Upholding the Disney Utopia
Through American Tragedy: A Study
of The Walt Disney Company’s
Responses to Pearl Harbor and 9/11

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Abstract

Since its founding in October 1923, The Walt Disney Company has endured as an influential preserver of fantasy, traditional American values, and folklore. As a company created to entertain the masses, its films often provide a sense of escapism as well as feelings of nostalgia. The company preserves these sentiments by “Disneyfying” danger in its media to shield viewers from harsh realities. Disneyfication is also utilized in the company’s responses to cultural shocks and tragedies as it must carefully navigate maintaining its family-friendly reputation, utopian ideals, and financial interests. This paper addresses The Walt Disney Company’s responses to two attacks on US soil: the bombing of Pearl Harbor in 1941 and the attacks on September 11, 2001 and examines the similarities and differences between the two. By utilizing interviews from Disney employees, animated film shorts, historical accounts, insignia, government documents, and newspaper articles, this paper analyzes the continuity of Disney’s methods of dealing with tragedy by controlling the narrative through Disneyfication, employing patriotic rhetoric, and reiterating the original values that form Disney’s utopian image. Disney’s responsiveness to changing social and political climates and use of varying mediums in its reactions to harsh realities contributes to the company’s enduring reputation and presence in American culture.


Introduction

A young Walt Disney craftily grabbed some shoe polish and cardboard, donned his father’s coat, applied black crepe hair to his chin, and went about his day to his fifth-grade class. Disney prepared this costume for Abraham Lincoln’s birthday and memorized the president’s famous Gettysburg Address to mark the occasion. Walt’s impressive performance of the speech led the principal to bring him around to every classroom so that he could recite it for all of the students at school, or so The Walt Disney Company tells it.¹

This piece of Disney folklore represents two major parts of The Walt Disney Company: the centrality of patriotic rhetoric to its brand and the company’s control over its public image. History regularly hails Walt Disney as a true patriot and champion of the common American. A love of country drove a sixteen-year-old Walt to convince his mother to allow him to lie about his age so that he could go to France with the Red Cross to aid the World War I effort, where he spent much of his time painting cartoons for spare change.² Later, as he gained fame, Disney still insisted upon putting forth a humble image which set him apart from many other Hollywood executives. During interviews and public appearances, Walt Disney routinely sang the praises of small-town rural America by telling stories of Marceline, Missouri, one of the towns where he grew up. Disney particularly loved to mythologize

his upbringing and described his own American success story as one where justice always triumphs over evil.\textsuperscript{3}

Much of this popular Disney folklore comes from the carefully told recollections of Disney and his family. In \textit{The Magic Kingdom}, Steven Watts asserts that Walt Disney carefully curated his public image as a modest, patriotic American. For example, Disney exaggerated his supposed small-town roots and upbringing as he spent most of his early life in big cities like Chicago and Kansas City, not Marceline. Despite his exaggerations and mythologizing, Disney’s actions and the creative directions he pushed his company in confirm that a love of country affected his craft. Examples can be seen in Disney’s eagerness to devote his company to the Allied war effort for several years, his resistance to profiting from the Great Moments with Mr. Lincoln attraction, and the creation of Frontierland in Disneyland to celebrate his version of American history. Since its conception, The Walt Disney Company has aligned itself with patriotic feelings and built a family-friendly brand. The company maintains a serious interest in upholding its pristine reputation as it relies heavily upon children and parents for the success of its films and theme parks. Patriotic rhetoric and carefully preserving its pristine reputation are vital for upholding the Disney utopia, or the idealized sense of safety, hope, and fantasy The Walt Disney Company puts forth.

In this paper, patriotism is used to refer to a strong devotion to and pride in one’s country. What it means to be a patriot or express patriotism

\textsuperscript{3}Ibid., 14.
is widely contested and filled with contradictions. Media from The Walt Disney Company routinely displays symbolic patriotism, defined by political scientists Leonie Huddy and Nadia Khatib as the pride in being an American combined with pride in American symbols such as the US flag and the national anthem.4 Patriotic symbols are employed by Disney not only during times of crisis but are deeply integral to the company’s brand. In many animated shorts, the company engages in uncritical patriotism by unconditionally supporting America and encouraging viewers to do the same. On rare occasions in its responses to dark moments, The Walt Disney Company adopts a more liberal form of national attachment known as constructive patriotism. This idea reflects a “critical loyalty” to America, where a love of country causes one to express their hopes for the nation to make positive change.5

In addition to aligning his brand with patriotic sentiments, Walt Disney formulated his company’s image by continuously affirming its purpose to the media. Disney did so through statements such as, “I am interested in entertaining people, in bringing pleasure, particularly laughter, to others, rather than being concerned with ‘expressing’ myself or obscure creative impressions.”6 In declaring his motivations, Walt Disney distinguished himself from other artists by stating that he wanted to make art that could be widely

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5Ibid., 66.
6Watts, The Magic Kingdom, 59.
enjoyed, not art to be admired by a cultured few in museums. Though Disney laid out his simple intentions, Disney shorts and films are routinely analyzed for underlying messages. Disney claimed the content of his work did not hold any deeper meaning, stating “We just try to make a good picture, and then the professors come along and tell us what we do.”\(^7\) Despite these jabs at academics, traces of events occurring in the public sphere and societal commentary can be observed in various Disney films.

Messages regarding the goodness of common people, the value of hard work, heroes prevailing over evil, and evocative fantasy images form the Disney utopia. The company’s wide cultural impact allows it to attempt to create a sense of escapism that resonates with the masses and convey messages about morality to the public. In *Containing Nationalism*, sociologist Michael Hechter argues that watching Disney animated films is one of the few shared cultural experiences among American children, making its content very influential as it is welcomed in homes under the guise of a “family-friendly” label.\(^8\) Disneyland and the other Disney parks are the physical manifestations of the utopian values, often referred to as Mickey Mouse Morality, where people are meant to go to forget their troubles and engage with the four lands consisting of a mirage of fantasy, adventure, a mythologized history, and the endless possibilities of the future. However, when disaster strikes, The Walt Disney Company’s core messaging about good triumphing evil risks becoming

\(^7\)Ibid., 70.

Knowing which stances companies take when tragedy hits is important information for consumers. Many choose to vote with their wallets by refusing to support companies depending on the positions they take on various public safety and political issues including climate change, presidential candidates, and social justice movements. In light of recent events with the COVID-19 pandemic and protests against racial injustice in America, The Walt Disney Company has had to navigate its position as a popular company with a global presence in times of deep political polarization. At the time of this writing, Disney and California Governor Gavin Newsom are in a tense debate as the company seeks to reopen the Disneyland theme park to the public despite the high COVID-19 case count in the area. After the deaths of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor in 2020 at the hands of the police, outrage sparked national protests. Disney pledged $5,000,000 towards social justice organizations, added content warnings for certain racist material on its streaming service Disney+, and released a video on its Youtube channel where Black employees shared stories of the racism and discrimination they have faced. Disney added that their monetary pledge would “further their longstanding work promoting social justice by eliminating disparities and racial discrimination through their advocacy and education programs.”

Critics have targeted Disney for making racist and sexist content throughout its history and for regularly

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centering white stories. The company rewrote some of its past with this carefully worded response.

As for Disney’s most widely circulated response, the company posted the following message to its social media pages: “We stand against racism. We stand for inclusion. We stand with our fellow Black employees, storytellers, creators, and the entire Black community. We must unite and speak out.”

This official statement drew some criticism for lacking phrases present in the posted video such as structural racism, white supremacy, and Black Lives Matter. The response did not deeply engage with the larger issues at play, and instead placed focused on more positive terms such as inclusion and unity. In general, The Walt Disney Company benefits from appearing neutral during social and political contention since it has customers and theme parks all over the world, and holds resorts in both liberal and conservative states in America. By remaining neutral to some degree, the company does not risk alienating groups of Disney consumers whenever its public relations messaging navigates the task of speaking on tragic realities while still putting forth a hopeful and comforting message to uphold the Disney utopia.

As a company with a strong global presence, Disney’s responses to tragedy must be careful to not tarnish its famed harmonious image or harm its financial prospects. I present The Walt Disney Company’s responses to two major tragedies: the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, and the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. These attacks on US soil,

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though sixty years apart, both greatly changed the country and landscape Disney operated in. Around the time of the attack on Pearl Harbor, Disney had already established a reputation as a popular company that reached many American people. Walt Disney had created an image for himself as both a model American and a common man who understood the dreams and anxieties of everyday people, and many parents trusted him to instill positive morals in children. The government utilized The Walt Disney Company’s influence by enlisting its assistance in training, propaganda, and educational films as the US entered World War II. Post 9/11, Disney had massive theme parks across the world, some of which became at risk for financial ruin as the travel industry dwindled. Shortly after the attack, government agencies urgently contacted Disney executives to express a concern that one of its theme parks would be a target for a subsequent terror attack. In both instances, the media and the public discussed Disney’s reactions and resulting actions at length.

I discuss the methods Disney relied upon to preserve its reputation and economic interests in its immediate responses as well as its less direct responses that came in the weeks and months following these tragedies. Disney appears to adopt a “show must go on” policy whenever disaster strikes, never allowing it to disrupt their production of new material for too long. The company creates films and physical spaces where people are supposed to go to feel safe and forget their troubles, which becomes more challenging during tumultuous times. This paper addresses how and why The Walt Dis-
ney Company’s responses to Pearl Harbor and 9/11 differ as it navigated the juxtaposition of tragic occurrences with the childlike innocence and fantasy the company represents in different temporal and social settings. In doing so, I analyze how the company has relied upon some of the same strategies such as controlling the delivery of the narrative through Disneyfication, employing patriotic rhetoric, and reiterating the original values that form Disney’s utopian image.

