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War in Peace: The American Legion and the Continuing Service of Film

The 1920 Fox Film Corporation picture, *The Face at Your Window* confronts the contemporary issue of labor agitation in a modern industrial town and features as its hero Frank Maxwell, the head of the local American Legion. Maxwell works in his father's factory mill and after he falls for Ruth, the "pretty daughter of an immigrant worker," is stabbed in the back by Ivan, another immigrant worker jealous of their relationship and critical of his family's "humane" treatment of the workers. The personal confrontation between American employer (Frank) and foreign employee (Ivan) is magnified by the arrival of Comrade Kelvin, "a tall foreign looking stranger" who looks to mobilize the workers. In response, Frank summons the American Legion, which races to protect the American city from this foreign invasion.¹

The American Legion emerged in the immediate aftermath of world war in March 1919, a point at which the focus of conservative discourse and government policy shifted from overseas campaigns to domestic threats, from military to political targets. This shift is often indexed by the Red Scare of 1919, which historians have now recognized as a crucial starting point for the Cold War. Within this context, the American Legion became one of the most prominent and influential conservative forces in America, championing the rights and causes of veterans, and remolding military citizens within an emerging "state of exception."² We see this process in *The Face at Your Window*, which imagines an important role for the American Legion in contemporary America. The film identifies a need and outlet for a militaristic response and helps to orchestrate a form of conservative nationalism ("Americanism") that was fostered during the war but that was soon after aligned to escalating fears of immigration and segued into anti-unionism. The Legion featured on screen in other

modern contexts—for example fighting a Japanese enemy in California in *Shadows of the West* (1920)—which like *The Face at Your Window* helped to foreground the American Legion within a year of its formation as the legitimate, government-supported response to foreign “terror” threats.

The Legion’s heroic appearance in *The Face at Your Window* further indicates the group’s imbrication with the political mainstream, as it expanded and appropriated military activities and imperatives into peacetime America. The film was endorsed by the Congress-approved Americanism Committee of the Motion Picture Industry, which had been set up in January 1920 to educate “immigrants in the ideals of America.”³ By this time, barely nine months after its formation, the Legion claimed almost a million members and was increasingly looking to use media and the emerging field of public relations as tools for its expanding remit. Its newspaper, *The American Legion Weekly (ALW)* launched on 4 July 1919 with a print-run of 12,000, but by November had a circulation of 300,000.⁴ From the outset, the Legion turned to film not only to define and promote its own role within post-war America but also to represent and challenge new enemies that emerged out of the European conflict. As early as October 1919, Legion officials were offering their “hearty cooperation in every way possible” to support the widespread exhibition of *Everybody’s Business*, a film that they believed would do much “to enlighten the public on the methods pursued by the Bolsheviks in their efforts to create lawlessness, disorder and unrest amongst the working classes.”⁵ Samuel Goldwyn, President of Goldwyn Pictures Corporation, also wrote to the Legion offering his company’s services in producing or distributing the Legion’s stories. “You stand on the threshold of a new epoch in American Life. You, yourselves, are to be the builders of that epoch,” Goldwyn wrote. “The message of which you are the bearers is full of dramatic possibilities; it is

vibrant with the color and magnetism of a new patriotism.”⁶ Aside from using contemporary films and potentially producing its own patriotic films, the Legion also repurposed existing war films. Before the end of 1919 the government offered the Legion the use of its patriotic war films and in its general media operations, the Legion learned from the Committee on Public Information (CPI) and from the state’s quite extensive use of film during WWI.⁷

The Legion’s increasingly prominent position in a state that was now preoccupied with questions around immigration, unionism and, more broadly, population management, is born out by its escalating influence within the Americanism Committee. Colonel Arthur Woods, who served as chairman of the Legion’s own National Americanism Commission, was asked to join the committee in April 1920 and then in November succeeded former Secretary of the Interior, Franklin K. Lane, as its head.⁸ Woods had previously served as Assistant to the Secretary for War in charge of Re-Employment and had asked producers and exhibitors for their help in finding jobs for returning soldiers. Through his ongoing work with the Legion Commission, Woods sought to promote and define “100% Americanism” and looked toward film to achieve this.⁹ On assuming the leadership of the Americanism Committee in 1920, Woods determined that “there should be injected into every picture some ideas that would make better Americans.”¹⁰ Indeed it was the then-head of the Americanism Committee, Franklin K. Lane, who requested the production of *The Face at Your Window* and approved its scenario. “It was intended to depict the ever present danger of malcontents and traitors within the country,” William Fox explained, “and to give timely warning to the nation to assert to its fullest extent the American patriotism that predominates in this country.”¹¹ By the time it was released,

Woods was acting chairman of the Americanism Committee and urged that the film be “exhibited in every city, town and hamlet in the United States.”¹²

