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Pop-Culture & Trump: Interviewing R. Sikoryak, Creator of the Unquotable Trump

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ROBERT A. SAUNDERS, OCT 1 2017

I recently sat down with Robert Sikoryak, who typically works under the name R. Sikoryak, to discuss his recent project *The Unquotable Trump*. Building on the artist's expertise at adapting great works of literature to the comic book format, the collection of retooled iconic covers uses Trump's bombastic quotes cast against fantastic scenes to satirize the U.S. president and his policies. With this explicitly political project, Sikoryak joins the ranks of other cartoonists who have turned their pen into a weapon against the billionaire reality-TV host-turned-leader of the free world, from Stephen Byrne's 'Trump Rally' to Pia Guerra's Bannon-Trump 'Big Boy' to the feminist anthology 'Resist'. In many of Sikoryak's depictions, Trump assumes the role of a super-powered antagonist, such as a winning-obsessed Magneto taking on the 'Ex-Men', an apish campaigner chastising 'The Black Voter', and a Dr. Doom-like overlord trying to nab some 'Hombres Fantásticos' (all of which reprise famous covers from Marvel Comics *The Uncanny X-Men*, *The Black Panther*, and *The Fantastic Four*, respectively). On other covers, he assumes more banal forms, such as a flesh-eating zombie in 'The Walking Donald', a misogynist thug dispatched by Wonder Woman, or a Bluto stand-in bragging to Popeye about his ability to build a 'wall'. Given the increasingly recognised power of graphic novels and sequential art to reinforce and transform political culture and even impact international relations, I wanted to dig into Sikoryak's motivations and methods, with an eye towards how such representation reinforces or challenges ideas about Trump in the U.S. and overseas.

Saunders: Could you discuss when and why you decided to embark on your now-famous project to employ classic comic-book covers to depict Donald Trump's bid for the U.S.? How did your previous experiences adapting literary classics to comics inform your work?

Sikoryak: The idea came to me in early November 2016, just a few days before the election. I was so exhausted and distressed by Trump's outrageous statements as a candidate that I wanted to say something. I thought it would be a perfect satirical response to take his actual quotes and put them into parodies of real comic book covers, which are so bold and graphic. But on November 2, I really didn't want to think about him anymore! And then, a few days later, he won the election, and I felt I had to do it.

I originally did 16 of the covers for a small, self-published black and white mini-comic, and I thought that would be it. But then I posted the images on Tumblr, and the response was overwhelmingly positive. So I was convinced to keep doing them, and I incorporated more quotes from the campaign as well as many spoken since the election. I drew a total of 48 covers over the course of about six and a half months.

This project is related in some ways to my comics that retell the classics (such as those in my book, *Masterpiece Comics*). For those, I also try to replicate the styles of famous comics, and I take great pleasure in remixing them with literary sources. *The Unquotable Trump* was an extension of that way of working.

Saunders: What is about comics – and particularly some of the more epic battles between superheroes and super-villains – that presents an attractive medium for satirizing Trump?

Sikoryak: Well, there have been many superhero parodies with presidents. Years ago, I drew one for *The Daily*

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Show with George W. Bush as The Decider. I think part of the reason it works so well is that comics are often very stark when depicting good and evil. And sometimes they're very simplistic in their worldview, as are Trump's statements. Now, I think comics can be quite subtle and nuanced, but for this series I'm definitely playing with the broad stereotypes of comics. At the same time, it was important for me to only use Trump's real quotes, I didn't want to exaggerate or change what he said. His actual, over-the-top speeches fit right into superhero covers. Also, I wanted to capture his rambling, spontaneous, colloquial way of speaking (rather than his Twitter voice) and play that off of the broad comic book tropes.

Saunders: Could you discuss how you decide on the direction of a piece of art. Do you begin with the quote and then locate a representative depiction or is it more free-form?

Sikoryak: My decision process was rather freeform, but it always involved research. Certainly I remembered many of Trump's quotes, but I went back and did internet searches to document the actual quotes and find many more. For the artwork, I know a lot of comic books history, and in some cases I knew I wanted to include a specific character before I had the quote. But there were searches for those as well. For instance, I knew I had to include a *Captain America* cover, but I went back to my own collection and searched online for the right issue to match the quote I chose (about war heroes who are captured).

Saunders: Do you follow Pres. Supervillain (@PresVillain) on Twitter and if so, how would you compare your respective projects?

Sikoryak: I do follow @PresVillain. Luckily for me, I discovered him long after I'd drawn my first 16 covers (in late 2016). I wouldn't have wanted to be influenced by his choices. It's a similar conceit, of course, and I assume it involves the same sort of research. But we aren't the first people to compare a President to an evil comic-book mastermind!

Saunders: So far, which depiction has provoked the most interest (positive or negative)? What sorts of feedback have you received and from whom?

Sikoryak: I think my "Nasty Woman" cover, a Wonder Woman parody, has provoked the most positive reaction. It definitely struck a nerve. I was really happy to see that, it's one of my favourites. Almost all of the feedback I've personally received has been very positive. I actually expected I'd get more backlash, even from opponents of Trump, in that I'm giving Trump even more attention. And I've read a little of that on Twitter. But for the most part, people who don't like him have really enjoyed the humour.

Saunders: Comics have long served as a mechanism for imparting American values abroad? How do you think your work will be interpreted outside of the United States?

Sikoryak: I decided early on that I should only use American comic covers, since Trump is so American. It wouldn't have felt right to me to insert him in a *Tintin* or an *Astro Boy* cover. Since the work has appeared on Tumblr, a few European publications have interviewed me and/or reprinted selected images. They got the humour and seemed to really enjoy it, too. I would like the world to see that Trump doesn't speak for all Americans.

Saunders: Has anyone tried to shut down or otherwise contest your project? (Trump's lawyers, Marvel or DC's legal team, etc.)?

Sikoryak: I haven't heard from any legal departments! I've been doing comics parodies professionally for almost three decades, and I didn't expect to have any trouble with this. Certainly *MAD Magazine* has sent a precedent for parodies that many cartoonists have benefited from. Not to mention other institutions like Saturday Night Live and The Daily Show. As far as Trump's lawyers go, I doubt that they or Trump will ever see it! Unless the right person talks about it on television, preferably someone on Fox News.

Saunders: What do you hope your readers take away from the series?

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Sikoryak: I hope my readers will find it funny... and scary.

Saunders: What's next for Unquotable Trump? And what's next for R. Sikoryak?

Sikoryak: The Unquotable Trump will be published in a full colour, oversized edition from Drawn and Quarterly, available this October. And I'll be returning to the classics with short adaptations of Emily Dickinson poems and a comic book version of Moby Dick. Generally I prefer to have a little more distance from my subject matter.

About the author:

Dr. Robert A. Saunders is a Professor in the Department of History, Politics and Geography at Farmingdale State College-SUNY. He is the author of four books, including *Popular Geopolitics and Nation Branding in the Post-Soviet Realm* (Routledge, 2017). His research explores the changing nature of national, religious, and political identity in the late 20th and early 21st centuries.