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# Tropes Trump Politics

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Aaron Berkowitz

## Tropes Trump Politics

**Comic creators are using longstanding superhero comic tropes in order to protest Donald Trump's presidency and policies. In doing this, they make comics, a notoriously insular medium, more inclusive for all.**

People often assume superhero comics are mere escapist fantasy without any higher meaning. In fact, superhero comics have been leading the charge for social progress since their inception with 1938's "[Action Comics](#)" #1, which introduced Superman. He served as a folk hero of sorts, fighting for truth, justice and the American Way that many new immigrants yearned for in those pre-war days.

Since then, these social justice values have only gotten stronger and more overt; comics have lampooned and outright protested against presidents like Richard Nixon and George W. Bush. And they are accelerating under Donald Trump. Writers are now using classic comic book tropes to highlight the wrongs they see in Trump's policies and supporters. From Captain America becoming the "compromised hero" turning from good to evil to Aquaman losing his position of power and influence (both in 2017), these tropes have evolved while staying true to the liberal ideals comic creators came up with back in the late 1930s.

These sensibilities were the driving force behind the creation of the first superhero, Superman, who embodied the idea of immigrant empowerment in a time when immigrants had very little power of their own. Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster created the Man of Steel.

Siegel, the son of Lithuanian Jewish immigrants, was ostracized in grade school for being different from his peers. His teachers and classmates purposefully ignored and mocked him because of his familial roots and religious ideology.

"At an early age, I got a taste of what it's like to be victimized," Siegel said in Larry Tye's book *Superman: The High-Flying History of America's Most Enduring Hero* (p.3-4). Siegel used this victimization to create the world's first Superhero. Inspired by the Jewish Biblical hero Samson, pulp hero [Doc Savage](#) and Nietzsche's idea of the "Übermensch," Siegel came up with the idea for Superman: a super-powered man who fought for the little guy. The disenfranchised.

Siegel's partner, Joe Shuster, was also the child of Jewish immigrants who grew up in impoverished households. They knew what it was like to be lower class in American society at the time. They used that knowledge when they began creating Superman stories.

"Jerry and Joe simply wrote and drew what they knew," Tye writes (p.34), so Superman became the ultimate immigrant. With his home planet dying, Jor-El was forced to send his son, Kal-El, to the planet Earth in order to save his life. Taken in by a kindly couple, Superman learned how to

see the best in people and how to use his powers to help others. So, in his early appearances, “he was just the crime fighter we needed to take on Al Capone and the robber barons.” (Preface p.xiv). He fought the villains Siegel and Shuster wanted to fight, not the fantastical aliens and robot creatures he would oppose years later. At the time, he was a folk hero, not a world-saving Superhero.

Likewise, one of Timely (now Marvel) Comics’ first superheroes, Captain America, also served as an outlet for two second generation immigrants’ rage against the spread of Nazism in their home countries and their desire to right this egregious wrong, since America was doing nothing about it.

In 1940, Joe Simon, another son of Jewish Immigrants from Rochester, changed his idea for a hero called “The Shield.” After a number of drafts and costume concepts proposed by his artist partner Jack Kirby (formerly Jacob Kurtzberg, another son of Jewish immigrants who grew up in the mean streets of the Lower East Side) they came up with the character who would soon be named “Captain America.”

In his book *Men of Tomorrow: Geeks, Gangsters and the Birth of the Comic Book*, Gerard Jones says Simon and Kirby brought “the passion of the immigrant, of the Jew” to superhero books (p. 201). Steve Rogers was a meek, scrawny son of an immigrant living the Lower East Side. He desired to be more, to be someone who could beat up the thugs who keep stealing his money, and the person who could put an end to Hitler and the Nazis. Pearl Harbor hadn’t happened yet, but Simon and Kirby were ahead of the curve. They made Rogers sign up for a military experiment which turned him into a “real American,” a hulking man-mountain of muscle who conspicuously looks just like Hitler’s Aryan Übermensch. However, on Cap’s first cover appearance he’s shown giving [Hitler a mean right hook](#). While America was still waffling on whether or not to join the war and while American Nazi sympathizers were [filling up Madison Square Garden](#) with their rallies, Cap was out there on the front lines, fighting a villain who the Jewish immigrants despised. Their friends and family from their homelands were being slaughtered by the trainload in Eastern Europe, but America was doing nothing. Good thing Cap was there to fight those evil Nazis.

Little would Simon and Kirby know that in 2017, Cap would become a “compromised hero” who essentially became an evil Nazi himself.

