

LAMPOONING INJUSTICE: PAUL CONRAD'S PERSPECTIVE ON CIVIL RIGHTS

Introduction

The Huntington Library, Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens is a rich depository of government records, diaries and journals, maps, ephemera, and a wide variety of other documents. The Huntington recently acquired political cartoons by Paul Conrad, one of America's most renowned cartoonists, which offer unique perspectives on contemporary issues. The vast collection includes most of Conrad's cartoons from 1959 to the 1990s; a number of which focus on events in the civil rights movement. This lesson explores some aspects of the civil rights movement through an analysis of several cartoons drawn for the Los Angeles Times during this pivotal period in United States History. It is intended as a supplement to a more in-depth study of the movement.

Objectives

- ◆ To assess the power of political cartoons.
- ◆ To examine the Supreme Court's decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, Topeka.
- ◆ To analyze cartoons reflecting on the desegregation of public education.
- ◆ To chronicle pivotal events in the African American civil rights movement.
- ◆ To examine unresolved issues of school integration.

Background Information

Paul Conrad, a graduate of the University of Iowa with a degree in art, began his career as a political cartoonist with the Denver Post. He joined the staff of the Los Angeles Times in 1964 and for the next 30 years, his cartoons were a regular feature of the editorial page of the Los Angeles Times and syndicated to more than 100 newspapers around the nation. Conrad won a number of prestigious awards for his political cartoons including three Pulitzer prizes and four Robert F. Kennedy Awards for editorial cartooning. The subjects of some of Conrad's cartoons, however, offered no accolades and resented being lampooned by this noted syndicated cartoonist. President Richard Nixon, often the subject of Conrad's drawings during the Watergate era, placed him on the infamous "enemies list." California governor Ronald Reagan, on an almost daily basis called the publisher of the Los Angeles Times to complain about Conrad's latest drawing.

Conrad, struck by the disparity between the races in the United States, used his skills as a cartoonist to dramatize the events of the civil rights movement. Alarmed by the slow progress in achieving a truly desegregated school system, Conrad often harkened back to the 1954 Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, using it as a theme for cartoons throughout his career, including a cartoon drawn in 1996, two years after his retirement from the Los Angeles Times.

Ralph Waldo Emerson said, "Caricatures are often the truest history of the times." Conrad's drawings over the past 40 years at the Denver Post and the Los Angeles Times are a powerful record of key issues that have confronted our nation in the second half of the twentieth century.

Lesson Activities

_____1. **Examine Conrad’s editorial cartoon** that appeared in the Los Angeles Times on June 13, 1969, entitled “Nothing new to report again today, Mr. Hoover.” Work through the **cartoon analysis worksheet and write a quick summary of your findings**. Be aware that Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated on April 4, 1968. Also be aware that J. Edgar Hoover, Director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, had kept wire-taps on King for years and suspected that the civil rights movement was nothing more than a front for Communists. In your groups, **discuss how Conrad chose to illustrate Hoover’s paranoia**.

- What is the message that the cartoonist wishes to portray?
- What symbols did Conrad use in the cartoon?
- How effective is the cartoon?
- What emotions does the cartoon evoke today, a generation after it was first published?

[~30 minutes]

_____2. a. **Read the textbook account** of the events leading to the Supreme Court’s decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*. You should be familiar with the high court’s 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision. **Please read Justice John Marshall Harlan’s dissent** in the *Plessy* case on the class blog. Be aware that a series of court rulings prior to the *Brown* decision opened the way for this landmark decision (e.g., principally two 1950 Court decisions in *Sweatt v. Painter* and *McLaurin v. Oklahoma State Board of Regents* that sealed the fate of Jim Crow and the separate but equal ruling of *Plessy v. Ferguson*).

b. **Review the Brown decision online** at The National Center for Public Policy Research website (<http://www.nationalcenter.org/brown.html>) and **prepare key learnings** of your group to share with the class:

- the **issues in the case** and the **reasoning behind the unanimous decision** of the Court. (Five separate school segregation cases from the District of Columbia, Delaware, Virginia, South Carolina, and Kansas were before the Court. These cases were consolidated and appeared alphabetically on the Court’s docket with *Brown v. Board of Education*, *Topeka, Kansas*, being the first.)
- also **focus on the 1955 decision** rearguing the *Brown* decision on the question of relief, commonly known as **Brown II**, which has been widely criticized as lacking the moral imperative of the first decision offering no guidance other than calling for desegregation “. . . with all deliberate speed” leaving interpretation open.

