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I. WHAT IS A POLITICAL CARTOON?

What makes political cartoons different from other forms of editorials? What is an editorial? Is a cartoon more powerful than a full-page editorial? How can one picture be worth a thousand words? Can a book of bubble talk convey as much as a book of words? What skills are needed to reduce complex situations into small spaces? How do cartoonists use humor, caricature, satire, symbols, stereotypes and summaries to convey their perspectives?

BACKGROUND

Political cartoons in America have a long and healthy tradition of criticizing intolerance, injustice, political corruption and social evils... Political or editorial cartoons are a wonderful springboard to classroom discussion, and there are numerous ways you can use them across the curriculum to engage children at higher levels of thinking.¹

Welcome to the world of cartoons and, more specifically, to the wonderful world of political cartoons. Your students may be most familiar with other kinds of cartoons including comic strips such as "Peanuts," animated cartoons such as "Bugs Bunny," and comic books such as "Superman." These types of cartoons usually seek to entertain their audience through the combined use of fantasy and humor. Political cartoons also entertain, often using stronger devices. They are sometimes **cynical** (scornful skepticism or negativity) and/or **satirical** (using wit to convey insults or scorn). They frequently rely on **stereotypes** (oversimplified opinions, conceptions or images) to address political issues.

¹ Heitzmann, William Ray.
"For Laughing Out Loud,"
National Education Association.
[www.nea.org/nea_today/0004/
heitz.html](http://www.nea.org/nea_today/0004/heitz.html)

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Political cartoons generally are thought-provoking and strive to educate the viewer about a current issue. They have grown extremely popular due to the straightforward way they address an issue. Whereas a typical newspaper article is filled with a great many words to relay information and ideas, a political cartoon reduces an entire article down to simple pictures. Found in newspapers across the globe, political cartoons have proved a powerful vehicle for swaying public opinion and criticizing or praising political figures. “Cartoons are now one of the most important weapons in a newspaper’s armory of political analysis... Unlike a news article or column, the cartoon has the capacity to almost instantaneously dissect a political issue. [A cartoon] can often have more veracity and insight than hundreds of words of text-based analysis.”² Indeed, a picture is worth a thousand words. And for centuries political cartoonists have used this sometimes devastating medium to cut the powerful and proud down to size.

Let’s explore the various elements of a political cartoon by dissecting the following cartoon entitled “Carter in the Middle,” by the Seattle P-I’s editorial cartoonist **David Horsey**.



“GEORGE! FIDEL! I HATE TO STATE THE OBVIOUS, BUT YOU’LL HAVE TROUBLE SHAKING HANDS IN YOUR CURRENT POSITIONS.”

² “Australian Political Cartooning — a Rich Tradition” Bringing the House Down — 12 Months of Political Cartoons exhibition (1996) www.cultureandrecreation.gov.au/articles/cartoons/



Given their similarities, political cartoons and editorials are generally placed in the same section of the newspaper, and their subjects often complement each other.



3 Served as the 39th president of the United States from 1977–1980, received the Nobel Peace Prize in 2002, the same year he recommended the Bush administration end the embargo against Cuba.

4 In 1959 overthrew the dictatorship of Fulgencio Batista and set up a socialist government; he remains the leader of Cuba today.

5 Arthur Maurice Bartlett and Frederic Taber Cooper (2003) "History of the 19th Century in Political Cartoons" www.boondocksnet.com/cartoons/

Because of their satirical nature, political cartoons use **caricatures**. A caricature is a drawing that exaggerates personal characteristics to make the picture more humorous and the characters immediately recognizable. In the cartoon on the previous page, Horsey uses caricature to exaggerate the physical features of President George W. Bush, former U.S. President Jimmy Carter³, and Cuban President Fidel Castro.⁴ He emphasizes Bush's "Dumbo" ears, small eyes and pointed nose. Cartoonists also rely heavily on **symbols** to clarify the cartoon's deeper meaning. A symbol is something that stands for or represents something else. Horsey uses symbols that Castro has made famous: a long, Marxist-like beard, a Cuban cigar and a revolutionary's cap. Notice Carter's shirt: here, Horsey employs the **label** "Jimmy." A label is a word or an icon (small image) used for identification. Additionally, Horsey uses a **caption** to describe and add meaning to his cartoon: "*George. Fidel. I hate to state the obvious, but you'll have trouble shaking hands in your current positions.*" True to form, this political cartoon is very satirical, using wit to insult the two leaders and their countries for decades of failed diplomatic relations.

The ideas expressed within the cartoon reflect the views of the artist; for this reason, political cartoons commonly are referred to as **editorial** cartoons. In a newspaper, editorials are articles presenting a columnist's point of view or opinion, so an editorial cartoon is a cartoon that expresses the viewpoint of a cartoonist. Given their similarities, political cartoons and editorials are generally placed in the same section of the newspaper, and their subjects often complement each other. Bartlett and Cooper state, in "History of the 19th Century in Political Cartoons," that "... there is no doubt that a serious political issue, when presented in the form of a telling cartoon, will be borne home to the minds of a far larger circle of average every-day men and women than it could ever be when discussed in the cold black and white of the editorial column."⁵



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II. WHAT IS THE HISTORY OF POLITICAL CARTOONS?

