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DEMOCRATIC VIOLENCE AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF
AMERICAN MORAL SENTIMENTS IN THE “GOOD WAR”

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For Mom, and for the memory of Dad

And for Kate

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ABSTRACT

In the first half of the 1940s the productive and imaginative energies of 100 million citizens of the United States were harnessed to a sustained project of global violence under the rubric of “total war” mobilization. This dissertation is a study of American moral sentiments under the pressure of that mobilization, which presented profound challenges to assumptions about permissible and impermissible killing, about the responsibility of individuals for state action in a democracy, and about the appropriate (and inappropriate) ways to experience mediated knowledge of a distant conflict. As Americans worked to reconcile their commitment to the war with day-to-day knowledge of its horrors, a broad range of actors – including military censors and civilian journalists, state officials and publishers, child psychologists and children themselves – articulated a vernacular “realism” which acknowledged the moral ambiguity of firebombing and other extreme forms of violence, yet accepted those acts as ethically tolerable. World War II Americans did not erase or turn a blind eye to their polity’s deep implication in international violence; instead, they found ways to come to terms with it at an affective level. In so doing, they established the foundations for Cold War justifications of lethal force which transcended racial and imperial understandings of force rooted in continental expansion and overseas empire. This dissertation draws on a wide range of published and unpublished records, including underutilized military and civilian censorship records, mass circulation print media, public and private surveys of popular opinion, the correspondence of public figures such as *Life* magazine publisher Henry Luce, and debates over children’s war play, in order to trace and document a transformation in the moral common sense of violence in the American Century.

Introduction

At around two in the afternoon on December 19, 1941, Secretary of State Cordell Hull arrived at a cabinet meeting carrying a brief document with the title “Declaration by United Nations.” In his mind it was a plan for world order, designed to “bind all the nations fighting the Axis to the acceptance of certain principles already stated in the Atlantic Charter.”¹ Hull hoped to commit the allies to the liberal principles Winston Churchill and Franklin Roosevelt announced during their mid-ocean summit the previous August: free trade, national self-determination, and economic security maintained by international cooperation.² But President Roosevelt hesitated, voicing doubts about his own powers to commit the nation to such a declaration.³ The problem was not the ambitious vision of postwar governance but the military alliance itself. The draft committed the United States to a “world-wide victory” and promised not to make peace unless all of the allies agreed. Could the president bind the polity to such an unlimited belligerency? The violence that lay in prospect was staggering, closer to a global civil war than a reprise of the intervention in France in 1917-1918. What if the public wanted peace on more limited terms? At the end of the meeting, the document went back to the State Department’s lawyers.

It was an unlikely moment for democratic scruples. A decade earlier Walter Lippmann told the President-Elect that he might have to “assume dictatorial powers” in the face of economic crisis, and Roosevelt’s demurral had not spared him the accusation that his

¹ Cordell Hull, *The Memoirs of Cordell Hull* (New York: MacMillan Co., 1948), 1116.

² On the ambiguities and politics of the Atlantic Charter, see Elizabeth Borgwardt, *A New Deal For the World: America’s Vision for Human Rights* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005).

³ *Foreign Relations of the United States*, 1942, Vol. 1, General (Washington: GPO, 1960), 1-8.

administration had done precisely that.⁴ Republicans condemned him as a tyrant for the National Recovery Act, for his “court packing” plan, for his election to a third term. At the end of 1941 the mantle of the dictator seemed more palpably at hand than at any of these earlier moments. The declaration of war against Japan pledged “all the resources of the country” to mobilization, and two War Powers Acts gave the president vast authority to reorganize the state, seize property, conscript men, and censor the news.⁵ The President’s friends and opponents alike supported the expansion of his authority. House Judiciary Committee Chairman Hatton Sumners spoke approvingly of granting the White House “what would ordinarily amount to a dictatorial power.”⁶ Clare Hoffman, an America First supporter from Michigan, described Roosevelt with a sense of awe while grudgingly supporting the first war powers bill: “Today he stands forth as the most powerful ruler in the world.”⁷ Three days later, the most powerful ruler in the world was not convinced he could sign Hull’s declaration.

Roosevelt’s doubts touched fundamental questions of popular sovereignty.⁸ The war that was declared with near-unanimity in December 1941 had virtually no public champions in

⁴ Ronald Steel, *Walter Lippmann and the American Century* (New York: Vintage, 1981), 300. On the appeal of dictatorship to a wide range of Americans in the first third of the century, see Benjamin Alpers, *Dictators, Democracy, and American Public Culture: Envisioning the Totalitarian Enemy, 1920s-1950s* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003).

⁵ Joint Resolution December 8, 1941, Public Law 77-328, 55 Stat 795. Arthur Krock, “Freedom of the Press Restricted for the War,” *New York Times*, December 21, 1941; “Roosevelt’s Powers Already Greater Than Any Previous President’s With More on the Way,” *The Wall Street Journal*, December 20, 1941.

⁶ *Congressional Record*, December 16, 1941, 10117.

⁷ *Congressional Record*, December 16, 1941, 10115.

⁸ In the days after the meeting, State Department lawyers addressed the problem in terms of the president’s authority to enter into binding alliances. *Foreign Relations of the United States*, 1942, Vol. 1, 8-12.

December 1940; there was no guarantee that popular enthusiasm would last. Even in 1941 it was clear that the representatives who spoke of “dictatorial” powers never contemplated closing the legislative branch and going home, or curtailing the elections that loomed less than a year away. And this continuity in representative government was no formality: the wartime Congress proved far from docile, rejecting administration requests for new taxes even when this meant, in February 1944, overriding the veto of a revenue act for the first time ever.⁹ Roosevelt had good reason to believe that the weeks-old war depended on public consent, exercised through channels of the democratic state that were not under his command.

The president’s moment of hesitation over the U.N. declaration points to the central concern of this dissertation: the extraordinary violence mobilized by the United States after 1941 was the project of a democratic state. This is a simple statement but one with political and moral implications for the nation’s history as a global power which have not been adequately explored. Over the next three decades American foreign relations were marked by the recurrent use of lethal force that often looked totalitarian in its capacity to erase cities or to propagate terror among civilian populations, but which rested on a foundation of common purpose that had to be constantly tested and shored up against erosion in 100 million minds.¹⁰ This dissertation is a history of the moral ramifications of international violence employed by a liberal democratic state, focusing on 1941-1945 as crucial years when a vernacular “realism” took shape as a

⁹ John Morton Blum, *V Was for Victory: Politics and American Culture* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1976), 242-244.

¹⁰ In a vast literature on the modalities of violence in U.S. conflicts since 1945, see for example Bruce Cumings, *The Korean War: A History* (New York: Modern Library, 2010), Bernd Greiner, *War Without Fronts: The USA in Vietnam* (New Haven: Yale, 2010), Nick Turse, *Kill Anything That Moves: The Real American War in Vietnam* (New York: Picador, 2013), David Hunt, *Vietnam’s Southern Revolution: From Peasant Insurrection to Total War* (University of Massachusetts Press, 2007). A powerful exploration of the meaning of Cold War-era violence in East Asia in particular is Heonik Kwon’s *The Other Cold War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

enduring, “common-sense” commitment to the ethics of killing that could survive in an era of civil rights, racial liberalism, and the end of empire. While this language corresponded in intriguing ways with an ascendance of realism in international relations theory, I focus on moral sentiments rather than formal arguments about the ethics of interstate politics or the definitions of “just and unjust wars”, and find traces of these sentiments in a wide range of sources generated at the intersection of state action and popular imagination. The primary sites of investigation include the archives of military and civilian censorship agencies, the deliberations of the Office of War Information and other public relations specialists, the work of quasi-official cultural entities such as the Council on Books in Wartime, and the cultural productions ranging from journalistic reportage to volumes of advice on wartime child-rearing.

None of this argument is meant to deny that war entailed cant and secrecy, or that tremendous power accrued in the hands of administrators who could make consequential decisions with little immediate oversight or accountability. Nevertheless, even in the crisis years of the early 1940s democratic government was not officially repudiated as in the fascist states, put in a military trust as in “Free France,” or circumscribed as in Great Britain, where general elections were delayed for a decade. Twenty-seven million Americans voted in 1942, costing the President’s party 45 seats in the House of Representatives. The executive charged with the conduct of the war then had to bargain with a less-friendly government over the means to wage the war. Two years later the role of commander-in-chief was seriously contested in a race that sprawled across the globe and ran to the very edges of the combat zone: ships carrying guns and soldiers to the front lines in 1944 also carried ballots to supply a national election held on six continents. Democracy was attenuated by stark social and legal divisions, few more malignant than the systematic exclusion of black citizens from the exercise of political rights in some

jurisdictions, but the historically embedded patterns of popular sovereignty that had been evolving since Alexis de Tocqueville's travels in Jacksonian America remained clearly recognizable.¹¹

From the perspective of liberals who had doubted the capacity of their government to compete with totalitarian regimes this was a triumph and a relief, but it also raised problems of guilt and sin, of justification and responsibility, in diffuse and pervasive ways. To emphasize the persistence of democracy is not write a reassuring narrative of democratic resilience (still less, inevitability), but to recover a subtly troubling story about the transformations of moral sentiments between the collapse of the League of Nations and the arrival of U.S. bombers over Korea in 1950. The continuity of democracy did not render the United States exceptional during the midnight of the century; rather, it deepened the imbrication of ordinary Americans in the darker aspects of contemporary history, drawing citizens into an intimate complicity with processes of killing that were the currency of a world-system underpinned as much by the circulation of force as by accelerated flows of capital and information.¹²

But it did so in highly distinctive ways. Unlike the immediate dilemmas of combat or resistance, democratic involvement in violence was highly abstract and depended on imaginative work instead of direct encounters. The Italian historian Claudio Pavone wrote that the moral

¹¹ Sean Wilentz explains and defends the use of the term "democracy" in a context falling short of fully egalitarian participation: "By democracy, I mean a historical fact, rooted in a vast array of events and experiences, that comes into being out of changing human relations between governors and the governed." Wilentz, *The Rise of American Democracy: Jefferson to Lincoln* (New York: Norton, 2006), xviii. James Kloppenberg defines democracy in somewhat thicker terms, resting upon an ethics of reciprocity and epistemic openness. But his account, too, would suggest that democratic government can be treated as an historical reality and not simply as an ideal state. Kloppenberg, *Toward Democracy: The Struggle for Self-Rule in European and American Thought* (New York: Oxford, 2016).

¹² Michael Geyer and Adam Tooze, eds., *The Cambridge History of the Second World War*, Volume III (New York: Cambridge, 2015), 1.

problems of the resistance were defined at the point where “citizens, hitherto more or less direct and conscious instruments and beneficiaries of state violence, became managers of violence in their own right.”¹³ This did not happen in the continental United States (the Philippines were another question). But in both official ideology and in countless moments of imaginative engagement, Americans became self-conscious managers of violence rather than ethically passive instruments of state action. The overlapping spheres of democratic governance and combat can be pictured in a literal sense from an official archive. The Office of War Information (OWI) collected photographs of soldiers voting, creating a visual record of connections between the polity and the battlefield on the most basic spatial level. Some images simply documented the novelty of polling stations set amid palm trees, but others captured more suggestive glimpses of a militarized democracy. In one photograph, a white soldier from New York can be seen discussing his ballot with a member of the Solomon Islands Labour Corps, bringing into a single frame the colonial order of the League of Nations mandates, the shattering destructiveness of the recent campaign on Guadalcanal, and the rituals of self-government that figured as both an eventual *telos* for colonized peoples and as a real source of immediate coercive authority [figure 1].

¹³ Claudio Pavone (trans. Peter Levy), *A Civil War: A History of the Italian Resistance* (London: Verso, 2014), 497.



Figure 1: Lt. Charles Shuman explains his ballot for New York elections to Pvt. Alex Kwaisufu, a “curious native” in the Solomon Islands Labour Corps, October 1943. NARA still pictures RG 208 LU Box 18.

Another arresting photo from the Pacific showed three soldiers reading the instructions for absentee ballots in a room full of bombs [figure 2]. One of the men in the photo carried a postal bag on his shoulder, and a black armband labeled “SOLDIER VOTING” just below a 7th Army Air Force patch. The image evoked the implication of the people in the war as politically responsible actors, from the point where a 500 pound high-explosive came off an assembly line, paid for in taxes and public debt, to the moment it was released over a foreign city by a registered voter—who could then return to base and cast a ballot for or against the political leadership directing the war. Industrial-scale killing was not, or at least not entirely, a foreign activity imposed from abroad and sustained by alienated labor and conscripted capital, but a

collective endeavor that a free people agreed to sustain. The caption noted that the soldier ballot was the only piece of mail that left the war zone uncensored—it was treated as a sovereign communication, closer to a diplomatic cable or a speech in Congress than to a letter home. Americans became the authors of the war waged by the democratic state. This dissertation is addressed to the moral world that became possible in the process.



Figure 2: Ballots and bombs: completing paperwork for absentee ballots in the 7th Army Air Force, a major hub in the transit of men and weapons west across the Pacific. NARA still pictures RG 208 LU Box 18.

A History of Moral Sentiments

An empirical moral history of democratic violence calls for a method that can reach past formal justifications to consider intuitive and affective elements of domestic wartime experience,

without abandoning the possibility of coherent ethical judgments.¹⁴ I refer to this project as a history of moral sentiments or of moral common sense (the latter term emphasizing more strongly the social character of these responses), borrowing from a burgeoning interdisciplinary literature on affect and politics, the cognitive science of morality, and the philosophy of emotions. The advantage of such an approach in this context is that it permits an extended investigation of the ethical structures of wartime violence in a period when clearly articulated controversy over whether or not to continue the war was in fact quite minimal. While pacifists like A.J. Muste and Bayard Rustin played an outsized role in postwar politics, their principled resistance was only a ripple on the surface of the pro-war consensus in the 1940s.¹⁵ The moral history of these years cannot hinge on a grand debate that failed to occur. The fact that most Americans never considered opposition did not prevent them from having complex and potentially consequential reactions to the world of pain that came home in newsprint, however. Nor did it prevent the many agencies of the national state from worrying incessantly about the mental condition of the people. One of the overlooked stories of the twentieth century was the quiet process of assimilating the “reality” of distant horrors to a daily life that was simultaneously geared to produce more violence and insulated from any direct experience of the consequences. This was an emotional reckoning, but it was a subtle recalibration of expectations and common-sense understandings of the way of the world, rather than a matter of the fierce and urgent passions which often claim pride of place in historical writing on emotions.

¹⁴ This discussion is closely informed by Jan Goldstein, “Toward an Empirical History of Moral Thinking: The Case of Racial Theory in Mid-Nineteenth Century France,” *American Historical Review*, Vol. 120, No 1 (2015), 1-27.

¹⁵ John D’Emilio, *Lost Prophet: The Life and Times of Bayard Rustin* (New York: The Free Press, 2003).

Historians have said much about emotions since Lucien Febvre's 1941 call for scholars to "plunge into the darkness where psychology wrestles with history."¹⁶ Less has been written on emotions and international relations in U.S. history, and that work is not much concerned with moral claims.¹⁷ An explosion of psychological research, meanwhile, emphasizes the inadequacy of formal reasoning to explain human moral judgments, highlighting emotionally-laden and intuitive processes instead.¹⁸ A pioneer in the experimental approach to moral judgment wrote recently that brain imagining and lesion studies point to the conclusion that moral evaluations emerge from the "integration of cognitive and affective systems"¹⁹ Or, as a recent literature review found, "the most obvious message from the neuroscience of morals: the moral brain is an emotional brain."²⁰

¹⁶ Lucien Febvre, "Sensibility and history: how to reconstitute the emotional life of the past," in *A New Kind of History and Other Essays* (New York: Harper, 1973), 12. Major works on emotions in U.S. history include Peter N. Stearns and Carol Z. Stearns, "Emotionology: Clarifying the History of Emotions and Emotional Standards," *American Historical Review*, Vol. 90, No. 4 (October, 1985), 813-836; Nicole Eustace, *Passion is the Gale: Emotion, Power, and the Coming of the American Revolution* (University of North Carolina Press, 2011); Michael E. Woods, *Emotional and Sectional Conflict in the Antebellum United States* (Cambridge University Press, 2014). For a pointed critique of claims about emotional modernity, see Barbara H. Rosenwein, "Worrying about Emotions in History," *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 107, No. 3 (June 2002), pp. 821-845.

¹⁷ Frank Costigliola, *Roosevelt's Lost Alliances: How Personal Politics Helped Start the Cold War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012).

¹⁸ See essays on "Moral Reasoning," "Moral Emotions" and "Moral Intuitions" in *The Moral Psychology Handbook* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010). See also Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion* (New York: Random House, 2012) and Joshua Greene *Moral Tribes: Emotion, Reason, and the Gap Between Us and Them* (New York: Penguin Press, 2013).

¹⁹ Jean Decety and Joson M. Cowell, "The Equivocal Relationship Between Morality and Empathy," in Decety and Thalia Wheatley, eds., *The Moral Brain: A Multidisciplinary Perspective* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2015), 282.

²⁰ Jesse Prinz, "Is the Moral Brain Ever Dispassionate?" in *The Moral Brain: A Multidisciplinary Perspective*, 65.

For the moment at least, this literature has managed to avoid a destructive “two cultures” split between natural scientists and humanistic scholars.²¹ Indeed, specialists in fMRIs and the French Revolution have converged on the moral sentiments at roughly the same time. Lynn Hunt has linked the “torrents of emotion” cultivated by sentimental novels to the emergence of self-evident rights in the Revolutionary Atlantic.²² James Chandler’s work on the “political sentimentalism” of Frank Capra’s films connects the same 18th century novels to the cinematic techniques used to elicit sympathy in mid-20th century films like *It’s a Wonderful Life* and *Mr Smith Goes to Washington*.²³ Similarly, Didier Fassin’s account of contemporary humanitarianism, a “moral history of the present,” draws heavily on a notion of moral sentiments, defined as “emotions that direct our attention to the suffering of others and make us want to remedy them.”²⁴

These works share an understanding that moral evaluations can be found outside of clearly formulated claims. Martha Nussbaum’s writings on the cognitive character and political consequences of emotions set this out with particular clarity. In her view emotions are cognitive judgments rather than simple moods, and arise out of the basic human condition of vulnerability to the world and our consequent “upheavals of thought” as we confront a world beyond our control. Because emotions have particular objects, and concern purposive action in an

²¹ C.P. Snow, *The Two Cultures* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993 [1963]). Cf. Tamsin Shaw, “The Psychologists Take Power,” *The New York Review of Books*, February 25, 2016.

²² Lynn Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2007), 68.

²³ James Chandler, *An Archaeology of Sympathy: The Sentimental Mode in Literature and Cinema* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 127.

²⁴ Didier Fassin, *Humanitarian Reason: A Moral History of the Present* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 1.

uncontrollable world, they are more like thoughts than physical sensations: emotions are judgments. But not all such judgments are equally articulate. She writes: “Some emotions, even in an adult, may preserve a preverbal infant's archaic and indistinct view of the object. We therefore cannot think of all emotions as having a linguistically formulable content.”²⁵

Nussbaum’s account is broader than moral reasoning, but she clearly includes ethical judgments within the broader framework of her analysis.²⁶ In *Political Emotions* she explores this insight in the public sphere, arguing that affect is as important to liberal democratic politics as it to totalitarian or authoritarian regimes, and that, for example, an “imaginative and emotional shift” can be blamed for the waning of the New Deal order.²⁷

Taking these arguments seriously invites a reconsideration of the text that has defined the study of wartime ethics over the past four decades, Michael Walzer’s *Just and Unjust Wars: A Moral Argument With Historical Illustrations*. I will argue that this literature suggests a way to take Walzer’s book as the point of departure for a particular kind of moral history, instead of relying on it as a benchmark for the ethical evaluation of history from the perspective of the present. This is so despite the self-consciously ahistorical character of his work, which is concerned “not with the making of the moral world but with its present character.”²⁸ In the first pages, Walzer steps into a debate recorded by Thucydides, quarreling across 24 centuries with

²⁵ Martha Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* (New York: Cambridge, 2001), 79

²⁶ Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought*, 16.

²⁷ Nussbaum *Political Emotions: Why Love Matters for Justice* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 1-2, 214.

²⁸ Michael Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars: A Moral Argument With Historical Illustrations* (New York: Basic Books, 2000 [1977]), XX.

Athenian soldiers over the right and wrong of a massacre.²⁹ The same chapter cites Shakespeare, Stendhal, and Hobbes. This dexterity in leapfrogging the centuries adds heft to the argument that killing and dying in war have rarely been amoral pursuits: ethical controversy has attended war as far as records can test the proposition. I do not dispute this core claim, but it does little to advance a history of morality as opposed to moral argumentation with “historical illustration.” Walzer’s historical vignettes remain astonishingly effective at establishing what he calls “*the moral reality of war*—that is, all those experiences of which moral language is descriptive or within which it is necessarily employed.”³⁰ Yet his account leaves more questions than answers about how moral reality assumes particular forms at specific moments. The point is perhaps most pronounced and problematic in his discussions of American wars from the 1940s to the 1970s. His trilogy of judgments is easily summarized: World War II was a just war except in its terminal stages of nuclear terror, Korea a mixed verdict (justified until the war of “containment” became one for the “rollback” of the north’s revolution), and Vietnam unjust from top to bottom.³¹ These sharply drawn lines, however convincing, must give the historian pause in light of the other thick continuities between these conflicts. Douglas MacArthur, the commander of the unjust phase of the Korean War, had led the Southwest Pacific theater in the just war, and served at the pleasure of the President who accepted the German and Japanese surrenders – and who sent troops to Korea in the first place. When MacArthur was fired, he was replaced by a general who had jumped out of an airplane over Normandy in the summer of 1944. Policy in Vietnam was directed by veterans (military and civilian) of the “good war”: John Kennedy and

²⁹ Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars*, 3-12.

³⁰ Walzer, 15.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 117-122, 299.

Lyndon Johnson both wore uniforms in World War II and were closely advised by MacGeorge Bundy, whose formation as a professional came under the guidance of his father's boss, Secretary of War Henry Stimson. Moreover, those policymakers were sustained in office by a national political culture and by national constituencies that looked broadly similar to those of the 1940s, at least into the late 1960s. What brought about such a basic change in the moral fabric of American life that the same individuals bore arms with (almost) perfect justice and perfect injustice in a single generation? Obviously there is no reason to believe the moral character of either individuals or political assemblages must remained fixed even in the short run, but the continuities across the 1941-1975 period are striking enough to at least suggest the need to reexamine the "moral reality" of the American century. The ethical structures of the good war must be better understood in order to begin to unravel this problem.

Just and Unjust Wars is a highly systematic argument, but Walzer explains the book as an effort to justify objections to the Vietnam war made during "those years of angry controversy" when urgent political struggle precluded exactly the sort of sustained philosophical reflections that are made in the text. His description of those years aligns as much with notions of moral sentimentality as with the *logos* of his mature work: "Our anger and indignation were shaped by the words available to express them, and the words were at the tips of our tongues even though we had never before explored their meanings and connections."³² Walzer's recollections reveal emotionally mediated intuitions of moral evil—anger and indignation arising with unexamined terms that sprang unbidden to the "tips of our tongues." Here is an important tension. On the one hand, the logic came first: a history of argument (thousands of years old)

³² Ibid., xvii.

provided the intellectual underwriting for the anti-war movement of the 1960s and 1970s. On the other hand, a murkier cognitive process, fired by anger and by an inchoate recognition of wrong, came first and the justification followed after the fact.

This is exactly how Adam Smith suggested that moral judgments arose in the first place. Smith believed, following David Hume's work on the "passions," that passions and experience informed morality, and that it was therefore possible to make an empirical study of the subject. In a particularly evocative passage of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Smith turned to violence to illustrate the point. He conjured an independent spectator to an original and as-yet nameless crime, "the man who first saw an inhuman murder."³³ The spectator would not know *a priori* that homicide from "avarice, envy, or unjust resentment" was wrong. He would instead be struck by "the last agonies of the dying person," above all by the sense of injustice voiced by the dying man himself. In such a moment, Smith wrote, it was inconceivable that the witness would reflect on "sacred rules" against the taking of a life, and then apply those rules to this instance. To the contrary, "detestation of this crime, it is evident, would arise instantaneously and antecedent to his having formed to himself any such general rule." Later, perhaps, the sense of injustice would cohere into a rule applicable to parallel cases. But such a rule would be an effect of moral judgment and not its source.

Something analogous but vastly more complicated happened in the polity when world war materialized as a distant reality in the early 1940s. The simple scenario of witnessing—the single spectator watching a homicide—ramified almost infinitely as millions of individuals encountered a steady supply of virtual violence over 1,300 days of belligerency, then looked over their shoulders to see how their neighbors were imagining the same war. Often private citizens

³³ Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (New York: Penguin, 2009 [1759]), 183-4.

grumbled that other people seemed inadequately attuned to a conflict that was pervasively present in the news but seemed strangely irrelevant to daily social interactions. In an October 1943 study of “public acceptance of realism in the news,” the OWI recorded a litany of complaints about what might be called psychological slacking. A typical comment was that “if the boys could be surrounded by horror—we should be able to take it too.”³⁴ Others, however, insisted that people understood the violence of the conflict perfectly, and that an intensification of “realism” would only torture the minds of soldiers’ families for no good reason. These comments were a form of deliberation about the consensus to continue the war—not a debate over *if* the war should continue, but an elaborate dialog about what the war actually was, and how citizens should imagine their place in it. However stable the underlying consensus, this deliberation was dynamic and meaningful because it dealt with a world that shifted every time a new kind of violence came over the horizon of the “real.” The constant emphasis on the “real” and “realism” also suggest that the shifts might be seen in the longer trajectory of modern intellectual history.

Realism in American Thought and Wartime Culture

The frequent recourse to a language of realism can be explained in part by the difficulties of long-distance perception: war had to become real because it did not physically intrude. But that language also bore affinities with deeper patterns in American thought. The most politically vital usage of “realism” in the interwar decades had little to do with foreign relations, but described instead a movement in legal thought emphasizing experience over logic, and provisional

³⁴ “Public Appraisal of the War News,” OWI Surveys Division Memorandum No. 67, OWI Surveys Division May 1942 – June 1942, NARA Record Group 44, entry 164, box 1799.

knowledge over conclusions drawn inexorably from axiomatic truths.³⁵ The influential jurist Karl Llewellyn defined realism as a mode of analysis that focused on official behavior—what the state did—and its consequences instead of on “self-evident” rights and internally consistent rules.³⁶ While closely tied to the Pragmatism elaborated by William James and John Dewey (among others) around the turn of the century, legal realism was less the application of a particular philosophy to law than one element of a broad intellectual front encompassing “Pragmatism in philosophy, non-Euclidean geometry, Einstein’s theories of physics, and new approaches in psychology and anthropology,” each of which was a new source of skepticism directed at old systems of thought.³⁷

The historian Morton White called this constellation of ideas a “revolt against formalism” and remarked in 1949 that it faced a sharp decline connected with the catastrophes of war and the atomic age.³⁸ Already by the late 1930s a more conservative mood had set in, with the years of conflict leading to the outright eclipse of Dewey, Veblen, and other thinkers he admired: “Abroad books were destroyed; here they glided out of public view.”³⁹ White did not elaborate on the precise role played by war in the decline of this broader realism, but Edward Purcell has shown how total war and genocide threatened to open an abyss of uncertainty under

³⁵ William W. Fisher III, Morton J. Horwitz, Thomas A. Reed, eds., *American Legal Realism* (New York: Oxford, 1993), xi-xiii.

³⁶ Karl Llewellyn, “A Realistic Jurisprudence—The Next Step,” *Columbia Law Review*, Vol 30, No 4, (April, 1930), 442-443.

³⁷ Fisher, Horwitz, and Reed, *American Legal Realism*, xiii.

³⁸ Morton White, *Social Thought in America: The Revolt Against Formalism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1957 [1949]), 4.

³⁹ Morton White, *Social Thought in America*, 3.

the feet of thinkers who allowed for the relativity of moral judgments.⁴⁰ To unmoor the world from eternal verities was one thing when it meant subverting the “rights” of industrial property, and another when trying to summon a language of condemnation for radical evil.

While White saw one intellectual movement derailed or eclipsed around the time of the war, another kind of realism was ascendant. By 1946 a capital-R “Realism” had taken shape in international relations theory, asserting the unalterable necessity of coercive violence in a world of sovereign states.⁴¹ This school of thought had its sources well outside of American Pragmatism.⁴² But in the daily political speech of mid-century Americans, wartime “realism” referred simultaneously to a preference for close empirical knowledge of how the world worked (rather than formulas describing how it ought to be) and increasingly to an acceptance of violence. White characterized the “revolt against formalism” in terms of an “anxiety to come to grips with reality” and an “attachment to the moving and the vital in social life.”⁴³ This accorded with the view of Roscoe Pound, the dean of Harvard Law School and a founder of legal realism, that the realists “hardly use realism in a technical philosophical sense. They use it rather in the sense which it bears in art.”⁴⁴ In the early 1940s, this intellectual heritage seemed to feed a public discourse which prized “realistic” depictions of the violence of war as important markers of civic

⁴⁰ Edward Purcell, Jr., *The Crisis of Democratic Theory: Scientific Naturalism & the Problem of Value* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1973).

⁴¹ E.H. Carr, *The Twenty Years' Crisis 1919-1939: An Introduction to the Study of International Relations* (MacMillan, 1995 [1939]); Hans Morgenthau, *Scientific Man vs. Power Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1946); Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1932).

⁴² John Bew, *Realpolitick: A History* (New York: Oxford, 2016).

⁴³ Morton White, *Social Thought in America*, 6.

⁴⁴ Roscoe Pound, “The Call for a Realist Jurisprudence,” *Harvard Law Review* Vol 44, No 5 (March 1931), 697.

engagement. And the official encouragement of a mass-consciousness of the war's "realities" fed into the emerging field of international relations. Kenneth Waltz's canonical formulation of postwar realism in *Man, the State, and War* (1959) was a highly scholarly work, emerging from a sustained engagement with major social thinkers from Thucydides to Rousseau and Marx, but it bore the fingerprints of mass participation in the same problems of managing international violence.⁴⁵ Waltz explained the purposes of his book with a reference to a popular title, citing Mortimer Adler's *How to Think About War and Peace* (1944).⁴⁶ Adler, the champion of the "great books" and the Encyclopedia Britannica, wrote his 1944 title as a mass-market study guide to wartime conduct and postwar security, intended to be read and discussed by a population immersed in the awareness of war.⁴⁷

Traveling the United States shortly after the end of the war, Simone de Beauvoir noted that the pragmatism and realism she encountered among ordinary Americans was quite frightening when applied to an international field: "their realism escapes the bounds of morality, as we see by the ease with which these sincere humanists adopt the idea of war as soon as the opportunity seems warranted."⁴⁸ She worried about the "terrifying" willingness of students to speak casually of nuclear weapons as a taken-for-granted part of contemporary reality.⁴⁹ While conservative voices had objected in apocalyptic terms to the progressive elements of pragmatism

⁴⁵ Kenneth Waltz, *Man, The State, and War: A Theoretical Analysis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959).

⁴⁶ Kenneth Waltz, *Man, The State, and War* (1959), 2.

⁴⁷ Mortimer Adler, *How to Think About War and Peace* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1996 [1944]).

⁴⁸ Simone de Beauvoir, *America Day by Day* (Berkeley: University of California, 2000 [1947]), 295-6.

⁴⁹ Simone de Beauvoir, *America Day by Day*, 307.

and legal realism for decades, before the 1940s it was hardly conceivable that a realistic mindset should encompass literally apocalyptic scales of violence. And these casual conversations were, ultimately, a part of the political order—as even a scholar intent on questions of great power balancing would acknowledge. The British historian E.H. Carr, whose *Twenty Years' Crisis* (1939) became one of the first major works of realist theory in international relations, defined the student of politics as “everyone who reads the politics column of a newspaper” and thought the judgments of such actors invariably became, especially in democracies, “a factor in the course of political events.”⁵⁰

Democracy and War

But how much of a factor was the democratic citizen in the operations of the wartime state, and how should the democracy figure in a moral history of the violence of the past century? Political scientists and theorists have long noted the “separate peace” among liberal democratic states as well as the propensity of those same states to engage in devastating wars outside the pale of liberalism.⁵¹ Comparisons among various “regime types” have meanwhile attempted to demonstrate the likelihood of democracies to target civilians and to initiate or win wars, and their credibility in bargaining, among many other topics.⁵² These studies help establish a highly

⁵⁰ Carr, *The Twenty Years' Crisis*, 5.

⁵¹ Michael W. Doyle, “Kant, Liberal Legacies, and Foreign Affairs, Part I” *Philosophy & Public Affairs* Vol. 12, No. 3 (Summer, 1983), pp. 205-235, and “Kant, Liberal Legacies, and Foreign Affairs, Part II” *Philosophy & Public Affairs* Vol. 12, No. 4 (Autumn, 1983), pp. 323-353.

⁵² Alexander Downes, “Restraint or Propellant? Democracy and Civilian Fatalities in Interstate Wars,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol 51, No. 6 (December 2007): 872-904; Dan Reiter and Allan C. Stam III, “Democracy, War Initiation, and Victory” *The American Political Science Review* Vol 92, No. 2 (June 1998): 377-389; Alexander Downes and Todd Sechser, “The Illusion of Democratic Credibility” *International Organization* Vol 66, No 3 (Summer 2012), 457-489.

general sense of how democratic states often have behaved, but say little about ethical self-understandings within a single democracy. Studies of public opinion come closer, though the aggregation of viewpoints into trend lines sacrifices the nuance of moral sensibility in even the best works.⁵³

Criticism of democracies is a commonplace, but as the object of moral inquiry democratic states are elusive quarry. The weight of intellectual tradition and the burden of contemporary anxieties often combine to shift attention to the long-run survival of popular sovereignty, effecting a substitution of worry over democracy's longevity for the harms which generated ethical concern in the first place. This pattern is particularly apparent in the critique of U.S. imperialism. William Appleman Williams framed what he called the "tragedy of American diplomacy" around six decades of intervention in Cuba that produced neither democracy nor modernization, but exploitation, revolution, and eventually a nuclear confrontation.⁵⁴ Yet a major part of his worry was the apportionment of American political authority, and much of the "tragedy" of American diplomacy was the subversion of popular sovereignty. As he described it, the terror of the Cold War lay with "the elitism that led to life-and-death decisions being made by a tiny group of leaders" combined with the "passivity and even indifference of most elected representatives."⁵⁵ Half a century earlier anxieties about the persistence of American democracy had also been perhaps the dominant element of protests against an early phase of overseas

⁵³ Adam Berinsky, *In Time of War: Understanding American Public Opinion From World War II to Iraq* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009).

⁵⁴ William Appleman Williams, *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy* (New York: Norton, 1972 [1959]), 6.

⁵⁵ William Appleman Williams, *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy*, 303.

expansion in Cuba and the Philippines. The anti-imperialist complaint that was the first item on the 1900 Democratic Party platform was not the violence of empire inscribed on the bodies of Filipino nationalists, but the claim that “imperialism abroad will lead quickly and inevitably to despotism at home.”⁵⁶ It is often difficult to wade into the moral evaluation of a democracy’s foreign policy without winding up in a discussion about that democracy’s longevity.

This drift of focus has deep intellectual roots. Plato’s *Republic* treated democracy in terms of how it was bound to consume itself: “the chances are that democracy is the ideal place to find the origin of tyranny—the harshest and most complete slavery arising, I guess, from the most extreme freedom.”⁵⁷ At the birth of the modern Atlantic world the problem of how a republic confronted its own political mortality was equally central, to the point where republicanism could look in retrospect like “a quarrel with time itself.”⁵⁸ For the twentieth century political scientist the question was recast in terms of the degree of modernization and economic development necessary to prevent a relapse into authoritarianism, but it remained a recognizable problem of how and whether democracy could survive the forces which always threatened to undermine it.⁵⁹ In the context of mid-twentieth century history in particular, this problem of endings is hardly trivial. At the same time, there is a danger that focusing too exclusively on survival, extension, or realization of democracy crowds out critical perspectives

⁵⁶ “1900 Democratic Party Platform,” Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=29587>.

⁵⁷ Plato, *The Republic* (New York: Cambridge, 2000), 276.

⁵⁸ Daniel Rodgers, “Republicanism: The Career of a Concept,” *Journal of American History*, Vol. 79, No. 1 (June 1992), 19.

⁵⁹ Seymour Martin Lipset, “Some Social Requisites of Democracy: Economic Development and Political Legitimacy,” *American Political Science Review* 53 (March 1959); Adam Przeworski and Fernando Limongi, “Modernization: Theories and Facts,” *World Politics* 49, no. 2 (January 1997): 155-183.

on what a democratic state is doing at any given point in time. Dwelling on democracy as a moral end may eclipse the view of a democratic state as a collective moral agent.

These are not mutually exclusive concerns, however: in the middle of the 19th century, chattel slavery was simultaneously a threat to popular sovereignty and also an ethically troublesome institution protected by one of the most expansively democratic governments in the world. From an abolitionist perspective it was equally plausible to imagine democracy besieged by the institution of human property, or a democratic state as one of the primary authors of moral evil. While Abraham Lincoln's great fear was that slavery would eventually extinguish democracy if it were permitted to expand, William Lloyd Garrison's terror was the guilt that accrued to active citizens of a slaveholding republic which appeared all too capable of reconciling human bondage with a wide suffrage.⁶⁰ Lincoln feared that slavery would usurp the ballot; Garrison, who refused to vote, feared the ballot as fatal connection to the evils of slavery.

My approach is an effort to turn the Garrisonian insight into an analytical perspective that can be applied to the recent past. The argument is informed by recent interdisciplinary investigations of the ethical character of democracy. Eric Beerbohm's *In Our Name: The Ethics of Democracy* offers a systematic treatment of how citizens might bear responsibility for unjust state acts if they are innocent of "complicitous agency" in even the weakest sense of expressing an opinion in a public poll.⁶¹ His arguments are framed by the basic acknowledgment that democratic decisions are the basis for coercion: "There is philosophical truth in the old metaphor

⁶⁰ W. Caleb McDaniel, *The Problem of Democracy in the Age of Slavery: Garrisonian Abolitionists & Transatlantic Reform* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2013), 8-11, 159-162; Henry Mayer, *All on Fire: William Lloyd Garrison and the Abolition of Slavery* (New York: Norton, 1998).

⁶¹ Eric Beerbohm, *In Our Name: The Ethics of Democracy* (Princeton University Press, 2012), 245-245, 250.

of ballots as paper rocks.”⁶² Jason Brennan’s *The Ethics of Voting* reaches a substantively different conclusion that is more skeptical of democracy itself (his follow-up volume is titled *Against Democracy*) but is similarly grounded in an appreciation for the capacity of democratic decisions to authorize force: “The symbol of democracy is not just the ballot—it is the ballot connected to a gun.”⁶³ With a more exclusive focus on the ethical problems of interstate conflict, Christopher Kutz’s *On War and Democracy* argues that the heightened legitimacy of collective decisions can lead to an “overly permissive attitude towards collective violence” requiring a deeper commitment to restraint.⁶⁴ While Beerbohm, Brennan and Kutz offer normative projects rather than empirical accounts of collective choices, their arguments echo sociologist Michael Mann’s case that ethnic cleansing is the “dark side of democracy,” a distinctly modern product of making “the people” the exclusive source of sovereignty.⁶⁵ The important element linking these diverse works, for the purposes of this thesis, is the stress placed on the broad distribution of official power, and the disquieting possibility of a corresponding distribution of responsibility for ethically questionable acts carried out by a democratic state. Democracy may be many other things as well: a political order harnessing the epistemic power of diverse minds,⁶⁶ an ethical practice of “moral imperfectionism” set against the totalitarian impulse to purge ostensible

⁶² Beerbohm, *In Our Name*, 81, 51.

⁶³ Brennan, *The Ethics of Voting* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 8.

⁶⁴ Christopher Kutz, *On War and Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 8.

⁶⁵ Michael Mann, *The Dark Side of Democracy: Explaining Ethnic Cleaning* (New York: Cambridge, 2005), 2.

⁶⁶ Helene Landemore, *Democratic Reason: Politics, Collective Intelligence, and the Rule of the Many* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012).

defects,⁶⁷ or a form of society dependent on an anti-aristocratic egalitarianism, particularly in the economic arena.⁶⁸ But the element of broadly-distributed power and responsibility is etymologically and historically unavoidable; self-government is desirable, but it is also morally risky business. The purpose of this dissertation is not, then, to dwell on the moral dilemmas of total war as such, but to examine the moral self-consciousness of the democratic polity as it undertook the work of world-spanning military coercion.

Chapters

The six chapters of this dissertation are arranged chronologically according to their analytical significance, although each deals primarily with the archives of the war years, and all overlap substantially. Chapter 1, “Violence in the ‘American Century’ 1865-1975,” locates the years 1941-1945 against the wider trajectory of physical security, danger, and state-building in American life between the Civil War and the conflict in Vietnam. This chapter draws on the papers of *Life* magazine publisher Henry Luce to examine the assumptions about violence shared by readers of Luce’s February 1941 essay on “The American Century,” and then traces a crooked path between 19th century empire and the atomic bomb in Secretary of War Henry Stimson’s meticulously maintained diary. These texts are examined alongside statistics of violent death in American life, including casualties of war and of domestic chaos, to support a reinterpretation of the reluctance to go to war between 1939-1941, and the mental adjustments that had to be made in the course of the years 1942-1945.

⁶⁷ Leela Gandhi, *The Common Cause: Postcolonial Ethics and the Practice of Democracy, 1900 to 1955* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014).

⁶⁸ Pierre Rosanvallon, *The Society of Equals* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), 1-3, 60-62, passim.

Chapter 2, “Morale Censorship and Moral Sentiments: Knowing Total War in ‘Unbombed America,’ 1941-1945,” reexamines the history of wartime censorship in order to establish the possibility of meaningful ethical judgments from the U.S. home front. Drawing on records of civilian and military agencies, including the Office of Censorship and the Office of War Information (OWI), but also a multiplicity of Army and Navy records, I describe how efforts to maintain morale by controlling information were first planned in the 1920s and 1930s, and how the wartime practices of censorship became neither liberal nor permissive, but actively encouraging of narratives of brutality and horror that would cultivate “toughness” and “realism.”

Chapter 3, “‘Remember Manila’: From Empire to Realism in Narratives of Savage War, 1941-43,” delves deeper into the work of wartime information agencies and their relationship with domestic and global publics by considering the colonial contexts of early American combat engagements from the Philippines and the Solomon Islands to Tunisia and Algeria. At the same time that public opinion specialists were worried about the durability of mass support that emerged for the war in December 1941, old tropes of race and empire surged to the surface of popular consciousness. While this seemed to offer a resource to maintain morale and popular investment in the fight, a combination of racial liberals and military officers concerned about overseas alliances sought to dampen the racial justification of violence and turn the public’s mind to more a more “realistic” and sustainable commitment to the production of violence.

Chapter 4, “‘Excellent Education Against a Negotiated Peace’: Imperial and Totalitarian Violence in the Office of War Information’s Hollywood,” analyzes the work of the OWI’s Hollywood office in reviewing and commenting on every film produced by the major American studios in the early 1940s. As the reviewers applied themselves to fictional works across a range of genres, they were forced to render case-by-case judgments on the suitability of violent acts in

films about the British and French colonial empires, the American west, the contemporary theaters of combat, and the dark visions of early *film noir*. While their work was focused on fiction rather than journalism, the sustained engagement with the possibilities of coercive force in such a wide range of contexts resulted in a singular archive worthy of exegesis.

Chapter 5, “‘I Didn’t Make Pleasant Remarks’: Pain as Realism in the War Book Culture” moves from the relatively short-lived cultural productions of newspaper and celluloid, to consider how the book industry cooperated with official purposes through the quasi-official Council on Books in Wartime. Books held a distinctive place in the transmission of wartime narratives, offering a degree of immediacy (dozens of volumes by war correspondents and other witnesses appeared before the end of the war) but also a chance to return to particular scenes over months and years. The war books lingered into the postwar as newsprint rarely did. Here too, my interest is in how “realism” was cultivated as a tolerance for pain and moral ambiguity. In addition to the records of the Council, this chapter draws on readership studies by trade groups and by graduate students of library science, book reviews, and a reading of dozens of books of reportage which offered more durable first-hand accounts of wartime violence than the glimpses available elsewhere.

Chapter 6, “Violence at the ‘Threshold of Democracy’: Toy Soldiers, Nervous Mothers, and Realist Childhood, 1930-1945,” is an account of how globally-circulating narratives of wartime violence were explicitly accorded a place within childhood, bringing the distant war into intimate precincts of domestic life. The chapter begins with an account of the interwar effort by pacifist groups, most of them led by women, to restrict toy weapons in the name of “peace education,” and then follows the advice given to parents by the Children’s Bureau and by a host of psychological experts about the appropriateness of “war play” and “war talk” among children.

This chapter is equally concerned with adult discourses on the proper exposure of the very young to disturbing ideas about international conflict, and with the voices of children themselves, as captured by psychiatrists and educators.

Chapter 1

Violence Across the “American Century”: 1865-1945

When the publisher Henry Luce sat down to settle the crises of a collapsing global civilization in 1941, he began far from the military confrontations in Europe and Asia. His first concern was the domestic mood. “The American people are unhappy,” Luce began his February, 1941 essay, “The American Century.”¹ Not just unhappy, but “confused”, “filled with foreboding,” and “nervous—or gloomy—or apathetic.” Calling for a permanent expansion of hard-edged U.S. power, Luce spoke a language of emotion in which the basic goodness of American force was confirmed by the unease of a people at peace. There might be “a universal aversion to all war—to killing and being killed.” But peace nonetheless *felt* wrong. The essay contained the seeds of an emotional accommodation with the violence of total war; indeed, it suggested that the national conscience was troubled by avoiding that violence. Twenty-five years later he remembered his essay as a declaration of war, and prided himself on the painful choice in favor of killing and being killed, both in 1941—when “not more than a dozen” Americans shared his view—and in 1966, when the escalating commitment to combat in Vietnam struck him as “a good thing rather than a bad thing.”²

But Luce’s recollections stumbled on a basic point: “The American Century” had not called for war. Luce wrote three times that “we are *in* the war” only to qualify the statement into a vapor. The country was not a belligerent. It was not suffering physical injury, nor was a descent

¹ “The American Century,” *Life*, February 17, 1941.

² “The Ideas of Henry Luce,” chapter 1, typescript dated 7/11/1966, pp. 1-7. Henry Luce Papers, Library of Congress, box 83, folder 1.

into the maelstrom inevitable; “we may never have to experience the full hell that war can be.” Just eight sentences after putting the United States “in” the war he wrote that it “may or may not be an advantage to continue diplomatic relations with Germany.” He did not call for the annihilation of Berlin by fleets of bombers; he didn’t even want to close the embassy. While he tilted at global domination, Luce’s commitment to violent means was vanishingly slight.³

The tentativeness of “The American Century” signifies an overlooked chasm in ethical evaluations of violence between 1941 and the postwar decades. In February 1941 total war did not fit the outline of Luce’s American century. By 1966 he could not imagine the United States in the world without such violence. The shift was more than a single man’s change of mind: it marked a transformation in the moral common sense of American democracy. Over the first half of the 1940s, “internationalism” came to encompass a sustained project of killing that could draw on deep wells of public support. By 1945, certainly, Americans were tired of war and ready to demobilize—the phrase “world peace” appeared more frequently in print in 1944 and 1945 than at any other time in the nation’s history.⁴ But while there was little individual or collective appetite for future crusades, there was a broadly shared assumption that national interests might

³ This was true in and out of print. Before writing his famous article Luce had briefly participated in the “Century Group,” a powerful interventionist lobby, only to leave at least in part over an ethical issue: in the spring of 1941, Luce favored breaking the British blockade to send humanitarian aid to Hitler’s Europe. See Mark Chadwin, *The Hawks of World War II* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1968), 113. Alan Brinkley provides another perspective, emphasizing Luce’s desire to move away from personal advocacy after becoming closely associated with the losing Willkie campaign in 1940. One might say that Luce kept to the margins of pro-war activism, but it would be more apt in many ways to remark on Luce’s centrality to the political culture, and the marginalization of voices demanding immediate war. See Alan Brinkley, *The Publisher: Henry Luce and His American Century* (New York: Random House, 2010), 286, 303, and *passim*.

⁴ Google Ngram Viewer: “[world peace]”, 1800-2000 in American English. Online. www.books.google.com/ngrams. August 2017.

require the sudden exercise of violence anywhere in the world, and that such violence was justifiable. The common sense had shifted.

This chapter makes an argument about the periodization of that change, situating the dramatic early years of the 1940s within a wider temporal frame to underscore the depth of the transformation that took place. First, the three decades after 1941 were in absolute terms the most violent in U.S. history, and this violence amounted to a shocking departure for a public culture that looked far more pacific in 1940 than it had at any other time since the Civil War. The surprisingly war-averse attitudes of the hundreds of individuals who responded to Henry Luce's essay on "The American Century" provide a jumping-off point to explore the objective material conditions of security that lurked behind interwar debates on intervention. Second, while race played a significant part in American understandings of World War II, the 1940s demonstrate considerable discontinuity with earlier iterations of American empire. The diaries of Secretary of War Henry Stimson, whose long career in the national state linked 19th century imperialism with the Cold War, provide a way to examine the war years as a hinge between the deeper history of U.S. expansionism and the postwar projection of force.

Writing about World War II requires a plea for indulgence. A vast literature charts these years as a "second chance" for Wilsonianism and as an entry of U.S. and Soviet modernizing energies into the space opened by the self-immolation of the European empires⁵; as a

⁵ Robert Divine, *Second Chance: The Triumph of Internationalism in America During World War II* (New York: Atheneum, 1967), William Roger Louis, *Imperialism at Bay: The United States and Decolonization of the British Empire, 1941-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (Cambridge University Press, 2007); Mark Mazower, *Hitler's Empire: How the Nazis Ruled Europe* (New York: Penguin, 2008); Adam Tooze, *Wages of Destruction: the Making and Breaking of the Nazi Economy* (New York: Penguin, 2006). David Ekbladh, *The*

culminating catastrophe in the careers of capitalism and of Enlightenment⁶; as the end of civilization⁷; as the preservation by a narrow margin of the liberal tradition⁸; or as the founding moment for modern human rights.⁹ Even “at home” the literature is vast. Within the domestic polity, war grew the state, recast the rights and obligations of the liberal citizen, and put millions of feet in motion.¹⁰ Amid these upheavals the transformation of expectations about force gets lost. But the change, for all its complexities, can be put simply: after 1941 the United States acquired and exercised the ability to kill people—both soldiers and civilians—in every part of the world. This was as much a novelty as the financial and diplomatic institutions of Bretton Woods and the United Nations, and it coincided with the persistence of political democracy. Democratic governance proved to be compatible with modalities of killing associated with nondemocratic rule.

Great American Mission: Modernization and the Construction of an American World Order (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).

⁶ Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001 [1944]); Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007 [1944]).

⁷ Nicholson Baker, *Human Smoke: The Beginnings of World War II, the End of Civilization* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2008).

⁸ Ira Katznelson, *Fear Itself: The New Deal and the Origins of Our Time* (New York: Norton, 2013).

⁹ Elizabeth Borgwardt, *A New Deal for the World: America's Vision for Human Rights* (Harvard, 2005), Mary Ann Glendon, *A World Made New: Eleanor Roosevelt and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (New York: Random House, 2001).

¹⁰ Alan Brinkley, *The End of Reform: New Deal Liberalism in Recession and War* (New York: Knopf, 1995), Jame Sparrow, *Warfare State: World War II Americans and the Age of Big Government* (Oxford, 2011), Bruce Cumings, *Dominion From Sea to Sea: Pacific Ascendancy and American Power* (Yale, 2009), esp. chapter 12, “The State as a Pretense of Itself.”

From the perspective of military histories of the United States these may be puzzling claims. The Civil War produced far greater violence on American soil than any other conflict, and in per capita terms King Philip's War was more devastating than any twentieth century conflict.¹¹ But U.S. casualties and the deaths of others in major American wars followed sharply divergent patterns, a fact which is quickly made clear by a rough comparison of U.S. war fatalities with the deaths of foreign soldiers and civilians in the same conflicts:

U.S. deaths in major wars, 1812-1973¹²

1812-1815: War of 1812	2,260
1846-1848: Mexican War	13,283
1861-1865: Civil War	364,511 - 755,000
1866-1891: Indian Wars	906
1898-1898: Spanish-American War	2,446
1899-1902: Philippine-American War	4,200
1917-1918: World War I	116,516
1941-1945: World War II	405,399
1950-1953: Korean Conflict	36,576
1964-1973: Vietnam Conflict	58,200

These figures evoke familiar narratives. Until the 1890s, major American wars were fought over the consolidation of a continental national state, including the appropriation of land and the definition of racial and political-economic order. After the 1890s, the nation's wars were "foreign," bound up in the construction of an international system hospitable to American

¹¹ Jill Lepore, *The Name of War: King Philip's War and the Origins of American Identity* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998).

¹² Scott Sigmund Carter, "Military personable and casualties, by war and branch of service, 1775-1991," Table Ed1-5, *Historical Statistics of the United States: Earliest Times to the Present* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006). Figures for late-19th century conflicts with Native American populations are taken from the *Historical Statistics*, Table Ed202-211 "Hostile engagements with Indians – military, civilian, and Indian casualties: 1866-1891." For the range of Civil War fatalities, see J. David Hacker, "A Census-Based Count of the Civil War Dead," *Civil War History*, Vol. 57, No 4 (December 2011), 307-348.

liberalism. Violence peaked twice, in the 1860s and 1940s, as a result of the sharpest and most sustained challenges to the national state, in its continental and global manifestations. Outside these dual crises—which lend basic narrative structure to national histories—violence was persistent but far more limited.

When we attempt to tally the “deaths of others,”¹³ including the military and civilian casualties of various national adversaries along with client-state allies (soldiers and civilians brought into the sweep of war by U.S. power), a different narrative trajectory becomes legible.

The deaths of others in American Wars, 1812-1973:¹⁴

1812-1815: War of 1812	800-3,000
1846-1848: Mexican War	5,000
1861-1865: Civil War	-

¹³ I borrow the phrase from John Tirman, *The Deaths of Others: The Fate of Civilians in America's Wars* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

¹⁴ The justification of these estimates requires explanation and a preemptive apology. Aside from the absence of comprehensive records for non-American casualties, no single metric could capture the complex forms of involvement and non-involvement by the United States in various conflicts, and the sliding scales of responsibility for discrete acts of violence. My effort has focused on isolating (1) fatalities directly attributable to the United States in the world wars and (2) more comprehensive figures for Vietnam and Korea, where the U.S. role cannot be separated in any meaningful sense from the total picture. This is not satisfactory, but provides one way to look at U.S. conflicts over the long-run. The basic ranges are taken from Michael Clodfelter, *Warfare and Armed Conflict: A Statistical Reference to Casualty and Other Figures, 1618-1991* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 1992), supplemented with figures from Meredith Reid Serkees and Frank Whelon Wayman, *Resort to War: A Data Guide to Inter-State, Extra-State, and Non-State Wars, 1816-2007* (Washington, D.C.: CQ Press, 2010). A useful estimate of the lethality of American direct involvement in the European war from 1917-1918 is James Quirk, “The Blood Test Revisited: A New Look at German Casualty Counts in World War I,” *The Journal of Military History*, Vol. 70, No. 3 (July 2006), 667-701. Figures for World War II are left deliberately open-ended, but the floor is established by the figures for Japanese casualties in the Pacific War given by John Dower, *War Without Mercy*. On Vietnam see Charles Hirshman, et al, “Vietnamese Casualties During the American War: A New Estimate,” *Population and Development Review*, Vol. 21, No 4 (December 1995), 783-812. Looming over all of this, of course, is the question of genocide in the settlement of the American continents. For a recent overview of this question see Benjamin Madley, “Reexamining the American Genocide Debate: Meaning, Historiography, and New Methods,” *The American Historical Review* (February 2015).

1866-1891: Indian Wars	4,133 - unknown
1898-1898: Spanish-American War	900
1899-1902: Philippine-American War	12,000-200,000
1917-1918: World War I	140,000*
1941-1945: World War II	+ 2 million*
1950-1953: Korean Conflict	2 – 4 million
1964-1973: Vietnam Conflict	1 – 4 million

** figures for the World Wars attempt to estimate deaths linked directly to U.S. combat involvement.*

This first thing to notice about these figures, in contrast to U.S. casualties, is the gross imprecision. But even with generous allowances for error, the magnitudes of these conflicts reveal a strikingly different pattern in the history of American violence. After tentative ventures in 1898 and 1917, the U.S. embarked on a sustained career in violence in the world between 1941 and 1973 that resembled little before it. Much of this story can be told in the language of diplomatic and military history without an emphasis on ethics. But the explosive violence of the middle decades of the 20th century also calls for what Jan Goldstein has described as an “empirical history of moral thinking,” which I understand as an inquiry which neither seeks to pass verdicts on the past in a contemporary idiom nor to dissolve morality into an absolute skepticism of ethical claims, but rather to recover and analyze the specific shapes given in particular moments to the intrinsic human processes of moral judgment.¹⁵ The moral history of violence in the American century, in this sense, remains thin. Certainly historians have considered the ethical dimensions of strategic bombing, nuclear weapons, and the choices for war in Korea and Vietnam.¹⁶ And attempts have been made to grapple in ethical terms with the

¹⁵ Jan Goldstein, “Toward an Empirical History of Moral Thinking: The Case of Racial Theory in Mid-Nineteenth Century France,” *American History Review*, Vol 120, No 1, February 2015, 1-27.

violence of modernity as a whole.¹⁷ But there is a sparsely-attended analytical space between the specific choices for war and the imponderables of humanity, a gap between theodicy and the Johnson administration. Twentieth century U.S. history presents the problem of a durable, historically specific moral permissiveness about international violence, a decades-long capacity to reconcile spectacularly costly wars with democracy. Democracy was unquestionably distorted by defense politics, surveillance, and official dishonesty. But it never vanished, and this demands explicit engagement not just on the side of explaining the liberal state's durability, but in coming to terms with what was produced by the rough work of democratic reason. The American ability to produce death at midcentury is a problem of historical conscience as pressing as those posed by other "extremely violent societies," and one complicated by the fact that democratic government not only persisted but expanded in the same period.¹⁸

¹⁶ Ronald Shaffer, *Wings of Judgment: American Bombing in World War II* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), Michael Sherry, *The Rise of American Air Power: The Creation of Armageddon* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), Gar Alperovitz, *The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb, And the Architecture of an American Myth* (New York: Knopf, 1995), Tsuyoshi Hasegawa, *Racing the Enemy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), John Dower, *War Without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War* (New York: Pantheon, 1986), Bruce Cumings, *The Origins of the Korean War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981-1990), A.C. Grayling, *Among the Dead Cities: The History and Moral Legacy of the WWII Bombing of Civilians in Germany and Japan* (New York: Walker Publishing, 2006), Jorg Friedrich (trans. Allison Brown), *The Fire: The Bombing of Germany, 1940-1945* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006)

¹⁷ Jonathan Glover, *Humanity: A Moral History of the Twentieth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000).

¹⁸ The term is borrowed from Christian Gerlach, whose interest in expanding the analysis of mass violence beyond the analytic confines of genocide and ethnic cleansing is helpful in this context. *Extremely Violent Societies: Mass Violence in the Twentieth-Century World* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010). See also Mark Mazower, "Violence and the State in the Twentieth Century," *The American Historical Review*, Vol 107, No 4 (October 2002), 1158-1178.

The point is not to establish an equivalence between the U.S. and totalitarian states, or worse to establish a rank order of atrocities. Precisely the opposite, it is to think about moral particularities rather than equivalences, about existing democracy rather than abstract categories, and about the specific imaginative frameworks that imbued force with ethical significance. Holocaust survivor Primo Levi wrote, in irritation at speculations about the universal capacity for evil: “I do not know, and it does not much interest me to know, whether in my depths there lurks a murderer, but I do know that I was a guiltless victim and I was not a murderer.”¹⁹ Similarly, historians of the U.S. in the world should not let metaphysical or psychological explorations of potential evil (or conversely, political science theories about democracy as the cure for lethal conflict) obscure the realities of 20th century violence as it was actually lived. All humans and all political societies might be capable of large-scale killing. Clearly, though, not all societies indulge such violence in equal measure. Global democracy might bring peace. The twentieth century democratic state did not.

Thinking about peace in 1941: “The American Century” and its readers²⁰

Lovinia Kenyon wept. She read “The American Century” out loud to her husband, then wrote to *Life* to record her uncharacteristic reaction: she was not normally moved by narratives, but was

¹⁹ Primo Levi (trans. Raymond Rosenthal), *The Drowned and the Saved* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1988), 48.

²⁰ The names of correspondents in the Henry Luce papers are taken from hand written return addresses or signatures, and spellings given here may not be exact in every case. The correspondence related to the “American Century” essay is arranged chronologically, however, and most of the letters should be easily located by the date, along with the box and folder numbers.

touched by a polemic on geopolitical ambitions. “Please don’t put me down as just another emotional woman! I don’t weep over books or at the theater ...”²¹ DeWitt Hall also grew sentimental: he took the article to signify that “the world is a big family after all.” In that spirit he enclosed a photo of himself in his reply, so that Henry Luce might think of him during the working day.²² For M.W. Shaw, of Minneapolis, the editorial was “a rope tossed overboard to a man drowning in a sea of confusion”; J. Hennigar wrote from Detroit that it appeared like a light “after years of stumbling in the semi-darkness.”²³

“The American Century” elicited deeply personal reactions across the country, preserved in hundreds of letters sent to *Life* between February and May 1941. The letters capture a crucial juncture in the years between Munich and Pearl Harbor: as the first missives poured into Rockefeller Plaza, the House of Representatives was debating the Lend-Lease bill providing arms to England. The last letters in the file arrived the same day that President Roosevelt declared an “unlimited national emergency,” a step that he hoped would instruct “sentimentalists” in the realities of “cold, hard fact.”²⁴ Yet as Roosevelt was intensely aware, and as the letters reveal in detail, sentiments mattered.

Joe Boyer’s response from Central Valley, California, was a case in point. Boyer described his reading and re-reading of Luce’s essay in almost devotional terms, writing that he

²¹ Lovinia Kenyon letter, March 8, 1941, Henry Luce papers, box 108, folder 5.

²² D.G. Hall letter, February 23, 1941, Henry Luce papers, box 108, folder 1.

²³ Shaw letter, February 15, 1941, Henry Luce papers, box 107, folder 6. Hennigar letter, March 7, 1941, Henry Luce papers, box 108, folder 5.

²⁴ Franklin Roosevelt, May 27, 1941, radio address, in Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=16120>.

planned to “preserve your magnificent article in the slip case of my favorite edition of ‘Leaves of Grass’ (the one with the Rockwell Kent illustrations).”²⁵ Luce, like Whitman, was “heroically ecstatic” and capable of a “clear facing of reality.” Boyer’s own life was wrapped up in the ethos of productivity and progress that *Life* (and Rockwell Kent) celebrated; when the magazine’s inaugural issue appeared in 1936 with its iconic cover photograph of the Fort Peck Dam, Boyer was employed as a laborer on a parallel project, the Grand Coulee Dam on the Columbia River in Washington state. When he read “The American Century” in 1941 he was working at the Shasta Dam in the Sacramento Valley (which powered defense plants across the west when it went online the following year) and planning to head east for work in on of the shipyards that were rapidly expanding during the early days of mobilization. Boyer’s emotional connection to the editorial rested on biographical foundations; Luce could scarcely have invented a better embodiment of his own ambitions.

As he read the “American Century,” Boyer imagined U.S. energies circling the globe without entering the European conflict. He conceded somewhat abstractly that liberty could mean fighting, but linked this only with “full aid to England”—not a declaration of war. Then he revealed sympathies that would have rattled interventionist planners in both the White House and Whitehall:

[T]here is a larger liberty understood best today by Ghandi [sic] and Kagawa, and there is a non-violent loving way to overcome evil with good, the only way in which progress and peace for the greatest number eventually can be attained. Even Napoleon realized this before he died.²⁶

²⁵ Boyer letter February 15, 1941, Henry Luce papers, box 107, folder 6.

²⁶ Boyer letter February 15, 1941, Henry Luce papers, box 107, folder 6.

Boyer's easy combination of Lucean and pacifist sentiments was neither unique nor a slippage in meaning between Manhattan and rural California. Carlton Sherwood, the vice president of a financial firm, wrote a similar letter postmarked from 30 Rockefeller Center, just a few floors away from Luce's own office. Sherwood had "visited Hoover at the Waldorf" the same day that he read the article and thought it mirrored the Quaker ex-president's thinking.²⁷ Hoover was vociferously and publicly opposed to any U.S. participation in the war. Sherwood was not wrong to imagine that the article could appeal to an anti-war Quaker. A few weeks later Richmond Miller requested reprints of Luce's editorial for discussion at the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting of Friends. Miller did not read *Life* magazine; he only stumbled across the article because he heard it quoted at length by Thomas Jones, the President of Fisk University and director of the Friends Civilian Public Service, the draft alternative for Conscientious Objectors.²⁸

But it was not only pacifists with well-formed doctrines who expressed objections to war in ethical terms. Other readers, with no obvious sectarian commitment to abstain from all violence, expressed more colloquial, common-sense judgments about the limits of permissible force. For Joseph Lahey of Coral Gables, Florida, there was nothing wrong with supplying England with munitions. But he parted company with the assertion that the United States should, as Luce put it in his essay, exert its power by "such means as we see fit." "Should we use force?" Lahey asked. "Should we murder like Hitler in exerting our influence?"²⁹ Many editorialists insisted that there could be no ethical difference between sending the English guns and pulling

²⁷ Sherwood letter February 15, 1941, Henry Luce papers, box 107, folder 6.

²⁸ Richmond Miller letter, March 26, 1941, Henry Luce papers, box 108, folder 11 [Note: a filing error has created two folders numbered "11" in the Luce papers. The folder referenced here is chronologically the first, spanning letters postmarked March 26-31, 1941.]

²⁹ Joseph Lahey letter, February 17, 1941, Henry Luce papers, box 107, folder 7.

the trigger.³⁰ But Lahey felt an enormous difference between the two. So did Sam Vogan, who reported that he had read “The American Century” in two sittings, before church and after Sunday school. He decided that the postwar opportunity for the U.S. to “rule the world with kindness” made it all the more urgent for the nation to abstain from fighting.³¹ Gordon Pape, of Cincinnati, was so enthusiastic that he offered to spend \$5,000 to promote Luce’s vision of “Americanism.” This was a particularly Atlanticist and pacifistic version of Americanism: Pape wanted a federal union of the U.S. and the United Kingdom, an immediate peace proposal to Germany, and an effort to “conquer the world by service and salesmanship rather than by force.”³²

As the fluidity of the moment might lead one to expect, other supporters were simply uncertain what Luce had actually said about the war. Ilion T. Jones, writing on the letterhead of the First Presbyterian Church in Iowa City, praised the article and hoped for a sequel to clarify whether or not the U.S. should join “Great Britain’s battle in order to establish an American Internationalism.”³³ One reader complained that “Solomon in his wisdom couldn’t tell what you mean,” while another wrote that it “reminded me of Gertrude Stein or someone talking double talk.”³⁴ These comments raise the possibility that Luce’s writing was simply too murky to

³⁰ Robert M. Hutchins, “The Proposition is Peace,” March 30, 1941, *Vital Speeches of the Day* Vol. 7, No 13, 389-392.

³¹ Vogan letter, February 16, 1941, Henry Luce papers, box 107, folder 7.

³² Pape letter, February 17, 1941, Henry Luce papers, box 107, folder 7.

³³ Jones letter, February 17, 1941, Henry Luce papers, box 107, folder 8.

amount to a program at all. But this makes the letters all the more interesting: they reveal background assumptions projected against the admittedly puzzling fabric of Luce's prose. The commanding assumption of the time was peace.

Shifting focus from individual voices to statistical aggregates, public opinion polling supports the point. Between 1938 and 1941 Americans grew gradually more amenable to intervention without ever favoring a declaration of war. By the time Luce's editorial appeared, nearly 70 percent of the population was willing to *risk* war rather than accept a German victory over England, but still only about 15 percent indicated that they would vote to go to war immediately.³⁵ This stance could be interpreted as a distinction without a difference, and was frequently derided as outright hypocrisy by both impatient interventionists and worried noninterventionists. But a more straightforward reading would take the polls at their word. Americans wanted many things in the world, including the defeat of Nazi Germany, but a primary good was to avoid killing and being killed in direct military confrontations.

The reluctance to resort to war is sometimes made to appear in retrospect as little more than a retreat into fantasy, an occlusion of real historical forces by utopian daydreams. This position might be sustained if we think primarily of "isolationism": a polemical concoction made to conflate particular policy preferences with the evident impossibility of a total divorce from the world. But if the problem is violence, rather than global interdependence or "isolation", peace should appear less as a chimera than an expectation firmly grounded in daily experience. Neither

³⁴ On "Solomon" see Colin K. Lee letter, February 14, 1941, Henry Luce papers box 107, folder 6. On "Gertrude Stein" see Henry Dixon of Boston, February 15, 1941, Henry Luce papers, box 107, folder 7.

³⁵ Benjamin Page, *The Rational Public: Fifty Years of Trends in Americans' Policy Preferences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 172-196.

Republican “Normalcy” nor the New Deal had delivered comprehensive social settlements. But Franklin Roosevelt’s promise of “freedom from fear” spoke to material conditions of security that made it possible to envision life without the fear of abrupt physical termination. These conditions did not erect positive barriers to war, but they should frame the profound reorientation towards violence that unfolded between 1941 and 1945.

* * *

In the three generations between the Civil War and 1940, violent death surged around the closely linked processes of national state formation and capitalist industrialization—and then went into a dramatic retreat. This was not a single process and it was not a smoothly linear progression. But American life on Franklin Roosevelt’s third inaugural offered the human body far greater physical security than when the President was born in 1882. Most obviously, there had been no major war on American soil since 1865, when combat fatalities were a pervasive domestic reality, particularly in the South.³⁶ But broadly pacific trends are also evident in civil life in the decades before Pearl Harbor.

The warlike conditions of national unification and industrialization inspired visions of apocalyptic resolutions to the social conflicts of the late 19th and early 20th century.³⁷ The potential of social relations to collapse into war was obvious at the highest level of the Federal state: between 1861 and 1901 the presidency was more dangerous than the fields of Gettysburg

³⁶ Drew Gilpin Faust, *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 2008).

³⁷ Jeffery Clymer, *America’s Culture of Terrorism: Violence, Capitalism and the Written Word* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003). Paul Avrich, *The Haymarket Tragedy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984).

had been in 1863; three of the nine men to take office after 1860 were shot to death. Danger was even more obvious in the industrial workplace: in the three years after McKinley's assassination, 200 workers were killed during strikes. By one estimate a striking worker in the U.S. at the turn of the century was almost as likely to be killed as his or her French counterparts were to be arrested in similar labor actions.³⁸ Thomas Nast, virtually the official illustrator of Republican nationalism in the era of the Civil War and Reconstruction, veered from political caricatures into visions of dynamite and skulls in the 1880s, often suggesting that a new epoch of civil strife was at hand.³⁹ Henry Stimson, the corporate lawyer who led the War Department under Franklin Roosevelt, read novels of socialist revolution (more will be said of his career below).⁴⁰ Other prominent politicians wrote them. During the 1912 election, Woodrow Wilson's confidant Edward House published a novel in which a progressive hero led 400,000 Midwestern insurgents into a "hell storm of lead and steel" to overturn plutocratic rule in Washington and New York.⁴¹ No one then knew that the Haymarket riot and police violence, the Homestead strike, and the massacre of coal workers at Ludlow, Colorado, represented the notorious peaks of domestic social confrontation, rather than portents of even more sanguinary repression and insurrection.

³⁸ William Forbath, *Law and the Shaping of the American Labor Movement* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 105-6.

³⁹ Morton Keller, *The Art and Politics of Thomas Nast* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968).

⁴⁰ Henry Stimson diaries, September 30, 1943, reel 8, vol 44, pg 160-161. The occasion for Stimson's recollection was a chance meeting with Bellamy's son, the editor of a Midwestern newspaper, during a lunch with war information officials.

⁴¹ Edward House, *Philip Dru, Administrator: A Story of Tomorrow, 1920-1935* (New York: B.W. Huebsch, 1912), 134-5. House's imagined civil war killed about as many Americans as combat would later claim in the Great War.

From this point of view it does not minimize working-class struggles to remark on the relatively peaceful course of New Deal unionism. The Great Depression signaled a crisis for global capitalism as severe as any prophesied over the previous half-century, yet it brought neither revolution nor reactionary terror to the United States. Consider the epicenters of modern industry, automobile and steel production. General Motors resisted the epochal sit-down strikes of 1937 with tear gas and police action, but physical confrontation dissipated when the governor of Michigan refused to evict the strikers and instead deployed the National Guard to interrupt the violence.⁴² The machine guns that had been turned on miners in Ludlow two decades earlier were silent in Flint; the autoworkers unionized without lethal violence from either the authorities or the strikers.⁴³ Almost immediately after this victory, CIO organizers breached the “Hindenburg Line” of anti-unionism, U.S. Steel, without anything approaching the bloodshed of 1919.⁴⁴ Labor organizers were confronted with beatings, intimidation, and occasionally murder elsewhere, notably in the 1937 Memorial Day Massacre in Chicago, in California’s Imperial Valley, and among southern textile workers. In the face of radical challenges, however, the force employed paled in comparison to the expectations of revolution that were given birth by earlier conflicts, and tended to be sporadic and locally directed rather than embodiments of national policy. The labor historian Philip Taft wrote in 1969 that the United States had “the bloodiest and most violent labor history of any industrial nation in the world,” but he marked the end of

⁴² Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear: The American People in Depression and War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 312-314.

⁴³ Thomas Andrews, *Killing for Coal: America’s Deadliest Labor War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008).

⁴⁴ Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear: The American People in Depression and War*, 314.

that pattern around 1937. After the turbulent first years of the Wagner Act, “the level of violence was substantially and permanently lowered.”⁴⁵

Beyond the picket lines, industrial machinery itself reached a more benign relationship with the human body. Steel workers in 1939 weren’t just unionized, they were eight times less likely to be killed on the job than they had been in 1913.⁴⁶ In 1890, railroads killed 3.27 of every 1,000 workers. In 1939, that figure had been reduced more than sixfold, to 0.51 workers per thousand.⁴⁷ Absolute terms are more useful than percentages in grasping the brute physical reality: more than 4,500 railroad workers died on the job in 1907; in 1940, the figure was 583.⁴⁸ Working for the DuPont Company had been as lethal as railroad labor in 1903, but by 1937, an employee of the leading chemical firm was almost 40 times less likely to be killed in a workplace accident than at the turn of the century.⁴⁹ In Pennsylvania, the site of the some of the most brutal labor confrontations in American history, the rate of lethal accidents for all

⁴⁵ Philip Taft and Philip Ross, “American Labor Violence: Its Causes, Character, and Outcome,” in Hugh Graham and Ted Gurr, *Violence in America: Historical and Comparative Perspectives: A Report to the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office), 221, 276.

⁴⁶ Aldrich, *Safety First*, Appendix Three “Manufacturing and Economywide Injury and Fatality Rates 1870-1939” Table A3.1 “Steel Industry Injury, Fatality, and Severity Rates, 1907-1939”

⁴⁷ Aldrich, *Safety First*, Appendix One, “Steam Railroad Injury and Fatality Rates 1880-1939” Table A1.1 RR Employee Injury and Fatality Rates, All Employees and Trainmen, 1880-1939.

⁴⁸ Historical Statistics of the U.S. TABLE Ba4768–4777 Railroad injuries and fatalities: 1890–19961, 2

⁴⁹ Aldrich, *Safety First*, Appendix Three “Manufacturing and Economywide Injury and Fatality Rates 1870-1939” Table A3.3 “DuPont Company Injury, Fatality, and Severity Rates, 1903-1937”

manufacturing workers fell by 80 percent between 1917 and 1938.⁵⁰ While American politics were shaken and remade by the unprecedented assertiveness of labor, something like peace settled on the industrial landscape. This was the product of technological, cultural, and legal factors, but in its consequences it was a reshaping of daily experience. In 1936, Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times* critiqued the boredom, surveillance, and sheer contingency of the industrial workplace, rather than its body-shattering danger. When Chaplin's character was pulled into the enormous gears of the machine, audiences could laugh.

Social interactions outside the workplace also offered greater physical security at the precipice of World War II. Homicide rates show complex and highly contested patterns, and figures must be read cautiously. Nonetheless, reported killings per capita stood at a 25-year low in 1940. In absolute terms, roughly 12,000 Americans were murdered in the first year of the Roosevelt administration; in 1941 the figure was under 8,000.⁵¹ And a particularly high-profile form of political terrorism declined radically between the late 19th century and the start of the second European war. The lynching of black Americans was one of the most public forms of lethal violence in U.S. history, leaving behind a photographic record implicating thousands of ordinary citizens in spectacles of ritualized torture and dismemberment. At its peak in the 1890s, over 100 people were lynched every year. But by the early 1940s, reported lynchings had

⁵⁰ Aldrich, *Safety First*, Appendix Three "Manufacturing and Economywide Injury and Fatality Rates 1870-1939" Table A3.4 "Fatality Rates per Thousand Manufacturing Workers, Selected States, 1911-1939"

⁵¹ *Historical Statistics of the United States*, TABLE Ec190-198, Reported homicides and homicide rates, by sex and mode of death: 1900-1997. On homicide more generally see Randolph Roth's *American Homicide* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009). Roth theorizes a strong inverse correlation between national state building and homicide: when people trust their government, they are less likely to kill fellow citizens.

declined to the single digits. Rather than “an implicit part of the social contract,” racially motivated lynchings “increasingly became grim reminders of an earlier era.”⁵² Although a Federal legal response to the practice was stymied by the procedural barriers of the Southern-dominated Senate, the Costigan-Wagner anti-lynching bill passed the U.S. House by a lopsided 277-120 vote in 1937.⁵³ Long before Jim Crow faltered, a substantial body of opinion sought to dismantle the extralegal violence used to bolster racial subordination. This was emphatically not an embrace of full equality; but it was a very real change in the terms of life and death across the American color line. Black or white, the body in pain compelled new interventions: in a 1936 case arising out of whipping and death threats in Mississippi, the Supreme Court overturned a conviction on the basis of police torture for the first time.⁵⁴ That decision came five years after the Wickersham Commission, created to investigate the enforcement of Prohibition, castigated coercive “third degree” police interrogations as widespread, but also as furtive, illegal, in decline in many cities, on the increase nowhere, and extremely rare among Federal officials.⁵⁵ Whether or not this was a correct assessment, it spoke to a presumption against nonlethal forms of violence as well as extrajudicial killing.

