

cartooning

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Political or editorial cartooning has been a ubiquitous feature of American politics since the eighteenth century. Usually characterized by a single image supplemented by or juxtaposed to text, cartoons comment on events, ideas, people, policies, and social mores, framing their observations with humor, derision, or irony. While the term *cartoon* did not gain its current meaning until 1843 (via a reference in the British satirical weekly *Punch*), the form had long made a regular appearance in election campaigns as a partisan tool and as a popular form of visual commentary on local and national politics in general. Cartoons introduced many of the enduring symbols and terms in American politics, including the Republican Party elephant and the manipulative redistricting term *gerrymander*.

The form emerged out of the transatlantic print culture of the eighteenth century and London's vibrant pictorial market of political prints commenting on British politics and colonial policy. The few American contributions by the likes of Philadelphia printer Benjamin Franklin and Boston silversmith and engraver Paul Revere, published

either as small woodcuts in newspapers or as single-sheet copper engraving broadsides, were cruder in appearance than their British counterparts. But such images as Franklin's 1754 "Join or Die" snake, calling on Britain's colonies to form a unified defense as war with France approached—often cited as the first American political cartoon and reissued during the 1765 Stamp Act Crisis and again in 1774—and Revere's 1770 fanciful depiction of the Boston Massacre were effective expressions of the Patriot cause and were widely disseminated on both sides of the Atlantic. The broadside form of cartoon continued to make an appearance, albeit infrequently, during the early electoral contests and presidential administrations of the young republic (one authority counted only 78 political prints before 1828).

Jacksonian Prints

The cartoon finally became a staple of political commentary and a weapon in the arsenals of political campaigns with the 1828 presidential contest between incumbent John Quincy Adams and Andrew Jackson. Cartoons became ubiquitous during the campaign, fueled by the expansion of male suffrage and the unusual bitterness of the election. Their rise as a popular form of political expression also resulted from the introduction of lithographic prints, which were substantially cheaper to produce and purchase than other visual print media of the time. While newspapers eschewed publishing cartoons via the more expensive process of engraving (which

Benjamin Franklin's warning to the British colonies in America to unite shows a snake in segments, each named for a colony or region. Published in the *Pennsylvania Gazette*, May 9, 1754. (Library of Congress)



permitted the publication of illustrations within the columns of type), lithography houses such as H. R. Robinson and, subsequently, Currier and Ives sprang up in New York and other northeastern cities, producing affordable single-sheet political prints in the thousands for a picture-hungry electorate.

Artists such as Edward William Clay and David Claypool Johnston established commercial careers as creators of political pictorial commentary during the antebellum period. Johnston, in particular, created many stark and original images, such as his 1828 caricature of Andrew Jackson as “Richard III,” his face composed from the dead bodies of Seminole Indians. But the standard antebellum political print featured flat, theatrical tableaux in which stiff figures—their faces rendered in expressionless portraits—were depicted performing absurd acts in incongruous situations, with gobs of pun-infested text emanating from their mouths into balloons overhead.

Despite its representational limitations, the print remained the dominant form of political pictorial commentary for more than three decades, extending into the presidential administration of Abraham Lincoln. Yet historians continue to speculate about how these often raucous and highly partisan images were actually used and where they were displayed. Too topical and unedifying to conform to the sentimental or didactic goals prescribed for lithographs that decorated genteel parlors, the prints may have found a place on kitchen walls; they were most likely to be appreciated in male-dominated institutions such as taverns, barber shops, and political clubs.

The Political Cartoon Comes of Age

By the 1840s, topical cartoons were a regular feature in weekly illustrated newspapers in Europe and England, including publications devoted entirely to satirical commentary, such as the French *Le Charivari* (1832), which inspired the British *Punch: The London Charivari* (1841). Meanwhile, pictorial publication remained anemic in the United States until midcentury, when improved transportation, innovations in printing—especially in the process of wood engraving, which was compatible with movable type—and public concern about the growing sectional crisis created the conditions for a viable commercial illustrated press. With the rise of weekly pictorial newspapers, particularly *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* in 1855 and *Harper's Weekly* in 1857, political cartooning entered a new phase that spelled the end of the long, comparatively tepid reign of the individual political print.

Although the pictorial press was centered in New York City, these publications relied on a broad readership and regularly featured cartoons that addressed national issues, printed in the crisp black and white linear codes of engraving. Cartoons often appeared on the weeklies' covers, complemented by a full- or double-page cartoon inside, and followed by more modest cartoons, usually commenting on social mores, among the ads in the back. The number of cartoons and their vituperative tone increased every election cycle, and the cartoonist whose name was synonymous with this mode and medium of expression was the German immigrant and ardent Republican Thomas Nast.

