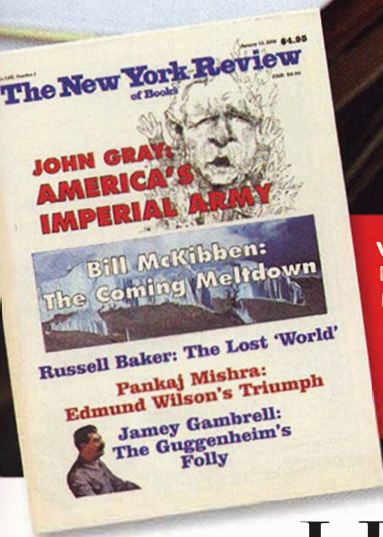
**VISIONARY**

David Levine in his Brooklyn Heights studio. Inset, a *New York Review of Books* cover with a Levine illustration.



LEVINE IN WINTER

For four decades, David Levine's acid-tipped portraits of everyone from Castro to Cheney gave *The New York Review of Books* its visual punch.

Now that the greatest caricaturist of the late 20th century is going blind, is he owed more than a fond farewell?

BY DAVID MARGOLICK

Throughout the year 2006, a great drama unfolded in *The New York Review of Books*. It didn't take place in one of its famously erudite articles on politics and culture, nor in the characteristically splenetic exchanges on the letters page, nor in a highbrow personal ad in the back. Instead, it occurred graphically, in the caricatures of David Levine, which had graced the publication for the past 44 years.

Levine's drawings—the latest crop around that time included Jimmy Carter, George Soros, and Colin Powell, along with the usual assortment of novelists, scientists, poets, potentates, and academics, dead and alive—still appeared. His customary irreverence was also intact: Vladimir Putin in a king's robe; the lips of Justice Samuel Alito, fresh from his unenlightening confirmation hearings, zippered shut. But to anyone familiar with Levine, something was

seriously off. The images were scarcer, cruder, more tentative. Even his signature, the casually confident “DLevine” that always nestled cozily at the bottom, was different: suddenly, it was crabbed and erratic, even illegible. Sometimes it all but tumbled out of the frame.

Few people may have noticed the change, because Levine’s older, classic drawings for the *Review*—there were more than 3,800 of them—still appeared in the magazine, not just amid the articles but in various promotions and inserts: Saul Bellow or Amelia Earhart, looking reproachful or entreating, urging readers to re-up. In Manhattan and Cambridge and Ann Arbor and Santa Monica, where calendars featuring Levine drawings still hung in their usual places, it was as if he’d never left. But when the older work was juxtaposed with the newer, sometimes across the page, the contrast was stark, and sobering.

Simultaneously, two more dramas were under way. One was on Henry Street in Brooklyn Heights, where Levine, now 81 years old, had long lived and worked. Gradually, his universe had grown darker and fuzzier. He could no longer see very clearly without strong light and magnification, or rely upon his hand: the lines that had always been his friends, the spare, crisp ones that defined someone’s shape, and the elaborate cross-hatchings that gave him soul, he could no longer control. His ophthalmologist had put it bluntly. “Mr. Levine, you don’t look your age,” he said. “But your eyes do.” His diagnosis: macular degeneration. Medications and injections didn’t help. Levine worked on, but laboriously. He abandoned pen and ink for pencil, which, as he puts it, “was more forgiving if I made a mistake.” But the results were plain enough. For the first time—except for those very few instances when it had been too tart for the publication’s taste—the *Review* rejected his work.

Meanwhile, at the magazine, long the flagship of the American liberal intelligentsia, there was the third drama: what to do about David. First, it debated whether to run what he’d submitted. Then it stopped sending him assignments: it was in April 2007 when his last original drawing (of the novelist Howard Norman) appeared. The *Review* now primarily uses the work of another artist, whose style resembles Levine’s but displays none of its wit. Still, the masthead lists Levine as “staff artist”; to both the *Review*’s co-founder and editor, Robert Silvers, and Rea Hederman, its owner and publisher, any suggestion to the contrary is preposterous. “I think of him as someone who’s done marvelous things for us and might do some again,” Silvers says.

But the ophthalmology texts don’t list anything called “macular regeneration.” Theoretically, one of the electronic devices Levine has tried will help him see the contrast in the photographs from which he works—the “scrap,” in artists’ lingo—well enough to resume work, or, through practice, his pencil drawings will magically meet the *Review*’s standards. It seems unlikely, though. All parties concerned seem too timid or gentlemanly or Pollyanna-ish to acknowledge the obvious: that one of the most remarkable runs in the history of journalism and art is almost certainly over. In

BATTLE SCARS
Levine’s famous
1966 depiction of
Lyndon B. Johnson.

TIME ONCE CLAIMED THAT LEVINE’S DRAWING OF L.B.J. DID MORE TO UNDERMINE HIS PRESIDENCY THAN ANY PHOTOGRAPH.