⁵² Stewart Tolnay and E.M. Beck, *A Festival of Violence: An Analysis of Southern Lynchings, 1882-1930* (Champaign: University of Illinois, 1995), 239. On the public character of lynching, see among other works James Allen, *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America* (Twin Palms, 2000) and Amy Wood, *Lynching and Spectacle: Witnessing Racial Violence in America, 1890-1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009).

⁵³ Ira Katznelson, *Fear Itself*. 179

⁵⁴ *Brown v. Mississippi*, 297 U.S. 278 (1936).

⁵⁵ 11 U.S. Wickersham Commission Reports. U.S. National on Law Observance and Enforcement 11 1931, pages 3-6.

Even microscopic assaults on the human body were repelled. Tuberculosis killed almost 200 of every 100,000 Americans in 1900. By 1940, that figure was cut to 46. Typhoid and Diphtheria mortality rates fell 30- and 40-fold, respectively, over the same period, and mortality from inflammatory diseases of the digestive tract declined from 140 to 10 per 100,000.⁵⁶ Giving birth remained among of the most perilous moments in an ordinary life, yet maternal mortality fell by half between 1915 and Pearl Harbor, while infant mortality declined by over 70 percent between the 1880s and 1940.⁵⁷ Death exemplifies the plasticity of constants in human history: a universal biological fact, death was measurably abated over a half century. In 1900 the annual mortality rate from all causes was 1,719 per 100,000. In 1940, it was 1,073.⁵⁸ There were new perils, to be sure: in particular automobile accidents and cancer began their climb up the ranks of recorded causes of death. But they did not match the trend in the other direction.

In brief, there was a very real diminution of mayhem and physical vulnerability, not just in the course of the New Deal, but spread over the term of Franklin Roosevelt's life. If these were not moral changes per se, they certainly informed expectations about the hazards and promises of ordinary life. A leading historian of workplace safety has written that by the start of World War II, formerly commonplace accidents "had become rare enough to be shocking."⁵⁹ The point can be generalized: by 1941 the violent dissolution of the body was an aberration to be contained, rather than a predictable if lamented part of life. While the New Deal was an effort to master the shocks of market-mediated modernity, it was also a politics of security particularly

⁵⁶ *Historical statistics of the United States*, TABLE Ab929–951 Death rate, by cause: 1900–1998. Contributed by Michael R. Haines.

⁵⁷ *Historical statistics of the United States*, TABLE Ab912–927 Fetal death ratio, neonatal mortality rate, infant mortality rate, and maternal mortality rate, by race: 1850–1998.

⁵⁹ Aldrich, *Safety First*, 7.

suited to a moment when security appeared achievable. Even in the depths of the Depression, the expectation of safety from the cradle to the grave was better rooted than it could ever previously have been. Herbert Hoover, leaving office a broken and discredited figure for his handling of the economy, took refuge in these facts. In his last address to Congress in December 1932, he remarked on the peaceful transition of power and then defended his record with the most compelling figures available: the infant mortality rate had dropped every year of his term in office.⁶⁰

This was the biopolitical backdrop against which Americans contemplated war with Germany, Japan, and Italy. Indeed, while Michel Foucault's theories of power are not at the center of this analysis, his writings on biopolitics, government, and the concept of "security" are at a minimum suggestive in this context. Foucault emphasized the pastoral tradition of the Near East as the basis for a governmentality which took the health and condition of a population as its ultimate end.⁶¹ In his account, the care of livestock became the foundational metaphor for the government of men, which assumed spiritual dimensions (the pastor, the divine king) while still literally managing bodies, responding to "dramatic mortality," and developing increasingly more pervasive and effective technologies of intervention.⁶² All of these terms were at play in the United States over the first half of the twentieth century. The four decades before the war

⁶⁰ Herbert Hoover, December 6, 1932, message to Congress, in Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*.

⁶¹ Michel Foucault *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures At the Collège De France, 1977-78* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan : République Française, 2007), 1, 21, 105, 123.

⁶² Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population*, 123-4, 67-8.

accomplished the most rapid rate of life expectancy extension in U.S. history, culminating in the proliferation of Federal agencies promising further security: Social Security, Farm Security, and finally a militarized concept of “national security” that depended above all else on managing a capability to project lethal violence globally.⁶³ Harry Hopkins, who oversaw the arming of London and Moscow as the administrator of Lend-Lease, was a New York social worker focusing on the control of Tuberculosis when then-Governor Roosevelt first hired him in 1931.⁶⁴ Jane Addams, earlier in this period, expected that international conflict would eventually be tamed by lessons emerging from industrial population centers, where “a new history of government begins with an attempt to make life possible and human in large cities.”⁶⁵ Sara Josephine Baker, the New York public health pioneer who is mostly known for her part in managing “Typhoid Mary” (Mary Mallon), was only somewhat less optimistic when she published her memoirs in 1939. Reflecting on the dramatic fall in infant mortality during her career in the city, she asked if the lives she saved were destined “to be simply more cannon fodder?” But she shied away from this thought, ending her memoir with the conviction that such gloom was “only a momentary reaction.”⁶⁶ The basic trajectory of physical security was upwards. Despite the bleak uncertainties of economic life in the 1930s, the generations that

⁶³ On the singularity of life expectancy advances in the early twentieth century see Robert J. Gordon, *The Rise and Fall of American Growth: The U.S. Standard of Living Since the Civil War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 13, 206-7, 215. Gordon cites a remarkable estimate that the economic value of reduced mortality between 1870-1940 was greater than the value of all other growth in market-purchased goods and services.

⁶⁴ Robert Sherwood, *Roosevelt and Hopkins: An Intimate History* (New York: Harper, 1948), 32.

⁶⁵ Jane Addams, *Newer Ideals of Peace*, 11.

⁶⁶ Sara Josephine Baker, *Fighting For Life* (New York: New York Review Books, 2013 [1939]), 259.

would be drawn into the largest military mobilization in U.S. history had better reason than almost any of their forebears to anticipate life without violent interruption. If this was not a moral condition per se, it was certainly the precondition for one.

So it is hardly surprising, to return to Henry Luce, that the wide readership of *Life* magazine would elide the question of war in the construction of global hegemony. Peace was not a Victorian illusion that had died in 1914; it was a felt reality that millions were unwilling to surrender until the threat of physical annihilation could be more plausibly imagined. This point is underlined by the fact that Luce's critics were more likely than his supporters to see in "The American Century" a declaration of war.⁶⁷ Some felt vindicated after months of suspecting a pro-war plot in the advocacy of aid to England.⁶⁸ Ruth Craig, from Burbank, California, thought that Luce's diagnosis of the national mood was backwards: "Our national nervousness can be attributed to the fact that we do realize that we are in this war and that our American conscience knows we should not be." E.L. Raleigh worried that a luminous vision of globalism might lower the ethical threshold for wartime violence. Liberal internationalism could seduce one into killing.

⁶⁷ A handful of supportive letters appeared to interpret the essay as a call to arms, but these writers were ambiguous. Ralph Westing wrote that aid "short of war" had been a political expedient that should be abandoned now, in favor of the "sober" need for U.S. commitment. But he was still thinking in terms of risks rather than plans: "Whether this brings us into active military participation is secondary." Thus many of the strongest interventionists continued to wage war in the subjunctive. Westing letter, Feb. 16, 1941, Henry Luce papers, box 107, folder 7.

⁶⁸ Charles Abbott letter, February 17, 1941, Henry Luce papers, box 107, folder 7. Abbott wrote: "Ever since your ardent championship of all aid 'short of war' began, I have wondered when a how you would switch to the advocacy of a 100% war policy. You have finally taken that step ..." Carl Spencer, February 15, 1941, Henry Luce papers, box 107, folder 6, remarked: "Thanks again for your revealing remarks. Honestly I've known it all the time. But it was a shock to hear you admit it."

“The average man in the street knows instinctively that there is only one thing that justifies his murdering some one else. That is self-preservation.” Jonathan Johns saw a “perpetual police power” as the unwanted corollary of internationalism, and F.W. Smith thought that a Wilsonian triumph would have meant U.S. soldiers fighting in “Armenia or Syria” in 1941.⁶⁹ Where the epithet “isolationist” made insularity the hallmark of anti-intervention politics, what linked many of these letters was a concern over the ethics and prudence of killing or risking lives to advance any policy beyond immediate self-defense.

The prevalence of these attitudes should be distinguished from the strength of organized pacifism. Pacifist groups reached high-water marks in the 1930s only to decline as anti-fascist violence appeared increasingly attractive.⁷⁰ But pacifism as a diverse set of formal doctrines was embedded in a historically specific abhorrence of violence, which encompassed a much broader set of constituencies and ideologies. The retreat of pacifism, then, did not leave the floor open to unrestrained belligerency, but only exposed the breadth of the aversion to violence in 1940. It would push the point too hard to see a “consensus.” Yet in some ways advocates of intervention and their opponents had more in common with each other in 1940-1 than with the fully mobilized population of 1945. It wasn’t just Midwestern insularity or principled pacifism that stood between the U.S. and commitment to the war; it was instead much wider presumption against violence.

⁶⁹ Jonathan Johns letter, February 14, 1941, Henry Luce papers, box 107, folder 6. Smith letter, March 2, 1941, Henry Luce papers, box 108, folder 3.

⁷⁰ Wittner, *Rebels Against War The American Peace Movement, 1933-1983* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1984), 30-33.

Two final letters from the archive of “The American Century” stand out because of their unusually direct contemplation of apocalyptic violence. And both were rooted in deep historical imaginations.

Ruth Watson of Indianapolis mixed the optimism of what she called Luce’s “truly magnificent” article with a gloom extracted from Oswald Spengler’s *Decline of the West*.⁷¹ Her letter spoke of two kinds of violence. First, she anticipated and apparently looked forward to a counterrevolutionary insurrection against the New Deal, remarking in the wake of Roosevelt’s second reelection that bullets would do what ballots could not. Second, she extrapolated a chilling corollary to Luce’s call to feed the people of the world: “do we feed 90% or the world and shoot 10% or do we, as you infer, intend to shoot 90% and feed 10%?” The question was awkwardly put, and a slightly bizarre inference from the editorial. Yet here was a vision that, however exaggerated, tended to the extremes of the mid-1940s, and directly imagined American killing and dying on a large scale.

While idiosyncratic, these ideas were not (entirely) untethered. The reality that grounded Watson’s speculations was neither a fascist politics nor a particularly astute guess about the course of the war, but rather a literally genealogical recovery of past violence. “My folks lit in this country in time to fight in the Colonial Wars, Indian Wars, the Amer. Rev., the War Between the States, other little bitty wars and the World War and I guess we won’t mind a revolution,” she wrote. Modern arms, after all, had greatly improved on what “the family used in the old days.” To make the point more concrete, she mentioned that that a relative still owned “the gun my great-great-grandmother used to shoot Indians with when she found the varmints lurking in

⁷¹ Ruth Watson letter, February 17, 1941, Henry Luce papers, box 107, folder 7.

the orchard or around the milk house.” In a post-script she added, “That’s no foolin’ about g-g-grand mamma!”⁷²

This writer came closer than her contemporaries to the spirit of the mid-1940s, when exterminatory violence held sway over large quarters of the world. But she did so by way of an older modality of mass violence. The logic of continental expansion and racial killing was available at the edge of memory: someone still had the old guns in an attic. A parallel thought occurred to Frank Makara, in Sharon, Massachusetts. His response to Luce, an unpublished essay he titled “The Earth’s Century,” praised the “beastly man” of antiquity as the progenitor of civilization.⁷³ Historical violence should be honored as a taproot of the West:

The savages wrested England from the Romans by exterminating the latter, man and woman, old and young, sick and infirm. This is not meant to condemn the Anglos and Saxons — for they knew no better. In fact ‘kill or be killed’ was their manly code of life and besides you who read this and I who write it are descendants of such savages.

But, he went on, progress had left this life behind. The “rugged individualism” of liberalism capitalism was an intermediary between the “savage” and the Christian millennium—which the U.S. should advance by staying out of the war and mediating an eventual peace. Rather than Spenglerian decline and inevitable conflict, this writer seemed to invoke something more like H.G. Wells’ vision of a pacific future governed by “a new sanity.”⁷⁴

These were drastically different kinds of historicism: one imagined exterminatory violence as a recurrent feature in the endless rise and decline of societies, the other rigorously

⁷² Ruth Watson letter, February 17, 1941, Henry Luce papers, box 107, folder 7.

⁷³ Frank Makara letter, April 4, 1941, Henry Luce papers, box 108, folder 10.

⁷⁴ H.G. Wells, *The Outline of History: Being a Plain History of Life and Mankind* (New York: Macmillan, 1920) vol. II, 573.

plotted an upward-trending historical progression. But they mirrored each other insofar as they went beyond their immediate circumstances to seek historical resources for the interpretation of dark times. And they found what they were looking for in a past marked by real and imaginary racial killing, ethically unbounded confrontations between members of a tribal humanity. Was the violence of the American century a recrudescence of the “barbarous years” of settlement, the wild expulsions of the white republic and the brutalities of chattel slavery? A powerful interpretive tradition yokes the military cultures of the 20th century to these earlier experiences, but an overemphasis on continuities is deceptive here. Even within a single life the meaning of violence shifted considerably across the middle of the 20th century, and the justifications of force had to be renegotiated constantly. This is apparent in the career of the man who would lead the War Department in the years when the Pentagon rose on the banks of the Potomac.

Henry Stimson’s Progress: Realities of Violence, 1911-1945

“At twelve o'clock I had my interview with the United Fruit Company over the case of torture in Honduras,” Secretary of State Henry Stimson wrote in his diary on January 2, 1931.⁷⁵ The meeting went well. Stimson presented evidence of the company’s complicity in torture in the plantation-dominated town of Tela, and watched as “perspiration poured down the face of the [company] president.” It was a brief encounter and only shallowly followed up: routine business.⁷⁶

⁷⁵ Henry Stimson diary, January 2, 1931, reel 3, vol. 15, pg 2-3.

⁷⁶ Stimson received a follow-up report in June of the same year, and after that the matter disappeared. Henry Stimson diary, June 5, 1931, reel 3, vol. 16, 129.

Shadows of violence crossed Henry Stimson's desk for more than three decades, from 1911 to 1945. A consummate diarist during his years leading the State and War Departments, he left an extended self-portrait of the management of force, from the quiet handling of torture to atomic bombing. His life dramatically foreshortens the *longue duree* of American history, demonstrating how untenable it is to think about late-twentieth century internationalism apart from earlier racial-imperial projects. The first master of the Pentagon also commanded veterans of 19th century "Indian wars." At the same time that his resume connects these epochs, however, Stimson's private perceptions should warn against drawing straight lines from colonialism to Hiroshima. His diaries not only link two eras of empire, but also capture subtle moral transformations in a single mind.

Stimson's internationalism was steeped in Atlantic-facing eastern institutions: he attended Exeter and Yale, was elected to Skull and Bones, then landed a partnership at Root and Clark, whose senior lawyer, Elihu Root, shaped the Army Stimson inherited when President Taft named him Secretary of War in 1911. Carrying on his mentor's administrative modernization was the centerpiece of Stimson's work in Washington. But Taft—whose career took him through three branches of Federal government by way of a stint ruling the Philippines—warned him at the outset that the Secretary of War was the "itinerant member" of the Cabinet.⁷⁷ His work was not confined to Washington and New York.

As promised, Stimson toured far-flung Army bases in 1911 and 1912, stopping at "Old Fort Apache" and passing near the Trinity test site, where nuclear war entered his purview a generation later. Against the responsibilities of the Manhattan Project his supervision of an Army

⁷⁷ Stimson diary, "Personal Reminiscences, 1911-1912, Confidential" reel 1, Vol II, 42.

of 80,000 appears leisurely.⁷⁸ This is not quite right, though. At Fort Apache, Stimson registered enough ongoing frictions to reflect that it was “the only remaining army post where any possibility of Indian trouble may be said to exist,” however unlikely.⁷⁹ His guide and friend, Gen. Leonard Wood, had won a Congressional Medal of Honor for his part in the capture of Geronimo in 1886, and introduced Stimson to Apache scouts who had served in that campaign.⁸⁰ At Fort Bliss in El Paso, he contemplated the border with revolutionary Mexico, noting recent deaths from cross-border gunfire; this impressed on him the need for a more centralized military and a willingness to take “drastic actions.”⁸¹ On the same trip, he weighed his first intervention in the Caribbean. He was shocked by the “pall of negro despotism” in San Domingo, then in U.S. receivership. As he steamed away from the pseudo-colony brooding on its “hopeless population,” news came of an insurrection across the border in Haiti. He telegraphed President Taft to confer about intervention (which did not happen in this case, but would four years later).⁸²

These were hardly formative experiences for the 43-year-old cabinet member, who registered the possibilities of force almost in passing. But this is itself worth pausing over. Stimson accepted the prospect of killing from Arizona to the Antilles with equanimity, and it is

⁷⁸ *Historical Statistics of the United States*, Table Ed26-47 - Military personnel on active duty, by branch of service and sex: 1789–1995.

⁷⁹ Stimson diary, “Personal Reminiscences, 1911-1912, Confidential” reel 1, Vol II, 64.

⁸⁰ Stimson diary, reel 1, vol II, 64-5.

⁸¹ Stimson diary, reel 1, vol II, 127-8.

⁸² Stimson diary, reel 1, vol II, 44.

tempting to jump from here to the geopolitics of the United States as an emerging world power. The protégé of Root and Theodore Roosevelt would build Franklin Roosevelt's Pentagon and train McGeorge Bundy (the son of one of his deputies in the 1940s) in time to lead the Kennedy-Johnson National Security Council. Perhaps American military power incubated in stable chambers from 1898 to 1968. Yet Stimson almost never wrote about war in these contexts. Public works and administrative modernization—efforts at consolidating the national state—loom larger than war in his memoirs of the War Department under Taft.⁸³ Peripheral irruptions of violence signified an ongoing process of continental expansion, racial dispossession, and national state formation—all of which were elements of international order, rather than breaches of the interstate peace. Stimson's concept of "peace" in a progressive era enfolded within it a presumption of policing and enforcement, which entailed prospects for violence at the borders between civilization and the dwindling sphere of non-self-governing peoples. In this respect it is worth noting where Stimson's personal unease came most clearly to the surface: in Hispanola, where local sovereignty by non-white populations was most deeply entrenched, and it was most difficult for him to imagine a transition to progressive governance in the image of a de-radicalized, post-Reconstruction Republican nationalism. Stimson was comfortable with force that was compact, incidental, and almost unavoidably tinged with racial understandings of who was and was not capable of rule at home. In his first term as Secretary of War, his major concern was the forceful administration of an imperial peace.

Only a few years later, however, he complained to his diary that he had become "stale with the long grind, and must begin again to think of something beside war ... For a year now, I

⁸³ Henry Stimson, *On Active Service in Peace and War*, 41-79.

have been devoting myself exclusively to the business of learning war, with no other thought.”⁸⁴

On a mid-life impulse he enlisted in 1917 in the Army he once led, and became a 50-year-old artillery officer in time to see combat in France in 1918. His experience of combat was brief, but World War I expanded both his ambitions for peace and his imagination of violent death.

In the first place, war became real in France. “Real” was the word he used when flashes of gunfire appeared over the horizon near the Somme, and again when he saw death at first hand. On January 16, 1918, he wrote that he was “settled at the front and at the close of my first day of real, albeit rather mild, war.” Real meant landscapes: “trees utterly smashed and ruined, and not a vestige left of flourishing towns and villages except flattened masses of bricks and stones.”⁸⁵ He also marveled at the incongruity of the wartime real coexisting with vestiges of civilian life and normal peacetime existence, particularly with entertainment which seemed to transport the mind away from the immediacies of combat life. After arriving with the 51st he was taken to a musical theater performance staged by the soldiers, a “curious situation”:

Here we were in an extemporized theatre in an old stable in a ruined French town only a short distance away from the battle lines of a terrible war; almost every man who was sitting there applauding the music had been through terrible experiences, killing or being killed, losing friends by the score, and yet for the moment we were all far away from such thoughts and roaring with fun over the music and the jokes.⁸⁶

This passage is worth highlighting for its meditation over the simultaneity of violent death and normal life. The theme recurred in his diary. What stood out was not the physical awkwardness of worn-out soldiers at the theater; it was their joyful exteriors in proximity to the trenches and

⁸⁴ Stimson diary, reel 1, volume 4, May 5, 1918.

⁸⁵ Stimson diary, reel 1, volume 4, January 16 and January 26, 1918.

⁸⁶ Stimson diary, reel 1, vol. 4, February 5, 1918.

even greater proximity to their own traumas. Stimson had similar thoughts when he orchestrated bombings in Nicaragua by telephone (a novelty in the early 1930s) as President Hoover's Secretary of State. Later still, in the 1940s, the juxtaposition became a commonplace.

More immediately real were casualties under his command. On June 22 he wrote about the first two wartime deaths in his unit, accidental victims of an exploding artillery piece. "I was not far off and it fell to my lot to take more or less charge of the subsequent proceedings," he wrote, "and I am glad to say that I was able to carry through this little bit of 'intimate' war, so to speak, without tremor, although of course it was hard experience."⁸⁷ The lesson he took from the incident, aside from his own capability, was that the men in his command could handle what he called "the real thing." To reassure himself on the point he tracked morale in consultation with the unit censor who read the soldiers' letters home.⁸⁸ When it came to policymaking in the next war, he was not naïve about the effect of industrial weapons on human bodies. And he had already spent time reflecting on morale and on the links between battlefield combatants and domestic life.

Stimson changed his mind about little in World War I. He emerged with an intensified commitment to law as a progressive, universal antithesis to warfare; the trenches gave deeper meaning to positions he already held. Six months to the day after writing about casualties in France, he had a long conversation with Elihu Root about the League of Nations and the future of world order. While deriding the League as fragile and corruptible, Root imagined a new order resting on a change in "the fundamental conception of international law." The basic problem of

⁸⁷ Stimson diary, reel 1, vol. 4, June 22, 1918.

⁸⁸ Stimson diary, reel 1, vol. 4, June 9 and June 26, 1918.

international relations stemmed from treating war as a private wrong in which the public—global society—had no interest. The solution was to domesticate international relations, treating aggression as a crime against the community, or perhaps even against a supranational sovereign. Where Root spoke of legal categories, Stimson turned the conversation to physical injury: “I broke in to cite the similar view taken by our ancestors of even a homicide; that it was merely the affair of the dead man's family and not of the state to avenge.”⁸⁹ While neither of them ever worked out the shape of this larger sovereignty, the alacrity of Stimson’s comparison of war to murder hinted at his later emphasis on the Kellogg-Briand Pact outlawing war and other legal instruments as the cornerstones of the European peace in the 1920s and 1930s.

Reconciling the legalist faith with persistent imperial violence presented few problems during his return to diplomatic service in the Coolidge and Hoover administrations. As he approached the Manchurian crisis in 1931, Stimson remained embroiled in the Nicaraguan government’s war against Augusto Sandino, classed as a “bandit” (in no small measure due to the terms of the settlement Stimson himself arranged during a diplomatic mission in 1927).⁹⁰ In January 1931 he spent a morning reviewing budgets for the *Guardia Nacional*, weighing the allocation of funds for weapons and for railroads.⁹¹ That April he discussed the bombing of

⁸⁹ “Memorandum of Talk with E.R. [Elihu Root], Stimson diary, reel 1, vol. 3, December 22, 1918.

⁹⁰ On the interventions in Nicaragua see Michael Schroeder, “The Sandino Rebellion Revisited: Civil War, Imperialism, Popular Nationalism, and State Formation Muddled Up Together in the Segovias of Nicaragua, 1926-1934,” in Gilbert Joseph, Catherine LeGrand and Ricardo Salvatore, *Close Encounters of Empire: Writing the Cultural History of U.S.-Latin American Relations* (Duke, 1998); Allen McPherson, *The Invaded: How Latin Americans and Their Allies Fought and Ended U.S. Occupations* (New York: Oxford, 2014); and Stimson’s own account, *American Policy in Nicaragua* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1927).

⁹¹ Stimson diary, reel 3, vol. 15, January 30, 1931, 60.

“bandits” over the telephone with American diplomats in Central America, then listened to the broadcast of a Marine band at home, and marveled that the same technology had allowed him to appraise a situation 2,000 miles away, consult the president, and order Marines into action—all, he noted, “since breakfast.”⁹² Days later he told the Cabinet about the same operations in a rather different historical frame: “I described ... the attacks of these ruthless small groups of bandits against unoffending settlers, comparing them to the attacks of the Mohawks on our former frontier settlements of New York.”⁹³ He also invoked his brief experience as the governor of the Philippines, telling a Nicaraguan official about the U.S. approach to policing and banditry in that country.⁹⁴

Stimson’s approach to Nicaragua might be described as a vestigial imperialism and contrasted with the nascent anti-fascist internationalism of his “non-recognition” policy towards Japanese territorial expansion in Manchuria. But tracing Stimson’s approach to violence, rather than leaping to his larger strategic vision, illuminates strong parallels between the cases. In both China and Central America in 1931-2, imperial racial formations structured good and bad violence, and in both cases he thought in terms of policing a civilized peace, rather than waging war. In his diary entries before and during the Manchurian crisis, Stimson repeatedly contemplated the possibility that the East Asian situation might demand U.S. force—but force deployed against China, rather than against Japan. The day before a “long and tiresome talk” with a Nicaraguan official about anti-bandit fighting in January 1931, Stimson and his staff

⁹² Stimson diary, reel 3, vol. 15, April 13 and April 14, 1931, 239-245.

⁹³ Stimson diary, reel 3, vol. 15, April 17, 1931, 255.

⁹⁴ Stimson diary, reel 4, vol. 20, January 11, 1932, 38.

weighed the possibility of military intervention on the Chinese coast to preserve unequal treaty rights.⁹⁵ On April 29 he worried that negotiations might require a “show of force” to prevent U.S. nationals from falling under Chinese law. He was strongly averse to a violent intervention on prudential grounds but considered it an unpleasant contingency that might be necessary because “the Chinese have not yet developed anything like a Supreme Court.”⁹⁶

When the Japanese army’s overt aggression in Manchuria triggered an international crisis that fall, Stimson’s efforts to invoke the Kellogg-Briand pact against war were braided with a racial pessimism and a persistent ability to imagine limited, regulatory violence within China instead of an open clash with Japan. On October 9, he reflected that Western peace treaties “no more fit the three great races of Russia, Japan, and China ... than, as I put it to the Cabinet, a stovepipe hat would fit an African savage.”⁹⁷ Even as he called the League’s response to Japan a test of international peace, he scolded reporters for anti-Tokyo reporting, because “Japan really stood as our buffer against the unknown powers behind her on the mainland of China and Russia.”⁹⁸ Clashes with Chinese citizens were more plausible and palatable than formal conflict with Japanese soldiers. The day before he announced the doctrine of non-recognition, Stimson interrupted his work on the policy to meet with the Japanese ambassador about the punishment of Japanese soldiers for assaulting a U.S. consul in Mukden. The Japanese government quickly apologized, but the issue of punishment persisted because, as Stimson noted in his diary, the *Chinese* population of Manchuria needed a reminder of U.S. prestige: “we would not be safe

⁹⁵ Stimson diary, reel 3, vol. 15, January 22, 1931, 39-43.

⁹⁶ Stimson diary, reel 3, vol. 16, April 29, 1931, 34.

⁹⁷ Stimson diary, reel 3, vol. 18, October 9, 1931, 111-112.

⁹⁸ Stimson diary, reel 3, vol. 18, October 15, 1931, 135-6.

there if these men were not punished.”⁹⁹ Four days later a court-martial was announced, and Stimson took satisfaction not at the restraint this would impose on the Kwantung Army, but at the “disciplinary effect upon the Chinese and other lawless elements.”¹⁰⁰

The possibility of violence against Chinese populations is a bright red strand throughout Stimson’s diary entries about the crisis. Later that month the issue arose in a meeting with Sir Ronald Lindsay, the British ambassador. Against a larger anxiety that Western and Japanese interventions might trigger Chinese militarization, Stimson reflected on “the last time we had been obliged to lay down a barrage at Nanking.” However reluctant he was to alienate Chinese affections, disciplinary force remained a possibility where local law was perceived to be inadequate. But he scoffed at Tokyo’s justification for the ominous encirclement of Shanghai: “In the international settlement at Shanghai, however, there was a perfectly efficient police force under white officers and largely consisting of white enlisted men.”¹⁰¹

Three days after this conversation Japanese bombers attacked Shanghai, starting a weeks-long battle with the 19th Route Army that left thousands dead in the city. Stimson compared the attack to the invasion of Belgium in 1914, but he also held out the hope that Kellogg-Briand and the League would prevent a general war. Even as he decried the “barbarism” of the bombers, his thoughts on violence continued to be preoccupied with the management of an unruly Chinese population. On the same day that he jotted down the comparison to Belgium, he met the Japanese ambassador and again stressed the danger that Japanese operations “would bring the Chinese to

⁹⁹ Stimson diary, reel 4, vol. 20, January 6, 1932, 18-19.

¹⁰⁰ Stimson diary, reel 4, vol. 20, January 10, 1932, 33-4

¹⁰¹ “Memorandum of Conversation Between Secretary Stimson and the British Ambassador, Sir Ronald Lindsay,” Stimson diary, January 25, 1932, reel 4, vol. 20, 95-6.

attack us.”¹⁰² Stimson condemned Japan for bringing weapons to bear against a civilian city. But Shanghai in a very real sense only merited the presumption of civilian status, and thus heightened protections from any use of force, because it was subject to a white police force and was the home to functioning Western legal institutions.

Race and empire marked Stimson’s encounters with violence at nearly every turn during the crises of the early 1930s. Even passing comments carried an imperial inflection. When Herbert Hoover complained to Stimson that he wished never to meet alone with the “dangerous and contrary” President-Elect Franklin Roosevelt, the Secretary reassured him by recalling his own successful management of Filipino officials, who, he noted, had been “regarded a treacherous race.”¹⁰³ The following Monday it was Stimson, not Hoover, sitting across from Roosevelt in Hyde Park, and the two men talked about the global economic crisis only after weighing the risks of revolution in Cuba and discussing military plans for the Philippines.¹⁰⁴ Roosevelt boasted of his role in drafting defense plans for the islands, and reminisced about his family’s history in East Asian commerce. They considered the possibility of future Marine involvement in Haiti, and talked about “Little Ted’s” governance of Puerto Rico, referring to the colonial governorship of the former President Roosevelt’s son. The meeting was an important one in establishing a baseline of agreement on East Asian policy that would underpin their later

¹⁰² Stimson diary, reel 4, vol. 20, February 3, 1932, 151-2.

¹⁰³ Stimson diary, reel 5, vol. 25, January 3, 1933, 71-2.

¹⁰⁴ “Memorandum of Conversation with Franklin D. Roosevelt, Monday, January 9, 1933,” Stimson diary, reel 5, vol. 25, 94-98.

collaboration, but their rapport was established in the glow of 19th century colonialism, not in anticipation of an anti-fascist struggle.

What must be underlined however, given the strongly racial character of the Pacific War from 1941, was the degree to which these considerations militated *against* conflict with Japan in the early 1930s. Stimson described his policy towards Tokyo as a “bluff.”¹⁰⁵ Disciplinary violence in China was not a bluff, nor was bombing Nicaragua. A war with Japan would collapse the international legal order that the bombardment of Chinese or Latin American targets ostensibly maintained. The logic that enabled interventions also sharply limited the scope of acceptable colonial violence, and ruled out almost absolutely a clash among the civilized. Stimson acknowledged that the United States had “ceased to be an annexing power” after it curtailed immigration in the 1920s and stopped “mingling in our population any more divergent elements.”¹⁰⁶ He fretted over the possibility of landing marines in El Salvador in 1932, and privately lamented the occupation of Haiti as an unfortunate obligation imposed by Wilson’s invasion.¹⁰⁷ Where self-governance faltered—and Stimson had little faith in self-governance anywhere—force was an appropriate remedial measure for the most advanced states. Yet such force was supposed to be tutelary and brief, and he continued to see general war as a catastrophe.

When he retired from public service in 1933 (a retirement that did not stick) he had garnered a long acquaintance with the violence of imperialism and at least glimpses of a more absolute violence in Europe in 1918. But he understood the former as limited and peripheral,

¹⁰⁵ Stimson diary, reel 4, vol. 20, January 26, 1932, 101-103.

¹⁰⁶ Stimson diary, reel 4, vol. 20, January 26, 1932, 101-2.

¹⁰⁷ Stimson diary, reel 4, vol. 20, Jan 25, 1932, 89.

while the latter he rejected as an anachronism. For five years thereafter his diary entries touched on physical conflict only in passing, and his commitment to the diary itself lapsed while he was out of office. From time to time there were glimpses of his attention, however. On the 20th anniversary of the Argonne offensive he spoke to veterans of his own 305th Field Artillery and interpreted the World War in terms of European fascism. The major lesson of the war had been the value of “tolerance between men of differing races” and the counterpoint this provided to “the doctrine which was being taught now across the Atlantic of racial hatred as an engine for selfish conquest.”¹⁰⁸ While Stimson was never a racial liberal, he recoiled from the fascist logic of race that might have allowed him to draw a straight line between his grand tour of the periphery in 1911 and the immolation of Japan in 1945.

Nor did his legalist faith provide a basis to anticipate either the globalism or the extremes of destructiveness reached in the mid-1940s. While his memoir claimed in retrospect that the crises of 1929-1930 marked the last years of his confidence in peace, he spent the spring and summer of 1939 publicly and privately responding to the European and East Asian crises at least partially in terms of international legal order.¹⁰⁹ In April 1939 he confidently invoked Kellogg-Briand while testifying in front of a Senate panel.¹¹⁰ When he was asked his opinion as a lawyer about the best defense of a corporation facing a (hypothetical) stockholders’ suit over a decision to terminate trade with Japan, he took League of Nations policy as a major point of departure.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁸ Stimson diary, reel 5, vol. 28, September 26, 1938, 172-3.

¹⁰⁹ Stimson, *On Active Service in Peace and War*, 188.

¹¹⁰ Stimson diary, reel 6, vol. 29, April 5, 1939, in a long section dictated in July, and labeled “1939,” 9.

None of Stimson's private reflections in the weeks before September 1, 1939 suggested that he was contemplating the enforcement of Kellogg-Briand by violence measures. A world governed by law seemed plausible far later than his post facto narrative suggests.

After the invasion of Poland Stimson became a public advocate of aid to England and was confirmed as the new Secretary of War in July 1940, joining fellow Republican Frank Knox, the Secretary of the Navy, as the face of a bipartisan emergency cabinet. The 16 months between his assumption of the office and Pearl Harbor mark one of the most interesting periods in his diary, revealing spasms of impatience and uncertainty beneath a generally consistent public advocacy of aid-short-of-war. Bringing himself to think total war was a tortuously slow process subject to reversals and apparent contradictions. In August, just a few weeks into his term, he sat sharing war stories after a meeting on defense plants with Assistant Secretary of War Robert Patterson and retired General John Palmer. All three were combat veterans: Patterson had won a distinguished service cross in France in 1918, and Palmer had taken part in Army actions from the 1894 Pullman strike to the Boxer Rebellion and the war in the Philippines. Stimson was particularly impressed with Patterson's account of killing "two or three Germans" on a patrol and then feigning death for 16 hours to escape capture. "It was quite a dramatic and gripping story," he noted.¹¹² The next day's diary showed an unusual flash of irritation at the "mushroom peace societies" that were pushing "timid Congressmen" away from conscription.¹¹³ Pacifists annoyed him when he had recently spent time turning over in his mind the image of a friend and colleague personally killing Germans.

¹¹¹ Stimson diary, reel 6, vol. 29, 4 and July 7, 1939, 21.

¹¹² Stimson diary, reel 6, vol. 30, August 21, 1940, 110.

¹¹³ Stimson diary, reel 6, vol. 30, August 22, 1940, 115.

At the same time, there were clear cross-currents in his thoughts on violence. In October 1940 he put in his diary a letter to the President declaring “one of those crises of history when the fate of the world depends upon a grave decision,” and suggested that the fleet be moved to Singapore in order to involve the U.S. in any war between Japan and the United Kingdom.¹¹⁴ Two weeks later, though, he showed alarm at the “vigorous and rather bloody action” implied by a Navy request to put 5,000 soldiers on 72-hour alert for the capture of the French island Martinique.¹¹⁵ For a year and a half he oscillated between these poles, steeling himself on the one hand for the great crises of history and on the other shying away from confrontations over islands the size of Martinique.

Over the course of December 1940 he seemed to move towards belligerency. At the start of the month he had lunch with Felix Frankfurter and Jean Monet, the once and future architect of European economic integration. Monet played on Stimson’s ego, suggesting a reiteration of the “Stimson doctrine” in the form of “an immediate declaration by the American Government that they will never recognize a France that becomes a vassal of Germany ...”¹¹⁶ This advice held U.S. power firmly within a diplomatic and legal realm. The U.S. response to the fall of France in this formulation would be entirely legal: the withholding of recognition. Stimson gave no sign of disagreement in his account of the conversation. Two weeks later his expectations for U.S. involvement looked more capacious. He described waking up early and brooding for hours over “the situation which seems to be pending” before meeting with Secretary Knox, General

¹¹⁴ Stimson diary, reel 6, vol. 31, October 12, 1940, 46-7.

¹¹⁵ Stimson diary, reel 6, vol. 31, October 30, 1940, 91.

¹¹⁶ Stimson diary, reel 6, vol. 32, December 2, 1940, 4.

Marshal, and General Stark for what turned out to be the discovery of a latent consensus. All four, Stimson told his diary, now expected the U.S. to enter the war, “and to my very great relief I found that they all agreed with me that the eventual big act will have to be to save the life line of Great Britain on the North Atlantic.”¹¹⁷

This marked an important moment of mutual recognition among the chief military leaders, but the “big act” was still only ambiguously a question of fighting. War meant preserving England by the protection of North Atlantic shipping. Still, the ground was shifting. The week after Christmas the President thrilled Stimson with a radio speech that began with a simultaneous disavowal of war and invocation of an emergency: “This is not a fireside chat on war. It is a talk on national security ...”¹¹⁸ In his speech Roosevelt called for the country to become the “arsenal of democracy,” dedicating its productive power to the defeat of the Axis. “I myself go one step further than the President,” Stimson wrote after listening to the address. When Americans “appreciate this issue between right and wrong they will be not satisfied unless they are offering their own bodies to the flames and are willing to fight as well as make munitions.”¹¹⁹ This was on the face of it a very direct indication that he was thinking about combat. Yet he remained reluctant. In late October, 1941, he had an “intimate” conversation with Secretary of State Cordell Hull, who asked him directly if the time had come for a declaration of

¹¹⁷ Stimson diary reel 6, vol. 31, December 16, 1940, 32.

¹¹⁸ Franklin Roosevelt, national radio address, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=15917>

¹¹⁹ Stimson diary, reel 6, vol. 32, December 29, 1940, 64.

war. He recorded his “NO” in capital letters in the diary, and described his hope that Hull’s diplomacy could still “shake the Japanese out of the Axis” and lead to a general settlement.¹²⁰

At the same time, the salience of international law and the lines between peace and war were growing increasingly unsettled in his thought. The morning after the “arsenal of democracy” talk, Stimson vented to the diary that he was “disgusted” with the Judge Advocate General for putting limits on the training of British bomber crews in U.S. airfields. “It just tends to show how closely everybody here is hanging on to the old figments of an international law which has been torn into tatters by the Germans,” he wrote.¹²¹ While the JAG ruling was not insurmountable—Stimson’s lieutenants quickly found ways to use civilian airliner TWA to train the British—the shock of this legal obstacle the day after Roosevelt’s speech was apparent in his contempt for the “old figments” of international law. When he testified at Congressional hearings on the Lend-Lease Act two weeks later, however, he felt he made “a tremendous impression” by focusing not just on Kellogg-Briand, but on the highly restrictive Budapest Articles of Interpretation drafted by the International Law Association in 1934.¹²² The Budapest Articles permitted discrimination against an aggressor but also treated the threat of war itself as a crime, and omitted any discussion of defensive wars.¹²³ Nowhere in the diary did this seem a contradiction to the Secretary, but he stood between distinctly different paths: along one route he

¹²⁰ Stimson diary, reel 7, vol. 35, October 28, 1941, 168.

¹²¹ Stimson diary, reel 6, vol. 32, December 30, 1940, 69-71.

¹²² Stimson diary, reel 6, vol. 32 January 16, 1941, 109.

¹²³ Hersh Lauterpacht, “The Pact of Paris and the Budapest Articles of Interpretation,” *Transactions of the Grotius Society*, Vol. 20 (1934), 178-204, 179.

was a lawyer pleading for a particular status of material being shipped from the U.S. to the U.K.; on the other road he was looking beyond the law for a fundamental moral license to embark on a violent confrontation with no limit.

On March 11, 1941 Roosevelt signed the Lend-Lease act, opening an enormous industrial lifeline to the British Empire (and eventually to the Soviet Union as well, following the beginning of Operation Barbarossa that summer). It was the most serious commitment the United States made before Pearl Harbor and profoundly shaped the politics of coalition warfare.¹²⁴ Senator Arthur Vandenberg wrote after the vote authorizing Lend-Lease that he felt he “was witnessing the suicide of the republic.”¹²⁵ On the same day, Stimson spoke about the bill to the War Department’s Conference of Public Relations Officers, using phrases that could have been taken directly from Henry Luce’s “American Century.” According to the text he put into his diary, he spoke on the urgency of morale, on the need for “real basic facts,” and on the necessity of an informed public willing to embrace a “just and necessary cause for going to war.”¹²⁶ But then, like Luce, he edged away: “We are not at war. There is no war hysteria or war enthusiasm.” Instead there was a “complicated” situation at home and abroad, which demanded the dutiful service of industrial workers and conscripted soldiers, but which could not be reduced to either war or peace. “This situation is complex because modern warfare, even in self-defense, has

¹²⁴ George C. Herring, *Aid to Russia, 1941-1946: Strategy, Diplomacy, the Origins of the Cold War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1973); Warren Kimbal, *The Most Unsordid Act: Lend-Lease, 1939-1941* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1969).

¹²⁵ Arthur H. Vandenberg, Jr., ed., *The Private Papers of Senator Vandenberg* (Boston: Riverside Press, 1952), 9-10.

¹²⁶ Stimson diary, reel 6, vol. 33, March 11, 1941, 80.

become extremely complex.”¹²⁷ As he multiplied the references to “complexity” he said nothing about the intricate logistical challenges of Lend-Lease itself, about global supply chains or the nature of a civil-military relationship mediated by billions of dollars of contracts meant to arm a foreign ally; he was instead grasping for the moral language to capture the war-in-peace of a vast mobilization on behalf of another belligerent.

When he spoke to supply officers a few days later he seems to have found that language. He called Lend Lease “an act of magnificent realism” because it “ended the old folly of remaining shackled by rules which the potential enemies of the country would not recognize.” Once again, the details he wrote in his diary suggest a speech having less to do with logistics than with justification:

I pointed out how the Nazis had destroyed the potential fundamental basis of international law; namely, mutual respect of the sovereignty of all the other families of the nations, and had entered upon a plan of aggression and world conquest and that the only law that was left was the law of self-defense. I pointed out that the Lease and Loan Act virtually made the warring democracies an expeditionary force of our country of which we were the base and the supply of munitions.¹²⁸

Stimson began to talk about “realism” when he was suspended between interventionist aims and a persistent hesitation at the point of war. Realism became useful insofar as it effaced the distinction between war and peace. There was only self-defense, a realm beyond legal limitation. Called in front of Congress to explain the ramifications of Roosevelt’s “shoot on sight” order for convoys to England in the fall of 1941, he took great satisfaction from this position. “I ripped them up from end to end,” he wrote after his testimony. When “some small town lawyer”

¹²⁷ Stimson diary, reel 6, vol. 33, March 11, 1941, 81.

¹²⁸ Stimson diary, reel 6, vol. 33, March 17, 1941, 94.

questioned him on the legality of the convoys and the risk of war, Stimson not only ignored the specifics of the legal questions but denied that “war” was a coherent category:

I told him sharply and shortly and in a loud voice that if he would tell me what war was and what belligerency was now in these days since the Nazi efforts had come in, why I could answer his question. I pointed out that China and Japan had been killing each other at the rate of millions a year for about three years and yet they didn't call it war, but called it an incident, and I told him that I would decline to discuss mere words with him. I would discuss facts.¹²⁹

This realism corresponded to a particular mood of self-conscious seriousness. When Bill Donovan brought him five reels of film showing German bombers in operation, he wrote: “the impression upon me was very intense - sombre.”¹³⁰ Days later he called George Marshall into his office to say that he had been “disgusted” by the “form of levity” in that year’s Army Day parade. He was especially upset about “women dancing cancons,” and wondered to his diary how the Germans would respond to a similar display in their ranks.¹³¹ Not long after chiding Marshall he privately expressed annoyance with Roosevelt: “We are in a serious situation ... the people feel that it is no time to joke about it and yet the President's press conferences are always on a light tone.”¹³²

As the U.S. edged towards the conflict, Stimson could not reliably call on either international law or racial assumptions of civilization and barbarism to justify the policy he wanted. Instead he cultivated a spirit of “realism” defined in part by an affective stance—a rigid

¹²⁹ Stimson diary, reel 7, vol. 35, October 13, 1941, 129-130.

¹³⁰ Stimson diary, reel 6, vol. 33, March 20, 1941, 104-5.

¹³¹ Stimson diary, reel 6, vol. 33, April 7, 1941, 143.

¹³² Stimson diary, reel 6, vol. 33, April 21, 1941, 174.

seriousness, a willingness to contemplate violence. This sensibility was particularly apparent in one of the last entries before Pearl Harbor. On December 4, the Chicago Tribune published a story about war planning under the banner headline “FDR’S WAR PLANS!”¹³³ Roosevelt and others in his administration were enraged by the disclosure, which pictured a level of commitment beyond what public opinion seemed likely to sustain. Stimson, on the other hand, saw the story as a chance to “to shake our American people out of their infernal apathy and ignorance of what this war means.”¹³⁴

* * *

Henry Stimson retired on his 78th birthday, weeks after the Japanese surrender, “on the verge of an emotional and coronary breakdown”, as he wrote later.¹³⁵ Between Pearl Harbor and his retirement he added 16 volumes to the diary. Soon after the war he entrusted this record to McGeorge Bundy, the son of Assistant Secretary of War Harvey Bundy, for editing and assembly into a memoir that was published under Stimson’s name. The book Bundy drafted, *On Active Service in Peace and War* (1948), turned a family friendship into an active apprenticeship in geopolitics, and has drawn attention primarily for its justification of the atomic bombings and for its place in the career of the younger Bundy.¹³⁶ The book examined Stimson’s career in its entirety, and it remains a rich source on his life.

¹³³ *Chicago Tribune*, December 4, 1941.

¹³⁴ Stimson diary, reel 7, vol. 36, December 4, 1941, 73-4.

¹³⁵ Stimson diary, reel 9, vol. 52, September 21, 1945 (dictated December 11, 1945), 163.

¹³⁶ Sean Malloy, *Atomic Tragedy: Henry L. Stimson and the Decision to Use the Bomb Against Japan* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008); Andrew Preston, *The War Council: McGeorge Bundy, the NSC, and Vietnam* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006).

But the translation of a diary into biography worked subtle changes in the ethical record of violence Stimson had recorded, less from any active agenda than by virtue of abstracting daily routine into sharp points of decision. Pearl Harbor became an almost complete occlusion of prewar mentalities: “a curtain of fire was lowered over the problems and anxieties of the preceding months.”¹³⁷ Of course the attack did decisively tilt the political debate between Roosevelt and his antagonists in Congress, and Stimson did express relief over the arrival of open belligerency. But the diary continued to register daily “problems and anxieties” over the use of force that were not settled by declaring war. The night of the attack he wrote that a declaration of war against Germany remained “an open question.”¹³⁸ The direction and intensity of violence were perpetually open questions, despite a consensus that Hitler’s empire presented the most serious strategic threat. In the first days of December he assumed that major East Coast cities would be bombed (setting up a “terrific howl” from the public, for which he hoped to avoid responsibility), and that the Philippines could be saved by reinforcements from China.¹³⁹ This imagined wartime geography shifted dramatically in just a few weeks. On December 25, Stimson was thrown into a rage by a report that reinforcements would be diverted from the Philippines to Great Britain. He left the office angry and called Harry Hopkins from home, threatening to resign, a call which prompted a hurried meeting with the President that evening. Stimson was

¹³⁷ Stimson, *On Active Service*, 393-4.

¹³⁸ Stimson diary, reel 7, vol. 36, December 7, 1941, 82.

¹³⁹ On Chinese reinforcements, see Stimson diary, reel 7, vol. 36, December 12, 1941, 102; on the bombing of cities, Stimson diary, December 8, 1941, 118.

reassured, but complained that “my Christmas was pretty well mashed up.”¹⁴⁰ By New Year’s Eve he was resigned to a Japanese occupation of the islands, and wrote—with a bit of trepidation—that he believed “our people will have enough steadfastness to carry through the work of driving the invaders out and reestablishing our effort in the Philippines, but I foresee many difficulties and a long strain.”¹⁴¹ The language of public opinion and psychological strain was telling. Pearl Harbor by no means erased Stimson’s doubts over the capacity of a democratic state to carry on the work of a world war.

Nor was this the end of the story. Between February and May 1942, the Secretary’s thoughts frequently turned to the problem of maintaining violence in the Philippines against the possibility of an abrupt end to the fighting. Manila surrendered at the end of the year, and within weeks both Manuel Quezon, the president of the Philippine Commonwealth, and General MacArthur asked for an end to the struggle. On February 8 Stimson wrote about the “ghastly” responsibility of responding to a telegram from Quezon, “who has evidently made up his mind to make a surrender for his people in order to avoid useless sacrifice.”¹⁴² The next day MacArthur suggested declaring the Philippines immediately independent in an attempt to extricate the colony from the war. Stimson described it as “a wholly unreal message,” and spent much of the day working to ensure that the President and his generals would order a prolonged resistance. Both the diary and the memoir dramatized a February 9 meeting, when Stimson stood in front of Roosevelt and Welles, “as if before the court,” and made his case for continuing the Filipino

¹⁴⁰ Stimson diary, reel 7, vol. 36, December 25, 1941, 145-7.

¹⁴¹ Stimson diary, reel 7, vol. 36, December 31, 1941, 160.

¹⁴² Stimson diary, reel 7, vol. 37, February 8, 1942, 98.

war.¹⁴³ He won the case. Two days later, after another plea from Quezon, Stimson drafted a “sharp answer” that invoked Constitutional limits on the President’s ability to give up U.S. property, and cited the United Nations Declaration of January 1 as a binding agreement precluding any “separate peace”: the Philippines would have to fight until the capacity for war was physically annihilated.¹⁴⁴ These decisions set in train a long resistance that was unwanted by some Filipinos. For years Americans had called Manila the “Paris of the Orient.” Early in 1942, there were pleas to turn the city instead into a Copenhagen or a Stockholm. By 1945 hundreds of thousands were dead and most of capital was leveled, leaving behind a landscape that the historian Theodore Friend compared to Warsaw.¹⁴⁵

Alongside the major questions about where and how to use force around the world, the diaries reveal another layer to Stimson’s daily encounters with violence. As he led the “warlords of Washington” Stimson was also part of a public coming to terms with the war from a distance. Often in the diary he was literally an audience member: in February 1942 he noted that a long sermon at his church had been an effort to “arouse in America a proper spirit towards the basic ethical and religious questions involved in the war.”¹⁴⁶ He wrote in August that a film from the crucial naval engagement at Midway was “altogether the most thrilling battle picture that I have seen because it is so entirely real and wonderfully effective.” He detailed the appearance of tracer bullets, fires, and bombs falling. After discussing the picture with the War Department’s

¹⁴³ Stimson diary, reel 7, vol. 37, February 9, 1942, 100-101.

¹⁴⁴ Stimson diary, reel 7, vol. 37, February 11, 1942, 104.

¹⁴⁵ Theodore Friend, *Between Two Empires: The Ordeal of the Philippines, 1929-1946* (New Haven: Yale, 1965), 231.

¹⁴⁶ Stimson diary, reel 7, vol. 37, February 8, 1942, 98.

Director of Public Relations, General Alexander Surles, he took the reel home to watch it again with the Bundys and his wife, Mabel.¹⁴⁷ When he toured Italy in July 1944, he encountered civilian victims of the bombing war, saw the ruins of Cassino, and noted the peculiar sensation of familiarity as he passed villages he had previously only “looked up on the war maps.”¹⁴⁸ At home a few weeks later he took to the air to warn the public against an “unwise wave of optimism.” He struck the old pose of the enlightened traveler, whose first-hand experience was a warrant to inveigh against complacency at home. But in Rome he had waxed lyrical to a group of journalists over the accuracy of their reporting, which had “given me a picture of the war contemporaneous with the events, which I have never seen the like of.”¹⁴⁹

The impulses to experience the war as immediately as was possible, to show it to Mabel and other intimate friends, and to disseminate it to the entire country were all aspects of a larger process of making sense of the war collectively, as well as individually. In May 1943 he complained that while four British photographers died filming *Desert Victory*, their counterparts in the U.S. Signal Corps “do not seem very anxious to be killed.” He insisted that official photographers take more risks to get combat footage as a “military duty.”¹⁵⁰ Later in May, Surles asked him to view a particularly grisly set of Soviet filmstrips from Stalingrad before making them publicly available. Stimson ordered the filmstrips released, remarking in the diary: “It is a

¹⁴⁷ Stimson diary, reel 7, vol. 40, August 10, 1942, 13

¹⁴⁸ Stimson diary, reel 9, vol. 47, July 4, 1944, 164-8.

¹⁴⁹ Stimson diary, reel 9, vol. 47, July 7, 1944, 205; July 24, 1944, 217.

¹⁵⁰ Stimson diary, reel 8, vol. 43, May 8, 1943, 23.

realistic description of war and people might as well know what war is like ...”¹⁵¹ In September a new Soviet film spurred him to write that it “conveyed an impression of size and horrors of which I had no conception. It is not a pleasant picture to sit through but I think our people ought to see it.”¹⁵² His frequent irritation at the public’s incomprehension of the war needs to be seen not just in terms of cynical manipulation of potential soldiers and workers. He was himself startled by, and unprepared for, what he saw of Stalingrad. To conceptualize all of this as merely a top-down process of high-level state officials disseminating particular information in order to manipulate public opinion is at once to give Stimson too much credit for cold calculation and stable perceptions (his moods and perspectives shifted as much as any opinion poll), and also to oversimplify the purposes of the state, which aimed not only to goad people into action but to persuade them to share an ethical sense of the war.

By the end of 1943 the secretary was keeping up with filmstrips showing “the horrors of what our boys are going through” in locations spread across the Mediterranean and the Pacific. In October he spoke to a large group of elected officials in the Library of Congress, and as part of the presentation showed them a “grim account” of casualties in the Solomon islands.¹⁵³ On December 7 he chatted with the OWI’s Elmer Davis about the relative difficulties of filming combat on sunny Pacific atolls and in Italy, where fighting often took place in bad weather and at night.¹⁵⁴ The conversations with Davis and the congressmen were directed to mobilizing the

¹⁵¹ Stimson diary, reel 8, vol. 43, May 24, 1943, 66.

¹⁵² Stimson diary, reel 8, vol. 44, September 9, 1943, 110.

¹⁵³ Stimson diary, reel 8, vol. 44, October 16 and October 20, 1943, 201, 210-211.

¹⁵⁴ Stimson diary, reel 8, vol. 45, December 7, 1943, 93-4.

public mind, but there was also a private side to his vicarious experience of the conflict. When he saw a series of “very realistic and unexpurgated” films from Italy in 1944, he brought his wife Mabel for the screening after meeting for lunch.¹⁵⁵ When the couple vacationed in Miami they watched an upsetting report together: “Both Mabel and I disliked this film for it had some horrid descriptions of poison gas upon goats at Panama - a quite unprofitable exhibition of horrors.”¹⁵⁶ Stimson spent much of his vacation with his wife visiting wounded soldiers and hearing accounts of their injuries, which he recorded in detail.¹⁵⁷ At home a week later he retreated into fiction, reading *The Silver Fox* out loud with his wife, but even this moment was under the cloud: “I first made the mistake of reading the report of the War Refugee Board on the atrocities in Poland and in Germany and that was such a horrible account that I took refuge in Miss Somerville's delightful novel and it was a good change.”¹⁵⁸

These glimpses of the Stimson's imaginative life fall short of demonstrating an inner ethical struggles. His entries on bombing show flashes of doubt in highly fragmented ways, such as his reflections on the “terrible and probably unnecessary” bombing of Dresden immediately before a meeting about the Manhattan Project.¹⁵⁹ He never worked out a philosophy of the bombing war. He wrote that he was shocked by the burning of Tokyo in June 1945, dissociating himself from that part of the war's end stages, but at the same time he was familiar enough with

¹⁵⁵ Stimson diary, reel 8, vol. 46, January 20, 1944, 30.

¹⁵⁶ Stimson diary, reel 9, vol. 49, December 8, 1944, 72.

¹⁵⁷ Stimson diary, reel 9, vol. 49, December 9, 1944, 73-79.

¹⁵⁸ Stimson diary, reel 9, vol. 49, December 17, 1944, 98.

¹⁵⁹ Stimson diary, reel 9, vol. 51, March 5, 1945, 163-4.

the devastation to worry that there would be no cities left in Japan to provide a test for the nuclear device.¹⁶⁰ The diary thus reveals only inconsistent and contradictory flashes of concern. But the absence of sustained reflection—or for that matter an ethical melodrama of self-justification—does not vitiate the significance of the diaries for a moral history. The diaries provide evidence for an ongoing recalibration of his moral sense of global violence, however halting and unsatisfying. The categories of his early career were never fully commensurate with the new measures of violence that he came to direct in the 1940s, a fact that revealed itself in his ongoing capacity for surprise at the “reality” of war and his fascination with the mechanisms that offered him glimpses from afar of the work carried out by his military. One of his most consistently expressed judgments was that the nation had a collective obligation to confront that reality. The “is” of violent death in the world entailed the “ought” of attention at home: the civilian imagination needed to be conscripted into the world of combat. This was a moral adjustment that can be seen piecemeal in his flashes of irritation at the President’s levity, his decisions to release graphic images of violence, and his incorporation of the war into his own family life. Ultimately this “realist” accommodation between democracy and war was more durable than Stimson’s prescriptions for international legal order. Between the hesitant dance of 1940 and the second atomic bomb there was a revolution in the moral common sense of Henry Stimson, and perhaps in the American democratic state writ large as well. Scales of violence that simply did not exist as plausible avenues of policy in the late 1930s were by 1945 woven into the daily practice of liberal internationalism. The diaries provide insight into the emergence of the violent American century Henry Luce recalled in the 1960s out of the far more reticent

¹⁶⁰ Stimson diary, reel 9, vol. 51, June 1 and 6, 1945, 149 and 160-161.

“American Century” announced in February 1941.

What the diaries cannot reveal, however, are the ways that the vast bureaucratic apparatus of war-making presided over by Stimson worked to give substance to his wish that the realities of war should gain the assent of a democratic polity. He was far from alone in his anxious desire to instill “realistic” attitudes by bridging the gulf between civilian mobilization and the war of violent death. Indeed, such concerns preceded his tenure in parts of the bureaucracy, reached beyond his explicit orders, and tell their own story about the moral sensibilities of American power in transit between a broad interwar pacifism and nuclear war.

Chapter 2

Morale Censorship and Moral Sentiments: Knowing Total War in “Unbombed America,” 1941-1945

Martha Gellhorn, the American war correspondent, found herself “in an alien country” on her return to Missouri at the end of World War II. “A gulf as wide as the Grand Canyon separates America from all the people who have known war in their own countries,” she wrote years later.

War, for Americans, is a fact but not a reality; it has not happened here in living memory. The history of the failed peace and the threatening future would be different if a few bombs had fallen on a few American cities during World War II. It is strange that too much safety should prove to be so dangerous.¹

While Gellhorn felt “bored or enraged” with American civilians, she spoke their language: the wish that bombs would fall on U.S. cities was a commonplace of the 1940s. As early as December 1941, General John DeWitt, the commander of Army defenses on the West coast, told the San Francisco city council that “it might have been better if some bombs had been dropped to awaken this city.”² When *Life* magazine reported on racial and labor strife in the fall of 1942, an indignant reader wrote that “a flight of Stukas should bomb hell out of Detroit some night.”³ That September a Philadelphia attorney told government researchers that the nation was “too damn complacent,” and only a bombing would make people “realize we are in [the] war.”⁴ In the

¹ Martha Gellhorn, *The Face of War*, (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1988 [1967, 1959]), 188-9.

² Richard Lingeman, *Don't You Know There's a War On?* (New York: Putnam, 1970) 26.

³ Harold Scarlett, “letter to the editor,” *Life*, Sept. 7, 1942.

⁴ “Civilian Participation in the War Effort,” October 17, 1942, Office of War Information survey, Office of Facts and Figures Records, National Archives Record Group 44, entry 162, box 1784.

cauldron of an unprecedented national mobilization, the fantasy of bombing at home became a widely invoked parable of domestic unity: a threat of external chastisement for internal dissonance or lassitude. To imagine bombing was to urge a deeper commitment to the war—emotionally, ethically, and in the daily labors of war-work.

But writing in 1967, Gellhorn turned the parable on its head. Rather than uniting the nation in martial purpose, an experience of bombing in the 1940s would have prevented decades of imperial violence in Asia. Knowing war, Americans might have rejected it. Instead, the state mastered the techniques of total war without the nation experiencing its human consequences, leaving a democratic people blind to the moral meanings of the battles they fought in Korea and Vietnam, as well as countless smaller conflicts. If racial blinders dulled sympathy and the geopolitics of containment set the stage for those wars, there was also a deeper problem of ethical incapacity—Americans had no frame of reference to think about the bombing of Pyongyang or Hanoi or the Plain of Jars, to imagine the wholesale devastation of peasant economies, to register a human reality behind “body counts.” Graham Greene’s quiet Americans were equipped with sophisticated models of modernization, but had no more sense of what violent death meant than Mark Twain’s innocents abroad—indeed, were even more “innocent” than those travelers, given another four decades distance from the Civil War.

Like Gellhorn, later historians have seen pernicious effects in the distance between Americans and war.⁵ Most of these scholars stressed an artificial distance, produced by

⁵ George H. Roeder, *The Censored War: American Visual Experience During World War Two* (New Haven: Yale, 1993), Francis W. Fox, *Madison Avenue Goes to War: The Strange Military Career of American Advertising, 1941-1945* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University, 1975); Susan Brewer, *Why America Fights: Patriotism and War Propaganda from the Philippines to Iraq* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), Phillip Knightley, *The First Casualty: The*

censorship and propaganda rather than geography alone, but resulting in the same stunted moral imagination. The most forceful writer to take up this view was the veteran Paul Fussell, for whom an analysis of domestic culture was inextricable from his own experiences as a combat soldier. For Fussell, the “intellectual damage wrought by the war” was among its worst legacies, amounting to a mental and emotional crippling of the nation for decades after 1945.⁶ The tacit collaboration of censors and a public reluctant to take responsibility for violence left the United States peculiarly ignorant about the war it fought. “[I]n unbombed America especially, the meaning of the war seemed inaccessible. As experience, thus, the suffering was wasted.”⁷ In a similar vein, the leading historian of photographic censorship wrote: “Had Americans seen more of World War II perhaps they would have had less war to see in Vietnam.”⁸ In these works, censors played the role that space did for Gellhorn, inhibiting the moral development of American democracy.

Gellhorn and the historians offer a useful bridge between the mobilization of the 1940s and postwar public culture, but their interpretation of censorship and the domestic war culture was mistaken. War was present in everyday life, even in “unbombed America,” and neither censorship nor distance barred a moral engagement with mass violence. Indeed, later historical exposés on the “hidden war” were often assembled out of material that was circulated to millions during the war years. Fussell pointed to soldiers losing their minds in combat as part of the

War Correspondent as Hero and Myth-Maker from the Crimea to Iraq, 3rd ed. (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004 [1975]).

⁶ Paul Fussell, *Wartime: Understanding and Behavior in the Second World War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 144.

⁷ Fussell, *Wartime*, 268.

⁸ Roeder, *The Censored War*, 155.

hidden interiority of war, but illustrated this with an account of U.S. submarine sailors handcuffed to their beds in the Pacific—an account published by Random House in 1943 and glowingly reviewed in the pages of the *New York Times*.⁹ He bitingly contrasted death as depicted in the Bayeux Tapestry with a 1977 popular history, *Life Goes to War*.¹⁰ In an “age of publicity and euphemism,” he wrote, no one would treat war as honestly as the artists who recorded the Norman invasion of 1066. But another look at *Life* magazine, rather than the derivative 1977 volume, suggests that someone in Henry Luce’s media empire was trying to present a grim picture: after the Allied landing in Normandy, the magazine reproduced exactly the same portions of the Bayeux Tapestry that Fussell cited, complete with burning homes, naked bodies, and severed heads. This, *Life* insisted, was realism: “So factual is the work that the Bayeux Tapestry is one of our chief historical sources on the decisive Battle of Hastings.”¹¹ The message, less than three weeks after the Channel crossing, was far from blandly reassuring.

This sort of material has been obscured by the low regard in which it was held by influential veterans, correspondents, and others who spent time with “the real war,” as well as by historians intent on demythologizing the conflict.¹² But the domestic war culture cannot be

⁹ Fussell, *Wartime*, 273. Fussell’s account of U.S. submariners driven “stark raving mad” cited Harry Edward Maule, *A Book of War Letters* (New York: Random House, 1943). See Orville Prescott’s review of Maule’s narrative in “The Books of the Times,” *New York Times*, November 15, 1943.

¹⁰ Fussell, *Wartime*, 247.

¹¹ “Speaking of Pictures ... Bayeux Tapestry Reports Old Invasion,” *Life*, June 26, 1944.

¹² For example Michael C.C. Adams, *The Best War Ever: America and World War II* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993); Kenneth Rose, *Myth and the Greatest Generation: A Social History of Americans in World War II* (New York: Routledge, 2008); John Bodnar, *The Good War in American Memory* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010).

dismissed as a colorless anodyne. More importantly, a moral history of American power in the latter half of the century cannot rest on the assumption that the public understood nothing of modern war as the democratic state made its ascent to globalism.

An avalanche of written reports kept the war constantly in front of an enormous domestic reading audience. In the last 11 months of the European conflict alone, military censors cleared 163 million words of reportage (cutting about 1 percent in the process), nearly four times the text of the Encyclopedia Britannica.¹³ Meanwhile, paper rationing meant that this flood of words issuing from wire services, metropolitan newspapers, and the military itself was poured into a shrinking space for news. Daily papers were 500 tons lighter in aggregate in 1944 than in 1940, and five pages shorter on average at the end of the war than at the beginning (from 27 pages in 1940 to 22 pages in 1945).¹⁴ At the same time readership surged: the daily circulation of newspapers went up by almost 9 million, from 39 million on the eve of war to over 48 million in 1945.¹⁵ From 1940 to 1946 the major weekly newsmagazines, too, nearly doubled their reach.¹⁶ Circulation figures if anything underestimate the growth in readership, because rationing limited

¹³ “Trend of Copy Submitted by Accredited Correspondents for SHAEF Censorship Between 1200 Hours 11 May and 1200 Hours 12 May 1945,” Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Forces (SHAEF), Public Relations Division Press Censorship Subject File, April 1944-June 1945, NARA Record Group 331, entry 86, box 47.

¹⁴ *Historical Statistics of the United States*, Millennial Edition On Line. TABLE Dg 287-292, “Newspapers – newsprint consumption and pages per issue, 1940-1978.”

¹⁵ *Historical Statistics of the United States*, Millennial Edition On Line. TABLE Dg267–274 “Newspapers – number and circulation, by type: 1920–1999.”

¹⁶ *Magazine Circulation and Rate Trends, 1940-1965* (New York: Association of National Advertisers, 1966), 12, 29. *Time* grew from 790,000 to over 1.5 million; *Newsweek* from 400,000 to 700,000; even the small but influential *New Yorker* expanded from 150,000 to 290,000, while *Life* magazine rose from slightly under 3 million to around 5 million issues every week.

the ability of publishers to keep pace with demand: a circumstance that encouraged the sharing of individual copies of newspapers and magazines. In short, there were more eyes on more issues of smaller publications; the physical changes in the papers themselves helped to rivet attention on the global conflagration.

Given this audience, it is worth reevaluating how words and images of the war came home in the 1940s, focusing on the role of military censorship and civilian propaganda in addition to revisiting the reporting itself. This research is not animated by a desire to expose what censors obscured, but to understand how information officials and journalists, in the process of managing domestic morale, tried to make moral sense of an apocalyptic moment in global history for a broad reading public. While censorship has never been a secret, its history is surprisingly elusive. The process was largely decentralized within the military, and little effort was made to assemble or preserve documents after 1945, many of which are simply gone. Perhaps more important, military press management is obscured by a degree of ideological acquiescence: because censorship of war zones during a dire emergency was (and remains) compatible with most free speech arguments, it draws a liberal shrug. Geoffrey Stone's monumental history of free speech in wartime is virtually silent on military censorship while emphasizing the difference between repression in 1917-1918 and the tolerance of "committed civil libertarian" figures in the Roosevelt administration.¹⁷ Far more attention has gone to the evaluation of positive propaganda efforts.¹⁸ Some of the sharpest conflicts in the 1940s,

¹⁷ Geoffrey Stone, *Perilous Times: Free Speech in Wartime* (New York, 2005), 240.

¹⁸ Allen Winkler, *The Politics of Propaganda: The Office of War Information, 1942-1945* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978); Brett Gary, *The Nervous Liberals: Propaganda Anxieties*

moreover, hinged on the precise timing of news releases and the career consequences of “scoops”—questions far less compelling to diplomatic, social, and legal historians than the prosecution of political dissent in 1917-1918.¹⁹

But a fresh examination of the records scattered about the archives of the military branches and various civilian agencies is vital. Reconsidering censorship in terms of the internationalization of U.S. history—rather than as a test of domestic liberalism—affords a new perspective on the workings of a democratic state violently enmeshed in the world. Through the study of censorship and morale, rather than journalists and liberalism, it is also possible to document decisions and judgments that provide a glimpse of the ethical accommodations that democracy made with total war. This approach looks to the quotidian work of censorship to begin thinking about how, as Adam Smith put it, “general rules of morality” emerge from both emotional and reasoned responses to the particularities of history.²⁰

Anticipating Morale Censorship: The ‘Unwritten Plan,’ 1931-1941

As the United States shed the legal encumbrances of neutrality and armed for a second world conflict in a generation, it did so under an ideological banner sharply at odds with coercive controls on the press. The Nazi enemy burned books; the Allies stood for freedom of speech as a war aim enshrined in the Atlantic Charter. “There is no question of censorship,” President

from World War I to the Cold War (New York, 1999); Susan Brewer, *Why America Fights: Patriotism and War Propaganda from the Philippines to Iraq* (New York: Oxford, 2009).

¹⁹ Ed Kennedy, *Ed Kennedy’s War: V-E- Day, Censorship & the Associated Press* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2012), 113-114.

²⁰ Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (New York: Penguin, 2009 [1759]), 183.

Roosevelt told reporters in February 1941 while discussing Congressional leaks of military information.²¹ These rhetorical commitments—both in enunciations of first principles and specific statements of policy—did not prevent censorship after the United States entered the war, but did define it narrowly in terms of operational security. While a famous propaganda campaign warned Americans to police their public and private conversations, the state promised in return not to interfere in matters of opinion or political information—in the parlance of the time, to abstain from “policy” and “morale” censorship.

But links between censorship and morale management are obvious when the history of censorship planning is traced through the interwar period. After 1918 Americans concerned with understanding the first World War spoke increasingly (if often quite loosely) of morale, psychology, and information controls as an interrelated complex. This preoccupation floated across disciplinary boundaries, and between professional and popular discourses, appearing everywhere from a Military Intelligence treatise on *Propaganda in its Military and Legal Aspects* published immediately after the war to a 1924 adult education course on “The Psychology of Propaganda and Public Opinion” at an affiliate of Cooper Union in New York.²² The psychologist G. Stanley Hall reflected that the war made “all intelligent people think and

²¹ Franklin Roosevelt, press conference, February 21, 1941. Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*. Online. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=16078>.

²² United States War Department Military Intelligence Branch, *Propaganda in its Military and Legal Aspects*, (Washington, D.C., 1918), 1-3. 110. Everett Dean Martin, *Psychology: What It Has to Teach You About Yourself and Your World and the World You Live In* (The People’s Institute Publishing Company, 1924).

talk much about morale.”²³ This was certainly true of the political scientist Harold Lasswell, whose dissertation on *Propaganda Technique in the World War* signaled a growing academic concern with individual and collective psychology, information manipulation, and war.²⁴ A few years later Lasswell published a 400 page propaganda bibliography with over 220 entries on censorship.²⁵ While these conversations were connected to the professional ascendancy of psychology²⁶ and public relations,²⁷ the genealogy of particular theories of morale mattered less than the increasingly powerful view that public sentiments needed management.²⁸

How this filtered into planning for censorship operations in future wars can be glimpsed in the curriculum of a proposed College of National Defense in 1931.²⁹ The College was meant to integrate civilian and military policymaking, with lectures and seminars on social theory”

²³ G. Stanley Hall, *Morale: The Supreme Standard of Life and Conduct* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1920), 22.

²⁴ Harold Lasswell, *Propaganda Technique in the World War* (New York: P. Smith, 1938 [1927]).

²⁵ Harold Lasswell, *Propaganda and Promotional Activities: An Annotated Bibliography* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1935).

²⁶ Ellen Herman, *The Romance of American Psychology: Political Culture in the Age of Experts* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

²⁷ Roland Marchand, *Creating the Corporate Soul: The Rise of Public Relations and Corporate Imagery in American Big Business* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

²⁸ Edward Bernays, *Propaganda* (New York: H. Liveright, 1928).

²⁹ The proposed “College of National Defense” was not realized, although its design bears similarities to the National Defense University chartered in 1976. On the efforts of the military branches to coordinate policy with the State Department, see Ernest May, “The Development of Political-Military Consultation in the United States,” *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 70, No. 2 (June 1955), 161-180, especially 169-171, and Fred Greene, “The Military View of American National Policy, 1904-1940,” *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 66, No. 2 (January 1961), 354-377.

fascism and Marxism, birth control, racial conflict, the operations of the Federal Reserve, and “European colonial expansion as a basic cause of the World War.” One proposed area of study was meant to combine “national psychology” with “control of public opinion.”³⁰ Censorship fell under this rubric, not as a technical problem of security but as part of an all-encompassing approach to the practice of war. A proposed “problem” for students involved a U.S.-Japan conflict triggered in part by misinformation about anti-American riots in Tokyo, leading to retaliatory racial violence in San Francisco. A key point in the scenario was a Japanese peace offer, “an effort to influence world public opinion.”³¹ The planners imagined an arena of globally circulating rumors and porous public spheres, where civil society might provoke fighting and also lend power to an unwanted peace proposal. There was much work for censors in such a world.

Of course this was doubly theoretical: an imaginary war for the students of a college that did not exist. But more concrete planning came to light twice in Congressional inquiries during the early 1930s, both times in connection with broader questions of industrial democracy, civil liberties, and the ethics of planning total war. The first was in 1931, when the War Policies Commission—established to study the economic burdens of war and the “conscription of capital”—revealed the industrial mobilization plans developed by the War Department for a new

³⁰ “Tentative curriculum and regulations governing methods of study and procedure in the proposed college of national defense,” in September 30, 1931, memorandum from the Joint Planning Committee to the Joint Board, J.B. 325, serial 496, “Proposed College of National Defense,” National Archives Record Group 225, Microfilm M1421.

³¹ “Tentative curriculum and regulations governing methods of study and procedure in the proposed college of national defense,” NARA Record Group 225, Microfilm M1421.

world conflict.³² The military vision was not modest: an illustration provided by the Department showed a box labeled “national resources” feeding an immense machine, which distributed “labor”, “capital” and “raw materials” to the war industries [Figure 1]. A tiny, subsidiary box between the military branches was marked “civilian necessities.” At the apex of the machine, controlling and adjusting the flow of national life, stood the President and a six-member council, including the Secretaries of War and Navy, along with directors of industry, labor, and the selective service. The sixth member was a “Director of Public Relations.”

What were the functions of this office? This was vague, but no one who spoke on the matter during the Commission’s hearings had simple press releases in mind. The most extensive comments came from the influential journalist Herbert Bayard Swope, an editor of the *New York World* who had written about German censorship from 1915-17 before moving to the War Industries Board as an assistant to Bernard Baruch.³³ Swope identified civilian morale as a strategic asset, citing Erich Ludendorff, whose ideal of total war—elaborated a few years later in *Der Totale Krieg*—was inextricable from a right-wing nationalist hostility to civil society.³⁴ Swope struck a Ludendorffian tone with a liberal twist, embracing an unfettered press but

³² *War Policies Commission*, 72d Congress, 1st Session, House Document No. 163 (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1931), vii-ix.

³³ Andrew T. Crosland, “Herbert Bayard Swope,” *American National Biography Online*.

³⁴ Scholarship on Ludendorff is rich – and terrifying. See Erich Ludendorff, *The Nation at War* (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1936); Michael Geyer, “German Strategy in the Age of Machine Warfare, 1914-1945,” in *Makers of Modern Strategy from Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age*, ed. Peter Paret (Princeton University Press, 1985), 527-97; Martin Kutz, “Fantasy, Reality, and Modes of Perception in Ludendorff’s and Goebbels’ Concepts of ‘Total War,’” in Roger Chickering, Stig Förster and Bernd Greiner, eds., *A World at Total War: Global Conflict and the Politics of Destruction*, ed. (Cambridge University Press, 2005), 189-206.

terminating it during hostilities. He imagined a cabinet-level official charged with “preserving morale” and the “goose stepping of public opinion.” “Public opinion must be conscripted,” Swope said. “[I]f we take the muzzles off the dogs of war, we must put the muzzles on the people and press [...] Censorship must prevail.”³⁵ Army and Navy planners avoided his language, but Swope’s view was consonant with an all-embracing mobilization. How could a state conscript labor, capital, land, and material without eventually drafting public opinion as well?

