

Humor on Pause: How Political Cartoonists Satirize Tragedy

Bush L*

Hillsborough Community College, University of South Florida, Florida, USA

Abstract

This essay investigates cartoons that were drawn in response to the four deaths of sitting U. S. Presidents during the 20th century. The author argues that there is a pattern to the cartoons that were drawn and examines why the cartoons are necessary. The author not only examines political cartoons from mainstream newspapers, but analyzes the cartoons that were published in the Chicago Defender. Finally, the author contrasts cartoons drawn about the deaths of sitting presidents to those drawn in response to the deaths of long-retired former presidents.

Keywords: Political; Humor; Patriotic

Introduction

News readers expect political cartoonists to lampoon contemporary controversial issues. They look forward to seeing the creative analogies, inventive wordplay, and comical caricatures presented to them in the daily newspaper. To news junkies, these rebuses are challenges as crossword puzzles are to lexicophiles. The metaphoric range of options for cartoonists in day-to-day politics is vast. However, when there is a tragedy such as the death of a sitting United States president, portraits are drawn more realistically, text is chosen more carefully, and analogies become more somber and patriotic. When reviewing the vast store of editorial cartoons following the deaths of sitting Presidents, the skimmer notices a pattern of motifs that the artists follow. One stage is sorrow and/or farewell. This is usually followed by a reference to the ascendancy of the Vice President to Commander-in-Chief. Among the cartoons are many that fix blame for the death—even for those who died of natural causes. The final motif is a step back to the primary function of cartoons, and that is humor. There were four sitting U. S. Presidents who died while in office during the 20th Century. William McKinley was assassinated in August 1901, Warren G Harding died of natural causes in 1923, Franklin Roosevelt died of natural causes in April 1945, and John F Kennedy was assassinated in November 1963. This essay examines the editorial cartoons that were drawn in memory of these heads of state and attempts to explain why the cartoons are significant.

In her book *On Death and Dying*, Elisabeth Kubler-Ross created a guideline for understanding the grieving process [1]. Her theory contends that there are five stages of grieving for the loss of a loved one: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Those theories deal with the grief of individuals, not of a collective conscience or entire culture. The media also examine the loss of significant celebrities and process the grief of society. In “Vicarious Grieving and the Media” R Scott Sullender argues, “A part of the grieving process, the process of bringing closure to this pain, includes a process of making meaning out of the tragedy. The media increasingly plays the role of a maker of meaning or an attributor of various diverse meanings” [2]. One aspect of the media, the political cartoon, has a unique way of dealing with the loss of sitting presidents. Cartoonists take the public through a four step process: grief, succession, responsibility, and return to humor. Kubler-Ross describes the grieving process, and consequently describes the memorializing process as well, “They are tools to help us frame and identify what we may be feeling. But they are not stops on some linear timeline in grief. Not everyone goes through all of them or goes in a prescribed order” [1]. The first stage of the process deals with grief for the loss. That is followed by cartoons pertaining to the ascension of

the vice president to president. Then there may be cartoons assigning responsibility to those who are to blame for the death of the president. Finally, the cartoonists return to drawing humorous satire about the new political situation. While the cartoons generally follow this order, like the stages of grieving outlined by Kubler-Ross, they are not clear-cut patterns in that, as with actual grieving, the stages of memorial cartoons can overlap or even switch positions.

When a head of state dies, there is a feeling of collective sorrow, and the nation goes into collective mourning. Cartoonists, some of whom had recently lampooned the head of state in question, must switch gears and become comforters. If the purpose of the press is to afflict the comfortable and comfort the afflicted, that is also the role of the cartoonist. Depending on the circumstances of the death of the head of state, that role of comforter can last from just a few days to weeks. In the case of Roosevelt, likely because he died of natural causes while the U. S. was at war, the memorial cartoons lasted for a few days before reverting to the news at hand. In the case of Warren Harding, because he died in San Francisco and his body was sent by rail to Washington D. C., the memorial cartoons for him lasted for more than a week. As comforters of the afflicted, cartoonists play a role in guiding Americans through the grieving process.

The second step in the memorial cartoon process is succession. One aspect of accepting the death of a head-of-state is swearing in the vice president as the new president. This is generally an unceremonious event, or events. Lyndon Johnson was sworn in on Air Force One before he headed to Washington D. C. Once in Washington, he was sworn in again by the Chief Justice. The vice president, though previously satirized by cartoonists, is depicted as a distinguished statesman, inconsistent with previous depictions and, likely, future depictions. It is helpful, though, for the collective grief of the nation that U. S. citizens regard the new leader as a strong and capable ruler. In fact, the Schlesinger Polls of Presidential Greatness rate the successors of McKinley and Harding as more effective than their predecessors, so vice presidents who have ascended to the presidency have been

*Corresponding author: Bush L, Hillsborough Community College, University of South Florida, Florida, USA, Tel: 239-218-5277; E-mail: larrybush@tampabay.rr.com

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generally competent. In addition, all 20th century successors won a presidential election of their own accord after succeeding a deceased president. There is a honeymoon period between the new president and the satirists, but it does not last very long.

While George Washington is often referred to as “The Father of our country,” each President is also seen by much of the citizenry as a father figure of the country. Therefore, when a president dies in office, be it by assassination or natural causes, there is a collective grief response that is similar to the grief response over the death of a parent. According to Paul B Sheatsley and Jacob J Feldman in their article, “The Assassination of President Kennedy,” there are significant feelings of collective grief among Americans due to the death of a ruler:

This involves the displacement of childhood feelings of dependency from one or both the subject’s parents onto the incumbent chief of state. Anxiety, the manifestations of which are difficult to distinguish from grief, is practically an inevitable consequence of the separation through death from the source of succor” [3].

And it appears that it does not take the death of a ruler with the stature of Franklin Roosevelt to elicit such a response. Sheatsley and Feldman tell of the response to news of the death of Warren J. Harding, a president that is consistently ranked, by historians, as one of the poorest performing U. S. Presidents, “What really jolts the situation into perspective, though, is the evidence of rather extravagant displays of grief attendant on the death of President Harding, a man of far less heroic stature” [3]. That a President whose administration was involved in scandals so criminal that some of his top appointees were charged and convicted on his passing should be mourned so deeply gives evidence that Americans mourn sitting presidents in a manner similar to the way they mourn parents, even wayward ones.

While much has been written comparing the deaths of presidents in office, comparisons are often made based on the popularity of the presidents. In this case, it is far more relevant to compare the cartoons based on the way in which the presidents died. Therefore, this essay begins by comparing and contrasting the memorials to William McKinley and John F. Kennedy; then it compares the memorials to Warren Harding and Franklin D. Roosevelt. There is also a chapter on a black newspaper’s cartoons and the contrast of its responses to the deaths of Harding and Kennedy.