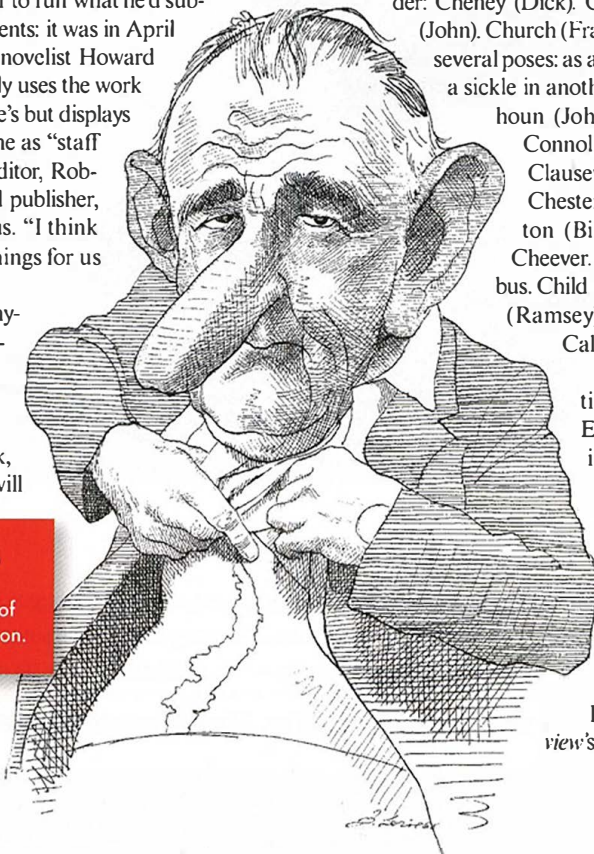
the course of it, more than anyone before him, Levine put together a facebook of human history, capturing everyone from Agnew and Albee to Zapata and Zola. Arguably, only Al Hirschfeld, the indomitable *New York Times* illustrator who worked almost to the very moment of his death, five years ago, at the age of 99, had so long a tenure or cast so lengthy a shadow, though his range was considerably narrower and his work as apolitical as Levine’s was politically charged. Some of Levine’s early subjects, such as writer Lillian Hellman, had begged to be spared his often savage strokes. But then came a total switch, and having Levine go at you certified your significance, no matter how he made you look.

In nearly three decades in New York I’d never met or seen Levine, nor did I know very much about him. But after years of savoring his work every other week in the *Review*, I felt he was a friend. When that work faltered, then vanished altogether, I wondered, and worried, about him. Someone told me he was ill, but I neither heard nor read anything about it. Then, this past March, I attended a program honoring another journalistic iconoclast, the late I. F. Stone, and there was Levine. He’d done Stone, of course—at least three times. One version appeared on the cover of a collection of Stone’s articles. (“The hardest job with drawing Izzy is that he already looked like a caricature,” he says.) “David Levine!” I gushed, with awe and, frankly, some relief, when we were introduced. “Where have you been? What’s going on with you? I miss you! Are you all right?”

A Lifetime’s Work

If you want to know the sheer scope of Levine’s work, just dip into any of the shallow drawers in the antique architect’s file in his study, where his caricatures are arranged alphabetically. I pulled the C’s. There was Churchill: seen from the rear, identifiable only by his shape, his palette, and his cigar. Then, in no particular order: Cheney (Dick). Carmichael (Stokely). Le Carré (John). Church (Frank). Carroll (Lewis). Castro (in several poses: as a baseball player in one, holding a sickle in another). Caesar and Caligula. Calhoun (John C.). Cunningham (Merce). Connolly (Cyril). Cuomo. Chirac. Von Clausewitz. Colette. Clifford (Clark). Chesterton. Cromwell. Chaucer. Clinton (Bill). Charles V. Califano (Joe). Cheever. Carswell (G. Harrold). Columbus. Child (Julia). Cullen (Countee). Clark (Ramsey). Chomsky. Chateaubriand. Callas. Curzon (Lord).

Because Silvers and his longtime co-editor, the late Barbara Epstein, always wanted fresh images, Levine got to draw many people repeatedly, ever refining and updating. He was at it long enough to engrave wrinkles into W. H. Auden, follow Philip Roth’s retreating hairline, trace Susan Sontag going gray. Type in any name at the “David Levine Gallery” on the *Review*’s Web site and you can assem-



ble something sounding like an olde English Christmas carol. There are 66 Richard Nixons, 41 Lyndon Johnsons, 23 Ronald Reagans, 16 Sigmund Freuds, 14 Norman Mailers, 13 Charles de Gaulles, 12 Jimmy Carters, 11 Adolf Hitlers, 10 William Shakespeares, nine Jean-Paul Sartres, eight Bertrand Russells, seven Menachem Begins, six Ernest Hemingways, five Marcel Prousts, four Ayatollah Khomeinis, three Bernard Be-rensens, two Elvis Presleys, and one . . . well, there are hundreds and hundreds of those. And lots of what ran in the *Review* isn't even there, to say nothing of what appeared elsewhere.

