

DON WRIGHT

BIOGRAPHY

Winning a Pulitzer Prize is the pinnacle of most journalistic careers. Don Wright, editorial cartoonist, has two of them (1966-1980), in addition to scores of other awards. Combining “a rare intelligence and a sense of moral outrage,” said one newspaper, Wright “uses his space with crystalline precision, capturing in a single frame the essence of a half-dozen windy op-ed articles.” His cartoons are on permanent display at Syracuse University and he has mounted several one-man art shows across the country. He began his career with the *Miami News* and has been at the *Palm Beach Post* since 1989. “Don Wright is unpredictable, not compartmentalized, free-spirited – beyond simple or traditional categorization,” as one writer put it. “And that is a trait of genius.”

SUMMARY

Julian Pleasants interviewed Don Wright on December 12, 2001 in West Palm Beach, Florida.

Mr. Wright begins his interview by recalling his early experience in newspapers straight out of high school. Originally a photographer and graphics editor, Mr. Wright recounts how Bill Baggs of the *Miami News* pushed him into trying editorial cartooning. Mr. Wright also comments on being syndicated and how he feels about the numerous awards that he has garnered throughout his career. He also discusses his daily work process, the characteristics of a good cartoonist, and how newspaper competition with

television has altered the profession. He concludes with thoughts about the future for himself personally and for editorial cartoonists in general.

P: Give me a little bit of your background, mainly your newspaper background.

W: [I] jumped right into the newspaper business after high school,...[I] didn't go to college. What I wanted to do, initially, more than anything else was to become a cartoonist. I wanted to do a comic strip along the lines of Steve Canyon, which was very popular at that time. I was told by my high school art teacher that the way to find out all of the things you had to do in order to become a strip cartoonist was to work for a newspaper. So ... that is basically how I started in newspapers, as a copy kid at the *Miami News*, way back in 1952.

P: Then you worked your way up to be a staff photographer?

W: Yes, [I] kind of got pushed into that, sidetracked in my desire to become a cartoonist by the fact that the art editor thought I did not know enough about functioning in his department.... Someone else on the staff actually suggested going into photography and pushed me in that direction and I did that.

P: Did you like it?

W: Loved it. It was my liberal education. It forced me out of this sort of naive, teenage cell I was living in. All of these fantasies about becoming a great strip cartoonist just went away. I began to understand what life was all about because I was forced into situations I had never dreamed of, covering bookie raids, seeing mutilated bodies and just shocking things that I came in contact with at an age that I think most

people my age at that age would never have had to confront....

There was a serial killer running loose across the country. His name was Dennis Whitney.... [H]e wound up in south Florida on a killing rampage. His technique was to go into a filling station at night where there were not many people [and] wait until there was no one and then go in and rob it. [He would] then take the guy into the back, into the bathroom and shoot him in the head.... He wound up in south Florida and indeed committed that same type of crime against a service station attendant.... This time, the service station attendant lived.... They took him to the hospital and began treating him. He was sort of hanging on, then he got a little bit better. It occurred to the editor of the paper that maybe since [he was alive, he could give a description of the man].... [He]...agreed to let me come in and talk to him about what this guy looked like.... The idea was that I would try to get his likeness down on a piece of paper by drawing it as he described it....This may have been one of the first times that police sketches was actually used.... Without overblowing it, [I] may have helped attached some significance to that technique....To be perfectly honest, the likeness really did not get Dennis Whitney to a fault. He saw the picture in the Miami area and cut and ran. In the process, [he] hijacked an automobile with a woman in it and he actually killed her, but they chased him down and they caught him. That was probably the first time that anything I had ever drawn really had much in the way of impact. I think about that a lot and wonder if perhaps in some way I contributed to the death of that woman. Also, I am puzzled as to why he thought he should leave in the first place because to me that drawing really did not establish a likeness at all....

P: Did you ever have any formal training?

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W: No, none whatsoever.

P: When did you discover you had an affinity for drawing?

