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# THE AMERICAN EDITORIAL CARTOON— A CRITICAL HISTORICAL SKETCH

Roger Penn Cuff

Published drawings that are designed to produce a humorous effect and to teach a lesson are editorial cartoons. When a cartoonist creates a sketch that is both pictorial and editorial, he communicates an opinion or a conviction. He reveals a preference for, or a judgment against, some person or class or issue or foible. Both social and political cartoons have been used as editorial vehicles.

The main form of published caricature in the United States during the nineteenth century was the political cartoon. The Nation was young and was interested in its own governmental progress. It had not yet built a rich set of social conventions. Cartoonists naturally, therefore, seized upon political issues more readily than upon problems primarily social or economic.

To be most effective, a cartoon must have three characteristics: sparkling wit, a basic element of fact, and a didactic or editorial purpose. The wit must be not merely lambent but pungent—keen and clever. The factual basis should include one or more characters enough like particular persons to be recognized as those persons and a situation similar enough to one in which the character or characters have actually been to be accepted as a probable or real situation. The didactic purpose should be to express an earnest, deepseated conviction held by the cartoonist. Essentially false caricatures cannot live long. Neither can those which do not rest upon the firm moral persuasion of the artist that creates them.

The prodding, preaching, satirizing purpose of cartoons varies from a mild form of raillery to a form almost brutally sharp. Caricature cannot be irrationally partisan and extremely abusive except at the peril of its own destruction. The range of satire is played upon with subtle variations by caricaturists. If the raillery is mild, the

humor must not be too obvious. If the ridicule is strong, the satire must not be too abusive. As long as a caricature is subtle and not overabusive and possesses all three of the characteristics that have been named, it will be effective.

A very brief historical sketch of the cartoon in America may be of value toward recognizing the importance of the editorial cartoon. In ancient times, some artistically minded Egyptians presented humor in graphic form. In more recent times, the United States has produced some great caricaturists. Some of the most prominent of the American cartoonists have been William Charles, Thomas Nast, Joseph Keppler, Bernhard Gillam, Art Young, J. N. Darling (also known as "Ding"), and Herbert Johnson.

In America, the nineteenth century was important for its political cartoons. Nevins and Weitenkampf have divided the century into four periods of caricature.

The first lasted from 1800 to about 1830. During this time such cartoons as were produced (they were neither numerous nor on the whole highly effective) were woodcuts or engravings in copper. William Charles, the most famous cartoonist of these three decades, made Britain the butt of his drawings during the War of 1812. Amos Doolittle and Elkanah Tisdale were cartoonists of fair ability. Doolittle designed some cartoons dealing with the War of 1812. Tisdale in 1812 made the famous "Gerrymander" out of a map which showed a redistricting, by the Democrats, of the townships of Essex County, Massachusetts. The artist, after drawing upon the map some wings, teeth, and claws, remarked, "That will do for a salamander." Some one else suggested that the dragonlike creature should be called a "Gerrymander," for Elbridge Gerry, who was then governor of Massachusetts. The "Gerrymander" cartoon was published in the *Boston Weekly Messenger*, March 26, 1812.

The second period began about 1830 and continued to about 1865 or even later. This was a period when lithography helped to make cartoons numerous and popular. The lithograph was less expensive

than the earlier copper engraving. Currier and Ives, to mention only one firm, made many lithographed prints, some of which were rather interesting cartoons, especially those drawn by Louis Maurer, even though most of the graphic designs of this period were somewhat naïve and conventional. Most of the prints made in this period were too complicated. They dealt with too many characters and used too many speeches. They lacked quick wit and rippling humor. They leaned too strongly upon hackneyed ideas. Among the good prints published by Currier and Ives were some dealing with the slavery question, the first Republican presidential campaign—that of John Charles Frémont—in 1856, and Lincoln's first presidential race in 1860. The better cartoonists of the period were James Akin (a part of his work belonged to the first period), Edward Williams Clay, Napoleon Sarony, David Claypoole Johnston, and Louis Maurer.

