

The Modern Labors of Hercules

In 2014 Vladimir Putin was depicted as Hercules performing his twelve labors in a Moscow art exhibit to celebrate the Russian leader's 62nd birthday. Putin is far from the first political leader to be so depicted. Alexander the Great was, perhaps, the first in a long line of rulers who have identified with the Greek hero.

This presentation offers a broad survey of political cartoons in which Hercules performing his labors has been depicted in association with modern world leaders and with modern issues like pollution and climate control.

In order to use a Herculean labor to convey their political messages successfully, political cartoonists are faced with several challenges. First of all, enough visual imagery must be provided to ensure that the viewer recognizes the mythological reference. Cartoonists must also take care to include attributes like Hercules' club or his lion skin as visual references and identification markers. Secondly, they must also assume that their viewers will recognize these allusions, that is, the superhuman strength of Hercules and the impossible labor he is performing. Finally, both artist and viewer must also share an awareness of the political situation to which the myth is being applied.

Many of the cartoons discussed in this presentation deal with situations peculiar to a particular country and/or time period and require viewers be provided with the necessary background information and historical context. Therefore, particular effort is made in this presentation to provide such background and to explain carefully the point of each cartoon.

This presentation includes not only representations of Putin depicted as Hercules but other "Herculean" political figures, including a number of American presidents like Andrew

Jackson, Grover Cleveland, Theodore Roosevelt, and Barack Obama. These depictions are analyzed and compared to ancient representations of the hero and the associations with Hercules are explained.

Some attention will also be given to reasons why certain labors, like that dealing with the Lernean Hydra, have been used more frequently in modern contexts than others.