

CHAPTER I

Why We Fight
Contending Narratives of World War II

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Henry Luce's signature essay "The American Century," published in *LIFE* magazine in February 1941, is sometimes assumed to be *the* definitive statement of a turn for the United States and its place in the world for the twentieth century. No doubt, its words carry a sweeping prescience:

Americans . . . have failed to play their part as a world power – a failure which has had disastrous consequences for themselves and for all mankind. And the cure is this: to accept wholeheartedly our duty and our opportunity as the most powerful and vital nation in the world and . . . to exert upon the world the full impact of our influence, for such purposes as we see fit and by such means as we see fit.¹

Indeed, Luce's essay generated almost five thousand letters of response from readers, overwhelmingly positive. He intervened in a foreign policy debate in which a conservative isolationism frequently dueled a left-liberal internationalism; within this fray, he carved out a novel position that stressed the need for the United States to seize opportunities arising from a world in flames and become the global leader of its own brand of market-driven internationalism. This internationalism would differ from the global aspirations of both Hitler and the left in that it was based on a liberal capitalist "freedom and democracy," rather than "socialism" or "one-man rule." As the founder of *Time*, *LIFE*, *Fortune*, and the *March of Time* newsreels, Luce had an ample arena in which to make his case.

Luce's "American Century" did prefigure official practice in key regards, a point to which I return at the end of this chapter. Yet it would be all too easy to view it as an indicative statement of the "real mission" of the United States during World War II, as a moment of honesty amidst the patriotic goads to national sacrifice and the calls to liberate oppressed peoples from the yoke of fascism. Something in these calls for liberation was indicative of a real and pervasive political force in the United States, one arising from a vastly different sensibility than that underlying the market liberalism of

Luce. Take, as one prominent example, the words and deeds of Henry Wallace, vice president under Franklin Delano Roosevelt from 1940 to 1944. Wallace's rhetoric was particularly significant given that Roosevelt made fewer and fewer public appearances during the war, leaving to his associates – chiefly Wallace – the task of defining its aims to the public.² Wallace explicitly positioned his idea of the war against Henry Luce's imperial manifesto: "Some have spoken of the 'American Century,'" the vice president asserted in 1942. "I say that the century on which we are entering – the century which will come out of this war – can and must be the century of the common man." In his speech and pamphlet, "The Price of Free World Victory" (1942), he described the American, French, Bolivarian, and Russian revolutions as unfinished struggles; they would only be complete, he asserted, with an Allied victory bringing farmers' cooperatives, collective bargaining rights for workers, an anti-imperial ethos, civil rights, and universal education worldwide.

The fascist, in Wallace's view, was the global antithesis of this vision. In a piece he wrote for the *New York Times* in 1944, he argued that fascism was a pressing danger not only in Europe but also within the United States and suggested that its most identifiable features were racial intolerance, misguided nationalism, and "the lust for money and power." American fascists, he argued, "claim to be super-patriots, but they would destroy every liberty guaranteed by the Constitution."³ Wallace was the highest-ranking product of a vast movement culture in the United States that shared and propelled such views. Following Michael Denning, I call this movement the Popular Front, a left-liberal coalition of labor unions, antiracist organizations, and antifascists that continued to exert real political muscle during the war years. Like this movement, Wallace labored to make his words flesh in national policy. In his role as chair of the Board of Economic Warfare, he fought with the more conservative State Department to require all procurement contracts for materials from Latin America to mandate fair labor standards and wage scales for workers. Such efforts were not generally successful, but they did earn Wallace a ranking as one of the most admired men in the United States in public opinion surveys as late as 1946.⁴

In postwar memory, the calls to sacrifice in the period from 1941–5 have been reduced to patriotic narratives of "the Good War" and "the Greatest Generation," which see World War II as the one righteous touchstone among a train of dubious US military engagements ever since. Beginning with the revisionist historiography of the 1960s, American scholars have overwhelmingly aligned themselves against the narrative of the Good War, arguing instead that the period from 1941–5 was anything but a time of

national unity or social harmony, and that Roosevelt's practice overseas was scarcely more emancipatory than that of the colonialist Churchill.⁵ American studies scholarship since the transnational turn has followed in this direction and tends to insert World War II into a continuum of imperial endeavors by the United States, and not without reason. Counters to the Good War have even found a place in American public memory as knowledge of the Japanese American incarceration, the racialization of the Japanese enemy, atrocities by US troops, and the turning away of Jewish refugees by federal authorities has become increasingly widespread.

