

In My Not So Humble Opinion

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Howard Chaykin's American Flagg! 35 years later

"I wanted to do a book that would annoy, piss off, and educate... and it did." – Howard Chaykin

To celebrate the Fourth of July holiday week, I am taking a look back at the first 14 issues of Howard Chaykin's comic book series, the dystopian political satire *American Flagg!* Written & drawn by Chaykin, lettered by Ken Bruzenak, and colored by Lynn Varley & Leslie Zahler, *American Flagg!* was published by First Comics.

This year is the 35th anniversary of the debut *American Flagg!* (according to Mike's Amazing World of Comics (<http://www.mikesamazingworld.com/mikes/features/comic.php?comid=87114>) the first issue went on sale June 20, 1983). This is one of those series that went totally under my radar for many years because, to be completely honest, I just was not mature or sophisticated enough to appreciate it back in my teenage Marvel Zombie days. Having become a fan of Chaykin through his later work, I subsequently discovered *American Flagg!* via back issues, and immediately fell in love with it.





American Flagg! is both very political and very patriotic, proudly wearing its love for America, albeit in a manner that was **very** different from most expressions of flag-waving to be found during the Reagan years. As editor Mike Gold explains in the first issue...

2 of 12 "Chaykin's probably the most patriotic person I know. Not in the usual 'Love It or Leave It' nonsense that serves to divide instead of unite – and is therefore *not* patriotic. Howard's patriotism comes from pride – and from great hope for America."

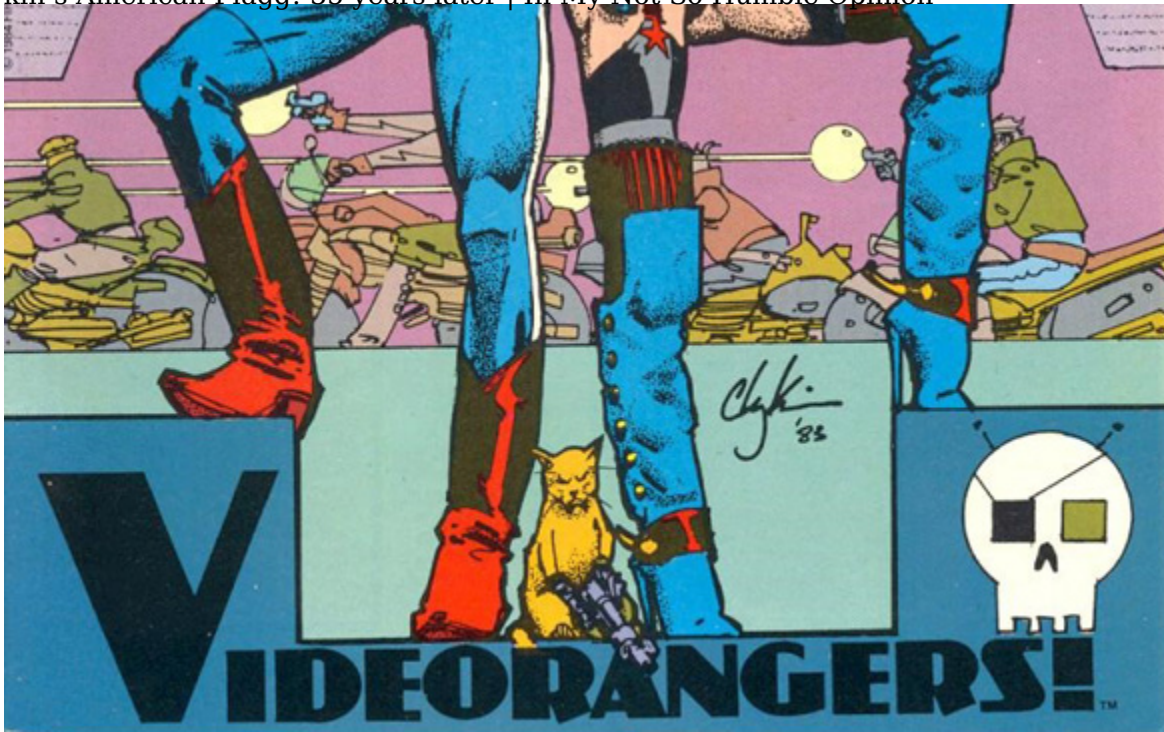
Of course, as he's acknowledged over the years, Chaykin was not only interested in politics, and he also utilized *American Flagg!* to delve deeply into the worlds of violence, guns, fashion, and sex... lots and lots of sex.

