

Send in the Mouse

How American Politicians Used Walt Disney Productions to Safeguard the American Home Front in WWII

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Abstract

Despite the success of Disney's first full length featured film *Snow White* in 1937¹, the animators' strike of the late 1930s and the war in Europe cutting of international profits brought the Walt Disney Company was near bankruptcy by 1941. Walt Disney was faced with the possibility of closing down his studio. However, the entrance of the United States into WWII and the rising threat of the spread of Nazism became the saving grace to the Walt Disney Studio. This essay explores the collaborations between Disney, businessman and politician Nelson Rockefeller, and President Franklin D. Roosevelt during the 1940s. Through the examination of Disney's time in South America, and his propaganda campaigns in the United States, correlations can be draw between the work of Disney, and the fulfillment of American political agendas of the Roosevelt administration. This essay will examine how political agendas can be fulfilled through the use of cultural icons rather than holding a military or political presence in both foreign and domestic affairs.

¹Neal Gabler, *Walt Disney: The Triumph of the American Imagination*. (New York: Vintage Books, 2006), 295.

Introduction

Walt Disney is one of the most prominent American figures of the twentieth century. His name and his productions are known in nearly every household in the United States and across the world. His work has touched the lives of millions and nearly fifty years after his death in 1966, his legacy and his name still live on. One of Disney's most beloved attributes was his childlike and charismatic personality.² People were drawn to Disney and because of his genuine nature and because of this, he was able to influence and change the American film and animation industry³. Upon his death, countless authors and journalist began to explore the life and work of Disney, covering his childhood, his productions and his death as a means to better understand the, "the man behind the mouse" and to pay tribute to an American hero.

Yet, despite the heavy amount of literature centralized around one of the most famous men in the animation industry, little work has been done in the study of the global and political influence Disney had through his productions. While some know of the WWII propaganda images and animations created in the Walt Disney Studios, fewer know about Disney's role as an ambassador of the United States in South America during the early stages of the war as Franklin D. Roosevelt and his administration sought to strengthen relationships and safeguard the Western Hemisphere from Nazi infiltration.⁴

Similar to the isolation policy practiced by the United States in WWI, as of late 1940, the United States had yet to make a formal entrance in the war. Rather than taking

² Theodore Thomas, Interview with John Canemaker. *Walt and El Grupo*. (Theodore Thomas Productions. 2008).

³ Gabler, *Walt Disney: The Triumph of the American Imagination*. 631.

⁴ *Walt and El Grupo*. Directed by Theodore Thomas. (Theodore Thomas Productions, 2008, Walt Disney Pictures, 2008).

an aggressive military stance in foreign affairs, the administration used the talents and creativity of Disney to fulfill the administration's political agendas and policies in both North and South America. This was accomplished through good will missions in Argentina, Brazil and Chile. Disney was also used to influence the American public through his pro-American, anti-Nazi propaganda. Through the examination of the history of Disney from 1941 to 1953, specifically focused on political policies and agendas it is clear that these agendas were met through a the use of Disney's ability to influence and speak to the general public on a global level.

In a world clouded by war, Disney did more than help the United States government clarify America's desired position on the war. Ironically, the war was also the one thing that saved the Walt Disney Studios from bankruptcy and possible extinction. Films such as *Saludos Amigos* and *The Three Caballeros* earned in \$900,000 in a period of 11 weeks, allowing the studio's debt to the Bank of America be reduced to just under \$1 million.⁵ Walt Disney had made significant contributions to the American success through his films alone with smaller contributions being with twelve hundred designs for military insignia and the Treasury Department crediting Disney with more than \$50 million worth of saving bonds.⁶ Through his collaborations with the U.S. government, Disney's work aided in the solidification and upholding of the Good Neighbor policy with South America as well as provide the monetary and physical support the United States needed to remain steadfast in the war.

⁵ Gabler. *Walt Disney: The Triumph of the American Imagination*. 410.

⁶ Ibid. 412.

Historiography

One of the most prominent historians of Walt Disney's involvement in government policies is J.B. Kaufman. In his book, *South of the Border with Disney*, Kaufman explains Disney's involvement with Franklin D. Roosevelt's, *Good Neighbor* policy between North and South America. Kaufman reveals Disney was given the honorary title of an ambassador to the United States and was sent to South America with a team of studio artist under the pretense that Disney and his team were conducting research for a South American inspired production. Kaufman argues, however, that the real motive behind Disney's presence in South America was to sell the American lifestyle to the Latin American people.⁷ Kaufman explains this was done to prevent Nazi influence in South America due to fears regarding German populations living on the continent. Through his rigorous study of this program in South America, Kaufman concludes that it was the character and the charm of Walt Disney, as well as his two Latin American inspired films, *Saludos Amigos* and *Los Tres Callberos*, that allowed the United States to maintain a strong relationship with the people of South America.

Susan King supports Kaufman in her article, "When Walt Disney Visited Latin America", stating that sending Disney as a "celebrity ambassador" was the best way in convincing leaders in South America leaders to ally with the United States without taking

⁷ J.B. Kaufman, *South of the Borders with Disney: Walt Disney and the Good Neighbor Program, 1941-1948* (Burbank: Disney Editions, 2009), 26.

a military presence.⁸ Barry Carr adds to this by arguing, “Walt Disney’s involvement in South America is the reason why Nazism did not hold in the Latin American region.”⁹

With the 1941 entrance of the United State into the war in Europe and Asia, President Roosevelt once again turned to Disney to influence the American people. Bob Thomas gives explanation to why Disney was so willing to once again work alongside the government in his book, *Walt Disney, An American Original*. Prior to Disney leaving for South America, Disney animators went on strike. Despite the success of movies like *Snow White* and *Fantasia*, animators felt overworked, underpaid and underrepresented. Thomas argues that the fear of bankruptcy is what pushed Disney to accept the commissions from the United States military and treasury to produce both training and propaganda productions.¹⁰ Thomas brings up an important point in that Disney did not do this purely out of goodwill, and he was compensated for his work.

