Tunisian Victory and Anglo-American Film Propaganda in World War II

The Historian, Vol. 58, No. 3 (March 1996)

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The story behind the making of the Anglo-American propaganda film *Tunisian Victory* provides an instructive study of inter-allied tensions during World War II. *Tunisian Victory* is generally regarded as a primary example of the power of film propaganda, emphasizing the ideological unity as well as the military power of the "special relationship" between England and the United States. It is technically competent and stylistically innovative in its construction. The film would seem, then, to stand as a tribute to the closeness of the Anglo-American alliance. A closer examination of the film's production, however, reveals a maze of transatlantic miscommunication, tension, and rivalry for power that characterized much of Anglo-American relations during the war. How these factors affected Anglo-American film propaganda is the subject of this article.

In the summer of 1943 Frank Capra, the noted American filmmaker, visited London. His purpose was to amalgamate his own partially completed documentary of the joint Anglo-American invasion of North Africa, "Operation Torch:' with a nearly finished British production of the same campaign. Although Capra went with high hopes and expectations, he quickly found himself embroiled in a struggle for control of Anglo-American film propaganda. The story begins with the creation of the Grand Alliance itself.

The entry of the United States into the Second World War in December 1941 changed the strategic, military, economic, and diplomatic relationship between Great Britain and the United States. Prior to Pearl Harbor, British propaganda in the United States was primarily intended to influence American public opinion toward intervention, sometimes with the tacit consent of an officially neutral United States government. Once America entered the war, however, the U.S. government not only encouraged the work of the British, in particular the Films Division of the Ministry of Information (M.o.I.), but assisted in many of its activities.[1]

Sidney Bernstein, an M.o.I. cinematographic advisor sent to the United States to facilitate Allied film cooperation, drafted the initial policy paper on film liaison in September 1942. Bernstein believed that the M.o.I. and the American Office of War Information (OWI) should share information about current film projects, their production status, and completed copies of films. He suggested a joint film panel to develop film policy, supervise the exchange of government films, and coordinate "with the services for the covering of the war on all fronts:'[2] Bernstein also took the first steps toward joint production, noting in his memorandum: "A number of film directors now in the U.S. Services are making arrangements to go, and are going, to Britain and the Middle East to film the activities of American troops. In some cases they may overlap work being done by our cameramen. In view of the shortage of manpower and equipment we should plan the use of all available staff irrespective of nationals." Further, although "the bulk of the films produced in either country are of home activities for home needs, a reasonable proportion of films must (a) illustrate the war effort in the opposite country, [and] (b) illustrate the joint enterprises and the United Nations' effort:'[3] Bernstein concluded that in addition to the exchange of films the possibility of joint production should be investigated.

At this time the British believed their film propaganda qualitatively surpassed that of the United States. The American propaganda machine was still developing, while the British had more than two years of actual experience. British confidence in the efficacy of their film propaganda relates directly to the military fortunes of the Allies in the second half of 1942. That year marked a turning point in the war. At the Battle of Midway in June 1942 the U.S. Navy halted the Japanese advance across the Pacific, and the British army won a decisive victory over Rommel's Afrika Korps that fall. In anticipation of the victory the British government had ordered a feature-length documentary to be prepared. The film, entitled

Desert Victory, was made by the British Army Film Unit in conjunction with the M.o.I.'s Films Division and was released in early 1943.

Desert Victory relates the campaign to drive the German army out of Egypt and Libya. It begins with a description of the desert, a ground the narrator describes as "only fit for war;' and juxtaposes military preparations with descriptions of the role of the home front in providing the necessary material for the campaign. Simple maps explain the disposition of troops from Great Britain and the dominions as they prepare for battle. The film then moves to a description of the actual offensive. The narration, written by journalist James Lansdale Hodson, keeps the audience tense as the countdown progresses toward the signal to attack. *Desert Victory* follows the men of the Eighth Army as they fight across the desert and rout the German troops. Although the film contains footage of the battle, the actual attack began at night and the producer, Roy Boulting, was forced to restage some scenes at Pinewood studios in England. Despite these restaged scenes, *Desert Victory* gives the viewer a vivid sense of battle conditions. The film is perhaps the greatest combat documentary of the war.[4]

