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The Media in World War Two: An Optimistic Perspective

I. INTRODUCTION:

After experiencing World War One and the Great Depression in quick succession one would expect the American public in the 1940s to be downtrodden and wary of further struggle. The eruption of a second great war within twenty years of the first, well within living memory, must have seemed unbearable; one more burden placed upon the back of an already overburdened populace. Surely, a war which would drag the nation into another international conflict would be extremely unpopular and inspire negative public sentiment. However logical these assumptions may be, an examination of primary sources of the era paints an entirely different picture. The way in which the mass media of the day portrays the war it is not a hopeless quagmire but a moral struggle in which all Americans must take part. The perspective provided by the media is the optimistic one that, although war is an aberration from ordinary life, it is also a grand challenge being fought valiantly by soldiers abroad and by civilians at home

II. CONTEXT:

US direct military involvement in World War Two began in 1941 and lasted for 4 years, until the final defeat of the Axis powers with the surrender of Japan in 1945. History will portray this period only in so far as it is associated with specific key events. While these events are interesting, in as much as they relate to the broad outline of the war, the historical summary of military events does little to illustrate how the war was experienced by the average American on

the home front. It is from the popular magazines, journals, and newspapers of the mass media that the average American develops his or her understanding of and attitude toward war. Thus it is that, because of its ability to influence understanding and experience, media's presentation of the war is granted great importance and is well worth evaluating.

The period of four years that World War Two spanned yields a vast supply of primary media documents for evaluation and in order to acquire a depth rather than breadth of analysis this paper will examine only those American media sources published in May of 1943. Now that the specific period under examination has been established it is time to turn to those primary sources written for and read by the American public. The way in which the media portrays the war follows two main veins: how the war is being fought by soldiers abroad and how the war is being fought by civilians at home. It is through the specific approach to both of these themes that the media manages to portray the war in an optimistic light.

III. PORTRAYAL OF THE WAR ON THE BATTLEFRONT

A. Victory and Defeat

In portraying the war as fought by soldiers abroad the mass media manages to present an unexpectedly optimistic picture. The majority of publications from May of 1943 place great emphasis on Allied victories as the result of daring in the face of long odds. Article after article describes battles in grandiose language which smacks heroic myths; saying things like "death and glory are the two old reliable trademarks of war . . . the Germans collected the death, the Americans the glory" or "audacious columns streamed to the coast from all directions, cutting the enemy into hundreds of hopeless, helpless units"¹. Fighting is not as simple as kill or be

¹ "The Victors" May 17, 1943. *LIFE*, 17

"Enemy Collapse was Swift, Surprising and Inglorious" May 17, 1943. *LIFE*, 32

killed; it is a noble mission, an epic clash of good and evil. Further, in looking at a broad range of primary sources it seems that many news sources downplay defeats and focus primarily on victory. While it is possible that victory is all there is to be reported that seems highly unlikely. When defeat is acknowledged it seems to be presented as just one part of a larger struggle, one which draws upon the bravery of fighting men and reveals the best in them just as much as victory does. One fictional short story tells how a soldier managed to call his girl back home and speak to her bravely and calmly even though he knew he was about to die. The young man's death was poignant but heroic, his example something to aspire to². In most publications emphasis is placed upon the glory of battle and of victory, meanwhile, defeat is either given little attention or described as tragic but still as glorious as victory.

B. Suffering

Coming from a time in which the media questions the military's every move and gory pictures are plastered across full magazine spreads it is startling the lack of emphasis placed on death and brutality during World War Two. What is most telling is that in reports of victory and defeat American casualties are either glazed over or omitted entirely. A May third Newsweek article on fighting in North Africa states simply that "the United States Army paid the stiff price of 1,500 dead and 10,500 wounded and missing"³ The article does not tug on the heartstrings of American readers but merely mentions the facts and moves on. A New York Times article recounting a disastrously failed attack in Tunisia says that the battle "killed or wounded many men" but does not say how many⁴. Just as interesting is a Life magazine article on the battle of the Bismark Sea which proclaims that the battle "cost Japs 22 ships and 15,000 men" but

