

Ramirez: Shooting at the Wounded

"I get to go back and shoot at the wounded."²³

Michael Ramirez is resident editorial cartoonist at the Los Angeles Times, where he succeeded Paul Conrad, a celebrated liberal cartoonist of three decades' tenure at the newspaper. Ramirez is a stridently conservative commentator, which makes him a rarity among cartoonists of the highest standard – even in America, where cartoonists generally gather around an ideological centre of gravity situated to the left of that of the average citizen. And his Mexican-Japanese ethnicity complicates his position in American political culture: he stridently articulates a frequently chauvinistic nationalist discourse, from the ambiguous vantage point of second-generation immigrant consciousness.

This tension and his position as a right-wing provocateur embedded in a stronghold of the liberal American media establishment, mean that he operates at the very brink of America's yawning cultural faultline. And, very unusually for leading cartoonists the world over, Ramirez is fairly consistently loyal to his country's present government; hence he provides an intriguing contrast to liberal and left-wing practitioners, not only by virtue of his particular positions on a range of issues, but by virtue of the aesthetic implications of his partisan approach to incumbent political power.

Ramirez was born in Tokyo in 1961, to a Mexican-American father and a Japanese mother. Their relationship brought a rare and initially uncomfortable cultural transfusion. "It was a great romance, because at the time Japan still had a very closed society," says Ramirez. "In fact, her parents had to disown her for awhile after my parents got married. Later they loved my Dad, but it was a social thing they had to do."²⁴

Ramirez's father was a first-generation American, while his grandfather was a Mexican refugee who fled across the border into California. "He was a political refugee," says Ramirez. "I can't remember who he was fighting with." (That he forgets the details of an event so pivotal in his family history is perhaps an index of the intensity of Ramirez's embrace of Americanness; his ancestral homeland's dramatic historical conflagrations have, it seems, been jettisoned as an uninteresting morass.)

The refugee's children grew up enthused with a fervent immigrant patriotism. "They really represented the American dream; they're immigrants coming to the United States and all very much dedicated Americans. My uncles all fought in the service."

²³ Ramirez quoted in Fester, Heather "Political cartoonist draws blood with sharp cultural comments" <http://index.truman.edu/issues/980423/News/cartoonist23.asp>

²⁴ Helgeson, "Drawing Blood" http://today.uci.edu/Features/profile_detail.asp?key=42

Ramirez's father, who had been a farm worker as a young man, later became a California state tax official and earned enough to fund the university education of his six children, four of whom became medical doctors. When Ramirez went to college in California in 1979, he was intent on following suit — but soon began drawing editorial cartoons for his student paper, and gradually began to redirect his ambitions.

"You don't really entertain those kinds of thoughts at first, because you don't think certain things can be realized — that someone would actually pay you to be an obnoxious illustrator of editorial commentary. So when you get a first taste of it in college, and come to realise there are jobs like that out there."²⁵

After college, Ramirez moved to Memphis, Tennessee to become resident editorial cartoonist for the Commercial Appeal. Here he steadily established himself as a vigorous, compelling commentator, and in 1994 joined the elite of American editorial cartoonists when he was awarded the Pulitzer Prize. And when Paul Conrad retired from the Los Angeles Times, Ramirez was approached to move west to a publication and a city whose dominant political current is markedly different to those of Tennessee, and to his own outlook. It was an unusual step for the paper, which sought a provocative editorial presence rather than one necessarily harmonious with its own perspectives.

Right-wing cartoonists have a harder job than the rest. Where their left-wing counterparts can frequently and fearlessly veer into naivete or plodding cant, conservative practitioners must travel dangerously close to the decayed cartoon language of fascist xenophobia and bigotry — particularly in an era of imperial warfare. At times Ramirez approaches this language, but his work is not engaged in a crudely reactionary aesthetic.

His penmanship is conventional — steeped in the homogenous but fertile visual language of mainstream American editorial cartoons. Ramirez frequently employs the stock symbols of this tradition, and uses intricate, laborious cross-hatching and half-tones to define light effects and form in sumptuous detail. While his sense of caricature is erratic and technically limited, as will be discussed in chapter three, he compensates for this with compositional and conceptual flair and a capacity to deliver a refined, richly worked image.

This considerable graphic skill is allied with a robust, sometimes vitriolic conservative political agenda. He calls himself an "equal opportunity offender", which is perhaps inaccurate given the consistently partisan narrative his cartoons construct. But ideological opponents acknowledge his capacity to communicate ideas with inventive force.

As Ed Stein of Denver's *Rocky Mountain Post* notes, Ramirez' riskiness and vigour distinguish him sharply from the timid mediocrity of many American cartoonists.

²⁵Ibid.

"Ramirez and I disagree about almost every public issue, but we agree the point of political cartooning is to make a point. Mike has a passion for making a precise and strong statement in every cartoon, and he's one of the few left who do that. He doesn't take any prisoners, he says what he says boldly and directly. In a business where many are shills for political parties, you have to be willing to attack people you agree with most of the time."²⁶

This chapter will trace Ramirez's political perspectives and investigate their rhetorical and graphic expression in his approaches to a range of themes.

