

That's Not Funny

Rage, Laughter, and Political Cartooning After 9/11

“For anyone to sit around and joke over a cup of coffee about a couple of thousand people being killed--they should be prosecuted just for that.”

-Eric Finch, neighbor of Eunice Stone, who mistakenly reported three men as possible terrorists in a Georgia Shoney's

Yikes. You expect to hear sentiments like that out of the small-town South, where they're always on the lookout for any excuse to lock up anyone with out-of-state plates. But getting locked up just for joking about the wrong thing is starting to feel like a real and imminent possibility in the United States. Political cartoons have historically been one of the few places in any newspaper where it's been permissible to say anything true. Their paradoxical strength is that they're not taken seriously, so that, like the court fool, they're given grudging license to point out the unspeakably obvious. But in the wave of patriotic repression following the terrorist attacks of 9/11, that license has been reined in sharply. There have been a few celebrated cases of cartoonists being fired or forced to apologize for “inappropriate” cartoons, and a lot more uncelebrated instances of proactive censorship by editorial fiat and staff being told that Our Paper Will Support the President, Period. But these are still exceptional.¹ Outspoken political art in America is generally

¹ Speaking of my own experience, my paper has only ever refused to run a cartoon once. This was the week after the destruction of the World Trade Centers, and although the cartoon was actually (for me) sort of

discouraged not by some dark fascist or corporate cabal but by the more mundane and insidious pressures of the market.

Even before 9/11, there was a growing divide between cartoonists who saw themselves as activists and those who just wanted to be entertainers. Cartoonists whose ambition is to see their work syndicated in as many papers as possible or re-printed in *USA Today* and the “Perspectives” page of *Newsweek*--where controversy, “edgy” humor, and genuine anger are not consumer-friendly--tend to model themselves not on Thomas Nast or Ralph Steadman but on Jay Leno and David Letterman, avoiding divisive issues and boring analysis and instead going for easy gags about politicians’ personal foibles, like Gore’s eggheaded book-learnin’ or Bush’s folksy illiteracy. (Notice, though, that these are the “foibles” that politicians’ spin doctors have approved for public consumption, that the candidates themselves make fun of in cameos on *SNL*--not their actual, alarming failings, like Al Gore’s craven hypocrisy or George Bush’s arrogance and cruelty). Anxious to avoid the charge of Bias in the Media, they make fun of *everyone*, left and right. No offense intended, folks--all in good fun! This sort of blanket, indiscriminate derision is essential to the detached, contemptuous cool that is *de rigueur* for any TV personality, and it’s also what renders mainstream political humor so empty and impotent. For one thing, it reinforces the idea that the opposing viewpoints we see represented on the nightly news really do represent opposite ends of the political

affirmative and defiant, our publisher felt that any representation of the twin towers at that time would “jeopardize our standing in the community.” Seriously. They did run the cartoon the following week; the issue was not content but timing. I wasn’t happy about it, but I also didn’t feel that it was an instance of political censorship. It was a very weird week, and everyone was doing whatever seemed like a good idea at the time.

spectrum, rather than violet vs. ultraviolet. But the real problem is that satire that mocks everything stands for nothing.

After 9/11, pundits ceremoniously tossed Irony into the cultural mass grave, on top of the by-now unidentifiable remains of Communism and Big Government. (As Rueben Bolling put it in *Tom the Dancing Bug*: “No Satirists in a Foxhole!”) But Irony, like Terror and Drugs, will always be with us. There’s been a lot of talk in cultural circles, talk that’s even filtered down into discussions about alternative comics, about something called “The New Sincerity,” which has presumably risen up in opposition to The Old Irony. This is what you might charitably call a false dichotomy. The kind of irony that’s been so corrupting is the empty, adolescent irony that advertising and corporate entertainment have appropriated. This kind of irony is always used as a distraction: by adolescents, to distract us from the fact that they have no idea what they think; by TV comedians, to distract us from the fact they’re not saying anything; and by advertisers, to distract us from the fact that they’re hucksters and con men. True irony is in dead earnest. Good satiric humor has always spoken out of the assurance and clarity of deeply held (if implicit) moral values. “A Modest Proposal” isn’t a powerful piece of rhetoric just because eating babies, as Sam Henderson would say, is always funny; it’s because restrained behind its country cleric’s genteel deadpan is the “fierce indignation” of Jonathan Swift. *MAD Magazine*’s all-fronts attack on hypocrisy and bigotry teaches respect for integrity and tolerance. And alternative cartoonists’ hip contempt for the corporate oligarchy betrays an embarrassingly uncool, idealistic belief in democracy.

