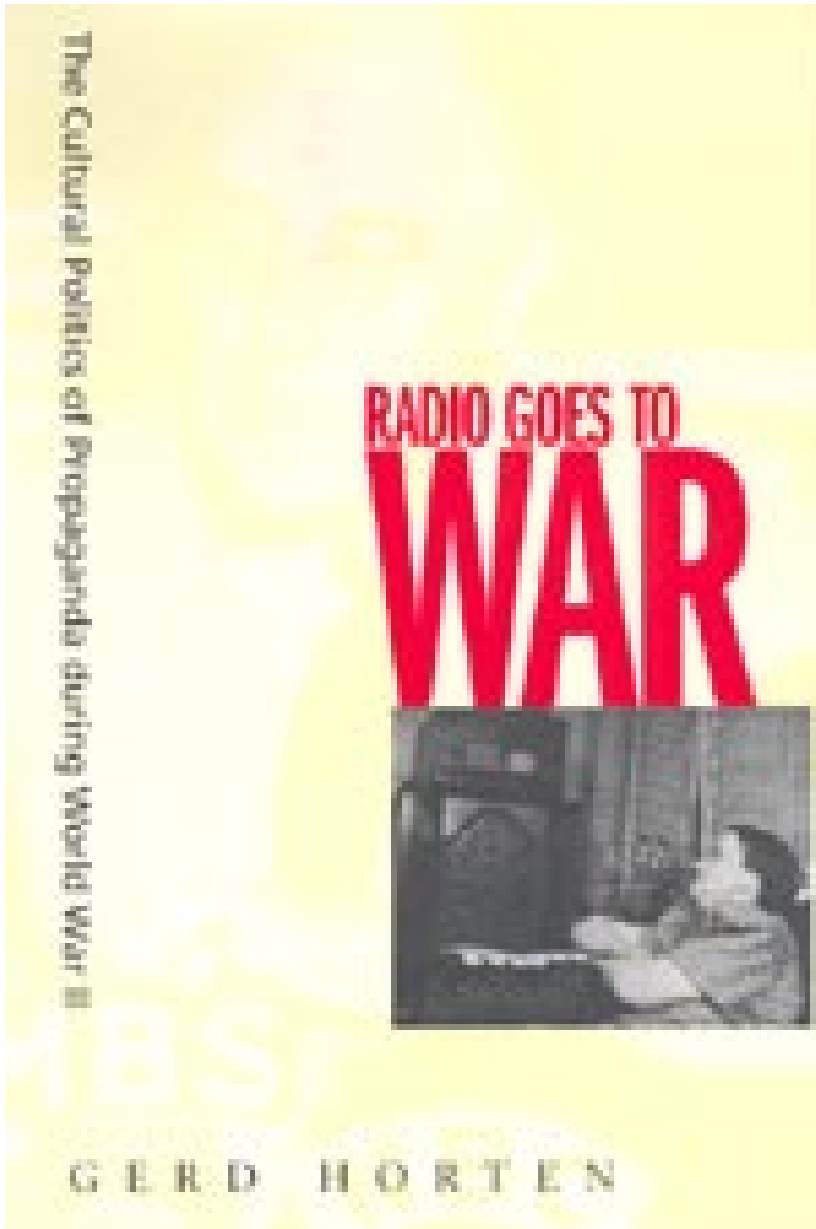


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CHAPTER 2

Uneasy Persuasion

Government Radio Propaganda, 1941–1943

FDR and his administration were very much aware of the public's distaste for propaganda, as well as the suspicions of their political opponents. From 1939 to 1941, Roosevelt and his advisers were forced to walk a very fine line. They went out of their way to assure politicians, the media, and the public that the government was not going to censor information; nor was it going to initiate a large-scale propaganda bureaucracy as long as the United States was not a belligerent. FDR persistently rejected the early demands for a government propaganda agency, which high-ranking cabinet members such as Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson, Vice President Henry Wallace, and Secretary of the Navy Frank Knox were calling for. Roosevelt and his close advisers understood that a central propaganda agency established prior to America's entry into war would become the target of every political enemy of the administration.¹

Yet during the same period, the government vastly increased its informational network, especially under the cover of the emerging defense effort. The two departments most actively involved in the radio defense effort were War and Treasury, both of which started their broadcast activities well before America's entry into the war. In late 1940 the War Department began collaborating with the networks on programs illustrating life in military training camps. As early as April 1941, it had established a Radio Division within its Bureau of Public Relations. This division was headed by Edward W. Kirby, formerly director of public relations of the National Association of Broadcasters, and started out with seven staff members, all with prior experience in broadcasting.²

Early in 1941 the Treasury Department began collaborating with the networks through both commercial and noncommercial radio programs to promote the sale of defense bonds and stamps. Its best-known non-commercial offering was *The Treasury Hour*, later called *The Treasury Star Parade*. The program was produced in New York, with transcriptions offered to all radio stations interested in playing them. The number of subscribing radio stations quickly rose from fewer than 300 in late 1941 to 830 stations in the country (out of a total of 920) by the summer of 1942; some radio stations even played the same show several times a week. Well-known writers such as Norman Rosten, Arch Oboler, Stephen Vincent Benét, Thomas Wolfe, Violet Atkins, and Neal Hopkins volunteered their time and service; scores of actors and actresses, including Bette Davis and Robert Montgomery, did the same.³

Yet these programs were just the tip of the iceberg. By late 1941 a basic infrastructure for information and publicity under government supervision was once again in place, justified by America's campaign of preparedness. The main links of this network were the Office of Government Reports (OGR), the Information Division of the Office of Emergency Management (OEM), and the Office of Facts and Figures (OFF). The OGR was created in mid-1939 to monitor American public opinion and to relay "the opinions, desires and complaints of the citizens" to the Executive Office. An important new agency created in connection with the inauguration of the Defense Program in June 1940 was the Division of Information of the OEM. Its task was to provide central information services to the Office of Civilian Defense, the Office of Price Administration, and other new defense agencies. Finally, the OFF was established as the first centralized agency to oversee all information and propaganda campaigns for the defense effort. From late 1941 to mid-1942, it coordinated most of the domestic propaganda campaigns. In June 1942 it was replaced by the Office of War Information, under the leadership of Elmer Davis.⁴

When Japanese bombs fell on Pearl Harbor in December 1941, thus, the U.S. government was not caught unprepared. A basic propaganda network was in place, though it had too many heads and too little coordination. Even more significantly, most Americans were ill prepared to answer one critical question: What was this war all about? With hindsight, many people consider World War II a "good war," probably the clearest case of a war that provided justifiable reasons to fight. Yet for many Americans in late 1941 and early 1942, these reasons were not obvious. When asked by a government survey as late as the spring of

