst in the world.” They fell short of their targets, or failed to detonate, or exploded “nowhere near a ship.” While President Franklin Roosevelt attested that airpower



Opposite: *The World in Arms* set highlighted war preparations of several European nations. Above, lower: The “Cavalry Charge” card (a detail from which is shown here) dubiously described mounted forces as important for scouting and pursuit of the enemy. Above, upper: J. Warren Bowman continued to run his successful gum company after the war (this is a postwar ad). Eventually, in 1956, Topps bought it.



Can America Maintain Peace with THE WORLD IN ARMS?

# THE WORLD IN ARMS

Picture Card and Bubble Gum

1¢

This package of Bubble Gum contains one  
of a series of Picture Cards depicting  
**AIRPLANES, SHIPS, IRON CAVALRY, FIELD ARTILLERY,  
FORTIFICATIONS, AND MISCELLANEOUS WORLD ARMS**

Save to get a complete collection  
Copyright, 1939, GUM, INC., Philadelphia, Pa.



## WHEN BUBBLE-GUM CARDS WERE **THE RAGE** by Lee W. Jones

was “the only means to gaining victory,” wrote British historian Richard Overy, US preparations were “flimsy.” The nation lacked a strategic bomber force and had to create one quickly “from scratch.” The military’s weaknesses reflected “years of neglect in weapons research.”

There were other erroneous contentions in the cards, too. Bombers were not “nearly invisible due to special paint.” Cavalry charges on horseback were no longer viable. Putting down revolutions in Latin America had ended when Roosevelt established the 1933 non-interventionist Good Neighbor policy.

**O**N THE BRIGHT SIDE of the preparedness ledger, the United States had the best submarines in the world and was pioneering the development of dive-bombing. Its marines were mastering the tactics of amphibious assault “to a degree of effectiveness unknown in foreign armies,” according to Spector.

Gum Inc. had taken on a daunting propaganda challenge in trying to portray a successful military mobilization to a historically isolated and anti-military nation *before* there was officially a war to join. The company managed to avoid jingoism and militarism, and even as it idealized and exaggerated the situation in favor of the United States, US forces would, after the Pearl Harbor attack, rapidly achieve remarkable success of the sort the card-makers had hoped for. In one year, a powerful military would be created, changing the “balance between the United States and her enemies...almost overnight,” Richard Overy wrote.

Later in 1941, but before Pearl Harbor, Gum Inc. produced the supplementary civil defense series *Uncle Sam’s Home Defense*. The idea of preparing in peacetime to protect the US homeland from direct attack was alien to the national experience in those days. The last serious threat to the nation had been the British fleet in the War of 1812. The threat Gum Inc. addressed in 1941 was what it called “today’s form of warfare,” which meant airplanes dropping conventional or poison-gas bombs on American cities. Fears of such a danger were intense. According to Overy, the “terror of air power was obsessing every mind,” and gas warfare was “an ever-present anxiety.” Germany’s 1940–1941 Blitz on London, the use of gas by Japan and Italy, and the fact that Germany had pioneered the weaponization of gas in World War I all substantiated Americans’ concerns. Gum Inc. stated that its goals for *Uncle Sam’s Home Defense* were to show the “necessity for...an army of Civilians trained and ready to protect” their communities in an emergency. Once again, the company was answering a US government request for publicity help, specifically for the army air corps. Gum Inc. created a card highlighting the new slogan “Keep ’em flying.”

The text on the *Uncle Sam’s Home Defense* cards reveals several noteworthy blind spots in Gum Inc.’s assessment of threats to

the United States. Its assertion that defense efforts are “naturally...concentrated in the Atlantic and Gulf Coasts” strangely left out the Pacific Coast. This Eastern emphasis is particularly ironic since it was Japan that was pioneering long-range strategic bombing with a new aircraft carrier force. Germany, the Axis power closest to the East Coast, had neither long-range bombers nor a carrier force, as should have been made obvious by its failure in the mid-1940 Battle of Britain.

These misjudgments can be attributed to the United States’ weak intelligence apparatus. British journalist Max Hastings has pointed out that America lacked “secret agents abroad” and thus did not have the ability to contradict faulty army intelligence reports such as those claiming that Germany had 12,000 long-range bombers. Also at fault was a president who, as Overy put it, so “deeply feared” Germany’s “scientific genius” that he was susceptible to hardly believable rumors about German capabilities, such as one report that Germany had a stratospheric bomber that could remain in flight without refueling for three straight days.

