# Feeding Freedom, Rationing Death: Federal Propaganda, Censorship, and the Origins of the “Good War” Myth

When Studs Terkel compiled an oral history of World War II in 1984 from interviews with American men and women who had lived through it, he discovered to his surprise that many of his subjects remembered the war as a “good war.” Terkel entitled his book “*The Good War*” to reflect the subjective views he heard, but he added the quotation marks “simply because the adjective ‘good’ mated to the noun ‘war’ is so incongruous.”[[1]](#footnote-1) Now, nearly forty years later, World War II continues to occupy “a revered place in our national consciousness,” and Americans still wax nostalgic about a war that killed over 50 million people.[[2]](#footnote-2) Many Americans continue to think and write about World War II as the “good war” in American history – as a moral conflict between good and evil in which the United States led a righteous crusade and waged a just war to save the world from Nazi tyranny in Europe and Japanese aggression in the Pacific, making the world safe for freedom and democracy. But the “good war” narrative mythologizes America’s experience in the war. Combat on every front was horrifying and, in the Pacific, race hatreds led both American and Japanese soldiers to commit atrocities in what John Dower famously called a “war without mercy.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

Since the end of World War II, the ideas of the “good war” have become a hallmark of American history and memory, but many of these contemporary conceptions originated not with the war itself but from particular postwar contexts and interpretations. After the war, many Americans believed that World War II had been not only a necessary war or a just war, but a “good war” – “the best war the country ever had”– because of its causes and effects.[[4]](#footnote-4) After all, the war delivered the United States from the Great Depression, saved the world from Nazi tyranny and Japanese militarism, created unprecedented national prosperity, and forged the nation into a global superpower and the leader of the free world. After it ended, many Americans credited the war for making the United States the richest society in human history, and they began to remember the war years as a national golden age. In some minds, World War II was an idyllic time when life was simpler, when innovative and enterprising Americans solved the world’s problems, and when everyone was united – there were no racial or gender tensions, no class conflict, and no divorce.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Later, Americans buttressed the “good war” narrative by juxtaposing World War II with the “bad war” in Vietnam. Unlike the Vietnam War, which tore American society apart, the Second World War had united (white) Americans who had no misgivings about the purity of their cause in the noble struggle against the evil Axis empires. Historians also mythologized World War II and its aftermath as the clearest example of American exceptionalism and contrasted the nation’s triumphant victory over Germany and Japan with defeat and humiliation in Vietnam and the development of the “Vietnam Syndrome.” By comparison, World War II seemed like a clear national victory over evil enemies while the Vietnam War was frustrating, divisive, and morally obscure. As Arnold Isaacs has observed, World War II was “ugly and degrading, even tragic, but not absurd. It was necessary. The Japanese had to be beaten, and there wasn’t any other way to do it. With all its cruelty and waste, it was still sane.”[[6]](#footnote-6) World War II showed that the world was full of evil and terror, but it also contained rationality and rough justice. The Vietnam War, in contrast, seemed absurd and senseless. Symbolically, World War II also represented the triumph of the American nation, its resources, technology, military, and industry while Vietnam became a metonym for lost ideals, failed trust, and the destruction of national myths and values.[[7]](#footnote-7)

More recently, Americans have enhanced the “good war” narrative through nostalgia. As Pearl Harbor, D-Day, and the atomic bombs reached their fiftieth and sixtieth anniversaries, Americans commemorated and mythologized the war through films, speeches, celebrations, and histories.[[8]](#footnote-8) This wave of patriotism increased after September 11th as government officials compared the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington with the attack on Pearl Harbor and invoked the rhetoric and memories of World War II to stir up nationalist resolve for a new “good” War on Terror. Finally, as the men and women who endured the Great Depression of the 1930s and served the war effort in the 1940s passed from history to immortality, journalists and historians memorialized them as “the greatest generation” – the finest generation any society has ever produced – because of their sacrifices on behalf of their country, their moral stand against evil and aggression, and the ways in which they built American society after the war.[[9]](#footnote-9) Into the new millennium, Americans saw World War II as a character-building experience for individuals and the nation, and they praised the war generation as model citizens for enhancing the country’s freedom and prosperity through their individualism, discipline, and self-sacrifice.[[10]](#footnote-10)

The “good war” narrative is therefore sedimentary. The myth contains multiple layers that were deposited in the particular historical contexts of postwar prosperity, the Vietnam War, and the nostalgia surrounding the passing of the “greatest generation.” But those contexts are often anachronistic to the bedrock of the myth’s origins during World War II itself. For most Americans who continue to think of World War II as a “good war,” their contemporary conceptions or memories did not exist in 1945. Studs Terkel, discovered, however, that the “good war” myth was made possible by the incredible irony of American warfare between 1941 and 1945. The incongruity of “good war” memories reflects the incongruity of America’s experience in World War II.

Terkel asked, “Must a society experience horror in order to understand horror?”[[11]](#footnote-11) Gerald Linderman discovered that U.S. soldiers experienced realities in combat that noncombatants and civilians could never understand. The daily experiences of loneliness, filth, pain, fear, fatigue, and death destroyed soldiers’ romantic idealism while the horrors of combat produced shock, disillusionment, and then dehumanization. Living day to day, soldiers succumbed to superstition and fatalism as combat obliterated all notions of control, security, order, or purpose, and the “cause” became extraneous to survival. Soldiers consciously and unconsciously adapted to war by hardening their attitudes and behavior towards suffering and death which further isolated and alienated them from civilians and noncombatants and created a separate “world within war.” There was nothing “good” about the experiences of killing and dying, but Americans regarded the war as “good” because so few of them had actually experienced this world within war; of the sixteen million men and women who served in the U.S. armed forces, only around 800,000 saw extended combat during World War II.[[12]](#footnote-12) In his interviews, Terkel realized that most Americans simply had not experienced the worst realities of World War II. At home, the United States largely avoided the apocalyptic destruction that devastated so much of the rest of the world and survived not only unscathed but emerged more powerful than ever. Protected by two oceans, and isolated for the first two years, the continental United States escaped blackouts, bombings, and famines to say nothing of the invasion, rape, conquest, and genocide that most other participants suffered. During World War II, most Americans lived a censored experience and what they missed from the war made their perspectives one-sided, their values parochial, and their thinking polarized. Terkel explained,

The crowning irony lay in World War Two itself. It had been a different kind of war… It was not fratricidal. It was not, most of us profoundly believed, ‘imperialistic.’ Our enemy was, patently, obscene: the Holocaust maker. It was one war that many who would have resisted ‘your other wars’ supported enthusiastically. It was a ‘just war,’ if there is any such animal. In a time of nuclear weaponry, it is the language of a lunatic. But World War Two…[[13]](#footnote-13)

It has become cliché to talk about the 1940s as an innocent time for Americans and yet the incongruity of America’s experience during World War II means that many Americans were naïve about the war and did not fully appreciate nor understand its true awfulness.[[14]](#footnote-14) In that sense, the “good war” was made not only by the justness and integrity of the cause itself, but also by nationalism and exceptional ignorance, innocence, and insulation.