Alternatives might have been offered: a number of witnesses represented strongly anti-censorship constituencies, particularly the socialists and pacifists who had borne the brunt of press controls in 1917-1918.³⁶ But the issue was submerged in wider objections to militarism and violence. While Norman Thomas, for example, testified that “war-time socialization” would produce “a Fascist state, socialized for the purpose of militarization,” he was speaking on mobilization *tout court*, and said nothing about the press.³⁷ For others the ethical problem of violence eclipsed the prospect of censorship. Dorothy Detzer, the Executive Secretary of the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom, saw planning as evidence that “American men are to be conscripted to kill babies.”³⁸ The Federal Council of Churches

³⁵ *War Policies Commission*, 72d Congress, 1st Session, House Document No. 163 (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1931), 791-4.

³⁶ On censorship between 1917-1918 see Geoffrey Stone, *Perilous Times: Free Speech in Wartime from the Sedition Act of 1798 to the War on Terrorism* (New York: Norton & Co., 2004), 135-234; and Christopher Cappozzola, *Uncle Sam Wants You: World War I and the Making of the Modern American Citizen* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 144-172.

³⁷ *War Policies Commission*, 72d Congress, 1st Session, House Document No. 163 (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1931), 724.

³⁸ *War Policies Commission*, 730.

deplored preparations for war in similar terms. The most specific concern about information management came from a more conservative quarter: Augustus Griswold, vice president of International Telephone & Telegraph, worried that military control over communications might “impair the property rights of hundreds of thousands of people throughout the country.”³⁹ And Griswold was happy with content restrictions, provided infrastructure was not nationalized.

As far as censorship was concerned, the 1931 hearings were more revealing than consequential. Congress neither curtailed nor formalized the planning efforts, and the military continued to anticipate a large role in handling national morale by controlling communications. Swope’s comments about “goose stepping public opinion” were reported briefly, then forgotten.⁴⁰ Three years later, however, another investigation appeared to derail the project. The Senate Sub-committee on the Munitions Industry (usually referred to as the “Nye Committee” after its chairman, North Dakota Senator Gerald Nye) compiled 40 volumes of testimony and documents ranging from the financial centers of London and New York to small-arms agents in the world’s newest sovereign state, Iraq. Later derided as isolationist theater, the Nye Committee was powerfully influential in the mid-1930s.

Shortly before Christmas in 1934, Missouri Senator Bennett Champ Clark, a World War veteran who later joined the America First Committee, used the hearings to pose sharper questions about the “Administrator of Public Relations” first mentioned in the 1931 mobilization plan. The Army’s representative initially reassured him that this figure would have limited

³⁹ Ibid., 353-4, 245.

⁴⁰ “Swope Sees Censor Inevitable in War,” *Boston Globe*, May 23, 1931.

powers.⁴¹ Clark left off questioning, but later returned to the matter after he (or his staff) had re-examined the full mobilization plan. He pointed to proposed legislation giving a wartime President authority over “the material resources” of the nation, including a power to ban the sale or purchase of any commodity without a Federal license. Clark asked if “commodity” could include printers ink and white paper. The War Department witness said yes. Clark pushed to a plausible conclusion:

Senator Clark: That is, any ingenuous man, familiar with the newspaper business, could in 2 hours work out 40 different ways to establish a press censorship?

Lieutenant Colonel Harris: With the President’s approval, I think he could.⁴²

The senator’s concerns were reflected in a subsequent report criticizing the War Department for making plans under which “strict control of the press is possible.”⁴³ The War Department took note, and worked to remove the impression that it was planning to take control of the press. Its 1936 mobilization plan erased all mentions of censorship, and replaced the “Administrator of Public Relations” with an explanation that public relations functions “are being revised by the appropriate agencies.”⁴⁴ In 1939 those plans were still “under revision,” and no new version was seen before Pearl Harbor. Censorship appeared to have vanished.

⁴¹ U.S. Senate, Munitions Industry Sub-Committee, part 15, December 17 and 18, 1934 (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1935), 3641-3642.

⁴² Ibid., 3931-3935.

⁴³ U.S. Senate, “Munitions Industry, Report on War Department Bills S. 1716- S. 1722 Relating to Industrial Mobilization in Wartime by the Special Committee on Investigation of the Munitions Industry,” 74th Congress 2d Session, Senate Report No. 944, Part 4, 55

⁴⁴ United States Joint Army and Navy Munitions Board, *Industrial Mobilization Plan: Revised 1936*, (Washington, DC: U.S. GPO, 1936), 45.

Of course, it had not. The deceptive silence over censorship planning was explained in a 1940 Council on Foreign Relations paper, *Mobilizing Civilian America*, a quasi-official document written by Harold Tobin, a professor of Political Science at Dartmouth, and Percy Bidwell, the Council's director of studies, during two years of close cooperation with military officials, particularly the public relations officers of the Army and Navy Intelligence Divisions. The Council's paper attributed the disappearance of censorship plans to the "bitter attacks of the Nye Committee" and a public mood that made it "difficult even today to get sober discussion of the kind of control of information which should be set up, should we again go to war."⁴⁵ But the erasure was entirely tactical, and in no way signaled a real change in planning. In a section labeled "the unwritten plan" the authors spoke of a "penumbra" of personal expertise surrounding the written text and explained that provisions for censorship and propaganda that had been deleted "may still be latent elements in the Plan."⁴⁶ In other words, whatever concessions were made to public opinion, the military fully expected to play a substantial part in controlling the flow of information in a new war. The authors of the Council paper were also quite clear about what censorship meant: its first function was to eliminate "information and opinions which might weaken popular enthusiasm for war": civilian morale was at least as central as the security of narrowly military information.⁴⁷

Given this history, coupled with the possibility of entering a war against strong domestic opposition in the years 1939-1941, it is not at all surprising to find a subcommittee of the Army

⁴⁵ Harold James Tobin and Percy Bidwell, *Mobilizing Civilian America* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 1940), 81-83, 5, 46-48.

⁴⁶ Tobin and Bidwell, *Mobilizing Civilian America*, 57.

⁴⁷ Tobin and Bidwell, *Mobilizing Civilian America*, 75, 101.

and Navy Joint Board (the immediate predecessor of the Joint Chiefs of Staff) drafting information management plans concerned with “the maintenance of national morale” in 1939.⁴⁸ Somewhat more surprising is that the plan which eventually prevailed preemptively gave up “hard and fast rules of censorship,” and called for voluntary compliance with the strictures of a combined national publicity and censorship office.

Indeed, the plan surprised even the men who commissioned it. The Joint Board rejected this approach out of hand in June 1939, reproaching its subordinates for proposing voluntary restraint rather than *a priori* press controls, and ordering a new draft giving the armed forces far-reaching control over print and broadcast outlets in the event of a conflict.⁴⁹ On the surface, the top brass lost this fight. The White House, threading its own cautious way towards intervention, ignored the plan for two years. When Roosevelt finally responded in April 1941, the press-savvy president denied having seen the more draconian strategy at all, writing to Secretary of War Henry Stimson and Secretary of the Navy Frank Knox that “I would have remembered any wild idea like that.”⁵⁰ He told the secretaries that the Joint Board was politically naïve, that Congress would explode at the suggestion of such a censorship plan (almost certainly an accurate assessment), and tossed the problem back to the military.

⁴⁸ "A GENERAL OUTLINE OF A NATIONAL PLAN FOR PUBLICITY DIVISION IN TIME OF WAR (SEE CHART "A")" National Archives, records of the Office of Censorship, Record Group 216 entry 05 Box 1211.

⁴⁹ June 20, 1939, secret memorandum J.B. 325 (Serial 641), from the Secretary of The Joint Board, to Joint Planning Committee. Records of the Office of Censorship, National Archives Record Group 216, entry 05, box 1211.

⁵⁰ Franklin Roosevelt memo to Secretary of War Stimson and Secretary of Navy Knox, April 2, 1941, Adjutant General records, National Archives, records of the Adjutant General's Office, Record Group 407, entry 36, box 3.

The Joint Board may have been naïve, but its subordinates were not. Indeed, when the top officers demanded stricter controls, advocates of the original “liberal” plan, Commanders Leland Lovette and F.D. Pryor, responded that the Joint Board had missed the point. Anticipating the President’s position, Lovette and Pryor pointed out that Congress would never let the military control newsrooms directly. But in a war fought overseas, this was irrelevant, because, they wrote, “anytime press matter passes into the channels of the mails, cables, radio (point to point), telegraphs or telephones, such matter becomes subject to censorship the same as any other regular communication.” This control would not be voluntary, but “positive, rigid and under direct control of the Theater Commanders.”⁵¹ The *a priori* control of the press was thus understood—legally and ideologically—as a matter of executive control of the armed forces, rather than a special restriction on the press that had to be authorized by Congress. What Lovette and Pryor understood so much more clearly than the Joint Board was the limitless potential of apparently modest information restrictions in a global war. Control would be exercised over space, not information. In effect, the justification of this censorship would be akin to the principles that kept a reporter from using the first amendment as cover to rummage through a locked drawer in the War Department—but in a supreme emergency, the drawer could expand to swallow more than 10 million soldiers fighting on three continents. No new law would have to govern what could be written and published from a war zone, because the military would have the power to control absolutely any access to the war zone, and to make entry, movement, and communications conditional on adherence to its orders.

⁵¹ Commander F.D. Pryor and Commander L.P. Lovette, USN, to Captain R.S. Crenshaw, USN, 11 July 1939 memo subject “Public Relations Plan, Comments on Joint Board Notes.” Record Group 216, entry 05, box 1211.

This history of interwar planning began to inform the training of prospective censors in a three week seminar held by the War Department's Military Intelligence Division in Clarendon, Virginia in August and September of 1941.⁵² Geared primarily to postal censorship (and in particular its role in intelligence gathering), the curriculum began with a long memorandum on "National Censorship," recounting efforts by the War and Navy Departments to establish a comprehensive military authority over communications after World War I. This document began by delineating "Censorship Objectives" with little cant about free expression. Censorship was used to "maintain existing governments, parties, and individuals in authority." This involved guarding military secrets, but it could also be necessary to "suppress accurate information which might adversely affect the will and morale of the public or alienate its support."⁵³ These aims were presented as the "historical" purposes of censorship—but they were not disclaimed in the present, and they are highly suggestive of the way Military Intelligence approached censorship limits in 1941. And the training documents make it obvious that journalism fell within the general structures of military control.⁵⁴ If there was a meaningful division between strict controls on military secrets and a liberal handling of morale questions, it was not emphasized at the level where censors learned their trade.

⁵² "Training Program: Officers' Censorship Class, August 15 – September 6, 1941." Office of Censorship Historical File, NARA RG 216 entry 05 box 1209.

⁵³ "National Censorship," memorandum assigned by Maj. W.P. Corderman, August 15, 1941, NARA RG 216, entry 05, box 1209.

⁵⁴ Memorandum, "Military Censorship," attached to files on MID training course, NARA RG 216, entry 05, box 1209.

The curriculum for this workshop was largely technical, but left room for humanistic reflection. Captain Ralph Liddle of Military Intelligence traced the etymology of “censor” to the Roman magistrates who oversaw the census, noting that censorship was from this early date associated with the supervision of moral conduct. And it was a universal function, Liddle claimed, not a product of a modern print culture: “It should be noted in passing that the ‘taboos’ of various tribes in all parts of the world represent an effective form of censorship.”⁵⁵ Not surprisingly, then, censorship was part of the fabric of American life, a necessary element of the moral order that did not contradict basic American legal principles. Liddle’s lecture said little about the management of cases, but it provides one glimpse of the censors at levels far closer to daily practice than White House statements on policy. Where there was authority to interdict paper, there was a long history validating a morale—and a moral—function. So an officer being trained in censorship would have learned in 1941.

Journalists began to realize the extent of the military’s authority over information, both potential and real, in the process of mobilization before Pearl Harbor. *Christian Science Monitor* foreign correspondent Joseph Harsch returned to Washington in May, 1941, after two years in Rome and Berlin—and was shocked at the limits on his access to information on the free side of the Atlantic, writing that “the old freedom for a correspondent to move about had been very much curtailed.”⁵⁶ He wasn’t complaining about any formal censorship function or legislative changes, but about new regulations and practices limiting physical movement. War and Navy

⁵⁵ Captain Ralph W. Liddle, lecture notes on censorship, NARA RG 216, entry 05, box 1209.

⁵⁶ Robert Desmond, *Tides of War: World News Reporting, 1940-45*, (University of Iowa Press, 1984), 213.

Department buildings were frequently closed, and shortly before Harsch's return the White House had begun fingerprinting journalists and issuing photo identification cards.

Less than two weeks after President Roosevelt had ruled out the strong version of the military's publicity plan in his letter to the Secretaries of the military departments, the National Press Club gathered in a large "off-the-record" meeting to discuss censorship with officials from the War, Navy and State Departments, in addition to Lowell Mellett, the president's information czar at the Office of Government Reports (a forerunner of the Office of War Information). It was a contentious meeting, highlighting a basic disagreement over whether a *de facto* censorship already existed. Reporters complained that briefings were often secret, that formerly public buildings were locked down, and that Espionage Act prosecution was hinted at in "requests" for the suppression of information; censorship, they argued, was a fact if not yet an institution. Fred Morehart of the Washington *Star* asked how the press should report on the Navy when reporters could not even physically approach the newly appointed assistant secretary of that Department, Ralph Bard: "we no longer have the freedom of the building, as you well know. If that isn't censorship, what is it?"⁵⁷ The Navy official gave an illuminating reply, dismissing the lack of access as a logistical issue and adding: "I think any information that you have needed out of the Navy, you have had out of the public relations branch." Military information would not be

⁵⁷ "Proceedings of the NATIONAL PRESS CLUB Second Off-the-Record Forum On Press Censorship," April 10, 1941, page 17. NARA RG 428 entry 3 box 19, Navy Office of Information Subject Files, 1940-1958. Assistant Secretary Bard was the second highest ranking civilian in the Navy Department, occupying the same office President Roosevelt held under Woodrow Wilson. A Republican and a Midwesterner, Bard was part of the 1940 appointment of Republicans to the top positions in the War and Navy Departments to lend bipartisan coloring to Roosevelt's tentative approach to interventionism. He was an eminently newsworthy subject.

gathered by journalists reporting on War and Navy like any other departments; it would be released from a press office, and that was that.

Contrary to the public line on censorship and “security,” officers in this meeting made no secret of their intention to limit disclosures damaging to domestic morale. Nor were they challenged in this by the civilian officials, such as Mellett, who would later wind up in the civilian Office of War Information (often represented as quite antagonistic to military information policy). The question of how domestic morale would control reporting was broached directly by Will Lang of *Life* magazine, whose photographs of soldiers injured in a training maneuver had been withheld from publication. “We have no general laws or rules as to what we can publish which will affect public morale,” Lang said. “Could you perhaps give us any such generalities?” General Robert Richardson, the head of the War Department information office before Pearl Harbor, admitted that he had personally asked for the suppression of the pictures, and explained his rationale in terms of the public’s tolerance for violence:

Knowing there is a certain soft point of view that dominates the mentality of this country—I will say childish, almost—they cannot ‘take it’ in seeing a picture of that kind, and I felt we would get a great reaction [...] For that reason, it struck me as having an undesirable effect on public opinion, not on people who really think very much, but on the people who feel; because to people who think, you know, life is a comedy, and to those who feel it is a tragedy.⁵⁸

General Richardson’s answer—given in the context of relatively harmless prewar training exercises—was a clear expression of the military’s intention to censor news on the basis of morale concerns, with a keen sensitivity to the domestic public’s tolerance for violence. More

⁵⁸ “Proceedings of the NATIONAL PRESS CLUB Second Off-the-Record Forum On Press Censorship,” April 10, 1941. Richardson was apparently reverting to his earlier career as an English professor at West Point, paraphrasing an epigram from the letters of Horace Walpole.

than that, though, Richardson revealed something of both the logic and the possible limits of such censorship. The target was public sentiment, not public reason—if enough of the people could be brought to feel the appropriate response to the conflict, greater disclosures would be possible. In response to another question, Richardson added that the standards of photographic censorship would not control all reporting, because “the printed word read produces a very different effect.”⁵⁹ While the military assumed a very broad license to regulate information in the name of morale, the doors to frank reporting were not sealed on the eve of the war. Once the United States was formally involved in the conflict, the machinery developed over the previous two decades would not work to keep the public uninformed, but to produce a public that was no longer “soft,” but was capable of tolerating distant pain.

Censorship in practice, 1941-1945

Presidential rhetoric after Pearl Harbor echoed Richardson’s concern for the public’s ability to “take it.” But instead of concealing wartime realities, the President invested heavily in preparing his audiences for them. In his December 9, 1941 radio address, Roosevelt did not use censorship as a screen for optimism: he told 60 million listeners that “the news has all been bad,” predicted a long war with high casualties, and forecast the loss of Midway, a worse strategic defeat than what came about.⁶⁰ He might have used the Navy’s cordon on information to present a more optimistic version of events. Instead, grim news underscored what he went on to call “the ethics

⁵⁹ “National Press Club Second Off-the-Record Forum on Press Censorship,” RG 428 entry 3 box 19.

⁶⁰ Franklin Roosevelt national radio address, December 9, 1941. Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=16056>.

of patriotism”: obligations defined not by conscription (already a familiar part of the landscape of citizenship by 1941) but by the judicious handling of information. Before mentioning military service or industrial production, taxes or rationing, the President enunciated an individual duty to “reject all rumors,” and outlined the “grave responsibility” of the press to ignore “unconfirmed reports.”⁶¹ Foregrounding these obligations—along with declarations that modern war was “dirty business”—Roosevelt worked to incorporate a mass public into a mediated war that would be horrible more often than it was inspiring. In his “map speech” the following February,⁶² the President invoked the public’s “ability to hear the worst, without flinching or losing heart.”⁶³ This was as much instruction as it was a promise of candor, contrasting the emotional toughness of those who bore up under the strain of bad news with the weakness of anyone who would consider a negotiated peace.

Scrutinizing these speeches for the British Embassy, a young Oxford philosopher assigned to war work in Washington had a label for the mood Roosevelt evoked: American opinion was becoming “realistic.” Isaiah Berlin sounded this note constantly in his dispatches for the Foreign Office, tracking the ebb and flow of realism as though it were aircraft

⁶¹ Roosevelt national radio address, December 9, 1941. On the meaning of “confirmed” and “unconfirmed” reporting, see Sweeney, *Secrets of Victory*, and Sam Lebovic’s penetrating study of press freedom and “patriotic” journalism, *Free Speech and Unfree News: The Paradox of Press Freedom in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016).

⁶² On the “map speech” see Susan Schulten, *The Geographic Imagination in America, 1880-1950* (University of Chicago Press, 2001), 204. Americans were advised in advance to have world maps available in front of them, to follow the President’s speech.

⁶³ February 23, 1942 radio address. *The American Presidency Project*, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=16224>.

production.⁶⁴ The scholarly apparatus of foreign policy “realism” lay in the postwar, but here was a sensibility perched somewhere between that doctrine and the older currents of pragmatism in American thought. It was as much a sentiment to be evoked as a lesson learned. Berlin applauded the “sober advice” of the President on December 9; by the end of 1944, after disturbing outbreaks of “idealism,” there were reassuring signs of Americans recognizing that “the world is a far colder, bleaker, harsher place,” and that “a mental readjustment must be made accordingly.”⁶⁵ It is telling, too, that he would record Walter Lippmann’s passing comment that the public was tilting towards a “hardboiled” foreign policy.⁶⁶ A foreign policy mood that could take the literary style of crime novelists like Dashiell Hammett as a touchstone would not have too many liberal scruples about censorship, but neither would it rely on press controls to obscure the violence of war. “Hardboiled” meant neither hiding from violence nor syllogistically excusing it as a part of a “just war”; it meant dwelling in ambiguity. Berlin’s commentary was an astute reading of top-level efforts to reconcile the public with heavy burdens, including both killing and dying.

This brand of realism also had an influential presence in the military information agencies and censorship organizations that proliferated with the assembly of vast new armed forces. Though mostly invisible to the public and folded into the Army and Navy hierarchies rather than operating as independent agencies, the military censors were the sinews of

⁶⁴ H.G. Nicholas, ed., *Washington Despatches, 1941-1945: Weekly Political Reports from the British Embassy* (University of Chicago Press, 1981), particularly pp. 6-8, 15, 23, 37, 40-1, 108, 148, 180, 199, 212-213.

⁶⁵ Nicholas, *Washington Despatches*, 482-3.

⁶⁶ Nicholas, *Washington Despatches*, 148.

information management. While the civilian OWI and Office of Censorship both had influential roles in molding public perceptions, only the military censors physically controlled the flow of paper; it mattered a great deal what they were prepared to see in print.⁶⁷ War correspondents under their authority wore uniforms and dined with officers; they were vetted by the FBI and carried official government identification; they could be expelled from a battlefield, a city or a continent at will (on one brief occasion the entire Associated Press was banned from reporting on the area of military control in Europe—virtually the entire continent). The censors read the correspondents' mail and telegraphs, listened to their phone conversations with editors and family, had the authority to take possession of notes leaving combat areas, and held a veto over all press copy.⁶⁸ Far more than any other state actors, they were in a position to occlude the

⁶⁷ This point was implicit in War and Navy planning before the war, and formalized early in 1943 in an agreement between the Office of Censorship and the War, Navy and State Departments, recognizing that all press material originating in overseas theaters had to be “cleared through the United States military or naval commander ... at the point of origin.” “Memorandum Approved Jointly by the State, War, and Navy Departments, and the Office of Censorship,” March 1943. A copy of this document is preserved in the Navy's records, NARA RG 313, entry 86, box 6.

⁶⁸ See Fletcher Pratt, “How the Censors Rigged the News,” *Harpers*, February 1946; on the mechanics of press controls, see the quasi-official history of the field press censors, *A history of field press censorship in SHAEF, World War II [compiled as an after action report by the United States Army field press censors at Supreme Headquarters, AEF]* (Paramus, N.J., Reproduced by 201st Field Press Censorship Organization, [n.d.]). The formal rules for reporting and censorship were laid out in War Department Field Manual 30-26, *Regulations for Correspondents Accompanying U.S. Army Forces in the Field* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1942). This set of regulations committed journalists to the terms outlined in the text above on penalty of expulsion from the theater of war, and made clear that they were “subject to military law and are under the control of the commander of the Army force which they accompany.” The specificity with which journalists were fitted into the workings of the army at the level of clothing is worth quoting, as it exemplifies something of the world these writers were entering: “The uniform includes the wearing of the official brassard on the left arm. The brassard is a green cloth band, 4 inches wide, with the appropriate word, ‘Correspondent,’ ... in white block letters 1 ¼ inches in height. This will be furnished by the War Department Bureau of Public Relations at the time of appointment.”

realities of war—if this were a priority. But the censors were capable of flexing informational muscle to protect the reputations of their commanding officers and civilian “morale” without putting a high gloss on the violence of the war. They too could embrace realism as an informational goal.

The complexities of this role are exemplified by the career of Captain W. Waldo Drake, the public information officer for Admiral Chester Nimitz in the Central Pacific. Like OWI chief Elmer Davis and national censor Byron Price, Drake was an ex-newsman, who had left the Los Angeles *Times* to manage public relations for the Pacific fleet before Pearl Harbor. And like Davis and Price, he maintained friendly relationships and a measure of mutual respect with prominent reporters, who in turn cultivated him as a direct channel for personal and professional messages.⁶⁹ But none of this inhibited his use of coercive controls. Contradicting repeated denials of any “multiple” censorship, Drake told Public Relations Officers (PROs), who ostensibly had no censorship function and acted more as guides for the press, that they were responsible for both the security and accuracy of press copy filed by reporters they accompanied.⁷⁰ When Frank Tremaine, the United Press bureau chief in Hawaii, complained to

⁶⁹ His records include friendly letters and requests for various types of assistance from Time writer John Hersey, Chicago Tribune reporter Stanley Johnston, AP reporter Clark Lee, and others. Drake not only maintained a regular correspondence with Keith Wheeler, but wrote on more than one occasion to Wheeler’s wife and mother while the reporter was covering fighting in the Aleutian islands in 1943. NARA Record Group 313, entry 86, box 13.

⁷⁰ Undated memorandum, Records of Naval Operating Forces C-in-C, Pacific Fleet (CINCPAC) Records relating to public relations, 1943-1946. Record Group 313, entry 86 box 6. The same box contains an October 12, 1943 document titled “CENSORSHIP REGULATIONS FOR THE UNITED STATES NAVY,” which listed as prohibited any criticism of the U.S. or its allies in terms of equipment, leadership, and morale, and then put a strong construction on these terms: “Censors should expressly remember that any press dispatch which indicates alleged disunity,

his editors about censorship decisions, Drake intercepted the letter and used it to instruct his staff on the handling of the press to mute such criticism in the future.⁷¹ This surveillance went beyond written or broadcast statements, to reach the routine conversations that were a central part of any reporting job—when PR officers overhead an INS reporter discussing the sinking of the *Yorktown* in a Honolulu bar, they reported the conversation to Drake, who threatened the reporter with a loss of accreditation.⁷²

In short, Drake had at his fingertips an extensive apparatus for information control. From early in the conflict, Drake was also being pushed to allow more graphic news, and the pressure was not just from journalists. In September 1942, intelligence officers in Honolulu, complaining that the public was too insulated, wrote Drake a lengthy plea for more violence in the press:

Brains in this war does not mean necessarily the type that are propped up 20 inches above a bureaucrat's desk, but also the amorphous mass that spews out onto the back of a plane seats while in contact with the enemy. This latter kind has to be wiped up later; some of the former might well be -- earlier.

It appears to be better to let the public see and know the 'spewy' side of war before it reaches every family in the form of casualties, for this war could be brought to an earlier end with fewer casualties if greater solidarity were felt now.⁷³

Drake's papers record no response to this missive. But his actions in the next year belied little disagreement. Touring the South Pacific Command and interviewing press officers in March 1943, he pushed for journalistic access to the front and reported disapprovingly that Admiral

timidity, lack of leadership, administrative incompetency, or presumed political interferences within the armed forces of the United States comes within the meaning of this statement."

⁷¹ July 10, 1942 memo, Drake to staff, NARA RG 313, entry 86, box 6.

⁷² June 20, 1942 memo, Drake to staff. NARA RG 313, entry 86, box 6.

⁷³ September 26, 1942 memo for Drake from Captain I.H. Mayfield, District Intelligence Office, Fourteenth Naval District, Honolulu, "Stork-and-Ostrich Propaganda." RG 313, entry 86, box 6.

Halsey was “strongly unsympathetic to the legitimate needs of the press.”⁷⁴ A few days later Admiral Nimitz wrote Halsey a note clearly taking Drake’s side, and emphasizing the priority Secretary Knox put on greater press coverage.⁷⁵

Drake’s push for greater access to the combat zone, with the sympathetic ear of Nimitz, led to one of the landmark disclosures of “the face of war” in American journalism. Late in November, 1943, Marines landed on the two-mile-long island of Betio, part of the Tarawa atoll in the Gilbert Islands. Betio was heavily defended and barely edged above sea level; both geography and fortifications exposed the invaders to clear lines of fire across the beaches, and errors in timing stranded landing vehicles on offshore reefs as the tide went out, forcing many men to swim to shore under fire. After three days of fighting, the bodies of more than 1,000 Marines and 4,600 Japanese soldiers and Korean laborers crowded a strip of sand the size of New York’s central park. There was little left to report on the island except for suffering flesh: “The face of one man was little more than a mass of butchered meat. The body twitched. [...] bandages hid gaping holes in the bodies of others, taut, gray countenances bespeaking their pain.”⁷⁶ This horrific landscape was reported extensively and rapidly, as Drake had arranged for 20 writers, five photographers, and several film crews and illustrators to accompany the invasion force—the press contingent was the same size as the one for the invasion of North Africa, which

⁷⁴ March 29, 1943 Drake memorandum to public relations officers. RG 313, entry 86, box 5.

⁷⁵ Nimitz to Halsey memo, April 3, 1943. RG 313, entry 86, box 6.

⁷⁶ “Writer Tells of Bodies Draping Broken Landing Craft at Betio,” *Washington Post*, November 29, 1942.

had sprawled over nearly 1,000 miles of Mediterranean coastline.⁷⁷ Among the reporters present were Robert Sherrod, who published a best-selling book on the battle less than a year later, and AP photographer Frank Filan, who would win a Pulitzer prize for his work on the island.

Years later Paul Fussell cited Tarawa as a rare instance in which journalists overcame both the military censors and their own inhibitions to honestly convey the lived experience of combat.⁷⁸ In fact, it marked a triumph of Drake's campaign for reportorial access in the Pacific—a campaign motivated by the desire to bring the public into closer contact with the realities of combat. When a group of correspondents formed an organization to bargain with the military over professional issues in the South West Pacific the following year, they lauded Drake as an exemplar of transparency, noting in particular that he had personally stayed up until 3:30 a.m. to clear the first, grim press copy from Tarawa.⁷⁹

The news stunned the home front, and was widely interpreted as a portent of accelerating violence across both oceans; the *New York Times* editorial page said Tarawa signified the opening of “a war of extermination” in the Pacific.⁸⁰ A *Washington Post* columnist, on the other hand, linked the casualties to the escalation of the air war in Europe, noting that more people were thought to have died in recent bombings of Bremen and Berlin than at Betio—and that in both cases a democratic people needed to accept its role in the killing. “We must realize that the

⁷⁷ “The Press: Not-so-silent service,” *Time*, December 6, 1943; Desmond, *Tides of War*, 251-2, 295.

⁷⁸ Fussell, *Wartime*, 147.

⁷⁹ Robert Trumbell, undated memo, “REPLIES TO PWAC’s 19 RECOMMENDATIONS.” NARA RG 313, entry 86, box 13.

⁸⁰ “The Lessons of Tarawa,” *New York Times*, December 1, 1943,

willingness to deal death cannot be delegated to our young men—and disowned by the rest of us. The responsibility for death in war is ours, nationally.”⁸¹ Everywhere, in fact, the reporting on Tarawa seemed to provoke calls for the nation to face death more squarely. The *Chicago Tribune* (which blamed Roosevelt’s cabinet for the casualties and called, not for the first time, for Gen. MacArthur to be put in charge of the war) conjured up a unique image of the dead literally ‘brought home’ in an illustration of the city’s Grant Park entirely covered with 1,092 crosses for the men killed in the Gilbert Islands, each occupying “an imaginary plot of ground, 100 by 100 feet square.”⁸² Kentucky’s junior senator, A.B. Chandler, used the news to warn against a second front, saying it would make the coasts of Western Europe into “a huge and tragic Tarawa.”⁸³ For the conservative nationalists who opposed administration strategy and wanted out of the European war as soon as possible, Tarawa was an opportunity to bludgeon the White House with bodies.

But military officials and the administration were even more eager than their critics to focus attention on the lethality of the battle. Just days after the island was secured, Admiral Nimitz flew to Betio from Hawaii and told reporters still stationed there that “he was afraid the American people were not sufficiently impressed with the toughness of the battle for Tarawa

⁸¹ Paul Schubert, “Heavy Casualties,” *Washington Post*, December 3, 1943.

⁸² “Navy Reveals 1,092 Yanks Die in Gilberts,” *Chicago Daily Tribune* Dec, 2, 1942. On December 6, in an editorial titled “Put Experts in Charge,” the same paper charged that Secretaries Stimson and Knox were political incompetents appointed only because of their willingness to “betray” the Republican Party by supporting the candidacy of Wendell Willkie.

⁸³ “Senator Chandler Sees Invasion as ‘Huge and Tragic Tarawa,’” *Washington Post*, December 26, 1943.

because it was over in three days.”⁸⁴ Rather than recoiling from the painful reporting he had helped engineer with Drake, Nimitz worried that it hadn’t gone far enough to prepare the country for even worse losses in the future. White House officials expressed frustration that “close-ups of shell-torn bodies” on the island had been cut from commercial newsreels after being cleared by the censors; the people needed exposure to such images before the onset of much larger military campaigns in 1944.⁸⁵ Office of War Information chief Elmer Davis told Secretary of War Stimson that the Tarawa reporting had been “top-notch” and complained that Army wasn’t helping reporters get similar coverage of the Italian campaign.⁸⁶ Palmer Hoyt, the head of domestic operations for the OWI, gave a speech to the Advertising Men’s Post 209 of the American Legion a few days later, and said that “more realism” was needed “in conditioning the American people for what is to come.”⁸⁷

* * *

“What is to come”—these words were pregnant with a well-founded expectation of an acceleration in the killing as the war moved closer to Germany and Japan. American casualties were a narrow slice of the total, but they illustrate the quickening tempo of the violence: in the Army alone there had been some 62,000 fatalities in 1942 and 1943 combined; over the

⁸⁴ “Nimitz Visits Death-Laden Tarawa Atoll,” William Hipple (Associated Press), *Washington Post*, December 1, 1943.

⁸⁵ “Government Seeks Stern Home Front: Official Sees Possibility of Tripled Casualty List for US in Coming Months,” *New York Times*, December 23, 1943. Some of the Tarawa images cut from the commercial newsreels would reappear in an official film, “With the Marines at Tarawa,” produced by Warner Bros. for the Marines Corps and the OWI; it won an Academy Award for short documentary in 1944.

⁸⁶ Henry Stimson diary, December 7, 1943 entry, microfilm reel 8, volume 45.

⁸⁷ “Too Little Realism Seen in War News,” *New York Times*, December 28, 1943

subsequent two years the number approached 250,000. For a year after the invasion of France, nearly as many members of the U.S. Army died every month as had been killed in all of 1942.⁸⁸ The deaths of others would grow even more calamitously as combat swallowed civilian populations from Saipan to the Ruhr, and strategic bombing burned out the major urban centers of northern Europe and Japan. These numbers will never be known with the precision of U.S. Army casualty lists.

An attempt to keep the home front innocent of these cascading human disasters would have put severe strains on any censorship organization. But there is little evidence that such an effort was made in the later years of the war, beyond an inconsistent (and sometimes exaggerated) restriction on “horrific” photographs. Admittedly, the records here leave much to be desired—there is no major archive of censored copy at all comparable to the centralized holdings of censored photographs.⁸⁹ The idiosyncratic records that do exist, though, bear out the idea that fairly graphic descriptions of violence were routinely deemed compatible with morale. For example, the Navy preserved a considerable file on the INS reporter Julian Hartt, including the censored pages of reports he filed from Okinawa in 1945.⁹⁰ Tucked in amid many clippings describing the bombing of Japan—“Yokohama was described today as a blazing inferno with

⁸⁸ U.S. Army Adjutant General, *Army Battle Casualties and Nonbattle Deaths in World War II: Final Report, 7 December 1941 – 31 December 1946* (1953), 96.

⁸⁹ Roeder, *The Censored War*, 177-178.

⁹⁰ Julian Hartt, “Personal File,” Navy Department records, RG 313, entry 86, box 17. These appear only to have been preserved because Hartt decided to ship his papers to public relations officers in Guam for safekeeping, and apparently never got them back. Since Hartt outlived the war, one can only speculate as to why the papers remained in Naval custody; further testimony to the somewhat idiosyncratic nature of the records on censorship.

smoke rising to more than 20,000 feet”⁹¹—are carbon-copy sheets with extensive red-pencil excisions and the stamps indicating that the stories were cleared for publication. These pages show the censors dutifully changing “fire bomb” to “incendiary”; blocking the precise number of sorties flown for air support on the island; and redacting descriptions of infantry movements. At the same time, they permitted descriptions of Japanese dead “stacked like cordwood” (eerily evoking what was shortly to become a common phrase in concentration camp reportage); of men set on fire by tracer rounds and then buried alive; of enemies strangled to death (when capture would presumably be possible); and of a staff sergeant “having a hell of a good time” killing with a machine gun.⁹² Whatever accident preserved Hartt’s copy, this small slice of the record cannot reveal the entire scope of censorship activity on Okinawa, to say nothing of the war as a whole, but it certainly does not square with an ethos of limiting the domestic consumption of potentially troubling violence.

On a more systematic level, the censors’ work in 1944-45 is best illustrated by the planning and conduct of censorship during the invasion of Normandy and subsequent European campaigns. Very little about information management was left to chance before the intricately mapped-out June 1944 invasion; provisions included a centralized Ministry of Information command in London to transmit stories overseas, “PR motorcyclists” idling on the English coastline to rush sealed bags of copy to message centers on D-Day, and public relations teams on the initial landing parties to censor every word leaving the continent by wireless transmission—

⁹¹ Julian Hartt papers clipping, *Los Angeles Evening Herald Express*, “City Left Flaming Inferno,” May 29, 1945. RG 313, entry 86, box 17

⁹² Julian Hartt censored press copy for April 14 and 28, 1945, NARA RG 313, entry 86, box 17

and carrier pigeon, should the issue arise.⁹³ While official histories argue that this was a liberal censorship and more critical accounts describe a restrictive one, the truth seems to be that there were extremely tight information controls without a corresponding intention to erase disturbing news.⁹⁴ The censors had the means, but not the motive, to secure a misleadingly sterile picture for domestic audiences.

This is not to say that Eisenhower's command was unwilling to employ censorship to shape the news, or that it was uninterested in domestic morale. In fact, the supreme commander was acutely concerned with the emotional response of the public to news of the invasion, as a secret memo on press guidance issued under his signature in May made clear:

The stress of public feeling among the peoples of the united Nations has been so great during the past months of expectancy that the release of pent-up emotion on D Day will have the character of an explosion. It will not be possible to stem the forces of the explosion but it is essential that they be channeled in a direction where, at worst, they will do least harm. Uncontrolled detonation would be disaster. At best, these forces should be directed where they will do most good for the Allied War Effort. Such direction will not be easy but it is incumbent on all concerned with the press and radio to ensure that these molders of public opinion are given such guidance as will cause the emotional forces liberated by the breaking of the news of the invasion to be kept within defined channels.⁹⁵

⁹³ "Public Relations Plan 'Overlord' Annex B (Press Censorship Plan)," May 11, 1944, SHAEF Special Staff, Public Relations Division Decimal File 000.74 to 000.9, NARA RG 331 entry 82 box 2. See also, "Press Communications Plan 'Overlord,'" May 26, 1944, SHAEF Special Staff, Public Relations Division Decimal File 000.4 to 000.73, NARA RG 331 entry 82 box 1.

⁹⁴ The official history, for example, describes Eisenhower's press policy in highly liberal terms: "Holding the view that democratic peoples must be told as much as possible concerning the accomplishments of their armies, the Supreme Commander went as far as he could, consistent with security, toward announcing full details of his forces' activities." Forrest Pogue, "SHAEF and the Press," Appendix A of *The Supreme Command* (Washington, Office of the Chief of Military History, Dept. of the Army, 1954), 520.

⁹⁵ "D Day Guidance For the Press," Eisenhower for Combined Chiefs of Staff, May 31, 1944, SHAEF Special Staff PR Division, NARA RG 331, entry 82, box 1.

The “defined channels” for appropriate public sentiments were only very loosely defined, however. The memo said that press reports should both emphasize the importance of the invasion and keep the public from growing too optimistic. What did this mean for, say, the reporting of casualties? Pre-invasion censorship guidance banned photographs “showing mutilation in a horrific degree,” but left verbal reports to the discretion of censors in the field, who sometimes ignored and finally decided to end any controls on “horridities” at a conference in Paris in early 1945. Reporting on psychiatric casualties was explicitly permitted, with the caveat that the topic not be treated “flippantly.”⁹⁶ In June and again in December 1944, the Public Relations Division sparred with military intelligence, when the latter tried to block the disclosure of killed-in-action figures. On both occasions the publicists got the better of the powerful intelligence chiefs, invoking the specter of “public over-optimism” and the need for more journalistic “realism” to counter concerns about divulging troop levels.⁹⁷ Thus the PRD was able to announce that more than 3,000 Americans had been killed in the first week of the war in France, and that over 44,000 had died by the end of November.⁹⁸

⁹⁶ Press censorship guidance No. 14, “Casualties,” May 24, 1944; censorship guidance No. 11 “Neurosis and Neuropsychiatry,” May 4, 1944. RG 331, entry 1, box 4. Record of “Press Censorship Conference,” Paris, January 30, 1945, RG 331 82 box 8.

⁹⁷ On the first occasion of dispute, in June 1944, Eisenhower reprimanded the PRD for disclosing casualty figures; but a week of heated telegraphic exchanges ended with a decision to continue releasing casualty figures, albeit at irregular intervals. See Gen. Surles to Eisenhower, June 12, 1944 and Eisenhower to Surles, June 17, 1944; SHAEF HQ to Publicity and Psychological Warfare Division, June 17, 1944; and Col. Ernest Dupuy, PRD, to SHAEF Chief of Staff, June 22, 1944. On the December dispute, see Brig. Gen. Frank Allen to Assistant Chief of Staff G-1, December 4, 1944; and G-1, G-2 and PRD correspondence, 9-13 December, 1944. All correspondence in RG 331, entry 82, box 1.

⁹⁸ “Press Censorship Guidance No. 518,” December 21, 1944, in 12th Army Group Censorship Guidances, RG 331, entry 194A, box 4.

Philip Knightley wrote in his powerful account of wartime censorship that reporting on the invasion of France was “stilted and overly formal ... for the most part, unsatisfactory.”⁹⁹ This was true of some writing, but SHAEF censors passed over 700,000 words for publication on June 6 alone—some of it, stilted or not, conveyed a sense of the war’s human consequences.¹⁰⁰ Charles Wertenbaker’s dispatch for *Life* described a shattered bulldozer on the beach “with its occupants spattered, an arm here, a leg there, a piece of pulp over yonder.”¹⁰¹ As on many other occasions, the text of *Life* was explicit in advising its readers of a reality worse than the images could show. Indeed, the June 19 issue of the magazine seemed designed to highlight the horrors of war above and beyond straight reporting of the invasion. The D-Day stories were supplemented with a feature on the Chemical Weapons Service, which explained how engineers had turned white phosphorous—initially used as a smokescreen—into an anti-personnel weapon:

[I]t has proved to be a terrifying and effective weapon for inflicting casualties. The shower of molten, burning particles that sprays up from a phosphorus shell burst sears its victims with agonizing burns. The Germans, who have no important source of elemental phosphorus to compare with natural deposits in the U.S., have protested its use as ‘inhumane.’¹⁰²

The feature, with photographs of phosphorous grenades and other chemical agents on test ranges, was an obvious product of active cooperation by the War Department. The Chemical Weapons

⁹⁹ Knightley, *The First Casualty*, 323.

¹⁰⁰ Pogue, *The Supreme Command* (Washington, Office of the Chief of Military History, Dept. of the Army, 1954), 519.

¹⁰¹ “Big Days: Sudden Storms and Sudden Death Shook History’s Greatest Armada,” *Life*, June 19, 1942.

¹⁰² “Chemical Warfare: Its Terrible Fire, Flame and Smoke Have Confused, Seared and Suffocated the Enemy Armies,” *Life*, June 19, 1944.

Service used the article to explain its role in burning down “Berlin, Hamburg, and other cities” and boasted of an innovative jellied gasoline bomb capable of “almost inextinguishable violence.”¹⁰³ The War Department staged a demonstration of Napalm flamethrowers in New Jersey the same week the *Life* article was published, and went into some detail about firebombs employing the same compound. The department explained that government researchers and Standard Oil had developed the weapons for use against enemy soldiers and cities, and had proved their efficacy by destroying replica German and Japanese “villages” constructed in the Utah desert.¹⁰⁴ When Napalm reached the European war in the summer of 1944 the censors initially put a blanket ban on “any mention of jettisonable auxiliary fuel tanks, which when dropped, explode and burn”; but by December the fire bombs could be described, and only the word “Napalm” itself was restricted.¹⁰⁵ There was no censorship problem when the AP reported that jellied oil and magnesium bombs were responsible for tens of thousands of civilian casualties in Berlin the following February.¹⁰⁶

Napalm was a small part of the journalists’ war, but its treatment exemplifies the casual passing of enemy deaths by the censors, even when presented terms stark enough to provoke unease among American civilians. By 1945 the OWI had to defend the military’s censorship

¹⁰³ “Three New Spectacular Weapons Demonstrated,” *Los Angeles Times*, June 18, 1944.

¹⁰⁴ “Three New Spectacular Weapons Demonstrated,” *Los Angeles Times*, June 18, 1944.

¹⁰⁵ A memo to Eisenhower and Spaatz from Joint Security Control in Washington insisted on total silence about Napalm, July 5, 1944, SHAEF Chief of Staff decimal file 000.7 to 000.7/1, RG 331, entry 1, box 2. “Press Censor Guidance No. 173,” July 7, 1944, stopped mention of the bombs. SHAEF Press Censorship Branch Subject Files, RG 331, entry 86, box 48. The ban was modified and substantially lifted in “Press Censors Guidance No. 540,” December 27, 1944, 12 Army Group Censorship Guidances, RG 331 entry 194A, box 4.

¹⁰⁶ “Heavy Berlin Casualties Laid to ‘Goop’ Fire Bombs,” *Washington Post*, February 28, 1945.

decisions against irate citizens who complained to Congress, like the Connecticut man who wrote to Sen. Thomas Hart about a harrowing night at the movies in New Haven. First his 14-year-old daughter had been terrified by a newsreel of a war criminal's hanging in Germany. The night got worse from there:

Then was shown troops in action in the Pacific with flame throwers. A Japanese victim ran through the flame into the foreground with his clothes entirely ablaze, and fell writhing in agony and then into unconsciousness just a few feet in front of the camera. Again my daughter shuddered, covered her face and slumped in her seat.¹⁰⁷

Replying to Sen. Hart, the OWI disclaimed responsibility for the film, then asked rhetorically, "what is an adverse effect? Was it good or bad for your correspondent's daughter to behold a shocking picturization of the horrors of war?"¹⁰⁸ One could remark on the differential presentation of German and Japanese bodies, but the differences struck this father far less forcefully than the combined weight of real deaths depicted on the screen. Meanwhile the European censorship allowed publication of a stream of figures, numbering the enemy dead without controversy: "A fair estimate of GERMANS killed since the NINTH opened its push would be 2,200"; "Enemy buried – 17,078"; "Enemy dead buried by [Third Army Sector] last 24 hours 59, buried in this operation 893, since 1 August 24,924."¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁷ Reynolds Longfellow to Sen. Thomas Hart letter, August 3, 1945, in OWI Correspondence with Congress, 1942-1945, RG 208, entry 2, box 11.

¹⁰⁸ Edward Klauber, Acting Director, Motion Picture Bureau of OWI, to Senator Hart, August 14, 1945. NARA RG 208, entry 2, box 11.

¹⁰⁹ Press Censor Guidance No. 467, December 9, 1944; Press Censor Guidance 495, December 15, 1944. SHAEF 12th Army Group Censorship Guidances, NARA RG 331, entry 194A, box 12; Press Censor Guidance 281, March 22, 1945; NARA RG 331, entry 194, box 4.

On the other hand, the censorship did energetically repress any news that revealed the killing of German prisoners or soldiers trying to surrender. The issue arose when an officer, speaking too freely in a press conference, told reporters that U.S. paratroopers did not take prisoners:

[T]hey kill them as they hold up their hands coming out, and after they get them in a group they are just liable to kill them right there..... They have no intention of taking prisoners. They are apt, in going along the road with prisoners and seeing one of their own men killed, to turn around and shoot a prisoner to make up for it. They are a tough people.¹¹⁰

An immediate censorship “stop” was put on the remark, and it does not appear to have been published at the time. But the objections had less to do with morale at home than with worries that such stories would lead to retaliation against American and British prisoners in German hands.¹¹¹ Those concerns, and the censorship stops, remained in place until the last days of the European war, blocking in particular a raft of May 1945 reports about allied troops summarily executing members of the S.S. and guards at liberated concentration camps.¹¹² These stories, it should be noted, were hardly critical or anti-war in tone, and arguably reflected the journalists’ assimilation to front-line *mores* rather than any rebellion against the public relations line. The notion that the public might protest these killings barely entered into the question.

¹¹⁰ I have been unable to locate the transcript of this conference, if one was preserved. The matter was apparently discussed between Eisenhower, his deputy Walter Bedell Smith, and Anthony Eden on the British side. The quotation is preserved in a letter from Eden to Walter Bedell Smith dated August 5, 1944. SHAEF Office of the Chief of Staff Decimal File 000.7 to 000.7/1, NARA RG 331, entry 1, box 2.

¹¹¹ Walter Bedell Smith to Anthony Eden, August 6, 1944. NARA RG 331, entry 1, box 2.

¹¹² “Trend of Copy Submitted by Accredited Correspondents for SHAEF Censorship,” April 30-May 1, 1945; May 3-4, 1945; and May 9-10, 1945; SHAEF PRD Press Censorship Branch Subject File, NARA RG 331, entry 86, box 47.

This reading is supported by the censors' handling of civilian deaths in Europe. The stops imposed on these stories were highly qualified and reflected no urgency to keep the home front from learning that non-combatants suffered in the liberation of the continent. A directive on German civilians, for example, instructed censors to block stories claiming that Allied policy was aimed at the "merciless repression of the German people." But the same directive also ordered censors to downplay the "human treatment" of German civilians, and indicated that violence affecting civilians was fair game for publication: "If, owing to military requirements, a village has to be destroyed, this should be reported factually and not generalized."¹¹³ Publications from *Time* to the *Spokane Daily Chronicle* did, in fact, report that U.S. soldiers burned small villages in retaliation for enemy sniping.¹¹⁴ If journalists sometimes conveyed a degree of satisfaction in German pain, the devastation of other European lives led to more ambivalent descriptions. An army corporal wrote in *Life* magazine about a nine-year-old boy in Sardinia, who lost his right arm and both parents in an American bombing raid, and "now spends the entire day pimping about town for his sister and managing the line of soldiers that forms outside her doorway."¹¹⁵ The story violated virtually all of what are taken as the absolute taboos of wartime censorship—the killing of innocents, the sexuality of soldiers (at once officially condoned and illicit in terms of domestic mores), the lack of certainty over the purpose and prospect of American power. Yet as a story by an officer, subject to military censorship and published in *Life*, this was scarcely less an official account than releases made by the OWI or the

¹¹³ Press Censorship Guidance No. 38, "German Civilians," December 14, 1944, NARA RG 331, entry 82, box 8.

¹¹⁴ *Spokane Daily Chronicle*, September 16, 1944; *Time*, September 25, 1944.

¹¹⁵ "After the Battles," *Life*, June 16, 1944.

White House. Civilian deaths were far from the center of wartime journalism, but they were equally far from being systematically eliminated by the state. And if the public were adequately hardboiled, why would it matter?

But again, this should not be taken as evidence of generally liberal censorship operations. When the censors or their commanders worried about the political effect of a story, even in a relatively trivial way, they showed little hesitation or lack of ability in blocking the transmission of copy. An example came in the last weeks of the European war, when the Ninth U.S. Army press camp wound up lodged in a castle that turned out to be owned by Nazi Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels. “This paradox is a great strain on the journalistic impulse,” the censors noted in a guidance that stopped any mention of the embarrassing coincidence.¹¹⁶ More famously, Allied commanders shut down the operations of the Associated Press in Europe for several hours after the unauthorized release of the final surrender of Germany by Edward Kennedy, who was then fired by the AP. This incident was subsequently inflated into a world-historic clash between the state and the press by Kennedy and AP chief Kent Cooper, both of whom maintained (not entirely plausibly) that censorship prevented the U.S. army from racing to Berlin and gave the Soviet Union an advantage in the division of Europe.¹¹⁷ In fact, the censorship archives do preserve a protest from 54 correspondents in Europe over the “outrageously unfair treatment” of the AP. But the injustice they perceived was not the

¹¹⁶ Ninth Army Sector Guidance No. 253, March 16, 1945. 12th Army Group Censorship Guidances. NARA RG 331, entry 194A, box 4.

¹¹⁷ Edward Kennedy and Julia Kennedy Cochrane (ed.), *Ed Kennedy's War: V-E Day, Censorship, and the Associated Press* (Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press, 2012), 169-170. Kent Cooper, *The Right to Know: An Exposition of the Evils of News Suppression and Propaganda* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1956), 203-236.

suspension of the AP activities; the correspondents, embarrassed at having been scooped, were outraged that the news service was permitted to resume working in Europe so quickly after “the most disgraceful, deliberate, and unethical double-cross in the history of journalism.”¹¹⁸ Far from joining a journalistic stand against the state, they wanted the ban on AP reporting re-imposed. Censorship in the field was by this point merely an accepted fact of life, and one far less threatening than the prospect of another journalist gaining a competitive advantage by flouting the rules. If the Kennedy case exemplifies anything beyond the frayed nerves of May 1945, it is the degree to which an attentive and potent press censorship operation was a thoroughly accepted part of daily life in the combat theaters by the end of the war.¹¹⁹

But the flipside of this quite sensitive censorship was that the orphan in Sardinia, the tens of thousands of dead in routine press releases, and the film of Japanese men burning alive were all deemed acceptable. If the prescribed terms for releasing news were violated, censorship would show its teeth. But no one would go looking for dereliction of duty among the press watchers if a 16-year-old girl shuddered in horror as film capturing the moment of an

¹¹⁸ May 8, 1945 letter to Eisenhower and Stimson, signed by 54 accredited journalists, copied in SHAEF main Public Relations Division memo to Surles, file labeled “Kennedy Release,” NARA RG 331, entry 1, box 4.

¹¹⁹ The Kennedy case also sheds light on the sources of conflict between journalists and censors in the absence of a systematic effort to thwart “realistic” reporting. Censorship was a constant source of career anxiety because it could cost precious minutes in the race to break a story first—most dramatically, but certainly not uniquely, in the case of V-E Day. In his memoir Kennedy recorded that he gained a personal victory in breaking the story of the Italian surrender “because I won the race to the censor’s basket.” Though one might suspect sour grapes after the V-E Day fiasco derailed his subsequent career, it is worth quoting his thoughts on the process: “I never had illusions about this kind of journalism—it was imbecilic by any sensible standard. But it was what the AP, the UP, the INS, and Reuters wanted; it was what we were paid to do. Get a beat of a minute or two on any important story and congratulations poured in from New York.” *Ed Kennedy’s War*, 104, 113-114.

individual's death flickered across the screen at home. Such was the emotional realism cultivated by official information management in the war years.

“At the mass funerals, Germans were more prominent and mournful”: Bombing and emotional realism

The relative roles of censorship and emotional realism in guiding wartime morality are nowhere better encapsulated than in the strategic bombing of German and Japanese cities. The highly publicized attacks on Guernica and Shanghai in 1937 had placed the human realities of urban bombing squarely in front of the American public, and it was the first aspect of the war to be formally addressed by the White House after the invasion of Poland. President Roosevelt's appeal to the belligerent nations, on September 1, 1939, to refrain from bombing civilians is often taken as an impotent enunciation of quickly discarded norms, little more than an ironic marker along the road to two flashes of man-made fission. The emotional terms of Roosevelt's appeal are nonetheless revealing—he invoked no formal legal principles, asserting only that the bombing of cities “has sickened the hearts of every civilized man and woman, and has profoundly shocked the conscience of humanity.”¹²⁰ Six years later President Truman bowed rhetorically to the same standard of non-combatant immunity when he described Hiroshima as “an important Japanese Army base.”¹²¹ The latter statement, sidestepping any real emotional response to the atomic bombing, is consonant with a view emphasizing the role of censorship

¹²⁰ Franklin D. Roosevelt: “An Appeal to Great Britain, France, Italy, Germany, and Poland to Refrain from Air Bombing of Civilians,” September 1, 1939. Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=15797>.

¹²¹ Harry S. Truman, “Statement by the President Announcing the Use of the A-Bomb at Hiroshima,” August 6, 1945. *The American Presidency Project*. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu>

and distance in obliterating American connections to the war's violence. In fact, however, the space between Roosevelt in 1939 and Truman in 1945 was marked less by the redaction of bombing than its gradual emotional revaluation. It was surpassingly obvious in August 1945 that Hiroshima had been a full and bustling city, not merely a military base—one need look no further than *Life* magazine in the immediate aftermath to learn that it was Japan's seventh-largest city—but it would not “sicken the heart” of readers who had for six years recalibrated their expectations of war's moral limits.

The notion that attitudes about bombing changed is not a novel point, of course. But histories of the air war understate the extent to which attacks on cities remained in the public eye even absent major controversies (such as those surrounding the publication of Vera Brittain's *Massacre by Bombing*). And they understate the moral engagement made by routine reporting. In March 1942, for example, widely circulated reports made it clear that 350-400 French civilians had died in Royal Air Force raids on the Paris Renault works.¹²² Not satisfied to class the dead as war-workers, *Life* insisted that these deaths were different from other civilian losses, because people felt differently about them—in fact, because Germans felt badly about them. Vichy protests were countered by a (somewhat dubious) allegation about the burials: “At the mass funerals, Germans were more prominent and mournful than Frenchmen.”¹²³ If Germans would mourn the dead, they were, *ipso facto*, not deserving of mourning.

Historical disputes over the morality of the air war have involved quite subtle evaluations of the relationship between U.S. and British bombing strategies, but the two were frequently

¹²² “British Bomb Paris,” *Life*, March 30, 1942.

¹²³ “British Bomb Paris,” *Life*, March 30, 1942.

conflated at the time. A story on the May 1942 R.A.F.-led bombing of Cologne mentioned that 1,000 U.S. and Canadian men took part in the raid, and went on to imagine the cellars where “many were roasted to death in the fires.”¹²⁴ The death count was estimated at 20,000, with little pretense that the tens of thousands were all somehow involved in military work. In the absence of good photographs from the ground, *Life* commissioned a painting of the city engulfed in fire, the famous cathedral silhouetted against the flames. A year later, the bombing of Hamburg was announced with little euphemism: “Hamburg Pictured in Ruin and Death”; “18,000 Died in Hamburg Tunnel”; “50% of Hamburg Folk Dead, Survivor Says.”¹²⁵

The Hamburg bombing was part of John Hersey's preparation for Hiroshima. Writing commentary on a series of paintings, Hersey built imaginative bridges between his readers, the pilots engaged in an impersonal war over Europe, and the people below. These raids, Hersey wrote, were far more destructive than the bombardments of Guernica, Rotterdam or Coventry. “But the aviators did not—and probably should not—speak of these facts in human terms,” he wrote.

The pride in their vices was audible; the thoughts in their mind were not. They did not have to see the faces in Hamburg's brazier to realize what was going on thousands of feet below. American fliers are not cruel or insensitive far from it. Most of them are naturally gentle, kind and generous. If they do not talk much about the damage they do, it is because their job is impersonal. It has to be. They have to keep it that way. They cannot dwell, audibly or inaudibly, on its awful effects.¹²⁶

¹²⁴ “German War on Civilians Boomerangs Back on the German City of Cologne,” *Life*, June 15, 1942.

¹²⁵ *New York Times*, July 31, 1943; August 25, 1943; and August 13, 1943.

¹²⁶ “Saturation of Hamburg,” *Life*, December 27, 1943.

Of course, a report like this could only leave the very substantial readership of the magazine to dwell on those facts. (And Hersey was enough absorbed by them to be drawn deeper into imagining a burning city in his famous reconstruction of the atomic bombing.) If the aviators required distance, domestic audiences could face facts: thousands drowned in a tunnel under the Elbe, and above ground “Hamburg was as bad as the seventh circle of Dante's hell, where flakes of fire fell on naked sinners.” Explicit moral arguments would be made in response to pacifist protests, but these remained firmly on the fringes of a wartime political culture, and were far outweighed by stories like Hersey's. The latter provided less in the way of explicit ethical reasoning than simple practice in contemplating with equanimity what had been the subject of absolute condemnation not long before. In a culture exhorting shared sacrifice and collective democratic effort in connection with everything war-related, a report like this could allow a reader to contemplate him or herself, over a cup of rationed coffee, as an author of Dante's seventh circle.

Compared to this reporting, the censors can claim only a modest role in normalizing the air war. Associated Press reporter Howard Cowan caused considerable consternation among officers when he reported, just after the burning of Dresden in February 1945, that the army had adopted a policy of “deliberate terror bombing.” Michael Sherry notes that Cowan's copy was “unaccountably” passed by a censor after a February press briefing, and helped propel the Dresden attack into its place as a symbol of modern war's inhumanity.¹²⁷ The censorship actions in this case appear to have been anything but mysterious, though, and instead reflected both

¹²⁷ Michael Sherry, *The Rise of American Air Power: The Creation of Armageddon* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 261.

deliberate decisions taken by SHAEF censors and a general willingness to permit news of mass killing by bomber to percolate through to the home front. Cowan's story, published February 18, 1945, was drawn entirely from a background press conference on February 16, when Air Commodore C.M. Grierson discussed "the employment of heavies against the centers of population."¹²⁸ While Grierson made no recorded remarks about a policy change, neither did he make any secret out of the casualties involved. And the censorship was not sloppy. Censors were told what part of the conference to pass and what to cut, the standard practice for such presentations. They were instructed in this case to allow the news of heavy bombers being used against population centers, as well as the explicit aim of disrupting relief efforts. On the other hand, the army imposed specific bans on Grierson's comments about the weather, and about coordination with Russian commanders in the selection of targets. Detailed attention went into the management of this press conference.

And further down the chain of command, the censors were not asleep at the transmitter. Cowan's story was only passed after he complained about cuts and the censor re-confirmed the guidances. And the preserved copy of his censored draft show that the censors worried about a sentence on the targeting of oil fields and railroad lines; there was no visible effort to cut the references to terror bombing at all, in multiple rounds of pre-publication scrutiny.¹²⁹ Finally, and perhaps more fundamentally, it is perfectly obvious that Cowan's story was in no way intended

¹²⁸ Press Conference by Air Commodore Grierson, Feb. 16, 1945. SHAEF Office of the Chief of Staff, Secretary, General Staff, Decimal File May 1943- August 1945 000.73 - 000.74, Subject Policy & Infractions of Press Censorship. NARA RG 331, entry 1, box 4

¹²⁹ Lt. Col. Richard H. Merrick in Paris to Col. Dupuy, Feb. 18, 1945, and SHAEF Office of the Chief of Staff, Secretary, General Staff, Decimal File May 1943- August 1945 000.73 - 000.74, Subject Policy & Infractions of Press Censorship. NARA RG 331, entry, 1 box 4

as a critical one. He speculated that Dresden-style bombings would “revive protests from some allied quarters against ‘uncivilized warfare’” only to editorialize that those voices were “likely to be balanced by satisfaction” among the victims of the Third Reich.¹³⁰ While officers panicked over the suggestion that they had made an explicit policy shift, which would have put them on the hook as personal lightning rods for any controversy stemming from the bombing, Cowan’s story was less a fluke than a fairly typical piece of journalism relating the burning of European and Japanese cities.

Conclusion

Martha Gellhorn was right to suggest that we have not come to grips with the violence of the American century, but it is a mistake to lay this condition at the feet of censor-induced blindness and national insularity in the 1940s. Throughout the war censors, propagandists, and journalists cultivated what they saw as an emotional toughness indispensable to a democracy in a total war, and this meant putting the horrors of industrialized conflict continually before the public as a part of the common effort. The result was an awareness of worldwide pain that gave pause even to the triumphalist editorial page that had declared an "American Century" a few years earlier. “When man enters a year like 1939, he cannot expect ever to find the entrance to that fateful tunnel again,” *Life* magazine editorialized, apropos the atomic bomb. “The point is that Americans, no less than Germans, have emerged from the tunnel with radically different practices and standards of permissible behavior toward others.”¹³¹ The transformation of the

¹³⁰ Cowan, draft copy of story marked “PASSED FOR PUBLICATION.” NARA RG 331, entry, 1 box 4.

¹³¹ “Atomic Age,” *Life*, August 20, 1945.

immediate postwar into a Cold War costing millions more lives would be a gradual and contingent process, but Luce surely had a point. The moral common sense of the next thirty years of warfare did not follow seamlessly from the middle of the 1940s, but the violence visited on East Asia—and threatened everywhere—in those years was not only thinkable, but by 1945 was an embedded part of a democratic political culture that had hardened itself to the work of total war. Explaining this development requires an understanding of the capacity of a censorship apparatus to enable the circulation of violent narratives even as it stood guard over the people's morale.

Chapter 3

“Remember Manila”: From Empire to Realism in Narratives of Savage War, 1941-44

Sixteen minutes after announcing the Pearl Harbor attack in a terse call with the major wire services, White House Press Secretary Stephen Early was back on the phone with word of a growing war: the Japanese had just bombed Manila, the capital of a colonial archipelago much larger and more distant from North American shores than Hawai'i.¹ The update came so quickly that some radio listeners, such as the followers of the recondite Sunday afternoon news program on NBC, “The University of Chicago Round Table,” heard the news from the Philippines first, a few seconds before the Pearl Harbor bombing was announced.² War approached the United States along paths defined by the imperial partitions that dominated the political geography of the world in 1941. This mattered a good deal for the language Americans could use to grapple with the moral significance of the conflict in its first years. Empire offered an immediately

¹ Early called the heads of the United Press, Associated Press, and the International New Service from his home at 2:20 p.m. EST with reports from Hawai'i, and was back on the phone at 2:36 p.m. to relay the bombing in the Philippines before he could leave for the White House. The times are given by Ed Lockett, Washington correspondent of Time magazine, in David Hulburd ed., *War Comes to the US - Dec. 7, 1941: The First 30 Hours as Reported to the Time-Life-Fortune News Bureau from the US and Abroad* (Fortune, 1941), typescript dispatches discontinuously paginated.

² “Canada: Neighbor at War,” *University of Chicago Round Table*, December 7, 1941. Regular listeners might have been prepared for the news: two weeks earlier Clare Booth Luce and Williams College President Tyler Dennett had forecast a “back door” to war in Asia, and discussed the military situation of the Philippines in some detail. Dennett was blunt about American interests in Southeast Asia, noting the importance of rubber production in the region: “when I have to get some new tires, I don't propose to pay a monopoly price—a price that has been set by the Japanese.” “The Philippines: Asset or Liability?” *University of Chicago Round Table*, November 16, 1941.

available vocabulary to fill an urgent need: it provided models of unrestrained, or “savage,” violence, and connected the global war with a more familiar and reassuring history of continental expansion. Empire thus seemed to offer one avenue to circumvent the jagged edges of doubt and hesitation which were persistently (if quietly) voiced by a population without a ready-made frame of understanding for the violence of total war. Indeed it might just have been plausible, in 1942, to imagine that the war would revitalize the 19th century projects of territorial empire, with the United States taking a leading place among the imperial powers. Yet this is not what happened. Instead, over the years 1941-1944 two trends worked in opposite directions. First, there was an immediate profusion of narratives that tied the new war directly to the logic of racial empire. Second, however, racial liberals and military pragmatists (the latter concerned with domestic stability and complex global alliances) in the war information agencies quickly moved to foreclose on any public understanding of the war as a racial or imperial conflict. Despite their need for engines of emotional commitment to wartime violence, these officials felt that a racial conceptualization of the war would only undermine morale and threaten the work of global mobilization. In place of empire, they turned to a language of morale, of affect, and of a “realism” which could tolerate violence without sanitizing the war. This chapter traces anxieties, doubts, and competing visions of violence lying just beneath the wider consensus in favor of waging the war. It examines (1) narratives of the war framed around empires and colonies, especially from 1941-1943, (2) expressions of ambivalence over wartime violence at the outset of the conflict, and (3) official and unofficial discourses of “realism” as an ethic of tolerating unpleasant violence. While the chapter ranges across the Pacific and Atlantic theater and discusses high-level officials, anonymous bureaucrats, famous journalists, and ordinary citizens voicing their opinions in surveys and letters, the story I seek to tell follows a relatively

straightforward trajectory. Americans had many resources at hand in 1941 to make moral sense of war by dehumanizing their adversaries. But this was neither an exclusive strategy nor an adequate one to the circumstances. Over the first years of the war it became apparent that a democratic total war would require the cultivation of a public culture which could simultaneously embrace the humanity of the enemy, and the justice of large-scale killing.

* * *

President Roosevelt downplayed the colonial aspect of the conflict in his address to Congress, deleting references to the Philippines from early drafts of his speech in order to rivet attention to Japanese “infamy” on “American soil.”³ But the nature of the war guaranteed the continual intrusion of empire in the daily narratives supplied by the press. Direct American participation in the fighting was confined almost entirely to U.S. and European colonial territory for nearly two years: five months of significant combat in the Philippines (and a drawn-out insurgency thereafter) were followed by campaigns in the League-mandated Solomon Islands and New Guinea; the China-Burma-India theater, most of which fell under the nominal authority of the last Emperor of India, King George VI; and French possessions in North Africa, where 50,000 American soldiers landed in November 1942.⁴ The *Los Angeles Times* columnist Tom Treanor reflected on a solemn holiday season in which accumulating bad news had overtaken Pearl

³ Emily Rosenberg, *A Date Which Will Live: Pearl Harbor in American Memory* (Durham, 2003), 15.

⁴ A variation on “Remember Pearl Harbor” appeared in a *Los Angeles Times* editorial cartoon May 7, 1942. Titled “R for Remember!”, it featured a letter “R” assembled from bloody daggers, each labeled with a name: Pearl Harbor, Manila, Batavia, Bataan, Corregidor, and Singapore. This widens the picture beyond Hawaii, but if anything understates the role of the U.S. in the colonial world by focusing on active combat theaters. American soldiers were simultaneously deploying to southern and central Africa and India; joining the occupying forces in Iran following a joint UK-Soviet invasion; and extending Washington’s presence in the Caribbean.

Harbor: “There probably weren't many Christmas parties where the jollity didn't dissolve into a discussion of the Philippines.”⁵ Treanor may have exaggerated, but Gallup studies of geographic literacy suggest that Americans did, in fact, “remember Manila” almost as much as they put Pearl Harbor at the center of their understandings of the war: more than five weeks into the invasion of Okinawa in 1945, only 26 percent of grade-school educated respondents, and a bare majority of the college-educated, could identify that island, the site of the last major battles of the war. Manila, on the other hand, was correctly identified by 63 percent of respondents with a grade school education and 95 percent of those with at least some college.⁶ It was not until the invasion of Sicily and Italy in the summer of 1943 that large numbers of American soldiers took part in ground combat on the territory of an independent nation-state.

These political lines helped shape the moral geography of the war. To a first approximation the justice of the confrontation between fascist and anti-fascist armies was captured in the red and black maps that showed the “front lines” surging back and forth between Allied and Axis domination.⁷ But the tensions of empire were never far from the surface. The very name given to the alliance—the “United Nations”—indicated the normative priority of national units, which repudiated “territorial aggrandizement” in the words of the Atlantic Charter, and it was precisely the neo-imperial ambitions of Berlin and Tokyo, not their inward-

⁵ Tom Treanor, “The Home Front” column, *Los Angeles Times*, December 26, 1941.

⁶ *The Gallup Poll: Public Opinion, 1935-1971* (New York: Random House, 1972), May 30, 1945, 507.

⁷ See for example the *Atlas of the World Battle Fronts in Semi-Monthly Phases to August 15, 1945* (United States: Supplement to the Biennial Report of the Chief of Staff of the United States Army, 1945).

facing totalitarianism (which was rivaled in its illiberalism and violence by the allied Soviet Union), that called for armed struggle in the first place.⁸ Yet the war was just as clearly fought *for* empires, as anti-British opponents of intervention on the right and left had vigorously pointed out throughout 1939-1941. The competing claims of the British Empire and American ambitions for markets and influence in the postwar world were central sources of inter-allied conflict.⁹ These tensions were if anything more profound at the level of racial order. The war boosted racial liberalism as the antithesis of Nazi doctrines and simultaneously gave the semblance of reality to lurid fantasies of a “yellow peril” engulfing the West, effectively authorizing a white supremacist interpretation of allied war aims.

Ever since John Dower’s *War Without Mercy: Race & Power in the Pacific War* demonstrated incontrovertibly the racial inflection of the U.S.-Japan confrontation, the standard narrative resolution of these tensions has been spatial: Washington looked across the Atlantic to an ideological confrontation, and across the Pacific to a virtual race war.¹⁰ The rivalry between the race war and the war for liberalism manifested in practical politics as a dispute over the priority of the Pacific and Atlantic theaters. Reactionary forces favored the Pacific and wanted to supply Douglas MacArthur even at the risk of losing Europe to Hitler forever; liberals saw Japan as a distinctly secondary priority. This view has much to commend it, and corresponds with important geographic and political alignments: in the grossest terms, conservative Republicans and western states prioritized the war against Japan, while New Deal loyalists and eastern

⁸ Mark Mazower, *Hitler’s Empire: How the Nazis Ruled Europe* (New York: Penguin, 2008).

⁹ William Roger Louis, *Imperialism at Bay: The United States and the Decolonization of the British Empire, 1941-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978).

¹⁰ John Dower, *War Without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986).

interests (and most military experts who had taken part in large-scale planning for coalition warfare) looked to “Berlin first.” But the East-West framing risks distortions if either anti-fascism or the intimate enmity of the United States and Japan occlude a wider colonial world that was not only geopolitically important, but which generated the news accounts that made up the everyday experience of the mediated war at home from 1941 to 1943.

If adequate attention is paid to the colonial contexts of the early 1940s, it becomes apparent that the American war can be divided not just between the Pacific and Europe, but between an early “imperial” war ranging from the invasion of the Philippines in 1941 to the conquest of Tunisia in the spring of 1943, and a later phase of “total” war between the core population centers of competing national states: a war that burned out the Ruhr and the Tokyo plain with the most sophisticated armaments of Detroit and Southern California. These events fit a heroic narrative of disaster and recovery in American memory, but they also trace out a larger transformation of ethical self-justification in which the emotional realism described in the last chapter came to supplant the basically racial assumptions about “good” international violence inherited from a long history of continental expansion. It might have been otherwise. As the first part of this chapter argues, the most immediately available language to mediate the shocks of a new world war was that of frontier and empire, of race and blood and savagery. That language both rendered intelligible a bewildering series of events and provided a moral account of violence that was still in some ways received as ambiguously defensible.

The second part half of the chapter argues that military and civilian leaders, faced with the persistent if muted signs of ambivalence in public understandings of the war, could have attempted to formalize and intensify that language of empire. Instead, the core propaganda agencies deliberately worked against a racial-imperial imagination of the conflict, and set their

sights on engineering a more durable public mood, one which could incorporate an indefinite commitment to international violence with a more universalistic notion of humanity. However much they may be said to have succeeded or to have failed in any particular endeavor, their efforts were consonant with a postwar in which Americans could gradually embrace decolonization and universal human rights as basic moral aims without renouncing global violence in service of national prerogatives.

Embracing “Savage” War

The censorship of American defeats in 1941-1942 was so severe that some reporters and editors felt the Soviet Union was more forthcoming about its military situation than the United States.¹¹ Based on polling and reports from newspaper editors, the Office of War Information fretted in November 1942 that there was “a menacing tendency on the part of quite a few people to put more credence in enemy reports than in those issued by our own armed forces.”¹² This atmosphere has understandably led to an historical interpretation of the period as one of a virtual blackout of meaningful news.¹³ But the censorship that allowed the Navy to fudge its losses for over a year was porous to more intimate human accounts—both factual and fantastic—of war in

¹¹ Richard Collier, *Fighting Words: The War Correspondents of World War Two* (New York: St. Martins Press, 1989), 118.

¹² Office of War Information Records, NARA RG 44 149 1710. “November 13, 1942
"Developing Situation--Government's Informational Policy Antagonizes Public and Press.”

¹³ See Susan Brewer, *Why We Fight*, 96-7, on civilians in the dark about the Philippines. A popular early journalistic account by the CBS reporter John McCutcheon Raleigh announced a similar thesis in its title: *Pacific Blackout* (Dodd, Mead & Co., 1943).

the colonial realm. Like the war itself, journalistic renderings of death came home along an imperial circuit, and would be shaped by the reanimation of tropes of colonial violence.

This was visible in the subtle web of relationships among images and captions conjured by *Life* in the weeks surrounding December 7. Pictures of dead Americans in Hawai'i appeared in print after the attacks (qualifying, if not contradicting, the claim that images of U.S. casualties were banned until 1943), when *Life* published a large photograph of seven bodies stored in an "emergency morgue" in Honolulu. The image was not gruesome, but neither was it impersonal or heroic, nor particularly dignified. Four of the seven corpses were pictured with exposed faces; one of the dead was a child.¹⁴ The magazine's lead article directed attention to the picture, reminding readers that they had spent years viewing foreign deaths in these same pages: "Now for the first time they may look on the bodies of their own war dead."¹⁵ This formulation was a logical one for the interventionist Luce publications. They had long strained to make Americans imagine themselves as physically vulnerable to aggression by playing up casualties elsewhere and insisting that the same could come to American shores. In November the magazine printed pictures of "the first Gold Star Mothers of World War II" (the families of sailors lost on the *Kearny*, torpedoed by a German warship in the North Atlantic) a few pages ahead of "the most macabre picture of the war," an image of a dead Russian with a head wound being dragged from a tank.¹⁶ The interventionist press exhorted Americans to see themselves as part of a war painted

¹⁴ "The Quick and the Dead," *Life*, December 29, 1941. Issues of *Life* reached the newsstand roughly a week ahead of the publication date.

¹⁵ "Attack on Hawaii," *Life*, December 29, 1941.

¹⁶ November 10, 1941, *Life*, "Shooting War," and "Picture of the Week."

in exceedingly dark shades; the effect was to demand commitment while emphasizing its cost. In the case of the pro-intervention agitation of 1939-41, however, the aim was to arm England. Few argued for an immediate declaration of war, and fewer still imagined the specifics of fighting and killing Germans.¹⁷

War in the Pacific drastically changed this. With the “emergency morgue” came very specific notions of retribution: *Life* reported that soldiers were promising their girlfriends “a necklace of Japs’ ears.”¹⁸ This response embodied a virulent anti-Japanese racism, to be sure, but it also touched chords of expansionist memory accessible to the most self-consciously anti-racist observers. Eleanor Roosevelt sympathized with Japanese-Americans in her column on December 16, and recommended to her readers the Slovene-American writer Louis Adamic’s books on the experience of immigrants in the United States.¹⁹ For her, Pearl Harbor emphatically did *not* herald a race war; it was instead a test of multiracial and multicultural democracy. But while she praised Adamic as a guide to a cosmopolitan wartime patriotism, she found a different model for the violent action of actually fighting the war: General George Armstrong Custer. It is a telling artifact of American sensibilities in the first flush of war that she would write of the late 19th century Indian wars while trying to make sense of events in 1942:

[W]e are living through the same kind of period at the moment, and perhaps we shall also develop some General Custers. We have made a good beginning, I

¹⁷ On the exceptional but influential group demanding an immediate entry into the war, see Mark Chadwin, *The Hawks of World War II* (University of North Carolina Press, 1968).

¹⁸ *Life*, December 29, 1941, “Troops on the Move.”

