

## TEACHER GUIDE

## 2004 DOC. #6: “Doonesbury” and “Boondocks” 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 similar adversarial relationship with Richard Nixon (1972 doc. #4). His caricature of “Tricky Dick” contributed to the public’s distrust of Nixon, who became the first president to resign from office.

On the other hand cartoonists could 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 (1936 doc. #2).

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. In 1975 Trudeau became the first comic strip cartoonist to win the Pulitzer Prize for Political Cartooning. Almost thirty years later Mike Doonesbury was again agonizing over presidential election campaigns in cartoons about the 2004 election. He was joined by a new generation of cartoon characters including Huey and Riley from the “Boondocks” strip. “Boondocks” creator Aaron McGruder credits Garry Trudeau as one of his heroes.

Several of the comic strips you will see reflect a media focus on issues of the candidates’ military service records during the Vietnam War. John Kerry had received a Purple Heart while commanding a “Swift Boat” during the Vietnam War. In the early 1970s he became a leader of the organization, Vietnam Veterans Against the War. In testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Kerry posed his now-famous question, “How do you ask a man to be the last man to die for a mistake?” In the 2004 campaign some Vietnam veterans accused Kerry of being unpatriotic for criticizing the war and for lying about U.S. war crimes during his earlier testimony. During the Vietnam War George W. Bush had enlisted in the Air National Guard. In the 2004 campaign he was questioned about having received special treatment as a Congressman’s son in order to avoid going to Vietnam. Others alleged that he went absent without leave during his time in the Air Guard.

Another important campaign issue in 2004 had to do with the candidates’ responsibility for the invasion of Iraq a generation after the end of the war in Vietnam. Some suggested that Senator Kerry had been wrong to vote for funding the invasion of Iraq. Others accused President Bush of misleading the nation into war by making false accusations about Saddam Hussein’s ties with al Qaeda and his stockpiling of weapons of mass destruction.

> **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.

> Project the document, 2004 #6a.

QUESTION	<b>Who is speaking here?</b>
SUGGESTED ANSWER	President Bush and an advisor.
EVIDENCE	the White House is in the foreground; Bush had been questioned by the media about his reasons for going to war in Iraq; Bush had worn a flight suit when he landed on an aircraft carrier in May 2003 to declare that "major hostilities" had ended in Iraq
QUESTION	<b>What are the messages in this strip about Bush or Kerry?</b>
SUGGESTED ANSWER	Bush will not accept responsibility for having misled the nation about the reasons for war. He thinks that patriotic symbolism will help his image.
EVIDENCE	"They keep asking me to take responsibility for misleading the nation . . . Maybe if I wore a flight suit"

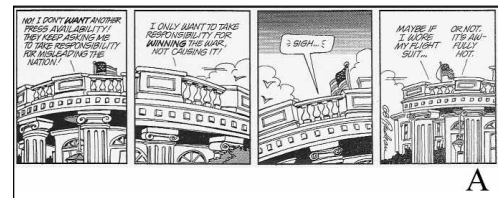
> Project the document, 2004 #6b.

QUESTION	<b>What are the messages in this strip about Bush or Kerry?</b>
SUGGESTED ANSWER	In contrast to his antiwar statements during the Vietnam War, Kerry failed to take a strong stance against the war in Iraq in 2003.
EVIDENCE	"Too little, too late" is a critical reference to Kerry's delayed and relatively mild criticism of the war in Iraq; "How do you ask a man to be the last man to die for a mistake?" is a quote from Kerry's antiwar testimony before a Senate committee in 1971

> Project the document, 2004 #6c.

QUESTION	<b>What are the messages in this strip about Bush or Kerry?</b>
SUGGESTED ANSWER	Bush cannot prove that he fulfilled his duty in the Guard.
EVIDENCE	the character offers a reward for proof that Bush fulfilled his enlistment requirement

**2004 DOC. #6a**



"Doonesbury"

PowerPoint Slide  
Cartoon on student handout

**2004 DOC. #6b**



"Doonesbury"

PowerPoint Slide  
Cartoon on student handout

**2004 DOC. #6c**



"Doonesbury"

PowerPoint Slide  
Cartoon on student handout

**QUESTION** The cartoonist devoted a full week's worth of strips to this reward for witnesses to Bush's Guard duty. What are the messages from the cartoonist about whether this story is worthy of media coverage?

**SUGGESTED ANSWER** The cartoonist thinks that the questions about Bush's Guard duty should be explored in detail.

**EVIDENCE** he's offering \$10,000 to anyone who can provide proof of Bush's service; he devotes a week's worth of strips to the question; the satirical intent of comments about "this trash story" and "end gutter politics" is revealed by Zonker's humorous offer of "puzzles and free refills"

**QUESTION** Does the cartoonist, Garry Trudeau, seem to be taking a stand for or against one candidate or the other through these strips? Explain.

**SUGGESTED ANSWER** Trudeau is critical of both candidates, Bush for being dishonest and Kerry for being weak. He seems to be especially critical of Bush based on the number of strips devoted to questioning his honesty.

> Project the document, 2004 #6d.

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

**SUGGESTED ANSWER** President Bush has not fulfilled his commitments and should not be re-elected.

**EVIDENCE** phrases "almost prevented," "almost captured," "almost found," along with images of Bush with hands up and a pitiful expression; "Isn't almost good enough?" with Huey's dubious expression

**2004 DOC. #6d**



**"Boondocks"**

**PowerPoint Slide  
Cartoon on student handout**

> Project the document, 2004 #6e.

QUESTION	<b>What are the messages in this strip about Bush and Kerry?</b>
SUGGESTED ANSWER	Bush misled the public about the reasons for war with Iraq. Kerry appears rigid and unappealing to most voters.
EVIDENCE	"Bush misled the public about Iraq"; "63% of voters say Kerry reminds them of a petrified oak tree"

> Project the document, 2004 #6f.

QUESTION	<b>What are the messages in this strip about Bush or Kerry?</b>
SUGGESTED ANSWER	Kerry appears weak and unwilling to provide a strong challenge to Bush.
EVIDENCE	"The country thinks you're weak on defense;" "We don't want to hurt anyone's feelings"

QUESTION	<b>Does the cartoonist, Aaron McGruder, seem to be taking a stand for or against one candidate or the other through these strips? Explain.</b>
SUGGESTED ANSWER	McGruder seems equally critical of both candidates in these strips. He criticizes Bush for failing to keep his commitments as leader of the "war on terror" and for misleading the public about the reasons for invading Iraq. He criticizes Kerry for being weak, inflexible and overly cautious.

**FURTHER QUESTIONS**

Garry Trudeau is a Yale-educated, white cartoonist who began syndicating his strip nationally in 1970. Aaron 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?

**2004 DOC. #6e**



**"Boondocks"**

PowerPoint Slide  
Cartoon on student handout

**2004 DOC. #6f**



**"Boondocks"**

PowerPoint Slide  
Cartoon on student handout

**ADDITIONAL INFO**

During the 2004 election campaign both Garry Trudeau and Aaron McGruder were outspoken in their public criticism of the Bush administration. Trudeau, who had been reticent to do media interviews in the past, agreed to an August 2004 interview and cover story in *Rolling Stone* magazine in which he said, "Bush has created more harm to this country's standing and security than any president in history" (<http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/5439743/>).

McGruder was given "The McGruder Award for the Most Outrageous Statement by a Black Public Figure" by conservative columnist Larry Elder in the March 11, 2004 edition of *Capitalism Magazine*. Elder criticized McGruder "for his relentless, almost pathological attacks on President George W. Bush" (<http://capmag.com/article.asp?ID=3560>).