Casablanca: The Romance of Propaganda

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"Casablanca provides twenty-first-century Americans with an oasis of hope in a desert of arbitrary cruelty and senseless violence."

As we approach the sixty-fifth anniversary of *Casablanca* (1942), it is clear that the elements that made the film an enduring international classic — an A-list cast in a riveting love story; an exotic, glamorous setting; melodramatic and heroic sacrifices; sharp, noir dialogue; and the triumph of idealism over cynicism in a "world gone mad" — are still capturing our imagination. It is one of those rare films from Hollywood's Golden Age which has managed to transcend its era to entertain generations of moviegoers for nearly three-quarters of a century. However, if we look beyond the nostalgia and the sentimental theme of lost love and redemption, we see that *Casablanca* actually presents a complex and intricate political and social commentary on the early days of World War II. The product of a decade when studios were routinely producing "a movie a week,"*Casablanca* surpasses its humble origins as "just another Warner Brothers' picture" by exploiting wartime patriotism and the traditional "American values" of freedom, liberty, and equality to shape audiences' perception of the war. In the most basic sense,*Casablanca* was an anti-fascist propaganda vehicle which was designed to support U.S. participation in the Allied Forces' struggle for global justice and democracy at a time when most Americans believed that U.S. foreign policy should have promoted isolationism and neutrality.

Hollywood and the Home Front

Although World War II began on September 1, 1939, as late as the beginning of December 1941, the time at which *Casablanca* is set, most Americans believed that the United States "should stay out of that phony war in Europe." In fact, a Gallup Poll taken during the first year of the war indicated that an overwhelming ninety-six percent of all Americans wanted the country to remain neutral.[1] However, by the time *Casablanca* premiered in November 1942, the bombing of Pearl Harbor had already occurred, and the United States had been at war for almost a year. Nevertheless, many Americans continued to support an isolationist foreign policy, and were uneasy about U.S. participation in a war that was thousands of miles away. To counteract this negative public sentiment towards American military participation in WWII, the Department of War established a "War Films" division, and hired filmmakers John Ford, Frank Capra, and *Casablanca*'s screenwriters, Julius and Philip Epstein, to travel to Washington, D.C. to create a series of seven American war propaganda films, grouped under the umbrella title of *Why We Fight*. Warner Brothers also produced some six hundred training and propaganda films under the supervision of Owen Crump, a member of the studio's shorts department.2

Between 1942 and 1945, Hollywood released 1,700 features, 500 of which dealt directly with war-related material. The U.S. government took an active role in the screening (and of course the censorship) of these films through its Office of War Information, and went as far as creating a production rubric which the studios were compelled to follow. This rubric included a "suggested" list of six feature film themes which would "benefit American morale." Washington suggested producing films that would: glorify the "American way of life;" "depict the enemy and their philosophy;" "reflect well on our allies;" "portray the industrial war effort at home;" "illustrate what individuals could do on the home front to support the war effort," and show "our fighting forces at work."3 As intended, the films produced under these guidelines (*Casablanca* included) not only provided the masses with popular entertainment but also reinforced the nation's support for the Allied war effort.

The United Nations on the Silver Screen

In an attempt to ensure its successful approval by the Hollywood censorship system (i.e., the Bureau of Motion Pictures), producer Hal Wallis, who was hired by Warner Brothers to oversee the project, assigned *Casablanca* one of these prescribed themes: "III B (United Nations — Conquered Nations) Drama." The secondary, or "minor," theme was officially declared "II C 3 (Enemy — Military) Drama." Specifically,*Casablanca* was designed to illustrate "that personal desires must be subordinated to the task of defeating fascism" (this theme, of course, was embodied in the character of Richard, or "Rick" Blaine, which was played by Humphrey Bogart). With the assistance of Howard Koch, the Epstein brothers translated this patriotic duty onto the screen by "graphically illustrating the chaos and misery which fascism and the war had brought."4 The United States served as a foil to the evils of fascism, and was portrayed as a virtuous "safe haven for the oppressed and homeless" — a nation of fearless refuge that anti-Nazi Germans, such as *Casablanca*'s Leuchtegs, could honor with a champagne toast.

