

The Public Presence of American Political Cartoons

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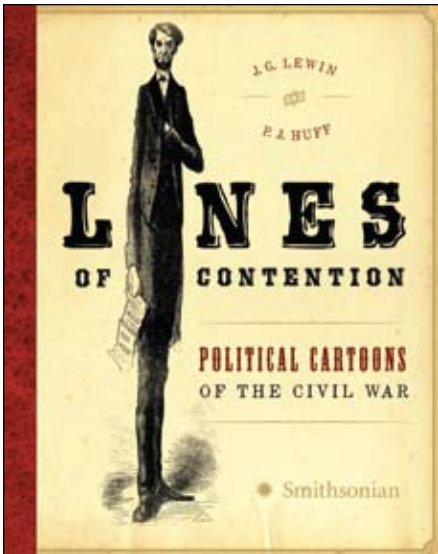
Dewey, Donald. *The Art of Ill Will: The Story of American Political Cartoons.* New York: New York University Press, 2007.

Lewin, J. G., and P. J. Huff. *Lines of Contention: Political Cartoons of the Civil War.* New York: HarperCollins/Smithsonian, 2007.

In 1903, Samuel Pennypacker, the newly inaugurated governor of Pennsylvania, introduced legislation that limited how cartoonists in the state could portray another person. Particularly upset at the Philadelphia *North American*, whose cartoonists had portrayed him as a parrot with no words of his own, Pennypacker proposed to make it a crime “to publish any cartoon ‘portraying, describing, or representing any person...in the form or likeness of a beast, bird, fish, insect, or other unhuman animal’” (Dewey 37). *North American* cartoonist Walt McDougall responded by drawing Pennypacker as a stein of beer, “warning that the legislation should have ‘included more than the animal kingdom alone, for we have an ample field in the vegetable, if not even the mineral field’” (Dewey 37).

Humorous now, the story illustrates the tremendous public presence American cartoons have enjoyed since the infancy of the Republic. Four other states pursued anti-cartoon legislation around the time of Pennypacker, and several twentieth-century presidencies, including Wilson’s and F. D. R.’s, took legal measures to shut down presses or publications who published cartoons of which they did not approve. Donald Dewey’s recent book, *The Art of Ill Will: The Story of American Political Cartoons*, serves as an excellent introduction to such a visible and volatile part of America’s political history. The book begins with a hefty 75-page introduction, which serves as the text portion

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of the book; the remaining 170 pages contain full-color cartoons. While the first half of the introduction moves through topical sections, such as politics, caricatures, symbols, and stereotypes, the second half progresses along an historical timeline, discussing the corresponding cartoon changes that accompany U.S. twentieth-century historical periods (the Gilded Age, World War I, the New Deal, and so on). This second half is essentially a telling of the decline of the political cartoon, through both changes in journalistic and editorial attitudes, as well as shifts in media and technologies.

If *The Art of Ill Will* is the story of American political cartooning, then *Lines of Contention: Political Cartoons of the Civil War* is political cartooning's first case study. Drawing on cartoons of the Civil War period, the story of the war is told through the progression of cartoons, carefully balanced between the North and the South, between professional cartoonists and loyalists producing broadsides in secret. Divided into six sections, each of which covers a theme of the war period and stands in historical order, the book takes the reader through the set-up, execution, and resolutions of the war's progression and conclusion. Authors J. G. Lewin and P. J. Huff present this tour of cartoons as a way to understand the war through its citizens—their political motivations and their perspectives—rather than through the (usual) battlegrounds; the book “becomes a history of the incidents, attitudes, and politics of the war as seen through the eyes of contemporary com-

mentators” (vii). Thus, the book mines a graphic art form to illustrate the myriad complexities of American political thought at the time. These complexities divest the war of its strict North-South portrayal, as Northerners and Southerners alike reviled Lincoln, Republican and Democratic parties split into multiple factions, and peacemongers from both sides diplomatically snuck over the Mason-Dixon to try to end the conflict.

RIGHT: “Throw Us a Line, Polk, and We’ll Give You a Tow!” by H. Buholzer, c. 1844. Early American cartoons relied on dialogue, often stuffing the frame with talking characters. Here James Polk’s team, pushed by Missouri Senator Thomas Hart Benton and South Carolina Senator John Calhoun, struggles to catch up to the front-runner Whig team of Henry Clay and Theodore Frelinghuysen in the race for the office of President (Polk in fact won the 1844 election). A feeble and aged Andrew Jackson, whose presidency made Polk’s career, holds up the balloon while Martin van Buren, the ex-President who had wanted to be the Democratic candidate, mutters his bitterness. The “Mint drops” were a cartoon symbol that emerged as a critique of the dissolution of the National Bank under Jackson, which Polk had supported. Tracy W. McGregor Library of American History, Special Collections, University of Virginia Library.





