

The Contemporary Comedic Genius Series presents:

Garry Trudeau's
Alpha House

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What Is The Contemporary Comedic Genius Series?

- **Designed specifically for OLLI classes**
- **Class format:**
 - Clips
 - Comedic technique analysis
 - Context of the times
 - Great comedians
 - Class interaction

What Comedians Are Covered?

- **Garry Trudeau**
- Woody Allen
- Monty Python
- SNL: The Gilda Age (1975-80)
- Robin Williams
- Jonathan Winters
- Jon Stewart
- Stephen Colbert
- Billy Crystal
- Richard Pryor
- Mel Brooks
- Smothers Brothers
- Lenny Bruce
- George Carlin
- Moms Mabley
- Tom Lehrer
- Firesign Theater
- The Committee

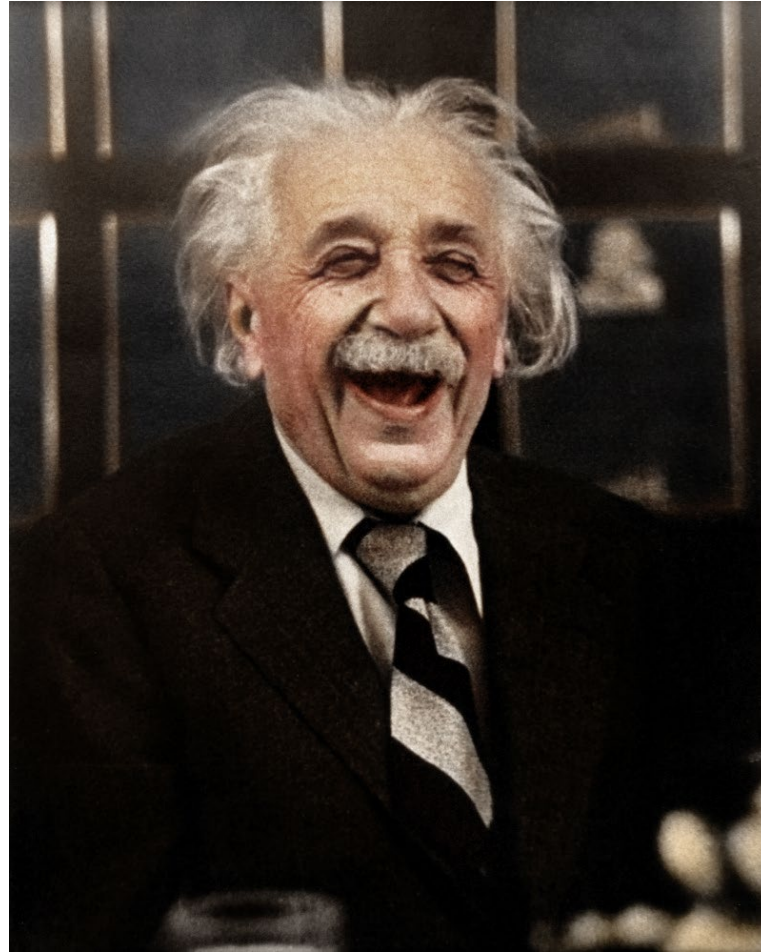
Who needs comedy anyway?

- Comedy = Dopamine, the neural transmitter
- Dopamine in seniors
 - Better sex life
 - Better memory
 - Better sleep
 - Greater enjoyment of life
 - More vigor
 - ---Did we mention better sex life?

Average American



Average American on Comedy



... Any Questions?

