

RONALD REAGAN, WARNER BROS., AND MILITARY PREPAREDNESS, 1937-1945

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When Ronald Reagan began his motion picture career in 1937 he entered a world in which entertainment and politics were joined. Behind Hollywood facade of a «never-never land of sunny skies, Sleeping Beauties, and ivory towers,» populated by political innocents, lay a serious side. Producers and writers as well as actors and actresses began to take sides on a variety of international and national issues. The politicization of Hollywood was certainly noticeable as early as the 1932 presidential campaign between Franklin D. Roosevelt and Herbert Hoover. It accelerated significantly in 1934 when Upton Sinclair ran for governor of California and a short time later when the Spanish Civil War divided Americans into pro- and anti-Franco factions. Reagan's studio, Warner Bros. Pictures, Inc., was among the movie colony's most politically conscious. Jack and Harry Warner «thought politically» and «had political motivation, intent, and drive,» screenwriter Paul Jarrico observed. The Warners were Jews, their family having come to America from Poland at the turn of the century. Alarmed by Hitler and anti-Semitism, by the late 1930s they had become obsessed with spies and saboteurs, and the need for military preparedness.

Not surprisingly the Warners' concerns found expression in their films. Eleven of the thirty movies Reagan made for Warner Bros. between 1937 and 1942, for example, reflected themes of preparedness, some seeking to dignify service in the United States military, others enlisting history for contemporary purposes, still others dwelling on the danger posed by espionage, and some openly supportive the beleaguered British.

The movies, and more generally a tense studio environment preoccupied with subversion, was one aspect of how the Warners' fervor for national security impinged on Reagan's early world. Jack Warner also helped set Reagan's course as a propagandist for the Army Air Corps (AAC) during World War II. It was he who prevailed on Major General Henry «Hap» Arnold in early 1942 to create the motion picture unit that would publicize the advantages of air power. Reagan, who never left the United States during the war, served in this unit between 1942 and 1945. During the war he appeared in or narrated several films for the Army Air Corps that tried to build morale and as they promoted American air power¹.

The Air Corps pictures, made while the United States was at war, left no doubt that the enemy was Germany and Japan. But the enemy was not always obvious in Reagan's early Warner Bros. films. It was difficult for any studio during the mid- and

late-1930s to make blatantly anti-fascist pictures. A major reason for this state of affairs was the opposition that came from the offices of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA), better known as the Hays Office (after its president Will H. Hays). The movie industry created the MPPDA during the early 1920s in the aftermath of the «Fatty» Arbuckle scandal. One of its missions was to frustrate efforts to establish government censorship. Hays tried, with considerable success, to convince the public that Hollywood could effectively regulate itself. The industry adopted a Production Code in 1930 and strengthened its enforcement four years later with the Production Code Administration (PCA), headed by a Catholic layman, Joseph I. Breen. The Roman Catholic Legion of Decency, with its threat of boycotts, put muscle behind the PCA's edicts. Before World War II began, Breen and Hays were unenthusiastic about anti-fascist films. Breen was quite probably deeply anti-Semitic while Hays admired the Italian dictator Mussolini. When the German consul objected to Warner Bros. making *Confessions of a Nazi Spy* in 1938, Breen tried unsuccessfully to persuade the studio to abandon the project. Unhappy with the anti-Nazi theme of *Underground* as late as September, 1939, Hays reminded Jack Warner of the «responsibility... to keep genuine screen entertainment flowing—unreflected by wartime propaganda, unpolluted by poisonous animosities»².

And so the Hollywood films of the late 1930s often approached the problem of fascism obliquely. Several of Reagan's early films were set in military surroundings usually with the actor in uniform. But they were only vaguely apprehensive about the international situation, stopping short of indicting Germany or Hitler. Nevertheless, they did promote preparedness in several ways.

First, many of the films sought to dignify military service and to increase enlistments. One of the first movies Reagan worked on after arriving in Hollywood (his small part was cut in final editing) was *Submarine D-1* (1937) which tried to «capture the spirit» of the submarine service. Reagan told his fans back in the Midwest that the movie sought to «take advantage of all the submarine excitement over in the Mediterranean»³. *Sergeant Murphy* (1937) was filmed at the Presidio in California and touted by the studio as about the «most picturesque» branch of the armed services, the cavalry. The picture was about a private (Reagan) and his race horse and the rags-to-riches story about how the animals won the Grand Nationals. Studio publicity promised audiences «spectacular cavalry charges and artillery drills over rough terrain» and an «impressive ceremony of raising the Stars and Stripes at sunrise»⁴.

