

Probing Question: How old is political satire?

July 15 2008, By Sue Marquette Poremba

During the 2004 election season, an animated streaming video featuring Senator John Kerry and President George Bush trading insults to the tune of This Land Is Your Land was seen by millions of people over the Internet—and was even viewed by astronauts on the International Space Station.

The video was produced by a company called JibJab, which specializes in animated comedy set to patriotic songs, all poking fun at politicians. JibJab, quite simply, is political satire for the wired 21st century.

Political satire has been around as long as politics and government. Part entertainment, part statement of beliefs, it always magnifies the wrongs (or perceived wrongs) of government and is found in all manner of media across centuries, from Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* to Jon Stewart's *The Daily Show*.

Although it usually intends to be funny, satire's main purpose is to launch an attack using the weapon of wit, says Robert Speel. "Political satire is using sarcasm and/or humor to point out the foibles, incompetence, or corruption of political leaders and government actions," explains the associate professor of political science at Penn State Erie. "Social satire, while often related to political satire, pokes fun at society, daily life, or certain classes of people rather than directly at political leaders and government."

So how old is political satire? At least 2,400 years old, says Speel. The ancient Greek dramatist Aristophanes, sometimes called the father of

comedy, satirized Athenian leaders and their conduct of the Peloponnesian War.

Political satire probably arrived in the United States on the Mayflower, but as the colonies struggled for independence, satire became a form of commentary on British rule.

"Benjamin Franklin was a prolific political satirist, in works such as *Rules by Which a Great Empire May Be Reduced to a Small One*, written in 1773," Speel says.

Political cartoons—which became increasingly popular in the 19th century, a time when many Americans were illiterate—remain a popular form of political satire today. The cartoons also helped shape modern-day politics. Explains Speel, "The cartoonist Thomas Nast became famous in the second half of the nineteenth century for his political cartoons in *Harper's Weekly* magazine, in which he created the symbols of the elephant for Republicans and the donkey for Democrats."

Nast published a series of cartoons critical of New York City's Boss Tweed, head of the Tammany Hall political machine, notes Speel. Tweed, who eventually went to prison, was reported to have said, "Stop them damned pictures. I don't care so much what the papers say about me. My constituents don't know how to read, but they can't help seeing them damned pictures."

Adds Speel, cartoons have even helped shape political jargon. "The term 'gerrymandering'—meaning redrawing electoral district boundaries to give a politician an unfair advantage—was coined when a political cartoonist in Boston named Elkanah Tisdale added a salamander's feet and head to a map of an oddly-shaped legislative district in Massachusetts drawn to benefit the party of Governor Elbridge Gerry in 1812."

While in some countries, expressing your views through political satire can get you thrown in jail or even put to death, in the United States, it is considered free speech and protected under the First Amendment.

"In perhaps one of the strangest U.S. Supreme Court cases in history, the constitutional right to political satire was upheld in *Flynt v. Falwell*, 1988," Speel says. *Hustler Magazine* publisher Larry Flynt had printed an ad parody in his magazine which televangelist Jerry Falwell considered libelous. Falwell sued Flynt and was awarded \$150,000 by a jury for emotional distress, but the Supreme Court unanimously overturned the jury decision by invoking First Amendment protection for speech concerning public figures.

"Political satire today is thriving, perhaps to an extent never before in human history," Speel adds. "In film over the past fifty years, we have had *Dr. Strangelove*, Woody Allen's *Bananas*, *Wag the Dog*, and Michael Moore's various documentaries. On television we have *The Simpsons* and *South Park*, both of which frequently utilize political satire. On the Internet, we have *The Onion* website, devoted to political and other forms of satire, and all kinds of amateur videos poking fun at presidential candidates on YouTube."

Will we see an increase in political satire as the 2008 presidential campaign heats up? It's a pretty good bet we will, believes Speel. The *JibJib* animation team—hard at work on new video spoofs starring Senators Obama and McCain—would certainly agree.

Source: By Sue Marquette Poremba, Research Penn State

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