

MEMETICS

DON'T TREND ON ME

BY MORRY KOLMAN

The history of the United States is a history of its political cartoons, even down to the idea of states being united.

According to the internet, it would be rather easy to kill a small Victorian child. Numerous methods have been offered; a Cool Ranch Dorito, the latest 100 Gecs album, and a single season of Riverdale to name a few. Show these to a chimney sweep, body weary and a face full of soot, and the sheer shock of exposure to something so alien would be enough to cause them to pass on. The deadliness of these weapons lies in their anachronistic incomprehensibility. The more eclectic ornaments of our 21st century menagerie, a charitable description of Flavor-Blasted® Xtra Cheesy Pizza Goldfish®, seem like such a product of our moment, so unlike anything that has come before them, that the lack of a reference point for these poor unassuming children would simply break their brain. Nevermind the fact that theirs was the era that developed potato chips, electronic music, and serialized fiction. No, it is easier to joke about how disconnected our cultural objects are from those of our past than to chew through what it might mean for them to be heirlooms, passed down and transfigured over time.

One such object - drenched in the potential of time-travel lethality - is a JPEG. Specifically, a yellow one with a silly-looking cartoon snake in the middle, sitting above the block-fonted plea "pwease no steppy." Pwease no steppy is only one viral iteration of the popular "No Step on Snek" memes, an inversion of the Gadsen "Don't Tread on Me" flag, which itself finds its origins in Benjamin Franklin's 1754 "Join or Die" political cartoon, well before the Victorian era.

As quick and biting reductions of politics into easily digestible pictures, political cartoons have been a mainstay of political discourse since the 18th century. More easily consumable than articles, and funnier to look at, cartoons offer artists opportunities to make complicated dynamics salient and simple truths striking. Uncle Sam on a tightrope can explain whatever tense geopolitical position the U.S. finds itself in, and a sufficiently shrewd caricature of an elected official can bring the abstract harms of their policy decisions back to the person behind the bill.



Warning to the British colonies in America "*join or die*" exhorting them to unite against the French and the Natives, Benjamin Franklin, The Pennsylvania Gazette, May 9, 1754.

The history of the United States is a history of its political cartoons, even down to the idea of states being united. Franklin's "Join or Die" poster is the first documented illustration of the colonies as a unified body. If seeing is believing, then the imagination of the US began with a doodle. The medium similarly helped steer the country away from dissolution during the Civil War, with political cartoonist Thomas Nast using his pen to bring the horrors of battle and slavery in the South to the doorsteps of Northern homes by means of the Harper's Weekly

newspaper. Nast's works contributed so much to the war building efforts of the Union that Lincoln often referred to him as his "best recruiting sergeant". While he's known for inaugurating the donkey and elephant as symbols of the Democratic and Republican parties, a much more sweeping example of the lasting influence of his work is our classic image of Santa Claus; who is first depicted as a jolly fat guy with a beard in a 1863 magazine cover, talking to Union soldiers on Christmas.

HARPER'S WEEKLY.

