Prologue:
Pearl Harbor

John Ford was the first of the five to go. By the time the Imperial Japanese Navy attacked the U.S. military base at Pearl Harbor, he was already three thousand miles from Hollywood and had been in uniform for three months. When news of the bombing came, Ford, now a lieutenant commander in the navy, and his wife, Mary, were guests at a Sunday luncheon at the home of Rear Admiral Andrew Pickens in Alexandria, Virginia. A maid nervously entered the room holding a telephone. "It's the War Department, animal," she said, stumbling over her employer's rank. The visitors braced themselves as the admiral left his table to take the call. He returned to the party and announced, "Gentlemen, Pearl Harbor has just been attacked by the Japanese. We are now at war." As the guests dispersed, the admiral's wife tried to save the afternoon. "It's no use getting excited. This is the seventh war that's been announced in this dining room," she said. She showed the Fords a bullet hole in the wall left by a musket ball during the American Revolution. "I never let them plaster over that," she told them.

Mary Ford later remembered that for "everybody at that table, their lives changed that minute." But Ford had already changed his life, drastically and unexpectedly. By late 1941, most people in the movie industry, like most people in the country, believed that it was only a matter of time before the

United States entered World War II. But what many of his colleagues viewed as a vague shadow spreading across the distant horizon, Ford accepted as a certainty that would require, and reward, advance preparation. For months before he left Hollywood for Washington, D.C., that September, he had been spending his nights and weekends overseeing the creation of a group he called the Naval Volunteer Photographic Unit, training camera operators, sound technicians, and editors to do their jobs under wartime conditions in close quarters; he even used gimbaled platforms in order to simulate attempts to develop film on ships while they pitched and listed. If war was inevitable, he believed the effort to record that war would be essential, and its planning could not be left to amateurs or to the bungling of War Department bureaucrats.

Still, Ford was an unlikely candidate to lead Hollywood's march toward battle. He was old enough to be the father of a typical draftee; at forty-six, he was just a couple of years from welcoming his first grandchild. And although he had done his part in Hollywood over the years on several of the industry's various committees—toiling among the interventionists, the fervent anti-Nazi campaigners, the leaders of ad hoc groups trying to provide aid in the Spanish Civil War—he hadn't been on the front lines of those battles recently. Since 1939, he had spent most of his time and energy directing a string of movies—among them *Stagecoach*, *Young Mr. Lincoln*, and *The Grapes of Wrath*—that had turned him into Hollywood's most respected filmmaker.

What moved Ford, just three weeks after completing production on *How Green Was My Valley*, the picture that would win him his third Best Director Academy Award in seven years, to step away from his thriving career and request a transfer from the Naval Reserve to active duty? Was it lingering shame at having failed the entrance exam for the Naval Academy at Annapolis as a high school student a quarter of a century earlier? Was it embarrassment about having missed America's entry into the First World War in 1917, when he was busy trying to break into the movie business as a stuntman, actor, and fledgling director? Ford's motivation was an enigma even to those closest to him—his wife, the colleagues with whom he made movies, and the drinking buddies at his favorite haunt, the Hollywood Athletic Club. "Is the ace director . . . tired of the tinsel of Hollywood?" one news story

queried. Ford seemed to delight in withholding any explanation at all, burnishing his public image as a taciturn and cryptic man by accepting an invitation to be interviewed about his decision and then declining to offer anything more expansive than, "I think it's the thing to do at this time."

It may have been that simple—a sense of duty, combined with a fear of how he might feel if he shirked it. That September, he had boarded a train for Washington, D.C., predicting misery and remorse for the able-bodied men in Hollywood who were still waiting, wondering what the war would mean and hoping the draft might leave them untouched. "They don't count," he wrote. "The blow will hit them hard next year." He checked into the Carlton Hotel, hung his uniform in the closet, and installed himself in his modest room with its single window of old, runny glass, stacking a couple of books on the bureau along with his pipes and cigars and living out of an open wardrobe trunk. He had the air, wrote a reporter who visited him, "of a man who might set out to sea with an hour's notice." In fact, that was just what he was thinking and even hoping; as Ford awaited orders from his mentor, intelligence chief "Wild" Bill Donovan, his mind was only on what was to come. "Things are moving apace here," he wrote to Mary, admonishing her to avoid the needless expense of late-night long-distance calls to him whenever she felt lonely or sad or angry, and telling her of the "hum of preparation and excitement" that the city was experiencing. "It would take volumes to say what I think of your unselfish courageous attitude in this present emergency," he added as he awaited her arrival in the capital. "Words literally fail me. I am very proud of you."

When Mary finally joined her husband in Washington, Ford gave his wife of twenty-one years something she had always wanted, a proper Catholic wedding ceremony. It was a preparatory gesture, a gift before what they both knew might be a long separation. And when the moment finally came, Ford and the men he trained, who had been streaming into Washington in the last few weeks, could barely contain their enthusiasm. Just hours after the news of Pearl Harbor broke, his Photo Unit recruits began showing up at the Carlton, knocking on the Fords' door, wanting to know what was going to happen next. The drinks started to flow, and as dusk fell on December 7, Ford and his men welcomed America into the war with cocktails.

The sense of urgency that had led Ford to upend his life was not shared by most of his colleagues in Hollywood until that December Sunday. William Wyler was at home in Bel Air the morning of Pearl Harbor, playing tennis with his friend John Huston. Wyler was a few weeks into shooting *Mrs. Miniver,* a drama about the gallantry of one middle-class British family and the inspiring home-front unity of their traditional village in the face of what, until that day, Americans still felt comfortable referring to as "the war in Europe." Huston, who was Wyler's junior and in many ways his protégé, was riding a wave of acclaim as his breakthrough directorial debut, *The Maltese Falcon,* was opening around the country. During their match, the two friends talked about an idea they had cooked up for a celebratory men-only trip they hoped to take later that winter, once Wyler completed *Mrs. Miniver.* That afternoon, they planned to join another friend, director Anatole Litvak, and meet with a travel agent about a visit to the Far East. "Willy and I wanted to get out of Hollywood for a while. I suggested it would be great to go on a proper trip to China," said Huston. "We wanted to see a bit of the outer world."

When Wyler's wife, Talli, who was pregnant with their second child, received a call telling her that Hawaii had been attacked, she ran out of the house and onto the tennis court, telling her husband and Huston to stop playing. The outer world was now at their doorstep. Later that day, the two men drove to Litvak's Malibu beach house, their prospective jaunt abroad already forgotten, and started making plans: How soon could they wrap up their professional commitments? How quickly could they walk away from the Hollywood work that now seemed to them like a silly game?

Wyler, who was thirty-nine, was exempt from military service because of his age. At thirty-five, Huston was a year under the cutoff and therefore eligible for the draft according to the Selective Service and Training Act of 1940, but the aftereffects of a childhood defined by frail health would probably have gotten him an easy 4-F exemption. However, there was no hesitation or second-guessing for either man. Wyler was a Jewish immigrant whose first sight of Americans had been the troops who liberated his hometown in Alsace at the end of World War I. He had relatives trapped in Europe. Eleven

days after Pearl Harbor, he was awaiting his first assignment from the Signal Corps, the army's communications unit. Huston's attitude was more devil-may-care; he had been making up for lost time since his bedbound youth—he had ridden with the Mexican cavalry as an adolescent—and he was sure the war would offer more opportunity to reinvent himself as a man of action. Less than a month after Wyler, he accepted his own Signal Corps commission—"a distinct loss to the Warner studios," noted the *New York Times,* "where he is the directorial find of the year." When he had saddled up in Mexico, Huston said, "I was only a kid . . . I was more interested in going horseback riding than learning how to fight. This time it's different."

