

THE SPHERE

Vol. 204 no. 1, published for the 233rd SFPA Mailing by Don Markstein, 14836 N. 35th St., Phoenix, AZ 85032, (602)485-7860, dmarkstein@cox.net or don@toonopedia.com, <http://www.toonopedia.com> or <http://www.uncadonald.com>. This issue's headline type: Viking.

There's a conspiracy theory going around, that Saddam Hussein is alive and well, enjoying luxurious retirement at the expense of the U.S. government. Does that sound plausible to you?

Me neither. Not that I'd put such a thing past either party, if it could possibly trust the other, of course. But if they **had** been in cahoots to the extent of pulling off something like that, seems to me he'd now be more of an eliminatable loose end than a candidate for lengthy retirement, luxurious or otherwise.

Still, I understand it's a fairly popular conspiracy theory in some parts of the world. I'd say that just goes to show how they think of the U.S. around there, but it doesn't. In fact, I'm not sure it goes to show anything, except that some people aren't very good at thinking things through.

Maybe it shows folks in that region think the U.S. government is more trustworthy than I do.

Most conspiracy theories fail because they require people to be stupider than they actually are. Saddam Hussein would have to be an idiot to go along with that scheme, and he didn't run the only stable government Iraq has had since the fall of the Ottoman Empire by being an idiot.

Still, it makes at least as much sense as the Non-Conspiracy Theories of why the U.S. went to war with Iraq. I'll skip the litany, because I believe the only one they're still clinging to is bringing freedom and democracy to the Iraqi People (who would be "pee-pul", I suppose, if the folks concerned with their freedom and democracy had been Liberals, as opposed to Republicans indistinguishable from the most virulent type of Liberal).

Question for those who supported this war because "we" just **had** to do something about that vile mad dog dictator. If the U.S. government sent people into your neighborhood, saying "We're here to **help** you", would you believe them?

Then why do you believe them when they do that in the Iraqis' neighborhoods?

Geez, with one side of their mouths they say they're bringing Democracy to Iraq, and with the other they say no way will the Shiites (remember the Shiites?) run the place. Ever see a democracy where 60% of the people couldn't outvote the rest? The U.S. has destroyed what, with all its **egregious** faults, was the closest thing the Middle

East had to a secular government; and if the Democracy side of its mouth is to be believed, will hand the country over to the damn Shiites!

As a philosophical construct, Democracy lays very legitimate claim to high ideals. But in actual practice, governments based on democratic principles, like other institutions created by mere humans, are far less than perfect. In Iraq, for example, given the well known proclivities of a clear majority of the people, a popular vote seems likely to elect a religious dictatorship.

Another philosophical construct/form of government like that is Communism. Abolition of the entrenched, inherited class structure, social and legal equality for all, exaltation of the laboring classes... All this sounds pretty good, and it's not hard to understand its popularity, especially in countries with low educational standards and a particularly large economic gap between workers and owners (such as the U.S. is rapidly becoming). Of course, a planned economy doesn't really lead to greater prosperity for all, but that's not always clear to the people caught up in it — including a great many government officials, who sincerely believe they can manage everything for the greater good of the populace.

What makes Communism hard to live with, even Communism in foreign countries, is its tendency toward evangelism. Communist countries often try to export their form of government. While a reasonable person would not meddle in the internal affairs of other countries (a principle strongly endorsed by the Founding Fathers of this one), it is **quite** reasonable to oppose those who threaten to meddle in one's **own** affairs.

So — the U.S. is bringing Democracy to Iraq, eh? And I suppose the next pipsqueak dictatorship the U.S. picks a fight with can expect the same.

If this continues, I confidently predict that as the 21st century rolls along, Democracy will come to be regarded with the same fear and loathing as Communism was in the 20th.

MORE SPAM

(Not to be confused with a certain commercial catch-phrase)

Last mailing, I was talking about the unfor-

tunately necessary practice of deleting the bulk of our e-mail without reading it. Most of the time, you can spot the ones you don't have to read easily enough, but there are pitfalls.