What makes good political comedy so tricky to pull off is that comedy is all about lawless subversion and mockery, but in order for comedy to be truly political, the comedian does finally have to take a side, to stand up and disclose, unironically, not only what he's against but what he's for. ("It seemed like it was time to either put up or shut up," as Tom Tomorrow said about his endorsement of Ralph Nader.²) Thereby making himself, in turn, vulnerable to ridicule. Earnestness is antithetical to comedy; the true believer is traditionally the straight man, the butt of the joke. It's just much less funny, and less fun, to say that we ought not to drop bombs on people or that capital punishment is wrong than it is to doink out someone's eyes with your fingers or crush them under an anvil so that they're crumpled up like an accordion.

This is why so many comedians stop being funny when they get political, and why so many smart and right-minded progressive political cartoonists come off as so insufferably pedantic, self-righteous, and smug. Cartoonists in alternative papers, whose audiences tend to be young, urban, and college-educated, are comparatively free from the pressure to be "fair" and "unbiased" (i.e., to avoid causing pro-lifers, Creationists, and NRA members to cancel their subscriptions) that inhibits their colleagues in daily family newspapers. But they also have to watch out for the opposite pitfall: that by preaching to the converted week after week they'll become so insulated inside their own opinions, so strident and monotonous, that they might as well not bother.

² Tomorrow interview in Ted Rall's anthology *Attitude*, Nantier, Beall, Minoustchine, 2002, p. 31.

Tom Tomorrow and Ted Rall, the two best-known alternative political cartoonists, to the shame of the mainstream press, have become some of the best sources of alternative news and analysis in print. Ted Rall is still the only person I've ever heard explain the obscene implications of Bush's proposed tax cut; it was from Tom Tomorrow that I learned that John Ashcroft and his staff stopped using commercial airline carriers in June of 2001. I'm grateful enough to them for their insights that I can't help but wish they'd even once made me laugh. Instead I always end up nodding at their strips in grim agreement or shaking my head with speechless outrage--the desired effects of all propaganda. Their cartoons don't really aim to elicit laughter, but the knowing smirk of the thirteen-year-old who's recently realized that he's the smartest person in the world and everyone else is stupid. It was, I am sorry to say, a small mercy when, for just one day after 9/11, neither of them had a ready, smartmouthed take on things. Tom Tomorrow simply published a photo of the smoking ruin of the World Trade Centers he'd taken from his rooftop, with the caption, "Words fail me." For once.

Their humorlessness obviously isn't so much a failing as a conscious decision. "If I can make people smile or laugh, it's obviously a bonus," Ted Rall shrugs, "but it's hardly a top priority for a political cartoonist worth his or her salt."³ Neither Rall nor Tomorrow is what you'd call a born cartoonist; cartooning just seems to be the most accessible medium available to them for their polemics. I think either of them would be just as happy as editorial columnists or call-in radio hosts (both forums Rall has also exploited). They're indifferent to what an earlier generation would have called the "art"

