

The Joke Stops Here: What If Al Franken Were President? The Incurable Comedian's Book Is Getting Votes On The Best-Seller List

BYLINE: PAUL DUCHENE, The Oregonian

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In his new book, comedian Al Franken wants to be elected U.S. president in the worst way.

And that's the way he gets the job.

Franken, the "Saturday Night Live" veteran and "Lateline" star, also is known for his "Politically Incorrect" appearances, which is appropriate given that his book, "Why Not Me?" [Delacourt, \$23.95], is about as incorrect as politics can get.

There's never been such a colorful presidential race, and Franken admits his character in the book overstepped even Franken's own bounds.

For example, he would never:

1] Run solely on haranguing banks over ATM fees [funded by insurance companies who want to get into the business]. His slogan? "Banks don't need money. People do."

2] Allow his alcoholic, sex-addict brother Otto to manage a campaign that pulls off every cheap political trick in the book.

3] Humiliate Vice President Al Gore on television and knock him out of the race after hiring cross-dressers to cheer at Gore's rallies.

4] Deliver an inauguration speech whose high points are apologies for injustices perpetuated against minorities -- illustrated by movies that vividly illustrate every single racist and sexist joke.

5] Have himself cloned.

Franken's not like that at all -- a point he made by phone last week before a visit to Portland for a book-signing Tuesday at Powell's and a debate Wednesday with right-wing lightning rod Arianna Huffington.

Why shouldn't we elect you? We elect actors who can't remember lines, why not stand-up comics who can at least think on their feet?

The book answers its own question. After my book "Rush Limbaugh Is a Big Fat Idiot" came out, people said: "Why not? You're fairly articulate, you know about politics, you're good-looking, only married once." I'd be terrible. I'm an indecisive person and I internalize a lot of stress. It's one thing to worry if a joke's funny and is this a good career move? But the idea of deciding which school gets funded and do you bomb Kosovo? . . . I'd be crushed.

So is this a stealth campaign?

It looks like a stealth campaign. There are two ways to market. One is to do the Pat Paulsen thing and announce you're running. I didn't want to do that -- I don't have time. I'm doing "Lateline" editing -- I've got a real job. And I'm not consistent with the Al Franken in the book who's a depraved fool on the campaign trail. I take campaigns seriously, and I wouldn't want to inject myself into something I think is kinda sacred. If I put myself on the ballot and even 50 people voted for me it'd be a travesty. So I wrote a book instead.

You have a debate with Arianna Huffington. Is she a conservative foil for you?

We go back four years -- we did Strange Bedfellows for Comedy Central in the 1996 election. It was amazing how much feedback we got. People loved it.

What gave you the idea for the book?

The book contract. What forces me to do anything? I had to. I didn't want to do 'Who's going to be the next [blowhard] after Rush Limbaugh?' Gingrich? Starr? I thought, I know . . . me! I transformed myself, made myself the worst person possible. It's scathing satire because the scenario has it that this guy could win.

Who was the most help writing the book?

Norm Ornstein [policy wonk] called me all the time -- very funny and brilliant. Bill Kimball and Mandy Grunwald [readers], I trust to tell me when I'm right. Howard Fineman [of Newsweek], who came up with the ATM fees. You know that's been tried? D'Amato tried it but the idea doesn't get much traction 'til Y2K when the system crashes.

Your campaign has that great ad of Snoopy weeping because he doesn't have any dog food. The old folks are eating it after the ATMs take all their money. Was that your idea?

Yeah. I had that one issue attacking banks over ATMs. The insurance companies like me because they want to get into the banking business. Now if you really dig around the business pages, you'll find they're actually trying to do this!

Do you have a brother named Otto?

No, my brother's named Owen, and he's nothing like Otto.

Dan Haggerty [Grizzly Adams] has a recurring part in the story. Is he a friend of yours?

No I don't know him, but every campaign has its Rosey Grier.

Did you ask Al Gore for an endorsement for the book?

I did, but I never heard back. I like the vice president and I consider him a friend, but the timing wasn't good. I needed it quick. I even had the quote: "It's frighteningly real -- the most scary thing is it could happen."

How much of your campaign is drawn from real war stories?

Less than you might think. I spent a lot of time around campaigns, but it's really my imagination. A lot of it was flights of fancy -- my wife saving that old man from drowning, I never heard of that. It'd be a nice thing.

Let's assume for the moment you DID get elected:

Who would play at your inaugural ball?

The Grateful Dead without Jerry -- the Other Ones.

Who wouldn't you pardon?

Ken Starr.

What would you legalize?

Homosexuality -- no wait, it's already legal.

What would be your favorite presidential perk?

Hetero sex in Air Force One.

Finally, how's the book doing?

It's doing well -- it made the best-seller list the first week out. We're in our fifth week now, and you find out on Wednesday where you'll be two Sundays ahead. We'll be 12th on The New York Times best-seller list two Sundays from now.

Preview

Al Franken

WHAT:

Reading and signing books

WHEN:

7:30 p.m. Tuesday

WHERE:

Northwest Neighborhood Cultural Center, 1819 N.W. Everett St.

ADMISSION:

Free