United We Win: An Pragmatic Analysis of How U.S. Propaganda Became True

"Loose lips sink ships"

The phrase "loose lips sink ships" is an American English idiom that originated during World War II. The saying, created by the War Advertising Council and later used by the United States Office of War Information suggests "beware of unguided talk." This type of propaganda poster was just one piece of a general campaign aimed at soldiers, servicemen, and citizens to avoid careless communication that could jeopardize or undermine the war effort. At the time, propaganda experts and historians today argue that the main goal of the poster and others alike were essentially just trying to scare people out of spreading rumors (even if they were true) containing bad news that could damage morale or create tension. Historian D'Ann Campbell argues that the purpose of wartime posters, propaganda, and censorship was "to clamp as tight a lid as possible on rumors that might lead to discouragement, frustration, strikes, or anything that would cut back military production."

World War II was a long war and the US was involved for three years and nine months. This demanded total mobilization which required national efforts of support through military conscription, conversions of industries to war production, rationing of resources, and government control over the economy and society to maximize war support. This is where propaganda comes in. Propaganda is the deliberate and systematic dissemination of biased or misleading language to influence public opinion or behavior to promote a cause or reason. It often uses symbols or slogans to appeal emotionally. It can be used for both constructive or destructive purposes which can lead to either the rise, or the downfall of a particular group. During World War II, the US government used propaganda to inform, motivate, and unify citizens to benefit the nation during

a global crisis. This essay aims to answer the question of how the United States used WWII propaganda to redefine truth by emphasizing practical consequences—what works to unify and motivate the public—and a pragmatic lens reveals both the power and limits of persuasion in a democracy?

The US engaged in various forms of propaganda prior to World War II with its official, large-scale efforts starting during World War I with the propaganda agency, Committee on Public Information (CPI) but continued after the attack on Pearl Harbor with the Office of War Information (OWI). The OWI, promulgated by President Franklin D. Roosevelt, was a United States government propaganda agency created in June of 1942 and operated until the end of the war in September 1945. Through radio broadcasts, newspapers, posters and pamphlets, films, and other forms of media, the OWI served as a connection between the battlefront and civilian communities. The office established branches overseas which led to large-scale information and propaganda campaigns abroad. The OWI did not go without controversy, in fact, the American public along with the US Congress were apprehensive of the use of propaganda for many reasons. For one, the press feared a centralized agency as the sole distributor for wartime information. Next, Congress had feared an American propaganda machine that could slightly resemble the one like Joseph Goebbel's operation in Nazi Germany. And finally, previous attempts at propaganda under the CPI during WWI were seen as a failure, and the American public strongly favored a more non-interventionalist policy. But following the attack on Pearl Harbor, the need for coordinated and properly disseminated wartime information far outweighed the fears associated with American propaganda. Therefore, President Roosevelt entrusted the OWI to CBS newsman and journalist Elmer Davis and gave the greenlight 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." The goals of propaganda at this point was to boost morale, sustain unity, and encourage participation whether through rationing, enlistment, or war bonds. All of this is to say that the stakes were extremely high regarding public understanding, national esprit de corps, and demarcation cohesion to win the war.

US World War II propaganda transformed information into messages made to persuade through meticulously coordinated appeals to ethos, pathos, and logos. Through a pragmatic approach, these rhetorical procedures defined "truth" as not something that had to be entirely accurate or factual, but rather as something that "worked" and had the ability to produce belief, change, and action. The more the message "worked" to: increase enlistment, boost morale, or justify sacrifice, the more "true" it became.