1942 whether they had “a clear idea of what the war is all about,” respondents were evenly divided. Half said they knew “what the war was about,” but the other half said they did not.⁵

This, then, was the biggest challenge throughout 1942, and radio joined the propaganda campaign. The purpose was, as described by poet-turned-propagandist Archibald MacLeish, to explain to Americans what their country was fighting for and “to make the war their own.” While all of radio—both commercial and noncommercial programming—joined the war effort right away, in this chapter and the next I will discuss noncommercial, government-sponsored broadcasts only. In contrast with commercial radio, these broadcasts were directly initiated and supervised by one of the propaganda agencies and were aired without commercial sponsorship, similar to network sustaining programs.*

Despite the collective memory of the Great War and the New Deal crusades, as well as considerable partisan political doubts, government radio propaganda gained a new lease on life, which extended from mid-1941 through early 1943. Yet it was based on an uneasy truce because the public had not forgotten past lessons and remained distrustful of government propaganda. And it was fraught with tensions because Republicans and conservative politicians remained skeptical about the Roosevelt administration’s political intentions. Robert Taft spoke for his party when he commented on the renewed battle for the hearts and minds of Americans: “The New Dealers are determined to make the country over under the cover of war if they can.”⁶ And as the government radio propaganda got under way, many Americans had a nagging sense of *déjà vu*: all this seemed very familiar.

Government Radio Propaganda after Pearl Harbor: Fighting for What?

The first noncommercial government radio program after the attack on Pearl Harbor was broadcast on December 15, 1941. The show had been

*The Federal Communications Act of 1934 stipulated that radio networks had to provide free airtime for public service broadcasts in return for their free use of the airwaves. These programs were also known as “sustainers,” because they usually ran during the less desirable hours of the networks’ broadcasting schedules. Noncommercial government propaganda shows made up a large part of this public service programming during World War II.

scheduled since mid-November to celebrate the sesquicentennial of the Bill of Rights. William B. Lewis, the new director of the Radio Division of the OFF and former vice president of CBS, had asked his friend Norman Corwin to write a radio play. Corwin, one of the best radio writers in the late 1930s and 1940s, had worked for CBS for a number of years. He had just completed his series of weekly drama shows, *Twenty-six by Corwin*, and agreed to do the program. Even before America's entry into the war, this show was planned as a first-class radio event and was scheduled to play during prime time. Lewis sought to sign up Hollywood stars, and President Roosevelt was scheduled to conclude the performance with a short talk.⁷

The fact that *We Hold These Truths*, as Corwin's play was titled, was broadcast just eight days after the bombing of Pearl Harbor gave it new significance. It also assured the participation of a first-class cast: James Stewart, Lionel Barrymore, Bob Burns, Rudy Vallee, and Orson Welles were among the actors, while Leopold Stokowski led the New York Philharmonic Orchestra in the national anthem. The president gave a short talk as planned. Corwin wrote a measured yet emotional radio play, in which he mixed the recitation of the first ten amendments to the Constitution with dramatic historical interludes and somber reminders for his listeners of what the Bill of Rights represented:

And then they framed amendments to the Constitution. . . . The Congress of the thirteen states, instructed by the people of the thirteen states, threw up a bulwark, wrote a hope, and made a sign for posterity against the bigots, the fanatics, bullies, lynchers, race-haters, the cruel men, the spiteful men, the sneaking men, the pessimists, the men who give up fights that have been just begun.⁸

It was no coincidence that the play had been written for the moment—for a confused and bewildered American people still trying to figure out what this war was all about. Corwin had been a committed antifascist and internationalist long before the official declaration of war, and *We Hold These Truths* was his first opportunity to indicate the stakes involved in the war to a large national audience, an estimated sixty million Americans.⁹ As he stressed in his play, the legacy of the Bill of Rights included having to fight for the liberties it secured:

Smith: Why, the more these amendments make us free, the more they'll be hated by those who don't want freedom because it spoils their game. . . .

Friend: You mean to say we're gonna have to fight all over again to keep our independence? Hope it don't get a habit.

Smith: I hope it does! It's a pretty good habit to get into, fightin' for your rights. There's always somebody waitin' for a chance to steal valuables—and if freedom ain't a valuable, I don't know what is.¹⁰

We Hold These Truths brought Corwin national recognition and made him an immediate candidate for the production of a larger propaganda series that the OFF had in mind in early 1942. Archibald MacLeish, who headed the propaganda agency at the time, and Lewis, who led the Radio Division, succeeded in signing Corwin up for the job and convinced him to start the series as soon as possible. The series—called *This Is War!*—premiered on Valentine's Day of 1942. For the next thirteen weeks, the half-hour program was heard every Saturday at 7:00 P.M., EST, broadcast by all four networks simultaneously over more than seven hundred stations. The scheduling as well as the national four-network hookup were unique for a government series and were not repeated throughout the war (except for FDR's fireside chats). The program was also shortwaved in seven foreign languages.¹¹

As the first show, "America at War," indicated, the series was candid, direct, and hard-hitting: "What we say tonight has to do with blood and bone and with anger, and also with a big job in the making. Laughter can wait. Soft music can have an evening off. No one is invited to sit down and take it easy. Later, later. There's a war on."¹² The show was direct in addressing the American audience and in its incitement of hatred for the enemy. "What is the enemy? We know what we are, but what is the enemy?" the film star Robert Montgomery rhetorically asked his audience in this first episode. Then he answered his own question:

The enemy is Murder International, Murder Unlimited; quick murder on the spot or slow murder in the concentration camp, murder for listening to the short-wave radio, for marrying a Pole, for Propagation of the Faith, for speaking one's mind, for trading with a non-Aryan, for being an invalid too long. . . . The enemy is a liar also. A gigantic and deliberate and willful liar.

Corwin referred to popular images of enemy atrocities, not much different from German atrocity stories during World War I: "The enemy is laughter over the bloody stump, the cold smile of the officer watching while the hostage digs his own grave, the coarse joke over the girl just raped. The enemy is the torture gag, officially approved, given the nod by the High Command."¹³

Corwin wrote only six of the thirteen shows, yet he established the overall character of the series. Not all of the episodes were as harshly

worded as the first one, and most tried to put the current conflict in perspective. Americans were reminded of heroic battles of the past, of the Revolutionary War and the Civil War. They were warned not to become stooges for the Nazis by passing on rumors, and they were candidly prepared for the sacrifices to come, including the possibility that many Americans would die in the fight. As poet Stephen Vincent Benét told his audience in the fourth show, entitled “Your Army”:

Men are going to die—very good men are going to die. They are going to die in the jungles for the shape of a Virginia field and the cross-roads store back home—they’re going to die in the cold, for the clear air of Montana and the smell of a New York street. . . .