¹⁹ Eleanor Roosevelt, “My Day,” Dec 16, 1941, and December 31, 1941. Eleanor Roosevelt Papers Project. Online. <https://www2.gwu.edu/~erpapers/myday/1941/>

think, in some of the things which have happened in the Battle of Manila and Pearl Harbor.²⁰

Even for self-conscious racial liberals like the First Lady, the outbreak of fighting in the Pacific oriented the wartime imaginary to draw on a deep history of racialized conflict. The “My Day” columns were brief, almost telegraphic dispatches, often bearing three or more datelines in a single week as Roosevelt traveled rapidly around the country, and she did not explain precisely what she meant by calling the 1940s “the same kind of period” as the late 19th century. But the martial aspects of continental expansionism came immediately to mind as she tried to imagine the world conflict coming into view. Her thoughts were inspired by a viewing of *They Died with their Boots On*, an Errol Flynn film that was one of several competing movies about Custer’s career. At about the same time, Henry Luce sat down with Winston Churchill—who was in Washington for the Arcadia Conference, which set the initial Anglo-American strategy for the coalition war—to watch a different film about Custer, and reported that it “put the old man in a good mood, and I got him to treat me to a personal account of the Battle of Omdurman.”²¹

Churchill had made a name as a journalist with his dispatches from the 1898 battle on the upper Nile, in which the recently-developed Maxim gun helped Nelson Kitchener’s expedition to kill

²⁰ Eleanor Roosevelt, “My Day,” January 23, 1942. Eleanor Roosevelt Papers Project. Online. <https://www2.gwu.edu/~erpapers/myday/1941/>.

Eleanor remained fascinated with the geographic reach of the conflict. In her March 17, 1942 column she noted that the International Flower Show in New York would “show rare orchids from all the lands which are at present being ravaged by war—Java, Burma, Malaya, India and the Philippines. I had not realized orchids grew in all these countries, for I thought of them as coming to us primarily from Latin-America. Since we grow them here now in our greenhouses, I imagine that with the fortunes of war, we may someday send them back to start again in the countries where they originated.”

²¹ Robert Elson, *Time Inc.: The Intimate History of a Publishing Enterprise* (New York: Atheneum, 1973), 20.

some 10,000 followers of a millenarian leader in a cataclysmically asymmetrical encounter, cementing British control over Sudan. At the time Churchill had labored over his account of that war's ethics, spending several pages exploring the "great, though perhaps academic, question ... Was the war justified by wisdom and right?"²² By 1942 it formed part of the long train of imperial memories that made up the cocktail conversations of the war's planners.

The attack on Hawai'i was refracted through an imperial lens, and was often understood as a recurrence of the siege of the Alamo—a dramatic military reversal which demanded the violent restoration of a civilized order. But Pearl Harbor itself afforded only a brief glimpse of lethal violence, the work of a single traumatic day. The attack resonated in slogans and fueled fantasies of racial vengeance, but could not supply fresh headlines about fighting. The war in the Philippines, on the other hand, provided a sustained stream of reporting on Americans and their colonial subjects as the victims and authors of large-scale killing, both of which had to be made comprehensible on a daily basis. Under the command of the media-conscious Douglas MacArthur, Army press officers in the Far East were notoriously controlling and politically sensitive, but their task (beyond security) was not to sanitize war so much as to guard the reputation of their commander.²³ MacArthur's censors did not stop photos of a Filipino firefighter arranging the bodies of his wife and three young children in a row for burial.²⁴ And the written accounts that emerged from censorship were far more explicit than photographs about

²² Winston Churchill, *The River War*, vol. II (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1899), 389.

²³ On MacArthur's censorship generally, see Phillip Knightley, *The First Casualty: The War Correspondent as Hero and Myth-Maker from the Crimea to Iraq*, 3rd ed. (Baltimore, MD, 2004), 304, *passim*.

²⁴ "Philippine Epic," *Life*, April 13, 1942.

how human bodies fared in modern war. W.L. White's long narrative reconstruction of the Philippines campaign from the point of view of a torpedo boat squadron, published to official approval late in the summer of 1942, aimed to confront a "smug citizenry" with "a grim language of realism."²⁵ White, the son of the influential *Emporia Gazette* editor William Allen White, lingered on macabre details and impressionistic scenes in which meaningful action deteriorated into hysterical suffering. He described a hospital landing platform so slick with blood that soldiers slipped as they delivered the injured, and wrote about Filipino dockworkers who were conscripted for a burial detail and plied with alcohol to keep them from abandoning a task consisting of gathering unidentifiable body parts and piling them in shallow bomb craters.²⁶

For the journalistic promoters of "grim realism," the campaign in the Philippines was more than a strategic defeat or a dramatization of Japanese infamy. It was a reversal of the civilizing mission that had justified American rule over the islands for forty years. As the modernized military and police forces of the colonial state failed, reporters suddenly found much to praise in the "barbarian virtues" of American subjects, whose alleged proficiency in "savage" violence was suddenly an asset.²⁷ The *New York Times* relayed somewhat exaggerated accounts of U.S. successes in deflecting Japanese landings on Luzon, but also hinted darkly that the Japanese would fall prey to dangerous natives once they penetrated the interior of that island.²⁸

²⁵ W.L. White, *The Were Expendable* (New York, 1942), vii.

²⁶ White, *They Were Expendable*, 19-22.

²⁷ That the defenses of 1942 failed to stop the Japanese conquest should not obscure the dramatic story of police and military modernization that was a central element and a lasting legacy of U.S. colonialism. See Alfred McCoy, *Policing America's Empire: The United States, The Philippines, and the Rise of the Surveillance State* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2009).

²⁸ "Filipinos Beat 154 Enemy Boats," *New York Times*, December 16, 1941.

Together with extensive maps of invasion routes, the *Times* published images of jungles and rice paddies between enemy troops and Manila, noting ominously that “this region is inhabited by the Ifugaos, a tribe of former head hunters.”²⁹ When Manila was about to capitulate three weeks later, the Los Angeles *Times* predicted a long guerrilla war, directly comparing the campaigns of 1898 and 1941-2: “In taking Manila ... Japan will have not much more than started the job of taking the Philippines, as we once discovered for ourselves.”³⁰ This imperial imaginary should not be conflated with the racialization of the Pacific War along a white/Asian or U.S./Japanese binary. Indeed, the African-American press, while advocating a “double victory” over Hitler and Jim Crow, could both identify with turn-of-the-century conquests and approve the use of savagery against Japan. The Chicago *Defender* drew attention to the role of black soldiers under one Captain Joseph Batchelor in suppressing Filipino “insurrectos” and “Igorot headhunters” at the turn of the century, and then drew much the same moral as the conservative Los Angeles paper: “What Batchelor and his men accomplished against the Insurrectos will have to be repeated by the Japs against the Americans, if they hope to capture Manila by going overland.”³¹ Thus the ostensible capacity of the Philippines to deploy uncivilized violence was now an asset for U.S. purposes.

²⁹ *New York Times*, December 11, 1941.

³⁰ “If We Should Lose the Battle of Manila,” *Los Angeles Times*, January 1, 1942.

³¹ “Negro Troops Hang Up Record For Japanese To Shoot At,” *Chicago Defender*, January 3, 1942. On Batchelor’s career see Timothy Russell, “‘I Feel Sorry for These People’: African American Soldiers in the Philippine-American War,” *The Journal of African American History*, Vol. 99, No. 3 (Summer 2014), 197-222.

With Japan positioned as the colonial conqueror and Americans pushed into the place of insurgents, veterans of McKinley's era were called on to ratify a revaluation of "savagery." Ross Barton, a 64-year-old veteran billed as "the first American soldier on the beach at Legaspi" in 1899, told reporters that he wished he could return to defend "the city I once helped take from the insurgents." He was confident in the defense of the islands, he said, partly because of modern U.S. arms, and partly because of his vivid memories of "how savagely they fought, those Filipinos." Barton both endorsed the old "civilizing mission" and assumed that useful vestiges of "savage" life remained as a wartime asset, suitable for appropriation by Americans. Though he mentioned modern weapons, the veteran imagined enemy soldiers falling prey to knives in the jungle: "And if they ever try to go from Legaspi to Manila, they'll leave their heads behind them."³²

Similarly, the *Los Angeles Times*—hardly a bastion of racial liberalism—found expressions of admiration for "the little dark men whom we fought" among veterans of 1898 who gathered to reminisce in Hollywood early in 1942.³³ Stories like this seldom prefaced a noticeable revision in racial attitudes, but instead advertised the advantages of abandoning "civilized" restraint in the conduct of war. Even anti-Christian violence—one of the most effective justifications for colonial rule earlier in the century³⁴—could have its uses, as

³² "Veteran Says Filipinos Will Slaughter Japanese," *Los Angeles Times*, December 29, 1941.

³³ "Veterans of Philippine Duty Hail Gens. MacArthur and Otis: Present Defender of Islands and Commander in '98 Paid Tribute by Men Who Once Saw Action There," *Los Angeles Times*, February 9, 1942.

³⁴ Joshua Gedacht, "'Mohammedan Religion Made it Necessary to Fire': Massacres on the American Imperial Frontier from South Dakota to the Southern Philippines," 397-409 in Alfred McCoy, ed., *Colonial Crucible: Empire in the Making of the Modern American State* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2009).

demonstrated by a questionable L.A. *Times* interpretation of Filipino Muslim motivations to fight: “A Moro *juramentado* is a Christian hater ... and to them Shintoist and Buddhist Japanese are Christians.”³⁵ From the embrace of “savages” at war it was not a great leap to reporting on U.S. soldiers fighting as savages. In the first half of 1942, reporters approvingly described “dirty fighting” techniques being taught at Fort Meade³⁶ and characterized MacArthur’s army as fighting “Indian style,” with a preference for bayonets over rifles.³⁷ The line between civilization and savagery all but vanished in a story by the Associated Press correspondent Clark Lee, who wrote about Filipino Scouts beheading Japanese soldiers in the darkness, while an American crept through the same jungle and slipped an armed grenade into the hand of a Japanese sentry in the middle of the night.³⁸ In the journalistic imagination, American soldiers were not just reluctant warriors bound by an abhorrence of war; instead, they could be presented in almost carnivalesque performances of violence.

The point is not that journalists conveyed a particularly reliable account of the earliest days of the conflict (I have my doubts about the Japanese sentry who passively accepted the gift of an armed grenade in the darkness), but that the stories they told—and cleared with censorship—drew on and modified historical repertoires of violence to convey a vivid experience of battlefield killing at home, rather than merely sanitizing and bowdlerizing the war.

³⁵ “Bolo-Swinging Moros Ready to Join in War on Japan,” *Los Angeles Times*, December 21, 1941.

³⁶ “Recreation officers at Fort Meade learn ‘Dirty Fighting’” *Life*, June 15, 1942.

³⁷ Melville Jacoby, “MacArthur’s Men,” *Life*, March 16, 1942.

³⁸ Clark Lee, “Japanese Mistake American, but Don’t Live to Admit It; Filipino Trails Enemy Patrol and Lops off 11 Heads,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 7, 1942. The A.P. story was also published in the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* on the same day.

If it was difficult or impossible to fully render the emerging shape of a global total war in all its logistical, social, and ethical aspects, it was easier to describe a frontier war, particularly when American military engagements were confined to a colonial world. And the descriptions of a “savage” war provoked an approving response at home. A sensationalized account of Filipino participation in the defense of Bataan drew wide attention under the headline “Igorots, Riding to Battle Atop Tanks, Wipe Out 1500 Japanese in Bataan: MacArthur Praises Heroic Natives, Who Were Headhunters.”³⁹ The story struck a chord, and a week later curious Californians were crowding the L.A. Times office to examine samples of the “primitive” weapons used by their allies—trophies of an earlier war, in which the very existence of such weapons was used to demonstrate the inability of their makers to govern themselves.⁴⁰ A young, attractive American woman was photographed holding a club the likes of which, the story reminded readers, helped kill 1,500 Japanese soldiers. “The Igorots were able to behead a man with one sweep of the strange, saw-toothed weapon,” the *Times* explained, “and there is a hook on the reverse side upon which the triumphant warrior tied the victim's head before proudly marching home with his

³⁹ *Los Angeles Times*, February 23, 1942.

⁴⁰ See for example the *New York Herald Tribune* cartoon of 1898, in which a Filipino “representative” is pictured throwing spears at a committee chairman in the U.S. House of Representatives, in Paul Kramer, *The Blood of Government* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 118. But Filipino weapons were treated differently in the colonial legal regime, not just in editorial cartoons. The bolo knife had a particular status under colonial law after 1902. The bolo was, uniquely among edged weapons, categorized with firearms as a weapon whose use could authorize American military units to employ force on their own authority in the period when policing functions had otherwise been turned over to civilian authorities. See Brian McAllister Linn, *The Guardians of Empire: The U.S. Army and the Pacific, 1902-1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 26.

trophy.”⁴¹ In 1900 the caption would have betokened the obvious justice of suppressing Filipino insurgents; in 1942, the idea that the smiling woman in the photo could herself collect human trophies would not be beyond the pale in mainstream publications. Ever in touch with the martial strains in public sentiment, even at an early point in his career, the actor Ronald Reagan picked up on the trend and began developing a script in which he would play a guerrilla fighter in the Philippines.⁴²

Much as bond drive promoters would later ask Americans to imagine themselves as the consumers of high-tech bombers and munitions, the vogue for stories about headhunters and exotic weapons provided an imaginative bridge between civilian life and the war unfolding thousands of miles from American shores.⁴³ When the press reported that the “knife-wielding Moros of Mindanao, the head-hunting Igorots of Luzon, [and] the black-toothed fighters of Sulu” would carry on a guerrilla war, 75 men in El Monte, California, decided to follow suit.⁴⁴ Forming a local civil defense club, they trained for “guerrilla war” with old rifles at the El Monte police department’s pistol range, and were particularly proud to “have been trained in use of bolo knives, the same as those used in the Philippine Islands.” Four of the men posed for news

⁴¹ “Weapons of Headhunters, Now Aiding MacArthur, Exhibited,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 1, 1942.

⁴² *Los Angeles Times*, March 2, 1942.

⁴³ James T. Sparrow, *Warfare State: World War II Americans and the Age of Big Government* (New York: Oxford UP, 2011), 146-7.

⁴⁴ “Filipinos Pledge Guerrillas Will Continue Fight on Japs: Knife-Wielding Natives and Well-Organized Units Will Make Foe ‘Remember Bataan,’ Official Vows,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 10, 1942.

photographers with the long, curved knives in hand.⁴⁵ Less personally adventurous groups, like a number of Rotary Clubs in southern California, took up a collection of \$22,500 to purchase “4500 bolos for the Filipino soldiers.” Five-year-old Norita Pablico of Los Angeles was reported to have given \$5 to equip her father with such a knife, ostensibly after someone told her that “one bolo knife equals four dead Japs.”⁴⁶ She obligingly posed for a photograph with a blade nearly her own size. So did the actor Gary Cooper, alongside Roque de la Isla of the Philippine Chamber of Commerce, in an Office of War Information photograph [figure 1]. The circulation of knives could even lead to friendships—when a staff sergeant grew homesick in New Guinea in 1942, he wrote directly to the donor of his knife, which had been supplied after the Army asked individuals to help supply weapons for jungle fighting.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ “Guerrillas Train With Bolo Knives: Band of 75 at El Monte Also Collects Arsenal and Takes Up Jujitsu,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 15, 1942.

⁴⁶ “Father Gets a Bolo Knife to Kill Japs,” *Los Angeles Times*, June 4, 1943.

⁴⁷ James Waterman Wise, ed., *Very Truly Ours: Letters From America's Fighting Men* (New York: Dial Press, 1943), pp. 129-30. Also, “Seeks Knives for Our Troops: General Giles Says South Pacific Fighters Need Them,” *New York Times*, December 30, 1942.



Figure 3. Gary Cooper and Roque de la Ysla of the Philippine Chamber of Commerce examine a Filipino bolo knife, 1942. Office of War Information image, National Archives, RG 208, FS Box 6.

Such enthusiasms were not limited to the west coast, where Pacific-facing racial anxieties and fears of invasion were strongest. Under the guidance of the Massachusetts Committee on Public Safety, a “tactical school” opened in Concord in 1942, providing a venue for Bert “Yank” Levy (described by *Time* magazine as a “combination of Daniel Boone and Jack the Ripper”) to

give lectures and demonstrations geared to the lesson that “guerrilla fighting has nothing in common with Marquis of Queensberry rules.”⁴⁸ Levy was by that point well known for a book on guerilla warfare that was described as “a civilian’s manual of mayhem and informal murder.”⁴⁹ At the same time, the 1942 Army Day parade in New York city was a blend of anti-fascist internationalism and an imperial triumph showcasing the global reach of U.S. military power. The streak of liberal internationalism was apparent at the outset: a series of floats recounting the war’s history was led by a skeletal figure in black, pounding kettledrums covered with swastikas, as a band played Handel’s “Death March.” This was the representation of National Socialism as the universal enemy of a united humanity. But some of the greatest applause, the *Times* reported, was for a “dramatic representation” of the defense of Bataan, in which bandaged and half-dressed soldiers marched through Manhattan, together with “Igorot natives from the mountains of Luzon, clad only in loin clothes, but riding tanks with long spears and knives in their hands, as well as smartly trained and drilled Filipino Scouts.”⁵⁰ After much searching in published accounts and New York municipal records I have been unable to determine who actually took part in the parade in the role of the Filipinos. Nonetheless, to audiences at the time, these were “savage” warriors aligned with the American cause. This relatively little-remembered demonstration of colonial mobilization in some ways echoed the exhibition of Filipino “natives” at the 1904 St. Louis World’s Fair, but the differences are instructive. Where the ethnological villages of the early 20th century fairs proclaimed an ideology

⁴⁸ “Home Was Never Like This,” *Time*, June 29, 1942.

⁴⁹ “You, Too, May Be a Guerilla,” *Time*, March 16, 1942.

⁵⁰ “Parade Prologue Tells War’s Story,” *New York Times*, June 14, 1942.

of progressive development, explicitly differentiating peoples on the basis of their ostensible movement towards (or distance from) an ideal civilization, the 1942 parade at least partially collapsed those distinctions to celebrate the singularity of purpose shared by crisply uniformed soldiers and warriors in loin clothes: organized killing beyond the limits of civilization was the shared project of all.⁵¹ The wages of benevolent assimilation were ironically not just to involve the Philippines in an extraordinarily lethal conflict, but also to provide an avenue for the United States to begin to repudiate the limits of civilization it had sought to impose on the world. If in response New Yorkers seemed less eager than Californians to form guerrilla companies and train with bolo knives, a blade could still supply a vicarious experience of a savage war. In October, three New Jersey boys—the youngest 11 years old—were stopped by the NYPD when they crossed the George Washington bridge with illegal hunting knives strapped to their legs, “bent on joining the Marines and exterminating the Japanese in the South Pacific.”⁵² This was play to be sure, but play in an imaginative realm that knit together frontier fantasies with intimations of racial extermination in a modern war spanning the globe. The youths had not set out west from New Jersey, after all, but had (correctly) surmised that the war they wanted to join was nearer to the ports of Manhattan than to their homes.

These ways of imagining the Pacific are usually contrasted with representations of the European war. The former was a racial conflict, inflected by a long history of eliminationist rhetoric about non-white populations; the latter was a contest between rival political traditions

⁵¹ Robert Rydell, *All the World's a Fair: Visions of Empire at American International Expositions, 1876-1916*, (Chicago, 1984), 169-177.

⁵² “Schoolboys, 11-16, Bent on Aiding Marines, Find Hunting Knife Bar to Progress Here,” *New York Times*, October 8, 1942.

within a European-American world, a challenge to liberal democratic civilization rather than a menace to blood and soil. But U.S. combat correspondents working in the 19 months between Pearl Harbor and the invasion of Sicily were always sailing or flying to someone's colonies, whether or not they ever glimpsed the Pacific. In certain respects, the difference between the dispersed colonial campaigns of 1941-1943 and the massed confrontations of 1944-1945 was as great as the difference between the European and the Pacific wars; the conflict might be bisected chronologically rather than hemispherically, at least from the point of view of direct American participation in the fighting. Operation TORCH, the Anglo-American invasion of North Africa, was trumpeted as a "second front" against Germany (Stalin, waiting impatiently for soldiers in northern Europe, was unimpressed); but the target was a 700-mile crescent of the southern Mediterranean coast, a wide arc of French Africa containing a multitude of colonized Arabs, Berbers and others. Somewhat different patterns of moral justification emerged in North Africa, but narratives of violence followed civilizational hierarchies much as in the Far Eastern theater of the war.

"The Arabs made the desert"

In the French colonies Americans fought the Nazi German army for the first time and simultaneously embarked on their first large-scale invasion and occupation of an Arab and Muslim land. In the daily press North Africa was usually treated as empty space. Magazines and books presented another story: Arab and Berber populations suffered along with combatants. When old racial formulations—frequently borrowed from British and French colonial administrators—blended with a new American practices of violence in the region, Arabs were imagined as responsible for the destruction of their own homes and bodies.

Ernie Pyle, the popular chronicler of the G.I. experience, wrote several times about the non-Europeans he encountered in Africa. Restless in the rear echelons, Pyle was seldom far from the coercive realities of combat for civilians. While the daily press reported a warm welcome for liberators in Africa, he knew the force that compelled obedience: “Here we were occupying countries and pretending not to.”⁵³ The deserts were not empty after all:

There were a lot of things the Charlotte doctors and nurses hadn't visualized before they set up their big tent hospital there in the field. The natives, for instance. ... They had local people in there wounded by shrapnel in the first battle. There was one old woman of eighty-one whose arm had been blown off.⁵⁴

Pyle was famous for his empathetic treatment of the suffering “little guy.” Witnessing Arab casualties, though, his tone could shift rapidly. “One Arab woman had been shot through the stomach,” Pyle wrote from Tunisia.

Her condition was grave, but on the second morning her husband arrived, said he had to go to work and there wasn't anybody to take care of the kids, and for her to get the hell home where she belonged. So she got up and walked out. The doctors didn't think she could have lived through the day. But you know how it is with us Arabs—we don't like our women gadding about when there's work at home.⁵⁵

The fact that the woman's injury happened in the course of an American invasion is lost almost entirely; instead, the family's behavior is the focus. Arabs became frustrating curiosities in their own homes, culpable for being in the way. Near Sidi bou Zid they were a “ridiculous impingement” on the battlefield, “driving their little sack-laden burros, as tanks and guns clanked past them” Pyle writes that “the asinine thought popped into my head: I wonder if the army

⁵³ Ernie Pyle, *Here is Your War* (New York: Henry Holt, 1943), 54.

⁵⁴ Pyle, *Here is Your War*, 80.

⁵⁵ Pyle, 80-81.

got permission to use this land before starting the attack.”⁵⁶

They had not. While controversy swirled around diplomatic relations with Vichy officials in Africa, the question of Arab or Berber permission to use the land was not a question at all. The land was itself evidence of Arab ineligibility for sovereignty. Decades earlier, the British novelist Norman Douglas had remarked of Tunisia that the desert did not make the Arab, but the Arab made the desert. This view was quoted approvingly by the liberal artist George Biddle, commissioned to paint for the War Department. Biddle objected to colonialism (it was brutal and, worse, inefficient), but he also wrote “I feel about Arabs, however, the way Clarence Darrow did about spinach: ‘I hate spinach and I’m glad I hate spinach, because if I didn’t I’d like it, and I hate spinach.’”⁵⁷ Cecil Brown, another well-regarded war correspondent, also borrowed this view. Flying British Imperial Airways from Baghdad to Cairo in 1941, he was told by a steward that Arab settlement invariably led to the deaths of trees and the expansion of deserts. “I do not know whether that’s true or not, but it certainly is true that down below us, stretching for thousands of miles, there are deserts and there are Arabs.”⁵⁸ Casual contempt for Arabs lent itself to violence, both deliberate and as the secondary result of combat. George Biddle agreed when a North Carolina doctor said to him in passing “No wonder the French beat them. I guess if we stayed here longer we would beat them too.”⁵⁹

Two days after this conversation, Biddle was billeted in a small African village that was

⁵⁶ Ibid., 170

⁵⁷ George Biddle, *Artist at War* (New York: Viking, 1944), 34.

⁵⁸ Cecil Brown, *Suez to Singapore* (New York: Random House, 1942), 120-121.

⁵⁹ Biddle, *Artist at War*, 20.

“pretty much shot to hell.” A few months later he would express tremendous sympathy for displaced Italians while reporting on the slow northern conquest of Allied armies; Tunisians were another matter: “They crawl back like worms into the doorless rooms, in among the rubble ... snuggling in comfortably among the litter of dust and masonry. After all it's about what they've always had, except more of it.”⁶⁰ Just as the Arabs made the desert, so too did they fit naturally amid the destruction brought by a foreign war. Journalists did not obscure the fact that the invasion made a war zone of civilian dwellings; instead, they normalized the fact in emotional and moral terms. *Life* magazine published paintings of Arabs lounging under the wings of an American bomber, taking advantage of the shade. The captions made them appear almost entirely unaffected: “Arabs would wander out under murderous fire to tend their sheep, or they would meander unconcernedly on a ridge sown with mines to scavenge from dead soldiers there.”⁶¹ But the claim made by the caption could not be squared with the image: across the road from the sleeping men in the painting was a Mosque, blown apart by repeated bombings. One would not need to dig deep, in 1943, to realize that North African civilians paid a price for a conflict not of their making.

Though also dependent on racial hierarchies, this kind of narrative differed from what was reported in the Pacific. There was little rage here, virtually no exterminationist sentiment, and no inclination to adopt the “primitive” aspects of the Arab as salutary traits in wartime. Instead, they were just in the way, inscrutably tending their flocks on land earmarked for war. Their deaths meant nothing—a point which sounds like a rhetorical flourish, but which reflects a

⁶⁰ Biddle, 25.

⁶¹ “North Africa: Rear,” *Life*, December 27, 1943.

discursive position taken in more than one contemporary report. An INS reporter, Lowell Bennett, related a story that paratroopers told him over drinks:

One Arab, they said, had picked up a dropped hand grenade, looked at it, puzzled over it, decided it was no good, then had noticed the trigger ring. Maybe something would happen if the ring was pulled? The ring was duly pulled, the four seconds duly elapsed and suddenly the Arab population of Africa was one less.⁶²

The story calls to mind the previously cited article by Clark Lee about a U.S. soldier killing a Japanese sentry by putting a grenade in his hand and slipping away. In that case the implicit ethical claim had been the justice of using any available means to produce death among the enemy. In this case, the killing was simply an amusing anecdote. Elsewhere Bennett wrote about fruitlessly chasing down lurid rumors of attacks on soldiers motivated by “the old Mohammedan spirit of killing white infidels,” and he felt overall that the North African Arabs were “an inoffensive, innocuous lot.”⁶³ No particular antipathy attached to the story about an accidental death, but neither was there any sense of a personal tragedy or U.S. culpability.

The military historian Russell Weigley argued that American armed forces underwent a profound transition from frontier constabulary to modern army in the years 1941-1945. As late as 1940, the dominant traditions in U.S. military culture were those of “a border constabulary for policing unruly Indians and Mexicans.”⁶⁴ This transformation involved more than the reorganization of the military; it meant a change in popular sentiments among civilians, who had to make sense of the war as it ranged over far-flung colonial outposts and then reached the urban

⁶² Lowell Bennett, *Assignment to Nowhere: The Battle For Tunisia* (Vanguard Press, 1943), 51.

⁶³ Bennett, *Assignment to Nowhere: The Battle For Tunisia*, 131-132.

⁶⁴ Russell Weigley, *Eisenhower's Lieutenants: The Campaigns of France and Germany, 1944-1945* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1981), xv, 1-2.

centers of Western Europe and demanded the construction of an unprecedentedly large army capable of directly confronting the massed power of a rival industrial empire. As this transformation began, ideas about “savages” and the use of violence in dealing with non-Western peoples deeply inflected writing that sought to interpret staggering new fields of violence to domestic audiences.

None of this is to suggest that Americans by and large perceived the war as one fought for the sake of empire. Surveys by the Office of Facts and Figures (later folded into the Office of War Information) found exactly the opposite, in fact. Expansionist goals were unpopular in 1942 and when survey subjects were asked directly “imperialism was renounced by three-quarters of the population.”⁶⁵ But empire, and the closely related myths of the frontier as a site of redemptive violence, provided a native idiom for journalists to disclose a fundamental fact of the conflict: that it would involve grave lapses in the civilized restraint of war.⁶⁶ Twentieth century Americans had a moral familiarity with continental expansion and frontier fighting that did not extend to the realities of a long, hegemonic war waged with industrial means. The closest such experience of the latter kind of war, in France during the first World War, was by 1941 a negative model, an example of something never to be repeated. The same was not so of frontier fighting; even Eleanor Roosevelt could appeal to Custer as an indisputable hero. Pearl Harbor closed the debate over intervention, but it did not acclimate the population to the idea of total war

⁶⁵ “AMERICAN PUBLIC OPINION IN THE FIRST FIVE MONTHS OF THE WAR,” Summary Report May 5, 1942, Division of Polls, Office of Facts and Figures records, National Archives Record Group 44, entry 162, box 1785.

⁶⁶ Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1973).

overnight. Instead, “savage war” filled the space between interwar hopes for permanent peace and the high modernist hells of 1944-5.

To appreciate the significance of this, however, it is necessary to examine both the ambivalence of public views of the war in the wake of Pearl Harbor, as well as the intense anxiety of the leading war information officials over the public’s relationship to wartime violence.

“I hope St. Peter will understand this business”: Worrying in the war consensus

The tendrils of ambivalence that lay beneath support for intervention after December 7 are reflected in extensive oral history interviews recorded by the Library of Congress in 1941 and 1942. Five University of Indiana students interviewed as a panel on the Wednesday after Pearl Harbor, for example, offered no objections to the declaration of war, but were reluctant to abandon what they saw as their generation’s distinctive attachment to peace. One registered alarm at the mood of Congress, before admitting that she might be swept up in the same mood:

We've been brought up for the past nineteen and twenty years to abhor war and to treat it as something that is not a part of our culture ... I for one was rather surprised at the Congressman the other day cheering so enthusiastically. And yet, I think if I were there, I'd probably have done the same thing.⁶⁷

This was a far cry from the pre-war resistance to intervention exemplified in the absolutist “Oxford oath,” the adherents of which promised never to take up arms for the nation in any war.⁶⁸ But it was one of many mental reservations, articulated by another student who felt that

⁶⁷ “Man-in-the-Street interviews,” December 10, 1941, Bloomington, Indiana, AFS 6360A. Library of Congress, online, <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/afcphhtml/afcphhome.html>

“the ... idea, I think, has been instilled into the minds of the youth of this country ever since the World War that war is the greatest of all evils.” When a member of the same panel said Pearl Harbor proved the folly of diplomacy, another student immediately objected: “Isn’t it better to trust than to shed the blood of so many millions of people?”⁶⁹ Half a week of war left few pacifists in Bloomington, but had hardly converted the student body to an unalloyed acceptance of unlimited war. Not everyone in town was so reserved, of course. An engineer in a nearby radio factory told the interviewers that American bombers would soon be “teaching the world that people who live in little bamboo houses shouldn’t throw bombs around.”⁷⁰ But this kind of bluster did not monopolize open conversation, to say nothing of inward reflection. Doubt persisted.

The interviewers sometimes nudged subjects towards unambiguous, almost cheerfully bellicose statements, voicing approval for patriotic utterances and subtly leading the conversations. But substantial distance often remained between approval of the war and the erasure of any emotional reticence or ambivalence. The mother of a draft-age son in Austin, Texas, was “behind [Roosevelt] a hundred percent,” but reluctant to assign a meaning to the war in particular ethical terms. In her interview she resisted questions that transparently asked for an outraged rejection of Japanese action.

John Henry Faulk: Do you think Japan attacked us, I mean do you think that attack was in any way justified?

Mrs. E. N. Curry: Well, I can't say, I just don't know.

⁶⁸ “15,000 Students Conduct Peace Mobilizations,” *New York Herald-Tribune*, November 9, 1935.

⁶⁹ “Man-in-the-Street interviews,” December 10, 1941, Bloomington, Indiana, AFS 6360A.

⁷⁰ “Dear Mr. President interviews,” January 8, 1942, Bloomington, Indiana, AFS 6400A.

John Henry Faulk: What did you think about it when you first heard about it?
What was your first reactions to war?
Mrs. E. N. Curry: [long pause] Well, I just don't know.⁷¹

After running into this apparent dead end, the interviewer asked if she had found the news “exciting”, and then inquired about her son’s plans (he was considering enlisting), before circling back to her personal feelings, which turned out to reflect generational concerns reaching back to the 1860s:

John Henry Faulk: What do you think about war Mrs. Curry? Especially with Japan?
Mrs. E. N. Curry: Well, I think war is horrible with anybody any time. Now, that's just exactly what I think about war. I've been hearing of war all my life. My daddy was an old Rebel soldier and I mean they went through plenty of hardships, a lot more so than they will have to do now.

Curry accepted that her son would likely serve overseas, but was hardly eager to see it happen—“If they want him, they’ll take him anyway so I might as well just be willing to it. Of course, they ain’t nobody willing ...”⁷² Her intertwined sense of national obligation and of the futility of resistance to state demands is rich fodder for any discussion of citizenship and state building. But her reflection on her father’s travails in the Confederate army adds another dimension to that story, indicating that her thoughts were backlit by an old family awareness of war as a profound evil.

One broad point of consensus in the interviews was the same one stressed by the President in his message to Congress—that the Japanese attack was *infamous*, a violation not only of territorial sovereignty but of the basic rules governing a fair fight. It wasn’t just killing; it was cheating. Fadie France, a YWCA secretary in Nashville, indicated this feeling, along with

⁷¹ "Man-in-the-Street", Austin, Texas, December 9, 1941 AFS 6368A.

⁷² "Man-in-the-Street", Austin, Texas, December 9, 1941 AFS 6368A.

her sense of its ubiquity in various media: “Being just another of the uninformed masses I have a feeling of resentment toward Japan for her treacherous, sly attack on the United States, words and thoughts put into my mouth by radio news commentators and writers of newspaper articles.”⁷³ Although “resentful”, Fadie France denied any feelings of hatred for Japan, partly because she blamed Germany for the attack, but also because her feelings just didn’t run that deep. She also, of course, described her views with a sense of ironic detachment and a defiant assertion of her own self-awareness of the consensus buzzing in her ears. She knew she hadn’t reached her conclusions entirely on her own. But she didn’t reject the war, and seemed sincerely to abhor the surprise attack.

Interviewers found the same rule-bound sense of indignation in a “Negro billiard hall” at the corner of 9th and U Street in Washington, D.C. on December 8. Interviewees here recast the prevailing nationalist outrage in terms of black loyalty to the nation and state, which could be sharply contrasted with both Japanese—and white American—treachery. As an unnamed man put it: “White people have always been traitors. Benedict Arnold, God dammit from down in the Revolutionary War and all other wars, Civil War, they were traitors. . . . You’ve never seen a black traitor in your life.”⁷⁴ Even as a comment like this posed a direct challenge to national claims of democracy and equality, it affirmed the basic moral framing of the conflict that the president enunciated by affirming “treachery” as the central category of offense. A bricklayer in the same billiard hall felt the central grievance was the bombing of sleeping men, who “should have been notified” before a war began. “Whether they are white, colored, or not, after all, they

⁷³ “Man-in-the-Street”, Miss Fadie France, Nashville, Tennessee, December 1941, AFS 6361A

⁷⁴ “Man-in-the-Street”, Washington, D.C., December 8, 1941 AFS 6358B.

[are] still human. And that's my belief. I think it is an injustice. To stab a man in the back as they did.”⁷⁵ This detail—the some of the targets had been literally asleep—was not one stressed by accounts of the bombing of Hawai’i, but it represented a highly concrete way for one man to articulate the boundary between acceptable and unacceptable killing.

This sense of moral outrage could prompt demands for unlimited retaliation—the man who spoke of Benedict Arnold hoped the U.S. would “wipe Japan off the face of the earth.”⁷⁶ But such extreme statements should be read cautiously. Outrage articulated in terms of a sense of fair play could still be limited by a sense of fair play. Some of those who initially sounded the tocsin for unrestraint stumbled into reservations they hadn’t realized they held until they were pressed on particulars by the interviewers. This was true in the case of a 22-year-old Brown University undergraduate, when an interviewer pressed him on how the war should be waged.

[Interviewer] *Charles Harrell*: Fight foul or fair?

William Patterson: Well [*laughs*], I don't know quite what you mean by foul.

Charles Harrell: Shall we bomb undefended cities?

William Patterson: No, I don't think so. I don't think it's -- I don't know really, I don't think it's good military tactic. I don't think it's productive of results.

Charles Harrell: Do you have any moral scruples against it?

William Patterson: Well, I don't know.

Charles Harrell: Have you thought of it?

William Patterson: Evidently not. [*laughs*]⁷⁷

This exchange is more than a little revealing. Asked generally about the conduct of the war, the student laughed (perhaps a bit self-consciously, one imagines) and asked for clarification of the terms. Given the example of bombing cities without defenses, he immediately rejected such

⁷⁵ "Man-in-the-Street", Washington, D.C., December 8, 1941 AFS 6358B, Location: "Negro billiard hall" on corner of 9th and U St.

⁷⁶ "Man-in-the-Street", Washington, D.C., December 8, 1941 AFS 6358B, Location: "Negro billiard hall" on corner of 9th and U St.

⁷⁷ "Man-On-the-Street", Buffalo, New York, December 1941. AFS 6454A

tactics, but without a clear sense of why, and without a ready-made ethical objection at his fingertips. Something, though, impelled him to say no, to laugh, and to equivocate when presented with the possibility of dropping bombs into centers of civilian life.

Hesitation in the face of total war was not limited to semi-private conversations; reservations also emerged in a number of journalistic accounts which shed light on the particular practices of this new conflict. Anti-war journalism was vanishingly rare, but reports from 1941-1942 exhibited a wide range of reactions to large-scale killing and dying, from cartoonish clichés to glimpses of empathy for individuals on the other side. The final, desultory defense of Manila yielded almost an ideal type of “yellow peril” dehumanization in the pages of the *Los Angeles Times*: American soldiers fought “Japanese robot infantrymen, faceless men walking upright into machine-gun fire, picking their way among the bodies of their dead...”⁷⁸ Other stories trumpeted death counts. One celebratory account of a bombing raid against troop transports reported that 10-15,000 men had been killed in a matter of minutes.⁷⁹ Sometimes the casualty counts came with pictures, as in a *Life* magazine story claiming that General Claire Chennault’s “Flying Tigers” (the group of well-remunerated American volunteer pilots in China) had “killed perhaps 800 Jap airmen” in a few months of fighting. Photographs of badly mangled Japanese pilots, large parts of their bodies missing amid the wreckage of their planes, were published alongside

⁷⁸ “Americans Fighting For Every Yard: Savage Jap Drives From Both Sides Close in on Manila” *Los Angeles Times*, January 1, 1942.

⁷⁹ “MacArthur’s Pilots Avenge Pearl Harbor: Thousands of Japanese Killed on Five Ships in Surprise Raid.” *Los Angeles Times*, March 6, 1942.

the story. After a successful aerial battle on Christmas day, *Life* reported, “The holocaust was on” in Burma and China.⁸⁰

At the same time, it was not unknown for major national publications to print statements of sympathy and even moral doubt. The bomber pilot Colin Kelly became the American war’s first hero when it was widely reported that he had sacrificed himself by crashing his plane into the Japanese cruiser *Haruna* off the Philippines. The first reports were wrong in almost every particular, and the story is often used to demonstrate the propagandistic tendencies of both state and press in wartime. Taken at face value, though, the story could still be unsettling. The columnist Tom Treanor recoiled from the implications of the official account. He did not of course seek to condemn Kelly, but he was horrified by the thought of what the pilot had done. “Suicide flying is a horrible and fascinating thought. The certainty is so much worse than fighting with even one chance in a thousand.”⁸¹ A few months later Kelly’s navigator, Lt. Joseph Bean, gained attention of his own when newspapers across the country published a letter he had written to his mother, which described the sinking of enemy ships in another light altogether from the headlines boasting of enemy fatalities. “That is the most pitiful thing in the world. It’s so cruel I’m almost ashamed of it except that I know they’d do the same to me if they had the chance.” Lt. Bean did not imagine his opponents as robotic infantrymen, as abstractly legitimate targets, or as members of a sub-human race.

It gives you a sick feeling to watch a heavy bomb drop into a ship that you know is loaded down with men who would like to live as much as you do. You see

⁸⁰ “Flying Tigers in Burma,” *Life*, March 30, 1942.

⁸¹ Tom Treanor, “The Home Front,” *Los Angeles Times*, December 12, 1941.

them—little dots floating down there drowning. Hundreds of them in one place and thousands and thousands of them in another.⁸²

He concluded on a quasi-confessional note: “I hope St. Peter will understand this business. It’s a hard thing to do but it’s my job so I’ll do the best I can by it.” Bean was not the only member of the armed forces to write about the enemy as recognizably human early in 1942, even as editorial cartoonists turned “Japs” into monkeys, lice, and rats. Captain John Wheeler, in a long magazine article on the defense of Luzon, described a badly injured Japanese infantryman who asked the American to kill him: “He would make a begging sign, pull open his shirt and pull a bayonet toward him.” In 1942 this easily could have been interpreted as an inborn disregard for life, a racial suicide wish that Americans could fulfill without moral qualms. Instead, Wheeler described a human response to injury: “He may have been told we killed all Japanese by torture, but I think he was just in terrible pain.”⁸³ If this glimpse of a suffering youth was fleeting, it was still a moment of recognition, putting the human pain of the enemy on display in one of the most read publications in the country.

These pricks of conscience and sympathy, or even doubt and ethical confusion, should not be exaggerated; they can easily be contrasted with vacuously reassuring stories describing combat as an adventure without moral content. But to ignore them is to lose track of a muted—though never inaudible—counterpoint in the early journalistic scoring of the war. Recovering this counterpoint is more than a matter of filling in a transitory part of the record, because it did

⁸² “Pilot Tells How It Feels to Be Slaughtering Japs: Kelly’s Navigator Reveals Emotions in Letter to Mother.” The letter, by Lt. Joseph Bean, was reprinted widely. See, e.g., the *Los Angeles Times*, March 17, 1942; the *Chicago Tribune*, March 17, 1942; the *Washington Post*, March 29, 1942.

⁸³ “Rear Guard in Luzon: Winner of DSC tells how U.S. Cavalry covered withdrawal of MacArthur into Bataan,” *Life*, March 2, 1942.

not vanish as the war came to dominate domestic culture. Instead—and I think quite remarkably—doubts, worries and ambivalence were woven into the fabric of support for the war. It would be too much to say that the state promoted skepticism, but officials charged with morale management (and large segments of public) came to see a good deal of utility in a public exposed to horrors it could not fully comprehend, but trained to interpret these as harsh realities that had simply to be borne as part and parcel of citizenship, a test of rational maturity.

“an offensive psychology”: the Committee on War Information and the Question of Organized Hatred

What did the state say about all of this? American information policies during the war were vexed by a dispersion of authority across antagonistic bureaucracies, and the heat of conflict can be discerned at the intersections of almost any two organizations, complicating generalizations about government handling of the news. The effect of this fragmentation is overstated, however, if attention is not given to important convergences (in the sense of overlapping rather than identical projects) on the subjects of emotional mobilization and the management of race relations. In short, the New Deal antifascists who initially held sway in domestic information agencies and their more conservative military counterparts all saw a need (1) to inculcate a deeper emotional commitment to the war at home, in order to overcome potentially serious complications arising from widespread ambivalence about the conflict and (2) to de-emphasize race as an organizing principle for violence. The combination of those imperfectly fitted pieces was critical to the evolution of moral sensibilities, as the violence escalated and U.S. involvement moved beyond the colonial realm.

The shared concern for the emotional state of the public is pronounced in the records of the Committee on War Information (CWI), a high-level—if loosely structured—coordinating committee initially chaired by the staunchly liberal Librarian of Congress Archibald MacLeish (and later by Office of War Information chief Elmer Davis). These meetings were often marked by sharp disputes over the politics of domestic propaganda, with wide fault lines between the liberal civilian agency administrators and the officials from the War and Navy Departments.⁸⁴ MacLeish’s early efforts to define war aims around the “Four Freedoms” met resistance from Assistant Secretary of War John McCloy, for example, who thought the Rooseveltian message “sounded too much like the Fourteen Points,” and that propaganda should downplay postwar aspirations and identify the enemy simply as “gangsters.”⁸⁵ But the differences were not intractable. At the same meeting, Treasury representative Ferdinand Kuhn reached for common ground between MacLeish and McCloy on the point that “[the] emphasis should be laid on keeping the anger of the public aroused.”⁸⁶ Kuhn’s comment alluded to an earlier agreement by

⁸⁴ In contrast to the famous Committee on Public Information in World War I, which met in full only once and left all power in the hands of chairman George Creel, the Committee on War Information met frequently and left power in no hands in particular. Also known as the Committee on Defense Information (before December 7) and the Committee on War Information Policy, it included as members the chiefs of the Office of War Information’s many bureaus (and before that, the Office of Government Reports and Office of Facts and Figures); the head of the War Department Bureau of Public Relations, General Alexander Surles; Undersecretary of War John McCloy; special assistant to the Secretary of the Navy Adlai Stevenson, with various other Navy representatives; and revolving representatives of the State Department, Treasury Department, Budget Bureau, Office of Emergency Management and Lend-Lease Administration. See minutes in NARA RG 208, entry 6E, box 11, Office of War Information, Records of the Historian, and in 208 entry 1, box 1, Records of the Office of the Director.

⁸⁵ “Committee on War Information Meeting,” Jan. 21, 1942, notes of Captain Kinter for MacLeish, NARA RG 208 entry 6E, box 11.

⁸⁶ “Committee on War Information Meeting,” Jan. 21, 1942, notes of Captain Kinter for MacLeish, NARA RG 208 entry 6E, box 11.

the entire CWI that a top priority was “to combat the tendency toward a defensive psychology in the United States and to build and maintain, in its place, an offensive psychology.” This approach, codified in “OFF [Office of Facts and Figures] Project Proposal No. 3,” approved by the CWI late in December 1941, went beyond the repudiation of “isolationism,” to insist that individuals develop an emotional desire for the nation to “hurt its enemies” everywhere in the world.⁸⁷ Here was a style quite distinct from the avuncular reasonableness of the President’s “map speech” laying out the global dimensions of the war by inviting an audience of millions to follow Roosevelt’s explanation of the war’s progress by studying world maps as they listened to him on the radio.⁸⁸ The goals of Project Proposal No. 3 were to reach deeper springs of long-term war commitment, recognizing as its authors did that “The emotional upsurge following Pearl Harbor will not last forever.”⁸⁹

The OFF/OWI emphasis on “offensive psychology” appeared to dovetail with Navy needs as well, despite some disagreements over secrecy. Naval aide Adlai Stevenson objected to MacLeish’s desire for fuller disclosures of casualties, remarking at an early meeting that December 7 had been “an Indian massacre” and that he wanted to “bury the corpse of Pearl Harbor” rather than publishing full casualty lists.⁹⁰ Overriding these concerns, though, was the

⁸⁷ “OFF Project Proposal No. 3,” adopted December 29, 1941. Office of War Information, Records of the Historian, RG 208 entry 6E box 11.

⁸⁸ Susan Schulten, *The Geographic Imagination in America, 1880-1950* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2001), 204.

⁸⁹ “OFF Project Proposal No. 3,” adopted December 29, 1941. RG 208 entry 6E box 11.

⁹⁰ “Committee on War Information Meeting,” Jan. 21, 1942, notes of Captain Kinter for MacLeish, NARA RG 208 entry 6E, box 11.

reality that the Navy, its forces divided between two oceans and badly set back in Hawaii, needed time before it could mount strategic offensives, and thus shared the problem MacLeish and the OFF had defined for the civilian information agencies: “the United States cannot take the *military* offensive at this time. It is not easy to create a risk-taking, daring, offensive spirit without offensive *action*.”⁹¹ Given this basic alignment, disagreements over the publication of casualty lists did nothing to keep the Navy from agreeing to a plan for the OFF to deal with public criticism of “apparent inaction by the Navy.”⁹² The Navy was no more impressed by the Four Freedoms than the War Department, but there was broad agreement on the need to make Americans feel a connection to the conflict in their bones, rather than passively acceding to a necessary war and participating where compelled by conscription or lured by defense dollars.

If this meant fostering an unprecedented sense of individual obligation to the national state, it also meant linking those individuals into long chains of causation directed towards the production of violent death.⁹³ And the information agencies worried endlessly that those links were not obvious enough to the people. Even in the absence of organized pacifist or isolationist dissent, morale was at risk if emotional commitment to the core project of the wartime state were to slip. The specter of France’s “strange defeat” haunted these discussions in the CWI:

⁹¹ “OFF Project Proposal No. 3,” adopted December 29, 1941. RG 208 entry 6E box 11. Emphases in the original.

⁹² “OFF Project Proposal No. 2,” undated memorandum discussed and approved December 29, 1941, Kintner notes for MacLeish. RG 208 entry 6E box 11.

⁹³ On obligations of citizenship during the war, see James Sparrow, *Warfare State: World War II Americans and the Age of Big Government* (New York: Oxford, 2011), and Robert Westbrook, *Why We Fought: Forging American Obligations in World War II* (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Books, 2004).

Reports from many points indicate a growing parallel between the attitude of the American public today toward the war and the attitude of the French public in 1939. The French knew they were at war and theoretically realized that an all out effort was necessary, but the war was something on the other side off the Maginot Line. The American public is losing the first surge-up of feeling after Pearl Harbor, and increasingly thinks of the war as something on the other side of the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans.⁹⁴

Exaggerated or not, this view represented more than speculation by the CWI. The first wartime study undertaken by the Surveys Division of the Office of Government Reports (another relatively prewar information agency that would be folded into the OWI) had addressed issues of national “mood” and pointed to a “fading of war excitement” in mid-December 1941.⁹⁵ Over the next year a series of surveys blending quantitative polling methods with qualitative interviews would probe the degree to which ordinary Americans were becoming mentally enmeshed in the war. The social scientists deployed to analyze popular attitudes built libraries of opinion data on a multiplicity of issues, but a recurrent concern was the question of what the people *felt*—or as the journalist Martha Gellhorn put it, was the war, for them, a reality?

Even when polls showed overwhelming support for administration policies, that support could be subdivided into desirable and undesirable sentiments. When the Surveys Division found that more than 90 percent of the population favored sending troops overseas in April 1942, it cautioned that fewer than a third of respondents—just one in five in the rural South—would identify such a deployment as being “for attack” while slightly more than a third wanted soldiers

⁹⁴ Committee on War Information meeting agenda for January 19, 1942. NARA RG 208, entry 6E, box 11.

⁹⁵ Surveys Division, Report No. 1, “Preliminary Report on Recent Developments,” December 19, 1941. Based on a survey of 200 urban residents of the East and West coasts plus Midwestern cities. Office of War Information Surveys Division. Intensive Surveys—Studies of Indoctrination. NARA RG 44, entry 162, box 1786.

sent abroad “for defense.”⁹⁶ This was a fuzzy distinction, not necessarily indicating specific strategic of policy preferences; individuals quoted in the study sometimes displayed an expansive notion of “defense,” extending well beyond an isolationist preference for Western hemisphere protection. It was far from obvious that they objected to any part of the administration’s war aims. But the survey’s authors interpreted the results as a threat, “a natural hangover from the pre-Pearl Harbor” days, indicative of “half-hearted approval of an expeditionary force on the grounds that it will keep fighting away from America.” Full mobilization meant internalizing virtually unlimited war; the people should “desire to fight the war anywhere with any means...”⁹⁷ These information projects were ultimately directed towards material outputs—marching boots, hands on the assembly line—but assumed a logic of their own, with war-consciousness taking pride of place as both a focus of study and, ultimately, a product of effective government. Their description of desirable attitudes might have been a direct answer to the Brown University student and the mother from Austin, Texas, who had seemed reluctant precisely about the need to fight anywhere, and with any means. A study of war-workers made in mid-1942 went so far as to express a worry that too much focus on the “war of production” would lead to “workers taking less seriously military and international aspects of the war.”⁹⁸

⁹⁶ Surveys Division, Report No. 13, “American Unity,” May 26, 1942. NARA RG 44, entry 162, box 1786.

⁹⁷ Surveys Division, Report No. 13, “American Unity,” May 26, 1942. NARA RG 44, entry 162, box 1786. What respondents meant by “defense” was never much elaborated, but the demographic composition of the answers is intriguing. A majority of men and a plurality of white respondents saw an expeditionary force in terms of “attack,” whereas 57 percent of black respondents and 58 percent of women said it was for defense.

⁹⁸ Surveys Division Report No. 21 “War Worker's Point of View,” July 28, 1942 RG 44, 162, 1786. The same study found, among other things, that first-generation European immigrants

Thickening emotional contact with the war in this case seemed to become an end in its own right, rather than a spur to material mobilization.

These studies shaped the decision, in May 1942, to move cautiously ahead with the publication of news about enemy atrocities.⁹⁹ The CWI minutes show only that there was a tentative consensus for the disclosure of documented atrocities “after careful checking” to prevent false reports, but the decision was revealing in several respects. Institutionally, it put War and Navy Department figures—McCloy and Stevenson—with direct influence over mandatory censorship policies in the position of weighing the effect of an entire category of news together with the officials responsible for domestic propaganda. One rarely finds Archibald MacLeish or his OWI successor, Elmer Davis, pressing the military on what sort of news to pass and what to block in specific cases—the separation of censorship and propaganda was a consistent shibboleth of 1940s information management—but the joint consideration of atrocity news exhibits a closer degree of coordination on basic principles than is usually admitted. The decision further bolsters the contention made in the previous chapter, that ethical concerns related to civilian “morale” were inseparable from the censorship of war news. Perhaps more interesting, a remarkable unsigned memorandum dwelled at length over the background of the decision, in the process shedding light on the meanings of “offensive psychology” as an informational goal.

were generally more “earnest” about the war than either second-generation family members or “those of old American heritage.”

⁹⁹ Notes of May 12, 1942, Committee of War Information meeting. RG 208, 6E, 11. It should be noted here that, not long after this decision, the OWI would reverse course and the military would tighten controls over the disclosure of atrocities after fears arose that Japan was employing its own violations of the laws of war for a “propaganda of humiliating the white race” in Southeast Asia. Committee on War Information Policy, July 29, 1942, RG 208, entry 1, box 1.

The memorandum, titled “Pros and Cons on Hate and Atrocities,” was an 11-page meditation on the history of foreign policy sentiments since 1917 and 1939, identifying the central problematic of the 1940s as the detachment of intellectual, moral, and emotional judgments from each other over the course of the interwar years. Private journalism and government information had convinced the nation of “enemy war guilt, enemy perfidy, enemy lies,” but had not produced deep wells of feeling:

[T]he Enemy has not been presented with the object of arousing Hate. And the main reason is that there has been in the American people, as a result of the post-war years, a deeply ingrained opposition to any emotional responses to international affairs.¹⁰⁰

Post-World War I skepticism of atrocity propaganda was described less in terms of reasoned doubts than as a reluctance to make affective investments overseas. “Americans threw their sympathies in all directions in the last war, and a large part of their thinking as they went to war was emotional,” the author wrote. Now the same population was chastened and emotionally circumspect, even as it came to accept as true the reports of “barbarities abroad.”

Those reports might be published, and even accepted (very few Americans would deny that a concentration camp is an unpleasant place), but the old fire was gone; there was very little feeling that ‘this is something America must stop’.¹⁰¹

Geopolitical and emotional disengagement were therefore linked—isolationism was a pathological emotional condition, a state of coldly rationalistic withdrawal; the information was available, “but the old fire was gone.” This made the role of information management a more

¹⁰⁰ “Confidential Attachment B—Pros and Cons on Hate and Atrocity,” May 5, 1942 memorandum (unsigned) discussed at May 12, 1942 CWI meeting. NARA RG 208 entry 6E box 11.

¹⁰¹ “Confidential Attachment B—Pros and Cons on Hate and Atrocity,” May 5, 1942 memorandum (unsigned) discussed at May 12, 1942 CWI meeting. RG 208 entry 6E box 11.

profound matter than the dissemination of facts and figures: “[T]he development of Hate demands a reversal not only of Government policy, but of deeply settled American attitudes.” The memo ended with no conclusive recommendations as to the wisdom of inciting hatred, but left the distinct impression that an emotional reconstruction was needed if the people were to sustain an effective war effort over an indefinite period of time.

Making “hate” a keynote of war information was a project that could have drawn directly on the voices already describing a race war in the Pacific. Indeed, records of U.S.-British discussions in a Joint Committee on Information Policy make it clear that information officials were acutely aware of the potential for propaganda to turn on racial images.¹⁰² But this approach was anathema to the OFF liberals who at the start of the war insisted that “anti-racial, basically human conceptions” were the taproot of the United Nations.¹⁰³ While they never quite managed to make the war an “anti-racial” one or to squash racist depictions of the Japanese in private publications, the liberals resisted an explicit racial coding of the war. A “Censorship Bulletin” circulated to publishers at the war agencies’ behest early in 1942 warned against “the Danger of Color References,” noting that the term “yellow bellies” could offend Chinese allies and that it was in principle undesirable to connect race with belligerency.¹⁰⁴ When General DeWitt made his infamous remark in Congressional testimony over Japanese internment that “a Jap is a Jap,”

¹⁰² See the minutes of various Joint Committee on Information Policy meetings, especially Sept. 17, 1942 and October 1, 1942. RG 208, entry 1, box 5. Archibald MacLeish argued so frequently that it would be impossible to make the war about race that his comments seem to speak more strongly to the fact that he considered it all too possible.

¹⁰³ “OFF Information Project Number One,” January 19, 1942, NARA RG 208 6E box 11.

¹⁰⁴ “Censorship Bulletin No. 2,” Jan. 12, 1942, General Records of the Department of the Navy, Office of Information subject Files, 1940-1958, NARA RG 428, entry 3 box 18.

the OWI was relieved to learn that the Army had reprimanded him for the comment, and had even considered a radio broadcast on the “incident” to widely disavow statements which made race central to the war.¹⁰⁵

While the fluidity of racial hierarchies under the pressure of the war is much debated, any hint of a strong linkage between race and the moral justification of violence was treated with a tremendous degree of concern by the information agencies.¹⁰⁶ In fact, violence—central to any war messages concerned with the enemy—was frequently the line between reluctantly justifying the racial order and pushing, however tentatively, for reform. An OWI report on “Negro morale” found that discrimination was a major impediment to full mobilization, but concluded impotently that “Folkways do not change swiftly.” Challenges to Jim Crow could safely be deferred, because “American Negroes know that their aspirations cannot be realized at once.”¹⁰⁷ When hierarchy shaded into violence, though, the OWI’s deliberations became far more urgent. Whatever their doubts about desegregation, propaganda officials sympathized with the left-wing Worker’s Defense League and the black press over the looming execution of Virginia sharecropper Odell Waller in the summer of 1942. Analysts of the black press pushed the propaganda agencies to weigh in on the matter, writing that the state of Virginia must be made to “realize the informational significance of this case.” If an execution took place on shaky

¹⁰⁵ Minutes of April 16, 1943 meeting, OWI Office of the Historian, Subject File, 1941-46. NARA RG 208 6E box 12.

¹⁰⁶ On the ambiguous effects of wartime mobilization on the U.S. racial order see Kevin M. Kruse and Stephen Tuck, *Fog of War: The Second World War and the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

¹⁰⁷ “Negroes in a Democracy at War,” May 27, 1942, Survey of Intelligence Materials No. 25, OFF Bureau of Intelligence, NARA RG 208 6E 11.

evidence, it would be “a timely example of why democracy isn’t worth fighting for except at home.”¹⁰⁸ Although the liberals gained no traction on the issue, it is worth noting that the specter of the electric chair at least galvanized a response, while more routine inequality did not.

A similar line was drawn when the CWI considered the tangle of issues raised by the Quit India movement in August 1942. In general terms, the information agencies strove not to make any commitments on the India question one way or another, and in the end U.S. propaganda both irritated the British and badly disappointed M.K. Gandhi and the Congress Party by selling American freedom and abundance while insisting that the question of independence was secondary to Allied military plans.¹⁰⁹ But there was one issue that prompted the CWI to confront London directly, and it sprang from American anxieties over the reinstatement of corporal punishment in the British crackdown on dissent within the Raj. The minutes of an August, 1942, meeting record that “MacLeish was authorized to tell the British Ministry of Information that this committee holds strongly the view that the whipping order in Bombay must be rescinded.”¹¹⁰ From a Virginia death sentence to whipping in Bombay, physical violence directed downward along a racialized order unsettled liberals who were otherwise quite capable of seeing race hierarchy as a problem for another day. This was the organizational milieu into which the call for

¹⁰⁸ Memo from Special Services Division to Office of Government Reports Executive Assistant Cornelius DuBois, “Is the Negro Press Pro-Axis?” June 22, 1942. NARA RG 44, entry 149, box 1710.

¹⁰⁹ On the OWI in the subcontinent during the 1940s, see Eric Pullin, “ ‘Noise and Flutter’: American Propaganda Strategy and Operation in India during World War II,” *Diplomatic History* Vol. 34, No. 2, April 2010.

¹¹⁰ OWI Records of the Office of the Director, minutes of meeting held August 12, 1942. NARA RG 208 entry 1 box 1.

organized hate would fall. It was not just a generic racial liberalism—which was actually quite weak—but a specific aversion to racial violence that kept the directors of national propaganda efforts from developing imperial tropes into an official moral justification for the war. As John Dower tells us, World War II was powerfully inflected by race in the Pacific, but it was not in an absolute sense a race war. Nor, despite the obvious strands of racism in state and society, would the propagandists seek to make it one. Indeed, they looked to develop instead an emotional commitment to almost limitless violence without the benefit of racism as a weapon.

On this score, the military wound up, again for its own reasons, in the same camp as the civilian propaganda officials. While top officers constituted a bulwark of racial conservatism in the 1940s, Army and Navy information agencies were no more eager than Archibald MacLeish to cultivate racial animosities as the bases of war sentiment. Such animosities fundamentally threatened the priority assigned to the war against Hitler. The deeply conservative Hearst papers cut to the heart of that strategy—and enraged the liberal interventionist press—when they editorialized that “in this truly World War it is of very little actual importance to the Occidental races which one of them dominates Europe.”¹¹¹ Inflammatory and racist depictions of the Japanese as the primary danger to American life served an agenda of reorienting the war effort towards the Pacific, sometimes with an insinuation that the United States should not be at war with Germany at all. The *Chicago Tribune*, with lurid “yellow peril” cartoons frequently displayed on its front page, savaged the administration’s aid to Britain and Russia while canonizing Douglas MacArthur and pushing for his elevation to Chief of Staff or Secretary of War, a move that would clearly signal the priority of the Pacific front over the build-up of troops and material in Britain for an eventual second front. These campaigns were followed nervously

¹¹¹ *PM*, May 22, 1942.

by the War Department Bureau of Public Relations, whose analysts parsed hundreds of newspapers, sorting reportage and editorials into positive and negative “trends.” Pacific-first criticisms fell squarely in with the “negative” column. One internal commentary by an anonymous War Department analyst seemed to channel *The Nation*’s acerbic Freda Kirchwey in describing the “Hearst-McCormick-Scripps-Howard press and their obsequious and less-dynamic satellites” as creating “a war strategy headache that is still throbbing in some editorials, columns and magazines.”¹¹² Racism could undercut domestic mobilization, alienate allies, and perhaps most threatening of all, subvert the White House and War Department’s prerogatives in setting the basic war strategy in concert with Moscow and London.

The upshot of the CWI discussions was, by the start of 1943, something of a muddle. Liberal journalists and the military fell out badly over the compromises made with Vichy authority in North Africa. At the same time, the ascent of corporate publicists in the OWI led to the resignation or ouster of many New Deal figures, foreclosing on the original “strategy of truth” that had aimed at a carefully informed public, and leaving a more visual, allusive, and ostensibly apolitical salesmanship in its place.¹¹³ No unitary American information strategy replaced MacLeish’s vision. But the broad agreements reached in the CWI during the first year and a half of the war did matter, insofar as they cemented the assumption across various agencies that the war effort required an emotional mobilization of the mass public, on terms other than the

¹¹² See for example the concerns over a push for MacArthur as Secretary of War in a memorandum for the Chief, Intelligence and Analysis Branch, April 24, 1942, “Army Editorials for the Week Ending April 18, 1942.” Also, “Press Opinion on ‘Pacific-First’ Strategy Controversy,” June 7, 1943. Both documents are in the Records of the War Department Bureau of Public Relations, NARA RG 107, entry 351, box 9.

¹¹³ The best account of the overall struggle over information policy remains Allen Winkler, *The Politics of Propaganda: The Office of War Information, 1942-1945* (New Haven: Yale, 1978).

promotion of race war. What was less obvious, from the perspective of this lofty perch, was whether the public would go along with the project.

“We can take it”: Realism as an emotional style for democratic total war

The answer to that question was, however, already taking shape in the popular press by the middle of 1942. Brutal war reportage provoked complaints from readers who thought the news too harsh; and the complaints, in turn, prompted editors (and other readers) to elaborate not just a defense of frank journalistic disclosures about the nature of combat, but a sense of the individual’s duty to share in the pain of the war. These dialogs gave substance to the thin, abstract liberal claim that the public should be informed about bad news: not only could the people tolerate viscerally disturbing news, but they had a positive obligation to be aware of the “reality” of war, reflected in detailed descriptions of death and pain, whether they liked it or not.

An early exchange along these lines recapitulated the interwar dispute between pacifists and “preparedness” advocates, transformed into an argument about emotions rather than policies. It began with *Life* reporter Robert Sherrod’s story about the training of Army pilots, provocatively titled “Kill or Be Killed.” Sherrod reported that American pilots were mechanically adept, but deficient in “killer instinct,” having been “brought up as most Americans to love their fellow men.” The solution was ethical reeducation by 25-year-old Lieutenant Col. Boyd “Buzz” Wagner, whose basic lesson was “the necessity of death.” Identified as an ace who had personally killed hundreds of enemy airmen, Wagner exhorted young recruits to stop thinking of their work as analogous to sports, and keep the reality of

killing foremost in mind: “You've got to spread all the death you can, and there's plenty of it in your guns.”¹¹⁴

Sherrod's report brought a sharp protest from a quarter that had otherwise been reticent about addressing this war: the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF). The WILPF, a non-sectarian pacifist group that had arisen out of the women's suffrage movement during the first world war, did not directly condemn the war in its response, and noted the “noble intentions” of Americans willing to fight fascism. But the organization objected to the “hair-raising information as to Buzz Wagner's sinister prowess and foul attitudes.”¹¹⁵ It protested Wagner's training as fostering sentiments “contrary to the laws of organized society,” and posing a threat to the postwar peace both internationally and at home. The WILPF did not speak to the ethics of bombing or aerial combat, and in fact made no comments whatever on the justice of the war or its conduct. Notably, though, it objected not just to Wagner's training, but to Sherrod's article as well. The group's ire was less immediately about behavior than about broad-based affective responses to the catastrophes of war. They rejected both the coolness with which Sherrod could report on killing, and the fervor of the officer who “relishes killing Japs.”¹¹⁶ If killing was necessary—which the group came surprisingly near to conceding in this letter—it should be done with a sense of regret, not enthusiasm.

The WILPF letter brought a string of angry responses, one from a pair of Army wives at Fort Sam Houston, Texas, who zeroed in on the same question of appropriate sentiments about

¹¹⁴ “Kill or Be Killed,” *Life*, June 1, 1942.

¹¹⁵ Randolph Norman Mould, Letter to the Editor, “Peace,” *Life*, July 13, 1942.

¹¹⁶ “Kill or Be Killed,” *Life*, June 1, 1942.

killing in war. “Mrs. Mould thinks she has a monopoly on the feeling that war and killing is hell,” the women wrote. “She, therefore, mistakes Buzz Wagner's grit and guts as evidence of a ‘foul attitude’ and ‘sinister prowess.’”¹¹⁷ Soldiers and their families felt the horror of war no less than pacifists. They just accepted a degree of stoicism as one more sacrifice:

We women who have sent our men into the fight with smiles on our faces, and then settled down to bring up our children and keep the home together, are sick of advice and criticism from those slackers who hide behind a fine-sounding title and will never know the meaning of war.

An affective counterpart of the soldier's moral superiority over the “slacker” was the superiority of the emotional realists over the squeamish worriers who did not “know the meaning of war.” Friction between pacifists and soldiers' families is hardly surprising, but the terms of debate here are worth noting—it was the more bellicose side which defended journalism intended to shock the public with the intrinsic darkness of the war.

Exchanges like this were common, but arose between strangers with opaque politics more often than with representatives of groups like the WILPF. In these cases the participants in the debates were linked only through the editorial pages that printed their letters. In March and August 1942, for example, *Life* magazine published photographic essays on the starvation and murder of civilians and prisoners of war in occupied Greece and Poland.¹¹⁸ These were not vaguely allusive images of death, but shocking and intimate photographs of mass graves, of suicide victims strung out on the barbed wire where they had died, of infants starved and children starving—scenes of the starkest degradation. While a few readers objected to the

¹¹⁷ Mrs. A.P. Clark, Jr. and Mrs. J.G. Eriksen, “Letter to the Editor,” *Life*, August 3, 1942.

¹¹⁸ “Germans Impose Mass Death on Red Prisoners and Poles,” *Life*, Feb. 23, 1942; “Famine and Death Ride Into Greece at the Heels of the Nazi Conquest,” *Life*, August 3, 1942.

images—“war is horrible enough without those pictures,” one wrote—others rushed to affirm the importance of gazing at suffering. A New York woman wrote in preemptive objection to an audience which would resist pictures of death:

Because you will have a flood of letter protesting the picture of the starved Polish children and murdered Russian prisoners, I hastened to write you. They are shocking, brutal, revolting--yes--but that is the kind of world we live in now. Others will do as I did--drop the magazine in horror at the first view. But those of us who realize the stark horror at large in this world and who realize that the mounting torrent of bad news concerns us, too, will tiptoe back to the pictures, knowing that victory will come only when we have understood and taken the full measure of our enemy.¹¹⁹

Sometimes writers would posit a more or less utilitarian role for atrocity stories, as a spur to production at home (one suggested putting posters of dead Greek civilians in every factory and post office in America), but just as frequently the argument embodied an inchoate sense that there was simply an obligation to look—often, oddly, an obligation owed to other Americans rather than to the actual victims. A Marine stationed in California wrote to applaud the publication of the atrocity photos from Greece in terms of domestic unity: “Some people might say it’s propaganda, but by God we need plenty more of it, to prove to the people of America that war is hell and it’s a game in which everyone must pull together.”¹²⁰

Published letters can of course reflect editorial whim as much as public opinion, and at times one sense that *Life* was ventriloquizing its readership by selecting letters to create an artificial “debate” that ultimately supported the magazine’s own editorial choices. But more rigorous surveys by the OWI also found a roughly even division over what it called “realism in

¹¹⁹ *Life*, “Letters to the editor,” March 16, 1942.

¹²⁰ *Life* letters to the editor, August 24, 1942.

the news.” When the agency asked Americans whether they approved of the publication of graphic stories about deaths and injuries in the fall of 1943 and the spring of 1944, 45-48 percent said yes and 42-43 percent said no.¹²¹ Responses were strongly moralistic; the supporters of “realism” invoked an obligation to share in the suffering. “My God, people around here are having a swell time. Let them see a few of these things our boys are going through,” said one respondent, while another worried that “Too many people are enjoying this war ...” Domestic resentments—against organized labor in particular—sometimes appeared in the comments, but the bottom line for most writers was a sense of civic duty to inhabit the same mental space as the combat soldier: “If the boys could be surrounded by horror -- we should be able to take it too.”¹²² Whatever morbid attractions the photographs and stories of violent death held, publishing and consuming them was defended not on free speech grounds, but as an emotional burden carried on behalf of the nation generally and the soldiers in particular. Looking at war was just another sacrifice, like mass taxation or conscription.

Critics of “realist” reporting also invoked the interests of soldiers and their families. “It’s too heart-rending to the mothers, the separation is bad enough but all that other stuff kills you,”

¹²¹ See “Public Appraisal of the War News,” OWI Surveys Division Memorandum No. 67, October 29, 1943, in NARA RG 44 entry 164 box 1799, and “Public Appraisal of War Information,” Surveys Division Memorandum No. 77, May 12, 1944, NARA RG 44 entry 164 box 1800. The text of the question referred to both photographs and written reports: “There’s been a lot of talk about whether we ought to get more complete stories of what happens on the battlefield -- even stories and pictures showing how American soldiers are suffering and dying. What do you think about this? Why?”

¹²² See “Public Appraisal of the War News,” OWI Surveys Division Memorandum No. 67, October 29, 1943, in NARA RG 44 entry 164 box 1799.

one respondent to the OWI surveys said.¹²³ More fundamentally, however, many of these interviewees rejected the premise that they were unaware of the costs of war and needed to be confronted with detailed information about distant suffering. “We’ve been getting enough of those pictures,” one respondent said, while another remarked that “it makes people suffer too much, *we know it already* [emphasis added].”¹²⁴ And indeed, perhaps they did already know much about the war. When the researchers asked people if they remembered specific instances of objectionable news, many said that they did. Their answers, cataloging a wide range of reports, provide a glimpse of the war as it had lodged in their imaginations:

“One showed three American boys dead on the beach—they were just laying dead and were just awful, just before this last war loan.” / “Pictures of dead and dying on the front, legs and arms off” / “The wounded, like the picture of the soldier with gangrene in his arm.” / “Starving children in Greece, etc.” / “A dead Nazi—flames on his back. Even if he was a German, so what, he’s human.” / “The story about Lexington being sunk and how the men were trapped beneath the deck—it’s enough to be notified that someone is dead; you don’t need to read about the tortures.” / “The story of the captain and a new pair of boots on; he lost his boot with his leg in it.” / “accounts of insanity in the American army.” / “Boys adrift so long at sea—we were never told in the other war; they shouldn’t tell how they suffered at sea.”¹²⁵

If all the distant sufferings of war could be imagined as a monster hidden behind smoked glass, each of these impressions was a scratch in the glass. Insignificant alone, an accumulation of scratches would begin to reveal the contours of whatever lay within. And the individual impressions did not remain individual, but were passed along in conversation, along with the

¹²³ “Public Appraisal of the War News,” OWI Surveys Division Memorandum No. 67, October 29, 1943, in NARA RG 44 entry 164 box 1799.

¹²⁴ “Public Appraisal of the War News,” OWI Surveys Division Memorandum No. 67, October 29, 1943, in NARA RG 44 entry 164 box 1799. Emphasis mine.

¹²⁵ “Public Appraisal of the War News,” OWI Surveys Division Memorandum No. 67, October 29, 1943, in NARA RG 44 entry 164 box 1799.

conviction that each story was only a partial revelation of an unthinkable totality. “War is always worse than can be told,” one informant said to the OWI researchers. “People I’ve talked to give me the lurid pictures.”¹²⁶ Indeed, a large part of the population was coming to assume that the experience of war was much worse than reported; they were imagining the beast through scratches in the glass. By April 1944, only 38 percent of respondents in a national poll said they trusted published accounts of combat, while a plurality, 44 percent, thought stories were sanitized to look better than reality; in July 1942, by contrast, 58 percent had trusted the accuracy of combat news, and just 28 percent assumed it was substantially censored for morale reasons.¹²⁷

Had the managers of war information in the CWI and the OWI been focused on suppressing the ugliness of war, the period between early 1943 and the Normandy landings would therefore have seemed like a catastrophe. But the darkening perceptions of war did not presage a loss of confidence in the state, and the OWI was relatively sanguine over sagging trust in official releases. The real problem, from their perspective, lay with the 40 percent of the population who resisted horror stories and pictures of death: “It may be the very people who protest against realism who need to be jolted into a full realization of the implications of the war.”¹²⁸ The evidence that the people “who protest against realism” were *practically* unrealistic or a drag on the war effort was circumstantial at best: it rested largely on the somewhat

¹²⁶ “Public Appraisal of the War News,” OWI Surveys Division Memorandum No. 67, October 29, 1943, in NARA RG 44 entry 164 box 1799.

¹²⁷ “Public Appraisal of War Information,” Surveys Division Memorandum No. 77, May 12, 1944, NARA RG 44 entry 164 box 1800

¹²⁸ “Public Appraisal of the War News,” OWI Surveys Division Memorandum No. 67, October 29, 1943, in NARA RG 44 entry 164 box 1799.

unsurprising finding that people who wanted more grim war news also tended to complain that other people weren't taking the war seriously enough. This had a sociological dimension as well: the advocates of "realism" tended to be wealthier, better educated, and male.¹²⁹ Other groups were not necessarily less canny in their assessment of events: women ultimately proved slightly better at estimating the length of the war than men, for example.¹³⁰ The core of "realism" was a high level of comfort with violence; the researchers worried that women were "considerably less willing to abandon the niceties of so-called 'civilized warfare.'"¹³¹ In fact, the study had shown only a slight gender difference, even if the accuracy of the surveys was taken at face value: 25 percent of women, compared with 20 percent of men, opposed the bombing of civilian targets in Japan. But this wasn't really the point; their concern spoke less to the possibility of organized dissent than to the official desire to universalize a "realistic" orientation towards violence.

That project was never quite a success. So defined, success would have amounted to something like total domination of the national mind: an emotional state shared among more than 100 million citizens. To the end of the war, there were cleavages in public attitudes towards the use of force. In one survey a narrow majority (54 percent) rejected giving the President the right to use force against Germany and Japan in the postwar without Congressional authorization; there was a nearly even split over the hypothetical bombing of Japanese cities with chemical

¹²⁹ "Public Appraisal of War Information," Surveys Division Memorandum No. 77, May 12, 1944, NARA RG 44 entry 164 box 1800

¹³⁰ OWI Surveys Division, Report No. 31, "Women and the War," August 6 1942. RG 44 entry 164 box 1798.

¹³¹ OWI Surveys Division, Report No. 31, "Women and the War," August 6 1942. RG 44 entry 164 box 1798.

weapons in retaliation for the killing of POWs.¹³² Americans did not all think or feel the same way about killing. But across a fractious landscape of opinion, a broad commitment to the war had been sustained despite plenty of evidence of its human costs. This, too, amounted to a kind of realism. And it represented something more than the triumph of wartime mentalities over pacifism, or the ascent of “internationalism” at the cost of “isolationism.” The realism of the type described in this chapter was not just a solution to a short-term war crisis, but a successor to deeper-rooted but faltering ways of imagining imperial violence. Despite the wild proliferation of stories about “savage” fighters and bolo knives, the public recollections of 1898 and the invocation of General Custer as a national hero, race did not become the dominant way of justifying the war. If by 1945 the United States looked something like an empire, it was an empire whose capacity to make ethical sense of global violence was separable from both formal territorial rule and strict racial categorizations. But it was not separable from the forms of “realism” that made the awareness of distant pain—pain suffered by American soldiers and their allies, as well as pain inflicted by them—a corollary of democratic citizenship. It was an empire that could be governed by a democracy, that could recognize a universal humanity, and could still its anxiety over killing.