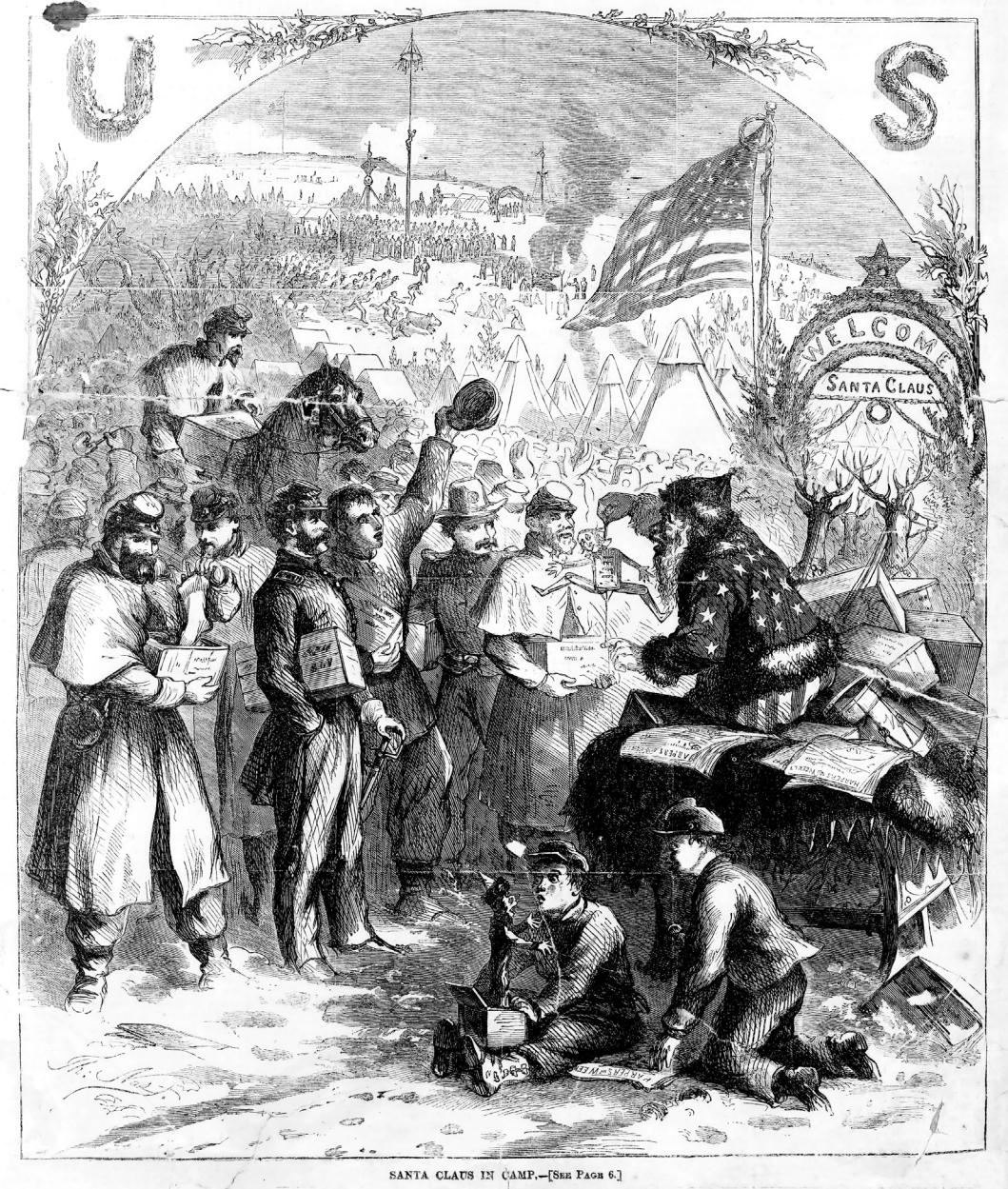
A JOURNAL OF CIVILIZATION.

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Entered according to Act of Congress, in the Year 1862, by Harper & Brothers, in the Clerk's Office of the District Court for the Southern District of New York.



SANTA CLAUS IN CAMP.—[SEE PAGE 6.]

Cover of Harper's Weekly,
one of the first depictions of Santa Claus.
Thomas Nast, January 3, 1863

As America matured, the artists of the 20th century pushed the direction of criticism inward while they developed the style of modern cartoons we think of today. Dr. Seuss, better known for his children's books, was a prolific cartoonist; the subtle political nods of Yertle the Turtle and the Sneetches stripped bare as he criticized non-intervention in World War II and the rise of fascism overseas. Herbert "Herblock" Block carried the torch into the Cold War. "McCarthyism," a term that defined the 1950s, was coined in one of his comics. He spent the better part of the mid-20th century dominating newspapers with critiques of the Red Scare, the Vietnam War, the Nixon administration, and more. A true foil to Thomas Nast, Herblock's vitriol was returned by multiple presidents in turn; Lyndon B. Johnson refused to give him the Presidential Medal of Freedom that he was nominated for after seeing a satirical cartoon of him and his handling of Vietnam a day earlier, and his depiction of Richard Nixon, then a Vice President, crawling out of a sewer got him added to the future resignee's infamous "enemies list."



Thomas Nast, titled "Fine-Ass Committee," a donkey stands in for a Democratic congressman blowing financial bubbles, after the Panic of 1873

lost budget and changed content. Neither inexpensive nor particularly shareable, cartoons are commentary with opportunity cost, money and feed space that would be better spent elsewhere, downgraded in the industry pivot-to-whatever-comes-next. Interestingly, this is not to say that there is no longer an appetite for cartoons; there will always be some baseline insatiability for visual forms of political satire. Rather, the economics of their medium have changed, and so humorous catharsis must now be found elsewhere. Enter memes.

