

Analyzing Cartoons

GRADES 6-12



Overview

This activity is geared toward participants in grades 6-12. The estimated amount of time to deliver this lesson is 45 minutes.

In this lesson, participants will discuss the role of a historian and discuss how to interpret cartoons to learn about attitudes that may have existed in the past.

Participants will then evaluate the process of using cartoons to extract historical information and think of further context that might be needed to learn about a particular topic.



Objective

Participants will be able to identify considerations one should take when analyzing historic cartoons to learn about the past.



Materials

- Analyzing Cartoons Worksheet
- Katherine Keough Cartoon Clippings-Seven in Total
- Chart Paper
- Post-its



Set Up

Select four separate documents you would like the students to analyze. Create two columns on three pieces of chart paper and label them “Navy” and “Military,” “Women” and “Men,” and lastly “How are they Portrayed?” and “How is it shown in the cartoon?”



Inquiry

Ask participants:

- What makes a joke funny?
- What makes a joke not as successful?

Humor is often linked to shared experience. Comedians will often try to generate laughter using jokes that the majority of the audience would understand. Let participants know that you will be discussing the shared experience of people in the United States during World War II. If applicable, share images in your collection showing men and women contributing to the war effort.

- What might people see in the news during World War II?
- How might have men been contributing to the war effort during this time?
- How might have women been contributing to the war effort during this time?



Investigation

Let participants know that they will be analyzing gag cartoons to determine attitudes towards women and men serving during World War II. These cartoons were collected by Katherine Keough. She joined the WAVES as an ensign and retired from the Navy Reserves as a commander.

- How might attitudes towards women during World War II differ from attitudes today?
- What might a woman serving in the military during this time have to keep in mind that a man might not?
- How might a cartoon provide information on attitudes towards women during this time?

Let participants know that historical cartoons can be a primary source, and historians can use primary sources to learn about the past. Model using the “Analyzing a Cartoon” worksheet with the “Nuts and Jolts” gag cartoon. State your thinking out loud as you move through the questions below and invite participants to share their thoughts:

- What people, objects, symbols, or places in the cartoon stand out to you? What is their significance?
- What words stand out to you? What was happening in history when this cartoon was produced?
- What message does this cartoon convey?
- How do the words and visuals work together to convey this message?
- Who drew this cartoon? What might their goal have been?
- What can this cartoon tell us about this point of history that you might not learn anywhere else?



Activity

Analyzing Cartoons

Hand each participant an “Analyzing Cartoons” worksheet. Separate participants into groups of four. Assign each group one of the cartoons and provide individual copies to each member of that group. Provide time for each group to examine their cartoons and record their answers on their worksheet. Present three pieces of chart paper labeled “Navy” and “Military,” “Women,” and “Men” and divide each chart into two columns: “How are they Portrayed?” and “How is it shown in cartoon?” Hand out post-its to the group. Have participants write how they believe a group may be perceived on one post-it and images or text from the cartoon that makes them believe that on another post-it. Participants can then place their post-it on the appropriate chart paper.

- How are women portrayed in these cartoons?
- How are men portrayed in these cartoons?
- How is the Navy/military portrayed?

Have participants discuss the following:

- What did we learn by analyzing these cartoons?
- What is challenging about this process?
- What could potential next steps be as a historian?
- What other primary resources could help provide context on this topic?

Create a Gag Cartoon

Have participants create their own gag cartoon sharing life at their school or community. The gag cartoon should consist of a drawing and caption. Speech bubbles are optional.



Lesson Connection

See our lesson, **Analyzing Historic Photographs**, for more content on how historians interpret other images to learn about the past.



Background

A gag cartoon, also known as a panel cartoon or gag panel, is generally a single-panel cartoon which often includes text in the form of a caption. Some of these cartoons would be created by cartoonists employed by newspapers or magazines. Others would be syndicated, or sold to a magazine or newspaper to be published. A “gag” in show business is another word for a comedic idea and the goal of a gag cartoon is to generate laughter.

Publications such as the *Boston Herald*, *Chicago Tribune*, and *New Yorker* would present these cartoons to entertain their audiences. Cartoons provide subjective viewpoints about issues of the time and the people involved in them. Cartoons often draw upon current events, popular culture and common attitudes of the time. To make a cartoon successful, the cartoonist wants the jokes to be humorous and relatable to a large number of people.



