

Confessions of a Hollywood Propagandist: Harry Warner, FDR and Celluloid Persuasion¹

by Nancy Snow

*In the hands of motion picture makers lies a gigantic obligation, honorable but frightening. We must have the courage and the wisdom to make pictures that are forthright, revealing and entertaining, pertinent to the hour and the unpredictable future.*²

—Harry Warner

*The motion picture industry could be the most powerful instrument of propaganda in the world, whether it tries to be or not.*³

—Franklin D. Roosevelt

Harry Warner was Roosevelt's man in Hollywood. He was not the bold, brash, bombastic and ever-tan brother Jack Warner, the public face of Warner Bros., who made up a story about being offered a diplomatic post after Roosevelt's victory in 1932, to which he replied, "I think I can do better for your foreign relations with a good picture about America now and then."⁴ More than Jack, Harry displayed a genuine passion and commitment to lofty ideas that promoted America's national security and vital interests. The moral conscience of Warner Bros., Harry became President Franklin D. Roosevelt's chief persuader in Hollywood, a valiant and courageous advocate for U.S. involvement against the rise of national socialism bellicosity abroad at a time when many in the United States remained isolationist.⁵

Betty Warner Sheinbaum recalls her father as:

(A) very serious, moral man. He was the company's conscience and driving force. It was up to him to provide the money and watch carefully what films were being made. He dealt with bankers constantly as the studio was in constant need of funds to continue productions. Harry loved being in America, away from the frequent pogroms against Jews in his native Poland. The U.S. was 'the land of opportunity.' He often spoke of his responsibilities as a filmmaker and insisted on making films about the Constitution and the Founding Fathers and people like Louis Pasteur, Emile Zola, the prison system, the underworld and other socially committed dramas.⁶

The writer Neal Gabler describes Harry Warner, in *An Empire of Their Own: How the Jews Invented Hollywood*, as the conscience of the Hollywood studio due largely to his devotion to Judaism and Judaic principles, which made him "tirelessly and often tiresomely messianic about racial and religious prejudice," the downtrodden, the persecuted, the losers and the forgotten.⁷ Harry's father, Benjamin, a devout Jew, had studied the Torah in secret in Poland, where the Jewish faith was under constant watch by the Polish police. Harry would recall his father telling him, "Son, you're going to have to fight with the weapon you have at your command so that the children and their children may have a right to live and have a Faith, no matter what their Faith may be, in our great country, America."⁸ Gabler notes, "Other Jewish moguls shied away from their Judaism and hid it. Harry paraded it."⁹ Like his father, Harry grew to love the "ism" that was America, its

◀ 39. Harry Warner in 1940.

•
Christian
Vigilantes
Arise!



•
BUY
GENTILE

•
EMPLOY
GENTILE

•
VOTE
GENTILE

Boycott the Movies!

HOLLYWOOD is the Sodom and Gomorrha

WHERE

INTERNATIONAL JEWRY

CONTROLS

VICE - DOPE - GAMBLING

where

YOUNG GENTILE GIRLS ARE RAPED

by

**JEWISH PRODUCERS, DIRECTORS, CASTING DIRECTORS
WHO GO UNPUNISHED**

THE JEWISH HOLLYWOOD ANTI-NAZI LEAGUE CONTROLS

COMMUNISM

IN THE MOTION PICTURE INDUSTRY

**STARS, WRITERS AND ARTISTS ARE COMPELLED TO PAY FOR COMMUNISTIC
ACTIVITIES**

◀ 40. The Warners collected materials like this flyer (circa 1939) as part of their effort to track anti-Semitism and Nazism in America.

promises as well as its challenges, its promotion of racial and religious tolerance, if not always fully idealized, as well as the educational potential that the film medium presented to share lessons for human betterment. “The motion picture presents right and wrong, as the Bible does,” said Harry Warner. “By showing both right and wrong, we teach the right.”¹⁰ Harry would say these words in his own defense when later brought before the top lawmakers in the country who accused him and his industry of inciting pro-war sentiment. He would pay tribute to his father’s moral lesson to fight with the celluloid weapon he had most at hand, through his public support for religious freedom in the face of persecution in a speech, “United We Survive, Divided We Fall,” which he presented to over 6,000 Warner Bros. Studio employees and their spouses on June 5, 1940. The speech was noteworthy for its cautionary message that America could and should not remain silent when it had an obligation to speak out against totalitarian ideologies playing out in Europe that were now laying roots in the United States:

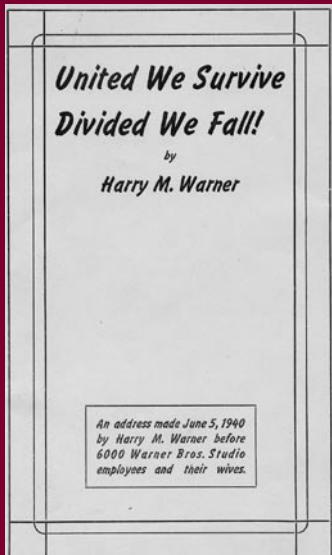
As I see it, we have a very simple problem here and that is: United we survive and divided we fall. We must unite and quit listening to anybody discussing whether you or I am a Jew or a Catholic or a Protestant or of any other faith—and not allow anyone to say anything against anybody’s faith—or we will fall just the same as they did over there, because we are confronted with the greatest organized machine, subversive or otherwise, that the world has ever had. And what bothers me is how we can have supposedly sane-thinking Americans who consciously or unconsciously are playing into the hands of Dictators and helping to divide us. I would think that if we know that the man who is coming into the second story window is going to kill either ourselves or one of our family, that we would try to defend ourselves. This is no different from anybody coming into any part of our country and using all of these methods to divide and destroy us.¹¹

As the first major Hollywood studio to shut down operations in Germany and take an openly hostile stance toward Hitler’s Germany, Warner Bros. signaled the possibility that in Hollywood, civic-mindedness and turning a profit need not be in perpetual conflict. Symbolically, it is important after the events of September 11, 2001 to note the possibility that celluloid profit and political responsibility need not be mutually exclusive. Though Harry Warner has been dead for over forty-five years and the heyday of the studio era in Hollywood has been gone for over fifty, his position as “the first

producer to make a definite declaration on the course the industry should take during the war,” offers some important lessons for a war-torn global communications era of our own.¹² He felt strongly that there was no place for any “ism” in Hollywood except for Americanism. Consider the producer’s words in March 1937, almost five years before America’s official entry into World War II:

The men and women who make a nation’s entertainment have obligations above and beyond their primary commercial objective, which is the box office. In the long run, Hollywood collectively, and producing companies individually, will succeed or fail, in my opinion, exactly in the proportion in which they recognize these obligations....The motion picture producer shares this obligation with the schools, the churches, the service organizations of all kinds which stand for tolerance, for decent thinking and fair relations with the rest of mankind. I do not mean that we should attempt, in the theater, to teach all the lessons, preach all the sermons or solve all the political problems of the world....We cannot do this, but we can and should give a helping hand to the cause of good government and of fair play. The motion picture can be a great power for peace and goodwill or, if we shirk our obvious duty, it can stand idly by and let the world go to pot. I think we are making an honest effort to use the screen’s influence for the greatest general good of humanity. I am proud that my company has had some part in this.¹³

Harry Warner took his moral and deeply religious obligations to heart, despite the decidedly anti-Semitic prejudices against Hollywood that still linger today. Both before and after Pearl Harbor, books were published that cast suspicion upon the motives of Jewish producers and studio owners like Warner. With titles like *Hell over Hollywood: The Truth about the Movies*, *What Is Wrong with the Movies* and *An American’s History of Hollywood—The Tower of Babel*, American readers were exposed to ugly stereotypes of greed and immorality surrounding Jews: “Hollywood debases, debauches and defiles—the characters and the lives of those who are brought within reach of its contaminating power and propaganda.” Hollywood “has perverted the character of our people.... We have lost much of the force of patriotic, moral and spiritual motivation.”¹⁴ Flyers like the anti-Semitic “Boycott the Movies,” with its devilish graphics, were dropped from the Taft Building like a California snowstorm on Hollywood Boulevard pedestrians.¹⁵