McKinley and Kennedy Deaths

Examining the two presidential assassinations that occurred in the 20th century, it is easier to find more to contrast than compare. One was shot with a pistol, the other with a rifle. One was shot at point blank range, the other from a distance. One died instantly while the other lingered for a week. The primary comparison is that they were shot by people who had bought into ideologies that were disparate with that of the United States. (While that would stand to reason, it has not been true of other assassins. John Hinckley Jr., Ronald Reagan’s attempted assassin was trying to impress Jodie Foster, an actress). The contrasts in the killings are marked by similar contrasts in the cartoons that were drawn in response to these events.

When William McKinley was shot by an anarchist on September 6, 1901, he was the third American president assassinated over the course of about 36 years. Therefore, there would have been many adult Americans who remembered the two previous assassinations (CDC 46). Those people who were born in the 1850s could recall the assassination of Abraham Lincoln in 1865 when they were youngsters, and they would have recalled the assassination of James Garfield in

1881 when they were 16 years older. The assassination of McKinley in 1901 was the third presidential assassination in their lives. They were the only generation of Americans to have experienced such tragedy.

Initially, news outlets reported that McKinley had been shot, but that the President would recover. In fact, through most of the seven days that McKinley was in the hospital, he was conscious and receiving visitors. However, doctors were unable to locate the bullet and remove it. As a result of sepsis from the infection caused by the bullet, McKinley developed abdominal gangrene and died on September 14. Beginning on September 8, two days after the shooting, there were poignant cartoons in newspapers assigning blame for the assassination attempt. Those ran for seven days until McKinley succumbed to poisoning. This is the one situation in which responsibility cartoons ran before grief cartoons.

Typical of the responsibility cartoons in September of 1901 is the following cartoon drawn by “George” for the *St. Paul Globe*. It depicts Uncle Sam observing a sewer pipe emptying into a retention pond. Among the sewage is “anarchy,” “nihilism,” and “mafia,” and they are coming from Hungary, Italy, Russia, Austria, and Germany. There are figures of people in the sewage as it descends into the pond. One is holding a knife and another is holding an incendiary device. Ultimately, they are mixing with the “Population of U. S.” The caption reads, “About time to stop acting as sewer for the entire world.” It is not unusual for xenophobic cartoons to get published when someone with a name that is difficult for English speakers to pronounce is accused of a major crime—even when the alleged criminal is, as in this case, a citizen born in the U. S. A (Figure 1).

McKinley’s assassin, Leon Czolgosz was born in Michigan as a child of immigrants [4]. However, because he had an unusual name, he was lumped with them. Eric Rauchway, in his article “McKinley and Us” explains, he was “an American among Americans, not a foreigner (despite the rush of consonants in his name), and that it was Czolgosz’s fanatic ideas about Americanness that made him into a murderer” [4]. He was an avowed anarchist who followed the teachings of, especially, Emma Goldman. That link resulted in Goldman’s arrest in Chicago (despite a lack of evidence that she helped plan or even endorsed Czolgosz’s actions). It also sparked the following cartoon by Frank Crane in the *Boston Herald*. “A School to Be Suppressed” depicts a female teacher (presumably Goldman) holding a pistol before three attentive young students. Another child is drawing a bomb on the chalkboard in the back of the room. Uncle Sam is intruding through the window with his hand out as if to halt the proceedings. The title



Figure 1: About Time to Stop Acting as Sewer for the Entire World, pen and ink cartoon from George, *St. Paul Globe*.

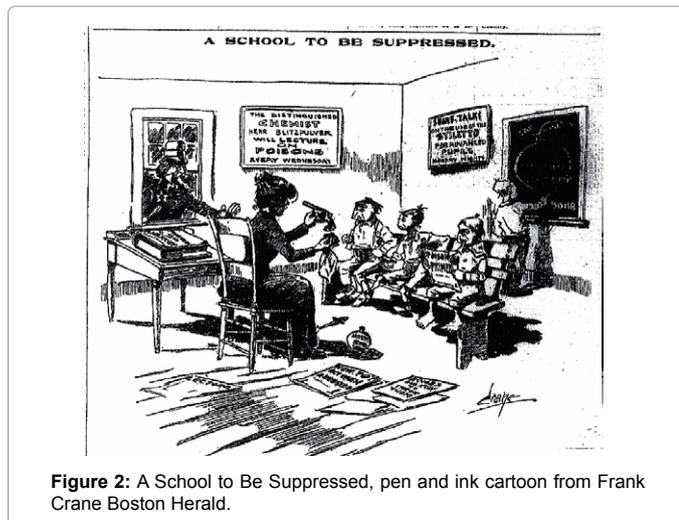


Figure 2: A School to Be Suppressed, pen and ink cartoon from Frank Crane Boston Herald.

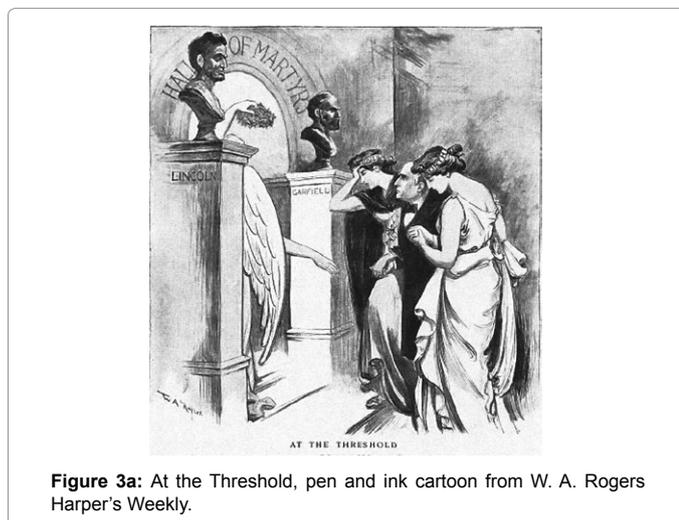


Figure 3a: At the Threshold, pen and ink cartoon from W. A. Rogers Harper's Weekly.

reflects the artist's view on Goldman's anarchistic teachings and suggests that such talk should not be allowed in America. The artist also suggests that Goldman's anarchistic followers are childlike and can be impressed with dangerous ideas in a manner similar to children. Thus, purveyors of such ideologies should be stopped. As the President lingered for eight days, it gave cartoonists plenty of time to point to reasons why he was shot. Once McKinley died, the process of printing grief and succession cartoons began in earnest as the responsibility cartoons had run their course (Figure 2).

The most well-known of the cartoons memorializing McKinley is William Allen Rogers' illustration depicting female representatives of the North and South escorting the late President into the Hall of Martyrs. True to patriotic themes of the 19th century, the escorts are depicted in the likeness of Columbia, the female counterpart to Uncle Sam which was used by cartoonists until she was replaced by Lady Liberty. Between busts of Lincoln and Garfield is one arm and hand of an angel reaching out to welcome McKinley. In the angel's other hand is a crown of thorns with which to coronate the late President. Biblically, the crown of thorns is mentioned by disciples Matthew and John as a painful aspect of the martyrdom of Christ (Figure 3a).