And—what are *we* going to do, sitting here at our radios? Squabble some more? Write letters to the papers? Curse out the Government? Spread the lies that divided a people? . . . There’s bad news now, and there’s going to be bad news for quite a while. The Army knows that. Our enemies aren’t pushovers—they are skillful, savage and relentless. They have trained for years for this chance to enslave the world—and that’s just what they mean to do.¹⁴

A confidential survey conducted by the Hooper polling firm for the OFF showed that *This Is War!* had garnered very respectable ratings. For the first seven episodes, they fluctuated between 19 and 24 percent, or an approximate average audience of twenty million listeners per program. Apparently, Americans, frightened by the war and reached in large numbers through the four-network hookup, were willing to give government propaganda another chance. Moreover, the report also suggested that many listeners had not been turned off by this propaganda, since the majority of those tuning in for the seventh broadcast had listened to at least one previous episode.¹⁵

Yet judging from some audience responses, which Corwin read on the last broadcast, “Yours Received and Content Noted,” even after the attack on Pearl Harbor, many Americans remained skeptical of propaganda. “Must you reach into our living rooms and remind us of the facts of death?” asked one listener, Ethel Meriden. “I believe the purpose of your program is to arouse hate among the millions of your listeners,” Mrs. M. Hansen wrote. “This is wrong.” Others objected to the demand for sacrifices: “For years, before the war, I was up against it,” wrote Henry J. Miller, referring to the hard times he had lived through during the Great Depression. “I was out of a job most of the time, but now I’ve got work and make a little money. . . . Why shouldn’t people like me who’ve never had the good things of life be permitted to make up

for lost time?”¹⁶ These critical listener responses and the continued reluctance many Americans felt toward propaganda suggest that the series was at best a mixed success.

If the popular vote was undecided, the political response was clear: the series did not play well with FDR’s political opponents. One constant suspicion among Republican and conservative politicians was that FDR and his New Dealers would twist government propaganda to promote their own political vision. As *This Is War!* demonstrated, their fears were well justified. In the first episode, for example, Corwin clearly revealed his own political bias. He emphasized that America had not wanted this war, that it was minding its own business when it was attacked, yet he simultaneously commended the New Deal policies of the 1930s: “We were busy educating our people, giving them a decent slant on things, trying to see that the hungry got fed and the jobless got work, trying to remember the forgotten man, trying to deal out a better deal around the table.”¹⁷

In the second program of the series, entitled “The White House and the War,” writer William N. Robson stressed FDR’s leadership qualities and the similarities between FDR and the great presidents George Washington and Abraham Lincoln. He reminded listeners of past struggles, such as Washington’s close escape in the early stage of the Revolutionary War and Lincoln’s despair in the first two years of the Civil War. World War II was to test America’s strength and steadfastness once more. The program emphasized that there was another great president in the White House, one hardened by his own debilitating illness and miraculous recovery: “Again the great house and the man in it. The anguish, the loneliness, the adversity, the responsibility; this time [it’s] the greatest struggle of mankind.”¹⁸ Clearly, propaganda like this made Roosevelt’s political opponents squirm in their seats.

An additional note of criticism came through an internal review of the OFF, provided by a special survey of its Intelligence Bureau. As part of a larger questionnaire, the bureau demonstrated that the better-educated and more prosperous people in the cities primarily listened to the series. This high-brow appeal, the researchers argued, kept the series from fulfilling its primary purpose, which was to reach people who were not yet aware of the consequences of the wartime crisis: “Listeners are too high on the social and educational scale for the program to accomplish its purpose among the millions in the population who may be needing its message most.”¹⁹

Corwin scoffed at the notion that *This Is War!* had reached the

“wrong” audience. As he saw it, there was a desperate need to explain this war to all the American people: “This is no time to make surveys, to take a clinical and academic point of view about radio and war. . . . There is a desperate necessity to explain this war to the people. They are confused. They are earnest. They want to fight, and they want to be sure what they are fighting for and what they are fighting against.”²⁰

Another writer, Arch Oboler, went even further, arguing that Americans would not start winning the war until they hated their enemies, and that radio drama had to work in this direction: “[Wartime drama] must do what we know will arouse the greatest response—through the intellect, yes, a little; but basically through the emotions, the emotions of self-pity, fear, hate, the desire for attainment, mass patriotism, translated into the will to action.”²¹

Oboler collaborated with the Institute for Education by Radio to produce a thirteen-play series, which aired over NBC in the spring of 1942. His notion of “action motivated by hatred” was most clearly expressed in a piece appropriately entitled “Hate,” in which a pastor in a small Norwegian town under German occupation inadvertently helps the German forces by trying to stay out of politics and by preaching to turn the other cheek. The pastor awakes to his foolishness only after he unknowingly aids the massacre of ten townspeople, including his own son. The play ends with him strangling a Nazi officer and joining the resistance.²²

Corwin and Oboler were certainly right on one point: in the spring of 1942, many Americans felt confused about the war—and the officials in the OFF knew it as well. The monthly surveys of American public opinion undertaken by the Intelligence Bureau of the OFF from February through July 1942 chronicled an increasing dissatisfaction with the course of the war coupled with a resurgence of disunity and isolationist sentiments. As the March report succinctly summarized, “The superficial unity following Pearl Harbor is not only gone but the sentiment favoring acceptance and consideration of a peace offer from Germany, even by Hitler, is by no means insignificant.”²³

To be sure, only a minority of Americans were willing to ponder such a peace offer: 15 percent of those surveyed by the OFF said that they would consider a peace offer by Hitler, even though they conceded that this would mean a *de facto* victory for Nazi Germany; 30 percent said they would consider a peace offer by the German military after it had overthrown Hitler. These were worrisome sentiments, and, more important, they were on the rise. The seemingly unending string of Allied

defeats in early 1942 and the growing realization that the war would last longer than expected were the main driving forces behind the growing uncertainty and skepticism.²⁴

This increased skepticism was accompanied by the crescendo of critical commentary in the isolationist and antiadministration press. The most vocal newspapers represented only a small section of the national press, but they were located in important metropolitan areas: the *Chicago Daily Tribune*, the *New York Daily News*, and the Hearst newspapers. Although the editorial policies of these papers were driven either by genuine isolationist concerns or by fervent hatred for the FDR administration rather than pro-fascist sentiments, the effect was the same: they largely echoed Axis propaganda and fostered divisions among Americans and between the United States and its allies.²⁵

From the beginning of the fighting in Europe, Great Britain had been at the top of the isolationists' list of enemies because it had involved the United States in World War I and, in their opinion, had done the same this time around. England, as the isolationists charged, liked to have others fight its wars:

She [England] has systematically sacrificed her Allies to her safety and her own immediate objectives.