The first issue of *American Flagg!* opens in October 2031 AD. It has been three and a half decades since 1996, "the Year of the Domino, when everything went to hell." The United States and the Soviet Union experienced simultaneous violent collapses, and the planet was stricken by a series of calamitous economic, social and ecological crises.

The American government relocated to the planet Mars ("temporarily of course") and, merging with private industry, reorganized as Plex USA. Ostensibly formed to help put the country back on its feet, the so-called Tricentennial Recovery Committee is actually intended to milk the planet dry of its remaining money & resources, so that the Plex can permanently establish an independent nation / corporation on Mars.

Across the globe a number of Malls have been constructed, hives of government & commerce, their twin goals to maintain order and keep the population pacified with entertainment that is suffused with explicit sex and graphic violence. The population of the former United States has splintered into numerous tribal factions, with different ethnic, religious, and political paramilitary "clubs" fighting it out. The Plex actively encourages these "clubs," providing them with weapons, and recording their battles to air on *Firefight All Night*, "the highest rated vidshow on three planets," one that makes the Plex "a fortune in ad revenues."





Into this morass of corruption and violence, of omnipresent mass media and runaway capitalism, all feeding an unending cycle of urban warfare, steps Reuben Flagg. Born on Marsplex to left-leaning bohemian parents, Reuben was raised to have a love for the ideals of the American Dream. For several of years Reuben starred in the Plex's top-rated exploitive TV cop show *Mark Thrust: Sexus Ranger*. Unfortunately for Reuben, even though the show got renewed, he was fired, replaced by a computer generated image. The out-of-work Flagg is drafted and shipped to Earth, where he is assigned to be the new deputy ranger at the Chicago Plexmall.

This is the first time Reuben experiences the dire situation of life on Earth. Chicago and the rest of the New Midwest are plagued by "70% unemployment, constant intergang warfare, and malaise on an epic scale." The idealistic Flagg is appalled, even more so when the various jockeying factions of the region each attempt to inveigle him in their corrupt activities.

As Reuben explains to Mandy Kreiger at the end of the third issue...

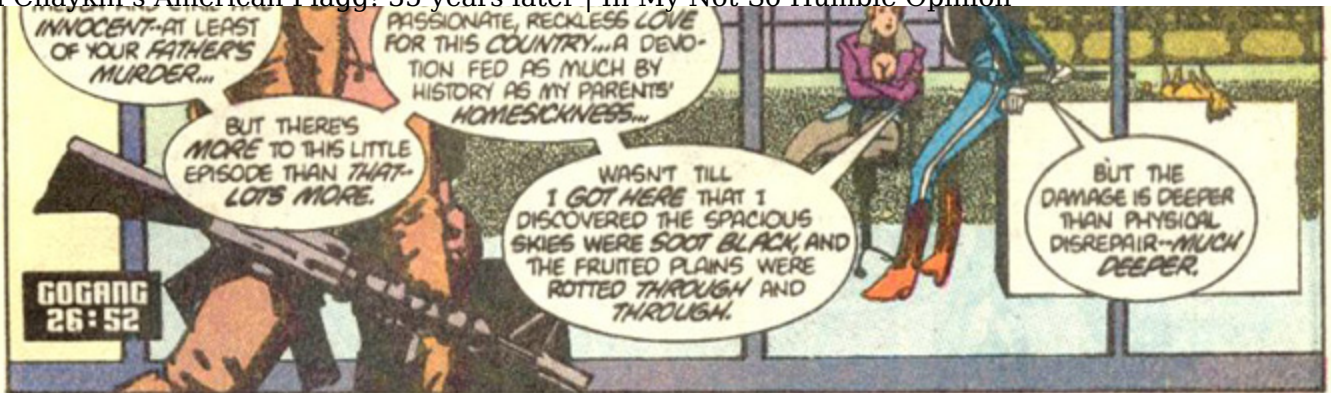
"I grew up on Mars with a passionate, reckless love for this country... a devotion fed as much by history as by my parents' homesickness... Wasn't till I got here that I discovered the spacious skies were soot black, and the fruited plains were rotted through and through.

"But the damage is deeper than physical disrepair – much deeper. The American Spirit – the honest, openhanded driving force of solidarity – has been castrated. Betrayed by the banks... big business... by slimy fat cats who use patriotism like a tart uses cheap perfume... betrayed by the Plex.

