

## Food Will Win the War: The Disney Way

By David Bossert



(Strong graphic design in *Food Will Win the War* coincided with the crisp narration describing America's abundant farmlands while pointing out that there are thirty million farmers, "twice as many as Axis has soldiers..."; ©Disney)

While the United States Treasury Department was busy urging Americans to pay their income taxes in 1942, Claude Wickard the Secretary of Agriculture wanted to remind audiences of the importance of food, and the farmers that grow it, to the war effort. The United States was supplying much needed food to its Allies and the Agriculture Department wanted to reassure Americans that the U.S. was growing enough for domestic use as well as shining a spotlight on the hard work and sacrifice of the farmers. To do this, the Agriculture Department working with

Office of the Coordinator of Information created a campaign promoting food, farmers and the contribution agriculture has to the war effort.

During a radio address, Wichard had emphasized the phrase, "Food will win the war and write the peace," which then became the basis for the first food related documentary war short. In early April 1942, Disney got a contract from the Agriculture Department to create a short public service announcement (PSA) which was initially titled *Food Will Win the War and Write the Peace*. Disney legend Hamilton Luske directed the short. When the storyboards were initially completed, it was sent to Ben James a marketing assistant at the Agriculture Department in Washington D.C. for review. Those first storyboards were rejected and a letter was dispatched back to Disney with specific criticisms that needed to be addressed. James passed along notes from Nelson Poynter, from the Office of the Coordinator of Information, pointing out that the storyboards gave the impression that the United States' "job of feeding the world was altogether too easy." He went on to say that "Hollywood for many years has spread the misconception that the United States is rich, fat. Let us not lead with our chin by perpetrating this misconception." Poynter also had concerns about the film's title and its relation to the then U.S. foreign policy. Ultimately, the title was shortened to simply *Food Will Win the War*.



(The opening of Food Will Win the War showing the “whole world is a flame...” ©Disney)

The film opens with a foreboding distant shot of the earth, the Europe continent visible in angry reds and oranges, with plumes of smoke as the announcer says, “The whole world is a flame, all the peoples of the United Nations are fighting the savage enemies of freedom...” The artists used color and imagery to convey the world in ruins as the camera slowly pushes in on Europe and dissolving to the destroyed homes and farms as the narrator continues, “...in many lands, towns are ravaged, countryside’s laid waste by ruthless Axis hoards...” The narration, accompanied by ominous music, sets the tone and mood of a desperate state of the world and then brightens, both in color palette and musically, as an image of North America dissolves on, rising above the scene of smoking ruins as the narrator says, “... but in their darkest hour comes a light of hope, a light that must grow stronger, and will grow stronger, it is the hope of

American agriculture..." The underscore changes from a grim theme to a symphonic rendition of 'America the Beautiful,' one of the most popular patriotic songs to this day, as a musical bed playing under the narration. The contrast between the ruins of Europe and the bounties of the American farmers coupled with the dramatic narrations evokes an emotional response of patriotism—a "we can do it" sense of pride.

The film then continues with the narration pointing out that America's "farmlands are abundant" and then visually showing that the farmlands are greater than all of Europe combined while pointing out that there are "thirty million" farmers, "twice as many as Axis has soldiers..." Using military terms as metaphors, there are a succession of images showing farm machinery, "battalions of combines, regiments of trucks, divisions of corn pickers, potato diggers, planting machines, columns of milking machines." Those descriptive adjectives are firm in connecting agriculture and the war effort seamlessly emphasizing the importance of the American farmers.

The narration goes through a series of statistics showing what the U.S. farmers produce in a year using visual images of recognizable landmarks and humor to make what is normally dry information more entertaining for the audience—one of the advantages to using animation. "The farmer with his wheat crop for this year, fifty-two billion, eight hundred million pounds of wheat. If all this wheat was made into flour, they'd be enough to snow under the entire German Panzer Army..." as an animated tank is covered with snow, the narrator concludes, "looks to me like another Russian winter!" Continuing along this theme, if all the flour was baked into bread, you could build an "Egyptian pyramid, and another, and another, and another. Placed a mile apart they'd stretch the length of the Suez Canal." The animation shows a series of images

depicting, sometimes in ludicrous fashion, the amount of food being produced by the farmers across the United States. These types of visual representations do drive home the point though and make such statistics much more palatable to understand. Telling the audience that farmers produce two billion, eight hundred and fifty million bushels of corn a year is abstract and meaningless until we hear, “...if all this was grown into one huge ear, it would make a bridge from London to the Black Sea...” and see the animation of a giant ear of corn descending across Europe as the narrator adds, “...and that hangs over your head Adolf!” Similar examples are made for soy beans, potatoes, tomatoes, vegetables, fruit juices, milk, butter, cheese, and meats.