**Literature Review**

The Walt Disney Company has always maintained a firm grasp over its reputation. In *The Magic Kingdom*, cultural historian Steven Watts explains several misleading statements Walt Disney employed while recounting his success story and argued that Disney actively tried to portray a Horatio Alger style rags-to-riches narrative. Disney’s reputation blossomed during the golden age of the company, which began in 1937 with the release of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* where the company’s creations received an influx of positive reactions, except from some high culture critics. However, as film scholar Eric Smoodin pointed out, much of the discourse surrounding The Walt Disney Company during its golden age came from Walt Disney himself, and therefore there are fewer unbiased accounts of the company’s operations during this time. Disney maintained a tight grasp over its public image by

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regularly speaking on behalf of the company and its employees. Additionally, the content of early Disney media cannot be assumed to communicate ideologies held by Walt Disney since he released material that differed from his own views on multiple occasions.\(^\text{13}\) In one clear example, Disney shorts during the Great Depression regularly displayed pro-labor messages while Walt Disney himself denounced unions and took an anti-labor position during an animator’s strike at his studio in 1941.\(^\text{14}\)

Mickey Mouse endures as a dominant figure despite Disney shedding some of its “old-fashioned conservative reputation,” in the words of cultural historian John Wills.\(^\text{15}\) Disney successfully shifted its messaging along with shifts in the dominant culture. Wills claims that Disney began occasionally “alienat[ing] its white middle-class core” as it started taking more risks in the 21st century.\(^\text{16}\) Releasing a video on its YouTube channel that mentioned white privilege and systemic racism serves as one recent example. While Disney has arguably become more progressive, even going as far as to place content warnings on its older media for depictions of racial stereotypes, Disney is not a company that takes giant risks since it benefits greatly from its current brand image. However, since safety and harmony are core tenets of the Disney utopia, the company often steps in to comment when these are

\(^{13}\) Critics commonly assume that Disney held populist beliefs for the way his films, particularly during the Great Depression, showcased the triumph of common folk over evil and powerful forces.

\(^{14}\) Smoodin, *Disney Discourse*, 17.


\(^{16}\) Ibid., 132.
at risk for certain populations.

In *Disney During World War II*, journalist John Baxter closely follows the company’s involvement in the war and applauds Walt Disney’s contribution to the Allied effort. He framed Disney’s multi-year devotion to the war as both a selfless act and proof that Walt Disney’s interests centered around innovation and the development of animation techniques rather than profit. The Disney publishing company published Baxter’s book, which almost exclusively relied upon materials provided by the Walt Disney archives. The book contains many images and documents unavailable anywhere besides the archives and the company could impact not only which documents were brought to light but the framing of the story as well. Baxter presents both Walt Disney and The Walt Disney Company in a favorable light.

As for Disney’s response to the 9/11 terrorist attacks, computer scientist Newton Lee detailed the immediate response from Disney on September 11. His book, *Counterterrorism and Cyber Security: Total Information Awareness*, followed the rare shutdown of Disney parks and internal memos sent to employees. Newton Lee worked for the Walt Disney Internet Group at the time of the attack. Lee described how US government agencies contacted Disney higher-ups over the concern that Disney studios or a Disney theme park might be a potential terrorist target due to its spaces of mass gathering. In this instance, The Walt Disney Company CEO had to navigate upholding

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the Disney utopia in an unprecedented time of fear and uncertainty while also considering that the country now viewed physical Disney spaces as dangerous to visit.

Baxter and Lee lay out The Walt Disney Company’s responses to the attack on Pearl Harbor and the 9/11 terrorist attacks in strict chronological detail. I utilize their accounts as well as primary sources to explain the company’s responses to these two attacks on US soil. Smoodin and Wills’ commentary on the Disney machine and public perception of the company inform my argument about the politics surrounding Disney’s choices to occasionally stray from its archetypal neutral stance. In this paper, I address what happened during each tragedy, explain the state of the company when the attack occurred, examine the company’s immediate and long-term responses to it, and finally discuss what counts as a tragedy according to Disney. I seek to compare the two responses, address why and how they differed, and analyze the juxtaposition of the values of the Disney utopia with harsh realities.
Chapter I: Hollywood’s Arsenal of Democracy

The Walt Disney Company and Pearl Harbor

We have the plant, the equipment, and the personnel, and we’re willing to do anything we can to help in any way.\textsuperscript{19}

- Walt Disney, 1941

On December 7, 1941, the Japanese Navy Air Service launched a surprise attack on the United States Pacific Fleet at Pearl Harbor naval base in Honolulu, Hawaii. The attack came amidst growing tensions between the two countries as Japan continued to make advances in Southeast Asia and the Pacific.\textsuperscript{20} The US had recently begun to take retaliatory actions by halting its supply of machine parts and aviation gas to Japan and later freezing Japanese assets.\textsuperscript{21} Japan faced the choice of abandoning its conquest efforts to avoid US consequences. In response to the looming decision, Prime Minister Hideki Tojo infamously stated that Japan “...[stood] on the threshold of glory or oblivion.”\textsuperscript{22} A week later, Japan would attack Pearl Harbor, leaving over 2,400 Americans dead. By the end of President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s address to the nation the next day, the United States had declared war on Japan. The country began a rapid mobilization process and went on to fight in both the Pacific and European theatres of the war. The

\textsuperscript{19}Baxter, \textit{Disney During World War II}, 14.


\textsuperscript{21}The National World War II Museum, \textit{The Path to Pearl Harbor}.

\textsuperscript{22}Underhill, \textit{The Rise of Fall of Franklin Delano Roosevelt}, 161.
attack further ignited racial animosities as many Americans sought revenge against the Japanese. President Roosevelt went on to sign an executive order to intern Japanese Americans living on the West Coast, but took no such action against those of German or Italian descent.

**The State of Disney in 1941**

In 1938, Walt Disney utilized the profits from his successful film *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937) to purchase fifty-one acres in Burbank, California to construct a new studio for The Walt Disney Company. The grandeur project sought to create an environment for the growing company where creativity could thrive. A *Los Angeles Times* article imparted that the plans for the studio included a small zoo for animators to study the movements of animals, an art school, a restaurant, beauty and barber shops, and a theatre for film previews. Business associates and employees alike knew that Walt Disney consistently reinvested profits back into his company, but this expensive leap of faith would prove to have been made at a precarious time.

The Second World War began in 1939 and endangered The Walt Disney Company’s finances. The Nazi’s Blitzkrieg cut off its European market, and the studio had already been experiencing financial strain due to *Pinocchio* (1940) and *Fantasia* (1940) finding far less success at the box office than

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23 "Elaborate Studio in Burbank to be Built by Walt Disney," *Los Angeles Times*, 1938.
Snow White despite the large sums of money put into both projects.\textsuperscript{24} In a report to shareholders in December of 1940, Walt Disney stated that “It has been impossible to effect an orderly release of the company’s pictures in any of the countries at war” since many of the territories occupied by the Axis powers forbade the release of American films.\textsuperscript{25} Further, banks that usually lent credit to the studio began to lend less due to the war, forcing the Disney studio to operate on a tighter budget.\textsuperscript{26} World War II therefore worsened the financial strain already plaguing The Walt Disney Company and left it in desperate need of cash flow.

As a firm believer in the power of animation, the prospect of making educational films for the government as a way to expand his studio’s capacity and break into a new market piqued Walt Disney’s interest. In November of 1940, he secured a contract with the National Film Board of Canada to produce four films promoting the sale of war bonds and *Stop That Tank!* to teach soldiers how to use an anti-tank rifle.\textsuperscript{27} Disney would not be able to fully break into the government contract business until after the US entrance into the war, where it would go on to produce similar training films for the United States.

The tense Disney animator’s strike which began at the Burbank Studio on May 29, 1941, further contributed to Disney’s financial hardships. Employ-

\textsuperscript{24}Baxter, *Disney During World War II*, 2.
\textsuperscript{26}Watts, *The Magic Kingdom*, 222.
\textsuperscript{27}Baxter, *Disney During World War II*, 15.
ees went on strike for five weeks due to anger over the lack of standardized rules for wages and promotions, which Disney took as a betrayal from many of the animators with whom he had close relationships and reacted by taking a largely antilabor stance.28 This perceived betrayal shifted the company atmosphere and affected the relationship between Walt Disney and Disney staff for years to come. George Bodle filed on behalf of the Disney strikers with the National Labor Relations Board in a lawsuit that read “... Mr. Disney stands today as the only unfair employer in motion pictures.”29 The strike produced a fair amount of negative press and endangered the reputation of the company as The New York Times and Los Angeles Times began to regularly cover the strike, and Variety magazine published an interview with the strikers. Not all Disney employees agreed with the highly publicized strike, and many continued going into work. One Disney employee sent in an anonymous letter to the Los Angeles Times to state their displeasure with the strikers. The employee wrote that “The experimental laboratory will now be a manufacturing plant. Mickey Mouse, child of inspirations and delicate whimsy, turned out on the assembly line. Strikers, I hope you are happy!”30 As the business grew, Walt Disney’s preference for focusing on rewarding employees based on their talent and creativity became less feasible. This Disney loyalist praised Disney’s unconventional style despite the unfair outcomes it produced for animators.

28 Watts, The Magic Kingdom, 206.
29 Ibid., 208.
Eventually, both parties reached a settlement to set standards for issues such as wages and job classifications. However, this solution proved to be short-term as the studio had to close for four weeks shortly after getting hit with another lawsuit for laying off 207 guild members and 49 nonstrikers.\footnote{Watts, \textit{The Magic Kingdom}, 225.} While an acceptable formula for hiring and layoffs started operations again, the event altered the famed positive and creative environment of the Disney Studio. Much of the blame for the lawsuits lays with Walt Disney’s unconventional business practices. When faced with difficult financial situations such as the low box office numbers of \textit{Pinocchio} and \textit{Fantasia}, Disney resorted to pausing bonuses and cutting the salaries of staff which ultimately ended in the company having to sign a contract to become a union shop.\footnote{Melissa Simpson, “The Disney Animator’s Strike of 1941 and the Formation of the UPA,” 2015.} Walt Disney expanded his company at a poor time and faced the repercussions of operating in a wartime market, and dealt with these problems in ways that harmed employees.