So influential was the Currier and Ives firm of lithographers that a brief sketch of the history of that firm should perhaps be given here. The two partners were Nathaniel Currier and James M. Ives. Currier served a lithographer's apprenticeship in Boston and opened a shop of his own in New York in 1834, when he was twenty-two. He was more of a businessman than an artist. Ives joined the firm in 1852. He was a brother-in-law to Nathaniel Currier's brother. He was an artist. It was he who made the four famous prints titled "The Four Seasons of Life" and subtitled "Childhood," "Youth," "Middle Age," and "Old Age." The heyday of the Currier and Ives firm was 1840–1890, a period of speed and artistry in producing prints of events and scenes that appealed to the popular imagination. In 1907 the firm succumbed to the competition with photography and color printing. Harry Twyford Peters, of New York City, has made a collection of about 6,000 Currier and Ives prints, the largest Currier and Ives collection in the world.

The third period continued from about 1865 or 1870 to about 1885. Within these two decades the weekly journal dominated the

field of caricature. The weekly magazine most famous for its political cartoons was *Harper's Weekly*, established in 1857. This was the golden era of the political cartoon. The most prominent caricature artists were Thomas Nast, Joseph Keppler, and Bernhard Gillam. Nast published in *Harper's Weekly* cartoons of the Civil War and of postwar party conflicts. Keppler published in *Leslie's Weekly* and in *Puck* some keenly humorous drawings. Gillam published in *Puck* some pro-Cleveland cartoons and later in *Judge* some anti-Cleveland caricatures. Nast was perhaps the greatest cartoonist that America has produced and probably one of the five or six greatest cartoonists that the world has produced. These three men ranked high. They had a large influence upon the national election of 1884. Their drawings were artistic, witty, and pungently satirical.

The final period of the century, about a decade and a half, was one in which the daily newspapers became the leading medium for the publication of cartoons. The *New York Daily Graphic* began to publish humorous drawings in the 1870's. John Wesley Jarvis holds the distinction of having designed the first cartoon that was published in an American newspaper. His "Death of the Embargo" appeared in the *New York Evening Post*, 1814. From that date not another cartoon is known to have received newspaper publication until 1839, and very few were so honored until the 1880's. In the eighties, the *New York World* became famous for its cartoons. It was during the presidential campaign of 1884 that the publication of graphic satires in the daily newspapers produced a really powerful effect. A drawing by Walt McDougall, "The Royal Feast of Belshazzar Blaine and the Money Kings," made a tremendous impression when published in the *New York World*, October 30, 1884. This drawing, based upon Blaine's attendance at a dinner, which had been arranged by the plutocrat Levi P. Morton and which was attended by a group of plutocrats, emphasized the conflict between poverty and wealth. The effect

was immediate and electric. During the closing decade of the century, it became common practice for daily newspapers to publish cartoons. This practice has continued to the present day. The type of newspaper that has been fostered by Joseph Pulitzer and William Randolph Hearst has encouraged the production of a large amount of graphic humor for publication in the papers owned by these men.

Some of the American dailies that have been notable for cartoons are the *New York Journal*, the *New York Herald Tribune*, the *New York World-Telegram*, the *New York Evening Mail*, *The New York Times*, the *New York Evening Post*, the *Chicago Tribune*, the *Chicago Daily News*, the *Cleveland World*, the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, the *Cleveland Leader*, the *Detroit Free Press*, the *Columbus Dispatch*, the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, the *Milwaukee Journal*, the *Washington Post*, and the *Washington Daily News*. Some of the leading cartoonists for twentieth-century newspapers have been John T. McCutcheon, who drew for the *Chicago Tribune*; Frederick B. Opper, who drew for the *New York Journal* and the *New York American*; J. N. Darling, who published cartoons in the *Sioux City Journal*, the *Des Moines Register*, the *New York Globe*, and the *New York Herald Tribune*; Charles Green Bush, who published in the *New York World*; Homer Davenport, who was a draughtsman for the *New York Journal* and the *New York Evening Mail*; and Charles R. Macauley, who was a cartoonist for the *Cleveland World*, the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, the *Cleveland Leader*, the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, and the *New York World*.

Some of the periodicals that have published cartoons within the twentieth century are *Puck*, *Judge*, *Life*, *The Masses*, *Vanity Fair*, *The New Yorker*, and *New Masses*. These have, however, been outshone in the field of caricature by the newspapers, whose cartoonists immediately seize upon the important new issues that arise. Some of the outstanding caricaturists for twentieth-century American periodicals have been J. S. Pughe, who has drawn for

*Puck*; Art Young, who has published in *Judge* and *Life* and *The Masses*; and Herbert Johnson, who has contributed cartoons to *The Saturday Evening Post*. These men hold a somewhat lower rating than Nast, Keppler, and Bernhard Gillam, who drew for the humorous weeklies in the period that ended about 1885.