Detail, cover of *The Art of Ill Will*.

While vast in scope, both books will leave the reader hungering for more conclusions than either book is willing to venture. Did, for instance, political cartoons have power to sway democratic participation? *Lines of Contention*, as a Smithsonian book, is unwilling to present anything beyond a balanced North-South representation of the Civil War, an approach that leaves holes (how exactly the war progressed from the Emancipation Proclamation in 1862 to the beginning of the end for the Confederacy in 1864, for example, is left out between chapters 4 and 5). *The Art of Ill Will* hedges on both sides of the fence, naming cartoon after cartoon that influenced the vote in particular elections, while then arguing that cartoonist power was limited, judging by the number of cartoon “targets” who were voted into office despite relentless cartoon campaigns against them.

However, both books make two invaluable contributions. First, both texts initiate the reader into the visual language of cartoons and the national heritage that American cartoons have provided. Uncle Sam, Lady Liberty, the eagle, the Republican elephant, and the Democratic donkey are all national symbols given to us by our cartoonists. Understanding these symbols, then, transforms our reading of cartoons. The 1899 William Carson cartoon on the cover of *The Art of Ill Will*, for example, shows Uncle Sam with an aggressive foreigner—a child in comparison to Uncle Sam’s bulk—who wears the “insurgent” banner. The American flag planted on a tropical island in the background along with Uncle Sam’s dialogue below—“Behave, You Fool! Durn Me, If

I Ain't Sorry I Undertook to Rescue You.”—clues us into the possibility of an unwanted American intervention overseas. (The actual event is the U.S. occupation of the Philippines and the subsequent violent suppression of the Philippine Insurrection, a movement led by Emilio Aguinaldo; he's the character yielding the knife.) The representational Uncle Sam, however, started out as Brother Jonathan in the 1700s, a character who represented the People of the young America: a tall, shrewd New Englander with a smart mouth and an allegiance only to himself. Around the Civil War, both Brother Jonathan and Abraham Lincoln took on Uncle Sam's dress—a waistcoat covered in stars, pants in red and white stripes—and soon Uncle Sam himself looked a lot like the Lincoln on the cover of *Lines of Contention*: tall, lanky, a sharp nose, unruly short hair, and a goatee. This transfer of physical properties between the characters mirrored the symbolic: Lincoln personified the people, while at the same time he personified a government that took on federal powers to fight a war. Furthermore, throughout *Lines of Contention's* Civil War cartoons, Lincoln-as-Sam often appears as a parent to the “naughty boys” of New York City (which was racked by draft riots), the Southern Confederacy, or the slave population. Carson's cartoon calls on the visual language of these earlier war images, drawing (literally) a powerful irony between the former American everyman and the man of the people who now, forty years later, takes his federal powers around the globe, squashing international rebellion and claiming another set of infantilized “children” as his own.

The second contribution of these books is highlighting an actual historical irony: the height of American political cartooning occurred during the second half of the nineteenth century, when nearly all publications were aligned with



"The Accommodating Jumping Jack (Sherman)" by Thomas Nast. Dialogue disappeared from cartoons by the end of the nineteenth century, as visual puns came to the fore. Thomas Nast, considered America's best cartoonist, here criticizes John Sherman (brother of Union General William Sherman) and his campaign for office in 1885. "Waving the bloody shirt" (here, wearing it) was a post-Civil War political practice of referencing Civil War martyrs to inspire support. Bernard Meeks Cartoon Collection, MSS 6442, Special Collections, University of Virginia Library.



specific political parties and “yellow journalism” came and went—a period exhibiting the exact antithesis of what we now consider fair and honest media coverage. Yet how do we understand the period’s consequent media influence in galvanizing public opinion and citizen participation? Does good political reporting that supports political action in fact require opinions, persuasions, and biases, and does “even-handed” journalism in fact promote a lack of free speech and a lackluster public square, as the multiple cartoonists who have been dropped or “let go” in the last ten years over issues of content might suggest? While these books do not provide answers to such questions, they do offer a new resource to tap: the cartoon.

LEFT: “The Retreat of Don Grover Quixote” by F. Victor Gilliam, from *Judge*, February 10, 1894. Changes in printing technology introduced color and speedy reproduction by the mid-nineteenth century, allowing weekly humor magazines like *Puck* and *Judge* to spring up. Here, a beat-up President Grover Cleveland led by his Secretary of State Walter Gresham are drawn as Don Quixote and his sidekick Pancho Sanchez, with the windmill of their foreign policy failures turning in the background. Bernard Meeks Cartoon Collection, MSS 6442, Special Collections, University of Virginia Library.