But to counter the myth of the Good War by reducing it to “just another Bad War” also misses the mark, flattening out distinct features of the historical moment and effacing alternate possibilities from the archive. Within the US public sphere, the “American Century” was one of several visions of the conflict that contended with others, even within the highest levels of government, in the period from 1941 to 1945. It must be remembered that the war aligned the country against fascism: a set of right-wing nation-states based around militarism, anticommunism, racism, and the violent hardening of existing social hierarchies. As such, it brought the United States into alignment not only with Churchill and Chiang Kai-shek but also with the Soviet Union and left-wing guerillas across Europe and Asia, including Josip Broz Tito, Mao Zedong, Zhou Enlai, Ho Chi Minh, Vo Nguyen Giap, Luis Taruc, and Kim Il-sung. The unprecedented influence of the political left in the United States in the 1930s and 1940s, combined with the political nature of the enemy in its German, Italian, or Japanese guises, inspired other American visions of “Why We Fight” that had little to do with the American Century. These visions also altered, in their own fashions, the political history of the war.

Cultural producers intervened in the public sphere to make the war their own, to shape its course in line with their respective visions. This chapter examines the multiplicity of ways in which American cultural producers articulated the mission and purpose of World War II, identifying the points of convergence and friction between the various discursive positions. The three major, sometimes overlapping, narrative strands identified by this chapter are (1) the American Century; (2) the Popular Front-informed internationalism of the “People's War;” and (3) what I call the “Free World/Slave World” narrative, a dualistic republican vision pitting a “free world” against “a slave world.” The “People's War” was particularly pervasive and is also the discourse least acknowledged by scholars of American culture in the 1940s, so I devote special attention to it in this chapter. It argues that in the cultural terrain, no single narrative

of “Why We Fight” became hegemonic during the war years, nor was any of one of them predestined to guide US policy after the war. While the American Century came to guide US foreign policy more clearly than the other narratives *after* the war, each left its mark on official and military practice, and all left their imprints on public memory in the postwar years. To engage the open-endedness of the historical moment in this manner is to engage what Lisa Lowe calls a “past conditional temporality.” That is to say, to reject the notion that the United States had already settled into its Cold War course before 1945 is to imagine “what could have been” and to acknowledge the contingent nature of history by refusing to retroactively impose a stable course of events on a highly unstable political struggle.⁶

First, we must examine the institutions engaged in mobilizing public opinion. Cultivating the “message” of the war was an official matter of the state, but only in part. State-generated propaganda was orchestrated through the Office of War Information (OWI), founded in July 1942, which replaced the short-lived Office of Facts and Figures. It printed literature, directed public relations campaigns (scrap metal, fuel conservation, and “Buy War Bonds” drives), and produced its own radio programs and documentaries, sometimes with the help of the culture industry’s top talents. However, the agency was deeply unpopular with congressional conservatives, who perceived it, not incorrectly, as promoting a New Deal vision of the country. In June 1943, one year after its creation, they decimated the agency’s budget, prohibiting it from creating materials for domestic consumption. Like much of the American public, moreover, Franklin Roosevelt was deeply averse to war propaganda because of his memory of (and participation in) the hysteria of World War I. He consequently gave the OWI limited power, and its officials were instructed not to focus on enemy atrocities, which ironically led to a downplaying of the emergent Holocaust. After the decimation of the OWI by Congress, the Treasury Department took center stage in managing the government’s wartime public relations effort.⁷

With the state seriously curtailed in its efforts to educate the public on the goals of the war, the culture industries and the culture at large was left to take up the task. Hollywood produced an endless stream of movies designed to boost morale, and network radio offered a barrage of war-related programming; meanwhile, commercial periodicals, organizational newspapers, and the publishing industry continued to inform and influence vast readerships. The culture industries offered a patriotic bill of fare that overwhelmingly promoted the war, yet its message often strayed from the OWI guidelines they had promised to uphold. OWI director Elmer

Davis and officials with the OWI's Bureau of Motion Pictures complained that Hollywood was offering only cheap thrills, gore, and stereotypical portrayals of the enemy, rather than serious, sophisticated presentations of war aims. Radio was more amenable, as stations offered airtime to short "commercials" and full programs produced by the Domestic Radio Bureau of the OWI and later by the Treasury Department.⁸ Overall, the variety of institutional sites involved in crafting the message of the war, along with a profound lack of consensus within the state over long-term war aims, worked against a unified narrative of the conflict, and the lack of coherence was widely felt. In December 1942, public opinion polls revealed that as many as 35 percent of those surveyed stated they had no clear idea why the United States was fighting.⁹

