

humphrey bogart's *sahara*

**propaganda, cinema and
the american character
in world war ii**

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How and why a people responds affirmatively to momentous events in the life of its nation is an intriguing question for the social historian. Part of the answer may be found in the degree to which a populace can connect such events to traditional (and often idealistic) themes in its culture, themes which have had wide currency and restatement. This kind of identification can be seen particularly in wartime; twice in this century large segments of the American population rallied around the call to preserve democracy under the guise of fighting a "war to end all wars" and another to preserve the "four freedoms." But popular perceptions of these global conflicts were not without both deliberate and unconscious manipulation in many areas of the culture, including commercial motion pictures.

Hollywood produced hundreds of feature films during World War II which depicted facets of that conflict on the domestic homefront, the soil of friendly Allies and far-flung battlefields. Many of the films showed no more than a crude addition of the war theme to plots that would have been filmed anyway in peacetime, such as gangster stories and musical comedies. But other movies reached a deeper level in subtly linking the war to American traditions and ideals. *Sahara*,¹ Columbia Pictures' biggest money-maker in 1943, starring Humphrey Bogart in a finely understated performance, is such a motion picture. Students of American culture will find *Sahara* and its never-filmed predecessor script, "Trans-Sahara," artifacts especially useful in examining two phenomena: the process of government pressure on

movie studios to ensure that the “approved” war aims were presented to tens of millions of domestic and international viewers; and the possibilities for artfully harnessing wartime patriotism to cherished American values of individual self-reliance, self-sacrifice, and the nation’s role as beacon of hope and right to a benighted world.

In all of America’s wars of the present century, the use of propaganda has been of great importance in attempting to unify the country behind a single set of war aims, define who the enemy was, why he fought, and why he had to be defeated. Manipulation of thought and emotion has become essential in generating a high level of morale and commitment. In World War II the Office of War Information (OWI) was the official arm of government propaganda, directing sophisticated appeals to particular groups of the population in contrast to the often crude efforts of the Committee on Public Information during World War I. But overt government propaganda—whether official statements, press releases, documentary, motivational and hate films—is ultimately less persuasive than images linked to subliminal as well as overt emotional experiences.² Elmer Davis, Director of the OWI, recognized these possibilities: “The easiest way to inject a propaganda idea into most people’s minds is to let it go in through the medium of an entertainment picture when they do not realize that they are being propagandized.” Hollywood, for its part, had no difficulty perceiving the relationship between art and persuasion; Darryl Zanuck, addressing the Writers’ Congress in 1943, stated plainly that “if you have something worth while to say, dress it in the glittering robes of entertainment and you will find a ready market. . . . Without entertainment no propaganda film is worth a dime.”³

President Franklin Roosevelt was aware of the propaganda potential, but he also saw the issue in terms of larger policy questions. A month after Pearl Harbor he spoke of the need to convey to the American populace a more accurate understanding of six crucial aspects of the conflict: the issues of the war; the enemy’s goals and characteristics; the concept of the United Nations coalition; the importance of domestic production; civilian roles on the homefront; and the realities faced by the Allied fighting men. Both the president and OWI director Davis were eager to interpret these war aims on the silver screen, making the motion picture an essential “weapon of democracy,” supplying morale “vitamins” for homefront Americans, men in uniform and Allied and neutral nations scattered over the globe. New York *Times* critic Bosley Crowther took the same position in January 1942, arguing that movies should be part of a “program of national persuasion.”⁴

The entertainment industry played an important role in stimulating patriotism and morale and propagating the official version of the war after 1941. Some of the film capital’s best talents—director John Ford, Frank Capra and John Huston, for example—made many orien-

tation, motivational, and documentary films directly for the government; perhaps the best known are the *Why We Fight* series and *The Battle of San Pietro*. Stars of stage, screen and broadcast journalism spoke directly and personally to the homefront. One measure of their contribution is the fact that while ten percent of war bond sales outlets were movie theaters, twenty percent of all bonds were sold there.⁵ Behind many of them stood the motion picture companies which were inclined to cooperate with government propaganda efforts for several reasons of their own. Many actors and studio personnel were instinctively patriotic and needed no prompting to use their public images and influence in helping win the war. Also, like any large industry of the day, Hollywood needed raw materials which were suddenly scarce, and cooperation with government seemed more likely to ensure an adequate supply than indifference or independence.⁶ Beyond this, however, studio executives concluded that some cooperation with government propaganda efforts was necessary to forestall outright censorship or even a takeover of the industry.⁷

Despite considerable studio willingness to voluntarily cooperate with the government, the Office of War Information's Bureau of Motion Pictures (BMP) grasped unprecedented powers to manipulate and control the screen industry, through both persuasion and intimidation. This was due, in part, to the fact that Hollywood, prior to the establishment of BMP influence, showed little expertise in identifying war aims and artfully incorporating them into movie scripts:

In the summer of 1942 Hollywood had under consideration or in production 213 films that dealt with the war in some manner. Forty percent of those focused on the armed forces, usually in combat. Less than 20 percent dealt with the enemy, and most of those portrayed spies and saboteurs. Other categories—the war issues, the United Nations, and the home front—received minimal attention. Even more disturbing to OWI, Hollywood had simply grafted the war to conventional mystery and action plots or appropriated it as a backdrop for frothy musicals and flippant comedies. Interpretation of the war remained at a rudimentary level: the United States was fighting because it had been attacked, and it would win.

