

ABSTRACT

Title of Document: "AN UNPLEASANT WARTIME FUNCTION":
RACE, FILM CENSORSHIP, AND THE
OFFICE OF WAR INFORMATION, 1942-1945

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History

This paper will try to untangle how the U.S. Office of War Information's Bureau of Motion Pictures tried to enact change in the world, using Hollywood films, during World War II. It will also show how inconsistencies within the agency and lack of support from the President, Congress, and Hollywood often sabotaged the Bureau's project. I argue that a structural component and a thematic component helped cripple the OWI's Bureau of Motion Pictures. First, the extremely decentralized, bureaucratic and conflict-laden nature of the government information network, and the limited enforcement power of the OWI and in particular the Bureau of Motion Pictures, limited its success. Second, the BMP's passionately liberal and racially progressive interpretation of U.S. war aims helped contribute to its downfall. The BMP operated during a watershed moment in race relations, in which hierarchies of racial and ethnic groups were shifting dramatically.

“AN UNPLEASANT WARTIME FUNCTION”: RACE, FILM CENSORSHIP,
AND THE OFFICE OF WAR INFORMATION, 1942-1945

By

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Introduction

This is the Army was released in movie theaters across America in August of 1943. It was based on a highly successful musical of the same name, written by Irving Berlin. It featured actual soldiers performing musical numbers and skits for the benefit of the Army Relief Fund. Once the musical was a hit, in the early days of the war, its producers began adapting it for the screen. *Variety*, the trade magazine of the entertainment industry, eagerly followed the film's casting, shooting, and release. Even President Roosevelt himself was a great fan of the show. Prominent filmmakers Jack Warner and Hal Wallis produced the film, and Michael Curtiz directed it. Profits returned by the film were promised to benefit the Army Relief Fund. When it was released, it was a box office smash, one of the biggest films of 1943.

The film starred many real soldiers, including actor Lt. Ronald Reagan as the main character, Johnny, and boxer Sgt. Joe Louis as himself. Louis was featured prominently in a musical number with other African-American soldiers. The musical, like the army itself, was segregated: the African-American soldiers appear only in their own number, not in the chorus of soldiers that is onstage during the rest of the show. The number with the African-American soldiers focuses not on their fighting ability or patriotism, but rather on the fact that a well-dressed man in Harlem will now be wearing army fatigues rather than classy suits. Even with the presence of black soldiers in the show, however, some of the white soldiers perform a minstrel number in blackface. The film was reviewed by the liberal and typically racially-progressive propagandists in President Roosevelt's Office of War Information. In

their review, mention of the minstrel number is conspicuously absent, but the film was approved for distribution in America and abroad.

By 1943, motion pictures and mainstream theater still featured blackface performances, but less commonly. Indeed, in *This is the Army*, Jerry Jones, the father of Ronald Reagan's character Johnny, comments that many of the soldiers in the show thought a minstrel number would be too "old-fashioned." In the film, Jerry, who is a veteran of World War I and helped stage a similar musical during that war, says happily that this time, the blackface number was just as much of a hit as when he and his colleagues performed the number during World War I, some twenty years before. African-American scholars and activists, from James Weldon Johnson and W.E.B. Du Bois to columnists in black newspapers like the *Chicago Defender*, had written critically about the subject of blackface. These writers debated the extent to which white performance in blackface demeaned black culture. Some argued that the very best that could be said was that blackface focused mass attention on musical and theatrical forms that black performers had had a hand in creating.¹ These comments by scholars and journalists, coupled with the acknowledgment in the film that minstrelsy was "old-fashioned," foreground blackface performance as a contentious issue and a potentially problematic style of performance.

In the same year, the OWI reviewed a film called *Fugitive From A Prison Camp*. This film featured an African-American character, "Chuckles Johnson," a petty thief whom the OWI perceived as a "lazy, insolvent, illiterate, Negro comic." In deciding whether to allow this film to be distributed abroad, the OWI had major concerns about antagonizing people of color in other countries. OWI reviewers

¹ Arthur Knight, *Disintegrating the Musical*, 35-7.

wrote: “More than half of the population of the world is made up of dark-skinned peoples, and the majority of them are our allies, fighting for the same things for which we are fighting. They are understandably offended by caricatures of themselves. In the interests of international unity we cannot afford to alienate these allies.”² The reviewers of this film believed that caricatures of African-Americans would offend “dark-skinned peoples” around the world- including Africans, Asians, and Middle-Easterners. The OWI felt it could not afford to perpetuate traditional racial stereotypes, especially when a major war aim was to spread democracy. OWI staff showed a particular interest in African-American equality and often worked with luminaries like Walter White, secretary of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), on eliminating caricatures of blacks on the screen.

This review suggests the OWI reviewers had binary worldview, in which white peoples occupied one pole and “dark-skinned” peoples occupied another. Both poles were fighting to achieve the same goals, and America, as a white nation, could no longer afford to jeopardize international unity by stereotyping these “dark-skinned” peoples in films – including African-Americans. The review was an acknowledgment that white peoples needed the help of the nonwhite peoples to fight a common enemy, the Axis powers. It also destabilized the notion that whites were naturally superior and able to win wars on their own. This review was not anomalous; indeed, in many of the OWI’s reviews, staffers made the same claim. This desire to restrict offensive imagery was even discussed in the OWI’s

² Film Review 4/22/1943, *Fugitive from a Prison Camp* Folder, Box 3516, Record Group 208 – OWI Records.

Government Information Manual for the Motion Picture Industry, a guidebook for Hollywood studios about how best to depict the war in their films.³

Why did the Office of War Information react so differently to *Fugitive* than it did to *This is the Army*? The blackface number in *This is the Army* perpetuated stereotypes of African-Americans, which was precisely the problem reviewers in the OWI had with the Chuckles Johnson character in *Fugitive*. The inconsistent responses of the OWI's Bureau of Motion Pictures indicate uncertainties about the status of blacks and whites in America and in the world. They also indicate that the OWI's project of removing racial stereotypes from the movies did not always succeed. This paper will try to untangle how the OWI's Bureau of Motion Pictures tried to enact change in the world using Hollywood films as a conduit. It will also show how inconsistencies within the agency and lack of support from the President, Congress, and Hollywood often sabotaged the Bureau's project.

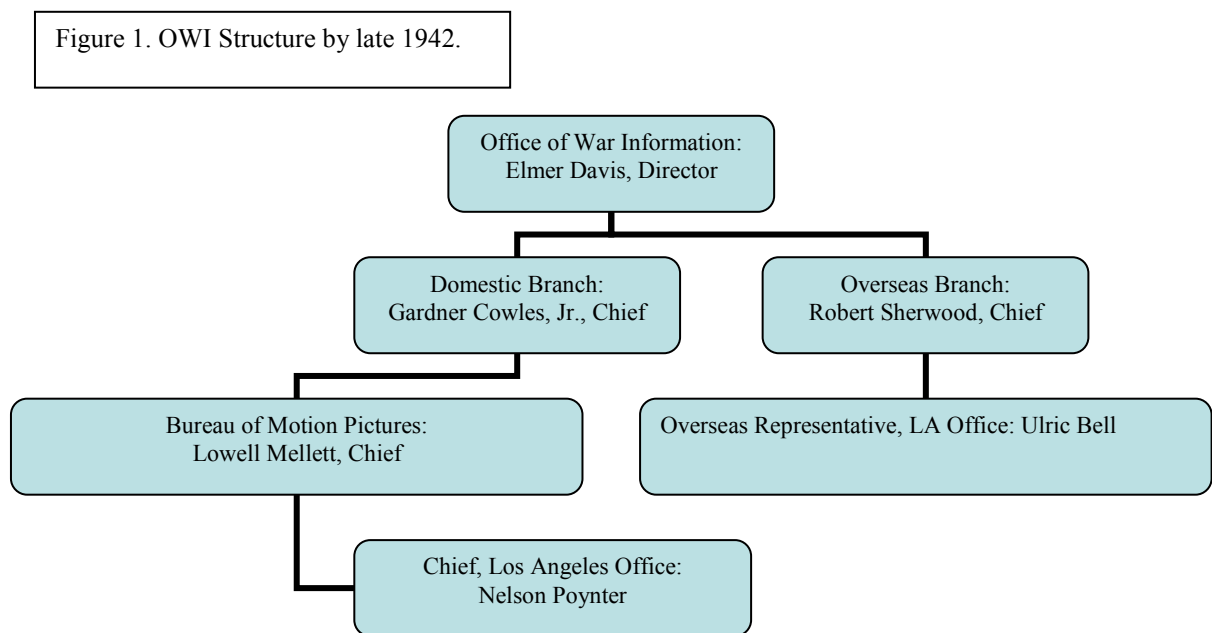
I argue that a structural component and a thematic component helped cripple the OWI's Bureau of Motion Pictures. First, the extremely decentralized, bureaucratic and conflict-laden nature of the government information network, and the limited enforcement power of the OWI and in particular the Bureau of Motion Pictures, limited its success. Second, the BMP's passionately liberal and racially progressive interpretation of United States war aims helped contribute to its downfall. The BMP operated during a watershed moment in race relations, in which hierarchies of racial and ethnic groups were shifting dramatically. African-Americans were agitating consistently and vocally for voting rights, a desegregated military, and many other issues. President Roosevelt and many Americans were uneasy about Great

³ *Government Information Manual for the Motion Picture Industry*, 171-180.

Britain's desire to maintain its colonial properties even as it fought for democratic government. A major nonwhite enemy, Japan, had for the first time in many decades proved a formidable opponent to white elites in the United States and Great Britain. Another major nonwhite power, China, was an ally of the United States despite longstanding American ill-will toward people of Chinese descent within its borders, and a rigid policy of immigration exclusion. In this context, the liberal employees of the Bureau of Motion Pictures felt it necessary to push for a more egalitarian depiction of nonwhite peoples in films, and to disentangle America's war with Japan from the idea of war with the Japanese race. Many opponents and critics of the bureau, of the New Deal, and of President Roosevelt, used this position to malign the BMP, and the OWI in general, as communist, or accuse it of forcing racial equality on the South. It is hard to say whether BMP staffers advocated true racial equality, or whether they believed instead that support from every race and nation in the world was necessary to bring about victory for the Allies. In either case, the position the BMP took was a controversial one.

The OWI's structure at the time of its formation is depicted in the chart in Figure 1. President Roosevelt created the agency by executive order on June 13, 1942. It was a consolidation of several precursor organizations. The director of the Office was Elmer Davis, a popular radio announcer and newsman. The organization was split into two branches, the Domestic Branch (led by *Look Magazine* publisher Gardner Cowles, Jr.) and the Overseas Branch (led by Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright Robert Sherwood). The Domestic Branch was responsible for encouraging Americans to support and participate in the war effort, disclosing

important information to them, and giving advice on how best to support their government, such as by purchasing war bonds and participating in the rationing of goods. The Overseas Branch was responsible for studying international public opinion about the war and the Allied cause, and promoting a favorable opinion of America among people especially in Allied and neutral countries. This branch also sought to limit any evidence that the American government and people were weak, racist, unsupportive of the Allied cause, wasteful, or undemocratic in any way.



As Figure 1 indicates, the OWI's Bureau of Motion Pictures fell under the purview of the Domestic Branch, though it had a representative from the Overseas Branch, Ulric Bell, to head the overseas distribution program. The BMP was led by Lowell Mellett, the former editor of the *Washington Daily News*.⁴ Mellett was a close friend of the

⁴ Koppes and Black, *Hollywood Goes To War*, 51.

President's. He had served as an advisor and bureau chief in Roosevelt's government for several years, most recently as coordinator of government films in the Office of Government Reports, a post he took right after Pearl Harbor. Mellett established a Los Angeles office of the BMP to interact directly with the movie industry while he remained in Washington, D.C., and he appointed his close friend Nelson Poynter, editor of the *St. Petersburg Times*, to be director of the Los Angeles office. Neither Mellett nor Poynter had any direct experience working with film, but both were passionate interventionists and New Deal liberals. Both, but especially Poynter, also had a history of sympathy with black civil rights agitation, which would influence the way they wanted to alter movies to fit the war aims. When President Roosevelt formed the OWI in June, 1942, the offices Mellett and Poynter set up were simply moved, wholesale, under the umbrella of the Domestic Branch. The Overseas Branch's motion picture liaison, Ulric Bell, came to work in the Los Angeles office alongside Poynter beginning in early 1943. Later that year, the Overseas Branch would have its own parallel motion picture bureau, equivalent to Mellett's.

As the main liaisons with Hollywood, Poynter and Bell became the primary points of contact between government policy (as represented by the OWI) and the art and commerce of the movie industry. For their project to work, they had to find some method to require film executives to take their advice and include material helpful to the war aims while deleting what might prove harmful. The Bureau of Motion Pictures, however, did not have the authority to enforce its requests. Support of the Bureau's war aims was strictly voluntary. Bell and Poynter did have one way they might solve the problem, though: in order for a film to get an export license, so that it

could be distributed abroad, films had to be approved by the Office of Censorship, another wartime agency that had an office in Los Angeles. International distribution was an essential source of revenue for the film industry. If Poynter and Bell could persuade Watterson Rothacker, the Hollywood Censor, to deny export licenses to films that failed to support the Bureau of Motion Pictures' recommendations, Poynter and Bell would then have the power to force Hollywood to fall in line.

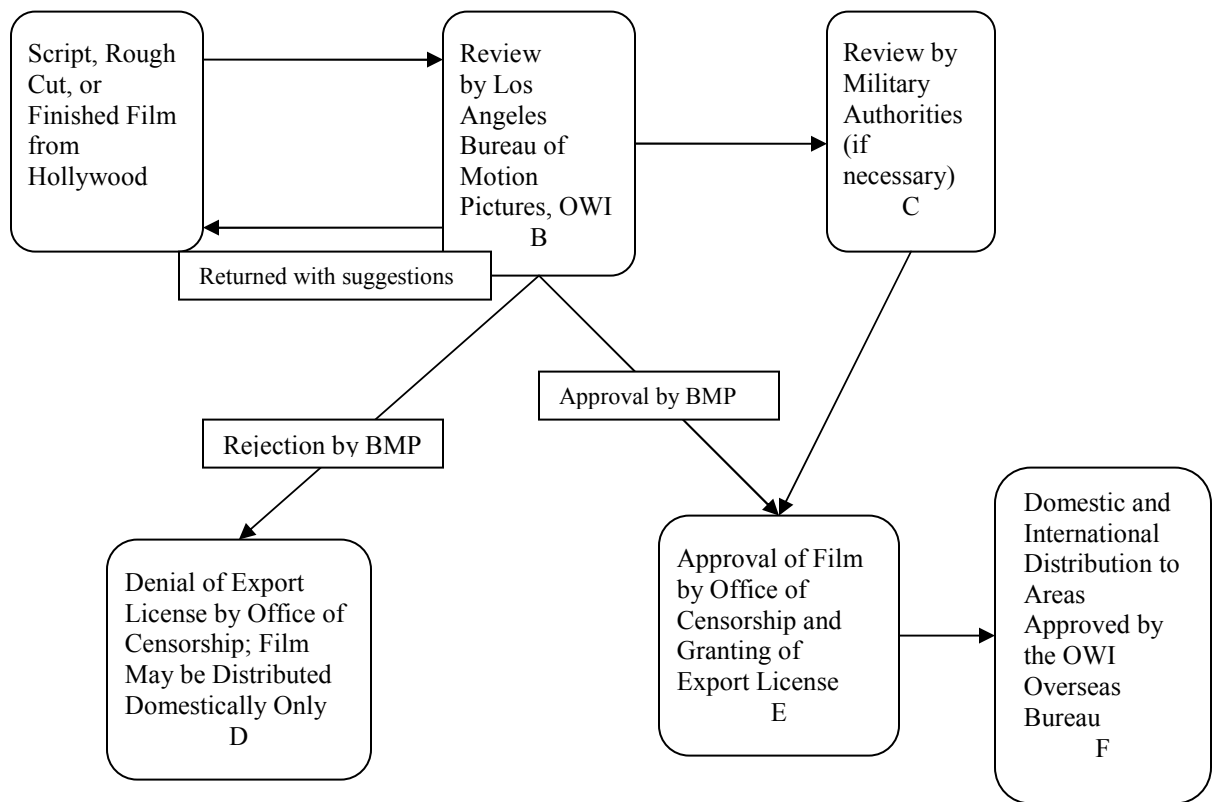


Figure 2. Bureau of Motion Pictures film review system, from creation of film to distribution

Figure 2 depicts the path a film might follow through the government review system, if Mellett's plans were successfully implemented. A film script or rough cut (box A) would be sent to the Los Angeles office of the OWI's Bureau of Motion Pictures (B). The BMP sometimes received finished films, but they preferred to

receive scripts or rough cuts so that changes could easily be made if necessary. If the reviewers had recommendations, the film would be sent back to its studio, but if it was approved, it might be sent to the military for clearance (C) – this was only necessary if military scenes were depicted – or sent along to the Office of Censorship (E). Censorship would grant it an export license. The film could then be distributed domestically and internationally (F). If the film was rejected by the BMP, the Office of Censorship could, in support of the OWI, deny the film an export license (D). The film could then only be distributed domestically. Unfortunately for the Bureau of Motion Pictures, however, this system was not always followed. This paper endeavors to understand why.

Historiography

A fairly small number of books and articles have been written about the OWI's Bureau of Motion Pictures. Allan Winkler's *The Politics of Propaganda* is the major institutional history of the Office of War Information. It is not specifically about the OWI's treatment of motion pictures. Instead, it addresses the OWI's leadership, such as the director, Elmer Davis, and his most upper-level colleagues, Robert Sherwood and Gardner Cowles, Jr. Winkler talks about their interactions with other relevant government departments, especially the military, and how the OWI jockeyed with other government offices to manage information about the war. Winkler views the OWI as a liberal office, made up of "passionate interventionists" who were committed to the ideological goals of the war. However, he argues that while they "wanted to communicate what they considered the basic American values

of freedom and democracy to friends and foes alike in all corners of the earth,” they were constrained by forces within American government and society and thus limited in spreading these ideologies. Winkler argues that Davis and his subordinates felt bound simply to “tell the truth,” believing that an informed American public would make good decisions and support the government on their own accord.⁵ But, of course, this “truth” had a liberal ideological bent.

The OWI’s main obstacles, according to Winkler, were an American public suspicious of propaganda, and an uncertainty about the President’s goals in fighting the war. American distrust of propaganda stemmed mostly from its inept and exaggerated use during World War I. The World War I propaganda office, the Committee on Public Information led by George Creel, “stirred up hatred of all things German. Portrayed as barbaric Huns, Germans appeared intent on conquering the world for their own selfish ends.” However, Creel’s exaggerated and caricatured images of Germans created hysteria about the German people which Americans later came to resent. Believing that Creel and President Wilson had manipulated the U.S. into war, some Americans became quite wary of propaganda. Propaganda’s close association in the public mind with the rising Nazi and Soviet regimes also contributed to America’s misgivings.⁶

The larger challenge facing the OWI, however, was President Roosevelt’s “ambiguity over basic American aims in the war.” Initially, Roosevelt seemed committed to emphasizing the ideological reasons for the war. He spoke of the four freedoms, “freedom of speech and expression, freedom of worship, freedom from

⁵ Winkler, *Politics of Propaganda*, 6.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 3-4.

want, freedom from fear,” and created, with Winston Churchill, the Atlantic Charter, which encouraged the ideologies of self-determination and democratic governance for nations after the war. Nevertheless, according to Winkler, President Roosevelt and his government were more concerned with winning the war than with spreading freedom and democracy: “as the fighting wore on the propaganda leaders became increasingly aware that the President, and the State, War, and Navy Departments, were willing to compromise those [ideological] aims in the interests of a quick end to the struggle.” OWI leadership thus had to contend with a federal government perhaps not as supportive of ideological concerns as they were.⁷

Winkler, therefore, addresses the OWI as a whole and focuses most of his attention on the beliefs and actions of its leadership. He talks in some detail about the political leanings of the major players in the OWI, focusing mostly on their belief in interventionism and the Four Freedoms. Because he focuses so completely on the leadership of the OWI, though, he tends to neglect the ways these beliefs were put into practice in each office and bureau of the OWI. So, for example, he does not make the connection between the liberalism of the Bureau of Motion Pictures’ leadership and their interpretation of the war aims espoused by President Roosevelt.

In contrast to Winkler, I will focus specifically on the Bureau of Motion Pictures, which he touches on only briefly. I agree with Winkler that bureaucratic battles between the OWI and other government agencies were frequent and damaging. I will discuss how the BMP interacted with the other government agencies Winkler mentions, but specifically the Office of Censorship where these conflicts constrained the BMP and limited its effectiveness. I will also go into much more

⁷ Winkler, *Politics of Propaganda*, 5-6.

depth regarding the interpretation of the war aims. I agree with Winkler that a fundamental problem for the BMP was a lack of guidance from President Roosevelt about the material the BMP should encourage in films. The confusion over war aims directly contributed to the BMP's conflicts with other agencies. In the absence of guidance from the President and from the director of the OWI, the BMP was left to determine which aspects of the war and the home front should be emphasized in movies, and which should be deleted. As I will show, the Office of Censorship had an entirely different opinion, and because of the peculiar hierarchies in these two offices, the priorities of the Office of Censorship won out over the priorities of the BMP. The BMP was left, then, to lobby for Hollywood support of its war aims, but with no real way to enforce its requests.

James M. Myers, in his dissertation *The Bureau of Motion Pictures: Its Influence on Film Content During World War II and the Reasons For Its Failure* provides an institutional history of the BMP that is similar to Winkler's study of the OWI. He tries to determine the extent of government control and censorship of films during World War II. He also tries to determine why the BMP failed in its project to control film content and why Congress closed the office, in its original incarnation, about eighteen months after it was founded. He does not talk much about the ideological aims of the members of the BMP, nor does he spend much time examining the specific changes the BMP requested by made in movies they reviewed. For Myers, the BMP failed because of politics, specifically because of its squabbles with other government agencies and with Hollywood studio executives. In this regard, he agrees with Winkler. He shows that Mellett tried too hard to control

Hollywood, which caused Hollywood to resent him and rebel. To these external conflicts, Myers adds internal politics, specifically between Mellett, his assistant director Nelson Poynter, and Overseas Bureau of Motion Pictures representative Ulric Bell. He shows how Bell, who was loyal to OWI director Elmer Davis, fought constantly with Poynter, who was loyal to Mellett. Bell and Poynter routinely tried to become the primary point of contact between the BMP and the Hollywood studios. In their power contest, Bell was especially antagonistic, trying both to supplant Poynter as main studio liaison and also to force and threaten Hollywood studios to take the BMP's advice.