Additional Resources/References

For access to primary source documents:

<http://docsteach.org/>

<https://www.fold3.com/>

<http://dp.la/>



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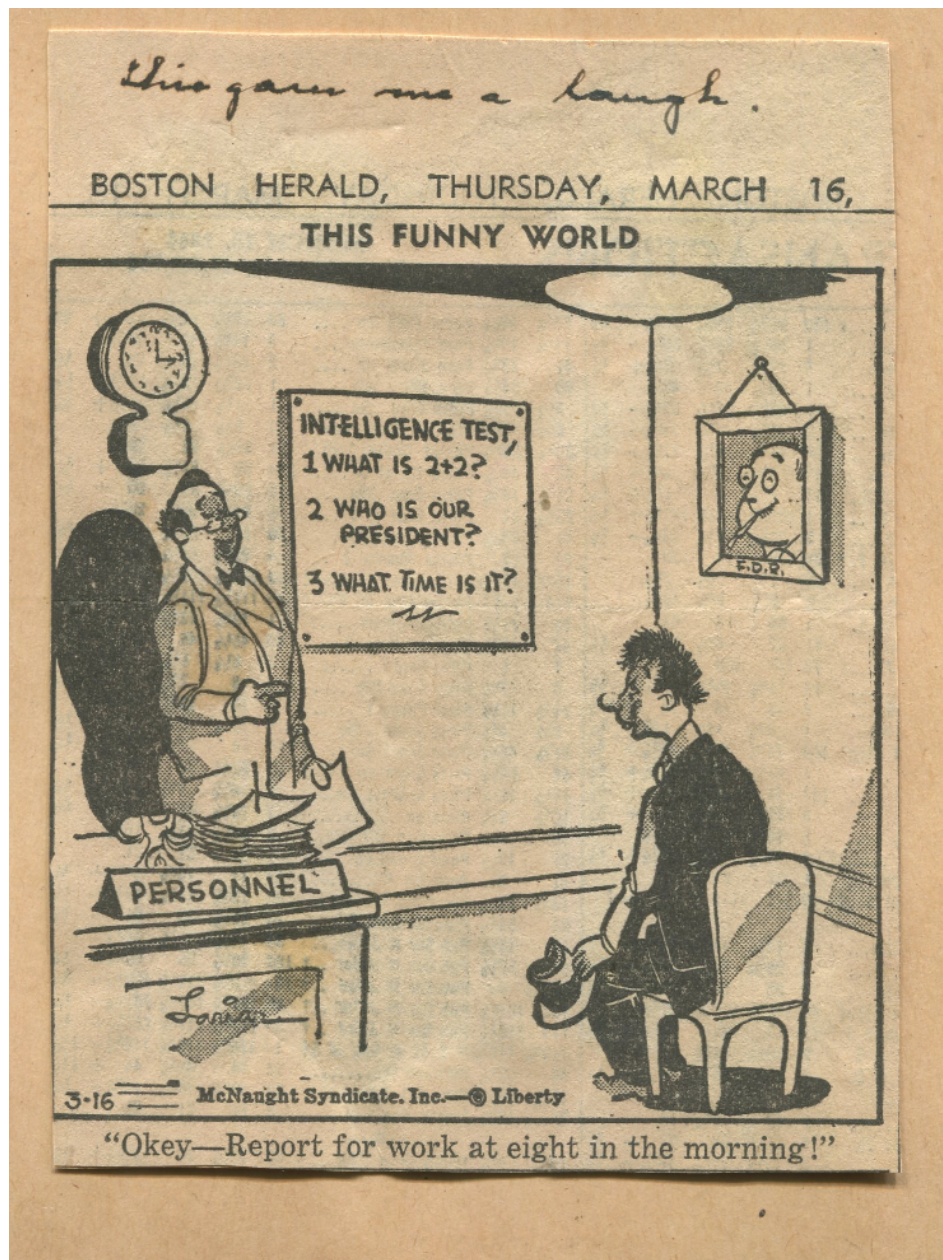
Full Muster: Inclusive Histories on Historic Naval Ships has been made possible in part by a major grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities: Democracy demands wisdom.

