



# Duck Diplomacy

A paper examining the public  
diplomacy lessons that can be  
drawn from Disney's use of  
the character Donald Duck in  
US Government  
commissioned wartime  
propaganda (1942-45).

Lauren Allison  
University of Southern California  
2012

---

## Duck Diplomacy: examining the public diplomacy lessons that can be drawn from Disney's use of the character Donald Duck in US Government commissioned wartime propaganda (1942-45).

### Duck Tales: A Background

In June 1934 'the world's most illustrious fowl' hatched onto American screens in *The Little Hen* (Blitz 1979: 10). This sailor suit-wearing duck went by the name of Donald Duck and first debuted in this Aesop tale adaption as a lazy character who fakes a 'bellyache' to escape having to help the Mother Hen harvest her corn while he hangs out at the 'Idle Hour Club'. Walt Disney had long been searching for a character to compliment the wholesome and straitlaced Mickey Mouse character who had become limited by his good nature and upstanding morals (Perry and Perry 1980:61).

Donald Duck, with his short temper and plucky determination to succeed, would go on to rival Mickey Mouse's star power within one short year (Finch 1975: 38) and would even co-host the 1957 Academy Awards. Donald Duck quickly became a household name; however, the United States entry into the Second World War in 1941 would see Donald Duck become a 'Poster Boy' for US involvement in the war.

Disney Productions involvement in the war was fourfold. Firstly, sections of the Disney studios were commandeered by the US military to protect the nearby Lockheed plant from possible airstrikes. This lasted for eight months starting in December 1941. Secondly, despite deciding to go into early retirement following the US military takeover of part of his Burbank studios, Walt Disney leapt back into the studio in January 1942 when the Naval Bureau of Aeronautics commissioned Disney to create twenty animated training films for \$80,000 (Eliot 1993: 165). These animated

training films were to prove so popular that every government agency started to commission further animations for their department. Thirdly, Walt Disney was commissioned by the US Government to produce animated short films to be shown in theatres across the United States in order to boost morale for the war effort. Fourthly, Disney dedicated resources to designing insignia for the military, free of charge (Blitz 1979: 133). As a consequence, during the war, 93% of Disney Productions' output was related to the war. (FIND SOURCE, eejit).

Through Disney's war effort activities, particularly in its short films for public audiences and insignia design, Donald's role as a 'poster boy' for the war effort is secured. By analysing the use of his character in Disney wartime productions, it becomes evident that the use of this character was indeed extremely effective. This paper aims to outline how Disney used Donald Duck during the war, why it was effective and what lessons can be learnt for cartoon public diplomacy campaigns from this example.

### Disney's Wartime Effort: Donald Duck Case Studies

In 1942, under the Secretary of the Treasury, Henry Morgenthau, Jr., the Office of War Information (OWI) was created to oversee war information released for domestic audiences. The Bureau of Motion Pictures (BMP) was then created as an arm of OWI to liaise with Hollywood regarding ways in which the film industry could help, or hinder, the war effort. This was complimented by the Hollywood-led War Activities Committee of the Motion Picture Industry (WAC), formerly the Motion Pictures Committee Cooperating for National Defense, who worked with the BMP to create networking between the government and Hollywood corporations, with the goal of promoting government material in support of the war effort and fill the gap that of the military's Motion Picture Unit (Solomon 1995: 91).

The early animated shorts that Disney had created for the Naval Bureau of Aeronautics had proved very effective and popular amongst the military audience and this did not go unnoticed in the military and government ranks. As a consequence, the Treasury commissioned Disney to create short animated films for public audiences. The first of which would be *Donald Gets Drafted* (1942). This short saw Donald Duck going through enlisting procedures of physical examinations, uniform assignment and basic training while a cheery tune echoed "*The Army's not the Army anymore. It's better than it's ever been before*". This short was intended as an upbeat animation that would highlight the joys that could be found chasing war nurses while creating light-hearted humour attended to slightly ridicule the processes involved in strict American military life with an aim of allowing those against the war effort to identify with Donald Donald.