Historian Claudia Springer argues that the production of propaganda through Hollywood productions, such as those of Walt Disney, correlates to high numbers of enlistments based on the time in which these pieces were released and distributed.¹¹ Robert Fyne’s *The Hollywood Propaganda of World War Two* complements Springer’s argument as Fyne explains that, “the Hollywood production of propaganda both privately and by commissions from the government are responsible for creating the national mood

⁸ Susan King, “When Walt Disney Visited Latin America.” *Los Angeles Times*, September 9, 2009.

⁹ Barry Carr, *‘Los Tres Caballeros’’: Walt Disney, Nelson Rockefeller and U.S. Latin American relations during WWII* (Victoria, Swinburne University of Technology, 2011), 103.

¹⁰ Bob Thomas, *Walt Disney, An American Original*. (Burbank: Disney Editions, 1994), 212.

¹¹ Claudia, Springer, *Military Propaganda: Defense Department Films from World War Two to Vietnam*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1986).

of the 1940s.”¹² Disney’s publications were geared towards the working class suburbanites. Targeting this specific demographic allowed for a wider awareness of the war and greater support on the home front.

In *Propaganda: The Art of Persuasion World War II*, Anthony Rhodes studies how viewers of propaganda productions were influenced by their messages. Rhodes argues, “that one of the most tactful forms of warfare during WWII was the propaganda that was produced to influence and control the lives and thoughts of civilians.”¹³

Disney’s propaganda films primarily proclaimed messages of anti-Nazism and encouraged enlistment, growing of victory gardens, paying taxes and purchasing war bonds. With the overwhelming production and displaying of the messages, the public began to internalize the messages they were bombarded with, and willingly supported them.¹⁴

One of the most crucial pieces to the success of Walt Disney’s propaganda productions was the use of popular Disney characters and humor. With this combination, Walt Disney’s propaganda publications quickly became the most viewed and distributed forms of propaganda.¹⁵ Steven Watts argues that through Walt Disney’s productions, Disney was able to, “show Americans how to participate in the war while on the home front by using simple, comical and familiar characters.”¹⁶ Walt Disney’s first propaganda

¹² Robert Fyne, *The Hollywood Propaganda of World War Two*. (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 1994), 277.

¹³ Anthony Rhodes, *Propaganda: The Art of Persuasion: World War II*. (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1976), 62.

¹⁴ Gabler. *Walt Disney: The Triumph of the American Imagination*. 425.

¹⁵ Ibid. 393.

¹⁶ Steven Watts. *Walt Disney: Art and Politics in the American Century*. *The Journal of American History* Vol. 82, no.1. (Organization of American Historians, 1995), 86.

motion picture geared towards the general public, *A New Spirit*, starred Donald Duck in the leading role of a patriotic American ready to contribute the United States war efforts. As Marcia Blitz points out in her book, *Donald Duck*, only “Donald Duck could make a painful process, such as paying taxes, as fun as possible.”¹⁷ With the successful response to Donald Duck’s role in *A New Spirit*, Donald Duck continued to star in Disney’s propaganda productions such as, *The Spirit of ’43*, *Der Fuehrers Face* and *Commando Duck*.¹⁸

By examining sources of Walt Disney’s involvement in Latin America and propaganda productions, we learn that the research and arguments of these authors support the idea that cultural icons charm and influence can be used for political gain. In studying the relationship of Walt Disney and the Roosevelt administration, correlations can be drawn between political gains through responses of those whom Walt Disney was able to impact. While the government, both within and outside of the United States borders, used Disney’s position in popular culture, it is important to remember that Walt Disney was also able to benefit from his work with the government. Without the success of Disney and the program in Latin American and propaganda publications, the Walt Disney Animation Studios would have fallen into bankruptcy and ceased to exist.

¹⁷ Marcia Blitz. *Donald Duck*. (New York: Harmony Books, 1979), 12.

¹⁸ *The Spirit of ’43* is a film created to encourage the American public to pay their taxes in order to support U.S. troops. *Der Fuehrer’s Face* features Donald Duck as an oppressed factory worker under the Nazi regime. This film gives Americans a snapshot of life under the Nazi regime and encourages viewers to buy war bonds. *Commando Duck* features Donald Duck fighting in the Asian Theater of the war.

Auslandsdeutschen: Germans Abroad and the Nazi Threat

While records show of a small Germanic population in Latin America as early as the conquests of Cortes and Magellan, the German population in South America increased in 1848 as a result of failed liberal revolutions prior to the unification of Germany.¹⁹ Despite emigration to a new country, Germans held true to the cultural institutions of their homeland. Lutheran Germans remained outsiders to the Catholic community, identified strongly to their German culture, as well as praised Germany's success and failures. Despite their lack of assimilation to the Latin American culture, Germans were seen as a favorite immigrant group among South American countries. In 1860, future Argentine President D.F. Sarmiento praised the Germans for, "their proverbial honesty, and their tireless devotion to work."²⁰ In 1865 the Chilean government reported that the Germans were the most preferable kind of immigrant.²¹

With the rise of the Nazi party in 1933, Germans living in South America occupied an in-between space in regards to loyalty to Germany or Latin America. Primarily, their interest lay in maintaining friendly relations with their Latin American neighbors, customers and political leaders.²² However, small Nazi organizations began to develop throughout several Latin American countries. According to Friedman, "German Protestant churches helped to encourage a positive reception of Nazi ideas."²³ Along

¹⁹ Max Paul Friedman, *Nazis and Good Neighbors: The United States Campaign Against Germans of Latin America in World War II*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 11.

