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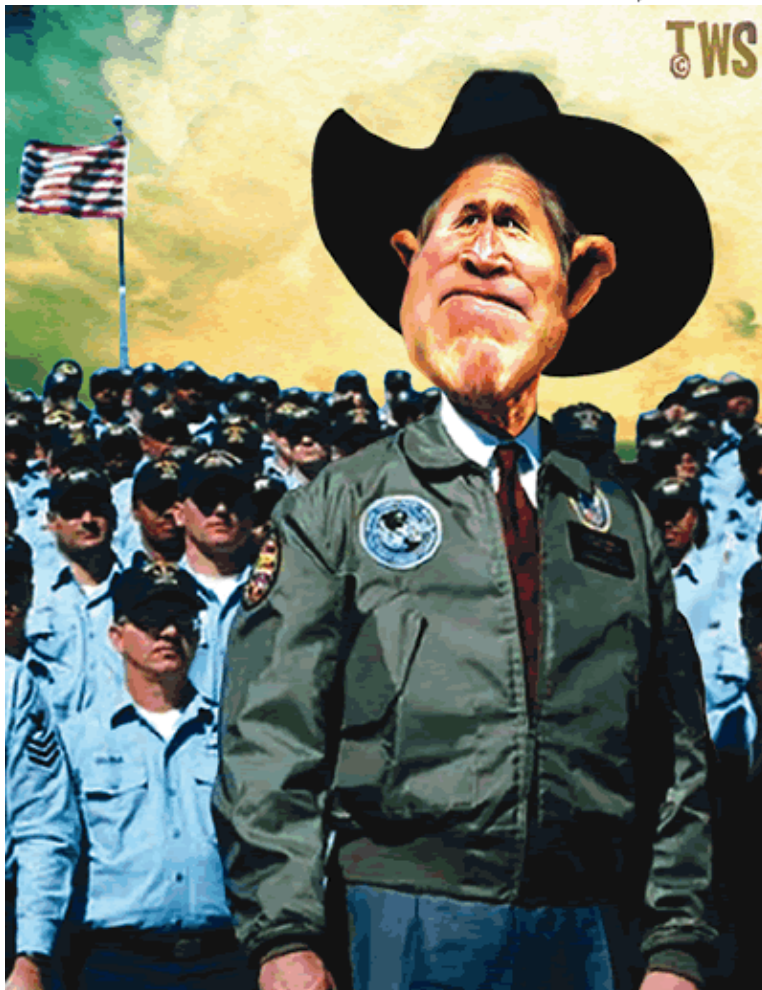
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MAD COWBOY DISEASE

THE ANGST OF SAVING FACE AFTER GOING OFF HALF-COCKED...

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We are an international community of people of many faiths calling for social justice and political freedom in the context of new structures of work, caring communities, and democratic social and economic arrangements. We seek to influence public discourse in order to inspire compassion, generosity, non-violence and recognition of the spiritual dimensions of life.

In a midsummer column on the state of thinking in Washington about the ongoing occupation of Iraq, David Brooks irritated many of his *New York Times* readers by comparing despondent and despairing senators with an “assertive and good-humored” President Bush. “Many will doubt this,” Brooks noted, “but Bush is a smart and compelling presence in person.”

In addition to disagreeing with Brooks’ description of the President’s intellectual capacity, readers may have been startled to encounter a serious treatment of a subject (Bush’s intelligence) that has become a staple of humor across the political spectrum. For Brooks, the question would seem to be why so many failures have plagued this confident and clever leader. Many others, looking back at a president who has pursued ill-conceived objectives with catastrophically poor strategies, wonder how such a buffoon was ever taken seriously.

