

# Eleven

## *No, I'm on the Editorial Page*

Every editorial cartoonist sooner or later faces the person who assumes that all cartoons belong in the comics section of the newspaper. The task of explaining to this person where one's cartoons can be found is not easy. Usually, the questioner has no idea of the location or purpose of the editorial page or why it has "comics" on it. I will try to explain it all for you.

At this writing (and the situation could change tomorrow), the typical newspaper editorial page is divided into distinct sections. Unsigned editorials usually go in the leftmost column. Their purpose is to express the consensus opinions of the newspaper's editorial board, which is usually made up of the publisher, the chief editorial page editor, other editorial writers, and whatever corporate chieftains care to sit in on the meetings. (Sometimes a hapless cartoonist is required to attend.) These unsigned editorials represent the official policy of the paper. If the board fails to reach a consensus on a particular subject, the publisher or some corporate person will invariably have his own views enshrined there. At too many newspapers, the unsigned editorial section is the most boring part of the page, a long gray column of text that strains to say nothing at all without appearing to be wishy-washy. It takes a lot of words to say nothing—many more than it does to be clearly understood. When they are not actively waffling, unsigned editorials too frequently sink to the role of community cheerleader, abdicating their responsibility to enlighten, moralize, or even entertain.

The rest of the editorial page offers commentary in the form of signed opinion columns, letters from readers—and, of course, the editorial cartoon. The opinions expressed in these signed pieces range from reasoned arguments to lunatic ravings from all over the political spectrum.

Staff writers and nationally syndicated columnists furnish the opinion columns. Opinion writers, be they local or national, identify their authorship and often have "specialties," such as right- or left-wing agendas, women's issues, minority concerns, humor, wry observation, exposé, etc. The column writer becomes identified with this signed work, unlike the anonymous authors of the unsigned editorials. Some newspapers only publish columns that resonate with their own particular mission, philosophy, or political viewpoint; others strive for "balance."

The "Letters to the Editor" section serves as a public sounding-board for local readers with personal peeves, beefs, or pats on the back they'd like to share. Letters range in tone from approval to reproof to downright hostility. They are edited for length, clarity, profanity, and libel at most papers.

And then there are the political cartoons.

For the purposes of this book, I use the terms "political" and "editorial" almost interchangeably—although, really, there is a distinction to be made. The label "editorial" suggests to many of us cartoonists that the cartoon in question is an illustration of someone *else's* opinion, while a "political" cartoon is (to be picky about it) the cartoonist's *original* work of political or



social commentary. There are wonderful cartoonists who do editorial illustrations, but the political cartoon should be an unambiguous work of impact and immediacy, which can be appreciated—or deplored—in seconds. It is signed by the cartoonist, who takes the blame for its content. A satirical drawing with an air of irreverence, if not irresponsibility, the political cartoon often sacrifices logic, reason, fairness, and a great deal of subtlety for the sake of immediacy. But that's okay. Most cartoonists are not very logical, reasonable, fair, or subtle people. Cartoonists are satirists; and “satirist” is really just another word for “professional smartass.”

I have found that, if it is not strictly true that nobody likes a smartass, those who do are few and far between. It is a rare person who can tolerate someone with the unfortunate habit of telling the truth as she sees it in the bluntest and most irreverent manner possible—and who possesses a daily forum for doing so. As a group, satirists have a long and unparalleled history of “problems with authority.” It is probably not a

coincidence that, anywhere in the world, as soon as a dictator (right- or left-wing—it's all the same) assumes power, the first people to be thrown into prison are the satirists.

This is why every free society needs political cartoonists. Actually, *every* society needs political cartoonists. *Somebody* has to make fun of Power. There are courageous cartoonists working under quite repressive governments all over the world. Many of these have spent time in jail for their work. Others have suffered even more grievously. This is all the more reason why a free society such as ours should value dissent as an expression of its vitality and a demonstration of its tolerance—if not its enthusiastic embrace—of freedom of the press.

Of course, institutions (like newspapers) even in a free society sometimes fall short of the aforementioned “tolerance of dissent” ideal. Today's newspapers are becoming more homogenized as more news outlets are acquired by fewer corporations with every passing day and every passing merger. Newspaper publishers strive to appear non-threatening to whatever powers—that-be currently have the means to deprive them of their positions.