The emergence of such a polity – whether it deserves the name of empire, nation, or something else – is difficult to make sense of in the short-run of the early 1940s. The glare of immediate emergencies dims the longer trend. But one of the OWI’s smaller offices managed to escape the fixation on short-term needs, and turned its attention to questions on the scale of decades and centuries. From the perspective of the OWI’s Hollywood bureau, tasked with

¹³² *The Gallup Poll: Public Opinion, 1935-1971* (New York: Random House, 1972), Poll on chemical weapons, January 17, 1945, pg. 438; on the postwar use of force, January 31, 1945, 485.

overseeing private film production between 1942-5, the role of the early 1940s as hinge years between 19th century imperial formations and American power in the postwar decades can be examined closely. So it is to Los Angeles that the next chapter turns.

Chapter 4

“Excellent Education Against a Negotiated Peace”: Imperial and Totalitarian Violence in the Office of War Information’s Hollywood

Sandy Roth is not remembered as a moral voice of the twentieth century. But in March 1943, the low-level war information worker was worried about a cinematic killing that strangely paralleled one of the century’s great literary homicides. Just months after the French publication of Albert Camus’ *The Stranger*, a novel pivoting on the shooting of an unnamed Arab in colonial Algeria, Roth was assigned to review an MGM spy thriller, *Assignment in Brittany*. She noted that the film showed a French officer casually stabbing an anonymous North African chauffeur. How would global audiences respond, she wondered, to “the picture of a French officer cold-bloodedly killing an Arab without too clear a justification”?¹ Roth’s concern, like the film itself, was soon forgotten, while Camus’ novel became a hallmark of postwar thought. Before returning Roth to obscurity, however, it is worth pausing over the moral nature of her criticism. If she was focused on propaganda values, she also registered a distinctly ethical concern: the killing was “cold blooded”; unjustified. Sixty million people died in the war that engaged her critical energies, including thousands of Americans (and uncounted Algerians and Tunisians) in the North African campaign that coincided with her review. Still, war was not a black hole. This particular killing, Roth felt, was beyond the ethical pale.

Her judgment was one of hundreds of such evaluations recorded by the small circle of reviewers employed by the Office of War Information Bureau of Motion Pictures (BMP)

¹ March 12, 1943, *Assignment in Brittany* review, Office of War Information (OWI) Records, National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) Record Group 208, entry 567, box 3511. NARA records are hereafter referred to by their record group, entry, and box numbers.

between 1942 and 1945. Their archive—frequently cited in film histories², but rarely evaluated as a coherent body of thought itself—constitutes a rare record of the invisible reconfigurations of conscience that ran through a society suddenly oriented to the global production of lethal violence. The BMP workers were not moral philosophers—their role has even been defined as “political” in contrast to the “moral” policing of the Production Code Administration.³ Nonetheless, they spent three years sifting narratives of violence, drawing lines between the permissible and the forbidden, between good and evil, in the imaginary cases that were their purview. Their office was in some sense a testing ground for the emerging ethics of global power. Because they dealt with Hollywood studios that trafficked as much in history and myth as

² E.g. Thomas Doherty, *Projections of War: Hollywood, American Culture, and World War II* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993); Koppes and Black, *Hollywood Goes to War: How Politics, Profits and Propaganda Shaped World War II Movies* (Berkeley: University of California, 1990); Rick Worland, “OWI Meets the Monsters: Hollywood Horror Films and War Propaganda, 1942-1945,” *Cinema Journal* vol. 37, No. 1 (Autumn 1997), 47-65; M.B.B. Buskupski, *Hollywood's War With Poland, 1939-1945* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2010). Doherty and Koppes in particular deploy the reviews to illustrate the stakes of ideological disputes about the content of wartime films; but they do not, as this chapter proposes to do, examine the ethics of wartime violence as a sustained category of OWI concern. This work is deeply indebted to their efforts to make sense of the operations of the OWI in the first place. It should also be noted that important recent studies of the film industry's relationship with Nazi Germany have moved away from this source base and provide a perspective rooted in deeper archival studies of the film industry. See especially the somewhat conflicting claims of Doherty's *Hollywood and Hitler: 1933-1939* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013) and Ben Urwand, *The Collaboration: Hollywood's Pact with Hitler* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013). The dispute between Urwand and Doherty could perhaps be better resolved with Avishai Margalit's recent work on compromise with authoritarian states than by purely empirical work. See Margalit, *On Compromise and Rotten Compromises* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010). Nonetheless, the fact that Hollywood's basic orientation towards Adolf Hitler could be so hotly contested signals the utility of further research not just into films as texts or audience reception, but to the textual archives—such as the OWI reviews—surrounding the production of films.

³ Stephen Prince, *Classical Film Violence: Designing and Regulating Brutality in Hollywood Cinema, 1930-1968* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2003), 151. On the Production Code generally, see Thomas Doherty, *Pre-Code Hollywood: Sex, Immorality, and Insurrection in American Cinema, 1930-1934* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999).

in geopolitics, the cases they considered ranged far beyond the immediate crisis. Where the horizon of military censorship was bounded by troop deployments, BMP reviewers dealt simultaneously with combat films and the frontier, with aerial bombing and Congolese slave labor, with guerrilla war in the Ukraine—and guerilla war in Kansas in the 1850s and 1860s. Mobilization for total war opened the totality of the past to ethical scrutiny; and it made the violence of empire (contemporary and historical) an embarrassing problem just as new scales of industrial killing demanded legitimation.

The record of their judgments sheds light on the United States' encounter with the world as a place distant and deranged by violence, but at the same time intimately knowable and comprehensible (the reviewers hoped) in moral and emotional terms. Their reviews provide an unusual vantage from which to take stock of 1942-1945 as hinge years not just between Versailles and Yalta, but between a world structured by the racialized “civilization” of empire and a world of formally sovereign nations whose guarantees of internal security were mortgaged to threats of total war. By explicitly outlining their own responses to violence, the reviewers left a glimpse of the moral revolutions of the war years, relevant to the closely entwined processes of decolonization, totalitarian violence, and liberal world order.

This chapter is organized in roughly chronological fashion, beginning with an overview of the Bureau of Motion Pictures as an institution and then analyzing a series of reviews from the agency's inception until its termination after the war. The analytically important structure, however, lies with a longer chronology stretching out before and beyond the 1940s. During the signal moments of wartime diplomacy over colonies, such as the Cairo conference of 1943, figures like Franklin Roosevelt had the luxury of speaking about the trusteeship of Indochina or the independence of Korea in prospective terms, quietly shelving problems of Allied guilt or

responsibility for both the past and present by imagining a long process of political maturation leading to an indefinitely deferred final condition of sovereign equality. Hollywood, ironically, was less flexible than Churchill or Chiang Kai-Shek; by virtue of its genre conventions the film industry forced questions about colonial history, past and present. This chapter contemplates how the violence of war was handled in 1940s “war movies”, but sets these discussions in the context of three other major genres. First, it considers the “Empire films” that revolved around British, French, and sometimes U.S. colonial possessions, and the condemnations these called forth from official reviewers. Second, the chapter delves into the handling of “Western” pictures by the OWI; the agency’s major aim with these depictions of continental expansionism was to isolate them in a misleadingly distant past, implicitly criticizing the violence of the “frontier” by insisting that it was wholly unlike the contemporary moment. Finally, the chapter closes with the OWI reviewers’ surprising receptiveness to “film noir”, a cinematic form whose dark visions of killing suited the realist mood rather than undermining it. Taken together, these pieces help reveal the outlines of a broad shift in sentiment marked by both the faltering of imperial justifications for coercion and the embrace of morally ambiguous violence.

Institutional and Ideological Background

The center of the Office of War Information’s Bureau of Motion Pictures was the Film Analysis Section, headed by the University of Chicago-trained political analyst Dorothy Jones, a 32-year-old Missouri native who (with Harold Lasswell) had studied Communist propaganda in Chicago during the depression.⁴ Her staff, amounting to just over a dozen reviewers over the course of the

⁴ See Harold Lasswell and Dorothy Blumenstock, *World Revolutionary Propaganda: A Chicago Study* (New York: Knopf, 1939). Their book, correlating economic indices with quantitatively and qualitatively described propaganda, proposed to be a “‘Middletown’—or rather, a

war—almost all women—provided detailed commentaries on storylines, filming scripts, and finished motion pictures for the bulk of Hollywood’s wartime output.⁵ These reviews entered the production process as the basic currency of OWI interactions with the studios, copied verbatim by higher-level agency officials in their correspondence with producers and directors.

The OWI’s recommendations were voluntary, but were backed up by the carefully cultivated cooperation of the Office of Censorship, which could deny export licenses and cut off lucrative overseas distribution. This was not automatic; both Censorship and the studios flaunted the OWI’s advice at times.⁶ But this power meant that the Analysis Section fell somewhere between a censor and an advisory body; it acted by persuasion, but a reserve of coercive potential lurked behind every review. If the studios sometimes chaffed at the advice, they did not ignore the agency.⁷

By 1944 the reviewers in the Analysis Section were survivors of a clash between Congressional conservatives and administration publicists. Congress was openly hostile to the OWI, particularly after the 1942 midterm elections, and it effectively ended the domestic

‘Bigtown’—of world revolutionary propaganda” (v). Jones brought this analysis to the OWI, attempting to gauge and influence the meaning of world historic events by categorizing and describing cinematic narratives.

⁵ Jones estimated in 1945 that of 1,300 films released between 1942-1944, the OWI reviewed more than two-thirds. Of these, three in ten received more comprehensive treatment as films “directly concerned with some aspect of the war.” Jones, “The Hollywood War Film: 1942-1944,” *Hollywood Quarterly*, Vol. 1, No 1, (October 1945).

⁶ Koppes and Black, *Hollywood Goes to War*, 80-81, 112, 135-141.

⁷ Allan Winkler’s judgment that the BMP amounted to a “passive observer” in Los Angeles leaves little space to explain why the studios bothered with extensive correspondence with the OWI, negotiating over fine points in hundreds of scripts. See Allen Winkler, *The Politics of Propaganda: The Office of War Information 1942-45* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978), 59.

information program by defunding it in 1943 while grudgingly preserving “overseas” operations as a necessity of war.⁸ The film reviewers survived as an unobtrusive set of players—they were small in number and, significantly, did not produce the kind of independent content (like a pamphlet on “Negroes and the War” praising the contributions of black servicemen) that enraged Southern Democrats and the GOP.⁹ Half the OWI domestic staff was dismissed in mid-1943, including 116 of the 130 employees of the Bureau of Motion Pictures. As the domestic program imploded, however, the reviewers quietly moved to the Overseas Branch and continued their work.¹⁰

This bureaucratic shift must inform any reading of the reviewers’ work. They leaned heavily on the emerging idiom of public diplomacy—a constantly reiterated worry was that a film might antagonize “overseas audiences.”¹¹ But their solicitude for a global audience should

⁸ See Winkler’s *Politics of Propaganda* for extensive treatment of these conflicts with Congress, and ideological disputes and shifts within the OWI.

⁹ Winkler, *Politics of Propaganda*, 56-68. The major state-produced propaganda films of the war years owed more to publicity bureaus in the War and Navy Departments than the OWI. Frank Capra’s *Why We Fight* series and the animated *Private SNAFU* were military productions, intended for the consumption of soldiers in training.

¹⁰ “Domestic OWI Dropped 777 Out of 1,269 to Meet Congressional Slash in Budget,” *New York Times*, August 11, 1943. “Ten in Hollywood Shifted,” *New York Times*, July 10, 1943. See also Koppes and Black, *Hollywood Goes to War*, 136-139.

¹¹ See Justin Hart, *Empire of Ideas: The Origins of Public Diplomacy and the Transformation of U.S. Foreign Policy* (New York: Oxford, 2013) and M. Todd Bennett, *One World, Big Screen: Hollywood, the Allies, and World War II* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2012). For a contemporary perspective on film as public diplomacy see Walter Wanger, “120,000 American Ambassadors,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol 18, No. 1 (October 1939), 45-59. Elizabeth Thompson provides an informative look at the reception of American films in her essay “Scarlett O’Hara in Damascus: Hollywood, Colonial Politics, and Arab Spectatorship During World War II,” in Dilip Goankar and Brian Edwards, *Globalizing American Studies* (Chicago, 2010). Brian Larkin explores the problems American film presented for imperial politics in “Circulating Empires:

not obscure their moral judgments. When the reviewers singled out lynching for criticism in every context, offering shifting justifications, they were not just a conduit for third party concerns. They were horrified by lynching. Their work was possible because of the notion that a movie's reception in the world mattered. But they understood this as well as any historian and realized that they stood on firmer ground forecasting an ally's objections than offering their own. And this does not begin to speak to a more basic issue: the day-to-day work of reading scripts and writing reviews was not plugged into a diplomatic circuit. The reviewers tested scripts against their own sensibilities far more often than they asked consular officials for advice. A room full of internationalist Potter Stewarts, they had no rubric to decide when the movies killed someone unjustly: they knew it when they saw it.

This makes their work worth unpacking. The reviewers constituted an audience that left behind a textured set of responses to wartime Hollywood from an identifiable ideological position. In 1942, they were liberals eager to spread an interventionist gospel. Dorothy Jones wrote that their program was drawn from President Roosevelt's 1942 state of the union, blending antifascism with an equality of sacrifice at home.¹² Internally their ideological predispositions look stronger: one review described Vice President Henry Wallace's May 8, 1942 speech on war aims (the "Century of the Common Man" speech) as "the greatest of our generation."¹³ But they

Colonial Authority and the Immoral, Subversive Problem of American Film," also in *Globalizing American Studies*.

¹² Dorothy Jones, "The Hollywood War Film: 1942-1944," *Hollywood Quarterly*, Vol. 1, No 1, (October 1945), 1-2.

¹³ The Price of Victory, unsigned review, NARA RG 208, entry 567, box 3524. Indeed, the key liaison between the OWI and the censorship was Ulric Bell, who before the war headed the interventionist Fight For Freedom, and had suggested Wendell Willkie as the legal counsel for studios when they were investigated by the Nye Committee in 1941.

were never in a position to evangelize the public in these terms; instead, they were readers and viewers of narratives produced by other hands. At the end of the war Jones was still irritated that the studios had not better absorbed her advice.¹⁴ Their problem was larger than studio cooperation, however, and ultimately involved an incommensurability between the liberal imagination and the world as it was dreamed of in Los Angeles. Beginning with a vision of cooperation between democratic sovereignties against a totalitarian enemy, they stumbled on the imperial organization of the 1940s—beginning with the first script they reviewed, *White Cargo*.

***White Cargo* and the Dilemmas of Imperial War**

The risqué leaflets in downtown Los Angeles in July 1940 already hinted that *White Cargo* would be a problem. A topless woman in a vaguely tropical wrap stood with her hands on her hips, introducing herself in an iconic line from the play: “I am Tondelayo.” The stage production at the Beaux Arts Theatre advertised a combination of scandal and air conditioning, an “uncensored” version of the transatlantic hit about interracial sex and murder on a Congo rubber plantation which, it promised, “will never be filmed by any studio (because of the Hays organization).”¹⁵

The Hays organization agreed. When an irate Angelino mailed one of the fliers to Joseph Breen, the formidable chief of the Production Code Administration, Breen replied that the “vilely offensive” show would never be condoned by his office—although as a stage production it was

¹⁴ Jones, “The Hollywood War Film.”

¹⁵ *History of Cinema Series I: Hollywood and the Production Code: Selection Files from the Motion Picture Association of America Production Code Collection* [microfilm] (hereafter “PCA files”), reel 19. “White Cargo” file, T.P. Geoghegan to Joseph Breen, July 8, 1940.

simply a “matter for the local police.”¹⁶ But the allure of the show (its long run on the L.A. stage broke local records) pushed the local police and Breen in opposite directions. The LAPD cracked down in December, arresting the producer and cast for indecency; Breen, on the other hand, began negotiating with MGM chief Louis B. Mayer over the edits necessary to obtain a license for a screen version.¹⁷ After months of back-and-forth over the central interracial relationship (the Code prohibited any suggestion of “miscegenation”) Breen wrote to tell Mayer that his latest script was suitable for filming.¹⁸ This might have been the last word, but even as Breen wrote Japanese warships were steaming east towards Hawaii. With the U.S. at war, the newly established OWI bureau in Hollywood turned out to have as many problems with the PCA-approved script as Breen had had with the original.

Based on the American traveler Ira Vera Simonton’s novel *Hell’s Playground* (1912), *White Cargo* was an eroticized *Heart of Darkness*.¹⁹ Simonton’s novel depicted a young Englishman’s travels through African rubber factories and ivory trading stations in an atmosphere of sexualized brutality, established en route with the observation that the only woman aboard the transport ship *Nigeria* was a dead nun, “rolled to and fro” through her cabin on rough seas. The cause of her death was obscure, but its logic clear enough. A white nun was a

¹⁶ Breen to Geoghegan, July 9, 1940, Production Code Administration papers, microfilm, reel 19. Indeed, the show was shut down in December by the LAPD, and the producer fined and imprisoned.

¹⁷ Los Angeles *Times*, January 22, 1941. Breen and Mayer correspondence in “White Cargo” file, Production Code Administration papers, reel 19.

¹⁸ Breen to Mayer, November 12, 1941, Production Code Administration papers, reel 19.

¹⁹ See Jeremy Rich, “Ira Vera Simonton’s Imperial Masquerades: Intersections of Gender, Race, and African Expertise in Progressive-Era America,” *Gender & History*, Vol. 22, No. 2 (August 2010), 322-340.

non-sequitur in an Africa coded for black male labor, black female sexuality and white male licentiousness. Next door to the nun's quarters the men toasted their dual project: "Let's drink to Hell's Playground; may the devil do his damndest [sic], but not before we've had a go at Africa's voluptuous daughters and had a run for our money."²⁰ The protagonist accordingly takes a native mistress, but is humiliated to learn later that she also has an African husband, and is taunted by a French administrator: "This woman sold you out for a *nigger*."²¹ In a rage he orders a slave to flog her with the *chicotte*, a whip made of hippopotamus skin, and then has another slave bring him a 14-year-old native girl, so that he might "out-savage the savage."²² This sets in train a convoluted series of events that leave the African women dead, and a chastened Englishman returning home with a new European fiancé, grateful for the re-civilizing power of white womanhood to redeem his equatorial transgressions.

To satisfy the Hays Office's prohibition on interracial sex, the screenplay turned the mistress ("Tondeleyo" in the stage and screen versions) into an Egyptian "gone native," rather than a Congolese (Gabonese in the case of the novel) woman. Breen was anxious to have this fact established early; one version of the script held the revelation back too long, which meant "that for nine reels the whole flavor of the picture will be one of miscegenation," violating the spirit, if not the letter, of the Code. The studio dutifully revealed Tondelayo's race before she

²⁰ Ira Vera Simonton, *Hell's Playground* (New York: Moffat, Yard, 1912), 2, 5, 282.

²¹ Simonton, *Hell's Playground*, 357.

²² Simonton, 374.

was allowed to marry—rather than become the mistress of—the white man.²³ Scrubbed of miscegenation, the Hays-approved script landed in OWI hands in 1942 with the complete colonial apparatus otherwise intact—forced labor, rigid racial hierarchies, the *chicotte* and summary capital punishment. So the Motion Picture Bureau’s war work began in the Congo, not Germany or Japan.

Dorothy Jones was unequivocal on her first reading: the script was unacceptable and the film should be shelved “for the duration.” Domestic and international propaganda campaigns aimed to “convince the colored peoples of the world that they have more to win on our side,” and the picture was a disaster from that point of view, built around the “fundamental acceptance of domination of the black by the white.”²⁴ As if this weren’t enough, the racial divide directly implicated a close ally and highlighted class concerns as well, making the Africa workers “slave labor to the British capitalist.” Her advice found its way word-for-word into a protest to the studio from BMP chief Nelson Poynter, the liberal publisher of the *St. Petersburg Times*.²⁵ While Poynter accepted Jones’s recommendation that the film be shelved, he kept the door open to MGM, and told his OWI supervisor, Domestic Branch head Lowell Mellett, that he wanted this script to serve as a “test case” for cooperating with Hollywood.²⁶ The studio, invested in using the picture as a vehicle for Hedy Lamarr to appear in an inadequate sarong, offered a series of revisions to the plantation setting. The country was fictionalized, the plantation no longer

²³ Production Code Administration to Mayer, October 15, 1941. Production Code Administration papers, Reel 19.

²⁴ Jones to Nelson Poynter, May 7, 1942. NARA RG 208, entry 567, box 3529.

²⁵ Poynter to Mannix, May 8, 1942. NARA RG 208, entry 567, box 3529.

²⁶ Poynter to Mellett, May 11, 1942. NARA RG 208, entry 567, box 3529.

explicitly British; the laborers were paid wages, rather than enslaved; and the whip vanished.

“Personally, I think they have taken the curse off this,” Poynter wrote, noting that the elimination of whipping in particular was a step forward.²⁷

Jones and her reviewers were less impressed. The setting of the film was still an indefensible colonialism: “The picture shows the worst aspects of British imperialism, while at the same time dealing sympathetically with the British overlords, who exploit the natives and keep them in a state of semi-savagery.”²⁸ The story of a doomed interracial affair was also unworkable, albeit for different reasons than the PCA ban on miscegenation. “The fundamental premise ... is that blacks are inferior to whites,” one reviewer wrote. The PCA-inspired change in Tondelayo’s racial background “only serves to emphasize ... that colored people are of an inferior caste ...”²⁹ Jones was irked that the film had been made at all, writing to Poynter that her initial recommendation to shelve the project had been justified.³⁰ In an unsigned memo a few days later, someone in the office vented frustration that while the “brutalization of the African natives” had been reduced, the film “keeps emphasizing WHITE, WHITE, WHITE, WHITE superiority.”³¹

²⁷ Poynter to Mellett, May 11, 1942. NARA RG 208, entry 567, box 3529.

²⁸ William Roberts review, September 23, 1942. NARA RG 208, entry 567, box 3529.

²⁹ Roberts review, September 23, 1942. NARA RG 208, entry 567, box 3529.

³⁰ Jones to Poynter, September 30, 1942. NARA RG 208, entry 567, box 3529.

³¹ October 6, 1942, unsigned memorandum on White Cargo. NARA RG 208, entry 567, box 3529.

There was something to this judgment. Yet looking at the PCA and OWI recommendations together underlines the war agency's efficacy in promoting a moral vision at variance with the program of the older organization. In the first script the agency reviewed, they succeeded in recasting the contours of acceptable violence, muting the coercion that could parade under the banner of a wartime ally. Here was the essential point: empire shocked the OWI liberals more than miscegenation; for the Hays office the reverse was true.

Another look at the Hays Office makes the point. Though mostly concerned with sex, Breen had asked for one modification in the film's violence. In the screen adaptation, Tondelayo dies when she is discovered trying to poison her English husband, and is in turn forced to take the poison herself by the plantation manager, Witzel. The ending was acceptable to the PCA, but only if Witzel was explicitly vested with "police powers" as a colonial official. "This is essential in order to permit him later on to force Tondeleyo to take the poison," the PCA warned.³² Such an imperial power of summary judgment clothed in law was at once a legitimizing force in the eyes of the Hays office and the definition of the problem for the OWI.

White Cargo was not an isolated case. At least 20 other films reviewed by the BMP—some released, some not, and others put off until the postwar—drew criticism for their treatment of overseas empires (see appendix). Usually these mixed political and moral evaluations. RKO's *Gunga Din*, a 1939 fantasy of millenarian insurrection and imperial pacification in British India's northwest frontier, struck reviewer Marjorie Thorson as unsuitable for re-release: "The basic assumption of the picture is that it is right for Britain to hold an alien country by force of arms."

³² PCA to Mayer, Nov 12, 1941. Production Code Administration paper, 19.

The villain of the picture sounds a distinctly sympathetic note. Although the leader and instigator of the holy war against the white man is shown to be a man of extreme violence, we no longer consider a man evil merely because he believes that he should fight for his principles. And this man's principles, for which he is willing to die, sound pretty good³³

This was not an editorial line imposed on the OWI by the State Department, but an independent value judgment; it embodied the reviewer's immediate reaction more than a concerted strategy to manage the public diplomacy between colonial and metropolitan allies. Thorson was in no position to push for Indian independence, even if she had embraced such an aim; but she could record an objection to the violence of colonial rule being celebrated on screen. Further, she consciously articulated this as a transvaluation of values: "we no longer consider a man evil" for violent rebellion against European rule; we once did. The balance of moral disapprobation fell on the imperial order itself, not the holy war against it. This is more telling as a singular artifact of evolving liberal sensibilities than it is as a calculated propaganda point.

The reviewers did not, of course, float in a political vacuum. Mobilization across national, imperial and racial frontiers was the basic precondition for these reviews. Yet we should not read into the work of the reviewers too much mastery of the situation, or assume that they were reliably guided by a higher hand of policy. Often, there simply wasn't a policy to follow. The agency convinced MGM to kill a version of Rudyard Kipling's *Kim* in 1942, amid contradictory concerns by Dorothy Jones and Lowell Mellett that it was both too enthusiastic about the Raj and insufficiently strong as pro-British propaganda.³⁴ American approaches to India would never reach a stable place from which a consistent propaganda policy could be

³³ Marjorie Thorson review of *Gunga Din*, September 30, 1942. NARA 208, entry 567, box 3517.

³⁴ Dorothy Jones to Nelson Poynter, August 4, 1942, and Lowell Mellett to Victor Saville, September 23, 1942 and October 3, 1942. NARA RG 208, entry 567, box 3520.

enunciated for the subcontinent.³⁵ This might have been a reason to leave the film to the studio's discretion. Yet empire was too discomfiting for the OWI to rest easy. To the agency's relief MGM relented; *Kim* disappeared until 1950.

Another film pulled from re-release in 1942 initially garnered positive reviews from the OWI. *The Real Glory* dealt with U.S. soldiers in the Philippines in 1906, training a local constabulary to fight "piratical, marauding Moros." Marjorie Thorson thought the picture "a particularly fortunate offering at the present time," emphasizing the U.S. intention to prepare the islands for national independence.³⁶ In this case the agency's comfort with the story depended on an odd elision of the American role in the conflict; reviewers described the suppression of the Moros as "the usual civil war of a people achieving nationhood."³⁷ Defying OWI expectations, the film outraged Philippine President Manuel Quezon for its depiction of Filipino Muslims as "bloodthirsty brigands" and the Filipino soldiers as cowards needing North American instruction.³⁸ While Poynter thought the film might be saved with a prologue explaining that "ten thousand Moros swore on the Koran that they would fight to the death with their Filipino brothers and the white man infidel," Quezon was unimpressed, and the studio agreed to stop

³⁵ On the tangled history of the OWI in India, see Eric Pullin, "'Noise and Flutter': American Propaganda Strategy and Operation in India during World War II," *Diplomatic History* Vol. 34, No. 2, April 2010.

³⁶ Marjorie Thorson Review, August 10, 1942. NARA RG 208, entry 567, box 3524.

³⁷ Nelson Poynter to Marvin Ezzell, August 3, 1942. NARA RG 208, entry 567, box 3524.

³⁸ See Charles Hawley, "You're a Better Filipino than I Am, John Wayne: World War II, Hollywood, and U.S.-Philippines Relations," *Pacific Historical Review*, Vol. 71, No. 3 (August 2002), pp. 389-414.

distributing the film.³⁹ After this misfire, the BMP scrutinized pictures dealing with the largest American colony as skeptically as films set in India. Lillian Bergquist objected to PRC's *Corregidor*, an otherwise praiseworthy film, because "not one Filipino is given a part of any importance."⁴⁰ Bergquist found *Manila Calling* even worse, featuring a condescending American plantation owner whose racist attitudes undercut Pacific solidarity. "Issues of the war are stated incorrectly," she noted.

[O]ne of the Americans (a Princeton man) says: 'History has always been a slugging match between education and the monkey people.' ... The United Nations do not hold a monopoly on education ... Nor are we fighting 'monkey people'—we are fighting fascism, a doctrine of force.⁴¹

The Philippine Commonwealth played a more direct role than Indian nationalists in influencing the production process. Still, in both cases OWI reviewers voiced a more or less consistent perspective: imperial violence was not justifiable and should not be available as a rhetorical resource to narrate the present war. This represented a different common sense than that of the studios, which—antifascist, conservative, or cynically indifferent—could operate comfortably with the assumptions of a 19th century civilizing mission as a moral authorization for force.

Military operations at the end of 1942 brought this into sharp relief as the American forces that had been assembled and trained for a second front in northern Europe crashed instead into the French Empire in North Africa. While U.S. policy bet heavily on a collaboration with

³⁹ Nelson Poynter to Marvin Ezzell, August 3, 1942; *Weekly Variety* September 23, 1942, in OWI records *The Real Glory* file. NARA RG 208, entry 567, box 3524

⁴⁰ Lillian Bergquist review of *Corregidor*, March 5, 1943. NARA RG 208, entry 567, box 3514.

⁴¹ Bergquist review of *Manila Calling*, September 28, 1942. NARA RG 208, entry 567, box 3521.

the Vichy authorities, the BMP found French military power in Africa (whether Vichy or “Free”) deeply problematic.⁴²

Oscar Hammerstein provided the immediate grounds for controversy. His Broadway play *Desert Song* had not been freighted with much significance in the 1920s. For the BMP it was a minefield. An operetta using the Riff uprising in Morocco in 1925 as a backdrop for an unlikely affair between a French woman and a rebel leader (actually the disguised son of a French officer), Warner Brothers felt the story could be adapted to wartime by dropping Nazi officers into the most objectionable roles. But the political geography loomed far larger in the eyes of the reviewers. Nelson Poynter—drawing on the work of reviewer Larry Williams—wrote to Warner Brothers that the French Army came across as an enslaving power “comparable to the Nazis,” promising justice but delivering “bondage and brutality” to the North Africans.⁴³ Ulric Bell, in his role as a liaison between the BMP and the Office of Censorship, told Byron Price (the head of the national censorship) that the French were shown “treating the Riffs much as the Germans are now treating the Poles.”⁴⁴ Bell monitored the project throughout the year: he applauded revisions that “take out some of the torture stuff” but lamented that the picture still showed “the French Army in deadly oppression of a North African people...”⁴⁵

⁴² Here the OWI’s position is surprising, and underlines how problematic imperial violence was for the reviewing staff. Criticism of the “Darlan deal,” which preserved Vichy authority in North Africa in exchange for limiting French resistance to the American invasion, focused on Darlan’s association with Hitler—not on the legitimacy of French rule in the Maghreb. See Henry Stimson’s account of pressuring Wendell Willkie to stifle his critique of cooperation with Vichy in *On Active Service in Peace and War* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1948), 545.

⁴³ Nelson Poynter to Steve Trilling (Warner Brothers), December 24, 1942. NARA RG 208, entry 567, box 3514.

⁴⁴ Ulric Bell to Byron Price, January 8, 1943, NARA RG 208, entry 567, box 3514.

On one level this effort to revise the film accorded perfectly with the diplomatic/military policy of accommodating Vichy rule in Algeria and Tunisia. A major OWI aim was to avoid “an insult to the French people” during the campaign in North Africa.⁴⁶ But the insult was projected, if not imagined, by the OWI itself; the basis for their concern was a highly critical perspective on the exercise of force in the French empire. Little indicates that anyone else had complained. The OWI brought the film to the State Department’s attention, not vice versa; Assistant Secretary of State Breckenridge Long even wrote to disclaim any interest, seeking to insulate State from charges it had anything to do with censorship.⁴⁷ The issue was less that Hollywood insulted the French than that imperial violence upset the sensibilities of the reviewers.

Indeed, the Bureau’s reviewers helped to scotch a hagiographic treatment of General Henri Giraud, the commander of French forces in North Africa, over the same issues. The biography planned by 20th Century Fox was to be even less critical than *Desert Song*; Giraud was written as “a staunch patriot, who never for a moment considered betraying his country.” This consistency was exactly the problem from Sandy Roth’s point of view. Giraud not only served in World War I, but in the 1920s helps to “crush the revolt of Abd-El-Krim in Spanish Morocco...”

Throughout the script, he is shown gaining his military laurels by helping to preserve French imperialistic rule in North Africa. It is stated several times that the hope of France lies in its Colonial Empire and in men like Giraud who preserve it.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Ulric Bell to Robert Riskin, Overseas Motion Picture Bureau, March 11, 1943. NARA RG 208, entry 567, box 3514.

⁴⁶ Eleanor Berneis, review, December 20, 1943, NARA RG 208, entry 567, box 3514.

⁴⁷ Assistant Secretary of State Breckinridge Long to Lowell Mellett, March 6, 1943. NARA RG 208, entry 567, box 3514.

⁴⁸ Sandy Roth review, April 16, 1943. NARA RG 208, entry 567, box 3516.

These scenes referenced the same bloody counterinsurgency Hammerstein had used for his operetta, a war in which a joint Franco-Spanish army had dissolved the Riff Republic between 1920-1926. For one film to show the same French officer suppressing the Riff and then resisting the Nazis threatened to connect the American war to a logic of imperial violence that the OWI no longer held legitimate. Roth was incredulous at the continuities: “Are French colonial policies of the past valid today?” That the studios and the reviewers would repeatedly give divergent answers suggests that her question was not rhetorical.

And the question cut deep into the lists of Hollywood’s wartime productions. Films like *White Cargo* and the abandoned Giraud project were significant productions, with long run times and major stars; *Kim* would eventually be played by Errol Flynn. These were obvious targets for a propaganda agency. But the Bureau’s attention to issues of imperial violence extended to trivial B pictures as well. Ulric Bell persuaded Republic to shelve *Gone With the Draft* in 1943, a “vaudeville in Iraq”, featuring a serviceman framed for a murder while trying to find a hamburger in Basra. The agency warned that “reliable technical advice” should be sought for any representations of Muslims in conflict with GIs.⁴⁹ *Jungle Siren*, starring the Olympic swimmer turned pulp star Buster Crabbe as an American soldier overseeing the construction of an airfield in French equatorial Africa, was released before the OWI could intervene. But the agency reviewed it for export and noted that “Negro laborers” were depicted negatively, and “in one sequence the Americans order them around at the point of a gun when they become

⁴⁹ Ulric Bell to Robert Riskin, June 25, 1943; Berneis review, June 4, 1943. NARA RG 208, entry 567, box 3517.

frightened.”⁵⁰ In myriad instances, the Bureau subtly smoothed the edges of empire, pushing to the margins tropes of hierarchy and routine violence that fit comfortably into Hollywood formulas.

Further complicating matters, empire could not always be held apart from American history, as *The Pride of the Marines* illustrated. The film was apparently born under the blue pen of state censorship, damned by HUAC in the 1950s as a subversive critique of American life (it featured the difficult postwar adjustment of a serviceman blinded on Guadalcanal). Its earliest iterations, however, dealt less with rehabilitation than preparation for combat, and its Americanism—not its ostensible radicalism—was a problem for the Bureau. The trouble was with the history of the Marines Corps itself, revealed in series of opening vignettes summarizing the past deployments of the force. “One of these shows Marines under Colonel Robert E. Lee capturing John Brown at Harper’s Ferry,” Peg Fenwick wrote. “To Negroes, John Brown has become a symbol of their struggle for freedom.” And the Marines had overseas problems as well:

[S]howing Marines quelling the Boxer Uprising in China is also extremely ill-advised. The suppression of the Boxer Rebellion by the great Powers has become a symbol of Western Imperialism. To present it as an heroic action is a complete negation of our war aims ...⁵¹

Within a single lifetime the Marines had suppressed abolitionist insurrection in a slave society and engaged in punitive expeditions against a quasi-colonial Chinese countryside. This history sat uneasily with the moral framing of a war against racist empires. The historical scenes were

⁵⁰ Lillian Bergquist review, October 13, 1942. NARA RG 208, entry 567, box 3520.

⁵¹ Peg Fenwick review, February 24, 1943. “Pride of the Marines” file, reviewed under working title “Fighting Marines.” NARA RG 208, entry 567, box 3524.

cut. Excising empire at home could be done with blunt erasure in this case, but it was impossible in one of the most popular genres of the war: the Western.

Closing the Frontier

The OWI's work would have been easier if William Cody had died younger. His first stage partner, "Texas Jack" Omohundro, had succumbed to pneumonia at the age of 33, in 1880. Another early partner, Wild Bill Hickok, was shot in Deadwood, South Dakota over a poker game in 1876—a year shy of 40. But "Buffalo Bill" was a survivor: his "Wild West" show toured until 1916, a year before his death at 70, by which time millions had seen the show in Europe and North America. Cody was a Civil War veteran, a gilded age spectacle—and a 20th century celebrity.⁵²

All of which made it impossible, Eleanor Berneis wrote in 1944, to contain 20th Century Fox's *Buffalo Bill* in the past. The defining feature of the film was the pervasive racial violence of 19th century continental expansion, "a most unhappy and unsavory phase of our country's development." Cody's life dragged that conflict into the present:

The fact that millions of people all over the world can recall attending Buffalo Bill's Wild West Shows can give overseas audiences the impression that the racial conflict portrayed is related to contemporary times, and is not just an episode from our country's ancient history.⁵³

Of course Cody's life was not "ancient history" in 1944—by the time his show ended a 31-year-old Franklin Roosevelt was the Assistant Secretary of the Navy. The youngest American general

⁵² On his life and celebrity in the context of U.S. expansionism see Richard Slotkin, "Buffalo Bill's 'Wild West' and the Mythologization of the American Empire," in *Cultures of United States Imperialism*, eds. Amy Kaplan and Donald Pease (Duke: 1993), 164-184.

⁵³ Eleanor Berneis film review, February 19, 1944. NARA RG 208, entry 567, box 3512.

of World War II could have seen the show as a West Point cadet. Nonetheless, the notion that frontier conflicts were “related to contemporary times” fundamentally undercut efforts to manage representations of the American past, particularly “the West.” The OWI would perhaps have preferred to avoid contests over territorial dominion altogether. At a minimum, though, the expropriation of the continent had to be isolated from the present by a barrier of moral and material progress, a redemptive passage of time between colonialism and the modern nation. The OWI worried constantly about the historical appearance of frontier films, demanding that “frontier era” conflicts should appear to end in sync with Frederick Jackson Turner’s (and the Census Bureau’s) epochal declaration of its closure in 1890.

Buffalo Bill threatened this ethical historicism. Reviewing the script before filming in July 1943, Lillian Bergquist gave the studio credit for dedicating the film to “the Red Race” in recognition of “those Indian Warriors who are now in the Armed Forces.” The producers were trying to serve the war effort. But Bergquist thought the narrative just couldn’t be bent to national purposes: “[T]he entire story is one of conflict between whites and Indians,” she wrote. Cody rejected the love of an Indian girl because of racial differences; he killed an Indian chief; and “he joins with the whites in the war against the Indians, although the red men obviously have justice on their side...”⁵⁴ Her review prompted Warren Pierce to write to the studio in unusually ruminative terms about the viability of any film dealing with Indian wars:

[The] problem is one which we have not hitherto encountered and, frankly, I am just sort of thinking out loud in this letter. That is the question of whether we can afford in time of war to permit the general export of films which deal with U.S. treatment of the Indians at the time of Buffalo Bill's era, despite their historic

⁵⁴ Lillian Bergquist, *Buffalo Bill* script review, July 28 1943. NARA RG 208, entry 567, box 3512.

accuracy. ... [S]o much of the story entails the white man's exploitation of the Indian, his casual disregard of treaties and his general pursuit of the Almighty Dollar, despite the rights of a minority, that I think it would be very bad to have such a film shown in many portions of the world at this time.⁵⁵

While this missive was revealing of the agency's thinking about Westerns in general, Pierce and Bergquist pushed too far for both the censor and the studio. If the government decided to take issue with frontier conflict *tout court*, where would that leave the western genre? The studios could afford to accommodate specific requests, but what was the request here? Could studios really make Westerns without a hint of exploitation or the "pursuit of the Almighty Dollar"? A month later Ulric Bell wrote to a contact in the Washington, D.C. offices of the OWI soliciting help with what was shaping up as a losing fight. The censor, Bell wrote, was "not greatly concerned over the racial problem" and was willing to pass "scenes of violence and lawlessness ... dated back many years in the past." From the perspective of the censor, *Buffalo Bill* was adequately insulated from the present; the OWI thought otherwise. If the Washington office made any response it is not recorded in the BMP files, and it made no difference to the studio: the script was not changed. Thus Eleanor Berneis, reviewing the film the following winter, was left to vent her frustration over the intrusion of frontier history into living memory.

While the OWI failed to influence *Buffalo Bill*, in other cases it succeeded in heading off undesirable productions entirely. Helen Hunt Jackson's *Ramona* (1885), a novel depicting the abuse of native Americans in southern California after the Mexican-American War, had been adapted for the screen four times (the first by D.W. Griffith in 1910) when Fox considered remaking it in 1943. When Warren Pierce learned of the project he screened the 1936 version,

⁵⁵ Warren Pierce to Eugene O'Neil, 20th Century Fox, July 31, 1943. NARA RG 208, entry 567, box 3512.

and sent the studio a list of scenes that could be “cleaned up, such as eliminating the brutal shooting of the Indian when he was being dispossessed from his home ...”⁵⁶ Apparently Fox responded quickly, because Pierce told Ulric Bell two days later that his intervention killed the project (it was not remade again until being picked up as a *telenovela* by a Mexican broadcaster in 2000).⁵⁷ The same studio gave up *Sitting Bull* after the OWI complained that it was a “verification of our historical failure to understand and solve our first great minority problem.”⁵⁸ In this case the OWI anticipated the appeal to factual accuracy and temporal distance, and explained that “however far back the story may be dated, it suggests an historically inherent state of mind which tends towards ‘righteous’ imperialism.” It is impossible to establish with certainty that the OWI was the decisive influence in a given case, but studios more than once abandoned pictures at early stages after receiving criticisms from the agency.

In many other cases the outcome fell somewhere between abandoning projects and defying the Bureau’s recommendations; the compromise cases in particular depended on fortifying the line between past and present. Concern about Westerns ran high enough to prompt a conference between Ulric Bell and Dorothy Jones in October 1943, after which Jones forwarded Bell a review of *Arizona Whirlwind* with a handwritten note: “the reviewing staff has been informed—and in the future we shall follow a policy of caution on westerns.”⁵⁹ The attached review was indeed a cautious one: the film about Indian robbers and a western

⁵⁶ Warren Pierce to Jason Joy, Fox, September 27, 1943. NARA RG 208, entry 567, box 3524.

⁵⁷ Warren Pierce to Ulric Bell, September 29, 1943. NARA RG 208, entry 567, box 3524.

⁵⁸ Philip Lewis to Jason Joy, June 28, 1944. NARA RG 208, entry 567, box 3525.

⁵⁹ Dorothy Jones to Ulric Bell, October 22, 1943, in *Arizona Whirlwind* files, NARA RG 208, entry 567, box 3511.

counterfeiting ring was criticized for depicting racial conflict and undermining faith in currency issued by the Army for occupied territories. Following the reviewers' lead, William Roberts wrote to the production company to ask for the removal of the Indian villains and for clearer temporal markers:

We would advise that all pictures be clearly dated as taking place during frontier days, both by dialogue, costumes, etc., and also by a foreward on export prints. The purpose of this is to avoid any possibility of confusion in the minds of foreign audiences who, frequently being unfamiliar with this country, might otherwise assume these Westerns to present a picture of contemporary America.⁶⁰

This time the agency was satisfied with the results. Less than six weeks later Sandy Roth reviewed a print that turned the "Indians" into white men in disguise and the counterfeiter into jewel thieves. Moreover, she was happy that "the use of a stagecoach and period costumes help date the film," although she still hoped an explicit title would identify the period as the 1890s.⁶¹

The issue of explicit dating and period costumes became a minor obsession of the Bureau.⁶² *Frontier Badmen*, about cowboys confronting a shady saloonkeeper who manipulated the cattle market in Abilene, Kansas in 1869, raised red flags as a film that could be interpreted

⁶⁰ William Roberts to Robert Tansey, Prescott Pictures, October 22, 1943. NARA RG 208, entry 567, box 3511.

⁶¹ Sandy Roth Review, November 30, 1943. NARA RG 208, entry 567, box 3511.

⁶² These concerns arose most frequently, but not exclusively, in connection with Western films. When the OWI (together with censorship personnel and Chinese consul T.K. Chang) screened a 1937 adaptation of Pearl Buck's *The Good Earth* in 1943, the first objection raised was that "the story is not dated." Sandy Roth expanded on the conversation in her review: "The only clue to the period of the story is the sequence dramatizing the 1911 Revolution, which takes place after story time lapse of ten or eleven years after the opening of the film. It is therefore possible that overseas audiences who know nothing of China or Chinese history will accept the film as a picture of contemporary China. Numerous references to household 'slaves' and selling daughters into slavery would prove offensive to the Chinese ..." See Sandy Roth review, August 26, 1943, NARA RG 208, entry 567, box 3517.

as modern and “re-enforce Hitler’s propaganda that America is a nation of gangsters and mob rule.”⁶³ The studio agreed to play up the periodization; when Peggy Fenwick saw the final film in August, she wrote that it was “definitely laid in the post-Civil War period, [and] contains no problem from the standpoint of the overseas branch of OWI.”⁶⁴ The pretense that “overseas audiences” were the only concern slipped in reviews of *In Old Oklahoma* (1943), a John Wayne film set in 1900. Peggy Fenwick thought the story raised a “serious problem” for *domestic* audiences: “The script makes a case for the Indians against the white man [and] substantiates that case by the behavior of the majority of white people in the story.”⁶⁵ The story was a protean conflict over land at the edge of industry: John Wayne plays a cowboy who contends with a financier over control of an Oklahoma oil field. Wayne, penniless, secures drilling rights from his old Army buddy, President Theodore Roosevelt. His claim to the land is contingent, however, on delivering oil by a deadline. When the financier resorts to sabotage and shuts down an oil pipeline to thwart Wayne’s project, the latter rounds up a war party of local Indians and coerces a settlement. Whether facing eviction or being deployed as a private militia by Wayne, the Indians are invariably put into armed conflict with groups of white men—so the OWI read the script.

When the OWI screened the final film seven months later the racial violence was muted (though the oil fields remained Indian territory) by pushing the non-white characters into the background. Moreover, as Sandy Roth wrote in her review, “The film is clearly dated by

⁶³ Sally Kaye script review, April 17, 1943. NARA RG 208, entry 567, box 3516.

⁶⁴ Peggy Fenwick review, August 12, 1943. NARA RG 208, entry 567, box 3516.

⁶⁵ Peggy Fenwick and Dorothy Jones script review, March 15, 1943. NARA RG 208, entry 567, box 3519.

costumes, the use of wagons, stage-coaches, etc.” The mixture of oil and race war was a combustible one in a conflict partly triggered by contests over colonial fuel supplies in Southeast Asia. But locking the story in a stagecoach pushed it safely over an historical horizon: the agency told the studio that *In Old Oklahoma* was “an excellent example of successful cooperation between this office and your studio.”⁶⁶

The Roy Rogers film *Along the Navajo Trail* was one of the last condemned by the OWI before the agency folded. The problem with this melodrama about violent swindlers stealing land in the path of an oil pipeline, Peggy Shepard wrote, was that “a taxicab is used in scene 127,” indicating a contemporary setting. “The only suggestion to be offered is that modern elements in the story be eliminated and the action be dated in the past.”⁶⁷ Three days later—the day Hiroshima was bombed—a liaison officer complained to the studio that “the OWI ... has expended a great deal of money, time, and energy” trying to correct an “anachronistic conception of the West”, and that the modern props had better be dropped from the film.⁶⁸ Perhaps anticipating an end of the OWI’s power after the news of Hiroshima, the studio ignored the advice. Eloise Perry recorded one of the agency’s last feature film reviews September 26, 1945, remarking that *Along the Navajo Trail* was still set in the present, and would “appear to confirm

⁶⁶ Sidney Harmon, OWI overseas branch, to Walter Goetz, Republic Productions, October 29, 1943. NARA RG 208, entry 567, box 3519.

⁶⁷ Peggy Shepard review, August 3, 1945. NARA RG 208, entry 567, box 3511.

⁶⁸ William Roberts to Steve Goodman, Republic Pictures, August 6, 1945. NARA RG 208, entry 567, box 3511.

the tradition of organized crime in America.”⁶⁹ With a nuclear dawn in the Far East, the OWI rode into its own sunset quibbling over Roy Rogers in a taxi.

But the apparently pedantic fixation on details of costuming, props, and dating should not obscure the deeper ideology at work. The agency at times seemed to abhor the western genre as a minefield of racial antagonisms and violent expansionism. The reviewers were capable of more subtle perceptions, however. Virtually every lynching depicted on screen drew a protest from the OWI, regardless of its place in a given plot (see appendix). It is tempting to say they aimed to scrub the fact of such killings from the screen. Yet the reviewers enthusiastically embraced a 1942 adaptation of Walter Van Tilburg Clark’s *The Ox-Bow Incident*, a darkly realistic account of the lynching of three innocent men in Nevada in 1885. Why did it endorse a prolonged meditation on lynch law when it routinely sought to suppress even casual allusions to the practice?

Lamar Trotti’s screenplay adhered closely to Clark’s story; either one could raise serious doubts about American society.⁷⁰ Both describe a small town’s reaction to the news of a local rancher’s murder. An angry but unfocused crowd is galvanized by a commanding local presence—an older veteran, Major Tetley—into an effective posse, which rides into the hills and finds a small party in possession of the dead man’s cattle. The suspects protest their innocence, offering to return to the ranch and prove they purchased the livestock legally. Their defense introduces enough doubt to split the posse, but when Major Tetley demands a vote, trumpeting the moral authority of “democracy” over the cold formalities of law, a majority agrees to hang

⁶⁹ Eloise Perry review, September 26, 1945. 208 567 3511

⁷⁰ Accounts of the plot are taken from the Bureau’s *Ox-Bow Incident* file, 208 567 3525 and from Walter Van Tilburg Clark, *The Ox-Bow Incident* (New York: Random House, 1940).

the suspects. The verdict is carried out, and the posse returns home, to the news that the rancher had not been killed in the first place—their hunt had been driven by an errant rumor. The sheriff grimly promises justice for the lynching party; Tetley kills himself.

The OWI read the story as an antifascist parable. Lillian Bergquist wrote:

The entire film is a powerful dramatization of why the democratic forces must win this war, of why justice and an orderly world must prevail over lawlessness and savage degeneracy... [T]he terrible event which climaxes their struggle are [sic] an illustration of today's battle between fascism and democracy as ways of life.⁷¹

But not every film with antifascist intentions escaped the agency's demands for a positive representation of American life. The OWI might have taken issue with much in *Ox-Bow*: the eagerness of the ordinary people for blood; the impotence of the voices urging respect for the law; even the implication of widespread lynching contained in the history of the single black character, who votes against the hangings because his brother died at the hands of a mob. Despite this baggage, Bergquist's endorsement was ringing: "this film should prove a powerful and effective weapon in our cause." Why?

The best explanation is that the *Ox-Bow* was marked by a more profound historicism than anything conveyed in titles announcing a 19th century setting. The lynch mob was not simply wrong in the particulars of the case; it was cast as a generational throwback. Take the driving force behind the lynching. Tetley's authority was martial, depending on his military bearing, his barked-out orders and his familiarity with violence. He was not an active Army officer, however, and his wealth drew nothing from a Federal pension: Tetley was a Confederate, clothed after two decades in the grey uniform of a defunct nationality. The neatly preserved uniform belied a

⁷¹ Lillian Bergquist review December 19, 1942. NARA RG 208, entry 567, box 3523.

frayed relationship with the future: He dealt coolly with the men he murdered, but erupted in rage at his own son, Gerald, who “hates the sight of blood and guns,” in the OWI’s characterization, and refused to vote for the hanging. It was on this point that Trotti’s screenplay made its most substantial deviation from the novel. In Clark’s story, the sensitive son hangs himself after learning the truth about the rancher and his own passive complicity in an unjust killing; his suicide prompts Tetley to shoot himself. In the film, Tetley’s suicide is linked to his own likely prosecution; the son lives. While this no doubt provided a less grim story for the OWI (and eliminated a suicide the Hays office might have objected to), both endings emphasize the utter failure of the Major to assert any kind of intergenerational mastery. He could no more direct Gerald along his violent path than he could impart substance to the national symbol he wore. In national, ideological, and psychological terms, he dies childless, his vigorously enacted manhood reduced to sterility.

Similarly, the black preacher, “Sparks,” is not generically cast as a representative of racial oppression. His suffering also has generational coordinates: a middle-aged man of God (professionally sanctified to a world beyond the present), his encounter with lynching came in early childhood, with the death of his older brother. While all too plausible as biography, this framing conceals the divergent trajectories of black and white lynching from the 1880s: while the extrajudicial execution of white Americans was to decline precipitously after that decade, similar violence against blacks was growing.⁷² *Ox-Bow* elides these racial trajectories, and ends with the

⁷² In broad outline, extrajudicial killing of whites dropped during “the lynching era,” in which “at least 2,462 African-American men, women and children met their deaths in the grasp of Southern mobs...” Stewart Tolnay and E.M. Beck, *A festival of Violence: An Analysis of Southern Lynchings, 1882-1930* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1995), 17. See also Randolph Roth’s *American Homicide* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009). Relevant discussions

strong suggestion that law and justice are closing in on Tetley, to the advantage of a man like Sparks. In contrast to Tetley's sterility and historical isolation, Sparks is put in a continuum of popular progress that subsumes the contradictions of a *Herrenvolk* democracy: "the Negro people have always been closely linked to our democratic heritage," Bergquist wrote. He was a sign of a timeless developmental process, where blackness could always betoken freedom without quite attaining it.

The OWI, this should make clear, was not uniformly hostile to the western as a genre; it did not attempt to scrub brutality and human failure from the American past in every case; and it did not demand perfect adherence to an ideal of national unity. Monsters could emerge from American history if they were rendered harmless—or at least tolerable—by the presumed shape of progressive History itself. This was put quite explicitly at times. Near the end of the war Robert O. Selznick attempted to reproduce the success of *Gone With the Wind* in a western, *Duel in the Sun*, that also foregrounded issues of lynching. The PCA and the studio fought bitterly over the highly sexualized film; the OWI gave it a pass, noting its historical framing:

Lawlessness, even lynching, is shown as part of the wildness of the West; however at the same time, the definite westward movement of civilization is emphasized. The overall impression made by the script is that whereas lawlessness, murder and injustice existed in the early West, they merely indicated a transitory phase and were steadily combatted and corrected.⁷³

Robert Pippin has recently revitalized the political study of the western film, uncovering new layers of irony, ambiguity and self-awareness in the "mythological modernism" of Howard

are also in Dominic Capeci, "The Lynching of Cleo Wright: Federal Protection of Constitutional Rights during World War II," *Journal of American History*, Vol. 72, No. 4 (March 1986), 859-887 and Ira Katznelson, *Fear Itself: The New Deal and the Origins of Our Time* (New York: Norton, 2013), 131-224.

⁷³ Virginia Richardson review, September 9, 1944. NARA RG 208, entry 567, box 3515.

Hawks and John Ford.⁷⁴ His reading gives Westerns a critical edge, as a literature capable of discerning the foundational violence behind modern bourgeois society.⁷⁵ Richard Slotkin's influential interpretations of the western also see in them a deep perception of American mythology—and sociology.⁷⁶ Both analyses credit the filmmaker with a probing eye; but the state was also an attentive observer. Through the Analysis Section the state could vehemently reject certain formulations of its past, signal the waning legitimacy of the modes of violence that built the 19th century empires, and at the same time tolerate and even embrace a morally problematic past laundered through progressive historical change.

And above all, the state could articulate a vision of good violence. Perhaps both frontier and empire were passing away into “one world”; but the OWI did not shy from the lethal means that would play midwife to this global vision of liberal modernity.

“There is nothing undemocratic about turning Nazi methods on the Nazis”

The production of Lillian Hellman's *Watch on the Rhine* mirrors *White Cargo*: both were filmed in mid-1942; both had successful pre-Pearl Harbor runs on the stage; both sparked sharply divergent critiques by the PCA and the OWI. But Joseph Breen's moral gatekeepers and Dorothy Jones's analysts seemed to swap places between the two pictures. Where the PCA had barely

⁷⁴ Robert Pippin, *Hollywood Westerns and American Myth: The Importance of Howard Hawks and John Ford for Political Philosophy* (New Haven: Yale, 2010), 96.

⁷⁵ Pippin, *Hollywood Westerns*, 81.

⁷⁶ Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth Century America* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998), 342-3.

noticed the imperial violence that set the OWI against *White Cargo*, Breen's organization protested strenuously against a killing that the OWI was happy to endorse in *Watch on the Rhine*.

Hellman's story was an interventionist parable. A German dissident named Kurt, working with an underground organization in the United States, is discovered and blackmailed by a Romanian diplomat, who threatens to expose the anti-Nazi group if he is not paid off in cash. The threat escalates into a physical fight, and the diplomat is knocked unconscious. Seeing both an opportunity and a threat, Kurt decides to kill the unconscious man. At this point his wife enters and realizes what he is doing—and tacitly condones it by leaving without comment. Later he confesses to his mother and mother-in-law, asking their forgiveness before he returns to the struggle in Europe. The film is an open plea for a commitment to anti-fascism that might require dirty hands.

The PCA hated it. Often the censors dealt with stories that skirted the Code in some dispensable detail. *Watch on the Rhine* had an open contradiction of Code morality baked into its storyline. "This is the murder," Breen wrote to J. Warner. "This murder is not only left unpunished, but the whole flavor of the story, and the actions of the various sympathetic characters involved, tend to condone and justify it."⁷⁷ It was not an incremental challenge to the policing of sexuality vis-à-vis hemlines, a violation to be negotiated through costuming; the whole story, Breen felt, justified killing.

However fussy the Code appears in retrospect, it should be recalled that Breen held his post precisely because he was not an inflexible martinet, but a politician skilled at negotiating

⁷⁷ Breen to J.L. Warner, May 29, 1942. "Watch on the Rhine" file, Production Code Administration papers, reel 20.

between the studios and the independent state censorship boards. In this case his skill was simply not up to the challenge of quietly reconciling the law-and-order ethos of the PCA with Hellman's politics—a measure of how fundamental was the disagreement. Breen suggested two drastic revisions: Kurt should be threatened with death, so as to give the homicide the character of self-defense; and he should be killed by the Nazis at the end, eliminating the perception that he was “permitted to go off scot-free.”⁷⁸ When Hellman saw the revisions she erupted in a devastating two-page rejoinder, writing that it was “deeply shocking” for the PCA to try to add another victim to the Nazi toll, even if fictive:

It seems to me scandalous that we, who are a country at war with Nazis, need to say that a man must himself be killed if he kills a Nazi. This is saying that any of our soldiers who kills a German must pay for the killing with his own life. This is not a far-fetched example; it is a very exact parallel. It is not only immoral thinking; it is very dangerous doctrine.

She mocked a secondary suggestion that the drinking in the film be reduced (“It is not ‘drinking’ to have a drink,” she wrote), before returning to the major point. Her story was absolutely a moral one, and the changes bordered on treasonous: “There is no justice in these objections to the script and I cannot believe that you agree with them, or with the strange theory that one needs to be killed if one kills a Nazi.”⁷⁹ The letter was forwarded to Breen by the film's director, who indicated his agreement with Hellman.

The seriousness with which Breen took the issue is indicated in a detailed letter sent the next day to Will Hays, at that point the largely symbolic head of the organization, whose office in New York kept him out of daily contact with the studios. Breen's correspondence with Hays

⁷⁸ Breen to Warner, June 5, 1942. Production Code Administration papers, reel 20.

⁷⁹ Lillian Hellman to Joseph Breen, July 13, 1942. Production Code Administration papers, reel 20.

usually dealt with very substantial controversies—particularly those likely to spill into the metropolitan press and demand some kind of comment. Breen pointed out that the Romanian diplomat was not, as Hellman said, a “Nazi,” but simply an opportunistic blackmailer, and that the film was set before the American declaration of war, rendering any analogy to combat untenable. But the deeper issue was that, regardless of pre-war or wartime settings, a transcendental principle was at stake: “we feel that there can be no justification of murder at any time.” Breen was not just mechanistically applying a formula; he too was engaged with the influence of the war on the public mind.

This whole matter touches upon the worry I mentioned to you the other day, namely, the general impression that seems to prevail in the minds of many people hereabouts that so long as the person killed is either a German or a Nazi, the killing is justified. Very few people hereabouts seem to realize that the law of justice, and all that justice implies, can not be suspended, even where there is great provocation – even when we are at war. You know, of course, that the law of justice holds at all times, and under all circumstances.⁸⁰

Breen is sometimes accused of narrowly legalistic thinking, but this was something else—a very deliberate application of principle to the wartime context. He concluded the letter to Hays insisting that “it is a crime against justice to slaughter a man because he is suspected of guilty knowledge, or is in sympathy with, or a part of, a band of killers.”

The OWI was just setting up its offices at this point, and played little part in the dispute (Breen got much of what he wanted). William Roberts and Dorothy Jones screened the film in October 1942 and found the killing unobjectionable, summarizing the morality play in their review: “[Kurt] realizes he must kill the Rumanian. He does so, arguing that while he hates

⁸⁰ Breen to Hays, July 21, 1942. Production Code Administration papers, reel 20.

violence, he has learned from experience that in fighting fascism it is kill or be killed.”⁸¹ The OWI reviewers were more in touch with the bruising 1940-1 fights over intervention than with the Production Code, and what struck them was not a moral scandal but a stale polemic after Pearl Harbor: “The story is two years out of date. On the whole it has no relation to what is going on today.”

Yet the OWI tied the film to “what is going on today” in a telling way when the reviewer wrote that “fighting fascism is kill or be killed.” That phrase—“kill or be killed”—had assumed an almost iconic status by the middle of 1942 (see chapter 2), and stood in for a set of moral sentiments that were at the center of the OWI’s effort to shape films directly related to the war. These feelings were as deep and elaborated as Breen’s rejection of a special wartime morality. While they found little expression in the brief treatment of Hellman’s story, they were given fuller voice as agency considered a slew of films that made the leap from the politics of pre-war anti-fascism—think *The Great Dictator*—to the physical confrontations of war.

An example in production at the same time as Hellman’s story was MGM’s *Cross of Lorraine*, another drama of 1940, this one set in France at the onset of the occupation. In the film two French POWs, Paul and Victor, are converted from resignation to rebellion when they experience Nazi depravity in a labor camp after the armistice they thought would send them home to their families. (When one prisoner intimates that they are all headed for the cemetery, another tops his pessimism: “Cemetery? Germans don’t bury you. They make soap out of you.”) Before they can escape and join the resistance they must kill a fellow prisoner suspected of informing—a step that Paul, a former schoolteacher with pacifist leanings, abhors. Dorothy Jones described the scene:

⁸¹ Roberts and Jones review, October 26, 1942. NARA RG 208, entry 567, box 3529.

Paul makes a speech in which he says that this would be murder, adding 'We cannot afford to fight the Nazis with Nazi methods. We would so degrade ourselves that victory would leave us with nothing ... we must not decide (that Duval is guilty) at a mock trial like this -- a trial in which the accused is not allowed a word in his own defense.'⁸²

Jones felt the story conveyed the right message, particularly in the conversion narrative. But the speech was all wrong. "There is nothing undemocratic about turning Nazi tactics against the Nazis themselves in wartime," she wrote in a surprisingly explicit commentary. "The entire question of democratic procedures in such a situation is entirely beside the point," and should be left out. Democracy was an end that could be reconciled with any means necessary to its preservation. She did not, however, rule out the possibility of letting Paul make a protest speech. It might be better, she suggested, if Paul were "shown as questioning only the idea of murder -- or of violence." Then he could be more explicitly brought to terms with that violence later in the film. She suggested several scenes in which

Paul could refute his earlier argument against violence in the case of Duval [the prisoner-informant]. This would meet the purpose of showing that he had learned his lesson about the Nazis without raising irrelevant questions which must of necessity remain unanswered.⁸³

The position Jones articulated is a complex one. She was not, as Breen feared, advancing the view that "any German" could be killed without conscience. The victim in this case was neither German nor a Nazi. Nor was she trying to banish misgivings from the screen entirely in the name of a wartime unanimity of feeling; Paul should still give his speech. What mattered was that

⁸² Jones review, *A Thousand Shall Fall (Cross of Lorraine)*, September 13, 1942. NARA RG 208, entry 567, box 3511.

⁸³ Dorothy Jones review of *A Thousand Shall Fall*, September 13, 1942. NARA RG 208, entry 567, box 3511.

democracy should not be imagined as intrinsically incompatible with useful acts of violence. Killing was a tool for a democracy just as for a totalitarian state; to say otherwise would be like suggesting that a wrench had more utility for a Democrat than for a Republican. The speech struck Jones as a category error rather than an ideological error.

Violence might be questioned on independent moral grounds (having nothing to do with democracy), she conceded—but those arguments should be raised only in order to be refuted. Paul would come to see what must be done: kill or be killed. Anything else would be, in her telling phrase, “raising irrelevant questions which must of necessity remain unanswered.”⁸⁴ The discomfort and impatience of the phrase is palpable. The conclusion: a democratic people had to live with killing and not get bogged down in the infinite regress of systematic moral reasoning about killing. The OWI and Hollywood should be teaching the people how to do this, not complicating the picture.

This work of moral and emotional mobilization was an urgent problem for the OWI in late 1942. Between Midway and Stalingrad the biggest fear of the Bureau was not unconditional military defeat, but a political settlement leaving the Reich in power; they feared an armistice as much as a losing war. Nicholson Baker’s astonishingly evocation *Human Smoke* concludes in 1942 on the note that most of the people who would die in World War II were still alive; indeed, to the OWI, there was a sharp risk that those lives might be ransomed for the cancellation of the war. Here was where *Cross of Lorraine* could make a real contribution: “This picture should

⁸⁴ The draft of the review in the OWI archive records someone’s sense that this was an unsettling idea: the paragraph is marked through in pencil. No initialing or other marginalia indicates who marked the page or when.

serve as excellent education against a negotiated peace with Nazi Germany.”⁸⁵ Properly regulated feelings about killing and violence were essential to avoid the temptation of liberalism by peace.

The (necessary) compatibility of democracy and violence was brought out in the OWI’s reviews of two scripts set in the United States: *Mary Smith, USA* and *Keeper of the Flame*. Both extended the commitment to political killing deep into the domestic sphere, making individuals—rather than the authorities licensed to act under the Production Code—responsible for lethal decisions touching on their own families. *Keeper of the Flame* borrowed the *Citizen Kane* device of a journalist investigating a wealthy national hero shortly after his death, in this case a man who nearly ran for President and might have suggested Charles Lindbergh. The journalist’s work is frustrated by an uncooperative widow, who turns out to have lied about her location the night her husband apparently drove his car off a washed-out bridge near their estate. As he digs further he “comes to the terrible conclusion that Christine murdered Forrest.” When he tries to confront her, he instead winds up saving her from a fascist agent sent to kill her, and learns the truth:

She unfolds the amazing and terrible story of Robert Forrest, Number One American Fascist who was planning the enslavement of his country along the same lines as Nazi Germany. Christine admits that she deliberately let Forrest go to his death without warning him because she knew of his traitorous plans which were soon to be put into operation.⁸⁶

When the widow eventually is murdered by a pro-German underground, the journalist publishes papers documenting the plot and dispelling the threat. There may have been a grisly wish-

⁸⁵ Dorothy Jones review of *A Thousand Shall Fall*, September 13, 1942. NARA RG 208, entry 567, box 3511.

⁸⁶ Lillian Bergquist review, December 7, 1942, NARA RG 208, entry 567, box 3520.

fulfillment in the story, which both killed off the Lindberg-figure and decisively discredited him in a single stroke. Even Pearl Harbor couldn't do this. The OWI gushed: "The makers of this film can be congratulated on a fine contribution the war effort."

In *Mary Smith, USA*, a young woman from Wisconsin moves to the national capital in 1941, and winds up working for a dashing internationalist hero (Henry Wallace, according to the OWI conferences with the studio) and marrying a young man bound for the Army. But then her husband is killed in training. Embittered by her loss, she falls in with a cynical "Maryland millionaire," a domestic fascist who wants her to create a scandal about her employer, discrediting his cause. She resists him until he threatens her—at which point she finds her husband's gun and kills him. Marjorie Thorson thought the political morality of the film was fine, and faulted only the depiction of the heroine: "Mary Smith is profoundly lacking in common sense," and should have been able to avoid the situation.⁸⁷ It would not do for Henry Wallace to have dim-witted secretaries (at least for the duration—by 1948 they could perhaps be Communist dupes). But killing the fascist was more than justified self-defense. Internal enemies signaled the point where the political field militarized, and a democratic self-defense required individuals to accept (if not act on, like Mary Smith) a role in the killing.

Going to war in a democratic society meant personal identification with the violence on the part of the citizenry, a commitment that could reach so far as killing a romantic partner, or in the case of *Watch on the Rhine*, appealing to a trifecta of wife, mother and mother-in-law for spiritual absolution. And the issue in the case of *Mary Smith* was also the specter of a "negotiated peace": through correspondence and conferences, the OWI convinced the author, Mildred Cram,

⁸⁷ Marjorie Thorson script review, October 20, 1942. NARA RG 208, entry 567, box 3521.

to make a peace deal the basic aim of the domestic fascist in her screenplay.⁸⁸ So the intimate, personal decisions by individuals to kill was linked up with the quintessential nature of a Clausewitzian “total war”: no possibility of a settlement short of absolute capitulation or extermination. These were no small issues.

The war work of Hollywood was not, of course, *sui generis*; film convention shaped what appeared on the screen, and in the OWI files, as much as political demands. If European emigres could organize against Hitler in films like *Watch on the Rhine*, so too could the mafia be called to arms. In *Hitler, Dead or Alive*, a wealthy industrialist puts a \$1 million price on the Führer’s head. Predictably enough, “Three gangsters, fresh from Alcatraz, snap up his offer and take off for Germany.”⁸⁹ Two are killed, but the third pulls off the assassination, “only to realize that he has accomplished nothing”: the war goes on. “A new Hitler, perhaps even a double, will take the dead dictator's place.” Total victory required the extirpation of an ideological system, not the decapitation of a regime. The industrialist gets the message as well: at the close of the film he has retooled his factories and is producing bombers. The OWI admired the film for working war themes into a B-picture:

Recent public opinion polls show that three out of every ten Americans would welcome a negotiated peace with German Army leaders. In other words, thirty per cent of the American public has confused the label - Hitler, Mussolini, Hirohito or what have you -- with the evil itself, which is the doctrine of militaristic force, the idea that a few men, because they are strong enough, have the right to dictate terms to the rest of the world.⁹⁰

⁸⁸ Maurice Revnes, MGM, to Nelson Poynter, OWI, August 27, 1942. NARA RG 208, entry 567 box 3521.

⁸⁹ August 27, 1942 Memorandum, “Hitler, Dead or Alive,” signed by William Roberts, Marjories Thorson and Dorothy Jones. NARA RG 208, entry 567, box 3518.

⁹⁰ OWI memo to Nick Grinde, July 25, 1942. NARA RG 208, entry 567, box 3518.

This unlikely story represented a blunt conscription of the mafia—a shotgun wedding of genre film and propaganda fare. More intriguing are a number of cases in which elements of the nascent film *noir* aesthetic merged with the OWI’s official morality. Paramount’s *This Gun for Hire* was a “psychological study of a young man who commits murder for a price,” very much a noir antihero. He kills a chemist and steals the formula for a new poison gas weapon on behalf of a shady figure from L.A.—all of which his conscience can handle, until it turns out he’s been paid off in “hot money.” On the road to revenge he takes a nightclub singer (Veronica Lake) hostage, and she convinces him not to kill the conspirators who hired him, but “to wring confessions from them that they are selling poison gas to Japan to be used against Americans.”⁹¹ *This Gun for Hire* was re-evaluated for overseas distribution in 1945 and found wanting as a representation of the U.S. abroad: the hero was a “psychopathic case” and the nation came across as one in which “gunplay and violence are commonplace occurrences.”⁹² For an earlier domestic audience, however, it was useful instruction in the bleak psychological demands of 1942. Orson Welles’ *Journey Into Fear*, one of the earliest films identified as a *noir* proper, was also highly esteemed by the OWI. In the film, Nazi assassins hunt an American engineer working in Turkey. His anxiety ratchets up with every encounter, until his fear is overcome by a righteous anger and he kills one of his assailants. Peggy Fenwick wrote that it was an apt allegory for the American psyche: “His ultimate realization ... symbolizes the American transition from pre-war attitudes to present-day determination to destroy the enemy.”⁹³

⁹¹ Marjorie Thorson review, August 19, 1942. NARA RG 208, entry 567, box 3527.

⁹² Virginia Richardson review, June 6, 1945. NARA RG 208, entry 567, box 3527.

London Blackout Murders nicely triangulates the OWI's relationship with the early stages of *noir*, justified killing, and the threat of a premature peace. Set in London at the height of the Blitz, draped in the gloom of soot and blackout curtains, the film begins with a young woman named Mary moving into the upstairs apartment of a tobacconist named Rawlings. Rawlings is an unnerving figure—he tells stories about Jack the Ripper and vanishes unaccountably during air raids. His business quickly becomes clear: he and his assistant are slipping into bomb shelters to murder men with a hypodermic needle hidden in his pipe. The victims are powerful industrialists working with Nazi spies to arrange a negotiated peace. Mary exposes Rawlings, and the story concludes in a secret trial beneath the courthouse.

In private he [the judge] informs Rawlings that he has done a fine and right thing, that he admires him, but that he must still face the death penalty. The law is the law, and the Book of Law is the only thing that stands between civilization and chaos. We are fighting for the Book of Law. Rawlings understands; he has always realized the possibility of having to sacrifice himself.⁹⁴

London Blackout Murders upheld the law in the same way that civil disobedience does, acknowledging its binding necessity while subverting its moral force. Though Rawlings must die, his victims had also merited death, and his criminality was ennobled (but still punished). In the end, Mary and her partner destroy the hypodermic needle, signaling their refusal to carry on the work—but the words of the judge absolve Rawlings of sin. Individuals need not actually kill, as Mary shows, but neither should they assume it is always wrong to do so. The film invites an extremely broad sentiment of complicity.

⁹³ Peggy Fenwick review, February 5, 1943, NARA RG 208, entry 567, box 3520

⁹⁴ Lillian Bergquist review, December 2, 1942. NARA RG 208, entry 567, box 3520

The OWI disliked the movie—Lillian Bergquist thought it was “dangerous”—but pointedly did not repudiate Rawlings’ ethical judgment. His decision to kill the proponents of a negotiated peace drew no comment, except that he was “well-intentioned” in a somewhat misguided course. What made the film dangerous, then? It was not the murders, but rather the suggestion that the circle of men conspiring in favor of an armistice might be taken seriously in the UK.

At this particular time all indications on the international scene point to a coming Axis peace offensive. Quite possibly the offensive would break about the time this picture is playing in the theaters. It is dangerous and unthinkable to suggest, as this picture does, that the British government in all likelihood would consider such a peace proposal.⁹⁵

The film is replete with reflections on dark times. It opens with newsreel footage of London burning under German bombardment. When Rawlings meets Mary’s sweetheart, a Royal Air Force pilot, he remarks that it is a strange age in which a soldier at war has to worry about his girl being killed at home. A detective muses at the futility of pursuing a single murderer when thousands are dying violently every day, by the active policy of the same states that prohibit homicide. This omnipresent violence was less alarming, however, than the suggestion that a negotiated peace could be taken seriously somewhere in Whitehall. Whether or not this was wisdom on the part of the OWI, it is a fact worth elevating out of the background and considering as an ethical judgment, and one the agency actively sought to propagate and universalize.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

Bergquist complained about the judge's speech as well, but not the portion in which he praised Rawlings for the murders. Rather, she objected to his statement of war aims, which fixated on the preservation of law:

We are not fighting for a 'Book of Law' -- rather we are fighting for the destruction of fascism, a system of tyranny and brutality which is the antithesis of the unwritten law of humanity, a broader law which comprises not only legalistic taboos and regulations passed by government authorities, but also the humanitarian ideas of economic, social, and political democracy for everyone on earth.⁹⁶

Bergquist here betrays nothing of a “brutalized” sensibility; hers was not a benumbed incapacity to make moral distinctions amid the general slaughter. Her review was, to the contrary, shot through with liberal internationalist idealism. And at the same time that she reiterated these values she spoke of the prohibition on murder in terms of “legalistic taboos”—a hardened pragmatism indeed.

Breen was wrong, then, if he thought the opponents of PCA morality wanted to suspend justice or transcendental morality for the duration. The reality within the OWI was more interesting, and in some ways more disturbing. They did not posit a state of exception, a removal of wartime from the norms of peacetime. Instead they stretched the fabric of morality to cover what was perceived as necessary. To move outside morality would no doubt be emotionally liberating; yet this they did not propose. Democratic audiences should be morally and emotionally committed to the production of violence, not taught to fragment war, ethics, and individual life into distinct realms.

These mostly domestic and personal parables corresponded closely with the agency's evaluations of combat (and training) films set in the 1930s and 1940s: the “World War II”

⁹⁶ Ibid.

movies that rapidly spawned their own sprawling genre.⁹⁷ These films have received ample attention over the years, and offer several ways of thinking through official and popular ideologies of American life. What I want to focus on is the OWI's attitude to the basic issues of combat: killing and dying. Neither the legal fact of international belligerency nor the political fact of wide support for the war entirely settled the questions raised by combat.

The OWI advocated for films that drew the war zones and the home front into intimate relations, emphasizing the shared commitments of soldiers looking through gun sights and civilians looking through newsprint. *Marines in the Making*, a 10-minute short filmed with USMC cooperation, was praised enthusiastically for helping "to give relatives of men in the service some understanding of the psychological preparation their men are receiving for the kill-or-be-killed requirements of warfare." Marjorie Gratz did not much concern herself with unity, teamwork, or any of the common shibboleths of the war film in her comments on the film. The movie was important instead as an instructional document conveying the lethal nature of the soldier's work:

It emphasizes the psychological transition which American boys must undergo to prepare themselves for modern war. American society has not prepared our boys for the business of killing. Our soldiers must have the conviction that they must kill or be killed. A burning hatred of the enemy must lend force to the bayonet in the hands of the lads who have never grasped anything more deadly than a baseball bat before. The psychological transition from the attitudes of peace to the intelligent and convinced aggressiveness of the soldier is a difficult but essential step in the training of our army. This film will be particularly valuable in popularizing an understanding of this fact.⁹⁸

⁹⁷ On combat films, see Jeanine Basinger, *The World War II Combat Film: Anatomy of a Genre* (New York: Columbia, 1986); Doherty, *Projections of War*; and Prince, *Classical Film Violence*.

