

American

Visual

Experience

During

World

War

Two



• • • • •
I have seen war. . . . I have seen blood running from the wounded. I have seen men coughing out their gassed lungs. I have seen the dead in the mud. . . . I have seen children starving. I have seen the agony of mothers and wives. I hate war.

—Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Chautauqua speech, 1936

MODERN WARFARE PRODUCES corpses in lavish abundance. Nonetheless, during World War II the United States government rationed photographs of the American dead more stingily than scarce commodities such as sugar, leather shoes, and rubber tires. Officials used images of pain and death to respond to what they perceived to be the public-relations needs of each phase of the war. "Public relations" often meant manipulation of opinion in ways that served narrowly conceived military, political, or business purposes. But sometimes it included serious efforts to inform citizens about such significant matters as the battlefield experiences of American soldiers who soon would return to civilian life.

Precedent and caution ruled at the outset of the war. Propagandists, like generals, are guided by lessons learned in past wars when fighting a new one. World War I taught them to avoid transparently upbeat depictions of the wartime experiences of American soldiers. Official releases during the Second World War seldom distorted these experiences as blatantly as materials circulated during the earlier war by the Com-

mittee on Public Information (CPI). A typical CPI silent-film caption read, "Along the roads the heroes wounded in the fight move back—their only sorrow that they can fight no longer." Other lessons learned from the earlier war suggested that the public would accept strict government control over information from combat areas, and that withheld images were less likely to rouse skepticism than prettified ones. During the entire nineteen months of American involvement in World War I, the government prohibited publication of any photographs of the American dead. A similar prohibition lasted for the first twenty-one months of American involvement in World War II.¹

Military circumstances encouraged this visual silence. The war started for the United States with a series of defeats and stalemates, which led government officials to fear that the public might become demoralized or impatient for peace. As *Time* magazine observed, in the first six months after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor the United States had "not taken a single inch of enemy territory, not yet beaten the enemy in a major battle of land, not yet opened an offensive campaign." Officials were especially worried that a significant portion of the population would press for a compromise settlement with Germany. A mid-1942 survey indicated that "three out of every ten Americans would view favorably a negotiated peace with German army leaders." When nearly a third of the citizenry held views so sharply divergent from official policy, the public commitment necessary to meet the war's massive demands on life and property seemed threatened.²

Censorship provided one answer to the threat. The government not only prohibited release of secret information about weapons or troop deployments, but also established guidelines warning against the publication of material that could be "distorted" and "used as propaganda against the war effort." Under a broad definition and strict enforcement of these guidelines the government could have censored almost anything. President Franklin D. Roosevelt's desire to maintain the appearance—and whenever it seemed safe, the substance—of candor prevented this from happening. Early in 1941 the Joint Army and Navy Public Relations Committee had proposed, at an initial cost of \$50 million, a system for "complete censorship of publications, radio, and motion pictures within the U.S.A." Finding the proposal "fishy," Roosevelt emphatically rejected this "wild scheme," noting that the Joint Board "obviously . . . knows nothing about what the American public—let alone the American press, would say to a thing like this."³

Roosevelt, serving an unprecedented third term, did know something about the public and the press. When he set up an Office of Censorship shortly after Pearl Harbor he gave it authority much less sweeping than that envisioned in the joint committee's plans. The office had power of mandatory censorship over all international communications not covered by military censorship and over domestic information originating from military installations and certain industrial facilities with military contracts. Its censorship of most other domestic information, however, relied on voluntary compliance by the press and the public with its guidelines.⁴

Nothing was voluntary about censorship in American combat zones. There the military allowed only accredited photographers pledged to abide by its rules, which varied over time and among services. Typically photographers submitted exposed film to field censors, who after classifying photographs in accordance with policies set by military and civilian leaders would send them back to the United States for further review and for distribution. *Life* photographer Margaret Bourke-White described a variation of this procedure used when she was covering the 1943 Italian campaign. She sent her negatives by army mail pouch directly to the Pentagon, where they were developed "either by the Signal Corps or by *Life* technicians under Army supervision." Then "pictures which passed censorship were sent on to *Life*. . . . Certain technical subjects had to pass British as well as American censors." Captions for the pictures passed through two American military censors, "then the complete layout was censored once more in Washington, so the text and pictures could be reviewed as a whole before publication." Officials put few restrictions on what pictures photographers took, assuming correctly that censors would keep objectionable material out of sight. Because they were far more likely to get in trouble for letting through a photograph they should have blocked than for restricting one they might have released, in doubtful cases censors were more likely to stop an image than let it pass.⁵