² "Remember this Day" May, 1943. *American Magazine*, .22

³ "School of Knocks" May 3, 1943. *Newsweek*,20

⁴ NYTimes(may 1)

nowhere makes mention of any Allied losses⁵. This is not to say that loss of life was entirely overlooked. Newspapers certainly reported war deaths, such as one New York Times article listing the names of “176 killed in action . . . eighty from New York, 24 from New Jersey, and 8 from Connecticut”⁶. However, the sentiment that seems to accompany this matter of fact article is that while these casualties were tragic they were also unavoidable. Death is no reason to stop fighting and it is not something that civilians at home should be made to dwell on. Even those articles which focus exclusively on the wounded tell an upbeat tale. One which discusses “Halloran Hospital” shows veterans recovering from, among other things, “a fractured jaw and lost lobe of ear” and fractured bones sustained from falling “off a roof while on guard duty”⁷. The majority of injuries are not severe and even those soldiers in the article with more serious injuries are well on their way to recovery thanks to the state of the art facilities which they enjoy. In all of these publications the reality of death and suffering is recognized but is either acknowledged only briefly or is eclipsed by pleasanter stories of enemy deaths and soldier recovery.

Along the same line of little attention being paid to death and suffering is the way the media portrays the war through images. While photographs of the war abound, almost none which are published for consumption by the general public show any actual fighting. In any publication one can find photos of soldiers resting at their bases, repairing weapons, or on look out duty. What cannot be found are photos of soldiers attacking the enemy or being attacked. There are some photographs which, at first glance, appear to depict actual fighting but the majority turn out to be only training exercises or rehearsals; providing an idea of battle conditions without the real threat of danger. Besides the pictures of training exercises, all images

⁵ “Bismark Sea” May 3, 1943. *LIFE*, 33

⁶ “Army Casualties Increase by 552” May 2, 1943. *The New York Times*

⁷ “Halloran Hospital” May 3, 1943. *LIFE*, 52

of soldiers in peril, shots being fired, planes dropping bombs and mines exploding take the form of hand-drawn illustrations. Not even these images portray death or carnage; bombs fall from airplanes onto unseen victims far below, mines explode sending unharmed soldiers flying comically through the air⁸. Clearly, photographers are not present on the battlefield during World War Two and this results in very specific reporting of the war. American civilians can get only as close to the action as reporters and photographers, thus, when members of the media stay one step back the American public is kept back as well. The majority of photographs depict only what goes on between battles while images of actual fighting are relegated to the animated world of semi-fantasy. The result is that the images provided of the war reinforce the optimistic tendencies in written reporting. Focus is placed upon those times and places when fighting is not going on. Meanwhile any attention that is given to fighting leaves out any elements of suffering and carnage.

C. Soldiers' Daily Lives

One more element of the optimistic picture of the war presented by the media is the way in which it reports on soldiers' lives. As mentioned previously, the majority of photographs depict soldiers either relaxing or engaging in war activities that pose no physical threat to their person. One memorable picture even depicts a soldier reclining in a foxhole while leisurely reading a book. However, it is not photographs alone that put out a rosy image of what daily life is like for a soldier. Written feature articles also provide a comforting picture of the way the good old American boys are living out the war. Some portray training as "*not* as dangerous as you may think . . . the best training, both physical and in warfare, that the army has to offer" (italics in

⁸ General Motors. Advertisement. *American Magazine*. May, 1943: 9
"Land Mines" May 3, 1943. *LIFE*, 40

original)⁹. Not only are the young men out of harm's way while preparing to go to war but will remain so because of the high quality training they have received. Meanwhile, those articles which deal directly with living conditions on the ground describe them as primitive but comfortable. For instance, on unexpected LIFE magazine article explains that US troops in Iceland are "kept comfortably warm in spite of the winter blizzards" and that their only complaint is that they are "bored with the lack of action."¹⁰ Another article describes how the army is working to provide the food its men prefer and that the average soldier receives one and a quarter pound more food a day than the average civilian¹¹. Still other articles focus on the upbeat positive attitude of the fighting men. In one such article a young man writes: "I'm going to be ok in this outfit. Even if its tough, I like it very much and I'm damned proud to be a part of it"¹². The positive bent does not stop with articles either; even advertisements play up the good morale of soldiers. Take one ad for Bell Telephone System which depicts a beaming man in uniform and declares "he can smile through it all"¹³. The combination of all these photographs, stories and ads combine to create a carefree image of what life is like for soldiers in the war: different from life back home, sometimes a challenge but overall pleasant.

