What To Tell America:
The Writers' Quarrel in the Office of
War Information

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During the early months of World War II, Americans encountered confusing and often contradictory war information from a large number of bureaus and departments. In the tangle of overlapping jurisdictions no one agency seemed authorized to explain what America was doing at home and abroad to win the war or what goals it hoped to achieve by fighting. In June 1942, President Franklin Roosevelt responded to demands for more news and less confusion by establishing the Office of War Information (OWI). It was intended to further an understanding of the "status and progress of the war effort and of the war policies, activities, and aims of the Government." Partly because of the vagueness of this mandate and partly because the new office was created out of existing agencies, each with its own conception of the proper role of an "information agency," the function of the OWI was never quite clear to many of its officials, to the public, and apparently even to the President himself. Was it supposed to serve as an ideological, news, propaganda, or advertising instrument? The dramatic resignation of a large group of writers in June 1943 illustrated the pernicious effects of this ambiguity. Even more important, it highlighted a basic disagreement within the administration over not only what but also how the American people should be told about the war.

Before the establishment of the OWI, three agencies had dealt with different aspects of domestic information; but none of them had authority to control or coordinate the flow of information from Washington, and each of them incurred the displeasure of the administration, the Congress, or the news media. The Division of Information of the Office of Emergency Management (OEM) had been created in March 1941 to coordinate informa-

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tion from all OEM agencies. Although a journalist, Robert Horton, served as director, his qualifications did not prevent newsmen from labelling the Division a bottleneck.² Horton’s bluntness also alienated many influential people. Despite the need for business-government cooperation, he made no effort to conceal his doubts about the good faith of leading business magnates; and although the administration wanted Horton to present a picture of unity in Washington, he refused. Horton acted on the premise that an information agency must tell the truth about the activities of government agencies with or without their approval. The war information program, he contended, must not be a “sales job.” The disorganized state of the agencies during the early months of the war led government officials and businessmen alike to regret Horton’s intractable devotion to the truth.³

Lowell Mellett’s Office of Government Reports (OGR) proved equally unsatisfactory as an information bureau but for quite another reason. Since 1939, the OGR, under Mellett’s direction, had operated a central press-clipping service for all Washington agencies, conducted public opinion polls, and maintained public inquiry offices throughout the country. But anti-New Dealers who knew Mellett as a close friend and adviser to the President suspected him of disseminating administration “propaganda” in the guise of information.⁴ Thus, early in 1942, when Roosevelt suggested that Mellett open a central information center in Washington, the President’s opponents in Congress criticized the project, denounced Mellett as an American Goebbels, and reduced his appropriation to a new low.⁵ Mellett’s effectiveness was clearly limited by partisan hostility.

During 1940 and early 1941, Roosevelt had been reluctant to set up an agency specifically to maintain morale. He assumed that morale would not be a problem once the “facts of war” impressed themselves upon Americans.⁶ Furthermore, Roosevelt knew that he stood to lose much support among congressmen who would equate a morale agency with a propaganda instrument. Yet he was under pressure to satisfy his supporters who

² "Press Agent Army," *Editor and Publisher*, 75 (Oct. 25, 1941), 24.
³ *Cong. Rec.*, 77 Cong., 1 Sess., 4244, 4247, 4259 (May 20, 1941). Lowell Mellett opposed expanding the Office of Government Records into a central information agency because he believed such an agency might constitute an improper infringement on legislative prerogatives. See Mellett to Franklin D. Roosevelt, May 5, Sept. 8, 1941, Lowell Mellett Papers (Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park).
⁴ Roosevelt to Mellett, Feb. 2, 1942, Mellett Papers; *Nation*, 154 (May 9, 1942), 531; notes on conference with Roosevelt, March 19, 1942, Harold D. Smith Papers (Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park).
feared that the public was apathetic toward the war. In May 1941, when the Bureau of the Budget urged the President to strengthen the country's civil defense program, Roosevelt evidently saw an opportunity to link morale with defense rather than "propaganda." He created an Office of Civil Defense (OCD) under the flamboyant "Little Flower," Fiorello LaGuardia, the mayor of New York City. A catch-all, the OCD was to handle civilian protection, morale, and information. By fall, dissatisfied with LaGuardia's handling of morale activities, the President decided to enlarge the division of the OCD responsible for morale into the Office of Facts and Figures (OFF), which could provide public opinion samplings and give Americans an accurate and coherent account of government policy.

Although the President had deliberately selected a dry and improbable title for the agency to avoid the stigma of propaganda, its director, Archibald MacLeish, poet turned bureaucrat, chafed under the inglorious name. MacLeish had only a single purpose—to prepare the country for a war that had to be fought. "A full knowledge of what we are fighting for," he later wrote the President, would be "a positive weapon in winning the war." Because the poet viewed the conflict as a revolution aimed at "the destruction of the whole system of ideas, the whole respect for truth, the whole authority of excellence which places law above force, beauty above cruelty, singleness above numbers," he exhorted scholars and writers to rise up against the system which threatened this way of life and to fight with the intellectual's most potent weapons—ideas and words.