41. In this speech from 1940, Harry Warner warned employees of the presence of the Fifth Column in America.

Granddaughter Cass Warner Sperling writes in *Hollywood Be Thy Name* that the anti-Nazi propaganda film *Confessions of a Nazi Spy* (1939) became finalized after Harry Warner received a telegram describing the murder of Jewish employee Joseph Kaufman by a group of German thugs who stormed into the Warner Bros. Berlin office. Harry immediately ceased all film operations in Germany, and at the movie's premiere in 1939, police showed up to monitor threats of bombing the theater or killing its producers Harry and Jack Warner for bringing to the public's attention that Germany was anything but a "friendly" nation.¹⁶ Despite the threats and box-office disappointment of the 1939 release of *Confessions*, the brothers re-released the film in May 1940 with new clips of Hitler's latest triumphs of the will. As a "thank you" for warning the world of the Nazi threat against democracy, Harry Warner was invited to speak before Congress for his efforts to propagandize the American public. Congressional isolationists would attack *Confessions of a Nazi Spy* in 1941 as "creating hysteria among the American public and inciting them to war," and Senator Gerald P. Nye (R, North Dakota) decried the end of entertainment and the beginning of political propaganda in the movies, "When you go to the movies, you go there to be entertained....And then the picture starts—goes to work on you, all done by trained actors, full of drama, cunningly devised....Before you know where you are, you have actually listened to a speech designed to make you believe that Hitler is going to get you."¹⁷

In a radio speech under the auspices of the isolationist America First Committee, Nye accused major studios like Warner Bros. of having become "gigantic engines of propaganda in existence to arouse the war fever in America and plunge this Nation to her destruction" and noted that the foreign policy of the United States was so in line with the foreign policy of Hollywood that G-men or government agents were swarming around studio lots checking film scripts for their pro-war content. The Roosevelt Administration was acting as a provocateur to the film industry, converting them "into the same kind of propaganda agencies that the German, Italian and Russian film industries have become."¹⁸ Nye, who denied being an anti-Semite, did point out that Hollywood was under Jewish control. "There is Harry and Jack Cohn (Columbia Pictures), there is Louis B. Mayer (of MGM)...the three Warner brothers, Arthur Loew, Nicholas Katz and David Bernstein."¹⁹ Within that incendiary atmosphere, Harry Warner would have to defend his film and reputation before the Nye committee investigating Hollywood propaganda activities. Nevertheless,



42. A July 1944 photo of Warner Bros. Teddington Studios in London.



43. FDR prepares to deliver a Fireside Chat.

Confessions of a Nazi Spy, arguably the most anti-Nazi film in Hollywood history, stands as a milestone for advocating intervention in international conflict in order to preserve democratic ideals. Harry told a dinner crowd on St. Patrick's Day in 1939:

Our producing company is making right now a picture revealing the astonishing lengths to which Nazi spies have gone in America. We are making this—and we will make more like it, no doubt, when the occasion arises. We have disregarded, and we will continue to disregard, threats and pleas intended to dissuade us from our purpose. We have defied, and we will continue to defy, any elements that may try to turn us from our loyal and sincere purpose of serving America.²⁰

Harry Warner understood the intersection between Hollywood and Washington that occurred during the pre-war and WWII period. More than any point in its short history, Hollywood in wartime was a propaganda weapon for the Roosevelt Administration and unlike what Nye said, it was a different type of propaganda agency than that of the Russians, Italians or Germans, one in oppositional battle against totalitarianism. As Gerald Nash points out, the opportunity that Hollywood had to become a messenger of democracy and Americanism in a global conflict cannot be underestimated: Among the manifold changes spawned by the global conflict, two were preeminent. As propaganda became a crucial weapon in the ideological struggle with totalitarianism in which the United States was engaged, manipulation of the mass media—and particularly motion pictures—became essential to the war effort. And, *ipso facto*, since the most skilled manipulators of mass or popular culture were already concentrated in Hollywood, that western film center assumed a new role in wartime. Already by 1939, the skillful direction of the Nazi propaganda machine under Joseph Goebbels in Germany had aroused President Franklin D. Roosevelt's advisors who urged him to develop an American propaganda effort which would sustain morale at home while spreading war aims abroad. More than ever, the portrayal of American values and American lifestyles assumed a major importance. The mass media occupied a central place in this effort. In the battle for men's minds, Hollywood now acquired a prominent place.²¹

Harry Warner presaged the gravitas of the war years by giving up gangster movies that had been the studio's bread-and-butter. He shifted his focus to historical figures that would inform, inspire and educate the American movie-going audience in the pre-war 1930s,