David Leopold, a curator who has spent the past three years cataloguing Levine's work, estimates that only half of Levine's caricatures were actually done for the *Review*. Thus far he's found more than 1,000 done for *Esquire*, almost 100 for *Time*, 71 for *The New Yorker*, and lots of others for *The Washington Post*, *Rolling Stone*, *Sports Illustrated*, *New York*, and a host of oddball publications, such as *Family Planning Perspective* (for which he once drew Margaret Sanger using a diaphragm as a trampoline). The few people he apparently never got around to drawing for the *Review*, like Jacqueline Kennedy, he invariably did for others (in Jackie's case, *Harper's*). But so inextricably linked are Levine and the *Review* that, no matter where Levine appeared, it was the *Review* that always came to mind.

The renowned French artist Honoré Daumier drew politicians whom no one later remembered. But the durability of those Levine depicted, plus the unique insight with which he drew them, guarantees the immortality of his works. "Nobody will want to publish a biography of any of the people he's done without including one of his pictures," another prominent illustrator, Edward Sorel, predicts. "People will want to reproduce his stuff forever." Sometimes, life resembled a Levine drawing. The writer Richard Elman recalled once encountering Hannah Arendt, Saul Bellow, Stephen Spender, Dwight Macdonald, and other literary luminaries at a party near Chicago. On hand was "a whole collection of animated David Levine caricature faces, drinking, standing about, sitting on overstuffed sofas, and smearing chopped liver onto crackers," he wrote. "There was no face in that room that did not seem to recall a page out of the *New York Review of Books*."

On the wall in Levine's kitchen, on the bulletin board by the telephone, hangs the David Levine calendar, which is sent annually to preferred *Review* subscribers. March featured a drawing of Abraham Lincoln, one Levine doesn't much like: his Lincoln, he feels, is smirking. "That one just got out of hand," he recalls. It was a rare lapse; Levine was invariably credited for getting things

uncannily right, undeservedly so in his estimation. "I was given a tremendous amount of credit for having unbelievable insights, more than any known shrink could hope ever to have," he says. "I might have stumbled on something, but that really wasn't something you could count on and call 'insight.'" These days, though, far from nailing his subjects, he has trouble summoning their names.

Over the years, Levine has done a few images of himself, and he gave himself no more breaks than anyone else. David Levine's David Levines are heavyset, disheveled, and shambling, with a bulging gut, hair matted and slicked back, and an enormous, vent-like beak. In his bedroom hangs one of his few self-portraits in oil, from 1965. In contrast to his finely wrought caricatures, his face in it is abstracted and undefined—pretty much

the way he sees everyone now. Without his work, he has lost the structure of his life—sometimes, it's hard for him to remember the day of the week—and his chief means of self-expression.

Levine believes the *Review* has fired him. In fact, for the rest of the year he remains under contract with the publication, which pays him around \$4,800 a month (down from the more than \$12,000 he once earned), essentially for the use of his old drawings. Whether or not it is renewed, he receives neither health insurance nor a pension. His friends feel vehemently that the *Review* owes him something better than that. "He is the visual trademark of that magazine," said Byron Dobell, a former editor at *Esquire* and, for more than four decades, a member of the weekly painting group Levine still runs with the portraitist Aaron Shikler. "They fed off his drawings for years. Let's say he goes completely blind. . . . They have no further obligations to him. . . . ? It's as if Disney decided, 'Let's throw Disney overboard. He's an old man. We don't need him.'" A series of heart problems, with all the customary stents and bypasses and pacemakers, knocked Levine off stride even before his eyesight did. "I haven't settled whether I am angry or I am just saying, 'Well, it was time anyway,'" he says. He's much more fired up about the conditions of the poor than he is about his own.

Proud to Be a Red

Born in Brooklyn in 1926, Levine grew up in a proletarian, politicized world. His father ran a small clothing factory. His mother was a left-wing rabble-rouser, the type to approach the most menacing cop at a protest and say, "Do you know you're a Cossack?" Levine handed out the *Daily Worker* by the Brooklyn docks and watched May Day marches around Union Square. He had studio space adjoining that of Rudolf Abel, the Soviet spy arrested in 1957 and eventually exchanged for the U-2

THE REVIEW REJECTED AN IMAGE OF HENRY KISSINGER SPORTING WHAT MUST HAVE BEEN THE WORLD'S SMALLEST PENIS.



