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Framing the President: Franklin D. Roosevelt, Participatory Quests, and the Rhetoric of Possibility in World War II Propaganda

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Framing the President: Franklin D. Roosevelt, Participatory Quests, and the Rhetoric of Possibility in World War II Propaganda

James J. Kimble

This essay examines The Life of Franklin D. Roosevelt, a comic book distributed internationally by the Office of War Information (OWI) in late 1942, as a creative form of international propaganda. Drawing from existing research in comic scholarship, narrative theory, and visual inquiry, this case study suggests that OWI’s booklet represented a fusion of verbal and visual appeals, which together worked to produce a potent depiction of President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s character traits and exceptionality. The analysis concludes that this depiction ultimately presented the president as the protagonist of a romantic quest narrative, one that actively invited foreign readers to envision an Allied victory in the ongoing war.

Keywords: propaganda, visual rhetoric, quest narratives, comic books, World War II

President Franklin D. Roosevelt increasingly became a primary target for Joseph Goebbels’s Nazi propaganda machine throughout 1942. Adolf Hitler had reportedly long feared FDR the “most of all the United Nations leaders” (Shirer, 1942, p. B7). The surprise American victory at Midway in June and the successful Allied invasion of North Africa in November demonstrated to the world that the president’s leadership was wresting the initiative on the war fronts away from Axis forces. Goebbels’s propaganda thus began to proclaim that FDR was a warmonger, a “servant of the Jews” (Herf, 2006, p. 165), a marionette, and, echoing his Führer’s own words, little more than “the half-Jew Roosevelt” (p. 170). The derisive attacks, wrote journalist William L. Shirer, were proof that the president had “become ‘world enemy number one’ to the Nazi propagandists” (p. B7).

The Roosevelt administration was aware of the personal barbs. The Office of War Information (OWI), the government organization responsible for managing the nation’s worldwide impression, noted internally that “the increasing Axis propaganda attacks on his [FDR] personality show that our enemies clearly recognize the influence of the President of the U.S. over the minds and hearts of men” (OWI, Overseas Operations Branch, 1942, p. 3). The issue, of course, was how to respond to them. At length, OWI recommended that its international propaganda operation “should make greater use of the personality of the President as a symbol of high ideals and of the coming liberation of mankind” (p. 3). President Roosevelt, as OWI saw it, needed to become a worldwide propaganda symbol in his own right.
Such a strategy would not necessarily be easy to undertake. OWI was already producing poster images of FDR, which were visually simple, inexpensive to print, and suitable for dissemination in places across the globe. Yet the agency could hardly expect simple poster portraits, however compelling the artistry, to make a persuasive case to international viewers that the president was not a villainous warmonger but instead a worthy leader who would be instrumental in liberating humankind from Axis tyranny. Conversely, the more argumentatively complex appeals that the organization typically disseminated to Americans on the home front (e.g., OWI, 1942, 1943) would have been overwhelmingly difficult to adapt to an international, multilingual context.

OWI’s primary response to this conundrum was as creative as it was eye catching. Taking a cue from the Treasury Department — which had recently tried to motivate American children to participate in its war bond program by producing a full-length comic book full of cartoon characters scheming ways to purchase war stamps and bonds (U.S. Treasury Department, 1942) — OWI’s propagandists crafted a comic book biography of the president for international distribution. It was called *The Life of Franklin D. Roosevelt: The 32nd President of the United States of America* (OWI, [1942]; hereinafter *Life of FDR*). By January 1943, the organization’s linguistic team had translated the comic book manuscript into nearly a dozen languages. Some 365,000 copies were soon on their way to a worldwide audience (“Publications,” ca. 1943/1986, frame 455).

Even a casual reading of *Life of FDR* (OWI, [1942]) suggests that OWI’s propagandists were up to the task of promoting Roosevelt as a potent international symbol. OWI chose to offer a graphic depiction of Roosevelt’s life story in hopes that it would be readily transferable across cultures. This seemingly straightforward approach had its advantages, for as Chris Murray points out, “people don’t work, fight and die for complex ideologies” but rather “are motivated by . . . myths that simplify and package ideology into forms that are emotionally stirring” (2000, p. 151). Indeed, because it appeared to be little more than a simple narrative portrait in cartoon form, OWI’s comic book was unlikely to have come across as either imposing or incomprehensible.

Nonetheless, a more sustained scrutiny of *Life of FDR* (OWI, [1942]) reveals that it was not as transparent as it might have seemed at first glance. Rather, it was actually a sophisticated appeal that harnessed all of the strategic elements of “sequential art,” as Will Eisner defines the comic book genre (2008, p. 7). In fact, as I will demonstrate, the booklet was a surprisingly potent propaganda vehicle whose form and content were perfectly suited to OWI’s needs as well as to its target audience. While the comic book was just one of countless initiatives in the war’s various propaganda fronts, its prominent role in defending FDR before a worldwide audience amid the greatest war in history makes it particularly noteworthy.

