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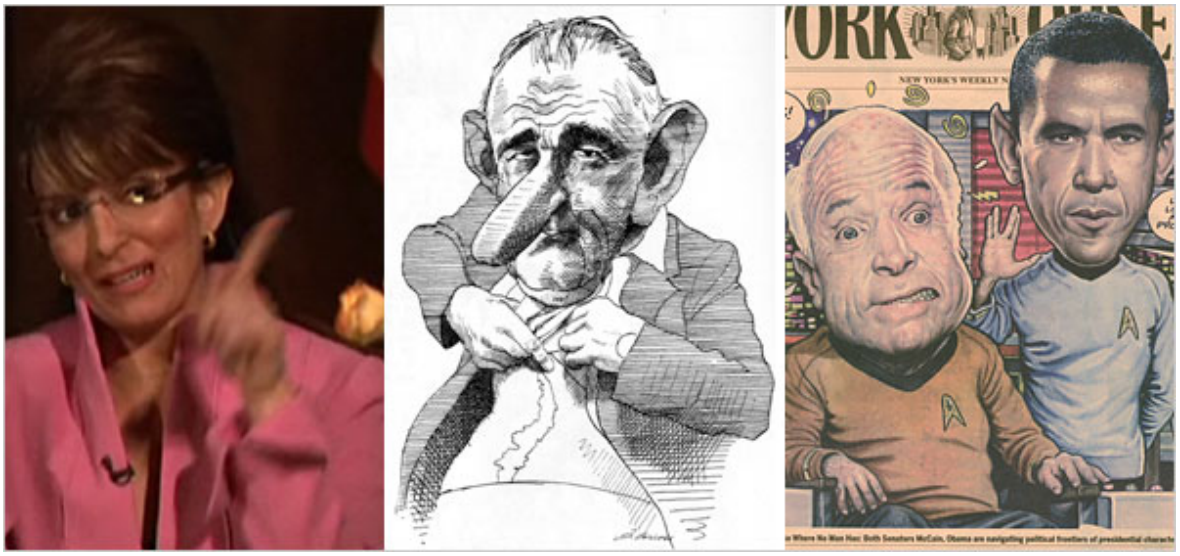
Arts

CONNECTIONS

The Power of Political Pratfalls



From left, Tina Fey as Sarah Palin; Lyndon B. Johnson by David Levine; John McCain and Barack Obama by Drew Friedman

By EDWARD ROTHSTEIN

A bumbling president, a rube candidate, a greedy politician — such are the caricatures of political life. Whether accurate or not, they can be more powerful than any argument.

Recall the fate of President Gerald Ford, doomed to be remembered as an irredeemable klutz, a judgment that readily slips into assessments of his political acumen. Why? Mainly because more than 30 years ago the comedian Chevy Chase used an incident in which Ford stumbled and made it the central feature of his impersonation on "Saturday Night Live." Every Ford skit ended with disastrous pratfalls. The impression created a reality. That caricature, of course, may have been flawed since Ford was a star athlete in his youth. But the image persists.

Such is the strange influence of caricature in politics. During the recent vice presidential debates, for example, one candidate, boasting of a "mavericky" perspective, when asked about how to deal with the world economic crisis, said: "We're gonna ask ourselves what would a maverick do in this situation, and then ya know, we'll do that." That same candidate, asked about global warming, said: "We don't know if this climate change whosie-whatsit is man-made or if it's just a natural part of the End of Days."

Oh, wait a minute. That wasn't Gov. Sarah Palin in the debate. That was Tina Fey doing her impression of Sarah Palin in the debate on "Saturday Night Live," an impersonation — filled with perky winks and folksy gosh-darn-its and a self-conscious elimination of g's at the end of whatever word she happened to be sayin' — that was so resonant, it almost displaced Ms. Palin's own performance as herself. Ms. Fey's impression appeared on countless news reports, inspired political punditry, racked up hits on YouTube and was watched in full on the NBC Web site, nbc.com, where it had, at last check, nearly five million views.

Is Ms. Fey's Sarah Palin destined to be the defining caricature in a campaign of exaggerated postures and caricatures? It may be. At times there has even been some ambiguity about where reality ends and caricature begins. In a sketch that recreated a unfortunate interview Ms. Palin had with Katie Couric of CBS News, Ms. Fey actually quoted Ms. Palin's own meandering words as the setup to a quiz-show punch line: "Katie, I'd like to use a lifeline now."

