

The Wonderful World of Disney

by Clifford Doerksen

FOUR YEARS AGO, WHEN THE Walt Disney Corp. made a bid to transform the Manassas National Battlefield Park into a theme park, intellectuals reared up in protest and ultimately defeated the project, even though it enjoyed the strong support of local businesses and politicians. Perhaps if the Ramada Hotel chain or Donald Trump had been behind the attempt to annex Manassas the outcome would have been the same, but the fact that it was Disney lent a particular color to the rhetoric of highbrow dissent. Was it not universally understood, after all, that the name "Disney" signified everything sentimental, false, and Philistine in American culture?

The day is now long past, but as Steven Watts reminds us in his valuable if uneven study, *Walt Disney and his works* once received adoring hosannas from the intelligentsia. Elite Disneyphiles in the 1930s included Gilbert Seldes, Sergei Eisenstein, Mark Van Doren, and Arturo Toscanini; comparisons to Leonardo, Hogarth, Daumier, and Matisse were routinely proffered, except by those critics who saw in Disney something entirely new and unprecedented in art. Disney himself affected an aw-shucks indifference to this kind of attention while it lasted, but the steady decline of his cultural reputation after 1940 was clearly galling to his mammoth ego.

The full reversal of Disney's critical fortunes was marked by the 1968 publication of Richard Schickel's scathing *The Disney Version*, which took Disney's measure in relation to the values of the counterculture and pronounced him vulgar, sentimental, and dehumanized, an assessment which has since become more or less entrenched as an upper-middlebrow shibboleth. Disney died shortly before the Schickel book appeared, but he had long before adopted a defensive

populist posture in relation to his many detractors. "The critics think I'm corny," he told his studio associates. "Well, I am corny. As long as people respond to it, I'm okay."

With *The Magic Kingdom*, Professor Steven Watts, hitherto a cultural historian of the early American Republic, presents us with a fresh opportunity to evaluate the life and work of this architect of modern American culture. Although a confessed Disneyphile and the beneficiary of unprecedented cooperation from both the Disney Archive and the Disney family, Watts has produced an admirably even-handed work that should hold considerable interest even for those cynical souls who find them-

selves congenitally out of sympathy with the Disney aesthetic.

Watts defines that aesthetic here as the depiction of people, objects, and scenes in which dark or messy dimensions have been wiped away. But that

doesn't keep him from exploring those same dimensions of Disney's own character. Driven, mercurial, domineering, manipulative, hard drinking, puritanical about sex but fond of grade-school potty humor, this Disney stands in stark contrast to Uncle Walt, the sunny television presence who warms the memory of anyone who grew up in the '50s.

The real subject of *The Magic Kingdom*, however, is not Disney's psychology but his work and its underlying cultural significance. Of course, no undertaking is more fraught with potential for intellectual pratfalls than the deep reading of popular culture (a point that Watts gamely acknowledges with a pre-emptive epigram from Walt Disney: "We just try to make a good picture. And then the professors come along and tell us what we do.") In attempting to draw out the deeper political and aesthetic meanings of Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck, Snow White, Pinocchio, Dumbo, and Bambi, Watts registers some hits and some misses. The most persuasive political analyses here are often also the most obvious ones. For example, it

seems safe to hazard that the national mania for Disney's "Three Little Pigs" and its hit theme song "Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Wolf?" in 1933 had something to do with the Depression. The political explication of the later Disney products of the Cold War era is similarly spot-on. Watts may be reaching a bit, however, with the observation that Mickey Mouse's eclipse in popularity by the more belligerent Donald Duck in the late '30s subtly reflected a gradual rethinking of America's global situation. Perhaps people were simply tired of the mouse and ready for a new cartoon character? In other places Watts is simply too much of a historian and not enough of a critic, as when his discussion of Disney's status as an Artist ends in stalemate, with some of Watts' grandest claims for Disney the auteur suddenly dampened into nothingness by the following disclaimer:

In many ways, of course, such highfalutin aesthetic maneuvering was at best incidental, and at worst unintended or unconscious. Most of the time Walt Disney simply followed his instincts in utilizing humor, comedy, and music in pursuit of mass entertainment, and any explicit thoughts about art lay deep in the shadows.