While I agree with Myers that the BMP suffered from political in-fighting, I do not agree that Bell and Poynter's arguments were a major cause of the BMP's downfall. Myers makes a Poynter into an innocent bystander, and describes Bell as an instigator, a power-hungry villain. This oversimplification contradicts the major work on the Bureau of Motion Pictures, *Hollywood Goes To War: How Politics, Profits, and Propaganda Shaped World War II Movies*, by Clayton R. Koppes and Gregory D. Black. For Koppes and Black, it was Poynter, not Bell, who caused many of the rifts between the BMP and Hollywood by reworking movie scripts despite his lack of film experience. To be sure, the wrangling for control of the BMP caused Hollywood and the rest of the government to wonder about the efficacy of the agency. However, it certainly was not the reason Hollywood studios refused to adopt some of the BMP's recommendations, nor was it the reason Congress decided to kill the agency. Instead, I will argue that Hollywood's resistance stemmed from a longstanding fear of government control of the film industry, from disagreements

over the ways war aims should be handled within movies, and from Hollywood's understanding of the kind of films audiences wanted to see. Congress's decision to kill the agency came both from ideological opposition to its purpose and from a sense that it was wasteful and inefficient.

The primary book on the BMP is Koppes and Black's *Hollywood Goes To War*. They describe how the OWI's "liberal propagandists" attempted to define the American war effort in terms of democracy fighting fascism. With the disingenuous claim that they were simply "telling the truth," the OWI, and the BMP in particular, advanced a specific set of beliefs that they encouraged filmmakers to work into their films.

Unlike Winkler, Koppes and Black do discuss race. According to Koppes and Black, the OWI was aware that America's white supremacist and segregationist ideologies were incompatible with the government's claims that it was fighting for democracy. Koppes and Black note that the OWI "recognized that the persistence of second class citizenship undermined black morale and called into question American preachments about the Four Freedoms." Thus it was incumbent on New Dealers to insist that blacks, too, could experience the American Dream. Still, as Koppes and Black point out, the "demands of profit and propaganda made it all but impossible to deal forthrightly with race on the screen." The OWI could not allow films to depict the extent of American oppression of blacks, for example, because it might damage America's reputation abroad. Also, Hollywood was often unwilling to alienate even a small portion of its audience by depicting controversial issues, so an accurate depiction of racism against blacks might alienate, for example, Southern whites who

supported jimcrow regulations. Koppes and Black add that the OWI often ran into trouble when it diverged from a more pragmatic focus on “widespread participation in the war effort and [promotion of] its New Deal philosophy.”⁸ Thus, the OWI often chose the most expedient course for improving blacks’ status in films. “The propagandists,” Koppes and Black write, “hoped to clean up the worst examples of racial stereotypes and to introduce positive black characters if that could be done without too much trouble,” such as by writing-out an offensive character that was not essential to the story.⁹ However, Koppes and Black do not attempt to explain why the OWI was not more forceful in pushing its racially-democratic ethos.

Koppes and Black’s focus on the spread of democratic ideologies precludes them from examining the dynamics of race in more detail. For example, they discuss portrayals of the Chinese in the same chapter as portrayals of the British, because these were both democratic allies of the U.S. Koppes and Black argue that the OWI focused on the democratic government of China in its propaganda, though China’s democratic leader, Chiang Kai-shek, was very corrupt and was kept in power by the U.S. government itself. According to the authors, “Britain and China received an extraordinary outpouring of American trust during the war,” and “Americans believed they shared with the British and Chinese an essentially compatible vision.” For this reason, the OWI attempted to “eliminate a perception of differences among the allies” and showcase unity.¹⁰ The authors are clearly aware that America had a history of virulent racism against the Chinese, but they emphasize that the OWI worked hard to depict China as a modern country whose politics were inextricably bound with

⁸ Koppes and Black, *Hollywood Goes To War*, 145-6

⁹ *Ibid.*, 179.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 223

America's, and who, therefore, should be treated with dignity and equality as one of America's most powerful allies.¹¹ To Koppes and Black, this was the major reason the OWI rejected traditional cinematic racial stereotypes of the Chinese. While this may be true, and while the OWI may have dressed up its prescriptions to Hollywood in these democratic terms, Koppes and Black do not address whether the OWI might have been concerned with broader implications of racism against the Chinese, in a context other than political expediency. Koppes and Black focus on the ways the BMP pushed for the support of all the democratic war aims it identified, and they argue that racial equality was simply one, if an important one, of these aims. I attempt to highlight the ways BMP's political leanings and understandings of racial hierarchies, informed by the racially unstable world in which they lived, influenced the very way they chose to understand the war aims. War aims, themselves, were contested, and the BMP's interpretation of them was not the same as interpretations by many other key actors.

In addition, Koppes and Black focus a chapter on screen portrayals of the Japanese. In this chapter, they argue that BMP reviewers discouraged Hollywood to portray the Japanese in simply a racist way, both because BMP reviewers were liberals who deplored racism, and because movies depicting the Allies fighting a racialized Japanese enemy, rather than a fascist Japanese government, did not explain the war aims to viewers and might cause hysteria. However, Koppes and Black argue, "OWI found the studios more receptive to a nuanced treatment of the German enemy than of the Japanese; despite all the agency's lobbying, the Japanese were

¹¹ Koppes and Black, *Hollywood Goes To War*, 236.

shown primarily as the beast in the jungle.”¹² Koppes and Black do not, unfortunately, endeavor to explain why Hollywood almost never showed good Japanese civilians, but frequently showed good German civilians. They do not explain the mechanisms for racism against the Japanese.

Koppes and Black generally do not address why the OWI pressed for a progressive reading of race, aside from suggesting that the OWI pushed for these changes primarily for wartime geopolitical pragmatism (e.g., the OWI does not want America to look bad in front of its allies). It is not possible to discern from their book whether OWI members might have been trying to push their own liberal politics, or whether domestic political constraints might have limited the actions the OWI was able to take. They focus on the major players: the U.S., China, Japan, Britain, Germany, and Russia. However, I will argue that OWI reviewers were acutely sensitive to depictions of people of color from other parts of the world as well: the Philippines, the South Pacific, South Asia, the Middle East, and Africa. I will argue that a broader concern existed in the 1940s about portraying people of color in a world where their role was changing dramatically in the eyes of white America.

Another key difference between my argument and that of Koppes and Black is that I place the BMP’s wrangling with Hollywood in a larger framework of interaction between Hollywood and the government over time. While Koppes and Black certainly discuss the ways the BMP worked with the Office of Censorship and other key agencies, they do not sufficiently place the agency in a broader historical context of government intervention in the media, of the Production Code Administration and the Legion of Decency, and of the larger debate about how the

¹² Koppes and Black, *Hollywood Goes To War*, 248.

government should determine what the American public and the international public knows. Finally, Koppes and Black do not sufficiently place the BMP's work in an international context. One of BMP's main goals was to influence people abroad and control international public opinion through movies. I will show how the BMP's concern with how America portrayed racial and ethnic groups was influenced by its sense that internationally, people of color, especially those under colonial rule, might conclude that a racist America might not be an ally at all.

The historiography about Americans' perceptions race is enormous and detailed. A current debate in African-American history is about whether the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s was truly a watershed moment, or whether it was simply a product of movements before, but was raised to national prominence after the Second World War and forced government action. Many scholars, such as Mary Dudziak and Penny von Eschen, argue that the Cold War provided the catalyst for the federal government to focus on civil rights issues, since discriminatory treatment of African-Americans undermined the democratic ideologies the U.S. was trying to spread at the time. Thus, discrimination against people of color at home provided propaganda for America's Communist enemies, and also made the newly-independent countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America look suspiciously on the freedom that America promised would accompany democracy.¹³ I will argue that many of these same issues arose in a different guise during World War II. The OWI tried to stop neutral and Allied countries from realizing the inequalities African-

¹³ See Mary L. Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights*, and Penny M. Von Eschen, *Race Against Empire*. Both these scholars do acknowledge the important civil rights agitation that occurred before the Cold War, to be sure.

Americans faced at home, because the OWI was afraid that fascism might seem like an appealing alternative to countries under imperial control.

Many other scholars, like Patricia Sullivan and Barbara Dianne Savage, locate key African-American protest movements during the Second World War, as part of a longer history of civil rights agitation. Savage discusses how African-Americans tried to use mass media, and radio in particular, to win over white Americans to their cause, agitate for desegregation of the military, and vocalize concerns about treatment of returning black veterans.¹⁴ Sullivan describes several New Deal liberals from the South who filled key government positions during the war and lobbied heavily for civil rights for African-Americans. In addition to ably demonstrating that many in Roosevelt's government worked for a civil rights agenda, including Mellett and Poynter before their tenure in the OWI, she shows how this civil rights platform in particular antagonized Roosevelt's enemies. The civil rights platform, and agitation on behalf of anti-poll-tax legislation in particular, so antagonized Southern Democrats and conservative Republicans that it became a key rallying point for opposing Roosevelt and the New Deal.¹⁵ I will argue, in agreement with Sullivan, that by 1943, Congress was hostile to Roosevelt and his agencies, especially ones in favor of liberal racial policies. In fact, while Roosevelt still had some supporters in Congress, many of his enemies held key positions on influential committees. Appointments on these committees were seniority-based, and many of the most senior members of Congress were Southern Democrats elected year after year by a jimcrow

¹⁴ Barbara Dianne Savage, *Broadcasting Freedom*.

¹⁵ Patricia Sullivan, *Days of Hope*.

constituency. As I will argue, these Congressmen helped close down the OWI's Bureau of Motion Pictures.

Scholarship on white America's views about other ethnic groups is much less extensive, especially regarding people in the Middle East and Africa. Much of the scholarship about Africa links America's opinion toward Africans to America's opinion toward black Americans, and the OWI made that connection often.¹⁶ Scholarship on Asia is growing very quickly, and many historians working in this area mark the Second World War as a turning point or key moment regarding racial imagery about Asians. Ronald T. Takaki's *Double Victory* is a bottom-up account of African-Americans, Chinese, Japanese, Native Americans, Mexican Americans, and Jews in the war, and he traces the many voices protesting racial inequality prior to the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s.¹⁷ K. Scott Wong's *Americans First* talks about Chinese Americans during World War II. He studies ways they participated in the war effort, how they were treated, and ways their racial status was renegotiated as China became an important American ally.¹⁸ Robert Lee, in his book *Orientalism: Asian Americans in Popular Culture*, describes the history of the variety of stereotypes assigned to Asians and locates them in American history. Lee argues that World War II was a key turning point in white America's opinion of Asians, due to the incompatibility of war aims with America's racism. For Lee, important American wartime racial policies, such as Japanese internment and the revocation of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1943, were a response to white America's questioning its supremacy: white elites made these political decisions to try to stabilize the place of

¹⁶ Final Script Review 2/1/1943, *Sahara* Folder, Box 3524, Record Group 208 – OWI Records.

¹⁷ Ronald T. Takaki, *Double Victory*.

¹⁸ K. Scott Wong, *Americans First*.

whites in developing racial hierarchies. However, these new policies raised other issues and required further negotiations by whites and Asian-Americans as roles were shifting. For Lee, the turning point of World War II led to the rehabilitation of Asian-Americans into the “model minority” during the Cold War.¹⁹

Perhaps the most influential book on this topic is John Dower’s *War Without Mercy*. Dower talks about ways the Japanese and white British and Americans depicted each other in their propaganda, and he emphasizes the racial character of the empire Japan wanted to create. Dower also discusses the imagined ties between African-Americans and other “colored” peoples (as Americans referred to them at the time) like the Japanese. He shows the ways the Japanese used African-American oppression to claim that the Japanese, another “colored” people, would be better rulers to them than their American white oppressors. Dower’s key point is that the image Americans propagated about Japan, and vice versa, tapped into long-held cultural notions of what foreignness and evil meant. For example, Dower shows how Americans who likened Japanese to hordes and infestations of vermin, subhumans, supermen, and suicidal maniacs, were all referring to myths of western culture which had also been used to describe African-Americans, Native Americans, and many other groups who had been enemies of, or colonized by, England and America. Likewise, he shows how the Japanese used discourses of “purity” to talk about how the white Allies were inferior to the Japanese. He not only describes the propaganda about each racial group, but also where this information appeared, such as in movies,

¹⁹ Robert Lee, *Orientalism*, 146-149.

comic strips, and music, as well as in foreign policy decisions and the correspondence of heads of state.²⁰

Several books, particularly Dower's and Lee's, argue that the destabilization of white supremacy during the war years influenced the culture of the American home front and also the decisions made by the American military and political leadership. These authors suggest that World War II was indeed a watershed moment in white America's opinion of Asia and Asian-Americans. While these books discuss cultural products like film, none of them focus on the ways a government agency like the OWI tried to contain and control depictions of racial minorities in film during this extraordinarily uncertain period. The Office of War Information's Bureau of Motion Pictures was more sensitive to these depictions than many other government agencies. Interestingly, though, as I will show in Chapter 2, reviewers in the BMP were not always able to move beyond the racist ideologies of the World War II era. As progressive and insightful as they were, they sometimes found racist stereotypes acceptable. These OWI reviews were the product of a world in flux: reviewers were struggling to understand the places of different racial and ethnic groups during this watershed moment in race relations.

In Chapter 1, I will discuss the ways in which the BMP tried to enact change while fighting against a sea of other agencies, muddled war aims, a suspicious Congress, and an unsupportive President. The BMP strongly encouraged the depiction of morale-building propaganda in films, such as racial equality, willingness to support the war through rationing at home, and defeat of a strong, but not all-

²⁰ John W. Dower, *War Without Mercy*.

powerful enemy. In doing so, the BMP went much further than other agencies, specifically the Office of Censorship, which was concerned with protecting freedom of the press and national security, and little else. As I will explain, due to a quirk in the hierarchy of agencies, the BMP needed the Office of Censorship to enforce its decisions to allow or prohibit a film's export. Since the offices differed so completely in their priorities, the BMP was at the mercy of the Office of Censorship, and was unable to fully implement its program.

In Chapter 2, I will discuss the ways the BMP's views about equitable depictions of racial minorities clashed with the views of many other government agencies and civilians. The BMP's stand on race, against the backdrop of dramatically shifting racial hierarchies in the World War II world, explains some of the controversy surrounding the office and highlights some of the reasons it was not successful. To be sure, the political battles and bureaucratic entanglements I describe in Chapter 1 are intimately tied to the ideologies I describe in Chapter 2. For example, because the BMP stressed racial equality as part of their democratic war aims, they alienated some of the Hollywood executives and Congressmen who resented their policies. I will use BMP reviews of several films to determine the racial ideologies the BMP tried to promote.

Ultimately, after several inept political decisions by BMP leadership, the Congress closed the entire Domestic Branch of the OWI. It slashed the OWI's budget dramatically during the appropriations hearings for 1944 (which happened in the summer of 1943). By August of 1943, Lowell Mellett had resigned his post, and the BMP was absorbed into the Overseas Branch, where it continued to function, with

a much smaller staff, until the end of the war. How, during its short life, did the Bureau of Motion Pictures try to enact change in Hollywood, and what sorts of changes did it want to enact? What forces, both inside and outside the government, tried to thwart these plans, and why?

Chapter 1: “We Cannot Delegate Our Authority”: The Office of Censorship, Film, and the OWI

Just over a week after the bombing of the U.S. naval base at Pearl Harbor by the Japanese, Congress passed the first War Powers act, giving President Franklin Delano Roosevelt the authority to create a censorship organization as part of his executive leadership for the war. On December 19, 1941, President Roosevelt issued Executive Order 8985, which established the Office of Censorship (OC) and conferred on its Director the power to “cause to be censored, in his absolute discretion,” international communications.²¹ By March of the following year, the various military and civilian offices performing smaller-scale censorship duties (such as the Army’s and Navy’s) had given control over to Byron Price, who was appointed Director of the office. Price, a newspaper man, had committed his career to maintaining freedom of the press. He felt his job was to help the press censor itself, and he was extremely careful to limit censorship to international communications and matters of national security.²²

Six months later, on June 13, 1942, President Roosevelt issued Executive Order 9182, which established the Office of War Information (OWI). The OWI was a consolidation of several precursor organizations, one of which was the Bureau of Motion Pictures (BMP).²³ The following month, on July 10, 1942, the newly

²¹ Letter, Byron Price to “all Divisions, Censorship Stations, and Boards of Review,” Nov. 9, 1942, OC-OWI Agreement Folder, Box 108, Record Group 216 – OC Records. Price is quoting from Executive Order 8985. The date and number of the Executive Order are provided on page 2 of the Record Group 216 Preliminary Inventory, also at the National Archives in College Park.

²² Michael S. Sweeney, *Secrets of Victory*, 7-39.

²³ OWI Preliminary Inventory, Record Group 208 – OWI Records, page 1.

appointed Director of OWI, Elmer Davis (another newspaper man), released a letter to the department heads of his organization in which he outlined the platform and the priorities of OWI. “This is a people’s war,” he wrote, “and to win it the people should know as much about it as they can. This office will do its best to tell the truth and nothing but the truth, both at home and abroad.” He felt very strongly that his new organization should not conflict with the American tradition of freedom of the press: “The Office of War Information will not, and does not want to, curtail the open-door policy that has always prevailed in the dealings of the government with press and radio and other news media.”²⁴ However, as he came to realize, the line between censorship and propaganda was not nearly that clear.

The divergent agendas of OWI and OC caused problems in the execution of their separate mandates. While OC was committed to encouraging voluntary censorship of the media, and limiting that censorship to particular issues of national security, some members of OWI were interested in using their propaganda authority to encourage the media to include images and language that glorified their image of American democracy: democratic, participatory, and racially equal. One key figure in OWI’s liberal agenda was Lowell Mellett, the chief of the Bureau of Motion Pictures. Mellett tried to use his authority to implant movies with his message, and was ultimately constrained by Price and Davis themselves. Then, the OC’s commitment to the principles of free-speech and self-regulation trumped OWI’s desire to use propaganda to promote images of American democracy, in part due to

²⁴ Letter, Elmer Davis to “Heads of All Departments and Agencies,” OC-OWI Agreement Folder, Box 108, Record Group 216 – OC Records.

the way these two organizations agreed to cooperate and share their functions in the early days of their establishment.²⁵

The conflicts between the OWI and the OC, especially regarding the Bureau of Motion Pictures, are indicative of the larger struggles the OWI faced in getting its message across. In this chapter, I will show that there were three major administrative problems that kept the Bureau of Motion Pictures from becoming the central liaison between the government and Hollywood, and from having the authority to require Hollywood to embed its films with the BMP's propaganda. These problems were separate but intertwined. First, the OWI had a difficult time doing its job because it was not supported by the rest of government: Congress, military leadership, the Office of Censorship, and the President himself. There was also considerable internal squabbling within the OWI. This came, in part, from personality clashes, but also stemmed from the rather haphazard way the agencies were combined into the OWI under President Roosevelt's executive order.

Second, Hollywood executives had mixed feelings about government regulation of their industry. Hollywood had a long history of self-regulation through its Production Code Administration. Many in Hollywood agreed with the liberal-left political beliefs of the Bureau of Motion Pictures. They wanted to be patriotic and use their industry to support the war effort. However, many of them were suspicious of government censorship, and resented government bureaucrats attempting to rewrite their scripts (especially when they felt it might jeopardize the picture's money-making potential). Many industry executives recognized the personality clashes

²⁵ It is ironic, of course, to note that the free speech principles the OC was trying to protect were in fact one of the major facets of American democracy that contributed to the ideal picture the OWI was trying to project.

within the BMP and tried to circumvent the complex film review process. This only made BMP officials more eager to clarify and codify the lines of authority between their agency and the others jockeying for decision-making power.

Third, the lack of any official war aims handed down from President Roosevelt made it difficult for the OWI and its branches to have a clear mandate. When the President established the OWI, he provided only limited guidance regarding the sorts of propaganda it should emphasize. The OWI did its best to cobble together a policy which was heavily informed by the left-liberal politics of many of its members. This particularly held true regarding the BMP's policy, the *Government Information Manual for the Motion Picture Industry*, which it issued in the summer of 1942. This policy was delivered to all the major studio heads, and it was the rubric used by reviewers to evaluate films. However, it was much more ambitious than the propaganda/censorship beliefs of other key agencies, particularly the Office of Censorship. The OC felt that in a democracy, freedom of the press and national security should be protected above all else. It was less concerned with advancing a particular interpretation of the American war aims. Unfortunately, however, this difference of approach proved detrimental to the BMP's agenda because of an agreement the BMP and OC worked out to clarify the lines of authority.

The mandate of the Office of Censorship gave it authority to grant or withhold export licenses to information being sent abroad. Because of this authority, OWI had to submit any information it wanted to send abroad to OC for approval. While OC was usually happy to approve OWI's information, it was not always willing to deny export licenses to films based on the Bureau of Motion Pictures' recommendations.

Because of its commitment to a free press, OC would only deny a license when it felt national security was at stake; to do so for any other reason would be tantamount to censorship. The BMP, on the other hand, wanted to deny export of certain films when filmmakers refused to follow OWI's recommendations. These recommendations tended to focus on inclusion of approved war aims and exclusion of derogatory images of Americans and American allies. OC would not always deny export licenses for these reasons, and because OWI had no enforcement authority, the BMP was often powerless to get its information across. These conflicts undermined the OWI's ability to carry out its propaganda campaign through the movies.

The OC, it must be stressed, was not primarily concerned with censoring the movies. Its major codes of practice did not mention movies at all. However, because it held decision-making power over the OWI in a particularly significant area, overseas export, the OC was forced to make decisions about movies. In the next section, I will address the conflicts OWI faced with the President, Congress, and the top military advisors. These conflicts account for much of the difficulty OWI had in obtaining and keeping control of film-review privileges, but they have been dealt with in great depth elsewhere.²⁶ The OWI's relationship with the Office of Censorship has been little-examined, but it is central to understanding the ways the OWI's decision-making power was limited.²⁷

²⁶ See Winkler, *Politics of Propaganda*, Koppes and Black, *Hollywood Goes to War*, and Myers, "Bureau of Motion Pictures."

²⁷ This topic is treated to some extent in Koppes and Black's *Hollywood Goes to War* and Sweeney's *Secrets of Victory*, but neither examines it in much depth, especially the attitudes of the Office of Censorship toward the OWI and the oversight role it was forced into.

War Aims

The OWI was founded in response to agitation in the press and popular opinion that the government was not providing enough information about the war, and that the information was contradictory; there was no authoritative source.²⁸ While the OWI helped solve this problem, the President did not allow the agency to become the central authority and clearinghouse of war information, because he did not provide them with complete enforcement power. In a letter to Lowell Mellett, written when Mellett coordinated films as part of the Office of Government Reports, President Roosevelt told Mellett explicitly that the “motion picture must remain free insofar as national security will permit. I want no censorship of the motion picture; I want no restrictions placed thereon which will impair the usefulness of the film other than those very necessary restrictions which the dictates of safety make imperative.”²⁹ This policy stayed in place when Mellett’s office was absorbed into the OWI. In fact, historian Allan Winkler argues that President Roosevelt often deliberately organized government agencies *without* clear lines of authority, because he felt that the agencies and the officials working for them should fight things out among themselves to arrive at the best solution. This tactic also saved him from having to take one side or another in political disputes.³⁰ Consequently, the tangled government information network included propaganda officials in the State, War, and Navy Departments, as well as the Office of Censorship, with whom the OWI had continual arguments.

