

By Jim Naureckas

MOVE OVER, SALMAN RUSHDIE. The latest target of blasphemy charges is seven feet tall, green and very damp.

The July issue of DC Comics' *Swamp Thing* will never appear. The plot, involving the vegetable superhero traveling back in time to meet Jesus, was deemed too sensitive for the title's readers. Rick Veitch, *Swamp Thing's* writer since 1986, quit the comic over the cancellation of the issue.

Actually, the comic is less a victim of fundamentalist fervor than of corporate greed. No Christian group had objected to the proposed theme, which everyone agrees was handled in a tasteful and reverent manner. But executives at DC's parent company, Warner Communications, edgy over their buyout struggles with Paramount and Time Inc., and worried about the success of their then unreleased Batman movie, gave the project a thumbs down.

Bat timing: Warner was not known as a courageous defender of freedom of expression to begin with. Its book division refused on ideological grounds to distribute Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman's *The Washington Connection and Third World Fascism* in 1973. More recently, the company backed out of an agreement with Eclipse Comics to co-publish *Brought to Light*, a contraceptive-related graphic novel.

Although the company declines comment, Warner is rumored to

The last temptation of the Swamp Thing



have warned DC president Jenette Kahn to keep a tighter rein on the creative staff after the *Batman* "Death of Robin" series, in which readers could call a 900 number to vote on whether the Boy Wonder lived or died. Following the people's choice, the Joker bludgeoned Batman's sidekick to death with a crowbar. (Ironically, the script portrayed the Joker as working for Rushdie critic Ayatollah Khomeini.)

Apparently, Warner brass feared that identification of Batman with this sort of brutality would hurt ticket sales. Little did they realize that it was Batman's dark edge—the

fact that he can throw villains off Gotham Cathedral without giving it a single thought balloon—that would send box office figures soaring.

COMICS

Swamp Thing covers somewhat different ground. The hero, a sort of elemental demigod, spends less time fighting crime than trying to reconcile his spiritual mission and human nature—much like Martin Scorsese's controversial depiction of Jesus in *The Last Temptation of Christ*. The Christ parallel makes it only natural that, when hostile aliens

sent him hurtling uncontrollably back through time, Swamp Thing would meet up with the real thing.

The script—which was dedicated to Rushdie—called for Swamp Thing to meet up with Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, where Swamp Thing assumes the form of an olive tree and witnesses Christ's decision to accept the Crucifixion. Swamp Thing fills the Holy Grail with juice produced by his body, and battles a demon that has been sent to attack the Messiah. But for the most part, the story unfolds the same way that it does in the New Testament. "It is no more blasphemous than *Ben-Hur*," according to a critic who reviewed the script for the *Comic Buyer's Guide*.

New Age, old problems: But the mere presence of the Christian deity was too much for DC's Kahn, who after consulting the corporate higher-ups pulled the plug on the issue. Although "the subject was handled with integrity and respect," according to a statement issued by Kahn, "the story concept itself would be offensive to many of our readers."

The *Swamp Thing's* creative team reacted with dismay to the decision. Veitch, who describes the comic's philosophy as "New Age spiritualism" (he lives just down the road from Windham Hill Records in Vermont), has often brought far more heterodox religious ideas into the comic than in the suppressed story. And other DC horror comics—all of which bear a "suggested for mature readers" warning—have taken even bigger risks, with a

Hellblazer story line presenting God, working through a gay-bashing fundamentalist sect, as a villain.

Michael Zulli, who as guest artist had nearly completed the pencil art for the Jesus story, says that the assignment was the first and last time he will work with a major comic book company. "There's a big resistance to truly mature comics written and drawn by adults for people with adult minds," says Zulli, whose *Puma Blues*, a left-leaning comic about ecological disaster, is independently published.

Now that Warner is paying attention to the strange publications of its subsidiary, some worry that the DC line will be forced to rein in the creative experiments that allowed the perennial No. 2 comics company to surpass Marvel in sales. (*Swamp Thing*, rescued from obscurity by Alan Moore in 1983, can be seen as the beginning of the company's renaissance, as Moore went on to work on such groundbreaking series as *Watchmen* and *V for Vendetta*.) Writers shudder at the mammoth communications conglomerate trying to impose some sort of orthodoxy on the convoluted theology of the DC universe.

But perhaps Warner will pay less attention now that *Batman* has gone through the roof. But for some, the golden age is over. "*Swamp Thing* is dead," says Zulli. "The teeth have been pulled." ■

Jim Naureckas is a former staff writer for *In These Times*. He has written as a freelancer for Eclipse Comics.

