

Critical Thinking and Viewing: The Propaganda Newsreel, 1942

OVERVIEW

On June 13, 1942, six months after the United States entered the Second World War, President Franklin Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9182, establishing the Office of War Information (OWI). The OWI's key objective was to mobilize the country for all-out war. This meant controlling all information Americans received about the war effort, both on the battlefronts and on the Homefront. In an era long before social media and 24/7 television news, movies were a critical means of communicating with Americans. Newsreels, in particular, were a critical source of information.

This lesson introduces students to the use of propaganda in newsreels and asks them to consider the following essential questions: How might a movie become a weapon of war? And When might propaganda be useful in preserving democracy?

Review, as needed, the basic definition of propaganda. Broadly defined, propaganda is the expression of opinions or actions intended to influence the thinking of others. Propaganda messages appeal to emotions rather than the intellect, framing issues in a biased or slanted manner so as to achieve a particular outcome.

ASK: When might propaganda be useful in preserving a democracy? Answers will vary and there is no simple response. Use the question to challenge students to think about the ultimate goal of propaganda—to sway public perceptions. Propaganda can have positive outcomes as well as negative ones. Being able to identify propaganda strategies is an essential critical-thinking skill for those living in a democracy.

Display PPT slide 2: Avenge Pearl Harbor. The slide shows two of the many propaganda posters produced by the government in response to the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, that killed thousands of US military personnel and civilians. “Avenge Pearl Harbor,” as well as “Remember Pearl Harbor,” were frequently used phrases that tapped into the shock and anger so many Americans felt after the attack. The goal of the emotional appeal was to persuade Americans to support the country’s war policies, which included purchasing war bonds and enlisting in the military.

Encourage students to analyze the elements within the composition of both images.

ASK: Propaganda messages appeal to emotions. Both of these posters do just that, but the compositions are significantly different. What is the difference in the emotional appeal of these two images?

- *Avenge Pearl Harbor. Anger is expressed through the depiction of Uncle Sam. Note his fist raised in defiance against the Japanese planes (indicated by the red circle, a*

symbol used by Japan's military, indicating Japan as the land of the rising sun). Students might also comment on the rolled-up sleeves revealing Sam's muscles, indicating America is not weak. Other elements within the composition worth noting are the smoke from the destruction caused by the attack and the use of "avenge," meaning to punish or seek retribution.

- *Above and Beyond the Call of Duty. While Uncle Sam was an easily recognized American icon, the sailor on this poster is a depiction of Navy messman Dorie Miller who was among those aboard the USS West Virginia on the morning of the Pearl Harbor attack. The depiction of Miller expresses pride rather than anger. He stands at attention, eyes forward, face determined. Note the Navy Cross pinned on Miller's uniform, awarded to him for his heroic behavior during the attack. He helped to remove the wounded, quite possibly saving numerous lives. Despite serving in the Navy as a cook, and not a gunner, he nonetheless manned the weapon of a fallen gunner and began shooting at the Japanese planes. Students should also note the reference to Pearl Harbor, indicated by smoke from a ship that has been hit and is burning.*

Briefly review the definition and significance of newsreels. A newsreel is a short nonfiction story recorded on film, usually on a current event or human-interest topic. Typically, newsreels were considered "short subjects" that played in movie theaters prior to the screening of a feature film.

Although newsreels are nonfiction, they are not necessarily objective. The newsreel editor selected which news stories to feature and how to frame those stories. Generally, a newsreel's purpose was to entertain as well as inform. During World War II, the newsreel became the primary means of communicating information about the war. Because newsreels were shown in theaters across America, the newsreel's influence on the public's perception of the government's war policies was significant. As a result, wartime newsreels were often used intentionally as propaganda tools.

Display PPT slide 3: Memo for Fox Movietone News. The image on this slide is an archival paper document from the Department of the Navy about the planned release of a Fox Movietone newsreel. Although the memo has no date as part of its header, the text indicates that the newsreel story is based on the footage captured by Fox Movietone cameraman Al Brick, who was on the scene at Pearl Harbor during the attack. Draw students' attention to the second paragraph and the text in all caps, noting that the newsreel cannot be released for screening in theaters until December 6. This is almost one year to the day after the attack.

