"Propaganda Must Be Painless": Radio Entertainment and Government Propaganda during World War II

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“Propaganda Must Be Painless”: Radio Entertainment and Government Propaganda During World War II

GERD HORTEN

I. INTRODUCTION

For a jittery radio industry concerned about the future of American broadcasting in the early months after America’s entry into World War II, William B. Lewis came as a godsend. As head of the Domestic Radio Division of the Office of Facts and Figures (OFF), and later the Office of War Information (OWI, June 1942), Lewis, a former vice-president of CBS, reassured the industry that the commercial structure of American radio would remain unchanged. In his first meeting with network executives and radio sponsors and advertisers in January 1942, he outlined his pragmatic approach to radio’s war effort. As he argued, “radio is valuable only because of the enormous audiences it has created.” During wartime, his government office planned to use radio’s popularity without unnecessarily disrupting radio structure and schedule: “Let’s not forget that radio is primarily an entertainment medium, and must continue to be if it is . . . to deliver the large audiences we want to reach.”

Lewis was very successful in pushing through his pragmatic approach for radio’s war effort. He was instrumental in filling the Radio Division of the OWI with men and women from radio stations, the networks, and advertising agencies — “dollar-a-year men,” as they were referred to at the time. Lewis was a charismatic, well-liked person and quickly developed a reputation for getting things done. By January 1943, he was promoted to assistant director of the Domestic Branch. He was one of the main architects who developed a distinctly “Madison Avenue” style of wartime propaganda against the opposition of writers and intellectuals employed by the OWI, who favored an informational propaganda approach. By early 1943, the latter resigned from government service, leaving it to media representatives and advertisers to sell the war to the American people.

In the case of radio, Lewis’s office, in collaboration with the radio industry, developed a simple yet effective plan for radio’s participation in the war. According to this Network Allocation Plan, as it became known,
radio programs would integrate war messages on a rotating schedule. The basic idea was to superimpose radio's war effort on the existing radio schedule in order to minimize disruptions of Americans' listening habits and to maximize the effect of war messages. The plan followed a simple premise shared by Lewis and radio representatives alike: "Radio propaganda must be painless."

Radio's Network Allocation Plan became the master schedule for the government's war effort through broadcasting because it combined two crucial imperatives. First, it demonstrated that a free media could effectively execute its war effort on a voluntary basis, adding credence to the conviction that democracy was a viable and preferable alternative to totalitarian Fascist regimes. Second, the plan least disrupted the established broadcasting schedule and thus, at the same time, assured comfortable profit margins for the radio industry and secured radio sponsors' and advertisers' continued interest in the swift and effective execution of radio's war effort.

To be sure, radio was only one of the media that disseminated the government propaganda campaigns during World War II. Films, newsreels, magazines, and all other media participated in this propaganda effort. Historians have studied most of these cultural genres in connection with their contribution to wartime propaganda. In contrast, radio's role for the domestic government propaganda has so far been ignored. 4 This oversight is all the more surprising because radio was the primary medium during World War II in the United States: 110 million Americans, 90 percent of the population, listened to an average of four hours daily. 5 In late 1942, Lewis argued that radio's execution of the war effort made it the most pervasive and most persuasive propaganda instrument in the country and, possibly, worldwide:

As 1943 dawns, American radio — of the free will of all its component parts — is coordinated to do a more effective job in the dissemination of war information than any other radio system in the world, or than any other medium of communication in this country. 6

In this essay, I argue with Lewis that American radio presented the most formidable propaganda medium in the country. I analyze radio's war effort through two of the most popular comedy programs of the 1940s: the Jack Benny Show and Fibber McGee and Molly. Radio comedy was the vanguard of radio's propaganda effort through entertainment. It was the most popular radio genre and thus reached the greatest number of Americans on a regular basis. As I show, radio entertainment proved not only relaxing and distracting, as many contemporary observers frequently noted, but, more importantly, these comedy shows simultaneously informed and inspired their listeners through a steady stream of well-dosed and well-orchestrated government propaganda campaigns.
II. RADIO COMEDY AND WARTIME PROPAGANDA

FIBBER McGEE: I tell you it ain't fair, Molly, they can’t do this to me – four gallons a week. Why, that's ridiculous.
MOLLY: I think so, too.
FIBBER: You do?
MOLLY: Yes, you don’t need four gallons!
FIBBER: Doggone it. I do too. Four gallons is outrageous. Where can I go on four gallons of gas?
MOLLY: Where do you wanna go, dearie?
MOLLY: You mean like running out of cigars?

On December 1, 1942, gas rationing went into effect nationwide. It was a Tuesday, and at 9 p.m. of the very same day, thirty million Americans tuned in to their favorite comedy couple, *Fibber McGee and Molly*. Gas rationing had also come to the residents of 79 Wistful Vista of the fictional small town in the Midwest, and Fibber McGee loudly expressed his dislike of the new rationing measure:

FIBBER: Ah, forget my cigars. I’m talking about this mileage rationing. I think it's a dirty deal. The whole thing is silly! It’s going to make everybody stay at home. Why, in two years a guy from Indiana won’t gonna know what a guy from Kansas is talking about.
MOLLY: Where are you from?
FIBBER: Illinois.
MOLLY: Then it’s happened already. I don’t even know what you’re talking about.
FIBBER: I’m talking about giving all the car owners a measly medicine drop full of gasoline. It’s an infringement on private rights, that’s what it is!
MOLLY: Look, dearie, look. The main reason they’re rationing gasoline is to save tires. Don’t you know if we keep driving like we have been a majority of automobiles will be off the road by next year?
FIBBER: Good! There’s too much traffic anyway! Too crowded. Get the cars off the road. That’ll be fine. That’s swell.
MOLLY: Well, I’m glad you feel that way, because yours would be one of them.
FIBBER: What?!! Me? Give up my car? Oh, no I don’t. I paid for my tires and by the hind leg of Leon Henderson I got a right to drive it!
As Molly went on to explain, the director of the Office of Price Administration (OPA), Leon Henderson, had taken this step not because of a shortage of fuels. Instead, the OPA had decided that the only way to safeguard the precariously low rubber supply was to ration gasoline and thus curtail driving. Gas rationing had started on the East Coast in May 1942. Over the summer and fall, the Roosevelt administration had, in addition, ordered a ban on pleasure driving and a thirty-five-mile speed limit on all of the nation's highways.

