FROM: Mort Gerber, Cartooning: The ART + BUSINESS.

Editorial cartoons (the term preferred over the old "political" because today's work covers the whole gamut of social and public issues) usually are found on the editorial pages of the newspaper and are vehicles for strong opinion. Like the editorial columnist, the cartoonist constantly challenges the establishment, often with a power that a writer cannot achieve. "Part of a cartoonist's job," says Tony Auth of the Philadelphia *Inquirer*, "is to confront people with things they really don't want to see."

Editorial cartoonists are a special breed who seem motivated by anger; by a smoldering sense of moral outrage at the world and a compulsive need to express it.

"Cartoons are ridicule and satire by definition," says Paul Conrad of the Los Angeles *Times*. Mike Peters of the Dayton *Daily News* says that "cartooning is not a fair art. . . . Cartoonists are like loaded guns, looking through the newspaper for a target to blast." Jeff MacNelly, now with the Chicago *Tribune*, who has been syndicated in over four hundred newspapers, agrees; he knows "many cartoonists who, if they couldn't draw, would be hired assassins." Pat Oliphant, of Universal Syndicate, who is credited with sparking the recent contemporary-look innovations in editorial cartooning, supposes his "position is negative. . . . If you're going to be in favor of something, you might as well not be a cartoonist."

In addition to a negative attitude, an editorial cartoonist should have several other strong traits, among them a genuine interest in politics, a good sense of history and sharp journalistic instincts. (Many, like Oliphant, Don Wright of the Miami *News* and Ben Sargent of the Austin *American-Statesman*, were originally newspapermen.) He must also be a good draughtsman, with a special talent for caricature, and as a humorist have sharp points of view which he is eager to express. In addition, he must work fast, thriving under the pressure of constant deadlines, and have the courage to hold to his opinion.

These are combinations of attributes and talents that few cartoonists have, which may be why the field is small. Moreover, as Jules Feiffer says, "It's not so much how good you are as how obsessed you are."

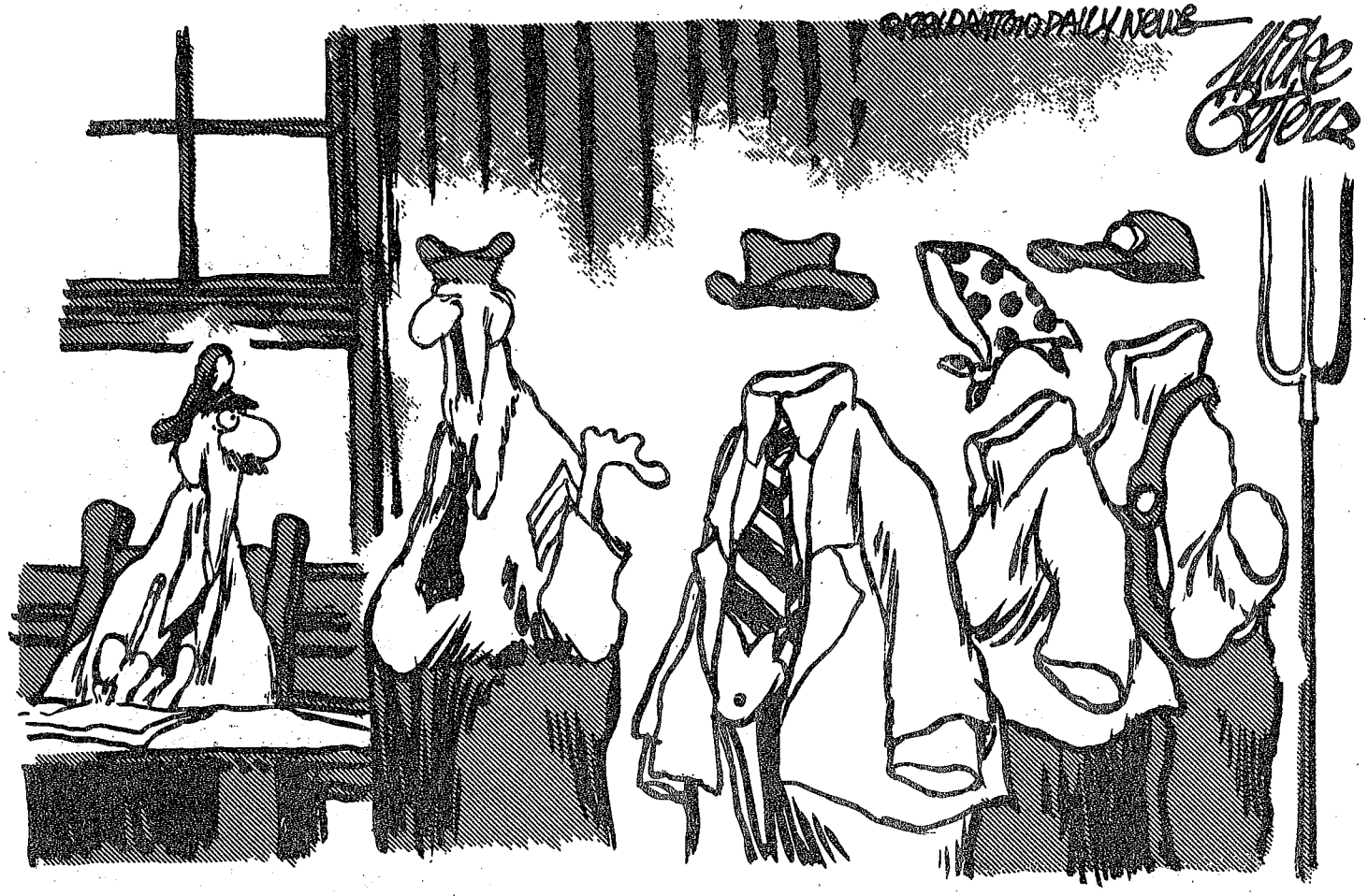
Editorial cartoonists as a group also seem to "think of themselves as entertainers," says Ed Stein, of Denver's *Rocky Mountain News*; "everybody was the class clown, having a personality that doesn't like to be anonymous." Stein notes that editorial cartoonists tend to become celebrities in their own cities, often important and influential. At cartoonist conventions they often compare the number of threatening letters and phone calls they receive. Editorial cartooning is "an interactive profession," says Stein, in which "the feedback from an audience is vitally important to the artist's work." This public response and attention—this ego gratification—is another important attraction, beyond the money, for editorial cartoonists, distinguishing them further from other cartoonists.

