**Artists, Propagandists, Political Masters**

If we accept that purpose is of prime importance in the definition of “propaganda,” then it is worth asking *whose* purpose is important, and, by extension, *who* the propagandist *really*is — the technician or his political master? Is the propagandist the originator of the idea or the man who puts the idea into practical effect?  
—Richard Taylor, *Film Propaganda: Soviet Russia and Nazi Germany*(New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2009).

In 2014, film historian Mark Harris published a book about the experiences of five Hollywood directors in World War II:*Five Came Back: A Story of Hollywood and the Second World War*, (NY: Penguin Press, 2014).

These directors — John Ford; George Stevens; John Huston; William Wyler; and Frank Capra — all enlisted in the Armed Forces to produce films that would aid the war effort. In other words, these great directors — every one of them a multiple-Oscar-winner — volunteered to create propaganda. They were artists turned propagandists, doing their work in a democracy at war.

In 2017, Netflix aired a three-part docuseries based on the book, directed by Laurent Bouzereau, written by Mark Harris, and narrated by Meryl Streep. Episode 1 is called *The Mission Begins*(59 minutes); Episode 2 is called *Conflict Zones*(67 minutes); and Episode 3 is called *The Price of Victory*(60 minutes). The series has extended interviews with five eminent contemporary directors (each of whom talks about one of the classic ones). Steven Spielberg discusses Wyler; Guillermo del Toro discusses Capra; Lawrence Kasdan discusses Stevens; Francis Ford Coppola discusses Huston; and Paul Greengrass discusses Ford. The series considers thirteen films the five classic directors produced on the period of 1942 to 1947 for the War Department: Ford’s *The Battle of Midway* (1942); Capra’s *Prelude to War*(1942); Capra’s *The Battle of Russia*(1943); Ford’s *Undercover: How to Operate Behind Enemy Lines*(1943); Huston’s *Report from the Aleutians*(1943); Wyler’s *The Memphis Belle: A Story of a Flying Fortress*(1944); Capra’s *The Negro Soldier*(1944); Capra and Huston’s *Tunisian Victory*(1944); Capra’s *Know Your Enemy: Japan*(1945); Huston’s *The Battle of San Pietro*(1945); Steven’s *Nazi Concentration Camps*(1945); Huston’s *Let There Be Light*(1946); and Wyler’s *Thunderbolt*(1947). In 2021, Netflix put twelve of these thirteen propaganda films into a new series, entitled *Five Came Back: The Reference Films.*One was not put into the reference series, a matter I will comment upon in due course.

Since the series has been readily available for some time now, I won’t spend much time on summarizing it. My intention instead is to look at how well each director did in producing effective war propaganda, and how much more complicated the creation of propaganda film was for American filmmakers in WWII than what I will call the “standard model of propaganda” would suggest. By “effective” war propaganda I mean propaganda that makes citizens more willing to support the war and sacrifice for their country, i.e., more likely to do such things as join the military, work in defense industries, buy war bonds, donate blood, make do with fewer consumer goods, and so on.

The standard model of propaganda holds that there are three key players in the production of either propaganda or marketing (both are really the same), which is the use of rhetoric to get people to do or support something. Marketing is rhetoric aimed at getting consumers to buy a product or feel favorably about a brand. Propaganda is rhetoric aimed at getting citizens to support a candidate or ideology. The standard model is that the client, which is either a company (in marketing) or a political group (in propaganda) — will hire an agent or agency. The agent — a marketer or propagandist — is an expert in the use of rhetoric. The client sets the requirements for the marketing or propaganda, with an eye to its intended or “target” audience.

In respect to propaganda, the triad is that of the political group, the propagandist, and the targeted citizens. The citizens could be a particular subgroup of a country, or a whole country, or group of countries, or the population of the whole world. The top or the triad — viewed by this model as the driving force in the production of propaganda — is the client, i.e., some political group, government agency, or government. It knows which messages it wants to transmit to which target audiences, and it employs the propagandist to craft those messages. But in the end, it is the *client* that will determine whether and when the propaganda will be used.

For a police state, this model is generally accurate. To take the paradigm case of Nazi Germany, after the Nazi Party took control, the Nazi government set up a ministry of propaganda, headed by Joseph Goebbels, that set goals and tight standards for the creation of propaganda generally and propaganda film specifically. Goebbels allowed filmmakers to make regular (i.e., entertainment rather than propaganda) movies, subject to his approval. But he also commissioned filmmakers to make propaganda films, and was usually involved in producing them. As I have described [elsewhere](https://reasonpapers.com/pdf/351/rp_351_20.pdf), the Regime routinely made films to promote its policies.

The model does not, however, accurately reflect much of America’s WWII film propaganda. The films discussed in *Five Came Back*illustrate my argument.

