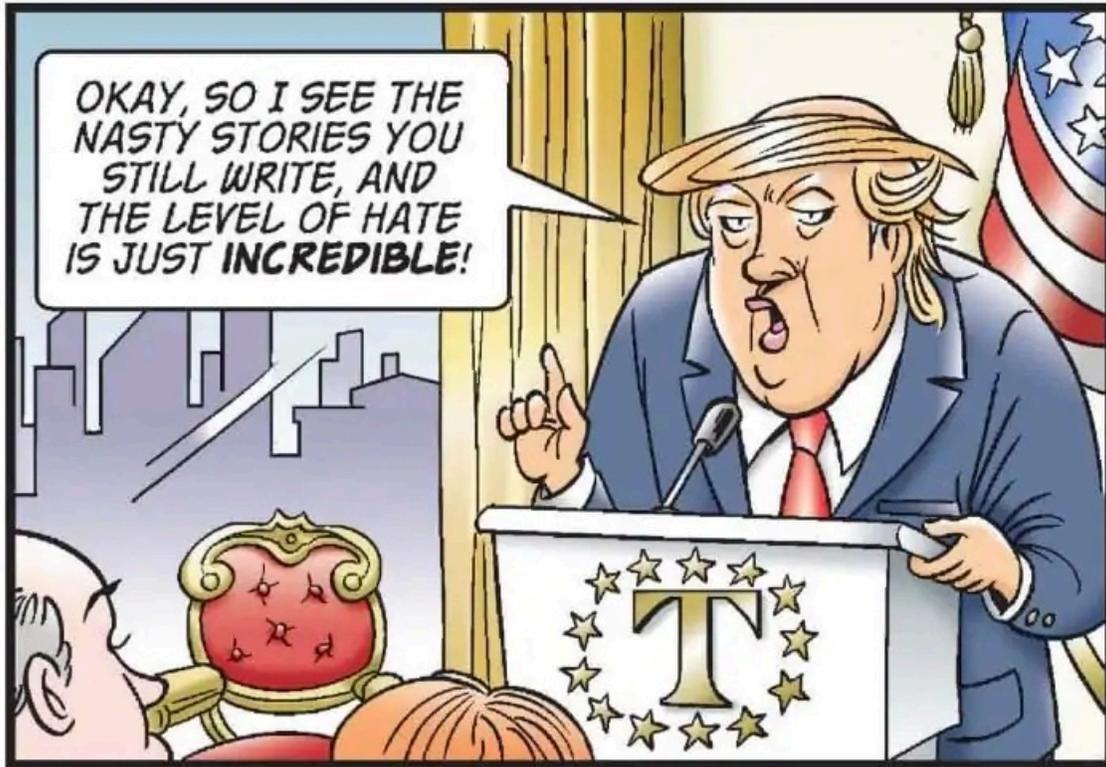


# ‘Big Satire is the least of Trump’s problems’: Garry Trudeau weighs in on how humor has taken on the president



A panel from "Doonesbury." (Andrews McMeel)

By [Michael Cavanaugh](#) September 19, 2018, *The Washington Post*

**IN THE PREFACE** to his new book “#SAD!: Doonesbury in the Time of Trump,” creator [Garry Trudeau](#) brings up the old Finley Dunne adage about advocacy journalism, about how it should comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. And that reference naturally raises the question: Does Trudeau think that Trump-era satire — from cartoonists to comedians — happens to be serving those same two needs, even if it’s not the aim?

“Trump is as thin-skinned as ever, but now that the slings and arrows are coming from the Justice Department, Big Satire is the least of Trump’s problems,” Trudeau tells *Comic Riffs* about puncturing the powerful. “When you’re fighting for your life, you’ve got less time to worry about whether Alec Baldwin is misrepresenting your hair” on “Saturday Night Live.”

“As for the afflicted, there seems to be no slackening of the public’s appetite for mockery of POTUS,” the “[Doonesbury](#)” creator adds. “And as we head into the midterms, it seems like all the wiseguys are bringing their A game.” (He

currently is a particular fan of [Stephen Colbert](#), Andy Borowitz and [Washington Post columnist Alexandra Petri](#).)

One satiric tactic that Trudeau is finding particularly fruitful is the mimicry of President Trump’s tweets. Right-leaning “Doonesbury” correspondent Roland B. Hedley Jr. has his own [Twitter account](#), and his Fox News-like takes on this administration become comic-strip fodder for the left-leaning Trudeau.

“Writing for Roland must be what it was like creating material for Colbert on his old show,” Trudeau says. “Every day is Opposite Day.”

“I like the challenge of trying to think like the White House,” he adds, “of finding a positive spin for words and actions that are basically indefensible — and doing it with only 280 characters is a kind of comedy haiku.”

Besides, the cartoonist says, “delighting a few people on Twitter would be an enormous waste of time if it couldn’t be repurposed. So every few months, I harvest the best tweets and re-adapt them for a Roland Sunday page.

“In effect, I’m generating and testing material online before publishing for a much larger audience.”

One area of parody that Trudeau likes to mine is Trump’s antagonism of the media — including his threats to loosen libel laws. Does Trudeau believe the president might ever actually alter the rules of satiric engagement?



A panel from “Doonesbury.” (Andrews McMeel)

“I realize that ‘established precedent’ is looking a little shaky these days, but ever since the [landmark Larry Flynt case] I’ve breathed a little easier — especially since ‘Doonesbury’ was invoked by name in the winning argument before the court,” Trudeau says. (Hustler publisher Flynt, after being sued for a parody Jerry Falwell ad, ultimately won the case, after his attorney cited satire such as “Doonesbury.”) “For now, satire is safe.”

Trump has “only one tool at his disposal — pressuring our corporate masters — but unfortunately for him, they couldn’t be happier with this golden age of satire,” the cartoonist continues. “Late-night comedy is booming, and Trump parodies and comics are everywhere. I don’t see any way Trump rolls us back. Attacking the clowns only helps sell more tickets to the circus.”

So Trump’s labeling of the media as “the enemy of the people” is a strategy with minimal traction, then?

“What’s interesting to me is that it doesn’t really seem to be catching on,” Trudeau says. “The rally rats like it, but no one else in the administration actually seems that comfortable with it. Even Fox mostly steers clear.”

Meanwhile, Trudeau can appreciate that Trump has been afflicted enough by “Doonesbury” over several decades to fire off some direct insults. Does the cartoonist have a favorite?

“The first is ‘third-rate,’ because it momentarily put me in the company of so many people I respect, like Seth Meyers and Sacha Baron Cohen,” he says.

“Also, I love that it’s one of his signature superlatives, that he skips over ‘second-rate’ to make sure it’s understood that we’re the worst.”

“My second favorite,” Trudeau notes, “is Trump’s characterization of the strip as ‘a lesson in pure salesmanship’ — clearly intended as a slur, and yet, oddly, the very thing he respects most.”