One of my goals in this essay, then, is to reanimate *Life of FDR* (OWI, [1942]), an important wartime appeal that has received little attention from propaganda scholars. Specifically, this case study of that key propaganda artifact proceeds through a rhetorical and
visual criticism of the comic book’s strategic approach. I situate the case study within the context of the so-called “cartoon war,” Steve M. Barkin’s term for OWI’s “concerted and intense effort” to study and, at least occasionally, to deploy “cartoon portrayals of soldiers and war, of the enemy and the homefront” (1984, p. 113). Here, the project joins a growing scholarly interest in the colorful collision of comic art and World War II (e.g., Goodnow & Kimble, 2016; Hirsch, 2014; Husband, 2013; Lent, 2014; Murray, 2011; Ribbens, 2010). Such scholarship, to borrow Cord A. Scott’s phrasing in *Comics and Conflict* (2014), focuses both on “depictions of war” and on “the propagandistic endeavor of the comic book” form itself (p. xv).

In contributing to that body of literature, this article contends that *Life of FDR* (OWI, [1942]) adopted an approach that capitalized on the comic book genre’s constant interplay of words and pictures — a dynamic that Scott McCloud describes as the mingling of “partners in a dance” (1994, p. 156) — to defend FDR from Goebbels’s attacks by crafting a participatory quest. It further argues that the booklet’s quest was narratively incomplete and thus invoked a rhetoric of possibility. Ultimately, the essay concludes that this ploy tacitly invited the booklet’s international readers to envision the American president and his nation’s cause as being not just worthy of victory but also inevitably victorious in the struggle against the Axis powers. In what follows, I develop these arguments in three sections: 1) *Life of FDR*’s verbal construction of the president’s character; 2) its visual depictions of his exceptionality; and 3) the resulting participatory quest and its invocation of a compelling rhetoric of possibility.

**Words, Claims, and Character**

Comic books are not just a visual phenomenon. While the medium’s colorful superheroes, dynamic depictions of violence, and artistic splash pages tend to catch the eye, it simultaneously relies heavily on verbal elements to complement those visual appeals. The relatively recent term *graphic novel* neatly captures this dynamic, suggesting that the essence of the genre lies in its unification of the visual and the verbal into a hybrid format. According to Eisner, one of the industry’s most heralded storytellers, comic books present “a montage of both word and image,” requiring readers “to exercise both visual and verbal interpretive skills” (2008, p. 2). Thus, even as the visual aspects of a typical comic book capture the reader’s imagination, its less flashy verbal aspects contribute at every turn.

True to form, *Life of FDR* (OWI, [1942]) showcases extensive verbal appeals amid its comic frames. One might, at first glance, assume that the comic book’s eighteen pages contain a relatively small amount of verbal text. To the contrary, a closer examination reveals that the booklet provides ample room for its discursive aspects. The editors begin with a brief introduction on the inside front cover (72 words) and close with a quick afterword inside the back cover (51 words). In between, the comic book’s omniscient narrator uses captions to speak in nearly every one of the 66 separate frames, for a total of 1,717 words. If one adds in the occasional remarks uttered by characters in the story line, as well as selected portions of one of the president’s speeches (p. 12) — and even a few drawings of newspaper headlines scattered throughout the publication — one finds that (the English version of) the booklet uses 2,197
words to tell its story. To put this sum in context, the comic book’s verbal appeals are roughly the equivalent of over six pages of double-spaced text.³

The comic book’s (OWI, [1942]) combination of narration and character utterances comprises several rational arguments and supporting data. The booklet’s introduction presents its central claim: the United States will soon free millions of people worldwide who have been conquered by the Axis powers. Invoking the synecdochal, body politic relationship between nations and their leaders (Kantorowicz, 1957, p. 7), Life of FDR further contends that “assurance that this promise will be kept may be found in ample measure” in President Roosevelt’s “life record” (inside cover). The remainder of the comic’s text then uses a narrated chronology to provide amplifying detail on three vital aspects of FDR’s character: benevolence, determination, and leadership. Each quality functions within the context of the president’s life story to support the publication’s premise that the United States, under Roosevelt’s guidance, will rescue the world’s enslaved millions.

Initially, Life of FDR (OWI, [1942]) offers ample evidence that Roosevelt’s character is benevolent. In his trips to Europe as a boy, for instance, the future president resists the temptation to isolate himself from foreigners, instead joining his tutor on bicycle tours, “learning the languages and customs of many countries” (p. 2). The learned youth quickly recognizes the importance of advocating for the needs of others. While at Harvard, the comic book shows, Roosevelt witnesses a fire in a dormitory and vows to militate for safer fire escapes. In his later political career, he frequently embraces a variety of “social reforms.” It is a quality, claims the booklet, “which has always characterized Roosevelt” (p. 5). The text then describes the positive results of the president’s many beneficial reforms during the Depression, including new bridges, productive dams, and electrical service to remote farm houses.