High-tech "spin-ons": toast of the future

By Tom Engelhardt

LAST FALL THE PENTAGON'S Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) announced that it would sink \$30 million into the development of the high-definition TV (HDTV) screen of the future. Unfortunately, the Pentagon's move to support the American electronics industry may be a case of too-little-too-late. Already Japanese and European HDTV consortiums are years and countless millions ahead in the race for the hottest consumer item of the 1990s (whose advanced microprocessors may well be at the leading edge of 21st century military technology).

But according to Pentagon insiders, the DARPA intervention marks a turning point in the relationship between military funding and our high-tech future. They believe we are situated at the beginning of the end of the era in which corporate and university labs raised money for crucial civilian R&D by working on "talking cockpits" and missile technology. The Pentagon's new awareness that American military pre-eminence may rest on "spin-ons" from the civilian economy has

resulted in a fierce intraservice scramble to fund consumer projects. Among these pioneering attempts to fuse Pentagon dollars with the consumer economy are:

The Midgetman Cold Fusion Popcorn Popper (MCFPP): The Pentagon's Primary Battle Development Group (PBDG) jumped in feet first on this one as soon as Stanley Pons and Martin Fleischman of the

HARDWARE

University of Utah announced the discovery of cold fusion in a jar. In a co-patenting agreement with the university and General Electric, PBDG is now preparing the funding that will make America No. 1 in the post-hot-air-popper era. By the first decade of the next century, the Midgetman should have the potential to deliver explosive amounts of butter-flavored popcorn to a movie theater or home several hundred miles away, with a circular hit ratio of plus or minus 10 feet. *Initial Funding:* \$14 billion. *Technical Problems:* An Odeon-Loews consortium, fearing the loss of the \$27 billion popcorn market, is hard at work on an anti-MCFPP defense system that

could intercept the popper early in its flight and divert it to a local airport, where the popcorn would explode harmlessly. *Cost to Consumer:* \$3 million. *Military spin-ons:* Cold fusion technology will power the 21st century war machine. The Polar Bear, a cold fusion battle tank, is already on the drawing boards. *Prognosis:* Experts agree that, barring a goof, U.S. popcorn technology could lead America to global energy dominance.

The Stealth Toaster: The Air Force's Aerotechnical Institute (AFAI), in conjunction with Northrop, is rushing to create a "personal toasting apparatus" for the next century. Molded through high-temperature ceramics, the apparatus' contours will be virtually invisible in a projected formica-and-chrome "kitchen of the future." Using micro-miniaturized supermemory chips and artificial intelligence systems, the apparatus will deliver a perfectly cooked and buttered piece of toast to the plate of a waiting breakfaster sight unseen. *Initial funding:* \$225 million. *Technical problems:* Micro-miniaturization. Based on present technology, the toaster package with all its hardware and software would be half a football field in length, necessitating unrealistic and costly changes in kitchen design. *Cost to consumer:* \$2,475,000 or \$1,320 per average toast slice for the typical family of four. *Military spin-ons:*

Stealth Toaster Technology represents our aerospace future. *Prognosis:* The German electronics and publishing conglomerate of Gemeinschaft and Gesundheit has a several-year headstart in resolving basic problems in buttering technology. Otherwise, America is out front on this one.

Star Wars all-body shades: The Strategic Defense Initiative's Skywalker Department of Technology (SDT) has just entered into agreement with Ralph Lauren and MIT to create this replacement for sunglasses. An all-body, laser-optics sun "sheath," it will not only offer you total solar protection in an ozone-depleted future but allow you to track, locate, and intercept a car, bus or human being over hundreds

The Midgetman should have the potential to deliver explosive amounts of butter-flavored popcorn to a movie theater or home several hundred miles away.

of city blocks. (It will be sold complete with multimodular personalized phone, privatized air conditioning, individualized cruise controls and multichoice entertainment unit). *Initial funding:* \$132 billion. *Technological problems:* none. *Cost to consumer:* \$1 billion. *Military Spin-ons:* You name it, it will provide it. *Prognosis:* A military takeover of the personal appearance industry (PAI) will turn PX's worldwide into cutting-edge fashion boutiques ensuring control over the teenage market for eons to come.

In a gold-rush-like atmosphere, such joint ventures are already sweeping out of the military's grasp. Only last week, for instance, the CIA and toy giant Hasbro embarked on a joint venture to produce an Encrypted Ninja Codebreaker Ring that would enable advanced Nintendo players to produce their own computer viruses.

If, however, the military does not fall to competition from other branches of the government and these projects succeed, prominent economists in Cambridge, Massachusetts believe that the American century could be extended another two hundreds years, making the Pentagon the most successful entrepreneur in history. ■

Tom Engelhardt, a senior editor at Pantheon Books, would like to thank his stealthy friend Todd Gitlin for R&D support.