Elmer Davis wished to change this emphasis. Davis, appointed director of the Office of War Information (OWI), formed in June 1942, to coordinate the flow of war-related words and images from government to public, was a respected radio commentator and a Rhodes scholar with no previous government experience. Although he never forgot that he was the head of the chief wartime propaganda agency, he took seriously his promises "to tell nothing but the truth" and "to see that the American people get just as much of it as genuine considerations of military security will permit." Thus even as Davis acknowledged that "security" required something short of full disclosure of all war news, his use of the adjective *genuine* announced his intention to avoid excessive recourse to this excuse for keeping information from the public.⁶

Others were less reluctant. Two months after Davis took office he received a prescient letter from George Creel, the former head of the CPI, which during World War I had combined functions now divided between Davis's office and the Office of Censorship. Creel noted that rather than having the freedom to build his own organization "from the ground up," Davis had to piece OWI together out of existing agencies that had been "running wild due to divided authority." Because Roosevelt hated to fire anyone, especially those loyal to him, OWI inherited much "dead wood." Nelson Rockefeller's maneuvering would allow him as Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs to compete with OWI for control of information flowing to and from Latin America. Most serious of all, warned Creel, "your control over Army, Navy and State is not real in any sense of the word." Supposedly those departments were to establish information policy in consultation with OWI, but "'coordination by conference' never worked and never will work." When a conflict arose, the

habitually restrictive military would use their pivotal role in the transmission of information to control access to it. "He was about right on all points," Davis later noted on the bottom of Creel's letter. Despite Davis's conviction that Americans wanted their war news to be "brutally frank," for nearly two years the photographs that best fit this definition accumulated in a "Chamber of Horrors" whose very existence remained secret.⁷

Some of the pictures finally did appear because of the intervention of the one man who could give Davis the leverage to pry images out of the chamber: President Roosevelt. Creel said in his letter to Davis that during World War I he had been able to resist constant attempts by the army and navy to "sit in arbitrary judgment" over what reached the public because every time they questioned his authority "[President] Woodrow Wilson hammered them down." Roosevelt had a different style. He was more inclined to give those to whom he had deputed authority leeway to define their responsibilities by hammering on each other. In the contest between Davis and the military, the military had most of the hammers.⁸

Fortunately for Davis, some military leaders shared his preference for a policy of openness. As early as June 1942 the army adjutant general advised all commanding generals that current visual reporting was inadequate to keep political and military leaders accurately informed on the war, and that better coverage would also help produce "an enlightened people." Others tried to follow the procedure Davis attributed to the chief of naval operations, Admiral Ernest J. King: withhold all information until the end of the war, then announce who won. The ultimate mediator among these voices was in no hurry to present the American public with a clear view of battlefield horrors. Roosevelt's visits to European combat zones as assistant secretary of the navy during World War I made him sensitive to the potential impact of visual encounters with war. During America's first year in the war only a few published photographs had acknowledged the costs of American involvement, such as one of a Marine in agony from wounds suffered at Guadalcanal. In early 1943 advisers warned Roosevelt that the government's inability and unwillingness to provide more forceful pictorial coverage of the war might lead to public perceptions inconsistent with war aims. An OWI memo warned that the public was getting the impression that "soldiers fight, that some of them get hurt and ride smiling in aerial ambulances, but that none of them get badly shot or spill any blood." It advised that the government release harsher pictures to prepare the public for the greater casualties to come and to reduce grumbling over minor inconveniences at home. Such pictures "would have a powerful impact on the source of strikes and absenteeism" and would rouse the public as had, during World War I, a picture that had showed an American soldier who remained "fighting mad" after his eye was shot out.⁹

Proponents of candor offered grim photographs as an antidote to the problems of success. If in 1942 officials feared that American military setbacks would demoralize the public, in 1943 they feared that victories would lead to overconfidence. The first few

months brought news of Soviet victory over the German armies at Stalingrad, continued advances in North Africa, the recovery of Guadalcanal, and damaging air attacks on Germany. In May *Newsweek* ran photographs of Americans badly injured in the Pacific campaign, and announced that "to harden home-front morale, the military services have adopted a new policy of letting civilians see photographically what warfare does to men who fight." In August, however, OWI's news bureau complained in internal memos that the Army Signal Corps was again growing more restrictive in giving OWI access to material, that the Marine Corps had closed its files to OWI after the agency released for publication a photograph showing a Marine's grave with the inscription "Here Lies a Devil Dog," and that the navy's picture files had been "absolutely closed to our Photographic Section for a long time."¹⁰