"Someone's got to stop the decline... Or try."

Of course, reading this scene in 2018, it is **also** possible to perceive this as an example of a white, straight, cisgender, able-bodied man riding into town and telling everyone they had better listen to him because only he knows how to save the day. Your mileage may vary.





In the past Chaykin has said words to the effect that while he is not a nice person, he is a good person.

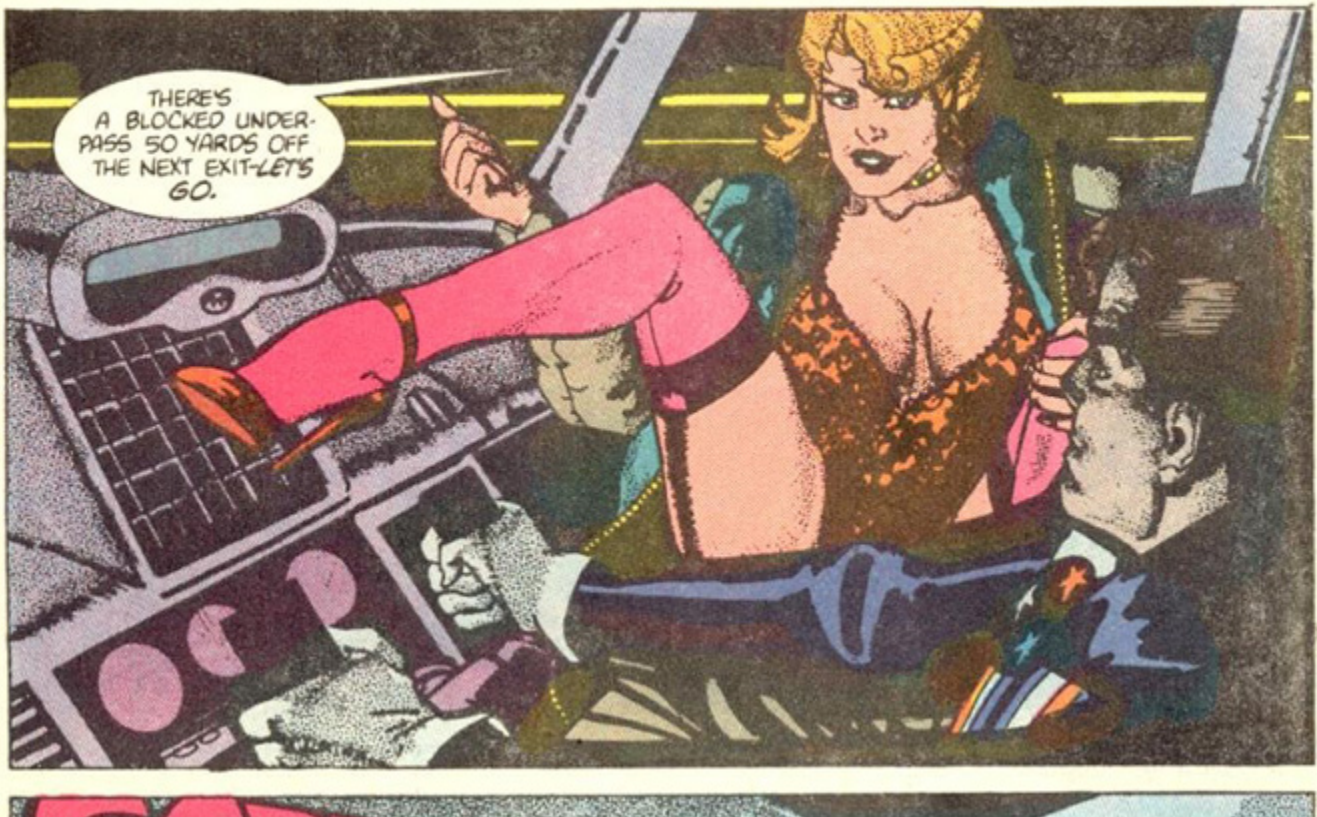
That is definitely how one could also describe his creation Reuben Flagg, as well. Reuben has all manner of glaring flaws. He is arrogant, impatient, short-tempered, sarcastic, a womanizer, and more than a bit self-righteous. On the other hand, he is also governed by a clear set of morals, he is honest, he hates injustice, and he has a clear aversion to killing. Reuben may not be nice, but he is basically good.

