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# Map and Geographical Imagery in Editorial Cartoons by Eldon Pletcher: Archival Research Paper

By Linda Ginn

## Background

Maps are representations of an area of the Earth or space that convey information related to place to anyone who has access to them and can interpret them. Information on maps might include political boundaries, elevation, location of water resources, location and name of roadways, or other types. They are not recent inventions by any means. One can imagine an early hunter drawing on the ground to indicate the direction of prey animals or a villager drawing a map to show a traveling trader how to reach the next village.

Ancient maps designed to last over some period of time were produced primarily for people traveling over land and sea for personal, commercial, and military purposes. With success in commerce, exploration and the spread of power at stake, maps and the information they contained became highly prized. They were collected, guarded, and only shared with trusted generals and those carrying out commissions of business or state (Brown, 1949).

Long associated with military intelligence, maps have been integral for conquest and success in battle. To capture an enemy's maps was a coup, but only if the information on them could be trusted. Deliberate disinformation is one way to mislead or deceive with maps, but maps also have inherent inaccuracies built in. Scale is one element of disinformation, but out of necessity rather than an attempt to deceive. Since a map is much smaller than the area of Earth or space it represents, not everything contained in the area can be shown. Also, portraying three-dimensional space on a two-dimensional surface has many pitfalls and is one reason for the development of so many systems of projection, like Mercator, cylindrical equal-area, sinusoidal, and Goode's homolosine equal-area. Each has positive and negative aspects, but all projections distort scale (Monmonier, 1996).

The display and use of maps has taken many forms throughout history. Perhaps the most propagandistic use of maps as signs of power has been in palace

galleries, throne rooms, audience chambers and corporate offices. Maps on display in these settings are often large and meant to be impressive, showing the extent of power, wealth and influence of the ruler, the country or the company. The school classroom is where maps with the most purity of purpose might be expected to be found. Maps are important elements for the teaching of many subjects, especially in the social sciences. Historically, though, educational maps have not always been objective and honest (British, 2010).

Maps are prominent parts of modern day society. Every family traveling on vacation in the car in past decades consulted maps along the way, and state hospitality centers still provide maps for travelers. Maps give directional information on city streets and in buildings. With the rise of geographic information systems, many people now consult maps on computers and handheld devices like tablets and Smartphones. GPS devices in moving vehicles make use of global positioning satellite technologies.

The usefulness of Web-based maps to display geographic datasets is one way mapping technology can be employed powerfully to transmit information to a viewer. Mashups, combinations of technology to portray information in new ways, often use maps, resulting in a transformation of static masses of data into dynamic moving pictures of that data over time. One example is Latoya Egwuekwe's "The Decline: The Geography of a Recession," originally a graduate school project. Ms. Egwuekwe combined county-level unemployment data with mapping technology and progressively darker colors to produce a dramatic visual representation of worsening economic conditions in the United States from January 2007-February 2011. Another example worth noting is "1000 Years of European History in 12 Minutes," by Yura Sazhych. This mashup shows political changes in Europe since about 1000 C.E. using color and moving borders. The understanding of political change is enhanced for the viewer, but an improvement in this mashup would be the addition of a date stamp.

Maps and mapping concepts are not just visual. They have also become essential elements in our verbal communications. In addition to simple noun and verb uses (a “map” of Texas, “map” out a new career), they are also used to express ideas such as obliteration (wiped off the “map”) or describe something widely known (This will put us on the “map”) (Ginn, 2012).

Since maps and map imagery have long been used to communicate information, it is not surprising that they were incorporated into a social and political commentary art form, the editorial cartoon. This study examined map and geographical imagery used in editorial cartoons by Eldon Pletcher. Cartoons in this study are part of the AAEC Editorial Cartoon Digital Collection in the Special Collections at The University of Southern Mississippi. An earlier study (Ginn, 2013) of map and geographical imagery in editorial cartoons from this collection sampled the work of multiple artists; the current study focused on one cartoonist, Eldon Pletcher, whose work constitutes the largest part of the digital collection.

The purpose of this study was to identify how often map and geographical imagery was part of Pletcher’s cartoon, the type of map imagery, geographic locations represented, the scale of the imagery, types of geographical landforms, manmade structures indicating place, and whether the imagery was merely locational or important to an understanding of the cartoon’s message.