Garry Trudeau

- **Born:** Garretson Beekman Trudeau, July 21, 1948, New York City
- **Spouse:** Jane Pauley, 3 kids
 - *Today show,*
 - *NBC Dateline,*
 - *The Jane Pauley Show,*
 - *CBS Sunday Evening News*
- **Education:** Yale University 1966-70

Career Highlights

- Published *Bull Tales* (1969), the predecessor to *Doonesbury*, in the Yale Daily News
 - Yale quarterback Brian Dowling was the model for *Doonesbury* character B.D., original subject of the comic strip
- Universal Press Syndicate picked up the strip and re-named it *Doonesbury*, 1970-present
 - 1,000 newspapers
 - First comic strip artist to win a Pulitzer Prize (1975)
 - When he started work on *Alpha House* in 2013, Trudeau cut back on creating new *Doonesbury* strips to just the Sunday editions

Expansion to Other Media

- **A Doonesbury Special (1977)**
 - Nominated for Oscar in animated short film category
- **Rap Master Ronnie (1984)**
 - Off-Broadway satirical review at the Village Gate, NYC and on Cinemax
- **Tanner 88 (1988) with Robert Altman**
 - HBO series about a Presidential campaign (predecessor to Alpha House)
 - **Awards:** Cannes Television Festival, British Academy Television Award, British Broadcasting Press Guild Award, American Emmy
- **Tanner on Tanner (2004) with Robert Altman**
 - Updated sequel to Tanner 88 for Sundance Channel
- **Duke 2000**
 - Web-based campaign of Uncle Duke from Doonesbury strip, foreshadows Donald Trump campaign of 2016
- **Alpha House (2013-2014)**
 - Amazon Prime series ran 2 seasons.
 - Four Republican U.S. Senators share a Georgetown house
 - Inspired by real-world townhouse shared by Senators Chuck Shumer (D-NY) and Dick Durbin (D-Illinois) and Rep. George Miller (D-CA)
 - Cynthia Nixon (Sen. Armiston) and Matt Malloy (Sen. Laffer) of the Tanner series were cast in Alpha House

From Tanner 88 to Alpha House: Cynthia Nixon

– Alex Tanner in Tanner 88

- Teenage daughter of Democratic Presidential candidate Jack Tanner
- Becomes the conscience of the campaign with her strong stances against South African apartheid and other issues

– In Tanner on Tanner (2004)

- Following Robert Redford's advice, she creates her documentary comparing 1988 and 2004 campaigns

– Best known as Miranda Hobbes in HBO's "*Sex and the City*"

– Senator Carly Armiston (D-NY) in Alpha House



From Tanner to Alpha House: Matt Malloy

- Matt Malloy
 - **Deke Connors**, a documentary filmmaker from the East Village who records the campaign in Tanner 88
 - **Senator Louis Laffer (R-Nev)** in Alpha House



Trudeau and the Military

- 2005 to 2014: “The Sandbox”
 - Dispatches from troops posted in Iraq and Afghanistan
 - Milblog posting of over 800 essays by deployed soldiers, returned vets, caregivers and spouses
 - Hosted on Trudeau’s website, Doonesbury.com
 - Trudeau wrote extensively about military issues over four decades
 - **Awards:**
 - **Dept of Army:** Commander’s Award for Public Service
 - **Disabled American Vets:** Commanders’ Award
 - **President’s Award:** Excellence in the Arts
 - **Vietnam Veterans of America:** Distinguished Public Service
 - **Vet Centers:** Special Award

Critiques of Trudeau

- **During Nixon impeachment hearings,**
 - Many newspapers refused to publish Doonesbury strip in which character Mark Slackmeyer yelled “Guilty! Guilty! Guilty!”
 - Similarly many newspapers refused to publish the Doonesbury strip in which a photo of Frank Sinatra dining with Mafia chieftains was featured
- **Saturday Review:**
 - “Trudeau is one of the most over-rated people in American arts and letters”
- **The Daily Caller:**
 - “Trudeau is a dinosaur who is incapable of writing a character who doesn’t sound like Trudeau”
- **The Nation:**
 - “Doonesbury is one of the great intellectual/artistic accomplishments of the past half century, irrespective of category”



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Evolution of Garry Trudeau's "Alpha House"