W: I do not know whether you discover that or you just simply love it so much that you do it until you get better and better at it.... It was just an inclination I had as a kid, it never left me.

P: In 1958, you became graphics editor at the *Miami News*. Tell me exactly what that entailed.

W: The graphics editor is pretty much what the photo editor is today on the newspaper. He is pretty much in charge of the photo department, assigns photographers to special assignments.... [The job] also involves laying out pages, particularly the picture page, which was one of the highlights of the newspaper at that time. Pretty much coordinating the photo department operation with the rest of the news desk.

P: Did you enjoy that job?

W: I did. It taught me a lot about editing and it taught me a lot about the responsibility of putting out a newspaper every day. [It] involves a lot of people working together and actually coming to some sort of consensus. Sometimes these arguments and debates about what should lead the paper and which picture should go with what can get pretty heated. It is the kind of process you would actually want. I think newspapers today are terribly formula-ridden and in those days you argued these things out. Generally, I think by the time the newspaper came out, it represented the very best efforts of everyone on that newspaper, combining to put that newspaper out and make it work. I thought we were very successful doing it that way.

P: At some point as I understand, Bill Baggs [editor of the *Miami News*] persuaded you to do some political cartoons.

W: He did not just persuade me, he kept on me all of the time. When I went into photo, my priorities changed. I sort of lost interest in doing cartooning as a way of making a living.... I was getting so much out of photography and learning so much, it was so exciting. The newspaper business in general, all of its facets were so exciting to me that becoming a cartoonist was the last thing in my mind.... For Bill, he always wanted his own editorial cartoonist. He always thought that I could do that if I wanted to. I did not want to. He kept after me and he kept after me. Finally, I tried it. It was the result of getting kind of hotheaded and deciding that on the news desk as photo editor, I was probably a heck of a lot better than I thought I was.... I quit one day in the heat of passion and debate [and] decided, by God, I will put it all on the line. I will quit, they will ask me to come back and I will get my way. Well, it really did not happen.

What happened is that Baggs stepped in and told me I would probably make a really good editorial cartoonist. He asked me if I had another job, I said no. He convinced me that I ought to try it. He said, if it does not work out you can go to *The [Miami] Herald* or do what you want. I liked Bill an awful lot. I told him, I am not really prepared to do this. I am not one of these people who keeps current on [the] crises and issues of the day. He said, well, you will, you will. I went in and I viewed this as something temporary just to get me through, get me a paycheck until I could find something else to do and here I am.

P: Was there a trial period? Did you have to start drawing right away?

W: He did not indicate in any way this was a trial period. He really believed that I was

going to succeed at this. To this day I wonder why he thought that, because I did not think that. When I go back and look at some of that early work I wonder why in the world he ever thought I could do this. Because some of that early work was God-awful.

I mean, it was not drawn well, it was not well thought-out. I evolved over a period of time. As a matter of fact, in some ways, I caused them a great deal of pain because I developed some very conservative attitudes. I found myself at odds with the editorial page.... To his credit, he never sat me down and said, you cannot think this way, you cannot do this. He let me pursue it, think about it. He let me read about it. He encouraged me to become well-informed and to not go skipping off in some emotional..., hotheaded direction. Never did he step in and say, you cannot draw those cartoons. I was drawing cartoons that were actually fairly conservative and sometimes a direct contradiction of what we were saying on the editorial page....

P: How would you assess his tenure as editor of the paper? He is legendary in Florida circles.

W: Well, he deserves to be a legend. We are talking about a different kind of newspaper man.... Bill Baggs was a courageous individual who thought newspapers ought to serve the community without giving itself away to powerful interests within that community. He had a marvelous way of becoming an active member of the Chamber of Commerce... and then coming back to the paper and allowing the paper to blast these same people who actually were very chummy with him. He had a marvelous way of actually encouraging that and still maintaining the friendship and respect of those powerful interests who were constantly complaining to him. Bill, look what your editorial page said today. Bill would say something like, you know, I just cannot control those

guys.... He understood that at the heart of all of that, a newspaper really should try to tell the truth, no matter how hard it was to do it....