Desert Victory received widespread praise both in Britain and the United States. Prime Minister Winston Churchill personally forwarded a copy to President Franklin Roosevelt, who said it was "about the best thing that had been done about the war on either side."[5] *Desert Victory* was, however, the last great combat documentary made entirely by the British. After 1942, the British war effort began to be subsumed by the Americans, an increasingly common occurrence in Allied operations. Future Allied film projects were to bear a heavy American stamp.

The first efforts at Anglo-American film cooperation were conducted by the military. With their long tradition of documentary filmmaking, as well as several years' experience in combat photography, the British could make realistic combat films, while the Americans had yet to make a film comparable to *Desert Victory*. British attitudes toward American film reflected both envy and contempt. The English realized that Hollywood productions far outpaced British films in terms of box office success. The British Army Film Unit in particular envied the cinematographic resources available to their American counterparts, but still firmly believed that their films, especially documentaries, were superior to American films. The condescending British attitude was epitomized by Major G.F. Emanual, the British Army Film Unit's liaison at the Walt Disney Studios. In October 1942 Emanual reported that the Americans did not yet realize the potential of film propaganda and that a lack of vision made American films "dull and stereotyped:' He concluded that "[t]he Walt Disney Studios could produce magnificent training films under the guidance of our own War Office."[6] The British perception that American film propagandists recognized British superiority was seemingly confirmed when Colonel Darryl Zanuck visited Britain on a fact-finding mission for the United States Army Signal Corps.[7]

Zanuck had served as an enlisted man in World War I and began his film career with Warner Brothers in the 1920s. A founder of 20th Century Fox in the early 1930s, he was chief of production until he joined the Army Signal Corps in 1942. Zanuck, known for his dedication to work, impatience with opposition, and volatile temper, was also an Anglophile in film matters. In a series of interviews with the British Army Film Unit, Zanuck expressed his admiration of British film propaganda and implied that American projects would benefit from British tutelage. His visit reinforced the Britons' belief that they would emerge as the dominant party in any film exchange, and set the stage for transatlantic misunderstanding that soured Anglo-American film relations for the rest of the war.[8]

Zanuck did not represent the majority opinion in the U.S. army propaganda organization. Although American propagandists admired British films, few regarded their own work as inferior. Until 1943, however, there was little direct communication among Allied filmmakers, despite Bernstein's recommendation of a joint film panel. The British hoped to follow the success of *Desert Victory* with a film about Operation Torch, the Allied invasion of North Africa, which was also the first large-scale joint military campaign of the war.[9] The project, originally titled Africa Freed, was to be an exposition of the British part of the campaign.[10] In the summer of 1943, as the North Africa campaign reached its

successful conclusion and Africa Freed neared its completion, Brenden Bracken, the British minister of information, decided that since Torch was a combined Allied operation, the film should document, at least in part, American involvement. He asked the U.S. Army Signal Corps, which had filmed the American part of the operation, to forward its footage to London. Bracken also requested an American film director to come to London to help turn Africa Freed into a joint Anglo-American project.[11]

Bracken's decision was based on diplomatic considerations. Since Operation Torch was a joint Allied offensive, to ignore the American contribution was to risk offending Allied sensitivities. Bracken and Jack Beddington, head of the M.o.I.'s Films Division, worried that without the assistance of U.S. propagandists the Torch film might not accurately reflect American views. This would leave the British open to criticism by American isolationists or, even worse, "by that section of the American community which has not made up its mind:' [12]

Many in the British government believed at this time that Anglo-American tensions were rising. In the fall of 1942, P.J. Grigg, the secretary of state for war, had prepared a memorandum titled "Anglo-American Relations in Washington in the Autumn of 1942:' Although primarily concerned with Lend-Lease, the memorandum provides insight into both American attitudes toward Britain, and the British interpretation of these attitudes. Grigg believed that prior to joining the war, Americans had admired Britain's heroic stand against the Nazi onslaught throughout 1940-41, and regarded the British as their first line of defense. Through LendLease, which represented the "proverbially generous side of the American character;' the United States provided Britain with needed materials to continue the fight. In response to public pressure, "the United States War Department went a considerable way to meet perceived British needs." [13] This magnanimous attitude, however, changed in 1942.

