



Superman of the People

by Adam McGovern

THE UNLIKELY STORIES OF A TEEN, A DUCK, A MASKED SOLDIER, AND THREE VERY ODD PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGNS

A high-school friend of mine used to tell anyone who would listen that organized crime should be running the country. "But they'd use your money for immoral purposes," dismayed fellow students would say. "They'd use my money for immoral purposes and provide a service," he'd reply; "The government we've got now uses my money for immoral purposes and doesn't provide a service."

This pragmatic view of government efficiency is certainly reflected in the sinister yet savvy management of Lex Luthor, longtime arch foe of Superman but recent President of the DC Universe's United States. Of course, there's a short distance between the benevolent scheming of the public President Luthor in the mainline DC comics and the unambiguous tyranny of the behind-the-scenes version in Frank Miller's *Dark Knight Strikes Again*, and either one can be seen as an allegory of people's distrust of politics in a country where less than half of those eligible ever cast a vote.

Get Down, America!

Howard the Duck's 1976 presidential portrait, by Bernie (then Berni) Wrightson.

Howard the Duck © 2004 Marvel Characters, Inc.





But other comics characters, in the grand super-heroic tradition, have represented political wish fulfillment more than reflecting real-life fears. Few comics fans haven't heard of (though perhaps few have also read) Joe Simon's *Prez* ("First Teen President of the U.S.A."), and readers of a certain age will well remember when Howard the Duck, that not-so-funny animal from another dimension, ran a 1976 campaign as the ultimate Washington outsider. Even Captain America came close to the logical conclusion of his role as a pumped-up patriotic problem-solver by almost throwing his mask into the ring in a landmark 1980 issue.

As we make our way through another election between aspirants who aren't always what they seem, *BACK ISSUE* feels the time is right to take a look at some of the fully fictional characters who have sought the nation's highest office.

THE PRIMARY

When it comes to super-powered presidents, the world of animation actually beat comics to the punch, with the serviceably titled *Super President*, a 1967 TV cartoon from DePatie-Freleng. The title character was a noble if irradiated chief executive with molecule-changing powers, souped-up crime-chasing vehicles, and a secret subterranean HQ later used by Ollie North. Having been born just too late for JFK in a household where his myth was alive and well, this all greatly appealed to me, though *Super President* was a one-termer, lasting for only a single season that few remember and even those of us who do tend to doubt we really saw. No one thinks about the seven guys who ran the country before George Washington, either (under the Articles of Confederation), so we might as well move on.

YOUNG MASTER PRESIDENT

The first comic-book character to run for public office was created to do so, but couldn't have been more surreal had he been a caped-and-bootied vote-seeker: Debuting for DC Comics in 1973, *Prez* was an enterprising teen from a fictional Anytown, USA (foresightedly named "Prez" Rickard by a prematurely proud mom), who meets his destiny when powerful interests seek to exploit the

recently lowered voting age with what they feel will be a naïve puppet Senatorial candidate. In the speed of an amphetamine binge, the electrified teen electorate also gets the presidential age minimum lowered, sweeping *Prez* into the White House instead. The brainchild of Captain America co-creator Joe Simon (now setting his sights higher than that rank for a patriotic hero), *Prez* foils his corrupt handlers and elevates a multicultural cabinet to push a peace-and-love agenda. Since we're still in a comic book, he also finds time to fend off malevolent robot chess pieces from the Soviet Union (superior chess players being one of the USSR's real-life PR weapons in those days of cold war stalemate), and a vampiric invasion from Transylvania (your guess is as good as mine).

Whether meant as a swipe at the surrealistic climate of then-President Nixon's misrule, a spoof of the flower-power generation, or relief from the wave of "relevance" then sweeping more straight-faced super-hero comics, the general readership ordered a recall and *Prez* didn't make it past a fourth issue (though a fifth was produced). The character was purged from DC continuity quicker than you can say "Saddam statue," though before cancellation he did inconveniently complicate both comic-book and political reality as the guest star (and acknowledged current president) in an issue of *Supergirl* (which must be the real reason they had to kill her).