like the French scientist Louis Pasteur, who was deemed a criminal in his day for publishing a pamphlet urging doctors to wash their hands before surgery to avoid infections. *The Story of Louis Pasteur* (1936) garnered an Academy Award for Best Actor for Paul Muni, and Harry would later say about the film, "When we made this picture, we didn't consider money. We know that it is difficult to get people to see and take an interest in that which educates them, but in spite of this, we took up this film. We must show the people the good and noble things in life." *Dr. Ehrlich's Magic Bullet* (1940), the first Hollywood movie to mention the formerly taboo word "syphilis", was about the life of the German doctor who developed Salvarsan, the first treatment for the disease, while *Voltaire* (1933) told the story of the French philosopher famous for the line, "Those who can make you believe absurdities can make you commit atrocities." Another film, *The Life of Emile Zola* (1937), received critical acclaim from the *New York Times* as "the finest historical film ever made and the greatest screen biography. It illustrates how injustice is combated by an idealist, how truth finally becomes victorious." While *Zola* won Jack Warner France's highest award, the Legion of Honor, for his service to the "glory of France, of science, of men of good will throughout the world and to the enduring art of the cinema," its persuasive message was a mirror to the soul of Harry. As granddaughter Cass Warner Sperling notes in *Hollywood Be Thy Name*, the film's ending speech by Zola foreshadowed to her grandfather Harry Warner the death and destruction looming across the Great Pond:

I see it clearly now. The Cause and Effect—the roots and the tree...What matters the individual if the idea survives? It's not the swaggering militarist—they're puppets that dance as the strings are pulled. It's those others—those who would worthlessly plunge us into the bloody abyss of war to protect their power...The world must be conquered, not by force of arms, but by ideas that liberate. Then the world can build anew—build it for the humble and wretched.²²

Harry Warner's most memorable brainchild was the Old Glory patriotic short film series, produced between 1936 and 1940, which lost the studio over a million in profits. The American Legion and the Daughters of the American Revolution heaped praise upon Warner for instilling values of what it means to be an American in trying times. The shorts used excerpts from speeches like Patrick Henry's "Give Me Liberty or Give Me Death" and were played before the start of feature length films in American theaters in the time slot devoted today to

advertising Coca-Cola. He would later add cartoons to the war preparedness mix, with Porky Pig, Donald Duck and Bugs Bunny taking the patriotic plunge. One cartoon, *Old Glory*, depicts Porky Pig as a young piglet who is frustrated with learning the Pledge of Allegiance. In a dream sequence, he is visited by Uncle Sam who explains to Porky the significance of learning the Pledge and its historical precedents in Paul Revere's ride and Lincoln's Gettysburg Address. When Porky awakens, he knows the Pledge because he understands the meaning behind the words. Another cartoon series created for the U.S. Army was *Private SNAFU*, written by *Cat in the Hat* author Theodore Geisel, who in World War II was designated a captain in Frank Capra's Signal Corps Unit.²³ Harry Warner would say about the Old Glory patriotic shorts and about the exaltation of American democracy in its pictures generally:

Hollywood will fail in its most important duty in trying times if it does not present an honest and forthright collective picture of American life, manners and privileges. A truthful picture of the American background is added assurance to a troubled world that our country will protect its rights and liberties while demonstrating the advantages of a democratic form of government....Accidentally and purposely we are advertising America to a world that is obviously a little weary of trouble....I am more than ever convinced that we have a double duty to perform. We must 'sell America' while we entertain the world.²⁴

Media critic Harry Martin called for a "21-gun salute to the Warner brothers for their motion picture studio's superb series of patriotic shorts in Technicolor, as fine and timely a collective contribution to the perpetuation of the American ideals as ever has come to Hollywood....While these are propaganda films of course, propaganda for the American system of government and society, and it is most heartening to find at least one of the studios willing to enter the field, even if it must do so through the back pages of yesterday's history books."²⁵ Along with the patriotic shorts, Harry Warner insisted that the American national anthem be played in its theater chain, which prompted *Variety* in February 1939 to report that "a wave of patriotism is sweeping the nation's showplaces, though not officially inspired. 'The Star Spangled Banner' is growing in popularity in theatres and cabarets, remindful of the period prior to and when America was in the World War."²⁶

While Harry Warner would occupy a formidable central place in the Hollywood-Washington wartime propaganda effort, he had to urge President Roosevelt to do more than the Lend-Lease Act to provide assistance to America's fighting allies, particularly the British. On May 20, 1940, brothers Harry and Jack sent an impassioned telegram to the White House that told FDR that his patriotic counterparts in Hollywood "cannot stand by and watch while others die for the civilization which is ours as much as theirs...We cannot contentedly sit still out here and do nothing while the world echoes with the march of savages to destroy everything we hold dear. We would rather die in an effort to be helpful than live to see barbarianism triumph. Will you please tell us, Mr. President, what you think we should do?" President Roosevelt, for his part, had not shown up at the premiere of *Confessions*, nor did he respond directly to the pleading letter. "If these many dogs were being killed, then we, the United States, would have come to their defense," Harry said behind closed doors.²⁷