Grigg believed that since they were now in the war themselves, Americans were less willing to meet British requests for assistance. This reluctance was based both on America's own pressing military needs, which the British felt the U.S. War Department exaggerated, and a mistrust of British motives and military competence. Sentiment among the U.S. military and public was that to "salve her pride America must have the biggest and the best equipped army in the world," an army that would "take complete control of the war" and rectify previous British military fiascoes. Grigg also argued that the United States wanted to make itself the dominant partner in the alliance "in order to dominate the policy of the United Nations, both during the war and the making of the subsequent peace."[14]

The British had depended heavily on the United States before Pearl Harbor, and by the end of 1942 there were few areas where the British were completely independent of American supplies. Over half the heavy weapons and armored vehicles used during the British phase of the North African campaign were of American origin. [15] *Desert Victory* shows American-made Sherman tanks being unloaded from transport ships in preparation for the offensive. [16] Combined with the feeling that America would have to carry the British army was the perception that the British were not contributing enough to the Allied war effort. The M.o.I. believed that a sequel to *Desert Victory* could show the American public the extent of British participation in the joint Allied offensive. In the spring of 1943, therefore, Bracken wanted to ensure that the Allied nature of the Torch campaign was not ignored. He feared that two films-a British film that did not include American involvement and an American film that ignored the British contribution-would give the impression of Allied disunity and heighten tensions. [17]

ln consultation with Samuel Spewack, head of the OWI's Overseas Branch in Britain, the British requested that Frank Capra produce the American section of the joint Torch film. Capra, a Sicilian immigrant, had begun his film career as a director in 1921. He joined Columbia pictures in the early 1930s and became famous for "screwball comedies" like It Happened One Night, and for his idealistic vision of America as depicted in Mr. Smith Goes to Washington. In 1942 he joined the U.S. Army Signal Corps and began his famous "Why We Fight" series, which was used to indoctrinate American soldiers. The first film of the series, Prelude to War, won an Oscar as the best documentary of 1942. Capra had begun work on a documentary of Operation Torch for the U.S. Army in the spring of 1943. To his

surprise, he was ordered to London in early August to assist in combining the American and British versions. [18]

Capra went to London believing that the procedures for a joint film project were already arranged. [19] When he arrived, however, he found that the British Army Film Unit, the makers of Africa Freed, were reluctant to scrap their nearly finished picture. The Film Unit resented Bracken's decision to make Africa Freed into a joint film, and used Capra's visit as a means of embarrassing the M.o.I.[20] Although they could not forestall Bracken's decision, they hoped at the very least to maintain editorial control over any joint film project.

For his part, Capra resented being treated as an inferior and certainly did not like being the pawn in an inter-service struggle. The situation was exacerbated by Capra's arrogance and irascibility. Eric Knight, a scriptwriter on the early "Why We Fight" films, vividly described how difficult it was to work with Capra: "Frank is a good lad, but a fool. He has availed himself not one whit of my talent, has asked me not one question about grand policy, sneers at the word 'documentary; [and] orders new scripts without reading old ones."[21] Knight referred to Capra, and filmmakers in general, as having a "Caesar complex" that made them "unable to listen" to advice.[22]

Capra viewed the nearly finished Africa Freed and pronounced it "very good;' although he found the absence of an American perspective troubling and said as much to his hosts. The British were "loath to [a] joint venture now [that] their picture [was] finished;' however, and tried to convince Capra that they should concentrate on establishing procedures for future cooperation rather than revise the North African film. [23] Capra refused to discuss such procedures until the issue of the joint Torch film was settled. Capra found the British Army Film Unit so intractable that he threatened to leave London unless an agreement was reached. A meeting between the M.o.l. and the Film Unit seemed to resolve the problem and Capra ordered copies of his version of the Torch film sent to him in London. [24]

