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Political Cartooning in the Age of Reagan

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Boston Globe

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DAN WASSERMAN

*Political Cartooning in the Age of Reagan**

I am very happy to be here. I bring greetings from the state of Massachusetts. I'm here on a brief furlough. I would like to talk informally, using some of my cartoons, about what a political cartoonist does. People ask me questions frequently about how I get my ideas, what goes into making up a political cartoon. They ask as though it were a little bit magical. I think that might be right because a lot of the time I don't understand exactly how it works. I never know going in with an idea or a drawing exactly how it's going to evolve. So I'd like to talk to you about what I *do* know about it, and maybe demystify it somewhat.

I'd like to show some work that I've done, most of it from the last year and a lot of it from the 1988 election campaign. It seems only appropriate to open with the Pledge of Allegiance, given the outcome of the campaign, so here's my version of it, as recited by George Bush.



**This talk was delivered at Sacred Heart University on November 15, 1988 as part of a lecture series dedicated to the memory of Daniel Friedman Gottlieb and Max Dickstein.*

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I started political cartooning in 1980 in the Reagan-Carter campaign. I had been doing it before then, but not full-time. Ronald Reagan and I have sort of grown up together, and he's been terrific for me. He's political in the sense that he has a point of view: he's not some kind of vague, mushy character, and he's given to all sorts of verbal and political mishaps. He always strikes me as seriously befuddled, and apparently it's not just me. The books that have come out about him from his own people since they've left the White House almost to a book have described what they euphemistically refer to as a "detached management style." You imagine the President with his face down in the soup in the middle of a Cabinet meeting.



He's going to be a tremendous loss. It's interesting, because as a cartoonist, drawing somebody like Reagan over and over again, they come to be like characters in an ongoing cartoon strip. They become familiar. Even in opposition, even in criticism of their policies, one comes to see them as characters that walk through a kind of landscape that you as a cartoonist are responsible for creating four or five times a week.

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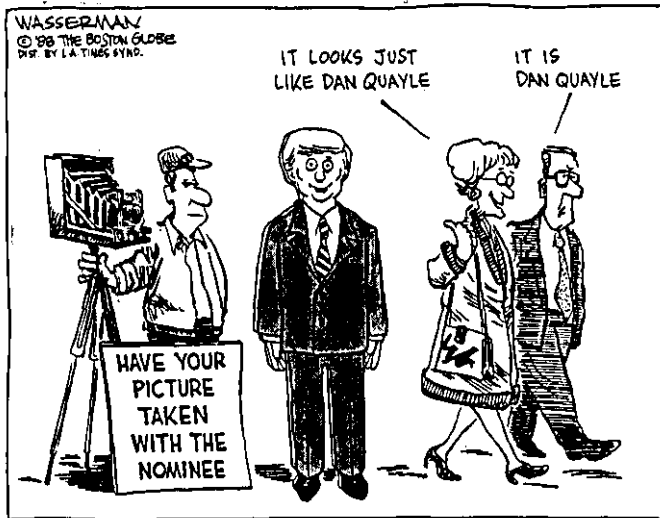
George Bush is going to make us work a little harder than Reagan did. First, there's a technical problem: his eyes are so close together, you see, that if you actually draw all the frames of the glasses it gets all confused. I just leave part of the glasses off—he's got space goggles on in my current version. These guys change, too, over time. There's actually a sort of cartoonist's convention. Cartoonists look at each other's work, and influence each other. You'll see that the Reagan caricatures at the end of the Reagan term are much more homogeneous than they were at the beginning.

George Bush has got himself what I call the "read my lips" problem from a number of points of view. First he's got himself totally dug in on this "no new taxes" thing. The stock and currency markets are in terror of this guy: what is he going to do about the deficit? He's said "read my lips," and they know that it's going to take him at least three or four weeks to take that back, and they are worried about what's going to happen in the interim. The other problem he has is I can't think of a guy who has a more unfortunate slogan than "Read my lips." Read my nose, read my ears — his nose and ears are pretty normal. Given his physiognomy, "Read my lips" is not one that I would have picked.

I'm going to shift now from the subject of caricature to the desire of cartoonists to find a strong visual image, preferably early in the day, and execute it without spilling ink all across it by deadline time. The idea is to find something that is going to stick in people's minds, that's going to create an image, in a graphic way, an idea that is difficult to dislodge. I've selected a couple of cartoons that I thought worked and were images that distilled an idea that felt right to me and that other people seemed to appreciate.