P: It seems today, from what I have learned, the bottom line is most important for newspapers.

W: ...To say that the bottom line is the chief concern for newspapers today is a generalization and it is true in most cases, but I think the biggest threat to newspapers is that they really have lost their identity and do not know exactly what they are anymore. Television changed newspapers. As television became more and more popular and newspaper subscribers started to fall away, newspapers sort of lost their way.... [T]hey began to do strange things like adopting sort of garish magazine formats and deciding that somehow, maybe if the newspaper front page looked a lot like a television set with things splashed all over it and very, very short, that this somehow would get readers back, thus get advertisers back. Well, it did not work. This kind of abrogating their real responsibility to this battle and to television has caused all of us who really believe in this business a lot of pain.... It is not just the bottom line in my organization, the Cox organization. [It] pretty much lets each newspaper run the way it wants to. We can call the shots here. This is a good newspaper actually, by the way. We are lucky to have people running this newspaper who are a lot like the people I grew up with....

P: Have you ever gotten any negative reaction from Cox, or from the headquarters, about any editorial cartoon you printed?

W: Never, in all honesty, never.... Sometimes I worry about it, where are they? Do they care? No, they have never pressured me about anything I have ever drawn....

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P: Why did you decide to come to the *Palm Beach Post* in 1989?

W: When the *News* closed down, I had some other offers. I had been with Cox all my life... [and they] stepped in and offered me a number of options.... All of my roots are in Miami and in south Florida.... I came to the *Post*..., everything worked out fine.

P: Have you ever wanted to be with the *New York Times* or *The Washington Post*? I know Rick Bragg worked at the *Miami Herald* and never anticipated he'd get to the *New York Times*.

W: ...Baggs was offered the job of the editor of the *New York Times* just before he got sick. Baggs came to me and sat me down over at one of those fancy clubs downtown. I knew something was up when he invited me there and asked me if I would be interested in becoming the first editorial page cartoonist for the *New York Times*. I said, you are damn right, I would. He said, I am going to bring you there.... It was not long after that, that he came down with pneumonia and passed away.

P: The *New York Times* still does not have an editorial cartoonist.

W: No, they do not do that....

P: When did you first become syndicated and was your first syndication with the *Chicago Tribune*?

W: No, the first syndication was with the *Washington Star*.... I consider myself somewhat of a purist in that I did not really seek syndication. I wanted to be able to do work that qualified to be reprinted nationally, but syndication, I did not really pursue that. Most cartoonists that come into this, say [they] want to get syndicated and make a lot of money. I did not think I was actually qualified nor consistent enough to be

syndicated, frankly. I did start getting reprinted nationally and drew some attention from syndicates and the *Washington Star* syndicate moved in pretty quickly.... I signed up with him and it was the biggest mistake I ever made because Harry Elmark was pretty much a one-man operation.... His idea of selling your work was to call people on the phone from his house and say, would you like to take him? It just did not work....

There were rumors flying around that I was getting very dissatisfied with my job because of things that had happened to me.... I was young and still felt that I knew all there was to know about practically everything, that nobody should question anything I did, most particularly my views in cartoons. I did not want anybody messing with me. That is a privilege no cartoonist should enjoy, by the way.... Jim Fayne [new editor] came in...[and] asked me if I was syndicated. I said, yes, sort of. When I said [I was with the] *Washington Star* syndicate, he said, they are doing a terrible job for you, they really are. The fact that he was interested in that, I was overwhelmed that he cared about that. Fayne got me a lawyer and we sued the *Washington Star* syndicate to get out of that contract....

As soon as it became clear that we were going to win, the [*Chicago Tribune*] moved in and said we would like to sign you up. We had discussions with them and I have been with them ever since.

P: In how many papers are you currently syndicated?

W: ...[W]e are mailing off every day about 325.

P: How does that syndication process work? How are you paid?

