

Eastern Illinois University

From the Selected Works of Ellen Corrigan

2015

Cartoon Politics

Ellen Corrigan



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CARTOON POLITICS

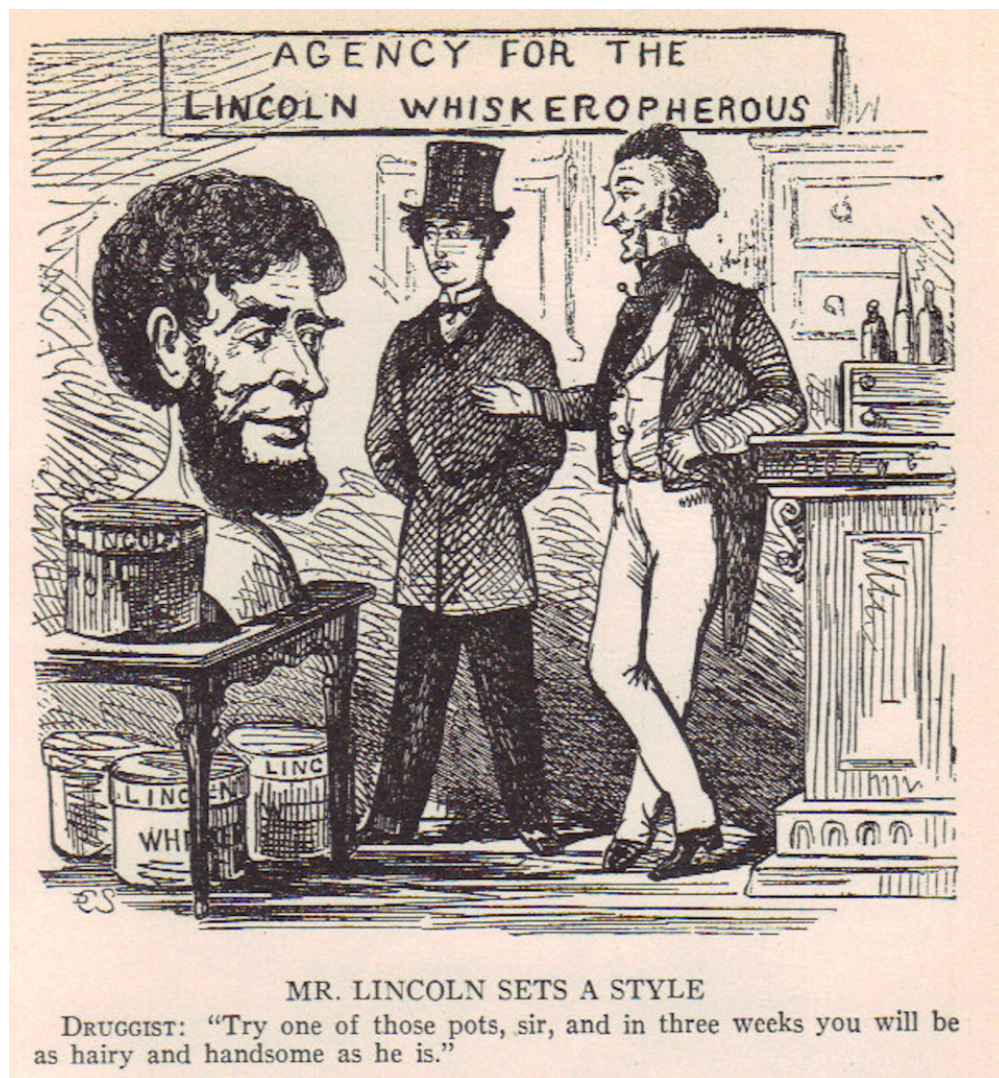
LINCOLN AND THE CIVIL WAR IN POLITICAL CARTOONS 1860-1865

Political cartoons, also known as editorial cartoons, are illustrations that use various forms of humor—caricature, satire, parody, lampoon, hyperbole, etc.—to comment on or criticize current political and social issues. In addition to expressing the opinions and attitudes of their creators, these cartoons may also reflect or influence public sentiment. Benjamin Franklin is credited with publishing the first modern political cartoon (“Join, or Die”) in his *Pennsylvania Gazette* on May 9, 1754.



Political cartoons can be offensive, controversial, even dangerous. In 2005 a Danish newspaper published a set of cartoons on Islam including depictions of Muhammad, leading to death threats against the cartoonists as well as worldwide protests, violent demonstrations, riots, and debates about free speech and censorship. In January 2015, five cartoonists were targeted and killed in an attack on a Paris-based satirical magazine.

