

Cartoons for the Classroom

Presented in cooperation with the Association of American Editorial Cartoonists (AAEC)

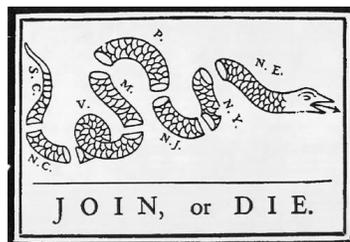


Don't get it? You're not alone

Decoding the message in historical cartoons is tough

Political cartoonists demand a lot from you. In order to interpret a cartoon's message, you need to have a grasp of current events, recognize the symbols used and put the message into historical context. Ray Heitzmann, Ph.D., who teaches at Villanova University, points out that's a lot for you to bring to the table. Heitzmann is a political cartoon specialist who's written and lectured on political cartoons for decades. He cites studies going back to 1930 that question the ability of students AND adults to comprehend the medium. Heitzmann's approach is to ensure students have a grasp of basic knowledge and background information before beginning any analysis of historical cartoons. And it takes practice. But puzzling through a cartoon can be fun.

For example, Ben Franklin's "Join or Die" is widely considered the first political cartoon to be published in an



Ben Franklin/ Pennsylvania Gazette
May 9, 1754

American newspaper. The message seems simple enough. Franklin is urging the colonies to unite. But there's more to it. Maybe much more. A common superstition at the time was that a snake that had been cut into pieces could heal itself into a perfect whole. And Karen Cook, a

researcher at the University of Kansas, insists that Franklin took his symbolism even further: That the snake actually represents a map. The curves of the snake suggest the coastline's shape, and the labels on its eight segments are in geographical order, from 'N.E.' - New England - at its head to 'S.C.' - South Carolina - at its tail. That's a lot of symbolism packed into such a simple cartoon.

And here are still more areas for exploration through your own research about this cartoon and its era.

- If there were 13 colonies, why did Franklin include only eight snake pieces? Didn't he want the others to unite?
- The cartoon originally had nothing to do with the colonies separating from England. What was Franklin pushing for?
- Aren't there negative connotations to a snake symbol? Forked tongue, Garden of Eden, etc.? Then why use it?

Additional resources

Association of American Editorial Cartoonists (AAEC)
<http://info.detnews.com/aaec/>

Ray Heitzmann's book: 50 Political Cartoons for Teaching U.S. History

<http://catalog.socialstudies.com/c/@VHTRG6DJWN8gc/Pages/product.html?record@TF26894>



Army Medical Examiner: "At last a perfect soldier!"
by Robert Minor, July 1916, New Masses magazine

Talking points:

Write a short definition for each of the following.

Context _____

Connotation _____

Robert Minor's "Perfect Soldier" appeared nearly 90 years ago. What was going on in 1916? What's the "joke" in Minor's cartoon? Explain Minor's stand on the military. What might his stand on war be? Does the toon still have meaning today?

Get out your newspaper

Gather a week's worth of political cartoons from your newspaper. Using the Cartoon Evaluation Worksheet (available online at the NIE Website) analyze each cartoon and identify the symbols used and the issues.