

The Tale of Two Donalds

by Michael Curtis

Neither film goers nor political commentators might see much in common between Walt Disney's colorful and noisy character Donald Duck who has delighted audiences for 70 years and the colorful and noisy personality, Donald Trump, who is starring in the political arena at the present time. Yet, both characters have been involved with Russian affairs in a somewhat unexpected and bizarre fashion. Both of these characters have been unjustly accused of high crimes or misdemeanors, though Trump's problem was self-inflicted.

Donald Duck has been redeemed. He was on July 28, 2016 found not guilty of a serious crime, and everyone can now recognize he is not a villain. He had been accused of extremism in the city court of Petropavlovsk Kamchatsky, capital of the Kamchatka region of eastern Siberia. His problem arose as a character in the Walt Disney film, the 8 minute film, "Der Fuehrer's Face" made in 1942. The director of it won an Oscar for best animated short cartoon in 1943.

The film was part of the US propaganda campaign during World War II. No one could mistake it for anything but a wartime satire, portraying leading Nazis in mocking caricature, not as a serious political commentary on the Nazi system. .

The film portrayed Donald in a nightmare setting, forced to work in an assembly line in a munitions factory making artillery shells in Nazi Germany. He had arrived at the factory at bayonet point. Donald sees a band made up of Joseph Goebbels playing the trombone. Heinrich Himmler playing the drums, Hermann Goering playing the piccolo, and Benito Mussolini on another set of drums. When he wakes up from the nightmare Donald shows he is proud to be a U.S. citizen, and embraces the Statue of Liberty.

A resident of the Siberian town who uploaded the Disney film was accused of inciting racial hatred and enmity and received a six month suspended sentence. The film was put of the federal list of "extremist materials," thereby making it illegal to produce or distribute in Russia. The list outlaws all items critical of the Russian government, and also Nazi propaganda.

A higher Russian court ruled in July 2016 that the lower court was wrong and that the film could not be regarded as extremist. Donald Duck will therefore be removed from the national list of extremist materials in Russia, a list that has existed in Russia since 2002 and which contains more than 3,700 items.

Satire finally seems to have been understood by some Russians. Now it is time for it to be appreciated by American political and media personalities during this heated presidential campaign. The issue concerns the Republican candidate for the Presidency, whose unequivocal political pronouncements have stirred controversy. At the press conference at his golf resort in Florida on July 27, 2016, Donald Trump uttered one of his many impromptu, sometimes bewildering remarks. He referred indirectly to FBI Director James B. Comey who had commented in a balanced way that it was indeed possible that Hillary Clinton's server had been accessed, though there was no evidence that it had happened.

The issue related to the leaking and publication by Wikileaks of some 20,000 emails written by members of the Democratic National Committee. Among them were derogatory remarks about Bernie Sanders, Hillary's political rival, who had been saying for months that the activities of the DNC were rigged against him. More relevant are two other issues. One is the question of why the leaks took place and whether foreign outsiders were aware of the contents of the emails. The other is the unresolved mystery regarding the many emails of Hillary Clinton.

Trump in an off hand, extravagant and thoughtless remark proposed a solution of that mystery. He said, "Russia if you are listening, I hope you're able to find the 30,000 emails that are missing. I think you'll be rewarded mightily by our press."

Understandably, the mainstream U.S. media was annoyed at Trump's jibe about their seeming lack of interest in pursuing the case of the missing emails. Trump has little flair or timing for comedy, and his remark can be accused of poor judgment. But instead of treating Trump's provocative statement as an ill judged, poor attempt at satire, the press, as well of course as political opponents, have treated it as if it were a serious policy proposal.

One accepts that US presidential campaigns are heated and one expects that rhetoric used by candidates may sometimes be excessive and even border on the fictional. It is improbable that political opponents have really believed that Trump was calling for a foreign power to carry out cyber-spying on Hillary Clinton or the DNC, or actively encouraging another country to commit a crime against the U.S. Yet, not surprisingly, Jake Sullivan, the senior policy advisor of Hillary, said this was the first time that a major presidential candidate has actively encouraged a foreign power to conduct espionage against his political opponent. One may dislike Trump's persona and personal style and disagree with the direction of his policy pronouncements but this is different from portraying him as a security risk or guilty of treason.

Yes, words matter and so does the commentary and parsing on them used by political figures. We learned from FBI Director Comey that "extreme carelessness" is not equivalent to "negligence." International public opinion was surprised when the White House "red line" pertinent in 2012 to the use of chemical weapons by the Assad regime in Syria turned out not to exist.

Donald Trump is not the first prominent person to make a gaffe in trying political humor. In 1984 Ronald Reagan in an off air radio sound check said, "I've signed legislation that will outlaw Russia forever. We begin bombing in 5 minutes." It was unlikely that Russian leaders at the time took Reagan's joke seriously. It is equally unlikely that President Vladimir Putin has taken Donald Trump's remark seriously, or that he will respond to Trump as the Russian court once treated Donald Duck. He might even laugh at the joke.