Any time a newspaper fears it may suffer financial reprisal—or even a bit of civic inconvenience—the first person to be fired is the cartoonist. Hardly ever is it a columnist, no matter

how many columnists the paper has on payroll. The easiest way for a newspaper to make everybody (especially local publishers and their corporate overlords) happy is to just dump the staff cartoonist. Syndicated cartoons by famous Pulitzer Prize winners are readily available, cheaper, and less likely to tread upon sensitive local toes.

Editorial cartoonists are also sometimes mistaken for comic strip cartoonists, to their unqualified horror. Some editorial cartoonists do have cartoon strips on the side, but these strips are almost never political—they are a way for that cartoonist to branch out into pure humor.

One exception—a cartoon strip that *is* a political cartoon—is the widely syndicated *Doonesbury*, by cartoonist Garry Trudeau. Trudeau has stood on the front lines of social and political commentary since the Vietnam War; and, though his work often contains humor, he has never strayed from his mission to satirize, inform—and even, at times, to shock. *Doonesbury* is so controversial in my area that one newspaper runs it in the classified ad section so sensitive readers will have to really make an effort to be offended by it. There was very little grumbling in the ranks of editorial page cartoonists when Garry Trudeau won the Pulitzer Prize for Editorial Cartooning in the 1970s.

Occasionally, though, the Pulitzer does go to a gag-driven cartoon strip from the comics pages. This always drives us editorial page cartoonists crazy. Not only does it endanger our fragile job security and give our editors (who are worried about their *own* jobs) more fuel for their arguments that we tone down our satire and consider the sensibilities of the newspaper subscribers, we see it as a grave insult and a deep misunderstanding of our work. The main purpose of a comic strip is to entertain; our cartoons are critiques. Though many comic strips do offer snippets of political or social commentary (some of which are even hard-hitting and insightful), the point of the strip is usually the joke at the end. Comic strip cartoonists also do not face the same resistance from editors, publishers, and angry local readers that confronts most editorial page cartoonists daily. When a non-political comic strip wins a major award that is historically reserved for political cartoonists who fight in the trenches every day, it only makes things more difficult for us all.

An ongoing debate among editorial cartoonists over the past couple of decades or so concerns the possibility that we *ourselves* have contributed to the blurring of the lines between political cartooning and the comics. Back in the early 1970s, the unwieldy, over-labeled editorial cartoon styles of the past were giving way to the more casual, freewheeling political-social commentary that we, the younger generation of cartoonists, were crafting. (Although alert readers of this book will discover—as I did, to my horror—that I labeled practically *everything* in my cartoons!)

My generation was widely influenced by the *MAD Magazine* of the 1960s, which showcased the dead-on caricatures by Mort Drucker. Though *MAD* occasionally featured political commentary, it was primarily a humor magazine. Then, in the mid-1960s, political cartoonist Pat Oliphant arrived from Australia and knocked our socks off with his unique style that incorporated more humor than was, at that time, customary in U.S. editorial cartoons. Previous generations of cartoonists had preferred to mock their politicians from a respectful distance, personifying them as donkeys, elephants, Uncle Sam, and so forth; and their portrayals of individual politicians' faces tended to be fairly realistic (unless he was a hated national enemy, like Hitler). But, like *MAD*'s Mort Drucker, Oliphant used caricature brilliantly, distorting the features of politicians but leaving no doubt as to their identity. Using a horizontal format that soon became popular among American cartoonists, his cartoons are set pieces full of characters and imagery which can either deliver complicated, layered messages or drive home simple ones.

Another contribution Oliphant made to political cartooning is his collection of shortcut images (Uncle Sam as W. C. Fields, NATO as a yard of chickens, NOW as a terrifying Wagnerian opera diva in a horned helmet, and other unabashedly stereotypical but easily recognizable fig-

ures). These icons have seeped so insidiously into the visual mainstream that we assume we thought them up ourselves. (It's a good thing cartoonists don't have to pay royalties on the images we steal.) Pat Oliphant continues to hit his targets every day with such virtuosity—combining superbly rendered drawings and caricatures with scathingly witty commentary—that we should be ashamed of ourselves for even trying to keep up.