For all Woods’ attempts to define Americanism, the concept remains elusive and malleable, reworked across the nation, depending in part on differing migratory patterns, and across time, as we see in 21st Century America with the onrush of new threats and popular anxieties. From the outset this concept would motivate the Legion’s work (one of the founding aims of the American Legion was to “foster and perpetuate a one hundred per cent Americanism”) and so warrants brief exposition here. At its initial convention, when the Legion established its Americanism Commission, it outlined its “duty” to realize “One hundred per cent Americanism” through education. It listed five goals that partly indicate the ways in which this term would be used to justify the management and shaping of populations, transforming and inculcating immigrants and “alien residents” into productive citizens. In particular, it foregrounded language training and the teaching of Americanism in schools as keystones to this Americanization campaign. Yet, the concept of Americanism is, by its nature, exclusionary, defined as much by what is not “American.” This is apparent in the first listed goal, which promised to “combat all anti-American tendencies, activities and propaganda.”¹³ The subjects chosen for the Americanism Commission’s annual essay writing contest also attest to this more regressive attempt to “combat” particular practices. While the 1922 contest asked schoolchildren “How the American Legion Can Best Serve the Nation,” in 1923 the topic was “Why America Should Ban Immigration for Five Years” and in 1924, “Why Communism is a Menace to Americanism.”¹⁴ By this stage, the concept of Americanism would be widely adopted and adapted by all manner of organizations and political figures, including the Ku Klux Klan, which defined 100% Americanism

in racial and religious terms. Writing in 1928, the chairman of the Legion's Americanism Commission, Frank Pinola, stated that "We of the Americanism Commission have come to the conclusion that it is a subjective term; it means just what you choose it to mean."¹⁵

The links between the American Legion and the U.S. military permeate the Legion's film operations, as it looks to film – in various forms and spaces – to continue service long after fighting has ceased, to support veterans' rights and treatment, to shape public policy, but also to promote a pervading, and enduring, conservative ideology ("Americanism") that aligns militaristic and nationalist sentiment. Writing in *Visual Education* in 1923, the National Commander of the Legion stated that "we cannot admit more immigrants until we Americanize those already here."¹⁶ Such language positions the Legion as a successor to the work of the CPI, which had used film and accompanying talks to mobilize and inculcate immigrant audiences within the cinema space. The Legion would now look to extend this use of film, exhibiting within local cinemas, Legion buildings and non-theatrical sites, and using advertisements, endorsements and competitions to circulate its messages beyond the screening venue. The Legion's multifarious use of film contributes to recent scholarship on what Charles Acland and Haidee Wasson have termed "useful" cinema.¹⁷ Indeed the Legion's active role in recognizing, and organizing around, film as a key site for shaping public life in the 1920s, further highlights that those groups using film as a platform for a cultural politic went well beyond the widely acknowledged women's and religious groups. My own work on the Ku Klux Klan provides one such example, while Lee Grieveson has recently shown how Henry Ford's Motion Picture Department produced films during the Red Scare.¹⁸ By 1919 Ford imagined film not only as a means of instructing modern

workers in industry and work but also, as Grieveson noted, of “visualizing citizenship” to young working class and immigrant audiences.

The American Legion emerged at this precise moment and recognized these possibilities. Earle A. Meyer, the Director of the American Legion Film Service, argued that “There is no activity through which the American Legion can accomplish more good than that of community movies. Our interpretation of community movies,” he continued, “is the utilization of moving pictures in advancing through visual entertainment and education a better appreciation of good citizenship and clean living.”¹⁹ Meyer’s comments attest both to the prominent, though historically overlooked, role of film in the American Legion and also to the particular ways in which film was imagined at the height of anxieties around immigration—which reached their apex with the introduction of the Immigration Act of 1924—as a means of defining and creating model American citizens. These anxieties were closely aligned to criticisms of the “movies.” Indeed, Meyer’s reference to “clean living” may be construed as a critique of Hollywood, at a moment when the nascent industry was enveloped in scandal. By 1923 the Legion was a significant voice in film reform, prominently featured in Will Hays’ Committee on Public Relations, and, in the words of Meyer, running a campaign “for cleaner and more truly American films.”²⁰ What follows examines the myriad ways in which the American Legion used film at this critical juncture in American social and political history. In short, whether appropriating wartime government films, partaking in film reform, or, after the establishment of a designated Film Service in 1921, producing, distributing and exhibiting movies, the Legion would look to champion the rights of veterans, project its own model of citizenship, and, in the process, extend and reimagine state intervention through its quasi-military, veterans’ organization.

“Houses built on Celluloid are as solid as Houses built on Rock”: Distributing Americanism

The American Legion Film Service began in 1921 as one of four agencies within the Publicity Division, alongside *The American Legion Weekly*, the American Legion News Service and the National Speakers’ Bureau, collectively tasked with keeping members and the public informed of Legion activities and, moreover, of maintaining a “favorable attitude of public opinion toward the Legion.”²¹ The Legion emerged at the precise moment when the very idea of “public opinion” was being articulated, and then measured, within America. It partly developed this idea from the state—again the CPI, which embraced the ideas of PR pioneers like Walter Lipmann, is an important precursor here—adapting wartime exigencies for an organization that represented the military in peacetime. Writing in 1924, *The American Legion Weekly* stated, “Public Opinion is the force which rules the world, or comes mighty close to.” The “Legion has grown great because public opinion has informed the Legion” and this has happened “by design and not by accident.”²²

So what role was imagined for film within the publicity division? For figures like Woods, film was intended to promote and disseminate the Legion’s notion of “Americanism,” but it also provided a means of “increasing interest and attendance at post meetings”—effectively drawing people into the Legion—and of linking the local Legion posts to the wider community through public film shows.²³ The plans for the establishment of the Film Service in August 1921 certainly suggest a strong economic motivation. The annual conference of the Indiana department of the American Legion addressed the “pressing problem” of the “empty treasury” and the challenge of finding a “legitimate and dignified means for the department to raise money,” while *The*

American Legion Weekly subsequently recognized a primary function of the service as a “revenue producer for posts and units.”²⁴ One advertisement in *ALW* for the Film Service was headlined “Easy Money” with the subheadings “There is no Better Way to Earn Money” and “It’s Dead Easy.” [figref 10.1]

Years later the Legion labeled its official booklet, listing all the films available through the service, “Here’s Money for your Post.” The booklet recognized the *value* of film to the Legion—in extending its message and attracting Legion members, and also more directly in economic terms—explaining that “every legionnaire owes it to his post to investigate this dignified and highly successful method of raising funds.”²⁵ In this way, the Legion recognized an important way to commercialize its Americanization efforts as, through film, the process of constructing post war citizens became a commercially lucrative Legion activity.