So what gives caricature its unusual power? Physically, caricature typically takes a particular feature — a hairdo, a verbal tic, a hand gesture, an accent — and exaggerates it, giving it such prominence that we come to see the person in a new and different light. Nearly every political cartoonist now portrays Senator Barack Obama with a narrow head and protruding ears; we begin to see him the same way.

The word comes from the Italian "caricare," meaning "to overload." Some characteristic is heavily piled on: the elongated nose, the prominent belly, the bulbous eyes. Caricature seems to have its earliest associations with portraits that showed human subjects to be transformed animals. This can be just a trick of perception, but the art comes from connecting physical characteristics to character, the way Leonardo da Vinci did in his human-animal hybrids. For a great caricaturist, physiognomy is a reflection of the hidden soul: by showing us something exaggerated, something overlooked is revealed.

That is also what gives caricature a polemical role in politics. Caricature characterizes and criticizes. While it can also distort and misrepresent, it claims to disclose a political physiognomy, bringing its contours to the surface. David Levine, for example, whose caricatures have been a staple of *The New York Review of Books*, created a powerful image of President Lyndon B. Johnson in 1966 by alluding to an almost trivial incident: Johnson exposing the scar on his belly from a recent gall bladder operation. But Mr. Levine turned the scar into a defining physical characteristic of the man. He also turned it into his defining political characteristic because the scar was a map of Vietnam. The caricature was accurate to the point of prophecy: it showed the wound that was to bring down the president.

Another kind of political caricature appeared in last week's New York Observer: Jason Horowitz compared the supposed emotional style of Senator John McCain with the apparent

unflappability of Senator Barack Obama — a point, as he noted, that has been made before. But the essay's focus came from an intellectual caricature, a portrait of exaggerated temperaments, reproduced by Drew Friedman in a color drawing. The candidates — in a cloaked form of advocacy — are portrayed as "Star Trek" archetypes: Senator McCain the demonstrative, emotional Captain Kirk; Senator Obama, the coolly detached Mr. Spock.

The most famous historical example of the influence of caricatures may be Thomas Nast's cartoons for Harper's Weekly in the 1870s, which drew attention to the corruption of William Marcy Tweed in New York City. The immensity of both the greed and power of the political leader, known as Boss Tweed, was alluded to by the figure's giant belly. In one cartoon, called "The Brain," Nast showed Tweed's weighty body topped by a bulging moneybag in the shape of his head. "Stop those damn pictures," Tweed is reported to have said. "I don't care what they print about me, most of my constituents can't read anyway — but those damn pictures!"

Of course caricature is never truly accurate; its job is to exaggerate, it dispenses with detail. This also makes it immune from easy challenge. A caricature bypasses argument. And now that pictures have become central to political life, caricatures have grown even stronger, and caricatured images are joined by caricatures of ideas.

That is one reason why, though debate and disagreement abound during this election season, in the midst of the fray there's remarkably little argument; postures and personalities are engaged in battle, not clearly defined policies or political ideas. In the presidential debate last week a coherent thread could scarcely be found; the candidates thrust prefab speeches and wonky allusions into their ripostes.

That is also why the attack mode of political campaigning has become so familiar: how else can caricatures confront each other? Candidates turn themselves into caricatures; opponents counter with their own. Debates today seem to be a kind of imagistic chess in which stump speeches and stock phrases are moved about to attract attention. The closest we get to argument are accusations. Arguments can be challenged on evidence or logic, but a caricature will have none of it. Instead of arguments we get caricatures of arguments. It is no wonder that the most talked-about event of the campaign so far is a caricature, and one that encapsulated what many already believed.

But it is impossible to imagine contemporary politics without caricature. It has come to seem almost necessary, providing a form of shorthand. Candidates provide the caricatures; pundits turn them into arguments.

In this case Ms. Palin seems prepared to offer a countercaricature. She said of Ms. Fey last month: "I love her. She's a hoot, and she's so talented." So perhaps Sarah Palin will meet "Sarah

Palin" one day. Or she may caricature "Tina Fey" to do battle with Tina Fey. In a way the confrontation has already begun. Ms. Palin — you can imagine the wink — said of Ms. Fey: "It would be fun to meet her, imitate her and keep on giving her new material."

Connections is a critic's perspective on arts and ideas.

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