Chaykin draws this line between Reuben and many other members of the cast, who are nice, but not necessarily good. C.K. Blitz, the mayor of Chicago, is certainly a nice guy. He is very friendly and polite, and knows how to make friends. He needs to be, to stay in office and do his job effectively. But, like most politicians, he is motivated primarily by self-interest, wheeling & dealing in order to acquire more power, prestige, and wealth. Blitz isn't a bad person per se, but he's always looking for the next angle that he can play for his personal gain.

John Scheiskopf and Ester de la Castro are even more striking examples. Both of them can definitely be **very** nice. Either of them will be your best friend ever... right up until the point when they no longer have a use for you, at which point they will literally knife you in the back. Beneath their polite manners and warm smiles, both Scheiskopf and de la Castro are incredibly selfish, power-hungry, immoral individuals who will casually commit mass murder in the furtherance of their goals.

Chaykin is clearly pointing out the danger of superficiality, of falling for outward appearances, both in politics and business. The slick, charming outward veneer often masks all number of sins and selfishness. In contrast, an individual like Flagg may be obviously flawed, but in his case what you see is what you get, and he doesn't hide who he is, good and bad.

Reuben is also Jewish. Chaykin establishes this in an almost-offhand manner, and it is only referred to in passing from time to time. It certainly is not a defining characteristic; Flagg is a character who, among other things, happens to be Jewish. Nevertheless, I believe that this made him one of the first ever Jewish characters to headline his own ongoing comic book series.





SCHEISKOPF?

SPARE ME
YOUR PETTY
JEALOUSIES.

...I'VE
WANTED
YOU...

SINCE
THE MOMENT
I LAID EYES
ON...

15

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Raul is such a very cat-like cat that I figured that Chaykin must have had at least one cat in real life. This

Howard Chaykin's American Flagg! 35 years later | In My Not So Humble Opinion
was confirmed by Chaykin's friend and occasional collaborator Don Cameron, who explained:

"Fun fact: Raul was based on a cat Howard had named Cochise who used to "mumble" all the time."