I recently got something with the header "You may find this interesting". That one could go either way, so of course, the next thing is to glance over at who it's from. This one was from somebody called "GorgeousWoman".

So GorgeousWoman thinks I may find it interesting, huh? My mouse pointer had already reached the "Delete" icon when I suddenly remembered — Rachel (who, by the way, turned 21 a few weeks ago) is using that silly name on Yahoo. So I opened it. She was just telling me about Free Comic Book Day, which I already knew of course, but still, one shouldn't treat a missive from one's daughter as if it were pornographic spam.

(By the way, Rachel and I are reduced to this form of communication because she's in Colorado. I sure do miss my baby — not Rachel (I love her but sometimes I can't stand her), but her son Nathan, who is 18 months old already.)

The problem, if it was one, of my own domain having been judged a spam source seems to have been solved. What happened was, rr.com, apparently a fairly popular ISP, put toonopedia.com on a blacklist, so every time I replied to one of their customers writing to the Toonopedia™, my reply would get bounced.

They did supply a procedure for getting off their blacklist. No doubt I could have jumped through their hoops, and may eventually have succeeded in clearing my name, as it were, but only at the frustrating and time-consuming cost of dealing with their paperwork and butting my head against their bureaucracy — and for what? So I can make their service more effective by answering questions from their customers?

Instead, I wrote a form letter (I ran it here last mailing), which I sent from my Cox address as a "courtesy note" to let my attempted correspondents know that instead of filtering out spam, their ISP was "protecting" them from personal communication, which they had solicited, and suggest they take their business elsewhere. Each time I sent that letter, I sent a copy to rr.com.

They seem to have taken the hint. I haven't been looking all that closely, so I don't know with absolute certainty that I've even gotten anything from that domain recently. But it used to happen every three or four weeks, and it seems to have stopped about three months ago.

LEPRECON 29

Another low-key weekend, a few program items I was on punctuating continuous talk with people I've known for years. I did see one guy who hasn't been around very often — Sam Konkin, whom I've known since the mid-1970s and haven't laid eyes on since about the early '90s. But since he keeps vampire's hours, and I'm an early-to-rise type, our waking times didn't overlap very much. Also, Tamelyn McLaren, a good friend of mine who moved out of Phoenix in 1997 or '98, turned up, but I don't know if any of you guys know her.

Sam was there to do a daily zine, as an alternative to the con's official daily zine, but the joke was on him — the con didn't have a daily zine, so his was the mainstream one. He seemed to be taking an interest in my schedule, so I gave him a print-out of the e-mail where they'd given it to me. I didn't intend it as a press release, but next morning my panels were plastered all over his front page, next to a photo of me. Sometimes Sam gets a little extreme about highlighting things with even the most tenuous connection to his politics — or at least, that's the only thing I can think of to explain this rather weird (and somewhat embarrassing) coverage.

I had volunteered for a family read-aloud session, and arranged for an overhead projector so I could read the kids a comic book. I chose "The Second-Richest Duck", Flintheart Glomgold's first meeting with Uncle Scrooge. Would've been a lot of fun, but nobody, and I do mean not one single person, showed up. Comparing notes, it appears none of the read-aloud sessions got great attendance, partly because they weren't pushed very much by the con and partly because they were in an out-of-the-way place. I think I'll try again at CopperCon in September, and this time suggest it be done in the babysitting room, where kids and parents are in and out all the time.

I did get a chance to go over some stuff with James Reade, who is drawing the first "Urban Cannibals" story. Gotta get to work and finish that script, tho. Right now, I have this zine to polish off, then a synopsis to write for a 30-page Mickey Mouse story, and then I can turn my attention to non-essential work. Unless something else comes up, of course.