Lowell Mellett, chief of the BMP, identified a related problem: "Somehow it is almost impossible to feel the war here in America where we seem to be safe. We are still in a state that makes it necessary for us to keep telling ourselves that it is true, that it is real, that we are part of it." Moreover, some studio executives believed that films should be totally escapist to help people forget current difficulties. Direct intervention into the Hollywood production process seemed the logical solution. Establishing a Hollywood office in mid-1942, the BMP staff prepared a "Manual for the Motion Picture Industry." Films, it urged, should portray the war as a struggle against fascism, whether at home or abroad, thus exposing the evils of racial or reli-

gious bigotry, as well as more obvious targets like militarism and totalitarianism.⁸

In the months after mid-1942, the BMP initially sought only to request changes in finished scripts, but by the end of the year it reached for larger power over synopses or outlines of even projected films, as well as the right to recommend deletions from the “long cut,” the final step before processing the print for commercial distribution. By late 1943 the BMP had persuaded every studio but one to submit all scripts for review before production. Threatened with a denial of export licenses for films not receiving the BMP imprimatur, Hollywood buckled under the pressure.⁹

Understandably enough, then, war themes became common in commercial motion pictures. Of a total of 1,313 movies made in 1942, 1943, and 1944, twenty-eight percent portrayed some aspect of the conflict. At least through 1943, the public wanted to see the war portrayed on the silver screen; war films, or those with war-related themes, were not only good for the country, they were good for box office receipts. Hollywood had an audience of 80 or 90 million viewers a week for whatever it chose to depict. The cinema was mass entertainment in 1942, having rebounded dramatically from the decline in attendance during the Depression. The war nourished movie receipts, as shortages in gasoline and rubber denied homefront Americans one of their major customary pleasures, thereby ushering millions back into the theaters.¹⁰ But exactly what should those audiences see?

The Office of War Information’s ideal combat movie should show “an ethnically and geographically diverse group of Americans [who] would articulate what they were fighting for, pay due regard to the role of the Allies, and battle an enemy who was formidable but not a superman.”¹¹ What it did not want was Hollywood’s dabbling in foreign policy. This fear is illustrated by the BMP’s reaction to “Trans-Sahara,” a script proposed by Columbia Pictures in mid-1942, at a time when the Bureau was just beginning to establish guidelines and was still relying on voluntary cooperation from the studios. “Trans-Sahara” was to be the story of a Nazi railroad from the Mediterranean to Dakar. But the eager studio had far more in mind than depicting the struggle to thwart completion of the crucial line; in a summary prepared for the BMP it listed the following intents:

- 1) We will try to show more fully why France collapsed. How the Nazi strategy succeeded there in undermining civilian and soldier morale, separating a government from its Allies and setting group against group.
- 2) We plan to emphasize the inherent democratic spirit of the vast majority of the French nation, and how we eventually hope to mobilize this potential strength to aid in the defeat of the Axis.
- 3) We will try to fully dramatize the complete disillusionment of the collaborationists, proving that there can be no bargaining with Axis ideology.

4) We will dramatize the global nature of this war. The equity that each of the United Nations possesses in the serious menace of the Trans-Sahara Railroad. Its impending [sic] completion at the port of Dakar — the jumping-off place for Hitler's armadas to conquer South America. Its threatening death-grip on all transport across the South Atlantic, to Africa, India, and Australia.

5) We plan to emphasize the great role that the Colonial peoples can take in defeating the Axis.¹²

The head of the BMP's Hollywood office granted approval to film such a belabored production, but Bureau chief Lowell Mellett was of a different mind, calling the story "pretty terrible" and "an attempt to make one phase of the war fit a hack fictional theme, with a few 'mon Dieu's' and 'sacre bleu's' thrown in for local color." But the nub of the matter was Columbia's zeal to interpret American foreign relations and "invent their own answers to important questions." The proposed depictions of the Vichy government and Marshall Petain and Pierre Laval were particularly sensitive. Mellett wrote that "I won't undertake to say what our policy should be with relation to those two men, and I think Columbia Pictures certainly should not. The African theater of war involves strategical questions, the solution of which should be attempted by those in the allied governments responsible for doing so rather than by someone who can provide a solution to suit a fanciful yarn." BMP headquarters in Washington strongly urged Columbia to shelve the script, with the further warning that no export license could possibly be granted for such a film.¹³

