

The Last Word **Jean Plantu**

The Power Of the Cliché

FRANCE'S LEADING POLITICAL CARTOONIST, Jean Plantu, 51, skewers politicians and potentes every day on the front page of *Le Monde* and every week in *L'Express*. He has sketched some 15,000 political cartoons in his 30-year career. Now, with the country in the midst of legislative elections, Plantu's pen is once again drawing blood.

What's he thinking when he limns those puffed-up pols? Those belligerent Uncle Sams? In an interview with *NEWSWEEK*'s Ginny Power, he gives us some sharp-edged reflections on politics, policy—and on the media. Excerpts:

POWER: Far-right leader Jean-Marie Le Pen's victory over Socialist Prime Minister Lionel Jospin in the first round of France's recent presidential elections was a surprise to many. How do you think Le Pen's National Front will affect the upcoming legislative elections?

PLANTU: Among the nearly 20 percent of voters who voted for Le Pen, many are from the provinces, and feel distanced from Paris. They're sick of the ruling elite and are saying no. It's a show of protest and of desperation. For someone who is unemployed or homeless, the RPR [President Jacques Chirac's political party] and the Socialists are the same thing. I think Le Pen has a grain of fascism in him, but I don't think his electors do. When I draw him, he's wearing a khaki shirt and an armband. But I try not to be too clichéd because I don't want the voters to think that once again the media and the Paris elite are just portraying him as a cliché. The press, the media and the political classes have not understood that that's how we are perceived.

But isn't that what you're doing?

Yes, but that's my job. You can say that I hit below the belt, but I'm a caricaturist. You know, my role is becoming much too important. People are reading less and accept a caricature as the final definition of a personality. People see a drawing and no longer feel the need to read the paper. We live in a dictatorship of artistic directors, television images and photos, in a dictator-

ship of clichés and images. After April 21, the press went out and reported from a little Alsatian village, with no immigrants, that had voted for Le Pen. The journalists were trying to show the stupidity of far-right voters. But it was illusory. Eighty percent of France's journalists are on the left. They did the easy thing instead of going to a crime-ridden suburb and finding National Front voters there. France is moving toward the right. The media is trying to hold up a mirror which is not that of the country. What they're showing is only the face of the media.

My role is becoming much too important. People are reading less and accept a caricature as the final definition of a personality.

For the first 20 years of your career, you chose the subjects you drew, which is no longer the case.

I drew a lot on the Third World. There is a famine in Malawi. Millions of people are going to die in Africa from AIDS because the labs are not doing anything to help them. There is a terrible famine in Iraq. It is the press's duty to bombard the pharmaceutical laboratories, the politicians, until something gets done.

The power of the United States over the rest of the world is a theme we've seen a lot in your drawings, like Uncle Sam's holding a shaft of wheat like a gun, pointing at a poor, shirtless African.



The United States has a view of the world which should have changed since September 11. Has it really changed? I don't have the answer yet. I don't condone any form of terrorism. But I'm constantly scandalized and angry at the injustices. But my convictions are tiny and the steamroller is gigantic.

You usually use Uncle Sam to represent the United States instead of President George W. Bush. Why?

Bush is difficult to draw. He's fairly handsome, and the finer the features the harder to exaggerate. Women are harder to draw than men. They're prettier and don't have big noses. I used to draw Nixon a lot. He was easy.

Do you get much hate mail?

Yes. I once drew an Arab with dynamite sticks strapped to his waist and the Israeli had small buildings strapped to his which read SETTLEMENTS. That week there was graffiti outside the building saying LE MONDE IS ANTI-SEMITIC and PLANTU IS A NAZI. Greenpeace just wrote to me because they thought I was comparing them to the National Front in a drawing.

Are there cartoons you've drawn which you regret?

Sure. In the mid-1990s I was drawing a lot of cartoons about [Slobodan] Milosevic. I regret not doing more at the time against the Kosovar militias as well. They were killing lots of people, too. In 1995 I was also throwing lots of grenades at [the then Prime Minister Alain] Juppé. I went a bit overboard. It's the same for former World Bank president [Jean-Claude] Trichet. There were accusations against him and I sort of executed him with my drawings. The court just dismissed the case for lack of evidence. But my drawings still exist.