The military denied these allegations of noncooperation. Davis considered the situation sufficiently serious to tell Roosevelt in late August that he would resign if the president did not instruct the War and Navy departments to cooperate with OWI in its attempts to give the American public a realistic depiction of the war. His decision resulted, Davis explained, more from "an accumulation of minor disagreements with the army and navy public relations bureaus" and the need for greater credibility with the press than from a dispute over any one issue. Davis was motivated not only by his personal beliefs but also by OWI's mandate to guard against use of security requirements to "unduly restrict the flow of information." He asked the president to "either confirm OWI in its authority and establish adequate machinery for OWI to carry out its responsibilities or . . . liquidate the present agency and establish a new organization with a new Director."¹¹

Davis's timing was good. Recent events had heightened administration fears of public overconfidence. The Allies had gained control of all North Africa in May 1943. By about the same time they had countered the U-boat threat effectively enough to assure Allied dominance in the Atlantic. Negotiations were under way that led to Italian surrender in September, and American forces were on the verge of dramatic advances in the Pacific. An OWI survey of public opinion completed one week before Davis threatened to resign indicated that although dissatisfaction with official information was not as great as it had been the previous winter, it seemed to be on the increase again. On the day Davis gave his ultimatum, OWI's regional observers reported that heightened optimism about the war might lead to complacency and thus "lagging production," but also noted growing resentment that "the war news is incomplete and sugar coated." The proportion of Americans who believed that government news releases made the situation look better than it was went from 28 percent in July 1942 to 39 percent in June 1943. Officials hoped that increased candor about the realities of war might reduce public skepticism.¹²

Roosevelt confirmed Davis's authority. In the future the burden would be on the military to demonstrate that material should not be released rather than on OWI to make the

Pearl Harbor the *New York Journal American* complained that the government refused to "hand out unpleasant 'facts and figures.' . . . Their 'information' is treacle for children." According to the *Journal American's* outraged count, the official information apparatus had swollen to three thousand full-time employees and used part of the time of more than thirty thousand other government workers. This apparatus threatened to evolve into the sort of "bureaucratic propaganda centers of 'enlightenment' " set up by Nazi propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels. In sum, the paper charged, "The fat cats in Washington fiddle with 'figures' while the people PAY, WORK AND DIE." Plausible rumors that the White House tapped some journalists' phones and planted informants in newsrooms increased the strains. Most editors agreed with the charge by the trade journal *Iron Age* that too much war news was "dry-cleaned."¹⁶

On the last issue critics directed complaints more against the military than against civilian agencies. Journalists respected former Associated Press executive Byron Price, director of the Office of Censorship and a twenty-year veteran of AP's Washington office. The activities of OWI were more controversial, but Elmer Davis also was widely trusted and the press considered him their ally in the attempt to get the military and other government agencies to open up. In 1941 the columnist Drew Pearson, never known to understate a conflict, described the navy as "beyond doubt . . . the most high-handed agency in Washington in its attitude toward the press." He reported "definite evidence that Navy Intelligence has been tapping telephone wires and shadowing newsmen who have unearthed news which the Navy does not like." Traumatized by the humiliating losses at Pearl Harbor and bearing most of the combat action during the early part of the war, the navy became the first symbol of war news obstructionism. The newspaper experience of Navy secretary Franklin Knox helped ease the tensions slightly, and as the burden of military effort shifted toward the army, so did the locus of press-military conflict. Whichever service they had to deal with, many journalists shared the view of the *Christian Science Monitor* editor Erwin D. Canham that military censors often made "petty and absurd decisions."¹⁷

Such complaints masked similarities between press policies and those of the government. Few news organizations had challenged visual censorship during World War I. As the historian James L. Baughman has noted, the national news magazines that came into prominence in the two decades after that war represented "a journalism of reassurance, not information." The few especially shocking pictures among those released in September 1943 may have been included because military authorities wished to show that neither the press nor the public wanted too much candor. If so, they proved their point: almost all newspapers and magazines declined to run them. The photo editor of the *New York Daily News* explained that he decided not to use the picture of the soldier whose foot had been blown off because "I personally try to select pictures that will go down well when I have my

case that it should. Davis's triumph can be attributed to the changing circumstances of war, because by this time congressional budget cuts that sharply reduced OWI's size had diminished further the agency's always limited power. Even after Roosevelt's support of Davis the military continued to exert great influence through its physical control of all material from combat zones. But Roosevelt and Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson made clear their judgment that the time for loosening restrictions had arrived. The War Department's Bureau of Public Relations (BPR) reexamined more than two hundred photographs from the Chamber of Horrors and cleared dozens for release. Most showed intact bodies and revealed little of the agonies of death. Some, however, did have the power to shock. One showed the bodies of American paratroopers sprawled like discarded rag dolls on a Sicilian field; another featured a close-up view of the leg of a soldier whose foot had been shot away.¹³