- **1939 Citizen Kane**
 - Orson Welles' ground-breaking parody of right-wing media mogul William Randolph Hearst
 - Highlights the role of mass media in forming opinions amongst the electorate
- **1972 The Candidate**
 - Robert Redford's parody of the shallowness of appearance upon which political elections turn
 - Includes actual journalists to give it similitude
- **1988 Tanner 88**
 - Trudeau's mixture of fictional and real political characters
 - Real issues of the day, surrounded by real politicians and media playing themselves,
 - They support the semi-documentary drama of the fictional main characters
 - Michael Murphy, who could visually stand in for Robert Redford, plays liberal candidate Jack Tanner
- **1998 Bullworth**
 - Warren Beatty's masterpiece shows a liberal politician experiencing nausea at the failure of liberal policies developed in the 1960s and 1970s,
 - He sells out in a deal with the devil in the form of a major insurance company, but gets to tell the truth before he is assassinated
- **2004 Tanner on Tanner**
 - A reprise of Trudeau's 1988 piece, except this time featuring the daughter, Alex Tanner, played by Cynthia Nixon as a representative of the new generation
 - This time, the real Robert Redford appears on camera as himself
- **2012-2014 Alpha House**
 - A fictionalized view of the real world in which contemporary Republican U.S. Senators live
 - With the occasional invasion by a couple of Democratic Senators, played by Wanda Sykes and Cynthia Nixon
 - At least we get a few laughs out of it

Comedic Toolbox

- Juxtaposition
 - Irony
 - Sarcasm
 - Sardonicism
- All highly context-dependent in nature
- All are also very dependent upon audience member's point of view
- May contain many layers, each addressing a different point of view

Juxtaposition

- **“An act or instance of placing two [contrasting] elements close together or side by side.”** — *Wikipedia*
 - This is often done in order to compare/contrast the two, to show similarities or differences
- **Examples:**
 - **Comedic attire:** Charlie Chaplin’s tight waistcoat contrasts with his exceedingly baggy pants
 - **Music:** Abrupt change of musical elements such as tempo, pitch, tone
 - **Arts/Photography:** Contrasting colors and shapes or dramatic positions
 - **Literature:** Adjoining seemingly incompatible words or phrases, such as “He slouched gracefully.”
 - **Woody Allen (*Bananas*):** Ordering a meal for a guerrilla army in the jungles of Central America as if he were in a New York delicatessen

Irony

- **Irony:** From the Greek, meaning “feigned ignorance”
 - A rhetorical device, literary technique, or event in which:
 - What appears on the surface to be the case or to be expected differs radically from what is actually the case. --
Wikipedia



Sarcasm

- “The use of words usually used to either mock/annoy someone, or simply for humorous purposes.” -- *Wikipedia*
 - Taken from Greek word “**sarkasmós**”, meaning “to tear flesh, bite the lip in rage, sneer”
 - May employ ambivalence
 - Not necessarily ironic
 - Mainly distinguished by the **inflection** with which it is spoken
 - Largely **context-dependent**

Sardonicism

- “Bitter, scornful, mocking” — *Wikipedia*
- “Expressing an uncomfortable truth in a clever and not necessarily malicious way, commonly with a degree of cynicism” — *Wikipedia*
- From the Mediterranean island of Sardinia
 - Traced to the ancient Greek **“grinning in the face of danger”**
 - **Curling one's lips back at evil**
 - Ancient belief that ingesting sardonion plant would result in convulsions resembling laughter and, ultimately, death
 - In 2009, hemlock water dropwort confirmed as the plant responsible for “sardonic grin”

**“The Price of Freedom Is Eternal
Vigilance.”**

-[attributed to] Thomas Jefferson

“A Republic—If You Can Keep It!”