US against them: Ramirez and the clean line

Like Zapiro, Ramirez' cartoons fall broadly into two modes. His stock approach is of undiluted attack, in which the subject is under fierce satirical assault. The second, less frequently used mode sees Ramirez approach an ambiguous, poignant or difficult scenario, and suspend his habitual tools of hostility. In these cartoons, he is at times rhetorically diffuse and fails effectively to manage the complexities of the subject — but in some cases, he also strikes veins of communicative richness.

These two modes do not correspond clearly with iconographic and iconoclastic intentions: in all his cartoons, Ramirez articulates a coherent though at times clearly precarious vision of a world whose leaders, politics and cultures fall wholly on either of a single crisp line between liberty and tyranny, hypocrisy and honesty, courage and cowardice. He divides his iconoclastic and iconographic energies cleanly according to this manichean demarcation; he does not seek to evaluate an issue or a figure reflexively, with a deliberate intention to anatomise opposing currents of truth, as Zapiro often does.

Ramirez' immigrant consciousness is both a source of his conservative patriotism and perhaps also an ideological membrane that insulates him from the reactionary xenophobia that thrives in contemporary rich-world conservatism. The material success of his family has given him a fervent faith in the reality of a meritocratic national narrative; of the notion that the frontier spirit and constitutional letter of American democracy has, both at present and in the past, catalysed a powerful egalitarian synthesis of diverse cultures, in which the material progress of immigrants, both old and new, has been defined by their energy, desire and ability.

The September 11 attacks on New York and Washington instantly eroded American religious and ethnic tolerance; abuse and distrust of Arabs became widespread, and the rise of xenophobic discourse in the national response to a hostile foreign attack prompted a Ramirez cartoon which stridently asserted the syncretic heterogeneity of American culture.

²⁶Ibid.



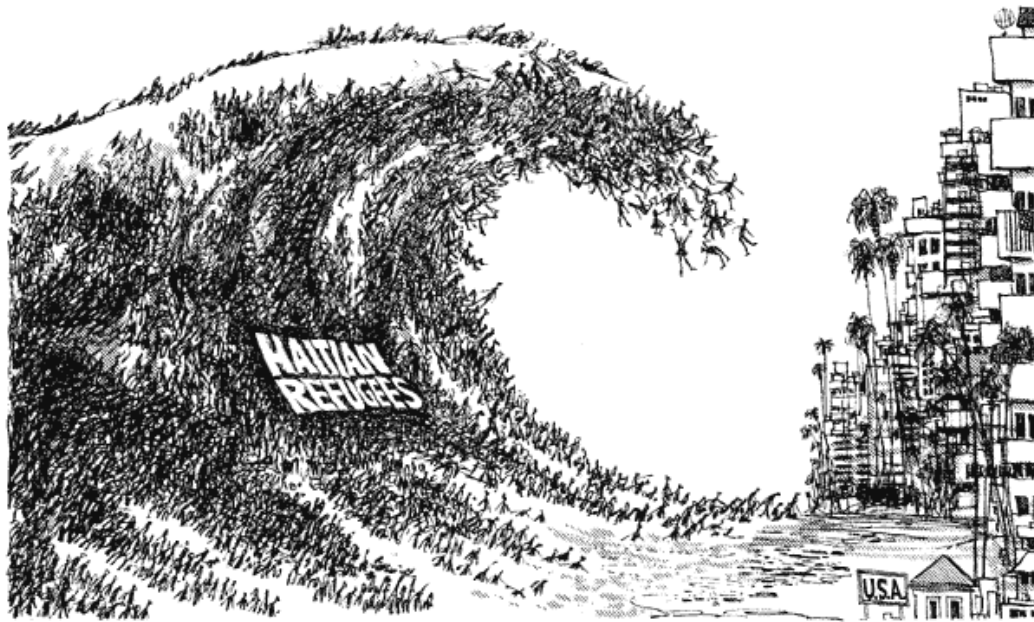
20 September 2001, [Los Angeles Times](#) . (All Ramirez cartoons reproduced here were published in the Los Angeles Times and sourced from Daryl Cagle's Professional Cartoonists' Index.)

The flag is wind-ruffled, its folds and shadows rendered with clear sensual enjoyment, and its stars representing the fifty states are defined by a catalogue of national and religious identities, culminating with “Muslim”, which is presented in bolder and larger lettering than the rest.

The invisibility of the American Muslim population in mainstream culture – at least prior to the attacks – is, within this frame, reversed. The cartoon is a direct and compellingly simple enunciation of social complexity, in which Ramirez's own minority identity adds demonstrative force to his comment. America is a land of minorities, he asserts, and this is the source of its vigour.

But by the same token, Ramirez is far better positioned than a Wasp cartoonist to dramatise immigration as a threat to the national interest – something he does in the cartoon below, which anticipates a vast influx of Haitian immigrants to the United States following the overthrow of President Jean Bertrand Aristide in 2004.