Nast became *Harper's Weekly's* leading cartoonist in his early twenties during the Civil War, and subsequently sealed his position at the publication, and his reputation in the broader field, with a series of brilliantly reductive, savagely caricatured cartoons attacking the “ring” of the corrupt Tammany Hall Democrats that controlled New York City's government. The only cartoonist able to rival Nast was another German immigrant, Joseph Keppler, whose Democratic-leaning satirical weekly *Puck* made its English-language debut in New York in 1877 (after a brief phase as a German-language magazine). What set *Puck* apart, and inaugurated another phase in editorial cartooning, was his introduction of chromolithography to U.S. magazine publishing. Each issue featured skillful caricatures of the illustrious and notorious rendered in full color against lavish, elaborate settings. As both *Puck's* publisher and chief artist, Keppler cultivated a host of younger cartoonists; some left his employ in 1881 to start *Judge*, a rival Republican satirical weekly.

The work of Nast, Keppler, and other Gilded Age artists established and, through repetition, institutionalized many of the symbols and pictorial conventions of political cartoons. Nast, in particular, excelled at devising figures that would become enduring iconographic political symbols. Figures embodying the nation, such as Liberty and Uncle Sam, had evolved and gained purchase in U.S. political culture since the eighteenth century; Nast introduced new symbols, including the Republican elephant, the Democratic machine Tammany tiger, and the bloated, diamond-bedecked urban political boss—epitomized in his rendition of Tammany Hall's William M. “Boss” Tweed. As that encapsulation of corruption demonstrated, both Nast and Keppler were masters of caricature—the exaggeration and distortion of the features and figures of individuals—in itself a

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In his cartoon “The Tammany Tiger Loose,” Thomas Nast depicts the Tammany Hall Democrats as a vicious tiger attacking the law, the ballot, the republic, and power. Published in *Harper’s Weekly*, November 11, 1871. (American Social History Project, Center for Media and Learning at The City University of New York Graduate Center)

sharp departure from antebellum cartoons’ presentation of relatively accurate countenances. By midcentury, caricature received a big boost from the invention of photography and the corresponding rapid proliferation of official photographic portraits. The public quickly grew familiar with the faces of the famous and infamous, giving cartoonists license to offer contorted versions that were intended to reveal the true motives and morality of their subjects. But these cartoonists’ devotion to physical distortion was most fervently directed at groups. While racial stereotypes had a long presence in U.S. cartooning (dating back to E. W. Clay’s 1830s “Life in Philadelphia” series lampooning northern free African Americans), Nast and Keppler reveled in grotesque ethnic portrayals to attack political opponents, especially simian Irish Americans for whom, along with Catholicism, both artists expressed antipathy.

Cartoons and the Daily Press

The true popularity of the Gilded Age cartoonists remains difficult to determine. The readership of the comparatively expensive illustrated weeklies rarely exceeded the hundreds of thousands. Nonetheless, the weeklies

continued to dominate editorial cartooning. With the exception of the short-lived *New York Daily Graphic*, newspapers remained underillustrated. Then on October 30, 1884, Joseph Pulitzer published a cartoon by Walt McDougall (assisted by Valerian Gribayedoff) on the front page of his *New York World*. “The Royal Feast of Belshazzar Blaine and the Money Kings,” which portrayed a poor family begging at a sumptuous feast attended by notorious robber barons and presided over by Democratic presidential candidate James G. Blaine, was later cited as a factor in Blaine’s loss to Grover Cleveland. After the publication of McDougall’s picture, political cartoons became a regular front-page feature in daily newspapers across the country.

Political cartoons were part of the larger visual extravaganza of Sunday supplements, comic strips, celebrity portraits, color, news illustrations, and eventually photojournalism that became crucial to the success of the mass-circulation press. For the first time, editorial cartoons became a truly popular medium reaching millions of readers daily. In turn, cartoonists became part of the celebrity culture the newspapers helped foster, gaining greater prestige and commensurate salaries.

By the turn of the twentieth century, every major newspaper across the country published political cartoons, usually on the front page. Amounting to some 2,000 professional editorial cartoonists, the ranks were notable for their absence of the generation that had dominated the era of the newsweeklies. And, in contrast to their often obstreperously independent predecessors, newspaper cartoonists were in thrall to their publishers and the latter's political party allegiances (as well as to the newspapers' increasing reliance on advertising revenue).

The transition to the newspaper phase of cartooning also marked a significant change in the medium's form. Now on daily rather than weekly schedules, required to address a broader range of readers and hampered by cruder newspaper reproduction, the new generation of cartoonists adopted a simpler pen-and-ink drawing style and briefer captions, relinquishing the laborious detail, baroque compositions, text-heavy messages, and classical and Shakespearean references that characterized the Gilded Age cartoons. Soon that form became even more streamlined when Robert Minor convinced the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch's* pressmen to let him draw using a blunt grease crayon on textured paper; the more sketchlike technique quickly caught on.

The cartoonists of the mass-circulation press, along with their professional predecessors, were not the only artists publishing editorial cartoons. From the Gilded Age onward, immigrants, African Americans, trade unionists, feminists, and radicals published alternative and oppositional periodicals. Often limited in circulation and resources, these publications included visual commentary offering their constituencies perspectives that countered or supplemented those in the commercial press. The number of these publications—and their cartoons—increased at the turn of the century with the great wave of immigration, a burgeoning reform movement, an increasingly militant labor movement, and the rise of the Socialist Party and other third parties, all assisted by decreased costs in the reproduction of illustrations.