RIGHT IS WRONG

From left: caricatures of Abraham Lincoln (1982), William F. Buckley Jr. (1970), and Toni Morrison (1987). Levine has regrets about some of his illustrations and admits to going easy on underprivileged groups.



pilot Francis Gary Powers. His friendly ties to Abel could explain why two F.B.I. agents showed up at Levine's house sometime in the 1950s (he was about to take his first trip to Europe, to study the art) to inform him he wasn't going. He still considers himself a Communist; it was the Soviets who strayed. So Stalin (whom he drew at least 10 times) gets the usual Levine treatment: in one version, he's flanked by all the headless generals he murdered.

Levine began to draw as a kid, sketching the stuffed foxes and squirrels in the Brooklyn Museum. After returning from the service, in 1946, he attended a fine-arts school in Philadelphia. A fire in his studio in Brooklyn's Park Slope around 1968 destroyed most of his early, large works in oils; seemingly crushed by the blow, he turned to smaller paintings, along with watercolors that some, like Edward Sorel, consider his finest work of all. Hanging from and stacked against the walls of the apartment he shares with his second wife, Kathy Hayes, is four decades of his output, mostly small paintings. Many are of his favorite subject: Coney Island. What better way to study humanity than observing them half nude on a beach, all posing for him? Many others are of garment workers: pressers and cutters and finishers, muscular and sweaty, beleaguered and dignified. All of the characters, even the women bent over their sewing machines, are really him, he says. Those paintings are as tender and affectionate as his caricatures are withering—Levine reserved all of his respect and pity for common folks—and of all his artwork are clearly what mattered, and matter, to him most. The caricatures, by contrast, were commissions. They paid the bills and, Levine says, gave him a chance to unload. Few of them hang at his house, though he's fond of them too. "I love my species," he says. "I love looking at their faces."

For a time, Levine survived on work from publications like *Gasoline Retailer*. In the late 1950s, he drew a line of unsuccessful Christmas cards. Then, in the early 1960s, he landed at *Esquire*. Along with contemporaries like Sorel and Jules Feiffer, Levine helped revive a tradition of political illustration that had faded since the days of Daumier and Thomas Nast. In 1963, while the city's newspapers were on strike, Barbara Epstein recruited Levine for the newly hatched *New York Review of Books*. He took to the task quickly. The mostly playful marginalia he'd done for *Esquire* deepened, becoming more ambitious and psychologically complex.

And a remarkable ritual quickly developed. Pretty much every other Thursday for the next 40 years, a messenger from the *Review* would drop off an envelope at the Heights Casino, on Montague Street, where Levine played tennis, a few blocks from his apartment. In it were photographs of the people he was to draw for the next issue, along with the articles about them. Always, Levine would read the pieces before setting pen to paper. Some, particularly

NEWSWEEK EDITORS ONCE DISCUSSED WHETHER LEVINE SHOULD FILE DOWN NIXON'S FANGS.

those on politics, he grasped instantly and tackled with relish because of their comic possibilities. But he thinks himself uneducated—"I didn't do anything in school," he says; "I studied volleyball"—and found articles on musical theory or physics or poetry heavy slogging. Still, he persevered, scouring the texts for ideas. Then he studied the photographs, looking for whatever element—nose, eyes, chin, hair, glasses, head—captured a person's essence. Sometimes, what most enthralled him emerged only as he drew.

Working in his studio overlooking Pierrepont Street, the surrounding windows covered up to block out the harsh light, he set pen (the point was Gilot 102) to paper (Strathmore double weight). Never was there a caption. "If I can't do it the way Charlie Chaplin did it, words are not going to help," he says.

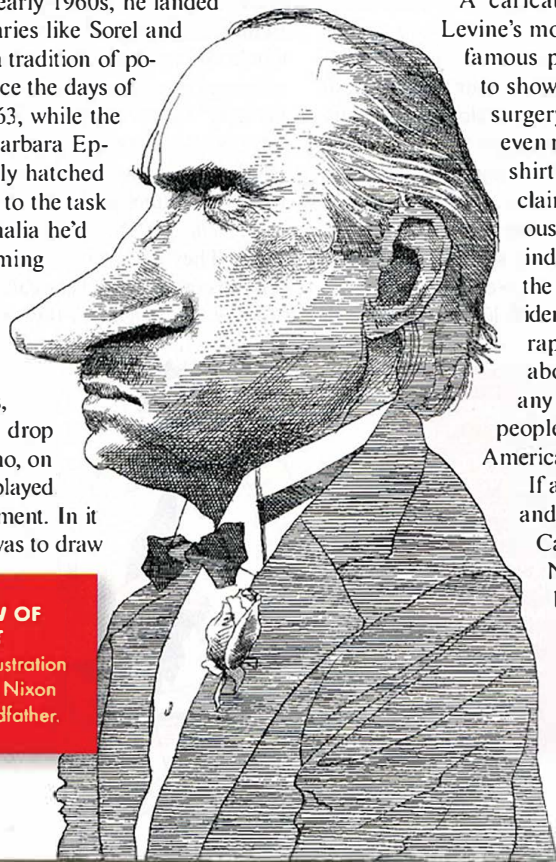
Each illustration took him a couple of hours. Tuesdays, the messenger would return to the Casino to pick up what he'd drawn.