This was just the beginning. As part of the more open policy a radiogram went out under Chief of Staff George C. Marshall's signature to commanding generals of all theaters of operations informing them that Roosevelt and Stimson remained unhappy with visual coverage of the war. Material produced to this point was "entirely unsatisfactory," as proven by comparisons to British depictions of the desert war or Soviet images of Stalingrad, "the city that stopped Hitler." Marshall urged generals to give effective and enthusiastic support to their photographic units and send Washington material that would "vividly portray the dangers, horrors, and grimness of War."¹⁴

Growing press restlessness had encouraged this new policy. Although the military complained that news organizations maneuvered to get around their regulations, the nation's newspapers and magazines loyally followed directives important to the war effort. The government had informed the press, for example, that it wished to keep secret the visit to Washington of Soviet foreign minister Vyachislav Molotov in the late spring of 1942; when Molotov walked past a crowd of photographers as he entered the White House, "not a camera clicked." British prime minister Winston Churchill wrote that after the White House sent word to the press that they should keep silent about his 1942 Washington visit with the president, reporters guarded details of his movements as carefully as those of an American battleship, and "no word ever appeared." Reporters and photographers in combat areas developed an especially strong sense of being part of the U.S. team. Supreme Allied Commander General Dwight David Eisenhower wrote to his brother in 1944 that "almost without exception, the 500 newspaper and radio men accredited [to my command] are my friends."¹⁵

War was one thing, politics another. In the 1940 election, as previously, many of the nation's newspapers opposed Roosevelt (although not nearly enough to justify his claim that 85 percent were against him), and most defined continued protection of the populace from administrative excesses as part of their wartime patriotic duty. Three months after

coffee in the morning." Although *Life* came closer than any other wartime magazine to fulfilling its stated intention to show "the truth . . . the good and the bad," and not to show only pictures that would "please the eye and soothe the nerves," even its editors carefully avoided images deemed too disturbing. *Life* accompanied its first photograph of Americans killed in the war, George Strock's powerful, elegantly composed picture of three American soldiers lying dead on Buna Beach in New Guinea, with a full-page editorial. The editors drew on familiar sports imagery to assure that the new visual message inspire viewers rather than discourage them: "We are still aware of the relaxed self-confidence with which the leading boy ran into the sudden burst of fire—almost like a halfback carrying the ball down a football field."¹⁸

Despite this institutionalized caution, during the final two years of the war a consensus emerged for increasingly explicit portrayal of what American soldiers experienced on the battlefield. Initial response to the September release of pictures of the dead encouraged more of the same. Some readers expressed distress over the pictures, which, they charged, "made a mockery of sacrifice" or would undermine support for the war, but a larger number approved. Editorial writers almost uniformly supported the new policy. The *Washington Post* said it was time that the government treated Americans as adults, and the photographs "can help us to understand something of what has been sacrificed for the victories we have won." The paper advised, however, that "an overdose of such photographs would be unhealthy," and strongly warned that it was "intolerable" to use these photographs to "manipulate" the public. The editors called on OWI to disabuse the army and the even more suspect navy of "the notion that they can alternately dose the public with stimulants and depressants in accordance with the mood they desire to create." Some involved in bond drives welcomed the possibility of having new stimulants at their disposal. One wired immediately from New Orleans with this request: "please rush air-mail gruesome photos of dead American soldiers for plant promotion Third War Loan."¹⁹

The released photographs had had the desired effect. An OWI analysis indicated that news of the Italian surrender had led to the feeling (dispelled somewhat by stiff German resistance in Italy) that the "war was next to being all over," but "publication of photos showing some of our boys killed in action had a sobering effect on people and brought the realities of war closer home." A month after the release of the pictures an OWI survey of workers in five war plants in the New York area found that 75 percent believed the photograph of dead American paratroopers in Italy would make an effective poster and increase war bond sales. The survey also revealed that "few think its subject matter too gruesome." In the same month another OWI report noted that because the public had been overexposed to all sorts of propaganda the only messages that still had the power to reach them were appeals from wounded servicemen and "those 'hate' pictures that showed American war dead. Everyone seems to agree that the latter are the strongest appeal and make the people so mad they dig down deep."²⁰