During World War II, the US government and Office of War Information were the primary source where Americans got their information regarding the war. They served as the primary source of "truth" by institutional authority. To inform American soldiers why the United States was involved in the war, the US Department of War produced a series of seven propaganda films directed by academy award-winning filmmaker Frank Capra from 1942 to 1945 called "Why We Fight," though President Roosevelt later gave the order for the distribution of public viewing across the nation. The series faced serious challenges such as trying to convince a noninterventionalist nation to get involved in the war and to become an ally of the Soviet Union. Many entries of these films include Axis Powers' propaganda footage from up to 20 years prior and recontextualized to frame support for the Allies. These films, produced by a beloved filmmaker with an excellent repertoire and greenlighted by the President, show how

official voices and respected figures were able to establish legitimacy and trust, leaning heavily into the ethos rhetorical element. The ethos of authority in “Why We Fight” derives from the narrator’s confident, omniscient voice and the seal of the War Department reading “This film, the first of a series, has been prepared by the War Department to acquaint members of the Army with factual information as to the causes, the events leading up to our entry into the war and the principles for which we are fighting,” (G. C. Marshall, Chief of Staff) (0:00-1:10), in the opening frame. Viewers are led to equate government sponsorship with truth, a rhetorical move that works pragmatically by transforming official narrative with moral authority. In a pragmatic sense, the government’s credibility produced belief. It mattered less about whether every claim was verifiable and more about how the audience accepted them as trustworthy.

Pathos was another rhetorical element that really dominated how propaganda was received during this time. Propaganda was used to stir emotions and ultimately showed how truth had the power to be *felt*. Let’s look back to the “Loose Lips Sink Ships” example from earlier. This poster was aimed to create anxiety about careless speech that could insinuate betrayal or secrecy. Another example is the “We Can Do It!” poster of Rosie the Riveter by artist J. Howard Miller. This was intended to make soldiers and American women feel prideful, empowered, and united. The “Why We Fight” series’ portrayal of soldiers defending “freedom” can also be noted to gain emotional justification of the nation's involvement in the dispute. Specifically, in the “Prelude to War,” the first film in the series, the line, “We are fighting for the Lord–against the devil himself,” (26:00) shifts a labyrinthine war into a sacred virtuous struggle and sacrifice. These emotion-driven appeals in US WWII propaganda appeals to bypass critical reasoning and instead anchor a belief in sentiment, a pragmatic version of truth, where conviction becomes reality through its effects on action.

The “Why We Fight” films also appeal to reasoning, showing how logical techniques created an apparent coherence and moral clarity. In the series, the films frequently use maps and timelines to visually “prove” aggression by the Axis Powers (Germany, Italy, and Japan). The use of these maps showing the expansion of Axis territory give the impression of empirical reasoning and visual logic explaining *why* the US has to fight. However, this logic is deliberately too selective. It blatantly omits Allied colonial interests and deeper causes. Another example of propaganda that appeals this way are posters and pamphlets with binary phrases such as “Freedom vs Tyranny” that try to make complex issues and politics seem self-evident when obviously there is a lot more to the story. Pragmatically, this type of propaganda finds its success in its clarity. It was able to give audiences a story that felt consistent and therefore had to be true in its nature to justify commitment.

Together, ethos, pathos, and logos worked together to produce a coherent, emotional and righteous space where the American cause became clear, self-evident, and justified. The propaganda did not merely reflect truth, it wasn’t trying to, instead built it through its power to persuade. Looking at it through a pragmatic window, this interlocking of emotional conviction, institutional legitimacy, and simplified reasoning reinstates that wartime “truth” was measured by success in uniting and motivating Americans to sustain the wartime effort. The propaganda worked, at mobilizing the American home, boosting optimism, and increasing production and in working, propaganda became “true.”

Pragmatists like William James and John Dewey redefine truth not as having an inert static correspondence with fact, but as a dynamic process that is measured by consequences. For James, a belief or notion is “true” if it is able to guide human behaviors and produce satisfying results for what is desired. Dewey only extends this idea to a social space by his idea that truth is

a natural tool used for problem-solving, tested by its ability to sustain communal life. Within this framework, truth is not something to be discovered, instead it is something to be made and verified through experience and practical outcomes, not accuracy. When specifically applied to rhetoric, pragmatism is able to shift the attention of truth from accuracy to function. In this case, what happens when language is able to produce action, purpose, and change? Using this perspective to analyze wartime propaganda provides a fogless view into how it thrived not on the balance of information but on its ability to make certain thoughts feel necessary and self-evident.