Strokes of Genius

What sets Levine's drawings apart is not just the technical artistry but also the wit. "He was the most brilliant visual punster that ever existed," says Sorel. Detesting much of 20th-century art—he is as conservative stylistically as he is radical politically—he drew Andy Warhol as Alfred E. Neuman, showed Picasso dumping a truckload of Picassos, and made the top of Claes Oldenburg's head a garbage-can lid. (After he depicted Jackson Pollock urinating squiggles onto a canvas, he says, the *Review* stopped assigning him modern artists. Silvers replies: "Certainly not consciously," adding that most stories about artists were in fact illustrated by their own work.) Monica Lewinsky smokes a cigar. Hemingway stands on an animal rug with a Hemingway head. Patton is squirreled away in a giant holster. Kenneth Starr is an ayatollah. Osama bin Laden is a long, bushy beard. Dan Quayle is a puny Sword of Damocles hanging over George H. W. Bush.

A caricature of Lyndon Johnson is probably Levine's most famous work of all: a takeoff on the famous photograph of Johnson lifting his shirt to show the incision from his recent gallbladder surgery, which Levine transformed into the even more famous image of Johnson lifting his shirt to reveal a map of Vietnam. *Time* once claimed that that drawing, which simultaneously captured Johnson's crudity and how indelibly the war had scarred both him and the country, did more to undermine his presidency than any photograph. Johnson biographer Robert Caro says he is asked more about Levine's depiction of Johnson than any other topic. "The photograph assaulted people, and the cartoon embedded it in the American consciousness," he says.

If anything, Levine was even harder on Nixon, and considerably more often. There is Nixon as Captain Queeg, steel balls in his hand, and Nixon with tapes spilling out of his trouser bottoms. There is Nixon as the Godfather. Nixon with Nguyen Van Thieu biting into his leg like a terrier, Nixon with Spiro Agnew and with Mao Zedong. There is Nixon as a fetus, Nixon kissing Brezhnev, Nixon manipulating a Lieutenant William Calley



**SHADOW OF
A DOUBT**
A 1972 illustration
of Richard Nixon
as the Godfather.

hand puppet. (The tally of 66 Nixon images does not count the numerous Nixons he did for other publications; *Newsweek* editors once discussed whether he should file down Nixon's fangs.) For few characters was Levine's distinctive cross-hatching better suited: with it, he managed to add several hours to Nixon's famed five-o'clock shadow.

Critics praised Levine for resurrecting a moribund art and capturing the *Zeitgeist*. "They are wickedly intelligent and shamelessly unfair," Hilton Kramer, of *The New York Times*, wrote of an exhibition of his caricatures in 1968. "Future historians of the sixties will find in these images a reliable guide to the bitter feelings and angry criticism that now fill every corner of our political life." One week the previous January, Levine had drawn covers for both *Time* (L.B.J. as Lear) and *Newsweek* (five Republican presidential contenders). A host of would-be Levines appeared. "I have never imitated Levine," one declared. "I have burglarized him."

Levine believed that power corrupts, and his scorn for anyone in authority was nonpartisan. So unflattering were his portraits of Ethel Kennedy's husband (whom he drew 6 times) and brother-in-law Jack (10 times) that she barred Levine from playing in the Robert F. Kennedy Memorial Pro-Celebrity Tennis Tournament. Levine had Lyndon Johnson shedding crocodile-shaped tears, and crocodiles shedding Johnson-shaped ones. He accentuated Ronald Reagan's every crease and crevice. He considered Bill Clinton (nine times) a liar and equivocator and wise guy and closet Republican, so he put his hand on a stack of Bibles, or had him eating waffles, or placed a hayseed between his teeth, or gave him an elephant's trunk.

However pejorative his caricatures of politicians were, he maintains that they were always designed to be constructive: by making the powerful funny-looking, he theorized, he might encourage some humility or self-awareness. (I asked him whether that had ever actually happened. He said it had not.) But Levine also knew when to stop. As he often cautions young illustrators, caricature fails when people are distorted beyond recognition. He allowed himself an exception with J. Edgar Hoover (he did him four times), whom he depicted once as an amoeba-like, cobwebbed blob. Then again, Hoover was the man who seized Levine's passport.

Conversely, Levine admits to going easy on anyone belonging to a group that had been historically disadvantaged, such as women and blacks. He still feels guilty about his rendition of Marilyn Monroe, whom he drew with a baseball bat on her shoulder and puffy, overly painted lips, as if she'd just been beaten or expected to be. He also rues one of his portrayals of Oscar Wilde, around one of

whose fingers he almost imperceptibly wrapped a ballet slipper; at the time, he explains, everyone was insensitive to gays. Rather than depict Eleanor Roosevelt as the usual ugly duckling, he turned her into a swan. One woman he did not indulge was Margaret Mead. He bared her breasts—to make up, he explains, for all those native women she exposed in various anthropological texts over the years.