The docuseries opens with each of the contemporary directors describing what he admires about the classic he is commenting on. For example, del Toro discusses how Capra, an immigrant from Sicily, became a quintessentially American director, creating such paeans to America as *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*(1937). The commenters all note that the directors joined the Armed Forces voluntarily.

Most remarkable in this regard was John Ford, the earliest of these directors to see that war was imminent. In 1939, Ford started informally putting together a team of cameramen and film editors. In 1941 he reported for duty as head of the photographic unit of the Office of Strategic Services, where he made documentaries for the Navy. His unit began by making a documentary for troop instruction called *Sex Hygiene*, and (not mentioned in the series) began work on a documentary about the intelligence failures leading up to the Pearl Harbor attack. The Navy Department confiscated this film as a danger to public morale.

On May 28, 1942, Ford went to Midway Island, camera in hand, having been told that military action was anticipated. On June 4, he climbed to the top of a 50-foot tower atop a powerhouse and filmed the Japanese air attack while shouting instructions to his assistant (Jack McKenzie) below. His film — in color — showed the bloody fight with complete realism. He was severely wounded during the attack.

Without telling his supervisors, Ford took this footage, along with footage of the “main event,” the huge naval battle in the waters off Midway Island, and footage of James Roosevelt, FDR’s eldest son, who served as a Marine lieutenant during the battle, to Los Angeles, fearing that the brass would suppress it (the film showed American servicemen dying during the battle).

He gave the footage to Robert Parrish to edit surreptitiously. The result — *The Battle of Midway* — is a powerful piece of propaganda. At 18 minutes, it is a tightly edited, vivid documentary of the battle, narrated by Donald Crisp, June Darwell, and Henry Fonda. It names some of the soldiers, sailors, and airmen who fought, and shows for the public the real face of the battle. A stirring, patriotic musical score adds to the power of the film, as does its contrasting treatment of the leisurely pace of life on Midway before the attack. Darwell provides a voiceover of the mother of one of the pilots, William Kinney, and we see the Kinney family home in Springfield, Ohio. Fonda speaks a five-minute narration of the battle itself, with the Japanese losses put on the screen at the end.

At Midway, the massive Japanese Imperial Navy force was intended to take possession of Midway, but was bushwacked by the American Navy. The Japanese lost four heavy aircraft carriers and one cruiser, while the Americans lost only one carrier (that had been severely damaged earlier) and one destroyer. The Japanese lost 320 planes, while the Americans lost 150. And 3,000 Japanese servicemen died, while only 317 Americans did.

But it is easy to see why the Navy Department might have had misgivings: while the battle was a major victory, the men defending the island itself were massively outmatched in firepower and suffered a horrific scourging during the three-day battle. Ford wanted to make clear to the audience the cost of this victory, and he succeeded in that. Something that helped guarantee that the film would be aired was Ford’s crafty inclusion of FDR’s son. When the film was screened at the White House, Roosevelt grew silent when his son appeared on screen. He then insisted that the film be released immediately to the general public. He said he wanted every American to see it, and it was shown in three-fourths of all American theaters. To be fair, I don’t think it was solely or even mainly the presence of his son that made him want the film widely shown. Midway was the first major victory over the Japanese, and FDR knew it would bolster American spirits.

So, we see one complication to the application of the standard model of propaganda to a free society. In a democracy, “the government” actually has a number of different power centers. The Navy Department might have wanted to confine screening of Ford’s work to sailors or even not to screen it at all, but the president’s support ensured it would be publicly screened. In a democracy, there often isn’t one client, but several competing clients for propaganda.

Frank Capra, who had served in WWI, enlisted — at age 44 — in the Army as a major just four days after Pearl Harbor. Army Chief of Staff George Marshall appointed him head of the Army’s film program (detouring around the Signal Corps). We learn that he struggled to come up with ideas and faced a possible shortage of funds. Then he watched Leni Riefenstahl’s famous propaganda film, *Triumph of the Will*, which glorified Hitler and had played around the world to great acclaim. (See my [extensive review of this film](https://www.academia.edu/28378912/Movie_review_of_Triumph_of_the_Will_2007_).) It “scared the hell out of me,” he said. He saw that it was powerfully effective in rousing Germans to support the Nazis, and wondered what he could do to top it. Then it occurred to him to show Americans exactly what sort of fanatical militarists they were up against, by using the Axis powers’ own propaganda against them — “We use their stuff as propaganda for ourselves.” So was born his classic*Prelude to War*(the first of a series called *Why We Fight*).

Early in the film, we see Hitler delivering a fiery speech, and watch the mesmerized crowd scream, “Seig heil.” We see Mussolini deliver a fiery speech, and see the mesmerized crowd scream, “Duce!” And we see a Japanese crowd listening to their Emperor and screaming, “Banzai!” In each case we see that the autocrats are saying the same thing: “Stop thinking, believe in me, and I will give you the world!”