Anyone considering becoming an editorial cartoonist should be at least minimally acquainted with the history and traditions of the form. (I've suggested several books and articles in the bibliography.) What's particularly important to a magazine gag cartoonist is the shift over the past fifteen years to the kind of light humor in ideas and techniques that had not been used before.

William Hogarth in eighteenth-century England, Honoré Daumier in nineteenth-century France and Thomas Nast in the late 1800s, regarded as the father of American political cartooning, were among the original strong influences.

The early American political cartoons, following the style of the times, were wrought with a heavy touch: ornate and complicated drawings embellished with details and explained with labels, captions and dialogue in balloons. The cartoons were heavy-handed satire that made use of classical allusions and a serious atmosphere that was created first through elaborate pen-and-inks, then, after Boardman Robinson introduced it in the early 1900s, litho crayon on pebbly paper, which became the standard technique for newspaper editorial cartoons for the next fifty years.

The political cartoons of the thirties, forties and fifties, continuing the old tradition, were generally solemn and static; dark, one-panel drawings that utilized allegorical figures, boldly labeled, in heroic, tableau poses. For example, a World War II cartoon by Rollin Kirby, in litho crayon, pictured a huge gorilla with "Axis Powers" lettered on it, hold-



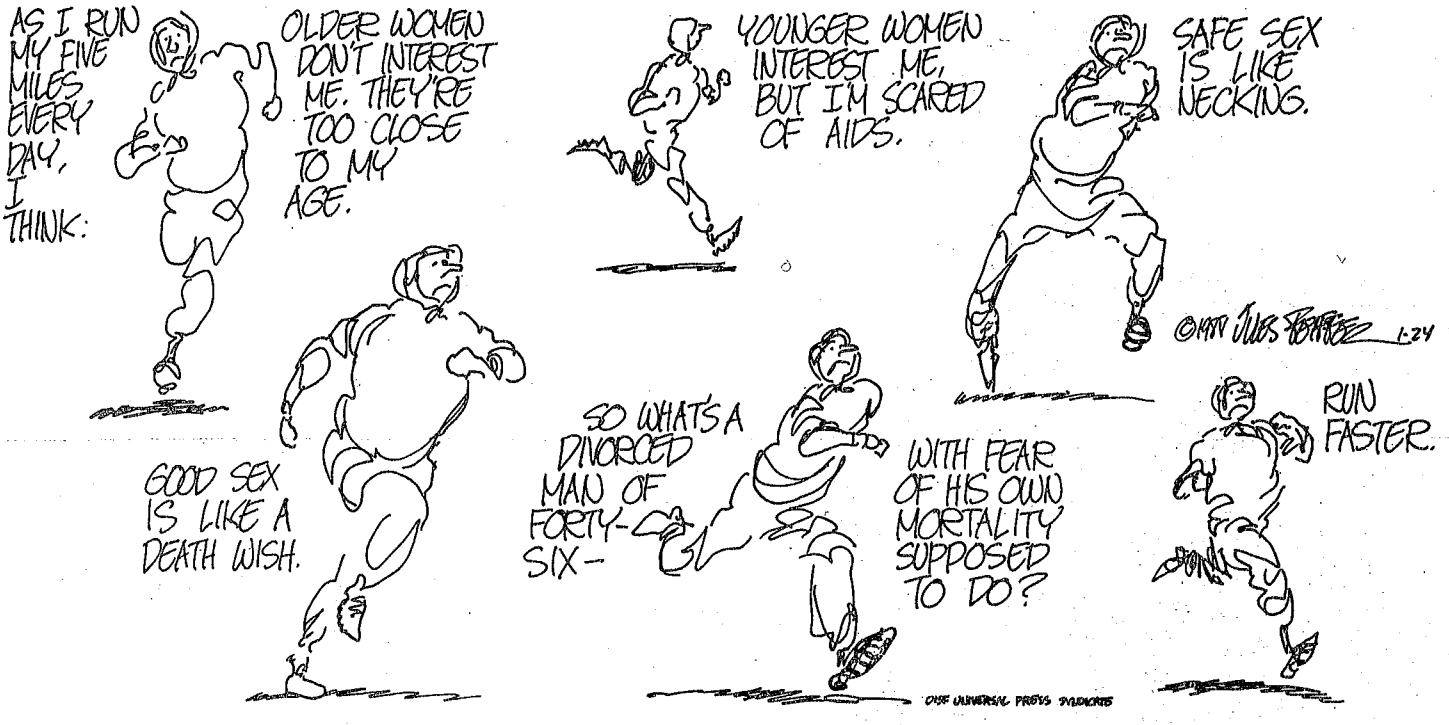
ing a blood-dripping knife in one hand and in the other a paper with the words, "Peace Terms. Made in Germany." The caption reads, "Beware Gargantua." Another, by Daniel Fitzpatrick, also in crayon, shows a towering, white-bearded old man labeled "History" writing with a quill on a tablet while standing on a hill enveloped in flame and smoke labeled "Greece," over a caption reading, "An Old Reporter On An Ancient Battlefield."