Generating some of this dissonance was a factor that has been downplayed or unacknowledged by many scholars of the period: namely, that the United States entered World War II in an era when the political left was arguably at its highest point of mobilization in US history. A highly energized labor movement, replete with organizers affiliated with socialist and communist organizations, had pushed the federal government to dramatically alter the nation's class structure through the reforms of the "Second New Deal" in the latter half of the 1930s. Class radicals formed a prominent position in a "force from below," particularly through the CIO unions, which pressured Roosevelt and enabled his liberal allies in Congress to adopt some of the more dramatic legislation of the New Deal, including the Wagner Act (1935), the Social Security Act (1935), and the Fair Labor Standards Act (1938).¹⁰ During the war, despite the "no strike pledge" of December 1941 decried by many New Left historians, labor expanded its position through a largely pro-union War Labor Board that facilitated a vast expansion of union membership, through wartime price controls from the Office of Price Administration (OPA), and through a rank-and-file militancy that took advantage of wartime labor shortages to push for shop-floor gains. All in all, the working class benefited disproportionately from the wartime boom: real wages in manufacturing rose by 27 percent from 1941–4, with the poorest paid enjoying the greatest wage increases.¹¹ Labor's most active constituents, who viewed fascism as a reactionary enemy of the common people, understandably saw the Allied war effort as extending and solidifying the democratic gains of the New Deal.¹²

At the same time, black migration during World War I had created a sizable black population in northern cities, which enabled the creation of a vibrant black press and increased black political organization. Historian Martha Biondi maintains that the expansion of the black public sphere

during World War II marked the real beginnings of the modern civil rights movement. In the struggles of black union activists in the CIO, fights against discrimination in housing and employment, and protests over segregation in the armed forces – all quite intense during World War II – a movement took shape.¹³ The African American press launched the “Double V” campaign, which stood for victory over fascism at home and abroad, and which had an uncompromisingly anticolonial dimension. Building on their antifascist work of the 1930s, both black and white leftists pushed to make the fight against the fascist enemy into a global war against reactionary politics, one that would expand the gains of the New Deal at home and set their country on a new internationalist course abroad.

Such views cohered in the narrative I call the “People’s War,” ubiquitous within wartime popular culture. It was generated most prominently by Vice President Henry A. Wallace, whom Roosevelt entrusted to define his administration’s war aims to the public. This narrative defined “victory” over fascism not simply as the restoration of the status quo, but as the destruction of the most reactionary forces at work in the world, a destruction that would bring in its wake a more tolerant, pluralistic, and economically level democracy. The People’s War tended to direct attention toward the German enemy as the greatest threat to world order and to the singular contribution of the Soviet allies in countering it; in this sense, the narrative was in line with Roosevelt’s own vision, which combated the sometimes openly expansionist “Asia First” focus of congressional conservatives.

This antifascist message first cohered in the United States in the 1930s, but encouraged by state sponsorship, left and liberal narratives of fascism gained access to much wider audiences during World War II. While they reached broad publics through print media during the Depression, left-liberal antifascisms were now able to break into the heavily vetted arenas of network radio and Hollywood film with greater consistency. The war also catapulted elaborate expositions of left-liberal antifascism to the top slots of the nonfiction bestseller list.¹⁴ In the literary realm, it should be noted that nonfictional accounts of the then-topical conflict were far more popular than fictional treatments. As one reviewer noted in *The New Masses* in 1943, “Current war novels . . . compete at an obvious disadvantage with eye-witness narratives now arriving from the front in such a rich crop. In battles for our existence, the photographic truth is for the moment worth more than the most plausible fiction.”¹⁵

Driving this general attraction to “the photographic truth” was the penchant for realism among the mid-century left, which ensured that travel literature, reportage, and other nonfiction forms dominated the

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list of titles carrying the narrative of the People's War. Such titles, some adapted to radio, included William Shirer's *Berlin Diary* (1941), Joseph E. Davies's *Mission to Moscow* (1942), John Roy Carlson's *Under Cover* (1943), Selden Menefee's *Assignment U.S.A.* (1943), Elizabeth Hawes's *Why Women Cry, or Wenches with Wrenches* (1943), Erskine Caldwell's *All Out on the Road to Smolensk* (1942), Edgar Snow's *People on Our Side* (1944), and Carlos Bulosan's *Laughter of My Father* (1944). Fictional and poetic treatments of the People's War included Upton Sinclair's *Wide Is the Gate* (1943); Norman Corwin's radio program *Columbia Workshop*, particularly the episodes "On a Note of Triumph" (1945) and "Unity Fair" (1945); Robert Terrall's mystery novel *They Deal in Death* (1943); Richard Brooks's *The Brick Fox-hole* (1945) the prose fiction of the journal *Negro Story*; and, on the critical edge of the People's War, Chester Himes's novel *If He Hollers Let Him Go* (1945). The genuine internationalism of *One World* (1943), the best-selling travelogue and postwar blueprint by former Republican presidential candidate Wendell Willkie, also furthered the narrative in key regards.