As del Toro puts it, “Capra takes a route that is unique in propaganda, which is, he makes it folksy. Speaking for the little guy . . . [Capra says] ‘See those guys? See the airs they put on? See how they think they are superior? Well, we’re gonna show them!’” Capra adds that Hitler and Mussolini looked like clowns — “If it weren’t so evil, if there weren’t so many people getting killed, it was a comedy.” Then his film shows the brutal force these dictators used, and by picturing the Axis forces moving over a map, eventually covering America, makes the point that if we lost our freedom, we’d lose everything. (Capra had hired Disney to do the visuals here — again, as del Toro notes, a folksy touch.)

So ends the first episode of the series. In the second episode, we learn that when Capra’s film was shown “internally,” i.e., to troops stationed at home, it was enthusiastically received. However, Lowell Mellett, head of the Office of War Information, opposed Capra’s request to release it to the general public, fearing it was too gruesome and might make Americans hate Germans. But that year the category of “Best Documentary” had been introduced to the Academy Awards. Going behind Mellett’s back, Capra arranged a showing of his picture for Academy members, part of an informal campaign for the Oscar. *Prelude to War* won (as did *Battle of Midway*), whereupon Mellett gave in, and Capra’s film was released to the general public. Still, as the narrator reports, it was a commercial flop — the public apparently wanted to know what was currently happening in the war, rather than rehearse the causes that led up to it.

*Prelude to War*thus illustrates two points. First, any propaganda — no matter how well-crafted — can fail to affect the target audience, or fail to affect the audience in the way intended by the propagandist. Second, a propagandist such as Ford or Capra may be able to get around a governmental power center. He may be able to control the client. The Netflix series makes it clear that people who get to the top in Hollywood’s political game often do equally well in Washington’s political game.

Let’s continue with the second episode of the docuseries, which examines several propaganda films that describe major WWII battles. It opens with del Toro observing that nobody in the US had made governmentally subsidized propaganda films before, and each of the five directors had a different approach. Ford approached the job on a “mythic” scale, Huston as an “adventure”; Wyler and Stevens aimed at a “completely human,” and Capra a “concept-solving” point of view.

We learn that the Army didn’t trust Huston, considering him “capable and intelligent” but also egoistical and outright odd. This led to some interesting results. He was first assigned to a minor battle zone, the Aleutian Islands. He wrote, narrated, and directed a documentary called *Report form the Aleutians.*In May 1943, Americans recaptured the last of the Aleutian Islands held by the Japanese (they had taken it during the Battle of Midway, as a diversionary attack). The Army thought this would be a good time to bring the film out as a 20-minute short, to show in theaters before the feature-length film. Huston later complained that it was a propaganda film, and that the Army had put pressure on him to show no American deaths.

Well, Huston did finish the project — but it was 40 minutes long. Mellett and the Army pressured him to cut it. To tie their hands, he took his story to the press, which backed releasing the film in full. Mellett was forced to give in, and the film was sent out for general distribution. Again, the director played effective politics to get his film released. Yet Mellett, it appears, had been correct in viewing it as too long. Its length meant that it had to be run alone as a feature, and few theaters wanted to do that. It was not widely screened.

The series next takes up the problem presented to American propaganda filmmakers by the North African campaign — the Desert War. The British had better footage of the fighting there; the British Army had been in that theater of war longer and had carried more of the load of war.

After a fierce fight, the British inflicted a major defeat on Rommel’s Afrika Korps in late 1942. The Americans only started to send forces in May of that year. The final victory — a joint one, in the Tunisian Campaign — came the following May. So, for two of the three years of fighting in that theater, the British fought the Axis armies primarily on their own. The Netflix series doesn’t give any of this history, but it is important to keep in mind.

The British propaganda film *Desert Victory*was released in 1943, to great reception in both Britian and America. As Paul Greenglass — himself a British filmmaker — notes, the British were more experienced in the use of film for morale-boosting and other propaganda purposes. American audiences were impressed with the film, despite the fact that, while giving credit to American workers, it made the British appear as if they had done all the fighting.

The American government wanted to do its own film on the campaign, and it turned to Capra to make a film to be called *Tunisian Victory*. But since Capra had no good film footage to use, he decided to recreate much of the battle. He asked fellow director George Stevens to have tanks drive through towns that had been liberated and reenact their liberation, and although Stevens felt this was dishonest, he complied. Capra also asked Huston to stage aerial combat back home (in the Mojave Desert and Orlando, Florida). While Huston did as Capra requested, he felt that the mock air battles were unconvincing. Like Stevens, he also felt it was phony.

