

ESSAYS



EDITOR'S NOTE:

This article contains only a very small sample of the World War II cartoons of Dr. Seuss that EAA editorial board member Richard Minear has assembled in his latest book, *Dr. Seuss Goes to War* (New Press, 1999, ISBN 1-56584-565-X). Watch for a review of this already much-discussed work in a future issue.

Dr. Seuss and Japan, December 1941

By Richard H. Minear



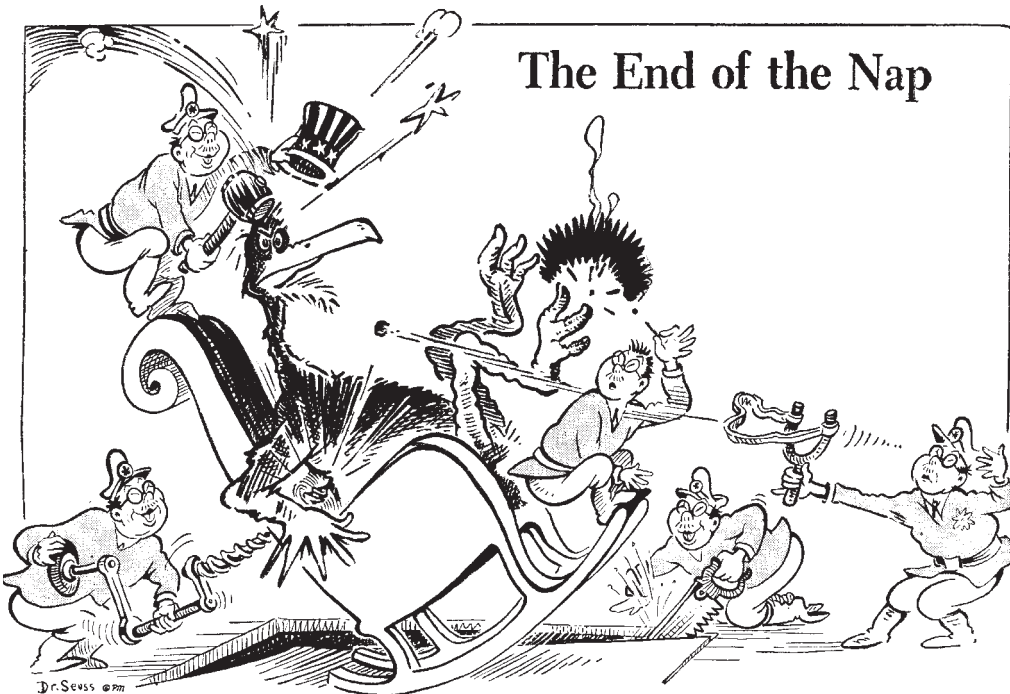
Dr. Seuss drew Hitler and many other Germans, visually distinct from Hitler; by contrast he draws only one "Japan."

Between January 30, 1941 and January 5, 1943, Dr. Seuss (Theodor Seuss Geisel, 1904–1991) drew over 400 editorial cartoons for the New York newspaper *PM*. They covered the waterfront of issues of the day. *PM* and Dr. Seuss favored American intervention in the war in Europe, fought the domestic opponents



of intervention (notably Charles A. Lindbergh), battled anti-Semitism and anti-black racism, and attacked Congressional attempts to roll back the New Deal. Once the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor pulled the U.S. formally into the war, *PM* and Dr. Seuss sought to mobilize the nation to fight the war. Four hundred cartoons in less than two calendar years—it was a truly massive output, and it has been virtually forgotten since 1943. Even devoted fans of Dr. Seuss know little about the cartoons, and only a few of the cartoons have ever been reprinted.

