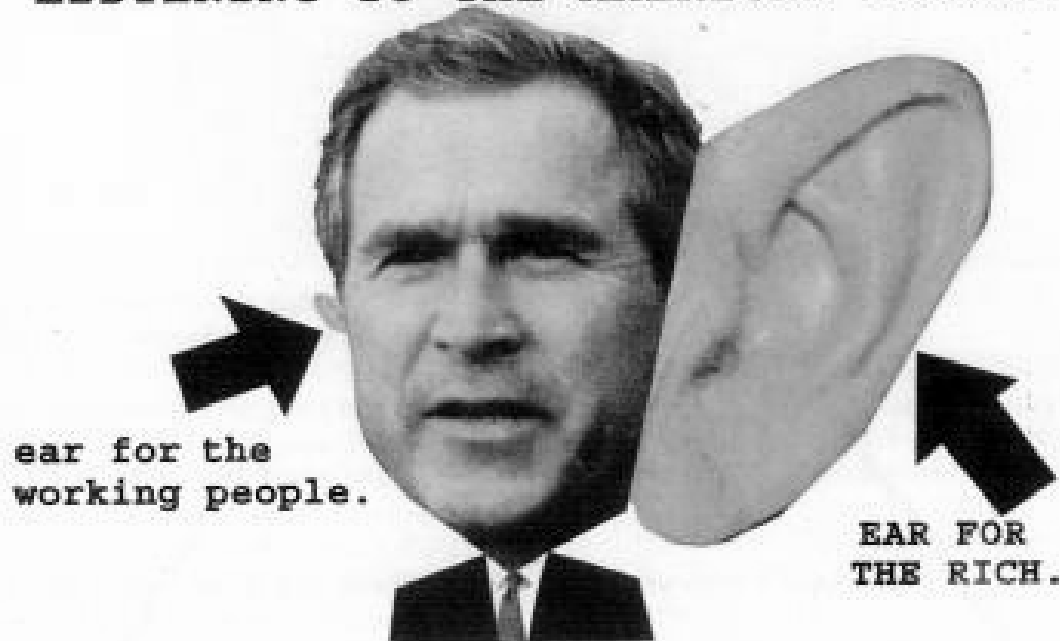


LITTLE MURDERS

Thirty years ago, editorial illustration in our mainstream media was provocative and smart, driving the words as often as following them. Today much of it is literal and safe, more decorative than idea-driven. How did this happen in an age where image is everything?

LISTENING TO THE AMERICAN PEOPLE



STEPHEN WACHNIGER

BY JESSE SUNENBLICK

When Howell Raines quit *The New York Times*, Jerelle Kraus publicly called him Caligula, because he chopped off people's heads before they got to speak. Now she is telling me how Raines saw penises everywhere, in the most innocent, ridiculous places, making her job as op-ed art director difficult. "Nobody else would see it, but he would see it," she tells me, "and then I'd have to

change it." What she remembers is a pencil. A Janusz Kapusta illustration of a round-erased pencil, signing a peace treaty, which she had to square off, in 1993, because of Caligula. "Get it?" she says. "A round-erased pencil?" I got it.

It was hard enough defending imagery that confronted religion or politics or race; to be on the lookout for accidental phalli was just another reminder of how far op-ed had fallen. Kraus knew better than anyone. No other art director had lasted more than roughly two years but she



ing to visually surprise readers by adding things like puzzle pages, stand alone art, and charts and graphs. Then he moved on to caricature. "What's wrong with hinting at something rather than beating our readers over the head with a sledgehammer, resorting to the obvious?" We

talked some more like that, and I believed him. He was opening up the page, and some illustrators I spoke with said he was easier to work with than his predecessor.

But in expanding the experience of the page, as he put it, it seemed to me that something had been lost. And when he then suggested that op-ed was still home to great art, I couldn't help but feel we were talking across some unbridgeable divide. Everything was fine to him. "Op-ed is one of the last places for black-and-white illustration," Shipley said. "It's something we cherish. I want people to think about illustration the same way they think about the articles. They don't have to get it in the first read."