RAMIREZ
 THE NEW YORK TIMES
 2004 FEBRUARY 23



23 February 2004

It is a terrifying image, particularly as it resonates with the tsunami disaster which occurred later that year; a grotesque storm of powerless figures inscribed with obsessive density of detail. The predicted refugees have no will or agency; they are cast onto American shores by an irresistible political tremor. These 'huddled and poor' seem to arrive in a far denser, more inchoate multitude than immigrants in past centuries, who, in the national imagination, sailed past the Statue of Liberty in a steady, determined, hopeful stream, polishing their entrepreneurial dreams as the New World appeared. In popular American narratives — from the novels of Willa Cather to Disney's *An American Tail* — the nineteenth and twentieth-century migrations of Irish, Germans, Poles, Italians and Jews came as a rich human river, not a monstrous human wave.

The cartoon is both sympathetic to its subjects and hysterically hyperbolic about their fate, as it prepares them to inflict mortal damage on both themselves and the implied hordes of pastel-clad pensioners in their Florida seafront blocks. In a sense it is an absurd literalisation of an absurd xenophobic bromide: "a tidal wave of immigrants"; but this absurdity is perversely affecting in its morbid compassion. This is Ramirez in an Old Testament mood, earnestly choreographing a ludicrous cataclysm in his A4-sized set.

But his discourse on immigration can move into far more level-headed territory. In the cartoon below, he delivers a cool materialist riposte to xenophobic paranoia.



January 18 2004

The timing of the exchange is expertly synchopated: the last-second leanness of the cashier's reply intensifies its sardonic upending of the customer's proposition. The cartoon's raw economic logic offers a pragmatic counterpoint to the inclusive sentimentality of the multicultural flag cartoon discussed above. Instead of identifying what makes America great, it identifies what makes America rich — a free market in which cheap immigrant (or overseas) labour buttresses the tower of prosperity. The customer's reactionary rhetoric is, interestingly, assailed by an ideology close to it on the political spectrum — a neoconservative vision of unfettered capital as the sole engine of prosperity and human progress. (The customer's rejection of immigrant labour chimes oddly with sentimental left-wing condemnation in the rich world of multinationals' use of cheap labour in the developing world.)

Ramirez's faith in the transcendent value of American democracy sustains his firmly held conviction that the Bush administration's belligerent foreign policy has been fundamentally benign, both in its intentions and its consequences. He is one of few editorial cartoonists to have consistently pursued this line, and he does so with uneven success.

Naturally, the task of dramatising contemporary world events from this vantage point demands a vigorous dramatisation of radical Islamic terrorism, the legitimising object of US aggression. Cartoon representations of the agents of extremist political violence are at once easy and difficult to produce; those agents are easily reducible to grotesque types of

inhuman malevolence, but also, by virtue of their anonymity and opaque, hermetic zeal they resist the intuitive aesthetic or moral analysis which compelling satire must deliver.

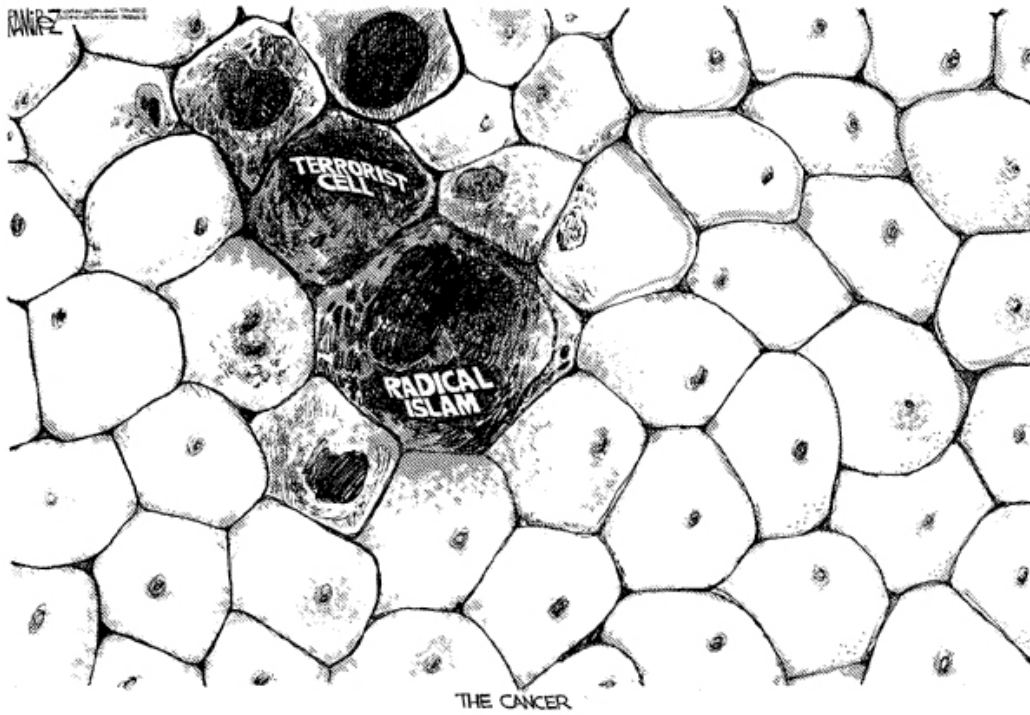
And suicide complicates matters. The cartoonist's eye can readily inflict damage on the image of the murderous politician, but it is eluded by the spectre of the anonymous murderous suicide. There is so much hatred and desolation in the act, it seems, that it seems that any attempt to corral it into the shape of a joke becomes a banal refusal to properly observe it.

