

THE POLITICAL CARTOON: A RHETORICAL TRANSACTION

Joseph M. Ferri

Joseph M. Ferri is Associate Professor of Speech Communication in the Department of English. He received his Master of Science degree from Emerson College, Boston and his Ph.D. in Rhetoric and Communication from Temple University, Philadelphia. His dissertation topic was *Pedro Albizu Campos, "El Maestro": Translation and Rhetorical Analysis of Selected Speeches*. Ferri has been co-editor of *Puerto Rican Voices: Oral History in Print* and has published and presented studies in rhetoric and public address, nonverbal communication, intercultural communication and mass media.

The political cartoon is a rhetorical transaction directed toward a predetermined end, and its function is "to form attitudes or to induce action in other human agents".¹ Its message employs symbols, written and pictorial, to attack a wrong or a threat to man and society. The symbols reflect the loyalty and support of a particular ideology by the cartoonist. There occurs an identification with the values, beliefs and procedures of one system and a demonstration of alienation to those of the opposing system.

The political cartoonist is a "social commentator with weapons, wit, symbolism, animalism - to direct at man and institutions."² The cartoon is a traditional form of visual satire; therefore, it should be, as David Worcester states, "the engine of anger, rather than the direct expression of anger," and should have as its aim "a preconceived purpose."³ Within the constraints placed on visual satire by the printed media, its message functions as an engine of anger and as an act of persuasion.

The cartoonist is attack-oriented. Bill Maudlin states: "A cartoonist can't really be 'for somebody.' He must find something and hit it."⁴ However, his/her message is seldom pure

¹ Kenneth Burke. *The Rhetoric of Motives*. (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1969), 41.

² Morton Keller. *The Art and Politics of Thomas Nast*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), 4.

³ David Worcester. *The Art of Satire*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1940), 13.

⁴ Bill Maudlin as quoted in J. Chal Vinson. *Thomas Nast: Political Cartoonist*. (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1967), 12. The cartoon reproductions at the end of the article come from this work. The numbers on the cartoons are those given by the publishers.

invective, direct abuse, or expression of anger. The message should tell the truth laughing. The essence of satire is wit which may be defined as "the power of giving pleasure by combining and contrasting ideas," and the quality of speech or writing which can "surprise and delight by its unexpectedness."⁵ Through wit – which rests on the ability to discover and reveal the power hidden in language by the linking together of two incongruous ideas, or a sudden revelation of concealed implications, or ingenious comparison – the message is presented.

The cartoonist, a molder of public opinion, seeks agreement with his/her public concerning the truth of the message and the fitness of the subject for wrath. The cartoonist, however, should be careful, for if he/she continues to rage when the public is content to rest, rapport will be lost.

This discussion of the political cartoon as a rhetorical transaction shall restrict itself to the messages presented in the pictorial satires of Thomas Nast, the North American cartoonist, during the Grant-Greeley Presidential Campaign of 1872. Nast believed the Republicans and President Grant were the instruments of the nation, of progress and liberalism, and of humanity. On the other hand, the Democrats were the voice of secession, of reaction, of Negrophobia, and of violence. In his pictorial satires, Nast expressed the following: (1) war was futile; (2) the Negro should be protected, especially his right to vote; (3) capitalism was the best way of life; (4) political graft and corruption were caused by the Democrats, Tammany Hall and Boss Tweed; (5) Catholics, Communists, and Internationalists were attempting to destroy the American way of life; (6) the rights of minority groups, especially the American Indian and the Chinese, had to be protected.⁶

The presidential campaigns from 1864 to 1884 were primarily centered on personalities rather than on complex issues. If the personalities were well-defined, like Greeley's, Nast was extremely effective in his pictorial satires.

⁵ Matthew Hodgart. *Satire*. (New York: World University Library, 1969), 111.

⁶ Nast, however, was extremely hostile toward the Irish Americans because of their involvement with the Democratic Party, their laborer status, and their Roman Catholic faith.

Thomas Nast, in his messages through the pictorial satire, could select one of the aims of satire – to destroy or to amend. The satirist, in either the literary or the pictorial message, is faced with the task of deciding what the purpose is and by what means it can be accomplished. The most prominent strategy employed by most satirists is reduction, and the devices are: caricature, imagery, disparaging comparison, and *reductio ad absurdum*. Even though more than one satiric device may be present in a single pictorial satire, this discussion shall present each independently. The most dominant device for the reduction strategy shall be named, defined, and exemplified.

