Political cartoons are pretty much what they sound like; cartoons that poke fun at political issues. The difficult thing about some political cartoons is that the reader has to understand the historical context in order to figure out the "punchline" of the cartoon.

Examining political cartoons from 10 years ago is a challenge for many adults even though the events happened during their lifetime. Going back 50 years, 100 years, or even 200 years is even more challenging since you need to know what is going on.

Take the example on the right. At first glance we can answer:

- What can we see?
- What does the text mean?
- Who are the people?
- What do they represent?
- What other clues can we find?

We now have to place the cartoon in historical context.

Once we have answered the questions, we can now put the pieces together:

- Uncle Sam is a symbol of the United States
- Uncle Sam is standing over Democracy almost as if he is protecting her
- Across a lake/pond is Europe, which in 1939 was at war
- Democracy is pleading to stay out of the war since America is the last refuge of democracy
- Capitol Hill is in the background which is a direct way of telling Congress not to get involved in the war in Europe

Source: Carey Orr, Chicago Tribune, 1939 (adapted)
The dates and caricature of FDR point to his 4 terms.

The tape reels and date point to Nixon and Watergate.

No matter how the political cartoon appears and whether it is talking about an event, a nation or national leaders; political cartoons express bias, point of view, and historical context. The trick is figuring out when it was drawn and what the cartoon is about.

No Pushover
Eagle = the USA and the Bear = the USSR fighting over Berlin
Source: Fred O. Seibel, Richmond Times-Dispatch

A Wise Economist Asks a Question
Squirrel = Symbol of someone who saves for the winter / 1931 (Great Depression)
Source: Chicago Tribune, August 19, 1931 (adapted)