Internationally, Roosevelt is similarly benevolent. Touring Europe after the destruction of World War I, the comic book FDR comments that his “greatest hope in life is to put an end to such horror and devastation” (OWI, [1942], p. 7). In his first inaugural address he dedicates the United States “to the policy of the good neighbor” (p. 10). Later, after averring “I hate war,” he suggests that under his leadership the nation has “sought steadfastly to assist international movements to prevent war” (p. 12). “We seek to dominate no other nation,” the cartoon president concludes. “We believe in freedom; we believe in peace” (p. 12).⁴ In using such language, the comic’s textual appeals defend Roosevelt from Goebbels’s attacks by returning again and again to what it portrays as the president’s wholly benevolent qualities — admirable qualities indeed if one is truly aiming to free enslaved millions.

The comic book also suggests numerous ways in which Roosevelt’s character is driven by the quality of personal determination. As soon as he is old enough, relates the narrator, the future president announces that he wants to join the Navy as part of his life-long devotion to sailing and the sea. Undeterred by his father’s insistence that he attend Groton Preparatory School instead, Roosevelt devotes his free time to the exhaustive study of “books on navigation and naval history” (OWI, [1942], p. 3). Later, as Assistant Secretary of the Navy in World War
I, he is similarly undeterred by President Woodrow Wilson’s decision that he should not be allowed to leave his administrative post to fight. “Always a man of action,” intones the narrator, FDR shows a fierce resolve to be part of the war effort, ultimately using his influence within the Navy to succeed “in being sent on a destroyer to Europe through the dangerous war zone” so that he can inspect naval facilities (p. 7).

That admirable level of determination, though, pales in comparison to the tenacity with which Roosevelt faces his dismaying encounter with polio at the age of 39. Here the narrator proudly notes that “Roosevelt’s courage was supreme” (OWI, [1942], p. 8). What follows is a “seven-year uphill battle against the terrible affliction.” FDR’s “determined fight,” continues the comic book, “amazed physicians,” and “his recovery became almost complete” (p. 9). Such powerful words work to provide assurance to international readers that the wartime leader of the United States will never surrender, and will not give up until the completion of his task. Given that the comic book is arguing that Roosevelt’s personal characteristics demonstrate the certainty of an Axis defeat — not to mention the certainty that the United States will subsequently free the subjugated millions — its consistent portrayal of the president’s determination is a savvy tactic.

Finally, OWI’s graphic booklet [1942] provides several examples to demonstrate that Roosevelt’s character has also fostered excellent leadership skills. On one level, the comic book works to associate him with other powerful leaders. While FDR is at Harvard, for example, his famous relative, the newly-elected President Theodore Roosevelt, makes an impromptu appearance in the dormitory to meet his younger fifth cousin. A few pages later, FDR finds himself campaigning for another president, Woodrow Wilson. Later, during his inspection trip to the European war zone, the young FDR makes time to meet privately with King George V. Then, after the war, Roosevelt manages to borrow some of Wilson’s reputation as architect of the League of Nations when he acquires the table on which the earlier president had drafted the league’s covenant. Hence, on page after page, the comic book associates FDR with some of the world’s best-known figures of authority.

On another level, FDR shows his own mettle at several points. As a new Secretary of the Navy, his leadership quickly increases the level of production in American shipyards, allowing new ships to begin “rolling down the ways and to sea at the greatest rate in history” (OWI, [1942], p. 6). After the Pearl Harbor attack he demonstrates a similar style of leadership, challenging the nation’s industries to produce “60,000 planes, 45,000 tanks, 20,000 anti-aircraft guns, and 8,000,000 tons of shipping” in just one year (p. 5). However, lest foreign readers of the booklet wonder if such ardent wartime leadership betrays the heart of a warmonger, as Goebbels had alleged, the narrator makes it clear that the president and his fellow citizens are fighting not for glory or for personal gain, but so “that liberty’s light may once again shine over the entire world” (p. 16). Here, then, the comic book depicts another positive character trait of this uncommonly powerful man, one whose leadership has changed the world for the better and whose conduct in the ongoing war is wholly virtuous.
Taken together, these three qualities construct a candid composite of President Roosevelt’s character. Keeping in mind that OWI [1942] distributed the comic book to foreign readers — at least some of whom would have known little about the president beyond his name and nationality — FDR comes across in the verbal descriptions as the ideal international leader. Yet as the publication’s introduction makes clear, the qualities of benevolence, determination, and strong leadership apply to more than just Roosevelt; they transfer via synecdoche to the entire nation, to its citizens, and to its armed forces. From an argumentative standpoint, then, these qualities serve as verbal evidence bolstering the publication’s primary claim about rescuing those under Axis domination. To be sure, the words alone might not have been sufficient in drawing OWI’s prospective readers into its defense of the president. For that reason, as the next section explains, the comic book complemented its words with compelling visual elements, providing more evocative ways to make its case for FDR and his nation.