At this point, the British film unit was working on a followup to *Desert Victory****.***Capra and Huston flew to London with the idea of urging the British to combine efforts, but when Huston saw the quality of the British film footage, he felt he was part of a “plot” to destroy a strong British film. After months of negotiation, Capra succeeded in getting the British Army film unit to agree to a joint film playing up Allied cooperation in the North African campaign. However, by the time the film was released, an internal US Army report accused it of being a Hollywood reenactment. *Tunisian Victory*did not do well in theaters. Readers should note that both films are readily available for free on YouTube, and if you watch the Capra film after watching the earlier British film, you can see the difference in quality.

Here then is an additional complication with our standard model: here, there were two separate clients, the US and British war departments. The propagandists were trying to construct propaganda that extolled the American contribution in North Africa, but they were also trying to do a joint film with the British, using primarily British film footage.

The series next takes up the case of William Wyler. He was in London when his own war film, *Mrs. Miniver*, appeared in theaters in 1942. Strangely, he was worried that he had been too soft on the Germans, but the British loved the film, and that gave Wyler credibility with the US Army. He got the assignments he has longed for, to do a film about a B-17 bomber crew flying its 25th mission. (After 25 missions, flight crews got to come home.) He had just started the project when he learned that he had won Best Picture and Best Director Academy Awards for *Mrs. Miniver*.

Wyler insisted on filming real flights, rather than miniatures. He took flight training courses so he could fly with the crew on actual bombing missions and take completely realistic footage. From this he assembled his masterful film *Memphis Belle*. The film spared the audience no part of the reality of the experiences of a bomber crew. As it opens, we see the bomber take off, flying over the peaceful English countryside, climbing higher to reach the best operational altitude, 25,000 feet, “five miles up — so high that you can’t be seen with the naked eye.” At that altitude. one minute without oxygen support will render you unconscious, and 20 minutes will lead to death. Spielberg points out that these flights consisted of intermingled monotony and terror. You see flak bursting in the air and fighter aircraft coming in to attack. The army brass was worried about Wyler being shot down over Germany, because he was Jewish, and likely would have been killed by the Germans if captured. On the flight back, German fighters attack, and other B-17s go down; but the *Memphis Belle* makes it back.

The War Department was worried that the movie was too realistic, with planes being shot down and airmen using salty language. But Wyler held out, and the movie was shown to American audiences, who loved it. It was a huge hit, and was reviewed on the *New York Times*front page under the headline, “Vivid Film of Daylight Bomb Raid Depicts Daring of Our Air Forces.”

In this case we see another complication with the standard model of propaganda. The client sees what the propagandist creates, pushes to change it, but acquiesces in the propagandist’s views; the audience responds favorably. Contrast this to the case of Huston’s *Report from the Aleutians*, where the propagandist got the client to agree to changes in the product, but the audience failed to respond.

We next look at Capra’s fifth film in the series *Why We Fight*, called *The Battle of Russia*, which he produced with Anatol Litvak directing. We are told that it was the “greatest” of the series. It was intended as a training film, but it turned out so good that the Army let it be released commercially. It did well at the box office. Also bolstering Capra’s esteem with the Army was his series of comedy cartoons, intended for the troops, which were cruder and more suggestive than commercial cartoons. Capra chose Warner Brothers to produce them. This all fits the standard model exactly. The propagandist creates what the client wants, and the product is then released to the audience, which responds as desired.

Germans and Japanese are portrayed differently in these propaganda films. As Greengrass puts it, the Germans were depicted as basically human: “the enemy is Hitler, not the German race *per se*.” By contrast, “Japan, as a whole, is viewed as a colony of ants.” In the Hollywood movies of the time, the Japanese were stereotyped as being like monkeys, with bad teeth and poor vision.

In 1942, of course, FDR had 100,000 Japanese Americans put into “internment” (i.e., concentration) camps. The plan was to eventually resettle them in small towns, but the War Department was worried that if the Japanese were demonized, no towns would tolerate them. Mellett went further, saying that he was not only concerned with these films helping us survive the war but also with us surviving as a democracy.

Ford found himself inadvertently embroiled in the issue of how to portray the Japanese. He had sent footage of the attack on Pearl Harbor to the renowned cinematographer Gregg Toland (with whom he had worked before the war) to make a documentary about what happened at Pearl Harbor and how quickly the US was able to rebuild its ships and refortify its harbor after the attack. But without Ford’s knowledge or consent, Toland had developed a feature-length (one hour, 21 minutes) movie about the attack, with the message that America had been “asleep” before the attack, and how perfidious the Japanese had been. This film (readily available [on YouTube](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IDNFZSFZ__E)) was truly an anti-Japanese screed — one that has to be seen to be believed — which directly accused the Japanese Americans on Hawaii of being complicit in the attack. When the War Department found out about this, it was angry not just with Toland, but with Ford, since Ford had chosen Toland to become a director.

