What to Show the World: 
The Office of War Information and 
Hollywood, 1942-1945

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The uneasy relationship between propaganda and democracy proved especially troublesome during World War II. Interpreting the war as a worldwide crusade, liberals in the Office of War Information (OWI) won unprecedented control over the content of American motion pictures. An understanding of the interaction between OWI and Hollywood sheds light on both the objectives and methods of the nation’s propaganda campaign and the content of wartime entertainment films. This episode, all but ignored by historians, offers insights into America’s war ideology and the intersection of politics and mass culture in wartime. Moreover, it raises the question of whether the Roosevelt administration’s propaganda strategy helped undermine some of its avowed war aims.¹

OWI, the chief government propaganda agency during World War II, was formed by an executive order on June 13, 1942, that consolidated several prewar information agencies. OWI’s domestic branch handled the home front; its overseas branch supervised all United States foreign

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propaganda activities, except in Latin America, which remained the preserve of the coordinator of inter-American affairs, Nelson Rockefeller. Franklin D. Roosevelt instructed OWI to implement a program through the press, radio, and motion pictures to enhance public understanding of the war; to coordinate the war-information activities of all federal agencies; and to act as the intermediary between federal agencies and the radio and motion picture industries. OWI director Elmer Davis, a liberal radio commentator, insisted that the agency’s policy was to tell the truth. But information could not be separated from interpretation, and OWI told the truth by degrees and with particular bias. In all important respects OWI met the criterion of a propaganda agency. It was an organization designed not only to disseminate information and to clarify issues but also to arouse support for particular symbols and ideas. “The easiest way to inject a propaganda idea into most people’s minds,” said Davis, “is to let it go in through the medium of an entertainment picture when they do not realize that they are being propagandized.”

Around Davis clustered a liberal staff that gave OWI one of the highest percentages of interventionist New Dealers of any wartime agency. Two assistant directors, Pulitzer-prize writers, Archibald MacLeish and Robert Sherwood, were enthusiastic New Dealers; another assistant director, Milton S. Eisenhower, though fiscally more cautious, was a New Deal veteran. The only assistant director who held the New Deal at some distance was Gardner Cowles, Jr., a moderate Republican publisher who had been recruited to give OWI an air of bipartisanship. Liberals of various hues permeated the second and third levels of the agency and included such figures as historians Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., and Henry Pringle, former Henry A. Wallace speech writer Jack Fleming, novelist Leo Rosten, journalists Joseph Barnes and Alan Cranston, financier James Warburg, and “China hand” Owen Lattimore.


2 Although some scholars acknowledge the presence of prominent liberals in OWI, ideology has not received the emphasis that its pivotal importance in the agency merits. See Winkler, “Politics and Propaganda,” 13-14, 22-28, 37-41. For example, not only the questions of technique examined by Sydney Weinberg but also ideological differences fueled the “writers’ quarrel!” of
The Bureau of Motion Pictures (BMP) in OWI was a New Deal stronghold. Its chief, Lowell Mellett, a former Scripps-Howard newspaper editor who had been a Roosevelt aide since 1939, had headed the first prewar information agency, the Office of Government Reports (OGR). “OGRE” and “Mellett’s Madhouse” to conservative critics, OGR supervised the government film program. In response to the movie industry’s offer of support in December 1941, Roosevelt told Mellett to advise Hollywood how it could further the war effort. Mellett established a liaison office in Hollywood and appointed as its head Nelson Poynter, a Scripps-Howard colleague. Poynter did not follow movies, but he shared Mellett’s enthusiasms. Assisting Poynter was a staunchly liberal reviewing staff headed by Dorothy Jones, a former research assistant for Harold Lasswell and a pioneer in film content analysis.4

The Hollywood office became part of OWI domestic operations in June 1942 and began one of the agency’s more important and controversial activities. The motion picture, said Davis, could be “the most powerful instrument of propaganda in the world, whether it tries to be or not.” Roosevelt believed movies were among the most effective means of reaching the American public. The motion-picture industry experienced far fewer wartime restrictions on output than most industries. Hollywood turned out nearly 500 pictures annually during the war and drew eighty million paid admissions per week, well above the prewar peak. Hollywood’s international influence far exceeded that of American radio and the press; foreign audiences, which also reached eighty million per week, often determined whether a film made a profit.


