

Illustrating War and Race:
Political Cartoons and the Civil War

By
Idris A. Young

Political cartoons can make you laugh but they are also serious, a matter of life and death. Just think about the 2006 controversy over the cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed in the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten*, that some believe led to the bombing of the Danish Embassy in Islamabad, Pakistan in 2008, where six people were killed. *Charlie Hebdo*, a French satirical magazine re-published 12 of these controversial cartoons, along with many other cartoons that criticized Islamic fundamentalism and caricatured the Prophet Muhammed. On Jan 7, 2015 two gunmen, offended by these cartoons, opened fire in the offices of *Charlie Hebdo* and killed twelve people. There is clearly conflict between Europeans and Islamic refugees. We might understand the power of these political cartoons if we shift to an earlier period of history also characterized by major political differences between those who believed in the necessity of slavery and those who wanted it abolished, between the North and the South, and between black and white. The political cartoons of the Civil War era might provide us with valuable information into how cartoons can express the racism of society as well as the anger at that racism. They can allow us to criticize the way society works by poking fun at it and they also can express hope for new ways of thinking and living with religious, racial and political difference.

Today there are fewer political cartoonists because of the decline of print newspapers and also because more people are able to do political commentary on the web by making their own 'cartoons' via meme generators (John Jennings). But during the time of the Civil War, political cartoons became an important form of commentary for a number of reasons. Previously, cartoons were often placed in the windows of lithography shops, in the hopes that they would capture the interest of people walking by. Political cartoons arose at a period when the steam press could make large amounts of prints so many people could see and read them. One of the places where hundreds of thousands of people saw political cartoons was Harper's

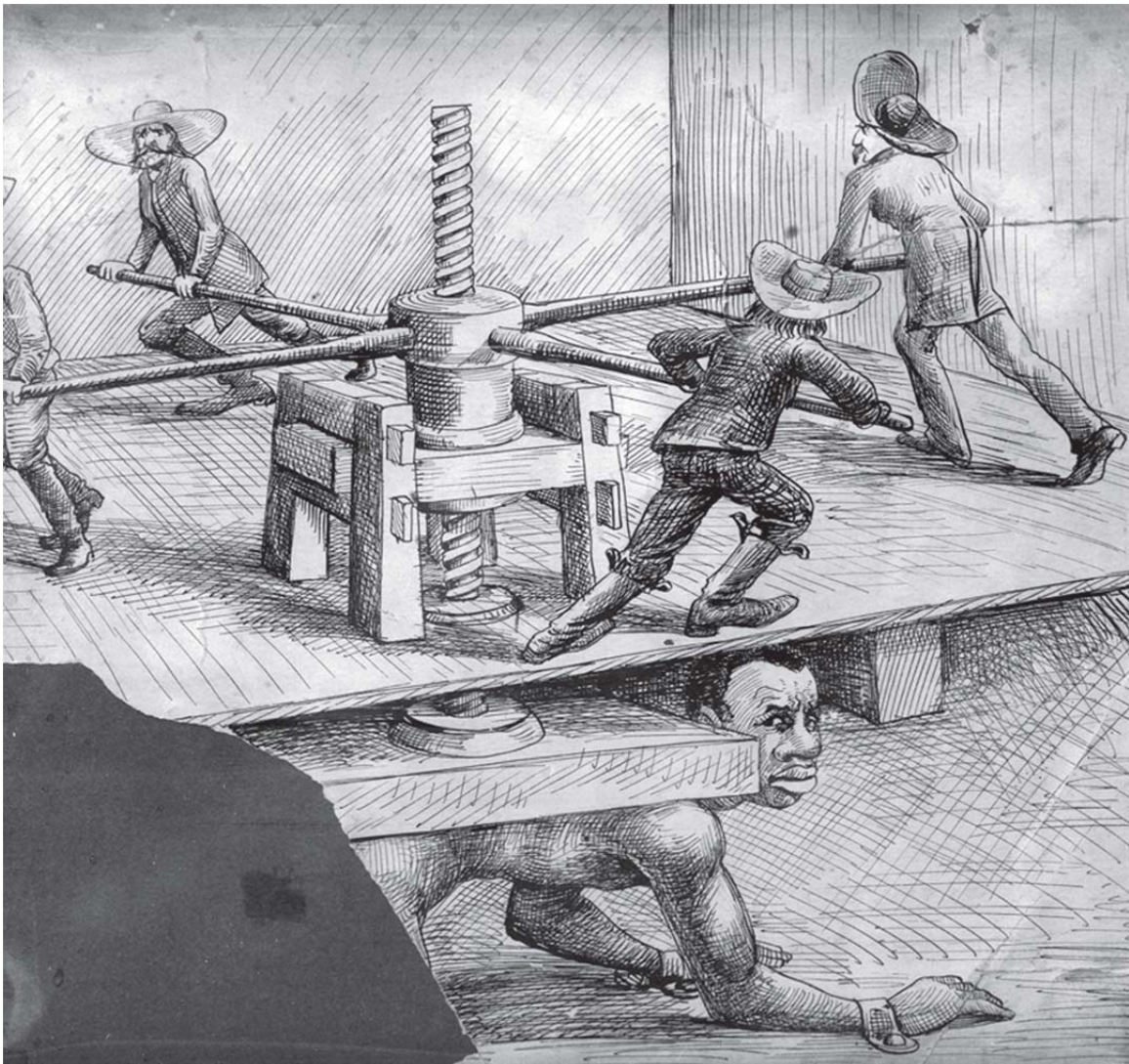
Weekly, first published in 1857. During the Civil War, Harper's Weekly was the major source of pictorial politics. Harper's Weekly had small political cartoons on the back page. These political cartoons were often by Thomas Nast. His cartoons were wood engraved with black and white. With the advances in printing technology, the cartoons could be understood by many because they have the ability to take very complex ideas and simplify them for the public. Ellen Goldner states that the "steam press could print large runs rapidly enough to intervene in the politics of the moment, thereby helping to propel the US political cartoon into prominence" (44).

