The connection between Hollywood and American politics has become an increasingly pertinent area of inquiry in our post 9/11 culture. Viewed through the lens of history, it is clear that the marriage between the media, its moguls and the American political system has long affected public life in this country and around the world. Nowhere is this more apparent than at Warner Bros. during World War II, where a personal crusade against fascism ultimately became an important part of American public policy.

Hollywood, like much of the United States, did not appear to oppose Nazism in the 1930s. Despite the fact that Hollywood's film empire had been built largely by Jews, there was little overt acknowledgement of the atrocities committed against Jews in Germany. The exception was Warner Bros. Armed with one of Hollywood’s most powerful studios, Jack and Harry Warner fought a war against Hitler with all the tools at their disposal—personal, professional and political.

Before the War

A 1933 Nazi edict demanded that American film studios operating in Germany fire all German-Jews. Despite the tremendous financial impact it would have on the studio, this convinced Harry Warner that it was time to pull out of Germany. By 1934, Warner Bros. had severed business ties with Germany and Harry had announced plans to produce an anti-Nazi film.

Producing an anti-Nazi film in 1934 was easier said than done, and no studio would release an anti-Nazi film until Confessions of a Nazi Spy (1930) by Warner Bros. Complex issues conspired against the Warners’ plans to create a film naming the Nazi threat. As Hitler gained power, the distribution of such a film in Europe grew increasingly difficult. At home, isolationist sentiment and anti-Semitism, together with industry concern that an anti-Nazi film could damage relations with the still important German film market, resulted in a 1934 Production Code Administration (PCA) ban on anti-Nazi films. Unable to explicitly fight fascism through feature films, Jack and Harry monitored the spread of Nazism throughout Europe and America. They were active with the Hollywood Anti-Nazi League, provided jobs for refugees from Europe and raised money for anti-Nazi organizations. Harry, especially, acted as a watchdog, even entrusting studio employees to inform him of anti-Semitic and Nazi activities. 1 Harry kept a list of newsreel coverage of the escalating situation in Germany. In his zealous fight to root out Nazism, Harry banned the 1938 newsreel Inside Nazi Germany from all Warner theatres, believing it to be pro-Nazi. But even Harry’s daughter Doris disagreed that the newsreel was pro-Nazi, telling him, “I think that for you to accuse the March of Time to be a pro-Nazi picture is all wrong.” 2 In 1939, when a group of Nazi newspaper editors toured the Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer lot, Harry took MGM to task, admonishing, “I just can’t bring myself to believe that you people would entertain those whom the world regards as the murderers of their own families.” 3

1 Waging Warners’ War by Randi Hokett

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As part of his crusade against Nazism, Harry gave several speeches to employees, industry heads and The American Legion—urging listeners to be on guard for Nazi presence in America. Complacency, he believed, would leave America vulnerable to fascist infiltration.

Jack and Harry both made numerous appeals to President Franklin Roosevelt, whom they had known since aiding Roosevelt in his 1933 presidential run. The Warners pledged to aid the country in whatever way possible and specifically offered up the use of the studio for the good of the country, so often the Roosevelt Administration would eventually take advantage of. Though surviving memos are often vague and cloaked in diplomatic language, Harry once suggested to Roosevelt a way in which a still officially indifferent America could aid war-torn Britain if “we consider the Atlantic Ocean our life-line, it is an assured fact that the Island of Great Britain is certainly a part of the life-line. What fools could anyone find if we undertook to man the Island to protect it from invasion.” In an effort to aid Britain, Jack and Harry donated two Spitfire planes to the British Royal Air Force. The Warners named the war planes after President Roosevelt and Secretary of State Cordell Hull.

As part of his crusade against Nazism, Harry gave several speeches—true stories about a fascist, a Jewish writer, and an incompetent ruler of Pretzel, Germany. At the studio, a 1933 Warner Bros. cartoon, Bosko’s Picture Show, was the first American production to poke fun at Hitler, who was caricatured as the incompetent ruler of Pretzel, Germany. In 1936, Warner Bros. released the groundbreaking film Confessions of a Nazi Spy, one of the earliest films dealing with racial and religious discrimination. The Life of Emile Zola, for instance, chronicles the life of French writer Émile Zola and his efforts to clear the incompetent ruler of Pretzel, Germany.