W: Every newspaper, depending on their size and circulation, pays the syndicate a fee and we basically split that. They [the syndicate] really determine what they charge to

those newspapers.

P: Have you ever wanted to be a writer?

W: Everybody wants to be a writer. Everybody thinks they are a writer. Writing is tough. I have known some very fine writers and I know how hard it is. I am not sure that I could be the kind of writer I like and respect and admire because of their turn-of-phrase and their intellect. I do not know that I can meet those standards. I might be willing to try.

P: You were able to evolve into an editorial cartoonist.

W: Yes, and I never thought I would. Let me tell you in all honesty, I am continuing to evolve.... I am still very much interested in what I am doing.... I am able to sit here read about... [events], spend all of my time digesting them and then telling people what I think about them. I like to think that my cartoons are a legitimate, valuable form of commentary. I think there are a lot of cartoonists who are doing something else. To me this is quite serious. I think there is a time to be funny and a time to not be so funny....

P: Do you consider yourself an artist or a newspaper man?

W: I do not know whether I am an artist. That is for others to judge. I have tried to be an artist. I am sometimes surprised at something latent within me that comes out and makes me believe at times I might qualify as an artist. There are other times I do stuff that I cannot believe I did and would like to have over to be changed.

P: You have had a one man art show at the Lowe Art Museum at Syracuse University. They have a collection of your work and other people consider you an artist.

W: Yes. Sometimes I think they are wrong, though.

P: I wanted to talk to you about two important events in your career, the winning of the Pulitzer Prize in 1966 and 1980. In both cases, it was awarded for general excellence. What was the key factor in the 1966 award? Did you send them a collection of your cartoons?

W: I think it is hard to know why the Pulitzer [committee] does some of the things it does. That entry included the number of cartoons they needed, that the entry specifies must be included. They did say it was for the body of my work, but the cartoon they selected was a cartoon of two people standing in a bombed-out landscape. One here and one over there. They obviously had been blown to bits and they just barely survived and one guy was saying, you mean you were bluffing? That is the one they selected as a representation of my work. If you are asking me what the criterion is, I am not sure, really. I do not know....

P: Were you surprised at the 1966 award? You had not been an editorial cartoonist very long.

W: No, I had not and I was shocked. As a matter of fact, I remember I was out at the water fountain. Newspaper offices always gather around to find out who is winning what. They don't do that much anymore.... I was at the water fountain in the middle of the city room. I used to clean my brushes in the water fountain because I did not have any other sink.... I was standing there when everybody screamed. I looked up, all these people running at me. They told me that I won the Pulitzer. I said shit! Or something like what. That is how it happened. Stunned, I was stunned.

P: What was your reaction to the 1980 award?

W: I was grateful. So many things had happened to the *News*. This was my

newspaper.... We were gradually whittling away to nothing. Our advertising was disappearing.... It was obvious that this could not possibly go on and we were not going to survive if we did not find some way to turn this paper around and get a better arrangement with the *Herald*....This time, I thought gee, this is great for the paper. [It] helps in some small way by putting us back on the map. You see, we are still full of quality here....

P: You won a lot of other awards. Sigma Chi, Overseas Press, David Brinkley Award, among many others. Which other awards are meaningful to you?

W: This is going to sound harsh. They are meaningful to me only on a temporary basis.... I have been in this business long enough to know that the only thing that matters is how you are judged on the cartoon you have done today that is in the paper. Fame is fleeting. I do not think that I want to attach too much priority to having done some work that a lot of very nice people though deserved an award. I would rather be judged on what I do every day and my consistency....

P: Discuss the process you go through every day to produce an editorial cartoon.

W: The process varies from day to day. The question that puzzles me the most and I almost resent, but the one that most people ask invariably is, how do you get your ideas?

P: Notice I did not ask that.

