

serts, is a result of short-lived changes in Medicare in the early 1980s that he contends made it harder for some of the elderly to get medical care. Death rates have since resumed their decline. He notes that killers once regarded as inevitable "frailties" of old age, such as osteoporosis, are now considered treatable diseases.

Fries's converging lines, says University of Chicago demographer Jay Olshansky, are meaningless. The fact is that overall life expectancy is affected by many more things, notably infant mortality, than just the survival of more people beyond 85. There may be a natural limit to life, but it is not necessarily 85.

Indeed, University of Minnesota demog-

rapher James Vaupel has scrutinized unusually accurate Swedish data on 85-year-olds and found drastic improvements in remaining life expectancy during the past 50 years. The same is true for Swedes as old as 100. If there is a biological limit to life, Vaupel suggests, it may be 100 years or more.

The search has taken scientists to other species, notably to fruit flies. Early results from one study suggest that death rates do not rise for elderly insects.

For most of us, unfortunately, all this is largely a theoretical exercise. We will continue to die from "preventable" causes long before we have a chance to test the outer limits of biology.

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ARTS & LETTERS

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*Corruption  
And Democracy*

"*Democracy: Henry Adams and the Role of Political Leader*" by B. H. Gilley, in *Biography* (Fall 1991), Center for Biographical Research, Varsity Cottage, Univ. of Hawaii, Honolulu, Hawaii 96822.

In *Democracy: An American Novel* (1880), Henry Adams skewered the post-Civil War breed of political leaders for having abandoned the high-minded disinterestedness of their patrician predecessors. Against the backdrop of corruption in the administrations of Presidents Rutherford B. Hayes and Ulysses S. Grant, the accusation seemed quite plausible. In fact, when the novel was first published anonymously, many American readers took it simply as a *roman à clef*.

Senator Silas P. Ratcliffe, *Democracy's* villain, was actually inspired by James G. Blaine, who as speaker of the House of Representatives had helped to deny Adams's father, Charles Francis Adams, the GOP presidential nomination in 1872. Henry Adams "was not content merely to condemn his Senator Ratcliffe for betraying the people and for enhancing his personal power," observes Gilley, an historian at Louisiana Tech University. Political corruption, in Adams's view, had become a much more complicated matter than that.

Ratcliffe had begun his political career during the Civil War as a well-intentioned governor of Illinois. "The Senator sought power to achieve legitimate political objectives," Gilley notes, "but the quest for political power obscured his goals." His attitude toward politics became calculating and selfish. Means became ends, integrity was sacrificed to expediency. Finally, the senator accepted a \$100,000 bribe to stifle his opposition to a huge government subsidy for the Inter-Oceanic Mail Steamship Company and allow the legislation to emerge from his committee and reach the Senate floor.

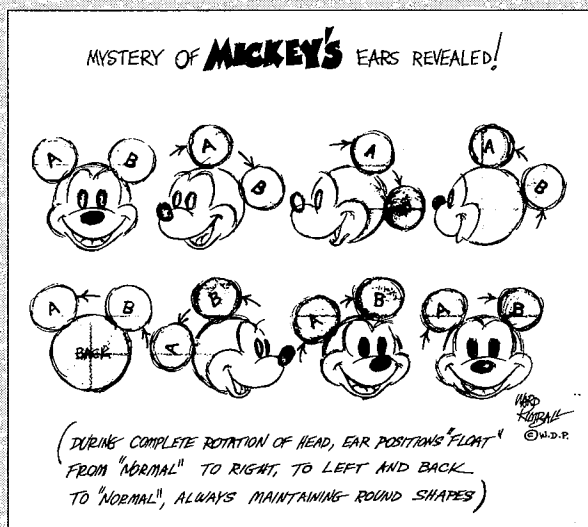
Adams did not excuse Ratcliffe's selfish rationale, Gilley says, but he did suggest that the erosion of Ratcliffe's will was a subtle development that was partly due to the pressures of democratic politics. American society's movement in an egalitarian direction and the rise of political parties had changed the environment in which political leaders had to act. George Washington had been able to stand above

## The Mouse That Roared

Novelist John Updike in *Art & Antiques* (Nov. 1991) ponders the enduring and widespread appeal of a plucky little rodent.

*His first, iconic manifestation had something of Chaplin to it; he was the little guy, just over the border of the respectable. His circular ears, like two minimal cents, bespeak the smallest economic unit, the overlookable democratic man. His name has passed into the language as a byword for the small, the weak—a "Mickey Mouse operation" means an undercapitalized company or minor surgery. Children of my generation—wearing our Mickey Mouse watches, prying pennies from our Mickey Mouse piggy banks (I won one in a third-grade spelling bee, my first intellectual triumph), following his running combat with Pegleg Pete in the daily fummies, going to the local movie-house movies every Saturday afternoon and cheering when his smiling visage burst onto the screen to introduce a cartoon—felt Mickey was one of us, a bridge to the adult world of which Donald Duck was, for all of his childish sailor suit, an irascible, tyrannical member. Mickey didn't seek trouble, and he didn't complain; he rolled with the punches, and surprised himself as much as us when . . . he showed warrior resourcefulness and won, once again, a blushing kiss from dear, all but identical Minnie. His minimal,*

*decent nature meant that he would yield, in the Disney animated cartoons, the starring role to combative, sputtering Donald Duck and even to Goofy, with his "gawshes" and Gary Cooper-like gawkiness. But for an occasional comeback like the "Sorcerer's Apprentice" episode of *Fantasia*, and [1990]'s rather souped-up *The Prince and the Pauper*, Mickey was through as a star by 1940. But, as with Marilyn Monroe when her career was over, his life as an icon gathered strength. The America that is not symbolized by that imperial Yankee Uncle Sam is symbolized by Mickey Mouse. He is America as it feels to itself—plucky, put-on, inventive, resilient, good-natured, game.*



political factions, but that aristocratic era was gone. "Washington was no politician at all, as we understand the word," Ratcliffe comments at one point in the novel. "He stood outside of politics. The

thing couldn't be done today . . . . If Washington were President now, he would have to learn our ways or lose the next election." Reluctantly, Henry Adams had come to the same conclusion.

## Inventing Leadbelly

"Our Singing Country: John and Alan Lomax, Leadbelly, and the Construction of an American Past" by Benjamin Filene, in *American Quarterly* (Dec. 1991), Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 701 W. 40th St., Baltimore, Md. 21211.

Leadbelly, the black singer and guitarist (1889–1949) who is now considered

among the most important of America's folk musicians, was first thrust into the