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From the Collection

The Henry Spencer Collection

Steven Wilson

Editor's Note: Steven Wilson is the Assistant Director and Curator of the Abraham Lincoln Library & Museum in Harrogate, TN.

Political cartooning is neither new nor particularly creative, although credit should be given to those who manage to convey the message with the best artistic contrivances. Thomas Nast would be such an individual. Fortunately for America, Nast was also responsible for providing politics with the lumbering Republican Elephant and the modern versions of the braying Democratic Donkey, Uncle Sam, Santa Claus, and the personification of America, Columbia. Indeed, the pen is mightier than the sword.

Nast was a child when his family left Bavaria and settled in America, a few of the many who fled what would later become Germany because of political turmoil. A short, plump man with a flowing mustache and goatee, as a child he was a poor student but excelled at drawing. He worked as a staff artist and artist-correspondent for *Harper's Weekly*, the *New York Illustrated News*, *Frank Leslie's Illustrated News*, the *London Illustrated News*, and eventually returned to *Harper's Weekly*. He later became a staunch Republican and devoted to Abraham Lincoln.

During the Civil War, Nast's cartoons skewered the South, Jefferson Davis, and Southern sympathizers, as well as promoted Lincoln and the Union. His bigotry was fixed as readily as was his love of the Union and Lincoln. Anti-Irish, he viewed these Sons of Eire as little more than mindless brutes prone to violence and drunkenness. Born and raised Catholic, he later converted to Protestantism and turned his pen against the Catholic Church. In one cartoon, he depicted Catholic hierarchy crawling out of "*The American River Ganges*" toward a group of American school children, their miter drawn to resemble the snapping jaws of crocodiles. He despised slavery and bestowed Blacks with a humanity in his cartoons that infuriated pro-slavery Southerners and Northern Democrats alike. After the war, his targets included Andrew Johnson (in Nast's eyes he somehow betrayed everything that Lincoln stood for), anti-Reconstructionist politicians,

corrupt public officials, Congress, Chinese exclusionists, the Mormon Church, and the Ku Klux Klan. He also targeted the English aristocracy as well as the various royal households of Europe. Thomas Nast and his razor sharp pen were not at a loss for subjects. Ironically, Nast preferred to draw his cartoons on blocks of wood for the engraver so no part of the message was lost in translation from rough sketch to finished work, to woodblock rendering, to engraving.

Nast, of course, was not the first political cartoonist. That honor belongs to William Hogarth, an Englishman whose 18th Century cartoons attacked corruption in English politics. Two centuries later “Boss” Tweed of Tammany Hall was the target, as Nast’s pen pierced the corrupt politician’s thick hide. Tweed, a commissioner for public works, might have better assumed the title commissioner of private gains as he and his cronies defrauded New York City of millions. Nast’s cartoons attacking Tammany Hall (a Democratic Party organization that influenced city politics well into the 20th Century) were blunt, effective, and troubled Tweed so that he supposedly cried, “I don’t care a straw for your newspaper articles...my constituents don’t know how to read, but they can’t help seeing them damn pictures.” The October 21, 1871, cartoon for *Harper’s Weekly*, *The “Brains”* depicts Boss Tweed as a rotund body with a sack of money for a head. The image tells the reader everything that Nast wants you to know about Boss Tweed and his ambitions.

Perhaps more well-known is Nast’s version of Santa Claus, that, with some modification, is still how Americans picture the Christmas icon today. Nast’s remarkable talent was in converting sometimes complex subjects into line drawings, creating a visual shorthand still effective today. Thomas Nast’s cartoons remind us of a violent and troubled past, and how the efforts of one person can change society. Nast was a product of 19th Century society, and his prejudices cannot be overlooked. Even those elements of his personality provide insight into an America struggling with equality and acceptance that was still hindered by pettiness and deep-seated suspicion of those who were different.

The late Doctor Henry Spencer of Virginia was a personal friend with an interest in a variety of subjects and a passion for learning. Curious, always curious, Henry was a friend and supporter of Lincoln Memorial University, and especially to the Abraham Lincoln Library and Museum. His generosity, encouragement, and guidance enabled the museum to grow

its collection and its programs. The collection that bears his name contains hundreds of woodcuts from various artists and is one of the many examples of Henry Spencer's commitment to this museum.