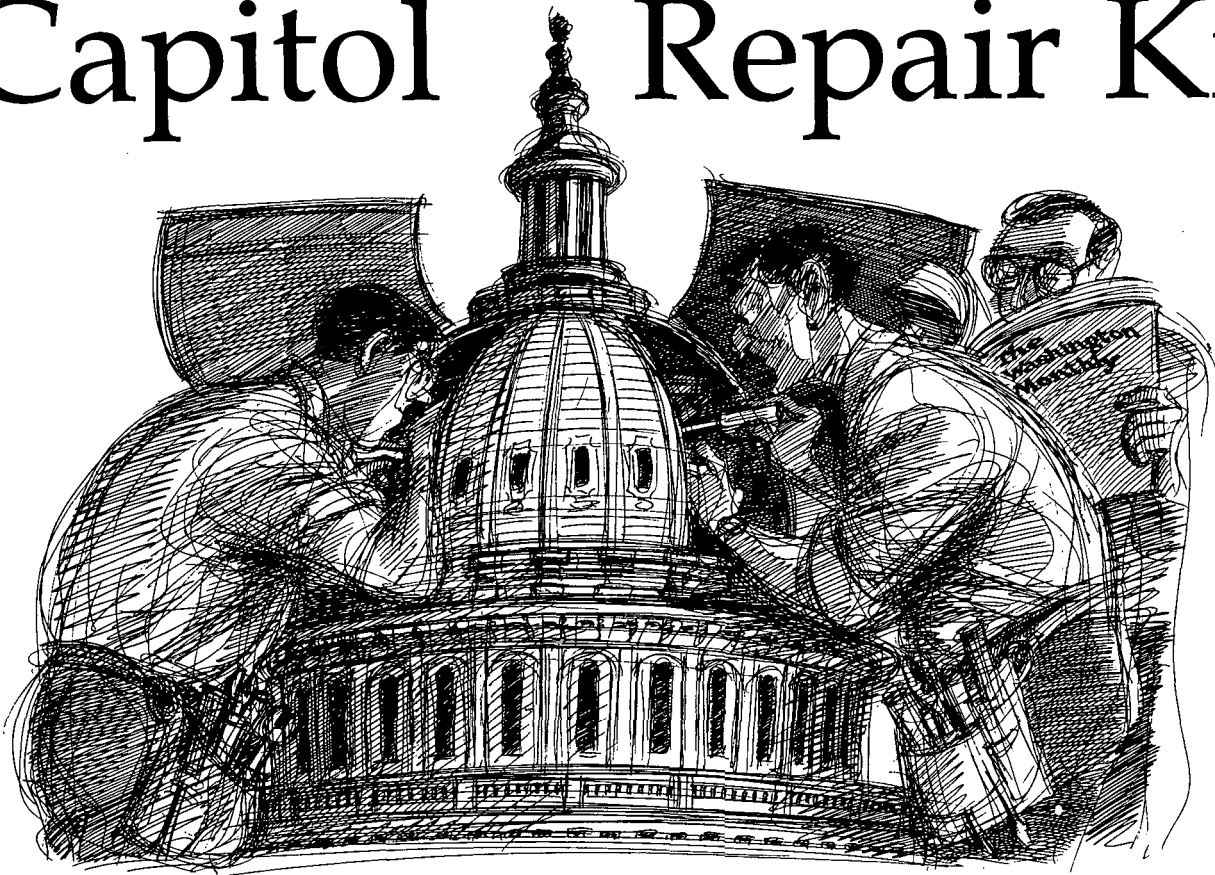
Still, everything in this book stands well above the current, permissively silly academic standards for the discussion of pop culture. And Watts succeeds admirably in generating an understanding of how a young nobody from the Midwest named Walter Elias Disney became a major mogul of movies and television and eponymous ruler of a theme-park kingdom.

Hardbitten Disneyphobes will come away from *The Magic Kingdom* fortified with the knowledge that the first movie tie-in merchandising campaign was for Disney's *Snow White* all the way back in 1937; confirmed Disney lovers will profit from the book's wealth of anecdotes concerning Walt Disney and the Disney studios. Those in between can benefit from a new perspective on a man whose influence on global popular culture has yet to wane, three decades after his death.

CLIFFORD DOERKSEN is a Woodrow Wilson Fellow in History at Princeton University.