"Trans-Sahara" would undoubtedly have been both an artistic and box office disaster, so freighted was it with geopolitical baggage. Columbia complied with the BMP request in early September and declined to buy the story from its writer.¹⁴ But the idea of a war film with a Saharan backdrop was not forgotten; it was hardly likely, given the intense American interest in North Africa, the first major battle test for American ground troops in the European theater. By October, 1942, Columbia was at work on a new script, and a year later *Sahara* premiered to enthusiastic audiences. Not only was it a more artful story, this film much more subtly linked the war's aims with hallowed images in the American character. Through subliminal identification it would generate a far more complete affirmation of American's role in Europe and the world than the crude propagandizing of a "Trans-Sahara." The BMP did not dictate the story line of *Sahara*, but in quashing its predecessor it paved the way for a more effective nationalistic picture.

Sahara, released in October, was one of the most popular movies of the day and the greatest money-maker for Columbia Pictures in 1943. *Variety*, the entertainment industry's trade paper, predicted in that month that it would "shoot out in front with great grosses," and in succeeding weeks reported "socko" premiers in various cities against competition like *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, *Sweet Rosie O'Grady*, *Song*

of *Bernadette*, and *Guadalcanal Diary*. For a period of roughly two months of first run engagements *Sahara* was one of a small number of productions "actively carrying the ball for the heavy sugar." With total receipts for a three month period reaching \$2,300,000, it was indeed a popular film, one which the American people wanted to see, as is attested by its audiences in second and third week showings.¹⁵

The fall of Tobruk in mid-1942 provides the backdrop against which the American (and Allied) destiny is played out in *Sahara*. Nazi Germany is still on the offensive, as yet undefeated in the Western Theater. An American tank (the only female "character" in the movie), appears stranded in the Libyan desert, surrounded by the enemy. Wryly acknowledging the precariousness of the situation as artillery shells fall close at hand, the tank's commander, Humphrey Bogart, steers a course through the sandy wastes, hoping to reach the fleeing British Eighth Army before the vehicle's meager reserve of fuel and water is exhausted. (Actually, the movie could have been titled *Mojave*. Filmed one hundred miles east of Palm Springs, the scenery is convincingly arid and lifeless, with not a Joshua tree or mesquite bush to be seen. Five hundred training troops from nearby Camp Young were utilized for battle sequences.)¹⁶ Sgt. Joe Gunn, as his name implies, is the American fighting man of Valley Forge, New Orleans, the Bloody Angle, and Chateau-Thierry, a self-willed man of destiny hewn from Old Hickory. When asked what part of the United States he comes from he replies, "No place, just the army." Yet, like John William Ward's portrait of Andrew Jackson, Gunn is more than a man of cold steel. Fondly referring to his tank as a "dame," he names it Lulubelle after a horse he had once had in the cavalry (his own tie to America's fighting past), and speaks fondly, if in sexist terms, of the temperamental iron maiden.¹⁷

Bogart's ex-cavalryman is also recognizable as that equally venerable American symbol, the cowboy. The setting uncannily recalls this figure, as we encounter the modern man on (mechanical) horseback in the sandy wastes of the desert. Henry Nash Smith has defined this epic American caricature, the man at home in raw nature, his native habitat, away from the corruptions of conventional life. Gunn, like his frontier predecessors, shows up as if out of nowhere, and will fade into nowhere once his avenging or saving mission has been completed. Both are figures outside of the formal geographical constraints of civilization, yet intricately bound to the value system of the culture, and in fact cast in the role of that system's protector. Such a responsibility, of course, encourages the mounted man of will to be a law unto himself, to himself frame the ground rules within which the values of the culture will be defined. Yet as students of American civilization will recognize, if this defines an essentially antisocial individual, it is precisely this character who has caught the national imagination ever since the days of Leatherstocking. Ward calls this figure "Nature's Nobleman."¹⁸

The sergeant and his two crewmen soon encounter the bombed-out remnant of an Allied field hospital and take the survivors aboard the *Lulubelle*. One, an Irish medical officer who outranks Gunn, wisely defers command of the enlarged group to the sergeant because, ostensibly, it is his tank and he has rescued the others. But in symbolic terms leadership has fallen to the Americans because the European Allies are shattered and scattered, and America must step into the breach.¹⁹ (In a truce parlay later in the film, a German officer sneers that the Americans are pulling British chestnuts out of the fire, and Gunn replies, in effect, that Americans don't like to see burned chestnuts.) The rescued Allies also include two Englishmen, another Irishman, a French Resistance veteran, and a South African; had there been more room on the tank central casting would undoubtedly have given us a Dane and a relative of Anne Frank as well. Frenchie is the voice of experience; he has served in the Resistance and watched the Nazis kill civilian hostages. In explaining to the Americans that German planes had just bombed the Allied field hospital in which they had served, Frenchie teaches that "a Nazi is like a mad dog." He tells the Americans that they can't really comprehend the Germans; there is no humanity in them. The dramatic possibilities of this prophetic voice are fulfilled later in the picture when Frenchie is shot in the back by a German while returning from a truce conference.