Out of the Industrial Revolution came advances in printmaking technology, which, along with the emerging field of photography, made it possible for politicians to craft a public image.



VANITY FAIR, 16 MARCH 1861

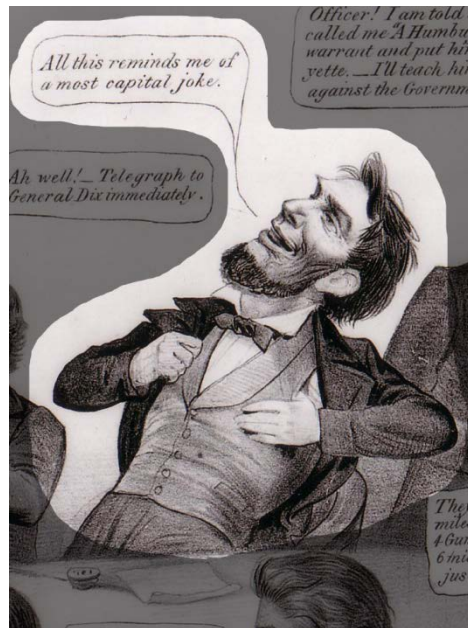
Lincoln seems to have been unconcerned with appearance, described during his initial presidential campaign as somewhat unkempt. An exception to this disregard was his growing of a beard between the time of his election and inauguration, believed to be in response to a letter from 11-year-old Grace Bedell of Westfield, N.Y., thus becoming the first U.S. president to sport facial hair. Lincoln's personal conveys his general indifference to patron-commissioned portraits of himself; his views on political caricatures are unknown.

The rise of weekly illustrated news and comic publications and political cartooning roughly coincided with Lincoln's presidency and the Civil War. One of the pioneers of the genre, the British comic magazine *Punch*, appropriated the term "cartoon," meaning a finished preliminary sketch for an artwork, to refer to its political caricatures. During the Civil War era, such cartoons also appeared as single-sheet commercial prints, broadsheets, campaign posters, and even on mailing envelopes.



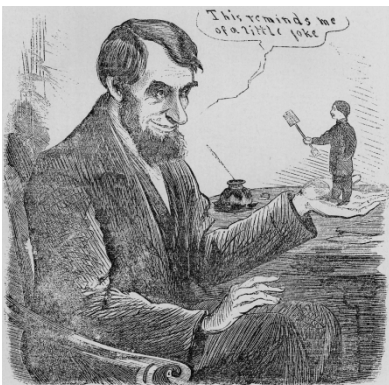
A stylistic distinction is evident between the two main cartoon formats: Commercial engravings and lithographs (e.g., Currier and Ives) tended toward a realistic, photographically-based look, relying more on situational absurdity for humor value, whereas the weekly comic style favored the more exaggerated approach of caricature.

Humor functions as a diversion in both senses of the word, as a form of entertainment or distraction. During the Civil War political cartoons served a dual purpose, offering an opportunity to laugh at the foibles of others, thereby diverting attention momentarily of the hardships caused by the ongoing war.

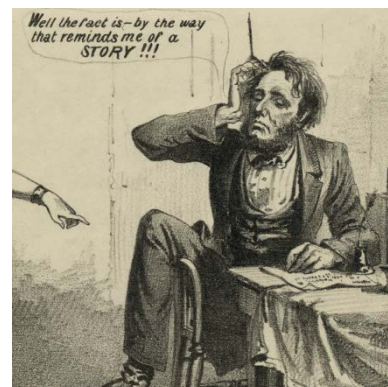


Running the "Machine" (DETAIL), CURRIER & IVES, 1864

Lincoln's penchant for jokes and amusing stories is well-known. He used humor as an icebreaker, as a deflector of questions and criticisms, and as a release valve for the stress of holding the highest elected national office during wartime. Several cartoons from the period feature the president launching into jest, portraying him as a buffoon who wasn't up to the job and didn't take serious matters seriously enough.



THIS REMINDS ME OF A LITTLE JOKE
 Frank Bellew
Harper's Weekly, 17 September 1864



COLUMBIA DEMANDS HER CHILDREN! (detail)
 Joseph E. Baker
 Lithograph, 1864



Mike, Remove the Salmon, FRANK BELLEW, HARPER'S WEEKLY, 16 JULY 1864

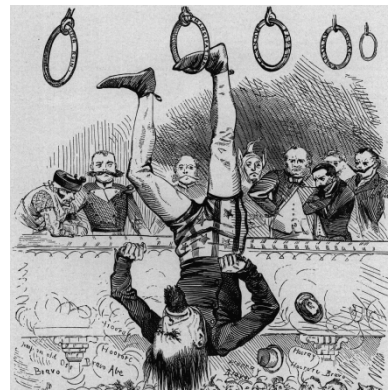
Although political cartoons comment on/address contemporary issues, humor is often timeless. Present-day viewers can still appreciate the comic element of a cartoon such as “Mike, Remove the Salmon” even without knowing the context. (Lincoln had accepted the resignation of his politically ambitious Secretary of the Treasury, Salmon P. Chase, the previous month.)