**Immediate Response**

The morning after the attack on Pearl Harbor, Walt Disney got a call from his studio manager.\footnote{Baxter, \textit{Disney During World War II}, 43} The manager informed him that 500 US army troops were marching into the Disney studio to set up and maintain an anti-aircraft installation to protect the Lockheed factory next door, where
they would remain for eight months.\textsuperscript{34} Another call that same day would further The Walt Disney Company’s involvement with the war effort. A US Navy lieutenant asked to form a contract with Disney Studios to produce twenty films on aircraft identification, which Disney readily accepted as he already explored the possibility of obtaining government contracts.\textsuperscript{35} This contract for training films truly kickstarted The Walt Disney Company’s immersion in the war, and Disney would go on to engage in government contracts to produce training, educational, entertainment, and public service announcement films. By the middle of 1942, various government contracts committed over 93\% of Disney’s production efforts to the Allied war effort.\textsuperscript{36}

Disney projected patriotic commitment by deciding to produce media for the war effort at-cost. This decision greatly contrasted the position Walt Disney had taken in recent lawsuits against him for lowering employee’s salaries, cutting bonuses, and laying off workers to cope with the company’s financial situation. The two groups disagreed on what at-cost truly meant, and funding often came late and in smaller amounts than agreed upon. In one instance, Congress failed to appropriate the $80,000 to pay The Walt Disney Company for the film \textit{The New Spirit} (1942), which starred Donald Duck as he learns the patriotic duty of paying one’s income tax.\textsuperscript{37} This film worked to diminish civilians’ feelings of powerlessness on the home front by stressing

\begin{flushleft}\textsuperscript{34}Ibid.\
\textsuperscript{35}Ibid., 15.\
\textsuperscript{36}Watts, \textit{The Magic Kingdom}, 229.\
\textsuperscript{37}Baxter, \textit{Disney During World War II}, 50\end{flushleft}
that paying one’s income tax was instrumental to the war effort. The New Spirit also encouraged a sense of uncritical patriotism as Donald Duck was portrayed as naive for questioning the importance of paying his taxes.

Several members of Congress, namely those that did not approve of President Roosevelt’s handling of the war effort, went on to call the film a waste of money, slandering the Disney media.\textsuperscript{38} An infuriated Walt Disney responded in a letter to California Senator Sheridan Downey expressing that not only did making the film cost $80,000, but the studio had lost another $50,000 from turning down other bookings during \textit{The New Spirit} Production.\textsuperscript{39} To not abandon his patriotic image, he ended the letter by writing, “We are not complaining. We are only trying to help.”\textsuperscript{40} The delayed payments from the government frustrated him as many politicians failed to see the potential value in Disney films. The letter seemed to echo Disney’s earlier comments about the purpose of his company and his values. Just as he had lied about his age to go to France with the Red Cross during World War I, Disney once again would utilize his artistic talent to improve morale in dark times. However, at this moment Disney needed the federal government as much as it needed him since the company required a financial lifeline.

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item \textsuperscript{38}Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{39}Watts, \textit{The Magic Kingdom}, 231.
\item \textsuperscript{40}Ibid.
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Long-term Response

Disney hit the ground running after Pearl Harbor and remained engaged with the war effort by producing patriotic insignia, propaganda, as well as training and educational films as requested by US government agencies and different divisions of the army. Disney prepared to provide what the US government needed and fully mobilized along with other American industries to devote a large majority of its work to the war effort. In addition to Disney’s propaganda films, film studios MGM, Paramount Pictures, and Warner Bros licensed Tom and Jerry, Superman, Bugs Bunny, and Daffy Duck to star in pro-military content. Disney utilized its popular characters and animation style to help important government messages reach a broader audience so that the American public would be entertained and enthusiastic about mundane things such as paying one’s taxes like Donald Duck or saving cooking fats like Minnie Mouse. Walt Disney badly needed the financial backing from the federal government to keep the studio running, but appeared happy to be aiding the war effort and remained committed to supporting the troops. One famous example of his dedication is when he readily offered for a military commander to live in his office due to a housing shortage in Southern California, where the officer took advantage of Disney’s generosity and remained in Disney’s office for six months.

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42 See Appendix A.
43 Watts, The Magic Kingdom, 29.
To address the morale of the US troops, The Walt Disney Company licensed its artistic talents to anyone in the armed forces who requested it by establishing a unit devoted to producing customized military insignia free of charge.\textsuperscript{44} Anyone in the military could write the Disney studios and request a design for themselves or their division. The unit worked throughout the war and turned out almost 1,300 insignia upon request and continued to make insignia for troops still overseas in the months after the war’s end.\textsuperscript{45} This act set Disney apart from other film studios as it allocated talented employees and company resources to the production of quality free material.

Source: US Naval Institute News

The above insignia presents a juxtaposition of the ideas of child-like innocence with war and violence. It depicts the character Happy from Disney’s

\textsuperscript{44}\textit{Baxter, Disney During World War II}, 122.
\textsuperscript{45}\textit{Ibid.}
*Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* working on a military ship. Happy possesses a gun in his holster and ammunition across his chest which places him in the wartime setting, but he remains in character as he diligently works to assist the Allied war effort. The dangerous work underwent Disneyfication as Happy gleefully whistles while he works, as he does in the popular song from *Snow White*. Disney animators designed the image for the crew of the U.S.S Jason, a repair ship that spent much of the war in the Solomon Islands and the Caroline Islands. Of the seven dwarfs, the Disney animators selected Happy, a character known for his joyful demeanor and dedication to his work to be the one to represent the crew. Insignia such as this one placed a beloved Disney character in a wartime setting with the goal of increasing morale in military units and fostering pride in their craft.

A quintessential aspect of the Disney machine had to be altered in order to meet the government’s needs: The Walt Disney Company would need to directly address tragic events and looming dangers that existed around the world. These dark topics conflicted with its usual messaging and family-friendly media. Disney was, however, able to utilize its famous characters to make the content more interesting or lighthearted when addressing heavy themes. This sort of Disneyfication comes across in entertainment shorts such as *Der Fuehrer’s Face* (1943), which won an academy award for the best animated short subject and featured the topics of Nazism and Donald Duck converging. During the film, Donald Duck has a nightmare that he works in a

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factory in Nazi Germany. Donald is depicted in dangerous conditions caused by ideological extremism as he is forced to consume nearly inedible food, must halt his work to declare “Heil Hitler” a comical amount of times, works “48 hours per day,” and has weapons pointed at him if he tries to resist.47 In the end, he awakens from his nightmare and jubilantly states “Boy, am I glad to be a citizen of the United States of America” in a show of symbolic patriotism as he kisses a Statue of Liberty figurine and the viewer is shown his American flag pajamas and sees a sign above his bed that reads, “home, sweet home.” Disney managed to demonize the enemy by portraying the way Germany treated its own people, while also not losing sight of comedic value or the personality of the Disney characters it lent to the war effort. While the short depicts Nazis as ruthless and threatening, evidence of larger war atrocities and Germany’s race-driven war aims was absent.

Disney’s wartime media and its displays of symbolic patriotism served as effective propaganda. The Disney shorts that praised the US and its people commonly featured iconic American symbols and patriotic music. Uncritical patriotic messaging encouraged people to act exactly as their country needed them to and reminded them of how privileged they were to be in the United States. The Disney shorts received wide viewership by appearing in mainstream theaters, and viewers had their guards down as they viewed content filled with familiar characters as entertainment rather than propaganda.48

47 Jack Kinney, Der Fuehrer’s Face, (Burbank, CA: Walt Disney Animation Studios, 1943).
48 Raiti, “The Disappearance of Disney Animated Propaganda: A Globalization Per-
Many shorts satirized the enemy which allowed for the war tensions to be Disneyfied as the enemy appeared foolish rather than dangerous in many of the films.\textsuperscript{49} \textit{Education for Death} (1943) would be an exception to this, as this animated film demonstrated how the Nazi ideology destroys natural human tendencies of empathy to create Nazi soldiers.

The Walt Disney Company maintained its focus on the war effort from 1942-1945 and produced many training films, including a 38 part warship identification series for the navy. While some of the films found success, others quickly became obsolete as machinery rapidly improved and tactics needed to be adjusted accordingly. Of all the government contracts Disney forged, the Jacksonville Project stands out as a particularly successful partnership. Shortly after the Battle of Midway, a battle in the Pacific where the United States triumphed over Japanese forces, the US Navy assigned famed Lieutenant Commander John S. Thach to work with animators at the Disney studio. Thach narrated three Disney training films on the topics of fixed gunnery and fighter tactics in what became known as the Jacksonville Project.\textsuperscript{50} These training films received praise for their effectiveness. Guadalcanal Military Major R. Paine stated, "If we could have used films like this for instructional purposes, many a neck would have been saved."\textsuperscript{51} Major Paine's words illustrate the utility of the Disney wartime media and its con-

\textsuperscript{49}Carlos Vidondo, “Political Cartoon in American WWII Propaganda: Disney’s Front Line,” (Universität Mannheim, 2014).

\textsuperscript{50}Baxter, \textit{Disney During World War II}, 24; See Appendix B.

\textsuperscript{51}Ibid., 26-27.
tribution to the Allied forces. The lending of one of the Navy’s most famed and skilled men to assist Disney during the filmmaking process exemplified the perceived value of the films.

The presence of heroic military figures like Thach and the seemingly endless stream of films Disney produced for the Navy, Army, the Canadians, and even for the Department of Agriculture left film producer Walter Wanger likening Disney to acting “as busy as a league of nations.” Wanger deemed the studio lot a “modernistic pastel-colored fairyland plant where thousands are creating and delivering in the interest of the new education of the free world.” His writing praised Disney’s efforts while describing how the utopian “fairyland” studio became part of the Allied war machine and took on a larger purpose. This article mimics the favorable manner in which the media routinely discussed Disney’s response to Pearl Harbor.

