

William Kulis
Teaching American History
September 16, 2010

Hollywood and World War II Propaganda

Throughout history, countries and their leaders have had to convince their fellow countrymen on the merits of going to war. Prior to the invention of mass media tools in the 20th Century, governments were limited in selling to its citizens the righteousness of its cause. Newspaper editorials or speeches by politicians limited leaders in attempts to whip up patriotic fever, generate support and keep its citizens support for war. By the 1930s the explosion and popularity of new medium in the radio and movie industry would change the way propaganda could reach worldwide audiences by belligerent countries.

The motion picture and radio industries were experiencing growing pains and increased government scrutiny during the pre-war period. Led by North Dakota Senator Gerald Nye (R), a congressional committee was investigating the movie industry's anti-German pro-British slant in movies such as *Confessions of a Nazi Spy* and *Foreign Correspondent*. Unbeknownst to Nye and his committee, President Franklin Roosevelt had developed a close friendship with Harry Warner of Warner Brothers studio.

With the beginning of the war for the United States in 1941, the relationship between the government and the film industry took a 360 degree turn. With the population still reeling from the shock of Pearl Harbor, the need for F.D.R. and his administration to convince Americans to fully support the war effort swung into action. Within six months of the declaration the Ministry of War Information and the celluloid

industry began cranking out documentaries urging all Americans to do their part to defeat the Japanese in the Pacific and the fascist regimes in Germany and Italy.

By 1942, with the “Island Hopping Campaign” taking shape in the Pacific, feature length movies featuring Hollywood stars begin hitting the movie screens. Films such as *Flying Tigers*, *Wake Island*, *Reunion in France* and *Guadalcanal Diary* depicted battles in the Pacific, wins and losses, and the war in Europe were flag-waving melodramas that helped convince the general public of the hard fighting that was going to be necessary to win the war. Actors John Wayne, William Bendix, Brian Donlevy, et al, eagerly took roles in these films that were churned out on a regular basis.

The most important films that the film industry produced were the documentary short films. These films often preceded feature films and the general themes were on increasing production in factories, the role of women in the war effort, and homeland security. Historians from this period believe that