Cartoons of the period portrayed Lincoln in a range of guises, but one of the simplest, most common means of ridiculing an individual is to turn him into a clown (or other circus-performing equivalent). For the entertainment of audiences both inside and outside the frame, these examples cast the Union president in the roles of equilibristic juggler, sword swallower, and ceiling walker.

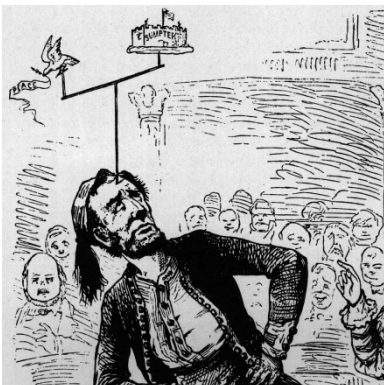
As President of the Confederate States of America, Jefferson Davis also received the cartoon treatment. In this 1861 *Vanity Fair* offering, Davis is drawn as a “juggler and acrobat” on a tightrope in a scene laden/heavy/filled with Confederate references and symbols. (Fresh in the public consciousness would have been the feats of Blondin, a French acrobat who walked a tightrope across the Niagara Falls gorge several times beginning in 1859. Lincoln was also presented as a funambulist on at least four different occasions.)



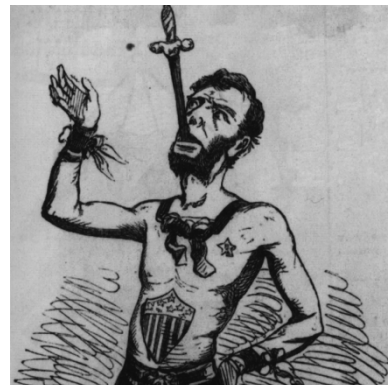
IN A POSITION TO BE RECOGNISED
Vanity Fair, 24 August 1861



A YANKEE OLMAR
Matt Morgan
Fun, 15 November 1862



PROF. LINCOLN IN HIS GREAT FEAT OF BALANCING
Henry Louis Stephens
Vanity Fair, 23 March 1861



GREAT AND ASTONISHING TRICK OF OLD ABE, THE WESTERN JUGGLER
Henry Louis Stephens
Frank Leslie's Budget of Fun,
15 March 1861

Caricature exaggerates physical and personal characteristics for comic or grotesque effect. Lincoln's appearance naturally lent itself—six feet, four inches tall and thin as rail, with facial features frequently described as “homely” (the polite 19th-century word for ugly).

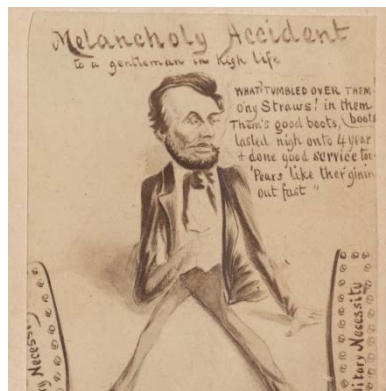
Playing up the president's height, “Long Abraham Lincoln a Little Longer” was published shortly after Lincoln's election to a second term—in other words, meaning that he would be in office “a little longer.”

Long Abraham Lincoln a Little Longer, FRANK BELLEW, HARPER'S WEEKLY, 26 NOVEMBER 1864



“A Melancholy Accident” portrays Lincoln as gangly, his big shoes with “military necessity” on the soles tripping over the “Constitution” and “habeas corpus.”

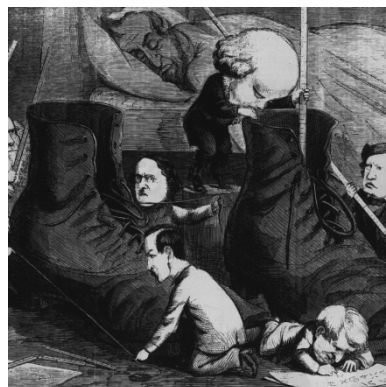
In “Presidential Cobblers,” Lincoln's advisers and associates are dwarfed by his big shoes. Published prior to his 1864 re-election, the cartoon is a metaphorical speculation on who would take over if he did not win a second term (big shoes to fill).