Some occasions when political cartoons have flourished in this country have been the War of 1812, Andrew Jackson's administrations, the war with Mexico, the Civil War, the Reconstruction period, the Hayes-Tilden campaign of 1876, the Cleveland-Blaine campaign of 1884, the McKinley Tariff issue of 1890, the Spanish-American War, the Theodore Roosevelt administrations, and the first and second world wars. Such notable political figures as Jackson, Lincoln, Johnson, Cleveland, Theodore Roosevelt, and Franklin D. Roosevelt have all inspired a sizable amount of caricature. Stephen A. Douglas, Samuel J. Tilden, and James G. Blaine were also subjected to much cartooning.

The political cartoon is the kind that has been predominant in the American press. Another kind, the social cartoon, has been somewhat prominent since about 1880. Some of the social cartoons have taken the side of the battle against trusts. Some have satirized the Populist movement. Art Young, Rollin Kirby, and Boardman Robinson have all drawn some social cartoons.

Even the political cartoons help to reveal the social life of the times represented in the caricatures. These cartoons display costumes, furnishings, colloquialisms, slogans, and even some elements of folklore, such as the popular conceptions of the symbols representing Brother Jonathan, Uncle Sam, Tammany Hall, and the Democratic and Republican parties.

Some of the more important of the living American cartoonists are John T. McCutcheon, Rollin Kirby, J. N. Darling, Boardman Robinson, Herbert Johnson, Harold Tucker Webster, Denys Wortman, Daniel R. Fitzpatrick, William Gropper, Daniel Bishop, Otto Soglow, Vaughn Shoemaker, and Peter Arno. McCutcheon has

published some of his best work in the *Chicago Tribune*. In 1931 he received the Pulitzer prize for cartoons. Kirby published a series of social cartoons in the *New York World* in 1913. He has also drawn political cartoons for various New York newspapers. Since August of 1942 he has been cartoonist for *Look* magazine. Darling, since working in his earlier career for the *Sioux City Journal* and the *Des Moines Register*, has been cartoonist for the *New York Globe* and the *New York Herald Tribune*. Robinson published a book of cartoons of the first world war; was cartoonist for the *Outlook*, London, 1922–1923; and has served on the staff of various newspapers in America. Johnson has been cartoonist for the *Philadelphia North American* and *The Saturday Evening Post*. Webster has published cartoons in the *New York World*, the *New York Tribune*, and the *New York Herald Tribune*. Wortman was cartoonist for the *New York World* from 1924 to 1930 and has been cartoonist for the *New York World-Telegram* since 1930. Fitzpatrick has been cartoonist for the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* since 1913. He has also contributed caricatures to *Collier's Weekly*. In 1926 he won the Pulitzer prize for cartoons. Gropper published in 1927 a book of political cartoons entitled *The Golden Land*. He has also drawn illustrations for numerous other books. Bishop was once cartoonist for the *Oregon Journal*, Portland. Since 1929 he has been draughtsman for the *St. Louis Star-Times*. Soglow has served as cartoonist for *The New Yorker*, *Life*, *Judge*, *Collier's* and *Harper's Bazaar*. Shoemaker has been the chief cartoonist of the *Chicago Daily News* since 1925. In 1938 he received the Pulitzer prize for cartoons. He has published several books of graphic humor. Arno has been on the staff of *The New Yorker* since 1925. He has also contributed to *The Saturday Evening Post*, *Harper's Bazaar*, and other magazines.

