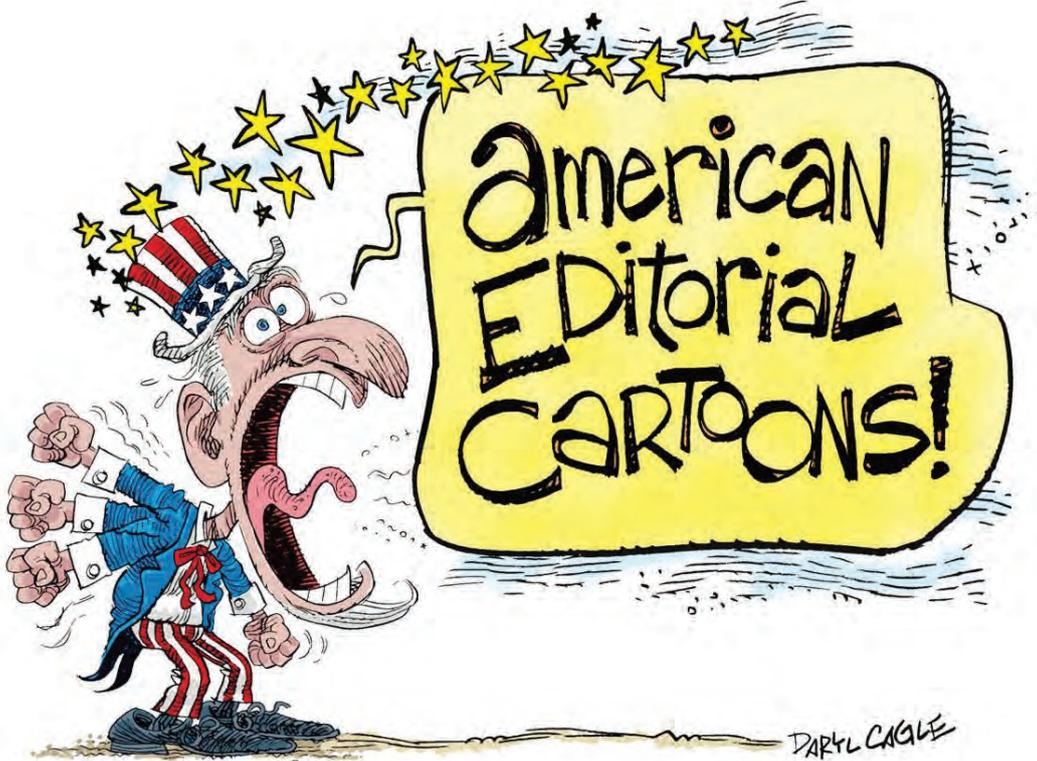




American Editorial Cartoons!

By Stephen Hess



"Uncle Sam," a lean figure wearing a top hat, first emerged as a symbol of the United States during the War of 1812. He has appeared in cartoons ever since. (Daryl Cagle/MSNBC.com)

A basic difference between the pictures in American editorial cartoons and those that you see in an art gallery are that these pictures are meant for the moment. The artists want you to laugh or get angry about something that is happening or happened yesterday. They ask only for a minute of your time before you go off to work.

There is one cartoon, however, that is still with Americans after 258 years. The first cartoon in an American newspaper appeared on May 9, 1754, 22 years before the American colonies declared

independence from Great Britain. A snake is divided into eight segments; on each segment is printed the initials of a colony. The cartoon was based on a popular superstition that a snake that had been severed would come back to life if the pieces were put together before sunset. "Join or Die." It is a crude drawing, but a powerful message. The amateur artist was Benjamin Franklin, printer and scientist, and one of the Founders of the United States.

