

Remembering Rube Goldberg

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As the generations roll on, many young people never learn of some important people and concepts. One that I mentioned in my most recent article is Rube Goldberg. Share his name with folks in their fifties or older, and they'll break into a big smile. Mention his name to anyone younger than forty, and a quizzical look will likely greet you.

You may wonder why I'd devote an entire column to Rube Goldberg. Aside from the fact that I've received some questions about him since my previous article, there are two reasons.

First, Rueben Garrett Lucius Goldberg, born in San Francisco in 1883, is an individual who, despite pressures from others in his life, pursued what he loved. As a result, he set a new standard for creativity, humor, and an innovative approach to his craft. Second, those attributes are admirable qualities in any leader, and the competence and confidence of leaders is what my articles address.

As a child, Rube Goldberg loved tracing figures and making line drawings. His parents, however, discouraged his efforts as not practical. His father pushed him to study engineering at the University of California at Berkeley. Upon graduation, Goldberg accepted a position designing sewers for the city of San Francisco. After only six months, he joined the San Francisco Chronicle as an office boy. He repeatedly offered sketches and cartoons to the editor, who eventually published some sports cartoons.

Goldberg moved to New York in 1907, where he was quickly accepted. A prolific creator, he produced several cartoons simultaneously, ultimately drawing for five different newspapers. In 1915, his work moved into syndication, and his popularity soared nationally.

Today, the name Rube Goldberg is synonymous with the comical and intricately complicated gadgets he created to accomplish simple daily tasks. Examples include activities such as wrapping a package, shining shoes, squeezing an orange, and washing the dishes.

Rube Goldberg is a proper name included in Webster's dictionary as an adjective. A Rube Goldberg activity refers to "accomplishing by extremely complex, roundabout means what seemingly could be done simply."

One purpose of Goldberg's 55 years of complicated "inventions" was to satirize government policies, which he considered excessive. In the years preceding World War II, he started drawing political cartoons. In 1948, he received a Pulitzer Prize for a cartoon warning of the dangers of atomic weapons.

In 1946, he and other cartoonists traveled overseas to entertain the troops. Enjoying the camaraderie, they established the National Cartoonists Society. Goldberg served as its first President.

His colleagues decided to select a Cartoonist of the Year by secret ballot. They chose to name the award "The Reuben" in Goldberg's honor. Winners have included Charles Schultz (Peanuts) in 1955 and 1964, Garry Trudeau (Doonesbury) in 1995, and Scott Adams (Dilbert) in 1998. Rube Goldberg received the award himself in 1967, three years before his death.

In 1949, at the peak of the Goldberg era, two competing engineering fraternities at Purdue University devised a "Rube Goldberg machine" contest. The competition continued for only six years, but was resurrected in 1983 when the original "traveling trophy" was discovered in a storage room.

The contest became a national event in 1988 with television, radio, and print media coverage. Regional competitions lead to the finals, hosted at Purdue University, this year on March 24. The objective is to build a Rube Goldberg machine in a 6'x6'x6' space. Last year's winner had 244 different steps, each step being a transfer of energy from one action to the next.

The entrants are judged on creativity and ability to complete the assignment successfully. This year's task is to inflate a balloon and pop it. Previous challenges have included watering a plant, casting a ballot, peeling an apple, shutting off an alarm clock, and putting a stamp on an envelope.

Aside from fun, the objective is to help students transcend traditional ways of looking at problems, engaging intuition and imagination. Yes, let's remember Rube Goldberg, whose legacy represents the best in American innovation, humor, and unconventional thinking!