²⁰ Ibid. 11.

²¹ Ibid. 12.

²² Ibid. 17.

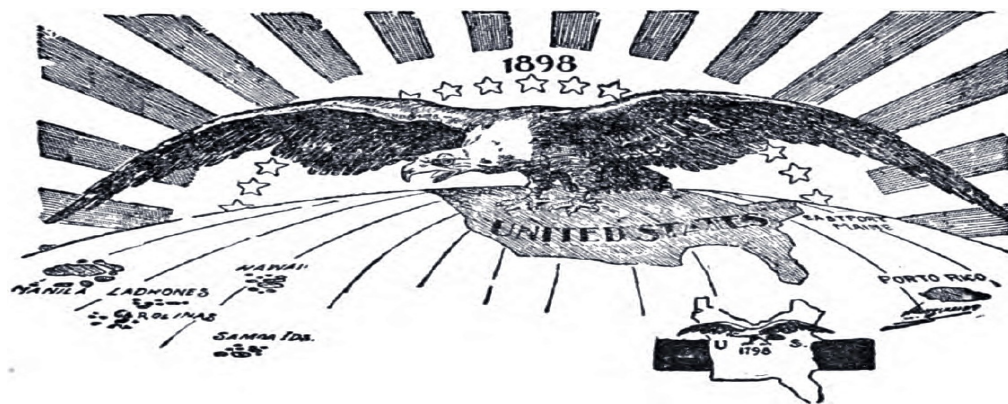
²³ Ibid. 30.

with the Protestant distribution of Nazi ideology, party organizers began distribution of *Auslandpropaganda*, [propaganda for distribution abroad],²⁴ such as the *Karibischer Beobachter* [Caribbean Watcher] and the *Volkischer Beobachter* [Folkdom Watcher]. These publications featured both images and speeches given by Hitler and various Nazi officials as well as news on industrial advancements Germany was making such as the construction of the Autobahn or images of latest car, truck and airplane models.²⁵

Though originally a small political organization in Latin America, Nazism was feared to be evolving and spreading as rapidly as the growth and spread of the ideology in Europe. Through the analysis of the strength of the party in Europe, the Roosevelt administration quickly realized that the Nazi presence was a threat both political and economical to United States and Latin American relations. It was determined that movements to strengthen relationships between North and South America were necessary in order to inhibit both the reach of Nazism in Latin America as well as prevent Nazism from expanding into the American home front.

The Roosevelt Administrations and the Good Neighbor Policy

[Figure 1] “Ten thousand miles from tip to tip.” (1898). [Source]



Ten thousand miles from tip to tip.—Philadelphia Press.

²⁴ Friedman, *Nazis and Good Neighbors*, 30.

²⁵ *Ibid.* 30.

In accordance to the Monroe Doctrine of 1823, the United States held a policy of isolation that withheld entrance in European affairs while allowing for the protection of the Western hemisphere from foreign military intervention. Because of this policy, ironically, the United States was able to impose its economic policies on South America as well as intervene in Latin American affairs throughout the nineteenth century.²⁶

During the 1880's U.S. Secretary of State James G. Blaine created what is now referred



[Figure 2] “The Big Stick in the Caribbean Sea.” (1904).
 [Source] <http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/file:Tr-bigstick-cartoon.JPG>.

to as the Big Brother policy, an extension of the Monroe Doctrine that sought to rally Latin American nations behind U.S. leadership as well as open their markets to U.S. traders.²⁷ The end of the Spanish-American War in 1898 granted the United States control of Puerto Rico, Guam and the Philippines as well as control

of the processing of the independence of Cuba.²⁸ The United States emerged from the war in 1898 with colonial holdings that allowed for naval bases across the Pacific Ocean as well as access to both Latin and Asian trade markets.

²⁶ Robert Jay Glickman, *America vis-à-vis Latin America: Opposition or Association?* (Toronto: Canadian Academy of the Arts, 2005). 26.

²⁷ Glickman, *America vis-à-vis Latin America: Opposition or Association?* 32.

²⁸ Don M. Coerver and Linda B. Hall. *Tangled Destinies, Latin American and The United States*. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1999). 49.

However, the United States refused to consider itself as an imperialist power despite the increasing interventionist foreign policy and military intervention that dominated the early twentieth century. After the United States was granted control of the zone surrounding the Panama Canal in 1904, President Theodore Roosevelt created the Roosevelt Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine.²⁹ This now allowed the United States to intervene in Latin American affairs politically, militarily and commercially.

Prior to World War I the United States became involved in a series of military interventions in order to preserve commercial interest in Latin America between 1898 and 1934. These interventions later became known as the “Banana Wars” due to the United Fruit Companies investments in the production of various products throughout the Caribbean Sea. Due to both the Roosevelt Corollary and the Monroe Doctrine, the United States held the right to intervene and stabilize the economy in Latin America as international payments to the United States were not being made.

²⁹ Glickman. *America vis-à-vis Latin America, Opposition or Association?* 32.