In initially outlining exactly how this financial model would work, the Indiana conference determined that the “most satisfactory way” of running a film show involved local posts contacting the department headquarters to book “a film drama especially suited for Americanization purposes.” The first film offered through this scheme, which was appositely described as a “joint Americanizing and financing movement,” was the 1918 Arnold Daly film, *My Own United States*.²⁶

Although *My Own United States* played extensively across Indiana in 1921, it was in early 1923 that the Film Service secured exclusive distribution and exhibition rights for the film, which it now promoted, using the title of its source material, as *The Man Without a Country*. In February coupons appeared in *The American Legion Weekly*, with a tagline “If your post is looking for a way to make money,” which invited commanders of Legion posts to send their details to the Film Service in Indianapolis. [figref 10.2]

The coupon read, “Please tell me how my post can increase its prestige and add to its treasury by showing the Legion’s motion picture film, ‘The Man without a Country’.”²⁷ Over the next few months, *ALW* encouraged further bookings by reporting on successful screenings, including an eight day run at one of the largest cinemas in Louisville, Kentucky, which brought a net profit of seventeen hundred dollars. While the Film Service was responsible for the technical details, the local post was tasked with publicising and bringing a crowd to the event. In Louisville, this involved a beauty contest run through a local paper, six airplanes dropping leaflets and tickets over the city, a parade of schoolchildren, and a chain telephone message through which each Legion member would contact ten friends to pass on details of the film. The Governor also attended a screening and gave an opening address.²⁸

Reports emphasised the usefulness of the film as a pedagogical tool—“If the American Legion had spent thousands of dollars in launching a program teaching the ideals of Americanism, through lectures and meetings, it could not have had the ‘creeping under the skin’ effect” of *The Man Without a Country*—but the impact stretched beyond those that had attended the film.²⁹ The screening was used to define and promote the Legion within the community, as the newspaper coverage, advertisements and promotional events helped position the Legion as an established, legitimate, pedagogical force within America. The Legion often organised special matinees of its films with reduced admission prices for children (or free for those pupils “too poor to pay”), and arranged writing contests with subjects such as “The Most Useful American” and “The Ten Greatest Americans.”³⁰ Prizes were given to the children that sold the most tickets for shows, boy scouts were used to publicise films, and, for example, when a local Legion post presented *The Man Without a Country* at a high school auditorium in Waukesha, Milwaukee, it donated the profits

back to the school.³¹ In Anderson, Indiana, alongside the newspaper campaigns, automobile stickers and essay contests, the Legion arranged a private screening of *The Man Without a Country* for the ministers and school officials of the city, “which resulted in the ministers announcing the film favorably from the pulpit.”³² The James E. Ryan Post in West Alexandria, which initially showed films in the local school auditorium, produced a 12 page programme for each screening, filled with advertisements from local businesses and would generate further goodwill each month by offering prizes to the boy and girl with the best school record. In this instance, the post even established its own censor board—involving the mayor, a minister and the superintendant of schools—who not only approved the pictures but, by extension, offered their support for the work of the local Legion.³³ Such endorsements served to promote the Legion and, more particularly, illustrated the group’s attempts to extend and repurpose a form of nationalism that was previously fostered during the war. The wartime challenges of constructing a nation of migrant workers and of defining a common fighting unit were now taken up in peacetime by the Legion and other religious, conservative groups, through their use of film.

Advertisements for other Legion-distributed films reveal similar practices. *Flashes of Action*, an official war department film taken by Signal Corps photographers, was widely advertised as a film that “EVERY RED BLOODED AMERICAN” should see, with further taglines claiming “It will make you a better American.”[figref 10.3]

Such publicity attributed a transformative power to the movie. This official war film, depicting American soldiers predominantly in France, was now used to create and mold post-war American citizens, while also seeking to define (and perhaps distinguish) its audience as “red blooded” Americans. The National Commander of

the Legion, John R. Quinn, noted the “priceless publicity” generated from these screenings, bolstering the Legion’s role and identity within the local community.³⁴

The Film Service sought not only to disseminate its films and projectors, but also its exhibition practices, as *ALW* regularly published accounts of film shows on its letters page. The “Step Keeper” who moderated the correspondence suggested that if he printed all the letters outlining how posts exhibit films, “This space would have to run over about eight pages” and jokingly added that he had now gathered enough material to “back Marcus Loew and a few prominent exhibitors off the map.”³⁵ The paper published pictures of theaters—for example, the sand bags adding a “realistic touch” outside a theater showing *Flashes of Action*—while the Film Service offered a \$25 prize for the post with the best exploitation stunt.³⁶ In the year from August 1923 to 1924, Legion posts put on 2,076 shows using films distributed by the Film Service and a reported five million people “went to the movies and read a Legion message on screen.” While this brought in \$33,000 to the national headquarters, the estimated take for local posts was considerably higher.³⁷