W: Bless you, sir. I have never been able to answer the question adequately and honestly do not even know why it is being asked. How does anyone get an idea? The fact of the matter is that it happens sometimes in a different way than it might have happened the day before. It is all contingent upon your passions, your feelings. Are

they running high?... Do you have to get something done by tomorrow that you are not particularly enthusiastic about? Those constant pressures lead you to tackle every day in a different way sometimes. You come in and you do not have anything. The closer you get to deadline, the more frantic you become, then you realize you have got to do something. Then your head says, okay, you have got this idea on that, but you did that before four or five years ago. You are just recycling an old idea. You think that is dishonest.... As the deadline gets closer, you have to do something. Those cartoons are, I think, the real test of the cartoonist. Can he maintain some kind of quality and get a thought across in a coherent matter on that kind of deadline? There are other times when the issues are so acute and, to you, so clear-cut... that your passions start running very high. You get five, six, seven ideas tumbling one over the other. You know every one of them has merit. That is a wonderful feeling to be able to select from one of those seven or eight and then go at it.

P: Do you always get the idea first and then start drawing?

W: Get the idea first? Yes.

P: Do you doodle?

W: Sometimes I doodle. I mentioned the pressure of deadlines. When it gets down to very close to knowing how much time I have allowed myself to draw a cartoon, then I will sit down and start doodling and hope that somehow the hands will come up with an idea.... You do other things, too. You start scratching yourself, you start getting up, sometimes you swear, you walk around the room, you sit down and doodle some more. That is painful stuff.

P: What time do you normally come in and do you always work here in the *Palm*

Beach Post office?

W: Yes, [I] try never to take it home with me.... I am chiefly a night-worker so I will start right around 1:00 a.m., then get the cartoon out. Usually I will have [already] started that cartoon because of the deadline pressures here..., this is a morning newspaper.... I try to get my cartoons started the day before, then when I come in at 1:00 a.m., finish it. Sometimes I come in and start fresh, it depends on whether I find an issue that is moving me and whether or not I feel I can get a good start and perhaps not shortcut the artwork to the extent that I might deprive the cartoon of its impact.

P: What time is your deadline?

W: 3:30 a.m. every day.

P: Do you work fifty-two weeks a year?

W: Five days a week. What does that amount to?

P: That is a lot of cartoons. What would you say are the characteristics or qualities of a good editorial cartoonist?

W: Independence, for one thing. I think it is critical. Independence within the framework of being allowed to say pretty much what you want within the bounds of good taste. I do not believe – I used to believe otherwise – I do not believe an editorial cartoonist should be able to do whatever he damn-well pleases, no matter what. I do not think that will work because the editor is always responsible for what you put in that paper.... [D]evotion to the craft itself, to understand that the cartoon is supposed to be a legitimate form of commentary that stimulates people and moves them to think.... I think you should always be able to impart as much impact to that cartoon through your artwork, if you have to, keep it to a minimum so that it does not interfere in your

message. That is a balance that I think only another editorial cartoonist would understand. Sometimes a perfectly good idea is overdrawn. It just gets cluttered. That is a shame.

P: Is too much text a problem?

W: Yes, too much text, but it is possible that sometimes what you call too much text or a lot of text is quite necessary. Change of pace is quite necessary. I have gone to doing a lot of panel cartoons and changing the format of the space that I have so that I do not become too predictable. Holding readers on the editorial page is the hardest challenge of all....

P: Someone else I talked to said that the reader needs to recognize who the people are and what the issue is. The cartoon has to be drawn well enough so that when a reader looks at it, they recognize that it is [Richard] Nixon [U.S. President, 1969-1974], for example.

W: I think each cartoonist develops their own caricature of key figures. For example, [Bill] Clinton [U.S. President, 1993-2001] was easy to do. If you looked at all of the cartoonists doing Clinton, you would see that none of them really matched up very much.... Their readers eventually got to the point where they accepted this caricature of Clinton whether it was remarkably close to the way Clinton looked or not.

P: The reader knew it was Clinton.