During the next week Capra established himself and his crew in London to complete production of his part of the joint picture. Capra also received approval to discuss future film projects with the British and to set up the mechanisms for joint production out of the Public Relations Office of the U.S. Army in Europe. Despite the administrative and technical problems with British propagandists, Capra admired the British people. "They are like golf balls," he wrote in his diary, "(s]oft covers and hard cores-each layer getting harder and harder." His only worry was that in America and Britain "reactionaries were coming out of their holes now that they smell victory." Capra felt that the time was right for a new statement of war aims expressed through the joint film.[25] Capra's optimism was short lived. On 30 August he received the " [s) hock of my life." Capra was ordered by the British Army Film Unit to turn his material on the Tunisian campaign over to the British so that they could decide whether to incorporate it into the revised film. Surprised and outraged, Capra refused. He informed Samuel Spewack of the OWI that he would not show his film to anyone until he received a positive commitment to a joint picture. Spewack and the U.S. Army backed his position. Capra wrote in his diary, "[The) British (are) annoyed at not being able to have their way. Their idea of co-operation is to do it their way. I'm the wrong man for that stuff." [26]

Capra's enthusiasm for a joint film quickly turned to disappointment even after he found that many in the M.o.I. supported him against the Film Unit. Although he preferred to go back to the United States to work on an independent film, a compromise was worked out between the various participants. Capra agreed to spend four weeks finishing his part, which would be viewed by representatives of all the services involved. A decision would then be made about whether to continue with the joint project.[27]

Over the next month, Capra's bitterness toward the British increased. On 8 October he showed the rough cut of his film to an audience of propaganda officials, among them Bracken, Beddington, and representatives of the British Army Film Unit. In his personal diary Capra referred to them as "all frozen faced and tightassed gents who try to make you feel like a bungler. What keeps me from telling them all to go to hell I don't know." He concluded that he didn't "give a damn whether they like the picture or

not."[28] Such an attitude did not bode well for future cooperation. Capra hoped that the British would decide against making a joint picture so that he could release his film in the United States before the British production was completed. He wrote, "the British seem to have such an inferiority complex about Americans, they are afraid to give any credit."[29] The next day, when confronted with further demands, he told Beddington that "I took no orders from the British." In his diary he added that "[t]he fight for supremacy is evidently bitter, but I must assert myself as I represent the USA." [30] Although Capra did not understand the context of the British attitude, his assessment of the character of Anglo-American film relations in the fall of 1943 was perceptive.

The year 1942 was the apex of the British war effort. After the North African campaign, Britain's war machine was quickly subsumed by the weight of the American military and industrial buildup. Capra's difficulty in making a joint picture was indicative on a small scale of the British reluctance to give up their preeminence to the United States in military, diplomatic, or propaganda matters without a fight. Fresh from the success of *Desert Victory*, the British Army Film Unit thought it held the upper hand in any film exchange. But, given Capra's established reputation, it is not surprising that American officials supported his effort to take editorial control from the British. What is surprising is how quickly the British political leadership yielded on the issue. Even Brenden Bracken, the minister of information, did not support the British Army Film Unit.

In November 1943 Capra returned to the United States to finish the Torch picture. Several British filmmakers, notably producer/director Hugh Stewart, accompanied him to ensure that the finished film gave equal credit to both British and American participation, but Capra now had almost complete editorial control.