**Pictures, Visualization, and Exceptionality**

While OWI had proven to be adept at wielding the written word in its propaganda, the organization was also well aware of the power of visuality. Consider that one of its most prominent personalities was Gardner Cowles Jr. As a young publisher at the Des Moines Register in the 1930s, Cowles had once teamed up with George Gallup, then a doctoral student at the University of Iowa. Gallup’s research at the time focused on readership surveys in an effort to determine what features in a newspaper story prompted subscribers to read or to ignore it. He found that readers preferred illustrated stories by a wide margin (Friedricks, 2000, p. 7). In subsequent years, Cowles integrated Gallup’s finding into the Register’s pages, commenting that “pictures are easy to read. They tell the story at a glance.” “The world’s news in The Register” he concluded, is “fully illustrated” (cited in Friedricks, 2000, pp. 86-87). In 1937, Cowles re-emphasized his belief in the power of visual appeals when he co-founded Look magazine, a publication that unabashedly emphasized imagery.

OWI’s *Life of FDR* [1942] was an excellent fit for Cowles’s visually intensive approach. Indeed, to complement its verbal appeals, the booklet offers what a mounts to a graphic visualization of the various stages of the president’s life. Again and again these pictures depict Roosevelt as an exceptional individual. Throughout the story line, then, the comic book invites the reader to become a visual witness to FDR’s potential greatness, and to see how he fulfills that promise as he leads the United States out of the Depression and, though he tries to avoid it, into World War II. Of the publication’s many visual appeals that portray this dynamic of exceptionality, two are especially prominent: the initial presentation of Roosevelt’s heroic compassion and the lengthier depiction of his perceived fitness.

**Heroic Compassion**

Readers’ initial encounter with the president in the comic book (OWI, [1942]) would have been the oversized likeness on its cover (see Figure 1). This central image features FDR in a spotlighted white foreground, in harsh contrast to a garish red-and-black backdrop. Although the drawing’s colors make it somewhat disagreeable in an aesthetic sense, the overall
composition is eye-catching. Moreover, the anonymous artist worked carefully to depict the president as having admirable and vital personal qualities that were easily discernible. Here, I suggest that this rendition of the president presents a vision of what I will call *heroic compassion*.

One useful way to examine this vision is through a direct comparison of the comic book’s cover with a well-known contemporary war bond poster by N. C. Wyeth (1942, see Figure 2); although they were aimed at different audiences, the two artifacts emerged from the same visual culture at approximately the same moment (see Finnegan, 2005, p. 34).

*Life of FDR*’s cover image of the president (OWI, [1942]) and Wyeth’s militant Uncle Sam (1942) exhibit two visual parallels that together suggest a heroic nature. One parallel is the positioning of the viewer relative to the figures. For his part, Roosevelt appears behind a podium, the scene suggesting that he is standing on a raised platform on a vast stage. Uncle Sam appears, literally, in a cloudy sky, directing the fighting from above. In both cases the viewer gazes up at the leader from a low angle. Numerous studies have concluded that the relationship implied in this kind of positioning is hierarchical, indicating the depicted individual’s exalted status. Lynda Lee Kaid and Anne Johnston, for example, point out that when one views subjects from such a low angle, they “appear stronger, more dominant, and more imposing” (2001, p. 31). Richard Herskowitz elaborates on this finding, confirming that “a low angle shot is ‘fitting’ for a powerful hero” (1979, p. 183). In this way, to echo Evan Lieberman and Kerry Hegarty, subjects like FDR and Uncle Sam “are imbued with the qualities of nobility and strength,” since the viewer’s perspective “looks up to them, heightening their stature and status” (2010, p. 42). If OWI’s artists...
were aiming to depict FDR in a heroic pose to create an awe-inspiring first impression, then, the low angle on the cover was a suitable choice.

A second visual parallel between the two figures involves their eye behavior. Both Roosevelt (OWI, [1942]) and Uncle Sam (Wyeth, 1942) are looking into the middle distance at something the viewer cannot see. In part, their fixed eyes reinforce the notion that these are powerful individuals since this look is typical of the “archetypal heroes” found in propaganda imagery (Judd, 1973, p. 32). Viewers are attracted to figures with such a distant gaze because it “can create a powerful sense of empathy or identification” (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996, p. 66). In a more profound sense, however, the eye behavior suggests that neither character is distracted by their immediate surroundings (Goffman, 1979, p. 64). Rather, the behavior is reminiscent of what Elisabeth J. Croll has referred to as the “rhetorical glaze.” Here, the figures’ “stare, fixed pointedly on some distant undefined object beyond the horizon,” functions to show that each is gazing into a “distant . . . dream of the future” (1991, p. 7). This visionary quality complicates the relationship between leader and viewer. On the one hand, because each leader can seemingly see what is yet to come, his power and authority appear to be all the greater. On the other hand, because viewers cannot clearly see the same vision, they are vulnerable, even dependent on the figure. Both perspectives ultimately reemphasize that FDR and Uncle Sam embody a heroic stature.