Our Vice-President-elect, Dan Quayle. This was after the debate with Bentsen. It's rare that someone in person over 90 minutes so confirms a stereotyped picture that they've had slapped on them, but this was truly amazing. That was two-dimensional Dan.

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On a more serious subject, this was a cartoon I did recently after the whales were trapped in the Alaskan ice.



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I was watching night after night, all that money, all that equipment, Reagan's calling the whales on the phone. I'm thinking, what's going on here? There are probably a half dozen people freezing to death either right at that moment or within the next two months in Anchorage, close by, and this just seemed to me wacky in two ways: wacky in the sort of prominence it was given by governments, and also by the media. The media created this. It was the whale equivalent of the girl in the well story from last year, and it pulls at our heart-strings, but really doesn't tell us a whole lot. I'm glad the whales got out: I have nothing against whales. But it just seemed to me a twisting of priorities and attention and empathy.

This is a cartoon I did last year during the wave of Ollie-mania.

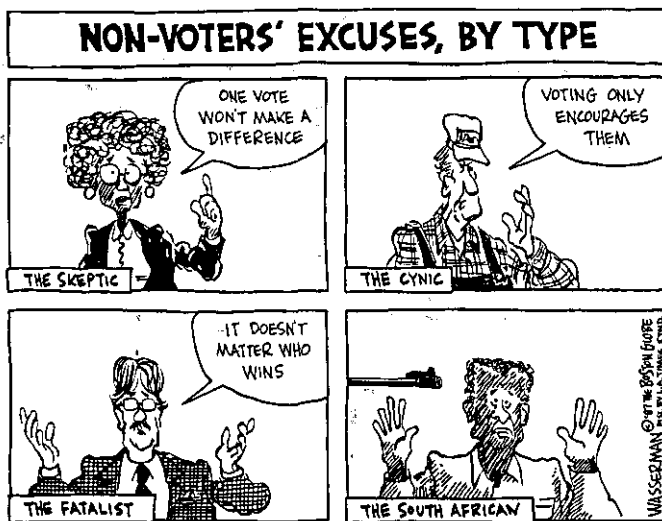


His celebrity status seemed to me totally out of whack with what he was actually responsible for and the programs that he directed. So this is my effort at some kind of corrective. I don't do this often, but this just seemed tailor-made: I clipped the first paragraph out of a story in the *New York Times* and slapped it on his chest as a medal. In the committee proceedings, the context seemed to be missing, so this was an effort to point that out.

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In addition to finding something that's cohesive graphically, cartoonists — if they're good — try to express a point of view. People sometimes ask me, "Are you fair?" I hope not, because a lot of times what people mean by fair is presenting all points of view. I'm not a journalist, I'm not a reporter, and I make no claims to objectivity. Quite the opposite, my job is to provoke people, to state an opinion, and to stimulate debate, and that means I don't give equal time. If I disagree with somebody I'm going to be on their case. If I agree with somebody they usually don't show up. You can't really do a positive cartoon: it's a negative art form.

Something that's very common in cartooning is to take two worlds and juxtapose them, fit them together and make people stop because it doesn't fit — on the surface it doesn't fit. Hopefully if people think about it for a minute maybe it comes together. Here's one example:

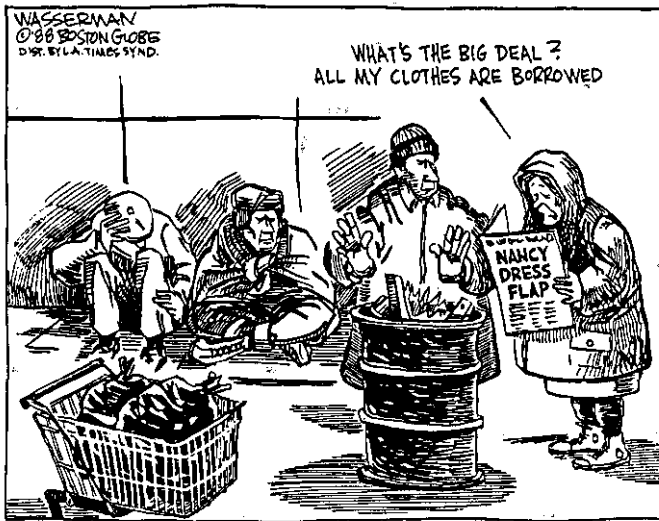


I'm not unsympathetic to the reasons that people don't vote. Particularly this election it seems to me pretty dispiriting, and you feel as though voting only encourages them. But on the other hand it's important that people realize that there are a lot of places where people die to win the right to exercise it.