## Terkel suggested that Americans lived insulated lives during the war, but I argue that Americans were able to think about the war as “good” not only because they were insulated by geography or removed from combat by circumstance, but also because their moral sensibilities about the war were managed by the U.S. government. As a prerequisite for winning the war, President Franklin D. Roosevelt created two government agencies, the Office of War Information (OWI) and the Office of Censorship, to buoy popular support for the war effort. Both offices sustained domestic morale, cultivated a popular mandate, and solicited a blank-check for the war effort. They did so by crafting an official narrative about the war through propaganda and censorship – through the stories told by the Office of War Information and the stories withheld by the Office of Censorship. But the offices did more than simply sell or spin saccharine war stories or hide bad news. As John McCallum has argued, officials also tried “to cultivate moral sentiments compatible with extraordinarily lethal policies.”[[15]](#footnote-15) Government officials used propaganda to inflate public opinion, domestic morale, and moral tolerance to meet the needs and realities of the war effort and used censorship to deflate military experiences and costs to match the public willingness to fight and sacrifice. The official narrative about the war therefore reflected the moral equilibrium that the federal government artificially created between domestic moral sensibilities and the military’s demands for victory.

Both offices encountered domestic resistance, however. The OWI detected parochial perspectives, national interests, and traditional values that did not match the needs of the war effort and so they crafted a narrative that replaced nationalism with internationalism, isolationism with intervention, complacency with the will to win, and moral qualms with infallibility. In these efforts, the OWI both led and followed popular opinion. Office officials led Americans to fight for a better world for everyone instead of putting America first, and they vilified the Axis leaders and armies and promoted the idea of the United Nations. But propagandists also appealed to the beliefs and attitudes that the public already held by using the rhetoric of freedom, and they connected the war’s necessities to traditional values and national exceptionalism. The OWI and other traditionalists also demonstrated how internationalism could serve national interests in order to win over those with parochial allegiances rather than universal, humanitarian concerns. The Office of Censorship likewise recognized that the war’s realities and expediencies exceeded the public tolerance for violence, suffering, and sacrifice. It therefore suppressed military deaths and battlefield atrocities to meet domestic sensibilities. As the war progressed, however, the Office of Censorship permitted more realism in its textual and visual depictions in order to strengthen American resolve.

The two offices, War Information and Censorship, focused explicitly on producing narratives about the war. In fact, Roosevelt considered merging them for a time, but the Office of Censorship director, Byron Price, opposed it.[[16]](#footnote-16) Of course, American narratives were always referred to as “information” while enemy narratives were labeled “propaganda,” but the government published materials not merely to inform but also to persuade. The OWI used known sources and based their arguments on facts, but officials could also manipulate or exaggerate realities to strengthen the government’s one-sided narrative and win public support. The OWI generally tried to avoid excessive salesmanship, but the staff nevertheless used advertising techniques like repetition, catchy slogans, and celebrity endorsements, and they appealed to their countrymen’s emotions and self-interests by drawing on contemporary beliefs based on class, gender, religion, and race. In addition, the OWI inundated the country with printed texts ranging from pamphlets, posters, advertisements, and cartoons to audiovisual materials like radio broadcasts, newsreels, and films that projected the government’s views on the war.[[17]](#footnote-17) Radio broadcasts and fireside chats seemed to be the best ways for the government to get its message across since ninety percent of Americans listened to four hours of radio every day and, during the war, news reports increased from five to twenty percent of radio coverage.[[18]](#footnote-18) The government’s patriotic narratives also appealed to editors, reporters, and producers because they knew that the war made for good stories and the war was good for business overall.[[19]](#footnote-19)

## The Office of War Information

Because the supreme, overarching goal of the United States government was to win the war as quickly decisively, quickly, and at minimal cost, the Office of War Information and the Office of Censorship crafted narratives that they believed would best help the U.S. defeat the Axis powers.[[20]](#footnote-20) Although they promoted misinformation, exaggeration, and sentimental or romanticized exceptionalism and nationalism, U.S. officials believed that such narratives would help the American war effort by sustaining national morale and capturing public support. For the government, popular support was tantamount to victory. President Roosevelt himself declared, “I am perfectly willing to mislead and tell untruths if it will help us win the war,” and the OWI informed local radio station program directors that “Morale is just as important as materiel.”[[21]](#footnote-21) Accordingly, the OWI called for victory in pamphlets that reproduced speeches and broadcasts from government officials and spurred Americans to support the government and the military so that the country could win the war decisively and quickly. Other publications denounced appeasement and peace settlements and demanded unconditional surrender and absolute victory without compromise.[[22]](#footnote-22)

The Office of War Information used propaganda – “the deliberate manipulation of facts, ideas, and lies” – as it cultivated a relationship between the government and the public that would help the United States to win the war.[[23]](#footnote-23) Originally established as the Office of Facts and Figures (OFF), and led by CBS news commentator Elmer Davis, the Office of War Information was founded on 13 June 1942 and directed by President Roosevelt to:

formulate and carry out, through the use of press, radio, motion picture, and other facilities, information programs designed to facilitate the development of an informed and intelligent understanding, at home and abroad, of the status and progress of the war effort and of the war policies, activities, and aims of the Government.[[24]](#footnote-24)

In short, the Office of War Information functioned as the government’s official mouthpiece to tell the Roosevelt administration’s version of the war and win public support. The OWI coordinated with other federal agencies and absorbed the Office of Government Reports, Foreign Intelligence Service, and the Information Service of the Office of Emergency Management. Davis also coordinated the official story about the war as he met with representatives from the Joint Chiefs of Staff; the War, Navy, and State Departments; the Office of the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs; the Board of Economic Warfare; the War Production Board; and the Office of Censorship.[[25]](#footnote-25)

Knowing that Americans were wary of “morale-building” and attempts to control what they read, saw, or thought, however, the government decided upon a “strategy of truth” in which it only restricted information that could hurt military operations or diplomatic negotiations.[[26]](#footnote-26) The strategy suggested that the government told the truth because it had nothing to hide and indicated that the government trusted informed citizens to make rational and correct decisions about the war. U.S. officials also recognized that citizens in a democracy deserved to know what was really going on and telling the truth also elicited the strongest public support for the war. Truth and war were rarely complementary, however. As Senator Hiram Johnson remarked during World War I, “The first casualty when war comes is truth,” and telling the truth in the Second World War “required more than a disposition toward honesty.”[[27]](#footnote-27) In a speech in February 1942, Roosevelt announced that he wanted Americans to hear the worst of the war without flinching, but government officials also believed that the more Americans saw of the war, the less likely they would be to support it. Accordingly, the OWI often mixed the truth with what Americans wanted to believe because truth was not always persuasive, and the Office of Censorship suppressed photographs and information that might decrease Americans’ will to do all that was necessary to win the war. As the war wore on, however, officials offered more realistic news coverage to combat national apathy or complacency. They hoped that graphic representations would show Americans what was at stake in the war and motivate them to raise their commitments to fight and sacrifice to levels that the military needed.[[28]](#footnote-28)

