

Nero's Incendiary History in Cartoons and Comics

This paper examines the lasting ideological significance of Nero's alleged roles as instigator and musical accompanist of Rome's fiery destruction. Prominent media figures continue to propagate the legend, from Bugs Bunny ("*[Nero] liked to play with matches, and for a fire yearned/ So he turned Rome to ashes and fiddled whiled it burned;*" McKimson and Pierce, 1953) to Rush Limbaugh ("Obama Fiddles While the Economy Burns," 2014). Various leaders masquerading as Nero with his marked visual iconography (fire, a stringed instrument) parade through visual media of the 18th to 21st centuries, chronicling divisions that have marked political history around the world.

The internet slang for a well-worn phrase or image that can be infinitely reused with topical modifications is "snowclone"; many dismiss snowclones as the domain of "lazy journalists and writers" (Whitman 2004). Despite the ennui that these endless iterations might induce, Nero's weaponization in modern socio-political culture wars offers valuable lessons about the underlying messages and cultural anxieties that each image exemplifies. These images, deeply influenced by nature of their immediate media environments, reveal a near-universal preoccupation with the risks of pinning collective hopes on a single individual.

A 1770 engraving in *The Oxford Magazine* imagines George III as Nero, fashioning well-known elements of Nero's story into a telling commentary on the failings of Britain's monarch (Caretta 2007, 129-135; Karhapää 2018). In an 1864 issue of London's *Comic News*, Lincoln appears as the "Yankee Nero." The elitist, racist overtones of this cartoon (e.g., Lincoln's "Yankee" striped trousers gauchely worn under his toga; playing the "bones," an instrument associated with African-American minstrels) reflect views widely evident in the contemporary press (Davis 1971; Bunker 1996; Dubrulle 2018, 203-207; Mitchell 2014, 325).

Political lampoons directed at recent U.S. Presidents are fairly unsubtle, using labels to explain (e.g.) that the flames surrounding a fiddle-playing George W. Bush represent global warming (Greenberg 2005). Many more recent cartoons leverage “viral” images or messages created by leaders themselves, highlighting the influence of online media in shaping political perceptions. Barack Obama’s occasional “selfies” at inopportune moments inspired a cartoon in which he interrupts his fiddling to snap a “selfie” as the city blazes (Ramirez 2013), while a cartoon by Luckovich (2017) uses Nero’s image to satirize the susceptibility of both media and public to the flickering distractions of social media and manufactured controversy.

Finally, a multi-paneled strip from *True Comics* (August 1947) presents Nero’s fire as the misunderstood enterprise of a modernizing leader’s ambition to build a safer, more beautiful city (cf. *Suet.Ner.38.1* and *Tac.Ann.15.43.5*). *True Comics* rehabilitates Nero’s iconic image of failed leadership in service of a “worthy” social agenda resembling the slum clearance initiatives championed by contemporary figures such as Robert Moses in New York. This message also supports the publication’s stated mission of countering the purportedly “deviant” content of early comic books (North 1940; Lepore 2014, 186).

In Roman eyes, Nero’s alleged crime was not “fiddling” in the sense of wasting time, as modern commentary often suggests; rather, it was prioritizing poetry and art in his city’s hour of need (Beard 2006; Gyles 1947). The evidence I present demonstrates that the instantly recognizable image of Nero indulging in a musical interlude during his city’s crisis moment gives him unique staying power in political criticism. Targeting a wide range of postclassical political and social issues, history’s hottest snowclone continues to influence the rhetoric of political commentary, juxtaposing past and present concerns much as Nero himself is said to have sung of Troy, “likening past calamities to current ones” as Rome burned (*Tac.Ann.15.39.3*).

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