Casablanca's casting reflected the Warner Brothers' sensitivity to the social and political landscape of the war (after all, Jack Warner was a colonel in the U.S. Army). The cast was a utopia of international understanding (or perhaps a microcosm of the "United Nations") within a modest budget. The actors represented a wide-range of nations — all of which, not so surprisingly — were major players in the war: Humphrey Bogart was American, Ingrid Bergman was Swedish, Conrad Veidt was German, Paul Heinreid was Austrian, and Claude Rains and Sydney Greenstreet were British. The minor roles were also played by a who's who of international stars. Yvonne, Rick's rejected lover, was portrayed by Madeleine LeBeau, a nineteen-year-old French refugee. She was one of a number of French characters who won the hearts of the viewing audience in the patriotic *Marseillaise* scene. The pickpocket, also known as the "Dark European" was appropriately portrayed by the “sinister” German, Curt Bois. Canadian John Qualen depicted Berger, Victor Laszlo’s Resistance contact in Casablanca. His role was especially important since it personified the cooperation between the Allies and Nazi Refugees.[5]

The staff at Rick’s café was not immune to the international spell cast by the Epstein Brothers. The cabaret singer, played by Corinna Mura, represented one of the many “Latin” characters featured in Hollywood’s wartime vehicles, which were designed to appeal to the foreign markets opening up south of the border. The role of Carl, the waiter, was played by another refugee from Hitler’s Europe, S. Z. Sakall. Sascha, Carl’s comedic bartender-sidekick, was Leonid Kinsky, a refugee from the Russian Revolution. Rick’s doorman and bodyguard Abdul was played by Dan Seymour, who was an Arab. For Jan and Annina Brandel, the young Bulgarian couple whose plight spurred Rick into heroic action, producer Hal Wallis chose Helmut Dantine and Joy Page. Dantine, an Austrian, was yet another Nazi refugee, while Page was Jack Warner’s stepdaughter. The one (and unfortunately only) Black actor in the film was Dooley Wilson, who performed the role of Sam the piano player. A one-dimensional character who was never fully developed, his main purpose was to entertain the café patrons, and serve as Rick’s confidante.[6]

Casablanca as Diasporic Purgatory

Stylistically, *Casablanca* employed many of the elements that characterized the genre of film noir, or “black film.” This cinematic approach, which ironically originated in Weimar, Germany in the 1930s, was not employed in the United States on a mainstream basis until the early 1940s(Bogart’s most famous film noir is, arguably,*The Maltese Falcon*, which was released in 1941). Concentrating on human depravity, perversion, manipulative/omnipotent heterosexuality, failure, despair, disillusionment, and the “forbidden,” film noir also implied a certain cinematic style: the use of light and shadow, nervous, rapid pacing, nightmare sequences, flashbacks, unwavering, hard-boiled authority figures, and “a seedy, urban landscape [to portray] a world gone wrong.”[7] By opening *Casablanca* with a map of the “Dark Continent” of Africa, director Michael Curtiz (who himself was in the process of smuggling family members out of Hungary) established the physical and psychological noir setting of the entire film — a chaotic and dangerous locale inhabited by a people without hope — a generation of refugees who were forced by the Nazis onto a trail of despair.[8] This treacherous journey, as we are told, usually began in Paris. The next stop (via train) was Marseilles, then across theMediterranean to Oran, Algeria, where the unfortunate refugees could travel by train, plane or foot to Casablanca. There, they would wait in tenuous limbo, until the day came when they finally secured the exit visas necessary for travel to Lisbon. Once in Portugal, these refugees, like so many other immigrants before them, could venture to the “democracy and freedom of the Americas” (i.e., the United States) — a haven, and a heaven, from the cruelty and death of fascist Europe.