As a particularly unique Disney film during the war years, *Victory Through Airpower* (1943) aimed more towards influencing the United States government rather than the opinions of American citizens. Based on the book by Alexander P. de Seversky, Disney made the film because he believed that the strategies and warfare theories put forth in the film would help the Allies win the war quicker and reduce casualties. The film exemplifies constructive patriotism as the Disney media praised the United States and its war aims while making explicit suggestions for altering its approach to warfare.

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52 Smoodin, *Disney Discourse*, 42.
53 Ibid.
54 Baxter, *Disney During World War II*, 76.
Victory Through Airpower depicts several of Seversky’s strategies including aerial bombing Axis industrial centers to cut off their production lines as opposed to having tanks and foot soldiers surround and attack industrial areas.\textsuperscript{55} Bombing scenes were Disneyfied to only show the destruction of infrastructure. This slight sanitization of the war erased the many civilian casualties that came as a result of bombing campaigns. The film utilizes different patriotic symbols, notably of a bald eagle attacking an octopus that represented Japan to remove its grip from different nations it had conquered.\textsuperscript{56} In one cut scene, the narrator stated that the Allied effort “…counter[ed] with the effectiveness of enemy carriers at Pearl Harbor.”\textsuperscript{57} The imagery of the US obliterating Japan and the cut scene narration can be seen as part of Disney’s reaction to the attack on Pearl Harbor. The film gained one enthusiastic fan in Winston Churchill who arranged for the film to be shown to President Roosevelt at the 1943 Quebec Conference.\textsuperscript{58}

\textbf{Analysis of Disney’s Response}

Disney’s wartime shorts placed iconic characters in dangerous settings and sought to include comedic tensions whenever possible to not abandon the company’s distinctive style. This task explains why Donald Duck became the

\textsuperscript{56}See Appendix C.
\textsuperscript{57}Baxter, \textit{Disney During World War II}, 79.
\textsuperscript{58}Ibid., 94.
more prevalent Disney character during the war years as opposed to Mickey Mouse since his fiery personality and clumsy demeanor easily translated into comedic army settings. In general, Disney tends to leave difficult topics outside of its scope and instead “perpetually produce positive images” of the nation.\(^{59}\) Disney accomplished both during the war by employing symbolic and uncritical patriotism as its media encouraged Americans to rally behind their nation with propagandist entertainment shorts, educational films, and public service announcement materials. The United States eventually reached a full mobilization where most work was war work, and The Walt Disney Company was no exception. By the end of the war, the studio had produced hundreds of thousands of feet of film for the US military.\(^{60}\)

After the making of the peace, the demand for educational films from Disney lessened so the studio resumed its main focus on entertainment.\(^{61}\) Therefore, while the partnership with the government provided an economic lifeline for Disney during a tumultuous time coming off of the early 1941 animator’s strike and less successful films, its developments and the new genre it explored with these contracts did not prove to be of much use to them in the postwar world. However, The Walt Disney Company’s engagement in international politics during the war benefited Disney’s image since the media began to praise the international scope of Disney products after the

\(^{59}\)Wills, *Disney Culture*, 28.
\(^{60}\)Baxter, *Disney During World War II*, 32.
\(^{61}\)Ibid., 32-33.
war’s end.\textsuperscript{62} The company received an influx of positive attention for its dedication to the war, which greatly diluted the negative press stories from the animator’s strike.

Though Disney demonized Japan in many of its post-Pearl Harbor films, Disney movies still went on to find great success in Japanese markets. After World War II ended, the US occupied Japan in an attempt to rebuild the country under the direction of General Douglas MacArthur.\textsuperscript{63} During the period of occupation, Americans censored Japanese media in a manner regularly characterized as inconsistent and arbitrary.\textsuperscript{64} Unlike other media categories, Disney movies went uncensored. Disney released \textit{Snow White} in Japan in 1950, \textit{Bambi} in 1951, and \textit{Cinderella} in 1952.\textsuperscript{65} Japanese consumers welcomed Western popular culture and gave the films a warm reception. This reaction led prominent Japanese businessman Chiharu Kawasaki to explore building a Disney theme park in Japan in the 1960s, an idea that would not come to fruition until the building of Tokyo Disneyland in 1979.\textsuperscript{66}

To uphold the values of the Disney utopia, the company Disneyfied certain content in its war media while clinging to its core themes of the goodness of the average American, patriotic symbols and rhetoric, and heroes prevailing over evil. The shorts acknowledged and made direct reference to the

\textsuperscript{62}Smoodin, \textit{Disney Discourse}, 6.


\textsuperscript{64}Ibid.

\textsuperscript{65}See Appendix D.

\textsuperscript{66}Nicolette Pisha, “Anime in America, Disney in Japan: The Global Exchange of Popular Media Visualized through Disney’s ‘Stitch,’” Master’s Thesis, (UNC Chapel Hill), 2010
tragedy and engaged with it in a variety of ways, but even while addressing
danger the messaging remained that the US would overcome and the country
remained the best possible place to be. Walt wanted to add in Disney char-
acters and humor whenever possible to make training films more interesting
and war subjects less depressing, in classic Disney fashion. The war shorts
returned agency to the common man by explaining how buying war bonds
and paying taxes helped the war effort and employed symbolic patriotism to
rally Americans behind their country and comply with its needs. The shorts
influenced public opinion fairly successfully. In a 1942 three-page Los Ange-
les Times feature titled, “Walt Disney Goes to War,” the journalist wrote of
Disney, “He’s a propaganda genius whom the Axis would gladly give a dozen
 crack divisions.” The article recognized the company’s efforts as both im-
pactful and patriotic, a very positive shift from how the LA Times covered
the company the year before during the animator’s strike.

Disney addressed the tragedy head-on and remained engaged with the
war effort, even producing insignia designs for troops still stationed for many
months after the war’s end. The company reiterated the central facets of its
brand including patriotic rhetoric and belief in the goodness of the American
people, and managed to offer a sense of agency and hope to people during
those uncertain times. The Walt Disney Company effectively navigated the
juxtaposition of iconic children’s characters with tragic realities to support
America’s war effort while securing an economic lifeline during tumultuous

years. In this instance, Disney responded in a manner that brought not only positive press and uplifted its reputation but provided an outlet for financial relief from government-contracted work.
Chapter II: “...Tomorrow’s Just a Dream Away”

Disney in a Post 9/11 World

...Our company around the world will continue to operate in this sometimes violent world in which we live, offering products that reach to the higher and more positive side of the human equation68

- Michael Eisner, September 11, 2001

On September 11, 2001, terrorists associated with the extremist group Al-Qaeda committed a series of attacks on American soil which killed 2,977 people and left many more injured.69 Militants hijacked four commercial airplanes for these attacks that resulted in two planes striking the Twin Towers in New York City, one hitting the Pentagon outside of Washington, D.C., and the fourth crashing into a field in Pennsylvania.70 September 11th is widely regarded as a second Pearl Harbor for Americans because they once again felt unsafe on their home soil.71 The travel industry dwindled as places of mass gathering and air travel became viewed as dangerous. Additionally, hate crimes against Muslims and Middle Eastern people drastically rose after the event.72 Surveillance increased around America as the government theorized about how to prevent further violence and began its “War On Terror” un-

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68 Lee, Counterterrorism and Cybersecurity: Total Information Awareness, 6.
69 ibid.
70 ibid.
72 ibid.
This effort resulted in the Transportation Security Act, the USA PATRIOT Act, and an international military campaign intended to target extremist groups in Afghanistan and Iraq. The attack altered the American landscape and left the country in a vulnerable and distrusting state.

**The State of Disney in 2001**

In 2001, Michael Eisner sat at the helm of The Walt Disney Company. Eisner, the former president of Paramount Pictures, assumed the position of CEO in September of 1984 and served as the first person outside the Disney family to spearhead the company. Colleagues regarded him as a “story man” who excelled in thinking of imaginative ideas and recognizing creativity in others, all characteristics notably held by Walt Disney.\(^{73}\) His time leading the company is recognized by a focus on global aims, directing high revenue towards new investments, and tough bargaining in business meetings.\(^{74}\) Eisner focused much of his energy on the Disney theme parks through efforts such as increasing ticket prices, expanding the parks, adding hotels, and building thrill attractions (including Splash Mountain in 1989) to attract more teenage visitors.\(^{75}\) Eisner further grew revenue by acquiring

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\(^{74}\) Ibid., 197.

\(^{75}\) Dirk Libbey, “Michael Eisner: The Best and Worst Thing to Ever Happen to the Disney Parks,” CinemaBlend, 2020
ABC and ESPN in 1996 as well as by increasing the company’s film output.\textsuperscript{76} The Walt Disney Company’s growth led to its reputation shifting from a “niche” animation studio to that of a dynamic media giant and a fierce competitor in the entertainment space.\textsuperscript{77} By 2001, however, much of the company expansion Eisner facilitated began to dwindle in a series of large investments that did not perform as expected.