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Documents and Images



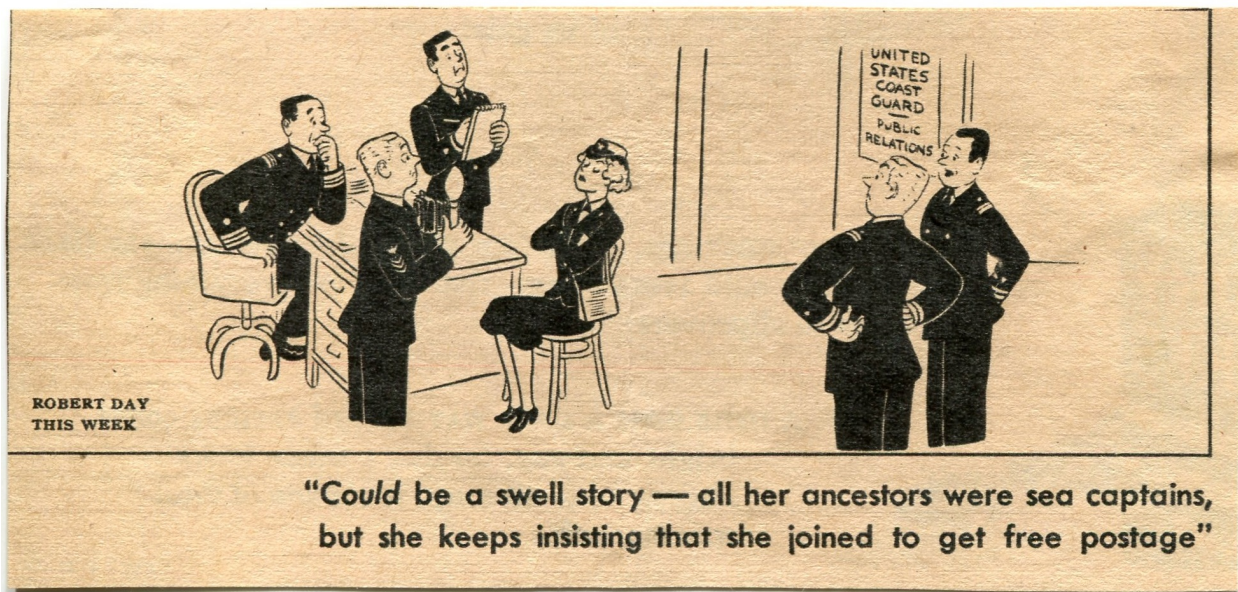
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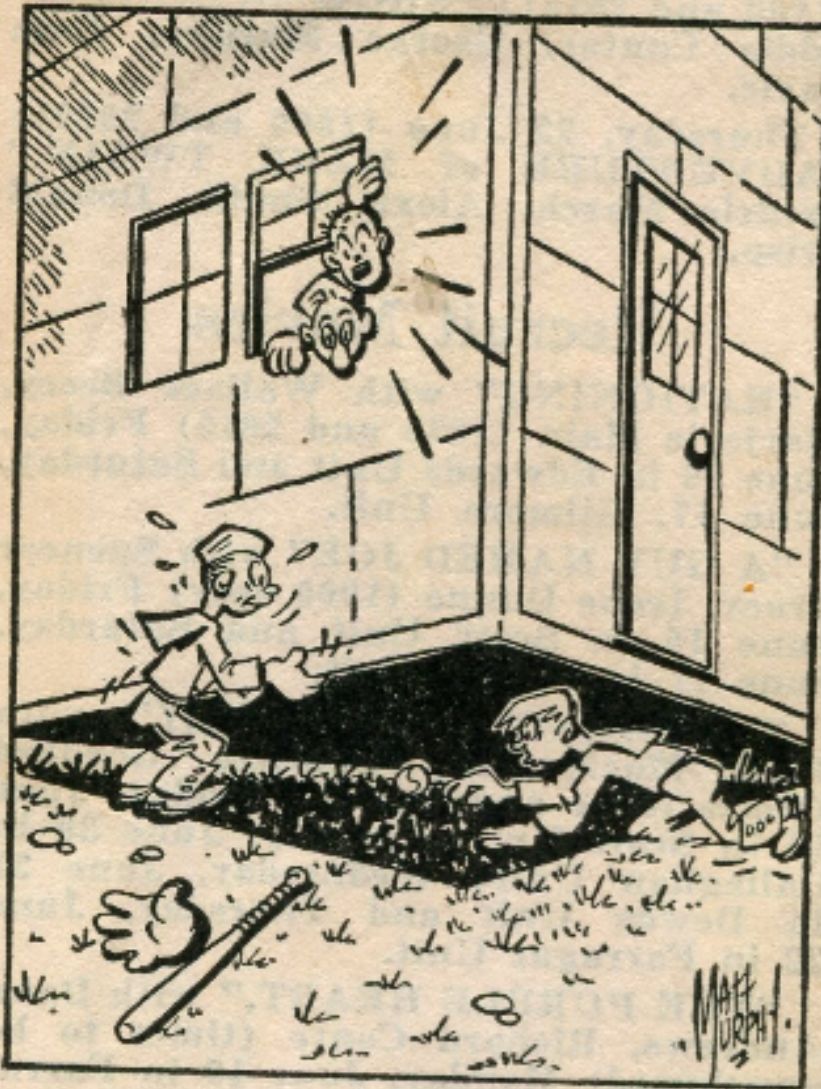
Credit: Courtesy of the Battleship New Jersey Museum and Memorial Collection, 2020.003.0264



