

THE SPHERE

Vol. 205 no. 1, published for the 234th SFPA Mailing by Don Markstein, 14836 N. 35th St., Phoenix, AZ 85032, (602)485-7860, ddmkstein@cox.net or don@toonopedia.com, <http://www.toonopedia.com> and <http://www.uncadonald.com>. Headline type: Liquid Crystal.

God told me to strike at al-Qaida and I struck them, and then He instructed me to strike at Saddam, which I did, and now I am determined to solve the problem in the Middle East. If you help me, I will act, and if not, the elections will come and I will have to focus on them.

George W. Bush
quoted in the Israeli newspaper *Haaretz*
June 26, 2003

This is a truly remarkable quote, and not just for his explicit admission that getting re-elected takes priority over the Direct Revelation of the Word of God. I guess he must figure God wants him re-elected more than anything else.

But then, why **shouldn't** God want such a devoted servant to have a lot of power? On Bush's orders, far more innocent people have been killed than were ever done in by the Son of Sam, another whose murders were justified because God told him to commit them. Bush may even have a bigger total than Osama bin Laden, who also kills people because God tells him to (tho I believe bin Laden, unlike Bush in this quote, doesn't claim direct personal communication).

Or maybe not, what do I know? Sorting out terrorist victims according to perpetrator isn't the kind of thing I feel very motivated to keep up to date on.

Anyway, this ties in with a suspicion I've had since the Reagan years, but which has recently been solidifying into horrifying plausibility. The one thing this suspicion explains, that's hard to understand any other way, is the rock-solid, virtually unanimous, one might say **fanatical** if the word weren't applicable to so many other things relating to this group, support for the State of Israel among millennialist Christians.

It seems very odd for monomaniacal Christians to support an endeavor of, by and for Jews, whom they don't otherwise appear to have much in the way of kind thoughts for — but remember, the State of Israel, or something much like it, figures into the Battle of Armageddon according to the Book of Revelation (Apocalypse in Catholicspeak). In fact, a very good case can be made that if Israel goes away or under-

goes substantial change, Armageddon will have to be postponed until conditions are again suitable for it — which may take centuries. Since many of these people hope and expect to live to see it, this would, from their point of view at least, be a very sad state of affairs.

Bush has been telling us for years that he's a born-again Christian; and tho I don't recall him making any specific statements about millennialist beliefs, I'll bet he's got 'em. Now, he claims God is directly dictating crucial elements of his foreign policy!

I live in fear that there is an element among today's right-wingers — and Bush, along with several among his coterie, looks **very much** like he's part of that element — who are trying to immanentize the Eschaton.

If you're not familiar with those terms, read *Illuminatus!*, which begins with the sentence "It was the year when they finally immanentized the Eschaton." You'll see a lot of parallels with the world around you.

LIBERAL-MEDIA- FRIENDLY CONSPIRACY THEORIES

Of course, this business about immanentizing the Eschaton smacks of Conspiracy Theory, and is *ipso facto* ridiculous. The same can be said of thinking Lee Harvey Oswald wasn't solely responsible for the Kennedy murder, or Franklin Roosevelt expected the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. How silly to believe such preposterous things! Why, one might as well believe in Hillary Clinton's Vast Right-Wing Conspiracy.

(In that case, there **actually** was a right-winger covertly arranging for the collusion of vast numbers of reporters, editors, investigators, alleged witnesses, alleged victims, prosecutors etc. in smearing the Clintons with anything that had even a remote chance of sticking. His name was, and remains, Richard Mellon Scaife. But he was spending his own money to do so, and I'm told that makes it not a conspiracy.)

But there are Conspiracy Theories that are actually quite well accepted among some who scoff at such paranoid ravings. You never hear them called Conspiracy Theories, because our Liberal Media regard Conspiracy Theories as crackpot stuff, and the Liberal Media would **never** suggest the people holding these theories are crackpots.

One of them is the Gay Agenda. According to this theory, homosexuals have what amounts to a "road map" which leads from their proper place as objects of hatred and scorn, to a glorious future in which — well, there's no unanimity on what their ultimate goal is, but surely, government and religiously sanctioned matrimony can't be the limit of it. Maybe they want legal mandates that everybody must be gay. Or maybe they'd be satisfied with less, perhaps merely open recruitment for their unholy lifestyle.