In 1937, Warner Bros. considered leaving out the credits. In the end, the credits were put back in, though some of the actors chose to work under an alias to protect European family members from Nazi retaliation. A particularly striking ad for the film depicted a man, feet indifferently thrown head on. The ad confidently retorts. “He’ll learn differently when he sees Confessions of a Nazi Spy.”

Contemporary criticism reproached Hollywood for not addressing the situation in Europe. A New York Times review praised Black Legion but also criticized Hollywood in general for being afraid to address social issues outside the U.S. But the film was breaking boundaries and would help pave the way for the first anti-Nazi film from a major studio, Confessions of a Nazi Spy.

The Warner Bros. series of Patriotic Shorts, based on important historic American figures and events, promoted American democracy. Begun in 1936, the series hit its stride in 1938 when Jack Warner declared, “I am more than ever convinced that we have a double duty to perform. We must ‘sell America’ while we entertain the world.” The shorts echoed Harry’s earlier speeches. Although concentration camps are mentioned in the film, like the earlier films dealing with racial and religious discrimination, the word “Jew” is never uttered.

At the studio, a 1933 Warner Bros. cartoon, Bobs’ Picture Show, was the first American production to poke fun at Hitler, who was caricatured as the incompetent ruler of Pretzel, Germany. In 1936, Warner Bros. released the groundbreaking film Confessions of a Nazi Spy, one of the earliest films dealing with racial and religious discrimination. The Life of Emile Zola, for instance, chronicles the life of French writer Émile Zola and his efforts to clear the incompetent ruler of Pretzel, Germany. At the studio, a 1933 Warner Bros. cartoon, Bosko’s Picture Show, was the first American production to poke fun at Hitler, who was caricatured as the incompetent ruler of Pretzel, Germany. In 1936, Warner Bros. released the groundbreaking film Confessions of a Nazi Spy, one of the earliest films dealing with racial and religious discrimination. The Life of Emile Zola, for instance, chronicles the life of French writer Emile Zola and his efforts to clear the incompetent ruler of Pretzel, Germany.

In 1939, Warner Bros. released the groundbreaking film Confessions of a Nazi Spy, Confessions was based on actual events and warned Americans of the presence of Nazis in America, a message that echoed Harry’s earlier speeches. Although concentration camps are mentioned in the film, like the earlier films dealing with racial and religious discrimination, the word “Jew” is never uttered.

Confessions was a controversial film from the very start, and Warner Bros. considered leaving out the credits. In the end, the credits were included, though some of the actors chose to work under an alias to protect European family members from Nazi retaliation. A particularly striking ad for the film depicted a man, feet indifferently thrown upon his desk, spouting, “Nazi spies in America? That’s got nothing to do with me!” “He’ll learn differently when he sees Confessions of a Nazi Spy,” the ad confidently retorts. The ad demonstrates how well the Warners understood Lincoln’s ideals and the concept that sometimes those ideals had to be defended.

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10. Lincoln in the White House (1924), part of the Patriotic Film Program, included one of the most important American historical figures and events.

11. Nana Bryant as Clara Barton, founder of the Red Cross, in Flag of Humanity (1939), part of the Patriotic Film Program. The Patriotic Military Shorts were written by Owen Crump, who would be instrumental, along with Jack Warner, in organizing the Army Air Corps’ First Motion Picture Unit (FMPU) once the U.S. entered the war.

12. Claude Rains as Haym Salomon, one of the first Jewish characters, in Mr. Deeds Goes to Town (1936). Rains was a personal friend of Warner Bros. executives. The studio hired him for the role of Haym Salomon, the mythical founder of the Red Cross, in 1939.

13. Sergeant York (1940), one of a series of military shorts introducing movie-goers to branches of the military.

14. March On, Marines (1940), a military short produced at the request of military officials.

15. The House and the Senate brought charges of propagandizing against the motion picture industry and named Warner Bros. as the ringleader. Confessions of a Nazi Spy and Sergeant York were identified as films intended to incite the country to war.