Sgt. Gunn's determination not only to regain Allied lines but to keep fighting as well sets the Britishers to grumbling about his foolhardiness. One man sarcastically notes that the American sergeant is so supremely self-willed that, like Moses, he thinks he could strike the rocks and command waters to gush forth.²⁰ The screenplay fulfills this water-from-the-rocks prophecy in its final moments, both literally and figuratively, but before that point there is much wandering to be done in the desert. *Lulubelle's* band providentially encounters a Sudanese corporal (played by veteran black actor Rex Ingram with a touch of Southern inflection) and his Italian prisoner. Sgt. Gunn, weighing the small group's odds against its water supply, takes the Sudanese aboard but leaves the Italian to die in the desert, despite his broken-English plea that he has a "wife and bambino" at home and a cousin in "Pitts-a-burgh" who works in a steel mill and who probably made *Lulubelle's* armor plate. Gunn's nobler instincts and the incipient bonds of Italian-American friendship soon overrule his common sense, however, and he adds the Italian to the tank's burden. (After all, what does America stand for: "give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free.") The addition of the black Sudanese is fortuitous (and symbolic),²¹ for the native knows of two caravan watering points in the area. The first well proves to be dry, and the thirsty band presses on toward the second, fifty miles distant. It is there that the climactic scenes of the picture will be played out. But first the character of the arch German Nazi must be more fully exposed. A *Mersserschmitt* (actually an American P-40 with German in-

signia) appears in the sky, and strafes the tank. Gunn orders no return fire until the emboldened plane flies too low, implying that classic American battlefield order, "don't fire until you see the whites of their eyes." Then, with one sure shot in the best dime novel fashion, the plane is shot down. On parachuting to earth the sneering blond Luftwaffe officer arrogantly demands that the Allies surrender to him. Disarmed, he is added to the tank's complement, despite the protestations of Frenchie, the voice of experience, who begs Gunn to allow him to take the German prisoner out behind a sand dune until it is time to move on.

During the strafing one of the Englishmen is wounded, and he slowly expires as Lulubelle searches for an oasis. Earlier, in the obligatory reminiscence-of-home scene, he had shown everyone a treasured picture of his girlfriend; now he dies deliriously murmuring her name. An important message for the homefront, this: the boys on the front lines must not be forgotten, for they have not forgotten those they have left behind.

Tambul, the Sudanese, leads on through a blinding sandstorm to the second abandoned caravan station where a seemingly dry well is found to be slowly dripping enough water to provide a few pints to share among the small band. Even the two prisoners are given their portion, although this kindness will scarcely be repaid in kind by the treacherous German. To collect the precious liquid in a tin cup Tambul descends to the bottom of the well, and is joined by one of the Americans, a Texan named Waco. Offering the black man a cigarette, Waco inquires about the polygamy practiced by "you Moham-medans." Tambul replies that he has only one wife, and, seeing Waco's surprise, asks how Waco's spouse would appreciate having to share her husband's attentions with several other women. The American insists that she wouldn't stand for it, and Tambul adds that his wife feels the same way, and, in any case, he is happy with just one wife. Waco philosophizes that there sure is a lot to learn from other folks in this war, and the gap of race and religion has been effectively bridged; the crusade against fascism has united far-flung Allies in international brotherhood.²²

The Italian prisoner, a weak yet repentant and basically humane man, asks if he might assist Sgt. Gunn in repairing Lulubelle. This provides the occasion for a dialogue on the merits of Mussolini. It becomes clear that Giuseppe has no deep allegiance to fascism. He admits to having fought willingly enough, but now has no regrets at being captured. The misled captive explains that Mussolini plastered his mottoes on the walls everywhere, and eventually all Italians came to believe them, in fact *had* to believe them. With a wife and child hostage to the state, he could not afford to laugh at Il Duce; in fact, he had no alternative but to do the dictator's bidding. Sgt. Gunn does not dispute the rationalization. One suspects he would not have been so

understanding of a similar excuse from the German prisoner. The stereotypes of the two enemies are distinctly different.