Ford was ordered to fix it, and he did. He completely gutted the Toland film, and produced what he originally wanted — a documentary about what had happened in the original attack and — most importantly — how we recovered. As Greengrass puts it, Ford took Toland’s movie, “cut it in half, and made it truthful.” The result was a short (34 minute) docudrama, *December 7th*, which was released in 1943, explicitly sanctioned by the War and Navy Department. The result (again, [readily available](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_uBKVz9k_CM) on YouTube) was well-reviewed, and won the 1944 Academy Award for Best Documentary. Roughly speaking, the first 25 minutes of the documentary recounts the attack, disavowing explicitly the idea that the Japanese Americans were involved; the last ten minutes document the amazingly rapid rebuilding efforts that followed. However, while the film was released widely, Ford and his film unit were placed under increased scrutiny.

In Episode 3 we see another case in which the War Department fought to minimize anti-Japanese (as opposed to antifascist) propaganda. After victory in Europe, Capra wanted to return to resume his Hollywood career, but the Army asked him to do one last film. Since we were still at war with Japan, Capra produced *Know Your Enemy: Japan*(1945). The film had been delayed because there was conflict about where to place the blame for the war. Capra’s film put the blame on the Japanese people collectively. It was blatantly racist — again, it has to be seen to be believed. It depicted the Japanese as being all alike — “like prints off the same negative” — and trained from childhood to fight in blind obedience to their emperor. Accordingly, the film tells us, “Defeating this enemy is as necessary as shooting down a mad dog.” The film is the one that Netflix chose not to include in its reference collection. But it is also [available](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PvcE9D3mn0Q) on YouTube.

Again, Mellett and the OWI deeply objected to this portrayal. The OWI consistently held throughout the war that we were fighting the fascists, not the (Japanese or German) people. Ironically, the Capra film arrived at the front three days after Japan surrendered. General MacArthur, who was tasked with the reconstruction of the country, told Washington that he would not permit the film to be shown to the troops, and strongly urged that it not be shown to the public. He effectively suppressed the film.

Both Toland’s film on Pearl Harbor and Capra’s *Know Your Enemy: Japan*fit the standard model. The client, after seeing what the propagandist produces, rejects the product. In the case of Toland’s film, the Department forced Ford to redo the film, leaving out the racist parts, which he willingly did. As for Capra’s film, at MacArthur’s urging it was completely quashed.

The Netflix series discuses a very important Capra war film, *The Negro Soldier*. The Army wanted to increase support for the war among African Americans. As the series correctly notes, a Gallup poll done in 1942 showed that nearly half of black Americans felt they would be no worse off if the Japanese took over the country. We learn in Episode 1 that Capra conceived the idea of producing a film about the contributions of black servicemen to the country. He first approached Wyler with the project, but Wyler — after visiting segregated Southern bases where the black soldiers trained, and hearing racist suggestions made by the Army (for example, that the film should avoid showing black officers with “heavily Negroid features”) — was so appalled that he wanted nothing to do with the project. In Episode 2, we learn that Capra was determined to see the project to fruition, so he kept the talented writer Carlton Moss (who plays the leading role of the pastor in the film) and hired a new director, Stuart Heister. As del Toro notes, Moss — a fine African American writer and actor — became the driving force of the project, and was clearly committed to producing a high-quality documentary.

And it was a fine film. Despite some worries in the black community that it would rehash stereotypes, it was widely praised by critics as a powerful, truthful, and well-crafted movie. This again fits the standard model. The client wants a piece of propaganda to promote a certain view, the agent produces it, the client is pleased with it and releases it to the target audience, and it works.

Parenthetically, the Netflix series does not mention the broad and profound historical importance of *The Negro Soldier.*After its release in 1944, the War Department made four more documentaries about African American contributions to the military: *Wings for the Man*(1945, about the Tuskegee Airmen);*Rolling on the Rhine*(1945, about the men of the Red Ball Express — the mainly black truck drivers who moved supplies for the troops in France after the landing at Normandy); *The Negro Sailor*(1946, about blacks serving in the Navy); and *Teamwork*(1947, about the ways in which blacks and whites worked together to win the war).

These films — especially the last two — were crafted to promote the desegregation of the armed forces. The Navy Department issued a desegregation order in 1946, and President Truman ordered desegregation of all the branches of service in 1948. The military was the first major American institution to desegregate, a full six years before the Supreme Court declared segregation unconstitutional.

I don’t criticize the Netflix production for not mentioning this — after all, its focus is on the contribution of these five great directors to the war. But its limitation of subject matter does bring up a point worth underscoring: many *other* filmmakers in the military made effective propaganda as well. For example, the Netflix series briefly mentions [the film that the Navy produced](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JolhiCbU_u8) about the bloody battle of Tarawa in the Pacific but doesn’t mention the fact that the footage was provided by the Marine film unit headed by Captain Louis Hayward, who had been a very popular British American romantic lead actor before the war. He and his film crew were the first film unit to land with the first wave in an amphibious assault, and two of the cameramen were killed during the filming. Hayward directed the film, which won the Academy Award for Best Documentary Short in 1944. It showed the first pictures of dead Marines, and FDR himself had to grant permission for it to be shown.