BMP believed that every film enhanced or diminished America’s reputation abroad and hence affected the nation’s power.5

The movie industry shared OWI’s perhaps exaggerated idea of its products’ power, but how effectively it would cooperate remained unclear. From the mid-1930s to the eve of World War II the industry was isolated from national intellectual, artistic, and political life. When Benito Mussolini’s army invaded Ethiopia in 1935, an agitated friend asked a producer, “Have you heard any late news?” The excited mogul replied: “Italy just banned Marie Antoinette!” Conservative businessmen and their bankers ran the studios. Louis B. Mayer of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, the single most influential man in Hollywood, decorated his desk with portraits of Herbert Hoover, Francis Cardinal Spellman, and Douglas MacArthur. The artistic, more liberal side of the industry—the directors and particularly the writers—felt squelched. The industry avoided “message films” in favor of romances, musicals, murder mysteries, and westerns—“pure entertainment” in Hollywood parlance. Stereotypes flourished; accuracy was incidental. Since 1934 the Hays Office had censored sex and profanity and taught that sin was always punished; the movies’ ideal world was an adolescent perception of middle-class America. Although international themes increased between 1939 and 1941, social awareness remained dim. “Most movies are made in the evident assumption that the audience is passive and wants to remain passive,” noted the film critic James Agee; “every effort is made to do all the work—the seeing, the explaining, the understanding, even the feeling.”6

Hollywood preferred to avoid issues; OWI demanded affirmation of New Deal liberalism for America and the world. When Poynter arrived in the movie capital he found the industry doing little to promote the larger issues of the war. In the summer of 1942 Hollywood had under

consideration or in production 213 films that dealt with the war in some manner. Forty percent of those focused on the armed forces, usually in combat. Less than 20 percent dealt with the enemy, and most of those portrayed spies and saboteurs. Other categories—the war issues, the United Nations, and the home front—received minimal attention. Even more disturbing to OWI, Hollywood had simply grafted the war to conventional mystery and action plots or appropriated it as a backdrop for frothy musicals and flippant comedies. Interpretation of the war remained at a rudimentary level: the United States was fighting because it had been attacked, and it would win.7

To help the industry "raise its sights," Poynter and his staff wrote a "Manual for the Motion-Picture Industry" in June 1942 that they intended as a guide for movie makers in future projects. The manual ranks as probably the most comprehensive statement of OWI's interpretation of the war. OWI believed the war was not merely a struggle for survival but a "people's war" between fascism and democracy, the crusade of Vice President Henry A. Wallace's "Century of the Common Man." The United States fought for a new democratic world based on the Four Freedoms—freedom of speech and religion and freedom from want and fear. The war was a people's struggle, BMP emphasized, "not a national, class or race war." Every person in the world had a concrete stake in the outcome; an Allied victory promised to all a decent standard of living, including a job, good housing, recreation, and health, unemployment, and old-age insurance—a world New Deal. The average man would also enjoy the right to participate in government, which suggested OWI's anti-imperialist stance. American minorities had not entered utopia, the bureau conceded, but progress was possible only under democracy, and the wartime gains of blacks, women, and other minorities would be preserved. A nation of united average citizens, who believed deeply in the cause of freedom and sacrificed willingly to promote victory, was the hallmark of BMP's democracy.8

The enemy was fascism. The enemy was not the Axis leadership nor all of the Axis-led peoples but fascist supporters anywhere, at home as well as abroad. "Any form of racial discrimination or religious in-


tolerance, special privileges of any citizen are manifestations of Fascism, and should be exposed as such," the manual advised. A fascist victory would entail racial discrimination, destruction of political rights, eradication of the rights of labor, and "complete regimentation of the personal life" of the common man. "There can be no peace until militarism and fascism are completely wiped out," BMP warned. When victory came, the United Nations, eschewing national interest and balance-of-power politics, would build a new world expressive of the collective will. The manual enjoyed wide distribution in Hollywood; some studios reproduced the entire contents for their personnel, and many writers welcomed the bureau's interpretation. 9

The manual reflected the intellectual ferment of the 1930s. Many intellectuals had put a premium on commitment to some large ideal or movement; a predetermined response, not an examination of experience in its many facets, was all-important. The quest for commitment converged in the late 1930s with the search for America; the war seemed to offer that unifying commitment and it reduced intellectual content to an uncritical adulation of America and Allies. Thus, BMP reviewers in 1942 objected to the depiction of Spanish Loyalist violence in Paramount's For Whom the Bell Tolls, "particularly at this time when we must believe in the rightness of our cause." The bureau continued:

Now it is necessary that we see the democratic-fascist battle as a whole and recognize that what the Loyalists were fighting for is essentially the same thing that we are. To focus too much attention on the chinks in our allies' armor is just what our enemies might wish. Perhaps it is realistic, but it is also going to be confusing to American audiences. 10

To OWI the reality of experience threatened response.

