

A decorative border surrounds the central text area. It consists of thin black lines forming a frame with rounded corners. Various geometric shapes are placed along these lines: a red circle on the top-left, a black circle on the top-right, a red diamond, a pink circle, and a black diamond on the left side, and a pink diamond, a red circle, and a black diamond on the bottom-right. Curved lines with arrowheads are also present, suggesting movement or flow.

Polluted Blood

The Visual and Dramatistic Rhetoric of Two 20th-Century
Venereal Disease Awareness Posters

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Introduction

In the 1930s, an estimated one in ten Americans would contract syphilis in their lifetimes, and up to four times as many would catch gonorrhea (Wuebker, 2015)

Public health crusades have existed for centuries, but the American campaigns of the 1930s and 1940s are well-known for both their pervasiveness and their unique rhetoric.



How did the shift in rhetorical tactics between the 1930s and 1940s impact messages conveyed about venereal disease?



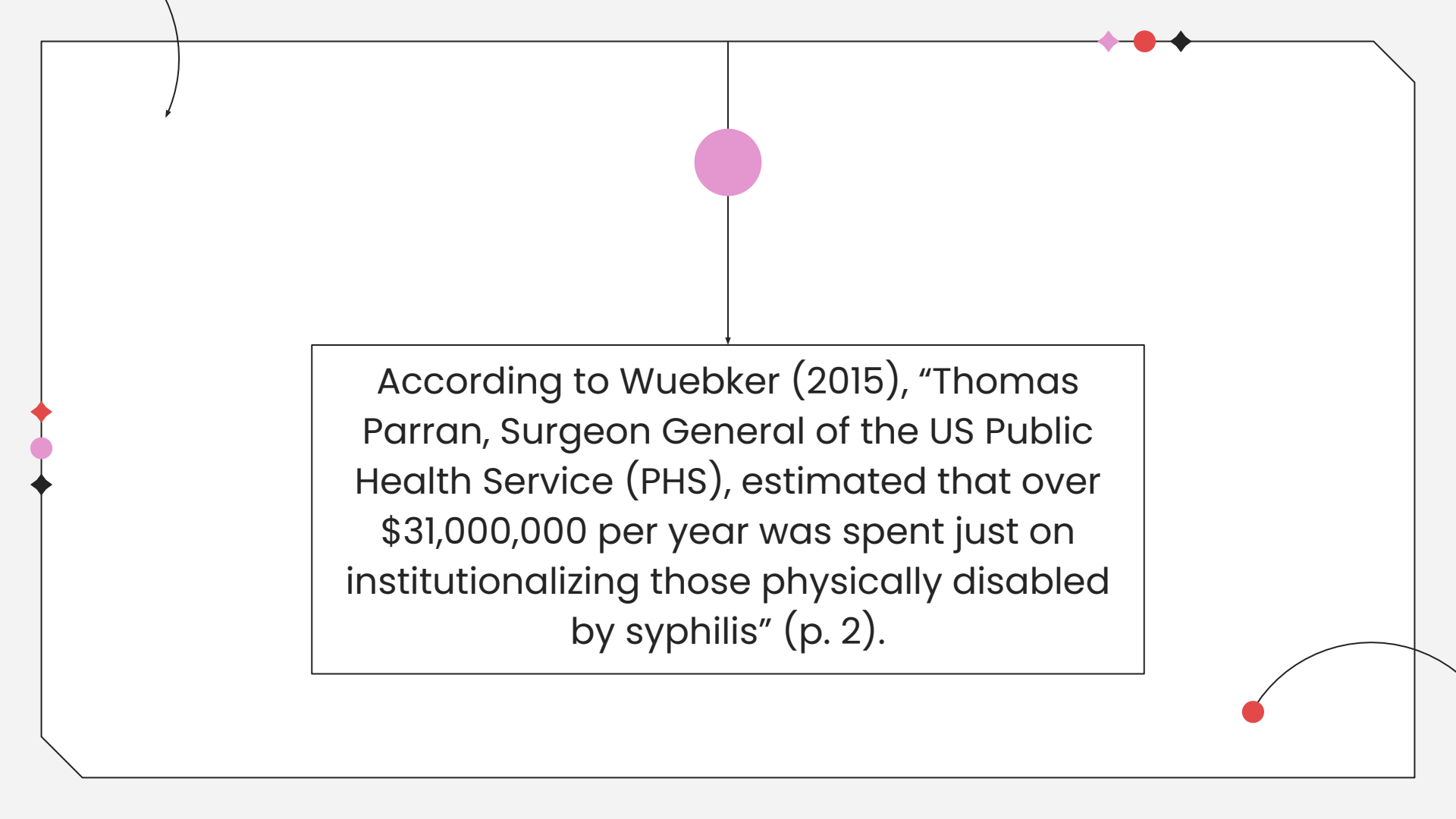
Historical Context

Before World War I, venereal disease control as an American public health issue was hampered by society's morals and judgments. (Cutler and Arnold, 1988).

Public health campaigns were launched in an effort to keep young men ready for action. While the nation was at war, VD control was considered a worthwhile effort.