The scholars and writers answered his call. MacLeish's staff—one of the most erudite groups in Washington—was hand-picked and noted for intelligence, integrity, and ability. Established journalists and writers like

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7 This group included Harold L. Ickes, Robert E. Sherwood, Archibald MacLeish, Harry Hopkins, Samuel I. Rosenman, and Henry Stimson.

8 The executive order creating the Office of Civil Defense (OCD) did not specifically empower the agency to handle morale. Nevertheless, this was a tacit function until the President gave OCD official authority to deal with morale early in September. Notes in Archibald MacLeish Papers, Box 37 (Manuscript Division, Library of Congress).

9 Fiorello LaGuardia had been concerned about "educating" the country about the war and had urged Roosevelt to create a cabinet-rank agency to coordinate the civil defense program. LaGuardia to William Y. Elliott, Oct. 24, 1940; LaGuardia to Roosevelt, April 20, 1940, Fiorella LaGuardia Papers (Municipal Archives, New York City).

10 MacLeish to Roosevelt, Sept. 29, 1941, OF 4619, Franklin D. Roosevelt Papers (Franklin D. Roosevelt Library). Memos and notes on information activities, No. 153, Series 41.3, Bureau of the Budget Records.

11 MacLeish to Henry Pringle, undated memorandum, Box 7, Henry Pringle Papers (Manuscript Division, Library of Congress); MacLeish to Grace Tully, Jan. 16, 1942, OF 4619, Roosevelt Papers.

12 MacLeish to Roosevelt, May 16, 1942, PSF, OFF folder, Roosevelt Papers.

13 MacLeish to author, June 23, 1966; Archibald MacLeish, The Irresponsibles: A Declaration (New York, 1940), 6.
Charles Poore, Malcolm Cowley, and Samuel Lubell joined Pulitzer Prize-winning historian Henry Pringle and younger enthusiasts like Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., and McGeorge Bundy. These men shared MacLeish’s conviction that the OFF’s most urgent task was to explain to Americans why the United States would have to fight the coming war.\textsuperscript{13}

The writers valued their freedom of expression, and in the OFF they exercised this freedom without restraint. In addition to ghostwriting and clearing speeches for other agencies, under Pringle’s supervision they had free rein in preparing pamphlets about the war. The informal structure of the OFF gave them virtual autonomy. Once the United States officially entered the war, they tried to discover the issues that troubled Americans and sought to clarify them and to explain the ideological conflict between democracy and fascism.\textsuperscript{14} Thus, while they did field research for a report on the shortage of doctors and wrote a description of the economic war potential of the country, they also prepared an ideological pamphlet on “The Four Freedoms,” and other papers on the enemy’s “strategy of terror” such as “The Tale of a City” and “Divide and Conquer.”

After the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, the OFF attempted to coordinate almost all civilian war information; but this proved more than it could handle. Although MacLeish lacked authority to force government agencies or the army to provide information, newsmen, nevertheless, blamed him for withholding news, especially after the Joint Chiefs of Staff refused to release details about the attack on Pearl Harbor.\textsuperscript{15} Conversely, MacLeish struggled as much to limit the endless flow of official statements as he did to free the restricted flow of news. Cabinet departments and wartime agencies supported small armies of public relations specialists, each eager to extol its own department at the expense of competitors. The treasury, agriculture,

\textsuperscript{13} Pringle to MacLeish, undated memorandum, Box 7, Pringle Papers.

\textsuperscript{14} The staff thought this type of work essential. They hoped to “combat the tendency toward a defensive psychology . . . and to build and maintain, in its place, an offensive strategy . . . The problem is rendered particularly difficult by the fact that the U. S. cannot take the military offensive at this time. . . . The emotional upsurge following Pearl Harbor will not last forever. Reports now coming to [Office of Facts and Figures] OFF suggest that national unity will have increasingly hard sledding if there is failure to utilize the energy, talent, and devotion of all the people in some phase of the war effort.” OFF Project Proposal, No. 3, Box 37, MacLeish Papers.

\textsuperscript{15} “Historic Appraisal of OWI,” transcribed interview with Philleo Nash, Jan. 9, 1952, OF 5013, Roosevelt Papers; MacLeish to Roosevelt, April 11, 1942, PSF, OFF Folder, \textit{ibid.}

MacLeish had urged Roosevelt to tell Americans the extent of the damage at Pearl Harbor to forestall rumors, but Rosenman and Sherwood opposed this for security reasons, and their view prevailed. Rosenman, \textit{Working with Roosevelt}, 309. The army and the navy also refused to release information which would enable OFF to compile a statistical report on war production. Pringle reminded MacLeish that the OFF “could do no more than urge.” Notes on interview with Robert Huse, Series 41.3, Bureau of the Budget Records; Pringle to MacLeish, June 1942, Pringle Papers.
and state departments pressed radio stations and magazines with ever increasing demands for time and space until the hard-pressed executives in these industries begged the President to set up an allocation plan. The mass of confusing information from radio commentators, news magazines, and above all from government press agents discredited the OFF.