A MELANCHOLY ACCIDENT

Henry Louis Stephens

From a set of six lithographs, also issued as a carte-de-visite, 1864



PRESIDENTIAL COBBLERS AND WIRE-PULLERS MEASURING AND ESTIMATING LINCOLN'S SHOES

Frank Bellew

New York Illustrated News, 5 March 1864

Columbia, the female personification of the United States, appears in numerous cartoons as the symbol of liberty and justice, sometimes in juxtaposition to the vilified president. As the highest officeholder, Lincoln was also a symbol of the U.S., and thus the scapegoat for national frustration.

The Uncle Sam character that later replaced Columbia as the national personification originated in the early 19th century but didn't catch on until James Montgomery Flagg's 1917 recruitment poster codified and popularized the image known today. In many cartoons of this period Lincoln is dressed in stars and stripes, a precursor to what Uncle Sam would eventually become.



OBERON AND TITANIA
John Tenniel
Punch, 5 April 1862



THE COPPERHEAD PARTY—IN FAVOR OF A VIGOROUS PROSECUTION OF PEACE!
Harper's Weekly, 28 February 1863

Britain was an interested observer of the events unfolding in its former colonies and current trade partner.

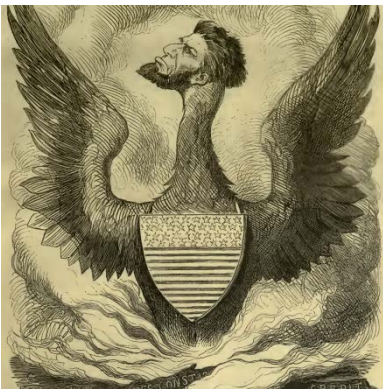
Politically, Britain had taken a neutral stance: The Lancashire textile industry was dependent on Southern cotton, but slavery was frowned upon (the Slavery Abolition Act having been passed in 1833).

As less than a century had elapsed since the Colonies declared and fought for independence from Britain in the Revolutionary War, the British were most perplexed by the Union's denial of the seceding states' right to self-governance. As President, Lincoln received the brunt of the criticism.

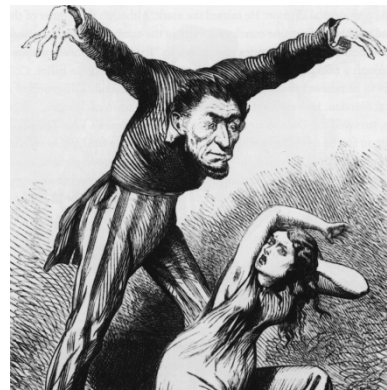
News of his 1864 re-election was received less than enthusiastically.

John Tenniel of *Punch* shows Lincoln as a phoenix rising from the ashes of the Constitution, habeas corpus, and state rights among other things.

Matt Morgan, who had recently left the London-based *Fun* and signed on as an artist for *Comic Monthly* in the States, interpreted Lincoln as a vampire feasting on the blood of emblematic Columbia to rejuvenate himself. (Ironically, Lincoln would be reenvisioned in the 21st century as a vampire hunter.)

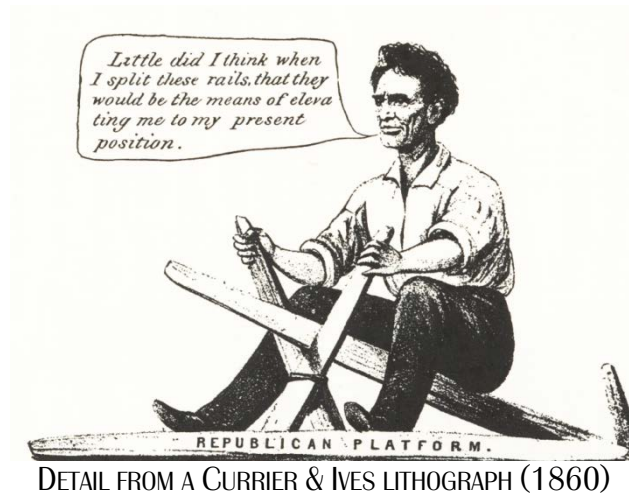


THE FEDERAL PHOENIX
John Tenniel
Punch, 3 December 1864



THE VAMPIRE
Matt Morgan
Comic News, 26 November 1864

The motif of the rail first appeared during the 1860 Republican convention at which Lincoln received the party's presidential nomination and was used frequently throughout the run of his campaign. Lincoln had split rails of wood for fence-building in his younger days; his supporters intended the rail to symbolize his humble, relatable origins. His opponents, on the other hand, used the rail symbol against him, insinuating that he was backwoods, uneducated, ill-prepared to take on the presidency.



