

Disney's Hall of Presidents Not '76 Politics

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The election year has produced a chorus of lamentations about how cynical and mistrustful of their political leaders the American voters have become. Such attitudes may or may not be justified, and may or may not be healthy, but before jumping to conclusions the lamenters might contemplate the Hall of Presidents here at Disney World.

The hall is said to be a composite of various Colonial structures in Boston and Philadelphia. Actually it is a permanent movie set designed to function as a shrine. On a typical day, 20,000 of those same, supposedly "alienated" Americans sit reverentially through a 23-minute show that reaches its climax when a red curtain rises to reveal a stage full of electronically controlled, computer-operated robots of sculpted plastic, which are presented as reincarnations of the 38 Presidents.

Since Disney World opened four years ago, roughly 20 million Americans have seen the show, which has vaguely liturgical overtones, including a sermon by the Lincoln robot. Another six million or so will have visited it this year before the voters make the decision that will determine whether a new robot will have to be installed here in 1977.

Spotlight on Nixon Robot

Sometimes there is a sharp intake of breath or a snicker when the spotlight picks out the Richard M. Nixon robot, which stands in the front row on the stage between seated figures of John Adams and Dwight D. Eisenhower. But the attendance has never dropped off, even when the real Mr. Nixon was being driven from office and the mood of political frustration was gathering in the land.

After it leaves the Nixon figure, the spotlight falls on a President Ford robot. A complicated hydraulic system is activated and the figure solemnly nods its head. The Lincoln figure then rises to its full 6 feet 4 inches to deliver an address composed of extracts from various Lincoln speeches, no one of which was apparently deemed adequate to the occasion.

While Lincoln speaks, the other Presidents turn his way, blink and nod approvingly. The Lincoln figure is programmed for 47 body movements and 15 head mo-



President Lincoln is the only model that speaks. It is programmed for 47 bodily movements and 15 head motions.

tions, more than any of the other Presidents but fewer than a Mickey Mouse who manages, in another exhibition, to conduct an orchestra.

At the Hall of Presidents, the presentation is unflinchingly holographic. All the Presidents are proclaimed by a recorded narrator's voice to be "illustrious men" whose names have been "indelibly inscribed on history's role of honor."

Into Strong Applause

Almost invariably, as the last notes of the "Battle Hymn of the Republic" fade from the hall, the audiences break into strong applause. Then the doors open and they exit into a small arcade that leads directly to a shop that sells various pieces of Americana, including a selection of glazed tiles for \$2 each that are decorated with faces of any one of the last four Presidents. A young sales person in a Colonial gown said that the Nixon tiles sold well. The same is apparently true of \$1.50 Lyndon Johnson creamers and \$27.50 John F. Kennedy busts.

In an afternoon and even-

ing of interviews in the vicinity of the shop with tourists who had just seen the show, there was not a single person who declared it to be anything other than inspiring. "Goose-pimpily," was the way one woman described her reaction. "It really got to me," said Wolfred Ives, a bookbinder from Concord, N.H. "It makes you stop and think."

It made him think, Mr. Ives said, how lucky he was to be an American. But when conversation turned from the "Magic Kingdom" — Disney World's own designation for itself—to the recent Presidential primary in his home state, Mr. Ives was quick to declare that the latter spectacle had gotten to him in an entirely different way.

If he had been home instead of in Florida, he would probably have voted for President Ford but, he said, he believes the country is "just stagnant now." And that those who seek the Presidency are in the race mainly for personal gain.

On Campaign Finances

Conversation then turned to the subject of campaign finances and illegal gifts by corporations to politicians. Mrs. Ives, in a mildly speculative tone appropriate to a discussion of tomorrow's weather, remarked, "I wonder how many Presidents have had corporations standing over them, saying, 'You do this' and 'You do that.'"

These emotional cross currents—a yearning to believe in Presidents along with a mistrust of those who seek the office—emerged in erratic counterpoint in most of the interviews.

Dino Damilo, a bearded auto mechanic and motorcyclist from Providence, R.I., with an iron cross and a skull tattooed on his right bicep, said he thought the show was "dynamite" and "a trip in itself."

Then he asked why the country never produced "a President who understands what's going on, some one that understands who's hurting."

Frank A. Delaney, a member of the New York Stock Exchange who lives near Morristown, N.J., said that he hoped that no new robot would have to be installed in the Hall of Presidents next year. "The one that's there right now is all right with me," Mr. Delaney said, indicating his support for President Ford.

But positive as his attitude was, the broker found that he could not quite suppress

unwelcomed thoughts during the show. It was his second trip to Disney World and he thought he remembered that the Kennedy and Nixon robots had spoken the first time he saw them. Probably, he told himself, they had been silenced by the Disney organization because of Watergate and the recent rash of articles about President Kennedy and a number of women.

A Disney employee assured the visitor that the Lincoln robot was the only one that had ever been programmed to speak.

For many, the mixed sentiments still focused on the Nixon figure. Angie DePasque of West Orange, N.J., whose husband drives a Rheingold brewery truck, said that she was surprised to see that it was still there and thought it should be removed.