Toward the end of Episode 2, the series discusses Huston’s film about the liberation of an Italian town. He had been sent by Capra to show the war in Europe as it was at the time. The town chosen was San Petro. However, by the time Huston and his crew arrived, the battle to liberate the town had ended. All that remained was massive rubble and many dead. Huston decided to do a recreation of the battle — to use fake film rather than actual combat footage. He did an accurate job of reconstructing the three-day siege of the town, and by jolting the cameras at odd times, and by using lots of real ordnance, he gave the film the feel of reality — though it nowhere disclosed that it was a reenactment of an earlier battle.

In particular, as Huston notes in his narration on the film, the battle had resulted in high casualties — and he showed this graphically, including pictures of many (apparently) dead American soldiers. This led to a problem: when the film was screened for the first time, the officers in attendance walked out one by one, till at the end only Huston remained. It was clear that in their view it was too graphic, and would therefore demoralize the troops, especially ones who had not yet seen battle. For this, Huston called them “assholes.” But the Army brass thought he had in fact slyly made an antiwar film — to which he flippantly responded that if he ever made a prowar film, he should be shot. The brass quashed the film. But when General Marshall (the Army Chief of Staff) saw it, he said that the troops should see it, to help prepare them for real combat. When the movie was released, critics responded favorably. Huston was later decorated and made a major.

Coppola makes an interesting point (alluding to his own antiwar film, *Apocalypse Now*) that perhaps all war movies are antiwar movies, but to the degree they arouse the viewers’ excitement and sense of adventure, this perversely glorifies war. I will return to this issue.

Episode 2 ends with D-Day looming ahead. Episode 3 opens with Stevens (for the Army) and Ford (for the Navy) agreeing to use their teams of cameramen and soundmen to film the D-Day landing together. Eisenhower chose them both to land with the troops at Normandy. The cameramen had been directed to film everything they saw. Back in Washington, Capra was able to produce newsreels about the crucial event. However, as Kasdan notes, much of the film taken was far too graphic to be used as propaganda. Remember, 4,000 men died on the first day of the landing alone.

After witnessing D-Day, Ford went on a drinking binge and was subsequently released from active duty and sent home. But D-Day was the start of Stevens’ best work. He and his crew moved with Army as the Allies liberated Europe. He was with the Free French as they went into Paris and filmed the surrender of the Germans there, which made the newsreels.

At this time, Wyler was assigned to film the role that the P-47 Thunderbolt fighter bomber played in the war. The result was a fine documentary, using very creative placement of the cameras on the plane. While he worked on this movie — which was released after the war — the Army sent him to various assignments. His crew filmed the liberation of Rome, again feeding the newsreels at home. Then a personal disaster. In an effort to get more footage for *Thunderbolt*, Wyler flew in a B-25 bomber. He did not use ear protection, and the loud engines deafened him. His career in the Army ended.

Stevens continued filming the war in Europe to the end, including the Battle of the Bulge. As the Allied troops entered Germany itself, they liberated the German concentration camps. It was here that Stevens did his finest work, documenting the horrors that had occurred in those murderous prisons. As the series rightly notes, when Stevens saw the unimaginable horrors of the camps, he realized that his job was not to make war propaganda, or even to craft a straight documentary, but to record evidence. The war ended two days after Stevens and his crew entered Dachau. But he chose to remain in Germany to produce two documentaries that would be used as evidence at the Nazi war crimes trials. When *Nazi Concentration Camps* was publicly released, it had an enormous impact.

The series discusses Huston’s last film for the Army, *Let There be Light*, a somber look at an Army hospital treating men recovering from what was then called “shell shock” or “battle fatigue,” now “post-traumatic stress disorder.” While the film was commissioned by the Army and was sensitively done, it was confiscated by the War Department before it could be screened. Again, the client disapproved of what the agent produced, and refused to use it. Decades after the war ended, Huston finally convinced the Army to allow the movie to be shown.

The series ends by discussing how deeply the war affected these directors, and how their approach to filmmaking was changed. They all went on to produce some of their finest work. The series discusses a number of their films, such as Capra’s *It’s a Wonderful Life* (1946) and Wyler’s *The Best Years of Our Lives*(1946).

But let’s finish by asking how good these directors were at crafting effective propaganda.