Tensions between the Americas were high by the 1930s and in order to maintain influence in Latin America but avoid war, the United States had to pursue new methods that did not involve military intervention. During his inaugural address on March 4, 1933, newly elected President Franklin Roosevelt introduced the Good Neighbor Policy. In this speech he stated that, “In the field of world policy I would dedicate this nation to the policy of the good neighbor-the neighbor who resolutely respects himself and, because he does so, respects the rights of others-the neighbor who respects his obligations and respects the sanctity of his agreements in and with a world of neighbors.”³⁰ The United States sought to have good relations with its bordering countries yet the rising conflicts in Europe were once again posing as a threat to Latin America support of the United States.



[Figure 3] “Good Neighbors.” (1943). [Source] The Basil O’Connor Collection, Franklin Delano Roosevelt Presidential Library, Box 21.

With the shift away from military intervention, the United States sought to maintain its influence via Pan-Americanism. This meant that the United States would support strong local leaders, train national guards and stimulate Latin America both economically and culturally. In December of 1933 Roosevelt reaffirmed the Good

³⁰ Franklin D. Roosevelt, “First Inaugural Address.” March 4, 1933. Speech. Accessed April 7, 2013. <<http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/5057>>.

Neighbor Policy in stating that, “The definite policy of the United States from now on is one opposed to armed intervention.”³¹

Throughout the 1930s the Good Neighbor Policy terminated U.S. Marines occupations throughout Latin America. Occupations in Nicaragua and Haiti came to an end, treaties were made in Cuba and negotiations were made in Mexico for compensation of foreign-owned oil assets. “Good Neighbor Cargo Fleets” were established between the US and South America and passenger liners such as the *SS California*, *SS Virginia* and *SS Pennsylvania* were refurbished and renamed, the *SS Uruguay*, *SS Brazil* and *SS Argentina*.³² This was done to reinforce the Pan-Americanisms between North and South America.

Simultaneous to the rising Nazi threat in both Europe and Latin America, the 1939 World’s Fair in New York sought to promote neighborly relations between the Americas. Argentina, Brazil, Cuba, Mexico, Nicaragua, and the Pan American Union were invited to showcase their countries and cultures at this fair. The 1939 World’s Fair attempted to shift the global mindset away from the looming war in order to promote peace and interdependence between nations.

Because the policy sought to maintain unity in the Western hemisphere, in August of 1940, Roosevelt created the Office of the Coordinator Inter-American Affairs and appointed Nelson Rockefeller the head of the organization.³³ Rockefeller began a series

³¹ Edgar B. Nixon. *Franklin D. Roosevelt and Foreign Affairs: Volume 1*. Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1969. 559-560.

³² Michael L. Grace. “Panama Pacific Lines Finished.” *Time Magazine*. May 9, 1938. Retrieved from: <<http://cruiselinehistory.com/cruise-line-history-panama-pacific-lines>> Accessed May 1, 2014.

³³ Nixon. *Franklin D. Roosevelt and Foreign Affairs: Volume 1*. 62.

of cooperation programs in Latin America as well as distributing anti-Axis propaganda throughout Latin America. His efforts were ill received and led to pro-Axis riots in various countries of South America. John Hay Whitney, the head of the Motion Picture Division of the CIAA believed that the, “power of Hollywood films could exert in the two pronged campaign to win the hearts and minds of Latin Americans and to convince Americans of the benefits of Pan American friendship.”³⁴ Whitney believe that the utilization of Latin American actors in Hollywood productions would change perceptions held by Americans about Latin Americans as well as sell the American culture to Latin Americans through the film industry.

Walt Disney Goes South of the Border



[Figure 4] “Walt and El Grupo.” (1941)
[Source] *Walt and El Grupo*, Theodore Thomas.

With the negative response to the propaganda campaigns headed by political leaders, Roosevelt and his administration redeveloped their good neighbor efforts to mirror Whitney’s suggestion of utilizing the film industry to strengthen U.S. Latin

³⁴ Brain O’Neil. *Carmen Miranda: The High Price of Fame and Bananas in Latin Legacies: Identity, Biography, and Community*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005). 195.

American relations. On February 27, 1941, President Roosevelt addressed American film producers at the 13th Annual Academy Awards. In his speech, he states that the United States, “must seek to affirm our faith in this Western world through the wider exchange of culture and education amongst the various nations of this hemisphere.”³⁵ Days following the Academy Awards, Walt Disney was contacted by Nelson Rockefeller. Disney was asked by Rockefeller to head South of the border on what he referred to as, “a goodwill mission.” Disney stated that, “they [the CIAA] wanted me to build up our relationship down there, and they wanted me to go down, kind of representing the culture side of the United States.”³⁶ But Disney did not want to just shake hands and kiss babies on the behalf of the US Government; Disney wanted to create a film inspired by Latin American culture.

However, the timing of the goodwill mission came during a time of financial strain at the Walt Disney Studios. With the success of Disney’s first full-length featured film, *Snow White*, Disney was able to invest \$3 million of the film’s profits into building a new studio in Burbank California.³⁷ Along with his new studio, Disney sought to produce two new full-length films, *Pinocchio* and *Fantasia* within the same year.³⁸ Animators, writers and artists were working around the clock in order to meet the release dates of these two films. But when the hours grew longer and the compensation for work became stagnated, the animators went on strike. The pressure of the strike was not the

³⁵ Franklin D. Roosevelt. “Address to the 13th Academy Awards.” February 27, 1941. Speech. Accessed January 14, 2013. <http://deist.com/2013/02/fdr_oscar_adress.php>

³⁶ Walt Disney. Interview Recording. *Walt and El Grupo*. Theodore Thomas Productions. 2008.