Brother Rat (1938), where Reagan began dating his first wife Jane Wyman, portrayed the life of cadets at the Virginia Military Institute. The picture was in the same vein as such other earlier Warner Bros.' films as *Flirtation Walk* (1934), which was set at West Point, and *Shipmates Forever* (1935) which was about Annapolis. The studio at first considered entitling *Brother Rat*, «Call to Arms,» but an executive feared it might be too obviously interpreted as a «war or preparedness story.» He agreed,

however, that «brave lads in uniform... embracing beauteous maidens» would make a good advertising strategy for the film⁵. When the studio produced a poorly made sequel, **Brother Rat and a Baby** (1939), a Warner Bros. executive tried to persuade VMI's superintendent that the film was a «socially necessary duty»⁶.

Dignifying the uniform was a theme in one of Reagan's first «A» movies, **Santa Fe Trail** (1940). Errol Flynn and Olivia De Havilland starred in this western, the only western, incidentally, that Reagan made for Warner Bros. Reagan played the then cultural icon, George Armstrong Custer. The movie followed Reagan, Flynn, and other cadets from their graduation at West Point as they pursued the abolitionist leader John Brown in 1854. Again, handsome men in uniform winning beautiful women was a theme.

Santa Fe Trail revealed a second way in which Warner Bros. used its pictures to push for preparedness. The studio enlisted history under its banner. During the 1930s the Warners used feature-length films, set in the past, to promote a patriotic revival in the United States and to comment on current events. In addition to the feature pictures, they also produced dozens of «patriotic shorts» about episodes from American history such as **Give Me Liberty** (1936), **Teddy the Rough Rider** (1937), **The Declaration of Independence** (1938), **The Bill of Rights** (1939), and **The Monroe Doctrine** (1939). **Santa Fe Trail** dealt with themes of honor and duty as it used an important episode from the American past to comment on the present. John Brown's abolitionist activities helped accelerate events leading to the American Civil War. For a later generation that endorsed civil rights he would be a hero, his efforts to secure black freedom celebrated. In 1940, though, when Southern views dominated studio treatments of racial issues, Brown was portrayed as a madman. The Canadian-born actor who portrayed Brown, Raymond Massey, played him—so he said—as a 1940 version of Hitler. Jack Warner had similar purposes in mind and devoted considerable attention to Massey's make-up to remind audiences of the danger posed by maniacal leaders⁷.

Another Reagan movie set in the past, also appearing in 1940, was **Knute Rockne - All American**. The picture was about the famous University of Notre Dame football coach who had been killed some years earlier in a plane crash. Reagan played the star running back George Gipp who died tragically while still in school. It was in this film that Reagan uttered the often-used line in Gipp's deathbed scene, «Win One for the Gipper». This movie was designed to promote Americanism. The football team was metaphor for the nation. The story indicted pacifism. Such sports as football, so Rockne (played by Pat O'Brien) said, expunged the «flaccid philosophy» that made men ill-prepared to meet the perils of the real world. Athletics built «courage, initiative, tolerance, and persistence, without which the most educated brain of man is not worth very much.» In a line surely intended to underscore the difference between American and Britain and Nazi barbarism, Coach Rockne (i.e., O'Brien) explained that «every red-blooded young man in any country is filled with what we might call the natural spirit

of combat. In many parts of Europe and elsewhere in the world this spirit manifests itself in continuous wars and revolutions». But Americans, he said, had «tried to make competitive sports act as a safer outlet for this spirit of combat....»⁸.

A third way in which Warner Bros. endorsed military readiness was by sounding an alarm over the danger posed by spies and saboteurs. Harry Warner told an audience in 1939 that movies could «be used as one of the most effectual means of exposing the plots against the United States...». If **Confessions of a Nazi Spy** was the best-known of the studio's films in this regard, there were other movies in this genre. **Secret Service of the Air** (1939) and **Murder in the Air** (1940), two «B» pictures in which Reagan played Secret Service agent Brass Bancroft, warned about domestic subversion. Publicity for the latter invited audiences to join Reagan battling 20,000 unseen enemies.⁹

The obsession with subversion spilled over into Reagan's working environment. Blaney F. Matthews, a former policeman whom the Warners hired to manage studio security, claimed there were a «million Nazis in the Western Hemisphere ready for an invisible invasion of the United States». He initiated a plan to fingerprint everyone who came onto the Warners' lot. Harry Warner, the company president, assembled 6,000 of his employees in mid-1940 and told them that «the danger is here». The entire Federal Bureau of Investigation could not protect them, he said. He urged vigilance and called for the ejection of those enemies who bored from within to undermine national security.¹⁰

The Warners became ardent supporters of Britain and urged their friend President Franklin D. Roosevelt to be more aggressive in supporting the British. They contributed money for ambulances and planes in 1940 and 1941. By September, 1941, they and other major studio heads had become the object of a Senate investigation of warmongering in Hollywood. The Senate committee singled out fifty films that reflected pro-war sentiment and Reagan's **Murder in the Air** and **International Squadron** (1941) appeared on the list.