Ramirez seeks to visualise the rise of extremist violence in two cartoons drawn in 2004, both of which are rhetorically and analytically unsatisfying.

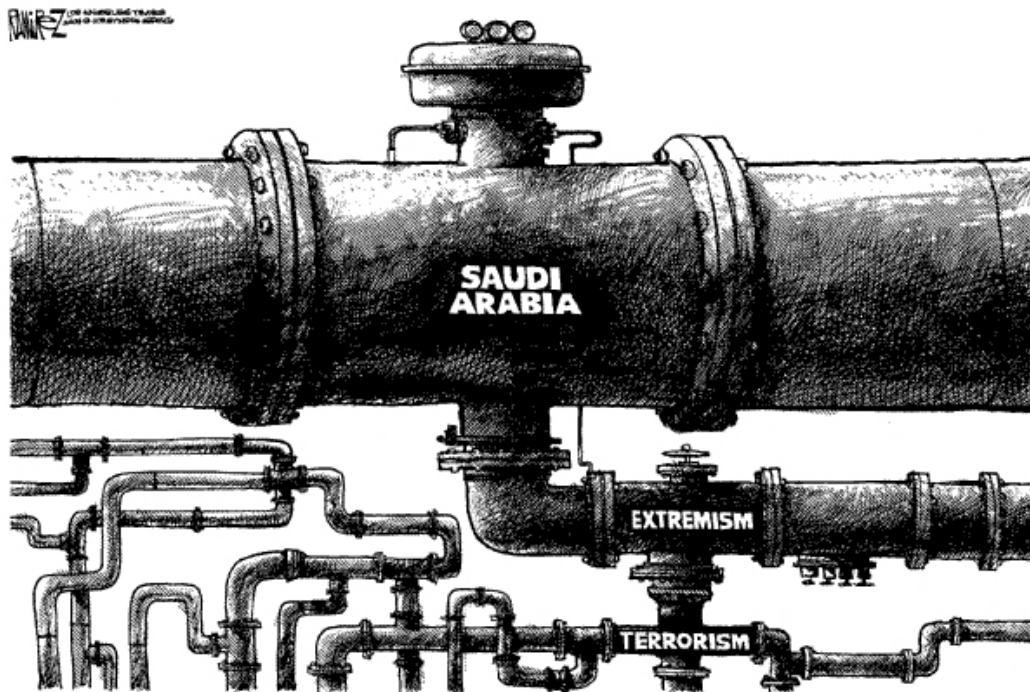
In the first, below, he literalises a medical metaphor which seems to have as little explanatory power as cancer itself. Susan Sontag's trenchant attack, in Illness as Metaphor,²⁷ on the identification of spiritual and emotional etiologies for cancer can be recycled to interrogate the use of cancer as a metaphor for spiritual decay or contamination; to represent a mysterious social phenomenon as an inexplicable biological phenomenon is an entirely static rhetorical failure.

The cartoon makes a fairly laboured play on the word 'cell', and draws an awkward causal link between its identified source of corruption, "radical Islam" and the "terrorist cell" adjoining it. As usual, Ramirez renders his metaphor with rich textural care, apparently using medical references, and the image is an arresting portrayal of a decaying fraction of a body. But it offers us little history or prophesy; we gain no sense of the reasons for the emergence of a malignant force within the body of Islam. This is not to suggest, as many have done, that such extremism can be tidily ledgered as an inevitable corollary of destructive US imperialism. But as an anatomisation of terror, Ramirez's cartoon is tautological and banal.

²⁷Sontag, Susan, Illness as Metaphor & AIDS and its metaphors, London: Picador: 2001



13 February 2004



June 3 2004

The second cartoon on extremism, drawn four months later, makes more of an attempt to offer an explanatory image, but the metaphor it employs — oil pipelines representing vectors of ideology — is forced. Ramirez fails to engage with the true dynamic of Saudi extremism, carelessly conflating the US-backed royal regime and the extremist dissidents who seek to topple it. The diagrammatic hierarchy of pipelines suggests a simple flow of destructive energy, from 'Saudi Arabia' to 'extremism' to 'terrorism', and offers no hint of the actual source of Saudi extremism — a confrontation between a corrupt, tyrannical, US-backed oligarchy and its radical domestic opposition.

Ramirez's failure to observe and depict with any accuracy the nature and etiology of Islamic extremism is of course an echo of a very similar analytic failure on the part of the Bush administration, as identified by Brown University historian Steven Graubard:

The knowledge of radical Islam in the US remains primitive and rhetorical. The Bush administration has undertaken nothing analogous to the efforts made to understand the Soviet Union in the time of Harry Truman, Dwight Eisenhower, John Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson, Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford. The federal government has yet to engage the leading independent think-tanks or universities to encourage them to discuss the context of foreign policy as it has been transformed by recent events. America once prided itself on helping instruct the world about arms control, and on how that knowledge helped contain the Soviet Union. There is no comparable command of the problems represented by terrorism.²⁸

But at times Ramirez's "primitive" knowledge of the Muslim world offers a strategic advantage. In two bluntly partisan cartoons, on the Arab world's respective responses to US abuses of Iraqi prisoners and the execution of American hostages, he strikes a rich vein of hypocrisy and lets it bleed profusely.