Unfortunately, for every refugee who reached the shores of America, there were countless others stranded in Casablanca: a city of Nazi-Vichy intimidation, corruption, and control. French North Africa was clearly a part of the world where justice was arbitrary, and the “American Dream” was the stuff of fairy tales. In Casablanca, innocent bystanders frequently became the victims of senseless crimes. Random German raids always concluded with a “round up of the usual suspects;” human vultures routinely pick-pocketed refugees right after warning them of the high incidence of crime. In this desert city, human trafficking was a way of life, and Rick’s Café Américain, with its tense and smoky atmosphere, was the marketplace where individuals could be bought and sold through this lucrative refugee trade. In Casablanca, men and women were commodities — unwilling participants in a perverse form of physical and spiritual slavery. It was a locale where the reversal of fortune was the norm, a “Twilight Zone” of morality where normally decent people routinely accepted menial positions and sold their most treasured belongings (including their bodies) just to survive. In this metropole of absurdity, con artists, such as Ugarte, lived in luxury, while Amsterdam’s leading banker was forced to wash dishes at Rick’s café.

All Is Fair in Love and War

One of the major attributes of film noir is that it reflected the cynical social trends of its era, including the influence of psychoanalysis on popular culture, and isolationism/neutrality on both the personal and political fronts.[9] Our first encounter with the proprietor of *Rick’s Café Américain* was during a chess match. The strategic game, which was symbolic of the competition and out-maneuvering that dominated World War II, was like a psychoanalytic therapy session in that it exposed the complex facets of Rick’s personality. His attitude towards his opponent elucidated that Rick was far more complicated than the non-partisan image he tried to maintain. In fact, his position was essentially a personification of the United States’ foreign policy before Pearl Harbor. Like the U.S. government, Rick seemed neutral:

> Rick: “I stick my neck out for nobody.”
>
> Captain Renault: “Wise foreign policy.”

However, as we soon discover, Rick, was also secretly committed to the restoration of democratic idealism and justice.

Although Rick attempted to conceal his political views, his sympathy for the underdog eventually surfaced. We discover that Rick was on the Gestapo “Roll of Honor” because he ran guns to the Ethiopians after their country was invaded by Mussolini in 1935. In 1936, he fought on the side of the Loyalists in the Spanish Civil War, against the fascist Franco-led rebels. Even though Rick made the point that he was well paid on both occasions, this was a poor attempt at concealing his contributions to the democratic cause. The fact that he fought against the Axis powers of Italy and Germany in Spain was particularly significant because it made the audience “understand that [World War II] did not commence with Pearl Harbor.” Rather, “the roots of aggression had a deeper origin.”10

Rick’s cynicism and mysterious exile from the United States added to his image as a romantic figure who was a “sucker for a lost cause.” His noir appearance became an effective facade, concealing his political views and allowing him to cross social and cultural boundaries without suspicion. However, from time to time, Rick’s protective armor cracked, exposing his true sympathies. In one scene, Rick refused to serve a German patron, tearing up his invitation, which would have presumably allowed him to receive “special treatment.” While there was no specific reason given for Rick’s action in the film, there was a cryptic conversation that indicated that Rick’s behavior was perhaps a little more politically motivated than he would have liked to admit:

> Rick: “Your cash is good at the bar.”
>
> German: “Do you know who I am?”
>
> Rick: “I do. You’re lucky the bar’s open to you.”

Another conversation, this time between Rick and Ferrari, the orchestrator of the local black market, also exposed Rick’s liberal political leanings. The owner of the rival café, “The Blue Parrot,” Ferrari offered to buy Sam’s contract, to which Rick replied: “I don’t buy or sell human beings.” Not only did this refusal reinforce the respect that Rick and Sam had for each other (which was particularly bold given the tenuous race relations of the 1940s), but it also conveyed the point that Rick — the American — was above the fascist practice of trading human beings.