It is significant that the artist included two escorts for McKinley [5]. In 1901, there were fewer than forty years that separated his death

from the American Civil War. Culturally, the North and South were two different entities within the same country. The southern white leadership had manipulated laws, passed to ensure blacks equality after emancipation, to the extent that blacks were still disfranchised second-class citizens in defiance of the spirit of emancipation. That McKinley, in his domestic policies, continued to bind the North and South despite differences in the two cultures, and not favoring one over the other, is why the two Columbias are depicted as equally responsible for presenting McKinley to the Hall. In "McKinley and Us," Eric Rauchway explains:

A year before his Presidential campaign, McKinley leased a house in Georgia, establishing some regional bona fides. In 1896 he did surprisingly well among Georgia voters for a Republican candidate. During his presidency he took federal responsibility for Confederate war graves, wearing a gray badge in his lapel to signify his sympathy for the Confederate South. He unified the country for the Spanish-American War of 1898, in which Northerner and Southerner, white and black, fought together for the United States [4].

By binding the two political entities, he raised the esteem of Republicans in the South, but he did this at the expense of southern blacks, who were allowed to fight in the Spanish-American War, but returned to the U. S. with few civil rights.

Likewise, the artist suggests that McKinley's assassination will make him a martyr as it had Lincoln and Garfield. However, according to Naveh in his book, *Crown of Thorns: Political Martyrdom in America from Abraham Lincoln to Martin Luther King Jr.*, because McKinley had not "experienced any divine revelation" martyrdom would not be forthcoming [6]. He argues that martyrs live a life that transforms humanity in such a way that it gives their existence a "mythical dimension" [6]. However, unlike Abraham Lincoln who ended slavery while preserving the union, McKinley was best known for maintaining the status quo while martyrs leave the status quo behind and die in the process of leading humanity to a new level of existence. Naveh sums up the deaths of both Garfield and McKinley:

Lacking the superhuman and redemptive dimension of their personality, these assassinated presidents could not enter the pantheon of the nation's mythical heroes. Later generations who did not experience the shock of the assassination hardly remembered their names and never viewed them as inspirational martyred figures [6].

A clue to the very reason why McKinley is not martyred is in the cartoon itself. Because McKinley worked to maintain peace between the North and South by tolerating racism, he did not address the civil rights abuses that existed in America. Had he inveighed against white supremacy in the late 19th century, he might have ultimately been respected as a martyr who died for a higher cause.

John F Kennedy was assassinated in November 1963. Unlike the previous assassination of McKinley 62 years earlier, there were some, but very few people alive who would have recalled both of the acts. For many cartoonists, these sudden and violent deaths are taxing to their consciences. It is their job to be critical of public officials, but when they suddenly die, as did Kennedy, they must turn off that part of their brain, and become uncommonly compassionate. The political cartoon dynamic that dictates appropriate behaviors had existed for a century before Kennedy was killed. Matthew C. Morrison researched this dynamic as published in the satirical journal, *Punch*, which was published in Britain, but widely circulated in the U. S. *Punch* was critical of Lincoln during the Civil War, even going so far as to suggest that Lincoln would not get reelected in 1864 [7]. In "The Role of the

Political Cartoonist in Image Making,” Morrison states, “Lincoln’s assassination evoked an apparent change in *Punch’s* feeling for the slain President. The tributes to Lincoln were a type of our country’s outpouring of affection for John F. and Robert F. Kennedy following their tragic deaths a hundred years later” [7]. Professionally, cartoonists must instantly disregard all the unkind cartoons they have drawn about the slain president and focus on his positive attributes. It may sound hypocritical, but it is a necessary aspect of political discourse.

William McKinley lingered for a week after he was shot, thereby, giving satirists that much time to modify the tone of their cartoons. However, with Kennedy, America was largely at peace (America was in an undeclared police action in Vietnam, but it had not escalated to a full-scale war yet), and Kennedy was vibrant and healthy. Therefore, he was fair game in morning editions of newspapers on November 22, the day he was killed. And as Morrison suggests, the event evoked an apparent change in the feelings for the President. The satire of November 21 gave way to the poignancy of November 23 (Figure 3b).

This Bill Mauldin cartoon depicts President Kennedy driving the “Alliance for Progress” truck [8]. The Alliance for Progress was a Kennedy project launched in March of 1961 that ran into problems of corruption throughout Latin America. In this case, Dr. Arturo Illia, who had recently voided his country’s oil contracts, is depicted stealing gasoline from the President of the United States as the president watches. Two days later, the President is killed by an assassin, and the same cartoonist, Bill Mauldin, drew the following tribute (Figure 4).



Figure 3b: Alliance for Progress pen and ink cartoon from Bill Mauldin Chicago Sun Times.



Figure 4: Lincoln Weeping, pen and ink cartoon from Bill Mauldin Chicago Sun Times.

Since President Kennedy was shot at 12:29 PM Central Time, afternoon newspapers scooped early editions on this issue. Cartoonist Bill Mauldin, who worked for the *Chicago Sun Times* in 1963, described the situation that he faced on that Friday afternoon. He said that he had finished his drawings for the weekend and was at a luncheon with friends when he heard that Kennedy had been shot and subsequently died. He got a ride back to the *Sun Times* building where he set out to draw an appropriate cartoon for the afternoon paper. Mauldin states:

I started the drawing at 2:15 and finished at 3:00—the fastest I had ever worked....I almost threw it away because I couldn’t get the hair right. No matter what I did with it, it looked more like Kennedy hair than Lincoln hair....

The *Chicago Sun-Times* engravers did a record job, and so did the press room. Our first edition was on the street at 4:45 P. M., November 22, 1963. The cartoon was on the back page, and later I was told that most Chicago news dealers sold the paper that side up [8].

Since this image was reprinted in many newspapers over the next few days, the fusion of Kennedy with Lincoln began in earnest. It was easy to align the two presidents as both were involved in civil rights and both were assassinated. Purveyors of popular culture list the numerical and other coincidental similarities between the two, but the fact that Mauldin compared Kennedy to Lincoln and melded the images of the presidents by not getting Lincoln’s hair right helped readers identify one with the other in American culture, if not American history [9].