Before the manual could have much effect, however, the bureau faced some immediate problems. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM) wanted to re-release the 1939 film The Real Glory, which dealt with the United States army's suppression of the turn-of-the-century Moro rebellion, but now billed as war between American and Japanese troops. Philippine President Manuel Quezon protested vigorously, and Mellett convinced

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producer Sam Goldwyn to withdraw the picture. The bureau’s patriotic appeals also staved off re-release of two glorifications of British imperialism, RKO’s *Gunga Din* and MGM’s *Kim*. When Columbia sought BMP advice on its proposed “‘Trans-Sahara,’” Mellett cautioned that American policy in Africa was not yet clear, and the studio dropped the project.11

But suggestions and patriotic persuasion had limits, OWI discovered in July 1942 when it screened Twentieth Century-Fox’s *Little Tokio, U.S.A.* The film grafted a fifth-column theme to a conventional murder mystery and portrayed the Japanese-Americans—“this Oriental bund”—as bent on sabotage and trying to take over California. The hero-detective bullied his way into a home without a search warrant, and the police beat up Japanese “‘spies’” they had arrested and disarmed. These “‘Gestapo methods’” dismayed the reviewers, who asked, “Did somebody mention that we are presumably fighting for the preservation of the Bill of Rights?” By the end of the film, the Japanese-Americans were marched off to detention camps; and the detective’s sweetheart, converted from isolationism, appeasement, and tolerance for Japanese-Americans, implored patriots to save America. “‘Invitation to the Witch Hunt,’” cried BMP.

Poynter appealed to the producer, Colonel Jason Joy, to make enough changes to “‘take most of the curse off.’” But Joy accused Poynter of going soft on the Japanese and gave OWI an ultimatum: *Little Tokio, U.S.A.* would go out as it stood or it could be killed if it contradicted government policy. Poynter capitulated. Twentieth Century-Fox had received army approval for the film and had rushed camera crews to “‘Little Tokio’” in Los Angeles to shoot footage of the actual evacuation.12

OWI now recognized that to inject its propaganda ideas into feature films, the Hollywood bureau had to influence the studios while films were being produced; moreover, since the army was interested mainly in security not ideology, the bureau had to be the sole point of contact between the government and the industry. Accordingly, Poynter asked the studios to submit their scripts to his office for review. While he had no direct power to demand scripts, Poynter achieved some limited cooperation. He had taken an unprecedented step. The Com-


mittee on Public Information (Creel Committee) of World War I had allowed films to go abroad only if the committee’s shorts went with them, but George Creel apparently had not attempted to influence the content of entertainment films directly.13

As studios hesitantly began submitting scripts, OWI encountered problems. Particularly sensitive was the depiction of home-front race relations. MGM’s “Man on America’s Conscience” refurbished Andrew Johnson as the hero of Reconstruction; vulture-like Thaddeus Stevens fulfilled the need for a heavy. OWI passed the script to Walter White, executive secretary of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, who, with the black press, the Daily Worker, and a group of Hollywood luminaries, raised a chorus of protest. Mayer dismissed the outcry as the work of what he called “the communist cell” at MGM. When Mellett appealed to national unity, the studio at last agreed to delete the inflammatory references to slavery and to change Stevens into a sincere, if still misguided, figure. The film, released in December 1942 as Tennessee Johnson, did not entirely please OWI, but it demonstrated nonetheless the influence the bureau could wield by reading scripts.14