An example within the first film, “Prelude to War” (1942), opens with the assertion “This is a fight between the free world and the slave world. If we lose, freedom dies. If we win, freedom lives,” (47:00-49:00). This contention shows the world at this time divided in two halves, the light and the dark under fascism which ends up creating a moral geography of good and evil. Factually, this is a great oversimplification of complex global politics, but pragmatically, it works. It is able to generate an illustration to the audience of moral clarity and emotional certainty at the time of heightened confusion and fear. The “truth” of this statement relies on its functions to persuade Americans that their participation in the war is absolutely necessary to combat the evil enemy.

However, a pragmatic success such as this one runs the risk of: if truthfulness is solely measured on its effects, does persuasion then have the ability of replacing understanding? The functional and moral clarity that made propaganda successful can blur the lines between what is factually true and what is functionally useful. Many Americans were led to believe that their moral superiority was obvious and their involvement in the war was purely defensive, but that way of thinking is truly binary and lacks complexity by leaving out important contextual details such as racial segregation or the internment of Japanese Americans. From a pragmatic

standpoint, these omissions were not necessarily “false” if they were able to sustain morale and unity but from an ethical perspective, they represent the danger of functional truth and how it can nearly justify anything that “works.” Therefore, this pragmatic lens uncovers both the power and threat of truth defined by its consequences.

World War II propaganda is a perfect example of pragmatic truth. Films, posters, pamphlets, and other media produced by the Office of War Information did not aim to present themselves as factually neutral, they aimed to *work*. Their success was measured in how effectively they united the public, motivated soldiers, and boosted the war effort. In this sense, propaganda fulfills James’ truth standard. It “worked” because it produced psychological and social efforts that reinforced national purpose. The “Why We Fight” series made the war seem as a clear honorable struggle between freedom and tyranny, its truth-value laid in the ways that the audiences responded by believing in America’s cause and acting on it. The message's accuracy was intentionally secondary to its emotional and motivational power. Pragmatically, the propaganda’s “truth” emerged in the kind of behaviors that it generated: enlistment, production, sacrifice, and pride.

If pragmatism claims that truth is judged by its effects, then propaganda during World War II definitely presents ethical concerns. Pragmatic communication emphasizes practical outcomes that work to achieve a goal but in the space of mass persuasion, success can coexist with distortion. US wartime propaganda accomplished impressive practical results: it boosted morale, gained support, and mass motivated in a time of uncertainty. Yet these same practical tools are simplified, manipulated, and excluded many relevant details. A pragmatic approach creates a moral and ethical black hole. It shows that effectiveness has moral weight only if it

supports understanding and communal growth. Without dialogue it risks blurring the line between motivation and control.

At its best, World War II propaganda displayed the power of communication to create solidarity and foster unity. The “We Can Do It!” Rosie the Riveter campaign poster gave women all across America a sense of urgency and importance that transformed factory labor into patriotic service. Or the poster with the slogan “United We Win” produced by the OWI that used simple imagery of diverse Americans working together to promote racial and class cooperation. Similarly, “Why We Fight” gave soldiers and civilians a story that explained hardships of the war to create a shared bond during times of fear. These campaigns boosted civic participation, encouraged teamwork, and reinforced democratic cohesion. From a pragmatic standpoint, these effects validated the messages. They *worked* because they incited movement and change. The ethical appeal of such persuasion lies in its constructive consequences, it encouraged citizens to see themselves as active movie parts in a moral collective rather than just passive observers.