Another Gum Inc. blind spot concerned Germany’s U-boats. It failed to mention them at all, even though they were one of the big military and civil defense issues of the time. In 1941, German subs were threatening Lend-Lease shipments, and once the destroyer USS *Greer* was attacked on September 4, there was a state of de facto naval war between the United States and Germany. Later, a U-boat would land saboteurs in America. Perhaps Gum Inc. ignored the threat of submarines because the United States was, in the words of historian Michael Gannon, so “appallingly undefended” against them that there was nothing “morale building” that could be said.

The threat of poison gas was, on the other hand, well covered. The “Gas Decontamination” card lists the various types of gases in use and what they smelled like. Phosgene, for example, smelled like “new mown hay.” Also mentioned were some of the horrifying effects. Phosgene was described as “deadly and torturing.” Mustard gas ate through clothing and flesh. The “Civilian Type Gas Mask” card tells how gas masks worked (by filtering toxins out of the air); how to put them on properly (hold one’s breath during the process); and how to remove them (wearing gloves). “Home Shelter Room” advised that gas masks be stored in the basement and that doors and windows be made gasproof by sealing them with wet blankets or rugs. The card advised people hiding in a basement to “remain as still as possible.”

Some of the advice, collected from various authorities, was unorthodox. One Los Angeles city health official, for example, urged those caught outside during a gas attack to “remove their outer clothing” before going inside, reasoning that it is “better to have a red face than a burned body.”

Generally, the cards related to gas attacks reveal Gum Inc.



Patriotism was the selling point of the *Uncle Sam* set (this is a detail of a package wrapper). The cards featured the efforts of the four main military branches: army, navy, marines, and army air forces.

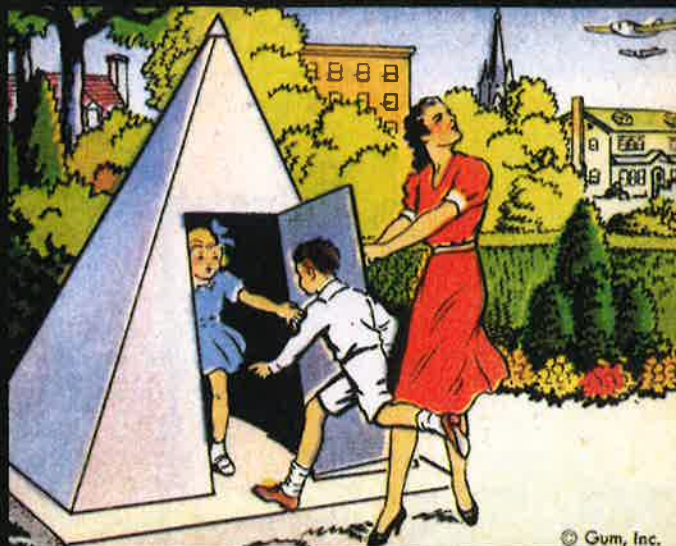


**117. Uncle Sam's HOME DEFENSE  
Steel Shelter**

This steel tent-like contrivance is one of several types of bomb shelters now being offered to American Civilians. It is made of quarter-inch steel, but it is not intended to withstand direct hits. Other type shelters are buried in the ground, made of concrete and are considered safer. The shelter shown in the diagram at the right is the well-known "Garden Variety" that is seeing service in Great Britain. It is made of pre-cast concrete sections entirely below ground. The home-owners enter their under-ground room by means of a man-hole in the walk.