The infrastructure of the Legion—as a national organization comprising local posts, often with their own buildings and supported by a chain of state, regional, and local officers—provides a network for the distribution of films. Through this network of local chapters the Legion was able to disseminate its propaganda about American national identity across the nation, so that it was not an ideological fantasy but a concept supported and promoted, often through the use of film, within disparate local communities. James E. Darst emphasized from the outset that the Film Service would also provide projecting machines, ensuring that these films could be circulated around the Legion’s network of 11,000 posts. These films could thus play at Legion halls but also at cinemas, schools or even church buildings, hired out by the Legion to present

its messages of Americanism—and indeed itself—within the local community.

This distribution and exhibition model counters much received wisdom about the American film industry. The Legion continued to distribute and monetize films long beyond their traditional life expectancy. In October 1924, the director of the Film Service wrote to Jason Joy in the Hays Office, to see if it could extend its distribution rights for *The Man Without a Country*. At present, the Legion only held rights in cities with a population up to 45,000, but six years after the film’s initial release, the Legion saw value in presenting it within major urban centers.³⁸ Its appropriation of war films transformed them for contemporary audiences, re-circulating and re-imagining them within small towns, in non-theatrical spaces and through sponsored shows. As early as 1922, members of the Film Service, buoyed by the distribution not only of films but also of projectors, claimed that 90% of Legion posts had “given some kind of movie show” and hoped that by midsummer the Legion “will have in circulation the largest non-theatrical library in the United States.”³⁹ The films not only showed publicly in theatrical spaces, but also increasingly after 1923—when rental prices were further reduced—as free, “good entertainment features for regular meetings.”⁴⁰ In circulating films made for the war long after the end of the conflict, the Legion operated on a different temporality, now expanding the practices and values of wartime and, with it, transporting a form of conservative nationalism into a fresh social context.

Through its distribution and, by extension, appropriation of war films, the Legion not only projected its vision of “Americanism” but also supported specific campaigns for veterans. For example, it used *Flashes of Action* to promote state campaigns for adjusted compensation and this proved particularly successful in Illinois and Kansas where the film was exhibited in more than 150 towns and cities. The Film Service director concluded “there is no stronger argument in favor of

adjusted compensation than the camera's story of the war."⁴¹ With fifteen prints in circulation, the film was shown by Legion posts in every community in Pennsylvania in advance of a vote on state adjusted compensation in November 1923. After the film was shown, text appeared on screen asking "Voters of Pennsylvania: You have seen what the boys did in 1917-18. What are you going to do November 7th?" In addition, the Speakers Bureau prepared an explanatory lecture, which was delivered during screenings.⁴² In this way, the Legion was formalizing its appropriation of these historical war pictures so that they were not only positioned as American Legion films but also, as the Legion pushed for legislative reform, now directly related to contemporary politics.⁴³ The Legion's methods here—in finding a fresh use and context for war films—matched its broader goal to reposition soldiers as valued and productive citizens after the completion of war.

In this way, the Legion used film to organize around and advocate for the rights of veterans. *Lest We Forget*, made for the Legion by Storey Pictures in 1921, depicted the efforts of the Legion to obtain justice and employment for disabled veterans.⁴⁴ *The Whipping Boss* (1924) fictionalized the recent, well-publicized case of Martin Tabert, a North Dakotan war veteran who was flogged to death in a convict lumber camp in Florida in 1923. The Legion had demanded an investigation into Tabert's death, which led to the conviction of his whipping boss and the abolition of the convict leasing system in Florida. The film celebrates and foregrounds the Legion's role within the narrative—the film's hero is a young Legion commander and it features Legion meetings—and positions the Legion at the center of a nationwide campaign to end the convict lease system. With a degree of dramatic license, the Legion manages to save the victim from death in *The Whipping Boss*, appearing, in the words of *Photoplay*, as "the St George that slays the dragon of viciousness."⁴⁵ In

handling the picture, the Legion sought to champion veterans' rights and, moreover, to celebrate its position as a champion of veterans' rights. John R. Quinn, the National Commander, wrote to Legionnaires explaining the decision to handle the picture. "I believe pictures leave a deeper impression upon the average mind than the spoken or printed word," he wrote, adding that the picture presents the Legion as a "community and national asset." Beyond this, Quinn saw the representation of veterans as an indication of the Legion's work in extending wartime demands within peacetime America. "The film graphically proves that the Legion is an organization carrying on now as it did in war," Quinn concluded, "for humanity and righteousness."⁴⁶

The struggles facing returning veterans also interested leading producers, who recognized the dramatic and commercial possibilities of this subject. The Legion announced a deal in 1922 with Thomas Ince to produce a picture with the working title, *Blood Bond*, at a cost of \$200,000. The story was written by C. Gardner Sullivan and would depict the problems confronting veterans on their return from war. The director John Griffith Wray travelled to Oregon and Eureka Falls, California in search of locations and a competition was planned in *ALW* that would determine a suitable title for the film. Announcing the production, the National Commander of the Legion explained that his organization was interested in producing films that "will inspire good citizenship and faith in our government and the people." The production was intended for release in time for the National Legion convention in New Orleans in October, although there is no evidence of its release.⁴⁷ The Legion did, however, sponsor screenings of Ince's *Skin Deep* at this point, a "virile, red-blooded drama" which told of a former gangster returning from war, regenerated by his experiences. The National Leader of the Legion spoke at its Chicago premiere, cinemas used Legion members to sell tickets, while Ince reportedly gave the Legion 10% of the

profits.⁴⁸ Members of the Hollywood Legion Post acted out a preamble to the film and also featured predominantly in the two-reel comedy *O Promise Me* (1922), which was filmed in and around the Legion clubhouse and was widely shown by posts.