The pivot point for Bush mockery, as for his administration in general, was 9/11. In *Cracking Up: American Humor in a Time of Conflict*, I follow the President’s treatment as the butt of jokes through the 2000 and 2004 elections. In the run-up to the first of these, Bush was mocked for his sketchy military record and for being the inarticulate governor of a weak-governor state. Ridiculer-in-Chief at the time Molly Ivins richly elaborated this line of ridicule in *Shrub: The Short But Happy Life of George W. Bush*, her pre-election political biography. Between his swearing in and 9/11, satirists and wags added the dubious (s)election victory handed to him by a one-vote majority of Supreme Court (in)justices to their shtick. But in the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, Bush’s popularity and job approval ratings soared in inverse relation to the dramatic falloff in Bush jokes and the parallel rise of humor aimed squarely at Osama bin Laden and the Taliban.

During the run-up to the 2004 election, anti-Bush satire rebounded, a trend that has intensified in tandem with the increasingly difficult-to-ignore cascade of his actual failures. Indeed, it’s fair to say that Bush’s 9/11 Teflon was washed off by the waters of Katrina and the blood of Iraq, leaving a less popular and, therefore, easier-to-ridicule target.

Easier, undoubtedly, but should mocking even detested conservatives as people be a strategy of the Left? The question has two parts: first, is personal ridicule effective as satire; second, is it ethically defensible? Early in the President’s first term, Mark Crispin Miller noted that Bush stupidity jokes (like similar putdowns of Andrew Jackson) have the unintended consequence of making their target seem like a regular guy, rather than an over-educated policy wonk. But the implication is not, as Miller argues, that such jokes are necessarily counter-productive, but that they must be unequivocal to succeed. A similar sub-genre of Bush-bashing humor, cowboy cartoons, illustrates this point. Unless they are drawn with undiluted intensity, these cartoons can end up bolstering Bush’s image by associating him with a positive American icon. Too often, Bush has been depicted almost cutely beneath a huge cowboy hat, well dressed even if he is “all hat and no cattle”! For an example of a more fully fanged approach, consider Marc Forrest’s “Mad Cowboy Disease,” an image devoid of any positive qualities whatsoever.

Though little known, Forrest’s work (available at theworriedshrimp.com) brings to Bush the man the unadulterated contempt that the most powerful cartoonist in American history, Thomas Nast, brought to attacking the Tammany Hall gang led by William Marcy (Boss) Tweed. In cartoon after cartoon, Nast portrayed his targets as predatory animals or greedy libertines. The connection Nast established between corrupt policies and corrupt lifestyles undoubtedly helped bring Tweed and Co. down.

Though less responsible for the post-Katrina turn against Bush than Nast was in toppling Tweed, satirists like Jon Stewart, Bill Maher, Keith Olbermann, Michael Moore, and Stephen Colbert have played their part in shifting the self-proclaimed “decider” back into harshly comic, diminishing frames. If nothing else, the irate response on the Right to Colbert’s gutsy performance at the 2006 White House Correspondent’s Dinner indicates that personal insult can be a feared and potent form of rhetoric. But, effective or not, is it fair?

When personal flaws have no impact on policy, mocking them is mean-spirited.

That such wit is the stock-in-trade of far-right ridicule mongers like Rush Limbaugh and Ann Coulter should give us pause. And yet it is often impossible to separate personal from political imperfections. Take the many Bushisms circulated online and collected in books. As these recent examples suggest, the President's inability to navigate an unscripted sentence is an ongoing source of mirth:

"These are big achievements for this country, and the people of Bulgaria ought to be proud of the achievements that they have achieved." (Sofia, Bulgaria, June 11, 2007)

"Amnesty means that you've got to pay a price for having been here illegally, and this bill does that." (Re. the immigration reform bill, Washington, D.C., June 26, 2007)

Though these sentences are far from the President's most ridiculous verbal performances, note that they fall at the two ends of his practice: the first circles in irritating redundancy; the second makes the very point he is trying to refute. One could say that this kind of linguistic struggle ought to be removed from the satirist's toolkit—except that this is the President who has insisted on subjecting grade school kids to one-size-fits-all, curriculum-flattening, standardized language exams. So I guess it's okay to leave at least one president behind!

