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Editorial cartoonist for Politico

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Thank you to the Herblock Foundation, to the judges and to Frank Swoboda. Thank you to the Library of Congress and thank you all for coming out tonight.

I have to say I'm a little worried. Ever since Frank gave me that call back on Valentine's Day, I've been worried that I'm deep into a hugely self-indulgent dream. I'm concerned this is all just a completely over-the-top Walter Mitty grand delusion, like in the Thurber story. "Introduced in the glittering chandeliered great hall by the venerable Librarian of Congress, and taking a momentary break from his work at the exciting new media venture, POLITICO, the esteemed cartoonist steps to the podium to share some profound thoughts with the assembled elite of the nation's capital." And then pow! I get snapped out of it by a car horn or a duck quack, and instead, there I am sitting in my attic with my dog, staring at the phone, hoping Sharon Scott at the Post might call with a freelance gig.

But as long as the fantasy is hanging in here, there are a few things I'd like to say tonight.

About the neckwear. Frank told me about Herb's love of truly ugly ties. In fact, he considered digging one of Herb's ties out of storage for me. So in the spirit of Herblock, I put out the word and Paige, who, would you believe, is our art director at POLITICO, came up with this beauty. So don't blame this on my wife or mother.

There are many people I'd like to thank for getting me here. Some of whom were able to join us tonight. First, of course, my family - my extraordinary wife, Sarah - my North Star - whose sense of adventure and verve I've been trying to keep up with for 30 years now. And my wonderful son, Owen, who dropped his studies in Oregon to fly out for this.

One essential stroke of luck needed by anyone setting off on this very odd career path is the blessing of an indulgent family, who somehow manage not to laugh too much when you chose to pursue - and stick with - the life of a cartoonist.

So thank you to my fabulous parents: my awesome mom, who made it tonight, and my great dad. Thank you for raising me in a loving home full of newspapers, books of Charles Addams cartoons, Mad Magazines - along with plenty of pencils and paper. They never doubted my choice to, as my dad puts it, "live by my wits."

Likewise, I'm very grateful to Sarah's parents, my wonderful in-laws, Glen and Nancy Stephens, who also came out from the west coast for tonight. They never seemed to mind an ink-stained wretch for a son-in-law.

Along the way I've also been blessed to know so many fine cartoonists who have inspired me. I was lucky enough to meet Herblock once.

In fact, when I was 11 years old a good friend gave me a copy of "Herblock's Gallery" as a birthday present. I clearly remember opening it. Standing there in my little PJ's -the ones with the little feet attached - and carefully studying how you can add a five o'clock shadow to everything from Richard Nixon's face to an ICBM and then they'll look really malevolent. That Herblock book introduced me to the very concept of the political cartoonist. The concept was further solidified in high school when I was fortunate enough to get to know the legendary LA Times cartoonist Paul Conrad, whose early encouragement really set me on my crosshatched path.

That eventually led to 25 years of mostly freelance cartooning, which was very rewarding and ultimately all good preparation for the big break that came along just three years ago when I was lucky enough to find myself on board for the launch of the good ship POLITICO.

For that, I have to thank Marty Tolchin, who's here tonight. Marty's excellent - superb taste in cartooning lead him to pull me aboard as staff cartoonist and illustrator. Ever since it's been one truly remarkable cruise.

It was more ridiculous good fortune to find myself on board with forward-thinking captains like John Harris and Jim VandeHei, and unwavering admirals like Robert Allbritton and Fred Ryan who have been so supportive and generous. It's really another cartoonist fantasy to find yourself with editors and publishers like these - who give you so much free reign, encourage innovation and understand the power of cartooning.

I'd also like to thank all my workmates at POLITICO whose daily hard work keep us afloat - particularly my editors Bill Nichols and Erika Pontarelli Compart. And I'm especially thankful to Chris Guirrerri, who helped out with the amazing programming for the Flash games.

One other group of friends I'd like to acknowledge is my fellow ink-stained wretches, especially the D.C. gang. Since moving to here 10 years ago, it's been great to get to know and to get daily inspiration from the Washington tribe of cartoonists. You really have to raise your game when you find yourself in a pool of cartoonists that includes the likes of Ann Telnaes, Richard Thompson, Tom Toles, KAL, Nick Galilfanaikis and Nate Beeler, among a bunch of others. I'm very lucky to count them as friends.