IV. PORTRAYAL OF THE WAR ON THE HOME FRONT

While the mass media of 1943 does pay special attention to the role of American soldiers fighting the war abroad, this coverage is only a small portion of reporting on the war in general. In fact, in publications aimed at the civilian population, events in Europe and the Pacific often take a back seat to news of how the war is being fought on the home front. This seems to follow

⁹ Clarke, Richard. May. A Paratrooper Writes Home. *American Magazine*, 12

¹⁰ "Soldiers in Iceland" May 10, 1943. *LIFE*, 36

¹¹ "Soldier Food" May 3, 1943. *LIFE*, 89

¹² Clarke, Richard. May. A Paratrooper Writes Home. *American Magazine*, 12

¹³ Bell Telephone Systems. Advertisement. *The Saturday Evening Post*. may 1, 1943: 1

naturally from the media's optimistic portrayal of defeat as unimportant and suffering not worth dwelling on; rather than focusing on distant battles they have no control over civilians must take a proactive role in the war effort at home. They are not helpless victims but are fighters, just as soldiers are, and it is the actions undertaken on the home front that will lead to victory.

A. Industry

Beginning on the larger scale, with the civilian population as a whole, the media demonstrates that the war can be fought by the efforts of American industry. The way in which industries can do this is by creating vital products. For instance, one article explains how during peacetime some small businesses “concentrate on gadgets – cigarette boxes, desk sets, junk jewelry, garden furniture”. However, now that war has broken out, these same businesses can “(dig) up war work” creating things such as “foundry wedges for aircraft parts” or “incendiary bomb blanket(s)”¹⁴. Advertisements in every publication explain how some manufacturer or other they has redirected its efforts from producing ordinary products to those things vital to the war effort. Car companies such as Studebaker and Cadillac are prime examples. Studebaker advertises how it is contributing to the war by focusing its efforts on producing airplane engines rather than motor cars¹⁵. Cadillac similarly boasts of how it makes “direct contributions” by designing and building tanks¹⁶. Another company changing production to meet war needs is Good Year whose Airfoam product was used to make mattress and seat cushions before the war but by 1943 is dedicated to “war-work only”, making such things as parachute seats and helmet liners¹⁷. Some industries changing over to war production are more surprising than others. For instance, the “Easy” washing machine company advertises how it has not “been building

¹⁴ “Small Small Business” May 17, 1943. *TIME*

¹⁵ Studebaker. Advertisement. May 3, 1943. *TIME*, 71

¹⁶ Cadillac. Advertisement. May 10, 1943. *TIME*, 39

¹⁷ Airfoam Goodyear. Advertisement. May 10, 1943. *TIME*, 31

washing machines lately” but “anti-aircraft gun mounts” instead. These examples are only a very few of the overwhelming number of ads aimed at the American public during this time. All industries seem proud of their ability to contribute to the war and want their customers to know of their contribution. A Time magazine ad for The International Nickel Company sums up the sentiment that industries are a vital part of the fight when it says that “today all industries must produce as never before – must speed the output of food, tanks, planes, guns, ships, and other instruments of war”¹⁸

B. Individual Employment

Of course, the war on the home front is not fought only on the large scale by industries but on the small scale, by individual citizens, as well. Despite the fact that ordinary American civilians live thousands of miles from actual combat and are never in any true danger the media still impresses upon them their vital role in fighting the war from home. Since such a large number of America’s working-aged men are away at war there is a labor shortage in the jobs they normally filled. In industry and factories which supply materials for war this shortage is unacceptable so there is a rush of civilian workers to fill these positions. In some cases these workers are men who have training in “related occupations”¹⁹. For instance, a baker might become a furnace tender or a silverware spinner an aircraft worker²⁰. Women too are drawn into industrial work from other industries; articles explain how manicurists are especially adaptable to precision work and jewelry inspectors can make wonderful screw and bolt inspectors²¹. Even women not previously in the work force are encouraged to join up by idealized stories of others doing just that. Publications remind Americans that going to work in the war industry is no more

¹⁸ The International Nickel Company Inc. Advertisement. May 10, 1943. *TIME*, 11

¹⁹ Aigner, Lucien. May 3, 1943. Old Skills New Jobs. *The New York Times Magazine*, 8

²⁰ Aigner, Lucien. May 3, 1943. Old Skills New Jobs. *The New York Times Magazine*, 8

²¹ Aigner, Lucien. May 3, 1943. Old Skills New Jobs. *The New York Times Magazine*, 8

than their patriotic duty. Similarly, many short stories and articles point out the effect these changes are having on the American household. Housekeepers have left for higher-paying war industry jobs while wives and mothers are taken away from the home for long periods each day; men are suddenly expected to play a larger role in domestic activities. Many comics in mainstream publications make light of the situation in order, one assumes, to boost American moral. One such comic depicts a man in his kitchen wearing an apron and telling another: “of course I’m the boss- my wife wanted me to wear a green apron and I insisted on this blue dotted one”²². The sentiment seems to be that the changes being undergone in the name of the war may not be ideal but one must make the best of them.