⁹⁸ Marjorie Gratz review, January 18, 1943. NARA RG 208, entry 567, box 3521.

Gratz went on to specify that the film's positive attributes included an element of brutality and violence beyond what she imagined as conventional soldiering.

They learn that combat with the enemy is a slugging match with no holds barred, and artificial rules of 'sportsmanship' a dangerous handicap in the struggle for America's survival. The Marines have long been famed for their ability to 'take it'. But now they are being trained to 'dish it out', too.

Leaving aside the validity of her assumption that the Marines had not previously been trained to “deal it out”, her enthusiasm for the film as a public document of such a rupture is important. She supposed a radicalization of Marines Corps violence, involving a psychological reorientation of recruits away from their childhood moral instruction—and proposed that this fact demanded disclosure and public assimilation. If basic training acclimated men to the unaccustomed task of killing it was just as well that filmgoers should be brought along for the ride. Technical training would be confined to boot camp, but the moral instruction was detachable and deserved a wide circulation.

This instruction had to be carefully modulated, however, to fit within a liberal democratic frame of meaning. Another film, *Salute to the Marines*, presented a conversion narrative not unlike those the OWI usually embraced; but the agency looked askance at the story. In the film a Marine veteran retires to the Philippines—“to satisfy his pacifist wife”—only to be called back to service during the Japanese invasion. The war serves as a social vindication for the military men against the wives and their pacifist friends. One man who preaches “the brotherhood of man” turns out to be a Nazi agent; when the bombs begin falling an officer makes clear the demands of gender in wartime: “if any of you men still believe in that peace and brotherly love talk, you'd better join the women.”⁹⁹ Eleanor Berneis thought this missed the mark.

[The film] re-affirms the out-moded contention that the attack on Pearl Harbor proved Pacifism and a philosophy of brotherly love toward all men as stupid, unworkable, a doctrine promulgated by Axis agents, and on the other hand that war is a necessary and inevitable part of our lives. This confuses the real issues of the war.¹⁰⁰

The moment demanded killing. But the reviewers were uneasy with storylines that repudiated universal peace as an aim or appeared to celebrate the virtues of militarism and nationalism. Violence was an instrument, not an autonomous culture or even a constant factor in history.

The reviewers also disliked stories where vengeful male honor stood apart from the rest of the nation (including “pacifist wives,” for example) in affective terms. Hatred needed to be both distributed and calibrated. An MGM project entitled *Salute to Courage* (abandoned at some point in 1943; a 1942 film with this title was unrelated) revolved around two Christian brothers and their emotional struggles with faith in wartime; the OWI followed production carefully. The reviewers harshly criticized the first draft of the script for representing a psychological disjuncture between soldiers and civilians, including a scene where brutalized prisoners speculate resentfully about the “swell camps” offered to interned Japanese-Americans at home.¹⁰¹ Soldiers experienced war differently, and the OWI was happy to represent this—the reviewers approved a juxtaposition of soldiers being killed off while their families listened to war reports on the radio in *The Eve of St. Mark*¹⁰²—but objected to the idea that an entirely different ethos prevailed in

⁹⁹ Eleanor Berneis review, June 11, 1943. NARA RG 208, entry 567, box 3525.

¹⁰⁰ Eleanor Berneis review, June 11, 1943. NARA RG 208, entry 567, box 3525.

¹⁰¹ Unsigned review, May 19, 1942, of “Holy Joe,” with files for *Salute to Courage*. NARA RG 208, entry 567, box 3525.

¹⁰² Sandy Roth review, May 10, 1944. NARA RG 208, entry 567, box 3515.

civilian and military spheres. A clash between humanitarian civilians and cynically violent soldiers undermined the ideal of a democratic orientation to war.

Salute to Courage was rewritten to highlight the divergent reactions of the brothers Tim (a missionary in China) and Dan (an Army chaplain) to the rape and murder of their sister Ellen (also a missionary) by Japanese soldiers. Thrown into the same combat unit after Pearl Harbor, Tim fixates on a personal lust for vengeance, while Dan's faith propels him to a more level-headed pursuit of a just war. Tim is only redeemed when Dan is killed in action. Peggy Fenwick thought the script was

an exceptional opportunity to interpret the role of violence as a necessity of war. We see that Dan accepts the violence of warfare as a means to an end, we see him side by side with the men in action. He does not accept the violence of personal revenge which Tim represents.¹⁰³

Tim and Dan fought the same war, but interpreted it differently emotionally. It mattered to the OWI that people not just work and fight, but that they feel the right way about violence. Blind or personalized hatred added little to a high modernist mobilization, which required each individual to be self-motivating but to play more muted roles than raging across the Pacific to extract revenge for a raped sister. Both the extent and the democratic nature of the society required that the average citizen engage with the realities of combat. "There is a real need for public understanding of the function of violence," Fenwick wrote later in her review. Even for young soldiers the "kill-or-be-killed demands" of combat are a shock, but it was "essential that we all accept violence as a necessity of war. If the violence of war is clearly understood and accepted, it will be easier ... to make a difficult transition back to the non-violent way of life."¹⁰⁴ Literally

¹⁰³ Peggy Fenwick script review, January 22, 1943. NARA RG 208, entry 567, box 3525.

¹⁰⁴ Peggy Fenwick script review, January 22, 1943. NARA RG 208, entry 567, box 3525.

everyone would have to participate in killing, at least vicariously, while tempering their enthusiasm so it did not overflow into postwar life. *Walk in the Sun*, a grim story of infantry combat in Italy, struck Eloise Perry as “one of the finest war pictures ever made” in large part because it paired ugly images of killing and dying with a message that Americans are “men who hate war, but who, when they must ... wage war intelligently and well because they are free men.”¹⁰⁵

Gung Ho elicited praise and censure as it walked this line. The picture dealt with a Marine who had observed Communist guerillas in western China, borrowing their tactics (hence the title, taken from the slogan of Chinese industrial cooperatives, meaning roughly “work together”). Carlson’s Raiders ostensibly embraced an anti-racist Popular Front interpretation of the war as a people’s struggle, roughly in line with the BMP’s ideology; it was a story the agency wanted told. The hitch, from the OWI perspective, was an early scene where the men explain why they want to volunteer for an elite combat unit. Most of their reasons contradicted the OWI’s insistence that violence was foreign to Americans, undertaken reluctantly. “Tedrow, the Kentucky mountaineer, admits he is a murderer; another volunteer for the Raiders appears to be an ex-gangster; another a psychopathic type with a lust for murder.”¹⁰⁶ Where the studio intended to depict an admirably rigorous masculinity, the reviewers saw dangerously unambivalent feelings about violence. In subsequent drafts the recruitment scenes remained intact, but buttressed with even more exposition of the war’s political meaning, putting the conflict,

¹⁰⁵ Eloise Perry review, March 6, 1945. NARA RG 208, entry 567, box 3529.

¹⁰⁶ Peggy Fenwick script review, June 8, 1943. NARA RG 208, entry 567, box 3517.

Fenwick said, “in proper perspective.” This perspective in place, “the story now offers no serious problems from the standpoint of this office.”¹⁰⁷

God is My Co-Pilot, on the other hand, never obtained a final stamp of approval. Under OWI prompting the studio made multiple changes, cutting dialog revealing that the General Claire Chennault’s “Flying Tigers” came to China as much for the high pay as any ideological commitment.¹⁰⁸ None of the revisions saved the final print from condemnation on the basis that the fighter pilots, and worse their friends at home, did not appear to feel anything deep about the war.

[The] Tigers are portrayed as treating the war as a game ; ... even more objectionable than this, are the sequences showing the townspeople of Macon following ... Scott’s exploits as though they were cheering a football hero and as though that were all the war meant to them.¹⁰⁹

The contrast with *Gung Ho* is striking. Homicidal impulses that could be folded into politics were more acceptable than a hollowed-out football-field patriotism that cheered the nation without appearing to invest deeper emotions in it.

Levity, in fact, had been considered an threat from the earliest days of the Bureau’s existence. The BMP and George Gallup carried on nervous correspondence in the spring of 1942 over Hal Roach’s *The Devil with Hitler*, a comedy wherein the Board of Directors of Hell threatens to replace Satan with the Führer. “Violent death is not a joke,” Lillian Bergquist warned in her review. “Hitler, Hirohito and Mussolini represent brutality and slavery -- and that

¹⁰⁷ Peggy Fenwick, final script review, October 9, 1943. NARA RG 208, entry 567, box 3517.

¹⁰⁸ Eleanor Berneis review of revised final script, July 24, 1944. See also William S. Cunningham letter to James Geller, Warner Brothers, March 13, 1944. NARA RG 208, entry 567, box 3517.

¹⁰⁹ Virginia Richardson review, February 23, 1945. NARA RG 208, entry 567, box 3517.

is not funny.”¹¹⁰ By contrast the morbid Disney short *Education for Death*, an animated biography of a German child’s transformation into a Nazi soldier, embraced not just the right politics but the right tone, and in the OWI’s evaluation, “packs a wallop.”¹¹¹

This project of managing sentiments often dovetailed with efforts to dampen racism in the service of Allied solidarity. *Air Force*, a Warner Brothers picture about a bomber crew in Hawaii on December 7, 1941, was a case in point. The story was defined by sharp racial lines; the Army pilots at one point take fire from “local Japs” in Hawaii, elaborating a Fifth Column myth that, the OWI pointed out, the FBI had discredited. Such a depiction not only “immeasurably increases our post-war problems” but undermined domestic morale as well. As Marjorie Thorson explained, narratives of Japanese infamy deflected a cooler comprehension of fascism into simplistic outrage. This might have been unavoidable at the beginning of 1942:

But we have been in the war nearly a year now; we have settled down to a more rational and constructive appraisal of what this war means. We know that rage is neither the most durable nor the most productive emotion.¹¹²

Blood and rage went together; the OWI wanted a war defined by neither.

Similarly, OWI reviewers compared *Little Tokyo* to Nazi propaganda both because of its unrelenting racism and its affective texture. The film opened with Japanese war leaders planning a strategy around the treachery of Japanese-Americans, leading to an orgy of communal violence on the West Coast. Dorothy Jones and Marjorie Thorson thought the movie would create

¹¹⁰ Lillian Bergquist review, October 15, 1942. See correspondence among Bergquist, Nelson Poynter, Lowell Mellett and George Gallup in the *Devil with Hitler* file, May 1942. NARA RG 208, entry 567, box 3515

¹¹¹ Marjorie Gratz review, December 10, 1942. NARA RG 208, entry 567, box 3515.

¹¹² Marjorie Thorson final script review, October 2, 1942. NARA RG 208, entry 567, box 3511.

“unreasoning hatred”: “This kind of propaganda, one of the vehicles by which the Nazis rode to power, addresses itself chiefly to emotional prejudice.”¹¹³ In one scene, a group of American children beat a Japanese boy who boasts that Japan will occupy California. Johnson and Thorson focused on the emotional impact, calling the beating a “mixture of pathos, bathos and patriotism ... designed to arouse the fighting instincts of every hundred-percenter in the audience.”¹¹⁴ Subsequent conferences between Nelson Poynter and a “frankly annoyed” Jason Joy at 20th Century Fox hinged on the question of whether or not hatred was being ginned up indiscriminately or focused on fascists.¹¹⁵ *Little Tokyo* was a geopolitical problem, threatening to exacerbate racial schisms in the Allied cause; but it was also a morale problem, diverting the will to fight an antifascist war into racist outrage.

Behind the Rising Sun was carefully scrutinized along racial/emotional lines, although it presented the war primarily from the perspective of Japanese characters. The protagonist, Taro Seki, is the scion of a liberal publishing family who returns home from an engineering school in the United States in 1936. Shocked by the rise of reactionary militarism, he nonetheless enters the army and after a tour of duty in China is “infected with the doctrine of world domination.” After a series of escalating betrayals that illustrate his abandoned liberalism, Taro is shot down during an American bombing raid. Long reviews by Peggy Fenwick (with Dorothy Jones also reading the scripts) indicated a frustration that the script neither analyzed fascism nor explained

¹¹³ Dorothy Jones and Marjorie Thorson review, July 14, 1942. NARA RG 208, entry 567, box 3520.

¹¹⁴ Ibid. Nelson Poynter was less concerned than the reviewers, but still wrote to Lowell Mellett that the film exemplified the importance of prior review of scripts by the agency.

¹¹⁵ See Poynter to Mellet, various dates, *Little Tokyo* file. NARA RG 208, entry 567, box 3520

the transpacific racial antagonisms behind enemy propaganda.¹¹⁶ Taro Seki held potential, after all: a Japanese liberal's moral collapse could explain fascism while repudiating a racial vision of the war. But the agency's hopes were mostly disappointed. While the reviewers admitted that the final film had positive elements, "these intellectual observations tend to be lost in the emotional reaction of hatred that is bound to be aroused against the Japanese."¹¹⁷

The opposite problem arose in connection with the treatment of Nazis. In *None Shall Escape* a German officer's life story is told from the witness stand during his postwar trial for "the wanton extermination of human life" in Litzbark, a Polish town. The officer, Wilhelm Grimm, is a World War veteran who settles down as a school teacher in Litzbark in 1919, until he is driven out for seducing a young girl, leading to her suicide. Twenty years later he returns as the SS officer in charge of the local occupation, together with his nephew, Willie. Willie mouths the right platitudes about Aryan superiority, but is shaken by his uncle's casual order to machine gun all the Jews who resist deportation in crowded train cars. After a Polish girl turns up dead in the brothel for German officers, he attends a forbidden church service and is shot at the altar by his uncle—at which point the film returns to the courtroom where an unrepentant Grimm promises the Nazi party will rise again.

None Shall Escape was one of the earliest films to fictionalize the mass killing of European Jews as distinct from other Nazi crimes. It is not an easy film to watch. OWI

¹¹⁶ Fenwick's review acknowledged a greater degree of legitimacy in Japanese grievances: "In a sense Western peoples have justified the use of such propaganda by their insistence upon regarding the Japanese as an inferior race." Script review, April 28, 1943. NARA RG 208, entry 567, box 3512

¹¹⁷ Unsigned review of film print, July 8, 1943. NARA RG 208, entry 567, box 3512

reviewers, however, felt that it did not deal severely enough with Willie's complicity—and by extension with “young Nazis” generally. The problem was not punishment (Willie dies, after all) but that the break with his uncle was too easy; it could lead Americans to sympathize with Axis youths who had been “destroyed as human beings by their education.”¹¹⁸ A liberal parsing of dehumanization thus became quite intricate work: it required that enemy nationals (German or Japanese) start off as human individuals and end up as something else, “destroyed as human beings.” As Berneis put it in her review, “observations made of actual Nazis” showed them incapable of any emotion other than the fear of military defeat; thus Willie's guilt was an impossibility. She thought the movie might be improved by putting a firmer stamp of approval on his death by having his liberal father appear on the witness stand to “state that if his son were not already dead he would, in justice to humanity, demand his death.”¹¹⁹ A few weeks later Berneis had second thoughts, and suggested that the filmmakers eliminate Willie's childhood indoctrination; a more recent convert to National Socialism could plausibly be re-converted to humanity.¹²⁰

Hollywood depicted Germans and Japanese in divergent ways, with images of the Japanese shaped by old traditions of white supremacy and the more recent “Pacific

¹¹⁸ Eleanor Berneis script review, June 23, 1943. NARA RG 208, entry 567, box 3522.

¹¹⁹ Eleanor Berneis script review, June 23, 1943. NARA RG 208, entry 567, box 3522.

¹²⁰ Berneis, August 3, 1943 review. Second thoughts of this sort were uncommon—but then the review process for the film was uncommonly rigorous. Warren Pierce wrote to John Mock at Columbia Pictures in June to tell him that “this is the most important and detailed review and comment which we have made on any motion picture submitted to this office.” A half-dozen reviewers were involved in the analysis at various points between March and December of 1943. See Pierce to John Mock, June 29, 1943. NARA RG 208, entry 567, box 3522.

estrangement” described by Akira Iriye.¹²¹ Yet the OWI aimed for convergence, insisting that Axis politics, not ethno-national characteristics, marked the enemy. This could be construed as an early victory for racial liberalism, and in many ways it anticipates the dynamics Mary Dudziak describes in *Cold War Civil Rights*. The nature of the convergence should be seen clearly, however, and not simply celebrated. If the film reviewers refused to fashion a weapon out of the potent racism available in the 1940s, it was only to reach instead for other ways of justifying violence. Turning away from the racial character of the enemy as the primary excuse for violence, the reviewers found an inward-looking approach, in which the American audiences were urged to accept killing calmly as democratic tool. As Peggy Fenwick wrote: “[It is] essential that we all accept violence as a necessity of war.” Such acceptance was an individualized duty in the collective life of war liberalism.

This was never more clear than in Lillian Bergquist’s evaluation of a script for *Bombardier* (1943). During air force training a student receives a letter from his mother, in which “she charges that if he becomes a bombardier, he will be a murderer of the innocent.” The letter becomes an obsession, and his performance suffers: “The vision of the civilians he will some day kill rises before him each time he tries to release a bomb at the target.”¹²² The psychological crisis is resolved when the base Chaplain explains the moral requirements of a just war and tells him that the Allies only bomb military targets. Bergquist liked the story, and wrote that it “brings up a problem that is very real to many Americans” in a generation raised to believe

¹²¹ Akira Iriye, *Pacific Estrangement: Japanese and American Expansionism, 1897-1911* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972). On the racial character of the war see John Dower, *War Without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War* (New York: Random House, 1986).

¹²² Lillian Bergquist script review, October 19, 1942. NARA RG 208, entry 567, box 3512

in peace. “But the question arises whether there may not be a more forceful method of dealing with the problem.”

What would this be? She suggested making the moral qualms even more central (if less poignant) by internalizing them in the trainee, rather than his mother. Perhaps, she thought, the young man belonged to a peace group in college, or had a pacifist professor. This established, the peace argument could be directly refuted—without exaggerating the humanity of bombing. “It is not strictly true that American bombs never kill innocent civilians,” Bergquist wrote, objecting to a major part of the chaplain’s speech. The student (and the audience) should be brought to comprehend the necessities of war, encompassing even civilian deaths in bombing raids, as better than a compromise peace.

This would be a far more valid answer to the young man’s problem than to state the obvious untruth that only the Axis, and never Americans, bomb civilians. In the kind of war the Axis has initiated – a global war affecting all civilians – it is plainly impossible that accidents could never happen.¹²³

If the explicit terms of this argument hang onto a distinction between terror bombing and collateral damage, the emotional message was that bombing civilians just had to be accepted. A democracy could authorize killing without compromising its liberalism, and the psychology of both bombardiers and movie-goers had better be able to take it.

Conclusion: Propaganda *Noir*

After the war came film noir. Liberal modernity promised “one world”; instead it proved a social solvent, melting what was solid into amoral contention. *Noir* was a symptom and a protest; its function, according to Raymond Borde and Etienne Chaumeton, the French critics who identified

¹²³ Lillian Bergquist script review, October 19, 1942. NARA RG 208, entry 567, box 3512

the genre, was to “transmit a social critique of the United States.”¹²⁴ John Bodnar has written that these films “sabotaged the narrative aspirations of the OWI,” a case in point being *Double Indemnity* (1944), a film that “not only countered wartime sentiment but kept alive a narrative about the dark side of human nature.”¹²⁵

But the OWI reviewers approved *This Gun for Hire* and *Journey Into Fear*—the only two 1942 films identified as *noir* by Borde and Chaumeton. As for *Double Indemnity*, they not only rated the story highly, but recommended it for special distribution in liberated areas.¹²⁶ Far from feeling undercut by *noir*, the propagandists tried to speed its export. If one of the most adept historians of American war culture can assume a film “sabotaged” OWI aspirations while that agency was actively promoting its distribution, then something is amiss in our understanding of wartime consciousness.

In fact, Bourde and Chaumeton were close to the mark. While they saw the critical power of *noir*, they never suggested that it was incompatible with mobilizing a population for war. In their meditation on the violence of *noir*, they wrote: “Is it necessary to add that such brutality serves the propaganda of war?”¹²⁷ The records to prove it stayed classified for another twenty years, but they were correct more literally than they probably guessed: the OWI had embraced the films they studied. The larger point is that the agency records do not perfectly confirm the

¹²⁴ Raymond Borde and Etienne Chaumeton [Paul Hammond trans.], *A Panorama of American Film Noir, 1941-1953* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2002 [1955]), 155.

¹²⁵ John Bodnar, *Blue-Collar Hollywood: Liberalism, Democracy, and Working People in American Film* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 2003), 66-67.

¹²⁶ Eleanor Berneis review, April 22, 1944. Berneis saw the film along with Jones, the head of the reviewing staff, and a third staff member; the recommendation was not a fluke. NARA RG 208, entry 567, box 3515.

¹²⁷ Borde and Chaumeton, *Panorama of American Film Noir*, 149-150.

“softening of emotional realism” that Bodnar saw as defining official goals.¹²⁸ OWI tolerated ambiguity; emotional realism was a resource in total war.

Siegfried Kracauer, the Frankfurt school exile who spent the war analyzing Weimar cinema at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, also thought there was a connection between propaganda and noir. What defined mid-1940s Hollywood for Kracauer was its “terror and sadism.” If this reflected deep insecurities in modernity, there was also a proximate cause that seemed to Kracauer obvious: “The trend undoubtedly had its source in the requirements of wartime propaganda.”¹²⁹ For Kracauer these were portents of an American fascism; not because they hid the dark part of human nature, but because they submerged the world in it. Barbara Deming, who spent the war years analyzing films for the Library of Congress, emerged from the 1940s with similar worries. Deming saw tokens of terror and realism in officially-vetted films like *Casablanca*; the violence of the war movies “belies the bright tableaux arranged, the bright words carefully mouthed, and hints at some very different sense of the actuality of things, repressed but secretly insistent.”¹³⁰ What propaganda and censorship produced together was an ambiguity that fed the war machine.

It is easy to set up a quarrel between interpretations of wartime film emphasizing bowdlerization or realism. But this misses the longer historical perspective on the morality of violence in war that emerges unexpectedly from the official reviewers’ archive. They did less to blot out the ugliness of combat than one might expect—and still they recoiled from the *chicotte*

¹²⁸ Bodnar, *Blue-Collar Hollywood*, 55.

¹²⁹ Siegfried Kracauer, “Hollywood’s Terror Films: Do They Reflect an American State of Mind?” *Commentary* 2 1946 pp 132-136.

¹³⁰ Barbara Deming, *Running Away From Myself: A Dream Portrait of America Drawn From the Films of the Forties* (New York: Grossman, 1969), 1, 10.

in the Congo basin. They advocated the necessity of “Nazi tactics”—while raising an indignant voice at lynching. They felt it would be wrong to get upset by the bombing of civilians, and equally wrong to be cavalier about stabbing unnamed Arab chauffeurs. Theirs was a distinctively liberal sensibility, impatient of limits on the violence deployed in the name of liberty and humanity (equality was a murkier matter), while unwilling to countenance pain that seemed to serve racial egoism or imperial hierarchy. They both advocated and embodied a moral sentimentality that tried to turn its back on the affective landscape of the 19th century world order of race and empire, while holding firmly to the sovereign citizenry’s responsibility to “kill or be killed” in a dangerous world, and to do so consciously as both a realist and a democrat.

Chapter 5

“I Didn’t Make Pleasant Remarks”: Pain as Realism in the War Book Culture

Before his suicide in February 1942, the Viennese writer Stefan Zweig reviewed the pieces of a broken world: Hitler’s Europe had canceled his citizenship, threatened his life, and burned his books. His Austria was erased, and with it the international republic of letters where he had made a life and career. For Zweig, the final catastrophe of a ruined century was the collapse of literature into an ominous silence. For all its horrors, in the first World War “the word still had power,” he wrote. “Whereas in 1939 not a single pronouncement by any writer had the slightest effect either for good or evil, and up to the present no book, pamphlet, essay or poem has stirred the masses to their core.” With Europe in the teeth of total war, the written word was dying and taking with it “the moral conscience of the world.”¹

The American publisher W. Warder Norton had similar anxieties. Citing Zweig’s suicide in a speech to the American Booksellers Association, Norton predicted shortages of good manuscripts as war psychology encroached on writers. “This is a time when it is difficult to find an unbombed ivory tower.”² Both men perceived a crisis for the book that went deeper than censorship: total war threatened the mentalities and social relations that made writing and reading ethically meaningful activities, rather than mere instruments of mass mobilization. Such concerns were not limited to publishers and writers. The influential library science professor Leon Carnovsky warned the American Library Association against efforts to manipulate reading

¹ Stefan Zweig, *The World of Yesterday* (New York: Viking, 1943), 240-1.

² W.W. Norton, “Wartime Trends in Reading and Publishing,” *Publisher’s Weekly*, May 9, 1942.

for the sake of morale: “there are more ways to ‘burn books’ than by setting them on fire.”³

Publishers might endure rationing and civil liberties might survive, while books died a moral death.

Later that unsettled year, floodlights lifted the dark of a late September evening from the front steps of the Free Public Library in Worcester, Massachusetts. As the high school band played, a “Street Book Rally” opened a weeklong fair focused on books in the war effort. Three nearby colleges sent students to discuss “Books as Weapons,” and they were joined by a wide circle of local readers—wider than some of the planners expected. A startled librarian remarked, at the end of the week, “Who would have thought *these* people would be so interested.”⁴ The attendees, who “scarcely looked the ‘bookish set’” according to one organizer, included hundreds of trade school students and workers from local factories who crowded display tables to examine new titles about, among other topics, “Our Fighting Fronts.” More than 2,000 people attended, and similar crowds turned out for war book events in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania; Rochester, New York; and Springfield, Illinois.⁵ Many of the books conveyed first-hand reports of violent clashes that had taken place only months earlier. And the books themselves were a star attraction. Some 1,900 people came to a book fair in Syracuse “without a single side-show,” while in Rochester people “stayed for hours to carefully examine all the books then to return to

³ Patti Becker, *Books and Libraries in American Society During World War II* (Routledge, 2005), 74.

⁴ Martha Huddleston memo, “Worcester Book Fair, Sept. 28 – Oct. 2, 1942,” Council on Books in Wartime Records, Princeton University Special Collections, box 7, folder 6.

⁵ Martha Huddleston memo, “Wilkes-Barre Book Shore, Week of November 30,” and other reports, Council on Books in Wartime Records, Princeton University, box 7, folder 6. On Springfield, see *Publisher’s Weekly*, April 25, 1942, “Springfield Book Festival.”

those which interested them most for a bit of reading, or note-taking.”⁶ In a literal sense, Zweig was wrong: across the United States in the fall of 1942, new books moved people.

This chapter argues that “war books” held a distinctive moral salience in the early 1940s. Zweig was right to link books and conscience, but he erred in thinking that literary effort no longer spoke to a wide public, or that wartime texts had no power over the moral imagination. On the contrary, the book trade constituted a critical locus for the U.S. public’s engagement with total war in its intimate and ethical dimensions, forging thick connections between domestic perceptions of the world and experiences of violence.⁷ This chapter grounds these claims in the work of journalists and witnesses who turned non-fiction into a booming wartime market, on the efforts of the Council on Books in Wartime to enlist books as a quasi-official part of the war effort, and finally in the response of a mass readership.

The Shape of the War Book Boom; Or, What Leviathan Read

Robert Darnton has suggested that (frequently inaccurate) publishing statistics are akin to early maps of the New World: wrong in detail, but a revelation in outline.⁸ This could certainly be said of the notoriously incomplete U.S. book trade statistics in the first half of the 20th century, and

⁶ Martha Huddleston, “SHOW OF BOOKS IN A WORLD AT WAR, OCTOBER 12-17 ROCHESTER PUBLIC LIBRARY”; “SYRACUSE COMMUNITY BOOK SHOW AND AUTHOR-LUNCHEON.” Council on Books in Wartime Records, box 7, folder 6.

⁷ On the role of books in moral change, see e.g. Lynn Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights: A History* (New York: Norton, 2007), especially 35-69, and Joseph Slaughter, *Human Rights Inc.: The World Novel, Narrative Form, and International Law* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007).

⁸ Robert Darnton, “Book Production in British India, 1850-1900” *Book History*, Vol. 5 (2002), 239-262.

the war years in particular.⁹ The material parameters of the industry cannot reveal the inner lives of readers, but they strongly hint at the workings of the social imagination. Two contradictory trends—an uptick in book-buying, coupled with a sharp reduction in paper and labor available to the industry—converged to accentuate the prominent place to narratives bearing immediate witness to violent conflict.

In the first place, book sales surged with the onset of the American war. *Time* magazine breathlessly reported that 1943 was “the most remarkable [year] in the 150-year-old history of U.S. publishing,” and estimated that 250-350 million books had been printed and sold.¹⁰ By the winter of 1945-6, the *Wall Street Journal* placed sales at an annual rate of over half a billion books.¹¹ While these journalistic accounts are impossible to confirm directly, Department of Commerce figures support the boom in outline. Even as the economy revived in 1940, spending on books lagged: \$240 million, down from a pre-Depression peak of \$309 in 1929. But from

⁹ Frustration with imprecise industry statistics was a persistent theme in the *Economic Survey of the Book Industry*, a widely-cited report issued by the National Association of Book Publishers in 1931 and re-issued with slight updates in 1949. The authors of the report went so far as to accuse the publishing business of “treason to the spirit of the book”: “It tries to sell knowledge and the spirit of research—but, generally, it knows little and has tried to find out less.” O.H. Cheney, *Economic Survey of the Book Industry, 1930-1931*, (New York: R.R. Bowker, 1949 [1931]), 12. More recently, Laura Miller and David Nord concluded that 20th century book statistics remained “estimates at best” well into the postwar period. See “Reading the Data on Books, Newspapers, and Magazines,” in *The History of the Book in America, Volume 5: The Enduring Book*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 503.

¹⁰ “The Year in Books,” *Time*, December 20, 1943

¹¹ “Literary Deflation: Book Publishers’ Sales Slump Sharply After Peak Wartime Output,” *The Wall Street Journal*, July 10, 1946. See also “The Boom in Books,” *Fortune*, November 1943; “Rationing Cuts Down Greatest Books Sales in History,” *The New York Times*, August 8, 1943; “The Boom in Books: Publishers Gauging Big Post-War Demand by 1943’s Record Sales,” *The Wall Street Journal*, November 23, 1943.

1941 sales grew every year, and by 1945 spending had doubled to \$520 million.¹² Book sales also increased as a share of “recreational” consumer spending, from 5.3 percent in 1940 to 8.1 percent in 1945.¹³

Linear measures miss the strange shape of the wartime book market, however. Most obviously, rationing reduced the stock of paper available to printers by 10-25 percent. The effects of this rationing are easy to see in the smaller margins and compressed typography that allowed the industry to reconcile rationing and consumer appetites. Books literally changed shape. Less visibly but more consequentially, publishers trimmed their lists to divert resources to the most reliable sellers. Between 1939 and 1941, an average of 9,400 new titles were published annually in the U.S. This figure dropped every year after Pearl Harbor, to a low of 5,386 in 1945.¹⁴ Fewer new books were published in the United States in 1945 than any other year of the 20th century except 1900, when the population was 55 million fewer and the illiteracy rate three times higher.¹⁵ Taking 1941 as a baseline, 11,605 books went missing during the war: unpublished, deferred, or simply unwritten.

¹² *Historical Statistics of the United States*, Millennial Edition On Line, Ed. by Susan B. Carter, Scott Sigmund Gartner, et al, (Cambridge University Press, 2006). Table Dh298-308 - Personal consumption expenditures for recreational goods: 1909–1963. Given the increase in cheap reprints and paperbacks, notably the 25-cent Pocket Books, the growth should not be written off as inflationary, and likely meant an even higher volume of purchases measured in copies sold, rather than dollars.

¹³ David Nord, Joan Rubin and Michael Schudson, eds. *A History of the Book in America, Volume 5: The Enduring Book* Chapel Hill: UNC, 2009), pp. 517.

¹⁴ *Historical Statistics of the United States*, Millennial Edition On Line. Alexander Field, “Books Published, by subject: 1880-1999” Table Dg225-252.

With more readers chasing fewer titles, the books that remained occupied more space in the public square. But public attention was uneven, and one of the largest wrinkles was the advantage of books promising to deliver the reality of a menacing world. After Pearl Harbor, publishers, booksellers and librarians all remarked on the emergence of a mass market for nonfiction. Rough quantification is again suggestive. In 1918, nonfiction cost nearly two-and-a-half times as much as fiction; works of fact rarely had the reach of the dime novel, and were priced for a more affluent and specialized (and often professional) audience. Between 1918 and 1940 prices gradually converged; on the eve of Pearl Harbor, nonfiction was about a third more expensive than fiction. After 1941 the gap closed precipitously, with the emergence of what *Publisher's Weekly* called "a new kind of nonfiction, war and current events" at the top of the bestseller lists. In 1943 bestselling nonfiction titles sold for less than most works of fiction.¹⁶ That same year, patrons of the Los Angeles Public Library borrowed more nonfiction books than novels for the first time in its history. These figures are starkly at odds with the notion that the home front turned to escapist fantasies; many readers turned to any books that offered a glimpse of the war's distant reality.¹⁷

¹⁵ By 1940 the Census Bureau counted 2.9 percent of the total population as illiterate. For 1900 the figure was 10.7 percent. *Historical Statistics of the United States*, Series P-23, Ancestry and Language in the United States.

¹⁶ Estimates were made by *Publisher's Weekly*, "Currents in the Trade," January 22, 1944. The *PW* figures are based on an average of prices among leading titles. Whether or not they accurately reflect the entire market, the method is at least consistent, and the figures illuminate a trend.

¹⁷ "War Subjects Eclipse Fiction at City Library," *Los Angeles Times*, February 8, 1943. Fussell, *Wartime*, 228-229. Fussell cites as an example of the taste for "quiet" literature the Henry James revival of the 1940s. But one of James's most important champions, Lionel Trilling, saw a deadly moral earnestness in the author, and wrote admiringly of the apocalyptic violence

The production of war-related nonfiction was facilitated and influenced by the availability of air travel to speed correspondents around the world on multiple round-trips, permitting a new timeliness in publishing and new forms of reflexivity about the distance between civilian and military life.¹⁸ If newspaper and radio reports delivered a one-way dispatch of information from the “war front” to the “home front”, books took more circuitous paths, interweaving reflective commentaries on domestic life with combat. Reporters shuttled between their home offices and the battlefield before they sat down to write. The centrality of air travel as a central element of the journalistic experience was emphasized in endpaper maps tracing the routes—tens of thousands of miles—taken by the correspondents and other witnesses. The point is not just that writers traveled, but that journalists, diplomats, and others circulated between the combat zones and North America during the war, rather than dusting off their notes for postwar memoirs. Clark Lee’s *They Call it Pacific* (1943) was typical. Lee wrote a series of newspaper reports from the Philippines and the Solomon Islands, then returned home to criticize both the censorship and editorial handling of this work, which he expanded into a book that was released just after the events it described.¹⁹ The Guadalcanal campaign ended in February 1943; Lee’s book was on shelves in March. Harry Hansen, the literary editor of the New York *World-Telegram*, wrote that publishing was so “close to the news” that libraries should take special

threatened in *The Princess Casimassima*, a story of 19th century anarchism and terrorism; see Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination* (New York: New York Review Books, 2008 [1950]), 58-92.

¹⁸ Jenifer Van Vleck, *Empire of the Air: Aviation and the American Ascendancy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013).

¹⁹ Clark Lee, *They Call it Pacific: An Eye-Witness Story of Our War Against Japan from Bataan to the Solomons* (New York: Viking, 1943).

precautions to preserve uncirculated copies of war narratives, lest the “very flood of books” lead to carelessness with valuable historical documents.²⁰

The near-simultaneity of violent experience and published memoir was far more pronounced than in previous wars. The Library of Congress classification for American “personal narratives” of the world wars includes almost twice as many entries for 1943 as for all of 1914-1918. Americans published over 320 personal accounts of the war between 1940-1945 (not including those by refugee and expatriate authors in the U.S.); fewer than 50 had appeared in the previous war.²¹ Where the literary legacy of the Great War rested almost entirely on the postwar writings of a generation of veterans, World War II produced an outpouring of books long before the cessation of hostilities. The second conflict, more than the first, was mediated by books—an old medium which proved to be as novel in its own way as the radio and newsreels.

These trends should be situated within the political history of American democracy. For a public highly self-conscious of its status as a self-governing community after the interwar collapse of European democracy, books were guides to the art of governance. Books offered advice on grand strategy, reconstruction, guerrilla tactics, and the relative merits of land, sea, and air power.²² Mortimer Adler, the “great books” champion at the University of Chicago and author of the bestselling *How to Read a Book* published a guide to Western understandings of

²⁰ “1943 from the Literary Desk,” *Publisher’s Weekly*, January 22, 1944.

²¹ These figures are approximate; they are derived from the titles listed under the Library of Congress subject headings for U.S. “personal narratives” of the world wars.

²² William Kernan, *Defense Will Not Win the War* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1942), Alexander de Seversky, *Victory Through Air Power* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1942), Wendell Willkie, *One World* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1943).

conflict under the title *How to Think About War and Peace*.²³ Closely associated with these “idea” books were the many works of reportage and memoir that detailed the experience of combat. James Scott’s notion of “seeing like a state” is usefully modified here to make individuals active agents of surveillance and information processing. Through the physical attenuation of the book trade and the proliferation of “war books,” one can imagine the body politic shifting its gaze, the democratic sovereign (like the grotesque anthropomorphic state looming over the frontispiece of the *Leviathan*, an agglomeration of individuals) refocusing on war as a newly prominent object in its field of vision. Democratic obligation was a commanding idiom of the war books. The citizen needed to share the suffering of the soldier, but also the decision-making responsibility of the policy maker. These were inextricably linked. To be a democratic citizen came to mean having an opinion on bombing—from its strategic efficacy to its meaning “on the ground.”

“We are asking readers to collaborate with authors”: The Council on Books in Wartime

Book publishers were the least regimented of American media in the early 1940s, but the war book culture still acquired a quasi-official aspect. Publishers coordinated with the national state through the Council on Books in Wartime, a trade group formed in March 1942 under a slogan borrowed from President Roosevelt: “Books are Weapons in the War of Ideas.”²⁴ The Council was a David among the bureaucratic Goliaths of publicity and production: its payroll from 1942-

²³ Mortimer Adler, *How to Think About War and Peace* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1944).

²⁴ Robert Ballou, *A History of the Council on Books in Wartime, 1942-1946* (New York: Garden City Press, 1946).

1946 was just \$41,000.²⁵ But as an intermediary between publishers and the state, the Council was estimable: it printed and shipped 100 million books to soldiers overseas, broadcast hundreds of radio programs, and linked corporate boardrooms and Federal offices with authors, librarians, booksellers and ultimately millions of readers.²⁶ And it articulated an ethics of readership around the intellectual and emotional investment of civilians in wartime violence.

The Council's signature domestic activity was the designation of "Imperative" books, singled out for coordinated national promotion by all the members of the Council, including competing publishing houses.²⁷ Bennett Cerf, the founder of Random House and head of Council publicity, identified the Imperatives in terms of public duty. "These books tell hard facts, without sugar coating, that must sink deep into the public consciousness," Cerf wrote in an announcement of the awards for the *Saturday Review*.²⁸ Cerf compared the award to the Navy's practice of granting shipyards and factories "E" banners (for "efficiency"). But the Council intended these awards less to recognize publishers than to steer public attention to books as an element of the war effort. The award instructed the public in its duties: an *imperative* was a book that everyone should read. At back of this, in turn, lay an insistence that everyone come to terms with "hard facts."

²⁵ Ballou, *A History of the Council of Books in Wartime, 1942-1946*, Appendix A, Financial Summary.

²⁶ John Hench, *Books as Weapons: Propaganda, Publishing, and the Battle for Global Markets in the Era of World War II* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010).

²⁷ Hench, *Books as Weapons*, 49-50.

²⁸ Bennett Cerf, "Trade Winds," *Saturday Review*, November 28, 1942.

Under this rubric seven titles gained an official imprimatur as “Imperative”²⁹:

W.L. White, *They Were Expendable* (1942)
John Hersey, *Into the Valley* (1943)
Wendell Willkie, *One World* (1943)
Walter Lippmann, *US Foreign Policy* (1944)
John Hersey *A Bell for Adano* (1944)
Edgar Snow, *People on Our Side* (1945)
Bill Mauldin, *Up Front* (1945)

Every title except for Lippmann’s reported lethal force first-hand, delivering on Cerf’s promise by representing pain and death without “sugar coating.” The selections reflected an ethos voiced by the left-leaning mystery writer Rex Stout, of the War Writers Board, when he told book fair audiences that the Council and the government were “asking readers to collaborate with authors by having the courage of their own convictions i.e. being able to ‘take’ what they read.”³⁰ Stout made no exhortation to longer hours or bond purchases in these remarks. He was asking people to consider their emotional experience of the war as a public property: individuals could perform a service by “collaborating” with the authors of war books, by tolerating represented pain. Realism was an obligation of liberal democratic citizenship, and was defined in central ways as a tolerance for violence. This language of being able to “take it” mattered in particular for a key collaboration between the OWI and the Council: the cultivation of John Hersey’s career.

The war made Hersey. An obscure reporter in 1942, by 1946 he had published four books and won the Pulitzer prize twice, securing a permanent place in American letters with his account of Hiroshima. After a propagandistic first book on the Philippines—Hersey later

²⁹ Ballou, *History of the Council on Books in Wartime*, 47-48.

³⁰ Janet Lumb to Norton, Sept. 9, 1942, Council on Books in Wartime Records, Box 9 folder 1.

expressed embarrassment at *Men on Bataan*³¹—he published a reflective account of marine combat on Guadalcanal, *Into the Valley*, followed by a novel of the U.S. occupation of Italy, *A Bell for Adano*.³² Hersey's shifting subject matter evoked the war in strikingly different moral registers, from glibly patriotic renderings of MacArthur to an increasingly universalized concern for human pain.³³ As he slipped away from a patriotic idiom, the Office of War Information and the Council on Books took an interest in his work—not as the target of censorship, but the subject of promotion.

Personnel mattered. The head of the OWI book section was Chester Kerr, a Harcourt, Brace editor who had been Hersey's roommate at Yale. Kerr played a critical role in boosting Hersey. But Hersey also filled the need for work affirming the war while foisting "reality" on readers. The further he moved from "propaganda" writing, the better he fit the ambitions of both Council and OWI opinion-makers.

Hersey's *Into the Valley* covered a day of combat on Guadalcanal in October, 1942, focusing on a Marine captain from Oriskany Falls, New York, and his company, which had

³¹ Nancy Huse, *John Hersey: The Writer and His Times* (PhD dissertation, University of Chicago, 1975), 19-27.

³² *A Bell for Adano* elaborated on a story Hersey wrote for *Life*, part of a broad reportorial oeuvre including narrative reconstructions of a Nazi death camp and of John F. Kennedy's navy career. See "Prisoner 339, Klooga," *Life*, October 30, 1944 and "Survival," *The New Yorker*, June 17, 1944.

³³ Hersey closed *Men on Bataan* with a lengthy excerpt from MacArthur's 1935 annual report, a peculiar document in which the General praised Genghis Khan "regardless of his destructiveness, his cruelty, his savagery" as the source of all the "unvarying necessities of war" (253-4). Events had, Hersey thought at the time, vindicated MacArthur against a pacifistic public. He devoted an earlier section to the General's "encounter with the enemy within": to wit, protestors he had lambasted at a 1932 commencement speech at the University of Pittsburgh. Hersey, *Men on Bataan*, 253-254, 183-187.

suffered 22 deaths before Hersey's arrival.³⁴ Hersey described the Marines variously as "boys" with no interest in war and also as "vicious looking as a bunch of pirates," proficient in killing with guns, shovels, and screwdrivers, depending on circumstance.³⁵ While Hersey stressed patriotic motives in earlier work, the Marines in *Into the Valley*, given the chance to go home, "would have said the hell with the valley." None articulated formal war aims; when Hersey asked why they fought, they fell silent until one soldier answered, "Jesus, what I'd give for a piece of blueberry pie."³⁶ In other words their violence only served to get them away from the violence. While the soldiers invoked domesticity and abundance they could not explain what that had to do with their war—it was just something to return to, a private *status quo ante*. The message was ambivalent, rendering Americans innocent of global ambitions but at the same time willing to fight without purpose.

Importantly in this regard, the text did not erase the physical brutality of Guadalcanal: innocence only extended to intentions. Hersey awoke one morning to a Marine with a telescope chanting, "step right up and take a peek. Ten cents a look, it's wonderful, it's romantic." At the other end of the scope were "a whole bunch of dead bodies," Japanese soldiers killed at the mouth of the Matanikau river.³⁷ Earlier in the book Hersey had remarked on his own empathy for an individual Japanese sniper, wondering what kind of a home the young man had left behind

³⁴ Hersey, *Into the Valley*, 26-27, 37.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 43.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 45.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 129-30.

(speculations which mirrored the close attention to the hometowns of US soldiers).³⁸ The book did not disguise anyone's humanity, or the basic inhumanity of mass-produced injury and death.

This was not obvious propaganda fodder, but the selection of Hersey's title as the second "imperative" made perfect sense in terms of the search for wartime realism, and fit well with the other titles under consideration. Even before Hersey finished the book, the "Advanced Readers Committee" of the Council appeared to be looking for a work of reportage emphasizing violence in personal terms.³⁹ Virginia Kirkus, the author of an influential publishing newsletter and one of the most active members of the committee, recommended Erskine Caldwell's *All Night Long* (1942), a brutal novel drawn directly from Caldwell's reporting on the Eastern Front. The book pivoted on rape and retribution in the life of a Russian couple—not real individuals, but composites of Caldwell's Soviet experiences. Kirkus said it "carried more conviction" than any journalistic report, because it successfully married "realism with tensely emotional value."⁴⁰ A few days later she gained support from most of the selection committee.⁴¹ But the choice faltered because of commercial timing: the Council's Executive Committee had already decided to wait

³⁸ Ibid., 59.

³⁹ The "Imperatives" were selected through a two-step process involving nomination by an "Advanced Readers Committee" consisting of Virginia Kirkus, et al., and a final selection by a "War Book Panel" including Irita Van Doren, etc. Judging by the Council's remaining correspondence the first group was far the more active of the two. On the dissolution of the War Book Panel, see Bennett Cerf to W. Norton, Nov. 5, 1943 and Archibald Ogden to Irita Van Doren, February 28, 1944, in Council on Books in Wartime Records,, Box 10, folder 3.

⁴⁰ Virginia Kirkus to Janet Lumb, Nov 16, 1942, Council on Books in Wartime Records, Box 4, folder 7.

⁴¹ Nov 24 1942 meeting of Advance Readers, present: Norton, Kirkus, Loveman, John Beecroft, Donald Gordon, Francis Ludlow, Meredith Wood. Council on Books in Wartime Records, Box 4, Folder 7.

until after Christmas for the next “Imperative” selection, in order not to antagonize the publishing houses without their own officially-branded war books.⁴² It was one thing to ask conservative publishing houses to back the Soviet Union as a wartime ally; it was another to demand that they promote competing titles in an anxious holiday season. By 1943, however, Caldwell’s book—released in August 1942—was verging on old news.

Despite this hiccup, the promotional aims of the trade were not basically at odds with wartime propaganda. Indeed, as the Council planned the “Imperative” selection process, it decided to seek closer ties with the Office of War Information. In January Warder Norton met with the OWI’s Chester Kerr to discuss making the Council a channel for the dissemination of ideas “which seemed of importance to the OWI.”⁴³ Even before this, internal Council correspondence casually discussed vetting book lists and publicity with government officials.⁴⁴

Hersey’s *Into the Valley* was an immediate beneficiary. There was no consensus on the next Imperative when the Advanced Readers Committee met on February 4, the same week Hersey’s book was published.⁴⁵ But Chester Kerr was invited to sit in on the deliberations, and he wrote Norton a few days later to reiterate his recommendations. *Into the Valley* was the first

⁴² November 10, 1942, Executive Committee minutes. Farrer and Cerf, representing publishing houses central to the project, were the ones to voice concern over the timing of the next Imperative. Council on Books in Wartime Records, Box 3.

⁴³ “Report of the Reorganization Committee,” Jan 28, 1943, Council on Books in Wartime Records, Box 1, Folder 9.

⁴⁴ December 3, 1942, Janet Lumb to Warder Norton. Council on Books in Wartime Records, Box 4, folder 7.

⁴⁵ Feb 3, 1943, Advanced Readers informal minutes. Council on Books in Wartime Records, Box 4, folder 7.

book on his list.⁴⁶ This note was followed quickly by urgent memos from the Council's Executive Secretary, Janet Lumb, underlining the OWI's recommendation that *Into the Valley* be selected as the next Imperative.⁴⁷ All Kerr had done—in writing, anyway—was to mention the title, but the Council responded as though under orders. The Advanced Readers quickly fell into line. Amy Loveman, who represented the Book-of-the-Month-Club at the Council, responded, tellingly: "I agree with the OWI."⁴⁸ A week later the Council announced that Hersey's book was the second Imperative.⁴⁹

The book jumped onto the New York Times bestsellers list, seeming to confirm the Council's boast that its endorsement could mean substantial sales. In all likelihood the book was bound to do well, as an early entry in the flourishing genre of South Pacific Marine combat stories. More interesting than the simple fact of sales were the echoes of the choice that came back to New York through surveys and spontaneous letters. A national audience, it turned out, was paying attention to the Council's recommendations. Lewis Mayer, an Oklahoma radio personality who regularly reviewed books for KTUL in Tulsa, wrote to thank the Council and record his cooperation: "I today recommended *Into the Valley* as an IMPERATIVE BOOK."⁵⁰

⁴⁶ Chester Kerr to Norton, February 19, 1943. Council on Books in Wartime Records, Box 4, folder 7.

⁴⁷ Lumb to Advanced Readers, Feb 23, 1943 and Feb 25, 1943. Council on Books in Wartime Records, Box 4, folder 7.

⁴⁸ Amy Loveman to Janet Lumb, February 25, 1943. Council on Books in Wartime Records, Box 4, folder 7.

⁴⁹ Council Press Release, March 8, 1943. Council on Books in Wartime Records, Box 10, folder 6.

He also praised the term “imperative,” saying it helped to “make the public sit up and take notice.” Three years before the publication of *Hiroshima* cemented John Hersey’s reputation, Tulsa and Oklahoma City knew the name—and had heard it in connection with a version of the OWI’s vision of “realistic” engagement with the sanguinary facts of the conflict.

More systematically, the Council surveyed dozens of booksellers, soliciting comments on the reception of the “Imperative” campaign. At least 67 sellers responded that the label made a difference.⁵¹ The Barnhart Book Store in Huntington, Indiana, reported that sales of Hersey doubled after the announcement of its selection. The manager sounded like an OWI official with an unprompted remark about cultivating “an attitude of obligation to keep informed.” The New Dominion Bookshop in Charlottesville, Virginia indicated that its clientele knew about the “Imperatives” before coming into the store. John Murphy wrote that the Book and Record Shop of Altoona, Pennsylvania, was making *Into the Valley* available as a free rental, because “it is our duty to make the public read those books which clarify our situation.” Frazier Scott, on the other hand, reported that his store in Germantown, Pennsylvania, had sold just two copies—but he confessed that he did not “push them too much as we live in a staid community of Friends.” Scott’s sales disappointed; still, this affirmation of total war had at least two buyers in a Quaker town.⁵²

Other booksellers were skeptical of the Council’s advertising. About 50 stores reported little change in sales. Martinsen Library and Bookshop in Santa Barbara, California, complained

⁵⁰ Lewis Mayer to Council on Books, May 7, 1942. Council on Books in Wartime Records, Box 7, folder 10.

⁵¹ See survey materials on Hersey in Council on Books in Wartime Records, Box 5, folder 19.

⁵² Ibid.

that “the market is glutted with all sorts of books on the war,” while managers of the Texas Book Store in Austin thought the Imperative “I” was “too decorative” for its customers. Still others made unfavorable comparisons between Hersey’s book and the previous selection, W.L. White’s *They Were Expendable*.

But even the critics virtually never rejected the notion that they had a responsibility to expose customers to war books instead of supplying “escape” reading. Booksellers shared the Council/OWI view that citizens had an obligation to look at, read about, and vicariously experience the war. John W. Todd, Jr., of the Shorey Book Store in Seattle had harsh words for John Hersey’s books over several years, but he was an enthusiastic proponent of the “Imperative” program anyway. Where many sellers simply mailed back the Council’s questionnaires, Todd wrote a letter evaluating the first two Imperative selections, requested more lists of recommended titles, and appended a lengthy essay he had written (and circulated to patrons of his store) on “The Power of Books in Winning the War.” The essay quoted President Roosevelt and Archibald MacLeish, compared the mobilization of books to industrial war work, and insisted on the vitality of war books to the “one substance without which no human achievement is possible – morale.”⁵³ Morale, for Todd, included the broadest political aims, and he strongly favored selections such as Wendell Willkie’s *One World*.⁵⁴ If this is unsurprising from the perspective of scholarship on 1940s liberal internationalism, what deserves underlining is how easily this concept of “morale” meshed with a close imaginative encounter with violence:

⁵³ John W. Todd, Jr. to Council, April 22, 1943, Council on Books in Wartime Records, Box 5, folder 19.

⁵⁴ John W. Todd, Jr. to Council, June 3, 1944. Council on Books in Wartime Records, Box 10, folder 6.

Todd's only specific complaint was that Hersey's descriptions of killing were not as forceful as White's combat reportage in *They Were Expandable*.

The Council shifted gears to promote Willkie's book and Walter Lippmann's *Foreign Policy* in 1943 and 1944, strongly emphasizing postwar policy rather than wartime experience, before returning to Hersey again to endorse his novel, *A Bell for Adano* in 1945. The book was a rather obvious paean to American internationalism, but again, as a work of propaganda, its frankness about violence was remarkable. American democratic authority was sharply differentiated from Fascist coercion, yet Hersey was quite clear about the violence that built a military occupation. The story began with a tense back-and-forth between Colonel Joppolo, the idealistic son of Italian immigrants, and a Hungarian-American Military Police officer, to whom "the whole war was a cynical joke."⁵⁵ Their banter revealed Joppolo as the man to cheer for, the embodiment of liberal war aims. But as they turn a corner in Adano, "the two men came on a dead Italian woman":

She had been dressed in black. Her right leg was blown off and the flies for some reason preferred the dark sticky pool of blood and dust to her stump.

'Awful,' the Major said, for although the blood was not yet dry, nevertheless there was already a beginning of a sweet but vomitous odor. 'It's a hell of a note,' he said, 'that we had to do that to our friends.' "

'Friends,' said Borth, 'that's a laugh.'"

'It wasn't them, not the ones like her,' the Major said. 'They weren't our enemies. My mother's mother must have been like her. It wasn't the poor ones like her, it was the bunch up there where we're going, those crooks in the City Hall.'⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Hersey, *A Bell for Adano*, 4.

⁵⁶ Hersey, *Adano*, 5-6.

Moments later they passed a crushed house, and Joppolo expressed regret again. Borth teased him: “maybe it was a crook’s house, how can you tell?” Dismembered civilians served as props to establish characters, and the characters—though not exactly profound—were telling. It was the cynic, Borth, who held to an ethically rigorous (though factually questionable) identification of the dead with legitimate targets. The idealist, on the other hand, saw his own grandmother in the bodies. But bodily injury and ethical compromise were, as with the burdens of reconstruction, an unavoidable part of Joppolo’s (and Hersey’s) internationalism. This was propaganda as a thickly described entry into a world of violence, rather than its erasure or bowdlerization. Hersey gave the dead a physical presence: they had a smell, they attracted flies; moreover, they possessed moral qualities of innocence and intimacy, summoning the protagonist’s grandmother to mind. For all of this, Hersey offered neither a dissent nor a total displacement of responsibility onto the enemy. The Fascists made the war, but the Americans bombed the city. This was not a sanitized account of war but it was a didactic one. The lessons to be learned were the costs of doing business, and the appropriate pose to strike while looking at death.

The book was popular. It won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction, was dramatized for radio, and adapted for the screen. Columnists invoked its messages, and even critics who disliked Hersey’s style paid it the backhanded compliment of their condescension, rather than ignoring it.⁵⁷ Hersey proved an effective vehicle for lessons in wartime realism, and continued to serve this purpose

⁵⁷ Lionel Trilling’s 1947 essay, “Manners, Morals, and the Novel” lamented the eclipse of moral sensibilities in American novels by an “intense social awareness” manifest in books that asked “what situation the Jew finds himself in, what it means to be a Negro, how one gets a bell for Adano ...” Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination* (New York: New York Review Books, 2008 [1950]), 214.

into the postwar. *Hiroshima* is so familiar as to need little explication—like the atomic bomb itself, it was a blinding punctuation at the end of Hersey’s wartime career. When it appeared on the newsstands a year after the bombings, Franklin D’Olier, the chairman of the Strategic Bombing Survey who was also the first national commander of the American Legion, phoned New Yorker editor Harold Ross with his congratulations. D’Olier “went on at some length about it,” and disclosed the committee’s conclusions that the bomb had not been necessary—Japan was about to surrender anyway. As Ross recorded the conversation, D’Olier said it “was a good thing we dropped the bomb to bring home horrors, etc. I gathered he thought Hersey’s piece would do more than his committee’s report to influence people.”⁵⁸ The *Hiroshima* bomb and the *Hiroshima* book, in this startling reading, accomplished the same work: to reinforce a realistic vision of mass suffering which was not strictly necessary but nonetheless was affirmed rather than repudiated.

The singularity of Hersey’s books can paradoxically understate the pervasiveness of such representations of total war in American print culture. Readership for any given story or book was never close to universal—even Hersey’s vast audience represented an important minority, as compared to the truly national attention held by a Roosevelt fireside chat.⁵⁹ But closely wrought narratives of violence were another story. These were woven into a broad and deep literature produced between 1939-45.

⁵⁸ Harold Ross to William Shawn, September 3, 1946. New Yorker Company Papers, New York Public Library, box 36, folder “William Shawn – Harold Ross – 3 of 5.”

⁵⁹ Michael Yavenditti, “John Hersey and the American Conscience: The Reception of ‘Hiroshima,’” *The Pacific Historical Review*, Vol. 43, No. 1 (Feb. 1973), 24-49.

“This people’s war is the most personal of all wars”

The war book authors were intensely self-conscious of their role in mediating between a home audience and overseas realms of violence, and many of them wound up writing extensively on their own physical movements. The *New Yorker*’s A.J. Liebling reported from Paris as it was bombed in 1940, came home to write about New York in 1941, covered North Africa in 1942-3, witnessed the Normandy landings from a landing craft that suffered fatalities, and by 1945 was reviewing books about the conflict from an office in midtown Manhattan. One of his most celebrated articles, “Mollie,” was based on domestic reporting on the life of a soldier whose body he had seen in Tunisia. The space between war and peace, not surprisingly, became a central theme of his book, *The Road Back to Paris* (1944).

“Getting off the plane,” Liebling wrote, meant a dreamlike encounter with friends who “hardly seemed to know that anything was wrong.”⁶⁰ This accords with the presumption that censorship and a patriotic press covered up realities that would alienate public enthusiasm for the wartime project. Yet his friends knew enough to recommend that he take “a few grains of nembutol” to sleep off any “painful experiences.” If this advice points to a reluctance to engage in detailed conversations about violence, it also registers a background assumption of trauma calling for narcotic oblivion. What marked the home-front mind was not ignorance but unreality—Liebling felt a jarring awareness of the difference between war as an intangible and war as irresistibly physical force:

I remember the curious feeling I had when I went to register for compulsory service on October 16, 1940, in a schoolhouse where I had to squeeze 215 pounds of me into a child’s seat, behind a child’s desk, to fill out a blank. The associations evoked were of learning long division and looking forward to recess,

⁶⁰ Liebling, *World War II Writings* (New York: Library of America, 2008 [1944]), 115.

rather than of bombed cities. Yet I had seen bombed cities, which none of the other men registering had.⁶¹

The mental world Liebling evoked was the opposite of forgetting violence. In the (literally) childlike domain of a classroom, he thought of bombed cities. But he also admitted his own growing boredom with recently-returned journalists, and recorded with fascination a lunch in which a friend who also reported on the war drifted between indignation at the distracted banality of U.S. civilians and distraction of his own while watching a beautiful blonde woman on ice skates at Rockefeller Center.⁶² Narratives like his emphasized the simultaneity of domestic routine and far-away war by dramatizing the process of moving between those realms.

Other writers were less forgiving of apparent “complacency” at home. The wire-service reporter Robert St. John made the passage between violence and domestic tranquility an indictment of the latter in his book about the invasion of Yugoslavia and Greece, *From the Land of Silent People* (1942), which was published one month after Pearl Harbor. While his story began in pre-war Belgrade, his first pages preview a moment of extreme horror, when he suffered an apparent psychotic break during a bombing in Corinth. In that moment, his recollection faltered. A witness “told me afterwards that I raved like a madman for an hour, completely out of my head.” In his deranged state, St. John yelled—he was told—“we’re dead and we’re in hell! This isn’t Greece, this is hell!”⁶³ Until then the demands of his editors

⁶¹ Liebling, *World War II Writings*, 119.

⁶² Liebling, *World War II Writings*, 119.

⁶³ Robert St. John, *From the Land of Silent People* (Garden City: Doubleday, Doran, 1942), 275-8.

provided a reference point for thinking about the war; afterwards Corinth became his moral touchstone. He wrote less about scoops and more about felt obligations to the bombed.

St. John developed this central incident in great detail in the middle of the book, giving 20 pages of lucid description and reflecting on the culpability of the invisible pilots above.⁶⁴ But he lifted one moment out of this story and described it in the forward. This was the moment which precipitated his mental collapse, a grotesque encounter with a mortally wounded man outside a hospital. A bomb had torn open the injured man's abdomen, gashed his head, and torn off both hands. Beyond the limits of triage, he was not brought into the hospital, so St. John found him dying on the sidewalk. The man screamed that without hands he could not "reach into his pocket to get a drachma to buy aspirin tablets to stop the funny feeling inside his head."⁶⁵ This single death became a synecdoche for the war as an event that did not become any more meaningful the more transparently it was described.

St. John took the incident to exemplify pain without any satisfying explanation, and as pain demanding public attention. "If it makes sense to you, all right. It makes no sense to me. If it fits in, fine. If it doesn't, just skip it. Then you will be able to forget. And that will be fine too—for you."⁶⁶ The judgment was unmistakable: it was wrong to turn away but it was just as wrong to impose a false coherence. At the start of the climactic chapter, "Bombs and Hospitals," he adds another prefatory comment to what he calls "a fair picture of what war really is":

But I doubt if many people in America want to know what war really is when it comes to a town like Corinth, because they may realize that Corinth in many ways

⁶⁴ St. John, *From the Land of Silent People*, 259-278.

⁶⁵ St. John, *From the Land of Silent People*, 1, 275.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 3.

is not much different than Darien, Connecticut, or Middletown, Indiana, or a lot of other American towns.

His effort to impose a physical sensibility of war—superimposing Corinth and Middletown—reads as missionary rather than journalistic. The book ends with St. John standing at a lecture platform, about to defy instructions to make his after-dinner remarks to an unidentified group “pleasant.” Earlier, a friend had urged him to put off his writing until he spent some time recovering in the country: “forget all you’ve been through. Then you can come back and write calmly ...” St. John not only refused these counsels, but dramatized that rejection as the culmination of his journey:

I didn’t make pleasant remarks in that lecture.
I didn’t go to the country to try to forget.
Maybe I don’t have perspective.⁶⁷

In the end, the book was as much about the witness forcing his unwanted truth on the people as it was about the war *per se*; it made a moral claim about the obligation to share suffering, even if this could only go so far as knowing about it in detail. That this insistence was not coupled to any political program (e.g. “promote MacArthur”; “a second front now”) makes it all the more interesting. It was a protean ethical idea that could be yoked to many agendas and was endlessly reproduced. But for this reason we should also be skeptical of claims that audiences usually resisted “the real war.” The almost ritualized confrontation between a complacent public and “reality” was a constitutive element of home front experience, and in no way precluded close public attention to violence. Though St. John posed as a Jeremiah, his challenge to the public mind was positively reviewed in the metropolitan press, and his book stayed on the *Publisher’s*

⁶⁷ Ibid., 351.

Weekly bestseller list through a crowded winter and into the spring. The Council on Books in Wartime even produced a radio dramatization of the work.⁶⁸

Journalists were willing to describe violence without a clarifying explanation in books dealing directly with U.S. soldiers as well as “foreign” wars. Keith Wheeler’s *The Pacific is My Beat* (1943) is a case in point, providing another glimpse of how journalists saw their relationship with home audiences. Wheeler had already completed a manuscript when he was sent to cover the invasion of Attu, at the western edge of the Aleutians, in May 1943. This three-week campaign (on an island with a peacetime population of 43) killed 500 Americans and nearly 3,000 Japanese soldiers. While the first part of Wheeler’s book assured readers that soldiers were “becoming killers only in talent for killing, not in mind or in heart”, he discarded this hopeful tone in a 98-page “Attu postscript.”⁶⁹

The climax of Wheeler’s long “postscript” was a chapter titled “The Valley of Handless Men,” which described Japanese suicides by hand grenade. The 800 mangled bodies in the Chichagof Valley amounted to the “utter denial of sentience and holiness.”⁷⁰ Wheeler noted that some of the handless bodies were surrounded by unexploded grenades with the pins pulled, and he “wondered how those who delayed or had to try several times with bad grenades could finish the job, having seen what happened to those who went first.”⁷¹ *Time* magazine suggested the suicides were the act of a subhuman race; Wheeler anticipated the claim and denied it.

⁶⁸ Ballou, *A History of the Council on Books in Wartime*, 96-7.

⁶⁹ Keith Wheeler, *The Pacific is My Beat* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1943), 8-9.

⁷⁰ Keith Wheeler, *The Pacific is My Beat*, 367.

⁷¹ Wheeler, *The Pacific is My Beat*, 372.

It was easier to say that the Japs were animals, not men, and that anything that came to them had no application or parallel with you. It was easier and simpler to feel that way but you knew damn well it wasn't true. The Japs had been men all right and, except that they were your enemies, they were as good and sound men as you were.⁷²

Crucially, this realization does not turn Wheeler away from the war. The book is not a dissent.

Later he sat with a combat chaplain to talk about the enemy dead. The chaplain confessed: "I'm glad they're dead, really glad of it." The sentiment alarmed him, but he could not repudiate it.

"How can I go back to my church when I've got it in me to be glad men are dead? In a way I'm sorry for these people and I wish we could have helped them. But now I'm glad they're dead."⁷³

The reporter and the chaplain agreed: the Japanese are as human as anyone, and they must be killed, perhaps to the point of extermination. Wheeler speculated that Japan might become an Attu of 70 million.⁷⁴

Wheeler, like St. John, also dramatized the encounter between witness and reader. The reporter was lounging below decks after writing part of his Attu story when a youth of 18 or 19, Jimmy O'Malley, found the typewritten pages. Moments later he threw the papers down and confronted the journalist: " 'I'm not going to read any more of that and, God damn it, you won't ever get it printed in the papers either,' he said."

'Nobody's got leave to write stuff like that. Why the hell don't you tone it down? Jesus Christ, nobody'll print that. They won't let you.'

I laughed at him and my laughter brought him to his feet. He stared at me, then slammed out of the room. I was still laughing when I realized what was in his

⁷² Ibid., 374-375.

⁷³ Ibid., 378.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 383.

face. Ten minutes earlier I had never laid eyes on Jimmy O'Malley in all my life; yet in ten minutes I had filled him with disgust and he hated me. He hated me because I had violated his mind with the record of facts I had seen. And he hated me for laughing.⁷⁵

Equally distant from euphemism and from pacifism, this writing tested the emotional commitments of anyone who had not been there—whether at home or just offshore. After O'Malley left, Wheeler reflected that “I ought to be filled with disgust and horror and frantic zeal to cure the murdering sickness in the world. But I’m not.”⁷⁶ Some wartime writing made violence heroic; but an important strain of narration revealed horror on every side—and instead of turning away, invited readers to step into the void. Wheeler wondered if the meaningful postwar division would turn out to be between “those who lived on the Attus and those who were a mile away and might as well have been in Chicago.” But his text made a third possibility obvious: one could travel vicariously to Attu, passing through outraged revulsion to a new realism.

Too often, books like this are treated as aberrant moments of truth-telling, but Wheeler’s account was echoed by the INS reporter Howard Handleman, who also wrote about the Chicago of Valley: “these suicides were shelled like oysters ... This death was indecent and obscene.”⁷⁷ His account described GIs looking at individual bodies, and encountering signs of Japanese humanity in a captured camp: family photos, drawings by children, pornography, and political cartoons of

⁷⁵ Ibid., 295-296.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 298.

⁷⁷ Howard Handleman, *Bridge to Victory: The Story of the Reconquest of the Aleutians* (New York: Random House, 1943), 219.

the Roosevelt family which seemed no more alien than a Republican editorial page.⁷⁸ After this humanization, he reached the jarring conclusion that the bodies “had little effect on the American soldiers ... death in such quantity becomes abstract.” But the abstraction didn’t quite hold: the soldiers moved from body to body, shaking their heads and repeating the phrase “it beats me.” A few pages later he says it was necessary to think of suffering Filipinos to stave off pity for the Japanese.⁷⁹ He ended the book writing about the prisoners he encountered, and his hope that the enemy would ultimately “take the human way out, and run” instead of forcing a war of extermination.⁸⁰

There was more intimacy than abstraction in the violence that Handleman and Wheeler reported. Attu was distant (closer to the Soviet Union than to Anchorage), tightly censored, and the site of fewer than 0.1 percent of American casualties. If there was a place for abstraction to subsume experience, or for censorship to bury horror in the name of morale, this was it. Instead, both authors personalized violence and humanized combatants, including the enemy; and both were permitted to widely circulate their narratives. That choice was ratified, rather than resisted, by military authorities. Handleman and Wheeler were imitated by Military Intelligence, which not only permitted their copy to appear in the U.S. without objection but oversaw publication of the War Department’s own set of first-person narratives, *The Capture of Attu, As Told By the Men Who Fought There* (1944). Cecil Brown voiced a publishing consensus when he wrote, in his 1942 memoir, *From Suez to Singapore*, “This people’s war is the most personal of all

⁷⁸ Handleman, *Bridge to Victory*, 154-159.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 219-222.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 265.

wars.”⁸¹ Reporters ensured that personal experiences did not remain private, but were instead conscripted into civilian awareness through the war books.

One surprising aspect of these personal narratives was the instability of race as an explanatory framework for violent behavior, even in the Pacific. Race was pervasive in wartime discourses, but the dynamics of racialized violence were quite different in the interior spaces opened up by the war books than in editorial caricatures or telegraphic headlines. The cartoon imagery of “yellow peril” often collapsed under the weight of sustained narratives of intimate contact with manifestly human Japanese enemies and with other non-white peoples west of California. But the permissibility of violence persisted.

Race and violence

Clark Lee’s *They Call It Pacific* (1943) linked wartime violence with prewar encounters of race in Manila and Shanghai. Lee recognized a dead Filipino on Bataan in 1942, but couldn’t remember the man’s name until a soldier identified him as Sergeant Hilario Francisco of the Philippines Constabulary. When he heard the name, Lee remembered an American woman insulting Francisco at the Hotel Manila in November 1941. “The words were unprintable, but the general tenor was: ‘We Americans are the ruling race here. You Filipinos are dirt.’”⁸² Lee described the insult early in the book, returning to it hundreds of pages later to underscore his shock at recognizing the body. He used the same technique to connect reports of suicidal

⁸¹ Cecil Brown, *From Suez to Singapore* (New York: Random House, 1942), ix.

⁸² Clark Lee, *They Call it Pacific: An Eye-Witness Story of Our War Against Japan from Bataan to the Solomons* (Viking, 1943), 24, 239-9.

American dive-bombings to a prewar conversation in Shanghai, where a Japanese naval officer and an American Marine traded boasts that their pilots were ready to fly directly into enemy ships. In the first anecdote, Lee inscribed American racial arrogance on the body of a colonial ally; in the second, he stripped racial distinctions from a mode of combat variously described as (white) American self-sacrifice or a uniquely Japanese disregard for life. The long narrative undermined racial understandings of violence common to shorter reportage.

Richard Tregaskis and Ira Wolfert achieved considerable fame in 1943 for their books about the Marine campaign on Guadalcanal, and the two authors hit similar racial and civilizational notes. “We are daytime fighters, and when twilight comes, we revert to our Indian-fighting past,” Wolfert wrote.⁸³ An older Marine evoked another history for Tregaskis: when the Japanese withdrew into the hills, Guadalcanal threatened to become “Another Nicaragua.”⁸⁴ Superimposed on the frontier-imperial tradition was a deracinated vision of a “long-range war of machines where steel is thrown in the darkness from twenty miles away” and killers were rarely able “to stand up and watch [their targets] die.”⁸⁵ Guadalcanal represented war made legible in terms of racialized bodies, and also war between completely invisible bodies.

But the bodies did not stay invisible or unimagined, nor did race exhaust the meaning of the killing. Tregaskis described casualties in racialized clichés—“his buck teeth bared in a humorless grim”—while Wolfert reported that pilots were “sickened” by the task of killing

⁸³ Ira Wolfert, *Battle for the Solomons* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1943), 138.

⁸⁴ Richard Tregaskis, *Guadalacanal Diary* (New York: Random House, 1943), 43-44.

⁸⁵ Wolfert, *Battle for the Solomons*, 92.

unprotected men in transport ships and resigned to “a day’s work which had to be done”.⁸⁶ Seeing the live bodies of prisoners, Tregaskis expressed sympathy for labor battalions.⁸⁷ These narratives were fairly typical examples of long-form “realistic” reporting that repeatedly invoked race without reducing the war to a racial conflict or denying the humanity of the enemy. “The Japs are people like anybody else,” Wolfert wrote.⁸⁸

Moreover, white journalists like Lee, Tregaskis and White did not monopolize the field. Carlos Romulo and Ben Kuroki revealed experiences of race closer to the contemporaneous novels of Richard Wright and Lillian Smith than to the race-baiting editorial illustrations and headlines of the McCormick or Hearst papers. Romulo’s *I Saw the Fall of the Philippines* (1943) narrated the Manila editor’s time under the command of Gen. MacArthur. Despite official constraints, Romulo sketched a remarkably frank personal history of U.S. colonial power. He joined MacArthur’s staff with a keen awareness that, forty years earlier, his own father had been among the nationalists hunted by MacArthur’s father. While older family members avoided the “blue-eyed foreign devils,” Romulo learned English from an occupying soldier. But counterinsurgency pierced the illusion of coexistence. One afternoon on the way home from school he discovered a body hanging from a tree in a park near his home. “I recognized him as Clemente, a neighbor who had lived a few houses away. I had no idea why the Americans had hanged him. But I knew then why my father hated the Americans.”⁸⁹

⁸⁶ Tregaskis, *Guadalcanal Diary*, 148; Wolfert, *Battle for the Solomons*, 169.

⁸⁷ Tregaskis, 106-107.

⁸⁸ Wolfert, *Battle for the Solomons*, 128-129

Romulo returned to his English lessons, but the incident was not the only one to reveal the coercion and outright brutality involved in the colonial regime. Late one night he overheard family members discussing his grandfather's torture by the "water cure." A few years later, as a teenager, the condescension of white civilians in Manila underscored that "as a Filipino perhaps I was not welcome everywhere in my native land." These incidents were leavened with enough official liberalism to culminate in, effectively, a conversion experience, when Romulo decided as a young man to embrace the "true" United States against a racism that "does not represent America."⁹⁰ Still, even as Romulo folded the incidents of war into a pro-American mindset, the stories were startling for a wartime memoir. The literature on American homefront culture in the 1940s culture does not prepare one to open a best-selling memoir by Douglas MacArthur's publicist to find the author claiming that American soldiers tortured his grandfather. Such violence could emerge in a book, insulated but not erased amid hundreds of pages. Romulo indirectly pushed his readers towards a skeptical engagement with authoritative texts by admitting that his Pulitzer Prize-winning reporting—on the sentiments of colonized Southeast Asians before 1941—was heavily self-censored to downplay racial domination: "those articles would never have won the Pulitzer prize if I had told all my experiences in the Orient. I held back a lot because as a writer I knew hatred is created by incidents."⁹¹ What we get with Romulo, ultimately, is a U.S. patriotism pregnant with dissent, an embrace of war that firmly repudiated the racial terms on which many Americans went to war, and an adulatory account of

⁸⁹ Carlos Romulo, *I Saw the Fall of the Philippines* (New York: Doubleday, Doran & Co.), 48.

⁹⁰ Romulo, *I Saw the Fall of the Philippines*, 53.

⁹¹ Romulo, *I Saw the Fall of the Philippines*, 4.

MacArthur that refused to forget the brutality of the occupation that brought him to the Philippines in the first place.

Ralph Martin's biography of Ben Kuroki, *Boy From Nebraska* (1946), also embedded critical perspectives on wartime violence in a story of heroic sacrifice by a Nisei volunteer in the Army Air Forces. Both parts of the "double V"—victory over fascism abroad and white supremacy at home—appeared fraught and incomplete in Kuroki's story, and both were sources of personal pain. Killing was not made easier for Kuroki because it advanced "democracy without discrimination."⁹² One of the childhood memories the book recalled was of Kuroki running through a high plains thunderstorm after he and his brothers fled in terror from a screening of "All Quiet on the Western Front."⁹³ As an adult he registered racism and the moral pain of war in almost equal measure: in a bar in Nebraska, a neighbor interpreted his post-enlistment drink as a celebration of Pearl Harbor; sitting in another bar, in North Africa in 1943, he was overwhelmed by the memory of bombing Tunis the previous December, and began to imagine the people around him running for safety. Overcome, he confessed to the bartender, "I was one of the guys in those American bombers who bombed this city last year. I wanna say I'm sorry about it, but orders is orders. I hope we didn't kill many people. I wanna apologize."⁹⁴

Kuroki's distinguished record—he volunteered for further flights after a crash-landing that briefly left him interned in Spanish Morocco—ironically brought him into closer contact with the racial barriers that excluded him from a full participation in wartime citizenship.