There were very few African American political cartoonists. Marvin D. Jeter and Mark Cervenka write about Henry Jackson Lewis, who was born sometime between the late 1830s and 1850s. He was the first African American political cartoonist. In 1879, six engravings that were made by Harper's Weekly staff were attributed to sketches by H. J. Lewis. His debut self portrait appears 13 July 1889 in *The Freeman*, a black owned and operated illustrated newspaper.



It is very rare to see a portrait without captions but his portrait resembles a coat of arms. He is dressed in a distinguished way, which suggests honor. The eagle above his head represents the United States of America. These details are important because blacks were not considered honorable citizens of the United States. The artist's tools in the portrait and the two books entitled Science of Fine Art and Science of Engraving lie below him. His son and daughter are on either side of him. The tools and books show that Africans were smart, talented, and literate. "The signs and symbols he employed tell us that he was acutely aware of the role art played in the struggle towards progress" (Taylor 198). Art can create and represent equality because the same tools can be used by everyone. During slavery children were usually separated from their fathers. The children on either side of

him imply that just because H.J Lewis is a black man doesn't mean that he has no relationship with his children. He can help raise them, just like white families. Born a slave, he was involved in a fire that maimed his left arm and blinded his left eye. His portrait doesn't show this as he faces the other direction. He doesn't want to be represented as half a man. Along with his self portrait he also talked about more issues about African Americans during the Civil War. His untitled, undated and unpublished work that appears in the DuSable Museum collection shows four southern democrats turning the screw of a copy press that flattens a naked black man to the floor.



The black man stares straight at the viewer in order to make him or her feel sympathy and guilt. The black man is larger than life so the viewer pays attention to the African American who is shackled to the ground.

Images with writing often times can communicate more than just text. Being able to decipher the image was especially important because slaves were forbidden to learn how to read and write. The political cartoon could impact even those who were not very literate. Political cartoons are important in creating a sense of community. People reading them can feel like they are being ridiculed or they can feel as if they agree with the cartoonist. Laughter at a cartoon helps form a community just as groups of people can be excluded from the joke. Sometimes as a Muslim African American boy, I cannot laugh at the jokes made by *Charlie Hebdo* though I don't believe in bombing them either. Being made fun of is different from being on the side of those telling the joke. But reading a cartoon allows one to see through the eyes of other people as the cartoon reflects their point of view. And this helps us understand different people. This is why the political cartoons of the Civil War are so important.



A Man Knows A Man is a very powerful political cartoon referring to disability caused by combat in the civil war. The point of view of this cartoon is from a white veteran. The white veteran gives his hand to the black veteran and says it was a

good thing that they never lost heart. During this period it was a revolutionary act for a white man to show respect to a black man. A handshake was a form of respect you gave to equals. The *A Man Knows A Man* cartoon is drawn with shading on the outfits while the complexion of the one man is much darker than the other man's. The men share one thing, however, and that is their disability. Their disabilities both resulted from engaging in combat in order to protect the union and end slavery. Both men have done so much to protect their vision of democracy but only the white man is being protected by the citizens he is protecting .