THE MAGIC KINGDOM:
Walt Disney and the American Way of Life
by Steven Watts
Houghton Mifflin, \$30

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Ode to the Gipper

by Matthew Dallek

IN EARLY 1987 DINESH D'SOUZA, just 26 years old and already an up-and-comer in the conservative movement with a flair for controversy, took a job as a senior domestic policy adviser in the Reagan White House. He was quickly disappointed. D'Souza discovered an administration riven by turf wars and petty personnel conflicts and a well-meaning but ineffectual president hardly up to the task of running the country. "No one — not even the president — seemed to be in charge," D'Souza confesses in his new book. "I liked Reagan as a person, but like many other conservatives, I worried that he lacked the intellectual temperament and administrative skills to give new direction to the country."

Now a research scholar at the American Enterprise Institute and author of best-selling screeds on multiculturalism and American race relations, D'Souza has changed his mind about his former boss. Drastically. *Ronald Reagan: How an Ordinary Man Became an Extraordinary Leader* reads like a long mea culpa. D'Souza concedes that the president was not perfect, remaining aloof from policy minutiae and the day-to-day operations of his staff. But, the author argues, Reagan was a great visionary, a shrewd and calculating chief executive who cured inflation, jump-started the stagnant economy, vanquished malaise, spread democracy to nations in need, and won the Cold War.

D'Souza is convincing on one point: Reagan was a more sophisticated operator than many critics have acknowledged. The Gipper inspired intense loyalty in his aides and possessed, in addition to his much-ballyhooped PR skills, an uncanny ability to make popular seemingly simplistic and antiquated conservative beliefs. He also played, it seems fair to say, a role in

ending the Cold War, helped lead the American right out of the political wilderness, and set the parameters for much of the current debate over welfare, taxes, and entitlements.

But the notion that Reagan was a brilliant statesman with a set of nation-saving policies — a 20th-century titan who revitalized America and made the world safe for democracy — contradicts much of what is known about the man and his administration. In book after book Reagan aides have charted,

in often painful detail, the president's disturbing lack of interest in and less-than-stellar grasp of vital national issues. Scholars and journalists have told a different though equally grim tale of ballooning deficits, expanding poverty rates, urban decay, and rampant corruption.

D'Souza responds to such less-than-rosy portraits of the Reagan presidency by drubbing disgruntled White House aides as perfidious "ingrates," assailing critics as liberal naysayers, and glossing over serious questions about the costs of Reagan's policies. He also displays an uncanny ability to turn Reagan's warts and blunders into great triumphs. The author claims, for example, that Reagan's decision to storm the tiny Caribbean island of Granada in 1983 marked a watershed in American diplomatic history, not only saving American medical students from bloodthirsty Cuban communists but also "help[ing] to exorcise the ghost of Vietnam from the American psyche." He argues that when the president mistakenly addressed his secretary of housing as "Mr. Mayor," Reagan was only showing his disdain for the Department of Housing and Urban Development, which he deemed a "rat hole of public policy." D'Souza further informs us that Reagan didn't care whether his secretary of the treasury and chief of staff swapped jobs because he had larger, more important matters to worry about. Finally, in a strange twist of logic, D'Souza touts Reagan's multibil-

lion-dollar budget deficit as a stroke of brilliance that helped run the Soviets into the ground and limit the growth of evil entitlement programs like welfare and Medicare.

There is nothing wrong with revising history, but D'Souza's book is too long on rhetoric and too short on facts to alter the verdict on Reagan's presidency.

MATTHEW DALLEK, a Visiting Scholar at U.C. Berkeley, is at work on a book, to be published by the Free Press, entitled *The Making of Ronald Reagan*.

The Reluctant Pol

by Richard Norton Smith

GEORGE BUSH IS THE FIRST healthy ex-president since William Howard Taft to forego writing a White House memoir. This is not all the two have in common. Reared in a family tradition of public service, subsequently polished at Yale, each man capably filled several appointive positions before being elevated to the presidency by a legendary sponsor whose shadow he could never quite escape. After losing a bitter three-way contest for re-election in 1912, Taft joked that no American had ever been elected ex-president by such an overwhelming majority. He went on to redeem himself as chief justice of the United States, in which position he could at last exercise the judicial temperament that had proven so ill-suited to the political arena.

Bush, too, seems a man at peace with himself, having demonstrated through his recent skydiving exploits and November dedication of his presidential library that life begins at 72. He may yet enjoy the ultimate vindication should his namesake son, currently Texas' popular governor, attain the White House in 2000. Yet the senior Bush, no less than Taft before him, appears a historical figure at odds with the prevailing culture. An

establishmentarian in a country suspicious of elites, a patrician in an increasingly populist party, a gentleman in an

RONALD REAGAN:
How an
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by Dinesh D'Souza
Free Press, \$25

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