-Benjamin Franklin, 1787

The American Political System Is Broken—Here's How and Why

Implied statement by Garry Trudeau
in the creation of Alpha House

Alpha House Episodes

Season 1

1. Pilot
2. No Shame
3. All Weapons Red
4. Triggers
5. Hippo Issues
6. Zingers
7. Prayer Brunch
8. Ruby Shoals
9. The Rebuttal
10. Showgirls
11. In The Saddle

Season 2

1. The Love Doctor
2. Gaffergate
3. The Contest
4. Shelter In Place
5. The Apparition
6. The Retreat
7. The Civility Zone
8. Bugged
9. There Will Be Water
10. The Nuptials

Issues in Alpha House

- Filibusters
- Afghanistan
- Homophobia
- Super PACs
- Memes
- Military clout
- Treatment of vets
- Technology in politics
- Religion in politics
- Fracking
- Code words
- Macho in politics
- Circus debates
- Paying No Taxes
- Congressional obstruction
- Dark money
- George W. standing
- Faking character
- Women in the military
- Congressional horse trading
- Ronald Reagan's words

Episode 1 Issues

- Personal moral corruption (Bill Murray)
- Embedded Racism (Gil John's dog)
- Flag-waving (pins)
- Afghanistan
 - (as a distraction from domestic problems)
- Homophobia
- Machismo in politics (Hickok)
- Quid Pro Quo gifts
- SuperPACs

Episode 2 Issues

- Homophobia
- Nakedness
- “Phony” latin@s/blacks
- Sports and Politics
- The Love Doctor
- Inter-party relations (Senate lunch room)
- Diane Von Furstenberg

Episode 3 Issues

- Military Contractors
- Political Ads (Robert's)
- Experience with other races/skin colors (Louis)
- Different forms of prayer
- Afghanistan in-country

Doonesbury on Donald Trump 1988



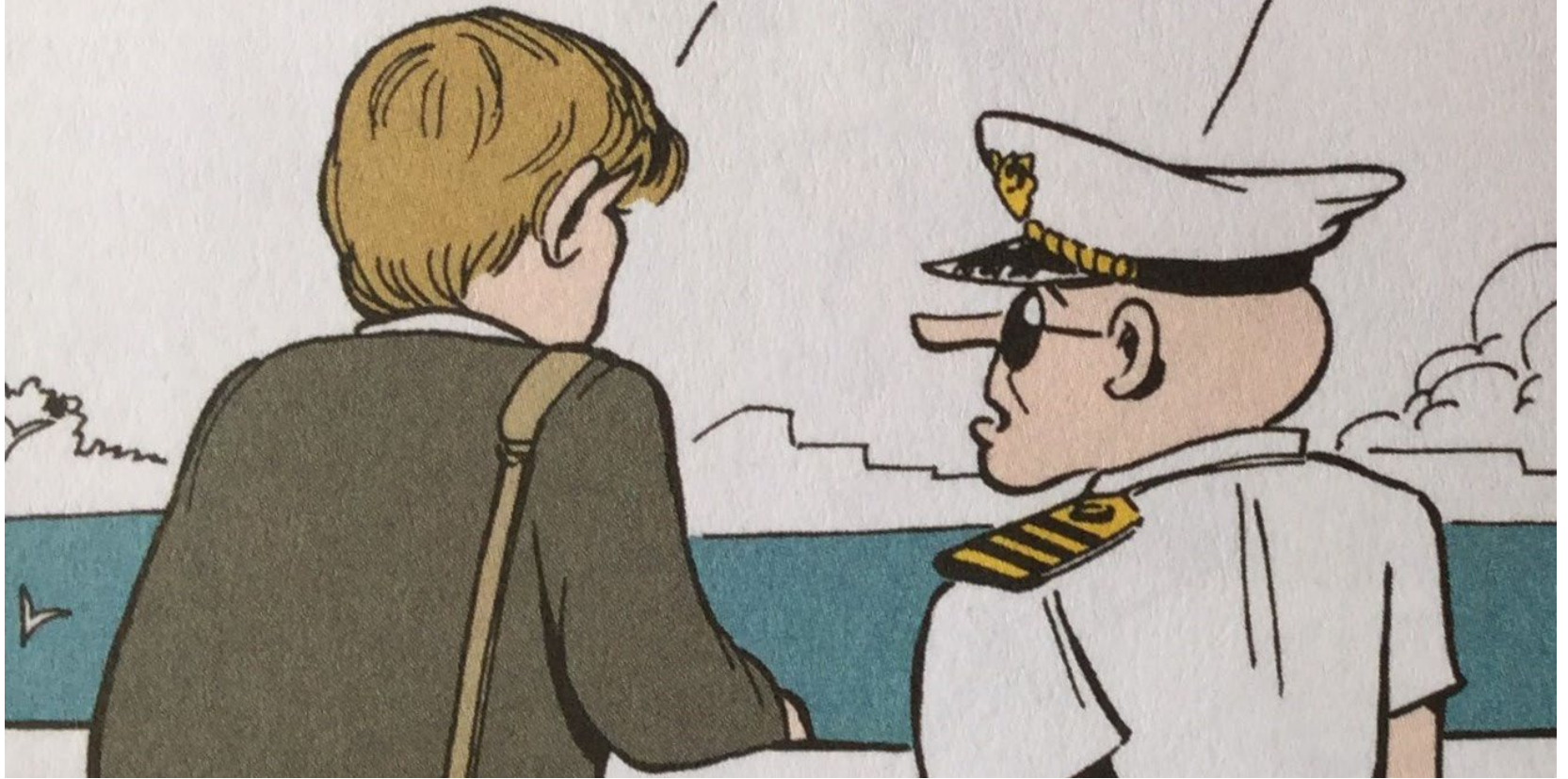
THEY LOOK LIKE NEW JERSEY LOCALS,
SIR. THEY'RE COMING OUT IN SMALL
BOATS TO WELCOME YOU BACK!