⁹² Ralph Martin, *Boy From Nebraska* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1946), 148.

⁹³ Martin, *Boy From Nebraska*, 5.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 150-151.

Trading on his growing celebrity, the OWI recruited him for propaganda work in the “relocation camps.” Confronting the “shock of the barbed wire” on American soil, he wondered briefly what would happen if he ran away—would the guards shoot him down on the soil he had risked his life to protect?⁹⁵ He worried even more seriously about being shot by Americans while flying from Tinian at the end of the war.⁹⁶ (178) Between 15-hour flights he drank heavily and lost sleep to nightmares of being stabbed by men on both sides. Moral misgivings returned even more sharply as he bombed the center of Japanese urban life: “Kobe, Nagoya, Yokohama, Tachikawa, Osaka, Ota, Tokyo, Tokyo, Tokyo ... Tokyo so many times.”

And downstairs in the streets and alleys and cellars, more fear and stink and death. What kind of people were the bombs killing? People who looked like him, maybe some who even thought like him. Besides the Japanese warmongers and Fascists, there must be many down there who neither hated nor wanted, but simply existed. ...⁹⁷

He ended the imaginative excursion with the hope that the means and ends were comparable: “if only it all adds up to something.” Kuroki left Tinian after a soldier from Nebraska, a native American, cut him with a kitchen knife in a fight. He woke up in a field hospital among Marines evacuated from Okinawa, who thought Nisei combat intelligence troops were “wonderful guys” and a black soldier who asked him “why won’t they let us be real American citizens?” He had no answer.⁹⁸

Kuroki’s biography was a postwar work, not a part of the wartime culture, albeit only by a few months. Yet the moral feeling to which it gave voice was very much a matter of wartime

⁹⁵ Ibid., 164.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 178.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 189-190.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 192.

experience. There is no obvious reason to treat it as a work of disillusion or disavowal—it is not *All Quiet on the Western Front*, despite the allusion to his childhood encounter with the film in a local theater. As historical documents of American racial formations they speak to a certain form of midcentury liberalism, but as records of wartime mentalities they do far more to expand the horizons of what it meant to “support” mobilization and to tolerate violence than to document any nascent pacifist dissent; neither came anywhere near suggesting opposition to any of the military decisions they witnessed or in which they participated. If Kuroki and Romulo spoke from personal experience, other writers tried to imagine themselves into the place of non-white peoples who fell along the path of the American military without gaining a voice in the U.S. public sphere. One novel did this for the South Pacific.

The wartime novel of James Norman Hall, already famous for his trilogy of books about the *Mutiny on the Bounty*, drew admiring attention from the critic Diana Trilling, who called it a “much more serious” novel than John Hersey’s Pulitzer-Prize winning *A Bell for Adano*. In Hall’s story, *Lost Island* (1944), Navy engineers destroy a Polynesian island to build airstrips, flattening a village and relocating the population. Trilling was drawn to the paradox of a world “in which we have to destroy civilization in order to try to preserve it.”⁹⁹ One air base cost an entire world, a point made by a native elder, who lived in seclusion and related “the epic poetic cosmology of his people” to a resident philologist.¹⁰⁰ Against this cosmology Hall set thousands of machines spread over the world, “brooding through the night, dreaming their fearful dreams,

⁹⁹ Diana Trilling, *Reviewing the Forties*, (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1978), 100-101.

¹⁰⁰ James Norman Hall, *Lost Island* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1944), 71.

and, with man's help, making them come true.”¹⁰¹ The officer in charge of construction remarked that “It's a pity we're forced to do the kind of work the Huns are so fond of.” Underscoring the comparison between the American eviction and decimation of the local society were the only white inhabitants of the island, a family of Jewish refugees from Europe who were about to be displaced for a second time by the military takeover.¹⁰²

The book was not a story of resistance or even of open dissent: all the dramatic tension came from the misgivings of white military men; the islanders were sympathetic but mostly silent. In fact, one of Hall's characters challenged the narrator's erasure of Polynesian voices at the very end of the book, in a critique of the story he had just revealed back home in the United States: “You've not particularized them to any extent, as individuals.” The narrator answered that time precluded further details, then went on to say that the last reports he received were of native women impregnated by American soldiers, and of a native man killed in a dispute with GI's over women.¹⁰³ This ending underscored a tragedy but did not move any of the men to question the legitimacy of the mission so much as it made them doubt their own probity. The problem was not “native” voices or lives but the American conscience. And this could be handled. As Diana Trilling immediately perceived, Hall was no more “anti-war” than Romulo or Kuroki or Richard Tregaskis. He was a guide to the management of moral unease in a world where racial difference could not authorize killing, but where killing was nevertheless a very visible product of American energies in the world, and where the collision of a mechanized wartime machine with

¹⁰¹ Hall, *Lost Island*, 173.

¹⁰² Hall, *Lost Island*, 187, 124-125.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 205-208.

populations that happened to be in the way could prompt uneasy comparisons between the collective self and the enemy.

Hall's decision to conjure a fiction about the real war is worth considering as well. He had lived in Tahiti for many years by 1944, after gaining fame with his 1932 bestseller *Mutiny on the Bounty*. He could easily have written a factual book the South Pacific, and indeed he wrote a number of non-fiction essays and memoirs of military service and Polynesian life over the course of his career. But a novel allowed him to express the ambivalence of *Lost Island* with a particular sharpness. Many professional journalists took this route as well before 1945, shifting their war to the space of fiction, or to putatively nonfictional psychological narratives that were virtually indistinguishable from novels in form.

Between fact and fiction

In 1945, the word “faction” irritated *New Yorker* book reviewer Russell Maloney. It ruined his wordplay. If “faction” didn't already exist as a word, it would have been a perfect neologism for “a special kind of writing that flourishes in wartime, an oil-and-water mixture of fact and fiction.” The occasion for Maloney's pique was Shelley Mydan's *The Open City* (1945), a novel drawn from her internment in Manila's Santo Tomas Prison. Mydans said her story was fiction but the background was real, to which Maloney wrote: “The only rational response to this is ‘the hell you say.’ ” His complaint was not with the book's truthfulness, but with the term “novel.” “Fiction has its own kind of reality,” he objected. It could not be combined with the reality of journalism.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰⁴ “Unripe Fiction,” *The New Yorker*, February 24, 1945.

The “kind of reality” embodied in novels was a much sought-after commodity among combat journalists, who used novelistic techniques to depict whatever proved inaccessible to journalistic propriety. Mydans had much more freedom to evoke anxieties of sexual violence in her novel than in newspapers and magazines where rape was often euphemistically left as “the unspeakable.” In her fictionalization of Manila in 1941, anticipations of rape arose in whispered conversations, philosophical disputes (was it better to survive or to seek to be killed resisting?), and a drum-beat repetition of the word “Nanking” in one woman’s mind. There was no euphemism in the private conversations she recreated. A soldier’s wife locked the door of a bathroom to advise another, urgently, not to resist: “Wear your diaphragm, you know. You don’t want to have any Jap babies.”¹⁰⁵ Other service wives voiced resentment that the Army had left the “open city” rather than turning it into a far eastern Stalingrad.¹⁰⁶ Books straddling the line between fact and fiction held an overflow of impressions unsuited to newspaper reporting.

The blending of fact and fiction was especially potent in Erskine Caldwell’s war work. Since *Tobacco Road* (1932) Caldwell had been among the nation’s most famous novelists, noted (and often banned) for his explicit depiction of sexuality, violence, and rural poverty. From such “realistic” fiction he turned to journalism in the Depression, often in collaboration with the photographer Margaret Bourke-White (the two published a book in 1937, and were married from 1939-42). They traveled to the Soviet Union just before the invasion in 1941 and produced three books about the Eastern front in rapid succession: *Russia at War* (1942), *All Out on the Road to*

¹⁰⁵ Shelley Mydans, *The Open City* (Doubleday, Doran), 24-25.

¹⁰⁶ The decision to declare Manila an “open city” was controversial on other levels. The Soviet Union, doubtful of Western commitments, was particularly harsh: *Pravda* referred to “Petain methods” in the Philippines, and compared the evacuation with the defense of Soviet cities. Los Angeles *Times*, Jan. 1, 1942, “Manila Open City Declaration Called Cowardly By Reds.”

Smolensk (1942), and *All Night Long: A Novel of Guerrilla Warfare in Russia* (1942). In the novel, the last of the three titles, Caldwell attempted to enter more directly into the experience and psychology of violence he had already reported in terms of material effects.

At the onset of the Nazi invasion Caldwell was confined to Moscow by the Soviet Information Bureau, gaining little perspective on the scale of the fighting until Bourke-White secured permission for them to travel to Smolensk, some 250 miles west of the capital. On the road he was struck by the overwhelming evidence for the targeting of civilians, writing about the exterminatory nature of the invasion—Jewish civilians were murdered without provocation—and widespread partisan warfare.¹⁰⁷ His reportorial account of the partisan war and civilian killing was cursory, drawn from brief interviews and from the ruins of villages. Writing a strictly journalistic account of what he could see (and quote) left him with cold bodies rather than living violence. His novel, *All Night Long*, represented an effort to give life—even sensuality—to the grappling struggle for survival. When his protagonist, Sergei, killed a German with a blade, Caldwell dwelled on the feeling of flesh against steel and the moral detachment it brought: “the German was an inanimate object.”¹⁰⁸ Despite this, the bodies of Germans are repeatedly humanized and even infantilized: Sergei looked on corpses, thinking that each one could be a university student; his companion, Fyoder, stabs a man and then remarks: “they’re sending

¹⁰⁷ Erskine Caldwell, *All Out on the Road to Smolensk* (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1942), 190-1.

¹⁰⁸ Erskine Caldwell, *All Night Long: A Novel of Guerrilla Warfare in Russia* (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1942), 44.

kindergartners now.”¹⁰⁹ Bourke-White photographed bodies; Caldwell reanimated them to die in print.

Caldwell justified killing—and its graphic representation—not just as a response to aggression, but as an answer to the sexual violence that was a central element of his characters’ psychological experience of the war. Sergei’s fiancé was imprisoned in a German brothel; Fyodor’s pregnant wife was bayoneted in the stomach and his 12-year-old daughter raped. The two men found an entire village of 200-300 people buried in a ditch, with the women bruised on the breasts and thighs.¹¹⁰

While Caldwell, Mydans and Hersey (in the case of *A Bell for Adano*) called their books novels, other writers published novelistic reconstructions as nonfiction. In between publishing a memoir in 1943 and a war novel in 1947, Ira Wolfert wrote an account of the occupied Philippines that drew on interviews but was narrated as a novel. *American Guerrilla in the Philippines* (1945) was a series of brutal vignettes purporting to convey precise dialog and psychological states from a long partisan conflict. Although he had seen combat in the Pacific, for this work Wolfert relied on interviews conducted in the last months of the war. Wolfert described one guerrilla approaching a Filipina woman to tell her that he was going to kill her husband, a suspected collaborator; later, he returned the body and told her she was better off while she wept and cursed him.¹¹¹ A separate group of guerrillas also assassinated Filipinos who

¹⁰⁹ Caldwell, *All Night Long*, 51, 103.

¹¹⁰ Caldwell, *All Night Long*, 82-5, 272-3, 161-66.

¹¹¹ Ira Wolfert, *American Guerilla in the Philippines* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1945), 105.

cooperated with the occupation and delivered mutilated bodies to their villages.¹¹² Sometimes conflicts among anti-Japanese armed groups led to violent clashes. In August 1943, Wolfert wrote, 200 people were killed on Leyte during a skirmish between guerrilla factions, one of which tried to use civilians as human shields. The strategy failed: “[the] soldiers were weeping as they fired into the civilians.”¹¹³

While grim in tone and arguably disclosing multiple war crimes by U.S.-allied forces, the book was evidently neither intended nor taken as a critique, and was well-received even as the fighting continued in the Philippines. It reached the *New York Times* and *Publisher's Weekly* bestseller lists, the Book of the Month Club promoted it, and a major studio purchased rights to the screenplay (Fritz Lang eventually produced the film). *American Guerrilla* was thoroughly mainstream journalism. It was also atrocity literature implicating Americans and their allies. Wolfert detailed a 1943 incident when U.S.-led guerrillas captured a wildly inaccurate sniper. He turned out to be a ten-year-old boy, a local child paid by Japanese soldiers to shoot at the guerrillas from a tree. The guerrillas disarmed the boy, then killed him with blows to the face from a rifle butt. His 12-year-old sister was watching; they decided to punish her as well. While one officer—Wolfert's informant—screamed that he would have them court-martialed, the guerrillas filled a tin with the boy's blood and tried to force his sister to drink from it, as “an example to the people.”¹¹⁴ For Wolfert this was regrettable, but not something that needed to be hidden from the people at home. It was entirely within the pale, on the other hand, when U.S.

¹¹² Wolfert, *American Guerrilla*, 147.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 142.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 184-185.

soldiers killed three Japanese men – caught shopping in Balingasag, far from any front lines – by trapping them in a church and burning it down.¹¹⁵

Wolfert had little familiarity with the Philippines, and the character of sprawling and decentralized partisan war that was fought by politically disparate groups cannot be extrapolated from his account. But his reliability is less interesting than his estimate of the kind of war people were willing to read about at home. Liberation did not need to be unambiguous, and this was perhaps more starkly apparent in book-length reportage than anywhere else. With U.S. soldiers returning to the islands, American guerrillas disarmed a Philippines Constabulary garrison in the Visayas Islands. The Constabulary sergeant ordered a surrender, but one man panicked and ran. Iliff Richardson, the American leader, shot him dead. The Filipino sergeant exploded in rage: ““Why do you murder?” cried the sergeant. ‘We surrender.’”

“I didn't want to shoot. They made me.”

“You shoot, you murder, you just want to shoot.”

I ran over to him and put my gun against his chest. I was crazy there for a minute. My finger itched crazily against the trigger.

“They ran,” I screamed. “You son of a bitch, they ran. They made me.”¹¹⁶

This scene is closer to *The Heart of Darkness* than to Tom Brokaw's vision of the greatest generation, but contemporary reviewers were not upset by the book, and no one read it as a protest. Antifascism does not explain this, nor does anti-Japanese racism. To invoke “brutalization” suggests a lack of sensitivity nowhere in evidence in Wolfert's work; further, brutalization implies an acquired indifference that in no way resembled the agitated and defensive soldiers described in this scene. The better explanation is that Wolfert's presumptive

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 85-6.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 268-269.

readership had learned by 1945 to accept U.S. global power as simultaneously a moral good and a force not always distinct from murder. Wolfert expected his readers to tolerate extraordinary ambiguities.

Diana Trilling came to the conclusion, by May 1944, that journalists had replaced novelists at the creative center of American writing. Looking back on 500 novels she had read as a reviewer for *The Nation* during the war, she claimed that none were worth saving for her personal library.¹¹⁷ Was the American novel obsolete, she asked? It was not. “There is still one sphere that journalism cannot penetrate—the moral sphere, which is uniquely the province of the novel.”¹¹⁸ Trilling’s wartime reviews were often penetrating, but moral imagination was a strange ground on which to defend the novel to the exclusion of journalism. In the same piece, she argued that novels slipped in prestige at the onset of the Depression, “when the individual lost prestige in the modern world” and the focus of the literary world shifted from “the moral life of the individual to the morality of the social structure itself.” Clearly, though, something else was happening in the early 1940s. The war books embedded moral judgments in a social world—indeed, insisted that the reporter and the audience were wrapped up in a relationship which somehow played a part in constituting the war’s ethical side—while still giving thick narrative accounts of the interior lives of individuals. This is particularly apparent in the books that treated war in religious and familial terms.

Seats of Judgment: Epistolary Nonfiction and Religious War Books

¹¹⁷ Diana Trilling, “What Has Happened to Our Novels?” *Harper’s Magazine*, May 1, 1944, 530.

¹¹⁸ Diana Trilling, “What Has Happened to Our Novels?” 536.

Charles Rinear turned to books as he struggled with the morality of wartime killing. A former New England boarding school teacher, Rinear volunteered for Air Force training before December 1941, but wrote to a friend in April 1942 that he had no desire to “kill any Japs.” As he awaited deployment he read extensively in the new war literature, and recommended John Steinbeck’s *The Moon is Down* and Antoine de Saint-Exupery’s *Flight to Arras*, a memoir of the air war in France, “though neither offered much of a solution to the status of the war in my mind.”¹¹⁹ Solutions remained elusive: he told his parents he was “glad” Tokyo had been bombed, but he also wrote, in a poem dedicated to a friend killed in the Royal Air Force, “You knew / The criminality of killing, even in war / And you delivered justice in a deadly plane.”¹²⁰ In June he was still thinking about Exupery’s book—which had declared that “Fighters no not fight; they murder”—writing his Aunt Connie about the French aviator and his own ambivalence. “I wish I could hate,” he concluded.¹²¹

When Rinear was killed in Sicily in 1943 his private worries became public. Houghton Press published his letters under the elaborate title *We Are of Clay: Letters and ‘Random Jottings’ of the Late Lieut. ‘Chick’ Rinear, P-38 Pilot, Who Did His Job, Yet Wondered* (1945). The title exemplified two genres of war writing. The first was epistolary nonfiction, the published correspondence between soldiers and family. The second was religious writing. Both put moral accounting in front of intimate authorities: family, friends, clergy, and a personal God.

¹¹⁹ Charles Rinear, *We Are of Clay: Letters and ‘Random Jottings’ of the Late Lieut. ‘Chick’ Rinear, P-38 Pilot, Who Did His Job, Yet Wondered* (Philadelphia: The Houghton Press, 1945), 37.

¹²⁰ Rinear, *We Are of Clay*, 38, 42.

¹²¹ Rinear, *We Are of Clay*, 44.

And both transformed inward experiences—personal correspondence and immanent religion—into part of the public culture of war.

Mina Curtiss, a professor of English at Smith College, collected dozens of personal exchanges for the aptly-titled *Letters Home* (1944). The Office of War Information had hired Curtiss as part of its ambitious program of tracking domestic morale, and sent her to interview military families in the Midwest in 1942. During her research, a soldier's mother turned over a shoebox full of letters that seemed to her a richer source than the interviews. Tracking down more letters and talking families into publishing them became her war-work.¹²²

Curtiss revealed expressions of sentiment just as complex as Private Raine's. Private Eric Golub, an engineer from Brooklyn, wrote to his wife about civilians killed in the bombing of Italian cities—he described streets littered with decomposing bodies and women weeping as their husbands dug for lost children in collapsed homes.¹²³ Sergeant Samuel Allen, Jr., a Norfolk, Virginia hotel manager was killed in Italy around the same time—before his death he wrote to his parents about North Africa: “It's a very, very horrible war, dirty, dishonest, not at all that glamor war that we read about in the home town papers we read.” Allen complained about German anti-personnel mines and wrote about showing “no mercy” in retaliation. “I hope that I haven't shocked you, yet in some ways I hope I have. You are the people that run things, not us out here.”¹²⁴ John Earle, who worked for the American Ambulance Field Service, excoriated nationalism as the root of wars and turned his critique away from the battlefield and back

¹²² Mina Curtiss, *Letters Home* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1944), vii.

¹²³ Curtiss, *Letters Home*, 94.

¹²⁴ Curtiss, *Letters Home*, 65.

towards the society he had left behind: “It is for this reason that I condemn the old ‘I pledge allegiance’ ... I hate this war not only for the horror it breeds but also the very reason behind its essence—on both sides.”¹²⁵ Curtiss picked letters that defied a simple patriotism; her correspondents expressed moral ambivalence about the “war effort” in which they were fully engaged participants, and were unafraid to reveal that ambivalence to family members who are often imagined as insulated and insensible to the dilemmas of the world beyond U.S. borders.

While Curtiss’s subjects were obscure, *The War Letters of Morton Eustis to His Mother* (1945) reflected an influential family’s dispute over the permissibility of wartime violence. Eustis, the grandson of Vice President Levi P. Morton, grew up across Lafayette Square from the White House. He joined the Army in 1940, and carried on a lengthy correspondence with his mother from India, North Africa, Italy, and France. In 1940-2 his letters were political but breezy: supportive of FDR, happy to be away from the overbearing family friends “Cabot and Emily” (the Massachusetts senator and his wife), and pro-British in India (the only prospect for independence was “for all the Hindus and Mohammedans to be converted to Christianity.”¹²⁶ In February 1943, approaching the front in Africa, his tone changed. The Allied war machine would go to Berlin, he told his mother, “wrecking all the communities along the road.” The Nazi problem would be solved by destroying Germany. “I hope you don’t think this is too bloodthirsty a program. Personally, I don’t think it’s bloodthirsty enough.”¹²⁷ At the end of May, he expressed a casual wish to kill a German personally. In July, after landing under fire in Sicily, he

¹²⁵ Curtiss, *Letters Home*, 35.

¹²⁶ Morton Eustis, *The War Letters of Morton Eustis to His Mother* (Washington, D.C.: The Spiral Press, 1945), 27, 5, 50.

¹²⁷ Eustis, *The War Letters of Morton Eustis*, 71.

quoted with approval an officer who wanted to catch a German soldier and kill him slowly with a knife.¹²⁸

Eustis's letter from Sicily paralleled the outrage over antipersonnel mines expressed by one of Curtiss's writers: in both cases, legal and widely-used weapons triggered demands for unlimited retaliation when these "normal" forms of war killed compatriots. The language of the letters displayed a moral reasoning that did not conform either to an unlimited-war perspective or to a sense of justice rooted in formal, universal rules. Instead, the emotional verdict of men under fire was that they had received a grave injustice deserving recompense. The responses of Eustis's mother are difficult to infer up to this point. But when Eustis remarked approvingly of the bombing of Rome, he provoked some kind of reproving answer.¹²⁹ Five days later he was defensive: "I can't agree with you about this bombing of cities," he wrote. He gave a utilitarian defense—bombing saved lives in the long run—and then revealed an entirely different line of thought in a second letter on the same day: "I'm so scared Germany may sue for peace before we have a chance to take a crack at her on her own soil that I wake up nights in a cold fury."¹³⁰

Two weeks later he expanded this defense into a lengthy rebuttal of "your theory and that of Aunt Helen about the bombing of enemy towns." He began cautiously, saying he had no wish to target civilians. "But if civilians must be killed to attain your objective, why then there's nothing to do but to kill them." This line seemed to rest on something like the familiar doctrine of "double effect," which permits civilian killing as an unintended (albeit foreseen)

¹²⁸ Eustis, *The War Letters of Morton Eustis*, 121, 140.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 169-170.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 171.

consequence—what in the postwar was reformulated as “collateral damage.” He did not say, as he had earlier, that casualties from bombing were small. Instead, he maintained that “hundreds of thousands” of deaths could be justified as the means to a stronger peace. But he also denied that the only reason to kill civilians was immediate military necessity. Killing Germans was pedagogical: it would teach them not to arm for a third war. “The German *people* should suffer, and suffer for many years.” Nor was this an extreme position, he insisted—even extermination might be justified. He concluded with the authority of experience: “If America had had any bombing of its own, it would feel quite differently, I feel sure.”¹³¹

An important aspect of this letter is the oscillation between formal categories of just war thought—e.g., that civilians could be killed as a foreseeable consequence of attacking urban military targets—and the angry, moralistic insistence that civilians *should* be killed because the Germans deserved to suffer as a people. The former was part of a liberal repertoire of arguments claiming dispassionate, universal applicability. The latter was the culmination of months of increasingly emotional missives reflecting his growing experience of violence. But Eustis did not separate the two, and it is impossible to imagine that the arguments did not build upon each other as he formulated them in the same pages.

These thoughts were rushed into publication when the author died in combat. Apparently he had, just before his death, convinced his family: “I am glad that you are coming around to my way of thinking about the bombing (of Germany). I thought you would.” Less than a month before his death in France, he returned to the issue apropos a story about a captured German officer “who was raving about the American ‘terror bombings’ of innocent women and

¹³¹ Ibid., 182-184.

children.” German moral indignation provoked him far more than any other experience of combat, and prompted him to hope that he would have a chance to “kill at least ten of them personally.”¹³²

Morton Eustis was neither a philosopher nor an obvious representative of public opinion, but his effort to make moral sense of war in dialog with his family was not exceptional. Soldiers are dependent for their moral orientations upon the behavior and culture of their immediate social group, the peers with whom one fights. But they look beyond this, and it mattered to Eustis that his mother and his aunt should approve. Keith Wheeler dedicated his brutal “Attu postscript” to his mother. Homosocial bonds may be stronger determinants of behavior in combat, but soldiers nonetheless looked for the moral validation of the domestic sphere. And in this case the soldier appears to have found it: the public display of these interactions made the dialog itself, and not just the combat testimonial, part of civilian understandings of the war.

Religious texts did similar work, laying bare the relations of wartime violence and inner life. The difference was that these texts moved the seat of judgment from the domestic sphere to the divine. American churches, to be sure, avoided crusading language—the jingoism of 1917 was an embarrassing memory.¹³³ But religious perceptions of the war are obvious even at the level of slogans: “praise the lord and pass the ammunition” and “God is my co-pilot” both enjoyed popular careers from Tin Pan Alley to Hollywood. Both slogans also served as titles for books that reported and interpreted the war in Christian terms.

¹³² Ibid., 205, 227.

¹³³ Gerald Sittser, *A Cautious Patriotism: The American Churches & the Second World War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2007).

Howell Forgy, a Presbyterian Navy Chaplain stationed at Pearl Harbor in 1941, took credit for the phrase “praise the lord and pass the ammunition” in his book, *And Pass the Ammunition* (1944).¹³⁴ No reader would mistake Forgy’s self-examination for the brassy popular song that popularized the phrase (the song’s author, Frank Loesser, was better known for “Jingle Jangle Jingle”).¹³⁵ The real subject of the book was a double conversion experience, leading the chaplain from pacifism to enlistment, and then from patriotic service to a firm embrace of total war informed by personal experience of its consequences. The first conversion was political and mediated. After reading about German aggression in the local newspapers of Murray, Kentucky in 1940, Forgy wrote to President Roosevelt to offer his services. He wasn’t expecting a response, but White House press secretary Stephen Early replied, telling him to enlist as a chaplain.

He described the next week as a stream-of-consciousness composed of loosely connected Biblical injunctions: “*Love your enemies ... And with a scourge of small cords He drove them from the temple ... Turn to him also the other cheek ... There shall be wars and rumors of wars ...*”¹³⁶ His protracted inner drama ended with enlistment, but not with a decisive step towards violence. When he chose the Navy he calculated that Army training would aggravate his

¹³⁴ When Frank Loesser wrote his famous song using the phrase, he attributed it to a Catholic chaplain, Captain McGuire, who denied having said any such thing. Donald Crosby, *Battlefield Chaplains: Catholic Priests in World War II* (Lawrence, Kansas: University of Kansas Press, 1994), 13-15.

¹³⁵ Kathleen Smith, *God Bless America: Tin Pan Alley Goes to War* (University Press of Kentucky, 2003), 15-16.

¹³⁶ Howell Forgy, *And Pass the Ammunition* (New York: D. Appleton Century, 1944), 148-149.

hayfever. His first conversion was a break with pacifism, but it left him shaken and doubtful. It also left his engagement with war entirely abstract. Allergies remained more real than killing.

In the Pacific he found “the hell of war, far worse than any man of peace could dream.”¹³⁷ But violence ratified his choice. On December 7, 1941, his offhand comment about passing the ammunition was a small part of the day, assuming it happened at all. He tended to burned sailors, then reflected on his decision to put on a uniform, musing on the newspaper abstractions that had prompted the decision. The difference between printed pictures of war and a “living close-up” was staggering, and it affirmed his commitment.¹³⁸ A few days later, a young sailor named Davidson left a note in his cabin expressing doubt that war could be distinguished from murder. “God knows, I was sympathetic with his views,” Forgy wrote.¹³⁹ They had a long conversation, recorded (or re-invented) in the book as a dialog about realism. Forgy began with the injustice of Pearl Harbor, and asked Davidson to try to imagine the U.S. launching such an attack. This left the young man unimpressed: “America, too, is far from being a moral nation,” Davidson told him. Forgy answered that U.S. moral superiority was relative, but still real, and that anything else was impossible in a sinful world. “All wars are evil,” Forgy said. But no decision of theirs could stop war. Seeing that the young man remained unconvinced, he added another line of reasoning: no one would pay any attention to a pacifist now, so he should fight and preserve his reputation, then campaign against the causes of war later.¹⁴⁰ The conversation

¹³⁷ Forgy, *And Pass the Ammunition*, 203.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 21.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 158.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 161-162.

was inconclusive, but months later their views converged. The signalman, whose “eyes were smiling,” found the chaplain to tell him excitedly about Japanese ships burning at sea.¹⁴¹ Both men had gone beyond their reluctant donning of a uniform to embrace the process of killing with a full knowledge of what mechanized total war felt like. On the level of day-to-day life, such exchanges constituted the moral character of the war: death became good news.

When Forgy returned to the United States he encountered a group of men singing the popular song about passing the ammunition. He waved to them, thinking at the same time that if enough men “really praise the Lord” then the ammunition would be unnecessary. He did not hear his own phrase as marching music—it was an expression of a tragic conception of a fallen world, which he ultimately expressed in a language that converged with many other strands of wartime thought. “The war had taught me one thing: Christ was not an idealist; He was the world's greatest realist.”¹⁴²

The influential Catholic prelate Francis Spellman—who decades later would be satirized by the editorial cartoonist Edward Sorel in a painting that depicted him carrying a rifle in Vietnam under the caption “pass the lord and praise the ammunition”¹⁴³—also conflated Christ with combatants. In *The Risen Soldier* (1944) he prayed over men at an air base while they prepared to bomb cities. The bombers called to mind “another Victor-Victim,” but the theologically conservative Spellman did not picture the war as morally blameless.¹⁴⁴ The

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 162.

¹⁴² Ibid., 240-242.

¹⁴³ Edward Sorel, *Making the World Safe for Hypocrisy: A Collection of Satirical Drawings and Commentaries* (Chicago: Swallow Press, 1972).

¹⁴⁴ Francis Spellman, *The Risen Soldier* (New York: MacMillan, 1944), 10.

soldiers' pain evoked Calvary, but wartime violence was part of a sinful world. Those who said soldiers died for peace erred. "They do not know whereof they speak, for war of itself never brings peace. War begets war because man has failed the Soldier."¹⁴⁵ Spellman's next book, *No Greater Love* (1945), was both a paean to soldiers and an anxious portrait of wartime barbarism. On a pilgrimage to Jerusalem he was told: "God must love the Moslems, for you Christians kill one another."¹⁴⁶ This notion was not dispelled on a European tour that showed him "the fury of American bombings" in Paris, tangles of German bodies that made him imagine even more dead in Berlin, and men whose "human sensibilities" had been so brutalized that they could "without flinching, shoot others."¹⁴⁷ Spellman's Catholicism, like Forgy's Protestant realism, was a Christianity that could support the violence of 1944-5 without minimizing or obfuscating.

Robert Scott's *God Is My Co-Pilot* (1943) pictured the war in different spiritual vestments. Some early reviewers took issue with his title, objecting that he had written a good war story without God. They were mistaken. Scott's faith was not orthodox, but he closely linked flying, killing, and transcendental spiritual experience. Flying was the key. Scott took the title from a missionary surgeon in Kunming, who told him—during surgery—that he had "the greatest co-pilot in the world" in a one-man plane. Thinking this over in terms of his combat in China, Scott predicted that the postwar world would be "closer to God," and implored the "Great

¹⁴⁵ Spellman, *The Risen Soldier*, 18.

¹⁴⁶ Spellman, *No Greater Love: The Story of Our Soldiers* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1945), 16.

¹⁴⁷ Spellman, *No Greater Love*, 88, 52-3, 97.

Flying Boss in the sky” to let him shoot down another 100 airplanes.¹⁴⁸ The spatial rendering of spiritual renewal—becoming “closer” to God—was not accidental, nor was the “Flying Boss” appellation entirely flip. Flight was worship for Scott, beginning with his first time in the air: a nearly fatal plunge on home-made wings cut from the canvas of a revivalist tent in Macon, Georgia, as a child.¹⁴⁹

Scott did not call the war in China a crusade, but a spiritual quality inflected his flight narratives. He described his sense of reverence flying past Mount Everest, “in Tibet called Chamolang, the Sacred One.” He was equally reverent about “that steadily purring engine which was carrying me on and on above the greatest of mountains.”¹⁵⁰ The elation of flight—sublime landscapes, technological omnipotence, and even the physiological sensations of acceleration and oxygen deprivation—made the connection to divinity plausible. A comparably transcendental experience was the “tribute” paid by crowds of Chinese nationalists who cheered for him as he left the country. He translated his feelings into flying terms: with that applause in mind, he wrote, he could easily end his life by flying directly into a Japanese plane.¹⁵¹ The last lines of the book return these spiritual sentiments to an embodied divinity, in verse borrowed from John Magee’s *High Flight*: “Put out my hand, and touched the face of God.”¹⁵² Religious feeling permeated Scott’s story.

¹⁴⁸ Robert Scott, *God is My Co-Pilot*, (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1943), xiii.

¹⁴⁹ Robert Scott, *God is My Co-Pilot*, 1.

¹⁵⁰ Robert Scott, *God is My Co-Pilot*, 95.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 276-277.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 277.

Scott described killing in the same terms, as an almost religious reverie. He spent “the greatest month of my life” strafing trucks in Burma and returned from combat “intoxicated with success”; when he counted forty bodies on the road he was “highly elated.”¹⁵³ On another occasion he was excited to machine-gun a disabled train outside Hanoi.¹⁵⁴ A few pages later, in a chapter titled “You’ve Got to Shoot at People,” he recalled turning machine-guns on Japanese men swimming away from sinking barges, and estimated that he had personally killed 600-1000 people on a single day in May 1942.¹⁵⁵ Flush with confidence and feeling “very arrogant and egotistical” on a Hong Kong raid, he impulsively attacked the city’s famous Peninsula Hotel. “My tracers ripped into the shining plate-glass of the pent-houses on its top, and I saw the broken windows cascade like snow to the streets, many floors below. I laughed, for I knew that behind those windows were Japanese high officers, enjoying that modern hotel.” For good measure he made another pass to shoot men on the fire escapes.¹⁵⁶ The quasi-religious elation of flight was not diminished by its transformation into combat; indeed, killing was just as elevating.

God is My Co-Pilot refused moral ambiguity: this was good violence without qualification. But Scott was aware that not everyone would read his account with the same equanimity. After many war stories, he spoke to the “theory” that killing other human beings “would come back to you at night, and you’d wake up in horror.” He was eager to refute this view, but glossed over systematic justification to offer the testimony of his personal feelings: “I

¹⁵³ Ibid., 130-133.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 142.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 145-147.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 231.

just laughed in my heart.”¹⁵⁷ Pilots, he wrote, did not feel moral qualms. This was by no means a consensus view, but as he turned to justification Scott’s narrative followed the same path as the other epistolary and religious authors. He claimed to expose his inner life, the laughter of his heart, to public examination and ultimately moral approval. While there was no groundswell of sentiment rejecting this variety of personal revelation, the reactions conjured by the reading of books remain particularly elusive realm of reception—books were not read with the same simultaneity of newspapers or heard collectively as were radio broadcasts. Still, enough attention was paid to readership that a tentative sketch of the response to these books is possible.

Conclusion: From Books to Readers

In 4,000 homes, the knock on the door in June 1945 may have been a moment of terror. The invasion of Okinawa, which killed 12,000 U.S. servicemen, had been front-page news for weeks. Ernie Pyle, the popular correspondent, was fatally shot there—his late-war death compounded fears of losing loved ones just as peace appeared at hand.

But this knock came from investigators with questions about books, rather than notices from the War Department. If the public was nervous, so was the publishing industry. Over three weeks that spring, two hundred interviewers canvased a hundred cities to find out if the bottom was about to fall out of the book market.¹⁵⁸ Their work captured a snapshot of reading habits in the last apocalyptic weeks of the conflict. Among the findings of the interviews: one in six

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 254.

¹⁵⁸ Henry C. Link and Harry Hopf, *People and Books: A study of reading and book-buying habits* (New York: Book Manufacturers' Institute, 1946), 30.

regular readers said their most recent book had been about the war. For the college educated, it was closer to one in five.¹⁵⁹ Even if this reflected a bias towards “patriotic” answers, it strongly suggests an ongoing engagement with titles about the war, just as publishers thought attention was turning elsewhere.

Beyond this point one must admit the limits of the archive. There is simply no reliable way to establish predominant reader responses to the violence encountered in hundreds of titles about the war. The traces left in letters, reviews, surveys and such offer the barest indications of how titles were received. Even a subtle reviewer might only remark on a book’s “brutal realism” without describing the mental shadows cast by specific accounts of violence.

And yet these books *were* sold, borrowed, circulated, and read. Traces of readership, however slight, can only be interpreted against this mostly-silent backdrop of mass consumption. This final section explores the social and geographic locations of reading, and considers some documented responses to war books. It does not, however, privilege in a positivistic way the chance record of an individual’s textual encounters over the certainty that thousands of others read precisely the same words. If we cannot presume to read minds, books still deepen our understanding of what the public had been exposed to while continuing to build guns, buy bonds, cast ballots, answer surveys, and give up family to the armed forces. The significance of the war books was ecological. Authors and publishers poured out a flood of morally fraught narratives of wartime violence without ever poisoning morale.

The physical ubiquity of war books stands out in a multiplicity of sources. Margaret Scott, a University of Chicago Library School graduate student, examined the records of a

¹⁵⁹ Link and Hopf, *People and Books: A study of reading and book-buying habits*, 72.

bookmobile plying a 382-mile circuit through rural Talladega County, Alabama, in 1941 and 1942. She found limited literacy and described the library patrons as “bound in a caste system which seriously deters cultural advancement.” Even here, though, ten titles about the war had made it into circulation by early 1942.¹⁶⁰ These books were less popular than titles on “better living” and religion, leading Scott to remark on the “lack of interest in current world problems.” But one might as easily be surprised by even this many war books bumping their way down rural Alabama roads before the national propaganda agency had gotten around to establishing a book section.¹⁶¹

Scott’s thesis supervisor, Library Science Professor Leon Carnovsky, sent several other students into the field to trace reading in the early 1940s.¹⁶² Augusta Davis examined circulation records from the George Cleveland Hall branch of the Chicago Public Library, in the middle of the south side “black belt.” Davis tracked the borrowing of 1,000 individuals over several months, and she too lamented what seemed like a relatively slight interest in world affairs. But

¹⁶⁰ Margaret Helen Scott, “Reading in an Alabama County: A Study of the Reading of Negro Adults in Talladega County, Alabama,” (Masters Thesis, University of Chicago Library School, 1943), pp. 11, 59.

¹⁶¹ The “Book Bureau” formally came into being in March 1942 in the Office of Facts and Figures. Office of War Information Records of the Historian, Records of the Historian Relating to the Domestic Branch, 1942-45, NARA RG 208, entry 6A, box 1.

¹⁶² The Chicago students also no doubt picked up some of the OWI ethos in their spring 1943 course, “Wartime Communications,” which taught the “analysis of my propaganda, sampling of home morale” and other topics echoing the program of both liberal and corporate propaganda officials. See *The Graduate Library School*, catalog for 1942-1943 sessions. See catalog description for course 317, “Wartime Communications.” The instructor Douglas Waples, published widely on reading, morale and propaganda from the early 1930s. See, e.g., Waples “Propaganda and Leisure Reading,” *The Journal of Higher Education*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (Feb, 1930), pp. 73-77 and Waples and Berelson, et al., *What Reading Does to People: A Summary of Evidence on the Social Effects of Reading and a Statement of Problems for Research* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1940).

her work also turned up the same titles that the Council and the OWI wanted read. Five individuals had checked out the first “Imperative” title, *They Were Expendable*, 10 had read Erskine Caldwell’s *All Out on the Road to Smolensk*, and 15 had St. John’s painful Balkan memoir, *From the Land of the Silent People*.¹⁶³

Davis stressed the (slight) overrepresentation of men among the borrowers of war books. But a simultaneous study at Chicago Teachers College found that many of the same titles were popular among the overwhelmingly female (and white) student body. During one week in October 1942, a sample of some 800 students reported that they read at least part of Caldwell’s book (11 times), William Shirer’s *Berlin Diary* (22 times), White’s *The Were Expendable* (11 times), St. Exupery’s *Flight to Arras* (twice) and a dozen other war titles spanning topics from combat surgery in Burma to guerrilla war in China, and for good measure *Mein Kampf* and *War and Peace*.¹⁶⁴ Some of these titles were requested 700 miles away by workers in a Wichita City, Kansas, airplane factory, who got their books from a WPA-funded bookmobile that crossed tight security—librarians had to show their birth certificates—to deliver books during shift changes.¹⁶⁵

The material pressures that brought the bookmobile to the factory stood out for Elin Kaufmann when she took time off from her publishing job at Alfred Knopf to work in Macy’s New York book section during the 1943 Christmas season. In one day on the job she sold a stack of copies of Eve Curie’s war memoir to a single man who “wanted to give it to *everybody* for

¹⁶³ Augusta Katharine Davis, “Negro Reading of Library War Books,” (Masters Thesis, University of Chicago Library School, 1943), 28-35.

¹⁶⁴ Bessie Ream, “The Reading of Students and Faculty at Chicago Teachers College,” (Masters Thesis, University of Chicago Library School, 1943).

¹⁶⁵ “Libraries and the War Program,” *Library Journal*, May 15, 1942.

Christmas”, discussed strategy in South Asia with a woman purchasing books about India’s war, and watched a boy dragged reluctantly away from *Target: Germany*—a book about the air war—to go visit Santa.¹⁶⁶ John Kidd, of Cincinnati, said business had been like a “cyclone”¹⁶⁷ That spring sidewalk crowds gathered in front of Brentano’s in Philadelphia, Marshall Field in Chicago, and the Penguin Bookstore in New York to gaze at war books displayed next to guns borrowed from collectors and manufacturers.¹⁶⁸

Teachers and librarians also wrote about the wartime interest of their patrons and pupils. Frances Brown, a high school English teacher in Dayton, Ohio, described her students’ unassigned war reading: Hersey, White, Caldwell, and St. John were popular. One of her students, in a note mimicking the language of Rex Stout and Bennett Cerf, recommended *Flight to Arras* as a book which “told in cold facts the hardships of a people overrun by an enemy with no such thing as mercy.”¹⁶⁹ Instructors at Peabody High School, the laboratory school of the Georgia State College for Women, reported that graduating seniors in 1943 were conscious of censorship in the press, wanted more war news, and read war books to fill the gaps before going into the world. They read Hersey, Tregaskis, and White.¹⁷⁰ Many were bound for employment in a local ordinance plant. It might have been possible to build bombs in Milledgeville, Georgia, for

¹⁶⁶ Elin Kaufmann, “Christmas Part-Timer At Macy’s,” *Publisher’s Weekly*, January 1, 1944.

¹⁶⁷ “Early 1944 Prospects in the Bookstores,” *Publisher’s Weekly*, January 29, 1944.

¹⁶⁸ *Publisher’s Weekly*, March 11, 1944.

¹⁶⁹ Frances Brown, “We Recommend: My Pupils and I think You and Your Classes Will Like These Books on Current Affairs,” *The Clearing House*, Vol. 17, No. 8 (April 1943), 493.

¹⁷⁰ Euri Bolton and Mildred English, “High School Seniors Think about the War and Peace” *The High School Journal*, Vol. 26, No. 6 (Nov – Dec 1943), 197-209.

two years without imagining where those bombs were bound. But the selection of books that these 17-year-olds read suggested that they chose otherwise, and many of the young women did their war work after reading descriptions of men killed by modern arms. Harlan Hatcher, who taught English at Ohio State University, voiced the common sentiment that “straight reporting” had outstripped fiction in representing “the disasters for which our minds were essentially unprepared”—and invoked St. John’s *Land of Silent People* as an example.¹⁷¹ St John, of course, had wanted nothing more than to imprint the knowledge of physical, bodily disasters on the minds of readers in places like Ohio, Georgia, and Illinois.

The war books anticipated and were superseded by a long wave of postwar experiments in the representation of wartime experience, from Norman Mailer’s *The Naked and the Dead* to the works of Celine, Kurt Vonnegut, Vassily Grossman, Thomas Pynchon and many others. But whatever these later works accomplished, they did not puncture a silence enveloping the catastrophic violence of the 1940s. There had not been any such silence in the early 1940s. Nor are the later books aptly described as explorations of ethical questions that had been left patriotically unexamined. In fact, an extraordinary literary effort was made during the 1940s to involve the public with the war’s “reality” as an ethical duty distinct from—though bolstering—the material support of mobilization. This was true of the metropolitan press and of some Hollywood filmmaking as well, but the project was carried the furthest between the covers of books written and published at the same time as the killing.

¹⁷¹ Harlan Hatcher, “A Scene of Confusion” *College English*, Vol 4, No 3 (December 1942), 157

How was this lost? The war books had a frisson of terror and significance in the 1940s that at least partially evaporated later. Cecil McHale, a librarian at the University of Michigan, noticed in 1942 that new books, even mediocre adventure stories, made him anxious in ways that the texts themselves could not explain. McHale—an advocate of “fun” reading—couldn’t find the fun in war books. The fact that they represented real suffering was too present. “[I]f it were only of another people, however, and another time ... But our hearts are caught and we can’t read without thinking, ‘The pity of it!’”¹⁷² We need not think McHale was an entirely representative reader to take the point. *From the Land of Silent People* may not rival *The Naked and the Dead* as a literary achievement. *The Naked and the Dead*, on the other hand, could not be read in the present tense. In 1942, the war books explicitly claimed a voice for people who were dying as the reader turned the pages. Norman Mailer had a bevy of strong reviews at his back; St. John had quasi-state organizations insisting that his work constituted a patriotic duty.

The war books were social facts: their content does not square with claims of domestic innocence and moral simplicity. American readers encountered reflective and even critical views of wartime ethics, while being drawn into ever closer personal participation in the wartime project. Documenting reception is more difficult, but inferences can and should be drawn from the books themselves: the reader’s sovereignty was not absolute. The violence depicted was a palpable intrusion, not a subtlety of language that could be missed. To appreciate the mere presence of these books in the mental environment of the 1940s is necessarily to set some limits on the moral psychology of the democratic warfare state. It is not plausible to think of a blind leviathan, striking at abstractions and knowing war only as the assembly of industrial equipment

¹⁷² Cecil J. McHale, “On Reading for the Fun of It,” *Library Journal*, December 15, 1942.

for some vague overseas purposes. Nor is it entirely consistent with this record to imagine a patriotic fury crowding out every nuance of thought.

These books partially reveal the substance behind blankly oracular findings of “support” for the war effort. Though no one read all of the books, and many read none, they offered thousands of glimpses of total war as a violation of humanity, exposing interior perspectives on pain rather than surface images of injury. Multiplied over a national readership, they well prepared Cold War liberals to read *Hiroshima* and keep building atomic bombs. Wartime “realism” meant, in no small measure, to authorize violations of humanity in the collective sentiments of a democratic people.

Chapter 6

Violence at the “Threshold of Democracy”: Toy Soldiers, Nervous Mothers, and Realist Childhood

Early in 1942 an 11-year-old boy elaborated a fantasy of global war to the psychiatric staff of New York’s Bellevue Hospital. He worried that enemy airplanes might bomb his home, driving him and his mother to an air raid shelter. “If they bomb the shelter and we all get killed, maybe just my little baby brother will be left walking around,” he said. The Germans would then, he speculated, raise his brother as a Nazi. “Maybe he might be one of the soldiers to go to Russia and fight and get cold and die and when he dies he might not even go to heaven.”¹ The doctors shrugged off talk of bombing as clinically uninteresting. It was common, they noted, for children “to weave the war situation into phantasies, expressing their own conflicts.”² But the “war situation” he described was not fanciful. Every element of the story echoed adult preoccupations with a rapidly globalizing conflict, from air raid panics on the coasts to frozen bodies in the Russian winter. Just weeks into the American war, impressions of far-flung violence and moral judgments on the dead (“he might not even go to heaven”) had filtered into the consciousness of an 11-year-old, sharing mental space with his family affections and antagonisms.

As war-mindedness invaded the intimate precincts of domestic life, Americans worked out the moral problems of violence in debates about the proper governance of children.

Condemning the enemy in these terms was simple. Even before the U.S. entry into the conflict,

¹ Lauretta Bender and John Frosch. “Children's Reactions to the War,” *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 12, no. 4 (1942), 573.

² Bender and Frosch, “Children’s Reactions to the War,” 585.

fascism was linked to a willingness to brutalize children or to indoctrinate them as instruments of aggression. Nothing better represented the injustice of the war in China than H.S. Wong's 1937 photograph of a baby burned by Japanese bombers and left crying in the wreckage of a Shanghai train station.³ Few books captured the peril of the Third Reich more vividly than Gregor Ziemer's *Education for Death: The Making of a Nazi* (1941), which was adapted for the screen as both a feature-length drama and an animated propaganda short.⁴ Defining the "good" wartime childhood was more fraught. Propaganda agencies stressed the insulation of U.S. children from harm, but also recognized family as a conduit through which the war would come directly into the home. This chapter examines how the ethical problems of global violence, which had been superficially resolved by the declaration of war, were reformulated within the family sphere that experts had recently called "the threshold of democracy."⁵

The term came from the final report of the 1940 White House conference on children, a gathering of educators, academics, juvenile court officials, and other child welfare advocates that met every decade between 1909 and 1970 and served as a barometer of major childcare concerns.⁶ When the meeting convened in 1940, it was called the "White House Conference on Children in a Democracy," and its final report—issued just days after Pearl Harbor—mingled the

³ "The Camera Overseas: 136,000,000 People See This Picture of Shanghai's South Station," *Life*, October 4, 1937;

⁴ Gregor Ziemer, *Education for Death* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1941).

⁵ U.S. Children's Bureau, *White House Conference On Children in a Democracy, Washington, D.C., January 18-20, 1940: Final Report*. (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1942), 3.

⁶ U.S. Children's Bureau, *The Story of the White House Conferences on Children and Youth* (1967), 1-2.

self-confidence of Progressive Era “child saving” with intimations of military catastrophe.⁷ Homer Folks, the 72-year-old chairman of the reports committee, had spent half a century advocating for child welfare in New York, and had presided over the first meeting in 1909. In 1941 he wrote, ominously, that “in war each child is, in an even more vital sense, an invaluable asset of the Nation.”⁸ Franklin Roosevelt’s address to the conference had been even more explicit, connecting the raising of children with “adequate munitions and implements of war.”⁹ Rev. Bryan McEntegart of the Catholic Charities of New York echoed this language when he called child welfare “part of the total defense program.”¹⁰ Few dared hope in the early 1940s, as Jane Addams had twenty years earlier, that the “humane quality” of child protection legislation would provide a model for peaceful internationalism.¹¹ Instead, the young were to be cultivated as the manpower for war.

Though grimmer than in past years, the participants in the 1940 conference took popular sovereignty quite seriously, and called on families to foster active, participatory social relations among their individual members, as well as between those members and the outside world. This was the meaning of the “threshold of democracy”: it signified the role of families in making democratic citizens. “Adults no longer make all the decisions,” the conference reported. “Lines

⁷ *White House Conference On Children in a Democracy*, 4.

⁸ *White House Conference On Children in a Democracy*, XIV-XV.

⁹ Franklin D. Roosevelt, “Radio Address at the White House Conference on Children in a Democracy. Washington, D.C.,” January 19, 1940. Online. Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=15999>.

¹⁰ “Social Workers Hear Discussion of White House Conference of 1940,” *Boston Globe*, October 31, 1940.

¹¹ Jane Addams, *Peace and Bread in Time of War* (New York: Macmillan, 1922), 83.

of authority within the family are shifting and often are not clear.”¹² The claim was neither entirely new—Tocqueville had seen “a sort of equality being established around the domestic hearth” a century before—nor fully reflective of the enduring power relations founded in family law. But the ideal of the “threshold of democracy” captured the entry of children into a broader political world, one in which they would ultimately hold sway as citizens. When that world was reorganized around the production of global violence, the imperative to socialize children into the collective practice of sovereignty remained.

The imaginative encounter with total war, then, was thoroughly intergenerational, despite the isolation of American children from physical danger to an extent unique among the major belligerent powers. For North Americans, killing and dying in combat was the preserve of males born between 1904 and 1927, and almost no one else.¹³ The contemplation of that violence, indeed a sense of responsibility for it, was far more distributed. While historians have paid close and sensitive attention to the social histories of families (and public policy directed at children and parents) during the wartime mobilization, far less has been said about the light that such perspectives can shed on the moral history of democratic state violence.¹⁴ Yet the potential illumination is substantial. Adult discourses about the government of children—both within and outside the home—and the evidence of childhood perceptions left in multiple wartime research

¹² *White House Conference On Children in a Democracy*, 27.

¹³ D’Ann Campbell, “Women in Combat: The World War II Experience in the United States, Great Britain, Germany, and the Soviet Union,” *The Journal of Military History*, Vol 57, No. 2 (April 1993), 301-323.

¹⁴ William Tuttle, *“Daddy’s Gone to War”: The Second World War in the Lives of America’s Children* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

projects make it plain that the Bellevue patient quoted above was far from unique in grasping the multiplicity of ways to kill and die in the early 1940s.

“War Toys: A Symposium”: Peace Education and Tin Soldiers

Was it wise, or even ethical, to encourage children to play games modeled on organized killing? The question arose recurrently on both sides of the Atlantic in the early twentieth century, in a series of sharply gendered debates shaped by the confluence of women’s activism and an emerging language of child development which gave the authority of science to perennial worries over the corruption of youth. Lucia Ames Mead, a New England suffragist, stirred the irritation of editorial writers across the country when she condemned toy soldiers in 1907. The Chicago Tribune angrily rejected the idea that, as the newspaper characterized Mead’s position, “the small boy is a little savage who must be brought up in the sweet and peaceful atmosphere of a perpetual Hague conference.” The *New York Times* mocked the notion that “the whole trouble with the world to-day may be directly traced to our nurseries.”¹⁵ But the idea persisted. Two years later the textbook publisher Edwin Ginn argued that war play was dangerous, and activists asked a New York toy store to remove tin soldiers and toy guns in 1912.¹⁶ When the First World War began in 1914, a committee of Chicago women petitioned manufacturers to discontinue soldiers and other war toys.¹⁷ Henry Moskowitz, a Romanian-born philosopher and a co-founder

¹⁵ “No More Tin Soldiers or Toy Muskets for Boston Boys,” *New York Times*, March 24, 1907; “Johnnie and His Tin Soldiers,” *Los Angeles Times*, February 14, 1907; “No More Toy Soldiers,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, February 18, 1907.

¹⁶ “The Toy Soldier Declared to be an Enemy of Peace,” *New York Times*, October 31, 1909; “The Talk of the Day,” December 22, 1912, *New York Tribune*.

¹⁷ “Toy Soldiers Meet Reverses,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, September 13, 1914.

of the NAACP, touched on a vaguely Freudian version of the argument when he told a New York Quaker meeting in 1915 that war toys should be avoided, in order not to “make the child subconsciously in favor war.”¹⁸ Elsie Parsons, the pioneering Anthropologist and feminist, made a similar case that “the idea of killing people [became] a familiarity of the mind” from childhood play.¹⁹

During the 1920s and 1930s these sporadic objections to “war play” ran into the marketing of sophisticated mass-produced toys by manufacturers who seized on real conflicts as the inspiration for miniature armies and battlefields. This was itself partly an effect of war. German producers had long dominated the international toy market, but their trade was radically disrupted after 1914, leading to the expansion of production in the United States and Japan. In 1914, over 40 percent of all the toys sold in the United States were imported, mostly from Germany; in 1919, the figure was 6 percent.²⁰ U.S. production in 1925 was worth about \$70 million, up 1,300 percent in two decades.²¹

The international competition over a growing market led State and Commerce Department officials to make detailed reports on toys in dozens of countries, monitoring the

¹⁸ “Moskowitz Defines False Patriotism,” *New York Times*, March 17, 1915.

¹⁹ Elsie Clews Parsons, “War Increases Toy Soldier Sales,” *New York Times*, April 4, 1915.

²⁰ Jeannette M. Calvin, *International Trade in Toys* (Washington: U.S. Govt. Print. Off., 1926), ii, 1, 3.

²¹ United States. Bureau of Foreign and Domestic Commerce, and Emma Dorothea Schuttrumpf, *World Trade in Toys* (Washington: U.S. Govt Print. Off., 1939), 10.

persistent demand for a “miniature world of play, patterned after adult life.”²² The invasion of Ethiopia spurred sales of toy trucks and machine guns in Italy, and prompted the Massachusetts retailer W.T. Grant to repaint white soldiers in a darker hue so they could be sold as an “African” army.²³ Other stores gave pride of place to “figures cast in the Algerian or Foreign Legion mode, because they are most suggestive of the flowing-robed Ethiopians.”²⁴ Tovy soldiers were also prized in the heavily militarized Panama Canal Zone, while American “tanks, submarines, etc” were popular in Czechoslovakia shortly before its invasion by Germany.²⁵ When the Soviet Union invaded Finland, American children could buy “soldiers in white suits and skis”.²⁶ The Moscow Oblast Toy Producers Cooperative, meanwhile, produced toy versions of the Red Army.²⁷ German toys commanded particular attention, spilling out of trade reports and into the press. In 1935, Reuters linked German re-armament to the appearance in Berlin toy stores of tanks, anti-aircraft guns, and soldiers posed as snipers, trench-diggers, and grenadiers.²⁸ A 1939 report by the Commerce Department commented in detail on the German “trend toward realism and naturalness,” exemplified by accurately-uniformed plastic soldiers from every service branch, including the Labor Corps and foreign armies, squaring off against British and French

²² United States. Bureau of Foreign and Domestic Commerce, and Emma Dorothea Schutrumpf, *World Trade in Toys* (Washington: U.S. Govt Print. Off., 1939), 1

²³ *World Trade in Toys*, 106; *Fortune*, December 1935, 28.

²⁴ “Ethiopian War is Reflected in Toy Designs,” *Washington Post*, November 7, 1935.

²⁵ *World Trade in Toys*, 20, 68-9.

²⁶ “Girls are buying tin soldiers,” *Boston Globe*, July 7, 1940

²⁷ *World Trade in Toys*, 132.

²⁸ “Military Toys are Popular in Germany,” *The China Press*, December 12, 1935.

foes (with “unidentifiable ‘native’ forces in tow), and equipment ranging from artillery and machine guns to field hospitals and anti-aircraft batteries.²⁹

As toy manufacturing marched in step with real rearmament, the previously somewhat diffuse moral unease over children’s war play took more coherent shape, leading to coordinated campaigns in the United States between the middle of the 1930s and 1941. A week before Christmas in 1930, disabled veterans piled into automobiles with members of a pacifist women’s group and crossed Paris pleading with parents not to buy toy soldiers for their children. The *New York Times* noted that the veterans who handed out pamphlets against “toys which will recall war with its sentiments of hate, cruelty and vengeance” were mostly one-armed.³⁰ The protest, laden in sentimental appeals to the pathos of the wounded soldier, to motherhood, and to the innocence of the Christmas holiday, dramatized peace politics on the terrain of individual consumer preference. Proposals for formal action, on the other hand, came at the Geneva Arms Reduction Conference two years later in 1932, when Paulina Luisi, the first Uruguayan woman to hold a medical degree and a well-known figure for her work on issues of trafficking and prostitution, proposed the abolition of toy soldiers alongside sharp new limits on land armaments.³¹ A few months later delegates of the Dominican Republic made a similar proposal that was referred to the conference’s Moral Disarmament Commission (set up with an eye to issues of education, nationalism in textbooks, and international broadcasting), suggesting that nations ban all “warlike toys” in 1935, after a three-year transitional period allowing

²⁹ *World Trade in Toys*, 11-12.

³⁰ “French Pacifists War Against Toy Soldiers,” *New York Times*, December 22, 1930.

³¹ “Woman Arms Delegate Urges Toy Soldier Ban,” *New York Herald-Tribune*, April 28, 1932.

manufacturers to beat swords into plowshares.³² These proposals drew little attention as the conference in Geneva foundered, but international disorder only underscored, for influential women's groups in particular, the stakes of peace education.

In the United States the “war play” question was raised principally by two groups, the national section of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) and a smaller (but brilliantly marketed) Manhattan-based group called World Peaceways, Inc. Both organizations were deeply influenced by internationally circulating ideas about peace, and both exemplified a politics that deployed motherhood as a source of authority to speak on questions of violence and international organization.

Children concerned the WILPF from its beginning as the International Congress of Women at the Hague, a meeting of suffragists and peace activists from Germany, the UK, France, and Belgium (and chaired by Jane Addams) held on neutral soil in 1915 to call for an armistice. One of its proposals was a call for “peace education.” When the WILPF met in Washington, D.C. in 1924, discussions of child psychology elicited lengthy notes from the FBI agent sent to observe the meetings. Anita Augspurg, a German feminist, linked international insecurity with disciplinary violence against children. French, Polish, and Austrian women voiced similar views.³³ A year later, the First General Congress on Child Welfare in Geneva considered resolutions on “Education for Peace” to transform the “combative instincts of the child”.³⁴ Down the street at the neighboring Jean Jacques Rousseau Institute, Swiss psychologist

³² “Mars in the Nursery,” *Fortune*, December 1935.

³³ Jane Addams FBI File, Agent A.P. Davidson report on Fourth International Congress of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, May, 1924.

Pierre Bovet taught courses on the topic—a syllabus covering “l’éducation et la paix” and “psychologie et pédagogie morales” wound up in the WILPF archive, borrowed by a delegate to the Congress.³⁵ For the WILPF, attention to toys and play was not just a symbolic way to talk about disarmament, but part of a longstanding conviction that childhood development was instrumental in to a long-term peace.

In contrast to the networks gathered under the WILPF banner, World Peaceways, Inc. sprang from the mind of a New York philanthropist and suffrage advocate, Theresa Mayer Durlach. It was best known for polished but sharply confrontational anti-war advertisements in national newsmagazines. One featured a crippled veteran with a gaunt, haunted expression, sitting in a wheelchair under the title, “Hello, Sucker.” Another pictured a woman holding up a cherubic toddler, beneath red text reading “*to be killed in action.*” The group was effective enough that Franklin Roosevelt’s Chief of Naval Operations, Admiral William Standley, singled it out for criticism in a speech to the New York State Chamber of Commerce in 1935, warning that its message undermined national security.³⁶ This was familiar ground. Standley often told conservative audiences that communists and Japanese agents promoted peace, particularly among children, in order to gradually disarm the United States and leave it vulnerable to aggression.³⁷ But Standley, who rarely shied away from calling someone subversive, hedged in

³⁴ Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom papers [hereafter “WILPF”], microfilm edition, Reel 100, IV: 69, 1456-8, “Resolutions on Education for Peace of the First General Congress on Child Welfare.”

³⁵ WILPF Microfilm, Reel 100, IV: 69, 1455. “Syllabus du cours de prof. Pierre Bovet.”

³⁶ “Standley Attacks Foes of Big Navy,” *New York Times*, November 8, 1935.

³⁷ See for example: “Peace Groups Menace to U.S., Standley Says,” *New York Herald Tribune*, September 18, 1935; “World War Order Asks Soviet Break,” *New York Times*, September 18,

this case, adding that he did not question the group's motivations or loyalty.

His uncharacteristic reticence may have been a matter of professional prudence: the president's mother and wife were both very publicly linked with World Peaceways. In 1934 Sara Roosevelt spent Mother's Day at a dinner organized by the group, along with President Benjamin Harrison's widow and the mother of polar explorer Richard Byrd.³⁸ A few years later she accepted an award for humanitarianism that was personally presented by World Peaceways director Estelle Sternberger, and posed for newspaper cameras with the activist.³⁹ Eleanor Roosevelt, for her part, supplied a letter to be read at a 1933 Armistice Day meeting organized jointly by World Peaceways and the WILPF.⁴⁰ While groups patronized by Eleanor Roosevelt were routinely and viciously attacked during the 1930s and 1940s, the association of the president's more conservative mother spoke to the social respectability of women's peace advocacy.

Where the WILPF was grounded in the left wing of progressive-era reform and above all the suffrage movement, the executive director of World Peaceways, Estelle Sternberger, came to

1935; "Objectors to College Military Training Called 'Anarchists' by Legion Commander," *Washington Post*, January 25, 1934.

³⁸ "Fetes Tomorrow to Honor Mothers," *New York Times*, May 12, 1934.

³⁹ "Einstein Medal for Humanitarianism is Awarded to Mother of President," *New York Times*, April 4, 1938.

⁴⁰ "Plea By Mrs. Roosevelt," *New York Times*, November 12, 1933. The meeting also featured statements from Mme. Sun Yat-sen; Marianne Hainisch, the mother of Austria's first president; and Mrs. Tsune Gauntlett, a Japanese peace advocate. Estelle Sternberger spoke in person, along with Princess Nour Hamada of Syria.

her position after a decade managing confederations of women's clubs.⁴¹ The founder was a less public personality. Theresa Mayer Durlach earned a PhD in Anthropology from Bernard College and worked on peace issues with Jane Addams before marrying a tobacco dealer and leaving public life to raise children in the 1920s. As Durlach explained to the *New York Times* in a rare 1937 interview, her children led straight back to politics.⁴² She created a small school for her own son and daughter, beginning with tutors and then expanding into two apartments on 90th Street, and used her close pedagogical involvement to steer the son away from playing war. At five Nathaniel discovered toy guns, and at eight he refused to sign a peace pledge, announcing that he might want to go to war someday. Durlach set out to study "just why he needed make-believe firearms" and concluded that the problem was insecurity. She tested alternative outlets for his anxiety, and found one in physical construction: hammering and painting were even more absorbing than guns. At age 10, he gave up war play and offered a donation to his mother's peace group. "If children were educated to feel that way, then war would not be possible and the war makers would be stopped dead in their tracks," she told the *Times*.⁴³

If this was more parable than biography, it offered a glimpse of the intimate concerns that might simultaneously motivate and authorize public claims about war and children, especially

⁴¹ Sternberger had served as executive secretary for the National Council of Jewish Women and was the Vice President of the National Council of Women of the United States, which represented about 5 million club members in the early 1930s entry. "Estelle Sternberger dies at 85; Radio Commentator on Politics," *New York Times*, December 24, 1971. See also her book, *The Supreme Cause: A Practical Book about Peace* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1936).

⁴² "War Foe Seeks to Put Peace Tracts on Every American Breakfast Table," *New York Times*, October 24, 1937.

⁴³ "War Foe Seeks to Put Peace Tracts on Every American Breakfast Table," *New York Times*, October 24, 1937.

claims made by women. And the decision to offer an interview in 1937 came as part of a concerted effort to make children's play into a political issue. It was sometimes difficult to tell where the WILPF and World Peaceways led, and where they moved in to endorse local initiatives. In July 1936 Estelle Sternberger penned an enthusiastic—if slightly territorial—letter to the New York Herald Tribune endorsing a call by the State Conference of Polish Clubs to organize against “the gift of ... death-suggesting toys to children.”⁴⁴ Four months later the group collaborated with the New Jersey State Federation of Women's Clubs on the same project.⁴⁵ In January 1937, World Peaceways announced the formation of a new Department of Youth, which would direct a subtle effort to divorce lethal weapons and toys, without trying to abolish childlike interest in violence altogether.

Guns and military weapons, they argued, should be treated like household poisons and regarded as unimaginable playthings, whether real or fake. Because the “fascination of disaster and destruction” was innate, however, they outlined alternative modes of sanguinary play: toy soldiers could be replaced by “toy railroad accidents, airplane crashes, and accidents at sea.”⁴⁶ This caught the attention of a Manchester Guardian writer, who noted that it only substituted accidents for “the outrages of man.”⁴⁷

Indeed, the point was not to isolate childhood from a knowledge of pain, but to prevent emotional enlistment in a military ethos that might lend itself to masculine outrages. A few

⁴⁴ “Nation-Wide Drive Against War Toys Begun,” *New York Herald-Tribune*, July 10, 1936.

⁴⁵ “Warlike Toys Fought By Clubs of Jersey,” *New York Times*, November 22, 1936.

⁴⁶ Drive is Begun For Abolishing Toy Weapons,” *New York Herald-Tribune*, January 15, 1937.

⁴⁷ “Miscellany,” *Manchester Guardian*, February 19, 1937.

weeks after Peaceways began its campaign, Carrie Chapman Catt, the prominent suffrage leader, called on women's groups to "survey the stores and shops for military toys, followed by authoritative protest."⁴⁸ At New York's prestigious Ethical Culture School, a gathering of elementary school teachers decided "to convince toy manufacturers that there is a market for lead postmen ... and other workers of society, instead of toy soldiers."⁴⁹ If these represented small but influential pockets of progressive elites, a far wider audience heard the same arguments when Eleanor Roosevelt decided to write about the issue in her column, "My Day." Reflecting on Armistice Day in 1937, Eleanor praised a WILPF section in Swarthmore, Pennsylvania, which asked parents to avoid Christmas gifts "concerned either with the activities of war or crime."⁵⁰ While she did not much elaborate at this point—the My Day columns were written daily and somewhat telegraphic in style—the first lady was clearly and publicly sympathetic.

Among her readers was the Lithuanian immigrant and New York Boy Scout executive board member Isaac Liberman, who was also the president of the century-old department store Arnold Constable & Co. A week after the column was published, Liberman announced that he would bar all war toys and games from his stores, and that "the toy department would be dedicated this Christmas to 'the inspiration of world peace.'"⁵¹ Alice Hughes, a popular syndicated writer, was fascinated by the decision and devoted most of her December 1 column to

⁴⁸ "Two Peace Meetings Will Be Held At YWCA National Headquarters," *New York Herald-Tribune*, February 27, 1937.

⁴⁹ "Ban on Tin Soldiers as Toy is Urged," *New York Times*, May 16, 1937.

⁵⁰ Eleanor Roosevelt, "My Day," November 12, 1937. Online. <https://www2.gwu.edu/~erpapers/myday/1937/>.

⁵¹ "Bars Toys of 'War' Type," *New York Times*, November 22, 1937.

the story, adding the detail that Ethel Custer, the store's toy buyer, "had already laid in her Christmas supply of soldiery and warfare" and had to ship it back. Hughes also described a conversation over the topic with her husband, a World War veteran, who "says in theory he agrees with World Peaceways," although he had doubts if children could ever be induced to stop playing at war.⁵² Without naming the store, the first lady wrote a follow-up describing a visit to buy Christmas gifts at "the toy department in a Fifth Avenue Department store which has taken seriously the idea that one should not display military toys".

The press cited Eleanor Roosevelt, World Peaceways, and the WILPF collectively as the inspiration for Arnold Constable & Co.'s decision, and both peace groups rushed congratulations to the store's management. At the end of the season, the experiment seemed to be a success. Liberman held a meeting in the toy department late in December to announce record sales, and to present Estelle Sternberger a check for World Peaceways; she gave a brief speech, saying that "We don't lay the foundation of sound peace thinking when we drag cannons and guns, poison gas spreaders and battleships into the nursery."⁵³ At the same meeting George Mothes, "New York's only pacifist Santa Claus," gave interviews and estimated that 12,000 children had visited him. Mothes described his interactions with the children as ethical tutorials, in which he had explained that "guns and other implements of war were taboo and that Christmas, as an observance of the birthday of the 'Prince of Peace,' should emphasize the spirit of peace." While boys still asked for guns, he said, "they grasped the idea of peace very quickly when they were told."

⁵² Alice Hughes, "A Woman's New York," *Washington Post*, December 1, 1937.

⁵³ "Pacifist Toy Department Celebrates Record Sales," *New York Herald-Tribune*, December 24, 1937.

A year later, newspapers were sufficiently attuned to the story to track Eleanor Roosevelt's thoughts on the subject. When one of her grandchildren explained that he hated killing but loved parades, she wondered in print whether toy soldiers might be more tolerable than toy guns. The New York Herald-Tribune reported the comment as a shift in policy. A few weeks later, however, the Los Angeles Times noted that "Mrs. Franklin D. Roosevelt stiffened her opposition to military toys again today when she heard that those on sale this Christmas included toy soldiers throwing hand grenades, operating machine guns, and carrying stretchers."⁵⁴ The following spring a Progressive Party Assemblyman in Madison, Wisconsin outlined a detailed plan to tax manufacturers, wholesalers, and retail outlets involved in the production and sales of military-themed toys.⁵⁵ Wilmington, Delaware banned war play in public parks in October 1939, immediately following the invasion of Poland. The superintendent of the parks system justified the decision in terms of "youngsters' psychology," saying she had seen children building "make-believe Maginot and Siegfried Lines."⁵⁶

These concerns extended beyond a narrow circle in the northeast. In December 1940, Rotary International devoted several pages of its flagship publication *The Rotarian* under the headline "War Toys? A Symposium."⁵⁷ The publication solicited views from its membership for a "debate-of-the-month" and then printed a range of replies split roughly into equal camps for and against war toys – not exactly a scientific sample of opinion, but one which captured

⁵⁴ "Mrs. Roosevelt May Give Toy Soldiers to Grandson," *New York Herald Tribune*, November 19, 1938. "First Lady Raps Warlike Toys," *Los Angeles Times*, December 21, 1938.

⁵⁵ "Tax on Military Toys Sought in Wisconsin," *New York Times*, March 22, 1939.

⁵⁶ "Playground Forbids Children to Play War," *New York Herald Tribune*, October 18, 1939.

⁵⁷ "War Toys? A Symposium," *The Rotarian*, December 1940.

thoughtful replies from around the hemisphere, ranging from New Hampshire to Mexico City. A lawyer from Kansas City cited the \$84 million value of domestic toy sales as evidence that the industry's influence should be taken seriously. He was firmly against war play. A pharmacist wrote from Havana, Cuba, in more subjective and personal terms: he worried that toy soldiers made war "almost something natural, real, part of everyday life." A crude oil distributor from Long Beach, CA, on the other hand, said he played with guns as a child but later came to fear them intensely. A woman from Nashville, Tennessee, reported that her two sons, with identical backgrounds and experiences playing with soldiers, had taken entirely different routes in life: one was in uniform, while the other "hates force and violence."

While this kind of forum has to be located within the broader debate over American foreign policy, few if any of the writers treated the question as a simple proxy for opinions on U.S. interventionism. And while the collection of letters hardly amounted to a major event, the publication was not a marginal one and Rotary International was not a hotbed of sectarian pacifism. Certainly, many people dismissed the question out of hand. When the Ontario Council of Women passed a resolution against war games in 1933, one dissenter objected that the measure would "make us a laughing stock among men."⁵⁸ (She was immediately told in reply that "Men are already a laughing stock among us for many of the things they do.") And ridicule did often follow. George Orwell wrote that critics of toy soldiers had no plausible substitutes for the playthings they wanted to eliminate: "tin pacifists somehow won't do."⁵⁹ But to let this

⁵⁸ "Pacifist Mamas Ban Toy Soldier Wars," *Washington Post*, December 12, 1933.

⁵⁹ George Orwell, *New English Weekly*, March 21, 1940, reprinted in George Orwell, Sonia Orwell, and Ian Angus. *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell, Volume 2: My Country Left or Right, 1940-1943* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1968), page 14.

skepticism lead our own analysis would be to risk overlooking the salience of the debate itself as an index of the moral mood in 1940-1941. Even if the pacifists and peace educators were mistaken in their causal claims, their position was a respectable one with a firm foothold in the public sphere. To a substantial part of the population, it made perfect sense to think about the democratic governance of children in terms of producing a demilitarized future. This is an appropriate point of departure from which to gauge developments after December 7.

A year later, the *New York Times* surveyed a newly militarized retail landscape. The Gimbals Christmas tree was trimmed with 200 silver stars, one for each employee in military service. Crowds of soldiers and sailors, themselves barely adults, jostled with parents and children to see the displays at F.A.O. Schwarz, studying barracks and tanks for inaccuracies.⁶⁰ Perhaps the most telling displays were the windows of Lord & Taylor's, which showed a series of uniformed men deployed around the world: an airman in Alaska, a Marine in the Solomon Islands, a sailor in Iceland, and a soldier in North Africa. These figures were arranged with their backs to the street, gazing at painted horizons and inviting an immediate identification. Passersby did not come face to face with the soldiers, but stood alongside them at the fringes of combat, overlooking the same vistas.⁶¹ What did children imagine looking out on these views?

The question preoccupied a number of contemporary social scientists and educators, who

⁶⁰ "Many Depict War Themes and Draws Crowds of Service Men," *New York Times*, December 10, 1942.

⁶¹ "Many Depict War Themes and Draws Crowds of Service Men," *New York Times*, December 10, 1942.

turned their attentions to the mental worlds of children. Their studies show a dual interest, both for the intellectual trends they track and perhaps more significantly for their inadvertent archival value, the result of preserving hundreds of immediate childhood responses to the war. While these archives provide glimpses rather than sustained narratives, their limitations are offset by their immediacy. Instead of recollections filtered through decades of subsequent experience, and told in adult language, the wartime studies offer childhood perspectives in the voice of children. In this section I will consider in some detail one particular study made shortly before Pearl Harbor, before moving to a wider discussion of studies and advice books from the years 1941-1945.

An important institutional locus for the study of children was the Teachers College of Columbia University, where John Dewey had long taught and where an empirical and experimental approach to education had deep roots.⁶² There, early in 1940, a PhD student named Ralph Preston began testing and interviewing children to study "the feasibility of dealing with complex social problems in the elementary grades" and to gather evidence on "the possible emotional effect upon children of truthful discussion of unpleasant social phenomena, and whether children should have access to information about them."⁶³ His study is worth attention in particular because it directly referenced pre-war debates about children and military conflict, and because it captured a set of mentalities on the cusp of direct American involvement in the conflict, when war was much discussed but not yet a national commitment.

⁶² For a review of research at Columbia and elsewhere up to 1943, see Arthur Jersild and Margaret Meigs, "Children and War," *Psychological Bulletin* Vol. 40, No. 8, October, 1943, 541-573.

⁶³ Ralph C. Preston, *Children's Reactions to a Contemporary War Situation* (New York: Columbia University Teachers College Bureau of Publications, 1942), 1-2.

Preston set a high bar for his subjects, assembling a battery of detailed questions drawn from the New York *Times* and *Life* magazine over a period of months. After giving the test to 291 boys and 290 girls between 8 and 15, he reported a general lack of "mastery" over the causes and consequences of the war, at one point lamenting the "singular confusion and contradiction" over the impact of mobilization on employment and inflation.⁶⁴ Given the evident confusion of much of Congress on the same issues, this was an odd standard. But Preston's in-depth interviews revealed the ubiquity of the war in the lives of children, as well as surprising nuances in their knowledge and feelings.