During the nineteenth century, editorial cartoons were comparatively rare. Even then, however, Joseph Keppler, Bernhard Gillam, and above all Thomas Nast created some editorial cartoons. Keppler

through his cartoons expressed his opinions freely; some people have thought, too freely. In various pictorial satires, he revealed opposition to the papacy, to Brigham Young's polygamy, and to Garfield's presidential candidacy. He also expressed his sympathy for Cleveland's candidacy in the race against Blaine. Gillam, during the presidential campaign of 1884, contributed to the magazine *Puck* some strongly pro-Cleveland cartoons. Later, after he became a contributor to *Judge*, his work was strongly anti-Cleveland. Nast made himself a powerful force through his editorial drawings for *Harper's Weekly*. During Lincoln's second race for the presidency, in 1864, Nast published a cartoon, entitled "Compromise with the South," in which he opposed appeasement and a negotiated peace. During the era of Reconstruction, he was anti-Johnson and pro-Grant. Later he satirized the Tweed Ring of New York City. In his caricatures he could quote Shakespeare with telling effect. He also borrowed clever ideas from Aesop's fables, *The Arabian Nights' Entertainments*, Cervantes, and other writers. He added to these ideas the dual power of his own artistry and imagination. He was a truly great editorial cartoonist, one of the greatest of all time. These three men were probably not the only editorial cartoonists in the period of the humorous weeklies, but the three belonged to the top rank.

Since the heyday of Nast, Keppler, and Gillam, *i.e.*, during the period when the newspapers have dominated the publication of cartoons—from 1885 till now—some of the outstanding editorial cartoonists have been Young, Darling, Robinson, Johnson, Bishop, and Shoemaker.

Young expressed his firm convictions and his conceptions of social justice in social cartoons, employing ridicule that stopped short of invective. He was primarily a social, rather than a political, cartoonist. One of his most famous cartoons was entitled "This World of Creepers." It represented people as living in fear of one another, of life, of death, and of even the Supreme Being. In another drawing,

he represented plutocracy as near coming into the toils of the law.

Darling has unhesitatingly put his strong convictions into his richly humorous caricatures, even when his opinions have been somewhat at variance with those editorially held by papers to which he has contributed. One of his most notable cartoons was named "Disarmament Conference of 1932." This drawing represented both England and the United States as occupying pews at church and as jovially and hypocritically looking up toward the heavens just at the moment when a plate was being passed for a contribution to finance a disarmament program.

Robinson has made some cartoons dealing with the horrors of the first world war and with the Treaty of Versailles. He has produced highly artistic pictorial sketches that have not been forced to conform to editorial views of newspapers that he has served. One of his best-known cartoons is "Europe, 1916" or "Europe Lured to Destruction." The drawing presents a lean donkey wearily approaching a dangerous precipice, lured onward by a carrot named Victory that is suspended before the donkey from a pole in the hand of the character Death, which is the creature's mount.

Johnson is an anti-New Dealer. He has satirized the high spending rate of the Franklin D. Roosevelt administration. He has represented the taxpayer as being in some difficult situations because of the expenditure of billions of dollars by the government. One of these cartoons is entitled "Nonsense! If it gets too deep, you can easily pull me out!" words that are spoken by a corpulent woman, symbolizing government spending, to a frail man, symbolic of the taxpayer, when both the woman and the man are wading in the deep waters of debt. After the entry of America into the second world war, Johnson did some cartooning encouraging to the war effort. His cartoon, "Our Way to Handle Vandals!" shows Uncle Sam holding the gun of production with which to exterminate Hitler, Tojo, and Mussolini, vandals bent on destroying America's democratic institutions.

Bishop has published in the *St. Louis Star-Times* a cartoon that was reproduced in the *Omaha World-Herald*, "Double Standard—War Front and Home Front." It represents factory workers as having to be pleaded with to remain at their posts and produce the supplies needed by soldiers who fight under command.

Shoemaker has published in the *Chicago Daily News* a cartoon, also reprinted in the *World-Herald*, "But I'm Giving 'Til It Hurts Now!" This drawing represents an American civilian as uttering the words of the title in response to a request that he purchase bonds during the Sixth War Loan Campaign. A soldier, on crutches and with one leg missing, replies to the civilian by asking, "What did you say, Mister?"

This brief sketch of cartoons and cartoonists, especially those marked by a definitely editorial tinge, reveals that American caricature is abundant. The cartoons of the twentieth century, though not bringing to light any draughtsman of Thomas Nast's power and reputation, are, on the average, of high quality. Editorial cartoons, because of their natural appeal, have a wider circulation and probably a greater influence than the all-verbal editorials. Even when a pictorial editorial does not remove a particular social condition at which the cartoon strikes, it may eliminate some kindred condition that needs removing. Clever cartoons are, beyond question, instruments of tremendous editorial power.

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