As David Holmgren ably demonstrates in the following article, no matter what the subject or point of view, political cartoons offer insight about public figures, events, and issues, whether they were published yesterday or 80 years ago. The medium of the political cartoon privileges one individual—the cartoonist—to express a personal point of view, usually in a prominent position on the editorial or front page. Capable of swaying the perceptions of thousands of viewers, an effective cartoon has the power to influence opinion, policy, and votes. Like today’s media commentators and Internet bloggers, political cartoonists celebrate, exaggerate, discredit, and mislead. They might also express tenderness, sorrow, fear, and, almost always, a sharp sense of humor.

Political cartoons like the ones in this article are only one component of a richly illustrated museum exhibit at the State Historical Building in Des Moines. “Portrait of a Governor: A Life, A Legacy” reveals the personal lives and public achievements of Iowa’s territorial and state governors through artifacts, images, and information. Objects used by Iowa governors range from Tom Vilsack’s Blackberry to Nathan Kendall’s magnificent top hat, from Robert Ray’s executive chair to George Clarke’s electric car, and from Terry Branstad’s motivational sign given to him by Rev. Robert Schuller to William Harding’s “Icy-Hot” thermos. Items representing Iowa’s newest governor, Chet Culver, are also included.

—Iby Jack Lufkin, curator

IOWA’S GOVERNORS IN CARTOONS

By DAVID HOLMGREN

We Americans love a good laugh at our leaders. We generally take them dead seriously when we vote for them on Election Day, but that doesn’t stop us from deeply imbibing all the media sources of humor directed against them. Whether those sources are newspapers, magazines, books, Internet, or late-night comedians, we never let our leaders forget that we’re the boss and they are here to serve us. This irreverent national tradition of ours is a healthy reflection of life in a democratic society. We elect our leaders, usually respect them, and even love a few of them, but we are not expected to salute, idolize, or worship them, and we exercise the right to express our opinions. That right is held especially dear by political cartoonists.

Political cartooning is probably the oldest form of this irreverence through illustration—an American tradition older than the Republic itself. Before the Revolution, Benjamin Franklin lampooned the British in cartoons that he circulated among friends. In the 1790s, Thomas Jefferson was drawn quite harshly by those who feared he was an atheist or out to destroy the new Constitution with its federal system. In the 1830s, Andrew Jackson was caricatured for issues ranging from Cabinet capers to his eradication of the Second Bank of the United States. Lincoln was depicted as an apish figure, a tyrant, and a primitive backwoods buffoon. The potency of any political cartoon diminishes as new controversies arise and new leaders take the stage, but the caricatures become icons, recognizable for decades—Theodore Roosevelt with his pince-nez and toothy grin, Franklin D. Roosevelt with a cigarette holder cocked arrogantly, Lyndon Johnson’s gigantic Dumbo ears, and Richard Nixon’s huge jowls and five o’clock shadow.

Political cartooning began in some Iowa newspapers by the end of the 19th century. Iowa’s governors have been frequent targets, although less often during the world wars and the Great Depression. The following cartoons from the last century and the stories behind them remind us of the dramatic power shifts and the consuming issues in Iowa politics, as drawn by some of Iowa’s most well-known and opinionated cartoonists.
Cartooning in Iowa newspapers coincided with the beginning of the Progressive Era (1900-1917). In general terms, the progressives fought for political, economic, and social reform to address national problems created by the growth of industry and large cities, and by the shift from a rural to an increasingly urban nation. In Iowa, progressives focused on liquor control, education, woman suffrage, election procedures, and curbing monopolies and corporate power (particularly by the railroads). Until the election of Democrat Woodrow Wilson to the presidency in 1912, progressivism in Iowa, as well as in the rest of America, resided largely within the Republican Party, divided between the new, insurgent progressives, and the older, establishment groups known either as stand-patters or conservatives.