Share this additional information. Months before the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor, Fox Movietone had assigned cameraman Al Brick to Hawaii. The studio anticipated that a war with Japan was imminent. On the morning of December 7, Brick was in the right place at the right time and began filming the attack as it was occurring. The footage, however, was

seized by the Department of the Navy. Not until a year later was this footage released for screening in theaters.

Remind students that at this time in history, there were no cell phones and no nationally broadcast television news stations or programs. The newsreel footage, therefore, was a significant contribution to documenting the attack.

ASK: Why do you think the Navy confiscated the footage? *There is no one correct answer. Student responses will vary. The objective of the question is to encourage students' critical thinking about the government's intentions for using the footage. Accept all reasonable responses.*

Screen Now It Can be Shown! (This newsreel is available with the other materials for this lesson, on the Story of Movies website.)

Discussion questions also appear on **PPT slide 4**.

GUIDED DISCUSSION

1. The newsreel begins with a title card explaining why the footage can be seen “now,” which is one year after the attack on Pearl Harbor. Why do you think the Department of the Navy finally released the footage? *The title card only states that the footage can no longer be of use to the enemy, suggesting that the situation is no longer the same. Challenge students to think more critically about the reasoning for releasing the footage, such as to reinforce the “treachery” of the attack and to sway public opinion in favor of supporting the government’s war policies.*
2. Make a list of specific words used in the narration to create a negative impression of the enemy, identified in the newsreel as “the Japs.” *Words and phrases include but are not limited to: Treacherous blow, phony Japanese peace negotiations, the Far Eastern double-crossers, sneak punchers, avenging the Jap treachery, and newsreel photographer Al Brick’s final statement of “slap the Japs right off the map.” These phrases are weighted with emotional connotations intended to trigger responses of indignation in American audiences.*
3. In contrast, what words and phrases, as well as images, create a positive representation of the American military forces at Pearl Harbor? *Answers will vary. The focus on the salvage and reclamation of the battleships and planes emphasizes the country’s ingenuity and determination to fight back, i.e., to “avenge” the treachery. By first showing the destruction (flames, billowing smoke, ships capsized), the subsequent images of the repaired ships steaming out of the harbor and later, on the sea, firing the big guns (seemingly at battle) are particularly inspiring. Specific words and phrases include the following: Steam forth to fight again, the saving of the battleships is like a miracle, the mighty craft, the naval might of the United States a year after Pearl Harbor is greater than ever, paying the Japs back for Pearl Harbor.*

4. Describe the music on the soundtrack during the attack and scenes of destruction. Compare that to the music used once the repair work begins. How does the soundtrack contribute to the emotional content of the newsreel? *During the attack, the music is dramatic, loud, suggesting tension and, some students may suggest, danger or fear. During the second half of the newsreel, patriotic songs are part of the soundtrack (including the Navy anthem, "Anchors Aweigh") and they emphasize patriotism and steely resolve, courage, and justified vengeance. Accept all thoughtful responses.*

Think more about it. Display PPT slide 5: Casualties at Pearl Harbor, December 7, 1941. On this slide is a paragraph taken from the news story summary for *Now It Can Be Shown!* listing the casualties as a result of the Japanese attack. This information, however, was not part of the final newsreel that played in movie theaters. Why do you think this information about the significant loss of military personnel was omitted from the newsreel story?

Answers will vary. Clearly, the focus in the newsreel is on the damage to the military ships and planes and not on personnel. Al Brick's footage as selected and edited into this newsreel does not include images of wounded and/or dead soldiers. The newsreel shows the havoc and then the relatively quick recovery of the weapons of war, meant to inspire American audiences. Showing human losses might have had a negative effect—shocking and saddening audiences, rather than instilling pride in a country that has refused to accept defeat. Accept all reasonable responses.

Conclude the activity. Revisit this question presented at the beginning of this activity: When might a propaganda film be useful in preserving a democracy? Ask students to comment on the propaganda elements of this newsreel and what they think the response (either positive or negative) might have been on movie audiences in 1942. *Answers will vary. Re-emphasize, however, the intended purpose of this newsreel—not merely to inform but to persuade. Accept all reasonable responses.*

Extend the activity. Assign for independent reading "Newsreel Footage from Pearl Harbor: *Now It Can Be Shown!*"