



LESSON PLAN: Analyzing Election Cartoons

HANDOUT #1

A Brief History

Generally, political cartoons can be defined as a caricature of a well known person, place or idea that is usually distorted or exaggerated to convey humor and/or a message. One of the earliest forms of caricature in Western culture goes back to Leonardo da Vinci in his drawings of deformity to define beauty.

More familiar forms of caricature for propaganda purposes are found in the Protestant Reformation and Martin Luther's socio-religious reforms. A politically evolving merchant class was one of the strongest supporters of the reformation and crucial to the success of Luther's reforms. The high illiteracy rate influenced the use of illustrations, usually printed on broadsheet posters or pamphlets, to convey messages to a large amount of people with the greatest amount of comprehension.

One of the best examples of the use of visual protest can be found in two wood cuts published in a pamphlet called "Passional Christi und Antichristi" which contrasts actions of Jesus with the Church hierarchy seen below. The image on the left depicts a well known Biblical episode of Jesus driving the moneychangers out of the Temple. In sharp contrast, the image on the right shows the Pope writing indulgences as the common people pay hard earned money for "forgiveness."



By the eighteenth century, the political cartoon had become a substantial form of commentary examining serious issues with humor and designed to affect the viewer's opinion. As western culture became more complex new subjects became available for discussion and the appeal and influence of cartoons on public life grew.



It is widely believed that the first American cartoon was Benjamin Franklin's "Join or Die" created in 1754 which had an explicit political purpose to support his plan for an intercolonial association to deal with the Iroquois Native Americans.



Though his proposal was unsuccessful, the image of a snake became an icon that could be displayed in different variations during that time period. The "Don't Tread on Me" battle flag was associated with the causes of colonial unity and the Revolutionary spirit.

PUCK was a U.S. periodical published in New York from 1876 to 1918. It was known for its colored cartoons on social and political issues. The term "Puck" comes from a Shakespeare character in *Midsummer Night's Dream* who was known for his mischievous character. Cartoonist/editor Joseph Keppler established Puck Magazine in 1876 as a weekly publication poking fun at such social issues as woman's suffrage, trade unions and politicians. It has been argued that Puck played a significant role in Grover



Cleveland's defeat of James G. Blaine in the 1884 presidential election. In a scathing cartoon by Bernard Gillam, Blaine was portrayed as a tattooed man with the engraved details of charges of political corruption.

Thomas Nast

Generally considered one of America's greatest political cartoonists, Thomas Nast was one of the most effective political commentators of the late 19th Century. One of his most favorite subjects was William Tweed (a.k.a. "Boss" Tweed) who was a New York politician, eventually convicted of corruption. Writing for Harpers Ferry magazine, Nast portrayed Tweed and the Tammany Ring (a political organization operated by Tweed) pointing at each other in answer to the question, "Who stole the people's money?" Tweed is reported to have demanded, "Stop them damned pictures. I don't care what the papers write about me. My constituents can't read. But, damn it, they can see pictures." Nast was offered a half-million dollars to leave New York to study art in Europe but that only increased his determination. Five years later, in 1876, another cartoon by Nast would be used by Spanish authorities to identify Tweed after his escape from New York. He was brought back to New York and died in debtors' prison.



Although his contribution to bringing down the Tweed Ring would remain the high point of his career, Nast's influence on American political culture went far beyond and continues today. Along with the Tammany Tiger, Nast created the G.O.P. Elephant, popularized the Democratic Donkey, and was the first to portray Santa Claus as the jolly, rotund, red-nosed character that is so familiar today. Nast's work inspired many if not all of the new generation of political cartoonists who worked for the daily press in the 1890s and early 1900s.

Discussion Questions:

1. What is the purpose of political cartoons?
2. The two wood cuts of Jesus casting the merchants from the temple and the pope issuing indulgences are believed to be the first political cartoon. Describe these illustrations and the message they present.
3. What was the message behind Benjamin Franklin's "Join or Die" illustration?

4. Describe the publication known as PUCK. How did one of its cartoons known as “the Illustrated Man” possibly help contribute to the outcome of a presidential election?
5. Look at the cartoon of “Who Stole the Money?” above. Examine the drawing and identify what messages are being portrayed in it?