A little more than a year after the Warner letter was sent to FDR, the President, in one of his famous fireside chats to the nation, declared an unlimited national emergency that seemed to draw from the "United We Survive" speech Harry had given his employees that admonished them to not repeat the mistake of inaction in the face of aggression that Europeans had made before World War I. FDR warned the American people as Harry Warner had warned his own employees:

The first and fundamental fact is that what started as a European war has developed, as the Nazis always intended it should develop, into a war for world domination. Adolf Hitler never considered the domination of Europe as an end in itself. European conquest was but a step toward ultimate goals in all the other countries. It is unmistakably apparent to all of us that unless the advance of Hitlerism is forcibly checked now, the Western Hemisphere will be within range of the Nazi weapons of destruction....The nation will expect all individuals and all groups to play their full parts without stint, without selfishness and without doubt that our democracy will triumphantly survive.²⁸

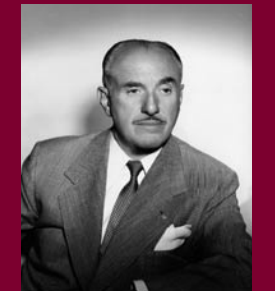
Harry and Jack wired the President with praise for such a declaration, but Roosevelt remained commander-in-chief of a nation divided over how involved the American people and its government should be in a European war. A strong isolationist movement permeated the country, which essentially meant that Roosevelt's speech served primarily as a warning that tougher times were ahead. Tough talk prevailed



44. Harry Warner's invitation to F.D.R.'s 1945 inauguration.



45. F.D.R. shakes hands with WW I hero Alvin York (circa 1941).



46. Jack Warner

over tough action. Harry Warner continued his involvement in the industry-wide Motion Picture Committee Cooperating for National Defense, which had been formed in October 1940 to help support national defense through producing training films for the armed forces and patriotic short films for the masses. The U.S. government would support in an unofficial capacity the production of anti-Nazi films and positive portrayals of the U.S. armed forces.²⁹ Will Hays, the "standards czar" in Hollywood and head of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America, Inc., which was responsible for the Motion Picture Production Code, a self-regulatory charter of do's and don'ts that became known as the Hays Code, thought that the sole function of Hollywood was as an entertainment medium, not an instructional one, and certainly not one that was an extension of a studio's personal crusades. On July 20, 1941, he issued his own statement in response to FDR's call for a national emergency:

The great function of the entertainment screen is to entertain, and in both scope and variety the pictures now planned or in the making in Hollywood Studios will live up to that principle.... While informational, educational and inspirational elements in pictures are growing, when the public lays down its money at the box office, it is primarily for entertainment.

Those who demand that the screen subordinate its wholesome function of recreation for any cause, however sincere, are sadly mistaken. Significance is not achieved at the expense of entertainment: It is the result of entertainment. Pictures do not need any other horse to ride in order to play their part in the prepared-

ness of mind and body which results from such recreation. There are those who would use the films to bemuse, rather than amuse, the American public. The screen has no room for such propaganda.³⁰

Hays did agree with Harry Warner that celluloid had a national defense purpose, and thought that film, more than any other mass medium, could boost morale around Roosevelt's national defense program. He released a statement that said, "Public morale must be maintained. It can only be maintained through the knowledge of problems that face us and of the far-flung efforts of the Army, the Navy, the Air Corps and of the many civilian groups now operating in the field of national defense. The screen...can make such achievements speak as no other medium can." In effect, Hays was supporting film for propaganda purposes, just not the propaganda of the dictatorship but of the democracy. He said that the Hollywood version "was achieved under freedom, not under the duress of dictatorship which can create only propaganda."³¹

While many, like Hays, distinguished acceptable mass persuasion in a democracy from the kind of deceitful propaganda undertaken by dictatorships, his distinction is somewhat futile when one considers the true etymology of the word propaganda. Richard Alan Nelson writes:

Those who interpret propaganda as a negative phenomenon tend to see it as a form of rhetoric designed to persuade without revealing the true intentions or even strategies of the communicator...

propaganda is neutrally defined as a systematic form of purposeful persuasion that attempts to influence the emotions, attitudes, opinions and actions of specified target audiences for ideological, political or commercial purposes through the controlled transmission of one-sided messages (which may or may not be factual) via mass and direct media channels.³²

A similar definition of propaganda that came out of a conference on Contemporary Soviet Propaganda and Disinformation sponsored by the U.S. Department of State and the Central Intelligence Agency concluded that propaganda:

Involves the dissemination of information—facts, arguments, rumors, half-truths or lies—to influence public opinion. As a systematic effort to persuade, it is an act of advocacy in mass communications, involving the making of deliberately one-sided statements to a mass audience. In this, it is not necessarily deceptive. Propaganda, then, is a process—a form of manipulative communication designed to elicit some predetermined response—the organized spreading of special doctrines, information, ideas or beliefs to promote or injure a cause, group, nation, etc.³³

The support by Will Hays and Harry Warner for national morale films gave proof to American isolationists that not only was the film industry creating propaganda in support of Roosevelt, but also manufacturing propaganda to further the film industry's own agenda. In opposition to the isolationist movement, Harry and Jack Warner, as well as Darryl Zanuck and Samuel Goldwyn, were major financial contributors to the Fight for Freedom Committee, the most outspoken of all the interventionist committees forming in the months before America's involvement in the Second World War. Chairman Bishop Henry W. Hobson described the group's purpose in an April 1941 radio address:

We believe, first, that freedom is worth fighting for. Second, that for us to say that Hitler's defeat is essential to insure man's Freedom is a cowardly and immoral position unless we are willing to face the dangers and sacrifices others are suffering in this struggle for freedom. Third, that it is dishonest to engage in a wholesale material support of those fighting to defeat the dictator aggressors, who seek to enslave man, without facing and admitting the fact that we are in this war. Fourth, unless we act now, with a recognition of the fact that we are at war and a readiness to do whatever is necessary to make certain Hitler's defeat, we shall lose the present war.³⁴

Fight for Freedom was fashioned along the lines of the Committee on Public Information (CPI) or Creel Committee, the first modern propaganda organization, founded in 1917, that had helped turn a then-pacifistic American populace into a nation at war. Progressive journalist George Creel initiated the CPI and urged President Woodrow Wilson to allow him to undertake all mass media means necessary to shift public opinion from conscientious objection to conscription. In his book, *How We Advertised America: The First Telling of the Amazing Story of the Committee on Public Information That Carried the Gospel of Americanism to Every Corner of the Globe*, Creel described his efforts as “a plain publicity proposition, a vast enterprise in salesmanship, the world's greatest adventure in advertising.”³⁵ Fight for Freedom did the same. Like the Four-Minute Men speakers' program of the Creel Committee, Fight for Freedom sent out its own speakers like author Dorothy Parker, Republican nominee for President-turned FDR ally Wendell Willkie, Public Works Administrator Harold Ickes, Sergeant Alvin York (whose life story was a popular Warner movie), OSS founder William Donovan and actor Burgess Meredith. The committee staged rallies, wrote letters, distributed pamphlets and petitions and advertised “V for Victory” national unity campaigns. Fight for Freedom was not the only interventionist organization—there were many others, like the Committee to Defend America and Friends of Democracy, that had formed to promote national unity after Roosevelt's election in 1940. Harry Warner produced his own patriotic short, *A Plea for National Unity*, which called on the American people to use Roosevelt's election to unify behind one president and not allow the divide and conquer crowd to deny “the man of the people's choice” for president.³⁶

By the summer of 1941, separate rallies both for and against American foreign intervention were being held, most notably at the Hollywood Bowl, which staged a very popular America First rally featuring Charles Lindbergh in June 1941, followed by a pro-interventionist rally featuring Wendell Willkie in July. Harry Warner warmed up the Willkie crowd by giving one of his pep rally speeches to his employees, many of whom later paraded from the Hollywood American Legion Post to the Hollywood Bowl. Other studios closed down early and allowed their employees to join the Warners' parade. Willkie told the 25,000 gathered, “The real issue is whether we are going to live in the future as free men, or whether the attack of the totalitarian powers is to destroy our prospect of freedom and force us, in desperation, to undertake another form of government...we are not arguing

for war, we are arguing for Freedom. War may come and probably will, whatever course we take.”³⁷ Isolationists in Washington took note of Hollywood's Willkie rally and Senator Wheeler noted that “the motion picture industry has been carrying on the most gigantic campaign of propaganda for war that was ever known in the history of the United States.”³⁸ On August 1, 1940, Senator Bennett Clark (D, Missouri) drew up Senate Resolution 152, co-authored with Senator Gerald P. Nye, that called for a congressional investigation of the Hollywood war propaganda machine. The hearings, while less than a serious inquiry, were mostly designed to serve as a platform for isolationist perspectives that were thought to be drowned out by the Hollywood war machine. They presaged the anti-communist McCarthy hearings that would come around a decade later. Gerald Nash writes that “it is doubtful if the investigation had much practical effect except to reflect an increasing recognition by politicians of the growing significance of propaganda and image making in American domestic as well as foreign policies.”³⁹