More than 80 percent of the boys in the study and about half the girls said they played "war games", reflecting a gendered pattern of play that has been noted by other historians. But remarkably, almost as many children -- 64 percent of the girls and 43 percent of the boys -- reported that they disapproved of war play because of its relationship to real fighting.⁶⁵ These responses might, of course, have owed more to the interview itself than to any preexisting doubts. Still, many of the children articulated views that strongly echoed critiques made in adult circles. One 11-year-old boy even cited the work of peace organizations directly: "I was once in World Peaceways and we said children shouldn't play with toy soldiers and guns ... Guns would make some little kids I know like war. I threw away my guns when I joined World Peaceways."⁶⁶ A 10-year-old girl also mentioned organized efforts to "do away with toy warfare and have the United States ban the supply of war toys."⁶⁷ Far more frequently, however, the subjects of the

⁶⁴ Ralph C. Preston, *Children's Reactions to a Contemporary War Situation*, 46.

⁶⁵ Ralph C. Preston, *Children's Reactions to a Contemporary War Situation*, 74.

⁶⁶ Ralph C. Preston, *Children's Reactions to a Contemporary War Situation*, 77.

study mentioned parents, usually their mothers, as the source of prohibitions on toy guns and soldiers. Where they offered explanations of the hazards presented by war play, the children usually spoke in terms of knowledge or ignorance of real fighting. "It's bad psychologically but it's a lot of fun," a 13-year-old boy reported. "I do it myself. If you understand war it's OK, otherwise it might make you want to be a soldier."⁶⁸ Another boy, also 13, said he liked to play with soldiers but recognized it as a problem for other children: "it's bad because they don't know the horrors of war and you can't explain it." A girl of the same age was less equivocal. "It's a bad influence. War isn't nice and children who play war get to think war is heroic and glorious."⁶⁹ A 10-year-old boy said "I have twelve toy soldiers. You shoot them down and it makes you blood-thirsty."⁷⁰

Underscoring these ambivalent comments about play, the children were also reluctant warriors when asked about the possibility of their own military service in the future. Twenty percent of the boys said they would refuse any service.⁷¹ More interesting, perhaps, the children who said they would serve often expressed fears of injury and death, and a preference for branches of the armed forces that seemed safer. An 11-year-old boy wanted to be a sailor if he were forced to go into the military: "You can get torpedoed, but there's always a chance to get saved more than if you're shot at by a bullet." Another 11-year-old said "I'd sit in an office. It's safer." And a 13-year-old thought in terms of rank rather than service branch: "I'd be a general.

⁶⁷ Preston, *Children's Reactions to a Contemporary War Situation*, 76.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 76.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 75.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 75.

⁷¹ Ibid., 77.

They don't get hurt. They stay back."⁷² Overall, half the male interviewees put their personal, physical safety first in talking about possible war service, followed by vocational interests, particularly the desire to learn to fly. A "repugnance to violence" was about as prevalent as a "desire for adventure" in determining relative service preferences, while "patriotism" and "pacifism" were at the bottom of the list, together accounting for only 5 percent of the answers. When the children were asked why men chose to become soldiers, the most common answer was force or threat, followed by propaganda -- almost none of the children believed soldiers volunteered out of patriotism.⁷³

Preston was struck by the materialism of the interviewees: "The paucity of references to ethical principles and ideals serves to emphasize the presence of hard-headed, if inaccurate, conceptions about the causes of war."⁷⁴ But what the responses also highlighted was the place of violence in the children's understandings of the contemporary world: political systems and arguments were often invisible, but the same was not true of killing and physical destruction. Very few of the children--between one in five and one in ten, depending on sex and age--could recall a non-military news event of any sort. But on average each child could recall and describe *three* discrete acts of real violence that they had picked up from the news.⁷⁵ *Life* was the most common source, perhaps because of the richness of its photography, and its frankness about destruction was often mentioned.⁷⁶ One girl reported: "I saw in *Life* a picture that made me sick

⁷² Ibid., 77-78.

⁷³ Ibid., 67.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 67-68.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 41.

at my stomach --a man with his face half off. I dreamt about it and saw blood spilling.”⁷⁷

There was a range of explicitly moralizing responses to the war, often expressed in complex terms. An 11-year-old girl said, "The Allies started it as much as Germany but I would hate to see the Allies a part of Germany. The Allies have a little more right because they don't want to see Czechoslovakia or Poland a part of Germany." A 12-year-old boy said the U.S. was "more friendly" to England, then reflected on a German maid who once worked for the family, and said he liked the German people, too.⁷⁸ More than a third of the children said neither side was right, but most of these children still favored an Allied victory—and virtually all of them reviled Hitler as a symbol of evil. A sort of meta-judgment behind this was a distinct propensity to describe war in negative terms:

You're not quite as free. You walk the street and have to go in a shelter because of airplanes going over. / People carry gas masks and go around with a sinking feeling. / War is never good. In England the children are taken to the country. In Germany they are just frightened. Children don't grow up well in an atmosphere of horror and fear. / It is sort of dismal. Cafes are not so filled. People are not having a good time. Sons and fathers are in the army. War used to be glorious. The best man would win. Now you're helpless with bombs and explosives. It's a question of who has the most. London is in darkness.⁷⁹

The study that produced these records was no doubt highly idiosyncratic, marked by the investigator's expectations of policy mastery by adolescents and by a sample composed of middle- and upper-income children from a major metropolitan area. All the same, they afford a glimpse of one version of the imaginative landscape that immediately preceded the militarized

⁷⁶ Ibid., 59.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 62.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 53.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 43-44.

Christmas of 1941. It is implausible that all of these dark impressions fell away entirely with the onset of American belligerency. Indeed, multiple wartime studies found similarly textured accounts of fear and confusion running alongside brighter reenactments of war as a simple adventure.

If this material provides some clues to the early wartime experience of childhood, Preston's study was also a clue as to the direction of adult discourses over the next four years. On the one hand, he was interested in how children processed difficult information and learned to relate to the world, and had a foot clearly in a progressive education tradition. On the other hand, he was concerned not just with the development of children as future citizens, but with their immediate emotional well-being. Could they, in the parlance of the time, "take it" if they were exposed to the realities of war? Almost as soon as U.S. combat operations began, a chorus of voices took up a line that was by turns insouciant and stern, telling parents that war play had nothing to do with real violence—and at the same time, that it was urgent they regulate their *own* emotional expressions in order to impress upon children a sense of stability and normality during a time of violence. These studies left a record of both a shifting adult ideology, and even further traces of how children actually played and talked about the violence of the conflict.

Harmless Play and Nervous Mothers

Early in 1942 a little-known doctor who had published a handful of articles on temper tantrums spoke to a parents meeting of the Sarah Lawrence Nursery School in Bronxville, New York. A young mother asked what she should do when her boy threatened to "shoot her dead." The best response, the doctor told her, was to play along and pretend to be dead. Some of the parents were

skeptical, but he insisted that war play and violent talk were normal and harmless. Twenty years before he was known as one of the foremost peace advocates in the country, Benjamin Spock's war work involved, in part, convincing parents to worry less when their children assimilated the world war into their domestic lives.

Spock's advice was part of an emerging chorus of claims by psychologists and educators that a properly realistic attitude meant letting children play war. The Federal Children's Bureau took the same position in a 1942 pamphlet "To Parents in Wartime," the keynote of which was that war play was appropriate and that the behavior of parents, particularly mothers, was the real object of concern. What parents talked about—the explicit conversations about violence and death—mattered less than their unspoken moods and unvoiced opinions, which, the Bureau warned parents, children could sense. The basic obligation of the parent was to maintain a stable affective life, allowing children to come to terms with wartime violence. The Children's Bureau instructed parents with a blunt variant on one of the key phrases of wartime culture: "Your children can take it if you can."⁸⁰

This meant banishing euphemism—"call things by their right names"—and letting children into adult conversations about the war, while also modulating the emotional tenor of family life to keep anxiety at bay. "Children can bear reality much better than the uncertainty created by a mystery," the Bureau warned. The pamphlet contrasted "Tommy", a 5-year-old who was a "keen, alert, busy, out-going sort of lad," and who had "a very active military existence in his play life" with 8-year-old "Phyllis," who was sensitive, socially insecure, unhappy about her

⁸⁰ "To Parents in Wartime," Children in Wartime No. 1, Children's Bureau Publication 282, (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1942), pp. 3.

looks, and whose “nights are disturbed by terrifying dreams.”⁸¹ While the ostensible point of the comparison was to highlight the differing needs of individual children, it clearly associated war play with mental and physical health. The goal was to manage the child’s adjustment to a world in which violence was a given, rather than to raise children into an expectation of peace.

The Children’s Bureau and the authors of a small shelf of wartime parenting guides shared a specific point of departure: the experience of Britain’s internally displaced children. In September 1939, 1.4 million children and mothers evacuated major cities in a voluntary but government-coordinated exodus prompted by fears of bombing and urban panic.⁸² By January 1940, almost 90 percent of the mothers and over 40 percent of the school-aged children had returned home—a circular migration that became the object of intensive study.⁸³ The social and psychological meanings of this drama were plumbed at length in studies by the Fabian Society, by Cambridge-based social workers, and most influentially by Anna Freud and Dorothy Burlingham, two psychologists who operated nurseries around London for children displaced by bombing and the threat of bombing. Freud and Burlingham understood destructive play as a natural part of infancy—“We often say, half jokingly, that there is a continual war raging in a nursery” —which was repressed as children grew older.⁸⁴ Real interstate war disrupted the process by normalizing violence: “It must be very difficult for them to accomplish this task of

⁸¹ “To Parents in Wartime,” 6.

⁸² Richard Padley and Margaret Cole, eds., *Evacuation Survey: A Report to the Fabian Society* (London: G. Routledge, 1940), 42.

⁸³ Padley and Cole, eds., *Evacuation Survey: A Report to the Fabian Society*, 1-2.

⁸⁴ Anna Freud and Dorothy T. Burlingham. *War and Children* (New York: Medical War Books, 1943), 22.

fighting their own death wishes when, at the same time, people are killed a hurt every day around them.” The reports they made of nursery life were full of passing reflections on the moral psychology of wartime. After one nighttime bombing, a young girl said that “it was a kind German, he did not drop the bomb on our house.” The psychologists noted: “It is rather curious to think that this is the idea of kindness with which the children of this period will grow up.”⁸⁵ Even a passing comment in a scientific treatise on child development could record the ethical derangement of the time.

While Freud and Burlingham offered a catalog of similar observations, their writings pushed an easily simplified message that was amplified by American observers. Children, they wrote, “either stay in the bombed areas with their parents and, quite apart from physical danger, get upset by their mothers’ fears and excitements ... [or] are evacuated to the country and suffer other shocks through separation from the parents ...”⁸⁶ The psychological burdens of the war for children in England had almost nothing to do with danger and almost everything to do with the composure and presence of their parents, primarily their mothers. A nervous or missing mother could be literally more traumatizing than a bomb. Conversely, exposure to the “horrors of war”—provided there was no actual injury—was manageable in the context of properly controlled parenting. With the threat of bombing entirely removed from the picture after a brief period of panic late in 1941 and early in 1942, and with the stability of home life thrown into question by the draft and the mobilization of women for work, this message was particularly potent in the American context.

⁸⁵ Freud and Burlingham. *War and Children*, 24, 137.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 83-84.

Freud and Burlingham had a direct line to an influential audience in the United States through one of their major sponsors, the Foster Parents' Plan for War Children, Inc., which maintained an office in midtown Manhattan and listed among its backers Sara and Eleanor Roosevelt, Efram Zimbalist, Tallulah Bankhead, Ira Gershwin, and Will Rogers, Jr., in addition to prominent politicians and journalists. By the time their analysis was published as a book in 1943 it had long been in circulation through a series of reports on the nurseries distributed by the Foster Parents' Plan.⁸⁷ Translated into American terms, where evacuation never became a serious issue (but where movement from county to county and state to state was a constant concern), the advice focused even more heavily on maternal affect, on the appropriate place of war in children's play and conversations, and on the exposure of children to war news. Sidonie Gruenberg, the director of the Child Study Association of America (CSAA) and a participant in the 1940 White House Conference on Children in Democracy, began a pamphlet with the claim that England taught a simple lesson: it is "parents who determine the mood. It is the tone in our millions of homes that will determine the tone of the nation."⁸⁸ Anna Wolf, one of Gruenberg's collaborators in the CSAA staff (along with Dr. Spock), credited Freud and Burlingham for revealing that childhood problems were due to the "nerves" of mothers rather than to bombs, and that the nation needed to "wake up and become tough-minded."⁸⁹ The

⁸⁷ *Freud-Burlingham Report*, November 1941. This publication is cited in accordance with the title used by most libraries for cataloging. The typescript publication was not identified as such, however, and bears as its title the name of the sponsoring organization: "The Foster Parents' Plan for War Children, Inc."

⁸⁸ Sidonie Gruenberg, "Children in Wartime: Parents' Questions," *The Family in a World at War*, New York: Harper & Brothers, 1942, pp. 255.

⁸⁹ Anna Wolf, *Our Children Face War* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1942), 95-6, 37.

message was proselytized in lectures and educational workshops. Daniel Prescott, of the American Council on Education and the University of Texas, held meetings in more than 400 southern California schools in December 1941 alone, telling thousands of teachers that “evidence from England” proved that bombing did less psychological damage than “jittery and anxious adults.”⁹⁰ These instructions had a distinct political edge in the context of pre-war campaigns for peace education: playing the part of the coolly accepting parent virtually ruled out the possibility of objecting to war play. Anxieties over the socialization of children into the war culture belonged to nervous mothers, whose very worries were a greater menace to children than the distant war.

Not everyone who disseminated the Freud/Burlingham message interpreted it the same way, of course. The anthropologist and public intellectual Margaret Mead called attention to British studies in an article criticizing the “various sorts of indictments of Americans, mothers and teachers and welfare workers, as hysterical and unable to take it.”⁹¹ Mead thought Americans faced a problem of nerve, but it was not one of nervous or hysterical mothers so much as a broadly shared cultural aversion to talking about death. “Even the modern educational methods which have mocked at the flowers-and-bees stories and insisted upon telling children ‘the facts of life’ have halted before the suggestions of telling children very much about the facts of death.” Wartime required rolling back what she called fifty years of “overprotection.” Anthropological research suggested, she wrote, that it was harmless to let children know about death and dying.

⁹⁰ Daniel A. Prescott, *Children and the War* (Austin, Texas: Hogg Foundation of the University of Texas), 1943, pp. 13.

⁹¹ Margaret Mead, “War Need Not Mar Our Children,” *Journal of Educational Sociology*, Vol. 16, No 4, “Children at War” issue, (December, 1942), 196.

“The children can stand up to reality, however grim, if the adults can, and if the adults believe in the children’s strength.”⁹² The Novelist Pearl Buck sounded the same note in her essay for the Child Studies Association of America, “At Home in the World,” insisting that “the home should be consciously a part of the world, a place where world problems are faced and talked about ...where nothing is hidden from the child.”⁹³ The violence of war should be discussed by the family. After all, she had benefited from an even closer exposure as the child of missionaries in China at the turn of the century: “I learned so early how to look on death that I cannot remember horror at a dead face.”⁹⁴

In contrast to Mead and Buck, most others focused on condemning American women and mothers far more sharply as the source of “unrealistic” attitudes, none more famously than the writer Philip Wylie. Wylie’s best-selling 1942 polemic, *A Generation of Vipers*, is largely remembered for coining the word “Momism” and for its slightly unhinged portrait of an American society dominated by women: a “Matriarchy in fact if not in declaration,” a “gynecocracy” in thrall to a new religion of “she-poper.”⁹⁵ Alongside the generalized misogyny, however, was a highly specific attack on the peace politics of women organized in civil society groups like the WILPF and World Peaceways. Freud and Burlingham had put an extraordinary burden on mothers by making their affective response almost the sole factor in the

⁹² Margaret Mead, “War Need Not Mar Our Children,” 200.

⁹³ Pearl S. Buck, “At Home in the World,” in Sidonie Gruenberg, ed., *The Family in a World at War* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1942), 132. Buck’s essay also appeared in *Marriage and Family Living*, Vol. 4, No. 1, February, 1942.

⁹⁴ Pearl S. Buck, ““At Home in the World,” 135.

⁹⁵ Philip Wylie, *Generation of Vipers* (New York: Rinehart, 1955 [1942]), 53, 207, 216.

“adjustment” of children to war, but their work went no further than an empirical claim about the family circumstances which seemed to produce the best adjustment to bombing in the UK.

Wylie, on the other hand, blamed women as an actively malign political force, responsible for the war itself. The ultimate cause of the conflict lay with the creation of a “huge class of idle, middle-aged women” who became “organization minded” during the suffrage movement and proceeded to demilitarize society by training generations of children to see physical violence as aberrant.⁹⁶ Part of Wylie’s argument sounded like a restatement of Mead’s worry about the invisibility of death: “The most Lethan error of the eunuch moms who operate the little red schoolhouse for the politicians has been to forget death.”⁹⁷ But he was less interested in demystifying a biological fact than in fixing blame for the conflict on maternalist pacifism, singling out World Peaceways as a culprit worth individual attention. That organization’s “scandalous posters” had stigmatized national defense to the point of inviting an attack, “and now we are being killed for it.”⁹⁸

The exhortations to realism about “war play” and violent talk had at times a thin, formulaic quality. But when the authors of psychological studies and popular parenting books discussed childhood conversations and mimicry of violence, they drew on hundreds of very specific encounters. They were actively engaged with the way children experienced the conflict, and recorded their observations in detail along with their normative judgments on how parents and teachers should treat these incursions of the distant conflict.

⁹⁶ Wylie, 200-203, 216.

⁹⁷ Wylie, 87-88.

⁹⁸ Wylie, 270, 279.

War Play in the Laboratory and Playground

A case in point was an elaborate study by the psychiatrist Juliette Louise Despert, who scrutinized 43 children at New York Hospital-Cornell Medical Center in late 1941 and early 1942.⁹⁹ Despert examined hospital records, gave parents an extensive questionnaire on anxiety and “war awareness”, and had a team of researchers observe the children at play in the hospital’s nursery school, after which follow-up interviews were conducted with the parents. The children were then assigned individual “play sessions” with psychiatrists under exacting conditions: “The play sessions take place in a sound-proof room which is equipped with a complete, mechanical recording device. All utterances of the child and psychiatrist are automatically set down. Notes on silent behavior are added later; synchronization is made possible by an attached time indicator.”¹⁰⁰ The procedure captured nuances beyond “nerves” and wooden rifles. A six-year-old girl worried about being bombed, and was reassured later by counting the United Nations flags outside Radio City and comparing them with the flags of the enemy: “They have only three countries.” She was overheard saying, “I hate you, B_____ [her sister]. No, I don’t. I hate Hitler. I don’t hate you.”¹⁰¹ A boy of seven who bit other children on the playground spoke about the difference between incendiary and explosive bombs, and when he “played Army” he gave himself the rank of Secretary of War.¹⁰² He wasn’t the only one to imagine himself directing

⁹⁹ Juliette Louise Despert, *Preliminary Report On Children's Reactions to the War: Including a Critical Survey of the Literature*. [n. p.], 1942.

¹⁰⁰ Juliette Louise Despert, *Preliminary Report On Children's Reactions to the War*, 42.

¹⁰¹ Despert, *Preliminary Report On Children's Reactions to the War*, 53-54.

¹⁰² Despert, 56-57.

armies instead of fighting in them. A nine-year-old mailed plans for invading Germany to the White House, and when he learned Hitler was unmarried, remarked to his mother, “Well, I wish I were a girl ... I would get him to marry me and then kill him.” The militarization of American political society was evident even to younger children, as in the case of a three-year-old who warned his mother, before she went to Washington, D.C., “There is a big war there.”¹⁰³

When a group of children aged 4-6 noticed a ship in the East River, the oldest girl explained that it was a warship, pointing out the guns and talking about bombers.

A: “Bombs drop on boats and they make them sink.”

J: “Do people like bombs?”

A: “I never saw a bomb drop on a boat so I don’t know. They don’t drop bombs on their own selves, just other people. Bombs are up in the airplanes.”

J: “How do they bomb ships?”

A: “They just drop, let go. It falls straight down.”

M: “Does it hurt?”

J: “Does it hit right on people’s head? I’m never going on a ship like that!”
(Pastes vigorously).¹⁰⁴

This childish dialog had an ethical texture, concerned with the consequences of bombing—would there be pain?—for strangers. The point may appear quite minor but deserves underlining. Historians often make much of distance, abstraction, and the inability to conceptualize the suffering of others in their accounts of modern war. But pain was evident enough to toddlers as a predictable consequence of bombing.

A continent away, Dorothy Baruch noticed similar conversations as the director of a preschool attached to Whittier College. She described a three-year-old girl named Kate who

¹⁰³ Ibid., 61-62, 72.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 65-66.

asked: “Will people be hurt and their legs come off?” Her mother’s reply, which Baruch endorsed as a sound model for other parents, was physical reassurance (a hug) coupled with a frank answer: “Yes, that can happen if people are in the way of the bombs.”¹⁰⁵ She began her book with a parallel between sex and death: “The facts of life. Shall we tell them? What facts of life? Those of the nineteen-twenties—where babies come from? Those of the nineteen-forties—where soldiers go?”¹⁰⁶ Baruch was unabashedly in favor of permitting children to play war and described the playground as a means of assimilating the violence “perpetually present” in adult conversation. And she, like Despert, also recorded highly idiosyncratic vignettes of what children actually did and said. Peter, a three-year-old, moved easily from targeting enemy planes to tending civilian casualties in a pretend-hospital. She oddly but effectively rendered this toddler’s words as verse:

I have two babies in here
That got hurt
I have another baby
That got hurt
By the war.¹⁰⁷

Baruch gave the war itself more causal power, and argued that behavior had shifted noticeably because of the conflict. “It is as if all the hounds of hell had been suddenly unleashed in those,

¹⁰⁵ Dorothy W. Baruch, *You ... Your Children ... And War* (New York: Appleton Century, 1942), 36.

¹⁰⁶ Baruch, *You ... Your Children ... And War*, 22.

¹⁰⁷ Baruch, 33.

our sweet children, since the beginning of the war.”¹⁰⁸ Global violence produced three things at once: new “tensions” within the family, new languages of violence with which to express anxieties and resentments, and above all a feeling that the language of wartime violence was an acceptable social currency. Children who talked about bombing their parents or stabbing their siblings were hardly the first in history to lash out with angry words, but it made a difference that violent language couldn’t easily be disavowed. “Adults can no longer say, ‘We don’t talk of killing.’ We *do*. So why should children not talk of killing, also?” Baruch sympathized with a the mother whose child said he’d “like the Japs to come and cut my tongue off.”¹⁰⁹ But ultimately it would do more harm than good to try to police a line between total war and childhood.

Angelo Patri was of a similar mind, but he embraced a childhood language of violence even more directly as an expression of the child’s comprehension of what was happening in the world. An influential Italian-American educator who had studied at Columbia University and who wrote frequently for popular audiences, Patri described a kindergarten teacher who was upset when a child made “paper dolls, called them Japs, cut their heads off, then clapped his hands with glee.” The teacher’s concern was unwarranted, Patri thought, because “children would be stupid not to know that we are out to kill the Japanese who attacked us.”¹¹⁰ For Patri, it was crucial that this did not amount to hatred, but only to a matter-of-fact acceptance of a civic responsibility. “Hate might cloud our minds and spoil our aim And we have to shoot straight

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 40.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 58, 60.

¹¹⁰ Angelo Patri, *Your Children in Wartime* (New York: Doubleday, Doran and Company, 1943), 80.

and often and swiftly.”¹¹¹ Anna Wolf, in a variation on the theme, wrote about teaching children a “healthy hate” that avoided racism, but at the same time cautioned against the “false notion” that the German people were themselves victims, bearing no blame for the aggression and crimes of the Third Reich. The “‘Innocent’ victims of wicked leaders are only relatively innocent,” she wrote.¹¹² Many decades of postwar controversies over the collective responsibility and *mens rea* of the German people in the 1930s and 1940s were foreshadowed in parenting advice books of the war years—a fact that by itself is some kind of index of the permeation of the war into the mind of the home front.

Most of the studies and anecdotes that went into parenting guides had relatively short time horizons, depending on days or weeks of observation (though often in the context of entire careers spent on family issues). But researchers at the Yale Clinic of Child Development captured a longer trajectory that happened to overlap with the war years, in a work on *The Child From Five to Ten* that was published in 1946. The clinic’s director, Arnold Gesell, and his coauthor, the pediatrician Frances Ilg, described their methodology as a “biographical-clinical approach” which worked through “intimate, consecutive, individualized contacts, rather than mass studies.”¹¹³ They followed 50 children at intervals from 5-9 years old, building on earlier studies of *The First Five Years of Life* (1940) and *Infant and Child in the Culture of Today* (1943).

Gesell and Ilg summarized their work in a series of timelines which briefly sketched

¹¹¹ Patri, *Your Children in Wartime* (New York: Doubleday, Doran and Company, 1943), 79.

¹¹² Anna Wolf, *Our Children Face War*, 171-172.

¹¹³ Arnold Gesell and Frances L. Ilg *The Child From Five to Ten* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1946), x.

common developmental characteristics at ages from two to ten. Each timeline was topical, covering for example the child's conceptualization of "time," "language and thought" or "the deity" as they grew older. One of the timelines was for "War."¹¹⁴ When two-year-olds were asked "What do soldiers do?" they gave no answers, but six to twelve months later the same children said that soldiers "March all around," and would sometimes mention guns without talk of fighting. Around three-and-a-half and four years, they could explain what military men did with their weapons: "Shoot the Japanese." These terse phrases soon expanded into narratives and moral judgments. Children of five, the authors wrote, rarely showed signs of fear, and spoke without emotion when they said that their own fathers were "in the war." They were also ethically curious and creative. One asked the investigators: "Are there good Japs and bad Japs? You can't tell me all the Jap children are bad." Others suggested plans for ending the war, ranging from assassination ("Get up behind Hitler when he isn't looking and shoot him") to legalistic formulas ("Pass a law, tell them they shouldn't hurt each other").¹¹⁵

At six and seven, the same topics seemed to be more emotionally fraught, provoking angry and aggressive condemnations of the enemy at first, and then an increasing level of personal fear, which sometimes appeared in dreams. A six-year-old said the war could be ended if the Army would "Bomb the Japs while they're asleep," and others traced on globes and atlases where they believed their fathers had been deployed. One seven-year-old dreamed that a spy approached her and asked a somewhat sinister question: "Do you like your government?" By eight and nine, however, the children's engagement with wartime topics was more matter-of-

¹¹⁴ Gesell and Ilg, *The Child From Five to Ten*, 447-449.

¹¹⁵ Gesell, 447-9.

fact. At these ages they asked about the origins of the war, the meaning of fascism, and how slave labor worked—they wanted to understand how it was possible to be compelled to work for the enemy. When researchers questioned them on their knowledge of the war at these ages, they provided earnest responses: “I know Russia is gaining and we captured Leyte,” one said.¹¹⁶

The same caveat must apply here as elsewhere: the study drew on a small sample from a specific social milieu in one corner of the country. All the same, the brief chronological account of “war” as a category of developmental psychology stands as a testimony to the continuous presence of the conflict in daily life. And the rest of the book frequently touched on wartime topics in passing. As the authors charted the awareness of death at various stages of growth, they noted that one five-year-old was “interested in the posture of the soldier who falls dead—‘Did he fall on his back or his face?’”¹¹⁷ Six-year-olds had an increasingly emotional sense of mortality, dwelling on their own and their mother’s deaths as possibilities, and linking these feelings to their knowledge that war produced death: “[H]e feels the passing shadow of the curse of Cain; for he is acquiring the idea of death by violence—death as a condition which results from killing! (The war has not delayed this insight).”¹¹⁸ Between six and nine, the children had nightmares that intermingled generic fears of violent injury with whatever they could imagine of the global conflict. At six, the content of dreams included “Fire, thunder and lightening, and war.”¹¹⁹

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 447-9.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 87.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 431.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 306.

Beyond the specialized milieu of education writers and psychological researchers, children's wartime play was recorded and discussed by journalists as an index of the conflict's complexity and reach into civilian society. Just as the realism of war toys struck observers as noteworthy in the late 1930s, a *Washington Post* reporter noticed in 1943 that the children playing near his house captured an astonishingly realistic sonic range, mimicking the distinctive sounds of mortars, anti-tank weapons, machine guns, and falling bombs. "[T]he pattern of the children's war games this time is as complex as the present war is—and follows it very closely," he wrote.¹²⁰ Girls participated as nurses attending to the wounded, and "officers" kept records of prisoners. The gendering of play activities is salient partly as a measure of how closely the play efforts mirrored what could be known of real organizations and practices. When the weather was bad they shifted to a particular urban scenario, reenacting house-to-house fighting in Stalingrad. If *Life* magazine and radio dramas supplied some of the sounds and images, personal contacts with adults also informed this kind of play. After being shot multiple times in the invasion of Saipan, Captain Earl White returned home to Los Angeles and conducted drills in a vacant lot for neighborhood children. While teaching the children, ranging from 3 to 11 years old, to stand at attention and present arms before fighting their battles, he also recounted the details of his service and explained how he had lost a thumb. " 'It wasn't so long ago that I was playing at this thing myself,' said Capt. White. 'I think it's good for them.' "¹²¹

Other forms of war play that attracted media attention were more organized and were

¹²⁰ "Fighting on Far-Flung World Battlefronts is Vividly Reenacted in Boys' War Games," *Washington Post*, May 14, 1943.

¹²¹ "Saipan Veteran Reviews Young Commando Army," *Los Angeles Times*, October 8, 1944.

often indirectly tied to recruitment and mobilization efforts. Many of these quasi-formal groups called themselves “commandos,” borrowing a piece of military terminology from highly publicized British special operations units. In Washington, D.C., “Murphy’s Commandos” ran obstacle courses in Park View Playground under the eyes of a 14-year-old leader, Robert Cohen. The group was assembled after Army and Navy officials met with “local recreation leaders” to express concerns about the physical fitness of inductees.¹²² In Elizabeth, New Jersey, a park police officer gave young offenders a chance to join the “Warinanco Junior Commandos” as an alternative to arrest for minor juvenile infractions.¹²³ These groups blurred the line between spontaneous childhood play and the almost paramilitary emphasis of schools operating under the guidelines of the High School Victory Council, the government organization whose materials stressed combat-specific training (throwing grenades, for example) in anticipation of inducting 80 percent of graduating seniors.¹²⁴

Harold Gray’s immensely popular comic strip “Little Orphan Annie” contributed to the vogue for the commando terminology when Annie formed a commando unit of her own,

¹²² “Playground Commandos Toughen Up,” *Washington Post*, July 2, 1943.

¹²³ “Juvenile Crime Curbed by ‘Junior Commandos,’” *New York Herald-Tribune*, December 19, 1943.

¹²⁴ U.S. Office of Education. Committee on Wartime Health Education for High Schools, *Physical fitness through health education for the Victory Corps*. (Washington, D.C.: 1943), 44, passim. Richard M. Ugland, “‘Education for Victory’: The High School Victory Corps and Curricular Adaptation during World War II,” *History of Education Quarterly*, Vol. 19, No. 4 (Winter, 1979), pp. 435-451, 435.

dedicated to collecting scrap metal and selling war bonds.¹²⁵ At first glance, Annie's ventures into wartime volunteering were completely anodyne, with little connection at all to the imagination of distant violence. And certainly there was little violence in the comic strip. But it nonetheless managed to make its own claims about the relationship of children to the battlefield. The deeply conservative Gray—who killed off Annie's benefactor, Daddy Warbucks, after Franklin Roosevelt's fourth-term nomination, and pointedly brought him back to life when the President died in 1945—built a sharp political commentary into the Junior Commandos stories. Once she began collecting scrap metal, Annie's patriotic efforts were opposed by villains who could have been drawn directly from Philip Wylie's attacks on organization women: a trio of mothers who tried to stop the "junior commandos" because they were alarmed at "all this war talk" and wanted children sheltered from the violence that commandos represented.¹²⁶

While unfair, Gray's caricature was not unrecognizable. One of the rearguard actions by the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) in 1942 was to protest casual or enthusiastic talk of killing (see chapters 2 and 3). And some of the language used in American newspapers seemed to confirm their worst fears about socializing children into an expectation of violence. A description of the British commandos under the headline "School for Murder" quoted a training officer who proudly differentiated ordinary combat from his specialty, "the personal, individual killing of a man in cold blood."¹²⁷ The Americans who were trained to

¹²⁵ "Col. Ann's J.C. Gang Grows by Leaps, Bounds" *Chicago Daily Tribune*, November 29, 1942; "The War Makes Us All Think, Even the Funny Papers" *Baltimore Afro-American*, August 15, 1942.

¹²⁶ "Little Orphan Annie," *Chicago Tribune*, June 18-20, 1942.

¹²⁷ "School for Murder," *New York Herald-Tribune*, October 17, 1943. The article was reprinted by the *Washington Post* on October 31.

borrow these tactics in the 1940s, the U.S. Army Rangers, were described in the press as men who started fighting in childhood, progressing from playground scraps to prizefighting and then to killing “with the cunning of the Indian and the ruthlessness of a gangster.”¹²⁸ Another newspaper reported that “Commando tactics were second nature” to the veterans of a boys’ camp outside Boston.¹²⁹ The discursive link between childhood activities and a capacity for especially brutal practices of warfare—explicitly identified as individual “murder”—was a connection drawn by multiple actors, including both the enthusiasts and the critics of folding children into the wartime imaginary.

And there was another register to these public discussions: sometimes war play was blamed for real casualties. The child actress Ann Todd, who appeared in more than a dozen wartime films, was hospitalized at age nine in 1942 for an infected cut suffered in a war game; two younger boys died in Venice, California, suffocating in an icebox “fox hole”; and children occasionally shot one another after borrowing real guns for their games.¹³⁰ These rare accidents usually drew local press attention without touching the broader discourse on the war. More unsettling, however, were cases which did not appear accidental. Despite the assurances of psychologists and educators that war play was harmless, a panic over “juvenile delinquency” brought forward the possibility that mobilization was producing a surplus of violence without

¹²⁸ “Ranger Troops to be the War’s Toughest,” *New York Herald-Tribune*, August 20, 1942.

¹²⁹ “Boys’ Camp Members Overseas Find Themselves Better Soldiers” *Boston Globe*, May 31, 1943

¹³⁰ “Child Actress Taken to Hospital,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 28, 1942; “Two Boys Perish in Icebox While Playing War Game,” *Los Angeles Times*, August 4, 1943. “Brooklyn Kids Wage Gang War,” *New York Amsterdam News*, October 9, 1943.

effectively channeling it to official purposes. But if this was so, what could be done about it?

Conclusion: The Juvenile Delinquency Scare

In February 1944 FBI director J. Edgar Hoover announced a “third front” in the global war: a campaign against crime by children. Hoover linked an apparent rise in juvenile delinquency to “screaming newspaper headlines about commando raids” and warned that the glamor of international violence was contributing to muggings, daylight robberies (sometimes using toy guns), and vandalism on a large scale. According to the FBI director, a pair of nine-year-old boys caused \$1.5 million in damage by setting fire to a war plant, and a six-year-old allegedly killed a railroad fireman by using rocks to derail a passenger train in Michigan.¹³¹ Hoover was not the only one to connect violence by minors with the war. Four months earlier the Office of War Information warned of a delinquency crisis, and Congress held hearings on the subject at the end of 1943.¹³² A bibliography published in 1946 found over 200 wartime publications on the topic.¹³³ These alarms were inseparable from conservative responses to social dislocation, and often the term “delinquency” signified anxieties over sexual behavior, not violence.¹³⁴ Indeed, in some respects the juvenile delinquency scare looks like a dress rehearsal for post-war moral

¹³¹ “A ‘Third Front’—Against Juvenile Crime,” *New York Times*, February 27, 1944.

¹³² “OWI Reports ‘Alarming’ Jump in Juvenile Cases Over U.S.,” *Washington Post*, October 10, 1943.

¹³³ K.S. Hingwe, “Select Works on Juvenile Delinquency During the Second World War,” *Bulletin of the Deccan College Research Institute*, Vol. 7, No. ¼ (December 1946), 254-266.

¹³⁴ Michael Katherine Smith, “You Can’t Say ‘No’ to a Soldier: Sexual Violence in the United States During World War II,” (PhD dissertation, College of William and Mary, August 2013), 4-5, 103-5; Marilyn Hegarty, *Victory Girls, Khaki-Wackies, and Patriotutes: The Regulation of Female Sexuality During World War II* (New York University Press, 2008), 26, 134-5.

panics centered on the consumer autonomy of an emerging youth culture. In the space of a decade Congress held hearings on juvenile delinquency twice, the first time focused on war mobilization and the second time on the influence of comic books. Throughout the early 1940s, however, experts and advocates whose primary interests lay in economic security or family policy voiced a recurrent worry that the war was working an intangible change in the behavior of children, turning them towards anarchic violence rather than the hyper-patriotism that pacifists had worried about.

The same suspicions arose after the first World War. Abraham Brill, an Austrian-born psychoanalyst who was among the early English translators of Freud, earned the attention of American criminologists when he argued that homicides in the 1920s were partly a consequence of the first World War.¹³⁵ Brill told a journalist that the infamous Chicago students Nathan Leopold and Richard Loeb, who were convicted of killing a 14-year-old neighbor in 1924, had formed their fundamental moral outlook “when a Nation which held murder in horror suddenly broke out in sturdy anthems of praise for killers and killing.”¹³⁶ The idea persisted. In 1940, a criminological researcher surveyed conflicts in the U.S. past and warned that war and criminality were closely intertwined historically, because “behavior formerly called criminal, i.e. killing, is now considered good and commendable.”¹³⁷

¹³⁵ H.C. Brearley, *Homicide in the United States* (Chapel Hill, NC: 1932), 31-32. Brearley mentions Brill’s work but discounts his theories about war and homicide because they would have predicted rising homicide rates in Germany, France and Great Britain after 1918.

¹³⁶ Milton MacKaye, “Youthful Killers,” *Outlook and Independent*, January 2, 1929.

¹³⁷ Betty B. Rosenbaum, “The Relationship Between War and Crime in the United States,” *Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology*, Vol. 30, No. 5, January-February 1940, 722.

These hardly seemed like arguments that would be conducive to mobilization, and one might expect state actors to try to minimize the appearance of a relationship between war and criminal violence. Yet as Hoover's broadside indicates, that is not quite what happened. Instead, public officials magnified the concern. When the Children's Bureau made its report on *Understanding Juvenile Delinquency* in the fall of 1943, it discussed wartime mentalities as one of the many hazards faced by children during the mobilization.¹³⁸ The Children's Bureau even elaborated a developmental model of morality within which such claims made sense. According to the Bureau's major publication on the subject, conscience emerged through emotional relationships with parents, and the disruption of those relationships made it easier for the ethical compromises of the battlefield, where prohibitions on harm had to be suspended, to translate into rougher domestic standards. "Social and moral values are shaken. Attitudes of hate and destructiveness, ordinarily forbidden or repressed, are not only permitted expression but are encouraged."¹³⁹ At a moment when the maintenance of morale was at a premium, the Bureau seemingly opened the possibility that war would undermine the social reproduction of conscience itself: not a particularly reassuring prospect.

But it was not a dissenting report, nor even a particularly unusual statement. The New York State Board of Social Welfare, for example, anticipated the Children's Bureau on the theme by several months. After holding hearings across the state in 1942 and 1943, the Welfare Board concluded that the simple fact of the war was eroding "controls against violence which have

¹³⁸ U.S. Department of Labor, Children's Bureau Publication 300, *Understanding Juvenile Delinquency* (1943), 3, 5, 21.

¹³⁹ *Understanding Juvenile Delinquency*, 17-18.

gradually and consistently been built up throughout civilization.” The problem was the daily infiltration of guns, bombers, and the details of knife fights as “the constant subjects of conversation” in everyday life.¹⁴⁰ This case was made, *vox populi vox dei*, by a chorus of citizens voicing the same worries. At the Watertown YMCA, a speaker wonder how the lesson “that it is wrong to kill” could be credible coming from adults planning a global war. In Rochester another speaker said that the current cultural “emphasis on brute force and mass killing” was bound to influence the attitudes and behavior of the young.¹⁴¹

The same logic appeared on a larger national canvas when the liberal Senator Claude Pepper of Florida convened hearings on juvenile delinquency in November and December 1943.¹⁴² Senator Pepper’s investigation brought forth a long list of renowned experts to testify, and in the process both slightly deflated the case for a real crime wave and at the same time further documented the readiness of public figures—in and out of the national government—to say that war was distorting the moral development of children. The hearings were held under the auspices of the Committee on Education and Labor, and their larger purpose, as Pepper explained at the outset, was resolutely practical: approximately 3 million draft-age men had been declared unfit for service because of “mental, moral, educational, or physical deficiencies,” and

¹⁴⁰ *The Effects of the War on Children: As Reported by Citizens of New York State at Public Hearings Held Under the Auspices of the State Board of Social Welfare*, (Albany, NY: New York State Board of Social Welfare, 1943), 15-16.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 74, 39.

¹⁴² U.S. Senate, Committee on Education and Labor, *Juvenile Delinquency: Hearings Before a Subcommittee of the Committee on Education and Labor US Senate*, 78th Congress, 1st Session (1943).

this drain on wartime manpower demanded an explanation.¹⁴³ If the specter of strikes and the reality of race riots represented acute threats to efficient mobilization, mistakes in the government of the young amounted to a chronic limitation on the military capacity of the nation.

The first witness, William Healy, was another pioneer of Freudian research in the United States and one of the authors of the American Law Institute's Model Youth Correction Authority Act. Healy had long argued for a complex multi-causal etiology of crime, which factored in social and biological circumstances while retaining a major role for individual cognition (and thus responsibility): "without mental life there can be no delinquency," he wrote in 1933.¹⁴⁴ When he appeared before the senators, Healy characteristically insisted that the problem of delinquency had many roots, and he did not hesitate to include wartime "mental life" in his diagnosis. Healy claimed that Americans were "constantly bombarded by ideas concerning criminality" and that "all this seems to find fertile soil for development because we have a very definite national spirit retained from pioneer wild west days."¹⁴⁵ He described a particularly long-run intellectual and cultural background to the problem, but like many others he also traced a fairly straight line between international events, "commando practice", and ultimately "assaults, hoodlumism, and vandalism."¹⁴⁶ Among older youth this took on an alarmingly rational aspect, as high school students weighed the chance of an early death in war against the risks of aggressive and anarchic behavior. Global war accelerated teenage recklessness, one

¹⁴³ U.S. Senate, *Juvenile Delinquency*, 1.

¹⁴⁴ Healy, William. "The Prevention of Delinquency and Criminality." *Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology* Vol. 24, no. 1 (1933), 75

¹⁴⁵ *Juvenile Delinquency*, 5.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 5.

small sliver of a society increasingly unhinged by wider circulations of legitimized violence.

Other witnesses spoke to a range of social and political anxieties: representatives of the AFL and conservative Catholics both insisted for quite different reasons on the duty of mothers to remain in the home rather than going into the workforce, and predictably attributed delinquency to changing labor patterns and a fleeting adjustment of gender norms.¹⁴⁷ Katherine Lenroot, the chief of the Children's Bureau, forcefully rejected these arguments and focused attention on the specific shortfalls in funding for child care services through the Lanham Act, one of the first Federal forays into daycare. Lenroot perceived a wide social failure, not a problem with individual mothers, telling the Congressional committee that delinquency resulted from a "serious breakdown in family security and parental guidance, and in community safeguards and services to children."¹⁴⁸ Expand the public provision of childcare, she argued, and much of the problem would vanish.

Her testimony—drawing on the reports of hundreds of her welfare workers spread across the country—was doggedly focused on improving the material conditions of working mothers. Yet she too invoked a less tangible set of imaginative links with the battlefield. It was important to keep women in the factories, she argued, not because their labor was necessary or for reasons of fundamental equality, but because women had been hurt by the enemy and deserved a chance to strike back. She cited a nursery school at a California aircraft plant that employed a large number of women who had lost husbands in the first days of the war. Contributing directly to the production of retaliatory violence was "a matter of very great importance to their general

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 69-83, 329.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 115.

emotional life,” Lenroot maintained.¹⁴⁹ As for children, their emotional lives and consequently their behavior were also bound up in the atmosphere of war, meaning a heightened sense of “excitement and adventure” along with the “tension, anxiety, and apprehension” of parents and teachers.¹⁵⁰ The keynote of her testimony was also the nuts-and-bolts details of how federal funding could support parents and communities in the supervision of children during a period of broad social dislocation, but she was quite ready to recognize echoes of interstate violence in the behavior of children. So was Mark McClosky, a settlement house and National Youth Administration veteran who was by 1943 the director of the Office of Community War Services in the Federal Security Agency. His office had set up programs in thousands of communities and frequently advised local police on delinquency and prostitution. And he also saw the “world situation” as a factor in delinquency: “It’s impossible to embark upon the greatest piece of destruction in the world without having it reflect on the conduct of young people.”¹⁵¹

Assessing these claims is difficult. Even the scale of the juvenile delinquency problem is hard to gauge. When a member of the Senate committee asked the Federal Security Agency’s McCloskey about the increase in juvenile crime, he confirmed it was real without hesitation. Pressed on the basis for his claim, he replied that his source was “spotty statistics.”¹⁵² The Bureau of Prisons reported a *decline* in juvenile offenses between 1942 and 1943, resulting from a reduction in the number of interstate auto thefts—perhaps an unintended benefit of gasoline

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 156.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 104.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 62.

¹⁵² Ibid., 62.

and rubber rationing.¹⁵³ While it is entirely plausible that the social dislocations of the time produced changes in behavior, there is no convincing evidence of a causal link between the circulation of wartime narratives or images and a broader rise in violence at home. Indeed it is difficult to imagine what such evidence might look like.

Still, as a moment in political history of wartime culture, the claims were themselves significant. John Martin, the director of the Office of Civilian Defense, divided the causes of delinquency into two groups: unnecessary risks that might be eliminated, and those hazards “which the Nation assumes in the interest of national self-preservation.” Crime produced by fantasies of violence fell into the category of costs that simply had to be borne. It was “unavoidable for a nation at war” that a certain amount of anarchic turmoil would follow from “the general emotional state of people and the war news with its unavoidable description of conflict and violence.”¹⁵⁴ By the start of 1944, the administrators responsible for the widest national projects of governing American childhood and family life had offered explanations that strangely mirrored the contentious claims of interwar pacifists. War threatened the moral order. It did so indirectly, by uprooting families and setting communities into a blur of unaccustomed motion; and it did so directly, by normalizing violence within everyday life.

A ten-year-old who joined a local “junior commandos” club in 1942 reached the draft age during the war in Korea. A toddler in Professor Gesell’s laboratory at Yale would have been eligible for military service when large-scale American deployments to Vietnam began in 1965. By these

¹⁵³ Ibid., 381.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 359

later dates the half-remembered “war talk” and “war play” of childhood may have seemed like a premonition to the children of the 1940s. There is a powerful temptation to infer some kind of causal connection here. The philosopher and scholar of violence Joanna Bourke has recently argued that war play is part of the “deep violence” of contemporary social life, and that notwithstanding the inability of social scientific inquiry to validate the claim, such play helps perpetuate violence.¹⁵⁵

These strong causal claims are not necessary, however, for the preceding narrative to inform the larger history of ethics, violence, and democracy in the American century. The common thread of a widely-conceived “realist” strain of thought was the insistence that self-consciously moral agents might be constrained by real, external factors to commit themselves to a course of action that felt deeply wrong. This could be true for a democratic polity as much as for a general or an individual soldier on the battlefield. Across a range of activities, from the censorship of the news to the production and oversight of films to the consumption of nonfiction literature, thousands of state actors worked to enable a wide acceptance of morally ambiguous violence. In the early 1940s, it reached the playground and the nursery as well, producing a “realist” childhood.

¹⁵⁵ Joanna Bourke, *Deep Violence: Military Violence, War Play, and the Social Life of Weapons* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2015), 159-190.

Conclusion

Realism and moral common sense, around and after 1945

The violent labor of 1944 and 1945 could only be the work of a blind Leviathan. So it seemed to Dwight MacDonald from his perch at *Politics*, a small dissenting journal published in New York in the last years of World War II. MacDonald's account of the conflict was one of unredeemed suffering, a human catastrophe that could only seed future catastrophes. When Nazi resistance collapsed in the spring of 1945, his cover illustration, under the headline "VICTORY!!!", was a reproduction of the *Danse Macabre* from Hartman Schedel's 1493 *Nuremberg Chronicle*.¹ The grinning, dancing skeletons reflected the ethically polarized images fillings newspapers that spring: celebrations in the streets of Allied cities, and reports from Buchenwald and Dachau of concentration camp victims—described by journalists as "human skeletons who had lost all likeness to anything human."² The *Danse Macabre*—a medieval trope in which the universal fact of mortality leveled the distinctions of temporal life—challenged the moral order of victory. For MacDonald, the war was ethically leveling. "Two horrors confront each other in Europe," he wrote in the same issue: "the dying Nazi horror" and "the surviving Allied horror."³ His point was not that Americans and their allies bore the same guilt as the Third Reich. Instead, the liberal democratic state erased the conditions of possibility for moral guilt and innocence just as

¹ *Politics*, May 1945. On the medieval images see Ulinka Rublack, *The Dance of Death* (New York: Penguin Classics, 2017).

² "Nazi Death Factory Shocks Germans on a Forced Tour," *New York Times*, April 18, 1945.

³ "The Two Horrors," *Politics*, May 1945.

effectively as totalitarianism appeared to divorce ordinary Germans from responsibility for their regime. “More and more, things happen *to* people,” he wrote.⁴

A few months later MacDonald called the atomic bomb a fitting achievement for democracies led by “colorless mediocrities”—Clement Atlee and Harry Truman—who were “Average Men elevated to their positions by the mechanics of the system.”⁵ No moral intentions, good or evil, attached to the apocalyptic end of the war; the democracies killed with “perfect automatism” and “an absolute lack of human consciousness or aims.” This outlook was pessimistic and at the same time exculpatory. War would recur, driven by mindless bureaucratic and economic processes. But when democratic polities burned cities and civilians, they literally did not know what they did. The parliamentary and congressional Leviathans of the 20th century were morally blind.

This was ironically much the same complaint that military and civilian planners had made in the early 1940s: citizens were not connected with the reality of global conflict. MacDonald was in many ways radically at odds with wartime culture, but he wove into his critique a widely shared set of ideas about what distance and abstraction did to the domestic experience of war. Americans spent the war talking about how little other Americans grasped the violent substance of modern armed conflict, about how they fell into a wide variety of moral errors as a consequence, and finally about the urgency of impressing a “realistic” sense of violence upon every corner of the polity. Hence the title of Richard Lingeman’s popular account

⁴ “The Responsibility of Peoples,” *Politics*, March 1945.

⁵ “The Bomb,” *Politics*, September 1945.

of life on the home front: *Don't You Know There's A War On?*⁶ The contours of this argument resonated four decades later in the oral histories Studs Terkel collected for his powerful book *"The Good War."* "No bombs were ever dropped on us," Peggy Terry, an Appalachian munitions worker, told Terkel in the 1980s. "I can't help but believe the cold war started because we were untouched."⁷ But of course people were not quite "untouched," and they did frequently and vividly imagine violence taking place beyond the horizon, and sometimes flowing out of their own work. Otherwise they would not have spoken of it at all.

The wager of this dissertation is thus a simple claim: MacDonald got it wrong. The democratic state distributed the moral engagement with violence rather than burying the ethical problems of war. Parceling out the work of killing unquestionably dulled the possibility of moral pain—war-workers and taxpayers were not ever in danger of becoming industrial Raskolnikovs, haunted and punished like Dostoevsky's murderer by a feeling of schismatic separation from communion with a wider humanity. But distributing the ethical problems of war did not empty those problems of moral concern. Between the late 1930s and the middle of the 1940s the global use of lethal force on a mass scale went from virtually unthinkable to a daily reality, changing millions of lives in concrete ways through taxes, labor, and conscription—but also reshaping the common sense of how violence was, and properly ought to be, part of the U.S. relationship with the rest of the world. This new common sense became a constitutive element of the "American Century." When the state exercised its military power over the next three decades it was not necessarily animated by a jingoistic popular will, a militarized version of Rousseau's *volonte*

⁶ Richard Lingeman, *Don't You Know There's a War On? The America Home Front, 1941-1945* (New York: Putnam, 1970).

⁷ Studs Terkel, *"The Good War": An Oral History of World War II* (New York: The New Press, 1997 [1984]), 113.

generale. But the state could draw on popular consent as well as secrecy and bureaucratic processes insulated from public scrutiny; without this, one might very reasonably doubt whether the wars of the Cold War could have been sustained alongside the expansion of political democracy in the Civil Rights years. Instead of taking at face value the lamentations over domestic blindness—which emphasize the literal and figurative distance of the war as its most salient ethical characteristics—we should pay attention to the fact that so many people shared a self-consciousness about their connection to far-away, intangible violence. Sometimes they voiced doubt, hesitation, and uncertainty about the boundaries of force; often they embraced the killing with enthusiasm; and at other times they worried and fought over what ought to be represented at home, and what share of pain and bodily disintegration should instead be shielded from a mass culture. Almost never was there a total absence of wartime violence.

In the first half of the 1940s discussions of armed conflict flooded books and newspapers, left traces in films unrelated to the war, and literally reached into the nursery, as developmental psychologists traced the dawning awareness of mortality among children in part by documenting how they discussed death in war. This was not just an inevitable spillover of the vast material mobilization, but the result of self-conscious efforts by state and civil society actors to reconcile a democratic society with a sustained project of global violence which was ethically troubling, however just or necessary we find it in retrospect. Quite literally, even a child could raise questions about the ethics of killing and dying in the 1940s. The story of wartime childhood is only a somewhat extreme aspect of “war mindedness.” By 1945, most Americans could identify the locations of major East Asian cities that had been central to the conflict—Manila and Chungking were popular symbols, their meaning animated by first-hand reports on terrifying scenes of slaughter. The books and magazine articles and other forms of reportage which

disclosed outer facts and inner experiences of wartime violence were neither “free” in the sense of being unregulated, nor were they fugitive texts which escaped the censor’s pen through the frictions and confusions of the battlefield. Instead, censorship agencies and propaganda officials frequently worked to put morally ambiguous and emotionally unsettling parts of war in front of wide domestic audiences. John Hersey’s account of Hiroshima after the atomic bombing, to this day one of the most frequently-read narratives of the war, was the culmination of a career carefully cultivated by official assistance. And officials within the various branches of the state did their own moral reasoning: at middle levels of the Office of War Information, men and women scrutinized the shades of ethical meaning in films about bombing and murder, invasions and lynchings, to sort acceptable and unacceptable killing. Thus an elaborate process played out that is ill-captured by the image of state actors manipulating civil society—instead, the wartime state was inseparably intertwined in a democratic reckoning with collective violence.

In postwar universities—flush with cash, talent, and anxiety—these conversations took the shape of theoretically and empirically sophisticated efforts to recover enlightenment hopes for a decently ordered society (domestically and internationally) from the desolation of contemporary history.⁸ Enormous intellectual energy chased after the ethical implications of the mid-century disasters. But the sense of a change in the landscape of possibility was felt generally, and was not just something discernable to close students of political theory or public opinion.

One index of the change was the capacious sense of global responsibility for human suffering manifested in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and the vernacular

⁸ Ira Katznelson, *Desolation and Enlightenment: Political Knowledge after Total War, Totalitarianism, and the Holocaust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003).

language of rights that made such a declaration appear sensible to much of the population.⁹ If American power could reach anywhere in the world, and could make pain legible anywhere, perhaps obligations were similarly limitless. As Siep Stuurman has recently pointed out, the very concept of a universal “humanity” was elaborated in a halting, piecemeal, and historically contingent fashion over thousands of years and various circumstances.¹⁰ In the 1940s, the project of waging war everywhere in the world paradoxically gave an enormous currency to claims of universal humanity; when the Gallup poll asked Americans what the war should be named in April 1942, one of the top five responses was the “War for Humanity.”¹¹ An equally salient effect, however, was the acceptance of total war as a necessity, constrained perhaps by rules of conduct intended to limit deliberate cruelty but crucially unconstrained in permissible results.¹² If the bombing of cities had to be justified in terms of forcing a military decision, the state openly admitted that civilians paid the price and that no *a priori* limits could be placed on the human

⁹ Mark Philip Bradley, *The World Reimagined: Americans and Human Rights in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Cambridge, 2016).

¹⁰ Siep Stuurman, *The Invention of Humanity: Equality and Cultural Difference in Global History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017). The war of the 1930s and 1940s has been described variously as a “total war,” a European civil war, and a “war among peoples,” as well as a self-defensive war against a self-consciously anti-humanistic ideology of racial and national supremacy. Borrowing from Stuurman’s account of the recurrent “invention” of humanity throughout global history, it seems plausible to describe the war of the American racial liberals as a “war within humanity”: a conflict no less violent, but one given an ambiguous ethical justification within a framework of universal humanity, letting go of the possibility that the enemy could be cast outside the pale of the human, but still accepting that the enemy could be killed in huge numbers.

¹¹ Thomas Bailey, *The Man in the Street: The Impact of American Public Opinion on Foreign Policy* (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1964 [1948]), 189.

¹² John Fabian Witt, *Lincoln’s Code: The Laws of War in American History* (New York: Free Press, 2012); Sahr Conway-Lanz, *Collateral Damage: American, Noncombatant Immunity, and Atrocity After World War II* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

costs of combat. Even if some kind of transhistorical human logic was at play in the dynamics of self-defense and retaliation, this was a historically specific formulation. A scale of violence that few Americans could seriously propose as late as 1941 came over the horizon of reality and ensconced itself as a new common sense: large-scale killing, anywhere in the world, was something the United States could do without giving up political democracy or abandoning the hope that collective action could answer at the bar of conscience.

The transformation of moral sentiment described here was by nature an elusive process, a reconfiguration of conscience which took place unevenly in millions of minds, only occasionally leaving records. My effort has been to assemble a portrait of the impressions, judgments, and emotions which came to constitute the prevailing assumption that the practices of total war were, if not good, then at least tolerable and the proper activity of a democratic polity. I believe the picture is a convincing one, but it must be frankly admitted that the real target of this inquiry is so inward-facing as to be mostly unrecoverable. Therefore it is appropriate that the final conclusions of this work should be put both strongly and weakly, in expansive and more conservative terms—both of which I will state briefly here.

At the more expansive end of the spectrum, the moral re-fashioning described in this manuscript outlines a neglected trajectory of the “American Century,” a trajectory which helps to explain the coexistence of domestic political democracy alongside the violence of the years 1941-1975. This is at least partly a causal story. The U.S. response to decolonization and the Cold War took the heavily militarized shape it did because a democratic people learned to authorize totalitarian modes of war in the early 1940s, at the same moment that liberal opinion began to tilt decisively away from older, often openly racialized, justifications of force founded in imperial projects of the 19th century. Peggy Terry, the munitions worker, was right in her

intuitive grasp of a connection between the experience of the 1940s and the subsequent violence of the Cold War. And she was right that that connection was not merely technological and bureaucratic, or economic and geopolitical, but lodged somehow in the imaginations of the many. Where her intuition went wrong was to make distance and the annihilation of violence the only thing that mattered to the shift from world war to Cold War battlefields. Consent mattered as much as concealment, and the inescapable presence of the war was as important as the absence of bombers over the streets of Chicago and New York.

In this version of the story, the realism of the postwar decades was not just a Cold War recurrence of a timeless, ahistorical argument first discerned by Thucydides—that no mercy can be expected in warfare on the basis of a shared humanity—but a re-statement of recent American history, reflecting the saturation of the domestic mind in stories and images of military force. When the public learned about the murder of hundreds of Vietnamese civilians in My Lai, for example, the ancient historian of the Peloponnesian War came easily to mind.¹³ His formulation of realism in international affairs was concerned, after all, with another massacre of the powerless, the people of Melos, by a sometimes-democratic power, Athens. But the experience of the 1940s was a much more powerful tool than the writings of the Greek historian for understanding the 1950s and 1960s. A writer from Macomb, Illinois, responded to the revelations of My Lai by urging readers of the *Chicago Tribune* to “recall Hiroshima.” The writer compared the fatalities of the atomic bombings—he reckoned them at 119,000-274,000—to the more limited number of victims at My Lai, and asked his readers to “reason in perspective,

¹³ See e.g. David Anderson, “Is the U.S. Losing Moral Credibility?” *The Wall Street Journal*, June 1, 1970.

and let those among us who are without sin first cast a stone.”¹⁴ Another writer, a doctor from Chicago, recalled his service in the 1940s and dispensed with My Lai as simply an inevitable result of the nature of war—soldiers deserved support, and the defining characteristic of the soldier, which civilians needed to comprehend, was that “he must learn to kill.”¹⁵

Without question, My Lai, the invasion of Cambodia, the bombing of Laos, and the long train of revelations about American power that came on the heels of Watergate and the Church Committee investigations genuinely shocked much of the country, and the search for a renewed sense of national virtue figured heavily in subsequent re-articulations of U.S. power.¹⁶ The most important point to be made here, however, is that the apparent evils of Cold War conflicts were not a simple breach of faith with postwar expectations for peace; they were also a fulfillment of the largely successful effort to reconcile wartime ethics and democracy. While people could be shocked by My Lai, they could also find a place for it in their existing understandings of the American place in the world, understandings that were forged above all in the mobilization of mind that took place in World War II. The phrase “he must learn to kill” might have been taken directly from the public exhortations and quiet conversations of the 1940s and dropped without modification into letters to the editor mitigating the guilt of later massacres.

Teaching soldiers to overcome inhibitions against killing was itself a highly visible concern of the postwar military, particularly following the counterintuitive findings of the journalist, soldier, and official historian S.L.A. Marshall that most U.S. infantrymen never fired

¹⁴ “Hiroshima and My Lai,” *Chicago Tribune*, December 5, 1969.

¹⁵ “Trained to Kill,” *Chicago Tribune*, November 19, 1970.

¹⁶ Barbara Keys, *Reclaiming American Virtue: The Human Rights Revolution of the 1970s* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014).

their rifles in combat—even when they were themselves exposed to enemy shooting and had the opportunity to use their weapons.¹⁷ Marshall's 1947 book *Men Against Fire* was immediately influential in Army training programs, and despite years of controversy over its core claim about the "ratio of fire" it remains a classic study of soldiers' behavior.¹⁸ Recruited for the Army's new Historical Branch in 1943, Marshall accompanied soldiers in the Pacific and developed a procedure of reviewing written reports and then assembling soldiers for group interviews.¹⁹ Based on this work he diagnosed a condition of battlefield anomie, arguing that soldiers lost efficacy as they became lonely, fearful, fatigued, and ultimately directionless; without adequate support from their immediate peers they were overwhelmed by the prospect of taking another human's life. This fear was in fact as great as the fear of being injured or killed, and it led to the low ratio of fire: "At the vital point [the soldier] becomes a conscientious objector, unknowing."²⁰ Marshall's remedy focused on improving battlefield communications, on training that emphasized coordinated mass fire on realistic targets rather than practicing individual marksmanship in artificial ranges, and generally on the social cohesiveness of the small combat group.²¹ If soldiers could be thus coaxed into shooting at humans once or twice, they would be

¹⁷ S.L.A. Marshall, *Men Against Fire: The Problem of Battle Command* (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 2000 [1947]), 50-63.

¹⁸ F.D.G. Williams, *SLAM: The Influence of S.L.A. Marshall on the United States Army* (Washington, D.C.: Office of the Command Historian, U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command, 1994), 51-2.

¹⁹ F.D.G. Williams, *SLAM: The Influence of S.L.A. Marshall on the United States Army*, 20-27.

²⁰ S.L.A. Marshall, *Men Against Fire: The Problem of Battle Command*, 79.

²¹ Williams, *SLAM: The Influence of S.L.A. Marshall*, 50-1; Marshall, *Men Against Fire*, 138-142, 156.

able to maintain the practice. “Once the plunge is made, the water seems less forbidding. As with every other duty in life, it is made easier by virtue of the fact that the man may say to himself: ‘I have done it once. I can do it again.’”²²

These conclusions were intensely local, focused on group dynamics and the potentially decisive role of individual riflemen; Marshall said his work was not meant to address social relationships within the Army as a unit, but only among men on the battlefield.²³ A key to his work, however, was the larger sociological claim he made about war. Marshall was an adventurer and a popularizer, who had reported on the Spanish Civil War and who lectured on military affairs to Kiwanis Clubs and on local radio stations across the country. For most of his civilian career, though, he was a journalist for the *Detroit News*, and *Men Against Fire* should be understood in part as a warning against overestimating Detroit’s fabled productivity as the decisive factor in contemporary military affairs.²⁴ For Marshall, global power was not a function of economic and industrial preponderance, or of the structure and leadership of military organizations, but of behavior in confrontations between groups of men threatening each other with lethal harm. Training had to be oriented towards the immediate social world of war, which was in turn embedded in a wider society with values antithetical to those of combat. The individual soldier was produced by social circles—of home, religion, school—which militated against violence. “The Army cannot unmake him,” Marshall wrote, but could only prepare the

²² S.L.A. Marshall, *Men Against Fire*, 79.

²³ S.L.A. Marshall, *Men Against Fire*, 22

²⁴ F.D.G. Williams, *SLAM: The Influence of S.L.A. Marshall on the United States Army*, 16; Marshall, *Men Against Fire*, 208.

soldier for the inevitable breach of civil standards.²⁵ The immediate solution involved training and communicative structures—immediate links between commanders and soldiers at every level—which would allow the social world of war to prevail over civilian inhibitions, and which would make the decision to fire on assigned targets both an automatic response *and* the result of initiative and intelligence distributed throughout the ranks of officers.

The book's recommendations were written for the military: theses meant to be nailed to the doors of service academies. It was supposed to inform the work of veterans such as those who survived the siege of Bastogne—men he described, echoing more than one official in 1940s Washington as “particularly hardboiled group of Americans.”²⁶ But my aim here is not to connect his work to particular behavior by soldiers in the 1950s, 1960s, and onward, so much as to highlight how his labors related to the wartime culture that informed public responses to later conflicts. For Marshall's work was addressed to a wider public as well as a narrow military audience, intended to “jog the minds of thinking soldiers and earnest civilians alike.”²⁷ This on first glance reads as a rhetorical flourish, or a gesture towards the marketing of a volume that was both the result of official study and a book reviewed in the major metropolitan newspapers.²⁸ Yet in his last pages he returned to these prefatory remarks to comment again on the dangers of a Detroit-born ethos of regarding war as a “great engineering job.”²⁹ War was killing and dying, not building. The ultimate risk was not that the wrong sort of training would weaken the armed

²⁵ Marshall, 78.

²⁶ Marshall, *Men Against Fire*, 210.

²⁷ Marshall, *Men Against Fire*, 10.

²⁸ “How Goes the Battle,” *New York Herald-Tribune*, October 19, 1947; “Battlefield's Lonely, Says Army Expert,” *Chicago Tribune*, December 21, 1947.

²⁹ Marshall, *Men Against Fire*, 210.

forces, but that a critical mass of democratic citizens would fail to apprehend the lesson, or would “unconsciously resist it and rule it out because it has not been part of their experience.” In his last paragraph, Marshall summed up the “final and greatest reality” of national strength as the product of the cradle and of motherhood, of civic education throughout childhood and youth, which led ultimately “into the halls of government” where the votes of elected legislators would decide how the civic culture supported the use of military force. Would individual soldiers fire in battle? This was a question that deeply worried Marshall. But his concern was no less for the polity’s comprehension and acceptance of war as he conceived it: killing and dying. If my interpretation of the early 1940s is right, he need not have worried excessively on the latter point. By 1945, the superficial pro-war consensus of late 1941 had been filled with an exhaustive catalog of ways to imagine killing and dying. And for all of the ambiguity and discomfort this engendered, that consensus in favor of continuing the war held. The American portions of the Cold War’s violence were built in part on this foundation.

This is admittedly a heavy interpretive burden to place on a mass sentiment which, whatever its historical salience, can only be inferred from glimpses of the moral imagination which happened to get frozen in the archives. A more limited construction of the same evidence would be agnostic about any causal link between the wartime culture of the 1940s and the agonies of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. There was, after all, a clamor for demobilization in 1945-6; the drive for Universal Military Training failed despite powerful and well-organized supporters; and the phrase “world peace” was used more frequently in print between 1944 and 1945 than at any other time in U.S. history.³⁰ Scholars rightly emphasize the contingency of the

³⁰ Google Ngram Viewer: '[world peace]', 1800-2000 in American English.

nascent Cold War conflict in the years between World War II and the onset of large-scale fighting in Korea in 1950.³¹ But even if the moral sensibility of the war years did not determine the shape of later conflicts, the empirical contribution of this study should influence how U.S. power in the world is understood in the crucial years of the mid-1940s. Both the “internationalism” and the “realism” of the 1940s look different in light of the pervasive presence of war violence in domestic life.

The internationalist projects pursued between the threshold of victory in 1944 and the hardening divisions of Europe and northeast Asia around 1948 were genuinely astonishing in their optimism and reach; historians who have sought to understand the United Nations Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as formative moments in the moral politics of the contemporary world have not been wrong. Yet the American vision for human rights in the 1940s was always more than a “New Deal for the world” precisely because it incorporated a prolonged experience of successful war making—not just overseas, but in the domestic mind as well—into the internationalization of a more pacific social agenda. Postwar internationalism was a work of “moral reconstruction,” an effort to leave behind the world of violence, but it was also a project which from the start presupposed the likelihood that military force would be necessary to its own defense.³²

³¹ Masuda Hajimu, *Cold War Crucible: The Korean Conflict and the Postwar World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015).

³² Mark Bradley, “Making Peace as a Project of Moral Reconstruction,” in Geyer and Tooze, eds., *The Cambridge History of the Second World War Volume III* (Cambridge, 2015); Jay Winter and Antoine Prost, *Rene Cassin and Human Rights: From the Great War to the Universal Declaration* (Cambridge, 2013), 238.

One frequently-mythologized moments in the birth of the postwar order was the conversion of the isolationist Republican Senator Arthur Vandenberg—who thought in 1941 that the Lend-Lease act was a crime that would destroy the republic—to the internationalist creed.³³ His oft-cited speech in the Senate in January 1945, shortly before the signing of the United Nations Charter in San Francisco, did not treat international organization in the future tense. He spoke instead of the *continued* unity of the “total battle fraternity of the United Nations” and endorsed the “peremptory use of force” by the President against postwar aggression by the defeated powers without any necessary appeal to Congress for authorization.³⁴ The tone of the speech was marked less by utopian aspirations than by reflections on what he called “the gory science of mass murder,” referring to the war on all sides. If the Cold War represented the failure and eclipse of certain U.N.-centered hopes, the war in Korea—replete with urban bombing, napalm, and the massive abuse of human rights on all sides—was not entirely a shocking departure from what was imagined and planned for in the midst of the “heady multilateralist zeitgeist of 1945.”³⁵ The United Nations was at its birth a “battle fraternity” as much as a society of technocratic planners. The limited claim, again, is not that the moral sensibilities of the 1940s made the annihilation of North Korean cities inevitable; but by 1945, the violence that would soon be visited on the Korean peninsula fell entirely inside the boundaries of the possible. Burning down an entire nation from the air was not by then a fantasy from H.G. Wells, but a recent experience.

³³ Arthur H. Vandenberg, jr. and Joe Alex Morris, eds., *The Private Papers of Senator Vandenberg* (Boston: Riverside Press, 1952), 9.

³⁴ U.S. Congress, Senate, *Congressional Record*, 79th Congress, 1st session, 164-167.

³⁵ Elizabeth Borgwardt, *A New Deal for the World*, 250-251.

Finally, this dissertation suggests a new way of reading postwar “realism.” Realist thought was a direct denial of the hope that conscience could ever master power, and was thus always the theoretical antagonist of the grandest internationalist hopes. But the founders of this version of realism never sought to annihilate ethics and treat the life of nations as wholly amoral. Hans Morgenthau’s slender wartime volume, *Scientific Man and Power Politics* (1946), dealt with Kant alongside Hobbes, and part of his realism was to accept that ethical claims about human action were as persistent as security competition between states. “Whatever some philosophers may have asserted about the amorality of political action,” he wrote, “philosophic tradition, historical judgment, and public opinion alike all refuse to withhold ethical valuation from the political sphere.”³⁶ E.H. Carr, George Kennan, and especially the theologian and champion of “Christian realism” Reinhold Niebuhr wrote frequently and with feeling about the ethics of international violence. For Carr, the “inadequacy of realism” in a too-consistent form was made obvious by the need of politicians for moral justifications, however hypocritical.³⁷ They used this moral language despite the fundamental contention that a permanent end to Machiavellian competition “is not of this world at all,” as Morgenthau put it.³⁸ The persistence of ethical meaning in the realist tradition is obvious, even if it might be better and more widely understood.

³⁶ Morgenthau, *Scientific Man and Power Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1946), 178.

³⁷ E.H. Carr, *The Twenty Years’ Crisis, 1919-1939: An Introduction to the Study of International Relations* (MacMillan, 1995 [1939]), 86.

³⁸ Morgenthau, *Scientific Man and Power Politics*, 201.

What is less obvious, however, is how the modern realist tradition was embedded in a social history of ideas transformed by the encounter with the shockingly violent means employed by the American democratic state. What this study has shown, I believe, is just how receptive wartime culture was to the mood of the realists. Far from being neglected Cassandras, or solitary technical experts swimming against the popular tide of pacifistic optimism, the leading realists voiced the moral common sense of 1945. When Morgenthau insisted that “Political ethics is indeed the ethics of doing evil,” and Niebuhr inveighed against the dangers of attempting to escape from the “unavoidable guilt” of military interventions (including the creation of an apocalyptic nuclear arsenal), they were distilling a prevailing ethos, not rebelling against it.³⁹ Intellectuals in other fields touched the same chords. Richard Hofstadter began his highly influential survey of U.S. history, *The American Political Tradition* (1948), by describing the Constitution as the product of “An Age of Realism.” This founding realism meant, for Hofstadter, the Hobbesian expectation that war was the natural condition of humanity coupled with the idea that experience, and not abstract theory, did (and should) guide the practice of democratic government.⁴⁰ Hofstadter was projecting onto the 1780s a synthesis of the war-haunted 1940s and the pragmatist philosophy of William James.

And these were only the most sophisticated articulations of the realist sensibility. Throughout the decade, the national headquarters of the American Legion sent to its swelling membership model speeches for Memorial Day and Armistice Day. These, too, spoke the

³⁹ Morgenthau, 201; Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007 [1952]), 42.

⁴⁰ Richard Hofstadter, *The American Political Tradition and the Men Who Made It* (New York: Vintage, 1989 [1948]), 5.

language of realism as an acceptance of force. “Now we are confronted with the result of trusting the theorists and disdaining our practical and hard-headed realists,” the Legion’s 1944 Memorial Day speech read.⁴¹ Two years later the Legion called on the nation “to be the realists we are supposed to be” and confront the need for military force to underpin international agreements.⁴² As its language turned even darker and more apocalyptic in the latter years of the decade, the Legion continued to conflate “realism” with a ready embrace of armed might—not just in terms of “preparedness” but a standing willingness to employ violence globally in the name of the national state. In its broadest sense, the American realism of the early 20th century had signified the priority of experience over logic and absolute principles, especially in the realm of the law.⁴³ When the supreme emergency of the Nazi empire brought firebombing and a global network of force projection within the pale of experience, there was no easy way to disentangle the ethos of “realism” from the willingness to obliterate cities.

This turn was noted with anxiety by two other intellectuals who had thought deeply about the meaning of war and American pragmatic thought. Robert Maynard Hutchins, the University of Chicago President who had opposed U.S. entry into the war on the grounds that the nation was morally unready for the fight, unsurprisingly sounded a note of ethical reproach in his 1945 commencement speech. Echoing the sentiment if not quoting the pages of MacDonald’s *Politics*, he complained that “[t]he word security, which is the great word today, has no moral

⁴¹ “Suggested Memorial Day Address for 1944,” National Publicity Division, The American Legion, Indianapolis, Indiana. American Legion Library Pamphlet File. Online.

⁴² “Suggested Memorial Day Address for 1946,” National Publicity Division, The American Legion, Indianapolis, Indiana. American Legion Library Pamphlet File. Online.

⁴³ On this vast corpus of thought, see William Fisher, Morton Horwitz, and Thomas Reed, eds., *American Legal Realism* (New York: Oxford, 1993).

significance.” To speak a language of right and wrong, he said, marked one as “guilty of the capital crime of modern times, lack of realism.”⁴⁴ Hutchins was at least in part carrying on an older philosophical dispute under the new circumstances of war and peace. But the philosopher John Dewey, who had many differences of interpretation with Hutchins, signaled his own dissatisfaction with the militarization of realism around the same time. In 1945 he wrote the introduction for a new edition of his late friend Jane Addams’ *Peace and Bread in Time of War* (a 1922 account of international peace activism in World War I). The title he gave the short essay was “Democratic versus Coercive International Organization: The Realism of Jane Addams.”⁴⁵ Dewey dwelled on the barely perceptible shifts in perspective that took place during a war—one of Addams’s accomplishments, he said, was to chart the difference between the gloomy present and a difficult-to-recall era before 1917, when it was unimaginable for massive U.S. armies to be engaged in violent clashes claiming millions of lives around the world. Now that realism seemed to mean, first and foremost, international coercion, Dewey insisted that Addams embodied a superior internationalism, one that did not depend on force but on international understanding, and which was “in fact much more *realistic*” than the hope of an effective world police force.⁴⁶ But this was far from Dewey at his most influential, and the dissenting note did little to change the direction of the tide.

In the end, however, tide is the wrong metaphor. To be sure, mobilization carried a terrible momentum. This was true in a material and bureaucratic sense and in an imaginative and

⁴⁴ The address was published as “Unrealistic Realism” in *The Christian Century*, July 4, 1945.

⁴⁵ John Dewey and Jo Ann Boydston, *The Later Works, 1925-1953, Volume 15: 1942-1948* (Carbondale: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 192.

⁴⁶ John Dewey, *The Later Works, 1925-1953, Volume 15*, 193-6.

moral sense. But tides are unthinking things, and throughout the 1940s the democratic state worked self-consciously to pull a broad public not just into physical acquiescence, but into an act of collectively willing the war forward. Of course, they never succeeded in evenly distributing their message, never mind creating a freely-chosen general will. But there is evidence enough to say that the consensus for World War II in the 1940s was filled out with an extraordinary awareness of morally ambiguous pain within a functioning civil society. If there is a lesson here for the future of the democratic state, it is that the preservation of democracy is not itself a guarantor of an ethical world. That depends on how a democratic public decides to direct its energies.

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