The Legion also produced short instructional, educational and news films, which served primarily as a way of propagating and teaching its form of Americanism.⁴⁹ For example, the 1922 national convention determined that a film should be produced to illustrate the “proper etiquette of the flag,” a repeated focus of the Legion Film Service. Indeed the service described its 1929 film on flag etiquette, *Old Glory*, as an “educational classic that every American should see.”⁵⁰ Alongside the educational shorts were news films, solicited by the Film Service as it provided projectors and cameras to posts. “If your post is planning to promenade down Main Street on twenty foot stilts, or to blow up the old bridge over Fall Creek as part of a sham battle (with the due permission of the authorities), tell the Film Service about it well in advance,” *ALW* advised. “Someone will be there with a cranked box to record it.” As a more specific example, the Film Service produced and distributed films showing members from every state parading in San Francisco at the 1923 convention and again at St Paul in 1924. Film served here as a way of connecting the local chapters within the national body, indicative of the ways in which the Legion stitched together a national identity (in part through military displays) and then, in turn, disseminated this across the nation.⁵¹ These local news items, of course, remained useful for those posts depicted. *ALW* commented on a post in New Jersey that had recorded its own history on film, which it would add to each year. In noting that the post had played this film on three occasions and netted more than \$300 for its building fund, the paper recognized the value of film in the construction—both literal and ideological—of the local post. “Houses built on celluloid,” it concluded, “are as

solid as houses built on rock.”⁵²

The Legion, Hays and Film Reform

The Legion used film to promote, define and fund itself and, moreover, to propagate a particular model of Americanism across the post-war nation. It did this not simply through the production, distribution and exploitation of film, but also by promulgating broader political stakes through film culture, positioning itself as a prominent reformer by campaigning for what it defined as “cleaner and more truly American films.”⁵³ From the outset, Legion posts were active in protesting against films or practices that ran counter to its ideals of Americanism. It launched protests against the production of German operas in LA in 1919 and 1920, even threatening to buy up all the tickets on the opening night at one show and to take “drastic action” as soon as the first word was uttered in German.⁵⁴ The Hollywood Post of the Legion would protest—with the aid of some egg throwing—in front of Miller’s Theatre where *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920) was scheduled to appear in 1921. Typical of the placards carried by “crippled” ex-servicemen was one reading “Why pay war tax to see German-made pictures?” as this widely publicized protest became part of a more organized campaign to introduce higher tariffs on imported films.⁵⁵ Within a week of its successful protests against *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, the Hollywood Post hosted a meeting which saw the establishment of a permanent organization opposed to the import of German films. The Legion promulgated a form of cultural nationalism, which other groups soon embraced. Kerry Segrave notes that “every branch of the motion picture industry was lining up against the foreign product,” with representatives from Equity, The Hollywood Board of Trade, and the Screenwriters Association, amongst those represented and brought together by the American

Legion. *Variety* suggested that the Legion's protests against this "invasion" of German films were "having great sentimental weight with the politicians."⁵⁶

The protest against *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* is indicative of the ways in which Legion groups would mobilize against individual films and theaters. The Hollywood Post would also seek to suppress Erich von Stroheim's *Foolish Wives*, which it claimed (incorrectly) was being made by a German director with German money "as German propaganda" and in 1924, the Legion, along with other veterans' groups, forced the cancellation of screenings of *The Fifth Year in Russia*, claiming that the film's purpose was to "disseminate Soviet propaganda."⁵⁷ Yet, the establishment of a permanent organization opposed to imported films also illustrates the ways in which the Legion, as a national organization, would seek to direct public policy, often by working alongside other influential parties. This was evident in Arthur Woods' work with the Americanism Committee and again in 1922 when Will Hays became the first President of the newly formed Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA). One of Hays's first moves was to establish the Committee on Public Relations, which sought to offer a "channel of communication between the public and industry," relaying comments, criticisms, and suggestions to the industry. The Committee comprised seventy-eight members from sixty-two national organizations, as Hays sought to appease and negotiate the concerns of religious, educational, labor, and fraternal groups. Amongst the organizations well represented was the American Legion, which had two members on the committee and one on the twenty-strong central body.⁵⁸

The Legion's correspondence with the Hays Office testifies to its elevated position within film's powerful institutions, and their discourses, at this seminal moment for the industry. Shortly after his appointment, Hays wrote to the leader of

the Legion praising a recent article, “The Movies Discover America,” published in *The American Legion Weekly*. Hays endorsed this “constructive effort, which typifies in my mind the spirit of your organization,” and corresponded regularly with Legion representatives, even advising on production and distribution queries.⁵⁹[figref 10.4]

