Politics and graphic design are not strange bedfellows. In fact, they are very compatible. However, when Print became part of the ménage à trois during the 1960s, some readers protested by canceling subscriptions because they didn’t want their design magazine sullied by partisanship (or views opposed to their own). “Politics has no place in a design magazine,” was the common refrain. At Print’s inception 75 years ago, the editors indeed kept their distance from articles that could be construed as favoring parties, causes or ideologies. With rare exceptions, like the anti-Nazi propaganda poster by Alex Steinweiss or some other government-induced piece of design, during founder William Edwin Rudge’s years Print avoided reproducing work bearing political messages, even though there were lots that could have been legitimately covered.

During the repressive McCarthy period, from the late 1940s into the late 1950s, when dissent was tainted as anti-American, Print generally ignored sociopolitical issues altogether. Being a trade journal, it was certainly prudent for Print to remain insulated. Yet with the arrival of the 1960s and all the decade represents, the magazine could no longer ignore the degree to which politics informed design and design helped express political messages and ideas.

Above, left: Propaganda posters by Jean Carlu, Lester Beall and Leo Lionni, featured in 1941.

Above, right: A 1940 piece on “the potential usefulness of the graphic arts industry to the government in a time of emergency.”
Mainstream and alternative political graphics were frequently covered in leading European design journals, and *Print* began melding political context into the domestic design discourse. The magazine found its more cosmopolitan mojo thanks to a new executive editor, Martin Fox (see page 48), who enlarged the editorial landscape to include peripheral influences, such as how type impacted political campaigns. *Print* shed its passive observer role and became an active member of not just the graphic design world but the world in which graphic design functioned. While it still ran portfolios, profiles and articles on developments and fashions in the field, it also sought to stimulate and agitate its readers.

One of the first attempts at sociopolitical debate was the story “Should the Government Subsidize the Arts?” A transcript from an NBC TV program, it featured the economist and ambassador to India, John Galbraith, as the “yes” vote, and *Harper’s Magazine* editor and cultural critic Russell Lynes as the “no.” Although this was a measured for-and-against debate, *Print* had stepped onto controversial turf that forced its readers to think about more than a narrowly defined professional issue. The proverbial floodgates were opened. Throughout the mid- to late-‘60s and ‘70s, *Print* covered every aspect of politics, from conventional electoral to revolutionary avant garde. Being in sync with the moment was what Fox brought to the table.

A small sampling of headlines during and after Fox’s tenure (1963–2003) shows the contemporary range and historical service that *Print* provided its readers. “Advertising and Politics: The Cleveland Mayoral Campaign” (January/February 1968) showed how innovative big idea ad design worked to help elect Carl Stokes, the first “negro” mayor of a major U.S. city. One of the ads shown in the article was used, says *Print*, to “lay to rest [the] race issue.” The ad reads: “Don’t Vote for a Negro. ... Vote for a Man. ... A man who believes. Carl Stokes.”

In the same issue, under the headline “The By-Any-Means Movement Makes The Art Scene,” Fox wrote a story about an “ultra-radical” activist group that was devoted to “thwarting the Power Structure.” Something akin to the Occupy Wall Streeters today, Fox notes that the By-Any-Means “Tongue-in-cheekily ... invited key members of the Power Structure to [their] exhibition opening. The invitees arrived utterly unprepared for the harrowing experience that lay in store for them,” which involved a “no-holds-barred attack, through the medium of art, on their inordinate propensity for self-delusion.” The article was far from critical of the “radicals,” and it came down hard on the Power Structure in a way that blended social and art criticism with reportage.

A year earlier *Print* had tripped out on LSD in the form of “The Gospel According to Dr. Leary: A Guide to the New Religion” (January/February ‘67). What, you ask, has this to do with graphic design or politics? Think: “Sex Drugs and Rock n’ Roll,” a mantra for the same youth culture that helped fight for civil rights, wage peace in Vietnam and otherwise alter the sociopolitical debate. LSD was, for better or worse, part of the mind-altering tools of these young rebels. Although Leary was not typical fodder for a design magazine profile, his quotation in the *Print* article is revelatory: “You can’t take LSD and not be creative. … You can’t take LSD and not ache to shout your revelation to the world.”
Another revelation was that African Americans were not treated like whites in the design and advertising fields. In “The Black Experience in Graphic Design” (November/December ’68), Print produced the first of various examinations of race. The callout tells it all: “Five talented black designers candidly discuss the frustrations and opportunities in a field where ‘flesh-colored’ means pink.” The writer, Dorothy Jackson, made the distressing point that, “The gap between the black designer’s first job and his first creative position is considerable.” She added that “Tokenism is still the order of the day in the graphic arts industry (having replaced a routine refusal or a smiling ‘I’ll call you’).” Such an indictment of racism was unheard of in the trade press of 1968.

Print often produced special thematic issues, and for 1969 it addressed civil rights in its “Black and White” issue. Dozens of designers were asked to make visual/verbal single-page statements about the inequities of the time, and many of the results are still as current as they were then (see above).
Print also opened some windows that had been shut closed at other magazines. The first time I became aware of the May 1968 Paris student and worker uprising was from James C. Douglass’ “The Graphics of Revolution” (September/October ’68), a timely look at the posters that helped define the surge of protest against a repressive, conservative government. “Overnight, last May, the City of Light darkened in revolution,” Douglass wrote. “Thousands of protesters battled police and riot troops nightly in the streets.” Paris was under siege and the graphics by Atelier Populaire, which have been celebrated ever since, were a means to express French dissent throughout the world.

