

# Editorial Cartoonist Don Wright An Eye on the Jugular

By Bob Bonin

**R**ICHARD M. NIXON, in the prime of his presidency, was a beady-eyed bamboozler and a shifty-eyed skulker. With hooded eyes and hidden motives, he was a sinister schemer, untrustworthy, deceitful and paranoid. At least that's how Don Wright of the *Miami News* pictured him.

Don Wright saw the emperor naked and dared to draw him that way. In the trenchant tradition of Thomas Nast, Don Wright practiced his profession to the hilt. He pierced Nixon's public pretensions. He lanced as ludicrous Nixon's bid to make one thing perfectly clear. He skewered with skepticism Nixon's statement: I am not a crook.

Wright's artistic license as an editorial cartoonist allows him freedom to exaggerate. Yet, a year ago, *Time* magazine noted that Nixon had been subjected to rough-house treatment on many of the

nation's editorial pages. And Wright was singled out as being "harder" on Nixon than any other editorial cartoonist. Where Nixon was concerned, there's no doubt Don Wright was in top form, the bite of his Rapido drawing pen especially poisonous.

Not that he didn't go "soft" on the former President at times. On occasion, the roundhouse punch was delivered as a tummy tickler (though still pointed enough to draw blood). Nixon became the clown prince engaged in presidential posturing, paunchy body teetering on spindly legs rooted flatfoot in wingtips. He was the chief executive, as Don Wright drew him, with what *Time* called a "bowling-pin nose and mashed-potato jowls." The humor was there, but so were the unmistakable undertones which depicted Nixon as he really was, in Wright's estimation.

The developing, unprecedented drama surrounding Richard M. Nixon partly explains the preoccupation with cartoon renderings of the man. But for Wright and other cartoonists, he also was a once-in-a-lifetime caricature — a delight to work with, and work over.

"We don't always get someone who has all those malformations of features," Wright said. "He was a ready-made caricature, easy to do."