For example, Earle Meyer wrote to the Hays Office in 1923 asking for help in making and distributing a film that would give the soldier’s perspective on the adjusted compensation appeal while Jason Joy, the Director of Public Relations at the MPPDA, attended a conference in Washington in 1923 called by the Legion. Amongst those attending this conference, which involved 67 national organizations, was President Harding. The conference sought to compile a “Flag Code” and Joy confirmed that the Committee of Public Relations would do all in its power to ensure that the flag was used in a “proper and dignified manner.” He even suggested the production of a film instructing people in the “proper use of the flag.” The Legion foregrounded the flag as a significant symbol of the state, and sought to rework it as a visual shorthand for its own form of nationalism.⁶⁰ Indeed we can see the fingerprints of the Legion on some of the film industry’s most significant policy documents. As one example, the MPPDA’s “Don’ts and be Carefuls” from 1927 lists “The use of the Flag” as its first subject to warrant “special care.” Three years later when this is formalized in the Production Code, the line reads; “The use of the Flag shall be consistently respectful.”⁶¹

The Legion directly criticized on-screen representations that ran counter to its own values. In his role as head of the Film Service, Earle Meyer endorsed familiar criticisms, offered by a contrasting range of reforming groups from the Ku Klux Klan to the Catholic Church, when he criticized producers in 1924 for making pictures that would appeal to the “‘thirteen year old’ intelligence of the average motion picture

audience” and spoke disparagingly of the continued presence on film of “flappers, custard pies and triangles.”⁶² However, the Legion also responded to very specific depictions on screen, writing to Hays and urging “drastic measures” to “stamp out” instances that ridicule or disrespect the United States service uniform. Whenever a director wishes to make a scene “look tough, obscene and rough” or to show men under the influence of liquor, the Legion wrote, “all that needs to be done is to place a few hard boiled extras in the uniform” of the armed services. The complaint was motivated by the Pathé film *Dynamite Smith* (1924). Hays responded by promising to get in touch at once with the distributor, to look more closely at the picture, and to see “what can be done about eliminations.”⁶³ The correspondence reveals Hays’s role in liaising between the Legion and the industry and also a desire to support and placate a group that was increasingly influential in determining the values and policies of post-war America. The relationship between Hays and the Legion was largely positive and mutually beneficial, and through this the Legion helped frame a nationalistic film discourse that was broadly consistent with a model of “Americanism” and with formations of citizenship that emerged out of the war.

Conclusion

The American Legion represents an early, prominent example of a conservative organization that looked to film to mold American citizens and to determine the values of a rapidly changing nation. The Legion was born out of war and appropriated both the films and values of wartime America into the post-war nation. The varied practices it adopted—whether using films to support specific campaigns, exhibiting films in schools and churches, profitably distributing war pictures to small town theaters or filming and exhibiting its own activities—served to highlight the needs of

veterans and beyond this, as the Legion became an influential and respected voice in film and political discourse, foregrounded a military agenda in the construction of this post-war nation. Through film, these veterans promoted and funded the Legion's place in America, fanning the memory of war while finding fresh battles and confronting new threats that would serve to define what it means to be "American."

The story, of course, does not finish here. The Legion would exercise an even greater influence on film thirty years later, once more in the aftermath of war, as it stirred up anti-communist hysteria and enforced and extended the Hollywood blacklist against apparent communist sympathizers. It listed associations, named names, boycotted and picketed films and visited studios, ultimately acting as judge on those with "suspect" affiliations.⁶⁴ The Legion's initial uses of film as it established itself across America after 1919 presage this more familiar history of the McCarthy era, of an industry—and a nation—challenged and torn apart by anxieties around immigration, foreign threats and by a wider battle over American national identity. It suggests a continuity between the periods and reveals a conservative group of veterans using film to define and project a form of "Americanism" that simultaneously challenges the "Bolshevism" and "Un-American" practices attributed to the Hollywood industry. The success of the Legion—evidenced and enacted through film—reveals a nation defined, then as now, by conflict and a military discourse. In these ways, this chapter presents not only a study of the American Legion or even the uses of film by social and political groups but also an example of the ways in which film would help to perpetuate a military agenda and culture beyond the dates of armistice. While the media forms may change and the face at the window may look different today, these practices remain as relevant as ever in 21st century America.

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Notes

¹ *Augusta Chronicle*, August 26, 1921, 5.

² Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*, trans. Kevin Attell (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005). For further consideration of the extension of “police power” after the war, see Lee Grieveson’s chapter within this collection.

³ *Moving Picture World*, December 11, 1920, 704.

⁴ Thomas A. Rumer, *The American Legion: An Official History, 1919-1989* (New York: M. Evans & Company, 1990), 75; *American Legion Weekly* (hereafter *ALW*), November 28, 1919, 6, 7, 12.

⁵ *Motion Picture News*, October 4, 1919, 2821.

⁶ *ALW*, December 19, 1919, 24.

⁷ The CPI was set up almost immediately after the declaration of war and, as Lee Grieveson shows in his chapter within this collection, adopted numerous strategies to convince immigrant audiences of the merits of American participation in a European war. *Variety* further reported in 1920 that President Wilson was eager to attend a day of film screenings organised by the Legion. *Variety*, November 12, 1920, 34.

⁸ The Committee’s first production, *The Land of Opportunity*, had received a full-page advertisement in *American Legion Weekly* (“Announcing the Initial

Americanization Production”), where it was described as a “two-reel superfeature that embodies the spirit of Lincoln—the spirit of America.” *ALW*, February 6, 1920, 36. For more on the work of the Americanism Committee, see Steven J. Ross, *Working Class Hollywood: Silent Film and the Shaping of Class in America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), 129-130.