³ Rall interview in *Attitude*, p. 117

of cartooning; it's not even clear, at a glance, whether their cartoons are hand-drawn. The relentlessly snide tone of their writing is visually echoed by Rall's thick, jagged lines, as angry as bathroom graffiti, and Tomorrow's flat clip-art characters, each with a bright, unfaltering 'Fifties rictus. There's a defiant iconoclasm to this deliberate crudeness, a generational backlash against the densely cross-hatched, macrocephalic caricatures of public figures that we still see day after day in mainstream editorial cartoons—the equivalent of punk or electronic music's scorn of traditional musicianship. The problem is that, as with quite a lot of punk and electronica, the idea of the art is a lot more interesting than the art itself. Their drawings are only decoration for their agendas; almost all of their cartoons would be just as effective without any illustrations at all. "If George Bush had played by the rules, he would have won," Rall wrote when the final tally of Florida votes, marginally supporting Bush's victory, was announced. "Instead, he lost." It's a point I've never heard made more cogently anywhere else. Likewise Tomorrow's accusation that if even one innocent man has been executed in America, we are all accessories to murder. But do you really need to know what the pictures were? This is good rhetoric, not cartooning.

I'm only picking on Rall and Tomorrow because they're the clearest and best-known examples of this tendency. It is endemic among alternative political cartoonists. Even Lynda Barry, who's a far better writer than most of the "literary" novelists getting respectful reviews today, resorts to running what might as well be the same four panels of Fred Milton, the Beat Poet Poodle, spouting middle-school-notebook peace slogans (sometimes complete with a peace sign or dove) whenever she's moved to make a topical

statement. Lesser talents clog their panels with so much dense cramped text that you'd only ever bother to read it out of a sense of social responsibility, and if you do--take my word for it--it always turns out to be a.) an angry declamation of the artist's political convictions or b.) a villainous straw-man argument put into the mouth of Uncle Sam, George Bush, or a corporate fat cat, in exposition as labored as Blofeld or Drax spelling out his master plan for world domination.⁴ They make me as embarrassed to be associated with the Left as those "Legalize Hemp" and "Free Mumia" dipshits who inevitably turn up at antiwar rallies.

But so what? Why should editorial cartoonists have to be funny? After all, *things* aren't exactly funny these days. And does it really matter whether they can draw or not, or whether their points are made with subtlety or wit? This is hardly the time for subtlety. Who am I, anyway, to criticize these artists who are not only my colleagues but my allies in a losing battle against apathy, ignorance, and disinformation? What am I, some big eminent humorologist? What kind of snobby aesthete niggles over the niceties of Art when the republic has been seized by an extremist coup with aggressive Imperial ambitions? These were supposed to be rhetorical questions, but as I sit here staring at them I find myself gnawing on my lips, wondering how to answer them. It seems pretty picayune to fault Rall or Tomorrow or anyone else for choosing social responsibility over laughs. Providing the consumer with his (or her) daily chuckle is a pretty trivial job in times that increasingly resemble a paranoid dystopian vision out of Philip K. Dick.

⁴ Mainstream liberal cartoonists suffer from the same tedious staging: We see Gary Trudeau's cast of aging, affluent boomers passively watching TV or surfing the net while onscreen voices make the satirical point for the day; Aaron MacGruder's characters also sit in front of the tube or amble through some formless background and expound the artist's current gripe or conspiracy theory.

Kierkegaard has a good one about a clown in a theater who keeps yelling “Fire!” at the audience, but they just laugh harder and harder at him until they all burn to death. This is sort of the plight of the political humorist today; things are so urgent and terrible that you just want to drop the funnyman act, tear off your joke wig and scream, “*HEY! I’M NOT FUCKING KIDDING!*”

The main problem with that didactic, hectoring approach is that most people just aren’t persuaded by argument. We are not rational creatures. (Working-class people vote Republican; George W. Bush is the President; we’re invading Iraq for some reason.) Pointing out logical inconsistencies, scoring points, and winning debates, as anyone who has ever been on an internet message board or in a relationship should know, tends to make your opponents defensive and hostile and entrenches them deeper in their own positions. One of the most important things that any artist or writer has to keep in mind, every working day, is that *no one cares what you think*. Why should anyone want to listen to you spout off about your crackpot political views? They don’t. Everyone has the right to an opinion, and it’s too bad but yours is no better than some guy’s with his baseball cap on backwards drinking a Coors Light. The only thing that entitles you to anyone’s attention as a cartoonist is being funny or entertaining or drawing well or telling a good story. Sorry, but that’s what it means, on the most rudimentary technical level, to be an “artist”—doing *something* better than most other people can. Just being bold or controversial, or advocating an ideologically “correct” agenda, doesn’t excuse an artist from doing his damn job. If you want anyone to listen to your opinions, you’re going to have to sneak them unobtrusively into a picture or a story or a song. Being right doesn’t