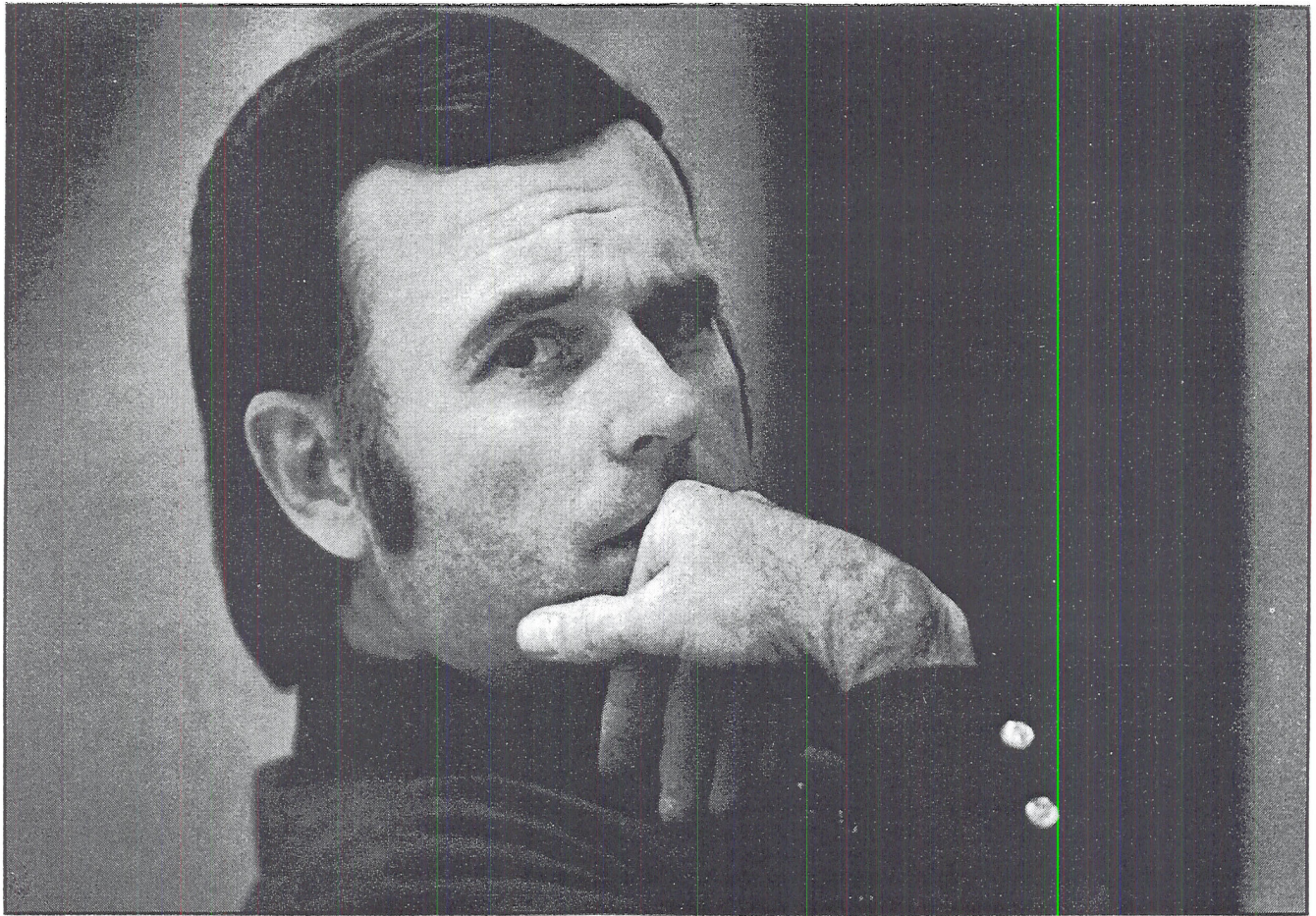
Wright claims Nixon's the one, the only personage he can draw well and quickly. "That's because I've done him so damn many times I just can't make any mistakes. That's a marvelous face he's got — thoroughly evil." Perfect, he chortles.

But the eyes, he says, letting us share in one stylistic secret, "the eyes are the key to my making Nixon look the way he does. They mean more than his nose or jowls. I like to work most of his expression into them. They're tiny. They dart around, they really do. Have you

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noticed they do funny things? . . .”

Not having those eyes, jowls and nose to caricature around anymore, Wright gets the drawing board heebie-jeebies. Gerald Ford is a tough cookie to draw. “Jerry Ford’s face,” Wright has reported, “bears a striking resemblance to the backside of my thumb.”

In the Nixon caricature, Wright displayed what the most effective editorial cartoonist is said to possess: a congenital killer instinct. With President Ford, he’s yet to go for the jugular. He worries about that and wonders if he and his cartooning colleagues in general have “lost our capacity to be vicious. We don’t seem to produce cartoons with explosive impact anymore, the kind that slam somebody right between the eyes with no subtlety at all.”

Properly employed, the tools of Wright’s trade — exaggeration and distortion — prey on peculiarities, search out incongruities and make brutally clear the distinction be-

tween one’s words and one’s actions. A person, issue or event is pared down to its PR-free essence and held up to ridicule. At its best, the editorial cartoon is a burlesque, free of namby-pamby, overlooking beauty marks, illuminating “warts and all,” and underlining calls for action. The editorial cartoon is an “unequivocal statement,” writes Newbold Noyes, former editor of the then *Washington Star-News*, “that white-hot point of light beneath the burning glass.” In the Wright mold, the editorial cartoon is an acidulous attack. And “viciousness,” Wright declares, “is central to its impact.”

