

Some perspective on political satire

By Dean Nelson
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The firestorm over The New Yorker magazine cover showing Barack Obama in the White House dressed in a Muslim robe and turban, fist-bumping his wife, Michelle, who looks like a militant Angela Davis with an AK-47 strapped to her back, with a portrait of Osama Bin Laden over the fireplace that is burning an American flag, shows us two things. One is that satire is alive and well in the United States. The other is that everything is fair game in humor until it is your ox that is being gored.

In 2005, Danish newspapers published editorial cartoons (which by definition exist to poke fun, provoke, make us uncomfortable, make us think, and maybe even make us laugh) depicting the prophet Muhammad as a terrorist, and most people got the satire. The ones who didn't took great offense, to the extreme of issuing death threats, bombing buildings and starting riots that have killed dozens of people.

Those cartoons took a point of view and made such a mockery of it that no reasonable person could take it to literally mean that the cartoonists or newspapers really thought that Muhammad was a terrorist. The point was that some people were using Muhammad as an excuse to do offensive and terrible things. I got the joke, but then it wasn't my beliefs or actions that were being criticized. It wasn't my ox.

I do remember wincing the first time I saw the Monty Python movie "The Life of Brian," when a number of people were crucified along with Brian, who some thought had claimed he was the Messiah. When all of those on crosses began singing and whistling "Always look on the bright side of life," I shook my head and wondered why everyone around me was laughing. As a Christian, I wondered, what is so funny?

I felt the same way when I passed a magazine rack years ago and saw the cover of Hustler magazine with a picture of the Easter bunny nailed to a cross. I didn't think it was funny, because again, it was making fun of a belief I hold dear.

But when I saw a National Lampoon magazine cover of a very sad-looking puppy with a gun held to its head and the headline said, "If you don't buy this magazine, we'll shoot this dog," I laughed out loud. It was so absurd that it struck me funny. But then, I've never had a dog shot in the head.

And "Borat," anyone?

These examples are so absurd, that no reasonable person would think they are to be taken literally. But when it's our beliefs that are being mocked, well, somehow the jokes don't seem so absurd.

Political satire, which is what The New Yorker cover is, has a rich tradition in this country. For more than 200 years, political cartoons have portrayed U.S. presidents as snakes and corporate

barons as Ebenezer Scrooge. Demands for apologies make the objects of the satire open for further derision. Satire is the culture's way of saying, "Let's not take these issues, and ourselves, quite so seriously."

I watched William Bennett and James Carville debate on CNN whether The New Yorker cartoon was appropriate. Predictably, Carville said he thought it was funny, because it made a mockery of the strange rumors that continue to circulate about Obama – that he's a secret Muslim, that he hates America, that the fist-bump between him and his wife is a secret terrorist coded jab, and that his wife hates whitey almost as much as she hates America. Equally predictably, Bennett said he thought it was offensive and not funny and that the "intellectual elites" are so out of touch with America that they don't even realize how big of a line they've crossed. Remember, though, it wasn't the Democrats who were being satirized.

Perhaps the biggest surprise, and disappointment, is in how the Obama campaign has reacted. Obama himself hasn't said much, but his spokesman called it "tasteless and offensive." Maybe it was. But he missed the point – the cartoon wasn't about Obama. It was about the offensive things people have been saying about him.

As we enter the season of seemingly pointless national political conventions, where candidates and parties will try to look more American and Christian than the other, and one candidate will try to demonize the other as an unpatriotic, untested peacenik, while the other will demonize his opponent as an ancient warmonger living in the past, maybe the best thing Americans can do is laugh at the charade of it all. It beats the alternative, which is cynicism or despair.

Maybe, in that respect, The New Yorker did us all a favor by getting us to think and maybe even laugh.

I have a cartoon hanging in my office, a New Yorker cartoon, incidentally, where St. Peter is holding some papers at the gate of heaven, while a hopeful new arrival awaits his judgment. The new arrival is responsible for what is written on the papers Peter is holding.

"Blasphemy? Yes," Peter says. "But it was funny!"

May we never lose sight of the difference.

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