Nobody else in the family was there, tho. Rachel, as I said earlier, is in Colorado. GiGi and Karen had long-standing plans for a trip to Mexico with some of GiGi's friends, and they

weren't about to let LepreCon get in the way. For the most part I got along okay without them, but it would've been nice if I'd had Nathan with me. Telling people like Tamelyn and Sam I have a grandson is fine, but introducing them to him would've been really great. He's such a neat kid! Of course, they pretty much all are at that age, but Nathan is particularly so — or is it just me?

Anyway, like I said, a low-key weekend. Quite enjoyable, but it seems like cons used to be a lot more exciting. Or at age 56, again, is it just me?

TOONOPEDIA™

Readership is still on the increase. As expected, February's average of more than 13,000 page views per day was a spike, owing to a few inexplicably very high days. But while March's average was a little less than 12,000, April's was almost 14,000 and May's, so far, is about 14,750. I'm utterly **dazzled** by my success in attracting readers, but would like it a whole lot better if I could successfully "monetize" them.

New articles this time are: The Adventures of Patsy; Big Chief Wahoo; Connie; Count Chocula; two Draculas; Egghead; The Fox; Frankenberry; three Frankensteins; Frankenstein Jr.; Funnyman; The Great Gusto; Ibis the Invincible; The Impossibles; Inch High, Private Eye; The Invaders; It, the Living Colossus; Long Sam; Luke Cage, Hero for Hire; Mike Nomad; Quackula; Peter Porkchops; The Punisher; Reg'lar Fellers; Shang Chi, Master of Kung Fu; The Small Society; Snagglepuss; Steve Roper; Watchmen; Werewolf; and The Yellow Claw. New total: 631, well over twice as many as I had when the site opened.

More than usual this time. A lot came in clusters, such as Steve Roper and Mike Nomad, who had to be dealt with separately because they were stars of the strip at different times. But when I did them, I kind of had to include Big Chief Wahoo, whom Roper had displaced, and at that point I might as well do the original star, The Great Gusto, no matter how few people remember him today. (Anyway, it's some distinction being the original star of a strip that's still running, and yet virtually unknown; and that deserves a least a brief article, which is all he got anyway.) I wrote all four of those in one long and tiring day.

There was even a cluster of clusters. I wrote one on a long series Prize Comics did about Frankenstein's Monster in the modern world, and having done that, figured I ought to do one on the Frank-

enstein series Marvel Comics did in the 1970s. And I rounded out the cluster with Dell's Frankenstein series from the '60s. But the Dell Frankenstein was one of a line of three superheroes based on old movie monsters, and there wasn't all that much to say about any of them, so what the heck, I polished off Dracula and Werewolf, too. But it seemed odd to write about an obscure Dracula series, when I still hadn't done the long-running and critically-acclaimed one Marvel ran in the '70s, so I wrote that article too.

Then I did Frankenstein Jr. (plus the other segment on the same show, The Impossibles). Then Chocula and Frankenberry. I was tempted to do Boo Berry too, but that way lies madness — in the form of Fruit Brute and Yummy Mummy, neither of which I'm ready to get down to. I did, tho, write up Quackula, for three major reasons. One, there isn't so much worth saying about him that the article would take very long to bat out. Two, I found a really good picture of him. Three, he's a duck, and I happen to like ducks. I'd have done Drak Pack and Groovy Ghoulies, but I haven't found good pictures of them yet.

There are a few obscuros this time, some of which don't even have the excuse of being part of a cluster. Connie, for example, I wrote up only because it was the strip's anniversary, and I didn't have anything else to link "Today in Toons" to. But within minutes of starting to research it, I found out it was the first adventure strip with a female protagonist, and that makes it actually worthy of an article.

The Adventures of Patsy is another obscure with a cool distinction — it sported the first costumed, super-powered hero in comics, some three years before Superman. I wrote that one up on its anniversary too, but not because it was the only thing I had. I'd been wanting to write it, but didn't have copies of the strip until just a few months ago.