16. Harry Warner testified in September 1941 before the Senate Subcommittee that Warner Bros. films were not propaganda but were strictly for entertainment. Warner argued that Warner Bros. films were specifically Confessions of a Nazi Spy and Sergeant York—were based on real events and that the films had been tremendously popular. But statements made by both Jack and Harry and their memos to President Roosevelt and others reveal that the Warner brothers were well aware of the persuasive power of the motion picture.

America (and Hollywood) Goes to War

The Senate Subcommittee hearings on propaganda in motion pictures were halted when the U.S. entered the war in December 1941. The President immediately issued a memorandum recognizing the importance of film to the war effort and stated that the government should not censor the industry. Whenever possible, films were to fall into one of six Bureau-approved categories: The Production Code, The Production Stamps, The Production Code Administration, The Production Code Association, The Production Code Administration, and The Production Code Administration. The Bureau established guidelines by which the motion picture industry could support the war effort. Whenever possible, films were to fall into one of six Bureau-approved categories: The Production Code, The Production Stamps, The Production Code Administration, The Production Code Association, The Production Code Administration, and The Production Code Administration.

Between its inception in 1942 and the end of the war in 1945, the FMPU used military personnel and studio resources to produce hundreds of short films for public and military use. The films gave instruction on numerous subjects including identifying the enemy, properly using weapons and contributing to the war effort on the home front.

The Office of War Information Bureau of Motion Pictures, the government’s liaison to Hollywood, was formed after the U.S. entered the war. The Bureau established guidelines by which the motion picture industry could support the war effort. Whenever possible, films were to fall into one of six Bureau-approved categories: The Production Code, The Production Stamps, The Production Code Administration, The Production Code Association, The Production Code Administration, and The Production Code Administration. The Bureau established guidelines by which the motion picture industry could support the war effort. Whenever possible, films were to fall into one of six Bureau-approved categories: The Production Code, The Production Stamps, The Production Code Administration, The Production Code Association, The Production Code Administration, and The Production Code Administration.
task completed, Jack felt he could be of more service back at the studio where they were producing ‘probably one hundred or more Feature and Short subjects pertaining to the War Effort.’ Many of these films followed the Bureau of Motion Picture guidelines and celebrated the American military, her allies and patriotic historical figures.

Films in the Production Front category are probably best represented by the Republic film *Rosie the Riveter*. Production Front films were intended to keep up morale and to show Americans that they could contribute even at home. *Wings for the Eagle* is one of the few films in the Production Front category made by Warner Bros. Films that fell into the Issues category intended to highlight the issues of the war and was exemplified, at Warner Bros., by the Bette Davis film *Watch on the Rhine*. But it was in the other four categories that Warner Bros. found an extension of the work they had already done to combat fascism.

Warner Bros. Armed Forces films celebrated the American military with heroic wartime stories. Titles like *Air Force*, *Dive Bomber* and *Destination Tokyo* depict diverse groups of men, bonded through their military service, as they faced conflict and eventually emerged victorious.

The stories of American military victory were designed to help maintain morale for viewers with relatives fighting overseas. Similar filmic devices were found in Warner films like *Captains of the Clouds* (about the Royal Canadian Air Force), which fell into the Our Allies category. However, the studio’s most notorious film, *Mission to Moscow*, was produced to suggest that Russia was our ally in the fight against Nazism. Based on the memoirs of Joseph Davies, U.S. ambassador to Russia, and produced, according to Jack Warner, at the request of President Roosevelt himself, the film garnered strong reactions on both sides. Warner Bros. received many letters both praising their efforts and accusing the Warners of being communists. Advertisements for the film simplified the differences between the U.S. and Russia, touting the film as the ‘Story of Two Guys Named Joe’—Joseph Davies and Joseph Stalin. Perhaps as a preemptive strike, advertisements emphasized that the film was “the Story of an American—Told American Style.”