Frank Bellew's 1860 cartoon for *Comic Monthly* takes the symbolic rail to an extreme, depicting Lincoln as a stick figure. A Currier and Ives print from the same year sees the rail as the foundation of his candidacy, perching him atop a woodpile labeled "Republican Platform."



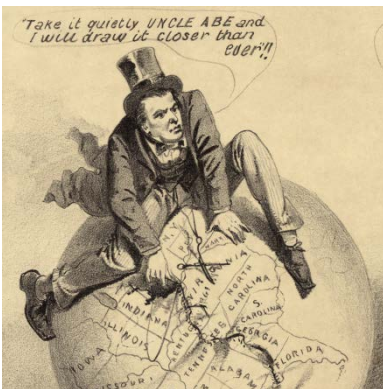
A "RAIL" OULD WESTERN GENTLEMAN
Frank Bellew
Comic Monthly, August 1860

As President-elect, Lincoln finds himself in a similarly elevated but less comfortable position—on a pile of bayonets, pointed end up—in the *Leslie's Illustrated* cartoon published two days before his inauguration.

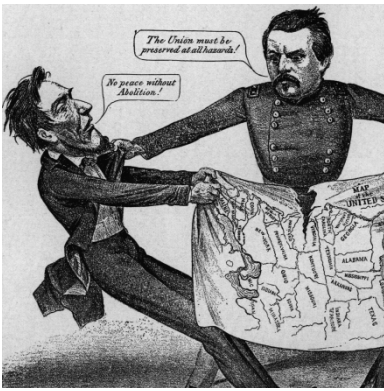


A PRESIDENT-ELECT'S UNCOMFORTABLE SEAT
Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper, 2 March 1861

The rail reappears sporadically during Lincoln's presidency—for example, in a Reconstruction-era cartoon by J. E. Baker in which Lincoln props up a globe with a rail while his Vice-President Andrew Johnson, a former tailor, sews the United States back together with a needle and thread.



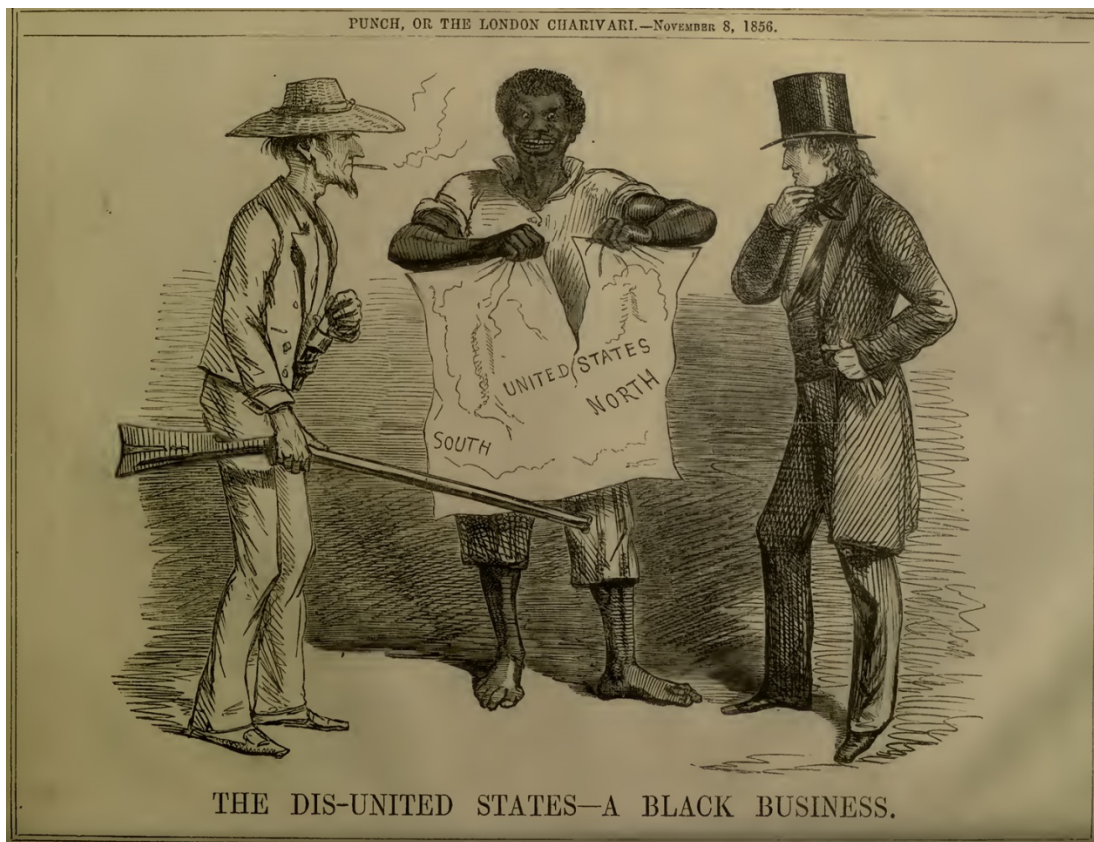
THE "RAIL SPLITTER" AT WORK REPAIRING THE UNION
Joseph E. Baker
Lithograph, Currier & Ives, ca.1864-1865