There are, of course, some important differences between the two illustrations, and it is in these differences that the depicted president’s compassion becomes evident. At first glance, the fact that both FDR and Uncle Sam are enveloped in the apparatus of warfare appears to present another parallel. Squadrons of bombers fly over both figures, while Uncle Sam (Wyeth, 1942) also directs charging infantry troops. FDR, for his part, adds ships, tanks, anti-aircraft weapons, and even an armament factory to his bombers (OWI, [1942]). Yet the lines created by the destructive forces in each image differ. Such lines — “vectors,” to use Gunther R. Kress and Theo van Leeuwen’s (1996, p. 44) term — offer vital clues to the propositional aspects of an image. In Wyeth’s poster, the vector emerges as a series of converging lines following the flight of the bombers, Uncle Sam’s pointing finger, and the charging infantry platoon. These lines merge off stage to the viewer’s right, making the unseen battle zone a “goal” and Uncle Sam himself the primary “actor” (p. 57). The image thus portrays its figure in the midst of a thoroughly militarized activity, the instruments of war in action at his command and the battle itself in progress or nearly so. Rather than a judicious figure of mercy, then, here is a depiction of righteous, wartime fury being unleashed even as the viewer watches.

The comic book’s cover, in contrast, presents a differing vector, one that suggests a gentler quality in the president (OWI, [1942]). The image’s primary lines converge on FDR himself. The bombers, ships, tanks, and anti-aircraft weapons point the way not to the battlefield, but to their commander-in-chief. At the same time, the president’s gaze and his extended arm create a secondary vector, this one presumably aimed at the war zone itself. Roosevelt is, then, both the primary goal and the actor in this image. The presence of warfare is
implied, but it remains out of sight as a secondary goal. The focus is instead on the president and his personal qualities. Consequently, unlike the Uncle Sam figure (Wyeth, 1942), the comic book draws attention not to a vengeful warrior directing immediate violence but to a reflective yet powerful man carefully and deliberately contemplating his next move.

FDR’s visage and personal presence specifically amplify that perspective by calling attention to his compassionate facial expression (OWI, [1942]). His intent look, as opposed to Uncle Sam’s scowl (Wyeth, 1942), appears to be concerned, even judicious. Although he is clearly prepared for battle, he seems to be hesitating before committing his forces to irreversible violence. His cautious demeanor in the face of crisis implies that he is capable of grace and sufferance. The presence of several microphones in the midst of so many engines of war suggests that his preference is to favor communication over belligerence. In addition, the president is much closer in proximity to the viewer than Wyeth’s figure. Whereas Uncle Sam is distant literally and emotionally, FDR is both near and approachable, akin to the presence and thus the protection of a father figure. While the forces at his command are formidable, the commander-in-chief’s evident thoughtfulness and his very immediacy connote the demeanor of a reluctant warrior who is also a compassionate leader.

This initial visual exposure to Roosevelt on the cover of *Life of FDR* (OWI, [1942]) presents a potent first impression. Even international readers who knew little about the president could conclude at a glance that the American leader commanded respect even as he was much more humane than Goebbels’s propaganda was proclaiming. Indeed, given its heavy reliance on visual elements, the cover drawing was suitable for literate as well as illiterate auditors. In the end, like any comic book producer, OWI wanted to capture the attention of its target audience and to encourage its constituents to look further into the story behind the cover. By immediately presenting FDR as an exceptional man of heroic compassion, the comic book was arguably well on the way to doing so.

**Perceived Fitness**

FDR’s engaging exceptionality appears somewhat more subtly in the comic book’s graphic visualization of his *perceived fitness*. Although *Life of FDR* (OWI, [1942]) targeted a foreign audience, many such readers were aware that some twenty years earlier the president had had a fearsome encounter with what was known at the time as infantile paralysis. Even before Roosevelt won his first presidential election, for instance, the *Manchester Guardian* noted his struggle with the affliction, emphasizing that “the first thing asked of a President of the United States is that he should be sound in wind and limb” (“Sound in Wind,” 1931, p. 10). Yet international audiences, like most Americans, were under the impression that Roosevelt had beaten the disease, or at least that he had few remaining symptoms — a notion that the White House and the president himself actively supported (Houck & Kiewe, 2003, p. 115).

*Life of FDR* (OWI, [1942]) offered an intriguing visual approach in support of this perceived fitness. The approach took advantage of the attributes of the comic book genre by continually fostering two prominent rhetorical strategies — composition (Harvey, 1979) and...
closure (McCloud, 1994). Both worked together to create a composite visual depiction of FDR as being victorious in his struggle with polio. Although the two strategies are in evidence throughout the comic book I will focus here on four consecutive frames in its center (pp. 8-9), as they are particularly crucial to the development of the artifact’s visual narrative (see Figure 3).

![Four consecutive panels from OWI's Life of FDR ([1942], pp. 8-9)](image_url)

Figure 3. Four consecutive panels from OWI's *Life of FDR* ([1942], pp. 8-9)
To set the context for the four panels: by this point in the story line (OWI, [1942]), readers have come to see the future president’s life as unusually active. His sailing, horseback riding, football playing, and other activities promote a robust image not unlike that of his presidential cousin. The first frame in Figure 3 continues this active theme (p. 8). It is the summer of 1921 and FDR is enjoying an energetic vacation at the family’s summer home. After accidently falling from a yacht into icy water, he joins his companions in a spirited struggle against a wildfire. This frame depicts FDR and his friends in the aftermath of their firefighting. Despite his exhaustion, Roosevelt appears in a dominant central position in the tableau. His masculine stance and rugged appearance offer a virile impression; even among his vigorous companions, his physical nature stands out. The second frame, in contrast, shows a markedly different FDR (p. 8). Here the protagonist is no longer the central figure, nor is he in the foreground. Instead, a doctor and Eleanor Roosevelt are now most prominent in the frame, their discussion about infantile paralysis making it clear how suddenly the future president has fallen ill.