Poynter seized that opportunity with one of the few scripts Paramount submitted, So Proudly We Hail, a $2 million epic of the siege of Bataan. He suggested that one of the army nurses headed for martyrdom might say: “Why are we dying? Why are we suffering? We thought we . . . could not be affected by all the pestiferous, political spots elsewhere in the world. We have learned a lot about epidemics and disease. . . . when a political plague broke out there [in Manchuria] by invasion, we would not have been willing to do something about it. We had to wait until this plague spread out further and further until it hit Pearl Harbor.” He also outlined a Christmas sermon that traced the cause of democracy from Jesus Christ through the “Century of the Common Man.” The studio wrote in some of Poynter’s ideas, though not in his exact words, and OWI ranked it among the best of the war films.15


Combat films reflected OWI’s influence probably as much as any type. In the bureau’s ideal combat movie an ethnically and geographically diverse group of Americans would articulate what they were fighting for, pay due regard to the role of the Allies, and battle an enemy who was formidable but not a superman. In RKO’s Bombardiers a pacifist-influenced bombardier worried about bombing innocent civilians. At OWI’s suggestion the revised script introduced the concept of a just war and explained that the enemy’s targets were everywhere while the Americans’, although admittedly not surgically precise, were limited to military targets. Occasionally the studios became too bold for the bureau. “War is horrible,” BMP acknowledged, but it nevertheless asked the studio to “minimize the more bloody aspects” in Corregidor. OWI liked reality but not too much of it, which reinforced Hollywood’s inclination toward avoidance. This, even more than OWI’s sermonettes, vitiated the impact of many combat pictures. So Proudly We Hail remained chiefly a cheesecake-studded story of love on the troop carriers and in the foxholes. And “the most sincere thing Paramount’s young women did,” said Agee, “was to alter their make-up to favor exhaustion (and not too much of it) over prettiness (and not too little of that). . . .” Few feature films approached the impact of combat documentaries, such as John Huston’s Battle of San Pietro and especially the British Desert Victory.16

By the fall of 1942 films in all categories were showing OWI’s imprint, whether through script review or application of the manual for the industry. The motion picture bureau praised two films released in 1942 for filling in gaps on the home front. MGM’s Keeper of the Flame dramatized native fascism. A wealthy American wanted to institute antilabor, anti-Negro, anti-Semitic, and anti-Catholic campaigns and to exploit the people of the United States for members of his class. Universal Pictures made Pittsburgh to show the home front geared for war. A tempestuous love triangle composed of John Wayne, Randolph Scott, and Marlene Dietrich was resolved when labor and management united behind something greater than themselves, the war effort. Some of the speeches had been “culled directly” from the OWI manual, the bureau observed, “and might have been improved by translation into terms more directly and simply relating to the characters . . . in this particular

film.’’ But OWI Hollywood reviewers urged Mellett not to miss *Pittsburgh* or *Keeper of the Flame*.

If the studios chose to ignore OWI, however, they could turn out what Poynter termed ‘‘ill-conceived atrocities.’’ Preston Sturges’ giddy Paramount comedy *Palm Beach Story* carried on the Hollywood tradition of satirizing the idle rich. But the BMP feared that this ‘‘libel on America at war,’’ with its blithe disregard of wartime hardships, would offend the American allies. Another Hollywood staple that disturbed OWI was the gangster film, of which Paramount’s *Lucky Jordan* was representative. The hero tried to dodge the draft and swindle the army; but when the Nazi agents beat up a gin-swilling, panhandling grandmother who had befriended him, he converted to the American cause, helped round up the Axis spy ring, and meekly returned to the army. His turnabout dramatized in specific, human terms the reality of fascism. Yet his individualistic commitment suggested to OWI reviewers that the United States had nothing ideological against Adolf Hitler; as the hero put it, Americans just did not like the way Nazis pushed people around. OWI wanted the hero to undergo a more profound intellectual awakening and to announce it explicitly. BMP feared, moreover, that gangster films’ cynicism and lawlessness, while not particularly harmful at home, tended to support Axis propaganda abroad. The bureau asked the Office of Censorship to bar *Palm Beach Story*, *Lucky Jordan*, and other films it disliked from export. The censorship code was limited mainly to security information, however, and since these films hardly contained military secrets, the censor granted them export licenses. The censor, ironically, was more lenient than the advocates of free speech.

