

Paper Mache for 5-2-25 by David Read

I have lived in two big cities, Los Angeles and Washington, DC (well, in nearby Maryland, but all part of the capital region). I was a subscriber to the Los Angeles Times for years as well as the Washington Post (pre-Jeff Bezos!) for the 20 years I lived back east. One of the highlights of both papers were the political cartoons by world class artists and critical observers. My first introduction to the art form was the regular entries in the Times by three-time Pulitzer Prize winner, Paul Conrad. I still remember one of his that showed an emaciated Somali in a dinner jacket titled simply "Optimist." It was during one of the endless food famines in the early 90s. Herbert Block, known professionally as Herblock, was the Washington Post political cartoonist for many years. Another multi-Pulitzer Prize winner, he had a field day during the McCarthy era and during the Watergate years. I met him at a talk he gave at the Women's National Democratic Club of which my mother-in-law was a member.

Political cartooning without a doubt is a unique intersection of art and social commentary and has long served as a powerful medium for expressing dissent, critiquing authority, and engaging the public in political discourse. It dates back centuries, and this artistic tradition remains a vital force in shaping public opinion and holding leaders accountable. Political cartooning can be traced to the early days of printing in Europe. One of the earliest political cartoonists was James Gillray, an 18th-century British artist known for his exaggerated depictions of political figures such as King George III and Napoleon Bonaparte. Gillray's biting satire set a precedent for political caricature, using visual metaphor and grotesque exaggeration to critique policy and leadership. Meanwhile in the U.S., Benjamin Franklin published "Join or Die" in 1754—considered the first American political cartoon—urging colonial unity against British threats. This simple yet impactful image demonstrated the power of visuals to distill complex political ideas into memorable, persuasive symbols.

In the 19th century, political cartooning flourished with the rise of mass newspapers and illustrated journals. Thomas Nast, often called the "Father of the American Cartoon," became famous for his work in *Harper's Weekly*. His cartoons exposed the corruption of Tammany Hall and Boss Tweed, helped solidify the Republican elephant and Democratic donkey as party symbols, and even popularized the modern image of Santa Claus.

Political cartoons can result in very serious consequences. In September 2005, the Danish newspaper Jyllands-Posten published twelve cartoon caricatures of the Prophet Mohammad, including one in which he seems to wear a bomb for a turban. That sparked protests and official outrage across the Muslim world, which continues for months as dozens of newspapers outside Denmark republish the cartoons. There were attacks on Danish diplomatic missions in the Muslim world and in 2008, police arrested three individuals for planning to kill cartoonist Kurt Westergaard.

In the digital age, political cartooning has evolved beyond the editorial pages of newspapers. Social media platforms have enabled independent cartoonists to share their work instantly with global audiences. Memes, animated shorts, and viral comics now supplement traditional editorial cartoons, continuing the tradition of satire in new forms. This democratization of the medium has broadened participation and extended the reach of political art, even as it raises concerns about misinformation and oversimplification. As both an art form and a tool of democracy, political cartooning remains an essential part of public discourse. Its history is one of courage, creativity, and confrontation—and its relevance endures in a world still hungry for truth, satire, and accountability.