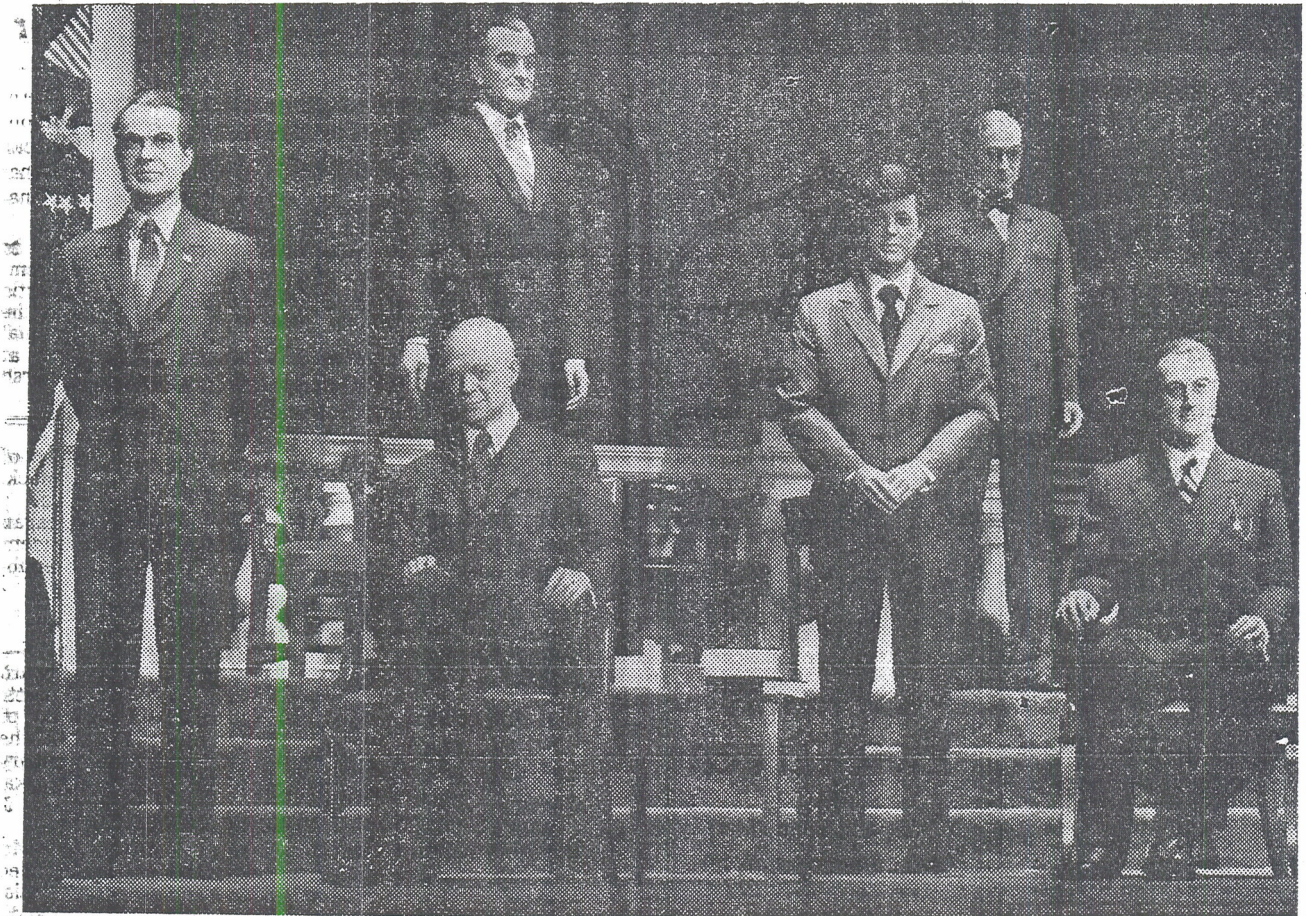
Joe Isia, who lays cables for the Commonwealth Edison Company of Chicago, said that it belonged. "Nixon wasn't the only one. They used him as a guinea pig," he said. The relative detachment with which Mr. Isia could view the former President didn't extend to the would-be Presidents of today. "You know what gets me," he said, "the Presidential election isn't till November but they're getting paid to run all around the country. How come it takes so much money to do a President? Whose money is it? It has to be ours."

Mr. Isia said that he would still be in Florida at the time of the Illinois primary but that he would not have voted anyway. Then, musing on the show, he expressed a preference for the earlier Presidents.

"Right away you respect Lincoln," he commented. You respect Washington. They weren't always moving around from state to state. They didn't leave a distorted taste in your mouth."

His wife, Pat, wondered if they were really so much better. "It's their clothes that make them different," she said.

Which was really the stronger emotion, the will to believe, or the disillusionment? With conversation going from the past to the present and from the "Magic Kingdom" to the world outside, it was impossible to tell. But thoughts of the world outside were clearly an intrusion. "This is the right way," said Mrs. Delaney, the wife of the stockbroker, "the way things should be."



Some of the computer-operated robots at Disney World's Hall of the Presidents. From the left are Presidents Nixon, Eisenhower, Johnson, Kennedy, Truman and Roosevelt. All 38 presidents are represented in the exhibit.