An issue devoted to “The Human Environment” (March/April ’68) may not seem controversial on the surface, but just think about current environmental and climate battles—rhetorical and otherwise—that still rage today. Print took a bold step in bringing this subject into the rarefied realm of graphic design. Drawing on wisdom and critique from leaders in government, private industry and the applied arts, the text-heavy issue was a dissertation on what we now call sustainability. Here’s what Lester Beall wrote: “Today’s design environment is one facet of man’s overall culture, and hence it is only, therefore, partially responsible for the visual mess we find ourselves surrounded by; and yet, in part it has contributed to the degradation of our overall environment.” Although his chest-beating did not represent the entire issue of Print, it spoke to concerns that had never before been aired among designers.
Women’s liberation was another topic that demanded editorial commitment at the time. By May/June 1970 Print could not ignore the subject that was consuming the growing number of women in the male-dominated profession. With its cover of Marianne holding the Women’s Lib banner while storming the barricades, author Patricia Allen Dreyfus led the charge: “The media love women’s liberation,” she wrote. “Bra-burnings, kara lessons, pickets and protests have become standard journalistic fare. … We have learned that over one-third of women who work do so in low-prestige, dead-end jobs as secretaries, clerical workers, waitresses, domestics. … The percentages and statistics leave no room for doubt. Women are losers. ... But not, interestingly, in commercial art.” She goes on to explain that while psychological barriers exist and promotions and salary increases are low, “art does operate as ‘meritocracy,’” and “women are allowed into it more than other fields.”

A feature story that was close to my heart at the time, “Artists Against the Air Force?” by Betty Vaughn (November/December ’72) churned up many emotional responses in readers and viewers. By 1972 the U.S. was stuck in the mire of Vietnam and experiencing a massive backlash from a homegrown anti-war movement. Design and illustration associations tried to stay clear of controversy. But it was the venerable Society of Illustrators in New York that stepped up with its first anti-war exhibition. For some it was too late but better than nothing, and for yet others it represented a betrayal. The exhibit was curated by Alan E. Cober and Lou Myers, who wrote, “Vietnam is an American obscenity, and on all sides evidence is mounting that our Air Force is involved in a deliberate and calculated effort to eradicate the rural population.”

For the 18 years prior to the exhibition, the U.S. Air Force was deeply associated with the Society, and many shows were mounted by artists who painted planes and personnel. The schism that ensued was news, and Print saw the need to solo-monically cover it by comparing the anti-war show with an Air Force show, which enabled the reader to grasp the polarization in the U.S. at that time.
Contemporary political coverage in *Print* was contextualized by its generous assortment of articles on history. When Gary Yanker’s “Prop-Art” about international propaganda posters was published (January/February ’70), it was a fresh view of musty work. Yanker noted, “Many observers of the commercial art scene are wondering what comes after Pop Art as a major world art movement.” His answer was Prop-Art. And if you think of the influences of Shepard Fairey and Banksy, among others, Yanker was right.

Perhaps *Print’s* interest in Russian revolutionary design and “agit-prop” as well as avant garde European graphics triggered the subsequent revival in the U.S. for the Constructivist visual language. Features in *Print* including “Design for a Revolution,” about a book by Szymon Bojko (May/June ’73), and “Typography of the Right and Left” by Robert A. Propper (May/June ’77) considered the radical visual languages that emerged from “days of great political and social upheaval, [when] mass communications—the printed word—became an instrument of government, and the printing press became ... the medium of revolutionary expression and missionary accomplishment.” Through these stories, *Print* offered validation to break from the norms and status quo—to be political.
In this sense, I began contributing histories about graphics and politics in the early ’80s. The idea was to give context to contemporary work by showing vintage agitational and polemical design that echoed the present. One of my features, “Radical Pique” (March/April ’82), made the claim that the socialist magazine The Masses “defined editorial drawing for generations to come.” While “The Underground Revisited” (March/April ’85) sought to show that “often crude and un-art-directed, counterculture publications … forced us to view design in a new way.”

I was certainly not alone on my political “beat.” J.C. Suares, former art director for The New York Times Op-Ed page, wrote “Them Damn Pictures: Political Art in America” (March/April ’75), which revealed a deep-seeded legacy of incisive pictorial commentary in the American press. If nothing else, these historical pieces informed contemporary designers and illustrators of how far the bar was once raised.

Also in the ’80s those designers and illustrators who had already lifted the bar were showcased in the magazine. “A Narrative Vision” by Valerie F. Brooks (September/October ’81) was an analysis of Sue Coe’s “epic urban drama.” Her imagery of police and the homeless in Grand Central and domestic disturbance on the Lower East Side was a precursor to her later visual reportages. And Print regularly followed the efforts of contemporary design impresarios, such as Charles Michael Helmken’s traveling exhibit of 125 designers who created posters about Hiroshima’s atomic bomb devastation (September/October ’85).
In “Celebrating Survival” (1985), Print covered an exhibition of 125 designs created for the city of Hiroshima on the 40th anniversary of the WWII atomic bomb detonation—a poster project “unparalleled in the history of American graphic arts.”

Print, politics and graphic (motion and digital) design have long shared the same quarters. In 2008 it was just simple logic that there should be a story on “Designing TV’s Political Satire” and “Election Design: The Good, the Bad and the Fake.” These are not controversial in the same way that Print was when it challenged the refrain “Politics has no place in a design magazine,” but it only goes to show that the magazine made it acceptable to cover issues that readers deemed unacceptable.