Table 1 illustrates the satiric spectrum; Table 2 organizes the fictional components and places the satiric devices used for persuasion under each.

TABLE 1
SATIRIC SPECTRUM

	Punitive Satire (Seeks to delight by revealing the indignation to which some recognizable victim is exposed)
Attack Oriented ⁷	Persuasive Satire (Seeks to persuade by reduction strategies with some degree of comparison either to something above the subject/object being satirized, with the intention of showing inadequacy, or to something below with the intention of degrading)

⁷ By Edward W. Rosenheim's definition, satire, punitive or persuasive, is "an attack by means of a manifest fiction upon discernible historical particulars." *Swift and the Satirist's Art* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1963).

TABLE 2
FICTIONAL COMPONENTS OF SATIRE

1. Distortion
 - a. Caricature
 - b. Imagery
2. Analogy
 - a. Disparaging comparison
 - b. Paradox
 - c. High burlesque
 - d. Low burlesque
3. Pure Fabrication
 - a. Grotesque satire
 - b. *Reductio ad absurdum*

The first satiric device, caricature, is used to reduce the false hero who claims a respect which is not due. The caricature is "a grotesque or ludicrous representation of scorn or ridicule of human vices or follies and exaggeration of their most characteristic features by means of graphic images."⁸ The cartoonist uses this device to strip the mask from the persona to reveal the truth behind or beneath the surface of mere outward appearance. When the mask is removed, the cartoonist selects what is to be utilized. The selection is determined by the message and by socially and culturally bound cognitive and affective factors. The cartoonist seeks a rhetoric of cooperation, rather than one of conflict or apathy, through a sharing of commonly understood symbol systems.

In the Thomas Nast cartoons of Horace Greeley, the attack is centered on the personality and character of the candidate rather than on the issues involved in the 1872 campaign. Greeley, the editor of the *New York Tribune*, was selected by a coalition of Liberal Republicans and Democrats to be the Democratic presidential candidate. The Republican reconstruction policies were being challenged by this group. Republican slogans such as "Should the cause won on the bat-

⁸Laurence Streicher, "On a Theory of Political Caricature," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 9 (1967), 431.

tlefield be lost at the polls?" and "Grant beat Davis - Greeley bailed him" were prevalent during the campaign. Since Nast supported Grant and his policies, he attacked Greeley, the Democrats, and the Liberal Republicans headed by the once staunch and respectable Union men Sumner, Schurz, Blair, Fenton and others.

Horace Greeley was highly esteemed for his journalism, but was also highly eccentric and considered "a perfect mark for any caricaturist."⁹ Greeley had a moon face fringed with whiskers, wore small steel-rimmed glasses, a tall white hat, a loose fitting white coat, and carried a green umbrella. In addition to these physical factors, Greeley was extremely outspoken and dogmatic. He would frequently reverse his opinions and take the opposite stance. It was fairly easy for Nast not only to caricature Greeley but also to refute Greeley's policies by quoting from his own writings from past years to show the stark contradiction of this candidate's statements.

In the first Nast cartoons to reduce the image of the man, the Democratic candidate, Greeley, was depicted as nothing; e.g., no threat to Grant's re-election and the continuation of Republican policies. Nast drew the white coat, hat and the glasses, symbols associated with the Democratic nominee, but he included no head or body. The pictorial reduction was reinforced by the caption: "Something That Will Blow Over." These early cartoons were found to be amusing even by Greeley himself. However, after the Democrats hired Matt Morgan, the English cartoonist, to match pens with Nast, the "campaign of caricature" began.¹⁰ Morgan depicted Grant as: (1) an intoxicated military tyrant; (2) a drunken Jeremy Diddler¹¹ dancing for Boss Tweed; (3) a Belshazzar leering and drunken on his throne; (4) an embezzler greater than Tweed. The Nast cartoons then became bitter.

Nast had to "destroy the unity that exists between people's character as we know them, and their speeches and actions, by replacing either the exalted figures or their utterances by

⁹Vinson, 24.

¹⁰Albert B. Paine. *Thomas Nast: His Period and His Pictures*. (New York: Macmillan Press, 1904) Chapter 28 title.