Though *Mission to Moscow* was clearly in line with the Warners’ war against Nazism, the film would haunt the studio during the House Un-American Activities Committee hearings of the late 1940s and early 1950s. Having fought for so long to produce the first anti-Nazi film, Warner Bros. was adept at the presentation of The Enemy. *Across the Pacific* is a story of intrigue depicting Sydney Greenstreet and Sen Young as an American and a Japanese-American working covertly for the Japanese cause. A publicity photo of Young as Joe Totsuiko portrays the enemy standing, a cigarette defiantly hanging from his lips, and a less-than-subtle spider web rising up in shadow behind him—Totsuiko is clearly not a man to be trusted.

Regarded by many film critics and fans as one of the best movies of all time, *Casablanca* is a fascinating study of the many faces of The Enemy. There is never any question that the Nazis are the enemy and...
that the Vichy French are, to some degree, allied with them. However, the greatest threat in Casablanca comes from the enemy within. Rick Blaine (Humphrey Bogart), a hardened nightclub owner, struggles to suppress his past as a romantic freedom fighter and maintain a cynical detachment from his customers and their politics. When an old love turns up with her husband, who is a famous member of the Resistance, Rick refuses to help the couple escape the Nazis. Rick eventually realizes that the problems between him and his lost love Ilsa (Ingrid Bergman) “don’t amount to a hill of beans” in a war-torn world, and he ultimately sacrifices his own happiness so that Ilsa and her husband can escape to freedom in America. Casablanca is likely so well remembered because it skillfully weaves its message of sacrifice in wartime with a timeless love story.

The Home Front category presented the greatest opportunity to combine Jack and Harry’s personal and professional war against fascism. Home Front films employed the stories of patriotic Americans to inspire the viewing public. All profits from This Is the Army, based on the successful stage show by Irving Berlin, were donated by Warner Bros. to the Army Emergency Relief Fund. Yankee Doodle Dandy starred James Cagney as George M. Cohan in this film about the life of the patriotic American composer/performer who penned “Yankee Doodle Boy” and “Over There.” The film begins with Cohan receiving a Medal of Honor from President Roosevelt. It was the first time a living president was portrayed by an actor in a film. Since Roosevelt received many requests by studios to use his image in a film, Roosevelt likely agreed to be portrayed in Yankee Doodle Dandy thanks to his friendly relationship with Jack and Harry Warner. Proceeds from the premiere of Yankee Doodle Dandy were donated by Warner Bros. to purchase war bonds to build ships. In addition to the millions Jack and Harry donated to the war effort, Warner Bros. employees regularly donated up to 10% of their paychecks to purchase war bonds. Warner Bros., along with the other Hollywood studios, produced war bond shorts and advertised war bonds in many of their print ads until the end of the war. Jack and Harry Warner had been dedicated to the defeat of fascism since Hitler took power in Germany in 1933. They recognized the power of motion pictures to influence popular attitudes and worked to utilize their position as media moguls to bring to light what they considered to be a very real threat to American freedoms. Consistent
offers to help the Roosevelt Administration in any way possible led to the establishment of the First Motion Picture Unit, which would produce hundreds of shorts to aid the war. The complex web of films they produced, both before and during the war, pushed the boundaries of important issues like racism and the role of popular film in society, leaving as the Warners’ legacy some of the most important films of the period. Harry’s personal dedication to the cause earned him the respect and admiration of his employees and colleagues, and Jack’s active supervision of wartime production won him a Medal for Merit. The Warners’ personal war against the spread of Nazi fascism also earned them an important place in the history of the intersection between politics, popular culture and propaganda.

NOTES

1. Nazi Data Files. Jack L. Warner Collection, School of Cinema-Television Library, University of Southern California.
9. As quoted in Colgan, 270.
10. Mission to Moscow, Correspondence, File 2085, Warner Bros. Archives, School of Cinema-Television, University of Southern California.
12. Depicting the enemy in a standing position, with a cigarette hanging from the lips, was visual shorthand for identifying the enemy. Publicity photos for Confessions of a Nazi Spy, Across the Pacific and Edge of Darkness all use the same visual device. See master photos for each title at the Warner Bros. Archives, School of Cinema-Television, University of Southern California.