matter if you're not interesting. This is why *Huck Finn* is still hilarious and heartbreaking while only tenured academics can claim with straight faces that *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is really the superior literary work; why *Dr. Strangelove* is still watched and laughed at and quoted forty years after its release while the well-meaning *Fail-Safe* airs on AMC at three A.M. In other words, art isn't just better art than propaganda; it's also better propaganda.

But the real reason why screeds like Tomorrow and Rall's get on my nerves isn't their artlessness; it's their ineptly concealed anger. The smiling mask of irony is just pulled too tight and too thin, clearly revealing the contours of the artist's own face beneath, twisted and sneering with rage. (It reminds you, excruciatingly, of those corporate flacks, conservative apologists, and Fundamentalist clergymen who try to feign cool, haughty amusement for the cameras when they're clearly apoplectic.) Anger, like argument, has to be filtered through art. A great humorist once pointed out that "one often contradicts an opinion when it is really only the tone in which it has been presented that is unsympathetic."⁵ I find most alternative political cartoonists off-putting, and *I'm on their side*. Undisguised anger is unattractive. It is repellent. Tom Tomorrow's unrelentingly sarcastic tone eventually gets to be just as annoying coming from him as it is from know-it-all teenagers. Ted Rall's knee-jerk cynicism—his apparent inability to believe that anyone is motivated by anything humane or decent—is rarely misplaced when directed at the Bush administration, but when he targets 9/11 widows or informs us that "most Americans secretly think the [WTC] footage is cool," it starts to seem more like a personal problem. Sure, it can be cathartic to elicit furious indignation or assent

⁵Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All-Too-Human*, Walter Kauffman translation, Vintage, Section 303.

from an audience that you know already agrees with you, but in the end all it leaves them with is bleak, futile, unconstructive anger. It's certainly not going to win any converts. Raw passion isn't any more persuasive than logic or rhetoric; it makes people avoid eye contact with you and make excuses for going home early. And—as an aside to my fellow cartoonists--although anger is an undeniably fun emotion to indulge as an artist, it's also, like a lot of other things that are fun to indulge, not very good for you. Which is the other, more personal reason why I try to transmute my own rage into laughter: because it keeps me from sawing my fucking head off.

“I get the feeling you hate Republicans too much to be funny about them, if you know what I mean.”

-E-mail to the author

The thing is, it turns out to be hard to avoid lapsing into that shrill tone when you're really mad. (I'll have to ask the reader to excuse my poor form in discussing some of my own work here, but it seems like the problems of drawing good political cartoons can only be understood from inside the process. Also I can criticize them frankly without further offending any of my fellow cartoonists, who tend, as a group, to be touchy and vindictive.) Here's a cartoon I drew during the week when it became clear to me that the Bush administration had decided to invade Iraq without even bothering to give us any credible excuse:

As a dissenting American citizen, I'm proud of this cartoon. It's honest and ballsy and says things that need to be publicly said. The image of George W., instead of Osama or Saddam, in the cross-hairs is gratifying to see. During the week that it ran, friends and acquaintances congratulated me in the same awed and wary way that I once congratulated Rocket Guy, a toy designer who intends to launch himself into space in a single-stage

rocket he's building in his back yard. It had me worried, for a week or so, that I might get a little official talking-to from the Ministry of Truth or Department of Information Retrieval or whatever they call themselves now. I worried about this only in a vague, unserious way, the same way I worry that someday my liver is going to quit, but still, anytime you're worried about the government taking unfavorable notice of you, it probably means you're doing something right.