Over a rise in the distance appears a German scout car with three soldiers, who are promptly captured. They, too, are looking for water, an exploratory party for a thirsty mechanized battalion. Prudence and faintheartedness tell the British soldiers to flee from this overwhelming force, but Sgt. Gunn summons the men with a classic against-impossible-odds speech. "Why Bataan, why Corregidor?" he asks. To delay, to buy time, until the Allies can be strong enough to beat the enemy. A timeworn battlefield pep talk to induce volunteers for a suicide mission, it works, because of course everyone *does* remember Bataan and Corregidor, not only Gunn's men but the folks in the theaters at home as well. So the three Germans are told that there is plenty of water in the oasis and that the Allies will trade it for German guns, knowing that this will draw the enemy force to the water hole. Relieved of the scout car, the Germans return to their unit with this intelligence, while Waco sets off (toward Palm Springs?) in the purloined vehicle to try to summon reinforcements for the handful of defenders. How, the others ask, can Waco hope to find British troops when he doesn't even know if there are any within hundreds of miles? He doesn't give the question much philosophical inquiry; he can only try. His mission, like that of the remaining men, is the only practical course; the Americans sense this instinctively as they metaphorically draw the covered wagons around the waterhole and send out a lone messenger to summon the cavalry.

The Germans swallow the bait, or, rather, hope to swallow both the small band of defenders and the expected water supply. The final reel extends the fight over several waves of attack in classic settlers-and-Indians style, each time reducing the number of defenders, each assault providing another moral to be drawn and hortatory last words to be uttered. The German and Italian prisoners are herded, unshackled, into the caravan station, the former having led his captors to believe he understands no English. But in fact he has overheard and understood all, and determines to make a break for the advancing German battle line. He commands the Italian to follow him, but Giuseppe passionately replies that he is through fighting for Der Fuhrer. Hitler with his master race nonsense is to blame for everything, including causing Mussolini to become what he was. As the camera peers down over the German flier's shoulder, Giuseppe gradually rises from his knees as his indictment of the Nazi dictator similarly rises in pitch. In a rage the German stabs his former ally in the back and, as he makes his escape, the Italian staggers out, knife still inserted, to tell in his dying breath of the other prisoner's flight.²³

The German aviator must be stopped before he can reach his countrymen, and Tambul follows in pursuit as bullets whiz past him. He is wounded and loses his gun, but closes the distance and tackles him. The two wrestle on the ground until the black man forces himself

astride the blond German and smothers his Nazi face in sand as white as his skin. The camera momentarily freezes on this tableau of Aryan supremacy's inglorious end. Tambul attempts to return to his comrades, but is hit by several shots. He dies within inches of safety, in his last breath giving the "thumbs up" gesture to assure the others that he has got his man.

The Germans, out of water and desperate, regroup for another charge. How can the remaining four Allies hold off a battalion, one asks. Sgt. Gunn replies that it is because the Allies are stronger, the Germans never having known the dignity of freedom. Another wave of attack comes. The British medical officer tells a wounded comrade he is attending to "never say die," and the next instant a mortar shell hits both of them directly. This attack is beaten off, but the defenders are now reduced to two.

The scene abruptly shifts to the sandy wastes where we see first Waco's abandoned scout car, then his rifle and empty canteen. As he crawls up the face of a dune of pure sand, rippling and fluid like a wind-whipped lake, the audience is by now suffering Waco's thirst, even if it hasn't been eating theater popcorn. Waco is at the end of his strength, and, even on all fours, cannot move another inch. His face becomes half buried in the shifting sands when, lo, over the dune comes a *deus ex machina* in the horsepower of a British (but American-made) jeep. Waco has risked the ultimate sacrifice, and it has paid off. The cavalry has been alerted; the wagon train will be saved.

Returning our gaze to the caravan station, we see Bogart and his one remaining companion awaiting the final charge. The latter asks how cold steel feels, and Sgt. Gunn replies laconically that it's all over pretty quickly. The Germans appear and are met with fire from the sergeant's machine gun. The Germans drop to the ground, and Gunn, in anger and despair and triumph, mounts his foxhole and shouts a defiant cry, "We ain't surrenderin'." In other war pictures like *Bataan*, this would be followed by the final gunburst, although the hero's death would not actually be depicted. But *Sahara* offers a different ending. The thirst-crazed Germans, crying "Wasser, Wasser," throw down their rifles and come stumbling to find the expected succor. Gunn yells, deliriously, hysterically, for them to come and get it. And indeed they do, for a German shell, unbeknownst to the two defenders, has landed in the well and sent the waters gushing out of the ground. The Tommy's prophecy has been fulfilled, with a twist; the rock has been smitten, and it gives forth its promise.

At the fade we see Lulubelle covering at least fifty captured Germans as they slog along toward British lines. They are met by Waco, leading British reinforcements who bring news of the first allied victory in the West, El Alamein. The reunion is joyful, yet sad with the memory of lost comrades. Waco: "How was it?" Gunn: "Pretty rough."