[~50 minutes]

_____3. a. After sharing key learnings with the class, **read Document B, The Southern Manifesto**, signed by 19 Senators and 81 members of the House of Representatives. **Take notes** on the following questions as you read:

- Why did the signers of the Manifesto regard the Supreme Court’s decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* as an abuse of judicial power?
- Why do the signers of the document believe that the Fourteenth Amendment does not apply in this case?
- Why do they believe that the 1896 *Plessy* ruling should have guided the Court’s ruling in the *Brown* case?

b. After discussing the Southern Manifesto in your group, **write a brief editorial either supporting or rejecting the point of view expressed by Southern legislators.** (Notice a newspaper editorial is about a paragraph or two in length.)

[~30 minutes]

____4. Get into groups of four (one group will have five). Each group will be assigned a Conrad cartoon, Documents C, D, E, and F. In your group **use clues from the cartoon to investigate issues to which Conrad alludes, researching and discussing** your assigned cartoon.

· **Group 1 and 2—Document C**— should focus on the Burger Court (Warren G. Burger) and recognize that the school integration decisions of the Warren Court were not overturned.

· **Groups 3-4, Document D and Groups 5-6, Document E**—should examine President Richard Nixon’s “Southern Strategy” as a means of “going slow” on school integration as a way of building a solid Republican majority in the South.

· **Group 7 and 8—Document F**— should examine the slow process of school integration as late as 1972.

[~30 minutes]

Whole class sharing out: **Explain the issues that formed the basis of your group’s Conrad cartoon.** [~10 minutes]

____5. Each person in your group, **read a different link:**

- a synopsis of Civil Rights Acts of 1957 , or this source
- a synopsis of Civil Rights Acts of 1964 , or this source
- a synopsis of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, or this source
- an account of the 1960 Civil Rights Act and the political maneuvering that ultimately weaken the bill to make it virtually ineffective

Discuss the differences in the Civil Rights Acts of 1957 and 1964.

Answer the following in your notebook and **discuss** with your group members:

- 1· What events precipitated stronger civil rights legislation in 1964 and 1965?
- 2· How did the 1964 and 1965 acts strengthen the federal government’s role in promoting civil rights?
- 3· To what extent did the civil rights acts of 1957, 1964, and 1965 repress state’s rights and alter the federal system established by the Constitution?
- 4· In your opinion, were these acts necessary? Explain.

[~30 minutes]

6. **Draw a political cartoon** reflecting your views on any one of these three civil rights acts.

Answer: How do cartoons draw attention to issues and marshal public opinion to support a cause? [~30 minutes]

Extra Credit Activities

1. Research one of the pivotal battles in the struggle for civil rights (e.g., integration of Central High School, Little Rock, Arkansas, 1957; burning of a bus carrying Freedom Riders outside Anniston, Alabama on Mother's Day, 1961; integration of the University of Mississippi, 1962; use of police dogs and fire hoses in Birmingham, 1963; Bloody Sunday at the Edmund Pettus Bridge, Selma, Alabama, 1965; school bussing in Boston, 1974). Draw a political cartoon illustrating the event and display the cartoon along with an eyewitness account.
2. Write an account explaining how the achievements of the African American civil rights movement influenced the quests of American Indians, Asian Americans, and Hispanic Americans for civil rights and equal opportunities.
3. Research the American Indian Movement (AIM) of the 1960s and 1970s. Analyze Conrad's November 12, 1972 cartoon "If you don't like it here, why don't you people go back where you came from!"

Please see cartoon on blog post 7/11/16

- How does Conrad use the "Love America or Leave It" slogan of the 1970s as a basis for the cartoon?
- What is the point Conrad is making?
- Do you think the cartoonist has conveyed a clear message?
- How would you have drawn the cartoon differently?