Chamberlain-Kahn Act, 1918

A decorative border surrounds the text box, featuring a thin black line with various geometric shapes (pink diamond, red circle, black diamond, pink circle) and curved lines at the corners and midpoints.

According to Wuebker (2015), "Thomas Parran, Surgeon General of the US Public Health Service (PHS), estimated that over \$31,000,000 per year was spent just on institutionalizing those physically disabled by syphilis" (p. 2).




Historical Context

Public information campaigns ramped up as Parran and the PHS explored every avenue they could to educate Americans—including the recently-formed Federal Art Project (FAP).

When America joined World War Two in 1941, VD education and control took on a new urgency.

During the seven years the FAP was printing public service announcements about VD, public health policies changed their focus from the civilian during peacetime to the soldier at war.



Posters

**"Whom have you
exposed to
syphilis"
(Verschuuren, ca.
1936-1939)**



Posters

"She may look
clean, but"
(U.S. Government,
1940)





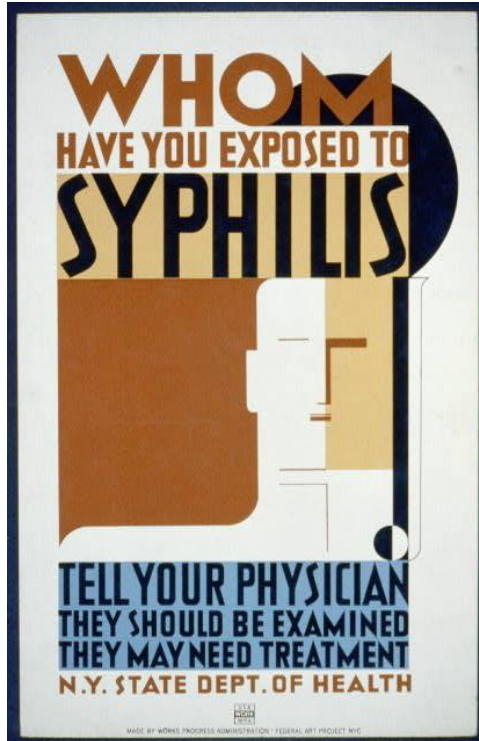
Rhetorical Perspectives

Semiotics: the study and interpretation of signs

Visual Pleasure Theory: visual images in media encourage the male gaze in viewers, regardless of their gender identity

Dramatistic Perspective: Views events as dramas to study human motivation, the cycle of order, pollution, guilt, purification, and redemption

