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# How the CIA Helped Disney Conquer Florida

| SMALL WORLD AFTER ALL |

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Starting in the mid-1960s when Disney set out to establish the Disney World Theme Park, they were determined to get land at below market prices and Disney operatives engaged in a far-ranging conspiracy to make sure sellers had no idea who was buying their Central Florida property.

By resorting to such tactics Disney acquired more than 40 square miles of land for less than \$200 an acre, but how to maintain control once

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he was also the founding partner of Donovan, Leisure, Newton & Irvine, a New York law firm whose attorneys included future C.I.A. director William Casey. Donovan's attorneys provided fake identities for Disney agents; they also set up a secret communications center, and orchestrated a disinformation campaign. In order to maintain "control over the overall development," Disney and his advisers realized, "the company would have to find a way to limit the voting power of the private residents" even though, they acknowledged, their efforts "violated the Equal Protection Clause" of the U.S. Constitution. Here again the CIA was there to help. Disney's principal legal strategist for Florida was a senior clandestine operative named Paul Helliwell. Having helped launch the C.I.A. secret war in Indochina, Helliwell relocated to Miami in 1960 in order to coordinate dirty tricks against Castro. At a secret "seminar" Disney convened in May 1965 Helliwell came up with the approach that to this day allows the Disney organization to avoid taxation and environmental regulation as well as maintain immunity from the U.S. Constitution. It was the same strategy the C.I.A. pursued in the foreign countries. Set up a puppet government; then use that regime to do your bidding.

Though no one lived there, Helliwell advised Disney to establish at least two phantom "cities," then use these fake governments to control land use and make sure the public monies the theme park generated stayed in Disney's private hands. On paper Disney World's "cities" would be regular American home towns—except their only official residents would be the handful of hand-picked Disney loyalists who periodically "elected" the officials who, in turn, ceded complete control to Disney executives.

In early 1967, the Florida legislature created Helliwell's two "cities," both named for the artificial reservoirs Disney engineers created by obstructing the area's natural water flow. When you visit Disney's Magic Kingdom, you are visiting the City of Bay Lake, Florida. The other was the City of Lake Buena Vista. In both "cities," in violation of both the U.S. and Florida Constitutions the Disney-engineered legislation established a property qualification for holding elective office, requiring that each candidate for office there "must be the owner, either directly or as a trustee, of real property situated in the City" in order "to be eligible to hold the office of councilman."



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Though enacted by the legislature, this and other crucial pieces of Disney-enabling legislation, which would reshape central Florida and affect the lives of tens of millions of people, was written by teams of Disney lawyers

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flown to Tallahassee where, without changing a word, Florida's compliant legislators enacted it into law. "No one thought of reading it," one ex-lawmaker later remarked. Later, after the houses there were sold, compliant legislatures excluded all the residents of Celebration from Disney's domain, to prevent them from voting.

Those who were there never forgot the day Disney inaugurated what truly would be a magic kingdom in Florida – magically above the law. The Governor and his Cabinet came down from Tallahassee. TV crews were in attendance, along with Florida's most eminent civic leaders. Right on schedule, the curtains parted. On the screen, Walt Disney gave his much beloved, self-deprecating smile, then announced that in Florida he was going to create a new kind of America, not just a theme park.

If Florida, among all the many melodramas of the last 500 years, could be said to have had only one defining moment, this was it because in this place, at this particular time, the distinction between reality and fantasy—nature and names—vanished entirely. Walt Disney was dead when he made this presentation. A chronic smoker, he had died of lung cancer seven weeks earlier. As the lips of the dead Disney moved, people in the audience murmured their agreement. As his hands gestured, they nodded their approval. The posthumous Walt Disney, like the mechanical Andrew Jackson in the Hall of the Presidents, had joined Mickey, Donald, and the Sorcerer's Apprentice in that special world where it doesn't matter whether you're real or not.

A month before he died Disney confirmed it was all a trick. There would "be no landowners, and therefore no voter control," Disney responded, when asked how he planned to maintain control.

Of course he was right about creating a new kind of America. By turning the State of Florida and its statutes into their enablers, Disney and his successors pioneered a business model based on public subsidy of private profit coupled with corporate immunity from the laws, regulations, and taxes imposed on actual people that now increasingly characterizes the economy of the United States. Over the decades Disney World has showed that, once tasted, partial impunity is never enough. As Disney World's powers increased, its lobbyists made sure the State of Florida lost even the authority to protect the public from injury and death there. In June 2005 Rob Jacobs, at the time chief of Florida's Bureau of Fair Rides

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and no one so much as protested.

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