

Cartoons for the Classroom

Presented by NIEonline.com and the Association of American Editorial Cartoonists (AAEC)



Ben Franklin's cartoon contribution

Join, or Die. The message seems simple enough. On May 9, 1754 Benjamin Franklin published this cartoon in *The Pennsylvania Gazette* to urge the American colonies to unite against a common threat during the French and Indian War. Newspapers across the colonies soon copied the cartoon and subsequently the symbol and the message was put to use in a variety of causes during the Revolutionary War and beyond.

A snake to represent the colonies? Interesting choice of symbols. But then a common 18th century superstition held that a snake cut into pieces could heal itself into a perfect whole. And a researcher at the University of Kansas, insists that Franklin took his symbolism even further: That the snake actually represents a map with the curves of the snake suggesting a coastline's shape.

Talking points

1. There were 13 original colonies but only eight segments appear in Franklin's snake. Five New England colonies are lumped together. But if you count the segments you'll find one colony is still missing. Which one? Do you think the omission was deliberate? A mistake? Can you read too much into a symbol?
2. Aren't there negative connotations to a snake symbol? A forked tongue, the Snake in the Garden of Eden, Snake in the grass, etc.? Find other ways a snake is used as a symbol. What's a Caduceus for example. What flag carries the motto "Don't tread on me" and features a snake?
3. Ben Franklin's visual rallying cry was the first political cartoon to appear in an American newspaper. What makes it a political cartoon? What is the function of a political cartoon? Is this communication tool as important today?

Between the lines

On Jan, 17, 2006, the nation will mark the 300th anniversary of Ben Franklin's birth. His "Join, or Die" cartoon was the first political cartoon to be published in an American newspaper.



Ben Franklin/ *Pennsylvania Gazette*, May 9, 1754

Get out your newspaper

Gather a collection of political cartoons from your newspaper over the next two weeks. Using the *Cartoon Evaluation Worksheet* (available online at the NIE Website) analyze each cartoon and explain the issues addressed and determine the point of view of the artist. Gather news stories about those issues and evaluate the cartoonists' opinions.

Additional resources

Association of American Editorial Cartoonists (AAEC)
<http://editorialcartoonists.com/>

Benjamin Franklin Tercentenary website
<http://www.benfranklin300.com/index.php>