

COMMENTARY

Of apes and men: Tarzan exercise in subtle racism

Rainier Spencer
Special to Sentinel-Voice
Lost in the current hoopla over Disney's *Tarzan* are some very important facts about race, power, and culture in the United States.

Disney films are a strange and unique breed. While the majority of American society seems to love them, they often manage to deeply scar certain portions of the populace.

If you don't think so, then go ask a Native American what she thought of the historical accuracy and the resultant messages of *Pocahontas*. Or, watch the slaves happily singing about never leaving "home" in the 1946 film "Song of the South," that is if you can find

a copy that Disney hasn't taken out of circulation.

I have not seen this latest iteration of the Tarzan legacy and I won't likely see it anytime soon because I have seen enough Tarzan films and read enough Tarzan novels to last a lifetime.

It doesn't matter to me that this new version is likely politically correct (so supposedly was "Pocahontas," after all), because in my opinion it is impossible to redeem the very Tarzan story itself.

"Tarzan of the Apes," written by Edgar Rice Burroughs, was published as a novel in 1914, and is one of the most racist books you will find. Don't enrich the

Burroughs estate by buying a copy; instead go down to your local library and check the book out.

As a teenager, I read a great many of Burroughs' novels. In addition to the Tarzan books, he had series that dealt with Venus, Mars and the center of the Earth. All his novels are extremely formulaic, but his very vivid imagination in terms of content makes up for the structural predictability.

As I have said, "Tarzan of the Apes" is an intensely racist novel.

An English nobleman's son is seemingly doomed to a quick death somewhere in Africa only to be saved and adopted by a friendly ape who

has just lost her own child.

The dramatic interest is that one of the uppercrust members of white society is thrust into black Africa to be reared by animals. This was then and still is now a very compelling scenario for the majority of the American public.

What interests me, however, in assessing the Tarzan novel and many of the earlier films is the contrast drawn between the indigenous Africans and Tarzan's apes.

In every important way, the non-human apes are portrayed as superior to the human Africans, who are generally depicted as headhunting cannibals with a keen interest in defiling

white women.

In terms of the society they have each constructed, the apes are shown as more complex, more human, and more appealing than the Africans.

While the earlier Tarzan films did not have the kinds of special effects that would have enabled them to depict the interactions in ape society described by Burroughs, those films' portrayal of black Africans left no doubt as to the latter's utter depravity. Many of us can remember watching reruns of those old Tarzan films on Saturday afternoons long before cable TV.

I don't know how Disney's new Tarzan is going to depict the indigenous

Africans.

In all the stills and trailers I have seen so far I have not detected any hint of the African population, so perhaps Disney is going to ignore them altogether. Disney may even portray them in a respectful way.

But to someone who has seen too many Tarzan films, and who has read twenty of the forty or so Tarzan novels by Burroughs, I have already had enough.

Instead of spending the money to take your child to see *Tarzan*, why not check the 1914 book out of the library and have your child read it? Then have a fruitful discussion about racism and the subtle ways that it is still perpetuated today.

Carl Rowan's Commentary

Personalities stifle appointments, exacerbate rampant homophobia

Special to Sentinel-Voice

Sen. James M. Inhofe, the Oklahoma Republican, has joined a long list of U.S. senators who have abused their power in an effort to impose their personal bigotries.

Senator James Eastland, D-Miss., and Olin Johnston and Strom Thurmond of South Carolina, in naked racism, conspired to hold up for more than a year President Kennedy's 1961 appointment of black lawyer Thurgood Marshall to the Second Circuit Court of Appeals in New York.

Eastland, chairman of the powerful Senate Judiciary Committee, wanted Kennedy to name Eastland's law-school roommate, Harold Cox, to a federal district court judgeship. Kennedy resisted. Eastland told Attorney General Robert Kennedy, "you tell your brother that when I get Cox, he gets the nigger [Marshall]."

Now the chairman of that same judiciary committee, Sen. Orrin G. Hatch, R-Utah, wants President Clinton to name Ted Stewart, chief of staff to Gov. Mike Leavitt, to a federal judgeship. Clinton has declined. So Hatch is holding up 37 Clinton appointees to the federal bench.