In the first, a figure representing autocratic Arab leadership, sporting a vast Semitic nose, is depicted condemning the Abu Ghraib abuses while perched amid a sea of graves of Saddam's victims, while a ghostly presence alongside him offers a dry commentary on his self-righteousness.

²⁸Graubard, Steven, "The Bush Fantasies That Are Guiding History" in Financial Times, February 3, 2005



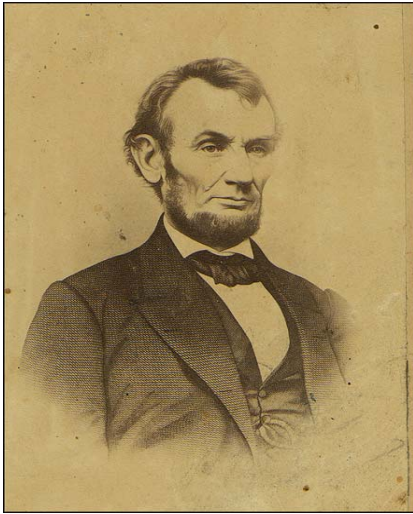
7 June 2004

In the second cartoon, drawn a week later, Ramirez returns to the theme following the broadcast beheading of a civilian American captive, and conscripts Uncle Sam to the cause. To allow for more furious gravitas, Ramirez subtracts his traditional, vaguely comical tall hat,



and renders him as a grotesque, ghostly figure.

13 June 2004, Los Angeles Times



Abraham Lincoln



20 September 2001

The weathered, aquiline architecture of his face is clearly modelled on that of Abraham Lincoln, but his eyes are far more malevolent. Ramirez's Uncle Sam is usually a terrifying, scourging spirit of righteous American violence, who also appeared in the aftermath of 9/11,

rallying the free world to the project of American revenge. The earlier cartoon is a propaganda tour de force.

Uncle Sam stands before a rich, wide field of black, with a seething aureole of white silhouetting his head and shoulders; he is a nineteenth-century presidential action hero, a hybrid of Lincoln and Dirty Harry emerging from his retirement in an icily controlled rage. He fixes his blank, inhuman gaze on us; the viewer may be potential allies or vacillators, or even the villains he is setting out to scourge. The cartoon expertly reformats American shock and confusion into the rousing familiarity of “getting even” in the sardonic style of the white-stetson western hero; the queasy disorientation of terror is swiftly tamed with a nostalgic Hollywood flourish.

But Ramirez's account of the invasion and occupation of Iraq plays less on the facile cowboy narrative that Bush's persona invokes than on the glorious gravitas of America's role in the Second World War. In doing so he draws a comparison which is laughable to those who prefer to characterise the Iraq campaign as an avaricious re-enactment of the US experience in Vietnam. But Ramirez stages his account of the invasion skilfully, and delivers an argument that is as potentially demagogic as documentary filmmaker Michael Moore's.

As the Iraqi insurgency against the occupiers intensified in April 2004, Ramirez memorialised the growing tally of dead American soldiers with a finely executed exercise in martial kitsch. A soldier's equipment – helmet, rifle, and boots – are arranged forlornly among a windblown cluster of rocks, forming a stark romantic silhouette suggestive of Joe Rosenthal's iconic photograph of the raising of the American flag as Iwo Jima was captured in 1945. To me there is something faintly comical about the macabre earnestness of the image, but for the viewer whose conception of military honour and sacrifice is untrammelled by pacifist baggage, there is not.

And the legend, inscribed with cinematic crispness of contrast into a mass of shadow, seeks, as Michael Moore does in Fahrenheit 9/11, to guide the viewer into a humble, individually experienced corner of the theatre of war.

But his intention is of course, diametrically opposed – where Moore employs individual pathos to illustrate the grave insult of Bush's idiotic venture, Ramirez employs individual pathos to illustrate the grave insult of Moore's idiotic venture. The cartoon asserts that the casualties of the occupation valorise it, where Moore asserts the opposite.

RAMIREZ
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26 April 2004

The power of America's military curriculum vitae is marshalled by Ramirez in a cartoon which adroitly intercuts past and present. The setting is a bombed-out European town — a citizen's beret suggests we are in France — in which liberating American troops offer an absurd explanation for their impending withdrawal. The townswoman they are speaking to is superbly gobsmacked. It is an ingenious sleight of speculation: by conflating an indisputably just war and an arguably unjust one, Ramirez muddies the historical waters and transfers to Bush the moral weight and steadfast vision of Roosevelt.



28 April 2004



June 4, 2004

A similar historical contrivance is at work in another cartoon drawn two months later, on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the Allied invasion of Normandy. Ramirez imagines the grim speculations of two pinheaded heroes preparing for probable death, and the result is a spectacular flash of transatlantic emotional blackmail. By hinting at and repurposing the

convulsively violent narrative that Steven Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan* implanted in the American historical imagination, the cartoon presents continental European opposition to the Iraq war as feeble, feckless amnesia – though that very opposition has arguably been, at least in part, a corollary of the continent's still vivid cultural memory of wartime suffering.