These two frames draw heavily (OWI, [1942], p. 8) on visual composition for their dramatic resonance. Comic books offer limited space for artists to present their narratives. According to Robert C. Harvey (1979, p. 650), cartoonists must therefore carefully plan the composition of their frames, choosing not only what specific scenes they will depict, but also what constituent elements they will highlight or de-emphasize within those scenes. The narrative’s jump from the aftermath of the fire to the doctor’s diagnosis clearly reveals the artist’s selectivity, since numerous events are absent from the chronology. Readers do not, for example, see Roosevelt’s return to the vacation house, his expressions of discomfort, the initial crisis in the morning, or the doctor’s examination. The transition from robust health to stigmatized illness is thus stunningly abrupt. At the same time, FDR’s visual presence diminishes from the first frame to the second. He transforms from an active, engaged protagonist into a passive bystander in his own story. The cartoonist, in other words, has carefully shaped the frames’ composition so that they provide just enough information to move the story forward even as they produce a visceral narrative impact.

The comic book’s next two frames (OWI, [1942]) also rely on a strategic use of composition. The third one (p. 8) features FDR’s sudden return to a central subject position. Though still wearing bed clothes, he is seated, not prone. His fist-in-hand gesture connotes formidable willpower even as his gaze looks ahead to a difficult recovery. The artist’s tight focus emphasizes Roosevelt’s intensity in the face of his affliction. In the fourth frame (p. 9), the future president’s active nature reappears. Not only are his physical prowess and determination again on display, but he has also returned to his life-long love of water activities. As in the previous frame, Roosevelt’s image grabs the reader’s eye, the drawing’s watery vector lines leading toward his focused gaze. The chronological gap between these two images is also strategic, placing FDR’s active therapy in immediate proximity to his decision to fight.
The movement of events across all four frames in Figure 3 (OWI, [1942], pp. 8-9) is seemingly quick. Despite their rapid succession, however, the frames represent a seven-year span. Each is effectively a snapshot of time, with the underlying chronological gaps being left to the reader’s imagination. McCloud contends that this task is typical of the comic book genre. Readers, he suggests, make sense of such chronological leaps without conscious thought, effortlessly using the cognitive process of closure to “connect these moments and mentally construct a continuous, unified reality” (1994, p. 67). Indeed, adds Eisner, the ability to piece together such visual narratives “enables us to recognize and be empathetic to surprise, humor, terror and the whole range of human experience” (2008, p. 24). In this way, the frames allow readers to identify with their inanimate depiction and to supply the narrative’s absent elements, investing the cartoon drawings with a life of their own. There is no need to show FDR’s return to the vacation house since the reader’s mind provides as much of that detail as is needed. Similarly, there is no need to use dozens of frames to depict him in physical therapy for seven grueling years, since the reader’s imagination readily supplies a picture of the intervening effort and time. Thus, although the four frames actually present static moments, readers are able to use closure to fuse those isolated threads, a process that is automatic, unnoticed, and, at times, visceral.

Working in concert, the artist’s compositional choices and the reader’s closure process inevitably help to portray FDR’s personal health as a victorious narrative. In this narrative the reader views Roosevelt being struck down by a dreaded disease but then witnesses his stunning use of willpower to overcome the affliction and ably lead the nation and the world. The comic book’s visual depictions (OWI, [1942]) provide consistent cues that would lead readers to draw such a conclusion. There is, for instance, a striking similarity between the pre-polio FDR and the post-polio FDR. Although he ages through the years, of course, the cartoon Roosevelt’s physical vibrancy and visible enthusiasm change little from beginning to end. He also appears in a majority of the booklet’s frames — and in most of them he is the primary visual element. Finally, the comic book’s cover image echoes on the last page, where a heroic President Roosevelt shakes hands with Winston Churchill against a backdrop of the entire world. Viewing such patterns could easily lead a reader to assume that FDR’s encounter with polio ended in a complete victory for the future president. The resulting impression of perceived fitness, built on visual composition and reaffirmed through closure, was surely powerful in its resonance.

Intriguingly, the only major change in the booklet’s depictions of FDR from beginning to end is the abrupt (though subtle) concealment of his legs (OWI, [1942]). Before the polio encounter, the future president’s legs appear in numerous active situations, as well as when he is merely standing, or at rest. The post-therapy FDR, in contrast, never displays his legs in the comic book. While readers do see him swimming, speaking, sailing, and taking the oath of office, they never again see him below the waist. This absence, however, would probably have been unremarkable to the typical reader of the time. Indeed, the cartoon FDR’s active life as a politician fighting the Depression and in the earliest stages of the war creates the appearance of more vigor, not less. Much like the real FDR — who managed a convincing show of perceived
fitness despite rarely displaying his legs in public (Houck & Kiewe, 2003) — the comic FDR’s apparent physical abilities benefited from dramatic misdirection.