(Using a “plump” girl as a metaphor for the eleven billion pounds of fats and oils produced each year in America and how it could “black out all of Berlin.”; ©Disney)

One of the more outlandish images is an enormous fat lady on one end of a giant scale with the other side showing a stack of dreadnaughts, a type of battleship. The narrator says, “...this little girl grown plump on a diet of our eleven billion pounds of fats and oils, would outweigh a hundred super dreadnaughts—and once more, she’d black out all of Berlin.” It’s a metaphor that would not be used by today’s standards.

The final statistical examples, personal favorites, points out that American hens lay fifty billion eggs a year that if “...made into one huge fried egg, it would cover all the United States and Canada. And don’t forget we have enough bacon to go around it.” The limited animation shows a gigantic fried egg sliding down and covering North America as bacon dissolves on around it. Then the scene cuts to a line of marching pigs, “one hundred million strong,” being led by Disney’s Three Little Pigs in a cameo dressed as the patriotic image of the “Spirit of ‘76” marching with fife, drum and American flag.



(“Who’s afraid of the big bad wolf, not the farmer of the United States who works and sacrifices to fill the holds of victory ships...,” says the narrator as an oversized silhouetted farmer pours grain into the hold of a ship. The striking and strong imagery conveying the might of American agriculture.; ©Disney)

Dissolving from the Three Little Pigs, the film goes into its final sequence designed to boost morale and galvanize how the public's collective sacrifice is contributing to the war effort. Although the film was made as a public service message for domestic audiences about the country's abundant food production and to credit the hard-working farmers, it is also an overt propaganda film. The film was shown in other countries as a way to encourage the, "...hard-fighting but underfed and undersupplied U.S. Allies." The end sequence, dissolves from the pigs and to the image of a giant farmer pouring grain from a sack into the cargo hold of ships as the narrator says, "Who's afraid of the big bad wolf, not the farmer of the United States who works and sacrifices to fill the holds of victory ships—ships turned out by men and woman working night and day, ships that must be fought through dark oceans where submarines work..." There are a continuing series of images of planes, battleships, and supply ships culminating with a strong message that was echoed in other PSAs and propaganda films. Four white stars animate on individually as the narrator says, "for all who fight for the freedom of speech, freedom of worship... freedom from want and fear." A U.S.A. logo, complete with an eagle, dissolves on with those four stars as the narrator concludes, "...under this insignia, is shipped food that will win the war."



(The logo image for the Lend-Lease Act of 1941, which allowed the U.S. to send food to Allies bypassing a “cash and carry” law that prevented the president from extending credit to countries that could not immediately pay for supplies. A color version appears towards the end of *Food Will Win the War*.)

Fred Shields did the strong, serious narration which helps to drive home the message of *Food Will Win the War*, while still adding an occasional moment of levity. Shields was also the voice for the radio announcer and narrator in *The New Spirit*, the later narration also being used in *The Spirit of '43*.

*Food Will Win the War* was released to theaters on July 21, 1942. It was an early production in the war effort at the Walt Disney Studios, but you could already see the economies in the animation with the use of limited animation and of camera moves on still art and sliding cels to create motion. Walt realized that doing full animation for government contracted pictures was not practical, especially after the cost issues that erupted over *The New Spirit*, the first tax picture for the Treasury Department that had been delivered months earlier. By the time *Food Will Win the War* and *Out of the Frying Pan into the Firing Line*, which was delivered a week later, were in production, 90% of the 550 studio employees were working on films directly related to the war effort. Disney became the go to studio for training films

because animation was the perfect technique to show how mechanical processes work. The Disney artists were brilliant at being able to bring the viewer inside of a device and to show how it worked, something that a live action camera couldn't do. Animation allowed for the material to be interesting and to have greater clarity than if presented in a more traditional form of educating. That was the magic that animation brought to these films—they made learning fun and entertaining.

A Life magazine article pointed out, "They can show an aviator what to expect flying through thunderclouds or, in a film on malaria, they can make a germ-bearing mosquito so gruesome that nobody could ever forget it." Aside from the animation techniques, Disney was masterful at creating stories that allowed the audience to laugh and learn—an early example of edutainment. At the time, Walt was referred to in another article as, "...this modest, farm-bred young man who never finished high school will be remembered as one of the best teachers of all time" sighting that "...he has set in motion nothing less than a revolution in the technique of education." These government contracts during WWII allowed the Disney Studios to branch out their animation into education and training, which would have a lasting impact on the company long after the war ended.

Food Will Win the War: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HeTqKKCm3Tg>

### **About the Author**

**David A. Bossert** is an artist, filmmaker, and author. He is a 32-year veteran of The Walt Disney Company and is an independent producer, creative director, and writer. Bossert is considered an authority and expert on Disney animation history. He is a member of the CalArts Board of Trustees and is a visiting scholar at Carnegie Mellon University's Entertainment Technology

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