As time changes opinions change. The opinion in this time was that service in war grants you citizenship. At first blacks were not allowed to fight in the military. But later in July 1862 Lincoln allowed blacks to fight in the Union army. Black and white regiments were segregated, and at first blacks were paid less than white soldiers of the same rank, seven dollars a month instead of thirteen. For many in this country war is seen as a way of turning boys into men. The cartoon is trying to explain that since they have both experienced war and have been wounded, they are both men. However war doesn't turn boys into men. African Americans were fully human and fully men before combat and war. Today there are men and women combatants. The adversities of disability caused in combat are shared by men and women today. While there were no female soldiers in the Civil War , black women were nurses, scouts, or spies, like Harriet Tubman, a scout for the second South Carolina Volunteers.

This cartoon shows how these two characters have lost so much from their injuries but they have also gained friendship and equality. The cartoonist clearly thought that war and suffering from war resulted in a common humanity and he wanted to portray this positive aspect of what was a brutal and very difficult war.

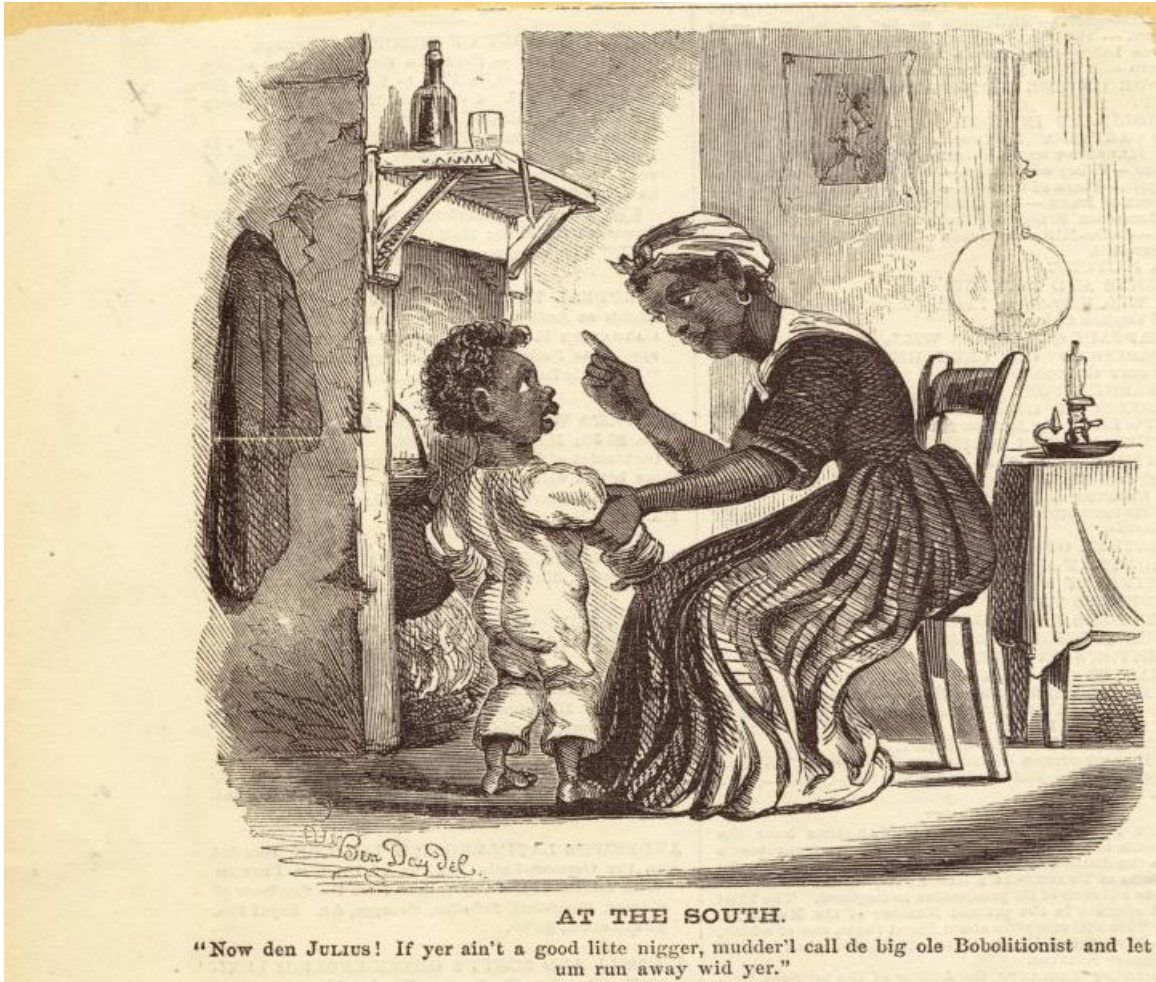


LINCOLN—“*I'm sorry to have to drop you, Sambo, but this concern won't carry us both!*”

I'm Sorry I have to Drop You Sambo is another cartoon that tells us a great deal about tense political climates and how people expressed their political views of the Civil War in ways that could reach many readers. *I'm Sorry I have to Drop You* is from the view of a person critiquing the North and Abraham Lincoln's claims about ending slavery. The style of the drawing shares some similarities with the *A Man*