Dr. Seuss drew several dozen cartoons dealing with Japan (some thirty of these are included in *Dr. Seuss Goes to War*). They appeared from June 1941 to December 1942 and covered a range of issues. Here are three from December 1941, Dr. Seuss's first three post-Pearl Harbor cartoons that deal with Japan. His first post-Pearl Harbor cartoon dealt not with Japan but with the domestic "isolationists" whom Dr. Seuss had been battling for months. But on December 9 Dr. Seuss drew "The End of the Nap." The eagle is one of two Seuss-



December 9, 1941

ian icons for the United States (the other is a human Uncle Sam). Note the single face on five Japanese bodies: coke-bottle eyeglasses, slant eyes, pig-gish nose, short bushy mustache

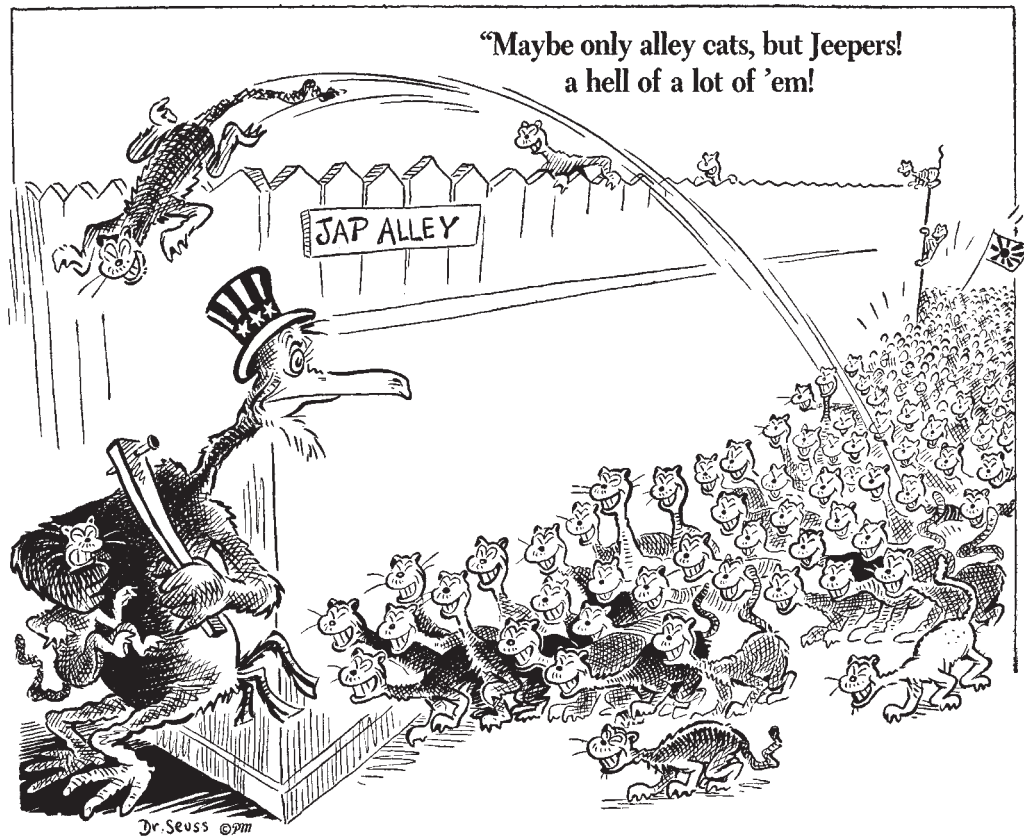


October 13, 1942

(in the earliest Japan cartoons, the mustaches are long and thin—almost Gilbert-and-Sullivan-ish), toothy smile. The face is not Prime Minister Tojo's or the Emperor's or Foreign Minister Togo's; it is stereotype pure and simple.

