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Guest Opinion

'Pocahontas' foes missing the point

Critics of Walt Disney's "Pocahontas" argue that the film company's latest attempt at re-writing American history promotes racism, rape and child molestation. Many educators, historians and American Indian groups have joined the chorus, pointing out all the historical inaccuracies: Pocahontas was not 19 when the British arrived in 1607, she was 10 to 12; she was not slender, but robust; and she was never romantically involved with John Smith, who was probably in his mid-30s when they met.

As a professional historian, I cannot condone the film's inaccuracies, but I do find the allegations of racism, child molestation and rape much too severe. And I certainly wouldn't discourage children from seeing the film on the basis of political correctness.

Critics miss the point — that history can be entertaining as well as educational. Entertainment is the business of Walt Disney Productions; it always has been. Education is the business of schoolteachers. Let *them* correct the historical inaccuracies. Both groups can and should be inspirational in their attempt to promote American history. But there is a deeper issue here.

In this era of political correctness, the founders of our country have come under greater scrutiny as members of different races and ethnicities gain political power and raise questions about heroes of the past. At issue is what they failed to do, rather than the benefits we've reaped by their achievements. We don't know whether to honor them for establishing a new nation or to reject them for the sins of omission.

"Hero-bashing" has become a national pastime. Anyone in a position of authority feels qualified to reveal "historical truth." Often it is done by applying contemporary standards to the past with a widespread inability to make appropriate allowances for prevailing historical conditions.

To be sure, we should *always* re-examine the past and those who helped to shape it in the light of the unforeseeable future. In no other way can we benefit from the lessons of history. But if we revere a John Smith or a Pocahontas, we should do so for their genuine attempt to better the condition of those who settled in America. If we fault them for their failures, we should at least acknowledge they were products of a different century, and as such, limited by the ethical standards of time.

After that is done, if these historical figures seem so disappointingly human, so much like ourselves, it is only because they actually were. But even that shouldn't prevent our children from enjoying Disney's interpretation of American history. ■

William C. Kashatus teaches American history and religion at William Penn Charter School.



WILLIAM C.
KASHATUS

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