When did the first political cartoon appear? How have cartoons shaped history or policy? How have cartoons given a voice to the disenfranchised? Who were some of first Americans to draw political cartoons? What role do cartoons play in swaying public opinion?

BACKGROUND

It may be that the man of the Stone Age was the first to draw rude and distorted likenesses of some unpopular chieftain, just as the Roman soldier of 79 A.D. scratched on the wall of his barracks in Pompeii an unflattering portrait of some martinet centurion, which the ashes of Vesuvius have preserved until today.⁷

As far as historians can determine, political cartoons did not start appearing en masse until the means was created to disseminate them: the printing press. Before this significant invention, it is likely that different modes of communication, such as the case quoted above, were employed to jab at the social and political conditions of a given time and place. Why political cartoons came about is relatively easy to infer:

- 1) Illuminating and criticizing the human condition is a natural outcrop of the human experience; and
- 2) This medium provides the easiest means for getting one's point across. (The earliest cartoons must have been nothing more than simple, widely recognizable symbols or pictures that did not require any written language to comprehend.)

⁷ Arthur Maurice Bartlett and Frederic Taber Cooper (2003) "History of the 19th Century in Political Cartoons"
www.boondocksnet.com/cartoons/



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The historical roots of political cartoons, while greatly outdating the invention of the printing press, really took hold in 16th century Europe. Since that time, they have proved instrumental in swaying public opinion during a number of significant periods in history. It is interesting to note that:

Benjamin Franklin was the first American to draw political cartoons. As publisher and printer, the revolutionist Franklin drafted several cartoons that persuaded colonists to rebel against England. The second American cartoonist was scarcely less famous in history: Paul Revere was a silversmith and engraver who created incendiary cartoons disguised as prints of news events... By the time of Lincoln's presidency, hundreds of cartoons appeared each year in magazines, newspapers, penny-prints, posters, lithographs and broadsides. During the Civil War President Lincoln himself called cartoonist Thomas Nast⁸ the 'North's best recruiting sergeant.'⁹

Although it is difficult to measure the influence that cartoons have had in shaping world, regional and local events, the power of this medium cannot be discounted. Imagine, for example, a disgruntled, illiterate farmer who sees a simple cartoon lampooning a corrupt king and is so galvanized to take up arms against the scoundrel that he joins a peasant uprising. Can you imagine other impacts a comic might have? The ability of a political cartoon to cut across social and educational boundaries can be used effectively by those seeking to influence the masses. Verbose treatises, manifestos and news articles have limited audiences with limited attention spans, whereas political cartoons deliver a message in one quick punch.

⁸ Thomas Nast is often listed as America's greatest cartoonist (see resources for more information).

⁹ Glen Baron, *Cartooning Washington: One Hundred Years of Cartoon Art in the Evergreen State*, ed. Maury Forman and Rick Marschall (Spokane: Melior Publications, 1989), p.2. See Benjamin Franklin's famous political cartoon that was published in the *Pennsylvania Gazette* in 1754. www.claudepepper.org/foundation/news/images/trans1.jpg



... cartoons provide a wealth of information about public sentiment and opinion, information often missing in scholarly accounts of historical events.



III. HOW CAN WE TEACH HISTORY THROUGH POLITICAL CARTOONS?

How were political cartoons used as propaganda during the two World Wars? Discuss how political cartoonists used stereotypes during this period and how are stereotypes used today? How have cartoons been used to record recent history? What themes tend to resonate universally? How is propaganda used today?

BACKGROUND

But among the spate of visual comments on current events, a few have an impact which transcends time and earns them a permanent place in the archives. Some by reason of their graphic artistry or originality, and some for the universality of their themes, find their way into the literature and history of their eras. ¹⁰

Political cartoons are like time capsules; they provide viewers with a slice of life of the time in which they were created. Although they may seem locked in a given era as they refer to specific events, the themes expressed in cartoons are often universal, transcending time and place. Certain nuances of a cartoon may be lost in subsequent generations, such as language usage, popular references and out-dated symbols. However, changes in society and culture by no means render political cartoons obsolete. In fact, because of their editorial nature and mass appeal, cartoons provide a wealth of information about public sentiment and opinion, information often missing in scholarly accounts of historical events.

Students interested in the World Wars might find it fascinating to look at both of these periods through the eyes of cartoonists:

¹⁰ Wepman, Dennis, "Witty World Books"
www.wittyworld.com/publications/finest.series.html



It was during First World War that cartoons became highly sophisticated tools of propaganda that promoted support for American men fighting on foreign soil. The public became accustomed to following the war through front-page illustrations, often in color. Cartoonists helped galvanize sentiments and loyalties. A majority promoted the purchase of war bonds and enlistment, and attempted to instill in citizens a hate and fear of the enemy.¹¹

World War II was no different. Students who grew up reading Dr. Seuss books may be surprised to learn that Dr. Seuss (Theodor Seuss Geisel) was one of the leading political cartoonists during that war. Between January 30, 1941 and January 5, 1943, Dr. Seuss drew more than 400 editorial cartoons for *PM*, a newspaper based in New York.¹² Dr. Seuss took a stand on numerous issues with his pen: he favored U.S. intervention in the war in Europe (fighting opponents such as Charles A. Lindberg) and fought against anti-Semitism and anti-black racism. After the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor and the U.S. formally entered the war, Dr. Seuss sought to mobilize the country through his very pointed cartoon illustrations. His cartoons not only lashed out at Hitler, Mussolini and the Japanese leadership, but also called on Americans to buy savings bonds and tolerate shortages. Dr. Seuss' cartoons vividly bring back to life the mood and the issues of the past.