Knows of Man cartoon. They both have detailed shading and different depths and contours in the ocean. The cartoon depicts the Emancipation Proclamation as a ship that is quickly sinking. "Sambo" and Lincoln abandon the ship but Lincoln decides that he can't survive if he has to help "Sambo". The union life buoy can only save one person so Lincoln pushes "Sambo" into the water. He tries to drown the black man in order to survive. Lincoln's top hat is floating beside him and inside it is the Fremont's Emancipation Proclamation. Major General John C. Frémont issued this proclamation in August 30 1861 in St. Louis, Missouri. The proclamation declared that all the property of those carrying weapons in rebellion, including slaves would be taken away. The confiscated slaves would be declared free. Given that the cartoonist shows the proclamation floating away, the possibility of slaves being set free from their rebel masters is drifting away. Trying not to be drowned at sea is ironic for African Americans who survived the Middle Passage and now were going to be drowned. Instead of two men being depicted on equal footing, *I'm Sorry I have to Drop You* shows a world where only one group of people can survive and they do this at the expense of others.

The images used in this cartoon would not mean the same thing today as they did during the Civil War time period. The caricature of Sambo is not commonly used today in modern day cartoons though there are some exceptions. Sambo is a racist caricature of black people where they are not considered people but illiterate animals with puffy, big lips, ink black skin and bulging white eyes. The cartoon's use of the word "Sambo" suggests a racist caricature but the drawing is less stereotypical. We see the muscular back and arms of a black person trying not to be pushed under by Abraham Lincoln. Not many people today would know what Frémont's Emancipation Proclamation represents.



The *At The South* cartoon supposedly represents a black woman, a mother, talking to her child. The viewpoint she represents is one of a white southerner. She threatens her child with the 'big ole Bobolitionist' and not the boogiemán, telling Julius that if he doesn't behave she is going to call the "Bobolitionist" and let him take her son. The woman's home seems clean and well taken care of. African American culture is represented by the banjo hanging on the wall which African slaves brought to America. There is no father in the house except for a possible image on the wall which relates to how black fathers were treated during slavery. However, the mother's nice dress, the chair and table with a cloth over it seem to tell us that slaves have better lives under slavery than they do when they are free in the North. The most stereotypical part of the cartoon is the way the mother speaks. The cartoonist writes her accent in a way that makes her seem ignorant. She can't even

say abolitionist correctly but instead calls them Bobolitionists. This cartoon supports the South's claims that slaves were happy in the South and were being tricked and forced into freedom by northern abolitionists. It shows the mother to be just as easily fooled as the child. The child is not just a child but he also represents the South and child-like Southern blacks who need to be protected against the North and freedom.

Political cartoons allow us a unique opportunity to see political moments and divisions through the eyes of the people living through it. Political cartoons were monumental in the shaping of many opinions and also the shaping of the Civil War. The cartoons of the Civil War era provides us with valuable information into how cartoons can express the racism of society as well as the anger at that racism. For example, H.J. Lewis shared a unique insight on an African Americans as most cartoonists were white. Cartoonists allow us to criticize the way society works by poking fun at it and they also express hope for new ways of thinking and living with religious, racial and political difference.

Bibliography

Primary Sources:

"At the South." *Harper's Weekly* 28 January 1860.

"A Man Knows a Man." *Harper's Weekly* 22 April 1865.

"I'm Sorry I Have to Drop You Sambo." *Harper's Weekly* 12 October 1861

Jennings, John. Personal Interview. 13 January 2016.

Lewis, Henry Jackson. "Self Portrait." *The Freeman* 13 July 1889.

---. "Untitled." Unpublished Cartoon. 1889-91. DuSable Museum of African American History, Chicago.

Secondary Sources:

Edwards, Rebecca. "Politics as Social History: Political Cartoons in the Gilded Age". *OAH Magazine of History* 13.4 (Summer 1999): 11-15.

Goldner, Ellen J. "The Art of Intervention: The Humor of Sojourner Truth and the Antebellum Political Cartoon". *MELUS* 37.4 (Winter 2012): 41-67.

Jeter, Marvin D., and Mark Cervenka. *Common-Place.org*. 7. 3 (April 2007):
<http://www.common-place-archives.org/vol-07/no-03/jeter-cervenka>.

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

Sachsman, David B., S. Kittrell Rushing and Roy Morris Jr. *Seeking a Voice: Images of Race and Gender in the 19th Century*. West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2009.

Taylor, Garland Martin. "Out of Jest: The Art of Henry Jackson Lewis." *Critical*

Inquiry 40.3 (Spring 2014): 198-202