But this discourse of the enemy – which described fascism as a global form of political reaction – had to contend with incompatible wartime visions of "Why We Fight." Sometimes produced, paradoxically, by leftists and liberals, these other visions did not entirely contradict the image of European fascists projected by the 1930s left. However, they tended to represent fascism as fully alien to the values of Allied nations while creating images of the Japanese people that were dramatically different from those of the left's "Boycott Japan" and "Aid to China" campaigns of the previous decade. One such prominent narrative divided the planet into a "free world" and a "slave world," receiving its most popular expressions in Frank Capra's famous documentary series *Why We Fight* (1942–4), in Pearl Buck's novel *Dragon Seed* (1942), and in John Steinbeck's novella *The Moon Is Down* (1942) (*Dragon Seed* and *The Moon Is Down* occupied top slots on the bestseller list in their years of publication, and Hollywood adapted both novels to film). To a more limited extent, this narrative can also be found in William Faulkner's "Two Soldiers" and "Shall Not Perish."¹⁶ Grounded in republican notions of "fitness for self-government," the Free World/Slave World narrative shifted the focus from Popular Front economic and racial justice to an abstract vision of democracy narrowed to the traditional liberal freedoms: freedom of speech, press, and assembly. In contrast to the radical antifascisms of the 1930s, it hardened the divisions between the peoples of the Allied and Axis nations, affirming the tolerant, democratic essence of the former and the immutable militarism, regimentation, and foreignness of the latter. It offered a People's War of a different sort: a war not between

ideas and governments, but between peoples possessing unreconcilable cultural, even racial, differences. Predictably, it took on its most ugly forms in its depictions of the Japanese.

The Free World/Slave World narrative also captured the racial cross-currents of World War II, encompassing both a call for tolerance and a new construction of otherness to demarcate the limits of the new pluralism. Pearl Buck's novel *Dragon Seed* offers a compelling, high-profile example. It was one of only two novels on the top-ten bestseller list in 1942 that directly dealt with the war (the other one was John Steinbeck's *The Moon Is Down*, an allegorical story of resistance in an unnamed land, albeit thinly veiled as Norway, which was in the #2 slot). Redubbed by one critic "The Good Earth's Warriors," *Dragon Seed* contained a cast similar to the rugged, yeoman farmers popularized by Buck's earlier work, but now engaged in a collective struggle to repel the Japanese from China.¹⁷ It was published at a particularly dark time in the Allied war effort. The Japanese were advancing virtually unchecked through Southeast Asia and beyond, while the Germans had taken virtually all of continental Europe and were within range of Moscow. In many ways, Buck offered up the Chinese as models of the democratic spirit, exemplars of the values that Americans would need to marshal to turn the tide.

Dragon Seed centers on the family of patriarch Ling Tan, his wife Ling Sao, and their five children. Ling Tan and his family are described as hard working, frugal, and suspicious of the new-fangled ways of the big city. Like the romanticized American yeoman, they are "neither rich nor poor" and desire only the pleasures afforded by farming their modest plot of land. Indeed, when war comes to their village, Ling Tan understands its root causes like any good Jeffersonian democrat would. Buck writes, "When he heard that the enemy envied his nation the land, he understood at once the whole war and its cause. 'Land . . . land is at the bottom of what men want. If one has too much land and the other too little, there will be wars.'"¹⁸ As with Steinbeck's Norwegians, Buck makes the Chinese a "free people" by inscribing them into the narrative of Jeffersonian agrarianism, a popular American self-image commonly resurrected in the 1930s and reformatted for the New Deal. Like other instances of the Free World/Slave World narrative, the universalism of the novel is one that ultimately homogenizes vast sections of the globe, representing the majority of the world's people as fundamentally compatible with the terms of American national virtue. Like so many Allied peoples in this narrative, Buck's Chinese become de facto Americans. One critic of Steinbeck's *The Moon Is Down* picked up on this tendency when he observed of the novella's allegory