Yet, the same tactics used to lead can also mislead. In over-simplifying complex global politics into binary rhetoric such as “freedom vs. tyranny,” “Why We Fight" overlooked many convenient realities such as colonialism, racism, and other internal contradictions in America. Emotional appeals often replaced nuance with certainty. Posters with slogans like “Loose Lips Sink Ships” created an atmosphere of fear that discouraged open discussion. From an ethical perspective, this reveals the darkness of pragmatic truth that when you assign value to communication measured solely based on its “effectiveness,” it risks boiling citizens down to instruments of policy rather than free thinkers and partners in deliberation. The line between ethical motivation and manipulation becomes difficult to decipher when both can technically “work” in producing moral and obedience.

A brief example of this ethical tension can be found in *Prelude to War* from "Why We Fight." The film opens up with contrastive maps of "free" and "slave" worlds, overlaid with religious language "We are fighting for the Lord–and against the devil himself," (26:00). The imagery united audiences emotionally but transformed this political conflict into a cosmic battle. This moral framing "works" because it inspires courage but it also erases complexity. This shows how pragmatic success can also mask the ethical cost that could also make it dangerous. Pragmatically, this contradiction does not invalidate the effectiveness of propaganda, rather, they show the importance of coupling usefulness with reflection. James and Dewey both recognized that ideas must be challenged in experience but they also warned that truth must inspire growth and communication, not domination.

Propaganda completely changed the direction of World War II. It's interesting to think about how the war would have progressed without it. Would there have been as much unity? Would there have been as much hate? Even now, propaganda shaped the way that we reflect on war. At this time, the United States used WWII propaganda to redefine what truth meant through emphasis of practical consequences and the guiding of human behaviors. More so, a pragmatic lens helped define truth in the context of the war as what worked to unify and motivate the public and ultimately revealed both the power and limits of persuasion in a democracy.

Citations

Goff, Seymour R. *Loose Lips Might Sink Ships*. Nabb Research Center Online Exhibits, Salisbury University, "Loose Lips Might Sink Ships." 1941. Accessed 4 Dec. 2025. libapps.salisbury.edu

James, William. *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking*. Project Gutenberg, Feb. 2004, https://www.gutenberg.org/files/5116/5116-h/5116-h.htm. Project Gutenberg

Lampard, Rod. "Why We Fight: Frank Capra's War." **rodlampard.com**, 24 Apr. 2017, https://rodlampard.com/2017/04/24/why-we-fight-frank-capras-war/. Invalid URL

Library of Congress. "Office of War Information." *Rosie the Riveter & WWII Home Front*, *loc.gov*, n.d. Accessed 4 Dec. 2025. https://guides.loc.gov/rosie-the-riveter/office-of-war-information#:~:text=The%20Office%20of%20War%20Information,order%20of%20August%2031%2C%201945.

Marshall Foundation. "Marshall and the Office of War Information." *George C. Marshall Foundation*, 22 June 2018, https://www.marshallfoundation.org/articles-and-features/marshall-and-the-office-of-war-information/. Invalid URL

National Archives. "Powers of Persuasion." *archives.gov*, https://www.archives.gov/exhibits/powers-of-persuasion.

PBS. “Leaflets Warning Japanese of Atomic Bomb.” *American Experience*, WGBH, https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/truman-leaflets/. PBS

Roosevelt, Franklin D. *Fireside Chats*. Presidential Documents Archive Guidebook, University of California, Santa Barbara, https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/presidential-documents-archive-guidebook/fireside-chats-f-roosevelt.

Tocqueville, John Dewey. *The Public and Its Problems*. Project Gutenberg, 20 June 2023 [EBook #71000], https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/71000/pg71000-images.html. Project Gutenberg

Whyte, Garth S. Jowett, and Victoria O’Donnell. *Propaganda & Persuasion*. 6th ed., SAGE Publications, 2015. PDF version, “What Is Propaganda?” csmeyns.github.io, https://csmeyns.github.io/propaganda-everyday/pdf/odonnell-jowett-2018-what-is-propaganda.pdf. csmeyns.github.io