CHESTNUT HILL, Mass. FOR STEPHEN COLBERT (the character), entering the race for president in both parties in a single state is a typical act of self-promotion. It follows directly from the performance of self-love on display in his interactions with his TV audience: the broad smiling, high-fiving, victory lapping, and applause-seeking that are regular and hilarious features of his show. By drenching it in laughter, Colbert (the character) makes narcissism look like fun.

But there are other features of his act that highlight what Stephen Colbert (the satirist) is up to in general and in this mock-campaign stunt in particular. By leaping to the right of everyone else, he takes conservative policies to absurd extremes, exposing their grounding in bad values, including but not limited to homophobia, religious pride, American exceptionalism and greed. In this way, he notes, “There’s nothing wrong with being gay. I have plenty of friends that are going to hell”; wants to know whether environmental changes that threaten Planet Earth will be bad for “Planet America”; says, “Sorry, Catholicism is clearly superior. Don’t believe me? Name one Protestant denomination that could afford a $660 million sexual-abuse settlement”; and insists that, “If I’m not making as much money as I want, the terrorists would’ve won!”

While the writers who work for The Colbert Report are obviously gifted, their ability to crank out a show based almost entirely on such reductions to the absurd suggests that the money-driven, base-debased state of our politics is supporting a new Golden Age for American satire, one that seems to be replaying the dynamic that allowed the most successful political cartoonist in U.S. history, Thomas Nast, to help drive William Marcy Tweed, the boss of Tammany Hall, the New York City Democratic Party machine, out of power in the 1870s.

Similarities not widely noted give the Colbert-Nast and Bush-Tweed comparisons significance, insofar as the Tammany abuses were based on the cronyism, corruption and lawlessness. As for policies, consider these Tweed precursors of Bush practices: running up $30 million in municipal debt in a few years that would take the city 30 years to pay off; enriching insiders and supporters while staging acts of charitable (think “compassionate conservative”) giving to the poor; undermining church-state separation by giving municipal funds to parochial schools; and rigging elections.

Enter Stephen Colbert, presidential candidate. Though he may try to run in both South Carolina primaries, his political stance will continue to make him a threat to conservatives. Just as Republicans running for president are polishing their positions — tacking hard right so that they can later tack back to center — Colbert will tack, as he might say, harder and hotter by being more pro-security, pro-Bush, pro-life and pro-Jesus than the Republican field. Outflanking the outflankers, Colbert (the satirist) will undermine their credibility by hurling the question raised by his “candidacy” back at the ostensibly “real” politicians, in this way putting the air quotes around the word real: Why should these constructed, tweaked and poll-driven characters be taken seriously?

Those who worry about the rising cynicism of the American electorate would be wrong to blame satirists like Colbert, Jon Stewart and Bill Maher for the trend. Satire directed at politicians becomes convincing not by virtue of its cleverness but by virtue of its accuracy. They could not make Dick Cheney seem like Darth Vader or George Bush seem like a blithering fool — any more than Rush Limbaugh could make Bill Clinton seem like a rogue — unless their targets provided a wealth of material. It takes a good deal of folly, corruption, mismanagement and hypocrisy to support effective satire. A sense of these failings and of their serious costs intensifies the impact of the satirist’s dark wit.


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