The men were seeking adventure, but more than that, they were reaching for relevance in a world that had become rougher and more frightening than anything their studio bosses would allow them to depict on film. Hollywood's best moviemakers shared a growing concern that they were fiddling while Europe burned, using their talents to beguile the American public with diversions—means of escape from the churn and horror of the headlines—rather than striving to bring the world into focus. Hollywood had never been interested in anticipating the news or leading public opinion, but recently its ability to react to changing circumstances had felt agonizingly slow. Wyler had intended *Mrs. Miniver,* a paean to the British national spirit, to galvanize American support for its closest ally; now that the United States itself was at war, he fretted that what he had once intended as a bold statement would seem embarrassingly behind the times. And Huston had spent much of that autumn working with his friend Howard Koch on the script for a Broadway play called *In Time to Come,* about Woodrow Wilson's vision for the League of Nations after World War I. When their drama opened three weeks after Pearl Harbor and, despite good reviews, closed a month later, Huston wasn't surprised. It "seemed dated," he wrote.

Suddenly, Hollywood's most skilled filmmakers faced the possibility that their movies would be of significantly less interest to audiences than the newsreels that preceded them. At MGM, George Stevens was busy making *Woman of the Year,* the comedy that initiated what would become one of the screen's most beloved sparring partnerships by teaming Katharine Hepburn with Spencer Tracy. Over the last several years, Stevens had demonstrated

an extraordinary knack for creating light-spirited movies that nonetheless seemed to take place in the here and now; he knew how to use the economic grind of the Depression and the buzz of modern urban life as context for deft romances that delighted moviegoers. His new film would be no exception—his heroine, Tess Harding, was a journalist, a staunch anti-Hitler interventionist whose must-read opinion pieces had themes like "Democracies Must Stand Together or Collapse." (One ad for her columns shouted, "Hitler Will Lose, Says Tess Harding.") The tone of *Woman of the Year* was perfect for a country engaged by world events but not yet ensnared in them. As the script had it, Tess's professional passion was merely a distraction on the way to her real destiny; her meetings with Churchill and Roosevelt would ultimately be exposed as busywork for a woman who was uneasily attempting to avoid a more meaningful future as a wife and mother.

But the picture wasn't working. The weekend of Pearl Harbor, Stevens was coming off a disappointing test screening of *Woman of the Year*. His producer at MGM, Joseph L. Mankiewicz, had told him that audiences had rejected the movie's last scene, in which Hepburn and Tracy reconciled while covering a prizefight. They wanted to see Hepburn brought low, humiliated for her careerism. Reluctantly, he was preparing to shoot a new ending, in which Tess was to be shamed by her inability to find her way around a kitchen and cook a simple breakfast. Stevens had shot some of Laurel and Hardy's funniest short comedies when he was coming up in the 1920s, and he knew how to execute the pratfalls the scene required, but not how to refute Hepburn's bluntly stated conviction that the new ending was "the worst bunch of shit I've ever read." He and Hepburn both went through with the reshoot, but by the time *Woman of the Year* was in theaters two months later, Stevens was already thinking about turning his cameras on the war. That winter, he had sat alone in a Los Angeles screening room and watched, with horror and enthrallment, Leni Riefenstahl's documentary tribute to Aryan invincibility, *Triumph of the Will*. After that, he knew he could not make another movie that could possibly be used to divert anyone's attention from the war. Stevens often said that he decided to enlist that night, but what he saw stirred more than just his patriotic desire to beat the Germans. Watching the movie, he said years later, he realized that "all film," including his own, "is propaganda."

It was no longer a dirty word, although it had been until recently. In the fall, a group of isolationist senators had responded to a simmering combination of antiwar passion, anti-Hollywood rhetoric, and no small amount of anti-Semitism by summoning the movie industry's studio heads to Washington for hearings on whether a small handful of the hundreds of movies they produced every year were barely concealed agitprop, dramas designed to exacerbate paranoia or spark a public appetite for militarism. Now, propaganda—documentaries, dramas, comedies, features, shorts, movies for public consumption, and movies for servicemen only—was being discussed in both Hollywood and Washington as a matter of strategic necessity. Sometimes the projects were given the less tarnished label "morale films," but there was no longer any argument about the rectitude of their purpose.

For Frank Capra, the shift in public sentiment brought about by Pearl Harbor confirmed the wisdom of a move he had been planning to make for months. Capra, already a three-time Academy Award winner, was Hollywood's most successful director, and its richest. At forty-four, he was, virtually alone in his profession, a millionaire, and he had gotten there via a series of comedies—*Mr. Deeds Goes to Town, You Can't Take It With You,* and the more dramatic *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*—that were expert at rousing a kind of generic populist high-spiritedness in moviegoers without ever getting too specific about their politics, which were as hard to parse as Capra's own.

In the summer of 1941, the columnist Stewart Alsop had written a piece for *Atlantic Monthly* called "Wanted: A Faith to Fight For," that caught the eye of General George Marshall. In the essay, Alsop warned, "To fight the war we will be sooner or later called upon to fight we need a crusading faith, the kind that inspired the soldiers of 1917, setting forth the war to make the world safe for democracy. We haven't got it; certainly the men who will do the fighting haven't got it." Marshall believed that movies could help to instill that crusading faith in both civilian audiences and new enlistees. Given Capra's résumé, which included terms running both the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences and the Screen Directors Guild in their formative years, he was perhaps more qualified than any other director in Hollywood to draw on the varied resources of an industry that he believed would be indispensable to the coming war effort. Like Ford, Capra had missed serving

in World War I, although not for lack of trying; after the death of his father in a farming accident in 1917, he had concluded that his family would no longer be able to bear the burden of his college tuition, and he began ROTC training with the intention of joining the army. Shortly after enlisting, he contracted the flu; by the time he recovered, armistice had been declared. Unlike Ford, the son of first-generation Irish Americans who had settled in Maine, Capra himself was an immigrant, the youngest child of working-class Sicilians who had moved him and three of his siblings to California when he was five. Not until the army tried to process him did Capra learn that he had never been naturalized, and more than twenty years later he still had not fully shaken off the immigrant's desire to do right by his adopted country. ("That was his politics: 'Pleased to be here,'" said Hepburn after they worked together.)

So as the war approached, Capra started planning his departure from Hollywood. He made a lucrative deal with Warner Bros. to direct Cary Grant in an adaptation of the Broadway hit *Arsenic and Old Lace*. "I thought, 'Well, if I go into the Army, I'd like to have something going for my family while I'm there,'" he wrote later. "Perhaps I can find a picture that I can make fast and get a percentage of the profits. That will keep them going." He was a week from finishing the movie when war broke out. Five days later, he agreed to join the Signal Corps as a major.

Decades later, Capra wrote of his decision to enter the army. "Patriotism? Possibly. But the real reason was that in the game of motion pictures, I had climbed the mountain, planted my flag, and heard the world applaud. And now I was bored." If his characteristically self-mythologizing explanation doesn't ring completely true, the grandiosity—and the sense of competition that lay just beneath it—were very real. In a matter of months, the war would reshape Hollywood from the top down, just as it reshaped the rest of America: Fully one-third of the studios' male workforce—more than seven thousand men—would eventually enlist or be drafted. But few of them would enter the war as these directors did, with the sense that in impending middle age, they had found themselves with a new world to conquer, a task that would test their abilities to help win the hearts and minds of the American

people under the hardest imaginable circumstances, with the greatest possible stakes.

The War Department's decision to enlist the movie industry's help after Pearl Harbor was not inevitable. The Signal Corps had used movies to train soldiers since 1929, just as the studios were making the transition from silent pictures to talkies, and in the 1930s, Roosevelt and his team had come to understand the power of short films and newsreels to sell the New Deal. But for much of the decade before Pearl Harbor, Hollywood and Washington had remained, in a way, competing principalities, each impressed by and distrustful of the clout held by the other. Hollywood feared the near-constant threat of censure, investigation, and regulation from the capital; Washington watched the growth of a medium that had become unrivaled in capturing the attention of the American people and, by degrees, learned to acknowledge, if sometimes unhappily, its power. But the beginning of the war marked the government's first attempt at a sustained program of filmed propaganda, and its use of Hollywood filmmakers to explain its objectives, tout its successes, and shape the war as a narrative for both civilians and soldiers constituted a remarkable, even radical experiment.