THE TRUE ISSUE, OR "THAT'S WHAT THE MATTER"
Lithograph, Currier & Ives, August 1864

This Currier and Ives print shows Abraham Lincoln and Jefferson Davis in a literal tug of war over the United States, tearing a map along the Union-Confederacy divide. Mediating in the middle ground is George McClellan, a Union Army major general who was in 1864 the Democratic presidential candidate.

The divided map motif appears in other cartoons, including a prescient *Punch* cartoon from 1856 ("The Dis-United States").

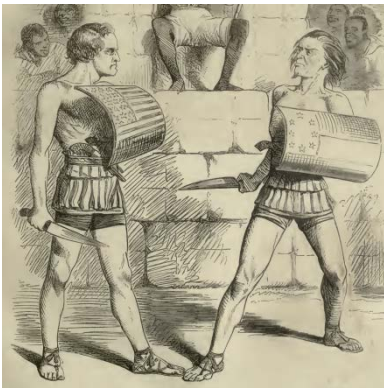


Some cartoons imagined the presidents of the U.S.A. and the C.S.A. confronting one another in a sports arena.

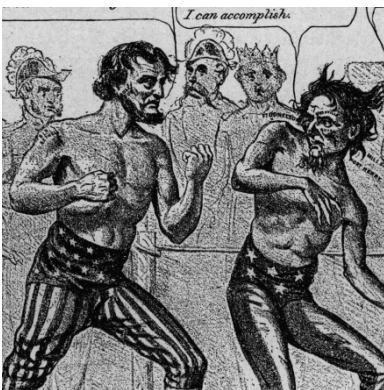
In his second *Punch* appearance, a belatedly-beardless Lincoln stands ready to face off against his opponent in classical Roman style (“Cæsar Imperator!”).

“Caving In” presents a more contemporary spin on the theme: The modern version of boxing evolved during the 19th century, and the first “world championship” match of Heenan v Sayers had just taken place in 1860.

Had such a contest occurred, what might the outcome have been? While Davis had more extensive military experience, Lincoln had an athletic background as a wrestler with a nearly undefeated record. He once jested in later life that he could have taken down George Washington—who had also been a wrestling champion—in a match.



“CÆSAR IMPERATOR!” OR, THE AMERICAN GLADIATORS
Punch, 18 May 1861

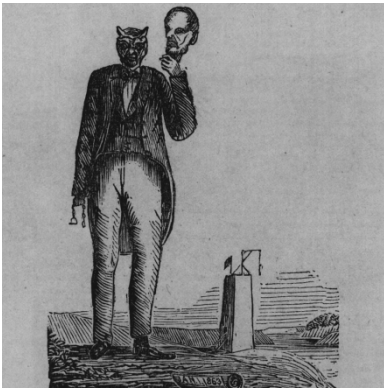


CAVING IN, OR A REBEL “DEEPLY HUMILIATED”
Benjamin Henry Day, Jr.
Lithograph, Currier & Ives, ca.1861-1863

With fewer publishing resources available, and therefore less prolific than their Northern and British counterparts, Southern publications nevertheless produced a handful of (unsurprisingly anti-Lincoln) cartoons during the war.

Adalbert Volck, a Southern sympathizer in Baltimore, also represented the Confederate point of view—although at the time distribution of his cartoons was limited only to private subscribers, until their republication several years after the war.

Characterizations of Lincoln alternate between incompetent and outright evil.



