

# Disney's America Tomorrow's Schoolhouse

by J. Quaid Loebbecke

Mickey Mouse will soon be teaching your kids American history, and for that you should be grateful. In a departure from their four currently operating parks, "Disney's America" will not be serving as a home for cartoon characters, but rather, will take American history as its theme.

Disney executives estimate that the park will draw 30,000 people a day and have gone on record stating their hope to make it as much an educational as an entertainment experience. One Disney vice president said that the park will not just be "a Pollyanna view of America", but will also be "fun", "entertaining", and "exciting".

If those last words give you pause, you are not alone. To the dismay of many, the information age is giving way swiftly to the "infotainment" age. More and more, people are turning to talk shows, television docudramas, tabloids and movies instead of newspapers or teachers for education and information about the world around them.

Unlike the university or the newsroom, where professional guidelines

establish standards of objectivity and research, entertainment companies adhere only to the dictates of either profit or their own personalities. They are free simply to be "fun, exciting, and entertaining". As the next step into the era of infotainment, Disney's America can be viewed as a threat to our understanding of history.

But that is not the whole story. Those who dismiss Disney's America as crass commercial exploitation are doing a great disservice to history and to themselves. They fail to recognize the educational opportunity that it represents. The advent of the infotainment age—though necessitating zealous protection of history from misrepresentation and manipulation—indicates that now, more than ever before, the public at large is hungry to know more about the past.

There is a mass audience for what used to be considered high-brow or intellectual; the one proviso is that people want to laugh while they learn. Talking heads and sterile lecturing will not suffice. But a creatively executed historical project like Ken Burns' exceptional documentary, *The Civil War*, has the power to

captivate millions.

Disney's America certainly has the potential to reach millions in the same way, and, more importantly, it will attract children as its primary audience. At its best, Disney's America will offer kids what traditional education cannot: the chance to experience history firsthand. By giving them the opportunity to see history as something living, and to relate to historical figures as real people like themselves, Disney's America will inspire children to return to school enthusiastic about learning history—and about learning in general.

A theme park can never replace the schoolhouse as the primary center of children's education, but it can be a vital supplement to traditional forms of enlightenment. Disney executives have stated that, in part, the park will be located near Washington in order to give families the chance both to experience history as recreated at Disney's America, and to visit some of the sites where American history has actually been made—and continues to be made.

At the very least, Disney should be commended for taking a bit of a gamble in departing from the surefire Disneyland concept (surefire outside of France, that is), and offering families an entertainment alternative which attempts to educate and inspire. If you need convincing that children's entertainment is not always conceived with such a social conscience, I have two words for you: Beavis and Butthead. Or, alternately, consider the video game recently on the market in which a scantily-clad woman is assaulted by four men in her bathroom.

The future presents consumers of entertainment both with promise and potential danger. Just as readers and viewers question news media biases in presenting information about the day's events, visitors to Disney's America will have to question—and teach their children to question—the version of history with which they are being presented. If they are vigilant, there is the possibility that millions will discover that learning history can in fact be "fun, entertaining, and exciting." And that is something for which to be grateful. ●

*J. Quaid Loebbecke lives in Washington, D.C. and counts among recent thrills passing the California Bar exam and riding on Disney's "The Pirates of the Caribbean".*



"We The People": recognizing the "courage and triumph" of the American immigrant heritage. [The Walt Disney Company].