In connection with its gas-rationing order, the government issued A, B, and C stickers. Holders of an A sticker received four gallons a week (later three). B card holders, like war workers, were given additional gasoline for essential driving. C stickers were issued only to people who needed their cars for work-related driving, for example, doctors. The cards were issued by the local rationing boards. What made gas rationing a contentious issue was that the respective stickers indicated a person's social status and standing in their communities. As another historian has pointedly put it: "Obviously, if you were an A card holder, you were a nobody - a nonessential who puttered about in his car on insignificant little errands while cars packed to the roof with joyriding war workers or large sedans driven by powerful men with mysterious connections blew carbon monoxide in your face." Nationwide gas rationing cemented Henderson's reputation as the most unpopular man in America.

[Enter Mr. Wilcox; one of McGee's neighbors]
FIBBER: This mileage rationing has gotten me disgusted.
MOLLY: You know, he's been raving about it all day, Mr. Wilcox. He thinks the OPA is trying to make an A-P-E out of him.
WILCOX: What business, pal?
FIBBER: Well, in the first place, I'll . . . Well, gee whiz. I've got responsibilities.
MOLLY: Oh, he really has, Mr. Wilcox.
FIBBER: [feebly] Yes.
MOLLY: You know, he's the sole supporter of three pinochle players at the Elks Club.
WILCOX: Fibber, you talk like a chump . . . If you had the brains of a seahorse, you'd realize the spot this country's in regarding rubber. Why, England has no civilian driving and Canada has had mileage rationing for months. So has our eastern seaboard.
FIBBER: What's that got to do with . . . [interrupted]
WILCOX: And you stand there and squawk putting your petty little private life against the importance of winning this war. FIBBER: I still don't get . . . [interrupted]
WILCOX: Get wise. Only a monkey could expect to do business as usual. And we haven't got time for monkey business! [Exit WILCOX under loud applause.]

FIBBER: You know, Molly, m-m-maybe I was wrong.

MOLLY: Well, for goodness' sake, at last you've begun to realize it.

FIBBER: As he says, only a monkey could . . . Hey! Was that guy calling me a monkey? What that -- , just because I think I got a right to more than four gallons a week. A guy of my standing in the community. . . .

[Fade into song by Kingsmen Quartet]

Like much of the nation, Fibber McGee was visibly rattled over the new gas-rationing measure. By the early 1940s, Fibber, played by Jim Jordan, was a well-known and well-liked character, who presented an excellent foil for the disgruntled American citizen: Fibber was full of himself, he was a windbag and a braggart, and yet a likeable neighborhood nuisance. He was a man who conducted his friendly rivalries with his neighbors in the open; in fact, the name calling and utter disrespect for social etiquette was one of the show's distinctive features. Above all, however, Fibber was a bungler and an easy fall guy for his patient and loving wife, Molly (Marian Jordan), and the other frequently intruding friends and neighbors.9

The show's writer, Don Quinn, usually left it to Fibber to bring up all the self-serving criticisms against government rationing measures -- "They should have foreseen this," "What in the case of an emergency?" "It's an infringement of civil liberties" -- only to have each of his charges deflated by the more respectable and socially responsible characters of the show. Yet Fibber echoed many of the sentiments of actual citizens, who were as dissatisfied about the measure as the radio comedian. Like Fibber, these citizens were told through subtle and often very direct means to lighten up and to put their petty little self-interest in perspective to the national interest and the war effort.

Typically, Fibber was put in his spot through humorous repartees or quick stabs at his inflated ego. During wartime, however, these exchanges could include a serious note or even harsh reminders of the war that America was engaged in. One of the best examples was the parting scene of Mayor LaTrivia on the same gas-rationing show. Gale Gordon, the actor who played LaTrivia, had been drafted into the Coast Guard and was leaving the program; his farewell was included in the show of December 1. Mayor LaTrivia was a serious and respected administrator of the fictional small town, intelligent, but stiff in his social skills. In his usual exchanges with Fibber, LaTrivia was bogged down by Fibber's quick wit and often illogical and nonsensical wordplays and faux pas, forcing LaTrivia to long dramatic pauses and generally ended in him leaving the McGees residence befuddled. In his farewell show, however, it was LaTrivia who left Fibber dumbfounded:
LATRIVIA: Well, for heaven’s sake, [McGee], stop your griping. You’re lucky you’ve got a car at all. Well, excuse me, McGee, but when I get over to Africa or Australia or wherever they send me, I’ll be thinking of you, McGee, and all the hardship you’re suffering . . . Goodbye, Mrs. McGee. I’ll see you when this is over.

MOLLY: Bye, Mr. Mayor, and happy landing.

LATRIVIA: Thank you. Good-bye, McGee.

FIBBER: Good-bye, Mr. Mayor. Don’t take any wooden anchors.

LATRIVIA: I won’t. And, McGee, when you drive, if you get up to thirty-five miles an hour, think of somebody who didn’t get a rubber lifeboat. Good-bye.

[Exit LATRIVIA under loud applause.]