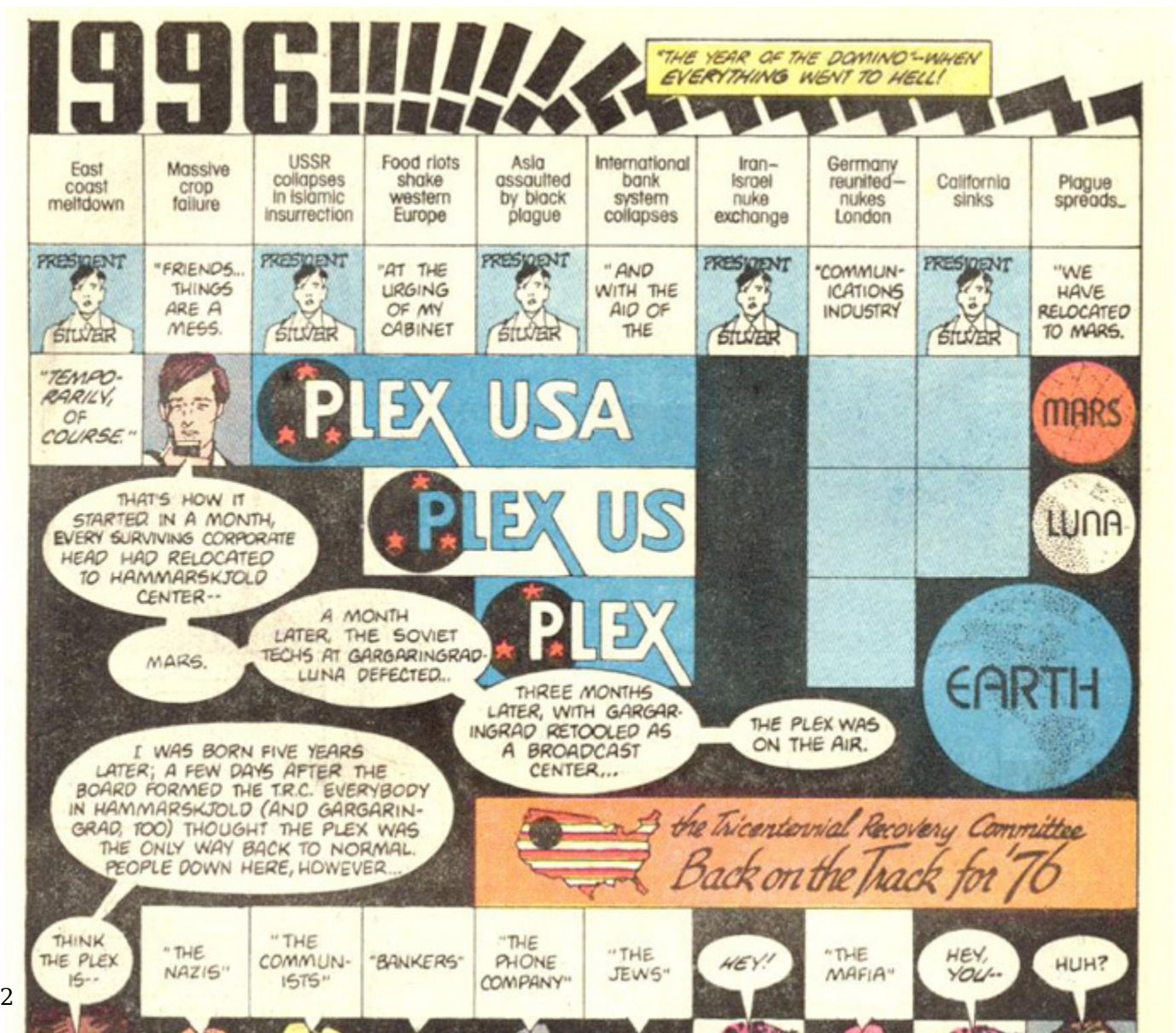


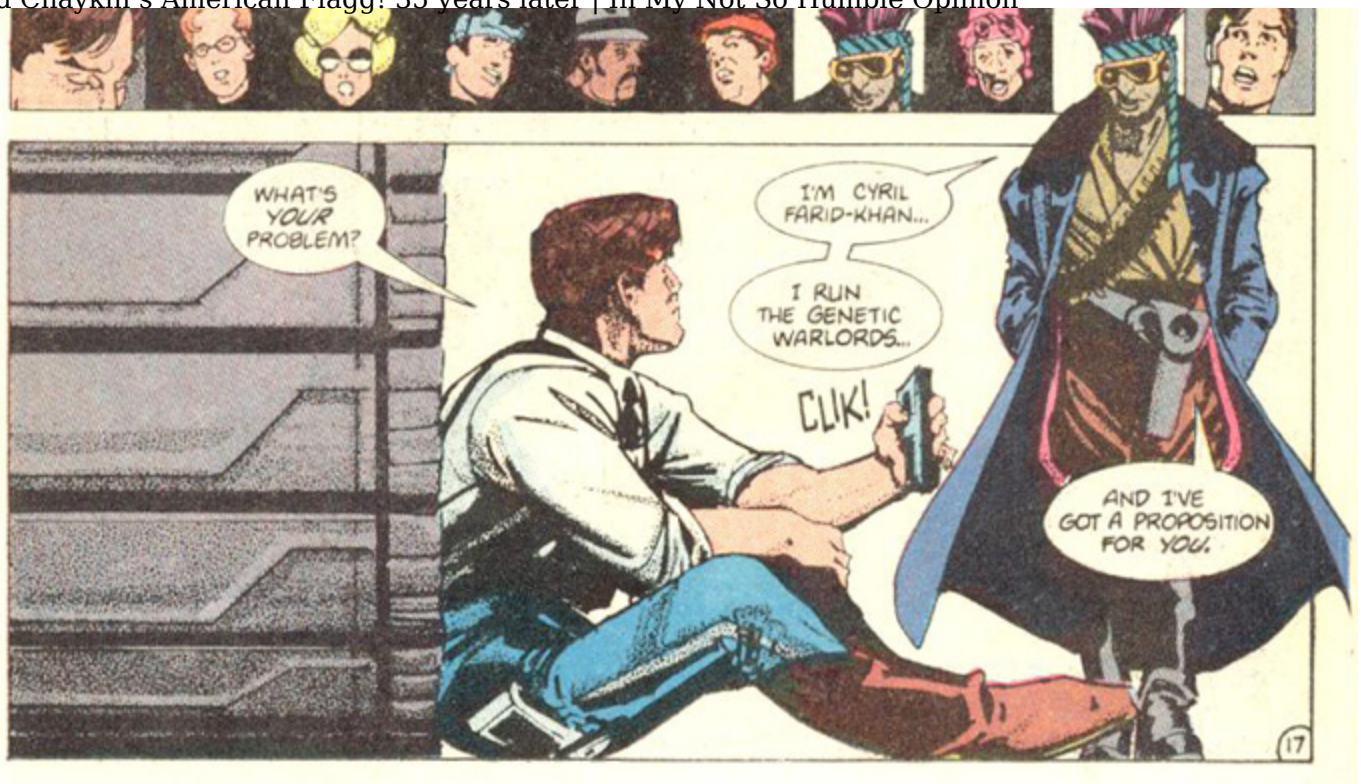


It's interesting to look at the place *American Flagg!* holds in Chaykin's career. In the prior decade Chaykin had produced a body of artwork of variable quality, ranging from good to lackluster. Chaykin himself is dismissive of much of the material he drew during that decade, regarding it as sub-par.

In early 1980, after a disagreement with Marvel editor-in-chief Jim Shooter, Chaykin left the field of comic books entirely, and for the next three years painted cover artwork for paperback novels. When he returned to comic books in 1983 with *American Flagg!*, Chaykin's work had clearly taken a seismic leap forward. The quality of Chaykin's art for this series is astonishing. Chaykin himself refers to *American Flagg!* as "the first thing I did that was any good." (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y-cvoqg9wzg>)

One of the most frequently-cited examples of Chaykin's work on *American Flagg!* is page 17 of the first issue. Chaykin's brilliant layouts work with Ken Bruzenak's superb lettering to create a stunning narrative sequence that lays out the back-story of the series.





Due to unforgiving deadlines and a crushing workload, Chaykin was unfortunately unable to draw the two epilogues to his first story arc. Issue #13 is penciled by James Sherman, and #14 by Pat Broderick, with both inked by Rick Burchett. All three artists do their best to emulate the tone, the storytelling modes utilized by Chaykin, but it isn't quite the same. It certainly serves as a very example of just how much of an impact the artist has on the look, the flow, the tone of the finished work in comic books.

American Flagg! was a very prescient work. Chaykin looked at the United States in the early 1980s and clearly perceived exactly where the country would be going over the next three and a half decades. The pervasive presence of mass media and its influence on the electoral process, the manipulation of government by private industry, the escalation of ethnic and religious conflicts and the factionalization of American society, the degradation of the environment... all of this is present.