Predictably, whenever Levine strayed beyond the tolerant precincts of the *Review*, he could expect trouble, even though these other publications always came to him. *The New York Times* killed one drawing of Nixon feeding papers into a shredder, and another of a

nude Kissinger, his back side tattooed with bombs, a map of Vietnam, and a skull and crossbones, even after promising a skeptical Levine it would run whatever he submitted. In 1982, *Time* spiked a drawing of Alabama governor George Wallace (then belatedly courting black voters) with an Afro. Years later, says Levine, *The New Yorker* killed a watercolor-and-pencil drawing of George W. Bush wearing his famous flight jacket and standing on

rows of flag-covered coffins. (*The New Yorker* says Levine submitted the work unsolicited. It later ran in the *Review*.)

The New Yorker's handling of another piece of work, in 2005, this one of Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas and then Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon sitting around a conference table, was more disturbing to him. At the magazine's request, Levine says, he placed sinister, hooded figures brandishing machine guns behind Abbas. To balance things off (at least in his own mind), he added some gigantic missiles alongside Sharon. When the drawing appeared, however, he was shocked to see that the missiles had vanished: never before, he says, had his art been altered behind his back. After that, he goes on, he got no further assignments from the magazine. "David Levine is a great political artist and kept on publishing with us after this, but all I remember about this was thinking that with Sharon being so ominously huge in the drawing, the bombs were too much," says David Remnick, *The New Yorker's* editor. "More important, if the implication is that we made the change for ominous political reasons, he is, with respect, wrong. This article didn't pull punches on Sharon, to say the least." Before long, though, the magazine did stop commissioning Levine: his new work required too much retouching.

The Review was positively laissez-faire by comparison. When he did encounter problems there, they sometimes concerned sexuality. "*The New York Review* is a little bit straight-up Puritan," he says. "They have a hang-up about sex." Until the offending portion was cropped, the caricature that accompanied a piece on Gay Talese's *Thy Neighbor's Wife* originally depicted the author with his

AMAZINGLY, LEVINE'S CARICATURES AREN'T SELLING. "NOBODY'S BEEN ASKING," HE SAYS. "MAYBE I HAVE TO DIE FIRST."



BACK TO THE FUTURE

From left: Henry Kissinger (1979), novelist Thomas Wolfe (1987), and Susan Sontag (1992). *The New York Times* killed the Kissinger drawing after promising it would run whatever Levine turned in.



fly open. The turtleneck in which he once dressed Philip Roth was changed when, at least as Epstein saw it, it too closely resembled a foreskin. But it was his images of Kissinger that ran into the most trouble. The *Review* published at least 10 of them, none especially kind. But it rejected a view of Kissinger's tattooed back side similar to the one the *Times* had spurned, as well as a 1982 image of a naked Kissinger as Atlas, holding the world and sporting what must have been the world's smallest penis. (It was later exhibited at Oxford's Ashmolean Museum and is now in private hands.)

Two years later, the *Review* spiked another naked Kissinger, this one showing him beneath an American-flag bedspread, gleefully ravaging a woman. Little of her is visible save her head, which also happens to be a globe. It "just didn't seem what we should do," Silvers says. Levine took it to Victor Navasky, then editor of *The Nation*, who published it. That in turn outraged feminists on Navasky's staff, who complained that Levine had made the world a woman and, by showing her grabbing the sheets, suggested that she might be enjoying herself. Navasky called a meeting and invited Levine, who only inflamed things more. "I said, 'I wanted to say that he was screwing the world, and as far as I know, approximately 99 percent of the world screws that way,'" he recalls. Navasky was Levine's court of last resort; he also published a caricature of George W. Bush handing out coat hangers—suitable for abortions—which, once again, *The New Yorker* had refused to run. (It said the work was inappropriate for a story concerning campaigning more than policy.)

At times, the *Review* did ask Levine to tone things down. Once, Epstein requested that he remove the froth around Zbigniew Brzezinski's mouth—she said it was redundant—and another time that he make Gore Vidal, with whom she was friendly, less obese. Then there were all those swastikas that Levine embedded into his work, like Hirschfeld's "Nina"s. The *Review* had Levine remove them from Clint Eastwood's clothing and the cleft of George Wallace's chin. "We sometimes thought the swastikas were inappropriate," recalls Silvers. "It was sometimes a question of detecting them. Someone would say, 'Hey, there's a swastika!'" A prostrate black man over whom Newt Gingrich leapfrogged in 1995 was airbrushed out of the finished product. (That was kinder than Levine's depiction of Gingrich as an elephant's rear end, the anus doubling as his mouth, done for *Playboy*.)