Ramirez's partisan history of the Iraq occupation was abruptly punctured by the revelation of the abuse of detainees at Abu Ghraib prison in April 2004. One of the most disturbing photographs released to the global media showed a hooded victim wired up to a mock torture device, and it was this image that Ramirez adapted in his response to the scandal.

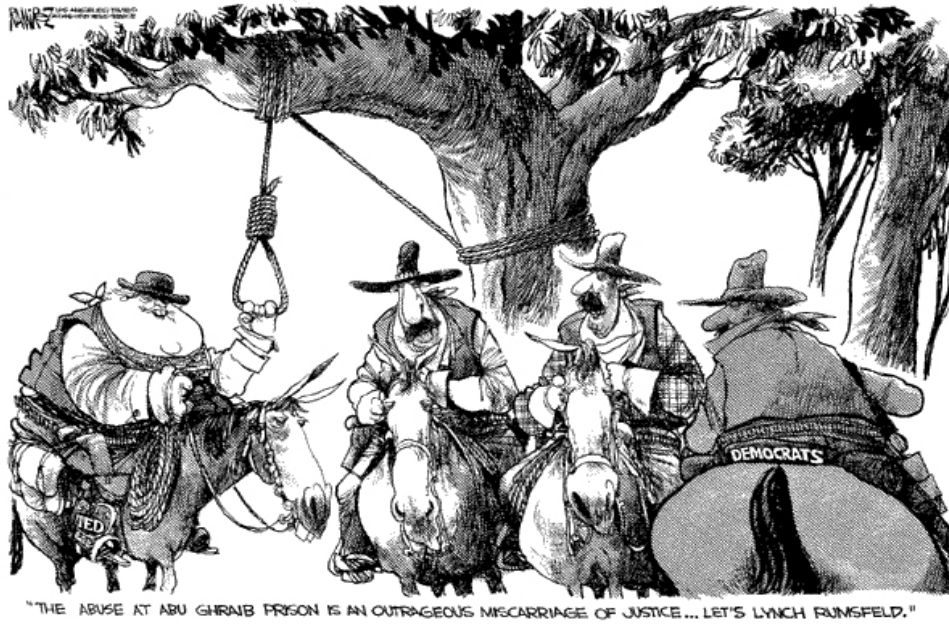


April 30 2004

US credibility, we are told, has been gravely damaged by the prison torturers. As a frank confrontation of an American offense, this cartoon is a rarity in Ramirez's work. And largely by virtue of the grotesque flair of those who art-directed the source image — which recalls the aesthetic of operatic, pseudo-mystical violence wallowed in by the Ku Klux Klan — it is an arresting cartoon.

But shortly afterward, Ramirez veered from the subdued honesty of his immediate response into facile, muddily conceived cattiness. Incensed by liberal Senator Ted Kennedy's call for Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld's resignation in the wake of the Abu Ghraib revelations, Ramirez casts him as an obese, self-satisfied ringleader of a Democratic lynch mob. His metaphor here is hyperbolic — a call for a resignation cannot even loosely be compared to a

lynching — and its violence chimes uncomfortably with the actual violence that sparked Kennedy's outrage.



May 11 2004

As the human and material cost of the Iraq occupation escalated in 2004, Ramirez's account of it grew ever more partisan. And when the Spanish electorate responded to the Madrid train bombings by immediately punishing President Jose Maria Aznar for his government's alleged concealment of Muslim extremist culpability, Ramirez entered the fray with corrosive propagandist energy.

RAMIREZ



16 March 2004

By flinching in the face of terrorist intimidation, Ramirez charges, the Spanish public had effectively ratified and justified the terrorist project. Both figures are grinning vacantly, their hands clasped and raised in gory triumph. Ramirez's decision to give a crude, simian face to the train bombers is an act of simultaneous demystification and fictionalisation; it strips the bombers of their powerful invisibility, but is also an indulgence of the rich propagandist tradition of inventing a repulsive single figure to stand for a nation, ethnicity or enemy force.

Similarly, the figure labelled "Spain", while bearing a very approximate resemblance to the Spanish prime minister Jose Zapatero, is a figure *for* Spain — a gormless, spineless suit. And when Zapatero later withdrew Spanish forces from Iraq, Ramirez picked up the story with another rancorous attack on what he perceived as unalloyed national cowardice.

RAMIREZ



20 April 2004

These casual personifications of an entire complex and traumatised society are reductive in every sense; Ramirez's instinct to deliver compelling stridency of argument costs him vital political acuity. It is an outdated approach to political symbolism: even the use in cartoons of Uncle Sam as a cipher for American foreign policy is far less prevalent today than during the Cold War, when the notion of states as monolithic political actors was in greater currency. In contemporary cartoonists' unwritten rulebook, any excess of satirical hostility is permitted, provided it is precisely addressed to those walking the corridors of power, and not to the entire polities they control.