### **Eldon Pletcher, Cartoonist**

Eldon Pletcher was born in Goshen, Indiana, in 1922. He studied at the Chicago Academy of Fine Arts (1941-1942) and, after military service in World War II, the University of Aberdeen (1946-1947) in Scotland. He also studied at the John Herron Art School in Indianapolis, Indiana, before beginning his career as a cartoonist at the *Sioux City Journal*. He was at the *Journal* from 1949-1966 and then moved to the *New Orleans Times Picayune*, where he drew and published cartoons from 1966-1984 or 1985 (Wichita State; Syracuse). Pletcher’s cartoons addressed issues of society, culture, current events, and politics at the local, state, regional, national, and international level.

### **Editorial Cartoons**

Editorial cartoons have been influential in American politics for as long as they have been published. It is generally agreed that the first editorial cartoon published in an American newspaper was by Benjamin Franklin in 1754 (Bush 1966, 9-11) (Figure 1), while an earlier cartoon of Franklin’s dates to 1747 (Somers, 1998). Franklin’s drawing of a divided snake signifying what he considered to be disunited British colonies in North America evolved into the famous “Join, or Die” cartoon that came to symbolize the unity needed to gain independence from England. Franklin’s snake appears to represent a roughly drawn map of the Eastern seaboard of the United States with the pieces labeled as colonies, though Georgia does not appear and the New England colonies are not individual (Belyeu, 2006).



Figure 1. “Join, or Die” by Benjamin Franklin Pennsylvania Gazette (Philadelphia, PA), May 9, 1754 (courtesy of Library of Congress)

In the U.S. presidential election of 1832, cartoons were used to attack then President Andrew Jackson. By the end of the American Civil War, the New York Evening Telegram was printing a front page cartoon each week. Cartoons published in the New York World likely contributed to Grover Cleveland’s defeat of James G. Blaine in the presidential election of 1884 (Bush, 1966).

Some of the best known historical political cartoons are those by Thomas Nast published in Harper’s Weekly in the 1860s and 1870s, which were important in discrediting New York City’s corrupt political leader, William Marcy Tweed of the Tammany Hall Society. Nast was the originator of the Democratic Party donkey and Republican Party

elephant symbols, and Chris Lamb (2004) credits him with being “the first cartoonist to fully demonstrate the impact that the cartoon could have on American society” (p. 43).

Editorial cartoons use words and pictures to communicate messages, often the thoughts and opinions of the cartoonist. “For good or bad, the cartoon can be a powerful force, and in its very nature it is a critical instrument because in a broad sense its base is caricature and caricature is ridicule.” (Fitzpatrick 1953, unnumbered page facing page 1)

As social commentary, cartoons can vary widely. According to Lamb (2004), some “cartoonists...use satire to challenge readers and shake them out of their complacency, whereas the so-called gag cartoonists soften their message with humor” (p.26). Elaine Miller, in her film about editorial cartoons focused on Hillary Rodham Clinton, said that “cartooning starts with an attitude” (1998). Even so, the most powerful editorial cartoons are not necessarily funny. Another major purpose is to provoke readers into thinking about social issues. “Political cartoonists mine the metaphors of our social landscape looking for those bombshells that startle and amuse us, but we readers are also a part of the meaning of these images because we share a culture with polarized ideas....We play our part.” (Miller, 1998)

Linus Abraham wrote, “Cartoons are intended to transform otherwise complex and opaque social events and situations into quick and easily readable depictions that facilitate comprehension of the nature of social issues and events. In doing so, they present society with visually palpable and hyper-ritualized depictions selectively exaggerated portions of ‘reality’) that attempt to reveal the essence and meaning of social events” (Abraham, 2009, p. 119).

The words are important, but they are not the primary aspect, because they are dependent on the images for the meaning to come through (Abraham, 2009). Lamb (2004) wrote, “If the imagery is powerful enough, there is no need for more than a few – if any – words” (p, 43). Said another way, “At

best, textual materials just supplement or enhance the visual messages” (Abraham, 2009, p. 122).

Imagery used in editorial cartoons is of many types. A person in a cartoon might be drawn to be recognizable, President Lyndon Johnson, for example. The person might be a device used by the cartoonist to portray an “Everyman” character, an image used repeatedly that rises over time to the status of a signature image. Lines can indicate movement, such as the curved lines around a tornado that portray a spinning motion or the straight lines behind a ship that indicate movement through water. Nursery rhyme characters, buildings, city skylines, clothing – all these and more are used by cartoonists to convey the messages of editorial cartoons.