It also isn't clear whether all homosexuals are in on it, or just a hidden committee of policy makers and opinion molders. Either way, non-homosexuals are very emphatically excluded — not that anyone who isn't gay would **want** to get in on anything so yucky, but anyway, their secrets are closely guarded and known only by the frightening results they've already achieved or might achieve in the near future if we don't put a stop to them right now.

The Gay Agenda Theory has much in common with the Zionist Plot Theory, but is supported by less hard evidence.

But what got me thinking along these lines is a Conspiracy Theory I see accepted as unquestioned fact, to the point where it scarcely even needs to be stated. It informs practically all the news reporting that comes out of Iraq.

This theory holds that American soldiers continue to be killed there because they're up against Saddam Hussein loyalists, sometimes referred to as die-hard Baath Party supporters — in other words, the killers aren't acting separately, but in collusion with one another. A corollary is that if "we" can smash Hussein's surviving organization, or eliminate the people behind it, the steady killings (which are often called "terrorism", tho it doesn't look much like unprovoked attacks on innocent non-combatants to me) will quickly cease.

That's why the nailing of Saddam Hussein's

sons was treated as such a big deal — now that they've taken out a couple of Saddamist bigwigs, surely the violent opposition will dry up.

I wasn't surprised when it didn't. Were you?

There is an unspoken "lemma" in this, a lemma being a mathematical term for a small theorem that must be proven along the way to proving a big theorem. I put it in quotes because the word applies to theorems, not theories, but there is an underlying assumption which, if not accepted without question, would make the Saddam Hussein Loyalists Theory fall apart.

The "lemma" is that the U.S. military isn't doing a darned thing in Iraq that a reasonable person could possibly object to. If it were, then ordinary people **might** be committing violence toward American soldiers for their own reasons, rather than because an organization they wrong-headedly belong to requires it of them, and **of course** that can't **possibly** be the case.

We keep hearing how many Americans have been killed since His Imperial Presidentness declared the war "over". I'd like to know how many innocent Iraqis, merely going about their daily business, have been slaughtered by occupying forces during that time. If the Liberal Media were to supply **that** statistic, a few folks might get a glimmering of an idea that maybe, just maybe, the ordinary, non-aligned people of Iraq might have reasons to want the Americans gone that have nothing to do with Saddam Hussein or the Baath Party.

If anything, in fact, I'd expect the deaths of Saddam Hussein's sons to **encourage** people to shoot at Americans. It lessens the chance that getting rid of the occupying army might bring the dictator back.

Please don't mistake this point of view for lack of support for the troops, who are there against their will and doing a nasty job that no sane person would do unless forced to by someone legally empowered to kill him for disobeying orders. They're not killing Iraqis because they want to, but because the horrifying circumstances they've been placed in have made them trigger-happy for purposes of self-preservation.

Ever since this ugly business started, I've been a staunch advocate of supporting the troops by bringing them home safely. It's **Bush** who, instead of taking our sons and daughters out of a dangerous situation he had no business ever

putting them in, responds to the continued killing with a big, macho "Bring 'em on!" Would he say that if he were the one being shot at?

As bad as the possibility of getting killed might be, I doubt it's worse than the mental grind of living the way they're forced to live. In situations like that, it's easy to succumb to an attitude that life doesn't matter — and as we've seen with Vietnam, it often happens that such an attitude stays with a person years after it stops being relevant. The longer this goes on, the more we're all going to pay for that.

Meanwhile, there's a pair of dead schmucks who appear to be related to Saddam Hussein, who they finally, after months, tracked down to a cousin's house and slaughtered in a hail of gunfire despite the fact that only a couple of others appear to have had the misfortune to have been in the house to defend them.

I hear in the news that it's evidence of their arrogance, or perhaps stupidity, that they were holed up in a marginally defended house with known relatives.

I'm not saying they weren't arrogant, and I'm not saying they weren't stupid. But I do think their location is more likely to have been evidence of desperation. In a country that seems to consist of a few scattered remnants of a former strong-arm regime, a lot of occupying troops, and a vast populace that has good reasons to hate both — I'll bet they didn't have anyplace else to go.

TOONOPEDIA™

I made *The New York Times*, but I had to fight for it a little. It seems Lionel Wilson, a long-time voice actor, died, and his obituary in the *Times* was decorated with my picture of his most famous character, Tom Terrific. It's true, of course, that **anybody** could have scanned the same picture I did from the interior of a 1957 comic book, and **anybody** could have dropped the background and substituted a green field of the exact shade I used... But this one even reproduced a flaw that I inadvertently left in (and which I keep meaning to go back in and fix, but never get around to). But they credited the picture to CBS, which may own the character but had nothing to do with producing that image.