War was invariably represented by a glowering, bearded Roman gladiator in armor, and Peace by a beautiful young woman with wings. A "political" comment might have shown a flailing swimmer labeled "Taxpayer" in an ocean labeled "Financial Trouble," being thrown a life preserver labeled "Tax Relief" by a grinning Uncle Sam standing on shore.

In contrast, today's approaches are more sophisticated in style, content and form. There are cartoons in the familiar single panel, like the Mike Peters example; multi-panel talk like Feiffer and Sorel; and other variations, like the Oliphant and Robinson examples here, all making use of lively humor and wit.

The editorial cartoonist may work with or without outside direction. If he's employed by a local newspaper, he may sit in on editorial conferences, noting which topics will be covered in the next edition, and choosing or being assigned one for his subject. A newspaper may expect its cartoonist to accept its own political philosophy and do cartoons along that line. However, if the cartoonist doesn't subscribe to the paper's policy, he could indeed have problems, either with his conscience or his editor.

The most successful editorial cartoonist is fiercely independent, working with no outside direction, choosing his own subjects and expressing his own opinions, guarding a strong sense of integrity. Un-



like a writer, a cartoonist, says the veteran Bill Mauldin, deals with the total creative effort. You must do it alone, he says, or "you're not a cartoonist, you're a pants presser." There should be no sacred cows for the cartoonist and he should always expect to offend somebody. "When you sign your work," says Oliphant, "you really have to believe what you've said." Sometimes, he adds, just deciding what you believe is "the exhausting part."