There’s not much to see in Wright’s outward personality to indicate a “vicious” streak. Say those who know him, he’s as mild-mannered as the next guy. Actually reserved and basically shy. Underneath the countenance, though,

beats the heart of an iconoclast — irreverent, impudent, impassioned and highly opinionated. His close friend, *Miami News* humorist John Keasler, contends that Wright’s “not a cartoonist” (with its happy-go-lucky connotations) “but more precisely a satirist who’s never been cruel but tries always to be devastating.”

Wright came to draw these lusty lampoons in roundabout fashion. Though having “an innate interest and ability to cartoon” since he was “yea high,” as he puts it, he’s not had any formal art training. That might have been different had he won the top prize in a Burdine’s art contest in his senior year at Miami Edison. The prize would have sent him to college on an art scholarship, and his career might have taken another course.

He joined the *Miami News* as an eager copyboy fresh out of high school. Twenty-three years later he’s still working for the *News* and is syndicated in approximately 50



other newspapers.

He talks ever so sketchily about those intervening years, truly amazed at "how time flies when . . ." so on and so forth. "I was withdrawn as a kid," he says. "Newspapering forced me into situations where I had to be aggressive, I had to become more aware of what was going on. I wouldn't give up that experience. It helped me much more, I think, than a college education, although I regret not having one. I've developed into a good newspaperman which helps me immensely as an editorial cartoonist."

In 1954, he graduated to the photo department as a staff photographer. Drafted into the Army two years later, he spent his hitch as a Signal Corps photographer. On discharge in 1956, he returned to the *News* and was quickly promoted to picture editor responsible for the selection and display of all photos and illustrations appearing in the paper.

Sitting at ease in a room down the hall from the Spartan office he shares with two editorial writers, he recalls his "formative years." As picture editor, he was pushed into writing, which he enjoyed. "All this time I became more aware of what were the political, the social issues," he says.

And he was whipping off cartoons for his own amusement, sticking them up on the newsroom bulletin board.

One day in mid-1963, something about the *News* or journalism in

general really irked him. He got stomping mad and quit. The late Bill Baggs, legendary editor of the *News*, persuaded him to reconsider. For some time Baggs had been trying to talk Wright into cartooning on a regular basis. Wright remembers that he hadn't been "that interested or that well-informed."

One last time, Baggs asked him to give it a try. He did, even though, says Wright, "I had no idea what an editorial cartoonist did, except that he was supposed to have an opinion. My first reaction was to look at, to study really, [Bill] Mauldin and Herblock [Herbert Block]," whose syndicated work was available to the *News*.

"I said, 'Well, I guess this is what an editorial cartoon is,' and I sat down and tried to combine their styles as my own because they were supposed to be the best."

The humor Mauldin of the Chicago *Sun-Times* brought to his cartoons and Herblock's viciousness ("he has no equal") appealed to the budding cartoonist. Looking back on some of those first cartoons, Wright wonders "why the hell the *News* ever stuck with me. They were just terrible," he says with a chuckle and a shake of his head. "I did have enough sense to know they were terrible — and also to realize they had to get better."

Better they got as he devoted more time to the craft. He read more, did his homework, engaged in more office debates, analyzed what was happening around him. He came to be more aware of events

— politically, socially, philosophically — which affect people's lives. He became better able to formulate reasoned opinion and to express it succinctly and passionately.