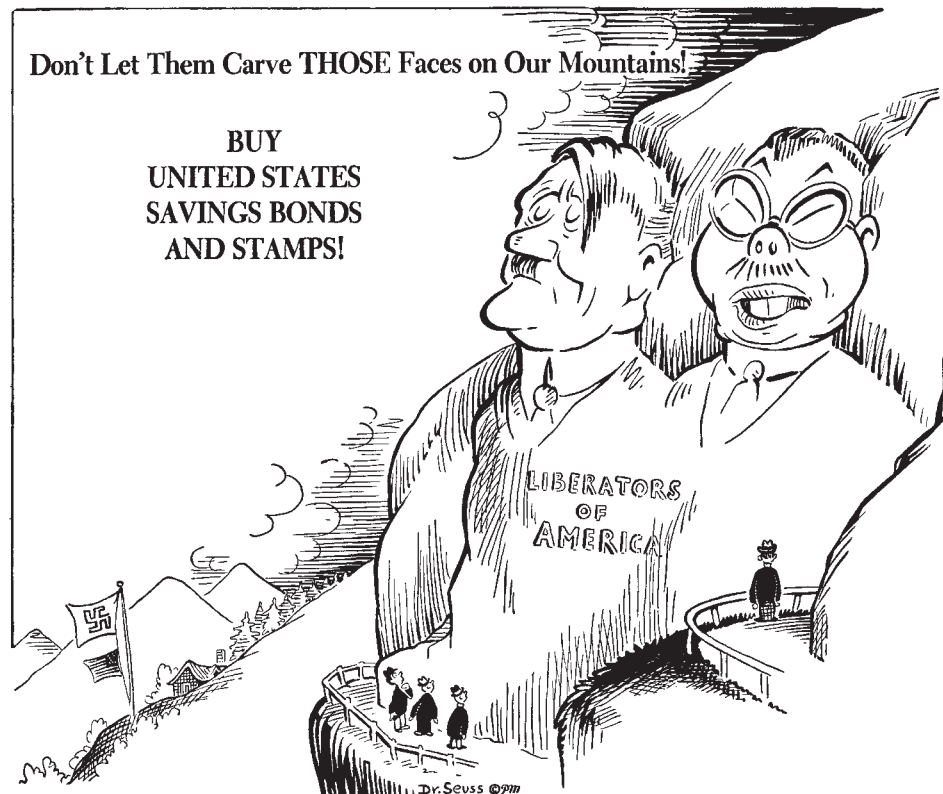
Dr. Seuss drew Hitler and many other Germans, visually distinct from Hitler; by contrast he draws only one "Japan." Note the activities of the Japanese: are they life-threatening, or merely Laurel-and-Hardy harassment? Earlier and later cartoons (December 1, 1941 and May 12, 1942) suggest the latter. If so, is it because Dr. Seuss wishes to counteract American fears, or because Dr. Seuss really did take Japan lightly? Note the assumption of American innocence—this despite the fact that in November Dr. Seuss had drawn two cartoons focusing on the U.S. embargo then in force (November 11 and 28).

The next day, December 10, 1941, Dr. Seuss depicted Japanese as alley cats in "Jap alley." If cats can be stereotyped and "Oriental," then surely these cats are. Note how many there are. Note the smiles. Note the



Dr. Seuss © 97M

December 10, 1941



December 12, 1941

ESSAYS



January 13, 1942

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one cat making an impossible leap from out of the crowd to descend on the American eagle from behind—sneak attack? Note, of course, the casual use of the term “Jap.”

Two days later, on December 12, Dr. Seuss imagined a new Mt. Rushmore (the real Rushmore had been completed less than a year), with Hitler and Dr. Seuss’s “Japan” as “liberators of America,” the historical personage and the free-floating stereotype side by side. Sometimes Dr. Seuss labeled the John Q. Public characters—here, the man immediately in front of Dr. Seuss’s “Japan”—“You”

or “You + Me,” in a direct appeal to the reader. But even without such a label, the reader identifies with this individual.

These are three of the several dozen editorial cartoons Dr. Seuss drew dealing with Japan. Those several dozen are, in turn, only a fraction of all the editorial cartoons Dr. Seuss drew in 1941 and 1942. We need to see these three in the context of those other cartoons, which include eloquent attacks on anti-Semitism and on anti-black racism, and an eloquent call for an end to American racism. We need to consider as well Dr. Seuss’s later engagement with Japan: in film (with

the *Why We Fight* series of director Capra and later, on his own, with *Design for Death*) and in print (*Horton Hears a Who*).

Moreover, we need to see Dr. Seuss’s cartoons in the context of World War II caricatures: U.S., Japanese, British, and Russian. Offensive as they are today, they are of a piece with—indeed, arguably less offensive than—many other U.S. and British cartoons of the day. As John Dower has shown in *War Without Mercy*, Japanese editorial cartoons invite criticism, too. Still, it is striking that so progressive a newspaper as *PM* and so anti-racist a cartoonist as Dr. Seuss could have been so oblivious to their own racism against Japan. ■

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