Nonetheless, Simon remembers the *Prez* administration with fondness. Speaking from his New York home, he recalls the character's pop-culture forefather: "I was sitting in a movie theater watching *Wild in the Streets*," he recounts with a laugh, in reference to the 1968 exploitation classic about a rock star intemperately elevated to office by 15-year-old voters, "and I loved it and thought it would really go over big [as a comics series]."



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FAR-OUT TEEN OF THE WEST WING!



Was the concept met with enthusiasm by the DC leadership? “They were taking anything I gave them at the time,” the comics legend says, and “[then- publisher] Carmine [Infantino] got very enthusiastic. And they loved [artist] Jerry Grandenetti’s work, but the readers didn’t accept

his style. I don’t know—nothing [new] sold at the time at DC, so you can’t blame me for everything,” he laughs.

Could it have been that the readership of that era just couldn’t comprehend a non-super-hero book? “I don’t *think* so,” Simon reasons with his usual sly humor. “I mean, how many super-hero books could they put out? It was a time when the sales seemed to be dominated by collectors, and they were looking for old characters; we were trying to be different. But if I knew [why the book failed], I’d still be in business!”

In conversation Simon is such a comedian that I had to wonder how serious he meant *Prez* to be. “Well, it kinda turned out to be true, with the Clinton people, didn’t it?”, he laughs. “But what I perceived was a cute little comedy sparked by some adventure plots, and I loved that book.” As to which side he took in the fun-house culture-war *Prez* depicted, Simon makes clear that he’s a longtime Republican who even designed stationery for Richard Nixon’s reelection committee. (And why not? Without Nixon signing the 18-year-old vote into law, there might have been no *Prez*.)

So did he sympathize with his star and fellow travelers or think of them as jokes? “Both!”, Simon enthuses, with just the sense of humor that generations of wary admirers have felt for the wacky concept. “I thought they were cute as hell.” Political loyalties notwithstanding, Simon takes the creator’s parental pride in all his ideas: “Yeah, I liked them; I wanted to be friends with them. *Prez* was a good guy.”

When asked whether he had any more stories in mind for the book when it was cancelled, Simon answers,

“Oh, yeah, we had a ball doin’ that stuff.” And does this enthusiasm extend to the two “issues” that other teams have brought out since? Neil Gaiman wrote a lyrical retelling of the Prez saga, with suitably groovy art by Mike Allred, in *The Sandman* #54 (1993); Simon beefed with DC over a perceived slight in creator credit, though he allows that Gaiman is “a terrific writer.” As for Ed Brubaker and Eric Shanower’s 1995 one-shot *Smells Like Teen President*, the grunge-era odyssey of a troubled youth who thinks he’s Prez’s abandoned son, Simon “never saw it. I guess they pulled that from my mailing list,” he laughs.

In any case these homages show that Simon’s not alone in his affection for the series—and the support column may be filling in ways no one expected, as Simon reveals recent studio interest in a *Prez* film: “DC turned them down, but they came back and they’re still discussing it.” Nothing could be more in keeping with the counterculture president than to demand full media exposure and not take no for an answer, so perhaps *Prez*’s cause still isn’t lost.

WAG THE DUCK

Of course, lost causes are how everything looked by the time the turmoil of the early 1970s gave way to the torpor of mid-decade, and while *Prez* was born in a time of domestic terrorism, government scandals, ethnic pride and environmental victories, it was into a climate of apathy, empty hedonism, nuclear threats, and really bad hairstyles that comics’ next presidential contender stepped into the arena—or waddled, as the case may be.

Steve Gerber’s satirical social commentator Howard the Duck threw his hat into the ring as of the letters page in the foul-tempered fowl’s fourth Marvel Comics issue. The poker-faced “campaign announcement” offers a fascinating look back at the ’70s from the viewpoint of those actually having to live through them, rather than the rose-colored aviator glasses of hipster nostalgia: “. . . in this impossible era when tumult and social trauma have given way to the mire of mediocrity and monotony . . . it’s time to take a stand.”