Given how central the movies became to the way the nation perceived the Second World War, it is striking how little forethought or planning went into the War Department's use of Hollywood. It began in an ad hoc way, the brainchild of a few senior officers—Marshall chief among them—who believed that the country, and the armed forces, had something to gain by the deployment of people who knew how to tell stories with cameras. The use of men like Ford and Capra came about in part because they were not only willing to serve, but eager to invent a program where none existed; they brought expertise and initiative to the table in an area that career military officers had neither the time nor the interest to master. In the immediate wake of the attack, there was no possibility of sitting down and calmly planning a cohesive approach to creating a filmed record of the war, or to let the half-dozen different government agencies and offices that shared a role in the dissemination of information sort out the lines of authority among themselves.

Nor was there any opportunity to discuss the complicated ethics involved.

On December 6, 1941, nobody anticipated there might be a need for such deliberation; a day later, the opportunity had already passed. A serious, extended discussion of the problems that might occur when a documentarian's duty to report the war with precision and accuracy conflicted with a propagandist's mission to sell the war to Americans whatever it took, or about the suitability of Hollywood filmmakers for either role, would, without question, have been divisive. It never happened. Some in the armed forces were astounded, and affronted, that directors who had until recently been guiding Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers across a dance floor or teaching John Wayne to look heroic on a horse would now be entrusted with educating servicemen, inspiring civilians, and, armed with guns and cameras, standing shoulder to shoulder on the battlefield with real soldiers. Hollywood directors could, after all, be put to use in Hollywood; indeed, many of them were quickly deployed on their home turf, studio backlots, where by the end of 1943 they would infuse more than three hundred movies with spirit-building messages that were often handpicked from a list of government-approved suggestions and sewn into scripts on the fly.

Some in the armed forces believed that the prospect of filmmakers without any knowledge of "the army way" wearing officers' bars on their shoulders was an invitation to chaos. The producers of newsreels would have been more natural choices to film the war than a group of fiction makers from California; they had proven experience in getting their crews to far-flung locations, and they knew how to communicate information with energetic, punchy economy to the audiences who saw their work in movie houses every week. But they were journalists, and thus untouchable; the only control over them that the War Department could exert was to keep them supplied with footage advancing the army point of view, and that footage would have to be too compelling for them to resist.

So the decision was left to those in Hollywood who wanted to be of service and who saw a chance to reshape the reputation of their industry in doing so, and to those in Washington who understood their value. The army needed Hollywood—its manpower, its know-how, its equipment, its salesmanship, its experience, and the ideas of its most skilled directors. Movies brought tens of millions of Americans out of their homes every week and

stirred them to laughter, tears, anger, and, increasingly, patriotism. Filmmakers could not win the war, but Capra, Ford, Huston, Stevens, and Wyler had already shown that they could win the people. That was more than enough to secure the five men—the most influential and innovative American film directors to volunteer for service—a place of critical importance in the war effort.

The men reported for duty with as much naiveté as excitement, almost as if they were novice actors freshly cast in starring roles. They had bid farewell to their families and pried themselves loose from the comfort of their careers, and they began their time in the armed forces ready to serve, though not necessarily to take command. Their first questions were almost childlike: *When do I change into my uniform? Where should I work? What is a salute supposed to look like? How do I get supplies? What do you want me to do first?* The war had begun, but the words Ford had used to describe what was happening back in October—"the present emergency"—felt somehow more appropriate in the early days after Pearl Harbor, before the Allies had mounted a counteroffensive and troops started to ship out. Everything felt temporary, unplanned, contingent.

The directors were ready to pitch in, but none of them, on the day they had enthusiastically received their commissions, had anticipated that they were walking away from their lives not for weeks or months, but years. They were men of vast ability and, in most cases, with egos to match—new officers with the experience of privates and, at least outwardly, the confidence of generals. And as genuine as their desire to make a contribution was, they had more personal reasons for volunteering: They saw their time in the military as the next chapter in the success stories they had all become—a testing ground and a proving ground. Huston imagined that the war might finally slake his thirst for risk and danger. For Ford, naval service represented the last chance to live the seafaring life he had always dreamed of, and a long-deferred opportunity to discover and measure his own bravery. Capra, the immigrant made good who still saw himself as an outsider, responded to the call to duty as a chance to define himself as the most American of Americans and win the respect he still felt eluded him. Wyler—the only Jew among the men, and the only one of the five with an imperiled family in Europe—wanted the

chance to fight the Germans that he had never had as a boy. And Stevens, a skilled manufacturer of gentle diversions, hoped to trade in fantasy for truth, to use his camera, for the first time, to record the world as it really was.

Over the next four years, the war would give each man exactly what he wanted, but those wishes would come true at a cost greater than any of them could have imagined. They would go to London and France, to the Pacific theater and the North African front, to ruined Italian cities and German death camps; they would film the war from land, sea, and air in ways that shaped, then and for generations after, America's perception of what it looked and sounded like to fight for the fate of the free world. They would honor their country, risk their lives, and create a new visual vocabulary for fictional and factual war movies; some of them would also blur the lines between the two, compromising themselves in ways they would spend the rest of their days trying to understand, or justify, or forget. By the time they came home, the idea they had once held that the war would be an adventure lingered only as a distant memory of their guileless incomprehension. They returned to Hollywood changed forever as men and as filmmakers.

Decades later, at the end of their lives, they were garlanded with honors and lifetime achievement awards for their enduring contributions to art and entertainment. But privately, they would still count among their most meaningful accomplishments a body of work that most of their admirers had long forgotten or never seen at all. As long as they lived, the war lived in them.

ONE

"The Only Way I Could Survive"

HOLLYWOOD, MARCH 1938–APRIL 1939

In the spring of 1938, Jack Warner hosted an industry dinner for the exiled novelist Thomas Mann. A Nobel laureate whose outspoken opposition to Hitler and his policies had led to the revocation of his German citizenship, Mann was then Germany's leading anti-Nazi voice in the United States. His presence at a Hollywood event was, if not a call to arms, at least a call to wallets. It was also a political coming-out of sorts for Warner and his older brother Harry, who, just three weeks after the Anschluss, were ready to commit themselves—and, more significantly, the company they and their brothers Albert and Sam had founded in 1923—to the fight against the Nazis. The day before the dinner, the studio had shut down its offices in Austria. It had stopped working with Germany four years earlier.

The fact that Warner Bros. was at the time the only studio to take such a step suggests the extreme uneasiness that characterized the behavior of the men, almost all of them Jewish, who ran Hollywood's biggest companies. Freewheeling and entrepreneurial within the confines of the industry they had helped to create, they approached politics only haltingly and after agonized deliberation. While bottom-line imperatives were unquestionably a part of their calculus, their trepidation also emanated from an accurate understanding of their fragile place in American culture; to confront any na-

tional or international issue that might turn the spotlight on their religion was to risk animosity and even censure. The motion-picture business was still just thirty years old; most of the people who had built it were first- or second-generation Americans who were still viewed warily by the large portion of the country's political power structure—to say nothing of the press and public—that had in common a tacit and sometimes overt anti-Semitism. The moguls knew they were perceived as arrivistes and aliens whose loyalties might be divided between the adoptive nation that was making them wealthy and their roots in their old homelands.