She sacrificed Norway—

She sacrificed Belgium in identically the same manner—

England abandoned France at Dunkirk—

In a word, England's plain policy seems to be to HAVE Allies, but not to BE an Ally.

(*Hearst Newspapers*, January 28, 1942)

Equally persistent were the isolationists' attacks on Russia. Had not Russia abandoned the Allied coalition in 1917? What would prevent Stalin from once again switching sides? After all, he had collaborated in the German conquests from 1939 to 1941 by adhering to the nonaggression pact signed with Hitler and had pursued his own territorial conquest against the Baltics and Finland. What were his territorial goals in eastern Europe? Did the United States have to fight Russia next, after Germany and Japan were defeated? Even in the spring of 1942, when the Soviet Union was absorbing the brunt of the German offensive and the survival of the Russian army hung in the balance, isolationist papers fueled persistent American skepticism about Russia's reliability as an ally:

Matters seem to be progressing very favorably in Russia—for Russia. Of course, Russia is not a full partner of the United Nations. She is a semi-partner of the

Axis. She is making friendly treaties with Japan—protecting Japan on her Siberian frontier.

There is always in the Russian mental process the suggestion of the brutal selfishness and utter untrustworthiness of this wild animal which is her symbol. (*Hearst Newspapers*, March 30, 1942)

Roosevelt was attacked with similar venom as the English and Russian allies. When he asked for suggestions for naming the war Americans were fighting, the *New York Daily News* printed a whole string of derogatory letters in its “Voice of the People” column:

The President wants a name for the war. Why not call it by the name history will give it—Roosevelt’s War? (April 9, 1942)

I favor “R.I.P. War”—standing for, among other things, Rogues in Power, Reds in Plush, Religion in Peril and Rights in Paun [*sic*]. (April 9, 1942)

Several suggestions for F.D.R. about naming the war: the Pyrrhic Victory, the Raw Deal, the Slaughter Pen, the Revenge of the Refugees. (April 11, 1942)

A final line of criticism pursued by isolationist papers was their attempt to commit the United States to a defensive war, which included a good amount of second-guessing and hindsight analysis. As the *Chicago Tribune* editorialized on January 12, 1942, with obvious reference to Pearl Harbor: “Had the plea of that committee [America First] against the neglect of our own national defenses been answered, the nation would have been spared much of the bitter news of recent days.” The point was clear for the isolationists: America had overextended itself and now was paying the price. To this criticism, the *New York Daily News*, on February 25, 1942, added its own dire prediction: “The point is that if the arsenal of democracy is stripped of too many of its own defenses it will be laid open to invasion and conquest.”

Shortly after the declaration of war, FDR and his advisers had decided not to impose the same draconian censorship as had been in effect during World War I, when the Espionage Act and Sedition Act had deemed any critical statement or opinion treacherous. These laws were still on the books in the early 1940s and were used in individual cases. In order to indicate this departure in policy, Roosevelt had appointed an experienced and well-liked journalist, Byron Price, as head of the Office of Censorship in December 1941. In general, the government professed to rely on the voluntary censorship of the newspaper editors and the heads of the radio news departments and on the basis of this “self-censorship,” the sweeping abuses of World War I were avoided. But the administration curtailed and manipulated the flow of information in other ways.

The most egregious example was military censorship. Based on the twin wartime imperatives of protecting American lives and national security, journalists and news agencies frequently received belated and cursory reports about the progress of the war. Moreover, this often happened after they had heard more detailed reports from their English counterparts over the BBC. Domestically as well, Roosevelt struck out against his opponents in the press: in early 1942, for example, charging that the reports by the *Chicago Tribune* constituted seditious reporting, he authorized Attorney General Francis Biddle to initiate a grand jury investigation against the newspaper. The investigation evaporated only after the Justice Department was unable to amass convincing proof to warrant prosecution.²⁶

It is also safe to say that the broad-scale censorship of a popular, conservative newspaper would have carried with it a considerable political toll, with administration critics claiming foul play and criticizing it as the pursuit of partisan politics under the cover of the wartime emergency. Therefore, Roosevelt had to counter the isolationist charges primarily in the public arena, although the content of the debate had shifted markedly. It focused less on whether or not the United States should fight and mainly questioned what kind of war America was to fight. In response to the demand for a defensive war, FDR addressed the nation in his second wartime fireside chat on February 23, 1942. He had asked listeners—about two-thirds of the American population—to have a map ready to help them follow his discussion. The president described the novel kind of warfare that required America to fight its enemies in far-away places and all around the globe. Emphasizing that his isolationist critics had been wrong before and were wrong again, he ridiculed what he called their “turtle policy”:

Those Americans who believed that we could live under the illusion of isolationism wanted the American eagle to imitate the tactics of the ostrich. Now, many of those same people, afraid that we may be sticking out our necks, want our national bird to be turned into a turtle. But we prefer the eagle as it is—flying high and striking hard.

I know that I speak for the mass of the American people when I say that we reject the turtle policy and will continue increasingly the policy of carrying the war to the enemy in distant lands and distant waters—as far away as possible from our own home grounds.²⁷

Government officials were encouraged by the popular appeal of FDR’s speech, as well as by the congratulatory letters that poured in by the thousands. Listeners congratulated Roosevelt on his “calm, delib-

erate, and measured statements” and agreed that the speech was an effective response to the isolationist challenge. Indeed, these letters conveyed the degree to which Americans still admired their leader. FDR had a cold the night he delivered his address, and many letter writers combined congratulations on the speech with more personal notes, including admonitions that he needed to take care of his health. As one letter illustrates, many listeners thought of Roosevelt as a friend or a relative:

If I am addressing you too informally, it is only because you have brought yourself so close to us, the people. You may believe me that as I listened to you last night your every cough made me wince, and prompted me to admonish you, as I would one of the family, to take good care of yourself, for the country's sake, as well as your own.²⁸

Yet FDR's advisers understood that it took more than the president's personal popularity to overcome Americans' uncertainty about the war and distrust of their allies. They needed to wage a concerted and sustained campaign for Americans' hearts and minds. As Archibald MacLeish put it in a speech on March 19, 1942: “The principal battle ground of this war is not the South Pacific. It is not the Middle East. It is not England or Norway, or the Russian steppes. It is American opinion.”²⁹

Radio continued its participation in the government propaganda campaigns. And at least in one respect radio—like no other medium—was able to bring the war closer to Americans. A number of historians have argued that in 1942 America was fighting a “sanitized” war. In this early stage, as George Roeder has demonstrated, photographs were prohibited from portraying the savagery and cruelty of the war. Thomas Doherty pointed out that movie directors likewise were instructed to keep “the awful devastations of combat from the homefront screen—sometimes by outright fabrication, usually by expedient omission.”³⁰ What made dramatized radio documentaries more real was that they got away with more graphic descriptions of the horror of the war because they did not *show* casualties of war. One of the dramatic approaches used by radio writers during World War II was the “you-technique,” which made listeners feel as if they were partaking in the action. This narrative strategy was employed in the *This Is War!* programs as well as in *The Man behind the Gun*, a series that presented life in the military from various angles—from training camps, submarines, aircraft carriers, and so forth.