¹¹Jeremy Diddler was a stage character noted for his tricks and for fraud. Vinson, 24.

inferior ones."¹² Greeley had to be shown as a foolish man whose judgment and public credibility were questionable. The caricature to reduce the man depicted Greeley with an exaggerated stomach and bottom to lower dignity, with un-groomed side whiskers and hair to emphasize disjointed coherence, and small but prominent eyes to stress greed and ambition. Greeley's judgment and credibility were questioned in "Red Hot." Nast shows a sweating, corpulent presidential candidate trying to eat from a steaming bowl containing Greeley's own words and former editorials and marked: "My Own Words and Deeds." A second example depicts a cruel Greeley in charge of a whipping post, swinging a whip, and branding "liar," "thief," and "convict" (Greeley's own words formerly applied to the Democrats) on the bare backs of the Blacks whose right to vote Greeley had once fought for.

The second satiric device employed by Nast to diminish and downgrade the Democratic presidential candidate was the use of images. His messages contained a comparison to inferior images: the animal and the fool.

Nast utilizes the animal image and depicts Greeley as: (1) a trained organ grinder's monkey holding a tin cup to collect votes from the Democrats of Tammany Hall - Tweed, Sweeney and Hall. In an upstairs window, a hooded figure marked "K.K.K." is seen next to Andrew Johnson; (2) a Trojan horse ridden by Charles Sumner and standing outside the gates of Washington, D.C. With these images of animals, Nast not only makes a comparison to inferiors but also emphasizes the manipulative character of Greeley and his adoption of all the evils of the Democrats.

The fool image is used by Nast to reveal stupidity. The observer is expected to laugh at the pictures and to agree with the label. Greeley is depicted in the following ludicrous situations and actions: (1) at the top of a ladder as he attempts to cover using only his white coat and hat a tall statue dedicated to slavery, the Ku Klux Klan, and Tammany Hall; (2) in a sinking ship which had struck a huge rock marked: "Tammany Ring Corruption," "Slavery," "K.K.K.," "War Issues," and "Secession." Greeley is trying to bail out the rushing water

with only a small dipper; (3) Greeley is seen in a Roman arena and is white-washing the stripes of corruption, graft, robbery, and illegal voting procedures perpetuated on the Tammany tiger; (4) as he holds a horn marked "N.Y. Trombone",¹³ Greeley is shouting: "Whoever calls this an 'organ' is a liar, villain and a scoundrel."

In the series of pictorial messages designed to reduce Greeley's personality and credibility, Nast employs the disparaging comparison which is the distortion of the familiar, an unexpected analogy. The messages had already downgraded or diminished the Greeley image through comparison with the animal and the fool symbols. Nast now depicts Greeley in the following ways: (1) Greeley is seen as a gentleman farmer accepting the combined Democratic and Republican nomination from Greeley, the editor. In the background, the Democratic donkey kicks fiercely when joined to an unhappy ox, representing Greeley's Republican following;¹⁴ (2) In "The Disaffected Senators" Schurz, Fenton, Trumbull, and Sumner, dressed as the conspirators of "Julius Caesar," are considering the selection of Greeley, dressed as a Roman senator but also wearing his tall white hat and his glasses; (3) In "Home-Stretched" Greeley, as a knight, is dismounted from his Democratic donkey by Grant. This jousting takes place before figures of Uncle Sam and Columbia who are seated in a throne box.¹⁵

The last satiric device to be considered is *reductio ad absurdum*. The political cartoonist pretends that his/her opponent's idea is excellent. The idea is not only applied to an actual situation but also exaggerates its appropriateness to the ultimate degree, until it becomes quite clear that the idea is ludicrous. Nast combines Greeley's words with pictorial satire to utilize the *reductio ad absurdum* strategy. The following are three examples of this satiric device: (1) "We are on the home

¹³ Greeley was the editor of the *New York Tribune*.

¹⁴ Albert Paine states: "It was not believed at that time (February) that Greeley was a Democratic Presidential possibility. Nevertheless, Nast, with his usual insight, did not fail to strike the precise situation as it developed a few months later." Paine, 220.

¹⁵ The last two examples may also be classified in Worcester's terminology -high burlesque- which in the comparison establishes a standard far exceeding the capabilities of the victim. Worcester, 44.