Hearing increasingly bad reports on the effect of American films abroad, Davis looked for a way to keep Hollywood from putting across ‘‘day in and day out, the most outrageous caricature of the American character.’’ Mellett proposed that a representative of OWI’s overseas branch join BMP’s Hollywood office; this official could more credibly object that certain films harmed foreign relations and could carry OWI’s case to the censor. ‘‘It would hurt like hell’’ if a picture were withheld from foreign distribution, Mellett pointed out. Davis agreed and ap-

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pointed one of Sherwood’s chief aides, Ulric Bell, as the overseas arm’s representative to Hollywood. A former Washington bureau chief for the Louisville Courier-Journal, Bell possessed impeccable New Deal credentials and had been one of the key figures in the prewar interventionist movement. Arriving in Hollywood in November 1942, he shared Poynter’s reviewing staff. Bell’s influence soon exceeded what Mellett and Poynter had dreamed of or, indeed, thought proper.19

OWI then tried to cut in on the chummy relationship between Hollywood and the more glamorous armed forces in early December 1942. The war and navy departments furnished men, equipment, and advice to the compliant industry. The military branches scrutinized scripts and films mainly for security and seldom cooperated with OWI. Davis asked the war and navy departments to channel all of their contacts with the movie industry through OWI’s Hollywood office. The military flatly declined.20

At the same time Mellett dispatched a hotly controversial letter to the studios. He advised the industry to submit routinely treatments and synopses of projected films, as well as finished scripts, to Poynter’s office. Mellett also asked the producers to submit all films to his Hollywood outpost in the long cut, the last stage before final prints were made. While little new material could be added then, OWI could still recommend that harmful scenes be snipped out. Moreover, all contacts between the studios and federal agencies, including the military services, should be channeled through BMP. “‘Censors Sharpen Axes,’” bannered Variety. Mellett wanted “‘complete censorship over the policy and content of our pictures.’” said Bill Goetz, vice president of Twentieth Century, reflecting the attitude of nearly all studio heads. The magnates wanted an in-house censor, such as Mayer or Y. Frank Freeman, the conservative head of Paramount.21

Shocked by the industry’s furious reaction, Mellett and Davis tried to soothe the executives. Studios remained free to make any picture they wanted without consulting anybody, and, short of violating treason


21 Mellett to Goldwyn, Dec. 9, 1942, Box 1443; Bill Goetz to Mellett, Dec. 21, 1942, Goetz to Gardner Cowles, Jr., Dec. 22, 1942, Jean Herrick to Cowles, Dec. 19, 1942, Box 12A, OWI Records; Variety, Dec. 23, 1942.
statutes, they could distribute any picture in the United States. The main purpose of the letter, Mellett and Davis insisted, had been to clarify the relationship between OWI and the armed forces for the industry. Privately Mellett told Poynter to pull back. Suggesting dialogue for *So Proudly We Hail* had been a mistake, Mellett said; Poynter agreed. The Hollywood-office pride in *Pittsburgh* and *Keeper of the Flame* could “only result from the appearance of your own stuff in those two pictures,” BMP’s chief continued. “The propaganda sticks out disturbingly.” “Great things” had already been accomplished, but Mellett warned Poynter to modify his operation in whatever ways necessary until the storm subsided.  

In fact, BMP reviewers acknowledged decided improvement in the treatment of OWI themes in late 1942 and early 1943. Hollywood tried to redeem its prewar condescension toward foreigners by stressing the Resistance. BMP liked the 1942 Academy Award winner *Casablanca* for its depiction of the valiant underground, the United States as the haven of the oppressed, and the subordination of personal desires to the greater cause of the war—although they would have preferred that the hero had verbalized the reasons for his conversion. As OWI suggested, Fritz Lang’s story of Lidice, *Hangmen Also Die*, showed a united Czechoslovakia resisting German barbarism. *This Land Is Mine*, the work of Jean Renoir and Dudley Nichols, seemed to OWI a “superb” picture of the French resistance, capped by the “vital” oration of the once cowardly schoolmaster defying occupation authorities. Yet, as critics such as Leo Braudy noted, the teacher, for all his passion, remained “a man orating in a locked room.” Even in the talented hands of Renoir and Nichols, the message overwhelmed the creation of believable characters and real situations.  

