

# Rudolph, Santa & the Red Scare

By

Rev. Dr. Todd F. Eklof

December 21, 2019

## Introduction

I very seldom repeat a sermon, with the exception of my Christmas services. I love the Christmas holiday and over the years have put together what I think are some pretty special services for the occasion. Today's service, *Rudolph, Santa & the Red Scare* is among my favorites. This will be the third time I've given it during the past nine years. Since it's ultimately a response to fascism and groupthink, which are manifesting on both the Left and the Right these days, I think it's as timely now as it's ever been.

Picasso once said, "Art is the lie that tells the truth," which isn't entirely unlike what Oscar Wilde meant in saying, "Life imitates Art far more than Art imitates life." Both statements seem especially true of the two animated holiday films many of us grew up watching, *Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer* and *Santa Claus is Coming to Town*, both of which, after more than half a century, are still so popular they remain top sellers every year. On the surface, they are simple children's stories based on two classic Christmas songs by the same titles. But as we consider the eras out of which these movies emerge, they are artful renderings of two troubling periods in U.S. history.

The first, *Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer*, produced by Arthur Rankin and Jules Bass, originally aired in 1964, not too long after our nation had committed thousands of troops to fight against the spread of Communism in Vietnam. But our cultural dread of Communism had begun decades earlier, at the start of the Industrial Age and the subsequent labor movement in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Industry, not wishing to cut into its profits by treating workers fairly, campaigned against organized labor by demonizing it as Socialism and Communism, both of which eventually became all but illegal in the U.S.

The Bolshevik revolution in Russia in 1917 was the beginning of what historians call the first *Red Scare*, because red is the color of the Communist Flag, which is why Russians also came to be called, "Reds." The second *Red Scare* occurred between 1947 and 1957, during the early Cold War Era in which Russians, also called Soviets, became a threatening force in Eastern Europe, including blocking the West's access to Berlin. At the same time, a Civil war in China resulted in the emergence of the People's Republic of China, another Communist superpower. It was also the period during which both Russia and China supported North Korea's move to regain control of the South, resulting in the Korean War. All of this led to a "red panic" here in the United States, leading to the emergence of the House Un-American Activities Committee, led by Senator Joseph McCarthy, and its infamous witch-hunt for Communist sympathizers.

McCarthyism, however, was but a symptom of the suspicion many Americans felt toward each other, especially toward government protestors and labor unions. At the time, anyone who was the least bit different became suspect. As one historian explains, "Fears generated by the Cold War initially played a key role in encouraging orthodoxy. But McCarthyism was simply the most visible symbol of the many political social forces promoting common standards of behavior."<sup>1</sup> Or, as one newspaper editor cautioned in 1954, "Conformity may very well be the central social problem of this age."<sup>2</sup> It seems "Common standards" of thinking and "conformity" are again emerging as one of today's central social problems.

It's doubtful, however, that the executives at Montgomery Ward were thinking about the significance of the color when commissioning Robert May to create a coloring book in 1939, which resulted in the first ever story of Rudolph the *Red* Nosed Reindeer. Nor is it likely that his brother-in-law, Johnny Marks, gave it a second thought a decade later when he adapted it into what may be the most beloved Christmas song of all time. They were just creating art that imitated their social reality.

Nevertheless, on both a symbolic and unconscious level, *red* does seem an odd color to associate with the story's tragic little figure. For, in addition to its social implications at the time, red, in general, has some fairly negative connotations. It's associated with anger, which is why matadors wave red-capes at raging bulls. It's also the color we use on warning signs, yield signs, and stops signs, and to hold us back at traffic lights. Red conditions us to make sure the coast is clear. It's also the color of injury, of blood that's been spilled. The Red Cross, Red Crescent, and Red Crystal are all symbols used to mark emergency medical equipment, facilities, and personnel during disasters. It also signifies extreme danger under the Homeland Security Advisory System established after 9/11 and has traditionally been used by government and military officials in the same way: "condition red," and "red alert." Emergency exits are also red, and "crossing the redline" means going beyond what we know are acceptable boundaries.

Can there be any wonder, then, that others wouldn't let poor red-nosed Rudolph play in any reindeer games? They were culturally conditioned to be suspicious of how different he seemed, and they disguised their fear by laughing and calling him names. I propose it was out of this social milieu, in which everyone was expected to look, think, speak, and act alike, during the midst of the Cold War, that Rankin and Bass depicted a cold world in which a red-nosed reindeer, an elf that doesn't like to make toys, a skinny Santa, and an entire island misfit toys are ridiculed and forced into exile. It was the 1950's version of today's Cancel Culture.