In 1900, conservative Republican Leslie Shaw was governor of Iowa. One of his political allies was Judge Nathaniel M. Hubbard of Cedar Rapids and Marion, attorney for the powerful Chicago & North Western Railway. In this cartoon, Hubbard is portrayed as exerting political pressure on Governor Shaw in dictating political appointments. Hubbard disliked former governor William Larrabee's progressive inclinations, especially regulating Iowa railroads. Seated in the governor's chair, Shaw appears as a more passive but pragmatic figure, while Hubbard pushes Shaw to replace Larrabee on the Board of Control (which oversaw state hospitals and asylums, prisons and reform schools, the state orphanage and veterans home, and schools for those who were deaf or blind).

Other conservative allies of Shaw were U.S. Senators William Boyd Allison and John H. Gear; Congressmen John A. T. Hull, William P. Hepburn, and David B. Henderson (who was also Speaker of the House); and Sioux City Journal editor George D. Perkins. Some of these stand-patters would appear in other political cartoons during the Progressive Era in Iowa. This one was drawn by Tyler McWhorter, who began political cartooning in 1896 at the Des Moines Leader.
Progressive Republican Albert Baird Cummins was elected to succeed Shaw as governor in 1901. Early in 1906, Cummins broke Iowa's two-term tradition by running for a third term as governor. Among the issues that he addressed was railroad regulation. Many Iowans believed that the railroads dominated both political and economic life in Iowa; they exploited farmers by setting exorbitantly high freight rates to carry farm products to market and bought off elected officials and other influential Iowans with free passes.

Cummins was challenged for renomination by Republican stand-patter George D. Perkins, editor of the *Sioux City Journal*. Perkins received emphatic support from his paper's own political cartoonist, the young J. N. ("Ding") Darling. Even though Cummins was a progressive fighting for stronger railroad regulation, Darling depicted him as an ineffective reformer in this cartoon in May 1906. Darling left the *Sioux City Journal* later that year to start his long and distinguished career at the Des Moines Register.
Despite the strong challenge by the conservative George Perkins, Cummins won renomination for a third term as governor. However, the fight had been cantankerous, especially at one head-to-head debate that nearly degenerated into a shouting match. A considerable number of conservative Republicans were further disaffected by Cummins's renomination. A few weeks before the election, Ding Darling portrayed Cummins's partial loss of Republican support. The cartoon fairly predicted the result on Election Day. Many Republicans chose either to vote Democratic or to sit at home on Election Day. Whereas Cummins had won his two previous elections with margins of about 80,000 votes, he won reelection in 1906 by only 20,000.

Despite opening the fight between progressive and conservative Republicans, Cummins's reelection was partly due to the underlying strength of the Republican Party in Iowa, a continuing political heritage from the Civil War era. Although the Democratic Party had considerable support in Iowa, only rarely did it gain enough voter support to win the governorship or control the state legislature. During the 70 years between the Civil War and the Great Depression, only one Democrat, Horace Boies, served as governor (1890–1894).
Almost immediately after Cummins won reelection, he began casting covetous eyes on a U.S. Senate seat, an objective of his since 1893. In turn, many conservative and progressive leaders began dreaming about sitting in the governor's chair, and speculation and gossip rose rapidly. Today we complain about the never-ending nature of political campaigning, but this was also true a century ago. Ding Darling's cartoon in May 1907 reflected Iowans' exasperation with campaigns starting up even before the dust settles on the last one.

Cummins did not seek reelection as governor; he was expecting longtime conservative William Boyd Allison to retire from the Senate, where he had served since 1873. To Cummins's chagrin, Allison announced his candidacy for another six-year term, even though he was nearly 80 and an invalid from prostatic cancer. Allied with conservatives in Iowa and old-guard Republicans in Washington, Allison won renomination in June 1908.