Donald was later featured in 'action' shorts such as *Fall Out, Fall In* and *Commando Duck*. These shorts were aimed at creating camaraderie between the American public and Donald Duck while lifting the negative connotations in relation to drafting and enlisting in the military. Disney's choice of Donald Duck for these 'combat' episodes drew on his plucky and gutsy attitude which the studios hoped would become the embodiment of the American Wartime mood. While Mickey Mouse was Disney's 'golden boy', his character was restrained by his 'clean' image, the studios hoped that Donald Duck would become the personification of a fighting spirit they sought to capture and perpetuate amongst the American population and also amongst military personnel. A measurement of the success of this can be found in the insignia that Disney Studios designed free of charge for military personnel and units. Out of 1200 different insignia, Donald appeared in over some 400 designs whereas Mickey Mouse only appeared on only a mere 35 designs highlighting how Donald's character had become a real emblem of wartime America. The military command had begun to hail Donald Duck as a 'tremendous morale builder' (Blitz: 1979: 133).

As these shorts were developed, Disney and Secretary Morgenthau disagreed on the way forward for Donald Duck. Morgenthau had envisioned a new character, a 'Mr Average Taxpayer',

designed specifically for these war effort productions. Disney refused his request with the reasoning 'Grown up with' (Blitz 1979: 129). The use of Donald Duck would be key to the success of the commissioned films. By using a character which already had an existing relationship with the American public, Disney were able to tap into an existing audience who were tied to Donald who they could identify with and therefore empathise with.

Animations were not only created to boost morale and support for the war effort, but they also served the explicit goal of advocating certain behavioural changes amongst the US population. In 1942, income tax legislation was changed so that, the following year, an additional 15million Americans would become eligible to pay income tax. Noting the negative impact that this could possibly have on support for US engagement in the war, the US Government commissioned an animation that would urge the public to pay such taxes and to do so in a timely fashion. In this vain, *The Spirit of '43* (1943) was created. *The Spirit of '43*, a remake of *The New Spirit* (1942) (also commissioned by the Treasury), opened with Donald Duck trying to decide between spending all his pay or saving some for his income tax. Two 'Donalds' come to help him make the decision: a Scottish 'Donald' appears as the 'Good Angel' urging him to save for taxes while a spendthrift 'Donald' invites him to enjoy his money at the 'Idle Hour Club', a bar with Swastika swing doors. The commentator points out that he can 'Spend for the Axis, or save for taxes' resulting in Donald punching the spendthrift version of himself through the Swastika swing doors which break and form a 'V'. The closing scenes are a kaleidoscope of cartoon war imagery showing how taxes can be used to 'bury the axis'. As Blitz writes, the closing scenes where a 'powerful blend of terrifying images and soul-stirring words' (1979:129).

*The Spirit of '43* was seen by over 26million Americans. A third of surveyed viewers attributed their decision to start saving for their taxes in part due to Donald Duck in this short. While it is difficult to determine the specific hard metrics stemming from this animation, it is

important to note that, in 1943, income taxes were submitted more promptly than ever before (Perry and Perry 1980: 94).

Donald Duck animations were also used to demonise the enemy. Perhaps the most famous of the Donald Duck wartime clips is *Der Fueher's Face* (1943) which saw Donald living through a day in 'Nutzi Land'. Nutzi Land is a world completely shaped with swastika imagery from the carefully manicured trees to swastika clouds. Donald's day becomes one of constant salutes to Hitler with a 'slave-like' workload that is constantly referenced by the voiceover. This documentary-styled episode ends with Donald waking up from his Nutzi Land nightmare wearing stars and stripes pajamas in his matching bedding. Upon waking, Donald declares his joy at being a US citizen. That year, *Der Fueher's Face* went on to win the Academy Award for 'Best Cartoon Short Subject' (1942-3). *Der Fueher's Face* also took on a pop culture life of its own when the theme song "Der Fuehrer's Face" became a hit in the 1940s and was given a new lease of life in a Spike Jones rerecording (Blitz 1979: 133).