Unlikely? Yes. *Time's* review called *Sahara* a "preposterous melodrama about Humphrey Bogart, nine other heroes and a derelict tank," but went on to label it "a triumphant combination of first rate entertainment, intelligent cinematics, and an unusual amount of honesty about war." *Newsweek* confirmed that "their victory against such odds sounds as escapist as boy-meets-girl," but concluded that "you couldn't ask for more convincing realism in grim detail" in "one of the most stirring, completely satisfying battle babies to come out of Hollywood." Bosley Crowther loved it too, and so, as we have seen, did audiences.²⁴ The critics might have added that it did not depict the war as it was actually being fought; no American tank troops, in fact, were fighting in that part of North Africa prior to El Alamein.

Sahara, 97 minutes of well-understated acting and stirring action, is, as should by now be apparent, a superb propaganda piece. But those responsible for the film were, on a much less conscious level, making a deeply nationalistic film. They could escape neither the blandishments of the wartime government nor the siren song of their own past as it had already been refracted through literature, folklore, the cinema, and the American ethos. *Sahara* is an archetypically American vision of the European phase of the Second World War, rooted in classic images of the American individual and group character as well as in prevailing cardboard stereotypes of cruel Germans and misled Italians.²⁵ The important war aims—saving democracy, mobilizing an international brotherhood to fight against racist fascism, defense of the weak against the arrogant totalitarianism of Germany, Japan and their comic-opera ally Italy—are presented in artful symbols drawing on the American citizen-soldier, on the traditions of pragmatic action and the use of violence for socially accepted goals, and on the stereotype of the western cowboy hero. Joe Gunn and his countrymen are indeed American "Everymen." Even the cinema format is archetypically American—the western movie formula—with its diverse cross section of characters in a seemingly inescapable situation, decimated one by one until help arrives at the end of the final reel.²⁶

Critics who have studied war movies have identified those characteristics which separate the undistinguished from the great or near-great films of that type. Aside from the fact that most of these writers list *Sahara* in the latter category, they reveal some of the artistic, nationalistic, and propagandistic strengths of the genre. Charles Champlin has commented that the more riveting war pictures convey "a truer account of the fear, the loneliness (including the loneliness of command), the confusion, the misery, and the sobering realization that the enemy who shot at you was not so much a beast as another man who marched to a different rhetoric." Experienced viewers will recognize that many World War II movies did not meet this standard, but were, as Lawrence Suid notes, mere escapism and adventure, transplanted westerns, creating their impact primarily through noise, combat and violence.²⁷ But perhaps these observations are too much

influenced by the 1970s and the disillusionments with the Vietnam War; audiences in the early 1940s experienced “their” war through different lenses. As pioneer film historian Lewis Jacobs writes, the real service of the World War II motion pictures was to “emotionalize” the conflict, bring the true nature of the enemy’s ideology to public awareness, convey a sympathetic image of America’s suffering partners, and present, in the best of the films, a dignified portrait of the American fighting man that rises helmet and epaulets above the celluloid cowboy hero. “In dramatizing the stories of conquered countries and attempting to tell what Americans and their allies were fighting for, the screen psychologically and materially met the crisis persuasively and with an urgent sense of its obligations . . . The best [of the genre] broke through the barriers of propaganda and entertainment to penetrate the truth of the terror and insanity let loose by fascism and by war itself.”²⁸

Humphrey Bogart’s *Sahara* does not quite measure up to Jacobs’ standard: the terror and insanity of war are not truly focused. But that message, after all, is not what most Americans, historically, at least, have wanted to remember about their wars. Adventure, excitement, comradeship and noble causes are what veterans recall. Dramatically and emotionally successful films like *Sahara* feed on hallowed images of Americans emerging successfully from battle after having fought against near-impossible odds. This is related to another motif, the invincible American fighting man whose causes are always morally right. So although mass violence is legitimized in war as a means of attaining national goals, Americans continue to see themselves as a peaceloving people.²⁹ Certainly the World War II films tended to idealize armed conflict in their depictions of virile action, masculinity proved and death challenged. War is necessary, but there is no intrinsic pleasure in it, and American soldiers are not contemptuous of human life.³⁰ Sgt. Joe Gunn is no macho warmonger. He has a job to be done, and there is pride in doing it well, but he makes no claims to it being a particularly noble occupation. Thus is the American soldier in the national character: brave, self-sacrificing, but a citizen soldier, not one who could ever truly relish a lifetime of combat.

Sahara reinforced beliefs about the uniqueness and superiority of the American experience by presenting them through a medium playing a central role in the leisure and fantasy lives of the society. Movie audiences were young even before the war, and this was accentuated as manpower was drained by the conflict. Many of those who absorbed Hollywood’s idealized version of the war were impressionable and receptive to *leitmotifs* reinforced through symbolic action set simultaneously in a contemporary and fantasy (idealized) setting. Writer Larry King remembers that among his peers in the 15-17 age bracket who viewed *Sahara* and other war films in the early Forties “the emotional involvement was total,” generating “burning patriotism.” He and the other too-young-to-enlist boys did not

faithfully attend the Saturday matinee to see Bob Hope in *Caught in the Draft*, or hear Irving Berlin's patriotic songs in *This Is the Army*; they came for *Action in the North Atlantic*, *Sahara* and *Thirty Seconds Over Tokyo*.³¹

Was *Sahara* unique among its genre in the artful use of hallowed images from American culture? Every viewer will select his or her own favorites, and the process is necessarily subjective. But a case can be made for regarding *Sahara* as more unique than typical of the Hollywood "battle babies" filmed during World War II. No other so successfully tapped the well of cowboy-frontier imagery, and unearthed even traces of Manifest Destiny and the "city upon the hill."