The finished film, *Tunisian Victory*, was released in April 1944 after being approved by both the British and the Americans. [31] Unlike *Desert Victory*, which reflected the traditions of the British documentary film movement, *Tunisian Victory* is reminiscent of Capra's "Why We Fight" series. Like the previous campaign films, *Tunisian Victory* begins by describing preparations for battle. Animated maps detail the progress of the troop convoys as they cross the Atlantic and go into action. The sense of Anglo-American cooperation is provided by the film's narration. Two soldiers, one British and the other American, describe the progress of the campaign. The narrators, George and Joe, take the audience through a discussion of the campaign strategy, to the loading of the ships, and finally into action. In the final scene George and Joe discuss Anglo-American cooperation. George remarks to his friend, "We may not always think alike, but we do think." To which Joe replies, "Why don't we ... keep on swinging together after the war? What couldn't we do?" Implicit in this dialogue is the importance of Anglo-American cooperation in peacetime as well as in winning the war.[32]

Artistically, *Tunisian Victory* was a worthy successor to *Desert Victory* and did reflect the combined nature of the operation. Yet Capra's film pleased neither the British nor the Americans. The British felt that *Tunisian Victory* lacked the British commitment to realism that had characterized their productions. One British critic felt that *Tunisian Victory* was too "Hollywoodish" to be a great combat documentary. Although American reviews were generally more favorable, the New York Times critic detected the major flaw in the film: "The most obvious encumbrance ... is that it is woefully late, that it isn't reaching the public until a year after the Tunisian victory was won. The center of fighting-and of interest-has long since shifted elsewhere:' an opinion shared by critics on both sides of the Atlantic. [33]

To the propaganda officials in the M.o.I., OWI, the British Army Film Unit, and the American Signal Corps, the delays in production were the natural outcome of poor planning. Each nation had films well into production when the decision to make a combined picture was reached; Africa Freed had been only several weeks away from distribution. Neither side wished to combine two nearly completed films. Because of the difficulties in making *Tunisian Victory*, the Joint Anglo-American Film Planning Commission (JAAFPC) was established in March 1944 to prevent future misunderstandings and expedite film production. The JAAFPC was formed in time to begin planning joint film projects to cover the

invasion of France scheduled for the summer of 1944. Well staffed, with representatives from every major civilian and military film organization, the JAAFPC had the resources and the desire not to repeat history. Sadly, it not only repeated past mistakes, it made some of its own.

The making of *Tunisian Victory* provides both an instructive look at Anglo-American tensions during a time when the "special relationship" was supposed to be strongest, and a cautionary tale about the study of film propaganda. If the finished project alone were considered, then we, as students of history, would be misled about the actual workings of the Anglo-American relationship-as its wartime propaganda intended. A combination of traditional historical investigation into documents and an examination of the film itself reveals a much more illuminating story.

NOTES

1. See Frederic Krome, *'A Weapon of War Second to None': Anglo-American Film Propaganda during World War II* (Ph.D. diss., University of Cincinnati, 1992), chapters one and two, passim.

2. Sidney Bernstein to Lowell Mellett, Memorandum, Development of Anglo-American Film Liaison, 16 September 1942, Entry 264, Box 1432, British Information Services File (also RG 208, Washington National Record Center, Suitland, Maryland), 1-2. Although produced by Bernstein as a representative of the M.o.I., no copies of this document remain in the M.o.I. files at the Public Record Office.

3. Ibid., 2-3. The term United Nations appeared frequently in documents of the period, well before the creation of the United Nations as an organization.

4.Clive Coultass, *Images for Battle: British Film and the Second World War* (Newark, N.J., 1989), 110-12.

5. Franklin D. Roosevelt to Winston Churchill, 17 March 1943, *Churchill and Roosevelt: The Complete Correspondence*, vol. 2, November 1942-February 1944, ed. Warren F. Kimball (New Jersey, 1984), 156.

6. Directorate of Army Kinematography (DAK), Twelfth Monthly Progress Report for the Army Council, October 1942, War Office Papers, WO 165/96, Public Record Office, London.

7. For details on Zanuck's career see Mel Gussow, *Don't Say Yes Until I Finish Talking: A Biography of Darryl Zanuck* (New York, 1971).