As Hitler consolidated his power in the 1930s, studio chiefs tended to express their Jewish identity in personal, one-on-one appeals and in the quiet writing of checks to good causes, not in speeches or statements, and certainly not in the movies they oversaw. Mostly, they stayed quiet; the decorous country-club discretion of MGM's Louis B. Mayer was much more the norm than the recent behavior of the Warners (real name: Wonskolaser), Jewish immigrants from Poland who didn't tiptoe around their hatred of Fascism and of Hitler and were increasingly unafraid to go public and to use their position to influence others. The Warners were ardently pro-Roosevelt (unlike most of the other studio czars, who were business-minded antilabor Republicans), and Harry, who was the eldest and very much the voice of his studio, had recently urged all of his employees to join the Hollywood Anti-Nazi League for the Defense of American Democracy, the movie industry's first and strongest anti-Hitler rallying and fund-raising organization.

Warner's rivals were so timid on the subject that his endorsement of anti-Nazi activism was in itself controversial enough to make headlines. The Anti-Nazi League was not at the time openly backed by any other studio heads, nor did it have the support of Joseph I. Breen, the head of the Production Code and one of the most prominent Catholic watchdogs of Hollywood morality. It was also viewed with suspicion by many Washington politicians, among them Martin Dies, the Texas congressman who in 1938 created the first version of what would become the House Un-American Activities Committee with the intention of investigating Communism in Hollywood studios, unions, and political organizations. Warner's dinner for Mann was such a startling break with tradition that the industry newspaper *Variety* was moved

to suggest (approvingly) that he was positioning himself at the forefront of a nascent "militant anti-Hitler campaign in Hollywood," and the columnist Walter Winchell cited Harry as "the leader of the fight to get the other major companies to discontinue doing business with" the Nazis. But the "fight" stopped well short of the Warners confronting their competitors at other studios; there wasn't much that Harry and Jack could do except to lead by example and hope that their rivals would start to feel pressure from their own rank and file.

Even as most studios maintained a strong financial interest in the German market and continued to do business with Hitler and his deputies, the issue of how to fight Hitler's rise to power was becoming a subject of discussion, and discomfort, in their boardrooms and executive suites. But in 1938, all of Hollywood's major moviemaking companies—Warners included—were adamant on one point: Whatever they thought about the Nazis, they would not allow their feelings, or anyone else's, about what was happening in Germany to play out onscreen. On rare occasions, a veiled or allusive argument against Fascism or tyranny would make its way into a motion picture, but it was then unthinkable that studios could use their own movies to sway public opinion about Hitler without sparking instant accusations that they were acting as propagandists for foreign—meaning Jewish—interests. Much of Hollywood's creative class—directors, writers, actors, independent producers—was becoming far more forthright about making its political sympathies known at rallies and in aid organizations, but for the most part, the noise they were making stopped when they passed through the gates and reported for work every morning. The studios didn't particularly care who among their "talent" was for or against Roosevelt, a Communist or a Fascist sympathizer, a Jew or a Gentile, but that tolerant indifference stemmed from a steely certainty that nobody's beliefs, whatever they might be, would seep onto the screen.

The stern eye of the Production Code as well as the studios' collective fear of giving offense meant that controversial material was systematically weeded out of scripts before the cameras ever rolled. It also meant that even the most highly praised and successful studio directors were treated as star employees rather than as artists entitled to shape their own creative visions. When a filmmaker's work reliably struck a chord with audiences, he was

rewarded with larger budgets, access to the best of his studio's contract stars, and a greater, though not unchecked, ability to pick and choose from among those properties that his bosses wanted to turn into movies. But there were limits, and political self-expression was one of them; no movie under the banner of a studio would ever reach American theaters unless the head of that studio was comfortable defending every frame and every line—and ideally, not a frame or line would need defending in the first place.

Sooner or later, every working director in Hollywood would find himself on the losing end of an argument about the content of one of his movies, fighting against a litany of often self-imposed restrictions about what couldn't or shouldn't or mustn't be said. In 1938, none of them was powerful enough to override the caution of the motion picture industry's leaders—certainly not John Huston, who was still trying to break into the business, or George Stevens and William Wyler, who were still working their way up. Even Frank Capra and John Ford, who were already near the top of their field, knew that on this subject, the men in charge were immovable. Over the course of a career at Fox that had begun well before the dawn of the sound era, Ford had earned the trust and respect of his bosses, most recently Darryl F. Zanuck, who had overseen all production for the studio since its 1935 merger with a rival company called Twentieth Century Pictures. Ford's public identity as a director had not yet been fully formed—the remarkable run that would firmly establish his reputation not just within Hollywood but with the American public would begin at the end of 1938 with the shooting of *Stagecoach*. Thus far, the reputation he had built steadily over the last fifteen years rested most firmly on a film that Fox and most other studios in Hollywood had declined to make because of its politics. In 1935, he had gone to RKO to shoot *The Informer,* a dark, unusually atmospheric melodrama about a man who sells out his friend to the police during the Irish rebellion. The film was close to Ford's heart—he had gone to Ireland as a young man in 1921 to visit relatives and support the IRA—and, although it was not a major hit, it greatly elevated Ford's status with critics and within the industry, winning him his first Academy Award for Best Director.

But if Ford imagined that the acclaim he had received would somehow

result in greater clout or creative freedom back at Fox, he was soon disillusioned. Three years after *The Informer* was released, he saw Jean Renoir's *Grand Illusion,* one of the first French-language films to win widespread attention in the United States. He was astonished by the power and the frankness of Renoir's drama, which portrayed officers, including one explicitly identified as Jewish, who were being held as prisoners during the First World War. Ford was moved by its portrayal of personal nobility in the face of a catastrophic clash of nations. It was, he said, "one of the best things I have ever seen." But when he tried early in 1938 to get Zanuck interested in an American remake, he was rebuffed so firmly that he was dissuaded from pressing his case further. The idea of pursuing a more socially or politically committed cinema, was, he felt, futile; no film with a strong political perspective would be able to surmount the studios' fear of being labeled interventionists, or the antipathy of the censors and what he disdainfully called the "financial wizards" to making waves. "If you're thinking of a general run of social pictures, or even just plain honest ones," he complained, "it's almost hopeless."

In 1938, Ford began to do offscreen what he was not permitted to do in his movies, and walked onto the stage of Los Angeles's Shrine Auditorium to speak at an Anti-Nazi League rally for the first time. He was not going out on a limb alone. The league was only two years old, but its membership already included hundreds, soon to be thousands, of actors, directors, screenwriters, and public intellectuals, a broad mix of Democrats, Socialists, and Communists. But Ford was particularly fearless about speaking out. "May I express my wholehearted desire to cooperate to [my] utmost ability with the Hollywood Anti-Nazi League," he said that fall, when Dies's new congressional committee started to go on the attack. "If this be Communism, count me in."

That rhetorical flourish spoke more of Ford's long-standing detestation of bullies like Dies than of his own political sympathies. A lifelong Catholic, he had little in common with the Popular Front leftists—many of them Jewish, many of them Communists—who were among Hollywood's most active anti-Nazi leaders. In a letter to his nephew, he had recently written of his conviction that "Communism to my mind is not the remedy this sick world is

seeking." Although he didn't identify his politics publicly, in the same letter he described himself as "a definite socialistic democrat—always left," and that was, at the time, accurate.

Ford was a deeply divided personality. On sets, he could be a sadist, often singling out a cast or crew member for abuse or humiliation. But in the public sphere, he would frequently become affronted at an unfair or lopsided fight and take a stand, always preferring David to Goliath. In 1936, incensed at the studios' antiunion policies and firm in his belief (which was tinged with some unseemly precepts about Jews and money) that "the picture racket is controlled from Wall Street," he urged his colleagues to make common cause with Hollywood's trade unions, and became one of the founding members of the Screen Directors Guild. A year later, he joined the SDG's first negotiating committee. And as the Spanish Civil War pricked Hollywood's conscience, Ford helped found organizations like the Motion Picture Artists' Committee to Aid Spain, which eventually boasted a membership of fifteen thousand; he also served as vice chairman of the Motion Picture Democratic Committee, an anti-Fascist, pro-Roosevelt group that was heavily involved in California state politics.

