



Understanding Impact

## Prosthetics and Progress: How WWI Veterans Shaped Disability Care

### Historical Context

World War I marked a turning point in the global response to human injury and the disabilities they caused. With the mechanization of warfare came devastating injuries such as lost limbs, facial disfigurements, and nerve damage, which forced nations to confront the long-term needs of wounded veterans, many of whom were young people under the age of 30. In the United States and Europe, the unprecedented number of amputees sparked both medical innovation and new public attitudes toward disability care. Prior to WWI, prosthetic limbs were primarily wooden, heavy, and uncomfortable, and psychiatric disabilities were often seen as weakness. Veterans returning from the frontlines advocated for better treatment, demanding that society recognize their sacrifices not with pity, but with meaningful rehabilitation and reintegration. Their efforts led to the expansion of veteran hospitals, the development of physical therapy, and a major push in prosthetics design, many of which were tailored to help men return to work and reclaim a sense of independence. The U.S. Surgeon General's office even partnered with universities and manufacturers to research more functional prosthetic limbs, linking technology with dignity. Yet this progress was shaped by the time and values of the era; disability support was often limited to male veterans and framed around a worker identity, leaving out civilians, women, and those deemed unproductive. Despite these limitations, the advances made in response to WWI injuries laid the foundation for modern rehabilitation medicine and influenced later disability rights movements.

### Connection to Habit

The innovations and reforms that emerged from WWI disability care demonstrate how traumatic events can reshape public health, social policy, and technology. The sheer number and severity of injuries due to WWI impacted the scale of this change. The choices made to care for wounded veterans reveal both progress and prejudice, helping students consider how history's legacies still shape who receives care, how disability is defined, and who is seen as deserving of support today.

## Discussion Questions

- What innovations in prosthetics and rehabilitation emerged from WWI, and how did they reflect society's values at the time?
- In what ways did the care provided to WWI veterans lay the groundwork for future disability rights movements?
- Who was left out of early disability care reforms, and what does that reveal about how impact is uneven across different groups?
- What parallels can you draw between the treatment of WWI veterans and how modern societies treat disabled individuals today?

## Suggested Activity

Materials Needed:

- Printed or digital copies of the 5 sources: [Prosthetics and Progress Primary Sources](#)
- [WWI Impact on Disability Rights Graphic Organizer](#)
- [WWI Impact on Disability Rights Guiding Questions](#)

Part 1: Station Rotation [50 mins]

Create five stations with one source per station (you can double the amount of stations if you have a larger amount of students). Students spend 10 minutes at each station in a small group.

At each station, they will:

- Analyze the source
- Discuss and record responses on their WWI Impact on Disability Rights Graphic Organizer
- Answer two questions per station using the WWI Impact on Disability Rights Guiding Questions document

Part 2: Debrief Discussion [15–20 mins]

Bring the class together for a large group discussion using the following questions:

1. Which source had the biggest emotional or intellectual impact on you? Why?
2. How did WWI change public and governmental attitudes toward disability?
3. Who was centered in these sources, and who might have been left out?
4. How does technology (like prosthetics) shape how society defines what a “normal” or “capable” body is?
5. In what ways do you see the legacy of these ideas in today’s military or civilian disability care?

Optional Homework or Extension: Have students create their own prosthetic advertisement/posters for wounded WWI veterans.

# Primary Sources

## Farmworker Justice Quotes and Guiding Questions

### **Source 1: U.S. Surgeon General's 1918 Report on Rehabilitation of Wounded Soldiers**

Excerpt: "Every disabled soldier must be returned to the highest degree of physical and economic efficiency. The artificial limb is no longer a symbol of limitation but of restoration."

From the War Department's Division of Physical Reconstruction (The Rehabilitation of Wounded Soldiers), [JSTOR](#)