Memes can in many ways be seen as extensions of political cartoons. Both are bite-sized, picture-based, and make their points through allegory and symbolism. Over the past two decades, memes have crept their way into politics, in each election playing a bigger role than the last. At this point, their utility has been embraced. Seeing the huge 2016 successes of the Bernie Sanders' Dank Meme Stash and the assorted meme machines of the alt-right, Michael Bloomberg's 2020 primary campaign spent upwards of a hundred thousand dollars on meme endorsements, and Donald Trump Jr.'s 6-million follower Instagram page is now almost completely dedicated to shitposting and viral

content. There are even government intelligence reports that include memes in their analysis of foreign election influence campaigns. Their rise is surprising to few. With political cartoons struggling to make the jump online, memes seem like the perfect successor to fill the void of humor left by their absence.

It's easy to think of this as a natural progression; first we had newspapers, newspapers have cartoons and politics, and so we got political cartoons; now we have the internet, the internet has memes and politics, and so we get political memes. The thing to understand is that this is not an evolution. Political cartoons

Looking back, the importance of political cartoons is clear. From our current vantage point however, their status seems less influential. With the now decades-long decline, print media, newspapers and magazines, the canonical hosts of cartoons, have

... and the Wolf chewed up the children and spit out their bones . . .
But those were Foreign Children and it really didn't matter."



Seuss, Dr., PM Magazine,
October 1, 1941

still exist today, in very similar form to their forebears. Memes are distributed, technological, and contagious. They come from a different creative process and spread through a novel dynamic of circulation. They are, when you get down to it, a fundamentally different type of image. That said, a difference of medium is not a breakage of tradition, and understanding the development of memes as a new means of political satire also helps us understand the development of the internet as a new means of politics.



THE SEVEN STAGES OF THE OFFICE SEEKER

Childs, J. (John), lithographer
New York, 84 Nassau St., NY, 1852

The early 2000s are pockmarked by incidents which we might consider proto-memes. The demise of Howard Dean's 2004 primary campaign was hastened by his infamous "Dean Scream", a raucous speech-ending screech that was remixed by listeners hundreds of times as it careened across the internet into the furrowed brows of prospective voters. This was followed by one of the first digitally-native works of viral political satire, JibJab's "This Land" parody song, which featured caricatures of George W. Bush and John Kerry singing catchy and satirical lyrics, looking strikingly similar to how they might appear in a cartoon. Four years later, Obama emerged victorious after running what is widely considered the first truly online political campaign, leaning into opportunities of virality with the now iconic Hope poster at the helm.

It is ironic given the abundance of spectacle, but it is surprisingly easy to overlook the role of media in politics. Not media as in New York Times, Twitter, Breitbart – media as in article, poster, PNG. There is the classic tale in American political history of John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon's first presidential debate in 1960. It was the first ever to be televised in addition to its usual format as a radio broadcast, and voters seemed to differ on the outcome depending on how they tuned in. Radio listeners tended to believe the smart-sounding Nixon came out victorious, whereas people watching on TV saw JFK – handsome and well dressed – as the winner. More than just a fun-fact of U.S. history, this illustrates a crucial truth of politics; its content is always inflected by its medium, and media, therefore, are political. Different media enable different things to be represented and create different modes of reception. FDR's fireside chats could have been displayed as newsreels or distributed via mail, but radio allowed him into people's homes, the audio-only feed producing the intimacy of a conversation or telephone call. Reagan owed his rise in significant part to his status as a movie star, a nice perk of which is the fact that it makes millions of people come together and literally look up to you whenever your newest film is in theaters.



In his essay "Photography and Electoral Appeal", French philosopher Roland Barthes reflected on the curiosity of campaign posters; why have a politician's face take up such a large portion of the image? These are real decisions with real issues at stake, and rather than explicating a policy platform, campaigns opt to spend their real estate on a large face shot of their nominee instead of an articulated plan for the country. This observation, Barthes says, is misleadingly premised. Posters don't use their limited space to present a detailed vision; they use it to present a symbolic one. The prevalence of portraits over programs in campaign propaganda is a bet, universally taken, that photographs and pictorial representations of politics have "a power to convert" the unreachable by non-visual media.