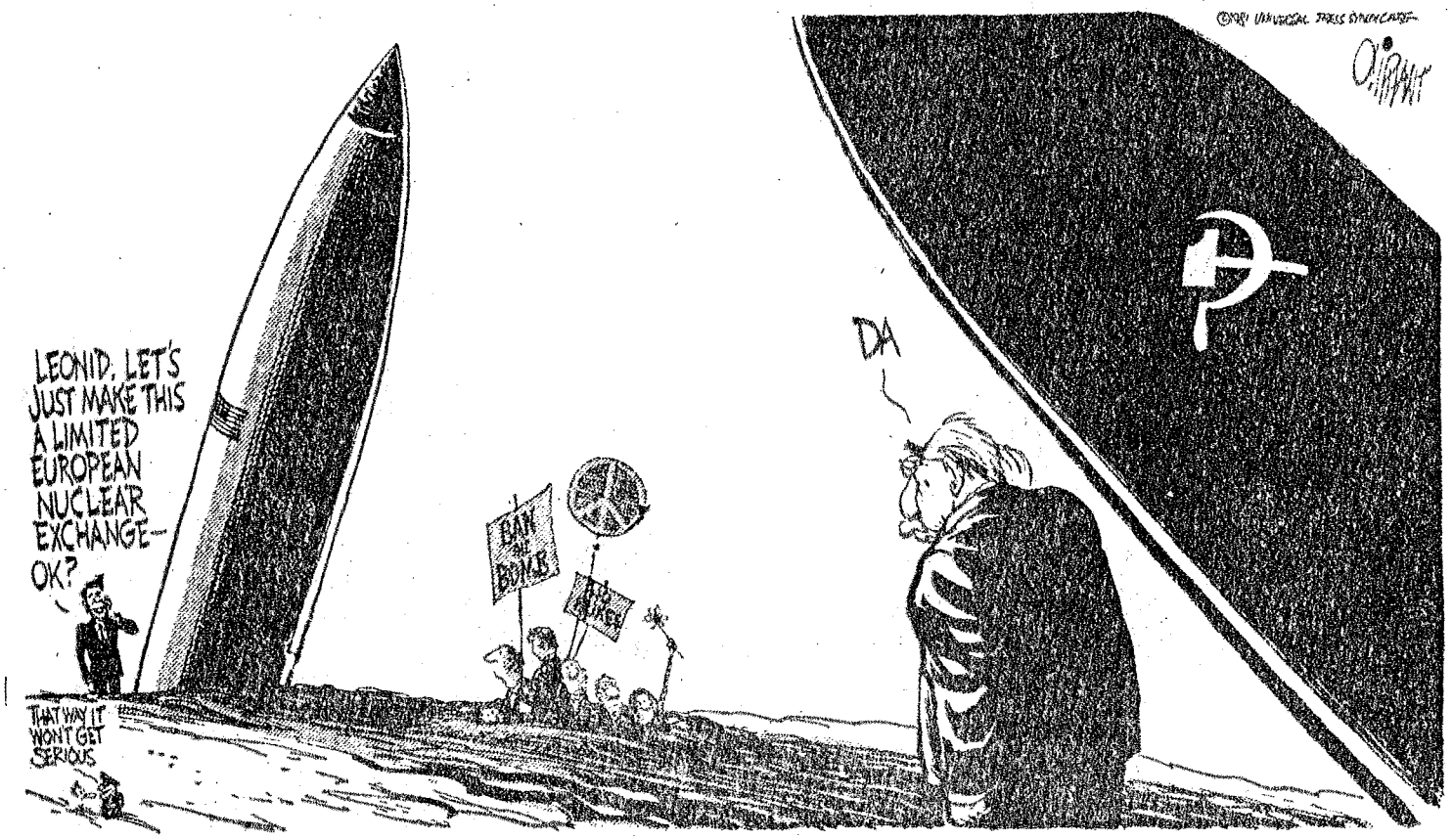
Most syndicated cartoonists produce a daily "belief" five times a week. Because of deadline pressures, they may begin their day at dawn. Some must turn in one finished drawing by the end of the day; others may mail in five at a time, once a week. Some do three, others only one.

Like magazine cartooning, coming up with the ideas is the most challenging part of the work. But where a magazine gag cartoon is instant communication of a *funny* idea, on *any* subject, an editorial cartoon is instant communication of a *provocative* idea on a *topical* subject—done funny. The prime purpose of a gag cartoon is to be funny; on a second level, it may also comment on some current social condition. The editorial cartoon works in reverse; its prime purpose is to make the comment and, in the process, it may also be funny.