MASKS AND FACES

The Southern Illustrated News, 8 November 1862



MASTER ABRAHAM LINCOLN GETS A NEW TOY

The Southern Illustrated News, 28 February 1863



[ABRAHAM LINCOLN AND BENJAMIN BUTLER AS DON QUIXOTE AND SANCHO PANZA]

Adalbert J. Volck (as V. Blada)

Etching, privately printed by Volck, ca.1862



WRITING THE EMANCIPATION PROCLAMATION

Adalbert J. Volck (as V. Blada)

Lithographic facsimile of etching originally produced ca.1862-1864,
issued as part of *Confederate War Etchings* portfolio

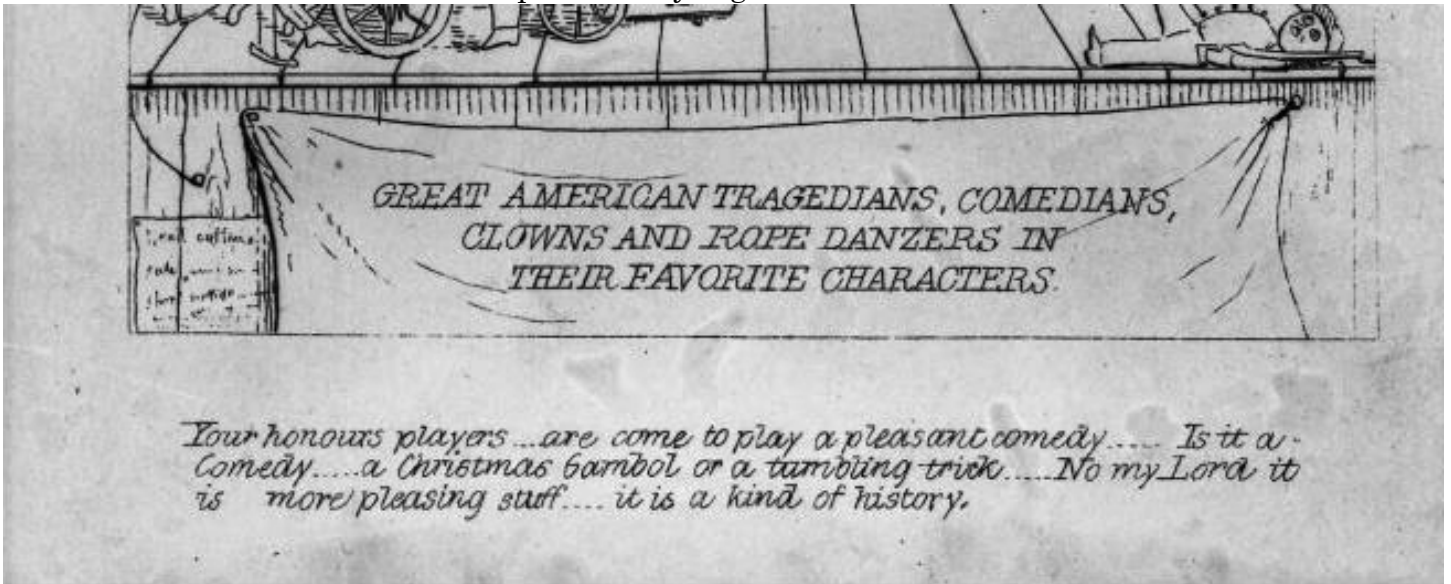


COMEDY OF DEATH

Adalbert J. Volck (as V. Blada)

Drawing, 1861

Captioning omitted from some versions gives the scene a more Shakespearean styling.





SYMPTOMS OF SPRING—UNCLE ABRAM'S CROP BEGINS TO SHOOT
Thomas Nast (attributed), *Frank Leslie's Budget of Fun*, April 1864

In reaction to a newly-ordered draft, Lincoln is depicted as a farmer aided by the “sun,” i.e., the war financing efforts of Treasury Secretary Salmon P. Chase, in cultivating a crop of soldiers aimed at “Dixie,” where behind a stone wall divider Jefferson Davis watches on barren ground in stormy weather. The caption includes a pun playing on the word “shoot,” as in both the sprouting of crops and the firing of weapons.



The Spirit of '76, VANITY FAIR, 4 MAY 1861

The agrarian Lincoln finds precedent in an 1861 *Vanity Fair* cartoon. His garden companion is Columbia, who in the accompanying caption inquires about a gallows-shaped plant, to which Lincoln responds, “It will bloom shortly and bear the Jeffersonia Davisiana.” In addition to the visual pun of the hanging garden, of note in the scene are the basket of “grape shot” in the foreground and the backdrop of a rotunda-like pavilion inscribed “Constitution.”



THE CAPTURE OF AN UNPROTECTED FEMALE, OR THE CLOSE OF THE REBELLION

John Cameron

Lithograph, Currier & Ives, 1865

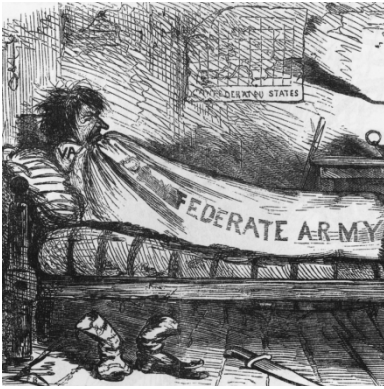
Endeavoring to evade capture by Union forces at the end of the war, Davis was apprehended with his wife's overcoat draped over his shoulders—a purportedly hasty attempt at disguise giving rise to the rumor that Davis had worn a complete outfit of women's clothes while fleeing. Caricaturists had a field day with this image, as numerous examples can be found of Davis more elaborately attired as a female in crinoline petticoats and hoop skirts.