Clearly, the most effective — not to mention prolific — producer and director of propaganda film in WWII was Capra, who, unlike Huston, was completely comfortable with producing film that supported the American war effort. Actually, the Netflix series doesn’t cover the full breadth of Capra’s contribution to WWII propaganda film. His *Why We Fight* series contained seven films (only two of which are mentioned by the series), ranging from 40 to 76 minutes in length:

*Prelude to War*(1942), *The Nazis Strike*(1943), *Divide and Conquer*(1943), *The Battle of Britain*(1943), *The Battle of Russia*(in two parts, 1943), *The Battle of China*(1944), and *War Comes to America*(1945). *Prelude to War*won an Academy Award for Best Documentary, and *The Battle for Russia*was nominated for an Academy Award. While the Netflix series says that *Prelude to War*was a flop, FDR considered it important and ordered it to be distributed in theaters around the county. The film was well-crafted, and did impress the servicemen who saw it. By the end of the war, 54 million Americans had watched one or more films in Capra’s series — a large fraction of the adults at a time when the population was about 136 million. This is besides the other movies he made, such as *The Negro Soldier,* *Tunisian Victory,* *Two Down and One to Go,* and *Know Your Enemy: Japan*. For his work, Capra was awarded the Legion of Merit, and George Marshall personally awarded him a Distinguished Service Medal from the US Army, a medal given for “exceptionally meritorious service in a duty of great responsibility.”

Capra had been an effective propagandist, in terms of audience reach and in terms of the approval of his client, the US Army. It would take another article to examine the rationality of his propaganda, which at its worst (*Know Your Enemy: Japan*) could be quite sophistical.

Ford was also successful as a propagandist, though not nearly as prolific as was Capra. Two of his documentaries (*The Battle of Midway*and *December 7th*) won Best Documentary Academy Awards. He also produced a short documentary (*Torpedo Squadron 8*) about an ill-fated squadron of pilots during the Battle of Midway, as well as *Undercover: How to Operate Behind Enemy Lines*. His film of the D-Day landing was used in newsreels. After leaving active duty, he made a wartime movie about the role played by PT boats — *They Were Expendable*(1945). (The Netflix series discusses this.) After D-Day, he remained in the Navy Reserve, and returned to active duty during the Korean War, producing two propaganda films in support of that war.

We should note that Ford, like Capra, was much decorated by the US military. He was given (among other awards) the Legion of Merit, the Meritorious Service Medal, and the Purple Heart.

Wyler’s propaganda films, while less numerous than Capra’s and Ford’s, were distinguished in their genre. *The Memphis Belle*made audiences appreciate the work done by the Army Air Corps, precisely because, while it did not dwell on extremely graphic images of dying American servicemen, it refused to sanitize what these men faced in their onerous duty. Nor did it have any staged footage. *Thunderbolt*was a perfectly complementary propaganda piece, focusing on fighter bombers. Again, the documentary explains the job those men were doing and shows their courage in doing it.

Nevertheless, it might be argued that Wyler’s greatest propaganda film was the one he made just before enlisting — *Mrs. Miniver*. The movie beautifully portrayed the bravery of British citizens who faced the Nazi Wehrmacht alone from 1939 through 1941. This brings up an important point touched upon in the docuseries: propaganda does not need to be commissioned or funded by government. The War Department produced a lot of propaganda films during the war, much of it by the five eminent directors, and much of it produced by other filmmakers and cinematographers within the Army Signal Corps and Naval Film Unit. But the Hollywood film industry produced many pictures supporting the war, without government funding. This is another deviation from the standard mode: in a democracy, groups of private citizens can make their own propaganda, which may or may not parallel the government-produced propaganda.

Stevens’ contribution to war propaganda was more limited than that of Capra or Ford, of course. His unit’s footage of the D-Day invasion was used by Capra to inform the public of a major step forward in the war. And his film *Nazi Concentration Camps*is magisterial. But was it effective war propaganda? I don’t think it was — I’m tempted to say it is of a higher purpose. Let me try to explain.

First, it doesn’t seem to have been aimed at increasing public support for the war. After all, at that point the war against the Nazi Regime was essentially over. And it hardly seems aimed at getting Americans to think that the war was justified. It seems obvious that most Americans had no doubts on that score. Stevens’ purpose was instead to document for history a crime of unimaginable wickedness. The Germans had been wrongfully accused of war crimes by the British in WWI, and many people in WWII doubted reports that the Nazis were committing atrocities. Stevens’ film was brilliantly successful in its documentary function.

Of the five directors covered in this docuseries, I would argue that the least effective propagandist was Huston, for the reason the Army suspected from the beginning: he was strange and full of himself. He complained about writing propaganda, but really, what the hell did he think he was inducted as an officer to do? Lead an army into combat? If he didn’t want to produce propaganda but just wanted “adventure,” he could have enlisted to fight as a regular soldier, as many of movie people of the time did, or just remained a civilian. He made the joke that if he ever made a *prowar*film, he should be shot. Capra knew that no one in the War Office was calling for these great filmmakers to make Americans *love all wars*, much less to get Americans to want to take over the world. The War Department merely wanted films that would incline Americans to *support this particular war.* To stop the Axis troops, American servicemen had to be prepared for and willing to fight — and as Capra put it, they couldn’t stop the aggressors with candy bars.