Dr. Seuss' political cartoons provide perfect examples of a cartoonist's ability to inform and educate over the course of decades. This phenomenon is applicable to modern-day political cartoons as well. Contemporary cartoonists, such as David Horsey, are influential in the present. At the same time, their work will provide an important archive of current events and issues for generations to come. Our descendants will be able to understand and discuss the events and issues of our lifetime through David Horsey's eyes: from the war in the Balkans to the war in Iraq, from the Monica Lewinsky affair to the Enron Scandal, from the Florida election results to the California recall, and the list goes on. Because a political cartoon is a primary source from a particular era, it is a valuable tool for teaching history.

11 Glen Baron, *Cartooning Washington*, ed. Maury Forman and Rick Marschall, (Spokane: Melior Publications, 1989) p.8.

12 See Richard M. Minear's *Dr. Seuss Goes to War* (New York: The New Press, 1999). Tremendous resource for World War II study features more than two hundred of Dr. Seuss' marvelous and passionate cartoons. Note that while Dr. Seuss lashes out at anti-Semitism and anti-black racism his cartoons portraying Japanese and Japanese-Americans are blatantly racist. Excellent opportunity to discuss how his illustrations reflect the national and local climate (ie Japanese internment camps in the Northwest).



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V. HOW CAN WE USE CARTOONS TO COPE IN OUR WORLD?

How might you convey an angry, confused, painful, frightened, anxious or joyous thought in cartoon form? What symbols would you use? Can complicated issues be reduced to an image or two? What are some messages that you would like to convey to your family, friends, teachers and parents? How would you do this without words?

BACKGROUND

Ultimately what the book's about is the commonality of human beings. It's crazy to divide things down along nationalistic or racial or religious lines... These metaphors, which are meant to self-destruct in my book — and I think they do self-destruct — still have a residual force and still get people worked up over them.¹⁸

Cartoonists, like other artists, enter their field for different reasons. They are motivated by their personal politics and a desire for change, their desire to educate and engage the public, and their love for the art form. Some, like the highly celebrated Iranian cartoonist **Marjane Satrapi**, pull out their pens as a way to cope with their own personal histories. Satrapi has incorporated biographical material into her recently published comic book entitled *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood*. Originally written in French, and now translated into six other languages including English, this book is the story of the young Satrapi growing up in a family of leftist intellectuals in Tehran.

¹⁸ Art Spiegelman referring to *Maus*, his Pulitzer Prize winning-cartoon book. www.northern.edu/hastingw/maus.htm Shannon, Edward A., "It's No More to Speak': Genre, the Insufficiency of Language, and the Improbability of Definition in Art Spiegelman's *Maus*," *Mid-Atlantic Almanack* 4 (1995) p. 11-13



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Through this young girl's eyes, the reader is confronted with the joys of overthrowing the opulent Shah of Iran, the puzzlement of being required to wear the chador as the Islamists took control, and the senselessness of the torture and killing that took place during the Iran-Iraq war. In order to cope with her painful memories of this turbulent period of modern-day Iran, Satrapi wields a powerful pen. Through the medium of comic strips, she combats her rage over a number of devastating events in her life, including her uncle's execution by the Islamic regime, the rape and murder by fire-squad of an acquaintance, and the death of a neighbor's family by an Iraqi missile.

Satrapi hopes to preserve the Iranian collective memory, particularly during those harsh years. She also hopes her book will reach readers too young to remember the Iran of two decades ago, as well as western audiences holding stereotypes of Iran. According to Satrapi who lives in Paris:

I wanted to put a few things straight. When I arrived in France, I met people who expected me to speak Arabic. So many Europeans do not know the difference between Arabs and Iranians. They don't know anything of our century-old culture. They seem to think that Iran has always been a country of religious fundamentalists, that Iranian women either have no place in our society or that they are hysterical black crows. In fact, Iranian women are not downtrodden weeds: my mother's maid has kicked out her husband, and I myself slapped so many men who behaved inappropriately in the street.¹⁹

In another interview, she points out that westerners today associate Iran with numerous myths; Americans are shocked to hear that women drive cars and hold government posts in Iran and that two-thirds of university students are female.²⁰

19 From The Middle East magazine, April 2003
www.chris-kutschera.com/%20A/Marjane%20Satrapi.htm

20 Bahrapour, Tara, "Tempering Rage by Drawing Comics: A Memoir Sketches an Iranian Childhood of Repression and Rebellion." The New York Times, 21 May, 2003.