By the spring of 1942, criticism of the information services had become acute. "It all seemed to boil down to three bitter complaints": wrote an observer, "first, that there was too much information; second, that there wasn't enough of it; and third, that in any event it was confusing and inconsistent." Congressmen and newspapermen overcame their natural suspicion of an official information agency and urged the creation of an organization to coordinate and release government information. The restrictions on his own authority impelled MacLeish to suggest to the director of the Bureau of the Budget and to Roosevelt that the OFF be replaced by a stronger agency incorporating the functions of the OFF, possibly the OGR, and the Information Division of the OEM.

Although MacLeish, Samuel Rosenman, and Harry Hopkins had been urging him to create a central agency, Roosevelt knew that a majority of congressmen and newspapermen would have regarded such an agency as a propaganda instrument to propel America into the war. After Pearl Harbor, however, the need for an information agency became greater. In December 1941 the President asked Milton Eisenhower of the Department of Agriculture to prepare a plan for an inclusive government information agency. Eisenhower submitted his outline in March 1942; and after some initial hesitation, Roosevelt acted upon his recommendations. On June 13, 1942, the President signed the executive order that established the OWI by

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16 Memorandum, William B. Lewis Papers (in the possession of William B. Lewis, New York). Lewis, Columbia Broadcasting System vice-president, went to Washington to take charge of the Network Allocation Plan under OFF. Later, in the Office of War Information (OWI), he headed the radio bureau and then became assistant director.


19 "Centralized United States News," Editor and Publisher, 75 (May 23, 1942), 20.

20 MacLeish to Smith, Feb. 20, 1942, MacLeish Papers; OFF Committee on War Information Meeting Minutes, June 1, 1942, Office of War Information Records (National Archives); MacLeish to Roosevelt, May 26, 1942, PPF, MacLeish Folder, Roosevelt Papers; "Formulation of the OWI Charter," 1, Historian's Files, OWI Records.


22 Roosevelt would have signed the order earlier had it not been for the state department and the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Both opposed including Nelson Rockefeller's Office of the Co-ordinator of Inter-American Affairs (which was not added) and William "Wild Bill" Donovan's Office of the Co-ordinator of Information (half of which was included).
combining the three existing agencies and the Foreign Information Service of the Office of the Coordinator of Information, which was to become the overseas branch of the OWI.\(^{23}\)

To forestall partisan criticism of the new agency, Roosevelt by-passed Horton, Mellett, and MacLeish, and selected Elmer Davis as director of the OWI. A popular and respected news commentator, an independent with a reputation for integrity, Davis not only lacked administrative experience but also held some reservations about his ability to do the job. "I should be distressed for the welfare of the Republic," he wrote to a friend, "if it could find nobody better than me."\(^{24}\) Nevertheless, Davis acceded to Roosevelt’s personal request and took on the task of heading the OWI. He told reporters that the OWI would give Americans not "morale-building" information but news—more news than they had been getting. Americans would have no need of an agency to stimulate morale, Davis asserted, if they could be made to understand the reasons for the demands made on them.\(^{25}\) But he quickly discovered that no sharp line could be drawn between news and information, and the OWI soon found itself attempting to make Americans appreciate the significance of the war.

This latter function, which Davis inherited from the OFF, should have been less demanding than it had been in World War I. During the first grim months of war, Americans did not have to be told why they were fighting. Yet, while Pearl Harbor gave the United States good reason to go to war, the Japanese attack also made it difficult to attribute American participation to any cause other than self-defense. OFF and then OWI officials feared that if Americans persisted in viewing the war purely as a response to attack instead of as a joint effort to destroy fascism, wartime and postwar international cooperation with the Allies might fail as it had after 1919. OWI pollsters apprehensively noted in the summer of 1942 that at least a third of the people they interviewed were willing to negotiate a separate peace with the Germans. Almost as many said they did not know what their country was fighting for, and other polls indicated that many Americans mistrusted the Allies.\(^{26}\) Reacting to this information, Davis and his

\(^{23}\) See note 1.

\(^{24}\) Davis to unidentified correspondent, March 31, 1942, Davis Papers.

\(^{25}\) New York Times, June 15, 1942; House, Hearings Before the Sub-committee of the Committee on Appropriations on the Second Supplemental National Defense Appropriation Bill for 1943, 77 Cong., 2 Sess., 1942, pp. 387-88. Davis later admitted that he wondered whether this policy "was as valid in fact as it was impressive in principle." Speech before the Naval War College, Nov. 16, 1951, Davis Papers.

staff undertook to convince Americans that only full cooperation with the Allies during and after the war could ensure a stable peace. "Nothing is for sale at bargain prices," Davis cautioned his countrymen. Victory itself would not bring about a miraculous transformation in international relations. Only if Americans committed themselves to the destruction of fascism and recognized their own obligation to establish a durable settlement could such a peace be assured.  