---

<sup>1</sup> Tindall, George Brown & Shi, David E., *America: A Narrative History*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., W.W. Norton & Company, New York, NY, 1992, p. 1269.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

Imagine the impact these scenes of cruelty and ignorance toward such innocent and loveable characters might have had upon a new generation of sympathetic children just beginning to emerge from this Age of extreme conformity and groupthink. It seems as if the film's creators were using their art to make a statement about society. Their work of fiction became a lie that told the truth about American culture at the time, but they also took their work to the next step, promoting a more egalitarian and pluralistic society, by not only mirroring what society was, but what it could become, by showing the worth and value of misfits, of the ostracized, the exiled, in the hope, perhaps, that life might eventually come to imitate their art and society become more inclusive of everyone.

With all of this as background, let's take a look at a few of the highlights from *Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer*.

### **RUDOLPH MONTAGE**

As a historical footnote, folksinger Burl Ives, who narrates this film, was himself listed as a Communist sympathizer by the House Un-American Activities Committee. Unable to perform or make a living because of it, Ives, who wasn't a Communist, eventually gave of the names of several of his former friends, including Pete Seeger, who didn't forgive him for many years, though the two reunited and sang *Blue Tale Fly* together during a concert in New York 41 years later.

By 1970, when Rankin and Bass first aired their second animated classic, *Santa Claus is Coming to Town*, society had changed. The counterculture was in full swing. The shy misfits who were abandoned to a lonely island in the *Rudolph* story finally stopped trying to fit in, had rebelliously infiltrated the mainstream, and were loudly and boldly living counter to cultural expectations and openly celebrating their differences. "Come mothers and fathers, throughout the land," sang folk artist Bob Dylan, "And don't criticize what you can't understand. Your sons and daughters are beyond your command. There's a battle outside and it's ragin,' it'll soon shake your windows and rattle your walls, for the times, they are a-changin'."

The times were indeed "a changin'," as our nation's youth publicly protested the injustices of racism and war. The authorities often responded to these mostly peaceful demonstrators with violence. During the 1968 Democratic Convention in Chicago, television viewers were horrified to watch 12,000 police officers gassing and clubbing demonstrators and protestors for three solid days, an event that caused Vice President Hubert Humphrey to lose his bid for the White House.

One particular and prominent non-conformist was Abbie Hoffman who boasted, "Our conception of revolution is that it's fun."<sup>3</sup> Hoffman was a leader of the Youth International Party, also known as "Yippies," or "Hippies," which often distributed leaflets promoting the legalization of marijuana, the abolition of money, student run

---

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. p. 1376.

schools, and free love. It's difficult to neglect the obvious similarity between the hippies and the redheaded, red-clad, Kris Kringle character, voiced by Mickey Rooney, in *Santa Claus is Coming to Town*.

Although I've not been able to find much about the intentions of Rankin and Bass when they produced these two films, I'm especially curious about what the toys signify in *Santa Claus is Coming to Town*. Certainly, they represent how silly some of the social rules and norms felt to the generation of "youth in revolt," and what seemed to them to be the outlawing of things that were harmless and fun. You'll notice how Kris Kringle has no problem breaking laws that he dismisses as "silly," an interesting role model to put before our nation's children. You'll also see a wedding that takes place outside the church, with no priest or marriage license—a free love marriage if you will. More interestingly, there's a reference to "magic seed corn," that can make reindeer fly, and, as we shall see, a full-blown psychedelic trip that ensues after a prim and proper schoolteacher receives a doll and finally lets her hair down.

The point of this film, however, wasn't to promote lawlessness and drugs, but to question a society in which people aren't judged by the kind of clothes they wear, where they're from, and their different lifestyles. The fact that Sombertown is a grey, colorless community in which everyone looks and acts just alike, yet seem miserable, would have spoken volumes about conformity in the Civil Rights and Vietnam era. It really is a story of youth in revolt, of a new generation of people saying, "we're not willing to conform to a set of cultural expectations if it means losing the best, most colorful, most enjoyable part of living in the process."

Let's take a look at a few of the highlights from *Santa Claus is Coming to town*:

### **SANTA MONTAGE**

Both these programs are ultimately about discrimination, oppression, and conformity. But they also show us that in the end we're all misfits, because we're all unique, like snowflakes, no two of us are exactly alike, and that it might just be our uniqueness that saves the day. They remind us, when move beyond fear, that *red* becomes the color of love, of roses and Valentine hearts, and can be the guiding light that helps us see through the fog of conformity and sameness. Rudolph with your nose so bright won't you guide our sleigh tonight. Merry Christmas.