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Satirizing Strife: Currier and Ives Political Cartoons

Megan A. Sutter
Gettysburg College

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Satirizing Strife: Currier and Ives Political Cartoons

Abstract

Currier and Ives' prints were a large part of the media during the Civil War era. Not only were Romantic prints sold and hung in people's parlors, but cartoons were also very popular. It is important to remember that Currier and Ives' goal was not to produce fine art, but to make a product that was attractive to middle-class consumers. Thus, political and social cartoons became a way to attract customers. They tried to stay away from controversial topics; however, their Darktown series was one of their best-selling series of the day. Today, the Darktown series is rarely displayed and relatively unknown because of its controversial depictions of slavery and African-Americans. The press also rarely took sides, but when pushed upon took up the side with the more popular argument. Special Collections is fortunate to have two Currier and Ives cartoons. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

The Gettysburg Compiler, Civil War, 150th Anniversary, Gettysburg, Civil War Memory, Sesquicentennial, 19th century newspapers, Currier & Ives, Currier and Ives, satire, cartoon, Civil War press

Disciplines

American Art and Architecture | History | United States History

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This blog post originally appeared in [The Gettysburg Compiler](#) and was created by students at Gettysburg College.

THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

Satirizing Strife: Currier and Ives Political Cartoons

February 28, 2014

By: Meg Sutter, '16

Currier and Ives' prints were a large part of the media during the Civil War era. Not only were Romantic prints sold and hung in people's parlors, but cartoons were also very popular. It is important to remember that Currier and Ives' goal was not to produce fine art, but to make a product that was attractive to middle-class consumers. Thus, political and social cartoons became a way to attract customers. They tried to stay away from controversial topics; however, their Darktown series was one of their best-selling series of the day. Today, the Darktown series is rarely displayed and relatively unknown because of its controversial depictions of slavery and African-Americans. The press also rarely took sides, but when pushed upon took up the side with the more popular argument. Special Collections is fortunate to have two Currier and Ives cartoons. The first cartoon, discussed below, illustrates a common criticism towards the Union during the war. It mocks a political conflict before the war, and the other displays a common criticism towards the Union during the war.



“Distinguished Militia Genl. During An Action”

One political cartoon that Special Collections has is entitled “Distinguished Militia Genl. During An Action.” This lithograph dates from around 1861 to 1862 and displays a Union general consulting a military tactics manual in the midst of battle. Soldiers are lying dead all around his horse yet he’s exclaiming that his last order did not have the supposed outcome and therefore he must check his manual. Humorously the officer says: “Oh! ah! – I see, – the next is to retreat.” Another

solider nearby is telling a confederate soldier not to kill his commander because they would be lost without his commands. The cartoon satirizes the fact that many Union generals at the beginning of the war were not necessarily qualified or had the experience to lead their troops into battle. It can be argued that part of the reason that the Union was unsuccessful in battle during the first half of the war was because it did not have strong military leadership. Many of the Union's military officers had little to no experience in combat, especially as commanders. While the generals were chosen by presidential appointment, the other officers were often appointed by governors. This created a wide range of officers with different backgrounds, many of whom lacked military experience. While West Point graduates made-up a good portion of the officer class, the majority of them went to serve for the Confederacy. When officers were killed in battle the replacements were questionable. Lower ranking officers were promoted, some without earning the promotion, but the troops needed a replacement officer for those who fell dead. In some cases, officers were assigned to new regiments with men they did not know. These new officers were often met with contempt because they did not belong. Whatever the case, we know for a fact that the people of the north knew about this flaw in their leadership. If they had not, we would not have this wonderfully sarcastic Currier and Ives political cartoon from 1861.

Stay tuned for insight into another Currier and Ives' political cartoon, "The Irrepressible Conflict."

Image:

Currier and Ives. "Distinguished Militia Genl. During An Action." Image Courtesy of Gettysburg College Special Collections.