At the time, Disney ran Disneyland in Anaheim, Walt Disney World in Florida, Disneyland Paris, and Tokyo Disneyland. In 2001, the company opened Disney’s California Adventure Park on February 8th and Tokyo Disneysea on September 4th. This marked the first time in company history that two new theme parks opened in the same calendar year.\textsuperscript{78} These deep financial commitments came months before a tragic event that would make traveling and places of mass gathering unappealing to many Americans. Tokyo Disneysea opened to great success and marked the milestone of 10 million visitors just 307 days after its grand opening.\textsuperscript{79} On the other hand, Disney’s California Adventure did not receive such a warm welcome. The investment cost $1.4 billion, but the park only reached an average of 4,500 visitors per day when projections placed daily attendance at 19,000.\textsuperscript{80} An article in the \textit{Los Angeles Times} reported on two restaurants that canceled their partnership

\textsuperscript{77}Flower, \textit{Prince of the Magic Kingdom}, pg. 197.
\textsuperscript{78}“Disney History,” Walt Disney Archives. In the 1980s, Epcot and Tokyo Disneyland opened within six months of each other but not in the same calendar year.
\textsuperscript{79}“Tokyo Disneysea Project,” OLC Group.
with the new park due to “sluggish attendance from the start,” and described
the park concept as one that “never took off.” California Adventure lacked
familiar Disney characters and instead celebrated various California destina-
tions such as Yosemite, Venice Beach, and the Golden Gate Bridge. Disney
employees pointed out that this idea likely did not land because rather than
creating an entirely new imagined space as done in Disneyland with its four
distinct lands, California Adventure featured knockoffs of attractions that
visitors could see in person. Despite having far fewer rides than the Dis-
neyland park, the company set the ticket prices at the same amount. When
faced with the choice of which park to attend, California Adventure regularly
lost out to Disneyland.

As for its 2001 film ventures, Disney released a sequel to Lady and the
Tramp in February, Atlantis: The Lost Empire in June, and The Princess
Diaries in August. Of the three, only Princess Diaries found great success
at the box office. Dreamworks released Shrek in April which overshadowed
many of Disney’s 2001 movies due to its immense popularity. To make up for
lost film revenue, Disney continued to convert many of its original films to
DVD, a process the company began in 1999. Vendors had high hopes that this
pursuit would increase the popularity of DVDs since the company’s choice to
sell VHS tapes had this effect years earlier. Eisner intended for DVD sales

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81 Ibid.
82 The Imagineering Story: Episode 4 “Hit or Miss,” Disney+, 2019.
83 Ibid.
to help the company’s financial struggles by bringing Disney classics out of the “Disney vault” for profitable re-releases. On the first day of release in October 2001, Disney sold over one million copies of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*.

The sun began to set on the “Disney Renaissance” as Eisner sought to manage a recent string of costly endeavors, some of which yielded disappointing results. Additionally, the 2000 stock market crash moved the economy into a recession. Many Americans lost their investments and saw their savings dwindle in the dot-com bubble burst. This negatively affected the advertising market, which served as a major revenue source for Disney due to its broadcast and cable television holdings. Such financial struggles are represented in the 2001 percentage change of Disney’s stock price, a decrease of 28.4%. In many aspects, the company had overextended itself while it struggled to find a method to yield consistent success in its films and theme parks. These economic challenges came right before a terrorist attack that would further damage Disney’s revenue as Americans grew fearful of air travel and populated areas.

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85 Ibid.
86 “Disney History,” Walt Disney Archives.
88 “Disney 59 Year Stock Price History,” *Macrotrends*. 

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**Immediate Response**

As soon as the second plane hit the World Trade Center, The Walt Disney Company announced its plans to shut down its theme parks worldwide. Disneyland and California Adventure had not yet opened and remained closed for the day. This marked their first closure since the national day of mourning after President John F. Kennedy’s assassination in 1963. Meanwhile, other Disney parks had to be evacuated to move guests to safety. At Disney World in Florida, management told cast members to adopt a “human wall procedure” to quickly usher guests out of the park. Cast members joined hands to form the wall and emptied the park in roughly thirty minutes as they moved towards the exits. As for the guests who had traveled to Disney vacation destinations, food and beverage stations remained open at no charge, phone lines were free so guests could reach family, and the AMC Theatre in Downtown Disney showed free films for stranded guests. The US government quickly worked to secure the airspace over Disney World due to the concern that the heavily populated area could be a target for a subsequent attack. The government then grounded all civilian air traffic for two

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90 Jim Hill, “What it was Like at Walt Disney World on 9/11,” *Huffpost*, 2011.
91 Ibid.
92 This information comes from Disneyhistory.com, a blog created for the purpose of recording Disney history and milestones. The blog began in October 1999 and has a dedicated “webmaster” who continually vets and adds new information to the site. Disney’s strong fanbase has created many websites similar to this one.
93 Hill, “What it was Like at Walt Disney World on 9/11,” *Huffpost*, 2011.
days, so the Disney resort hotels offered free accommodations for guests.\footnote{Lee, \textit{Counterterrorism and Cyber Security: Total Information Awareness}, 6}

Disney tasked cast members with the vital task of clearing the parks during a dangerous situation as it continued unfolding, all while ensuring to not stir panic. A former Disney World cast member identified as Michael who worked in Frontierland on September 11, 2001, shared with Jim Hill of HuffPost:

> We were told not to tell the guests what had happened unless they asked us. I remember one guest asking me and — after I told them — they just stood there blank-faced and didn’t move for a bit. By the way, the announcement that was made over the public address system in the theme parks that morning did NOT mention anything about what had happened or why the parks were closing. It simply stated that “... Due to circumstances beyond our control, the Magic Kingdom is now closed. Please follow the direction of the nearest Cast Member.”\footnote{Hill, “What it was Like at Walt Disney World on 9/11,” \textit{Huffpost}, 2011.}

Michael’s experience encapsulates how The Walt Disney Company reacted to an unprecedented situation in real-time. Disney wanted guests to remain calm and quickly exit the park, resulting in the ushering of guests outside the gates without them knowing why. Disney permitted the cast members to answer truthfully when asked about what was occurring, leading employees like Michael to shift from acting as a character in a themed land to delivering news of a devastating terrorist attack on US soil that he had only been made aware of moments earlier.

Although the mythical atmosphere of Disney theme parks is part of their
allure, the company took immediate steps to alter the space to increase safety measures. Since they would open again the next morning, Disney set up security tables overnight at all Disney theme parks which remain to this day. Today, one cannot even enter the Downtown Disney shopping area in Anaheim without passing through security and undergoing a bag check. Safety took precedence over the Disney escapist fantasy.

To preserve the famed environment inside the park, Disney also shed any aspects of the park that might elicit memories of the attack or serve as a trigger. Changes began with the famous Jungle Cruise attraction in Adventureland, which takes visitors through a river full of animal animatronics. Visible in the attraction is a crashed plane, where the skipper would make the joke, “Well, this is how I landed my job here. Kinda plane to see. I took a crash course!” Disney removed the joke from the ride immediately as it was no longer considered appropriate. The Walt Disney Company intends for its parks to serve as a refuge and place for people to relax and enjoy themselves. In order to allow people to do so, it had to alter its manufactured environment to provide a safe space fully removed from harsh realities.

Disney took security actions at its other properties, including its stores and office buildings. All the Disney Stores and theatre productions closed


\[97\] Disney had to remove another joke from the attraction after a crocodile killed a two year old boy at its Grand Floridian Resort in 2016. The joke went, “Watch your children, or the crocodiles will.” In 2021, the company announced further plans to rework the ride to remove various negative depictions of Indigenous peoples present throughout the ride. Critics have called out these negative racial depictions and accused the ride of celebrating imperialism.
immediately. At the Disney Stores in Manhattan, the company removed its merchandise from window displays and in its place put up posters that featured the Walt Disney quote, “Tomorrow will be better for as long as America keeps alive the ideals of freedom and a better life.” Quickly altering its messaging at its public-facing establishments, particularly those located near Ground Zero, communicated sensitivity to the travesty at hand. The quote promotes the utopian values of harmony, freedom, and continuous improvement. Additionally, Disney got in contact with the staff in its office buildings to ensure that they felt safe. Newton Lee recorded that his Disney Internet Group superiors promptly informed employees over email of the company’s new precautionary measures, permitted employees to come or stay at work according to their own comfort level, and finally stated, “In the meantime, please know that your safety and that of your loved ones is our top priority.” Disney did not close down all facilities, specifically those far from New York City, but permitted employees to do whatever made them feel safe and secure.

At 7:24 pm PT on September 11, Michael Eisner sent an email to all Disney employees. He began by praising their actions, writing that “Everybody acted with stoic determination to maintain Disney operations in efficient and caring ways.” Disney employees managed the immense pressure of navigat-

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98 Lee, Counterterrorism and Cyber Security: Total Information Awareness, 7.
99 Fabrikant and Schiesel, “Suddenly, the Magic is in Short Supply,” The New York Times, 2001; See Appendix E.
100 Lee, Counterterrorism and Cyber Security: Total Information Awareness, 7.
101 Ibid., 6.
ing this unprecedented situation while not losing sight of the Disney brand image. Eisner ended his message with the following paragraph:

I want to thank all of you – who are understandably upset, normally confused about our complicated world and tolerably angry – for being calm and calming to our guests. Finally let me say our company around the world will continue to operate in this sometimes violent world in which we live, offering products that reach to the higher and more positive side of the human equation.\textsuperscript{102}

Eisner’s message communicated understanding, appreciation, and a “show must go on” policy. He established the horror of the attack and asserted that while violent things may happen again, their work would never be halted. By already mentioning the future of company operations, the email contained a sense of embedded optimism. Finally, Eisner reasserted the supposed purpose of Disney media and products, which is to “reach to the higher and more positive side of the human equation.” Though the country was shaken, Disney would continue onwards.

\textbf{Long-Term Response}

The events on September 11, 2001, left the country in a deep state of mourning. People began to fear crowded places, suspicion and distrust rose, travel declined, and security increased in many industries. Nine days after the attack, the FBI reached out to Disney to express concern that a Hollywood

\textsuperscript{102}Ibid.
studio like theirs could be targeted for a future attack.\textsuperscript{103} This prompted company President Bob Iger to share these concerns with Disney employees in an email where he asked them to report suspicious activity and shared the increased security measures Disney had taken, including mandated identification badges at its buildings in Glendale and Burbank.\textsuperscript{104} These communications informed employees that their employer was closely working with law enforcement to keep them safe.