Meanwhile, for governor, Republicans nominated State Auditor Beryl F. Carroll, a conservative. He beat out Lieutenant Governor Warren Garst, a Coon Rapids farmer and Cummins's progressive protégé for the nomination. It now appeared that progressives were to be eclipsed in the Republican Party in Iowa and that Cummins's political career was over.
Then in August 1908, only two months after winning the renomination, Senator Allison died, and Iowa's political landscape suddenly changed. Intense political maneuvering and deal making followed. Cummins made no secret of his desire to run for the Senate. As governor, he called for a special session of the legislature to deal with the Senate vacancy for the next term. Legislators amended election law and allowed a primary in conjunction with the general election on November 3, to be followed in three weeks by a special election in the legislature.

On Election Day, it came as no surprise when Beryl Carroll was elected governor, and Cummins handily won the primary for the Senate seat. Three weeks later, the legislature met and elected Cummins to finish Allison's Senate term, initiating a sudden rapid-fire rotation in the governorship. Rather than serving out his term, Cummins immediately resigned as governor, and his lieutenant governor, Warren Garst, was inaugurated as governor for a tenure of only seven weeks.

Ding Darling commemorated this turnover with two cartoons that ran in successive morning editions of the Des Moines Register and Leader. And on inauguration day in January 1909, his friendly cartoon showed the Iowa public welcoming Carroll as he moves down the hall from the state auditor's office to the governor's office.
By the late spring of 1910, the national Republican Party was entering the crisis that in two years would lead to a disastrous rupture between conservative supporters of William Howard Taft and progressive supporters of Theodore Roosevelt. The debacle would lead in turn to Republican defeat and changes in both progressive and national leadership of the Democratic Party.

This 1910 division within the national Republican Party was reflected precisely in Iowa. In Ding Darling's cartoon, progressive U.S. Senators Albert Cummins and Jonathan Prentiss Dolliver lead a crusade carrying the "Roosevelt Standard of Progressive Republicanism" to surmount "vested interests." Although Dolliver was a more experienced and powerful congressman, a gifted orator, and a recognized leader of the progressives, Darling drew Cummins, not Dolliver, as the standard-bearer.

The smashed and stunned figures under "Vested Interests" are old-guard Republican leaders: "Uncle Joe" Cannon, Speaker of the House, and Nelson Aldrich, senator from Rhode Island. On the right, a skeptical and disapproving Iowa public glowers at three Iowa conservatives digging in their heels, Governor Carroll and U.S. Representatives John A. T. Hull and Walter I. Smith. A week after the cartoon appeared, Carroll and Smith were narrowly renominated, while Hull, a Civil War veteran and congressman for nearly 20 years, lost the renomination.
Under the nation’s Constitution, U.S. senators were elected by state legislatures, not by the voters. As the Progressive Era unfolded in the early 1900s, however, demand for popular election of senators began to rise. Many states were nominating senatorial candidates through primaries, and state legislators pledged to support the voters’ choice. In February 1911, the Iowa legislature voted for popular election, but the attempt to change was abruptly halted by Governor Carroll, who was just beginning his second term.

Carroll vetoed the bill on February 21, prompting Ding Darling’s two-part, unflattering cartoon of the governor the next day, Washington’s Birthday, which marked both events.

Two years later, the 17th Amendment to the Constitution was ratified, which required popular election of senators in all states.

P. S.—George Washington wasn’t the only one that didn’t know the difference between a perfectly good cherry tree and a bramble bush.
Governor Carroll retired at the end of his second term and was succeeded in January 1913 by George W. Clarke. Early in 1915, just as Clarke was beginning his second term, he ruffled feathers in the state legislature by raising questions in his biennial message about the legislature's hiring practices. For example, he asked why the legislature was employing more doormen for the Capitol than there were doors in the building. He also questioned the hiring of well-to-do veterans for jobs in the Capitol while poor veterans were passed over for consideration.