*Life of FDR’s* presentation of Roosevelt’s heroic compassion on the one hand and its clever depiction of his perceived fitness on the other thus rely heavily on the comic book’s visual construction of exceptionality (OWI, [1942]). Specifically, the drawings provide compelling imagery to suggest heroic and compassionate qualities in Roosevelt even as they lead the reader to reach positive conclusions about his stunning recovery from polio. At the same time, they provide additional support for the booklet’s verbal elements, consistently bolstering OWI’s claims that FDR embodied the qualities of benevolence, determination, and leadership. Considered together, the comic book’s words and pictures offered international readers an attractive and dramatic glimpse into the president’s life story. Arguably, it was a perceptive and highly fitting response to Goebbels’s attacks on FDR. Most critically, though, as the concluding section of this essay contends, it was also a clever means of reconstructing the president’s life as a narrative quest, one whose unfinished nature tacitly invited readers to participate in envisioning the certainty of an eventual Allied victory.

**FDR’s Participatory Quest and the Rhetoric of Possibility**

To this point, I have contended that *Life of FDR*’s (OWI, [1942]) skillful use of the comic book genre’s intimate interaction between the visual and the verbal was well suited for its worldwide audience. After all, as Bonny Norton observes in her study of multilingual readers, “comic books can be seen as innovative in seeking to convey meaning through multimodality” (2003, p. 143). In the context of the World War II era perhaps only moving pictures offered a similar synthesis of appeals. To be sure, film was much less portable than soft cover booklets in 1942, and the process of supplying dubbed audio translations in a number of regional languages was more challenging. OWI’s comic book, in contrast, was able to fairly quickly place a simple, yet visceral propaganda message into the hands of hundreds of thousands of people in locales across the globe. Thus, at least for the propaganda context of the 1940s, *Life of FDR* represented a unique mix of potent elements.

Still, *Life of FDR* (OWI, [1942]) is much more than the sum of its parts. To wit, from a narrative perspective, it goes beyond its defense of FDR against Goebbels’s propaganda attacks by featuring an intriguing variation on the mythic form of the romantic quest. According to Northrop Frye, in such stories the archetypal hero triumphs over a formidable foe in the course of an adventurous journey (1957, p. 187). As Martha Solomon (1979) has demonstrated, this basic formula can serve as a useful rhetorical template in political discourse, showcasing the hero’s destiny in defeating the adversary and in fulfilling the quest. For the cartoon Roosevelt, the initial journey from relative obscurity into political power is indeed marked by a ferocious struggle with an inanimate foe: polio. Tellingly, however, the evident victory over that foe leads not to the plot’s denouement but to the introduction of the Axis powers as a second foe. Had the comic book’s narrative come to a halt after FDR faced down his affliction, the romantic quest
would have been mythically complete with polio’s defeat at the hands of the strong-willed hero. Yet Life of FDR goes on from that initial victory, bringing readers into the midst of the still-unresolved world war of late 1942.

FDR’s romantic quest is thus structurally incomplete (OWI, [1942]). Rather than ending with the traditional vanquishing of a foe, his tale ends with a struggle still in progress. Of course, by that point Roosevelt’s initial defeat of polio has already prompted readers to anticipate the ultimate defeat of the Axis. In narrative terms, that is, the first victory foreshadows a second victory, thereby encouraging readers to anticipate it as well. Roosevelt, the comic book suggests, survived the first foe after a terrific struggle, hence he will also inevitably prevail against the second foe. In fact, as the war begins in earnest in the comic book’s closing pages, the narrator affirms that “Franklin Roosevelt is a man who never shirked a task and will not lose this, the greatest battle of his life” (p. 16, emphasis added). While the ultimate fulfillment of the second quest is narratively assured, then, it necessarily remains in the future, requiring readers to imagine its successful outcome on their own.

This participatory element harkens back to McCloud’s notion of closure (1994). If readers mentally enact closure on a small scale from frame to frame, then the analogical connection between Roosevelt’s two struggles (OWI, [1942]) essentially asks them to go a step further by invoking a version of the rhetoric of possibility. To do so, it first invites them to “envision an absent reality” (Poulakos, 1984, p. 223) and then shows that future reality as “not merely conceivable, but attainable” (Kirkwood, 1992, p. 9). The eventual Allied victory, in this vision, is certain. Readers can follow Roosevelt’s narrative quest and draw for themselves OWI’s desired conclusion: that his character, willpower, and personal history ensure an Axis defeat even as they guarantee that the United States will free the world’s enslaved. In the ongoing worldwide struggle, the establishment of such a belief in the hearts and minds of countless international readers would have been an ideal means of defending Roosevelt from Goebbels’s propaganda jibes. Indeed, a successful worldwide launch of the comic book’s mythic story, complete with its participatory version of narrative possibility, would have been a priceless propaganda victory in the larger course of the war.