As a well-recognized company that ran places of mass gathering around the world, government officials repeatedly referenced Disney as the country prepared to heal its morale and travel industry. To address national anxieties and promote the safety of air travel, President George Bush made a speech on September 27, 2001, from Chicago O’Hare airport. President Bush spoke directly to Americans, stating:

> When they struck, they wanted to create an atmosphere of fear. And one of the great goals of this nation’s war is to restore public confidence in the airline industry. It’s to tell the traveling public: Get on board. Do your business around the country. Fly and enjoy America’s great destination spots. Get down to Disney World in Florida. Take your families and enjoy life, the way we want it to be enjoyed.\textsuperscript{105}

Some criticized the President’s speech for attempting to move the nation along too quickly and for endorsing The Walt Disney Company. However, Bush’s choice to name Disney World when referring to “America’s great-

\textsuperscript{103}Ibid., 8.
\textsuperscript{104}Ibid.
est destination spots” exemplifies not only the popularity of Disney tourist spots but its association with American entertainment and the attention it attracted during the 9/11 aftermath. Journalists predicted that The Walt Disney Company would suffer as it faced “more [financial] uncertainty than its competitors” due to its large reliance on hotels, theme parks, and its broadcast and cable television.\textsuperscript{106} This financial struggle came amidst an already challenging fiscal year for the company. Disney came up again in a political discussion during a June 2002 Congressional Joint Hearing on Science and Technology to Combat Terrorism. At the hearing, lawmakers stated, “Recent information indicates that popular venues such as ballparks, concert halls, and entertainment complexes (Disney World for example) are at risk.”\textsuperscript{107} Once again, the park received recognition as a well-attended American entertainment space as government officials discussed the seemingly new dangers visitors to the park faced in a post-9/11 world. The Disney parks faced an uphill recovery as ordinary Americans and government leaders alike remained wary of crowded places.

In order to account for the lull in park visitors, Disney adjusted its theme park management. At the Magic Kingdom in Florida, Disney changed the park hours to close at 7 pm rather than 9 pm, which helped to cut costs since the rides cost the same amount to run whether the park attendance


\textsuperscript{107} “Science and Technology to Combat Terrorism,” Congressional Joint Hearing, June 25, 2002.
level reached 100% or 10% capacity. Cost-cutting became Disney’s new coping strategy as it adapted to fewer visitors. Since theme parks and resorts made up about half of the company’s profit, Disney’s stock took a greater hit than its other media conglomerate competitors. Despite these drastic conditions, Michael Eisner continued to project positivity and often redirected focus to the state of the country whenever pressed about Disney’s finances. In a statement to *The New York Times*, Eisner said, “...as the nation slowly gains equilibrium, so does Disney.” While the statement was economically sound since Disney would in fact begin to recover as Americans healed and felt more comfortable traveling, it also served the function of allying Disney with the country and mood of Americans. Cast members had to maintain the famed Disney parks atmosphere and distract guests in the days and weeks following the attacks. This effort did not Disneyfy the tragedy as nothing was downplayed. Instead, keeping the parks open and preserving the famed Disney atmosphere communicated to visitors that it was okay for them to come to the parks to forget about the tragedy for a few hours at a time and focus on other things by engaging with escapist entertainment.

Disney’s public relations team worked to widely circulate its contributions to national healing. During the aftermath of the attack, many Americans and companies made philanthropic contributions. As many as 58% of Americans

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109 Ibid.
110 Ibid.
111 Ibid.
donated money to relief efforts within one month following the attack to the point where the American Red Cross and September 11th Fund issued public statements informing the public that they would no longer be asking for more money.\textsuperscript{112} In its financial response, The Walt Disney Company established the DisneyHAND survival relief fund. Disney donated $5 million to this fund while its employees gave a combined $7 million for assistance to victims’ families and aid organizations helping with recovery and rebuilding efforts.\textsuperscript{113} DisneyHAND is still active today and recently directed attention towards inequity in education.\textsuperscript{114} Additionally, Disney rallied behind the US troops and directed funds towards them. The company accomplished this by becoming a United Service Organizations sponsor and creating a program to provide military personnel with complimentary theme park tickets.\textsuperscript{115} Press releases and speeches by Disney executives spread the news of these charitable acts.

Disney utilized its broadcast channels to promote healing through its initiative with First Lady Laura Bush. Disney worked with the First Lady to produce public service announcements to help children “cope with their feelings and emotions” after the terrorist attack.\textsuperscript{116} These announcements

\textsuperscript{113} “Disneyhand Is Dedicated To Making The Dreams Of Families And Children A Reality Through Focused Public Service Initiatives, Community Outreach And Volunteering In Areas Including Learning, Health, Compassion And The Environment,” The Walt Disney Company, 2002.
\textsuperscript{114} “Disneyhand Teacher Awards,” D23.
\textsuperscript{116} Ibid.
featured Laura Bush speaking about her feelings without listing specific details of the attack and would frequently air on ABC and RadioDisney to target children aged 6-14.\textsuperscript{117} Focusing on feelings rather than harsh realities also aligned with the company’s image. Disney circulated these child-friendly clips to aid children that felt confused or fearful after 9/11.

Finally, just as the content of Disney theme parks had to be surveyed to sever any potential links to the tragedy that could trigger guests, the same had to be done for Disney’s upcoming films. This effort led to the halting of the release of \textit{Big Trouble} starring Tim Allen since the plot of the comedic crime movie featured a bomb in a suitcase on an airplane.\textsuperscript{118} Another film in production, \textit{Lilo \& Stitch}, had to be reworked to remove features that could remind viewers of the terrorist attack. Disney altered \textit{Lilo \& Stitch}’s ending before it could be released in 2002 because the original version of a chase scene featured a sort of plane hijacking.\textsuperscript{119} In the first version, the characters Stitch and Jumba hijack a Boeing 747 to attempt to rescue Lilo. They then engage in a high-speed chase through an urban setting to attempt to catch the villain. In the altered version, the commercial airplane is replaced with a spaceship, the interior of which appears alien-like rather than the familiar interior of a Boeing 747. This change helped the film seem further removed from reality. Moreover, the high-speed chase scene swapped the busy

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\textsuperscript{117}Ibid.
\textsuperscript{119}How 9/11 Changed Disney’s \textit{Lilo \& Stitch}, Vox, 2016.
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city background where the plane almost hit several pedestrians for scenic Hawaiian mountains. This change took the setting from a scene reminiscent of 9/11 with an airplane moving to the heart of a city to that of an island adventure with sci-fi elements.

Side by side comparison of the changes made to the *Lilo & Stitch* high-speed chase scene. Source: Vox.

**Analysis of Disney’s Response**

The Walt Disney Company responded to the September 11 terrorist attacks in real-time to protect its guests, employees, and reputation. In so doing, Disney altered its theme parks, increased security at all its properties, reached out to its employees, revised its upcoming media projects, invested
in further charitable work, created resources for children to cope with the tragedy, and utilized its PR team to advertise many of these efforts. In addition to protecting its business interests, Disney’s response had to align with its brand image and maintain a calm and optimistic attitude at a time when the world was shaken. Disney formulates its responses to national tragedy to mimic the values touted by its films and vacation destinations to accomplish this goal. Striking a balance between acknowledging the horror of 9/11 while still projecting optimism for the future was imperative, specifically for the sake of the travel industry and company finances.

Disney had to make changes to the theme park atmosphere for it to function in a post-9/11 world. To avoid highlighting the obvious risk associated with visiting an area as populated as a Disney vacation destination, the company never officially commented on the park closures.\(^{120}\) Addressing that the parks had to close to protect guests in the event of a subsequent terrorist attack would have further harmed park attendance and might have irreversibly altered the park’s escapism fantasy. Film studies scholar Michael Peter Bolus defines escapism as “the idea that the experience will allow the spectator to ‘escape’ from the pressures and stress of their everyday routines by entering a self-contained, manufactured world that offers respite, if only temporarily.”\(^{121}\) The Disney theme parks are commonly associated with escapism, and cast members and Imagineers are the ones tasked with

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\(^{120}\) Hill, “What it was Like at Walt Disney World on 9/11,” Huffpost, 2011.
\(^{121}\) Michael Peter Bolus, “Aesthetics and the Cinematic Narrative,” (Anthem Press, 2019), 120.
creating the safe, manufactured world. Disney’s controlled escapist experience is unique in that the various theme park lands occupy physical spaces that visitors can enter as they engage with and freely experience childhood nostalgia.

Producing a manufactured fantasy environment that fosters escapist sentiment becomes not only more important but more challenging once tragedy arises. While Disney parks can serve as a welcome distraction or relief, providing a “...certain brand of comfort presumably absent in the course of our navigating real-world phenomena,” adjustments had to be made to the parks to increase safety to ensure that they could remain a place where visitors could temporarily leave their hardships at the gate.\textsuperscript{122} Disney had to erase any potentially triggering elements of the park and sufficiently assure guests of their safety while not compromising the manufactured utopian environment the guests visited to find relief from current events.

The concept behind Disney theme park success is well-known to company employees. Famed Imagineer John Hench stated that “the meaning of the parks is very simple, it is that you’re going to be okay. It doesn’t matter what is happening in the world, it doesn’t matter how screwed up your life is... it’s reassurance, a sense of comfort.”\textsuperscript{123} Hench’s words closely resemble Bolus’s definition of escapism and Walt Disney’s goal for his theme parks. Disney’s pursuit of creating an environment where escapism can take place

\textsuperscript{122}Ibid., 119.  
\textsuperscript{123}The Imagineering Story, “A Carousel of Progress,” Disney+, 2019.
is not subtle. The plaque at the Disneyland entrance states, “Here you leave Today and enter the world of Yesterday, Tomorrow, and Fantasy.” This message signifies the atmosphere of the park and gives park visitors permission to buy into the themed lands and literally leave their worries at the door. For the Disney escapist experience to survive after 9/11, the company got to work overnight.