Clarke blew the lid off the pot by charging that these hiring practices constituted graft. A host of legislators considered Clarke's accusations deeply insulting and "unmanly." Clarke responded that he did not mean to imply that laws had been broken, only that the legislature needed to be less political and more mindful about spending the taxpayers' money. The episode created the impression for some that the governor was calmly asking reasonable questions while the legislature was overreacting. Darling's cartoon on February 1, 1915, reflected that impression.
In 1916, Republicans selected Lieutenant Governor William L. Harding to run as Clarke's successor. At that time, progressive elements in both parties were demanding road improvements and prohibition. Iowa's roads were still mostly dirt, especially in rural areas. Gravel and paved roads would help farmers market their crops more efficiently and profitably, leading to increased agricultural production and indirectly to increased commerce and industry. As to the second issue—prohibition—Iowa's long history of dissension among temperance crusaders, ethnic and religious groups, and liquor interests was reaching its climax.

The governor's race that year was unusual because neither candidate campaigned on traditional party positions. Republicans tended to be prohibitionists and at least the party's progressive wing supported the Good Roads movement, but their candidate, Harding, opposed prohibition and claimed that road improvements were too expensive. Democrats were generally antiprohibition and proponents of small government and low spending, but candidate Edwin T. Meredith ran as a prohibitionist and was unable to deflect Harding's charges that he favored high state spending for road improvements.

In this confusing political year in Iowa, leading Republican newspapers supported Meredith. Ding Darling created a series of anti-Harding cartoons in the Des Moines Register. In this one, Harding's allies are unsavory liquor interests and greedy corporations who are deceiving the honest Iowa farmer while attacking citizens who favor good government and good roads. Several weeks later, Harding won the election, again probably because of Iowa's strong historical leaning to the Republican Party. He went on to serve two often stormy terms in office.
During World War I and the 1920s, Republicans continued to dominate both the governor’s office and the state legislature, but the coming of the Great Depression brought tremendous political changes. In 1930, shortly after the stock market crash, three-term governor John Hammill sought a U.S. Senate seat, and the Republicans nominated progressive Dan W. Turner, a former state legislator and progressive. He was elected that fall.

Unfortunately for Turner, the start of his term in January 1931 coincided with a deepening of the Depression and the rise of farm militancy led by Milo Reno and the Iowa Farmers Union. By the summer of 1932, Republicans in Iowa, as across the nation, were facing hostile voters with a national election only months away.

Iowa Democrats nominated Clyde Herring, a former car dealer and 1920 gubernatorial candidate, to oppose Turner. On Election Day the Democratic sweep across the country led by Franklin D. Roosevelt also swept Herring into the governor’s office. During the interim between election and inauguration, the economic crisis deepened nationally. Although Turner and Herring worked together amicably during the transition, they were unable to limit the burgeoning debt of farmers and increasing farm foreclosures. Two days after taking office, Herring issued a proclamation calling for a moratorium on farm foreclosures. Ding Darling’s cartoon a few days later showed Herring’s frantic, first effort to deal with the crisis. Just as a farmer crushed by farm debt is about to lose his farm by a sheriff’s sale, the new governor points to imminent farm legislation.

Although Herring’s proclamation had no legal force, the urgency of the moment helped Herring obtain first temporary, and later permanent legislative acts to aid struggling farmers. Herring went on to serve two terms as governor and then one term in the U.S. Senate.

By the late 1930s, the Democratic tide across the nation began to ebb, and this was particularly noticeable in Iowa. After Herring’s two terms as governor, and one term by Democrat Nelson Kraschel (1937–1939), the state began to resume its normal Republican voting patterns. In 1938 Republican George Wilson unseated Kraschel, and in 1942 Bourke B. Hickenlooper succeeded Wilson. Hickenlooper went on to win a U.S. Senate seat in 1944, and Iowans elected another Republican, Robert Blue, as governor.
This cartoon from August 1946 shows how a cartoonist can take out his personal wrath on an elected official. Skilled cartoonist Ding Darling was also a conservation activist whose vision and hard work led to a consolidated state natural resources agency. In the summer of 1946, Darling became increasingly disturbed with what he viewed as Governor Robert Blue’s interference with the State Conservation Commission’s operations by appointing political associates indifferent to conservation.