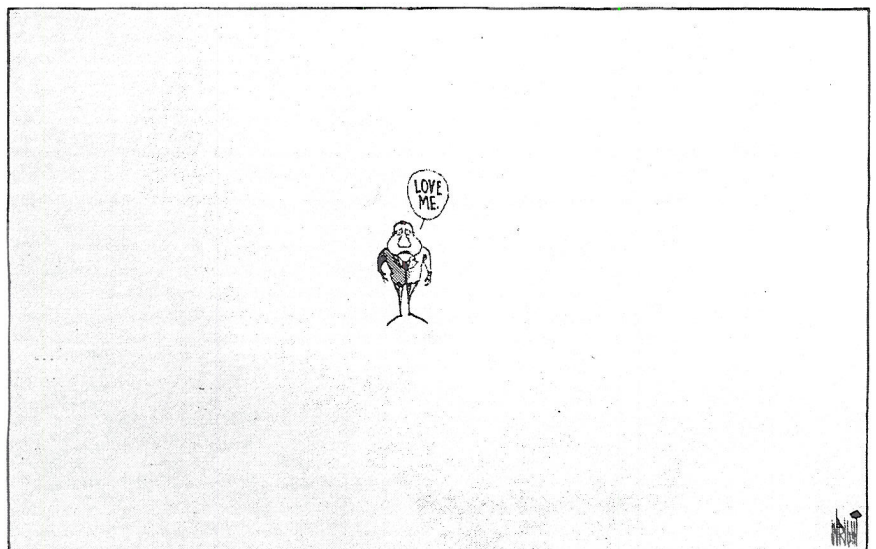
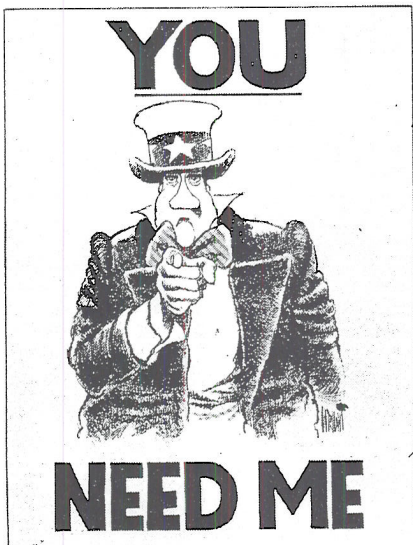
In 1966, Wright was awarded the Pulitzer Prize. The recognition was nice, he agrees. But more important, to him anyway, is getting readers to take time to look at his editorial cartoons day after day. "I consider myself a part of the editorial page," he explains. "In that sense, my job is to stimulate people.

"I must simplify an issue to the point where the message comes through in a way they can understand. Then I want them to agree or disagree to the extent that they get furious or enthusiastic enough to come back tomorrow."

He thinks it largely his job to draw readers onto the editorial page in the first place. "People don't read a newspaper," he says, "not really. They scan it. There's no sure way to make people read the editorial page either, but the cartoon might stop them long enough to get into the page."

Wright believes editorial page editors deserve some criticism. "Most of them don't understand their audience. They don't realize they have to get average readers — I hate to use that word — into their editorial page.

"The significance of the cartoon is that it really can take a fairly complex subject and, if the cartoonist is good, break it down to the extent that the average guy can look at it, understand some facet of





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the issue involved and get some feeling toward it. This gets back to the true function of an editorial page and the cartoon’s role in it.

“The cartoonist has got to have impact. Yet lots of editorial page editors want to shy away from controversial cartoons that seem to be harsh. But that’s *exactly* what a cartoon *should* be, goddammit. It should grate on your nerves or irritate you or sometimes make you bust out laughing. It should slam you right between the eyes. It can’t be mild in any sense. If it is, the editorial page is going to be confined to, you know, just the chamber-of-commerce type readers.

“If I can get a certain type of reader — who might not otherwise read the editorial page — to stop long enough to look at the cartoon, to get into the editorial page, maybe even read it, maybe in a way I’m getting him interested in political and social issues.

“Here’s something readers may have a problem with,” he offers, chuckling again. “Maybe some editorial page editors too:

“By its very nature, the editorial cartoon is basically a simple instrument. It can’t explain itself. Either you get it or you don’t. An editorial, though, can do anything the writer wants. It can be vague. It can talk all around the issue. Most editorials spend too much time speaking about ‘on the other hand. . . .’ The editorial cartoon can’t be subtle

or balanced viewpoint. It’s to be judged quickly. Take it or leave it.”

An editorial cartoon consists of unequal parts of idea and drawing (perhaps 75 per cent the former, 25 per cent the latter). Wright thinks too many judge his editorial cartoons by artwork alone.