The film reaches a political turning point when Ilsa and Victor Laszlo arrive in Casablanca. Their simple clothing suggests that they were, like the other inhabitants of the town, refugees, running from country to country to escape capture by the Gestapo. The fact that Rick broke his isolationist rule of “never drinking with a customer,” and sat down with the Laszlos, indicated that they were not a typical couple. Rick’s emotional reaction to Ilsa signified that “isolationism [would] no longer be a practical policy.” At that moment, it became clear that Rick’s rule of “never sticking his neck out for no one” would be reversed. Like Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Rick would be persuaded by an ally to enter the war. His self-preserving mantra — “I’m the only cause I’m interested in” — would never again be recited in Casablanca.

Ugarte’s letters of transit, which caused his death, as well as the death of two German couriers, compelled the Laszlos to seek Rick’s assistance. The visas were especially valuable because they were signed by Charles de Gaulle. This was a change from the first version of the film, when the letters were signed by Maxim Weygand, the commander of the Vichy forces in Africa. This alteration was clearly a stroke of U.S. propaganda, for by 1941, de Gaulle had become the world-famous leader of “Free France.” The irony of this political maneuver was that de Gaulle did not have any official authority in North Africa.

In fact, by the time *Casablanca* premiered in 1942, he was considered a war criminal and would have been captured and tried for treason (and most likely executed) if he dared set foot in Vichy territory. De Gaulle had as much authority to sign letters of transit which could never have been "rescinded or even questioned" as an ordinary American did of ordering a nuclear war.[11] Perhaps this message of "equality" between de Gaulle and the average American was precisely the message that Warner Brothers wished to convey.

Casablanca and the Third Reich

In order to place the Nazi threat close to home, Koch and the Epsteins saturated *Casablanca* with powerful assertions of German dominance. Nazi soldiers were given the best tables at Rick's café because they were "German and would take [them] anyway," just like they annexed most of Europe. Major Heinrich Strasser's duty was to expand the domain of the Third Reich (i.e., through the German social and political policy of *Lebensraum*). Strasser, *Casablanca*'s most potent villain, made his intentions clear through his first statement in the film: "We [the Germans] have to become accustomed to all climates — from Russia to the Sahara." This sense of foreboding Nazi control was brought to the shores of the United States when Strasser explained to Rick that the Germans planned on invading London and New York.[12] Rick, the defensive American, refused to appease the Germans as most of Europe had done, and warned the autocratic Strasser that even the Nazis could not handle certain sections of New York.[13] Rick's response not only reaffirmed Allied strength, but also helped boost American morale by proclaiming that even the arrogant Nazis could never defeat the idealism, patriotism and spirit of the democratic United States.

The noir theme of foreboding Nazi domination was once again echoed by Rick when he inquired: "If it is December 1941 in Casablanca, what time is it in New York." Although Sam replied that his watch had stopped a long time ago, Rick proceeded to answer his own question: "I bet they're asleep in New York. I bet they're asleep all across America." Clearly, Rick did not mean "asleep" in the literal sense; he meant it in the political sense. While this might have been true on December 6, 1941, by the evening of December 7, it was clear that Americans could no longer afford turn a blind eye to the "phony war in Europe." Pearl Harbor had been bombed the morning of December 7, and scores of American casualties served as a rude awakening to the anger and violence that was raging half way around the world. The fact that Rick chose to focus on New York, the most powerful city in the world, only heightened the vulnerability of the United States. It implied that if Americans did not begin to take the war effort seriously, *they* could become the denizens of Casablanca: prisoners in a German-Vichy protectorate, surrounded by an omni-present Nazi search light. This horrifying image was probably enough to scare many Americans into increasing their support of the war effort.