During World War II, Don Quinn was one of the acknowledged masters of the integrated OWI propaganda messages. Quinn had been with Jim and Marian Jordan since their debut of the *Fibber McGee and Molly Show* in early 1935. By 1940, the program was one of the established top comedy broadcasts in the country, and its popularity led to a marked increase of radio situation comedies. From 1942 to 1946, it alternated with the *Bob Hope Show* as the top-rated comedy program; each of them attracted an average weekly audience of thirty million Americans.10

When asked about the success of his “propaganda shows,” Quinn argued that he was simply following established and successful rules for comedy writing. Listeners were already interested in these war-related topics, which made it easier for the writer: “We have better audience reaction, we get more fan mail, our Crossley [listener rating] goes up.” In fact, to test the effectiveness of popular radio shows, the OWI agreed to give the *Fibber McGee and Molly Show* the exclusive rights to one OWI plug, an appeal for merchant seaman. On the day after the program, according to the War Shipping Administration, the responses doubled.11

Quinn and *Fibber McGee and Molly* were part of a very effective and efficient propaganda effort. In radio circles, the master schedule for this propaganda effort became known as the Network Allocation Plan. The plan was no secret and was, in fact, frequently discussed in the trade magazines. Yet largely unaware to the general public, American radio was organized into an extremely powerful propaganda medium.

III. GOVERNMENT PROPAGANDA AND THE RADIO INDUSTRY

The Network Allocation Plan was the outcome of a very intimate collaboration between the Radio Division of the OFF, network executives, and radio advertisers. In the early months of 1942, they met repeatedly to
discuss how radio could contribute to America's war effort. If the first months of 1942 were any indication, the biggest fear was not radio's apathy but rather its overzealous and uncoordinated participation. The reason was that immediately after the attack on Pearl Harbor, radio writers and advertisers both on the national and local level seized the opportunity to exhibit their patriotism and tried to outdo each other in appeals for sacrifice and national unity. Moreover, what had been a trickle of government requests for air time before the war quickly turned into a flood of demands after December 7. In a first assessment of radio's war effort a little more than a month after the American entry into the war, the national advertisers criticized what they called "the present hit-and-miss system" of radio's effort and openly wondered whether the overall effect of the time contributed was actually constructive. They especially objected to the incessant "plugging" of war messages and the "canned material" disseminated by government agencies. 12

This was not the only criticism. In fact, the assessment of the advertisers echoed the sentiment of the leading officials in the Radio Division of the OFF. After all, only a few months prior, William Lewis and Douglas Meservey had held leading positions in the CBS and NBC radio networks, respectively. Lewis became head of the Radio Division of the OFF in October 1941; Meservey was recruited as deputy chief one month later. They understood the challenges ahead of them as well as anybody else in the industry. In mid-December 1941, Meservey, in a departmental memorandum, summarized what had to be done. First of all, as he started out, it was important to remember that to the American listener "radio is primarily an entertainment medium." Consequently, radio had a saturation point on informational and educational material. "The problem," as Meservey succinctly stated it, was "to make the best possible use of radio for the war effort while still maintaining the tremendous audience which [made] the medium so valuable." The radio industry was ready to do its part, but advertisers and writers needed "curbing as well as direction," as Meservey emphasized. The key words were selectivity, coordination, and allocation. 13

Lewis fully agreed with this assessment. When the leading officials in charge of radio at the OFF and at other government agencies met with representatives of the Association of National Advertisers on January 20, 1942, Lewis presented Meservey's proposal for overall radio coordination. As he emphasized, the main problem facing radio was one "of skillfully superimposing the war effort on the existing structure," which needed the concerted collaboration of the government agencies and the entire radio industry. 14

The radio industry concurred with this call for coordination. The National Association of Broadcasters for its part had founded the Broadcasters' Victory Council as the central liaison between the radio industry and the various government war agencies. The networks created the Network Relations Committee for the same purpose. The advertisers, finally, had
established the War Advertising Council to assess the new challenges coming in the wake of America's entry into war. Its Radio Advisory Committee was charged with handling the cooperation with the government's war effort through radio.

The industry accepted the Radio Division of the OFF – and finally the OWI – as the central clearing station for their collaboration. The plan that coordinated radio's war effort, on the other hand, was conceived of by the Radio Advisory Committee of the Advertising Council. It was simple and yet effective. In essence, this plan asked the government agencies to provide every national advertiser with a definite schedule of war messages to be covered well ahead of time. It would then be left up to the writer or producer of the program to incorporate the government message in the most effective manner. Radio thus became one area of the intricate government–business cooperation that characterized most of America's war effort.  

The Network Allocation Plan was inaugurated on April 27, 1942. It dealt solely with sponsored shows carried over one of the three networks – NBC, CBS, and the Blue Network (later ABC). It asked the sponsors and advertisers of weekly programs to include a war message on every fourth show. Network programs which aired more than once a week, for example, news broadcasts or soap operas, were asked to include OWI messages on a biweekly schedule. Secondly, the OWI drew up four-week plans to give sponsors and advertisers adequate time to prepare their shows. It selected three or four topics per week and emphasized them according to their respective importance. The Tuesday night schedule for the first four weeks of the Network Allocation Schedule (April 27–May 24, 1942) is presented in Table 1.

The Radio Division of the OWI, in connection with network representatives and the War Advertising Council, prepared a similar schedule for daytime and nighttime radio for every day of the week. As Seymour Morris, the Chief of the Allocation Division of the Radio Division, rightly argued, it was “the largest advertising campaign that has ever been attempted in this country.” When Archibald MacLeish, the director of the OFF, informed Franklin D. Roosevelt about the radio collaboration, MacLeish was equally enthusiastic: “I think the plan [Network Allocation Plan] offers potentially the most powerful weapon of communication on government information ever designed in any country.”