I fired off a protest, of course, but didn't have much expectation of getting the high and

mighty *New York Times* to give me credit. After all, I didn't draw the picture either — I just found it, scanned it, did considerable clean-up on it, and posted it on the Web where it could be appropriated free of charge without so much as a by-your-leave. To my surprise, tho, they wrote back a couple of days later and apologized. They not only fixed the picture caption on the Web, but also ran a line about it in the corrections, both on-line and in print.

I guess they're still smarting from the Jayson Blair episode, and want to head off even small complaints of inaccuracy. Anyway, they did fix it, and the self-styled "newspaper of record" now contains a record of my Toonopedia™.

Traffic continues to rise steadily. May was the first month in which every single day had at least 10,000 page views. Average that month was 14,814. One day in June dropped slightly below 10,000, but the average that month was still over 16,000, mainly due to the biggest and strangest spike I've ever had — 68,886 in one day, with no spillover to adjacent days and no explanation I could discover. July has been a bit more normal, and looks like it'll close out with an average in the neighborhood of 15,000 per day. I still haven't had a month with more than a half-million, but that could be coming.

(That's page views, not "hits" — actually, I'm doing well over a million hits a month.)

New articles since the last SFPA mailing: Angel & the Ape; The Black Terror; Blade, Vampire Hunter; The Blonde Phantom; The Bungle Family; Crankshaft; Deadman; Dr. Mid-Nite; Fighting Yank; Hokey Wolf; Huey, Dewey & Louie; Infinity, Inc.; Iron Fist; The Junior Woodchucks; Latigo; M.A.R.S. Patrol; The Mighty Mightor; Moose Miller; Pixie & Dixie; Ren & Stimpy; Snooper & Blabber; Super-Hip; Supermouse; Uncle Sam (traditional); Uncle Sam (Quality Comics); The Upside-Downs; Wildcat; The Woman in Red. New total: 658.

Only four Hanna-Barbera, when I'm hoping to have a book's worth by next Xmas. Not **too** bad for a nine-week period, but I should try to step up production in that category.

Doing separate articles for "Huey, Dewey & Louie" and "Junior Woodchucks" is nothing new — I've done separate ones on "Superman" and "Superboy", "Nick Fury" and "Sgt. Fury" and probably other pairs that are actually two

aspects of the same character; and I plan to do more. In fact, I'm eventually going to supplement the one on "Archie" with both "Little Archie" and "Pureheart the Powerful" (Archie as a superhero). I did the Woodchucks one for GiGi. Somebody on one of her message boards mentioned that there wasn't one, and she said she'd see to it one got posted. Next day, there it was. I figured I needed the nephews article to go with it, but it was a couple of weeks before I had a chance to write one. (In between I did a couple that required less research, because I wanted to keep up the sort-of steady flow but didn't have time for a big one.)

Ease of research was also why I did The Black Terror, a very minor superhero from a very minor publisher, but nonetheless one that hung on for a long time and is still remembered by a few people. But one character from a company looks naked all by itself, so I added a few — two of which (Supermouse, the first ongoing funny animal superhero and The Woman in Red, the first female superhero) actually were notable enough to where I've known for a long time I was eventually going to write them up. I found out later that they all went into the public domain in the 1960s when nobody bothered to renew the copyrights, so Alan Moore has populated a planet with that company's characters and used them in a couple of his own stories.

Another that I've always planned to write up was *The Upside-Downs*, a remarkable comic strip from the early 20th century, where the second half of each page-long adventure was read by turning the first half upside-down.

The two Uncle Sams (Uncles Sam?) went up on July 4th, of course. And no, I haven't been overcome by jingoistic fervor, just trying to be complete. For the comic book Sam, I used a picture of him bashing an Indian in the face.

Another one geared to a special occasion was Super-Hip, a fondly remembered supporting character in DC's Bob Hope comic book. That one went up on Hope's 100th birthday.

The Bungle Family was a special request. A woman wrote in to say her 86-year-old father remembered that one and would like to know more about it. I figured at 86 maybe he couldn't wait too long, so that was the next one I wrote. In researching it, I was surprised to find a lot of critical acclaim. I'd only barely heard of it, and

had no idea it was considered such a classic by so many knowledgeable people. I feel like she did me a favor by pointing me at it, because otherwise it might have taken me years to get around to it.