### **Maps and Geographical Imagery in Editorial Cartoons**

An inventory of a cartoon’s visual and textual content is the basis of interpretation of cartoons. What images are present and what is their relationship? What do the words say? Deeper interpretation involves analysis of the imagery which, together with the text, leads the reader to understand the meaning being conveyed by the cartoonist.

The presence of any imagery in editorial cartoons is intentional. The space in a cartoon is too valuable to be wasted on anything incidental or superfluous. Is a map of France in a cartoon present to identify the geographic location of the issue being addressed, or is the shape of France used to convey another idea or a larger meaning?

Other geographic imagery presents similar opportunities for analysis and interpretation. A cartoon that shows a little girl carrying school books walking down a lane next to a creek while leading a lamb, with a schoolhouse in the background, is probably not about nursery rhymes, sheep, creeks, or buildings. The cartoonist is probably using a nursery rhyme image to convey a message about the education of children. The lane and creek (geographical features) may not be germane to either location or meaning in this example.

In contrast, in a cartoon showing people in a canoe trying to navigate a creek studded with boulders labeled with societal issues such as war, debt, and poverty, the creek and boulders are used as integral aspects of meaning. A cartoon showing people climbing a mountain may be about mountain climbing, or it may allude to a hard task being undertaken or a political situation that will be difficult to accomplish.

Manmade structures that are easily identifiable provide readers a key to geographic location and therefore, context, without the need for words. Do they also function to portray deeper meaning? Does the presence of the U.S. Capitol dome signify only the geographic setting of Washington DC for general context, or does the image contribute to a reader's understanding that the cartoon is addressing some aspect of national politics? Does the presence of the Louisiana Superdome in a city skyline simply fix the location as New Orleans, or does it mean the cartoon has to do with football?

### **Methodology and Data Collection**

Editorial cartoons examined and analyzed for this study are part of the AAEC Editorial Cartoon Digital Collection in the Special Collections at The University of Southern Mississippi (AAEC). The digital collection consists of 1,924 images of cartoons by more than 50 artists. Images in the digital collection were selected from more than 6,500 original cartoons in the print Editorial Cartoon Collection, which has artwork by more than 300 cartoonists with creation dates from the 1950s and later. Cartoons from the 1960s and 1970s make up the bulk of the digital collection. (Special Collections, AAEC).

The work of Eldon Pletcher constitutes almost half of the AAEC Editorial Cartoon Digital Collection, with 899 cartoons of 1,924. A simple search for cartoon metadata records with "Pletcher" in any field was used to retrieve all digitized cartoons by Eldon Pletcher. The first 200 cartoons in the results list were viewed. Data were recorded to answer the research questions as shown below.

### *Research Questions*

Q1. Does the cartoon contain map or geographical imagery?

(Yes or No)

Q2. What map and geographical images are shown?

(Globe; Great circle/Hemisphere; Continent; Country; State; Geographical landforms; or Manmade structures that convey location)

Q3. What locations are indicated or shown?

(Names of cities, states, regions, countries, continents; or Space)

Q4. What is the scale of the imagery?

(Extraterrestrial/Global; Continental; National; State; Local/Close)

Q5. What geographic landforms are present?

(Mountains, oceans, lakes, rivers, etc.)

Q6. What manmade structures indicating place are present?

(Structures such as pyramids, the U.S. Capitol dome, the Eiffel Tower, etc.)

Q7. Do the images just specify location, or are they important to the cartoon's meaning?

(Location or Meaning)

Two delimitations were determined. Cartoons by Eldon Pletcher in the Editorial Cartoon Digital Collection were included up to a count of 200. Cartoons with manmade structures that required labeling to be identified or that did not readily convey any geographic location were excluded.

### **Results**

The purpose of this study was to analyze map and geographical imagery in Eldon Pletcher's editorial cartoons in the AAEC Editorial Cartoon Digital Collection in the Special Collections at The University of Southern Mississippi. Two hundred digitized editorial cartoons were examined.

Research question 1 asked how many cartoons contained map or geographical imagery. Thirty-four of 200 cartoons (17 percent) had map or geographical imagery as part of the visual content. See Table 1.