A number of Americans objected to defining the war as an ideological struggle. "They want to take our country away, don't they?" replied one indignant housewife to a pollster. "That's what we're fighting for—to save our hides." Others holding this view resented what they considered to be the patronizing assumptions of the OWI. "I think it is an insult to the intelligence of the American people . . . ," declared Congressman Joe Starnes on the floor of the House, "to say that we do not know why we are fighting. . . ." To avoid antagonizing such people, OWI radio programs and pamphlets usually skirted ideological issues and sought to make the conflict personally meaningful for Americans. The OWI did not want the people to equate the war with Woodrow Wilson's futile crusade to "make the world safe for democracy"; instead, it stressed the need to make the world safe from fascism. John Dewey, for example, suggested that the OWI reject themes like "freedom" or "democracy" in favor of programs showing the fate of the average American under possible Nazi domination. For the most part, the staff concurred and relied on the theme of profit and loss: "These will be the blessings of victory; these the calamities of defeat."  

The OWI could say little more so long as Roosevelt avoided committing himself either to specific peace aims or to explaining the war consistently as something more than a direct response to aggression. Since the task of the agency, as Davis saw it, was to explain administration policy, the OWI therefore had to rely mainly on the obvious argument of self-defense to explain America's participation in the war and even its future role in making peace. But because the United States was in little danger of attack, this ap-

28 "The Grievance Pattern: Elements of Disunity in America," OWI Bureau of Intelligence, Division of Surveys Special Report No. 15n (June 25, 1942), 51 (Columbia University Library).  
29 New York Times, June 27, 1943; Cong. Record, 78 Cong., 1 Sess., 6133 (June 18, 1943).  
proach evidently failed to stimulate Americans to make the sacrifices demanded by total war mobilization. The OFF and the OWI had indeed convinced many people of the need to fight fascism, reported an early poll, but the agencies had "not kindled their imaginations, nor moved them to the heroic action which can be born only of profound emotion as well as conviction."

Davis understood the President’s caution about enunciating peace aims. Later, after he had listened to correspondents condemn the government’s war policies, Davis wrote Bernard DeVoto that they were wishing that somebody would sound the shofar and proclaim a great crusade for democracy and freedom. A worthy objective; but I seem to recall that precisely this was done in 1918—. . . but unfortunately it didn’t stick. What they are trying to do now—to get something sufficiently satisfactory at once to the Congress and to our allies so that it will stick—is much less picturesque, romantic, and satisfactory to the idealistic impulse.

Nevertheless, the President’s "wait-and-see" policy placed a great burden on the OWI, which drew criticism for failing to guide public opinion on policy questions when no policy existed. Davis, to his chagrin, was charged with purposely avoiding the deeper issues of the war for the safer tasks of campaigning for more scrap iron or civilian defense recruits. DeVoto, less temperate than Davis, angrily denounced the administration’s lack of confidence in the people:

There has been too God-damned much exhortation and denunciation, too God-damned much cleverness, . . . and too God-damned little straight talking over the table at an adult public. . . . If the government gets into trouble over the peace and the domestic front after the war, it will be because it didn’t treat the men of good will as intelligent.

The President’s vague definition of the OWI’s purpose and Davis’ reluctance to insist on a clarification also fostered misconceptions about its legiti-

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31 According to Sherwood, "the American people, who were so willing and proud to give whatever was required of them in blood and sweat, were loudly reluctant to cut down on their normal consumption of red meat and gasoline and their use of such essentials as electric toasters and elastic girdles."

32 "Survey of Intelligence Materials," OWI Bureau of Intelligence Report, No. 17, April 1, 1943, p. 16 (Columbia University Library); "Roundtable No. 5: What is Wrong with American Propaganda," Free World, II (March 1942), 140.

33 Davis to Bernard DeVoto, March 26, 1944, Bernard DeVoto Papers (Stanford University).

34 DeVoto to Davis, Aug. 26, 1943, ibid.
mate functions. A serious misunderstanding developed because it frequently had conflicting duties, such as publicizing the administration's domestic program and giving the public an accurate account of the government's mobilization efforts. The combination of these functions was enough to make many congressmen suspicious of the OWI as an administration propaganda organization; and certainly Oscar Ewing, chairman of the Democratic National Committee, encouraged Roosevelt to treat it as such. As a solution to the government's "inadequate job in selling this war to the people," Ewing proposed that the agency and the Committee coordinate their counter-propaganda and publicity to deal with "sore spots" throughout the country. The party in power, he reminded Roosevelt, gets the benefit from "a good job of selling and pays the consequences for a bad one."

There is no evidence that Roosevelt took Ewing's advice, but many journalists believed that the government did view the war program as a product to be sold to America. The nature of the OWI's assignments, wrote Bruce Catton, put the head of the agency into an impossible situation. Although Davis knew that propaganda and news had to be divorced, he was forced to rely heavily on advertising and radio executives to run the government's promotional campaigns to stimulate bond sales, waste-paper collection, and other activities. The result, Catton contended, "was a steady absorption by OWI of the sales-promotion ideas and techniques."