Succession cartoons nearly always follow a similar script. Normally, they depict an American icon showing the way to the new leader. They depict the new president as a responsible man who will guide the nation into the future. There is very little variation in the themes of succession cartoons, but they are a necessary step after the initial grief cartoons in the process of guiding the public through a difficult period. In the following cartoon by Baldy, John Kennedy, supervised by Lady Liberty, is passing a torch labeled “The Eternal Flame” to Lyndon Johnson as if they are in a relay race. This illustration is among the more comforting, yet misrepresentative, of succession cartoons because it depicts the recently deceased president guiding the new president. Throughout American history, presidents have not tutored their possible successors on the fine points of their jobs. In fact, many vice presidents have been at odds with the president because the president is the top official in the Administration while the vice president is the president of the Senate—a legislative position. Otherwise, the vice president is a constant reminder to the president that he is just waiting for the president to die so that he can attain the top position. According to Lyndon Johnson, “The Vice President, is like a raven, hovering around the head of the President, reminding him of his mortality” [10]. Hence, there is often no love lost between the two, and there is certainly no instruction taking place. Additionally, there was a noted rivalry between Lyndon Johnson and John Kennedy’s Attorney General and brother, Robert Kennedy, that rendered Johnson effectively impotent as Vice President [11]. However, once Kennedy was shot, Robert Kennedy was on his own, and ultimately subservient to the new President. The following cartoon by Baldy illustrating the teamwork of John Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson belies the political situation within the administration, but for the citizenry, in a time of sorrow and instability, it is comforting to think the two might have been this cooperative (Figure 5).

Following the assassination of John F. Kennedy many cartoons were published that assigned blame. Typical of responsibility cartoons in November of 1963 is the one from Herbert Block of the *Washington*

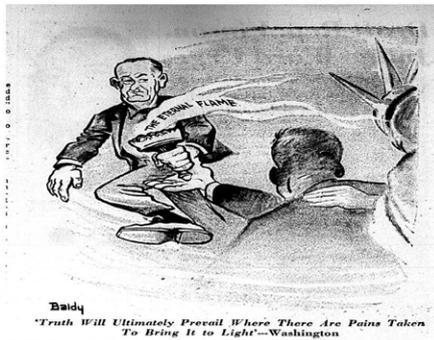


Figure 5: Truth Will Ultimately Prevail Where There Are Pains Taken to Bring it to Light—Washington, pen and ink cartoon from Clifford H. Baldowski (Baldy) Atlanta Constitution.



Figure 6: Sportsmen! Kids! Maniacs!, pen and ink cartoon from Herbert Block Washington Post.

Post. On November 27, 1963, he depicted an advertisement for a rifle, drawn to resemble the Carcano rifle used to shoot the President, which was available to “sportsmen, kids, and maniacs.” It has a “sharpshooter” telescopic sight.” This cartoon suggests that while the gun is for sportsmen, who are likely to use it responsibly, it is also available to kids and maniacs, who are likely to be more reckless with it. While, in 1901, political cartoonists were more concerned with the ideology of Leon Czolgoz, by 1963, the availability of the rifle “and other weapons” is a concern of artists in light of the Kennedy assassination (Figure 6).

In 1901, William McKinley was assassinated with a concealed pistol, but the overwhelming blame was assigned to the assassin’s anarchistic ethos and assumed immigrant status not to his ability to purchase and carry a gun. While Oswald, Kennedy’s killer, confirmed that he was a communist, his political ideology was less of a concern than that rifles with long-range accuracy were available to him and the general public. Throughout the 19th century and into the early 20th century the public mindset was directed more at arming the public than restricting the number of arms, how they are purchased, and who may own them. In the early 19th century, the government took great pains to arm the public so that there would be sufficient defense in case of a foreign attack (as the War of 1812). According to Michael A Bellesiles in *Arming America*:

In 1803 Secretary of War Henry Dearborn conducted the first significant census of the militia and its arms, both privately and publicly owned. Dearborn discovered that 45 percent of the militia bore arms [thus, more than half of soldiers were unarmed]. His census of weapons, which was certainly incomplete indicated that just 4.9 percent of America’s population was armed, or 23.7 percent of its white adult males [12].

Bellesiles argues that because of the dearth of firearms in America and, with exceptions of during the War of 1812 and the American Civil War, there was a government effort throughout the 19th century to better arm Americans. Bellesiles states, “It would appear that at no time prior to 1850 did more than a tenth of the [American] people own guns” [12]. The effort to encourage more Americans to own more arms, both rifles and pistols, even into the early 1900s, was hindered by the fact that because gunsmithing was a time-intensive vocation, the price of guns was out of reach for most Americans. However, by the 1960s, guns were mass-produced and, therefore, no longer cost-prohibitive. Since guns were available to most Americans, there was a movement already in place to restrict who could own guns. Hence, while the Herblock cartoon would not have been credible to skimmers in 1901, by 1963 Americans understood that there were some people who should not own guns.

Herbert Block picked up on the mail-order aspect of Oswald’s weapons acquisition and exploited that aspect of the Kennedy assassination. Lee Harvey Oswald obtained both the Kennedy murder weapon and the handgun he used to kill Officer J. D. Tippit by mail on two separate dates and under an alias. Oswald purchased the Smith & Wesson .38 caliber revolver on January 27, 1963 from Los Angeles. The Mannlicher-Carcano carbine with the four-power scope was sent to Oswald’s post office box in Dallas on March 12, 1963. Both weapons were ordered by Oswald under the name “A. Hidell” [4]. According to the artist:

For years the Washington Post has been running editorials on the witlessness of permitting the easy, indiscriminate, and unlicensed sale of firearms—particularly pistols, which are designed not for shooting game but for shooting people. And it has also urged sharp restriction of the importation and sale of foreign weapons, such as the one purchased by Lee Harvey Oswald....

Let us by all means have it clear on the record that the cost of the gun that killed the 35th President of the United States was all of \$19.95—*with gun sight* (emphasis in the original) [13].

Block states that the inexpensive price in the cartoon elicited doubt among the public and other newspapers that a rifle and sight could be purchased for \$12.78, but a reporter found a credible advertisement for a rifle and sight for a cheaper price, prompting Block to state, “For those who don’t need to be so careful in aim, so selective in target, the friendly shops and mail order businesses offer an ever wider variety, with plenty in supply to put guns and lives into the hands of anyone. And the price is right” [13].

Finally, Oswald was a self-confessed communist, and in 1963 went to Mexico, “apparently plumping for Castro and seeking permission to traverse Cuba on their [he and his wife’s] way back to the U. S. S. R” (McKinley 108). However, unlike the cartoons responding to the assassination of William McKinley, the assassin’s ideology was not a concern of cartoonists. While nihilists and anarchists were despised in the early 20th century, those ethics did not matter as much to political cartoonists in the 1960s. After all, cartoonists had recently finished a battle with Joseph McCarthy over ideology. Likewise, the availability of

firearms to kill the president was not a concern in 1901, but by 1963, it was front and center.