Another influential editorial cartoonist and humorist was the late—the wonderfully great—Jeff MacNelly, whose goofy, folksy approach and gentle humor delivered his editorial messages so painlessly that even those of us who disagreed with his point of view loved him. He, too, used the horizontal format, populating his cartoons with people, dogs, buildings, cars, trucks, ships, fighter planes, and all types of weapons. He could infuse inanimate objects with an amazing degree of personality and humor. Jeff was never happy with his caricatures, though I thought they were very good. He complained that the fingers and arms of the people he drew looked like wet spaghetti. I tried to copy the wet spaghetti, because I liked the look. But it never worked for me. Nor was I ever able to draw tanks, bombs, planes, or ships with any personality.

Jeff was a prodigy who earned his first Pulitzer at the age of twenty-four while working at *The Richmond News Leader*—and received two more as his career matured. Naturally, he, too, spawned a crop of imitators who couldn't match his philosophical sophistication or his wit. Both Oliphant and MacNelly became widely syndicated in the 1970s, and their influence spread all over the country. They made mixing politics and humor look easy.

Unfortunately for the rest of us young cartoonists, our editors and publishers—impressed by those two virtuosos and the humorous style they used to such great effect—gradually began to demand more humor from us, too. Trouble is, comedy and satire are both very difficult to master. Now, even I believe that without humor, satire—real, biting satire—just comes off as sarcasm. And satire *itself* can be funny—but not everyone recognizes it when they see it. (One local newspaper that ran Art Buchwald's columns had to place the word "satire" in big, bold letters every few paragraphs so that people would stop taking Buchwald so seriously.) Though a good cartoonist might occasionally create a cartoon that is both piercingly satirical and hilariously funny, it takes outstanding ability to accomplish both on a regular basis. Pat and Jeff, though their drawings were often very funny, always presented *viewpoints* in their witty cartoons. They were—what's the word?—*talented!*

Frankly, though, not many editors were able to tell the difference between caricature with a purpose . . . and just a funny face. To be fair, editors inhabit a world of words, while cartoonists experience life visually. Language and imagery are two very different forms of expression, and few people are good judges of both. If you ask me, I think it's a shame and a sorry joke on editors and cartoonists to be bound like two cats with their tails tied together, caught in an endless battle of words versus pictures.

And so, with the increasing availability of funnier, more viewer-friendly cartoons—syndicated to our very own newspapers at bargain-basement prices—those of us whose editors were already beginning to suggest that we use a "feather, not a meat ax" in our cartoons got the message that we'd better lighten up. Most of us couldn't churn out brilliant gems of satire and wit every day; faced with our bosses' demands for more humor (backed up by the threat of editorial rejection), our cartoons tended to become funnier—but less satirical. Mere illustration began to pass for opinion; mere humor for satire. Editorial cartoons evolved into simple riffs on the headlines, kind of like Leno and Letterman or whoever will replace them. Cartoonists became almost interchangeable for a while.

This situation abated as we cartoonists of the 1970s began to find our own styles—and today's younger cartoonists bring new influences to the table. They love animated television shows like *The Simpsons* and *South Park*, which offer sharply satirical social commentary. The new

cartoonists know politics and history and are producing fine cartoons—many of them created directly on the computer.

Lucky for them, and for those of us who still freelance, it is much easier to get information these days than it was when I was a full-time cartoonist. Information and visual images abound on television and the Internet. When I first began doing cartoons, there were three television networks that ran nightly news shows: ABC, NBC, and CBS. Then, in 1980, Ted Turner launched CNN and changed TV news forever. Suddenly cartoonists, being visual animals, had more opportunities to place faces with the names we were reading about in newspapers. (Well, the *national* names and faces, anyway.)

In the 1970s and '80s, it was extremely difficult for me—working so far from Columbia, our state capitol—to follow state news in a timely fashion or to find good likenesses of any but the most prominent state politicians. Newspaper coverage of state issues struck me as confusing and incomplete. Issues in our state take a long time to unfold and are hard to follow, maybe because so much political maneuvering takes place in committees, restaurants, bars, and on dove shoots. Many state concerns, moreover, are never conclusively resolved. A victorious vote on one day can be squelched any number of ways the very next day—or in a week, or a year, or even several years down the road. Given my aversion to actual work and my rationalization that it would not do for me to know too much more than my readers, it would have taken a more diligent analyst than I to make sense of it all.