Catton's views were shared within the OWI. The group of writers and journalists from the writers' group in the OFF grew increasingly apprehensive of the advertising techniques and personnel on which the office relied. The writers, interested primarily in intelligently informing the public about the major domestic and ideological issues of the war, believed the businessmen managing the government's promotional campaigns conceived of their job as "selling" the administration's war program to the greatest number of people. These advertising and radio executives appealed to the man-on-the-street in terms they thought he would best understand. Thus, OWI techniques were as varied as its goals. Serious pamphlets like "The Four Freedoms" or "The Thousand Million" contrasted sharply with radio announcements dedicated to the principle of "a truth a day keeps Hitler away."

The writers often aimed above the heads of most Americans; the radio executives aimed too low and often addressed the public "as if it were not quite grown up."

25 "Formulation of the OWI Charter," 17, Historian's Files, OWI Records.
26 Ewing to Roosevelt, March 16, 1943, OF 5015, Box 3, Roosevelt Papers.
27 Catton, War Lords of Washington, 74, 188-89.
28 Charles Siepmann to Pringle, May 5, 1942, Pringle Papers.
Almost instinctively, the two groups distrusted each other. In fact, Mac-Leish had established a separate writers' bureau because he anticipated conflicts between the writers and the radio and advertising men. The writers believed the "dollar-a-year" men wanted to "manipulate" rather than inform the people. The businessmen, for their part, worked to convince Americans to cooperate with the government and resented the autonomy and self-righteousness of writers whom they felt to be impractical and expendable. The quarrel, unresolved by Davis, increased in intensity until April 1943 when the writers and researchers resigned en masse, bringing the OWI pamphlet operation to an abrupt end. But the source of this conflict went back to the formation of the agency.

When the OFF was merged into the OWI, Pringle and his staff believed that they would continue to serve as an idea center and an influence on policy formation. But the writers found themselves submerged in a huge bureaucracy, far removed from the director who himself felt, as he later recalled, "like a man who had married a wartime widow and was trying to raise her children by all her previous husbands." The writers disliked being subordinate to radio and advertising executives who considered them excess baggage. They also resented the lack of interest in their work shown by Gardner Cowles, Jr., the director of the domestic branch. Cowles, a midwestern newspaper publisher, believed that the OWI existed to perform specific service functions for other government agencies, not to initiate projects unrelated to this purpose. He considered the writers and their pamphlets an unnecessary frill. Whenever possible, Cowles preferred to work through commercial channels and established close relations with the advertising industry's War Advertising Council to promote and coordinate campaigns.

Cowles and the Council worked effectively to publicize problems requiring action on the home front, but they tended to discourage material emphasizing the grimmer side of the war. When the secretary of the American Jewish Congress asked the Council to help portray Hitler's brutality toward conquered people, Cowles and the Council chairman replied that all available advertising space was committed to such subjects as war production and food rationing. More than once, Cowles disclaimed responsibility

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41 Pringle to MacLeish, undated Memorandum, Box 7, Pringle Papers; "The Role of the Bureau of Publications," Box 2, ibid.
42 Speech before the Naval War College, Nov. 16, 1951, Davis Papers.
43 Memo to Pringle, probably from John Fleming, recording Pringle's conversation with Cowles, Feb. 27, 1943, Pringle Papers.
44 Hearings Before the Subcommittee of the Committee on Appropriations on the National War Agencies Appropriation Bill for 1944, 78 Cong., 1 Sess., 1943, p. 715.
for posters and pamphlets depicting the grimness of the war. For the anniversary of Pearl Harbor, the Bureau of Graphics had designed a poster showing a tattered American flag waving defiantly, with the motto "We here resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain. . . ." One of Cowles' staff members objected to it and argued that the poster should have celebrated December 7 as a "day of patriotic fervor rather than a day of mourning." Cowles agreed, but the poster had been printed before he saw it.45

Cowles' position within the government, however, was far from secure. Early in 1943, Roosevelt had warned him and Davis to anticipate a struggle in Congress for their 1944 appropriation. The President told them that he would not intervene.46 Davis entrusted his subordinate with the unenviable task of pulling the budget for the domestic branch through Congress. The 1942 elections had produced a conservative majority which suspected that wartime agencies were extensions of the New Deal. The OWI was the most vulnerable of these agencies. Congressmen who equated "information" with "propaganda"47 had discovered what they considered to be five prime examples. Three of these were pamphlets prepared by the writers' group. Southern Democrats condemned "Negroes and the War," written to counteract Japanese propaganda questioning the stake of the Negro in American society.48 A pamphlet on taxation and a primer on inflation by Samuel Lubell also came under fire for praising Roosevelt and the New