Such problems, among others, counteracted OWI-approved efforts to reverse Hollywood’s negative prewar image of the Soviet Union. The idea of filming Ambassador Joseph E. Davies’ *Mission to Moscow* apparently did not originate with OWI, but BMP reviewers made some relatively minor suggestions when they read the script, which followed the book all too faithfully. Beneath a giant world map, the prescient

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Davies chatted amiably with an avuncular Joseph Stalin, illustrating how Americans and Russians were all brothers under the skin in the global struggle. Bell termed the picture "a socko job on the isolationists and appeasers—the boldest thing yet done by Hollywood." Bold perhaps, but its cosmetic treatment of the occupation of Finland, whitewash of the Moscow purge trials, and abnormally simplistic formula evidently convinced few viewers. Mission to Moscow was "mishmash," said Manny Farber of New Republic. "A great glad two-million-dollar bowl of canned borscht . . .," sighed Agee.

Brotherhood usually meant Americanization. Lillian Hellman’s script for Goldwyn’s North Star had good possibilities, particularly in its semi-documentary approach to ordinary Russians. But director Lewis Milestone turned the Bessarabian cooperative into an American prairie town, and the handsome peasants sang and danced as if they had strayed from a Broadway musical. "War has put Hollywood’s traditional conception of the Muscovites through the wringer," observed Variety, "and they have come out shaved, washed, sober, good to their families, Rotarians, brother Elks, and 33rd Degree Mason.

The motion-picture bureau also recorded success in reorienting the portrayal of the home front. One Destiny told how Pearl Harbor changed the lives and affections of various persons in an Iowa farm community. The bureau persuaded Twentieth Century-Fox to change the original script’s emphasis on ill feeling between an enlisted man and a man who stayed on the farm to an understanding of how the war effort needed various talents in many places. King Vidor’s An American Romance originally recounted the rags-to-riches saga of a Slavic immigrant who became a great automobile manufacturer, sold out, and then returned to manufacture aircraft for the war effort. The individualistic, Henry Ford-inspired hero troubled OWI, but bureau induced changes softened the picture sufficiently for OWI approval. Blacks, who in the first script had been nice but definitely to be kept in their place, were eliminated. The depiction of labor unions as radical


violent conspiracies—"a fascist tactic pure and simple," said OWI—was altered. For OWI and outside reviewers alike, the strength of *An American Romance* lay in its documentary-style celebration of United States geography that conveyed "the greatness of America."  

Despite BMP's influence on movie content, Bell began campaigning to curb pictures he felt were still undesirable. The Office of Censorship issued a new code on December 11, 1942, that helped Bell immensely. The new index banned from export films that showed rationing or other economic preparations for a long war, scenes of lawlessness in which order was not restored and the offenders punished (this aimed primarily at gangster films), and portrayals of labor or class conflict in the United States since 1917. Bell wanted the code tightened even more. Poynter vehemently disagreed, especially with the restrictions on post-1917 America. If OWI's strategy was to tell the truth, he argued, it should "make a sacrifice hit now and then." Films should admit the United States had problems, as foreigners knew, but should show how democracy solved them. "Fascist methods need not be used to defeat the common enemy of Fascism," he told Bell. Poynter predicted that the new code would make studios shy away from significant war themes.  

Bell nevertheless pressed the censor, particularly as a means of trapping "B" movies that were often shot without scripts and of thwarting studios that tried to parlay military or FBI approval into an export license. *They Came to Blow Up America*, which dealt with the seven saboteurs who landed on Long Island in 1942, was a case in point. The Federal Bureau of Investigation saw nothing wrong with the script, but Bell thought the sabotage was exaggerated and FBI was shown as inefficient. "Even the FBI's approval does not make it suitable for overseas presentation," he said. The censor passed it anyway. Bell enlisted Davis' help in February 1943 for a test case, Republic's quickie "B" feature, *London Blackout Murders*. This picture implied the British government would accept a negotiated peace, took some mild swipes at Lend Lease, and showed an overworked doctor accidentally cutting off a woman's head during a blackout instead of amputating her leg. Censor-

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20 Poynter to Bell, Feb. 13, 1943, Box 1438, Bell to Riskin, March 31, 1943, Box 3510, Bell to Riskin, April 3, 1943, Box 15, OWI Records; Bell to Poynter, May 19, 1943, Poynter to Bell, June 4, 1943, Poynter to Mellett, June 5, 26, 1943, Box 16, Mellett Papers.
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ship director Byron Price could not agree that ‘‘suppression should go
the lengths Bell has suggested.’’ America’s allies could ‘‘take it,’’ Price
said, ‘‘and the enemy would find ways to distort developments
anyway.’’ RKO hid its low-budget picture I Walked With a Zombie
from Bell until the censor granted an export license. In similar fashion
other films, including the Bob Hope-Dorothy Lamour picaresque Road
to Morocco, which Eisenhower had said ‘‘simply must not reach North
Africa,’’ were spirited out of the country.28