¹² Freud as quoted in Hodgart, 110.

stretch" were Greeley's words printed in the *New York Tribune* (9 October 1872). Nast utilized these words in a caption of a pictorial satire published a week before the election. A prostrate Greeley is being carried by two Liberal Republicans to a Chappaqua farmhouse and a young boy is running after the litter and solemn procession to return a tag marked "And Gratz Brown"¹⁶ which had fallen from Greeley's coat; (2) "Let Us Clasp Hands Over the Bloody Chasm" was the slogan of Greeley and the Liberal Republicans after the Civil War. The visual message showed Greeley attempting to clasp hands with the specters of the Union soldiers who had died victims of atrocities at Andersonville Prison. In Greeley's coat pocket was a pamphlet entitled "What I Know About Shaking Hands Over the Bloodiest Chasm," and a skull and bones with "Whoever Entered Here Left Hope Behind" was prominent beside the Greeley figure; (3) "Another Feather in His Hat" depicts the Democratic nominee placing in his hat a "Cincinnati Convention" feather. Among the feathers already in the hat are expressions from Greeley's editorials - "Peaceful Secession, 1860," "On to Richmond, 1861," "Peaceful Negotiations at Niagara, 1863," "Down with Lincoln, 1864," "Bailing Jeff Davis, 1865" and "Anything to Beat Grant, 1872." All of these expressions combined with the visual to further reduce Greeley's image and his chances for election to the Presidency of the United States.

Horace Greeley did not win the election; Grant was re-elected to a second term. Greeley returned to the editorship of the *New York Tribune*; however, he died on November 29th. The critics of Thomas Nast blamed the political cartoonist not only for the defeat of Greeley at the polls but also for his death.¹⁷

¹⁶Early in the campaign, Nast could not find a photograph of the Vice-presidential candidate, Gratz Brown, so he drew a tag on the coat of Greeley and marked it "And Gratz Brown." This was so popular with the Nast public that Brown's face was never shown by Nast throughout his series of pictorial messages during the election campaign.

¹⁷In February, 1903, Chauncey Depew read into the Congressional Record his account of Greeley's death and implied Nast was the contributing factor. Later, in a sworn affidavit, the *New York Tribune* revealed that Greeley had been seriously ill throughout the campaign and had been seriously affected by the death of his wife in 1872. Paine, 536-538.

The political ideology of Thomas Nast orbited around President Grant and the Republican Party; he remained, even after corruption charges against Grant and his administration were made, a firm believer in the slogan: "As soon doubt Christ as to doubt Grant."¹⁸ This identification with Grant and his administration was so complete that Nast was unable to be an objective critic of the political scene. When the editors of *Harper's* reluctantly admitted some irregularities in the Grant administration, the faith of Nast in the "Savior" of the North was not shaken. Of the hundreds of political cartoons published by Nast, only one criticized Grant.¹⁹

At the end of his first Presidential campaign, Grant said, "Two things elected me —the sword of Sheridan and the pencil of Thomas Nast."²⁰ After the 1872 campaign, grateful Republicans offered Nast a sinecure as official American Commissioner to the Vienna Exposition and started a testimonial fund for \$10,000. Both offers were refused by Nast. In 1872, Nast was receiving a salary of \$18,000, almost four times the earnings of most Congressmen and only \$7,000 less than President Grant's pay.²¹

Harper's had the largest circulation of illustrated papers of the time - an estimated circulation of over 100,000.²² Through his weekly cartoon or cartoons, the Nast messages, in the visual satire form, attacked the opponents of Grant and his administration. The political campaigns in the period following the Civil War were power struggles which concentrated on personalities. Therefore, the Nast messages centered their attack on Greeley - his personality, character, and association with Democratic political thought. Greeley, as stated earlier, was a perfect "mark" for a caricaturist, and the Greeley inability to maintain a steadfast point of view was employed by Nast to weaken Greeley's candidacy.

¹⁸Vinson, 23.

¹⁹After Grant appointed Alexander Shepherd as Governor of Washington, D.C. Nast drew the figure of Columbia as she chastized Grant: "Don't let us have anymore of this nonsense. It is a good trait to stand by one's friends, but..." Paine, 294.

²⁰Paine, 139.

²¹Vinson, 25-26

²²Vinson, 5.

Nast's purpose was to destroy the support Greeley collected due to his editorship of the *New York Tribune*. Horace Greeley was popular,²³ personable, brilliant and impulsive. It was this last quality that Nast exploited to show the "real" Greeley in order to reduce his credibility. In the pictorial satire it is the presentation of the incongruity and inconstancy which attempted to mold public opinion by focusing on this weakness. Greeley's words were combined with the visual to verify the editorial comments of *Harper's*: "If there is one quality which is indispensable to a President, it is sound judgment. If there is one public man who is totally destitute of it, it is Horace Greeley."²⁴

In addition to the attack on the Greeley personality and character, the message seeks to establish an identification of Democratic vices and weaknesses with Greeley. The Democrats were the voice of the discontented; the Republicans were the instrument of the Union. The political climate of the North was captured by Robert Ingersoll, who stated: "Soldiers, every scar you have on your heroic bodies was given you by a Democrat. Every scar, every arm that is missing, every limb that is gone, is a souvenir of a Democrat."²⁵ Nast's messages reminded the public of the roles taken by Democrats and inserted the Greeley figure into the scheme to establish his identification with these negative roles.²⁶

It may be concluded that the political cartoon is a rhetorical transaction with distinctive features. Its form is the visual satire which combines written and pictorial symbols, and the agent seeks a rhetoric of cooperation in order to influence or persuade the observer of a particular ideology.