As Clayton Koppes and Gregory Black have argued convincingly, Hollywood and the movie industry became “a compliant part of the American war machine.” Like radio, the film producers were eager to collaborate with the OWI and were an essential part in the government information and propaganda campaigns. Yet as I argue in this article, radio played an even more integral part in the OWI propaganda effort than did the movies, largely because 90 percent of the American people owned at least one radio set and on average had it tuned in for about four hours daily. During the war years, ninety million Americans went to the movies weekly.
Table 1. Radio Network Allocation Plan for Tuesday Night (April 27–May 24, 1942)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Week</th>
<th>Network 1</th>
<th>Network 2</th>
<th>Network 3</th>
<th>Network 4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>First week</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(April 27–May 3, 1942)</td>
<td>7:30 NBC-Red</td>
<td>8:00 CBS</td>
<td>9:00 Blue</td>
<td>10:00 CBS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Burns &amp; Allen</em></td>
<td><em>Missing Heirs</em></td>
<td><em>Jury Trials</em></td>
<td><em>Glenn Miller</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(22.1 rating)</td>
<td>(13.0 rating)</td>
<td>(7.1 rating)</td>
<td>(3.4 rating)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>War bonds</em></td>
<td><em>Marines</em></td>
<td><em>Need for nurses</em></td>
<td><em>Scrap metal</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Second week</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(May 4–11, 1942)</td>
<td>8:00 Blue</td>
<td>8:30 NBC</td>
<td>9:00 CBS</td>
<td>9:30 NBC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Cugat</em></td>
<td><em>Treasure Chest</em></td>
<td><em>Duffy’s Tavern</em></td>
<td><em>Fibber McGee</em></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>(3.3)</td>
<td>(14.4)</td>
<td>(6.4)</td>
<td>(40.8)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Sugar rationing</em></td>
<td><em>War bonds</em></td>
<td><em>Price control</em></td>
<td><em>Sugar rationing</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Third week</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(May 11–17, 1942)</td>
<td>7:00 Blue</td>
<td>7:30 CBS</td>
<td>9:00 NBC</td>
<td>10:30 NBC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Easy Aces</em></td>
<td><em>Second Husband</em></td>
<td><em>Battle of Sexes</em></td>
<td><em>Red Skelton</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(6.1)</td>
<td>(8.5)</td>
<td>(15.3)</td>
<td>(22.6)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Price control</em></td>
<td><em>Need for nurses</em></td>
<td><em>War bonds</em></td>
<td><em>USO</em></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Fourth week</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(May 18–24, 1942)</td>
<td>6:15 CBS</td>
<td>8:00 NBC</td>
<td>8:30 CBS</td>
<td>10:00 NBC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Voice of Broadway</em></td>
<td><em>Johnny Presents</em></td>
<td><em>Bob Burns</em></td>
<td><em>Bob Hope</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(3.7)</td>
<td>(12.9)</td>
<td>(16.7)</td>
<td>(34.3)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Car pooling</em></td>
<td><em>War bonds</em></td>
<td><em>War bonds</em></td>
<td><em>U.S.O.</em></td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Cooperative analysis of broadcasting ratings of April 1942, as given in the OWI outline. Obviously, these ratings changed over time, but presented general estimates of program popularity. The themes reflect the priorities of the OWI for the first four weeks after the inauguration of the Allocation Plan on April 27, 1942.

Through the Radio Allocation Plan, the OWI messages reached the same number of people every day of the week. At least as important was that radio had become a part of everyday life and radio characters were as familiar to listeners as friends or neighbors.18

From May 15 through June 15, 1942, *Variety* collaborated with the OFF Radio Division in order to monitor the network allocations. Together they discovered that, despite some glitches, the Network Allocation Plan was catching on fast. Robert J. Landry, the editor of *Variety* who wrote the reports on “radio’s showmanship,” especially praised shows that integrated allocated OWI messages into the plot rather than delivering straight messages.19

Landry and the OFF highlighted examples of shows that discussed or introduced war-related topics without missing a beat. The first *Fibber McGee and Molly* program under the Network Allocation Plan received wide attention as a model for other shows. The program was broadcast on May 5 under the title “Sugar Substitute” and was part of OFF’s effort to register Americans for sugar rationing. In the episode, Fibber McGee...
had set his mind on helping the government’s drive by developing a chemical sugar substitute. As he explained his reasoning to Molly, “Hitler got a substitute for everything.” “Yes,” retorted his wife, “And do you know that they’ll soon need a substitute for Hitler.”

Another show cited favorably was Easy Aces, a long-running comedy program of Goodman and Jane Ace that broadcast three times a week for fifteen minutes over the Blue Network. The comedy was largely built on Goodman playing the straight man for his dim-witted wife, Jane, who played the archetypal “Dumb Dora.” In this particular show, Ace was discussing a new war organization called the USO, which he had just read about in the paper:

ACE: I see here where they’re starting a big campaign to raise thirty-two million dollars between May 11 and July 14... There’s an organization [called] the U.S.O.
JANE: U.S.A. you mean.
ACE: No, U.S.O.
JANE: Now wait a minute, dear... don’t start telling me they’ve changed the name of this country... I know the U.S.A. as well as...
ACE: I’m talking about the U.S.O.
JANE: United States of, and nothing else?
ACE: It’s not the United States...
JANE: Dear, don’t let anybody hear you talk like that...
ACE: Like what... I said U.S.O.
JANE: U.S.A. United States of America. You can’t say United States of... and leave it dangling there in the air... Can’t you admit when you made a mistake... I won’t tell anybody... Dear!
ACE: Seven, eight, nine, ten.
JANE: What?
ACE: Look, Jane, there’s an organization known as the U.S.O. The United Service Organization... it’s a very important outfit... It makes the leisure time the boys in the army have pleasant... and they even perform personal service for the men in the Army... they give them movies... radio entertainment... they entertain the men in the camps... even on the firing lines. And they need money to carry on this wonderful work... thirty-two million dollars to be exact.