In mid-summer 1943, however, Bell triumphed. Congress’ anti-New
Deal axe chopped OWI’s domestic branch to a fraction of its former
size. Mellett and Poynter left BMP, Paramount executive Stanton Griff-

28 Bell to Davis, Jan. 9, 1943, Davis to Price, Jan. 16, 1943, Price to Davis, Jan. 23, 1943,
Milton S. Eisenhowerto Bell, Dec. 31, 1943, Box 3, Bell to Davis, March 8, 1943, Box 3509,
Bell to Phil Hamblet, Feb. 23, 1943, Box 3518, OWI Records.

29 Bell to Louis Lober, Dec. 15, 1943, Cunningham to Lober, June 29, 1944, Box 3509, Bell
to Riskin, Nov. 1, 1943, Box 3, Feature Review, Buffalo Bill, Box 3518, ‘‘Report of Activities of
the Overseas Branch, Bureau of Motion Pictures, Hollywood Office, January 1, 1943-August
15, 1943,’’ Box 65, OWI Records; Motion Picture Herald, Aug. 14, 1943; Winkler, ‘‘Politics
and Propaganda,’’ 84-85. Richard R. Lingeman erroneously concludes that the Hollywood
liaison efforts ended with the budget cut. Lingeman, Don’t You Know There’s a War On?, 188.
Although the revised censorship code was issued about the same time as Mellett’s letter to the
studios, the two events appear not to be connected.

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stolen car, a joy ride, a murder, an attempted suicide and the repentant older generation.’’ While the film promised something for everyone, OWI told Monogram Pictures to tone it down if it wanted foreign release. The studio’s cuts did not satisfy OWI. Following BMP recommendations closely, Rothacker ordered 508 feet cut from the film before he approved it for export. RKO’s contribution to delinquency was a film whose progression of titles suggested its modification under OWI pressure: Youth Runs Wild became Are These Our Children? then The Dangerous Age, which was released as Look to Your Children, whose conclusion assembled a series of “stock shots showing how the Boy Scouts, 4-H Clubs, city playgrounds and similar institutions are combating juvenile problems.’’ Like sin punished in the end, democracy solving its problems was ruled suitable for export.30

Almost all the major OWI themes converged in the most expensive picture made up to that time, Darryl Zanuck’s hagiographic Wilson, released in August 1944. BMP persuaded screenwriter Lamar Trotti to balance machine politicians by emphasizing the people’s power. The studio excised a line to which BMP objected: “With Wilson now firmly in the saddle and riding herd on a docile Congress. . . .” While the original script had dwelled on the failure of the League of Nations, the revised version stressed hope. A few obstructive men could not kill the League, Woodrow Wilson said; “the dream of a world united against the awful wastes of war is too deeply imbedded in the hearts of men everywhere.’’ OWI recommended Wilson for special distribution in liberated areas, not merely because its theme was “so vital to the psychological warfare of the United Nations,” but because of the picture’s “rare entertainment value.” Despite good intentions and a $5.2 million budget, however, Hollywood and OWI reduced a character worthy of William Shakespeare to a cardboard prig and his ideas to primer simplicity. As history it was a travesty; as entertainment, a bore; as box-office, a bust.31

Wilson was one of the last major films to deal significantly with OWI themes. Combat pictures, such as Thirty Seconds Over Tokyo, held steady; and pictures about the home front, such as Pride of the Marines, 30 Bell to Watterson Rothacker, Nov. 12, 1943, Feature Review, Where Are Your Children, Nov. 8, 1943, “Cuts Required by Rothacker for ‘Where Are Your Children?’” [Dec. 1, 1943], Box 3530, Feature Reviews, The Dangerous Age, March 30, 1944, Youth Runs Wild, July 25, 1944, Box 3515, OWI Records. Michael Wood suggests that this typical Hollywood treatment of social problems is representative of “middle class American liberalism.” Wood, America in the Movies, 126, 129, 125.