³⁷ *Walt and El Grupo*. Directed by Theodore Thomas. (Theodore Thomas Productions, 2008), DVD (Walt Disney Pictures, 2008).

³⁸ Theodore Thomas. *Walt and El Grupo*.

only weight on Disney's shoulders. The outbreak of war in Europe cost Disney three fourths of his total international profits.³⁹ The combination of the cost of the new Burbank studios, the animators strike and the lack of international profits put Disney \$4.5 million in debt.⁴⁰ The application for the loan to produce the Latin America film was denied as the bank was concerned that the film would be purely propaganda and would not do well in theaters.⁴¹ But, the U.S. Government saw the possibilities and benefits of the film as a means to promote Pan-Americanism. The Government also felt that Disney's relationship with Rockefeller could serve as an entrée to other branches of government, and took a gamble on Disney and his film.⁴² Both the trip to Latin America as well as any productions to come from the trip was underwritten by the government.⁴³

With the primary focus on both the people and politics in the "ABC" countries, or Argentina, Brazil and Chile, in April of 1941, Disney and a team of eighteen of his studios top writers, animators and artist set off to Latin America. On April 18, Disney and his team arrived in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil and began a series of banquets and meetings with political leaders. The government, such as the meeting with Brazilian President Getulio Vargas, arranged these events and contacts. This meeting was seen critical to the U.S. campaign to win over Latin American political leaders.

Throughout the 1930s both the United States and Germany sought to ally with Brazil. During this time, President Vargas negotiated with both countries in order to determine the benefits of an alliance with either country. Traditionally, President Vargas

³⁹ Gabler. *Walt Disney: The Triumph of the American Imagination*. 372.

⁴⁰ Theodore Thomas. *Walt and El Grupo*.

⁴¹ Gabler, *Walt Disney: The Triumph of the American Imagination*. 382.

⁴² Gabler, *Walt Disney: The Triumph of the American Imagination*. 382.

⁴³ Thomas, Theodore. Interview with J.B. Kaufman. *Walt and El Grupo*. Theodore Thomas Productions. 2008.

favored nationalism and industrialism as the corner stones for a centralized government.⁴⁴ However, in order to maintain his dictatorship and industrialize, Vargas needed funding. Vargas saw that the United States could provide Brazil with both the finances and a viable partner in trade. In exchange for an alliance that would provide the United States access to Brazil's rubber industry, allowing the continued supply of war goods to Europe, Brazil would receive the funding needed to industrialize. Vargas saw that the United States could provide Brazil with both the finances and a viable partner in trade.

In January of 1942, Brazil broke off relations with Germany, joining the Allied Powers (the United States, Great Britain, France and the Soviet Union) and declaring war



[Figure 5] "El Gaucho Disney"
 [Source] *Walt and El Grupo*. Theodore Thomas

on Germany and Italy in August of 1942.⁴⁵ While Disney could not speak on behalf of government funding, he could speak to the merging of cultures between the United States and Brazil. With the conclusion of this meeting Disney's inspirations and name of his film was born.

The next stop on the good will

mission was Buenos Aires, Argentina. Due to the excitement Disney had stirred up

⁴⁴ Daniel Katz and Dana G. Munro. "Review of Brazil Under Vargas. By Karl Loewenstein." *Public Opinion Quarterly*: Summer (1998): 664, accessed May 12, 2014. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2745456>.

⁴⁵ Karl Loewenstein. *Brazil Under Vargas*. New York: Russell & Russell, 1973. p. 347.

amongst the locals in Rio de Janeiro, the arrival of Disney to Buenos Aires was broadcasted on the radio and published in newspapers.⁴⁶ Rio was alive with both excitement and celebration allowing for Disney and his team to gather footage that could speak to the culture of Argentina. The team set up their temporary penthouse studio, and in no time the studio was filled with the same amount excitement and celebration present in the streets of Rio. Despite being busy with their work, Disney and the team were continuously visited by local celebrities, journalist, and film workers who were hopeful to catch a glimpse of the magic that was being created in their own backyard.⁴⁷

While in Argentina, Disney and his team were invited to *Asados*, the equivalent to American style barbecues, where they were exposed to native songs and dances including the dance of the gaucho. While the gaucho is a symbol of nationalism throughout Latin America, the gaucho holds a symbolic role to Argentine nationalism as the gaucho stands as a symbol against corruption as well as Argentine tradition.⁴⁸ In order to capture the essence of the gaucho, lessons were arranged with local dance teachers. These lessons allowed for both live action shots to be recorded, but also served as reference for the artist in rendering the clothing and movement of the dancers. Research for the gaucho inspired filmed continued with meetings with the Debutantes cartoonist. During these meetings both the Argentine and American artist shared inspirations that would later be used to create one of the short segments of the film, *El Gaucho Goofy*.⁴⁹

Before traveling to their final destination in Latin America, Disney and his team took a brief detour to Uruguay in order to attend the Montevideo opening *Fantasia*.

⁴⁶ Theodore Thomas. *Walt and El Grupo*.

⁴⁷ Theodore Thomas. *Walt and El Grupo*.

⁴⁸ *Encyclopedia Britannica Online*, s.v. "Jose Hernandez," accessed June 04, 2014.

⁴⁹ Theodore Thomas. *Walt and El Grupo*.