W: The reader knew it was Clinton, even though technically, as a legitimate caricature of Clinton, it really was not on the mark. You develop your own stylized Clinton, Nixon, George W. Bush [U.S. President, 2001-present] and all the rest of these key figures. Some of them are better at caricatures than others. Someone like Mike Peters

[editorial cartoonist], ... does some of the most grotesque caricatures, but at the same time so inanely funny that you not only accept them, you like them....

P: Is humor an essential quality for an editorial cartoonist?

W: [You have] got to have a good sense of humor, but I think the problem with editorial cartooning today is that most of the young people doing it feel that is all they are supposed to do – be funny.... For some strange reason the editors seem to think that this is all there is and they are reprinting this stuff. As a consequence of that, we are losing our reputation for being able to offer legitimate form of commentary through the cartoon....

P: Critics say what they would like to get from editorial cartoonists is truth, but what does that mean?

W: Yes, what does it mean. My truth may not be the same as your truth. I would like to think that any cartoonist doing this has studied his issue quite carefully and is prepared to defend it once he takes this volatile position that upsets all of these readers. When they call, he is prepared to defend it in detail. If he is not, I think to some extent he is cheating.... [Y]ou need to explain to them why you believe what you [do and] how you have interpreted this crisis, why you think George W. Bush's role in it was not up to snuff [and] where you think he made mistakes.... [S]ome of the readers who call in, they are livid beyond the point of even, at first, feeling that there is anything legitimate you can say to them. They just want to paste you as quickly as [they] can, then get off the line. If you can... get involved in a conversation, you find that they come to believe that this whole idea of differing with one another is really part of a democratic system and it actually works. They leave the conversation actually liking you

and still disagreeing with you. If you can do that, you have accomplished a great deal and it all started with your cartoon.

P: I would guess that you hear, "you have gone too far this time," a lot.

W: Yes. When they say you have gone too far this time and you keep them on the line, you can actually realize that the two of you have differences about this and may never agree. They feel satisfied that you are not completely beyond hope. It means they are going to come back to the paper the next day and maybe they will find something that they might agree with.

P: Would you feel like you are not doing your job if you did not get any responses?

W: There is nothing worse... than being ignored, believe me.

P: What do you read in preparation for your opinions?

W: I am a news junkie. I keep this horrible thing [television] on most of the time.

P: CNN.

W: ... I have the wire services, all of them. I read the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, my own paper, *The Miami Herald*, and the *Sun Sentinel* every day. In between that, I have got *Time* and *Newsweek*. My recreational reading generally leans toward current events. That is what I do.

P: Once you have done all your preparation and you come up with an idea, do you at any point run this by somebody else, ask them what they think?

W: I have been doing this a long time. Here, they pretty much let me go. When I was coming up, of course, the idea was to submit the idea first to get an okay on it. Now, what I do is work out a cartoon that I think is the one I want to go with after wading through a lot of different ideas. I check it out with my wife, mostly. [I ask her,] what do

you think about this? Here is the sketch. She will critique it and say, no that is not you.

I will go back and start all over again. By the time I come in and get down to work, that is my cartoon. That is the one I am going to do. I will just turn it in....There is plenty of time for them to say no, we cannot do this. That really has not happened.

P: It seems to me, from viewing some of your cartoons, that you are very concerned about punctuating pomposity and exposing hypocrisy. You are particularly good at providing satirical comments on current events. Is that a fair assessment?

W: I think it is a fair assessment of any really good cartoonist. You are talking about those character flaws that are, I think, running rampant throughout our religious leaders and our politicians. It is sitting there, I think you should go after it. I do not think you should hold back.

P: What sins are most abhorrent to you?

W: Hypocrisy is, I think, probably at the head of my list. One of the phrases that makes me cringe when a politician uses it is, the American people think or the American people want. I do not know what the American people want. Sometimes do not think the American people know what they want. I know that most of these politicians really have no idea what the American people want. I know there are polls. I have my problems with polls being the deciding barometer as to how the public is going to go on much of anything.

P: I have noticed, in viewing your cartoons, that you have always had a very strong interest in the environment.