= SIGH...



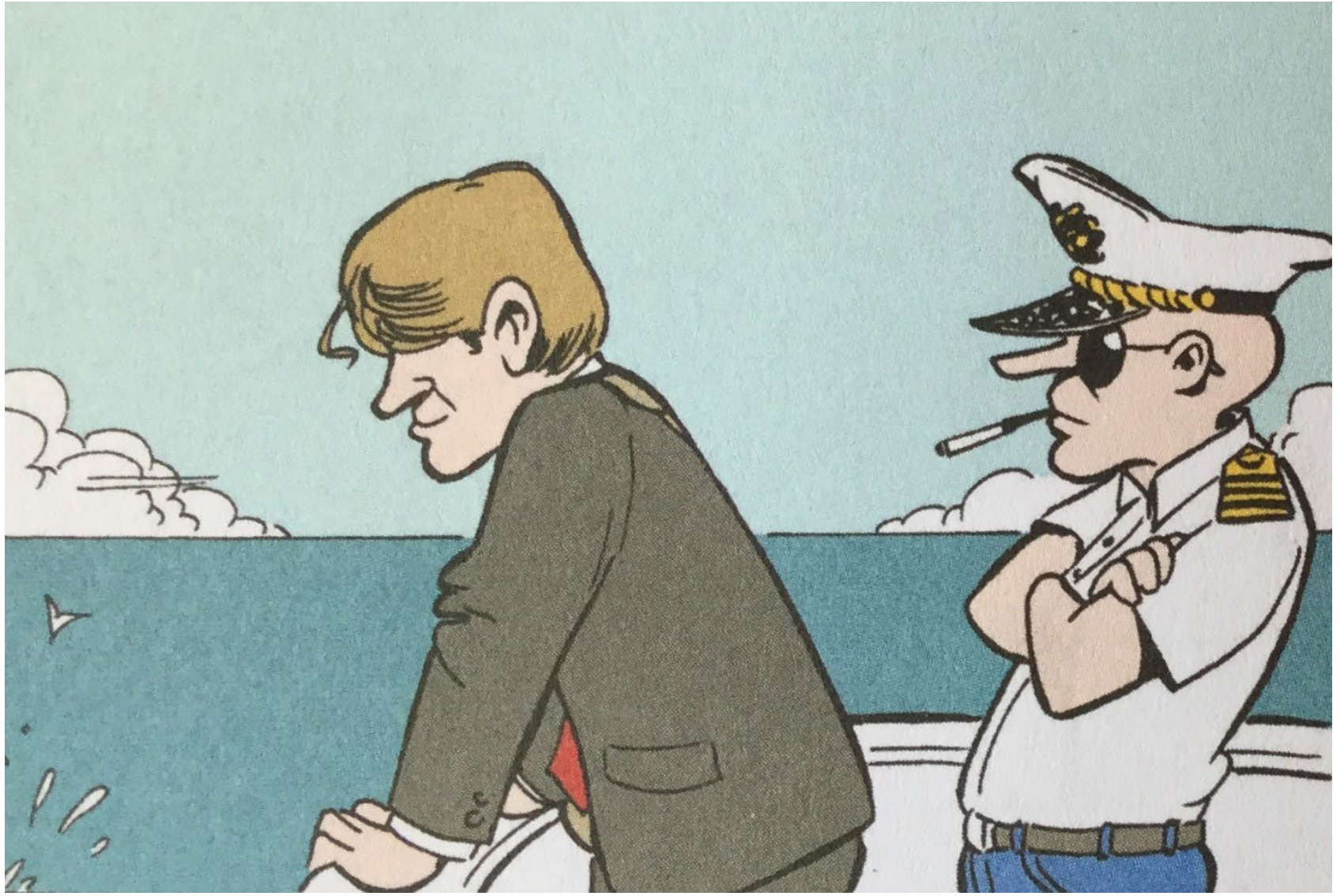
YOU KNOW, CAPTAIN, SOME-
TIMES I WISH THE TRUMP
PRINCESS DIDN'T ATTRACT
QUITE SO MUCH ATTENTION.

WHY'S THAT,
SIR? I THOUGHT
THAT WAS THE
WHOLE POINT!



