

Comedy or Commentary?
The History of Political Cartoons

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When we first think of cartoons, most of us probably think of comic strips, comic books, or animation. The history of cartoons is actually much more than that. Cartoons have been around since ancient times and have lasted throughout history and in many countries. You can see cartoons in advertising, newspapers, magazines, television, and movies. There are cartoons of animals, regular people, superheroes, and politicians. So cartoons are many things to many people. Mainly, cartoons are entertainment and they usually make us laugh, but they can be more than that. Cartoons have helped shape history, by capturing and sometimes even changing the way people look at their leaders.

Since it would be impossible to include all kinds of cartoons, I am going to focus on political cartoons. Political cartoons, more than any other kind, have actually affected history and people's opinions more than any other kind. They are not always funny. In fact, they are sometimes very critical of people in leadership positions.

Political cartoons are usually made up of two elements, caricature and allusion. Caricature is exaggeration, so it takes a person's real features, but blows them up or shrinks

them down to make a comic representation. Allusion is a reference to a situation, so the cartoonists will put symbols or words into the cartoon to mock a political situation. It is through caricature and allusion that political cartoons influence people's opinions and possibly spark a lot of controversy.

In America, Ben Franklin is credited with creating the first political cartoon in this country. In May of 1754, he showed the thirteen early American colonies as separate sections of a snake. The slogan, "Join or Die!" had to do with the French and Indian War at the time, but it quickly became a symbol of patriotism leading up to and during the American Revolution from 1775 to 1783. The message became: if the thirteen colonies did not come together as one, they would not be strong against England. This is a very strong message and one that was shared widely. This snake is an example of allusion.

Before photography, which was invented in the early 1800's, cartoons were used to flatter or celebrate with people, but artists soon realized cartoons could also be used to insult people. The word "satire" means using wit to criticize behavior. Wit is intelligent humor and can be the most hurtful. Many famous people have been victim of satirical cartoons, such as President Bush and President Obama, but they are not the only ones.

Cartoons in the U.S. have been used to criticize presidents throughout history. Abraham Lincoln was victim of many cruel cartoons that showed him as weak or villainous during the Civil War years from 1861 to 1865. This is an instance when cartooning did not impact the president's re-election, but some people think that in portraying President Lincoln as a weak and evil person, the people who disliked him (including John Wilkes Booth) may have been given "permission" to hurt him. The cartoon of Lincoln shows him unraveling a ball of yarn. It compares the yarn to the United States as it came unraveled in the months leading up to the Civil War in 1861 and Lincoln as responsible. This cartoon uses allusion; the ball of yarn is the nation.

Another Lincoln cartoon is actually modern, published in 2008. We know it is Lincoln in the cartoon because it is the Lincoln Memorial. He is giving the "thumbs up" to President Obama for being the first African American president. Lincoln and President Obama have been linked in many cartoons because President Lincoln is credited with ending slavery in our country. President Obama even took his oath of office as president on the very same Bible President Lincoln used when he became president.

Another president who has been in many political cartoons is President Richard Nixon. He is the only president to have resigned from the Office of President. That was the year 1974. Nixon resigned because of the

Watergate scandal. President Nixon covered up laws that had been broken while he was running for re-election. Then he was dishonest about it.

President Bush was widely criticized for his behavior immediately following the attack on the Twin Towers in New York. This cartoon is an allusion to the fact that President Bush was reading a children's book, "My Pet Goat," when he learned of the attack. President Bush continued to read the book for the next several minutes when he knew the nation was under attack. If you look closely at the cartoon, a figure dressed as Uncle Sam, representing the United States, is returning a book entitled "Our Pet Goat" to the Bush Presidential Library.

The next cartoon is a caricature of both President Bush and Vice-president Cheney. You know who they are and that it is caricature by looking at their exaggerated facial features. The meaning of this cartoon is that the United States was not welcomed in Iraq as the President and Vice-president thought we would be, but rather only celebrated when we say we're leaving the country.

During the 2008 election, there were many political cartoons created of both the Democratic and Republican tickets. Barack Obama was often portrayed in racist ways and Joe Biden was often accused of putting his foot in his mouth by saying things he should not have. John McCain was satirized because of his hunched body and old age and Sarah

Palin was portrayed as being much too inexperienced to be a Vice-president. All four were subjects of both caricature and allusion and the cartoons helped shape public opinion about the candidates.

When President Obama became president, the cartoons did not stop. Many say the cartoons about him have been racist since it is not possible to be overtly racist in photographs or writings. Early in 2009 when President Obama was in the middle of trying to pass the Stimulus Bill, the editors of the New York Post published a cartoon that many people found offensive. You can look at the cartoon and conclude that it is comparing President Obama to a chimpanzee (and we know this because the caption tells us who it is). Because the chimpanzee has been shot by two white police officers, some people see this cartoon as both violent and racist. Other people looked at the cartoon and said that it was not saying anything more than the stimulus bill was so bad that monkeys may have written it. The controversy goes on because one of the people who worked for this newspaper was fired because she didn't think the cartoon should be published.

Mad Magazine is a very humorous magazine that is all cartoons. It was started in 1952 as a comic book but grew into a very popular magazine. Its official mascot is Alfred E. Newman and most people recognize this face. Mad Magazine made fun of politics, politicians, famous actors, artists, movies, television shows, etc. It is a very good example of

satire. Some people believe that successful television shows like the Simpsons, which is based on cartooning, are the modern day Mad Magazine. The magazine is still being published, but it is now owned by a major corporation, Time, Inc., and many people think it is no longer as funny as it once was because they have to make cartoons that are not as shocking.

Cartoons can have a dangerous side. One cartoonist, Kurt Westergaard, has had to go into hiding after publishing a cartoon that offended some people. In 2005, a Danish newspaper, Jyllands-Posten, published a cartoon that showed the prophet Muhammad in a way that bothered many Muslims. One of the problems is that some Muslims believe that one should not draw or paint the human form, and this was a drawing of their most important person. The cartoon was seen as blasphemous, and many protested the publication of the cartoon around the world. The Danish embassies were attacked in many countries - Syria, Lebanon, and Iran. Some Muslim leaders issued death threats against the artist and the publisher of the paper. The cartoonist is still in hiding today.

When I first started doing research on this topic, I was interested in reading about cartooning and maybe becoming a better cartoonist myself. Once I got into my reading, I discovered that there is a serious side to cartoons, especially those that are political. I also

discovered that political cartoons can have a big impact on society and cause a lot of debate and controversy, even the possibility of violence. Political cartoons became my focus because I soon realized these types of cartoons are powerful because they implement caricature and/or allusion. They are quick and easy to understand, like other cartoons, and they have the ability to surprise, educate, or anger their viewers. Political cartoons are usually the ones that have the biggest impact on people and shape or reflect the views of a society.

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