

Secrets of Victory: The Office of Censorship and The American Press and Radio in World War II

Intelligence in Recent Public Literature

By Michael S. Sweeney. Chapel Hill & London: University of North Carolina Press, 2001. 274 pages.

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On 17 August 1942, a nationally syndicated columnist wrote that she had received “a very stern letter” about her remarks on the weather, “... and so from now on I shall not tell you whether it rains or whether the sun shines where I happen to be.” The columnist was Eleanor Roosevelt and she was referring to an article in which she had described weather conditions during one of her official visits around the country with her husband, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, during World War II. That the First Lady would receive such a reprimand reveals much about the nature, scope, and effectiveness of censorship in wartime America. How and why such information restrictions succeeded are the subjects of Michael Sweeney’s history of the Office of Censorship, *Secrets of Victory*.

Wartime censorship is a seldom-mentioned relative of intelligence. Operations Security is the primary method of denying a wartime opponent

access to official channels of information or intelligence. In a robust democracy like the United States, however, public channels of information—whether derived from official or unofficial sources, or developed by investigative techniques—represent an arena of exchange more or less exempt from government restrictions. Controlling the public's access to information during a war is a controversial proposition. And this is not simply a constitutional or legal issue. Domestic morale and support for wartime policies depend heavily on an informed public. If citizens are denied access to reasonable amounts of information, or, worse, if they are deceived about policies or events, their support can turn to opposition.

In time of war, controlling public information that an enemy might exploit to undermine the conduct of military operations, strategic policy, or homeland defense, becomes as important as managing official secrets. The current war on terrorism is no different. Information once considered innocuous—such as structural data for stadiums, bridges, and public works—is now considered to have an intelligence value for terrorists. But how can such information be controlled? Who manages public information? What kinds of information need to be protected? Who enforces restrictions? What is the relationship between censorship, intelligence, security, and propaganda? These are the questions addressed in Sweeney's book that bear relevance for today.

During World War II, President Roosevelt had the power to control information given to the media. Legislation had been passed in 1938 that forbade unauthorized photographs, sketches, or maps of military bases, and gave the President the authority to define which types of military information needed security protection. Roosevelt cited this law when he issued Executive Order 8381 in May 1940, imposing presidential control over classification systems. The President was reluctant, however, to exercise these authorities. He recalled the overzealous application of espionage laws during World War I, which resulted in the jailing of hundreds of socialists and pacifists for criticizing President Wilson, war profiteering, and anti-German violence. He also was sensitive to potential tensions between censorship and the work of the wartime information agency, the Committee for Public Information. Believing that it was critical for Americans to receive news about the war, he set two conditions for the media: their stories must be accurate and they could not help the enemy.

FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover initially headed the media relations program, while the military operated cable and postal censorship offices around the country. Hoover soon recommended the creation of a new agency with a

civilian director to oversee all censorship activity. Roosevelt picked the executive news editor of the Associated Press, Byron Price, to take the lead. Price was a remarkably good choice, as it turned out. He was known among newspaper editors and reporters as a fair man. He accepted the job only after assurances that he would work directly for the President and that censorship would remain voluntary.

On 15 January 1942, Price's Office of Censorship issued its first Voluntary Censorship Code. The Code underwent four major revisions during the war. Price put the onus for censorship directly on the journalists. His methods were to nudge and talk them into compliance under his motto: "Least said, soonest mended." The civilian censors had no authority to excise material prior to publication or punish violators, although they could publish the names of those who stepped over the bounds. Only the Justice Department could prosecute offenders under the provisions of the 1918 Espionage Act.

Price delegated the release of information to "appropriate authorities," meaning that those directly involved—from combat commanders to government department heads—decided what information about their activities could be made public. This kept the Censorship Office out of numerous controversies. A case in point was the famous episode in which Gen. George Patton slapped a soldier suffering from battle fatigue. Newsmen filed requests to print the story; Gen. Dwight Eisenhower, the Supreme Allied Commander, gave his approval.

The system of voluntary censorship worked. Self-censorship created a supportive culture among reporters and editors. Price worked hard to keep the system voluntary. In the middle of the war, for example, he opposed legislation that would have created an American version of the British "Official Secrets Act," which would have decentralized the program and put every federal department in charge of its own censorship program. Price kept the Censorship Office separate from the Office of War Information (OWI), believing that combining censorship activities with the pseudo-propaganda releases of the OWI would subvert the aim of keeping the American public truthfully informed about the war. He also beat off an attempt by the Military Intelligence Division of the War Department to enforce stronger censorship of information about the military. In this the Joint Chiefs of Staff opposed Price, but he prevailed.

Professor Sweeney provides enough anecdotes about major incidents during World War II to give the reader a taste of the problem of finding a

proper balance between wartime secrecy and the public's right to know. He recounts, for example, the story of the *Chicago Tribune's* alleged compromise of American codebreaking. The Navy jumped to the conclusion that certain information in a news article came from classified documents; in fact, the *Tribune's* reporter had seen a copy of a message from Adm. Nimitz, carelessly left out, that listed the Japanese ships that were part of the task force set to attack Midway. The Navy's repeated efforts to punish the *Tribune* actually increased the chance that the Japanese might discover clues to our codebreaking.

In *Secrets of Victory*, the author suggests that President Roosevelt abused the censorship system. Censors restricted photographs of the President and information on his whereabouts. These restrictions allowed him to hide his infirmity during the 1944 presidential election campaign and cover up his affair with Lucy Rutherford.

If there was any mistake by the censorship authorities, it probably came near the end of the war. Military intelligence, with initial acquiescence by the Office of Censorship, refused to release information to the public about Japanese balloon-born bombs that were carried over the American northwest by prevailing winds. The intention was to keep Tokyo in the dark about the effectiveness of the balloon "attacks." Price subsequently asked for at least a partial release of information on the potential danger of the balloon bombs; however, the Navy refused. The news clampdown may have contributed to some of the (few) casualties that the bombs caused.

At 5:28 p.m. on 15 August 1945, Price canceled the censorship code and placed an "Out of Business" sign on his office door. He had succeeded in the balancing act of keeping secrets *and* informing the public. In January 1946, President Truman presented him with the Medal of Merit, noting that he had made a "complete success of administering censorship and simultaneous defense of the freedom of the press." Similar adulation ironically came from the American Civil Liberties Union, which stated that Price "censored the press and made them like it."

Sweeney's book is filled with interesting information for the general reader. If there is any complaint, it may come from the insular viewpoint of cryptologists who probably would have liked to see more discussion of the connection between wartime information activities and their profession. Col. Preston Corderman, the eventual commander of the Army's cryptologic organization, the Signals Intelligence Service (SIS), began his wartime career in the summer of 1941 by training postal censors. He went

on to direct the Postal Division of the Office of Censorship. Sweeney could have highlighted Corderman's later SIS command and its exploitation of intercepted diplomatic communications— many in code—that were obtained from the cable censors who collected all diplomatic cable traffic into and out of the United States. It was this group that provided army codebreakers with many of the messages about Soviet espionage in the United States that became known as the Venona project.

Secrets of Victory is a well-told, lean history. It avoids getting bogged down in detailing the administrative structure of the Office of Censorship and uses anecdotes sparingly but to good effect. Professor Sweeney keeps his narrative focused on the success of the program: The American public remained well-informed about the course of the war and no secrets were given to the enemy. He provides a case study with strong relevance today.

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