“That people react to my cartoons is fine. Yet I would hope they’re reacting for the right reasons. The most important thing . . . is that they get beyond the drawing and find out what it is I’m trying to say.

“Sure, artwork counts. If I’ve got a really great idea that I know is going to have impact, I can ruin that cartoon with the drawing. Yet it can’t carry on artwork alone.” Rollin Kirby, a distinguished cartoonist of a much earlier age, put it this way back in 1918: “A good idea has carried many an indifferent drawing to glory.” But never vice versa.

Wright believes the most effective cartoon results from “a combination of good idea and ability to get it across with a minimum of artwork — not too little, not too much. That’s hard not only to do but to describe. I know the right combination when I see it. I have a pretty good idea of knowing when I have a complete piece of work.

“But my problem is,” and he taps his head, “I can visualize exactly what I want up here but I can’t seem to get it down on the drawing

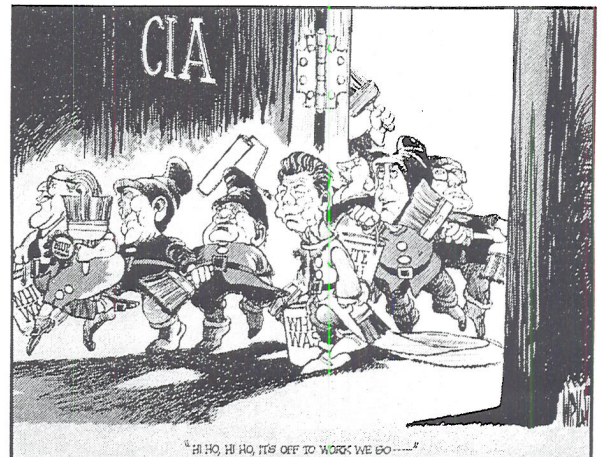
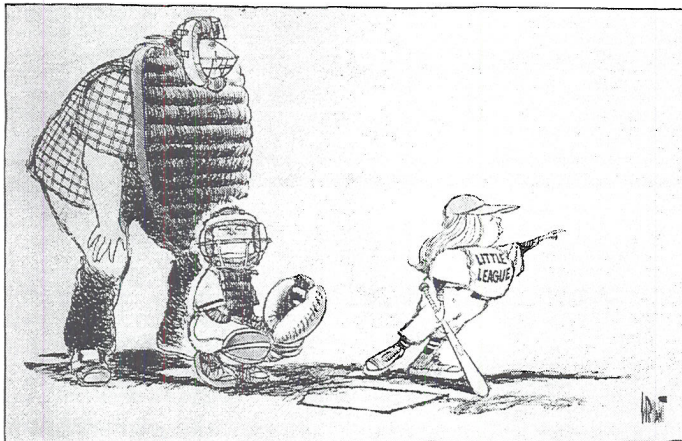
board in precisely that manner. You see, I’m not a natural artist. I’ve had no formal training, as I said. Any development artistically is strictly by trial and error. It takes me a long time to produce the drawing.”

Friends at the *News* say that’s not the half of it, that perfectionist that he is, Wright literally agonizes over his artwork. It’s a long, drawn-out ordeal as he laboriously transforms the roughest stick-figure scribbles into skillfully stylized sketches. Such artistic refinement is a painful process.

“Usually I’m not satisfied with most anything I do. I just have never produced a cartoon — silly as this may sound — that I really care all that much for. There isn’t a single one that I wouldn’t like to go back and rearrange somehow.” Including his Pulitzer Prize-winning portfolio.

“If I hit on an idea fairly early in the day, that means I have just that much more time to spend on drawing.” But that rarely happens, for a number of reasons. Chief among them is that it’s “damn difficult” to settle on one idea culled from the many feasible ones available, mostly taken from the day’s top news stories. Seldom does he draw a cartoon specifically to illustrate an editorial.