A July 1941 Gallup survey indicated that 79% of Americans polled were still against the U.S. entering the war against the Germans and Italians, but Harry Warner had his own interventionist foreign policy in mind. He sent a letter to FDR asking him “what fault could anyone find if we undertook to man the Island to protect it from invasion, so as to allow the English Army to go wherever they may be needed.”⁴⁰ The President thanked Harry Warner for bringing the plan to his attention but kept it at the level of a suggestion until the sinking of British ships carrying Lend-Lease supplies forced the U.S. to escort Lend-Lease shipments to Iceland where British ships took over patrol. Nevertheless, by fall 1941, the country remained deeply divided about intervening on the side of the Brits and it would be an incident in the Pacific, not the Atlantic, which would spur the nation to join the Allied cause.

On December 7, 1941, Harry Warner went to war. Jack Warner was on the golf course at the time, and when told of the Japanese bombing he replied, “Pearl Harbor. Where the hell is that?”⁴¹ Unlike some of the other studio bosses who either panicked or stuck their heads in the California sand, Harry Warner responded like a dutiful soldier called to public service. He did not ask FDR what he thought his studio should do, or send letters of suggestion about ratcheting up the Allied effort. Harry would make films in support of the war effort. In one of his many pep rally speeches before studio employees, Harry said:

Our company is about to start the largest program of pictures for the government that has ever been undertaken to be made by any company in the industry. We have agreed to make from four to five hundred reels of training pictures in the coming year. We are also going to make Irving Berlin's *This Is the Army*. In making these pictures, we want them made at absolute cost. When I say absolute cost, I mean exactly that. I don't want to make a single dollar of profit out of these pictures.⁴²

The Warner Bros. “three E” founding motto, “Educate, Entertain and Enlighten,” was soon replaced after the start of World War II with a more fitting sign of a Hollywood and Washington nexus obtained from a *New York Times* review that commended the Warner Bros. Studio for “combining good citizenship with good picture making.” Harry was now an industry spokesman for the war effort. He declared that “the glamour era has vanished. Glamour belonged to the decade which brought us the war...Another decade of glamour and frolic may come back to us. If it does, I hope this monstrous war will have taught man to leaven his fun with some thought.”⁴³ Before Pearl Harbor, much of Hollywood produced entertainment films with very little propaganda value—Harry Warner and Warner Bros. Studios was an exception. Now even President Roosevelt understood fully how motion pictures could be used to influence, entertain and provide valuable persuasive information in support of a war effort. By the 1940s, more than eighty million Americans were going to the movies every week with another 100 million going to the movies overseas.

Within six months of Pearl Harbor, President Roosevelt would create a special division for motion pictures within the Office of War Information, which distributed a motion picture manual offering guidance to film makers on major themes like democracy, the homeland and the role of the United Nations in promoting a view of America's involvement in World War II as a people's war for democracy and against fascism.⁴⁴ By 1943, Warner Bros. would produce the most profitable film in its history, Irving Berlin's *This is the Army*, with profits of over \$10 million donated to the Army Emergency Relief Fund. The film ends with soldiers performing in Washington before a Roosevelt look-alike. Film historian David Culbert explains why *This is the Army* was the most-watched and most-profitable movie to come out of Hollywood during the war years of 1940-1945, “(It) defines what Americans thought to be their own peculiar virtues: lack of sophistication combined with technological wizardry; a salesmanship perhaps overstated, but connected to an understated, almost simple-

mindful ideological commitment. In this respect, the film should be the first place to look for an insight into how Americans understood the nature of their nation's participation in the battles of the Second World War.⁴⁵ Harry Warner released a statement around the time of the film's debut to his fellow producers in Hollywood. Despite rumors to the contrary that the public was becoming bored with war pictures, Hollywood had a continued obligation to make them and Warner Bros. would lead the way. He urged theater owners not to be intimidated or coerced into not showing war pictures and said that if the motion picture industry did not attempt to explain and inform the public about the current struggle "there would be little justification for our existence.... Any arbitrary exclusion of war films, either to satisfy a small appeaser element or for personal reasons without regard to the general public interest, is equivalent to sabotage."⁴⁶