Anaylsing the content of these various shorts it is evident that they were created with two goals in mind: (i) to generate positive feeling towards the war effort and negative feelings towards the enemy and (ii) to motivate certain behaviours amongst the general population that would support the foreign policy goals of the administration. These goals were important given the context of isolationism which had been prevalent until the Pearl Harbour bombing by Japanese forces. The US Government recognised the need to garner public support behind the decision to enter the war and these animated shorts were perceived as an effective means to do so. In testament to the Government's belief in Disney animation as an effective public diplomacy strategy, it is important to note that Disney was remunerated for these productions, whereas most other studios received no remuneration for their productions of appearance of their staple characters in any public diplomacy efforts (Elliot 1993: 166). In fact, by analysing the raw output statistics it is clear that the government viewed these animations as valuable towards the war effort. In Disney

Productions, during the fiscal year 1942-1943, 95% of the 204,000 feet of film produced by Disney had been commissioned by the US military (Soloman 1995: 91). This volume was more than five times the previous highest output for any given year in Disney's history showing the level of investment the Treasury put into Disney animation.

The use of Donald Duck to personify the war effort didn't stop with these short animations. Following the success of these initial animations, the US Government expanded their efforts south of the border to Latin America with *Saludos Amigos* (1943) and *The Three Caballeros* (1945). North of the border, the Canadian government had already recognised the opportunity to incorporate Disney and Donald Duck by commissioning four public theatrical trailers using Disney characters to encourage the purchase of war bonds. Walt Disney himself, recognised the success of ...(Elliot 167)

### [Analysis and Public Diplomacy Lessons: What was Donald Duck's key to success?](#)

Donald's persona was also a key to his success in these campaigns. Unlike Mickey who was 'calm' and 'rational' (Rovin 1991: 74) Donald Duck suffered from temper tantrums (as witnessed in his second ever appearance in *The Orphan's Benefit* [1934]), spouts of jealousy and had a sexual nature which saw him chasing around women in several shorts such as *Donald Gets Drafted* (1942). It can be argued that these character quirks allowed Donald Duck to become less cartoonlike and more humanlike in his nature, therefore allowing the public to relate to him and identify with him. Rovin went so far as to say that Donald represented the 'pessimist in all of us' (Rovin 1991: 74). While seen as a plucky character, Donald Duck also suffers from natural human instincts like nerves which were witnessed in the caricatured 'knees knocking' in *Commando Duck* (1944). This personal connection with an element of a public diplomacy campaign is a difficult component to capture. Personal connection or identification can

be a key to the success of campaign as a level of public engagement in necessary to influence opinion.

Given his likeability factor, the choice of Donald Duck to lead the charge in wartime animations was indeed successful. While Morgenthau objected to the 'recycling' of an existing Disney character, he failed to recognise the potential which lay in tying government desires to an American cultural zeitgeist. Donald's popularity in the lead up to the war was undeniable and it proved successful to harness his popularity and direct empathy towards Donald Duck to support for the war effort. By 1941, and with the increased 'star-spangled' imagery used in the propaganda films, Donald became part of an American brand. This overt-jingoism also allowed for the solidifying of national identity and harness existing US national identity sentiments which were present following the Pearl Harbor attack. The 'rally 'round the flag' call became synonymous with a 'rally 'round the duck' call, as Donald was never very far from a star or a stripe. Disney was an American brand and in 1941, Donald was fast becoming a national icon.

The Donald Duck animations also benefited from a perceived distance from the government. While it was evident in starting titles that these animations were commissioned by the US government, the alternative use of the medium of animation created some distances from traditional public government messaging. Coupled with the humour and lighthearted nature of Donald Duck's character, this messaging presented a more engaging form of public diplomacy than that which had been seen in the First World War which centralised around print media.