When 80 to 90 million Americans a week streamed into the movie palaces in 1943 to see powerful war dramas like *Sahara*, they came away with pride in their fighting men, renewed faith in the worth of the nation's sacrifice and a cathartic experience. True, their emotions were being manipulated; they were willing receptors of propaganda. But they were also receiving a satisfying reaffirmation of their culture's values at a time of great national challenge. To homefront Americans in 1943, *Sahara* was the real war.

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notes

1. Screenplay by John Lawson and Zoltan Korda, from a story by Philip MacDonald. Directed by Korda for Columbia Pictures. Featuring in addition to Bogart, Bruce Bennett as Waco, Rex Ingram as Tambul, J. Carrol Naish as Giuseppe, Dan Duryea as Jimmy, Richard Nugent as the British medical officer, and Kurt Krueger as the German aviator. Ironically, Lawson's deeply nationalistic screenplay would be forgotten in the McCarthy Era when he found himself one of the blacklisted "Hollywood Ten."

2. Melvin Small, "Motion Pictures and the Study of Attitudes: Some Problems for Historians," *Film & History*, 2 (1972), 2-3, while arguing that movies may be more important in reflecting rather than shaping opinion, recognizes that the more subliminal the message, the more likely it is to be accepted uncritically.

3. Clayton R. Koppes and Gregory D. Black, "What to Show the World: The Office of War Information and Hollywood, 1942-1945," *Journal of American History*, 20 (1971), 88, 89; Roger Manvell, *Films and the Second World War* (New York, 1974), 203. The Koppes and Black article, based on OWI and BMP files, is the best account of the Bureau of Motion Pictures; see also the authors' other articles: "OWI Goes to the Movies: The Bureau of Intelligence's Criticism of Hollywood, 1942-43," *Prologue*, 6 (1974), 44-59; "OWI Goes to the Movies," *Foreign Service Journal*, 51 (1974), 18-23, 29-30. Film historian William Hughes concludes that for film to achieve significant propagandistic ends it must present a definite point of view and argue from that position; be selective in the presentation of facts to bolster the argument; reduce large, complex issues to emotionally simplistic or cathartic dimensions; and, without their perceiving it, ask the audience for a commitment. "The Propagandist's Art," *Film & History*, 4 (1974), 11.

4. Lewis Jacobs, "World War II and the American Film," in Arthur F. McClure, ed., *The Movies: An American Idiom* (Rutherford, N.J., 1971), 164, originally printed in *Cinema Journal*, 7 (1967-1968); Dorothy B. Jones, "The Hollywood War Film: 1942-1945," *Hollywood Quarterly*, 1 (1945-1946), 1-2; Koppes and Black, "What to Show the World," 88, 89. Crowther is quoted in David E. Meerse, "To Reassure a Nation: Hollywood Presents World War II," *Film & History*, 6 (1976), 79.

5. Meerse, 81.

6. The federal government had, in fact, "been extraordinarily generous in allowing Hollywood to continue business as usual. Had the need been greater for military filmmaking, or for the raw materials of film processing, or for studio lots and equipment, the government might well have directed an end to new feature-film production, as it did, for example, with automobiles. In that case the entertainment needs of soldiers and civilians could have been met by re-releasing the best of the more than five hundred sound films stored in

Hollywood's vaults." Robert Sklar, *Movie-Made America: A Cultural History of American Movies* (New York, 1975), 250.

7. Richard R. Lingeman, *Don't You Know There's a War On? The American Home Front, 1941-1945* (New York, 1970), 170-8, 185. The work, a spicy account of how people went about their daily lives in the midst of the most concentrated war effort the country has yet known, delineates some of the efforts made by government and the mass media to mold opinion and create a national consensus behind the military effort. See also John M. Blum, *V was for Victory: Politics and American Culture During World War II* (New York, 1976).

8. Koppes and Black, "What to Show the World," 90-91; Jacobs, 167; Meerse, 84. Nearly all cinema historians agree that the early efforts, especially those made in 1942, were unsuccessful in artfully or accurately conveying the realities of the war; see, for example the criticisms of Jacobs, Jones, and Manvell.