In truth, from George Clinton and Erica Jong to

NIXON’S SECRET WAR ON COMICS

Most Americans are unaware of the 1950s Congressional hearings against comic books, but that was not the last time the medium found itself at the center of little-regarded history. Passing almost unnoticed among the volumes of Richard Nixon’s tapes released by the National Archives is a lesser-known set from the former leader’s waning years in Saddle River, New Jersey. In this excerpt, Nixon and an aide discuss the ominous parallel-universe portrayal of his perpetual administration in Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons’ graphic novel Watchmen. Admirers of the book’s landmark status could scarcely have suspected just how historic it was. .

Assistant [nervously]: I-I see you’re back in the comics pages, sir. . .

Nixon: Yeah—that candy-ass limey, Moore! [Sound of gin bottle accidentally tipping over on the desk] Can’t we send some a’ Hoover’s boys in and “find” a little reefer in his drawers? Have the [expletive] deported!

Assistant: A-actually, he already lives abroad, sir. . . . And Mr. Hoover’s passed on. A-and you’re no longer in the White House.

Nixon [grumbling]: There’s a cancer on the ex-presidency. . .

Note: No facts were used in the preparation of this item.



FEATHERED MALLARD OF MUNICIPALITY!

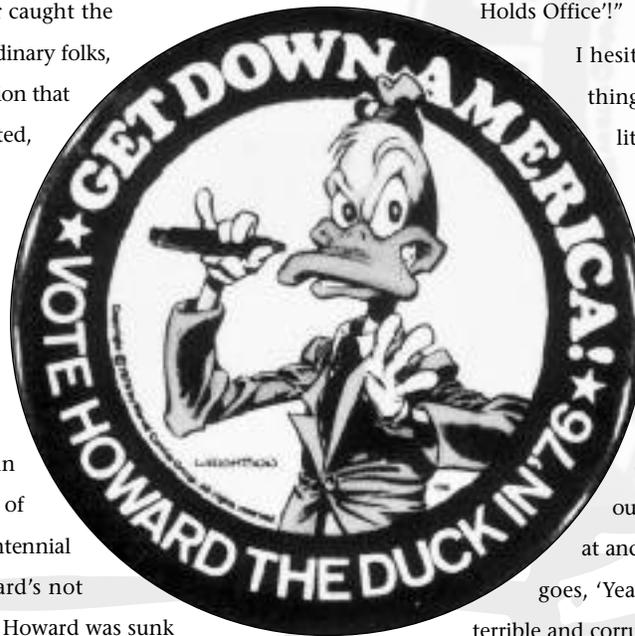
Martin Scorsese and Gerber himself, the '70s offered more *un*-monotonous pop culture than we'd see for another two decades; nevertheless, the political class hadn't caught on any more than they have now, so we sorely needed a candidate—even a fictional one—who could yell "Charge!" rather than, well, "Duck!"

Professing that he needed something to do until November, Howard accepted the "All Night Party"'s endorsement, embarking on a kamikaze campaign of protest pranks (like dumping a polluting company's waste back on its manicured lawn) and unvarnished truthfulness. The latter caught the admiration of many ordinary folks, along with the assumption that he'd soon be assassinated, which many would-be duckhunters-for-hire tried. Along the way Howard earned the opprobrium of candidates Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter, and the endorsement of Captain America, who was sick of hearing about the Bicentennial and appreciated Howard's not invoking it. At length, Howard was sunk by a sex scandal trumped up by a resentful Canadian super-patriot bent on subverting American elections.

I'm not making this up, but Gerber was the mad genius who did, so I went to the source. Speaking from his home in the absurdity capital of America, Las Vegas, and as funny in person as he is on paper, Gerber sat down for a campaign postmortem.

"The nature of the character lent itself to social and political satire, and being the first election after Watergate it was a very peculiar time in American political history," Gerber reminisces of the perfectly logical context for this perfectly surreal storyline.

"Storyline" scarcely does the idea justice, though, since it was staged as more of a multimedia prank, with campaign buttons ("Get Down, America! Vote Howard the Duck in '76"), regular letters-page bulletins, and,



Gerber confirms, actual write-in votes. "He got about 200 in the general election," Gerber says, citing press reports. "Ford wasn't worried."

Not that there's traditionally much competition from comics characters for elected leaders—I asked Gerber what he thinks it says about the medium that so many of its heroes are monarchs (from Black Panther to Aquaman) while so few try the democratic process. "I'd never thought about that before," he laughed, "but it probably says something about the culture in general. After all, the expression is 'So-and-so Rules,' not 'So-and-so Holds Office!'"