At the Shrine Auditorium on the day Ford spoke, the subject was Hitler, although Dorothy Parker, who presided over the rally, refused to use his name, referring to him only as "that certain man." The theme of the day was twofold: the evil of Fascism abroad, and the possible menace of Nazi cells within the United States. An audience of four thousand listened as the Anti-Nazi League's special guest speaker, a former U.S. ambassador to Germany, warned via audio hookup from Carnegie Hall that "America is not free from . . . Nazi activity," which was then a common it-can-happen-here refrain in newspapers and radio broadcasts. For many in Hollywood, fighting Hitler was a good cause, but not yet a crisis. For Ford, though, the rally's message was resonant, and the threat felt immediate. It was not premature to imagine a day when the United States would have to defend itself.

Over the last ten years, Hollywood had not made many war movies, and even those that showcased the excitement of combat or of aerial derring-do tended to emphasize above all the grave human cost of military conflict. "War itself is so ugly and so terrible," said the French writer André Maurois

that year, "that I do not believe it is possible to see a representation of such life without wishing never to live it. The difficulty is not to give a war film the character of a great adventure—a characteristic which modern war does not have." The trauma of what was then still called the Great War was still fresh, and the loss of more than 100,000 American soldiers in just a year had left the United States deeply averse to the idea of military involvement a continent away. The First World War had been a subject for movies as early as armistice, and in 1928, Ford had made it the backdrop of one of his most moving silent films, *Four Sons,* about brothers from Bavaria who end up fighting on opposite sides. But no movie had defined World War I for American audiences more than Lewis Milestone's 1930 masterpiece *All Quiet on the Western Front,* an adaptation of Erich Maria Remarque's widely read novel. The film had affirmed and reinforced the public's perception of the war as a descent into carnage that had robbed every nation that fought in it of a generation of young men, all for a tenuous peace that few believed would last. Almost ten years later, it remained for many in the industry Hollywood's last and best word on the subject.

George Stevens had been thirteen when the United States entered the war in 1917; as a child, he had read daily reports of the deaths of American boys just a few years older than he was. Twenty years later, he shuddered at the prospect of another costly war—and like many Americans, the conflict in Europe felt remote to him. Stevens had no old-country roots anywhere; he had grown up in California, his parents were stage actors, he had cut his teeth directing slapstick shorts when he was barely out of his teens, and show business was the only life he had ever known. Though he was, at thirty-four, a laconic and introverted man who was sometimes teased on his sets about the expression of impenetrable, stone-faced preoccupation that he tended to wear like a mask, most of the dozen features he had directed for RKO were loose, energetic, and joyful. Under contract to the studio, he had distinguished himself as one of Hollywood's most adroit up-and-coming directors, a filmmaker who had a confident light touch and a gift for bringing out strong work in his actors. He'd made a critically praised literary adaptation, *Alice Adams,* and a hit musical, *Swing Time,* and he was a particular favorite of actresses, including Katharine Hepburn, Barbara Stanwyck (with whom he

had made *Annie Oakley*), and RKO's most important female star, Ginger Rogers, whom he had just directed in the sparkling comedy *Vivacious Lady*.

As he watched Ford and many of his fellow directors begin to immerse themselves in a kind of activism that might eventually lead to American intervention in Europe, Stevens felt his own consciousness begin to stir with a growing sense of alarm. As a filmmaker he believed, for the first time, that he had a duty to make a movie that engaged with the world's dangerous realities, and he thought the hits he had delivered for RKO had earned him the right to make a passion project. In 1938, he had one in mind: an adaptation of Humphrey Cobb's novel *Paths of Glory*, the bleak and harrowing story of three French soldiers during World War I who face a court-martial and death sentence for cowardice when they refuse orders from their superiors to advance in an attack that they know amounts to a suicide mission. Like *All Quiet on the Western Front*, Cobb's novel was a mostly apolitical indictment of the brutality of war, which it depicted as a vicious game in which vain old men with little at personal risk heedlessly send young soldiers to their deaths.

Stevens later said that his own position regarding the possibility of another war was vague and uninformed; like many Americans who were old enough to remember doughboys being gassed in the trenches, he imagined at the time that an American move against Hitler's reinvigorated Germany could lead to unimaginable loss, and that the United States would do better to turn away from the nightmare that Europe was becoming. He thought *Paths of Glory* could serve as both a reminder and a warning. But his pitch to make the movie was rejected repeatedly by RKO's production chief Pandro Berman. "He [said], 'You can't make that picture,'" Stevens recalled. "And I said, 'Why the hell can't we?'" When Stevens pressed him, Berman first said that his resistance was not ideological but financial: Foreign markets were extremely important to the studios, and he believed that France would not only refuse to show *Paths of Glory* but might boycott all RKO product in retaliation. "Well, don't run it in France," Stevens replied. "This is a picture for the rest of the world." But another delegation from the studio then approached Stevens and said flatly, "It's an anti-war picture."

"Yes, it's true," Stevens said. "It's an argument against war."

"Well, this is no time to be making an anti-war picture," they replied. "War is in the offing."

"I said, 'What better time for an anti-war picture?'" Stevens remembered decades later. "And they said, 'What about Hitler? If somebody doesn't fight Hitler, what will happen?' . . . It was another eight years before I [understood] that. I got all the way to Dachau before I could say that we should've fought Hitler three years before the development . . . that brought [us] into it."

At the time, though, Stevens didn't recognize what he later viewed as his own naiveté; he just felt thwarted.* And more than that, manhandled, especially when RKO swiftly steered him toward the property it had decided should be his next film: *Gunga Din*. Stevens was given a budget of nearly $2 million—the largest the studio had ever approved—to film Rudyard Kipling's rousing story of the glory and the valor of the British Empire in India, and the film proved to be tremendously successful with audiences, who loved seeing Cary Grant in uniform and Sam Jaffe play an Indian. The movie, which was released in early 1939, raised its young director's profile considerably, and was mostly well received by critics. Stevens gave little thought to its pro-war subtext while he was making it. But decades later, his verdict on *Gunga Din* was close to that of the critic for the Bombay publication *FilmIndia,* which called the movie "Imperialist propaganda." "The film is delightfully evil in the fascist sense," said Stevens. "It celebrates the rumble of the drums and the waving of the flags. . . . I really got that film done just before it would have been too late. Another year . . . and I would have been too smart to do it."

At the same time that RKO was steering Stevens away from *Paths of Glory,* a far more powerful filmmaker found himself in a battle with his bosses over a war movie. It was not a position to which Frank Capra was accustomed. By 1938, Capra was the most important director on the Columbia Pictures lot, and nobody else even came close. Columbia was not a powerhouse, not one of the studios that were then referred to in the industry as the "big five" (Warner Bros., 20th Century Fox, RKO, MGM, and Paramount).

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* *Paths of Glory* was eventually made in 1957, by Stanley Kubrick.

Like Universal, it was considered a second-tier company with more modest financial underpinnings and a far less impressive stable of talent. Capra was the exception; his 1934 comedy *It Happened One Night* had swept the Academy Awards, *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* had won him his second Best Director Oscar two years later, and the fall of 1938 brought an adaptation of the Broadway hit *You Can't Take It With You* that would win the Best Picture Oscar and bring Capra his third Best Director trophy in five years.

In the public eye, Capra was the first brand-name director of the sound era; his latest movie had landed him on the cover of *Time* magazine with the headline "Columbia's Gem." The article praised his understated on-set style, explaining that he "works without mannerisms [and] confers quietly with his actors and technical crew before each take." It also enthusiastically advanced the rags-to-riches autobiography that Capra had, even at the outset of his career, actively promoted, taking him from his humble beginnings as an immigrant boy from Sicily selling newspapers on California street corners to his present $350,000-per-annum salary and his and his wife Lucille's lifestyle as "two of the community's most dazzling celebrities. . . . [They] spend most of the year in a vacation cottage in Malibu Beach and send two of their three children to the U.C.L.A. nursery school."