The president's fool: Ramirez on American politics

The increasing polarisation of American politics has played into Ramirez's hand as an abrasively partisan cartoonist who operates at the very brink of the country's fraying cultural seam. A right-wing commentator embedded in a leading Californian publication, he relishes provoking his largely liberal readership.

Ramirez sparked much controversy in 2002 with a cartoon on the case of Andrea Yates, who was charged with killing her five children while suffering from severe depression and pleaded temporary insanity. On the day Yates was sentenced to life in prison, he drew a dowdy, overweight, shapeless female figure wearing a National Organisation of Women T-shirt and carrying a sign reading, "We support Andrea Yates." Her speech bubble reads, "Just think of these as late, late, late, late, late, late, late, late term abortions."

So Ramirez uses one feminist cause to skewer another by hyperbolically superimposing pro-choice language on the murder of children. Ramirez relishes summarising the popular image of a physically unattractive militant feminist (though of course in doing so he simply applies his ubiquitous 'default' caricature of an elongated, jawless head and bulbous nose, with the addition of a no-nonsense hairstyle and academic spectacles.)

RAMIREZ



March 16 2002

Ramirez has often dealt with the abortion issue as an ideological touchstone. It is a feverish and intractable rallying point in the American political landscape – and is generally shunned as a subject by careful cartoonists who prefer to avoid alienating editors and readers on either side of the fence. That Ramirez confronts abortion unambiguously is an index of his considerable journalistic courage.

At times this courage, when allied to Ramirez's occasional deviations from rhetorical lucidity, can alienate even the conservative establishment whose interests he generally defends. The clearest example of this came in July 2003, when he produced a cartoon which made an awkward visual reference to Eddie Adams' iconic 1968 photograph of a Vietnamese police officer executing a suspected Viet Cong fighter in a Saigon street. In place of the victim, Ramirez placed Bush, and his killer is labelled, mysteriously, "politics". In the background, a storefront sign tells us we are in Iraq.



July 18 2003

Ramirez's intention was to present Bush as being unfairly victimised by domestic political machinations which threatened to undermine his chief priority, the occupation of Iraq. Aside from the sheer obtuseness of the notion of a head of state's business being interrupted by "politics", the cartoon fails because of its hyperbolic and reckless adoption of an iconic image of terrifying violence for prosaic partisan purposes.



Eddie Adams, Viet Cong Execution, Associated Press 1968

Were the shooter an identifiable figure, instead of a nebulous abstract noun, there would be a little more parodic cohesion to the cartoon; as it is, the shooter is a rough approximation of the

Vietnamese policeman, disrupting both the setting of the cartoon and its metaphor. While parody is often chiefly driven by bathos, particularly in the hand of the political cartoonist, the bathos generated here achieves only a tasteless trivialisation of the source, and fails entirely to achieve the sophisticated ironic parody valorised by Hutcheon.

Within days of the cartoon's publication, the US Secret Service visited Ramirez at his home to question him on his intentions in drawing it. They feared it was a "snuff cartoon" which may encourage violent attacks on the president.

This sparked a media uproar, and an angry response from congressman Christopher Cox, chairman of the house committee on homeland security, who wrote in a letter to the director of the Secret Service:

Those of us in Southern California are used to seeing Michael Ramirez's political cartoons in the Los Angeles Times. They are amusing, insightful, sometimes historical, sometimes biting — but never illegal. I was disappointed to read that the US Secret Service, according to an agency spokesman, was considering 'what action, if any, could be taken' against Mr. Ramirez for his recent cartoon depicting political attacks on President Bush. The use of federal power to attempt to influence the work of an editorial cartoonist for the Los Angeles Times reflects profoundly bad judgment.²⁹

Ramirez — presumably as embarrassed by the inarticulacy of his cartoon as outraged by the interrogation it brought — was far from convincing in his explanation of his intentions to the Los Angeles Times:

President Bush is the target, metaphorically speaking, of a political assassination because of 16 words that he uttered in the State of the Union [his false claim that Iraq was sourcing uranium from Africa]. The image, from the Vietnam era, is a very disturbing image. The political attack on the president, based strictly on sheer political motivations, also is very disturbing.³⁰

In cartoons such as these, Ramirez stretches a source image to serve as an ill-fitting template metaphor for his journalistic argument, and as a result the cartoon's parodic logic misfires uncomfortably. In another cartoon, Ramirez uses a similarly distressing photograph as a source text, again to attack liberal American opinion — but here he memorialises the depicted violence instead of awkwardly parodying it.

²⁹US House of Representatives website: <http://cox.house.gov/html/release.cfm?id=683>

³⁰Capmag.com: <http://capmag.com/article.asp?ID=2973>



March 11 2003



Halabja, Kurdistan, Iraq 1988

The cartoon apparently draws on a photograph taken from a different angle to the photograph above of the bodies of a father and child killed in Saddam Hussein's chemical weapons attack on the Kurdish town of Halabja in 1988. Ramirez offers a morbidly detailed graphic reproduction of the image, and then, with a strange flourish of historical ventriloquism, imagines the dead father voicing a ghostly sarcastic gibe at those protesting against the US-led invasion of Iraq.

