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How Satire Happens



By Marty Kaplan



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On May 4, 1970, when 29 Ohio National Guardsmen shot 67 rounds of ammunition at a group of unarmed Kent State University students protesting Richard Nixon's expansion of the Vietnam War into Cambodia, killing four students and wounding nine others, I was the president of the *Harvard Lampoon*, the nation's oldest college humor magazine.

Campuses across the country erupted in protests, some of them violent. Four million students at 450 colleges and universities went on strike. Some Harvard students may have supported Nixon's widening of the war, and some may have found a way to forgive the Kent State shooters, but I didn't know any of them, and certainly not on the *Lampoon*. We were furious, and since lampooning is what we did, that's how we channeled our rage.

Though I didn't know it then, this was the same year that *Charlie Hebdo* first appeared, as the rebranding of a weekly called *Hara-Kiri*, which had been banned by the French government for a cover mocking the effusive press coverage of former President Charles de Gaulle's death by contrasting it with the media's relatively restrained attention to a nightclub fire that killed 146 people the week before.

The broadsheet that the *Lampoon* published four days after Kent State didn't get us banned, but it aspired to the same tastelessness. Our format was a parody of the treatment Nixon was getting in the establishment press. We thought the papers were bending over backwards to be respectful toward a paranoid warmonger while showing contempt for student protesters, whom they portrayed as dirty draft-dodging druggies. So we decided to out-do the sycophantic media by dialing the suck-up into the red zone.

Under the headline "Famous Dick Shrinker to Lobotomize Punks," we reported approvingly the news that Nixon's former psychiatrist had developed a pencil-and-paper test to screen American children aged six to eight for "anti-social attitudes and

Of course barbarians and dictators can be just as jovial as cartoonists or college kids. Comedy can kill. I know there's a line between humor that dehumanizes and lampoonery that democratizes. If nothing is sacred, nothing is civilized. But who gets to draw that line, how do you demarcate the holy, without privileging the very authority that parody exists to challenge?

On the back page of the *Lampoon's* Kent State broadside, we ran two quotes. One is an excerpt from Mark Twain's 1905 essay "The Damned Human Race," as relevant to 1970 as when he wrote it, and as miserably apt today. The passage ends with this:

Man is the Religious Animal. He is the only Religious Animal. He is the only animal that has the True Religion - several of them. He is the only animal that loves his neighbor as himself, and cuts his throat if his theology isn't straight. He has made a graveyard of the globe in trying his honest best to smooth his brother's path to happiness and heaven. He was at it in the time of the Caesars, he was at it in Mahomet's time, he was at it in the time of the Inquisition, he was at it in France a couple of centuries, he was at it in England in Mary's day, he has been at it ever since he first saw the light... - he will be at it somewhere else tomorrow.

The other quote accompanied a drawing of a girl kneeling over the body of a Kent State student, based on a photo by John Filo, who would win the Pulitzer Prize for it. In that iconic image of terror and grief, her arms are outstretched in agony, her face contorted by a silent scream. The words are from *King Lear*: "Nothing will come of nothing. Speak again."

As long as the only animal that has the True Religion is at it somewhere else tomorrow, the obligation of satire will be to speak again. And to speak against.

This piece first appeared in the Jewish Journal, where you can reach me at martyk@jewishjournal.com.

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