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[Contents of Issue Menu](#)

[Click Here](#)

[Home](#)

New York Post "Chimp" Cartoon: Incendiary Satire has a Dangerous Past to be Concerned About Between the Lines

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The *New York Post* issued a “sideways” explanation (I really wouldn’t call it an apology) on a provocative and highly incendiary political cartoon it ran on February 18th, 2009. Combining two news events of the day, one in which a Connecticut woman named Charla Nash was attacked by her “pet” chimpanzee - which nearly ripped off her face before having to be shot to death by police (when the chimpanzee turned on them); the second event was President Barack Obama signing a highly controversial but badly needed economic stimulus bill into law - essentially within his first month in office, a nearly impossible feat, given the highly partisan divide in Congress.

Instead of satirizing one or the other, the *Post* satirized both - in the same cartoon. And they didn’t seem to have a problem with that (according to their explanation) except one had nothing to do with the other. One was a personal tragedy in our society, while the other was a stark reality of our society. However, another stark reality of society surfaced in the midst of these two events, the First Amendment and the ability of the free press to speak for or against acts of government, popular and unpopular, in truth and in satire.

Political cartoons are editorial commentary in satire where one picture is worth a thousand words. In fact, that is the specific intent of political satire, to mock how political action looks to the every man (woman), and to reflect dissent in the aftermath of popular actions. The *New York Post* offered a very incendiary cartoon, rooted in

cultural codification, racial symbolism and violent extremism we've come to know as America in various periods of its history. Incendiary cartoons have a dangerous past in American culture. Often a cue for social dissent, political cartoons that "cross the line" have historically been predators to social revolt, personal violence and tragic results.

The "chimp" cartoon" was more than about police shooting a chimpanzee. Yes, that event did occur. But when coupled around the dissent of the stimulus package, the cartoon takes on an entirely different meaning. The deeper, and most offensive aspect of the cartoon was in the caption. This is where the *Post* explanation holds no water and gives credence to the racial subterfuge implied under the guise of satire. The caption shows one police officer saying to another officer (who shot the chimpanzee), "They'll have to find someone else to write the next stimulus bill."

The *Post* says the cartoon was about the Nash incident, but the caption was referring to what the media and the Congress (and the public) has been calling the \$789 billion dollar Obama Stimulus Package. Let's be clear on the semantics that have been circling around this issue; The President called for it, the President lobbied to have it introduced, the President shepherded the partisan conflict that threatened to kill the bill and the President signed the bill into law. Congress, nor anyone in Congress, could have gotten this stimulus bill through except by the large political will and public popularity of President Obama. Moreover, to the *Post*'s irrational response, neither Nash nor her chimpanzee had anything to do with the stimulus bill.

Most cartoons will scribble text in the images to help with the interpretation. For instance, if the police were the Congress and the gun was Obama and the chimpanzee was the American Public - properly labeled, the cartoon and caption could make sense. Or if the police were the public, Congress was the gun and the chimpanzee was the economy, the cartoon and caption could make sense. But with no labels, it's left to the public's discretion to figure out the meaning of the cartoon, but the caption is the tip-off and the *Post* cartoon had no text for interpretation or explanation. That's a code.

In the last few weeks, police have shot black men in Oakland, Pasadena and Compton, under highly suspicious circumstances. That's a sign. America's own history reflects hundreds of documented instances racializing black people (particularly black men), most commonly referring to them as "monkeys." There are even archival documents showing the great Abraham Lincoln, because of his anti-slavery leanings and questions about his lineage, as a monkey. Monkeys, Apes, Chimps were all symbols for sub-human evolution during Social Darwinism, when Blacks were thought to be derivatives of the lowest primates (monkeys) rather than the highest primates (humans). This symbolism carried through half the 20th Century when black WW II soldiers were thought to have tails (by Japanese and German soldiers). The references lasted the whole century.

American society tries to portray African Americans as hyper-sensitive when it comes to issues of race, but there is not much the *Post*, or anybody else, can say when everybody knows that it was the Obama administration that wrote the stimulus bill that made it through Congress. He asked for it. He set the spending priorities and he got what he asked for. To suggest that the chimp wasn't a symbol for Obama really insults the intelligence of us all. And black people really get tired of having their intelligence insulted, despite the supposition that we don't have any (intelligence).

We've certainly seen enough symbols, signs and codes to know them when we see them. The only fool in this play is the editor that green-lighted the cartoon. The danger here is that political cartoons have a prominent place in America's assassination history. Prior to the deaths of Presidents Lincoln and Kennedy, and even black leaders like Malcolm and King, incendiary political cartoons made the publishing rounds, suggesting they were better dead than as living advocates of unpopular social action. Unrebutted suggestion is nothing more than a planted seed in the mind of a social deviant. If the *Post* is trying to sow seeds of discontent and murder, we need to rebut it at every turn - or some fool might mistake it for popular sentiment. They have in the past.

That's why the *Post* is being protested. They should be. We have to check them, or wreck them, when they insult our intelligence and our sensibilities in taking us into dangerous, tragic paths concerning our leadership as well as the leadership of this country.

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[Contents of Issue Menu](#)
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[Home](#)

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