OWI records show that bad war made it possible for Americans to think of their own war effort as “good.”[[29]](#footnote-29) War crimes, atrocities, mass killings, and genocide committed by the Axis forces made American objectives and combat necessary or just by comparison. The OWI showed that American enemies were real and that they posed a genuine threat to U.S. national security and values. It argued that, in contrast to the German and Japanese aggressors, the United States did not seek war and only joined the conflict after the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor and Germany declared war. In a nationwide radio broadcast in July 1942, Secretary of State Cordell Hull announced that “We Americans are fighting today because we have been attacked.”[[30]](#footnote-30) While the Axis powers fought to conquer the world, America defended democracy and protected humanity as the “incubator of democratic principles.”[[31]](#footnote-31)

Drawing on historical and cultural binaries that Americans would easily understand and readily support, the OWI portrayed World War II as a global zero-sum battle between good and evil. In the war’s unambiguous moral structure, the Allies represented freedom, democracy, and civilization while the Axis signified slavery, dictatorship, and barbarism.[[32]](#footnote-32) American enemies always epitomized compulsion, indoctrination, and tyranny while the United States embodied free will and political and religious liberty. The Nazis fought to enslave humanity and the Japanese threatened civilization while the United States and its allies fought to liberate the spirit of man in every corner of the globe.[[33]](#footnote-33) Cordell Hull told Americans that the war was not merely a fight between nations but a struggle between opposing ideals and ways of life.[[34]](#footnote-34) He described Axis leaders as ambitious, depraved, and cruel and warned that enemy forces sought to conquer and enslave the United States and every other nation. Although many Americans may not have felt so threatened, Hull insisted that the war was a life and death struggle for freedom, homes, and survival. To explain what was at stake in the war he depicted America’s enemies as barbarians devoid of virtue and honor who fought against civilized customs, institutions, and religion. One year after Pearl Harbor, former Senator George Norris reminded Americans that “a murderous, unmerciful, and unrelenting enemy” had “stabbed our nation in the back” and that the United States and its allies now fought to defend world civilization against slavery and dictatorship.[[35]](#footnote-35)

The OWI also changed American sentiments by demonstrating that America’s enemies were evil. OWI literature named Hitler “the outstanding dictator of the ages,” and portrayed Mussolini, Hirohito, and Tojo all as villains bent on world domination. Cordell Hull accused Germany and Japan of murdering women, children, and civilians, and he denounced the rape, pillage, torture, terror, and deprivation in territories conquered by the Axis. Against such enemies and evils, the United States had to fight for freedom and Hull warned Americans against complacency and apathy. He argued that a “lack of vigilance,” posed the greatest threat to American liberty and held that the United States could only enjoy the fruits of liberty insofar as it was willing to fight, suffer, and die for it. The right to freedom, he stated, could not be separated from the duty to defend it.[[36]](#footnote-36) To strengthen American resolve, the OWI repeatedly warned what would happen (especially to a loved one) if Hitler won.[[37]](#footnote-37) This sort of fear-mongering was used by the OWI in its pamphlet, *Tale of a City* which told Americans about the fall of Warsaw and implicitly warned that Washington or New York City might suffer similar fates if the United States did not stop the Nazis from enslaving the entire human race.[[38]](#footnote-38) And although the OWI announced that the Axis leaders were the real enemies of America, not the German or Japanese people, OWI publications still relied on cultural and racial stereotypes that vilified their foes.[[39]](#footnote-39) German, Italian, and Japanese armies were often depicted as cunning, brutal, relentless, fanatical, and cowardly scoundrels who won through overwhelming force or treachery. The Americans and their allies, on the other hand, were brave, caring, and fair fighters who always won by overcoming superior odds.[[40]](#footnote-40) America’s enemies were also militaristic and blood-thirsty while Americans themselves were reluctant to shed blood, although they were always portrayed as “invincible once aroused.”[[41]](#footnote-41) One OWI pamphlet quoted Madame Chiang Kai-Shek who told the U.S. House of Representatives in February 1943 that the “American people have every right to be proud of their fighting men.”[[42]](#footnote-42)

To ensure that public attitudes matched the military’s needs, the OWI also tried to overcome traditional American isolationism.[[43]](#footnote-43) In tracts, films, and reports, the OWI pointed out the fallacies of isolationism and called for international intervention. In a memorandum from February 1942, the Office of Facts and Figures reported that the government needed to do more to convince the public that a defensive, “America First” kind of war would not work.[[44]](#footnote-44) President Roosevelt had already told Americans in 1941 that “the future and the safety of our country and of our democracy are overwhelmingly involved in events far beyond our borders” and that “the future of all American Republics is today in serious danger.”[[45]](#footnote-45) Cordell Hull mirrored the president’s words and affirmed that no nation was immune to attack. He recognized that Americans felt safe from the war in the Western Hemisphere because of their ocean borders but he contended that peaceful intentions, avoiding provocation, neutrality, distance, and defending borders – all the things that should normally keep a country safe – would not work against aggression. The United States could only ensure its safety through strength – by cultivating superior will, destroying their enemies, and pursuing concerted action in defense of freedom.[[46]](#footnote-46) The President of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, Eric Johnston, likewise warned that nationalism and isolationism would only lead to another war for a future generation of Americans, just as it had after World War I.[[47]](#footnote-47)

The OWI swore that U.S. intervention and internationalism would lead to a better world for everyone. Government officials insisted that the United States fought for liberalism, universalism, freedom, and human rights to combat domestic pacifism and isolationism whose proponents wanted to avoid another world war and felt understandably hesitant about killing and dying.[[48]](#footnote-48) In 1943, the OWI published Madame Chiang’s address to the U.S. House of Representatives in which she called for the United States and the United Nations to build “a better society for all mankind, with special privileges for none.”[[49]](#footnote-49) Another OWI pamphlet described World War II as “a war of the people for all peoples, a war for the establishment of brotherhood.”[[50]](#footnote-50) But the OWI did not simply replace national interests with international ideals; it also advertised for a better world by publicizing President Roosevelt’s State of the Union address from 1941 where he argued that the United States had to stand up for four essential freedoms: freedom of speech, freedom of worship, freedom from want, and freedom from fear.[[51]](#footnote-51) The president declared that the U.S. fought for the freedom for everyone “to worship God in his own way,” to speak openly “not without fear of contradiction, but without fear of punishment,” as well as freedom from poverty and scarcity and from domination, conquest, or arrest.[[52]](#footnote-52) In short, the president announced that:

