Join, or Die political cartoon

PERMANENT ID:
12389

LANGUAGE:
English

DATE:
May 9, 1754

IMAGE DESCRIPTION:
This illustration in the *Pennsylvania Gazette*, published by Benjamin Franklin, is widely regarded as the first American political cartoon. In this image, Franklin uses the image of a snake cut into eight pieces to make a political point that American colonists from the 13 colonies, who often squabbled among one another needed to unite to defend themselves against violence that threatened them all. The context for this cartoon was the outbreak of hostilities between France and Britain and their respective Native American allies in North America. This conflict is often called the French and Indian War in the United States, although the fighting in North America was only one theater of a worldwide conflict known as the Seven Years' War. In an editorial column, Franklin reported on Iroquois attacks against British colonists and warned that if the colonists did not agree to present a united front at the upcoming Albany Conference more violence would ensue. To illustrate his point, he added in an engraved image of a snake cut into pieces, each labeled with an abbreviation for a specific colony. Actually, this image cheats a little. Instead of showing a snake cut into 13 pieces one for each colony the colonies that made up New England are combined into one segment the snake's head labeled "N. E." The other pieces of the snake are labeled "N.Y." (New York), "N. J." (New Jersey), P. (Pennsylvania), M. (Maryland), V. (Virginia), N. C. (North Carolina), and the tail is labeled "S. C." (South Carolina). The slogan accompanying the image, "Join, or Die," referenced the superstition that a snake that had been cut in half could come back to life if it could rejoin the pieces of its body before the sun set. This simple image contained several clear and powerful messages: although the colonists were divided, they had the chance to save themselves if they joined together. But time was short; if
they failed to unite, the consequences could be fatal.
This cartoon enjoyed instant popularity, and images of cut-up snakes were quickly republished in newspapers in New York and Boston. Much like modern-day internet memes, people who shared this image did not always copy it exactly as it had originally appeared, but often made changes to the image or the caption to appeal to their audience. For instance, when this cartoon ran in the Boston Gazette, the caption was changed to "Unite and Conquer." Well after the Seven Years' War had ended, Franklin's snake became a symbol of colonial unity against controversial British policies when Paul Revere published his own version of "Join, or Die" during the Stamp Act crisis. It remained a popular pro-colonist symbol throughout the American Revolution and remains to this day one of the most recognizable visual metaphors in American history.

FORMAT:
Periodical illustrations; Prints; Woodcuts; Political cartoons

PUBLISHER:
Historical Society of Pennsylvania

ARTIST:
Unknown Artist; Moloshok, Rachel; Moloshok, Rachel; Historical Society of Pennsylvania; Benjamin Franklin, 1706-1790