W: ... When I grew up as a kid playing in the woods – and I did a lot of that – I was always mesmerized by nature.... It makes me angry when we take it for granted. This is

a beautiful planet and we are screwing it up....That is my very profound attitude about that and every chance I get to say something on behalf of the planet, I try to do it....

P: Do you see your job more as a catalyst or as someone trying to educate people about issues?

W: That is a good question. Probably some of both.... Getting them [young people] involved in reading, but especially getting them involved in issues to the extent that they really want to read what you are saying on the editorial page.... I think my job is to try to be stimulating enough to that age reader to get them maybe hooked on the editorial page.... so that they will linger long enough to read that column to the left and the columns underneath.... It is vital that we get young people back into reading, it is vital that we get them back into newspapers. It sounds terribly preachy, but we will not survive if we do not....

P: Do you see that as some kind of a competition with the thirty-second sound bite?

W: Absolutely I do. When I was growing up the newspaper was the information hub for the family, particularly on Sundays.... It is not any more....Television is having problems of its own. Viewership is falling off....I think newspapers are probably missing a good bet. I think they ought to go back to doing what they do best. This includes beautiful writing, ... telling people the truth, no matter how hard it is. Engendering that kind of respect from people who want to find something they can rely upon. Also, at the same time, they can choose their story. [If they are] seeing something they do not want to read, they can turn the page and go to something else, where they have complete and total control over what they are seeing and reading in the newspaper. It is vital that we give them the quality and we keep them there with really good writing and good

reporting.

P: Tom Fiedler [editorial page editor, *The Miami Herald*] mentioned that everybody was watching the 2000 presidential election on television, but the newspapers were the ones that made sense of what was happening. The next day, it was newspaper's responsibility to explain what had happened.

W: We were filling in the holes. Television is a medium of the moment. The trouble with newspapers is that for some reason, for the longest time, they believed they had to be that too....They cannot compete with television on that basis....They [television] do not really cover [news] that completely. That is our job. If we did that in the way that we are capable of doing [newspapers could compete better]....

P: What is your opinion of *USA Today*?

W: I did not approve of *USA Today* at first because I thought it was more of that same stuff. Colored boxes and glitzy this and that plastered all over the front page, but *USA Today* has evolved into a newspaper now that does fairly good reporting, good investigative reporting. They have transformed themselves quite gradually into quite a substantial newspaper....

P: When you write your editorial cartoons, let's say an editorial on the Everglades, do you hope that impacts Governor Jeb Bush [Florida governor, 1999-present] or the Florida legislature? Do you expect to have some shift in opinion as a result of it?

W: Of course you do. I think one of the mistakes that editorial pages make is that they seem to be writing... solely to politicians, solely to the governor, ...trying to pressure him into doing what the editorial page wants. The bet that they are missing is [that] they ought to be talking to the people who elect them. I think that is a better way to go after

it....

P: Do you think readers read the editorial pages?

W: No.... Our job is to be stimulating on the editorial page. I do not know whether it means changing the format somewhat, perhaps changing it, altering it from day to day or something. The editorial page is extremely valuable. It is full of facts. [In] the *Wall Street Journal*, that column down the left-hand side which reflects their view is beautifully written. It is mean, it has an edge to it. You cannot take your eyeballs away from that baby whether you agree or disagree with it. We have got to be able to do that on our editorial page....

P: I noticed you have had an interesting time drawing cartoons of Richard Nixon, as did most editorialists.

W: Everyone had a great time with Richard Nixon.

P: You miss him terribly, do you not?

W: We have got John Ashcroft [U.S. Attorney General, 2001-present] now....

P: You indicated that you are pretty liberal in your views. How do you assess Richard Nixon as president?

W: I think Richard Nixon was personally a very troubled man who lacked confidence. I think he had a nature, an instinct that led him to believe that everyone around him really could not be trusted. I think there was paranoia there beyond belief. In summing up Richard Nixon, I would have to say, [his presidency was] one of our biggest tragedies. It is not that Nixon was not capable of being president, it was just that he would never allow himself to be president. His entire time seemed to be spent trying to figure out who was going to do what to him. He did not even trust his own aides. I think that just

held him back and kept him from being a good president.