On September 11, 2001, the World Trade Center in New York City and the Pentagon near Washington D. C. were attacked. Mayor Rudolph Giuliani led New Yorkers through more than two weeks of grieving for the dead and caring for those who were hospitalized. After eighteen days, Giuliani appeared on the comedy show, *Saturday Night Live*, and when asked by Lorne Michaels when the show could go back to being funny again, Giuliani answered, "Why start now?" According to former SNL actor Stephen Medwid, "At that moment, you could feel an entire nation exhale. With tears in my eyes, I joined the studio audience in unabashed laughter"[14]. That phenomenon applies to political cartoons as well. There is a reticence among editorial cartoonists to draw humorous cartoons related to the tragic event that had been headlining the news for weeks. There are many variables for cartoonists, editors, and publishers to consider when running a humorous cartoon after a tragedy, but at some point the cartoonists must revert to their primary purpose of producing humorous satire. That point, arbitrarily chosen by humorists at some time around two to three weeks after a tragedy, is consistent with the return to humor after the deaths of three of the four presidents who died in the 20th century.

On September 24, 1901, nearly three weeks after McKinley was shot, Frank Wing published a humorous cartoon. "Enlarge the White House" makes light of Theodore Roosevelt's large estate. It depicts a man, perhaps Uncle Sam, asking a child who he is and where he is going. The child responds that he is President Roosevelt's son and that he is "going over to Auntie Cowles' to sleep. One of us has to go every night, 'cause our house is so small." At the time of his ascent to the presidency, Roosevelt had six children, and while six children may seem like a large family to many in other times of history, in 1900, the average family in the U. S. comprised 4.6 people [15]. Therefore, six children would have been a larger family than most, but it was paltry next to John Tyler's brood of 15.

Unlike other vice presidents who have become presidents, Theodore Roosevelt was well-known to the American public when he ascended to the presidency. Roosevelt did most of the campaigning for the McKinley/Roosevelt ticket in which he logged over 21,000 miles (by rail) and gave 673 speeches in 567 towns in 24 states [7] (Morris 769). Americans also knew him from his writings and exploits with the Rough Riders during the Spanish-American War; they knew his and his family's wealth, and they knew his home, Sagamore Hill, an 18,000 square foot mansion in Oyster Bay, New York. So those Americans who did not know him before the campaign, knew him by November of 1900. He was so well-known that an unidentified McKinley staffer is quoted, "I feel sorry for McKinley. He has a man of destiny behind him" [7]. The White House has 55,000 square feet, of which over 18,000 is used as a residence for the President and his family, so a family of eight is easily accommodated in the structure, and there would be no cause for a child to see Auntie Cowles every night in order to sleep. However, the artist facetiously suggests that the White House is too small for the famously wealthy Roosevelt family (Figure 7).

Likewise, on December 3, 1963, the *Miami Herald* printed a Paul Conrad cartoon depicting the 88th Congress sleeping in the Capitol. One congressman says, "He Would Want, I Think, for Us to Carry On as Before." The artist makes reference to the late President, but the satire is directed more at Congress than Kennedy. This Congress was notorious for sitting on civil rights legislation that the Kennedy Administration had been pushing. It is a risky cartoon to publish within two weeks of the assassination of a head of state, but it was Conrad's signal to the

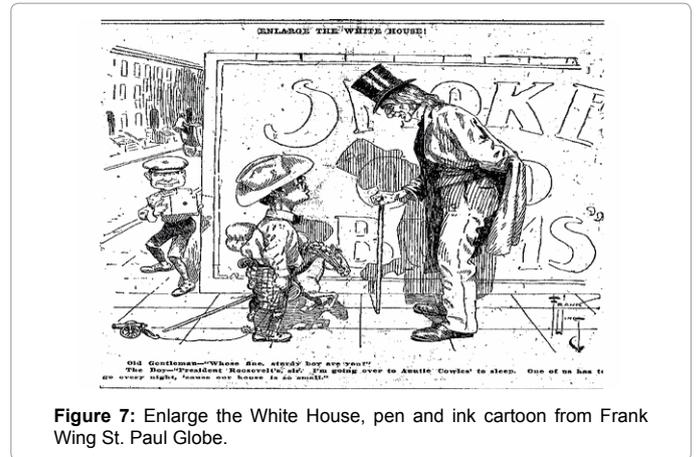


Figure 7: Enlarge the White House, pen and ink cartoon from Frank Wing St. Paul Globe.

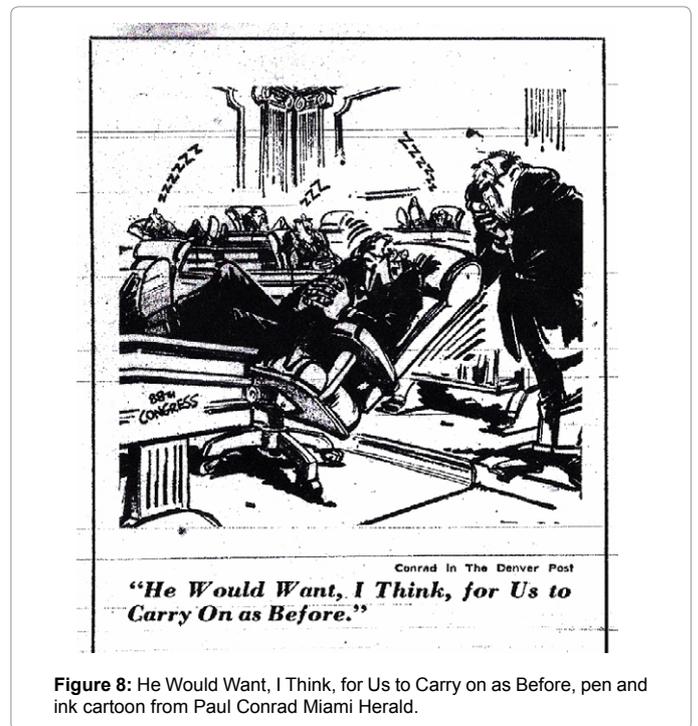


Figure 8: He Would Want, I Think, for Us to Carry On as Before, pen and ink cartoon from Paul Conrad Miami Herald.

American public that it was okay to laugh again. This cartoon ran in Miami, but there is little chance that editors in Boston, where Kennedy called home, Washington D. C., the seat of government, or in Dallas, where Kennedy was shot, would have printed this. In this case, physical distance made this cartoon publishable in certain areas while it would have been deemed in poor taste to print in other newspapers (Figure 8).

Harding and Roosevelt Deaths

Warren Harding died in San Francisco on August 2, 1923 of some type of heart failure. He had been ill through the last half of July, but doctors were confident that he would recover completely and be able to return to Washington in August. Franklin Roosevelt died on April 12, 1945 while visiting Warm Springs, Georgia. Some Americans knew that he had polio and was confined to a wheelchair most of the time, but his death caught most Americans by surprise because he had been a vivacious president for over twelve years and was commanding a military force that was defeating the Axis Nations in World War II.