Columbia president Harry Cohn had such confidence in Capra that he had not hesitated to pay $200,000 to buy him the screen rights to *You Can't Take It With You*. But he also knew how to say no, and, just two months after the *Time* story, when Capra came to him with an idea for a new movie, Cohn turned his most valuable employee down flat. For several years, Capra had wanted to film an adaptation of Maxwell Anderson's play *Valley Forge*, a drama about the conditions endured by American fighters in the Revolutionary War during the punishing winter of 1778. The *New York Times* had praised the play as a chance to "worship at the shrine of an inspiring figure," George Washington, but in fact, Anderson's play was perfectly suited to Capra; it was a veneration not so much of General Washington as of the common soldier whose fighting spirit convinced him not to surrender.

Cohn had already turned up his nose at *Valley Forge* when Capra first pitched it three years earlier, just after the success of *It Happened One Night*. Now Capra returned to make his case with considerably more clout as well as

the inducement of casting Gary Cooper as Washington—and Cohn told him the answer was still no. The reason was something Capra hadn't anticipated: Cohn said he couldn't bring himself to finance a movie in which audiences would be encouraged to root against British soldiers at a moment when England was under an ever greater threat from Germany. Capra didn't put up much of a fight; he got the point. He hadn't even considered the potential public relations peril of appearing to take the wrong side.

It was not the first time Cohn had saved Capra from himself. Over the last few years, the director's naïve and inconsistent political instincts had sometimes led him close to disaster. In 1935, after he visited Italy and expressed his admiration for Benito Mussolini, Il Duce—a big fan of Capra's movies—offered Columbia $1 million if Capra would direct a film biography based on his life, with Mussolini himself writing the screenplay. Capra, who was said to have a picture of the dictator on his bedroom wall, may have been interested, but Cohn, after briefly considering it, scotched the idea, saying, "After all, I'm a Jew. He's mixed up with Hitler and I don't want no part of it." Cohn was blunt, coarse, and abrasive—most filmmakers couldn't stand him—but he was also hard-nosed and shrewdly protective of his assets, Capra chief among them, and he believed that as an outsider, the director could not afford to dabble in global politics without having his loyalty questioned. Hollywood was already seen by too much of the rest of America as a nest of perversion and subversion, and the industry's growing population of foreign-born filmmakers, writers, and actors had to walk an especially careful line. Even in 1938, Capra's foreign origins made him such an easy target for casual distaste that a *Collier's* magazine profile could lightly refer to him as a "little wop."

Capra's infatuation with Mussolini soon subsided, but his sympathies remained maddeningly difficult to track, even for those who knew him. He supported Franco during the Spanish Civil War while most of his Hollywood colleagues were raising funds for the Loyalists. And when it came to domestic affairs, his politics were described as "reactionary" by Edward Bernds, a sound engineer who worked with him several times and who wrote in his diary in 1936 that Capra was a "bitter Roosevelt hater" who couldn't stop complaining about the income tax.

At any given moment, Capra's passions could be inflamed by populism or by distrust of the working class, by loathing for Communists or contempt for capitalists, by economic self-protection or New Deal generosity. Throughout the 1930s, his politics had been defined more by his quick temper than by any ideological consistency. His conflicting impulses were manifest in *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town,* a comedy about an eccentric young New England poet who inherits $20 million and learns what it's like to have the whole world reach into his pockets. Capra's left-wing screenwriter Robert Riskin brought an unmistakable progressivism to the film, especially in an episode in which a farmer is driven to madness by his inability to feed and clothe his family in the Depression; his plight moves Deeds to a quasi-socialistic resolve to spread the wealth. But the movie's ideas, and its ideals, are highly mutable. In one scene, *Deeds* can sound like a people's cry against the greed of entrenched financial barons; in the next, it turns into a near-Fascist rant against big-city sophistication, with both positions expressed in a kind of one-size-fits-all anger ("Salesmen, politicians, moochers—they all want something!" Deeds complains). Still, few in *Deeds*'s audience would have guessed that its director was an Alf Landon supporter who shunned practically every Hollywood organization as a potential hotbed of Communism. While Ford and many of Capra's other colleagues worked to found the Screen Directors Guild in 1936, Capra refused to join for eighteen months. When he did, it was only because his growing interest in the fight for directors' rights finally overtook his deep scorn for unions.

In 1937, Capra took a trip to Russia with Riskin; he was treated as royalty by apparatchiks who were convinced that his movies were anticapitalist, and he was said to have reciprocated their hospitality by expressing great enthusiasm for Stalinism and contempt for "the bosses of cinema" in America. But he also made his antiwar views plain; when he was invited to watch a military parade in Red Square, he asked to be excused, saying, "I can't stand the sight of so much war paraphernalia. . . . Just imagine what will happen when all these tanks, guns and rifles begin to shoot. No, I definitely don't want to see this. We Americans are a peaceful nation. We don't intend to fight."

All of his contradictory perspectives were even more apparent in *You*

Can't Take It With You, which he started shooting in early 1938. George S. Kaufman and Moss Hart's comedy about the eccentricities of a large and chaotic New York family whose elderly patriarch has for years refused to pay any income tax allowed Capra (with Riskin's considerable help) to combine his various economic and social hobbyhorses into something approaching a unified semiphilosophy. In the film, the grandfather opposes the tax system in part because of his belief that the money he would pay is likely to be spent on armament. One of the movie's villains is a rapacious millionaire who serves as a mouthpiece for the then-popular contention that profit-obsessed tycoons would eventually manipulate the United States into entering a war: "With the world going crazy," he practically cackles, "the next big move is munitions, and [we] are going to cash in on it! . . . There won't be a bullet, gun, or cannon made in this country without us." Kaufman and Hart's play had also included some pointed jabs at anti-Communist paranoia, but those lines may have hit too close to home for Capra; the movie stripped them away and replaced them with a virtually indecipherable monologue that begins, "Communism, fascism, voodooism—everybody's got 'ism' these days! . . . When things go a little bad . . . go out and get yourself an 'ism' and you're in business!" The speech then goes on to praise (but not define) "Americanism," and concludes, "Lincoln said, 'With malice toward none and charity to all.' Nowadays they say, 'Think the way I do, or I'll bomb the daylights out of you.'"

Critics and the public loved the madcap homilizing of *You Can't Take It With You*—at least in America. Overseas, there was considerable dissent, much of it along the lines of Graham Greene's assertion that Capra "emerges as a rather muddled and sentimental idealist who feels—vaguely—that something is wrong with the social system" but cannot come up with a better solution than for Wall Street magnates to "throw everything up and play the harmonica."

As the opening of his movie approached, Capra was rocked by a personal tragedy. While he was at the first Los Angeles press screening of *You Can't Take It With You,* he received an emergency call summoning him to the hospital, where he learned that his severely disabled three-year-old son John had died after what was supposed to be a routine tonsillectomy. As he and Lucille grieved, he again turned his attention outward and quickly returned

to work. In late 1938, after Cohn told him he couldn't make *Valley Forge*, Capra visited Washington, D.C., with the notion of making a sequel to *Deeds*. He had in mind a film, wrote one reporter, "with a political theme. He wants to show one of his honest people—say, a cowboy Senator in the guise of Gary Cooper—against the artificial background of the two august bodies of government we know as the houses of Congress."

Capra's original notion for the new movie, which he was then calling *Mr. Deeds Goes to Washington*, won Cohn's approval, which meant that almost alone among his peers, he would have the chance to make a film that commented directly on contemporary American politics—whether or not he could figure out exactly what he wanted to say. In a 1938 interview, he tried, for the first time, to explain where he stood on various issues, but what emerged was an awkward laundry list of tenets from a man who saw himself as an embattled patriot surrounded by enemies even within his own industry. "Capra likes American institutions," the sympathetic reporter wrote, clearly paraphrasing him. "He doesn't regard the men who made the country as a lot of fools. He is against dictatorship. He believes in things like freedom of the press. All this makes him a marked man in Hollywood, where so many of the intellectuals are sound, orthodox American-haters."