It, the Living Colossus is another obscure, but the concept is so whacky (one of those goofy monsters Marvel used to feature circa 1960 returns as a superhero) I had to get it in sooner or later. While writing it (it didn't take much research), I happened to notice the title can be sung to the tune of "Yes, We Have No Bananas", and haven't been able to get that out of my head since. Hopefully, passing it on to you, you lucky duckies, will purge me of it.

One way to monetize the Toonopedia™ (tho it won't directly cash in on those page views) would be to collect it into book form. But to do that sort

of thing in print, I'd have to be able to offer something complete within itself — reasonably solid coverage of a definable sub-category rather than just a bunch of articles gathered to fill it up. I'm starting to think I'm far enough along to set that as a realistic goal.

Between Marvel and DC, either of which would be a decent-size volume, Marvel would be the clear choice to go for, for two reasons. It would sell better, and it would take less work. I made up a list, and if I were to write a Marvel article every week, I could have a respectable volume on sale in time for Xmas, 2004. So there's a disproportionate amount of Marvel stuff this time.

But there is a certain sameness to Marvel characters, and the grind of one per week got pretty boring. I got to thinking Hanna-Barbera would also make a pretty decent volume, and could be done at a slower pace for a 2004 Xmas release. It may not sell as well as a Marvel one, but it should do well enough; and while I'm working on it, I can be whittling away at Marvel so when I tackle it later it won't be so daunting.

So the plan at present is to have a Hanna-Barbera book ready next year, Marvel in '05, DC in '06, and then we'll see. It's vague and uncertain, but as it looks right now, that's my goal.

As always, point your browser at <http://www.toonopedia.com>

NED BROOKS:

Connection between Caspar Milquetoast and Casper the Friendly Ghost? Uh, let's see. Corporate ties? No. Creator ties? No. Ties related to spelling the first name the same? No.

Guess not.

Am I sure of that story about repairing the axe handle with Duck Tape? No, of course not — I wasn't there to see it with my own eyes. But I **did** get it in direct conversation with the person who claims to have done it, so at least it's not some kind of a rumor.

GARY BROWN:

I agree entirely that it's better to create a new character, one that has no baggage, than to interject contradictory elements into the history of an established character, and make him into something he isn't.

But — how do you know that applies to The Rawhide Kid? Do you have some reliable source of information that he was **not** gay when they introduced him in 1955?

I don't. I do know he wasn't **openly** homosexual before, but then, I've seen a fair number of cases in real life, in which someone who wasn't openly homosexual turned out to have been a closet homosexual all along, then became a flaming faggot type shortly after coming out. And if a thing isn't too fantastic to happen for real, it certainly can't be too fantastic for a funnybook.

So, while the practice you object to, warping existing characters instead of creating new ones to specs, is indeed an objectionable one, I don't see how the objection applies in this case.

Meanwhile, Marvel has announced plans to revive Millie the Model, only instead of an adult professional model, she will now be a teenage tennis star. Beats me why some people, who voice the same objection you do to hitherto-unrevealed information about The Rawhide Kid, aren't up in arms about this **actual** complete revision of an established character.

I said once before, if there had been a few complaints about deceptive design on the Palm Beach County ballots, or a few **dozen** complaints, or maybe even a few **hundred**, I'd say what a bunch of dorks! But when there are **tens of thousands**, and when the deceptive design works strongly in favor of the candidate openly favored by the people running the election, one simply has to entertain the possibility that something fishy might have been going on.

Instead, it's interpreted as "evidence" that the "pee-pul" aren't competent to govern themselves, a supposition no politician will ever own up to, tho it's at the core of a great deal of the ruling party's rhetoric.

But it doesn't even matter, because if the Supreme Court (which is every bit as Liberal as the Media) hadn't stepped in, it may have come out while it still made a difference, that even with all the shady business going on Bush **still** didn't get as many Florida votes as Gore. And since these facts **aren't even in dispute**, I gotta wonder about all those Republicans who continue to gloat at great volume and length about the alleged "result", and sneer loudly and repeatedly at the idea of the election having been stolen. Who are they trying to convince, themselves?