As an artist and a humorist, however, I'm disappointed in myself. In retrospect, the joke is too obvious--turning the euphemism "regime change" against its authors is a rhetorical trick I saw on lots of signs at the October 26th protest in Washington. But mainly it fails because it exemplifies all the characteristics of bad alternative cartooning I've criticized above. It not only just comes out and tells you what I think, which is clumsy and artless, but what *you* ought to think, which is authoritarian. It takes on the same tone I dislike in Tomorrow and Rall. Also, as in so much of their work, the drawing is only a superfluous illustration to the rant. Most inexcusably of all, it's not funny.

Here's the same cartoon, redrawn in the guise of farce a week later, after I'd calmed down some:

I'm much happier with this effort than with the first, even though I also consider it a failure, albeit for exactly the opposite reasons. This one *is* funny (and the drawing and its details are essential), but its political point--that the current American government is just as criminally aggressive as any it's scheming to topple--is so deeply implicit that you pretty much have to have already come to the same conclusion on your own or else seen the previous week's cartoon to even get it. It's not even clear what army is supposed to be closing in on the doomed administration; I certainly didn't mean to imply that we were in danger of an Iraqi ground invasion, but rather that we Americans might finally have to drive Bush and company forcibly out of the capitol. For me, however, all this confusion is redeemed by 1.) George Bush's anxious, dithering fingers and 2.) John Ashcroft, like Daffy trapped on a desert island with Bugs, imagining eating Donald Rumsfeld. It's a fate they both deserve. My only uncertainty is about who should be condemned to eat who.

If I have to choose, I almost always decide to err in the direction of comedy rather than political relevance, just because I find it less embarrassing to look silly than to look self-righteous—the chronic anxiety of the ironist. The risk of opting for laughs over politics is that you'll produce work that's just irrelevant and pointless—the “USA Today” school of cartooning. Here is my favorite example of a post-9/11 cartoon that is funny but isn't about anything:



I think this is hilarious. My only gripe about the comedy is that the cartoonist doesn't follow through on his premise as it deserves, either because he can't draw well enough or just didn't bother. (You have to assume from the caption that the dance must be the Charleston; what you really want to see is the Taliban in turbans and raccoon coats, women throwing off their burquas to become flappers, everybody drinking bathtub gin.) A more serious objection is that it makes a trivial joke out of a tragic situation. Though of course that's *why* it's hilarious; the release of tension it affords us is relief that, for just a second, we don't have to take things so seriously and can laugh at something stupid. But then, most Americans don't seem to need any excuse to quit caring about the fate of some faceless foreigners. You'd really have to be familiar with the context of the cartoonist's past work to determine whether he was being deliberately callous. A quick perusal of Mueller's website suggests he's utterly apolitical, the sort of cartoonist who'll

go for any gag he can, topical or absurd. But being “apolitical,” by default, always means siding with the status quo. Ultimately this cartoon may be worse than just irrelevant; it lets us off the hook for our guilty complicity and abets us in our ignorance and apathy. Still, you’d have to be a more humorless and dogmatic person than I am to get genuinely steamed about it. “Bombed ’em back to the Jazz Age.” That cracks me up. I’m a bad person, I guess.

No—wait. Let’s think about this a second. Obviously I cannot be bad. I think there is something about this guilty laughter that goes to the heart of why humor is so much more insidious and powerful than mere argument. Haven’t you laughed at something you were embarrassed to be caught laughing at? Something tasteless or offensive or just plain stupid? The day after the terrorist attacks I was racking my brains over whether it was even possible to do a cartoon about them when a friend called me with the idea for this one:



I think this cartoon works in the same way that Mueller's does; there is something audacious and exhilarating about finding some way—no matter how dumb--not to take death seriously. I was out of my mind with rage that week, and when my friend described this image to me ("the Empire State Building looking kind of smug," is how he put it) I threw back my head and laughed the sort of savage, raucous laugh that startles other people in the room. The fever had broken; I felt my gut unclench with joy and gratitude. (But I didn't run the cartoon for another year.)