Donald Duck was also successful due to his cross-generational appeal. These films focused on unpleasant tasks that everyday Americans were going to have to undergo in



order to support the war effort such as paying taxes, enlisting in the arm, buying war bonds. Naturally, these were not very popular ideas; however, by using a character that would appeal to both a younger generation (as cartoons are traditionally intended) but also to a generation which had grown up with Donald Duck. Disney played on an existing relationship between audience and protagonist. Following an initial screening for *The Spirit of '43* (1943), The New York Times wrote that the animation had a 'novel attraction' that was a 'thoroughly agreeable inducement to a tough task' (New York Times 1943: 29). Donald Duck went through every trial and darkness of wartime with the American public. It could be argue that on principle, using popular childhood figures, can be an excellent motivator of public opinion. This is was evidence in the 2012 Presidential Elections in the United States where Sesame Street's 'Big Bird' became a national talking point and cultural reference for differing policies in the campaign (Blow 2012: A21).

### [Analysis and Public Diplomacy Lessons: The Role of Cartoon animation in Public Diplomacy](#)

More generally, when looking at the medium of animation for public diplomacy campaign, Gerard Raiti, argues that animation is a medium which carries a certain uniqueness that allows it to be 'conducive to propaganda' (2007: 153). The devices employed in animation provide an excellent medium which can leave a lasting impact on an audience. This is evidenced through the Nazi imagery employed in the scenes of *Der Fueher's Face* (1943) are particularly striking in reinforcing the monotony and slave like existence of a swastika-filled world. Animation also allows for the employment of humouristic devices which can act to 'soften' more serious issues. Bubble-like aircraft and faces on bullets, as seen in *The Spirit of '43* (1943), are emblematic of an attempt to soften the harsh realities of war, possible enhancing its suitability to younger audiences. The

humour employed in *Donald Gets Drafted* (1942) was an attempt to make light of enlisting procedures which could provide unpopular amongst the American public. WAR WEARINESS

An interesting element of wartime animation propaganda is its use of stereotypes. Any stereotypes of Germans or of the Japanese were extremely caricatured and racist representations of the two peoples. The Emperor of Japan, Hirohito, suffers from extreme racial stereotyping in *Der Fuehrer's Face* (1943) with buck teeth, narrow eyes and broken English. Even the trees in Japan are not safe from racist representations as *Commando Duck* (1944) illustrated in a scene where a Japanese soldier hides in a tree with narrowed eyes and exclaims in broken English "Happy Cherry Blossoms to you, please." This racial stereotyping highlights an important component of propaganda and public diplomacy: the use of readymade narratives and opinions. While it may have been more 'politically correct' for Disney to avoid such stereotyping, the writers and production team monopolised on existing stereotypes to reinforce negative representations of the enemy and the 'other'. By using this existing framework, Disney facilitated 'demonisation' of the enemy by building on fear and prejudice. An example of this can be found in *Education for Death* (1943). This pseudo-documentary animation did not feature Disney characters but rather focused on the indoctrination process of a young boy named Hans in Nazi Germany. Racial stereotypes were used to play on existing American perceptions of Nazi German, as well as to further the image of Nazi Germany as a place where children were raised devoid of emotion and were indoctrinated as killing machines. This use of racial stereotypes and existing prejudice can be found throughout animation propaganda. Woodhead highlighted the use of Jewish stereotypes in Nazi animation propaganda (1999: 1).

Animation propaganda also benefits from its potential to being a class-less medium through which the government can widen their outreach and scope. Animation did not require large amounts of dialogue and in Disney animations a large emphasis was placed on movement and physical humour. Donald Duck, as a character, is not a very vocal personality. His elocution is

punctured with quacks and mutterings meaning that his characters mood and sentiments can be understood simply from watching his face and movement. The 1930s and 1940s saw the rise of animation and the US Government were wise to select this developing medium as a way to reach a wider audience. The selection of an 'entertainment' medium was also key to its success at a time when public opinion was not yet fully mobilised around another world war. The use of 'shorts' instead of feature films meant that the animations could be tagged at the start or feature films and therefore there was no need to overtly publicise them in order to obtain an audience. The shorts could also be easily sent abroad to boost morale amongst military stationed overseas. These examples highlight the need to understand current mediums of dissemination when designing a public diplomacy strategy as well as the possibility for animation to serve as 'potent piece of propaganda' (Blitz 1979: 129).