Text: "Yes, mother. . . I do outrank him...but there's nothing in regulations that says I can order him to propose."

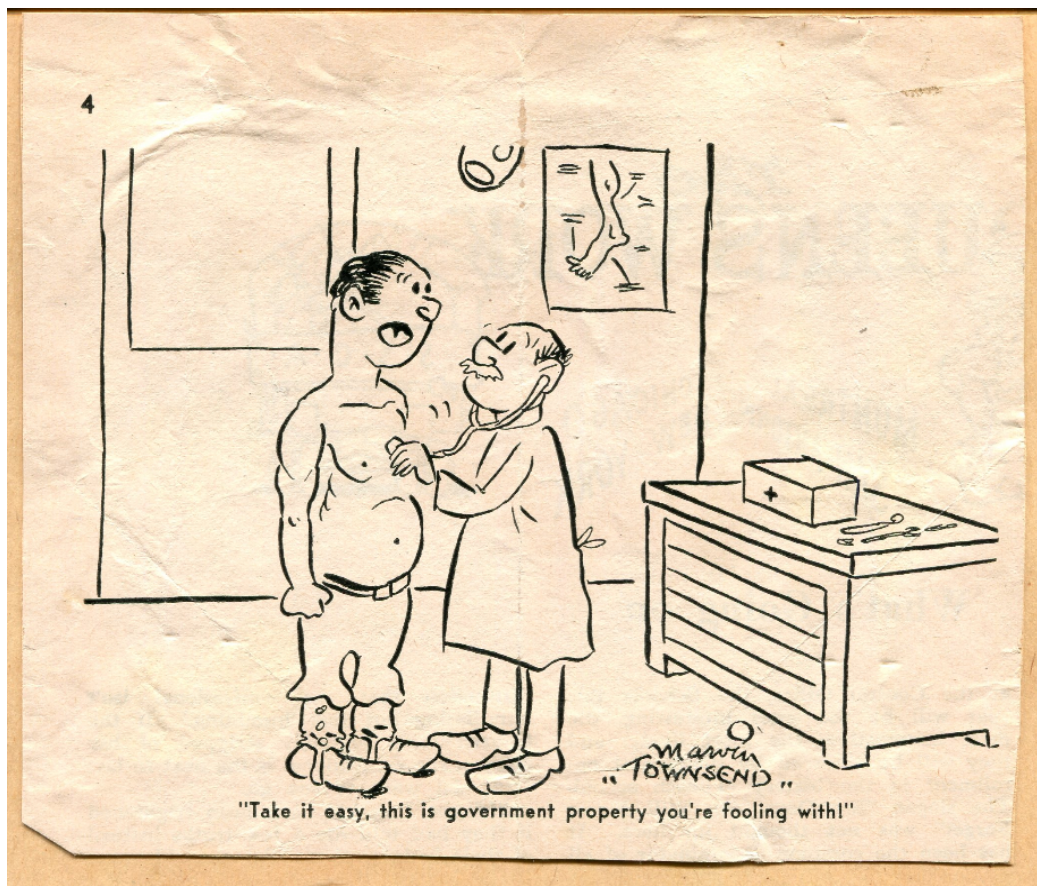
Credit: Courtesy of the Battleship New Jersey Museum and Memorial Collection, 2020.003.0264

BOOTS McGEE—



“Look what physical hardening did for McGee!”

Credit: Courtesy of the Battleship New Jersey Museum and Memorial Collection, 2020.003.0264



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