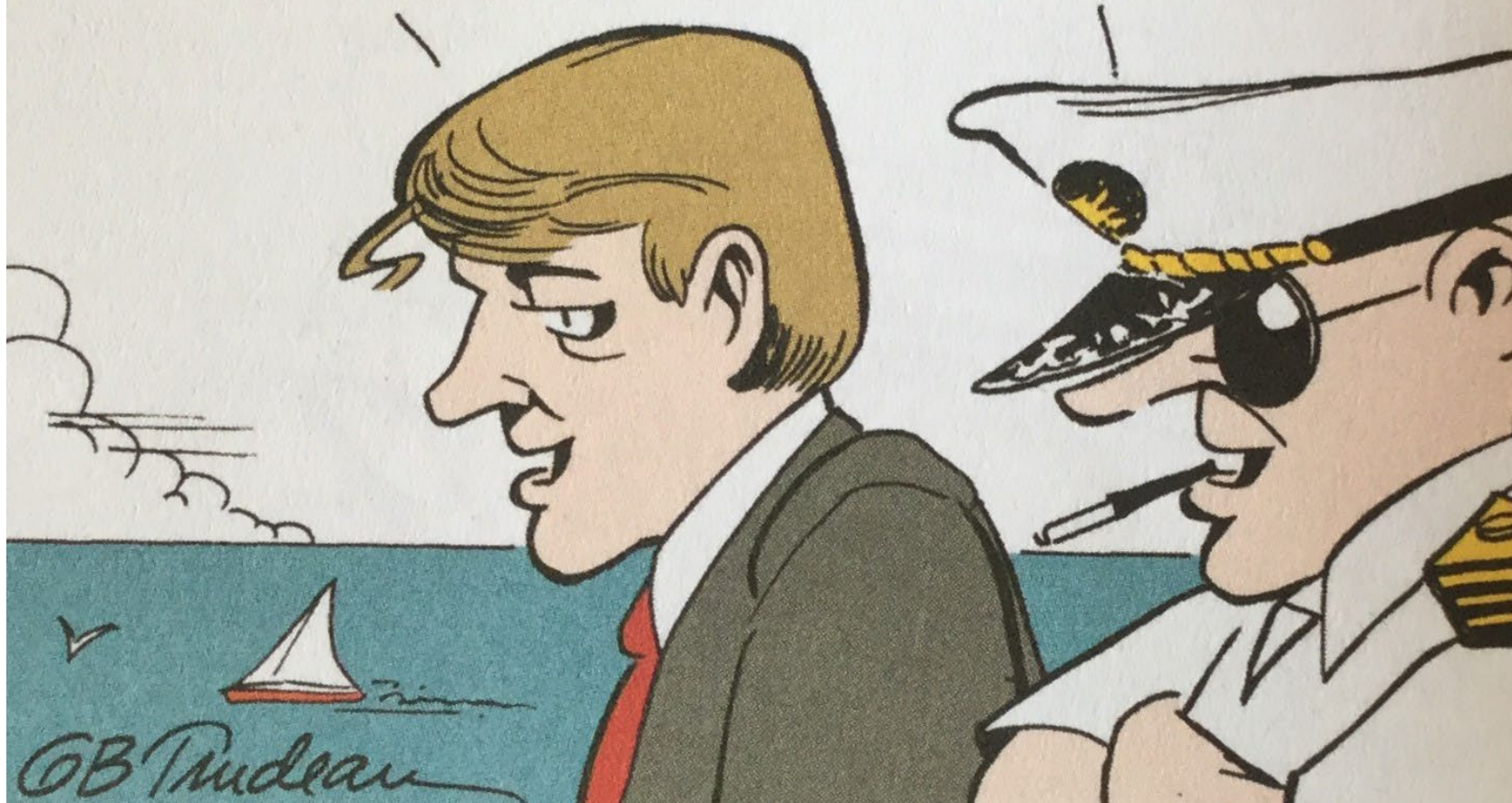
WELL, IT WAS, BUT IT'S BEGINNING
TO MAKE ME FEEL GUILTY. I
HAVE SO MUCH, AND THESE
PEOPLE HAVE SO LITTLE!
IT DOESN'T SEEM FAIR!





STILL, I DO LOVE
WATCHING THEM DIVE
FOR CASINO CHIPS.

YES, SIR. FOR A LOT
OF THESE KIDS, IT'S
THEIR FIRST BET!



Doonesbury on Trump 2016





OH, RIGHT. A
"NEWSPAPER."

WE'RE BACK WITH OUR OLD
PALS ALICE AND ELMONT
FOR MORE STREET TALK...