Darling’s attack on Blue and Republican State Chair Willis B. York seemed sudden and harsh because neither conservation issues nor the commission’s operations had been in the news prior to the cartoon. Although the public response to the cartoon seemed favorable, Darling felt compelled to issue a statement the following day clarifying his reasons for the cartoon. He pointed to at least one of Blue’s appointments to the commission as being very partisan on a commission that had an established nonpartisan reputation. Indeed, his public statement was at least as harsh on Blue as the cartoon had been.

The outcome was a standoff. Darling’s popularity remained high, and Blue was easily reelected governor that fall.
In 1948, Governor Blue lost his bid for a third term in the June primary to Republican William S. Beardsley, a druggist, farmer, and state representative from Warren County. Beardsley went on to win the election in November.

Little more than a year later, in January 1950, the Republican campaign pot in Iowa was already boiling. Beardsley and U.S. Senator Bourke B. Hickenlooper both announced their intentions to run for reelection. Beardsley was unopposed for renomination, but not Hickenlooper. Republican Harry B. Thompson of Muscatine also announced his candidacy for the Senate, and there were rumblings of other Republican challengers. In this ironic cartoon, a happy Republican elephant seems to invite even more Republicans to throw their hats in the ring. Both Beardsley and Hickenlooper easily won renomination and reelection.

The cartoon was drawn by Tom Carlisle, who had started at the Des Moines Register in 1926 as Ding Darling's assistant. When Darling retired in April 1949, Carlisle became chief cartoonist for the next decade until his own retirement.
The Republican trend continued until the mid-1950s. Beardsley won a third term in 1952, and Republican Leo Hoegh was elected governor after Beardsley announced plans to retire. Yet another Republican, Leo Elthon, served very briefly as governor when Beardsley was tragically killed in a car accident on November 21, 1954, only seven weeks before Hoegh was to take office.

During the summer of 1956, northwestern Iowa suffered first from drought and then from hail storms. In a two-day tour inspecting the crop damage, Hoegh was in a National Guard plane when the fuel gauge apparently malfunctioned. Out of fuel, the engine sputtered and died at 1,000 feet. The pilot skillfully guided the plane to a bumpy landing in a field near Harlan, and everyone on board escaped without injury.

Frank Miller drew this cartoon for the Des Moines Register and Tribune in the aftermath of what could have been a second tragedy for the governor’s office in less than two years.

Miller joined the staff at the Des Moines Register in 1953. His cartoons usually appeared on the editorial page.
That new kind of corn is sure doing well in Iowa.

By the late 1950s, in Iowa and across the nation, the political tide was turning against the GOP. Republican governor Hoegh’s bid for reelection was upset on Election Day by Democrat Herschel Loveless of Ottumwa. Loveless was the first Democratic governor in 18 years. Although Democrats across the nation increased their majorities in Congress, Iowa Republicans reelected Hickenlooper to the Senate and retained control of all other statewide elective offices as well as the legislature.

In November 1958, cartoonist Frank Miller caught the joy of Democrats and the dismay of Republicans a few days after the election. Not only had Loveless won another term, but Democrats picked up a number of other statewide offices and sent three new Democrats to the U.S. House of Representatives.

Among the party’s victors that year was political newcomer Harold E. Hughes, elected to the Iowa State Commerce Commission; and Neal Smith, elected to his first term in the U.S. House of Representatives. Smith would be reelected continuously until 1994.
In 1960, Herschel Loveless decided to run for a U.S. Senate seat instead of a third term as governor. The state attorney general, Republican Norman Erbe, was elected governor. In 1962, he faced reelection against State Commerce Commissioner Harold E. Hughes.

Perhaps the most charged campaign issue was liquor control, characterized for decades as “the wets” versus “the drys.” Iowa historically leaned politically and culturally toward liquor control, and in 1934, a year after national prohibition had ended, Iowa established the State Liquor Commission to control sales and consumption.