²⁸ Winkler, *Politics of Propaganda*, 22.

²⁹ Letter from President Roosevelt to Lowell Mellett, December 18, 1941, Box 5, Folder “White House -1941 (1),” Lowell Mellett Papers, Franklin Delano Roosevelt Presidential Library, Hyde Park, New York.

³⁰ Winkler, *Politics of Propaganda*, 20.

OWI's disputes with these agencies, especially the Office of Censorship, crippled their ability to distribute information.

These agencies did not only fight with OWI about turf and authority. They did not agree with the OWI's interpretation of the purpose and goal of war information. When he established the OWI, President Roosevelt did not specify what information the OWI should emphasize and what they should try to hide. Without a clear mandate, OWI composed its own set of guidelines. The Bureau of Motion Pictures wrote a guidebook for the motion picture industry using guidelines from its parent organization, the OWI.³¹ According to historians Koppes and Black, the BMP's policy was derived from President Roosevelt's Four Freedoms, as well as a speech made by Vice President Henry A. Wallace from early 1942 called "Century of the Common Man." In it, Wallace depicted the war as a battle between good and evil across the world, where the Allies were fighting for the good of individual rights and freedoms which would allow for "a decent standard of living for all, to be attained through government action in a mixed economy – in short, a world New Deal." This speech was written in response to a more conservative editorial by *Time* magazine's editor Henry Luce, who stressed that the war meant American power across the world, individual business success, and "stability, order, and economic freedom."³²

Using Wallace's speech as a guide, the Bureau of Motion Pictures wrote their *Government Information Manual*. The manual declared that the majority of the American people supported the war but did not have adequate information about why America was fighting. It explained that the American people were not susceptible to

³¹ Government Manual for Motion Pictures. See also Koppes and Black, *Hollywood Goes To War*, 50.

³² Koppes and Black, *Hollywood Goes to War*, 66.

propaganda in general, but preferred the truth: “The government believes that truth in the end is the only medium to bring about the proper understanding of democracy, one important ingredient that can help make democracy work.” The BMP’s policies, of course, could easily be interpreted as propaganda anyway, because it encouraged Americans and their allies to support an idealized picture of American government and society. The BMP outlined six major war aims to focus on in movies: the issues (the Four Freedoms, for example), the enemy, the United Nations³³ and its peoples, work and production, the home front, and the fighting forces. Along the lines of Wallace’s speech, the BMP argued that America was fighting for “survival,” for “freedom and against slavery,” which must “be established on a world-wide basis or [these freedoms] will always be in jeopardy in America.”³⁴ The BMP argued that the Axis powers were using militarism to “divide group against group,” but that it was dangerous to believe that all Germans, Italians and Japanese were “bestial barbarians.” Interestingly, racial equality was one of the most consistently stressed platforms in the manual- for example, in the longest section, “The Issues,” racial equality was mentioned explicitly in four out of thirteen bullet points and was alluded to in three more. For example:

A) We may wonder what do the underprivileged, the uneducated, the oppressed minorities – even in this country – have to fight for. Can we portray on the screen the fact that under the democratic process the underprivileged have become less underprivileged, our literacy has come up,

³³ Although the United Nations did not formally exist until 1945, OWI propagandists and the American government in general often used the term to refer to the Allied nations working together to stop the Axis.

³⁴ *Government Information Manual for the Motion Picture Industry*, 174.

new opportunities have opened for youth. We are clearing our slums, we are establishing electric lines to out-of-the-way farmers, we are abolishing vicious tenant farming, improving the lot of minorities.

B) There is a brave new world ahead, if we will fight for it. This brave new world can only come among a people who are free economically, socially, and in their respective religions and races.³⁵

The manual also discussed the importance of workers' contributions, as well as women, people on the home front, soldiers, and farmers. Instead of simply encouraging filmmakers to depict military successes or evil foreign foes, the BMP developed a nuanced, far-reaching understanding of the issues at stake in the war. The BMP hoped to provide Hollywood with a wide variety of topics to make films about.

OWI and the War and State Departments

The Bureau of Motion Pictures advocated democracy for all, racial equality, class equality, and a defeat of militarism. They stressed that an informed public would make the best decisions about supporting the war, so they sought to include as much information as possible in movies. The American military had, in general, a much less liberal perspective on the dissemination of information. The perspectives of top military officials varied, but most felt that the less information released, the better; they did not want to risk national security by revealing military secrets, and they defined "secrets" quite narrowly. For this reason, military officials pressured the Office of Censorship, in order to try to wrest some control of freedom of the press

³⁵ *Government Information Manual for the Motion Picture Industry*, 175.

from that Office. For example, the military was concerned enough about revealing the weather over the radio (because the weather might indicate poor conditions for flying, for example) that they forced the Office of Censorship to prohibit radio announcers from saying a baseball game was called on account of rain.³⁶

Top military officials were a fairly conservative group, and Elmer Davis, head of the OWI, continually had confrontations with them. Davis felt that “propaganda can only be effective if it is guided by military intelligence and synchronized with military operations.” However, most military officials felt that information about the war was theirs to protect, placing more importance on military and security needs than the free flow of information.³⁷ For example, historian Allan Winkler depicts Admiral Ernest J. King, chief of naval operations and commander-in-chief of the U.S. Fleet, as stubborn and secretive.³⁸ Davis later said he “always suspected that Admiral King’s idea of War Information was that there should be just *one* communiqué. Some morning we would announce that the war was over and that we won it.”³⁹ Similarly, according to Winkler, Henry Stimson, the Secretary of War, was suspicious of Davis and his new organization: “Suspicious of civilians who might interfere with strategic operations or compromise security regulations, Stimson saw the war as a military engagement that the Army and Navy could best fight. He viewed OWI and the newfangled propaganda techniques as only peripheral to that effort.”⁴⁰ Davis had to constantly pressure military officials to release information about the war effort. One important exception is General Eisenhower, who tended to

³⁶ Sweeney, *Secrets of Victory*, Chapter 4.

³⁷ Winkler, *Politics of Propaganda*, 46.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 46.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 48.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 45.

support OWI policies, and allowed OWI members who came to his camps in North Africa to gather intelligence much more readily than other generals did. The General's brother Milton, it should be said, was a top OWI official, so that may account for the General's permissive attitude.⁴¹

Many of the top military people also did not agree with the left-liberal perspective of the OWI, especially regarding race relations. The American military remained segregated throughout the war, amid continual protest and race-based violence and lynchings in American military camps. NAACP secretary Walter White traveled extensively through military camps, both in the U.S. and abroad. He found extreme racial prejudice to be endemic to the leadership in these camps, much more so, he said, than among the troops. One interesting exception is Admiral Chester Nimitz, who, though a Texan raised amid jimcrow racism, was one of the first to completely desegregate some of his units and allow black and white soldiers to sleep, work, and eat together.⁴²

The American military tended to view the Japanese enemy, too, in racialized terms. Historian John Dower recounts that American soldiers sometimes brought back souvenirs from Japanese they had killed- an ear, a finger, a skull- but it would have been unthinkable to do the same with the body of a German or Italian enemy.⁴³ The military released Pocket Guides to foreign lands to be distributed to soldiers being sent overseas. These guides were written for many of the places in which soldiers might be stationed, such as Burma, Egypt, West Africa, Syria, and New Zealand. The guides described the language, culture, food, history, and dress of

⁴¹ Winkler, *Politics of Propaganda*, 29.

⁴² White, *A Man Called White*, 272-3.

⁴³ Dower, *War Without Mercy*, 64-5.

peoples who lived in these places, and described a variety of different ethnic groups. The guide to China is particularly fascinating. While the majority of the guide is fairly even-handed in its description of the Chinese, the end of the guide features a cartoon entitled “How To Spot A Jap” which advises soldiers about the visible differences between the Chinese and Japanese. In the cartoon, the Chinese were shown to be physically quite similar to Americans, whereas the Japanese were fundamentally different. For example, the Chinese man “is about the size of an average American,” while the Japanese man “is shorter – and looks as if his legs are joined directly to his chest!” While the Chinese man’s skin is a “dull bronze” color, the Japanese man’s skin tone is “lighter – more on the lemon-yellow side.” The Chinese man’s gait is similar to an American man’s, whereas the Japanese man shuffles. The cartoon then goes on to describe the Japanese man’s buck teeth, hissing speech, and deceitful demeanor.⁴⁴ These extraordinary descriptions indicate a willingness within the American military to use racial terms to describe the Japanese enemy, while using race to link the Chinese to the Allies. The Bureau of Motion Pictures tried to discourage filmmakers from this depicting the Japanese in this way, but the BMP’s recommendations were clearly undermined by the military establishment. The military’s attitude also found support among the public: just after Pearl Harbor, *Time* magazine published an article entitled “How To Tell Your Friends From The Japs” which, though not a cartoon, presented similar information.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ U.S. War and Navy Departments, *A Pocket Guide to China*, 64-75. In the course of my research I located Pocket Guides for a variety of different locations in Africa, Asia, the Middle East, and Latin America, and none were nearly as racially discriminatory as the China guide was against the Japanese. The military apparently did not publish one for Japan during the war.

⁴⁵ “How To Tell Your Friends From The Japs,” *Time Magazine*, Monday, Dec. 22, 1941, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,932034,00.html>.

The OWI's Bureau of Motion Pictures frequently confronted the Secretaries of War and Navy when filmmakers wanted to include military or war scenes in their movies. Just like Elmer Davis, Mellett and Poynter had to struggle with top military officials to retain control of their film review duties. Like the Office of Censorship, the military was unconcerned with supporting the BMP's propaganda policies, and were most concerned with maintaining accuracy in the depictions of battles and equipment. They were also quite strict about national security. What made top military officials even harder for the BMP to deal with, however, was their longstanding positive relationships with film executives.

Prior to the advent of the OWI, the military had offered help to filmmakers who wanted to portray battle scenes. If Hollywood would allow the military to see scripts and rough cuts, the military would provide Hollywood with advisors and sometimes equipment and uniforms to help films achieve accuracy in their details. Because Hollywood executives had a history of working well with the military, and because the military was primarily concerned with protecting military secrets, Hollywood executives often submitted movies to the military reviewers prior to the BMP, so as to circumvent the OWI's process.⁴⁶ In order to rectify this matter, Lowell Mellett tried repeatedly to work out an arrangement with the military so that military reviewers would make sure the BMP viewed films in advance of, or at the same time as, the military. In a letter to Major General Alexander D. Surles of January 5, 1943, Mellett outlines one such arrangement; interestingly, in order to avoid the appearance that the BMP is trying to censor Hollywood, he assured Surles that the OWI was simply trying to retain control over what is appropriately in its domain:

⁴⁶ Koppes and Black, *Hollywood Goes to War*, 113-4.

It is understood, of course, that OWI exercises no “right” of clearance in the matter of pictures. The purport of this agreement is that the War Department will consult completely with OWI on those pictures over which the Department does have the right of clearance, by reason of use of Army uniforms, insignia, etc., in order to avoid as far as possible the production of pictures that may contravene in some manner the general war information program.⁴⁷

These proposals did not always bear fruit, however. Two months later, in a letter from March, 8, 1943, Ulric Bell of the BMP related in a letter to Elmer Davis that “The Army and Navy give approval of pictures only within their purview but in such a way that studios often use this approval as an excuse for stalling off OWI. Even on military points, the service censors sometimes approve material to which the OWI would take exception.” He added, “The Army is supposed to have an agreement with Mellett [...] but I have seen no evidence of its practical application.”⁴⁸

The OWI faced similar concerns with the State Department. Elmer Davis and the OWI leadership were often forced to contend with Secretary of State Cordell Hull. Historian Allan Winkler paints Hull as a cautious man who jealously guarded his areas of authority, in part due to President Roosevelt’s tendency to make foreign affairs decisions by himself. Further, Hull was “reluctant to allow other organizations to intervene in anything that touched on foreign affairs,” and he viewed the OWI and

⁴⁷ Letter from Lowell Mellett to Major General Alexander D. Surles, January 5, 1943 Box 3509, Record Group 208 – OWI Records.

⁴⁸ Letter from Ulric Bell to Elmer Davis, March 8, 1943, Box 3509, Record Group 208 – OWI Records.

the agencies before it as “careless and irresponsible.”⁴⁹ As hard as Davis pushed with Hull, Stimson, and the rest, these leaders continued to provide him with as little information as possible: “Even though by the end of 1942 a relationship had evolved whereby Davis met regularly with Hull, Knox [Secretary of the Navy], and Stimson [...], the OWI head got only what the others were willing to give.”⁵⁰

The Bureau of Motion Pictures sought to clarify their confusing relationship with the State Department. Because of the lack of clear lines of authority, and because the BMP was not accorded a clear mandate to make decisions about movie content and enforce them, misinformation spread like wildfire throughout Hollywood about who to report to and which agency was in charge of what. Rumors abounded: in one example, regarding a movie called *Desert Song*, the press began to report that production was being held up “pending a decision by the State Department.” On March 6, 1943, Assistant Secretary of State Breckinridge Long wrote to Mellett about this rumor. He told Mellett that the State Department’s “interest in motion pictures is based upon two fundamental principles, namely, their effect on foreign relations, and their value as a means to promote the Department’s program in cultural relations.” He said that while the State Department has its own review board for educational and documentary films being sent abroad, it did not have a similar one for commercial pictures because “it is without authority to do so in peace time and in war time this is essentially the function of the Office of Censorship. The Office of Censorship may, of course, solicit the opinion of the Department informally.”⁵¹ In response, Mellett

⁴⁹ Winkler, *Politics of Propaganda*, 43.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 51.

⁵¹ Letter from Breckinridge Long to Lowell Mellett, March 6, 1943, Box 3509, Record Group 208 – OWI Records.

wrote that the Censor's office had the authority to issue or deny export licenses, and had been directed by the Censor (Byron Price) to consult many offices, including the State Department and the OWI, when expert guidance was sought. However, the "Censor's office, of course, under its complete authority can disregard your views or our views and act on its own judgment."⁵² This was exactly the problem the BMP had with the Office of Censorship. As we will see below, the Office of Censorship often refused to fall in line behind the BMP, and the BMP had no authority to force them to do so.

Internal Battles and Battles with Congress

Even within the OWI, tempers flared over the programs and tactics used by different departments. For example, when the precursor organizations were consolidated into the OWI, Archibald MacLeish, award-winning poet and Librarian of Congress, led the Office of Facts and Figures, which provided factual information to the public in the form of posters and pamphlets. After consolidation, MacLeish's agency fell under the control of Gardner Cowles, Jr., an advertising man who published the popular *Look* magazine. Cowles and his staff sought to change these pamphlets and posters to a flashier, more image-heavy, advertising style, in hopes of informing a wider audience. MacLeish and his staff, which consisted of liberal intellectuals and historians including Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., protested this move, because they felt Cowles' tactics were really nothing more than a dumbing-down of

⁵² Letter from Lowell Mellett to Breckinridge Long, March 11, 1943, Box 3509, Record Group 208 – OWI Records.

the information content of the materials. MacLeish and his writers eventually quit over the issue.⁵³

One of the most dramatic feuds was within the Bureau of Motion Pictures itself. Ulric Bell and Nelson Poynter, while initially happy to work together, increasingly fought over authority in the BMP's Los Angeles office. As has been ably demonstrated by James Myers, Ulric Bell, who represented the Overseas Branch of the OWI, wanted to push Hollywood to follow the BMP's requests. He also wanted the Los Angeles Censor, Watterson Rothacker, to support the BMP. The only way the BMP could enforce its requests was to ask the Censor to refusing to grant export licenses to movies the BMP deemed offensive. In this way, Hollywood would learn to take the BMP's advice or risk losing the profits generated by international distribution.

According to Myers, Poynter favored a gentler approach, hoping to win Hollywood's trust and encourage them to support the BMP by appealing to their patriotism and encouraging them to do their duty.⁵⁴ Poynter often overstepped his bounds as well, though: in one incident, Poynter was chastised by Hollywood and the press for trying to rewrite scripts despite the fact that he was "incompetent" regarding those sorts of creative pursuits.⁵⁵ Bell and Poynter often appealed to Mellett with different plans about how to restructure the bureau to make it more efficient, and to determine whose job was more important. In one letter, Poynter wrote to Mellett that "[t]he Ulric Bell situation here has grown worse and it will grow still worse. It's

⁵³ Sydney Weinberg, "What To Tell America: The Writers' Quarrel in the Office of War Information," 281-297.

⁵⁴ Myers, "Bureau of Motion Pictures," 145-6.

⁵⁵ Koppes and Black, *Hollywood Goes to War*, 110-111.

permeating our own staff of reviewers. Ulric is jittery and hyper-sensitive about jurisdiction.”⁵⁶ Poynter and Bell frequently got into arguments in letters to one another. The problem never was solved, and the feud went on from late 1942 until the agency was dismantled in mid-1943.

The OWI did not enjoy unequivocal support from the president, either. President Roosevelt refused to go out on a limb for the OWI. As Winkler puts it, the President talked about war aims in general terms and refused to put any muscle behind the OWI: “Uneasy about formal propaganda, unwilling to allow the power of publicity to drift from his own hands, he accepted the propaganda organization as a necessary if cumbersome addition to the war effort, but not one that demanded any more than his minimal support.”⁵⁷ When a quarrel between Davis, the Director of the OWI, and Sherwood, the Overseas Branch Chief, nearly split the agency in two, the president considered forcing the OWI to merge with the Office of Censorship, under the control of OC director Byron Price. Price refused to head such an organization, fearing that the press would not support an agency reminiscent of Creel’s World War I bureau, in which censorship and propaganda stemmed from the same office. The president’s ultimate solution was simply to force Davis and Sherwood to work their issues out on their own.⁵⁸ The president also refused to support the agency in the 1943 budget appropriations hearings in Congress, a fact which ultimately contributed to the agency’s complete restructuring.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ Letter from Nelson Poynter to Lowell Mellett, April 29, 1943, Box 16, Lowell Mellett Papers.

⁵⁷ Winkler, *Politics of Propaganda*, 68-9.

⁵⁸ Winkler, *Politics of Propaganda*, 108 and Sweeney, *Secrets of Victory*, 97-8.

⁵⁹ Winkler, *Politics of Propaganda*, 70.

In addition to these internal struggles and struggles throughout the executive branch, the OWI incurred suspicion from Congress. During the war years, conservative Republicans and Southern Democrats tried to use their influence in Congress to reject Roosevelt's plans and limit his power.⁶⁰ Also, many of these opponents did not agree with the left-liberal perspective of many OWI members, and their racially- and socially-progressive interpretation of the war aims. Opponents of President Roosevelt in Congress were unsure that the OWI, and the various propaganda bureaus that preceded it, were not, in fact, a mouthpiece for the president and a committee to help get him reelected. For example, when the president selected Lowell Mellett to be head of the Office of Government Reports in December 1941, Mellett attempted to build a new building in Washington, D.C. to house the new agency. Roosevelt's opponents in Congress called the project wasteful and excessive, and forced Mellett to defend the new agency and the new building in press conferences. They suspected that Roosevelt's close friend Mellett was simply planning to run a committee to reelect the president and his allies. Some among the press began to refer to the new agency and building as "Mellett's Madhouse." In fact, Mellett's conflicts with some members of Congress became quite heated: when Senator Harry Byrd asked Mellett whether his new, "extravagant" agency was "dispensing publicity, information, or propaganda," Mellett accused Byrd of "willful disregard of the truth." Byrd responded by calling Mellett an "arrogant and proud bureaucrat."⁶¹ Needless to say, Mellett did not have a relationship with Congress, and

⁶⁰ Sullivan, *Days of Hope*, 43.

⁶¹ "Accuses Mellett Again on OGR Work," *New York Times*, May 3, 1942, 39. The phrase "dispensing publicity, information or propaganda" is a quote from the article's author; the rest of the quotes are present in the article but are quoted from Mellett and Byrd, respectively.

when Congress dismantled the OWI, suspicion of Mellett was a factor in their decision.

The Creel Committee and Propaganda Skepticism

The American public seemed quite suspicious of government propaganda. As described earlier, to historian Allan Winkler, one of the major roadblocks in OWI's propaganda mission was getting the public to accept it after the controversial and racially-charged propaganda of the Committee on Public Information (Creel Committee), the government's propaganda agency during World War I. Winkler argues that the Creel Committee "stirred up hatred of all things German. Portrayed as barbaric Huns, Germans appeared intent on conquering the world for their own selfish ends." However, Creel's exaggerated and caricatured images of Germans created a hysteria which Americans later came to resent. Many Americans believed that Creel and President Wilson had used propaganda to manipulate the U.S. into war. Propaganda's close association in the public mind with the rising Nazi and Soviet regime also contributed to Americans' misgivings.⁶²

Historians Clayton R. Koppes and Gregory D. Black discuss the ways the OWI tried to distance itself from the Creel Committee's reputation. For example, Koppes and Black argue that the OWI leadership realized how controversial their agency's activities would be, so Davis and other leaders portrayed OWI as "simply an innocuous information agency" whose goals were "to tell the truth" and "give the people 'the facts' and let them make up their own minds." In public, OWI leaders distanced themselves from the reputation of the propaganda agencies of its enemies,

⁶² Winkler, *Politics of Propaganda*, 3-4.

stressing that their agency was not a clone of its Soviet or Nazi counterparts, and “it tried to avoid the crude caricatures of ‘the Hun’ and blatant atrocity stories disseminated by the Committee on Public Information (Creel Committee).” Davis and the other leadership were well aware, however, of the fact that their job did not consist simply of “neutral reporting,” and Koppes and Black argue that in office communications, the leadership discussed how to “arouse people to belief and action. OWI devoted most of its efforts, not to ‘the facts’, but to their interpretive contexts—in short, to provide a favorable field for the reception of carefully selected material.”⁶³

Hollywood and Self-Regulation

Since the early days of the film industry, Hollywood executives had been extremely wary of government regulation. Hollywood films found their first boom in popularity during the height of the Progressive era, when many reformers felt obliged to protest immoral or unhealthy imagery on the screen. Much of this reformist agenda was tied to the idea that since film was a low cost activity, wealthy and working class people alike could enjoy the same material. It was a democratic amusement. Reformers felt the uneducated poor or working class might be easily corrupted by material that was vulgar. As one scholar put it, “it was the great unwashed who patronized the picture shows, uncritically and with deplorably enthusiastic regularity. It was the moral duty of their betters, protests from

⁶³ Clayton R. Koppes and Gregory D. Black, “Blacks, Loyalty, and Motion Picture Propaganda,” 131. Koppes and Black also cite Winkler, *Politics of Propaganda*, 12-13, 18-19.

libertarians to the contrary, to save them from their baser instincts.”⁶⁴ Religious groups, particularly the Catholic Church, joined the crusade.