The Mac Lincoln Harrisburg Highland Fling, VANITY FAIR, 9 MARCH 1861

The caricaturing of Davis as cross-dresser parallels the comic response to Lincoln's arrival in Washington, D.C. for his inauguration. For the last leg of his journey, Lincoln had been advised to travel by night from Harrisburg, Pennsylvania in order to dodge an assassination plot. Although no attempt was made to disguise the President-elect, one news report claimed he was wearing a scotch plaid cap and military cloak. The idea caught on, and the cap became part of the iconography of the early days of Lincoln's presidency.

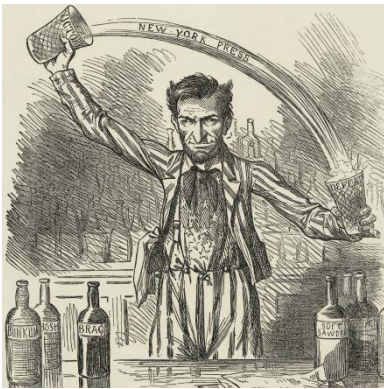


A SHORT BLANKET

Frank Bellew

Harper's Weekly, 14 December 1861

Captioned “OLD SECESH. ‘While I cover my Neck, I expose my Feet, and if I cover my Feet, I expose my Neck. Ugh!’”, this cartoon comments on the Confederate military strategy as well as the inadequate supplies of its troops.



THE LATEST FROM AMERICA; OR, THE NEW YORK “EYE-DUSTER,” TO BE TAKEN EVERY DAY

Punch, 26 July 1862

This cartoon implies that Lincoln influenced misreporting of the war in newspapers by serving members of the press a cocktail of “Bunkum,” “Bosh,” and “Brag.”



ABOUT THE SIZE OF IT *Harper's Weekly*, 25 July 1864

The “Kilkenny cats” reference—from a tale in which two cats fight to the death, destroying each other to the extent that only their tails remained—alludes to General Ulysses S. Grant’s military strategy of attrition. On the tail of the United States cat is a quote from Grant’s May 11, 1864 dispatch to Washington during the Battle of Spotsylvania Court House.



JEFF. DAVIS GOING TO WAR / JEFF. RETURNING FROM WAR AN ___ Lithograph, E. Rogers, 1861

Featuring an inverted optical illusion, this cartoon becomes self-explanatory when rotated 180 degrees.



THE PRESIDENT'S INAUGURAL

Thomas Nast

New York Illustrated News, 23 March 1861

Even without the accompanying caption, this cartoon can easily be understood as representing the contrasting Northern and Southern perceptions of Lincoln's taking of the presidential office.

In the 1860s an estimated twenty percent of Americans were unable to read and write—Nast himself reportedly may have been functionally illiterate—making political cartoons a powerful medium in their ability to communicate without words.



UNHEEDED ADVICE

Thomas Nast

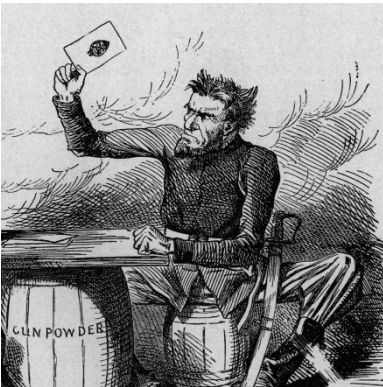
Phunny Phellow, November 1862

This unsigned cartoon by Nast from his sideline gig for a lesser humor magazine has Confederate General “Stonewall” Jackson jumping from the proverbial frying pan into the fire.



THE NEW ORLEANS PLUM
Punch, 24 May 1862

Cartoonists sometimes used familiar literary references to illustrate a point. This cartoon published shortly after the Union's capture of New Orleans spoofs the popular nursery rhyme "Little Jack Horner."



ABE LINCOLN'S LAST CARD; OR, ROUGE-ET-NOIR
John Tenniel
Punch, 18 October 1862

With Lincoln and Davis playing cards on top of a gunpowder keg, this cartoon views the previous month's preliminary announcement of the Emancipation Proclamation as the potentially volatile move of a desperate gambler driven to his last resort.