45 Administrative secretary of the American Jewish Congress to Cowles, Feb. 13, 1943, domestic branch, Gardner Cowles Correspondence, OWI Records; Katherine Blackburn to Cowles, Oct. 30, 1942, reply Nov. 2, 1942, ibid.
46 Interview with Cowles, Jan. 16, 1963; interview with Lewis, April 1965.
47 Oregon's Republican Senator Rufus C. Holman replied to the testimony of Chester LaRoche, Chairman of the War Advertising Council, "In all of this guiding and directing the people's thought, it is amazing to me that they have any independent thoughts left." LaRoche interjected: "We do not guide their thoughts. We give them information." The Senator replied: "This whole propaganda machine . . . is to put thoughts into people's heads so that they will have no thoughts of their own." Senate, Hearings Before the Subcommittee of the Committee on Appropriations on the National War Agencies Appropriation Bill for 1944, 78 Cong., 1 Sess., 1943, p. 265.
48 Holman, wrote Newsweek, "hates the New Deal and all its works—its 'propaganda,' its 'psychology,' its 'ribbons and curls and furbelows.' . . . But primarily and frankly he detests President Roosevelt, who, he asserts has brought 'nothing but unhappiness' to the American people." "The flurry over government propaganda agencies," continued the article, "showed Congress's deepening determination to hit—and hit hard—at any and all New Deal soft spots that can be found. . . ." Newsweek, XXI (Feb. 22, 1943), 25, 26, 29.
49 Ironically, southern Democrats attacked the pamphlet as overrating the Negro, and northern Republicans condemned it for underrating him. Davis, "OWI Report to the President," 58. See also Harold F. Gosnell, "Obstacles to Domestic Pamphleteering BY OWI in World War II," Journalism Quarterly, 23 (Dec. 1946), 364-68, for an informative account of the fight over "Negroes and the War." The reactions of some southern congressmen may be found in Cong. Rec., 78 Cong., 1 Sess., 1311, 6126 (Jan. 14, Feb. 25, June 18, 1943); New York Times, March 9, 1943.
Deal. When irate congressmen claimed, with some justification, that the pamphlets minimized the importance of Congress and supported executive policies which had not yet been approved, Davis apologized; and Cowles regretted his approval of the booklets and attempted to make his bureau seem as inoffensive as possible before the OWI budget came up for consideration.40

This experience confirmed Cowles' conviction that the OWI could only justify itself before Congress if it made its services indispensable to other Washington agencies and terminated all controversial or extraneous functions. If he could eliminate pamphlets and posters and economize on surveys by relying on commercial polling agencies, Cowles thought he could blunt congressional opposition to his proposed budget.40 Without pamphlets and independent surveys, the OWI could no longer be suspected of trying to influence policy. As early as February, Cowles had told Pringle of the changes that he proposed to make in the structure and purpose of the domestic branch. Pringle reminded Cowles that he and MacLeish had persuaded most of the staff of the Bureau of Publication and Graphics to join the agency because of their common interest in war information policy. If Cowles intended to sublimate their work into carrying out orders, whether they agreed with them or not, Pringle warned Cowles that he doubted whether they or any creative people would remain in the OWI.51 Nevertheless, Cowles reorganized the branch.

By this time, he had come to rely upon the two men who symbolized for the Pringle group everything "unholy" in the "Madison Avenue" approach to the war. In February, Cowles centralized control of the domestic branch under William Lewis, former vice-president of the Columbia Broadcasting System, and James Allen, erstwhile motion-picture executive. Lewis was to supervise the writers directly, and he and Allen brought in Price Gilbert, former vice-president of Coca-Cola, to head the Bureau of Graphics and


40 Board of War Information Minutes, Oct. 31, 1942, OWI Records; Board of War Information Minutes, Feb. 11, 1943, ibid. At this meeting, Cowles told the Board (consisting of Davis and the major executives of OWI) that Congress would severely cut the domestic branch appropriation unless he held the budget to the 1943 limits. Davis agreed that some cutting would be necessary. Later, Cowles proposed ending the pamphlet and poster program to save paper.

Cowles "took the view that the intelligence operations undertaken by OWI . . . should not be directed toward the guidance of policy makers in other agencies since OWI was not responsible for the making of policy, and they should not be used as in the past to discover hidden causes, since OWI was not equipped to do very much about these hidden causes." "Development of Public Opinion Research in the Domestic Field," No. 156, Series 41.3, Bureau of the Budget Records. The Bureau of Intelligence was entirely abolished in the new budget.

51 See note 43.
Printing.\textsuperscript{52} Both the writers and graphics staff were upset about the unexpected shake-up which placed them under the supervision of "ad-men."

Lewis immediately tried to bring the writers and graphics people, who had enjoyed virtual autonomy, under control. Hereafter, he told them, they must write only to specification for certain markets or people, "not what they dream up." "[W]e will go on the theory," he declared, "never to do any work until [we are] sure it will get read, seen or heard."\textsuperscript{53} And Gilbert, familiar with the techniques of commercial poster advertising, argued that posters by the noted artist Ben Shahn portraying Nazi brutality were too unattractive for display. He expressed a preference for Norman Rockwell's visually appealing scenes of America. Poster language too, he insisted, must be simple and direct because "high-sounding" words would lose the prospective audience.\textsuperscript{54}

The writers and graphics staff briddled at what they construed as a thinly veiled attempt to gag them.\textsuperscript{55} They believed that Lewis' interest in distribu-

\textsuperscript{52} Harold Gosnell, "Obstacles to Domestic Pamphleteering," \textit{Journalism Quarterly}, 23 (Dec. 1946), 361.

\textsuperscript{53} Stenographic record of meeting with Lewis and Price Gilbert, March 2, 1943. Minutes taken by secretary of Francis Brennan and included in Brennan Diary (in the possession of Francis Brennan, New York).