As for caricature (which I loved to do), even if it *had* been possible to get timely video footage or photos of the parties involved in a state issue, it would still have been tough to sort out the good guys and bad guys. It was therefore easier for me to do national and international cartoons than to do cartoons about state issues. So I did the easy stuff. It was hard enough!

My Bob Jones, Jr. cartoon certainly illustrates the problems I had with local news. I had read at work one day that Bob Jones, Jr. (the former president of Bob Jones University in Greenville and the father of current president Bob Jones III) had put some kind of prayer curse on then-Secretary of State Al Haig for denying a visa to the radical Irish Protestant leader Ian Paisley. I had a photo of Bob Jr. and did a cartoon about it using his face. But the local TV news that night showed his son, Bob III, speaking from the Bob Jones University podium with a voice-over about the incident. So I erased the father's face and drew Bob III, figuring that TV news wouldn't lie, right? Wrong. When I got to work the next day with the cartoon all inked, my editor, Aubrey Bowie, told me that Bob *Junior* had said it, not Bob III. I told him what I'd seen; then I called the



TV station. The news director said, oh, yeah, that Bob Jr. had said it, but they only had file footage of Bob III, and they didn't think anybody would notice. I laid into him, but I was the only person who complained. I don't even think the Bobs caught it.

Today's cartoonists face new problems. One interesting, if alarming, development since my own days as a cartoonist has been that television coverage of national news events seems to have evolved into a cacophony of pundits—political columnists, commentators, and “think tank” spokesmen and -women possessing

varying degrees of scholarship and reason—each professing to analyze the issues of the day. Many of these “experts” harbor undisguised political ideologies and ties to interest groups that espouse and fund narrow political agendas. They are not journalists, although they play them on TV. They are Personalities: politically driven celebrities invented by TV news to fill all the space on cable channels like CNN, MSNBC, CNBC, and FOX. It’s hard to come away from one of these shoutfests with any real understanding of the issues. Nowadays, as I follow the news, I have to watch one or two cable stations, read one or two periodicals, and get Jim to read the paper to me every morning before I can make up my mind.

Another problem for today’s political cartoonists is that real Power—our perpetual target—has gone underground. Power today is defined by *access* to lawmakers and fueled by money. Politicians—or even the offices they hold—are no more powerful than the interest groups that support them. These groups—tobacco companies, insurance companies, drug companies, oil companies, and defense contractors; lobbying coalitions and Political Action Committees (or PACs) funded by large corporations, professional organizations, and other moneyed interests; and even large media outlets, to name just a few—act individually or together to elect and influence lawmakers.

Now *that’s* power.

Our funny little pictures of politicians no longer mean very much, except in context. I’ve wished since 1987 that we could make politicians wear those NASCAR racing suits with bright patches representing each of their donors. I even did a color cartoon to that effect in 1994.

Most ominously for newspaper cartoonists, the rise of the Internet allows more and more people to get their news online for free. The costs of producing a daily newspaper are rising, and subscriptions are falling. A few large media conglomerates are swallowing up smaller media outlets in cities all over the country. Focusing on the bottom line, more and more executives and businessmen are rapidly reaching the conclusion that the editorial cartoonist is an expense the newspaper cannot afford.

Cartooning positions are being eliminated at an alarming pace. When I joined the Association of American Editorial Cartoonists in 1976, there were many respected editorial cartoonists working full-time at newspapers all over the country—more than 150, according to Clay Bennett, the 2005 president of the AAEC and a Pulitzer-Prize-winning cartoonist with *The Christian Science Monitor*. But today, Bennett says, full-time cartoonists only number about eighty. The AAEC website reports a larger number of members—but too many of us are either semi-retired or freelancing.

As more and more of us become unemployed and our newspaper positions go unfilled, we cartoonists will find other ways to speak out. We will work for Internet publications; we will use the Internet to self-syndicate; we will become publishers of our own work. Maybe we’ll build openings to the world that even we don’t know about yet. But one thing is certain. We will never stop doing cartoons, even if we can’t earn a living at it. We will do them just for ourselves. We will be doing political cartoons when we are ninety-seven years old, living in the old cartoonists’ home. We can’t help it—we can’t stop.