of occupied Norway, “The Norwegians were only Joads with different names.”¹⁹

Yet this universalism required its other: in Buck’s case, the Japanese. The Japanese invasion upsets the idyllic rhythms of village life in *Dragon Seed*. The peasants curiously look on as foreign planes bomb the nearby town, but when war comes to their village, the results are brutal. The taxes the Japanese impose destroy the viability of the farms, but Buck presents rape as the most serious crime of the Japanese occupation, which visits the Ling Tan family when his daughter-in-law Orchid is raped and murdered by Japanese troops. Unable to find any women after they have all gone into hiding, the invaders sexually assault Lao San, the youngest son of the family. Completely dehumanized throughout the book, a menace to both productive labor and white womanhood (albeit white womanhood in yellowface), the Japanese’s presentation fully reproduces Yellow Peril discourse. One contemporary reviewer from the *Saturday Review of Literature* found this to be the main limitation of the book, writing, “One difficulty is that it is an either or book. The Chinese are virtuously white and the Japanese are viciously black.”²⁰ Like Steinbeck in *The Moon Is Down* and Capra in *Why We Fight*, Buck effaced all cultural differences among US allies, creating an internally homogeneous “free world” filled with peoples essentially American at heart, peoples that required a racialized adversary for their legibility.

Yet Buck, like most purveyors of the Free World/Slave World narrative were New Deal liberals, and not devotees of Luce and his American Century. Buck critiqued recent US policy in Asia by reminding readers, in fleeting moments of dialogue, that the Japanese invasion of China could not have happened without the support of British and American companies (during the invasion, the United States kept the Japanese war machine fully oiled, quite literally – supplying it with 80 percent of its oil and 90 percent of its gasoline – a fact duly noted by leftists and liberals after the invasion of 1937).²¹ And Ling Tan’s comments on land inequality as the root of war carried populist echoes of the New Deal. Yet Buck’s Edenic portrait of the prewar Chinese countryside could maintain its coherence only by eliminating the longer history of Western imperialism in the region. Apart from bringing some foreign-made goods into the towns, the West has seemingly left no footprint at all in Ling Tan’s village; like Wang Lung in *The Good Earth*, he and his family plow the earth in a rural idyll essentially unchanged for centuries. In representing her setting as uncontaminated by negative influences from the West, Buck must necessarily extract it from the global flows of capital that constituted a very real connection between many Chinese villages and the outside world since the mid-nineteenth

century. Though Buck became a critic of the Cold War, her highly influential work *Dragon Seed*, as with other iterations of the Free World/Slave World narrative, helped lay the groundwork for American Cold War liberal universalism. While serving world-ordering ends, this universalism disavowed imperialism, past and present, and attempted to create sentimental bonds between Americans and decolonizing peoples, homogenizing the latter through a proto-multiculturalism that recognized superficial cultural difference in a world full of “Americans under the skin.”²² Yet this impulse to cultural tolerance was belied by the Cold War’s imperial nature, which created resistance movements in the global south, necessitating a “Good Asian”/“Bad Asian” dynamic outlined by Floyd Cheung in Chapter 9.

Yet, significantly, the protagonists of *The Moon Is Down* and *Dragon Seed* are not Americans: their authors imagine them to possess an innate fitness for self-government and capacity for liberation independent of any American intervention or presence. This was not the case in the cultural productions of the American Century, the last major discourse of World War II considered here. These narratives directly figured Americans and Britons tutoring other peoples in the practice of democratic governance or schooling them in the strategy for their own liberation. The American Century could also be found on the bestseller list, most prominently with John Hersey’s novel *A Bell for Adano* (1944) and, though it did not directly figure the ongoing war, Margaret Landon’s *Anna and the King of Siam* (1944), the inspiration for Oscar Hammerstein’s *The King and I*. It also found expression in lesser known works in the reportage and nonfiction category, including George Weller’s *Singapore Is Silent* (1943), Ira Wolfert’s *American Guerilla in the Philippines* (1945), Thomas Clare’s *Lookin’ Eastward: A G.I. Salaam to India*, and the many book-length works of reporter Dorothy Thompson. Some of these authors openly supported the British colonial project, while others mirrored Luce exactly. Weller’s narrative of the fall of Singapore, for instance, introduces American readers to a Southeast Asian world with which they have deep economic ties that they have yet to acknowledge or act on. “Being forcibly deprived of automobiles,” he writes, “has taught America that it too has economic rights which must be fought for, taken, and held in the Southwest Pacific.” To secure these rights, he recommends maintaining a string of US bases in the Pacific after the Japanese are defeated.²³

The most prominent fictional proponent of the American Century is John Hersey’s *A Bell for Adano*, published serially in 1943 and as a critically acclaimed novel in 1944. The plot revolves around an American military officer, Major Victor Joppolo, who has been tasked with administering