Chaykin also foresaw the dangers posed by a heavily-armed paranoid conspiracy-peddling white supremacist alt-right movement based out of the American heartland, or as they call themselves here, the American Survivalist Labor Committee. In issue #9, the A.S.L.C. stage a grandiose political rally which they broadcast to the region via the Fasfax Chicago network, and their charismatic leader boldly declares...

"We're here to stop this country's slide into oblivion... a crisis precipitated by the most malevolent criminal cartel known to man... the Italo-Brit-Zionist Conspiracy."

There is even a subplot in the second half of the initial year-long story arc involving plans by the Soviet Union to manipulate the outcome of a Presidential election. In 1983 that might have left readers going "What a crazy idea!" but in 2018 has most of us responding "Um, yeah, I can totally believe it."





Chaykin's work on this series was also groundbreaking and influential. It's probable that a number of up-and-coming creators who read *American Flagg!* in the early 1980s were influenced by it, and soon after

Howard Chaykin's *American Flagg!* 35 years later | In My Not So Humble Opinion
utilized the tropes and techniques in their work for DC and Marvel. It's unfortunate that all these years later *American Flagg!* is still under-recognized, whereas *The Dark Knight Returns* and *Watchmen*, two books that could be regarded as its immediate successors, have both received widespread acclaim and multiple printings.

If you haven't read *American Flagg!* before, I certainly recommend it. In 2009 the first 14 issues were collected into two trade paperbacks by Image Comics which are still readily available. It is one of the best examples I can think of that demonstrates the vast, often untapped, potential of the comic book medium.

- [American Flagg!](https://benjaminherman.wordpress.com/tag/american-flagg/) (<https://benjaminherman.wordpress.com/tag/american-flagg/>)
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mrbrklyn says:
Your comment is awaiting moderation.
July 28, 2018 at 5:16 am
Check
http://www.mrbrklyn.com/american_flagg.html

There are a few books on this as well. It always seems that the material outstretches my ability to find the time to write it all up.

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