Erica Jong, Woody Allen, Christopher Isherwood, and Sontag were all unhappy with Levine. So was Philip Roth, whom Levine encountered one day outside Bergdorf Goodman shortly after one of his nine caricatures of the author had appeared. "What did you do to my sweet little *goyish shtik* [Christian and small] nose?" Roth complained. Truman Capote also feigned indignation. "You're the man who did my dewlaps like this!" he remonstrated, tugging at the excess skin around his neck. Levine says he may have saved Norman Mailer's life, spotting and then

restraining him when, engrossed in a conversation, he had been about to walk into traffic near his home in Brooklyn Heights. Afterward, though, Mailer apparently could think only about all the unflattering portraits Levine had done of him. "Oh. It's you" was the only thanks Mailer could muster. Others, though, including Arthur Schlesinger Jr., actually appreciated what Levine had made of them. "He was a particularly homely man," Levine recalls. "He must have expected something much worse."

As much of a fixture as he was in the *Review*, Levine was a stranger around it. He seldom visited its offices, and then only to pick up errant art books. Rarely did he see, or even talk to, Epstein or Silvers. "Every time I came in, he was on the phone to Timbuktu," he says. Levine says that he was only occasionally invited to *Review* events, and that that was quite all right by him, since in his mind the editors considered him, quite literally, a hired hand. Not that he disagreed. "Intellectually I always felt they were well above me," he explains.

At a party at Epstein's once, he recalls, the poet Robert Lowell said something to him. "I sort of stood there listening and then he moved on," Levine recalls. "The next guy came along the line and said, 'Did you understand a word he said?,' and I said, 'Not one.'"

Levine's son, Matthew, who licenses the right to create products featuring his father's caricatures and paintings through a company called D. Levine Ink, believes that the *Review*, knowing it would one day have to wean itself off its aging illustrator, had used him less frequently and prominently even before his eyesight deteriorated. By the time retired Supreme Court justice Sandra Day O'Connor sat for Levine's painting group, in October 2006, Levine saw her only as a blur. Levine never really discussed his failing eyesight with Silvers or Epstein, but at some point in 2006 the effects could no longer be ignored. Coming from another illustrator, the new works, in pencil, would have been perfectly respectable; many of them, including one

of Barack Obama, were used. But they lacked the lapidary precision and devastating eloquence of his old drawings: the struggle to pull off a decent likeness also sapped him of his wit. Most of the *Review*'s roughly 140,000 subscribers may not have noticed, but his fellow artists did. Following the decline in Levine's work from one issue to the next was to them like watching another iron horse, Lou Gehrig, suddenly faltering on the field.

Soon the rejections came, from the *Review* and other publications. "These drawings are not what we have come to expect from David Levine," Levine says Silvers told him. (Silvers says he was far more delicate—that is, if he said anything at all. "I think we just didn't use them and said we were sorry," he recalls.) Levine didn't argue. "I agreed that there was something wrong and that a problem had developed," he says. He subsequently tore up most of the rejected pieces.

Levine nonetheless insists that over time the quality of his work in pencil would have improved. Some of his colleagues,

THE *REVIEW* HAD LEVINE REMOVE SWASTIKAS FROM CLINT EASTWOOD'S CLOTHING AND THE CLEFT OF GEORGE WALLACE'S CHIN.



**AN ACTOR
PREPARES**
A 1981
depiction of
Ronald Reagan.

such as Jules Feiffer, agree. The *Review's* "callous disregard" for Levine, he wrote Silvers in February 2007, was "stunningly at odds" with its long tradition of "intellectual conscience and decency," and was tactically unwise to boot. "You are handing your enemies a gift," he warned. "What fun *The Weekly Standard*, *The National Review* and *The Wall Street Journal* are going to have at your expense when this affair goes public." Certainly, he concluded, "the greatest caricaturist of the last half of the Twentieth Century deserves better from you."

Even friends who concede that Levine's latest drawings are no longer worthy of the *Review* criticize its handling of him, which they consider insensitive from the start. Levine neither asked for nor received any stock in the publication when he went to work there, for instance, so that when Rea Hederman bought it for \$4.5 million in 1984 he reaped none of the profits. Friends say Levine never realized how indispensable he was there, and was almost pathologically unable to stand up for himself. Levine agrees. It goes with his fear of authority, he says.

"If you're going to write this as a Greek tragedy, the fatal flaw is David's inability to confront the situation," says Sorel. "You would think it would occur to him to get something on paper because 'this may not be the last time I get screwed.' No! And so, finally, he gets blind, they don't need him anymore, and they don't even tell him that they're getting somebody else—he just opens up the paper and finds out that somebody else is there. . . . You can't help being angry at David too. Because David, who keeps talking about his days in the Communist Party, should of all people have known the nature of capitalism! I mean, it's almost laughable."

