Thomas Nast's Political Cartoons As A Representation Of American History

Thomas Nast was one of the most influential political cartoonists in United States history. He is the man behind the donkey and elephant representing our two political parties, Uncle Sam, and the first depiction of Santa Clause. During the Civil War and Reconstruction eras, Nast created thousands of political cartoons in efforts “not to entertain, but move his audience, to make them scream out in outrage or anger, to prod them to action.” Through examining a selection of his political cartoons during this era, it is evident how and when public opinion shifted to match his own. Political cartoons were created so that everyone could understand complex situations playing out throughout the country. Political cartoons became a wide-reaching medium, which allowed Thomas Nast to reach a broad audience across the country.

In his early reconstruction cartoons, it is apparent that Nast supported Northern Republicans, and thought that southerners should not be easily welcomed back into the union. In the cartoon “Shall I trust these men and not this man”, published in August of 1865, Nast illustrates that confederate men were being pardoned and welcomed into the Union before black men who served in the Union army were even allowed to become citizens. Black men that fought for the union were treated less than white men who fought against it. This cartoon illustrates that this is backwards logic, and that confederate soldiers should not be put above black union war veterans.

In the cartoon “The Contrast of Suffering - Andersonville and Fortress Monroe”, Nast illustrates the disparities between Andersonville, a prison for union soldiers run by the confederacy, and Fortress Monroe, the place that Jefferson Davis was sent for punishment after the war. Nast is trying to illustrate that the punishment that Davis is receiving is not nearly enough. This echoes the north’s opinion of reconstruction of the time, which was that the south should suffer. Nast appears to want the south, and confederate leaders to be held accountable for the war and suffer similarly to how they made union soldiers suffer in Andersonville.

Another cartoon that illustrates Nast’s belief that reconstruction had been too lenient on the south is “Amphitheatrum Johnsonianum - Massacre of the Innocents at New Orleans”, published March 30, 1867. This cartoon uses the massacre at New Orleans, where democrats attacked and killed many black republicans at a convention, to blame Johnson for the riot. It shows Andrew Johnson as an emperor sitting on the sidelines watching everything unfold without intervention. This cartoon illustrates Nast’s staunch disapproval of Johnson and his reconstruction policies. Nast believed that Johnson’s reconstruction was too lenient, therefore causing the riot to occur.

In 1868, Nast created “This is a white man’s Government”, which commented on the suppression of the black vote by white southern democrats. Nathan Bedford Forrest, a founder of the KKK, is illustrated in the middle with an Irish immigrant to the left, and August Belmont on the right. Belmont, a prominent donor of the democratic party, is shown holding a packet of money, alluding to the idea that democrats have to buy elections and cheat to stay in power. These three men are holding down a black man who is reaching for a ballet box symbolizing that they are suppressing his right to vote. The black man is also holding an American flag,

symbolizing that the democratic party isn't only terrorizing a minority group, but rather the entire country. This cartoon further illustrates Nast's disapproval of the democratic party, and seeks to paint them in a very negative light. In the background of the cartoon, only destruction can be seen. Burning buildings are pictured, perhaps insinuating that the south is in many ways still a war zone, and is still currently being destroyed by white southern democrats.

"The Modern Samson", created in 1868, uses the biblical story of Samson to provide more commentary on the suppression of black Americans by southern democrats. In the original story, Samson loses his power when his hair is cut. In the cartoon, the woman, symbolizing southern democrats, has cut off the black man's hair, representing his loss of voting rights. When he loses his suffrage, he loses his power. In the background of the cartoon, many prominent southern democrats are featured surrounded by fire and destruction, similar to the background of "This is a White Man's Government". This cartoon further demonstrates Nast's unfavorable view of southern democrats, and pushes the idea that they are savage and reckless people who do not believe in political equity, something that Nast believed to be important for society.

In 1872, Ulysses S. Grant was up for re-election, but had been plagued with scandals in the previous years of his administration. Nast thought Grant to be a great president, and wanted him to be re-elected. In the cartoon "The Republic is not Ungrateful", Thomas Nast depicts America protecting Grant from lies and scandals. Abraham Lincoln and George Washington appear in the background of the cartoon, perhaps in efforts to paint Grant in an even more positive light. Nast wanted to convey that Grant was as great as these two idolized presidents, and that he deserves to be re-elected. Grant went on to win re-election with 55% of the popular vote.

In 1873-1874, the nation went through an economic depression. It was around this time that public opinion on reconstruction started to change. Northerners wanted the government to shift its focus from the south to more pressing issues like the economy. Many northerners believed that southern governments were corrupt, many thinking that this was because of the participation of black people. The cartoon "Colored Rule in a Reconstructed State" takes place in South Carolina where the legislature had a black majority. The cartoon depicts these black legislators in a rather negative light. They are depicted as being disruptive and rude, further contributing to the idea that they were the reason for corruption in these reconstructed governments. Nast agreed with this opinion shift in the north, and thought that black people were to blame for corruption in these governments, although these governments may have been just as corrupt as some governments located in the north. Northerners thought that there was no coming back for the south, and that everyone just needed to move on to more important matters.

As reconstruction came to an end in 1876, corruption was rampant on both sides. In the cartoon "The Ignorant Vote - Honors are Easy", Nast conveys this concept by placing representatives for both parties on the scales of justice. The black person on the left represents republicans and the Irish man on the right represents democrats. They are shown as equal, symbolizing that both sides are equally terrible. The North was especially tired of reconstruction at this time, as was Nast, and everyone just wanted to move on. Republicans started to care less about equality for African Americans, and started to move into a new mindset, as can be inferred from Nast's later portrayals of black people in many of his cartoons at the time, including "Colored Rule in a Colored State".

Overall, Thomas Nast was exceptional at conveying and persuading public opinion during the era of Reconstruction. His cartoons were clever and gave many the opportunity to be informed on issues happening around the country. He provided excellent commentary on many controversial topics, and was successfully able to help shift public opinion one way or the other. His cartoons are invaluable today and help historians and students alike understand society as it was during the era of Reconstruction.