\textsuperscript{54} \textit{Ibid.}, March 3 meeting.

\textsuperscript{55} The poet William Rose Benét, who was a friend of some of the writers, expressed their opinion of what was happening to OWI in a poem in the \textit{Saturday Review}, XXVI (May 8, 1943), 22.

Oh boy, but there's an ocean
Of joy in promotion,
Answering the question
"What's in it for me?",
Settling the digestion
Of the Land of the Free!
That's the stuff to feed the Rubes,
Subway Chumps and City Boobs!
Aren't you on to the surprising
Way they fall for Advertising? . . .
Try this delicious health-building War!
Buy \textit{all} you need—then buy some more!
\textit{Never mind what we're fighting for!}
Customers, customers, come and buy!
\textit{A short girdle does not bind the thigh.}
We're the Salesmen of the OWI . . .

But the People say "Bosh!" and the People say "Mush!"
To the Pretty-Girl Ad with the smirk and blush.
They're not the Hicks that you take them for.
They know what is needed to win this war.
They know that only the Truth can win
No matter how bad a jam we're in.
They don't need any Sugar-Coater,
Nor will they heed the Slick Promoter
They know where the boys are marching and flying,
tion precluded concern about content, and they refused to concede that the general public might be more receptive to a Rockwell than a Shahn. Shahn and Francis Brennan, the former chief of the graphics bureau, who objected to treating the American people "as if they were twelve years old," composed a poster embodying their idea of Gilbert's requirements. It showed the Statue of Liberty, arm upraised, carrying not a torch but four frosty bottles of Coca-Cola—the motto "The War That Refreshes: The Four Delicious Freedoms!" Brennan explained to Davis why he felt compelled to leave the OWI. The advertising men, he wrote,

utilize every trick of the trade to make necessary civilian actions appear palatable, comfortable, and not quite as inconvenient as Guadalcanal. . . . To our shame, while American soldiers rotted in the desert heat, the Graphics Division was designing posters about ordering coal early. . . . Now, with the African campaign at its height we are instructed to produce more ancient graphic saws that will soon smile cheerfully from the billboards, saying: "I'm happy in my new war job," and "We'll have enough to eat this winter, won't we, Mother?"

Both you and Mr. Cowles have said that some advertising techniques are valuable. If by that you mean the fairly simple job of getting messages printed, distributed, and read, I agree. But if you mean psychological approaches, content, and ideas, I most firmly do not agree. . . . Those techniques have done more toward dimming perception, suspending critical values, and spreading the sticky syrup of complacency over the people than almost any other factor.56

The crisis in the OWI began when a new pamphlet was ready to go to press in January 1943. Acting independently on a suggestion from an aide in the Department of Agriculture, W. McNeil Lowry of the writers group had prepared a report on the potential food supply. After a careful study, based on department statistics, Lowry concluded that the food quotas set by Secretary of Agriculture Claude Wickard could not be filled because of the

The jungles and sands where they're fighting and dying. . . .
They know damn well, with appropriate phlegm,
That Wounds and Death are in it for them.
Though glad they are of the work they do—
But they want the Hucksters told it too,
The minds that on the brink of Hell
Can only think how to buy and sell—
The people back home who hate to think
That anything's real but food and drink—
Who still don't know how the People feel
Silently, grimly, hotly, truly,
But think that the lowest kind of appeal
That doesn't upset the fools unduly
Is the sort of tripe to feed to the masses,
Since they're not so bright as the upper classes!

In closing, I'll only say, "God save us!
It isn't your fault at all, Elmer Davis."

56 Brennan to Davis, April 6, 1943, Pringle Papers.
acute shortage of farm labor and machinery. Wickard and James Byrnes, then head of the Office of Economic Stabilization, opposed publication of the report. Neither Wickard nor Byrnes wanted to provide the powerful farm bloc with ammunition in its fight to eliminate government interference in the market and to force the administration to allocate a higher priority to production of farm machinery. Lowry claimed that Cowles and Allen had refused to release the report unless the figures were changed to "soft-pedal the unpleasant prospects for the American dinner table." When Pringle and Lowry indignantly refused permission to make the report more palatable, Allen cancelled publication of the pamphlet and warned the writers that other reports then in progress might suffer the same fate. He did not explain to them, however, that the OWI had no authority to dispute a governmental policy or to create one if none existed. The writers, enraged over what appeared to be a deliberate attempt to falsify the evidence, held an unsatisfactory four-hour meeting with Cowles to explain their objections to Lewis, Allen, and the advertising executives in the OWI. They decided to resign unless they could be directly responsible to Davis, whom they respected. The director expressed his sympathy but refused to overrule Cowles. Although Davis asked each of the writers to reconsider and fight it out, they saw no reason to remain. Cowles had demanded Pringle's resignation, and most of the writers believed they could no longer do worthwhile work in the OWI.

