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Meanwhile: Laughing all the way to the war

Paul Lewis December 8, 2006

BOSTON: Now that most Americans have come to see the Iraq War as a mistake, it's easy to celebrate the work of progressive satirists who spoke truth to power from the start.

At great cost to himself, Bill Maher dared to question the courage of American generals who struck at the enemy from positions of personal safety. Jon Stewart began to call President George W. Bush's war the "Mess O'Potamia" early on.

Yet lest we believe that humor necessarily provides insight and conveys useful information, we should return to the winter of 2002-2003, during which a toxic stew of arguments both scared and tickled the country to war.

In the post-9/11 context of fear and anger, it was easy for Bush and his team to excite emotions by implying that Saddam Hussein had been in cahoots with the 9/11 terrorists and by conjuring the image of a "mushroom cloud" over an American city.

Because we tend to celebrate humor and let the ideas it conveys glide under rational scrutiny, it's important to revisit the jokes and parodies that added mirth to this campaign of fallacious persuasion.

We can begin by noting that prominent figures who asked questions or raised objections became the target of blistering "butt wars" crafted not to engage but to ridicule their ideas. Just ask the Dixie Chicks.

Or, take the French, Germans and Belgians—somebody please! Adapting a phrase now widely seen as highlighting Bush's excessively blunt approach to foreign policy, these countries were referred to as "the axis of weasels" because they dared to urge caution.

Pushing hard for the invasion in late February 2003, Dennis Miller quipped, "I say we invade Iraq and then invade Chirac." And mainstream comics piled on this easy target: "You know why the French don't want to bomb Saddam Hussein? Because he hates America, he loves mistresses and wears a beret. He IS French, people" (Conan O'Brien); "I don't know why people are surprised

that France won't help us get Saddam out of Iraq. After all, France wouldn't help us get the Germans out of France!" (Jay Leno); "The last time the French asked for 'more proof,' it came marching into Paris under a German flag" (David Letterman).

Though witty enough, each of these jokes drew attention away from the real issues: whether the French or German objections to the Bush war plan were correct. And Letterman's allusion to the need for "more proof" obscured the most crucial question before us as a country.

At the core of the dispute over Saddam's possession of nuclear and conventional weapons stood the United Nations inspection team led by Hans Blix. In the complex post-Cold War world in which non-state movements were a rising threat and in which large-scale military options needed to be re-evaluated for likely effects and effectiveness, the value of objective, multinational inspections as one foundation of international security was all too quickly thrown aside.

One online parody featured a box for a new product, Blix cereal, that called the UN inspector a "crème puff" and showed him wearing pink rabbit ears. Another online animation showed Blix sitting on a couch chatting with Saddam. Over and over, the inspector looked away when cabinet doors opened to reveal missiles. Meanwhile, Rush Limbaugh was playing a song that had Blix singing "just one look, that's all it took."

Yes, these were giddy times of excitement and confusion. Combining anger with mockery — let's call it "rage-icule" — congressional Republicans voted to rename menu items in their cafeteria "Freedom Fries" and "Freedom Toast."

The lesson is clear: Though at its best political satire speaks truth to power, humor can also muddy thought, trivialize real problems and promote catastrophic mistakes.