P: What is your view of Ronald Reagan [U.S. President, 1981-1989]?

W: My problem with Ronald Reagan is they kept calling him the Great Communicator.... I did not think he was a great communicator at all. I think he was an example of how standards have plummeted so precipitously that concentration on using the English language, in the kind of way that would move people to believe you and get the public moving in the direction you wanted them to move in, is lost.... Other than that I think he was certainly conservative, but he was a nice enough man. I disagreed with him most of the time....

P: What about Bill Clinton?

W: Interesting man, great cartoon subject. Someone I would not trust as far as I could throw him, of course. If you want me to sum up Bill Clinton that would take probably an hour-and-a-half. As a cartoonist, I have to tell you I really miss him....

P: Why are there not many female editorial cartoonists?

W: There are a couple. When I was asked about the state of editorial cartooning, I used to maintain that if one really good female cartoonist came up, that made a lot of impact, who was strong and independent, that she would almost become instantly wealthy overnight. We were ready for that,... we were ready for a strong female viewpoint on the editorial page.... I do not think we ever really got someone of that stature. There are some female editorial cartoonists out there. If you ask me their names, I could not tell you.

P: Could you discuss some of the other editorial cartoonists you admire?

W: Jeff MacNelly I guess would be right up at the top of the list. Jim Borgman. I like

Mike Peters. That is kind of hard to do. My general feeling is that the editorial cartooning, in terms of quality, has fallen off again so precipitously that my first reaction is to get mad as hell at what is happening, then the next thing I do is try to back off and not start getting into that again....

P: What was your assessment of one of the giants of the industry, Herbert Block, who recently passed away on October 7, 2001?

W: I admired Herbert Block for a lot of reasons. Herblock could write, he was a good writer. He was a good student of politics. He was a detail person and he was tough.... No matter what you say about all the other cartoonists and the stuff they did, Herblock was the guy who got Richard Nixon.

P: Herblock's cartoons had a huge impact on the public view of Joe McCarthy [U.S. Senator from Wisconsin, 1947-1957; held hearings to root out communists in America]. He presented McCarthy as sort of an ape man.

W: [I give] credit to the *Washington Post*. It took courage to do that kind of work at that time....You are only as good as the paper who backs you....

P: When you look back at your career as an editorial cartoonist, what do you consider to be your most important contribution?

W: I do not think I have made my most important contribution yet and if I thought I had I would stop doing it. I keep hoping that I can somehow make some sort of big difference. As sappy as that sounds, every day I think maybe I can change something. My major contributions, if there is such a thing for me, would be influencing some kid to become an editorial cartoonist in the vein I would love editorial cartoonists to be. To understand that we need to recapture our legitimacy as commentators....

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P: What is the future for editorial cartoonists? What will happen once Oliphant and Mike Peters and the rest of the current group are no longer doing their work?

W: The trouble with this subject, as long as I have been doing it, is you come off like some kind of old fart complaining about the way how good things used to be. I do not mean to do that, I just think that we have lost our way. I think editors are putting up with junk and running it because they think that is all there is. I think we ought to be providing them with something better....

P: It seems to me that this state has a large quantity of outstanding newspapers.

W: This state [does], yes. By comparison with other states, [this state has] some of the best, [and more] really fine newspapers than any other state in the union, I believe....We have some really great substantial newspapers in this state. We are very lucky.

P: Why and how did that happen?

W: Why did that happen? Burgeoning population probably demanded it. We get people from all areas of the United States who, from whence they come, demand good newspapers. It is partly that. I think we have just been lucky in getting good people in the right places at the right times to put out good newspapers....

P: What is the future of newspapers? Are we going to eliminate the hand-held document that we have now?

W: I have never believed that. I think people like something tactile. I do not think the printed page is ever going to disappear....

[End of interview]