Clinton has circumvented a holdup by Hatch and other GOP senators of his appointment of Chinese-American Bill Lann Lee to head the Civil Rights Department by giving him a recess appointment. Some senators opposed Lee because he favors affirmative action programs.

Now Inhofe has jumped in with a declaration that he will personally block all



CARL ROWAN

Clinton nominees who require Senate confirmation because Clinton has given a recess appointment as ambassador to Luxembourg to a prominent homosexual philanthropist, James C. Hormel. Inhofe says Hormel, heir to the Hormel meatpacking fortune, is an "activist homosexual who will put his agenda ahead of the agenda of the United States."

Therefore, the Oklahoma senator says, he has put a personal "hold" on Clinton's nominations of Deputy Treasury Secretary Lawrence Summers to replace retiring Treasury Secretary Robert E. Rubin and veteran diplomat Richard Holbrooke to serve as ambassador to the United Nations—among other Clinton appointments. Inhofe wants Clinton to sign a pledge not to make any more recess appointments without his approval and that of his right-wing cronies. This single-senator blockage of good appointments is lunacy. It hurts the nation, and the senate ought to stop the practice immediately.

Recess appointments (made when the senate is not in session) are clearly authorized by the constitution. President Reagan made 239 of them in eight years, President Bush made 78 in four years, and Clinton has made a mere 58 in six years.

No matter who is putting on these personal "holds" they represent the ugliest of politics and constitute a scandalous practice that demeans the Senate and affronts democracy. This stench of homophobia aroused by Inhofe ought to be enough to provoke the Senate to clean up its act regarding the confirmation process.

Preparing leaders for 21st century requires diversity

Special to Sentinel-Voice

In order to graduate from college and receive my liberal arts degree, I had to pass a swimming test. My college believed that swimming was a life skill which was necessary to live in the world, just as my studies in economics, literature and biology were.

All the demographics for the United States in the 21st century show that our nation will radically change demographically and that there will be no one racial/ethnic group which will be in the majority. European Americans will be just one among many groups and the largest single racial/ethnic group is likely to be Hispanic. Yet too few of our educational institutions are focusing on this reality and requiring courses which will prepare leaders to swim in the 21st century realities. Too many of our future leaders are not being required to learn about living in a diverse world of many races, cultures and religions.

One program which seeks to prepare 21st century leaders is the Diversity Management Program of Cleveland State University and the National Training Laboratory.

This new graduate studies program is aimed at a variety of people, including human resource professionals, school administrators, law enforcement officials and health care administrators to help them become facilitators and leaders in the workplace

Civil Rights Journal

By Bernice Powell Jackson

of the present and the future. As the workforce becomes more and more diverse, as clients and product markets and membership bases diversify, there will be increasing demand for leaders who understand themselves and their own culture and who understand how to relate to people of other races and cultures. Students in this 18-20 month long program can earn either a continuing education certificate or a master's degree in psychology.

Clearly, this exciting program is just one much-needed step as we poise our entry into a new century and a new millennium. But courses in diversity "management," in the history of the contributions of all races and cultures to this nation, in understanding different religions, in understanding race and racism should all be prerequisites for graduation not only for those who are majoring in African American or Latino/a or native American or Asian American studies, but for all who attend our colleges.

And what about at the high school and junior high and

elementary levels? All children attending schools in this increasingly-diverse nation, even those who live for the moment in an entirely homogenous town, must learn all of our histories and should be excited by learning about their own and other cultures. In this increasingly mobile world, where most of us will move several times over our lifetimes, and in this increasingly global village marketplace, where a small town business person may be suddenly dealing with a client thousands of miles and several cultures away, all our children must be educated to understand and value diversity.

Swimming is a life skill which all should have. So is understanding and living in a diverse world. For the leaders of the 21st century not to have this life-saving skill will mean they will be swimming upstream their whole lifetime.

(NOTE: For more information on the Diversity Management Program, write Dr. Melodie Yates, Cleveland State University, Rhodes Tower 1227, Cleveland, OH 44115 or call (216) 687-9394 or e-mail: m.yates@popmail.csuohio.edu.)

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