Matthew Levine, who is the director of communications and marketing for Research to Prevent Blindness (he held the position before his father's difficulties), goes easier on the *Review*, saying that what seems like insensitivity is really more confusion: the people there just aren't built for such awkward situations. But the hurt, and the financial impact, are real. "He's not going to wind up on the soup lines somewhere, but his income has been dramatically reduced," he says. A divorce long ago stripped Levine of some assets, and others are tied up in real estate. True, he owns all those oils and watercolors. But Levine's social-realist paintings are out of style; his admirers are selling—or bequeathing—them rather than buying more. It hasn't helped that Levine, imbued as he is with the old Communist notion that people who work with their hands never make much money, is uncomfortable with commerce, and has set the prices high enough to sabotage the whole thing.

A Legacy Up for Grabs

Amazingly, the caricatures (which go for between \$4,000 and \$6,000, and, like the paintings, are handled by New York's Forum Gallery) aren't selling, either. "Nobody's

been asking," says Levine. "Maybe I have to die first." Fearful that the I.R.S. will soak his two children when he passes, he's half-facetiously advised them to burn everything. In fact, many Levine caricatures are already in museums and archives; the Library of Congress alone owns 76. Tracking down the originals isn't easy; many, having been cared for haphazardly, are lost. One that is accounted for is the priceless caricature of Lyndon Johnson's belly, which belongs to A. Whitney Ellsworth, the *Review's* first publisher. Ellsworth thinks he paid around \$100 for it; Levine recalls giving it to him for free.

So cash is short; a \$3,000 contraption that would heighten the contrast of images so that he could work from them more easily seems beyond his means. "They could solve this whole thing with a pension," he says.

Both Silvers and Hederman say they have always tried to pay Levine generously. Even people who've written for the *Review* from the outset do not get a pension, Hederman notes. Silvers stresses that the *Review* continues to work with Levine,

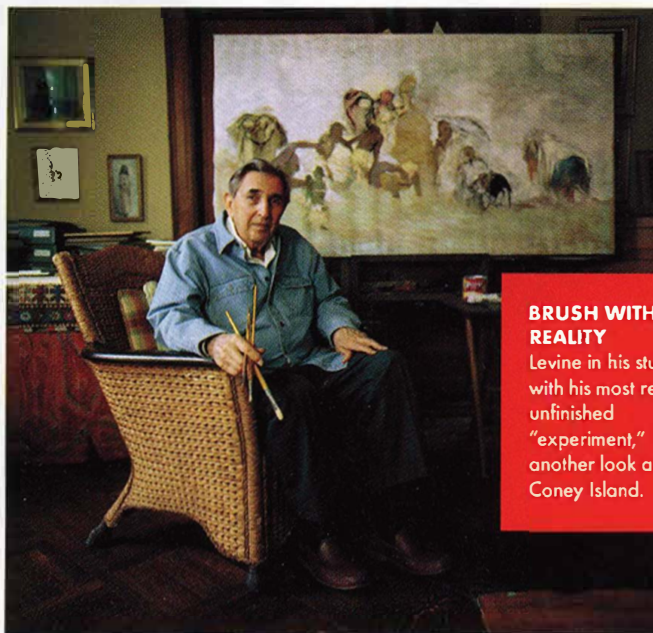
noting his monthly payment, as well as Levine's role in picking the drawings to be used for the 2009 calendar. "This notion of an absolute break should be understood as not quite right," he says. "I can't feel we did something wrong." Both he and Hederman say they await the next Levine drawing. "It might be very different," says Silvers. "Perhaps it would be a very simple outline. There are caricatures that are only five strokes. God knows what he might do. So I would never rule anything out. . . . We still feel the most affectionate admiration for him. If there were some way we could work things out, I'd be entirely open."

But Levine is proud, even hypersensitive—when the *Review* recently sent him a wristwatch featuring one of his Shakespeare caricatures, he misconstrued it as a parting gift—and refuses to send in anything on spec. And the magazine, which continues to sell David Levine mouse pads, David Levine postcards, and David Levine reproductions—from which Levine derives only token royalties—is too timid or too pragmatic or maybe too considerate to ask. So the awkward pas de deux continues. Such is combat between habitual noncombatants.

In the meantime, Levine tries to keep busy. A book of his presidential drawings will be published this fall, with exhibits in New York and Los Angeles. There'll also be a Levine show in Toronto. Whatever his personal circumstances, he seeks nobody's pity. "How old am I?" he asks. "Eighty-one. *Eighty-one!* That's 20 years past my parents! I feel that I've lived the golden life. I've done everything I want to do. If I can keep doing it, even a part of it, that's fun." And that he hopes to do. In fact, he's planning an excursion soon.

He's going back to Coney Island, an easel and paintbrushes in hand. □

"I MIGHT HAVE STUMBLERD ON SOMETHING, BUT THAT REALLY WASN'T SOMETHING YOU COULD COUNT ON AND CALL 'INSIGHT.'"



BRUSH WITH REALITY

Levine in his studio with his most recent unfinished "experiment," another look at Coney Island.