

And divided we laugh: the year in humor

By Paul Lewis | December 29, 2006

FROM THE RISE of Stephen Colbert to the fall of Michael Richards, from the use of racial stereotypes in campaign ads to the recycling of botched jokes on YouTube, 2006 was a year in which provocative humor, driven by hardball politics and new media, convulsed America.

In 2005, the last of George W. Bush's 9/11 Teflon washed off in the waters of Katrina and the blood of Iraq. This year, as the White House mantra "stay the course" joined such mocked and discarded expressions as "mission accomplished" and "heckuva job," the president remained the most-ridiculed man in the country.

With so much anger animating our politics, the jokes Americans told and how they were received revealed a country cracking up in two ways: On the one hand, we were frequently and, at times, uproariously amused; on the other, laughter often rang out from opposite sides of our cultural fault lines.

These jokes had real consequences; by contributing to a public perception of haplessness and indirection at the White House, they helped bring down conservative leaders who were once thought invulnerable.

Humor writers everywhere were handed the gift of the year when Vice President Dick "Deadeye" Cheney shot Texas attorney Harry Whittington while quail hunting in Texas in February. Meanwhile, for jumping with both feet onto the heaping pile of ruined hypocrites, Representative Mark Foley and the Rev. Ted Haggard became the target of both serious scorn and comic harassment after being caught up in gay sex scandals.

Not all of the year's humor was political, of course. For the hard work they put into amusing the public, let's raise a New Year's Eve glass to Lindsay Lohan, Britney Spears, Kevin Federline, Ashlee Simpson, Paris Hilton, Tom Cruise, Katie Holmes, Pamela Anderson, Kid Rock, and Tara (Miss USA) Conner. Yet beyond the comparatively toothless and generally predictable celebrity putdowns, American humor reflected broader disaffection with the course of events in the country and in the world. Notable in this regard was the work of Stephen Colbert, veteran of "The Daily Show with Jon Stewart," who launched his own program, "The Colbert Report," in October 2005.

Appearing in what *In These Times* editor Jessica Clark calls "full conservative drag," Colbert exaggerates what he sees as biased far-right reporting. If, for instance, Fox News's Bill O'Reilly devotes endless hours to a concocted "War on Christmas," Colbert features a cartoon in which Santa is shot out of his sled by a World War I fighter plane (presumably piloted by secular liberals) and then rescued by Jesus, who catches him in his own aircraft.

Colbert's most controversial performance came on April 29, when he appeared as the host of the annual White House Correspondent's Dinner. Staying in character, he mocked Bush with excessive praise for his gut-based decision-making. About the president's sinking approval rating, Colbert quipped, "We know that polls are just a collection of statistics that reflect what people are thinking in 'reality.' And reality has a well-known liberal bias."

This routine failed to amuse the president, the first lady, and many members of the

press (whom Colbert also mocked) -- not because it was witless but because it hit too close to home.

By spinning off current events, Colbert's show joined the already crowded field of fake-news humor. From the left, while Jon Stewart provided irony-laced stories about politics to fans who relied on him for their news fix, whitehouse.org blasted away with phony news releases and headlines like "President Bush Berates New York Times for Revealing the Super-Duper-Classified Military Secret that Our Troops in Iraq are Sitting Ducks." From the right, scrappleface.com, which boasts about presenting the "news fairly unbalanced," featured such stories as "Iran May Stop Nuke-Making in Exchange for ICBMs" and "Democrats to Boost Minimum Wage, Minimum Service."

Regardless of its target, fake news reminds us that all reporting is less objective than it seems, a matter of "truthiness" (to use Colbert's word of the year) rather than truth.

To the extent that voters noticed and reacted to this distinction, they punished Republicans. As R. J. Crane, the editor of topplebush.com, sees it, by the time the midterm elections rolled around, "the relentless ridicule" of mainstream comics, anti-Bush Web sites, and partisan cartoonists had helped push a "critical mass" of opinion against the decider-in-chief.

To be sure, Bush wasn't the only one in the pillory. Other politicians earned public ridicule when their jokes backfired. Just before Election Day, Senator John Kerry tried to tell a joke about how Bush's stupidity got the United States trapped in the Iraq War. Instead, he ended up suggesting that the American military is populated by academic underperformers. Whoops!

Meanwhile, in front of an all-white audience in Breaks, Va., Senator George Allen, the incumbent Republican favored

to win reelection, used an obscure racial slur -- macaca -- to refer to an American college student of Indian descent who was shooting video for Allen's Democratic opponent. Though the remark sent titters through the supportive crowd, when the footage ran repeatedly on TV and YouTube, a wider audience saw arrogance and intolerance in the murky images. Allen, who until recently was considered a decent prospect for the Republican presidential nomination, ended up losing his seat.

Attempts at ethnic humor are always dicey. Still, Sacha Baron Cohen's movie "Borat," which opened just before Election Day, proved to be a hit both in the United States and abroad. It struck particular chords here. No doubt Borat, the character, embodies the spirit of every ethnic joke ever told anywhere by being a dirty, uncouth, and incompetent foreigner and, perhaps, also by being foolish in a nonthreatening way. It was easy to laugh at a country in which being the "fourth-best prostitute" counts as an achievement.

And yet Borat has far more to say about America than about Kazakhstan as a land of fools. For, as he travels west in search of "cultural learnings," Borat encounters Americans all too willing to join him in expressing repugnantly homophobic, misogynist, racist, and anti-Semitic views. A pied piper of bias, Cohen used feigned hate speech both to call forth the inner bigot in his marks and to challenge our vaunted sense of national superiority. Cohen's American fans know that the real joke is on us, and presumably agree with his implicit criticism of US culture. In this regard, "Borat" is part of the trend toward marketing comedy to groups defined by their shared values. Such marketing has promoted niche satire on the left and right. But at the same time, technology has made it virtually impossible to control one's audience -- a crucial reason why jokes (and attempted jokes) proved so explosive this year. With camcorders and cellphones recording everywhere, and with YouTube recycling gaffes, public

speakers (like Borat's interlocutors) could no longer count on being able to share their edgy kidding with just their supporters. Even Rush Limbaugh, who has addressed a large audience of "ditto-headed" fans for decades, was caught by his own webcam mocking Parkinson's sufferer Michael J. Fox.

Over and over again in cyberspace, Limbaugh, Kerry, Allen, and Bush -- along with Michael Richards, the comic whose bizarre racial diatribe was captured on camera -- reenacted moments of weakness or folly they surely wished to erase.

Yet while partisans on all sides of our national divides used humor as a cudgel, most of us were far less serious about the jokes we shared. Though talk radio thrives on what we might call "rage-icule" and the Internet hosts whole galaxies of hostile satire, for the most part we laughed to relax, connect, and, above all, enjoy ourselves. Most of the time when we asked "Have you heard the one about . . ." we were just taking a moment to step back from the troubles of a demanding and dangerous world.

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