That era is now. After all, what is Hope if not bottom text? Perhaps the only portrait to come close to its virality since is the meme Trump retweeted of himself as Pepe, instantly taken as an acknowledgement and call-to-arms of the nascent alt-right. The myriad forms of political memes - from one-off mergings of political figures and internet culture like the Trump Pepe meme, to templatizations of politicians a la Bernie "once again asking for your financial support," and even everyday memes whose content is simply a joke about a politics in general - have become a constituent part of online political life and a mainstay format of satire.

While neither meme nor cartoon, the Obama Hope poster is the perfect example to understand the shifts in media politics that underlie the historical narrative of this article. The poster succeeded because the same things that made it ubiquitous are also what imbued it with meaning. First, it's flat. With only five colors, the image has a much easier time holding its fidelity no matter where it is displayed; stickers, signs, or screens. Second, it's easily remixable. The simplicity of its iconic styling and the eponymous tagline gave anybody with a photo editor and an idea a viral motif that everybody would instantly recognize. Together, these factors turned Obama's image from run-of-the-mill campaign material into a geyser of political energy and conversation; versions and formats springing up across the internet, a cacophony of pointed critiques and ironic shitposts foreshadowing the dynamics of our current moment. Traditional candidate portraiture tries to symbolize through stature; a suit to convey professionalism, an upward look to present aspiration. The Hope poster, following Barthes, sees Obama solidly within those tropes. But much like memes in comparison to cartoons, within the format itself we are also given something more; an image meant to be shared, a canvas for voice, and a candidate that was ready for the next era of political communication.

The memetic form of humor, while in the same tradition as cartoons, brings new avenues of political symbolism unreachable by its ancestor. German artist and visual theorist Hito Steyerl's concept of "the poor image" is useful for understanding why. A poor image is "a copy in motion", a picture or video that accumulates the history of its replication as it passes through hand after hand, conveying its history to each

successive viewer. For memes, this looks like grainy JPEGs that have been uploaded and downloaded one too many times, a reddit post of an Instagram screenshot of a funny tweet, or a label on a meme that is clearly covering up a different smaller label that was there before. In their circulation, memes carry the ephemeral digital fingerprints of everyone else who has already shared and consumed this content. They tell

you that they come from other people, that they're supported by viewers like you. The distribution of poor images is one of the bedrock mechanisms of the echo chamber. The in-jokes and symbols that propagate through memes cultivate a group identity through shared consumption; one that is reinforced by both the means of receiving the content and the look of the image itself.

The difference between a political cartoon and a meme is that a cartoon does not present its own stamp of approval. Every meme, however, brings with it the social proof of the uncountable mass of the internet before you. This is why meme culture tends to align itself with populist candidates, like Sanders and Trump instead of Clinton and Biden; as images that live and die by their ability to create broad experiences of relatability between those that interact with them, memes are the perfect match for campaigns that stake their ground on the aesthetics of mass. It is hard to think of a way in which a protest or a rally is like a cartoon; funny illustrations share little in common with political events. For memes though, whose energy multiplies as millions of people pile on, the connection is obvious.

One of the larger political shifts of the past two decades has been the introduction of a new player onto the field, that of "the internet". The internet does things. It names boats Boaty McBoatface, it floods people's GoFundMes, it loves public figures and it eviscerates them too. We talk about the internet as we would a person or group, but with an air of amusement that betrays an equal mix of fascination and uncertainty. Who is the internet? Why did it do that? What does it want? It is difficult to reconcile the arms-length curiosity that frames these questions with the inevitable fact that the internet is us. I go on the internet, I make a meme, I share the memes of others. You, in all likelihood, do as well. Together, within a network of undersea cables, ethernet cords, and data centers, a new public sphere emerges, bringing with it new types of media and a new body politic. The transition from cartoons to memes is the transition from newspapers to platforms, and from readers to users. Neither inherently a good thing or a bad thing, it is nonetheless a new relation to politics and one another that we must navigate together. Luckily for us, media

mediates. Political cartoons and memes, while different in style and form, work together to leave us with a historical constant. However different new eras may seem, however completely unlike the past the present may appear, it will always be funny to laugh at the government, and we will all laugh harder if we do so together. If the Victorian child survived the Industrial Revolution, I'm sure we can handle the digital age. ■