Like a number of other shows, *The Man behind the Gun* attempted

to place listeners in the middle of the action by directly involving them. Rather than describing a situation, such as “The radio man listens on his earphones, waiting for a report from the scouting force,” the narrative focused on the listener: “You’re sitting there, with the earphones digging into your skull, waiting and listening . . . listening for the sound of a circuit key being opened somewhere in the thousands of miles of sky all around you . . . waiting for the sound of static . . . the sound of the scouting force calling you.”³¹

The writer of the show, Ranald MacDougall, argued that the “you-technique” provided an endless number of variations, which drew the listeners in by personalizing and dramatizing the plot. This technique was ideal for broadcasting, since it played on listeners’ imaginations and pulled them out of their armchairs and into the cockpit of a fighter plane, onto the deck of a destroyer, or into a ditch on the front line. The “you” used in radio was a powerful technique, especially since it was a human voice that addressed each listener as an individual.

As one program of the series *The Treasury Star Parade* demonstrated, this and similar techniques were ideal for “personalizing” the war. In the “Ballad of Bataan,” Norman Rosten eulogized the American and Allied soldiers fighting on Bataan and Corregidor. In early May 1942, Corregidor finally fell to the Japanese, yet the Allied soldiers had held the peninsula for weeks against an overwhelming force. It was this kind of endurance, sacrifice, and determination, as Rosten emphasized, that was needed on the home front as well:

You, listening at home, safe in your chairs,
surrounded by safety, who do not feel
the bullet strike, or the sun’s whip on your back,
how can you know these weeks of battle?
How can you feel the bayonet turn in the wound,
or gangrene eating the bone away?
What image describes the grenade exploding
in a foxhole, or the loneliness of the evening?
How do we tell the anguish of thirst?
How is the leaking blood weighed and described?

Rosten told those still expecting to strike a deal with the enemy or hoping for humanity and decency in dealing with the Nazis and Japanese to wake up to the cold-blooded reality of this war:

Those who had the strength, men and nurses,
tried to swim the three-mile bay to Corregidor;

tried to fight the shark-infested waters
 under the roaming eye of planes.
 O, you flying assassins in your armored sky,
 look away this time, do not see them!
 [Planes diving]
 Did anyone say mercy?
 Does the new order deal in sentiment? . . .
 Does one ask for mercy from murderers?
 [Machine guns strafing in and out]
 There's the kind of mercy:
 the pureblooded Aryan kind!³²

Despite the confusing ploy of blaming Aryans for supposed Asian brutality, radio dramas like these had the potential of achieving one of the key goals of radio propaganda. They drew listeners out of their secure environment and into the war, making them feel, for a few minutes at least, the anxiety, the sheer fright, and the pain of soldiers in combat.³³

Enemies and Allies

As should be clear by now, the question of why the United States should fight often became a question of what and whom it should fight against. As Frank Capra so brilliantly demonstrated in his film propaganda series *Why We Fight*, one question could not be discussed without the other. In Capra's propaganda films, totalitarian ideology and Allied ideals were depicted as completely irreconcilable opposites: they showed the striking differences between democracy and dictatorship, freedom and slavery, tolerance and bigotry, light and dark.³⁴

In the spring of 1942, radio writers turned increasingly to describing "the nature of the enemy" so that Americans could understand what the stakes were. Most of this radio propaganda was directed against Nazi Germany for a simple reason: Roosevelt and his military advisers had decided on an Atlantic First strategy, yet in early 1942 Americans' anger and hatred was overwhelmingly directed toward the Japanese. Early in April 1942, the Intelligence Bureau of the OFF included the following question in its regular survey: "Granting that it is important for us to fight the Axis every place we can, which do you think is more important for the United States to do right now—put most of our effort into fighting Japan or into fighting Germany?" Sixty-two percent of respon-

dents chose Japan, 21 percent chose Germany, and 17 percent had no opinion—three to one in favor of fighting Japan first.³⁵

John Dower has argued that the attack on Pearl Harbor was only one of the reasons that made it easier for Americans to hate the Japanese enemy; the other was racism. The most demeaning and spiteful expression of this hatred was reflected in the frequent portrayal of the Japanese as “subhuman creatures,” unworthy of being compared to other human beings.³⁶ Radio propaganda was no exception. In one program of *The Treasury Star Parade* entitled “A Lesson in Japanese,” Neal Hopkins taught his listeners about the Japanese:

Listen! Have you ever watched a well-trained monkey at the zoo! Have you seen how carefully he imitates his trainer? . . . The monkey goes through so many human movements so well that he actually seems to *be* human! But under his fur, he’s still a savage little beast!

Now consider the imitative little Japanese . . . who for seventy-five years has built himself into something so closely resembling a civilized human being that he actually believes he is just that.

In the same play Hopkins referred to yet another popular image—the Japanese as an agile reptile, thoroughly at home in the jungles of the southern Pacific. Describing the strongly inflected sound of the letter *s* in the Japanese language, he commented:

You know, snakes have the same characteristic—hissing! What a sharp similarity. . . . The Japanese—some of them painted green—some of them covered with green mosquito netting—wiggling their way across the ground on the plains of Luzon—through the jungles of Java—the hills of Burma—Listen!