Casablanca's Paris flashback scenes reinforced the frightening, encroaching image of Nazi domination and destruction. Prior to the Nazi invasion of France, Paris was peaceful, beautiful and carefree. However, after the invasion, the capital became a center of chaos, death, fear and French military abandonment. The Nazis also destroyed Ilsa and Rick's romance: their laughter and joy suddenly became replaced by tension, tears and muffled Gestapo voices. “A crazy world where anything [could] happen” forced them to part, leaving Rick with nothing but an awkward apology and a broken heart. The flashback scenes clearly illustrated that the war was brutal; it shattered a nation, a romance, and the lives of millions of innocent people. It had to end, and according to *Casablanca*, the United States was the perfect candidate for this difficult task.

Despite Ilsa’s repeated rejections and the absurdity of the world around him, Rick does not abandon his altruism and romantic sentimentality. One of Rick’s finest moments came when Annina Brandel, a Bulgarian refugee, asked for his assistance in escaping her tortuous existence in Casablanca. She and her husband Jan were desperately searching for visas to the United States, when they were approached by the corrupt Chief of Police, Captain Louis Renault. Rather than allowing Annina to obtain the visas by selling her body to Renault, Rick rigged the roulette wheel so the couple could win the money to buy their passage to the U.S. Rick’s actions, which represented the power than American virtue had over Vichy corruption, were questioned by another patron, who asked Carl about the honesty of the roulette table. Carl’s reply — “As honest as the day is long” — was probably one of the film’s most insightful statements. Like the days in Casablanca, the roulette table’s honesty was also short-lived. In this German-occupied desert town, the nights seemed to last forever.

Resistance and Resurrection

Rick’s sympathy for the Allies, and his blatant resistance of Nazi authority, was once again conveyed in the famous *Marseillaise* scene. This scene, which was a symbolic battle between the Allied Free French and the Axis Germans, began when Major Strasser’s troops started singing the patriotic *Die Wacht am Rheim*, a song that was brought over to the United States by German immigrants, and thus conveniently in the American public domain.14 Soon after the Germans began to sing, Rick gave the orchestra permission to play the French national anthem, *La Marseillaise*. The Allied supporters, led by Victor Laszlo and Yvonne, Rick’s rejected lover (who, out of spite, in true Vichy form, defected to the Axis side and began to date a Nazi officer), began to sing in cannon with the Germans soldiers. The singers of *La Marseillaise* eventually managed to drown out the German voices; thus, they secured a small, but emotionally and politically significant, victory for the righteous Allies, which was fittingly rounded out by Yvonne’s teary-eyed exclamation “Vive La France.”

Rick’s Café Américain was condemned as a center of pro-Ally sympathy after the *Marseillaise* scene. The closing of the popular meeting place was just another example of the type of exacting revenge that the Nazi regime used to control, dominate and terrorize Casablanca. The corruption and greed of the Axis powers was further exemplified through Captain Renault’s actions during this scene. A stooge of the Vichy and Nazi governments, the unscrupulous Chief of Police willingly did the bidding of his bosses and closed the café under the pretense of “illegal gambling.” In the same breath, he graciously received his share of this “illegal” activity — his winnings from the roulette table.

The corruption, inhumane behavior, and arbitrary punishment exacted by the colonizers of Casablanca stood in stark contrast to the selflessness and altruism of characters such as Victor Laszlo, Ilsa’s husband and one of the key figures in the Resistance movement. Victor was, like Rick, a troubled figure with a dark and mysterious soul. Charismatic and broody in turns, he had a torrid past that involved torture in a Third Reich concentration camp for printing anti-Nazi handbills in his native Prague.[15] When he finally managed to escape from the concentration camp, he was so ill that Ilsa was forced to cancel her plans to leave Paris with Rick so that she could help her husband (whom she thought had perished in the camps) to regain his health. For the next two years, the Laszlos were forced to move from country to country, trying desperately to elude capture by the Gestapo, which sought to curtail their anti-Nazi rallies and publications permanently.

