

Earl Raab

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ON EDITORIAL CARTOONS

Editorial cartoons have had a special place in journalism. They can often be more powerful than newspaper articles or essays for good or for evil, as Jews have had occasion to learn, even as recently as last week in San Francisco.

The editorial cartoon is caricature, hyperbole, a distillation of some important piece of truth- or falsehood. An editorial cartoonist named Nast achieved fame more than a half century ago by depicting the corruption of Tammany Hall in New York.

He did it not by carefully documenting that corruption; that was someone else's job. Nast did it by projecting a pictorial image of fat, corrupt-looking bosses which stuck in the public's mind. Those images became politically potent. In Nazi Germany, Streicher did it by projecting pictorial images of beak-nosed, corrupt-looking Jews. In combination with other material these images stuck in the public's mind.

An editorial cartoonist has a lot of power, and therefore responsibility. With a few strokes of the pen, a cartoonist can transmit personal biases or misconceptions to hundreds of thousands of people. And of all journalists, with close competition from headline-writers and photographers, the editorial cartoonist is susceptible to the "Cheap Shot."

A Cheap Shot, in this case is when the editorial cartoonist twists an important truth in order to get the biggest bang for his drawing line; to give the biggest jolt to his audience. That is when the editorial cartoonist strays furthest from journalism and comes closest to show business. When he does that, the editorial cartoonist unwittingly caricatures the worst that is in the media today.

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Last week, a Chronicle editorial cartoonist named Meyer did a drawing of Begin looking reflectively at the Beirut massacre date, stamped like a concentration camp number on his arm. The thrust of the image was to compare the Israeli role in the Beirut massacre to the Nazi role in the Holocaust.

One doubts that the cartoonist really believed in the truth of that comparison. It was a Cheap Shot. Suppose a cartoonist drew a picture of the publisher of the *Chronicle* personally massacring women and children because he wanted an independent Palestinian state with PLO control - or, indeed, because he published cartoons of the kind we saw in the Chronicle last week. Those would also have been a Cheap Shot.

The Cheap Shot is attractive for cartoonists; but it is an abomination on the editorial page of a presumably responsible newspaper. How can it be averted? Well, newspapers are not required to publish every cartoon they receive from their own staff cartoonists or from the syndicates. They cannot wrap themselves in the First Amendment everytime they publish a cartoon, because in fact they censor out cartoons every week- for a variety of reasons, including the fact that they don't agree with them.

Of course, if newspapers publish Cheap Shots for the same reason that the editorial cartoonist draw them - for commercial, show-business reasons- then we are in deeper trouble. The *Chronicle* has had more than its share

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of Cheap Shot cartoons.

In any case, citizens should object (as did the organized Jewish community). Newspapers are not vitally wounded when they get a number of cancellations; sometimes they revel in such cancellations. On the other hand, no one should be required to have something offensive come into his or her home; and a cancellation is a signal that a reader is seriously offended. However, with or without such a signal, readers should let the cartoonist and publisher know what they think of such Cheap Shots.