The longer the war went on, the more futile it seemed to suppress harsh pictures. Casualties within families or communities confronted more and more people with evidence of war's capacity to kill and maim. The invasion of occupied France on D-Day (June 6, 1944), the push into Germany that followed, and island battles in the Pacific yielded a rapidly growing stock of death pictures to choose from, as over two-thirds of all Americans killed in World War II died in 1944 and 1945. Strategic plans also favored more emotionally forceful images. In January 1944 Elmer Davis told the War Information Board, which advised OWI, that one reason for the recent decision to release stories and pictures of Japanese atrocities was the belief that such releases would "nullify any voices that might be raised here if we should undertake bombing of Japanese cities." Important as these factors were, the primary reason for the more open policy remained fear that public complacency was damaging the war effort, as indicated by worker absenteeism, job switching, strikes, and decreases in voluntary enlistments. An OWI analysis from December 1943 referred to this as the "Over-the-Hump Psychology" and identified as its features a growing "selfishness," the reluctance of civilians to make sacrifices proportionate to those made by soldiers, and a concern on the part of individuals, businesses, the farm bloc, and unions to divert much energy into the scramble for postwar advantages.²¹

Marshall spelled out these concerns in a cable sent to commanding generals in January 1944. He asked them to rush to Washington pictorial material showing the war "as it is actually being fought, without the usual effort to eliminate the tragic aspects of battle," including "scenes showing casualties during and immediately after action." He specifically requested motion picture footage for use in films intended to discourage absenteeism and strikes among industrial workers. This trend toward more explicit portrayal of American war dead continued right up to the end of the war. It was slightly moderated by, among other factors, the desire to prepare the public for peace settlements that would leave Germany and Japan with enough economic strength and political stability to serve as buffers against expansion of Soviet influence.²²

Respect for the feelings of soldiers' families also counted. Elmer Davis did not know in advance the exact date of the long-awaited Allied assault on German positions in France. But as this massive cross-Channel attack became imminent, he reminded planners of the upcoming bond drive that whenever the great invasion took place it would be a time of severe emotional strain for millions of Americans with loved ones in the service. Davis insisted that organizers must handle bond promotions with "good taste." Similarly, John Huston claimed that because of the "emotional effect it would have on the families" he eliminated from his documentary *San Pietro* a scene in which the taped voices of servicemen interviewed one day before they were killed in battle could be heard as their pictures appeared on the screen.²³

Because of such legitimate considerations, as well as for the more questionable purpose of manipulating public attitudes, some images remained forbidden from the beginning to

the end of the war. The original draft of Marshall's January 1944 cable had asked commanding generals to send pictures with "no effort to eliminate the horrible or tragic," but Marshall or one of his subordinates deleted the word "horrible" from the version actually sent. Censorship guidelines issued by SHAEF (Supreme Headquarters, Allied Expeditionary Force) in June 1944 prohibited release of "photographs of a 'horrific' nature, or of mental cases." The following February, when BPR surveyed generals to find out how they interpreted censorship policies as they applied to hospitalized American soldiers, Eisenhower replied that in his command the practice, like that of the British, was to allow photographs where the casualties were "walking wounded or are obviously cheerful," but that "photographs of a horrific nature are always stopped." A rule maintained throughout the war forbade publication of any photograph revealing identifiable features of the American dead. Different criteria governed depictions of the dead and wounded from other countries, especially non-Western ones.²⁴

Censors kept emotionally wounded Americans out of sight throughout the war and after. The policy of BPR concerning pictorial or other publicity on "psychoneurotic" casualties remained one of "complete silence" until May 1944. It loosened only slightly after that, although a secret study carried out by the Office of the Surgeon General concluded that "psychiatric casualties are as inevitable as gunshot and shrapnel wounds." Contrary to the assumption embedded in the phrase "battle-hardened veteran," the longer a soldier fought, the greater the probability of emotional breakdown. The study found that on average an infantryman could "last" about two hundred days before breaking down.²⁵