Capra had long been a pacifist, but on a trip to Washington to research his new movie, that began to change. He had always been susceptible to the charisma of powerful men, and when he met President Roosevelt for the first time, he was surprised to find himself dazzled; the president's "awesome aura" made his "heart skip." Capra, who had twice voted against Roosevelt, couldn't quite come around to supporting him for a third term, but soon after his visit east, he broke with many of his fellow Republicans by becoming a publicly committed interventionist. He returned to Los Angeles, and on November 18, 1938, he attended an Anti-Nazi League rally titled "Quarantine Hitler" at the Philharmonic Auditorium. Before an audience of thirty-five hundred, he stepped to the microphone and spoke in support of a trade boycott, endorsing a statement that "capitulation to Hitler means barbarism and terror." Capra never looked back. Like Ford, he was about to become one of the movie industry's strongest advocates for America's involvement in what he now believed was a rapidly approaching world war.

The "Quarantine Hitler" rally was held a week after the rampage of *Kristallnacht,* which had made most studios realize with dismay that their days of releasing movies in Germany were probably numbered; in the wake of so much destruction, many in the Hollywood community (though by no means everyone) also came to grips with the fact that complacent silence was no longer a moral option. The beating of Jews and the burning and looting of thousands of synagogues and Jewish-owned businesses in Germany and Austria might have galvanized the nation and moved Washington to action more quickly if Americans had been able to see the mayhem and cruelty unfold on movie screens. But the producers of newsreels were dependent on footage they received from overseas, and all they had to present to moviegoers were some photographs of the aftermath. The inability to show Americans an unfiltered version of what was happening overseas was of great enough concern to spur an unusual summit meeting the day of the rally among the five major producers of newsreels (which included Fox, Paramount, and Universal) to discuss pooling their resources in order to better educate the public about Nazi atrocities.

For the many émigré Jews in Hollywood's creative class, *Kristallnacht* marked the moment when the oppression they or their families had fled Europe to avoid could no longer be forgotten or ignored. William Wyler had not been back to his hometown of Mulhouse on the French-German border since 1930, when he had traveled there during a vacation. At the time, he had described Berlin as "the most interesting and most pathetic city in Europe . . . torn by groups of radicals and reactionaries, each fighting for a different government. . . . The people . . . seem to be hopeless in all this chaos." In the decade since, he hadn't gone home again, nor did he do much to identify publicly with his Jewish or his European roots. Jewish filmmakers in the 1930s were easy targets—for anti-Semites, for anti-Communists, for xenophobes. Wyler, whose English was impeccable but unmistakably accented, had worked hard to become an American; as the situation in Germany worsened, he had shown little interest in activist engagement. When Jack Warner would press the point in a letter, he would write a hundred-dollar check to the Hollywood Anti-Nazi League; when the Motion Picture Artists' Committee—whose rallying cry was, "Watch for the Ambulance from Hollywood to

Spain!"—would nudge him, he would donate two hundred dollars to a relief fund. But more than anything, he simply wanted to be left alone to make pictures, preferably without having to infuse them with any topicality or political resonance.

By 1938, Wyler was so fully assimilated that it almost came as a surprise when his background became a subject for discussion—which it did a month before *Kristallnacht,* when he married. The future Talli Wyler was a tall, attractive Texan with a calm and gracious demeanor, a graduate of Southern Methodist University who had come to Hollywood with some minor acting ambitions, which she would quickly abandon after her marriage. She met Wyler that September; they married a month later. Not until that December did he meet Talli's concerned parents, who had come from Dallas to Hollywood to spend Christmas with their daughter and the man she had impulsively wed. By then, Talli was pregnant (they would name the baby girl Cathy, after the heroine of the new movie Wyler had just started directing, *Wuthering Heights*). Talli had told her mother and father that Wyler was Jewish, and she remembered later that they arrived for the holidays worried about what their daughter's new life would be like "because of all the terrible things happening in Europe." Wyler, as a new husband and expectant father, shared their distress. As a private citizen, an emigrant, and a Jew, he was profoundly troubled by the news he was reading and determined to do what he could to fight back. But as an artist, he was relieved to report for work every morning freed from the burdens he carried in the rest of his life. On the set, he could be a director; not having to be anything else for those hours was a kind of luxury.

One of the few men in Hollywood who was close enough to Wyler to understand how hard he had worked to forge a new identity for himself was John Huston. When Wyler decided to marry, he and Talli had resolved that the ceremony would be private; he called Huston, who arranged for the wedding to take place at the home of his father, the actor Walter Huston. Aside from Wyler's brother, lawyer, agent, and his aged parents (whom he had helped emigrate from Alsace and installed in a house near his), the only guests Wyler invited to the wedding were John and his wife, Lesley, who provided the cake. The friendship between Wyler and Huston, one of the deepest and

most enduring bonds between two directors in Hollywood history, was in some ways a marriage of opposites. Huston was tall, brash, sybaritic, and reckless; Wyler was a compact five foot eight, quiet, and so meticulous that he earned his lifelong nickname ("Forty-Take Wyler" or "Fifty-Take Wyler," depending on who was doing the complaining) before he had directed even a single major success. Huston's romantic dalliances, which included but were not limited to five marriages, were wild, public, sometimes simultaneous, and almost always impulsive. Wyler, after a stormy early marriage to Margaret Sullavan and a serious affair with his most famous leading lady, Bette Davis, married Margaret Tallichet, the woman he called "Talli," in 1938, and at thirty-six settled into a life of contented domesticity that lasted until his death more than forty years later. Huston, thirty-two when he helped his best friend plan his wedding, was just beginning to get past what had amounted to a destructive and anarchic adolescence that had seemed to stretch through his twenties.

But the two men were more alike than they appeared to be. Wyler, despite the buttoned-down reticence that would lead one columnist, just a few years later, to call him "an iron gray man in a gray flannel suit," was, under the surface, something of a thrill seeker who loved downhill skiing and outdoor adventure; before he married Talli, he could often be seen at the end of a shooting day tearing through the studio gates on his Harley-Davidson, frequently with an actress holding on for dear life. And Huston, a last-call bon vivant who liked to present himself as a disheveled renegade (the *New York Times* called him "The Great Unpressed"), was painstaking and focused when it came to his work, a quality he deeply admired in Wyler and sought to emulate.

Both men were among the first filmmakers who could legitimately be called second-generation Hollywood. Huston was the son of the highly regarded actor Walter Huston, and Wyler was a distant cousin of the man *Time* magazine labeled "Famed Nepotist Carl Laemmle," the head of Universal whose propensity for hiring relatives led Ogden Nash to quip, "Uncle Carl Laemmle has a very large faemmle." It was Laemmle who had paid for Wyler's emigration from Alsace to America and had given him his first apprenticeship as a studio shipping clerk in 1920.

A decade later, it was Wyler who gave Huston his first job on a movie, rewriting dialogue for one of his earliest talkies, a loose adaptation of Eugene O'Neill's *Desire Under the Elms* called *A House Divided*. Wyler hired him to please Huston's father, the film's star, and he never regretted it. "Willy was certainly my best friend in the industry," said Huston. "We seemed instantly to have many things in common. . . . Willy liked the things that I liked. We'd go down to Mexico. We'd go up in the mountains. We'd gamble." Wyler was the teasing older brother/mentor who would mock Huston as a "long-legged, lobster-nosed, shark-livered, mutton-fisted, pernivorous Presbyterian landlubber"; Huston was the devil on his shoulder, his barstool comrade, and his eager pupil in the ways of the movie business.