This is the truly subversive power of laughter; it's *involuntary*, like falling in love with someone you shouldn't, or lusting after someone you don't even like. It gets in under our ideology and defenses, without regard to what we've been taught to think or how we're supposed to feel, helplessly tickling our naked, shameful selves. This is why making people laugh is more than a "bonus", why as far as I'm concerned it is a *sine qua non* for any political cartoonist: by making a cartoon a joke, rather than a lecture or a rant, the cartoonist makes the reader his collaborator instead of a captive audience or an opponent in a debate. An accomplice. A friend.⁶ A good punchline is never explicitly contained in the joke itself, but occurs in the mind of the listener or reader. (Which is why it's not just boring but annoying when someone explains a joke—it insults your intelligence.) Embarrassingly, my favorite example of this comes from Jay Leno: "Can you imagine what the world would be like if everyone goofed off at work as much as you do?" The real punchline is left unspoken; the joke is you, and the world, and your laughter is a forced confession. If you "get" a joke, it means that, on some level, you understand its point of view. You may not want to own up to sharing it--as in misogynistic, racist, or golf jokes--but if you laugh or smile, you're acknowledging, even if grudgingly, your complicity.

But, like love, laughter is also utterly amoral; it's just as easy to laugh at the suffering of the oppressed (the *metier* of right-wing cartoonists and commentators) as it is

⁶Once, in a thumb-wrestling match that was maybe getting a little too intense, my opponent's thumb suddenly darted forward and *kissed* my thumb. He just quickly touched his thumb to mine and made a little kissing noise. The match was instantly over, needless to say, and it was pretty obvious whose thumb had won, but I didn't feel like I'd lost. It just wasn't a contest anymore. You see what I mean?

to mock their oppressors. Easier, actually. And a lot safer. Not to mention more lucrative. Witness the scary popularity of Rush Limbaugh. The crudest, most basic form of humor is cruelty. It's a tool that has to be wielded carefully, with artistry and discretion and conscience. The Empire State Building gag may be (barely) more ethically defensible than the Jazz Age one because it's drawn from the helpless anger of the defeated (Bush's rhetoric notwithstanding, I'm going to go ahead and call 9/11 a loss for the home team), while it seems a little tacky to make a crack at the expense of people you're bombing—adding insult to incineration.

So let's turn to an inarguably deserving target: the Bush administration. This tension between being amusing and being conscientious crystallizes conveniently around the question of how to depict George Bush, Jr. in cartoons. It feels like a concession to pay any attention to him at all, buying into the official lie that he really is the President in any meaningful sense—that he's qualified, that he was elected, that he actually makes any decisions or does anything other than show up for photo-ops and read speeches at fundraisers. Making fun of the man's stupidity is legitimate but kind of obvious: Tom Tomorrow draws him as the perennially unworried Alfred E. Newman; Ward Sutton as Curious George, forever screwing up and being bailed out by Dick Cheney as the Man in the Yellow Hat; Derf ("The City") and I both automatically seem to assume that he calls the Vice-President "Mister Cheney," the way you address all your parents' friends when you're a kid. There is this perverse temptation to depict him as merely hapless, somehow sympathetic. With his anxious, beady eyes set too close together and his forehead perpetually wrinkled with insecurity, he looks as though even he dimly apprehends that

he is far out of his depth, like a Rhesus monkey at the controls of a crashing starship. But George Bush, Jr. is not just a fool; he is a dangerous fool, a front man for a calculating and brutal gang of fixers and hit men who have nothing but contempt for democracy. To depict him as a clueless buffoon is not only too easy but doing him a favor. Perhaps the best solution to this problem has been Ted Rall's, who unfailingly refers to him as "Generalissimo," and draws him in a preposterous tinpot dictator's outfit, effectively rendering both his absurdity and thuggishness and never letting us forget that his is an illegitimate junta. The only weakness of that portrayal is that, except for the uniform, Generalissimo Bush is indistinguishable from every other character Rall draws. Caricature is one of the sharpest instruments at the cartoonist's disposal, and too many alternatives have cast it rashly aside. There is a magical power in appropriating your enemy's likeness, a delightfully unfair advantage in making him do whatever undignified thing you want him to. I think the only time I've scored a bull's-eye (if I may use that phrase about our Commander-in-Chief) was with the cartoon "America: Preserve Your Virtue!", which manages to expose Bush as both dumb *and* calculating, equating the drunken cunning of the Yale frat boy with the cynical demagoguery of the American President—and a kind of lying with which we're all familiar with a kind to which so many Americans still seem naively susceptible.