[A soft hissing, building under]

Do you hear them? . . . Do you hear the little green snakes?³⁷

Portrayals like these both reflected and reinforced the deep-seated hatred of the Japanese. In contrast, even in the middle of the war, Americans found good things to say about Germans. When asked to describe the Germans in July 1942, most respondents chose terms such as “war-like” and “cruel,” but they also called the Germans “hard working.” The three descriptions most frequently selected for the Japanese enemy were “treacherous,” “sly,” and “cruel.”³⁸

It was in this context that the U.S. government launched one of its most successful and long-running radio propaganda series, with the goal of focusing attention on the German enemy first. *You Can’t Do Business*

with Hitler, written by Douglass Miller and based on a book with the same title, was begun by the Office of Emergency Management in April 1942. (The OEM merged into the OWI in June 1942.) For fifteen years prior to the war, Miller, who announced the broadcasts, had been commercial attaché to the American embassy in Berlin. His book, published in mid-1941, was a popular exposé of Nazi war aims and the Germans' methods of fighting the war; it also described the possible repercussions of a Nazi victory for American business. Miller painted a gloomy picture. He emphasized that Nazi Germany used business as a weapon in its strategy for global supremacy and that a defeat of the Allies would slowly but surely strangle American business and free enterprise. An adamant interventionist who saw no common ground between Nazi Germany and the United States, Miller strongly advocated a declaration of war against Germany as early as mid-1941. As he stated, "The current situation leaves us two alternative settlements for a future world—a German settlement or an American settlement."³⁹

The premise of an irreconcilable conflict was also the starting point of every program of the series. Each episode opened with Hitler addressing his obedient followers:

Voice [On filter—vehement—hysterical]:

Meine deutschen Volksgenossen—Männer und Frauen. In diesen Schicksalsstunden sind wir von unbeugsamen Siegeswillen gefüllt [*sic*]. Der Reichsadler fliegt vom Nordkap bis zum [*sic*] Griechenland und unsere siegesreichen Truppen verfolgen. . . .

Miller [Low, emphatic]:

You Can't Do Business with Hitler!

[*Music*: Build to abrupt peak and cut sharp]

Announcer: We are now at war. There are but two alternatives: total victory or total defeat. There can be no such thing as a military stalemate that would result in the survival of Hitlerism.⁴⁰

From its inception, the series enjoyed a "runaway radio popularity" according to *Variety*. Within weeks, 720 radio stations from all over the country requested transcriptions of the program. "With no advance publicity," as the *Variety* reporter emphasized, "the transcription has smashed all records in the radio industry and is being air-waved by as many as ten competing stations in the same areas where rival stations refuse to carry the same programs except when the President speaks to the country." Originally, the OEM had planned only thirteen programs—as in the case of *This Is War!*—but *You Can't Do Business with*

Hitler was repeatedly extended and ran until March 1943, for a total of fifty-six episodes.⁴¹

The program covered every aspect of Hitler's Germany and Nazi conquest, as even a partial list of broadcast titles will attest: "The Anti-Christ," "Swastikas over the Equator," "Work or Die," "Women versus Hitlerism," "Trial by Terror," "No God for Poland," "Health by Decree," "Education in the New Order." The first thirteen programs emphasized Nazi Germany's way of mixing business with military strategy and conquest. A set of broadcasts also took aim at both isolationists and fascist sympathizers in the United States, recalling the propaganda strategy Goebbels employed so adroitly in France in 1940: to divide and attack the enemy from within. The later shows increasingly focused on the everyday social changes brought about by Hitlerism—changes that awaited Americans if they were to lose the war.

One of the most frequently repeated themes of the series was the destruction of the family and the mistreatment of women under Nazi rule. As the broadcasts stressed, Hitler's regime had systematically destroyed the family as a social unit because he needed soldiers who were absolutely obedient to his commands. The most despicable outcome of this policy, as was reiterated in a variety of themes in shows such as "Women versus Hitlerism," "The German Mother," "Origin of the Nazi Species," or "The Nazi Estate of Matrimony," was that both German women and women from occupied countries were forced to have children out of wedlock to replenish Hitler's armies.

The dramatized programs by Miller and the other writers frequently provided brief history lessons of actual changes that had occurred in Nazi Germany. In fact, every program was spiced with references and quotations from published books: "Unbelievable? Want proof? See a book entitled *Nazi Germany: Its Women and Family Life* written by the brilliant sociologist, Clifford Kirkpatrick." Like Capra's *Why We Fight* and Corwin's *This Is War!, You Can't Do Business with Hitler* was "docudrama," propaganda that relied heavily on documented dramatizations of the enemy's way of life, including propaganda the Axis powers themselves used for domestic consumption.

Yet *You Can't Do Business with Hitler* was more didactic and emotionally restrained than much other government propaganda. This was probably because Miller and his colleagues faced a particularly tricky situation with respect to the German enemy—again a legacy of World War I. Many Americans remembered the exaggerated propaganda campaigns against the "Huns" during World War I. Now that the Nazis

were perpetrating unbelievable atrocities all over Europe, American propagandists had to restrain their material, or at least provide evidence that they were not making outlandish claims. If they wanted to cry wolf again, American propagandists had to make sure they had documentation on which to base their charges.

You Can't Do Business with Hitler owed much of its success to the application of these didactic and familiar dramatic techniques. Nazi policies were personalized through these dramatized plots, arousing disbelief, hatred, and, at times, pity for the victims—who included Germans. Finally, the ultimate threat was always the hint of what would happen to America if it were occupied by the Nazis.

As indicated, the series enlightened a large number of Americans about the changes that had occurred in Germany since the Nazi takeover. As it emphasized, Germany had undergone a social and political revolution since 1933. The subjugation of women, the disintegration of the family and parental authority, the purging of all faiths, the indoctrination of a Nazi youth, and a complete disregard for common decency and humanity were the mainstays of the New Germany. As the shows emphasized, Hitler and the Gestapo reigned with an iron fist over both Germans and the conquered countries, which fared even worse.

What was surprising about the series was its exaggerated portrayal of a gulf between the Nazis and the rest of the German people. Judging from these programs, Germans suffered almost as much under Nazi rule as did people in the occupied countries. According to a number of these broadcasts, Germans also were subjugated to ruthless policies against their will. In an episode entitled “Work or Die,” the audience was told how the average German worker had been enslaved in a systematic eight-year-long campaign. Similarly, two episodes, “Beast of Burden” and “The Sell-Out,” focused on how German businessmen had become beasts of burden, “groomed by the Gestapo to serve, feed and obey the New Order in Germany.” According to the broadcasts, private business was disappearing in Germany and was being replaced by “Hermann Goering, Inc.”⁴²

As during World War I, the U.S. government tried to pursue a propaganda policy that distinguished between the leaders of the enemy country and the people themselves and repeatedly called on the people to overthrow their governments. The policy ultimately failed and disintegrated, especially in the last two years of the war, just as it had done in the previous war. Once a significant number of American soldiers were

dying at the hands of Germans, Americans awoke to the fact that most enemy people were in fact supporting their militaristic leadership.