Most historians would argue that there is little to compare between Harding and Roosevelt. They were from opposing parties. Harding presided for 881 days while Roosevelt held office for 4,422 days. Roosevelt is assessed by historians and political scientists as one of the best U. S. Presidents ever while Harding is among the worst. Roosevelt ran a tight ship through the Great Depression and World War II while Harding filled his administration with miscreants. However, Harding and Roosevelt are comparable because they were the only two sitting U. S. presidents who died of natural causes during the twentieth century, and there were similarities in the memorial cartoons that were drawn on their behalf.

Two examples of memorial cartoons illustrate the similarities in cartoons between that of Harding's and Roosevelt's deaths. The first one is a tribute to Harding. It depicts Uncle Sam in mourning while in the background there is a wreath on a door and Harding's dog, Laddie-Boy, a celebrity in his own right and well-known to the nation in the early 1920s, is pressed against the door. The second cartoon depicts Uncle Sam at a simple gravesite for "F. D. R." The title, "Even as GI Joe," suggests that Roosevelt was one of the troops fighting for American freedom. This illustration depicts a simple gravesite and, figuratively, places him closer to the fates of the millions of nearly anonymous Allied soldiers who died in battle throughout Europe, Africa, and the Pacific (Figures 9 and 10).

According to Paul B. Sheatsley and Jacob J Feldman, in "The Assassination of President Kennedy: A Preliminary Report on Public

Reactions and Behavior."

There is very little doubt that the demise of President Roosevelt brought forth reactions of nearly the breadth and intensity as those brought forth by the Kennedy assassination. This is hardly surprising because Roosevelt was indeed a heroic figure for much of the public. What really jolts the situation into perspective, though, is the evidence of rather extravagant displays of grief attendant on the death of President Harding, a man of far less heroic stature [3].

These "extravagant displays of grief" are depicted in the cartoons of the day as well. J. N. (Ding) Darling drew several cartoons for the *Des Moines Register* showing a grieving populace as the president's body was transported by rail from San Francisco to Washington D. C. Many other major newspapers followed suit.

The editorial cartoons characterizing grief for the death of Franklin Roosevelt were much less numerous. Most newspapers ran no cartoons at all on the first few days after his death, using that space for photographs and stories about the late President. Due to exigencies of war, there was a shortage of paper, and choices of what would run and what would not were difficult, and often, editorial cartoons were left out of the newspaper. When they finally did run memorial cartoons, there were fewer of them. It was not that FDR was less revered than Harding, and in fact, the opposite is true. Roosevelt, who was elected to four terms as President presided over the years of the Great Depression and most of World War II. And, according to the Schlesinger Polls of 1948 and 1962, experts picked FDR as the third greatest President [16]. Since Roosevelt died in April of 1945, the U. S. was still at war against the Axis Powers, so American newspapers had bigger issues to deal with, even the death of the President. The focus of newspapers and cartoonists was to continue to cover the war and continue to depict Allies as heroic liberators in Europe and Asia, and depict the Germans and Japanese as evil war-mongers. That is what editors decided best served the American public at that time.

The following cartoon, drawn by Ding Darling, and published in the *Des Moines Register* on August 8, 1923, depicts the ghost of Warren Harding assisting Calvin Coolidge writing history. Although Harding's mouth is not open, indicating that he is the speaker, the skimmer assumes that Harding tells Coolidge, "Good bye and good luck." Unlike the cartoon showing Kennedy handing Johnson "The Eternal Flame" upon Kennedy's passing, Harding did not consider Coolidge a raven hovering around his head reminding him of his mortality. Harding at least included his Vice President in administrative matters. According to Arthur Schlesinger Jr., "Harding was the first President to make his Vice President, Calvin Coolidge, a regular at cabinet meetings" [10]. Hence, "Goodbye and Good Luck" is representative of the Harding administration to a greater extent than most. More representative of succession cartoons are those that depict Uncle Sam, a symbol of the American public, aiding the new President in his duties. As with "Man of Destiny," the Doyle cartoon below, very often, succession cartoons include ekphrasis from the Bible, Shakespeare, or a previous statesman to lend gravity to the illustration (Figures 11 and 12).

The third stage of memorial cartoons is the attempt by cartoonists to assign blame for the presidents' deaths. This is logical for the two presidents who were assassinated. However, it is also true for the deaths of Harding and Roosevelt. If the purpose of the media is to make meaning of a historic event, then that is the objective of the August 4, 1923 Ding Darling cartoon. While the American presidency comes with a substantial salary and tremendous prestige, it also has its pitfalls that are exemplified in this cartoon. No one should be surprised that



Figure 9: Uncle Sam Mourning, cartoon from J. N. (Ding) Darling Des Moines Register.



Figure 10: Even as GI Joe, cartoon from Anonymous Tampa Daily Times.

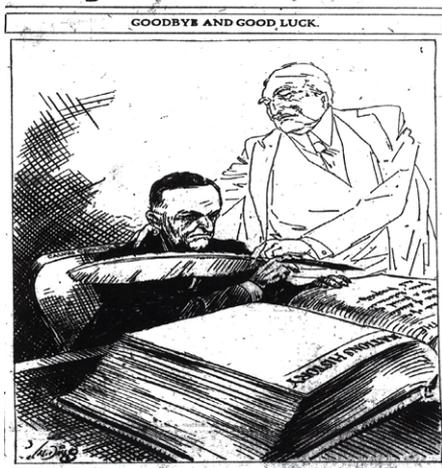


Figure 11: "Goodbye and Good Luck, cartoon from J. N. Ding Darling Des Moines Register.



Figure 12: Man of Destiny, cartoon from Jerry Doyle St. Petersburg Times.

these stressors could compromise the health of a president (Figure 13).

The Real Assassins" depicts a stern Uncle Sam watching men crawl away from the White House into a desert landscape. The men are labeled "Political malice," "Public selfishness," "Malicious criticism," "Jealousy," "Abuse," "Thoughtless demands," "Lies," "Office greed," "Fickle public," and "Skulking critic." Newspaper accounts from 1923 say that Harding died of apoplexy, a stress-related affliction, so Darling drew a cartoon assigning blame for the President's stress. In this way, the artist suggests that President Harding was killed by all of these malefactors, and that they are now slinking away from Washington D. C. In their essay on stress and leadership, Robert S Robins and Robert M Dorn, characterize Harding:

Though surrounded by thieves--whom he felt he could not refuse because of their past support of him—he himself was always honest.

Though successful and well-liked, Harding was psychologically frail... His reaction to stressors continued to be withdrawal. Even as the scandals mounted, Harding showed only the slightest signs of facing the problem [11].