No army had ever made a greater effort to recruit only the mentally healthy. Through pre-induction examinations the U.S. military rejected because of "neuropsychiatric disorders and emotional problems" 970,000 men, or approximately one of every eighteen tested. Even with this extensive screening, such are the stresses of modern war that over a million American soldiers, more than three times the number who died in combat, "suffered psychiatric symptoms serious enough to debilitate them for some period." The overwhelmingly negative public response to General George S. Patton's behavior when he slapped a soldier hospitalized for battle fatigue suggested that despite censorship many Americans on the home front knew that the soldier's breakdown was neither abnormal nor proof of unwillingness to serve.²⁶

News organizations expressed no desire to run photographs of physicians sedating battle-crazed soldiers. But the government decision to release images from the Chamber of Horrors did not end all controversy. In early 1944 the revelation of several instances where officials withheld information merely because it was embarrassing to authorities led to editorials describing some aspects of military censorship as "stupid, repugnant and intolerable." The *Houston Post* complained that censors assumed "that the American people lack the intestinal stamina to hear the bad news." Mimicking the language of the government's

own "strategy of truth," the *Pittsburgh Press* concluded that "the only way to get full public cooperation is to tell the people the truth." Those government officials who favored more openness used such editorials in support of their arguments against providing the public with what Palmer Hoyt, director of OWI's Domestic Branch, described in a January 1944 speech as "spoon-fed" information.²⁷

Hoyt referred mainly to censorship of words. Pictures too were spoon-fed to the public; but perhaps because of the multisensory nature of war, as well as the technical limitations of early twentieth-century photography, the most striking images to come out of World War I were written ones. This remained true even when the lifting of censorship after the war allowed the release of gruesome photographs of mutilated and rotting corpses. None of these pictures had the power of, for instance, British officer Stuart Cloete's description, published years after the incident, of his experience serving on a burial party after the 1916 battle of the Somme: "As you lifted a body by its arms and legs, they detached themselves from the torso, and this was not the worst thing. Each body was covered inches deep with a black fur of flies, which flew up into your face, into your mouth, eyes and nostrils as you approached. The bodies crawled with maggots. . . . We stopped every now and then to vomit . . . the bodies had the consistency of Camembert cheese. I once fell and put my hand through the belly of a man. It was days before I got the smell out of my hands."²⁸

During World War II newspaper and magazine editors and government censors kept tighter restrictions on pictures than on words despite this ability of words to disturb. No photograph released during the fall 1943 War Loan campaign depicted a scene like that described in a passage by the writer John Steinbeck used in an advertisement for the campaign: "I have seen children hauled out of a blasted building; lumps of rubbish, dirty meat in pinafores." The reason was partly a practical one. Military authorities could easily screen all physical materials leaving combat zones, including photographs, but could not control what writers took home in their memories. But this was not the whole reason, since the government chose to make use of Steinbeck's words. Officials perhaps assumed that visual images were likely to be comprehended and remembered by a much larger audience than written material and therefore had to be handled with greater care. Such had been the assumption of the New York courts two decades earlier when they upheld a law requiring that newsreels be approved by the state film censor. The judges considered censorship necessary because "the audience for film, often including the 'child and illiterate adult,' was more susceptible to influence than newspaper readers."²⁹

Words were not invariably harsher than visual images. At the outset of the war the National Broadcasting Company advised its reporters that their combat radio broadcasts should not be "unduly harrowing." Indeed, words could serve, as in the *Life* editorial accompanying the Buna Beach photograph, to cushion the impact of visual images. Similarly, the country's five major newsreel companies used narrations designed to make

the visuals they presented seem both dramatic and encouraging. Their twice-weekly offerings, included as part of the regular show at movie theaters, reached tens of millions of viewers.³⁰

What the newsreel war often looked like in 1942 and 1943, according to one OWI analyst, was a "travelogue." Because they required government permits and other assistance, newsreel companies cultivated the good will of whoever was in power in Washington. In 1932, for instance, they complied when President Herbert Hoover asked them to downplay the politically embarrassing "Bonus March" on Washington and the government's use of force to dislodge the marchers. Although wary of war coverage during the 1930s because "it is expensive, it is dangerous for the cameramen, and it seldom if ever produces pictures worth looking at," as soon as World War II began newsreel companies recognized that it created a hunger for news that would grow proportionately with American involvement, as would the companies' need for government cooperation. To make such cooperation more likely, they gave highly favorable coverage to events such as Roosevelt's signing of the Lend-Lease Act in March 1941 and assured the president that they would not allow critics of the act equal time. After Pearl Harbor the companies devoted roughly three-quarters of their screen time to coverage of the war, making them more dependent than ever on the government for opportunities for their camera crews (who required the same accreditation as still photographers), clearance of film they shot, and access to the huge volume of footage generated by military film units.³¹