School aged children were given a half holiday in order to attend the premiere and local children's choirs and band performed music from *Snow White*.⁵⁰ According to the diary of Jeanette Thomas, the wife of animator Frank Thomas, "signs [at the premiere] said, 'Welcome Walt Disney' and words to the effect that the German ambassador had been asked to leave the country."⁵¹ The trip came to its conclusion with a brief stop in Chile. During the time in Chile, Disney and his team collected final shots for the film and began to compile all of their research, renderings and recordings to create the film *Saludos Amigos*. *Saludos Amigos*, or *Good Friends*, would use the images captured on the goodwill mission to showcase a merging of cultures between the United States and Latin America. However, the film would not be completed until the summer of 1942, as the war in Europe called Disney to begin a new style of film production: war propaganda.

The Need of Support on the Home Front

The beginning of Disney's Propaganda Productions



With the attack on Pearl Harbor by the Japanese in December of 1941, the Walt Disney Studios was called on not only to support the war effort through their productions, but the Burbank studio became a temporary military base. Five hundred troops were moved into studio to provide an anti-aircraft installation in order to protect the nearby Lockheed airplane

[Figure 6] The New Spirit.
[Source] http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/file:The_New_Spirit.JPG.

factory.⁵² In order to further security, the studio was draped in camouflage, parking garages were converted into ammunition depots and a mess kitchen was built.⁵³ The army had not only commandeered the Burbank studio, but within a matter of months, the army would take over a portion of Disney's film publications.

Disney knew that the essential purpose of these studios was to create entertainment, nonetheless he began to solicit government work as early as 1940 in order to pull the studios out of financial hardship.⁵⁴ Disney was able to secure a position amongst the defense committee on the platform that his motivation was to, "solely by a desire to help as best I can in the present emergency."⁵⁵ Disney landed his first contract from the documentary filmmaker John Grierson where he produced *Four Methods of Flush Riveting*, an instructional video film on an antitank rifle and four shorts promoting the sale of Canadian war bonds.⁵⁶ Disney was persistent in soliciting government work, as any funding coming into the studio would help in containing both the debt and the strike within the studios.

After the attack at Pearl Harbor, Disney's amount of government work drastically increased. On December 9, 1941 Disney received a call from the navy offering \$90,000 in exchange for twenty films on aircraft and warship identification.⁵⁷ A week later, Disney received a call from John L. Sullivan, the assistant secretary of the treasury with the offer of \$40,000 to produce a film that could encourage Americans to pay their

⁵² Gabler. *Walt Disney: The Triumph of the American Imagination*. 381.

⁵³ Gabler. *Walt Disney: The Triumph of the American Imagination*. 382.

⁵⁴ Gabler. *Walt Disney: The Triumph of the American Imagination*. 382.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.* 743.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.* 383.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.* 383.

taxes.⁵⁸ Sullivan believed that, “what John Barrymore can’t do, maybe Mickey Mouse could.”⁵⁹ However Disney argued that Donald Duck would be a better character to be used in the film.⁶⁰ The treasury approved and with release date set on January 23, Disney and the studio began production of *The New Spirit*.

In *The New Spirit*, Donald Duck is faced with the choice of either paying his taxes, as a good America should, or keeping the funds for himself. With the underlying message that not paying taxes could ultimately lead to the Axis powers gaining the upper hand, Donald chooses to fulfill his patriotic duty and pay his taxes to, “defeat the axis.”⁶¹ Once released to the theaters, *The New Spirit* became a tremendous success. It was estimated that the film reached over 32 million Americans and was shown in nearly twelve thousand theaters throughout the country.⁶² According to a Gallup poll, 37 percent of people said that the film had had an effect on their willingness to pay taxes.⁶³

However the studio was still desperate for work and while Disney waited from movie government work, the South American films became his lifeline. Unlike his previous productions such as *Snow White*, *Fantasia* and *Pinocchio*, Disney would make *Saludos Amigos*, “simple and not too arty.”⁶⁴ The film would also be divided into twelve themed shorts and distributed in three packages of four shorts. Throughout the spring and summer of 1942, the studios worked on the shorts and by July of 1942, they were

⁵⁸ Ibid. 384.

⁵⁹ Henry Morgenthau. Diary, n.d., no. 493, pp. 12-13, FDR Presidential Library.

⁶⁰ Gabler. *Walt Disney: The Triumph of the American Imagination*. 384.

⁶¹ Wilfred Jackson and Ben Sharpsteen, dir. 1942. *A New Spirit*. Walt Disney Productions. Motion Picture. Accessed October 10, 2013. <http://youtube.com/RclA9jKzvw>.

⁶² Gabler. *Walt Disney: The Triumph of the American Imagination*. 385.

⁶³ Ibid. 385.

⁶⁴ St. Clair Mckelway and Harold Ross. The Talk of the Town: Pollen Man. *The New Yorker*, November 1, 1941,14-15.

shipped to Nelson Rockefeller and President Roosevelt. In response to the films, Frank Alstock, the now directors of the Motion Picture Division wrote that the shorts had, “far surpassed any of the pictures we have shown,” and that the film had, “quite exceeds out highest expectations.”⁶⁵



[Figure 6] The Three Caballeros.
[Source]http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/file:The_Three_Caballeros.JPG.

The first segment of the Latin American series was released to both the United States and various Latin American countries in February of 1943 with the additional segments being released throughout 1943 and 1944.⁶⁶ The films featured both the live action documentary sequences that were captured on the trip, as well as the animations that were produced in the Burbank studios. The segments included the short films such as *The Three Caballeros* that stared Donald Duck and his new “amigos” Joe Carioca, the cigar-smoking

parrot who represented Cuban culture and Panchito the pistol-packing rooster who was designed to represent the culture of Mexico.⁶⁷ The short, *El Gaucho Goofy*, started Goofy as the American cowboy who is learning the ways of the Argentine Gaucho.