Yes, that's what illustrators wanted, too. But that kind of nuance is rare today.

In the Cathie Bleck illustration, Humpty Dumpty bounces broken-shelled against the ground while a dove of peace watches shamefully, atop a nearby wall. It is succinct, not mysterious. The only human characteristic is a generic, downturned mouth and beady, disgruntled eyes. "It's an image that's been used before, sure," Bleck told me. "When you're in such a tight timeframe, and you don't hit the nail on the head a couple times, it's easy to go back to an image people are comfortable with. Because they wanted something that would convey an array of feelings on the Middle East."

But she *had* turned in two other images, one of which might have been at least something to ponder: a surrealist image of an open doorway leading to a barren room with a Turkish façade and cracked walls, indicating, in her words, destruction and in-

trospection. After all I had heard, it seems obvious why this tack didn't work. But why not Humpty Dumpty?

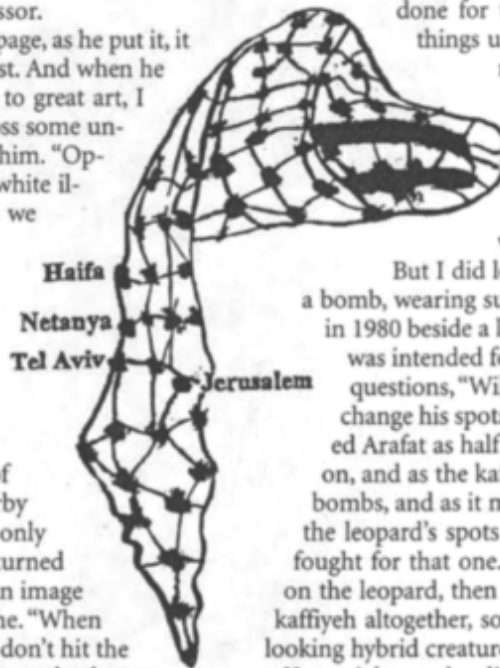
I looked and looked at it. Guarnaccia had e-mailed Bleck saying, "Thanks for the wonderful job," and hours later it had been rejected. Hidden somewhere was a fatal flaw, but what? I remembered something Robert Grossman had told me, regarding faces. They almost never use an identifiable face, he had said. "Human faces make them nervous, so they often use something that's symbolic — hammers and sickles and stars."

And so Mark Podwal came to mind. Among other things, he does Arafats, and nobody could ever accuse the man of being impartial. He'd shown me three Arafats he had done for the *Times* that also seemed to sum things up, but differently. In a way, it was irrelevant to look; if they didn't let Humpty Dumpty through there was no way Arafat would get through. And if you couldn't draw Arafat, and you couldn't humanize Humpty Dumpty, what was left in the middle?

But I did look. The first image was of Arafat as a bomb, wearing sunglasses and his kaffiyeh, which ran in 1980 beside a letter to the editor. The second image was intended for a 1996 op-ed article that asked the questions, "Will the PLO stop terrorism? Can Arafat change his spots?" The original he submitted depicted Arafat as half lamb, half leopard, with his kaffiyeh on, and as the kaffiyeh draped down its spots became bombs, and as it merged with the leopard you saw that the leopard's spots were also bombs. Jerelle Kraus had fought for that one. First an editor removed the bombs on the leopard, then the bombs on the kaffiyeh, then the kaffiyeh altogether, so all that remained was a ridiculous-looking hybrid creature.

You might say he did the third one intentionally bland. Because he knew how times had changed. This was last year. He didn't even bother drawing Arafat. He simply drew the kaffiyeh, and as it flowed down it became a map of Palestine. But you know the story with that one. Because you never saw it. ■

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'Can Arafat change his spots?'