The companies differed significantly. An OWI analysis described MGM News of the Day as "the most politically and socially liberal . . . in promoting Russia, negroes, and war," Fox Movietone as "steady middle-of-the-road," Paramount as "truly outstanding for the calibre and amount of its documentation," Pathé as extreme in its "indifference to government suggested or inspired stories," and Universal as "almost hysterical" in its attempts to get humor into everything, as when one of the company's newsreels says of American pursuit ships, "When these babies get on a Jap's tail it's good-bye Mister Zippo-Nippo." Whatever their bias, each had no choice but to acquiesce to official censorship policies.³²

Not everyone in government had the same idea as to what these policies should be. The Office of War Information carefully monitored newsreels and had considerable influence on what stories they featured. The agency's Newsreel Division reported early in 1943 that for the first time in five months the week's newsreels did not include "a story set up or arranged by this Division." Here as elsewhere, however, OWI efforts to encourage openness ran into resistance. A 1941 memo had stated army policy on the matter: commanders should cooperate with newsreel companies only if cooperation did not create any extra expense or work and if the companies agreed to submit all material for review and never exhibit "any reel or any part thereof which has been disapproved by the War Department." In May 1942 the newsreel coordinator for the motion picture industry complained that because of such

obstacles the industry "had no pictures from any war area that might be called outstanding" and had "exhausted our last hope of obtaining any cooperation from the Army or the Navy." When OWI was established one month later, it had no effective means of loosening military control over combat film. The civilian agency had to request invitations for its representatives to attend screenings of footage that the navy made available to the newsreel companies.³³

By October OWI reported that the newsreels had made some progress in being able to "bring the cost of this war in human lives directly to the people." The navy had released to the newsreels, from Guadalcanal, strong footage of Japanese dead and pictures of American Marines with "torn and dirty uniforms and their generally disheveled appearance." But a year later, just one month after the first still photographs of dead appeared in magazines and newspapers, the newsreels were still working under severe restrictions: "The war is certainly beautiful through the eyes of the motion picture camera for this week's showings," wrote an OWI analyst. "No more peaceful a scene was ever made by a travelogue as that our war correspondents recorded through their lens of that palm-dotted atoll. . . . There is something lacking. . . . I have a suspicion it might be in the film pool at the Pentagon." But the policy of greater revelation affected newsreels as well as still photography. Footage of the fighting at Tarawa Atoll and elsewhere showed American dead. Newsreel analysts in OWI reported in December "by far the best American war action pictures to date, equaling if not surpassing the Russian war shots in depicting actual combat scenes." Such coverage became more common during the last twenty-one months of the war.³⁴

No one seriously challenged the government's authority to exert some control over footage originating in combat areas. Movies made in Hollywood were a different matter. In previous decades government relations with the motion picture studios had left a legacy of cooperation and distrust, both of which persisted throughout the war years. Cooperation reached new levels as war threatened and then broke out in Europe. Early and sustained administration involvement assured that Warner Brothers' *Juárez* (1939), the first film ever to receive its premier showing in Mexico's presidential palace, would be a paean to U.S.-Mexican friendship. It depicted Benito Juárez as he led the fight for Mexican independence, drawing inspiration from the American wartime president whose treasured picture kept watch over his headquarters, Abraham Lincoln. Even before Pearl Harbor the film industry created the Motion Picture Committee Cooperating for National Defense (renamed the War Activities Committee soon after the bombing of Pearl Harbor), which among other things distributed without charge current films to American troops (43,000 prints shipped by war's end).³⁵

Moviemakers shared President Roosevelt's estimate of their industry's potential. Like him they believed it could become the most powerful force for building public support for the war. They also believed they knew better than bureaucrats how to achieve this while

turning a profit. Many studio heads were especially concerned that the government might use claims of wartime need to break the power of the major studios, long threatened by an ongoing antitrust case which sought to weaken the oligopolistic control that the production companies maintained over the distribution of their product through extensive ownership of theaters and coercive film-booking practices. Deferral of this case to the postwar years helped pave the way for a wary wartime partnership between image makers in Hollywood and Washington.