Jules Feiffer has been doing it all in his weekly cartoon in the *Village Voice* for over thirty years now, carrying on his now-familiar sequential dialogues in matters heavy and light. Feiffer basically believes that *everything* is politics, so his work not only deals with contemporary issues and events, but with personal emotions and philosophies; the politics of private as well as public life. Of his own body of work Feiffer prefers "the long-lasting things like the 'Wheel of Life,' rather than the angry political stuff. I like the things that have to do with the way people see themselves in their lives, in relation to the world; cartoons that maintain their resonance over a decade or more, that deal with constants in society, like corporate greed, racism, pollution; things that never lose their timeliness.

"A cartoon," for Feiffer, "is a response to the confusion in national affairs, international affairs and my private life . . . a therapeutic response to my own sense of confusion, my own anger. Coming up with an idea, putting it into a pithy statement of what I want to say, takes it away from the personal into a more general area for a reader. This gives me a feeling of control of my life . . . I've nailed it, I understand that. That illusion may not last, but for the moment it's gratifying, and if I didn't have it, it would be troubling."

A New Yorker profile, written by Jim Stevenson, published in 1979, detailed the daily schedule of Pat Oliphant, then with the Washington *Star*. Oliphant produced a daily cartoon five times a week that appeared in nearly five hundred newspapers throughout the world, and his deadline was to turn in a finished drawing to the paper by the end of



every day. "Ideas are the toughest part," he said, "ideas that suit you and your manner of expression." Oliphant feels that you can't work ahead or stockpile ideas; he has made notes or carried ideas in his head but they went stale. There is no "shelf life" to an idea, he says.

Jerry Robinson, who created his own syndicate (Cartoonists and Writers) in 1978, *does* work ahead. He produces six "Life with Robinson" panels a week, and estimates that seventy-five percent of his time is spent on ideas and writing. During the week he reads newspapers and periodicals of public opinion and listens to news reports on radio and television, clipping articles and making notes on subjects that he thinks will make a good cartoon.

"But almost everything I read for the cartoons I would read anyway," Robinson points out. While Robinson draws a whole week of cartoons in advance, he says it's "not as good as doing one a day. It's hard to anticipate what will still be current seven days later." He begins production on Monday morning, writing in one sitting about fifteen cartoons from the notes and ideas he has collected. Some of the ideas will have been fully formed in his mind already; he develops the others mostly by doodling pictures first. He then selects the best six and lays them out (in light pencil on a plate finish bristol). All of the final drawings are done "under pressure" on Tuesday, in pen, brush and ink.

To maintain accuracy in his cartoons (like the right chairs and desks in the Senate) Robinson relies on research from an extensive personal morgue, composed largely of sketches he's made of places and faces.

Robinson maintains that "sketching people from life or from television [like "Face the Nation" or "Meet the Press"] is preferable to all other techniques for doing caricatures, since it's the one way you can get a full sense of people . . . beyond the physical look, and that includes their characteristic gestures and attitudes." News photos are helpful, says Robinson, but "after you've done someone for a little while, don't use the original."

Robinson's Cartoonists and Writers Syndicate has two other features besides his "Life With Robinson" panel. One is a political caricatures panel and the other, called "Views of the World," is a portfolio of the work of the leading political cartoonists from the largest and most influential journals in some forty countries.

The editorial cartoonist faces all the creative challenges of the magazine gag cartoonist plus a few special ones. For one thing, he mines his ideas from the same small group of subjects as his colleagues, unlike the magazine gag cartoonist, who is unlimited in his choice of subjects. With perhaps two dozen top syndicated editorial cartoonists working

Jerry Robinson

the same themes every day, graphic images representing concepts like war, the economy, taxes—can become overused. The editorial cartoonist therefore must not only come up with something truly original to *say* about a given subject, he must also say it in a unique manner. This may be why humor—a most personal ingredient of expression—has become so important in editorial cartooning. While *what* someone says about a subject—his point of view—may be similar to the next cartoonist's opinion, the *way* he says it, through humor—his jokes—is likely to be different.

If you are seriously interested in trying to crack this field, start by following a rigid work schedule to produce one topical cartoon every day. Study the news regularly and work on subjects that excite you most. This may be the same way you'd begin getting ideas for magazine gag cartoons, except here you can refer to real events and real people. To dramatize the idea, you might use a cliché symbol or allegorical reference. Animate the idea in whichever form it works best; single-panel, multi-panel, caption or dialogue.