The “compromised hero” trope appears quite regularly in superhero comics. It generally consists of a hero, many times one seen as a bastion of heroism, truth, justice and fairness, who is, either by mind control, magic or some other outside force, corrupted and joins forces with evil ne’er do wells. Prominent heroes such as The X-Men’s [Jean Grey](#), [Green Lantern](#) and [Daredevil](#) have been compromised. None of these examples were used to promote progressive ideas. They just existed to tell new and exciting stories with these characters.

When the *Secret Empire* miniseries ran from April to August 2017, it injected social satire into this longstanding motif. In this series, writer Nick Spencer turned Captain America, a hero who

once stood for everything new immigrants idealized about America, into a fascist dictator who ran a secret society, Hydra, that sympathized with the Nazis in Marvel's version of World War II. Cap promised that Hydra's America would be a stronger country than it was with America's former president. He turned into everything he stood against. This book was being written at the same time that a former reality star who promised to restore the "greatness" of America became the leader of the free world. Spencer was clearly taking some of his cues from Trump's many rallies.

The series was inspired by the original "[Secret Empire](#)" storyline from 1974's "Captain America" #169-175, which involved a conspiracy where a secret society called the Secret Empire infiltrated the American government, going so far up the chain that even the president, who, at the time, was Richard Nixon, is a member. In the comic, the president ends up killing himself and a replacement is brought in by the non-compromised government officials so the American public wouldn't panic. This issue came out only a month before Nixon resigned over the Watergate scandal. Spencer was inspired by this show of protest against the president, although his story wasn't quite as blatant as the 1974 story.

Before *Secret Empire* began, Steve Rogers hands over the mantle of Captain America to his best friend and partner, Sam Wilson, an African American who grew up in Harlem and rallied for social justice through his career as the superhero The Falcon. Rogers loses his powers in a battle, which forces him to give up the title of Captain America. In the pages of *Captain America: Sam Wilson*, also written by Spencer, Wilson is derided by conservative media outlets as well as much of the white, working-class American public for being a "social justice warrior" and a poor successor to Rogers, despite gaining Rogers' blessing. In the series, Wilson fights against Hydra, as well as Americans who abduct undocumented immigrants who try to cross the border from Mexico into America and a new, privately owned police force deployed into inner cities to "clean them up" called the Americops. Wilson faces his toughest challenge with the American public when these Americops savagely beat up a young, African American superhero trying to stop a robbery, believing that he was the perpetrator. The Americops' assault mirrored the deaths of many African American men in America, including Eric Garner and Michael Brown, among others.

Wilson receives flak from the American public for supporting a supposed criminal. Their support for extreme police violence mirrors Trump's support. He even said during a [speech to police officers](#) that they shouldn't worry about "roughing up" suspects. This wasn't the only connection Spencer made to Trump's policies.

During this time, Rogers' arch enemy, the Red Skull, a Nazi who was one of Hitler's favorite enforcers and the current leader of a Hydra splinter group, used a magically-powered device called the Cosmic Cube to give Rogers back his powers, while making him a sleeper agent for Hydra. The Cube can change reality to suit the whim of whoever wields it. Rogers' Hydra persona is awakened and, after months of careful planning, he legally gains control of America through an emergency powers act. Once he takes his place as President of the United States, he reveals to the world his Hydra ties and thus begins *Secret Empire*.

In *Secret Empire*, Rogers rules America with an iron fist, creating a space shield that traps all of the most powerful heroes in space, while also keeping any unwanted alien species out, a blatant allegory for Trump's proposed Mexico border wall. He sets up concentration camps for a race of humans called "Inhumans" with alien DNA which grants them superpowers in order to separate them from society. He even makes a speech at the United Nations where he basically boasts that America is more powerful than any country and that he will destroy any country that would dare to oppose Hydra's reign. While many civilians and heroes oppose Cap's reign, it is implied that a large number of American citizens support his fascistic, hateful rhetoric. Eventually, the evil Captain America is defeated after the heroes use the Cosmic Cube to resurrect pre-Hydra Captain America to fight him. However, the damage is done and Spencer shows that America is irrevocably changed by all the citizens who supported the evil Cap's agenda.

This storyline differs from other stories about "compromised heroes" because it used its status as a controversial story about a beloved character in order to make an incisive point about modern politics in Trump's America.

In an [interview](#) with ABC News, Spencer said "I felt it was very important when we're doing a story about fascism to not end it saying, 'well that's it, we've beaten it and it's gone forever.' I wanted to emphasize that this is the kind of fight that you have to keep fighting forever."