It's very difficult to find this exquisite balance between passionate engagement and ironic detachment--to be *both* an activist and an entertainer. You have to be angry to want to draw a political cartoon in the first place, but it's almost impossible to produce artful or funny work when you're angry. And a weekly (much less daily) deadline doesn't

allow much time for your anger to cool and be tempered into humor. For me, it's like finding that magic window somewhere between two and five beers in which I mysteriously shoot much better pool than I really can. I swear that's the best analogy I can think of. Your convictions have to be so clear and deeply held that they're implicit in every drawing, every gag, without your having to step out from behind the curtain and explain them. Your command of your art has to be so assured, and your sense of humor so fiercely honed, that your anger is automatically expressed as comedy. Like some sweet-tasting shooter designed to get college girls shitfaced, a good cartoon should go down so easily that you don't notice the highly volatile content, so that by the time it hits your brain it's too late.

For my money, the only cartoonist since 9/11 who's consistently been able to pull this off is Rueben Bolling of *Tom the Dancing Bug*. He was the only one of us who was able to draw anything artful or considered immediately after the attacks, when pretty much everyone else submitted frank admissions of defeat. In that week's version of "Super-Fun-Pak Comix," his recurring parody of the daily comics page, the punchline of every single strip, regardless of the setup, was: "Terrorists destroyed the World Trade Centers, killing thousands." It captured exactly how the abrupt discontinuity of the event felt: like a shocking, tasteless non-sequitur interrupting the routine storyline of all our lives, the timing wrong, the delivery eerily deadpan. It also perfectly mimicked the way in which that ugly, stunning moment of reality abruptly truncated the happy inanity of the Nineties. This couldn't have been depicted as dramatically in any other medium; what's more banal and reliable than the daily comics page? (Even sitcoms are more innovative;

it was national news when the mom in *Family Circus* got a new haircut.) He used the metacartoon again to complex effect when his character God-Man, the Hero With Omnipotent Powers, flew to Afghanistan to punch out Osama bin Laden. “Aren’t you the character the author uses to make satirical comments about religion and cul—“ starts Osama. “Not anymore!” answers God-Man, smiting him with a mighty left hook. “Now I’m a vehicle for the author’s wholly unironic fantasies of violence and rage!” It was a cheering example of irony letting you have it both ways--getting to indulge our lust for righteous vengeance while acknowledging its infantile futility. Moral relativism intruded on the genre of the boy’s adventure strip in “Billy Dare in *Smuggler’s Cape*, Chapter MVLCI: On the Trail of Evil!” when our hero Billy, pursuing his nemesis Dr. Mordu to his home country of Nefralia, finds himself in an alternate strip in which *Mordu* is the hero. He’s as bewildered as those innocent Americans, raised on the juvenile morality tales of history class and Hollywood, who found themselves cast as the Great Satan. “The New New Yorker,” a heartbreaking parody of Saul Steinberg’s famous “New Yorker’s View of the World,” with the jaunty arrogance of that illustration turned to isolation and paranoia, seemed so inevitable in retrospect that I couldn’t believe I hadn’t thought of it. Week after week, seeing that he’d once again drawn exactly the cartoon I would have if only I had thought of it, I paid him the sincerest compliment any cartoonist can give to a colleague: seething jealousy and resentment.