Whether its task was to familiarize Americans with new war organization, to inform them about rationing measures, or simply to reinforce the general sacrifices that were necessary for the war effort, commercial radio was the primary medium to deliver to the American public these OWI messages. As Landry emphasized, the Allocation Plan and the Radio War Guide, which were published regularly to inform sponsors, writers, and
advertisers of the government messages to be covered, came as close to a "master morale plan" as the United States ever developed. 22

Cooperation in the Network Allocation Plan was voluntary, but the Radio Bureau did not sit idly by when it found an agency or sponsor lacking in compliance. In the relatively few cases where this did happen, resistance was generally due to company presidents' dislike for the Roosevelt administration and the OWI. The staff of the Radio Division usually worked through the advertising agencies in order to coax radio sponsors into compliance. The staffers reminded the advertising agencies that the OWI had not curtailed radio, as feared by the industry, or they referred to the contributions and patriotic sacrifices of the sponsor's competitors. Most often, though, they used their connections and friendships to apply subtle pressure, as the following letter from Seymour Morris of the Allocation Division shows. In this instance, Morris wrote to a friend at Proctor and Gamble, a radio sponsor, and asked for his help with another program sponsor:

Here is a little confidential matter which I would like to drop in your lap. Of all the agencies in the country, the one which is doing the poorest job for us on the Allocation Plan assignments is the Biow Company [Ginny Simms Show, NBC]. . . . The situation was unfortunate enough when it was simply a case of doing a poor job for us on every message they delivered. . . . They now want to be excused altogether from any cooperation on this program. . . . Therefore, it occurred to me that you as an individual could be extremely helpful to us if - when a convenient occasion arises - you could drop into Mr. Biow's ear a few of the opinions which your Company has about the Network Allocation Plan and the job it has done to date.

A week after he had sent the letter, Seymour received assurance by W. M. Ramsey, general manager of Proctor and Gamble, that he would personally take care of the OWI's problem: "I should be very glad to take this matter up with him [Milton Biow] at the first convenient opportunity. I shall also consider the matter as off the record by destroying the letter as you suggest." 23

Seymour's request had to be off the record because the OWI had no authority to enforce the Allocation Plan. Yet for the most part, the Radio Division did not have to apply pressure in order to get compliance from radio sponsors and advertisers as well as radio talent. Actually, the radio industry's cooperation was as much based on self-interest as it was on patriotism. First of all, the voluntary collaboration of radio programs ensured that the government would not alter or disrupt commercial radio broadcasting. Secondly, as Quinn indicated and most advertising agencies and writers agreed, "when they use war themes and use them well, their Crossleys go up." 24 And finally, as the army recruitment campaigns intensi-
fied through 1942, making radio shows essential to the war effort provided an “insurance policy”: it protected stars and writers from the draft and kept popular shows on the air – to the financial benefit of everybody involved.

By August and September 1942, the draft had become the biggest concern of the entertainment industry, as the call went out to every able-bodied man between the ages of eighteen and thirty-eight to serve his country. Of the twenty-five most popular radio stars, slightly more than half were of draft age:25

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Star</th>
<th>Age</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abbott and *Costello</td>
<td>Jean Hersholt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*Goodman Ace</td>
<td>*Bob Hope</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fred Allen</td>
<td>Jim Jordan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*Amos and Andy</td>
<td>*Kay Kyser</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jack Benny</td>
<td>*Andre Kostelanetz</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Major Bowes</td>
<td>*Harold J. Peary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bob Burns</td>
<td>Edward G. Robinson</td>
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<tr>
<td>George Burns</td>
<td>*Lanny Ross</td>
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<td>Eddie Cantor</td>
<td>[Kate Smith]</td>
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<tr>
<td>*Bing Crosby</td>
<td>*Red Skelton</td>
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<td>*Nelson Eddy</td>
<td>*Fred Waring</td>
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<tr>
<td>Clifton Fadmian</td>
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[*Indicates being of draft age.]

It is true that a number of these stars had been asked not to enlist. It is probably also true that each of them, as well as less well-known entertainers, were more valuable for the war effort on the radio than in battle fatigues.

On the other hand, it was not difficult to look through the scheme of the War Advertising Council, whose head, Chet La Roche, suggested to the OWI in August 1942 that the Radio Division was not using the commercial programs enough. As Nat Wolff, the Hollywood representative of the Radio Division, argued, the advertisers were scared of losing their radio talent:

Let’s not kid ourselves about Chet La Roche suddenly practically demanding that commercial radio be used more importantly by the government.

Chet has already lost Ezra Stone of the Aldrich Family; Reber [another advertiser] is worried about losing Crosby; Lord & Thomas [advertising agency] is just as worried about losing Hope as well as Kyser. And it is quite obvious that if we can use commercial programs more effectively by using more of their time, that the agencies will have very little trouble selling the ideas to their clients because the alternative is that they will lose their top stars altogether.26
Therefore, while cooperation in the Network Allocation Plan was voluntary, wartime circumstances almost guaranteed full and swift collaboration of the radio industry. The Radio Division of the OWI did not need legal jurisdiction to enforce the radio propaganda effort. As I argued before, the majority of shows participated willingly and eagerly, as radio sponsors and advertisers feared nothing more than bad publicity or to be deemed nonessential to the country's war effort.

IV. RADIO WARTIME PROPAGANDA: COMEDY, HUMOR, AND UNITY

WILSON: And now, Ladies and Gentlemen, from Williams Field near Chandler, Arizona, we bring you a man who after a week under the blazing Arizona sun no longer looks like a frog belly in the moonlight . . . Jack Benny!
BENNY: Thank you, thank you . . . Hmmm . . . Frog belly in the moonlight? Jell-O again. This is Jack Benny speaking. And, Don, although you put it rather crudely, there's no question about it . . . I do look much better with my desert tan.
WILSON: Yes, Jack, you certainly do.
BENNY: Why not, I was outdoors all the time – horseback riding, swimming . . . I tell you, Don, I feel like a million dollars . . . I mean twenty-five thousand, yet I can feel like a million. [Loud Laughter]

Jack Benny was America's most liked tightwad and fall guy. Benny is, in fact, credited both by radio historians and fellow comedians for building the first radio comedy based on the idea of the fall guy. As comedian Fred Allen argued, "Practically all the comedy shows owe their structure to Benny's conceptions . . . He was the first comedian in radio to realize you could get big laughs by ridiculing yourself instead of your stooges." Or as Benny himself put it more succinctly: "The minute I come on, even the most hen-pecked guy in the audience feels good."28