Of Course, the media demonstrates to the public that changing careers is not the only way they can fight the war. Civilians can also take on additional roles on top of their ordinary work. One New York Times article explains the desperate need for volunteers in areas such as health assistance, child care, and foster care²³. Organizations such as the Citizens Service Corps, Citizens Defense Corps and Air Raid Protection Service are also promoted with civilians encouraged to join up. Some publications boast proudly of the success of such programs saying that civilian defense “has come to mean the total mobilization of the people” and emphasizing the importance of this mobilization for the war effort.²⁴ Other volunteer efforts that civilians are encouraged to undertake as part of the war struggle include work volunteering at farms or canneries where shortage of labor can keep food from being harvested or preserved²⁵. Even children are considered an important part of this mobilization and the media in 1943 encourages

²² Carr, Gene. May 1, 1943. *The Saturday Evening Post*, 92

²³ Mackenzie, Katherine. May 2, 1943. Volunteer Family Aides. *The New York Times*

²⁴ Landis, James N. May 30, 1943. Two Years of OCD. *The New York Times*

²⁵ “Canning Crops Endangered by Lack of Labor” May 27, 1943. *Chicago Daily Tribune*

them to join groups such as “Victory Corps” and to participate in low skill volunteer work²⁶. As one inspirational poster reads: “unless you are giving every precious minute of your time . . . every ounce of strength that you can spare . . . towards helping win this war as a civilian, you are letting down those soldiers who are sacrificing lives to win it for you.”²⁷ Thus it is that the media encourages the view that citizens are an important part of fighting the war and that the changing nature of their work, whether in taking on new war time employment or volunteering in additional jobs, is one part of that fight.

C. Individuals’ Daily Lives

Another way the media suggests that citizens are fighting the war from home is by changing their lifestyles. Already, we have seen how citizens’ lives are changed by taking on new jobs or volunteering but these are only very small parts of the overall lifestyle change necessary to win the war. The need for diverting production to the creation of war materials, the sheer amount of these materials necessary to fight the war, and the shortage of labor to do so all results in the production of fewer goods for domestic consumption. This subsequent lack of goods is the main driving force behind the change in American lifestyles. What is fascinating is that, rather than simply telling Americans that conservation is a necessity, the media approaches this need as a noble mission on par with any carried out by the military. It does not coerce them into changing their ways but appeals to their patriotic and moral sensibilities. Civilians are encouraged to be patient when it comes to food shortages and to be creative in making what food they do have last longer. Daily newspapers publicize “food demonstrations” put on by cities and civilian defense offices in order to teach citizens how to “adapt their cooking to changes in the

²⁶ Mackenzie, Katherine. May 2, 1943. Volunteer Family Aides. *The New York Times*

²⁷ Every Civilian a Fighter. Advertisement. May 3, 1943. *LIFE*, 101

food supply”²⁸. Many popular magazines also run frequent features on how to make food stamps last and suggesting recipes and tips to avoid waste. Not only are citizens encouraged to use the food that they purchase wisely but are also advised to plant “victory gardens” to grow their own vegetables. Publications report that many Americans have taken this suggestion as a call to battle and victory gardens are springing up across the country bringing the number in May of 1943 to around “18,000,000”²⁹. The magazine spreads which discuss victory gardens feature pictures of all kinds of Americans, from nuns, to prisoners, to college girls tilling soil and tending crops; one picture even shows the plaza in front of San Francisco’s city hall covered in vegetables. According to these stories it would seem that the whole country has been mobilized in the war effort and this mobilization is vital for victory.