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I don't do a lot of Nancy Reagan cartoons. My feeling is, she's probably not there by choice. I'm sure she's really happy to be there, but I'm not sure. Ron asked her if she wanted to run, and there's a kind of ganging up on political wives, or political husbands in the Zaccaro case, that I think is pretty easy and not necessarily to the point. But there are occasions when things happen around first spouses, if that's a term, that are sufficiently in the news, and raise issues that are useable. So without going after Nancy directly, I drew this cartoon on the clothed and the unclothed.

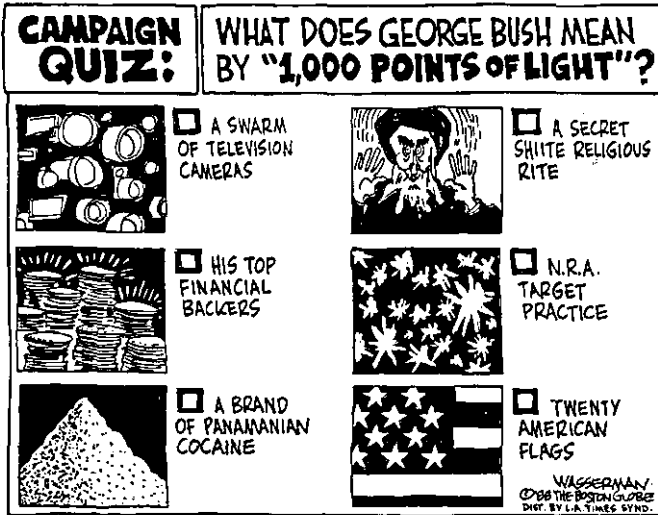


Humor is used in different ways in cartooning, but the thing I think it's most important for is it opens people up. If people can laugh, if they find something unexpected, it creates a little window of opportunity to consider a different point of view. I don't think a cartoon changes people's minds, but it can briefly stop them from slipping into a groove, enough to entertain an opposing perspective. So that's really the purpose of the humor. Sometimes you just want to give the readers a break. You know, you're coming down heavy with pictures of South African jails and homeless people, and sometimes people over breakfast like to see something that's just whimsical. So you use what you can to accomplish both purposes:

one is to not be predictable, not be heavy-handed, and the other is to kind of pry open people's minds and catch their attention.

I have to tell you, before I show you this next cartoon: I try to be pretty responsible about what I do. I do research: I do photo research. In newspapers they call the old articles "clips." I go to the library, I look stuff up. The facts I distort are correct to begin with. In the first debate George Bush is talking about a "thousand points of light," and Dukakis goes, "What? What is he talking about?" And I was curious what he was talking about. I sort of had an inkling but I wasn't sure, so I called the Bush campaign headquarters. I said, "I'd like to speak to somebody about the thousand points of light," and I got bounced from one person to another person. Finally somebody said, "They'll call you back." An hour later a guy calls me back from the press office and I said, "Can you tell me exactly what the Vice-President was talking about last night when he said a thousand points of light." "Well," the guy says, "did you hear his speech in New Orleans?" I said "Yes." He said, "Well then you know what he was talking about." I said, "The phrase doesn't stick in my mind. Maybe you could refresh my memory." He says, "You know that Dukakis wants a heavy federal bureaucracy, bothering people with lots of regulations, and a kind of smothering effect with government doing everything for everybody." I said, "I know that's the Vice-President's opinion. I'm not sure it's true." He said, "Well, a thousand points of light is the volunteer organizations all across America that are helping out voluntarily without the heavy hand of the federal bureaucracy." I said, "OK, so is this a phrase of George Bush's?" He said, "This is the opposite of the Dukakis heavy federal hand getting into everybody's lives and telling them what to do." I said, "I think I understand the distinction here. Where is the quote from?" And he said, "Well, the quote is from the idea that on the one hand you have a blinding spotlight coming out of Washington, and on the other hand throughout the nation you have these thousand points of light." I asked, "Did George Bush make this up?" and the guy says, "No, his speechwriter did." I said, "Thank you very much."