⁹ *Film Daily*, August 20, 1919, 4; *ALW*, February 13, 1920, 18; *Exhibitors Herald*, December 24, 1921, 143. Woods presented a report on the Americanism efforts of the industry in Washington in December 1921, outlining the continued efforts to make the screen “a strong influence for right things in America.”

¹⁰ *Moving Picture World*, December 11, 1920, 704.

¹¹ Letter from Fox to the NAACP, 23 September 1921, Records of the NAACP, box 1, C 312, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

¹² *Exhibitors Trade Review*, November 27, 1920. Woods’ call would prove somewhat problematic. Fox’s defensive explanation of *The Face at Your Window* came in the form of a letter to the NAACP, after it had complained to Fox that the film was being widely used as propaganda for a re-emergent Ku Klux Klan. The Klan’s exploitation of the film challenged the Legion’s own use. In St Augustine, Florida, where it was screened to raise funds for the local Legion post, a letter complained that “the Klan is glorified and everyone goes away with the impression that the Legion and the Klan are affiliated.” The Klan’s attempts to re-appropriate *The Face at your Window* for its own cause mirrors the Legion’s more approved use of government film throughout this period. Correspondence between Fox and the NAACP is in the Records of the NAACP, box 1, C 312, Library of Congress, Washington, DC; *The News-Sentinel*, September 23, 1921, 5; For more on the ways in which the Klan used film during this period, see Tom Rice, *White Robes, Silver*

Screens: Movies and the Making of the Ku Klux Klan (Bloomington, IN.: Indiana University Press, 2015).

¹³ *ALW*, January 16, 1920, 5-7, 26.

¹⁴ Joel Spring, *Educating the Consumer Citizen: A History of the Marriage of Schools, Advertising and Media* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2003); *ALW*, February 9, 1923, 7; *ALW*, July 4, 1924, 13; *ALW*, May 22, 1925, 14.

¹⁵ Rumer, *The American Legion: An Official History, 1919-1989*, 181.

¹⁶ Alvin Owsley, "What Constitutes American Citizenship," *Visual Education* (September 1923): 218.

¹⁷ For recent work in this field, see Charles R. Acland and Haidee Wasson, eds., *Useful Cinema* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011); Devin Orgeron, Marsha Orgeron, and Dan Streible, eds., *Learning with the Lights Off: Educational Film in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012); Lee Grieveson and Colin MacCabe eds., *Empire and Film* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); Lee Grieveson and Colin MacCabe eds., *Film and the End of Empire* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

¹⁸ Rice, *White Robes, Silver Screens: Movies and the Making of the Ku Klux Klan*; Lee Grieveson, "The Work of Film in the Age of Ford Mechanization," *Cinema Journal* 51, no. 3 (Spring 2012): 25-51.

¹⁹ "Why We Use Movies," *Visual Education* (January 1923): 16. Meyer's comments appeared in the "Why we use movies" section, which a few months earlier had featured the American Legion's National Chaplain, who credited the movies with "rapidly diminishing" religious prejudice. Somewhat speculatively, he suggested that Christ would likely embrace the movies—He "probably would write scenarios, direct His own pictures and even go so far as to act for the camera"—as he would recognize

the “possibilities of the screen in reaching multiplied audiences.” *Visual Education*, (October-November 1922): 351-352. Lemuel Bolles, the National Adjunct of the Legion further argued in this section that film “can inspire a finer appreciation of our government and of the country we are privileged to call our own than any other medium of teaching.” *Visual Education* (April 1923): 125.

²⁰ “Film Service Gets Generous Approval,” *Pinedale Roundup*, March 6, 1924.

²¹ *ALW*, October 28, 1921, 35.

²² *ALW*, August 29, 1924, 17.

²³ *ALW*, October 28, 1921, 35.

²⁴ *ALW*, August 19, 1921, 15; *ALW*, July 7, 1922, 9.

²⁵ *ALW*, December 19, 1924, 16; *American Legion Monthly*, September 1929, 81.

²⁶ *ALW*, August 19, 1921, 15.

²⁷ *ALW*, February 16, 1923, 18.

²⁸ *ALW*, March 16, 1923, 16. *ALW* concluded that as a result of the screening, “Jefferson Post is on the map in Louiseville.”

²⁹ *Stevens Point Daily Journal*, February 14, 1922, 1.

³⁰ *ALW*, November 16, 1923, 13; *ALW*, August 3, 1923, 10;

³¹ *ALW*, July 7, 1922, 24-26; *Waukesha Daily Freeman*, May 17, 1922, 1.

Further reports in *ALW* (January 26, 1923, 10) noted that the film had “stirred communities deeply” whenever it had played and had offered a “great lesson in patriotism to the children of hundreds of communities.”

³² *ALW*, April 20, 1923, 20-21.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ironwood Daily Globe*, May 16, 1922, 5; *Exhibitors Trade Review*, February 16, 1924, 13.

³⁵ *ALW*, August 3, 1923, 10.

³⁶ *ALW*, August 11, 1922, 11.

³⁷ *ALW*, August 29, 1924, 17.

³⁸ Letter from Henry J. Prue to Col. Jason Joy, 9 October 1924, accessed at the American Legion Library, Indianapolis.