In the years between Ben Franklin and modern cartoonists are many hundreds of men

and women (mostly men) who tried to influence their times through their cartoons and occasionally even had an impact on American history. Probably the country's most famous cartoonist

"Join, or Die," by Benjamin Franklin, was the first cartoon in an American newspaper (1754). It was a strong message to the American colonies to unite. (Courtesy Library of Congress)



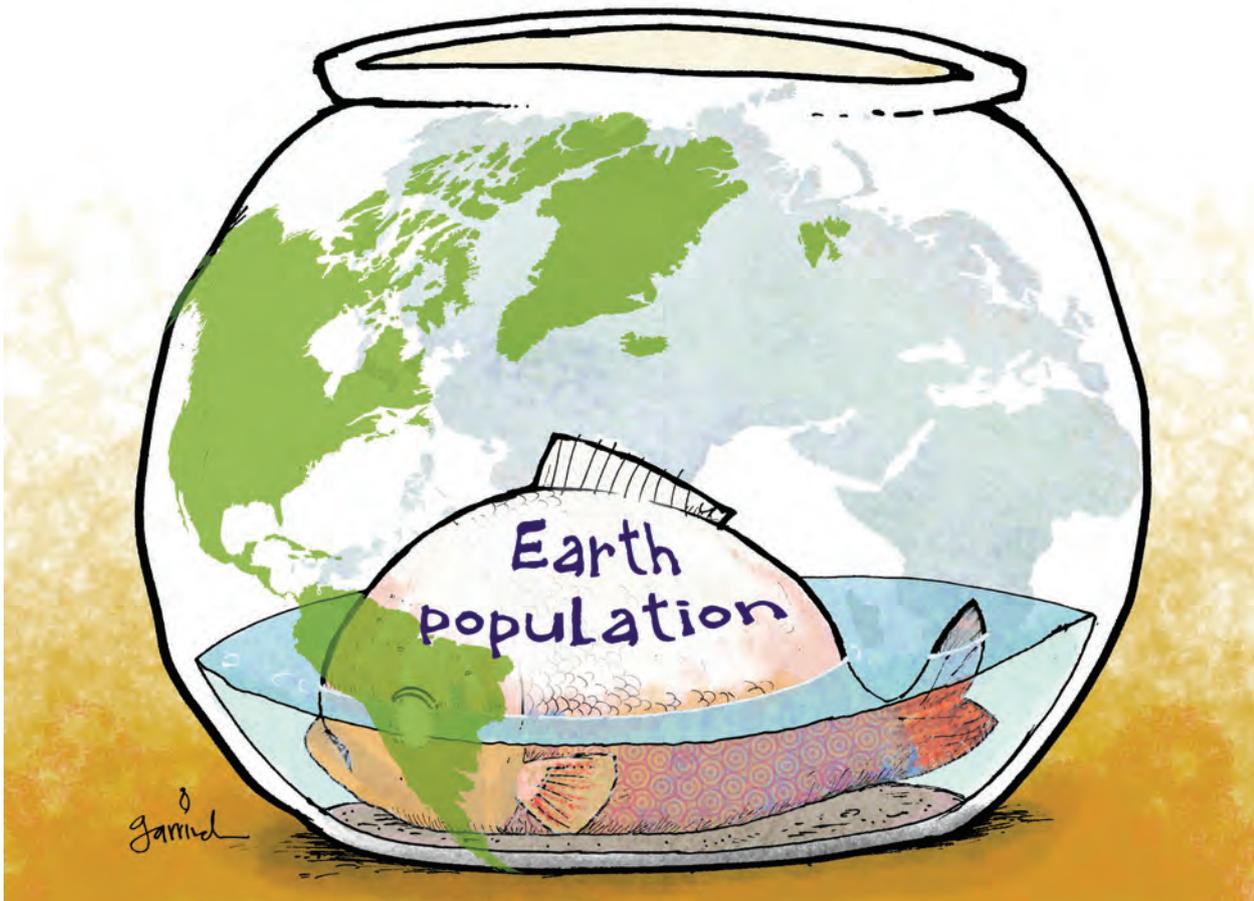
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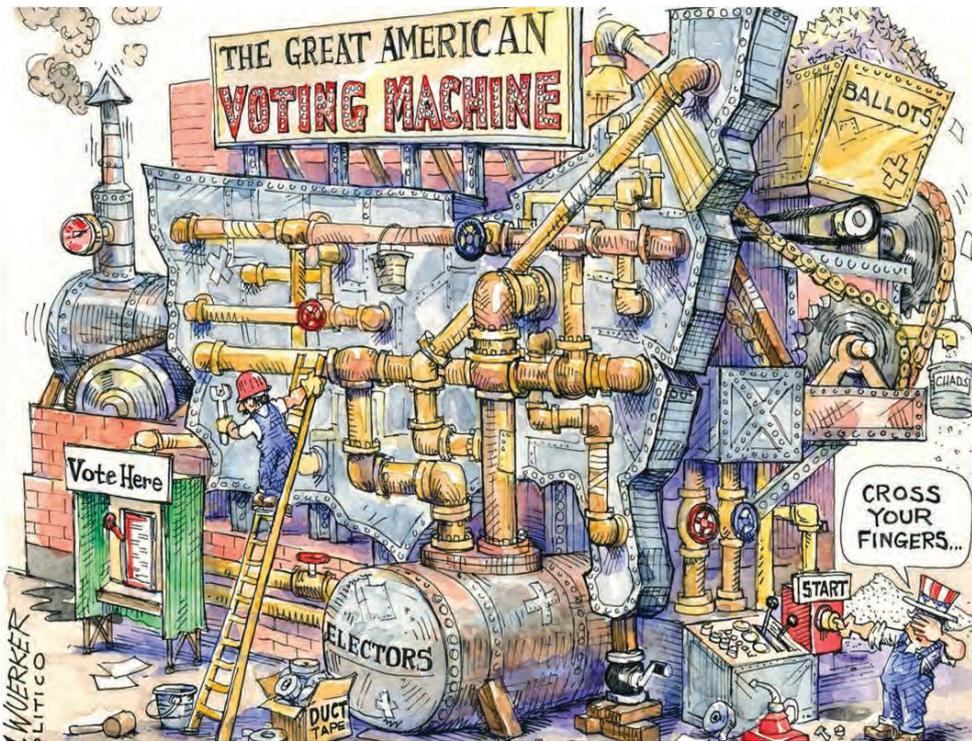
Kevin Kallauger ("KAL") portrays the irony of Earth Day celebrated by humans, whose activities contribute to global warming. KAL draws cartoons for *The Economist*. (Kevin "KAL" Kallauger/*The Economist*)