The cartoon is an example of skilful, if faintly absurd, propagandist emotional blackmail, in which pacifist sentiment is magically reconfigured as a heartless indifference to the suffering

of war. A blunt moral equation is established: Saddam's victims must be avenged; to oppose the invasion is to dishonor them.

A similar technique is used in the cartoon below, in which Ramirez at once chides the historically apathetic American voting public and pays tribute to the courage of Afghani women voters. Here Ramirez applies his propagandist skills to the cause of democracy itself, lovingly romanticising the polling-booth scene with moody chiaroscuro effects. The drapery of the voter's burkah is painstakingly rendered, and she radiates a halo of germinating freedom.



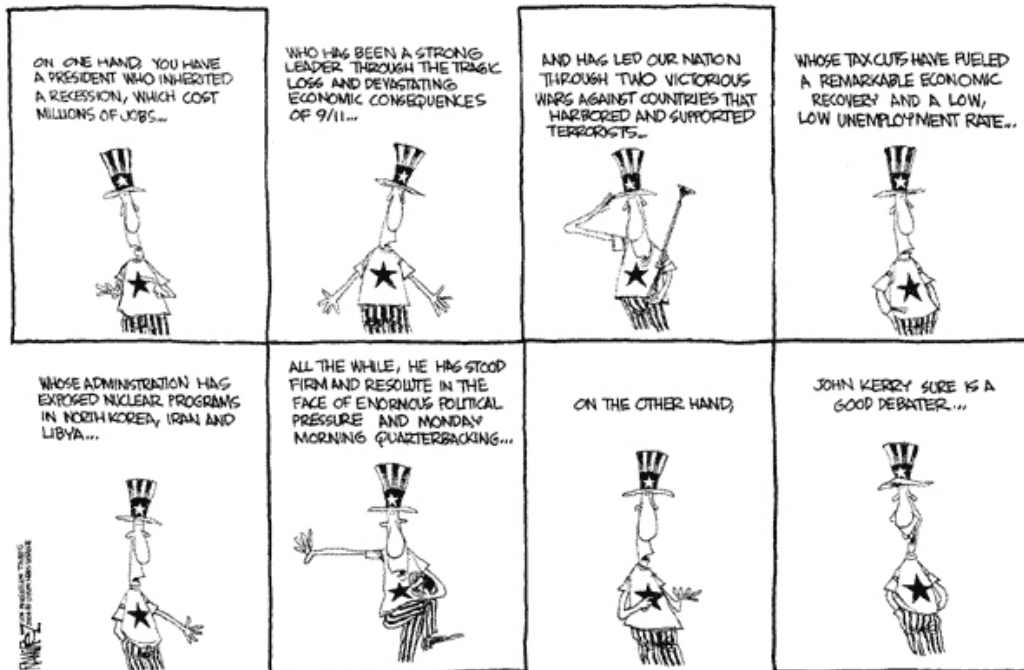
SHE BRAVED PERSECUTION, THREATS OF BODILY HARM AND DEATH TO VOTE...WHAT'S YOUR EXCUSE?

November 2 2004

But when Ramirez actually climbs into the election trenches, he suspends all idealisation of the democratic process. He made no attempt to impartially evaluate the competing platforms of Kerry and Bush in the runup to the 2004 presidential poll, choosing instead to operate as an unapologetic auxiliary spin doctor for the Republican campaign. It is not unusual for editorial journalists to endorse a candidate or party in a liberal democracy, but the vociferousness of Ramirez's election cartoons is hard to reconcile with the journalist's professional obligation to interrogate, evaluate and balance partisan arguments.

In one cartoon, Ramirez responded to Kerry's victory in the first live television debate against Bush with a multi-panel cartoon in which an American everyman figure offers an infuriatingly glib counterpoint to Zapiro's equivocating dancer cartoon discussed in the previous chapter. Ramirez uses the word-space afforded by the multipanel format to reel off a string of tenuous pro-Bush arguments before dismissing Kerry's victory as evidence of mere facile verbal

agility. The sealed-off discursive playground of the cartoon grants Ramirez the power to occupy both lecterns — to articulate his own argument and then ventriloquise a puny counterargument. When you hold the pen, you call the shots.



October 11 2004

In another election cartoon, below, Ramirez seizes on Kerry's remark that if he were elected, he would combat terrorism to the point where it became a "nuisance factor". Like the Bush campaign itself, Ramirez has no qualms about using the memory and imagery of the 9/11 terror attacks as political fuel; he depicts Kerry amid the gutted devastation of ground zero, muttering vaguely, "what a nuisance".



October 14 2004

Does this cynical, absurd misquotation stray beyond the satirist's legitimate licence to distort? The cartoon is at once horribly clumsy and exquisitely clever. It is so inconsequential in its silliness that the Kerry campaign would feel silly trying to counter it; yet its irrational charge helped, in some degree, to propel a popular decision that was anything but inconsequential.

Such is the deceptive power of the political cartoon: it can bend and rewrite history while appearing only to mock it. Like a mediaeval king's fool, it camouflages its subversion of truth and power with layers of irony and frivolity. But, of course, Ramirez is an unusual king's fool: he gives his king no trouble at all, saving his sharpest taunts for pretenders to the throne.