RANDY CLEARY:

The kindly, racism-free U.S. government ran concentration camps during World War II, just like the evil, racist Nazis and (in one case at least) allies. I don't know why it's so great a stretch to

imagine them (for purposes of enjoying a story) conducting medical experiments on minorities too — especially since they **did** conduct medical experiments on minorities around then, just not documentable ones confined within the span of World War II.

Furthermore, interjecting this scenario into the Captain America origin story doesn't detract in the least from Steve Rogers's courage in undergoing the experiment, because he didn't **know** it had been done before. As far as he knew the Super Soldier Formula was totally untested, and that takes as much guts as if it actually had been.

I'm not saying you have to **like** the thing — from the reviews, I gather I probably wouldn't like it very much myself. Just don't roll your eyes jingoistically at the thought of anyone writing a story based on the premise that the U.S. government is capable of evil, because it's a perfectly reasonable one, as we conservatives see confirmed every day in the news.

This business of meeting threats before they reach our shores — seems to me, you'd better be **damn sure** such an alleged threat actually is a threat before you start sending troops over there to shoot up the countryside, because when you cross an ocean to start a war, the presumption of innocence goes in the other direction.

And to apply such a "principle" to Iraq is just plain ludicrous. Even with the worst will in the world, which I'm not saying they don't have, after 12 years of sanctions Iraq's military couldn't **conceivably** deliver a weapon onto U.S. soil. The only way they could get it here would be for individuals or small groups, not affiliated with the military in any findable way, to sneak it in, and nothing done in Iraq during the past few months would preclude their doing that even now. That's if they **had** any weapons to speak of, and it's becoming increasingly clear (first clue being the fact that they didn't use any even when the regime was fighting for its life) they didn't.

Not that this should come as a great surprise — the evidence presented before the war wouldn't convince anyone who didn't already believe with all his heart.

You sure do place a great deal of trust in the U.S. government — not just in swallowing its transparent lies about Iraq, but also in your indignant denial (seen in your disdain for the Captain America origin revision) that it's capable of anything like the Tuskegee experiment, which is a matter of undisputed historical record.

As a lifelong conservative, I very strongly disagree. And I am appalled to see such anti-conservative views color the rhetoric of so many people who call themselves "conservative".

JANICE GELB:

While it's **technically** true that country music stations all over the U.S. started boycotting The Dixie Chicks when they exercised their right of free speech on the subject of His Imperial Presidentness, it would be even truer to say **one** large **chain** of radio stations, with outlets all over the U.S., is boycotting them. I understand their stuff is actually selling **better** now than before, but you don't hear much about that in the Liberal Media.

TONI W. REINHARDT:

I see you're slipping into the current popular mis-usage of the word "appeasement". Tsk tsk. A professional editor, too.

Used properly, in its historical sense, the word "appeasement" refers to the practice of allowing an expansionist military power (specifically, Germany in the days leading up to World War II, but it can be applied to the present world situation as well) to take over a defenseless country, in hopes that it will be satisfied with that and not gobble up too many more. Since Saddam Hussein's government has not attempted to take over anything since 1990 (and appeasement was very emphatically not practiced at that time), and since the only thing anybody wanted to allow it was continued existence in the face of U.S. opposition, obviously, the word must be **grossly** contorted before it can be construed as describing anything being done in that direction.

In reality, appeasement, in this case, is what the world is doing to George W. Bush, by sitting back and letting him have his way first with Afghanistan, and then Iraq.

But you're right about one thing — it won't work. I certainly would like to be proven wrong, but he's on the march and he isn't likely to stop there. Syria, Iran — what next? I've heard speculation that Saddam Hussein is holed up in France. Did they do that embarrassing "freedom fries" routine just to soften us up?

I appreciate the amusement you express at the idea that the Media are **not** Liberal, since it's the closest you've come to responding to anything

I've said since last year or the year before, when I accidentally committed that borderline *faux pas* that I almost immediately apologized for. (I'm quite generous enough to believe that's the actual reason, and not the demonstrated fact that you, who consider yourself such a wag when ridiculing Liberals, can't figure out what to say to a genuine conservative, which you are not.)

