Drawing a controversy

In his new book, Victor S. Navasky traces the radical roots of political cartoons and their power to provoke

BY ROBIN LINDLEY
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Throughout modern history, political cartoonists have been threatened, censored, jailed and even murdered because of their art.

In his book, "The Art of Controversy: Political Cartoons and Their Enduring Power" (Knopf), writer and editor Victor S. Navasky examines the elusive power of political cartoons and includes a rich array of notable examples. In this wide-ranging study, Navasky ponders the unique effect of this art form that has provoked reactions from amusement to outrage to violence.

Navasky examines the work of his artist friends and colleagues, including David Levine and Ed Sorel, as well as artists such as Francisco Goya and French satirist Honoré Daumier. The book reveals how cartoons and caricatures have exposed lies and stupidity and influenced the public discourse, for good and for ill.

Navasky is the George Delacorte Professor of Magazine Journalism at Columbia University's Graduate School of Journalism, where he directs the Delacorte Center of Magazines and chairs the Columbia Journalism Review. He is also the former editor and publisher of The Nation, and before that was an editor for The New York Times Magazine. In the 1960s he was founding editor and publisher of the satirical magazine Monocle. His other books include "Kennedy Justice"; "Naming Names," which won a National Book Award; and "A Matter of Opinion," a prize-winning memoir.

Robin Lindley: *How did you come to write your book on the history and power of political cartoons?*

Victor S. Navasky: I came to write it because, in more than 30 years at The Nation – first as the editor-in-chief and then as publisher – only once did my staff march on my office and demand that we not publish something in advance: David Levine's caricature of Henry Kissinger. It shows Kissinger screwing the world in the form of a woman with a globe where her head should be, with Kissinger on top and the world-woman on the bottom.

At the time, I called a meeting. The objection to the cartoon was that it was politically incorrect, [and] I thought this was another example of the left's obsession with political correctness.

The obvious didn't occur to me until about 10 years later with the Danish Mohammed [cartoons]. The Muslim world reacted violently to the cartoons of Mohammed. Everyone talked about it as a phenomenon of Muslimism and its forbidding reproduction [of images of Mohammed]. But it made me think back to when the staff marched on my office. I asked myself why was it, in this bastion of word people who object to many things, the only time they took physical action was over a cartoon?

I then started some research of my own, and of course discovered they threw Daumier into prison, and the most powerful cartoonists were the ones who caused the greatest emotional reactions, which is not unexpected.

"Gee, I didn't realize how rough you boys lived on th' ground."

Bill Mauldin's iconic World War II characters Willie and Joe humanized the war experience for families back home.

The Levine cartoon of Kissinger came to The Nation because he called me one day and asked if we'd be interested in the Kissinger caricature because he had done it originally for the New York Review, and it was too strong for them. I said, "Of course I'm interested, but it will get me in a lot of trouble." He asked why. I said, "I don't know, but it will." We certainly published it, and we got a fair amount of mail on it. All of the cartoonists supported our running it.

R.L.: *From the history you relate in your book, it's striking that time and again, in the past five centuries or so, political cartoonists have faced persecution for their images.*

V.N.: It's not just [political cartoonists]. Artists and writers who were dissenters have been persecuted over time.

The leading Palestinian cartoonist Naji al-Ali was murdered on the streets of London [in 1987]. They never solved the crime, but there were two theories. One was that the [Israeli Intellegince Agency] Mossad did it because his cartoons against Israel were so powerful. The other was that Arafat commissioned it because he also took out after Arafat. The point is that there was no disagreement that the reason he was killed was because of his cartoons. He was coming out of the office of his magazine when he was shot.

R.L.: *The violence may surprise some readers. You write that, in response to the Danish cartoons of Mohammed, more than 100 people were killed in protests around the world.*

V.N.: Yes, and it goes all the way back in time and comes right up to the present. I cite the literature in neuroscience and social psychology, [and] I found some experiments, but, for me, they were inconclusive.

My own working hypothesis is that one of the reasons people get so upset by cartoons and caricatures – especially the victims or people who identify with the victims – is that:

See CONTROVERSY, page 5