The Four Freedoms of common humanity are as much elements of man’s needs as air and sunlight, bread and salt. Deprive him of these freedoms and he dies – deprive him of a part of them and a part of him withers. Give them to him in full and abundant measure and he will cross the threshold of a new age, the greatest age of man. These freedoms are the rights of men of every creed and every race, wherever they live.[[53]](#footnote-53)

The OWI republished portions of the President’s speech throughout the war and explicitly instructed local radio directors to tell their audiences that “we are fighting for the four freedoms.”[[54]](#footnote-54) In its radio guides, the OWI told local stations to show how the four freedoms were important to everyone through news discussions and dramatic programs that illustrated what the loss of freedoms meant for conquered people. The OWI offered Roosevelt’s four freedoms as an alternative future to Hitler’s National Socialism and promised a global New Deal that would liberate the rest of the world and make all of America’s sacrificial killing and dying worthwhile.[[55]](#footnote-55) To reach those goals, the OWI lifted American sensibilities to match the military necessities of victory. It warned that force as a political action would not be eliminated unless the U.S. and its allies opposed it with equal or greater economic or moral collective power.[[56]](#footnote-56)

The internationalist meaning and universalist promise of the four freedoms speech was transformed and redirected by Norman Rockwell’s famous *Four Freedoms* paintings.[[57]](#footnote-57) First published in the *Saturday Evening Post* in 1943, Rockwell’s artwork depicted Roosevelt’s four freedoms as sentimental and iconic representations of American life, thereby converting them into “symbols of American exceptionalism and virtue.”[[58]](#footnote-58) By romanticizing Roosevelt’s universalism and internationalism, Rockwell connected the worldwide utopian vision to the national, local, and familial concerns of Americans. The OWI initially rejected Rockwell because it did not consider him a real artist and it wanted to elevate public tastes, not embrace them. But the OWI changed its mind when Rockwell’s paintings gained widespread acclaim. Roosevelt himself praised Rockwell for illustrating the everyday meanings of the four freedoms for the common man. In fact, the paintings proved so effective that the Treasury Department used them for the Four Freedoms bond show and promotional tour which visited fifteen cities between April 1943 and May 1944, and ultimately sold $130 million in war bonds. The OWI printed 2.5 million copies of the *Four Freedoms* and produced a radio program and a newsreel in which Rockwell hosted his neighbors for Thanksgiving dinner in Vermont.[[59]](#footnote-59) Some historians have criticized Rockwell’s paintings and their alleged political project, lamenting that they once again led the United States to retreat from internationalist virtues towards nationalist ambitions. But government officials recognized the power of the images and acknowledged that Americans were governed by self-interest and had a hard time fighting for international or universal causes. Government rhetoric and political projects, however idealistic, still had to show ordinary Americans with sons, families, and local concerns what the war could possibly offer them.[[60]](#footnote-60) Rockwell’s paintings, and the OWI’s narrative as a whole, made such an overture.

The OWI also subordinated national interests to international or universal interests by calling for a better world organized around the United Nations. Early on, OWI literature frequently referred back to the Atlantic Charter which Roosevelt signed with British Prime Minister Winston Churchill in August 1941.[[61]](#footnote-61) The Charter promised freedom, equality, peace, and material advancement for victims of both Axis and colonial aggression and obligated each signatory to foster stable government and settle their differences with other states through peaceful methods.[[62]](#footnote-62) The U.S. extended the Charter on January 26, 1942, when twenty-six countries pledged to fight for the war aims outlined in the Atlantic Charter by signing the Declaration of the United Nations.[[63]](#footnote-63) By promoting the war as a unified struggle for freedom, the OWI countered both isolationism and imperialism and sold internationalism as a grand strategy for world peace.[[64]](#footnote-64) Although Americans typically referred to them as U.S. allies, Roosevelt insistently promoted the concept of the United Nations. Just three months into the war, the OWI determined that the “superficial unity” created by Pearl Harbor had ended and the United States needed to advertise the idea of the United Nations to maintain the country’s will to fight.[[65]](#footnote-65) In fact, the OWI coached local radio program directors to give more attention to the reasons the U.S. was fighting and to the United Nations, “our brothers-in-arms,” who had not received “full radio treatment.” As the office explained, radio programs could create unity by showing that Chinese, British, and Russian soldiers and civilians, and “all the people of the United Nations are fighting the same fight” as American soldiers and civilians. Chinese workers on Asian roads and American technicians on U.S. airfields labored for the same cause, the OWI pointed out, and the office wanted U.S. radio programs to make “*unmistakably clear at every opportunity*” that the U.S. and its allies were all in the war together, they fight together and win together.[[66]](#footnote-66)

In order to have a postwar world better than the prewar world, the OWI pushed Americans to “win the peace.” To do so, Eric Johnston explained in one pamphlet, the United States would have to abandon its “shell of super-nationalism.”[[67]](#footnote-67) Cordell Hull recognized that the needs of peace would rival those of the war and he told his national radio audience that the United States would have to work with the United Nations to restore order by managing homelessness, hunger, famine, damaged infrastructure, and the tide of refugees including displaced persons, camp inmates, POWs, and forced laborers.[[68]](#footnote-68) Hull admitted, however, that “nationalism and its spirit are essential to the healthy and normal political and economic life of a people,” but he warned that nationalism could become deadly when taken to extremes.[[69]](#footnote-69) In another OWI pamphlet, Madame Chiang called on the U.S. to create a new world where everyone could live in harmony by forging a humanitarian and universal peace settlement that would avoid punitive punishment, and provincial, national, or even continental ambitions.[[70]](#footnote-70) In the new order, Minnesota Governor Harold Stassen explained, the United States would have to replace the old conventions of diplomacy, balance of power, treaties, and wars, and subsume national rights to human rights by introducing a global bill of rights and a code of justice to protect the fundamental dignity of every person.[[71]](#footnote-71) Stassen also exhorted the U.S. to create a better world by increasing trade, raising standards of living, and increasing global literacy and health.

Internationalism was not completely altruistic, however; the OWI also promoted global involvement to achieve national strategic and economic interests. The OWI argued that a better world would bless Americans too and officials suggested that internationalism would enable Americans to get what they wanted.[[72]](#footnote-72) Johnston anticipated that the war would devastate Europe and Asia but leave the United States unscathed. The U.S., he claimed, would become a superpower and, by default, would have to reconstruct the world either out of humanitarian decency or national self-interest.[[73]](#footnote-73) Furthermore, U.S. officials promoted more explicit nationalism, romanticism, and sentimentalism because these themes appealed to Americans more than international liberalism, and it crafted a saccharine narrative of the war that emphasized sentimental images of American life and values.