The only important test for the cartoon is to make sure it really says what you *feel*—boldly and clearly. Don't try to say too much. Keep it simple and make only one point at a time. An editorial cartoonist who appears several times a week can take more than one crack at a subject. Assume that your reader has read the same news you have, and don't be too obvious. A subtle approach is more compatible with sophisticated humor. What's funny, as we've said before, is a matter of personal taste. *How* funny an editorial comment should be is a matter of opinion. One thing is certain; humor in editorial cartoons does make the cartoon memorable. A good cartoon evokes a visceral reaction that is deep and long lasting. Jeff MacNelly believes that "you can get the reader's attention and hold it better through humor than with a hatchet." Paul Szep of the Boston *Globe* says that the cartoon "has to be entertaining in itself because you're competing against the old tube." People see pretty grim things on the six o'clock news and it doesn't work, he says, to "go for the jugular" every day. "You need humor and ridicule." However, the humor should always be used as the means; the end is making the comment.

Accuracy in drawing is particularly important in the editorial cartoon, since the selection and rendering of details is part of the comment.

The outstanding element of editorial drawing, of course, is the caricature, which is itself a distinct and elusive art form. Some cartoonists can do caricature naturally and easily; others cannot. One of the difficulties which beginners encounter is that they attempt realistic portraits instead of exaggerated caricature. They also tend to repeat the already-accepted images of public figures done by other caricaturists, rather than creating their own personal versions.

You'll learn to caricature better by sketching from

life rather than from photographs or other drawings, which carry their own interpretations. Sketches, though, should be selective and minimal. Try this exercise: *Look* at a face first *without* drawing it, studying the shape of the head, the hairline, the nose, etc. *Then* draw the face from memory. This automatically prevents it from being a realistic drawing and forces you to be interpretive.

Al Hirschfeld, the theatrical caricaturist, makes little sketch notes with a pencil during performances. The jottings don't look like anything to anyone else, but they're helpful reminders to Hirschfeld when he does his drawings later.

Gestures add distinctiveness. Think of impressionists like Rich Little, imitating the hunched shoulders of Richard Nixon or the strut of Jimmy Cagney. You often recognize a close friend or relative from a distance by the way he walks. You can learn these mannerisms only by direct observation. Good caricatures do not depend on always exaggerating the same features of the subject, but shift their focus over the course of time. Nixon's dark beard was an early target, giving way to his nose and eyes. Cartoonists initially emphasized Ronald Reagan's neck wrinkles, then switched to his pompadour.