Disneyfying new security measures presented a challenge at the theme parks. Guests wanted to feel safe, but drastically increasing security presence could dilute the atmosphere in a way that distracted guests and took away from the sense of escapism they were meant to feel. Armed guards had to be added around the park even if they were visually distracting and reminded guests of real-world dangers. Other changes such as removing a joke from the Jungle Cruise attraction or adding security checkpoints before park entry did not greatly alter the ambiance and were simple fixes. Downplaying the threat of danger could make the company appear insensitive or careless, so Disney higher-ups attempted to avoid speaking on the increased security measures whenever possible.¹²⁴ To attempt to preserve the mood of the space, Disney had its cast members try to present an extra cheerful image to get Americans through the moment.¹²⁵ The Walt Disney Company Disneyfied post-9/11 sentiments by persistently projecting an optimistic vision of the future at a time of rampant feelings of deep fear and uncertainty to make the situation

¹²⁵ Hill, “What it was Like at Walt Disney World on 9/11,” *Huffpost*, 2011.
Disney had to find an appropriate response to the tragedy across all of the industries in which it worked and for each of its locations around the globe. The company addressed tourism destinations, stores, its business buildings in Southern California, media content, and public messaging. Aligning its responses with patriotic rhetoric helped Disney put forth a hopeful vision, as seen with the posters of Walt Disney in the New York Disney stores. These posters embodied symbolic patriotism since they praised the country’s values, presented an idealized view of its future, and utilized American emblems. Disney also displayed a commitment to these ideals behind the scenes as it worked cooperatively with the US government and began making free ticket offerings to US service members and charitable donations to troops. This response was not unique as many American businesses fell in line and stood with the government and military after the devastating attack.

While Disney responded in various mediums, it did not greatly change its regular media content to speak to the tragedy. Other media sources arguably had more flexibility to do so since Disney mostly created content meant to resonate with children and families around the world. The television show South Park provided an animated response by mentioning Osama bin Laden in an episode and DC Comics reacted by featuring an American Flag laid over the Twin Towers on a comic book cover.\textsuperscript{126} DC Comics also

\textsuperscript{126}Raiti, “The Disappearance of Disney Animated Propaganda: A Globalization Perspective,” 163; See Appendix F.
began to incorporate the War on Terror into the storylines of figures such as Captain America and Spiderman, which was feasible since the company’s audience primarily came from North America while The Walt Disney Company brought in broader international revenue.\textsuperscript{127} Therefore, the storylines would resonate with a larger portion of DC Comics’ consumers. Disney’s international presence forced it to create content relevant around the world, leading it to show support for America through local actions rather than in its more widely circulated content.

**Comparing Disney’s Reactions to Pearl Harbor and 9/11**

The Walt Disney Company undoubtedly functioned in two very different economic and social settings during the two tragedies discussed in this paper. After Pearl Harbor, the country entered a healthy economic state due to the production boom caused by the US entry into the war. Contrastly, the dot-com bubble burst before 9/11 resulted in some Americans losing their savings and the stock market saw a dip of more than 10\% in the days following the attack.\textsuperscript{128} The tragedies themselves both agitated racial anxieties. In response to Pearl Harbor, the government interned Japanese Americans out of fear that they were spies or had loyalties elsewhere. During the af-

\textsuperscript{127}Ibid.

termath of 9/11, the number of racially motivated attacks against people of Middle Eastern descent and/or Muslims increased. The FBI reported that in 2001 there were 481 hate crimes committed against Muslims, while in the year prior there were 28.\textsuperscript{129} The fear caused by these national tragedies led to rising levels of hysteria and uncertainty as American soil was no longer untouchable. These tensions created difficulties for media bases like Disney as they navigated these unprecedented moments and a damaged American psyche.

In 1941, Walt Disney held the position of CEO. The Walt Disney Company had no theme parks and continued working to grow its audience by finding a formula for producing consistently successful animation movies. By 2001, Disney occupied the position of a global media giant and wielded far more influence. The Walt Disney Company had a large tourism sector, greatly increased its film output, and had fans around the world to please and produce a utopian fantasy for. In both 1941 and 2001, Disney made huge financial investments to expand the company right before an attack on US soil. However, World War II ended up catapulting financial gain in the end as Disney’s contracts with the federal government provided steady income, while the 9/11 attack had the opposite effect. In a 2001 interview with \textit{The New York Times}, Michael Eisner stated that he believed “If we have a couple of months where fear holds people home, by the time that has

\textsuperscript{129}Kuang Keng Kuek Sur, “Datat: Hate Crimes Against Muslims Increased After 9/11,” \textit{The World}, 2016. It is important to note that there were likely other attacks that went unreported.
subsided, the demand for our products is always greater than anything we had anticipated,” since the company had observed this pattern in the wake of past national devastations.\textsuperscript{130} However, Disney’s financial woes continued to worsen after 9/11 since tourism played an integral role in its revenue.

One of the starkest differences between how Disney responded to the bombing of Pearl Harbor and the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks is the absence of animated propaganda from the latter. Disney’s actions in World War II relied almost exclusively on the talents of Disney animators. As discussed in Chapter I, Disney produced animated shorts to stir up patriotism, train troops, convince Americans to conserve precious materials, and present strategies to help win the war. One reason for the disappearance of this propaganda is that animated shorts wielded far less influence in 2001 than in 1941.\textsuperscript{131} In the 1940s, many Americans visited the cinema where propaganda shorts and newsreels were shown. By the 21st century, these large audience bases were partly lost due to the popularity of televisions and computers. The fragmentation of audiences due to the increased availability of personal technological devices lessened the effectiveness of propaganda as changing technological mediums brought the challenge of creating messages that would successfully resonate with individuals rather than broad groups.\textsuperscript{132} A rising global culture centered on consumers contributed to the demand for Disney

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{130}Fabrikant and Schiesel, “Suddenly, the Magic is in Short Supply,” \textit{The New York Times}, 2001.
\item \textsuperscript{131}Raiti, “The Disappearance of Disney Animated Propaganda: A Globalization Perspective,” 161.
\item \textsuperscript{132}Ibid.
\end{itemize}
to produce content that would be relevant across the world as Disney increased its operations on the international stage.\textsuperscript{133} Therefore, specifically tailored media would have run the risk of alienating part of Disney’s 2001 audience.

Despite the absence of animated propaganda, Disney’s reliance on aligning with patriotic rhetoric, appealing to utopian values, and controlling the narrative through Disneyfication remained constant in its responses to these two American tragedies. These methods allowed the company to maintain its brand image of family-friendly, fantasy entertainment and protect its financial interests during times of national mourning, though it executed its responses differently. One explanation for such differences is that after Pearl Harbor, the US government saved the Disney company with funding from government contracts, while in 2001 Disney had to manage to ameliorate its own financial woes while it worked to present healing messages to the country as well. This meant that Eisner had to divert attention towards making up lost revenue in addition to crafting a response to the tragedy. Further, Disney had a significantly smaller capacity in 1941. To successfully produce animated propaganda and training films, the studio had to shift 93\% of its efforts toward the Allied cause. Meanwhile, in 2001, Disney could continue working on projects for its other sectors while simultaneously partnering with the First Lady for public messaging campaigns and raising charitable donations.

\textsuperscript{133}Ibid., 165.
Patriotic rhetoric and symbolic patriotism were central themes in Disney’s responses to both tragedies. The company aligned itself with America’s armed forces, albeit more directly in the case of Pearl Harbor. In 1941, Disney produced insignia for the military, created training films, and even shared its studio lot with troops. In 2001, the company made financial donations to the US army and provided free park attendance for members of the armed forces. In each instance, The Walt Disney Company rallied behind the US military through actions that corresponded to the impact of the attack. Since Pearl Harbor led to the country joining a war and the mobilization of the entire nation’s economy, Disney had more avenues to show support for the army. The aftermath of 9/11 resulted in several public campaigns to demonstrate support for first responders which Disney contributed to with its DisneyHAND relief fund. In 1941 and 2001, the content immediately coming out of the Disney company praised patriotic values. The animated shorts of the 1940s stressed through characters like Donald Duck how lucky people were to live in America. Similarly, after 9/11 Walt Disney’s words on the American value of freedom replaced Disney’s usual material items at its public-facing establishments and the company produced public service announcements to promote national healing and push the country forward.

Both Walt Disney and Michael Eisner in their capacities as CEO participated in media interviews to shape the public’s perception of Disney’s responses. Each man had multiple conversations with the press about the work Disney was doing to aid the tragedy and in 2001 Disney’s public relations
team further spread this news. Disney and Eisner projected a humble image of a company that had the good of the country in mind while also communicating that both America and Disney would recover from these hardships. In this sense, they exerted some control over the press coverage of Disney by highlighting its contributions to the war or recovery efforts and praising American’s tenacity. As the CEOs of a prominent American company, Eisner and Disney’s optimistic visions provided the necessary messaging to uphold the Disney utopia during these two moments in history where violent attacks scarred the American psyche. Even when the country experienced violence, Disney would continue to offer safe spaces of nostalgia and fantasy in its films and theme parks.

Finally, Disney edited its media content to match the national mood. In 1941, Disney produced a constant stream of patriotic propaganda and put its other projects on the back burner to prioritize government contracts. It did so to mobilize along with the rest of the country and produced seemingly endless amounts of content about the war. In 2001, Disney once again delayed projects but did so because they contained references to dangerous scenarios involving planes. Disney’s sensitivity to the national mood reflected positively on its brand image. The company maintained its prominent place in American media by providing comforting movies and vacation destinations where consumers could forget about current events by engaging with escapist entertainment in times of peace and tragedy.
What Counts as a Tragedy?

It is valuable to consider what counts as a tragedy to The Walt Disney Company, or in other words, when Disney chooses to respond to world events and why. The two events discussed at length in this paper were widely regarded as tragedies and Disney responded in ways that the media and public viewed as positive. When the American people and the US government speak of something as devastating, Disney treats it as such. Disney parks have closed due to a pandemic (albeit against its wishes), natural disasters, and during the day of national mourning after the assassination of a president.\textsuperscript{134} This demonstrates that the company will take large financial hits in its tourism sector in the name of public safety, or in the case of the JFK assassination, to appear respectful and remain aligned with the country when the entire population seems to agree on an issue.