The couple’s burdensome existence did not ease upon their arrival in Casablanca. Although the city was technically still a part of Unoccupied (or Free) France, it was nevertheless under heavy Axis (i.e., German, Vichy and Italian) influence. One misstep could have prevented the Laszlos from reaching the United States, where Victor hoped he could continue his political activism by raising money and support for his underground fighters. He was already under the relentless watch of the Nazis, who had forbidden the sale of exit visas to the Laszlos. Thus, refusing to allow Strasser to sit at his table could have cost Victor his freedom; leading the orchestra in *La Marseillaise* was virtually an act of revolution.[16] However, the audience is always aware of the power that Rick continues to have over Laszlo. While it is true that Ilsa had a profound admiration for the man she married — she was not singing in either of her close-ups; rather, she was staring at her husband in awe — her romantic affection and passion was for Rick. Moreover, even during Victor’s strongest moment in the film, the orchestra still required Rick’s permission to respond to Laszlo’s request for the French national anthem. Thus for all the passion that Victor contributed to the scene, it was Rick, the American, who ultimately became the romantic and political hero of the film.

The Nazis’ brutal and inhumane treatment of Victor was the perfect vehicle to portray the enemy in an unfavorable light. The hatred that the Nazis had for Laszlo was first illustrated by the warning that Major Strasser gave Rick and the rest of Casablanca: he threatened that he would personally punish anyone who provided the Laszlos with exit visas to the United States. With this one statement, Strasser made sure that “it would take a miracle to get [the Laszlos] out of Casablanca.” By that time, the “Germans [had already] outlawed miracles.” Once Victor and Strasser met face to face, their mutual hatred intensified. Strasser attempted to make a deal with Victor: he would give him the exit visas in exchange for the names of the Resistance leaders. Laszlo’s disdain for Nazi coercion was conveyed through his sharp remark: “If I didn’t tell you when I was in a concentration camp, where you had more *persuasive measures* [i.e., torture], why would I tell you now?”[17] Victor’s dedication to the Cause was evident: fighting the Nazis was like breathing; without it, he would die: “If we stop fighting our enemies, the world would die.” No German threat could make him forsake his comrades, especially since there would be thousands to replace him if he were killed. By Laszlo’s estimation, “even the Nazis couldn’t kill that fast.”

Throughout the film, Renault (*right*) reveals the danger inherent in the unstable road he chose for himself, with the Nazis on one side and his friend Rick on the other. When Rick first met Strasser, Renault was suspiciously too quick to reinforce his friend’s image of neutrality. The captain repeatedly interrupted the conversation with misplaced comments such as “Ho, Diplomat,” as if to reassure Strasser that he had no reason to be suspicious of Rick, or to question Renault’s loyalty. During the same encounter, Renault also awkwardly repeats the term “Third Reich” as though there would be others. This Nazi patronization would prove to be a very tenuous strategy for Renault. While it clearly undermined German authority, it also stretched the boundaries of his friendship with Rick. Captain Renault’s hypocrisy came to a head after Strasser ordered his men to search Rick’s office for the valuable exit visas. To appease the Germans, the Captain ordered his officers to be “especially destructive.”18 However, Renault’s guilt compelled him to apologize to Rick for being a Nazi goon; he reassured the café owner that his request was only uttered to appeal to the Nazis’ violent nature.

The ultimate resolution of Renault’s political hedging came during the final “Airport” scene. Renault had to choose between Rick and his alliance with the Nazis. Instead of incriminating Rick with the Laszlos’ escape and Major Strasser’s murder, he told his men to “round up the usual suspects.” While this act saved Rick, it undoubtedly — and disturbingly — led to the arrest, and perhaps even the execution, of an innocent man (most likely a local Moroccan). Renault’s most profound display of patriotism (and pro-Ally propaganda) came as he opened a bottle of “Vichy Water”:

> Captain Renault: “Rick, you’re not only a sentimentalist, but you’ve also become a patriot.”
>
> Rick: “Maybe, but it seemed like a good time to start.”