This cartoon reflects the effect that presiding over the most powerful

country in the world has on those who are elected to do so. It can result in succumbing to the stress of the position. Based on the analysis by Robins and Dorn, the pressures enumerated by Darling, in the cartoon, probably pushed Harding over the edge. "The Real Assassins" is an overt responsibility cartoon while the following cartoon, "War Widow," is a bit more subtle (Figure 14).

"War Widow," by Burch, was published in the *Atlanta Constitution* on April 16, 1945. It depicts Lady Liberty looking affectionately at a portrait of Franklin Roosevelt in a helmet with five stars. The caption at the bottom of the cartoon merely says, "War Widow," suggesting that FDR was a victim of World War II, like thousands of other American soldiers. According to Robins and Dorn in "Stress and Political Leadership," Franklin Roosevelt was a "happy warrior" in that he sought "conditions that normally create stress" and he found them in politics. (Robins 7) Since FDR died in his fourth term, he triumphed in four elections. He spent his first two terms defeating the Great Depression and the third one defeating the Axis in World War II. That the artist depicts him as a victim of the battles that he so happily engaged suggests that even after winning so many political battles, he succumbed to the very conditions that brought him happiness. Again, the artist attaches meaning to the death of Roosevelt by suggesting that, as with soldiers in the field, he was another victim of World War II.

When Franklin Roosevelt died in office the cartoons went through the grief and succession stages, but the return to humor was slow. Journalist Ernie Pyle was killed in action shortly after Roosevelt died, and the public dealt with the deaths of loved ones on a daily basis. There were no cartoons satirizing Truman and his penchant for indelicate



Figure 13: The Real Assassins, cartoon by J. N. Ding Darling Des Moines Register.



Figure 14: War Widow, cartoon by Burch Atlanta Constitution.

verbiage or his background as a haberdasher. He was the commander-in-chief of the U. S. Armed Forces, and any satire was at the expense of the Germans and Japanese. In addition, there were sedition laws that cartoonists and editors were hesitant to test. Less than twenty years earlier several cartoonists had been either prosecuted or the publications for which they drew were put out of business by the federal government for violating the Espionage Act of 1917. During World War I, socialist periodical, *The Masses* was put out of business by the U. S. Postal Service because its content was deemed subversive. Artists such as Art Young were prosecuted, and others lost their jobs for producing cartoons that were critical of U. S. involvement in World War I. In *Drawn to Extremes*, Chris Lamb states, "World War I had turned the 'golden age of cartooning' into the 'dark age of cartooning' as cartoonists replaced social activism with nationalism and jingoism." Even if a cartoonist were to have drawn a humorous cartoon that would have made light of Truman's peculiarities, it is likely that an editor would have nixed the project for fear of offending censors.

However, with the Harding death, there was a clear return to humor at the expense of the new President. Morris's "Nary a Word," which ran in the *Los Angeles Times* during the third week after Harding's death on August 22, 1923, comments on Coolidge's renowned taciturn public demeanor. The cartoonist depicts Coolidge as a sphinx, a mysterious or enigmatic person, suggesting that those in politics will have a difficult time understanding him or predicting what he will do. This one is typical of the cartoons that caricature Coolidge in that nearly all such caricatures depict him with his mouth closed—even when he is talking (Figure 15).

There is evidence that in the immediate aftermath of tragic events an underground humor arises. In his essay, "A Model for Collecting WTC Jokes," Folklorist Bill Ellis says about jokes that are created during times of tragedies that they are "a way of expressing 'a terrain of terrifying candor concerning the most extreme situations.' A function of disaster joking is the desire to 'speak the last word' about essentially unspeakable events" [17]. These jokes will not be universally accepted. And Ellis points out that when such jokes circulate:

The jokes will be strongly resisted by cultural custodians, particularly teachers, who will respond to them with 'indignation and dismay.' They will be widely mentioned in media editorials, usually as an indication of a 'sick' state of mind [17].

In journalism, editors are the cultural custodians that determine when it is appropriate to return to humor. While most cartoonists regard humor as their bread and butter, editors mediate the return to



Figure 15: Nary a Word, cartoon by Morris Los Angeles Times.

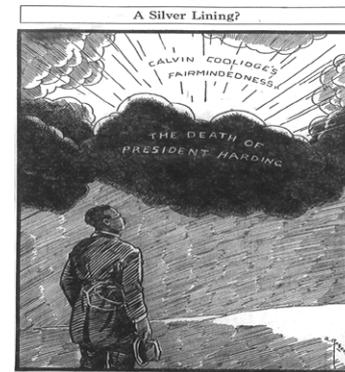


Figure 16: A Silver Lining? Cartoon by Leslie Rogers Chicago Defender.

humor with their choices of when to or whether to run a cartoon. It is best not to offend readers and advertisers by jumping the gun and introducing humor into a sensitive subject while nerves are still raw.

A Harding and Kennedy Comparison

The *Chicago Defender*, in its campaign to advance civil rights in the U. S., found no friend in the Harding Administration, and thus, was not dismayed at his passing. The cartoons in the *Defender* following his and Kennedy's deaths were significantly different in comparison to the way mainstream newspapers treated the deaths. Like the mainstream newspapers, the *Defender* attempted to predict what Coolidge would do when he entered the White House. There was hope that as a New Englander, he would install a cabinet that was sympathetic with the civil rights agenda of the black community, and like the mainstream journalists, the *Defender* journalists could not predict what Coolidge would do either (Figure 16).

During the Jim Crow era black newspapers did not treat tragedies in the same way as their mainstream counterparts. The cartoonists of the time were also divergent in their treatment of the deaths of presidents. Since both houses of Congress were "lily white" at the time, there was no reason for blacks to commiserate with whites. It was merely an opportunity for change, and in black newspapers, they celebrated any possible positive change. In 1923, black leaders felt that things could not get worse, and change could only be for the better. This situation led to a more pragmatic approach by the black cartoonist, Leslie Rogers, and published in the *Chicago Defender*. The *Defender* published Rogers's cartoon depicting Harding's administration as a black cloud over African-Americans and anticipated that Coolidge would be the silver lining around the cloud that advances civil rights. It took only two weeks for the black newspaper to publish its verdict on the ascension of Coolidge (Figure 17).

On August 25, 1923, the *Chicago Defender* published the answer to the question raised in the cartoon of August 8. Is Calvin Coolidge the silver lining to the black cloud of President Harding? The cartoon by Rogers depicts President Coolidge introducing C. Bascom Slemple as the secretary to the president (chief of staff), and later appointing Clarence Sherrill as his military aide a move away from betterment of the political situation for African-Americans. In his essay, "Calvin Coolidge's Afro-American Connection," Maceo Crenshaw Dailey Jr. states [18].