Table 1: Presence of Map or Geographical Imagery

	Quantity
Imagery present	34
Imagery not present	166
Total	200

Question 2 asked what map and geographical imagery was shown in the cartoons. Manmade structures were most often seen in the cartoons that had map or geographical imagery – 17 of 34 (50 percent). The types of imagery and quantities are shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Map and Geographical Imagery by Type

	Quantity
Extraterrestrial (smallest scale)	2
Global	1
National	4
State	2
Local/Close (largest scale)	25
Total	34

Question 3 asked what geographic locations were indicated or shown. Washington DC was most often seen, 10 cartoons (29 percent), followed by no specific location in eight cartoons (23 percent). One cartoon had two distinct locations. Geographic landforms were associated with no specific location. The geographic location data are shown in Table 3.

Question 4 asked about the scale of the map and geographical imagery. By far, most cartoon imagery was large scale (25 of 34 cartoons, or 74 percent), described here as Local/Close, with the reader seeing the imagery as if from very close range. The smallest scale placed the reader in outer space seeing imagery of planets. The scale data are shown in Table 4.

Table 4: Scale of Map and Geographic Imagery

	Quantity
Global	2
Great circle/Hemisphere	3
Continent	0
Country	4
State	1
Geographical landforms	7
Manmade structures	17
Total	34

Table 3: Geographic Locations

	Quantity
United States	3
Washington DC	10
Space	2
Mississippi	1
Baton Rouge	3
New Orleans	2
Louisiana	1
Falkland Islands	1
Moscow	1
Berlin	1
Cambodia	1
London	1
No specific location	8
Total	35

Question 5 asked what geographical landforms were present. Descriptive terms were used to record a variety of landforms seen in 11 cartoons, as shown in Table 5 (presented alphabetically).

Table 5: Geographical Landforms

	Quantity
Cliff	1
Creek	1
Iceberg	1
Lake bottom	1
Moon	1
Mountain	2
Ocean	2

Planet(s)	2
Total	11

Question 6 asked what manmade structures indicating place were present. The most often seen manmade structure was the U.S. Capitol dome (seven of 18 cartoons, or 39 percent) in Washington DC, followed by the White House (Washington) and the Louisiana State House in Baton Rouge (three each). Manmade structures that required a label for identification were not recorded. The manmade structure data are shown in Table 6.

Table 6: Manmade Structures Indicating Place

	Quantity
U.S. Capitol dome (Washington DC)	7
White House (Washington DC)	3
Louisiana State House (Baton Rouge)	3
Louisiana Superdome (New Orleans)	2
Kremlin (Moscow)	1
Berlin Cathedral (Berlin)	1
Westminster Palace (London)	1
Total	18

Question 7 asked whether the images just specified location or if they were important to an understanding of the cartoon’s meaning. By a wide margin, the imagery was interpreted as being important to understanding the meaning of the cartoon (27 of 34 cartoons, or 79 percent). See Table 7.

Table 7: Location vs Meaning

	Quantity
Location	7
Meaning	27
Total	34

### Cartoon Examples

Several examples of editorial cartoons with map and geographical imagery illustrate the data in Tables 1-7 above.

“Mr. Begin reconsiders a Palestinian homeland,” (Figure 2), shows the Earth as a globe with lines of latitude and longitude, surrounded from a distance by other planets. A wooden structure has been nailed to the Earth, perhaps not very securely. At the end of the structure is a platform on which Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin, dressed in workman’s overalls, is kneeling on hands and knees using a hammer to attach groundcover and a palm tree. Data collected: Q2 Global; Q3 Space; Q4 Extraterrestrial (scale); Q5 Planet(s); Q6 N/A; Q7 Meaning.



Figure 2. “Mr. Begin reconsiders a Palestinian homeland,” by Eldon Pletcher. Special Collections, McCain Library and Archives, University of Southern Mississippi

“It’s homogenized,” (Figure 3), uses a map of Louisiana to show the location of the topical content of this cartoon. Pletcher uses a milk truck and milk industry terminology to comment on the 1979 governor’s election campaign in Louisiana. Data collected: Q2 State; Q3 Louisiana; Q4 State (scale); Q5 N/A; Q6 N/A; Q7 Location.