### **Source 2: Excerpt from Carry On: Letters in War-Time by Conings by Dawson (1917)**

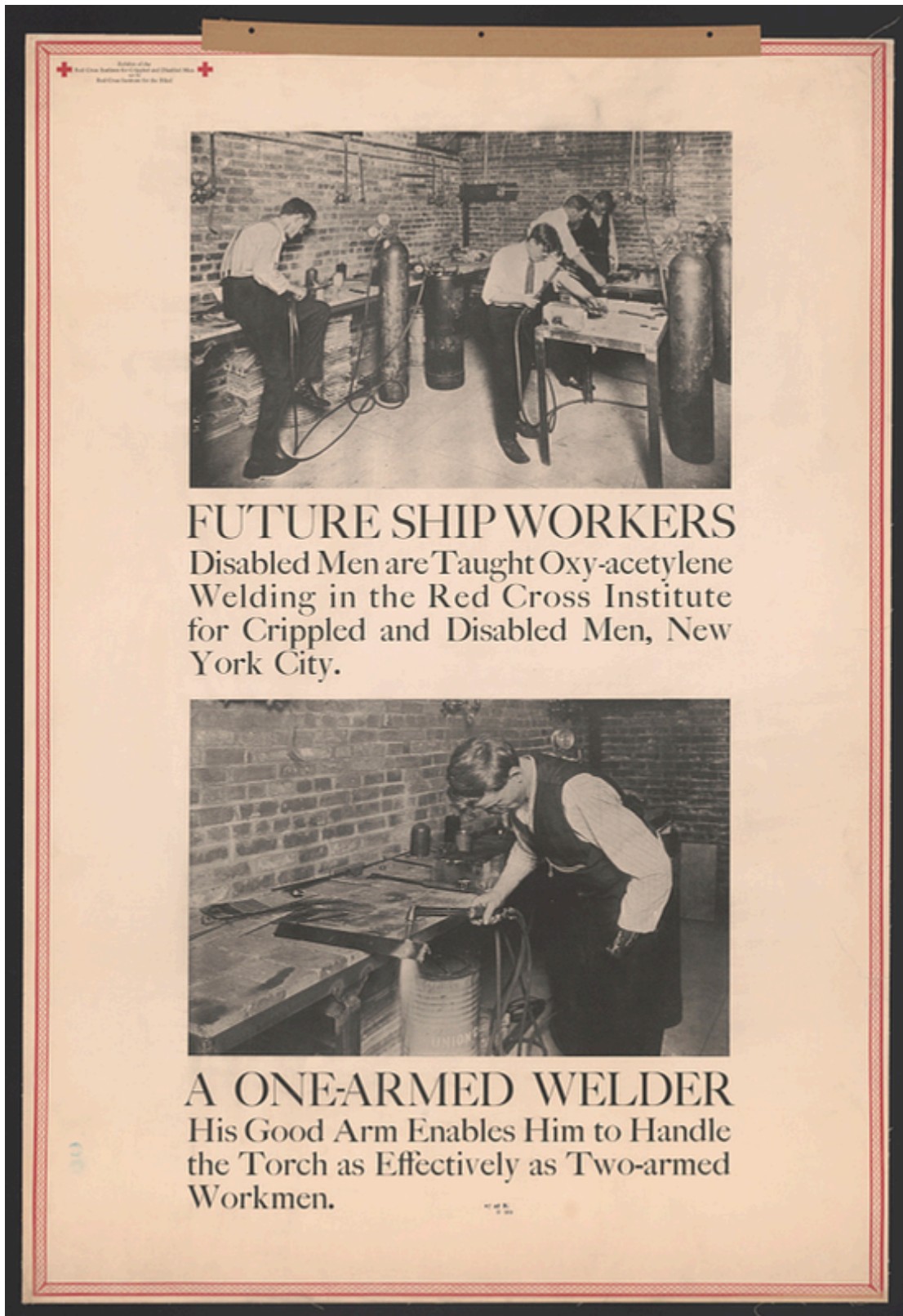
Context: This book is a collection of letters written by Coningsby Dawson during WWI, providing personal perspectives on the experiences of soldiers and the impact of war injuries.

Excerpt: "These are the men who have lost what no skill can restore, and yet, they wear their losses with pride... The artificial limb does not lessen their humanity."

### Source 3: Future ship workers, A one-armed welder.

Context:

Exhibit poster showing two scenes in which men with partial arm amputations are taught welding (1919)



The poster features two black and white photographs. The top photograph shows three men in a workshop setting, each working at a separate station with large gas cylinders and welding equipment. The bottom photograph shows a man with a prosthetic arm, wearing a dark vest over a light shirt, focused on welding a piece of metal on a workbench.

**FUTURE SHIP WORKERS**  
Disabled Men are Taught Oxy-acetylene  
Welding in the Red Cross Institute  
for Crippled and Disabled Men, New  
York City.

**A ONEARMED WELDER**  
His Good Arm Enables Him to Handle  
the Torch as Effectively as Two-armed  
Workmen.



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**Source 5: Picture of prosthetic limb manufactured  
by Northwestern Artificial Limb Company**

Context: Minnesota's thriving medical device industry has its origins in prosthetic development. Starting in the late 1800s, the Twin Cities emerged as a center for companies specializing in artificial limbs. What began in Hennepin County as a way to serve local needs soon grew into the nation's leading hub for prosthetic manufacturing.



# WWI Impact on Disability Rights Guiding Questions

## Source 1: Surgeon General's Report (1918)

- What does “economic efficiency” suggest about how veterans were expected to recover?
- How is disability being framed: as a limitation or as a challenge to be overcome?

## Source 2: Carry On by Conings by Dawson (1917)

- What emotions or values does this quote evoke?
- How does it reinforce or humanize the experience of disabled soldiers?

## Source 3: One-Armed Welder Poster (1919)

- What message is this poster trying to communicate about work and worth?
- How does the visual influence the viewer's perception of disability?

## Source 4: Johnson-Norton Prosthetic Advertisement (1915)

- What is being advertised about prosthetics (function, style, pride, or something else)?
- Who do you think the target audience was?

## Source 5: Northwestern Artificial Limb Company (early 1900s)

- What can you infer about local industry and innovation in disability care?
- How do regional companies play a role in shaping national policy and support?

# WWI Impact on Disability Rights Graphic Organizer

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

<b>Source</b>	<b>What does this source show about attitudes toward disability?</b>	<b>What kind of impact did this source have on disability rights (social, technological, or cultural)?</b>
<b>Source 1</b>		
<b>Source 2</b>		
<b>Source 3</b>		
<b>Source 4</b>		
<b>Source 5</b>		