So I'm thinking, maybe it's time to run through *The Comics Journal's* top 100 of the 20th century and make sure they're all included. (Big talk for a guy who still has one or two Reuben Award winners to write up.)

Mostly, it's just the same old same-old. I'm gradually whittling away at the job, but there doesn't seem to be any end to the stuff that's crying out to be included.

The URL, as always, is
<http://www.toonopedia.com>.

NEW DISNEY COMICS

I missed the first batch when it came out — they just came and went in my neighborhood store, and I never even saw them. Fortunately, Gemstone Publishing had a booth at San Diego, and equally fortunately, I got to go to the con. John Clark and Gary Leach, both of whom I'd dealt with as editors (and known before they started editing), were manning it when I went by, so all I had to do was mention I'd missed them I was instantly no longer missing them.

(Unfortunately, John and Gary can't put me on the freebie list so easily — they had to argue to get superstars like Don Rosa and William van Horn on it, and I'm not exactly a superstar.)

It's the usual top-notch job. Excellent production values (even considering the extremely high price for monthly comics), and a good mix of stories that are new to the American audience (reprinted from European comics). The main reason I'm mentioning them is that some of those reprinted European stories are **mine!**

Walt Disney's Comics & Stories #635 went on sale in July, with a seven-page Horace Horse-collar story I wrote a couple of years ago. Also, the issue of *Mickey Mouse* that goes on sale in September will contain one of my ten-pagers. I was a little disgruntled about not being credited in the publisher's solicitations (John gave me some song and dance about only being allowed 50 words), but at least they're running bylines in the comics themselves. (Unfortunately, the bylines are on the inside covers. They used to do that back at Gladstone, and whenever somebody

bought an ad there, out would go the bylines.)

Damn, it feels **good** to see those stories printed in my own language, out where people I know can read them.

SAN DIEGO

I mentioned I went to the con. Didn't make a big production about it, tho — the con ran from Thursday morning to Sunday evening, but I arrived Saturday about noon and left Sunday morning. Just as well — the thing was so huge (estimated 70-75,000, with a huckster room more than a quarter of a mile long), I don't think I'd have gotten any benefit out of just wandering around for days. As it was, I had a scheduled agenda and stuck to it, and everything worked.

At least I was spared a lot of the standing in line that usually accompanies something like this. I'd pre-registered as a pro, so I not only got to skip the **looong** line of people who hadn't pre-registered — I also got to skip the line of people who did pre-register, but not as pros.

And I am **never** buying a paper airline ticket again! I groaned audibly when I saw how many people were waiting at the airport counter, but hadn't stood there more than five minutes before somebody came by to announce that those with e-tickets could check in using one of their handy terminals. I went over and poked the screen a few times, and out came a boarding pass! **Hoo boy**, do I love computers!

The reason I went was to have a meeting with a couple of Egmont editors (Egmont being the Danish comic book publisher I write those Disney stories for), one of whom I dealt with on a story a few months ago but had never actually met before; and to have dinner at Egmont's expense Saturday night, along with most of the Disney comic book people at the con. There were 20 at the table, and a fine time was had by all. (Good food, too.)

I also scheduled lunch Saturday with Harry McCracken, one of the old Apatoons guys, and breakfast Sunday with Gary Brown. Great seeing both (along with David Gerstein, my regular editor at Egmont, who joined me and Harry; and Wayne DeWald, whom I'd never met in person before, who was with Gary). Gary says the last time we were actually together was 1974, which seems beyond belief to me even tho I have no doubt it's true..

Harry tells me there is now an Apatoons member who is younger than the apa itself (which is 22 now, and which, in case I haven't mentioned it recently, GiGi and I founded). I met him briefly. He called me "Mister" and acted like meeting me was a big deal. Gawd.

The rest of the time, I cruised the convention center's exhibit hall (that quarter-mile huckster room), wondering if I'd run into anybody I know and seldom doing so. I just can't believe that convention has gotten so **big!**

RESULTS VS. PRINCIPLES

Mark Evanier's blog (<http://www.newsfromme.com>) recently had something about how most people seem to take result-oriented stands on various issues, rather than principled ones — i.e., he never seems to hear people say they don't like a particular result from the application of a principle they hold, but must nonetheless not strive to overturn it because the principle is still sound.

I suppose that applies to the opposite, as well — liking an outcome but denouncing it anyway because it violates a larger principle. So brace yourselves, because that's what I'm about to do.