8. See Anthony Aldgate, "Creative Tensions: *Desert Victory*, the Army Film Unit and Anglo-American Rivalry, 1943-5," in *Britain and the Cinema in the Second World War*, ed. Philip Taylor (New York, 1988), 152-53, for a discussion of the significance of Zanuck's visit for Anglo-American film cooperation. Aldgate, however, relied almost exclusively on British sources.

9. 0n the details of the Torch campaign see John Keegan, Tl1e Second World War (New York, 1989), 337-41.

10. For details of *Africa Freed* see Coultass, *Images for Battle*, 140-41.

11. PRO INF 1/223, Operation Torch Film, 30 April 1943. Also see Clive Coultass, "*Tunisian Victory*: A Film Too Late?" *Imperial War Museum Review* 1(1988):64-73.

12. PRO INF 1/223. "Notes of a Meeting with Mr. Spewack:' 20 July 1943.

13. PRO CAB 66/30 W.P. (42) 515, "Anglo-American Relations in Washington in the Autumn of 1942:' 9 November 1943, 1-2.

14. Ibid., 2-3.

15. See PRO CAB 66/30 W.P. (42) 486, "Visit of the Minister of Production to America," 29 October 1942, for an assessment of British dependence upon American supplies and equipment.

16. Publicity Photos of *Desert Victory*, Stills Collection, Film Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

17. Bracken and Beddington held a series of meetings with officials of the Overseas Branch of the OWi in July 1943 to discuss these problems. See PRO INF 1/223, "Notes of a Meeting with Mr. Spewack," 20 July 1943. On Anglo-American tensions over strategic differences see Keegan, *The Second World War*, 310-19.

18. PRO INF 1/223, "Notes of a Meeting with Mr. Spewack, 20 July 1943." A copy of the cable requesting that Capra be sent to London was given to the M.o.I. See PRO INF 1/223, Colonel Tupper (Public Relations Officer, U.S. Army ETO) to Beddington, 4 August 1943. Capra received word of the decision on 7 August 1943. He arrived in Scotland on 13 August. Throughout his trip Capra kept an itinerary of his movements and thoughts. Frank Capra Papers (hereafter referred to as FCP), Capra Itinerary, Cinema Archives, Wesleyan University, Middletown, Conn. In his autobiography, Capra devotes only five pages to his experience in London and makes little mention of Anglo-American film tensions. See Frank Capra, *The Name Above the Title* (New York, 1971), 351-55.

19. See Aldgate, "Mr. Capra Goes to War," 21-39.

20. The success of Capra's films was known to the British Army Film Unit by the spring of 1943. Its resentment was further heightened by Churchill's desire to exhibit them in the United Kingdom. See Capra, *The Name Above the Title*, 354.

21. Eric Knight to Jere Knight, 24 August 1942, Knight Papers. Reprinted in *Film and Propaganda in America: A Documentary History*, Part 2 (Westport, 1991), Document 44, 155.

22. Ibid., 156.

23. FCP, Capra Itinerary, 16 August 1943.

24. FCP, Capra Itinerary, 17-18 August 1943.

25. FCP, Capra Itinerary, 18-29 August 1943.

26. FCP, Capra Itinerary, 31 August 1943.

27. FCP, Capra Itinerary, 3 September 1943.

28. FCP, Capra Itinerary, 8 October 1943.

29. FCP, Capra Itinerary, 9 October 1943.

30. FCP, Capra Itinerary, 10 October 1943.

31. See Thomas Baird (British Library of Information Films Division) to Stanton Griffis (OW!), 23 February 1944; and Taylor Mills (OWi) to General Alexander Surles, 26 February 1944; Entry 268, Box 1484, Tunisian Victory File, RG 208, WNRC. For a breakdown of the credits for the film see FCP, Film Projects, Script for *Tunisian Victory*.

32. Coultass, "*Tunisian Victory*-A Film Too Late?" 70-71. The Official Script can be found in FCP, Film Projects, Script Credits, *Tunisian Victory*. The film is available on videocassette.

33. For a summation of the criticisms see Coultass, "*Tunisian Victory*-A Film Too Late?" 72.