Notice, by the way, that Bolling hardly ever gives us lessons in politics or angry diatribes; his cartoons more often express ambivalence and moral confusion. Propaganda always gives us answers and leaves us with complacent certainty; art admits to

ambiguity, contradiction, and uncomfortable, conflicted emotions. Art, like humor, is most effective when the artist doesn't condescend to explain things to his audience, when he takes them on as active collaborators. Ted Rall's most resonant strips end not with an angry caption telling us How It Is, Man, but with a wordless panel from which we infer our own conclusion: a corporate drone and a prisoner, each doing time in his cubicle/cell; an executed murderer and his victim buried side by side, abandoned in the ground, equally dead; an uncharged "detainee" sitting in his cell, waiting in vain for an indignant America to demand his freedom. Ward Sutton's strip "Sightings," a sort of comic-strip *Rashomon*, shows how each witness to the WTC attack has degraded his pure shocked perception of the event into an agenda, from litigious greed to political opportunism to jingoistic vengeance, until the unimaginable human tragedy at its epicenter has been obliterated. The strip is so haunting because instead of ending with this contemptuous generalization--*Look how obtuse and self-serving everyone is*--it returns instead to the desperate, unanswered question asked by a man trapped in one of the doomed towers as he futilely waves a white towel out a window: "Can anyone see me?"

"Who cares what you think?"

-George W. Bush, to Philadelphia journalist Bill Hanglely

Don't get me wrong; not even the funniest and most artful political cartoons are going to change the poll numbers by one one-thousandth of a percentage point, much less bring down The Man. Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. once estimated that the full barrage of American art directed against the Vietnam War had had the cumulative effect of "one

very large banana-cream pie, two meters in diameter, twenty centimeters thick, and dropped from a height of ten meters or more.”⁷ No cartoonist has ever drawn anything more hideous and damning than George Grosz’s caricatures of Weimar Republic generals and businessmen, but, in the end, he got the fuck out of Germany. Contemporary American politicians, more sanguine about satire than their predecessors and savvier about P.R. than their colleagues in banana republics, who still take their critics to task with cattle prods, know that freedom of expression is perfectly harmless and gives malcontents and fringe groups an outlet for their grouching. They’ve learned to appear humorous and self-deprecating, showing us all that they can laugh at themselves. Sometimes they even request originals of cartoons about themselves to hang on their office walls. This alone should serve as proof of the emasculation of political cartooning in the twenty-first century. History does not record that Boss Tweed ever asked for a framed Nast. Try to imagine the humorless and vindictive Nixon chuckling over Ralph Steadman’s drawing of Nixon’s own grimacing head being excised like a dripping malignancy from the heart of the Republic with a pair of forceps.

I’m writing this last paragraph the day after the Republicans won back control of the legislature. It becomes less tenable, as of today, to blame the blackening political skies solely on the Bush administration. It may be time to concede, regretfully, that the American people themselves are just plain stupid, and will reliably vote for whoever spends more on TV ads, and deserve whatever happens to them. The Republicans will make Bush’s tax cut permanent, ensuring that the wealthiest 1% of the country who

⁷Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. “Address to P.E.N. Conference in Stockholm, 1973,” from *Wampeters, Foma, & Granfalloon*, Dell, 1976, p. 226.

bought him the presidency will ride out the collapse of the economy at the same standard of living to which they've become accustomed. But I doubt the TV news and papers will waste too much airtime or column space on a boring, cerebral story like that; they'll be too distracted by the shiny new generation of high-tech weaponry we'll be deploying in Iraq, and the officially approved clips of footage from the front. Notice I'm sounding a lot like Rall and Tomorrow now. So far I'm failing to find the funny side of the situation. But I'm going to have to, by five o'clock on Monday. Basically, political cartooning requires the same hopeless, optimistic doublethink it takes to dissent in this country or, for that matter, to do anything else in this life: you understand, down to your core, that it won't make any difference, and get up every day and act as though it did. "Cartoons can't save the world," Ted Rall admits, "but that's no reason not to try."⁸ Yes. Right. Because useless is not the same as meaningless. It matters when the truth is spoken, even if nobody listens. And laughter, like truth, or love, is valuable for its own sake. Hey let's end by raising a toast:

"Someday, somewhere, somehow--everything will be funny for everyone."

-Robert Stone

Damascus Gate

⁸Rall's foreword to *Attitude*, p. 7.

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