I hesitated to ask how he'd do things differently now since so little seems to have changed, but opted not to delay the inevitable, and sparked his comic, tragic sense: "When I last read the story I was struck by, 'Gee, satire really doesn't seem to do much good, does it?' You can parade this out there for everybody to look at and everybody sort of nods and goes, 'Yeah, yeah, isn't the system terrible and corrupt and aren't the electorate led like sheep and aren't we really stupid' and then they go do the same thing the next time. And apparently, for 20 years *beyond* the next time." But who says nothing ever changes—Gerber did agree that, after the popular Clinton presidency, Howard might have to fake the sex scandal himself "*in order to win.*"

And what would Howard's advice be to those who *are* running this time? "Go home and start again in September," Gerber said, in the midst of an already overheated campaign spring. "Leave everybody alone. Eleven months of this is really a little too much. Let's do what we used to do, start the campaign on Labor Day, give everybody two months to think about it and then have the election." Apparently fatigued by the disputed presidential contest of 2000, the Duck, we were assured, would also "endorse the abolition of the

Electoral College.”

Better to take refuge in fantasy: Though comics fans usually want to know which supervillain is stronger, Howard calls for different standards, so I asked how he might have fared in an election against satirist Michael Moore’s 2000 candidate Ficus, the potted plant. “It depends on whether they’d cheat and feed Ficus Miracle-Gro,” Gerber gamely replied. Emboldened, I asked how Pigasus, the Yippies’ prank porker presidential candidate from 1968, fared on Howard’s homeworld, but alas, “I don’t follow the elections back there.” You heard it, kids: even Gerber has grown apathetic. But seriously, I thanked him for his time and undiminished vigor. “Just feed me some Miracle-Gro,” he replied.

CITIZEN CAP

It may not be true that the political climate never changes, since comics creators obviously think that increasingly drastic solutions are necessary, from an ordinary teen in the ’72 election, to a dimension-crossing duck in ’76, to a super-powered vigilante in 1980. By that election, when independent candidate John Anderson was focusing the frustration of many Americans with the choices offered by the two major parties, writer Roger Stern and artist John Byrne decided to tell a story about Captain America himself considering a campaign (in *Captain America* #250).

Unlike his usual adventures, Cap didn’t leap but was pushed into his presidential contemplations, drafted in an unauthorized publicity campaign by the fictional, fledgling New Populist Party. After a disillusioned nation’s fantasies are fired by the prospect and Cap fields the frenzy both pro and con and searches his soul in an unusually cerebral story, he decides against it, in a convention speech explaining how he guards the American dream, is unsuited to the messy compromises of the current reality, and leaves it up to ordinary people to choose leaders who can make the dream come true.

Looking back, it’s tempting to see Cap’s concession as the warning of a cartoon character wiser than some actual politicians about the peril of choosing style over substance in the then-current election that went to movie-star Ronald Reagan. But both parties’ winners

have ruled by soundbite ever since, and in an email exchange Stern recalled how gray the political area looked at the time:

“You have to remember that the story was written in 1980, during the Iranian hostage situation. Jimmy Carter was up for re-election, and was challenged from within his own party by Teddy Kennedy. The nation was looking for a candidate they could trust, someone who knew what he was doing and could be an effective, articulate leader. If there had been an actual Captain America, he could have won in a landslide. The sad reality was that we wound up with eight years of Ronald Reagan soundbites, most of which didn’t make a damn bit of sense. [But] I think this is a problem the nation has faced for a long time; it’s just gotten worse in recent years.”

More divisive to some comics fans than politics, of course, might be the story’s implication of the limits of the super-hero fantasy in general, though Stern sees his whole run on the title as a reflection of real-life concerns: “Beneath the surface, issues were raised in just about all of our Captain America stories,” Stern says of both the thought-provoking and the action-packed sequences. “The Machinesth story’s subtext was about the quality of life and the ethics of euthanasia. The Batroc and Hyde story dealt with extortion, petro-politics, and revenge. And of course, the whole series was about a man out of time who sought to reconcile his ideals with day-to-day realities. But it was fun—and a nice change of pace—to write a story in which no more than a couple of punches were thrown.”