Summit

Continued from page 3

as in the South, is out to shove most of humanity beneath the survival threshold, depriving them even of ... air and water, while the privileged are obliged to shut themselves into fortified enclaves."

Summing things up, economist Alain Lipietz said the meeting had pushed "pessimism of the intellect" even farther than usual, challenging the very concept of progress. He saw space for optimism in the fact that "the system is getting jammed" and the victims themselves have to do something about it. "This first summit could not provide answers. We need symbols. We are able to 'act locally'. But we still need to 'think globally'. We need to make proposals at the global level."

This was where the Paris TOES was weak. About its only concrete proposal was to ban

use of international loans for arms purchases. The demand for an international conference between debtor and creditor nations to find a political solution to the debt crisis skirts the problem of the subservience of both Third World and rich governments to an uncontrolled and uncontrollable economic system.

The poor summit's experts initiated their project for an "observatory" to evaluate G-7 with a resumé of its first 15 years, noting the turning point at the end of the '70s to privatization—transfer of resources from the public to the private sectors. A parallel turn to privatization seems to have occurred on the left. The new "Third Worldism" has abandoned armed liberation struggle aimed at seizing state power in favor of peaceful non-governmental organizations (NGOs), local community organizing and "networking." It is not clear how "international civil society" is to convince the financial centers of West-

ern capitalism to abandon the priority of profit-making. As Lipietz noted, there was frequent reference to "moral force."

Next year, when the G-7 meet in the U.S.,

American organizers of "the other economic summit" will have the opportunity to provide more concrete alternative policy proposals. □

CALENDAR

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OAK RIDGE, TN

August 6

The Oak Ridge Environmental Peace Alliance and other co-sponsoring groups present the "NEVER AGAIN: March for Peace and the Environment" action on Hiroshima Day. This action is seen as a major event in this "Year of Resistance." People from diverse backgrounds and understandings will come together to create a large compelling turnout which will nonviolently demonstrate that the issues surrounding peace and the environment can no longer

be ignored. The action will span five days and features a march and nonviolent civil disobedience rally on Sunday, Hiroshima Day. For more information contact Oak Ridge Environmental Peace Alliance, P.O. Box 1101, Knoxville, TN 37901. (615) 588-9370 or (615) 573-2322.

TORONTO

August 9-13

The 8th Assembly of The Fourth World presents "Decentralist Congress, Making the World Healthy, Happy and Whole" at the University of Toronto, Canada. Featured speakers include Ivan Illich, Leopold Kohr and John Papworth. The Congress will include forums on community economics, organizing for change, bioregions, communication strategies, and profound spiritual transformation. The Fourth World is a movement to enhance the quality of all life in the biosphere through the development of a decentralist philosophy and specific actions. For more information contact The School of Living, 3030 Sleepy Hollow Rd., Falls Church, VA 22042, (703) 237-7507.

FINDLAY, OH

August 17-20

The Democratic Socialists of America Youth Section will be holding its 14th annual summer conference at Findlay College. Speakers include Barbara Ehrenreich, Reginald Wilson and William Winpisinger. Find out what's happening in the U.S.'s largest progressive/radical youth group and how you can become involved. Scholarships and carpooling are available. Contact Dinah Leventhal, 15 Dutch St., Suite 500, New York, NY 10038, (212) 962-0390.

PETALUME, CA

August 24-27

The War Resisters League presents its 1989 National Conference "Reclaiming Culture: Nonviolent Responses to Militarism in Our Lives." This conference will examine the militarization of our culture and focus on the many creative efforts we are taking to free ourselves from this weight. Small group discussion topics will progress from militarism in ourselves to resistance, and finally to the demilitarization of our society. Workshops will cover many of the areas pervaded by militarization—from home to community to global levels. For more information contact War Resisters League, 339 Lafayette St., New York, NY 10012, (212) 228-0450.

MIDDLE EAST

September 23-October 10

"A Pilgrimage of Peace," a Middle East study tour sponsored by New Jewish Agenda of Santa Fe, N.M. A unique opportunity to meet Israelis and Palestinians who care about peace and work together to overcome differences. 1989 cost \$2,000 inclusive from New York. Contact Arline Goldberg, Rt. 14, Box 257, Santa Fe, NM 87505, (505) 471-4861.

ESTELI, NICARAGUA

September 23-October 28

NICA offers five weeks of intensive Spanish classes, a political/cultural program, family living and community involvement. An educational, crosscultural experience in beautiful northern Nicaragua. Some financial aid available. NICA, P.O. Box 1409-IT, Cambridge, MA 02238, (617) 497-7142.

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