A reformed alcoholic, Harold Hughes opposed the existing system of liquor purchase: only state-owned stores could sell liquor by the bottle, which could then be served at home or at a private “key club.” Although a bar could sell a bottle of beer, it could not legally sell a glass of liquor. Hughes argued that this system bred corruption and was unenforceable. Any bar could charge a dollar for membership and call itself a club. Hughes campaigned for liquor to be sold by the drink at establishments with liquor licenses.

Erbe was not able to clarify his position on liquor-by-the-drink, whereas Hughes took a clear and forthright stand in favor of it. On Election Day, Hughes upset Erbe’s reelection effort and entered office in January. Just ten days later this Frank Miller cartoon appeared in the Des Moines Register, showing Hughes charging into the treacherous political battle on liquor-by-the-drink.

In 1964 and 1966, Hughes went on to win two more terms as governor, both by landsides. Even in 1968, when Iowa went strongly Republican, Hughes won a seat in the U.S. Senate.
When Harold Hughes was elected to the U.S. Senate in 1968, Robert Ray, state chair of the Republican Party, was elected governor. In 1970 Ray was narrowly reelected, but in 1972 he was reelected by a landslide. In 1974, Ray ran for an unprecedented fourth term. Despite the drubbing Republicans took at the polls across the nation because of the Watergate scandals and economic inflation, Ray won again in a landslide. (A change in the state constitution increased the governor’s term from two to four years, following a national trend.)

This fourth victory began to give Ray an aura of political invincibility. By early 1978, with Democrats in control of the legislature and Republican prospects uncertain, Iowa Republicans were overjoyed when Ray announced that he would run for a fifth term. In February, Frank Miller drew this Republican elephant rejoicing in front of Terrace Hill, the governor’s home. The cartoon captured the essence of Republican sentiment. In the fall, Ray was reelected in a landslide victory. He wound up serving as governor for a total of 14 years over five terms. No previous governor had even approached this record.
Robert Ray retired in 1982. Lieutenant Governor Terry Branstad was elected governor and was subsequently reelected in 1986 and 1990.

When Branstad announced his candidacy for a fourth term, he faced a primary challenge from Congressman Fred Grandy of Sioux City. Grandy had been a celebrity from the television show *Love Boat* in the 1970s and '80s, on which he had played the ship’s purser, “Gopher.” Back in Sioux City, Grandy had been elected to Congress in 1986, but many Iowans still informally referred to him as “Gopher” rather than as “Congressman Grandy.” Late in 1993, as Grandy considered challenging Branstad, Des Moines Register cartoonist Brian Duffy drew this cartoon, suggesting what might have been the governor’s discomfort at this prospect.

Grandy did indeed challenge Branstad for renomination. Nevertheless, Branstad won renomination and reelection.

These cartoons spanning a century are only a small part of Iowa’s rich heritage of political humor. Our right to freely express our opinions of our leaders includes the right to enjoy an occasional chuckle while contemplating a cartoonist’s pointed message, for political cartoons convey far more than humor. Through the art of illustration and caricature, they deliver strong opinions with the power to influence the public.

David Holmgren has worked as both an employee and volunteer at the State Historical Society of Iowa. He has been a researcher and writer for Iowa’s battle flags collection and the Iowa governors exhibit. He has a master’s degree in history from Iowa State University.

NOTE ON SOURCES

A search for political cartoons over the past century included many major newspapers in Iowa, including the Des Moines Capital, Marshalltown Republican, Cedar Rapids Gazette, Davenport Democrat, and Council Bluffs Non-Pareil. None of these appeared to have an in-house cartoonist dealing with state or local issues. Most of these papers reprinted syndicated cartoons on national and international issues, and even then seldom on a daily basis. One cartoon was found in the Eagle Grove Eagle, published in Governor Blue’s hometown shortly after his election to office; it was not used for this article. The newspapers most likely to have a political cartoonist on staff were those published in Des Moines, Iowa’s capital and largest city. Research in the Des Moines Leader and Des Moines Register, as well as in the Sioux City Journal, centered on those periods when the legislature was in session or during campaigns.