In the 1910s and 1920s, censorship of films was largely handled by state, city and county boards of review; no federal laws had yet been passed to outline what material was acceptable for films. Movies about race, racism, miscegenation, and other provocative themes often suffered the brunt of local censorship: for example, the films of Oscar Micheaux, an African-American director who looked at racial politics in both the black and white communities, routinely got censored or denied permission to be shown.⁶⁵ In 1915, the Supreme Court decided in *Mutual Film Corporation v. Industrial Commission of Ohio* that films did not have the same freedom of speech rights that other media did under the First Amendment. According to this decision, Hollywood could be regulated like a business, conceivably by the government; the sanctity of the First Amendment did not extend to the cinema. The *Mutual* decision happened in the middle of serious protests about racism in D. W. Griffith’s *Birth of a Nation*. Many African-American civil rights organizations, including the NAACP, agitated to get the movie banned. From almost the beginning, issues of race and censorship have been intimately tied in the film sphere; both federal and state governments, as well as the Hollywood film industry, consistently had difficulty deciding whether racist or pro-equality imagery could or should be present in films. Further, Hollywood was very concerned about alienating any segment of its audience; it did not want to risk aggravating southern whites who might feel insulted by images of black civil rights. It must be added that these

⁶⁴ James M. Skinner, *Cross and the Cinema*, 2.

⁶⁵ Charlene Regester, “Black Films-White Censors,” 159-186.

southern whites had more money and clout than black audiences, so the consequences for alienating black audiences was much lower.⁶⁶

In the early 1920s, Congress and a variety of state and city boards considered passing legislation about movie content and distribution rules. Instead of allowing the government to regulate the industry, the major Hollywood studios decided to form a self-regulation arm, the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA), and selected Will Hays to be the president in 1922. Over time, self-censorship evolved into a strict Production Code that all films had to satisfy in order to get a seal of approval for distribution to theaters across the country. Joseph Breen, a conservative Catholic, headed the Production Code Administration, which was the enforcement arm of the MPPDA. The Production Code was designed to honor the morals and ideals supported by American conservative Catholics, who had become a powerful interest group. The Catholic Church formed a special organization, the Legion of Decency, which screened movies and assigned different ratings based on how acceptable they were for their Catholic worshippers. The specter of large-scale Catholic boycotts caused Hollywood to want to make movies as acceptable as possible for the Legion.

The Legion and the PCA worked in tandem, beginning in 1934, to force Hollywood films to conform to the interests of this specialized minority group. The Production Code had a variety of requirements but it most strongly prohibited issues pertaining to sexuality: nudity of any kind, suggestive clothing, sexual relations of any kind, open-mouthed kissing, adultery, the suggestion of adultery or promiscuity,

⁶⁶ For more on the fear of alienating audiences, see Skinner, *Cross and the Cinema*. See also Gregory D. Black, *The Catholic Crusade Against the Movie and Hollywood Censored: Morality Codes, Catholics, and the Movies*.

and prostitution. These things occasionally were allowed to remain in movies, especially if this behavior was punished or reprimanded.⁶⁷ The Code did not discuss racial issues in much detail; the only explicit mention was that “[n]o picture shall be produced that tends to incite bigotry or hatred among peoples of differing races, religions, or national origins. The use of such offensive words as Chink, Dago, Frog, Greaser, Hunkie, Kike, Nigger, Spic, Wop, Yid should be avoided.” In addition, nudity was acceptable only in depictions of natives of foreign lands.⁶⁸

By 1942, the Production Code Administration and the Legion of Decency had had the final say on motion picture content for nearly a decade. So when OWI and OC began to work together for government censorship of the movies, movies were already being censored and reshaped. Byron Price, as director of OC and as a newspaper man, remained committed to freedom of the press and emphasized his commitment to allowing Hollywood and the rest of the media to govern itself as completely as possible. This attitude won him the consistent support of the Hollywood community. The OWI, which dealt more intimately with Hollywood through its Bureau of Motion Pictures, continuously created controversy due to Lowell Mellett’s willingness to disrupt the tradition of self-censorship treasured by Hollywood. Hollywood existed under the Production Code partly so that the government would not step in. When Mellett, as a government official, began to make requests of Hollywood, the studio executives did not take to it kindly. Hollywood resented the fact that outsiders were attempting to advise their industry;

⁶⁷ Skinner, *Cross and the Cinema*, Chapters 1 and 3.

⁶⁸ Motion Picture Production Code, in Gerald C. Gardner, *Censorship Papers*, 211.

several articles in *Variety* suggest their lack of faith in Mellett by wondering exactly what he did all day.⁶⁹

Many Hollywood producers, directors, writers, and stars were active in the American war effort. Many joined the military and served overseas. Hollywood writers formed Writers Congresses that dealt with key issues of the war. Many people in Hollywood were politically active and tended to be liberal, and movies encouraging interventionist sentiment began to appear in the late 1930s, when the majority of Americans still felt that isolationism was a preferable course.

When the OWI's Bureau of Motion Pictures tried to advise Hollywood producers on how best to support the war aims with their films, many producers became offended and hostile. Many in the motion picture industry continued to cooperate, but came to resent the opinions of people they felt were not qualified to alter or rewrite Hollywood films. Walter Wanger, film producer, president of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, and outspoken supporter of the war and of black equality, wrote an article criticizing the Bureau of Motion Pictures for intervening in Hollywood as amateurs among industry experts. He argued that patriotic members of the industry were far more qualified than government bureaucrats to introduce war aims into films and still make films audiences wanted to see: "Hollywood is concerned about more than censorship. The OWI shows a growing desire *to write things into* scripts. Indeed, there is a mounting urge to dominate production. The officials moving in this direction are not equipped by any

⁶⁹ See, for example, "See Elmer Davis' Sweeping Changes: Expect Bill Lewis Stays Over Radio; Rosten Resigns, Mellett Uncertain," *Variety*, July 1, 1942, 3; and "Let Hollywood Dramatize War," *Variety*, July 15, 1942, 3.

past relation to the movie industry.”⁷⁰ He argued that well-made films are more likely to be effective because audiences will go and watch them. Implicit in this argument, however, was Wanger’s concern for Hollywood’s bottom line: he was concerned that if the OWI continued to meddle in films, the box office would suffer.

Clearly, while the top Hollywood executives were concerned about “government regulation” and “censorship,” they were also concerned about their product. The studio system afforded them monopolistic control of an extremely wealthy, profitable and influential industry. But every time they decided which films to make and which not to make, they were, in a sense, censoring what the American public would see. In deciding to follow the wishes of certain segments of the population, like Catholics, they were censoring what the public would see. They were concerned that government intervention would jeopardize their monopoly. They preferred it when government regulation was bureaucratic and confusing because that allowed the executives to play bureaus against one another and better manipulate outcomes. As we will see below, when Lowell Mellett attempted to consolidate the BMP’s power in Hollywood, he set off a firestorm of controversy which in the end helped dismantle the bureau.

The OWI-OC Agreement

When OWI was established, Elmer Davis laid out each department’s role in the organization in a document called OWI Regulation Number One, dated July 10, 1942. He outlined the job of the Motion Picture Bureau and its chief, Lowell Mellett: “The Chief of the Bureau of Motion Pictures [...] will serve as the central point of

⁷⁰ Wanger, “OWI and Motion Pictures,” 100-110.

contact between the motion picture industry and Federal officials to the end that the motion picture industry, both theatrical and non-theatrical, may make the maximum contribution to keeping the American public fully informed on vital aspects of the war.” There would also be an Overseas Bureau, with agents stationed throughout the world reporting to OWI about the people there. These agents would provide information to the Overseas Bureau Motion Pictures Chief, Ulric Bell, who would then advise the Bureau of Motion Pictures about where a film should or should not be exported.⁷¹ This would allow the Bureau of Motion Pictures to determine if the depiction of a certain group of people, for example, the Chinese, might be offensive enough that the picture should not be exported to China.

While OC’s codes, correspondence, and policies rarely, if ever, mentioned motion pictures, OWI saw them as a positive propaganda tool. Because of the wide distribution of films, and because of the power of movie imagery, OWI felt that it could extend a depiction of the American way of life to the far reaches of the globe, both to allied and enemy lands. OWI’s mandate allowed it to consider the propaganda content of films, of both Hollywood and government origin. According to Executive Order 9182, which established OWI, the Director had the power to “[f]ormulate and carry out, through the use of press, radio, motion picture, and other facilities, information programs designed to facilitate the development of an informed and intelligent understanding, at home and abroad, of the status and progress of the war effort and of the war policies, activities, and aims of the government.”⁷² OWI’s Bureau of Motion Pictures tried to inject propaganda content into films that would

⁷¹ OWI Regulation Number One by Elmer Davis, July 10, 1942, OC-OWI Agreement Folder, Box 108, Record Group 216 – OC Records.

⁷² U.S. Government Printing Office, Executive Order 9182, 7 Federal Register 4468, June 16, 1942.

then be exported; in order to do that, of course, OWI had to receive an export license from OC.

This, of course, posed a problem: Byron Price was given the power, by the government, to censor at his discretion. But given OC's commitment to restraint in censorship, and its decision to only censor security concerns, OWI was unclear as to whether the OC would deny an export license to a picture at OWI's request. Lowell Mellett wanted OC to support his propaganda agenda, but was unsure whether OC would ignore its commitment to free press enough to fall in line behind OWI. This example of where the mandates of two agencies overlapped is one reason the two offices elected to work out plans for how to handle occasions like this, where their work touched.

In October of 1942, top officials in the Office of Censorship began weighing in on areas in which their work conflicted with the OWI. The Broadcasting Division, for example, argued that their work touched the OWI's most seriously in the foreign language domestic and short wave radio broadcast arenas.⁷³ Another OC official, the Chief Postal Censor, N.V. Carlson, said that censorship of the OWI's material abroad will be no different than the censorship of other government agencies: "We will take into consideration the fact the material is being sent by one governmental agency in this country to its branch in England, *but we will retain the right to final clearance. We cannot delegate our authority*" (emphasis mine).⁷⁴ Another memo related a story from the Broadcasting Division in which two foreign language performers "were

⁷³ Memo from J.H. Ryan to Robert K. Richards, October 6, 1942, OWI Folder, Box 107, Record Group 216 – OC Records.

⁷⁴ Memo from N.V. Carlson to Mr. Sorrells, October 24, 1942, OWI Folder, Box 107, Record Group 216 – OC Records.

taken off the air by a station manager because he was told by an OWI staffer that ‘the Office of Censorship was going to move in if he, the manager, didn’t.’”⁷⁵

If OWI felt that films, radio broadcasts, or other media contained material that contradicted the OWI propaganda program, they could suggest that the material be removed or that dissemination of the media cease. However, if the filmmaker or broadcaster did not comply, OWI had no authority to compel them; the OC had the final word. This, perhaps, was why the OWI staffer in this example threatened the station manager with OC enforcement. OC did not like the idea that they were the enforcement arm of OWI, and since the priorities of the two agencies were quite different, OWI never felt certain OC would back them up. This complex hierarchy of regulation, enforcement, and authority is characteristic of agencies in President Roosevelt’s administration. According to Winkler, Roosevelt organized his government this way on purpose: “Roosevelt’s method allowed him to procrastinate when he chose, to watch his subordinates thrash out the details of an issue, and then to intervene only when he felt the time was right, with the ultimate power of decision in his own hands.” Roosevelt also felt strongly that competition among agencies and executives produced the best result.⁷⁶ This arrangement, of course, could also cause agencies to be incapacitated as they struggled through stalemates to establish lines of authority. OWI’s effectiveness as a propaganda agency was seriously limited by its subordinate role under the authority of OC.

The basic line that had to be drawn, OC staffers argued, was that OWI was a “releasing agency,” an agency strictly concerned with what information could be

⁷⁵ Memo from Robert K. Richards to J.H. Ryan, October 6, 1942, OWI Folder, Box 107, Record Group 216 – OC Records.

⁷⁶ Winkler, *Politics of Propaganda*, 20.

released. OC, on the other hand, was a “censorship agency operating under Code of Wartime Practices for the various divisions, and [was] not a releasing agency.”⁷⁷ The Code of Wartime Practices was OC’s basic guide to censorship. Published in January, 1942, the Code consisted of two handbooks: one for broadcasting and one for the press. Neither of these discussed motion pictures.

One staffer, Robert K. Richards, felt that OWI’s job was in “promoting the war effort” and that OC’s job was “to keep the enemy ignorant,” and the only relation between the two functions was for OC “to acquaint the OWI with the Code.” He thought it was “necessary” that OWI “learn[ed] all about appropriate authorities.”⁷⁸

Another staffer, Eugene Carr, summarized the boundaries in this way:

The Office of War Information should release information only after it has been measured against the various codes of censorship, depending on the medium through which the information is being released, and if such information crosses the code involved, then the Office of War Information should obtain appropriate authority for the release, or failing to do so, should not make the release. The Office of War information, in itself, is not an appropriate authority for information which crosses the various codes. [...]

The Office of Censorship should confine its activities to censorship, should not at any time act as a releasing agency, and should not at any time advise on questions outside the various codes.⁷⁹

⁷⁷ Memo from Eugene Carr to J.H. Ryan, October 3, 1942, OC-OWI Agreement Folder, Box 108, Record Group 216 – OC Records.

⁷⁸ Memo from Robert K. Richards to J.H. Ryan, October 6, 1942, OC-OWI Agreement Folder, Box 108, Record Group 216 – OC Records.

⁷⁹ Memo from Eugene Carr to J.H. Ryan, October 3, 1942, OC-OWI Agreement Folder, Box 108, Record Group 216 – OC Records.

Carr argued, then, that whenever OWI wanted to distribute information, be it in film, press release, radio broadcast, or any other media, it should compare the information with the relevant Office of Censorship code. If the information violated the code, OWI should speak to the relevant OC department (for example, the Broadcast Division for an intended radio broadcast) and get the department's permission. If permission was denied, OWI had no authority on its own to release the information. The Office of Censorship should not release information on its own, but rather allow OWI to fulfill that role. This arrangement, while perhaps workable in theory, failed to account for the diverse methods of propaganda OWI used. The Office of Censorship had a narrow understanding of the government information program, in the sense that it emphasized traditional, well-documented methods of information exchange, especially radio, newspapers, and the mail. Motion pictures were rarely, if ever, discussed. None of OC's codes or agreements mentioned movies explicitly, perhaps reasoning that it was a self-regulating industry, and that it was not included under the free press definition created in the *Mutual v. Ohio* Supreme Court Case in 1915.

The OC leadership did not foresee these collisions, however, and entered into negotiations with OWI for an arrangement that would satisfy both parties. On November 9, 1942, they reached an agreement. The introductory section of the agreement said that an "intelligent and realistic censorship requires that in many instances the censor weigh the merits of a case to determine whether information might be more valuable to the war effort, if published, than harmful to it." According to the agreement, since one of the main jobs of OWI was to provide U.S. allies and

enemies “facts about the American war effort, the American philosophy, [and] American war aims and objectives,” OC was necessarily involved because “government-originated information must cross our borders as international communications.” The agreement was written to “establish a practical working arrangement” because of the “conflict[s] of interpretation” that might arise, which could “nullify the effectiveness of one or the other of the two agencies in executing the President’s orders.” The main premise of the arrangement was that domestic censorship was voluntary, and the media would follow the Code of Wartime Practices set out by OC, but when media, either produced privately or by the government through OWI, was going to be sent abroad, it still had to be reviewed by OC. The agreement said nothing about movies.⁸⁰

The OWI-OC agreement codified the procedure that OWI had to forward any media it wanted to send abroad to OC for approval. Unfortunately, though, OWI could not depend on OC to support its agenda because it could not be sure OC would deny export licenses to films for any reason besides national security concerns.⁸¹ As the Broadcasting Division anecdote above shows, OC resented being the enforcement arm of OWI. This issue would come to a head in by March of 1943, but in November of 1942, neither agency seemed to find this an area of conflict.

⁸⁰ It is unclear from the records of OWI and OC why OWI did not stress more firmly the different types of media it planned to use, the movies in particular. Elmer Davis was the OWI leader who signed off on this agreement; Lowell Mellett of the Bureau of Motion Pictures seemed to be absent from the deliberations. It is possible that Elmer Davis’ background in radio and newspaper media led him to focus on those two aspects of the propaganda program when he met with OC. Another possibility is that Davis was not aware of the extent to which smaller bureaus in the OWI, such as the BMP, were trying to inject media with propaganda that fell outside the purview of the agreement. Davis would become a vocal opponent of Mellett’s tactics in an episode that I will discuss below; however, this episode happened after the agreement was signed.

⁸¹ For a comprehensive treatment of this problem, see Koppes and Black, *Hollywood Goes to War*, Chapter 4, especially pages 105-6.

Enforcing the Agreement: OWI asks for OC's Support

By the end of 1942, Mellett and his assistant chief, Nelson Poynter, were frustrated with Hollywood's attempts to circumvent their previewing authority. In the Bureau of Motion Pictures, Mellett and Poynter had devised a system by which the propaganda program could use movies to their fullest advantage. Their staff would preview movies, either in the script stage or in the first rough cut, and would suggest alterations to dialogue, situations, and characters that did not meet the propaganda aims of the OWI. Poynter and Mellett had encouraged studios to send scripts and finished films to the BMP offices in Los Angeles, where the films would be reviewed by staffers, and returned with suggestions or shipped to the Office of Censorship where they would be approved for export (to countries the OWI deemed acceptable to see them). Some members of the Hollywood community quickly found out that the OWI had no enforcement power, so they could send films directly to the OC, get approved for export under their less rigorous review process, and then show it to OWI, making the OWI's recommendations moot.⁸²

In frustration, Mellett gave a damning speech in November 1942 condemning Hollywood for not shouldering its share of the war burden by cooperating. Then on December 9, 1942, he sent a letter to all the studios telling them "it would be advisable" that they submit all scripts and synopses to his office, as well as rough cuts of films, and he asked that all contact between studios and the government get filtered through his office.⁸³ This dramatic consolidation of power infuriated Hollywood

⁸² Koppes and Black, *Hollywood Goes to War*, 107.

⁸³ Koppes and Black, *Hollywood Goes to War*, 108-9; see also Report by Louella O. Parsons for the Motion Picture Editor International News Service (Hollywood, Dec. 18 [1942]), in OWI Administration Subject File, Box 56, Record Group 216 – OC Records.

studios, forcing Elmer Davis to hold a press conference to control the damage on December 23. In this conference, he distanced the rest of the OWI from Mellett's letter, saying that following these rules was voluntary.

This panic about government intervention in a self-regulated industry subsided in the next few months, but in March, 1943, the issue of the Mellett office overstepping its bounds presented itself again. This time the office would not be condemned by Hollywood, but rather by the Office of Censorship itself. On March 5, N.R. Howard, an assistant director to Byron Price at OC, sent a memo to Colonel Carlson, the Chief Postal Censor at OC. Gene Katz, a "sort of super-liaison man of OWI" who had worked with Howard on the OC-OWI agreement, called and asked "how to approach [them] best on [OWI's] eternal project of how to get OC to back up OWI on its film policy." Howard reminded Carlson in this memo of the contents of the agreement, which gives the OC "security censorship of all OWI proposes to do and binds [OC] not to inflict censorship on OWI projects from other considerations." Howard told Carlson that since Carlson, as Postal Censor, issued the export licenses, it was his choice whether or not to support Mellett's endeavors; he adds that "Lowell Mellett was forever after [the OC] to have us backstop Mellett's psychological censorship of Hollywood and my impression is we did not."⁸⁴ OC, then, was unwilling to "backstop Mellett's psychological censorship" by denying export licenses to movies simply because Mellett's bureau deemed their content unsatisfactory.

⁸⁴ Memo from N.R. Howard to Col. Carlson, March 5, 1943, OC-OWI Agreement Folder, Box 108, Record Group 216 – OC Records.

On March 8, Ulric Bell wrote a letter to Elmer Davis reiterating some of the major concerns between the BMP and other governmental departments, focusing on the BMP's difficulties with the OC. Bell related that Byron Price himself told Bell he was "unsure that other departments agree with OWI" and that he did "not feel he should take the responsibility of stopping obviously bad material offered for export." The Los Angeles Censor, Watterson Rothacker, felt obligated to follow Price's instructions: "He tries to cooperate and on occasions has been most helpful. But he declines flatly, on the ground that his instructions forbid, to establish a rule that OWI see pictures before he passes upon them. The result is often a hide-and-seek race of producers to get the Censor's okay before they show their stuff to OWI." Rothacker refused to make it a policy that all films go through OWI's reviewing system before being sent to his office. For an example, Bell cited a conflict over RKO's *I Walked With A Zombie*:

We had tried for six weeks to get the studio to let us see this one, since its action takes place in the British West Indies and we had anticipated problems on export, but were always told it was not ready. Finally on February 4, RKO called this office to say we could see the picture. It developed that Byron Price's representative, Colonel Rothacker, had granted a license for it on February 3, the day before the studio invited us to look at it.⁸⁵

Set on a British-possessed island in the Caribbean, the film focuses on a man whose ailing wife becomes a zombie. Interestingly, it does not depict or allude to the war in any way. However, because the island setting features several key characters who are "native" voodoo practitioners, and because the island is a colonial possession of

⁸⁵ Letter from Ulric Bell to Elmer Davis, March 8, 1943, OWI box 3509.

Britain, the BMP had concerns about the ways the natives were depicted. Although many of the natives spoke “grammatical, unaccented English, [...] they are shown chiefly as menials and are referred to by the white characters as “primitive” and “superstitious” [...] There are no cultured or educated Negroes in the story.” The BMP’s chief concern about this movie, according to its review, is that “[in] Africa, the West Indies, India and other countries where there are dark-skinned peoples, this attitude of whites might be resented.”⁸⁶ This was a typical criticism for the BMP: they did not want to suggest that whites were superior and looked down on people of color, and felt that it was an essential part of their mission to correct films that might suggest this. In his letter to Rothacker about this movie, Ulric Bell stressed that since the movie’s “net effect is to draw a sharp line of cleavage between the two peoples,” it “should not be exported and is potentially very bad for domestic distribution.”⁸⁷

Several weeks later, on March 27, Byron Price of OC wrote a memo to Howard listing for him some main points to consider as he discussed the OC’s concerns with OWI. This terse, coldly logical memo addressed the entire purview of government censorship of the media, not just the movies. In it, he stressed that the censorship OC enforced was voluntary; “[t]here [was] no reason to believe that Congress would authorize compulsory censorship. The choice [was] between voluntary censorship and no censorship.” The only way they had achieved cooperation from the press was by confining censorship to security issues; voluntary censorship “can be maintained only when backed by the confidence of the publishing

⁸⁶ Feature Review, *I Walked With A Zombie*, reviewed by Larry Williams, *I Walked With A Zombie* Folder, Box 3519, Record Group 208 – OWI Records.

