

Why We Fight

By Thomas W. Bohn

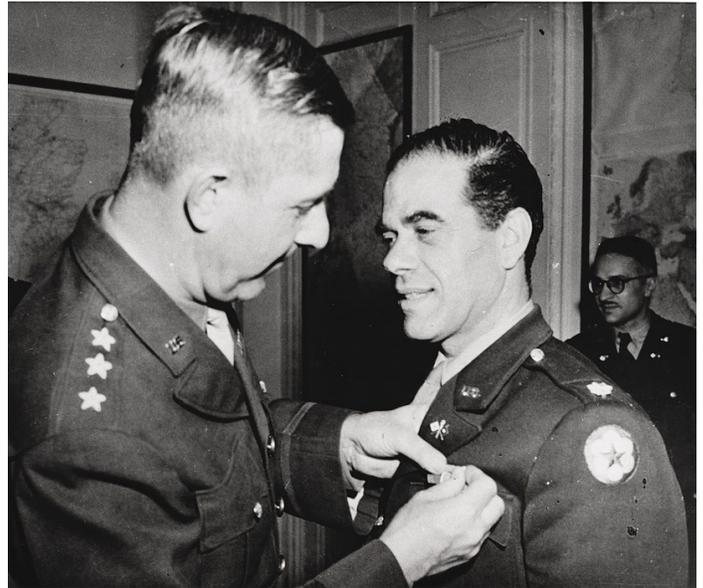
On August 18, 1941, the U.S. House of Representatives voted 203 “yes” vs 202 “no” to extend the Selective Service Act. By a legislative eyelash, this country’s reluctance for international commitment was dramatically demonstrated.

Less than four months later, that reluctance would be irrevocably shattered. A peacetime Army, suddenly thrust into war, was still not certain who, what or why it was fighting. A series of morale lectures delivered by Army officers to “soldiers bone tired from basic training was baffling, bewildering or just boring.” Faced with instilling a deeper sense of urgency and meaning to the War, General George C. Marshall directed the preparation of a series of films to replace the lectures.

Intended as a series of “orientation” films for all Army troops before they went overseas, the “Why We Fight” Series consisted of seven separate films produced between 1942-45 by the US Army Signal Corps under the supervision of Academy Award winning director Frank Capra. Capra was recruited specifically by Marshall and early in 1942 was charged with the task of “maintaining morale and instilling loyalty and discipline into the civilian Army being assembled to make war on professional enemies” through a series of films.

In answer to this charge, Capra assembled a team and set about producing seven films in less than three years. In addition to Capra, other key Hollywood personnel associated with the Series included director Anatole Litvak, editor William Hornbeck, writers Anthony Veiller and Eric Knight, composer Dimitri Tiomkin, and narrator Walter Huston.

The overall style of the series was based on the compilation format, a method of creating meaning and narrative by blending previously unrelated visuals of documentary footage through editing and adding strong doses of narration and music. Each film in the series was unique and stand-alone. The first and last films in the Series, “Prelude to War” (1942) and “War Comes to America (1945) are primarily history lessons focused on how and why America was fighting this war. Indeed, a clear indicator of the premise of the entire Series is the change in the title of the last film in the Series from “America Goes to War” to “War Comes to America.” Both films contrast two world orders - Axis and Allied and Slave and



Lt. Gen. Jacob L. Devers, commander of U.S. Forces in the European theater of operations, decorates Lt. Col. Frank Capra with the Legion of Merit award. Courtesy [Library of Congress Prints & Photographs Online Collection](#).

Free - with major emphasis on the events and reasons leading up to war. “The Nazis Strike” (1943) and “Divide and Conquer” (1943) are battlefield films with an emphasis on overall Nazi war strategy and campaign tactics. Taking place in a limited arena of space and time they focus on specific battles designed to impress upon America’s young troops, the ruthlessness and battle hardened strength of the German Army. The remaining three films, “The Battle of Britain” (1943), “The Battle of Russia” (1943) and “The Battle of China” (1944) were “ally” films emphasizing that America was not fighting the war alone and these countries had fought longer, suffered direct assault on their people and lands, and had “bought time” for the United States prior to December 7, 1941.

Visually, the films operate on a dual premise - to communicate information about and to increase understanding of the causes of World War II. There was an emphasis on “proving” this by using newsreel, documentary, and battlefield footage. For example, “The Battle of Russia” contained approximately 7,400 feet of film. Of this total, some 4,500 feet were from Russian feature productions, documentary films, combat footage, and newsreels. As this was film originally shot for another purpose and, as such, represents “found footage”, in order to create meaning and develop a consistent narrative, Capra and his team used editing as the principal stylistic building block for the Series. Many of the basic stylistic elements familiar to Capra - shot composition, movement, lighting, set design, acting - were

not available or used. As film historian Richard Griffith noted, "Deprived of star glamour and production value, drawing their material from newsreel archives and combat film photographed at random, they were forced back upon the basic resources of the film medium."

The films were short by Hollywood standards, averaging 57 minutes each. Since the Series' basic theme was one of contrasting the slave and free worlds, Capra's parallel editing style worked very effectively and efficiently. The dominant transition between shots was the cut and the average shot length was 3.5 seconds. The overall pace of the film was rapid but not pell-mell. There was a distinct and deliberate editing pattern and rhythm in the films designed to communicate information and increase understanding coherently, efficiently, and repeatedly. Stitching together a coherent narrative, however, also required the liberal and creative use of music and narration. Walter Huston was the principal narrator of the Series. His voice is older, raspy, and filled with authority. The narration is colloquial and conversational befitting the intended audience for the films, one-third of whom had not finished high school. In "Prelude to War," for example, the Axis powers are described as "all hopped up with the same ideas" and Mussolini "beat his chest like Tarzan." In "The Battle of Britain" the narrator states, "The pace was too hot. Something had gone haywire. The Nazis had to call time out."

The music for the films was composed and coordinated by well-known Hollywood composer Dimitri Tiomkin. Tiomkin created the score for each film after it had achieved its final form and described himself "weeping over the moviola" as he composed.

The music is elementary, repetitive, and designed for immediate and easy appeal. Like the narration, it is familiar and often colloquial, and designed to convey

a strong and immediate emotional tone and meaning. For example, in "War Comes to America," "Rhapsody in Blue" is used with footage describing the history and growth of America. "My Country Tis of Thee" is often used as a musical coda describing the United States. "This Is the Army, Mr. Jones" is used in a sequence describing the first peacetime draft.

The film historian Richard MacCann has described "The Why We Fight" series as a "combination of a sermon, a between halves pep talk, and a barroom bull session." While this is an apt description, it is somewhat incomplete. Burdened with the task of making the war understandable and acceptable, "The Why We Fight" series is also an American history lesson and posits a clear and compelling moral philosophy. The Series was designed to both inform and inspire; to show Army troops what they were fighting for and why. Employing the compilation format, visuals of unrelated and unconnected reality were edited into a cohesive and compelling argument, with music and narration providing an emotional undercurrent. Historically, the Series was a meeting of the talent of a commercial film industry, a strong tradition of documentary film, and the needs of war. All of this worked to produce what most critics and historians acknowledge were the finest documentary films of World War II.

The views expressed in these essays are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

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