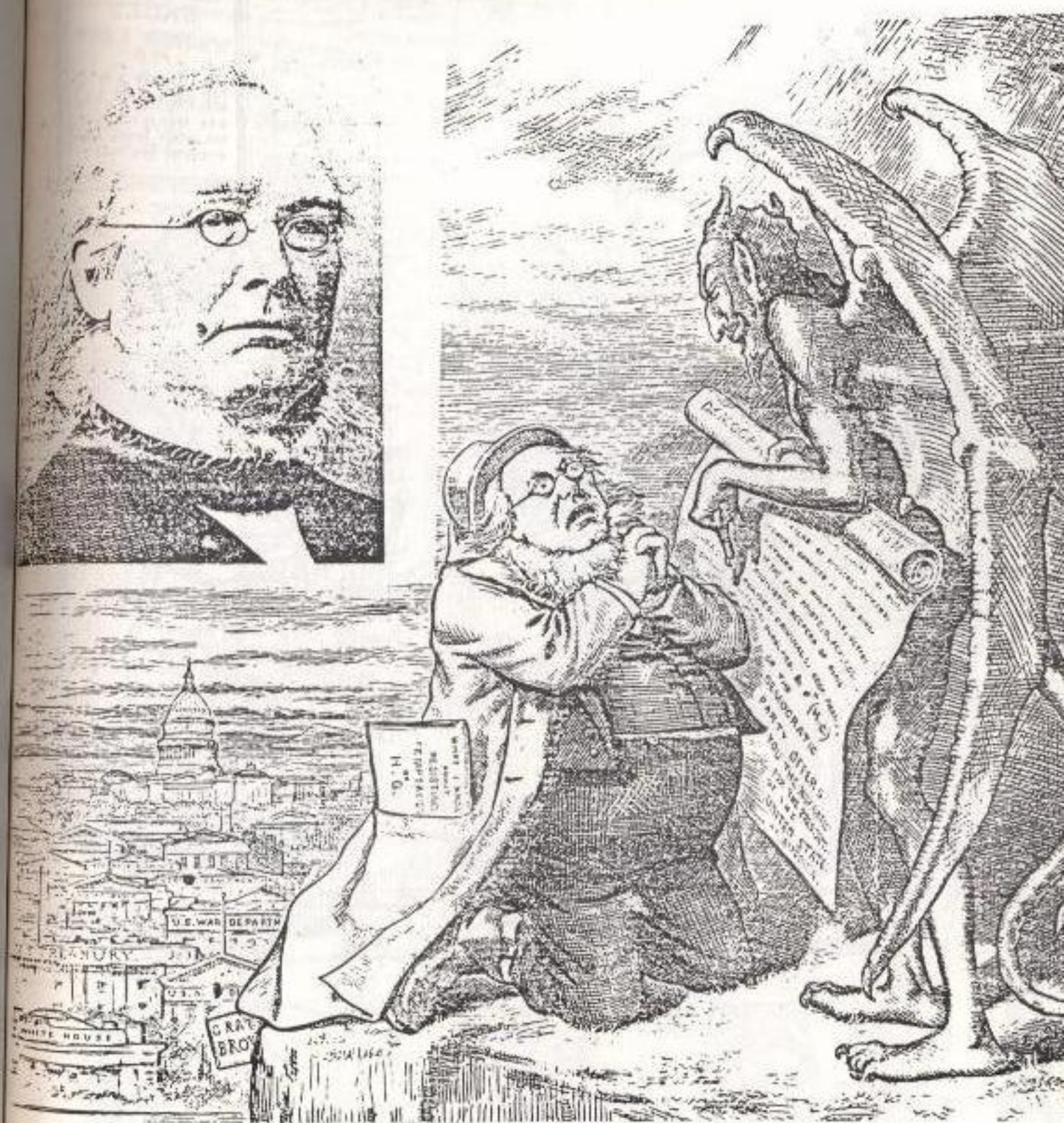
The political cartoon in the United States is over 100 years old and has covered the entire political spectrum. The political cartoons of Thomas Nast during the 1872 campaign reflected his identification with one political ideology, his alienation to the opposing system, and his efforts to induce the public to take a particular stance.