9. Koppes and Black, "What to Show the World," 93-103.

10. Jones, 2-3; Manny Farber, "Movies in Wartime," *New Republic*, Jan. 3, 1944, 19. Lingeman, 205-6, is the source for the higher attendance figure; Koppes and Black, "What to Show the World," 89, cite the lower estimate.

11. Koppes and Black, "What to Show the World," 95.

12. D. A. Doran, Columbia Pictures, to Nelson Poynter, BMP, 25 Aug. 1942, Box 1438, Records of the Office of War Information, RG 208 (Federal Records Center, Suitland, MD); I am indebted to Clayton Koppes and Gregory Black for sharing this and other documents from Box 1438 with me.

13. Poynter to Lowell Mellett, OWI, 25 Aug. 1942; Mellett to Poynter, 28 Aug. 1942; Mellett to Poynter, 1 Sept. 1942; all in Box 1438, OWI Records.

14. Mellett to Poynter, 4 Sept. 1942, Box 1438; Log, Hollywood Office, BMP, 10 Feb. 1943, Box 1556, OWI Records.

15. *Variety's* weekly "National Box Office Survey" shows how popular war films were in both major cities and the country at large. *Sahara's* grosses are listed in the "Pictures" pages of *Variety*, as well as the "National Box Office Survey," from October 20 through December 22, 1943; the receipts for the year's most popular movies are given in "Top Grossers of the Season," January 5, 1944, 54.

16. The War Department gave considerable cooperation to filmmakers during the war, but did impose the restriction that American soldiers and military equipment should not be disguised as those of the enemy. But Army assistance to *Sahara* went beyond these guidelines in ensuring a realistic presentation. The production managers visited army desert training areas in California, Nevada, and Arizona where they were briefed on tank operations. When a site east of Palm Springs was selected, the Army donated a tank for the two months of location shooting. Then, disregarding its own regulations, it permitted one of its P-40s to be painted in German markings and the 500 soldiers to be dressed in German garb for the attack on the water hole, which took two days to rehearse and shoot. Lawrence H. Suid, *Guts and Glory: Great American War Movies* (Reading, Mass., 1978), 43, 49-50.

17. John William Ward, *Andrew Jackson, Symbol for an Age* (New York, 1962), chaps. 8-10.

18. Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (Cambridge, 1950), Book 2, "The Sons of Leatherstocking"; Ward, chap. 3.

19. *Sahara* received criticism from some military circles which felt that the implication that Americans singlehandedly were winning the war would offend Allied sensibilities; Meerse, 82-83.

20. One doubts that the filmmakers were aware of it, but the parallel here to the popular image of Andrew Jackson is uncanny. Jackson was perceived by some contemporaries as having such extreme self-possession and conscious destiny that he literally willed victory at New Orleans and the taking of a bullet inches from his heart in his celebrated duel with Charles Dickinson. For discussion of this theme, see Ward, chap. 8.

21. The BMP "Manual for the Motion Picture Industry" encouraged the occasional inclusion of black soldiers to demonstrate that it was a democratic war being fought. Lingeman, 183-4.

22. It should be noted that *Sahara* "Westernizes" Tambul, in accent as in religious practice, to make him a sympathetic character that does not challenge moviegoers' conceptions of the "good Negro." I disagree, however, with Suid's assertion (page 48) that Tambul's role typifies Hollywood's "inferior position" for blacks.

23. A recent historian has written that "in most films the United Nations fought against invasion and enslavement, but there was little indication of what they were fighting for"; Allen M. Winkler, *The Politics of Propaganda: The Office of War Information, 1942-1945* (New Haven, 1978), 58. In *Sahara* Giuseppe and Tambul are the vehicles for incorporating the war's nobler goals into the dialogue.

24. *Time* (Oct. 18, 1943), 94, 97; *Newsweek* (Oct. 25, 1943), 110; *New York Times* (Nov. 12, 1943), 25:2; see also the comments in *New Republic* (Jan. 3, 1944), 18.

25. Cinematic Germans were typically two dimensional, displaying "typical" fascist mannerisms but hardly probing the depths of the authoritarian character; Richard Oehling, "Germans in Hollywood Films: Part III," *Film & History*, 4 (1974), 7, 9; Farber, 16, 17.

26. Alan G. Barbour, *Humphrey Bogart* (New York, 1973), 97; Arthur F. McClure,

“Hollywood at War: The American Motion Picture and World War II, 1939-1945,” *Journal of Popular Film*, 1 (1972), 129. *The Lost Patrol* (1934) as well as other World War II efforts like *Bataan* and *Then There Were None* also fit this formula.

27. Champlin is quoted in Suid, xx; Suid’s own comments are found on page xvii. For a similar contemporary view, see Farber, 18.

28. Jacobs, 176; Jones, 12.

29. Suid, 8.

30. Meerse, 86-87.

31. Larry L. King, “The Battle of Popcorn Bay,” *Harpers*, 234 (May, 1967), 50-54.