In its publications, the OWI celebrated American patriotism, national innocence, goodness, and harmony and romanticized the war’s images and ideals to encourage public unity and support and to overcome domestic disunity. The romanticized version of the war thus grew out of the OWI’s attempts to link the war to American values such as religious and civic beliefs, family loyalty, and national and local pride.[[74]](#footnote-74) Once again, the OWI contrasted Nazi Germany and imperial Japan with the United States, a land of tolerance and equality where races, classes, and genders enjoyed equal rights and opportunities.[[75]](#footnote-75) The OWI suggested that American servicemen fought for American women and defended domesticity and promoted working women who served the war and made homes that their men could come home to; “It’s a woman’s war now,” declared the OWI magazine, *War Jobs for Women*.[[76]](#footnote-76) The government also promoted the illusion of racial unity and indicated that different social classes did not exist in America, or at least that they did not matter, because all ethnicities and classes were committed to the same ideals and worked for the same cause.[[77]](#footnote-77) The OWI also turned capital and labor into allies by exalting workers and abasing executives, it depicted female workers, and presented the United States as a melting pot whose diversity gave it the strength necessary to win the war.[[78]](#footnote-78)

## Despite the commitment to truth and realism, however, the OWI also managed Americans’ moral sensibilities through omissions, compromises, and white-washing which they felt were necessary to boost national morale. For over a year, for instance, the government withheld the full U.S. casualty lists from the public until it “ceased to be effective,” as Elmer Davis wrote to Roosevelt in December 1942.[[79]](#footnote-79) By then, the OWI and the Public Relations Bureaus of the Army and Navy agreed that publishing the lists would actually improve public understanding and morale. In many instances, the stories that the OWI told hid deeper, more nuanced, or contrary realities. For example, when the government portrayed the war as a fight between freedom and slavery, it always showed the Allies on the side of freedom, but this outlook also concealed Stalin’s annexation of the Baltics.[[80]](#footnote-80) Like the Office of Censorship, the OWI also hid atrocities and war crimes from the public to reconcile popular sentiment with military realities. Officially, the OWI indicated that the United States only ever destroyed bad things. This meant that the U.S. military was committed to precision bombing in which they destroyed enemy targets precisely, avoided collateral damage, and refrained from injuring civilians or innocent people. Official accounts suggested that precision bombing removed murder and moral ambiguity from U.S. sorties and showed that American soldiers could seemingly engage in the awful business of war without getting their hands dirty. Most of the time though, precision bombing was not much different than area or strategic bombing since darkness, weather conditions, or smoke could obscure targets and U.S. sorties often aimed for large urban areas, not specific marks.[[81]](#footnote-81) The military also made exceptions for the sake of expediency. In the Doolittle Raid on Tokyo in 1942, U.S. officials claimed that enemy morale constituted a legitimate bombing target.[[82]](#footnote-82) At the end of the war, President Truman called Hiroshima a “military base” because Americans did not feel right about bombing noncombatants even though the U.S. firebombing campaign over the previous year had killed more than 300,000 Japanese civilians. Ultimately, U.S. soldiers and the American public rejoiced in the atomic bombs because they seemingly ended the war and saved thousands of American lives.[[83]](#footnote-83)

## The Office of Censorship

While the Office of War Information handled the offensive propaganda, the Office of Censorship took on a more defensive role and validated the official narrative by withholding contradictory stories. While the OWI lifted American moral tolerance to the level of military realities, the Office of Censorship matched public moral sentiments to military exigencies by deflating military realities to match the public willingness to sacrifice and fight.[[84]](#footnote-84) Formed just days after Pearl Harbor on December 16, 1941, the Office of Censorship oversaw both domestic and military censorship until its role expired in August 1945; the office thus paralleled the time of American combat more closely than any other federal agency or office during the war.[[85]](#footnote-85) Generally, the office withheld information that might help the enemy such as shipping schedules, weather reports, coastal defenses, and the President’s travels, or information from military bases or industrial facilities with military contracts. As the war became increasingly bloody, however, censors also limited stories that might lead Americans to question the nation’s moral role.[[86]](#footnote-86) The Office of Censorship therefore prohibited the publication of uninspiring materials – most often pictures more than words since texts were easier to screen and they felt that images could have a greater impact on public morale.[[87]](#footnote-87) The office included two boards: a Policy Board which included cabinet members and agency heads under the chairmanship of the Postmaster General, and an Operating Board appointed by the director to coordinate the interests of several government departments.[[88]](#footnote-88)

Most domestic censorship was voluntary; newspapers and radio stations could freely report sensitive stories though doing so would contradict the government’s needs.[[89]](#footnote-89) Led by Byron Price, the Office of Censorship sought cooperation from journalists rather than conformity, and the censors maintained a good relationship with the press by asking them to censor themselves. A life-long newspaperman with twenty years of experience in Washington, Price had formerly worked as the executive news editor and acting general manager of the Associated Press and he believed that journalists supported the war like all other Americans. Consequently, Price aimed to help the press censor itself by adopting “the Voice of the Dove;” he maintained that “you could get more out of people by asking them to do something than by ordering them.”[[90]](#footnote-90)

The Roosevelt administration considered censorship a necessary evil. When Roosevelt appointed Price as Censorship director, he noted that “All Americans abhor censorship, just as they abhor war. But… some degree of censorship is essential in wartime, and we are at war.”[[91]](#footnote-91) Generally, the media complied because the alternatives to censorship were worse. No censorship would have helped the enemy and total censorship would have been intolerable.[[92]](#footnote-92) Admiral Ernest J. King suggested withholding all information until the end of the war, but Roosevelt knew that the public would not stand for absolute censorship.[[93]](#footnote-93) An unfree press would have led the public to distrust the news and their government, and the Roosevelt administration was frightened by the thought of fighting a war as a democracy without an open press. Censorship, therefore, was a moderate, middle path. The government began by “rationing death” as it did in World War I when all photographs of dead American servicemen were prohibited. The war also started badly for the United States with defeats, stalemates, and few successes to report. Worried that the news would demoralize Americans and lead to calls for peace, the government saw censorship as a solution to their military setbacks. Censorship could have included almost anything, but the Office of Censorship mostly just wanted to restrict anything that might hurt the government’s ability to prosecute the war and censors erred on the side of caution since they were more likely to be criticized for letting information through than for restricting it.[[94]](#footnote-94)

The domestic press appeared to recognize these wartime realities because they proved incredibly compliant. There were no prescribed legal penalties for violating the censorship code. If a newspaper violated the code, the censor would publicize the offense and censure the offenders. Fines and prison sentences could be assessed only if the code violations were serious enough to demonstrably injure the government’s war effort. Usually though, the military simply cringed when the press published something threatening. For their part, journalists tried to follow the rules knowing that non-compliance could endanger national security or provoke compulsory censorship or both, and reprimands could decrease a paper’s circulation or radio audience, cutting their profits.[[95]](#footnote-95) Thousands of violations did occur, of course, but Office officials felt they were sins of omission rather than commission.