Huston’s first two films (*Report from the Aleutians*and *Tunisian Victory*) failed at the box office. His *Battle of San Pietro*was approved, but more as a training film. The fact that it was almost entirely fake footage was never made clear. And that it had an antiwar message seems obvious. As military historian Michael Hasken [puts it](https://warfarehistorynetwork.com/article/the-film-and-battle-of-san-pietro/),

To this day, film historians dispute Huston’s assertion that *The Battle of San Pietro* includes actual combat footage and even assert that “dead” soldiers are miraculously seen alive in archival reels after the combat scenes were filmed.

Nevertheless, the film makes a strong antiwar statement and stands out in the history of documentary filmmaking. One might wonder whether making an antiwar statement about the war against the Nazis was really such an admirable statement to make.

And Huston’s genuinely excellent piece on shell shock or post-traumatic stress disorder (*Let There Be Light*) was never shown at all. Again, it could hardly be called supportive of the war effort — the war was over by the time it was released — or aimed at inducing people to join or otherwise support the US Armed Forces. At best it could be viewed as intended to get Americans to support aid for veterans suffering from battle-induced mental issues. More likely, it was meant as an antiwar film about what war actually does to many of the soldiers.

Arguably, both America and Huston himself would have been better off had he stayed a civilian and continued to make movies of the quality of *The Maltese Falcon*(1941), *Key Largo*(1948), *The Treasure of Sierra Madre*(1948), *The African Queen*(1951), and *The Man Who Would Be King*(1975) — all either written or adapted by Huston, and all directed by him.

Let me conclude with a couple of points about the Netflix series itself. It suffers from (minor) problems of continuity. Movies such as *Prelude to Victory* and *The Negro Soldier*are raised at one point, then disappear, only to come up again in another episode. Also, it is light on historical details, even when they are crucial to understanding the impact (or lack thereof) of some of the films discussed. For example, to consider the problem of why *Desert Victory*gave the impression that the British were winning the war in North Africa almost singlehandedly, one might want to know that at the time of that victory, they *were* winning the war almost singlehandedly.

But all in all, this series constitutes an enjoyable and informative documentary. Despite its occasional errors and omissions of important questions and frames of reference, it sheds light on a subject that is manifestly easy to overlook or underestimate.

Let me conclude by briefly raising two issues this series brings to mind.

First, we need to remember that it only discusses the wartime propaganda produced by the five famous directors it covers. But the War and Navy Departments made many other propaganda films, either using other directors — I mentioned Lewis Hayward, but I could have mentioned others, such as Billy Wilder and others — or produced by their own film units, such as the estimable US Army Signal Corps. Moreover, all during this period, Hollywood churned out many independent pictures that were either overtly propagandistic or contained covertly propagandistic elements. (For a good survey of American WWII films, see Clayton Koppes and Gregory Black, *Hollywood Goes to War: How Politics, Profit and Propaganda Shaped World War II,*NY: The Free Press [1987]).

Indeed, I would suggest that even in a democracy such as ours, propaganda is omnipresent. In a [recent piece](https://libertyunbound.com/countering-birth-of-a-nation-in-film/) in these pages, I made the case that what is arguably the first great American picture — *The Birth of a Nation* — was deliberate, deceitful propaganda. And more recently, I have written that an [anti-fracking](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/369364251_Fighting_Fire_with_Fire_Using_Film_to_Counter_Film_Propaganda) HBO documentary and an [anti-nuclear-power](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/375528044_Fighting_Fire_with_Fire_II_Countering_FIlm_Propaganda_with_Video_Podcasting) Netflix docuseries are not just propaganda — which can be reasonable and legitimate — but are in fact deceitful.

Now, please don’t misunderstand me. While I am saying that propaganda is prevalent *even in*democracies, I am *not* saying that propaganda is more of a problem in democracies. No, obviously, propaganda is a bigger problem in authoritarian regimes. The major reason for this is that in a democracy, people who disagree with your propaganda are free to make their own counterpropaganda. This power was, in fact, the gravamen of my three aforementioned articles.

The second issue that the series makes one think about is how much more powerful modern media are as instruments of mass indoctrination. Goebbels thought radio was a perfect instrument for disseminating propaganda. But radio is a feeble medium compared to, say, YouTube. Lenin thought cinema is a powerful medium for spreading propaganda — as indeed it is. But the power of cinema is feeble compared to that of TikTok.

So powerful are the new media that they can be used as tools to indoctrinate citizens around the world. Goebbels made anti-English propaganda films attacking England — but England could block the screening of those films in English theaters. Britain made anti-Nazi propaganda, which Germany could block from being screened in its own theaters. But while China can block Facebook, the US apparently can’t ban TikTok (which is controlled by the Chinese police state).

This asymmetry poses the old paradox of tolerance, no?

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