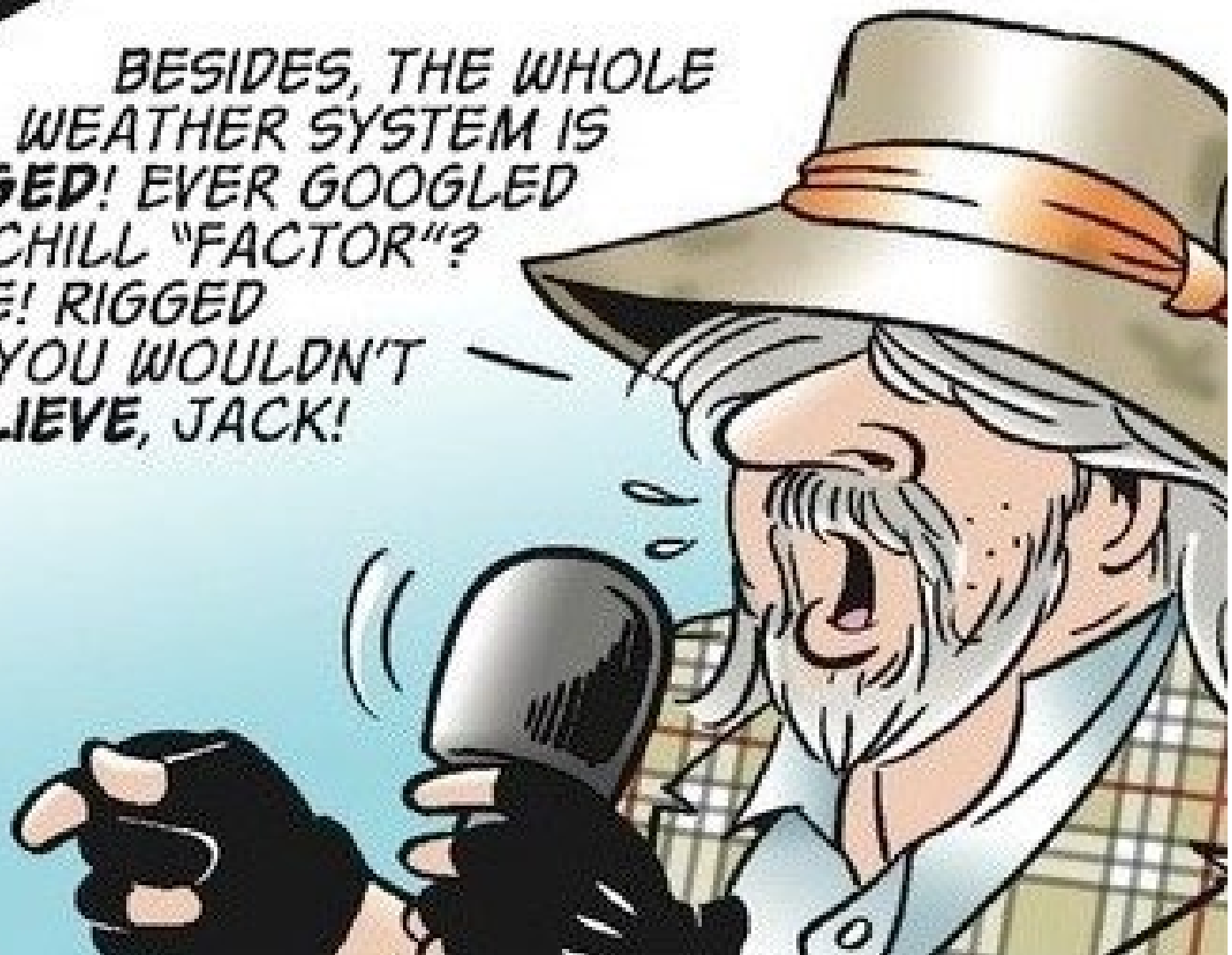
OKAY, PANEL, HOW DO WE FEEL ABOUT GLOBAL WARMING? ANY IMPACT ON THE HOMELESS? JUMP BALL.

I GOT THIS!

FIRST OF ALL, ANYONE WHO'S
EVER LICKED A LAMPPOST IN
JANUARY KNOWS GLOBAL
WARMING IS A TOTAL
CROCK!



BESIDES, THE WHOLE
WEATHER SYSTEM IS
RIGGED! EVER GOOGLED
WIND CHILL "FACTOR"?
I HAVE! RIGGED
LIKE YOU WOULDN'T
BELIEVE, JACK!



IT'S ALL A CONSPIRACY! A CHINESE SCAM TO GET US TO BUY THEIR BOTTLED WATER AND STEAKS!



YOU KNOW, ELMONT,
YOUR TIME MAY HAVE
FINALLY ARRIVED.

I WAS
ABOUT
TO SAY.

HELLO? IT'S BEEN
PULLING INTO
PORT FOR YEARS!



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