The case of these commissioned Disney works also brings forth interesting links to the outsourcing of public diplomacy efforts. As previously mentioned, the OWI could not have the capacity or manpower to manufacture the propaganda films that it would have liked, so it turned to the American brand of Disney to outsource production. The use of Disney Productions was a source of pride for Walt Disney and, as someone constantly trying to reemphasise his 'Americanness' and prove his worthiness as a film-maker in Hollywood (Eliot 1993: 167). Although Eliot argues that Disney was 'infuriated' by the pressure from every government agency, he does concede that Disney secretly craved the attention and these commissions, along with subsequent awards, gave him the 'long-overdue' recognition of his work (*ibid.* : 166, 167). In the 1941 Testimony of Walt Disney before the House Committee on Un-American Activities, Walt Disney was hailed as one of the greatest examples of film creators in his profession due to his work for the 'American people' and 'the world' (Peary and Peary 1980: 98). His pride in the success of the commissions led to him releasing *Victory Through Air Power* (1943) as a commercial film production reminiscent of the government films. Despite a lack of success at the American box office, the film was supposedly

used by Winston Churchill to persuade Franklin Roosevelt to go ahead with the designed bombing campaign (Eliot 1993: 168).

The above example demonstrates that outsourcing may enhance a public diplomacy campaign if the aims of the campaign dovetail with the ideology of the outsourcing company. Benefits, whether monetary or reputational, must be apparent to the company in order assure continued service and possible complimentary production which help reach the goals of the campaign. The replication of some of these ideas is seen through 'pro-bono' work by Warner Brothers who produced noncommissioned anti-fascist productions during the war (Roberts 2006: 5).

## Conclusions

Mickey Mouse was both the 'golden child' and 'problem child' of Walt Disney (Blitz 1979: 13). At first glance he would seem the natural Disney character to embody a US public diplomacy campaign; however, despite being every inch an American symbol, Mickey's wholesome, institutionalised character meant that he could never be billed as the hero of what was about to become a long and dirty world war. As the 'outrageous antithesis to Mickey' (*ibid.*: 14), Donald Duck provided a ready-made symbol to embody the American gutsy positivity the US Government hoped to reinforce amongst the American population. By selecting Disney Studios as its outsourcing company, the US government selected a national brand with which the US public could identify with and relate to.

The case of Donald Duck in wartime propaganda is a strong argument for the incorporation of popular culture icons, characters or personalities as cultural points of reference and empathy to underpin public diplomacy strategies. Iconography in public diplomacy can be used successfully to propagate certain agendas and messages by intertwining existing sympathetic branding and

preexisting narratives with relatable public diplomacy objectives. That being said, the icon employed must always be something that can be controlled. Any negative incidents involving such a symbol hold the possibility to be associated with linked campaigns.

In historical perspective, the case of Donald Duck 1941-45 demonstrates a need to incorporate the fast development of new mass media into public diplomacy strategies in order to expand communication of messaging. The development of animation provided a turning point in public diplomacy and propaganda efforts in the twentieth century and furthered the development of 'image-driven' propaganda witnessed through the use of posters in the First World War.

The themes used in the Donald Duck animations did not seek to create new ideas or to completely overhaul public opinion. Rather, they were an attempt to latch onto existing opinions and relate them to the character of Donald Duck.

Donald Duck's wartime influence did not end with the close of war in 1945. In a 1993 Wall Street Journal Article, Roger Thurow wrote about the departure of Paja Patak (Donald Duck in Serbo-Croat) from Serbia following American and UN sanctions. He describes the local magazine headlines of "Who killed Donald Duck?" and "We will never be forgiven for chasing Mickey out!", and writes of a young girl who explains that her mother blamed Donald's death on 'Mr Milosevic'. The Newspaper that published Disney cartoons ran obituaries of Donald and Mickey while child psychologists worried about effect that would be had on children who no longer had Disney to distract them from the war around them. Thurow argued that Donald Duck and Mickey Mouse 'accomplished what the world's diplomats (had) so far been able to do: Focus Serbia's attention to the consequences of its actions' (*ibid.*).

Given Donald Duck's timeless appeal and ability to cross generations and cultures, perhaps his career as a public diplomat is not yet over.