Spencer expertly fills the book with many veiled and not-so-veiled references to contemporary politics. As mentioned, Cap builds a space wall, American citizens support hateful, arguably un-American rhetoric while despising the ruler's African American predecessor, the evil ruler boasts about the greatness of his country and how it is more powerful militarily than any other nation, and tries to undo whatever progress his African American predecessor may have made while in power. Change some words around and this could look like it came right from a daily news report about Trump and his policies as president in the wake of Barack Obama's eight-year term.

Spencer deftly uses the theme to mirror his obviously liberal views (he was an outspoken Hillary Clinton supporter). Captain America is unquestionably an exaggerated stand-in for Trump. Both Cap and Trump are new Presidents who are perceived as evil and unworthy of their position by some, but not most, of the population. Spencer also uses the "compromised hero" trope to make a point about the current landscape of American politics in a powerful way. In the comics, the system is broken because our "compromised hero" was able to manipulate others into basically handing him his position of power. In real life, people protested against the electoral college allowing this person who did not win the popular vote to become President anyway. In addition to this, Spencer obviously makes his Trump-surrogate into the villain of the story. Spencer is, quite explicitly, (and satisfyingly) saying that Trump is the villain of the 2016 Election story, an unfit leader who took office under false pretenses.

Unlike prior writers of stories about "compromised heroes," Spencer stirringly uses the

formerly-good main character to make a sobering statement about our current president and the effectiveness of the electoral process. Aquaman, another superhero, also had a fall from grace and a “loss of power” in 2017 which mirrored the 2016 election. Much like with *Secret Empire*, a trope was turned into an allegory for modern politics.

The “loss of power” trope is when a character who previously had a position of power, whether it was wealth or royalty, suddenly loses it, usually in order to create drama.

Writer Dan Abnett used the allegory to tell a story critiquing Trump’s rise to power in the pages of *Aquaman*, by making Aquaman’s main villain a xenophobe who wishes to create a barrier between Atlantis and the surface world in order to keep any non-Atlantean out of their nation, much like how one of Trump’s campaign promises was to [build a wall](#) between the United States and Mexico in order to keep undocumented immigrants out of the country.

In issues 23 and 24 from July and August 2017, Aquaman, the half-human, half-Atlantean king of the undersea world of Atlantis is put on trial by a hateful, xenophobic former-terrorist. Throughout Abnett’s run on the “Aquaman” title, the hero has been trying to ease tensions between Atlantis and the surface world. Aquaman’s royal court disagrees with Aquaman. They believe that surface dwellers are a threat to Atlantis’ sovereignty. Corum Rath, a xenophobic warlord who despises surface dwellers is used as the figurehead for a coup staged by the Atlantean royal court. They put Aquaman on trial and abdicate him from the throne. Rath takes the throne. His first order of business is to create a magical barrier which keeps all Atlanteans in Atlantis and all surface dwellers out, yet another thinly-veiled reference to Trump’s border wall. It is also revealed that the Atlantean people support Rath’s policies regarding surface dwellers.

While not as fleshed out as *Secret Empire*, Abnett’s *Aquaman* uses the storyline to consummately send up Donald Trump, his policies and his rise to power. Aquaman, the more progressive prior leader, was succeeded by a leader who opposed nearly every policy he created, much like Obama and Trump. Rath, like Trump, is xenophobic against outsiders who want to meddle in the affairs of his kingdom. In Trump’s case, he doesn’t want to allow undocumented immigrants into the country because, ostensibly, he wants to keep American jobs. However, he’s also stated at his Presidential campaign announcement in [2015](#) that he believes undocumented Mexicans are, mainly “criminals, drug dealers and rapists” while only some are “good people.” Like Trump, Rath says that he wants surface dwellers out of the Atlantean’s affairs because he’s afraid of war and wants to protect the Atlantean people. In reality, Rath despises surface dwellers with unnecessary hatred. Abnett has never given Rath a past tragedy which would spark his hatred for surface dwellers. He just hates them with a passion, just because they look and act different than he does.

Our hero lost his power as king, which may not bode well for future relations between the surface world and Atlantis, since Rath severed all ties with the surface world. In reality, Trump’s inaugural address called for an “America First” policy which sounds a lot like an isolationist policy.

Trump's policies are not only extending the application of established tropes, but they're also inspiring new motifs and storylines.