Disney’s response efforts do vary depending on the political implications of a tragic event. When an event is politicized or if Americans disagree on what next steps should be taken, Disney does not engage as thoroughly as it did with Pearl Harbor and 9/11. In the wake of the mass calls for racial justice and police reform following the murder of George Floyd, the shooting at a Las Vegas concert in 2017, the Sandy Hook shooting in 2012, the Parkland shooting in 2018, and the recent insurrection at the US Capitol in

\textsuperscript{134} Since the company has investments across the world, Disney is able to present fairly localized responses. At present, it has opened its theme parks wherever it has been permitted to during the COVID-19 pandemic. In the United States, this has resulted in Disney World in Florida operating while Disneyland in Anaheim is closed.
January 2021, Disney responded with only a public statement and in some cases made a charitable donation. Former CEO Bob Iger routinely denounced gun violence in displays of constructive patriotism by calling out America for having the worst gun violence record “in the modern world” and demanded action from politicians.\textsuperscript{135} Despite such words, Disney came under fire for hypocrisy as it simultaneously donated to politicians that openly supported the National Rifle Association and opposed stricter gun legislation.\textsuperscript{136} Incidents of gun violence are widely regarded as tragic, however their aftermath is heavily politicized as the debate over gun rights remains deeply contested in US politics.

After the 2021 insurrection in Washington, D.C., current Disney CEO Bob Chapek issued a statement condemning the rioters and included Disney’s archetypal calls for harmony and utopian values. Chapek wrote, “Now, more than ever, it is imperative that we come together as one nation — united by our shared values, including decency, kindness, and respect for others. We should seize this opportunity...with optimism and hope for a better, brighter future for all of America.”\textsuperscript{137} While the condemnation risked alienating the company’s far-right consumers, a public relations statement filled with symbolic patriotism is a relatively small response to an attempted overthrow of American democracy. What these events demonstrate is that Disney reserves

\textsuperscript{137}Bob Chapek, January 7, 2021, 4:36 pm, via @WaltDisneyCo on Twitter.
its full force responses for events where Americans are in overwhelming agreement as to the next steps the country should take, as with Pearl Harbor and 9/11.\footnote{In 1941, a Gallup poll found that 97\% of Americans supported declaring war after Pearl Harbor. Similarly, a 2001 Gallup poll found that just 6\% of Americans opposed the use of US military forces to combat terrorism after 9/11.} When national sentiment is split, Disney tends to provide small-scale responses such as by making a statement and potentially diverting funds to charitable causes while continuing usual operations.

On the international level, Disney appears to prioritize its relationships with foreign governments in times of political contention since it relies on those partnerships to continue running theme parks and releasing media content in other countries. For example, Disney did not present a response to the 2019-2020 Hong Kong protests and remained aligned on the side of the government, rather than the local people whose patronage they also depend on.\footnote{Christopher Palmeri, “Disney’s Iger Staying Silent on Hong Kong Protests After NBA’s China Row,” \textit{Bloomberg}, 2019.} During the protests, Hong Kong residents fought against an extradition bill that would allow for suspects to be extradited to mainland China.\footnote{“The Hong Kong Protests Explained,” \textit{BBC News}, 2019.} The protests continued to escalate as instances of police brutality and violent rhetoric from government officials rose, leading to the death of two protestors and the injuries of thousands more.\footnote{Ibid.} Hong Kong Disneyland remained open during the entirety of the protests even as weekday attendance plummeted by at least 90\%.\footnote{Steven Russolillo and Stella Yifan Xie, “Protests Have Turned Hong Kong Disneyland into a ‘Ghost Town,’” \textit{Wall Street Journal}, 2019.}
Media outlets highlighted Disney’s lack of action on this matter as details about its live-action movie, *Mulan*, came to light. The film’s lead actress expressed support for the Hong Kong police and the movie credits revealed that filming for the movie took place in the Xinjiang Region, an internment site of Uighur Muslims.\(^{143}\) A #BoycottMulan campaign subsequently began and gained traction on Twitter. Disney did not respond to this widely discussed event to protect its beneficial relationship with the Chinese government. Bob Iger confirmed this at *Wall Street Journal*’s Tech Live Conference when he stated that he would not speak on the protests because he believed doing so would harm The Walt Disney Company.\(^{144}\) The juxtaposition of Disney’s handling of the protests following George Floyd’s murder in America and the Hong Kong protests against the extradition bill illuminates how Disney decides to craft its responses to history-making events. Disney employed its unity rhetoric in the case of the former since it could condemn racism without directly criticizing the US government. Conversely, it could not weigh in on the Hong Kong protests without alienating the government in mainland China. For Disney to act, the conditions of overwhelming public agreement and the possibility to respond without obliterating its financial interests and partnerships must be met.

Importantly, Disney maintains its standard of creating as few ripples as

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\(^{143}\) Caitlin O’Kane, “‘Boycott Mulan’ Trends on Twitter after Credits Reveal Region of China Where Movie Was Filmed,” *CBS News*, 2020.

\(^{144}\) Palmeri, “Disney’s Iger Staying Silent on Hong Kong Protests After NBA’s China Row,” *Bloomberg*, 2019.
possible during dark moments even in the wake of inner-company tragedies. After Walt Disney died from lung cancer, which many took as a surprise, the flag at Disneyland was lowered to half staff and the Disneyland band played a song in Walt’s honor.\textsuperscript{145} However, the park remained open the very next day with Disney executives stating it was what Walt would have wanted.\textsuperscript{146} Decades later, when company president Frank Wells died in a helicopter crash in 1994, Disney named the new office building in Burbank in his honor but business continued as per usual.\textsuperscript{147} In the aftermath of both tragic instances, the company caused few disruptions and maintained its show must go on policy.

**Conclusion**

The Walt Disney Company occupies a unique place in global entertainment because of its scope, influence, and the importance of its pristine reputation to its success. American business analyst Joe Flower argues that “No other American company carries the mix of expectations Disney does,” and that people do not often hold opinions on companies of similar size, such as Paramount Pictures or Apple.\textsuperscript{148} Disney has deeply invested fans all across the globe as well as the political spectrum who place expectations on the company’s actions. Many Disney consumers feel a sense of ownership over

\textsuperscript{145} The Imagineering Story Episode 2: “What Would Walt Do?” Disney+, 2019.
\textsuperscript{146} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{147} “Frank Wells,” D23.
\textsuperscript{148} Flower, Prince of the Magic Kingdom, x.
the company due to its entanglement with their childhoods. Even when Disney makes a relatively small decision such as retheming a ride, its decision is scrutinized and widely debated in public discourse. Consequently, Disney is seldom able to make a decision that will please all of its fans.

Disney earned its grandiose reputation by producing innovative entertainment since the 1920s. Sociologists Joel Best and Kathleen Lowney argue that Disney’s good reputation often binds its hands. More specifically, “...the name Disney has become closely linked in the public mind with decent, family-oriented entertainment. This positive reputation, in turn, makes Disney an attractive target for all sorts of social critiques in a way that its rivals are not.” While Disney’s unique brand image helps its products succeed, it comes with the disadvantage of fostering high expectations that result in increased attention from critics. Whenever Disney fails to create cutting-edge, wholesome entertainment, its shortcomings are discussed by the public at length. A more intense spotlight is shined upon The Walt Disney Company in times of darkness since many people rely on the company for sources of joy and hope, while others argue it has a responsibility to speak

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149 The most recent example of this phenomenon is the retheming of Splash Mountain into a Princess and the Frog ride. The change was initiated because the film Splash Mountain is based on contains various racist depictions of African Americans. Shortly after Disney announced the news in 2020, it began to trend on social media and fans made petitions on Change.org in an attempt to sway the company to reverse its decision. The petitions gained thousands of signatures. It is worth noting that Disney made this change in an attempt to please fans and remove a racist piece of the company’s past.


151 Ibid.
out as a widely influential media corporation. As Disney navigated this mix of expectations in 1941 and 2001, it found a formula for crafting favorable responses to meet the moment.

To protect its wholesome image and its business relationships, it is vital that Disney acts in a manner that corresponds with the attitudes of the local people and the government it is operating under. Disney successfully did so during 9/11 and Pearl Harbor due to the strong patriotic feelings that grew in the wake of these events. The Walt Disney Company employed American emblems and unity rhetoric to project symbolic patriotism and help foster national healing. These optimistic visions presented an unceasing positive image for the future at times when many Americans felt deeply fearful. Disney thereby controlled the tragedy narrative through Disneyfication by shifting focus away from the threats to the country and towards American tenacity and national unity. Meanwhile, its films, animated shorts, and physical vacation destinations continued to offer nostalgia, imaginative elements, and familiar characters for guests to escape from the stressors of their everyday lives by engaging with the Disney utopian fantasy.

While the mediums through which Disney responds to national tragedies shifted during its transformation from an animation company to a global media giant, its methods of employing patriotic rhetoric, referring to utopian values, and controlling the delivery of the narrative through Disneyfication have stayed constant throughout the company’s history. Disney’s responsiveness to changing social and political climates in its reactions to harsh
realities contributes to the company’s enduring reputation and presence in American culture. During dark times, people often desire a sense of comfort and seek out sources of hope that can pick them back up. By redirecting focus towards the nation’s healing and perseverance, Disney instills faith in people that regardless of what happened today, there will always be a great, big beautiful tomorrow to which we can look forward.
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Appendix

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Source: www.Periscopefilm.com
C. A Bald Eagle attacks an octopus representing Japan in Disney’s *Victory Through Airpower* (1943).

D. Posters for the Japanese releases of *Snow White*, *Cinderella*, and *Bambi*.

Source: *The Imagineering Story*, Episode 2: What Would Walt Do? via Disney+

F. DC Comics character Superman carries a 9/11 first responder to safety. Source: Kevin Conrad, Worthpoint.