Analysis





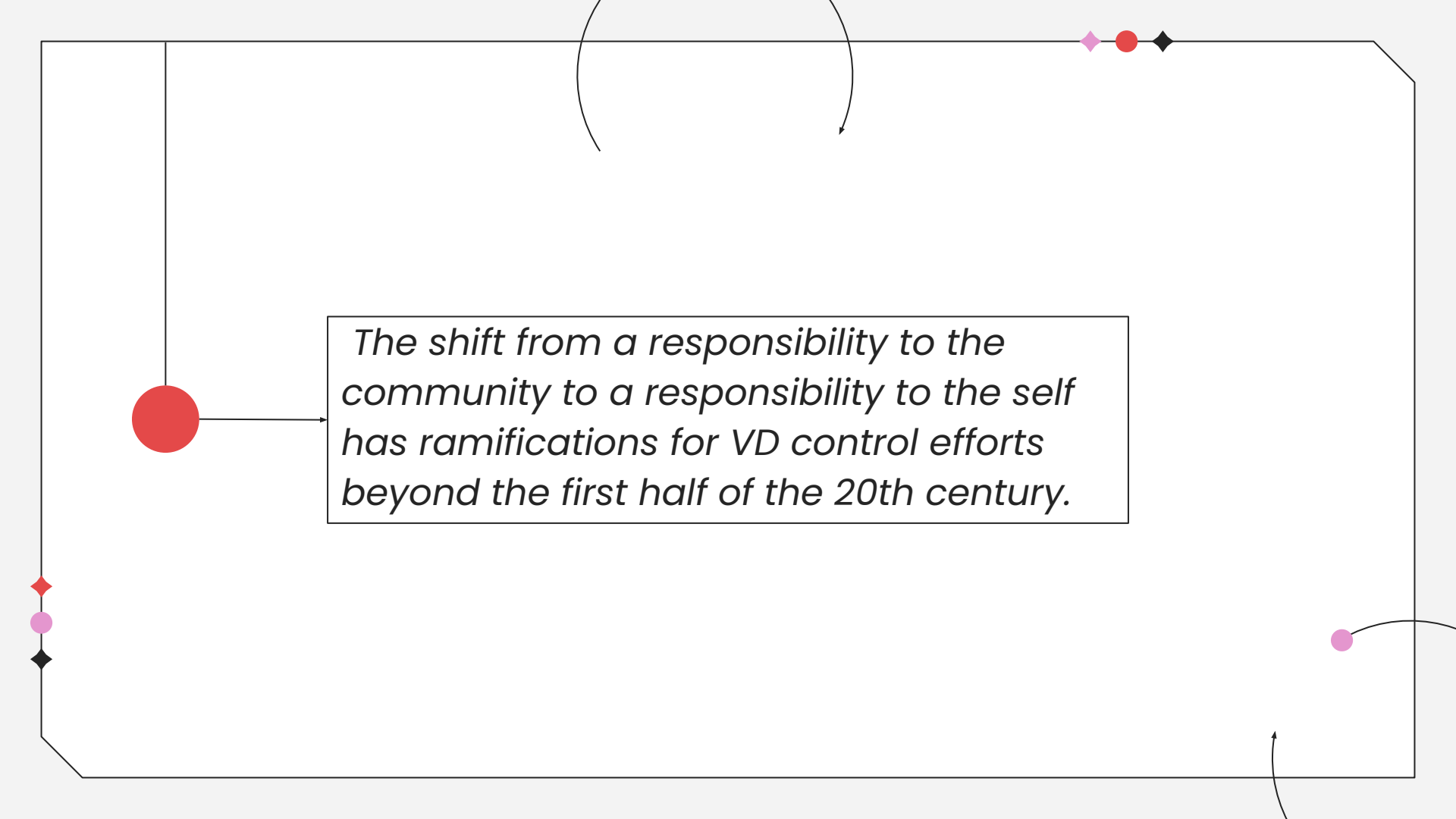
Conclusion

While the Great Depression of the 1930s was marked by government efforts to improve the nation internally, World War II gave America a common enemy to rally against. Public health campaigns followed this pattern.


Whom have you exposed” recommends taking personal responsibility to protect others and improve public health.

“She may look clean but” presents VD as an outside force to combat.





The shift from a responsibility to the community to a responsibility to the self has ramifications for VD control efforts beyond the first half of the 20th century.



The nonjudgemental model of “Whom have you exposed,” which offers purification and redemption to those afflicted with VD is preferable to the devil term-laden model of “She may look clean but,” which provokes fear and reduces women to symbols of disease.

Thank you!

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