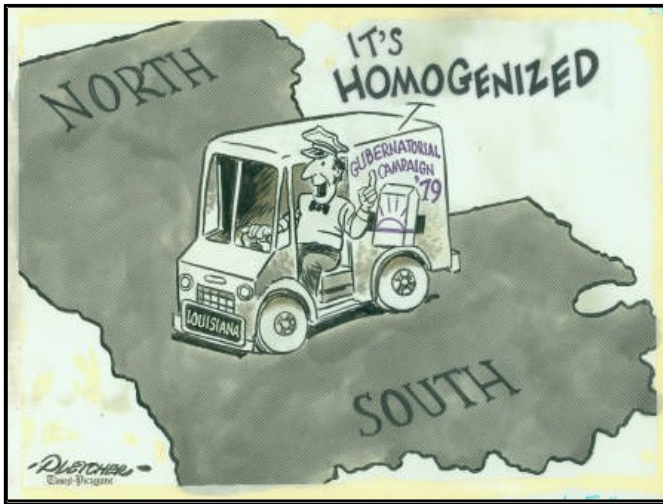


Figure 3: "It's homogenized," by Eldon Pletcher. Special Collections, McCain Library and Archives, University of Southern Mississippi

"Deep South college entrance test scores," (Figure 4), is an example of a map image used as the background of a graph. While the location is apparent from the shape of the map, it is the graph itself which has more importance. Data collected: Q2 Country; Q3 United States; Q4 National (scale); Q5 N/A; Q6 N/A; Q7 Meaning.

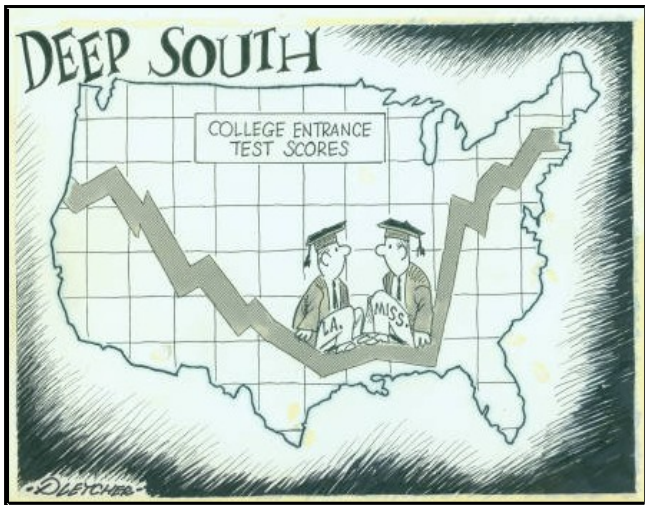


Figure 4. "Deep South college entrance test scores," by Eldon Pletcher. Special Collections, McCain Library and Archives, University of Southern Mississippi

"Yes, Mr. President, I'm giving my full support to your increase in defense spending," (Figure 5), shows a manmade structure, the U.S. Capitol dome, outside the window at the upper right. This fixes the location of the action of the cartoon as Washington DC, but the meaning is broader as it relates to U.S.

politics on a national scale. Data collected: Q2 Manmade structure; Q3 Washington DC; Q4 Local/Close (scale); Q5 N/A; Q6 U.S. Capitol dome; Q7 Meaning.



Figure 5. "Yes, Mr. President, I'm giving my full support to your increase in defense spending," by Eldon Pletcher. Special Collections, McCain Library and Archives, University of Southern Mississippi

"International year of the child," (Figure 6), is a biting example of satirical wit. An emaciated and naked child holds a large empty bowl, the outside of which is marked with lines of latitude and longitude, ocean, and indistinct continental area. The International Year of the Child was proclaimed on January 1, 1979, by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) to highlight malnutrition and other issues that impact children worldwide.

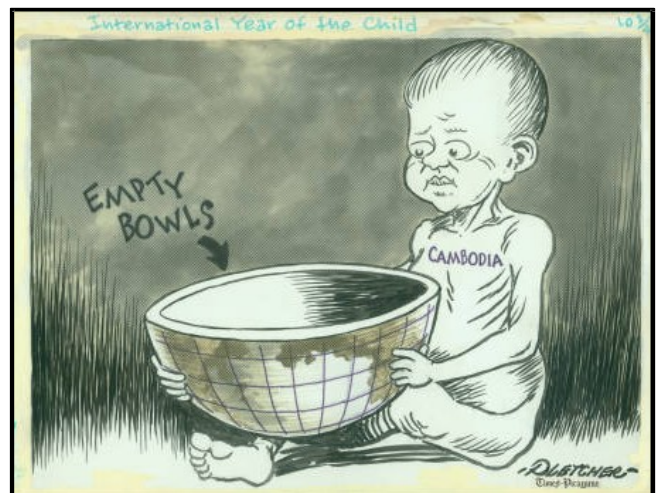


Figure 6. "International year of the child," by Eldon Pletcher. Special Collections, McCain Library and Archives, University of Southern Mississippi