I guess most people here probably applauded the Supreme Court's action in striking down Texas's (and by extension every state's) laws against sodomy. At least, I don't **think** SFPA has somehow become a bastion of homophobia. I mean, I'm not the most in-touch guy around, but **even** I would've noticed **that**.

And I'm glad to see the law gone too — as I am **any** time we manage to shed a law against something that's nobody's business as long as the people involved aren't complaining. These things have absolutely no place in a free society — or even in **our** society, if you ask me.

But as one thing after another becomes federalized, I have to wonder, just **what** are we still allowed to decide on a local level? In terms of bureaucrats employed, money spent, and sheer **volume of regulation**, the federal government is bigger than all the states combined — has been all my life, and it continues to get bigger, in both absolute and relative terms.

While it's nice to get rid of sodomy laws, this is the same Supreme Court that says it's okay to

seize people's property when they're accused of crimes, and not give it back when charges are dropped or even when the victims are acquitted. On the whole, I don't see that either freedom or utility is enhanced by increased centralization, and I **certainly** don't like seeing the court arrogate more and more authority unto itself.

When we depend on central authority to make us free of lower authorities, we are treading on very shaky ground. Federalizing an issue makes it available to the enemies of freedom at that level, as well as friends. If our point of view prevails today, that's nice, but nothing lasts forever, and no doubt other points of view will prevail another day. Now that sodomy is a federal issue, it may be that the federal government will reverse itself — it's done so in the past. And should that happen, there may no longer be states with different laws on the matter, as there were back when Texas still had its law.

Working for freedom on a lower level is slower and more painstaking, but it's also a hell of a lot more reliable.

Another along these lines: Martha Stewart.

Results-wise, I couldn't care less if they put that smug, smarmy, irritating woman in jail or bury her under it. But I can't see a single reason for doing either that makes sense except in the most avant-garde, pioneering ways of interpreting the law, and breaking new ground in law is to be feared by anyone who loves freedom.

What is **she** accused of, anyway? As near as I can make out, she's supposed to have covered up a crime that they can't even prove was committed in the first place. And unless I'm missing something fairly large, the "cover-up" seems to consist mainly of exercising her Fifth Amendment rights not to hand prosecutors a case against her on a silver platter.

Don't get me started on whether or not it **should** be against the law for people to use their specialized knowledge in doing business. It's too close to the deadline. There's no evidence she **did** do that, only evidence that she tried to avoid being prosecuted for it. And in a free society — or even, as I quipped earlier, in **our** society — that should **not** be a crime.

Then there's Harlan Ellison's lawsuit against AOL Time Warner. This one goes against my grain on two counts — I generally cheer for

human beings against corporations (whether or not I like them personally — principle vs. results again), and I generally cheer for authors against dorks who think they have a perfect right to post copyrighted material in public. But again, there's a larger issue involved.

What seems to have happened, briefly, is that a guy posted a couple of Ellison's stories, and Ellison sued not just the guy, but also the conglomerate that made it possible. (Please excuse me if this no-doubt overly quick summary glosses over salient points — like I said a couple of paragraphs ago, the deadline is looming.)

Now, the guilty party has apparently been sufficiently punished — even tho he does seem to be still alive and may even come out of shock before too long, I'm sure he's come to a clear understanding of what "all rights reserved" means. But Ellison won't drop it because AOL Time Warner is still fighting.

So — how, exactly, are they guilty? As I understand it, they moved quickly to remove the copyrighted material as soon as they were told about it. To me, this obviates any responsibility on their part. If they'd stalled unreasonably, I can see where he'd have a case. But that doesn't seem to be what happened.

The larger issue, this time, is Internet communication itself. If a corporation can be held liable for anything posted on its facilities, even after acting within a reasonable time to repair the damage, then they're going to want to scrutinize everything **before** it goes up. It's only natural — responsibility and control are two sides of a coin; and anyone being held responsible for a thing will of course act to bring it under control. The eventual result would be that anything posted to a message board or even sent via e-mail would need prior approval by the owner of the board or ISP, and I don't think I need to tell you how **that** would stifle communication

It would be like holding the phone company responsible for libel committed via telephone.

If Ellison wins this one — well, let's enjoy free expression on the Internet while we've got it, because pretty soon it'll be dead.

No mailing comments this time. Too much to do. This is nine pages before formatting, and that's enough. See you next mailing.