Censorship in combat zones, on the other hand, was mandatory, and the Office of Censorship had absolute control over all communications from the war to the home front. The military demanded accreditations for all civilian reporters, photographers, and newsreel units who were vetted by the FBI and given official government identifications.[[96]](#footnote-96) Furthermore, they required all members of the press to wear military uniforms, eat with officers, and conform to military law. War correspondents could also be expelled at will from any city, battlefield, or continent.[[97]](#footnote-97) A military Public Relations Officer (PRO) and staff assigned reporters to individual military units while one print correspondent, one radio correspondent, and one photographer received the big picture from theater headquarters and then portrayed the story through symbolic events, focusing particularly on the U.S. role.[[98]](#footnote-98)

The Office of Censorship hid visual representations from the public in a file at the Pentagon called the “Chamber of Horrors” which included pictures that the Office felt would depress the American people and hurt the war effort. In September 1943, however, the Office released some photos from the file because the government worried that Americans had grown complacent about the war. Thereafter, visual and textual portrayals of the war became increasingly graphic – the Office of Censorship was allowed to show American deaths, but not bloody deaths. In fact, the blood of an American soldier was not publicly seen until the spring of 1945 and even then, the face of the GI was blocked in Robert Capa’s photograph.[[99]](#footnote-99)

More generally, censorship eliminated the trauma of war to maintain the public’s commitment to keep fighting. Until the end of the war, the Office of Censorship prohibited pictures of body parts like intestines or limbs.[[100]](#footnote-100) Censors also removed photographs of American soldiers losing control including crying, any kind of psychological suffering or mental breakdown, and alcohol. It also excised the ambiguity or randomness of war by forbidding photographs of soldiers killed or wounded in training, by accidents, friendly fire, or self-inflicted wounds. Thus, the pictures that were released for public consumption showed clean images without blood, gore, or even a lot of suffering.

The Office of Censorship extended guidelines on cleanliness and control to the sexual sphere as well. Soldiers who had been wounded in the genitals were not shown and their wounds were officially announced as “lower abdomen” injuries. The Office also withheld materials that illustrated a lack of restraint by soldiers, such as photographs of prostitutes, or military prophylaxis stations where soldiers would clean themselves after sexual experiences.[[101]](#footnote-101) By protecting and projecting more virtuous images of the war, U.S. officials indicated that the war was good because it was fought by good, moral men. The Office held contradictory standards about domestic unity, however. Censors removed depictions of black soldiers in integrated social spaces so as to not offend whites, but they also suppressed fights between American and allied soldiers to suggest unity in the fight against the Axis.[[102]](#footnote-102) The government also censored photographs of waste like piles of unused materials or conditions that suggested that soldiers were not receiving adequate treatment. Thus, although the censorship code focused on military security, the Office of Censorship also removed materials that might dampen public support for the war.

The Office of Censorship also matched the war’s realities to American moral sentiments by restricting stories of American atrocities through what some have called the “unwritten clause” of the censorship code.[[103]](#footnote-103) Although the United States had signed the 1929 Geneva Conventions which generally governed the conduct of warfare and prohibited killing the wounded, bombing hospitals, or desecrating enemy bodies, American soldiers repeatedly violated the conventions in the Pacific.[[104]](#footnote-104) They executed Japanese prisoners, desecrated dead bodies, and collected Japanese body parts as souvenirs. In many cases, soldiers extracted gold teeth from living or dead enemies, cut off their ears, or boiled their heads to save the skulls. The disgusting trophies were then mounted on military vehicles or shipped home to their wives, girlfriends, or family members, and even public officials.[[105]](#footnote-105)

In the Office of Censorship, Price and his staff argued that they could not censor atrocities because the information did not threaten military or national security under the code. However, the stories illustrated a lack of discipline, and the military was so embarrassed by the material that they pressured Price to develop a solution. Military officials pressed for a blanket provision that would restrict all atrocity stories, but Price refused. Although the Office of Censorship recognized the problem, the staff believed that the military should keep its own soldiers in line, and they did not want to be accused of covering up military crimes. Ultimately, Price and the censors agreed to warn and discourage the press from publicizing U.S. atrocities and contacted offending reporters, but the Office of Censorship never suppressed atrocity stories as an official practice.[[106]](#footnote-106) Eventually, officials agreed to restrict embarrassing war crimes so the army could save face, but censorship also aimed at saving American lives since the military had argued that atrocity stories could provoke Japanese retaliation against American soldiers and POWs. Lastly, censorship proposed to aid the war effort since the government worried that atrocities would help enemy propaganda and hurt domestic support.

As the war wore on, both the OWI and the Office of Censorship worried that Americans were becoming complacent and lacked the stomach to follow through on their commitments and needed federal inspiration and intervention to raise their willingness to fight to the end. Even after just a few months, the Office of Facts and Figures determined that “the public lacks awareness of the seriousness, urgency and magnitude of the problems posed by the war.”[[107]](#footnote-107) Official perceptions really changed, however, between 1942 and 1943. Earlier, the government had worried that the blood, trauma, and tragedy of the war would demoralize the public, but by 1943, officials worried that propaganda and censorship had made Americans complacent and threatened to undermine the war effort. Even though the public always maintained a strong belief that the United States would win the war, there was a growing uncertainty about the duration of the war. Consequently, the Office of Censorship tried to give Americans a more explicit and realistic depiction of U.S. soldiers on the battlefield.[[108]](#footnote-108)Although the OWI was committed to the truth and a realistic portrayal of the war, it viewed those responsibilities and narratives as instruments for the larger, more important purpose of winning the war.