In **International Squadron**, which opened as the Senate hearings were in full session, Reagan played an intrepid American pilot—one of the «avenging 'angels' hurtling out of the heaven» —who joined the British RAF. A few months later he co-starred with Warner Bros.' leading man, Errol Flynn, in another pro-British films, **Desperate Journey** (1942), about pilots downed behind German lines.

In addition to the Warners' enthusiasm for national defense, two other observations are worth noting about this early period in Reagan's early career. One was the public person that the studio built for him. Reagan was often cast in heroic roles (even if many of them were in «B» pictures) and a part of his image was that of a courageous pilot. Publicity for such movies as **Secret Service of the Air**, **International Squadron**, and **Desperate Journey** showed Reagan in aviator's uniform and his picture was sometimes displayed in movie theaters with such American air heroes as Charles

Lindbergh. This image was ironic because Reagan did not like to fly, had been in a plane only once, and would not travel by air regularly until the 1950s. Nevertheless, he carried over into World War II where he played pilots or narrated films about combat missions.

Another interesting point about these pictures was their enthusiasm for the technology related to air power. **Murder in the Air**, of course, featured a weapon called the Inertia Projector which was an early prototype of the Strategic Defense Initiative. The idea for this weapon probably came from rumors, reported in such papers as the *New York Times* during the mid- 1930s, that the Italian Marconi inventor had built and tested such a device. It used an electromagnetic beam (or death ray) to destroy enemy aircraft.

More generally, though, the fascination at Warner Bros. with air power came at a crucial time in the history of American aviation. World War II marked a turning point in the development of the United States Air Force. The U.S. had approximately 3,900 planes in 1938. Just a few years later during the war, when the Air Corps was under General Arnold's command, America manufactured close to 145,000 aircraft a year. Arnold had been an apostle of air power long before World War II. His friendship with Jack Warner proved important in the creation of a propaganda unit that promoted American aviation. It also was significant for Reagan's career during the war.

Jack Warner lobbied Arnold in early 1942 to establish a film unit that would glorify service, make people «subconsciously think of the Air Corps,» and increase enlistments¹¹. Warner wanted a commission and he was made a lieutenant colonel in charge of what became known as the First Motion Picture Base Unit (FMPBU), located in Culver City, California (not too many miles from Reagan's home). He remained in charge of the FMPBU for about six months, retaining his civilian salary of several thousand dollars a month all the while. When orders came transferring out of the Los Angeles area, he resigned his commission in the fall of 1942 to return to civilian life. Hollywood and Warner Bros., of course, produced several films during the war that emphasized the accomplishments of the air force.

Reagan's, whose poor eyesight limited him to noncombat status, transferred into the FMPBU in May, 1942. The FMPBU made at least 200 films during the war, most of which ran for less than a half hour and close but a few thousand dollars. Reagan thought of the unit as «the Signal Corps for Hap Arnold's new air force.» He appeared in several of the films while he narrated others. It is perhaps no longer possible to know exactly how many of these pictures he took part in¹². Some of the pictures, such as **Rear Gunner** (1942), tried to persuade recruits to join up for a particular type of job. Others, such as **Beyond the Line of Duty** (1942) which was about a real hero, Captain Hewitt T. Wheeler, who won the Distinguished Service Cross, sought to build morale. Still others, such as **Jap Zero** (1943), offer instruction in flying—in this case, telling servicemen how to recognize enemy planes. Some films—**Beyond the Line of Duty**, **Target Tokyo**, **Fight for the Sky**—celebrated not only heroic pilots but the technology that helped build their aircraft.

Assessing what these early experiences meant to Reagan poses a challenging problem for the historian. Despite the public record that Reagan left behind, the private man—as both his most astute biographer Lou Cannon and his wife Nancy tell us—remains an enigma. Yet Reagan watchers have noted the former President's desire to ingratiate himself to employers and his ability to adapt to his environment. It is important to understand, too, that from the beginning of Reagan's training as a performer as a youth in Dixon, Illinois, acting was a way of learning. Reagan's early years in motion pictures are therefore likely to be significant in the development of his political outlook¹.

Reagan's filmmaking at Warner Bros. and later in the Army Air Corps touched the serious world of politics in many ways. But no issue assumed greater importance between 1937 and 1945 than did national security. The Warners were first and foremost entertainers, to be sure, and they were not afraid to play fast and loose with the facts of story. But their world—Reagan's early working environment—placed great emphasis on combating anti-Semitism, promoting Americanism, fighting the enemy within, and building United States military power. Their purposes coincided nicely with the goals of General Arnold who saw America's future as a global leader dependent on air power.

During these years Reagan had a screen image created that associated him with good citizenship, military valor, heroism. But more than this public persona, Reagan likely came away from this period with an understanding of how national and international issues could be dramatized in an entertaining fashion. He also took with him a way of viewing such issues, one that saw America beset by enemies at home and abroad, one that emphasized military preparedness as a way to secure America's place as a world leader.