which fulfilled OWI’s desire for films about returning veterans, showed a slight increase. But the other OWI categories showed sharp declines. The 1944 Academy Award winner, Bing Crosby’s Going My Way, reflected the shift to non-ideological, frequently religious, entertainment pictures in which war and rumors of war seldom intruded. Several reasons contributed to this shift, among them increasing war weariness and a sense that the war would end soon. But another important cause of the decline was what Poynter had predicted: the alliance between OWI and the censor made the studios shy away from significant themes.32

By the fall of 1943 Bell had convinced every studio except Paramount to let OWI read all their scripts instead of certain selected ones, and even Paramount agreed to discuss its scripts with OWI in general terms. In 1943 OWI read 466 scripts, in 1944, 744. The 1,210 scripts reviewed in those two years represented almost three fourths of the 1,652 scripts the Hollywood office read between May 1942 and its demise in August 1945. From September 1943 through August 1944, BMP analyzed eighty-four scripts with American lawlessness or corruption as a main theme; forty-seven were corrected to its satisfaction. Racial problems were corrected or eliminated in twenty of twenty-four instances, distortions of military or political facts in forty-four of fifty-nine cases. Fifty-nine of the eighty scripts that portrayed Americans oblivious to the war were improved. During this period OWI managed to have 277 of the 390 cases of objectionable material corrected, a success ratio of 71 percent. Yet these statistics understate OWI’s influence. Many scripts already showed the influence of the “Manual for the Motion Picture Industry” when they reached OWI readers, making alterations unnecessary. Complete statistics are not available, but from January through August 1943—before Bell’s agreement with the censor had much effect—BMP induced the industry to drop twenty-nine scheduled productions and, particularly noteworthy, to rework parts of five films already approved by the censor. Bell closed the remaining gaps in the line established by Mellett and Poynter. From mid-1943 until the end of the war, OWI exerted an influence over an American mass medium never equaled before or since by a government agency.33

content of World War II motion pictures is inexplicable without reference to the bureau.

Hollywood had proved to be remarkably compliant. The industry found that its sincere desire to help the war effort need not interfere with business that was better than usual. Freedom of the screen had never been Hollywood's long suit: an industry that had feared being "en-slaved" by Mellett was already in thrall to Will Hays. As the studios learned that OWI wanted "only to be helpful, their attitudes change[d] miraculously," observed Robert Riskin, a Sherwood aide who had been one of Hollywood's highest-paid writers. In "brutal honesty," Riskin continued, the industry's "unprecedented profits" had encouraged cooperation that surprised even the "movie moguls." The studios let BMP know what stories they were considering for production—some of the hottest secrets in movieland—so that the bureau could steer them into less crowded areas and thus smooth out the picture cycle. OWI's international role was especially important. Hollywood films hit the beaches right behind the American troops, provided they had OWI approval: the agency charged admission and held the money in trust for the studios. United States film makers were planning a large-scale invasion of the foreign market after the war, and OWI established indispensable beachheads. Indeed, Riskin lamented in mid-1944: "An unsavory opinion seems to prevail within OWI that the Motion Picture Bureau is unduly concerned with considerations for commercial interests."

Although OWI and Hollywood first seemed to conflict, they eventually developed excellent rapport, for their aims and approaches were essentially compatible. The "chief function of mass culture," Robert Warshow has observed, "is to relieve one of the necessity of experiencing one's life directly." Hollywood, conceiving of its audience as passive, emphasized entertainment and avoidance of issues. OWI encouraged Hollywood to treat more social issues and to move beyond national and racial stereotypes. However, since OWI was interested mainly in response, it stressed ideology and affirmation; it raised social issues only to have democracy wash them away. Here the seemingly divergent paths of Hollywood and OWI joined: avoidance and affirmation both led to evasion of experience. Instead of opening realms of understanding by confronting experience, OWI, the propaganda agency, and Hollywood,

the dream factory, joined hands to deny realities. However laudable the goals of propaganda, Jaques Ellul has suggested that it creates a person "'who is not at ease except when integrated in the mass, who rejects critical judgments, choices, and differentiations because he clings to clear certainties.'"35 Through their influence over motion pictures, the OWI's liberals undermined the liberation for which they said they fought.

35 Warshow. Immediate Experience. 38; Agee. Agee on Film. 330; Ellul. Propaganda. 256.