⁶⁵ Gabler. *Walt Disney: The Triumph of the American Imagination*. 395.

⁶⁶ Ibid. 402.

⁶⁷ Ibid. 402.

While the films received their share of negative criticisms, the response to these films amongst Latin American populations was astonishing. Following their original debuts throughout the 1940s, the films were released to Latin American theaters four additional times with the final double feature being released in 1981.⁶⁸ Nelson Rockefeller noted that the films were an “outstanding achievement in the development of hemispheric solidarity.”⁶⁹ In South America, theaters discontinued their double-featured policy so that they could show *Saludos Amigos* more frequently.⁷⁰ From the offices of the Bolivian embassy, an official wrote to Disney that the film was, “completely adored in South America.”⁷¹ The Latin American films surpassed the expectations of Rockefeller and according to film historian Alfred Charles Richard Jr., the films, “did more to cement a community interest between peoples of the Americas in a few months than the State Department had done in fifty years.”⁷² Yet despite the success of the Latin American Film it was imperative that business with the government was necessary for the studio to survive.

Disney continued to accept contracts from various government organizations such as the Department of Agriculture for whom he produced a film that promoted the Lend

⁶⁸ Gabler. *Walt Disney: The Triumph of the American Imagination*. 411.

⁶⁹ Nelson Rockefeller to Walt Disney, May 20, 1943, Seminar (for South American Countries, Walt Disney Corr., Inter-Office 1938-1944, R-S, A1631, WDA. Cited from Neal Gabler’s, *Walt Disney, The Triumph of The American Imagination*. 743.

⁷⁰ Gabler. *Walt Disney: The Triumph of the American Imagination*. 402.

⁷¹ Gladys Arnold to Walt Disney, October 9, 1943, A Folder, Walt Disney Corr., 1942-1943, S-Z. A1632, WDA. Cited from Neal Gabler’s, *Walt Disney, The Triumph of the American Imagination*. 743.

⁷² Alfred Charles Richard Jr. *Censorship and Hollywood’s Hispanic Image: An Interpretive Filmography, 1936-1955*. Westport, Greenwood Publishing, 1993. 274.

Lease program.⁷³ Contracts were also accepted from the Council of National Defense to create a series of posters that cautioned Americans not to divulge sensitive information.⁷⁴ However despite the work coming into the studio, Disney became frustrated over the kinds of films he had to produce. In his eyes, he was producing unimaginative training videos and educational films with primitive animation but he understood the economic and patriotic necessity of doing so.⁷⁵ Disney was, “fearful of being labeled a propagandist...with consequent damage to his reputation as a whimsical, non-political artist.”⁷⁶ While Disney was concerned with the direction his work was headed, the advancements on the Nazi party in Europe called for a new kind of film to be produced and shown to the American public.

Anti-Nazi Propaganda

In 1942, Henry Morgenthau Jr. and Jock Whitney began to push Disney towards the creation of propaganda shorts that would directly attack the Nazis and their way of life.⁷⁷ In February of 1942, *Reader's Digest* had published a story entitled, “Education for Death” that described the indoctrination of children under the Nazi regime.⁷⁸ Both Morgenthau and Whitney were interested in buying the rights to the story and while

⁷³ Gabler. *Walt Disney: The Triumph of the American Imagination*. 388.

⁷⁴ Ibid. 388.

⁷⁵ Gabler. *Walt Disney: The Triumph of the American Imagination*. 389.

⁷⁶ Inter-Office Combinations, Kuhn to Morgenthau. March 6, 1942. Morgenthau Diary, #505. FDR Library. Cited from Neal Gabler's, *Walt Disney, The Triumph of the American Imagination*. 739.

⁷⁷ Gabler. *Walt Disney: The Triumph of the American Imagination*. 390.

⁷⁸ Ibid. 390.

reluctant to cross the line into propaganda production, *Education for Death* was put into production that June.⁷⁹

The film was released in January of 1943 and follows the story of a young German boy, Hans, and his development into adulthood under the Nazi regime.⁸⁰ The story of Hans begins before his birth with the marriage of his parents. Upon their wedding day they receive a copy of *Mein Kampf*. When a baby is conceived, the couple must choose an approved Aryan name and the bedtime stories that Hans is read paints democracy as the wicked witch who curses the Aryan princess and Hitler and National Socialism as the epic savior of the fairytale.⁸¹ As Hans attends his schooling he learns lessons of national selection and is exposed to the Hitler youth movement. As Hans grows into adulthood and becomes a Nazi soldier, his empathy and value of human life decreases as he is transformed from an innocent child to a ruthless killing machine.

Disney also produced similar anti-Nazi propaganda shorts such as *Der Fuehrers Face*, that starred Donald Duck as he experiences the life of a Nazi factory worker, forced to eat Nazi food rations, read and memorize *Mein Kampf* and constantly salute the Fuehrer only to realize it was merely a dream.⁸² Disney also prepared a Nazi-themed version of *Chicken Little* in which Foxey Loxy gains access to the chicken coop by deploying Nazi tactics.⁸³ However these films did not sway the public opinion, they only

⁷⁹ Ibid. 390.

⁸⁰ Clyde, Geronimi, dir. 1943. *Education for Death: The Making of the Nazi*. Walt Disney Productions. Motion Picture. Accessed October 11, 2013. <http://youtube.com/D8CuNij-NI>.

⁸¹ Geronimi. *Education for Death*.