Or take Bush's tenacious unwillingness to reconsider obviously ruinous policies in almost any area—from fighting the wrong war to giving tax breaks to the wrong people. Both the inability to attend to opposing views and the refusal to recognize empirical evidence that contradicts one's assumptions are signs of mental weakness. Since these kinds of stupidity have underpinned policies as ineffective as abstinence-only sex education and global warming denial, mocking both the policies and the habits of mind that have supported them is fair enough.

Enjoying Bush stupidity humor does not necessarily require a particular view of his relation to other "deciders." It may well be that intelligent but malevolent players—Dick Cheney, other neocons, corporate and far-right Christian lobbyists—have used this intellectually challenged man. Though one can, and perhaps should, make this point seriously, it's worth noting that it has served as the basis of an entire subset of Bush humor that depicts him as weak, distracted, and childish.

Many on the Left (including this magazine, which has declined to publish caricature cartoons) concede that, while an ad hominem attack can help to bring down a political opponent, it may also make everyone more cynical about politics, while arousing anger and deepening intransigence among supporters of the one attacked. Salman Rushdie's view, published in "Defend the Right to be Offended" in [openDemocracy](#), that one should "never personalize" political arguments is often cited: that you should "never [be] rude to the person, but...can be savagely rude about what the person thinks." The problem with this approach is that it assumes an overly sharp distinction between the personal and the political. As Nast demonstrated, when ridicule highlights character flaws (including greed, hypocrisy, and stupidity) that influence policy, it can be not only effective but logical (that is, on point) as well.

It's the "never" in "never personalize" that seems too rigid, almost inhuman. Shylock asks rhetorically, "If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die? And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge?" In a perfect world, humor would be divorced from hostility. In this world—in which the weak contend with the strong, in which the performance of seriousness, dignity, resolve, and intelligence is used to create a sense of authority and invulnerability (think of Bush during a State of the Union speech)—comic deflation aimed at the intertwined ideas and bearing (affect, personality) of the powerful can be a legitimate and non-violent form of resistance. Of course, progressive satire and mockery can misfire; just as scattershot jokes aimed at all politicians and, therefore, at none, can promote cynicism rather than concern. But serious arguments can also have unintended effects. In either mode, tact is essential.

The treatment of Bill Clinton's sexual relationship with Monica Lewinsky provides an interesting contrast. The butt of a zillion jokes, Clinton was satirized, lampooned, and generally hosed down for his randy behavior and unconvincing

cover up. If at the time Clinton had been trying to weaken sexual harassment laws that protect women in the workplace, then the Lewinsky jokes would have seemed far more interesting as satire than they did, though of course they have been funny enough to keep late-night audiences laughing for years. The fact that Clinton remained a strong supporter of woman's rights shifts his transgression far, far over onto the personal side of the personal/political spectrum, a point often made in his impeachment trial in the Senate.

Our current President is another creature altogether. Whether he's defending his decision to invade Iraq or his determination to extend the occupation indefinitely, he's inclined to begin sentences with the phrase "I happen to believe..." as though his confidence in an idea lends it credibility, as if he should still be taken seriously. By way of antidote, we could do worse than the bumper sticker that reads, "Somewhere in Texas a village is missing its idiot." Bush stupidity jokes remind us that we know this idiot. He's the guy who happens to believe that very rich people need much more money, that Cheney, Brownie, Rummy, and Gonzo are the "heckuva job" quartet, that "people have access to health care in America," and that... well, this sentence could go on, and on, and on, couldn't it? Most recently, Bush has taken with moronic enthusiasm to the idea that we're fighting them over there "so we won't have to face them here at home." Since there's just one terrorist out there, it's easy to assent to the President's point, right? Denounce, protest, impeach him if you will, but take this guy seriously? You've got to be kidding.

Paul Lewis, a professor of English at Boston College, writes about humor for Tikkun.

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