Ask for Uncle Sam Bubble Gum and complete your collection of cards Nos. 1 to 96 picturing U. S. Soldiers, Sailors, Marines and Airmen in training to Defend America. Copyright 1941, GUM, INC., Phila., Pa. Printed in U. S. A. Buy U. S. Defense Savings Bonds or Stamps



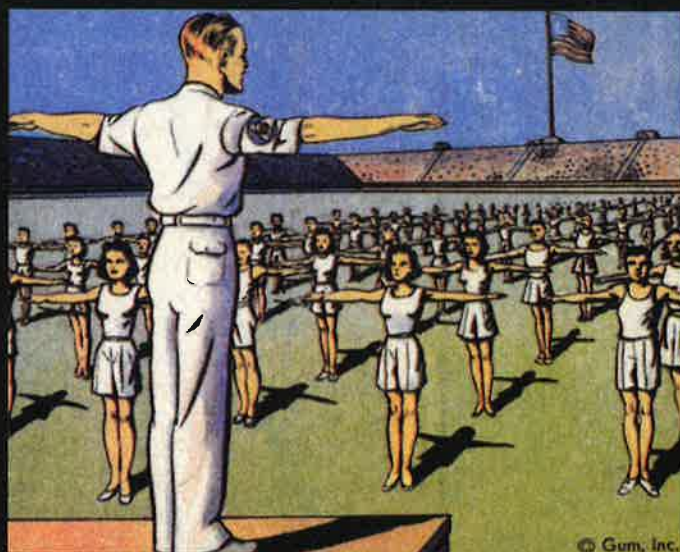
© Gum, Inc.

**123. Uncle Sam's HOME DEFENSE  
"Hale" America**



As part of the Civilian Defense plans to help "build up" America to withstand an attack, an Office of National Health has been created with John B. Kelly, well known athlete of Philadelphia, as Director. Under him are nine Area Directors responsible for the nine designated areas of the Defense setup. Plans include the distribution of information about proper eating habits; fostering sports and organizing community physical training groups (see picture); and the setting up of a speakers' bureau to carry the message to students and Defense workers. Young men of draft age, boys approaching twenty-one, parents of children under twenty-one and the children themselves come in for particular attention. Alice Marble, tennis star, is National Head of women's activities.

Ask for Uncle Sam Bubble Gum and complete your collection of cards Nos. 1 to 96 picturing U. S. Soldiers, Sailors, Marines and Airmen in training to Defend America. Copyright 1941, GUM, INC., Phila., Pa. Printed in U. S. A. Buy U. S. Defense Savings Bonds or Stamps



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**125 Uncle Sam's HOME DEFENSE  
Individual Defense Against Incendiary Bombs**

Much of the success which has accompanied Great Britain's defense against incendiary bombs has been due to the fact that every householder has been trained to take care of these fire bombs when they fall. Incendiary bombs do not explode, they burn with an intense heat. If they can be cooled down and "isolated," in other words, separated from their surroundings, they are less dangerous. The picture shows the "hose and scoop" treatment. The small boy will turn the scoop over to his mother as soon as she has the bomb cool enough to approach. Then she will scoop it up and carry it out to some open spot where it can burn itself out without spreading. "Snuffers" for use on pavement, consisting of inverted asbestos-lined bowls with long handles have been found helpful in London. It is the duty of the Fire Department to impart such information to householders.

Ask for Uncle Sam Bubble Gum and complete your collection of cards Nos. 1 to 96 picturing U. S. Soldiers, Sailors, Marines and Airmen in training to Defend America. Copyright 1941, GUM, INC., Phila., Pa. Printed in U. S. A. Buy U. S. Defense Savings Bonds or Stamps



© Gum, Inc.

Three cards, front and back, from the *Uncle Sam's Home Defense* set. The top one shows a commercially available backyard bomb shelter that, judging from appearances, might not have been worth the investment. The middle shows an instructor leading a group in calisthenics, which some people, controversially, considered essential for getting the nation ready to go to war. At bottom, a mother tries to extinguish a bomb in the family living room. Running away would certainly have been the wiser course of action.







## WHEN BUBBLE-GUM CARDS WERE **THE RAGE** by Lee W. Jones

struggling, and not always succeeding, to strike a balance between alarming and reassuring its young audience.

A similar tension between educating and frightening turned up in the coverage of responses on the ground to bombing threats. Numerous cards depict simulations or drills, with would-be enemy planes looming ominously above. While some cards portray controlled and well-managed reactions to air threats, other cards must have incited fear. Among the frightening cards is one that depicted a school evacuation, with scared children outside and planes flying overhead. Another showed the arrival of an ambulance, suggesting serious injury. Then there was one with a crying little girl comforted by a nurse as someone is put in an ambulance in the background.