⁸⁷ Letter from Ulric Bell to Watterson Rothacker, March 10, 1943, *I Walked With A Zombie* Folder, Box 3519, Record Group 208 – OWI Records.

industry in the honest intentions of the censor.” Censorship for morale or any other reasons “would be looked upon with suspicion since it could not be explained as an effort to keep information from the enemy but only from our own people.” He added that censorship for morale reasons “would inevitably become tangled with issues of editorial opinion and criticism.” The culmination of his argument said that they have “ample proof” that morale censorship

would be resented and unquestionably disregarded by a large part of the publishing industry. Nor is there any reason to suppose that Congress would supply funds for such an operation. The choice is narrowed to voluntary censorship for security only, or no censorship. [...] If OWI wants to bring about an end to all censorship, the best way is to continue its unauthorized efforts at censorship for morale reasons, which already have aroused suspicion in the publishing industry.

Finally, he ended the letter with a thinly veiled threat: “It is, furthermore, the function and responsibility to OC to decide where the dangerous limit lies, and we have the contacts and facilities for doing so.”⁸⁸ As this remarkable letter suggests, Byron Price was not willing to let OWI jeopardize freedom of the press. He was committed to following his Code of Wartime Practices, and to censoring for security only. Though he does not mention movies specifically, his message comes across loud and clear: any attempt by OWI to force OC to deny export for morale reasons would be ignored and continued attempts would cause OWI harm. OC refused to be OWI’s enforcement arm.

⁸⁸ Memo from Byron Price to Mr. Howard, March 27, 1943, OC-OWI Agreement Folder, Box 108, Record Group 216 – OC Records.

Both OC and OWI only had power when the industries with which they dealt agreed to accommodate them. Censorship was voluntary, but the press almost never purposely published a story that blatantly disregarded the OC codes. It was a testament to Byron Price's leadership that journalists were willing to censor themselves for him without the threat of punishment. According to historian Michael Sweeney, Price was able to win journalists' favor by laying out a limited set of ground rules, sticking to them, and trusting journalists to support him and use their best judgment. For example, he set up the "appropriate authority" doctrine, which held that a newspaper or radio journalist could publish any story on the war so long as a government official agreed to stand by it as an appropriate authority. Apparently, journalists liked and respected the fact that Price trusted their professional judgment, and they did their very best to follow his short list of clearly-worded directives.⁸⁹ The OC had enforcement power in one particular arena, an arena where OWI needed it: oversight of information being sent abroad. Clearly, then, OC had decision-making power over OWI, and if necessary, they would use it to enforce the OWI's subordinate role.

End of the War and End of Censorship

The OWI's Bureau of Motion Pictures did not last much longer in its original form. In early 1943, a rising conservative faction in Congress used its power to cripple the OWI by cutting its budget dramatically. In part, Congress was suspicious of the artists and intellectuals in the OWI whom they deemed liberal, wasteful and unscrupulous. For example, in the House Appropriations Committee meeting for the

⁸⁹ Sweeney, *Secrets of Victory*, 43-4.

OWI, Representative Taber of New York questioned the OWI leaders about the foreigners the bureau employed, what they did, and whether or not they were loyal to the Allied cause.⁹⁰ He also reprimanded them for awarding what he saw as unnecessary pay raises to many of the OWI employees. Davis and the rest of the leadership argued that these raises were simply intended to draw and keep talented people in their employ. Over sixty pages of the transcript of the Appropriations hearings for the OWI is devoted to Taber asking about each and every person who received a sizeable raise.⁹¹ The point was, of course, that the OWI is extravagant and wasteful. Taber even questioned the efficacy of the Bureau of Motion Pictures, bringing up Walter Wanger's article and asking Davis to defend the BMP.⁹²

Many on the committee did not agree with the liberal stance of the OWI. One particularly serious controversy arose over a pamphlet called *Negroes and the War* which OWI published in 1942. This pamphlet described the ways black Americans contributed to the war effort and the cultural fabric of America in general. It caused some members of Congress, particularly Southern Democrats, to conclude that the OWI wanted to force its liberal, racially progressive beliefs on an unsupportive public.⁹³ For example, Representative Overton Brooks of Louisiana registered a formal protest to awarding the OWI appropriations funds, because the OWI had no right to raise the issue of racial inequality in a time when Americans needed to band together to fight the war. Brooks argued that distribution of the pamphlet "has been accompanied by a heightening of the friction between the two races in the South,

⁹⁰ U.S. House, 78th Congress, 1st Sess., *National War Agencies Appropriations Bill for 1944*, 757-8.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 986-1046.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 1047-8.

⁹³ Winkler, *Politics of Propaganda*, 55-7.

increasing disorders and disturbances, and in many cases actual race riots with resulting stress and even loss of life.”⁹⁴

Mostly, however, representatives on the Appropriations Committee were concerned that the OWI was so completely in favor of President Roosevelt and his policies that they were using their budget to help get him and his party reelected. In one instance, Representative Woodrum asked Elmer Davis whether the OWI was interested in “promoting the good fortune or the bad fortunes of any candidate or any party?” and proceeded to inquire whether Davis would support the OWI if its members supported one party over another.⁹⁵ Another key issue that doomed the OWI was its publication of an issue of *Victory*, its military magazine, which heralded President Roosevelt as a great hero and defender of worldwide liberty. Senator Holman of Oregon, who “frankly [...] detest[ed]” President Roosevelt and the New Deal, raged against the OWI in the Senate for issuing such blatant pro-Roosevelt propaganda.⁹⁶

The ultimate result of these hearings was that Congress slashed the OWI’s Domestic Branch budget to 27 percent of its allotment from the previous year. The Bureau of Motion Pictures, which had been under the Domestic Branch, shifted to the Overseas Branch under Ulric Bell, and the Domestic Branch confined itself to making informational shorts. Mellett left the OWI, though he continued to consult, and Poynter’s role was limited considerably. The Bureau of Motion Pictures’ work continued through the end of the war, with Bell as its leader. Koppes and Black argue that without Mellett and Poynter, the role of the OWI actually strengthened. Bell,

⁹⁴ U.S. House, 78th Congress, 1st Sess., *National War Agencies Appropriations Bill for 1944*, 1312.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 717.

⁹⁶ “Congress Blast Against OWI Portends Assault on New Deal,” *Newsweek*, February 22, 1943, 25.

who had worked closely with Watterson Rothaker in the Los Angeles Office of the Censor, strengthened his ties to OC and strengthened his ties to the studios.⁹⁷ Bell worked to increase his influence with Rothacker, so that by November of 1943, Bell claimed that his office “usually [has] a hand in [films] before they reach the Censor, and we recommend for or against them before he acts. Mr. Rothacker, much more so now than at the start, tries to enforce the Censor’s Code with all possible regard to Government general policy, as interpreted here by OWI.”⁹⁸ In addition, as the U.S. achieved military successes abroad, there were more markets where films could be exported, and Hollywood studios were eager to have their films accepted by Bell and the Bureau of Motion Pictures. Without Mellett and Poynter, the main figures of controversy, the Bureau ran much more smoothly.⁹⁹ Perhaps, also, the much more streamlined process and the improved relationship between Rothacker and Bell increased the willingness of Hollywood to comply with their joint venture.

Byron Price at the Office of Censorship remained through the end of the war. He was one of the first to make plans to shut down a wartime office when the war ended, in further evidence of his commitment to lack of censorship unless absolutely necessary.¹⁰⁰ Toward the end of his tenure as Chief, Price sent letters of thanks to his many supporters in Hollywood, such as David O. Selznick, Walt Disney, Harry Cohn of Columbia Pictures, Jack L. Warner of Warner Bros., Y. Frank Freeman of Paramount, and Will Hays of the MPPDA and Joseph Breen of the Production Code Administration. In this form letter, he told them he appreciated what they had done to

⁹⁷ Koppes and Black, *Hollywood Goes To War*, 138-9

⁹⁸ Letter from Ulric Bell to Kurt London, Secretary of the Inter-Regional Film Committee of the OWI, 11/26/1943, Washington Correspondence Folder, Box 3509, Record Group 208 – OWI Records.

⁹⁹ Koppes and Black, *Hollywood Goes to War*, 138-9.

¹⁰⁰ Sweeney, *Secrets of Victory*, 6.

aid in “an unpleasant wartime function. Without your cooperation film censorship would have been onerous; with it, it has become unnecessary.” He reminded them that censorship was not being abolished, but rather “turned over to you who have shown that you can handle the job. [...] As long as the Office of Censorship is in existence, you are urged to bring to my attention any attempt to censor motion pictures by any other agency. The motion picture industry itself is the only assistant censor recognized by this office.”¹⁰¹ To the end, he maintained his commitment to self-regulation and voluntary censorship of Hollywood. He also reiterated that his office was in fact the only one permitted to perform any censorship function.

In response, he received several extremely supportive letters from these studio leaders, congratulating him on a job well done. Frank Freeman wrote that he “cannot conceive of any relationship being more pleasant and more constructive than the relationship that existed between your office [...] and those of us in the motion picture industry.” He added: “To me it would be unthinkable not to carry out, in good faith, the responsibility you have given us [...] The example you set for us is one that should make us doubly careful to preserve and maintain your confidence in us.”¹⁰² C.W. Koerner, Vice President of RKO Radio Pictures, wrote: “I feel that I cannot permit this moment to pass without expressing to you the sincere respect with which this Studio has come to look upon and cooperate with this important war effort.”¹⁰³

Will Hays himself expressed his appreciation: “Again I want to express my sincerest

¹⁰¹ Form letter from Byron Price, June 9, 1945, Film Industry Folder, Box 108, Record Group 216 – OC Records.

¹⁰² Letter from Frank Freeman to Byron Price, June 13, 1945, Film Industry Folder, Box 108, Record Group 216 – OC Records.

¹⁰³ Letter from C.W. Koerner to Byron Price, May 29, 1945, Film Industry Folder, Box 108, Record Group 216 – OC Records.

commendation and appreciation for the way you handled the whole matter. As I told you, it has been a most distinguished performance and all who have been directly interested in it [...] are under very great obligation to you. For the organized industry and myself, I want to express my gratitude.”¹⁰⁴ These luminaries, and many others, clearly appreciated the respectful distance he kept from censoring Hollywood.

Conclusion

The Office of Censorship and the Office of War Information engaged in a battle between promoting positive democratic imagery in movies and other media and being committed to free speech and freedom from censorship. The OWI’s Bureau of Motion Pictures, under Lowell Mellett and Nelson Poynter, tried to use their role to improve the lot of racial and ethnic minorities through the elimination of racist imagery in movies. They also did this to improve the reputation of American democracy abroad. However, the Office of Censorship was strongly committed to censoring only material that conflicted with America’s national security agenda, on the principle that any censorship of the media is wrong and it should only be used when absolutely necessary. Because of an agreement worked out between the two offices, the OC retained final decision-making authority over any media the OWI wanted to export. In its subordinate role, the OWI needed the OC’s help if it wanted to enforce the recommendations it made to the studios. The Office of Censorship’s director, Byron Price, remained committed to freedom of speech and refused to help. On one hand, then, an opportunity was lost in promoting more egalitarian views on

¹⁰⁴ Letter from Will Hays to Byron Price, June 4, 1945, Film Industry Folder, Box 108, Record Group 216 – OC Records.

race; had they had more influence, the OWI might have eased some of the simmering racial tensions, or ignited them, in America and abroad. On the other hand, though, a battle was won for non-interference by the government, and Byron Price was heralded as a hero of the First Amendment and a hero of Hollywood.

Chapter 2: “A More Enlightened Attitude in the Picturing of So Called Colored People”: Race and the Bureau of Motion Pictures

In 1942, after the United States had entered World War II, Mahatma Gandhi, activist for Indian independence from British colonial rule, told U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt: “I venture to think [...] that the Allied declaration that [they] are fighting to make the world safe for freedom of the individual sounds hollow, so long as India, and for that matter, Africa, are exploited by Great Britain, and America has the Negro problem in her own home.”¹⁰⁵ The World War II era represented dramatic shifts in the meanings of race, racism, and empire. Germany and Japan sought to enlarge their race-based empires, Allied colonial powers tried to defeat Germany and Japan but retain control of their colonies, and African-Americans struggled to obtain democracy for themselves while their country fought for it abroad. The U.S. Office of War Information was keenly aware of these shifts and contradictions, and tried to address them in its information policy. The OWI’s Bureau of Motion Pictures developed a *Government Manual for Motion Pictures*, which disclosed the BMP’s interpretation of American war aims, particularly regarding race and democracy.

The Office of War Information’s Bureau of Motion Pictures had been forced to determine its own criteria for evaluating films. As an advisory agency to Hollywood, the BMP offered suggestions as to how film executives might better

¹⁰⁵ Thorne, *Allies of a Kind*, 8-9.

serve the war effort by injecting certain war aims into their films. The BMP's mandate, of course, did not include the authority to enforce its requests, so it relied on the help of the Office of Censorship, often to no avail. It is clear, however, that the BMP's understanding of why America was fighting was different than the beliefs of many others, within the government and without.

In this chapter, I will discuss the implications of the war aims the BMP listed in its *Government Manual for Motion Pictures*, particularly regarding race relations. As historians Koppes and Black point out, the BMP chose to follow a certain line of interpretation, that of Henry Wallace, rather than that of Henry Luce, in establishing its war aims. The meaning of the war aims was contested, especially because President Roosevelt provided limited guidance about it. For the BMP, the war aims not only included the home front happily participating in war rationing, for example, but also included portraying racial minorities more equally so as not to offend America's allies abroad. For many politicians, the war aims did not mean this. For the Office of Censorship, free speech was paramount, and war aims focused providing as much information to the public as possible without releasing information about national security that could aid the enemy. For many southern Democrats, the war aims did not include equal rights to black Americans, as we saw in the Representative Overton Brooks' protest over the *Negroes and the War* pamphlet. For Hollywood, the war aims included cooperating with the government and showing their patriotism, but they felt compelled to always watch their bottom line.

President Roosevelt formed the OWI in June, 1942 as a consolidation of various propaganda agencies. The OWI's Bureau of Motion Pictures Los Angeles

office evaluated films (completed films, rough cuts, or scripts) for distribution at home and abroad. The BMP contained staff from both the Domestic and the Overseas Branches of the OWI: Nelson Poynter headed the Domestic staff and Ulric Bell headed the Overseas staff. Poynter's group focused on advising filmmakers about how to include information in films to encourage and inspire Americans. Bell's group focused on ensuring that film content would support U.S. military and diplomatic actions abroad and would show that Americans supported democracy and individualism. Though, technically, they had different agendas, both staffs reviewed films together and judged films with regard to both sets of criteria; there was not a separate process for domestic and for overseas distribution. In both cases, BMP recommendations to Hollywood were meant to be followed only voluntarily; the bureau had no authority to force Hollywood to adopt its propaganda. Although the Bureau of Motion Pictures was technically the title of only the Domestic side of the film reviewing group, for simplicity's sake I will refer to the whole operation as the BMP.

BMP reviewers had an interest in viewing films early in the process because it was easier for them to get studios to effect changes. Very often members of the BMP would review films at several points in the production process to ensure that their recommendations were being put into place. The BMP would recommend films to the Office of Censorship, which would then grant licenses to the filmmakers to distribute approved films abroad, in areas deemed suitable by OWI (the BMP often used experts in the Overseas Branch to determine what areas were acceptable). The OWI also recommended films for translation into foreign languages, especially in

instances where films had particularly strong propaganda content. Studios, for the most part, cooperated with the OWI's recommendations because overseas distribution was a huge part of their profits.

World Race Relations

The Second World War constituted a watershed in global race relations. At this moment, the liberal staffers of the OWI's Bureau of Motion Pictures tried to destabilize the American picture of white supremacy, which contrasted fundamentally with the major war aim of spreading democracy and equality. The BMP had to confront the fact that the United States was not only grappling with a nonwhite enemy (Japan) on equal, rather than colonial, terms, but was doing so with the aid of China, a country whose people had long been discriminated against in the United States.

Although the BMP often dressed up its recommendations in terms of democratic ideologies, it was fundamentally dealing with the changing dynamics of race, both at home and abroad. The BMP was surprisingly sympathetic to the plight of people of color, and BMP film reviewers used their authority to encourage less stereotypical images of African-Americans, Chinese, and other people of color. I explore ways in which the BMP attempted to shape American cinema to reflect these shifts.

The OWI was born into an America where hierarchies of race were becoming increasingly problematic. The *Pittsburgh Courier*, a prominent African-American newspaper, led the "Double V" campaign to agitate for the same rights at home as America was fighting abroad. This campaign reflected a growing discontent among African-Americans with the discrimination they faced in the U.S.: in segregated

military units, in unequal economic and legal opportunities, and in their inability to register to vote in large portions of the country. African-Americans also suffered persecution by lynchings and rapes which often went unpunished. The "Double V" campaign pointed directly to the incongruity between the democratic ideology for which America was supposed to be fighting and the racist realities in American society. It emphasized the lack of equality that white America was trying hard to avoid addressing.

At the same time, white Southern Democrats were pressing to maintain jimcrow regulations in the name of states' rights and the upholding of traditional local values. As Patricia Sullivan argues, the era of Roosevelt's presidency was characterized by the president's attempt to realign the Democratic Party toward his liberal New Deal policies and by his enemies in Congress, particularly Southern Democrats, trying to use their clout in Congress to constrain the president. Initially, Southern Democrats tended to favor Roosevelt's New Deal policies, because the changes he made in the early Depression era favored wealthy white landowners in the South. Soon, however, many in the white ruling class came to resent New Deal policies because they "stirred the stagnant economic and political relationships that had persisted in the South" since the turn of the century. New Deal policies threatened the cheap labor supply by pushing for a minimum wage, credit, and federal work relief; this threatened the ability of whites to control the economic security of poor blacks and whites.¹⁰⁶ At the same time, in the late 1930s, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) began to make real strides in its battle to bring black civil rights cases before the Supreme Court. In

¹⁰⁶ Sullivan, *Days of Hope*, 3, 44-5.

1938, for example, the NAACP “won its first major Supreme Court victory in the nascent legal assault on segregation when the Court ordered Missouri’s all-white law school to admit Lloyd Gaines.”¹⁰⁷ However, white politicians in the South used these defeats to try to win support from their constituencies against the New Deal: “[C]onservative politicians easily traded on the growth of black political activity to revive white solidarity as a unifying force in southern politics. They portrayed New Deal reformers and labor activists as part of a sinister effort to overturn white supremacy.”¹⁰⁸

Due to tactics like literacy tests and the poll tax, voting in much of the South was restricted to a very small percentage of the population, leaving out most blacks and poor whites. This helped guarantee that certain members of Congress would be reelected term after term, even if their beliefs did not correspond with those of the majority of the population. Consequently, these Southern Democrats were some of the most senior members of Congress and occupied the chair of some key committees. For example, Kenneth D. McKellar, Democrat from Tennessee, was the chair of the Senate subcommittee for war appropriations in 1943, which was the Senate committee that helped dismantle the Office of War Information in 1943. He had been Senator since 1917 (he was a Congressional Representative from 1911-1917) and would continue his career in the Senate until 1952.¹⁰⁹ He opposed most New Deal legislation; for example, during the debate about appropriations for the Farm Securities Administration (FSA) in 1942, he accused its leader, Beanie

¹⁰⁷ Sullivan, *Days of Hope*, 5.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹⁰⁹ Biographical Directory of the United States Congress, Kenneth McKellar entry, <http://bioguide.congress.gov/biosearch/biosearch1.asp> (accessed 3 April 3007).

Baldwin, of being a communist because he wanted to subsidize poor farmers, “giv[ing] away [the Government’s] money to people who will not work for it.” FSA subsidies included money to pay poll taxes, if it was requested by farm families.¹¹⁰ Thus, two large and increasingly vocal contingents, African-Americans and white Southerners, reminded America and the world at large that racial divisions undermined the American promise of democracy.

Black civil rights activists were also increasingly agitating for equal representation in films. Walter White, the secretary of the NAACP, was a vocal advocate of this cause, and on several occasions convened groups of Hollywood luminaries interested in African-American civil rights. As soon as Lowell Mellett became Coordinator of Government Films in December of 1941, and as soon as Elmer Davis became head of the OWI in June of 1942, White sent them letters encouraging them to “tak[e] a more enlightened attitude in the picturing of so-called colored people.”¹¹¹ He also established a longer-term correspondence with Nelson Poynter, the head of the BMP’s Los Angeles office.

White’s close friend Wendell Willkie, former presidential nominee, often worked with him in this endeavor. For example, in July of 1942, just after the OWI’s Bureau of Motion Pictures had been formed, White and Willkie held a luncheon at 20th Century-Fox film studio in Hollywood. Willkie was chairman of the board of that studio, and was also Special Counsel of the NAACP.¹¹² The hosts were producers Walter Wanger and Darryl F. Zanuck. According to a press release from

¹¹⁰ Sullivan, *Days of Hope*, 128.

¹¹¹ Letter from Walter White to Lowell Mellett, December 24, 1941; see also letter from Walter White to Elmer Davis, June 18, 1942, box 462, folder “OWI Films 1941-44,” Walter White Papers.

¹¹² Koppes and Black, “Blacks, Loyalty, and Motion Picture Propaganda,” 392.

the NAACP, White argued that films perpetuated a dangerous stereotype about African-Americans: “[S]howing him always as a mentally inferior creature, lacking in ambition, is one of the reasons for the denial to the Negro of opportunity and for the low morale not only of Negroes but of colored peoples throughout the world as it constantly holds the Negro up to ridicule and disparagement.”¹¹³ Unfortunately, while many stars and filmmakers signed on in support and agreed to try to change depictions of African-Americans in their films, very quickly new concerns took over and their promise to White was forgotten. A similar campaign met with the same fate three years later.¹¹⁴

Interestingly, as Walter White was pushing for less subordinate roles for blacks, some black actors, like Lena Horne, supported him completely, while others, like Hattie McDaniel, criticized him publicly. According to McDaniel, forcing Hollywood to maintain a higher standard for black characters would result in the elimination of many parts for black actors. It would become much harder for black actors to make a living.¹¹⁵ And, to a degree, she was correct in her assessment: when the Bureau of Motion Pictures found a black character to be stereotypical or disparaging to African-Americans, it would often simply suggest editing the character out, for the sake of expediency.

It is important to note that in this speech, and in his letters to Mellett and Davis, White used rhetoric about the war and about the international plight of

¹¹³ Press Release: “Film Executives Pledge Better Roles for Negroes at Conferences with NAACP Secretary,” July 31, 1942, “Films, Newspaper Clippings, Press Releases 1942” Folder, Walter White Papers.

¹¹⁴ Minutes of luncheon meeting, October 17, 1945, Films: Hollywood Bureau 1945-9 Folder, Box A277, Walter White Papers.

¹¹⁵ Koppes and Black, “Blacks, Loyalty, and Motion Picture Propaganda,” 392.