At the time of the American entry into World War II, Benny's show already was a national institution. He started his radio program in 1932 and, after five years on the air, he had become the most popular radio comedian. His trademark greeting, "Jell-O again," quickly became part of everyday language, and his legendary stinginess turned all Scotsmen into his relatives. When a national magazine took a poll in 1944 to determine who had the best-known radio voice, Benny finished first, followed by Franklin D. Roosevelt, Bob Hope, and Bing Crosby.29

Jack Benny was the best-developed radio character on the air. Equally well known was his radio "gang," the key members of which appeared with Benny for nearly two decades (on radio and, for the most part, televi-
sion): Don Wilson, the big and jolly announcer; Phil Harris, bandleader, Southern playboy, and reputed drunkard; Dennis Day, the singer of the show, who also played the silly, polite, and stupid “kid;” Eddie Rochester, Benny’s skeptical and, at times, disrespectful black valet and butler; and, finally, Mary Livingstone, Benny’s wife in real life, who played a variety of roles. Other well-known features of the show included props like Benny’s violin and the continuous joking about his poor playing, his vault in the basement of his house (where he hid his money), and his 1924-model car, his beloved “Maxwell.” On October 18, 1942, Maxwell became the first war casualty of the Jack Benny Show:

Wilson: And now Ladies and Gentlemen, I have an important announcement to make . . . Last Monday afternoon Jack Benny went to an official automobile graveyard in Los Angeles and contributed his famous Maxwell to the [War] Salvage Drive. Benny: Yup, little Maxie has gone to do her bit in the war effort.

Wilson: So at this time, folks, we would like to reenact for you all that took place on that historic occasion. . . . [Whole cast riding in Maxwell – sound of an old car]

Benny: Oh, just imagine. Imagine turning a car like this into the junk pile. While the motor is in a wonderful condition.

Rochester: Wonderful condition?

Benny: No! Pay attention! . . . I’m sentimental.

Rochester: I lifted up the hood yesterday and the spark plugs were playing “Reel Down the Fan Belt.”

Benny: That’s a lie, because I’m wearing the fan belt . . . You know, fellows, I realize I should give my car to the Salvage Drive . . . But you can’t blame a fellow for being blue and all choked up.

Dennis: Did the laundry shrink your collar, Mr. Benny?

Benny: No! Pay attention! . . . I’m sentimental.

Benny’s show was part of the October 1942 scrap-metal drive. Scrap metal, and especially steel, was one of the scarcest raw materials during World War II. The OPA hoped that five million of the thirty million tons of steel scrap needed to maintain steel production would be furnished through the recycling of old automobiles. Benny’s Maxwell was the best-known old car in the country, and the show was therefore ideally suited to carry the government appeal to the American people.

As the show continued, Benny returned home with Rochester after delivering his car to the junkyard, but he was still mourning the loss of his dear “Maxie”:

Benny: How can I sleep with my Maxwell all busted up in that junkyard I don’t know.
ROCHESTER: Boss, why don't you look at it this way? . . . Before you know it, the scrap from your car is gonna be part of a battleship . . . or a tank . . . or an airplane.

BENNY: Gee.

ROCHESTER: I tell ya, boss, if everybody in the country turned in their old junky cars and dug up all the scrap they could, there wouldn't be no shortage of nothin' . . . specially Victory.


The government had been conducting scrap-metal drives since early 1942. As the Radio Division officials well understood, the danger was that the public would tire of repeated appeals for rationing and other drives. The periodic reports by the Special Service Division of the OWI Intelligence Bureau showed that this was indeed the case. The Intelligence Bureau of the OWI was responsible for monitoring American public opinion during the war, especially Americans' responses to the government propaganda campaigns.

The Special Service Division undertook its first major radio-listening survey in December 1942 and showed that the radio war effort was generally well received by the public. Between December 1 and 5, 1942, the OWI investigators interviewed 518 people of a cross section of Philadelphia residents and conducted longer interviews with 45 additional people. Hand in hand with these interviews, a parallel group of researchers monitored the four radio stations in the city over a two-week period to reveal the total number of war messages they broadcast.30

The monitoring report showed that approximately one-fifth of all radio time in the city was given to war-related material, which indicated that local programs were following their special Announcement Plan, which the OFF had modeled after and synchronized with the Network Allocation Plan. Like the Network Plan, the Local Allocation Plan asked that about every fourth local show should present a war message. Secondly, the interviews indicated that three-fourths of Philadelphia residents listened to the same or more radio programs than a year before, and 62 percent agreed that there was about the right amount of war-related shows on the air. The programs most disliked were radio serial stories about the war, war dramatizations, and some talks by government officials. Least criticized, as the report emphasized, were special messages like asking people to save tin or to have their tires inspected in order to save rubber. One man's comment summarized the tenor of the report concerning war messages: "I think it [necessary contribution to the war effort] should be called to the public's attention a lot. . . . Some need an awful lot of prodding. I didn't save at first, and I think it was the radio that got me started."31
As the war wore on, however, listeners became less sympathetic to the “prodding” by government agencies. The OWI Intelligence Bureau learned this in a study conducted in December 1943, a year after the first one, in which 3,500 people nationwide were questioned about their opinion of radio’s war effort. What the researchers found was that many listeners were fed up with war appeals but hesitated to make such an unpatriotic statement. Clearly, the war was one year older, and some appeals had been repeated hundreds of times during that year. In fact, 60 percent of listeners disliked some specific appeals, including salvage drives. The criticisms of listeners were not always a reflection of the radio propaganda effort, but could reveal the poor execution of certain drives: half of the people tired of scrap drives, for example, argued that tin cans and waste paper were not collected anyway.32

More importantly, however, the study showed that listeners increasingly viewed straight appeals as just another type of commercial. As the researchers confirmed, a third to a half of the American people had a dislike for commercials. Straight government messages progressively met the same resistance by these listeners as did commercials and in fact increased listeners’ impression that there were too many commercials on the air. As individual responses indicated, straight government messages between programs or at the beginning or end of radio shows were often tuned out just like commercials; people simply did not listen to these fillers. One person expressed this sentiment both for himself as for other people he knew: “Lots of people don’t listen to the announcements between programs because they are fed up on [sic] silly, sentimental commercials.”33