Armed with those facts, I then communicated them immediately to the readership of the *Boston Globe*.



The campaign was useful to the cartoonist as a comic and difficult as a commentator. The issues that were discussed were so trivial, so banal, that it left me wishing for the 1980 Ronald Reagan campaign, because even though I disagreed with 95% of what he said, he said something: he came out and he said, look, I'm for lower taxes, getting the government off people's backs, higher defense spending, the road to growth is x, y, and z, and you could argue with him, instead of all this kind of flag-waving, with no content.

Dukakis may have had a few good ideas, but couldn't find a way of getting them across until it was too late. The primaries of course were indicative of what kind of campaign we were in for, with people adjusting their political personae from week to week depending on what their pollsters told them. This was democracy by demographics.

This is Dick Gephardt:



There was a scare for the Dukakis people: they were very well organized, very well financed, but they were worried about the kind of enthusiasm and energy in the Jackson campaign. Especially toward the end, they weren't sure about New York, so the word came in that the Duke had to jazz up his act some because they were worried he was getting eclipsed. This is my vision of that attempted transformation.



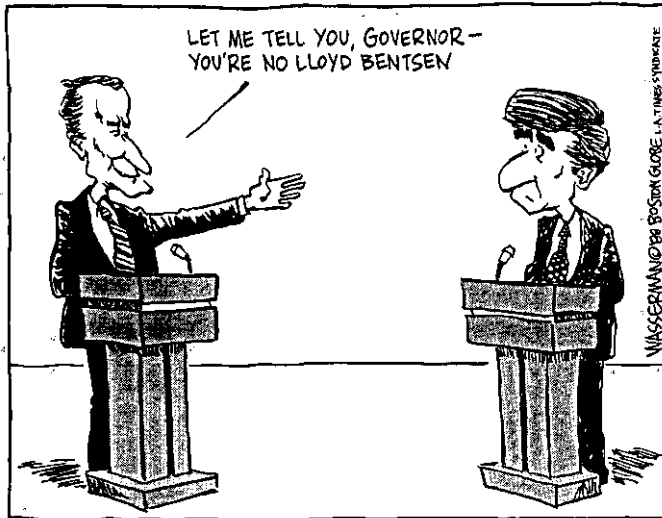
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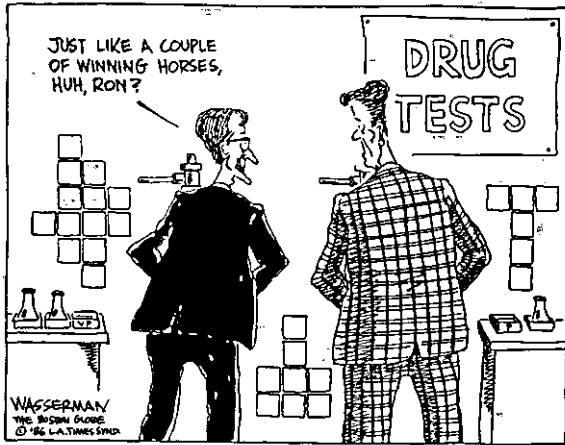
Once the primaries were over we got it down to Mike and George, and as soon as Dukakis started to plummet after the Republican Convention he got into a hole that he never dug out of, and it was an amazing transformation politically of Bush from wimp to winner — there was sort of a wimp transplant that took place. Dukakis is 17 points up and just got pasted. This was my cartoon previewing debate #1:



He technically won that debate. Mondale won the first debate too; so you could sort of see what was in the offing. Then we had the Vice-Presidential debate with Bentsen and Quayle, and then came debate #2, which everybody agreed was Dukakis' big chance to present himself to the nation, a huge audience. This is my summary of the outcome.



I want to close out the presentation part just talking a little bit about cartoonists as employees. Cartoonists have to deal with the fact that they work for major newspapers, which are businesses run by publishers and boards of directors, and there are limits that are imposed. I happen to be very fortunate in that I work for a newspaper that allows a lot of editorial freedom to its columnists and its cartoonists. The ground rules are fairly broad, but there are times when cartoonists run into problems with editors and publishers over curious kinds of things. Some of them are predictable — questions of taste, questions of religion — and some of them are unpredictable, so I brought some unexpurgated cartoons here, some of which appeared in the paper, some which did not. I drew this cartoon when Reagan and Bush started their big drug testing program and announced that they would show the way to the federal employees.