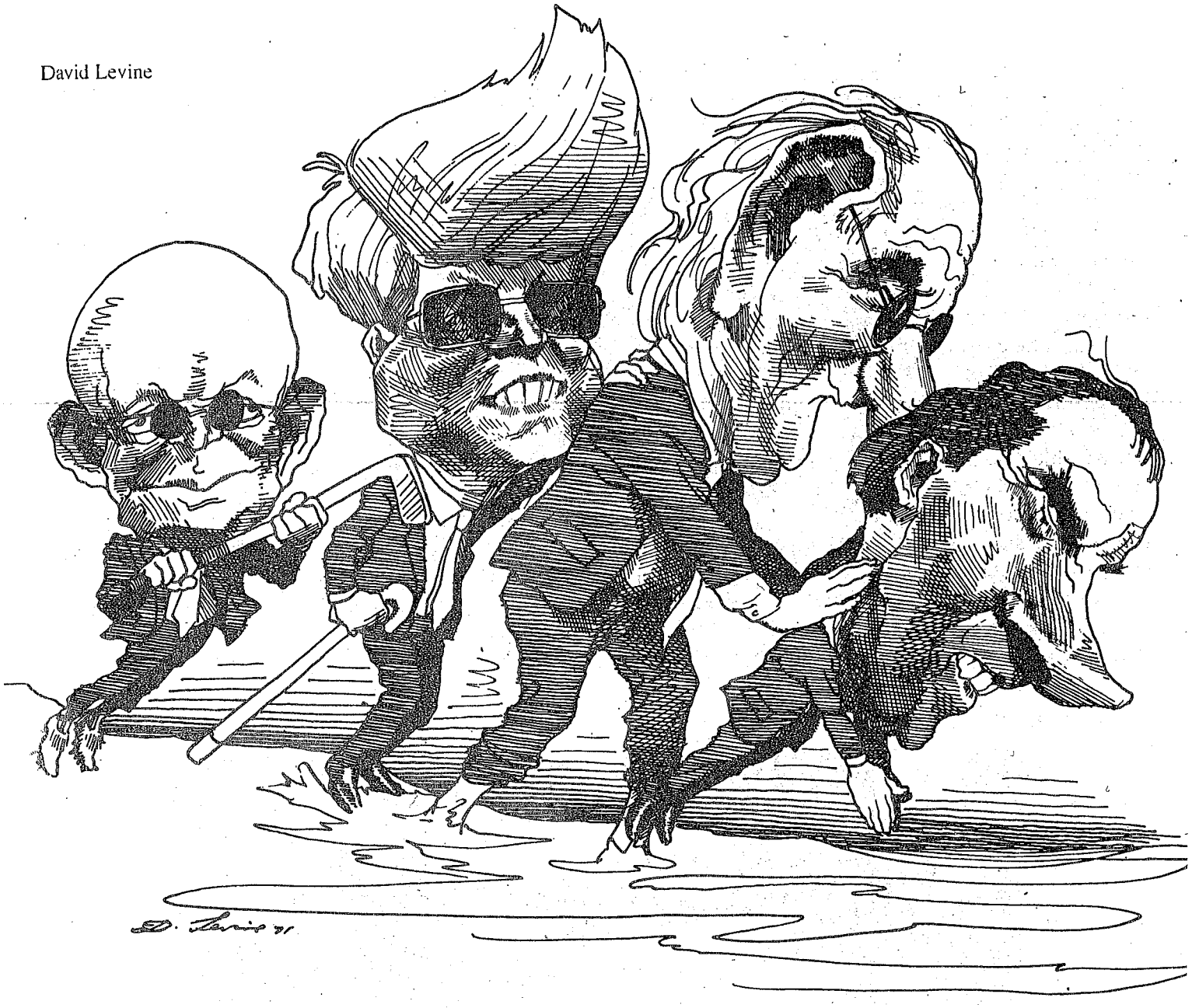
Caricature, though, is more than cleverly distorting a pretty face and reducing it to essentials. The true art is to maintain the essence of personality. The great caricaturists, like David Levine, are able to capture their subjects in all their subtle moods and emotions in different situations, even as they change through the years. That is exceptional art. Your studies of the art of caricature must include the drawings of Levine and Ed Sorel.

As I pointed out before, the standard technique for the editorial cartoon used to be a litho crayon, and while a few cartoonists today, notably Herblock and Mauldin, still use it, most others are returning to the pen and brush and ink, perhaps because they impart a lighter and looser feeling, more in keeping with the more humorous content. The one consideration that must be remembered is that your drawings are meant for newspaper reproduction, so line

Paul Szep

"WOULD YOU BUY A USED PALESTINIAN GOVT. IN EXILE FROM THIS MAN?

David Levine



and halftone must be bold and clearly defined. To get a uniform gray, many cartoonists draw on a chemically treated paper (such as Grafix board) which, when brushed with another chemical, produces one or two gray tones. The process replaces the use of Ben Day sheets, patterned acetate which is cut and pressed on areas to be shaded.

If you maintain the discipline of doing an original editorial cartoon five times a week for a few months, you will have accomplished two things. First, you'll have discovered for yourself whether or not you're cut out to be an editorial cartoonist. Secondly, if you *are*, you'll have a portfolio of work ready to show to prospective employers.

There is no standard procedure for seeking a job as an editorial cartoonist on a newspaper. If you investigate the histories of the successful cartoonists you'll find many were lucky to be at the editor's office when he was looking for a cartoonist. Others knew somebody with clout. Many who have broken in over recent years—Jim Borgman, Tony Auth, Paul Szep, Mike Peters, Doug Marlette, among others—began their editorial cartooning careers right out of college. Others kept banging on doors, going to great lengths and distances. Oliphant moved from his hometown, Adelaide, Australia, to his job at the Denver *Post*. Gene Bassett left New York and went to Honolulu because "you have to go where the paper is." One young cartoonist, according to Jerry Robinson, took a bus ride out west and got off at some city whose local newspaper didn't have an editorial cartoon. He spent a few days walking