⁸² King, Jack, dir. 1943. *Der Fuehrer's Face: The Making of the Nazi*. Walt Disney Productions. Motion Picture. Accessed October 11, 2013. <http://youtube.com/5LYDoFzfILU>.

⁸³ Gabler. *Walt Disney: The Triumph of the American Imagination*. 390.

reinforced it by attacking Nazism and Hitler.⁸⁴ Disney sought to aim higher than reinforcing the opinion of the general public. If he was going to make propaganda, he wanted it to lead a crusade and not just follow one.⁸⁵ Disney wanted to help change the course of the war with a film that he truly believed in, which he was able to do with his final major propaganda film, *Victory Through Air Power*.

Victory Through Air Power

Former Russian air commander Major Alexander P. de Seversky, the assistant attaché to the Russian embassy in the United States, argued in his book, *Victory Through Air power*, that, “only air power can carry an offensive war to the enemy, and only the offensive can win the war.”⁸⁶ While Seversky’s book was heavily criticized, Disney was enchanted by the idea of creating a film that showed the power in which long-range bombers would win the war.⁸⁷ While the studios would spend the summer of 1942 continuing to produce training videos, Disney would be occupied with the *Victory* film. For Seversky, as for Disney, the film was all about patriotism, all about prompting a new way to win the war, and what Seversky believed to be the only way to win the war.⁸⁸

The film would feature both animation and live footage and scenes of Seversky lecturing interspersed with animation. Disney was especially excited about the final sequence that would show the enemy as an octopus and America as an eagle whom

⁸⁴ Ibid. 390.

⁸⁵ Ibid. 390.

⁸⁶ Gabler. *Walt Disney: The Triumph of the American Imagination*. 391.

⁸⁷ Ibid. 391.

⁸⁸ Ibid. 391.

strikes away at the octopus's heart with American air power.⁸⁹ *Victory* would not be ordinary propaganda-it would be earth-shaking propaganda.⁹⁰

Disney was convinced that the war could not be won with land forces and naval attacks and that the United States could not afford to fully equip the army, navy and air force simultaneously.⁹¹ In an interview with *The New York Times*, Disney stated that, "People need to know about it [the war]. A lot of them are still bound by traditional ways of thinking and a movie like this can break through a lot of misconceptions."⁹² The next two months would be spent working around the clock to complete *Victory* with the film being finalized in a late May of 1943. After an intimate private screening of *Victory* in New York and Washington D.C., praise came pouring in for the film. Albert Lasker, a former advertising executive called the film the, "most powerful and vital document yet put before the American public."⁹³ Lasker was right. *Victory* received countless praise from viewers calling the film, "exhilarating," "stimulating," "ingenious" and so simple that "even a youngster of 11 or so would have no difficulty in understanding what it's all

⁸⁹ Perce, Pearce, dir. 1943. *Victory Through Air Power*. Walt Disney Productions. Motion Picture. Accessed January 20, 2014. <http://youtube.com/watch?v=J7Nj59bfOM>.

⁹⁰ Disney to Pearse [sic], Dave [Hand], Sherriff. Memo. August 27, 1943. *Victory Through Air Power-I*, ARI, *Victory Through Air Power* Folder, Walt Disney Corr., Inter-Office, 1938-1944, A1632, WDA. Cited From Neal Gablers, *Walt Disney: The Triumph of the American Imagination*. Pp.740.

⁹¹ Gabler. 403.

⁹² Theodore Straus. 1943. "Donald Duck's Disney." *The New York Times*. February 7. Cited from Neal Gabler's, *Walt Disney, The Triumph of the American Imagination*. .742.

⁹³ Albert Lasker to Walt Disney. Tel. July 2, 1943. Cited from Neal Gabler's, *Walt Disney, The Triumph of the American Imagination*. . 743.

about.”⁹⁴ Despite his first full lengthed film *Snow White*, Disney had finally found what he had gone so long without, success.

Victory

Disney’s work abroad has also brought in a victory of it own. In March of 1944 after the completion of *Victory*, Disney underwent an additional trip to Latin American where he began to lay the groundwork for additional Latin inspired films as well as prepare for a \$200,000 film on literacy that would be showed throughout South America.⁹⁵ In 1946 Nelson Rockefeller called Disney’s South American trip and films as the, “most effective work in inter-American relations. They did more than anything else to bring the people of the Americas closer together.”⁹⁶

Conclusion

Through the examination of the collaboration between Walt Disney, Nelson Rockefeller and the Roosevelt administration, the argument stands that political policies and agendas can be met through the use of cultural icons and their ability to reach the general public. Rather than intervening politically or militarily in foreign and domestic affairs, the work of Disney was successful in both swaying the American public opinion to not only be aware of, but to support the war effort, as well as create a bond between North and South America through the merging of cultures as shown in his films. This,

⁹⁴ Gabler. *Walt Disney: The Triumph of the American Imagination*. 404.

⁹⁵ Ibid. 405.

⁹⁶ Nelson Rockefeller to Walt Disney. May 17, 1946, Ro Folder, Walt Disney Corr., 1945-1952, A1635, WDA. Cited from Neal Gabler’s, *Walt Disney, The Triumph of the American Imagination*. 746.

perhaps, more than the iconic Snow White or Fantasia, were Disney's cultural masterpieces and his saving grace by providing the funds to keep his studio alive. Through this collaboration between Walt Disney and the government, the United States was able to uphold the Good Neighbor policy with South America as well as gain the support both in monetary and physical forms that were necessary to step out of the WWII victorious as a united country, and a world superpower.

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