While the appointments of Slemple and Sherrill counted as excellent political strategy for gaining white southern support, they were



Figure 17: Meet My Secretary, cartoon by Leslie Rogers Chicago Defender.

decisions anathema to many blacks who viewed the two men as little more than segregationists and members of the “Lily White” faction. That faction had emerged in the South in the 1890s on the basis of a political program excluding Afro-Americans from participating and exercising influence in Republican Party conventions on the local, state, and national levels [18].

Black newspapers did not follow the lead of mainstream newspapers in mourning the loss of a president, they concerned themselves with political survival at a time when that survival was in jeopardy, and the cartoonist depicted their situation without pretending to ruefulness when pity was not in order.

The *Chicago Defender* did not memorialize the death of Roosevelt in its cartoons in 1945. By then, there had been positive steps taken toward integration and the social betterment of blacks. By 1945, blacks had made the switch from voting mainly for Republicans to voting mainly for Democrats, largely because of the efforts of the Roosevelt administrations. While they did not memorialize Roosevelt in cartoons, they published articles in praise of him and his administrations.

By the time Kennedy was assassinated in 1963, Truman had integrated the armed forces, Jackie Robinson had integrated professional sports, and the Supreme Court had ordered the integration of all public schools. Kennedy had inveighed for national equality of blacks, but southern legislators had blocked all efforts to pass laws that supported the Supreme Court’s decision, so his death was treated differently than Harding’s. On November 23, 1963, the *Chicago Defender* published a Eugene cartoon that depicts the spirits of Abraham Lincoln and John Kennedy. As a black man walks down the “Freedom Road,” he says, “Goodbye, dear friend.” This cartoon suggests that the sentiments of blacks had largely continued to support Democrats (at least support for this Democrat) during the forty years from 1923 to 1963. This cartoonist evokes the image of Lincoln to tap into the sentiments of the reading public. Barry Schwartz describes this type of cartoon, “They are studies of people in communion with their past, drawing upon the vital symbols of the nation’s traditions, locating themselves in time, identifying themselves with something capable of giving meaning to their lives” [9]. In contrast to the death of Harding, the death of Kennedy may have been perceived as the death knell of civil rights. In times of crisis, it is essential that cartoonists use these symbols to comfort a reading public that may be grieving the loss of a symbol of progress for their cause (Figure 18).

As integration progressed, the *Defender* followed more mainstream norms in its editorial cartoon depictions in 1963 than it had forty years earlier. In addition, the artist incorporated traditional depictions that were a part of the readership’s collective memory. The definition of “collective memory” that Barry Schwartz and Howard Schuman use is apt in this situation. They state, “collective memory...: what individuals believe about the past and relate these beliefs to traditional methods of representing it.” In this case, Winslow represents Lincoln, the great emancipator, with Kennedy, a civil rights endorser, as they bid farewell to the black man who is still on the road to freedom. Unlike Warren Harding and Calvin Coolidge, depictions of Lincoln and Kennedy are positive images in the collective memories of blacks and civil rights proponents.

Conclusion

Political cartoons reflect the priorities of society at the time of an event. Because they are published contemporaneously to an event they show the emotion and raw energy that is spawned by, in these cases, the deaths of presidents. They also reflect trends in social behaviors. As ideology was blamed for the assassination of McKinley and gun control was ignored, lack of gun control was blamed for the assassination of Kennedy, and ideology was largely ignored.

W. T. Mitchell has theorized that everything is related to everything else in the world in some way or another. That said, if a cartoonist makes an obscure connection, that does not mean that the skimmers will understand it. When cartoonists draw memorial cartoons, it is much more important that skimmers understand the artist’s intent so that skimmers do not believe that the cartoonist is accidentally making fun. Therefore, there is a limited range of analogies that cartoonists can make without seeming too cavalier about a tragic situation. The symbols and pictorial representations in the cartoons must be clear, patriotic, and somber. When a sitting president dies, either naturally, by assassination, or accident, there is no room for mirthful portrayals or for even the appearance of mirth.

Note that this rule applies to sitting presidents. The most common mirthful tool to satirize the deaths of celebrities, including former presidents, is the pearly gates analogy. Borne of the Book of Revelation in the Bible, it is the entrance to heaven. The scripture reads, “The twelve gates were twelve pearls: each individual gate was of one pearl. And the street of the city was pure gold, like transparent glass” (Revelation 21: 21 KJV). Cartoonists have taken the liberty of depicting these gates as a single gate in the clouds guarded by St. Peter. It is where the deceased are admitted to heaven. It is in this depiction that former sitting presidents who have lived a full life and died of natural causes



Figure 18: Good-bye, Dear Friend, cartoon by Eugene Winslow Chicago Defender.

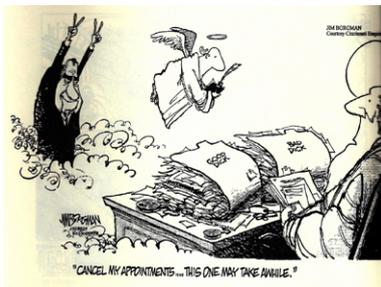


Figure 19: Cancel My Appointments....This One May Take Awhile, cartoon by Jim Borgman in the Cincinnati Enquirer 1994.

may be satirized. Of course, in order for a cartoonist to depict a former president in this way, the statesman's terms must be well-behind him. In order for the cartoon to work, the former president must be depicted humorously atoning for a faux pas that was a part of his past. While the cartoonist is making fun of the former president, s/he is, at the same time conceding that the former president has, indeed, merited a trip to heaven. That is often a great consolation from some of the cartoonists who, years earlier, were putting the chief of state through Hell.

Among the pearly gates analogies used by cartoonists to depict former presidents, is this cartoon by Jim Borgman following the death of Richard Nixon on April 22, 1994. In it, Borgman depicts Nixon approaching St. Peter flashing his infamous victory sign. St. Peter, with two bulging files in front of him labeled "Good Dick" and "Bad Dick" tells his angel assistant, "Cancel my appointments....This one may take awhile." While the pearly gates are not represented, the location is clear. Skimmers who viewed this cartoon in 1994 would have remembered that Nixon, the statesman who ended the Vietnam War and opened relations between the U. S. and China also resigned under the threat of impeachment for his apparent role in the Watergate Scandal. It is clear that while this cartoon was appropriate twenty years after Nixon's resignation, one can ascertain that from the way Warren Harding's death was treated in 1923, had Nixon died while in office, this cartoon would never have seen the light of publication (Figure 19).

Political cartoons following the natural deaths of presidents hinge not on the popularity of the late president, but on the circumstances surrounding the death. Based on the studies in this essay, one could conclude that the next time an American president dies there will be a period of mournful cartoons, the new president will be treated as an honorable leader, and some cartoonists will lay the responsibility of the death on some entity. Eventually, after a respectable amount of time, somewhere around three weeks, there will be a cautious return to humor. In all cases, cartoonists will use traditional symbols and patriotic representations to comfort grieving skimmers and make meaning of the crisis situation.

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