A 14-hour day is not uncommon to Wright. Typically he gets into the office about 10 a.m. and heads for





home sometime after midnight. He confesses that he's mostly to blame for his long hours on the job. "I tend to get all wrapped up in other aspects of the newspaper. I'm very free with my advice," he smiles, "as to what we should do with which pictures, story priorities, that sort of thing."

Nor is he above taking time to indulge in endless rounds of practical jokes, usually at his friend Keasler's, the managing editor's or the chief photographer's expense. Wright is also a sports buff and a certified football fanatic.

Maybe, he's most willing to concede, "maybe I get so engrossed in all these other things simply because I really don't want to get down to business. The drawing's so damn hard for me to come by. . . ." Then, again, maybe it's something that Keasler has noticed, that Wright spends the day "revving up to that certain pitch" at which all his energies and emotions are razor-sharp. Wright talks of working into a frenzy — adrenalin pumping, nerves in an uproar. "If I'm to arouse passions," he says, "I have to feel deeply what I'm doing, otherwise the readers are getting cheated."

Several *News* staff members describe Wright as an incredibly intense person, super-sensitive to individual liberties, their care and preservation. Many view his scathing satire of Nixon as Wright simply doing what comes naturally; that is, protesting in no uncertain terms what he saw as "erosion of our individual rights." He adds pointedly: "Any hint of government intrusion on our private lives scares me." Nixon and his wire-tapping, no-knock, search-and-seizure policies scared him plenty.

"His instinct for social issues is uncanny," says Clarke Ash, associate editor of the *Miami News*. Ash edits the editorial page and, in that line of duty, is Wright's boss — if he can be said to have one. Ash remarks that the paper and its editorial cartoonist are "in synch editorially."

"The paper would be crazy to let me go wherever I wanted editorially," Wright says. "But I think

I enjoy more freedom to express my own opinion than most other cartoonists. I've never had anything rejected. Sure, we've discussed some of my positions at times, some of my ideas. There have been times when I've been talked out of them on logical grounds. Or maybe this particular idea can be construed to go over the line into bad taste, for instance.

"If they can convince me of that, then I back off and start all over again. Every cartoonist needs this debate. There's too much demanded of an editorial cartoonist to do away with this. He's got to have the responsibility shared. He's got to have someone to bounce the idea off of, to talk it over with."

Wright gives Ash a look-see at his squiggly-line rough penciled on rag copy paper. He's not asking for approval, as such, but for an indication that the cartoon is on the right track, that the message comes through. "If I get the reaction I want from him, that's my first hurdle.

"Then I'll check it out with a few key friends," namely his wife, Carolyn, a *Miami Herald* reporter, and Keasler. "If I don't get the reaction I want from them, if the idea fails that test, I start over again." Keasler says Wright is "not one to settle for second best. He's always after the idea that's a real

slammer, one that has impact. He gets it, too, more often than not."

"Goddammit," Wright says, "I have a lot of trouble getting down to executing one single idea. I always feel like I could find one a little better. If I started out early in the day with one of my first ideas, I'd be out in juke time."

That'll be the day, when he leaves the *News* newsroom while the sun still shines, with his wife to head for home in South Dade, to unwind there, as he likes to, with a good book. An avid reader, he's a fan of fiction, skims through most best-sellers and is interested in psychological novels and books about ESP and UFOs and psychic phenomena.

Or maybe to unwind with a few rousing sets of tennis. He's a weekend tennis bum. On any given Saturday (and some Sundays) he's likely to spend sunrise to sunset on the courts, playing with the zest he brings weekdays to his editorial cartoons.

His leisure time may be the only predictable aspect of life around Don Wright. Back at the drawing board he takes them as they come.

"I consider myself first a good newspaperman. Nobody should be able to pinpoint me on any given issue. I try to understand . . . and take a position based on the information I've been able to get." ■



"THANKS A LOT."