When administration officials worried that public perceptions and attitudes fell short of the government’s war aims, the Office of Censorship released more graphic photographs to prepare the American public for the higher casualties that the military expected. Such portrayals would also reduce the domestic murmuring about minor inconveniences on the home front.[[109]](#footnote-109) Accordingly, the government released some materials and *Newsweek* published photographs of badly injured Americans in May 1943. At the OWI, Elmer Davis even threatened to resign unless the military allowed his office to show civilians what the war was really like. Roosevelt conceded and placed the burden on the military to prove that photographs from combat zones should not be published, rather than the OWI to prove that they should. In September 1943, *Life* magazine published George Strock’s photograph of three dead U.S. soldiers on Buna Beach in New Guinea, the first time the public had seen dead Americans during the war.[[110]](#footnote-110) With the loosened restrictions, the War Department’s Bureau of Public Relations reviewed more than 200 photographs from the Chamber of Horrors and cleared dozens for release. General George C. Marshall, the head of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, also issued a radiogram telling American generals to send photographs that illustrated the awfulness of the war.[[111]](#footnote-111) Still, although restrictions eased, the military continued to censor letters and photographs from the war zones, especially graphic pictures, and those where American dead could be identified.[[112]](#footnote-112)

By exposing Americans to more graphic realism, the government sanctified morally questionable behaviors. Officials made dying look like a sacrificial act and killing like a noble deed in behalf of a greater cause. The government raised morale not so much by withholding the bad war as by transforming moral sentiments so that Americans would see the government’s efforts to win the war as necessary, just, or even good. Censorship certainly abated as the war progressed but “Americans eventually saw more not because the government loosened control, but because it used its power to encourage a different emphasis in the visual presentation of the war.”[[113]](#footnote-113) Officials changed the war’s focus according to their needs, and pictures of dead Americans became the most powerful weapon for the government in the struggle to preserve and control national morale. Ultimately, propagandists and censors encouraged “emotional toughness,” which they felt was vital for democracy during wartime.[[114]](#footnote-114)

Of course, censorship faced resistance as well. The Office of Facts and Figures reported complaints against the government for failing to inform the public about the purposes and problems of prosecuting the war and for deliberately withholding bad news. Americans did not like the prohibition against publishing news about casualties or maritime losses and they complained that the Army and Navy would not release strategic information or other details about the war, even when they could not possibly benefit the enemy. Nevertheless, the office survey revealed that censorship was the most common but least specific complaint, and even though the OFF admitted that newspaper headlines often sugarcoated reality, they determined that the articles themselves effectively told the truth about what was really happening in the field.[[115]](#footnote-115)

After the Office of Censorship was disestablished with the end of the war, Byron Price filed a report about the office and its wartime role and performance. Price admitted that censorship endangered democracy and built its house on sand – “Everything the censor does is contrary to the fundamentals of liberty,” he wrote.[[116]](#footnote-116) Price affirmed that censorship needed restraints to ensure that it preserved, rather than destroyed, institutional and individual freedoms, and it would only work as long as the public believed that it was critical for national survival. Nevertheless, he argued that censorship was an instrument of war and contributed to the success of combat by depriving the enemy of information and collecting information that could be used against the enemy. Censorship, Price confirmed, had saved American lives, kept thousands of dangerous items out of the press, deleted intelligence before it could reach Berlin or Tokyo, and helped with counter-espionage and economic warfare.[[117]](#footnote-117) His report itemized specific achievements of the office and explained how censorship had kept critical military secrets such as the U.S. invasion of North Africa in November 1942, the location of the Casablanca Conference, the D-Day invasion, and the confidentiality of the Manhattan Project. In reviewing its achievements, Price concluded that the Office of Censorship had accomplished its fundamental purpose in spite of its delicate tasks and it had helped the United States win the war.

## War-Making and Myth-Making

Victory and the postwar period seemed to corroborate the government’s account of the war. The slave world that the United States fought against was worse than any propaganda could have predicted, and Americans were shocked and sickened by the Holocaust and other Axis war crimes. The better world that the U.S. had envisioned came true beyond any white Americans’ wildest dreams, and Americans savored the delicious fruits of victory. The war not only ended the Great Depression but made the United States the world’s most powerful military, economic, and industrial nation. As the only nation that emerged from the war richer and stronger, the U.S. owned two-thirds of the world’s gold and made half of the world’s manufactured products. The U.S. military boasted the world’s largest navy, the largest air force, and an atomic monopoly. Politically, the war reinforced American power in the Western Hemisphere, extended its power in the Pacific, and gave the United States the ability to dominate the new United Nations.[[118]](#footnote-118) Because of the war, women received new employment opportunities and social roles while African Americans enjoyed new jobs. Wartime prosperity also led to postwar prosperity which featured the GI Bill, a new middle class, and the Baby Boomers, all “goods” that Americans traced back to the war.[[119]](#footnote-119)

The government’s official account of World War II “was seldom concerned with producing an objective account of what had taken place.”[[120]](#footnote-120)It ignored how the United States had dismissed the Nazis during the 1930s, rejected refugees, and mistreated Japan. Most of all, the government’s story about World War II glossed over the 400,000 American deaths – for much of the war, Americans could not even look at them. When they did, U.S. officials controlled the images to support its story of the war. The “good war” also highlighted how the U.S. sent goods and funds to Europe but overlooked the blood that the Soviets spent to stop the German Wehrmacht. The myth whitewashed the treatment of minorities such as the Japanese internment camps and the segregation and hypocrisy towards African Americans. The official narrative about the war presumed American moral superiority and exceptionalism and disregarded the immorality of American air campaigns. The war’s legacy also led to the Cold War and reified American myths of national exceptionalism.

The “good war” myth may tempt us to conclude that a romanticized war displaced the real war, but historians should discriminate between the “good war” fought *by* the United States and the “good war” *for* the United States. More than simply prepositional semantics, the “good war” fought by the United States is inaccurate. The U.S. fought a war that killed 400,000 Americans and millions of Germans and Japanese. The U.S. military killed hundreds of thousands of civilians through strategic bombing, firebombing, and atomic bombing. Everywhere, the United States fought a war of annihilation, and, in the Pacific, American soldiers fought a race war against Japan and committed ghastly atrocities.[[121]](#footnote-121) The basic contours of the war, however, made America one of the war’s moral heroes and suggested that World War II was good *for* the United States in many ways. The U.S. had largely stayed out the war until Japan attacked Pearl Harbor. In response, the U.S. took on monstrous enemies and won, and when the war ended, the United States was richer and more powerful than any other nation. For those who lived through it, the war was the definitive experience of their lives, although it was not long enough to generate discontent. During the war, American life expectancy, which had flattened throughout the 1930s, grew three years between 1939 and 1945 even while accounting for over 400,000 military deaths.[[122]](#footnote-122) In the U.S., the standard of living had risen to the point that “Materially, it is possible for every man to be an individual king.”[[123]](#footnote-123) On the surface, World War II felt like a “good war” because it delivered the country from the Great Depression and the United States emerged as the war’s greatest victor. Americans took pride in their victory over evil and believed that victory was worth the cost. Americans also accepted the idea that the war built national and individual character and made more heroes than victims in the United States. The government justified American atrocities as necessary evils – as bad acts required and imposed on them by the war in order to overcome evil and ultimately restore good. Officials emphasized victory over tragedy and argued that if the war was not a virtuous or good affair, then they could at least still celebrate the good that the war had made.