The New Yorker Staff cartoonist Liza Donnelly portrays women as pillars holding up the world. (Liza Donnelly/*The New Yorker*)



Population and environmental concerns motivate this cartoon by Gustavo "Garrincha" Rodriguez, cartoonist for *El Nuevo Herald*. (Garrincha/*El Nuevo Herald*)



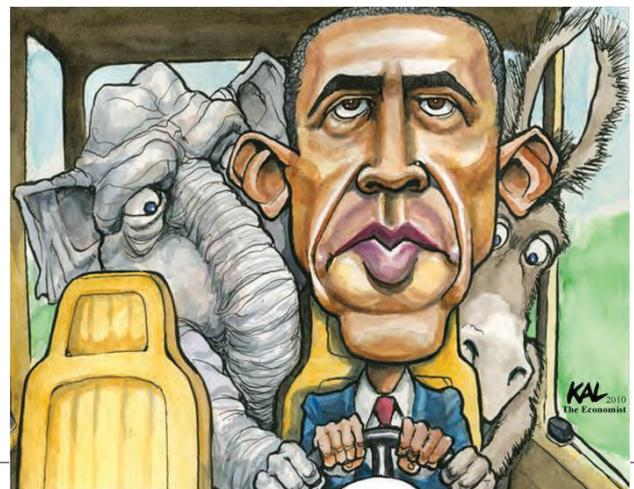
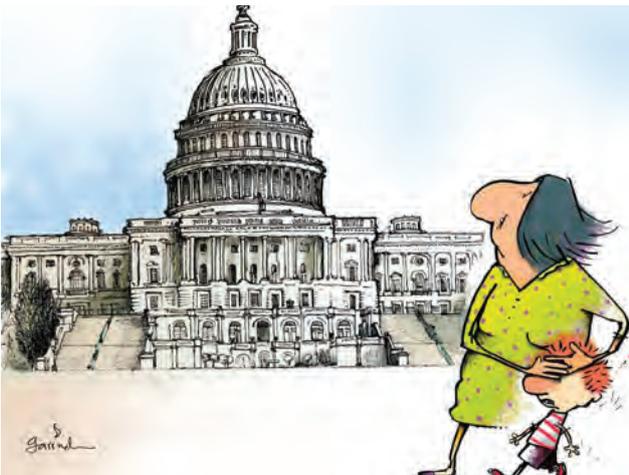
Counterclockwise, top to bottom:

Politico's Matt Wuerker pokes fun at the complexities of U.S. elections.
(Matt Wuerker/*Politico*)

American disgust for Congressional performance is conveyed by a mother shielding her child from the sight of the Capitol Building in Washington, D.C.
(Garrincha/*El Nuevo Herald*)

In this cartoon commemorating the late Steve Jobs, Garrincha uses the Christian symbolism of St. Peter greeting the dead at the gates of heaven to illustrate the ubiquity of Apple products and Jobs' achievements.
(Garrincha/*El Nuevo Herald*)

Another Kallaugher cartoon shows President Obama's attempt to steer the government impeded by both Republicans (elephant) and Democrats (donkey).
(Kevin "KAL" Kallaugher/*The Economist*)



was Thomas Nast (1840–1902), who worked for Harper’s Weekly magazine in the 1860s and ‘70s. He crusaded against a gang of corrupt New York City politicians led by William Marcy Tweed. When Tweed escaped to Spain, he was captured by a Spanish official who did not read English but recognized Tweed from a Nast cartoon! Tweed died in prison.

Some say that a cartoon also decided a presidential election. In 1884 James G. Blaine (Republican) was running against Grover Cleveland (Democrat). Five days before voters went to the polls, a powerful anti-Blaine cartoon covered the entire front page of the New York World. The Democrats reproduced it on thousands of billboards throughout the state. Blaine would have been elected if he had carried New York, and since he lost New York by a mere 1,100 votes, the cartoon may have been responsible for elevating Cleveland to the White House.

The cartoon about the 2008 Iowa Caucus by Pulitzer Prize-winning cartoonist Matt Wuerker, that I think is very funny, may not be nearly as risible to those who cannot immediately identify the eight contenders for the Democratic presidential nomination that year. Yet the cartoon’s point is clear: These Important People (including Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton) will do anything (wash your car, cut your grass) to get your vote. “I just love caucus [election] time,” says the smiling Iowa farmer.



Matt Wuerker depicts 2008 contenders for the Democratic Party nomination, including Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama, wooing Iowa voters. The caucus is a meeting of citizens who select Iowa’s favorite for the party ticket. (Matt Wuerker/Politico)

Such cartoons are drawn for other Americans, which means that some of their targets may not be obvious to those who do not spend their days deconstructing American politics.

Cartoons are protected by the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution: “Congress shall make no law ... abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press.” Yet this is not an absolute right. It rubs up against other rights Americans are given, and must be adjudicated in the courts. Fortunately, when the issue is Cartoonist vs. Politician, to date the cartoonist has always won.

What’s special about the tradition of editorial cartooning in America? For me it’s the right of the cartoonist to remind those in power or those seeking power that the cartoonist is prepared to laugh at them. Running governments is serious business and laughter is not an inconsequential people’s weapon in a society that elects its leaders.

Stephen Hess, senior fellow emeritus at the Brookings Institution in Washington, is the co-author of three books on this subject, most recently, with Sandy Northrop, *American Political Cartoons: The Evolution of a National Identity, 1754–2010* (Transaction Publishers, 2011).