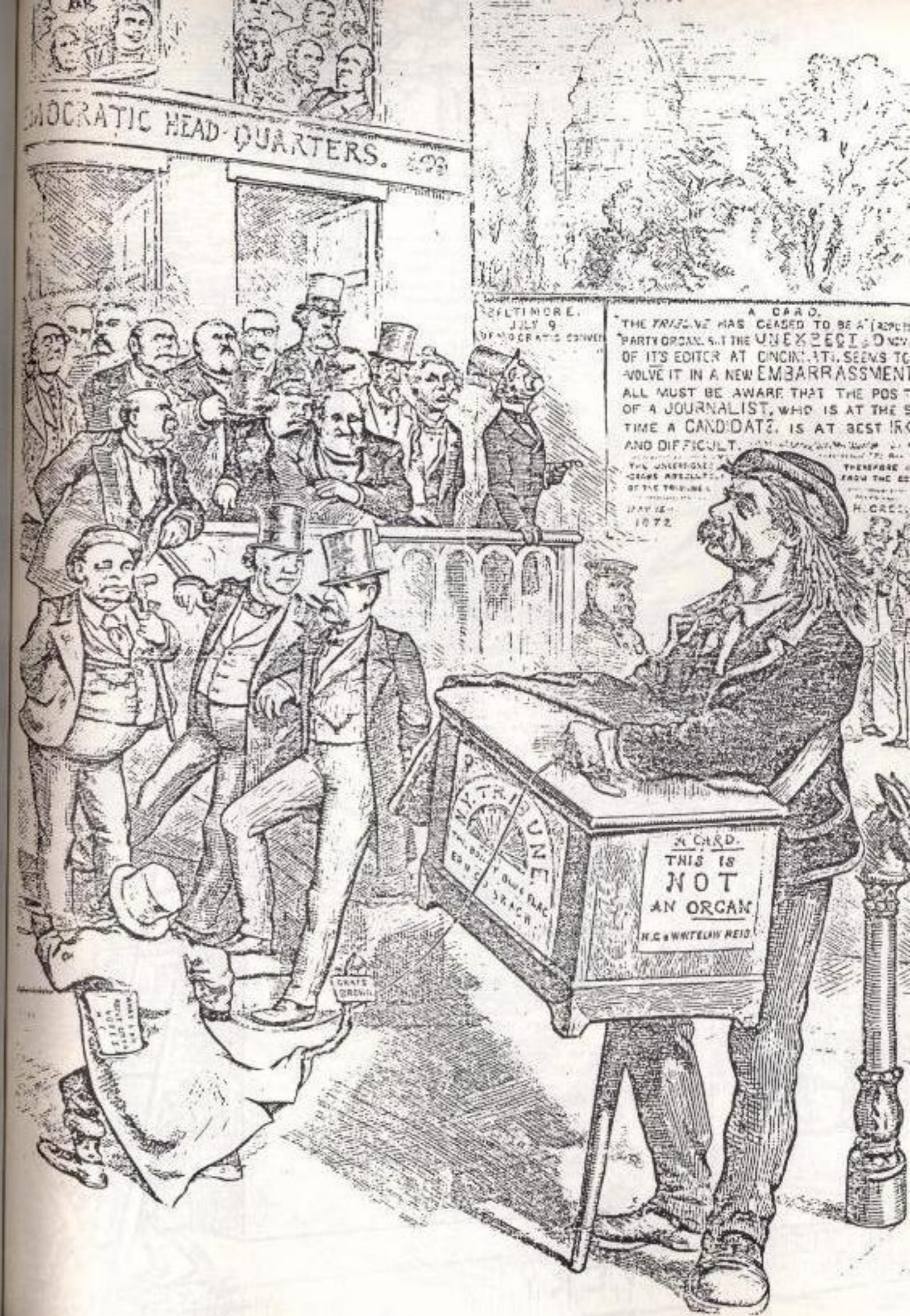
²³ "He (Greeley) called out a larger proportion of those who intended to vote against him than any candidate had ever succeeded in doing." James Blaine as quoted in Paine, 255.

²⁴ Paine, 257.

²⁵ Vinson, 23.

²⁶ This is illustrated in Prints 70, 76, 68, and 77.