NOTES AND REFERENCES:

(1) This paper is based on several archival sources including a careful viewing of all of Reagan's films made for Warner Bros. between 1937 and 1945 (located in the State Historical Society of Wisconsin); the studio production records located in the Warner Bros. Archive of Historical Papers at the University of Southern California; the Production Code Administration Files for all Reagan's film in the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences Library, Beverly Hills, California; and the Records of the Army Air Corps First Motion Picture Base Unit, Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama.

The literature on Ronald Reagan has either dismissed the connection between his movie career and political development, underestimated the connection, or oversimplified it. For example, Anne Edwards writes that «the contents of Reagan's films could not have been farther from the realities of the times,» and that in 1940, «most major filmmakers seemed not to hear the trumpets of approaching war». See Anne EDWARDS, *Early Reagan* (New York: William Morrow, 1987). Those writers such as Lou Cannon, Garry Wills, and Laurence Leamer who have probed Reagan's involvement in Hollywood politics have used relatively few archival sources and left the relation

between Reagan's movie career and his later politics largely undeveloped. See Lou CANNON, *Reagan* (New York: A Perigee Book, 1982); Lou CANNON, *President Reagan: The Role of a Lifetime* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1991); Garry WILLS, *Reagan's America: Innocents at Home* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1987); and Laurence LEAMER, *Make-Believe: The Story of Nancy & Ronald Reagan* (New York: Harper & Row, 1983). Michael Rogin expresses a view shared by Wills and others that Reagan later as U.S. President was unable to distinguish between reality and old films that he had seen. See Michael ROGIN, *Ronald Reagan, The Movie and Other Episodes in Political Demonology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), pp. 7-8.

(2) Quotation, Will H. Hays to Jack Warner, Sept. 15, 1939, Folder 15, Box 58, Jack L. Warner Papers, University of Southern California, Los Angeles (hereafter cited as JLW-USC). See also the Production Code Administration files for *Underground* and *Confession of a Nazi Spy* in the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences Library, Beverly Hills, California (hereafter cited as PCA files, AMPASL). The censorship reports in the PCA files for other films produced before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in December, 1941, provide additional evidence of the opposition to anti-Nazi films mounted by Hays and Breen.

(3) See Ronald (Dutch) REAGAN, «Four Pictures Finished, 'Dutch' Gets a Raise, Hunts for a House,» *Des Moines Sunday Register*, Oct. 3, 1937, p. 8 (General News). See also Hal Wallis to Frank Wead, Jan. 2, 1935, Story File for *Submarine D-1*, Warner Bros. Archive of Historical Papers, University of Southern California, Los Angeles (hereafter cited as WBAHP-USC); and Wead to Wallis, Jan. 2, 1935, *ibid*.

(4) See Trailer, Publicity File for *Sergeant Murphy*, WBAHP-USC.

(5) See Hal Wallis to Robert Lord and William Keighley, June 28, 1938, Story File for *Brother Rat*, WBAHP-USC.

(6) See Robert Lord to C. E. Kilbourne, Sept. 11, 1939, Story File for *Brother Rat and a Baby*, WBAHP-USC.

(7) See Massey's interview in M. R. WERNER, «John Brown's Part in 'Santa Fe Trails' Based on History,» *Santa Fe New Mexican*, Dec. 12, 1940, p. 10.

(8) Quotation from the film, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison.

(9) See Harry Warner quoted in Christine COLGAN, «Warner Bros.' Crusade Against the Third Reich: A Study of Anti-Nazi Activism and Film Production, 1933-1941» (doctoral thesis, University of Southern California, 1985), p. 25; and Pressbook for *Murder in the Air*, Reel 6, United Artist Collection, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison. See also Stephen Vaughn, «Spies, National Security, and the 'Inertia Projector: The Secret Service Films of Ronald Reagan,» *American Quarterly*, No. 39 (Fall, 1987): 355-380.

(10) See Blayne F. MATTHEWS, *The Specter of Sabotage* (Los Angeles: Lymanhouse, 1941), [5], 29, 37, 41, and 43; and Harry M. WARNER, «United We Survive, Divided We Fall!» pp. 4, 6, 7, 19-14, an Address made June 5, 1940, Folder: «Harry M. Warner—Speeches & Interviews,» Box 56, JLW-USC.

(11) See «Notes for Washington Talk,» [undated (March?, 1942)], Folder 6, Box 60, JLW-USC.

(12) See Ronald REAGAN, *An American Life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990), p. 98.

(13) See CANNON, *President Reagan* cit.; Nancy REAGAN, *My Turn* (New York: 1990); WILLS, *Reagan's America* cit.; and James David BARBER, *Presidential Character: Predicting Performance in the White House* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1972, 1985), p. 477.