The newspaper's phones rang off the hook. My editor stood behind me. He said: Listen, they're the ones that are making a big deal out of this. They're announcing it to the whole world. These guys are making fools of themselves. The publisher thought it was unseemly in a family newspaper.

The next cartoon is a religious cartoon prompted by the controversy over the movie *The Last Temptation of Christ*.



Cardinal Law of Boston told people that he didn't see how anyone who was a member of the faith could go and see this movie, and he said this without having seen it himself, so I made a comment on this. No cartoon that I've done in my entire career has received as much hostile reaction as this cartoon.

Some people believe that certain religious figures should just not be made fun of. They take it as a slap at the faith. I spent a week on the phone with irate readers asking me to explain this, and I'd say: I'm making a commentary on the fact that the Cardinal was advising people about something that he had not seen. To the callers, that didn't seem like a legitimate topic for satire.

This is a banned in Boston cartoon.



The first time I submitted this cartoon they said these are just rumors about Gary Hart, none of it's been proven, this is a smear. I said, OK. I bought the reasoning. Two weeks later, the *Miami Herald* ran the big exposé on Hart. I came back and resubmitted the drawing. They said "No." I said, "What do you mean? There's no denying this." And they said, "Yeah, but we can't run it." I said, "You told me we couldn't run it because it was a smear on Gary Hart. If it's true, how can it be a smear? They explained they weren't going to run it because it was a smear on JFK and FDR.

That's the story of my cartooning, and I'm open to any and all questions.

Do you ever get calls from any of these guys?

Local politicians call. The guys in Washington are sort of hardened, and they want to pretend that they don't care. They'll call if you mis-spell their name, but they will pretend not to be affected. Local politicians get very irate, and they will call themselves or have people on their staffs call just to say this is an awful cartoon and you misinterpreted, and so on. You get a lot more response on the local level.

Do you have any books, hats, caps, mugs, T-shirts?

I have a book. I even have a copy here. It's called *We've Been Framed*, and it's cartoons from the first seven years of the Reagan Administration. It's got cartoons in the back on Massachusetts, featuring a lot of Mike Dukakis cartoons, so it's going to be a collector's item. It's published by Faber and Faber, so harass your local bookseller.

I'm curious to know when you decided to become a cartoonist. How old were you?

Well, I've always had this fantasy about being a cartoonist. Since I was a kid, I used to sort of soak up comic books and political cartoons, but it never seemed like something I could do until about 8 years ago. I was in Washington, working at a boring job, drawing on my lunch hour, and people said you know you ought to send those into the paper, they're pretty good. So I said OK, and I'd send them in. And I did that for a couple of months, and then I called the people up I was sending them in to and they said, "Yeah, they're not bad, keep sending them." So, six months went by and all of a sudden one weekend cartoons showed up in two competing papers and everyone was furious at me and I was delighted. That was the beginning of my career.

I'm interested in what is suppressed. What do you hold on to in addition to what you've submitted that's suppressed?

What do I already know not to submit? What kind of self-censorship goes on? It's not so much that I will not do a controversial subject that I think is important, as just pick the timing and pick the issue. You wait until it's a real clear case that is kind of unassailable for its moral or political force, and you take a lot of time to make sure that the cartoon is effective. There's nothing worse than having to argue for a cartoon about a subject that you believe is important if the cartoon is only mediocre. I mean, you're really setting yourself up there, because people are going to be looking for some reason to reject it. So you've got to work extra hard on those cartoons. I have a tremendous amount of editorial freedom at the Globe, and the instances I showed are really the exception.

How about local subjects: local heroes, or local politicians, say, from South Boston?

One cartoon on any of those subjects is going to go through and not be a problem. If I were to come back to them and make a campaign out of something, I think we might have to sit down and have a discussion about it. I'm not saying I'd lose. I go after local developers, I talk about the state of the school system, police performance, stuff like that. It doesn't seem to create a lot of static. Harvard University is a sensitive subject, interestingly enough. Not all the time, but it's a respected institution, it's right up there with the Church.