Acknowledging the changing gender politics of our times, comic writers are shying away from tropes like the tough female who has no time for love, or the damsel in distress who constantly needs saving. Instead, they've created new themes and an entire new subgenre of superhero comics: pre-teen and teen empowered female heroes.

These storylines find their roots in the first female superhero, Wonder Woman.

Diana, the princess of the mythological Amazonian island Themyscira, was created by Psychologist William Moulton Marston. He sought to make a superhero who embodied his idea of the "new woman," an empowered woman who could do as she pleased without the fear of being reprimanded by a man. Marston called her "psychological propaganda for the new type of woman who, I believe, should rule the world."

Diana leaves Themyscira, a feminist's paradise, to help the "world of man" fight fascism. In an [article](#) for Smithsonian.com, Jill Lepore, the writer of *A Secret History of Wonder Woman*, writes, "She'd left Paradise to fight fascism with feminism, in 'America, the last citadel of democracy, and of equal rights for women!'"

Marston used feminists he knew, like Olive Byrne, with whom he was in a polyamorous relationship, and Margaret Sanger, Byrne's aunt and one of the feminist icons of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, to create Wonder Woman. While she wasn't reacting against a specific political issue, she did represent a powerful woman in a time when women's empowerment was starting to grow. Throughout the century, she remained iconic, appearing on the cover of the 1971 [debut issue](#) of the feminist magazine "Ms. Magazine," which proclaimed "Wonder Woman for President," up to today when she became a feminist icon in the box office through a highly grossing film.

Her power lives on in comics designed to court young, empowered female readers in a time when the President has no desire to protect their freedoms or place them in his administration.

These books reflect a growing awareness of female empowerment in society. Comics like *Moon Girl and Devil Dinosaur* and *The Unstoppable Wasp* star heroes who work or study in the STEM fields by day and fight evil by night. They're not bogged down by standing in the shadow of prior male heroes. Moon Girl, a totally new hero, is an adolescent African American girl who happens to be one of the smartest humans in the world. While still in grade school, she invents a wide array of cutting edge technological marvels. By night, she uses her mental connection to a hulking-yet-benevolent dinosaur to fight crime, putting her gadgets to good use while catching criminals. The Wasp, AKA Nadia Pym, the daughter of the original Ant-Man, Hank Pym, is a teenage former Russian-spy who strives to help out girls like her who were abducted at a young age and forced into forms of slavery. In her case, the Russian government forced her to become an emotionless assassin/spy. She also runs a program called "Geniuses in action

Research Laboratories,” or “G.I.R.L.” for short, where female geniuses of all colors and creeds hone their skills and use them to effect change in the world through experiments and inventions.

By creating these new genres, which may, in turn produce more new tropes and motifs, writers are resisting Trump not by mocking his policies or agendas, but by trying to show younger women that they can be empowered and proving to conservatives and male chauvinists that they don't have to stand for disenfranchisement. They show the power of independent women who live in dangerous times. Moon Girl and The Wasp both encounter danger from villains who want to physically harm them, echoing the dangers of current Republican policies for women. These books also inspire them to become scientists or doctors. Much like Wonder Woman, they will fight oppression with the motivation to become more than what society tells them to be.

These new books are both exciting and essential because they're supporting women's fears and criticisms against Trump's policies and outdated social norms they're expected to fulfill. Women are, possibly, even more negatively affected by Trump's policies than men. And though male heroes are being used mainly in conjunction with these older tropes, they're getting more incisive. Because comics are a male dominated profession, with many instances of [sexual abuse](#), the characters themselves are taking the first steps towards becoming more progressive and inclusive.

Superman was a folk hero for the immigrants, but in his earlier appearances he also spanked women and derided Lois Lane's more progressive qualities as a female investigative journalist in the pre-war times. Readers don't have to rationalize their favorite hero's horrible behavior like that, since they simply do not act like that anymore.

The inclusion of anti-Trump or anti-alt-right messages in these books only serves to make them stronger pieces of art. They hold a higher meaning than just fun beat-'em-up books where everything is resolved at the end. They may be escapist, but they also carry subtext that furthers a progressive viewpoint.

Even as they wear brightly colored spandex garishly emblazoned with the colors of the American flag, they stand for deadly serious beliefs.

These stories help open a reader's eyes to a social injustice or a regressive political policy that they may not have recognized before. Perhaps, for example, the inclusion of the Americops in the *Captain America* books was enough for a reader to realize just how unjust police brutality is. If these values could open up even just a few readers' eyes to social injustices, then the use of tropes to protest Trump's policies are a worthwhile endeavor.