

TEACHER GUIDE

2000 DOC. #6: Comic Strips

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Political cartoons have been a part of the U.S. presidential election landscape since at least 1800 (doc. #5). Sometimes editorial cartoonists have had a deep impact on the voters’ views of candidates. In 1872 (doc. #1) cartoonist Thomas Nast drew cartoons attacking Democratic candidate Horace Greeley so constantly and effectively that Greeley commented after his loss, “I have been assailed so bitterly that I hardly knew whether I was running for the presidency or the penitentiary” (Boller 129). Cartoonist Herblock had a similarly adversarial relationship with Richard Nixon (1972 doc. #4). His caricature of “Tricky Dick” contributed to the public’s distrust of Nixon (the first President to resign from office).

On the other hand cartoonists could also elevate the image of a presidential candidate as well. Cartoonist Clifford Berryman forever endeared children to presidential candidate Teddy Roosevelt with his cartoon of the “Teddy bear” that Roosevelt refused to shoot. Franklin D. Roosevelt certainly benefited from Rollin Kirby’s cartoons in praise of him.

Garry Trudeau’s earliest “Doonesbury” election cartoons, published in his college newspaper, showed Mike Doonesbury sitting in front of the TV and holding his head during the 1968 Nixon versus Humphrey campaign. Seven years later, in 1975, Trudeau became the first comic strip cartoonist to win the Pulitzer Prize for Political Cartooning. A quarter century later Mike Doonesbury was still agonizing over presidential election campaigns. He was joined by a new generation of cartoon characters, including Huey and Riley from the “Boondocks” comic strip. “Boondocks” creator Aaron McGruder credits Garry Trudeau as one of his heroes.

> Distribute the two-page handouts of “Doonesbury” and “Boondocks” comic strips. Have students work in teams to answer the questions and prepare answers for the class.

Have each team present answers to the following questions. Note that the order of the presentation questions differs from the student handout.

> **Project** the document, 2000 doc. #6a.

QUESTION	What political characters does each of the speech bubbles represent? Explain your reasoning.
SUGGESTED ANSWER	All the bubbles represent President Bill Clinton except the 4th bubble that represents Al Gore.
EVIDENCE	they are in the White House where Clinton was President and Gore Vice President in June of 2000; “I do really dumb things” is a reference to Clinton’s sex scandal

2000 DOC. #6a



**“Doonesbury” Strip #1
June 5, 2000**

PowerPoint Slide
Cartoon on student handout

QUESTION **What are the messages about Gore and Bush?**

SUGGESTED ANSWER Gore has an image problem because he seems too smart while Bush is doing better because he is funny.

EVIDENCE "people will always prefer the class clown to the class nerd"

> **Explain** that you will discuss the third question after presenting all three strips.

> **Project** the document, 2000 doc. #6b.

QUESTION **Who is speaking here?**

SUGGESTED ANSWER Clinton and Gore are represented here, the same as in the first strip.

QUESTION **What are the messages in this strip about Gore and Bush?**

SUGGESTED ANSWER Gore should pretend to be more of a "regular guy." Bush's difficulty pronouncing words makes him seem less elitist and voters forget that he had a privileged upbringing.

EVIDENCE "reactivate your down-home accent," "anything to soften you up," Bush's "Ivy League pedigree evaporates" when he speaks

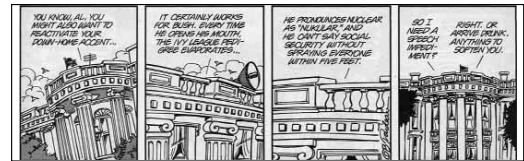
> **Project** the document, 2000 doc. #6c.

QUESTION **Who does the guy in the hat represent? What about the last speech bubble? Explain your reasoning.**

SUGGESTED ANSWER George W. Bush is the guy in the hat and he is speaking to an aide.

EVIDENCE the aide calls him "Governor" and his cowboy hat represents Texas

2000 DOC. #6b



**"Doonesbury" Strip #2
June 7, 2000**

PowerPoint Slide
Cartoon on student handout

2000 DOC. #6c



**"Doonesbury" Strip #3
September 9, 2000**

PowerPoint Slide
Cartoon on student handout

QUESTION **What are the messages here about Bush?**

SUGGESTED ANSWER Bush is shallow and stupid.