How do you find out, apart from a lot of irate phone calls, when a cartoon is particularly effective? For example, I thought the whale cartoon was a tremendous cartoon, the kind that could win a prize, easily. It's complex, it generates a whole series of ideas and paradoxes. Do you get positive feedback?

I get feedback from people at the newspaper and a cartoon like that people will call up about. People will call up and say, I've been throwing things at the television all week about this and I'm glad somebody finally said it. There's a sense when you pull something together that there are lots of other people that are three-quarters of

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the way to the idea and somehow you've given them an image that captures what they were almost thinking, and it's very satisfying to people. And it's satisfying for me to know that that worked. So I get phone calls, I get letters, I get requests for reprints, that kind of stuff, so there's some barometer there.

What is your normal day like, from beginning to end?

Well, it's hard to say whether I have a normal day. I guess a typical day starts around 8 o'clock with the radio, newspapers. I get in to the paper for a 10 o'clock editorial staff meeting, which is not about cartoons but about editorials, but I sit in and take notes and harass the editorial writers. It's great being a cartoonist because you're not an expert in anything but you know something about everything, so you can just sort of mouth off and make people's teeth grind, people who know all the intricacies of Lebanon and you say, well, clearly that's immoral. So I sit in there, I take notes, and I try and come up with a cartoon idea by about noon, one o'clock. I show it to a couple of people whose opinion I respect. If it gets an enthusiastic reception I take it to my editor and I say this is what I'm doing for tomorrow. 95% of the time he says fine. Every once in a while he'll say, I think you could make it stronger by doing this, and every once in a while he'll say that's not going in the newspaper. But assuming it goes through, it takes me anywhere from two hours to four hours to do the final drawing. I make copies for syndication, I take it down to the camera room, and I usually leave around 6, 6:30.

Did you ever have to retract a cartoon?

Retract a cartoon? I've pulled cartoons at the last minute because the news has changed, and I've regretted one or two cartoons that I've drawn. Every once in a while there's a cartoon where you just say I got this one wrong. It's not like you slandered somebody, it's just you change your mind about what was important or what the situation was about.

Do you ever stray away from politics and get more into talk-show topics, Tyson and Givens, things like that?

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Yeah, I didn't bring some of the less political stuff here, but I do cartoons on smoking, on advertising. When there was speculation on who Bush was going to pick for his VP I had a cartoon of the Bush-Elvis ticket. The slogan was "Bush Lives." So I mix it up and do that kind of social stuff.

Are there some subjects that make you so angry that you can't draw them?

There are subjects that make me very angry, where it's sometimes difficult to come up with an image or an irony that I think is adequate to my level of anger. And it's frustrating: you can do a cartoon on the subject, you can make it clear where you stand, but it's frustrating sometimes not to be able to have the impact that you'd like to have on something that is really an outrage. And there's also the problem—U.S. policy in Central America comes to mind,—of just doing the same subject again and again and again, and feeling that the situation doesn't change: where do you reach down to get some new image or some new way of presenting it that's going to be fresh, that you haven't done before or somebody else hasn't done before that's really going to advance the debate or illuminate something new?

You mentioned you listen to the radio and read newspapers. I was wondering what newspapers do you read or television do you watch?

I listen to National Public Radio's Morning Edition, and I read the *Globe* and the *New York Times*. When I get into the paper I flip through the *Christian Science Monitor*, the *Boston Herald*, and for my comic entertainment I read the editorial page of the *Wall Street Journal*.

Who are your heroes in the field?

Graphically, I don't think there's anybody who can touch Pat Oliphant. He and I differ politically on some things and differ in tone, but I'm in awe of the strength of his drawing. For commentary and economy of presentation, I think of Doug Marlette. Tony Awth at the *Philadelphia Inquirer* is somebody whose work I like. There are a lot of people who I have respect for. There's a guy named Toles

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up in Buffalo who I think is very funny, does a kind of goofy, really kind of comic strip approach to political events. And the dean of American political cartooning is Herblock at the *Washington Post*. I admire him for his consistency and the fact that he doesn't let up, and whoever is down there, he bangs away, and he's tough. The people I don't respect are the people who I think are frivolous and do a cartoon version of the Johnny Carson show — whatever's laughable without much consistency of viewpoint or thought. And Herblock seems to me just the opposite of that.

Thanks a lot. This was a lot of fun.