Obviously, all radio comedy programs did resort to straight announcements when their writers failed to come up with a funny way to integrate the allocated OWI message. Yet for the majority of shows, Benny’s writers did not lack ideas for integrating OWI themes, especially on rationing. Benny’s renowned stinginess presented the ideal foil for discussing savings of any kind. Early in 1942, when the country went on “war saving time” and turned ahead the clocks in order to save electricity, Benny was the first to use the “loss” of one hour to his advantage—by cutting his cast’s pay.34 When the OPA announced a flurry of rationing measures toward the end of 1942, Benny became just as easily the butt of the casts’ jokes, as in the following program where they commented on Jack’s hospitality:

WILSON: Well, Jack, gas isn’t the only thing being rationed nowadays.
JACK: No, there are a lot of things, Don... A half pound of sugar a week... no whipped cream... one cup of coffee a day... a meatless Tuesday... But we’ll just have to get used to it.
MARY: Get used to it... You’ve been rehearsing for this all your life.35
As some of the excerpts show, not all of the integrated OWI messages were ingenious works of radio comedy writing: some were flat, some were predictable, and some were uproariously funny – like radio comedy in general. What made them so very important for the OWI propaganda effort was that they provided a steady, well-dosed, and monitored stream of official reminders, government messages, and appeals for sacrifice to 80 percent of the American people every single day.

Moreover, these messages were delivered by comedians and entertainers Americans had come to love. As Benny argued, the most important aspect of any comedian’s success was whether the audience liked him or her: “In the first place, to become real successful they [the listeners] must like you very much on the stage. They must have a feeling like: ‘Gee, I like this fella.’ ” After that, as he went on, everything else was secondary. A comedian could develop a character comedy, a situation comedy, or straight gag routine, as long as he/she was well liked and recognizable. Once this basis was established, listeners forgave comedians even for occasional bad shows.36

Clearly the popularity of the comedy programs and the delivery of sugar-coated messages through humor and by likeable comedians was far preferable to straight propaganda programs. Yet I argue that at least one further element made the radio comedy programs of the 1940s particularly suited for the execution of these propaganda campaigns. This was the comedy formula of the fall guy, which had become a dominant feature of radio comedy in the early 1940s.

Undoubtedly, radio comedy in the 1940s contained a great variety of humor. Yet most important in the context of the war was the comedians’ ability to unite the public behind America’s war effort. While laughter and comedy can be contentious and even vindictive, wartime radio comedy overwhelmingly followed a different route: it provided laughter as a means for social cohesion and cross-cultural and cross-class harmony. John Morreall has best summarized this social function of humor: “Laughter is contagious, but in spreading from person to person, it has a cohesive effect. Laughing together unites people. . . . To laugh with another person for whatever reason, even if only at a piece of absurdity, is to get closer to that person. . . . Sharing humor is in this respect like sharing an enjoyable meal.”37

This cohesive role was the major function of radio comedy during World War II. People laughed with each other at home and they laughed with the live audiences, and listeners knew that there were millions of people tuned in to the same program just as they were. The likeable fall guy provided the ideal foil for exactly this kind of humor. This way, everybody could laugh at the same thing or the same person, knowing full well that the comedian could take it and, indeed, would certainly come back for more. At the same time, as in the example of Fibber McGee, listeners were subtly reminded of their own foolishness, yet without having a finger pointed at themselves.
The fall guy was the creation of a medium apprehensive of public criticism and concerned about offending somebody—anybody. This radio comedy formula had developed in the 1930s and was in full bloom by 1940. In comparison with today’s comedy style, radio comedians in the 1940s were very tame in their social criticism as well as their political satire. As Don Quinn remarked, “Any radio show with a rating of 0.01 or more will have enough trouble with pressure groups and self-appointed guardians of public morals without begging for more with offensive material.” Especially during World War II, comedy writers, entertainers, and sponsors were even more cautious not to attract bad publicity or to cross the OWI. What had developed as a successful protection for the sponsor in the early days of radio by uniting the listening public against the fall guy was ideally suited as cohesive humor for wartime America.

It is important to recognize, however, that while the smooth integration of government propaganda was the dominant trend, no comedy program abided by it exclusively. Comedy has to be critical in order to stay credible. Despite sponsor or OWI pressures, therefore, comedy writers did insert occasional critical and irreverent comments—for example, skits that reflected some of the disgruntlement of the American public with government wartime measures. One such policy was the prohibition of any weather reports during World War II. In the spring of 1942, when the military insisted on such a ban because of the widespread fear of Axis bomber attacks of American cities, the American public had been behind it. One year later, however, the ban was still in effect, even though the chances of Axis bomber attacks were virtually nil. Benny expressed the public ridicule of the ban when he quipped with Don Wilson about the prohibition of weather reports in a show in May 1943:

JACK: Anyway, Don, here we are at Gardner Field [California]... If I was in the Air Force, this is where I’d like to be stationed. I mean the climate is so cool and refreshing.
WILSON: Cool?... I stepped outside a few minutes ago and the thermometer said—
JACK: Huh uh, Don, that’s a military secret!
WILSON: But these fellows in the audience are all soldiers, can’t we tell them?
JACK: No, no Don... And stop perspiring, that’s a clue.39

Radio’s master of political satire and irreverent wit was Fred Allen, who was the most censored comedian in radio during the 1930s and 1940s. To be sure, Allen collaborated with the OWI to promote civilian cooperation with the salvage drives and rationing measures and was particularly effective in ridiculing hoarders and ration-book cheaters. Yet he also delivered some of the most stinging criticisms of government measures during World War II. In 1943, one of his radio characters, Mrs.
Nussbaum, explained the rationing system to her audience through a practical example – buying coffee:

**Mrs. Nussbaum:** You are pointing to the coffee grinder.  
**Allen:** Yes.  
**Mrs. N.:** The grocer is pointing to an empty shelf.  
**Allen:** Yes.  
**Mrs. N.:** You are pointing to your rationing book.  
**Allen:** And?  
**Mrs. N.:** The grocer is pointing to the door.  
**Allen:** That’s all there is to the point system?  
**Mrs. N.:** You are getting the point.40

While Allen’s battles with network vice-presidents over censorship issues where legendary, all comedians and comedy writers routinely complained about the petty restrictions they were working under. Every script had to be sent to the Continuity Acceptance Division of the networks, which checked the material for decency, possible offenses, and sponsor concerns. To start with, all swearwords, even relatively harmless ones like “darn,” were out. Secondly, as Allen emphasized, when the scripts returned from the network censors, jokes had to be deleted because of “mention of competitive products and networks . . . and political references were banished lest they stir up somebody in Washington.”41

Writers therefore always considered it a great feat if they were able to outsmart the censors, even in what nowadays seem relatively minor issues. Milt Josefsberg, one of Jack Benny’s writers, recalls with great relish how their team of writers got around the NBC censors during World War II. Benny was performing for sailors at a Navy base and was showing off his knowledge of naval military history by listing naval heroes:

**Jack:** . . . and then of course there was Admiral Stephen Decatur, who earned immortality when in the face of overwhelming enemy odds he uttered those fearless words, “Full speed ahead and ‘oh fudge’ to the torpedoes.”  
**Mary:** Jack – in the middle of a battle, Stephen Decatur said, “Oh fudge to the torpedoes?”  
**Jack:** Well, Mary, he wanted to say something stronger but he couldn’t because the Shore Patrol was standing next to him.

As Josefsberg explained, the phrase “Damn the torpedoes” was well known, especially among sailors. By using the dainty “Oh fudge,” Benny was playing on his slightly effeminate radio character and shared with the sailors a laugh at the censors’ expense; the shore patrol was fair game for sailors’ ridicule, as it frequently spoiled their fun; it fulfilled a similar role in the navy as network censors did in radio.42
V. CONCLUSION

As numerous writers on humor have asserted, comedy has to contain critical and at times biting commentary in order to stay credible with its audiences. While this element was further constrained during World War II, critical commentary remained one of the elements that endeared radio comedians to their audiences. This also highlights an important aspect of the cooperation between the OWI Radio Division and the radio industry. While the Network Allocation Plan provided the most important blueprint for radio's propaganda effort, the OWI never completely controlled radio entertainment during the war.

Overall, however, radio's domestic propaganda effort through entertainment was an overwhelming success. OWI officials, broadcasters, and advertisers collaborated to organize radio into an effective propaganda vehicle while maintaining the regular broadcast schedule and without disrupting Americans' listening habits. Radio was indeed able to do it all: it continued to entertain its audiences and to sell products while simultaneously uniting Americans behind the war effort.

NOTES

1. One fear was that advertisers would withdraw from sponsorship and leave radio financially strapped. The other main concern was over how much government agencies would intervene in the broadcasting industry because of the wartime emergency. While a government-run radio was never a serious threat, the Communications Act of 1934 provided the legal basis for a government takeover of broadcasting during World War II, and thus could be used as leverage on the part of government agencies. Section 606 specified that during wartime and national emergencies "the President may suspend or amend, for such time as he may see fit, the rules and regulations applicable to any or all stations within the jurisdiction of the United States as prescribed by the Commission." See Max D. Paglin, *A Legislative History of the Communications Act of 1934* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

2. Speech by William B. Lewis, January 20, 1942, National Archives, Record Group 208, Entry 93, Box 602 (hereafter, for example, cited as NA 208–93–602), folder "Association of National Advertisers."


4. The most important studies on World War II media propaganda in the United States are by Frank W. Fox, *Madison Avenue Goes to War: The Strange Military Career of American Advertising, 1941–1945* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1975); Maureen Honey, *Creating Rosie the Riveter: Class, Gender, and Propaganda During World War II* (Amherst: University of Massachu-


7. *Fibber McGee and Molly*, December 1, 1942; Micro 475, State Historical Society of Wisconsin; hereafter cited as SHSW.


15. As Alan Brinkley has argued, the defining aspect of the cooperation between the private economic sector and the U.S. government during the war was the pursuit of a conciliatory approach by the FDR administration, which led to the “abdication of power to corporate figures.” Rather than keeping strong regulatory powers in the hands of government agencies like the War Production Board (WPB), Brinkley charged that the WPB became the primary example of the “corporate ‘capture’ of state institutions” during World War II (Alan Brinkley, “The New Deal and the Idea of the State,” in *The Rise and the Fall of the New Deal Order, 1930–1960*, ed. Steve Fraser and Gary Gerstle [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989], 102–3).

The OWI and radio propaganda were part and parcel of this larger process. For an analysis of the political implications of the relationship between commercial sponsorship and radio propaganda, see Gerd Horten, “Radio Goes to War: The Cultural Politics of Radio Propaganda During World War II” (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Berkeley, 1994), especially chapter 6 and the conclusion.

17. Seymour Morris to Stuart Sherman, October 22, 1942; NA 208–103–645, folder “Policy;” and Archibald MacLeish to F.D.R., April 8, 1942; NA 208–93–598, folder “Allocation Plan.”


24. L. Menkin to G. Zachary, November 6, 1942; NA 208–93–602, folder “Pedlar and Ryan.”


27. *Jack Benny Show*, October 18, 1942; UCLA, Special Collections, Jack Benny Collection, Box 26.


31. Ibid., 16.


33. Ibid., 15.

34. *Jack Benny Show*, February 8, 1942; UCLA, Special Collections, Jack Benny Collection, Box 25.


39. *Jack Benny Show*, May 23, 1943; UCLA, Special Collections, Jack Benny Collection, Box 27.