According to the media, however the effort that Americans put into changing their relationship with food is not enough. This same effort must be extended to all parts of their lives. An important example is the civilian’s relationship to his automobile and to driving. As previously mentioned automobile manufacturers are among the many switching their focus from domestic products to war materials. As such it is very difficult during this time period to purchase or repair a car. Similarly, great amounts of gasoline are necessary to keep the military’s ships, planes, tanks, and jeeps running in remote locations around the world. So, gas on the domestic front is a rare commodity and civilians receive a gasoline ration just as they receive a food ration. Because of both of these factors, few automobiles being made and rare gasoline, citizens are encouraged to care for their cars closely, share rides when possible, and to avoid driving altogether whenever feasible. One magazine suggests cheerfully: “save rubber and gas

²⁸ Holt, Jane. May 3, 1943. News of Food. *The New York Times*

²⁹ “Victory Gardens” May 3, 1943. *LIFE*

for the boys by walking”³⁰. This new reality seems to have come home for Americans as even characters in short stories mourn the challenge of pushing bicycles up hills and yet none would imagine driving which could in short order lead to losing the war. Similar reports of how American civilians can fight the war from home touch upon nearly all aspects of life. One series of articles suggests ways to decorate a “home in wartime”. During this time of struggle resources are scarce and one must make do with what one has; for instance, make furniture last longer by using slip covers for chairs or by repainting and repairing dressers³¹. Similar suggestions are made for methods of gentle cleaning to make clothing or sheets last longer while others advise how to alter popular clothing trends in order to make them fit in with government restrictions on cloth. Articles and advertisements alike praise an American sense of thrift and ingenuity in civilians as traits as necessary for victory as bravery in soldiers.

C. Consumerism

Along the same lines as the necessity of conserving food, cars, gasoline, and home products, is the ubiquitous message that civilians must fight the axis powers with purchasing power. One of the most persistent ways in which the media impresses upon civilians the need for them to fight is through the medium of advertising. Page after endless page, in every periodical one comes across, advertisers tell citizens that it is their duty as Americans to fight the war and that they can do so through consumption. One Pillsbury ad exclaims grandly: “another American weapon batters the axis . . . thirty million rolling pins, in the capable hands of mothers, daughters, bakers everywhere”³². It then proceeds to explain how Pillsbury products save ration points and therefore buying them contributes to the war effort; clearly, baking biscuits is one

³⁰ Walk-Overs. Advertisement. May 17, 1943. *LIFE*, 66

³¹ “The Home in Wartime” May 9, 1943. *The New York Times Magazine*, 24
Storey, Walter Rendell. May 9, 1943. Slip Cover Magic. *The New York Times Magazine*, 24

³² Pillsbury Flour Mill Company. Advertisement. May 31, 1943. *TIME*, 5

more way to stamp out fascism. Ads for Pacific Factag fabrics claim that their garment tags are “a weapon just as a gun is a weapon” because they enable “America, patriotically bent on conserving essential war materials, to get the most good out of its purchases”³³ Another ad, for Steel-Grip gloves suggests that their protection is vital “to keep war production moving”³⁴. Even those companies that don’t manage to justify how their product assists the war effort still manage to mention it in some way, usually a small note encouraging Americans to “Buy war bonds!”. One Canada Dry ad takes up the favored imagery of battle and glory when it writes: “those stamps are your bullets – those books are your guns. . . . let freedom ring – with all the War Bonds and stamps you can buy!”³⁵. If one is to believe the media then one of the most important things a civilian can do for the war effort is make the correct purchases.

IV. SUMMARY

World War Two was a huge undertaking in every way; it crossed continents, endured for years and impacted every area of life. There were bombing campaigns and concentration camps, hospitals and grave yards filled to capacity, weapons more advanced and deadly than any before. And yet, the messages aimed at the American public reflect little of this. Instead, in describing both the war on the battle front and the war on the home front the media is overwhelmingly optimistic. It shows to civilians at home that the war as experienced by soldiers is not dreadful but glorious, both in victory and defeat. Defeat itself is sanitized by the media; given little significance it is not allowed to unduly worry Americans or to undercut the more important news of victories. Meanwhile, publications also focus on soldiers’ lives between battles. Civilians are able to see that their husbands, sons, and neighbors, while eager to come home, are not suffering

³³ Pacific Factag Fabrics. Advertisement. May 24, 1943. *LIFE*, 61

³⁴ Sat eve post p 82 may 29 Industrial Gloves co ad

³⁵ Canada Dry. Advertisement. May 15, 1943. *The Saturday Evening Post*, 96

inordinately. The first half of the media's positive approach therefore involves focusing on the desirable and ignoring the distasteful elements of war. The second half of the positive approach consists of incorporating civilians into the war. The media does not leave civilians as impotent bystanders relegated to watching helplessly as events unfold. Rather, it puts the war in their hands; everything civilians do can contribute to ultimate victory. Their industries can win the war, their job choices and volunteerism makes them soldiers, the products they buy are weapons. The media's message to the public is innocent and hopeful, a call to a grand challenge; things are bad, but not unbearable, and if we work hard together we will overcome.

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