“colored peoples” to try to improve the lot of African-Americans at home. The Double-V campaign and White’s speeches suggest that many Americans believed that “colored peoples” around the world were engaged in a similar fight for rights of citizenship. It also indicates a dawning realization and fear among Americans that in the U.S. and abroad, nonwhite peoples could join together and potentially harness their power to unseat white leadership. The Bureau of Motion Pictures continually made this point, as I will describe below: in its film reviews, it often wrote that it was unwise to portray any nonwhite people, including American blacks, as inferior because there were so many of them and because the Allies needed their support to win the war.

Another component in the shifting world racial hierarchy was the issue of empire. During World War II, several of colonies of France and England were agitating for independence or civil rights. In India, for example, Gandhi was leading protests against the injustices of imperial control. Further, the irony that England and France were fighting a war against the empires of Japan and Germany while trying to retain control of their own imperial properties was not lost on President Roosevelt or many Americans. The Allies fought in many of the places they had colonized: India and Burma, North Africa, and Southeast Asia. The citizens of these locales provided constant reminders of the disjuncture between fighting for democracy and maintaining an empire that refused to allow nations to govern themselves.

Race as a factor in empire-building was, of course, a fundamental issue with the Axis powers: Nazi Germany was using race as a justification to murder millions of Jews as it conquered Europe, and Japan was looking to build its empire along the

theme of a Pan-Asian Sphere. Decisive Japanese victories in the early months of the war reminded whites that they did not necessarily possess natural superiority in battle or government. Britain and America considerably underestimated the Japanese military in the beginning of the war. Much of this underestimation came from racial arrogance on the part of American and British military and government leadership. According to historian Christopher Thorne, prior to Pearl Harbor, both U.S. and British ambassadors in Tokyo warned their governments that a sudden attack might be imminent, but the American and British governments could not believe that the “Japanese would be so foolish as to challenge the potential might of the United States and Britain.”¹¹⁶ Henry Stimson, U.S. Secretary of War, wrote in 1940 that Japan has shown “that when the United States indicates by clear language and bold actions that she intends to carry out a clear and affirmative policy in the Far East, Japan will yield to that policy, even though it conflicts with her own Asiatic policy and conceived interests.”¹¹⁷ Similarly, in order to intimidate Japan, Britain’s Prime Minister Winston Churchill sent two ships, the *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse*, to the coast of Singapore in the fall of 1941. He assumed that the mere presence of these ships in the Pacific would restrain Japanese expansion. The ships were quickly and easily destroyed by Japan.¹¹⁸

The potent Japanese military, and Japan’s imperial vision, served to turn the notion of white superiority in military and colonial pursuits on its head. Further, the Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor solidified a confrontation between white and nonwhite peoples that white America had not had to face before: the fact that a

¹¹⁶ Thorne, *Allies of a Kind*, 3.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 4.

nonwhite people, with a modern military, had caught America by surprise, and attacked it first. This powerful victory by an "inferior" race may have contributed to the anger and violence with which U.S. filmmakers depicted the Japanese in films of this time. The OWI struggled to encourage Hollywood to depict them as a formidable, but beatable, foe, rather than either as savage lunatics or mindless robots manipulated by fascist rulers.

One difficult interaction between whites and nonwhites during this period was between the white Allied nations and China. China, a country whose people had long been discriminated against in America through immigration restriction and employment discrimination, became an important ally in the war against the Axis, and particularly against Japan. China now had to be recast from a backward, filthy, mysterious, alien land to a democratic, dignified ally with a long cultural heritage that was worthy of American respect. China's help now had to be presented by the OWI as instrumental in fighting against Japan, one of the most formidable foes America had had to face in its history. Winston Churchill's opinion of the Chinese did not help matters. Churchill tended to speak of the Chinese, Indians, Africans, and many others in racist and derogatory terms: 'To President [Roosevelt]', noted Churchill's doctor in 1943, 'China means four hundred million people who are going to count in the world of tomorrow, but Winston thinks only of the colour of their skins; it is when he talks of India or China that you remember he is a Victorian.'"¹¹⁹

Racial stereotypes still abounded in 1940s Hollywood: the sly Chinese, cannibals in the South Seas, obsequious African-Americans, and barbarous, bloodthirsty Muslims. The OWI decided these racist depictions could no longer

¹¹⁹ Thorne, *Allies of a Kind*, 6.

continue to be broadcast through the world, and it began to challenge them. Hollywood, however, still wanted to make movies with these stereotypes. OWI's Bureau of Motion Pictures had a tough job ahead: they had to devise more inclusive racial policy without angering African-Americans, international audiences, Southerners, Hollywood, and other government agencies. To accomplish this, BMP leadership had to determine when to demand changes in films and when to retreat, and they had to prioritize which issues to pursue, and when.

BMP Film Reviewers

The BMP's leadership consisted of three individuals whose backgrounds encouraged them to embrace a liberal understanding of what America was fighting for. Lowell Mellett was a newsman who had a long career as an assistant to President Roosevelt prior to his appointment to the OWI. He showed sympathy for and an interest in civil rights agitation during the years before the war. For example, in 1938, when Mellett was director of the National Emergency Council (NEC), he was asked by the President to head a committee of liberal Southerners publishing a *Report on the Economic Conditions of the South*. Mellett, who was from Indiana originally, felt that the report was extremely helpful in bringing national focus to the "peculiar problems" facing the Southern economy, one of which, of course, was the inefficiency and damage caused by a segregated workforce and the sharecropping system.¹²⁰ Mellett was not, however, willing to plunge dramatically into racial equality and desegregation. The members of the report committee were prominent Southerners, but Mellett felt very strongly that the committee should contain only

¹²⁰ Sullivan, *Days of Hope*, 66-7.

white Southerners, in order that the report would have more impact in the South.¹²¹

Mellett genuinely felt that even with the support of Washington, economic change in the South would have to be supported by Southerners as well.¹²²

Another reason for his decision was that in 1938, the Roosevelt administration was trying to strategically force Southern Democrats to fall in line behind the liberal beliefs of his coalition. As historian Patricia Sullivan puts it, “the Roosevelt administration carefully avoided any suggestion that it aimed to upset the racial status quo in the South” because they needed the support of powerful Southern politicians.¹²³ Mellett could not afford to jeopardize the president’s plan. His close relationship with the President made it impolitic for him to become a more vocal supporter of racial and ethnic equality. However, his co-authorship of the *Government Manual for Motion Pictures* and his support of the BMP’s work on inclusion of racial equality suggest his sympathy for the cause.

Prior to the war, Ulric Bell, the Overseas Bureau of Motion Pictures representative in the Los Angeles Office, was a vocal interventionist. He was also a former newspaperman who was the Executive Director of Fight for Freedom, a leading interventionist activist group. By 1941, the public was still quite divided over entry into the war, but Hollywood tended to be in favor of intervention. In fact, the number of movies being produced suggesting America’s place in the growing conflict so far outweighed the amount with an isolationist slant that some isolationist members of Congress began to investigate war propaganda and its connection to monopolies in the motion picture industry. In the hearings that followed, in

¹²¹ Sullivan, *Days of Hope*, 64.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 67.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 70.

September of 1941, these Congressmen, most prominently Gerald P. Nye, the Senator from North Dakota, accused Hollywood studios of having monopolistic control over the content of pictures, and using that control to fill movies with interventionist propaganda.¹²⁴ In the ensuing battle, Ulric Bell of Fight for Freedom encouraged the Hollywood executives in question to hire Wendell Willkie, former presidential nominee, to be their lawyer. Willkie was a Republican, but was an active supporter of black civil rights.

Nelson Poynter was the BMP administrator who was the most prominent supporter of black civil rights prior to the war. He was the editor of the *Petersburg Times* newspaper, and as a Floridian and a prominent citizen, liberal Southern activists often sought his support (though he was originally from Indiana). For example, Senator Claude Pepper of Florida, the only Senator from the South who supported civil rights at the time, co-sponsored a bill to abolish the poll tax in 1940. Abolition of the poll tax became a key issue for many supporters of the New Deal. Virginia Durr, a key activist in Washington for the movement, saw that the anti-poll tax bill was continuously in trouble in Congress, so, according to historian Patricia Sullivan, she “asked Eleanor Roosevelt if she would convene a meeting of southerners who supported the poll-tax fight and who could give Pepper a real sense of political support-people like Nelson Poynter, editor of the *Petersburg Times*.”¹²⁵ Poynter was close friends with Lowell Mellett, and when Mellett appointed him head of the Los Angeles BMP, Poynter focused on racial equality in films. He also

¹²⁴ Koppes and Black, *Hollywood Goes To War*, 17-8.

¹²⁵ Sullivan, *Days of Hope*, 114.

developed a longstanding correspondence with Walter White, secretary of the NAACP.

The Bureau of Motion Pictures staffers who worked under Poynter and Bell in the Los Angeles office were mostly low-level bureaucrats, and not much is known about them. They tended to be New Deal liberals, but most of them did not seem to go on to careers in politics. They did not leave their papers in an archives, nor did they write memoirs. The little we can know about them is from their correspondence and reviews in the OWI files. Their reviews supported very clearly the platform outlined in the *Government Manual for the Motion Picture Industry*.

In fact, they sometimes were more outraged and upset about violations of the racial and ethnic components of the *Manual* than their supervisors, Bell and Poynter, were. For example, Dorothy B. Jones (the head film reviewer) and Marjorie Thorson wrote on a finished film called *Little Tokyo, U.S.A.* in early July, 1942. The film dramatizes Japanese espionage in Los Angeles prior to Pearl Harbor. In the reviewers' opinion, "virtually everything in it [...] is calculated to shiver the well-sensitized spines of the Office of War Information." The film's content indicated a dramatic misunderstanding of the American war program. Reviewers argued that the film's main goal is to breed hatred of the Japanese and Japanese-Americans because it shows that there is no such thing as a loyal American of Japanese descent – all were saboteurs. The film ends when all Japanese-Americans are herded into internment camps. Nelson Poynter wrote that he found it disturbing, but did "not regard it quite as passionately as do Mrs. Thorson and Mrs. Jones."¹²⁶ While he was "not as upset

¹²⁶ Letter from Nelson Poynter to Lowell Mellett, July 21, 1942, Box 3520, "Little Tokyo, U.S.A." Folder, Record Group 208 – OWI Papers.

by it as our reviewers, [...] the net effect of the picture in [his] judgment is to cause the audience to hate all Japanese, including the loyal fellow citizens.” He thought that this problem could be solved through editing portions of the film, but that it was a good example of why the BMP should evaluate a film prior to its completion.¹²⁷ Lowell Mellett agreed: “Picture would not be very harmful if in two or three spots, it can be amended to prove that all Japanese were not subversive.”¹²⁸

Throughout this process, Poynter negotiated with Colonel Jason Joy of 20th Century Fox, the studio that released his film. Joy initially refused to make any edits on the film: “Joy was a little annoyed and more or less put it on an all or nothing basis – that it would [be released] as is, or they would kill the picture entirely if it were out of line with government policy. I told him we would not take the responsibility for this and therefore, it would [be released] as is rather than have the government kill it.”¹²⁹ Poynter knew that requiring Joy to make changes or pull the film had the appearance of government censorship. Not only was censorship outside his authority, but it would have set forth a firestorm of controversy about government regulation of the film industry. He therefore asked Joy to make only a few changes, and he was ultimately successful.

Although the decisions the OWI made were not always consistent, they were often marked by certain principles. First, the OWI professed a belief in racial brotherhood and international cooperation. OWI reviewers saw themselves as part of

¹²⁷ Letter from Nelson Poynter to Lowell Mellett, July 23, 1942, Box 3520, “Little Tokyo, U.S.A.” Folder, Record Group 208 – OWI Papers.

¹²⁸ Letter from Lowell Mellett, July 24, 1942, Box 3520, “Little Tokyo, U.S.A.” Folder, Record Group 208 – OWI Papers.

¹²⁹ Letter from Nelson Poynter to Lowell Mellett, July 23, 1942, Box 3520, “Little Tokyo, U.S.A.” Folder, Record Group 208 – OWI Papers.

a world in flux: racial hierarchies were rapidly changing, and reviewers genuinely wanted the U.S. to play a positive role. Second, they often felt unable to affect the changes they wanted to because of real or imagined constraints placed on them by the federal government and American society. In some instances, reviewers felt they would like films to address certain issues, but they also feared the issues would become divisive to the American public. In other instances, reviewers felt obligated to ask other government agencies whether those agencies would object to having certain issues or characters present in a film. Third, in some cases reviewers were unable to free themselves completely from the racism of their time. That they were sometimes quite oblivious to some expressions of racism, seems obvious today. The records of the OWI, then, show how low-level bureaucrats wrestled with the swiftly changing meaning of race in the 1940s.

The Race War At Home

The OWI was interested in helping to improve the portrayals of African-Americans; it was sympathetic to their plight and felt that helping them would benefit American society and the world at large. This new regard for people of color was, in part, a product of the changing racial hierarchies of the 1940s world; it is clear, for example, that Creel's propaganda agency in World War I felt no such urge to advocate on behalf of people of color, and had no qualms about portraying America's enemy in racist terms.¹³⁰ Further, OWI reviewers knew that depicting African-American equality would encourage other countries to believe Americans were practicing the democracy they were trying to spread. However, these reviewers were

¹³⁰ Winkler, *Politics of Propaganda*, 3.

also aware that they were operating under the constraints of the federal government, Hollywood's timidity, and contemporary American prejudices.

The OWI's review of a film called *Action in the North Atlantic*, from September 1942, indicates some of these issues. In this film, the character of a "Negro pantryman" proved problematic to the OWI, because his character brought up questions about the status of African-Americans that the OWI felt were too controversial to address during wartime: "The colored pantryman asks what he has to hope for in return for risking his life. This question is not answered by the simple device of having a white sailor die protecting him from German bullets. He is still a pantryman, and the inference is that he will go on being a pantryman, unless, by some miracle, he becomes another Rochester or Joe Louis."¹³¹ This last remark was quite telling: the reviewer seemed to be suggesting that the only way for an African-American to make his or her way out of the underclass was by being an entertainer (like Rochester, the obsequious butler played by Eddie Anderson on the *Jack Benny Show*), or an athlete (like boxer Joe Louis).¹³² Further, the tone of this comment suggested regret, or, perhaps, sarcasm, as though the reviewers wished they could do something more to help African-Americans' plight.

Ultimately, the studio that produced the film, Warner Brothers, edited the pantryman out. In reference to this change, the OWI wrote: "The character of the Negro pantryman has been eliminated entirely. This amounts to side-stepping the

¹³¹ Script Treatment Review by Dorothy Jones and William Roberts 6/20/1942, *Action in the North Atlantic* Folder, Box 3511, Record Group 208 – OWI Papers.

¹³² Another way to read this comment might be that the OWI reviewers were suggesting that the pantryman character should also possess skills as an athlete or performer, which would make his social betterment after the war seem more possible. Many Black characters in films of this period have such skills. For example, in the film *Lifeboat*, discussed below, Canada Lee's character "Joe," is a ship steward with musical talent: he plays the recorder. For information on Rochester and Joe Louis, see Savage, *Broadcasting Freedom*, 88 and 162.

issue, but it is preferable to the unfortunate mishandling of the subject in the treatment.”¹³³ The reviewers concluded that it would be too difficult to tackle this issue, raise questions for viewers at home and abroad, and risk damaging the unity of America and the image of equality abroad. So the OWI decided to “side-step” the issue, allow him to be eliminated, and recommend the movie for distribution. In a sense, then, this character was too real, and the OWI did not believe that America, or the world, was ready for such realism.

The OWI’s review of a film called *Liberty Ship*, which was written in September 1942, illustrates the constraints the OWI was under in contending with the government and with controversial material. In this film, about employees in an American shipyard, the OWI found that “[t]he problems of the Negro are honestly and convincingly presented” through the character of a “colored welder” called Bob Kinnan.¹³⁴

The OWI felt obligated to ask the Maritime Commission whether it objected to showing an African-American employed as a craftsman in a military shipyard.¹³⁵ The OWI did not want to stir up debate around the contentious issue of segregation within the military and war production industries, which African-Americans were actively protesting at the time (indeed, only a year earlier, in late June, 1941, President Roosevelt had issued an executive order desegregating defense jobs, but not the military).¹³⁶ According to one telegram, members of the OWI wanted to keep the

¹³³ Script Review 9/8/1942, *Action in the North Atlantic Folder*, Box 3511, Record Group 208 – OWI Papers.

¹³⁴ Script Review 9/14/1942, *Liberty Ship Folder*, Box 3520, Record Group 208 – OWI Papers.

¹³⁵ Western Union Telegram from Nelson Poynter to Lowell Mellett 9/14/1942, *Liberty Ship Folder*, Box 3520, Record Group 208 – OWI Papers.

¹³⁶ Savage, *Broadcasting Freedom*, 71.

character in despite suggestions from someone called O’Dea (presumably of the Maritime Commission) to eliminate the character from the film. The OWI wanted to “keep it in unless the maritime commission has Negro problems more acute than [it] realize[s].”¹³⁷ This, then, is an example of the OWI trying to promote its agenda within the confines of government policies.

Secondly, in the film, the character, Bob Kinnan, is often mistreated by the other workers and, in one episode, faces discrimination in trying to buy a house in a nice (white) neighborhood. During this time, housing discrimination was becoming a contentious issue in African-American communities, in the face of the Federal Housing Administration policy that encouraged banks and real estate companies to improve the value of their property by keeping African-Americans segregated.¹³⁸ The OWI was concerned about this housing episode in the film, and it suggested omitting the scene (despite the fact they admitted doing so was “hedging the issue”): “The problem is real, the challenge deserves statement, but it is a challenge to which there should be an answer. At the present time there appears to be none. It is questionable whether, at this time, it is wise to raise an issue that cannot be satisfactorily solved.”¹³⁹ Again, as with *Action in the North Atlantic*, the OWI wanted to avoid showing a problem, even though it believed the problem deserved addressing, because it suspected that the problem would be divisive. The OWI was afraid the scene might further endanger the racial unity it was trying so sincerely to promote.

¹³⁷ Western Union Telegram from Nelson Poynter to Lowell Mellett 9/14/1942, *Liberty Ship* Folder, Box 3520, Record Group 208 – OWI Papers.

¹³⁸ Biondi, *To Stand and Fight*, 112-113.

¹³⁹ No writer listed, Script Review 9/14/1942, Box 3520, *Liberty Ship* Folder, Box 3520, Record Group 208 – OWI Records.

It is unclear from the OWI's files why the reviewers were so keen to keep Bob Kinnan's character in, but were willing to eliminate many other black characters from other films. It seems possible, however, that the positive aspects of Bob Kinnan's storyline outweighed the negative aspects. For example, in one part of the film, a fellow shipyard employee, who is a Nazi sympathizer, tries to take advantage of Kinnan's alienation from the white workers. He tells Kinnan that America will never accept him because he is black, so he should support the Nazis, but Kinnan rejects this bizarre reasoning and stands by his patriotic American coworkers instead. This was an ideal message, from the OWI's perspective, because Kinnan's loyalty to his country is paramount. Keeping him in the film but removing the housing scene would maximize the film's positive message, because the film would feature a patriotic, hard-working African-American character who refused to succumb to Nazi propaganda.¹⁴⁰

Historians Koppes and Black argue that the OWI in general was most concerned with minimizing the appearance of racial conflict and stressing harmony. They contend that the OWI tried to attain unity by persuading white Americans to recognize black culture and achievement, while at the same time assuaging the concerns of blacks and therefore diffusing their militancy.¹⁴¹ To Koppes and Black, the OWI, and the BMP in particular, were willing to ignore demands by African-Americans for less demeaning portrayals in movies, when it seemed to suit the BMP's program of maintaining unity, through motion pictures, during the war.

¹⁴⁰ Script Review 9/14/1942, Box 3520, *Liberty Ship* Folder, Box 3520, Record Group 208 – OWI Records. It is unclear from the OWI files whether the recommended changes were made, and the film *Liberty Ship* is unavailable for viewing.

¹⁴¹ Koppes and Black, "Blacks, Loyalty, and Motion Picture Propaganda," 389.

However, as I demonstrated with the *Little Tokyo, U.S.A.* example, administrators in the BMP tried to mediate between their reviewers, advocacy groups, other government agencies, and Hollywood. They tried to make strategic decisions about what changes to push for, and when to push for them, in order to get the most done. In the case of the film *Tennessee Johnson*, controversy broke over the portrayal of President Andrew Johnson as an American hero and ignored his racist attitudes. The film also made a villain out of Thaddeus Stevens, an advocate of reconstruction rights for American blacks. Walter White of the NAACP led a campaign to edit this film or stop its release, but was unsuccessful. The BMP was able to get the film's studio, MGM, to tone down some of the film's most offensive material, but refused to make the film into a larger battle. Nelson Poynter told Walter White that the BMP "want[ed] t encourage the studios to make films with real guts, films that can cause complaint from pro-Fascist minorities; therefore, I think we have to ... register our complaints and be willing to lose a battle and win a war."¹⁴² Koppes and Black claim the BMP's concern for black rights was negligible, or at least much less important than their concern for winning the war as a whole. Rather, black rights, and the rights of all nonwhite peoples, were essential to the BMP's understanding of what it would take to win the war. It seems clear that Poynter was working to negotiate between all the constituencies that requested his support. He had to make politically sound decisions to best achieve the goals of his agency.

Although the members of OWI were genuinely interested in addressing the concerns of African-Americans, they were still products of their time. They

¹⁴² Koppes and Black, "Blacks, Loyalty, and Motion Picture Propaganda," 394, quoting from Nelson Poynter to Walter White, August 28, 1942, Box 3510, Record Group 208 – OWI Records.

sometimes could not escape the racism of their contemporary society, and a modern reader of their reviews would notice several instances where their decisions were marked with substantially less sympathy and foresight. In Alfred Hitchcock's *Lifeboat*, which was reviewed in July 1943, for example, OWI reviewers did not realize the extent to which they excluded Joe, the one African-American character, from their analysis, even as they criticized the film for alienating him.