In the case of the Japanese, as mentioned earlier, this transition was easier for Americans to make. From the outset of the United States' participation in the war, consistently fewer Americans were willing to distinguish between the Japanese people and their government than in the German case. While public sentiment gradually hardened toward the Axis enemies, Americans' attitudes toward Germans remained conflicted up until D-Day. Even in the spring of 1944, 65 percent of Americans interviewed in an OWI survey thought that the German people would like to get rid of their Nazi leaders but doubted that they would succeed. In contrast, only 13 percent thought that the Japanese people disliked their leadership.⁴³

It was sound propaganda policy, therefore, to keep the focus on Nazi Germany. In June 1942, the OWI expanded on the idea used in the *You Can't Do Business with Hitler* series to produce a show covering all Axis powers. *This Is Your Enemy*, which ran until September 1943, was a more polished production, yet it substantively duplicated much of *You Can't Do Business with Hitler*, which kept running concurrently. Particularly, the new series retained an emphasis on Nazi Germany: out of sixty-eight episodes, only seven dealt with Japan and two with Italy; the rest focused on the Nazi threat.⁴⁴

The listener responses to *This Is Your Enemy* preserved by the OWI reflect a favorable reception. The letter writers compared it to *You Can't Do Business with Hitler* and called both series "highly informative," "grim and realistic," and "fact-filled drama." One letter from a listener in Buffalo, New York, captured the tenor of the responses: "I listen to your program every Sunday and although it is harsh and cruel I think it does the American people good to know whom we are up against."⁴⁵

By September 1942, the FDR administration achieved one of its goals. According to the surveys undertaken by the Intelligence Bureau of the OWI, a majority of Americans now agreed that Germany had to be subdued first: "Last spring they wanted to hit hardest at Japan. . . . Americans are now convinced that we should turn most of our strength on Germany." Clearly, government radio propaganda alone could not be credited for this turnaround. The escalated U-boat war in the Atlantic hand in hand with government propaganda in all media brought about this shift. Yet series like *You Can't Do Business with Hitler* and *This Is Your Enemy* played over radio stations in every corner of the United States in 1942 and educated Americans—sometimes for the first time—

about the enormous changes that had taken place in Germany, as well as the monumental task ahead of them.⁴⁶

On the other hand, no amount of government propaganda could brush off the residue of latently positive and conciliatory sentiments Americans seemed to harbor toward Germans, especially in comparison with their Asian enemy. Similarly, noncommercial government radio propaganda also found its limits when it came to selling America's allies to the people. As mentioned earlier, both Axis propaganda and the isolationist newspapers in the United States hammered away at two of the most important allies of the United States, England and Russia. Elmer Davis, director of the OWI, had eloquently described the warped logic behind the isolationist attacks in one of his regular radio talks over CBS in February 1942: "Some people want the United States to win so long as England loses. Some people want the United States to win so long as Russia loses. And some people want the United States to win so long as Roosevelt loses."⁴⁷

In the case of Russia, government propaganda generally pursued the route of least resistance, that is, emphasizing the terrible and widely acknowledged sacrifices the Russian people were making in the face of battle. Radio programs stressed the terrific fighting spirit and heroism of individual Red Army soldiers. Yet the U.S. government also tried to portray a different and changed Russia, a "New Russia" that emerged out of battling the Nazis. In "A Letter from a Red Army Man," broadcast in late March 1942 as part of *The Treasury Star Parade*, Boris Grabatov stressed this "New Russia." He portrayed Russians as not all that different from Americans. They loved to celebrate and sing, they loved their families and their way of life, and yet they knew that they had to do their part in defeating "the Hitler beast." Like Americans, they were fighting for their families, their country, and the future of humankind: "This is our battle to the death. Across many lands and many oceans, I clasp your hand, my American friend."⁴⁸

Selling the Russians to the American people was one of the most difficult tasks ever assigned to a government propaganda agency, as revealed by the storm of protest that greeted the premiere of the controversial movie *Mission to Moscow* in early 1943. Under pressure from the OWI, the movie presented a whitewashed version of the Soviet Union that was not much different from the United States except, as film critic James Agee wryly noted, "that in Russia everybody affects a Weber and Fields accent and women run locomotives."⁴⁹ Americans' skepticism toward Russia remained strong despite this concerted propaganda cam-

paign. Americans readily acknowledged the sacrifices being made by the Russian people. In fact, throughout 1942, they consistently thought that the Soviet Union—of all the United States’ allies—was trying hardest to win the war. On the other hand, Americans distrusted the Soviet Union the most when it came to postwar planning. In November 1942, 51 percent of respondents to a government poll believed that Russia would cooperate with the United States after the war (up from only 38 percent in February 1942), whereas 75 percent trusted in English postwar cooperation, and 80 percent believed China would be a dependable ally after the war.⁵⁰

The problem facing the OWI with regard to Great Britain was the opposite of the Russian quandary. An overwhelming majority—roughly 85 percent—was willing to trust England as a postwar ally, but during 1942, Americans questioned its commitment to winning the war. If Americans thought Russia was trying the hardest to win the war, England was thought to be doing the least. Coupled with this skepticism was a persistent belief by a strong minority (one-third of Americans) in 1942 that the British were trying to get Americans to do the fighting for them.⁵¹

Lewis and other officials in the OWI were concerned about this strong, vocal minority and decided to do something about it. Again Lewis sent word to Corwin and asked if he would be willing to produce a series in collaboration with CBS to enhance Americans’ appreciation for the British contribution to the war. Corwin again eagerly accepted and headed to England to produce a series of broadcasts based on his firsthand observations. As he reminisced later, he shared the OWI officials’ sense of urgency: “I expected and understood (though I did not condone) a certain measure of American antipathy toward the British. But the scope and the utter senselessness of most anti-British sentiment puzzled me.” *An American in England*, as the new series was titled, was produced in London, shortwaved to the United States, and broadcast over the national CBS network. To add to its appeal, Edward Murrow was signed up to narrate the programs.⁵²

Corwin portrayed the British as Americans had already come to know them through Murrow’s news reports and other descriptions: resilient and unbending, holding out with a mixture of understated humor and a stiff upper lip. Moreover, he tried to convey the fears and deprivations the English experienced in their everyday lives, from ducking bombs to queuing for rationed food. But this ambitious transatlantic project ran into a number of problems, some of them technical, others having to

do with programming. Ironically, *An American in England* had more listeners in England, where it was broadcast over the BBC, than in the United States, where it ran opposite Bob Hope, who then had the highest-rated show on American radio.⁵³

The Impact of Government Radio Propaganda

Corwin's series from England points to one of the weaknesses of a number of the noncommercial government radio series. Because they were broadcast as sustaining programs, most of them were assigned "leftover" air times—time slots that sponsors did not want to occupy. These frequently were hours on weekend afternoons or, as with *An American in England*, slots that networks had given up on because of competition from a show on another network. Another noncommercial government series hampered by its status as sustainer was *The Man behind the Gun*. Despite its initial popularity, the program was moved three times within its first twenty-six weeks and twice thereafter. As its writer, Ranald MacDougall, argued, the networks often seemed to be fulfilling their duty without caring about the results: "Seemingly, the networks are content merely to list their [noncommercial] programs in impressive booklets, without particularly caring that these programs are not being listened to by the public they are meant to serve."⁵⁴