This is a white man's
 government.
 Auction block.
 Hunting down with
 blood-hounds.
 A negro has no rights
 which a white man is
 bound to respect.
 Slavery.
 Whipping-post.
 New York riots.
 Negroes hung at lamp-
 posts.
 Attempt to introduce
 pestilence in the North.
 Attempt to burn Northern
 cities.
 Burning of colored orphan
 asylum.
 New Orleans and Memphis
 massacres.
 Belle Isle and Andersonville
 atrocities.
 Assassination of Lincoln.
 Ku-klux outrages to U. S. unions,
 white and black.
 Burning of Freedmen's schools.
 Whipping and shooting of teach-
 ers.
 Reputation.
 Fort Pillow massacre, approved
 by Congress of Confederate States
 of America.

KU-KLUX.

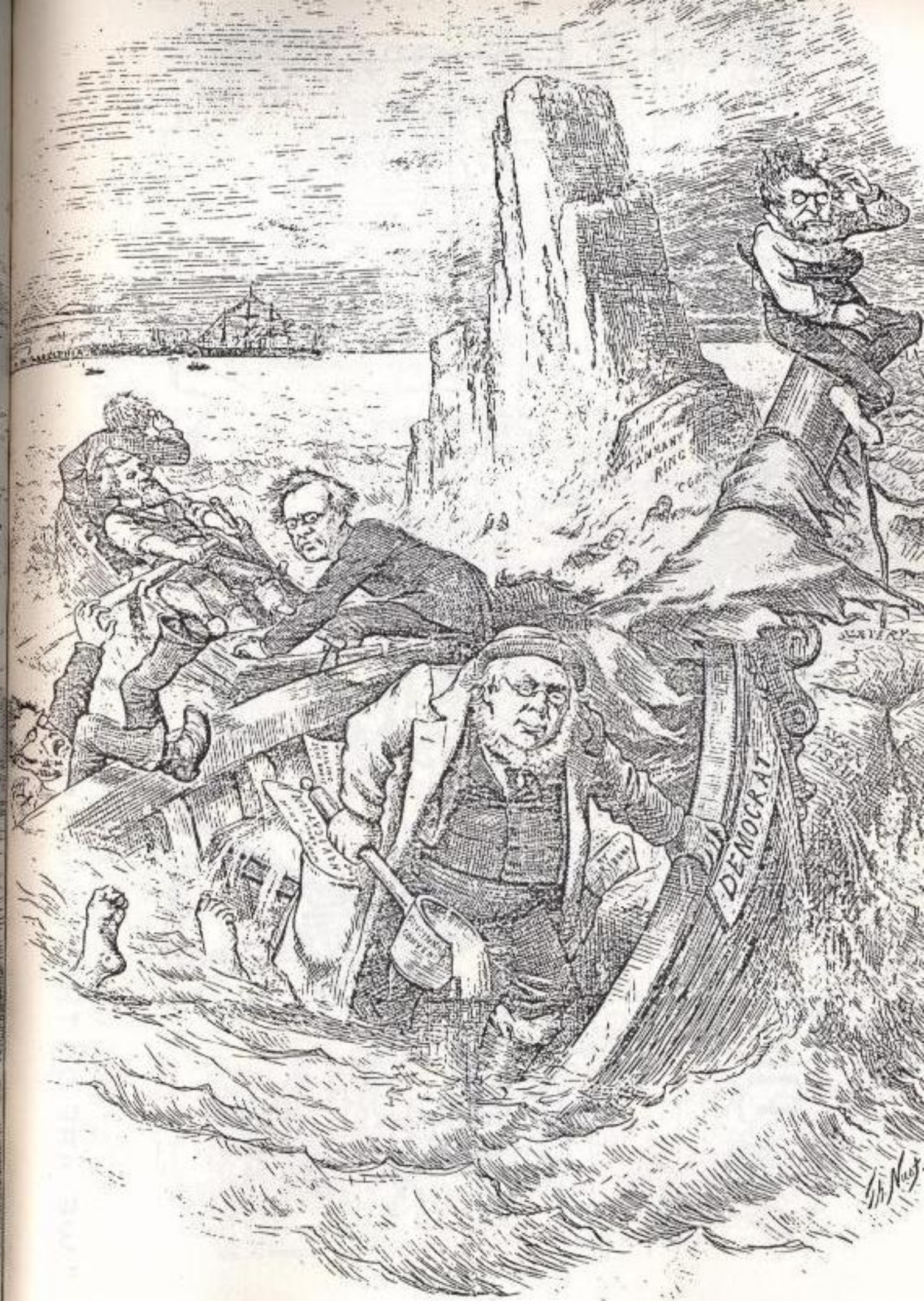


THE RULE OF TAMMANY RING.