Renault acknowledged that Rick was right and also decided to make a fresh start. Maybe it was his guilt, or the sudden realization that the Nazis could lose the war — either way, Renault instantaneously dropped the bottle into the trash, which he then kicked over. Renault’s action thus symbolized the “rejection of Vichy France’s authority and his embrace of the Allied Cause.”19 It also symbolized that start of Renault’s and Rick’s “beautiful friendship.”

Propaganda Triumphs Over Romance

The “Airport” scene served a dual purpose: it exorcised Renault’s Nazi demons and resurrected the corrupt character, whose heart was his “least vulnerable spot,” as a “born again” Ally who redeemed himself by sabotaging the enemy. It also resolved the romance between Rick and Ilsa by conveying the idea that neutrality could no longer be a policy, both for the café owner, and for the United States. Before this final scene, it seemed as though Rick and Ilsa were going to submit to their passion by abandoning Victor and fleeing to the United States together. However, once again, duty and honor prevent the star-crossed lovers from realizing their forbidden romance. When the audience finally sees Rick at the airport, it is clear from his dark and foreboding demeanor that their escape will not proceed according to plan. He would once again sacrifice his own happiness for a greater cause, embodying the American propagandist theme that “personal desires must be subordinated to the task of defeating fascism.” As he explained to Ilsa: “I’m no good at being noble, but it doesn’t take much to see that the problems of three little people don’t amount to a hill of beans in this crazy world.”

Rick knew that he had to “think for all of us,” and reluctantly forced Ilsa to leave with Victor. He reminded her of the danger that awaited the café owner: “I have a job to do. Where I’m going you can’t follow. What I’ve got to do you can’t be any part of.” As an Allied sympathizer, Rick would most likely be captured by the Nazis, and like Laszlo, be taken to a concentration camp to await his brutal punishment. Victor was aware of this possibility, and welcomed Rick “to the fight.” He reassured him that “this time I know our side will win.” Thus, at the end of the film, we are provided with a double-dose of tragic romantic fantasy. For every person who has loved and lost, Rick’s choice becomes a moment of supreme self-vindication.[20]

As producer Hal Wallis was fighting to keep *Casablanca* true to his vision of what a war propaganda film should be, history intervened. In November 1942, the Allies landed in North Africa. With the Battle of Casablanca, they secured their first success in the African theatre. The impact of this victory on the United States was tremendous. The city of Casablanca was mentioned in newspapers and on the radio almost daily, sparking so much interest in the “exotic” locale that fashion designers even began inserting Moroccan motifs into their lines.[21] Hal Wallis could not have bought this kind of publicity for *Casablanca*.

To take advantage of this remarkable historical coincidence, Wallis accelerated the production of *Casablanca* so that the film could premier on November 26, 1942, just eighteen days after the Allied landing. The film opened nationwide on January 23, 1943, just as President Franklin Roosevelt, Prime Minister Winston Churchill, and Soviet Premier Joseph Stalin were planning their war strategy. Coincidentally (or perhaps not so coincidentally), their meeting was held in Casablanca (Roosevelt’s headquarters was even code-named “Rick’s Place”), which undoubtedly contributed to the film’s profit of nearly a million dollars (which, by 1943 standards, was an astronomical figure).[22]

Although there are more obvious examples of World War II propaganda films than *Casablanca*, no other film so intricately reflects the historical moment it was produced — the early days of World War II — and the psychological needs of yesterday’s, today’s, and tomorrow’s audiences. Not only does it capture the United States’ perception of itself in the 1940s — cynical yet altruistic, independent yet worldly, idealistic yet naïve — but it also provides twenty-first century Americans with an oasis of hope in a desert of arbitrary cruelty and senseless violence. Like Rick, we too can believe that despite our unyielding surface, we are moral within — capable of personal sacrifice in the name of freedom and democracy. For in *Casablanca*, there will always be a place where good triumphs over evil, and despite the “fight for love and glory,” romance survives in a world gone mad.