Even though many Americans recognized the war’s advantages or benefits, it is nevertheless disproportionate to think of World War II as a “good war,” not because the myth is nostalgic or patriotic and not critical, but because it is one-sided. Many veterans insisted that only those who had fought in the jungles and hedgerows knew what the war was really like, and everyone realized that stylized images and descriptions were insufficient to illustrate that reality. The challenges of representation were further complicated by the need to win the war and the range of American experiences. World War II engulfed so many lives and so many experiences that it encompassed multiple realities, and historians need to acknowledge the pluralism of truths that the war produced. That does not mean historians should accept historical relativism; on the contrary, they should always try to determine empirically what life was really like during the war and should distinguish truth from error, but too often scholars have examined World War II searching for the one single reality that characterized the catastrophe instead of recognizing the plural realities that made the war truly global. U.S. officials and contemporary historians err not in making World War II good or bad, but in making it a singular experience.

But why did the singular, romanticized explanation for World War II prevail over plural narratives, and why did the story of the “good war” defeat more critical accounts? Susan Brewer lamented that, “In the end, the uplifting and misleading propaganda version of World War II survived and the ‘strategy of truth’ did not.”[[124]](#footnote-124) George Roeder similarly observes that individual efforts, traditions of free speech, diversity, and a commitment to the truth all encouraged a greater dialogue about the war, but wartime texts and images encouraged Manichean thinking and representations. Polarized thinking became one of the costs of the war.[[125]](#footnote-125) After the war, national prosperity, bad wars, and nostalgia all led to the production, reception, and memory of the “good war” myth, but Americans could not have thought of the war as “good” without the efforts of the Office of War Information and the Office of Censorship. The U.S. government cared more about winning the war than anything else, and propagandists and censors sacrificed nuance for stories they believed would lead to victory. Propaganda and censorship met more important needs than alternative narratives but, in the end, myth seems to have defeated reality because the American public preferred accounts of national exceptionalism to narratives that diminished or universalized America’s role in the world.

War-making always involves myth-making. The United States has always utilized propaganda in times of war to explain, justify, and sell killing and dying to Americans. From the Spanish-American War to Afghanistan and Iraq, Americans have always demanded to know why they have to kill and die and expect national leaders to justify the cause and the worthiness of their sacrifices.[[126]](#footnote-126) Government officials explain, justify, or promote war aims by turning them into propaganda. During World War II, the U.S. government reduced foreign policy to patriotic maxims, slogans, and symbols that were easily understood and rapidly reproduced. American leaders explained that the United States was fighting for a better world that would be safe for democracy. Officials also presented the war as a Manichean struggle between opposing ideals and binaries: democracy versus dictatorship, freedom against slavery, civilization over barbarism, and good against evil. Most importantly, however, U.S. officials made the war palatable to Americans by censoring the war’s horrors and by raising the nation’s moral tolerance.

Why do Americans care whether their wars are good? The answer does not seem exceptionally American. The Battle of Britain, the French Resistance, and Russia’s Great Patriotic War all illustrate national variations of the “good war” myth. Every belligerent insists on justifications, meanings, and moral means or ends in war, not just Americans. The American version of World War II remains distinctive, however, because of the results of the war, the desire for moral exceptionalism, and its democratic commitments. At the end of the war, the United States was victorious, powerful, and rich, and Americans could not believe that a bad war could have had such good results. Americans also ultimately ended up with the version of the war that they preferred. They believed that World War II was, overall, a good, moral battle in which innocent victims nobly fought for freedom and democracy and defended themselves and their ideals against evil, ruthless enemies. Overseas, the war was fought by decent soldiers, and at home the war was fought by patriotic citizens who had faith in and supported their country, their leaders, and the cause. In the great moral drama that was the Second World War, Americans wanted to believe that the United States played a starring heroic role and won a better world for everyone.[[127]](#footnote-127)

But repining that Americans in World War II saw or heard no evil only because they did not want to simplifies the war and the ways in which its myths and realities were produced and accepted. The Office of War Information and the Office of Censorship selected facts and colorful narratives to appeal to the beliefs and values that Americans held about their country and its role in history and the world.[[128]](#footnote-128) But the government did not simply tell Americans what they wanted to see, hear, or believe; officials also used propaganda to convince Americans of new values and visions for the future of the country and the world. As long as Americans care about their wars, propaganda will be necessary to explain and simplify war’s complexities and to help the country withstand its shades of gray. Propaganda is necessarily reductionist, and the lucidity it aims for can both clarify and blind officials and the public. Americans seemed to both love and hate the myth’s clarity and blindness.[[129]](#footnote-129) Sometimes the public criticized censorship and insisted that they could handle the war’s realism, while at other times they craved an easy, simple morality fable.[[130]](#footnote-130) The OWI reported in February 1942 that the public did not like that the government was withholding information, but most Americans also believed that withholding information was necessary and wise.[[131]](#footnote-131) The stories produced and withheld by U.S. officials suggest that Americans also ended up with the narratives about the war that the government felt it had to tell them. The OWI explained in 1942, “The things which happen to human beings in war have been more terrible under the onslaught of the Axis than ever before in history. The victims of Germany and Japan must be helped. The American people have to be schooled in a new stamina to conquer a barbarism which by all standards of ordinary common sense is inconceivable.”[[132]](#footnote-132)

The notion of the “good war” thus also developed from the relationship between a democratic government and its citizens – from the uncertainty that the Roosevelt administration felt towards the American people. Although the OWI instituted a “strategy of truth” and adopted more realism as the war progressed, government officials still relied on simplistic slogans, moral maxims, preferred stories, and censored materials to overcome domestic resistance and raise public morale and support for the war. The United States needed to win the war, but officials doubted whether Americans had the willingness to sacrifice, the commitment to internationalism, and the moral and political stomach for the costs of total war. Through propaganda and censorship, government officials inflated public sentiments and deflated military realities to establish a moral equilibrium that would maximize domestic support and help the United States win the war. For that very reason, the work of the Office of War Information and the Office of Censorship should be considered a necessary evil. Their efforts to make American morality compatible with warfare through propaganda, and their work to match the war’s realities to popular sentiments through censorship were simultaneously inaccurate but defensible. While the idea of a “good war” accumulated mythical layers after the war, Americans’ moral thinking about warfare remains a relic of World War II expediencies.

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4. Michael C. C. Adams, *The Best War Ever: America and World War II* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), xiii. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Adams, xiii. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Arnold R. Isaacs, *Vietnam Shadows: The War, Its Ghosts, and Its Legacy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Isaacs, 4, 6–7. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. For examples of these “good war” views see Stephen E. Ambrose, *Band of Brothers: E Company, 506th Regiment, 101st Airborne from Normandy to Hitler’s Eagle’s Nest* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2017); James Bradley and Ron Powers, *Flags of Our Fathers* (New York: Bantam Books, 2006). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
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