Pletcher identifies Cambodia by labeling the child, but the upturned bowl suggests the southern hemisphere of the Earth, which may also be the target of his comment (Cambodia is in the northern hemisphere but somewhat close to the Equator). Turning the image upside down does not show a land mass that suggests the northern hemisphere. Could the map imagery on the empty bowl also suggest that the southern hemisphere is missing out on the world's attention to childhood hunger and food insufficiency? Data collected: Q2 Hemisphere; Q3 Southern Hemisphere; Q4 Local/Close (scale); Q5 N/A; Q6 N/A; Q7 Meaning.

“Re-election landslide,” (Figure 7), is another example of a manmade structure identifying location. In this case, it is Westminster Palace in London, the seat of the British Parliament. Other elements provide the meaning that Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's party had been returned to power by a wide margin in a reelection campaign in Great Britain despite a seriously depressed national economy. Data collected: Q2 Manmade structure; Q3 London; Q4 Local/Close (scale); Q5 N/A; Q6 Westminster Palace; Q7 Location.



Figure 7: “Re-election landslide,” by Eldon Pletcher. Special Collections, McCain Library and Archives, University of Southern Mississippi

It could be argued that the 27 cartoons in which the map and geographical imagery was important to understanding the meaning are more imaginative than the ones that use a map image to fix the location of the topical content. “Deep South college

entrance test scores” is an example of a cartoon that seemed to require more of the cartoonist than did “It’s homogenized,” the one about the 1979 Louisiana governor’s race.

From the standpoint of the researcher, the cartoons that required more inspection and analysis to understand them were more interesting than the ones that just indicated location. The most interesting one in this study, perhaps the most engaging because it is so enigmatic, is “International year of the child,” where the map and geographical imagery used causes the reader to stop, think, and ask, “What did Pletcher mean by using the map imagery on the outside of the bowl the child is holding? Was he indicating the southern hemisphere, specifically? Or was he making a worldwide comment but showing half a world? What did he mean?”

## Conclusion

This study analyzed 200 editorial cartoons drawn by Eldon Pletcher, who worked for *the New Orleans Times Picayune* for almost 20 years. The presence of map and geographical imagery in Pletcher’s cartoons was the specific focus. Thirty-four (17 percent) of the cartoons analyzed contained map and geographical imagery. Of these, 18 used recognizable manmade structures to convey location or meaning and 11 used geographical landforms. Only five cartoons used actual map images.

Maps, geographical landforms, and manmade structures are just one type of imagery at the disposal of the editorial cartoonist. Whatever is used, the cartoonist’s wit and skill are required to select just the right images and words to convey the intended message.

Editorial cartoons have been a vibrant and unique part of the landscape of social and political commentary in newspaper journalism for at least 150 years. They are transitioning online along with newspapers and also into social media by being shared and posted by enthusiasts. The popularity of editorial cartoons will likely continue, due in part to the talent of cartoonists drawing on their artistic and journalistic abilities to combine words and images into this unique form of communication.

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The screenshot shows the 'Digital Collections' page for the University of Southern Mississippi. The header includes the university logo and navigation links: Home, About, Browse, Using These Images, Civil Rights in Mississippi Digital Archive, McCain Library & Archives Home, Mississippi Digital Library, and ? Help. A search bar is present with a 'Search' button and a link to 'Advanced Search'. The main content area is titled 'AAEC Editorial Cartoons' and features a carousel of cartoon thumbnails. One thumbnail is highlighted with the caption 'Collective bargaining bill; June 15, [1968 or 1974]'. To the right, a 'Recent Additions' section displays two new cartoon thumbnails with their respective dates: 'I really am sick!; November 24, 1970' and '"Red" hotline; February 11, 1968'.

“The Editorial Cartoon Digital Collection contains examples of the work of member artists of the American Association of Editorial Cartoonists (AAEC). With more than 1000 cartoons representing more than 50 cartoonists, the digital collection is still growing. Created primarily in the 1960s and 1970s, the cartoons reflect changes in American social and political attitudes and provide artistic commentary on such topics as the Civil Rights Movement, Watergate, the Vietnam War, government bureaucracy, taxes, and political corruption.

More editorial cartoons are available in McCain Library & Archives, as well as information about the cartoonists.” For more information visit: <http://digilib.usm.edu/cdm/landingpage/collection/cartoon>.