Other nightmarish portrayals included fires, rescues, and unexploded bombs. "Individual Defense against Incendiary Bombs," while meant to be helpful, was quite terrifying. A mother and son in the midst of their bombed-out home attempt to extinguish an incendiary bomb during an attack, appearing oblivious to the possibility of additional firebombs landing nearby. The card claims falsely that "incendiary bombs do not explode." The Germans actually armed their incendiaries with delayed-action hand grenades designed to kill civilians who tried to extinguish them.

Cards depicting bomb shelters offered some dubious suggestions and strategies (though perhaps not as questionable as the duck-and-cover advice of the early Cold War days). "Steel Shelter" shows a commercially available backyard structure along with the alarming image of a frightened family rushing to safety, while the text on the back warns that this shelter model "was not intended to withstand a direct hit." It recommends safer types that were "buried in the ground." That bit of advice may not have aligned perfectly with the federal government's guidance that "basements and cellars" were "hazardous."

Several cards suggested taking shelter in subways, following the London Blitz model. But this made little sense in the United States, where most cities did not have undergrounds. Even the most substantial subway system, New York City's, would not have provided adequate protection, because its tunnels weren't deep enough below the surface.

Ultimately, the Office of Civilian Defense recommended the home as the safest place, specifically in a "prepared Refuge room" in the center of the house, as shown on the card "The Family Unit."

The most unusual card in the set may have been "Hale America," which depicted an exercise leader directing a large group of young females dressed in white uniforms that seems eerily reminiscent of a Hitler Youth girls division. Gum Inc. described the workout as part of a program to "build up" America "to withstand an attack." Calisthenics may have contributed overall to a more able-bodied, war-ready population, of course, but the program included frivolous defense-fitness activities such as "mass

tap dancing, ballet and bowling." The head of the Office of Civilian Defense's Children's Activities section, Mayris Chaney, a dancer, had said that among her goals were "providing recreation for children during air raids" and "developing programs of dancing and rhythmic exercises" for people "confined in an air-raid shelter"—both of which seem unrealistic, to say the least. In the furor and recriminations surrounding the Pearl Harbor attack, Congress attacked these fitness activities as frivolous and prohibited the use of Office of Civilian Defense funds for dance instruction. The office's Physical Fitness Division, which oversaw the program, was shut down.

**W**HILE THE *Uncle Sam's Home Defense* set tried to present the civil defense program as efficient and well-organized, most historians saw it otherwise. Richard Overly described preparations as "flimsy," and Lee Kennett argued that shortly after Pearl Harbor, Americans felt that the nation did not have a civil defense program "worthy of the name." One problem was that the Office of Civilian Defense lacked funding, as well as a sense of urgency, and unlike the workers depicted on the war cards, the actual volunteers were generally deprived of necessities such as identifying armbands, whistles, and even gas masks. They also often lacked essential firefighting equipment and air-raid sirens. The Pearl Harbor attack brought changes, providing funding, better leadership, and the impetus for volunteering. Ten million civilians were recruited by mid-1942.

While air attacks never quite developed, civil defense units refocused and worked with success in efforts such as flood relief to mitigate disasters that did occur. Kennett argues that the civil defense's "best battles" came in war-related "campaigns, rallies and drives" such as Victory Gardens, recycling campaigns, and organized morale-boosting events.

Gum Inc.'s record by the end of its run of pre-Pearl Harbor war cards (another set followed in 1942) wasn't all positive, but its mission had been a tricky one. The first set ran head on into a generally skeptical population. Subsequent sets took on the difficult task of persuading the people of a historically isolated nation to rev themselves up for a war that hadn't yet arrived on their shores. The cards attempted to portray a controlled and rational military mobilization, and the depictions on them were certainly idealized and exaggerated. Once war came to America at Pearl Harbor, however, military and civil defenses rapidly improved in ways that Gum Inc. had hoped to encourage. One after the other, the company and the nation rallied to the needs of war. ★



Above: "Home Shelter Room" urges citizens to descend into their basements and "remain as still as possible." This father apparently took the latter advice to heart; he didn't even loosen his tie. Opposite: Flip the "Civilian Type Gas Mask" card over to find instructions on use and cleaning.

LEE W. JONES earned his doctorate degree under historian and John F. Kennedy advisor Arthur Schlesinger Jr. and is now retired from teaching history at the Birch Wathen Lenox School in New York City. He has written for *The Nation*.