In a letter to Lowell Mellett appointing him coordinator of government films, written ten days after the Pearl Harbor attack, Roosevelt defined the ambiguous terms of the relationship. He advised that "the motion picture must remain free insofar as national security will permit." Mellett, a newspaper editor before he became an aide to the president in 1939, headed the Bureau of Motion Pictures in OWI when legislation established that agency in June 1942. In addition to producing some films of its own and coordinating distribution of those produced by other government agencies, the bureau had the task of assuring that all films coming out of Hollywood served, or at least did not undermine, war aims. Its efforts were hampered by internal disputes, by industry executives' determination to protect their established prerogatives, and by the desire of the studios to maintain mutually beneficial relations with the military services, whose views were not always congruent with OWI's. As in other areas, the military had a considerable head start over the newly created wartime agency. Six months before Pearl Harbor the director of BPR reported that "the continuous and equitable contact of this branch with the picture industry assures their confidence and cooperation to a remarkable degree." During the war the studios found this cooperation more indispensable than ever owing to their increased need to use military facilities, equipment, and footage in film production. Military noncooperation could doom a film more rapidly than OWI objections. When the War Department refused to aid Paramount with the proposed 1943 film *Advance Agent to Africa*, despite assurances that the film would be "made strictly to glorify the United States Army, as *WAKE ISLAND* glorified the Marine Corps," the company killed the project.³⁶

Making the most of its limited power, OWI sometimes helped bring a movie into being, discourage its production, or effect a major shift in its emphasis. More frequently, OWI actions brought about minor changes in the film scripts it reviewed, which totaled 1,652 by war's end. Because OWI staffers ranked earnestness as the highest virtue, one of their most frequent complaints was that filmmakers did not treat crucial issues with sufficient gravity. If Dagwood Bumstead carried out his airplane spotting and blackout enforcement duties with bumbling incompetence, perhaps viewers would lose faith in the civil defense program. Although budget cuts forced OWI to reduce its operations in 1943, the agency maintained its influence over film content through its strengthened working relationship with the Office of Censorship, which could deny filmmakers the export licenses essential for acceptable profit margins.

These power struggles made little difference in Hollywood depictions of gore because well-established industry practices were roughly consistent with government recommendations. Early in the 1930s independent producer Jesse Lasky warned moviemakers to avoid "excessive brutality and intimate details of killing and murder" because they could lead to costly confrontations with local and state censorship boards. Such concerns caused the industry to tighten and strengthen its self-censoring Production Code in 1934. In its hesitation to portray the horrors of war, particularly as they affected Americans, Hollywood merely conducted business as usual. To be sure, Americans saw fictional counterparts of their country's soldiers die on the nation's seventeen thousand movie screens soon after Pearl Harbor, nearly two years before the release of photographs and newsreels of actual death. But in these early films American deaths, always portrayed as heroic and meaningful, never hinted at the capacity of the machinery of modern warfare to mutilate the human body. They also were rare: by OWI's count, between May and November 1942 only five of sixty-one feature films with war scenes showed Americans dying in combat. This led OWI analysts to fear that because so many enemy and so few Americans died in Hollywood's war, audiences would conclude that enemy soldiers were more willing to die for their country.³⁷

The office of War Information sought to fine-tune the presentation of death and suffering. For instance, in an "Information Manual" prepared for the industry in 1942, OWI suggested this guideline: "In crowds unostentatiously show a few wounded men. Prepare people, but do not alarm them, against the casualties to come." The office also advised that "the blood and thunder type of war story is not desirable at this time" because "a deluge of pictures of this type might have an unfortunate effect upon public morale." As Hollywood depicted violence more graphically as the war wore on, the government called more often for restraint. In 1943 OWI asked the producers to "minimize the bloody aspects" in *Corregidor*, and the War Department successfully persuaded Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer to "tone down" its depiction in *Thirty Seconds over Tokyo* (1944) of the ordeal one airman went through when his shattered leg required an operation. Contradictory as the messages Hollywood received from Washington seemed to be, most could be accommodated through interpreting with different emphases this OWI guideline: "The mortal realities of war must be impressed vividly on every citizen. This does not mean dwelling at length on pain, anguish, and bloodshed. Nor does it mean sugar-coating the truth."³⁸

The movement toward more vivid portrayal of war's "mortal realities" makes it easy to date films from the period. The first post-Pearl Harbor productions, such as *Shores of Tripoli*, Twentieth-Century Fox's biggest money maker in 1942, promoted a jaunty view of war as adventure reminiscent of World War I propaganda films. *Shores* perpetuated the fatuous story that when asked what they needed, besieged Marines at Wake Island had replied, "Send us more Japs." Later in the year Paramount released *Wake Island*, which provided a more somber view of that battle and ended with the principal characters, after a