EVIDENCE "this election isn't about content," "isn't that what America wants?"

QUESTION **Does Trudeau seem to be taking a stand for or against any of the candidates through these strips? Explain.**

SUGGESTED ANSWER Although Trudeau is making fun of Bush, Gore, and Clinton, he makes Bush out to be a stupid simpleton and Gore out to be too smart. This would seem to be more supportive of Gore. Nader is not mentioned at all.

> **Project** the document, 2000 doc. #6d.

QUESTION **What are the messages in this strip about Bush?**

SUGGESTED ANSWER Bush is pro-gun and pro-death penalty.

EVIDENCE "G.W. Bush will let you carry guns anywhere you want," "he'll also install electric chairs in every courtroom and jail cell"

> **Explain** that you will discuss the other questions after presenting all three strips.

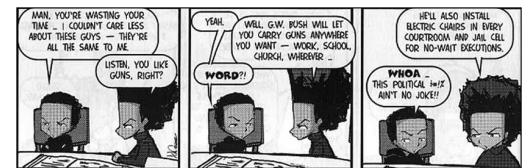
> **Project** the document, 2000 doc. #6e.

QUESTION **What are the messages in this strip about Ralph Nader?**

SUGGESTED ANSWER Nader will decriminalize drugs.

EVIDENCE "he'll decriminalize drugs"

2000 DOC. #6d



**"Boondocks" Strip #1
October 19, 2000**

PowerPoint Slide
Cartoon on student handout

2000 DOC. #6e



**"Boondocks" Strip #2
October 20, 2000**

PowerPoint Slide
Cartoon on student handout

> Project the document, 2000 doc. #6f.

QUESTION **What are the messages in this strip about Al Gore?**

SUGGESTED ANSWER Gore is boring.

EVIDENCE "he's your run-of-the-mill politician," "Clinton minus the charm," "he sounds kinda DULL"

QUESTION **What comic roles do the characters Huey (the older brother) and Riley play in these three strips?**

SUGGESTED ANSWER Riley plays the naïve, young, hip-hop talking brother while Huey is the sharp, intellectual, older brother who tricks Riley into learning something about politics. In comic terms, Huey plays the "straight man" while Riley provides the "comic relief."

QUESTION **What are the messages being presented about African American boys in these strips?**

SUGGESTED ANSWER The character of Riley aspires to the stereotype of the gun toting, drug running, inner-city black male. Huey presents a very different image of an intellectually sophisticated and politically engaged young black man. One could argue that the character of Riley reinforces a stereotype. On the other hand McGruder challenges stereotypes by showing two young African American boys who are very different from each other.

2000 DOC. #6f



**"Boondocks" Strip #3
October 21, 2000**

PowerPoint Slide
Cartoon on student handout

QUESTION

Does Aaron McGruder, the cartoonist, seem to be taking a stand for or against any of the candidates through his strip? Explain your answer.

SUGGESTED ANSWER

Although there is no clear preference shown in these three strips, Bush is shown as crazy for guns and executions and Nader as into drugs, while Gore is merely portrayed as dull. Similar to Trudeau’s three strips, McGruder seems to favor Gore. McGruder gave Nader as much coverage in these strips as he gives Bush and Gore, which is a lot more than most media sources did at the time.

QUESTION

Is the information in comic strips about political candidates accurate?

SUGGESTED ANSWER

Comic strips are intended to make people laugh and to think. They are not necessarily a credible source for campaign information.

SEE NOTE →

FURTHER QUESTIONS

Garry Trudeau is a Yale-educated, white cartoonist who began syndicating his strip nationally in 1970. Aaran McGruder is a young African American cartoonist educated at the University of Maryland who began national distribution of “Boondocks” in 1999. How might the age, race, and background of these cartoonists influence the content of their comic strips?

Can you think of other contemporary cartoonists whose work deals with presidential campaigns?

Discuss what level of political awareness political cartoons like these might require in order for the reader to understand the humor.

Does political cartooning promote political engagement or cynicism? Why or why not?

NOTE

Comic strips typically appear on the comic page of a newspaper, reinforcing their humorous or satirical nature. Occasionally a comic strip that frequently focuses on political issues, like “Doonesury,” appears on the editorial page. This elevates the strip to the level of political commentary.

CONNECTIONS

(see thematic listing)

Cartoons