In the end, of course, it would be impossible all these years later to accurately measure Life of FDR’s success at using its clever romantic quest to woo a foreign audience during World War II (OWI, [1942]). However, an account of the booklet’s reception in Turkey — a neutral country at the time — has survived, providing some insight into the comic book’s appeal to international readers. Writing from Istanbul in 1943, W. H. Mullen wrote to OWI headquarters that the release of Life of FDR had “startled, thrilled, astounded Turkey” (p. 13). “Our entire supply of 30,800 copies,” continued the report, “was completely sold out within a day,” as “crowds mobbed the newsboys. Scuffles broke out in front of news-stands. Street cars came to a standstill. Automobile traffic was paralyzed. It seemed as if everybody in Istanbul was determined to buy a copy within the first half hour” (p. 14). Mullen added that the next day, “on his way by boat up the Bosphorus one of our boys counted 19 passengers out of 30 clutching the
cartoon books. They were reading carefully, showing each other the pictures, discussing eagerly and earnestly” (p. 15). Most importantly from OWI’s perspective, though, was the report’s assessment of how the comic book might have shaped local opinions of the U.S. war effort. “Along with the success in Tunisia and our bombing raids all over the map,” Mullen concluded, the booklet was taken seriously by Turks as another “indication that the Americans were definitely on their way here” (p. 16).

This report’s finding, though necessarily anecdotal, provides compelling testimony regarding the appeal of OWI’s *Life of FDR* [1942]. The publication might have been only a comic book, but its humble package concealed both a pointed defense of FDR on the international stage as well as a particularly alluring quest myth that invited foreign readers to participate in envisioning an Allied victory. In form and content it was, at the very least, an intriguing propaganda vehicle during the early stages of World War II. Not surprisingly, then, the propaganda team within OWI felt that the booklet was an overwhelming success. As staffer Armitage Watkins wrote (1943, p. 1), “we have received from our foreign missions unqualified praise for this publication and requests for additional similar publications.” In its wake, he added, “there is an enormous demand for facts in cartoon form.”

Ironically, however, *Life of FDR* appears to have been OWI’s [1942] last comic book project. At the time of its publication several similar ventures were in the planning stages. Archival records mention, among others, “Bombs Away,” the cartoon story of the crew of a Flying Fortress, “Wings of America,” a cartoon history of U.S. aviation, and an untitled comic book project featuring the life of an anonymous Marine (OWI, [1943], p. 5). But by early 1943 the agency was suffering from internal power struggles and simultaneously struggling to appease overtly hostile members of Congress (Weinberg, 1968). Goebbels, it turned out, was not the agency’s only enemy. By that summer, then, punitive budget cuts had foreclosed the possibility of any more comic book projects. “OWI’s cartoon war,” writes Barkin, “had come to an end” (1984, p. 117).
Kimble

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Framing the President


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Footnotes

1. Numerous translations of the comic book (OWI, [1942]) are preserved in the same National Archives box as the English version (which was destined for locations such as Capetown, Dublin, London, and Hawaii). The repository possesses versions printed in Afrikaans, Arabic, Chinese, French, Hebrew, Icelandic, Persian, Spanish, Swedish, and Turkish. OWI also created a version in Portuguese, but no such copy remains in the archives. The publication’s print run was actually 561,739, so it is possible that there were later stages of distribution whose records have not survived (OWI, Overseas Operations Branch, 1942, p. 1).

2. From the perspective of American scholarship, at least, Life of FDR remains obscure, probably due to its domestic lack of accessibility. Although the comic book was printed in numbers that exceeded many of OWI’s other publications, all but a handful were shipped abroad, making it much less available in the United States, even within most of the largest research libraries.

3. To offer another perspective, the number of words in the comic book’s textual appeals is 63% more than the number of words used in the Declaration of Independence.

4. The comic book here quotes FDR’s 1936 Chautauqua address. The three paragraphs of the quotation, however, are presented out of order. The second paragraph, moreover, adds a few clarifying words not in the speech’s official text (Roosevelt, 1938).

5. Here the comic book paraphrases FDR’s 1942 Message to Congress. It misstates FDR’s figure for shipping tons in 1942, which was 10 million, not 8 million (Roosevelt, 1950).

6. Another parallel is the obvious echo in body placement (in mirrored stances, each figure is upright, extends one arm while holding back the other, and holds his head in a similar pose).

7. OWI seems to have been aware of the potency of the comic book genre. As staffer Armitage Watkins later explained (1943, p. 1), “the cartoon device [in Life of FDR] is employed in order to appeal to a mass audience of all classes of literacy.”

8. I should clarify that, like Solomon (1979), I mean here to invoke Frye’s (1957) version of the heroic quest. Joseph Campbell (1949/1968) offers another well-known treatment of such quests. The many stages of the hero’s journey in Campbell’s so-called monomyth might make for a slightly different analysis of Life of FDR (OWI, [1942]), although it makes sense to suggest that FDR’s defeat of polio belongs to Campbell’s category of “preliminary victories,” with the larger “crisis at the nadir” still to come (p. 109).