Lifeboat takes place during the war, and features American and British characters from all walks of life who are trapped together in a lifeboat after their ship is sunk. These characters represent many white ethnic groups, but there is also one African-American character on the boat: Joe, played by Canada Lee, a well-regarded actor and civil rights activist during the war. The OWI believed his character posed some problems: he is a former pickpocket, he is set apart from the other characters, he is treated patronizingly, and he is reluctant to participate in informal voting and discussion about the course of action. The OWI's point is well taken: indeed, in the film, Joe's character is associated with stock racial stereotypes of African-Americans, such as petty crime, a natural musical bent (he plays a recorder throughout the movie), and devout Christian beliefs (he spontaneously says a prayer over the body of a character who dies). He is even called "George" throughout the first part of the movie, which was a stock name applied to African-American servants, particularly the famous Pullman Car Porters.¹⁴³ However, Joe is not a pushover, a factor the OWI fails to discuss: he corrects the man who had been calling him "George," and when

¹⁴³ A. Philip Randolph, leader of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, one of the most powerful black unions in America, made it part of his platform when he founded the union to encourage passengers to call porters by their actual names and not patronizingly call them all "George." See Beth Tompkins Bates, *Pullman Porters*. See *Lifeboat* Film Review, 7/31/1943, *Lifeboat* Folder, Box 3520, Record Group 208 – OWI Papers.

asked to participate in voting, he does not refuse in a subservient way. Instead, he scoffs, “Do I get to vote too? I’d rather stay out of it,” suggesting pointed sarcasm about the invitation the white characters extend to him to participate and contribute his opinion.¹⁴⁴

Despite the backbone that Canada Lee brings to Joe, the OWI still felt that his character was a poor representative of African-Americans. However, the major problem the OWI saw with the movie is that most of the Americans in the lifeboat are ignorant about the war and look foolish compared with the Nazi character. For two pages, the OWI described the ways the film compares Americans unfavorably with the Nazi. But in these two pages the OWI barely mentioned the African-American character. Joe’s presence was cited only once, when the OWI reported Joe’s response to the death of a character. But the OWI did not expect Joe to be as informed as it expected the other characters to be about international relations, and about the war. It did not even address whether he, too, seemed ignorant of the war. It did not lump him in with the other Americans and Europeans; it held him to a lower standard and ultimately only complained that he seemed alienated from everyone else.¹⁴⁵ By not including Canada Lee’s character among the Americans, by not addressing how

¹⁴⁴ It may be a testament to Canada Lee’s politics and acting ability that he brought dignity and backbone to a character that could easily have been played as a subservient coward. According to Barbara Savage, Lee routinely performed on radio programs sponsored by civil rights activists during the war. See Savage, *Broadcasting Freedom*. The OWI wrote most of its criticism about the character of Joe based only on a reading of the script, so they wouldn’t have seen the way Canada Lee portrayed the character; however, even in later reviews, after they saw Lee’s portrayal, they still had a problem with the character. Perhaps in focusing on superficial markers of character and class, they ignored more subtle signals about his standing in the racial hierarchy of the characters. It is entirely possible, in fact, that a viewer might decide Joe is actually the least barbarous and most humane person aboard the lifeboat.

¹⁴⁵ This supports a trend regarding movies during this period: in almost all of the movies that deal with patriotic Americans supporting the war effort, those Americans are inevitably white. When they are not native born, they may be white Europeans, like in the OWI-sanctioned *America*, which dealt with a white central European man settling in America and becoming a productive, patriotic citizen. See Script Review 11/5/1942, *America* Folder, Box 3511, Record Group 208 – OWI Records.

patriotic and knowledgeable he might be, the OWI marginalized his character just as much as it argued Hitchcock had done.

The OWI's inconsistent advocacy of African-American equality on film was particularly apparent in its reviews of two movies with supernatural content. Both films, *I Walked With A Zombie* (1943) and *Revenge of the Zombies* (1943), deal with voodooism, and depict the ignorance and savagery of African-Americans. In both cases, the OWI perceived the films as depicting a "clash of native superstitions with the white man's beliefs."¹⁴⁶ In the initial version of *Revenge of the Zombies*, in fact, the OWI rejected the film's presentation of African-Americans because the plot hinges on their inferior intellect: "the Nazi scientist has found it easy to turn these Negroes into zombies because, as he says, they are 'of a lower mentality.'"¹⁴⁷ For both of these films, the OWI argued that regardless of the fantasy nature of the content, the films clearly played to stereotypes about African-Americans that could cause disunity at home and criticism abroad.

However, the OWI's policy was not monolithic or consistent, as was clear by its review of another supernatural picture, *Captive Wild Woman*, in March of 1943. In this film, a "mad doctor" turns a gorilla into dark-skinned girl, and then back into a gorilla again.¹⁴⁸ As the film was under review by OWI, the office received letters of protest from the *Daily Worker* and a group called the "Organized Employees of Phi Beta Kappa," who called it "an unspeakable insult to the nation particularly the

¹⁴⁶ Letter from Ulric Bell to Watterson Rothacker 3/10/1943, *I Walked With A Zombie* Folder, Box 3519, Record Group 208 – OWI Records.

¹⁴⁷ Letter from William S. Cunningham to Lindsley Parsons 4/27/1943, *Revenge of the Zombies* Folder, Box 3524, Record Group 208 – OWI Records. Despite the filmmakers removing this plot point, the OWI still denies the film export because of its fantastic treatment of the Nazi enemy (See Script Review 7/23/1943).

¹⁴⁸ Inter-office Memorandum from Lowell Mellett to Nelson Poynter 3/11/1943, *Captive Wild Woman* Folder, Box 3513, Record Group 208 – OWI Records.

Negro people who are helping to win the war,” and charging that it was “cut from the whole cloth of Goebbels [*sic*] gutter mouthings.”¹⁴⁹ However, despite the protest, the OWI found no problem with the film. In a letter from reviewer Warren Pierce to BMP chief Lowell Mellett, Pierce outlined his boss Ulric Bell’s opinion of the film: Bell “says it is perfectly all right. The film is a circus story and a mad doctor does transform a female gorilla into a woman [...] However it is a perfectly harmless fantasy according to Ulric. He is even satisfied with it for overseas distribution.” In a post-script on this report, Pierce added, “[p]robably all of this controversy is caused due to the fact that [the woman] is reported to be part Negro, which, of course, has nothing to do with the picture.”¹⁵⁰ Apparently the OWI did not consider that even the suggestion of such close kinship between African-Americans and gorillas might prove offensive.¹⁵¹

The Race War Abroad

The majority of the films OWI reviewed during its existence dealt, not surprisingly, with war, the military, or Americans abroad. These films presented special challenges for the OWI. Many of the same issues film reviewers faced about African-Americans were also present in these films: white Americans held racist

¹⁴⁹ Telegram from Organized Employees Phi Beta Kappa to OWI Washington DC 3/25/1943, *Captive Wild Woman* Folder, Box 3513, Record Group 208 – OWI Records. The letter from the *Daily Worker* is only referred to in correspondence between Lowell Mellett and Nelson Poynter; it is not present in the files. However, the correspondence does say that the *Daily Worker* writes that Universal Pictures told them the girl “is not a Negro but an American Indian,” which, of course, Universal thinks solves the problem.

¹⁵⁰ Letter from Warren Pierce to Lowell Mellett 3/15/1943, *Captive Wild Woman* Folder, Box 3513, Record Group 208 – OWI Records.

¹⁵¹ In the final film, the girl does seem to be of at least partially African-American descent. No mention of her skin color is made throughout the film, but everyone else is white. The film does seem to locate the dark-skinned girl in an intermediate place between the civilized white characters and the wild animals in the circus act.

beliefs about people of color in Africa, the Middle East, and Asia, just as they did about African-Americans. The persistent theme of foreignness in the films the OWI reviewed indicates a fundamental American uneasiness with people of color from foreign lands: Americans were fighting major battles in places where the culture and landscape were fundamentally different than what they were used to, and the people spoke a wide variety of languages unfamiliar to American ears. Most important, Americans were fighting against, and alongside, Asians whose presence in the United States had been decried throughout the course of U.S. history. This sense of foreign cultures as strange and perhaps dangerous was dramatized again and again in these movies.¹⁵²

The OWI still had to face limitations placed on it by the federal government. But these films with an international setting added several other constraints. First, films set abroad were far more likely to feature characters of different ethnicities and from different countries. If these characters appeared subject to white Americans and Europeans, or if their cultures or beliefs were ridiculed, people of those cultures who saw the films would necessarily be offended. With ridicule of African-Americans, the OWI feared international audiences would assume white Americans would treat all people of color in a discriminatory fashion, because they treated African-Americans that way. However, with ridicule of people of color from other countries, the OWI could virtually guarantee international audiences would be offended. So it tried to excise the racial stereotypes about Asians, Middle Easterners, and Africans, that Hollywood filmmakers regularly used. But as with the African-American

¹⁵²One rather strange exception is the boom of movies about Australia made at this time: there were at least three in the files that I saw, and I assume it has to do with increased interest in Australia because of its strategic location in the Pacific theatre.

characters, the OWI could not always disengage itself enough from contemporary society to notice discriminatory portrayals that would be immediately apparent to the modern viewer.

The OWI deplored the use of stock characters for Asian people, but the agency was especially disturbed by depictions of Chinese and Japanese characters. The OWI had the major job of rehabilitating the American image of the Chinese, now that they were important allies of the U.S. Films were still being made that depicted Chinese people as foolish, sly, or unclean. For example, concerning a film called *Halfway to Shanghai* (viewed in June, 1942), the OWI wrote that the character of Mr. Wu, “a prosperous, middle-class Chinese,” whose “every outward aspect indicates that he represents China’s most solid citizenry” was, despite this, “portrayed as a silly, constantly giggling, ridiculous buffoon.”¹⁵³

The OWI felt compelled to address stereotypical portrayals of the Japanese for a different reason: they were America’s enemies and must be shown as a formidable, but beatable, foe. The OWI consistently tried to prevent movies from broadcasting crude, racist propaganda about the Japanese. Some movies, such as 1943’s *The Story of Dr. Wassell*, were raised the OWI’s ire due to their racial epithets: in *Dr. Wassell*, Japanese are portrayed as “a dwarfish horde of island men,” which the OWI considered part of an “outmoded concept of the world.” The OWI thought this worldview encouraged attacking the Japanese “on the basis of a physical characteristic rather than their Fascistic ideology and their plan for conquest.”¹⁵⁴ This

¹⁵³ Feature Review 6/11/1942, *Halfway to Shanghai* Folder, Box 3517, Record Group 208 – OWI Records.

¹⁵⁴ Script Review 4/7/1943, *The Story of Dr. Wassell* Folder, Box 3526, Record Group 208 – OWI Records.

critique went even further regarding a film called *Shadow of Japan* (1944), which, the OWI felt, consisted of nothing but racial hatred: documentary footage and fictional depictions of Japanese atrocities which are “sensational” and “largely pornographic,” and with a narrator who “screams” about how the Japanese are “a race of animals who must be wiped off the face of the earth.”¹⁵⁵

This sort of characterization was the antithesis to what the OWI encouraged in portrayals of the Japanese enemy. To the OWI, the Japanese were contemptible because of their fascist ideology, not their race. In its review of 1943’s *The Purple Heart*, the OWI pointed this out: “it fails to make anywhere the important distinction between the Japanese militarists and the Japanese people, a distinction called for by our government’s information policy. Obviously, this cannot be the main point of the story. It would be helpful, however, if somewhere in the script, some hint of this viewpoint could be expressed.”¹⁵⁶ Many Americans feared that the Japanese were a race apart, even a separate species, and that they all thought alike.¹⁵⁷ Some portions of the American government even sanctioned this belief. As part of its “Why We Fight” series, the War Department created a film called *Know Your Enemy – Japan*. It was directed by Hollywood director Frank Capra, and took so long to make (from 1942-1945) that it was not released until the end of the war. Capra used footage of the Japanese military to reinforce the idea that they were a nation of citizens with

¹⁵⁵ Memorandum from Gene Kern to William Cunningham 11/15/1944, *Shadow of Japan* Folder, Box 3525, Record Group 208 – OWI Records.

¹⁵⁶ The OWI was quite enthused about this film, despite its questionable content regarding the Japanese. It is hard to tell from the files whether this problem was fixed, because the greatest problem the OWI had with this film dealt with a Chinese character that betrayed the American allies. Most of the memoranda in the file were about that. However, it does seem that they permitted the film to be distributed overseas. See Script Review 10/13/43, *The Purple Heart* Folder, Box 3524., Record Group 208 – OWI Records.

¹⁵⁷ Dower, *War Without Mercy*, 8.

collective will, devoid of individual identities; in fact, the narration of the film describes the Japanese as “photographic prints off the same negative.”¹⁵⁸ In contrast to this perception of Japanese culture, the OWI’s perception promoted the difference between Japan as a race and Japan as a government, and between Japan as a nation and Japanese individuals.

The OWI reviewed several films that take place in the “South Seas” and feature “island natives.” Just as with films featuring African-Americans and voodoo spirituality, these films show these “natives” clashing with white culture and Christianity: “The natives emerge as superstitious and ignorant, and their antagonism against “strangers” implies racial antagonism, since the strangers are all white people. The Americans still exploit the natives and the assumption remains that the Americans and the Christian religion are superior to the island people and their beliefs.”¹⁵⁹ The OWI used similar language here as it did to describe the African-Americans in the voodoo movies: “superstitious and ignorant.” BMP reviewers were quick to condemn this sort of racism. They opposed the depiction of direct clashes between white and nonwhite cultures, particularly verbal slurs in dialogue and economic exploitation.

The OWI was not always aware, though, of a more broad reading of discrimination or stereotyping. For example, the OWI is quite complimentary about *Rhythm of the Islands*, which it reviewed in January, 1943: “[T]he fact that the principle tribe of natives, particularly the chieftain, are characterized as hard-working,

¹⁵⁸ Dower, *War Without Mercy*, 19.

¹⁵⁹ Film Review 2/7/1945, *Song of the Sarong* Folder, Box 3526, Record Group 208 – OWI Records.

intelligent and industrious, makes it of value to this office.”¹⁶⁰ However, the synopsis suggests more subtle, but equally damaging, displays of inequality between white Americans and island natives. The plot revolves around two white Americans who are buying Paradise Island in the Pacific, and they make payments toward the purchase of the island by dressing as natives and performing shows for tourists. The fact that they parody the native culture to earn money to then buy the island itself is quite significant. The film has several jokes about culture clashes. For example, one of the white Americans, “ignorant of island customs, has unwittingly engaged himself to the chieftain’s daughter.” The OWI concluded that the film parodied the way tourists interact with natives; the example it provided was when “a woman tourist, mistaking Tommy [one of the Americans] for a native, condescendingly tries to examine his teeth and gets well bitten for her pains.” At the end of the film, the wise chieftain tells the white Americans that the island belongs to the original inhabitants, but he allows them to stay and solves the Americans’s problems. The OWI says “the relations between Tommy and the natives are shown to be excellent.” However, it is clear that the natives are in the film for white Americans to exploit, mock or use however they would like. It seems that the OWI, in this instance, remained blind to the sort of cultural imperialism depicted in this film.¹⁶¹

The OWI was not blind to more overt depictions or discussions of imperialism, although it did not always combat them. The OWI was aware that imperial subjugation was incompatible with the democratic ideologies it was trying to

¹⁶⁰ Film Review 1/23/1943, *Rhythm of the Islands* Folder, Box 3524, Record Group 208 – OWI Records.

¹⁶¹ Film Review 1/23/1943, *Rhythm of the Islands* Folder, Box 3524, Record Group 208 – OWI Records.

spread; however, it also had to avoid angering Britain, which was both a major imperial power and the United States' most important ally. In *Adventures in Iraq*, which the OWI reviewed in 1942, three white Americans are forced to crash-land their plane in Iraq, which was part of the British Empire, and they get taken hostage by a sheik. This sheik speaks with an upper-class British accent, and says that he went to European schools to become civilized and lose his attachment to barbarous local custom. Although this point is not mentioned in the OWI file, the white Americans also use the word "civilization" and repeat that the village where they are trapped is uncivilized. The sheik, however, is a product of a colonized country: he is born into local culture but was "civilized" into Western culture. The sheik is currently on the side of the Germans, because they are able to pay him better for the use of his land's oil. This makes a powerful statement regarding the allegiances forced by colonialism: a conquered people might not necessarily support their imperial rulers in war endeavors.

The OWI attacked this film. Its main objection was the suggestion that all of Iraq was pro-Axis and that this tribe which purports to be Iraqi is depicted as blood-thirsty devil-worshippers. The OWI was also concerned about the strident anti-British sentiment in the film. According to reviewer Peg Fenwick, "[t]here has been a great deal of Nazi propaganda on the subject of British imperialism already. To add to it, no matter how innocently, is simply to play into Axis' hands." Although Iraq was "technically neutral," the OWI did not want to alienate the country by allowing ridiculously offensive imagery to be distributed.¹⁶²

¹⁶² Release Print Review 12/21/1942, *Adventure in Iraq* Folder, Box 3511, Record Group 208 – OWI Records.

The problem of imperialism, both political and cultural, presents itself in many ways in films the OWI reviewed. In the case of the Philippines, white Americans were forced to address both the heroic fighting of people of color, and the fact that these people of color were under America's imperial control. In *Back to Bataan*, which was reviewed by the OWI in 1945, John Wayne leads an American operation to train and organize Filipino guerilla soldiers to storm a Japanese prison camp housing Allied soldiers. The OWI was quite partial to this film, and wanted to make sure that its war details were accurate. The OWI procured maps of the Philippines from the War Department to give to the RKO, the studio producing the film. They asked Claude A. Buss of the San Francisco bureau of the OWI to provide technical advice (because that bureau specialized in Asian culture and society). The OWI wanted to stress the good relationship between the Philippines and the United States. When they viewed the film, the BMP reviewers were pleased to see a fairly even-handed portrayal of Filipinos. The Filipinos are generally portrayed as brave, seeming to possess an unwavering desire to fight against the Japanese. There is even an adorable Filipino boy who sacrifices his life in order to protect the American and Filipino soldiers.

Imperialism is explored in several ways in this film. First, the OWI was concerned about the emphasis on Japanese empire-building because the film emphasizes Japan's interest in a race-based empire, an "Asia for Asiatics." The OWI worried that this would appeal to viewers' emotions rather than logic, and it preferred the Japanese to focus their hate on Americans rather than on uniting a racial group.

The OWI did not want allow any part of Japan's rhetoric to appeal to viewers.¹⁶³ Second, there is a scene toward the beginning of the film where Miss Barnes, an American schoolteacher, is leading her Filipino class and asks them what contributions the Spanish brought to the Philippines, and what contributions the Americans brought. The correct answer to the latter question is that America brought the Filipinos dignity and the knowledge that men need to be free. The only concern the OWI had about this scene was that it wanted to make sure the American schoolteacher did not sound condescending or arrogant when she asks what the Americans have "given" the Philippines.¹⁶⁴

This scene initiates a broader discussion in the film that the OWI did not address: the merits of Japanese versus American imperial control. The OWI rarely commented on America as an imperial power, despite the fact that it addressed Britain's empire fairly often. In *Back to Bataan*, no one mentions the limitations of Filipino freedom under American colonial rule. This problem is complicated by subsequent struggles in the film over granting the Philippines independence. The viewer learns that the Americans have set aside a future date, in 1946, to grant the Philippines its freedom, but the Japanese, in the film, try to win the allegiance of the Philippines by offering immediate independence. The Filipinos turn the Japanese down and attack them violently in retaliation, presumably because Japanese freedom is not the kind they want. The film makes an implicit claim, then, for imperial control by the U.S. rather than Japan: if the Philippines must be under imperial control, it is better to be under the benevolent leadership of America than the duplicitous

¹⁶³ Script Review 9/21/1944, *Back to Bataan* Folder, Box 3511, Record Group 208 – OWI Records.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

leadership of Japan. Perhaps because American forces in the film are fighting for democracy and are willing to grant the Philippines its freedom, the OWI did not address questions the film brings up about America's history as an imperial power.

The OWI was especially sensitive to possible instances of American arrogance. It repeatedly stated that America would not be able to beat their enemies without the aid of allies, and therefore films should not illustrate Americans winning battles single-handedly. While it continually stressed this point regarding forces of some size and influence, like Britain, Russia, and China, it also emphasized that film portrayals should not alienate smaller, less strategically-essential forces either. For example, as we saw above, in *Adventures in Iraq*, the OWI refused to allow Iraqis to be burlesqued because the United States could not afford to alienate any potentially friendly nation. In *Back to Bataan*, the BMP reviewer Gene Kern's biggest disappointment with the finished film was a switch from a fairly straightforward pro-Filipino film, to a film emphasizing the prowess of the American military:

Unfortunately, -- from the point of view of overseas policy, -- the emphasis has been shifted from a sincere, undiluted tribute to the Filipinos to a glorification of American arms and justice. Whereas "The Invisible Army" [the film's original name] was primarily the story of the Filipino guerillas, "Back to Bataan" emerges more as the story of Americans returning to liberate fellow Americans and Filipinos -- although the point is strongly made that the Filipinos do more than their share in the fight for freedom.¹⁶⁵

The OWI particularly objected to a new "opening and closing "frame"" which showed actual veterans of the prison camps marching proudly with their names and

¹⁶⁵ Film Review 5/4/1945, *Back to Bataan* Folder, Box 3511, Record Group 208 -- OWI Records.

ranks superimposed, and a voice-over proclaiming the success of the American campaign.¹⁶⁶ Though the OWI files did not mention it, all of the soldiers shown are white Americans: no Filipino soldiers, even though they too were freed from the camps, are shown proudly marching.

As *Back to Bataan* illustrates, military films that took place in Asia provided a fascinating flashpoint for multicultural encounters. A major theme in the OWI files regarding military films is the presentation of United Nations forces working together in a friendly and equitable way, and it was particularly impressed when films featured Americans of many ethnicities working together in one unit, and units working together with other nations' forces on the Allied side.¹⁶⁷ The OWI criticized *Objective, Burma!* (1945) for not depicting international military cooperation. When it allowed the film to be distributed despite these concerns, the international press castigated the film, and America, severely.¹⁶⁸

Objective, Burma! details the adventures of a paratrooper unit, led by Errol Flynn, as it lands in the Burmese jungle to disable a Japanese radar station. Although Flynn's team suffers substantial casualties, almost all of them happen off screen. The Japanese foes, however, get decimated several times by the team. What is most striking to the modern viewer is the comparative lack of nonwhite people in a movie about a campaign in the Asian jungle: apart from the scores of nameless Japanese soldiers, there are two Gurkha guides (who appear to be of South Asian descent),

¹⁶⁶ Film Review 5/4/1945, *Back to Bataan* Folder, Box 3511, Record Group 208 – OWI Records.

¹⁶⁷ Of course, the multiethnic American unit almost always consisted solely of a people from a variety of white European ethnic groups. It is interesting to note that by this point, men of Jewish, Italian, and Irish descent, among others, are commonly “white” enough to be in the military scenes and the OWI applauded this multiethnicism.

¹⁶⁸ Script Review 5/29/1944, *Objective, Burma!* Folder, Box 3522, Record Group 208 – OWI Records.

three friendly Burmese locals who the team meets near their village, several Chinese soldiers on the American army base, and one captain from the Chinese army, Captain Li, who accompanies the team on its mission. Nothing disparaging is said about Captain Li; indeed, he is treated cordially and speaks nearly unaccented English. The problem is that he, along with every other person of color on the Allied side, does not do much throughout the movie. Captain Li is constantly ordered around by Errol Flynn, and although there is another white soldier of Captain Li's rank under Errol Flynn's command, that white soldier assumes several leadership roles and is consulted by Flynn for advice far more frequently than Captain Li is. Captain Li's main job is that of translator. In this film, none of the people of color aside from Captain Li speak English, and none is given subtitles. Large portions of the film omit dialogue and feature distinctly foreign jungle sounds: elephants, monkeys, and tropical birds. The film's refusal to make foreign languages intelligible and distinct seems to equate Asian languages with the sounds of animals: the film makes those sounds seem foreign and dangerous, and privileges the English dialogue.