WHOLESALF FRAUD.
 CORRUPTION.
 NO CITIZEN HAD ANY RIGHTS THAT A TAMMANY BOUGH
 WAS BOUND TO RESPECT.
 CORRUPT JUDGEMERY—CARDOZZO, BARNARD, AND MCUNX.
 FRAUDULENT AND ILLEGAL VOTING.
 BRIBERY.
 COUNTING OUT THE VOTES OF CITIZENS.
 RIOT AND BLOODSHED.

NAMES NOT TO BE FORGOTTEN:
 TWEED, SWEENEY, CONNOLLY, and HALL.

SLAVERY

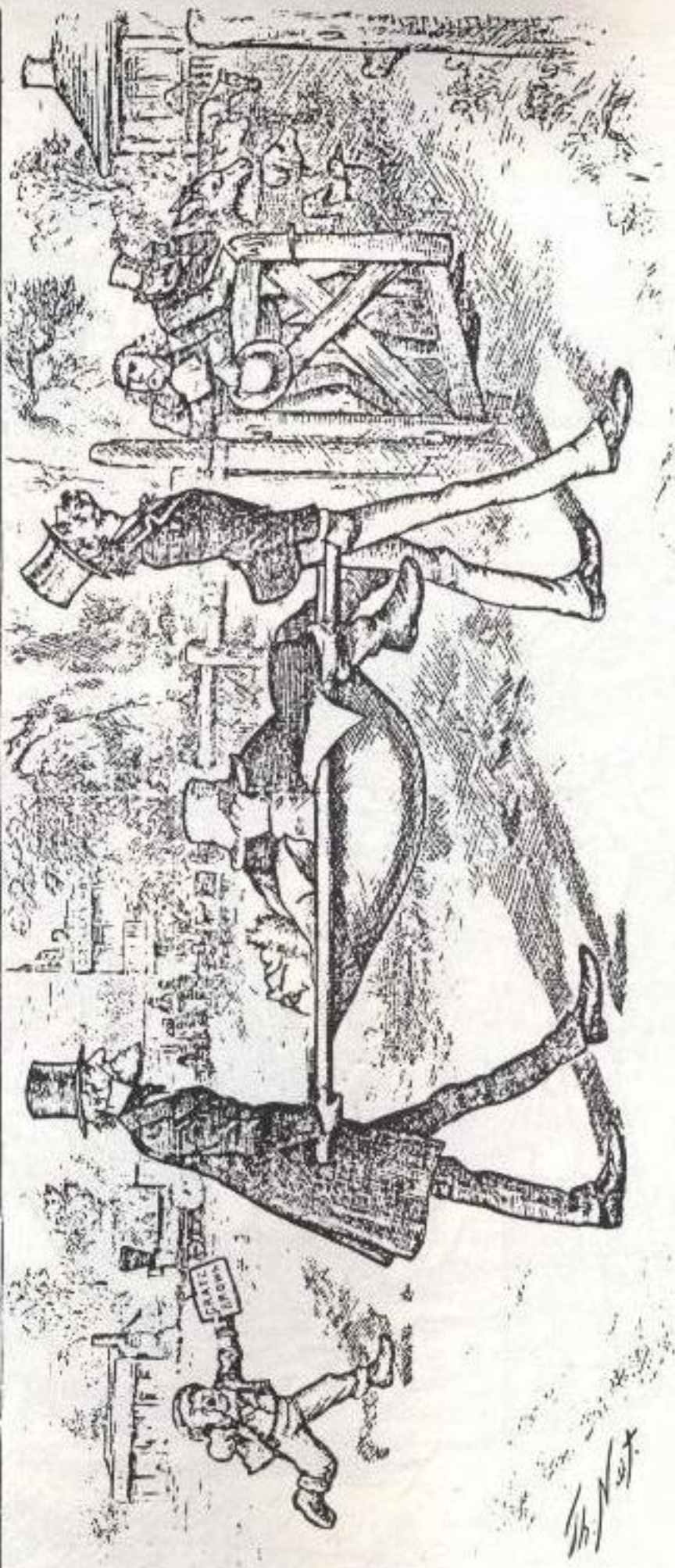




NEW SERIES.

NEW-YORK, WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 6, 1872.

DEAR AT ANY PRICE



"WE ARE ON THE HOME STRETCH"

"LET US CLASP HANDS OVER THE BLOODY CHASM"