It's the future of this greater tribe of political cartoonists that I'd like to briefly address here tonight. As long as I've got the podium and we're not yet turning into pumpkins, I'd like to indulge in a little cheerleading for the future of the political cartooning.

Too often in recent years talk about editorial cartoonists sounds too much like talk of California Condors or white rhinos. People see us as nearly extinct anachronisms from a previous era about to disappear as our paper-based habitat in the media landscape is plowed under to make way for the Brave Digital Future. I think people who believe this aren't accurately seeing the terrain ahead.

The media are certainly going through a dizzying transformation, but I think it's headed in a direction that favors the political cartoonist. Not only do I think we're not going to go extinct, I think we're going to thrive. I mean think about it. The media are now all about speaking to the shrinking attention span of the American public. Newspaper columns are shrinking down to blog posts; blog posts are shrinking

down to Tweets. I'm sure any day now this miniaturization of a unit of news will shrink it further, down to 50 characters or less, and we'll be calling them "peeps", or "e-burps" or something.

The news and the policy debates that flow from the news are getting sliced and diced down into smaller and simpler morsels. Taking complex topics and shrinking them down to black and white, simple-minded and often glib political points - that's the political cartoonist's mission statement. We do all of that - and we do it with funny pictures!

It's not just the size of the news that's trending toward the cartoonish, it's also the tone. My boss John Harris has written about the media, and of the media circus, and the rise of what he's dubbed the Freakshow. Originally the Freakshow was out there on it's own: the howlers and the bloviators, the late night buffoons you'd only find way out on the edge of AM talk radio and later also found in the rough edged beginning of Blogosphere. But the Freakshow has now snuck into the Big Top.

The old Journalism of Lion Taming Investigative Reporting and carefully edited, fact-checked news is getting elbowed out of the way by a new breed of ranting clowns and shrieking jesters. We're losing the sober ringmasters like Walter Cronkite. Flip on what we call the news shows on cable and you get to watch anchors leering and chortling through the outrages of the day, trading insults and throwing mud. Combined with the decline of the traditional newspaper model of newsgathering, it's pretty clear the clowns are now running the media circus.

Good news if you're a clown.

Conflating newscasts with comedy shows present real issues for our democracy. I personally still think the concept of a well-informed electorate is a good one, as is keeping some civility in civil discourse. But briefly setting aside what's good for society - if the news media is turning into a big cartoon - this can only be good news for us cartoonists.

The infantile oversimplification of politics, with helpings of mockery mixed in, is something cartoonists have been doing for a few hundred years. Glen Beck's got nothing on us. The new media landscape and its shrunken attention span is one we can do well in. The Web is first of all a visual world. It's clear Al Gore created the Internet for us cartoonists.

I don't want to come off as completely glib about the media's bleak trajectory right now. While I AM saying that the "Buffoonification" of the media is just great for us buffoons, I also believe that good-humored political satire is a healthy thing for the body politic. Shock value for attention's sake is not. Too many in the media seek controversy for attention's sake. In the Internet age, the drive to go viral often means toying with the incendiary, which I think these days is very dangerous stuff. Poking your political adversaries in the eye all the time eventually just makes us all blind. I hope and believe as we mature into the new media age, people will get this, and true wit and incisive satire will win out. What we need is more good-natured humor that brings out our better angels and less of the purely mean-spirited stuff that stirs up old demons.

To wrap up - and bring this back to Herblock - I think if he were a young cartoonist today he'd have his scanner and Wacom tablet - maybe even an iPad - and he'd be happily cartooning away. I also imagine he'd relish the opportunity to be on the Web, as well as doing animations and the like.

The drawing tools and means of publication are changing, but the power and viability of a good political cartoon remains as strong as it was in Herb's time. In fact, I'd say it's considerably stronger. I truly believe, thanks to the new media, we're on the cusp of another golden age of cartooning. If a picture is worth a thousand words, then if I've done my math right, a picture is worth more than seven tweets! If only Herblock were here to join in on all the fun.

One of my friends and sharper critics at POLITICO from the get go has been Craig Carnell, our security guard. Craig appreciates a good cartoon. Since POLITICO's launch, I always know if I've had a good day when I head out the door at POLITICO, because if Craig likes what he saw in the day's paper, the highest praise I get is, "Hey, Matt, nice one today.. Herblock would be proud."

As of today, Craig's praise has a whole new ring to it. Now more than ever as I work from cartoon to cartoon I truly hope Herblock would be proud.

Thank you again for this tremendous honor.