After *A House Divided* was finished, Wyler and Huston cemented their comradeship by taking an unlikely road trip together, dressing as hobos and sleeping in boxcars, all in the name of research for a movie they didn't end up making. It may have been a lark for Wyler, but for Huston it was one more symptom of a life that was careening out of control. His first marriage, to an alcoholic he had wed when he was just twenty, had fallen apart. In 1933, he was involved in a drunk-driving accident in which a starlet was injured. Soon after that, a young actress was killed when she stepped in front of a car Huston was driving on Sunset Boulevard. Huston, who insisted he had not been drinking, was cleared of any wrongdoing by a grand jury, but the case generated harsh headlines across the country ("Why Should Auto Murderers Go Free?" asked a *Los Angeles Herald Examiner* editorial) and he was branded a spoiled, irresponsible wreck. "The experience seemed to bring my whole miserable existence to a head," he said. Almost broke, he exiled himself to Europe. "Whatever I turned my hand to, nothing seemed to work," he recalled. "I'd pull myself out halfway and slide back in again."

When Huston returned to the United States in 1935, he had done little to change the perception that, as James Agee wrote, he would "never amount to more than an awfully nice guy to get drunk with." He was, said producer Henry Blanke, "hopelessly immature. You'd see him at every party, wearing bangs, with a monkey on his shoulder. Charming. Very talented, but without an ounce of discipline in his makeup."

It was Wyler who rescued Huston, giving him a writing job and, more important, the chance to reinvent himself. He saw a kindred spirit in Huston—"we were both young and adventurous and we did a lot of things together, everything, from girls to skiing, God knows what," he said—but he also saw nascent talent. "He was a good writer," he said. "Otherwise, we wouldn't have lasted together."

While Huston had been away, Wyler's stock had soared thanks to well-received adaptations of Lillian Hellman's Broadway play *The Children's Hour* and Sidney Kingsley's *Dead End*. He had also stayed close to Walter Huston, directing him in *Dodsworth* and winning his first Best Director Academy Award nomination for the movie in 1937. Now Wyler was behind the camera again, working with Bette Davis in the Civil War melodrama *Jezebel*, Warner Bros.' attempt to jump in front of *Gone with the Wind*, and he was unhappy with the screenplay. A week into production, he urged the studio to hire Huston not only to do rewrites but, in Blanke's words, "to sort of represent him in preparing the last half of the script." Blanke told Warner production head Hal Wallis that Wyler "apparently knows Huston personally, spends a great deal of time with him and will see him at night, and he maintains that Huston knows exactly his feelings and thoughts about the script. . . . Huston apparently will be a sort of a go-between operating between the writers, and you, and himself. . . . [I] told Wyler we would try it out." Wyler's faith was repaid when *Jezebel*, which was released in early 1938, became a hit and won Davis her second Oscar. Warner rewarded Huston by hiring him as a full-time contract writer who would move from one project to another depending upon where he was needed.

With Europe still fresh in his experience, Huston had a keen interest in the brewing war and its political roots, and soon after *Jezebel*, the studio gave him a writing assignment that would fuel that passion and consume him for a year: *Juárez*, an expensive, overscaled nineteenth-century historical drama about the emperor Maximilian, installed by France as Mexico's monarch, his mad wife Carlotta, and Benito Juárez, the country's president. Huston would work with two other writers, Wolfgang Reinhardt and Aeneas MacKenzie, and all three men shared Reinhardt's vision that "the dialogue, as far as it is

political and ideological, must consist of phrases from today's newspapers; every child must be able to recognize that Napoleon in his Mexican intervention is none other than Mussolini plus Hitler in their Spanish adventure."

Huston was enthralled by the lengthy process and the three-way writing effort, which he said was "by way of being dialectic" given Reinhardt's historical knowledge of Europe, MacKenzie's love of "the monarchical system," and his own status as "a Jeffersonian Democrat espousing ideas similar to those of Benito Juárez." And he knew the film was lucky to have a home at Warners, the first studio that seemed willing to champion a strong anti-Hitler allegory. Throughout 1938, as Germany's threat to Czechoslovakia became ever greater, the three writers redrafted their script to make the parallels even more explicit. At one point the screenplay ran to 230 pages, a blueprint for what would have been a four-hour movie. With each new draft, Huston in particular would embroider, adding lines like "Our task is to fight the tyrant . . . fight . . . fight . . . to keep the cause of democracy alive."

It's not clear that Huston's preferred version of the screenplay would ever have been filmable, but when *Juárez* finally foundered, what undid months of his work wasn't corporate trepidation but movie-star egotism. Warner Bros. had given the title role to Paul Muni, at the time the studio's most prestigious male star. In the last few years, Muni had made a specialty out of transformative historical roles in costume dramas, having played Louis Pasteur and Emile Zola. Though still held in critical esteem, he was a vain and humorless man who was beginning to panic about his waning box-office strength and would do anything to get his own way. When he read the script and saw that his character was written with aphoristic minimalism while his costars Brian Aherne and Bette Davis got all of the big emotional scenes as Maximilian and Carlotta, he brought his brother-in-law onto the production and had him rewrite the entire screenplay to amplify his role, while the director, William Dieterle, stood by haplessly. "The first thing Muni wanted was more dialogue. . . . He just tore the script apart and ruined it," said Huston.

At the end of 1938, a few months before *Juárez* was released, Wyler helped Huston bounce back from his disappointment by hiring him to do a final polish of Ben Hecht and Charles MacArthur's script for *Wuthering Heights,* which he was about to start for his boss, the independent producer

Samuel Goldwyn. Huston gratefully took the job but declined credit, saying, "Hecht and MacArthur had written a beautiful screenplay but it was almost in treatment form, so I put it into a screenplay. . . . For me to have intruded my name would have been vulgar."

Wuthering Heights and *Juárez* had their premieres within days of each other in April 1939. Wyler's movie was rapturously received, and despite Goldwyn's infamous remark that "*I* made *Wuthering Heights*—William Wyler only directed it," the film—lushly mounted, extravagantly romantic, and perfectly suited for audiences who sought refuge from the troubles of the modern world—did a great deal to burnish Wyler's growing reputation; in what later came to be seen as an epochal year for American movies, it won the New York Film Critics Circle Award for best picture, edging *Gone with the Wind*. *Juárez* ended up as little more than an unhappy footnote; the version that was first tested before audiences was received so poorly that Warner Bros. immediately cut twenty-five minutes out of it. The parallels to Hitler and Mussolini that Huston had worked so hard to instill remained thunderously clear, starting with the opening titles, which refer to a "dictator" building a "war machine," and the first scenes, in which Napoleon III (Claude Rains) intones, "Let the world know that the conquest of Mexico is only the beginning of the fulfillment of our holy mission." Reviewing the movie in the *New York Times,* Frank S. Nugent took notice that Hollywood finally seemed to be shaking off its studious neutrality about Europe; he wrote approvingly that "in the contest between dictator and democrat the Warners have owned their uncompromising allegiance to the latter. . . . With pardonable opportunism, they have written between the lines . . . the text of a liberal's scorn for fascism and Nazism." But other critics were chillier; the movie, which was still long and ungainly, was a costly box-office flop, and the experience left Huston determined not to have his work undercut again. "I knew that if I'd been the director instead of William Dieterle, this wouldn't have happened," he said. "So I knew I was going to have to be responsible for the things I wrote" by becoming a director. "That was the only way I could survive."

Juárez failed in part because its elliptical, propaganda-as-historical-allegory approach felt quaint to an audience that had been watching goose-

stepping German soldiers in newsreels every week and was now primed for tougher, more direct attacks on Hitler from Hollywood. The week Huston's movie opened, it was overshadowed by the premiere of an energetic Warner Bros. crime drama that marked the first time any studio had allowed a movie to take as its subject the perceived German threat within U.S. borders. The challenge built into the new film's ad campaign took aim not only at the pusillanimous self-interest of other studios but at the evolving taste of moviegoers. Finally, Warners announced in its slogan, the public would have a chance to see something that had been too long kept off screens: "The Picture That Calls A Swastika A Swastika!"