There is no doubt that the networks pursued a dual agenda by collaborating with a number of government agencies in airing noncommercial government radio propaganda. Network executives followed their hearts in aiding America's war effort, but they also wanted to prove their worth to the government and especially the FCC. As MacDougall implied, to make sure that the government was not overlooking their contribution, they regularly summarized their voluntary network collaboration in thick booklets, which they sent to the OWI and the FCC.⁵⁵

Most of the government radio propaganda series ran as regular sustaining programs. The series that gathered the largest audiences, *This is War!*, was an exception, since it was broadcast over all networks simultaneously during prime time—a privilege that was usually reserved only for FDR's fireside chats. The other show that beat the odds based on its own appeal was *The Army Hour*, which aired on Sunday afternoons over NBC and ran throughout the war, attracting several million listeners every week. Series such as *The Treasury Star Parade*, *You Can't Do Business with Hitler*, and *This Is Your Enemy* also became standard fare by playing regularly over most of the country's radio stations, often

being repeated several times per week. Yet their status as noncommercial, public service programs did relegate them to the niches of the radio schedule. Thus, whereas the networks eagerly collaborated with the government propaganda agencies and tried to remain in good standing with the FCC, they certainly did not risk disrupting their regular, profitable prime-time schedules.

The second factor that limited the effectiveness of this radio propaganda certainly had to do with America's legacies—from both World War I and the New Deal. As some letters and opinion polls amply certified, Americans did not swallow government propaganda hook, line, and sinker. This fact was further illuminated by propaganda studies undertaken during World War II, such as the frequently cited study by Carl Hovland and others that analyzed the effect of the propaganda film *The Battle of Britain*. The film, the fourth in Capra's *Why We Fight* series, was intended to convey three key messages: teach Americans about the righteousness of their cause; highlight the integrity and fighting ability of Great Britain; and increase the fighting morale of American soldiers. Hovland and his team of researchers concluded that the film succeeded most fully in meeting the first goal. Comparing the research group with a control group, the authors found an increased level of historical understanding of the causes of the war and a slightly heightened sense that Britain, and especially the Royal Air Force, had performed a heroic deed in fending off the German attack. Yet this newfound knowledge did not change the soldiers' opinions on two crucial issues. The overall attitude toward Britain had improved only slightly, with a large minority still distrusting Britain's will to fight. The willingness of the soldiers to fight and die for the cause, finally, remained low.⁵⁶

Other studies concurred with these findings. The reception of propaganda as well as other media messages was a complex and personalized process, as social scientists found out during World War II. People constantly read and absorbed images and messages selectively, through several filters. They ignored mediated messages that did not fit with their preconceived notions, distorted media images, or adjusted new facts to merge with their overall worldview. This wave of communication studies during World War II led to a complete revision of the dominant paradigm in media research. Before the war, most researchers had firmly upheld the "magic bullet theory" (also referred to as the "hypodermic needle theory"), which argued that media messages directly and instantaneously produced a predictable change in personal opinion and behavior among the recipients. The fear and suspicion of propaganda prior to and at the beginning of World War II were based on popularized

versions of this model. The new, emerging paradigm, in contrast, emphasized the limited influence of propaganda and the media and was appropriately termed the “limited effects model.”⁵⁷ As these forerunners of recent reception theory confirmed, the government was definitely dealing with audiences that constantly negotiated, reread, or actively resisted their messages. In general, the media research conducted during World War II, as well as common sense, reminds us to be cautious about taking the effects of propaganda for granted—unless we want to fall back on the simplistic notions of the “magic bullet theory.”

Conclusion

The year 1942 marked the high tide of noncommercial government radio propaganda. During these months there was a fragile, war-driven consensus among network executives, government officials, and the politicians in Congress that Americans needed to be told or reminded what this war was all about. The overall impact was mixed and limited. Series such as *You Can't Do Business with Hitler* continued to find audiences, not least of all because Americans were poorly informed and curious about the changes that had occurred in Germany over the past ten years. These programs taught Americans valuable lessons about the nature of the enemy and helped the FDR administration in pushing through its Atlantic First strategy. On the other hand, as the pro-Allied propaganda demonstrated, no amount of propaganda could break Americans' resilient skepticism. Even though most Americans acknowledged that Russia was bearing the brunt of the fight in Europe in 1942, and gave them credit for it, at least half of the population continued to distrust the Soviet Union. Along the same lines, while most Americans trusted Great Britain and thought it would prove a loyal postwar ally, a large minority criticized its war effort in 1942 and doubted its determination to fight and win the war.

Noncommercial government radio propaganda continued throughout the war. CBS followed up Corwin's *An American in England* with two similar programs: one entitled *An American in Russia* and the other a series on Latin America produced by Orson Welles. Corwin continued to write war drama, including a number of outstanding pieces like *Untitled* (1944), a eulogy for an American soldier who died in action, or *On a Note of Triumph* (1945), a thoughtful, provocative radio drama played over CBS on V-E Day.⁵⁸ NBC also continued its collaboration

with *The Army Hour* and other government programs. But some of the urgency that had spurred the propaganda shows in early 1942 had clearly dissipated a year later.

Beginning in 1943, there was a rising wave of criticism directed against government radio propaganda and the role of the OWI as a whole by politicians no longer willing to suspend their opposition to government propaganda initiated by the Roosevelt administration. With an eventual Allied victory in sight, Republicans and conservative Democrats had seen enough government propaganda, which to them confirmed their worst fears, that is, that the Domestic Branch of the OWI had become FDR's public relations agency or at least was propagating overall policies in line with those of the New Deal. Not surprisingly, they went after the Domestic Branch at the first chance that presented itself: the appropriations hearings for the OWI beginning in 1943. In the summer of 1943, Congress cut the budget of the Domestic Branch—which included the Radio Division—to one-third of its former appropriation. Moreover, it prohibited the branch from publishing pamphlets or producing radio propaganda series.⁵⁹

Before considering in greater depth the political backlash against government radio propaganda during World War II, one further layer needs to be added to this discussion of noncommercial radio propaganda. This is the government's involvement in domestic foreign-language programming. Aside from radio news and commentary, no segment of radio broadcasting was influenced more by the war. More important, through the OWI and the FCC the government severely censored the stations and programs directed at sizable ethnic audiences. The urge to control and change these programs further fueled the political objections to government-sponsored radio propaganda.