The OWI was more concerned with the lack of non-American army units, however, "in the Burma theatre, where British and Chinese armies have done the bulk of the fighting;" it feared that the heroism of an American unit fighting on its own gives an "impression of American self-glorification."¹⁶⁹ In an initial draft of the script, the OWI pointed out several jokes and statements that came across as arrogant: one character makes fun of the Gurkha character's long name and the fact that he cannot speak English, and in one instance Captain Li discusses the inadequacy of Chinese military methods: it referred to "Captain Li's statement that China has been

¹⁶⁹ Script Review 5/29/1944, *Objective, Burma!* Folder, Box 3522, Record Group 208 – OWI Records.

fighting a defensive war and must learn to strike back [...] We feel Chinese counter-attacks deserve better than this from a Chinese Captain assigned to ‘learn American fighting methods.’”¹⁷⁰ As usual, the OWI was very sensitive to verbal discrimination (although for some reason it ignored several references to the Japanese as “monkeys”); it encouraged most of these phrases to be edited out in the final film, and they were.

Despite these changes, the OWI was still quite wary of the lack of participation shown in the film by the Chinese and British armies, and was reluctant to approve it for overseas distribution. Finally, the New York office of the OWI Motion Picture Bureau showed the film to specialists on the regions portrayed in the film (which it often did to try to ensure cultural accuracy), and these reviewers thought it would be acceptable for distribution. In the opinion of the New York office, the film depicted sufficient participation by other countries: several Asians appear in the film, the soldiers are briefed by a British officer, and the film only depicts one campaign, not the invasion of Burma as a whole, so viewers could assume international contributions to other Burma campaigns. The OWI reviewer in New York even ventures to guess that the British will be pleased: “My own hunch is that the British reviewers will praise it as the kind of film the British themselves should have made and didn’t.”¹⁷¹ However, exactly the opposite happened. The OWI file on this film includes several newspaper articles about how offended the British were about their absence from the picture. For example, one article details how the film “was pulled from the Warner theatre [in London] after a one-week run because of

¹⁷⁰ Script Review 5/29/1944, *Objective, Burma!* Folder, Box 3522, Record Group 208 – OWI Records.

¹⁷¹ Ferdinand Kuhn, quoted in letter from an unnamed author to William S. Cunningham 3/21/1945, *Objective, Burma!* Folder, Box 3522, Record Group 208 – OWI Records.

newspaper objection to the one-sided portrayal of the Burma campaign.” Several other articles indicate that American soldiers who fought in Burma were upset at the depiction. One article says the film is so “inaccurate” that “it’s been banned from all civilian theatres in the Burma-India theatre. And the GI’s have been seeing it either for laughs or to come out storming.”¹⁷² Clearly, then, for all their discussion, reviewers at OWI misread the international mood.

The OWI was very impressed when films successfully depicted forces from a variety of different countries and races fighting with unity. In 1943’s *Sahara*, starring Humphrey Bogart, the action takes place in Northeast Africa, and Humphrey Bogart’s character leads a rag-tag group of Allied forces in the defense of a strategically-placed water well south of Egypt. There is one character of Middle Eastern descent: a guide that is working for the Nazis to lead them to wells to get water. The OWI was concerned that his portrayal might be thought to be representative of all Middle Easterners, which contradicts the fact that many members of that group were on the Allied side; in the final version of the film, the guide is still present, but his role seems to be drastically reduced.¹⁷³

The Allied group contains mostly American and British soldiers, but also present are a Free French soldier, a captured Nazi pilot, a captured Italian soldier (who is convincingly regretful about fighting against the Allies and joins their side), and, most significantly, a black British Sudanese soldier named Tambul. No mention

¹⁷² None of the articles mention how the Burmese, Chinese, or Indians felt about the film. The first article quoted is titled “Londoners Irked So “Burma” Off Screen, dated 9/26/1945, but with no author or publication listed. The second is a *Variety* article dated 7/2/1945 written by Harry W. Flannery and titled “Soldiers’ Reaction to ‘Objective Burma’ Told.” See *Objective, Burma!* Folder, Box 3522, Record Group 208 – OWI Records.

¹⁷³ Final Script Review 2/1/1943, *Sahara* Folder, Box 3524, Record Group 208 – OWI Records.

is made of Tambul's land being colonized by the British; they simply mention that he is a "British Sudanese" soldier, but this fact is not treated as positive or negative. Tambul is welcomed as an equal into the group, and is a hero in their campaign. The OWI was pleased with the mixture of ethnicities in the group but did feel, in the early stages of script review, that Tambul is "a sort of Gunga Din," standing apart from the others in the group and doing their bidding.¹⁷⁴ This problem was toned down in the final version of the film; the viewer notices that many of the questionable scenes pointing to Tambul's inferiority were deleted, although he still tends to carry out orders rather than take responsibility. This, however, is not always the case: unfortunately Tambul is killed when he takes the initiative to go after, and kill, the escaping Nazi prisoner. Tambul's lack of initiative until his death scene does not suggest his lack of expertise as a soldier, however. Instead, Tambul is portrayed as bravely trying to save his squad, aware that he might die in the process, and several other characters die in this final battle. Nevertheless, his power, nobility, and bravery are fetishized, and the viewer gets the sense these are his most prominent characteristics; in the end, Tambul does fulfill, to a degree, the stereotype of the noble savage.

The Allied soldiers welcome Tambul from the start, and none of them seems concerned about working alongside a black soldier. Bogart's character makes several references to Tambul's right to be granted equal treatment among the soldiers, in response to the racism of the Nazi prisoner: when Tambul begins to search the prisoner for weapons, he protests being touched by a member of an "inferior race." Bogart insists that Tambul continue, telling the Nazi that Tambul's skin color will not

¹⁷⁴ Final Script Review 2/1/1943, *Sahara* Folder, Box 3524, Record Group 208 – OWI Records.

rub off and dirty his “pretty white uniform.” This is an interesting device to remind viewers that the Nazis are the ones with racial hatred and discrimination as their ideology and platform, not the Allies.

The theme of foreignness presents itself again, in a speech between Tambul and one of the white American soldiers at the well. In this speech, Tambul describes the local custom of marrying four wives, and discusses why his scriptures suggest that having four wives is ideal. He never specifies the denomination of his faith, but it is implied that he is Muslim. When the American soldier, who had just married before he joined the service, asks whether Tambul himself has four wives, Tambul replies that he does not, because his one wife would not like it. At the end of the scene, the white soldier says that he sure has learned from talking with Tambul, and Tambul replies that he believes they all have much to learn from each other. In this way, the movie tries to manage the problem of foreignness: the white soldier is curious but sympathetic, Tambul is matter-of-fact and non-threatening, and in the end his life and beliefs are not all that different from the white soldier’s. Tambul’s death ultimately contains the problem of foreignness, however; the survivors of the battle are white Allies. Tambul’s death, though heroic, suggests that the sacrifice of blacks and other “colored peoples” might be necessary for whites to remain in power. In praising this scene, the OWI tacitly accepted this. Reviewers said the film “a moving and convincing portrayal of the unity of the United Nations’ fighting men.”¹⁷⁵ The Tambul character is referred to throughout the OWI file on *Sahara* as the “Sudanese Negro,” which links him to the “Negroes” in America. The film thus performs the

¹⁷⁵No reviewer listed, *Sahara* Rough Print Review 7/8/1943, *Sahara* Folder, Box 3524, Record Group 208 – OWI Records.

additional service of reminding whites that blacks of all cultural extractions (whether they are as foreign to white America as Tambul or as close as a neighbor or employee) might not be as different from themselves as they think.

Conclusion

During World War II, the New Deal liberals who worked in President Roosevelt's Office of War Information realized that race was one of the key issues that linked people in America to people overseas. They saw that international racial hierarchies were shifting: African-Americans were agitating for civil rights, white colonial empires were crumbling, and the United States faced Japan, which was proving to be a fierce, intimidating (and nonwhite) enemy. White Americans could no longer be assured of their superiority. In this time of flux, the OWI believed unity was its main goal: unity both within the United States and between the United States and its allies. However, this idea of unity was made up of mutually exclusive components: in order for America to be unified with its allies of all races and nations, and in order for those allies not to be offended at America's arrogance and traditional belief in white superiority, white Americans could no longer afford to perpetuate racial stereotypes in their films. Yet by undermining the traditional notion of white supremacy, the OWI feared it might cause disunity in America, and raise questions that would anger Americans and threaten their backing of the war effort. The OWI, then, had to strike a balance between the contradictions inherent in this ideology.

In its *Government Information Manual for the Motion Picture Industry*, the Bureau of Motion Pictures outlined their interpretation of the American war program,

an interpretation which placed heavy emphasis on multiculturalism. BMP leadership fostered relationships with civil rights activists and members of the film industry who shared their beliefs. However, BMP leadership, especially Nelson Poynter and Ulric Bell, had to strike a fine line between supporting their ideology and accomplishing their goals. Hollywood also was torn between the liberal and racially progressive politics of many of its stars, screenwriters, and directors, and the more conservative, budget-conscious studio executives. Most frequently, these studio executives did not choose to perpetuate racial stereotypes because they found them entertaining or even accurate. They were not interested in censoring racially progressive attitudes, per se. Instead, they were concerned about achieving box office success and avoiding spending money on re-shooting or rewriting objectionable material in their movies.

The reviewers on the BMP staff were thrust into the position of making and enforcing policy, by shaping the way America, through its films, broadcast itself to the rest of the world. They did not require the voting support of an electorate or the favor of the governing elite, so there may have been more room in their work for honest advocacy of their own personal beliefs on race. This, then, is an interesting case of bureaucratic enforcement of wider national policy, or of creating national policy where none existed. In a sense, then, the BMP wielded both an enormous amount of power and very little: on the one hand, the opinions of low-level bureaucrats were shaping films which, the BMP believed, represented America's policy on race and other issues to international audiences; on the other hand, the BMP had no real enforcement power. At many stages in the reviewing process, budgetary

and administrative concerns tempered the BMP's ability to broadcast its racially progressive view of America to the world.

Conclusion

In 1943, both *This is the Army* and *Fugitive from a Prison Camp* were released into movie theaters. *This is the Army*, an Irving Berlin musical starring American soldiers, featured a segregated cast, a blackface number, and a number in which black soldiers sing not about their valor, but about how army fatigues are fashionable in Harlem. *Fugitive from a Prison Camp* features an African-American character as a thieving, illiterate, comic foil. Both of these movies had the potential to perpetuate African-American stereotypes. What were some of the factors that led *This is the Army* to be accepted by the OWI's Bureau of Motion Pictures, and led *Fugitive* get criticized for its stereotyping of American blacks?

First, *This is the Army* was filmed with the support of, and for the benefit of, the U.S. military. American military leadership had an extraordinary amount of influence over both the government Hollywood, especially in times of war. Hollywood enjoyed a close working relationship with the military. The military was able garner favor among the public by depicting its victories on the screen, and Hollywood was able to achieve accuracy in their battle scenes by obtaining advice from the military. Additionally, military leadership was often suspicious of the new propaganda agency, the OWI. The OWI's Bureau of Motion Pictures threatened the military's ability to control the way soldiers and battles were portrayed in Hollywood films. Military leadership tended also to dislike the propaganda agency because they felt they should control when information was released to the public. In doing so, however, they were often overly-restrictive; for example, they refused to release information about naval losses in the Pacific early in the war, and earned the wrath of

journalists for keeping secrets from the public.¹⁷⁶ Also, President Roosevelt was a fan of the *This is the Army* and encouraged the film project. He tended to support the military over the OWI when the two got into disputes. It seems unlikely that the Bureau of Motion Pictures, even if it found the film offensive, would attempt to change a film that was so favored by the military and the President.

The Hollywood community supported the film version of the musical from the early days of the war. The musical, when it was a theater show, was an enormous hit. Everyone in Hollywood seemed to follow the production of the movie version: the trade journal *Variety* reported on the film nearly every week. Hollywood studio executives were always guarding their financial bottom line, and if ever a movie promised to make money, this was it: it appealed to American patriotism, supported the military financially, and had been tested, and succeeded, as a musical stage show in theaters across the country. In short, there was no way the Bureau of Motion Pictures, with its inability to enforce its requests, would be able to change the content of such a prominent film, even if it wanted to. Nelson Poynter, director of the BMP's Los Angeles office, was too politic an administrator for that. Also, it is logical to assume that Hollywood intended this film to make the majority of its money domestically, because a portion of its profits were being donated to the American military, and because it was meant to encourage American patriotism. It is possible that the BMP was not worried about depicting racial equality in this movie because there was less of a risk to offend international audiences.

It is unclear, however, whether the BMP even had objections to the movie at all. Why might reviewers have neglected to mention the potentially controversial

¹⁷⁶ Winkler, *Politics of Propaganda*, 50-51.

scenes? First, they might not have found them to be controversial. Blackface was a common performance style in American theater history, and while it seemed a bit “old-fashioned” for the World War II era (as one character from the movie put it), it would not have been alien to most audiences, in America at least. And though some activists and journalists discussed the racism of blackface, most of the discussion was located within the black community, in African-American newspapers and among members of prominent civil rights organizations like the NAACP.

BMP reviewers also might not have perceived the performance number featuring black soldiers to be racist. In this number, an all-black cast sings and tap dances a song entitled “What the Well-Dressed Man in Harlem Will Wear” in front of stage scenery with giant Sambo characters. While most of the musical numbers in the show include dancing, this number features extraordinarily strong tap dancers and talented jazz singers. Some viewers might have been offended that this number focused strictly on Harlem nightlife, dance, women, and fashion; the black soldiers only performed in this number, while an all-white chorus performed the rest of the musical, with its comedic numbers as well as its dramatic numbers about fighting and war. However, other viewers might have considered the very presence of black soldiers to be racially progressive. The musical acknowledged that the American military has black soldiers and the show allotted a place to address African-American culture, albeit a stereotypical side of that culture. The musical was racially segregated, but the actual American military was segregated as well. One of the most famous African-American entertainers of the day, boxer Joe Louis, appeared in the

number. For many viewers, the inclusion of African-American performers in any capacity must have been a very positive thing to see.

Reviewers from the Bureau of Motion Pictures also tended not to acknowledge racial stereotyping when the stereotype seemed positive or harmless. While stereotypes that painted African-Americans as foolish, superstitious, criminal, or lazy garnered heavy criticism from BMP reviewers, stereotypes like musical ability or religiosity did not cause as much alarm. As I discussed with the movie *Lifeboat*, the African-American character, Joe, is a former pickpocket, quite religious, and musically-inclined. He also does not participate in many of the group decisions the characters make. The BMP criticized the filmmakers for keeping Joe out of the discussions and for casting him as a reformed criminal, but they do not mention the equally stereotypical musical and religious characteristics.¹⁷⁷ Similarly, BMP reviewers seize on Chuckles Johnson from *Fugitive from a Prison Camp*'s characteristics as a "lazy, insolvent, illiterate, [and] comic[al]."¹⁷⁸ Therefore, reviewers from the BMP might not have been attuned to the stereotypes present in the African-American musical number in *This is the Army*. Stereotypes about African-American dancing ability and interest in fashion are far less obviously damaging than stereotypes about criminality, foolishness and laziness.

In determining why this movie was not criticized by the BMP, timing is a key consideration as well. As this movie was being filmed, the OWI was embroiled in its battle with Congress to maintain its budget for the following year. The BMP, like all the other bureaus in the OWI, was preoccupied with the Congressional hearings.

¹⁷⁷ Film Review, 7/31/1943, *Lifeboat* Folder, Box 3520, Record Group 208 – OWI Papers.

¹⁷⁸ Film Review, 4/22/1943, *Fugitive from a Prison Camp* Folder, Box 3516, Record Group 208 – OWI Records.

Further, if the BMP criticized a film like *This is the Army* while Congress was evaluating the OWI's budget, critics of the OWI in Congress would have ammunition for their argument that the OWI should be closed. Enemies of President Roosevelt and the New Deal, and also enemies of Lowell Mellett and other OWI employees, accused the OWI of being communistic, racially liberal, and interested only in reelecting the President. If the Bureau of Motion Pictures attempted to alter *This is the Army*, Congress could accuse the OWI even more readily of being unpatriotic. The BMP's decision to press for changes to a particular movie often depended on whether or not doing so would antagonize powerful leaders in the military, Office of Censorship, Congress, or Hollywood. In this instance, the powerful members of Congress that were deciding the fate of the OWI either hated President Roosevelt and his politics, were Southern Democrats trying to stay in power, or both. It would have been impolitic for Nelson Poynter and the rest of the Bureau's leadership to press for *This is the Army* to be edited. It would not have worked, and it would have caused a scandal that added to Congress' negative opinion of the OWI.

Why, then, did the BMP argue for change in *Fugitive from a Prison Camp*?

The Chuckles Johnson character represented a much more obvious and damaging sort of stereotype, the sort that the BMP tended to notice more frequently. The BMP were very concerned about how the United States home front was depicted to people in other countries, and they argued that "[m]ore than half of the population of the world is made up of dark-skinned peoples, and the majority of them are our allies, fighting for the same things for which we are fighting. They are understandably offended by caricatures of themselves. In the interests of international unity we cannot afford to

alienate these allies.”¹⁷⁹ Of course, the BMP did assume that international viewers would understand what the stereotypes for African-Americans were, and would understand their significance; they assumed international audiences would have similar points of reference to American audiences. Also, this was a film the BMP could feasibly attempt to change: it was not praised by the rest of the government, and Hollywood did not count on it as a sure money-maker. This was a battle it could win.

This is the Army and *Fugitive from a Prison Camp* highlight some of the most important issues facing the Bureau of Motion Pictures during World War II. First, President Roosevelt, in forming the Office of War Information, of which the BMP was a part, was not concerned with giving the OWI unlimited power or a clear mandate to perform its duties. He often created a complex web of interconnected agencies, hoping the agencies would sort out lines of authority and areas of jurisdiction. The Bureau of Motion Pictures suffered heavily in this arrangement because it ultimately was at the mercy of the Office of Censorship. The OC, headed by Byron Price, was able to decide whether films should get an export license, so BMP reviewers had to ask that the OC refuse licenses to films the BMP deemed problematic or dangerous. The OC did not always agree, so the BMP had limited power, at least where overseas distribution was concerned.

Second, the Bureau of Motion Pictures composed its own *Government Manual for the Motion Picture Industry*, based on BMP leadership’s interpretation of the priorities of the American war program. Due in part to the liberal leanings of the

¹⁷⁹ Film Review 4/22/1943, *Fugitive from a Prison Camp* Folder, Box 3516, Record Group 208 – OWI Records.

BMP's leadership, especially Nelson Poynter and Lowell Mellett, this manual stressed that films should strive for less stereotypical portrayals of people of color. The priorities of the BMP did not necessarily mesh with the priorities of other important government agencies, such as the military, Congress, and the Office of Censorship. This made the BMP's job increasingly difficult.

Third, Hollywood had a long history of self-regulation and was very wary of intrusion by the government. The studio heads sought to maintain their control over a very important and lucrative industry. Since the BMP had no enforcement power, the studios could find ways to avoid fulfilling the BMP's requests by, for example, obtaining an export license from the Office of Censorship before even showing a film to the BMP. While many in Hollywood did agree with the political sympathies of the BMP, Hollywood executives were always very careful to guard their financial bottom line. They were afraid of losing income by alienating audiences.

And fourth, the racial climate of the world was changing dramatically. This was a race war in many respects. Japan tried to organize an empire around a Pan-Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere, and Germany used racial purity as an organizing principle for its burgeoning empire. Japan and Germany both put their races at the top of the hierarchies they were trying to enforce. Japan was a very potent foe and defeated the American military very badly, especially in the beginning of the war, and the fact that Japan was a nonwhite enemy made these defeats even more stunning to many white Americans. The Chinese, like the Japanese, had long faced racism and immigration restrictions in the United States, but now China had become a potentially essential ally for the U.S. and all the negative myths and stereotypes about China had

to be made positive. America also was forced to address its own imperial history, as a colonizer of the Philippines, and the colonial history of its major ally, Great Britain. American leadership often criticized Great Britain for trying to retain control of its colonies while fighting a war to promote democratic government, but America had to address its rule over the Philippines, especially when Japan tried to conquer that country and offer it independence on Japan's terms.

Finally, activists for African-American rights were extraordinarily busy during the war years, working to desegregate schools, the military, and defense industries; to improve the portrayals of blacks on the screen; and to repeal the poll-tax and increase voter participation among blacks, along with many other issues. The Bureau of Motion Pictures, in pushing for fewer racial stereotypes on the screen, was deliberately responding to the global race issues of the day. In doing so, the BMP was able to improve some of the portrayals of people of color on the screen, but many social and political conservatives used the BMP's beliefs to question its patriotism and loyalty and accuse it of being leftist.

The OWI was interested in spreading democracy and equality and fighting fascism. The reviewers believed that improving the cinematic portrayals of people of color would improve global race relations, and they thought this goal was consistent with the war aims President Roosevelt outlined in his "Four Freedoms" speech and his Atlantic Charter. Further, the racialized empires of Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan underscored, to the OWI, the link between racism and fascism. However, the OWI had to contend with white America's virulent racism, particularly against African-Americans and Asians. In order to effectively link the democratic Allied

powers with equality and the fascist Axis powers with racial discrimination in the international public mindset, the OWI had to challenge American white supremacy.

The OWI thus used its control of international film distribution to emphasize racial equality. The OWI had the reputation in the federal government of being filled with liberal New Dealers, interested in spreading their politics and keeping President Roosevelt in power. Very little is known, however, about the backgrounds and political inclinations of individual reviewers, though they seem to be bureaucrats with no long-term political aspirations. The OWI did not have final say in whether to allow films to be distributed abroad, because it had to forward its recommendations to the Office of Censorship. Therefore although the OWI had virtually no enforcement power, it did permit American bureaucrats a voice in shaping international race relations. In turn, these reviewers were products of their time: they were progressive on racial issues, to be sure, but very often they were unaware of more subtle, institutionalized forms of racism and superiority in the films they reviewed. The reviewers' decisions were not always consistent, and their power in altering films was not absolute, but, in my view, that is what makes the OWI so interesting. Through its files, we can understand how, in a time of racial upheaval, the Bureau of Motion Pictures worked to negotiate a more progressive American vision of racial brotherhood.

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Provided below are the most readily accessible formats for viewing the films I watched. I viewed *Back to Bataan* on video (Released in Davenport, Iowa: Blackhawk Films, [198-?]) and *Lifeboat* on television (A Comcast Cable On-Demand Presentation). The DVD publication information was located on Internet Movie Database, accessed on 12/13/2005 (<http://www.imdb.com>).

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