Harry Warner, perhaps unlike any other Hollywood movie mogul before or since, understood the intersection of education, entertainment and influence that only Hollywood could deliver in volumes. His patriotism fueled his passion for a medium with a message. His relationship with President Roosevelt, though not always of one mind, left a lasting legacy of the line of political persuasion and propaganda that became a permanent fixture in the post-World War II America and that now extends from the White House to the movie set. There are many in Hollywood who see no clear function of the movie industry other than to entertain the masses. A nation at war requires little extra effort to mobilize Americans to a coordinated message. Harry Warner would likely be frustrated with the cynicism, apathy and all-mighty profit god that pervades Hollywood movie making today. This is why the words of poet Carl Sandburg affirm the idea that Harry Warner, though not college-educated and never a Harvard man, had a greater impact:

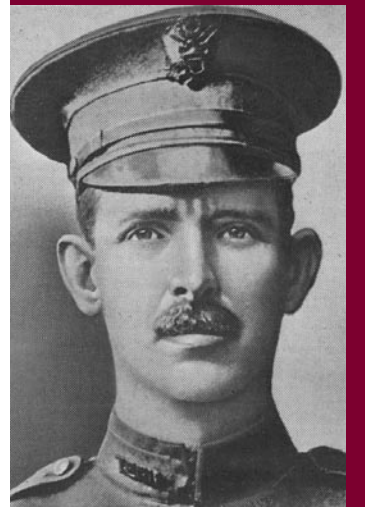
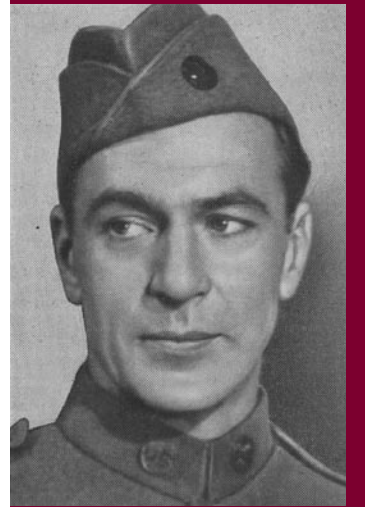
I meet people occasionally who think that motion pictures, the product that Hollywood makes, is merely entertainment and has nothing to do with education. That's one of the darndest fool fallacies that is current. When I was a motion picture editor on the *Chicago Daily News*, we used to report what was a four-handkerchief picture as distinguished from the two-handkerchief picture. Anything that brings you to tears by way of drama does something to the deepest roots of your personality. All movies, good or bad, are educational and Hollywood is the foremost educational institute on earth.... What, Hollywood's more important than Harvard? The answer is, not as clean as Harvard, but nevertheless, farther reaching.⁴⁷

NOTES

1. Author's note: This article is dedicated to Betty Warner Sheinbaum, daughter of the great Harry Warner. On October 1, 2003, I had the pleasure of meeting Mrs. Sheinbaum and hearing her read her father's memorable words. I hope that this article, in its own small way, will add to Betty's fond memories of her father Harry and the enormous impact he had in promoting Hollywood's role in educating, influencing and informing global publics about humanity's strengths and weaknesses.
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9. Gabler, 140.
10. Gabler, 196.
11. Harry M. Warner, "United We Survive, Divided We Fall," Jack L. Warner Collection, University of Southern California.
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13. Warner Sheinbaum, 12.
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15. *In Our Own Backyard*, Item 6.
16. Warner Sperleng, 232-233.
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18. John E. Moser, "Gigantic Engines of Propaganda: The 1941 Senate Investigation of Hollywood," *The Historian*, Vol. 63, Issue 4, 2001.
19. 76th Congress, 2nd session, Senate, Subcommittee of Committee on Military Affairs, *Hearings on Motion Picture Industry*, Washington, D.C., 1942; *Vital Speeches of the Day*, vol. 7 (September 15, 1941), 720-723.
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27. Warner Sperleng, 235.
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29. Colgan, 662.
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38. Colgan, 678.
39. Nash, 180.
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41. Nash, 240.
42. Nash, 240.
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44. Nash, 182.
45. David Culbert, "This is the Army," *History Today*, Volume 50, Issue 4, April 2000, 43.
46. *Los Angeles Examiner*, May 20, 1943.
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47. The ad campaign for *Sergeant York* (1941) often juxtaposed Gary Cooper (top) with the real Sergeant Alvin York (middle).



48. An ad from the second run of *Sergeant York* depicts the World War I hero chasing down World War II enemies.