"YOU MEAN THERE'S A LIMIT TO HOW MANY WISHES I GET?"
FIRST MAGIC MONTHS
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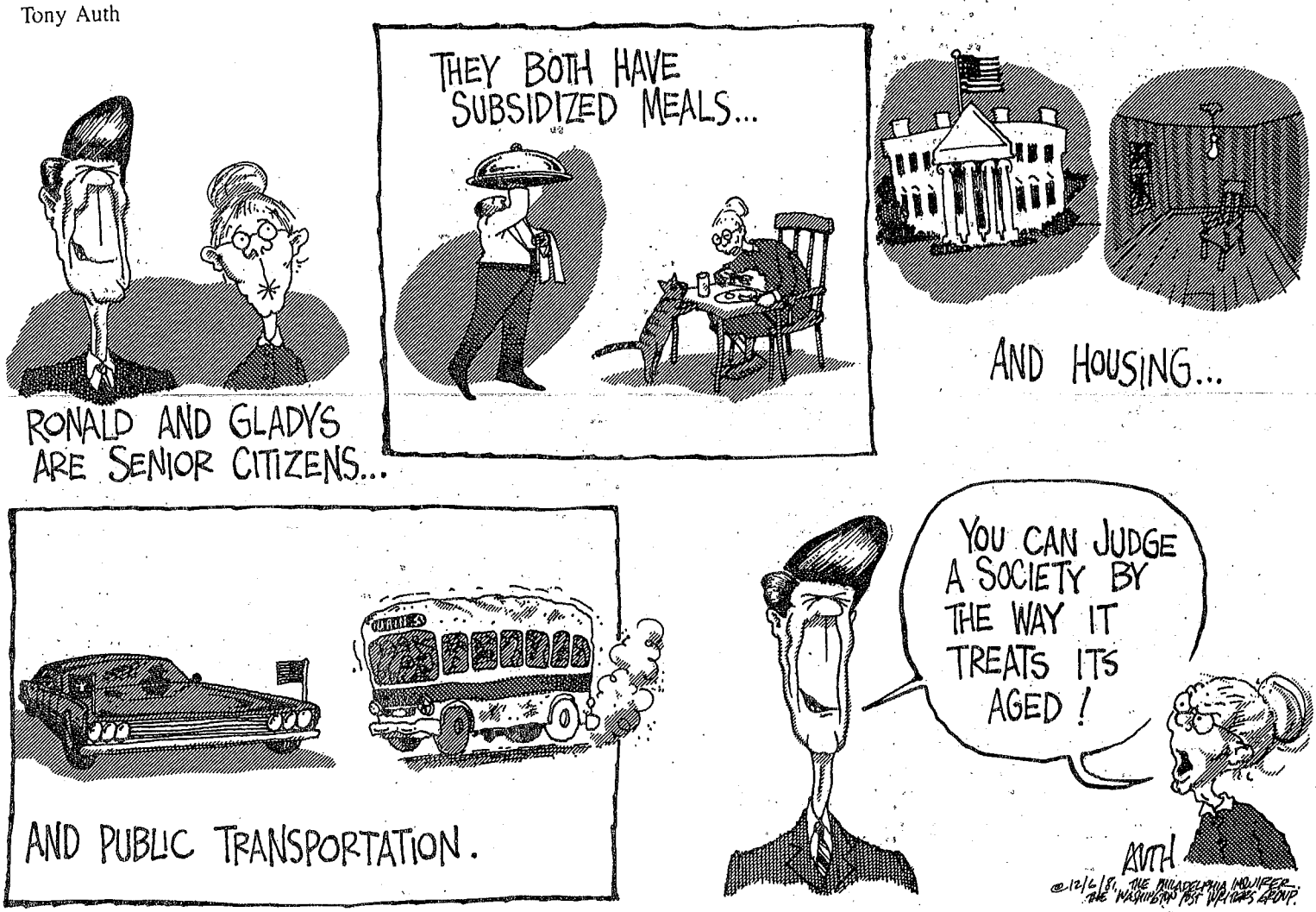
Tony Auth



around, becoming familiar with the local issues, went back to his hotel, drew a dozen cartoons about them, called on the newpaper's editor, showed him the drawings and, yes, he got the job.

The acceptance of humor in editorial cartooning has led some of its artists to the comic strip. MacNelly, after establishing himself as a political cartoonist, created the comic strip "Shoe," and Doug Marlette, of the Charlotte *Observer*, followed suit with his own "Kudzu." Garry Trudeau's "Doonesbury" fits both categories. Auth and Szep collaborated on a humor panel, Mike Peters now does a humor strip, "Mother Goose and Grimm," and many other editorial cartoonists are venturing into the humor field.

The flow could just as easily go the other way, too. If you're a mild-mannered magazine cartoonist who gets angry enough, you might turn into a full-fledged editorial cartoonist. And have yet another box to play in.