America's entry into World War I starkly demarcated alternative from mass-circulation cartoons. Few newspapers (and consequently, cartoonists) criticized the mobilization for war. Recognizing the popularity of political cartooning and capitalizing on the press's war enthusiasm, President Woodrow Wilson's administration established a Bureau of Cartoons as an arm of the propagandistic Committee on Public Information. The Bureau issued a weekly *Bulletin for Cartoonists* with

instructions about appropriate subjects and how to illustrate them. While absorbing cartoons into the war effort, the government also targeted dissenting images. After passage of the 1917 Espionage Statute and the 1918 Sedition Act, publications alleged to engage in "obstruction of recruitment" were banned from the U.S. mail, effectively eliminating most alternative publications. In the case of the New York-based *The Masses*, a radical monthly with a small circulation but a big reputation for featuring cartoons by some of the outstanding artists of the era, the government went further and, citing the cartoons, prosecuted the editor and several artists. Two trials resulted in hung juries but also ultimately spelled the end of the magazine.

Uniformity, Decline, and Experimentation

Isolationism, complacency, and suspicion of reforms characterized commercial editorial cartooning after the war. Significantly, most of the women who had breached the walls of the male cartoonist club (and were limited to drawing only cartoons about suffrage) lost their jobs in the wake of passage of the Nineteenth Amendment. National syndication of cartoons only exacerbated uniformity as local cartoonists were replaced by more celebrated practitioners located in major cities. Public interest in editorial cartoons lagged: they were removed from their long-standing front-page perch and relocated to the interior editorial page in reduced size.

Over the course of cartooning's long history, commentators and scholars have contemplated its influence on public opinion. Stories abound about its impact on presidential contests such as the 1884 election, where the wide circulation of the *World's* "Belshazzar" cover and *Puck's* corruption-covered "Tattooed Man" cartoon purportedly undermined Blaine's chances. There is strong evidence that multitudes were entertained by such energetic cartoon assaults but little indication that the medium actually changed minds. Moreover, some of the most notorious campaigns, such as the assault on Republican William McKinley's candidacy by Hearst cartoonist Oliver Davenport in 1896, did not avert their victims' electoral triumphs.

Indeed, Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal is a signal example of a time in which mainstream political cartoons misrepresented popular political sentiments. Influenced by their overwhelmingly Republican publishers, most commercial political cartoons in the 1930s denounced the administration's policies and tirelessly depicted the

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Army Medical Examiner: "At last a perfect soldier!"

Robert Minor's cartoons, like this one published in *The Masses*, July 1916, set the precedent for short captions and sketch-like drawings. (American Social History Project, Center for Media and Learning at The City University of New York Graduate Center)

country in the grip of an unpopular dictatorship. In contrast, cartoons in the alternative press provided greater insight into the attributes that contributed to Roosevelt's political longevity.

The post-World War II era saw little change in political cartoons' overall lackluster and conservative performance. Most newspaper cartoonists avoided controversy, which the larger profession implicitly applauded in a run of Pulitzer Prizes awarded to uninspired (and subsequently forgotten) work. Postwar conservatism and political repression, coupled with the rise of television, the triumph of syndication, and the start of what would be a long death roll of newspapers and cartoonist jobs further undermined originality and fostered conformity. The aging cohort of cartoonists saw their ranks diminish, and few registered surprise when the *New York Times* decided not to replace its cartoonist Edwin Marcus when he retired in 1958. Herbert Block in the *Washington Post* and Walt Kelly in his politically inflected comic strip

Pogo took on imposing figures such as Senator Joseph McCarthy; but the most promising cartoonist of the war generation, Bill Mauldin (creator of the irreverent *Up Front* cartoons eagerly read by GIs in *Stars and Stripes*), weary of attacks on his postwar cartoons about domestic problems and political repression, quit the profession for almost a decade.

Only when the Vietnam War reached its height in the late 1960s did many political cartoonists emerge from their torpor to take the unprecedented step of criticizing U.S. government foreign policy during wartime. But these visual commentaries—which found even greater purchase during the Watergate scandal that eventually undermined President Richard Nixon's administration—paled compared to the work of "antiestablishment" cartoonists such as Jules Feiffer, Edward Sorel, and David Levine. These and other polemical and innovative cartoonists were published in periodicals directed at younger and more liberal readers (complemented by Gary Trudeau, whose *Doonesbury* reinvigorated the otherwise moribund newspaper comic strip).

At the close of the first decade of the twenty-first century, the fate of editorial cartoons seemed entwined with the rapid decline of newspapers. Only some 70 full-time professional cartoonists continued to work in the commercial realm. Yet once again the introduction of a new medium, the Internet, signaled a change in the field—at least in the number of practitioners whose work is available. In the realm of print, a period of experimentation was under way, exemplified by the recent work of "graphic journalists" such as Joe Sacco, who created extended, first-person investigatory narratives about Bosnia, the Gaza Strip, and Iraq. Published serially in magazines and as books, these and other "long form" projects defied the constraints of the time-tested single-panel format and marked yet another new phase in the history of the political cartoon.

See also press and politics.

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