Though Cap declined to lead the nation, he did bring a disparate creative team together, uniting the American Stern (“a practical moderate in all things—including moderation,” he quips) with the conservative, Canadian Byrne. I wondered how this mix worked to bring the story about.

“I don’t believe that John is as conservative as some think,” Stern offered. “His personal politics is much



STAR SPANGLED CHAMPION
AND PRESIDENT?



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more traditional and reasoned than the sad, arrogant reactionary-speak that passes for conservatism these days. We both believe in the American dream. You really have to, if you're going to be faithful to the concept of Captain America.

"What John brought to the Cap-for-President story was more dramatic and atmospheric than political," Stern continued. "The scene he drew, where Cap goes back to his old school building, will always stay in my mind. And remember the gigantic poster of Cap at the convention? It was like something out of Citizen Kane. John handled all the staging, and the poster at the convention was all his [idea]. John's art really made that story work."

Giving as good a summation as one could want for both the escapism and civic striving that form the subtext of these strange tales, Stern concluded, "But the story was more about ideals than politics. Or rather, it was about ideals over politics."

BETTER LUCK NEXT TIME

Comics creators don't seem set to abandon those ideals any time soon—in 2004 alone, Iron Man's alter-ego Tony Stark has become the Marvel Universe's fictional Secretary of Defense, Captain America has been asked to be a maverick candidate's vice-presidential running-

mate (and has declined again—for now), and a retired movie-serialesque rocketman has reemerged as Mayor of New York in Wildstorm's *Ex Machina* series (a fate also foreseen for Cap's partner the Falcon [himself a former fictional Congressional candidate] in a futuristic 2002 issue of *Black Panther*). For comics fans, if not real-life political buffs, the choices look sure to stay exciting.

BACKISSUE[!] Unofficial Ballot

VOTE for one (1):

PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES

SUPER PRESIDENT

DePatie-Freleng Party

PREZ RICKARD

Flower Power Party

HOWARD THE DUCK

All-Night Party

CAPTAIN AMERICA

Avengers Party

LEX LUTHOR

Hair Club for Men Party

end

POWER POLITICS

It's little surprise that comic-book characters seeking public office has been rare, but more surprising that they've lost out to real-life politicians when the crossover tally is totaled.

Presidents have been recurring guest-stars in comics at least since John F. Kennedy started making semi-regular appearances with Superman in the early 1960s, doing everything from impersonating Clark Kent in order to protect Supes' secret identity (!) to enlisting the Blue Boy Scout to promote a national physical fitness program (the latter story published post-assassination, reportedly at Lyndon Johnson's request).

*Presidents whom writers don't happen to like are always a handy source of super-villains, too. An off-the-rails Ronald Reagan is apparently president-for-life in Frank Miller's *Dark Knight Returns*, while the dystopia of Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons' *Watchmen* is partially due to a President Nixon with even more staying power than the real thing. Miller (also with Gibbons) went on to chisel a predicted President Quayle onto Mt. Rushmore (before moving on to the onomatopoeically-named fictional President Rexall) in his political action thriller *Give Me Liberty*.*

*At Marvel, Presidents Carter, Bush I, and Clinton have cameoed, in incisive but balanced portrayals of their charisma and misjudgments, in J. Michael Straczynski and Gary Frank's *Supreme Power*, and Vice President Dick Cheney has been an unlikely supporting-cast member in the current *Silver Surfer* series.*

*George W. Bush nearly has a genre to himself, arguing politics with unstereotypical savvy in *Black Panther's* "Enemy of the State II" story arc (issues #43-45), rallying the super-troops with his loved-and-hated single-mindedness in *The Ultimates* and *The Order*, and pre-incarnated as a fumbling frontier mayor in the satirical *Rawhide Kid* revival.*

*On Saturday Night Live some real-life politicians have gotten to be super-heroes themselves in the "X-Presidents" animated shorts, while characters who've gotten to be comic-book leaders while being neither real nor super have included the star of the manga *Eagle: The Making of an Asian-American President* and the literally landmark head of state in *Spider-Girl's* parallel universe, *President G.W. Bridge*.*