On April 14, the writers released to the press an impassioned statement explaining their resignations. They asserted that it was no longer possible to give an honest and objective picture of the war with domestic activities of the OWI controlled by "high-pressure promoters who prefer slick salesmanship to honest information." Davis, incensed at the unexpected and

An adequate account of the farm situation is in Dean Albertson, Roosevelt's Farmer: Claude R. Wickard in the New Deal (New York, 1961), chapters 15-17, especially pp. 331, 360-61. Samuel Lubell, who assisted James Byrnes in the Office of Economic Stabilization, and Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., also helped clarify the issue, as did W. McNeil Lowry, the author of the pamphlet, and John R. Fleming, the former chief of the Bureau of Publications and Graphics. New York World-Telegram, April 13, 1943.


Lewis to Cowles, March 22, 1943, Lewis Papers.


See New York Times and Washington News, April 14-16, 1943, for best accounts. See also Cowley, "The Sorrows of Elmer Davis," 591-92. Lowry, who had quietly resigned in March, refused to sign the statement. Those signatures included Pringle, Schlesinger, MacKay, Kuhn, Adrienne Koch, Brennan, Hamburger, and six researchers. According to Lowry, Pringle regretted his decision to sign the statement when he realized the harm he had caused Davis and OWI. Schlesinger wrote the following explanation for his decision:
intemperate public attack, accepted their resignations and angrily denied the charges. In his report to the President, he explained the defection of the writers in terms of the brilliant individual who is unable to work on a team.

Such a man [he wrote] is very apt to insist that he must proclaim the truth as he sees it; if you tell him that so long as he works for the Government he must proclaim the truth as the President ... [sees] it, he may feel that this is an intolerable limitation on his freedom of thought and speech. In that case, he must go. ... In an organization that is going to get any work done you cannot do much with people who are convinced that they are the sole authorized custodians of Truth.62

Yet Davis understood that their initiative, their imagination, and their passionate conviction were all qualities that the OWT needed, and was the poorer without.

Much of this difficulty might have been avoided had the purpose of the writers' bureau been clarified at the outset. The animosity between the two groups was reinforced by their conflicting ideas about the function of an information agency. Pringle and his staff insisted that they retain the autonomy and influence they had exercised in the OFF, not realizing that such independence of action was virtually incompatible with the function of a major government agency. The frustrated writers saw themselves as defending truth against a vast and hostile bureaucracy; they were unaware of any change in their mandate. Cowles believed that the OWT existed mainly to provide services for other agencies and to coordinate government campaigns; but his opposition to the writers' pamphlets was as much a matter of political necessity as personal preference, since Congress was critical of the operations of the domestic branch. But Cowles, Lewis, and Allen never explained to the writers the political reasons for their decisions, nor is there any evidence that the writers would have accepted them as adequate justification for curtailing functions of the domestic branch. Moreover, Davis

"The advertising men have been striking out for more and more power over the whole domestic information policy. This has meant a primary interest in manipulating the people, not in giving them the facts. It has meant an increasing reliance of advertising techniques instead of honest information. ... It has meant an increasing conviction that any government information campaign likely to affect a vested business interest should first be approved by that interest. It has meant a steady replacement of independent writers, newspapermen, publishers, mostly of liberal inclination, by men beholden to the business community for their livelihood and thinking always as the business community thinks." Schlesinger to DeVoto, April 1943, DeVoto Papers.

Schlesinger, with twenty years perspective, noted: "I [did not] recognize that the conservative gains in the Congressional elections of 1942 were forcing the Administration to retreat all along the line and to abandon exposed and expendable positions like, I fear, the writer's bureau of OWI." Schlesinger to the author, March 27, 1963.

62 Davis, "Report to the President," 42-43, Davis Papers.
was too dependent on the administrative skill of his assistants to question their decisions, and he seems to have been unaware of the intensity of the conflict.\textsuperscript{63}

The resignation of the writers marked the real end of the OWI as an information agency, and congressional budgetary action confirmed the destruction of the domestic branch. Despite the elimination of the pamphlet operation, Congress drastically reduced the OWI's appropriation. Cowles, a Republican, swayed only three GOP senators.\textsuperscript{64} Congress allocated "just enough money to relieve them of the odium of having put us out of business," Davis wrote DeVoto, "and carefully not enough to let us accomplish anything much." Palmer Hoyt, who was to relieve Cowles, "came down to take charge of our Domestic Branch and arrived just in time to learn that it had been abolished."\textsuperscript{65}

\begin{itemize}
\item Davis' lack of administrative ability was bemoaned by many members of the staff. See, for example, William E. Daugherty, "Personnel Qualifications for Psychological Warfare," William E. Daugherty, ed., in collaboration with Morris Janowitz, \textit{A Psychological Warfare Casebook} (Baltimore, 1958), 169; Schlesinger to DeVoto, April 1943, DeVoto Papers; interviews with Cowles, Jan. 16, 1963, and Eisenhower, April 5, 1963.
\item In the Senate, Willkie Republicans voted for OWI, and the southern Democratic vote split, mainly because of the controversy over "Negroes and the War." In the House, it was a caucus matter; and the only Republican who wanted to keep OWI was Christian Herter, one of the pioneers in OFF.
\item Davis to DeVoto, July 4, 1943, DeVoto Papers.
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