But it would be a lot funnier if you came up with some new material. How many reporters are registered Democrats as opposed to Republicans, how often they use the word "ultra" to describe conservatives as opposed to liberals, how many unkind things they say about Israel, as opposed to Palestinians... Yawn. I can get that sort of worn-out material, which was inconsequential even when brand-new, from any right-winger in the Liberal Media, and there are a lot of right-wingers in the Liberal Media. They don't call you guys dittoheads for nothing.

How's about freshening it up? Tell us about the vast number of newspapers and TV stations that supported Gore, as opposed to the pitiful few favoring Bush. Or the huge prevalence of non-interest in the non-charges against Clinton, as opposed to the practically non-existent trumpeting of them as tantamount to treason. Or the plethora of papers that prominently displayed Gore's Florida majority in the after-the-fact recount the Supreme Court kindly refrained from squelching, rather than burying that fact at the end, to be tossed out by every copy editor who found the story running a few lines too long. Or how overwhelmingly many were against the war in Iraq, as opposed to the tiny minority who relied on their in-bedded journalists and behaved like cheerleaders for it.

Not that there's anything **liberal** about trying to put restraints on the relentless expansion of the U.S. government, or anything **conservative** about adopting the David Schlosser definition of "defense", but you know what I mean.

And it would be even funnier if you got the **joke** about your own unquestioning faith in what you read in the Ultra-Republican portion of the Liberal Press. But then, if you had any idea why I find what you say on the subject so risible, it wouldn't be so risible.

But like I said, I'm a generous guy, so I'll tell you. What I'm laughing at is the fact that you and others attempting to co-opt the word "conservative" simply **can't stand** the thought that they're not uniformly in lock-step with you. As you demonstrate over and over, it doesn't matter how

much of the constant Media stream agrees with you — you only notice when it doesn't.

I'm betting, tho, that even having had it explained, you **still** won't get it.

Your memory is as conveniently poor as ever. Bush I wasn't ousted because he refused to deliver promised tax cuts. **One** of the reasons he was ousted was because he **did** deliver tax **in-**creases when he said he wouldn't. With Bush II not content squandering the Clinton Surplus on increased spending in every destruction-oriented way he can think of, but also determined to give it to his wealthy cronies for "private" sector squandering, that is **not** a trivial error.

Not that I'm particularly opposed to tax cuts. For destructive effect on the economy, it's pretty irrelevant whether the out-of-control spending Bush embarked on immediately upon being installed in office is funded by taxing or borrowing. It's still an attack on the livelihood of the Americans who can least afford it. It's **spend-thrift government** that has to be reined in, or is that too **conservative** a concept for you spare-no-expense-on-bombs types to grasp?

As for your assertion that cutting taxes for rich people will result in greater revenue for the government (as if **that** were a legitimate conservative goal!) — puh-leeze! In the words of a great American, that trick never works! It doesn't even have as good a track record as deficit spending, which used to be cited as a fool-proof stimulus to the economy until it got thoroughly discredited. (But don't count it out — it'll be back when voters catch on to the welfare for plutocrats scam.)

Re: the supposed necessity of the 1861-65 war in getting the slaves freed: You'll believe **any-**thing the government says, won't you?

GEORGE WELLS:

Yes, it was Al Capp, not Ham Fisher (Joe Palooka), who was seduced by a woman who disagreed with his politics, so she could pin "crimes" on him. In fact, I believe that happened when Fisher was already dead. (He died of his own bile, committing suicide after being disgraced by his fraudulent attempts to label Capp a pornographer.)

No, I never did read Max Brand to my kids. Not much of a western fan, I'm afraid. I can see, tho, that his books would be the sort of thing likely to work with kids, with their straightforward plots and characterizations, and clear, professionally written prose.