³⁹ *ALW*, July 7, 1922, 24-26. The article explained that a “non-theatrical library is one in which there are no films with captions like, ‘And as the dawn of the new day rosed the gentle crests of the placid Berkshires, Willard and Iolanthe rode out from Chester into the goldern void of the future’.”

⁴⁰ *ALW*, September 7, 1923, 17. Rental prices were dependent on the size of the community's population. “Free Movies,” *American Legion Monthly* (April 1929): 33.

⁴¹ *ALW*, 29 December 1922, 19; *ALW*, November 24, 1922, 15. Many of the films distributed by the Legion directly related to the war or contained official war footage. For example *The Lost Battalion*, which was first released in 1918 and then handled by the Legion in 1924, featured, as its actors, survivors from the Argonne. *ALW*, November 7, 1924, 17; *ALW*, December 26, 1924, 20.

⁴² *ALW*, July 20, 1923, 9; *ALW*, October 20, 1922, 17.

⁴³ The Adjusted Compensation Act of 1924 authorized payment to veterans who had served in the War, depending on their length of service. Payments of less than \$50 were paid in cash, while others were awarded a certificate which, much like an insurance policy, would be redeemed in 1945.

⁴⁴ *Exhibitors Herald*, December 11, 1920, 70; *Exhibitors Herald*, April 30, 1921, 59.

⁴⁵ *ALW*, February 1, 1924, 23; *ALW*, February 8, 1924, 15; *Edwardsville Intelligencer*, March 3, 1924, 8; “The Whipping Boss,” *Photoplay* (February 1924): 90. The example deviates slightly from those already discussed; in this instance, the Legion secured the exclusive distribution of a newly-released feature film with “one of the largest deals put over recently in the independent market.”

⁴⁶ *Moving Picture World*, February 23, 1924, 636; *Exhibitors Trade Review*, February 16, 1924, 13.

⁴⁷ *ALW*, August 4, 1922, 28; *Film Daily*, August 15, 1922, 1; *ALW*, September 22, 1922, 20.

⁴⁸ *ALW*, October 20, 1922, 27; *Exhibitors Herald*, October 7, 1922, 33; “Skin Deep,” *Visual Education* (December 1922): 411.

⁴⁹ *American Legion Weekly* recognised these films as a “powerful aid in membership drives,” and as an attraction that helped “get everybody out for a meeting.” *ALW*, November 24, 1922, 15; *ALW*, May 18, 1923, 27.

⁵⁰ *ALW*, November 10, 1922, 9; *The American Legion Presents Old Glory: An Educational Classic that Every American Should See* (American Legion Film Service, 1929).

⁵¹ Earle Meyer not only recognized film as the “most lucrative post activity,” but also saw the circulation of short news films as a chance to see what other posts are doing: “They take you on a trip to France with the Legion delegation, or on a tour of the United States with Marshall Froch.” “Money-Raising Campaigns,” *Visual Education* (March 1923): 92.

⁵² *ALW*, July 7, 1922, 25.

⁵³ *Pinedale Roundup*, March 6, 1924.

⁵⁴ *Variety*, December 10, 1920, 10.

⁵⁵ *Variety*, May 13, 1921, 47; *Variety*, May 20, 1921, 1; *Exhibitors Herald*, May 21, 1921, 35; “Right Off the Grill,” *Picture-Play* (August 1921): 53.

⁵⁶ Kerry Segrave, *Foreign Films in America: A History* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland and Company, 2004), 22-27; *Variety*, June 3, 1921, 46.

⁵⁷ Louis Pizzitola, *Hearst over Hollywood: Power, Passion and Propaganda in the Movies* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 399; *Indianapolis News*, January 25, 1924.

⁵⁸ Anne Morey, *Hollywood Outsiders: The Adaptation of the Film Industry, 1913–1934* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 124; *ALW*, October 20, 1922, 3.

⁵⁹ Letter from Will Hays to Commander Alvin Owsley, 1 May 1923, accessed at the American Legion Library, Indianapolis; The article written by Charles Phelps Cushing, appeared in *ALW*, May 4, 1923, 3-5, 28-30. Hays’ assistant, Ralph Hayes, wrote a lengthy piece in *The American Legion Weekly* (October 20, 1922, 3-6, 28-30) outlining the role of the committee in 1922.

⁶⁰ Earle A. Meyer to Jason S. Joy, 18 December 1923, accessed at the American Legion Library, Indianapolis; Jason S. Joy, Resume of Activities for Week Ending 16 June 1923, MPPDA Digital Archive, <http://mppda.flinders.edu.au/records/85>.

⁶¹ Reprinted in Jon Lewis, *Hollywood V. Hard Core: How the Struggle Over Censorship Saved the Modern Film Industry* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 301-307.

⁶² *Pinedale Roundup*, March 6, 1924.

⁶³ Resolution, 10 December 1924; Will Hays to General James Drain, 22 January 1925, accessed at the American Legion Library, Indianapolis.

⁶⁴ “Did the Movies Really Clean House?,” *American Legion Monthly*, December 1951, 12-13, 49-56; “The Movies and the American Legion,” *American Legion Monthly*, May 1953, 14-15, 39-43; Larry Ceplair, *Anti-Communism in Twentieth Century America: A Critical History* (Santa Barbara, California: Prager, 2011); Edward Dmytryk, *Odd Man Out: A Memoir of the Hollywood Ten* (Carbondale, Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, 1996), 91-92.

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